

Football God 381

Chapter 381: Quarterfinal clash; Cameroon vs Nigeria [2]

45 minutes, 1-1...

During half-time, Eric Chelle had only a few words for his players.

"Come on boys, you know, and I know what we're capable of".

"Cameroon are not our true opponents".

"They're just a stepping stone towards glory".

"In the 2nd half, pull no punches, go for the knockout blow!"

"Let's show them who's boss!"

It was only a few words but the Nigerian players had so much respect already for their coach that they came out for the 2nd half with their blood boiling.

Especially in one of the players, an old habit came back.

They do say old habits die hard.

'Win!' 'Win!' 'Win!'

The voice was already rearing its head in Sam's mind.

And in kind, Sam responded, embracing his mamba mentality and singlehandedly turning the game around in the 2nd half.

Tonight would be remembered as the night when Sam went berserk.

As soon as the 2nd half started, for the first few minutes, it was still a game of end-to-end football as Cameroon played Nigeria like equals, eager to lay down their credentials in the biggest stage of African football.

They were eager to cause an upset, but then there was Sam.

BZZZ!

In the 61st minute, he erupted.

Tiki taka football, Sam brought it to the Nigerian squad.

The Cameroonian defense did a good job since, holding him and Victor Osimhen's threat off, curbing Nigeria's fearsome attack but they could only do it for so long before one of them truly erupted.

In the 60th minute, Sam entered the flow state, fueled by his incredible desire to grab this game by the scruff of the neck and win it.

And in the 61st, he showed exactly what he was mad off.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

3 swift passes to cut the Cameroonian defense open.

The first starting from Sam who passed to the right to Alex Iwobi, the 2nd being Alex Iwobi cutting the ball back to Sam, Sam skipping past a challenge, and the 3rd into the 18-yard box towards Victor Osimhen.

Bam!

With his incredible physicality, Victor Osimhen held off the press of the Cameroonian center backs, tracking Sam's run and as soon as he entered the 18-yard box, he played the final pass, laying the ball in Sam's path.

Before the Cameroonian defense could react...

POW!

Sam struck the ball with venom, hitting it with such force that the ball seemed to bend from the point of impact, rushing towards goal like a missile.

Andre Onana stood no chance, caught ball watching as the ball honed towards the top left corner with absolute speed and force, almost tearing the net apart in its wake.

"GOALLLLLLLLLL...!" The Nigerian fans erupted in ecstasy.

"COME ON!!!" Sam roared at the top of his lungs.

His first goal was straight out of the top drawer, but Sam was not done yet.

Far from it.

Rather, he was just starting.

BZZZ!

8 minutes after his first goal in this game, giving Nigeria the lead, Sam buzzed into the Cameroon 18-yard box again, just in time after an incredible Ademola Looman dribble as the winger played a cross into the box for Osimhen.

Osimhen reacted to the cross but the Cameroonian center backs also reacted to him, and so he decided to leave it having noticed someone behind him.

Osimhen feinted, jumping over the ball and fooling the Cameroonian defense, leaving it to the unmarked Sam.

"Mark HIM!!!" The Cameroonian coach screamed at the top of his lungs but it was already too late as buzzing into the right position at the right time, Sam hit the ball on a volley with his right foot.

BAM!

Another powerful shot that left Andre Onana no chance.

Like a thunderbolt, it streaked towards goal, nesting into the top right corner before Andre Onana could blink his eyes.

"F*ck!" Onana cursed, punching the air in frustration.

Sam?

Having just scored his brace in the AFCON quarterfinals, he was already wheeling away towards the corner flag as he slid on his knees in celebration, igniting the stadium into a cauldron of noise.

Familiar chants were started by the Nigerian fans.

"Sam!" "Sam!" "Sam!"

In the 69th minute of the game, with his 2nd goal of the game, Sam doomed all hopes of a Cameroonian comeback as the scoreline was now 1-3.

And yet, he was not done yet.

From the 70th minute on, Sam's dribbling was fully unlocked.

BZZZ!

Like a bee, he buzzed around the Cameroonian players, eliciting cheers from the Nigerian players as he ran circles around their opponents.

Everywhere he went, players were nutmegged, left scrambling for the ball on their butts.

Everywhere he appeared, players were left chasing shadows.

This aggravated some aggressive reaction from the Cameroonian players, but Sam was equally adept at avoiding trouble as he was at creating it with his dribbles.

And in the 77th minute, the frustration finally got to the Cameroonian players, one of them hitting Sam a fraction too hard, inviting a straight red card!

FWEEEE!

The referee didn't even hesitate.

Groans reverberated around the stadium from dissatisfied Cameroonian fans, but the referee was having none of it. His decision was final.

Suddenly down to 10 men, Cameroon was doomed.

Sam took the freekick. And despite being almost 30 yards away from the post, he hit a dangerous freekick that beat Andre Onana again only for the goalpost to come to the rescue, hitting it before bouncing off for a corner kick.

Sam grabbed his head. "F*ck! I missed".

"F*ck you!" A Cameroonian player growled in his ear before running off.

Chuckling, Sam continued his game.

Cameroon survived the corner kick. For a few minutes, they thought it was over but in the 83rd minute of the game, Sam piled on their misery.

In that moment, he turned into a prime Neymar.

After receiving a cross-field pass from Ola Aina with his chest, Sam controlled the ball perfectly and as the tackle flew in, he nutmegged the first player.

With a la croqueta, he cut through 2 more Cameroonian players taking him to the left side of the pitch. And before he could be sandwiched there, with a Cruyff turn, he smoothly turned away from trouble.

The Cameroonian players were left chasing his shadow.

Whoosh!

A sliding tackle flew in but Sam smoothly jumped over it.

And then facing his final challenger, Sam flicked the ball, rainbow-flicking the poor guy before quickly setting his sight on goal.

As the ball descended, Sam traced it with his eyes, and then...

POW!

He swung his leg again, hitting it with such force that it flew off with speed.

This time, Andre Onana saw the ball. This time, he dived after it and actually touched it, but again the force behind it was too much.

It snuck past Andre Onana's grasp, and into the net.

"GOALLLLLLL!!!" The commentators screamed.

"A hatrick!"

"Samuel Moses scores a hatrick in the AFCON quarterfinals!"

"Holy cheeks! The boy is on God mode!"

"He is unstoppable!"

"Unplayable!"

"Unbeatable!"

Charging towards the corner flag passionately, Sam jumped high into the air and when he landed, he did the suiii celebration.

"SUIII...!!!"

Millions of Nigerian fans around the world did the celebration with him.

With Sam's hatrick, Cameroon was doomed. They later scored a goal in additional time, making it 2-4 but it changed nothing.

Nigeria won the game and Sam won another man of the match award with his haul of 3 goals and 1 assist. Crazy!

Chapter 382: Quarterfinal clash; Botswana vs Senegal

Cameroon vs Nigeria was not a contest.

Rather, it was a one-sided humiliation where Sam dominated, pushing himself to the forefront of the race for both the golden ball and golden boot awards for the AFCON tournament.

That performance was not just any type of performance, it was a statement display from the best player in the world.

Mohamed Salah may have won the ballon d'Or award but nobody doubted that now, Sam was by a sizeable margin the best player in the world.

He did not just pass the eye test; his numbers were insane.

And now, it was Senegal's turn.

Later that same day, in the night, Botswana took on Senegal, a game where Botswana was predicted to be put to the sword by the Senegalese.

The quarterfinal clash between Botswana and Senegal was a true David vs Goliath battle, and the Complexe Sportif Mohamed V stadium in Casablanca crackled with anticipation.

Over 40,000 spectators filled the stadium, eager to witness whether the underdog Zebras of Botswana could stand against the might of the Teranga Lions of Senegal in this high-stakes AFCON encounter.

Afterall, a spot in the semifinal was what was at stake.

Botswana's passionate supporters, dressed in sky blue and white, sang relentlessly, their voices carrying a mix of excitement and defiance.

They knew their team was the tournament's Cinderella story, and they were determined to push them forward.

Meanwhile, Senegalese fans, a sea of green, yellow, and red dominated the stands, their rhythmic drumming and choreographed chants creating a relentless, hypnotic energy.

You could feel the confidence of the fans from the drums alone.

FWEEEE!

From the first whistle, the stadium pulsed with nervous tension.

It was supposed to be a game of David vs Goliath, an absolute crushing from Senegal, but still it was the AFCON quarterfinal, a knockout game where any single mistake could result in elimination.

This was why like the other quarterfinal games, every touch of the ball in this stadium still brought a reaction; gasps from Botswana's faithful when their team surged forward, deafening roars from Senegalese fans whenever their star players danced past defenders.

The weight of expectation hung in the air as Senegal, one of the tournament favorites pressed high, while Botswana fought with heart and grit, refusing to back down before the towering visage of their opponent's momentum.

As the game reached its boiling point, the atmosphere became a storm of noise; whistles, vuvuzelas, and chants blending into a deafening wall of sound.

And that was when the dreadlock was broken, in the 39th minute.

POW!

It was a thunderbolt shot.

It was a shot from outside the 18-yard box.

It was Idrissa Gueye, the Senegal midfielder who unleashed the shot, leaving the Botswana goalkeeper no chance.

A goal befitting of the AFCON quarterfinals, a goal with enough raw energy to cut through the tension in this stadium.

"GOALLLLL...!!!" Senegalese fans celebrated at the top of their lungs.

Charging towards the corner flag alongside his teammates, Idrissa Gueye jumped down on the field, sliding forward in celebration as his teammates jumped after him, celebrating the goal exuberantly.

The first half came to an end 0-1 in Senegal's favor.

When second half started, the onslaught continued.

It was all Senegal, just Botswana defending desperately for their lives even as they were already losing the game.

Senegal was too strong, too stacked, leaving the Botswana players no openings to attack. They hoarded possession with an iron fist, attacking again and again to show their superiority in the game.

And then, the superiority eventually showed... from the corner kick.

It was another Senegal corner kick, and this time, the towering center back and captain of the national team, Kalidou Koulibaly was the one who leapt highest, planting a powerful header towards goal and beating Botswana's goalkeeper.

"GOALLLLL...!" The Senegalese players and fans celebrated the goal with as much passion and excitement as the first goal.

That goal entered in the 58th minute.

It was not over, not while Ismaila Sarr was yet to enter the scoresheet.

And then, the winger finally did it, taking a ball from deep and going on an incredible solo run before coolly slotting past the goalkeeper into the bottom right corner, scoring a crazy goal that got Senegalese fans on their feet again, screaming for joy and hailing his name.

Charging towards the corner flag, Ismaila Sarr celebrated by pointing to his jersey name, showing the world that he was HIM.

He was still a contender for the golden ball award.

Sarr's goal came in the 66th minute.

It was already 0-3 in Senegal's favor, but the Teranga Lions of Senegal were not yet satisfied. They wanted 1 more, at least 1 more, and they got it.

This time, it was the striker, Nicolas Jackson who finally got it.

The Chelsea striker was injured previously, but he recovered fast enough to play a role in the quarterfinal of the AFCON tournament.

It was a classic poacher's goal, lashing into a cross from Ndiaye, the right winger before tapping into the net from close range in the 74th minute.

0-4 to Senegal..., and they were finally satisfied.

The game eventually came to an end 0-4, Idrissa Gueye winning the man of the match award with his goal and assist.

Senegal progressed; Botswana was eliminated.

And with that, the quarterfinal fixtures of the AFCON tournament were all played, sending the eliminated countries home and giving the qualified countries one more stage to showcase their talents.

The semifinal fixtures of the AFCON tournament were finally ready.

(AFCON 2025:)

(Tunisia – Morocco)

(Date: 14th January, 2026)

...

(Senegal – Nigeria)

(Date: 14th January, 2026)

The semifinal clash was set, and they were to be played on the same day.

The 4 last surviving teams in the tournament.

Tunisia would take on Morocco in a potentially intense battle, while Senegal would take on Nigeria in undoubtedly the most blockbuster encounter of the tournament so far.

It was a clash between 2 tournament favorites.

A clash between the Teranga Lions of Senegal and the Super Eagles of Nigeria; it was going to be a treat to never forget.

Chapter 383: Semifinal matchups; the final culling

Out of the 24 countries that competed in the AFCON tournament from the group stage, after going through a treacherous process of culling, now only 4 African countries remained in the tournament.

Only 4 made it to the semifinals.

And now, it was time for the final culling.

(AFCON 2025:)

(Tunisia – Morocco)

(Date: 14th January, 2026)

...

(Senegal – Nigeria)

(Date: 14th January, 2026)

Football was an unpredictable sport.

At the beginning of the tournament, nobody predicted Tunisia to make it all the way to the semifinal of the AFCON tournament but here they were, alongside 3 big names of African footballing history.

And now, alongside the big 3, they were to undergo the final culling in the prelude to the final game of the AFCON tournament.

After the quarterfinal, the teams had 3 days of rest to prepare for their next game in the semifinals.

The atmosphere in the Nigerian camp was full of palpable tension. Afterall, this time, theirs was the clash dubbed as the clash of titans.

The matchup of death.

On the other side of the matchup, Morocco already took on another tournament favorite once in Egypt, passing the test with flying colors.

Now it was Senegal and Nigeria's turn to prove their mettle against a dangerous opponent, to show that they were cut from champion material.

In those 3 days, in the Nigerian camp, Eric Chelle didn't push his players to the limit physically like others expected.

Rather, the coach employed meditation techniques with his players.

Eric Chelle already worked with his players long enough to have a good idea about their physical condition. This was why he knew that after training so hard for every game since the group stage till now, all his players were in peak physical condition, even the substitutes.

This was why in those 3 days that they had, instead of working his players to the bone, he rather utilized the days for what they were meant for, rest.

In his words. "You've pushed your bodies enough, now it's time to push your minds".

"Football is a physical game as much as it's a game of the mind".

Employing advanced post-match recovery processes and meditation practices with his players, Eric Chelle made sure that all his players were at their peak and well rested before the game.

He didn't just do that though.

While they recovered their body, he drilled them mentally, going on a literal lecture, explaining his tactics for the Senegal game.

It was Nigeria's biggest game in the tournament so far, their biggest test.

Eric Chelle was determined to pass the test, and so were his players.

Eric Chelle had literal sleepless nights, analyzing, making deductions to dissect the strengths and weaknesses of the Senegal team to the barest minimum for his players to quickly grasp.

And then, he drilled his own approach to the game into their heads.

Only after that was the coach satisfied.

But he was not the only one working his ass off though. This was the semifinals, one more step and it would be the AFCON final; the other 3 coaches also worked their asses off analyzing and dissecting the opposition team.

To them, it was now or never. There was no better shot at the AFCON trophy than the semifinal right now, they had to give their all to take it.

It was going to be a clash of titans.

Like this, time moved fast. In a jiffy, it was already D-day.

14th January, 2026...

The evening was cloudy and cold, a perfect atmosphere for football.

The venue for the first semifinal game was the Complexe Sportif Mohammed V stadium in Casablanca.

And that evening, the stadium was a seething cauldron of passion and tension as Morocco, the tournament hosts faced Tunisia in a blockbuster AFCON semifinal.

The stakes could not have been higher.

One step away from the final, a North African rivalry brimming with history, and a stadium overflowing with 50,000 roaring fans, each heartbeat synched with the drama unfolding on the pitch.

From the moment the teams emerged from the tunnel, the Moroccan crowd erupted into a deafening wall of noise.

"Dima Maghrib!" "Dima Maghrib!"

Waves of red flooded the stands, massive flags unfurling as the thunderous chants of the Moroccan fanbase shook the stadium.

The rhythmic beating of drums and the blaring of horns created an almost hypnotic intensity, a force willing the Atlas Lions forward.

But the Tunisian supporters were defiant.

A section of the stadium pulsed with the determined energy of their traveling fans, draped in red and white, belting out war cries of their own.

Their chants rose and fell in waves, refusing to be drowned out by the Moroccan onslaught.

The home advantage was just unfair, but they refused to give up.

And then...

FWEEEE!

The game started.

Morocco was the favorite, but Tunisia played the game of their lives, leaving it all on the pitch against the Atlas Lions.

Every pass, every challenge, every surge forward sent shockwaves through the stands. The tension was suffocating.

Gasps of anticipation turned into deafening roars with each near-miss, and jeers cascaded down as tempers flared on the field.

And when the goal finally came, the stadium exploded; one half in absolute delirium and the other in stunned silence and bitter defiance.

It was an agonizing goal, an own goal.

After holding out for most of the first half, in the additional time after 45 minutes, Morocco finally broke the deadlock, one of the Tunisian defenders scoring an agonizing own goal.

Morocco didn't care though; they celebrated the goal exuberantly.

The first half came to an end 0-1 in Morocco's favor.

When second half started, Morocco piled on the pressure even as Tunisian bravely defended for their lives.

As the game neared its climax, the sheer intensity of the atmosphere was overwhelming and it was in that atmosphere where Brahim Diaz shone brightly.

Like a beacon of light in darkness, the Real Madrid winger went on an incredible solo run, carrying the Moroccan dream forward as he scored from close range after dribbling through the whole Tunisian defense!

In the 62nd minute, Brahim Diaz ended the game.

"GOALLLL...!!!" Moroccan fans roared at the top of their lungs.

On that night, it would be recorded that after a valiant performance from Tunisia, they bowed out of the tournament with their heads held high.

On that night, Brahim Diaz won the man of the match award.

And Morocco matched to the final of the 2025 AFCON tournament.

Next was Senegal vs Nigeria.

Chapter 384: Semifinal clash; Senegal vs Nigeria [1]

(AFCON 2025:)

(Tunisia 0-2 Morocco)

(Date: 14th January, 2026)

...

(Senegal – Nigeria)

(Date: 14th January, 2026)

Tunisia vs Morocco was decided.

Now on to the clash of death, Senegal vs Nigeria.

The game was scheduled to be played in the 2nd biggest stadium in Morocco based in the capital city of Rabat, the Complexe Sportif Prince Moulay Abdellah stadium with a seating capacity of over 69,000 fans.

On the night, the 69,000+ capacity stadium was filled to the brim.

That night, the Complexe Sportif Prince Moulay Abdellah became a coliseum of war.

This was not just a semifinal, this was the battle of death, a clash of titans; a clash of Senegal vs Nigeria, two of Africa's greatest footballing powerhouses, locked in the most intense, nerve-shredding showdown of the tournament.

The buildup to the game itself was filled with tension and when the night eventually came, the air was suffocating with tension.

There was an equal presence of fans supporting both countries as the 2 different fanbases went all out in support of their team.

The Senegalese faithful, draped in green, yellow, and red pounded their drums like war signals, their chants rhythmic, deep, and unrelenting as if summoning their warriors to battle.

Across the stands, a sea of Nigerian green and white erupted with fierce, unyielding energy, their voices shaking the very foundations of the stadium as they screamed chants to support their team.

"Up Super Eagles!"

When the players started marching out of the tunnel, the noise around the stadium hit a crescendo, rising above the roof.

Both nations started with their strongest lineups, holding nothing back.

Nigeria started with a now customary 4-2-3-1 formation.

In between the posts for the Super Eagles stood the imposing figure of Stanley Nwabali, the Nigerian-born goalkeeper. While ahead of him stood a quadruple defensive set-up comprising Samuel Ajayi, William Troost-Ekong, Calvin Bassey, and the electric Ola Aina.

Ahead of them in midfield was the duo of Frank Onyeka and Alex Iwobi, then further ahead was the power-offence quadruple.

Victor Osimhen led the attack as the striker.

To his right and left flanks respectively were Moses Simon and Ademola Lookman, the Brest and Atalanta wingers while behind Osimhen was the core of the Nigerian team, Samuel Moses, the young FC Barcelona star.

It was a formidable lineup, but Senegal's lineup was just as formidable.

Senegal started in a 3-4-3 formation.

In between the posts for the Teranga Lions of Senegal was Edouard Mendy, the ex-Chelsea goalkeeper. Ahead of him was a defensive trio comprising Diallo, Kalidou Koulibaly, and Seck.

Ahead of the defense in midfield was a formidable quadruple of Sarr, Idrissa Gueye, Camara, and Diarra.

As for the attack, it was comprised of the attacking trios of Ismaila Sarr, Nicolas Jackson, and Ndiaye.

The game was poised to be a clash of titans.

FWEEEEEE!

That sound unleashed the demons in the players, they were let loose.

The moment the referee's whistle blew, the match became a battlefield, and the atmosphere turned feral.

At first, it became a contest of physically as the 2 midfields wrestled for the ball, trying to snatch dominance over the game which neither side was outrightly successful at. They were evenly matched.

This continued for a few minutes until the game settled down.

As soon as the game settled down though, they didn't let it stay that way, they amped up the tempo.

BOOM!

The players of both sides clashed with aggressive intent.

And firmly behind them from the stands, the 2 different fanbases supported their teams, roaring at the top of their lungs in support and hate for the other side.

Every touch of the ball was met with a roar of approval or a cacophony of whistles, every foul was greeted with furious protests, and every missed chance sent fans to their knees in agony.

The stadium was literally alive, a living, breathing entity fueled by pure, unfiltered passion.

This was no ordinary game; it was like a derby.

But Sam was used to derby games.

In England, he played derby games against Chelsea, Tottenham, and the likes, other London clubs. And then in Spain, he played in the derby of derbies, the crazy El Classico between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona.

All these games were tough games, but a trend that Sam already established in his career was that he always turned up in the big games.

In those games where everywhere is locked, no space left to attack, everywhere was left airtight, that was when he thrived.

That was when his mamba mentality reared its head.

'Win!'

'Win!' 'Win!' 'Win!'

Sam was the first player to hit the zone state in this game.

And in the 23rd minute of the game, he erupted, proving the difference maker between both sides.

Bam!

Under pressure, Alex Iwobi overhit a cross towards the Senegal 18-yard box that was too high to get to.

All the players in the 18-yard box gave up, but Sam didn't.

Thud!

Kicking the ground with his powerful legs, like a spring, his legs stretched and then he leapt into the air like an elastic frog.

Sam didn't just jump, he also raised his right leg, above his head, after the ball that was flying above him with speed, then...

Bam!

One touch. One silky, delicate touch.

And like an obedient puppy, the ball calmed down, all the momentum of its flight killed in that one touch.

"My GOD! What a leap!"

Even as the commentators raved in shock and the Senegal players finally came back to their senses, realizing the sudden threat where they never expected one, before they could move, Sam already improvised.

After such a crazy ball control, what next?

Having tried the Senegal center backs once already, Sam knew that they won't give him time to settle on the ball if he decided to land.

And so, he improvised in mid-air to shoot.

After controlling the ball by raising his right leg above his head, still suspended in mid-air, Sam twisted his body, his back now facing ground.

And as his right leg descended, including the ball, his left leg swung up.

POW!

An overhead kick!

No one expected that crazy leap and mid-air ball control; no one expected the sudden overhead kick too.

"...!"

Edouard Mendy was rooted to one spot, watching as the ball rushed with speed into the net before his brain could even realize what just happened.

When he realized, Sam was already whirling away in celebration.

"GOALLLLLLLLLLLLLL...!!!" This stadium roared to life.

"ZINEDINE SAM!!!"

"ZINEDINE SAM!!!" The commentators roared shrilly.

"What guts! What temerity! To hit a bicycle kick in the AFCON semifinals, only Samuel Moses would have thought of this, only that madman!"

"And to do it against Senegal, the Teranga Lions, freak!"

"Samuel Moses is a freak!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, peel your eyes and savor every moment of it because you're currently watching the best player in the world in action!"

Sam charged towards the corner flag before sliding on his knees in celebration, pointing at the Nigerian fans who responded with exuberant energy.

"SAM!!!" They chanted at the top of their lungs, tearing their shirts, celebrating, some even wanting to jump into the pitch to celebrate with him.

It was chaos, beautiful chaos that Sam orchestrated.

In the 23rd minute of the game, 0-1 to Nigeria, courtesy of an absolute Sam banger goal.

What a moment to be alive!

Chapter 385: Semifinal clash; Senegal vs Nigeria [2]

"IDRISSA GUEYE!!!"

"IDRISSA GUEYE!!!"

"IDRISSA GUEYE!!!"

"What a player, what a moment!"

"He's been buzzing all game, the driving heart of Senegal's midfield tonight and he's popped up with the all-important clutch goal!"

"Who saw this coming?!"

"No one!"

"Senegal is ahead, 2-1!"

"Bonkers! Absolute cinema at the Complexe Sportif Prince Moulay Abdellah!"

"Now, this is football!"

"Peak!"

45 minutes plus 2 minute of additional time, 2-1...

Just like that, from 0-1 up, Nigeria started trailing in this game, and then...

FWEEEE!

The referee blew his whistle for half-time.

The Nigerian players walked down the tunnel to their dressing room feeling like they just let up a big opportunity.

How did this happen? Just how?!

They honestly had no idea.

In the dressing room, Eric Chelle, the Nigerian coach paced up and down, the tension and proceedings of the game having gotten to him too.

He was tense even as he tried his best to stay calm.

He knew that his mood as the coach could affect his players though, this was what enabled Eric Chelle to calm down, and then he faced his players.

"You think we can't win?!" His voice was loud and full of venom.

"Why? Are they superior to us?"

Silence.

"Answer me!"

"No sir!"

"Then why are we not winning?"

Silence.

Eric Chelle glared at his players. "We have all the tools necessary to win this game, there is absolutely no reason why we should be trailing!"

"Now, I want you to go out there and snatch what is rightfully ours, the lead!"

"I'm not satisfied with just an equalizer; I want 2 goals!" He raised 2 fingers for emphasis. "2 goals as fast as possible!"

"That is what we deserve!"

"That is what we've worked so hard for!"

"We can't fumble after getting this far, unacceptable!"

"We must win, and we will win! Got it?"

"Yes sir!"

"Now get ready to go back to that pitch, we have a game to win".

When Eric Chelle was done with his speech, the Super Eagles players felt their blood boiling, their muscles spasming with contraptions of anticipation and adrenaline. They could not wait to get back on that pitch.

And soon enough, they returned, entering the pitch again to a familiar cauldron of noise.

As they entered the pitch, their coach's words continued reverberating in their heads, leaving their eyes burning with a fiery zeal.

The referee didn't dawdle.

FWEEEE!

He blew the whistle again, and then the clash started in this stadium.

BOOM!

The fan service hit an even higher crescendo this time around.

Just as the players clashed between themselves on the pitch, the fans also clashed between themselves in the stadium stands, competing with their loud voices and their drums.

It was a crazy spectacle to behold.

On the pitch, riding on the foundation of all this energy and passion, Senegal and Nigeria played the game of their lives.

Bam! Bam!

The ball moved so fast it felt like a blur; it was a game of intense football!

There was no dull moment.

If Senegal was not attacking, Nigeria was attacking.

And there were exciting matchups all over the pitch; Ismaila Sarr vs Samuel Ajayi, Ndiaye vs Ola Aina, Nicolas Jackson vs William Troost-Ekong and Calvin Bassey, Idrissa Gueye against the Nigerian midfield duo.

For the Nigerian side, it was Moses Simon vs Diallo, Ademola Lookman vs Seck, Victor Osimhen vs the towering Koulibaly, and Sam vs Idrissa Gueye, Camara, Koulibaly, literally everyone that faced him.

Sam was not in one place, at least not anymore.

Eric Chelle didn't just motivate his players, he also tweaked something.

Sam may have scored the only Nigerian goal so far but he was being man-marked by the fearsome Koulibaly, limiting his influence, and this was why Eric Chelle finally gave his No. 10 a free role in the second half.

Yes, in the Nigerian national team, Sam now wore the No. 10 jersey.

The switch happened just before the AFCON tournament was to start.

And in this second half, even as other players fought, among the Nigerians, the player whose no. kept flashing in the cameras was Nigeria's no. 10.

Sam was everywhere.

Flexing his stamina, running himself to the ground, chasing after loose balls, jumping into tackles and when in possession, orchestrating the play, spraying passes left and right to set his teammates up.

Sam was doing everything, back to his all-action self this second half.

But still, it was not enough.

Senegal was too tough, a literal mountain to crack.

And time was moving.

50 minutes, no goal...

60 minutes, no goal...

70 minutes, no goal....

In the 70th minute, Eric Chelle finally made changes, an offensive change, taking off Moses Simon and introducing a second striker in Viktor Boniface.

As soon as Boniface entered the pitch, Nigeria's attack changed, becoming more brutish, powerful, and direct to the point.

And that was the change that Eric Chelle, the change that separated good coaches from great coaches, the change that made the difference.

In the 76th minute of the game, Viktor Boniface went up against Diallo, chasing a loose ball.

Moses Simon would have failed the physicality duel but this time, against Viktor Boniface, Diallo jammed against a wall, shoved aside by Boniface.

Sarr, the Senegalese midfielder quickly rushed in to intercept but holding his ground, Boniface regained his composure before hitting a quick cross into the box, towards an un-marked Victor Osimhen.

Osimhen was unmarked!

Thud!

The Nigerian striker moved immediately.

But reading his threat, Koulibaly pounced after him, grabbing his jersey, intent on bringing him down.

Even if he took a red card for it, at least, he would have protected his team's lead. They simply needed to hold on for 20+ minutes to the end of the game.

But Osimhen was having none of it.

"Get lost!" He growled as the ball floated in.

Swinging his arms, he tried to shrug off Koulibaly but the Senegalese center back was too strong. His desperate struggles managed to do something though, making Koulibaly lose his balance, collapsing to the pitch.

Even as Koulibaly collapsed to the pitch, he never let go, still grabbing Osimhen's jersey, intent on bringing him to the ground with him.

Osimhen felt the tug, he could not fight it.

But before going down, his eyes gleamed. 'I need to do this first!'

The ball floated in and as he also lost balance due to Koulibaly's pull, Osimhen jumped and swung his right leg on a volley.

He could not add much power to the shot, but it was enough.

Bam!

An awkward shot.

Edouard Mendy, the Senegalese goalkeeper dived after the ball but due to hitting it awkwardly, the ball moved slower than Mendy expected.

If Osimhen hit the ball normally, Mendy would have caught it.

But due to losing his balance due to Koulibaly's tug, the awkward shot enabled the slowly floating ball to miss Mendy entirely, going past the goalkeeper and entering the net from an awkward angle.

Thud!

Victor Osimhen finally fell down but he didn't stay down, immediately rolling to his feet and jumping, pumping his fists aggressively as adrenaline and ecstasy filled his head with dopamine.

"COME ON...!!!" Osimhen roared.

"GOALLLLLLLLLLL...!!!" Nigerian fans in the stadium roared.

The game was level again.

The commentators raved.

"What a game!"

Chapter 387: Semifinal clash; Senegal vs Nigeria [4]

"GOALLLLLLL...!!!" Nigerian fans in the stadium roared.

In the 77th minute, 2-2...

The game was level again.

"COME ON!!!" Victor Osimhen roared.

The Nigerian striker didn't just celebrate in one place though.

Dodging his teammates, he charged towards the corner flag, all the while pumping his fists aggressively out of sheer euphoria and excitement.

A goal to draw your country level in the semifinal of the AFCON tournament, there were few goals better for a career highlight reel than this goal.

This was a goal that every striker yearned to score for their country, and Victor Osimhen just scored it.

Of course, he was ecstatic.

Of course, he felt on top of the world.

As soon as he arrived at the corner flag, Victor Osimhen went on his knees, all emotional as he pointed his fingers up to heaven in gratitude.

With that goal, Nigeria was on again.

The game was still on!

One more thing though, it would not be a goal without the raving of the commentators. "What a game it is!"

"What a goal!"

"Born in Nigeria, bred in Napoli, a striker forged in blood finally finds his moment in the semifinal of the AFCON tournament!"

"A goal for the Super Eagles!"

"A goal forevermore!"

"What a moment to be alive!"

"What a game!"

"First, it was 0-1 to Nigeria, courtesy of the young genius, Samuel Moses from a bicycle kick to never forget!"

"And then, in the blink of an eye, Senegal leveled, Nicolas Jackson of Chelsea being the savior for the Teranga Lions!"

"And then, even faster than the first time, Senegal scored again, this time from a thunderbolt from Idrissa Gueye!"

"Then, it was 2-1 to Senegal, from 0-1 down!"

"At that point, we thought we've seen it all but little did we know we were just starting. The Super Eagles kept on pushing, again and again, and finally, in the 77th minute of the game, they got a reward for their persistence".

"Another goal..., 2-2!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, peel your eyes open because you're witnessing a classic of classics in the AFCON tournament, a game that is not forgotten years and decades after it is played".

"That is what we are bearing witness to today".

"A classico!"

"The game is level again, who shall prevail or are we going to penalties?"

From the beginning of this game, the tension between both sides was high and now, after Victor Osimhen's goal, the tensions boiled over.

While Osimhen celebrated his goal, nobody knew who started it first but Frank Onyeka and Idrissa Gueye quickly clashed on the pitch, exchanging words and needing the referee to intervene.

The referee brandished his card, handing 2 yellow cards to them each.

The tension was now even more palpable.

But then, even that could not stop the progression of this game.

FWEEEE!

The referee's whistle sounded again, the signal to continue the game and the war of fire and brimstone continued in this Moroccan stadium.

Bam! Bam!

Both countries played with even more urgency and intensity.

Both wanted the winning goal, the goal that would seal the game and establish them as legends of African football.

By now, both coaches already made changes to their lineups, bringing some fresh legs to increase mobility on the pitch.

The intensity of the game increased even more, end to end, extremely heated. The fans in the stadium stands held their breaths.

The tension was also getting to them, making their voices lower than normal, but they were soon triggered...

BAM!

The ball grazed the bar before going off for a goal kick off another Idrissa Gueye shot, and the Nigerian fans could not help their blood pressure rising.

The Senegalese fans were no different either.

After Victor Osimhen's goal, the Senegal defense finally adapted, noting the threat of a rampant Viktor Osimhen. And with the defense being so compact, they were able to marshal and keep the 2 strikers quiet, but not the ACM though.

Nigeria's central attacking midfielder was still everywhere.

Sam chased every ball as if he never got tired, dribbled as if he had lungs of Dragons. He was drenched in sweat but never stopped fighting.

But despite it all though, the Teranga Lions found the breakthrough first, in the 84th minute of the game.

Again, it was Nicolas Jackson.

And again, it was a pass from Ismaila Sarr.

Whoosh!

The ball rushed into the 18-yard box courtesy of an Ismaila Sarr cross, making the Nigerian defense to react in response.

But then..., Calvin Bassey slipped!

"...!"

Originally, Nicolas Jackson already gave up hope of getting to that ball but as soon as he noticed Calvin Bassey slip, adrenaline filled his body.

Thud!

The Senegalese striker dug his left leg on the ground, using the momentum to push himself like a spring into motion, stretching his right leg out in the process, and then...

Bam!

That was all the Nigerian goalkeeper heard.

Stanley Nwabali calculated the trajectory of the ball, diving after it but Nicolas Jackson's long legs were what confused the Nigerian goalkeeper.

A normal striker's legs would not be long enough to reach that ball, but Jackson's legs were long enough, poking the ball into the net.

Silence, then...

BOOM!

The Complexe Sportif Prince Moulay Abdellah exploded in ecstasy.

Nicolas Jackson celebrated by charging to the corner flag, sliding on his knees in celebration even as he pumped his fists with passion.

In the 84th minute, 3-2...

Agony. Regret, anger became the theme among the Nigerians.

The commentators raved. Senegalese fans rejoiced; Nigerian fans were stunned.

It seemed all but over, but then, just 3 minutes after Senegal's goal, Nigeria proved their credentials as tournament favorites.

Like a bee, the Super Eagles stung.

And this time, it was Alex Iwobi, orchestrated by Sam.

In the final few minutes of the game, losing?

Sam lost it, he felt like he was going crazy. Inside his head felt like a chaotic volcano that was about to erupt.

'Win!' 'Win!' 'Win!'

It kept on screaming in his head.

And then when the ball eventually touched his leg this time, he went gaga!

Sam went on one of those mazy runs, cutting through Senegal like a hot knife through butter, skipping past challenges like they were not there, long enough, deep enough till he was in Senegal's 18-yard box, and then...

Bam!

He pushed the ball back to Alex Iwobi since multiple defenders already blocked his path. With his run, he created space for his teammates.

As soon as he pushed the ball, Alex Iwobi erupted.

POW!

A shot executed with anger and rage.

Like a missile, it tore through the air to its destination. Edouard Mendy dived but he stood no chance, the ball tore its way into the net!

And then...

"COME ON!!!"

Pupils dilated, veins popping all over his body like molten fire in a volcano, Sam screamed passionately despite the fact that he was not the one who scored the goal even as he turned to face Alex Iwobi.

"COME ON!"

Alex Iwobi screamed back at him as they jumped at each other, bumping their chest against each other in celebration.

In the 87th minute of this game, 3-3!

At this moment, Sam didn't feel like a professional football player alongside his teammates at all.

Rather, he felt like a gladiator.

Chapter 388: Semifinal clash; Senegal vs Nigeria [5]

FWEEEEEE!

The full-time whistle.

3-3.

Senegal and Nigeria could not be separated in 90 minutes.

Both countries were stacked with ballers, evenly matched after an incredible game of 90 minutes.
And now, over to extra-time.

Before that, this was the game in numbers.

[23rd minute: 1st goal- Nigeria]

[Goalscorer: Samuel Moses]

[Assist Provider: Alex Iwobi]

...

[43rd minute: 2nd goal- Senegal]

[Goalscorer: Nicolas Jackson]

[Assist Provider: Ismaila Sarr]

...

[47 + 2nd minute: 3rd goal- Senegal]

[Goalscorer: Idrissa Gueye]

...

[77th minute: 4th goal- Nigeria]

[Goalscorer: Victor Osimhen]

[Assist Provider: Viktor Boniface]

...

[84th minute: 5th goal- Senegal]

[Goalscorer: Nicolas Jackson]

[Assist Provider: Ismaila Sarr]

...

[87th minute: 6th goal- Nigeria]

[Goalscorer: Alex Iwobi]

[Assist Provider: Samuel Moses]

A 6-goal thriller after 90 minutes.

90 minutes of unforgettable, intense football.

Alex Iwobi got a goal and assist, Sam got a goal and assist, Idrissa Gueye got a goal, Ismaila Sarr got 2 assists, Nicolas Jackson got 2 goals.

There were so many contenders for the man of the match award.

It was a game straight out of the top drawer, incredible football was played across the 90 minutes that just passed.

This game, literally all the stars in both countries showed up.

But now, it was extra-time.

Huddled up in the stadium alongside their coach, for the first time in a long time, Sam noticed that his breathing was extremely ragged even as he listened to the words of their coach who addressed them.

On the other side, the Senegal coach also addressed his players.

And then...

FWEEE!

The first half of extra-time started.

And once again, Nigeria and Senegal refused to give in to their opponents, coming out to play football like they were not the same players who just played 90 minutes of non-stop attacking football.

On the stands, the fans of both sides had their hearts on their throat.

It was a wonder why an emergency was not called yet in the stadium for a heart attack emergency, that was how vicious and vivid the tension was.

In the first half of extra-time, the players of both sides kept on giving their all, buzzing in attack and staying even more defensively disciplined as the last thing they wanted was conceding a goal at this stage of the game.

In the end, Ademola Lookman got the best chance of the first half of extra-time as after another one of those mazy runs from him, he unleashed a shot across the face of goal only for it to graze the bar before rolling off for a goal kick.

Ademola Lookman grabbed his head in disbelief. "F*ck!" He cursed.

The game continued but then the referee's whistle sounded again, bringing the first half of extra time to an end after 15 more minutes of football.

During the second half of extra time, both coaches made changes again, and of the changes, Eric Chelle took Ademola Lookman off for Kelechi Iheanacho, already preparing for the penalty shootout.

The Senegal coach's changes reflected the same thing as among his changes, one of them included introducing Sadio Mane into the pitch this late into the game.

And with that, the second half of extra-time started.

Another 15 minutes of less intense football, but that took nothing away from the tension of the game.

Rather, it was even more tense than all the other halves.

Afterall, at this stage of the game, it was already too late to rally round to overcome a deficit. Any country that scored now was the winner, that was the consensus on the pitch and among the fans.

And so, both countries defended desperately for their lives.

In the 108th minute, spotting Edouard Mendy slightly off his lines, Sam hit another one of those trademark shots from the halfway line.

But this time, Edouard Mendy covered ground fast, snatching the ball from the air before it could enter the net.

Another reason why it was easier for Mendy was because Sam didn't hit it perfectly. After 108 minutes of such intense football, Sam's legs were like jelly.

He was dead tired and exhausted, but he kept on pushing.

In the 113th minute, Idrissa Gueye tried another of those crazy shots of his, this time forcing Calvin Bassey to make a desperate block with his body on the line.

At this point, the players no longer cared about injury or taking care of themselves, they just wanted to win and they did everything they could for it.

In the 114th minute, in a counterattack orchestrated by Calvin Bassey's block, Kelechi Iheanacho received the ball in the wing before going on a mazy run, charging through players buoyed by his fresh legs.

He cut into the box successfully but when it finally reached the execution part, Kelechi Iheanacho skied the ball!

Groans of frustration and disappointment quickly filled the stadium.

Iheanacho was also disappointed at himself, but there was nothing he could do about it.

There was no more time, the game was drawing to an end.

And then, in the 118th minute, in a moment that definitely gave millions of Nigerian fans multiple heart attacks, Sadio Mane, the Senegalese legend received the ball in the 18-yard box one-on-one with Stanley Nwabali, Nigeria's goalkeeper!

"...!"

Trepidations ran through the hearts of the Super Eagles fans, but then, Stanley Nwabali pulled a Jesus moment, creating a miracle.

Bam!

Sadio Mane hit the ball at point-blank range but from that range, showing reflexes similar to those of the Flash, Stanley Nwabali's left hand moved.

The ball struck his hand, and bounced.

It was still a loose ball!

"...!"

Sadio Mane pounced but once again showing inhuman reflexes, Stanley Nwabali jumped, pushing the ball away before Sadio Mane could get to it.

BOOM!

That miraculous double-save elicited roars of adoration from the fans of the Super Eagles that filled this stadium, some tearing their clothes in the passion.

It was a moment of individual brilliance, and it was recognized by the world, the commentators especially talking non-stop about it.

Stanley Nwabali saved Nigeria, and then...

FWEEEE!

The referee's whistle sounded again.

Extra-time was over, and now, on to penalties.

Chapter 389: A penalty shootout

The Complexe Sportif Prince Moulay Abdellah in Rabat was at its absolute boiling point.

120 minutes of sheer war, six goals split between two African footballing giants, and yet no winner.

It was a game unlike any other.

The final whistle of extra-time had blown, but there was no relief; only the nerve-wracking dread of a penalty shootout.

The nerves among the fans were at their highest.

At this point, both sets of fans had to agree that the game was now out of their hands. A penalty shootout was a 50/50 gamble, any side could win it at this point; and the fans could not help but feel tense.

Fans, players, coaches, everyone knew what was at stake.

A ticket to the final. Glory or heartbreak.

The stadium, once a deafening inferno of chants had settled into an eerie tension as the players converged around their coaches, the 2 coaches already going over his penalty lineup with their players.

This was the moment of truth.

Some fans couldn't watch. Others clutched their heads. Prayers filled the air.

Now, it was time. The referee handed the ball to the first taker. The moment of reckoning had arrived.

Senegal's captain, Kalidou Koulibaly stepped up first.

Stanley Nwabali, the Nigerian goalkeeper tried a few subtle antics to get into the head of his opponent but Koulibaly was having none of it.

Ice-cold, he sent Nwabali the wrong way, burying the ball into the bottom left corner. 1-0, Senegal.

BOOM!

Senegalese fans roared in ecstasy and relief.

But then..., Sam took the ball.

"...!"

The stadium fell into shocked silence, the commentators reacted.

"Wow..., Sam is Nigeria's first penalty taker!" The shock could be heard in their voices.

"Wow, nobody saw this coming, what a bold decision from Eric Chelle".

"Yes, we all know the boy is good. Everybody with an eye can see just how talented Sam is, but people often forget that the boy is still a teenager".

"In a penalty shootout at the semifinal of the AFCON tournament, to make him the first taker, don't you think that's too much for his age?"

"This is literally his first AFCON!"

"It's a gamble from Eric Chelle!"

"Sam is well-known for his mamba mentality approach to football. Tonight will be one of his ultimate tests, prove your mentality in the biggest of stages!"

"Will the young genius crumble under pressure, or will he thrive?"

Confidently, after taking the ball Sam swaggered to the penalty spot.

Edouard Mendy stared the 20-year-old down, looking into his eyes with intensity, trying to intimidate him but Sam only smirked in reply.

The stadium was as silent as a church.

"Sam vs Edouard Mendy, who shall prevail?"

A deep breath, a powerful run-up, and Sam rifled the ball with immense power, straight down the middle of the post.

Edouard Mendy dived left.

1-1!

"And he scored!"

"Nerves of steel, Sam!"

Sam pumped a fist in celebration at the fans, growling slightly.

And well, that penalty set the tone for the rest of the shootout. 2 talisman for both countries scored, and both nations were infused with confidence.

The second round...

Senegal's Ismaila Sarr went up. His shot was nearly perfect; Nwabali dived the right way but couldn't reach it. 2-1, Senegal.

Nigeria's response? Victor Osimhen, the Nigerian striker who had been electric all tournament stepped up. His shot was clinical, the bottom right corner, leaving no chance for Mendy. 2-2.

The third round...

Boulaye Dia for Senegal. Calm as you like, he dinked it cheekily down the middle as Nwabali committed early.

The audacity! 3-2, Senegal.

But Kelechi Iheanacho was not to be outdone. A short stutter in his run-up, then a side-footed strike. Mendy got fingertips on it, but it was in! 3-3.

The fourth round...

Senegal's Idrissa Gueye walked up. Experience on his side, the midfielder struck it confidently. No mistake. 4-3, Senegal.

For Nigeria, Viktor Boniface took responsibility. The pressure was immense, but he sent Mendy the wrong way. 4-4.

The fifth round, the decisive moment...

This was it.

If Senegal scored, Nigeria would have to score to stay alive. If Senegal missed, Nigeria could win it with their next shot.

Pape Matar Sarr, the Senegalese midfielder stepped up and placed the ball down. He exhaled. The tension was unbearable.

He took his shot, and Nwabali guessed right!

Whoosh!

A full-stretch dive to his left. The ball was parried away! **SENEGAL HAD MISSED!**

BOOM!

The Nigerian end of the stadium quickly erupted in chaos, but it wasn't over yet. Nigeria still had to convert.

The final shot...

With a nation holding its breath, who would take Nigeria's final penalty?

Stanley Nwabali!

Eric Chelle was pulling moves right out of George R.R Martin's a Song of Ice and Fire!

Yes, the Nigerian coach sent out his goalkeeper.

The hero of the night now had the chance to seal it himself.

The goalkeeper picked up the ball, walked to the spot. The weight of history was now on his shoulders.

BOOOOOO!

The Senegalese fans booed, trying to rattle him. Opposite him, Mendy stood tall, ready for anything.

Nwabali took a deep breath. One step back, two, three, and then...

FWEEEE!

The referee blew his whistle.

Stanley Nwabali ran up... a smooth, composed strike...

Bam!

Silence, for a second, and then...

[illegible]

BOTTOM CORNER. MENDY BEATEN. GAME OVER!

The stadium exploded!

Nigerian players stormed the pitch. The bench emptied in a blur of green and white as they rushed to mob Nwabali, their savior, their warrior.

Osimhen tackled him to the ground. Iheanacho leapt onto his back. The fans in the stands went berserk, screaming, crying dancing.

It was mad euphoria on the pitch.

On the other side, Senegal's players collapsed in devastation. Some fell to their knees; others buried their faces in their jerseys. The dream had ended in the cruelest way possible.

Tonight was a night for the ages.

Nigeria had survived the battle of death, the clash of titans.

Nwabali, goalkeeper, hero, legend had etched his name into AFCON immortality and Nigerian footballing folklore.

As the Super Eagles celebrated, Africa knew it had witnessed one of the greatest semifinals in the history of the tournament.

Chapter 390: A date in the final

With Sam's heroics yesterday, getting another goal and assist, taking his tally to a more ridiculous figure of 11 goals and 5 assists, Sam's name was already immortalized in this AFCON tournament but he was not the hero last night.

Last night was Stanley Nwabali's night.

The Nigerian goalkeeper won the man of the match award at the end of the game, having pushed Nigeria over the edge to win the game.

And with that, a date was finally set in the final.

A date between 2 of the favorites that were recognized at the beginning of the tournament, a date between Morocco and Nigeria.

(AFCON 2025:)

(Final:)

(Morocco – Nigeria)

(Date: 18th January, 2026)

Both countries didn't have it all smooth-sailing for them.

Just like Nigeria faced a big hurdle yesterday in Senegal, having to fight through the Teranga Lions, Morocco also passed through a trial of blood in the form of clashing against the Pharaohs of Egypt led by the Egyptian King.

And just like Nigeria, they passed their test with flying colors.

And now, these 2 nations were to clash in the final of the tournament.

After their crazy performances since the beginning of the tournament till now, both countries were in crazy form.

The final was billed to be another clash of titans, another game where 2 giants of African football would clash in a battle to the death.

But before that, another game was scheduled in the tournament.

The game for 3rd place.

(AFCON 2025:)

(Match for 3rd place:)

(Tunisia – Senegal)

(Date: 17th January, 2026)

The 3rd place match would be played a day before the final, but even that would only take place in 3 days.

And so, Sam and his teammates had a little time to recover from the game that drained them of all strength.

Playing 120 minutes against Senegal drained the Nigerian squad.

And now, led by their coach, they all went through post-match recovery procedures to recover as soon as possible for the final clash that would take place in the largest stadium in Morocco, the Grande Stade de Tanger stadium in Tangier.

Before the 3rd place match, in one of the evenings as Sam continued recovering from the exertion of the Senegal game, he spoke with his girlfriend.

"Hey babe".

"My big baby," she smiled. "How are you faring?"

Sam smiled tiredly. "It's tough, honestly, far tougher than I expected". He chuckled. "I never expected staying and maintaining my body at the top level to perform at my best every game in a tournament would be this hard".

He sighed. "Now, I admire what Lionel Messi and that Argentina team did during the 2022 World Cup even more".

Kayla smiled. "Messi is your idol, right?"

Sam smirked. "Is that even a question?"

She chuckled. "Well, make your idol proud. Replicate what he did with his country with your country".

Sam smiled. "I don't even know if Messi watches the AFCON tournament, but I want to believe he does". He grinned. "That's one of the things motivating me to keep on giving my best for each and every game".

"You can do it babe!" Kayla smiled. "It's just 1 more game remaining now".

"Yeah," Sam nodded. "1 more game... against Morocco".

"You guys can win!"

Sam smiled again. "I know we can, but..."

He sighed. "You know, most of my teammates got to the last AFCON final too only to lose to Ivory Coast, the then hosts in the final".

"The situation this time is so similar, and I feel like the trauma of that last AFCON tournament is already getting to them".

"Then help them!"

"Huh?"

Kayla smiled. "You dummy, it's so simple! Have you forgotten your time in Fulham, when you loved playing the captain even as you were not the captain?"

"It's one of the things that drew me to you, those antics of yours".

"It made you seem so confident".

"I am confident!" Sam stressed.

Kayla laughed. "Anyways, your teammates need you know. Just like you used to motivate your teammates back in Fulham, motivate them".

"With Fulham, you broke trends that nobody ever expected".

"You won the premier league with Fulham Sam! Surely, winning the AFCON with Nigeria is not an impossible task".

Sam smiled, regaining his confidence again. "You know what? You're right babe, we're absolutely going to crush Morocco!"

"It's time to go rile up the boys!"

After a few more talk, they ended the call.

For the next few days, alongside his teammates, Sam did what he always did before. Train, train, and train again..., non-stop training.

And then, in a flash, it was already 17th.

...

17th January, 2026...

In the Complexe Sportif Mohammed V stadium in Casablanca, on a cool breezy night, Tunisia took on Senegal in the 3rd place match of the tournament.

Just like the Nigerian squad was exhausted after the semifinal game, the Senegal squad was also extremely exhausted after that grueling match.

It showed in the 3rd place match, giving Tunisia some initial hope.

The first half came to an end 0-0.

But as soon as Sadio Mane was introduced into the game, within just 3 minutes, the veteran Senegalese footballer showed his genius, receiving a pass from Idrissa Gueye before curling past the goalkeeper to score.

Sadio Mane's goal in the 66th minute of the game ended up being the only goal of the game, the winner.

And just like that, Senegal won, claiming 3rd place in the AFCON tournament.

With 3rd place in the tournament already finalized, all eyes turned and focused on the penultimate game of the 2025 AFCON tournament, the epic final clash between Morocco and Nigeria.

Both nations would do anything to win!

Hours after Senegal's win, Morocco's captain, Achraf Hakimi was caught by reporters who threw questions at him.

"Captain, Nigeria's attack are billed as the most fearsome in the tournament so far. Do you think your team can stop them?"

"Of course!" Hakimi answered confidently without hesitation.

"We've handled and tamed much worse attacks, Nigeria's attack is not going to be any different. We'll definitely win!"

The mind games already started.

That same night, Hakimi's words were thrown at Troost-Ekong, Nigeria's captain who responded by calling Hakimi's words the words of a drunkard.

Fires were already being shot, all in preparation for the penultimate moment of the tournament.

To the fans, it felt like a long time but it no longer tarried.

In the blink of an eye, D-day was already here.

It was 18th of January, 2026.