

SportsInnovation 2026
Opening Speech
DFL CEO Steffen Merkel



Dear guests,

a very warm welcome to SportsInnovation 2026! I am delighted to meet you all here in Düsseldorf. Looking around at these full rows, it is fantastic to see the network that has grown around our event – a network of people and companies dedicated to shaping the future of our industry. Over the next two days, we all hope to discover groundbreaking technologies, fresh perspectives, and immersive experiences.

I certainly share that hope.

It's impressive to see how this event has continuously evolved since its beginnings. I would like to congratulate the teams from DFL and D.SPORTS, who have worked together for many months to make today possible. The arena looks stunning once again, the programme is outstanding, and we are welcoming more guests than ever before. Thank you for your dedication!

I still remember the early days: in 2018, we launched SportsInnovation as a platform for innovative minds in sport. Since then, it has become Europe's leading sport-tech event. SportsInnovation showcases and connects the innovative power of our entire sector in a unique, personal way. I am sure that, through this exchange, many ideas, sketches, and prototypes will grow and mature today and tomorrow. Together, we are experiencing and discussing nothing less than the future of sport.

Personal networking is at the heart of this event, and it fits perfectly with the DFL's guiding theme for SportsInnovation. As you just saw in the video: "Embracing a connected future." This is our vision for the DFL, the Bundesliga, and Bundesliga 2. Connections – whether mobile or physical networks, internet knots, server centres, cloud computing, or storage – are the foundation for almost every application you will see on the pitch, on stage, or in the Innovation Lab over these two days.

The value chain in German professional football is changing as technology advances, with new methods of data collection, analysis, and production. These fields will become even more closely connected in the future. That's why, under the motto "Embracing a connected future for the sports and media industry," we are demonstrating this development at SportsInnovation 2026.

Innovation is central to the DFL's mission – at every level. Through technological and organisational progress, we are strengthening the sporting appeal, competitiveness, and economic stability of German professional football in a sustainable way – creating added value for clubs, partners, and fans. One unique feature of the DFL is our tightly integrated media production and distribution. Already today, the Bundesliga's media product is among the most advanced in global professional sport – with state-of-the-art production, innovative formats, and personalised content.

Technologies such as automated cameras, remote production, AI-driven processes, and green production play a crucial role. At the centre of it all are the added value for our clubs and customers – our media partners, and ultimately, the fans, both here in Germany and around the world.

Because: technology is never an end in itself; it must deliver real value. In sport, that means value for the people whose passion makes our industry possible. In Germany alone, more than 43 million people are interested in football.

What we know today is this: these 43 million people have very individual ideas about how they want to experience the Bundesliga. When you think about an international context, it becomes even clearer that personalisation and localisation are becoming increasingly important in a time of fragmented demand and media markets. They open up new ways to reach audiences of all generations, to inspire them for our sport – and, from a business perspective, to secure existing marketing models and develop new ones.

Our media product connects Bundesliga fans worldwide with the places where it all happens – the vibrant stadiums of the Bundesliga and Bundesliga 2. That's why, this season, in close cooperation with our partners, we have widened the keyhole for fans, so to speak, without taking the whole door of the dressing room off its hinges – and without taking away the magic of the sport.

A key role, perhaps THE key role in this is played by data. Match data is becoming ever more closely linked with the media production and product of German professional football. The more than 200 million data points we collect per match are selected and combined to generate new insights – such as goal probability or the match momentum. This makes the game more measurable, more comparable, and sometimes easier to understand.

Of course, for the 80 million “national coaches” in Germany, gut feeling will always play a role. That's part of what makes football special. But I believe that innovation does not harm the culture of debate we cherish in football – on the contrary, it fuels it.

That's why the DFL is once again taking a pioneering role with the introduction of 3D tracking, presenting innovative applications for clubs and the league at SportsInnovation 2026 such as automated event detection. Refereeing also benefits from this closer integration – think of semi-automated offside detection, ref-cam, and referees announcing decisions.

None of this is just for show. It serves a higher purpose – to further strengthen the quality, fairness and integrity of competition.

Another important network is our partner network. The DFL sees itself as a driver in a broad innovation ecosystem. We work closely with leading global media and technology companies to further develop the Bundesliga, Bundesliga 2, and our media product. This includes the clubs, who both benefit from and contribute to this innovative strength. The same goes for start-ups and key multipliers, with whom we identify, test, and bring new technologies to market early on.

In this spirit, I warmly welcome ServiceNow as our newest technology partner to the DFL alongside Amazon Web Services. Both are also the main partners of SportsInnovation. My thanks also go to every exhibitor and partner, and to the many fascinating personalities who will enrich our stage programme. Thank you all for your contribution!

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the role of artificial intelligence in our industry. AI is also one form of connection as it is about structuring and connecting huge amount of data. So no surprise that AI was already the central topic at SportsInnovation two years ago. And also this year it runs like a thread through the stage programme, the exhibition area, and the Innovation Lab. AI makes many things easier. It masters complex processes, can handle repetitive tasks at scale, and is constantly learning. It is becoming ever more creative and helps us to better understand and meet fan needs – a powerful lever for greater efficiency and personalisation, which we intend to use purpose-, but also carefully.

We all feel how huge the impact of AI is in our time. To put our feelings on a solid factual basis and draw the right conclusions, we have brought in a scientific partner: the WHU Otto Beisheim School of Management will conduct a study on the significance and future potential of AI for our industry. The full results will be available in a few weeks, but already, we can draw some initial conclusions for German professional football:

1. AI is on every agenda – that's what every club has confirmed.
2. AI is seen as highly relevant for the future (the next five years).
3. However, many players in our industry are still in exploration mode, and operational use cases are leading the way.
4. The study signals readiness: the question is not if AI will shape football, but how proactively the league can turn alignment into competitive advantage.

These are still high-level, but encouraging findings. They confirm our commitment at the DFL to expand and connect knowledge about AI in German professional football – between clubs, ourselves as the league organisation, our partners, and the industry. We want to break down the meta-topic of our time, make it manageable, develop best practice examples, and start a conversation about them – so that everyone who wishes can gain the best possible impulses for their own business model. Events like this, SportsInnovation, play a key role in that.

When looking at our business, AI is usually associated first with media production, content creation, and the automation of digital processes. However, according to our study, the potential goes much further. Another key finding from our Delphi study, which surveyed more than 70 industry experts, is this: the core of the game moves first.

The highest alignment appears in game-related areas such as training optimisation, coaching support, performance analytics, and personalised fan content. Confidence is strongest where AI strengthens the competitive core. This is an insight we will examine in more detail. But it clearly shows once again: AI is not just a gimmick. It can reach right into the very heart of the game.

I look forward to sharing the full results of the study with you soon – and I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Sascha Schmidt and his team at WHU for their dedicated and insightful work on this topic.

At the same time, it is up to us as human beings to use AI in the right way and in the right places – and to get involved wherever it is necessary and appropriate. I am not just thinking about quality assurance. I am especially thinking about the boundaries we set for ourselves and for AI. When it comes to empathy, morality, and compliance, we humans remain responsible. This is more important than ever in times of disinformation and fake news.

Since SportsInnovation 2024, the DFL has adopted a Code of Conduct that forms our technical and moral foundation for the use of AI. On this, and on any other topic relating to the DFL Group, you are welcome to talk to me and my colleagues. I also invite you to visit the DFL booth to discuss any of the topics we are presenting today and tomorrow.

There, you can also experience the “Bundesliga Shared Experience” – a small 180-degree cinema where you might have your most impressive Bundesliga experience outside the stadium. And you will see how we are building an intelligently connected value chain for the Bundesliga and Bundesliga 2, by linking processes and technologies such as AI, cloud infrastructure, and real-time data analysis.

One last thought. Something people are still better at than AI is: getting together. This evening, we will enjoy a wonderful event on a Rhine riverboat, which I am very much looking forward to. I am sure we will have a fantastic time there.

Once again, my thanks to our team at the DFL and our partner D.SPORTS for their excellent cooperation and support. I wish us all an inspiring time at SportsInnovation 2026. Thank you – and enjoy the event!