

Champions 211

Chapter 211: The Fateful Matchup

The tied game with Aston Villa on their home ground made the Forest players find that the number of reporters at the sidelines had suddenly increased during their usual training. Everyone knew the local media, which made them think that most of the unfamiliar faces were from London.

“We just tied a game. Why is the media so excited?” Eastwood asked with confusion as he pointed to the cameras behind the mesh wire fence during an interval in the team training.

“Because they’ve realized that we’re destined to be the champions of this season!” Twain affirmed with a nod.

Eastwood turned his head in astonishment to look at Twain. “Boss, you aren’t kidding, are you?”

Twain seriously shook his head, “No, of course I’m joking.”

Someone was chuckling next to him.

Next to them, David Kerslake explained, “They are paying close attention to us, not because of us, but because of our opponents in next round. Arsenal.”

Recently, the media had been hyping up the fateful entanglement between Arsenal and Nottingham Forest. It was like a melodramatic primetime soap opera, and there were only a handful of people who did not know about it. Only people like Eastwood, who did not care about anything except playing football well, were surprised to see so many reporters gathering in Wilford.

Standing outside the training grounds with the other reporters, Pierce Brosnan could not help but lament the fateful arrangement: the opponent that Arsenal was facing while looking to break the record was the team that had created the record. When Brian Clough had led the team to create the record, it was thought that no one could hope to break it for a long time. And now the record was in danger of being broken while he was still alive.

The North London media, with the exception of those in support of Tottenham Hotspur, were unanimously in support of Arsenal and optimistic that Arsenal would break the 25-year record on the Forest team’s home grounds. After all, Arsenal was strong and in good shape, and the Forest team still had not adapted to the rhythm of the Premier League. Their score of one point from a concession and a draw in the first two rounds of the tournament was unconvincing in the face of the mighty Arsenal.

At the end of training, the players walked from the training ground to the locker room, and along the way, the reporters came up to them to ask questions related to the record and Arsenal. Most of them asked, “What do you think of Arsenal’s strength? How likely are they to break the record?” Some players were able to politely answer the questions, even though they had little to do with them.

However, they occasionally met a bad-tempered player who was unresponsive to the reporters, like George Wood. He looked coldly at the reporters putting their microphones in front of his lips, and just as the reporters became full of anticipation, he turned his gaze away and left the group of reporters without a word.

Afterwards, there were more and more Forest players like him who treated the reporters that way. At first, everyone was interested in the attention, as it still felt fresh. After all, they were so far away from the record that happened 25 years ago that Arsenal breaking it wouldn't be too bad.

But if the people around them constantly asked questions like "How's Arsenal," and "How's Henry," and the like, they would feel that they were being derided.

At the Forest team's regular press conference, about 95% of the reporters asked questions about the next game, and 80% of those requested that Twain talk about his view on Arsenal looking to tie the record.

Tang En himself did not dislike Arsenal or Wenger; after all, he had a tiny bit of friendship with Arsène Wenger. But he detested the media, which was just playing up the news. He did not want to play nice with the media.

So, when all the reporters had finished asking their questions, Twain tugged his ears in front of the cameras and asked, "I keep thinking I'm mishearing you, so I checked my ears to make they're working okay. But apparently, my ears weren't the problem. So then I thought to myself, maybe my brain's out of order. Maybe I just couldn't understand your questions properly. But that can't be right, because it's impossible for my brain to go wrong. So finally there's only one conclusion I could arrive at: you must be the problem."

He had said so many misleading things that the reporters were completely baffled; they did not understand what he had said or what he wanted to express.

Looking at the bewildered reporters, Twain sighed. "Sure enough, I have to be blunt so that you can understand. Ladies and gentlemen, you have come to the wrong place. If you're interested in Arsenal, go to North London. This is Wilford, not London Colney. Still, I'm sure that you won't be able to ask any questions that aren't about Arsenal, so today's press conference is over. Until the game is over, my team and I will not be accepting any types of interviews."

After that, Twain got up and left the conference hall, leaving the room full of stunned reporters, looking at each other in dismay.

Twain firmly walked away, and Ms. Barbara Lucy from the Forest club stayed behind to clean up the mess for him. "Ladies and gentlemen, today's press conference is over. Please kindly make your way back."

After she was done, she quickly walked out to catch up with Twain, who was marching back to the office.

"Mr. Twain?" She called in an inquiring tone.

Twain stopped and turned around to look at Evan's private secretary. "What can I do for you, Miss Lucy?"

"Um... I'd like to remind you that Sky TV has one more interview with you tomorrow morning."

"To ask me questions about Arsenal while we sit in the café at the Wilford training base?"

"I don't know, but I think... yes." Lucy nodded.

“Very well, you can help me reject it. If we’ve already agreed to the interview, let David deal with those pesky reporters while I train the team.”

Lucy nodded and left. Just as Twain entered his office, he received a call from Evan Doughty. “Tony, I hear that you’re make things hard for the media all over the UK.”

“You’re very well-informed, Evan.”

“Don’t forget, I have friends in the media too.” Evan laughed. “They called and complained to me that the Forest manager refused to play ball with them.”

“I really wanted to oblige, but they were all about Arsenal. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t work with them.” Twain shrugged.

“Come on, Tony. You don’t have to do this in front of me. You felt uneasy, didn’t you?”

“Well... If someone was singing your direct competitor’s praises in front of you, wanted you to say nice things about your competitor, and on top of that, would be dissatisfied if you didn’t say anything nice... Well, I think you would be unhappy too, Evan.”

“With regards to that... You’re quite right, Tony. Do your job well, and just let those who look down on us suffer!”

Having just finished his conversation with the club chairman, Twain received another call from Pierce Brosnan. “Tony, did you really mean what you said at the press conference just now?”

Brosnan was still standing in the Wilford training base parking lot while the other reporters complained as they left about Tony Twain acting all high-and-mighty. He was the only one still reluctant to leave. He hoped to use his personal connection to obtain the rights to an exclusive interview.

“Of course it’s true,” Twain said, his tone serious.

“That’s...”

“All right, Mr. Reporter.” Twain always called Brosnan “Mr. Reporter.” He did not want Brosnan to think that they had a close relationship. “There are some things that I think it’s more appropriate for me to say personally than for you to say on my behalf. So I’ll be updating my personal column in the Evening Post soon.”

“But...” Brosnan still wanted to have his name on a report that would attract public attention.

“Mr. Reporter, would you dare to call your colleagues ‘sons of b**ches’ in an article that you wrote?”

“How could that be? Why would I-”

“That’s right, but I dare to.” Twain guffawed and hung up the phone.

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The next day, in the Nottingham Evening Post, Twain’s column published a statement about his refusal to do an interview. In the article, Twain rebuked the media for being disrespectful towards others, and said that they had no professional ethics. At this point, he used the term “sons of b**ches” to describe

the media for the first time. Of course, despite the use of foul language, his tone was not intense; it was still in his trademark style. Sarcasm and swearing coexisted, interspersed with irony and all sorts of bizarre metaphors.

Twain refused to mess around with the media. Trying to pry any information from him was just wishful thinking. The first to hit a snag had been the Sky TV reporter. Twain used the excuse of having to lead the team's training, and, in order to reject the television network with the exclusive rights to broadcast the Premier League, said that he could not be distracted before an impending big game.

The media had to dig deep for gossip. They tried every possible way of locating Forest players from twenty-five years ago, but there were only a handful of people to be found. Needless to say, most of the focus was on the Forest team's past manager, Brian Clough.

More than twenty reporters gathered at Clough's doorstep in the distant Derby in a single day. They all wanted to hear the record-maker's views on the team that was fast overtaking him.

Clough was much more experienced in dealing with the media than Twain was. He extolled Arsenal in the interview, claimed he was an admirer of Arsène Wenger, that Arsenal was his favorite team, and that his favorite striker was Thierry Henry. He said that he believed that Arsenal played the art of football, and that it put them ahead in the decade-long Premier League. Therefore, if his own record were to be in a tie with, or even broken by, such an outstanding and remarkable team, he had nothing to complain about. Finally, he encouraged Arsenal to go beyond the Forest team of that time.

He may have delighted the Arsenal fans with his words, but then the recalcitrant old man added, "Just like what Manager Tony Twain said: records are made to be broken. After all, we set the record, no one can deny the existence of that record. For me, forty-two undefeated games are even more exciting than becoming the Champions League champion. Arsenal is just a younger generation challenging us."

This remark was not made until the end, but it was enough to illustrate the old man's pride. Unfortunately, not everyone noticed.

Tang En noticed it, and the remark made him feel a lot better. He knew the Chief was still helping him, but the way the old Englishman expressed his feelings was more steeped in the English tradition. He would always like to convey his feelings in an unspoken and understated manner.

I support you, Tony, he seemed to be saying. But don't expect to publicly hear a good word from me.

Perhaps one day, when you reach the stage that I was at in my peak, I will grudgingly say, "It will do, it's just like when I was young."

That will be the best compliment I'll give you, kid!

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Arsène Wenger had little affection for the English press. But still, unlike Twain's gruff handling of the media, he would always try to be cautious and rarely appeared alone in front of the media. This was because when he first arrived in England, the British paparazzi had claimed that the Frenchman was gay.

Now that Arsenal was close to breaking the record, he had to appear in front of the television cameras more often than usual, or in the sports edition of the newspapers.

Whenever Nottingham Forest was mentioned, he would express his obligatory respect for the team. When Clough said he was his idol, Wenger also spoke with excitement and proclaimed that he was a Nottingham Forest fan too. He had liked to watch Clough's team play when he was young. The years when the Forest team had swept across Europe were still unforgettable to him. Just thinking about it still stirred his heart.

But who knew which remarks were true and which ones were fake?

When the topic of the imminent game came up, Wenger put aside his admiration for Nottingham Forest. Although he gave recognition to Tony Twain's achievements in the summer's transfer market, he stated with much confidence that his team was ready to create a new record.

"The best way to pay tribute to the record holder is to beat them and create a new record." After this declaration of victory that thrilled the media, Wenger walked back to his office building. He already understood how to deal with the media, but evidently his opponent was still ignorant.

A smile emerged on the Frenchman's face as he thought of the contentious relationship between Twain and the press.

A 35-year-old manager? So young...

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"Welcome to Nottingham! The historic city of central England. Here lies the lush Sherwood Forest and the world-renowned bandit who robbed the rich to help the poor, Robin Hood! There is also a notable team here: Nottingham Forest!" The cameraman coordinated with the Sky TV Reporter's words at this point, and cut to the City Ground Stadium behind the reporter, zooming in to provide a close-up shot of Nottingham Forest's logo. The red color was particularly eye-catching in the sun.

"Yes, Brian Clough created the Forest empire, and left a record for future generations to look up to—an unbeaten record in England's top league: forty-two games! Until today... twenty-five years later, this record may be rewritten. And we can't help but rue the mysterious twist of fate: For the team to succeed in breaking the record, they must defeat the creator of the record!"

As soon as he had yelled this out, he saw two groups of people, both wearing red jerseys. But when the two separate groups of fans walked past him, the Arsenal fans were singing songs that supported Arsenal, and the Nottingham Forest fans were singing new songs that they had made up for Tony Twain.

The camera closely followed these two groups of people and seemed to get a glimpse of the match that was happening in a while.

The stands were almost full, and the news media was huddled outside of the stadium. Everyone was looking forward to the performances of the two opponents, who were brought together by destiny in this fateful showdown.

Arsenal and Nottingham Forest were deeply connected, because two of the founding members of Arsenal were Nottingham Forest players. When Arsenal was first established, they did not even have their own kits. Those two founders went to the Forest club to borrow a bunch of jerseys and footballs, which was considered to have helped build up their team.

However, the developments of the two teams could be said to be polar opposites. Arsenal relied on Herbert Chapman in the 1930s to create their dynasty, and embarked on the road to riches. And what about Nottingham Forest? It had never been considered a rich and powerful club. It was considered an old-style strong team at most, but only became a household name during Clough's era. Finances, influence, strength... no matter which aspect was compared, the Forest team looked like a poor country relative to Arsenal, even though it was this poor relative that had helped Arsenal when it was in its infancy.

Next to Arsenal, perhaps the only ways that the Forest people retained their self-respect were their two shiny silver Champions League trophies and their record of 42 consecutive undefeated games in the England's top leagues.

But now, the Champions League trophy was a thing of the future, and it was uncertain when it would happen again. But the 42-game record had been tied by Arsenal, and furthermore, the day of the record being broken was publicized by the media as if it were today.

The glory of the past was gradually drifting away, and now the Forest team was starting again from the beginning.

Chapter 212: This Is My Team Part 1

The viewing stands of City Ground were already full of fans and their loud, unceasing cheers. Both teams were warming up in the middle of the soccer field. Tang En sat alone in the locker room, staring at the blank tactical board and mumbling to himself.

"Guys, what match are we playing today? I know that the record from 25 years ago is too far away from us in history. At that time, some of you weren't even born yet. Even so, that glory belongs to Nottingham Forest. And today, someone is here attempting to take away glory that belongs to us. Will you cede it?"

Tang En paused and thought briefly. "No, that's too sentimental."

He coughed and waved his hands with furrowed brows. "Arsenal is a strong team. They've already gotten 42 matches with no losses! Are you afraid? Have your legs gone soft?"

"No... that just sounds like a bluff." Tang En dismissed it again.

"Aha! Our... this season, we have not had the best beginning. In two league matches, we got a loss and a draw. Now we have to face an opponent like Arsenal..."

Tang En stopped before he had even finished.

Tang En felt a tinge of nerves. What he had felt half a year ago at Cardiff Millennium Stadium all came rushing back. But this situation was different from that one. In truth, this was just a normal league match.

Why do I have to care about a record that has absolutely nothing to do with me? Regardless of whether we let Arsenal take three points or one, and allow them to set a new record, what loss is it to us?

Arsenal is not our direct competition in the path towards the championship. It is completely understandable if we lose this match. After all, difference between Arsenal and us is simply too great...

If I were smart... I would tell our players to relax as much as they could, and to get rid of any unimportant thoughts unrelated to the competition. No matter the result, we just need to learn something useful in our fight with Arsenal. That's enough.

But...

"Mr. Twain, what do you think of Arsène Wenger and his team tying with Forest's undefeated record of 42 no-losses in the English Premier League?"

"Mr. Twain, what do you have to say, as the holder of the current record, about meeting with Arsenal in this crucial match?"

"Arsenal is very strong. As their opponent, what does Forest have in store for this match?"

"Henry has been in excellent condition recently. Can you say what special arrangements you have in mind to counter him?"

"As a team that has managed to go neck-to-neck with the record by Forest, do you think that Arsenal is already a great team?"

"What do you think of the manager Arsène Wenger? Do you intend to learn from him?"

Whenever he recalled these questions, he was not, in fact, smart. Tang En was not one who did not know his limits, but this did not mean he could tolerate such insults and contempt without retaliating, either. It made him feel impotent.

He hated being looked down on, hated being ignored, hated being made to be a stepping stone for someone else. He was only 35; but in reality, he was even younger!

He was still young, and the young would always be rash without thinking of the consequences. They just wanted to retaliate straight away, and what came later would come later.

That's not a bad thing. This is soccer, not some kind of political show. We can retaliate when we are unhappy; we can box them in their ears if we're looked down upon, or even pinch their cheeks to make them face us. Why should we have to give up our hard work if we truly want to win? Is it only because our opponents are stronger than us?

Bulls**t!

I was never afraid of anyone, no matter who is sitting in the managerial seat opposing mine. Whether it was Wenger or Ferguson. My team shouldn't be afraid of anyone either, regardless of whether it's Arsenal or Manchester United that stands before them!

The corridor filled with the crisp sounds of shoes hitting the ground. Tang En knew that his players were back from their warm-up. He relaxed his clenched fists and waited for the players to open the door, so that they could see a confident manager full of fighting spirit.

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At the same time, in another locker room, just like Tony Twain, Arsène Wenger did not go out with the players to observe their conditions during the warm-up. Instead, he stayed back alone in the locker room for the away team, trying to calm himself down.

He was anxious... or excited. At this point, just 90 minutes from now was a crucial moment in which he could potentially make history. He was both as nervous and as exhilarated as a new player.

They stood on the home ground of the current record holders and faced their guardians. As long as they did not lose to them, Arsenal would become the new record holders and be written into history. And he – Arsène Wenger, a Frenchman, would be the chief manager behind this record. It would be an incomparable achievement in his managerial career. Compared to this, a mere Premier League championship appeared almost insignificant.

Arsène Wenger paced about in the somewhat cramped locker room with its old installations.

The tactics for the match were well-thought out, and he did not believe that his players would have any problems implementing them during the match. The team's condition was good, and they had already defeated countless strong opponents before this. There were only a handful left who could possibly resist the domination of his team.

His only regret was that the match was not held in Highbury.

What threat could Forest possibly present? Wenger remembered the time when he had followed the Youth team to Nottingham to participate in one of the usual matches of the FA Youth Cup. It was there that he had gotten to know Tony Twain, who had left him with an impression. It was not easy for any manager to be remembered by the rather arrogant Frenchman.

He did not expect the words that he had said to Twain after the match to become reality so soon.

What should he be on guard against? Tony Twain was not a man he could see through. What kind of trouble would he create in the match for Arsenal?

He couldn't know.

But there was one thing he did believe: so long as the team played to their own rhythm in the match, victory would not be far from them. They had done that for the past 42 matches, and would surely do the same for the 43rd. There would not be any changes simply because they met with Nottingham Forest.

Noisy footsteps filled the corridor. Wenger stopped and sat down in his seat as he waited quietly.

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"Does anyone know if there's any special meaning behind this match?" Tang En asked with a raised hand.

"Isn't it about that record? A streak... A streak of no-losses for 42 matches?" All the players spoke over one another, some with certainty and some without.

What Tang En thought was not wrong. What has a single 25-year-old record got to do with the current Forest? What does it have to do with these players, who only joined Forest this summer for various reasons?

If he spent precious time here babbling to the players about the once glorious history of Forest, he was sure a good half of them would fall asleep. It simply had nothing to do with them; they were not interested. It would also have no effect whatsoever on drumming up their morale...

“Wrong. There is no special meaning behind the match today.” Tang En waved his hands and said, “This is just any normal match in the Premier League. What does a record from 25 years ago have to do with us?”

A number of people shook their heads and agreed with Tang En.

“There are only four days between the second and third round. Our time is very tight. Not to mention, we still have to deal with the damned media pestering us, asking questions like what we think of Arsenal... what a joke. What does Arsenal’s record-breaking have to do with us? I hope you can win this match today, but it isn’t for some pointless reason like stopping Arsenal from breaking the record. It is because this is a Premier League match that we can either win and get three points from, or lose and get nothing. Arsenal is our opponent. Which team would not want to beat? We did not have a good start with a loss and a draw, so we have no right to just give away three good points to our opponents on our home ground. Do you think I’m just boasting when I say I want to defeat Arsenal? That I’m just day-dreaming?”

Tang En looked around at the players in the locker room. He scrutinized their expressions, hoping for a clue to their thoughts.

Albertini shook his head. He still did not know how to speak much English, and only knew a few words, but he said, “No, manager.”

Hierro’s English was just slightly better than Albertini’s. That was probably because there were English players on Real Madrid. When Steve McManaman first arrived at Real Madrid, Hierro was the person in charge of introducing him to the team’s traditions and his teammates, and making all sorts of arrangements for McManaman.

The Spanish veteran said, “Even teams like Real Madrid and Barcelona do not undefeated forever. I will not have any surprise if Arsenal end up losing this match.”

Even with his struggle with grammar and pronunciation, everyone understood what he was trying to say.

“In a football match, anything is possible.” Viduka did not say much, but spoke to the point.

Tang En’s gaze stopped at Wood, hoping he would express his thoughts in front of everyone. With a look at Tang En, Wood declared, “If you tell us to win this match, we’ll win it.”

His words amused the audience in the locker room. How could it be that easy?

Tang En also smiled and nodded. “Very good, George. I’ll tell you that we need to win before every match we play in the future.”

Chapter 213: This Is My Team Part 2

After saying that to Wood, Tang En turned to face the rest of the players in the locker room. He spread his arms out and said, "Everyone, remember this. This is a Premier League match on our home turf. It's a match that we have to take down if you don't want to be kicked back into the EFL at the end of this season. So, we can't allow the Londoners to do whatever they want. I hope you understand. Regardless of how we see this match, Arsenal intends on including this match in their plans, and to celebrate making history with a new record. It's not my style to let my enemies celebrate their successes on my home ground."

Tang En shrugged and continued. "I've already told you about the tactics we'll be using in our match today. I believe everyone knows what to do."

Everyone nodded to show that they understood their duties. Tang En placed both palms onto the table with the tactical board and looked hard at his players. Some of them were older than he was, but he had never doubted his own ability to lead this team. Even if the original, "real Tony Twain" were to be found, Tang En did not worry that his place would be stolen from him.

This was a team that belonged completely to him. He wanted to give this team his ideals, his understanding of football, his persistence towards victory, his hatred of failure, and his greed for the championship. He wanted to instill all these into the team. He would brand his person on Nottingham Forest, just like old man Clough. Whenever the Red Forest that once swept across Europe and England's football was mentioned, Clough's name would also be heard.

In several years' time, he hoped that people would talk about Tony Twain and his Nottingham Forest.

"Guys, you need to remember: Nottingham Forest fears no opponent. Whether it is Liverpool, who were UEFA Champions for three years in five, or Arsenal, who has an undefeated 42-match streak of no losses... Go get 'em!"

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Fàbregas stood with the away team in the waiting area. Just beside him was the home team, Nottingham Forest. It was unknown if this Spanish boy, who had been in UK for less than a year, had already memorised the 20 teams in the Premier League. Regardless, the name "Nottingham Forest" would be the most unforgettable one he encountered in his football career.

When he was the part of the main core of Arsenal's youth team, it was Nottingham Forest that had dragged him, from high up in the clouds, straight down into the mud, teaching him that English football was not as easy to deal with as he had imagined. He would remember for life the match he had played in mud and heavy rain, in the FA Youth Cup.

And there was one other person he could not forget.

Even though the starting formation of Forest included his Spanish comrade Hierro, Fàbregas barely gave him a glance, seeming uninterested in greeting his senior. Instead, as he stood among his team members, he looked only diagonally ahead with his eyes focused on one Forest player.

He was in a red Forest jersey with "13, G.Wood" written on the back. After that setback, Fàbregas had hoped in his heart that he could some day pit himself against Wood again. He had not expected that day to come so quickly. It had not even been a full year, and he was already going to meet him on the field for a second time. The difference between now and then is that it was no longer a low-level competition like the FA Youth Cup. Now, they were representing England's highest level of competition: in the English Premier League!

Fàbregas was not a jot surprised to see his "old rival" in the starting formation of Forest team. After that match with him, he could tell that the quiet little guy was not just some mediocre player. In such a weak team, it was always easier for the young to grab the limelight. Hadn't Piqué already told him that? He had chosen Forest simply for a higher chance of getting fielded and receiving more training. Otherwise, why wouldn't he have gone to Manchester United or Arsenal instead?

But Gerard Piqué was in the substitutes' list while this lad was part of the main force... George Wood, how much stronger have you already become?

Fàbregas had been staring at Wood in a daze while someone called his name in Spanish. With a start, he realised it was Hierro from Forest, smiling and greeting him. It must have been fate to be able to meet another Spaniard here, not to mention that they were once each other's rivals in the domestic league.

"What are you looking at, Cesc?" Fàbregas had no time to look away before Hierro managed to follow his gaze, finding his teammate George Wood at the end of it. Hierro smiled knowingly. After the match schedule for the league matches were announced and it was known that the third match was to be with Arsenal, Wes Morgan spared no effort relating to the new recruits how George Wood had once single-handedly managed to freeze out Fàbregas. After hearing the story, Hierro could more or less understand the grudge between the two youths.

Despite the rivalry between Real Madrid and Barcelona in Spain, they were both Spaniards, so Hierro still knew a little about Barcelona's Youth team players, such as Fàbregas. According to rumours, Fàbregas had once been looked upon as the successor of Pep Guardiola and Xavi. Even without seeing Fàbregas play, Hierro knew enough about Pep Guardiola to understand how good Fàbregas must be. If George Wood could successfully freeze out such a player, whose successor could he be called?

To save Fàbregas from embarrassment, Hierro thought quickly and changed the topic. "Are you looking for Piqué? He isn't in the starting line-up."

Fàbregas nodded. "That's too bad, I noticed that too."

Now that they no longer played for their old teams, there was less blustering and aggression in the air, even as opponents. Hierro joked, "Look at us. You're from Barcelona and I'm from Madrid, but even when we were in Spain we didn't get to play with each other. Now that we've come here, we are..."

On mention of the two teams, Fàbregas started laughing. "But I've jeered at you, Hierro... from the spectators' stand." The "War of the Century" that Hierro used to be a part of had had no shortage of heated exchanges. On the field, this Spanish player from Barcelona, clad in his white jersey, had showed no mercy and toppled anyone who tried to breakthrough his iron guard. For that, he probably received the most boos and jeers. But that was several years ago.

Hierro laughed too. "What a coincidence. Piqué had said that to me before as well..."

The two of them stood in the players' walkway and made small talk with seemingly no air of tension for the impending match. On the other hand, George Wood kept a straight back and stared forward into the entrance to the stadium with an apparent lack of interest in the conversations around him.

Hierro was a veteran who had already experienced countless important matches; he knew how to pace himself mentally and physically. Meanwhile, for George Wood, so long as Tony Twain commanded it, he would execute it faithfully.

And Twain had said, "Arsenal is our enemy! We have to defeat them!"

Wood resolved to look upon the people around him as his enemies and refused to make contact with them; his mind was filled only with thoughts of defeating them. Though his might seem like a one-track mind, it was exactly what Tang En liked about him.

The three referees ahead of the teams looked back and gave the signal for their entrance. Immediately, Hierro nodded to Fàbregas and their conversation came to an end. The smiles on their faces vanished in an instant, and just like that, the air of tension before any important match returned to the players' corridor.

There was no longer chatter or whispering of any kind.

The broadcast in the stadium rang out with a loud voice. "Let us welcome competing teams, Arsenal and Forest!"

"Alright, it's us!"

"Time to go!"

The captains from both teams shouted as they led their teams out.

Waves of cheering from the spectator's stand greeted them, washing over each of their proud faces.

Chapter 214: The Start of the Match Part 1

Although Nottingham Forest was just a newly promoted team, and their opponent, Arsenal, was the defending champion, it was no exaggeration to say that this was the most high-profile match in the Premier League.

Sky TV had chosen this game to be broadcasted live to all of England. It was believed that on top of the benefits for the Arsenal fans, there would be a lot of interest in whether the 25-year unbeaten record could be broken.

"Forty-three, this is a captivating figure. As long as Wenger's team does not lose to Nottingham Forest here, they will set a new record. But Arsenal has to be careful, since at the same time, this can also be a pitfall." Martin Taylor sat in the press box and began to speak, giving the audience his analysis of the game through the microphone. "I don't think Tony Twain will let his opponent get three points on the Forest team's home ground."

Next to him, Andy Gray added. "Yes, that's right, he's like a bulldog."

“That’s an accurate description.”

The pair of partners laughed.

The two commentators had time to joke, but the players on the field did not even have time to catch their breath. From the moment the whistle blew, they had to be in the zone.

The result of the coin toss was that Arsenal got the right to kick off. But less than a minute after shooting out the ball, they lost control of it. But the Forest team did not get it either.

Because he was the replacement for Patrick Vieira’s position, young Cesc Fàbregas had to take on the responsibility of organizing the offense, and most of Arsenal’s balls had to be delivered to his feet; even more so for the kick offs.

But just when Fàbregas had stopped the ball, he saw the number 13, George Wood, charging up from the other side.

For this game, the task Twain had given to Wood was to mark Fàbregas. And if he had any energy left, he could help Albertini. Even though Fàbregas was still young, and perhaps it might seem incomprehensible that Twain was so worried about the kid, Tang En knew his energy. If he left him be, he would have suffered the consequences sooner or later.

Albertini’s mission was also focused on defense because in this game, the Forest team was up against the formidable Arsenal. After only two rounds of the tournament, Arsenal had already scored nine goals: a 4:1 victory over Everton and a 5:3 victory over Middlesbrough.

Arsenal’s starting line-up in this game was not too different from what it had been in the first two rounds. There was the German goalkeeper, Jens Lehmann, and the the right back, Lauren. Then, because Sol Campbell had not recovered from his injury, Pascal Cygan and Yaya Touré were partners for the center back positions, and the left back was Ashley Cole. The four players Arsenal placed in the midfield were Jermaine Pennant, Gilberto Silva, Cesc Fàbregas and Robert Pirès. And up on the frontline were the two partners, their team captain, Thierry Henry, and the veteran, Dennis Bergkamp.

Their lineup was dynamic and experienced. When comparing the strength of the two teams, Wenger did not believe that the Forest team was even close to being the more powerful team. What made him feel a little uneasy was that Arsenal was playing against the Forest team on their home turf, and according to rumors, Tony Twain was a man who placed great importance on home games.

Additionally, looking at a series of performances from Twain before this match, Wenger did not think that the Forest team would let Arsenal easily create a new record on their home ground.

In this game, he wanted his team to channel momentum into their control right at the start of the game. If they did that, the next step would be easy. His Arsenal players were always skilled at controlling situations, and directing the momentum of the game to move according to Arsenal’s rhythm.

However, Twain was well aware of it too. It was clear from the beginning that he had no intention of handing over the rhythm of the game so readily. Arsenal likes to control the field, doesn’t it? And it likes to emphasize playing beautiful football, doesn’t it? Well, my team may not have those skills, but we’re superb at wreaking havoc!

George Wood had good stamina and a remarkable physique, so he was given the responsibility of causing destruction and marking Fàbregas closely, just like he had done to him in that youth team game.

From the opening seconds of the game, Wood was doing very well.

The young Spaniard had just stopped the football, and Wood had already rushed up to him. He nimbly dodged the tackle with the intention of flashing past his charging opponent. But Wood's left foot dragged behind and hooked Fàbregas' foot. The football was derailed but they remained on the same spot. The referee's whistle was well-timed. The applause from the stands was not for the referee, but for George Wood.

Who would not like a player who was groomed from their own youth team and ended up in a main position on the First Team?

When he saw Fàbregas tripped by George Wood, Wenger shot a glance at Tony Twain from the technical area and wondered if this would be the Forest team's tactical tone in this game.

He decided to observe for another ten minutes.

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Within those ten minutes, the Forest team thoroughly carried out Twain's destructive tactics. He never tried to overwhelm Arsenal on offense, or compete with Arsenal on which team had a higher rate of ball possession or had more passes. But if Arsenal wanted to play with ease, the Forest team would not let them.

Besides the goalkeeper, Twain wanted the team to proactively intercept the ball and fortify their defense from the front field to all other sections. They must not allow Arsenal to do passes, control the ball, or dribble it. Otherwise, the Forest team would only end up chasing the ball on their opponent's tail.

This was only the way for the current Forest team to compete with Arsenal.

In the previous day's tactical preparation session, Twain had drawn a red line just in front of the arc in the opponent's penalty area on the tactical board. He told the players that this was the first line of defense for the Forest team. "Our defense starts from our opponent's penalty area." Since he had said so, that was what the players did.

After a full ten minutes, when the score was displayed at the bottom of the screen, it was still 0:0. Arsenal slightly predominated in the possession rate, with 54% versus Forest's 46%. Arsenal had two shots on goal, and the Forest team had one. The number of fouls that the Forest team had was four, and Arsenal did not even have one.

The simple data statistics were already enough to summarize what had happened on the field in the last ten minutes.

In front of the televisions, the Arsenal admirers did not see the robust victory that they anticipated or the typical Arsenal style of play. They saw mistakes, fouls, whistles that interrupted the game from time to time, and the Forest fans singing in the stands.

What else was there? The King of Highbury, Henry, breaking through on the left wing and then crossing inside to shoot at the goal? Pirès' skillful running passes and coordination with Henry on the left wing? Pennant's sharp breakthrough from the side? Dennis Bergkamp's amazing technique? Ashley Cole plugging in from the rear to assist in the attack?

No, there was nothing.

Apart from Wenger, Tang En might have been the only person in the world who understood Wenger's trust in and high regard for Fàbregas. He knew that Vieira's injury might be considered bad news in the minds of Arsenal fans, but for Arsène Wenger, it was a chance for Cesc Fàbregas to properly establish his position.

Arsenal's offense must be launched by Fàbregas. During an offense, all the balls would be given to him first, and then he must decide on the direction and manner of the offense. Whether it would be a long pass behind, or a short pass to infiltrate and drive forward layer by layer; whether they would seize the opportunity to quickly counterattack or stabilize first and wait for teammates to come up and support... All of those decisions were handed over to the 17-year-old Francesc Fàbregas.

That heavy responsibility was not given to any other players, even considering his young age. Since he was taking Vieira's place, he must be able to realize Vieira's responsibility.

In Arsenal's first two victorious rounds, Fàbregas did not manage to score a goal, but the role that he played on the field spoke for itself. The media had already eagerly begun to bestow the Spanish lad with the title of "Vieira's successor."

Twain had appointed George Wood to carry out man-on-man marking defense against Fàbregas. No matter where Fàbregas was, as long as he received the ball, Wood must immediately close in on him without any fear of losing his defensive position. When Wood was putting pressure on Fàbregas, Ribéry would cover the center.

First of all, they had to prevent Arsenal from entering their familiar rhythm. Then, the Forest team must find opportunities to counterattack in the chaos. It all depended on Albertini's performance. Tang En believed in the Italian, just like he trusted George Wood. The Forest team's first shot to the goal, within ten minutes of the start of the match, came from a long pass by Albertini after he intercepted the ball in the backfield.

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Seeing how the game had developed, Wenger was certain of what Tony Twain had in mind. But he did not get up and walk to the sidelines to make any adjustments. Instead, he turned to his assistant manager, Pat Rice, who was sitting beside him, and asked, "What do you think, Pat?"

"I think Twain is no different from most other opponents when it comes to dealing with our tactics," Rice said.

"But if the game only lasted for ten minutes, he would have done better than the other opponents."

"Are we going to change anything, Arsène?"

“No...” Wenger rested his chin on his palm and shook his head. “No, it’s too early. Their tactics are flawed too. Every time number 13 presses forward to defend against Fàbregas, there’s a gap behind him. We’ll continue to observe; if Cesc can’t handle it alone, let Dennis help him.”

Pat Rice nodded and jotted down Wenger’s remark in the little notebook that he carried.

Chapter 215: The Start of the Match Part 2

Cesc Fàbregas felt like he had gone back to that day on the muddy field, being dogged by the relentless opponent who was always silent, but whose presence he could always feel.

What is this bulls**t tactic? One-on-one marking starting from the center circle? I see the gap behind you all... a big, empty gap. As long as I pass through it... as long as it’s passed, it will be a penetrating... Dammit!

Fàbregas finally shook off Wood’s defense, but he did not dare to dribble another step. Wood’s stamina was perhaps the best he had ever seen in his many years of playing. If his pace was slower by half a beat, he might end up tangled up with him again.

Without managing to reconfirm the situation ahead, he lowered his head and shot a direct pass. In all other previous games, the player who received his passes from this position was supposed to be Dennis Bergkamp. He would use his excellent footwork to control the ball, taunt the opposing defenders, and then, as the stunned spectators watched, he would shoot the football into the goal...

Yes, just like that.

Who was going to be the unlucky one to fall under his feet this time?

Just as he passed the ball, Fàbregas felt a gust of wind on his face; Number 13 for the Forest team had swiftly returned to defend his position. Seeing the man rushing back, the Spanish kid smiled. Ah, so you realize that a gap forms if you try to put pressure on me.

He gazed past George Wood and saw a player in the blue Arsenal away jersey with a number 10 on its back receive his pass. He was reassured to see Dennis.

Bergkamp had just received the ball, and a player had already marked him. Not George Wood, who had returned to defend, nor Ribéry, the substitute. This player wore the bright team captain’s armband and had a head full of curly hair; it was the Italian, Albertini.

Unlike Wood, Albertini’s defensive position calling card was so good that when Bergkamp received the ball, he found that he did not have a forward route for the ball.

He paused for a moment and immediately pulled the ball back to his foot to avoid being robbed by his opponents. If he had been facing Number 13, who only knew how to pounce at the first touch, he could have seized the opportunity to pass easily. But the opponent in front of him made him pay attention again. When he was still playing for Inter Milan, he had played against Albertini, who who had been playing on AC Milan.

This was not an easy player to deal with.

He pulled the ball back, turned around, and pushed his back against Albertini. He looked up and saw that Wood was already charging back, which meant that no one was watching the Spanish player!

Without hesitation, the Dutchman passed the football to Fàbregas at the back, and then turned to shake off Albertini and ran forward. It was a two-versus-one pass!

Wood, who had just run back, found that the football had been passed behind him again. He stared blankly for a moment; it seemed like his brain had short-circuited. The 32-year-old Albertini reacted faster than he did. After seeing that Bergkamp had turned, he turned around as well. In order to make up for the disadvantage in speed, he skillfully thrust himself into the middle of Bergkamp's forward line and stretched his arm out to pull as well.

Fàbregas understood Bergkamp's intentions, so he did not let the football stay at his feet, and immediately crossed the ball with a header, hoping to pass ahead to Bergkamp's foot. But the ball was intercepted halfway, and the player who cut the ball was the veteran, Albertini.

While he turned to run and follow Bergkamp, he did not forget to look back at Fàbregas' movements. When he saw Number 15 move his leg, he knew where he was going to pass to, so he turned decisively again. And when the football came, he jumped and headed the ball to George Wood, who was not too far ahead.

When he landed on the ground, Albertini made a "pass it back" hand signal to Wood, who dutifully passed the ball back to him. The Italian seemed bent on giving Fàbregas a lesson, and passed the ball directly to him without stopping; but the pass was farther, faster, and more accurate!

The football flew high over Arsenal's midfield to the Forest team's right wing, where there seemed to be no one.

"Ashley Young!" Taylor screamed.

The ball that Albertini passed suddenly descended from above to a spot in the distance where Ashley Young could catch up; there was not even a person within ten meters of him, in front or behind!

Just now, when Fàbregas had been planning the attack, Arsenal's left wing, from Pirès to Ashley Cole, had all been under pressure. They did not expect the Forest team to counterattack so quickly, or that the Italian's passing would be so sudden and so accurate.

As long as Ashley Young stopped the ball well, the Forest team's counterattack would be a cinch.

Ashley Young looked up at the ball over his head, stretched his feet to hook the ball, and the football stopped ahead, slowly rolling.

"Beautiful!" David Kerslake could not help but jump to his feet in the technical area.

"There are only two men in Arsenal's penalty area, Cygan and Touré, and the Forest team's counterattack is too precise!" Martin Tayler shouted. He really wanted to rave about Albertini's long pass without stopping the ball, but unfortunately he could not deal with it now. "Ashley Young crossed the ball!"

If Campbell had not been injured before the season and hadn't needed to be out for two months, the French center back, Cygan, would not have had the opportunity to be in the starting lineup. After Arsène

Wenger had spent two million pounds to bring him to Highbury, his performance had been disappointing, and as a center back, his judgement of ball placements was terrible.

The partner that Ashley Young was passing to was clearly rotating. Cygan had originally intended to jab under his opponent's foot. But now, he could only hurriedly jump and hope to head the ball out. But the football slipped past his shiny forehead.

A missed header!

At that moment, Cygan's heart went cold.

He knew who was behind him, and it was definitely not his teammate, Touré. It was the Forest team's powerful center forward, Mark Viduka!

"Boom!" The City Ground stands had already erupted in a rush of cheers.

Mark Viduka headed the ball to the goal with all his might.

The only person that Arsenal fans and players could pin their hopes on for now was their goalkeeper, Lehmann, who was less than five meters away from the ball. But that distance was too small, unless it was God's will, or something utterly unexpected happened...

Although Cygan missed the football, his missed header in front had rocked the Australian instead, and Viduka did not have time to adjust the angle of his header. He could only strike the football straight towards the goal. The consequence was that Lehmann was standing right in front of it.

It looked like Arsenal might not concede the ball!

Lehmann's conditioned reflex made him jump backwards and swing his hands up to block the ball. His action was terrible, because he was reaching forward with his hands, not upwards towards the rear.

He successfully blocked the ball at the cost of falling into the goal. But he did not smack the football far enough away; Touré and Viduka collided, and Cygan was still on the ground after he pounced. At that time, who else was in the Arsenal penalty area?

The fans cheered the answer excitedly. "Eastwooooooooood!!"

The Romani Gypsy, who had been lying in ambush behind Mark Viduka, finally stepped up. When he was presented with this golden opportunity, he swept the football with a kick into the Arsenal goal without any reservations. It was as easy as shooting during training!

"YES!It's a GOOOOAL!!"

The City Ground reached fever pitch.

Chapter 216: Adjustments Part 1

"YES! It's a GOOOAL!"

The moment that Freddy Eastwood scored, the spectators' stands exploded into a frenzy of cheers. All of Forest's fans were jumping out of their seats with their arms up in the air.

“The is the first goal for Nottingham Forest in this Premier League season! The actual first! Unbelievably, it was on Arsenal’s goal! What a beautiful counterattack! An incredible long pass! A banana shot by Albertini!”

Instead of running to the sidelines to celebrate with the fans, the scorer, Freddy Eastwood, turned and ran to the midfield to give their new Captain, Albertini, a tight hug.

At least 85% of the credit for that goal belonged to him.

Watching the ball cross the goal line, Tang En and Kerslake both jumped from their seats and went running to the sidelines with raised arms. He did it! His tactic worked!

“Nottingham Forest is beating Arsenal on their home ground! This match is looking to be more than a simple record-breaking ceremony for Wenger. Just like Tony Twain said: as much as he doesn’t care about a 25-year-old record being broken, he doesn’t want to lose this match either.”

After cheering for Freddy Eastwood, the fans of Forest immediately began singing a song that they had come up with in the spur-of-the-moment, in praise of Albertini. “We have an Italian, with curls and messy hair! He may be 32, but take him lightly and you’ll pay! Take him lightly and you’ll pay!”

As a player, a single beautiful performance is enough to win over fans.

Surrounded by his teammates, Albertini was bombarded with their excited yells, so much that he could not even make out what the fans were singing. But there was one thing he was certain of: leaving Italy and coming to the UK was the right choice.

Clustered between his teammates, feeling their expectations and his heavy responsibility, having his name hailed loudly by their fans; it felt incredible. It was as though he had returned to his time in AC Milan. I, Albertini, am far from being old!

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But the point was lost all too suddenly. Beside him, Pat Rice held his head in his hands. Wenger turned to look at Tang En and his assistant, who were celebrating the goal at the sidelines, and stood. He could not allow the match to be dragged into Forest’s flow. He had to bring the focus of Arsenal’s offense back to Dennis Bergkamp.

As he stood at the sidelines, all of Arsenal’s players looked back at him, knowing that their manager would surely have new instructions for them after losing a point. Wenger signalled to Dennis Bergkamp, getting him to withdraw just enough to support Fàbregas instead.

Bergkamp nodded in understanding.

Although the starting position of the Dutch was technically a forward wherein he was Henry’s partner, he could also play well in the midfield. Withdrawing to coordinate the offense would help to take some pressure off of Fàbregas, and at the same time, open him up to opportunities to take advantage of the gap left behind by Wood once he moved forward.

The adjustments Wenger made had some effect. With both Bergkamp and Fàbregas working together and coordinating the offense, it pulled the attention of Forest’s defense. With Henry’s positioning being more flexible, he would often pull to the left and partner up with Robert Pirès. That way, Forest’s

defensive line had no choice but to run with Henry; after all, that Frenchman was the greatest threat on Arsenal.

Arsenal did not just rely on Henry to score. Pirès, Bergkamp, Jermaine Pennant, and even Gilberto Silva and Ashley Cole all had the ability to rush in and score a goal. Arsenal had many places from which they could attack, and anyone of them could be part of the offense. Just two or three of them with a pass-and-go combination would easily create the space they needed.

When Henry successfully received a ball, he launched it towards the goal with a spin and a kick. Amidst the held breath throughout City Ground, Tang En rose from his manager's seat. And then the ball hit the goalpost.

Tang En could tell that Arsenal had given Bergkamp, not Fàbregas, more responsibility in the organization of offense. Since Wenger had made changes, Tang En moved to adjust accordingly. Wood's duty remained the same: to continue guarding aggressively against Fàbregas. With him acting as the core, the entire formation of Forest would advance and put pressure on Arsenal. Forest, who was in the lead, did not withdraw into a defensive position like a cowardly turtle, but instead moved up their area of defense.

It seemed that Tang En had not given up on close-marking and tackling, even with a numerical advantage. He understood deeply the strengths of Arsenal, which were about the same as those of every technically strong football team. They absolutely could not be given any space that will allow them the full use of their technical capabilities; otherwise, the team with the weaker skillset, Forest in this case, would be set on a path to failure.

Bergkamp's withdrawal to reorganize was a clear attempt to use the space created by George Wood's advancement. Since that's their intention, we'll use the whole team to fill up this hole for good. With the entire formation advancing, we'll continue to pressure Arsenal and eventually take initiative in the match.

In advancing the formation itself forward, the best tactic would naturally be offside traps. At the same time, Tang En did not intend on restricting Forest's offense for the sake of defending. In contrast, he expected Ribéry and Ashley Young, the two side midfielders, to actively support the offense. Once Forest got an opportunity to attack, the side midfielders and full backs would cut forward and suppress Arsenal's offensive abilities in the wings.

In addition, they were to use the most efficient method in their offense; the ball could not stay under their feet a second longer than necessary if a pass was possible. The idea that Tang En had tried to instill in the players during training was this: opportunities and breaks were not created by dribbling; instead, they were created through the team's positional awareness and passing. The future direction of their offense would be to use their movements to create opportunities for themselves on one hand, and to force opponents into dead-ends on the other.

They could not pin their hopes on using their own ability to singularly take on five defenders before scoring. It was Arsenal they were facing, not amateurs.

Even if Arsenal had had Jermaine Pennant and Robert Pirès in the wings, Tang En did not think Ribéry and Ashley Young would have lost out to them. In fact, he believed that Ribéry was superior to Pennant.

This differed greatly from what Wenger thought. In terms of ability, Wenger did not think that Forest was at Arsenal's level at all. However, Tang En felt that what Forest was lacking was not ability, but experience. The experience gleaned from the top-level league was more important than anything else.

Having to harden up and fight such a tough battle with Arsenal just in the league's third round, Tang En believed that the match will give his players a tremendous amount experience, probably the equivalent of playing in at least five normal matches.

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Wenger quickly discovered the changes Tang En made, but he did not follow-up with any adjustments. From another perspective, it was no longer the knowledge of the managers that was at play between the two teams, but the abilities of the players.

However, Wenger had to admit that Twain had improved markedly since their first meeting. In their first encounter, Tony Twain, who had at the time been managing the Youth team, could only use weird strategies to deal with Arsenal. But now, he was already able to go head-to-head with him in his tactical maneuvers.

Looking at George Wood's animated figure on the field, Wenger thought that perhaps he really should have tried to poach the boy over. Even if he himself did not like rougher tactics or players who could only use their body to play the game, he had to admit that Number 13 would likely become a threat to him in the future.

Forest continued to press for the ball, but the main referee was light on the whistle because it was Forest's home ground. Several defensive measures that looked almost like fouls were ignored. As a result, even if Wood had gotten Fàbregas rolling on the ground before passing the ball to Albertini, with the young Spanish champion making a huge show out of it, it would not have caught the referee's attention.

To be fair, Fàbregas's abilities were not less than George Wood's. Rather, Tang En's strategy, which was designed specifically with Arsenal in mind, played to Wood's greatest strengths while effectively restricting Fàbregas's abilities.

After watching for another ten minutes, Wenger shook his head at Pat Rice, who sat beside him. "Tang En has thoroughly analysed us, but we know very little about this Forest team. We've been too passive."

Rice nodded in agreement. "Before this, I thought he was just quarrelling with the media for all four days."

"No, Pat. What Forest has showed in this match can't be achieved in just four days."

Pat looked in surprise when Wenger said this. "You mean..."

"From the moment Tony Twain was promoted to the Premier League, he must have already thought of us as an important opponent." Wenger continued steadily. "It's quite funny for a newly promoted team to view the defending champions as their main opponent, isn't it?"

Pat did not know what to say. Arsène had once warned him to be careful of Tony Twain, but had said nothing when asked why. Now, Pat understood it better.

“No... that’s incredibly ambitious for a newly-promoted...”

Wenger looked down at his watch. Without him realising it, the first-half was already ticking down to its end.

The match seemed to have passed in a flurry of tackling or being tackled. The lofty and sophisticated offense that was said to be as fluid as water and as elegant as a dance, so prized by Arsenal, was completely absent from the match.

Wenger did not give a thought to making any adjustments before the end of the first half. The situation was not going to change simply by shouting from the sidelines or changing a single player.

Half-time would be good.

Very well, Tang En. You win the first half...

Let’s fight again in the second half!

Chapter 217: Adjustments Part 2

“Forest team did beautifully.” Taylor, on the viewing platform, praised the home team, who had managed to retain their lead in the first half. “Of course, I’m not referring to their style of football, or the one-point lead they have. In truth, Arsenal’s defensive line has been problematic for the last two rounds, allowing their opponents to score. However, the control Forest has over the pace of the match is telling...”

“...Of a chance to overtake Arsenal!” Gray shouted, without any fear of offending Arsenal’s supporters.

Although Tang En could not hear the praises being sung of him by the two commentators, he could see that Forest had the advantage from the situation on the field. The resounding cheers from the spectators’ stand for Forest team did not stop for a single moment. Even assistant manager David Kerslake, who sat next to him, could not stop smiling as he watched the match. He had not expected results like this, being able to lead by a point and completely restrict their opponents.

But Tang En only frowned joylessly. From time to time, the lens of the camera panned to his face. With that expression, he was sure to mislead anyone who had just switched on their televisions to think that Forest had fallen behind.

With Forest’s current abilities against an opponent like Arsenal, having a one-point lead was not enough to stop Tang En from worrying.

1:0. In Tang En’s opinion, that was the most unstable score possible.

Soon, the main referee blew the whistle signalling the end of the first half amidst the cheers of Forest’s fans. The players from Arsenal hung their heads as they quickly made their way towards the players’ corridor. It was not that they were unhappy with the score. Rather, they were upset that they had remained at a disadvantage throughout the entire first half; that they had been beaten into helplessness by a newly promoted team and been unable to render any effective offense in return. Although they

lead the league in their technical ability, a combination of rough fouling, forceful pressing with disregard for stamina, numerous little tricks, and a splash of bias from the referee had forced them into a corner.

Returning to the locker room, Arsenal's players were panting roughly. They looked even more tired than Forest's players, who had been running non-stop for the entire first half.

Of course, Wenger did not consider that a sign of a physical issue. He stood in the locker room and scanned his audience. No matter what, the players could not lose their morale.

The Frenchman started speaking. "I thought that the most important match was the previous round of the league."

He spoke with an even, unhurried tone at a normal volume. It was almost as if he was speaking about something that had nothing to do with himself.

"Do you still remember how painfully we were whacked by Middlesbrough on our home ground? In three minutes, we lost two straight goals and let our opponents overtake us with a score of 1:3. At that point, everyone thought we were goners; that the pressure of trying to level with an undefeated record was too much for us. But what was the final score? 5:3."

Wenger stretched out his hands, indicating five on his left and three on his right.

"After that match, I thought that you guys had already figured out how to deal with this record thing. We may be Forest's opponents, but their manager, Tony Twain, said something very true: 'Records were made to be broken.' Put your hearts into the match, and don't think about anything that comes after."

At that point, Wenger looked at Fàbregas. The Spanish boy was still trying to catch his breath, his head down. It seemed like he was thoroughly pestered by George Wood in the first half.

Wenger asked, "Cesc, what do you think of Number 13?"

In response to the manager's question, Fàbregas looked up, his breath suddenly becoming steady. He shook his head. "It's no problem. I can deal with it."

Wenger smiled and made no move to strike at the youth's pride. But that was in spite of what he could see; Fàbregas was not performing well in the face of George Wood. Wood surpassed him physically. Perhaps if it was Patrick Vieira playing, the situation would be different. His experience, technique, and fitness would all allow them to regain control of the midfield. Unfortunately, Vieira had gotten injured before the start of the season.

"Good. In the second half, make sure you reduce your time in possession of the ball."

Fàbregas nodded. It was a first for Fàbregas to be met with such a setback twice in a row against a no-name player like George Wood.

Wenger knew what Fàbregas must be thinking, but said nothing. Instead, he turned to the Captain, Henry, to discuss their successes and failures in the first half. With one watching from the manager's seat, and the other experiencing the match in the field, both of them had to put their heads together to discuss their thoughts.

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On the other side, the atmosphere in Forest's locker room was not as exultant as one would expect. Tang En's brows, which were still tightly furrowed, were noticed by the players coming in. His expression made them unsure if they had done badly in some way, and all of them to quieted down.

Fortunately, Tang En quickly answered their unspoken question. "Do you know why I'm still frowning? You guys did very well, and I should commend you. But I hope you realize that the match still has 45 minutes left. A one-point lead is not much insurance, and after the goal in the first half, we spent put way too much effort into defense. In the next half, we need to make some changes..."

He pointed to the tactical board, which was already drawn up with the formation of both teams.

"Ribéry and Ashley Young. When we're in possession, I want the two of you to cut inwards and allow Baines and Chimbona to come up into the wings to pull on the full backs from Arsenal. When you have an opportunity, try to cut in from the sides of the penalty area."

Tang En drew an arrow as he explained, "Demi, your mission is to send the ball to the same area in their defensive line. If the opponents start taking notice of your position, send the ball straight to the mid path."

Albertini nodded in affirmation as he looked at the crisscrossing arrows and lines on the tactical board. He felt good about his condition in the match; it should be no problem for him to send out such a ball.

Tang En then looked at Wood and said, "George. When we are attacking, your main priority is to protect Demi. You know what to do, right?"

Wood nodded.

"Excellent. Everyone knows what their target is. Don't slack! Our opponents are not of a League One team. I hope we can all celebrate a victory together when the match is over!"

Tang En clapped his hands and held up his fist.

"Let those who looked down on us go to hell!"

Chapter 218: One on One

Arsenal tried to regain control of the game five minutes into the start of the second half. Henry was more active than he had been in the first half. He was constantly on the wing, seeking out opportunities to coordinate with Pirès and trying to break through the flanks. They almost succeeded once; Henry and Pirès did a two-versus-one pass on the wing and then cut into the penalty area. Coming up to defend against Henry, Matthew Upson's foot slipped, and he suddenly fell.

Henry did not expect this, and as a result, he shot the ball towards the stands behind back of the goal.

All of the Nottingham Forest people gasped. Twain was also startled, and almost jumped from his seat in the technical area.

Upson got up from the ground and turned to look at the goal in panic. Hierro came up to him and patted his shoulder to reassure him.

On the Arsenal side, Henry held his head in his hands. He had not thought that his volley would overshoot and fly out. When Upson fell down, it was just the Forest team goalkeeper in front of him, and the the goal. During training and even during matches, a situation like that would normally have been a walk in the park.

Wenger looked even sorrier than Henry. He stood up from his seat, saw that the ball did not go in, suddenly waved his hands, and sat down.

Arsenal's luck did not seem too good today.

After their narrow escape, the Forest team launched their offense. During the halftime interval, Twain had told them that they were not secure at all with only one goal. What he said had almost come true just now; the Forest players understood the principle.

Albertini was responsible for organizing the attack. Bergkamp came up to intercept, and Albertini chose not to break through, even though he was certain that he could drop the Dutchman in front of him. But he glimpsed George Wood standing not too far from his side.

He remembered Twain's separate conversation with him after a training session.

"Demetrio, what do you think of this George kid?"

"Not bad, very good." His English was not very good, so he did not say much.

"I'm sure you can also see that I value him very much. Now, he's impeccable in his defense, but he lacks a lot in offense. I was hoping you could help him."

"I understand, sir."

Bergkamp saw Albertini move the football to the right. Thinking he was going to break through, he quickly shifted his center of gravity. His opponent did indeed run towards that direction, but he had also passed the football to George Wood with his heel.

Wood received the ball; however, Albertini was enmeshed with Bergkamp. What should he do?

Fàbregas saw Wood take the ball and rush up with gritted teeth. He wanted to take revenge. I can't always let this kid pressure me. You robbed me, I'll rob you back!

Wood, who had received the ball, did not know what to do next. He had wanted to pass the ball to Albertini, but he saw that Albertini had an opponent at his side, so he dismissed the idea. Just when he was at a loss, Fàbregas charged up!

Unsurprisingly, George Wood, who was not good at ball control, lost the ball.

"Arsenal has the ball again! Beautiful steal! Cesc Fàbregas' steal has given Arsenal a chance to fight back, and the Forest team hasn't been able to defend against it, since everyone is still on the offense!"

What Taylor had said was right. When the Forest players saw that Albertini had the ball, they all pressed on eagerly, especially everyone from the two wings. They all rushed up and interrupted the team's coordinated offense.

What they did not expect was that Albertini did not pass the ball Ribéry or Ashley Young, but to George Wood, who rarely participated in the team's offense. Leighton Baines and Pascal Chimbonda had to run back at all costs, just like during their sprinting drill. Just like that, their physical energy was wasted.

Wood just saw a flash in front of his eyes, and suddenly there was nothing in front of his feet.

He had lost the ball.

At that point, Wood would not ask himself what to do. Almost instinctively, he turned to stick to Fàbregas. With his superior physical strength, he crushed down on his opponent. The Spaniard could not speed up, and could not shake him off.

Fàbregas was rammed by Wood from the side, causing his body to lose balance and his pace to become erratic. The football was knocked away, beyond his control range. Hierro received the football just in time, and the ball was back under the Forest team's control.

Twain, who witnessed the scene from the technical area, shook his head and said to David Kerlake, "Looks like we should strengthen Wood's offensive training."

Kerlake nodded in agreement. "Compared to his defense, his offense is almost amateur."

The spectacle of that 60-meter indirect assist to Freddy Eastwood's goal during his debut for the Forest First Team was never seen again in subsequent competitions or training. Wood might have been possessed by some supernatural power that day.

Hierro passed the ball back to Albertini, who retreated to provide support. This time the Italian did not pass the ball to Wood, but passed it straight ahead to Viduka. Under pressure from Touré, Viduka could not turn around, so he could only pass to Ashley Young on the wing. And in the face of Ashley Cole's defense, the youthful Young had no other options; he chose to pass the ball to the right back, Chimbonda, who had just wedged in. The Frenchman just received the ball when his fellow countryman, Pirès, forced his way in. Thus, he could only pass the ball to Albertini in the middle, and Albertini cleverly gave away the ball.

After the football had gone in a big circle, it ended up back in front of George Wood.

Everything that then happened on the field was like a replay of what had happened a minute ago; Fàbregas came forward again to snatch, George Wood lost the ball, but he immediately used his defensive instincts and superhuman stamina to intercept it again.

"I really don't understand! When did Wood become the core of the Forest team?" a disgruntled fan complained in the stands. Perhaps they thought that if Albertini had the ball, the team would have already struck the opponent's penalty area, and it would not have been necessary for them to engage in a technical entanglement in the midfield.

Even Kerlake could see that Albertini was deliberately giving George Wood chances to take the ball. He turned to look at Twain, and Twain looked back at him and shrugged, indicating that this was not his idea.

In fact, Twain knew very well that Albertini doing this had something to do with him asking Albertini to teach Wood.

What did Albertini have in mind?

Twain put his chin on his hand and looked at the running figure of Albertini.

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Albertini believed there was no better way to teach a man like Wood than to push him into an unavoidable situation. He passed the ball to Wood again and again, forcing Wood to think about how to pass the ball forward instead of just across and back.

When Wood received the ball again, he saw Fàbregas dashing over, so he acted on his conditioned reflexes and passed the ball back.

Albertini waved to him and yelled, "Forward!"

Wood was stumped for a moment. Then he obediently ran forward and brushed past Fàbregas, who had rushed up. At the same, Albertini passed the ball ahead of him. A two-versus-one pass!

The Arsenal players did not think that George Wood would be able to dribble the ball and plug in the attack. Even Fàbregas did not react. He turned sideways and looked at Wood, still awkwardly dribbling the ball, and forgot to defend in turn.

There was not a player wearing the yellow Arsenal away jersey within five meters of Wood. What should he do now?

Albertini ran up from behind, waving at Wood. "Over here!"

Wood listened and passed the ball to him. Albertini shouted again, "Forward!"

Wood continued to move forward, and the Arsenal players reacted. The Forest team was planning on utilizing the coordination of the two men in the center to force a breakthrough!

How can we let you get away with that?

Cygan rushed up to block Wood's running route, and Touré was in the wing to protect Cygan's back whenever necessary. At this time, the two Arsenal center backs put all their focus on George Wood, who had suddenly stepped forward, while neglecting the others.

Albertini made a feint and suddenly shot a direct pass!

All of a sudden, Viduka was no longer in an offside position; what was more, he had received the ball. He was going to single-handedly make the shot!

The City Ground burst into deafening cheers. This was an amazing opportunity. The same thought emerged in everyone's mind simultaneously: if we lead by two points, we will definitely win!

Lehmann attacked, and Viduka received the ball and turned. There was no time to determine the goalkeeper's position, so he just swung his foot and made his shot.

A striker's instinct let him choose the angle of the shot, hoping to bypass Lehmann. But when the tall German landed from his jump, his toes still grazed against the football, the ball bounced and brushed against the goal post and rolled out past the end line.

“The ball didn’t go in! This was the best chance for the Forest team in the second half so far; even better than Henry’s chance. It’s a pity that Viduka didn’t make it.” Taylor shook his head and sighed, “Lehmann saved the team and rescued Wenger.”

What Taylor had said was right. When he saw that the opponent directly struck the heart of his team from the middle, Wenger could not sit still. He suddenly got up from his seat and marched towards the field. The team’s performance had not improved, and the Forest team’s oppressive defense had completely restrained Arsenal’s tactics.

He glanced sideways at Twain, who was also standing on the sidelines. The other man was focused on the game and did not notice him.

Wenger went back again, and said to his assistant manager, Pat Rice, “Get Ljungberg and Reyes to go warm up.”

His long-term partner, Rice, could hear that Le Professeur’s voice was not as mild as usual.

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Viduka’s shot had only been a corner ball in the end, but it still electrified Twain. He felt like his heart was about to pop out of his mouth.

He rushed to the sideline. When he discovered that the ball had not entered the goal, he scratched his head with some embarrassment.

But he did not lose heart, because he saw a scene full of hope.

Albertini was leading George Wood to run forward, and taught him step by step how to pass the ball and position himself; Wood did well, too.

He rarely emphasized offense in the center. The Forest team was a team that placed importance on offense through the wings. However, if Wood could develop quickly, the center could also become an important trigger point.

Viduka had wasted Albertini’s incredible pass. It was almost impossible to get another opportunity like that in the game because a high-caliber opponent like Arsenal was very adept at self- adjustment.

But Albertini did not grumble about Viduka. Instead, he stepped forward to pat the Australian on the shoulder and ruffled his short hair. Without a word, he ran to the spot for the corner ball. He was also the Forest team’s player in the first position for the place kick.

While the team was using a place kick to attack, Twain’s task for Wood was to be at the back to defend. Hierro and Upson both ran up, and Wood turned and ran back. Standing in his position and looking at the crowded penalty area, he was still relishing his recent drive.

Twain asked him to learn the Italian’s playing style and how to handle the ball. So he watched Albertini very closely during the game. He remembered the scene of Albertini letting him press on, but not passing the ball to him. Instead, he had passed the ball to Viduka. Honestly, he had not even anticipated it. He had not seem Viduka’s position while he was pressing on. Furthermore, he was even facing Viduka; Albertini’s back was to him. How had he known that Viduka was inside the penalty area?

And there was also the long pass in the first half. It was so accurate! He had never kicked a pass that was more than fifteen meters long, but the team captain's pass was estimated to be fifty meters! He seemed to know in advance that area had no opponents, and knew in advance that Ashley Young would run up, and then he had timed his pass perfectly. It was amazing!

Wood almost never admired anyone, and would not say good things about others. However, at this time, he sincerely admired his team captain and mentor who did not speak much English.

Just as he had snapped out of his thoughts, the Forest team's corner ball was kicked.

Lehmann did not feel reassured by the center back, Cygan. He stood in between the two men and struck out Albertini's corner. Fàbregas beautifully dropped the ball outside the penalty area. George Wood was still in the Forest team's midfield area. Now no one could threaten him, and he could finally handle the ball comfortably.

Henry was starting to make a move!

He scanned this point from the corner of his eye, immediately shot a direct pass and sent the football accurately to the foot of the team captain.

"Arsenal counterattacks! Their speed is incredible!"

The Forest players ran back as if their lives depended on it, but for a veteran like Hierro, the mind was willing, but the body was powerless.

"The Forest team's singlehanded shot boosted the players' morale, and almost everyone rushed up for the corner ball; maybe they thought that they were close to scoring a goal... but now, the Forest team's large-scale pressure made the Arsenal players feel like they're closer to the goal!"

"Now, except for the goalkeeper, Darren Ward, the only Forest players in the backfield are the left back, Leighton Baines, and George Wood! Arsenal's counterattack is swift. Except for Henry, Pennant and Pirès have quickly followed up, three against two! An excellent opportunity for Arsenal... not to be missed!"

As Taylor was shouting excitedly, Twain was not excited at all. He cursed, "Damn it!"

He suddenly remembered one of Henry's goals. It was Arsenal against Tottenham Hotspur. Tottenham Hotspur's throw-in ball was headed by one of the Arsenal players; then Henry received the ball in the midfield, and began a long-range raid. Through the change of speed and rhythm, he continuously flashed past the interception of Matthew Etherington, Stephen Carr, Ledley King and other Tottenham Hotspur players, and finally shot the ball into the Tottenham Hotspur's goal, which helped Arsenal win with a score of 3:0.

That had happened in November 2002. Was he going to replicate it in the City Ground in 2004?

Ribéry chased Henry at full speed and dived behind the opponent to shovel him, at the risk of getting a red card.

It was as if Henry had eyes on the back of his head. He accelerated the ball forward, then jumped just in time to escape Ribéry's dive, and continued to move forward!

Everyone in the stands, whether they were Forest fans or Arsenal fans, all stood up from their seats.

Would this be another magnificent goal for the Arsenal fans to relish? Or were the forest fans about to be humiliated?

“Henry broke through Ribéry! Now, the only man in his way is George Wood!”

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George Wood looked up at Henry, who was driving the ball towards him, and did not show any confusion or panic. There was no time for him to do such a thing. Henry was charging like the wind.

Do I commit a foul? Or should I...

Henry would not give Wood time to make a choice. He suddenly slowed down and let Wood think that he was about to do a feint to bypass him. Wood was fooled, and lowered his center of gravity.

Henry was delighted to see this. He was the most frustrated person in this game. The Arsenal midfield was completely restrained by the destructive play of the Forest team, and was unable to support him effectively. And when he had finally gotten the ball after much difficulty, he was surrounded by the Forest players and it was hard to break through. Now it would all be okay; as long as he bypassed this kid in front of him, it would be wide open ahead!

Wood had just dropped his center of gravity when he saw Henry suddenly poke the ball outwards and then speed up! He overtook him from the side!

“And he has broken through!”

He had forced a breakthrough!

Wood’s reaction was also quick. The cheers of the Arsenal fans had just begun to ring out when he turned around and chased Henry.

He did not give up; he did not know how to give up. All he knew was that Twain had told him to keep the defensive line safe, not to let his opponents break through right in front of him, and he had to do it. This is my job. If I can’t do this, how am I supposed to get paid?

With this in mind, Wood pounced towards Henry.

“Oh, no! He didn’t shake him off! The distance between George Wood and Henry isn’t widening!” Andy Gray exclaimed. Even he did not think that George Wood’s speed was on par with Henry’s, who was widely recognized as a speedy striker.

“Get past him!!” The Arsenal fans leaned forward and shouted in the stands.

“Stop him!” The Forest fans roared, waving their fists.

Henry was a little surprised to find himself entangled again. He knew it was that Number 13, whom he had not expected to be so tenacious. He decided to switch gears again, and stopped suddenly. He pushed the ball slightly leftward with the outside of his left foot; Wood missed his aim and overshot. Henry started again and was going to catch up with the football, thinking that he should have completely shaken off this troublesome shadow now.

No!

After Wood found that he had missed his target, he came to a sudden stop as well, and then turned around, hurled himself across, and dived towards the ball at the fastest speed he could muster.

He might lack experience in his technique compared to Henry, but in terms of physical fitness, he would not lose out to anyone.

The football was rolling in front of Henry; as long as he could get over to it, he could do it with a single shot....

Suddenly, a foot cut in front of his eyes, and the football was swept by that foot and flew out!

Damn it!

Who's this?!

When Henry jumped up to avoid the leg, he saw that the man lying on the ground was Number 13!

How—can—this—be—possible?! Where did he come from? I clearly shook him off! He couldn't possibly have show up again!

The seasoned Henry stared wide-eyed at George Wood, and watched him get up from the ground and stagger along to kick the football in front of him out of the sideline, despite the fact that there was no other Arsenal player apart from him. He could take control of the ball and seize the opportunity to give Arsenal a chance to fight back.

“What a hero! George Wood!!”

Gray used the tone reserved for cheering after a goal to shout Wood's name.

When Henry first had begun to speed up his dribbling, bypass Ribéry, and charge across the center circle, who would have had the slightest confidence that Wood could stop the King of Arsenal from moving forward?

When Henry was switching gears between fast and slow to break through him, who would believe that this kid could still turn around and stick to him?

When Henry used the sudden stop to make Wood overshoot, how many people had already thought that Henry had succeeded?

The kid had done it. Even though nobody knew how, he had surprised everyone. He successfully defended against a world-class striker in a one-on-one defense of the rapid dribbler, Henry.

The moment when they saw him turn around to intercept the ball from an impossible position, forcing Henry to jump up, was even more exciting than watching a goal being scored!

The fans felt the same way. The chants of “Wood! Wood!” over the City Ground were louder than the ones that had come after Eastwood's goal.

Albertini rushed back and hugged Wood. He then slapped him on the back and shouted repeatedly, “Well done! Well done!”

He almost gave up when he was still running forward at that moment, and many of his teammates probably had the same thought. But George Wood's performance spurred them, and they sped up their slowing pace. They gritted their teeth and ran back, panting, to their defensive positions.

Met with Albertini's praise, George Wood did not have a happy expression on his face, but his heart was a little excited.

This feels terrific!

Chapter 219: Forgone Conclusion Part 1

Playing football was like fighting a war; it was a fight between the teams' morale. In his face-off with Henry, George Wood's successful defense greatly boosted the Forest players' morale; it told them that they were not inferior to Arsenal. Even the opponent's captain, their strongest forward, was unable to get an edge over Wood. In the face of the Forest team, the rest of Arsenal would be the same!

Soon after, Arsenal adjusted. In the 67th minute, Wenger replaced Pennant, who was not performing well, with Ljungberg. Even though the young man was Nottinghamian, he received the most jeers from the spectators when he was fielded. He was a player nurtured under Notts County, Forest's rival.

Next, Wenger replaced Bergkamp, who had been completely clamped down by Wood and Albertini, with Reyes. As Reyes was entering the field, Wenger pulled him aside and told him to relay one thing to Fàbregas: "Keep your cool."

George Wood performed brilliantly, not just in his successful face-off against Henry, but in his close-marking defense with Fàbregas; it rebuffed his advancement countless times. Against such an unreasonable defender, the Spanish lad really had no better ideas about what to do.

Still, Wenger insisted that Fàbregas stay on the field. On one hand, he had no better option to replace the Spaniard; on the other, he felt that the experience would be good training for Fàbregas. If Cesc wanted to become a player like Vieira, this match was necessary for him. Only after experiencing setbacks would he be able to take a step forward; otherwise, this could be as far as he went.

He needed to learn to cool down and use his brain, not just his body, to play football. That could be very helpful to him. After all, Fàbregas's physical capability was far from Wood's, and a competition of physical abilities between players would continue to occur in all sorts of matches. If Fàbregas always failed to play up to his usual standards just because he was faced with a fierce defender, he could not amount to much.

The appearance of Ljungberg and Reyes on the field increased the offensive abilities of Arsenal, improving their initially weakened wings. Wenger's players were gradually taking back control, but time was running out for them.

"The match is already into its 75th minute and the score remains 1:0. Home team Nottingham Forest is leading against Arsenal. Against Forest, who is aggressively pressuring them in defense, Arsenal's players are lacking options. They've made too many mistakes. If the situation continues, it's only a matter of time before Forest wins their first three points in this league's season."

Only a matter of time...

That must be what the players from Forest were thinking in their hearts. Though it was not impossible, whether in theory or reality, for a newly promoted team to defeat the defending champions, the notion of defeating defending champions, who had not yet lost in 42 matches, still stirred the players up.

The veterans with experience who had already gone through all sorts of similar situations knew exactly how to handle the match. But there were too few veterans on Forest team; they could not stop the young players, who were thinking in their hearts, "We're about to defeat Arsenal! We'll soon become an amazing dark horse that overturned the defending champions! Their streak of 42 no-losses is going to end at our feet!"

It really was a seductive future.

Just like Medusa's alluring face, it tempted the young of Forest team to forget that they were still in the midst of an intense match; to forget what sort of dangerous creature they were facing.

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The match time passed into its 80th minute. Forest maintained its lead and the enthusiastic cheers from the spectators' stand rose and fell with no sign of stopping.

As the players began losing their focus, Forest's oppressive-style defense started to show cracks, with more and more of them appearing quickly. This resulted in Arsenal's players beginning to feel that they could keep possession of the ball for a longer time. In fact, some of Forest's players no longer tried to press for the ball in the first place. Instead, they looked and waited to see if they should go for the ball or simply retreat and box them out.

Tang En sensed the danger in the air. He took up a position at the sidelines and hollered while gesturing with his hands agitatedly, "Press for the ball! Press for the ball! PRESS FOR THE BALL! Don't give them a chance to get it! Dammit!"

What Tang En wanted from the forwards was the use of counter-pressing as an oppressive play, but both Viduka and Eastwood were obviously not as eager as they were at the beginning of the match. George Wood was still running without a pause, but would he be able to cover the entire field? Albertini too was still running, but he was 32; he had the will but lacked the strength.

Ribéry, Ashley Young, Baines, and Chimbonda... all of them looked like they could no longer run. The match had them constantly running forward and retreating, retreating and then rushing ahead. It had had too much of a toll on their stamina. Even so, Tang En still stood on the sidelines asking them to continue pressing for the ball; to not let Arsenal have even a sliver of an opportunity. How did Forest do so well in the initial 80 minutes? It was because they had sacrificed their stamina to prevent Arsenal from falling into a match pace that they were familiar with.

Now that their stamina was beginning to wear out, Arsenal was slowly making their way back into a rhythm.

Fàbregas had also cooled down. He had no more intentions of toughing it out against George Wood. If Wood came up to press against him, he would immediately pass the ball out. After that, through his

positional awareness, he would try to create opportunities for himself to receive the ball again. He was not going to get into any more useless entanglements with Wood in the midfield.

What makes a strong team strong? Their experience and their patience.

Despite the chaos in the first half of the match and Henry's failed solo runs on two separate attempts, Arsenal's disadvantageous situation in the field did not cause their players to fall into a panic. Wenger's substitutions stabilized Arsenal's conditions and their players waited patiently for an opportunity.

At the 83rd minute, after a one-two combination from Pirès and Henry, the ball was not passed into the crowded penalty area but went outside instead. Gilberto Silva came up suddenly from behind and took a long shot, but it went high. This, however, was not the crux of the matter. The crucial matter at hand was that before the Brazilian took his shot, there were approximately three seconds that passed without a single Forest player trying to interrupt him.

Tang En was extremely displeased with the situation and decided to make a substitution.

84 minutes into the match, Aaron Lennon was fielded to substitute Ashley Young. This was an attempt to increase the threat from the wings and to use Lennon, who was younger, to suppress Ashley Cole.

Before Lennon even made any contact with the ball after being fielded, Arsenal launched another attack. Fàbregas and Ljungberg attempted a combo attack. After attracting George Wood's attention, Fàbregas passed the ball to the Swede and quickly continued cutting forward. From this, it looked as if he was about to do a one-two combination with a wall pass. George Wood continued pressing Fàbregas, attempting to block him from receiving a pass.

As expected, Ljungberg passed the ball back to Fàbregas. Under George Wood's close-marking defense, Fàbregas had to switch directions quickly to protect the ball. With Arsenal's offense already in the penalty area, Fàbregas did not believe Wood would dare to risk a foul. Gilberto, on seeing that Fàbregas had control over the ball, rapidly pressed forward.

The earlier long shot from the Brazilian had alarmed Forest. This caused Center back Upson to immediately press Gilberto when he rushed forward again. Fàbregas faked a side pass. Upson who thought he was going to pass quickly, surged forward another step. At that moment, the young Spaniard champion suddenly used his back heel to pass behind him instead. Separated from George Wood, the ball penetrated the defensive line and was received by Henry, who had gotten past them unnoticed.

No one expected that. With Fàbregas completely disabled by George Wood's defense throughout the match, the rest of Forest's players paid little heed to the area where they were engaged. Instead, all their attention was caught by Gilberto, who came up from the back. With Wood in his way and his back against the direction of the attack, how did he know there would be a break? And how did he even anticipate Henry's appearance there?

Regardless of how Fàbregas had managed it, his pass created an opportunity for Henry to get his third solo run in this match. If he could not score a goal off of such a ball, he would not be Thierry Henry!

The Frenchman took his shot at the goal. Grazing the turf, the ball flew rapidly and slid off Darren Ward's hand, bouncing off the inner pole on the far end of the goalpost and bounced in!

“Magnificent! Arsenal scores an equalizer in the last moment!! Thierry Henry! Arsenal’s king! This could be a record-making goal!!!”

Three-quarters of City Ground’s spectators fell into silence while the away team fans gathered at the viewing platform loosed a cacophony of cheers. The players from Arsenal were also celebrating wildly as members of Nottingham Forest stood shock still in their positions, not believing what they saw.

They had persisted for 85 minutes but had still failed to guard it in the end. Tang En, who was on the sidelines when the ball was lost, threw a punch at the glass board next to the manager’s seat. He could not put his rage and disappointment into words. He only knew that he was angry. Very angry. How could Upson have rushed forward so rashly?

Chapter 220: Forgone Conclusion Part 2

Albertini had been running towards Gilberto. Even if the ball were to be passed to the Brazilian, Albertini would be able to prevent him from scoring. But Upson had left his post and abandoned his position. The pass from Fàbregas landed exactly where Upson should have been.

Even with Hierro’s vast experience, he had no way of dealing with a mistake like that. Furthermore, it was already the 85th minute and he could barely run.

After venting his frustration and unhappiness, Tang En called up Peter Crouch, who had just finished his warm-up from the substitute’s bench. Tang En refused to end the match on a draw. He did not care a bit about that record; he just could not accept that the three points that they had almost had in their hands had slipped away and become only one!

We were dominating the entire match. But just because of a low-level mistake, we ruined such a good situation. I cannot accept this!

While Arsenal’s players finished their celebrations and were about to kick off the match, Forest changed out a player on their sidelines – Tang En substituted Hierro, who was already dog-tired, for Crouch.

The tactics of the Forest team morphed into something simpler and cruder in an instant. There were no more complicated maneuvers, like cutting outside for support or feinting attacks from the wings while attacking from the middle. All backfield players took only one action when they received the ball – to pass it forward to Viduka and Crouch. If they had the opportunity for a direct attack, they would take it. If not, they would return it to Eastwood or Ribéry to use in long shots and high balls.

There was not much technique to speak of, but at this point, Tang En could not care less about that.

Forest, which had begun their battle anew, pressed towards Arsenal’s penalty area in a frenzy. Tang En’s substitution at the eleventh hour stirred up all of Forest; everyone knew that their boss was enraged. He could not accept this result.

And so, Arsenal, who had dominated the English Premier League for over a season, were pushed back into their penalty area even after their goal!

“This is a frenzied attack coming from Forest! Albertini makes a long shot! But Ashley Cole takes a mighty kick to get it out of the attacking area... Such desperation! Ribéry gets a break, and he’s in! He

fell over! The main referee refuses to award a penalty kick! City Ground's spectator's stands are ringing with heart-stopping jeers! That is despite the fact that Ribéry looked as if he was purposely trying to get a penalty kick off the judge from the footage..."

As his partner commentated enthusiastically, Martin Taylor shook his head. "If only Forest had started playing this way 20 minutes earlier, the score would have been 2:1 with them in the lead by now. It's too bad..."

He cast his gaze towards the sidelines. Both Wenger and Tang En were standing on the sidelines, anxiously watching the match's progress while looking at the time. While it felt all too long for the prior, it seemed much too short for the latter.

Although Forest's final wave of indiscriminate attacks had caused the defending champions some embarrassment, Arsenal managed to get the result they wanted: a 1:1 Draw. They managed 43 matches in a row without defeat, and a new record was birthed.

When the final whistle of the match was blown by the main referee, thunderous applause filled City Ground. Of course, the fans were not congratulating Arsenal for their new record, but Nottingham Forest, whose players performed remarkably despite the draw at the last minute.

Martin Taylor said it well. "Although Nottingham Forest did not manage to end the legend of Arsenal's undefeated streak, the young team showed the future to a countless number of Forest's fans. If this scene was the deciding factor of the result, then maybe they had not failed completely. But in all fairness, this match would have ended 3:1 with the home team victorious. It was too bad. Their youth gave them their courage, but it also made them pay for it. Regardless, I still like this Forest team. Looking at the back of a team of young ones running brings me hope."

No matter how they were at each other's throat during the match, the tension from Tang En's body seeped away as soon as the final whistle was blown. He looked at the scoreboard and then at Arsenal's players, who were running and cheering. He could only shake his head helplessly. The rage he had felt when they had lost the ball had all but disappeared.

The match was over, wasn't it?

He turned to see Wenger walking towards him with a smile and an outstretched arm.

"Whatever the result, this has been a great match," Wenger said, an echo of what Arsenal's youth team manager had once said to Tang En. That was during his first encounter with Wenger.

Tang En shook his head. "Except for the result, this has been a great match."

Wenger laughed. He was in a good mood.

Although Tang En himself was not in the best of moods, he still congratulated Wenger. "Congratulations on the new record."

This time, it was Wenger who shook his head. "Oh, no. A new record is only made for others to break. I hope we'll meet again on the field. I'll see you later at the press conference. I have to leave now."

Wenger gave Tang En a pat on his shoulder and left to join the celebratory crowd.

The despondent Forest players had their heads bowed as they walked past Tang En. He looked at Wenger and then shouted at the players, "Why do all of you look like you have lost a ball? Listen to the cheers from the spectators' stand! Who do you think they're for? They're not for Arsenal, they're for us! Everyone did well! Raise your heads!"

Tang En shouted so loudly, even Wenger could hear him clearly with his back turned. He only smiled and, with a shake of his head, walked to his own players with open arms.

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At the press conference after the match, the media put all their focus on Wenger, who had led Arsenal to the making of the new record. They heaped all kinds of praise onto him, forgetting that Arsenal's field performance was almost abysmal.

Tang En sat at the side with crossed arms, staring coldly at the media who were all such opportunists.

In this regard, Wenger was much more considerate than the media and took the initiative to direct the topic to Forest instead. He repeatedly complimented the excellent performance and tactics shown by Forest and their players; how it all took him by surprise, and the outstanding management by Tony Twain. At the end, the Frenchman also gallantly paid tribute to Brian Clough.

The press conference ended with the managers in an embrace and shaking each other's hands. Everything appeared joyous and wonderful; on Forest's end, they did not lose the match and even got a draw off the mighty Arsenal; for Arsenal themselves, a new record was successfully etched into history.

However, in the hearts of the two, it was not as harmonious as it appeared to be. While this draw schooled both Tang En and Forest team, it also made Wenger realize a formidable opponent he would face in the future.