



## NORBERT MEIER : PLAYER PROFILE

Norbert Meier is currently one of the most recognisable faces active in German

football today. This has come on the back of a successful playing career most notably as part of the great Werder Bremen sides of the 1980's. He has followed this up with a coaching career which has been filled a wide range of joy, disappointment and even occasional controversy. The drama that Meier has been a part of in recent years and decades has made him an important part of the fabric of German in recent times. Meier was born on the 20th of September 1958 in Reinbek, a suburb to the east of Hamburg living in the Eichenbusch area of the town. Though born in Reinbek Meier simply claims to be from the region as a whole without any particular ties to one area, "Of course I am a native of Schleswig-Holstein, but in football I have always had more to do with Hamburg. Clearly Hamburg was my youth but I feel like a North German". His football identity was certainly shaped by Hamburg and its big clubs. "As a teenager I was in the [HSV] Volksparkstadion and also at St. Pauli. Both clubs were always special". However there can be no doubt as to how his hometown played a part in shaping his future to come.

It was in Reinbek that Meier made an early start to his football career by joining his local side TSV Reinbek's youth setup at just six years of age. This is the same club which counts current German international Max Kruse among its former youth players. Meier would spend six years at the club from 1964 to 1970. It was during these formative years that Meier was influenced by club legend Jürgen Krienke who had just finished his playing career and had taken up a role as a youth director at the club. In 1970 Meier moved to play for the youth team of FC Voran Ohe though this was only for one year. In 1971 Meier again moved, this time for what would be the majority of his teenage years to VfL Lohbrügge until 1975. It was at Lohbrügge that his developing promise and talent attracted the attention of scouts from St. Pauli where he finished his youth career.



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Meier would spend two years in the youth ranks of St.Pauli. The first of these Meier would spend in the B-jugend u-17 side though he would progress from this after one season. In the second of these seasons, Meier was part of the St.Pauli A-jugend u-19 side which won the Hamburg championship. This success resulted in qualification for the national playoff series. In the round of sixteen, St.Pauli played SV Mehring with the first away leg ending in a 1-1 draw in front of 3,500 spectators. However this is far as they would progress as St.Pauli were eliminated 12-3 on aggregate by Schalke in the quarter finals.

Meier's break into senior football came when he moved back to the suburbs to play for ASV Bergedorf, nicknamed 'The Magpies' in the summer of 1977 as an 18 year old. This not only meant a step up in quality but also an increase in expectation excitement as the club features a strong support base. "There were always at least 1,000 spectators. I think every amateur club today would rub his hands if they had as many supporters as we did" remembers Meier. Over the course of a three year stint at the club Meier continued to develop on the potential he had shown at youth level, particularly under the guidance of former Hamburg player Peter Rohrschneide who took charge of the side in 1979. Meier describes his time in a positive light saying, "Bergedorf 85 was a wonderful springboard" acknowledging how important the club was in his development.

In his first season at ASV Bergedorf in 1977/78 campaign, Meier would quickly experience success as the side won the 4th tier verbandsliga-Hamburg by a single point. However the side would miss out in the post season promotion round to remain at the 4th tier of German football. The side would just fall short in the following season, this time missing out on the title by one point to VFL Stade. The 1979/80 season would be Meier's final season at Bergedorf and though successful, it would end in another near miss for the club. Bergedorf would finish second in the league two

points behind Hummelsbüttler SV, a side who would win promotion in the post season promotion playoffs. It was in these playoffs that Meier would play his final competitive game for the club.

In the promotion playoffs, Bergedorf were put in Nord-Gruppe A (North group A), a four team group with TuS Celle, VfR Neumünster and Lüneburger SK. Lüneburger SK would enter the final game on seven points ahead of Bergedorf who sat on six, leaving it all to play for in the final game of the group to be played in Bergedorf. The Sander Tannen stadium in Bergedorf was packed to capacity, with over 10,000 spectators in attendance. It was a fiercely contested game which remained 0-0 until the final minute, upon which a dash of controversy was injected into the game.

In the 90th minute, Meier had control of the ball in the opposition box when he appeared to be fouled by a Lüneburger defender. The appeal was waved away by the referee, Hans-Joachim Osmers from Bremen to a chorus of frantic shouts from the home players and supporters. In the midst of the chaos, Lüneburg broke quickly to score a goal on a counter attack through Karsten Wagner to break Bergedorfer hearts in the final act of the game. After the final whistle, the referee was left bleeding during a small riot at the stadium.

It is even believed that even Meier's father came to hit the referee with his umbrella during the mêlée, which the newspaper Bild described as 'The Football of Bergedorf'. Referee Osmers would later be famous for awarding a 'phantom' goal to FC Bayern's Thomas Helmer vs. Nurnberg in the Bundesliga in 1994 which cause that game to be replayed, though Bergedorf were to have no second chance on this occasion. Despite the disappointment of missing promotion, Meier himself had been a highlight of the side throughout the season with a number of excellent displays.

These good performances led to some of Germany's top clubs taking an interest in Meier, firstly with a week's trial with Hamburg in 1980. Though Meier was not kept on afterwards, he is aware of the stage of his career he was in at that point. "There is no resentment on my part. Let's not forget: The HSV was then a club that has set standards. I was never angry, this was a team that later won the European cup". Speaking on why so many players from the local area did not eventually play for Hamburg like himself, Meier said "If you want to look positively, you can call it coincidence. Maybe clubs don't look so closely on their own front door".

Following this, further interest in Meier came from Rudi Assauer, the then general manager at Werder Bremen. Assauer gave Meier the opportunity of having a trial with Werder though things did not always go as Meier had wished. Meier remembers despite scoring two own goals in a training game "but I have also made three!", as Meier was finding his feet at the higher level.

#### **Bundesliga Debut**

Despite the eventful trials it was Werder Bremen, then of the 2. Bundesliga Nord which signed Meier to his first professional contract in the summer of 1980. His debut came in a pre-season intertoto game against Lillestrom where he scored in a 2-1 win. In the league,

Meier adapted to the step up to professional football scoring an impressive 16 goals in 39 appearances. This helped Werder return to the Bundesliga by winning the league, 3 points clear of Braunschweig in what was the final season of the regional 2. Bundesliga format.

His coach in this first season in Bremen was Kuno Klötzer who had just three years previously led Hamburg to the Uefa Cup Winners Cup. However Klötzer was forced to leave his position before the end of the season due to injuries sustained in a car accident, though he would coach again with Duisburg the following season. His replacement proved crucial in the development of both Werder and Meier as Otto Rehhagel, who was to become legendary at the club took over for the remaining games of the season following a previous brief stint in charge with Bremen in 1976.

It was all change for Meier in 1981/82 including a step up standard to the Bundesliga and a change in coach as Rehhagel took charge of his first full season at the club. The club and Meier defied expectations by achieving immediate success in the top flight as Werder finished 5th, a mere six points away from the title but good enough to qualify for the Uefa Cup. This was a campaign, which was highlighted by wins against FC Bayern München and eventual champion Hamburg.

This was also the season where Meier as part of three appearances for the Germany 'B' team, would first represent his country. His debut for the side came in September 1981 in a B International against Poland at Czestochowa, winning 1-0 in a game that would feature future teammates in the German senior side such as Lothar Matthaus. Later that month he would again play 90 minutes as Germany 'B' would win 1-0 away against the full senior side of Luxembourg in a venue he would have notable personal success later for the senior side. His final B team appearance came in mid February of the following year in a substitute appearance in a 1-0 win in Mannaheim against Portugal 'B'. Having adapted well to the international setup, his next appearance in national team colours would be for the senior side later that year.

However there were occasional teething troubles during this season, most notably a record 9-2 league defeat for Werder coming against Eintracht Frankfurt. Meier had put Werder 1-0 in the game but the flood of goals that came against them proved to be a harsh but important lesson in the development of the team as a consistently competitive top-flight side. However on a personal level, Meier adapted quickly to this higher level of football by continuing his great form from the previous season by scoring 15 goals in his maiden Bundesliga campaign, equal 8th overall in the scoring charts.

In the following 82/83 league campaign, Bremen missed out on completing their stunning rise back to the top of German football as they missed out on the title on goal difference to that season's European cup winner Hamburg. The highlight of this league campaign would be a club record victory in an 8-1 defeat of Kickers Offenbach. It was another high scoring result in a 7-2 win against Sturm Graz in the pre-season intertoto cup, where Meier scored twice, helping Werder to win their division in the competition. This provided the launch

pad for this season of great personal achievement for Meier.

Meier's first major European game came in a Uefa Cup first round tie against East German side FC Vorwärts Frankfurt. Here he scored his first goal in a major European competition, opening the scoring away in the first leg of tie to ultimately help Werder advance on away goals. In the second round rout 8-2 of IK Brage of Sweden, Meier again opened the scoring in the first leg and also added two in the second away leg. This was however as far as this side would go in their first taste of European competition. They were eliminated 3-2 by Dundee United in the third round despite Meier again getting on the score sheet in the first leg to finish as Werder's top scorer in Europe that season with five goals.

#### **International Breakthrough**

This impressive club form was good enough to earn Meier a call up to the full national side, with his debut coming with a start in a Friendly against England at Wembley in October of 1982 where Meier played 68 minutes in a 2-1 win. This was followed up by a first competitive appearance in March of 1983 away to Albania, again in a 2-1 victory helping West Germany qualify for Euro 84. In June 1983 Meier scored his only goals at international level, scoring two in a 4-2 win against Yugoslavia in a summer friendly. The game, played in Luxembourg as part of their federation's 75th anniversary celebrations saw Meier hit two impressive left-footed strikes from outside the box, one each into each top corner, typical of Meier's spectacular style to put his side 2-0 up.

Having reached the top level of football by making his international debut, a friendly in January 1983 would also reconnect Meier to his roots in the game. Meier would travel with his Werder Bremen side to play in a friendly game with his home town side and the side where he started in youth football, TSV Reinbek. Some 2,300 people crowded into Reinbek's modest Paul Luckow station to watch the local minnows take on the Bundesliga side. Meier played a full 90 minutes and although not managing to get a sentimental goal himself, Werder would win out 2-0 over a very spirited display from Reinbek with goals from Rudi Völler and Wolfgang Sidka in the first half. This homecoming was an example of how far Meier had come in his still young career.

Meier had marked himself out as one of the top players in German football on the pitch, known for his energetic performances and as "one of those players for which you would pay the entrance fee". Off the pitch Meier was beginning to enjoy the lifestyle of a footballer, perhaps on occasion too much so. A story emerged from this time, which rumored that Meier and club mate Jonny Otten had one night amounted a bill at a Gentleman's club which they could not pay off, so they called their club manager Willi Lemke for help. Lemke agreed to pay the debt providing both players would sign a less costly contract extension that would save Werder money, with allegedly both players obliging.

In the league during the 1983/84 season Meier was again amongst the goals, scoring 14 times, though this effort

could only help Werder to 5th in the Bundesliga table. The high point for Meier in his club form was a run to the semi-final of the West German cup where Meier scored in albeit losing effort after extra time to Borussia Mönchengladbach. Despite a modestly successful season at club level for Meier, 1984 marked the high point of his National team career. With Germany qualifying for Euro 84, Meier was called into the West German squad for the finals tournament in France.

Having been left out of the surprise 0-0 draw with Portugal, Meier was brought in for the second group game against Romania where he provide an assist to club mate Rudi Völler for the opening goal in a 2-1 win. In the final group game Meier was subbed off after an hour with a yellow card but with Germany looking the stronger side and temporarily sitting top of their group, needing only a draw to progress. However an 81st minute goal for Portugal in the other group game and a dramatic 90th minute headed goal for Spain put both Iberian countries through and sent West Germany home.

The following three seasons brought a series of near misses rather than success for Meier. In the 1984/85 season Werder finished second in the Bundesliga, four points away from champions Bayern München. Meier could only manage half of his previous season's goal tally with 7 goals, though this did include his only career hat-trick coming in game day three in a 6-2 win over Köln. In the 1985/86 season Werder again missed out on the league title, as in 82/83 by a matter of goal difference this time to FC Bayern.

For the national side, 1985 saw Meier make his final appearance for West Germany in his only World cup qualification match though this ended in a 1-0 defeat to Portugal, drawing to an end his International career. With Franz Beckenbauer taking charge of the national side, Meier missed out on the 1986 World cup as increasing limited game time at Bremen proved costly. Beckenbauer spoke of Meier at this time "Meier is in a super form, but he just plays too rare." The 1986/87 season was a relatively unsuccessful season, as Werder finished 5th in the league, some 13 points away from repeat champions FC Bayern but this only proved to be the calm before the storm.

In the 1987/88 season Werder Bremen were Bundesliga champions. Norbert Meier had earned his first major success as a player to add to previous success in the 2. Bundesliga and Intertoto cup. Werder finished four points clear at the top of the table finally edging out FC Bayern to the title. This was the culmination of Werder's climb back to the pinnacle of German football from when Meier had joined a then 2. Bundesliga Werder side seven years previously.

Aside from Meier, coach Otto Rehhagel remained from that 2. Bundesliga winning side along with fellow players Jonny Otten and Thomas Schaaf with Benno Möhlmann and goalkeeper Dieter Burdenski briefly featuring in the Bundesliga winning side. Meier was an important contributor as ever with his usual quality but also the side's third top scorer behind the two main strikers, by notching up seven goals from midfield in the league. Though this title made up for the near

misses in the past, according to Meier there was a sense in the squad that this side had the quality to have won more. "With the championship in 1988, the misses were forgotten. Although we already said now and then to each other: We could be two times German Champion now!"

Following this league success, Meier was only to have one more full season at Werder in 1988/89, which was a season that was to provide further landmarks in Meier's career. The season began with Meier coming on as a half time substitute for his only DFB Supercup appearance to help in a 2-0 win against Eintracht Frankfurt, collecting what would be his final silverware as a player. It would also be his only campaign in the European Cup where he made four appearances. He provide two assists in the first round tie against Dynamo Berlin in a 5-0 win as Werder overturned a 3 goal first leg deficit. His final appearance in the competition came at the San Siro as Werder were eliminated 1-0 in the quarterfinals to Sacchi's great AC Milan side who would eventually win that season's competition.

Further domestic success eluded Meier as a third place league finish added to cup final defeat as Werder lost 4-1 to Borussia Dortmund. Meier had made two appearances in the Cup run to the final though Meier himself missed out on the final through injury and was forced to be an onlooker for the game. "When Werder was in the final, I had an Achilles tendon injury which needed surgery". Though disappointed to miss out, holds no resentment in what would form part of Meier's future attitude to the unpredictable nature of the cup saying

*"These games, in which you cannot make amends have their own special charm". Meier was to not achieve cup success during his time as a player.*

Meier would only play a limited role at Werder the following 1989/90 season until he made a mid-season transfer away from the club. Meier's playing time had been gradually reducing in the previous seasons, ending with him only managing seven appearances from fourteen games in his final half season at the club. His final goal for the club came in a season high 6-1 win against Stuttgart bringing his final total to 82 goals for the club.

With this, Meier transferred away from the club during the winter break to Borussia Mönchengladbach leaving Werder in a significantly better position than the 2. Bundesliga side he had joined almost a decade earlier. "I was [leaving] but I also paved the way for a glorious time for the Werder team.", showing that Meier still had the club close to his heart upon leaving. He also was respectful of the small influence from Rehagel that Meier would later use in his coaching career, comparing it to like a father and son relationship raising children

*"There are things you take over and things that you do consciously different"*

In contrast to Bremen's successes, that season 'Gladbach was a team in turmoil. Having finished the previous season in sixth position, the found themselves

in a relegation battle. The club went with decisive action in November of that season and made a coaching change, bringing in Gerd Vom Bruch to lead the side. It would be Vom Bruch who would sign Meier on a free transfer into the side who were struggling, despite it including future stars such as Stefan Effenberg and Oliver Bierhoff.

Meier arrived with 'Gladbach sitting bottom of the Bundesliga table though only two points away from safety. His debut appearance for his new club was to be one of mixed emotions as 'Gladbach ran out 4-0 winners over his former side Werder, providing the assist for the second goal in the process. The result lifted his new side clear of the automatic relegation places. With the side battling right to the end of the season, 'Gladbach would eventually finish a single point and one place clear of the relegation places, preserving their Bundesliga status.

The league form improved greatly in 1990/91 for 'Gladbach as they finished in the top half of the table in a comfortable ninth place. This was despite a shock exit from the first round of the DFB Cup to third tier Oberliga Nordrhein side FC Remscheid, though this was a side which contained players such as Carsten Pröpper who would later feature in the Bundesliga. Meier would play 24 times this season in which he would score twice, the only goals of his 'Gladbach career. The second of these and what would be the final goal of his career came in May as an equalizer in a 1-1 draw with KFC Uerdingen.

The 1991/92 season would be Meier's final season as a player, ending an eleven year career as a professional. He played thirteen times in this final season, solely in the first half of the season with only one 90th minute appearance in that time. He also made one cup appearance, that in a 2-0 quarterfinal win over Stuttgarter Kickers as part of their journey to the final against Hannover which they would narrowly lose on penalties though Meier would miss out. "I was not there as I was only a standby professional".

Upon retiring from playing, Meier not only had his successes at Bremen, he also set a league record of being substituted 111 times from games, currently equaled by Mehmet Scholl and Ulf Kirsten. This mainly occurred at Werder where he would earn the nickname "Home-Meier" as Meier would often be sacrificed by Rehagel in away games for tactical reasons. Meier himself would later joke that being substituted so often makes his scoring record all the more impressive.

However, leaving the playing side of the game would be far from the end of Meier's involvement in German football. Having bedded into the setup at Borussia Mönchengladbach, Meier would assume a role at coaching underage sides at the club. This would prove to be the springboard for a long and often dramatic career as a coach, highlighted by two spells in the Bundesliga with Duisburg and Fortuna Düsseldorf where Meier, once a great player and student under Rehagel, was to become a respected coach in his own right.

Credit to Klaus from 'f-archiv.de' and Tim from Bergedorf85 blog '85live.blogspot.com' for their help researching this piece.