

Champions 251

Chapter 251: Wood's Struggle Part 2

“Think about it from the moment you stood in front of my home and told me, ‘I think you should sign on the best player in all of England’ to now. You have become Forest team’s main player and played in all the matches of the season. What changes have occurred in you? You’ve become stronger – countless times – stronger than the silly lad you were then. It’s been two years. Time passes quickly, but your improvement is even quicker. If you can’t accept losing like this to Riquelme, being completely at his mercy, don’t just sit here and stew. You need to work even harder. If you want to attain victory over your opponents, you need to work hundreds of times harder, even more than usual! Do you understand me?”

Wood nodded and said, “I understand.”

Tang En laughed. “That’s right. The match is already lost, so just let it go. Don’t keep looking so upset, as if someone died. It’ll drag everyone else into a lousy mood. If you can’t accept it, then vent your grievances on the training ground. Demi is a greatly experienced Defensive Midfielder. You can learn many things from him that will last you throughout your career.”

“I know. He... is really great.” Wood, who was a little arrogant, would rarely have admiration for someone else; but he would willingly complement the Italian man whose face was constantly adorned with a smile.

Hearing Wood speak two sentences in a breath, Tang En knew his mood had gotten better. He rubbed his hands together and indicated with two fingers, saying, “Just before I came to speak to you, I had two options in mind for the next match. A, to let you rest for a round—tell the media that your body is exhausted, and rotation is needed—or B, to let you continue as a starting player without making any comment to the media.”

“My body is fine.” Wood said, making the decision for Tang En.

“I thought so, George.” Tang En nodded. “Even if I said you needed to rest because of an injury or exhaustion, I wouldn’t believe it myself. So, there’s only option B left. But, there isn’t much time left for you. You won’t have the chance to work harder, a hundred times harder, on the training field to improve yourself. Three days after, we will be heading to Old Trafford to go against Manchester United. Are you ready to deal with the people who will question you first thing in the morning and shut them up?”

The two looked at each other, and Wood took his time to respond. After a while, he asked, “Is Manchester United strong?”

This was not Wood acting stupid. He did not have such humor yet.

Before being promoted to the English Premier League, George Wood had never been concerned about the situation there. Furthermore, he was the same way before playing soccer, and Manchester had started on the low in the current season. It was normal for Wood not to know about the might of Red Devils.

Tang En started laughing. "Don't you ever read the news or watch television? Villarreal CF had only one Riquelme, but Manchester United has several players like him."

On hearing that, Wood's eyes brightened.

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Tang En was right on the money. They awoke from their sleep to much commentary and remarks about Forest's match that day. Most of it had to do with Wood, and of those, 99 percent were criticising his performance.

Comments about his youth and lack of experience could not even be considered criticisms any longer. England's media had always been harsh and critical with no heed to "being discreet". Some of the commentaries even slammed George Wood for being as stupid as a pig before the Argentine.

"Riquelme's pace was already slow enough, but George Wood's reactions were even slower."

"... Yes. The rest period for Spaniards has always been late. Notice that the kick-off for this match is not 12 midnight; El Madrigal is not selling supper to satisfy hungry fans. But George Wood is playing sleepily; it's as if it's already late at night!"

"Look at him being played by the Argentine. I couldn't bear to watch and turned off the television..."

"Why not use Brynjar Gunnarsson who is much more experienced? George Wood's player resume is a great big blank slate. It's so clean, it's unbelievable. Against a player like Riquelme in an away match, why choose to let such a child defend? The two of them are just not on the same level!"

"We all know that Tony Twain's strategy is to let George Wood protect the space behind Albertini. This allows Albertini to organize the offense. With Nottingham Forest playing as the away team in El Madrigal, playing defense and counterattacking needed precisely the Italian's expertise in long passing. But George Wood could not even complete his mission. In the end, Albertini had to give up on the offense instead to assist him with the defense..."

"... to tell the truth, this is just Tony Twain's biased trust of George Wood. It's incomprehensible. Let's review the appearances of Nottingham Forest's players in this season. Other than player number one, goalkeeper Darren Ward, who else appeared in all matches, league or otherwise? It was George Wood, without even a minute of absence. The problem, then, is obvious. How can it be solved?"

It was practically a one-sided "George Wood Criticism Fest." If the criticized player was weak-hearted, he would probably have already drowned in the heartless media.

Coincidentally, they had met with a professional player who cared little about the news or anything that happened in the football scene.

The match with Villarreal CF ended on the night of 25th November. There were only two days left for the Forest team before they challenged Manchester United on their home ground. It would be too silly for them to spend this precious time waging a spit battle with the media.

The gates of the Wilford Training Ground continued to be surrounded by reporters, but they had no hope of interviewing any player from Forest. Tony Twain had also rejected all interviews and instructed the club to cancel the routine press conference on the 26th. Just when the English Media had begun

stirring up the topic, Forest team shut their doors to them. No one knew what was happening on the team.

Even after arriving in Manchester from Nottingham by car, at the front door of the hotel the team was staying at, Tang En did not say a word to the flock of media around him. The disappointed media could only wait until the pre-match press conference on the day before the match after the teams had settled in. Both managers would be attending on that day. They refused to believe they would fail at prying Tony's mouth open by then.

The media, with no real news to report, could only write with their imaginations, fulfilling the desire of the public to sneak peeks. Their articles all began with, "according to a certain Forest player who had disclosed," or "based on what certain high-ranking personnel of Forest has said..."

Whatever it was about, such as chaos happening in the locker room, Gunnarsson accusing George Wood of playing like he was sleepwalking and appealing for an opportunity to be a starter, the club's higher-ups being displeased with Tony for his stubbornness in player usage, and George Wood explosive clash with Albertini during training involving punching and kicking.

These reports were as bizarre as the readers wanted them to be, fulfilling their obscene desires.

So, when Ferguson saw his assistant at Old Trafford completely engrossed in reading the newspaper with Tony's photograph on it, he said disdainfully, "What are you doing, reading that? Are you collecting the latest information on our opponents? Don't believe a word of what the media says. In fact, you can't even believe some of the things you say to them."

Queiroz grinned as he looked up at the old Scot, saying, "No, Boss. I'm reading a novel."

Chapter 252: Heavy Responsibility Part 1

The readers in England who liked to peep at other people's tabloid papers soon realized that the reports were all nonsense; the same newspapers had similarly related news except today's and yesterday's versions of the story were completely different.

The reporters also felt that the writing was too exaggerated. It was better to wait for the press conference the day before the game. They were so looking forward to the conference that while the Forest team was in the Old Trafford stadium doing their drills to adapt to the field, a group of excited reporters was already waiting in the conference room.

When the team had finished their training and walked back to the locker room to take a shower, Twain went straight from the field to the conference room.

At the end of the corridor, Twain nearly collided head-on with someone who had walked around of the corner. Seeing the other person's full head of white hair, Twain reflexively took the other person's arm to assist him, assuming that he was a clumsy old man. He was surprised to find out that the man whom he was supporting was actually the manager of Manchester United, Alex Ferguson!

The encounter was incredibly awkward.

These were the circumstances in which these two men, whose teams were about to play against each other, met for the first time.

Ferguson looked down and patted the dust from the walls off of his body, and was surprised to see Twain when he looked up.

The two men looked at each other for a while, and Ferguson smiled. "You must be regretting taking a step back just now, Mr. Twain."

"Now that you mention it, I do regret it a little, Sir Ferguson." Twain replied.

"People say that Tony Twain is a manager with a powerful and glib tongue... well, I finally believe it." Ferguson's expression remained unchanged. What was initially seen as a friendly smile now felt like a gibe.

Ferguson was great at playing mind games with other managers before games. It was his forte. Kevin Keegan, who had been doing well at Newcastle United, was thrown off by a similar blow to his mentality, and thus readily surrendered the championship title of the league. The poor man had even ranted on a television show, "I would love it if we beat Manchester United; love it!" The former European Footballer of the Year clearly did not stand a chance when it came to engaging in a psychological battle with Ferguson.

The long-term trading of blows between Ferguson and the Frenchman, Arsène Wenger, had become a hallmark of the Premier League, and now he wanted to use his move against Twain.

But he seemed to have picked the wrong opponent.

Twain smiled. "I'm the opposite of you, Sir Ferguson. I never doubt your eloquence."

The two men stood in the corridor, both feeling that they had met their match.

Upon hearing Twain's reply, Ferguson nodded. "Would you mind going out at the same time with me?" He pointed in a direction where some noise was coming from.

This was not at all a signal that Ferguson wanted to shake hands or make peace with Twain. But Twain would have been cowardly to refuse, so he nodded.

When the managers appeared together at the press conference, they immediately attracted the attention of the media. The small room was filled with camera flashes and for a few seconds, the press room became brilliant white.

Ferguson was accustomed to scenes like that. He walked to his own seat with his head held high. But Twain was still somewhat uncomfortable. He squinted and crossed the room with a frown on his face and his head lowered.

After the managers were seated, the press release official announced that they could start.

Just as the announcement was made, all the reporters held up their hands, and half of the raised arms were directed at the Forest team for the recent events.

When Twain heard the first reporter's question, he knew.

“Hello, Mr. Twain. I’m from The Sun. I’d like to ask about the recent media coverage. Is it true?”

Twain did not directly answer the reporter. Instead, he faced the other reporters with looks of anticipation and said, “Who else is going to ask about the internal dynamics of the Forest team these past few days? Why don’t you all ask together, and I’ll give a unified answer.”

When the reporters heard that, they thought that there was going to be a show. So they all stood and threw out all the questions they had long kept in their minds.

Twain sat in front of the microphone and listened carefully to every question. Sometimes he would even nod lightly, and seemed to be thinking about how to organize his answer.

When everyone was finished with their questions, he raised his head and asked, “Anyone else? If there’s no one else, it’s my turn to speak. You’ve all raised a lot of questions here; that’s good, reporters always like to ask questions. Now I also have a question, and I hope you can answer me... I summed up all the questions you have asked just now, and found an area that I can’t understand: why is it that some of the questions that puzzle you are about the news that you wrote yourselves? Well, who can tell me? The Sun asked me whether the news was true, and I wanted to ask them, if it wasn’t true, why did you publish it in your newspaper?! Are you scamming for writing fees and wasting the publication’s layout space and paper?”

Twain really wanted to curse and swear at the group of reporters. Fortunately, he refrained from doing so. He would not have been able to escape a penalty from the Football Association if it had come to that. Although he did not use foul language, his tone was harsh; and unless the reporters had problems with their intelligence, they could make out the hidden anger in his remarks.

“Today’s press conference is about tomorrow’s competition, not about the press conference after the last UEFA Europa League game. Everyone, please be clear about that. While you’re so morbidly interested in the Forest team’s locker room situation, have you ever considered the owner here?” Twain looked at Ferguson sitting next to him.

In the eyes of the reporters, Twain did this out of respect for his senior, Sir Alex Ferguson. Such a stance was reasonable in an away match.

Then Twain said, “So let’s focus on tomorrow’s game. Manchester United is a great team with many outstanding players. Sir Alex Ferguson is also a remarkable manager. Just look at his many accomplishments.”

His words corresponded with everyone’s expectations. Almost every manager who came to Old Trafford would say the same thing to the reporters, with the exception of Wenger and Mourinho, of course.

However, after that, Twain had a sudden change of tack. “But Nottingham Forest is not here to worship the mighty Manchester United. We are here to compete. The game has only one purpose, and that victory.”

Once he had made his stance clear, Twain stopped. “I’ve said everything I wanted to say.”

Ferguson glanced at Twain and then continued his train of thought. “That’s right; a football game is about winning. I agree with Mr. Twain on this point.”

Twain looked at Ferguson and smiled, and the old Scottish man smiled at him too.

Their competition continued covertly.

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A football fanatic might get dizzy when seeing these names appearing on the field as one's opponents. Such a fan would know what these players' strengths were, and what they represented.

Ruud van Nistelrooy, the Netherlands national team's main striker, whose nickname was "The King of Goal Area," and whose perceptive awareness in shooting into the goal was world class.

Wayne Rooney, England's golden boy, and the biggest discovery of the England national team in the UEFA European Championship held in Portugal. He had quickly established himself in the squad after his transfer to Manchester United at a sky-high price.

Cristiano Ronaldo, another golden boy; he was the golden player of the Portuguese national team. Known as the successor to Luís Figo, his fancy dribbling and formidable speed were his key features.

Paul Scholes, the Manchester United veteran, was cautious and conscientious. With outstanding strength, his powerful long shots were his signature skill.

Ryan Giggs, the lightning-fast Welshman and national team captain of Wales, was one of the world's top three left wingers.

Gary Neville was once a key figure in Manchester United's brilliant '92 generation. He was England and Manchester United's number one choice for a right back. He had a robust way of playing and his interceptions were fierce. At the same, he was excellent at long range crosses, and had a successful partnership with Beckham in the right flank with plenty of assists for each other.

Rio Ferdinand, who had been the most expensive defender in the world when he had moved from Leeds United to Manchester United in 2002, was still the most expensive defender in England. Before the drug test uproar, he was the English national team's main center back. And before the sudden rise of John Terry, the center back combination of him and Sol Campbell was considered the best in the football world.

And of course, Roy Keane should not be forgotten; the Irishman was the captain of Manchester United, the spiritual leader of the Red Devils after Eric Cantona, and an indispensably important figure. As long as he was present, Manchester United would always be full of fighting spirit and unafraid of any opponents. His enemies would always hate him and wish he was dead, and the Manchester United fans would always support him and love him to death.

Chapter 253: Heavy Responsibility Part 2

Because Keane was transferred from Nottingham Forest to Manchester United, he accepted media interviews before this game and talked about the game.

"I was never surprised by the arrival of this day because I've always known Nottingham Forest would come back." The Irishman was still very fond of the team who brought him into the top English leagues, "Even today I still thank Mr. Clough; I'll never forget everything that he had taught me in his lifetime..."

When Keane had played for the Forest team, the Forest manager at that time, Brian Clough, had doted on him a lot due to his amazing talent. His requirements would be met as much as possible, and every time he wanted to take time off Clough would agree without question. After Keane's outstanding performance in the first season, Clough even gave him a brand-new Ford car. At that time, Clough was Keane's most respected and admired person. However, due to what had happened later, the outside world had always thought that their friendship had faded away.

At a time when many football clubs wanted to buy Keane, Keane had been at a crucial moment of renewing his contract with the Forest team. Clough naturally assumed that Keane was using these transfer rumors to put pressure on the Forest club and get the salary that he had hoped for. Consequently, Clough publicly chided him as a "greedy kid" in the newspapers. Nonetheless, it was not these trivial matters that led them to part ways. It was when, after a terrible performance in a game, Clough slapped Keane in front of everyone in the locker room doorway.

Only now, after Brian Clough had passed away, did Keane then once again publicly reveal his respect for the old man. But was it too late?

Without going too far off the topic, in short, Keane expressed his respect for Clough in the interview, and then mentioned the current Forest team. "I don't agree that this game will be relatively easy for Manchester United. No game is easy for Manchester United. Not to mention, the Forest team is still ranked above us."

Keane had become a Manchester United man through and through. It might be sad for the older fans to hear him mentioned. But the younger Forest supporters did not feel that way because they had another Roy Keane: George Wood, who had quickly become the new darling of City Ground by virtue of his performance.

After he lost to Villarreal CF, only the media outside Nottingham criticized him. Nottingham's local media and fans remained confident in Wood.

"George Wood is the best!" said a banner on the away stand at Old Trafford, a counter-response from the Nottingham Forest fans to the harsh media.

At the present, the players from both teams, who had just warmed up on the field, had returned to their respective locker rooms to make final preparations for the game that was about to be kicked-off.

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"In fact, our recent achievements are not bad." Ferguson stood among the players and paced back and forth. "We've won a few crucial games. But we are Manchester United, and we are not going to be satisfied with being in the top ten like ordinary teams. We're aware that we've also unaccountably lost a few games."

Manchester United's locker room was silent, with everyone focused on listening to their boss's speech. In this room, there was only one boss; that was Alex Ferguson. Those who dared to oppose him, and those who dared to show disrespect to him, would be kicked out uncompromisingly. Jaap Stam and David Beckham were examples.

“I’ll say it again; Nottingham Forest is a strong team. If anyone else thinks that they’re just insignificant clowns, you can raise your hands now, and I’ll replace you with someone else. That Portuguese guy, Mourinho, underestimated that team, and Chelsea lost as a result. Souness was tricked by Tony Twain’s modesty, so Newcastle United lost. Do you want to be an idiot who gets ridiculed by your opponents after losing a game?”

The players shook their heads.

“That’s right. We all like to mock idiots, but I don’t think anyone likes to be the object of ridicule. We’re at our home ground for this game, so failure is absolutely unacceptable!”

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The visiting team used the locker room on the other side.

“Compared to their powerful offense, Manchester United’s weakness is in its defense.” Twain stood in front of the tactical board and analyzed their opponents for the players. “The weakest link in their team is the goalkeeper. Their sixth place ranking after fourteen rounds in the league this season has a lot to do with the instability of their goalkeeper. Tim Howard, did well in his first year, but his problems are all being exposed this season.

Truthfully, the Forest team’s problem was their goalkeeper as well. The Forest team still had very few games in which they did not concede a ball. Darren Ward’s ability did not qualify him to be the main goalkeeper in the Premier League. But Twain had neglected the issue during the summer transfer and now he regretted it.

“Rio Ferdinand is an outstanding center back, but he has never had a stable partner. Wes Brown, John O’Shea, the Frenchman, Mikaël Silvestre; none of them were qualified to be center backs. We can make use of that in this game; bypass Rio Ferdinand, and break through his partner. If Ferdinand comes to help fill the gap, seize hold of the gap he’s left and pass the ball!

Twain marked Rio Ferdinand’s position with an arrow directly inserted into Manchester United’s goal.

“Keane is a problem. So during this game... Demetrio, you need to move up in your position to hinder him; don’t give him too much time to help Ferdinand.

Albertini nodded. “Okay, boss.”

“When Manchester United attacks, you have to return to defend; I’ll let George help you.”

Speaking of which, Twain glanced at George Wood. Even though the Forest team was now within his control and the atmosphere on the team was fairly good, he still could not penetrate other people’s thoughts. The media’s unscrupulous speculation, which did not care about what the Forest players thought, might really convince the rest of the team that he overly favored George Wood. Like Brynjar Gunnarsson, who was repeatedly mentioned in those nonsense reports as a direct competitor with Wood for the same position. With the media adding fuel to the fire, who knew what Gunnarsson really thought?

As young players, Piqué and Bendtner had to be substitutes. Why was George Wood able to be in the starting lineup for every game?

Could anyone guarantee that such thoughts would not emerge in the young players' minds?

Such problems initially did not exist, or were not serious enough to produce any disastrous effects. However, due to the fact that the Forest team had lost to Villarreal, it was hyped up by the media to such an extent that it attracted Twain's attention.

This was another reason why Twain was harsh and insolent towards the media.

I can understand that you need to create fake stories and sensational news to attract the public's interest for the sake of sales volume and your livelihoods. After all, I'm not a moralist. I have absolutely no interest in correcting British society by calling for the return of media ethics and asking the public to reflect on the lack of media integrity. But if you target my team, don't blame me for not giving you face.

The Chinese had a good saying: If others do not offend me, I will not offend others; if other people offend me, I will retaliate!

"George." Wood stood up when he heard his name called.

"You have a heavy responsibility for today's game. In addition to defending Manchester United's number 8, Scholes, you have to pay attention to covering Demetrio. If Keane comes up to attack, you will be required to defend against him at times. Also... if our defense in our flanks is tight, you'll have to help too." Even Twain, not to mention the other players on the Forest team, thought that this demand was a little harsh for Wood.

How could one man deal with all of those situations at the same time?

Some people turned to look at George Wood in the corner, but they did not see Wood frown with hesitation. Instead, they saw him nod and reply simply, "Okay."

Doesn't this kid know how to complain? This is not a job that one man can do! Is he right in the head? How can he just agree to whatever the manager says? He should have his own thoughts once in a while!

Twain had not expected Wood to answer so straightforwardly. His original intention was to just mention it; but in reality, all four midfielders would still be involved in the defense. Ribéry and Ashley Young needed to retreat to assist the full backs defend.

Unexpectedly, Wood had agreed, so he grinned. "Are you sure you're capable of accomplishing all of that, George?"

With a calm face, Wood said, "If not, you can bring me off the field."

Was he confident? Or was he dim-witted?

Twain sighed. "Alright. Ribéry and Young, you two can be more aggressive on the flanks and create pressure for the Manchester United's defense to prevent their two wingers from stepping forward and participating in offense."

The two midfielders understood why Twain wanted them to do that. They both looked at Wood. Victory was most important, but now they had one more thing to look forward to. They all want to see if George Wood could accomplish all the tasks that the boss gave him, or have to be brought off earlier.

And they could tell that there were more than a couple of people with the same idea. It was clear from everyone's expression as they looked at Wood.

Chapter 254: Going Head-On Part 1

While the players from both teams were waiting in the players' corridors in Old Trafford to enter the field, cheers drifted in from the spectators' stands outside. The atmosphere at the dream stadium of English football washed over Forest's players.

The younger players on Forest seemed somewhat agitated about the match. It was not because of an inane reason like being able to play at their dream stadium; instead, they were influenced by their manager to have a desire to battle the strong.

All youths have the same way of thinking; If we defeat mighty opponents, it can only mean that we are mightier than them!

Even if Manchester United was currently two ranks lower than Forest, their fame was already far beyond that of Nottingham Forest. In terms of total honors received, they were pulling ahead of Forest by leaps and bounds. People would easily believe the truth of Manchester United as a strong team, but not of Nottingham Forest. There was no way out of it; it was a habitual way of thinking. Now that Nottingham Forest was ranked fifth and was said to be a dark horse by some—a considerably courteous nickname—there were still others that believed that Forest's sustained rank was a product of mere luck. Those who had said this had obviously neglected to consider how Tang En's team had forced Arsenal to a draw, how they had defeated Chelsea and Newcastle, and how they, after the first round of the League match, had maintained ten consecutive rounds with no defeats. They only saw Forest team's continued lack of victory (which was simply a series of draws), and how Forest had lost to Black Rovers and Liverpool.

Keane, as the captain of Manchester United, stood right at the front of the team with the captain's armband.

Numerous people had mentioned to Wood that Manchester's Roy Keane was what he would be in the future; his goal. It was only in today's match that Wood got an opportunity to observe his "future self" at close range.

The Irish man would occasionally turn back to look at his team. Wood could make out the stern expression he had on his face. His gaze swept across the people behind him and finally landed on George Wood, who had been staring at him the whole time.

Wood found Keane looking back at him but made no attempt to move his gaze away. After a brief look at Wood, Keane turned back to the front. No one had ever told him that the youth in front of him, the one that seemed rather rude, would one day become like him. He was not interested in George Wood. Maybe the lad was a new player who had more curiosity than usual; someone who would accidentally go into a daze upon seeing a football star.

George Wood stared at the back of Roy Keane for a while before retrieving his gaze. He stood just behind Darren Ward, the goalkeeper, and was situated extremely close to the Manchester captain. He

suddenly remembered that Keane was their opponent in this match. Did he seem as if he was forwardly expressing some sort of goodwill by looking at Keane like that?

That would not do; it was not George Wood's style. As he shifted his gaze he saw Albertini, who was at the front of the team looking back at him smilingly.

"George." Albertini turned and rounded past Ward, stepping in front of Wood.

"If you have an opportunity during the match, you could try to cut forward. The Boss gave you some heavy duty guarding to do, but it would be meaningless for you to just stay behind while we are engaging in offense. It is not enough for an outstanding defensive midfielder to only defend. Do you understand what I mean?"

Wood shook his head and said, "He told me I only needed to focus on defense..."

Albertini smiled and said, "If you wish to achieve more than Roy Keane, you cannot afford to only pay attention to defending. Your defense is already fantastic; you're the best defensive player I have seen!" Although his words were slightly exaggerated, it worked as an effective encouragement.

"What should I do, Demi?"

"Work a little more on offense. The defensive midfielders can no longer just stick to defending. At times, you need to rush into the opponent's penalty area and do a powerful long shot!" Albertini said with a smack of his fist.

"But I'm terrible at shooting..."

"If you don't try at all, how do you know if your shooting is bad? When was the last time you took the initiative in a match to shoot?"

Wood thought for a bit and shook his head. "I don't remember..."

Albertini spread his hands out and laughed. "See. Start with this match. I will create opportunities for you. During our offense, use your own judgment to decide if the situation is suitable for you to move forward. Don't just stick to doing only whatever the boss says. You have to exercise your brain too." He pointed towards his own head. "Football. To kick well, it's not enough to only use the body, you also need to use your brain."

Wood nodded. "I got it, Demi."

Albertini patted his shoulders and turned to walk back.

Just as the main referee was speaking to Keane about something, he saw Albertini walking towards them and called him over. At that point, Keane twisted to face the Manchester players behind him, shouting, "Get ready, guys! It's time for us to move out!"

Although Albertini was facing the referee, he raised his right arm high at the same time. The Forest players at the back who saw their captain's motion fell into silence. The chattering and laughter among them ceased, and everyone's expression turned serious.

The match was about to begin.

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Old Trafford was England's largest football stadium. Although Wembley had a greater seating capacity, they also had running tracks and were therefore not considered a professional football stadium.

This stadium had 96 years of history behind it. After numerous expansions and renovation work, it could seat 67 thousand people. The red Old Trafford was once called the "The Theater of Dreams" by a famous football star from Manchester, Bobby Charlton. This moniker was incredibly apt; whether from its scale or past glories, the Old Trafford could certainly live up to it.

Today, 28th November 2004, Nottingham Forest team opened the curtains for the play in "The Theatre of Dreams." In the face of Roy Keane's defense, Albertini appeared calm and dignified. Compared to the other children on Forest, he was an experienced old general. Here, the only one who could be discussed at the same level as those football stars from Manchester was him, Demetrio Albertini. The old Spanish Midfielder, Hierro, was not included in the list of starters.

Keane clearly knew the kind of player he was facing and was in no hurry to rush forward. Instead, he boxed out the position.

Albertini looked up and surveyed the situation around him. In the left wing, Ribéry was closely marked by Gary Neville. On the right, although there was no one around Ashley Young, Ronaldo was prowling nearby. It seemed like a purposeful trap.

Ahead...

Needless to say, both Eastwood and Viduka were being closely marked. Even if the ball could pass through and be received by them, there was no way for them to turn around; they would only end up being surrounded by opponents.

Keane's positioning was excellent, much better than Wood's. It prevented Albertini from suddenly going for a break and passing. In the end, he could only choose to pass the ball back to George Wood.

Although the Wood of today was still quite distant from the skill level of Roy Keane, he was far from a new player who would be at a loss after receiving the ball.

Seeing Albertini's situation, he turned and passed the ball back to the right back, Chimbonda. With the full back in possession of the ball, Cristiano Ronaldo was not very active in pressing to get the ball. He took a step forward and attempted a steal but was easily passed from the side. Ashley Young saw Chimbonda move forward and hurriedly shifted towards the middle to make space for him.

Compared to Gary Neville on the right, Manchester's Left Back had always been a problem. Despite having tried a number of players for the position, Ferguson had yet to find someone he was satisfied with.

This Summer, he had bought the Argentine Gabriel Ivan Heinze from Paris Saint-Germain for a price of seven million. Based on his performance over the last few months, he had a good hold over the main position of the Left Back on Manchester United. Against Heinze, Chimbonda tried to break through but was intercepted. However, the Argentine failed to keep control of the ball; the ball he had managed to intercept was picked up by the alert Ashley Young from Cristiano Ronaldo's side.

Right after, Ashley Young took advantage of Heinze moving out of his position and broke in from the wings.

“Nottingham Forest is on the attack; their momentum is strong!”

As Heinze was already passed, the Center Backs of Manchester United needed to eke out a player to fill in. The responsibility fell to Wes Brown. But this way, Manchester United’s penalty area became empty. Roy Keane had little choice but to patch up the space left behind by Brown. Defense was an engineered system; once a problem appeared somewhere, it would create a ripple effect down the chain.

Viduka, Eastwood, and Ribéry all cut forward into Manchester United’s penalty area. Albertini alone stopped halfway outside it. At this point, Ashley Young passed to the center. He did not pass it towards the penalty area but instead to Albertini, who was just outside it. While Roy Keane was retreating to fill in the gap, he was also taking notice of Albertini’s movements. He was sure of the Italian’s abilities. Age was not a factor that would affect Albertini. They were both 32; they were far from being old.

“S**t!” With a curse, Keane turned and dashed outwards towards Albertini.

Albertini got into position; it was a pose for a direct shot! Albertini’s banana shots were famous, only a fool would let him have a clear shot without any disruption!

Keane leaped forward in hopes of using his body to block Albertini’s shot at the goal.

“The Italian is about to shoot!”

Ferguson stood from his seat with fisted hands, ready to curse.

But the curses he had set to unleash were quickly swallowed down; Albertini did not shoot. He positioned himself in that manner, but watched as the ball whizzed right past him.

When the ball landed at the foot of another Forest member, everyone was stunned. It was not just Manchester United players; even Forest’s players themselves did not expect it. The one who had appeared at the landing point and received the ball was George Wood!

Chapter 255: Going Head-On Part 2

All the players of Manchester United had their eye on the three Forest players within the penalty area. Even Albertini only had Roy Keane to guard him. Upon stopping the ball, there was no one within five or six meters of Wood; he could see no red jerseys from Manchester United.

No one had thought that Wood would appear at a spot so close to the penalty area – prior to this, he had almost never participated in the offense.

Even the commentator was taken by surprise and shouted, “George Wood! When did he get here?!”

There was nobody to disrupt him where he stood, and he could take his time to adjust his distance to the ball satisfactorily before gracefully swinging his leg to powerfully volley the ball...

Unlike usual, Albertini did not yell from the side, “Shoot!” Instead, he quietly fisted his hands as if trying to conserve some energy for Wood.

Wood looked down at ball beneath his foot. His mind swam with Albertini's words. "If you don't try, how do you know you can't do it?"

Do I still remember my goal shooting training while I was on the Youth Team? What did the coach say? Straighten my arch?

He lifted his right foot with a flourish.

"George Woooooo- Wow..." The commentator had originally intended on dragging out his voice to cheer for Wood's goal, but the actual shot made it hard for him to get excited.

Wood kicked with all his power and the ball shot towards... the second level of the Northward spectators' stands.

Before Wood had taken his shot, Manchester's goalkeeper, the American Tim Howard, was rather nervous. In the end, he saw the ball flying out while he jumped for show. His hands were not even raised – the ball was ten meters away from the post!

"Defensive Midfielder Wood takes a powerful kick to eliminate the threat, kicking the ball towards the spectators' stands." The commentator could only describe the attempted shot this way – in a way much closer to the situation in reality.

Wood was disappointed in his own performance and looked towards the stands behind Manchester's goal in a daze. Then, Albertini came to give him a pat on his shoulder. "Not bad."

Wood did not understand why the captain would say that and looked at him questioningly.

"It's a start. A good start," the amicable Italian said with a grin.

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Wood's terrible shot received thanks from Manchester United's fans by way of their loud jeers. They were truly disagreeable people.

Outside the field, Kerslake noticed Wood's decision not to pass the ball but instead take a rare shot at the goal. He turned towards Tang En. Tang En read the confusion and unspoken question in his eyes all at once, shrugging. "It wasn't me."

What a familiar scene... Tang En recalled. In the match with Arsenal, Albertini had also encouraged Wood to take the initiative to cut forward and take part in the offense.

Seeing Albertini hurriedly run up to Wood to comfort him after he missed the shot, Tang En broke into a wide smile. This old general was indeed the right choice!

Kerslake asked from his side, "Should we remind him, Tony?"

Tang En shook his head. "No, why should we? Don't you think this is good?"

"But we lost such a fantastic opportunity..."

"In exchange for growth, I'm absolutely willing to waste ten more chances. David, you also came from the Youth Training Camp. Do you still remember what the youth players needed most?"

Kerslake scratched his head. "Um... We're in the English Premier League now. It's a little different from the matches with the Youth Team..."

"Of course. This is the English Premier League. But we have many youths so full of potential in our team. Why did they choose to play with us? It's because we can provide them with opportunities, many more than if they had gone anywhere else. As far as such valuable experimentation goes, not only should we hold back our criticisms and restrictions about it, we must encourage them. This aspect, I think, is no different from the Youth Team." As he finished speaking, Tang En rose and walked towards the sidelines, showing a thumbs-up sign to George Wood and Albertini.

After doing so, he walked back and sat down. He continued to say to David Kerslake, "Of course, about George's difficulty with aiming... I think there's a need for us to consider including more shooting drills during his daily training..."

Kerslake laughed. "Tony, I'm suddenly remembering the first time you brought George over to the Youth Team Training Grounds. What is it that makes you look so well upon him; to value him so greatly?"

Naturally, Tang En could not reveal that he was initially just patronizing the silly boy when he had first brought him to the Youth Training Grounds.

"Maybe it's because I saw something in him that I don't see in many others: foolishness."

"Foolishness?" Kerslake said, seemingly perplexed.

"Yes... because he was foolish, he knew that he needed to put in much greater effort in order to stand on the same field as the others. Because of his foolishness, he never dared to give himself any slack. Have you ever seen him loaf around during training?"

Kerslake shook his head. "I've only ever seen him giving himself additional training."

"Exactly. It is because he knows how lacking he is compared with the others. If he doesn't work hard, it will be impossible for him to even passably become a professional footballer. Frankly, I didn't initially see any potential in him to play soccer. With his physique, he could possibly have had a future as a track and field athlete. But later, his performance completely won me over and I decided to give him a chance." Here, Tang En pointed his chin towards the field.

Manchester United was on their offense. George Wood stood at the back of captain Albertini, alertly marking the opposing players. Compared with the George Wood who had first appeared on the sidelines of Forest's training area, loudly demanding to train with the First Team, he was completely and utterly transformed into a person who was beyond merely looking like a professional footballer.

He was now an authentic professional football player. Compared with other players who had more fame or earned more money than him, he was much purer.

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"George Wood of Nottingham Forest has wasted their best chance to score since the beginning of the match. They may quickly begin to regret their reckless handling of things. After all, they're facing Manchester United! Any wasted opportunity will be punished!"

As the commentator was prattling on endlessly, the attack from Manchester United got blocked by George Wood and Albertini's co-defense.

Paul Scholes tried to dribble past Albertini in an attempt to draw Wood out before passing the ball.

But before he could even completely pass Albertini, George Wood had already dashed forward with a ferocious but legal slide tackle from the front. Worried about getting injured, Scholes jumped up and allowed Wood to slide under his legs and tackle the ball away from him.

But Manchester United's attack had not yet ended.

Roy Keane followed behind Scholes and rushed forward.

Wood also got to his feet to pursue the ball.

The Manchester captain took possession of the ball and took a fury-filled shot!

"Roy--"

The commentator's howling had just taken off when the ball viciously rebounded back.

A muffled thump could be heard throughout the stadium. Keane's powerful shot had smacked right into the face of George Wood, who had surged forward to block the goal.

The shot was so strong, the ball rebounded up high and flew directly out of the end lines from the middle of the penalty area. Meanwhile, Wood fell backward and landed heavily like a sandbag on the ground.

Chapter 256: Roy Keane Part 1

Lying on the ground, Wood stared blankly at the sky over Old Trafford, his mind blank. He did not know what had happened, but he could feel something warm flowing from his nose to his lips, and it tasted salty.

I'm supposed to playing, right? What's going on?

The sky over his head was getting smaller, and there were many people in the periphery. They were looking down at him.

He could recognize a few people; there was Demetrio, Roy Keane...

There was an uproar. Lots of sounds reverberated in his ears, and he could not hear what the people were saying.

While Wood was still lying on the ground and wondering what was going on, Keane was explaining to the referee that it was purely an accident. Who could know that his volley towards the goal would be blocked by George Wood, using only his face?

Wood was surrounded by many people. Off field, Twain did not know what had happened. He only saw George fall suddenly backwards. Keane's shot was too fast and too close, and his eyes could not keep

up. But soon he saw the referee looking down to assess the situation, so he got up and waved to the Forest substitutes' bench to signal for the team doctor.

"What's going on?" He turned to look at the big screen above the stands at Old Trafford, where the scene was being replayed.

Keane's volley had smashed Wood in the nose!

Twain winced. He could not help but feel the pain just by watching it.

"Keane's shot hit Wood in the face. It looks like Wood is hurt pretty bad. He's still lying on the ground and can't get up..." The commentator had not finished his sentence when he saw Wood get up unsteadily from the ground.

Wood was finally able to hear what the people around him were saying. He froze when he realized that the referee wanted to send him off the field.

Send me off? A red card? Did I get sent off? How can that be? I haven't fouled yet... No, it wasn't me who fouled just now... No, who just committed a foul?

He felt dizzy and could not think clearly. He shook his head hard.

The referee assumed that his action meant "no." He spoke sternly to Wood. "Lad, you have to leave the field now!"

"Why?" Wood responded in confusion.

Next to him, Albertini explained hurriedly. "You're injured. You have to leave the field so you can receive medical attention."

"But I feel... there's nothing wrong with me." Wood was not lying. Other than his head feeling a bit heavy, he was fine. Even the feeling of dizziness was rapidly diminishing.

The Forest team doctor, Fleming, finally rushed into the crowd. He brushed aside the players who were watching hullabaloo, ran to Wood, and exclaimed, "Oh my God!"

Next to them, the referee shook his head. "Even if your body really is strong enough for there to be no problem at all, you still need to go back to the locker room and change your jersey." He pointed at Wood's chest. "The rules don't allow players to continue the game wearing a blood-stained jersey."

Upon hearing what the referee said, Wood looked down at his chest. His yellow Forest team away jersey had a huge stain of fresh blood.

What's going on?

He reached up to touch his lips and found that they were wet. Then he looked at his hands and saw that his fingers were red. Obviously, it was blood.

"Bloody hell!" Next to him, Fleming shook his head and swore. He had finally snapped out of his shock at the sight of Wood glancing down at his chest indifferently and touching his lips. "George! Look at you. You looked like someone threw ketchup on your face! What the hell are you still doing here?" He stepped forward and grabbed Wood's arm. "Come with me!"

"I'm fine, I can still..." Wood struggled.

"Do you really think this red stuff is ketchup? It's blood!" Fleming raised his voice to admonish the kid. At the same time, he also sighed internally. Does this kid not know what pain feels like? He was hit directly in the face by this shot, but he didn't even contort his face in pain.

After the referee had repeated the rules to Wood, he went to the sidelines accompanied by the team doctor, Fleming, to receive treatment to staunch the bleeding.

Roy Keane stood outside the crowd and watched Wood walking off the field at Fleming's request. He had intended to apologize to the kid and explain himself. But now, Wood did not even seem to need it.

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When Twain saw the replay on the big screen, he knew that the Forest team would be down a player for a while. As a result, taking advantage of the fact that the situation on the field was still chaotic and the game had not resumed yet, he called Albertini over to the sideline, and told him to remind the entire team to focus on defense. In the absence of Wood, the team had to prioritize defense. They could not let Manchester United take advantage of the fact that the Forest team was a player short.

Albertini nodded and ran back.

After he had covered that important matter, Twain was in the right mindset to think about Wood, who was undergoing treatment from Fleming on the other side of the field. I hope it's not a broken nose.

If Wood was truly hurt and could not play for the Forest team... Twain had never considered who would be his substitute.

Gunnarsson could do it. However, in Twain's view, he had completely failed to keep up with the pace of the English Premier League. He was definitely good enough to play a main role in the English Football League Championship, which was the former Football League First Division. However, in the Premier League, he could only really be a substitute for the Forest team; after all, their goal was not simply to maintain their rank.

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Wood was on the sidelines, receiving treatment to stop the bleeding. Fleming had to first check whether his nose was broken or not, because that kind of impact was likely to lead to a fracture of the bridge of his nose. It would not be a simple matter of stuffing two balls of tissue paper up his nose.

He touched it and found that it was normal. He was relieved, and gave Wood the tissue paper.

"Stuff them in."

Wood listened and stuffed them in, but immediately took them back out.

"I can't breathe," Wood said to the perplexed Fleming.

"Breathe through your mouth..."

Wood shook his head, and then raised his head up high. He looked up at the sky and did not say anything. He then sucked in through his nose with all his strength; occasionally his throat would rattle, and something would be gulped down.

Fleming did not know what Wood was doing; soon the lad lowered his head again and said, "I'm ok."

"You're ok? It stopped?" Fleming was a little surprised. "What did you just swallow?"

"Blood," Wood answered truthfully.

Fleming grimaced. "You swallowed the blood from your nose?"

Wood nodded.

"Oh my god..." Fleming had no idea what the expression on his face looked like.

Wood ignored him and turned back to the field, but was stopped by Fleming. "Where are you going? You can't go back now without the permission of the referee. Have you forgotten? You've got to back to the locker room and change your jersey."

Wood looked down at the red bloodstains on his jersey, which did not look good at all.

So he ran past Manchester United's substitutes' bench, into the players' corridor, and back into the locker room to change his jersey.

After he watched Wood disappear into the corridor, Fleming walked towards the Forest team's technical area. Twain asked him, "What's the situation?"

Fleming grinned. "You saw him run. Do you still think there's a problem?"

"Erm..." Twain also felt he asked a rather silly question.

"What the hell did he eat growing up?" Fleming said to himself, frowning.

"What's the matter?"

"I gave him tissue paper to stuff his nose to stop the bleeding, and he complained that he couldn't breathe. Then he tilted his head back and swallowed all the blood from his nose..." Fleming grimaced.

When he heard what Fleming had said, Twain smiled. "Just get used to it, Gary."

When Wood had returned to the sidelines from the locker room, Twain stopped him. "How does it feel, George?"

Wood did not understand what he was asking. "How does what feel?"

"The feeling of shooting into the goal."

"I... can't say." Wood shook his head.

"Well... Slow down, don't rush. Don't forget to defend, either." Twain patted Wood on the shoulder and said nothing else.

The fourth official came over to check Wood's nose and make sure he had no bloodstains on his face, his neck, or his new jersey. Only then was he allowed to stand on the sidelines and wait for the referee's call.

The referee saw that Wood had already changed into his new jersey. He waved to him as he ran towards the Forest team's midfield, and Wood ran up.

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Because George Wood had gone back to the locker room to change his clothes, the Forest team had had about five minutes during which they had one player less than Manchester United.

That had been a great opportunity for Manchester United to break out of the deadlock from earlier, because the Forest team was not short a striker, but a vital defensive midfielder. However, Twain's earlier adjustment had made the Forest team completely abandon their offense for those five minutes. They did not give up of their own accord, but rather because of Manchester United's fierce attack. Even if they had wanted to counterattack, they were essentially powerless.

Compared to Ryan Giggs on Manchester's left flank, Cristiano Ronaldo on the right flank was much more active. Franck Ribéry, who had consistently performed outstandingly for the last two months, was so quashed by Ronaldo that he could not attack at all.

Fortunately, Albertini was experienced, and quickly organized the Forest team's midfield defense. Apart from one time whereby Piqué did not shoot far to lift an attack and Rooney missed the goal after seizing the opportunity of not being marked by anyone, there were no other thrilling moments.

As a result, when Wood was back on the field, the score on the big screen scoreboard had not changed. It was still 0:0.

Nottingham Forest was far more tenacious than Manchester United had anticipated.

Chapter 257: Roy Keane Part 2

Albertini saw Wood run to the field again and returned to his side. He turned and smiled at him.

"How's it going, George? You okay?"

Wood nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Great, then we can make an attack now!"

When he heard Albertini say that, Wood looked at the time on the big screen. The game had been going for twenty minutes, and the score was still 0:0. The Forest team looked a little battered, but this had happened at Old Trafford to, hadn't it?

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Manchester United continued to attack. After Scholes had taken possession of the ball, he gave it to Ryan Giggs on the flank. The Welshman was old now. If he had received the ball two years ago, he would

have caused his opponent's entire right flank to go into high tension. His breakthroughs had always been successful and intimidating for his opponents.

Now, his breakthroughs had obviously lessened. Compared to Cristiano Ronaldo on the right flank, he looked like a hero past his prime. But that did not mean that he should be taken lightly.

Chimbonda, the young man from France, had somewhat underrated Ryan Giggs. He had heard of the Welshman's fame for his prowess, but that was a long time ago, and no one could escape the stress of time.

That was what Chimbonda thought when he rushed up the first time. He wanted to seize the opportunity from his rival not yet adjusting his ball to intercept and counterattack. Except he underestimated the strength of the veteran. Giggs saw Chimbonda rush up, and nimbly used the tip of his toes to poke the football in between Chimbonda's legs!

Afterwards, he immediately jumped to dodge his rival's tackle.

"Oh, oh, oh, oh!" The commentator was excited. After twenty minutes of play, Ryan Giggs had not had a breakthrough. It had been disappointing not to see the Welshman's lightning-fast breakthroughs. "Ryan Giggs! Look at the gap between Chimbonda's legs! Big enough to drive a car through! What was he thinking? He's too rash!"

When Albertini saw Giggs break past Chimbonda, he hurriedly dropped his position and rushed to the flank because he was closer. Instead of letting the center back rush over, it was better for him to go. So, he ran towards Ryan Giggs and signaled to Matthew Upson to return to his position.

Ruud van Nistelrooy and Wayne Rooney were not just there for show.

Seeing Giggs break through Chimbonda, Ferguson stood up from his seat and clenched his fists, waiting for the right moment to cheer.

The Nottingham Forest defensive line had been torn apart. To make up for the crack, the Forest team would need to draw their players from other areas; in that way, more cracks would appear one after another. This was the moment he had been waiting for!

In contrast to Ferguson's expectations, Twain also stood up from his seat and leaned out of the Old Trafford technical area, clutching both his fists; but it was not to celebrate anything. His lips were pursed as if he was ready to swear at any time.

Giggs saw Albertini coming at him, and he knew clearly the situation in the penalty area without even looking.

It was crowded in front of the Forest team's goal. Ruud van Nistelrooy attracted all of Gerard Piqué's defensive attention, Wayne Rooney was marked by Matthew Upson, and Leighton Baines had come back to the penalty area to help defend. Cristiano Ronaldo had also gotten in on the action. It would be ineffective to kick the ball to the front of the goal, which would most likely be headed out anyway.

Albertini was getting closer to him. Ryan Giggs feinted a direct cross movement, which tricked Albertini into doing a slide tackle. The Welshman simply twisted and flashed past Albertini, and then crossed the ball to the front of the penalty area.

And Scholes was there!

Albertini went up to fill the position; George Wood naturally would cover Albertini's position.

Paul Scholes ran towards the ball, looking like he was going to shoot directly. Wood wanted to leap and block the line of shooting while he was swinging his feet to kick. But there was a sudden flash in his mind of the scene of Ryan Giggs whizzing past Demetrio...

Therefore, he suddenly halted; at the same time, ahead of him, Scholes missed the ball!

The football flew past Wood and fell to Roy Keane!

Not again!

Wood turned at the same time and rushed towards him again. He could not think about whether the ball would hit his face or not. He was the defensive midfielder and the first barrier to the goal. He absolutely must not retreat.

"Roy Keane received the ball... and George Wood rushed up!"

When the football had not yet zoomed in, Keane had already swung up his leg on the spot with the intention of volleying the ball with his leg straight away. But he suddenly saw Wood turn around, which surprised him a little. Why wasn't this kid tricked by Paul?

The next second, he did not have time to think about that problem. Keane changed his mind about a direct volley at the last moment because he was not certain if he would hit the Wood with the ball again.

Kid, even if Scholes couldn't trick you, you won't have any other way now!

Wood saw Keane swing his leg, so he vaulted himself again; everything was exactly the same as when he was hit in the face. However, this time he was tricked.

Roy Keane was poised, and George Wood leaped out. It was a vivid scene. But then Keane kicked the ball close to the ground, and Wood flew past him.

Immediately after, without waiting for Wood to get up, the Manchester United captain changed to his other foot to shoot!

This time it was not a feint, it was real!

"Roy Keane!!"

It was as if the football was shot from a cannon. It instantly passed through the crowd in the penalty area, and when Wood turned back, he could only see van Nistelrooy lowering his head to let the ball pass.

Because his view was blocked by the crowd in the penalty area, the goalkeeper, Darren Ward, did know how to be on guard against Keane's long shot. Although he leapt up, he was too far away from the ball.

"What a GOOOOOOAL!! What a great GOOOOOOAL!!!"

The football forcefully lifted the net up, and the stands in The Theatre of Dreams erupted into thunderous applause and cheers. The leading man, Roy Keane, clenched his fist, brandished it into the sky, and hollered skywards!

And under his feet lay George Wood, who was beaten by his single shot.

Chapter 258: The First Half Part 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It was said that it was Wood himself who went to find Twain. Before that, he had never touched a football before..." Ever since Wood's spectacular performance during his first match, the media had paid

an increased amount of attention to them, even gradually digging up much of his past. “What a genius...”

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

Various big clubs were placing more emphasis on defenders, especially defensive midfielders. Chelsea was one of them. Makelele was already almost thirty, but they still bought him from Real Madrid. Why would they do that? Because they lacked a player who could stop offenses and who intercepted offenses frantically.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nolan discovered that after he had been consecutively intercepted by Wood, he had actually somewhat lost the confidence to face off against him. Now, whenever Nolan saw Wood, he would have the urge to quickly pass the ball out. This time was no exception. Campo had passed the ball to Nolan, before running forward in hopes of attracting the attention of the Nottingham Forest defenders. But to his surprise, the moment Nolan saw Wood lunging at him murderously, he panicked and passed the ball back immediately. However, Ivan Campo was no longer there.

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

"A passing mistake! This is a fatal mistake!"

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

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

Cheering sounds exploded from the stands.

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

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

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

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

The sound of the whistle rang out.

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

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

This was really an unexpected bonus!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That future?

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

Sounds great!

The whistle blew.

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

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

“GOOOOOOOAL!!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Poor Tony...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“See you in fifteen minutes time.”

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

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

“Hey, Martin! I think Motson’s right; Twain is indeed a very interesting fellow. I’ve commentated football matches for many, many years, but I’ve never seen an entire team of players collectively rush to their manager and stack on top of him like that! For Tony Twain to be so popular with the players, he must have cast some magic! Just like Harry Potter!” Andy Gray, who had just taken off his earphones, continued to talk non-stop as though he was in the midst of commentating a match.

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

Chapter 259: The First Half Part 2

In the changing room, the Nottingham Forest players were in a rather good mood at first, since they had managed to equalize the score by the end of the first half. On their way back to the changing room, they were laughing and talking happily. Upon seeing this, Tang En, who was off to the side, scowled at Walker. Walker knew that the players, despite feeling great about themselves, were in for a tongue-lashing.

As expected, once everyone entered the changing room, Tang En’s face turned into a glower as soon as Walker closed the door.

When everyone saw the manager’s face, their idle chatting slowly died down until the room became completely silent. With the manager in such a bad mood, who would dare to keep talking?

“Who still remembers the first thing I told all of you before the match?” Tang En glared at the twelve players in the changing room, but nobody dared to make a sound. Perhaps they had already forgotten, or perhaps they remembered; but they dared not say because they did not know what their manager’s intentions were.

So, Tang En started to call names. “Morgan?”

Morgan hesitated for a split second before answering in an unsure tone, “Well... I think it was about defense, chief.”

“Well... I think it was about defense...” Tang En imitated the tone of his young center back. “Are you doubting your memory?”

“It was defense! Defense! That’s right, it was defense!” Morgan frantically shouted.

Tang En looked at Morgan and grinned, but it managed to make Morgan even more uneasy and frightened. Morgan felt that he had already been made the target for the boss to vent his anger on.

“Very good, Mr. Morgan. You may take a seat now,” Tang En said, waving his hands.

It was only at that moment that Morgan realized that he had stood up from the bench, just like a student who was answering a teacher’s question during class.

Tang En turned around and looked at the rest of the players. After that, he unfolded his hands and once again repeated his words from before the match. “‘Defense, lads, I want you all to know the importance of defense!’ We spent ten minutes talking about how to guard against the opponent’s offenses, and in the end we conceded a goal twelve minutes into the game. Now, I know you guys all want to say that that goal had a certain element of chance involved. But a goal conceded is a goal conceded. I don’t want any excuses for it. Honestly, we played poorly in the first half. Very poorly. We should feel lucky to have tied with Bolton. Ashley Young performed outstandingly, Freddy as well.” Tang En looked at the two players who had contributed significantly to the goal and nodded his head to express his recognition of their efforts. “But this shouldn’t conceal the issue. I admit that I’m also partially responsible for our horrible performance in the first half. My tactics failed and gave the opponent a chance to score. But all of you should also reflect on your performance.”

After that, Tang En walked to the tactics board and drew the actual formation of Bolton and Nottingham Forest during the match. It was derived from what Tang En had observed during the match. Bolton’s was 4312, while Nottingham Forest’s was 4231.

“Rebrov did very well in the midfield, so I want you to continue playing that position.” Tang En drew a circle around the middle of the three midfielders, before drawing another arrow from within the circle, pointing towards the kick-off circle. “But you have to position yourself slightly farther back in the second half. Maintain a sufficient distance away from Wood, but don’t leave his protection range.”

Rebrov nodded his head, showing that he understood.

“And Gunnarsson, very sorry, but you’ll have to rest for the second half. I’m going to let Crouch substitute you. You did pretty well for the first half; you provided effective support behind him. However, there are only eleven people on the field, and we need to go on the offensive in the second half.” Tang En stared at Gunnarsson, trying his best to appear to be as sincere as he could. Being substituted out during half-time was not considered a good thing.

Gunnarsson was slightly unwilling, but he still nodded his head. George Wood’s performance was indeed much better than his, so there was nothing wrong with leaving Wood on the field.

Seeing Gunnarsson nodding, Tang En wiped away the solid circle he drew on the board. Afterwards, he added a symbol beside Eastwood that was meant to symbolize Peter Crouch.

“Crouch, when you’re up on the field, make use of your height and create opportunities for your teammates to score as much as possible. If the opportunity arises, you can try to score yourself. Simply put, you can choose the most appropriate way to deal with the ball according to the situation. Don’t be constrained by my instructions. You got it?”

“Got it, Boss,” Crouch said with a sullen face. This was his first time representing Nottingham Forest in a match. If he played well, his future would be guaranteed. But if he didn’t... He would have to sink yet again into uncertainty. He did not want to return to Aston Villa, as the experience he had had there was like a nightmare. He knew that Nottingham Forest had a loan-to-buy contract with Aston Villa regarding

him, but whether he would be bought over by Nottingham Forest would be entirely dependent upon his performance this season. Now was his best chance to prove his worth to his new manager.

Tang En saw Crouch's expression, and felt that it was too grim. This was not good; it would affect his performance on the field. Tang En smiled and said, "Don't pull that long face, Peter. Do you like to dance?"

Crouch nodded his head fervently, unsure how the manager knew.

Tang En paid no heed to Crouch's curious stare. He winked at Crouch and said, "If you score, just dance on the field! Like this..." He imitated Crouch's robot dance from his memories, which Crouch often did when he scored for the national team. However, Tang En's imitation was not like it at all. Instead of looking like a robot, he ended up looking more like a marionette puppet. As a result, the changing room erupted into a wave of laughter. The heavy atmosphere from Tang En's lecturing had gotten livelier.

"Tony, is that a rusty robot man?" Walker seized the opportunity to poke fun at him.

Tang En scratched his head with embarrassment and said, "Anything will do, as long as you guys stop pushing me to the ground. Look, my button..." Tang En pulled on his collar.

This time, even louder laughter erupted within the changing room, and there were even whistling sounds.

Tang En did not interrupt the players' enjoyment. He smiled and looked at them from the side. After everyone finished laughing, he made a gesture to quiet down the room. "Alright lads, let's continue. McPhail, your performance in the first half wasn't good enough. You should be more active later. Where did your imagination go? Dribble past those defensive players. Don't be afraid to lose possession of the ball. Even if you do, there's still George!"

Tang En pointed at Wood, who was sitting at the corner of the room expressionlessly. A smattering of laughter resounded throughout the changing room.

"Hey, George, you hear that? Everyone thinks highly of you, so keep on playing like that in the second half!" Tang En took that chance to brief Wood on his task for the second half. "Intercept all the balls that try to get past from your side!"

Upon finishing the player arrangements, Tang En began to talk about the overall tactics to be deployed.

"We managed to equalize the score by the end of the first half. If I were Allardyce, I definitely wouldn't let the matter rest. I'd search for opportunities to take back the lead as soon as the second half began. So, all the full backs will have to be on high alert for the first ten minutes of the second half, because Bolton will definitely apply pressure and go on the offense. Our formation will have to be more defensive. We'll need to play counter attack as our strategy. After ten minutes, if Bolton still doesn't score, they will definitely start to try for a stable game, and hope to maintain this score. They will then play to win back on their home grounds next weekend. We can't give them that chance! If they retreat, we'll go on the offense instead! Give them a fatal blow!"

After saying this, Tang En clenched his fists and raised his voice. "Lads, I don't care whether you transferred over last summer, or if you just joined the team this month; I also don't care if you were transferred over to the first team from the youth team, or if you've been on this team all this time. I

don't care which team you were previously on, which manager you played under, whether you've gotten honorable titles or you have nothing to your name... In short, we are now one team, and we trained together. So, I want you all to understand what my football—Tony Twain's football—is like!" Tang En said, pointing to his own chest.

"I'm sure some of you here already know what happened to Nottingham Forest during last season's playoffs, so I can tell all of you: what is Tony Twain's football? It is victory! I hate defeats! Especially those that happen when I'm on the brink of success! I hope that the only thing that you all think about when you're out there playing, is victory! You must tell yourself, today I must win! Not 'what if I lose', or other worthless thoughts like that!"

"Now that we're already in the semi-finals of the EFL Cup, we're only one step short of advancing into the finals! Just one month ago, who would have thought that we would be able to accomplish that? At that time, we were ranked fourth from the bottom. Even Crystal Palace ridiculed us, and they were ranked third from the bottom! That match, we showed Crystal Palace how small they are! Now, we have to show Bolton the same thing! Finish them off on our home grounds! Don't let them have a chance of comeback on their home grounds! It's ours, and nobody can take it away from us!"

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"What kind of person is Tony Twain? How should I say it..." In the resting room designated for announcers, John Motson was currently discussing Twain with the two people opposite him. "I can't define him. It really is impossible to say with any certainty what kind of person he really is. The definitive adjectives used to describe him in the past are completely wrong... It's very complicated. So if you ask me what kind of person he is, I can't answer you. I'm afraid even Twain himself is unable to do so. Hence, in order to understand what kind of person he is, you will have to see for yourself..."

"Hey, John. Why do I feel like you're patronizing us?" Gray said, sounding annoyed.

Motson shrugged. "I can only say what kind of person I feel Tony Twain is. He seems to be very rash, one who speaks his mind. He will use any and all means to achieve his goal, and he is someone that bears grudges easily... But this may not necessarily be your evaluation of him. There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes. The same thing applies to Tony Twain."

Martin Taylor fell into deep thought for a while before opening his mouth. "Andy, I feel like there's a need to repeat what I said to you before the match—exactly what kind of person Twain is, we'll have to see for ourselves."

Motson agreed with Martin. "That's right. You two have to see for yourselves during the match's second half. It will be a good opportunity to do so. According to my experience, Tony Twain's team tends to always start performing after the half time break..."

Chapter 260: A Show of Genius Part 1

The penalty shot in the 31st minute of the first half was a heavy blow to the Forest team. For the rest of the time, Nottingham Forest played somewhat listlessly. They had conceded two goals to their opponents in within thirty minutes, and furthermore, their opponent was Manchester United. How were they supposed to play this game?

Some people thought about their loss to Liverpool in that championship game. Then, it had also been 0:2 in the first half of the game, and the team completely collapsed afterward.

It was the same today, only George Wood was still running; but he alone was too insignificant for Manchester United's mighty midfield.

When the whistle sounded at the end of the first half, the cheers of the Red Devils were ringing throughout Old Trafford as though they could see that a victory was within reach.

Twain did not rush back to the locker room. He just stood on the sidelines, watching his men enter the corridor. All the Forest players who had played bowed their heads when they passed by their manager. They all felt that they played terribly in the first forty-five minutes of today's game.

Opposite them, Ferguson did not rush back to the locker room either. He stood on the sidelines with a smile on his face. Whenever a Manchester United player passed by him, he would pat the player on the shoulder.

The contrast between these two managers, one with an expressionless face and the other with a face full of smiles, was as wide as the difference between the scores on the electronic scoreboard.

When the field was only left with the substitute players from both teams warming up, Twain and Ferguson entered the players' corridor one after the other.

Pushing open the door, Twain thought momentarily that he had walked into an empty room. It was completely silent, as though there was no one around.

Looking at the dejected players, the original speech that Twain had prepared vanished without a trace. It was necessary now to change his strategy.

He cleared his throat to alert everyone of his presence. It attracted a lot of people's attention.

Once he got everyone's attention, Twain lifted his wrist to look at his watch and pretended to be surprised when he said, "Is there something wrong with my watch? Is the game over? David, should we compare the time?"

Kerslake knew what Twain wanted to do, and he shook his head. "There's no need, Tony. It's only just the end of the first half."

"It's the end of the first half? Are you sure?" Twain widened his eyes in response.

"I'm sure." Kerslake nodded in reply.

"Well..." When he heard the answer, Twain looked at the players. "It looks like my watch is normal... and my memory is fine... In that case..."

He dragged out his voice and paused for a moment. "We still have forty-five minutes left, so what are you guys doing? Every one of you looks so glum, I thought that I had entered the wrong room or remembered the wrong time. Is the game over? No? In that case, why are you all looking like that? Or is it because..." He gestured to the door of the locker room and raised his voice. "You think that we won't improve? That we have no chance in the second half, and that this game is over? Just like that? Answer me!"

There were a few sporadic replies among the players, “No, boss...”

“On my team, I will never put up with cowards who give up hope and think that they have lost before the game even ends! If anyone here doesn’t have confidence in himself or his teammates, you can put your hands up now. The time is near for the winter transfer period!”

No one raised their hand.

“What? No one’s raising his hand? So, were you sleeping just now? Okay, let’s put that problem aside for a while...” Twain waved aside the issue. “I don’t want to waste my time talking about this nonsense for the whole fifteen minutes of the half time interval. Yes, we’re not in a good position right now; we’re two goals behind in the game. It seems difficult to bounce back. But these are not reasons to give up the game. We have no reason at all to give up hope of winning.”

When they heard the manager’s tone soften, the players, who had had their heads down and had dared not breathe too loudly for fear of being scolded, slowly raised their heads one by one.

“Franck.” Twain turned to the corner of the locker room to look at Ribéry and said, “You’re a midfielder and even a winger. Remember, you’re just helping Baines to defend. I will not criticize you for giving our opponent a chance to fake-dive for a penalty, but you have to know that you are an attacking player. Defending is not your primary task. How many times have you tangled with Ronaldo near our penalty area? How can we counterattack if we successfully intercept the ball?”

Twain’s tone was not severe, and everything he said made sense. Ribéry repeatedly nodded as he listened. He was too rash on the field; he only thought of how to win in the one-on-one with Ronaldo, and completely forgot the team’s overall tactical needs. In hindsight, his actions lacked consideration.

“We all know that in addition to creating opportunities to score goals on the flanks, focusing our effort on the flanks plays an important role in suppressing our opponents’ offense there. So, Franck, if you retreat too much, it’s equivalent to letting our opponents suppress our offense on the left flank...”

Ribéry fully understood what Twain had said up to this point. He had been completely steered by Ronaldo.

“I understand now, boss. I’m not going to let them get so comfortable in the second half,” he said, clutching his fist.

Twain nodded and turned to Wood again. “And... George. Remember your mission from before the game?”

Wood nodded his head.

“Your support for the flanks isn’t enough. If you’re more active, Ribéry won’t be under so much pressure.”

Wood opened his mouth as if he wanted to defend himself. But he immediately gave up the idea and said nothing. Instead, next to him, Albertini spoke up for him. “Boss, I’m not... Actually, Keane has too much pressure on George.”

Twain nodded to indicate that he knew. However, he continued from Albertini’s words. “Anyone would be under great pressure playing against Keane. Do you think that the Arsenal team captain, Patrick

Vieira, isn't under a lot of pressure? He's the same. Roy Keane is just that kind of player. So, George, I'll say it again: if you can't accomplish the mission I gave you, I'll make a substitution."

Twain spoke amiably to Ribéry. But to his most favored George Wood, he was instead harsh to the point of being unreasonable. In the face of such a ridiculous arrangement, an average player might have complained already.

But not Wood. He did not show any changes in his expression; he just nodded his head. "Okay." His tone was so even that some of his teammates thought that he must have not heard Twain's words, but he had just simply answered.

Twain also did not ask if they understood again. He just turned around and spoke to all the players. "Guys, you should know that football is a team sport. Whether it's offense or defense, it's not determined by one or two players. So... you also need to help Wood." He smiled. "Don't let Wood become a superman on his own, I need eleven supermen!"

"That's easy, boss!" Eastwood raised his hand and stood up.

"Do you have any good suggestions, Freddy?" Twain looked at him.

Freddy nodded and said seriously, "Just wear your underwear on the outside!"

Even the usually-serious Mark Viduka could not help but laugh when he heard his forward partner say that. His laughter in the quiet room was like a spark. Everyone, including the players and coaches, all laughed loudly. The oppressive mood in the locker room was swept away by laughter.

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When both managers of the two teams were back on the sidelines waiting for the whistle to kick off the second half, Twain stole a glance at Ferguson, The old Scottish man's seemingly smiley face was flushed pink.

When he saw the faintly smiling face, he felt uncomfortable and quickly turned his face back.

There are still forty-five minutes left; don't get happy too soon, Sir Ferguson...

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After the start of the second half, there seemed to be a repeat of the first half. Manchester United made use of their home advantage to launch a tidal wave of attacks on the Forest team's goal, one wave after another, and battered the other team.

Ribéry remembered Twain's words during the halftime interval. However, when he found that he could not reach the football during the game, he hesitated for a while and ran back. Counterattack? First, we have to not lose the ball before we can do it.

When he saw that the situation had not improved, Twain stood up from the technical area and walked to the sidelines. He waved to the field and shouted, "George!"

Wood heard Twain's call, but he did not look back. He knew why Twain had called him.

Keane pressed on more frequently in the second half, which seemed to be inspired by Ferguson. Scholes and Roy Keane, together with Wayne Rooney and van Nistelrooy taking turns to retreat, were making the defense in the middle very tense.

Wood had never experienced this kind of feeling in a game. When he faced Roy Keane, he would feel extremely nervous. There was no time to breathe. Any negligence could bring about fatal results. He did not have the presence of mind to think about other issues; he only had eyes for Manchester United number 16.

Tang En could understand Wood's current situation, because he remembered that when Keane had announced his retirement in the future, his sworn enemy in the Premier League, Patrick Vieira, had paid tribute to the Manchester United captain, saying he was the greatest midfielder he had ever played against. He had to bring his A game when playing against Keane in a match and use all of his energy. He liked the thrill of being totally involved in playing against a dab hand.

Tang En did not know if Wood liked that feeling, but he was certain that by playing against Keane, who was in tip-top condition, in a life-and-death game, George would develop far more than he had from three months of hard training in the training ground.

There was something buried in Tang En's heart which he did not say to anyone: Even if they lost this game, then as long as the process met Twain's expectations, he would not have any complaints. He could withstand the pressure of a losing streak.

Everything that he had showed so far was to motivate the players, and was not evidence that he was unable to withstand loss as others might think.

Failure was the only way to victory. Of course, that failure must be worthwhile.

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"Roy Keane has possession of the ball, but he's unable to shoot at the goal... He's always followed by George Wood at his side, and Wood is inseparable from him, like his shadow. This must be the tactical arrangement of Manager Tony Twain."

Keane saw George Wood closing in on him and immediately passed the ball to Ronaldo on the flank. Wood saw it and rushed to Ronaldo again. The Portuguese player saw him coming and passed the ball back to Keane. The center back, Piqué, stepped forward to fill the gap, but the ball was passed behind him. Luckily, the Forest team's right back, Leighton Baines, received the ball in the penalty area in time and obstructed Wayne Rooney by kicking the ball out.

Twain shook his head on the sideline when he saw the scene. This won't do, people can't outrun the ball no matter how fast they are.

Wood stood beside Keane and saw the goalkeeper, Darren Ward, give Baines a thumbs up, thanking him for the timely recovery and for lifting a threat. Suddenly, there was a flash of inspiration in his mind.

Why can't we do it this way?

He walked towards Albertini and succinctly conveyed his idea. Albertini quickly understood what Wood had in mind. He considered it, and then nodded. "It's not the boss's arrangement, I think we can give it a try."

Next, he turned to tell everyone Wood's idea; not everyone agreed. Some of them hesitated because George Wood had never been trained as a full back, and the Spaniard, Piqué, had never been a defending midfielder.

Taking advantage of the dead ball, Albertini informed several teammates who needed to take part in the plan. "I don't think there's any hesitation in this. Look at the score, we're already two goals behind. If we can't curb Manchester United's attack, we have no chance to fight back. George's idea isn't bad. Piqué, have you ever played as a defending midfielder?"

The Spanish lad shook his head. "No, Demetrio."

"Then why not take this opportunity to try?"

"But this is an important game..."

"Forget about that, it's not a cup final. Okay, it's settled. Piqué, you will still play center back as usual. If you see Keane coming up to get the ball, just head the ball out to stall him. Then Baines, you'll receive inside the penalty area as a center back and leave the flank to George. Any problems? No? Then let's do it!" At this critical moment, Albertini showed a team captain's capability and courage, and concisely assigned the new tasks. Of course, this had something to do with his English proficiency. He always avoided using grammatically long and complex sentences, and instead used phrases to express his meaning so that everyone could comprehend him well.

No one had any objections to him doing this because everyone knew that how highly Twain regarded the Italian team captain. The relationship between the two of them sometimes did not seem purely like that of a manager and player.

From the sidelines, Twain saw his players gather together and part quickly. He did not know what had happened. Then, when Manchester United attacked again, he was surprised to find Piqué in Wood's position!

"Defending midfielder!" He could not help yelling, and next to him, Kerslake asked, "Is there a problem, Tony?"

Twain hurriedly shook his head. "No, no, this is good..."

He still remembered that, because Piqué was unable to play in any tournaments on the Manchester United First Team and Ferguson had felt he would be wasting time playing in the reserve team games, he was put on loan to Real Zaragoza FC, a team in La Liga. Right from the start, he was faced with the same dilemma of not being able to play in competitions. But the contract between Manchester United and Real Zaragoza FC stipulated the number of appearances for Piqué. He had to play twenty times in a season, so Real Zaragoza arranged for Piqué to play in the last few minutes of the game while also using him as a jack of all trades, a utility player. He would play in whichever position that was short of a player. This included defending midfielder.

Originally, Piqué could only play right back and center back. But, compelled by the circumstances in Real Zaragoza, he also developed a third position as a defending midfielder.

As it turned out, Piqué also did well in the defending midfielder position, even though his favorite position was still center back.

I didn't expect Piqué's third position to emerge in the Premier League two years ahead of time, Tang En thought.

Piqué was pushed entirely beyond his limit the first time he played as a defending midfielder. He seemed to be at a loss facing off against Keane. He was easily shaken off. Fortunately, Albertini made up for the breach in time and resolved the crisis.

Piqué made a gesture of apology to the team captain. Albertini smiled at him and said, "It was inevitable for your first time. There's actually no difference in the position, you just need to pay attention to your movements. The defense for outside of the penalty area and inside it are not the same. Don't strike with your foot too easily, just stick to him!"

Piqué nodded to show that he understood.

On the other side, the Portuguese genius Cristiano Ronaldo was somewhat surprised to find that his opponent had changed. Leighton Baines had gone to the penalty area; he looked like he was a center back, and that Scarface...

Ribéry wanted to come back to help with the defense, but he was only supposed to "help." Although running up and down frequently made him feel tired, he persisted with gritted teeth.

Wood looked up and saw Ribéry running towards him. "What are you doing?"

"The boss said to help with the defense..." The Frenchman secretly pointed to the Manchester United number 7.

"No need." Wood bluntly rejected Ribéry's good intentions. "If you're here, who's going to attack?" He pointed to Manchester United's backfield.

Ribéry wanted to refute Wood, but he shut his mouth as soon as he opened it, turned, and ran back.

Cristiano Ronaldo was close to Wood's side, and he could clearly hear his conversation with Ribéry. The kid did not even glance at him when he spoke, and the Portuguese player suddenly felt slighted. Are you looking down on me? Do you think you can defend against me alone? Okay, let's see you try!

When Keane once again received the ball and faced Piqué while preparing for a breakthrough, he suddenly saw Ronaldo waving at him from the flank, asking him to pass the ball.

With such an obvious intention to pass the ball, any idiot would know to defend ahead of time!

Keane ignored him and chose to pass to Paul Scholes. Scholes then passed to Giggs on the left flank. Giggs crossed to van Nistelrooy, giving him a chance to a shot into the goal; but his header missed.

This seemed to give Ronaldo a chance to show his displeasure. He wagged his hand and was somewhat unhappy that Keane did not pass the ball to him. Keane glanced at him and turned to run back.

Twain was amused by the scene. Ronaldo, who had just joined Manchester United, had extremely bad relationships in Manchester United's locker room because of his smugness over his exceptional dribbling skills and his good looks, him being highly regarded by the manager, his arrogance, and his unsociability. At that time, there was no lack of negative news about him. He was even directly sent back to his home country, Portugal, by Ferguson for a long time after a fight with his teammates. It was once reported that he was going to be transferred out of Manchester United.

The kid was still far from being mature.