

ALEXANDER NUBEL:



The heir apparent at Schalke

Schalke have had a recent history of high quality goalkeepers, from the likes of Norbert Nigbur in the 1960s and 70s to Jens Lehmann who played his part in the 1997 UEFA Cup triumph. At the turn of the century, the Gelsenkirchen side have been blessed in producing the best goalkeeper in German football in Manuel Neuer who revolutionised the position and created a new standard for the modern keeper. Recently, Ralf Fährmann has been the club's number one and has proven to be one of the more consistent shot stoppers in the Bundesliga.

But a steep decline in Fährmann's form along with injury has seen Germany under-21 international goalkeeper Alexander Nübel step up to the plate to fill the void. At the age of 11, Nübel joined his home town club Paderborn where he developed through the ranks. Despite conceding a lot of goals playing for a weak farm system at Paderborn it was evident that Nübel was very talented.

Then-Paderborn manager André Breitenreiter spotted his talent and promoted Nübel to the first team in 2014 where he would gain valuable experience playing behind the experienced Lukas Kruse. When Paderborn succumbed to relegation in the 2014/15 season, Breitenreiter left the club and was appointed Schalke manager. One of his first signings was Nübel. Joining a development project with a strong youth system in place could help him blossom into a bright young talent.

In the past couple of seasons since becoming Schalke's second choice goalkeeper, Nübel has been the understudy of Fährmann. Although he hasn't played any meaningful football, he's used his time to learn, absorb and wait for his opportunity to arise.

MAKING A STRONG FIRST IMPRESSION

As the expected number two heading into this season, it looked very likely that for another Bundesliga campaign Nübel would be playing behind club captain Ralf Fährmann. Yet, prior to Schalke's matchday eight fixture at home to Werder Bremen, Fährmann succumbed to injury during the warm up. At very short notice, the 22-year-old was in net for Domenico Tedesco's side.

It was a baptism of fire for Nübel on his first start for Schalke. His debut had come on the final matchday of the 2016/17 season in stoppage time in a 4-1 win over Hoffenheim, while his only other Bundesliga appearance for the club was a half against Eintracht Frankfurt on the last day of last season.

For someone who up to this point in his career had played such little first team football, it was almost a make or break situation for Nübel to impress the Schalke faithful.

It was an impressive performance by Nübel despite the a 2-0 defeat. He looked comfortable in possession, commanded the 18-yard box and played every situation on its merit. It was unfortunate that it took two very classy goals by Maximilian Eggstein to sour what was an impressive debut.

As Fährmann continued his recovery from injury, Nübel continued to play between the sticks, even in the Champions League. Despite playing just the two group-stage games against Galatasaray, he kept clean sheets in both fixtures in what was a crucial stretch for

Schalke. Nübel would also produce the goods in the DFB Pokal against 2. Bundesliga side Köln.

In a game in which his side were second best, Nübel came up trumps on multiple occasions with Schalke doing just enough to send the game to penalties, taken in front of Köln's Südkurve. Not overawed by the occasion, Nübel made a huge save from ex-Schalke midfielder Marco Höger early in the shootout to help Die Knappen progress to the third round.

Whilst in context of the game they were small moments, in the long term they may have been a catalyst to Nübel getting his chance down the line.

DISTRIBUTION

An expectation of the modern goalkeeper is the ability to be comfortable in possession, making a combination of both short and long passes with considerable accuracy and precision. Nübel has that in his arsenal. On numerous occasions this season, he has shown a coolness in possession, seemingly knowing when to boot the ball clear and when to pick out a teammate.

In his first six Bundesliga outings this season, Nübel has completed 89.6% of passes. When compared to teammate Ralf Fährmann's 85.8% it represents a slight improvement. Where Nübel really trumps Fährmann is playing the ball long.

The 22-year-old shot stopper has 78% accuracy with passes from distance overall, with only one game dropping below 75%. That is 8% better than Fährmann. Let's take a look at a scenario against Borussia Mönchengladbach where Nübel is able to assess his options before producing a perfectly

distributed ball.



Schalke are looking to switch play using Nübel's strong ability to play the ball. Matija Nastasić finds his goalkeeper with Borussia Mönchengladbach forward Lars Stindl applying a heavy press. Alassane Pléa is in no man's land, not really pressing or in a position to intercept the ball. Nabil Bentaleb is offering a short option, but with Stindl bearing down on Nübel it would be a risky pass to complete.



Out of picture is Daniel Caligiuri. After dropping back to provide an option out wide he presses forward to create a long option. His run is critical in this sequence as without such a play, Nübel would be forced to clear with Schalke potentially losing possession.



Nübel hits a perfectly precise ball to Caligiuri in his stride. Although Pléa makes up plenty of

ground on the Schalke defender the move is able to progress. The importance of a keeper who can make that play is very important in the modern game. Gone are the days when those between the sticks were just shot stoppers.

LORD OF THE MANOR

A common criticism of Fährmann is his inability to command the penalty area, but the immediate impression of Nübel is that he is in complete control. On set pieces, it is essential for a keeper to take control of the situation by setting up the defensive structure. Does Nübel prefer to have cover at his front or back post at corners?

For free kicks from distance, it's essential that the goalkeeper communicates to his defence to set a line which acts as an offside trap. When the ball is played, keepers can get caught in two minds whether they should come out and claim the ball or parry, or stay at home inside the six-yard box. Against Hertha Berlin, we see this in action.



The ball isn't in a particularly dangerous position but an excellent delivery, some poor man marking and indecision from the goalkeeper could lead to a Hertha Berlin equaliser. Valentino Lazaro is over this free-kick, while Schalke are set up defensively on the edge of the 18-yard box with Nübel sitting on the six-yard line. The initial movement from Nübel is vital in his decision making process.



It's a positive choice by Nübel who makes an initial step to his left. He has identified that the delivery from Lazaro is heading towards the back post. By coming off his initial line, Nübel will challenge the play with either a catch or a parry clear towards the touch line. Whilst Schalke have a 3v2 advantage in this scenario, there is still a chance for a Hertha player to make the situation difficult.



Nübel makes a strong decision and takes possession of the ball as two Hertha players lurk ominously. Due to making a smart initial read on where the ball was likeliest to end up, as well as choosing to take possession, he ensured that the situation was defused.

QUICK AND DECISIVE

A split-second decision by a goalkeeper can be the difference between being in position to make a save and conceding. As he has shown this season, Nübel is very agile and very quick off his line. One thing to note about him is he is very aggressive in closing down angles and making the goal seem smaller for the attacking player.



Against Borussia Mönchengladbach, Nübel showcased his feline abilities midway through the first half when he was called into action. The visitors Gladbach are in a great position at the edge of the area as Nastasić gets caught in between challenging Lars Stindl and man-marking Denis Zakaria. The former plays an intelligent ball past the Schalke defender as Nübel is stationed on his line waiting for the play to develop.



In the space of a second, Nübel spots the danger and pounces to the edge of the six-yard box. By pushing off his line, the Schalke goalkeeper is aiming to shut down the route to goal at his near post whilst also being big enough to cover up the remainder of his goal. There is still plenty of goal for Zakaria to aim at but for the most part it's well covered.



Zakaria takes aim with a powerful effort but Nübel is up to the task, pulling off an excellent reflex save to keep the score at 0-0. By making quick movements to shrink the goal and close down the angles, Nübel was able to make what should've been a routine goal for Borussia Mönchengladbach end up as a corner instead.

FORCING THE ISSUE

With Schalke having a very poor season by the club's high expectations, Die Knappen entered the winter break in need of change. The obvious options would have been to bring in more attacking, creative players who would improve the team going forward and potentially one or two defensive players. Beginning their Rückrunde against Wolfsburg, not many could've expected to see Alexander Nübel named as a starter for the foreseeable future with club captain Ralf Fährmann relegated to the bench.

In his short time in Gelsenkirchen Domenico Tedesco hasn't shied away from making big, cultural decisions. In his first season in charge, he stripped the captaincy from local man Benedikt Höwedes and essentially exiled him away from the club. The same won't be expected to happen to Ralf Fährmann, but his dropping from the starting XI is still significant.

On many occasions in years gone by, Schalke have allowed their strongest players to either leave on the cheap or in particular when their contracts have run out. Most recently, they let Leon Goretzka's contract expire at the end of last season before he joined the record champions

Bayern Munich for free. This is the dilemma which Schalke are in once more. Nübel is out of contract at the end of next season and with what had been a limited amount of

opportunities his departure was becoming more likely.

With Ralf Fährmann having one of his worst seasons to date and Nübel impressing as a stand-in, there is only one option. Even if it means that Fährmann is elsewhere in the near future, Schalke must stick true and move forward with Nübel by all means. Extending his contract should be one of the first things in sporting director Christian Heidel's mind this summer.

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