

DOMINICK DREXLER:



Köln's jack of all trades

BY MATT KARAGICH // allabouttherangers.com

Köln have gone through a rollercoaster of emotions over the past couple of seasons, from the jubilation of making their first European appearance in 25 years to following that with relegation. The karneval club comes from the rich German area of the Rhineland where the likes of Fortuna Düsseldorf, Bayer Leverkusen and Borussia Mönchengladbach all reside. Köln are on the outside looking in though, as the others mentioned all play in the Bundesliga.

After last season's relegation, Köln made immediate changes with Holstein Kiel manager Markus Anfang coming to his hometown club to turn the ship around. He brought over Rafael Czichos with him to help stabilise the defence and introduce a familiar face knowledgeable about Anfang's system. However, the key piece to Anfang's success at Holstein Kiel was attacking midfielder Dominick Drexler.

Drexler has had a turbulent career to date plying his trade with a variety of clubs, including Bayer Leverkusen in their under-19s, but after missing out on professional contract he moved around. Rot-Weiß Erfurt, Greuther Fürth for a couple of seasons and VfR Aalen all featured, but he really failed to make a strong enough impression at any. But in the 2016/17 season that all changed when he joined Holstein Kiel on a free transfer.

Since then, Drexler has transcended into a player who you can't leave off the team sheet. Seven goals and 14 assists in his first season under Markus Anfang at Holstein Kiel helped Die Störche gain promotion to the second tier of German football for the first since playing in the old 2. Bundesliga Nord back in the early 80s.

The Bonn native's previous campaign was electrifying and really solidified that Drexler had made it in the 2. Bundesliga. For the first

time in his career he reached double digits in goals with 12 and was a pivotal distributor to 2. Bundesliga top scorer Marvin Ducksch. At 28, Drexler was finally beginning to become the player he had been touted to be.

MISSING PIECE TO AN EXPENSIVE PUZZLE

Last summer, Drexler made the move to Danish SuperLiga club FC Midtjylland for £2.25 million and was set to play a pivotal role in their Europa League campaign. However, from the moment he arrived in Denmark it became increasingly evident that the move wasn't going to work out. Rumblings of disdain and dissatisfaction led to rumours of Drexler looking for a way out.

Köln were in the middle of their preseason camp. In Markus Anfang's first season in charge, it seemed that there were issues with the style of play and the players being unable to adapt. Despite having easily the best squad in the 2. Bundesliga on paper with the likes of Timo Horn, German international Jonas Hector and one of the best strikers in Germany's second tier Simon Terodde, nothing was clicking.

Perhaps it became obvious that the key to unlocking Köln's full potential was to bring in the player who had been able to drive Holstein Kiel. Just a few weeks prior to the commencement of the season, Dominick Drexler was on his way to Köln for £3.6 million in what was one of the worst kept secrets in the league.

Since his arrival Köln have been a driving force, and his partnership with Louis Schaub has been critical in leading Markus Anfang's side to the top of the 2. Bundesliga. Drexler knew

how to pull the strings in Anfang's system. A combination of high pressing and a consistent, attacking style of football has allowed the team's potential to be unlocked.

It hasn't taken Drexler long to endear himself to Köln. A string of man-of-the-match performances included his three assists in a 3-1 victory over Arminia Bielefeld where it seemed the ball was on a string for him. Drexler has the capabilities to take the game over through his ability to create, strong defensive movements and a surprisingly good knack for regularly finding the back of the net.

Even with a change in formation from Anfang's 4-1-4-1 to a 3-5-2, the role for Drexler is the same.

LEADING FROM THE FRONT

In a system that is reliant on pressing, especially within their own half, Drexler is entrusted to intensely press the ball carrier. Once the player in possession enters Köln's half, expect to see Drexler try to win the ball back for his side to go on the counter. For this to happen, Drexler has to not only be physically strong but to have a big engine. As is quite common, he will press with intensity for 90 minutes.



Against VfL Bochum, we see an example of Drexler hounding the ball carrier for possession. Even when the ball is played elsewhere we will see the Köln midfielder in pursuit.

In the scenario above, Bochum have a free kick inside Köln's half which they try to take quickly. Jhon Cordoba blocks the quick pass but Lee Chung-yung is making himself an option by moving out wide. Drexler picks up Lee's initial movements and aims for the South Korean.



As Lee takes possession Drexler is within touching distance of his opponent. The options aren't favourable for Bochum with Lee facing in the wrong direction. He could play the ball back to his goalkeeper but that would allow Köln to press further up the pitch and get out of their own half. Instead, Lee manoeuvres his way out of Drexler's clutches and finds Robert Tesche.



With Tesche in possession, Drexler leaves Lee and pursues the ball carrier immediately making a 2v1 situation for Köln. If Tesche plays back to Lee, Drexler is in a decent position to win possession for Köln. With Bochum having plenty of numbers forward, a counter-attack could undo the Bochum defence.

The element of pressing with intent to force an error and win possession back for Köln is quite pivotal. Although Bochum were able to keep possession you can see Drexler doesn't allow the player in possession time to assess

the best options available. Through this, Drexler covers a lot of ground. Against Ingolstadt (below) he is able to force a situation where time and space is minimalised.



Timo Horn has cleared the ball from within his own area but fails to give any of his teammates a chance to take possession. Björn Paulsen has plenty of time to make the right decision which is a header towards Christian Träsch who has an abundance of space. Drexler reads the play intelligently and is sprinting towards Träsch.



As Träsch takes possession, Drexler has gained considerable ground on the Ingolstadt defender. Köln are quite deep which aids Drexler's pursuit as Träsch doesn't have a particularly good option to play the next ball.



In that moment of indecision, Drexler is able

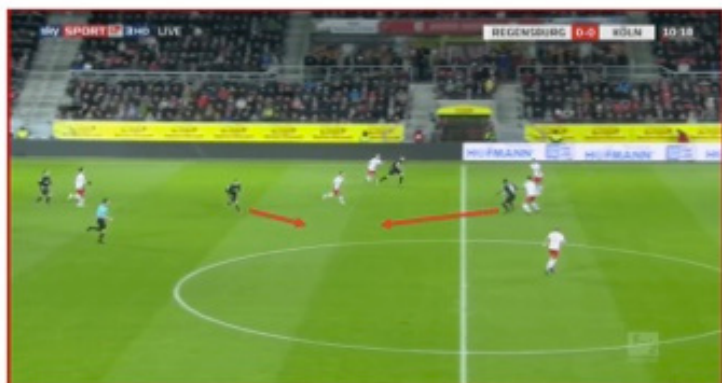
to close the gap to within touching distance. Now Träsch can either play the ball back or try and create space going forward. The Ingolstadt midfielder chooses the latter and gets a bit of breathing space to whip a ball into the 18-yard-box.



The ball in is of little danger to the Köln defence as it's headed clear. Though simple, by applying pressure to Träsch in a not so dangerous situation he was able to force doubt in his opponent's decision making, thus defusing a potentially dangerous attack.

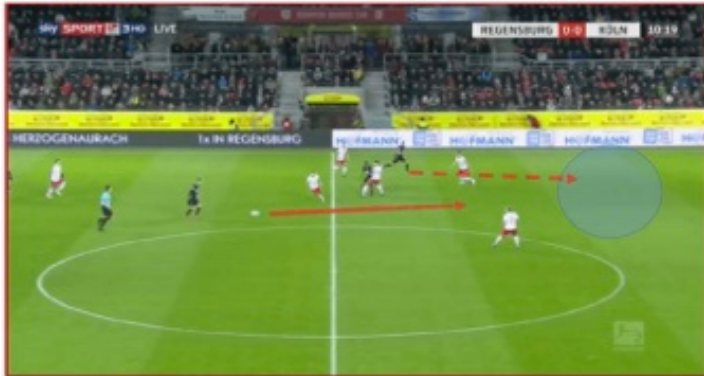
PRECISION THROUGH THE PASS

One of Drexler's strongest attributes is as a passer. He seems to have this uncanny knack of playing the right pass at the right time. In his role as the number 10, it's essential that he is able to link up with two forward players. This season we have seen Drexler produce 12 assists in the 2. Bundesliga and they have come in a variety of ways.



In Köln's matchday 16 fixture with Jahn

Regensburg, we see Drexler's precision on full display. With a long ball from Timo Horn to Jhon Cordoba, it's evident that with quick play Köln can expose the Regensburg defenders who are quite high up the pitch. Cordoba plays a quick header to the space in front of Drexler.



Without a second thought Drexler plays it first time with Simon Terodde running into space. There is a considerable gap between the Jahn defence and goalkeeper allowing Terodde to run onto the ball. Drexler takes full advantage by placing the ball in a dangerous area with the Regensburg defenders relatively motionless.



Terodde collects with little resistance from the Jahn Regensburg defenders and sticks the ball past a helpless Philipp Pentke. Drexler's instinct to quickly develop the move is lethal to the opposition. But he is more than a one touch pony.

Against St. Pauli earlier in the season, Drexler produced a classy assist to Simon Terodde to level the scores. There are a couple of key components which allowed the assist to take place.



With the ball played forward to Drexler, St. Pauli midfielder Marvin Knoll is in a good position to force Drexler back or even dispossess him. We can see Drexler is looking for the byline, and he has Knoll covered for straight pace. At least if Drexler can get to the byline he will be able to create a potentially dangerous ball to the Köln players streaming into the box.



Drexler is able to get around Knoll and now has the option to play the ball to his left. However, Philipp Ziereis - who was tightly marking Terodde - has come to close down the space in front of Drexler. Knoll and Ziereis are focussed on the ball, but Terodde is free if Drexler can get the ball to him.



With the perfect weight and accuracy Drexler picks out the unmarked Terodde who scores past Robin Himmelmann. Timing is of the

essence when Drexler makes a play. This has been the case so often in the past two seasons when something he has touched leads to a goal.

SET-PIECE THREAT

One of Drexler's strings to his very long bow is his ability to score, even if he might not replicate the number of goals he scored last season for Holstein Kiel. But essentially, he doesn't need to when you have the likes of Simon Terodde, Jhon Córdoba and Anthony Modeste. That said, Drexler has chipped in with six 2. Bundesliga goals with two of those coming from set pieces.



In Köln's tricky fixture at Ingolstadt, Drexler was able to score a crucial second goal to give Markus Anfang's side an important victory. Just before the hour mark, Johannes Geis is about to put the ball into the area. Drexler is occupying the back post with Christian Träsch zonally marking whilst the rest are being tightly man-marked.



The ball is delivered to the far post and Drexler is already in prime position. Träsch is late

getting into a decent position to at least thwart a potential goal-bound effort. Jonathan Kotzke has dropped off his opponent, while Córdoba is ready to pounce. Goalkeeper Philipp Tschauner is in a very good position to make a save.



Drexler connects brilliantly beating Tschauner at his near post. There's not a whole lot the Ingolstadt shot stopper could have done with a powerful effort from close range. But what happens when a similar scenario is greeted by tight man-marking?



We can see such a situation against Sandhausen when Drexler is able to beat his marker to the spot and equalise for Köln. From a free kick in a dangerous area, we see Sandhausen setting up the offside trap on the six-yard line. Drexler is once again the back-post option with Philipp Förster tightly man-marking the Köln midfielder.



As the ball comes in, Drexler fights Förster for prime position but the Sandhausen defender is well placed to prevent the Köln midfielder from getting past. Undeterred, Drexler goes behind Förster and not only gets ahead of his opponent but gets goal side.



With Drexler in a perfect position he taps the ball home with Marcel Schuhen left helpless.

MARKUS ANFANG'S PRIZED JEWEL

With Köln in a position to return back to the Bundesliga, Markus Anfang can count his lucky stars that his favourite pupil Dominick Drexler is helping bring one of Germany's best supported clubs back to the top flight. In a scenario where the formation has changed and Drexler's role has been adapted, the Bonn native has had little issue in conveying the creative ideas of Anfang's on the pitch.

Drexler adds the creative touch to the correct play in almost every conceivable scenario. His intelligence combined with the duo of Louis Schaub and Johannes Geis can create a sustainable model for Köln if they go up.

One of many lingering questions for Drexler and Köln will come at the end of the season when the 28-year-old is out of contract. Will Köln be able to keep Anfang's prized jewel, or will Drexler once again go for a change of scenario as has been so often the case in his travel-laden career?



