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Köbi Kuhn: "We're looking for young Swiss Abroad"

More and more young Swiss footballers are being wooed by major-league European clubs and are moving abroad. No fewer than 30 players under the age of 18 are currently under contract abroad. The Swiss Football Association is aiming to counteract this trend by looking for young footballers born abroad but with a Swiss passport. Heinz Eckert discussed this with National Trainer Köbi Kuhn.

"Swiss Review": Right now, 30 young Swiss footballers are playing professionally for foreign teams. Has this ever happened before?

Köbi Kuhn: I don't think so – at least I can't remember a time when so many Swiss were playing abroad at once.

Why do you think this has come about?

It has a lot to do with political and social trends in Europe, not least the fact that there are virtually no restrictions nowadays on signing up for a foreign club. In my day this was impossible: the Italian Football Association even imposed a ten-year ban on foreign players. But it's also indicative of the excellent system for promoting young talents that the Swiss Football Association has operated with clubs over the past ten years. After all, the under-17 national team won the European championship and other junior teams have consistently performed well. All this has attracted the attentions of clubs abroad to young Swiss footballing talents.

How were young talents promoted in your day?

In my day there was no systematic, nationwide scheme for promoting promising young players. I only got the right support when I switched from little FC Wiedikon to major-league FC Zürich at the age of 18.

Do players train differently now than before?

You can't compare training methods now and then. In the old days we more or less trained ourselves, practising on the pitch until it got dark. Nowadays juniors and their coaches are systematically trained according to the strict guidelines of the football association.

How has football changed since you were a player? The technique has remained the same.

Granted, the technique hasn't changed; but the strain on players is much greater because the modern game is much faster. For instance: In my day, a mid-fielder normally had five seconds between taking the ball and passing it. Nowadays a mid-fielder has barely a second to take the ball, control it and pass it. This is confirmed by video and TV replays. Also, the game is much more compact and faster than before, with lots more mid-field duels. Footballers nowadays have to react much faster and think ahead more.

Are today's footballers also in better physical shape than before?

Absolutely. They are also taller and stronger. At 1.75 meters I was regarded as average-height. Now I would be one of the smallest. The average height for today's footballers is 1.80 meters. But the way the game has developed makes players more prone to injury. Nowadays players train

much more frequently, and much more intensively. At FC Zürich we would normally train on two afternoons, and four times a week when we reached the semi-finals of the European Cup. Lots of us went to work in the mornings. Nowadays professionals train every day.

What are the most important criteria now for training promising players?

Because footballers' reactions have to be faster nowadays, the training emphasis must be on techniques. It's also important to remember that the lion's share of this work is done by clubs, in close collaboration with the Swiss Football Association. The idea is that juniors should be fully trained in techniques by the time they are 14.

The best young Swiss talents are children of immigrants or naturalised foreigners. Do these players have a different attitude to sport than young Swiss?

Since most have their roots in countries that accord football a much higher value than we do, these young players often have different influences and are more ambitious than their Swiss counterparts. Then there is the fact that, unlike Swiss players, football promises them a way up the social ladder and their career is supported by the entire family.

JAKOB KUHN

■ Jakob "Köbi" Kuhn (born 12 October 1943) has been the trainer of the Swiss National Football Team since 2001. In 2004 he was instrumental in taking Switzerland to the European Championships in Portugal.

Apart from a two-month stint with the city's rival club Grasshoppers, his entire career as a professional footballer was spent with FC Zürich. With them he won the Swiss championship six times and the Swiss Cup five times

between 1962 and 1977. He played for the national team in 63 internationals.

Before his appointment as national team trainer, he successfully trained the under-21 national team. His strategy is to seek success with motivated players who want to form a close-knit unit ("You must be eleven good friends"). With this in mind he has appointed lots of young players and has no qualms about firing players like Ciriaco Sforza if they threaten to derail this harmony.

WANTED: YOUNG TALENTS

■ With 1500 clubs, 11,200 teams and 280,000 active members, the Swiss Football Association (SFA) is the most important sports organisation in Switzerland. In line with its commitment to promoting football for young people, the SFA has created a ground-breaking new concept for encouraging up-and-coming young talents. Five professional coaches work with the 25 most gifted players in each region, and at the same time train one of the junior national teams

for 15- to 20-year-olds. The Football Association is now looking for the football stars of tomorrow among young Swiss Abroad.

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What can foreign clubs offer young Swiss footballers that Swiss Super League clubs can't? Is it just more cash?

Of course it's a huge incentive to switch to a top European club that's rich in tradition. But often it would be better for their development abroad if players first did their time and proved themselves with a Swiss club. Players who leave Switzerland before their 18th birthday usually spend more time on the substitute bench than they would if they

sidering, but I didn't have to move abroad for financial reasons.

Do the young footballers who currently play for big foreign clubs still like to play in the Swiss national team?

Yes. For them, as for all footballers, it's always an honour to be invited to play for the national team. Also, the national team is still a showcase and it's a special distinction to boast the title "national team player". And

abroad, and I personally know a young footballer with an African father, a Swiss mother and a Swiss passport, who plays top-class football in Namibia. I'm sure these cases are not unique.

What can the football association offer talented young Swiss Abroad?

We run our own training centres in German and French speaking Switzerland. Pupils also receive schooling, stay with host families and are given an opportunity to take part in trials for the national team.

Do other countries also look for footballing talents abroad?

Yes, of course. The Turks employ professional scouts all over Europe. The Italians and Spaniards also keep a close eye on their compatriots abroad and keep themselves well informed about all young talents. "Secondos" (the offspring of Italian immigrant families) who are currently playing in Italy were also discovered by club scouts and enticed away from Switzerland. Our association is too small to launch such an intensive search abroad. This is where we hope Swiss Review can help us. We are convinced that among the 600,000 Swiss Abroad there are



Köbi Kuhn with national team striker Alex Frei: Proud to play for Switzerland.

played for a Swiss team. Also, it would be only fair if the football association and clubs could enjoy some return on the investment they have made in junior players. But we can't control the drain; we can only make the best of the situation.

You're one of the best Swiss footballers of all time and have never played abroad. Have you never regretted being a professional at the wrong time?

No, not really. The opportunities for transfers abroad weren't as good as they are now. Italy had a ban on foreign players, and the German league was in its infancy and had so little money that lots of German players opted to play in Switzerland to earn some cash. I had offers from Anderlecht and Marseilles. At the time Marseilles was worth con-

to play in a packed Stade de France in Paris, cheered on by tens of thousands of red-shirted Swiss supporters, is a very special experience that even a hardened professional never forgets.

Now the Swiss Football Association wants to look for young talents among the Swiss Abroad. What do you expect to gain from this?

We're convinced that there are talented young people among the Swiss Abroad who can play football well and could be supported and trained by us to become members of the national team.

Do you have any concrete reasons to believe this?

Yes, we have already been tipped off by the fathers of highly talented sons who live

a few young talents born abroad but with a Swiss passport who have a chance of making it to the national team trials. We hope that lots of football-playing young Swiss Abroad will be attracted by our offer and apply. This appeal is also aimed at girls who play football, since the football association also runs a training centre for women.

Would this type of football training in Switzerland entail costs for the parents?

No. The Swiss Football Association would certainly find a financing solution. Both I and the Swiss Football Association look forward to being able to invite a group of young players to an introductory training camp in Switzerland in the near future.