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SIDELINES

Germany's Coach Is Out of His Depth, and So Is Its Chancellor

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By Philipp Köster
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BERLIN — The start was promising.

In a WhatsApp group — under the peppy name "Get prepared" — the coach of Germany's football team, Hansi Flick, delivered a stirring motivational message to the 26 players representing the country at the World Cup. Under a picture of a lamp, his colleague added: "May our light shine in Qatar!"

Well, not quite. After losing to Japan, in a lackluster, anemic display, the team just about managed to draw with Spain, thanks to a late equalizer. It goes into Thursday's match against Costa Rica needing a win and for Spain to avoid defeat against Japan. After a disastrous outing in 2018 — where the country was knocked out in the group stage for the first time in 80 years — and mediocre performances since, it's hardly the pick-me-up German football was crying out for.

There are many reasons for the poor showing. But one surely is the coach, Mr. Flick. For much of his managerial career, he seemed destined to be a perennial assistant — first to Joachim Löw, Germany's longtime national coach, and then at Bayern Munich, Germany's biggest club. Yet in the past three years, things changed fast for Mr. Flick. He became the boss at Bayern, guiding the club to a Champions League title, and then replaced his former boss Mr. Löw as the head of the national team. From understudy, Mr. Flick has become the leading man.

In a curious twist of history, German politics has seen a similar story unfold — that of Chancellor Olaf Scholz. A few years ago, he too seemed to be going nowhere. Passed over for the party leadership in 2019, he was defined by his long service in Angela Merkel's

cabinet: a trusted functionary, but no leader. Yet in the election last year, his association with Ms. Merkel — and ability to project a sense of continuity — helped propel him to the chancellery.

Now these two men are struggling to navigate a period where Germany's strength and resilience, as a football side and as a country, are being tested. In difficult circumstances, both seem to be out of their depth.

The parallels between Mr. Flick and Mr. Scholz, born seven years apart, are obvious. Both are intelligent, but can quickly become unpleasant if this intellectual brilliance is not sufficiently appreciated. Both communicate poorly with the public, but are offended when misunderstood. Above all, both are unwaveringly pragmatic. Vision, inspiration and romance have no role to play. Mr. Flick's news conferences are as boring as those of the chancellor, which is a quite an achievement.

The problem is that the cozy and manageable world of the past decade no longer exists, neither in football nor in politics. Climate catastrophe, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have shaken Germans from their comfort zone. It is slowly dawning on everyone that Germany, wallowing in memories of past successes, has become complacent.

In politics, that complacency has taken the form of shirking difficult decisions — for example, on the delivery of tanks to Ukraine and the continued operation of nuclear power plants to replace Russian gas. In football, where the German team effectively thought it was unbeatable after winning the World Cup in 2014, it has led to allowing the youth system that had been the bedrock of success to grow stale.

The country needs a new start, and to get there, it needs charismatic leaders. In football, that could be a charmer like Liverpool's manager, Jürgen Klopp; in politics, that could be an eloquent intellectual like the economy minister, Robert Habeck. Instead, we have Mr. Flick and Mr. Scholz, dull epigones of their former bosses. In office, they have maintained the illusion that there might yet be a return to the world of yesteryear, that Germany can, without really changing anything, be once again economically healthy and sportingly successful.

There's a popular theory in Germany that major social changes surface in the style of the national team. The German victory in the 1954 World Cup, the so-called Miracle of Bern, is considered the symbolic foundation of the West German state after World War II. The team of the '70s, led by longhaired free spirits like Günter Netzer, breathed the free spirit of the student revolt. And in the '80s, the German team emulated the conservative restoration under Helmut Kohl with its mindless kicking on the pitch.

If there is a lock step between politics and football, this World Cup may reveal whether Germany is soon to overcome its fear of change and embark on a new beginning. For that to happen, the risk avoidance that has made the German game so unattractive in recent

years would have to give way to a new desire to attack and enjoy, encouraged by a national coach who would also have to reinvent himself.

Such a refreshing new style would do more than breathe life into a moribund side. It could also send a signal to German society that it too can free itself from the shackles of fear. An exhibition of creativity and passion and fighting spirit would be the perfect tonic for the purgatorial state of the country, vacillating between a longing for change and anxiety about what it might bring. Who knows, maybe even the politicians would take note.

It hasn't happened yet. The team has been cagey and cautious, lacking in fluency and purpose. But all is not lost. Germany could still make it to the next round, and there were signs at the end of the Spain game that the side, especially its younger players, was ready to seize the moment. It could still be that the football team, through its passion and spirit, will show the whole country that it can survive the hard winter ahead.

After all, it's never wise to write off the Germans, and anything is possible. Or in the words of Mr. Flick: Get prepared.

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