

Champions 621

Chapter 621: One Step Closer

Chen Jian and his two young friends began a year-long training career at the Nottingham Forest Club's youth camp. The interesting things they would be able to learn from that kind of training would only be revealed after a year.

North Wilford suddenly came alive. Hunan Television had set up a team to follow and film. They would produce five weeks of the program, to show the domestic audience the daily life and training of the three lucky contestants in Britain and Nottingham. Reality shows were popular in foreign countries.

They would leave after one month of filming. In a few days, no one would pay attention to them because five weeks were enough see the repetition of their lives. To watch for a year would be unbearable...

The media at North Wilford would soon be reduced to what it was before. Except for the Nottingham local media, there would no one who would go to focus on the Chinese boys. Twain's real intention was the same. He could not stop the Chinese reporters from swarming around the three to do their enthusiastic reporting. but he could use other indifferent tactics to pour cold water on them to cool their enthusiasm quickly and exchange for a quiet environment for the teenagers.

Twain rather looked forward to how Chen Jian would become after a year of training.

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The three Chinese visitors kept the Nottingham Forest Football Club busy for a while. As Twain had to lead the team to train and compete everywhere, Allan Adams already had some cooperation with the Chinese side, so he had the most interaction with the Chinese media. The Nottingham Forest Football Club took the opportunity to expand their influence in China. Allan and Evan began to seriously consider the plan to visit China the next summer.

After all, Beckham only had a two-year contract. They had to speed up the development of the new market while he was still on the Forest team to make the most of his commercial appeal. Otherwise, as soon as the contract expired, it would be for naught if he went away to the United States.

Twain signed Beckham out of consideration for his competitive value, while Allan considered his commercial value, which could really be counted as governing in his position.

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When the three Chinese teenagers began the difficult adjustment in Nottingham, Twain took the team to Milan.

He thought his team would be subjected to a bombarding welcome from the Italian media.

He did not expect the media that came to greet them at the airport would be all British. The Italian media were pathetically few. Other than La Gazzetta dello Sport, there were no Italian press to be found and obviously no television station.

Twain thought about it and finally understood. He smiled.

This is nice. I was worried about the lack of peace before the game. It's all good now. Ah, the Italian hosts are really understanding.

The English media rushed forward, and Twain waved his hands, "Not too many interviews before the game. Ask your questions at the press conference."

The reporter from La Gazzetta dello Sport did not care. He shouted in English, "Sir, how confident are you in winning the game against AC Milan?"

Twain pretended not to hear it and walked away. Some of the Forest players were stopped by the media for brief interviews. The Italian reporter joined in as well.

He located Grosso, who was also Italian.

Grosso had gradually lost his main position on the Forest team. Twain was unhappy that he could not adapt to the pace of the English league, but his experience could still help the team in the Champions League, especially when they played against an Italian team like AC Milan — he had played at Inter Milan for a season and was no stranger to the same-city nemesis — and thus he was brought to AC Milan.

The Italian reporters went up to worm their way in with Grosso and asked trivial questions like if he would be playing in the game.

Grosso shook his head. "The manager hasn't released the starting lineup list yet. I don't know if I will be able to start."

"Life in England doesn't seem to be too good, does it?" The reporter asked as if he were making small talk.

Grosso was still a star player and was experienced in dealing with the media. He immediately became wary when he heard the question.

In any case, he was now a Nottingham Forest player and would have to speak from the perspective of Nottingham Forest. His position in the Forest team was not very stable. He had not adapted to the pace of the English Premier League and was unable to continue with the competition due to minor injuries and illnesses. To adapt to a new league tournament was naturally out of the question.

However, he could not honestly nod his head and admit "yes." In that case, his "yes" would become "a major player in the team is unhappy with Tony Twain and complains in hopes of getting the main position" the next day.

Grosso was not stupid. He did want to obtain a stable position, but he did not want to be a weapon used by the media.

"It's going okay; everything's fine." Grosso put off the question.

The Italian reporter was apparently reluctant to let it go. "Does okay mean that there are areas which are not so good?"

“It means it’s going well and everything’s fine.”

After spending a period of time with Twain, a smart person would have learned his way of speaking and used it against the media.

Grosso refused to give them a chance to poke holes. After he said what he had to say, he found a very suitable reason to say goodbye to the reporter.

“It’s time to board the bus.” He pointed to the exit ahead where the assistant manager David Kerslake stood with a red bus parked behind him.

The Italian reporter nodded helplessly. He did not manage to pry something of value out of Grosso. If he could not get anything out of his fellow countryman, then forget Tony Twain.

He scratched his head. It looked like this was a better treatment than having his question ignored.

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At the pre-match press conference, Twain finally met the Italian reporters, who would have nothing to report if they did not come. The media bosses would not have let them act arbitrarily.

Twain also did not speak or act excessively at the press conference. His speech appeared to be normal: a brief assessment of their opponent and an admission that it was not a good thing to draw the home game, but he did not think the Forest team would say goodbye to the Champions League tournament this season.

There was nothing explosive and the smile on his face even made it feel like the feud between him and the Italian media had long since been written off with one stroke.

The atmosphere of the press conference was harmonious and friendly. He and Ancelotti even shook hands when they met. The media wanted to hype up the feud between the two teams and even thought of the headline “Life and Death Battle,” but there was no use for it. The managers on both sides did not seem to care much about the media’s disruption to the game.

“They tried to annoy me so that I would lose my cool, but I did not fall for it.” Twain said to Dunn after he came down.

Indeed, he could not lose his cool. Nottingham Forest’s coaching staff had already laid out their tactics to deal with AC Milan.

Analyzing from the current situation, AC Milan, who tied the away game at 0:0 would certainly choose to attack at home, but it would not be a full-on attack. Ancelotti would not be so foolish as to stake it all, but it was certain that he was going to attack. That was what Nottingham Forest needed to take advantage of.

Everyone knew what Nottingham Forest was best at — defensive counterattack.

In the away game at the famous San Siro stadium, would Nottingham Forest dare to bombard the penalty area of AC Milan as if they were at home?

Based on Tony Twain's conservative style, he would insist the team play defensive counterattack and sneak in the attacks on the basis of a solid defense.

Anyone who had studied the Forest team over the last few years would agree.

Consequently, Twain definitely would not do that.

He instructed the team to continue attack wildly in the away game and fight to score goals first. What followed after was within his control.

"Adding up all the ages of their rear defensive line players and it will be almost more than two hundred years old. Ancelotti likes to believe in experience, so we will let him know how unreliable a veteran's body is. We'll use speed and force to break through. We'll bully the fact that they turn slowly! Intercept in the front field, as long as the ball is at their feet! We're physically better than them! And we're younger than them!"

Twain slammed the tactical board with his palm.

For that reason, his starting lineup was full of young players. The strikers were Nicklas Bendtner and Arshavin. The midfielders were Ribéry, Lennon, van der Vaart, and George Wood. In the rear defensive line, there was Pepe, Piqué, Gareth Bale, and Rafinha. The oldest in this starting lineup was the goalkeeper, Edwin van der Sar.

Twain's tactics were simple, and there were no shocking magical tricks. He just used players who were younger than the AC Milan players, had good stamina and physical fitness advantages to topple AC Milan, and to catch the opponent off guard at the beginning of the game.

The tactic was a bit risky, but it was better than clinging fast to defense to obtain a tied away game. A football game was supposed to be a gamble. No matter how well prepared a tactic was, the plan could not always keep up with the changes.

Twain decided to start the offense from an entirely new entry point, starting from everyone's usual knowledge of the Forest team's habits.

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The AC Milan players did not think that Nottingham Forest would choose such a crazy tactic in the away game — offense, and not just simply offense. In addition to offense, more offense!

"If our offense does not work within fifteen minutes, then..." Twain did not go on. He just shook his head. Taking a gamble required a little bit of excitement to be fun.

Nottingham Forest's offense was fierce, but it had yet to break the old rear defensive line of AC Milan. Ancelotti was not an idiot. Just like how Twain managed to successfully plot against the man last time in the City Ground stadium, AC Milan managed to ward off his offense this time in the San Siro stadium.

Being old also had its benefits, such as invaluable battle-worn experience and Maldini's impeccable command.

After fifteen minutes, the score was still 0:0.

“Tony, what’s going to happen next...” asked Kerslake.

“Keep fighting like this.” Twain answered without turning his head as he watched the field.

At the end of the first half, the score was still 0:0.

During halftime, Twain did not criticize his players for not scoring in the first half. Instead he encouraged the players’ performance and told to continue playing in the second half like they did in the first half. There were no special changes.

The two teams changed sides to compete again in the second half. AC Milan significantly stepped up the offensive to try to score a goal.

Ancelotti admitted that his team was stunned by Nottingham Forest’s surprise offensive in the first half and was a little unresponsive. He ruminated during the second part of the first half, and realized that the Forest team’s offensive was fierce, but without merit. It looked ferocious, but there was no firm defense within the attack. It was a product from a spurt of energy. It would be promising if they could hold on to their attack.

Once he understood that, the first half was over. During halftime, Ancelotti instructed his team to be a little more proactive in the second half and to boldly attack if there was a chance for offense. They did not need to be afraid that there would be gaps in their rear defensive line because they might lose out in one area but gain in another. As long as AC Milan dared to press up, Nottingham Forest’s offensive would have to pull back and be recalled. The defensive pressure on their side would naturally ease.

That was what happened. AC Milan stepped up their offensive in the second half and suppressed the opponent’s offense with their own offensive. The game was entertaining.

The two teams fought fiercely. Kaka had a wonderful performance and Ribéry, the new Ballon d’Or recipient, also did his best. There had been media reports that the game between the two teams was actually a continuation of the feud between the Ballon d’Or recipient and FIFA World Player of the Year. There were still some people who cried foul that Ribéry only received the Silver Ball for the FIFA World Player of the Year.

It was like a duel between two superb masters. They played brilliantly and marvelously, and the spectators cheered with gratification. But in fact, no one really hit their target.

Twain did not stand up. He did not cross his legs. Instead, he cupped his chin in the palm of his left hand with his left elbow rested on his lap as he fixed his eyes on the field. The television broadcast frequently panned to him but could not capture his expression.

Ancelotti got up frequently and paced back and forth between the field and the technical area.

He could already tell what Twain wanted to do, but unlike at the City Ground stadium, he could not change anything this time. He had used up the two substitution spots on offense, and he could not make Maldini and the others on the rear defensive line ten years younger.

In the first eighty minutes, the pace of the game was set by the Forest team, and it was very fast. Neutral football fans in front of the TV whooped with relish as they watched. The AC Milan fans who understood football frowned silently.

The AC Milan players could not run anymore.

The Nottingham Forest players — from the fastest-paced league, the English Premier League — were still alive and well. Furthermore, even more frightening was that Twain finally got up from the technical area and decided to change players. He replaced van der Vaart, who was not feeling well, with Petrov and moved Ribéry to the middle.

Ancelotti raised his eyebrows.

In the 87th minute, AC Milan's Italian style of defense collapsed.

Maldini could no longer withstand the repeated shocks from Nottingham Forest — Lennon passed the ball from the flank, and Bendtner pressed in on the former world's best left-back to shoot a powerful header.

Dida pounced on the ball and let go, and Ribéry followed up with a volley.

The people in the Nottingham Forest technical area and on substitutes' bench rushed out of their seats with their arms raised.

Twain and Kerslake embraced excitedly. They finally scored! The dark clouds that hung above their heads were swept away. Even better, it was a last-minute goal. If AC Milan did not want to be eliminated, they had to score two consecutive goals within the remaining six minutes! But it would not be easy for the AC Milan players, who had been led by the Forest team in a fast-paced high-speed sports competition the entire game.

Why did Twain insist on offense? It was to drag the aging AC Milan players into a fast-paced battle and consume their strength. If the experienced players had not helped, AC Milan's goal should have been breached long ago. But it was good, because there was not much time left for AC Milan.

After the game resumed, AC Milan desperately pressed on the attack, and the Forest team played defensive counterattack, keeping AC Milan at a loss.

Eventually, at the San Siro stadium, the home of AC Milan, Nottingham Forest beat its rival by 1:0. They also knocked out the team that used to have high hopes placed on them with a total score of 1:0.

The San Siro stadium was filled with a sense of loss. The AC Milan fans in the stands even had tears on their faces. They were unable to accept that the powerful AC Milan was stopped at the round of 16, knowing that their goal would have been to break into the finals again. And then whoever the opponent was, they were going to finally win the Champions League title. How could they stop there?

Tony Twain celebrated the victory wildly, completely different from his calm during the game. Some of the AC Milan fans thought it was a provocation, and there were fragments of boos from the stands near the Forest team's technical area.

But not many AC Milan people were interested in booing Twain and his team. Their failure could not be changed. They could only hope that the team's performance in the domestic arena would satisfy them. Most of the fans left the stadium in frustration.

At the post-match press conference, Twain, who won the game, did not continue with his sarcasm. Compared to his previous performance on the sidelines, he now was very calm and mild.

The words used to describe Twain were a little odd to people, but he was currently acting that way. He smiled and answered all the questions, without the slightest hint of provocation in his tone, which those who were familiar with him found strange. Was Tony Twain possessed by an alien?

Ancelotti did not expect Twain's attitude to be so nice. He even took the initiative to embrace him a couple of times at the press conference. The first time was before the start of the press conference. They walked up and hugged briefly. The second time was at the end. Twain again took the initiative to hug him and patted him on the shoulder, as if to comfort him.

It surprised Ancelotti so much that he thought the man had taken the wrong medicine.

Then Twain smiled and left the venue under everyone's astonished gazes.

No one knew why Twain was so happy, so they discussed and speculated it. It was quite simple. Nottingham Forest beat AC Milan and took another step toward the Champions League final. For the defending champion, it had been extremely tough to defend this season. Every step forward was joyful.

Twain was just happy because he won the game. Who did not like to win? He was someone who regarded victory as life.

Chapter 622: The Troubles of The Forest Merry Men

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In the eyes of the media, Twain not being sarcastic when he opened his mouth was "loss of control" and forgetting himself. In fact, his recent good mood was a form of expression.

Having eliminated AC Milan in the Champions League game and advanced to the top eight, they also had endless success in the domestic league tournament. In the 27th round of the league tournament, Nottingham Forest already had the same number of points as the top-ranked Arsenal. They only ranked second because they had fewer scored goals than Arsenal.

After the 28th round of the league tournament, Twain's team jumped to number one. Arsenal currently had 64 points after they tied for two consecutive games and Manchester United caught up to them. While the Forest team topped the table with 66 points.

Nottingham Forest rushed to first place in the league this season. Even though they had not managed to keep the spot from start to finish, it was enough for the Forest fans to be filled with hope. Because Nottingham Forest did not rush into the number one spot at all for the first two seasons, it was a boost to their confidence. The UEFA Champions League title had allowed the Forest team to discover the confidence of a winner.

As a result, their performance this season also seemed reasonable. One had to know that it took Twain four years of preparation to get to this day.

There were ten rounds left in the league tournament. As long as the Forest team was able to maintain this result, they would be able to achieve the goal he set at the

beginning of the season with ten more rounds to go.

How could he not be happy in the face of such a wonderful situation?

Of course, this happiness would not last long. Twain was still clear about this. He was aware that to be a manager, there were far more troubles than happy occasions...

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With the recommencement of the Champions League games and the national team competition included during this period, the Forest team would need to face many games in the final phase. He would need to carefully manage during that period. One careless move and the entire game could be lost. Rotation was the best way to make use of different lineup combinations to let the players rest, stay in shape, and avoid injury.

Fortunately, the Forest team gave up the English FA Cup in early January.

Otherwise there would be an additional FA Cup for them to play. Toward the end, the stronger the opponents and the more determination to fight, the more intense the games would be and the less regard for injury. It was unnecessary for use up their energy for this kind of competition.

The Twain that transmigrated from China was not a true Englishman. He was far less interested in the English FA Cup than the Premier League and Champions League. Perhaps the FA Cup still had its important status, but in Twain's heart, the FA Cup and the EFL Cup belonged to the same category: used to train and cultivate new players.

The Forest team's current rotation was different from the rotation in the first half of the season. The earlier half of the season allowed more players to play and maintain their form while placating the hearts of his players. Twain often employed large-scale rotations, but that situation changed after February.

The current rotation was not about satisfying the substitutes' desire to play, but for the main players to get better rest and avoid injury. Therefore, the rotation was small scale. Twain was determined not to rotate some key positions, such as the defensive midfielder.

Poor Sidwell discovered that the future was not as wonderful as he first imagined when he came to the Forest team — no human could be George Wood's replacement. Perhaps the only thing in the world that could probably do it was the chair in the substitutes' bench.

Unless Twain did not want Wood to play, Sidwell did not have a chance to play. They were eliminated in both the FA Cup and the EFL Cup a while ago, so his chances plummeted. Now as the competition schedule entered an intense period, he thought his chances of playing would increase. He did not expect Twain to rotate the strikers, midfielders, full-backs, and even the attacking midfielders, but not the defensive midfielder.

George Wood was young and strong and in a stable form. He was the mainstay core force. What did he have to compete with that monster? When he was on the Reading team, he was occasionally selected to appear for the England team. Since coming to Nottingham Forest, the door to the national team had been largely closed

to him. No coach would recruit a substitute player with a handful of appearances to play in a club, not to mention England's midfield was bloated. Even George Wood had been abandoned by McClaren.

Among the young players, Lennon and Bendtner had the best treatment. Since van Nistelrooy and Beckham were veterans, Twain paid more consideration to their protection during the rotation. As their substitutes, Bendtner and Lennon were able to have plenty of time to play.

Similarly, the rotation system was good news for the Chinese player, Sun Jihai. Since he could play multiple positions, he still had a place in the team even though his form had declined due to age. Twain liked Sun Jihai's professional attitude, so he did not really have to worry about the future. He could stay on the Forest team until his contract expired before considering other places.

Sidwell's agent was already considering a change of club for his player next season. Nottingham Forest paid a good salary, but for a professional player, still in his prime competition years, sitting on the bench and counting money were not ideal pursuits.

After nearly a season of sitting on the bench with the Forest team, Sidwell also repositioned himself. He was not the kind of player who was suited to play for a powerhouse team. Maybe he could be in the future, but not now. The best fit for him to play to his full ability was a mid to lower stream team like Reading. He might not be paid as well as being a substitute on the Forest team, but he would be able to get constant opportunities for appearances and even become the core of the team, as he did in Reading in the previous two seasons.

While he could still play, he did not want to spend his career on the bench of a powerhouse team and slowly be forgotten.

Perhaps he could win a lot of championship trophies if he stayed on the Forest team, but what did those shiny silver trophies have to do with him as a substitute? He could do without such an honor.

He decided to have a showdown with Manager Tony Twain at the end of the season. His agent would help him reach out privately to teams interested in him. They were not as famous as Nottingham Forest, but they would give him a stable position.

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Chimbonda had the same troubles as Sidwell.

He had realized a fact that made him feel hopeless. The Forest team's manager, Mr. Tony Twain had some things in common with the Arsenal manager, Mr. Wenger: if two players were compared, and Player B was more capable than Player A, but Player A was younger than Player B, then they would not hesitate to choose Player A, and not Player B.

The reality upset him a little. Chimbonda was no longer young. He just had his 29th birthday on the 21st last month. His contract would expire next summer, when he would be 30 years old.

For managers who valued youth, thirty years old was enough for them to find a better replacement. For example, the Brazilian mainstay, Rafinha who sat firmly on the team.

In Chimbonda's view, Rafinha, the full back from Brazil, was terrible. If the team

needed to defend, he still frequently needed the right midfielder and defensive midfielder to come over and help fill in the gaps.

But in Tony Twain's eyes, Rafinha was young and had good physical strength. He could run back when he went up to assist, an ability that had declined for the older Chimbonda.

He was once selected for the French national team during the most brilliant two years of the Forest team, but he soon became a transient player. Sagna, from Arsenal, had become the main player in the French national team, and he was also younger than Chimbonda.

Youth... youth, I hate youth!

That fight with Bendtner during training caused his position in the team to plummet further and he was ranked below Sun Jihai. He knew Manager Twain did not like him. He was getting older, and he was the first person to fight in the First Team since Twain took over.

Twain was very concerned about the unity and stability within the team, the area he was most proud of. He mentioned it countless times in front of the media and was slightly smug when he said that it was the reason that the Forest team could continue to improve and win. That was why he joked with the players and carefully maintained the atmosphere inside the locker room, which no one was allowed to destroy.

Chimbonda was well aware of it because he was the second batch of players to follow the man. The first group of Forest players, such as George Wood and Leighton Baines, had followed Twain since League One. He had also followed Tony Twain for a long time, so he knew the manager's character and likes. He also knew what he hated.

He hated everything that undermined unity within the team. He had forgotten. Did his future in the Forest team expire with the punch that he had thrown?

Was he going to find a different way out at the end of the season, or was he going to stay until his contract expired and see how the team's attitude towards him changed before he decided on his future?

Chimbonda had a heavy load on his mind.

On the whole, looking back on the Forest team over the past few years, it was rather good. The mood within the team was harmonious and there was none of the fights like certain powerhouse clubs. The team results were also good. Everyone's salaries and bonuses were satisfactory. No matter where they went, they enjoyed the various benefits that glory brought.

He did not want to leave this club. To be a European champion was something he did not even think of when he played in France. It was Nottingham Forest that gave him everything and he hoped to continue to play there for a few more years. It would be the best if he could play until he retired. Anyway, I have nothing to hope for. Join the French national team to win the World Cup? Stop kidding. To be able to play in a club that can still achieve honors and to play until retirement is the highest ideal for a professional player.

Chimbonda was a realistic man. He had no illusions.

That was the difference between the troubles that he and Sidwell faced.

He was 29 years old and getting older. A full-back's physical fitness requirements were higher than a center back. Stamina and speed were inversely correlated to the increase in age. Ambitious people would still be unyielding in the hope of achieving bigger challenges while more realistic people would start to consider life after retirement and make money the priority in the final period of their career. A stable and good income was what they wanted most. It made no difference whether they sat on the bench or were the main force.

Sidwell was now 25 years old. He would only be 26 years old at the end of the year. His physical fitness and competitive level could be maintained at a relatively high level for the next few years. He was in his "golden age" or "prime playing years." The bench was not the career that he wanted.

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A team that brought players from all over the world with different personalities and diverse ideas together was bound to have a current of tension underneath the seemingly calm surface. In fact, everyone would have a set of different troubles exclusive to them.

Tony Twain's control over this team could not be denied. He was the well-deserved king of this team and the highest leader of the team, and everyone listened to him. However, even a powerful manager could not control the hearts of everyone in his hands.

Chimbonda and Sidwell each had their own troubles, but others within the team might also have their own troubles.

For example, another new worry struck recently. The target was Ribéry, and Tony Twain also met with trouble.

"According to our Spanish counterparts, the La Liga powerhouse club, Real Madrid is brewing a plan to poach Nottingham Forest's core player, Franck Ribéry. It is rumored that the Real Madrid president, Calderón, is very interested in Franck Ribéry, who recently won the Ballon d'Or. Of course, the Real Madrid Football Club has formally clarified this rumor, denying that the club's sporting director, Mijatović, was in private contact with Ribéry agent..."

The latest transfer rumor that popped up on sports news was reprinted by major print media within two days. Because he won the Ballon d'Or and the "Player of the Year" award from World Soccer, Franck Ribéry had become a hot commodity in the football world. Any news about him was enough for the sports media to hype up, not to mention that that piece of news was linked with Real Madrid, the best football club of the twentieth century, the forever restive club, the club that liked to poach all kinds of "players of the year," the club that had just received a huge amount of television broadcast funds and commercial sponsorship funds.

At the same time, they were Nottingham Forest's rivals in the quarterfinals of the Champions League.

It was enough to let people's imagination roam.

Chapter 623: Not Going Anywhere

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After he ended a day of training, the Forest team manager, Tony Twain was surrounded by reporters on the sidelines of the training ground. He told them that the day after tomorrow was the team's regular press conference and they could ask their questions then, but the reporters did not intend to let him go just like that. "Have you heard the news, Manager Twain? Real Madrid is interested in Ribéry..."

"I have not heard it. I've never heard of this..." Twain held up his hands as if he were surrendering to the annoying flies.

"What do you think of this rumor? If it is something to do with Real Madrid, so is it basically true?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything. Don't ask me, I have no idea, I have no idea at all." Twain squeezed his way out. "The day after tomorrow is the regular press conference, and besides I don't know anything now. I have not even spoken to Ribéry about this. You won't be able to find out anything from me." Twain was eager to get out of his current predicament. "You have to let me find out what happened and why, before I can answer your questions and satisfy your desires, you bunch of curious babies... All right! Now let me out of here! Damn it!"

He pulled the two reporters in front of him aside and rushed out of the encirclement. "It's going through a battle trying to leave work... Damn it!" Twain muttered as he ran out.

He had not spoken to Ribéry yet, but it did not mean that he knew nothing. As a manager, he had his own ways of getting the information.

After he learned of the rumor from the media, his first thought was not to scold Real Madrid for poaching his player, but to prove the truth of the news.

Because of the unfortunate timing of this rumor — just before the Forest team and Real Madrid was supposed to play a game — the news that Real Madrid was interested in the Forest team's Franck blew up in the media.

From the point of view of a conspiracy theorist like Twain, how could he not think of other scenarios?

Was it fake news deliberately fabricated by Real Madrid to distract Nottingham Forest? It was not as if nobody had used that method before. Similar small tricks were the norm in professional football.

Other than arson and murder, any means could be used for victory.

If even giving opponents drugged water could happen, then what was so strange about this?

Thus Twain decided to check the truth first.

He looked for European football's big shot agent, Mendes, hoping to get some information about it from him.

Mendes was a big player in the agency world and well-informed. He would know if it was real news or false rumor. Twain got what he wanted from him.

But now he did not want to tell the reporters because he had not spoken to Ribéry yet. He felt it was necessary for him to hear what Ribéry had to say.

Having shaken off the annoying reporters, Twain walked back to his office. During training, he had given Ribéry a heads up and asked him to head to his office after training was over.

Because Twain was delayed by the reporters, Ribéry was already waiting inside by the time he returned to the office.

Ribéry knew why Twain wanted to talk to him alone. He stood up from the couch when he saw Twain enter the room. He greeted him with a grin on his face. "Boss!" Twain nodded and walked behind his desk to sit down.

There was no need to beat about the bush. "I've noticed the recent news..." He paused and hoped that Ribéry would take the initiative to continue, but Ribéry just looked at him with a smile on his face. He curled his lips. "Has your agent been in contact with Real Madrid?"

Ribéry nodded. "Mijatović looked for my agent."

Twain grunted. That was what Mendes told him. Ribéry did not lie to his face. He felt slightly relieved.

He hated it the most when his players lied to him, like Ashley Young. No matter how good the relationship was before, there would always be an ill feeling in the heart. A broken mirror was impossible to repair. Once the relationship had a rift, it would always be there, reminiscent of uncomfortable things.

If Ribéry had lied to him, what would he do? Twain was not willing to think about such a thing. He was very fond of Ribéry and did not want to let a small matter spoil their relationship.

"Do you want to go to Real Madrid?" Twain asked.

"Not yet, boss." Ribéry shook his head.

"Does that mean it's possible in the future?"

"Who can certain about the things in the future?" Ribéry replied with a smile.

Twain had to admit that Ribéry was right. No one knew what would happen in the future. He would like to continue working on the Forest team, but what if the Forest

team went bankrupt due to the newly built stadium, the owner changed, and the new owner did not like Twain's bad temper. What was he going to do if he were fired? It was just a small possibility, but who could guarantee it would not happen?

Ribéry's remark was very honest. If he had patted his chest and said he would not go anywhere, Twain would probably have been suspicious.

Twain was lost in his thoughts, and Ribéry realized it. "Are you worried that I'm going to be distracted by this, boss?" he asked.

"Ah, uh... Well." He was not worried about it. He was worried that he would really lose Ribéry. When Scarface was not yet well known, the Nottingham Forest team was everything to him. But as his fame grew, the honors such as the Ballon d'Or award, the Player of the Year award, and the Silver Ball in FIFA World Player of the Year poured in. One day, would Ribéry think that a pond like Nottingham Forest was too small?

There were others who were the same as Ribéry.

While Twain pursued constant victories and championship titles, he also elevated the value and expectations of his players on the team. If one day they felt that the Forest

team could no longer meet their expectations, would they leave? There was no denying that there were loyal players who would rather stay with the team as it was relegated, but most people would chase after better interests.

“A man will do anything in his means to become rich” might be a little serious, but “water flows downhill, and people climb higher” was a very normal thing.

Twain did not mind turnover on the team. New blood was always needed to stay vitalized. But he did not want the few valued players to leave. After all, as an ordinary person, he still had a sense of “loyalists” complex and hoped that his team would produce a few loyalists to accompany him through thick and thin to rule the football world. They would rise together from there and bid farewell there as well... How wonderful and romantic it would be!

The most romantic thing I can think of is to accompany you as we slowly grow old.

“Don’t worry, boss.” Ribéry laughed again. He had not had any plastic surgery done yet, and the scar on his face pulled as he laughed, which made him look a little strange, but he liked to laugh and did not care how he looked.

“This level of harassment is not going to bother me. I will play like how I usually play. Besides, these kinds of things are handled by my agent. He will not look for me unless it is really time to leave.”

“That’s pathetic of your agent, Franck.” Twain cracked a joke and ended the conversation.

What Ribéry said was the same as what Twain had learned. Ribéry did not deceive him, which was the purpose in finding Ribéry to talk alone. Now he could go and calmly face the media, because he did not want to say in front of them that “my

player is loyal and Real Madrid will hit a wall if they try to poach him” and be stabbed in the back by that player.

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In Madrid, the sunny Valdebebas training complex for the Real Madrid Football Club was the largest football training base in the world, so it was called “a sports city.”

As a senior staff member of the Real Madrid Club board, Mijatović had an office in Valdebebas, but he was rarely there. He flew around the world, looking for the extraordinary star players for Real Madrid.

But he showed up today. President Calderón was there and he was there to report to the president on his trip to the United Kingdom.

The main focus was about the result of his meeting with Franck Ribéry’s agent. When he got out of the car, he was stopped by the manager, Schuster, who also guided the team’s training.

“Mr. Mijatović, I’ve heard some rumors about our team recently...”

It was a little awkward for Mijatović to be stopped by Schuster, so he chuckled. “Are you referring to Franck Ribéry, Mr. Schuster?”

“Obviously. I just have one question: why do I have to find out the news about a new player joining my team from the press?” Schuster looked upset. He was also known as a fanatic coach in Spain. After he joined Real Madrid, he was slightly more disciplined in a powerhouse club. It was superficial; he had not changed his character.

“Ah, about that. Mr. Schuster, you are the manager of this team and only responsible for the training and competition. I’m in charge of the jobs like the players’ transfers. This is the division of labor. We are assigned different jobs...”

Schuster interrupted him. “Of course I know the division of labor is different. I also know that this is not England and a coach here is not really a manager. I’m not asking for much. I just hope you give me a heads up when you decide who you want to buy. Just a little discussion?” He looked upset as he continued. “I don’t want to find out from the media who my team intends to sign.”

It was about the dignity of a manager, and Schuster had reason to be upset. Once he was in a powerhouse club, he realized that it was not easy to be its manager. His title was “manager,” but it was more like a puppet. Even Mr. President had a say in the team’s layout, but he had no right to be heard at all in the transfer market. Looking at Mijatović anxious look, Schuster smiled. “Is Mr. President waiting for you?”

See, even a meeting like this doesn’t involve me. I can’t buy the players I want but they keep pushing for the players I don’t want.

Mijatović did not respond to the question with an obvious answer.

“Well, good luck, Mr. Mijatović. Also, I want to give you a tiny reminder that we can’t even fit an ant on the left flank.”

Mijatović heard the remark and walked away with a sullen face. He even forgot to say goodbye.

Looking at his back, Schuster had a disgusted expression.

He looked up at the blue sky and his thoughts meandered from the subject of Ribéry to Nottingham Forest, their opponent in the quarterfinal games of the Champions League.

They were a tricky opponent, the type that Real Madrid disliked the most to encounter. They disliked them from their manager to their players.

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“The Real Madrid club has denied this matter, and I don’t think it’s necessary to continue the hype.” Twain and George Wood attended the regular press conference together. He did not bring Ribéry because he did not want to give the group of reporters the chance to continue the hype. Now that the league tournament and the Champions League games intertwined as they progressed, the pressure on the team as the front-runner in the league tournament was already immense. He did not want the media to continue to put pressure on the team because of the matter.

He told the media, “Nothing of this sort, completely baseless rumors, that’s all.”

“But Manager Twain, in the summer of 2003, Real Madrid also said they had no contact with Beckham at all...”

“Then you have to ask the president of Real Madrid, and not come here to ask me.”

Twain was not happy. “You can ask them, ‘have you ever lied to the public? We have the right to know.’” He mimicked the sharp tone of the reporter.

Someone laughed.

“Franck Ribéry is currently a player at Nottingham Forest and will be in the future. It’s so simple, and you guys have to make it complicated. I don’t think there is any need

to continue the discussion on this topic. From now on, if you ask about the league tournament and the Champions League, I'd be happy to answer you. But if it's still about Franck Ribéry, I won't answer."

"We have the right to ask questions..."

"I also have the right to refuse to answer," Twain retorted.

The reporters looked at the two sitting at the table — Tony Twain and George Wood, the most difficult combination to deal with — so he gave up.

"Well, can you talk about the latest situation on the training?"

The press conference was back on track to what Twain wanted.

George Wood sat to one side and did not say a word. He looked more like a background fixture than a living person. The reporters knew there was nothing valuable to ask Wood, so no one bothered him.

As they were on their way out at the end of the press conference, Wood, who had been silent, asked Twain, "will Ribéry really leave?"

Twain froze for a moment and then smiled. "You should ask Ribéry."

"I already asked, and he said he would certainly not go."

"That's all there is to it. Why did you still ask me?" Twain spread his hands.

"But didn't Real Madrid also say that they had not been in private contact with Ribéry's agent?"

"Hey, you kid... All right... I don't want him to leave, and I'm sure he won't. I don't think there will be any other place for him other than Nottingham Forest. Are you satisfied with this answer, George?"

Wood did not answer but did not continue to ask any questions.

Because he also did not think there was a better team in the world than Nottingham Forest.

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The rumors about Real Madrid's pursuit of Franck Ribéry came to an end the next day.

Pierce Brosnan published an interview with Ribéry in the Nottingham Evening Post, in which he expressed his love and loyalty toward the Forest team.

"I love this team and have a lot of fun living in Nottingham. I don't think there's a team better suited to how I play than this team. I want to thank Real Madrid for their interest in me, even though it was just a rumor... After all, for a club like Real Madrid to be interested means that my ability is recognized, but I would like to reiterate that I will not leave. I like this team. I like my teammates and coaches here. We are like a big family. Of course, the fans here are the best I've ever seen. I'm enjoying it all, and I don't see any need to leave."

With this newspaper in his hand, Twain had a good laugh.

He was really very happy, from the bottom of his heart.

He and Ribéry were on the same page. It's truly wonderful that Ribéry likes it here!

Chapter 624: You're Under Pressure, I'm Under Pressure

The Forest team played an important league game when the rumors about Ribéry's transfer swirled around. Their opponent was Arsenal, their direct competitor for the league title. Twain would not allow the team to make any mistakes, but the result was not what he wanted.

The game ended up with a 0:0 draw. They were forced to a tie with Arsenal at home, and Twain was a little upset. However, there was no other way. He could not win the game just because he wanted to win. The game was not always won by the strongest team; sometimes luck was the most important factor. The Forest team was as powerful as Arsenal and comparable in terms of luck. So they could only tie.

The draw was not a good result for either team. Twain wanted to win, and so did Wenger. As the season drew to a close, the top three teams had hopes of winning the league title. Which team would give up?

The draw was great news for Ferguson's Manchester United team.

Taking advantage of the Forest team's draw, Manchester United, who won their league game for the round, rose to the first in the league's rankings. They had the same number of points as Forest, but were dominant in terms of goals scored.

In March, after the Champions League tournament was completed, the most important thing was the domestic league. There were now nine rounds left out of 38, and the top three teams were still in a tight race.

At present, Manchester United was in first place with 67 points, Nottingham Forest was in second with 67 points, followed by Arsenal with 65 points. No one knew which team would become the league champion.

It was the delight of football for the spectators, but not an easy job for the three teams' managers.

Furthermore, all the three teams had advanced to the quarterfinals in the Champions League. Another English team in the quarterfinals was Chelsea, led by Grant.

Faced with the hope of both the league title and the Champions League title again, Twain did not want to give up the league tournament like he did a year ago. After communicating with the coaching staff and team doctors, he believed the team's condition could cope with the two competition. They currently ranked second in the league and had the same points as Manchester United. Even though they would challenge Real Madrid in the Champions League, the Forest team might not lose. It would be a pity to give up either side.

Therefore, the Monday morning after they played the league game against Arsenal, Twain announced the team's real goal this season at the regular coaches' meeting.

"I want to win both championships."

The coaching staff was not surprised, as if they had taken it into account.

With Twain's propensity to pursue victory and championship titles, plus the strength of the team was now a level higher, he really had no reason to give up any of these championships.

The players had the ability and the manager had the idea, so that was how it would be.

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On March 16th, the 30th round of the league, at their home ground, Nottingham Forest deployed a lineup made of half main players and half substitutes to defeat Bolton Wanderers by 1:0. They continued to keep pace with Manchester United in the rankings while the hapless Arsenal, on the other hand, was behind the two teams by four points after a tie with Middlesbrough.

Just as the media began to speculate on whether Nottingham Forest or Manchester United would be the final champion of the league, the Forest team unexpectedly lost in the 31st round of the league.

On March 22nd, Nottingham Forest had an away challenge against Blackburn Rovers. Although the opponent currently ranked mid-stream, and Blackburn Rovers was crushed 5:3 by the Forest team in the first half of last year's league tournament, Twain still dared not take them lightly. He sent the strongest squad he could.

However, while he took it seriously, his players did not have the same regard. Nottingham Forest underestimated the opponent during the game and was slow in getting into the game state.

The result was a goal by the opponent in the opening thirteen minutes.

Following that, the Forest team launched a counterattack and tied the score shortly after the start of the second half. The Forest fans thought it was time for the Forest star players to perform next, but they did not expect Blackburn's breakout.

They scored two consecutive goals in the final ten minutes of the game, destroying the Forest team's dream of a reversal to achieve victory.

"To be fair... Nottingham Forest has no reason to win this game at all." After the game, the television commentator said, "I couldn't find the slightest positive point other than that equalizer goal. The players of the Forest team played as if they were asleep. John said the Forest team was slow to enter the state, but I thought they did not get in at all... It could be that they underestimated their opponent. Who knows? They lost anyway. Manchester United comes out ahead in fight for the league title."

Twain's face turned ugly when he heard the whistle at the end of the game. They had lost to the most undeserving opponent at a crucial moment in the race for the league title. After his team tied with Arsenal, Twain just comforted his players that it was just bad luck and he was not furious, but now he was keen to rush into the locker room and berate everyone.

In his plan, a game against a strong team was an effort to win, and a draw was the minimum requirement, but when up against a midstream team that was not as strong as they were, especially an unambitious midstream team, the Forest team's goal was victory and nothing else. The name "Blackburn Rovers" was included in Twain's "victory list" and the three points were planned.

Who would have guessed they would end up losing the game!

With those three points gone, their same-point advantage with Manchester United was gone. The Forest team fell to the second place, and the points gap with Manchester United turned into a three-point difference.

The three-point gap could not be underestimated. In the final sprint of the league tournament, even a one-point gap could cause irreparable failure, so no one wanted to make a mistake at a time like that. Making a mistake meant a season of hard work would be for naught.

Unfortunately...

The atmosphere seemed a bit subdued in the visitors' locker room at Ewood Park stadium because of the loss. Tony Twain was outside for the post-match press conference, and Kerslake was comforting some of the dejected players.

Everyone knew what it meant to lose the game: they had ceded the initiative to compete for the league title to Manchester United.

The locker room door opened with a "whoosh" sound and everyone raised their heads to see Twain with a dark expression.

Someone even heard a swallow.

"In the press conference, all the reporters' questions for me were just about one thing: 'whether this loss will have any adverse effect on the team's bid for the title.'" Twain said to his players as he shut the door with the back of his hand. His voice was low, but the Forest players knew it was nothing more than a low dark cloud in the sky before the storm.

"Guess how I answered? 'You ask the question when you already know the answer.'" Twain shrugged. "I wanted to say something that was more unpleasant, but I did not want to cause any more trouble. At this critical juncture, I f**king sent in the strongest squad, just for you to go up and underestimate the enemy!" He did not hold back from the use of foul language. "I'm so disappointed by your performance! No fighting spirit at all! I thought you guys were going to play a little better after that equalizer. I did not think you'd become incompetent right away! What were you thinking? We don't have a Champions League game, and we don't have to play in the FA Cup. It's just this damn league tournament! Blackburn Rovers! You couldn't even defeat such an opponent! How else do you expect to compete for the title against Manchester United and Arsenal?! You actually lost to the Blackburn Rovers!"

Twain scolded everyone, including the team captain, George Wood. The reason Twain scolded him was that Wood had too little support for the team's offense. He didn't appear firm enough when it was time to go up and seemed too concerned about defense.

No one could escape the misfortune of Twain's spittle, except for those who failed to come to the away game.

"Think about it! You bunch of bastards!"

After he scolded everyone, Twain slammed the door and left, leaving a room full of people staring blankly at each other. The atmosphere was extremely awkward.

The people on the current Forest team were not used to being scolded by their own manager so mercilessly. The team had done well the last two years, so Twain rarely criticized them. He wanted to maintain a good atmosphere, and the players' performance gave him no cause for any rebuke. So the older players had forgotten that Twain's mouth could sometimes aim at them and the newcomers had no chance to encounter that kind of thing.

No one liked to be scolded, whether they was a nobody or a star player. Twain's unapologetic rant had left some feeling embarrassed. But Tony Twain was the manager of the team, so they could only be silent and bury the dissatisfaction deep in their hearts.

Bendtner kicked his boots off in frustration. The brittle sound of cleats hitting the ground broke the silence in the locker room.

Kerslake clapped and forced a smile onto his face. "Well, guys, don't take it to heart. Whether it's this failure or... whatever else, pack up your things and get ready to board the bus."

The group began to quietly pack their backpacks.

Kerslake whispered a few words to Dunn and turned to leave the locker room. He was going to look for Tony Twain. Some things could not be bottled up inside.

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Kerslake found Twain sitting inside the bus.

"Tony."

Twain looked up at him. The anger on his face had not dissipated.

"I think we need to talk."

"What about?"

"About the mess you left behind after your venting."

"Are you saying I shouldn't criticize them?"

"No, that's not what I mean." Kerslake saw Twain's face darkening and knew he was still angry. "I just think... the players already know the problem lies with them and I'm sure they'll kill their opponent in the next game. But your admonishment screwed things up... Well, I mean, you did not stir up their competitiveness, but you might have scolded them into..."

"How so?" Twain gave a quick glance sideways at Kerslake.

"Tony, once a crack appears, it's impossible to heal again. I don't want any discordance to appear in the locker room..."

"Are you worried that I've caused some players to become our enemies with my scolding?"

Kerslake did not answer, but his manner unmistakably told him the answer.

Twain did not refute him. He frowned and remained silent for a moment. "Well, I'll apologize to them, but I'll wait until tomorrow. I can't back down now."

Kerslake smiled. "I knew you are a smart man, Tony."

"No need for flattery. I'm in a bad mood right now," Twain said gruffly.

"Take a moment to relax." As the season drew to a close and the goal of a Double was officially put on the table, Kerslake knew that the pressure on Twain's head was growing. When they won the game,

they were afraid of losing the next. Or they regretted not winning after a draw. As for losing a game... they did not even want to talk about it. That pressure would be with him all the time until the season ended.

“Take care of yourself, Tony.” He recalled how Twain came to him with a miserable expression and said he did not feel well after they had tied the home game with AC Milan and had asked him to attend the press conference. Kerslake was taken aback. Being a manager was a stressful career, and in the long run, the position was quite damaging to people’s health.

He still remembered the sudden fainting incident of Liverpool’s former manager, Houllier, in 2001, while he directed the game against Leeds United. When he was rushed to hospital, he was diagnosed with a heart attack and only managed to survive due to an eleven-hour surgery. Houllier spent five months recuperating before he returned to the Liverpool manager’s post.

The English Premier League managers might be under the most pressure in the world, whether they were at the top or bottom of the rankings. Everyone was under pressure and no one was much more relaxed than another.

Kerslake worried that the recent events would add to Twain’s psychological stress and cause damage to his health, so he had to remind Twain to stay calm at such times.

“You’re the manager of the team. If something happens to you, we will not only lose the game. It will be easy to lose the entire season.”

Twain was not an unreasonable man. He could not be angry in the face of Kerslake’s kindness.

“Thank you, David.” He could only express his gratitude. His body felt fine. Only the psychological pressure was great. However, what manager was not under a little psychological pressure? If he could not withstand this pressure, he should just quit.

“In that case... I will head back. Those boys are taking their time to get changed...” Kerslake got off the bus and went back to the locker room to urge the players to come out.

Twain sat alone in the empty bus, recalling every word he had just said in the locker room. Now that he was a little calmer, he admitted that some of his words were vicious. It looked like an apology was in order, but he had to wait until the next day.

He wanted to let the boys feel his anger to the fullest. Otherwise, if he joked and had fun with them all the time, would they really think that they could do whatever they want and he would condone it? You can joke with me, but you can’t lose a game. Losing a game that shouldn’t have been lost is even worse.

I’m the boss of this team. Ace player? Superstar footballer? You all have to listen to me.

The sound of footsteps came from outside the bus, and the Nottingham Forest players boarded one by one. He kept a straight face and did not acknowledge them. The players were also quiet as they got on the bus.

In this uncomfortable atmosphere, Nottingham Forest returned to Nottingham overnight to prepare for the next round of the league tournament — a home game against Portsmouth, who humiliated them with a score of 7:4. But this time, no one would dare to look down on their opponent again, because like

Blackburn Rovers, who once scored three goals against the Forest in the first leg and was even better than them, Portsmouth had once scored four goals against Nottingham Forest, who claimed to start out with defense.

Chapter 625: Likes and Dislikes

The atmosphere on the training ground today was slightly heavy due to Twain's sudden outburst in the locker room the day before. Kerslake initially thought that Twain would apologize on the spot once the players came arrived. He did not expect Twain to just wave for the team to start the training as normal and then stand silently on the side, wearing his sunglasses so that no one could see his eyes.

It made him a little disgruntled. How could he renege on what they had agreed upon?

But now he had to be in charge of the team training, and he knew that he had to protect Twain's image in front of everyone. We will discuss the matter in private.

Twain did not give him the opportunity. As soon as the training was over, he gathered the team and made a formal apology.

"I have to apologize to you." He said. Some of the players looked surprised.

"I know I blew my top a little yesterday. When I thought about it later, I felt some of my words were harsh. I can't treat you like that because you're all my players and we're a team for better or worse. I shouldn't have given you a dressing down for losing the game." Twain said as the looks of astonishment on the men's faces deepened.

Dunn stood behind Twain without any expression on his face. He was very familiar with the speech. Twain recited to him at least ten times yesterday before he was finally able to deliver it so smoothly.

"I know I've caused myself a lot of trouble with this mouth, but it's definitely not my intention to give you trouble."

Kerslake did not anticipate Twain to adopt such a humble stance. He thought at best that it would be "I am sorry for what happened yesterday." He did not expect him to say so much.

"So, I'm here to offer a formal apology to you. Let bygones be bygones. Although it was not right for me to rebuke you all, losing a game was not a good thing either. I do not want to lose another game in the next round of the league tournament." The last remark fully indicated that Twain was still a little unhappy.

The small crisis passed as a result of his voluntary apology. The team returned to normal and there was more laughter during the training. Twain still joked with the people around him, looking no different from before.

Twain did not say he was angry because he was stressed. Although he was really angry due to it, he could not say it to the players. He did not want to admit that he lost control due to stress. What would the players think of him? Would some think that their manager was actually a coward who was strong in appearance but weak in reality? Would they be disappointed, lose their trust in him, and no longer listen to everything he said?

Twain dared not gamble with people's hearts, so he still had to act as if he were fearless to placate their hearts.

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On March 29th, the final league game before the Champions League quarterfinals, Nottingham Forest easily beat Portsmouth, which came for revenge, by 2:0 at home.

Perhaps encouraged by Blackburn Rovers' win over Nottingham Forest in the previous round, Portsmouth wanted to achieve three points from the away game, too, but they overlooked the factor that made the Forest team value the game.

The Forest team that attached importance to strong opponents, so it was not a surprise that they lost. The entire game was under the control of the Forest team, and Portsmouth lost without the slightest chance.

After the game, the old Redknapp helplessly said, "There's nothing to say. The two teams are not on the same level at all."

Wasn't that the case? All of the Forest team's targets were championship titles, and Portsmouth's highest goal might be to qualify for the UEFA Europa League.

The two teams were not of the same category opponents at all.

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The win over Portsmouth did not increase the pressure on Twain's head. Nottingham Forest was second in the league, only three points behind the league's number one team, Manchester United. The next thing the Forest team could do was to make certain they did not make a mistake and wait patiently for Manchester United to slip up, twice in a row.

The probability of it was low.

Twain sighed and temporarily put the troubles of the league tournament aside to prepare for the Champions League game.

The opponent was Real Madrid. It was an away game first and then a home game, which was Twain's favorite schedule.

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After Nottingham Forest played the league, they flew straight to Madrid for the pre-match preparation.

Tony Twain was no stranger to Bernabéu. The European powerhouse clubs were so few that they would encounter them repeatedly, but he and La Liga's Real Madrid were brought together by fate.

The first time he had met Shania and taken her on a trip to Spain, they came to the Bernabéu stadium. He later led the team to play against Real Madrid in the Champions League and other tournaments on a number of occasions. He also got David Beckham for free from Real Madrid last summer.

Indeed, Beckham overshadowed Tony Twain this time in Madrid and became the media's focus.

While doing their adaptive training at the Bernabéu stadium, countless media outlets huddled on the sidelines, waiting to interview Beckham. When Twain announced the end of practice and free time for interviews, a group surged forward to surround David Beckham.

There were quite a few fans in the stands wearing Real Madrid jerseys and holding Beckham's posters and jerseys to welcome the Englishman.

"I am grateful to the Real Madrid fans for still remembering me even now. My four years at Real Madrid were fantastic and I am proud to have played for this great team." The interview took place on the sidelines of the training ground. Beckham, who had just finished training, had fine beads of sweat on his forehead, and his training suit was soaked in perspiration. He gasped slightly for breath as he spoke because of the intensity of the training, but he still showed a charming smile and patience. The sun shone on his face, and the smile seemed warm enough to melt hearts. Suddenly, screams could be heard.

Twain was educating Wood on the side, "George, take a look at David Beckham. This is what makes a star player. He speaks measuredly, pleases everyone, and does not offend anyone. Your image gives others a sense of keeping people at a distance. I don't think it's good."

George retorted, "You have offended all the people you can offend. Aren't you still a star?"

"Err..." Twain was momentarily tongue-tied. He watched Beckham, who was surrounded with a smile on his face, and asked Wood, "do you wish to be liked or hated by people?"

"I don't know." Wood answered quickly.

"You don't know?" Twain was a little staggered.

"Is it good to be liked or hated by people?" Wood asked.

Twain blurted out, "Of course it's to be liked by people."

"Then why do you seem so happy to be hated by people?"

Twain was dumbfounded again. He suddenly realized that George Wood's tongue was getting sharper.

"Ah, uh, this... That... In fact..." Twain hemmed and hawed for a while before he eventually came up with an excuse. "When I dislike people, I hope they hate me. When I like people, I hope that they also like me. It sounds like it's a mouthful, but that's what I mean anyway."

"Then don't you think it's just a delusion?"

"Hey, George!" Twain was a little annoyed. I know that it's deluded but you really shouldn't put it so bluntly.

Wood did not seem to hear the displeasure in Twain's tone. He looked at Beckham and said to himself, "Woox says he wants me to stay true to myself, but I don't know what my true qualities are. Sometimes I want everyone to hate me, and sometimes I want everyone to like me. Mom said I should try to make everyone like me, but I think it is difficult, because sometimes to let others like you, you have to do something that you do not like."

“Hey, George.”

“Yes?”

“You are even more deluded than I am.”

“Maybe. Anyway, I think if a star player is going to do a lot of things he does not like, I’d rather not be a star player. In fact, I do not want to be a star. I just want to earn money, that’s all.”

“If you don’t want to be a star, how are you going to make money?”

“It’s pretty good now.”

“Aren’t you a star now? Everywhere you go, someone asks you for an autograph. Woox has signed you a few commercial contracts. Do you know the influence of those businesses? They are leading in their respective industries. Do you like it when you attend those commercial events?”

Wood did not answer but looked distractedly at Beckham.

After a while, he said, “maybe I’ll hate it down the road.”

Twain nodded. That much was true. People wanted to be famous and looked forward to becoming a big star when they were still unknown. Once they became the focus of attention and even their farts interested the media, they would feel special and amazing. But when they were really famous, they would slowly realize that fame was actually a painful thing. They had no privacy at all, and everything was exposed to the public. Even being secretly captured on camera picking their nose at home would invite ridicule and criticism. Furthermore, the people who laughed at and criticized would think it was acceptable because “you are a public figure.”

Twain went through this kind of mentality change. Just after he had transmigrated, he had hoped to become famous. Now, he began to feel that fame was not a good thing. When he went out to return a Turkish female fan’s cell phone, it was treated by the media as a “rendezvous with a rumored girlfriend.” Fortunately, Shania knew the whole story behind the matter, or he would not know how worried he would be.

He was quite careful about his private life. But if anyone else commented on his life and used the reason “because you are a public figure,” he reckoned he would say “to hell with public figures” to the person’s face.

Wait a minute... Why would I think that if Shania did not know what was going on, I’d be in a lot of trouble.

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Beckham finally got rid of the reporters. The smile on his face had not disappeared from beginning to end. He appeared patient, kind, and gentle, which won a lot of people’s affection. The media finished their interview with Beckham and turned around to interview Twain. They suddenly felt themselves going from a sunny spring day to a cold and howling winter day.

“Don’t ask me about the lineup or tactics for the game. And don’t ask me how confident I am in winning,” Twain said with a straight face.

“Then what else can we ask?” Some of the reporters were displeased.

“Ah, we can talk about today’s weather.” A smile re-emerged on Twain’s face. “There’s plenty of sunshine in Madrid and I like the sun. Madrid is a very nice city. What do you think?”

George Wood started to pack up and leave. Not everyone would be interviewed by the reporters. Although he was the team captain, he was too low-key. Moreover, if someone came to interview him, he just dealt a few words. He was not David Beckham nor Tony Twain.

Beckham came over and seemed to be leaving as well.

The two men walked out side by side. When they walked to the exit, Beckham was stopped by a group of fans who leaned against the railing of the stands, reached down with their hands, and scrambled to get Beckham’s autograph.

Beckham did not show any impatience. He stopped in his tracks and smiled as he took the pens handed by the fans and signed the places they asked for.

Because George Wood was with Beckham, he was stopped as well and could not leave. He had to stand to the side and wait for Beckham to sign autographs.

If the security guards had not come over, perhaps the autograph signing would have been endless.

As they walked into the tunnel after they left the enthusiastic fans behind, Beckham smiled apologetically to George Wood. “Sorry that you had to wait there.”

Wood shook his head to show that he did not mind. He did not feel impatient while he waited, for he was lost in contemplation.

He thought of the first person to ask for his autograph and the first to acknowledge him, even earlier than Tony Twain.

If that had not happened, what would it be like now?

George Wood never thought of such an uninteresting question before, because people could not come back from the dead. But when he saw Beckham surrounded by a group of fans asking for autographs, he naturally thought about it.

— Give him an autograph. George, he’s your first fan. You can’t treat him so coldly. Squat down and sign!

— Here lies the beloved son of Michael Bernard and Fiona Bernard, Nottingham Forest’s most loyal fan, and George Wood’s eternal supporter — Gavin Bernard.

— George, you must become a big star player!

Would there be a little red in all that white?

“It’s good to sign autographs for the fans. I won’t feel impatient.”

Beckham smiled. "Other people said you're ferocious and kind of a traditional English tough guy. They compare you with Vinnie Jones and Robbie Savage. Why don't you try to refute it? We both know you're not."

Wood shook his head. "I hope the people I dislike hate me."

"George..."

"What's the matter?"

"You and Tony... Ah, no, boss are very much alike."

Wood concurred wordlessly.

Chapter 626: Ribéry Again

Loud booing erupted in the Bernabéu stadium stands, surging forth from the towering stands to the field, which put a huge strain on the fans of the visiting team.

The Bernabéu fans were gentle compared to the Camp Nou fans. Hissing at visitors did not happen much, except for a few of Real Madrid's arch-rivals. Though not an archrival, Nottingham Forest received loud booing, mainly due to George Wood.

He had just pushed down Robinho dribbling the ball in a high-speed dash.

The Brazilian BMX Boy was nimble and dribbled the ball past Wood's side. Stuck behind him, Wood wanted to stop the opponent's attack but could not achieve it through conventional means. Between a shovel to the ball from behind or a push, he chose the latter.

Robinho rolled several times, which looked pretty scary, but he did not actually get hurt at all. The home fans were extremely unhappy with the seemingly scary foul and were even more disgruntled that the referee only gave a verbal warning and did not pull out a card.

The Brazilian, Robinho, was much stronger than he had been when he first joined Real Madrid and had the upper hand in most physical confrontations. It was not easy for the average defensive player to push him down easily, but he lost his balance with a push from George Wood. The gap in the physical strength between the two men was apparent.

Defending against Robinho was to momentarily fill in a gap. George Wood's target for the game was not the Brazilian kid, but Guti.

After Zidane retired, Real Madrid's offense descended into a chaos, completely without a routine or goal. They were completely reliant on a few players' abilities and performances to be able to win. If they played badly, they would lose to any team. The situation only gradually improved after one season because last season's newly appointed manager, Schuster, trusted Guti enough and promoted him to become Real Madrid's midfield engine.

For more than a season, almost all of Real Madrid's attacks had been launched and organized by Guti, who was in a good shape. Real Madrid was not only winning, but also winning beautifully. But if Guti did not play nimbly, then Real Madrid would be crushed terribly.

Even though Wesley Sneijder was in good form and highly praised at the start of the season, Robinho, wearing Real Madrid number 10, was known as "Pelé's successor," and Real Madrid's front line was filled with brilliant star players and appeared to be good and powerful, if Guti was not at the back to launch the attacks and control the rhythm, the team was no different than a handful of loose sand.

Therefore, Twain laid out a strategy to contain Guti.

George Wood was the key figure, but the other teammates would help as well — not to help defend, but to assist in fouls.

Guti was a talented, but bad-tempered, player with a reckless character. He was never placed in important positions in the early days of his career, which had a lot to do with his character. It was not until Zidane's departure that he slowly made his mark and became the core of Real Madrid's midfield. However, he was still short-tempered and could easily lose control of his mood. Once his mood was out of control, his level of play would greatly decline, he would increasingly make mistakes, and become more irritable, and the quality of Real Madrid's offense would plummet.

As a result, the Forest team's tactics for the game were very simple: defensive counterattack for the offense and mainly anger and bar Guti in terms of defense. To be able to infuriate him would be the best. If they could not provoke him, then they would use the advantages of their overall defense to trap him, so that he could not easily take the ball and organize attacks.

Guti's strength was finding holes in his opponents' defenses and making unexpected straight passes. His penetrating straight passes repeatedly assisted his team in breaking through and scoring goals. But his weaknesses were also clear — his body was thin and weak. His ability to fight was not good. Once the opponent closed in and pressed hard, and then added some physical impact to interfere, he would have a greater chance of dropping the ball under his feet.

The incident with Robinho was purely accidental. Wood was originally going to defend against Guti, but Guti poked the football to Robinho. Wood had to change the target to the BMX Boy. He did not have the time to use footwork to fight with Robinho. After he was squeezed to the side, he immediately pushed Robinho to the ground and ended the attack from Real Madrid.

He carried on with his usual detestable style. He did not go up and reach out with his hand to pull up Robinho as a sign of friendliness. Instead, he turned and walked away.

Robinho lay on the ground in a daze for a moment. The referee came up to ask him if he was fine or if he needed a stretcher or something. He dilly-dallied to stand up but was not really hurt. The tumble looked scary, but the impact lessened during the tumble.

The boos in the Bernabéu stands continued until Real Madrid was ready to start with a free kick in the front field.

Real Madrid's number 23, Sneijder, drove the free kick into the penalty area and Pepe responded with a header. The football fell in the front of the penalty area and caused a sudden bout of looting.

Eventually van der Vaart brought the football out amidst the chaos and handed it to David Beckham who received it diagonally in front.

There was a round of applause in the stands when Beckham received the football. The applause did not come from the visiting team, Nottingham Forest's fan stands, but from the home fans.

The fans thanked him for his efforts to retake the league title for Real Madrid in the final season.

The scene really touched the bystanders. But for Beckham, it had nothing to do with him. He wanted to appreciate the love that the Real Madrid fans had shown him, but he had to wait until after the game. He was wearing a Nottingham Forest jersey with the ball at his feet. His teammates were actively running forward, ready to fight back. It was not the time to show mercy!

He did a long pass!

Van Nistelrooy went to the flank to receive the ball. Ribéry plugged in at a high speed. His sudden assault attracted the attention of the Real Madrid defenders. Diarra followed him to retreat and Cannavaro also focused on him. Van Nistelrooy passed the ball to his frontline partner, Eastwood.

Eastwood was outside the penalty area and close to the middle while he was temporarily unmarked. Because the defensive forces were curbed by Ribéry. He kicked a long shot without hesitation!

The quality of the shot was quite high! Fully preoccupied with defense, Casillas sprang up and caught the football with a single palm. Although the shot did not go in, it made the Bernabéu stadium gasp.

Eastwood launched the shot on the spot. He did not run up to it, relying entirely on leaning back and using his abdominal strength to drive the shot. The shot was sudden. If not for Casillas' excellent form, perhaps he would have gotten the shot in.

Real Madrid's defense was pathetic compared to its glittering offensive lineup. In the game, Schuster used Cannavaro and Heinze as center-back partners. The left-back was Marcelo and the right-back was Ramos. Of the four players, the two full-backs liked to attack. The center back-partners lacked height and it was strenuous trying to defend against high-altitude balls. Heinze was not a genuine center-back. He only occasionally played as one. He was best at playing in the left-back position. Consequently, it was not hard to imagine the level he played at in the position.

Real Madrid's defensive problems were still not better, and they basically relied on Cannavaro alone. When the former FIFA World Player of the Year was in a good shape, Real Madrid's defensive line looked decent. If his condition was not good, no matter how remarkable Casillas was, he could only accept the humiliation of picking up the ball from the inside of the net.

Real Madrid employed offensive tactics at home for the game. Their defensive line pressed forward and left many gaps behind. The Forest team's offensive tactic was very simple: find a way to hit the opponent's back. They would make use of Beckham's long passes, or van der Vaart to divert the ball, as well as the high-speed insertions from the two flanks to create and seek a void. It was not impossible to overcome Bernabéu as long as they were able to take advantage of their chances.

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Nottingham Forest's corner kick was fired, and it was a mess in front of the goal, but no one got to the ball which allowed Casillas to come out and confiscate it. Casillas threw it to launch a quick attack, wanting to counterattack against Nottingham Forest.

He threw the ball to Higuaín in front of him. Higuaín had intended to catch the ball and turn around, but the football was kicked out by George Wood, who circled to the front to defend.

Higuaín turned away and managed to shake off Wood, but there was no ball at his feet. Nottingham Forest took advantage of the momentum to start another attack. Meanwhile, Pepe and Piqué ran back to the rear defensive line. Real Madrid's quick attack did not happen but it pressed the Forest team within its half.

Real Madrid's defense was relatively passive, but passivity did not mean that they did not need to exert themselves. But while they were defending, they were used to retreating to the penalty area and setting up a defensive array. As a result, their defense lacked depth and could be easily penetrated. It was a common problem in most La Liga teams. The style of playing and national characteristics determined that they advocated offense more and ignored defense.

The result of their defense was that Nottingham Forest could pass the ball and position themselves as they wished outside of the thirty-meter zone to look for opportunities without pressure. If Real Madrid was unable to withstand and press out to make a grab for the ball, they would pass the ball back to gradually pull the compressed formation backward. After they pulled it off, Real Madrid would be lured out. As long as their formation was cracked open, there would be plenty of gaps to seize hold of in the eyes of the Forest team. It just depended on whether they could grasp it.

Given the height and aerial defense capabilities of the Real Madrid rear defensive line, Twain instructed the Forest team to focus their offense mainly on high balls and scramble for the second point of fall.

Through his research on Real Madrid, he believed that the Real Madrid players were not too concerned with the second point of fall in defense. Van Nistelrooy did not have to be the spearhead in the attack. He mainly acted as the bridgehead stronghold and tactical center forward.

Van Nistelrooy had an ability that was quite valuable, an ability that was slowly decreasing for many strikers.

To be a true center forward, van Nistelrooy not only could score his own shots, his body and skills guaranteed that he could control the football within an encirclement to wait for his teammates to come support. Then he would pass the football to his teammates who had the chance. When needed, he could head up to suppress the opponent's entire line of defense, or pull out to rip apart the opponent's defense to create opportunities for his teammates. A center forward like van Nistelrooy would turn around to take the ball, and currently many strikers could do little once they turned their backs on the offensive.

It was the difference between a striker and a center forward. Eastwood was a striker, and van Nistelrooy was a center forward.

Beckham once again passed the football into the penalty area. Ramos, who played the role of a center-back, jumped up to head the football out.

The second point of fall was taken by the Forest team.

Van der Vaart passed the football to Ribéry, and Ribéry caught the opponent's attention on the flank. Gareth Bale dashed to plug in. Diarra, who ran to the flank to fill in the position, hesitated and opted to follow Bale to retreat. He let go of his defense against Ribéry. Ribéry took the opportunity to dribbled across. He looked like he was going to shoot.

Cannavaro immediately cut across to block him.

But Ribéry did a feint and sent the football van der Vaart in the middle.

Van der Vaart also made to look like he was about to do a long shot, leading Heinze, the particularly easily excited defender, to slide to the ground and shovel.

The football had already rolled to Beckham's right foot.

The ball went around and came back again.

Beckham caught the attention of two Real Madrid players as soon as he took the ball. Marcelo immediately stood in front of him to block, while Sneijder was in charge of protecting the middle.

Rafinha saw the ball on the right flank and did not hesitate to plug in. He attracted Marcelo's attention which resulted in Marcelo following him to retreat. Sneijder silently came over to fill the position.

Beckham passed the ball just as Sneijder came up to intercept the ball. He did not send a high ball at an angle into the penalty area but kicked a straight pass.

It was not passed to Rafinha on the right wing but to the player behind Sneijder — George Wood!

George Wood decisively inserted into the void and received a pass from Beckham.

"George Wood! He showed up in the flanks of the Real Madrid defense!"

Wood did not pass the ball after he received it. He did not continue to dribble forward. He swung his leg for a vigorous shot!

The football flew out like a cannonball and headed straight for the nearest corner of the goal.

George Wood rarely shot with certainty like that. Casillas could only slam the football out in a hurry and could not pounce on the end line. Because the ball that Wood shot out spun slightly outward, maybe he was going to pass, but it turned into a shot.

The football was pounced on by Casillas, but it bounced toward the goal.

This scene startled and made countless people in the Bernabéu stands gasp.

Van Nistelrooy charged out from the crowd and did a header shot!

The football flew toward the goal but was kicked out in front of the goal line by Ramos, who rushed back. The football flew outside the box and the second point of fall still belonged to Nottingham Forest. Van der Vaart shot straight away but missed. The football brushed along the turf and turned to the left. If no one blocked it, the ball would have rolled out of the end line, and it would have been a false alarm.

A leg suddenly extended from within the crowd and firmly cut off the incoming ball!

“Franck Ribéry! He stopped the ball!” The commentator exclaimed.

Casillas’ reaction was so fast that he had just landed on the ground when he pushed up pounce toward the back corner, intending to block the Forest team’s attack.

Ribéry, who intercepted the ball, did not hesitate to turn around and swing his leg to volley the football into the goal on the spot.

Casillas was too slow by half a beat.

The football flew over before his hands got there and smacked into the net.

“The ball went in — ”

Accompanied by the commentator’s yells, Bernabéu suddenly quieted down.

It was only nine minutes and eighteen seconds after the start, and the gates of Real Madrid were lost.

The haughty Real Madrid people were unable to accept this for a moment.

“That’s terrible defense!” Schuster, who sat in the technical area, slapped his leg angrily and complained to the assistant manager next to him. “I need a center-back and they’ve brought me Robben who can’t get on the field.”

Ribéry celebrated the goal wildly. Schuster’s brows wrinkled more and more tightly. He thought of the recent rumors. By the end of this season, when he still needed a defender, would Mijatović bring him another Ribéry?

The people around Tony Twain celebrated their lead. He did too, but he quickly put down his raised arms. He turned around and saw the president’s podium above the grandstand. Like Schuster, he also thought of the recent rumors. Would Ribéry’s excellent performance in front of the Real Madrid president further motivate their poaching?

After the end of this season, perhaps he would not have a holiday to speak of.

Chapter 627: Guti

“With his nimble positioning, Franck Ribéry exploded with amazing energy. Compared to his performance in the previous two seasons, he is now at the level of the FIFA World Player of the Year!” The commentator was still gushing about Ribéry when the game had already resumed.

“He was fixed on the left flank when he started his career. His first season in the English Premier League was stunning and successful. He was, at best, considered a rather good shock worker on the flank. Then Tony Twain asked him to lean more to the middle, and the fine-tuning of the position gave us a more comprehensive Franck Ribéry. Whether it’s breaking through and passing on the flank, scoring goals from the middle, or even organizing the offense, he’s doing a pretty fine job!”

Just then, Ribéry took the ball and the commentator immediately got excited. “Now Franck Ribéry has the ball!”

Ribéry felt he was in a great shape and wanted to have a face-off with Ramos. However, he was blocked by Ramos and could not cut inside. His speed was suppressed, and he could not accelerate. The ball was sent out of the sidelines by Ramos with a slide tackle.

Seeing the ball shoved out of bounds, van der Vaart, who was waiting to support, was a bit disgruntled. He waved his hands. He was next to Ribéry and unmarked. If Ribéry had passed the football to him, there was a chance to move the football and reorganize the attack, but Ribéry chose to go alone and ignored his teammates coming up to support.

Ribéry saw the gesture and hurriedly raised his hands to express his apology. He ignored his teammates, beside himself with joy from the goal.

Although the Forest team obtained an out of bounds ball, they did not pose a threat to Real Madrid. Bale’s pass was intercepted, and Real Madrid took the opportunity to launch a counterattack. Nottingham Forest quickly retreated to defend — except for George Wood.

The football reached Guti’s feet again, and George Wood went up to face him.

Guti was still in the center circle. The Forest team’s flanks quickly retreated to defend. George Wood intended to build the first line of defense in the center circle.

Guti was going to pass the ball as he saw Wood come up. However, when he looked up to find someone, he found that there was no suitable route for the ball to go. While he was distracted, George Wood rushed in front of his eyes.

Guti jabbed the football to the left and then quickly pulled it back to get rid of him.

But George Wood was not fooled. He leaned his body forward and forced Guti to turn around. As long as Guti had his back facing the attacking direction, the Forest players would have plenty of time to run back to defend.

Guti had to turn around to protect the ball. He would not be able to send the football to the most dangerous place at first chance.

That was what annoyed Guti the most. What upset him were Wood’s incessant knocks to his back. The little moves were bothersome. The leg kept wanting to reach in front of him and grab the ball, but he could not reach it. Consequently, he could only kick at Guti’s ankles.

Guti did not want to be entangled with the opponent there. He was not a fool. He knew it was tantamount to delaying his team’s attacking speed. So he passed the football to Diarra and then turned around to give Wood a hard glare.

Wood met his glare. The look in his eyes was not friendly. It was cold, as if he was looking at prey and not a human being. Guti hated the look, and he felt insulted.

He ran forward and Wood retreated with him.

He knew he was the kid’s target in this game, so he decided to humiliate the other team.

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The Forest team played defensive counterattack, different from Real Madrid's rear defensive line, which was full of holes. Real Madrid's attacking players had to wrack their brains when they were up against the Nottingham Forest team's dense and comprehensive defense.

After a string of passes, the football reached Higuain's feet. He planned to turn around and break through, but he was blocked by Pepe. He turned around and the football was left behind.

However, the Forest team's ball could not be easily passed out either. Pepe's forward pass was poked out from behind by Raúl.

Real Madrid continued to launch an offensive, and Raúl held onto the football despite Pepe's close marking and grabs.

The current Raúl was very different from a younger Raúl. He was no longer purely the striker who only needed to be responsible for scoring goals. On the current Real Madrid team, his job was often not to score, but to defend and set his teammates up with opportunities to score.

Pepe's desire to intercept Raúl's ball was not easy. The position was very sensitive. He did not dare to foul and thus could only interfere from behind. As long as Raúl did not turn around to breakthrough, he could only do that.

Raúl found that Pepe's defense was quite tight. He was not certain that he could turn around and break through into the box, so he sent the football out.

Once again, the football landed at Guti's feet.

Guti did not even have to look up to know who the dark shadow that appeared in front of him was.

He was now in front of the box and lifted his leg to as if he were going to shoot. Wood did not hesitate to pounce and block, but Guti's ankle shook and the shot turned into a straight pass.

Instead of passing it to Raúl in front of him, he passed it to the other side, which was a visual dead corner for him. He found a passing path. The football bypassed the crowd in front of the box and was sent to Robinho's feet.

Huge cheers erupted in the stands at the Bernabéu stadium. The popular Brazilian BMX Boy always evoked some kind of anticipation every time he got the ball. The Real Madrid fans liked this kind of player who was good at performing fancy techniques because it pleased them.

Piqué filled in and Robinho came kick the ball.

The cheers from the stands were even louder when Robinho was seen to start performing.

Piqué's reaction was fast. He expected Robinho's next step to be cutting inside after he swung past him, so he quickly turned to cut across the route of Robinho's advance.

But he anticipated wrong. Robinho did not move after he pulled in the ball. Piqué threw himself into the empty space and fell to the ground.

The Brazilian kid easily flashed past the fallen Piqué, and did not wait for the other Forest players to rush over. He cut inside and lifted his leg to shoot.

Edwin van der Sar put all his attention on Robinho after he received the ball. He saw him shoot, and quickly pounced and sent the football out of the end line.

Although he did not score a goal, Guti shot a smug glance at George Wood. The attack was initiated by him from there, when he deceived George Wood with the ball direction and line of sight. When he looked at Raúl and Higuaín on the left, who would have thought he was actually going to pass the football to the empty space on the right?

But when Guti glanced at Wood, what he saw made him feel more frustrated.

He only saw George Wood's back. Wood was busy returning to the box to defend the corner.

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Real Madrid significantly stepped up their offensive. A corner kick was not done. The football was topped by the Forest defender and Real Madrid midfielders continued to intercept the ball to continue the attack. Unwilling to trail behind at home, Real Madrid had to quickly equalize the score and the longer they dragged, the worse it was for them.

However, the Forest team's defense was tested by many major games, and until the end of the first half, Real Madrid did not get any good chances. In addition to Robinho's shot, Sneijder also had a long shot that bypassed Edwin van der Sar's hands, but flew out as it brushed against the goal post. Raúl got another close shot, but it was deflected out of the end line by Pepe.

The three attacks were concentrated within ten minutes after they dropped the ball, but when they did not succeed with their attacks, the Forest team's quick counterattack forced Real Madrid to stop their frenzied offense. They were worried that a quick counterattack by the Forest team would widen the gap in the score.

Twain had a happy smile on his face on the sidelines. So far, the game was well within his plan. Real Madrid was not afraid of other teams going head to head with them, or they liked the other teams to challenge them because they did not care about conceding a few goals. They just needed to have one more goal. What they hated most were opponents that shrank, stationed their players near the box, compacted their defense, and used quick sneak attacks to take care of everything.

Nottingham Forest was one of those teams.

As a result, the Real Madrid players played hard in the first half. They had to strengthen their offense and strive to equalize the score, and they had to be aware of the opponent's sudden launch of quick attacks. With a long pass expert like Beckham, the Forest team's quick counterattacks were a notch faster than before.

Nottingham Forest's offense was like that most of the time. The football would be handed over to Beckham, and van der Vaart and Ribéry would plug ahead. Van Nistelrooy would pull to the flanks, and Eastwood would retreat to provide support. Beckham would do a long pass and send the football to the feet of a Forest player. Perhaps it would be Ribéry, van der Vaart, van Nistelrooy, or Eastwood. His long passes had a hit rate of eight out of ten kicks.

The situation gave Real Madrid's defense a headache. Unless someone could stick close to Beckham, they could not stop him. The cost for that type of counterattack was so low that it would only take Beckham lifting his foot.

Schuster was silent throughout the first half except during that goal concede. He was looking for a way to break the tactic. He knew that if he could not break it, he could only count on luck.

It would humiliating for any manager to admit he had to rely on luck to win.

At the end of the first half, Schuster's face did not look good. He already heard the sounds of boos traveling from the stands. Some complained that they were behind on the score, and some complained that the game was ugly to watch. What should he complain about as a manager?

I need defenders. I don't need Ribéry and Cristiano Ronaldo!

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Twain was happy and made no secret of it. He praised everyone. The attacking players played a good game while the defensive players were credited for the team staying in the lead.

"You guys did a great job. We have to play like that in the second half. We're not going to lose unless all the luck runs to the other side," Twain said firmly, enhancing the players' confidence. The words were superfluous. It was not the first time the current Nottingham Forest team had played in Bernabéu. They were no longer the Nottingham Forest players who pulled out their cameras when they saw the stadium.

Some bobbed their heads. Twain was not saying nice things to boost their morale. It was the truth. As long as the Forest team was in the lead, victory was in the bag.

"Guti is at the heart of their offense." When Twain finished saying the things that everyone knew, he began to lay out a more detailed strategy. "I think the only problem we had in the first half was... Guti was not provoked enough." The smile on Twain's face looked sinister.

"Don't count on George alone. We will change our strategy a little in the second half. Find ways to irritate Guti and make him lose his cool." Judging by the first half of the game, Guti's temper had shown a lot more restraint than before. Whenever Wood pushed someone and refused to show friendliness, anyone would be dissatisfied. If it had been Guti two seasons ago, he might have gotten up and grabbed his neck, or when the Forest team's attack had not even crossed half the field, he would commit an unnecessary, vicious foul and punished with a yellow card, or even a red card, and then be sent off.

During the game, Guti unexpectedly endured his anger when faced with Wood's intentional and unintentional provocations, which made Twain view him in a new light. Was it Schuster's request, or had he matured?

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In the home team's locker room, Schuster pulled Guti aside to talk about an important matter.

"Obviously, you're the first person that every opponent wants to eliminate."

Guti sipped his water and did not comment.

“You did well in the first half, but I’m still worried. I wonder if Tony Twain would ask more Forest players to surround you?”

Guti stopped drinking and looked at his manager.

“I’m sure he will do that.” After his previous remark surprised Guti, Schuster seemed to be more convinced of the idea. “He will do whatever he can to win. Everyone knows you’re the core of Real Madrid’s offense.”

“Are you saying he wants his people to irritate me, make me play erratically, or cause me to play rough and be sent off?” Guti asked.

Schuster nodded.

Guti recalled George Wood’s behavior in the first half. It did look like they had the idea. “I’m not going to let them get what they want.” He cursed.

“You have to stay calm, no matter how they provoke you,” Schuster cautioned.

Guti put down the water bottle and nodded. “I know what to do, sir.”

Schuster patted him on the shoulder, ending the conversation.

As long as Guti did not lose his cool, Real Madrid would have hopes of equalizing the score in the second half, or even take the lead.

The key was still Guti, whose form and play was now a barometer of Real Madrid’s results.

But would Twain easily let go of Guti?

Schuster had second thoughts. If Guti can really stay calm, Nottingham Forest will be out of luck. Just wait and see which team has the upper hand in the second half.

Chapter 628: Real Madrid’s Core

During halftime, the situation that Guti had to face in the second half was still in his imagination. He might be able to reference previous games to get a sense in advance, but none of those teams were Nottingham Forest, and the managers of those teams were not Tony Twain.

After the second half began, he quickly understood the situation. George Wood was still there to keep an eye on him, but the players who disrupted him were replaced by other people, such as van der Vaart.

Guti had decided that he would not be angry no matter how much Wood provoked him. On the contrary, he wanted to find ways to send Wood off the field. However, the situation was completely different from what he had envisioned. The Forest team instructed them to take turns to provoke him, foul, make rough moves that fell between a foul and not, and pull little stunts the referees could not see to.

He could hardly stand it several times. He wanted to hit back hard and then turn to leave abruptly, but he knew his retaliation would result in a red card, so after he thought about it, he did not put it into practice.

He had made a lot of progress in controlling his temper.

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The game continued with Real Madrid's offense still largely organized by Guti. When Guti was assailed by the Nottingham Forest players, the rest of the Real Madrid players took over Guti's job. Diarra participated in the offense. While his offensive level was the weakest out of Real Madrid's four midfielders, he was the most active one because he was the defensive midfielder and had more chances to get the ball.

It was kind of amazing. Diarra should have been defense-oriented, but he rushed to the front of the Forest team's penalty area and did not go back. Sometimes he could also be seen on the right flank. Everything he did had to do with the offense, and when the Forest team counterattacked, Diarra still slowly ran back from the front field. His speed could not be considered fast, and coupled with his running posture, he looked like he was unable to run fast, which made people anxious.

Sneijder was a very comprehensive midfielder, but it was not feasible to get him to take on the responsibility of organizing the offense in Twain's view.

Not knowing why, Twain always worried about Sneijder when he watched him play football. He was concerned about his uncalled-for mistakes. He always seemed to have no way of firmly controlling the football. His actions were big and looked brash. His main task as the midfielder on Real Madrid's left flank was to assist in the offense and provide support for the defense. He was there to assist. He was slightly browbeaten when Nottingham Forest had a free hand to press in closely.

On the other side, Robinho's position was more flexible. He could suddenly go left or right, which made him a headache for Twain, because his personal skills were outstanding. He could become an important factor to break the balance in a deadlock.

Overall, Real Madrid had the upper hand in the game, and Nottingham Forest was still dominated by defense.

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Twain observed Guti and found that he was indeed very angry, but he would not explode, which frustrated him. If Guti could really keep his temper under control, then he would be the unlucky one in the end.

Because the number of fouls increased, the odds of getting a card became higher. It was not good for them to get more cards.

However, Twain could not change his decision yet because even though he said to provoke Guti more, Nottingham Forest also had to be on guard against Guti in terms of formal tactics. They could not give him too much space to move, or his straight passes could rip apart the Forest team's defenses.

Twelve minutes after the second half, van der Vaart finally got a yellow card. He was given yellow card by the referee because he had pushed Guti down from behind. There was a flurry of disgruntled boos in the Bernabéu stands. The fans thought the referee was too late in issuing the yellow card. According to their standards, George Wood should have been sent off in the first half and ten minutes into the second half, and the Forest team should have only been left with one goalkeeper, Edwin van der Sar.

Guti still did not explode and even had a smile on his face. He was either mocking van der Vaart or ridiculing Tony Twain, who came up with the idea.

Twain sat in the technical area, frowning.

The location of van der Vaart's foul was not ideal: twenty-five meters from the goal and to the left side of the front of the penalty area.

After having been closely marked by the Nottingham Forest players for close to sixty minutes, Sneijder, who had been constantly making mistakes, stood in front of the football. He wore the number 23 jersey. The original owner of the jersey number stood among the human wall in front of him, with his hands across his chest, nervously gazing at the new Real Madrid number 23 in front of him.

Ever since Beckham and Roberto Carlos left, Real Madrid's first pick for free kicks had become the Dutch kid.

For Sneijder, the first period of the season was perfect. With the frenzy of goals, victories, long shots, and free kicks that he accomplished for Real Madrid, especially after he cracked open Villarreal's goal with a free kick, he was hailed as "the New Beckham."

Sneijder did not like the label because it sounded as if he was just a replacement for Beckham. He was Sneijder, and not anyone's number two.

Sneijder stood in front of the ball, staring intently in front of him. Guti stood next to him, and everyone knew he was covering for Sneijder.

The human wall was built under the command of Edwin van der Sar to block the nearest corner. Then Edwin van der Sar moved back to the furthest corner.

"Sneijder is ready for the shot..."

The referee's whistle rang, and before the commentator was done, he saw Guti run to the football. The Forest team's human wall remained unmoved because they knew it was a feint, and the Dutchman behind was the real McCoy.

Guti did not run straight through the football. He paused in front of the ball and then swung his left leg...

Twain jerked up from his seat, and shouted, "F**k..."

Sneijder stood behind Guti and did not move an inch. He watched Guti kick the football to send it flying over the stupefied human wall and fall into the nearest corner of the goal!

Edwin van der Sar did not expect to Guti to be the one to shoot the free kick, so he did not respond. He just turned his head to watch the football fly into the goal.

When he turned to see the football enter the goal, Guti clenched his fist and cheered. Sneijder wanted to come up and hug him in celebration, but almost got elbowed instead. The resentment from being continuously harassed that had been bottled up was finally given the opportunity to vent. He was like the center of a volcanic eruption; it was dangerous to get close to him.

Raúl was the first to rush up and embrace him, containing the hot magma that spewed out of Guti.

This goal was too important for Real Madrid.

“Guti! Guti! Guti!” Thunderous cheers erupted in the Bernabéu stands. They shouted the name of their vice-captain and jumped out of their seats.

Like them, Schuster and the others rushed out of Real Madrid’s technical area with their arms raised high. With the score equalized, a huge weight was finally lifted off him.

The goal was eventually conceded, but Twain was not furious. He just stood on the sidelines and shook his head.

It looked like the current Guti was tenacious beyond his imagination and remained unshakeable in the face of those provocations. Twain felt he had to give up the arrangements he had instructed during halftime. Wood could deal with Guti alone. More players on him would only mess up their own pace.

Taking advantage of the time while the opponent was celebrating the goal, Twain called Wood to his side.

“George, go up and tell them that Guti is yours and yours only.” He pointed to Wood as he spoke to him.

Wood nodded.

“If you need to foul, it’s best to foul near the center circle. If he’s in front of the box, try not to let him turn around as the main defensive strategy. You know what to do.”

Wood continued to nod.

“Don’t give them a free kick in that dangerous zone. A place kick is a very important method to break the dense defense. Tell them to put more efforts into the counterattack. We have to score another goal when we get the chance.”

“Okay.” Wood turned around and ran back, but Twain stopped him again.

“Be careful not to get a card, George.”

Wood grunted and then turned around again to run back to the field.

Twain walked back to the technical area and sat down. He shrugged at Dunn with a helpless look.

Dunn reassured him, “It’s nothing. We already have an away goal and it’s still just a draw. On the whole, we are the ones who have the upper hand.”

Twain shook his head. “I wanted to leave Bernabéu with a victory...”

“The game is not over yet.” Dunn could only continue to encourage.

Twain was silent. He turned his head to re-focus on the game.

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Wood returned to the field with Twain's latest order. Guti found that the men who had mobbed him were gone. Only George Wood alone was left in front of him. He turned his head to glance at the Nottingham Forest technical area. He knew it had to have been the manager's intention.

Did he realize it was useless to let so many people deal with me? Guti smiled.

Yes, for a time, he was forced to the point that he could not even make a successful straight pass. Other than being able to do cross and return passes, the rest were just mistakes. But you cannot prevent me from getting a free kick, can you? Don't think that just because Real Madrid used to have Figo, Roberto Carlos, Beckham, Zidane and now there's Sneijder, no one else can do a free kick. It's exactly my intention for you to besiege me. With so many fouls, I will definitely get a suitable free kick even just one time.

But Guti could not laugh. When fewer players mobbed him, his chances did not increase. George Wood no longer set provoking him as the number one goal. Instead, he defended against him.

As a famous defensive genius, Guti suffered unspeakably by Wood's marking. If they were further away from the goal, Wood would intercept the ball as much as he could. When he could not intercept the ball, he would not hesitate to use a covert foul to resolve the battle. When they were close to the penalty area, he mainly used interference and did not make moves lightly. It forced Guti to give the football to his teammates. If Guti had to fight it out alone with Wood, it would be as he wanted, but Guti would not win many times.

When Real Madrid wanted to attack and pass the football to Guti from the backfield, Guti was used to turning his head before he received the ball to observe the positions of his teammates and opponents, so that he could decide what to do when he received the ball. But Wood would take advantage of the opportunity suddenly snatch it away. He managed to intercept the ball that should have belonged to Guti several times using that method.

He caused Guti to only consider protecting the football when he received the ball, and then to think about how to organize the attack. As a result, Real Madrid's offense was greatly diminished.

Robinho was a good player, but he had not yet been able to become the organizer of the team's offense. He fought hard against the Forest team's two full backs on the flank. Unfortunately, he was of little assistance to Real Madrid's offensive. Some people liked to watch him perform fancy skills in the face of the opposing defenders, but in Twain's view, performance was useless. Unless he could break through in a straight line, he was just making crosswise movements outside. No matter how fancy his actions were, they were no different from a circus clown.

Robinho's movements were a lot more practical than when he first went to Real Madrid, but the Brazilian's flashy side remained ingrained in nature. Sometimes, when he clung to his footwork, the team had already lost the opportunity to attack. Besides, his movements were cumbersome, not simple and practical like Messi's. Messi could be characterized by one word: fast. Fast movement and fast pace were the most practical skill in modern football arena.

Twain laughed every time he saw Robinho start to do scissors when up against Bale or other defensive players. If my defenders are deceived by a few moves that they knew were fake, then Nottingham Forest would not call itself “a European champion through defense.” Instead of putting all your efforts on the step over, wouldn’t it be better to dodge, grab, and pass the ball?

When Robinho first started playing, people exclaimed that he was “Pelé’s successor, “but in Twain’s eyes, Robinho’s progress over the last few years had been limited, a few light-years away from what people expected of him.

At least Robinho was nothing to be afraid of in the game.

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After Guti scored, he received George Wood’s meticulous care, Robinho was stuck in a quagmire of fighting alone, Sneijder’s form was flat and he was up to his ears between offense and defense, and Higuaín was at a loss and made frequent mistakes in the face of the Forest team’s fierce marking and tackles.

Only Raúl was as diligent as ever, but he could not get the ball because of the lack of effective midfield support. During the defense, his sense of responsibility drove him to even go back to their penalty area. It was doubtful how much energy he could use to participate in the attack. Of course, no one doubted that he did not exert himself but working too hard in defense might affect his play in the offense.

As for Marcelo and Ramos, Schuster was apparently afraid of the Forest team’s flank offense, so he did not ask them for frequent assists.

Real Madrid was out of ideas when up against Nottingham Forest entrenched in defense.

And what about Nottingham Forest? There were several chances to counterattack, but they did not manage to seize them. With Real Madrid’s frenzied attack, they did not even have a chance to fight back.

By the time the game ended, the score was 1:1.

The score had to have upset Schuster, but he did not show it. He just stood on the sidelines for a while, then turned and shook hands with Twain. He walked into the tunnel with his head lowered.

Having gotten an away goal and a tied game, Twain also did not show a happy side. He felt a little reluctant — he had hoped to win, but unfortunately he only almost won.

With regret, Nottingham Forest left the Spanish capital and flew back to England to prepare for the next leg of the match. Even on their own home ground, Twain was not confident that they would be able to defeat Real Madrid. It looked like they still have work to do on Guti...

Chapter 629: Anger

Having tied with Real Madrid in the away game, the Forest team already had the upper hand in the duel for the top four spots between the two teams. However, this advantage was not secure. Twain dared not say his team would be able to reach the semi-finals. His team was competing in two tournaments, so

he had to be careful. This season was not the same as last season, when he decided on the approach to give up the league tournament to guarantee the Champions League, so that the team could prepare to compete in just one tournament. At present, Twain's team needed to put its energy in both the league tournament and Champions League. The team had to close the gap in score with Manchester United in the Premier League and strive to reach the Champions League finals for the third time in a row.

Back in Nottingham for the challenge against the underdog team, Birmingham City, in the league tournament, Twain would make a rotation.

With a line-up made up of an equal number of main players and substitute players, the Forest team easily beat Birmingham City at home by 2:0. George Wood did not play in the game, and the substitute player, Sidwell, did well in the starting lineup.

Twain apparently noticed that the players yearned for more chances to play. He would let everyone have a game to play whenever the conditions allowed.

Bendtner replaced van Nistelrooy to start and scored the two goals. He was selected as the best player of the game after the match and received a bottle of champagne. He looked very happy when he spoke to the reporters. When Twain first brought him from Denmark to England, he said he was the future of the team, the core player and main striker of the Forest team in the future, but there had been Viduka and Anelka, and after that, van Nistelrooy. Bendtner's position had always been awkward. All he could do now was to seize the rare opportunities to try to show himself and strive to score more goals.

He had done very well this season, with eleven goals recorded while he played as a substitute — eight goals in the league tournament and three goals in various cup tournaments.

He also sat firmly in the position of the main striker for the Denmark national team.

In Twain's mind, he nurtured Bendtner as the Forest team's future main center forward. Van Nistelrooy would grow old. His physical condition and competitive state would decline, and frequent injuries would follow, normal, predictable conditions. Bendtner would have to take over. With the guarantee of a strong center forward, other players on the forward line would be easy to find. He could head to the transfer market and look for another one to join Eastwood and Arshavin. He did not have to worry too much about Nottingham Forest's forward line over the next ten years.

When he first bought Bendtner, he changed the fate of the Danish lad, but in order to avoid the tragedy of spoiling things to seek instant benefits, Twain intended to allow Bendtner to develop slowly in accordance with the experience he knew and not suddenly push him onto the main forward line. He hoped that Bendtner could slowly learn, gradually grow, and finally become Nottingham Forest's reigning striker in a few years.

That was his plan. Twain thought he considered well and that he had taken every aspect into account. Nothing should have been overlooked.

When he saw Bendtner was awarded as the best player in the game, he gave high praises to the Danish kid in the locker room. While he complimented him, Twain seemed to see Bendtner become the Premier League's future king of strikers and the glory years of Nottingham Forest dominating Europe...

Another piece of good news that made Twain happy was that in the round of the league tournament, Nottingham Forest's other rivals were either tied or defeated in their games — Manchester United tied 2:2 with Middlesbrough in their away game, Arsenal tied 1:1 with Liverpool at home, and Chelsea lost 0:2 to Manchester City in their away game.

The Forest team still ranked second, but only had a one-point gap with the first placed, Manchester United and six points difference with the third placed Arsenal. As long as they did not make any big mistakes, they could basically secure their second place.

Twain's goal for the season was not to be second in the league. He had already been in the second place for two consecutive seasons. The media had taken to calling him "always second best" which was unfair to him because he was the manager of a Champions League and EFL Cup winning team. But the media's dictionary did not have the word "fairness." As long as there was something to be hyped, they would do so.

Even if the media had not given Twain such a nasty nickname, Twain did not want to be second in the league tournament anymore. His aim for the season was the league title. To settle for second place in the league did not make him happy. He was delighted with Manchester United's mistake now that the teams were only one point apart. More importantly, the Forest team had not yet played against Manchester United in the second half of the league tournament.

As long as they did not make any more mistakes themselves, there would be an opportunity to compete against Manchester United. According to the competition schedule, Nottingham Forest would challenge Manchester United in an away game in the final round of the league tournament this season. If the point difference between the two teams was still one point, then it would be time for the league champion to be fresh.

It was good for the English Premier League and fans for the competition to be so intense.

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After they played the 33rd round of the league tournament, Nottingham Forest ranked second, with 76 points. Immediately thereafter, they would face their powerful rival, Real Madrid, at home.

It was not the first time Real Madrid had been the visiting team at the City Ground stadium. Although they were meeting for the first time in the knockout stage, Twain's first opponent of the group stage in his first Champions League season was Real Madrid, which was also the first game at the City Ground stadium since its return to the Champions League after many years.

Numerous Spanish media outlets came to England with Real Madrid. They were rather concerned about this game because Real Madrid had stopped at the Champions League round of 16 for three consecutive seasons. To be able to advance to the quarterfinals this season had led to expectations that they could win the tenth Champions League trophy in their club's history. If this did happen, Real Madrid could be considered the most well-deserved top team among the football clubs.

With such strong expectations, there was no reason to stop at the quarterfinals.

Despite the home draw of 1:1 with Nottingham Forest, the media and fans were still more bullish on Real Madrid. The Forest team only had one away goal and it was a draw for both teams. They believed

that Real Madrid might concede a few goals, but it was impossible for them not to score. As long as there was a goal, an away goal, one goal would offset Nottingham Forest's away goal. The additional goals would all be Real Madrid's earned advantage.

Even if the two teams eventually tied at 3:3 at the City Ground stadium, it would be Real Madrid that would advance.

Therefore, the Real Madrid people came to the optimistic conclusion of their inevitable promotion.

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The Real Madrid team had yet to leave for Nottingham, but Tony Twain had already started the fight.

In an interview with the British paper, The Guardian, he spoke about the first leg of the match between the two teams. He admitted that his tactics were to deal with Guti, and then praised Guti as the core of Real Madrid. The remarks all appeared to be normal and was a very common interview when published.

However, following that, Twain changed tack.

"In fact, I think Guti should be happy about being harassed by the crowd and hobbling off the field after the game, because it showed one thing. He gets the attention of the enemy. Looking back at a few years ago, while he was still on the bench..." Twain laughed and did not go on.

The content of the interview was marked in bold by the newspaper editor, and its meaning was self-evident.

Sure enough, after the Spanish media printed the interview, it caused many reactions.

No elaboration on the reactions of Real Madrid fans were required. On The Guardian's website alone, almost all of the comments below the interview rebuked Tony Twain. Some of the comments were in English, some were in Spanish, and there was even Japanese and Chinese.

With the exception of Real Madrid supporters, the majority of the people thought that Tony Twain lacked respect for his opponent.

"I can't believe those words were said by a famous manager..." a famous commentator in the Spanish press Diario AS critiqued Tony Twain's remarks.

"We are a gentleman's country and pay attention to the spirit of sportsmanship. I think Tony Twain's remarks are a serious violation of what we are proud of..." Even British government officials felt that Twain's remarks embarrassed them. The sports secretary, Tessa Jowell criticized Twain. After all, the Real Madrid Club and the Spanish royal family had a very good relationship. They represented the Spanish sports image abroad and that image was disparaged by a Premier League manager.

The Sun's "Tony Twain's brain has a loose screw again" headline was striking. They even made a special feature to uncover all the incredible comments that Twain had said since he took office and captioned "Tony Twain's Crazy Talk."

There was a sea of punitive voices in the Spanish media, and the English media almost one-sidedly stood against Twain. They slammed him for never using his brain before speaking and indirectly demanded Twain to come forward and explain his remarks, which were clearly insulting to his opponent.

Subsequently, Twain came out and explained in his own column.

“I’m very surprised at the reactions that my remarks had elicited. I merely made an assessment of my opponent and did not use any insulting words. That was the complete truth. In some people’s view, it had become disrespectful toward the opponent. You can go ask Guti yourself. Did he not play as a substitute in a great team like Real Madrid a few years ago? I’m not saying he’s not good enough, but the main position belonged the greater players such as Beckham, Zidane, and Figo. Compared to them, Guti was not up to scratch. Was I wrong to say that? I really don’t understand how holding up a magnifying glass all day to find fault in my words can be a fun job.”

How was this an explanation? Even though it was meant to be an explanation, Twain’s unpleasant tone appeared to be more like adding fuel to the fire.

“In the spirit of the sport? Excuse me, when my goalkeeper, Paul Gerrard had to retire after he was struck by the Reading player, Hunt, and had a concussion, why did the respected sports secretary, Ms. Tessa Jowell, not come out and give her enlightening remarks about ‘sportsmanship’? She should just focus on the Beijing Olympics and be ready for the London Olympics, rather than dictate what I should or should not say.

“Since I’m attacked for airing my opinions about the opposing players, then let us not talk any more in the future, okay? Everyone should just shut up and the world will be peaceful.

“If you really can’t find anything to report in the media, I suggest you take out all the pages and publish public service advertisements to promote the spirit of sports.”

He stated that it was an explanation, but in reality, it was Twain’s backlash.

It was not known if Tony Twain was first man to launch such an unapologetic attack on Britain’s Secretary of State for Culture, Media, and Sport, in English football. He was completely red-hot to the point of being burnt to black. His number of enemies increased.

Jowell was a sports minister, but she had no right to dictate Twain’s conduct. The only thing she did wrong was that she should not have gotten involved in the matter and made the remarks to stir up Twain’s hornet’s nest. After Twain fought back, she did not say anything more. It was most appropriate for a senior government official to remain silent in a war of words with an ordinary civilian. She should have done so long ago.

The Spanish media was unwilling to forgive, but the voices of the English media became much weaker as the game approached. It was meaningless to hype that kind of thing, and ultimately it was time to return to the game itself.

The hype with great fanfare was not at all for the “dignity of Spanish football,” “for the sake of sports ethics,” or “to respect the opponent.” They just did it to attract readers and greater interest.

Reporting was the type of career that was best at “doing bad things while retaining a good reputation.” Twain was aware of what they were up to, so he did not let them off easily.

The biggest impact of his words was on Real Madrid. Guti was even more furious. When he arrived in Nottingham, he looked enraged as he accepted an interview. “I do not care for people who judge others maliciously, and I have no interest in responding to such a meaningless topic.” He rudely rejected the

reporter's question about Twain's remarks. But even if he did not answer the question, would the media have nothing to add?

"Guti expressed strong dissatisfaction to Tony Twain's comments!"

"Guti thinks that Tony Twain is not worth a mention!"

And so on.

With the media adding fuel to the fire, the two sides made an all-out effort.

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Dunn found it somewhat incomprehensible that Twain would suddenly bring up Guti. He felt that Twain did not need to cause himself trouble.

Twain just shrugged, indicating that the idle sports secretary was an unexpected "surprise." It used to be a normal thing for everyone to insult each other in the football circles. It was a highlight in football, and a stunt that the media was happy to see. Mourinho once scolded Wenger as a "voyeur," and Ferguson said he wanted two bullets to kill Wenger and Victoria. At the times, why did the British government officials not come out and say something?

Therefore, Jowell's appearance was really unexpected. It enraged him further. There was a tyrannical sense of "outsiders should not interfere with what we insiders say or do within our circle" and it did not matter if it was a government official, but also a woman at the same time.

Leaving aside the impulsive sports secretary, Twain's plan went well. He paid the price of being sworn at a lot and being hated, but he succeeded in angering Real Madrid's midfielder, Guti.

Perhaps he was not as famous as Raúl and the others, but in Twain's eyes, he was the real core of the current Real Madrid team. With him around, Real Madrid's offense had a direction and strategy. Without him around, Real Madrid's attack would become a mess.

Once Guti was enraged, he would lose the calm that an organizer had to have. What Real Madrid's offense would be like then? He could already imagine.

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Everything was as Twain had expected. During the two team's second leg of the match, Guti's performance was completely different from the first leg. Anyone could see his restless motions, and Real Madrid's offense became disorganized for the first time. They relied on Guti, but he made frequent mistakes. He repeatedly lost the ball. There had even been a few times when he sent the ball to the Forest players' feet.

Amidst the sprawling boos of the City Ground stadium, his temper grew worse, and he even received a yellow card before the end of the first half for an unnecessary ferocious shove to put down George Wood. The Forest players relentlessly demanded that the referee give him a red card to send him straight off the field.

The game was explosive, and verbal conflicts between players on both sides were common.

In the 70th minute of the game, Schuster could not stand it any longer and replaced Guti with Gago. Within those seventy minutes, Guti passed the ball 76 times but only succeeded 30 times. His frequent mistakes did not help the team's offense at all. Instead, he caused the entire team to become hotheaded like him.

With less conflict, Real Madrid's offense lost its way altogether. They relied more on the star players' individual skills to fight alone. Their occasional cooperation was overwhelmed by the Forest team's overall defense. The indomitable Real Madrid was at its wits' end in the face of Nottingham Forest's impenetrable defense at home.

In the end, the two sides had a 0:0 draw.

This result left Real Madrid's fans with ashen faces and caused the Real Madrid players to stare blankly at the loss. They suffered the disadvantage of fewer away goals and were eliminated by Nottingham Forest...

"Nottingham Forest broke into the top four again! For the third year in a row! It's amazing, incredible..." the commentator repeated, not knowing what to say.

The game had been ugly to watch, without any highlights to speak of. If neutral fans were to watch the game, they would have turned off their TVs or changed the channel. Such a game gave the commentator nothing of interest or special to mention. However, to be able to break into the Champions League top four spots three years in a row was a remarkable achievement. Very few teams were able to do this... No, it was even possible to say, "almost none."

The game was so ugly that it disgusted people but also had a remarkable great achievement, which was a wondrous contradiction integrated within Tony Twain's team. For the first time, the commentator sensed the deficiency in his vocabulary and could not express this feeling appropriately.

He could only say...

"I wish Tony Twain and his team all the best."

Chapter 630: Still Undefeated

Advancing into the Champions League's top four, and for three years in a row, was a remarkable achievement. Even if they did not win the Champions League cup at the end of the season, Tony Twain's name would be engraved in the history of the Champions League. His prestige in Nottingham Forest flourished. When people mentioned "Nottingham Forest" outside of England, they only knew of Tony Twain's team and did not know real owner of the club. He became the face and spokesperson of Nottingham Forest. When Tony Twain was brought up, it was natural to associate him with Nottingham Forest. When Nottingham Forest was mentioned, the first person that came to mind was Tony Twain.

Flushed with success on the field, Twain was also a winner outside the field. Just after the Champions League game, Armani made an announcement that Tony Twain had become their brand ambassador in the United Kingdom. Large photographs of Tony Twain wearing an Armani windbreaker appeared in major shopping malls.

It had been decided a while back, but it was never made public. Armani had been looking for the right opportunity to make the announcement. The current progress to the Champions League semi finals was the best opportunity. Twain took time to have several sets of photographs taken, which could be used for the ads. Twain felt ashamed to say that he had desired it a year ago, but it was only recently facilitated by Shania, who had pulled strings and build the bridges from far away in the United States. It was his business, but Shania was more meticulous than him.

Speaking of Shania, the young girl was doing well in America. Because she had some friends in the show business world, she was not a newbie in Hollywood. She had people looking after her wherever she went, so Twain did not have to worry. There was nothing he could worry about since showbusiness was not his field.

Shania was very fond of movies. She liked that she was now able to work in the production of films, and not just runways with their busy schedules and conflicts. Other than sometimes flying around the world to promote the fashion products she was the brand ambassador for, she lived in Hollywood and interacted with famous movie stars. Another important job of hers was to attend class — her agent, Mr. Fasal, arranged acting classes for her. Since she had decided to attempt a film career, the lessons were indispensable.

Shania was very enthusiastic and in high spirits during her phone conversation with Twain. That was the most reassuring thing for Twain. He was afraid that the young girl would throw tantrums and make things difficult for Fasal.

The only pity was that to smoothly pave the way for her career, Shania had to reside in the United States for some time and was unable to return to the United Kingdom.

After Shania settled in the United States, the most delighted was Beckham's wife, Victoria. Although her husband went against her will and chose to return to Britain instead of going to the United States, she temporarily compromised. She never gave up her desire to move to America. It was not news that she wanted to go to the teeming world of Hollywood, and Beckham did not think there was anything wrong with it. After all, he had a career, and so did his wife.

Victoria sometimes flew to the United States to visit Shania and met with the other Hollywood stars.

Beckham was alone and in the same boat as Twain.

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Having advanced into the Champions League semi finals, the next game would be at the end of April. Tony Twain had nearly one month to carry out the strategies for the tournament. The battle for the league title had already entered a white-hot stage:

After the 33rd round of the league tournament on April 5th, Nottingham Forest came in second with 76 points. Manchester United occupied the top of the rankings with 77 points and Arsenal was in third place with 70 points. The team most likely to win the league title was among those three teams.

Although Chelsea had changed their manager, their results in the league tournament had not improved. Currently pushed out of the top four by Liverpool, their league goal was no longer to win the league title, but to achieve the qualification for next season's UEFA Champions League.

It was a sorry sight for a Champions League winner to have fallen to such a point. However, professional football was like that. There was no victorious general in the world forever. There was always an ebb and flow.

Compared with the results in the league tournament, Chelsea was surprisingly resilient in the Champions League.

After Mourinho's dismissal, everyone thought that Chelsea would face a full collapse and be routed in both league tournament and Champions League. Even if they had advanced from the group stage, they would not have gone far in the knockout stage.

That was what Tony Twain thought. He was not optimistic on Grant's coaching ability. It was confirmed by their erratic performance in the league tournament, which was overturned by their strength in the Champions League.

There were three teams from the Premier League in the top four of the Champions League, of which one was Tony Twain's Nottingham Forest. The other was Ferguson's Manchester United, and the third was Chelsea led by Grant.

Both leading their teams into the Champions League semifinals, Tony Twain received acclaim whereas the voices surrounding Grant remained skeptical. The Forest team's opponent in the quarterfinals was the powerful Real Madrid, while Chelsea's opponent was Fenerbahçe. Putting aside the home ground factor, the team was at bottom out of the eight teams.

As a result, Chelsea's victory was not convincing. Furthermore, popular opinion among the media and fans stated that Grant's current achievements were built upon Mourinho's foundation, so there was nothing to praise. Because the lineup that Grant used was basically Mourinho's. Shevchenko still sat on the bench. Looking at the games, a strong Mourinho style was still present and the team's training might be in accordance with the routine used during Mourinho's time in office.

How could any achievements made against such a context be convincing?

Therefore, Grant had a bad relationship with the English media. Although Mourinho also had numerous disputes with the media, the media was fond of the existence of such a subject like Mourinho as a whole. Grant could not create any topic for the media as he was always taciturn, did not cause a war of words with other managers, was not attractive, and was not an idol of middle-aged and elderly women. He was an ordinary team manager. Compared to Mourinho, Grant was a real disappointment.

On the other hand, there was Tony Twain. To the English media, every day was like a holiday with Tony Twain around. After they sent away Real Madrid, which triggered the war of words between the two countries, they were now welcoming Chelsea, which they had an old grudge with.

Remember the series of storms triggered by Mourinho's dismissal? Tony Twain, who had nothing to do with it, became the protagonist, but the media liked it. They openly criticized Tony Twain for shooting his mouth off without using his brain, but also counted on the great Tony Twain to have a few more gaffes so that they could increase their circulation.

Nottingham Forest challenged Chelsea in an away game in the 34th round of the league tournament. The media was as excited as a pack of wild dogs in heat.

Grant did not want to talk more about his feud with Twain. In truth, they did not used to have a grudge. It was Twain's remark of "who is that?" that made one.

However, the media was relentless and insisted that Grant expressed his views on it. They surrounded him with questions that had nothing to do with the team. It was all variations of "how's Tony Twain?".

Grant could not take it anymore and roared, "when I first took over the helm, you always talked about Mourinho. Now you're talking about Tony Twain. Are you here to interview me, or to interview those two people? I know you're comparing me with Mourinho, but I think I've done a great job, leading the team into the Champions League semi finals! What does it have to do with me when our league ranking is not ideal?"

His sudden outburst left the reporters in an uproar.

Grant finished by saying, "why aren't we in a good position in the rankings? What other explanation can I give? I can do my job well, but when I accepted to lead the team, we were already too many points behind the leading teams. We have been playing catch up with those teams, which is not easy. What else do you want? You think I'm inferior to Mourinho. So why is it me, not him, who is sitting here for an interview now?"

There was a strong sense of attacking Mourinho within these remarks.

Previously when the media had been critical that Grant was inferior to Mourinho, he did not come out to refute. They did not expect his first counterattack to be so bold. Was he not afraid to offend the power in the locker room with his remarks? Everyone knew that his ability to run the locker room was poor and that he could not hold down the big names at all. Now his words would no doubt add fuel to the fire. Could it be that leading the team into the Champions League semi finals had hardened his backbone?

Having said that, Grant got up and turned to leave abruptly.

As soon as he left, Twain came in and watched Grant leave with a smirk on his face. He had heard the entirety of Grant's rage outside the door. He felt that Grant's remarks were laughable and that the way in which he offed the blame to his predecessor was crude.

He decided to further irritate the other man.

"When I took over Nottingham Forest in the second half of the EFL Championship season, the team ranked fourth from the bottom. After half a season, we returned to the English Premier League," he said with a grin. "I hope to use this story to encourage Manager Grant. Saying that 'when I took over this team, this team is at a certain ranking on the list' is an excuse that only incompetent people use. Ah, I'm not saying that Mr. Grant is incompetent. Please stop distorting my words. You know, to be able to lead the team to the Champions League semifinals is a remarkable result. If I were Grant, I would give up the league tournament and concentrate on preparing for the Champions League, since Chelsea will definitely not be able to win the league title this season anyway."

Although he told the truth and his advice also made a lot of sense, the Chelsea fans would be able to accept it from anyone besides Tony Twain. It had to be a provocation when he said it.

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Twain did not know if Grant was further enraged before the game because he did not accept any more interviews, so no one knew his thoughts.

Twain got the answer at the game — Grant was furious and wanted to settle the scores with Twain.

Chelsea did their best at home with the intention of defeating Nottingham Forest. It did not matter whether he angered their manager or not, Chelsea would not let Nottingham Forest off at home.

The two teams had accumulated a deep enough feud over the past few years. All Twain did was to add firewood to an already burning fire.

If Chelsea wanted to attack, Nottingham Forest would defend. Playing defensive counterattack in an away game was what the Forest team was best at. Twain was worried that Chelsea would not attack, but it was all good now.

No matter how fierce the Chelsea offense was, Nottingham Forest was accustomed to such scenarios and patiently contended with Chelsea amid the sprawling boos. Defense came first in defensive counterattack. The Chelsea fans in the stands tried to insult and provoke Nottingham Forest, but Twain's team was unmoved.

Chelsea besieged the Forest team's half of the field. The score remained at 0:0.

With ten minutes left to play before the end of the game, Grant suddenly figured it out. For Nottingham Forest, the only acceptable result was to win because they were in a tight race with Manchester United. They would lose all hope of winning the title if they did not win the game. Then even if it was a draw, it might still be a failure for Twain. I can accept a draw, so in that case...

He decided to let the team stop its attack and contend with the Forest team. Getting one point was enough to make Twain furious. For someone who did not respect his opponent, preventing him from getting the result he wanted was the best revenge.

Playing for the sake of retaliation against his opponent, Grant was already at a disadvantage in terms of standards.

Twain brought on two attacking players, Arshavin and Petrov, in one go and replaced the exhausted full-backs, Rafinha and Leighton Baines. He pulled George Wood back to play center-back with Pepe and Kompany. The Forest team was passively beaten and looked pathetic before the changes. Now, they began to take the initiative to attack and also dared to put in the forces — everyone but the three center-backs went up. They no longer looked pathetic with only two or three players involved in the counterattacks.

The pressure on their defense was eased and Nottingham Forest's offense began to display its prowess.

Chelsea was surprised by the sudden turn of events and the Forest team instantly strengthened their offensive, which overwhelmed them.

In the 87th minute, Chelsea, who had been attacking for the last eighty minutes, became the trailing team.

1:0!

Arshavin shook his arms and shouted.

Nottingham Forest eventually won the game. Twain left Stamford Bridge with a smile. Although Mourinho was gone, his unbeaten record against Chelsea continued. The feud between him and Chelsea would also continue...