

ON SOCCER

The Giant World Cup Rookie and an Enduring Dutch Mystery

The Netherlands is Europe's most reliable talent factory. Unless you need a goalkeeper.



By Rory Smith

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DOHA, Qatar — As they sat around the dinner table, Andries Noppert's family raised the question as gently and as kindly as they could.

He had been trying to make it as a professional soccer player for more than a decade. At 6 feet 8 inches, he had the physical gifts, and nobody would question his determination, his drive. But he was 26 now, and if everyone was completely honest, it did not seem to be working out. He had been at four clubs, and hardly played for any of them. He had made barely more than a dozen appearances in seven years.

The constant disappointment, the ongoing frustration, was taking its toll, and that was before anyone even mentioned his misfortune with injury. Perhaps, Noppert's parents suggested, it might be time to try something else. His wife wondered if a career in the police force might provide a more reliable salary for their young family.

Two years on from that attempted intervention, Noppert finds himself at the World Cup, and not as a mere observer. He has barely played 50 senior games as a professional, but on Saturday he is almost certain to start in goal for the Netherlands in its round of 16 match against the United States. It is, as Noppert himself has put it, more than a little “bizarre.”

His own interpretation of his unusual career arc — the long, slow burn, followed by the sudden and unexpected ignition — is that his progress was slowed not only by a succession of injuries but by his own failure to grasp his talent. “I may have made the wrong choices at times,” he has said.

It is an assessment reinforced by those who have worked with him. Noppert started out at Heerenveen, his local team, before spells at NAC Breda, the Italian side Foggia, Dordrecht back in the Netherlands and, after he rejected his family's attempts to persuade him to go into law enforcement, Go Ahead Eagles.

It was only at the latter that he found regular playing time. Until then, he had been “at peace with being second choice,” according to Kees van Wonderen, who coached him at Go Ahead Eagles and then, last summer, returned him to Heerenveen. Noppert “lacked sharpness and hunger,” he said.

“Let's just say that Andries didn't make it hard to not pick him,” he said.

Noppert's individual case, then, might be filed in the same category as all of the other heartening stories the World Cup unearths at quadrennial intervals: the heroes who emerge from nowhere, the players seeking redemption, the sudden superstars.

His story, though, does not exist in isolation. It is part of a pattern, and one that, from a Dutch point of view, is less touching and more troubling. A couple of years after he might have given up on his career, Noppert is at the World Cup not only because of his determination, his refusal to give in, but because the Netherlands cannot produce goalkeepers.

There is, of course, one noteworthy exception: Edwin van der Sar, formerly of Ajax, Juventus and Manchester United. And there have been, over the years, a trickle of perfectly respectable, though hardly awe-inspiring, goalkeepers who have won the Dutch colors: Hans van Breukelen, Ed de Goey, Jasper Cillessen.

The supply, though, has not been steady enough to dispel the impression that the Netherlands, a country that churns out some of the brightest young outfield talent on the planet at industrial volume, has a chronic blind spot between the posts.

Noppert, after all, has been selected ahead of Justin Bijlow, who has spent only 18 months as Feyenoord's first-choice goalkeeper, and Remko Pasveer, a 39-year-old who made his international debut this year. The reasons for that, as offered by Louis van Gaal, the Dutch coach, hardly amount to resounding praise.

"He was in shape," van Gaal said of Noppert. "We were impressed by how he played in the weeks prior to the World Cup. He only stopped the balls he could stop."

But then that, perhaps, is all that is necessary. After all, the pickings are distinctly slim. No major European team outside of Ajax employs a Dutch goalkeeper. Seven of the 18 teams in the Dutch top flight employ imported goalkeepers. Van Gaal has taken roughly a third of the qualified goalkeepers available to him to Qatar.

The reasons for that veer from the loftily philosophical to the pragmatically economic, the former PSV Eindhoven and Feyenoord goalkeeper Patrick Lodewijks told the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* earlier this year. Lodewijks spent five years working with the country's soccer federation as a goalkeeper coach.



Noppert and the Netherlands can advance to the quarterfinals by beating the United States on Saturday. Laurence Griffiths/Getty Images

Dutch teams invariably demand that their goalkeepers, as is the country's tradition, possess the technical ability to take part in build-up play, he said, but it comes at the cost of neglecting the rather more rudimentary skills of saving shots and catching crosses.

"The best goalkeeper in the Eredivisie is a German, Lars Unnerstall," Lodewijks said last season. "A giant, top athlete, great reflexes. But he was second choice at PSV, because he couldn't play soccer well."

The financial reality of Dutch soccer, meanwhile, discourages clubs from investing too much time in their goalkeepers. All Dutch teams are reliant on generating income from transfer fees — even Ajax, the richest and most powerful side in the Eredivisie, earned as much money in selling two players to Manchester United in a few weeks last summer as it does from all other revenue streams over the course of a year — and goalkeepers fetch significantly smaller fees than, for example, elfin attacking midfielders. The goalkeeper business is not a lucrative one.

Lodewijks suggests the solution is a complete overhaul in how Dutch clubs think about the position: spending more time on dedicated training sessions, rather than focusing on how goalkeepers can be involved in general play; major teams sending the most promising prospects out on loan to smaller teams, where they may have rather more to do than watching on passively "as youth teams win big."

Until then, the position of Dutch goalkeeper will remain unusually fertile ground for feel-good stories like Noppert's: a place for late bloomers and stray talents and prospective law enforcement officers.

He does, at least, seem well-suited to such a rapid promotion. "He's a real Frisian," defender Virgil van Dijk said last week, referring to the part of the Netherlands where Noppert grew up, a place famed for its stoicism and straight-talking. (It is unclear how this differs from the rest of the country.) "He's sober, but very direct. He's a boy after my own heart."

Van Gaal, too, has taken heart from how unmoved Noppert was by the prospect of making his debut for his country at the World Cup. “He has the sort of personality that means he would not be too impressed by this championship,” he said. It would be a lot tougher, after all, being a policeman.