

URS FISCHER:



How he turned Union Berlin into promotion candidates

BY MATT KARAGICH // [@MatthewKaragich](#)

In sport, especially American sport, we hear the phrase “offence wins games and defence wins championships”. It is a mantra which rings true in some ways for the 2018/19 edition of Union Berlin. The cult club in Germany’s 2. Bundesliga has a strong historical footprint in the game, especially from the days of the German Democratic Republic. But since reunification, the club has never featured in the Bundesliga. They came close in the 2016/17 season under Jens Keller, but fell just short at the final hurdle and finished fourth.

However, this season there is a sense that Union Berlin are on the rise to not only reach the promotion/relegation play-offs but to gain promotion to the top flight. The manager in charge of spearheading Die Eisernen’s revolution from mid-table mediocrity to promotion candidates is 53-year-old Urs Fischer. A native of Switzerland, Fischer has transformed Union’s style of play which focuses on a proactive approach to defending and being efficient going forward.

It’s evident that Fischer has been able to convey this point successfully as Union boast the 2. Bundesliga’s tightest defence with only 26 goals conceded from 27 matches. Sitting in the promotion play-off spot and only three points behind Hamburger SV, Union Berlin fans can dare to dream of life in the Bundesliga.

URS FISCHER

Fischer was a product of FC Zürich’s academy system and throughout his playing career would make 303 appearances for the first team with a stint at St. Gallen in between. It was fitting that Fischer would start his coaching career where it all began. Like his playing career, he would rise through the ranks before getting his chance to manage the first team.

However, his time at Zürich proved to be unfruitful and he was subsequently sacked midway through the 2012/13 season after a string of poor results. Fischer would then head to FC Thun between 2013 to 2015 where he performed admirably with a side that severely lacked the monetary power that others in the league possessed. The dream job of Basel came up and Fischer took it with both hands. His stint at Basel last over two and half years, and in that time he would win the Swiss Championship twice and the Swiss Cup once.

A string to his bow was his ability to develop players. In his last season in charge of Basel he was a catalyst in the development of current Borussia Dortmund centre-back Manuel Akanji as well as Wolfsburg winger Renato Steffen. It was evident that someone with a winning record was built for bigger and better things, thus was surprising to see Fischer named as Union Berlin coach. Nevertheless, this has been an excellent move for Fischer as he looks to build his reputation outside the borders of Swiss football.

FORMATION

Over his managerial career, Fischer has tended to favour a 4-2-3-1 formation with a traditional number nine leading the line. However, this season at Union Berlin the Zürich native has opted for an attacking 4-3-3 with two central midfielders and a defensive midfielder. In possession, the full-backs in Ken Reichel or Christopher Lenz and Christopher Trimmel will add support out wide whilst the midfield three remain tight.

Grischa Prömel is Union Berlin’s version of Frank Lampard; a versatile box-to-box midfielder who can play in a variety of different positions if needed by Fischer. His strong work rate and creativity in midfield proves to be the catalyst in getting Union Berlin going

forward. He plays a pivotal role in midfield. He is deployed alongside on-loan Hannover 96 midfielder Manuel Schmiedebach and Felix Kroos in a tight midfield three.

Thanks to an astute bit of business during the summer, Union Berlin brought in striker Sebastian Andersson from Kaiserslautern. Due to the injuries to Sebastian Polter, this has proved to be a very important bit of business with his 10 goals this season.

SOLID DEFENSIVELY BUT NOT IMPENETRABLE

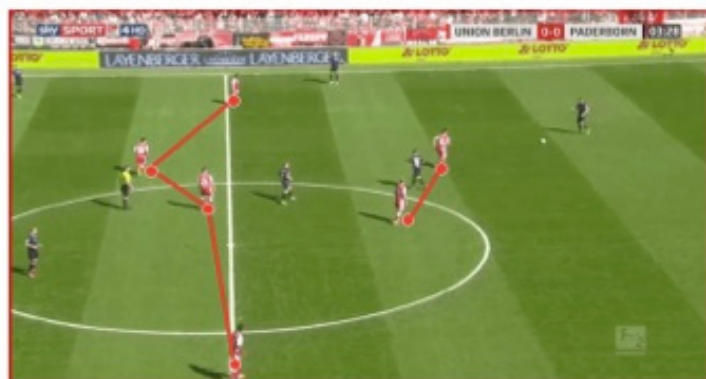
The basis of any good side is having a strong and resilient defence, which Union Berlin do possess. They boast strong goalkeeping, a solid centre-back duo and two astute wingers who are strong in their defensive responsibilities as well as joining rushes and being a part of the attack.

What makes this remarkable in many ways is that three players from the defence, including the goalkeeper, were signings in the summer. Only club captain Christopher Trimmel and Marvin Friedrich were a part of the defensive setup last season. Part of the success has been the system, but the ability to understand each others' tendencies so quickly has been beneficial to their strong defensive performances.



In this scenario, we take a look at how Union Berlin look to play defensively when patient buildup penetrates the defensive line. With

Paderborn deep inside their defensive third of the pitch, Union Berlin are applying a light zonal press upon the ball carrier. Two players cover the space in front, forcing the Paderborn defender to move the ball laterally.



As Paderborn progress up the field, the two forwards have regressed towards the halfway line. From the 4-3-3 system implemented, one of the wingers has dropped into midfield to support the three-man midfield. It's quite common to see Union Berlin opt for a 4-4-2 out of possession.



As time elapses, Paderborn have had meaningless possession but are starting to break down Union Berlin defensively. The biggest issue is the spaces between the back four and midfield which Paderborn are starting to exploit. With the ball played to Kai Pröger, Sven Michel makes the run between the spaces.



Although this attack doesn't amount to anything dangerous with Trimmel able to clear, it was a friendly reminder of how strong attacking teams can exploit Union's defensive structures.

COUNTER-ATTACKING SUPREMOS

One of Union Berlin's biggest tendencies under Fischer is their ability to hit teams on the counter-attack. In the 2. Bundesliga this season, Die Eisernen are second in the league in counter-attacking goals scored with six. Only Köln have scored more.

Fischer's side are deadly. Teams who press high up the pitch like Holstein Kiel and Paderborn can be burnt by their sheer efficiency. Against Holstein Kiel, precisely that happened.



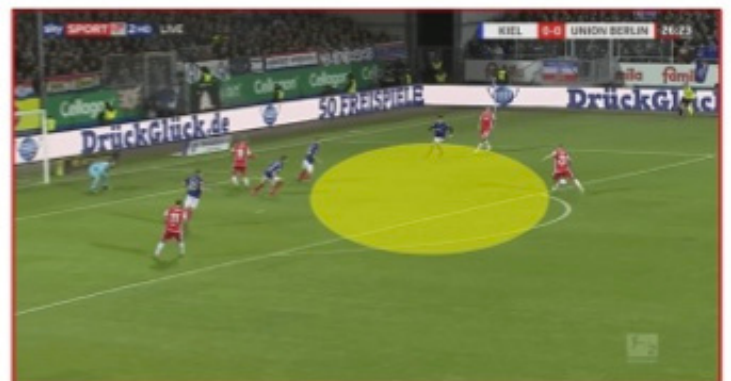
In this scenario, Holstein Kiel are pressing high in their final third, but with so many numbers up Union look to hit them on the counter-attack. Carlos Mané is looking to play the ball where he is facing and Trimmel is providing that option. With Kiel still intent on pressing, Felix Kroos can stray into Union's offensive half untouched whilst Prömel is tracked by Atakan Karazor.



With Trimmel in possession, Prömel is out of the picture and is making a long run down the right wing with Karazor left in his wake. Kroos keeps pushing forward to provide an option. Trimmel hits a perfectly weighted pass in front of Prömel, who can run onto the ball without breaking stride.



Prömel is now on the edge of the area but Holstein Kiel have matched the number of Union Berlin attackers. However, Kroos has caught Hauke Wahl ball-watching and pulls his run back to meet Prömel's ball into the space.



Thanks to an excellent pass to Kroos from Prömel, the midfielder has an abundance of time and space to assess the situation. Kroos can take a touch and shoot, pass the ball to Akaki Gogia or shoot first time. He does the latter and gives Union the lead. The movement included a total of four passes, and showcases how Fischer's side can take advantage of teams aggressively pressing them high up the pitch.

TITAN SET-PIECE STRUCTURE

We know that under Fischer, Union Berlin don't concede very often. What has been

evident this season is how they defend set-pieces. In the 2. Bundesliga, Union Berlin have conceded just five goals from set-pieces; only Dynamo Dresden have conceded fewer with four.

This all comes down to how they set up, with them being particularly successful at killing off danger from corners. There are a couple of examples which showcase a clear strategy at play.



In the first instance against Heidenheim, we can see the structure conveyed. All 10 of the Union Berlin outfield players are inside the penalty area, immediately giving themselves a man advantage.

Kroos is marking space around the near post and will look to shift forward if the ball is delivered to the space in front. Sebastian Andersson is guarding the space in front of Rafał Gikiewicz. With the plan of keeping the keeper on his line it's important for Andersson to pick up the pieces. All of the Heidenheim players inside the box are tightly man-marked.



As the ball is played in we can already see the game plan in action with Kroos edging forward

ever so slightly to cover a ball to the near post. Andersson is in position to snuff out the danger with the ball delivered around the six-yard area. Gikiewicz is off his line but won't be challenging the ball. As the Heidenheim players edge towards the ball, the Union defenders remain goal side and don't allow their opponents a good run at winning the header.



With Gikiewicz retreating, Robert Zulj heads the ball away for another corner. But what if a team is looking to play a short corner in order to draw numbers out of the 18-yard box? Will we see a different defensive structure, or do Union Berlin just alter the formula? Against Ingolstadt we saw a well-oiled machine understanding the formula to avoid conceding from dead-ball situations.



From the outset, Union Berlin remain with the same structure. Two players are defending the space in front of the goalkeeper whilst those inside the box are man-marking an opponent. However, with Ingolstadt looking to play the ball short we have two Union players, Mané and Schmielbach, in position and ready to deal with anything potentially short.



Again, from the outset the Union defence remain goal-side of their opponents with only Björn Paulsen able to escape the clutches of Friedrich. Kroos and Andersson occupy the space in front of the keeper with the set-piece heading between the six-yard box and the penalty spot. With Poulsen breaking loose he has the best chance to influence the play for Ingolstadt.



However, Ingolstadt concede a foul and the danger is averted. This defensive scheme is heavily reliant on discipline, so failure to remain tight on your direct opponent inside the area can be costly. That said, Union have been superb at minimising the danger from set-pieces and it's no wonder they are one of the best in the league at it.

CONCLUSION

Union Berlin might not be the most eye-catching side to watch in the 2. Bundesliga but their commitment to prioritising a defence-first attitude holds them in good stead for the final stages of the season. Fischer has created a stubborn defensive system built

to frustrate sides in open play and especially from set-pieces, with everyone in the team understanding the importance of defending.

Whilst the race for promotion is hotting up with less than a third of the season remaining, Union Berlin are in a great position to reach the play-offs at the very least. Fischer has spearheaded this promotion challenge out of nowhere. The question remains whether this squad and game style can send Union Berlin to the Bundesliga.



