

Sustainability in the Bundesliga: less waste, more money for clubs

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The DFL, together with PreZero, is advancing the circular economy in the Bundesliga and 2. Bundesliga. What this looks like in practice is demonstrated by the example of FC Bayern Munich.

New cycles: together with PreZero, the DFL is driving the reduction of waste in German professional football.

Last year, the DFL announced a strategic alliance with companies from the Schwarz Group. Together with PreZero, the Group's full-service environmental services provider, the League aims to implement concrete sustainability measures with its 36 clubs—specifically in the area of circular economy. A key focus is on optimising resource cycles in stadiums, training centres and club headquarters.

Through this approach, the DFL aims to create an additional service offering for Bundesliga and 2. Bundesliga clubs and to make both leagues more sustainable and future-proof. Relevant requirements are also anchored in the Sustainability Guideline introduced into the DFL Licensing Regulations for the 2023/24 season, compliance with which is mandatory for clubs—such as Section 2.1 (climate, environmental and resource management), Section 2.6 (reduction of water consumption) and Section 2.7 (waste management). But how is this complex topic implemented in practice at club level?

Cup system and a second life for the pitch

As Germany's largest sports club, FC Bayern sees itself as having a responsibility to lead by example in circular economy matters. The topic is considered strategically important and is therefore overseen directly by CEO Jan-Christian Dreesen. Denise Heinemann, Team Lead Sustainability at FC Bayern, is responsible for implementation.

A football club does not have a typical value chain like, for example, a car manufacturer—which led FC Bayern to ask a fundamental question: what is actually our product, and how do we generate revenue? This first required defining the club's own value creation: “FC Bayern's value creation takes place at different levels, for example on matchdays, through media marketing or in merchandising,” explains Heinemann.

In practice, this means identifying potential wherever possible. “Examples include grass cuttings, which are used to produce packaging, and the ‘old’ pitch from the Allianz Arena being given a second life by being relaid at the FC Bayern Campus. Another example is the reusable cup system that has been established at the Allianz Arena for almost ten years, helping us avoid large quantities of single-use waste. At all our sites, we aim for continuous monitoring of our recycling concept together with PreZero,” says Heinemann.

Sustainability is also a theme in merchandising: “Scarves and shirts are often not thrown away—on the contrary, there is a real run on old fan items, some of which even come back onto the market as retro collections,” Heinemann notes. The retro boom can thus be seen as an important

factor in a functioning circular economy. In its sustainability report, the club explains circular economy principles and other sustainability measures to fans in a clear and engaging way. “The feedback on our communication shows that we are reaching our fans and encouraging them to take part,” Heinemann adds.

Individual conditions for clubs

Is FC Bayern a sustainability benchmark for the league? At the DFL headquarters in Frankfurt, the implementation of circular economy measures at individual clubs is closely monitored. Prof. Dr Torsten Weber, sustainability expert at the DFL and Professor of Marketing & Sustainability Management at CBS University of Applied Sciences, highlights that clubs face very different conditions when meeting sustainability criteria: “Each club should go through its own self-assessment process as part of a materiality analysis and answer the question: what is our impact in the context of circular economy? The fields of action are similar across clubs, but the structures are very different.”

He sees FC Bayern as having a special role in this context: “FC Bayern, for example, cannot be compared with a smaller club—simply because of the volumes involved, such as shirts or merchandising. However, the circular systems, materials and processes that clubs aim to optimise in the coming years are quite similar across the league.”

According to Weber, clubs can also expect long-term economic benefits: “The fact is that there are clear financial potentials, including cost savings through reduced resource consumption. By cutting waste, optimising water cycles, using energy more efficiently and reducing the need for primary raw materials, companies—and clubs—can often significantly lower their operating costs.” Less waste, more money in the pocket—this is, in simplified terms, the long-term win-win equation for the DFL and its clubs.

And what about public acceptance of such an ambitious undertaking in times of crises and conflict? “Even though public discourse has changed, we believe the topic remains highly important. During the peak of the sustainability debate a few years ago, there was certainly more societal attention. Today, companies are more likely to ask: where is the business case? What is the concrete benefit? Regardless of this shift, collaboration with the clubs continues to be highly focused and ambitious,” Weber emphasises.