

Football God 101

Chapter 101 Debut game; debut moment of magic

'There's still time to make my mark'.

FWEEEE!

Immediately after the referee's whistle went off, restarting the game, Sam used a familiar mantra to calm his nerves as he jogged about the pitch.

For this game, he replaced Pereira as the attacking midfielder of the team while Alex Iwobi had more of a defensive midfield role.

As soon as the game restarted, with fresh legs, Fulham FC increased their intensity, dominating possession even more than before.

Entering this game, Sam was determined to do just one thing, make his mark but he didn't rush about it.

A season and a half of playing in the NPFL for Enyimba FC already taught Sam a lot of things, and one of these things was to not be rash.

He still had a vivid recollection of his first game for Enyimba FC where due to his overenthusiasm to make his mark, he cost his team a goal. Though he made amends later in the game, that moment haunted him for a long time.

This was why for the first few minutes after entering the pitch, Sam seemed to turn into Xavi Hernandez reincarnated.

Just like the Barcelona legend, for 10 minutes, he played tidy and effective football, boasting incredible stats of a hundred percent pass completion rate.

With his tidy passes, setting up his teammates to take the risk, Sam helped Fulham FC dominate the possession even more for the final minutes of this game, thoroughly killing the Rotherham momentum.

After 10 minutes on the pitch though, with only 5 minutes remaining till the 90th minute, Sam finally decided to be adventurous a bit.

Receiving the ball in the middle of the pitch, just like before, the desperate Rotherham players expected him to pass sideways to the nearest teammate as they pressed aggressively, blocking his passing lanes while rushing towards him.

They expected to intimidate him with their aggressive press but Sam was not impressed. At that moment, he decided to switch it up.

'Let's leave a moment for the fans to remember'.

Bam!

Flicking the ball with the tip of his boot, he raised it above the first Rotherham player's outstretched leg, easily skipping past the first challenge.

The second challenge came from the right.

With his spatial awareness, Sam knew that this was the closest player to his position. Feeling mischievous, he decided to take more risk.

As the player charged in, he took a heavy step, staggering slightly as this player was destabilized by it, reacting by staggering backward unsteadily.

When the Rotherham player realized that it was a feint, he became even more aggressive, charging forward again and that was when Sam did him dirty.

Shifting the ball with the outside of his boot, Sam took the ball closer to the Rotherham player and just as this player stretched his leg out to steal the ball, Sam smoothly switched from the outside of his boot to the inside, cutting the ball back.

He deleted the Rotherham player with the elastico dribble. Enjoy new stories from empire

It was executed so silkily that it almost seemed like a snake's bite, and the aftermath was the Rotherham player collapsing to the field on his butt.

"Oh my!" The commentator exclaimed, laughing. "The new guy is feeling cheeky! What a move!"

"And oh..., he's played a pass, what a pass!"

"Jimenez is one on one with the goalkeeper!"

Immediately after skipping past the 2 challenges in the middle of the pitch, space opened up in the Rotherham formation. That was when Sam spotted Jimenez, the striker who was subbed into the game alongside him and Alex Iwobi make a run.

He did not hesitate, playing an inch-perfect defense splitting pass.

Raul Jimenez charged past the defenders, calmly controlling the ball before shooting it at goal with his second touch.

The Rotherham goalkeeper who was already charging towards him made his body big and unfortunately for Jimenez, the ball hit the goalkeeper's leg, rebounding back into the 18-yard box as players scrambled for it.

In the end, one of the Rotherham players got there first but due to the urgency, he executed a flawed clearance of the ball, shooting it high into the air instead of clearing it upfield.

The ball descended in the midfield where Alex Iwobi lurked.

A Rotherham player tried to win the aerial duel from the Nigerian international but outmuscling the opposition player, Alex Iwobi calmly won the ball before taking a look up the field, spotting a few options.

There were others in better positions but at this moment, Alex ignored all of them before threading a pass to Sam who just entered the 18-yard box.

A Rotherham player slid on the pitch, trying to intercept the ball but it just slipped past his outstretched leg.

The ball was an inch perfect pass in Sam's running path.

Sam took the ball in his strides, pushing it forward slightly and setting himself up before unleashing a whipped ground ball towards goal.

The Rotherham goalkeeper was rooted to the spot, only watching as the ball rolled through the ground with speed towards the bottom left corner.

He watched the ball all the way till it nestled into his net.

"Goalllll...!" Sam pumped a fist in celebration before turning, pointing at Alex Iwobi as he jogged towards the Nigerian international.

Alex Iwobi turned around, letting Sam jump on his back to celebrate.

"What a goal!" The commentator screamed.

"What a debut for the young Nigerian player".

"He started the move, it didn't pan out, and yet somehow, he still ended it!"

"What a debut performance!"

"It's a dream debut for him".

In the 86th minute of the game, Fulham FC scored the 2nd goal of the game through Sam, dooming Rotherham to a damning loss.

After that goal, the Rotherham momentum truly dissipated completely as Fulham FC fully dominated the rest of the game, coming close to scoring a few more times mostly through Jimenez.

Fulham FC did not get the 3rd goal though.

After additional minutes by the referee, the game finally came to an end.

Fulham FC won 2-0.

Chapter 102 EFL Cup semifinal- leg 1 of 2

(EFL Cup!)

(Semifinal- Leg 1 of 2:)

(Liverpool – Fulham)

(Date: 10 January, 2024)

...

De Cordova-Reid won the man of the match award of the Rotherham game.

Immediately after the game, the winger faced the media where he did an interview, answering multiple questions, including questions relating to the young Nigerian midfielder who made his debut for Fulham today and got a goal for it.

De Cordova-Reid may not have a personal relationship with Sam yet, but they were teammates. He had only glowing words for the young attacking midfielder, wishing him the best to help take Fulham FC to greater heights together.

Shortly after the game, after Sam returned to his hotel room to rest where he got treated to another video call session with his mom and sister back home in Nigeria. After the video call session was when his manager sent him their next fixture.

Apparently, Coach Yemi Daniel was not the only coach who sent his players fixtures for the next game, Coach Marco Silva practiced it also.

When Sam saw the details of the next game though, he was surprised.

The EFL Cup was also known as the Carabao Cup in England.

It was not the tournament that caught his attention though. Rather, it was the opponent that Fulham FC would be facing in the first leg of the Carabao Cup game.

Having watched his team play against one of the best clubs in England in the form of Arsenal just about a week or so ago from the stands, pulling off an upset and winning the game, Sam was about to see his team take on another heavyweight of the English premier league.

It didn't matter that they would be playing Liverpool FC in the Carabao Cup at all, Liverpool was still one of the best clubs in England.

Thinking of Liverpool reminded Sam of his game against Manchester City in the final of the 2023 FIFA Club World Cup.

Both of these clubs had a similar level of prestige in the premier league. Under the tutelage of Jurgen Klopp, Liverpool already built a dynasty in England.

And considering that his current team, Fulham was far stronger than his old club, Enyimba FC, Sam could not wait for his team's next game.

He was motivated to do even more in training.

For the next few days, Sam kept on being the first player to report to training every day and in the training sessions, his performances only became more prominent as he slowly settled into his new surroundings.

He was already building a tight understanding with Alex Iwobi. Anytime that they were both on the same 6-side team, their team won majority of the times.

Fulham's manager, Marco Silva saw all these but when the time came, he stuck with his starting XI formation.

(Fulham FC starting XI:)

(B. Leno: Goalkeeper)

(T. Castagne: Right Back)

(T. Adarabioyo: Right Center Back)

(I. Diop: Left Center Back)

(A. Robinson: Left Back)

(H. Reed: Center Midfielder)

(J. Palhinha: Center Midfielder)

(B. De Cordova-Reid: Right Winger)

(A. Pereira: Center Attacking Midfielder)

(Willian: Left Winger)

(R. Jimenez: Striker)

Marco Silva's starting XI was a strong one but he left a few big names out of the squad entirely, names like Alex Iwobi.

Just like Sam, Alex Iwobi was still a relatively new player to Fulham FC having signed a contract with them just early last year 2023.

Like most teams did in the Carabao Cup, Coach Marco Silva was not putting all his chips on winning the game, rather keeping certain chips for Fulham's next game in the premier league.

While the likes of Alex Iwobi didn't even make it to the bench, staying out of the lineup entirely, Sam made it to the bench for this game.

Like Fulham, Liverpool approached this game with a reasonably strong lineup with the likes of Virgil Van Dijk and Konate starting in defense, Mac Allister starting in midfield, while Diogo Jota and Luiz Diaz started in attack.

It was a mix of experience and young energy for the Liverpool team as the likes of Curtis Jones and Harvey Elliot also started the game.

One fact played in favor of Liverpool FC for this game though, it was the simple fact that they were playing this game in their iconic stadium, Anfield.

All his life as a football fan, Sam watched most of football's iconic stadiums only on TV, having bitter and sweet memories from them.

Anfield in particular was one of the stadiums he dreaded most.

Afterall, it was this same stadium that killed his favorite club, FC Barcelona's dreams for a 6th UEFA champions league title back in 2018.

Despite coming to Anfield with a solid 3-0 lead from the first leg back in Camp Nou, Barcelona, and with the likes of Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez still plying their trades for FC Barcelona, Barca fumbled in the atmosphere of this iconic stadium, surrendering their lead and losing 4-0 in Anfield.

When Sam stepped into Anfield on 10th January, feeling the energy of the fans in red as they sang their iconic song 'you'll never walk alone', he felt goosebumps.

'What... a stadium!'

FWEEEE!

As soon as the referee's whistle went off and the game started, just like most people expected, Liverpool FC started the game on the front foot, dominating Fulham FC in most parameters in the field of play.

Against the run of play though, it was Fulham who opened the deadlock first.

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In an unexpected moment of magic from the Fulham winger, after receiving a pass in the right, Willian, the silky winger went on a mazy run through the Liverpool FC defense, dashing past players with his pace before setting himself up and curling a shot past the Liverpool goalkeeper.

Kelleher who started in place of Allison Becker, the Liverpool no. 1 goalkeeper dived but the ball just barely curled past his hands into the net.

Against the run of play, Fulham FC went on the lead, 1-0.

"GOALLLL...!" Screaming loudly, Willian ran to the corner flag, slapping his chest excitedly as he celebrated wildly.

The whole Fulham FC team celebrated excitedly.

And when their celebration eventually died down, the referee blew his whistle, the signal to continue the game.

FWEEEE!

To Liverpool FC, the game truly started from that point.

A war started on the pitch.

Chapter 103 The Anfield Effect [1]

What is the Anfield effect?

To many, it was a myth, just a term made up by Liverpool fans to scare their rivals when they visit their home stadium, but was it really just a myth?

Liverpool FC is one of the oldest clubs in England with a lot of history, only behind Manchester United and over the years, there was one thing that opposition players always testified of, even legends of the game, and it was the atmosphere of this stadium during the high-stake games.

Legendary football players like the Brazilian legend, Ronaldo Nazario already testified of the Anfield effect, the very effect of playing in this iconic stadium.

Coming from 3-0 down to win 4-0 at home and snatch the final spot of the UEFA Champions league was not something that any club could do.

Not even the best clubs in the world could do it, and most definitely not against the FC Barcelona squad of 2018 led by a rampant Lionel Messi, yet, Liverpool managed to do it, how?

They did it because of the Anfield effect.

Sam had watched Liverpool games as a neutral fan lots of times as he grew up, witnessing miracle after miracle happen in this stadium, and finally, for the first time in his life, he experienced it as a professional football player.

FWEEEE!

As soon as the referee's whistle sounded after Willian's goal for Fulham, to the Liverpool players, the game truly started at that point.

A war started on the pitch!

Jurgen Kloop, the Liverpool manager was known for a few things, including his chill attitude and his 4-3-3 formation, but his formation was less known and notorious compared to his tactical approach to football.

Jurgen Kloop adapted the tactical approach of gegen-pressing.

It was a chaotic, high-intensity approach to football where the work rate of all the Liverpool outfield players is expected to be at an insane rate across 90 minutes.

It was a grueling approach to football, but for Jurgen Kloop, it paid dividends.

This chaotic, high-intensity approach to football was why in the premier league, Liverpool FC were known as Manchester City's kryptonite.

Afterall, during the Pep Guardiola era in the premier league, Liverpool under Jurgen Kloop are the only club to have pipped Man City to the premier league title once, with the Pep Guardiola machine taking all other titles.

Manchester City were renowned as the control machine. With incredible ball-retaining midfielders like Bernardo Silva and Phil Foden, they play a game of control where they carefully work their way towards goal and simply blow their opponents away, but not Liverpool FC.

Jurgen Kloop's mentality was simple; when playing against the masters of control, don't try to beat them at their own game, instead, switch it up.

Switch it up from control to chaos, pure unadulterated chaos.

In the 2018/2019 season, Liverpool FC fully embodied this philosophy at its peak as led by the legendary forward trio of Sadio Mane, Roberto Firmino, and Mohamed Salah, Liverpool swept aside all opposition to win the double of the UEFA champions league and the premier league title.

Of course, even during their peak, one thing was a constant that enabled them pull off miracle after miracle, the Anfield effect.

From the 19th minute, as soon as the game restarted after Willian's goal, Liverpool FC came roaring out like a rabid mother Tiger whose cubs were threatened by another predator.

The Tiger came roaring out rabidly with chaos and furious retribution.

"Allez!" "Allez!" "Allez!"

The Liverpool fans started, singing, chanting, drowning the iconic stadium with noise and in the chaos of the noise, the Liverpool players thrived.

The Liverpool team as a whole played like a master of chaos.

From the back, Virgil Van Dijk, the tall and imposing center back kept an incredibly cool head, leading the team from the back and kickstarting their play as the rest of his defense alongside him snuffed out all further Fulham attacks. Experience tales with empire

The triumvate of Willian, De Cordova-Reid and Jimenez were completely locked out by the Liverpool defense for the rest of the first half, letting their midfield and offense to thrive in the chaos that followed.

With Van Dijk leading from the back, Diogo Jota led from the front.

The Portuguese forward led the attack, pressing alongside the rest of his forwards with relentless intensity as they didn't let the ball stay in Fulham legs for more than a few seconds.

And with the Argentinian International, Alexis Mac Allister orchestrating play from the base of midfield, assisted by his partners in crime in midfield today, Ryan Gravenberch and Curtis Jones, Liverpool FC posed a great threat with every attack.

The Liverpool attacking trio for this game each tested the Fulham goalkeeper multiple times as the half wore on but Bernd Leno was on top of his game, putting out impressive save after save to keep his team in the game.

The more the game wore on and the louder the stadium became, the more rattled the Fulham players became, leading into more mistakes.

And the more mistakes they made; the more chaos reigned.

And the more chaos reigned, the more the Liverpool players thrived.

20 minutes passed...

30 minutes passed...

And finally, on the 41st minute, after relentless attacks against the Fulham box, Liverpool FC finally had their closest chance of the first half.

Receiving the ball in the center of the pitch, Alexis Mac Allister, the Argentinian international drove forward a bit with the ball and out of the blue, he unleashed an incredible shot at goal from almost 30 yards out!

BANG!

The ball rose high into the air, beating the goalkeeper before hitting the post, making a loud banging sound reverberate as the flustered Fulham players pounced on the rebound, barely clearing it off back into the field.

For the remaining minutes of the first half, Liverpool FC kept dominating their opponents, trying chance after chance to no avail.

Diogo Jota came closest after Mac Allister but in the end, Bernd Leno was still on top of his game, keeping him out.

Incredibly, Fulham managed to escape to half time still leading 1-0.

The question was, would their lead last?

Afterall, the Anfield effect was still in play.

Chapter 104 The Anfield Effect [2]

In the dressing room, an agitated Coach Marco Silva paced up and down with his hands in his pocket. When he finally spoke, he tried to sound calm.

"We're winning guys, I want you to keep your head in the game when we resume for the second half. Remember, we're winning".

"Don't let the Anfield atmosphere affect you too much".

"Try to ignore the Liverpool fans and just focus on playing football".

"Now see, our tactical approach to the second half will be a little more reserved than the first. This time, I want us to be more defensive".

"Defend like a team, don't do the mistake of getting drawn into their chaotic rhythm". He clapped.
"Let's go out there and play our own game, come on!"

FWEEEEEE!

When second half started, the Liverpool domination restarted instantly.

And this time, it was led by Luis Diaz.

Down the left-hand side of the pitch, having ghosted for most of the first half, the Colombian winger finally entered the zone state, regularly violating Castagne for the first 10 minutes of the second half as this right back was twisted and turned inside out.

Castagne tried his best, but the more he tried, the more Luis Diaz twisted him inside out with crazy dribbles down the left-hand side.

It was almost like every move he made, Luis Diaz could just do enough to beat him on the dribble and run past him.

"Allez!" "Allez!" "Allez!"

The atmosphere in this iconic stadium was now fever high.

The Fulham players were literally playing football in a battlefield. They were barely hanging on against this atmosphere of football created by the fans in red, it was almost suffocating them.

For the first few minutes of the second half, they did a good job to curb the Liverpool momentum, including the rampant Luis Diaz but there was only so much that they could do.

In the 68th minute of the game, the stalemate was finally broken.

Receiving the ball in the left-hand side from Curtis Jones, the Colombian winger, Luis Diaz put on his nitro boost again as like a floating rocket, he floated into the Fulham 18-yard box, weaving past players like they were not there.

Luis Diaz dribbled past Castagne and 2 more Fulham players, leaving them for dead even as he weighed his options in the 18-yard box.

At one side, there was Diogo Jota calling for the ball. At another side, there was Harvey Elliot and at the opposite end, there was Bradley, the young Liverpool right back who was making an overlapping run.

The Fulham players scrambled to cover all the passing options. They focused on that so much, forgetting that Luis Diaz was now close to their goalkeeper.

BAM!

The Colombian winger pulled the trigger, unleashing a low shot towards goal from a tight corner but for the umpteenth time this game, Bernd Leno was the Fulham savior as making his body big, this goalkeeper's leg managed to save the ball.

The ball bounced back into the 18-yard box as the Fulham players scrambled to recover and clear the ball, but they were not fast enough.

Curtis Jones, the young Liverpool midfielder was the first player to get to the loose ball and this player didn't hesitate, unleashing a volleyed shot towards goal.

Bam!

Bernd Leno dived again but it was not enough as Curtis Jones' volleyed shot was directed towards the opposite side of the goal.

The ball shot into the net with power, shaking it furiously.

"GOALLLL....!" Anfield as a whole roared in ecstasy.

Having stayed believing, faithfully roaring their team on since, the Liverpool fans were finally rewarded with the equalizing goal that tied the game 1-1 but they were not satisfied yet.

The Liverpool fans wanted more.

"Allez!" "Allez!" "Allez!"

That goal only injected more energy into the Liverpool momentum.

Their gen-gen pressing style became even more aggressive after the play restarted, as for the next few minutes, they totally suffocated Fulham FC.

In the touchline, Coach Marco Silva paced up and down, agitated and finally, not able to hold his nerves any longer, this manager made changes.

Marco Silva made a triple change, subbing off Reed, Pereira, and Willian who was now ineffective after his goal, putting on Wilson, Cairney, and Sam.

Coach Marco Silva patted the young Nigerian on the head. "Do your thing, match their intensity, you have the stamina for it".

Marco Silva's instructions for Sam were simple. He already gave up on his formation, now he wanted to match Liverpool's gen-pen press.

He wanted to introduce players with stamina to counter the press.

The Fulham coach was not the only one to make changes though, shortly after, Jurgen Kloop, the Liverpool manager made a double change, taking off Harvey Elliot and Ryan Gravenberch while introducing Darwin Nunez and Cody Gakpo.

With the fresh legs, Liverpool FC became more menacing on the pitch.

The fans were supplying their players with endless energy.

"Allez!" "Allez!" "Allez!"

Badump! Badump!

On the pitch, Sam could feel his heart beating against his chest rapidly.

It had been a long time since he was this tense in a football game. The last time he felt like this, he was still an inexperienced player during his first game in Plateau United's home stadium, Enyimba FC's bitter rivals.

In that game, Sam made mistakes, feeling like the atmosphere of the stadium was suffocating him. And this time, Sam felt the same way, perhaps even worse.

The whole Fulham FC team was playing horribly.

'Come on!'

'This is my moment; I must seize it!'

'I can't fumble now!'

Sam did his rituals, growling all the words he could in his mind to help his concentration but he never even came close to entering the zone state.

The Anfield effect was already in play.

Playing in this iconic stadium, Zinedine Sam was shackled, tamed.

And finally, merely 3 minutes after Curtis Jones' goal, 2 minutes after Sam entered the pitch, it finally happened, the game-changing moment.

This time, it was the endless chaotic energy of Darwin Nunez that forced the Fulham defenders into making silly mistakes, setting up Cody Gakpo, the second Liverpool substitute for the goal.

Isolated in the box after a poor Fulham clearance, Cody Gakpo took the loose ball in his strides, skipped past a few challenges before slipping the ball past a helpless Bernd Leno into the net.

And with that goal, Fulham's fate was sealed.

"GOALLLLL...!" Anfield roared as soon as the net shook.

Running towards the corner flag, Cody Gakpo slid on his knees in celebration even as the loud roars of adoration from the fans put a smile on his face.

Liverpool FC now led 2-1.

There were no more changes to the game.

For the remaining minutes of this Carabao Cup game, Fulham FC tried to create something as Sam slowly grew into the game but it was not enough.

He was nowhere near his best level on this game.

Despite how much Sam tried, it was not enough.

FWEEEEEE!

It was only when the final whistle sounded, bringing the game to an end that he collapsed on the pitch, realization dawning in. 'We lost'.

Chapter 105 Welcome to the premier league

'We lost'.

They were just 2 words but to Sam, it felt like the weight of the whole world was pressing down on him.

Laying down on the pitch, he looked up, a strange look on his face.

The Liverpool FC players didn't celebrate too much, simply waving at their fans to acknowledge their support before walking into the dressing room.

And that was when while still laying down on the pitch, Sam noticed a player in the colors of Fulham FC walk towards him. Not the jersey, just casual clothes.

Inclining his head to look, he recognized the face. It was Alex Iwobi.

At some point, noticing him on the ground on the pitch, the Nigerian international walked into the pitch to help him up.

Standing above him, the Nigerian international stared at him, smiling slightly. "I know, it feels awful right? I feel the same way after every defeat too," but then he chuckled. "But you'll have to get used to it Sam".

"Here in the premier league, unless you are perhaps playing for Manchester City, you have to get used to losing games".

"That way, it won't leave scars". Alex Iwobi extended a hand to help him up.

For a moment, there was a dazed look in Sam's face like he was thinking about something, then he smiled. "I don't want to get used to losing, but when I lose, I think I can take it better now".

Alex shrugged. "Anything you say man".

Taking Alex Iwobi's hand, Sam helped himself up and as soon as he stood up, his eyes lingered in the Liverpool FC players in red as they walked into the tunnel.

There was a strange glint in his eyes. "There's a second leg of this game, right?"

"Yes, and we'll play it in our home stadium".

"Good," Sam nodded, the glint in his eyes turning sharper. "Next time, I won't lose".

Alex Iwobi looked at him, shaking his head and chuckling. "That's not even Liverpool's strongest lineup, but I like your mentality man". He slapped Sam playfully on the shoulder. "Let's go".

Sam obliged, walking out of the iconic pitch alongside Alex.

As he walked out, remembering something, he looked up at the stands that were filled with tens of thousands of fans in red.

Sam grinned, thinking. 'Next time, you guys will remember my name, I promise!' He clenched his fists tightly as he left.

After an impressive display all game, being the main shining light for Liverpool FC throughout the game, the Argentinian International, Alexis Mac Allister scooped home the man of the match award for this game.

And with that, today finally drew to a close.

As soon as Sam got back home to his hotel room, after having another video call session with his mom and sister even as they talked about the game, his mom especially cursing the Liverpool defense which made Sam palm his face tiredly, Sam finally got a new WhatsApp message from his coach.

It was the fixture for Fulham's next game. After the game against Liverpool FC, Fulham's next game was in 3 days.

(Premier League:)

(Chelsea – Fulham)

(Date: 13th January, 2024)

As soon as he saw the club name on the fixture, Sam could not help but chuckle. 'Damn! What a welcome to the premier league'.

On his first weeks in England, he already watched and participated in his team playing against 2 of the English premier league's most prestigious clubs already in the form of Arsenal and Liverpool.

And now, his club was about to go up against a 3rd heavyweight of the English premier league in Chelsea FC, and all of it was within a matter of days.

'It's good though'.

'Big games mean more publicity, it's the perfect setting to make a name for myself early in the premier league'.

Thinking of something, he grimaced. 'That is if I play though'.

Alex Iwobi's words never left his head yet. Back in Nigeria, Sam may have been seen as the African Zidane, a generational player already, but here in England, there was no shortage of generational players.

To the Fulham manager, Marco Silva, all he had was an exciting talent who was yet to be proven consistently in the biggest stages.

Sam wondered if Coach Marco Silva would trust him for the Chelsea game.

He didn't think too deep into it though, thinking too much would deprive him of sleep. Instead of thinking, he would rather sleep, wake up early and focus on putting even more in training to convince his coach.

Sam slept early that night.

Waking up early the next day, he started his ritual again. Running through the streets of Fulham and ending in Craven Cottage, the home stadium of Fulham FC, he quickly completed his daily system quest before returning back to his hotel room to freshen up.

Not too long after, he reported to the stadium again for training, this time even earlier than ever before as he got there just a few minutes after 7.

Again, he was the first Fulham FC player to report for training.

Before his coach and other players could come, Sam did some personal training on the pitch with the ball as he put in the hard work.

And when the manager eventually came, at exactly 8:00am, training started.

And again, Sam put out another stand-out performance in training.

For the next few days, Sam kept on putting impressive performances in training as he made the squad that would be traveling to London to play against Chelsea FC, staying in the bench for the second consecutive game.

Alex Iwobi also stayed in the bench for this game.

For the second consecutive game, Sam made a trip to one of the most iconic stadiums in the world and all of England, Chelsea FC's home stadium, Stamford Bridge.

Marco Silva's starting line-up for this game was his perceived current best starting XI.

Diop and Adarabioyo started in center defense. Tete started as the right back of the team, while Robinson completed the 4-man defense as the left back. Like usual, Bernd Leno started as the goalkeeper.

In the 4-2-3-1 formation, Cairney and Palhinha started as the defensive midfielders. Pereira started as the attacking midfielder, Willian as the left winger, while Wilson started as the right winger.

For this game, Raul Jimenez led the attack as the striker.

On the Chelsea side though, they were going up against the likes of Raheem Sterling, Cole Palmer, Thiago Silva, and Enzo Fernandez.

It was going to be another uphill battle for Fulham FC.

Chapter 106 A trip to Stamford Bridge

Sitting on the bench, Sam took in the atmosphere of this stadium including the elite players that lined up in blue for Chelsea FC.

A few years ago, while still plying his trade for Manchester City, he remembered Raheem Sterling being one of the best wingers in the world.

The now Chelsea forward's output in front of goal may have reduced a lot, but he was still one of the fastest dribblers in the whole world.

And Cole Palmer? Despite the fact that this was his debut season for Chelsea FC, the young attacking midfielder was having a terrific season already.

Sam clenched his fists tightly. 'I'll get to his level soon enough'.

The Chelsea midfield was anchored by the reliable presence of a world cup-winning midfielder in Enzo Fernandez, alongside the tenacious Moises Caicedo.

It was a strong lineup, Sam wondered how his teammates would fare.

As soon as the whistle went off though, he knew.

FWEEEE!

As soon as the referee's whistle sounded to kickstart the game, Chelsea started the game on the front foot but the domination was lesser than Sam expected. His teammates didn't buckle before their superior opponents.

Despite playing in one of the most iconic stadiums in the world, against superior opponents, the Fulham FC team managed to play a much-improved game than in the Liverpool game, sticking to their football philosophy.

For the first few minutes of the game, a few players shone as the stand-out players already. The midfield duo of Enzo Fernandez and Moises Caicedo impressed, helping Chelsea dominate the midfield battle.

And progressing forward, a young player stole all the plaudits for the first few minutes of this game in the name of Cole Palmer.

Having developed a reputation for himself in the premier league this season already, giving him the nickname Cold Palmer, in this premier league game, the young English midfielder was once again living up to his reputation.

Cole Palmer was torturing the Fulham FC defense.

His vision was incredible, consistently splitting the Fulham defense open with defense splitting passes only for Broja, the starting striker for Chelsea FC to fluff his lines, missing chance after chance.

On the left-hand side, despite the fact that he was far less effective than his counterpart on the right, Raheem Sterling was also being a menace.

Anytime the ball touched his leg, this silky winger was electric, going on mazy runs as he dribbled through multiple players.

If only his mazy runs had an end product, he would be the best player of this game even as Fulham combated impressively to impose themselves in the game.

Despite the fact that they played better than in the Liverpool FC game, Chelsea was still dominating the game.

Fulham's shining light in this half came in the forms of Willian and Raul Jimenez. The left winger was once again being electric, torturing Malo Gusto at a worrying consistency down the Chelsea left hand side.

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The only thing was that just like Raheem Sterling, he lacked the end product.

He showed impressive chemistry at times with Jimenez though, setting up the Fulham striker a few times in good spots as Jimenez showed his threat, threatening the Chelsea goal repeatedly.

The only reason why Jimenez was not able to get his name on the scoresheet yet and open the scoring was because of the presence of the reliable Chelsea stalwart, the ageless Brazilian legend, Thiago Silva.

Despite being 39 years old already, this center back showed that age was just a number as he was comfortably head and shoulders above every other Chelsea defender, locking out the Fulham forwards.

The first half was mostly frustrating for both teams until a moment of madness just before halftime when a Chelsea player was tripped in the box.

FWEEEE!

The referee immediately blew for a penalty.

Raheem Sterling came forward, trying to take the ball to take the penalty but Cole Palmer refused to hand it over, stepping forward to take the penalty kick to the ire of the Chelsea left winger.

Taking penalties were part of Cole Palmer's duties since he was the designated Chelsea penalty taker, and he didn't want to leave the opportunity to Raheem Sterling just because he was a senior player.

As soon as the referee's whistle blew again, the young English midfielder took a breath before doing a short run and shooting the ball into the net.

The goalkeeper dived towards the other side, letting the ball nestle confidently in the left side of the post.

"GOALLLL...!" The Chelsea fans erupted with loud roars of jubilation.

Running towards the corner flag even as he was swarmed by his teammates, Cole Palmer did his already iconic chill cold celebration.

The Chelsea fans felt on top of the moon.

The first half ended 1-0 in Chelsea FC's favor.

In the dressing room, a furious Marco Silva went on a rant as he berated a few of his players' performance in the first half.

While the coach ranted, Sam stared at him, hoping for some reaction but the coach stayed stubborn. He made no changes for the second half.

When second half started, Fulham FC improved but just a bit as Chelsea's firm grip on the game continued.

There were beliefs in the media that Chelsea's main problem this season was goalscoring. Once they got the goal though, the Chelsea team was deep and compact enough to protect their lead.

In the second half, Fulham hustled and struggled to no avail, trying everything in their repertoire to get the equalizing goal.

Their relentless attack only opened them up to devastating counterattacks from the rampant Chelsea forwards which still didn't yield much fruit.

As the game wore on, desperate, Marco Silva finally made changes, a double change as he removed Wilson and Paulinha, putting De Cordova-Reid and Alex Iwobi in their place to try turning the game around.

Despite the 2 experienced players being introduced to the game, the Chelsea team refused to give an inch, barely giving the Fulham forwards a sniff at goal.

At the 80th minute, even more desperate now, Marco Silva made 2 more changes, taking Jimenez off for Muniz while introducing Castagne for Tete yet it was not enough for them to turn the game.

Throughout, from the bench, Sam threw glances at his coach, praying for just one opportunity to enter the game yet the manager never looked in his direction.

In the end, the score line didn't change.

After 90 minutes plus additional minutes by the referee, the premier league game in Stamford Bridge ended 1-0 in Chelsea FC's favor.

Sam never got the chance to play even a single minute.

He sighed. 'Today is not my day'.

Chapter 107 A talk with Alex Iwobi

The atmosphere in the Fulham dressing room was dampening after the loss against Chelsea FC in Stamford Bridge.

Chelsea was one of the best and most renowned teams in England but this season, they were in a period of transition. This was why the Fulham players felt like they missed an opportunity to run away with a point in the premier league.

None of them said anything though, including the coach.

Once they were ready, they packed their things and left the stadium to join their bus. As they left was when Sam whispered to his Nigerian counterpart.

"We could have done better".

Alex looked at him, and only patted him on the back in response.

The whole team took a flight back to Fulham City and as soon as they arrived, separating from their other teammates, Sam looked at Alex Iwobi. "Are you free today? I want to visit your place".

"Today? You don't want to rest after the game?"

"I didn't play".

"Oh," Alex nodded in understanding before looking at his time. "Yeah, you can, I think I'm free this night".

"Thank you".

Returning to his hotel room, Mr. Moses tried to speak with his son but Sam was not in the mood. After greeting his father, he informed him.

"Please dad, I want to go visit Alex Iwobi and spend the night there, maybe play a game with him on his pitch".

"Is it not too late?"

"No".

Mr. Moses looked at his son, a complicated look in his eyes. "When will you return?"

"Tomorrow morning". Explore more adventures at empire

As Sam quickly got ready to leave, his dad stopped him. "Son, you're doing great, don't put too much pressure on yourself".

"When the time comes, you'll enter the Fulham starting XI, just be patient".

Hearing that, Sam flashed a smile at his father. "Thanks dad".

With that, he left the hotel, taking the car as he drove through the streets of Fulham towards Alex Iwobi's apartment.

On arriving, the gateman let him in having been informed of his arrival already. Inside, Sam was treated to a delicious African dish that Alex's wife already prepared in anticipation of his arrival.

During today's dinner though, she was not as vibrant as the last dinner since she could read the atmosphere, telling that Sam and her husband were not in the best mood since their club lost a game today.

After eating, Alex Iwobi led Sam towards the green field of his little football pitch as they conversed. "I know how you feel man, sorry".

He stole a glance at Sam. "But Sam, I think you should work on your expectations. I know it may be hard to understand the distinction now, but this is no longer the NPFL, this is the premier league".

"You're not guaranteed a spot in the starting line up anymore like you are still playing for Enyimba FC. As you can see, even I am fighting for starting spots".

Sam sighed, looking ahead at the green field. "I just feel that I'm good enough to make the starting XI already".

"You're good enough doesn't mean you'll automatically make it, you know that right?"

Sam looked at him. "Then am I not working enough? Be truthful, every day, I'm the first to report to training and in every training session, I'm one of the better performers every day and I have no niggling injury issue, so why?"

Alex chuckled. "You know, I ask that sometimes too, every player does, but we have no choice. We just have to deal with it".

Originally, Sam had no qualms with being patient.

He had gone through this phase with Coach Yemi Daniel sometime before so he understood the need to prove himself. His only frustration was that he was not even getting the chance to do so like he wanted yet.

In normal circumstances, he would have stayed patient still but about a week ago, this stopped being a normal situation.

This was because his system finally updated his season system quest.

~-----~

[Congratulations! You have played your first game for Fulham FC as a substitute; you are now eligible for the season system quest!]

[Considering that you entered the premier league half-way through the season, only 1 season system quest is available.]

[Season Quest: Trophy Quest- Break the mold!]

>Fulham FC has gone trophy less through multiple seasons for a long time. In your debut season in the premier league, break this mold and help Fulham FC win its first trophy in years<

[Season Mission: Win a trophy!]

[Mission Reward: Random reward!]

...

[Penalty for mission failure: -3 decrease to 5 random football attributes!]

~----~

As soon as Sam saw this new system mission, he felt like coals of fire were lit in his butt and this was why he became desperate.

For this season, Fulham FC were competing in 3 different competitions, the EFL Cup, the FA Cup, and the premier league title.

Of the 3 competitions, Sam eliminated the premier league first. There was a reason it was the hardest league in the world, Sam had no delusion that somehow, he could push a mid-table team like Fulham to winning the league in his first season.

The same went for the FA Cup. As the oldest cup competition in the world, the FA Cup had a lot of prestige and clubs in the premier league attached a lot of importance to it.

Among the 3 tournaments, the EFL Cup was the weaker one.

Most strong teams in the premier league never field their strongest lineups in the EFL Cup. They rest their main players during the EFL games, giving bench and young players opportunities to prove themselves.

Liverpool more or less did the same thing in their last game despite the fact that they won in Anfield.

This was why Sam set his focus on the EFL Cup. In his books, it was the only slightly realistic way for him to break Fulham FC's trophy drought.

Another reason why he was so desperate was the fact that after the Chelsea game, their next game was in the EFL Cup again against Liverpool FC, the second leg to determine one of the finalist of the EFL Cup.

One game to take him a step closer to completing the system mission.

This was the main reason why Sam was so desperate to play.

If the normal Fulham played against Liverpool, despite the fact that they were playing at home, Sam was still not confident in his team winning.

This was why he was so frustrated and wanted to change this status quo by all means.

Thinking about the last word that Alex said to him, Sam suddenly stopped, forcing the Nigerian international to stop too.

As Alex looked at him, he asked. "Fortune favors the bold right?"

Alex Iwobi narrowed his eyes. "What do you want to do?"

Alex shrugged. "Since the manager is so dead-set in his old-school way and fails to recognize the talent that is on his hand, I'll just have to take the Ronaldo approach, be bold and tell him of my worth to his face till he sees it".

Alex shook his head. "Sam, I don't advise that, it can easily backfire".

"I already made my decision," Sam chuckled. "There's no other way".

Chapter 108 Fortune favors the bold

Fulham FC's next game was in the EFL Cup and it was in 11 days.

It was more than enough time for the Fulham players to rest up and prepare for the blockbuster encounter to determine their fate in the EFL Cup.

Like usual, Coach Marco Silva sent the fixture to his players.

(EFL Cup!)

(Semifinal- Leg 2 of 2)

(Fulham – Liverpool)

(Date: 24th January, 2024)

...

(Current Aggregate: 1-2)

After the Chelsea game, due to having more than enough time to prepare for the next game, the Fulham manager, Marco Silva gave his players 2 days of rest to properly recover before training started again.

When the D-day for training eventually came, just like before, Sam was the first player to report to Craven Cottage for training, even earlier than ever before.

And eventually, when training started, once again, Sam put out an eye-catching performance.

As his confidence grew since coming to England, so did his performances in training as he played at a level heads and shoulders above some of his teammates.

Coming to England, at first, Sam was intimidated but after his breakthrough to 80 overall rating, his feeling of inferiority reduced but when he finally decided to use his snooping tool on all his teammates, his confidence fully returned.

The Fulham FC team was full of players with a lot of experience in the highest stage, playing in the big 5 European leagues but that was all that they had more than Sam. Sam beat them in almost every other way.

The day he decided to use his snooping tool on his teammates, to his shock, Sam discovered that in terms of overall rating, there were only 2 players in the whole Fulham FC team that were better than him.

Only Raul Jimenez, the Fulham striker and Bernd Leno, the Fulham goalkeeper were higher rated than him at 81 overall rating each.

There was only 1 more 80 overall rated player in the Fulham team in Joao Palhinha, the Fulham defensive midfielder, followed by the likes of Alex Iwobi and Willian at an overall rating of 79 each.

All the other Fulham players were rated 77 and below.

The day that Sam learned this, his confidence rose to the moon and alongside it his performance in training. He didn't play like a new player at all, rather like a veteran with a lot of playing experience.

Despite his eye-catching displays in training for the next few days though, including his incredible work rate and diligence, always being the first to come to training, he was still at the periphery of Coach Marco Silva's starting XI formation for the blockbuster encounter against Liverpool FC.

The lack of recognition bothered Sam. He didn't let it kill his enthusiasm, but it was like torture.

He felt like a metal placed on an anvil and despite proving his tenacity time and time again, Marco Silva kept on hitting him on the anvil with disappointments.

It was hard, but with the help of his family, Sam was able to stay believing.

At some point, in one of the video calls, Mrs. Moses snapped, raining insults on the stupid coach who was too dense to recognize the gold at hand in the form of her son who was going to become the best player in the world.

"Don't mind him my son, you're the best player in that team".

"Don't worry, I'll put that foolish coach of yours in prayers. Trust me and trust God, in a few days, when the fires of heaven burn that ass of his, he'll put your name in that starting book of his".

"Starting lineup". Mr. Moses corrected his wife.

"Whatever!"

It was just typical mom, but listening to her rant eased Sam's pain.

But this time though, on the 21st of January, 3 days to the game, Sam finally got fed up. He finally decided to take the drastic action that he thought of about a week ago.

The next day, on the 21st, he was the first Fulham player to report to training like usual and when the coach arrived and training eventually started at 8:00am, Sam ingested one of the energy elixirs that he stored in the inventory.

With the help of the energy elixir, in today's training session, Sam was able to play at a truly extraterrestrial level, dwarfing the performance of all his teammates as he showed his talent.

By the end of it all, his unbiased teammates were left heaping praise on him for his performance today, yet he stayed at the periphery of his coach's starting XI.

That day, after the training session, as other players got set to start going home, Sam set his eyes on his coach.

His eyes gleamed. 'Fortune favors the bold'.

'It's now or never!'

Sam walked up to Coach Marco Silva when he was isolated with only one of his assistant coaches. "Coach, I need to speak to you".

Inclining his head and noticing him, Marco Silva smiled. "Hey Sam, how are you doing?"

"I'm good coach".

"That's great," Marco Silva grinned. "Your performance in training today was really great, you've really attracted my attention. Keep it up and you'll be rewarded".

Sam took a deep breath. "Actually, coach, that is why I came today".

"Oh". Marco Silva said, paying more attention to him now.

Sam looked his coach in the eye. "Coach, I know it's not my place but please, I want to play in the next game against Liverpool".

"We can't afford to lose it, and I believe I can help us win".

"You've seen my performance in training, you've seen my diligence, you've seen my ability, just give me this chance and I promise you won't regret it".

Silently, Marco Silva just stared at Sam for a few seconds and then he picked up his bag. "I heard you Sam".

He turned to leave with his assistant. "This should be the first and last time that you try that with me".

"As for your answer. I am the coach, I make the decisions, that is my job. You stick to your job, got it?"

"Yes boss".

Coach Marco Silva walked away with his assistant.

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Sam hesitated as he stared at this middle-aged man leave, but then he gritted his teeth. 'Fortune favors the bold'. He chanted in his mind, then...

"If you want to win tomorrow's game, I am your only chance".

It took all of Sam's courage to say that.

Hearing that, Marco Silva paused a bit but without saying a word, he left.

Sam returned home feeling like a huge burden already left his chest. He already said his mind, so he no longer paid attention to it.

For the next few days in all the remaining training sessions, he kept on giving his best even as he stayed at the periphery of the coach's starting XI, only making the bench.

And then, like the flipping pages of a book, the D-day approached, tomorrow, and with it the final starting XI was nailed in.

Raul Jimenez was to lead the line as the striker with Willian, Pereira, and De-Cordova-Reid behind him as the attacking playmakers.

Palhinha and Ciarney started in the defensive midfield positions, while the defense comprised of Castagne, Adarabioyo, Diop, and Robinson.

Bernd Leno started in between the posts.

As for the opposition side, Liverpool FC fielded a strong line up led by an attack of Cody Gakpo, Darwin Nunez, and Luis Diaz.

Their midfield comprised of the trio of Harvey Elliot, Alexis Mac Allister, and Ryan Gravenberch. While their 4-man defense comprised Conor Bradley, Jarel Quansah, Virgil Van Dijk, and Joe Gomez.

Kelleher started in between the posts again with Allison on the bench.

The game was poised to be a blockbuster encounter.

Chapter 109 A blockbuster encounter vs Liverpool

Sitting on the bench, Sam watched as his teammates lined up against some of the best players in the world.

The feeling in his chest was not the best, but he stayed calm.

'I already did all I could, now is to wait for the repercussions of my actions'.

Since standing up to his coach after the training session, he never came any closer to making Marco Silva's starting XI lineup. And not just that, these days, the coach barely looked him in the eye and that did not bode well to his career.

Sam just hoped it was not too bad to be salvaged yet.

Today, Craven Cottage was filled to the brim with almost 30,000 fans.

Just like Sam, the enthusiastic Fulham FC fans knew that the Carabao Cup was their only true chance of breaking their silverware drought if they were to win one this season, that was why they came out in droves to support their team.

The noise around the stadium was deafening as the fans in black and white sang their team on, boosting them with endless energy, and finally, the game started with the referee's signal.

FWEEEE!

After the coin toss, Liverpool FC were to start the game from kickoff.

As soon as the referee's whistle sounded, Liverpool FC passed the ball, commencing play as the Fulham FC players charged aggressively after the ball.

It was clear today that the Fulham players were filled with a lot of energy.

Buoyed by the loud noise made by the fans, the Fulham players pressed with relentless energy, eventually stealing the ball back and immediately, a quick-fire Fulham attack started.

Pereira was the one who won the ball back deep in the Liverpool half and immediately, he passed to Willian who was running down the left wing.

Taking the ball in his strides, the pacey Fulham winger hit the ball down the wing before chasing after it at full speed, running past the young Liverpool academy graduate, Conor Bradley.

Bradley recovered quickly though, not letting Willian dribble through but the Fulham winger thought on his feet, quickly dragging the ball back before playing a raking pass into the middle for Pereira to run into.

Immediately, the Liverpool defense scrambled to defend, Quansah especially charging towards the opposition attacking midfielder.

Pereira didn't shoot the ball though, instead, he jumped over it, leaving it to his teammate who shadowed his run from the right-hand side of the field.

De Codova-Reid was the one who shadowed Pereira's run.

"...!"

For a moment, the Liverpool defense panicked as space opened up on their defense and Cordova-Reid didn't hesitate, hitting the ball first time, an accurate whipped low shot towards goal.

It was an impressive shot but Kelleher, the Liverpool goalkeeper was alert as he dived, pushing the ball out for a corner to make the first save of the day.

The noise in this stadium rose to a crescendo, acknowledging the play as the energetic Fulham fans went behind their team.

When the corner was taken though, Darwin Nunez rose above everyone else, heading the ball away to safety.

And after that Fulham quick attack, Liverpool FC finally settled into the game.

For the first few minutes, Fulham FC had the better chances but the Liverpool defense cleverly shot them out. The Liverpool attack was also active as the trio of Luis Diaz, Darwin Nunez, and Cody Gakpo worried.

And the more time went on, the more they grew into the game.

With Alexis Mac Allister dictating the game from midfield, it was only a matter of time before Liverpool took control of this game.

And ironically, they didn't need to take control yet before they got a result.

The Fulham energy was still high up until the 11th minute when they came crashing down from their high throne, receiving a reality check.

Receiving the ball in the left wing, Luis Diaz created the first miracle moment of this game as he exploded immediately, going on a mazy run.

Using his quick feet to wriggle and skip past challenges, he burst into the Fulham 18-yard box and as the energetic Fulham players swarmed him, he used a simple ball flick to escape the confinement, creating space for himself.

"Oh...! What a flick! The Colombian is in the mood!"

"Will he shoot?!"

"Yes he does!"

"Oh myyyyy! What a GOALLLL!"

Immediately after Luis Diaz created space for himself, without even taking a look, this winger wrapped the inside of his right boot around the ball, curling in a perfect shot towards goal that left Leno going on a full-stretch dive.

The Fulham goalkeeper's hand barely missed the ball, allowing it to nestle into the net as Liverpool scored the first goal of the night.

The Colombian winger immediately charged towards the corner flag, pumping his fists excitedly while kissing the Liverpool badge in celebration.

In response, the Fulham fans drowned him in a chorus of boos.

"BOOO...!"

The commentator laughed. "The fans are angry but Luis Diaz doesn't care, all he cares about is his goal".

"That goal definitely has a lot of repercussions for this game".

"With that goal, Fulham now trail Liverpool with 2 goals. Unless somehow, they magically score 2 goals without conceding another, they're packing their bags home from the Carabao Cup".

"And honestly, I don't see those 2 goals coming, Liverpool is just starting".

It was brutal but it was reality.

The commentator was right, Liverpool FC was just starting.

After that goal, Liverpool FC took over control of the game in a stranglehold. The whole team as a whole switched on, finally reporting to work.

The Fulham FC players ran themselves to the ground, trying to regain their rhythm but Luis Diaz and Alexis Mac Allister did not let it.

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The midfielder and winger combined repeatedly, breaking down the Fulham defense like a hot knife through butter as they created attack after attack.

They dominated Fulham FC despite the loud noise being made by their fans.

Behind them, their defense was rock solid.

That first attack was the only time Willian got the better of the young Conor Bradley as led by Virgil Van Dijk, the Liverpool captain, the whole team defended superbly, shutting off all Fulham attacks.

Liverpool FC played admirably, dominating Fulham. Perhaps the only blemish to their 1st half display was the fact that they didn't score the 2nd goal to extend their lead.

The game went to halftime with Liverpool leading 0-1 in Craven Cottage.

Chapter 110 A reality check

"What the heck happened out there?!" Marco Silva raged in the dressing room as soon as his players entered.

"Can someone tell me what the heck happened?!"

"How can you start the game so good and end it so horribly?!"

"What went wrong???"

He panted, glaring at his players. "Pereira, you were sh*t! Cordova-Reid, you were sh*t! Is that how we want to win this game?!"

Today, this coach was done with mincing words with his players as he told them the meanest words he could think of.

He didn't just criticize Pereira and De Cordova-Reid's performance, he also criticized Willian, Cairney, and heck, he criticized the whole defense.

Marco Silva was already emotional, weighed down by the performance of his players in the first half. After his rant, he located a chair and sat down, panting heavily as he had a look of frustration on his face.

After about a minute or so, he finally calmed down. He cleaned his face with a towel before facing his teammates again. "Come on guys".

He looked them in the face. "We can still do this; you just have to believe".

"Teams have comeback from much worse situations before. Even Liverpool, do you guys remember the miracle of Istanbul?" He grinned.

"If Liverpool could do that, we can't we create our own miracle of Istanbul?"

"Do you think we're too small to do it?"

There was no response.

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"Come on guys, do you think we're too small to do it?!"

"No coach".

"Good," Marco Silva nodded. "Now listen to me," he looked at them. "I'm not making any changes yet, I'll keep on trusting you guys".

"Remember the game plan, stick with it, and give your all".

"We need a goal, come on!" He clapped. "Go in there and get me the first goal! We can do this!"

Like he said, Marco Silva didn't make a single change for the second half and this was a decision he grew to regret.

As soon as the second half started, Fulham FC kicked off play but they didn't hold possession for long, the aggressive Liverpool press won the ball back and almost immediately, Luis Diaz almost scored his 2nd goal of the game.

The goalpost came to the rescue, leaving a frustrated Marco Silva kicking angrily on the touchline as he yelled a few words in anger.

The coach's frustrations didn't matter though, the war continued on the pitch. To the Fulham players' credit, they didn't role down on their belly.

The Fulham fans were still loud, creating a noisy atmosphere to support their team and in this atmosphere, the Fulham players strived to play their game.

Among the forward line, despite their incredible work rate this game, they could not create anything tangible against the Liverpool defense, only Jimenez caused a threat the few times that the ball got to him.

Virgil Van Dijk had him firmly under control.

Liverpool started the second half on a high, dominating but as the game wore on, they reduced their intensity a bit as Fulham started regaining control, but never enough control to pose a serious threat to their goal.

The Fulham players on the pitch tried everything, did their best but the brutal reality was that their best was not enough.

60 minutes in and still no goal, an agitated Marco Silva finally made changes.

The Fulham coach made a double change, taking off Cairney and De Cordova-Reid who was locked by Joe Gomez all game, introducing Muniz and Alex Iwobi to try giving his team some attacking thrust.

With Alex Iwobi's introduction, Fulham's control over the game became a bit firmer but that was all, their attacking threat barely increased.

A few minutes later, Jurgen Klopp, the Liverpool manager made a double change, bringing in Diogo Jota and Curtis Jones while taking off Cody Gakpo and Ryan Gravenberch.

With the change, Liverpool's attacking threat increased even more.

As for Fulham, their attack remained as bland as ever against the star-studded Liverpool FC defense.

Having screamed his lungs out in the touchline for the past dozen minutes and still no improvement, Marco Silva finally gave up on his team, going back to the bench immediately after the 75th minute mark when another of his team's more promising attacks led to a corner.

With the likes of Darwin Nunez and Virgil Van Dijk defending the corner, he saw no hope of his team scoring but that was the unpredictable aspect of football.

As soon as the corner was taken...

"GOALLL...!" The Fulham coach jumped to his feet, running around the touchline as he celebrated excitedly.

Against the run of play, Diop, the Fulham center back rose highest for the corner, planting a firm header beyond Kelleher into the goal to score Fulham's goal of the game in the 76th minute of the game.

"What a header!"

"Are Fulham back in the game?"

"They still need one goal to make the aggregate even, but surely this goal can turn the momentum round, right?"

Diop, the Fulham center back didn't celebrate his goal, simply pumping a fist at the home fans to acknowledge them before picking the ball and running back.

They needed to restart the game fast.

Standing on the touchline again, Coach Marco Silva was hopeful, cheering his team on alongside the fans but after the game restarted, his energy started reducing as Liverpool put out a defensive masterclass.

All the Fulham FC attacks were like bricks harmlessly thrown against a stone wall; it didn't even budge it.

And with the Argentinian midfielder, Alexis Mac Allister still boxing the midfield battle with Luiz Diaz still being electric, Liverpool still posed a great threat.

As the minutes wore on, the Fulham manager's endless energy slowly drained till his face became that of frustration again.

He made another change, introducing Tete into the game in place of Castagne who picked up a knock, and yet his team was barely stringing passes together.

80 minutes passed; Liverpool still dominated.

85 minutes passed; Liverpool still dominated. And that was the straw that broke his already weak mental defenses, Marco Silva gave up on the game as Jurgen Klopp made another double change.

The Liverpool coach introduced the French defender, Ibrahima Konate alongside Clark, taking off Alexis Mac Alister and Darwin Nunez from the game.

With the double change, Liverpool totally locked the game off.

Marco Silva watched as his players made mistake after mistake, failing to do the bare basics to commence an attack.

The pressure already got to his players, now all he saw was chaos.

Marco Silva gritted his teeth, admitting defeat to the superior team but at that moment, one of his assistant coaches snuck up to him.

"We already lost grips over the game, why not give the boy a chance? You know who I mean".

Hearing that, Marco Silva stared at his assistant before staring at the boy, then he shook his head. "I need to discipline him. He needs to know his place".

"Silva, can you put your pride down for once and think of the team?"

The coach glared at his assistant but he didn't flinch.

"What will it take away from you? Pride? Who cares about pride if it will help us win the game?"

"The game is literally already over; you'll only be handling him a few minutes to live up to his words".

"If he can't, fine, you can punish him all you want".

"But, what if he can?"

Silence; Marco Silva just stared at his assistant.

"What if he can?"

Marco Silva closed his eyes, then he sighed. "Tell him to warm up, he's entering the game".

His assistant tapped him on the back before leaving. "I think you made the right decision".

A few seconds later, Sam started jogging on the touchline, warming up and a minute later, he was introduced into the game.

Sam was introduced into the game at just the 88th minute, 2 minutes to fulltime.

What could he do?