

Godfather Of Champions

Chapter 17: Off To London Part 1

Tuesday, January 7th, was a busy day for Nottingham Forest Team substitute manager Tony Twain.

After the two-day break, the players had a slight decline in their physical condition when they returned to the training ground. Tang En stood on the sidelines to watch for a while, and the players' performance made him scowl. He shouted for them to stop, after which he called Ade Stovell, the fitness coach, and the assistant managers over to revise today's team training program to strength training. They were to do nothing, but restore their stamina.

Tang En knew very little about training. Basically he left that to the two assistant managers, Des Walker and Ian Bowyer to manage. Goalkeeper training had a goalkeeper coach, strength training had a fitness coach, etc. The entire coaching team's division of work was essentially clear-cut. He did not need to worry about that. He only had to verify Walker's training plan.

This saved him, a half-baked manager, from giving the game away.

After making these adjustments, the two doctors whom he had "ordered" from Professor Constantine arrived, too. Tang En took them to the physiotherapy room and introduced them to the other two doctors: 35-year-old Irishman Gary Fleming and 58-year-old Englishman John Haselden.

The new two doctors were over the age of 55, had just retired from the Royal Hospital of Nottingham University, and they were hardcore Forest fans. This reassured Tang En, as foreign fans' loyalty would keep them from doing anything harmful to their club.

"These two are Steve Devin and Roger Langley. They are your new colleagues. Gary, you brief them on the team. I have to go back." Tang En briefly introduced the two doctors, shook their hands before leaving, wished them well, and then turned to leave.

Just as he was returning to the training ground, his cellphone rang again.

"This is Twain."

"Tony, I've got a kid here looking for you. He says that you asked him to come," came the voice of the guard Ian MacDonald on the phone.

Tang En looked down at his watch, 9:30, not a minute more, not a minute less. This boy was punctual. "That's right, I've asked him to come, you bring him in."

Ten minutes later, old Ian walked in with a tall lad to the training ground, brought him right to Twain, and then went back.

Tang En looked at George Wood. His face was much cleaner than yesterday. He wore new clothes and a pair of Nike sneakers on his feet with some wear and tear, but at least not worn to the point of showing his toes.

“Have you had breakfast?” It was a very Chinese greeting. Tang En still had some of his habits.

Wood was a little surprised, then he nodded. “I ate.”

“How did you get here?” Tang En, who realized that he might have asked the wrong question, changed the subject.

“Rode, bus, and then I ran.”

When Tang En heard him say that, he carefully observed Wood again. His face was ruddy, with fine beads of sweat on his forehead, and he was slightly panting, but it wasn't obvious. He thought about how the boy had ran and completed a 45-minute walk in 15 minutes. Unlike his sickly and petite mother, he was about 1.8 meters tall and very strong. Maybe Sophia gave her entire life essence to her son to have such a freak of nature.

“Very well. You come with me. We're going to cut through here. The training ground on the north side is where you're going to be.”

Wood asked in puzzlement, “Not here? This is not the training ground?”

“This is the First Team training ground. I'm taking you to the youth team training ground.” Tang En led the way.

Unexpectedly, Wood stopped and said, “Youth team? I'm not going. I want be here, play professional matches, get paid a salary and bonus.”

Tang En looked back at him and said, “That's not going to work. You've never played a match. This is an adult team's match and you haven't adapted...”

Wood stood still. “I must play.”

“Why?”

“They say First Team gets more money to play.”

If he had heard Wood say this yesterday afternoon, Tang En would have chuckled. But he could not laugh after seeing their family's situation. Looking at the obstinate Wood, Tang En suddenly thought of an idea.

"Very well. I can give you a chance. However, it's not my decision alone if you want to be a member of the first team. Do you see them?" Tang En pointed to the first team players and the coaches training on the training ground.

Wood nodded.

"You have to prove that you have the ability to play alongside them, to convince those professional coaches, who are very demanding, to agree to let you join the first team."

"How do I prove it?"

Gotcha! Tang En secretly smiled, but spoke with a serious expression. "It's simple. Play a match against them and let everyone judge your standard."

Tang En had a clear grasp of Wood's temperament. He stubbornly insisted on his own ideas, would not give up until he tried, and was dead set on his goals. So he would let him suffer the hard way, otherwise he would not listen to anyone else's words. He was a complete rookie, who had never played ball before, in a match with professional players. Tang En was very sure about what the outcome would be. This was not some fantasy fiction. There was no such thing. He was going to make Wood suffer a little, remember it well, and know that professional football was not as simple as he thought.

Wood nodded. "OK!"

So, Tang En took him back again, stood on the sidelines, and shouted for the training to stop. After that, he called Des Walker over.

"What's the matter? Tony?" Walker looked curiously at George Wood, who stood beside Twain.

"Let everyone play a simple match. And then," Tang En pointed to Wood, "count him in. Liam." Tang En beckoned a coach over.

"Bring him to the locker room to change his clothes." He pointed at Wood while he instructed Liam O'Kane, who came running.

Watching Wood go, Walker then asked, "Tony, who is he?"

"Some talented kid I found on the street. He expressed to me his pressing desire to become a professional footballer, so I brought him in for training. Before going to the youth team, let him first have a feel of the professional football atmosphere." Tang En

was selective in what he said. He did not tell Walker the whole truth. After all, he did not know if Wood would mind letting people know about his family.

“Oh, right. Des, put Wood in the group that’s not wearing the vests. Then tell those wearing the yellow vests that if they want to get a chance to take the field first in the next match, this match is an important assessment, and bad performances will affect their chances.”

In the Forest team training matches, those not wearing the vests represented the substitutes team, and the starters were wearing the yellow vests. Walker nodded and turned back to arrange the players.

Soon, Wood changed his clothes and returned to sidelines. Tang En glanced at him. Wood did look somewhat like a player, wearing the jersey.

“Well, in terms of appearance, you’re a professional player.” Tang En nodded his head. “Go on. You and the others not wearing yellow vests are a team. Des, you’re the referee!”

Then, Tang En watched the game on the sidelines with his arms folded across his chest.

It was clear that Wood did not play ball and did not know how to coordinate with his teammates. He was given the position of striker, but he only knew how to run after the ball. Wherever the ball went, he followed. When he got close to it, the other player had already passed the ball, and he then turned and ran after it. Ten minutes had passed, and he did not touch the ball once.

Walker, who was the referee, kept looking back at Twain on the sidelines. He could not see what talent this kid had.

To be honest, Tang En did not see it either, except his physical strength was comparatively better, and he was faster. But his performance suggested that he was more suited to be a track and field athlete than a football player. Starting to feel flustered under Walker’s gaze, Tang En pulled his sunglasses from his coat pocket and put them on, so that even if he closed his eyes, no one would see that he really felt Wood’s performance was unbearable to watch.

Walker guessed as much when he saw Twain put on his sunglasses. The rest of the match was entirely useless. This kid was a complete football beginner.

Wood’s teammates were also baffled. This kid could not play football at all. Why was he training with them? No one would pass the ball to him. Wood carried on running. Wherever the ball went, Wood followed.

Tang En watched for another 10 minutes. In the 20 minutes George did not change at all. He even deduced that this boy had not watched many matches and completely did not understand football at all. It must be tough for him seeing how he was panting on the field. He signaled for a substitution so that Wood could come off.

Wood lowered his head, taking big gulps of breath, and came to Twain.

“George, how are you feeling?” Tang En asked him.

Wood said nothing with his head down, just gasping for air. Tang En knew he now comprehended the intensity of professional football.

“This is just at the training level, if it were an official match... Now do you think professional football is so easy? At your current level, you won't get a professional contract, not even the lowest level contract. I know why you want to train here, but to be able to train in this place depends on your level, too. Frankly, your performance just now was really crap. Do you think it would be possible for me to sign a professional contract with you based on your performance just now?”

Wood still did not speak. Maybe he was still unconvinced with his head lowered.

“Okay, follow me to the youth team and receive a proper training. You are not without opportunities. Besides, there's also money in becoming a member of the youth team.”

When he heard Twain said that, Wood looked up, stared at him and asked, “Really?”

Tang En knew that the poor boy would only react when he mentioned money. “Why would I lie to you? I am a professional manager. I have a credit card, so the bank can vouch for my credit.”

“How much money?” Wood meant how much he would be paid as a youth team player.

Tang En thought about signing a better youth team contract for this boy. His family situation was difficult. “A weekly salary of eighty pounds. If you play in a match, it's £35 per match. If you put in a goal, £7 a goal. If you assist, £3 per assist. This is the best youth team contract. Those who first joined the team only received £55 per week. In addition, the club is responsible for providing lunch. You're a local, so accommodation will not be provided.” Tang En did not lie. This was indeed the best Forest youth team contract. Originally, Michael Dawson and Andy Reid with their outstanding performances in the youth team, both had this contract, except as a defender, Dawson did not have the goal and assist rewards.

Till now, the two of them were still on this contract because they had just been drawn from the youth team. But Tang En was already considering giving them a first-team contract with better pay. After all, to retain this sort of talent within the team, it was necessary to compensate them generously to ensure that they played well for the team.

Unexpectedly Wood looked rather hesitant after he heard what Twain said. Tang En also saw it. "What is it?"

"Is this really the best?" asked Wood.

He actually thought it was too low? Tang En nodded, then pointed at Dawson on the training ground and said, "See that tall man? He just got into the First Team right before New Year's Day and has been on the best contract for the youth team. If you don't believe me, I can call him over and you ask him. Need me to call?"

Wood shook his head. Maybe he did not think Twain was lying.

"How much do you get a week at the moving company?" Tang En asked.

Wood gave it a thought, "Two hundred pounds."

Tang En rolled his eyes behind the sunglasses. This was indeed a lot more than playing for the youth team. Tang En now understood Wood's reason for his hesitation.

"The youth team's pay is really not very high. But you know, even Rooney's salary was only eighty pounds a week when he was at the youth team, just like yours."

"Who's Rooney?" Wood looked perplexed.

