

Champions 371

Chapter 371: We've Won Part 2

At the post-match press conference whereby, the press waited to watch the verbal sparring between the two managers, Mourinho took the initiative to praise the Forest team's performance. He gave special praise to Gareth Bale's performance after being brought on.

However, he did not admit that his team had performed badly. He thought that they were just a little unlucky.

Seemingly to prove that his words were true, Twain also praised Chelsea's good performance and said that their unbeaten record for ten rounds was not due to luck. It was because they were a truly strong team.

But then, Twain switched and said he was even prouder of his players because Chelsea had done so well. Everyone had done a great job.

He even took the trouble to mention every player individually to praise them by name. But he did not especially draw attention to Bale. He stressed that it was not an individual victory. Rather, it was a team victory.

He deliberately dialed down the spotlight on Bale.

Some players could withstand the tremendous pressure on the field, but might not easily cope with the praise and expectations outside of the field. Bale was still young, and Twain wanted to protect him.

Even so, Twain could not manage the media's frenzied speculation about the young player after the game.

At 16 years and 105 days old, he had scored his first professional goal for his team. He had just broken the new record for the youngest player to debut in the history of the football club and the Premier League with the Manchester City match. And now he had now broken new heights as the youngest goalscorer in the history of the football club and the Premier League. Before this, the record had been held by the Everton's young player, James Vaughan in a match against Crystal Palace on April 11 of this year. Vaughan was only 16 years and 271 days old when he scored the goal.

Bale's goal made everyone review the changes in the Premier League's youngest ever goalscorer record in recent years:

The first was Wayne Rooney, who made his mark in the Everton versus Arsenal match on October 19, 2002. When he scored that goal, he was only 16 years and 361 days old. After that, on December 26 in the same year, the young Leeds United player James Milner broke the new record at 16 years and 357 days. Two and a half years later, James Vaughan, once again a young player from Everton, set the record at 16 years and 271 days.

And now Bale's goal had pushed the record up by another 166 days.

At 16 years and 105 days, perhaps the new record might not be toppled for a very long time.

Therefore, Twain's thought of wanting to protect Bale was good. But because of the goal, Bale had gained the same level of attention that Wayne Rooney had received in that year.

The next day after the game, every newspaper headline was dedicated to the young man. The feud between Twain and Mourinho lost to Gareth Bale's shot.

All the Welsh people claimed that they had gained another genius while the English discussed the new record enthusiastically.

On the surface, it seemed like everyone was delighted. Only Twain was between laughter and tears when he looked at the overwhelmingly large photograph of Bale.

Dunn consoled him. "Gold will shine sooner or later. When you took him away from my team, you should have known that this day would come. Unless you had no faith in his ability."

"Are you trying to console me?" Twain rolled his eyes at Dunn and sighed. "Whatever. Looking at this from a different perspective, this is what Bale has to experience."

Just as he was speaking, Twain's cell phone rang.

Twain looked down at his turned-over phone and suddenly laughed. "A message from Eastwood. He told me he watched the game with Chelsea and couldn't wait to get back to the team. He even said he knew what I'm worried about now because Sabina already predicted it. He said that if he'd played that last free kick, the result would have been the same, but I wouldn't have to worry about anything!"

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After training started again, Twain read the Romani Gypsy's message in front of all the players, who all laughed.

"Finally, he asked me to thank all of you on his behalf. He loves all of you."

The players whistled.

"Good job, guys. We've taken the first place in the league. Was anyone too excited to sleep last night?"

Bale raised his hand.

He immediately drew everyone's attention. Everyone laughed when they saw that it was Bale.

"You need more practice, Gareth. It's only a game! If you're too excited to sleep after winning, then you have to live with insomnia for the rest of your life."

The laughter became even louder.

Bale's head hung lower.

Upon seeing that, Twain cleared his throat. "All right, everybody, listen up. From now on I want you to forget yesterday's game and put all your energies into a new battle. Our opponent is..."

Everyone knew which game he referred to, so they answered in unison. "Benfica!"

After that shout, everybody laughed. This was a team they had defeated in the past. They did not feel any pressure at all.

“Very good; we just beat them not long ago. Now we’re going to defeat them again!”

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Since Leighton Baines was injured, Twain put the young Gareth Bale in the starting lineup for this game in Portugal.

Before the game, Twain joked to Bale, “You may be the youngest player in a starting lineup the history of the Champions League. Are you nervous?”

Bale shook his head. “Still okay, chief.”

If Bale had said that he was not nervous with certainty, Twain might worry about it. Instead, his mind was set at ease. “Go ahead, don’t think about anything else. It’s just a game.”

The jeers of tens of thousands of Benfica fans on their home ground did not make Bale’s legs go weak. He was already a professional player who had been baptized in fierce battle. He was no longer a child who had no confidence because others laughed at his appearance.

In the game, Nottingham Forest experienced a tough ninety minutes and won 1:0 against the group’s qualifying competitor, Benfica. Their double victories over Benfica helped the Forest team stabilize their ranking with seven points and second place in the group.

Real Madrid, who defeated Lille in their away game, was at the top.

In this game, everyone on the Forest team kept up their condition from the game with Chelsea. No matter what difficult situations they faced, they never gave up. They held on by the skin of their teeth in the team’s most difficult situation and did not let their opponents breach their goal. On the contrary, when Benfica was kept back, they succeeded with a sneak attack and completely reversed the situation on the field. Then the game submitted to the pace of the Forest team. Forest played well and with ease. Benfica became more and more impatient. Finally, they had to swallow the bitter fruit of their failure.

At the post-match press conference, Twain faced a room full of Portuguese media and said with conceit, “Until now, I believe many of you here were still skeptical about our strength and still believed that Benfica’s loss to Nottingham Forest in the previous game was an upset. An unexpected fluke. Now, we’ve proven you wrong. It would have been an upset if Benfica had beaten us!”

Chapter 372: Goodbye, Ian Part 1

After the game, the Portuguese media addressed Tony Twain as “The Arrogant Englishman.” The English people were delighted. They liked the label and accepted it on Twain’s behalf.

“...I’m sure Benfica will remember Tony Twain, this ‘The Arrogant Englishman,’ for a long time.”

Back in England, the speculation about Bale continued. Twain decided to pay close attention but not to intervene too much. He believed that Bale himself must have been certain about what he should and

should not do if he wanted to succeed. He understood Bale, a young player who liked to use his brains to play football. If he could use his head to play on the field, he must have known how to deal with the things that followed closely at his heels outside of the field.

Besides, he still had his good father.

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Due to the continuous battle, the Forest team's fitness coach reminded Twain that the strain on the players' physical fitness was extremely high over a short period of time and that injuries were likely to occur under such circumstances.

Twain was well aware of that.

Therefore, in the 12th round of the Premier League on November 5th, the Forest team sent its second lineup. Except for George Wood, the goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar, and the striker Anelka, everyone else in the starting lineup had been rotated.

Wes Morgan and Matthew Upson formed a center back partnership. The left back was the young Gareth Bale, and the right back was the Chinese player, Sun Jihai. The left winger was Kris Commons and the right winger was Aaron Lennon, who was a year older than Gareth Bale. The two midfielders were Albertini and George Wood. The strikers were Anelka and Bendtner.

Sun Jihai's appearance in the starting lineup made the Chinese media very excited. The day before Twain released the team's starting list in advance, the Chinese media arrived in throngs.

Although this was the Forest team's away game, there were still a lot of Chinese people who came.

The resurgence of the Forest team in the Champions League attracted more and more interest from the East. Since Sun Jihai had joined the team, he had few opportunities to appear because the team's performance was good. Twain did not need to replace the starting lineup. So Sun Jihai could only play as Chimbonda's substitute.

This time, Sun Jihai's appearance in the starting lineup roused the Chinese fans' interest in the Forest team. The Forest team's popularity in China had risen steadily.

Twain's hands were tied. When he had bought Sun Jihai, he had said that Sun Jihai would not be a substitute once he joined. However, who could have known the team would play so well when the season started that he would have no reason to change the team's main lineup? As a result, he could only arrange for Sun Jihai play in the domestic cups and some unimportant league games. Fortunately, Sun Jihai did not have any conflict with Twain so far because he played less. He still trained diligently every day as he waited for his opportunity. In addition, he had a good relationship with his teammates. Everyone was very fond of the Chinese player. The atmosphere of the team was very good. Even Anelka, rumored to be terrible by the outside world, was not too difficult to get along with. Perhaps that could be a reason for him to feel at ease to stay on the Forest team.

In this game, the Forest team challenged Birmingham City in an away game. As their opponent was not very strong, the lineup which Twain had deployed somewhat underestimated their competitors.

But if he could have known the results of another league tournament in advance, he would have regretted his decision, preferring to send all the main players to win the game.

The Forest team's last round of the league tournament was closely watched by the media because it was a competition between the league's second-ranked team and the top dog. For this round of the league tournament, the media, which had previously given them attention, had all rushed to Manchester. Beside the supporters of Nottingham Forest and Birmingham, no one else cared about the two teams.

After all, there was a big battle going on in Manchester.

It was the battle between Mourinho and Ferguson.

This game was more intense by a hundredfold than the one between Chelsea and the Forest team. It might not be brilliant to watch, but it was certainly fierce.

During the game, the referee presented a total of seven yellow cards, three for Manchester United and four for Chelsea: Alan Smith, Cristiano Ronaldo, Darren Fletcher, Didier Drogba, Paulo Ferreira, William Gallas, and Claude Makelele.

Manchester United was in the lead in the 31st minute when Fletcher scored a goal. Then the game entered a stage where the players from both sides continually fouled and received yellow cards.

Martin Taylor, who was the commentator for this game, explained, "An equally high-profile game, of course, the rivalry between Chelsea and Manchester United is much bigger. In the game with the Forest team, the competition was still focused on the football. But for this game, the focus of Chelsea and Manchester United players are on each other."

"A red card has not emerged so far. The referee has been lenient!"

Other than the supporters of both teams, no one would think that this 1:0 game was enjoyable to watch. Manchester United had the last laugh in their game against Chelsea. They defended the dignity of a powerful old Premier League team and a former overlord.

Meanwhile, in Birmingham, the Forest team was dragged into a deadlock by the home team. They scored a goal, which was then equalized by their opponents. Both teams scored 1:1. No one had another way to threaten the opponent's goal again.

The match ended in a draw.

Initially, Twain was still in a very good mood, as he had not conceded the game by sending a lineup mostly made up of substitutes. He was ready to praise the players in the locker room.

At that time, Kerslake ripped off the earphones stuffed in his ears with a dark expression. He had followed the other game closely on the radio—Manchester United versus Chelsea.

"Chelsea lost," he told Twain.

Twain was stunned for a moment upon hearing the news. He immediately turned aside and swore. The only word to describe his mood at that moment was regret.

Why didn't we defeat Birmingham? If we had beaten them, we would have had the same points as Chelsea now. And what's more, we're short a damn game! F**k!

Kerslake looked at Twain, who turned his head around with clenched fists. "Tony?"

When Twain turned back again, he had already returned to normal. "I'm alright, just feeling a little regretful, that's all."

"We didn't even expect..." said Kerslake with a bitter smile.

"I want to call that Portuguese man and ask how he could have lost the game!"

Kerslake laughed aloud when he heard Twain's angry retort.

"Forget it, the game's already over. It's useless to say anything. Let's go to the locker room. We should commend the players on their performance." Twain put up his jacket collar to withstand Birmingham's chilly night winds. Then he walked towards the home team's technical area to shake hands with the Birmingham City manager waiting there.

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From the looks of it, the Forest team not winning this game meant that they had lost a great opportunity to catch up with Chelsea. No one had any idea the effect this would have on them in the long run.

As Chelsea had lost to Manchester United and the Forest team had tied with Birmingham City, the gap between the two teams had narrowed to just two points. Chelsea had twenty-eight points after the twelfth round of the league tournament, while the Forest team followed closely by twenty-six points with one game short.

Except for Tony Twain, most people had not expected the team ranked third in the league.

Placed after Chelsea and Nottingham Forest, the third-ranked team was Wigan Athletic.

This newly promoted team had lost to Nottingham Forest in the league's first game. Since then, they had relied on their tenacity and an unyielding spirit unique to a grassroots team to achieve seven victories, two draws, and two defeats within their twelve rounds in the league tournament. Like the Forest team, they were also short one game. With their twenty-three points, they were ahead of Manchester United with twenty-one points and Arsenal with twenty.

The media exclaimed that Wigan Athletic was replicating Nottingham Forest's "dark horse miracle" of last season.

Since Nottingham Forest was mentioned, the media pulled in Twain again to talk about his views on Wigan Athletic. Twain did not give any face to the media. He said, "You can just refer to the words I said at the press conference after the first round of this season and reprint them. I said what needed to be said two and a half months ago. I don't want to repeat myself."

He was still brooding about not defeating Birmingham City.

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After the match against Birmingham City, the league tournament was paused to make way for the national team competition. Currently, the Forest team also had a number of players who were summoned to their respective national teams. From a certain perspective, a team's strength could be seen from the number of national team players it had, even though a football club's manager was always reluctant to have so many players leave his own team for the national team competition.

The First Team training base in Wilford suddenly became empty.

Twain still came to the training base early in the morning, but he did not go in.

"The team isn't training today, Tony." Old Ian was a little puzzled when he saw Twain standing at the gate.

Twain turned to look at the old man and laughed. He suddenly felt that this scene was similar to when he had first come here.

"I know, Ian. I'm waiting for Evan."

"Ah, the chairman... Do you both have an event to attend?"

"Yes, a business promotion." Twain was referring to the agreement with their partner company, Sports Interactive. Twain was the spokesperson for the Football Manager simulation games. Within the contractual period, he must be involved in the company's promotional activities for the launch of each edition of the Football Manager game. They were going to attend the FM 06 promotional event today.

"Tony, you're a busy man now," Ian chuckled.

Chapter 373: Goodbye, Ian Part 2

He was indeed busy. Being a Premier League manager was completely different from being an English Football League Championship team manager. Therefore, he could only smile at Ian MacDonald's words.

"Oh, yes, I need to tell you something, Tony. I'm planning to hang up my boots."

Twain did not react at first. "Hang up your boots?" What was the gatekeeper hanging up his boots for? But soon he understood and raised his voice in surprise. "You're retiring!"

"Yes, my health isn't so great. My kids are adamant that I quit." Ian cleared his throat. "Initially I had said I would resign from the club next January. But I think I'm going to wait until the end of the season. I want to see the team go a little further. When the players stop playing, don't they normally say they're hanging up their boots? Well, I want to hang up my boots too!" Ian grinned and chuckled.

Twain was at a loss for words. He knew that Ian was in bad health and had been in the hospital for a period of rest some time ago. The club had temporarily transferred a security guard from the youth team to help out. At that time, Twain had felt unused to seeing a stern, cold-faced uniformed security guard at the gate day in and day out, and not that old man who always smiled and greeted everyone.

Considering the elderly man's health, leaving the post was indeed a wise choice, and Twain had no reason to stop him. That was also why he was at a loss for words.

Seeing that Twain was quiet, Ian said, "But it's good. Now, I can go watch a live match. It's been a long time since I last watched a Forest game at City Ground. Sometimes..." He looked back at the radio on the table. "It's uncomfortable to listen to the radio here and not watch the game."

Twain's lips quivered. "You're still not used to it?"

"Of course I am. After all, I've worked here for more than ten years." MacDonald turned to look at the inside of the training base. "When I first started standing here, it was Brian Clough's last season with the Forest team. I can still clearly remember the day when 'Big 'Ead' (Brian Clough's nickname) bid farewell to this place. He was alone, holding his dog as he walked out..." MacDonald pointed to the road in front of the gate and waved his hand. "When he passed me by, he said to me: 'Goodbye, Ian. I wish you all the best.' Then I said: 'Good luck to you too, sir.' Then he walked away without turning back and was gone.

"I've seen a lot of people walk out of this gate and never come back. Sometimes I think, 'It's really unlucky of me. Just when I was getting close with them, they're all gone. The Forest team was also relegated.' Then I saw more people come in, the Forest team was promoted, and relegated again, promoted again, and then relegated... After we were beaten by Manchester United by 1:8, they came here listlessly to start another new day of training. That was a tough time.

"Do you know what I thought when I first saw you here, Tony?"

Twain shook his head.

"I thought, another unlucky chap!" Ian MacDonald guffawed. He laughed so happily that he coughed.

Twain laughed with him.

"I had seen many new managers smugly take on their new roles and leave here without a choice in the end. I had no hope for you at all. At the time, I was worried about whether the Forest team would disappear from here because of bankruptcy. I think many people were worried about that. No one cared about how the new manager was."

"But you've proven that you're different, and the most special one. Thank you, Tony."

Twain was about to say something when he saw MacDonald wave his hand in the direction behind him, "The chairman's car is here, Tony."

The red-colored Audi A6 stopped beside Twain during their conversation.

"Good morning, Ian!" Evan Doughty poked his head out from the driver's seat to wave at Ian MacDonald.

"Good morning, Mr. Chairman." Ian slightly nodded, and then said to Twain, "Goodbye, Tony."

"Goodbye, Ian."

"Let's go, Tony!" Evan beckoned to Twain and motioned for him to get in the car. "Bye, Ian!"

"Goodbye, Mr. Chairman."

Twain got into the car. Evan restarted the engine and drove through the gate of the training base. He looked back and could not see Ian MacDonald. Maybe he was back in the small guardhouse.

Even though there was no training today, he still had to be there to hold his post.

“Hey, Evan.”

“Yes?”

“Ian told me just now that he’ll retire when the season is over.”

Doughty looked at Twain, and Twain pointed towards the front. “You’re driving.”

Evan Doughty turned his head back. “Is it because of his health?”

“Yes. His children don’t support his continuing as a guard at the training base.”

“Ian MacDonald has been working here for thirteen years. He’s the last witness of that era, isn’t he? When my father took over the team, he had already been working here for a long time.”

Twain leaned back on the seat and said, “All the old people are gone.”

“Isn’t that nice? The cycle of life. You see what the media says about us? ‘The Young Forest team’! I like that label, young and full of vitality!”

“But... I’m used to having someone to say hello to me every day.”

Evan Doughty was silent for a moment and said, “Of course, the club won’t let him leave just like that. I’ll consider giving him an honorary title of a ‘Lifelong Fan’ and reserving a lifetime seat for him in the stands.”

Twain did not say anything. That was what Evan could do as the chairman of the club. What about him? He should prepare a parting gift for the old man too.

But what should he give him?

Chapter 374: FIFA Virus Part 1

Between November 10 and 16, Europe held two matches between the national teams. Those powerhouse football clubs were deeply affected by the so-called “FIFA virus.” Even though the Forest team was not a big club, it still felt the impact.

The “FIFA virus” referred to the period stipulated by FIFA for the international top league tournament during which the national teams transferred a large number of players from the football clubs to conduct the intensive national team competitions. When the players returned to their respective clubs, they were physically and mentally exhausted. With their conditions declined, they played in the football club matches like they were sleepwalking.

This viral outbreak could be long or short. A short outbreak only affected one or two games. As for the long ones, there was another name for them: “World Cup Syndrome.” The players who performed well at the World Cup often fell into a downturn season.

Twain had met with another difficult problem in his coaching career: how to deal with and overcome the “FIFA virus.”

The Forest team's main players list was reviewed.

The main goalkeeper, Edwin van der Sar, was drafted by the Netherlands national team.

Leighton Baines was originally the main force of England's under 21 national youth team. But he was not selected due to his injury.

Sun Jihai was China's national team's main player. If he returned to China, he would need to travel across the Eurasian continent. That was not something to be pleased about. The long journey would greatly affect the player's physical function and state of play. But fortunately, nothing deviated from history on that point. The Chinese national team was eliminated in the first stage of the German World Cup qualifiers for the Asia region. China lost to a Middle Eastern team in the supposedly fixed match. That happened a year ago on November 17. In the near future, Twain would not have to wrangle with the Chinese Football Association over Sun Jihai's long-distance flights.

As the main force for Spain's under-21 national youth team, Gerard Piqué was drafted to participate in the youth team competition.

The loss on the defensive line was smaller. After all, Pepe had not been selected for the Portuguese national team and the Brazilian Football Confederation did not come to him. Brazil had always been like that. There were too many local geniuses. Many footballers who played in Europe had been called geniuses in their country. However, only a handful was able to join the Brazillian national team. At that time, the top Bundesliga striker, Aílton, considered the idea of becoming a Qatar citizen to play in international games. The Barcelona midfielder, Deco, was even more thorough. He directly applied for Portuguese nationality and joined the Portuguese national team.

Countless geniuses had been unable to join the Brazillian national team in their lifetimes. What was another exceptional talent in the English Premier League?

In the midfield, Albertini had already announced his withdrawal from the Italian national team. He could use this time to take a good rest at home without the constant travel. Despite George Wood's outstanding performance, there were a lot of star midfielders in England. Eriksson could not even manage his existing roster, never mind recruiting a newcomer. Therefore, Wood, highly praised by the media, could also take advantage of his rare free time to accompany his mother.

Ashley Young, who had always been England's under-21 national youth team's main force, was drafted into the youth team tournament. Like him, Aaron Lennon was enlisted, but in the under-18 youth team competition.

Although always the substitute player in the Forest team, Brynjar Gunnarsson was also recruited by the Icelandic national team.

As expected, Franck Ribéry was selected for the French national team. The French media had started to speculate on that very early on. Originally from a low-level league, the previously poor kid was now prominently chosen for the Gaul legion, like the classic Chinese phrase of a pheasant becoming a phoenix.

Mikel Arteta was perhaps the most frustrated midfielder in the Forest team. He was skilled and had performed well on the Forest team. However, no matter how well he performed, the Spanish national

team was closed to him. Arteta might only be able to lament his untimely birth. At a time when the Spanish national team had Xavi and Iniesta at the helm, there was no need for another holding midfielder. Even Real Madrid's Guti had not been put on the Spanish national team for a long time.

Arteta had only played a few games on behalf of Spain's under-21 national youth team. He still had never represented the Spanish national team.

The midfield was the most affected, with the largest number of players drafted.

The situation with regards to the strikers was simple. Nicklas Bendtner was the Denmark national youth team's main fixture. He must return to his country for the competition. Like him, Mark Viduka could not be missing in the important game to determine whether Australia could be in Germany next year. He had become the player with the longest flight distance on the team. It was a great test of his physical fitness. Fortunately, the Australian bull had always been proud of his excellent health.

And the other outstanding striker on the Forest team, Nicolas Anelka, was not selected for the French national team due to his terrible relationship with the French Football Federation.

Freddy Eastwood was overlooked because of his injury.

In that way, the Nottingham Forest First Team's main list of twenty-three players now had eight players selected for their respective national teams. And most of them were part of the main force.

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Twain's attitude was contradictory towards the national team games.

For the players who could not play in the club at the moment (like Brynjar Gunnarsson and Aaron Lennon), Twain still wanted them to maintain their condition through the national team games.

And those players who were the main force players in the club, Twain did not want them to be the main force in the national teams because that would add to their burden.

In reality, that thinking was selfish. But what football club manager was not selfish?

Everyone wanted their players to be healthy, not be in a state of decline from not playing for long periods. Twain was the same. Even though he was an Englishman now, he was not patriotic. Is it to be expected that the English national team wants my players? Who's going to take responsibility when my players are injured playing for the country?

It was also fortunate that the Chinese national team was eliminated a year ago. If not, Twain would have had to wrangle with the Chinese Football Association. He used to be from China and was still Chinese at heart. But if you want to take my player away from me? No way!

Fortunately, Albertini had already announced his withdrawal from the national team. Otherwise, the old Demetrio, who had just recently recovered from his injury, could be worn out by both the national team and football club. Who could withstand it? The cost of players who were injured while playing for the national teams would still be borne by the football clubs in the end. It was unreasonable for the clubs to pay wages and bonuses to the players, only to be worried about the national teams which had no hope of reaching the finals.

It was said to be the responsibility of every player to play for the national team. But still, Twain would only be happy to let his players compete on behalf of their countries if FIFA ruled that the national teams would be responsible for all the medical expenses of the players who were injured during the national team tournaments and compensate for the clubs' loss.

Chapter 375: FIFA Virus Part 2

Up until now, the Forest team had rarely targeted African players in the transfer market even though Twain knew that the African players were very valuable. He used the more expensive European players rather than buy the Africans players. Why?

It was because of the continent's conflict with the league tournaments and football clubs' match schedules. The biennial African Cup of Nations was different from the other continents' tournaments. Due to its special geographical location, their competition was not held during the Northern Hemisphere summer break of most national leagues, but during the red-hot winter tournament period of every national league. In that way, if a team had too many African players, then come January, most of its players would be missing. How were they supposed to play? Tang En was not without such an experience. When he played the FM game, he could not even get eleven players in the starting lineup in some key games because there were so many African and South American players on the team who returned to their countries for the tournaments.

Fortunately, that was just a video game. But Twain did not want that to happen in reality. It would kill him.

Twain had never wanted to be a manager of a national team, so he would certainly consider those issues from the football club's standpoint. As the Chinese saying went, "The butt decides the head." That meant that one's position determined one's perspective and scope. Wherever one was positioned would determine how they viewed the world.

However, because the two games of the national teams were not friendly matches or warm-up games, all the national teams viewed their two games with great importance. Therefore, Twain's wishful thinking was not correct.

In the end, Brynjar Gunnarsson, the club's perpetual substitute, was only a substitute in the Icelandic national team for two games and did not get a minute to play. How could he maintain his condition?

Ashley Young played two games for England's under-21 national youth team for a total of one hundred and forty minutes. Aaron Lennon represented the under-18 national youth team and played the two games in their entirety, for a total of one hundred and eighty minutes. On behalf of the Netherlands' national team, Edwin van der Sar played one hundred and eighty minutes of two games. Gerard Piqué represented Spain's under-21 national youth team and also played two games in their entirety.

Franck Ribéry made his debut on his national team and performed well until he was brought off amidst the cheers and applause in Stade de France at the 87th minute. Ribéry looked proud of his success while Twain gnashed his teeth in front of the television. He could tell from tiny clues that Ribéry's stamina was flagging in the final moments of the game. In the next game, Ribéry was a substitute; but still, he played for almost twenty minutes.

As the main center forward of the Australian national team, Mark Viduka naturally would not play as a substitute. He also played for the entire one hundred and eighty minutes.

Nicklas Bendtner fully played the two games on behalf of Denmark's national youth team.

Although most of the players performed well in the games, Bendtner and Viduka both scored goals. Ribéry had his first assist in his national team career and the French media fell over themselves in their eagerness to make him the target of their reports after the game.

But Twain only saw those players' listless appearances on the first day of training after they returned.

The training for that day was mainly to restore their physical fitness. Twain still had to rotate for the league game in three days' time. Any players who played on the national team game had to take a break. His goal shifted from England to the Iberian Peninsula.

To Madrid, the capital of Spain.

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Ribéry, who had represented the national team for the first time, was thrilled. He could not imagine he would have had such an opportunity a season ago. At that time, he was still at a loss about his future at a small pier in a town west of France. He did not know whether he was right to persist at being a professional player.

The phone call from the Nottingham Forest Club had changed the trajectory of his life.

From the familiar France to the completely unfamiliar England, he had made a mark for himself. Not only did he play in the top league, but he also quickly became the team's main force and was well-known. Now he also became a member of the French national team. No one mocked his facial scar. Everyone put the focus on his legs.

This was the life he had wanted.

Therefore, when he started the game on the behalf of his national team, he gnashed his teeth to persist even when he was down to the last bit of his physical strength. He did not want to be replaced because he could not run. If that happened, he would have regrets in his first national team game.

After he returned to the club, the cost was that Twain had told him that he did not even make the cut for the next league game. He had to stay at home and rest.

Ribéry was not the only one. Piqué and Ashley Young also did not make the list for the game.

Wes Morgan and Aaron Lennon took their places.

Who their next opponent was, how strong they were, what the outcome of the game would be and whether their ranking would slip... Twain did not worry about those questions at all. A season was long. Even if they were halted at this point, they still had a chance to pull ahead.

However, Twain did not want to miss the game with Real Madrid. He wanted to make sure his team was in good condition and use his strongest lineup to be a "guest" of Bernabeu.

Apart from the revenge factor, Tang En had a tinny tiny wish in his heart, a fan's wish. He wanted to compete with Zidane once at the Bernabeu before Zidane's retirement.

Because of his arrival in this world, many things had slightly deviated. Twain did not know whether Zidane would continue to play after the end of the season. But he knew there were not many chances to play against Zidane. This time, the ballot had coincidentally grouped his team with Real Madrid. He had no reason to miss these two games.

In the first game at his home ground, the inadequate Forest team lost to Real Madrid. This time, in the away game, Twain could send his strongest squad. He wanted the challenge to see if he had the ability to defeat Real Madrid.

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The Forest team needed to deal with their rivals in the league before they dealt with Real Madrid.

On November 19th, Nottingham Forest lost to Newcastle United at St James' Park by 1:2. Their league points stalled.

For the first time in his real-life career, Tony Twain experienced the power of the FIFA virus.

Although his players had not been injured in the national team games and he had allowed the players who had not recovered physically to rest at home in Nottingham, he could not resolve the predicament of the Wilford training base being empty for one and half weeks. His main players were picked clean and he could not even carry the overall tactical training for the entire team. He could only let those who were left behind do simple physical training and technical exercises.

Then, three days after the players' return, they traveled north to Newcastle and hurriedly challenged their opponents who had a strong home advantage.

With only one goal conceded, Twain had to be thankful for the players' fighting spirit.

As Wigan Athletic lost to Arsenal at home by 2:3, the Forest team was able to keep their current second-place ranking in the league. However, the gap between them and Chelsea had widened to five points. Chelsea had defeated Blackburn Rovers at their home ground with a score of 3:0.

Twain exposed his lack of experience. After two consecutive defeats, he could only watch as Chelsea widened what was once a narrow gap.

But no matter how much rue he had in his heart, he still must smile in front of his team to encourage and console them.

"All right, let's forget about the past games." In the visitors' locker room at St James' Park, Twain smiled at his men and said, "There are more important games ahead of us. Two months ago, our opponents beat us on our home ground. Now we're going to their home to get back what we lost!"

Chapter 376: A Starry Night Part 1

That summer two years ago, Twain had come to Spain with Shania after first getting to know her. Madrid, the Spanish capital, was the first stop to begin his tour of the European football giants.

There were big and small clubs scattered within and around Madrid, but only one could be called a real powerhouse club: Real Madrid, the symbol of Spanish football.

At that time, Twain had only done a turn round outside of Real Madrid's home stadium, Bernabéu. He didn't go in as the other tourists did. He was not an ordinary tourist anymore. He was the manager of another team. Which manager of a team would buy a ticket to visit the home of another team and take a photograph as a souvenir?

Twain did not want to display that kind of blatant worship.

If I ever go in, there are only two possible reasons. First, I became the owner of this team; or second, I lead my team to compete here.

He did not know if he would have a chance to realize the first possibility in this lifetime. However, the second possibility was close at hand.

The white Santiago Bernabéu stadium stood quietly in front of him. Twain sat in the coach provided by the Real Madrid club, looking at the letters on the giant white wall.

He did not have the excitement that he had had when he was in close proximity of this football temple for the first time. Obviously, he would not point at the building like a tour guide to the bus full of players and say, "Look! This is the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium!"

That would be embarrassing.

However, there were some players who took out their cell phones and digital cameras and snapped away happily outside the stadium. For some of them, to be able to play in this stadium was like a dream. None of the stadiums in England were as big as Bernabéu. Compared to the Forest team's home, the City Ground stadium, Bernabéu was a real juggernaut for some people.

Twain turned to look at them and cleared his throat.

When they heard their manager cough, some people hurriedly put away their cameras. They did not expect to hear Twain say, "No need to put them away. If you want to photograph it, take a few more now. You won't have the chance when you get out of the bus later."

Everyone on the bus looked at Twain.

"We aren't invited for a tour. This game is not a friendly warm-up match. So, when you get out of the bus later, you'd better behave like an opponent. Don't let the people of Madrid mock you."

The players put their cell phones and digital cameras into their bags and just turned their gazes toward the white stadium getting increasingly closer.

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Today was not the game day. Other than the busy stadium staff, only Nottingham Forest came to Bernabéu to adapt to the stadium and do their warm-up training.

Twain sat on the real leather seat of the visiting team's technical area at the Bernabéu stadium and watched the players do simple training drills on the field. But his mind was filled with thoughts about the pre-game press conference that had just ended. Both managers from the two teams attended at the same time, but the media was only concerned with Real Madrid's Brazilian manager, Luxemburgo.

Before this Champions League group stage match, there was a fight of the century recently in the first leg of the season. Real Madrid had lost 0:3 to their arch rival Barcelona at home. Ronaldinho became the star of Bernabéu in that game. His second goal even made the picky and harsh Real Madrid fans stand up to applaud him. Naturally, from that perspective, it could also reflect how disappointed the fans were about Real Madrid.

Because they had just lost such an important game, the media had thrown that problem at Luxemburgo, who had struggled recently.

The media was concerned about whether Ronaldo, who had suffered minor injuries in the fight of the century, would be able to play. They were also worried that the condition of Zidane, who had returned to the French national team, would be affected by the recent national team game. They cared about Raúl's continued decline in performance. They were interested in Beckham, Robinho, Casillas, Helguera... No one cared about the Nottingham Forest players.

Twain thought that that was a covert form of discrimination. As Real Madrid's opponent, his team and Real Madrid were equal. But all eyes were still on Real Madrid. No one was interested in the "villain" of this game. It was as if the problem in Real Madrid was more difficult to deal with and more attention-grabbing than their opponent.

Can I treat this as contempt?

He wanted to ask that question, but he still resisted in the end. Since you don't take us seriously, we will show you on the field.

As Twain was still brooding over what had happened at the press conference, David Kerslake came over and muttered, "This is the turf used in the stadium of a La Liga powerhouse club?"

Twain lifted his eyes to look at him.

"It's terrible! It's very slippery and unstable. I suspect the turf was pasted with glue."

When he was a fan, Tang En had followed La Liga with interest and often stayed up late to watch the games. He knew that the quality of the turf in the Bernabéu was extremely bad for a period of time. Even their own players complained. Then, during the winter break of a certain season, Real Madrid changed the turf in Bernabéu and the criticism of their home turf faded away. Perhaps the Forest team had happened to encounter that period.

However, he still answered Kerslake, "Or can it be one of Real Madrid's small tricks? To deliberately let us think that the turf quality is poor, and then for us to change our boots, so that they can beat us on normal turf."

Kerslake paused for a minute when he heard Twain say that, wondering how probable it might be.

Twain laughed, “Don’t overthink it. I’m just talking nonsense. It’s unlikely that a big club like Real Madrid would do such a thing. The quality of their turf is really terrible. We just have to be ready.”

“They have the money to pay for big names, but they can’t change the turf?” Kerslake snorted.

“Who knows? Maybe they think that the substandard turf can cause more trouble for the visiting teams.” Twain shrugged his shoulders. “If that’s the case, they’re not thorough enough.”

When Kerslake heard that, the first thing that came into his mind was the time when Twain had instructed the training base’s turf maintenance workers to over-water the youth team stadium, and then dragged Arsenal, which relied on techniques to play, into a contest with the Forest youth team in the quagmire. He burst into laughter.

“Not everyone is such a jerk, Tony.”

Hoarse laughter rang out on the sidelines of the Bernabéu stadium.

The players glanced over there and then turned back. They were used to it.

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Twain did not know much about Luxemburgo. Most of what he knew was entirely limited to his failed coaching experience. For example, he had had a lot of difficulty coaching the Brazilian national team in the South Korea-Japan World Cup qualifier and was almost eliminated. Or, for instance, the ugly defensive counterattack style of football during his time at Real Madrid. Although to be fair, Luxemburgo was not as incompetent as Twain had imagined. For example, he was the manager who had led his teams to win the most championship titles in Brazil and even led the Brazilian national team to win the 1999 Copa América title. His performance was not bad during his coaching in Real Madrid. However, he had lost a game that should not have been lost.

Four days ago, Real Madrid was thrashed 0:3 by Barcelona on their home ground, and they were powerless to fight back. The slogan “Get lost, Luxemburgo” resounded through the night sky at Bernabéu in that game. Until now, the dark clouds of dismissal still loomed over the Brazilian’s head.

Looking at how embarrassed Luxemburgo was, being pressed by the media in the pre-match press conference, Twain should honestly have been thankful. Of course, he was never afraid to face the crafty media.

Twain knew that Luxemburgo would be dismissed. That was something he was certain that it would happen because Real Madrid had lost to Barcelona.

Therefore, he did not mind adding a bit of fuel to the fire.

This period was the concentrated outbreak of all of Real Madrid’s problems in recent years. It was the lowest point of their lowest ebb. What Twain wanted to do was not to pull Real Madrid up at the critical moment, but to push them further into the abyss.

I want to wipe you out while you’re still ailing!

Chapter 377: A Starry Night Part 2

On the day of the game, half an hour before the kickoff, in the visitor's locker room at the Bernabéu stadium, Twain stood in the middle of the spacious locker room. "Does anyone here think Real Madrid is invincible?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"That's right. They just lost to Barcelona, and lost miserably," Twain said sternly. "So, we have nothing to be afraid of from Real Madrid."

Ribéry stood up and said with a look of confusion, "Boss, we didn't say we were afraid."

Laughter broke out in the locker room. Someone even whistled gleefully.

Twain gave Ribéry a glare. The French kid had just ruined the stern atmosphere he had tried to set up. He cleared his throat to conceal his embarrassment. But the laughter in the locker room did not stop for a while. So he kept quiet and waited for the boys to stop laughing.

As their laughter subsided, Twain continued to speak. "Alright, had enough laughter, boys?"

There was another burst of laughter.

"You'll be sorry later!" Twain pointed at them, "Seriously, our opponents might have encountered a lot of trouble recently, but a lean camel is still bigger than a horse. We can't take them lightly. After all, this is their home ground, and Real Madrid always plays very well at home. We should be careful in dealing with them. Real Madrid is in a bit of a mess internally, but some of them are able to change the game based on their own strength. We have to pay special attention to those players."

Twain turned around and wrote down a name on the tactical board: Zidane.

"This guy is Real Madrid's midfield core. He has to be closely marked. As long as he can't play fully, the Real Madrid offense will be partially paralyzed."

All of the Forest players looked serious. They definitely knew how formidable the team captain of the French national team, number 5, was.

"So, we have to assign someone to specifically mark him." Twain pretended to search in the crowd, but everyone knew who he would name. Pepe and Piqué, who sat next to George Wood on both sides, moved sideways accordingly.

"Well... George." Twain pointed to Wood, "You're going to mark Zidane in this game. He's number 5 in Real Madrid. Try your best to entangle him no matter what."

Wood nodded. "Okay."

Twain took a look at Wood, who answered simply and did not say anything else. He shifted the subject to another person.

"Ronaldo." Twain wrote another name. "He has put on more weight than he did when he was in Barcelona, but he's still the most menacing striker on the planet. Do not give him space to shoot. All the defenders, you can mark and defend against him. His current build makes him less nimble than before,

so you have to seize on that point. Pay close attention to his positioning and watch out for the long balls from Real Madrid's backfield."

The players on the defensive line nodded at the same time.

"As for Beckham... Be careful of his place kicks and try not to give Real Madrid a chance to take free kicks in dangerous zones. Remember how we lost the game in the first round. Don't be deceived by his polished looks. He's really powerful, a real genius."

"And then we have Raúl..."

The players listened attentively. Twain covered almost all the eleven players in Real Madrid's starting lineup. Even the goalkeeper, Casillas, was not spared.

He really had done a lot of homework for this game. Hard work would always pay off. Twain believed in that.

The preparation time before the game went by quickly. When Twain had introduced all of the Real Madrid players in one shot, it was time for the team to go out and play.

"Does anyone have any questions?" Twain raised his hand. "Of course, even if there is any problem, it's too late to put it forward, guys."

The players laughed. "No, Chief!"

"Good, I hope you guys really don't have any. I don't want to pile details on you like our points in the group, rankings, advancement, and so on. You just need to know one thing." Twain paused to look at everyone and raised his arm. "Just win the game. Win and win again! And we'll be able to charge our way out of this damn group! So, your job is very simple, and that's to f**king-"

"Win the game!!" Everyone stood up and hollered.

Twain's hand swung down with force.

"Fantastic, let's go out!"

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"Welcome to the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium! Welcome to the hallowed grounds of football!"

"This is the UEFA Champions League Group D game, to be played by the home team, Real Madrid, against England's Nottingham Forest!"

"...ESPN coming to you live from Santiago Bernabéu stadium!"

The Real Madrid flags unfurled in the stands and the fans held up high posters of the superstar footballers accompanied by the live broadcast of Real Madrid's anthem, "Hala Madrid" (Let's go, Madrid).

Twain looked around the towering stands, "It's really lively."

Kerslake stood next to him. "The Nottingham Forest people like this stadium very much."

Twain glanced back at him. "Because we won the Champions League for the second time here?"

His assistant manager nodded, "Bernabéu has brought us only good memories."

"What are you implying, David?" Twain laughed.

"We'll only find out after the match." Kerslake shrugged.

"Are you nervous, David?"

"It's just a group stage game. What's there to be nervous about?"

"Well said. Too bad our players don't seem to be nervous at all, otherwise I would have let you say that to them just now."

They shifted their gaze from the stands to the field.

The players from both teams shook hands in a file and then gathered together for the media to take photographs.

The red Nottingham Forest team, together with the white Real Madrid, the sparkling flashes from the stands, the billowing flags, the noisy clamor... Before his transmigration, he could only have had a taste of this experience in the FM game and watched such scenes on the television. Now it had truly appeared before Twain's eyes.

And those stars whom he had used to look up to, like Zidane, Raúl, Ronaldo, Beckham, Roberto Carlos...

He thought of the tours that this team of "Galácticos" had done in China for two years in a row. That crazy scene was still vivid in his mind. He suddenly snorted.

Superstars?

Galácticos?

Invincible?

There is no such thing as an invincible fleet in this world. I'm going to take you down today!

Chapter 378: Hiss— Part 1

When Wood and Zidane shook hands before the game, he carefully observed the Frenchman. Before the game, he had heard a lot about the man. There were many legends about him. What people talked about the most were the two headers in the World Cup final in France and that sky-high volley in the 2002 Champions League final.

Ribéry was the person who said the most because he had just gotten along with Zidane in the France national team games. Zidane was a living legend to him. He always thought he could only watch him from afar. He had not expected to have the opportunity to be in close contact with him and train with him for competitions. And now they had become opponents.

Ribéry seriously described to Wood how formidable Zidane was. Wood had asked at that time, more powerful than Riquelme?

Ribéry laughed heartily for a long time before he answered Wood. They are not at the same level.

Now, Wood had a distinct impression of him. He had not had a real sense of him when others had told him how powerful Zidane was before. But with Ribéry's comparison, he understood. He had experienced firsthand how good Riquelme was. If Zidane was more powerful than Riquelme, he had to deal with him seriously.

The 33-year-old Zidane was no longer that young guy from AS Cannes. People had always said he was balding. Now he was actually bald.

The Real Madrid players were very serious when they shook hands with the Forest players. Even the cheerful and optimistic Roberto Carlos' face was taut.

They obviously knew how important this game was.

After losing to Barcelona, everyone was under a lot of pressure. If they lost to Nottingham Forest again, they did not know what kind of storm would await them.

Luxemburgo stood on the sidelines with his arms folded across his chest and gazed towards the field with knitted brows.

In comparison, the visiting Forest team was not under any pressure. Twain told his players before the game that they had to win, but the players did not appear apprehensive.

After a simple ceremony, the players from both teams stood in their respective halves and waited for the kickoff.

Twain walked back to the technical area and sat down.

The referee stood outside the center circle and looked at his watch one last time before the game to confirm the time. When he looked up again, he blew the whistle.

And the game began!

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Real Madrid kicked off.

Luxemburgo had deployed the strongest squad he could send for this game.

The goalkeeper was Spain's number one national goalkeeper, Iker Casillas. The two center backs were Sergio Ramos and Ivan Helguera. On the left and right sides, the two fullbacks were the veterans Roberto Carlos on the left and Michel Salgado on the right. There were four midfielders, Zidane on the left, Beckham on the right, and Gravesen and Guti in the middle. The two strikers were still Ronaldo and Raul.

There were also Robinho and Baptista sitting on the substitutes' bench.

Luxemburgo did not have a pair of defensive midfielders in the midfield this time. Having just lost a momentous competition in his home ground, he hoped to use offense to express his goodwill towards the angry Real Madrid fans and save his precarious managerial position.

A banner with the slogan “Get lost, Luxemburgo” had already appeared in the stands of this game.

Consequently, he had two aims for this game. One was to win the game and the other was to win it beautifully.

Real Madrid also traditionally insisted on those two principles. Real Madrid’s football was like that. Victories were commonplace for them and not worth bragging about. Winning beautifully was something they were proud of.

To put it another way, the Bernabéu fans might be concerned about how many minutes Casillas could play continuously without conceding a goal. However, they cared more about how many games their strikers could continuously score more than two goals in.

For most other coaches, leading their teams to victory could be considered a great achievement. But for the Real Madrid manager, if he could not lead his team to play well, it would be useless to win more games. There was only one outcome. He might celebrate being the season’s champion in Madrid’s Plaza de Cibeles with the people, but the next day, all the major media outlets might be filled with the latest news of his dismissal.

As a result, it was hard to be the manager of Real Madrid.

Luxemburgo had experienced the glory and splendor of being a powerhouse club manager. Now it was his turn to experience the cruelty and ruthlessness of the powerhouse clubs.

“Real Madrid has launched a fierce attack at the Forest team’s interior since the start of the game. It looks like the Brazilian has decided to use offense to destroy the Forest team. How is Manager Tony Twain going to deal with it?” The ESPN commentator asked in the commentary.

How was he going to deal with it?

Twain asked himself that question numerous times.

He knew that Luxemburgo’s style in Real Madrid was defensive counterattacking. However, after he saw Real Madrid’s recent defeat to Barcelona, Twain thought Luxemburgo would not be able to persist with a defensive counterattack tactic which would incite a resounding jeer in Bernabéu for the game.

In order to please the fans with his own coaching position, he would definitely let the team press on and attack. They would play the “beautiful football” that the Real Madrid fans liked to watch. In that way, although the pressure on the Forest team’s defense surged, the massive empty tracts behind the Real Madrid defensive line could be exploited.

Twain changed his mind and decided not to engage in an intense exchange with Real Madrid at the Bernabéu. The Forest team was currently not Real Madrid’s match in offense, even if this Real Madrid was just a “feeble horse.”

Many teams would face a dilemma when playing against Real Madrid of whether to play offense or defense. Playing offense would mean going head to head with Real Madrid to score, which was too

demanding for many teams. But what about defense? They would also worry whether their defensive line could hold up for ninety minutes in the face of Real Madrid's frenzy of attacks.

But Twain was not worried about that. He understood Real Madrid, and he knew the current Real Madrid.

He knew how to defend against and stop the attacks of Real Madrid's superstar squad.

And that way was to use high pressing.

The first line of defense was built, starting from the front line. If possession was lost, the players had to mark their opponents right away and immediately intercept the ball. Their movements had to be ruthless and fast. They must utilize physical impact, shovel the ball, take fouls, and use all allowed methods to disrupt Real Madrid's offensive rhythm. They must force those arrogant superstars to scramble and get flustered.

Then they must end the game with a highly efficient sneak counterattack.

That was what Twain hoped to do.

To that end, he asked Anelka to defend and said that he must counter-intercept immediately. If he could not do it, he would bring him off.

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The ball was passed to Zidane's feet and George Wood immediately rushed up to intercept the ball. He thought that his speed must be so fast that the opponent could not respond in time. In the narrow space on the edge of the sideline, Zidane definitely could not evade him unless he kicked the ball out of bounds.

He did not expect Zidane to suddenly step on the ball, turn 180 degrees, and swing past the side of his feet!

"Wow—it's the Marseille Turn!"

Stunned, Wood sat on the floor and watched Real Madrid's number five elegantly bypass him.

This was his first exchange with the football legend, and he was defeated!

After he bypassed Wood, Zidane directly passed the ball to Roberto Carlos who plugged in from the flank. The compact Brazilian fullback swiftly plugged in from the back and Chimbonda cut across to block, but Carlos brutally broke through. Carlos jerked the ball forward and then sped forward to skirt around Chimbonda, who still needed to turn.

The cheering in Bernabéu stadium began from the moment Zidane swung past Wood, reaching fever pitch when Carlos broke through Chimbonda.

Twain stood up from his seat amidst the deafening cheers.

Roberto Carlos' glance swept across the penalty area. He glimpsed from the corner of his eye that Chimbonda was back in pursuit, which left him little time.

So, he crossed the ball!

It was a classic Roberto Carlos' type of cross. It was a powerful volley which sent the football into the Nottingham Forest penalty area. It was chaotic in front of the goal. As long as someone extended his leg to receive the football, there was a high probability of drilling the ball into the Forest team goal.

Raul had poked the ball first but had missed the goal.

The cheers in Bernabéu became a sigh.

Nottingham Forest had a narrow escape.

Twain sat back down again.

"Is it asking too much of George to defend against Zidane? Do you want Demetrio to help him?" asked Kerslake after he sat down.

Twain shook his head, "I can't spare another man. I know that asking Wood to mark Zidane is difficult, but there's no other way. Let George persevere."

Chapter 379: Hiss—- Part 2

Bypassed by Zidane, George Wood did not get back up and continue to fight as usual. Instead, he sat on the ground in a daze for a moment before getting back on his feet. At that point, Real Madrid's first attack was over.

Zidane ran from his side and went back to his position. George Wood stood nearer to the middle. His eyes were always on Zidane. It was a fierce gaze.

He felt humiliated, which was unacceptable.

That turn brought him back to a year ago at El Madrigal. That terrible night when he was utterly played by an Argentinian attacking midfielder.

That indifferent Argentine always glanced at him with a colder look, as if to remind him: who do you think you are?

He could not stand such contempt.

When Zidane ran past him, it was as if he did not exist.

In fact, that was normal. Who would care about a common opponent? But it gave George Wood a bad association.

He wanted to beat the Frenchman. No matter how formidable Ribéry had described him as, he was going to crush him and leave a deep impression in the man's heart. Just like the impression that Riquelme had left on him.

Nottingham Forest's offense could not enter Real Madrid's thirty-meter zone. As they had very few players for offense, their passes were cut off by Gravesen after the third pass.

This time, the football was not given to Zidane, but to Guti.

Like Zidane, Guti was a holding midfielder for Real Madrid. He was highly talented and had great passing ability. However, he could not be a major player. It was only in this game that Luxemburgo needed the team to launch a large-scale offense, so he replaced the Uruguayan midfielder, Pablo Garcia.

When Guti made his debut, he played as a center forward, a forward player with the same prospects as Raul. However, as the years passed, he played a lot of positions. He even occasionally played as a center back. Now he was fixed in the midfield. His scalpel-like passing precision was his trademark.

But the biggest difference between him and Zidane was that Zidane was like a waterfall whereas Guti was just a fountain. He was like Duan Yu's Six Meridian Divine Swords, only effective intermittently.

His role in this game was not to organize the offense, but to assist Zidane and help him share the pressure. When the seasoned Real Madrid saw George Wood mark Zidane one-on-one, they changed the player to organize the attacks.

Guti was Albertini's opponent.

The people at the Bernabéu stadium were not unfamiliar with the Italian. During the short period he played for Atlético Madrid, Albertini had used a beautiful long shot to deal the fatal blow to Real Madrid in the final moments of the game. It was the Madrid Derby. After the match, Raul took the initiative to exchange jerseys with Albertini.

This time was a repeat of a similar scene. Albertini appeared to be very active. He beautifully defended against and intercepted Guti's dribble. He then immediately organized the offense on the spot and sent the football to the front field with a beautiful long pass!

"Albertini's long pass! And Anelka!"

Anelka, who had just rushed up to attack, had not had time to fall back to defend when he saw the football flying towards him. Anelka, who could never lift his spirits for the defense, suddenly perked up.

His chance was here!

He was mocked by others when he had played for Real Madrid. He had only scored two goals in one season. Although he had helped this La Liga giant to take down the Champions League title that season, people ignored his contribution to the team when they tallied up the season. They could only see his faults and did not credit him for the Champions League championship. The entirety of Bernabéu was his enemy. Until now, when he received the football, he could still clearly hear the hiss from all sides of the stadium, which was evidently a welcome gift for him.

He hoped to score a beautiful goal here and complete his revenge on Bernabéu.

"He stops the ball beautifully!"

Anelka stopped the football evenly. Salgado rushed up to defend. But Anelka did not hurry to charge forward. He first controlled the ball under his foot. When Salgado came up, he deftly pulled back the ball and staggered his ex-teammate with the feint.

Then, he abruptly started and cut in diagonally!

The plucky Salgado would never let Anelka go so easily. He turned around and gave chase.

Anelka stuck his opponent firmly behind his back and guarded the ball while he hurtled towards the penalty area.

Helguera rushed over to defend against Anelka.

It was another ex-teammate.

The French striker clenched his teeth and quickly contracted his leg muscles to stop fast. He suddenly leaned back. Chasing at his back, Salgado could not circumvent him in time. He forced himself to an emergency stop, but it was difficult to accelerate again. Anelka interrupted Salgado's rhythm with the emergency halt and disrupted Helguera's rhythm at the same time.

As a former teammate, Anelka was very familiar with Helguera's defensive shortcomings. Regardless of the situation, he was used to facing his defensive targets with his back and bottom. Due to that, he used to regularly bypass Helguera with ease during training.

This was no exception.

Anelka's sudden halt made Helguera think that the Frenchman was ready to shoot, so he hurriedly braked and then turned to block this shot.

The French striker had waited for the moment when Helguera turned. He nimbly pulled the football to the side, which removed the ball from Helguera's view.

The loud hisses from the stands were heart-stopping, but Anelka could not hear anything. He only had eyes for the goal in front of him. He just wanted revenge.

Ramos dashed to save it but it was too late. Having skirted Helguera, Anelka quickly shot towards the goal!

But this time, "Saint Iker" did not save Real Madrid.

The football brushed past his fingertips and flew into the goal behind him!

"GOOOAL!"

"Nicolas Anelka!"

Twain raised his arms and stood up from his seat.

The Frenchman, who had scored the goal, placed his index finger in front of his lips and did a circle in front of the goal facing the stands.

I've never been happier!

Chapter 380: A Yellow Card Part 1

When Anelka put his index finger on his lips to make a "keep quiet" gesture, the Bernabéu stadium went quiet for a moment, but immediately got even louder.

The Real Madrid fans hated the French striker to the core. They did not hesitate to put up their middle fingers at the arrogant Frenchman and abuse him with the most commonly used insults in Spain.

Ear-splitting cheers rang out from Nottingham Forest substitutes' bench and resounded clearly in the midst of the booing of the entire stadium.

The Forest team's substitutes stood on the sidelines and applauded Anelka. Twain pumped his fists in celebration of the goal. He was not celebrating, he was demonstrating in front of Bernabéu.

Being ahead of Real Madrid was not very exciting to Twain. He had already done the same thing once in City Ground stadium.

Taking the lead over Real Madrid at Bernabéu was not considered a winning advantage. Still, Twain enjoyed the thrill of striking a blow to the team on their home ground.

As a result, he was very pleased to see Anelka put his forefinger on his lips to make the Bernabéu fans shut up.

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"What a surprise, Nottingham Forest takes the lead in Bernabéu! The English scored a goal in the first five minutes of the game!"

The ESPN commentator was right. It was normal to lead against Real Madrid, but it was astounding to take the lead within such a short period of time from the start of the game.

"I believe that this Nottingham Forest team, which has defeated Benfica twice, is definitely not a complete unknown who pulled off an upset in Portugal."

The group points and ranking were displayed in the lower left corner of the screen. Real Madrid and Nottingham Forest occupied the first and second spots respectively, but they had the same points: ten each.

The television footage then gave Tony Twain, who stood on the sidelines, a five-second closeup. His face no longer showed the excitement and joy from the goal. It was replaced with a serious expression.

"The youngest manager in the UEFA Champions League has taken the lead at Bernabéu. Tony Twain seemed to be shrouded in a mist that we can't see through."

Twain did not know that the television commentator was commenting on his close-up. He stood on the sidelines for a while before he walked back to the technical area.

"The game has just begun, David," he said.

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After the kickoff, Real Madrid was not adversely affected by the goal; instead, they soon launched a frenzy of counterattacks.

After all, this was a veteran powerhouse club. No matter what low point they were facing, their foundation still existed. It would be a sham if they were to be knocked out by one goal.

Wood once again became a busy man. Such a moment was rarely seen as the Forest team's strength increased and their ranking in the Premier League rose. When the Forest team was weak and often pressed by their opponents' positional warfare, George Wood was the most eye-catching player, which was one of the reasons why he quickly became famous even though he was young and had debuted less than two years.

More balls were sent to Zidane's feet. It looked like they did not trust Guti, who was a brilliant but inconsistent playmaker.

More offense was concentrated on Zidane's side, which meant that George Wood was under more pressure.

As the game progressed, Zidane made him feel bad again, whether Wood admitted it or not.

When an opponent faced the French baldie, he would always have a way to bypass his opponent. If he could not go around, he would immediately pass the ball and not leave his opponent with too much time to intercept.

This was not only a divergence in skill but also a huge disparity in experience.

Zidane took possession of the ball when he faced Wood and made a feint to move the ball to the left for a breakthrough. Wood quickly rushed out. Then Zidane calmly shifted the ball to the right flank as Salgado plugged in from behind.

Wood was not the only one under enormous pressure. The young left back Gareth Bale and the right back Chimbonda were equally so. It could be said that everyone in the Forest defensive line faced tremendous pressure. This defensive line was very young and the offensive lineup they faced was world-class.

Salgado did not break past Bale. But after he lured Bale to the vicinity of the end line, he passed the ball back.

And behind him was the right midfielder, Beckham!

"Beware the Englishman!" The commentator shouted in an exaggerated way.

Beckham did not stop the ball. Instead, he received Salgado's return pass and made a direct pass.

The football drew a perfect arc in the air and almost hit Ronaldo, who was not good at headers, on the forehead!

"A header by Ronaldo... WOOOW!"

Close at hand, Edwin van der Sar made an incredible save. He deflected Ronaldo's header with a single palm!

"Oh, what a shame! If the shot was headed by Morientes instead, it would have gone in."

Ronaldo put his hands on his hips as he looked at van der Sar, who had gotten up from the ground, in disbelief. He had thought that this ball was set to go in.

In fact, when he saw Beckham swing his leg to kick, Twain's heart leaped as well. At that moment, when he saw the football hit Ronaldo's head and then change direction to fly towards the goal, his heart almost came out of his throat.

Fortunately, van der Sar's outstanding performance put Twain's heart back in its place. But it was still thumping wildly.

After taking the lead, Twain experienced that keyed up state where a heart attack might happen at any time.

1:0 was not secure at all.

However, the Forest team must now persevere with the defensive counterattack. They had to hold fast under their opponents' constant onslaught and wait for the opportunity to sneak attack again.

This was not just testing the mettle of the players on the field, but putting this manager's heart to the test.

Very soon, Twain was unable to sit still in the technical area. He stood up and held onto the awning of the technical area. He continued to keep a close eye on the situation on the field.

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This was not the first time that the Forest team was confronted with a situation in which they were under enormous pressure from their opponents. They had recently had a taste of it in the league game with Chelsea.

It was painful, but they must bear it.

This was also a game experience.

Once there was a breakthrough by Zidane which resulted in a corner kick. Albertini pulled George Wood aside.

His hand slipped. He almost could not grasp Wood's arm. Albertini realized that Wood's arms were very sweaty.

"George."

Wood turned his head to look at his captain.

"Let's switch. I'll defend against Zidane."

Wood, who always listened to the team captain, shook his head this time. "No, Demetrio. The chief told me to defend-

"But..." Albertini wanted to say, "But you won't be able to." However, before the words came out of his mouth, he swallowed them back. Those words would be too much of a blow.

George Wood was not a fool. He knew what Albertini wanted to say. He gasped, "He's really good. But the chief said to let me defend against him. Unless I'm being brought off, he's mine."

After that, he ran past Albertini and returned to the penalty area to participate in the defense.

Albertini shook his head as he looked at Wood's back, and then ran to go back.

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Kerslake noticed that Albertini had pulled Wood aside to discuss the matter. He turned to Twain.

Twain shook his head and said nothing.

Kerslake turned his gaze back to the field.

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The situation did not improve. Zidane was still very active. Pressing on, Real Madrid still bombarded the Forest team's penalty area. It looked like they wanted to regain the dignity and position they had lost.

Twain stood up from his seat again and walked to the sidelines. Edwin van der Sar was preparing to kick off the ball. He placed the football twice. He had been wasting game time since the first half began.

Wood stood on the right side of the center circle, and not far from him was the Frenchman.

Twain took a breath, and then suddenly shouted Wood's name. "George!"

Not only Wood but almost all of the Forest team and even some of the Real Madrid players heard it. They all eyed Twain at the same time.

"Did you forget what I said to you? Restrain him!" Twain pointed at Zidane. "I don't care what you do, use any means! By hook or by crook! Use whatever damn means!"

He pounded his fist in the palm of his hand.

If Zidane could be hurt and brought off the field without Wood even getting a yellow card, that would be the perfect outcome in Twain's mind.

However, that was not likely.

Real Madrid's right flank was on the side of both teams' technical areas. Beckham heard Twain's expletive-peppered English clearly. He glanced towards the indecorous visiting manager and frowned.

Zidane also looked toward the sidelines. He saw Twain point in his direction as he shouted and knew in all likelihood that it was related to himself. It was merely to let the boy mark him. Zidane had seen much of that in his career. Almost every manager would instruct the same to his team's main defensive players.

Except, the disparity between him and this Forest team's number 13 seemed to be too big. Up until now, everything was well within his control. He did not feel that the game was too hard. Other than conceding a goal, which was an accident, the Forest team was completely misfiring now.

Ever since they took the lead, they had not even fired a single shot at the goal. Everyone had withdrawn to their side of the field. As long as Real Madrid continued to attack like this, an equalizer was only a matter of time. Things would be simple once they equalized the score. The opponent would surely collapse. At that time, it would be a home victory for Real Madrid.