

Champions 141

Chapter 141: Wood's Debut Part 2

After the first half of the match, the score was still tied at 0:0. Tang En was very satisfied. His mood got even better after he saw Coppell's grimace.

In the changing room, he did not specifically praise any individual player, but rather commended everyone on the team. He wanted to let them know that a football match is played by a team, and was not meant to be a stage for any individual player. No one player should be placed above the rest of the team.

There was a great quote in the movie "Goal!" that had deeply moved Tang En when he had first seen it.

In the movie, Newcastle's manager pointed at the team logo on the main character's jersey, patted the shoulder of the player behind him, and said, "Remember, the name on the front of the shirt is more important than the one on the back."

Therefore, even though Wood's performance was exceptional, Tang En did not praise him at all. Plus, he also knew that that kind of flattery was completely ineffective on George Wood. Instead, Wood, who was representing the adult team for the first time, received praises and encouragement from his other teammates. His midfield partner, Gunnarsson, sat with Wood and said, patting his shoulder, "Well done, young lad! You're much better than I expected!"

Morgan, who had played with Wood before on the youth team, said teasingly, "Brynjar, what you just said was pointless! George has always been outstanding."

"Huh?" Gunnarsson didn't get why Morgan had phrased it this way.

"Do you guys know that Spanish guy from Arsenal?" Morgan saw that everyone else became as interested as Gunnarsson, and decided to start showing off, standing in the middle of the changing room. Tang En and Walker did not stop him, because there was nothing much for him to say for the time left in the break. The time was better off left to the players themselves.

Most of the players did not know who Morgan was referring to. Only Huth, the German midfielder who had just entered the team, nodded his head and said, "His name is Fabregas."

Morgan was glad that someone else knew who he was referring to. Otherwise, he would have embarrassed himself. "That's right, him! I heard that he's already playing for Arsenal's first team! Do you know how young he is?"

Huth nodded his head again. "He just turned sixteen."

"Wow, you really do know everything!" Morgan liked his midfield partner a lot. They had a lot of chemistry between them, and were sure to become great partners.

"When I was in Chelsea," Huth said, "I often overheard the others discussing the new young guy that Arsenal had just bought."

“Huh? What? What were they saying about him?” The players immediately redirected their attention. The untold stories of an English Premier League changing room were something that many people enjoyed hearing about. Even Tang En, who outwardly acted disinterested, was actually listening intently.

Huth was an honest man. Seeing everyone’s interest, he told them everything he knew. “That youngster only entered Arsenal in October, and had represented the first team in a match before Christmas. Although the outsiders still don’t think much of him, everyone on the team thinks that he’s a genius. He is very... um, very mature, and looks nothing like a sixteen year-old. And frankly, I feel that even Chelsea’s midfielders can’t compare to his talent.”

His appraisal was very good, and the players around him, who were playing in a lower tier league, did not even dare to think about it. English Premier League... To the majority of players, it was like a dream. The ability to play in the English Premier League at the age of sixteen was no ordinary feat. Not to mention, he was in a top club: the highly-competitive Arsenal.

Eastwood did not agree with Huth, because he had been in Westham United’s training camp with Joe Cole at the same time. “Joe Cole is also in Chelsea, no?”

Huth nodded his head and said, “Yes, but I think that even he is no match for that Spanish lad.”

“Why?”

“Well... I don’t know. If you insist on making me give a reason, I can’t really explain it. But I just feel like that young man has a very bright future ahead of him,” Huth said, scratching his head and frowning. He appeared genuine.

Looking at the honest German, Eastwood said no more. He believed that Huth had told the truth.

Morgan, who had been completely forgotten, perked up again. “That’s right! That Spanish guy is amazing! But do you all know, there is someone who’s able to mark him so well that he can’t perform at all!”

He had very successfully recaptured his teammates’ attention.

Tang En knew who Morgan was talking about. He looked at Wood; his expression was calm. He even looked slightly stupefied. He was neither filled with anticipation, nor did he feel at all shy. It was as though the person that Morgan was about to mention was not him.

Hence, Morgan continued to vividly describe an FA Youth Cup match played on a muddy field. “.... Although we were leading, Arsenal, under the lead of that Spanish lad, launched wave after wave of offenses against our goalpost. I even saved a ball at the goalpost line. But we all knew full well that the situation could not carry on this way. Chief also knew this!” At this, everyone turned their head towards Tang En, who was standing by the door.

Seeing that everyone was looking at him, Tang En only smiled and continued the story. “That’s right, I switched George in.” He made everyone turn their attention towards Wood instead.

Morgan continued, “I was on the field, so I don’t know what Chief had said to Wood. But I clearly remember seeing him point to that Spanish lad and say something. Afterwards, Wood ran onto the field

and stood in front of him. Afterwards, that talented Spanish player could no longer pose any threat to us for the rest of the match!”

After the story was over, everyone else was still looking at Wood. However, the look in their eyes was completely different this time. This included Gunnarsson as well, who had been encouraging Wood a few moments ago. Even Eastwood, who had had no interest in him a moment ago, became fascinated by this quiet teammate of his.

Nobody uttered a single word; the changing room fell into a state of utter silence.

Tang En clapped his hands and reminded everyone to snap out of their thoughts. “Alright, alright, Lads. You guys did very well in the first half. Keep playing that way in the second half! There’s not much time left, so get ready to go back onto the field!”

With mixed feelings, the players stood up once again, opened the door, and headed towards the field. Wood was behind the group, and was stopped by Tang En.

“George, do you have any thoughts on that story?” At times, Tang En really wanted to see what material the lad’s heart was made of. He simply did not act like an eighteen year-old.

Wood shook his head and replied, “Nothing.”

“You’re not excited? Or happy?”

Wood kept shaking his head. “No. That day, you told me to mark number 25 with my full might, so I did. Is there anything wrong with that?”

Tang En shot Wood a look, before laughing and shaking his head. “You did well, very well. George, your mother is watching you in the VIP suite. Did you know that the club’s owner is there as well? If you perform really well and win his favor, he will let me give you a new contract. A contract to join the adult team.”

Hearing Tang En say this, a glimmer of light flashed across Wood’s eyes.

“I could earn a lot of money, right?” Wood asked.

Tang En nodded his head. “The better you perform in the second half, the higher your weekly salary will be on that contract.”

Wood looked at Tang En and asked, “What do you want me to do for the second half?”

With his goal achieved, Tang En shrugged his shoulders. “Exactly what you did in the first half. You’re a defensive midfielder, so the region in front of the penalty area and the region after the halfway line is your territory. Don’t let your opponents get past your territory and threaten our goalpost without a fight. Any opponent that wants to cross your territory... get rid of them.” Tang En made a slashing gesture before adding, “Just be careful not to get any more cards.”

Chapter 142: There’s Someone Up There

Warning! This is our territory. Trespassing will be considered an illegal invasion. Please withdraw immediately. Otherwise, it will be regarded as a provocation, and I will break you!

I repeat! This is our territory. Trespassing will be considered an illegal invasion. Please withdraw immediately. Otherwise, it will be regarded as a provocation, and I will break you in three seconds!

One!

Two!

Three!

Boom!

There was a muffled thud, and beads of sweat sprayed everywhere. Cut grass scattered.

The Reading player, who was wearing a horizontally striped white and blue jersey, was pathetically hurled sideways. And George Wood stood at the point of the collision, with the football he had just seized lying still beneath his foot.

“Foul—” The Reading fans could not finish speaking before they were drowned out by louder cheers.

“Well done; beautiful!” The Forest fans all stood up and shouted.

The referee also seemed to hear the cries of the home fans. He wagged his finger at the prone Reading player, who was demanding a free kick as he ran backwards away from him.

“Give me the ball!” Gunnarsson called out next to Wood. This was a great opportunity for the Forest team to fight back.

Wood did as he was told and passed the ball, but did not follow. He firmly remembered Twain’s request to him: defend, and don’t let the opponents get past him to threaten the goal. The vast area between the halfway line and the line at the penalty area is my territory, he seemed to be saying. I’m the ruler here, and anyone who wants to pass through must ask for my permission! The kid from Reading just now did not get my permission.

“What a beautiful defensive block!” exclaimed Motson. “Steve Sidwell is a player with a great physique on the Reading team, but he doesn’t stand a chance in front of George Wood! Coppell is furious at the referee’s penalty decision. But in fact, this was actually a reasonable collision. If he were to question why his player had flown so far... Well, there’s only one explanation, and that is that George Wood is too strong! Poor Sidwell hit a wall directly while he was dribbling the ball at high speed!”

When he saw Coppell stomping in front of the technical area as though he were a monkey robbed of its banana, Tang En could not suppress his inner delight. He looked at Coppell, who had been clapping for Wood’s performance a moment ago, and said to Walker beside him, “Des, did you see that, Mr. Nice Guy is getting impatient.”

Walker smiled and said, “I think he flew into a rage during halftime.”

“This is good. I know he wants to beat me here, so the longer the score remains at 0:0, the better it is for us.”

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Both Tang En and Walker were right. Coppell wanted to defeat Twain so badly that he was almost insane with the thought of it. During the halftime interval, he had berated all the players in the locker room, as the combined force of Reading's entire main lineup had been unable to take down the Forest team's substitute lineup in the first half. His plan was not just to obtain the three points from this match, but to obtain them beautifully. Whether it was through the gameplay or the score, he wanted to leave that cunning Tony Twain speechless.

"Don't tell me you guys can't even beat the damn Nottingham Forest Second Team! Those two center backs have never been partnered before. They've probably spent less time practicing together than you all have f**king spent in women's beds! Break through those two stupid center backs! They will collapse at the first attack!"

The players sat in the locker room with their heads lowered. Who knew what was going on in their minds?

It was not that they didn't want to win. Indeed, they launched a frenzy of offense against the home team the moment the second half started, but the two defensive midfielders were simply too powerful. Most of the offense ended in front of them, and even if they were able to get other passes through, they were collectively resisted by the Forest team's defense. They knew that the two first-time center back partners were the Forest team's Achilles' heel for the game, but still, it was as if they had formed a steel barricade in front of the Forest team's penalty area.

Sidwell's courage was admirable, but the outcome was disappointing.

The one wearing the Nottingham number 33 jersey was not a player, but a wall. A wall that ran from one sideline of the field to the other.

Sidwell still clearly saw him defending on the right wing. After a three-touch pass, the football was passed to the left wing. The Reading player was about to speed up to break through the Forest defensive line, but just as he kicked the football out, he was tackled. When he finally got up from the ground, he looked at the back number on the jersey... It was number 33 again.

The game had already been going on for seventy-nine minutes, but his speed had not varied at all!

This is terrifying!

This was the only thing Sidwell could think when he saw George Wood for the first time.

Wood could be seen repeatedly doing lateral sprints in the 30-meter zone for the duration of the match. He might look silly playing this way, simply following the football, but he still terrified his opponents. He and Gunnarsson were like a pair of steel jaws, ceaselessly opening and closing, and snapping off the Reading team's offense route.

Wood rendered Reading completely helpless, so they simply lobbed the ball from the backfield to pass it to the striker in the front. This happened to fit with Robert Huth's intention. George Wood's hyper style of play had kept him idle for too long.

Now, as he watched the football fall from the sky, he and Hill jumped up and took turns cleaning up the overhead zone of Nottingham Forest's penalty area.

Reading, who had lost Goater, was completely unable to pose any threat to the Forest team's defensive line. If they intended to break through the Forest team's intensive defense from the wings, then at least one of the two defensive midfielders would immediately help the backs defend the wings. If they were going to take a long shot from the midfield, it was highly likely that the moment the striker swung his leg, the football at his feet would be tackled by Wood and Gunnarsson.

At the eightieth minute, the latest game statistics were displayed on the television screen. Twain's team had the absolute disadvantage for ball possession, at only 31%. The Reading team had 69% of the ball control, but they still had only eight shots on goal.

"This is insane! I know that before this match, there were a lot of Forest fans looking forward to fantastic goals from their new favorite, Freddy Eastwood. But this game has become the stage for this eighteen-year-old, George Wood! I think it's worth reminding you once again that this young man wearing the number 33 is playing for Forest's First team for the first time today! This is his maiden battle, but it's so perfect that it leaves you speechless! We may be seeing the rise of another star player!" The fervor in Motson's voice could be heard across the United Kingdom through the satellite signal.

Tang En did not know how many people would watch a League One match on the television, but he knew that Wood had succeeded. The kid's performance was better than he had imagined. Much better.

Next to Twain, Walker said excitedly, "Tony, I saw you pull Wood aside and speak to him for a while in the locker room. What did you say to him that made him so energetic in the second half? It's like he's on drugs!"

Tang En shrugged. "I told him that because he was transferred to the First Team, I would consider giving him a new contract to replace the original youth contract."

"Is that all?" Walker was a little disappointed.

"Of course not. I also told him that the better his performance is, the higher his weekly wage on the contract would be."

Walker paused for a moment, then burst out laughing.

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In the VIP box, Evan was congratulating Sophia. "Madam, you have a talented son! Tony's never wrong about people."

Sophia smiled. "Thank you for your compliment, Mr. Chairman."

On their other side, the Reading chairman was depressed. He could hear Evan Doughty's laughter from several seats away. Before the game, he had been looking forward to a beautiful victory when he heard that Twain was going to send out his substitute lineup.

Damn it! Even a draw can make you so happy, you good-for-nothing Yankee!

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From the 85th minute onwards, Tang En began his substitution plan. He basically let the players on the substitutes' bench do their warm-ups to drag out the game time. So, he did not bring on three substitutes at once, but rather brought on a substitute once every one or two minutes.

The score was still 0:0, and his purpose had been achieved. Next, he could reasonably make use of the rules to prolong the game time, and he could obtain a point that way.

In fact, it was not pointless for the Reading team to tie the game today. Although it seemed like the Forest team had deployed a lot of new substitutes, most players on the team would be the main force in the latter half of this season. For example, Tang En had decided to fully promote George Wood to the First Team. With such a fantastic performance in his first game, he was certain that no one would question that decision. At the same time, he was not concerned at all that letting Wood play for the First Team so soon would ruin the young man... "The Cautionary Tale of Zhongyong" would not apply to George Wood.

Rebrov stood on the sidelines and waited for a dead ball. He was going to replace Eastwood. For tactical reasons, the Romani had not had much to do in this match. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that the Forest team's spotlight had simply been on George Wood alone in this game. Before this game, the critics were worried that Twain would lose. Now that they had seen this, would they have anything else to add? Or would they have to eat their words?

The Reading team launched another attack. They were unwilling to draw a tie with the Forest team for this match.

But George Wood's invisible wall emerged once again. Compared to the exhausted Reading team, who were staggering along in their dribbling, he looked as if he had just been brought on, vigorous and swift.

Pop! Wood intercepted the ball from the Reading attacking midfielder, James Harper. He then took a big step forward to bypass his opponent and kicked the ball before he could even react, completely thrusting the football out of the other's range of control.

Then Wood caught up with the football and got it back. But what should he do next?

Over the past year or so, he had only practiced defense. Other than the basic techniques of passing, he knew nothing about attacking tactics. What could he do?

He did not see the emptiness in Reading's defensive line, nor did he see Eastwood, who intended to outmaneuver them from the wing. Suddenly, he heard a roar.

"What are you doing? Pass the ball! Kick the ball forward!!"

Tang En was waving his arms and shouting at him from the sidelines.

That's right, now is a good time for the team to attack. But who do I to pass it to?

"Don't worry so much, damn it! Just kick it to the front! Use all your strength!" Tang En, who was standing on the sidelines at that point, wished he could personally go on the field to replace Wood to kick the ball.

Now was the best chance for the Forest team to fight back and seize this opportunity. Maybe they could emerge victorious from the match!

But if the opportunity was wasted due to Wood's hesitation, and the team lost the chance to score... Tang En wouldn't know whether to cry or laugh.

"Kick towards the goal!"

Wood snapped to attention from Tang En's tone. He no longer cared about the chaotic situation in the Reading team's front field. He kicked the ball with all of his strength. The football flew high into the air and drew a rainbow-like arc, hurtling towards the goal.

The cheering in the stands grew louder and louder. Amidst the cheering, the Reading goalkeeper Jamie Ashdown turned and ran towards the goal.

Seeing this scene on the field, even Tang En was stunned. Was he possessed by the spirits of David Beckham and Xabi Alonso? Even during training, this kid had never kicked such an accurate shot!

"George Wood passes... My God! Is that a direct shot?"

In the VIP box, even Evan Doughty could not help but stand up to lean over and watch the football flying across the stadium.

Coppell rushed out of the technical area and almost dashed straight to the field. He clutched his fists and shouted, "Damn it! Don't let the ball in!"

Ashdown looked up at the descending football and muttered to himself, "You will not go in, will not go in, will not... go in!"

He watched and timed his opportunity to move backwards and leap. He raised his hands with the intention knocking the football off the beam. That way, everything would be over.

But he underestimated the power and speed with which Wood had kicked the ball. The football did not strike his fingertips, but slammed into his wrists. Then Ashdown fell into the goal, and the football did not fly out off the beam as intended. Instead, it bounced back to the front of the goal.

Damn it! There was still a chance ... Ashdown struggled to untangle from the net and got up to pounce towards the football. At the same time, as he heard the cheering from the stands suddenly get much louder than before, there was a sudden whoosh beside his ears as if a supersonic plane had just flown over his head.

A shadowy figure appeared in front of the football. Due to the backlighting, he could not see the man's jersey color or appearance. Was it his teammate, a Reading center back coming to defend?

Tang En jumped on the sidelines.

Motson stood up from his seat with the microphone in his hands.

Evan Doughty's hands pressed tightly against the box window, and his fingers made a squeaking sound from pressing so hard.

Ashdown saw the dark shadow swing his leg, and fiercely kick the football. He watched in despair as the ball flew past him. The clamor from the stands reached a climax and he could not hear anything else that followed.

“Goooooal!! Oh my God! Nottingham Forest takes the lead against Reading at the last moment of the game! Freddy Eastwood appeared like a ghost in front of the goal! What a beautiful assisted shot! I bet even Twain did not expect to win the game! Look at him on the sidelines! He’s going nuts! He’s hugging everyone he sees! This is truly an incredible goal! A sixty-meter indirect assist shot from the eighteen-year-old George Wood, who made his debut in this match! Beautifully done, kid! This is your first game; continue to play like this, you will have an incomparably brilliant and bright future!” Motson howled along without any regard. He had every reason to be impulsive after such a goal.

The Nottingham Forest players, who had been waiting in the backfield without any expectations, spread their arms and roared as they rushed towards Eastwood in the front to celebrate the goal that had ignited the City Ground.

Gunnarsson punched the back of his midfield partner in excitement. And when Wood turned to look at him, he laughed and shouted, “Are you stupid? We scored! Nice work, lad! It’s your assist!” Afterwards, he ran towards Eastwood, just like everyone else.

While everyone else was going wild, Wood still had no reaction. He stood in the center circle in a daze, in the exact spot where he had just taken the shot. He looked at his celebrating teammates around him, looked at Eastwood who was crushed underneath, looked at Tony Twain who was hugging everyone on the sidelines, and saw the cheering fans in the City Ground stands.

Apart from gasping for breath, he was only thinking about one question: How much can this performance increase my weekly salary on that contract?

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Walker shook Twain’s shoulder with all his strength, screamed at Twain with the tip of his nose almost in his face. “Tony! Tony! He’s a genius! I swear! I swear by my twenty-year career, he’s going to be a great player! You know who I’m talking about, right?”

When Tang En finally calmed down, he grabbed Walker by the shoulder and replied, “Of course I know, Des!” Then he turned and looked at George Wood, who was in a daze on the field.

Kid, from the moment you were alone on the youth team training ground, thinking of ways to practice your passing; from the moment you went to Gavin’s grave alone to give him flowers; from that time you came to my doorstep and said to me, “Sir, you should sign the best player in England,” I knew damn well you were going to succeed, George!

Gavin’s idol can’t be an insignificant nobody!

Kid, you’ve got a fantastic start, now are you ready? Stride forward on this road ... No, run! Charge at full speed!

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That wonderful goal had completely crushed Reading. Nottingham Forest defeated Reading, with their last-minute “lucky ball,” and received an unplanned three points.

At the post-match press conference, a reporter suggested that even God did not want Nottingham Forest to lose, and had helped the team at the last moment. Tang En was not angry, he joked good-naturedly, “In fact, when I need to, I will always ask God for help. Mr. Coppell is a good man, and I want to thank him again for delivering the three points to my team when I needed them.”

Coppell was a little embarrassed. “I agree with Mr. Twain’s words. This time, my team did not lose to Nottingham Forest, but to God.” He pointed above with a wry smile.

He was right. There was someone up there for Tony Twain!

Chapter 143: The Future Of Three Million Six Hundred Thousand Part 1

Nottingham Forest rose by one spot in the rankings after winning the match. They had risen from fifteenth to fourteenth, while Reading fell from tenth to eleventh due to their loss.

However, the greatest take away from the match was still George Wood’s rapid growth. Tang En no longer had to worry about the issue of only having two defensive midfielders. Now, he had three defensive midfielders: Brynjar Gunnarsson, Eugen Bopp, and George Wood. Those three players should be more than competent enough to handle the next few month’s matches.

Because this was only a normal English League One match, its influence was nowhere near that of an English Premier League match. Therefore, Wood had not succeeded countrywide. But still, he had become the new pet of City Ground Stadium. He had already become famous in Nottingham.

Of course, if that sixty meter long shot had directly flown into the goalpost, things would be different. Tang En was sure that Wood would have become famous throughout England overnight. People would definitely have compared Wood to David Beckham—in the past, the now world-famous Beckham’s amazing long shot had made everyone remember his name and his bright smile.

Becoming famous too early was not necessarily a good thing. At the very least, Tang En would have to start worrying about lots of other teams asking the club for a price, or doing to Wood what Nottingham Forest was currently doing to Ashley Young.

The most urgent matter at hand was giving Wood a new contract, and the contract had to express sufficient sincerity.

Tang En decided to find Evan to discuss Wood. He knew that Evan had seen Wood’s performance that day from the suite. And as for the contract, Tang En could decide it completely on his own. Still, there was still one other matter that required further discussion with Evan.

Tang En had just left his office when he saw Evan appearing from the staircase exit. After seeing Tang En, Evan waved happily at him and said, “Looks like I came at the right time. Are you going out, Tony?”

“I was actually about to go find you, Evan,” Tang En said.

“We really do have a connection, Tony,” Evan said, laughing. “I’m here to find you as well.”

Tang En smiled. "Well, let me guess why you're trying to find me... I think I know."

Evan nodded and said, "I know why you wanted to find me too."

After that, the two of them said simultaneously, "George Wood."

Tang En snapped his fingers and said, "Very good. I was planning on giving him a new professional contract."

"I agree, that kid's future should be with Nottingham Forest. Tony, give him an eight-year contract."

Tang En became silent for a while after hearing this. The longer a contract was, the better it was for a club. But for the player, it would become slightly more difficult for his salary to increase.

Evan knew what Tang En was thinking about, and said with a smile, "The contract may be slightly longer, but you may do as you see fit for the rest." This clearly meant that as long as the contract period was long enough, everything else—from the salary, to the prize money—was up to Tang En to decide.

Tang En understood what Evan meant, and lightly nodded his head before saying, "There's still one more thing that I want to discuss with you."

"Speak your mind, Tony."

"The match that day, did you see Wood's mother in the suite?"

Evan nodded his head and replied, "I didn't expect his mother to be that young and pretty... she doesn't look like the mother of an eighteen year-old."

"Yeah. She loves her son a lot. Wood's performance is great, and she seems to be in good spirits too. But did you know? His mother's body has actually always been in a poor state."

Upon hearing Tang En, Evan was slightly shocked. "I really couldn't tell..."

"The main reason that Wood plays football is to earn money to treat his mother's illness. He loves her a lot. His family situation is pretty complex. To put it simply, he and his mother lead a hard life. Do you understand what I'm trying to get at?"

Evan stroked his chin, not giving Tang En an immediate reply.

"Evan, if you want a player to stay in the club, the effect of a contract is relatively small," said Tang En. "As long as someone else wants to snatch our people, there's always a way for them to do so. And Wood's situation is very special, so I think his mother is a very good way to—"

"I understand. You can go and offer Wood the contract, and tell him that the club will arrange treatment for his mother's illness. Not to mention, a new star staying in the slums... I'm a little worried about that. Let him move out of there; the club will provide the house."

Tang En was elated. "Thank you, Evan, on Wood's behalf."

"Don't thank me, Tony. You're right. Players need to feel like it's worthwhile to be on the team. If they're working for the club, then the club has an obligation to take care of them and help them resolve their problems. I also have another piece of good news to tell you."

“Yes?”

“We got that young lad that you wanted.” Evan clenched his fists and continued, “Allan gave his family one hundred thousand pounds, and they agreed to convince their son to cooperate with us. Now, we can officially make an offer to Watford. But.. Tony, do you think this kid is worth that price?”

Tang En thought about Ashley Young’s value in the future and smiled. “Evan, rest assured. In a few years time, you will be very happy that we bought him. Freddy Eastwood, George Wood, Kris Commons, Wes Morgan, and Ashley Young; those kids are the future of Nottingham Forest. If we get promoted to the English Premier League, I will continue to find more young people... when that time comes, I will shock all of England!

“That’s awesome!” Evan clapped his hands and continued. “If you require any assistance from the club, contact me immediately. I believe in your foresight, Tony.”

Tang En laughed. You should, he thought. My foresight goes three and a half years into the future!

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After the morning’s training ended, Tang En called Wood into his office, where there was a stack of papers on the desk. Tang En stuffed a fountain pen into Wood’s hand and pointed at the stack of papers. “George,” he said, “this is your new contract. Want to take a look?”

Wood approached the desk and picked up the contract. He saw that they were all legal provisions that he did not understand. “Where’s the salary portion?” he asked.

As expected, simply hearing about the new contract was not enough to excite Wood. He only cared about his weekly salary. That was Wood’s style.

Tang En approached him and flipped two pages before pointing to a line in the middle of the page and saying, “Here, you want me to read it to you?”

Wood nodded and passed the contract back to Tang En.

“Your weekly salary from now on will be two thousand five hundred pounds.” After reading to that point, Tang En looked up at Wood. He saw that the expression on his face had changed slightly. Tang En continued, “But this is only your salary, and only the first year’s. In the future, your weekly salary will increase by fifteen percent every year....”

“How much is that?”

“Umm...” Tang En grabbed a calculator from one of the desk’s drawers. After tapping furiously on it for a while, he raised his head and told Wood, “For the first year, your weekly salary will be two thousand five hundred. Second year, two thousand, eight hundred and seventy-five. Third year, three thousand, three hundred. Fourth year, three thousand, eight hundred.... and so on and so forth.”

Wood did not object. Right now, earning three thousand eight hundred pounds a week was like a dream to him.

“And that’s not all,” Tang En added. “For the first two years of the contract, there’s an additional reward every season when you play twenty matches. Sounds pretty good, right?”

Wood nodded his head. It did sound much better than that contract he had signed for the youth team.

“There’s still more.” Tang En removed a credit card from the drawer and passed to Wood. “The club made this for you. There’s already ten thousand pounds on it. That’s your signing fee. In the future, your monthly salary will be transferred to this account at the right time.”

Wood received the card from Tang En, and started to grip it tightly. His thumbs slid up and down the card as he felt its texture. His name and card number were on it. This tiny little card contained ten thousand pounds. This was not a dream; the card was really in his hands.

Seeing that Wood was interested, Tang En smiled and said, “George, now your credit is also guaranteed by the bank.”

Hearing those familiar words, Wood raised his head and looked at Tang En.

Tang En patted his shoulders and said, “There’s still another piece of good news for you. The club has decided to fund your mother’s treatment and find new lodging for you two. The club will pay for half of the monthly rent. Soon, the two of you can move out of that slum.”

Wood stared at Tang En with his eyes wide, as though he dared not believe what he was hearing. Tang En nodded his head and said, “Are you intending to stay nearer to the training grounds, or further away from it?”

George Wood was agitated, and stuttered when he spoke. “I... I don’t know.”

Tang En passed the fountain pen over to him and said, “Sign your name here, then go home and discuss with your mother where you want to stay. Tell me tomorrow when you come for training.”

Wood grasped the pen tightly in his hands, and the tip of the pen stopped on the contract. The last time he had signed his name like this was at the side of the training field. He had done it in order to satisfy the request of a child he hadn’t known, named Gavin Bernard. Later, the boy died, while Wood became a professional football player.

He hesitated for a few moments, then signed his name.

From that moment onward, he was an official member of Nottingham Forest’s first team.

Chapter 144: The Future Of Three Million Six Hundred Thousand Part 2

George Wood signed an eight-year contract. Nottingham Forest’s fans were happy to see that the young player had placed his future in Nottingham Forest instead of going elsewhere for money.

After settling Wood’s contract, Tang En also managed to secure the purchase of another important player.

That concerned Ashley Young. When Nottingham Forest first offered five hundred thousand pounds, Watford was not moved at all. Nottingham Forest offered six hundred thousand pounds the second time, but Watford still remained unmoved.

This time, the effect of the one hundred thousand pounds which Allan Adams had given to Ashley Young finally kicked in. Ashley Young made it very clear to Watford club that he wanted them to let him go to Nottingham Forest. That was because he was currently unable to play in any matches there, and he was already eighteen years old. If he was unable to get sufficient play time on the field, he wouldn't be able to improve his skills.

After that, Tang En gave Young a call. Over the phone, Tang En promised Young that he would be given a core position on the team. At the same time, he hoped that Young would continue to cooperate with Nottingham Forest and have one or two press interviews. Publicly expressing his intentions to join Nottingham Forest would also put pressure on Watford FC.

Upon being promised a core position on the team, Ashley Young was naturally willing to do whatever Tang En told him to. One day later, in front of his house, he accepted an interview from Pearce Bruce, a reporter from the Nottingham Evening Post. The interview was mainly centred around Nottingham Forest and Tony Twain.

During the interview, Ashley Young expressed his desire to join the team under Manager Twain. He also casually talked about Nottingham Forest's five win streak in the league, and how he felt that much of the credit should go to Tony Twain. While still wearing the Watford jersey, Ashley Young had already begun to praise Nottingham Forest.

"...Nottingham Forest has a glorious history. It would be a dream come true to play for a team like that! You know that young guys like me tend to experience the greatest spikes in their abilities. So, there is a need for us to participate in more matches to gain experience. Since I'm unable to get many opportunities to play at Watford, why shouldn't I change to a different environment?"

With interviews like that being published, Watford FC could not deny that they would not be able to make the team's greatest hope stay. Now, all they could do was let the team earn as much money as possible through Ashley Young's transfer, and make up for the loss of the player by monetary means.

But Allan was unwilling to be ripped off any more. He made a final offer to Watford—seven hundred thousand pounds, and not a penny more. "After all," he told them, "the player's attitude is clear for everyone to see. The rest is up to you. At worst, Nottingham Forest can just switch to another target. Seven hundred thousand can get a very good player in League One."

Just as Nottingham Forest made their offer, Young called Watford's manager to inform him that he had just suffered an injury and would have to take one day of leave, and that he would be unable to participate in training.

Given the situation, what more could Watford FC say? They knew full well that a coincidence like that was impossible. It must have been a collusion between Young and Nottingham Forest. But even though they had no doubt that they were right, they did not have enough proof to raise the matter to the English Football Association and FIFA.

Just like that, Nottingham Forest bought Watford's rising star, Ashley Young, with a transfer fee of seven hundred thousand pounds.

But Tang En's footsteps in the transfer market did not stop there. There was still a very big problem with the team's left and right backs. And, at the same time, because Rebrov was playing as a midfielder,

there were only three people left on the team's frontline. This was evidently insufficient for the team to deal with the demands of the remaining half-season, considering the team's participation in both League One and the EFL Cup.

In the previous season, the team's right back had had an issue, so Tang En had made John Thompson play as right back instead. It later proved to be a successful switch. Now, it was the left back's turn to be Nottingham Forest's weak spot. Although Gareth Bale was talented, he was only fourteen. As the saying goes, "Distant water cannot quench present thirst." So, the team still needed to search for a suitable left back on the market.

Tang En was not too knowledgeable about League One, but he knew an expert. He told Moore, the old football scout, that the team currently needed a young left back who could be nurtured, and who had a lot of potential and room for growth. After Moore heard the problem, he immediately wrote down an answer: Leighton Baines, a young player from Wigan Athletic F.C., who currently was only a substitute player for the team. If Tony Twain wanted, he just had to do what he had done for Ashley Young and promise him a position as a core player. If that happened, neither Wigan nor Baines himself could reject an offer.

Tang En stared at the name for quite some time before he finally recalled who this person was: the team captain of Wigan during the 06-07 English Premier League, England National Team U21 core left back, and the new talent whom Manchester United's Manager, Ferguson, openly expressed his desire for.

And it just so happened that Leighton Baines was currently only playing as a substitute for Wigan. From this, Tang En knew that he had gotten a good deal once again. If Tang En did not buy him now, it would be difficult for Nottingham Forest to purchase him once Wigan realized his true value.

As such, without uttering another word, Tang En sent a request to Wigan for the purchase of Leighton Baines, along with an offer of four hundred thousand pounds. For a young player who had just started playing for the first team, this price was far from low. So, Wigan did not have any reason to refuse it. Just like that, the future team captain of Wigan was snatched away by Tang En.

With Leighton Baines and the Norwegian Davy Oyen, Tang En was finally able to rest assured about Nottingham Forest's left back issues.

As for the striker position, Tang En had thought of a suitable candidate long ago.

That person was Peter Crouch, who liked to perform a robot dance after he scored, and who would later become Liverpool and England's tall-guys killer. However, he was currently very unsatisfied with his time at Aston Villa. Crouch had debuted in Tottenham Hotspurs, but he only started to draw the attention of other clubs when he was in Portsmouth. There, he scored a total of eighteen goals in thirty-seven matches over the span of one season. Following that, he had been bought over by Aston Villa at a price of five million pounds, where he still remained. However, he had been unable to recapture the glory of his time at Portsmouth.

In the 01-02 season, when he had just joined Aston Villa, he had scored two goals in seven matches. After that, he represented the team fourteen times in the 02-03 season and did not score a single goal. By the end of the first half of the 03-04 season, he had been fielded sixteen times and was part of the starting lineup for nearly every match of the season, but he only scored four goals...

For a core striker, these kinds of results were nothing short of miserable.

Aston Villa had started to regret its impulses back then, and was currently in a hurry to get rid of him. Hence, Nottingham Forest appeared at the right time, bringing up a loan-to-buy proposal to Aston Villa. Crouch would be loaned to Nottingham Forest till the end of this season, and, should his performance be good, they would buy him for one million eight hundred thousand pounds.

The English Premier League team, Aston Villa, agreed to this proposal, so the only thing left to do was to discuss personal benefits with Crouch. Tang En was originally a bit worried that a core striker playing for an English Premier League team like Crouch might not be willing to play in a League One team. But this turned out not to be an issue at all. Crouch wanted a change of environment, and the league which had made him famous before was League One.

Since the player had no objections, things were much simpler. Nottingham Forest and Aston Villa came to an agreement on the loan-to-buy proposal, and Crouch made things easy for Nottingham Forest in terms of his personal benefits. With both parties willing, Tang En got the tallest striker in the England National football team's history, Peter Crouch, who was six feet, seven inches tall.

Two days before the first round of the EFL Cup semi-finals, Tang En brought all the Nottingham Forest players, including those who had just joined the team during the winter transfer window, to attend a press conference. This was so that he could do a simple announcement of the new players to the public.

Freddy Eastwood (transferred from Grays Athletic for one hundred thousand pounds), Clint Hill (transferred from Oldham Athletic for three hundred thousand pounds), Robert Huth (on loan from Chelsea), Kris Commons (transferred from Stoke City for three hundred thousand pounds), George Wood (transferred to first team, new contract), Stephen McPhail (on loan from Leeds United), Ashley Young (transferred over from Watford for seven hundred thousand pounds), Leighton Baines (transferred from Wigan Athletic for four hundred thousand pounds), and Peter Crouch (loan-to-buy from Aston Villa for one million eight hundred thousand pounds).

Tang En smiled as he stood amidst the players and let the media take pictures of them. That winter, Nottingham Forest spent a total of three million, six hundred thousand pounds in the transfer market. Tang En had already assured Evan that the money would not go to waste. These people were Nottingham Forest's future. Under the flashing lights, an entirely new Nottingham Forest was forming.

Chapter 145: The Future

The transfer budget announced by Nottingham Forest the previous summer had been 3.5 million pounds. Of the many players that Collymore had bought at that time, the only ones who could play as the main force were Gunnarsson, Rebrov and Gareth Taylor. And in the winter, the Forest team did not announce what their transfer budget was. The media told readers that Tony Twain's actual investment in the transfer market had already exceeded the summer budget, and that he had mostly bought young players. Therefore, was the 3.6 million spent this time worth the money? The media heavily questioned Twain's actions in the January transfer market. Almost all of the players he had bought were young, and had yet not proved their abilities in the adult teams. What would they bring to the team? Dynamism and healthy competition, or impulsive recklessness and lack of experience?

At the press conference, Tang En told the press and the equally skeptical fans that these players were the future of the Forest team. 3.6 million seemed to be a lot, but they were investing in the future. In a few years' time, 3.6 million would seem miniscule compared with their value.

Basically, the goal of the winter transfer period was to supplement the existing lineup. Tang En was compelled by circumstances to make the bold and decisive adjustments that he did. Considering the stability of the team, Tang En told Evan that he no longer needed him to introduce anyone from the transfer market.

Next, he had to deal with a Premier League team. On January 22nd, the first round of the EFL Cup semi-final would be Nottingham Forest playing against Bolton Wanderers in a home match.

Bolton Wanderers was a special team in English football because they were especially international. Of course, internationalization was nothing new for the English Premier League; the former Chelsea had set a record by not putting any English players in their eleven-player starting lineup for the Premier League. But Bolton Wanderers' internationalization was nothing like Chelsea's.

Bolton Wanderers currently had all kinds of international players on their team: the Brazilian striker Mário Jardel, the Danish striker Henrik Pedersen, the Nigerian midfielder Jay-Jay Okocha, the French midfielder Ibrahim Ba, the French midfielder Youri Djorkaeff, the Greek midfielder Stelios Giannakopoulos, the Danish defensive midfielder Per Frandsen, the French full back Bruno N'Gotty, and the Spanish full back Iván Campo.

These players were all famous, and the youngest among the international players was the substitute striker, twenty-eight-year-old Henrik Pedersen. The oldest was thirty-five-year-old Djorkaeff, who had formerly been the main midfielder for the world champion French national football team. Most of these men were star players who were already past their prime, unable to play on their original teams, and were therefore transferred to Bolton Wanderers. In addition, Kevin Davies, the team's main striker, was only twenty-six years old, but because he was burdened with premature fame and displaced from Southampton, he joined Bolton Wanderers on a free transfer.

This was a very interesting phenomenon. In the English Premier League, very few clubs would be keen to choose veteran players who were past their prime to become the teams' main forces. The values of these players were not high, but their salary requirements were. They still had their reputations, but they were not as strong as they had been. It stood to reason that with its English Premier League team qualification, even though Bolton Wanderers had little money to purchase foreign superstar players, it would not be a problem at all for the team to still buy outstanding domestic players.

There was an historical origin to this and it was largely related to Manchester United. In 1958, after the Munich air disaster, the Golden Age Manchester United team was nearly dismantled. Sir Matt Busby, who had escaped with his life, regrouped the team and continued to play in matches with the Manchester United Youth and Second Team players. After Manchester United's misfortune, the team's struggles aroused the sympathy and admiration of the entire football world; throughout football's entire history, football has always been seen by English people as a sport for the brave. Even if a player's leg was broken, he would still insist on finishing the game before going to the hospital. Therefore, the fighting spirit demonstrated by Manchester United won everyone's respect. Three months after the plane crash, Manchester United and Bolton Wanderers both advanced to the FA Cup final. In that

match, Manchester United with its heavy casualties not only lost to Bolton Wanderers, but also suffered unacceptable humiliation from the Bolton Wanderers' fans.

They did something completely outrageous during the match: nearly a thousand Bolton Wanderers fans waved their hands and made a humming drone sound. The action was meant to mimic the sound of a plane falling and crashing, and was done to humiliate Manchester United. Their lack of basic compassion led to the isolation of the Bolton Wanderers, and more sympathy for Manchester United.

Since then, Manchester United and Bolton Wanderers have become irreconcilable arch-enemies. And Bolton Wanderers had gone back and forth between the Premier League and League One for nearly a decade. It was said that one of the reasons was that the teams in England's northwest region tried hardest when playing against Bolton Wanderers. Furthermore, Bolton Wanderers also had a hard time buying good players in England, so they had to look to the international market to seek out those veteran players who were past their prime to help the team avoid relegation.

It was awful that the team had to pay for the sin of its fans. But this was part of English football tradition, where the clubs and fans were inseparable. The fans fanatically followed the team, and the team would never abandon their supporters.

Of course, Tang En had no intention of using the past to motivate his team to defeat Bolton Wanderers. The Forest team had nothing to do with Manchester United, not to mention that Manchester United had previously thrashed the Forest team in a Premier League away match with a final score of 8:1. The relationship between the two teams was not a close one. On the other hand, the Forest team had a closer relationship with Manchester United's deadly rival, Arsenal—because Arsenal was built by men from the Forest team.

Tang En could not care less about the enmity between Manchester United and Bolton Wanderers, but it did give him an opportunity to take advantage of it. Bolton Wanderers had not been able to buy players with high caliber, so although the team was in the Premier League, it was relatively weak. Most of the players on the team were older. Even though they were experienced, their physical strength was much less than that of the young Forest team.

Due to many successive battles, the Bolton Wanderers team had sustained lots of injuries. Their main striker, Kevin Davies, for example, was injured in the last game against Portsmouth. If he wanted to play in the EFL Cup semi-final, he would have to play while still injured, and his strength would take a massive hit.

Their other striker, the Brazilian Jardel, seemed to have been born in the wrong place. At six feet, two inches, he should not have been Brazil, but rather in any European country. The roughness of his technique was the most important reason that he was left out of the big clubs. Although he had not scored at all during his first seven games for Bolton Wanderers and thus was benched by the club, his height and header were still no small threat to Tang En. No one could say when a player like him would suddenly erupt and counterattack. Just a day after the last round of the English Premier League match, a piece of welcome news came from the transfer market: the twenty-nine-year-old Brazilian striker had been loaned to A.C. Ancona on its final tour in Serie A to help the team avoid relegation. Tang En heaved a sigh of relief at his departure. If that towering player had appeared in the EFL Cup semi-final, his impact would have been a severe test of the new Forest team's defenders.

As for Djorkaeff, he was turning thirty-six years old in about a month. He could only play as a substitute on the team, and his opportunities for an appearance were lessening. Although his experience was still intact, his body was losing its vigor.

One of the biggest threats on the team was the Nigerian Okocha, who was excellent at dribbling and capable in assists. He was now the core of Bolton Wanderers' midfield and the initiator of the team's offense.

If the English Football League Championship hadn't happened, Tang En might have been worried about defending against Okocha. But now, he knew what to do.

George Wood's defensive stance was still problematic; there was no way around it, other than compensating through continuous competition and accumulation of experience. However, his ability to focus on one-on-one marking had reached its pinnacle. Okocha would find his opponents harder to deal with than he had anticipated.

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On the morning of January 22nd, although the atmosphere in the city was charged with the anticipation of battle, the weather remained uncommonly calm. Tang En got up early and went to the Forest training ground.

According to the regulation of the team, the players on the main list must arrive at Wilford in the morning before every home game, take the team bus to a hotel close to the stadium to eat and rest in the afternoon, then take the bus to the stadium again for the match.

Tang En liked to arrive earlier than everyone else before the home game and chat with Eastwood, who was warming up with his horseback riding in the empty training ground. This was a rare moment of relaxation before the game. Once the team was assembled, Tang En and Walker would be secluded in a hotel room to study their opponents.

"Good morning, sir." Eastwood greeted Tang En loudly as he rode up to him on his horse.

Every time he saw this young man, Tang En could not help but smile. Eastwood was such a cheerful and optimistic person that his optimism was contagious.

"Good morning, Freddy. How are you feeling today?" He looked up at the Romani Gypsy.

Eastwood jumped down from his horse. "Very good, sir. I feel like I'm gonna score some goals today."

Tang En laughed. Eastwood had scored consistently since he joined the team in early January, scoring three goals in two games, which perfectly proved his ability. There were no longer any criticisms or doubts about him, whether they be in the newspapers, on television, or on the radio.

When you succeed, everyone will shut up, Tang En thought.

Looking at Eastwood, Tang En nodded. "Very well, Freddy. You can start in the game today. You actually might have a new partner by then."

“That telephone pole?” Eastwood was referring to Crouch by the nickname he had given to his new teammate. Crouch quickly accepted the nickname because everyone in the team used it. With his tall, lanky build, the nickname suited him well.

But Tang En had discovered an issue. It seemed that taller players like Robert Huth and Crouch were naturally more wooden or straightforward. Although Crouch was not wooden, he was straightforward. He also had a nice temperament. He was not upset by Eastwood’s new nickname for him, and was happy when everyone else called him that too. This was because Walker had told him that if players assign their teammates a nickname, that means that they have accepted them.

“Well, but I don’t know when he will be on the field,” Tang En said, shaking his head. Who could say clearly how the game was going to go? If football games depended only upon words, ideas, following tactics, and taking turns to rehearse so that the outcome would be predetermined, then it would not be so popular.

The suspense of not knowing what the future held was the most thrilling part.

“Another thing, Freddy. It seems you and George’s relationship isn’t very good.” They would be frequently working together on the field in the future. If their relationship was not managed well, it might drag down the team. This was not what Tang En wanted to see. Even a stronger team could fall apart due to locker room issues. He had to nip it in the bud while he still could.

Once Tang En brought it up, Eastwood fell silent for a moment. Even optimistic and cheerful people often have a reluctance to mention the past. Originally, he had had a promising future at West Ham United. And if he had continued on that path, he might even have been playing for the First Team at West Ham United by now. But his injury ended everything. He was laid off by the West Ham youth team and could not find any team willing to accept him even after his injury had healed. Eventually, he ended up playing in the amateur league. Training time for amateur games was almost never guaranteed, and was far worse than the training he had received at West Ham United. When he was not training, he was a salesman at his father’s used car dealership.

Sometimes, when he was idle, he would look into the distance in a daze. Would he have to live this way for the rest of his life? He would wait till his father was old before taking over the car dealership; he would sell used cars, raise several children with his wife, and then send them to play football when they grow up. Then he would go down to the club every day to pick them up and watch his sons live out his own dreams...

Was that his future?

And who was responsible for all of that? George Wood, who always looked at others with menace in his eyes.

They may be on the same team now, but that did not mean that they had to be friendly.

Tang En saw that Eastwood did not speak, and he knew he must be thinking of the past. So, he suddenly asked, “Gypsies are descendants of Indians, right?”

This question was a big jump from the previous one. It stumped Eastwood for a moment before he nodded and said, “Yes, that’s what everyone says.”

“So do you believe in Buddhism, then?”

Eastwood shook his head. “No, I’m not religious.”

Tang En was a little surprised. He thought that nomadic ethnic groups always believed in some kind of religion, like Christianity. But he had to continue on the topic, so he said, “There is a word in Buddhism: ‘Karma.’ Do you know what it means?”

The word could be easily comprehended from its meaning, “cause and effect,” so Eastwood nodded. But soon, he shook his head again.

“Well, simply put, it’s the idea that... Everything in this world is connected. It may seem unrelated, but there’s a link. If... If you had not been injured at that time, do you know where you’d be and what kind of life you would be living right now?”

The question made Eastwood think for a moment, then he shook his head and said, “I don’t know. That didn’t happen.”

“Well, we can still use common sense and hypothetically say that if there was no accident, you would have been transferred from the West Ham youth team to the First Team, and then you would have represented the team in the League Championship this season, and we would have been opponents.” Tang En pointed at Eastwood, and then to himself. “But you’re right, that didn’t happen. We’re in a team now, I’ve signed you on and you’re scoring goals to prove that I made the right choice. Why do you think we’re able to have this nice chat instead of spitting at each other before the game?”

“Because... of that injury?” Eastwood said.

Tang En nodded. “George’s foul, that was definitely wrong of him. But he didn’t mean it. He’d been playing football for less than three months. I wanted him to play the striker position at the time, but he was completely overwhelmed on the field. He was nervous, and his mind went blank. And when he saw you running past him with the ball...” There was no point in saying what happened next. Eastwood could still feel the pain in his right leg whenever he recalled the incident.

“I’m not trying to explain anything on his behalf, because that’s ultimately his responsibility. That was an unscrupulous foul, and it almost ruined your future. What I do want to say may not make you happy, but I have to tell you... Freddy, sometimes I think, ‘I should thank George. If it wasn’t for his foul, how could I have a striker as good as Freddy Eastwood?’ Maybe, in that alternate future, I’d hit the roof on the sidelines because you breached my team’s goal. Or maybe you’d knock my team out of an important game make me fail, and then maybe I’d be dismissed and continue to be a youth coach, or work God knows where else... just like the future you imagined for yourself. But now it’s alright, those things never happened. They only exist in another future. And you,” Tang En pointed at Eastwood and said. “Freddy Eastwood now wears the Forest team’s red jersey and has scored three goals in two consecutive games. You live on the training ground in Wilford, joke with my players, and come to training in a good mood every single day. You bring me victory by scoring goals in matches, and even your horse has become the darling of this city... This is your present. As for your future? You’re going to be the greatest striker in the history of this team. You’re going to score a ton of goals, you’re going to bring me and the Forest fans one trophy after another, and the City Ground stands will go crazy for you countless times. And then, when you decide to retire...”

Tang En looked up at the multicolored glow of the sunrise in the eastern sky, took a deep breath of the fresh morning air, shook his head, and said, "I can't imagine what it will be like."

After hearing Twain say so much without stopping, Eastwood did not utter a word. His hands were just unconsciously stroking his horse's neck.

"If you were not hurt, maybe you'd still be at West Ham United, or maybe you'd go to another lower-level team, and then you'd eliminate Manchester United in some match, and you'd score the winning goal. You'd become a celebrity in England within a week, appear on television and in the newspapers. Then you'd be forgotten while you still played on that team until you retired in obscurity. That goal with which you eliminated Manchester United would be the most glorious moment of your career," Tang En continued. This was a different future from what Eastwood had imagined. He had never thought of a future like that. But Tang En knew that that was the future he was supposed to have if he'd kept going.

"It's different now. You don't have to worry about that future. Because you've joined Nottingham Forest. You've joined my team, and you will join me in becoming the second most brilliant creator of the Forest team." Tang En spread his arms to embrace the Wilford training ground.

"I'll become a legendary manager and you'll become a legendary striker. We'll be mentioned all the time, all the way until we're old. People will say, 'Eastwood is the greatest striker in the history of the Forest team, how could anyone compare that clumsy little kid to him! Tony Twain's most successful deal in his career was buying Freddy from an amateur team! Look at all those prizes in his trophy room!'"

Tang En imitated the tone of the fans' discussion, and Eastwood was amused by the manner in which he spoke. He was so serious in his description of that imaginary future that Eastwood did not know if it was true or false. Perhaps he was spinning a story, perhaps... could it really be realized?

"So, I have to say, Freddy... I am very grateful to you for accepting the invitation from Nottingham Forest to join the team. I'm also thankful to God, even though I've never believed in him. It's fate that's let us stand together now to discuss each other's future. Do you doubt our future?"

Freddy shook his head. "I don't know, sir... Everything you're saying is so crazy that I really don't know if it's true..."

"Yes, it's crazy." Tang En thought of the lunch that day with Evan and Allan and how he was shaken to the core when they told him about the plan. "But to prove that I'm not lying, to prove that I can see the future, Freddy, we will win this afternoon. Because this game is the starting point for that future."

Afterwards, Tang En waved good-bye to him. "See you later, Freddy. Go back and have breakfast."

Eastwood looked at the back of Twain's confident figure and opened his mouth, but said nothing.

Chapter 146: The Cunning Allardyce Part 1

The stands of City Ground Stadium were already fully seated. At a glance, almost everyone appeared to be Nottingham Forest fans wearing red jerseys. There were only one thousand, three hundred Bolton fans there to root for their team.

The match had not started yet, and both teams' fans had just finished one round of "antiphonal singing." They temporarily lowered their banners and muffled their drums, deciding to resume the sounds of battle after the match began. The broadcasting system in the stadium started playing the Forest fans' favorite songs. Some of them were the newest and most popular songs, while some were oldies which had been popular during the seventies and eighties. These oldies had witnessed Nottingham Forest's first tastes of glory. As such, whenever they resounded throughout the air of City Ground Stadium, it was as though the older fans had travelled back in time twenty years. There, Nottingham Forest triumphed over their opponents one after another. They were fearless, and nobody could defeat them. They were England's champions. They were the Kings of Europe!

Now, even though the oldies and City Ground stadium remained, the people have changed.

Many fans looked forward to this EFL Cup semi-finals. Do we still have a chance to witness the start of another round of glory? they all wondered. Brian Clough, the legend of Nottingham Forest, once led the team to obtain three EFL Cup championship titles. Can Tony Twain, who has been deemed by most people as the person who resembles Clough the most, prove his own ability?

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Martin Taylor was a tall old man with white hair. From his looks, he did not seem to be any different from any other old gentleman from London. He wore a neat suit, had neatly combed hair, and had a natural smile. However, everyone that was familiar with English Football knew who he was. He was one of England's best football commentators, and one of Europe's best commentators. He was, in fact, one of the best football commentators in the world. His voice was widely considered "the nicest-sounding sports commentary in the world." His voice and pronunciation were clear, and his commentating style was humorous and interesting, calm and neutral, yet not lacking in passion. He had almost no shortcomings to speak of. He was the idol of many sports commentators throughout the world.

Andy Gray was an ex-professional football player who had, upon his retirement, become a commentator. Unlike Martin Taylor, his voice was quite passionate, especially when a goal was scored. The combination of these two men has been regarded as the "golden duo" of English sports commentary, and their voices have been used as the commentary for several generations of the famous football game series, "FIFA". At the same time, they were also the two most reputable English commentators in China.

If the two of them appeared at a stadium at the same time, then there could only be one reason for it—they were there to commentate a match.

Gray smiled and looked at the man in front of them. "John, the Sky plc is the one in-charge of broadcasting. What are you doing here? Be careful not to let those news reporters from smaller firms get a picture of you, or else they would publicize widely: BBC's best commentator John Motson intends to switch over to Sky plc!" Gray imitated the reporters and shouted like he was trying to make a fuss.

Motson smiled and said, "Andy, why can't it be 'Sky plc's golden duo intends to betray their former company, joining the BBC as a pair?'"

The football commentators relied solely on their words and their wits. When it came to bickering, they would never lose to anyone.

Martin Taylor clapped his hands off to the side and said, "Alright, if the two of you continue on like this, the argument will go on for another three days. Motson, what are you doing here?"

Motson had thirty-one years of experience commentating football matches, while Martin Taylor was very experienced as well. Before the German World Cup, he had already commentated for seven consecutive World Cup matches. With these statistics of his, it could be said that there was no one else more experienced than him in the entire commentating industry.

"Watching the match," Motson said as he shrugged his shoulders.

His reply surprised Taylor slightly. "John, I seem to remember that you aren't a fan of Bolton, am I right?"

"I'm not here for Bolton, Martin."

"But you aren't a Nottingham Forest fan, either," Gray, who was beside them, added on Taylor's behalf. No wonder they were the golden duo.

"Can't I watch their match if I'm not their fan, Andy?" Motson asked back, smiling.

He had a point. Gray scratched his head while Taylor immediately continued, "John, you seem very interested in Nottingham Forest. I've noticed that you've commentated on almost all of their recent matches. What made you regard them so highly?"

"Hmm, instead of saying that I'm interested in Nottingham Forest, I think it's more accurate to say that I'm interested in their manager."

"Tony Twain?" Gray asked.

Motson nodded his head and said, "Martin, you guys have always commentated on the Premier League, so you might not know much about Twain. But, I advise the two of you to pay more attention to him during the match; you'll discover that he is a very interesting person."

"Very interesting? How so?" Gray asked.

"In every way." Motson smiled and waved goodbye to them. "Alright, the match should be starting soon. I'm going to the stands."

He turned and left the lounge, heading towards the passageway leading to the stands.

Gray stared at Motson's back and shook his head before asking Taylor, "Martin, what do you think of that? It's very unlike him. Motson has actually come down to watch a live match of a team he doesn't support, simply because he thinks that Tony Twain is interesting!"

Taylor laughed. "Exactly what kind of person he is, I suppose we shall see for ourselves. I've done some research on Tony Twain as well, but that's only the homework that I did in order to commentate this match. I believe that seeing him with our own eyes will help deepen our impression of him. Let's go, Andy. Our work is about to start."

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John Motson was seated in the third row of the stands, and he looked just like the normal fans seated around him. Nobody knew that this person, who wore a dull grey overcoat and had a head full of white hair, was the commentator whose passionate voice they heard every weekend.

Motson was seated very near to the Nottingham Forest's manager's seats, and he could see Tony Twain, who was standing at the side of the field, if he stood up. Twain had just exited the changing room, and his team was already on the field preparing for the match.

This was not the first time that Tony Twain was leading his team to play against an English Premier League team. Motson still remembered the FA Cup match held last year on January 4th, when Nottingham Forest had faced off against West ham United in this exact stadium. Two days prior to that match, he had still been laughing at Twain's clumsy first appearance on the field in a television broadcast. However, on the actual match day, he had been completely fascinated by the second half.

Cup matches seemed to be where Tony Twain was catapulted to fame.

The previous time was the FA Cup, and this time was the EFL Cup. What kind of match would the man bring this time?

The clear sound of the whistle resounded throughout the stadium, but it was quickly buried beneath the sound of cheers. The match had begun!

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What kind of team was Bolton? It was certainly not a team that adhered to the currently popular technique-centric play style, nor was it a team that subscribed to the standard style either. They had a very traditional English play style instead, with the team adopting a sturdy formation. Their midfield and backfield defense was fierce, and they would make use of long passes to assault the enemy's back defense line.

This was clear just from their two frontline shooters on their starting line up. The first, Kevin Davies, was extremely adept at headers, despite the fact that he was only six feet tall,. The other was Henrik Pedersen. Although his techniques were not that refined, he had the build of a classic Northern European player.

When these two were paired together, the strength of their assault should not be underestimated.

To Tang En, the main flaw in Bolton's frontline was Kevin Davies' injury, as well as Bolton only having one method of offense.

Even an idiot knew how Bolton would play—they would send a long-ball through the air to get the ball in front of Nottingham Forest's goalpost, then rely on Davies and Pederson's header abilities. Even if they ended up unable to shoot the ball, they would still be able to cause chaos in the penalty area.

As such, Tang En sent out Wes Morgan and Robert Huth as center-backs. They were not fast, but they were strong and good at headers. They were the only combination that could guard against Bolton's frontline. As for Clint Hill, he was awaiting further instructions on the substitutes' bench. The right back was still John Thompson, but Tang En decided to use the younger Leighton Baines instead of Davy Oyen for the left back. Baines was much better in terms of stamina and speed, and he was also able to do long shots and free kicks.

For the midfield, the starting line up sent out by Bolton was Kevin Nolan and Ivan Campo. The left side was Okocha while the right side was Giannakopoulos. Among them, aside from the Nigerian, the other three were adept at sprinting and intercepting, reducing the opponent's room for offense. It was as though they had set up an iron fence in the midfield that prevented their opponent's offense from passing through easily.

In response to this, Tang En removed Rebrov from the midfield, and instead sent out players who were very similar to Bolton's. The two defensive midfielders in the middle were Gunnarsson and George Wood. The left side was McPhail, who was still on loan from Leeds United, while the right side was Ashley Young, who had just joined the team.

Tang En hoped to stabilise the backline defense with those two defensive midfielders. At the same time, with a lack of an organizational midfielder, the team's offense would have to rely heavily on the two wings. McPhail and Ashley Young were both individually strong and skilful players with the ability to dribble and break through with the ball before passing to the middle and shooting, all by themselves.

Tang En's tactic for this match was still to counterattack. After all, Bolton was still an English Premier League Team and should not be underestimated.

Tang En felt that there was an irrefutable truth on the football field: victory for a match must be built upon the foundation of a sturdy defense. Without defense, a team might as well forget everything else.

McPhail and Ashley Young had both demonstrated exceptionally strong individual abilities and exceptional conditions during training. During the tactics briefing before the match, Tang En had told the two of them that if they were on the offense during the match, the team might not be able to lend them much support. However, he would not excessively ask them to return to defend either. Rather, they had to rely solely on themselves for offense. Tang En encouraged them to be in less of a hurry to pass the ball out once they got it. Instead, they should be more willing to break through and engage in a one-on-one face-off. If they lost possession of the ball, they should try to regain possession on the spot without panicking. Wood and the others were still behind them. The key was believing that their own techniques would be effective against Bolton's defense line.

Chapter 147: The Cunning Allardyce Part 2

Many managers liked to restrict the performance of young players on the field. They desperately wished that they could plan the players' every action and make them carry them all out meticulously and flawlessly. During tactics briefings and trainings, they would often tell young players "don't dribble excessively," or "don't do one-on-one face offs," or "don't try to forcibly break through," or "don't hog the ball." If a player did not do as he was told, he would lose his position on the field. And just like that, a young genius with overflowing talent would be smothered.

Tang En was different. During trainings, he liked to encourage the young players to play freely, and was pleased to see those players suddenly veering from his instructions and resolving issues in their own ways. When he gave them that confidence, the young players would reciprocate with results that thrilled him. It was football's version of "giving a plum in exchange for a peach."

On the frontline, Tang En let the well-conditioned Freddy Eastwood remain on the starting line up. His partner was the skillful Rebrov. This was the first time that Rebrov would be returning to the frontline in six matches. Tang En hoped that his skills and speed would create some trouble for Bolton's rear defense line, which was comprised mainly of older, slower players.

Bolton's starting lineup for the match was thirty-two year-old French veteran player Bruno N'Gotty, thirty-year-old Anthony Barnes, thirty-two-year-old Simon Charlton, and twenty-year-old Nichy Hunt. Although this defense line was very experienced, no one could know what would happen if it was relentlessly assaulted by Nottingham Forest's young players. After all, even the oldest players in Nottingham Forest's current starting lineup, the goalkeeper Darren Ward and forward Serhiy Rebrov, were only twenty-nine years-old.

Tang En used such a young team because he believed that it is alright to be lacking in experience, as long as you make up for it in stamina. However, only ten minutes into the match, Tang En already felt that things weren't looking good for them.

The team had already given Bolton three consecutive free kicks in front of the penalty area. Each time Nolan stood in front of the ball and prepared for the free kick, Tang En's heart rate would skyrocket.

All three of the free kicks were given to them by George Wood; he was still too young and lacked match experience. Out of the three, two of them could have been avoided. Fortunately, Nolan's free kicks did not score. Conceding a goal ten minutes into the match would have had too great of an impact on Nottingham Forest.

But still, the situation made Tang En unable to resist raising his voice and reprimanding him. "Wood!" Tang En shouted. "Calm down! Don't tackle when you don't need to! Just sticking to him is enough!"

These words should only really be shouted at the side of the training field. But Wood's training still was not sufficient. No wonder he was always requesting more training. He too was well aware of his own issues.

Once he was finished shouting, Tang En returned to the manager's seat. When he got there, Walker said to him, "Tony, you should really calm down too. We're only ten minutes into the match, there's no need to be so anxious."

Tang En drank a mouthful of water and nodded. "You're right, Walker. But this opponent is not easy at all." He shot a glance at the away team's manager seat. Seated there was a strong, slightly tanned, square-faced man: Sam Allardyce. "Allardyce is a cunning guy," Tang En said.

As Tang En remembered it, Bolton recovered under Allardyce's leadership. He led the team into the Premier League, and successfully defended their place in the league for three consecutive years. Afterwards, he had even led the team into the UEFA Europa League. He was a very good manager, so he later assumed the managerial position for Newcastle, the powerhouse. The previous manager of Newcastle had been Glenn Roeder, who had almost let Tang En mount a comeback in last year's FA Cup.

Walker smiled and said, "But why do I feel that you are even more cunning than him?"

Tang En scratched his head. He knew what Walker was referring to. When interviewed right before the match, Tang En had acted extremely confident and smug, claiming that he would play offensively on his

home grounds to defeat Bolton. At the end, right after he had closed the changing room's doors, the first sentence which had come from his mouth was, "Defense, lads, I want you all to know the importance of defense!"

In the end, it was clear that Bolton's starting lineup had indeed been affected by Tang En's declaration of "offensive tactics." Although Kevin Nolan was adept at intercepting, his offensive talent was not to be underestimated either. Walker believed Allardyce's reasoning for letting the twenty-one year-old Nolan be part of the starting line up, and not the real defensive midfielder Per Frandsen, was that he hoped to give the midfielder a chance—aside from tackling, Nolan was still exceptional at passing and place kicking, as well as the ability to shoot from far away.

Tang En watched the match while chatting with Walker. "Nolan is actually the proof of Allardyce's cunning. If he had chosen Frandsen to be part of the starting lineup instead, I would be happier. It's a pity that he chose to use Nolan. He's good at offense and defense..."

While he was still speaking, Nolan skilfully broke past Gunnarsson. This time, he was already at the arc of the penalty area.

Where was Wood?

Tang En could not help but stand up.

Okocha! Wood was marking Okocha, and Okocha was still five metres away from Nolan. In other words, Wood was about five metres away from Nolan!

Currently, the players in front of Nolan were Wes Morgan and Robert Huth, who were part of the back defense line. He had ample space to go for a long distance shot!

"Dammit..." Tang En swore. Afterwards, he fiercely raised his voice and shouted, "Don't let him shoot!"

Before he finished his words, Nolan raised his leg outside the penalty area and shot.

Wes Morgan rushed up to use his body to block this sudden shot; the ball bounced once on his shoulder, and just happened go in the complete opposite direction from where the goalkeeper had lunged. A loud cheering noise was immediately heard coming from the Southern stands.

"Kevin Nolan!" Martin Taylor shouted from the commentator's seat.

Afterward, his partner, Andy Gray, shouted even louder, "A beautiful far shot! In the English Premier League, Kevin Nolan has already delivered four such far shots for us! And he has done so once again today at the EFL Cup. His goal has helped Bolton to take the lead on away grounds!"

From the side of the field, Tang En looked at the ball that had flown into Nottingham Forest's goalpost. Ward, who had lunged in the wrong direction, was unable to do anything about it. Tang En angrily threw a punch to the ground, before turning around and walking back to his seat. Walker was also speechless at this conceded goal. If Morgan had not blocked it, perhaps it might not have gone in.

Tang En stood in front of Walker, and said with his arms unfolded, "Twelve minutes in, and we're already down. Before the match started, I spent ten minutes talking about the importance of defense. In the end, we ended up losing the ball even sooner! We were just talking about Nolan, and he just scored!"

Walker shook his head and said, "Tony, think about it this way... conceding a goal so early might not necessarily be such a bad thing. We still have seventy-eight minutes to chase back the score."

Tang En turned around and looked at the Bolton players, who were running around the field and celebrating their goal, as well as the Bolton fans, who were cheering from the Southern stands. He gritted his teeth and said, "You're right, Des. But nobody likes to concede goals... How are we supposed to play our counterattack like this?"

Walker did not say anything, because he did not know how to reply. Tang En was right; how was Nottingham Forest, who had accidentally conceded a goal, going to continue their strategy of counterattacking? What if they went on the offensive? Bolton still had three defensive midfielders waiting for them.

Thinking about it this way, Walker discovered that what Tang En had said was indeed true. He turned his head and looked at Bolton's manager Sam Allardyce, who was currently celebrating with his assistants at his seat. Nolan had already attempted three far shots twelve minutes into the match. Evidently, he had been specially instructed to do so before the match. Allardyce was very cunning indeed.

Chapter 148: The Better Interceptor Part 1

Tang En realized that he had made more than one mistake. The game had already been in progress for more than twenty minutes, and since the Bolton Wanderers had taken the lead, the Forest team had not immediately organized a counterattack. But this was not because they did not want to, but because they could not.

The problem lay in his deployment and formation of his players.

He had let Rebrov play forward, and had originally hoped to use the Ukrainian's speed against Bolton Wanderers' sluggish defense. He did not anticipate that the ball could not be passed to Rebrov's feet at all from their own backfield. And Rebrov was not great at being the first player to intercept long passes.

Even though Bolton Wanderers' four midfielders were in parallel positions on the list before the match, the formation turned out to be 4-3-1-2 once they started playing. Iván Campo, Kevin Nolan, and Giannakopoulos were the three main defenders behind Okocha. Their presence was the chief reason why the Forest team's offense could not be organized smoothly.

Rebrov needed the support of the midfielders to give him more passes to the leg instead of header passes if he was playing forward. But now, because of Bolton Wanderers' three defensive midfielders, the Forest team's offense could not break through the first line of defense. Obviously, there would be no support for the striker.

The other mistake that Tang En made was having George Wood closely mark Okocha.

Now that he thought of it, Wood's amazing performance in the previous game may not have been a good thing. It seemed that he had caught the high-level attention of Bolton Wanderers Manager Allardyce. Otherwise, he would have been Tang En's surprise attack to catch his opponent unawares. Wood's performance in the previous game had been so dazzling that even if he had not become the most famous young player in the United Kingdom, he could not have escaped Allardyce's notice.

Originally, Okocha had been a very important piece in Bolton Wanderers' offense, and his personal skills would often bring unexpected rewards. But looking at this game, Okocha was more of a "relay station." Whenever the ball was passed to him, he passed it out again after it had attracted Wood's attention. He rarely dribbled the ball to break through the midfield before passing the ball out, and almost never shot at the goal.

Clearly, Allardyce had specially laid out the plan before the match to reduce the number of Forest defenders in the midfield at the expense of Okocha. Then he had arranged for Kevin Nolan to come up from behind to shoot for the goal. He succeeded, and, thanks to his strategy, the Forest team was currently behind by a point.

Kevin Davies, who had a slight injury to his foot, replaced the player who was originally slated to play. But why start with the tall, strong Henrik Pedersen? It was to give Tang En a false message: I will continue to insist on playing the traditional tactics of high balls and fight high, so that Twain will put the defense focus on high balls in the penalty area, and then Nolan will complete the real killer shot!

Their real aim was to score a goal and obtain three points in this away match so that they would have more leeway when they returned to the midfield. At that time, Davies' injury would have been better, and the lagging Forest team would have played directly into the Bolton Wanderers' hands.

After they had had the lead for more than ten minutes in the game, the Bolton Wanderers changed from charging forward and aggressively striking to retreating and defending across the board and then using long passes to harass the Forest defense line.

They wanted to maintain the current score.

No wonder there were three defensive midfielders on the field with excellent physical fitness, running abilities, and interception abilities. Forest's midfield line was pushed back to within thirty meters of their penalty area. The Forest strikers, Rebrov and Eastwood, were essentially surrounded, with no room to unleash their strengths.

And what about the Forest team's two wings? Bolton Wanderers' three defenders in the midfield were basically taking care of the middle, left, and right wings. Every time Ashley Young and McPhail dribbled to break through, they would be faced by at least two Bolton Wanderers players – a wing-back and a defensive midfielder.

So, while Bolton Wanderers' center of the field might seem a little empty, Allardyce was not afraid, because he knew the Forest team did not have an attacking midfielder player who would be able to intercept the ball in the center of the field, organize an offense, and break through. The two defensive midfielders, Gunnarsson and George Wood, could not intercept the ball to organize an offense.

He had carefully calculated all the arrangements of the Forest team before he made this tactical arrangement.

Tang En looked at Sam Allardyce, who stood on the sidelines, watching the game with his arms across his chest. He truly was a man capable of taking over Newcastle. He could see right into Tang En's mind.

The Forest team had intended to do a long pass to Rebrov and Eastwood at the front, but the Bolton Wanderers center backs were able to shoot it out with their headers. Bolton Wanderers players were

not afraid of high balls. They played like this in the Premier League, so they naturally knew how to stop Tang En's team.

Tang En looked at his players, who were at their wits' end on the offensive front. Then he again looked at Allardyce on the sidelines, waving his arms to direct his team's defense.

Allardyce was considered, at most, an upper mid-level manager in the Premier League. And if the Forest team reached the Premier League, Tang En would have to play against managers like Ferguson and Wenger, and the tactical master Rafael Benítez. These world-class managers were much more powerful than Sam Allardyce.

If you can't handle the likes of Sam Allardyce, Tang En told himself, if you can't even beat Bolton Wanderers, ranked in the middle of the Premier League... Then when you're at the Premier League, you're due early for relegation!

Don't think of this game as the EFL Cup semi-final. To hell with the trophy! Just treat this game as a Premier League match! Check to see if you, as a manager, are qualified to have a foothold in the Premier League. Find out if you're capable of leading this team to the future you talked about this morning!

The players are watching you, the coaching team is watching you, Mr. Chairman sitting in the box is watching you. The loyal fans in the stands are watching you, and even the little Gavin is watching you from heaven!

Allardyce... Tang En turned his head again and looked at the man. If you want to hold on to these three points, I will let you hold. I want to see how long you can hold on for!

He turned to walk back to the technical area and asked Walker, "Des, how much time is left in the first half?"

Walker looked at his watch. "It's just past thirty minutes. Tony, our offense is completely closed off..."

Tang En reached out to interrupt Walker's complaint and then said to Peter Crouch, who was sitting on the substitutes' bench, "Crouch, you go warm up and go to the locker room at halftime!"

In general, those substitutes who would not be expected to appear in the game for the time being, would be led by the coaching team to do their warm-ups on the field rather than go to the locker room during the halftime interval. There was only one type of substitute player who would be asked to follow the starting lineup to the locker room at the halftime interval, and that was a player who was going to play when the second half started.

Crouch was stunned. He had not expected to get a chance to play so soon.

"Quickly, go!" Walker turned to him and signaled.

Crouch immediately stood up from the bench. There was a "bang" sound, and he covered his head and sat back down. Walker and Tang En turned their heads away; they could not bear to watch. He had bumped into the awning over the substitutes' bench.

The cameras naturally captured the amusing scene, and Andy Gray laughed in the press box, "Maybe the Forest team should have a special seat for Crouch: a skylight in the awning over the substitutes' bench!"

“Hey, hey!” exclaimed Tang En, “Are you gonna have to be taken to the hospital on a stretcher before you even play? How are you feeling, Crouch?”

When they heard Twain, the surrounding substitutes could not help laughing. Crouch clutched his head and mumbled, “Don’t bring me off, Boss, I... I can do it...”

Even Tang En burst into laughter.

“You haven’t even played yet, Peter!”

Red-faced, Crouch went to do his warm ups.

As Crouch ran off to the distance, Tang En returned to the sidelines. Walker followed too, and voiced his doubts. “Tony, Crouch is tall, but his header abilities aren’t too great. Can he really play against those defenders?”

“Des, the tallest Bolton Wanderers defender is only six feet, two inches. How does that compare to Crouch? That five-inch gap is not so easy to make up for. Besides, I’m not just trying to get him to intercept with headers.” Tang En glanced at Allardyce. He had noticed Crouch, who was warming up on the sidelines. He was too conspicuous to keep a low profile. “What do you think about a man with a height of six feet, seven inches who can pedal and dribble?”

“It’s a little weird.” Walker knew who Twain was talking about.

“Yes, his ability is beyond our normal comprehension. Even if he’s not good at headers, his height on the field acts as a deterrent to the defenders. His ability to assist his teammates with the ball is outstanding. We can take advantage of that and pass the ball to him. He’s different from Rebrov in that he’s not afraid of the English-style defense. And I think he’s going to make the Bolton Wanderers defenders feel very uncomfortable.”

After listening to these words, Walker did not say anything, because Crouch’s performance during training made it obvious. His long legs indeed made it difficult for Wes Morgan and Robert Huth to defend against him, let alone Clint Hill, who was shorter in stature. They could not keep up with Crouch’s pace.

Just as he was about to turn back to the technical area, Tang En added, “Another thing, Des. After this game, design a specialized practice program for Crouch to strengthen his headers. It’s a waste of his height if he doesn’t have a good header to complement it.”

Crouch did get some headers, but that was because of his height advantage. He still lacked header skills. Tang En wanted to make Crouch a veritable “Air Master,” but that was not something that could be achieved overnight.

Beside the problem of the strikers, the Forest team’s two wings did not soar like Tang En had imagined either. Under the opponents’ fierce pressure, McPhail and Ashley Young finally got a rare opportunity for an individual breakthrough which brought several place kicks for the Forest team.

Chapter 149: The Better Interceptor Part 2

If the two wings could not soar, there would be no chance in the middle and no hope of winning. Tang En would have to hope that God would lend a helping hand again. But Tang En did not think that God was “Lei Feng.” If everything required a miracle, what was the point of him as a manager?

In reality, his current issue was not worrying about what Bolton Wanderers would do. It was obvious that Allardyce was very satisfied with this away game score of 1:0. The entire team had been recalled. Kevin Davies was only in front field for show, and he had taken the initiative to give up a number of shots that had given both sides a chance; after all, his injury had not fully recovered, and he dared not risk it.

Tang En’s problem was that he could not make any substitutions now. Through the recent games, Rebrov had just started to play with confidence. If he was brought off in the first half, it would truly be all for nothing.

After watching the game for nearly thirty minutes, Tang En caved and decided not to make Rebrov play as the striker anymore, not even as the occasional guest player. The twenty-nine-year-old “veteran” had come to the point where he had to use his experience and passing to assist the team, and was not scoring goals. He and Shevchenko were not the same type of players after all.

“Rebrov!” He stood on the sidelines and shouted towards the field. His voice traveled over the Bolton Wanderers fans in the south stand of the City Ground. “Retreat!” He waved his hand towards the halfway line, and the meaning of this hand gesture was clear.

Having played in the midfield for a few matches, Rebrov too felt that playing as the striker was quite uncomfortable now, and he was glad that the manager had changed his mind.

Back in midfield, Rebrov’s performance was much better than it had been for the previous thirty minutes, and the Forest team was able to organize some effective offense. And at the same time, because of his presence, the three Bolton Wanderers defensive midfielders could not help being distracted while trying to guard the middle; they were clearly aware of Rebrov’s recent repeated use of long shots. This gave McPhail and Ashley Young a chance to be active on the wings.

After Ashley Young received Rebrov’s pass, he used his speed to forcefully break through Iván Campo and Simon Charlton. Eastwood’s deft running position shook off the center back who was marking him. He then swung a header to shoot at the goal, but the header was slightly too high. Although there was no goal, the City Ground burst into loud cheering. It seemed that, against the odds, the Forest team might be able to score in the first half.

Tang En saw the way Freddy Eastwood was rubbing his head with regret, but he was not as disappointed as his team looked. At least he knew now that the Forest team had been revitalized.

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“Eastwood! Oh—he missed a chance to score!”

“Opportunities like that don’t come often! The Forest team has only just awakened from their slumber in the latter part of the game’s first half. Their attacks are gradually getting more menacing, but it’s not nearly enough! Manager Tony Twain’s move to let Rebrov return to the midfield was right. With him there, the Forest team’s offense is as slick as oil! Just look at Ashley Young’s breakthrough! It was truly

beautiful; Iván Campo and Simon Charlton were powerless against his speed. But it was ultimately thanks to Rebrov's passing. He sent the ball directly where Ashley Young was sprinting to, and not to his feet. That way, Young could take full advantage of his speed..."

Allardyce had come to realize the threat of Rebrov in the midfield, so he signaled to Nolan on the sidelines to mark the Ukrainian.

Nolan was younger, physically stronger, and more than enough to deal with the twenty-nine-year-old Rebrov. But, just when he had just made the adjustment, Tang En followed suit.

When he saw Allardyce's signal to Nolan on the sidelines, Tang En knew what he was going to do. It was nothing more than letting a defensive midfielder closely mark the core of the Forest team's offensive organization and using all possible means to curb Rebrov's play.

That tactic was often employed by the La Liga managers against Real Madrid's core midfielder, Guti, during the 06-07 season. As long as Guti was guarded, the entire Real Madrid team was essentially guarded as well. This was because Guti was the key figure in controlling Real Madrid's offensive momentum.

Rebrov was playing this role for Nottingham Forest now. His experience could help the team control its rhythm, and tell it when to divide, when to control the ball, when to be fast and when to be slow. His experience was a cut above the rest of his teammates. After all, he was a veteran who had played in the UEFA Champions League, and of a different level from the Forest team boys in the midfield.

Bolton Wanderers intend to use young Nolan to grind Rebrov down, but... have you asked for my opinion, Mr. Allardyce?

The visiting team was now playing a defend-to-the-death tactic, and Okocha seemed dispensable on the field. And Wood was still following him...

"George!!" Tang En yelled from the sidelines, and Wood temporarily took his eyes off Okocha and turned to his manager on the sidelines.

"Protect the Ukrainian!!" Tang En pointed to Rebrov, who was tangled with Nolan. "Don't let him lose the ball!"

In such a noisy environment, he could only summarize, and could not exhort repeatedly as he would in the locker room. Now he could only wait to see how much Wood could comprehend.

Rebrov planned to dribble past Nolan, but the ball at his feet was cut by Nolan. Cheers erupted again on the south stand; this was a chance for the Bolton Wanderers to counterattack!

But when Nolan had just bypassed Rebrov and was about to drive the ball away, he saw that a man had also charged to the front of the ball. The man was wearing the red home team jersey!

They each had a chance! Nolan did not intend to give back the ball without a fight. He exerted his utmost strength to charge past the man. He planned to use the momentum of his recent successful interception to intercept the ball again!

However, the person he faced this time was no longer Rebrov, but ...

“Boom!” The two men’s feet clashed ferociously, and the football swerved to the side. Nolan wanted to intercept, but he could do nothing because he had tumbled to the ground. Even though his opponent staggered, the man was able to maintain his balance, and he ran past Nolan without turning back.

The entire City Ground broke out great cheers on the stands. George Wood, the “magic kid” who had done the crazy incepting in the midfield and eventually assisted with a sixty-meter long pass in the previous match, was back!

Rebrov turned his head back and saw Wood. He immediately abandoned his plan to turn back to intercept. He knew this kid’s ferocious intercepting skill from training. With Wood by his side, he only had to think about how to attack. He did not have to worry about losing the ball and the opponent fighting back; he could go forward boldly without fear.

Wood caught up with the football and, without any hesitation, chose to pass the ball to the nearest person he could see, and the one to whom he could pass the ball most easily—Rebrov!

Nolan was powerless. As he lay on the ground, he turned to look back at his own defense zone being breached. There were no Bolton Wanderers players around Rebrov, and he had plenty of time to decide whether to shoot for the goal or pass the ball once he had taken control of it...

“Nottingham Forest has gained the advantage with its offense! With no one to mark Rebrov... Here comes the long shot!” Martin Taylor called out.

After seeing Nolan being broken through, the Bolton Wanderers’ Finnish goalkeeper, Jussi Jääskeläinen, was ready for Rebrov’s long-range shot. When he saw his kick, he leapt and soared, and used both his fists to strike out!

“Beautiful block by Jääskeläinen! He saved the goal!”

There was a huge collective sigh from the stands, but soon the fans applauded Rebrov, who had tried to shoot, and George Wood, who had intercepted the ball for the counterattack.

Although the counterattack had not resulted in a goal, it gave the Forest team more confidence, especially for the attacking players. They all knew what type of person was backing them up: he was tireless and had excellent interception ability. It was like having a wall of silence standing tall and upright inside the halfway line, giving them support and a peace of mind—You can attack as boldly as you want, I’m here to watch your back.

That was it. Tang En would recover by allocating a dedicated bodyguard for the core of the organization.

Mr. Allardyce, do you think that players like Kevin Nolan, Giannakopoulos, and Iván Campo are good at intercepting? Very well, now, let them see who the better interceptor is!

Chapter 150: The First Half Part 1

Tang En knew that George Wood was a naturally outstanding football player, because he could faithfully complete all the tasks his manager gave to him. As a defensive player, what else was more important?

He had made Wood protect Rebrov, but he could not say it clearly due to the restrictions at the time. In the end, Wood was able to quickly understand his thoughts, and executed the task perfectly. It was so perfect that nobody could have asked for anything more. No one could ask him to protect Rebrov, keep an eye on Okocha, dribble the ball past five people, and pass the ball to his teammates in front of the goalpost all at once.

Wood's position was brought forward, and he followed Rebrov everywhere. In return, Gunnarsson shouldered Wood's original task—marking Okocha. Luckily, Bolton was still heavily focused on defense, so Okocha was not being too daring.

Kevin Nolan had already scored a goal in this match, and was in top condition. However, it was just his luck to have met George Wood. Although the Rebrov was having a hard time being marked by him, he was having an even harder time being marked by Wood!

Not to mention, Nolan was consistently unable to snatch the ball away from Rebrov. Even when he was able to snatch the ball, he was immediately faced with Wood's attempts to steal it back. George Wood had marked him perfectly as though he was Okocha, completely crippling his ability to turn around or get past anyone. If he was any slower, the ball under his feet would be stolen away.

This kid was fast in every way, from his sprinting speed, to his reaction speed and the speed at which he could kick.

What made Nolan even more furious was that Wood had not received any new instructions from the technical area, but had taken the task up on his own. Whenever Bolton gained possession of the ball and was about to go on the offensive, he would run up and try to snatch the ball as soon as Nolan received it, stopping them from constructing any effective offense.

“Kevin Nolan is completely unable to turn around! Even though he's being marked by George Wood alone, he must feel that there are people surrounding him on all sides!” Andy Gray commentated. He had become slightly more interested in George Wood. “Ah! Nolan passed back, and Bolton's offense was once again stopped... Something that Bolton had required three defensive midfielders to do was single-handedly accomplished by George Wood! What an impressive young lad! Where exactly did Tony Twain find him?”

“It was said that it was Wood himself who went to find Twain. Before that, he had never touched a football before...” Ever since Wood's spectacular performance during his first match, the media had paid an increased amount of attention to them, even gradually digging up much of his past. “What a genius...”

Upon seeing Wood's performance, Motson, who was in the stands, once again remembered the previous match that he had commentated. This lad was no longer a newbie playing his first game, someone whom he could not say much about. Tang En, who was looking at Wood from the side of the field, must feel overjoyed. However, he was probably getting a headache as well—how was he going to handle the other clubs' interests in George Wood?

Various big clubs were placing more emphasis on defenders, especially defensive midfielders. Chelsea was one of them. Makelele was already almost thirty, but they still bought him from Real Madrid. Why

would they do that? Because they lacked a player who could stop offenses and who intercepted offenses frantically.

But now, Real Madrid has sold Makelele. Although they have the newly-joined Beckham, their results have not improved at all. Instead, they have become even worse. Without Makelele tirelessly sprinting around and intercepting in the midfield, Zidane and the others are unable to carry out their offenses without risk. Pavon and Helguera also lost the barrier in front of them. With the back defensive line directly facing off against the opponent's firepower, it would be a wonder if they did not concede goals. In the past, when Makelele was still around, there were no criticisms of Real Madrid's defense being not up to par. Ever since Makelele left, rumors of Real Madrid's backline defense being amateur-level started to appear, before gradually becoming the general consensus.

This was precisely the importance of that plain-looking, inconspicuous Makelele, who did the dirty work and received a low-paying salary. By the time Real Madrid realized that the club truly could not do without him, it was already too difficult for them to find a replacement, because the entire world lacked a defensive midfielder who was that good. Graveson and Pablo Garcia proved to be a failed introduction into the team, and they were completely unable to replace Makelele's role in Real Madrid. It was only during the 06-07 season, when Capello brought in three defensive midfielders all in one go, Diarra, Emerson and Gago, that they could begin to achieve Makelele's effect. But it was not always effective, and the entire team of eleven players was still required for defense, as opposed to only one, as it had been during Makelele's time.

Although Motson was worrying on Tang En's behalf, Tang En did not care about that in the slightest. He knew that Wood would not be leaving Nottingham for at least three years. After all, Nottingham Forest was still actively searching for a way to cure his mother's illness. Tang En was well aware of the kind of person Wood was. He believed that Wood himself also understood that the reason he could enjoy his current success was because he was in Nottingham Forest, which was willing to give young players opportunities. And, because he met Tony Twain.

Out of the players who changed football teams at a young age, only a few were able to become successful in the end. Defensive players were unlike offensive players; one mistake would be enough to end his entire professional career. If a forward missed the chance to score, he could simply wait for the next time his teammate passed the ball to him. But what about defensive players? Their margin of error was just too small.

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The match continued with both teams in a stalemate for the rest of the first half. Although Nottingham Forest's offense exerted quite a bit of pressure on Bolton in the last ten minutes, Bolton still managed to stand their ground and did not concede a goal. This upset Nottingham deeply.

Tang En was already quite satisfied with these results. The most important thing was for the team to regain their confidence and their fighting spirit. As for equalizing the score by the end of the first-half, that would have been an extra bonus.

Nolan discovered that after he had been consecutively intercepted by Wood, he had actually somewhat lost the confidence to face off against him. Now, whenever Nolan saw Wood, he would have the urge to quickly pass the ball out. This time was no exception. Campo had passed the ball to Nolan, before

running forward in hopes of attracting the attention of the Nottingham Forest defenders. But to his surprise, the moment Nolan saw Wood lunging at him murderously, he panicked and passed the ball back immediately. However, Ivan Campo was no longer there.

Ashley Young easily received the ball that Nolan had unwittingly passed to him, and the only person standing before him was Simon Charlton, whom he had already broken past once before!

“A passing mistake! This is a fatal mistake!”

Upon realizing that the ball had been passed behind him, Campo, who had dashed to the front, frantically turned around and chased after the ball. However, it was already too late. Ashley Young was on the move.

Simon Charlton rushed up to defend against him, hoping to use his experience to trap Young. But, next to the agile Ashley Young, Simon Charlton seemed clumsy in comparison. The young number 18 player from Nottingham Forest had changed direction three consecutive times while running, causing Charlton to become dizzy and expose his back to Ashley Young. Afterwards, Young did not hold back as he circled around Charlton’s back, diagonally running into the penalty area.

Cheering sounds exploded from the stands.

Now, Ashley Young could shoot or pass the ball; it depended entirely upon his mood.

Bolton’s goalkeeper, Jaaskelainen, immediately moved to block Ashley Young’s shot, and Bolton’s center back Hunt’s first choice was also to block his shot. Ashley Young raised his right leg, and it appeared as though he was going to shoot for the goal.

Hunt rushed forward and did a sliding tackle in hopes of blocking the shot, but Young did not kick the ball out. Instead, he suddenly turned towards the center. His actions fooled both Jaaskelainen and Hunt.

Hunt, who was unable to stop himself in the midst of the sliding tackle, tripped Ashley Young, inside the penalty area.

The sound of the whistle rang out.

“Ashley Young falls to the ground! This is a penalty, no doubt! The first half was about to end, and Nottingham Forest has gotten a penalty kick!” Martin Taylor shouted loudly. City Ground Stadium’s stands were filled with roaring; the camera lenses were trembling from it.

Seeing this unfolding, Tang En, who was by the side of the field, suddenly jumped up, turned around, and hugged Walker tightly.

This was really an unexpected bonus!

“This is a perfect display of Ashley Young’s individual skills! Tony Twain has brought another genius kid from Watford! Five consecutive direction changes in a row...Poor Simon Charlton, poor Nichy Hunt, poor Bolton!”

Martin Taylor, who was beside Gray, added on behalf of his partner, “Poor Watford. For seven hundred thousand pounds, not only did they lose an exceptional young player, they also provided reinforcements for their competitor in the league.”

The Nottingham Forest players ran towards their newly-joined teammate, surrounding him and congratulating him for his brilliant performance. He had used his individual skills to bring the team a chance for comeback. This was the best way to integrate into the team!

The cheers gradually died down as Freddy Eastwood hugged the ball and stood in front of the penalty spot. He was the player appointed by Tang En for penalty kicks.

He carefully placed the ball on the white dot, and took a few steps back.

Everyone on the stadium's stands—the technical area by the side of the field, the audience in front of the television, and the listeners in front of the radio—all held their breaths, not daring to make a sound.

Tang En stood by the side of the field and clenched his fists until his knuckles turned pale.

Eastwood raised his head and looked at the goalpost, but his brain was replaying that scene at Wilford, when Tony Twain had said to him, "Freddy, we have to win this afternoon's match, because this match is the starting point of that future!"

That future?

You are the legendary manager, while I am the legendary shooter?

Sounds great!

The whistle blew.

"Eastwood runs up to the ball... And he shoots! In the middle!"

Jaaskelainen predicted the wrong direction and leapt to the right side, but Eastwood had shot the ball towards where he was originally standing. The ball flew into the goalpost!

"GOOOOOOOAL!!"

The stands went wild once again. This time, the camera lenses shook even more vigorously than they had before.

"YES! YES! Nottingham Forest has evened out the score! Their relentless offense has finally paid off! This is Freddy Eastwood's fourth goal in three consecutive matches! What a terrifying killer! Now, who still dares to say that he is an amateur player?"

After scoring, Eastwood rushed towards the technical area. His target was Tony Twain, who was currently in the midst of celebrating with the managerial staff.

Now I believe you, Boss! We will have that future!

When he was still about three or four meters away from Tang En, Eastwood leapt into the air in Tang En's direction. Tang En, who had just turned around, was unable to defend himself, and Eastwood collided with him. Afterwards, even more players joined in, causing Tang En and the coaching staff behind him to finally be unable to take the weight. As a result, all of them fell to the ground, and more than ten people were stacked on top of one another. It was a spectacular sight!

It was rare to see a player knocking over his manager after scoring a goal, with the rest of the team joining afterward. However, it had happened to Tony Twain twice. Seeing this, Taylor and Gray thought to themselves that it was no wonder Motson called Twain interesting. He seemed very well-liked by his players.

Motson, who was seated in the stands, was surrounded by cheering Nottingham Forest fans. Seeing the human pyramid in front of the technical area, Motson smiled.

Poor Tony...

The referee finally appeared to save Tang En. With his intervention, the fanatical Nottingham Forest players finally returned to the field. By the time Walker pulled Tang En up from the ground, his suit was already extremely wrinkled, and his white shirt had gotten dirty. One of his buttons had fallen off, his face was flushed red, and his hair was very unkempt. He looked like he had just finished doing a very different activity.

Seeing Tang En like that, even Walker could not help but burst out in laughter.

“Darn it!” Tang En panted heavily and waved his hands about. “I want to add a new rule to the team’s rules and regulations: Pushing down the manager and piling up into a pyramid as a form of celebration is strictly prohibited! My clothes!” He unfolded his hands to express his “miserable state” to Walker, but instead caused an even louder wave of laughter from the technical area and the substitutes’ bench.

Martin Taylor, who was on the commentator’s seat, had the same opinion as Tang En. He laughed and said, “I think Mr. Twain should suggest that FIFA prohibit using these kinds of celebration methods after scoring a goal, especially if the person at the bottom is the manager...”

Gray, who was beside him, did not care that it was a live broadcast. He leaned on the table and started laughing loudly.

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Nottingham Forest, who had equalized the score, very much wanted to ride the momentum and score more goals, but the referee saved Bolton by blowing the whistle and signifying the end of the first half.

“1:1! Looking at the process, I would guess that neither team is too happy with the progress. But from the results, this is a very fair score. Tony Twain and Sam Allardyce will be making use of these fifteen minutes of half time to make some necessary adjustments. Let’s rest for a short while as we look forward to an even more exciting face off in the second half!

“See you in fifteen minutes time.”

As soon as Martin Taylor took off his soundproof headphones, waves of loud noises assaulted his ears, taking his breath away.

“An atmosphere like this at City Ground Stadium,” He muttered to himself. “Just how many years has it been since we last saw something like this?” Even the knowledgeable Taylor could not remember.

“Hey, Martin! I think Motson’s right; Twain is indeed a very interesting fellow. I’ve commentated football matches for many, many years, but I’ve never seen an entire team of players collectively rush to their manager and stack on top of him like that! For Tony Twain to be so popular with the players, he

must have cast some magic! Just like Harry Potter!” Andy Gray, who had just taken off his earphones, continued to talk non-stop as though he was in the midst of commentating a match.

Taylor smiled and said, “If Twain knows magic, then he wouldn’t have to tie with Bolton in the first half. He could just win with a wave of his wand!” Taylor waved his hands. “Let’s go get a drink, Andy. Who knows; we might even meet Motson. He understands Twain better than both of us combined. Whether or not Tony Twain knows magic, we’ll find out when you ask him.”