

SVE Report: U23 Regulation in the Deutsche Eishockey Liga

A contribution to the debate from the perspective of the players based on quantitative and qualitative research

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Executive Summary

- A U23 player in the DEL gets an average of 9 minutes 19 seconds of ice time per game.
- After their 24th birthday, every second former U23 player disappears from the DEL, even though they are the best of their respective year.
- Only 32 of all former U23 players born in 1995-1998 were able to establish themselves in the DEL after their 24th birthday.
- A recent survey among all DEL players showed a clear opinion on the U23 rule and the role of the league:
- 78 percent of the players surveyed do not see the DEL in the role of a training league.
- Around 87 percent of the players surveyed questioned whether the U23 rule makes sense.
- In its current form, the U23 rule fails to achieve its long-term goals.
- In the long term, a flawed junior rule harms German ice hockey in both sporting and financial terms.
- In international comparison, players aged 22 or 23 are often no longer junior players, but supporting pillars in their teams.

1. Introduction

In order to develop German ice hockey in the long term and sustainably, a regulation on "the future age structure of the DEL squads and a gradual reduction in player licenses" (Stufenplan zur Nachwuchsförderung, Penny DEL) which is generally known as the "U23 rule" was adopted for the 2018/2019 season.

The U23 rule stipulates that by the 2025/2026 season, a minimum of six of the 31 available licenses must be awarded to players in the U23 and U20 age groups (Stufenplan zur Nachwuchsförderung, Penny DEL). Thus, in coordination with the DEB concept "Powerplay26" (Powerplay 26, DEB), young national players should be developed, who in the future should regularly chase a medal in black-red-gold. Furthermore, not only the German national team but also the clubs and the league should benefit from the U23 rule. After all, advertising with successful German players also attracts fans to the stadiums. Especially in view of the high dependence of clubs' revenues on the number of fans, the development of young, German players should also be in the interest of the clubs (dependence on matchday revenues, SZ).

Almost five years after the introduction of the U23 rule, its success is doubtful. Even on the part of the league, voices are getting louder that consider readjusting the rule (Jürgen Arnold on the U23 rule, Eishockey News). As Mr. Arnold, head of the DEL supervisory board, has stated, one has to look past success stories, such as Moritz Seider and Tim Stützle, and take a closer look at the numbers in order to evaluate the success of the regulation and to derive further measures for action.

That the scheme in its current form might not lead to the desired goals seemed clear and also emerged from discussions with the clubs' sporting decision-makers. Nevertheless, shortly before the 2022 German Cup break, an interview (Success thanks to U23 rule, Penny DEL) was published in which the U23 rule is highly praised. Mentioned is the generally very positive trend that more and more young players make the leap into the DEL and the first players have now cracked the 100-game mark. The U23 rule is cited as the main culprit for this and celebrated as a complete success.

We, the Spielervereinigung Eishockey e.V., are of the opinion that the "success" of the U23 rule should not be measured solely by the number of young players in the league and the cracked 100 games mark.

In our opinion, the primary goal of a junior development scheme must be to develop young German players in their teams into future national players who can regularly compete for medals against the world's greatest ice hockey nations in the future, with the goal of placing German ice hockey among the top 5 in the long term.

The fact that a German player reaches the 100 games is pleasing. However, one must also critically question how the player reaches these 100 games. In our opinion, the average ice time is clearly decisive here. Do they regularly play an average of 15 minutes and develop further in competition with the best players in

Germany? Does the young player establish himself in the league in the long term, and also reach the 300 games? The 500?

In order to get to the bottom of these questions, we as SVE decided to find out whether the current U23 scheme achieves its desired objective.

On the following pages we would like to present the results of our research and point out possible pitfalls of the U23 rule. Based on our research, we would like to conduct a fact-based debate on the future and possibilities of adapting the U23 rule.

In doing so, we would like to focus on three factors that have a significant impact on the long-term development direction of German ice hockey:

1. The ice time of a U23 player
2. The number of players who have gone through the U23 rule
3. The consequences for players just over U23 and the whole German ice hockey

2. Methods and Data Collection

In summary, our analysis is based on quantitative and qualitative approaches. To understand how players view the U23 rule, we conducted an anonymous survey among DEL players using Google Forms. Both open-ended and closed-ended questions were used in this survey.

The open questions served to more clearly depict the opinion of the respondents and at the same time to gain important insights into the minds of the players. On the other hand, the closed questions served to qualitatively substantiate the players' perceptions. Increasingly, rating scales and occasional yes/no single-choice questions were used. Regarding the formulation as well as the scaling of the rating scales, we decided to combine verbal and numerical scales in an even unipolar scale in order to eliminate, among other things, the risk of tending toward the middle. This resulted in scales ranging from 0 (very poor, very weak) to 5 (very strong, very good).

With regard to the single-choice questions, we wanted to distinguish between the opinions of German players and non-German players in order to work out whether there are differences in the perception of problematic issues between German and non-German players. Therefore, the questions were asked in German and English.

In addition to our survey, we analyzed the team squads as well as the ice times of the U23 players in the current season 2022/2023. Official team profiles on www.penny-del.org served as the data basis. Since the team profiles on the league's website did not allow us to draw conclusions about the age and nationality of individual players, each team squad was matched with its counterpart on the www.eliteprospects.com website.

Because the league's statistics are diverse, we had to streamline the data sets to facilitate our analysis. Accordingly, the categories of position, shooting hand, games, goals, assists, points, plus-minus, changes per game, face-offs won, face-offs lost, penalty minutes, shots on goal, shooting percentage, goals over and game-winning goals were removed. Furthermore, all goalkeepers could be removed as they do not fall under the U23 rule.

The aim of our analysis is to determine the number of German players born between 95 and 98 on the one hand and to work out the ice time of the U23 players on the other. In this way, we would like to show to what extent the U23 rule contributes to the long-term development of young German players and their ability to establish themselves in the league.

Following the argumentation of the U23 rule, there should be a lot of well-trained German players in the squads of the teams who have earned a regular place in their teams through their development within the framework of the U23 rule. We have restricted our analysis to the 1995-1998 cohort, as the 1995 cohort was the first to fall under the U23 rule in its entirety.

However, the main focus of our quantitative analysis was to determine the ice time of the current U23 players. Because again, the official reasoning is that the U23 rule promotes the development of players by giving them playing time in Germany's top league and allowing them to actively participate in competitive play.

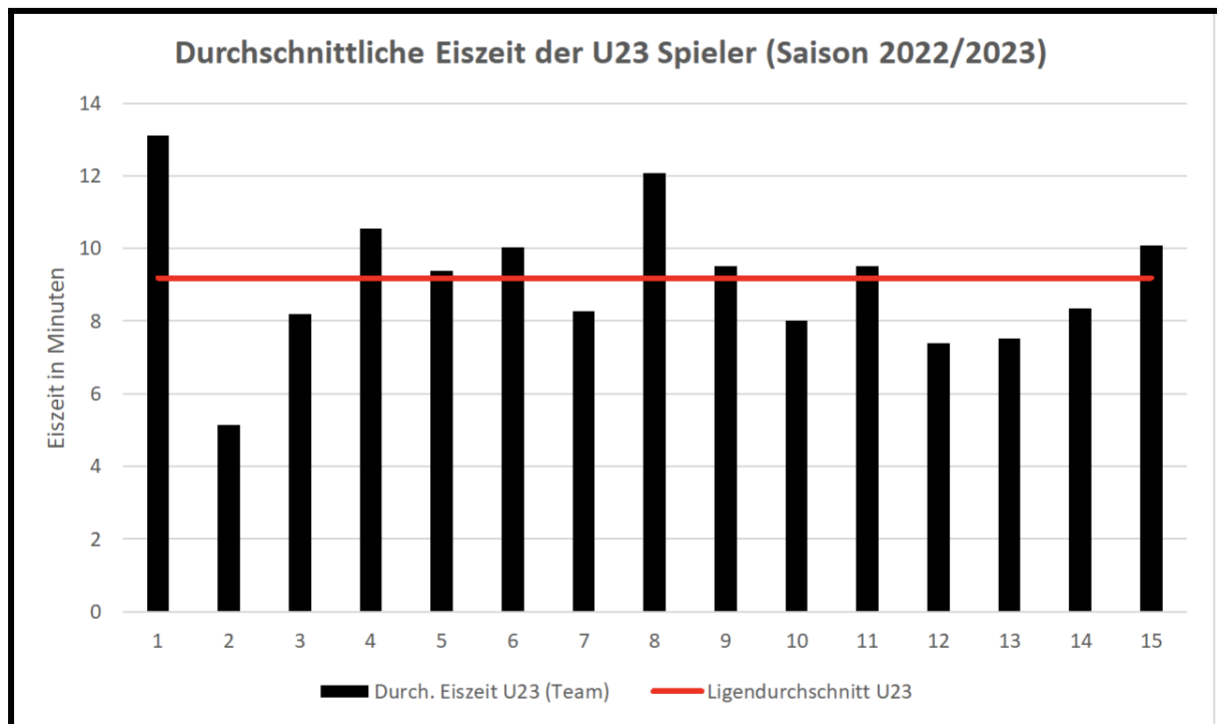
To make it easier to categorize players, German players who fall under the U23 rule or are part of the 1995-1998 cohort were given appropriate labels in a comparison with eliteprospects.com. U23 players were assigned a "U23" and the 1995-1998 cohorts were assigned an "AJ", for "older years".

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Distribution of ice time for U23 players in the 2022/2023 season

Based on the values of the 15 teams, an U23 player in the DEL receives an average of 9 minutes and 19 seconds of ice time.

Graph 1: Average ice time of U23 players in the 2022/2023 season



Unfortunately, Graph 1 shows clear differences in the league comparison. While some clubs are far above the average, other clubs are almost 4 minutes behind. That an average ice time of 9 minutes 19 seconds is too little to develop a young player has also been confirmed to us by NHL experts.

The explanations for the insufficient ice time are complex and difficult to generalize. Of course, a coach's confidence in his player is particularly crucial for ice time. So what is the source of the lack of confidence? The simplest reason is probably that the coach does not have sufficient confidence in the player's abilities. How could these be developed? Through ice time. So a vicious circle is emerging in which developable ice time and developable skills negatively affect each other.

A correlation analysis between the ice time of an U23 player and his scored points confirms this assumption ($r=0.67$). A player who plays more gets more chances to prove his skills. Conversely, a player who has already proven his ability will continue to get more chances to play.

Beyond that, we hypothesize that there are other indirect factors that determine ice time and thus the development of a player. In our opinion, these include the budget of a team, the position in the standings, the external and internal pressure to succeed, and the injury situation in the team. For these hypotheses, a deeper insight into data sets would certainly be very informative.

Table 1: Distribution of U23 ice times season 2022/2023

Team	Durchschnitt (Minuten)	Maximale Eiszeit (Minuten)	Minimale Eiszeit (Minuten)
1	13,1	17,56	6,25
2	5,15	9,06	0
3	8,2	17,25	4,14
4	10,54	14,21	8,58
5	9,37	16,39	1,41
6	10,04	16,46	0
7	8,26	18,37	0,29
8	12,08	18,58	6,42
9	9,52	18,51	8,19
10	8	15,28	1,49
11	9,51	13,33	4,51
12	7,39	12,28	2,19
13	7,51	12,51	5,51
14	8,34	15,5	3,59
15	10,08	16,52	5,14

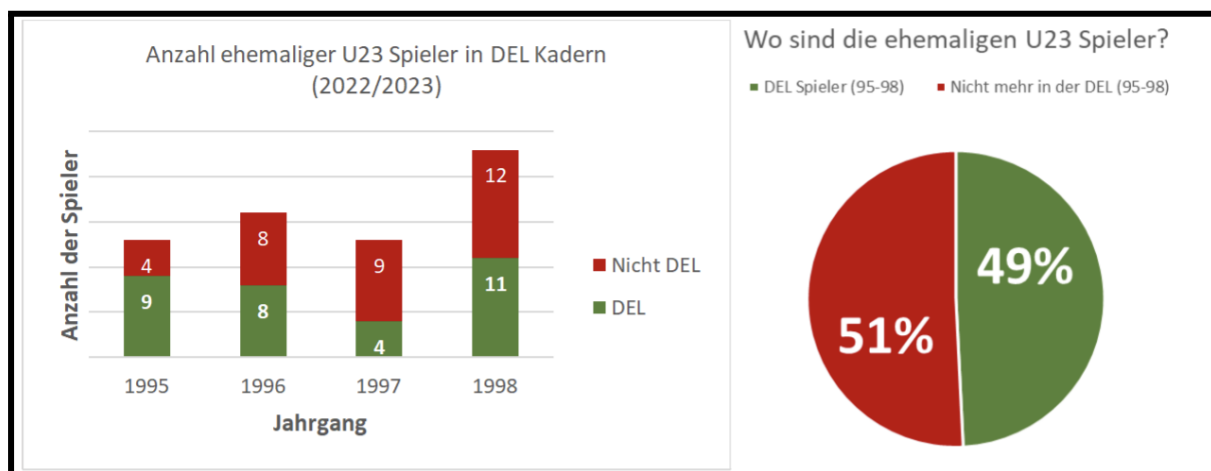
Table 1 shows an overview of the different key figures and reveals that there are also significant differences in playing time within the U23 cohort. While there are some players who are on the ice for more than 18 minutes, other U23 players spend a large part of the games on the bench.

Accordingly, it is hardly surprising that the breadth of young, German players is failing to develop in the way that was hoped for when the rule was introduced. How is a young player supposed to develop and get used to the competitive level of Germany's highest professional league if he barely touches the ice with his skates per third?

3.2 The 24th birthday - what next?

One of the core objectives of the U23 rule is to develop players into long-term performers in their teams and the national team. Accordingly, there should be more than enough players in the DEL who have benefited from the U23 rule and have developed into regular players in their teams. Since in the 2022/2023 season all German players born in 1999 and up will play under the protection of the U23 rule, players born in 1998 should have earned a "normal" place in the DEL teams by now.

Graph 2 and 3: Number of former U23 players in DEL squads (2022/2023)

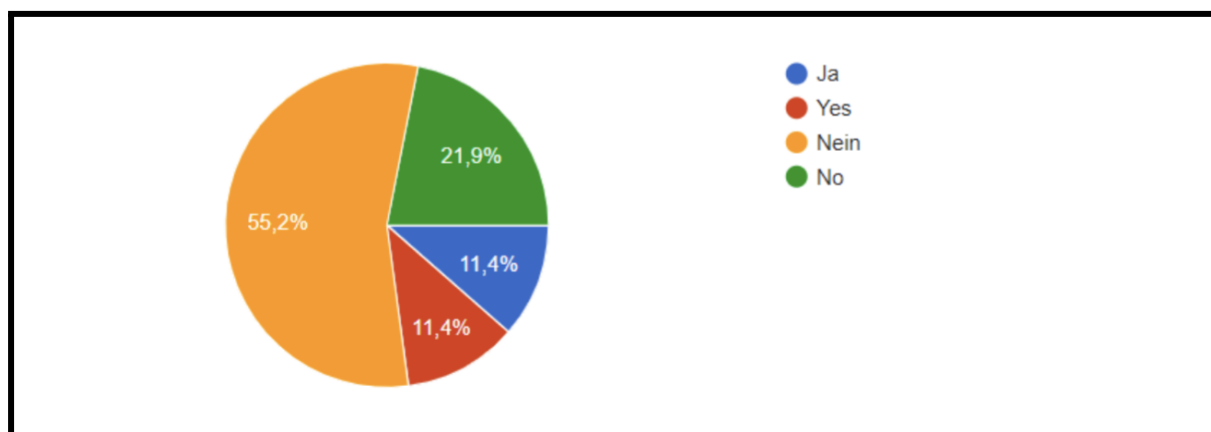


Shockingly, graphs 2 and 3 show that only one in two former U23 players is able to establish himself in the league in the long term after his 24th birthday.

In our opinion, the current U23 rule clearly fails to achieve its goal of developing young German players into top performers in the long term. Unfortunately, it is relatively easy for a player who enters the league at the age of 18 to break the 100-game mark in the course of his U23 years, given that he plays 56 games per season. The fact that such a player might then have to celebrate his 200-game anniversary in the top division is all the more frightening.

3.3 The U23 rule from the players' point of view

Evaluation 1: Is the DEL a training league?



As the pie chart clearly shows, around 78 percent of the players surveyed do not see Germany's top division in the role of a training league. Following the simple vote, the players were able to explain in more detail why or why not they perceive the DEL as a training league.

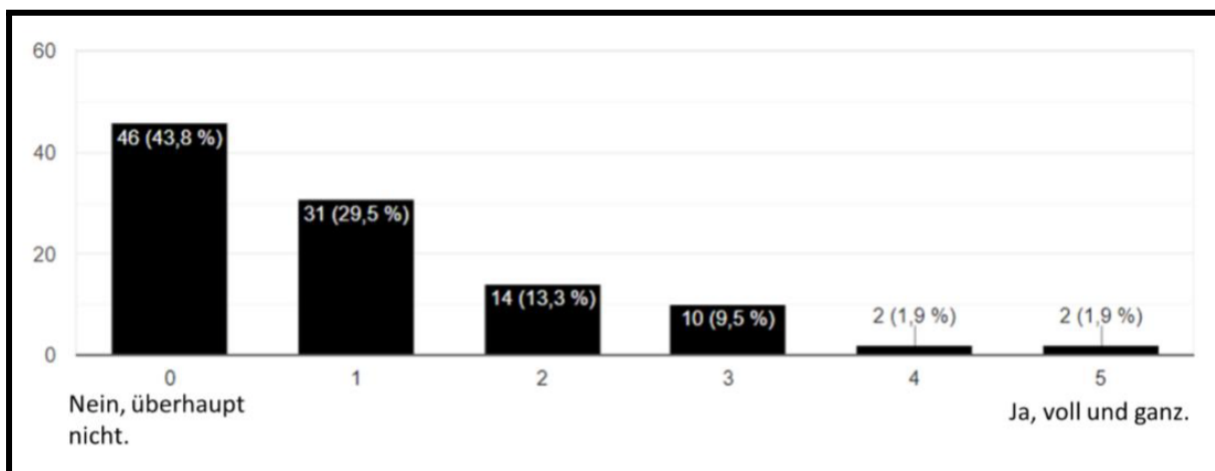
The opinion poll showed that the majority perceived the DEL 2 and the Oberliga as possible training leagues in which young players could develop further in order to

later fight for a place in a first league team. Accordingly, the majority sees the DEL as a league in which simply the best players should play.

The main criticism of the current situation is that an average U23 player is not being developed well enough at the moment, as his playing time is largely limited. What is interesting here is that the non-German respondents also notice that the U23 players hardly play in their teams and thus cannot develop further.

After discussing in the first step whether the DEL is generally perceived as a training league, we then wanted to find out how the U23 rule is seen by those it affects most - the players.

Evaluation 2: Does the U23 rule help train young players?

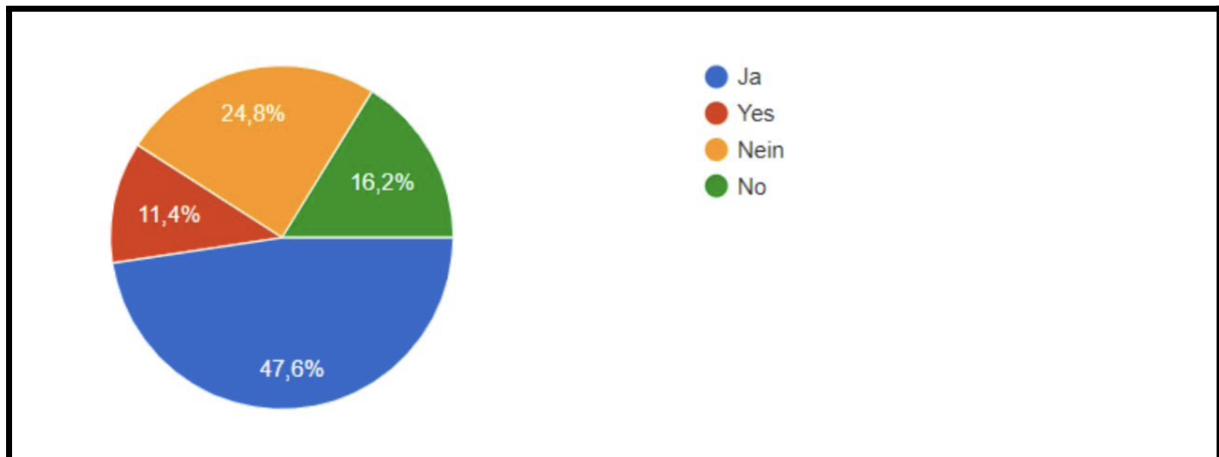


Although the U23 rule is celebrated by the league as "a very trend-setting decision for the entire German ice hockey" (Success thanks to U23 rule, Penny DEL), evaluation 2 illustrates that the players have a different opinion.

Evaluation 2 shows that around 87 percent of the players surveyed are of the opinion that the U23 rule does not help or hardly helps to develop young players. Thus, the majority of the players surveyed are against the usefulness of the U23 rule.

The effectiveness of the rule is massively doubted from the players' point of view, which should consequently also call into question the *raison d'être* of the U23 rule in its current form. Finally, it must be questioned how the U23 rule was created in terms of process and whose expertise was involved in its development in order to avoid mistakes in the future.

Evaluation 3: Need for a separate funding scheme



Evaluation 3 visualizes that player opinion regarding the necessity of a separate support scheme for young players is by no means homogeneous. While a total of 59% of the players surveyed consider a separate support scheme to be necessary, 40% of the players see no reason for the introduction of a support scheme.

Here, the prevailing opinion is that a player will play anyway if he is "good enough". In our opinion, however, performance can only prevail if players have enjoyed excellent youth development in their younger years. In addition, we must not neglect the fact that not every player is ready in a flash to play in the DEL at the age of 18-19.

Accordingly, solutions have to be worked out which, among other things, take into account the different stages of development of a young player. From the players' side, there are many different points that speak for or against a separate support scheme. We would like to summarize these in a short overview.

Excerpt from the opinion of the players

Question: Why is there a need for a separate funding scheme?

- *"Current system not helpful."*
- *"If young player is in lineup, he should play enough."*
- *"Young players are the future of the sport and need to be encouraged."*
- *"Most players don't play under U23 and then have to go to 2nd division."*
- *"Under U23 pure supplementary player role."*
- *"Young players just sit."*

Question: why is there no need for a separate funding scheme?

- *"If you're good enough, you can make it without the U23 rule."*
- *"Young players have to work their way up through DEL2, Oberliga, Föli."*
- *"Pro teams should not have the task of dragging underdeveloped players along."*
- *"U23 not in player's best interest if he doesn't play and develop."*
- *"Young players are given a place as a gift and don't have to earn it."*

4. Executive Summary

Our research shows that an U23 player in the DEL gets an average of 9 minutes 19 seconds of ice time per game. As confirmed by the NHL's international experts, this is too little to develop a player. In addition, stark disparities are evident in league-wide comparisons, where some teams lag behind the league average by as much as four minutes.

Furthermore, it has been shown that the majority of players disappear from the league after their 24th birthday. Sooner or later, every second player born between 1995 and 1998 disappeared from the squads of the DEL teams. At this point, it should be emphasized once again that these are the best players of their respective years. Moreover, players in their early 20s are often already top performers in their clubs in other countries.

After the data-driven debate, it was no surprise to us that logically the players are also critical of the current U23 rule. Around 87 percent think that the U23 rule does not help develop young players.

As SVE, we work closely with players' associations from other leagues, such as the NHLPA, to further develop our sport. As the voice of the players, we want to be a dialogue-oriented partner on an equal footing with the association and the leagues to actively advocate for the future of our heartfelt sport.

Unfortunately, our research makes clear that the U23 regulation in its current form has undesirable effects on the individual player and on German ice hockey as a whole, which will sooner or later be felt in national and international competition as well as in the purses of the clubs.

As SVE, we are interested in the long-term, sustainable strengthening of German ice hockey and are happy to contribute our expertise to the design of alternative solutions. We look forward to a factual and forward-looking exchange with all relevant players in German ice hockey and are available for discussions at any time.