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"Football in America is on the upswing"

by OC 2006 FIFA World Cup

FIFA World Cup™ and European Championship winner Jürgen Klinsmann is set to travel the globe as an international ambassador for the 2006 FIFA World Cup. The cosmopolitan 38 year-old hails from Swabia in southern Germany but now lives with his Californian-born wife and two children near Los Angeles. In a recent interview, he discussed Major League Soccer in America, his transformation from leading striker to leading businessman - and tells us why he sets his alarm for 6.30 am every Saturday

morning.

Jürgen Klinsmann, if it's all right with you, we'll start with the trick question: who won the American championship last season?

Easy question. It's still a very new league, the eighth season started last week, and Los Angeles Galaxy are the reigning champions. So I have the title holders on my doorstep. I'm closely involved with the team and train with the lads whenever I get the chance. The league consists of ten professional clubs and still needs to become more established, but it's headed in the right direction.

Is the captain of the Euro 96-winning side able to keep up with US professionals?

In terms of skill maybe, but physically I reach my limits relatively quickly. But as I only train every now and then, I pretty much get away with a lack of physical fitness.

You were a world-class striker, but also an articulate and persuasive communicator, just the qualities a good coach needs. Was coaching ever an option?

I took my coaching badge along with most of my team-mates from 1996, because you never know what might come along. But at the present time I'm not prepared to tie myself to the demanding schedule of a particular club or association. My kids are aged six and one-and-a-half, so my independence is too valuable at the moment. Maybe it'll be different in five or ten years. It's a fascinating job, but you have to work full time and then some more.



But you've taken on major responsibility as an international ambassador.

Yes, and I really enjoy it. We're getting through plenty of preparatory work, all geared up to creating a sense of anticipation as we head towards 2006. You need to set up events in other countries and not only in Germany. I really look forward to these events. It certainly helps that I'm fluent in a number of languages, and that I'm well connected in international football.

Let's go back to football in America. A couple of years ago, attempts were made to 'Americanise' the game, there were penalty shoot-outs to decide drawn games. Was that the right thing to do?

To begin with, the idea was to make the Laws of the Game fit American culture. Americans need a winner, the idea of a draw is difficult to accept here. But since then, the league has gone back to the original Laws in nearly every respect. The one exception is a ten-minute period of "golden goal" extra time after a draw.

How good is football in America, in your opinion?

Football is steadily gaining in popularity, especially among young people. Nowadays, there are scholarships available for outstanding youth footballers, which is helping to drive the game forward. American Football, basketball and baseball are losing ground among young people. Many parents think American Football is too dangerous, basketball is only for tall kids, and there's not enough running and movement in baseball. Their loss is football's gain.

Are you involved in the development of football in America?

Our marketing agency [*Klinsmann is a Vice President of the SoccerSolutions agency - Ed.*] conceived the business plan for a football academy, to be developed alongside a dedicated football stadium in Los Angeles. We're heavily involved in American youth football together with our close partner adidas. And we work as consultants to the National Soccer Coaches Association of America.

How did you manage the transition from training daily as a professional footballer to the life of a business executive?

My wife, kids and I have lived in California for five years now. As I decided to pursue new opportunities immediately after ending my playing career, the transition was relatively smooth. After I stopped playing, I studied at the Technical University here in California. Then I began discussing future plans with my business partners, Mick Hoban and Warren Mersereau. Two years ago, they founded their own marketing agency, and six months later I joined them as the third partner (www.soccersolutions.com).

Have you been able to follow VfB Stuttgart's excellent run from your California home?

We get the featured match every Saturday live on satellite - which does involve switching on the TV at 6.30 am on Saturdays...

That's a fine time for football...

It's a fine time to eat breakfast and sit in front of the telly with the kids. So I'm aware of what's going on in Germany, from a distance, as it were.