



Poch is right...top four is more important than cups

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

by Matt Barlow
in Cologne



STEFFEN FREUND thinks it probably all started with a game against Arsenal. He was banned at the time and so he took a seat with Tottenham fans to watch the derby, everyone got along famously, a song was born and a connection was made.

Spurs fans started to sing, 'I love Steffen Freund, Steffen Freund loves me,' and the anthem to a cult hero only grew louder as the midfield hard-man failed to score a single goal in five years at White Hart Lane.

'I loved the intensity, you could feel it much more than when you're on the pitch,' says Freund, as he reflects on good times ahead of Wednesday's clash in the Champions League between Tottenham and Borussia Dortmund, the two clubs closest to his heart. 'They realised from that day I was a supporter, like them.'

'You know the history of Tottenham Hotspur. You know my style of football. Maybe we were not best suited to each other.'

'I wasn't skilful enough to be Glenn Hoddle. Maybe supporters were laughing in the beginning when I won the ball and played it straight to the opponents again. I can laugh about it, but I know how good I was without the ball, and I think I was one of the best.'

At Spurs, they adored Freund's commitment and courage, and his popularity has been reinforced since by occasions like the time when he turned up at the World Darts Championship at Alexandra Palace dressed in a purple Teletubbies outfit.

'I lost a bet with my children,' explains Freund. 'My family love darts. As a child in Brandenburg, my hometown, there is a lot of water. We would take a boat and go camping on an island in the forest, we'd have a dartboard.'

'So when you live in London and you have the option, you have to go to Ally Pally. It was the third round and Adrian Lewis threw a nine-darter. I was there only once and that was the day. What a game.'

Another eccentric man-of-the-people moment came when he wore his old 1999 League Cup final shirt, covered in autographs, as he took his son to see his Tottenham play at Old



DAY HE BECAME A TELETUBBY!

FREUND, dressed as Tinky Winky after losing a bet, meets darts fans at Ally Pally in 2014



Then and now: Freund poses with a photo of himself at his first club, Stahl Brandenburg

PICTURE: KEVIN QUIGLEY

FACTFILE

AGE: 49
POSITION: Defensive midfielder
CLUB CAREER: Stahl Brandenburg 1988-91
Schalke 04 1991-93
Borussia Dortmund 1993-98
Tottenham 1998-2003
Kaiserslautern 2003-04
Leicester (loan) 2004



At Tottenham:

Games 131
Goals 0

INTERNATIONAL CAREER:

Germany:
Caps 21
Goals 0

HONOURS:

Borussia Dortmund: Bundesliga in 1994-95 and 1995-96, Champions League 1997
Tottenham: League Cup 1999
Germany: Euro 96

SAYS STEFFEN FREUND

Spurs cult hero and now a German TV star



Trafford. He grabbed it from its display case in his Berlin home, where it resides alongside other souvenirs, including shirts from every season signed by his team-mates.

It didn't take long for the away fans to serenade him with his song as a queue formed for selfies.

'My boy is a Man United fan and was in his Man United shirt. That's why I wore my Spurs shirt,' said Freund. 'It wasn't to be in the paper, trust me, but that reaction showed I did something good.'

'I always say my years at Tottenham was my most enjoyable time. At Borussia Dortmund we won the Bundesliga twice, the Champions League and the Club World Cup, and I won the European Championships, but that was the most enjoyable.'

Freund was 29 when he was signed from Dortmund, by George

Graham, when Patrick Vieira and Roy Keane were prowling the midfields of the Premier League.

'George had won everything — but it was for the wrong club,' smiles Freund. 'The supporters didn't like him from his past with Arsenal. And Leeds, because it's not a club we all love, right?'

'The atmosphere is outstanding at Elland Road but sometimes you'd go to take a throw and they'd spit on you.'

'No problem, I loved it when it was boiling. I loved the crowds in England and I loved the respect. Even Arsenal supporters would respect me. I always gave 100 per cent — that was the key to a place in the hearts of the supporters.'

Freund has flourished in television since leaving Tottenham for the second time — after a three-year coaching stint — and he bustles around the studio in Cologne before settling into conversation.

He is prepping for his Monday night show, *100% Bundesliga*, a look at the weekend's action from Germany's top two divisions.

Freund has been impressed by the Dortmund of Lucien Favre, top of the German league, the work of Michael Zorc, his former team-mate who became the club's sporting director, and the impact of English teenager Jadon Sancho. But is no less effusive in his praise for Mauricio Pochettino, the man who marked the beginning of the end of his time at Spurs. Freund's first farewell came in 2003, released by Hoddle at the end of his contract. He was

invited back, nine years later, complete with his UEFA Pro Licence and experience coaching Germany's Under 17s, to join Andre Villas-Boas's backroom staff, and later Tim Sherwood's.

WHEN Pochettino arrived, however, he spent one season working as a club ambassador and left in 2015.

'We don't have enough people like Mauricio,' says Freund. 'Former players and Pro Licence coaches with top-level experience, leading football clubs.'

'That's not against Andre. We worked together — I'm not against that style. Look how much Jose Mourinho has won, he worked hard to be a top coach and Andre did the same in Portugal. But overall we've gone too much that way. In Germany, young coaches are coming through and only learning football from the book.'

In one full season under Villas-Boas, Tottenham came fifth with 72 points, a Premier League best for the club at the time. Then they sold Gareth Bale, sacked Villas-Boas in December, replaced him with Sherwood and finished sixth with 69 points.

In the first season under Pochettino they dropped to 64 points, finishing fifth.

'He could have sacked him easily but Daniel Levy realised he had to stay with Mauricio,' said Freund. 'It was the right decision,

and something positive comes back to Andre, Tim and me. The club at the time was really noisy, really nervous; really angry if we didn't beat teams at home.'

'Maybe Daniel realised it would never change if he didn't stay with the coach.'

Pochettino has responded by leading Spurs into the Champions League for three years in a row but the debate around silverware lingers on because they have won only one League Cup (2008) since Freund's team won the same trophy, 20 years ago.

'I won silverware several times and I remember every moment,' says the 49-year-old. 'It is special for everyone because you feel it, but I have changed my view.'

'Football is now more of a business and, in England, Spurs, are No 6 financially. Others are stronger and Mauricio's job is to be in the top four, so they can have more money from the Champions League, and keep the best players and the coach.'

'And, I have to say it, they are above Arsenal. When we finished fifth with Andre, you could feel the pressure on the last day because if we won and Arsenal drew we were in the Champions League, above them. Mauricio has done it. That's why the supporters are happy.'

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