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Ciriaco Sforza and Swiss football (soccer)

Single-minded and successful

«Objective attained» was the Swiss football (soccer) team's verdict on its World Cup performance. "Not quite up to expectations" was the personal view of Ciriaco Sforza.

Detroit's Pontiac Silver Dome, June 22, 16:00 hours local time: Switzerland plays against Romania. After a good hour of play, Ciriaco Sforza gets the ball from a midfield pass, with a clean kick

René Lenzin

leaves an opposing player behind, in an energetic breakthrough outwits the Romanian offside trap and passes the ball to Adrian Knup, running alongside and perfectly placed for a goal. Switzerland leads 3-1, then increases its ad-

vantage to 4-1 and qualifies for the next round.

This goal symbolised the success story of the Italo-Swiss, Sforza, as well as of the Swiss team. Words like decisiveness, self-confidence and clever tactics come to mind – qualities which brought Switzerland to the World Cup after 28 years of absence and made Sforza one of the most highly regarded players in the German Bundesliga.

Euphoria on the one hand, limits on the other

The victory over Romania let loose an unrestrained wave of euphoria in Switzerland. Then the 0-2 defeat by Colombia and above all the hard to bear, because so high, 0-3 score against Spain in the second round brought fans down to earth with a bang. But Switzerland had been one of the best 16 teams in the World Cup and had got as far as realism suggested it could have done. No more and no less. Success against a team like Romania turned out to be possible only provided virtually all the players came up to their potential together and the game went well for them. It was unfortunate that in the last match a star player like Ciriaco Sforza was not in top form.

Born on March 2, 1970, into an Italian immigrant family, "Ciri" grew up in the Aargau town of Wohlen and played in the top regional league at the early age of 13. At 16, with a contract as football apprentice he went over to Zurich's National League A club, Grasshoppers, and in 1993 changed over to FC Kaiserslautern. In this German Palatinate town he not only played himself into the hearts of local fans, but was also instrumental in raising his club to second place in the German league championships. Since taking up Swiss citizenship, he has played for his new

country 27 times and scored three goals. Together with Stéphane Chapuisat (25), Adrian Knup (26) and Alain Sutter (26), Sforza at the age of 24 belongs to the new generation of Swiss soccer players whose path took them abroad early on and who made a strong impact there. "Being afraid doesn't suit me. I always knew that I would be a success in the Bundesliga", boasted Sforza in an interview.

Self-confidence is one of the strengths of this midfielder, convinced that he will sooner or later play in Italy, the dreamland of almost all footballers. But his boastfulness is not so much a sign that he thinks too much of himself as of single-mindedness and a sense of what is possible. As a 16-year old beginner in the highest Swiss player category, Sforza had already earned respect for his agility. After a temporary low which he overcame by changing down for a short period from his top club, Grasshoppers, to FC Aarau, nothing came in the way of his rise to stardom.

Two mentalities

He faces the media with remarkable poise and composure for his age. Only once, after the 1-1 in the first World Cup match against the USA, did he make an incautious remark about Roy Hodgson, the trainer of the national team. In full knowledge of his not exactly magic performance and facing a problem with a persistent muscle injury, his southern roots came through for a moment. "I often think like a Swiss and react like an Italian". Sforza's youth was marked by both mentalities, just like thousands of other children of immigrant families.

He plays for Switzerland, but he now wants to get his Italian nationality back. Not because he feels more like an Italian but because an EU passport "simply makes things easier". That is an eminently practical approach – typical of Ciriaco Sforza and one which will in all probability take him far in his football career. His not very brilliant performance in the World Cup is unlikely to prove more than a temporary dampener on his future chances.

Dynamism, determination and self-confidence – typical qualities of Ciriaco Sforza. (Photo: Widler)

