

German tax evasion

Uli, Uli, Uli

BERLIN

Secret Swiss bank accounts suddenly have a famous face

ULRICH HOENESS is one of Germany's football greats, up there with Franz Beckenbauer, with whom he won a World Cup in 1974 and many titles for Bayern Munich, their club. A Swabian butcher's son with blond curls, "Uli" was lean, clever and fast. And he was good at life. When a knee injury ended his career in 1979, he became Bayern's manager, leading the team where he is still president to decades of success. He has survived a plane crash and run a thriving sausage business. Growing paunchier over the years, he remained earthy and became a moral voice in German sport



Swiss family Hoeness?

and society. Politicians couldn't be photographed enough with him.

And now he may face prison. For over a decade, it has emerged, Mr Hoeness had a bank account in Switzerland that he hid from the German tax authorities. He seems to have counted on a German-Swiss agreement that would have kept such account holders anonymous while settling their back taxes through transfers between the governments. But when the leftist parties in Germany's upper house killed that deal last year, he came clean. In January, he turned himself in, paying more than €3m (\$3.9m) in back taxes.

Such a course normally assures tax sinners amnesty. Not in Mr Hoeness's case, it seems. In March investigators searched his Bavarian-style house by an Alpine lake and arrested him. He was set free for about €5m bail. Perhaps his declaration was not complete. Or the authorities were already on to him, so the amnesty no longer applies.

Ordinary Germans are genuinely shocked to have lost a role model. Politicians on the left, who want to make taxes and wealth big campaign issues this year, were able to gloat. The right, especially in Bavaria, has distanced itself quickly from Mr Hoeness. Angela Merkel, the chancellor, let it be known that she was "disappointed".

Mr Hoeness's beloved team has so far taken the crisis in its stride. Bayern dominates the German league and is on course for the finals in the European Champions League. On April 23rd the Bavarian side trounced Barcelona, arguably the best team in the world, 4-0. Mr Hoeness was, as usual, in the stands wearing his red and white scarf. But after the triumph, he had to return to his unfolding private disaster.