

LINTON MAINA:



The Hannover wunderkind ready to set the 2. Bundesliga ablaze

BY MATTHEW KARAGICH // @MatthewKaragich

The renaissance of youth football in Germany has been representative in the country's success on the big stage. Their World Cup triumph in 2014 was accompanied by numerous appearances in the semi-finals of major tournaments. Some youth academies are more recognised than others. Die Knappenschmiede run by Schalke is arguably the most successful alongside Borussia Dortmund's who have produced some of the best German players running around. From Leroy Sané to Marco Reus, it's no wonder the German youth system is a factory for top end talent.

One such academy which flies under the radar in this category is Hannover 96; it is not the biggest club in North Germany by any stretch but it has a strong following. But what does not get recognised is the quality of players exiting the club via it's youth program. Players such as former Arsenal defender Per Mertesacker, former Schalke players in Fabian Ernst and Gerald Asamoah and now Borussia Dortmund Head of first team football Sebastian Kehl all graduated from Hannover.

Now, Hannover's next crop of talented academy graduates will look to take the club back to the Bundesliga after the relegation of last season. Waldemar Anton is already well known in the Hannover first team for quite some time making 102 league appearances for the club. At one stage last season, Anton was named captain of the club and was the youngest to be given the honour. Sebastian Soto is a promising striker hailing from the United States and one who has attracted plenty of interest from Bundesliga sides like Borussia Dortmund.

Linton Maina is an interesting case, someone who has shown an abundance of talent at youth level but is still yet to showcase his full array of skills at first team level. The Berlin-

born midfielder set his sights on becoming a first team regular from the moment he joined Hannover's academy back in 2014 from SV Empor Berlin. Maina made an immediate impact at U17 level, playing in a variety of different roles under trainer Christoph Dabrowski.

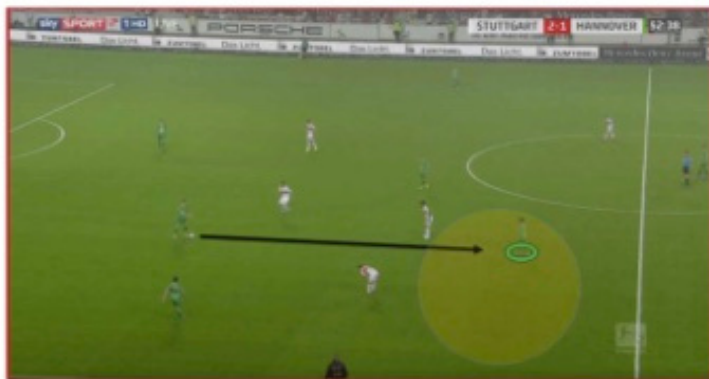
Dabrowski has played a pivotal role in the development of Maina in a footballing sense. After floating around in an assistance role behind ex trainers Michael Frontzek, Thomas Schaaf and Daniel Stendel, who currently manages Barnsley in the Championship, Dabrowski took charge of Hannover's U19 side at the time Maina gained promotion from the U17 side. With the U19's, Maina made 47 appearances, scoring 11 goals and producing six assists. During that time the Berlin native was dominant in the German under age set-up, representing the U18's up to the U20's.

At the conclusion of his time with the U19's, then Hannover manager André Breitenreiter promoted Maina to the first team towards the end of the 2017/18 campaign, when he made two appearances off the bench in defeats at Borussia Dortmund and on the final day to Bayer Leverkusen. In the defeat to Bayer Leverkusen, Maina recorded his first assist to now Werder Bremen striker Martin Harnik.

Maina would make his first start for Hannover the following season on the opening matchday against Werder Bremen. The now 20-year old would go on to make a further 19 appearances, with injuries largely disrupting his first full campaign with the first team. The big milestone for Maina was his first Bundesliga goal coming against northern rivals Wolfsburg at home. In the matches he played, Maina showed plenty of talent and technical ability to get Hannover fans excited. The question remains, can Maina be one of the go-to players that helps Hannover in the promotion push this season?

TECHNIQUE ON THE BALL

Maina has been considered as one of the more technically gifted players to graduate from Hannover's academy. One of his best attributes is the ability to maintain tight control of the ball in difficult spaces, as he is able to find solutions when under intense pressure. Over the course of his career at all levels, Maina completes only 47.7% of dribbles which isn't particularly impressive. There should be an improvement this season barring any injuries or interruptions.



Against Stuttgart in the season opener, Maina was perfect while dribbling and proved to be a handful in an exciting duel with Borna Sosa. In the initial phase of play we see Hannover looking to play from the back, with Marcel Franke on the ball and Maina getting in behind the Stuttgart press. Three Stuttgart players focused on the ball carrier with Maina in plenty of space. The positioning of Maina is strong to acknowledge Stuttgart's game plan and the ball from Franke is on point. With space and nobody pressing behind Maina, the Berlin native can turn and go.



With the defence split and Maina turning to go,

Sosa now applies pressure. Intelligently, Maina spots the space out wide vacated by Sosa and looks to turn onto his predominant foot and lead a Hannover attack. The quickness of Maina to change direction after the interaction with Sosa is key which forces the Stuttgart defender to foul. What's critical in this scenario is watching Maina process the play, seeing the space behind the press and exploiting it to give Franke an option. Then, on turning with the ball and seeing Sosa close in, he finds the best area of attack and tries to utilise this to Hannover's advantage.



In the final game of the Bundesliga last season, we see Maina's quickness in possession and technique on the ball which allows him to take the space in front of him. As Fortuna Düsseldorf fullback Matthias Zimmermann closes in on Maina, the Hannover midfielder is decisive with the ball. A quick touch away from a lunging Zimmermann and he leaves the Fortuna defender in his wake.

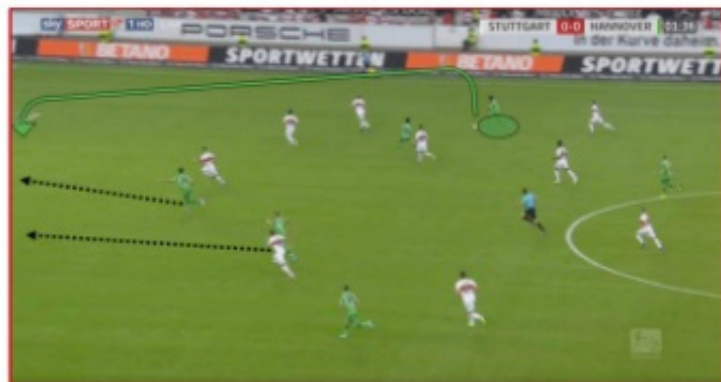


As the play progresses, Maina has entered the box with Kaan Ayhan now covering the speedy midfielder. Maina is surveying the box looking for an option to play towards. But with the Fortuna Düsseldorf defence covering

the Hannover attack well, Maina's only real option is to attack the space highlighted. He quickly plays around Ayhan and drives at goal. Maina shows intelligence in the box, despite not scoring as Rensing parried his shot into the bar. Nevertheless, Maina shows patience and intellect in waiting till the last moment to evaluate passing options before going on his own.

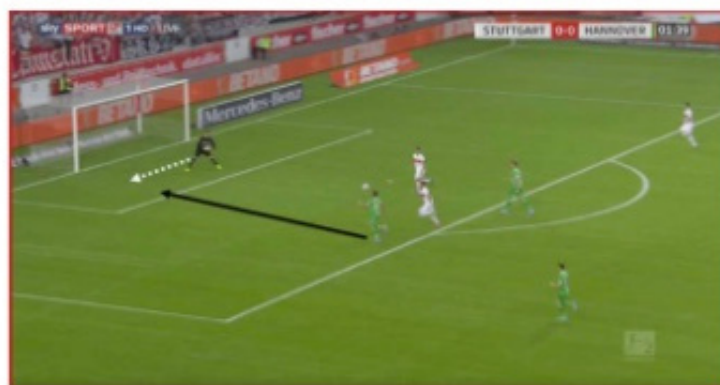
PASSING REPERTOIRE

A strong technical ability on the ball can also be showcased with how you use possession. Maina is someone who values possession and is able to process multiple situations before playing the ball. This is evident statistically where Maina has a 74.5% pass completion rate over his career. Yet since playing first team football in the Bundesliga, Maina managed to complete 76.6% of his passes. It's evident that with time Maina can easily be a player who is a low to mid 80% passer as he continues to grow.



One part of his passing repertoire that does need improving is playing the long ball. Prior to the start of this season, Maina managed to complete only 51.3% of his long passes. This is not an indictment on Maina but it's certainly something that can be refined over time. Fortunately, in his first couple of games the 20-year old has been very accurate in trying to find a teammate with long ball. This season so far, Maina is tracking at 88.9% from attempts going long and we can see why. In this situation Maina can see both Hendrik Weydandt and

Edgar Prib running towards the 18-yard box. The Stuttgart defence is out of position and a ball into the area could cause havoc.



The ball is too strong for Weydandt but plays Prib in perfectly who takes a touch before taking aim at goal. Whilst not resulting in the opener, the ability to exploit the space in behind the defence and take his teammates towards the vacated area and the ball is critical. In the match with Stuttgart, Maina completed all six long balls in the 2-1 defeat.



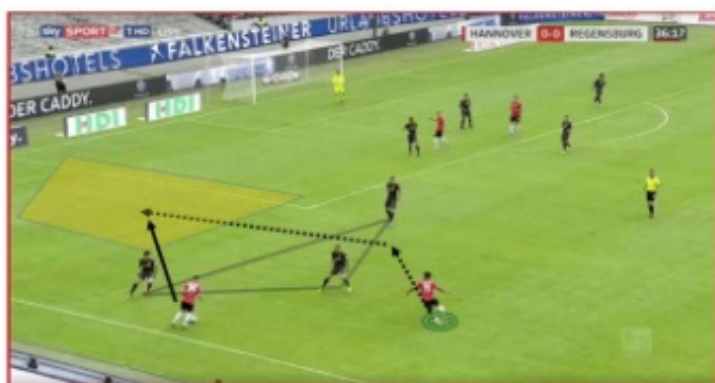
Now, a situation from the other side of the pitch with Jahn Regensburg where Maina played as an inverted left wing back. Here we see a similar principle applied in many ways with one exception. With Marvin Ducksch coming towards Maina and presenting, this allows Weydandt to duck out of the back and become a long option to aim for. Maina is able to see the play develop and opts for Weydandt.



Like the initial situation this doesn't result in a goal as Weydandt can't convert with keeper Alexander Meyer collecting. However, the application and process from Maina is good. Taking into account both situations, he recognises his options quickly and looks to find the best one. When he is able to, then Maina pulls the trigger. Whilst both scenarios saw Hannover leave with nothing, a little refinement in timing and finishing is needed and there is no doubt that later in the season these deliveries by Maina will end in assists.

TWO-WAY OPERATOR

Movement off the ball to create space is an important aspect in many teams' footballing philosophy. Likewise, is pressing the ball carrier to win possession back. These are two aspects at which Maina is proficient at and these are why Hannover trainer Mirko Slomka will likely favour the selection of the Berlin native. Firstly, we look at Maina's work off the ball and how he is able to keep himself involved in the play as well as looking after his defensive responsibilities.

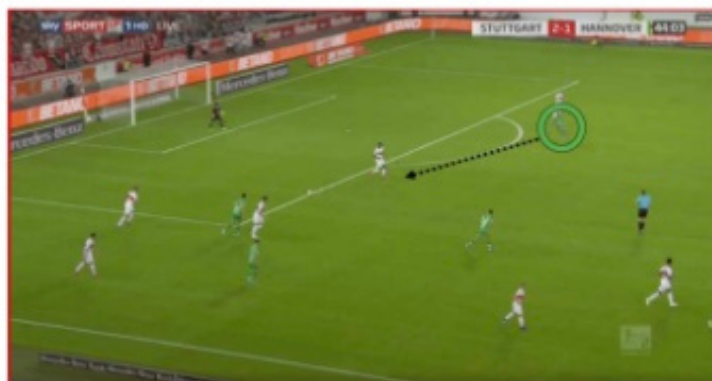


The initial situation is against Jahn Regensburg; Florian Muslija is on the ball with Maina nearby. Jahn have set up a triangle defensively yet there is plenty of space to exploit if the correct run is made. Maina circles around and makes an intelligent run to the empty space at the edge of the area. Muslija plays Maina through with confidence.



Maina immediately crosses first time to give Weydandt and Ducksch the best opportunity for a goal scoring opportunity. The cross is off target and Regensburg are able to clear. Whilst the cross was inaccurate, what we look for is the smart play off the ball. After realising there is space to exploit at the edge of the box, Maina is able to get into gear and give Muslija a reason to keep the attack going rather than pull back and reset.

Defensively, we see the work rate and determination of the 20-year old. As someone who has played a variety of positions including wing back, it is certainly something that can be an asset to Maina's game - a fundamental understanding of how important team defence is but also enables Maina to be tactically adaptable in a variety of different situations.



The scenario used comes in the season opener, with Hannover trailing and looking to force the issue before the break, while Stuttgart look to play out from the back and get to the interval. Maxime Awoudja has possession and is rattled after conceding an own goal moments prior. Maina, aware of this situation, intensely presses Awoudja.



This proves to be a fruitful choice, as Awoudja panics on the ball and gives it straight to Prib. Hannover are able to retain possession in the final third and create an opportunity on goal. Knowing the situation and understanding the state of the game is all important and on this occasion Maina is able to pick out the weakness and win possession back. Whilst Hannover aren't particularly a team that presses in the final third, it's good to see one of the young charges take advantage of a less confident opponent.

TRUSTING YOUTH

Hannover are in the middle when it comes to the squad's average age at 25.4 years, with Sandhausen boasting the oldest at 27.4 and newly promoted Wehen Wiesbaden having the youngest squad at 23.9. But it will be Hannover's young players, in particular those

who have graduated from the academy like Maina, Anton and Soto who will have a big role in the club's potential return to the Bundesliga.

One of the biggest gripes against Hannover as a club is not trusting their youth products enough. It is evident that some of the players who have left as academy prospects have been able to fulfil successful careers elsewhere. But the problem with that is these players could easily shine on the big stage when given a chance. Bad transfer windows and going for big names has seen Hannover in this situation with relegation occurring twice in the past four seasons.

Maina is one that has shown glimpses of his capabilities at Bundesliga and still has more room for development. A season in the 2. Bundesliga will be great for him, as the deadwood is removed from the club this will enable his opportunity to stake a claim as not only a first team regular, but a figure head that Hannover can call upon to influence the game. The question will be whether Slomka will back the youth movement in the long run and back their abilities, or, accept the normality of bringing in players who don't fit the club which has seen Hannover yo-yo back and forth between the top two tiers of German football.

