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[See table of contents](#)

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THE LAST OF THE OSSIS

Michael Ballack and the very Idea of a "Führungsspieler"

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1. IN 2010

Neuer, Lahm, Mertesacker, Boateng, Friedrich, Schweinsteiger, Özil, Khedira, Müller, Podolski, Klose. What might have sounded like a poem by the early Peter Handke - Ladies and Gentleman - is in fact the team line-up of the German national soccer team that beat Argentina 4:0 in the quarter finals of the 2010 South Africa World Cup. The victory marked the finest performance of a German squad since 1990 - the year the team clinched the title in Italy.

The new German team of 2010 was hailed by fans and media all over the planet. No word of "panzers" or "robots" anymore, because these guys were different: young, cool, lively, innovative, joyful, elegant and, most importantly, "multi-cultural", as a felt majority of the German players (or their parents) were born in countries like Tunisia, Brazil, Turkey, Ghana and Poland. None of the players on the pitch, however, had either been born in the former GDR or the "neue Bundesländer" (a post 1990 synonym for new federal countries in the East). In other words, just like the championship-team of 1990, the squad of 2010, representing a, the new Germany, was thoroughly "Ossiless".

But wait. What about Michael Ballack? Our beloved superstar, born 1976 in the Saxonian town of Görlitz? Well yes, Ballack, the designated skipper, was also in the stadium on that fine day, standing on the sidelines in a black suite, limping, with crutches, cheering relentlessly for his team mates, and yet, one felt, he already anticipating the consequences of their stellar performance, namely, that his time as the unquestioned leader, the "Führungsspieler" of our soccer nation, had come to an end.



After almost 20 years in the spotlight of the national media it was time for Ballack to pass the sceptre. Given the unmatched importance of the national team for the emotional well being of my country, such a power shift in “Die Mannschaft” is not to be taken lightly. It carries an enormous symbolic weight. Especially since Ballack is part of a long and venerable tradition of German world-class athletes who were – for the lack of a better term – products of the GDR-sports-system. Names like Katrin Krabbe, Jan Ullrich, Heike Drechsler, Franziska von Almsick, Matthias Sammer, Claudia Pechstein come to mind. All of whom, however, had retired by the summer of 2010 (or were forced to do so).

Michael Ballack, who always speaks highly (if shyly) of his GDR-childhood and youth, started playing soccer in 1982, at the age of seven, at the BSG Motor Fritz Heckert in what was then called Karl-Marx-Stadt (today Chemnitz). Due to his undeniable gifts, he became soon part of the promotion system of the state. In the fall of 1989, thirteen years of age, he had joined the youth team of the then first league club FC Karl-Marx-Stadt and attended a special school for gifted young athletes, the Kinder- und Jugendsportschule Emil Wallner (where he graduated in 1993).

On further reflection, Ballack has emerged not only as the most famous, the only truly global star of the generation that Robert Ide refers to in his aptly titled book “Geteilte Träume – Divided Dreams”¹, he, Ballack, is by 2010 also the last representative, the last member of a dying tribe of sportsmen and -women – the last of the “Ossis”.

For an “Ossi” in the fullest and thereby always paternalistic sense of the word, he has always been, at least for us, the soccer fans from the West. The label stuck with him his entire career – just like (and possibly because of) his Saxonian accent. And when I referred to him “as our beloved superstar”, it was not with a sense of irony or even sarcasm, for, truth be told, Ballack was never really a player cherished by the fans. He never established or evoked a truly emotional relation with them, (like for example Rudi Völler, Jürgen Klinsmann or our chancellors very sweetheart, Sebastian Schweinsteiger did). Ballack was always tough to read, hence, tough to like. He is one of the players – and you will hear that a lot – “that nobody really knows” – and fully trusts. Yes, he is extremely highly regarded, but not revered, much less truly loved. Ballack, our man with Number 13 (!), could never do it quite right. And indeed, he never did.

So permit me, or rather, the Wessi in me, to talk you through the decisive stages and signature moments of his career, a career that remains notoriously unfinished and uncrowned.

2. “THE YOUNG GENTLEMAN FROM THE EAST”

Like almost every talented, ambitious young man from the East Michael Ballack took the first opportunity and moved to the West (“machte rüber”), in his case, to play in the Bundesliga. His first club there was the fiercely competitive provincial club of Kaiserslautern in Southern Germany (Pfalz). Already in his first year as a professional, the season of 1995/1996, Ballack won with his club the Championship (Meisterschaft), a miraculous and to the present day unmatched achievement, as Kaiserslautern had just been promoted. Clearly, our hero’s star was on the rise. Due to his intelligent passing, versatile style, his cool allure, his slightly condescending elegance and yes, his physical beauty, Ballack was soon charmingly compared to Franz Beckenbauer, and called, “der kleine Kaiser” (the little emperor).

But already in his second season, Ballack had become a regular starter, problems and allegations emerged that should stick with him to the present day as Ballack, the young star from Saxonia, was perceived by fans and portrayed by media as aloof and selfish, as a youngster who could not deal with success. His sober attitude was taken for arrogance, his cool tempers for laziness and even phlegm. Especially Ballack’s coach, the already then legendary Otto Rehhagel (safely labelled as an “old school guy” from the heart of the Ruhrgebiet) made no secret of his opinion, that this “talented young man from East Germany” had still a lot to learn - especially in terms of character.

Now, assessments like these may not be untypical for a young successful professional, but on the other hand they seem to summarize quite succinctly one of the main aspects of the Wessi-Ossi-pattern, lead, in other words, right into the heart of the stereotype (especially when dealing with a professionally successful ossi).

More than once became I part of conversations in which my Wessi-colleagues would raise suspicions concerning the character of our common ossi-colleague, would confess an inability to understand his or her behaviour, to read the signs and gestures. In these conversations he or she or I would regularly notice a certain lack of liveliness in this “other”. “Robot-like” is a common concept in such a context, up to very philosophical suspicion of “other minds”, that is, the living doubt, whether the other in question has an inner life at all and is not just an artificially animated shell or machine. After all, these people were systematically trained not to reveal their true intentions, weren’t they, were all too used to live a life of double standards and double truths... It is, of course, one of saddest ironies of such projections that Ossi tend raise the very same doubts and questions

concerning the Wessi-colleagues, most notably in form of an alleged “inner hollowness”, a “robot-like behaviour” or other machine-metaphors.

Not that we Wessis would feel seriously puzzled, at least not in Ballack’s case, for his true intentions were just all too obvious. They were purely materialistic, you see, he was just another young Ossi who wanted to make up for his twenty years of non-consumption and was therefore only after the money. And sure enough, Ballack’s next career move led to him Bayer Leverkusen – a club without tradition nor distinction – but a lot of doe, eternally provided by the company who owns it: the global pharma-giant Bayer. By 1999, the year Ballack joined, Bayer had already established a solid track record of hiring top-players from the former GDR, like Andreas Thom, Ulf Kirsten and Falco Götz.

So this is where our hero went to, Leverkusen, and it was in Leverkusen where Ballack acquired the second and most decisive stigma of his career, namely, that he was not a winner, that, every time it really mattered, Ballack lacked that little magic something that distinguishes the real champion.

Most notably, by the year of the 1999/2000 Ballack’s Leverkusen lead the Bundesliga right up to the last day of play. A draw against the low ranked team of Unterhaching would have been sufficient to secure the championship, but no, Leverkusen lost this away game in the most grotesque way possible, by an own goal, 1:0, scored by, well, Michael Ballack. And when a still astonishingly successful Leverkusen, lost, under Ballack’s guidance, one season later both the Champions League final and the national Cup final and came in again in as a runner up in the Liga, the case seemed settled: Ballack was a very fine player, yes, but not a winner, not a leader. Something was lacking. What was it? Clearly, the Ossi-suspicion was one everybody’s mind: Not tough enough!

Could, would Ballack ever recover from that looser-image? And if so, how? Well, if it was about pure facts, the answer is no. As of autumn 2010, Ballack’s resume still lacks an international title of any kind. In the course of his distinguished career, he managed to loose, as a key player, no less than 5 international finals (and several semi-finals): most of them in a most unfortunate manner. So it is safe to say that soccer history will remember him as the eternal runner up...

But facts are not everything, and Ballack did indeed find a way to free himself (at least temporarily) from this image- which takes us directly to the 2002 World Cup, to South Korea, to Seoul.

3. LEADING BY SACRIFICE

God alone knows how this embarrassingly underperforming German squad had managed to reach the semi-final, but there they were, in Seoul, against the host South Korea: The German squad of 2002 had one real Führungsspieler, our skipper, he was blond, strong, determined and fiercely looking: his name was Oliver Kahn! Ballack was the second force in the team, now: 71st minute of the semi-final, the score is still 0:0. A Korean counter attack on the way, quick, gutsy turns. Ballack chases the ball possessing Korean midfielder, who is about to enter the box. High alert, imminent danger: What to do? With no chance to play the ball, Ballack decides to tackle from behind. It wasn't pretty, you see, but effective. The Korean falls, moans. Free kick, 17 Meter distance. A feast for the invincible Kahn. Ballack knew with certainty that he would be booked for a foul like that, and he also was, without a doubt, all too aware of the fact that he already had been booked in the game before. So with the second warning he would miss next game, hence, the final. And sure enough, Ballack was booked, only to score, three minutes after the shocking news, the decisive 1:0 against Korea. Germany was in the final, Ballack not. But in that moment, in Seoul, a new German leader was born. More than that: A moral hero! A martyr!

With one brave booking, Michael Ballack had successfully tackled the eternal conceptual quandaries of leadership, had cracked the dichotomy of individuality vs. collectivity, had proven himself to be a true team player, who will not hesitate to sacrifice his own interests or even existence for the good of the collective. Ballack had led the squad, in a way, well, it was felt and eventually even said out loud, only an "Ossi" could have done it.

It was a final and rather unappreciated irony of the tournament that no other than "Übermensch" Kahn - to many, especially, I dare to say, in the East, the paradigmatic embodiment of an overambitious, aggressive and egoistic Wessi - committed the decisive mistake that sealed the loss against Brazil. History had spoken. Kahn's all metaphysics of the will were proven wrong, Ballack's "collective leadership" the hay of the day! So the way cleared for Ballack - who just had signed with the eternal national champions of Bayern Munich - to take center stage, to become, if he only wanted to, the new leader of soccer Germany.

4. CAN AN OSSI LEAD THE NATION?

And yet, not everybody found himself convinced. In fact, the question if Ballack was, so to speak, mentally and socially fit to lead the national team was still

lingering on the mind of the Western fan and was most explicitly raised in the fall of 2003 in a Bild-Zeitung-column written by former German legend and then soccer analyst in chief Günter Netzer, who opined the following: "Ballack is not suited for the role of a Führungsspieler" (leader of the squad), an assesment Netzer justified as follows: "Ballack grew up in the GDR. There, the collective (das Kollektiv) was the only thing that mattered, this blocked the way for real geniuses to emerge. Not to imply that this strategy was entirely bad, but Ballack seems to be satisfied with his present status, although he could have much more influence in the team." ²

Thus spoke Netzer and thereby, quite intentionally, triggered a public debate that lasted for weeks and brought to light the entire web of mutual suspicions, allegations and prejudices of the reunified Germany. Could an Ossi truly lead the nation? The question was, of course, not confined to soccer – and never been meant to. After all, Angela Merkel, then head of CDU and leader of the parliamentary opposition, was one her way to become the next German chancellor.

Let me repeat the quote: "Ballack grew up in the GDR. There, the collective was the only thing that mattered, this blocked the way for real geniuses to emerge. Not to imply that this strategy was entirely bad, but Ballack seems to be satisfied with his present status, although he could have much more influence in the team."

It would be very difficult indeed to summarize the strenuous relationship between German politics, culture, history and the very concept of "Führer" in a more succinct manner. You have it all: the bourgeois admiration of individualism in the form of "genie religion" on the one hand, and the social democratics tendency to serve the the gospel of mediocrity on the other. The all too human longing for the good given savior, the Heilsgestalt, and the eternal doubt if that one was "the one", articulated in the old Lohengrin-question: Where do you come from?", and the absolute taboo to ask that very question: "Nie sollst du mich befragen, woher ich kam der der Fahrt"...

Can an individual free itself from its own history and formation? And applied to the very act of asking this question in 2003: Can Germany ever free itself from his Führer-Kult? Maybe in politics. But certainly not in soccer, as it remains a fact that every fully functional soccer team needs a hard-nosed enforcer with a strong sense of hierarchies who will make the decisive calls and won't hesitate to play foul or dirty when need be (and there is always need). Ballack grew into that role, at his club as well as in the national team, won two national doubles with Bayern Munich and then, in his quest for an international title, signed with Chelsea London in 2006.

2006, Merkel is chancellor, Ballack team captain and the nation in full mental preparation mode to host the World Cup, remember, that magic summer of waving flags and healthy patriotism (it was healthy, wasn't it), when the reunified Germany finally felt itself as a "einig Vaterland" - and a good humoured one at that. The Ossi-thing, clearly, had become a non-issue, seemed once and for all a thing of the past.

Sure, there was this little telling controversy between Ballack and the ever so slick team-manager Oliver Bierhoff over a banner that the team was to unroll after its loss in the semi-finals ("Thank you fans, you were great!" or something), were Ballack positioned himself in clear opposition the market-mainstream by claiming his right to honestly weep for at least a few minutes, proving once more that this man, deep in his heart, was still dancing to a different ideological tune.

But that was a minor coincidence and Ballack's reign lasted, through another lost final in the European-Championship, until our skipper was gravely injured in the English cup final of May 2010 and, by consequence, was out for the world cup. Our deepest fears came true. No leader this time? Everybody was devastated, except for the young team itself. Some key players seemed actually rather relieved: Tactically, Ballack had for while been rumoured to slow the game down, and socially speaking, the 33-year old veteran and his somewhat old school approach to authority and hierarchy disliked by quite a few of the younger players. Anyway, you all have seen them play. Schweinsteiger, Klose and newly appointed skipper Lahm did take care of business, and so we re-enter the last act in the drama.

5. CALL IT A PLAY?

Almost immediately after the tournament an open and at times even vile media feud developed around the question of Ballack's future status and function for the team. After all, his contract in Chelsea had not been extended and so our hero decided to come back to Bayer Leverkusen. Number 13 was coming home. Looking back at these almost 20 years of world class performances - it cannot escape us that Ballack's career and public perception was, maybe for a very last time in history, framed by the stereotypes that constitute the semantics of the "Ossi-field".

- i) As a materialistic careerist without genuine values, bonds or convictions; a person so hard to read and reach that he almost seems pathologically deformed

- ii) As a player/person that lacks the necessary inner toughness in character to go all the way, a destined loser (although on a very high level)
- iii) A self-negating collectivist that is willing to sacrifice his dreams for the common good, in other words: someone who doesn't get how it really works in a capitalist society
- iv) A cold, egoistic player with a sickening ambition and a distinct tendency to feel misunderstood and to perceive himself as being treated unfairly

Clearly, this set of Ossi-attributes is blatantly self-contradictory. But that should not surprise us. Most long lasting stereotypes are. That is their evil beauty. At the time we speak (October 2010), Ballack is again injured. His future as a professional is in doubt, his return to the national team rather unlikely. The obituaries, one hears, are already in the making. He will be dearly missed. Because whatever the reason is: They just don't make Ossis like that anymore. It's a real pity.

Notes

¹ Robert Ide, *Geteilte Träume - Meine Eltern, die Wende und Ich*, Luchterhand, 2007

² Bild, 17.9.2003