

Young, ready and able?

Germany hopes a young, talented trio can pull it out of a historic slump when it arrives in Japan.



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The Little Kaiser

Comparisons to Franz "Der Kaiser" Beckenbauer came quickly when **Michael Ballack** began gracing the Bundesliga fields in 1998 during Kaiserslautern's surprise title campaign.

Ballack has dark, bushy hair and runs with his body upright — as if he's got a broomstick for a spine. He has a graceful, unharried gait that his detractors mistake for nonchalance.

But Ballack, 25, silenced his critics when he scored three goals in the two-game playoff against Ukraine that earned Germany passage to the World Cup.

Before those strikes, Ballack had been fodder for the German media that enjoyed painting him as a snob — "the Ken doll of the Bundesliga," a pretty boy whose designer clothes proved he didn't have the grit to be a true soccer hero. Ballack didn't do himself any favors by posing in black leather for *SportBild*.

But *Kicker* magazine named Ballack, who's been with Bayer Leverkusen since 1999, this season's best defensive midfielder, an odd category for the Bundesliga's highest-scoring German. Ballack likes to play deep and pick his chances to move forward.

Last fall, he shot Germany to the World Cup. Next fall, he's expected to join Beckenbauer's Bayern Munich, where he could become a big Kaiser.

Better than Beckham

Sebastian Deisler played nine times for his national team by the time he turned 21. Only three other Germans accumulated as many caps by that age: Franz Beckenbauer (14), Olaf Thon (14) and Bernd Schuster (11).

Two years ago, American midfielder Tony Sanneh, then a Hertha Berlin teammate of Deisler's, called him better than Beckham.

"He can cross and hit free kicks just as well," Sanneh said, "but is more athletic, plays more defense and is better at dribbling past people."

Deisler, who turned 22 in January, may have grown tired of the comparison. For one, he prefers to play centrally. Plus, he may be haunted from the last time it was made — on the eve of Germany's World Cup qualifying showdown with England in Munich last September.

Before the game, German federation coach Uli Stielike — a man known more for his disparaging comments — hailed Deisler at Beckham's expense.

England trounced the Germans, 5-1, with Beckham playing a role in all its goals. Worse yet, just as England was gaining momentum with the score tied, 1-1, Deisler missed the easiest of chances.

Still, many Germans believe Deisler, who should join Bayern Munich next season, will prove himself this summer.

Sophisticated defender

Only the most delusional Germany fans could see its successful qualification for the World Cup as a sign that the team has recovered from its worst form in 50 years.

The clincher, a 4-1 win over Ukraine in the European playoffs, came as a breath of fresh air — but it can't erase the first-round exit at the 2000 European Championship or more recent stark reminders of fallibility, such as the inability to get the goal at home against Finland that would have made the Ukraine game unnecessary.

Germany's soccer leaders see the 2002 World Cup as step toward building a title contender on home soil in 2006. That's why **Sebastian Kehl**, 21, is likely to see action in Japan.

He has only three caps and didn't play a role in qualifying. His Bundesliga performances for Freiburg, before his midseason transfer to Borussia Dortmund, have been inconsistent. But he's a defender with qualities that seem to have disappeared from the German game.

Kehl sweeps in front of the backline with the tools to orchestrate a defense and initiate attacks. His skills and composure stand out among the hordes of crude destroyers. If he can handle the international game, Germany's future could look much brighter.

— Mike Woitalla