

Sports Illustrated, April 17, 2000

The Best Medicine

To hasten his development, top young U.S. player Landon Donovan has swallowed the prescription to play for an aspirin company in Germany

By Marc Spiegler

Since he began playing soccer in Redlands, Calif., in 1987, Landon Donovan has loved taking the field at night. "Day games are less exciting—people come to them thinking about what they'll be doing afterward," the 18-year-old striker says, "but night games are events, like concerts. I always get pumped up to play them." The days have been long and hard for Donovan since February '99 when he signed a four-year, \$400,000 contract with Bayer Leverkusen, the premier club in Germany's Bundesliga. Leverkusen assigned him to its developmental *regionalliga* squad, which plays in small stadiums in the hinterlands. Under constant pressure to perform, targeted because of his big salary, 9,000 miles from home, the kid who might become the U.S.'s first great goal scorer had struggled.

Last month, however, Donovan finally found his footing. Fittingly, the breakthrough came at night, in a midweek *regionalliga* match against Essen. Though it was a home game for Leverkusen it took place at a stadium in nearby Cologne; Leverkusen's field lacks the facilities to contain Essen's supporters, the rabid Red Bulls, who must be funneled into an enclosure to prevent violence. Twenty-five minutes into the game Donovan shunted his defender aside, stretched out a leg and tapped a teammate's weak shot home. Three minutes later, on a two-on-one breakaway, he volleyed a pass into the corner of the net from 15 yards out. Then, with a minute left in the first half, Donovan scored his third goal, drilling in a loose ball from near the top of the penalty box to give Bayer a 5-1 lead; they won 5-2. "Some games you can do no wrong," Donovan says. "I just kept shooting." In the papers the next day soccer writers compared Donovan to Leverkusen's famed scorer Ulf Kristen, the Bundesliga's Pél .

Donovan describes the Essen game as a "coming of age," one that validated his decision to leave home and endure the hardships of adjusting to life in industrial Leverkusen. It scarcely helped that he was shuttling between Leverkusen and various international tournaments to play for the U.S. under-17 team. But those hassles had their rewards. In November, Donovan received the Golden Ball, given to the outstanding player at the under-17 world championship in New Zealand, capping a youth career that included 35 goals and 16 assists in 41 international games.

A chasm yawns, however, between being the world's best 17-year-old striker and just holding your own against veteran professionals. When most Americans think of soccer goals, they imagine a striker breaking from the pack and tricking the goalie with deft footwork. But most scores occur in deep traffic, and the striker's art involves meeting a ball that flies in at an acute angle, often with absurd spin, and instantly deflecting it toward the goal on a line that neither the goalie nor any other defender can intersect. Usually there's a defender's hip, shoulder or elbow complicating the execution of this magic trick; sometimes it's

all three. The feat is akin to hitting a knuckleball with a warped bat while standing on a seesaw.

Donovan has the gift to pull off such minor miracles. He rose rapidly through Southern Californian's youth soccer system. At 17 he was not only playing for the U.S. under-23 team but also scoring regularly. He returned to the U.S. on Sunday to play with the under23 team in an Olympic qualifying tournament "We've never had such a highly touted young attacking player," says Bruce Arena, coach of the national team. "A lot of people are saying Landon's the savior of American soccer, and I'd love to say he's the real thing, the answer to our problems. But there's no direct correlation between success in the under-17s and at the senior level. Plus, I think all those expectations can be a huge burden."

The questions about Donovan involve only the sport's intangibles. In speed and agility tests he eclipses elite players years older than he is, and his ball handling technique is world-class. But world-class soccer is not played in the U.S., and at 16 Donovan started hearing from clubs in England and Germany. "We seldom offer a young foreign player such a contract," says Michael Reschke of Bayer Leverkusen, "but in 21 years working with young players, I've rarely seen such strong potential."

The time in Germany has transformed Donovan's game. The 5' 8", 145-pound striker rarely touches the ball without getting body-checked by his taller, heavier markers, and he has become noticeably more physical. On defense he charges at the goalkeeper or ball handler, forcing him to make a move. Donovan has learned to dribble with his elbows out, jabbing opponents as he sprints forward. "I definitely played horribly at first," Donovan recalls. "I just couldn't understand why my game was not working. There's no creativity or flair in the game here. People kept telling me I have to battle-that's the German theme in life. Finally, I quit playing like a sissy and decided to fight and run."

His head coach, Peter Hermann, says, "Landon has a great heart," by which Hermann means the combination of courage and resilience so prized in Germany. Coaches gauge it in youngsters by submitting them to harsh conditions and two-a-day practices, pushing potential stars to prove themselves against rough-hewn veterans. Donovan's recent successes have confirmed Leverkusen management's belief in his potential. Next year he will move up to the first team, a progression that was not expected so soon. But promotion to the first team does not ensure playing time: Leverkusen's Bundesliga team is 35 deep, enough to fill two game-day rosters.

Though Leverkusen has high expectations for Donovan, he hardly gets preferential treatment. Shortly after his November exploits in New Zealand he bounced onto the team bus and sat near the front. Suddenly Hermann was looming above him, pointing to the top of Donovan's thin cotton warmup suit. Loudly, the coach demanded, "What are you wearing underneath?" Nothing, it turned out, except for a thin gold necklace. As chuckles echoed from the rear of the bus, Hermann forced his young striker to strip off his top and put on a thick sweatshirt. Pouting, Donovan muttered, "Man, I just got back here, and I'm already getting yelled at."

Hermann, a member of the first Leverkusen team to fight its way up into the Bundesliga, in 1979, treats his work as seriously as a surgeon. "Your body is your capital, and you have to do everything for it," he says. "That's why I told Landon that he has to wear an undershirt when it's cold. You must say, 'For 10 years I will do everything for football.' You must train hard, you have to eat the right foods, you have to watch games to learn tactics. You must only go to the disco when you are on holiday. You must blow-dry your hair so it isn't wet when you go outside."

Within Leverkusen's soccer combine, people characterize the sport as a "hard business." The Bayer Leverkusen uniforms have the word ASPIRIN printed across their chests, in homage to the parent company's best-known product. Players are awarded bonuses for games started, goals scored and wins; fines are levied for even minor infractions. Few players on the *regionalliga* team have lucrative contracts like Donovan's, so those extra payouts matter. The competition for starting slots often rages so intensely that practice injuries are commonplace. With mantralike similarity the Leverkusen bosses point out that Donovan is competing against grown men with families to feed. Donovan's getting the same message from his father. "I always try to drill into him that it's not a club team anymore," Tim Donovan says. "Everyone's playing for money, and he's trying to take away someone's job. Landon says, 'I know, I know, but I think it was hard for a 17-year-old to grasp.'"

Like Landon, fellow Leverkusen *regionalliga* player John Thorrington left the States at 17, but at first he played for the reserve team of powerhouse Manchester United. "In England there weren't so many rules," says Thorrington, now 20, who transferred to Leverkusen last year. "We were one big club, training together, and the practices were less intense. Afterward the younger players had to clean the first team's shoes. And if the older players thought you were out of line, they'd drag you into the steam baths and hold a 'court case' to punish you." Such high jinks and camaraderie are unimaginable in Germany, where soccer clubs have the hierarchy and stiff professionalism of a Big Five accounting firm.

When Leverkusen made an offer to Donovan, his father pushed him to accept it. "Landon had a chance to do exactly what I had hoped to do," recalls Tim Donovan, a former semipro hockey player who works for a pharmaceutical company in Nebraska, "but I didn't have the ability or the talent." Not that Landon needed much encouragement. He had wanted to play in Europe since he was 13. But his mother, Donna Kenney-Cash, a special-education teacher, had hoped he would go to college—he earned a high school GED, having missed most of his junior year to play with the under-17 team—and she worried about his leaving home so young.

By the standards of the soccer world Landon's age was no big deal. On his *regionalliga* team, goalkeeper Romuald Peiser came from Paris at 15, and dozens of young Africans play for Italian teams every season. Even after Leverkusen offered enough upfront money to establish Landon's college fund, Kenney-Cash had her doubts. There were heated arguments at the dinner table. Finally Landon's parents, who divorced when he was two years old, agreed to let him go and to visit him for stretches as he settled in. Today Donovan says his mom still wants him Stateside. "It's hard on me and on his twin sister, Tristan," Kenney-

Cash says, "and I worry he'll start to see soccer only as a business. I still hope one day he doesn't tell me, 'Mom, you shouldn't have let me go.'"

Donovan talks about having a life beyond soccer, but the sport dominates his time. He goes out rarely and then only to a movie or restaurant. He avoids all risk off the field. "I don't want to put myself in a bad situation," he says. "What happens if I drink a beer and become an alcoholic? What if I try something else, and I like it? I'm not here to make friends. I'm here to play professional soccer."

Despite his recent success, living in Germany remains hard for Donovan. The language barrier walls him off from much of daily life; his main friend in Germany is Thorrington, a fellow Californian. But separation from his family has been the most difficult, especially the distance from Tristan, who is a high school senior. "She's everything to me," he says. "We talk two or three times a week on the phone, but I think the more we talk, the harder it is on her. When I go back to California, we don't hang out as much as possible, just because we get too attached. It makes it so much harder when I leave." Says Tristan, "It's like missing a part of yourself." His phone bills are in the high triple digits.

Emotionally it would have been far easier for Donovan to play for a team in Major League Soccer, but both he and Thorrington describe bypassing MLS as a no-brainer. The US. league is a fledgling business in a marginal sport; the Bundesliga is the central focus of an entire country's sporting passion. "Here we get 8,000 people watching third-division games," says Thorrington.

Nevertheless, Donovan still struggles to get settled in Germany. Less than a week after his hat trick against Essen he told Hermann he felt worn-out and homesick. The team had a bye weekend coming up, and other players were planning visits home. Leverkusen shelled out for a plane ticket, and the next day Donovan touched down in Southern California. There's more than just expatriate blues at play here. The strain Donovan is under is enormous, especially for a kid whose lifelong friends are giddily preparing for prom night. "I wanted to chill out and see my family," Donovan says. "I wanted to spend time just doing whatever I wanted, not having a schedule. There have been times in Germany, like when I wasn't playing, that I wanted to go home the next day. But when I'm playing well, I can't imagine why I would ever leave."