

Looking ahead: The Bundesliga and Bundesliga 2 in 2030

With the establishment of the task force “Future of Professional Football”, the DFL has taken a large step forward creating a framework for open-ended discussions by involving a wide range of experts. Based on shared values, concepts have been developed for promoting greater social responsibility in professional football as a cultural asset in Germany and also for implementing cost discipline and transparency at national and international level.

Looking ahead to 2030, the following target picture has been outlined:

- As one of the largest and most popular professional sports leagues in the world, the Bundesliga and the Bundesliga 2 enjoy sporting success and good financial health. Enthralling the crowds in the stadiums, they represent one of Germany’s most attractive media contents and have global reach. Competition in both leagues is fair and honest and generates huge excitement across the entire range of the league tables. German clubs are among the strongest in the world.
- With measures taken to promote sustainability in their core business based on the three pillars of “economy”, “ecology” and “society”, the professional clubs have been able to bring broad segments of the population onside in terms of the environment and climate protection in pursuit of carbon neutrality and to social responsibility and good leadership. Both internal and externally, professional football acts as role model for an inclusive society.
- The Bundesliga and Bundesliga 2 protect and respect human dignity on the basis of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and provide fair working conditions for their employees, including players and coaches.
- The clubs have been successful in maintaining and strengthening the passion of all fan groups and have continued to inspire their loyalty. One crucial factor here is the ongoing development of participatory structures in the clubs and associations. The close interaction between clubs (including the coaches and players) and the great fan diversity is mirrored in regular forums and structures designed to promote exchanges and dialogue.
- Women’s football has continued to develop strongly, recording a high in the number of girls’ and women’s teams. The top division has been professionalised thanks to the close co-operation between the DFB, the DFL and their clubs. The result is an attractive sports competition which is economically viable.
- The DFL and the clubs have a concept for promoting gender equality. With these measures significantly more leadership positions in football are being taken up by women in full-time and honorary roles.
- The attitude and conduct of the DFL and the clubs are characterised by integrity, transparency, good economic sense and democratic structures. Compliance systems headed by independent supervisory bodies provide the framework for compliance with laws and standards, especially those relating to fair competition. They ensure equality of opportunity, diversity and openness. Just like the fans, sponsors and other stakeholders, the DFL and the clubs are able to take a critical look at themselves and accept responsibility in order to represent football as a social entity not only now but also in the future. Acting as a game changer, professional football uses its appeal to promote social cohesion.

Background and task

The DFL Executive Committee launched its task force Future of Professional Football in September 2020. 37 experts from the fields of sport, society, science, politics and business were appointed to reflect on past developments, hold discussions across multiple disciplines and eventually devise practical ways forward.

The process

In light of the multifaceted and fundamental issues, a key factor was to take account of a wide range of external perspectives, thus allowing an interdisciplinary discussion of the complex questions.

The three working groups that make up the task force held a total of nine meetings between October and December 2020. Each meeting was chaired by psychologist Prof. Heidi Möller, the managing director of the Department of Psychology at the University of Kassel, where she is Professor of Theory and Methodology of Counselling. Members of the DFL Executive Committee attended the meetings as silent observers to gain an understanding of the key issues being discussed in the working groups.

In open-ended discussions lasting more than 30 hours, the task force took a detailed look at German professional football, examining issues previously identified by the DFL Executive Committee such as the balance of competition, cash flows, social integration, ethical guidelines, fan interests, financial stability and the promotion of women’s football.

The result

Proceeding in a spirit of trust, the constructive discussions in the working groups helped to elaborate problem areas, identify goals and define initial recommendations for achieving those objectives. The vision outlined above has subsequently been developed on the basis of the working group discussions, with the direct and interdisciplinary exchange of information and ideas creating a better understanding of the positions of other stakeholders.

While there was a broad consensus on the problem areas and the goals derived from them, very different – and not always mutually compatible – measures for achieving those goals were discussed. The results therefore offer an insight into the multi-faceted ideas exchanged and can serve as a basis for discussion for the DFL Executive Committee and the 36 clubs and companies of Bundesliga and Bundesliga 2.

A decision can be made on some of the measures and ideas, with the clubs implementing them in the near future. Others will require extensive, more detailed examination and elaboration by expert panels and commissions, resulting in a recommendation in favour of a gradual approach.

Task force recommendations

1. Fundamental commitment to sustainability for German professional football

- Sustainability across all its dimensions ought to serve as the basis for the business activities of the DFL and the Bundesliga and Bundesliga 2 clubs. The DFL and all Bundesliga and Bundesliga 2 clubs recognise their economic, ecological and social responsibility for the core business of the Bundesliga as a key foundation of their economic business activities and the social integration of professional football.
- To take account of global developments and changing requirements as well as securing ongoing financial success, rating agencies should be requested for proposals to record and assess the sustainability standards at the Bundesliga and Bundesliga 2 clubs.
- The DFL will consult experts and make a decision on aligning the measures to ESG (environmental, social, governance) criteria or SDGs (sustainable development goals).
- Following an initial assessment of the current situation, a regular review – also in the context of the licensing process – should play a role in the ongoing sustainable development of professional football. The clubs will be recommended to deploy a sustainability officer.
- The criteria could have the following priorities:
 - The introduction of uniform, cross-league ecology ratings and/or sustainability standards (even including a review of supply chains, for example)
 - A clear commitment to values such as inclusion, anti-racism and diversity
 - The implementation of transparent and stricter compliance and governance guidelines for clubs and their officers (also covering liability).

2. Establishment of a sustainability and responsibility commission

- Building on the proposal to take ESG criteria into greater consideration across all processes of professional football, a sustainability and responsibility commission can provide the DFL and the clubs with support in their transformation process.
- One of the first tasks of this commission could be to elaborate criteria for the request for proposals from rating agencies to record and assess the clubs, but also to propose additional licensing terms and conditions.
- In the process of implementing the objectives, the stakeholders place the main emphasis on awareness and reward systems – but also, if necessary, on sanctions.

3. Development of a binding values structure/code of conduct and human rights-based approach

- With the clear aim of embodying the defined values, the task force recommends developing binding codes and a human rights-based approach. These should apply equally to all stakeholders in professional football, including associations, clubs, their boards, fans, as well as players and coaches, but also to sponsors and partners of the league and the clubs.
- Here the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights should be used as the basis, in particular to ensure a uniform and internationally recognised approach, which also includes compensation.
- To gain the broadest possible acceptance and success, all stakeholders (including associations, clubs, fans, coaches, players, sponsors and civil society) should be involved in the development process.

4. Identification of new strategic partners with a focus on sustainable and responsible action and economic management

- To achieve a stronger focus here, the DFL and its clubs should enter into new strategic partnerships and sponsorship deals, looking in particular at sustainability and digitalisation. For example, the creation of additional sport sponsorship rights both at league and club level can be examined (e.g. “sustainability partners”).
- The additional income obtained, if it is generated at league level, can be distributed among clubs in line with the planned ratings.
- Here the league and the clubs should not focus solely on traditional sponsorship. Possible are projects and investments in further digitalisation, sustainability and much else besides.
- The introduction of a “pre-season” can be used to reinforce solidarity between the clubs and leagues. Whether friendlies between Bundesliga clubs and lower-league teams could be played and marketed should be explored in more detail. Any revenue should be used to benefit the lower-league clubs and/or charitable initiatives.

5. Implementation of nationally visible campaigns and introduction of “awards” / “day of service”

- A clear aim of the DFL should be increase the visibility of the many projects which already enjoy the commitment of players, coaches, associations, clubs and fans. However, new nationwide initiatives should also be launched. For example, bundled social projects implemented nationwide under a specific theme / motto (with new ones to be defined every year) would lend the clubs’ individual invaluable initiatives greater visibility. As an example, the issue of equality in education could be addressed and, by involving day-care facilities in deprived areas and offering physical education classes, ensure that children are attracted to the sport.
- One possibility for creating incentives for commitments and making them stand out more prominently could be the introduction of various “awards”. Feasible here is the creation of an award for players who have shown the greatest commitment off the pitch with their own social projects in the previous season (“social awards”). Awards of this kind can be extended to include clubs, fans/fan projects or officials.
- Another initiative for addressing social problems and bringing people closer together on the basis of mutual support in direct dialogue on a local basis (“building bridges”) could be introducing a “day of service” (see major leagues in the US). Players, coaches, fans and clubs use this day to actively support local initiatives, including food banks, care homes for the elderly/disabled or other social institutions and projects, both financially and personally.
- Examples of other potential initiatives/campaigns discussed by the task force include providing materials and infrastructure (football boots, balls, goal posts, football pitches) or free tickets for deprived people and social assistance associations. Working together with sponsors may be a very feasible option for implementing these kinds of initiatives.

6. Convocation of a working group to strengthen the financial stability of professional football clubs

- Revising the licensing system and its economic/financial criteria is a sensible measure for ensuring the future financial stability of all professional football clubs and the integrity of the competitions.
- The balance between income and expenses must be ensured. This needs to be examined in the course of the next discussion relating to the distribution of media revenue.
- In addition to stricter requirements on liquidity, profitability and building up equity, further discussions on rules governing wage bills and transfer fees, but also squad sizes and loan arrangements, should be held.
- Due to significant overlaps of several topics, the existing DFL commissions “Finances” and “Football” as well as the players’ representatives should be involved.

7. Advocate for reforms at European or global level in cooperation with political institutions

- In addition to reviewing immediate possibilities under association law (in terms of the by-laws) for strengthening financial stability and competitive integrity, the DFL (and its clubs) should work together on a national basis with politicians (irrespective of existing initiatives) to advocate for reforms at European level and play a leading role here. This concerns in particular:
 - 1) A cap on player wages (different forms of salary cap)
 - 2) Vigorous implementation of a stricter Financial Fair Play
 - 3) Stricter regulation and control of the players’ agent system
 - 4) Establishment of a clearing house for player transfers and all related payments (including transfer fees and agent fees)
 - 5) More equal distribution of UEFA prize money to the clubs.

8. Evaluation of structures for controlled strategic investments in the context of the 50+1 rule

- Many of the participants on the task force believe that the 50+1 rule has played a significant role in ensuring the stability of professional football in Germany and should be retained.
- However, examples in other European leagues have shown that the involvement of professional investors can result in more competition.
- A sensible step in this respect would be an impartial, open review of whether the path into professional football for certain investors who fulfil or follow ESG criteria can be simplified – in line with transparent terms and conditions.
- Objectives and requirements for possible strategic partnerships would have to be defined by the DFL (transparent due diligence processes for examining the seriousness / integrity of investors). In this matter, non-financial support, such as digital development, etc. should also be considered.

9. Initiation of political steps and steps under association law to strengthen regulation of the agency sector

- In respect to player agents, alongside supporting European moves, the task force also advocates examining steps that can be taken nationally with the aim of creating greater transparency (for players, clubs and associations) as well as proportionality, thus generating greater social acceptance, easing the financial burden on clubs and protecting young players. The following could be introduced:
 - 1) Mandatory accreditation of agents
 - 2) A cap on agent expenses (on the basis of licensing process requirements with the possibility of financial sanctions)
 - 3) Circumvention restricted.

10. Offer to provide agent services for (young) players and their families

- With the aim of clarifying the general conditions for starting a career in professional football at an early stage and also for preventing aspiring professional players from entering into early contractual obligations, the task force recommends exploring the possibility of setting up independent agent services.
- A good start point here are the existing networks and structures, from player representatives and players’ councils, as well as offers at the academies.
- Current professional players will accompany the process and can also benefit from a support structure of this kind.

11. Formation of a DFL commission to intensify the dialogue across the range of fan groups

- With the aim of intensifying the dialogue conducted in recent years between the DFL, clubs and fans and of getting an even closer understanding of the opinions and needs of all fan groups in important decisions in the DFL Executive Committee, the task force recommends setting up a DFL commission.
- The appointment of democratically legitimised representatives would ensure that the fan landscape is represented in all its diversity.
- During the discussion it was proposed that an empirical study of fan interests and needs could be initiated using a participatory research concept. Existing survey formats should be considered when the study and its design are drawn up.

12. Development of criteria for constructive club-fan dialogue

- In addition to the new DFL commission proposed for intensifying the dialogue across the range of fan groups, the existing club-fan dialogues should be further developed and standardised – especially in the light of the general conditions that vary greatly from club to club. One way of doing this is by devising quality criteria. The possibility of incorporating these dialogues in the statutes of the DFL e.V. association could also be examined.
- It was also suggested that players and coaches be more closely involved in the exchanges.
- Other possibilities discussed for providing a more structured approach for fans to exercise co-determination options included:
 - 1) Involving fans in club committees (e.g. supervisory board members)
 - 2) By using modern formats such as ideas competitions / hackathons or in a similar way to citizens’ assemblies, the expertise that fans have can be integrated as key challenges in professional football.

The creativity and participation of the various fan scenes can be supported and used with simple digital approaches and technologies (collecting opinions, conducting quick surveys).

13. Optimising exchange formats and benchmarking processes

- The task force proposes stronger exchanges that cover multiple topics (“know-how exchange”). On the one hand, platforms for exchanges between the league and clubs could be set up with the aim of creating solidarity – even in light of the existing competition and possible restrictions under competition law. On the other hand, best practices from other leagues and countries can be regularly discussed, for example as part of regular comparative studies.
- Consideration could be given to an exchange of information and ideas on different approaches to financial and strategic planning or on fan relations. The exchanges that already take place between the clubs can and should be intensified and expanded to include other topics.
- The dialogue could be initiated through the DFL commission, which could also define the focus for the exchanges.

14. Promotion of women’s football

- In order to reinforce the professionalisation of the top leagues, but also to increase the attraction and profile of women’s football in general, the DFL should work closely with the DFB to develop a plan of action, for example as part of a strategy paper. Stakeholders in women’s football, including players, should play a central role in this process.
- It is especially important here that existing structures are supported and new structures are established. However, this should not put flourishing, established systems at a disadvantage. In particular, it is important to protect long-established clubs in women’s football. Further development and learning can be supported through partnerships with women’s teams to benefit from the head start that many men’s Bundesliga clubs have in terms of marketing, training and further education, investments as well as access to networks.
- Obligations of the clubs’ by-laws should also be discussed, including obligations to support a girls’/women’s section or to treat girls and junior women based on the existing academy regulations for the men’s juniors. These discussions should also be incorporated in the considerations on the general long-term youth development systems.

15. Promotion of women in football

- Professional football should not only promote women’s football more strongly, but also make the case more intensively for women on the other side of the touchline – whether in honorary positions or in professional careers.
- With more women in management positions, diversity will produce a competitive advantage for professional football in Germany over the longer term.
- First steps on the path to greater diversity:

- 1) Continually improving and supporting the training of women coaches and referees – gradually increasing the number of women coaches and referees in the top divisions
- 2) Creating career prospects for girls and women in football on and off the pitch, e.g. by providing grants to attend the DFB academy, by financing the supervision of women referees and providing opportunities for practical training and job shadowing at all levels of professional football, including coaching
- 3) Developing concepts to increase the media visibility of women’s football and women in football – “Creating role models for young girls”
- 4) Specifying diversity strategies and instituting measures to bring more women into management positions in professional football in a structured way.

16. Implementation of the measures for long-term youth development

- The increase in the financial support for youth development work already provided as a result of the new system for distributing the national revenues from media rights should be further expanded to improve the sporting and professional support of young talents in all leagues.
- In particular, the DFL and the “Football” commission should consider establishing standardised registration systems to enable better exchange of information between the clubs.
- The measures planned as part of the Project Future (DFB) should also be included in the considerations.

17. Institutionalisation of interdisciplinary dialogue structures

- With the aim of reviewing developments and progress on a regular basis and identifying possible needs for adjustments, the process that has been started with the task force should be institutionalised. To accompany the implementation and evaluation of initiatives, it could be worthwhile to consider establishing an independent advisory board, composed of members from different disciplines. Furthermore, this board would reflect on developments in professional football on a regular basis and provide advice on advancing the game.

Conclusion

Through the interdisciplinary dialogue that has been started as well as detailed elaboration and successive implementation of the recommendations, the DFL has taken a clear stance with a commitment to sustainability in the key aspects involving ecology, economy, social responsibility and good management. By taking these bold steps, the DFL and its clubs will be successful in playing a pioneering role in Europe.

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