



BLUE BLITZ

Colts, Business Interests Prepare for Game in Germany

By Matt Ottinger

Photo courtesy Indianapolis Colts

The National Football League (NFL) produces what is now widely regarded as America’s favorite sport, but for more than a decade it’s been stretching the “national” moniker with an ongoing push to grow fan support in not just Europe, but Africa, South America and Asia as well.

The league’s first game in Europe was in London in 1983, although its first contest outside of North America was in Tokyo in 1976.

The Indianapolis Colts organization and its staff knew they would be hosting an NFL game in Berlin during the upcoming season, and in

May it was revealed they would be playing the Atlanta Falcons on November 9 – the 36th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Back heim again in Germany

The Colts have previously played abroad in London (2016) and Frankfurt (2023), but this will be the team’s first time as the home team.

Being the host gives the franchise “a far greater portfolio of assets that we can use to help market and to merchandise and to monetize our presence over there,” shares Roger VanDerSnick, the Colts’ chief commercial officer.

“We’ll have far more flexibility and use of intellectual property – really hosting and executing events, driving activations and sponsorship of those activations,” he reports. “When we were in Frankfurt, we had

far fewer things that we could do, and it was more limited to more internal facing activations and hospitality and events – less so about marketing in the area.”

There’s an ongoing quest for NFL teams to become fan favorites in the areas in which they can market. Domestically, the league allows teams their own marketing territories. For instance, the Chicago Bears would be prohibited from posting a billboard in Indianapolis. But abroad, certain teams are allowed to market in different countries. The Colts are among 11 teams allowed in the German market. The Colts’ territories also include Austria and Switzerland.

The team’s access to these German-speaking markets could stem from the fact that its former linebacker, Björn Werner, is the most prominent broadcasting – and podcasting – voice promoting American football in Europe.

Always a Colt

The Colts compare Werner’s reach in Germany to that of former punter turned media personality Pat McAfee’s in the United States. Werner remarks on the comparisons, noting similarities as a past Colts player known for his wide-reaching football podcast (“Football Bromance”) and visibility as a commentator.

“(The Colts) reached out to me and said, ‘Hey, we are deciding that we want to be one of the teams applying to have German market rights and we would love for you to be the global ambassador,’ because obviously here I have kind of a brand and I’m one of a few German players who made it to the NFL,” Werner shares, noting he displayed his Colts jersey in the background of his podcasts even before he was their global ambassador.

“I’m still proud of what I achieved as a German in America. We were living the American dream and now I brought all this back to Germany and I’m always thankful for American football.”

He also consults for the Colts regarding how to reach not just Germany, but Austria and Switzerland as well.

“Obviously, Germany has a bigger population and a lot more fans. Austria is a smaller country (with around nine million residents), but they love football, and they have a great infrastructure with their football club system,” Werner points out. “They play very good local football.”

In addition to Werner, Colts offensive tackle Bernhard Raimann is from Austria, so the Colts are well-positioned to capitalize on the opportunity.

VanDerSnick also expresses excitement for playing in Berlin’s Olympic Stadium, noting it’s the same facility in which U.S.

track and field legend Jesse Owens showcased his talents, leading the U.S. to victories over the Nazi era German team in front of Adolf Hitler and other Third Reich brass in 1936.

Firsts and goals

Werner explains plans are underway for events leading up to the game. Talks are still in process on official events, but they will likely provide opportunities for Indiana businesses.

“The plan is to have a lot of activations

in Berlin around the game or before the game as well to hype it up and get the whole city (involved),” he reveals. “Berlin is the biggest city in Germany and is a very important city in Europe as well. (We want) to have it (turn) blue and white.”

Those opportunities for celebration and connection should not be understated, according to Colin Renk, vice president of client and partner services for The International Center and president and co-founder of the Indiana-Germanic Business Council (IGBC).



Photo courtesy Indianapolis Colts

While his career was cut short by injuries, former Colts player Björn Werner has become a standout NFL analyst in his native Germany and still serves the team as an advocate overseas. It’s timely as the game continues to grow in German-speaking countries, building opportunities for Indiana companies to connect.



Renk notes that Germany presents an attractive trade opportunity for Hoosier businesses, and the upcoming Colts game is an ideal opportunity for introductions and more.

“Germany has – for the past five years – been one of the top five export and import markets for us. A lot of the trade volume is going to be more in pharmaceuticals and it’s going to be medical equipment, some advanced machinery and things like that,” he offers. “Recently, Eli Lilly opened a new facility in Germany, right on France’s border, so there are a lot of products coming in and out of there when it comes to foreign direct investment.

“A lot of that is tied to manufacturing, automotive, some medical device type stuff – a lot of logistics,” Renk adds.

Indiana has no shortage of German heritage when one analyzes lineages, surnames or even the proliferation of German breweries, for instance, in the state before Prohibition.

Fast forward to today and a strong commercial presence remains. German companies like INDEX Corporation, which is one of the world’s leading manufacturers of CNC turning machines, has a significant operation in Noblesville. Its president and CEO, Michael Huggett, believes the German influence has been positive for his company, pointing to work-based learning strategies as a key example.

“We’ve been running a German-style junior tech program for the last three years,” he relays. “We bring about five young individuals in from outside of our company and then we teach them how to be service techs for us.

“It’s about a nine-month program here in Indiana and then they go for at least two months to Germany for in-depth training on the factory floor and working with customers over there,” he continues.

For Renk, when it comes to building international relationships, it’s important to convey cultural accuracy when presenting Indiana to Germans. He points to the distinctions between “German-American” and actually “German.”

“My hope is that we’ll have a lot stronger youthful connections and hopefully maybe some entrepreneurs that really look at Indiana,” he explains, noting the connections made through the Colts’ presence could play a role. “We have (the Rally innovation conference), we have the Global Entrepreneurship Congress and a lot of sports technology – so those are kind of youthful things that I think a lot of Berliners and Germans could look into.”



Indianapolis Colts fans from around Europe gathered in Cologne, Germany for a watch party for the 2024 Week 5 matchup between the Colts and division rival Jacksonville Jaguars.

‘Blue’ skies ahead

The timing is ideal to spur Indiana/Germany relations, according to Renk, as the IGBC recently organized a business trip for the Colts last fall that touched five German cities in 12 days.

“It was absolutely fantastic because the one thing that’s pretty prevalent in Germany is that city and state pride . . .,” he notes. “It is kind of the equivalent of when someone comes to the Midwest and they come to Indianapolis and everyone says, ‘Indianapolis is the best.’”

The group participated in government and business meetings, receptions and engagement opportunities, Renk adds.

“We took Blue – the Colts’ mascot – and that helped generate some content, and it was a really good meeting and we ended in Berlin,” he shares.

Blue, it turns out, is more than a mascot, asserts VanDerSnick, explaining the whimsical horse has over nine million followers across social media channels.

“It is a storytelling machine that really resonates with the (youthful) target market that we’re looking at,” he states, noting incorporating the mascot is just part of a larger ongoing and coordinated marketing campaign.

The long game

NFL fandom is hardly in short supply in

Europe. All reports indicate the games sell out quickly and some note it’s a more family-friendly experience than professional soccer matches.

“(When the Colts played in) Frankfurt, you had a lot of the fun aspects (of soccer) and the singing and the scarves and all those things, but it was very much a family-friendly event,” VanDerSnick explains.

He points to a team like the Kansas City Chiefs as having done an impressive job of leveraging on-field success with creative marketing to gain popularity in Europe – and believes the Colts can have similar success.

“We have a plan – and that’s a credit to the Irsay family – that’s fully funded,” he reveals. “But we know we’re not going to change the world overnight.”

In terms of moving the needle, the NFL and its teams are playing a long game. The investments in marketing, staff time and more certainly add up and VanDerSnick shares some of his colleagues on the events staff have been overseas six times already.

“When we go over there, we give up a home game – and nobody’s paying us back for that,” he explains. “So, coupled with just the opportunity cost and the real cost of this investment and sending a team over there, it’s a big investment.

“But we do it because we believe in where the NFL is going and that there’s big opportunity for us in the long haul.”