

Greatest 101

Chapter 101 - First Training Session As A Pro I

At exactly 8:00 AM, Zachary locked the door of his apartment and started descending the stairs. He was no longer fatigued after feasting on a sumptuous breakfast of yogurt, whole-grain toast, creamed rice, tinned fruit, and juice.

He took his feeding seriously. He always made sure to stick to a diet leaning towards energy-rich foods for breakfast. The sugars and starch in the diet would be—converted to glucose, which provided energy for intensive exercise. Thanks to his feeding habits and physical conditioning elixirs, he was always able to train much longer than most of his colleagues. That was one of the main reasons why he improved much faster than his age mates.

Zachary dashed down the flight of stairs—and reached the lobby on the ground floor in no time. However, before he could open the door and move out of the building, he noticed a familiar shapely figure standing close to the mailbox on one side of the lobby. It was Kristin Stein, probably sorting through her mail. She took note of him as soon as he cast his gaze on her.

"Good morning, neighbor," she greeted, waving an arm at him. She emphasized the last word—neighbor.

"Good morning, Miss Kristin," Zachary returned the greeting, half-heartedly waving back at her.

"Why call me Miss?" Kristin raised an eyebrow. "The way you address me makes me seem like your boss." She pouted.

Zachary smiled, choosing to ignore her comment. "You have a lot of mail," he queried, pointing at the bulk of envelopes in her left hand.

"These are academic documents from my former school," Kristin replied, the corners of her mouth twisting into a smile. "I'll be using them to apply for university in the coming week."

She creased a brow like she was trying to recall something. "That reminds me. You must have already completed your upper secondary education. Won't you be applying for university soon? The deadline is almost coming up in mid-April." She pressed, locking eyes with Zachary.

"Nope," Zachary replied, gently shaking his head. "I'll be dedicating this year to my football career. I'm swamped with a busy training schedule already. I can't spare any time for anything else. I'll only apply for university education after my career has taken off." He added, sounding slightly defensive. He didn't wish to be perceived by Kristin as someone who didn't like school.

What he didn't mention, though, was that he probably wouldn't be in Norway for three years. That was the minimum period required to complete a bachelor's course. So, he was better off waiting until settling down somewhere he would be sure to spend a long time. Only then would he comfortably apply for university education.

"Oh," Kristin said, nodding as if she understood his worries. "But you could think about taking short language courses in the meantime. As a football player, you'll need to learn a few international languages. That's if you intend to join teams in non-English or non-French-speaking countries. There are German, Spanish, and Italian courses at NTNU. You could think about taking one of them starting from the next semester." She suggested.

"I'll think about it," Zachary replied perfunctorily. He glanced at his watch and noticed that it was already six minutes past eight. The bus would be leaving in only four minutes. "I have to rush to Lerkendal for training now. Let's catch up some other time." Zachary intoned.

"Okay, okay." Kristin smiled, giving him a teasing look. "Run along to your training, Mr. Superstar. But don't forget that you promised you would get us to the Europa League quarterfinals. I'll be rooting for you—as your top fan, of course." She said, shooing him away with her hand.

Zachary smiled wryly, finding himself at a loss for words. He hadn't promised to help Rosenborg reach the quarterfinals of the Europa League. To the best of his knowledge, they hadn't concluded that conversation. But he didn't try to dispute Kristin's slip-up. That would take more of his already limited time and delay his departure for Lerkendal. If he missed the next bus, he would have to wait 20 minutes for another one to depart from Stj?rdalsveien—his apartment's location. So, he said his goodbyes to Kristin and rushed out of the building like the wind.

He slowed down when he reached the street to prevent himself from slipping on the partially frozen ground. He cast a cursory glance above and noticed that the morning had brought strings of white stratus to contrast against the blue sky. They drifted lazily in the breeze without destination or purpose. The good news was that there was no sign of any grey mixed in them, meaning there probably wouldn't be any precipitation that day.

Zachary was glad that he didn't have to train in rainy weather. He tightened his scarf around his neck and tossed his Nike Brasilia gym-bag over his shoulder—and continued jogging towards the bus stop. In only a couple of minutes, he arrived as an ATB light green bus pulled up before a group of passengers standing haphazardly in front of the bus-stop-shade.

Zachary first glanced at the Digital Information Display Unit in the shade to double-check whether the bus would travel via Lerkendal before following the others into the vehicle. He swiped his bus-card on the automatic fare collection machine at the door and then found himself a seat next to a window. He then placed his gym-bag on his lap and pulled on his headphones as the bus started moving.

As it sped across the well-maintained streets of Trondheim, he immersed his mind into listening to some Enya-music and watching the buildings flash by. For him, there was something about listening to the beautiful tunes and melodies that soothed him to his soul. He let his head sway gently with the beat, and slowly, he allowed the music to infuse his mind.

He felt happy and free.

He was finally beginning his journey as a professional footballer in one of the top Norwegian clubs. There was a pleasure like none he'd felt before in knowing that he was about to achieve his previous life's dream of playing in Europe. Zachary leaned back into the bus seat and let the happiness soak right into his bones.

Twenty minutes later, the bus pulled into the allocated parking at the bus stop of Lerkendal. Zachary picked up his gym bag and exited the bus along with a few other passengers. Since he only had about half an hour before the training, he began hurrying towards the stadium right away. He wanted to pick his training gear first from the logistics department before joining the rest of the players in one of the training pitches within Lerkendal Idrettspark.

However, just as he'd taken a few steps away from the bus station, he heard someone calling out to him. He took off his headphones and turned back only to notice that another Rosenborg player had been walking behind him all along.

Zachary had seen him before on one or two of the Rosenborg training sessions he'd previously attended. He had typical Caucasian features with a straight but slightly upturned nose and thin lips. His dark-

brown hair fashioned into a style similar to a lighter version of the funky Mohawk gave him an air of playfulness that radiated about his persona.

"Hello," the other person said. "I'm Nicki Nielsen. I just transferred to this club last January. You seem to be also a player here." He extended a hand for a greeting. "Nice to meet you," he added, smiling.

"Nice to meet you, too," Zachary replied, shaking his hand. "I'm Zachary Bemba. I have also just joined the club only three days ago, to be specific. I'm just fresh from the academy." He couldn't help but take note of a few tattoos on the fingers of Nicki Nielson. Zachary couldn't help but wonder why he'd also used the crowded bus instead of his car since he seemed like a person with style and a swagger.

"Oh, so you're an academy graduate," Nicki said, grinning. The two began to walk together towards the gates of the stadium. "It seems like I saw you during some of the training sessions in February. How come you have just joined the club?"

"Well," Zachary said, trying to sort out what kind of information he should disclose to a new teammate. "The negotiations for my contract took longer than expected. However, I was still allowed to train with the club before sealing the deal since I graduated from the local academy."

"I guess congratulations are in order then," Nicki said, laughing. "How old are you, by the way?"

"Eighteen," Zachary replied succinctly.

"Oh, my!" Nicki exclaimed, inclining his head slightly and examining him. "You're just eighteen. Then you must be very talented to be joining the senior club at such a young age."

"I try," Zachary replied as they entered the tunnels heading to locker rooms. "So, which club were you from before joining Rosenborg?" He inquired, wishing to change the topic.

"Villarreal," Nicki responded.

Zachary could have sworn that he detected a hint of annoyance in his tone. So, he skillfully changed the topic once again. "And which number do you play?"

"Striking," Nicki replied, grinning. "I'm a number nine in both body and soul. What about you?"

"Midfield," Zachary responded, a soft smile outlining his face. "Central midfielder, to be specific," he emphasized.

"Hahaha," Nicki laughed heartily, placing an arm around Zachary's shoulder. "It's a good thing that we don't have to compete for similar numbers. So, we can 'really' become good friends."

"I think so too," Zachary nodded, glancing at his watch. It was already 8:40 AM. "But, can we talk later on the pitch? At the moment, I have to first head to logistics to pick up some supplies for this month. If I don't leave now, I'll surely be late for training."

"Okay, see you later, man," Nicki said, removing his arm from Zachary's shoulder. "But better hurry. The coaches usually arrive ten minutes before the start of the training."

"Okay," Zachary replied. "I'll be at the pitch in 10 minutes. See you there." He waved before rushing towards the logistics department.

Three minutes later, Zachary picked up his supplies comprising a set of training jerseys, boots, shin guards, ankle guards, and several ointments from logistics. He hurried to his locker and stored the supplies before dressing up and heading to the training pitch. He was finally ready for his first training session as a Rosenborg player.

Chapter 102 - First Official Training As A Pro II

Dressed in his new all-black Rosenborg tracksuit, Zachary made it to the pitch when it was only nine minutes to nine. He let out a long pent-up breath when he noticed that the coaches hadn't arrived yet.

Most of the other players had long started going through warm-up exercises on the green. Some were stretching or gathered in groups playing rondos or juggling the ball. The rest were running cone drills.

It was still the pre-training session. The players were free to utilize it to train in whichever way they wished. Despite the lack of supervision, all of them went about their training with absolute focus, befitting their status as professional footballers of a top Norwegian club.

Zachary let his gaze roam over the whole pitch, passing over the four goalkeepers practicing their diving and catching—until it rested on a group going through a cone drill. He noticed Tore Reginiussen, the newly appointed Rosenborg captain, running triangles through the cones. His receding hairline and looming height of over six feet gave him a mean look. It was the sort of look that Zachary had seen on no-nonsense players like Rio Ferdinand, Marco Materazzi, and Gennaro Gattuso.

Contrary to his fearsome bearing, the captain was an easy-going person who didn't get into conflict with anyone unless they made a major blunder on the field. As long as you played to the best of your abilities, you would remain in the good books of the no-nonsense captain.

Accompanying him was Mikael Dorsin, the vice-captain, John Chibuike, the striker from Nigeria, and Nicki Nielson, Zachary's new acquaintance. They ran through the cones—at times moving backward and forward while making successive sharp turns.

As Zachary watched the four of them take turns running the cone drill, he guessed they were working on their quickness, reaction times, and agility.

He had a good understanding of the drill since he'd practiced with it even in his previous life. It helped improve quickness and agility for short sprints and fast changes of direction. It taught players how to control their bodies and maintain ready stances. Additionally, the drill improved reaction times since a player had to wait for a partner's cue before sprinting to a cone—similar to how one needed to react to the ball or opponent during a game. It was a very effective drill.

Since Zachary had already run six miles that morning, he had no intentions of joining in any intensive drills. So, he found himself a spot on the sidelines and started stretching.

He wanted to conserve his stamina by going through a lighter warm-up routine. That way, he would be able to perform at his best when the actual training session commenced.

However, when he was only a minute into the routine, Mikael Dorsin noticed him and paused running the triangle cone drill. "Zachary," he, the vice-captain, yelled, waving an arm. "Come over and join us. Don't just stretch on the sidelines alone." On hearing Mikael yelling, the other three players training with him also turned and cast their gazes towards Zachary.

"And here I thought I could take it easy during warm-up today," Zachary mumbled inaudibly, smiling wryly. He stopped stretching and jogged towards the center circle, where Mikael Dorsin and the rest were training.

Although Zachary wished to avoid the drills, he couldn't simply ignore the vice-captain's invite. He wanted to fit into the team, and the first step to doing that was to bond over-practice.

"A small bird informed me that you have finally joined our ranks," Mikael, the vice-captain, intoned, smiling. "Congratulations." He extended a gloved hand for a greeting.

"Thank you, and good morning to you too," Zachary said, shaking his hand.

Mikael had a Viking look about him, with blonde ear-length hair that was of a lighter shade. He was an imposing defender who had been a central figure at Rosenborg since 2008. If it wasn't for his more mature age, Zachary was sure that he would still be the captain instead of Tore Reginiussen, the newly recruited number-4.

Over the past few Rosenborg training sessions that Zachary had attended, he'd come to understand that he had to be on good terms with the vice-captain to fit into the team. But luckily, Mikael cared for only one thing—taking Rosenborg back to the top. As long as you were talented enough, he would treat you as a friend both on and off the pitch. He regarded Zachary particularly well since he was one of the most promising young talents on the team.

"Okay, let's get back to business," Mikael said after Zachary had finished bumping fists with Nicki Nielson and mouthing a 'hello' to the other players—Tore Reginiussen and John Chibuike.

Zachary then accompanied the four senior players as they ran the triangle drill over the next few minutes. They didn't converse among themselves but focused solely on the training. They repeated the exercise over and over again until they were out of breath. By then, the coaches had already arrived and were setting up the training equipment in the field.

FWEEEEEEE

At 9:30 AM, the assistant coach's whistle sounded. Every player on the pitch, including Zachary, immediately stopped whatever they were doing and got into their lines at one end of the pitch. When the assistants finally finished setting up the cones into two lines, Mr. Rolf Aas, the fitness coach, started leading Zachary and his new teammates through the dynamic warm-up.

The Rosenborg first-team training had officially begun.

"Let's start slow and warm-up those sleeping muscles," said Mr. Rolf Aas as he stepped through the cones, demonstrating what he expected of the players.

The players followed him, starting with slow and light dynamic actions such as stretching calves. They continued adding more vigorous movements such as frog-hops and walking-front-leg-raises as they made rounds around the cones. They made the exercise progressively more intense—until they were sprinting and all drenched in sweat towards the end of the workout.

By then, Zachary was already breathing like a fish just taken out of the water. He was exhausted since he'd been training intensively since before dawn. However, Zachary still forced himself to keep up with the rest until the workout ended. He understood that he could get better quicker only when he pushed himself beyond his limits. And since he possessed a cheat like the physical conditioning elixir, he was determined to utilize it to improve his fitness as quickly as possible.

After completing the dynamic warm-up, the players were allowed a short water break. But two minutes later, Trond Henriksen, Rosenborg's assistant coach, blew his whistle, signaling for the start of passing drills.

Zachary and his teammates didn't complain in the slightest. They started passing the ball through training-mannequins set up in rectangular formations around the field. For the next twenty minutes, they didn't do anything complicated. They 'simply' kicked the ball to their colleagues when it was their turn as they moved clockwise around the mannequins. They mainly focused on practicing the basics such as passing, ball control, and positioning—doing the associated routines in the drill over-and-over-again to achieve perfection.

Zachary was amazed once again at how professionals could use simple basic training routines to achieve their goals. But he was well aware that it was all thanks to the coaches who were supervising the players.

The coaches were constantly yelling at the players to remain sharp or correct their kicking postures. They didn't allow for any laxity, making the drill very intense and effective. When a player made a mistake, they wouldn't mince words with him. They would give him a mouthful of their harsh critique as they pointed out what he had done wrong.

As the session progressed, the players transitioned into doing more complex movements involving many variations of give-and-go routines. Since Zachary wasn't new to professional team training focusing on passing, he went through the passing drills without making any mistakes. He was very motivated to make an impression and win a spot on the squad heading to Sweden the following day. Moreover, his mastery of the Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju had helped refine his passing skills. Thus, he went through the drill without losing much energy since he was more efficient with the ball.

At exactly 11:00 AM, Trond Henriksen, the assistant coach of Rosenborg, blew his whistle once again and signaled for all the players to head to the touchline where Coach Johansen was waiting. Everyone on the pitch, including Zachary and his group, halted their drilling immediately and trekked towards the coaches.

"Good morning to you all," Coach Johansen greeted after the players had formed a semi-circle around him. He spoke in English since he was aware that many of the newly recruited players hadn't mastered the Norwegian language.

"Good morning, coach," the players replied, more or less in unison.

"Without wasting time, we shall in a moment continue the positioning training that we started yesterday," said the coach, rubbing his red-bearded chin. "In this session, we won't focus on any position-specific training drills, but teamwork. This session aims to help us adapt to the new 4-3-3 formation that we'll mainly use during this season. For your information, that's the formation we'll be using in the friendly game against Malmö tomorrow. So, be sharp."

Coach Johansen went on to explain what he expected of the players during the following session. They would play an 11-vs-11 game, focusing on passing and positioning in the 4-3-3 formation. Each player could only make a maximum of two touches on the ball before passing it on. Otherwise, he would incur a penalty for holding onto the ball longer than allowed.

When Coach Johansen finished explaining the drill, his assistant Trond Henriksen divided the players into two teams—one in the red bibs and the other in green bibs. Zachary was eager to play since it had been a long time since he'd participated in an intense match.

Chapter 103 - First Official Training As A Pro III

There were a total of twenty-eight Rosenborg players attending training that day. They couldn't all play at once in a single 11-vs-11 game session. So, the assistant coach left six of them, including Zachary, on

the bench. They would only get the chance to join in on the action after the squad rotation slated to happen fifteen minutes later.

Zachary wasn't displeased in the slightest on hearing that he wouldn't be in either of the starting line-ups. He could use the break in training to rest and regain his strength while observing the goings-on on the green. That would help him be more prepared when it was his turn to join the game.

So, he stood on the sidelines and chugged down some water as he observed the players taking their positions on the field. He noticed that the coaches had divided the squad in an imbalanced way. The most probable starting eleven were all in green, while the second-stringers were in red bibs.

Zachary could easily guess the coaches' intent. It seemed they had organized the scrimmage match with the sole purpose of improving the teamwork of the first-stringers who were in green bibs. On the other hand, the second-stringers in red bibs 'simply' served as the perfect whetting stones for them. The coaches were only using them to sharpen the starting squad, which would play the friendly against Malmo in Sweden the following day.

On making that realization, Zachary was even more delighted to be on the bench instead of being part of the red team. He hadn't joined Rosenborg to become the whetting stone for others. His only wish was for the coaches to give him a chance to showcase his talent in an official game.

As long as he could play in an official match for thirty minutes, he was sure he could convince the coaches to keep him in the squad. With his A-graded passing skills, game intelligence, and tactical awareness, he knew that he could easily rival any other midfielder on the Rosenborg starting eleven. All he needed was a chance to prove himself, and he hoped it would come sooner rather than later. That way, he could kick start his professional career in the best way possible.

Zachary watched from the sidelines as Nicki Nielson, Rosenborg's newly recruited number-9 from Villarreal, took his position over the ball in the center circle. There was no trace of the laxity or playfulness about his persona that had been present when Zachary had met him earlier that morning. Zachary could tell he was carefully assessing the situation all over the field as he awaited the referee's whistle.

His opinion of the forward increased right away.

FWEEEEEEEE

At 11:15 AM, Trond Henriksen, Rosenborg's assistant coach, blew his whistle. The scrimmage match started immediately with the green team's kick-off.

Nicki Nielson raised his leg and hammered the ball back into his half—towards Mix Diskerud in the left midfield.

Mix Diskerud, one of Rosenborg's first-stringers in a green bib, controlled the ball perfectly and passed it back to the defense with his second touch. Tore Reginiussen, Rosenborg's newly appointed captain, received it just outside the 18-yard box. He quickly flicked it to Per Rønning, his counterpart in the central defense. The latter didn't hold on to it for more than a few seconds. He sent it towards the touchline where Mikael Dorsin was waiting with a simple—but precise pass.

By then, the opponents, dressed in red bibs, were already high-pressing the green team and cutting down their passing options. If it were some amateur squad of players, they would have lost the ball since they were limited to only two touches.

That meant that even before a player received the ball, he would have to make himself some yards of space first by running into open space—away from his opponents. Then, he would have to control the ball while judging where to pass it with his subsequent touch.

The player had to complete the whole process seamlessly in a matter of seconds—so that he wouldn't get caught on the back foot by an opponent who could be lurking nearby. That was a tall order for anyone to achieve if he didn't possess high-level ball control, in-game risk analysis, and spatial awareness.

However, the team in green bibs wasn't just any ordinary squad. They were the most probable starting eleven of Rosenborg for the new season. All the experienced players like Mikael Dorsin, Mike Jensen, Tore Reginiussen, and Tobias Mikkelsen were on their side.

So, they passed the ball from one end of the pitch to the other, with seamless one-two touches. They managed to dominate the red team comprising the second-stringers without much effort. They even bore down on the red team's goal on several occasions and unleashed several shots on target. However, the skillful goalkeeping of Daniel Þorlund, the red team's number-1, kept the score at 0:0.

"Ole and Fredrik, don't let them pass the ball freely in the midfield," Zachary heard Coach Trond Henriksen yelling at the midfielders in red bibs.

"The objective of the exercise is to hone our passing and positioning capabilities when under pressure. If you don't press them, the workout will turn out to be pointless. So, run at them as if your life depends on it. Don't give them any breathing space and try to win the ball back as quickly as possible." He roared at the top of his voice in-between gasps of breath.

On hearing the assistant coach yelling, the players in red bibs upped their game and focused their attention on pressing the green team. Ole Selnø and Fredrik Midtsjø, the central midfielders, worked harder than everyone else, trying their best to dispossess the green team. Thanks to their efforts, they managed to force Mix Diskerud, the green team's attacking midfielder, to take more than two touches on the ball, thereby incurring a foul.

FWEEEEEEE

The assistant coach blew his whistle, and the ball turned over to the red team. Fredrik Midtsjø re-started the game with a back pass to Daniel Ørland, the red team's goalkeeper.

Daniel Ørland controlled the ball well in his box before passing it down the wing towards Jørgen Skjelvik, the left-back. The latter kicked it towards Ole Selnø in the defensive midfield after skipping past Nicki Nielson, the green team's center forward.

The team in red had finally gained their first spell of possession in the game.

For the next few minutes, they played confidently with short but precise quick passes, trying to find their way through the green team's highly agile 4-3-3 formation. It seemed the boys in red bibs would be the ones dictating the tempo of the game for a while.

However, the pressing of the players in green came at them with an intensity befitting their statuses as the first-stringers before they could even make a single shot on target. They tightly marked the players in red and limited their passing options. They didn't give the red team players any breather until they forced them to play the ball high and long towards John Chibuike, the red team's center forward.

However, John Chibuike, the striker from Nigeria, failed to get at the end of Ole's defense-splitting pass. Tore Reginiussen, Rosenborg's captain, out-jumped him and headed the ball back into the midfield. Mike Jensen, the highly tactical defensive midfielder, chested the ball down in midfield before unleashing a grounded through pass towards the right-wing with his second touch.

With that single pass, Mike Jensen had managed to catch his opponents unawares.

Tobias Mikkelsen, the green team's forward on the right flank, received the ball in the wing, skipping past Jørgen Skjelvik, the red team's left-back, with a deft initial touch. He then played a one-two with Nicki Nielson, the center forward, advancing towards the red team's box like the wind.

Brede Moe, the red team's center back, hurriedly closed them down. But the two forwards were too speedy for him. Without any surprise, they skipped past him with their short and precise quick passes. They managed to step into the red team's box in a matter of seconds.

Zachary could only sigh as he watched Nicki Nielson receive a return ball inside the box. Without losing his composure, he immediately fired a first-time shot into the bottom left corner. 1:0.

The green team had managed to obtain the first goal in the scrimmage match. It wasn't that the red team wasn't trying. However, the green team comprising of the first-stringers was much better.

FWEEEEEEE

Trond Henriksen blew his whistle once again, drawing the attention of all players on the pitch.

"Okay, okay," he yelled, "that was some fine play from the boys in green. However, the boys in red should have done better to stop the goal. So, as usual, the red boys should go down and give us 20 press-ups." He clapped his hands for emphasis.

All the players and trainers on the pitch laughed at that. And without any complaints, the red team members started doing press-ups as the penalty for conceding the goal. When they finished, the assistant coach nodded before calling for a squad rotation since the fifteen minutes had almost elapsed.

Zachary quickly tightened his laces and pulled up his stockings over his shin guards before jogging into the field—towards the assistant coach. He hoped to join the green side, composed of the most skilled players on the Rosenborg squad. In such a team, he would easily showcase his superior passing skills and impress the coaching staff.

However, Trond Henriksen, the assistant coach, shattered his hopes in the next moment. "Zachary, pick up a red bib from Fredrick," he intoned, his tone overbearing. "For the next fifteen minutes, you'll play right midfield. Make sure you do your best to press when your team doesn't have the ball. No resting is allowed on the pitch. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, trying his best to hide his disappointment. He wasn't happy about being included in the red team, which seemed like the whetting stone for the starting eleven.

However, Zachary couldn't defy the coach's orders since he was still a nobody who had just joined the team. So, he silently swallowed down his displeasure and picked up the red bib from the heavily worn-out Fredrik Midtsj?.

Zachary then took up his position on the pitch along Ole Seln?s and Borek Dockal in the red team's three-man-midfield. Since he had failed to join the stronger side, he would try his best to showcase his individual ability even against the starting eleven. That way, he would surely obtain the ticket to join the squad heading to Sweden the following day.

Chapter 104 - First Official Training As A Pro IV

Zachary abandoned all the redundant thoughts and focused on assessing the field when he stepped into his position. He started scrutinizing both his opponents and teammates carefully while waiting for the whistle to restart the game. Positioning, standing postures, facial expressions, alertness—Zachary took them all in.

His brain was in overdrive as he searched for gaps in the green team's 4-3-3 attacking formation. He also tried to anticipate future passing opportunities that could arise from the potential actions of his teammates. He had taken the first step to perform as a Maestro by beginning with the necessary on-field risk analysis even before the game restarted. That way, he would release the ball accurately and quickly to his teammates after receiving a pass.

FWEEEEEEE

The assistant coach blew his whistle a few seconds later, signaling for the red team to restart the scrimmage game.

John Chibuike, the red team's center forward, kick-started the game with a simple pass back to Borek Dockal, the attacking midfielder. The latter didn't even control the ball. Instead, he flicked it towards Ole Selnø, the red team's defensive midfielder, with his first touch.

Ole controlled the ball beautifully and passed it towards the left-wing before Nicki Nielson, the green team's center forward, could close him down.

Jørgen Skjelvik, the red team's left-back, received the ball near the touchline, showcasing his high-level ball control with a flashy deft touch. But he was instantly closed down by Tobias Mikkelsen, the highly agile Rosenborg starting winger.

Tobias positioned his body well while pressing Jørgen, thereby cutting off all his forward passing options through the wing.

Jørgen Skjelvik could only choose to make a back pass to Daniel Ørland, the goalkeeper, instead of standing the risk of losing possession.

Daniel Ørland then played the ball quickly towards Ole Selnø since Nicki Nielson was almost closing him down. Zachary could guess that his teammates were about to fall into a disadvantageous situation. Although his red team still maintained possession, he could tell that it was the opponents with the initiative. The first-stringers in green bibs were very good at creating high-pressing zones deep in the red team's half. They had managed to keep the red team in their own half before Zachary arrived on the pitch using those tactics.

However, Zachary wasn't prepared to let the game situation continue following the green team's tempo. He hoped to earn a spot on the starting squad for the match against Malmö the following day. The best way to achieve that was to make a marked impact against the much stronger side comprising the first-stringers in green bibs.

"Ole, pass here," he yelled at the top of his voice, running back into his half—away from Mix Diskerud, the player in green that was marking him. "Pass here."

Ole Seln?s just cast a single glance towards him while controlling the low ball from Daniel ?rlund, the goalkeeper. Without any pause in his actions, he then raised his leg and kicked the ball to Zachary with his second touch.

Zachary could feel his heart palpitating with excitement as the ball rolled towards him. He was finally playing in an internal scrimmage match for a professional club in Europe for the first time after signing his contract. A soft smile outlined his face as he received the ball with a simple deft touch, pushing it just a few feet in front of him in the process.

Meanwhile, he simultaneously let his gaze survey the situation on the pitch.

In that instant, his brain mapped the entire placement of all the players in his field of vision. He noticed that both Ole Seln?s and Borek Dockal, his counterparts in the red team's midfield, had already moved into open space. They were seemingly waiting for a pass from him. Daniel Berntsen, his teammate in the wing for that match, was already sprinting on the left flank, ostensibly anticipating a through ball from him. On the other hand, Mix Diskerud, the green team's attacking midfielder, was closing him down quickly. He would be upon him within seconds if he didn't release the ball right away.

However, Zachary had long gotten used to playing under tense situations. He had a lot of experience under his belt since he'd already played in two international youth tournaments and even won one—that's was while playing on the weaker side.

He was very confident in his skills, and even the pressing of the professionals couldn't phase him. So, he maintained his composure as his brain filtered out the noise and assessed the game situation at that very instant.

Zachary's soccer brain managed to take in many other trivial situations that he would have ignored if he hadn't mastered the Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju. His mind was in overdrive, analyzing risk and deducing the best position to distribute the ball before the opponents could close him down. Zachary managed to complete a simple vector analysis, including a summation of the easiest linear or curved routes to make the most effective pass at that moment.

And then it all came to him. Out of the corner of his eyes, he noticed John Chibuike, the red team's center forward, taking his first step away from Per R?nning, the center-back who'd been marking him.

A light bulb went off in Zachary's head as he shifted his full attention towards the striker from Nigeria. Their gazes seemed to collide for a brief moment over the fifty-yard distance.

Zachary was made aware of the intention of the forward in that instant. By instinct, he knew that John Chibuike wanted the ball, and he wanted it then.

Thus, he didn't dawdle. He raised his leg high and smashed the ball away from him before any opposing midfielders could close him down. Zachary even incorporated some kicking postures of the Bend-it like Beckham Juju when he'd unleashed the defense-splitting pass towards the striker. Furthermore, he'd timed it perfectly to release John Chibuike just as he was stepping away from his marker.

The ball flew towards the green team's half, flashing above the players in both red and green bibs. Then at the last moment, it curved abruptly, taking a nosedive and bouncing a few yards ahead of the sprinting John Chibuike.

"Offside," Per R?nning, the center-back who'd been marking John Chibuike, raised his arm and yelled at the top of his voice. However, Trond Henriksen, the assistant coach refereeing the scrimmage game, waved his arms before indicating for play to continue. Per R?nning could only shake his head as he rushed back towards his goal to defend.

But by then, John Chibuike was already ahead of the green team's last line of defense by a few yards. He was sprinting towards the bouncing ball like the wind.

He managed to reach it first and head it in front of him with his first touch. His control was perfect. He'd managed to guide the ball to the front of the 18-yard box using his head and even left the chasing defenders in the dust with only that single touch.

Zachary smiled as he watched the striker chasing after the ball before beating the keeper with a fine strike on his second touch from the edge of the box. 1:1. The red team had managed to pull one back in the scrimmage game.

Zachary could hardly contain his delight since he'd made a good assist and contributed towards the goal. He couldn't come to terms with how easy it was to quickly assess the playing field after learning the Zinedine-Pirlo Mental Juju. His only wish was that the coaches were watching him.

FWEEEEEEE

Coach Boyd Johansen watched the scrimmage game from the sidelines. He was attentively watching out for any promising players that could play an instrumental role in Rosenborg's game against Malmo the following day.

He couldn't help but smile when he watched Zachary still performing like a superstar, even against the pros. The young player had been making a lot of defense-splitting passes since entering the pitch. Sometimes he would unleash the ball towards the wing where one of the wingers was lurking—and at others, he would play it low through the defense. He'd revitalized the red team with his uncanny passing ability. And thanks to him, the score remained only 2:1 in favor of Rosenborg's starting players in green bibs. That was even after playing the game for more than 30 minutes. If he hadn't been present, the red team's situation could have been worse.

The boy was still a prodigy, just like he'd been in the academy.

However, Coach Johansen knew that he couldn't rush to use him in the official games before dealing with his growth spurt. He didn't want to lose a promising young player to injuries only because he was impatient to use him. Moreover, the club chairman had urged him to manage Zachary's training with care so that the club wouldn't incur a loss.

Coach Johansen, though, was glad that the management had already purchased the highly tactical Mike Jensen from Brøndby IF. Thanks to that, he could afford to wait for a few months before using Zachary. So, he'd reinforced his decision of keeping Zachary out of the starting roster after watching Jensen playing.

He smiled as he watched Zachary make another raking pass towards Daniel Berntsen, the red team's winger. Meanwhile, his mind worked on a plan to help Zachary adapt to the professional league. He resolved to design a good fitness training regimen to keep him busy and prepare him for the more competitive stage of the Tippeligaen as soon as possible. His only hope was that Zachary wasn't one of the impatient types who would grow frustrated from lacking first-team football.

Chapter 105 - Battling With Emotions

Zachary was devastated on hearing that he wouldn't be part of the squad heading to Sweden the following day. Although he had given everything he had in the practice session, the coaches hadn't even considered him as a bench candidate.

His mood was at an all-time low.

He left the pitch as soon as Coach Johansen released them from training. He didn't even take part in small talk with the rest of his new teammates. He couldn't guarantee he would be able to rein in his raging emotions while hanging out with them.

He returned to the dressing room and quickly took a shower to calm himself. But not even the cold water provided an ounce of relief. He still felt enraged. He was furious at the coaches for not considering him even after performing better than most during that day's training.

He dressed in silence and walked out of the locker room before his teammates returned from the pitch. He didn't want to face them while still in a volatile state of mind. He feared he would get into an argument or, worse, a fistfight with some of them if he lingered too long. So, he did the best he could to avoid the worst situation possible and started walking towards the stadium's exit.

He knew that the right thing to do was to calm down and reign in his emotions, but his mind wouldn't listen to him. All he had to do was think about how he hadn't been picked for the squad—then, his temper would spiral out of his control once more. He had some self-awareness of what was happening to him. He had experienced a similar state of mind on multiple occasions during his previous life. It usually came to him when he experienced a major setback. He would lose control of his emotions and lash out at everyone around him.

In his previous life, while at TP Mazembe, he had even gotten into a fight with one of the assistant coaches after failing to make it into the starting line-up. So, he was well aware he had anger management issues. He thought he had overcome his psychological problems after returning to the past. But it seemed he'd been wrong all along.

"Why is this happening to me all over again?" Zachary mumbled to himself, quickening his pace through the stadium tunnel. His previous life's psychologist had ascertained that the trigger of his anger episodes had been the death of his grandma. But in his new life, she was still alive and well. So, what was the root of the problem? He mused, trying his best to push the negative thoughts out of his mind.

After walking through the tunnels leading to the stadium's exit for a few minutes, he had, to some extent, regained some control over his emotions. But he knew that it wasn't nearly enough to keep himself in check while interacting with others. He could still blunder and punch someone if they said the wrong phrase. So, he quickened his pace until he'd almost broken into a full sprint as the exit appeared in front of him.

But to his horror, Coach Johansen was waiting beside the entrance. The coach was leaning on the wall, arms folded across his chest, seemingly anticipating his arrival.

[Why is he here? Isn't he supposed to be in his office finalizing the game plan for tomorrow?] Zachary wondered, slowing down his steps and facing the coach.

Zachary's emotions threatened to spiral out of control once again after he came face to face with the man who'd left him out of the squad. But he forced himself to take a deep breath, balled his fists, and in some way managed to calm down before he could do or say anything he would regret. In the meantime, Coach Johansen watched him silently without saying a word.

"Coach," Zachary intoned, trying his best to keep his tone at the very least neutral.

Coach Johansen regarded him for a moment more before saying: "Let's talk in my office." He then led the way back into the tunnels.

A few minutes later, Zachary settled himself in a chair beside Coach Johansen's desk. He silently observed the gangling red-bearded coach clearing the five-by-seven cards, where he drew the game plans, from his table. He then settled down in his chair and returned to his silent observation of Zachary.

The silence that spanned across the next few seconds was unnerving.

"So, why did you leave the pitch early today?" Coach Johansen asked finally.

"Coach, I—" Zachary couldn't seem to find the right words to explain himself.

"Was it because you were disappointed that you didn't make the squad for tomorrow?" The coach probed, his tone flat.

Zachary didn't like the look on the coach's face. He could feel that the coach was about to deliver either some bad news or a harsh judgment on him.

"Coach," Zachary intoned, his emotions getting the better of him. "Clearly, I've been playing better than most during training. You must also see that I'm a better player than a large part of the midfielders. So, why was I left out?" He couldn't help but voice out his doubts.

He had been working tirelessly since graduating from the academy. He had soldiered through physicals on a daily basis to keep himself in shape—and even attended the Rosenberg training sessions before signing the contract. He'd done all that in the hopes of quickly earning a spot on the Rosenberg starting squad.

He believed he deserved the right to, at least, be among the substitutes—that was if he couldn't become a first-stringer. However, the coach hadn't considered him for even a friendly game, whose sole purpose was to prepare players for the new Tippeligaen season. That meant that he wasn't even considered one of the core players for the new season.

Zachary knew that if he didn't get clarity, his mood would sour over the next few days. What would follow would be him falling into an anger episode once more. So, he went against all reason and decided to question the coach about his squad selection.

However, Coach Johansen's reaction surprised him. Instead of getting angry, he smiled softly. What was up with that? He wondered. Was his plight of not being part of the squad sounding like a joke to the coach?

Zachary clenched his fists as he felt anger threatening to stir within him. But he reigned himself in and counted backward from ten to zero, over and over, trying to calm his fragile emotions. He was barely able to prevent himself from punching Coach Johansen's face after it stretched into a grin.

"Zach, you know I'm on your side," the coach said after a moment, still smiling. "I understand your eagerness to join the squad as quickly as possible. I really do. But you have to remain patient while

building your fitness in the meantime. You should have heard of the saying that haste makes waste! Haven't you?"

Zachary nodded in assent. "Is my being left out of the squad related to my so-called growth-spurt issue?"

"Yes," Coach Johansen replied. "You've played under me for approximately two years. So, I would have liked to use you right away if there wasn't that particular problem."

"But coach," Zachary intoned, frowning. "I already informed you that I have full mastery over my body. I have been doing training drills, including yoga, to improve my body control and coordination over the past few months. I know that I'll be able to play like usual, no, better than usual, if you give me a chance. That's all I'm asking for."

Coach Johansen held up his hand. "Zach, I've given this a lot of thought. I can't put you on the squad until you deal with your growth spurt problem. That means getting clearance from the medical department. If they say that you are in the clear to play at the professional stage, I'll start considering you for the squad right away."

"Moreover," the coach continued, shaking his head. "You have got to use this time to adapt to the professional stage. My advice to you is to keep on training to improve yourself as you wait for your chance. Try to fit into the club by interacting with the other players."

"Remember that I'm on your side," he added, words coming out of his mouth slowly but steadily. "I want you to perform well as soon as you join the starting squad. But you've got to remain patient and humble in the meantime. Don't start questioning the decisions of the coaching staff, as you did just now. If a coach, other than myself, had been in this chair, you wouldn't have gotten off lightly. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied perfunctorily. Although he still wanted to participate in the game the following day, there was nothing he could do to make that happen. The coaches had already made up their minds that his growth spurt was a problem. Maybe, they even thought that his body control capabilities had decreased over the past year due to his growing height. So, they wouldn't be giving him a spot on the starting line-up any time soon.

However, Zachary was sure none of his attributes and skills had declined over the past few months. He could see it on the system interface. His balance-and-coordination and his body control were all at the A+ grading. If the growth spurt had affected him, those stats would have fallen to a lower grade. So, he

wasn't worried in the slightest that he would get injured while playing in an official game. But, he still needed to convince the coaches to allow him to show that he was fully fit. And he could only do that in an official game.

"Did you manage to hire a professional fitness trainer?" Coach Johansen asked, breaking him out of contemplation.

"Not yet," Zachary replied, shaking his head.

"Why not?" He asked, frowning. "Your agent had promised to help you find one! What happened?"

"It has only been two days," Zachary answered, not wanting to disclose that he'd dissuaded Emily from getting him a fitness coach.

"Just forget it." Coach Johansen sighed.

"Why not work with Coach Bjørn Peters? He was your coach in the academy. So, you should be familiar with him."

"If it's him, the club will be able to keep tabs easily on your training," he added. "And if your claim of being fully fit holds, you'll get a chance to convince the guys in charge of the medicals sooner than expected. What do you think?" He locked eyes with Zachary.

"That's okay with me," Zachary replied, smiling. Bjørn was an easy-going guy who cared about his students. So, Zachary was sure that he would do his best to help him get into Rosenborg's starting lineup. There wasn't any reason for him to refuse.

"Great," Coach Johansen intoned, smiling. "I'll inform Coach Peters this evening. You can link up and begin working on your fitness with him tomorrow. Work hard during this period. I expect big things from you. So, don't disappoint me."

Chapter 106 - Two Months

Monday, April 29, 2013.

In one of the gyms at the Lerkendal Idresspark, the home ground of Rosenborg BK, Zachary was entirely focused on his training. Salty droplets rolled down his face dripping onto the gym floor as he pushed his body up, completing his 50th press-up. Down his back ran a dark stripe amid the light-grey color of his sleeveless Nike top—a spreading map of perspiration showing the hard work he'd been putting into his workout that morning. Coach Bjørn Peters stood at the side, watching him like a hawk and shouting instructions at the pace of a machine gun.

There was no other soul in the gym. The other players had been—given the morning off since they had played a Tippeligaen match against Sandnes Ulf the previous day.

"Keep moving, don't slow down," Coach Bjørn Peters yelled, clapping his hands as he moved around Zachary's position on the floor. "You can do it. Up and down, up and down..."

Zachary felt dog-tired. It felt like his energy reserves had gone the way of the buffalo. His vision was hazy as his entire being screamed at him to let loose and relax—to take a moment and lie supine on the floor.

At that juncture, the hard floor looked as welcoming as the comfiest of bed in Zachary's eyes. But, he knew he couldn't stop before finishing the entire set of sixty press-ups. If he gave in to the exhaustion, the effectiveness of the whole routine would be—diminished. So, he squeezed out more steam from the depths of his being and forced himself to complete the 51st press-up that morning.

It had been almost two months since the day he'd signed the professional contract with Rosenborg. He hadn't made it into the club's starting eleven yet. He had spent most of his time working with Coach Bjørn Peters on his fitness. He had gone through various drills in a progressive overload regimen to enhance his body control simultaneously with his balance and coordination.

He had followed Coach Johansen's advice to utilize the time before he made it onto the starting line-up to improve his fitness further. He wanted to assure the club management and coaching staff that his growth spurt wasn't an issue and wouldn't prevent him from performing in Norway's top-tier league. The only way to achieve that was by going through carefully planned training drills to improve his fitness in the shortest time possible. That way, the coaches wouldn't have to worry about him being prone to injuries due to his changing physique.

With that in mind, Zachary had maintained a strict schedule of training with Coach Bjørn Peters during most of the day times he wasn't training with the rest of the Rosenborg squad. Bench presses, yoga,

knee tuck classic planks, press-ups, sit-ups, hip-flexor stretches—he'd done them all over the two months under the watchful eyes of the fitness coach.

"Don't slow down," Coach Bjørn Peters yelled. "Endure. Just nine more to go, and then we can stop for a water break." He added, clapping his hands at a steady rhythm, maybe to cheer on Zachary.

Zachary, on his part, didn't reply since he had no strength to mouth even a simple yes. All his focus was on completing the remaining nine press-ups.

His black hair, tied into a loose bun, was soaking wet. He looked like he'd just pulled himself from a pool. Yet there was no water around, but only the expansive well-equipped gym of Rosenborg. He didn't mind the sweat in the slightest and continued with the press-up routine until he finished the entire set of sixty.

"Okay, you did great," Coach Bjørn Peters said, smiling. "Let's take a five-minute break before we continue." He handed him a water bottle.

Zachary received the bottle and chugged down some water. It tasted like the rarest elixir in the world. So, he drunk it with abandon, trying to recover his stamina in the shortest time possible.

"Next," Coach Bjørn Peters said after a few minutes. "We shall begin the knee tuck classic planks using a Bosu fitness ball. I'll explain it to you once again. Keep your eyes on me so that you don't miss a thing." He added, picking up a blue Bosu ball from a nearby shelf and placing it on the floor.

Zachary took a few steps back to give the coach enough room for the demonstration. He then watched the coach settle into a full plank position, with palms resting on the Bosu ball and hands in line with his shoulders. From his posture, Zachary could tell that Coach Bjørn Peters was as fit as a fiddle. He could even give some professional footballers a run for their money.

"While doing the knee tuck classic planks, the most important thing is to form a straight line from your shoulders to your heels," he said, turning to cast a glance at Zachary while still in the plank position. "Then, all you need to do next is brace your core and drive your right knee across your body toward your left elbow." His words came out of his mouth at a stable rate even though he was in an unnatural stance.

"Pause at the top point for about thirty seconds—and then reverse direction back to starting position," the coach continued, still demonstrating the exercise atop the Bosu ball. "Continue alternating between legs for a total of fifty repetitions. Are we clear?" He asked, picking himself up from the floor.

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, nodding.

He could easily follow the coach's explanation since he had been doing the knee tuck classic planks over the course of the previous month. That was after failing to make the Rosenberg squad at the start of the season. He'd channeled all the fury he felt at that time, using it as motivation to improve his fitness as he awaited a chance to join the starting eleven. The training was a form of therapy for him. With an intense workout, he could overcome any anger episode easily without causing a scene.

Over the previous two months, Zachary had lived only for training. He'd neither socialized with friends nor spent any time doing anything that wasn't related to football. He'd even declined invitations from both Kristin and Marta to have dinner together during the Easter weekend. All his focus had been on the prize—gaining a spot on the first team as quickly as possible. All the other things could wait until he was a regular on the Rosenberg squad. He didn't intend to keep watching the Rosenberg Tippeligaen matches as a spectator in the stands.

So, he had exercised like a mad man—utilizing every single moment to train with the help of the physical conditioning elixir. He'd even added several simple fitness routines in his everyday living to make the most of those otherwise stationary few seconds to work in his favor.

When the microwave was on, he would do jumping jacks.

When water was boiling in the kettle, he would do squats.

When the adverts were on between his TV programs, mainly sports and music shows, he would lift hand weights.

After washroom breaks, he would do different kinds of plank exercises.

Thanks to those routines, he could feel his fitness improving gradually once again. The previous year, it had almost plateaued, with none of his physical attributes experiencing any remarkable growth.

However, with the two months of dedicated training, he could feel that he'd entered a period of rapid improvement once more. He had a feeling that one of his attributes could break into the S-grading very soon—that was if he kept up the training.

"Zachary, are we together?" Coach Bjørn Peters said, his voice rising slightly. "Why are you spacing out when I'm busy explaining the exercising routine to you? Does this seem like something easy to you?" He frowned, seemingly annoyed.

"Sorry, coach," Zachary replied, his voice humble. "It won't happen again."

Coach Bjørn Peters nodded, his facial expression relaxing a bit. "I was saying that you're going to have to focus on stabilizing more because you'll be on one leg at a time. You've got to maintain that balance on one leg for more than thirty seconds. And don't relax your abdominal muscles while you're at it. Otherwise, the exercise will be ineffective. Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach."

"Okay, since you've rested enough, go down and give me 50 sets of the knee tuck classic planks," he said, looking at his watch. "You need to hurry and finish this in maybe twenty minutes. Coach Johansen has already informed me that he needs you to attend the match video review meeting at 11:00 AM. So, you'll need some time to prepare before heading to the tactics room."

"He wants me to attend the video review meeting?" Zachary asked, feeling his heart start to palpitate with expectation. Coach Johansen had not called him for such meetings for the previous two months. That was because only the players on the previous or following match squads could attend those meetings.

"Yes," Coach Peters replied, smiling. "Don't think that all your hard work has gone unnoticed by the coaching staff. I have also already submitted a report to the guys in charge of your medical, telling them that you're fully fit and ready for action. They should be calling you for another assessment within the next few days."

"Thanks, coach," Zachary replied, reflexively bowing slightly at the waist. He could hardly contain his happiness. Rosenborg would be facing off against Strindheim IL in the second round of the Norwegian

Football Cup in two days. If the head coach had called him for the video review meeting, he was most likely part of the squad for that match.

"You're welcome," Coach Peters replied, smiling. "And this was all because of your hard work. So, keep at it and give me fifty of those knee planks right away."

"Aye, coach," Zachary said, nodding in assent. He then settled down in the plank position on the dome-shaped upper side of the Bosu ball.

He then drew his knee forward and started the knee plank routine right away. Since it seemed he was going to get a chance to join the match squad, after all, he was more motivated than usual to complete the workout.

Chapter 107 - An Opportunity

Zachary managed to complete the set of fifty repetitions of knee tuck classic planks when it was already forty minutes to eleven. It was almost time for the match video review meeting with coach Johansen and the rest of the Rosenborg match squad members to commence.

He quickly thanked Coach Bjørn Peters and said his goodbyes before rushing out of the gym like the wind. He jogged the entire way through the corridors, running past a few Rosenborg employees who were cleaning or moving equipment, and finally arrived at one of the bathroom areas.

Without wasting any time, he undressed and entered the shower right away. His actions were hurried since he didn't intend to end up late for the team meeting slated to begin at 11:00 AM. He had only thirty-five minutes to get ready. He stood under the showerhead, letting the heated water wash away all the sweat his body had accumulated from the two-hour workout.

When he finished cleaning up, he observed himself in the mirror as he dried it up with a towel.

A face with a chiseled jawline and pronounced angular cheekbones stared back at him. It had deep-set brown eyes, just beneath a prominent forehead, that matched well with its overgrown dark hair. Below the face was a chest and a pair of shoulders, built like a tank, making the mirror image all the more imposing.

Zachary smiled, feeling pleased with his reflection. After toiling on a daily basis over the past year, he had developed lean muscles that compounded well with his height. His body didn't look out of proportion or overly buff despite his looming height of six feet four. He wasn't like a Peter Crouch, but more of a Zlatan Ibrahimović body type. That, coupled with his ebony skin tone, made him look as if he was all muscles of steel.

Zachary hummed an African Lingala tune as he took extra care to rid his hair of moisture with a handheld drier. He had let it grow over the past year on just a whim to alter his image. It had grown long enough for him to easily tie into an afro-styled bun at the back of his head. Although it was a hustle to clean the overgrown hair, it was worth the effort since it made him look more dignified—and different from his previous life's self. Zachary liked that.

When he had finished drying and combing through his hair, he donned his black Rosenborg tracksuit in the dressing room before rushing to the canteen to grab a quick bite. Even though he was close to running late, he still had to replenish his energy reserves after the two-hour intensive workout that morning. So, he quickly gobbled up an egg omelet with avocado spread on toast and drank some juice at the canteen while keeping a close eye on his watch.

After finishing his meal, he felt reinvigorated and full of energy once more. He rushed to the tactics room without further ado. He was one of the last players to arrive for the meeting. Most of the other first-team players like Lund Hansen, the goalkeeper, Tore Reginiussen, the captain, Mikael Dorsin, the assistant captain, and Nicki Nielsen had already taken their seats in the room. But the good news was that Coach Johansen and his assistants were yet to arrive. Zachary let out a pent-up breath of air and silently slipped into the room without drawing any attention.

None of the players tried to invite him to join their small groups since they knew that trying to hold a conversation with Zachary was a lost cause. Over the past two months, he had built himself a not-so-good reputation in the team. He hadn't interacted much with the other players—which distanced him further from them. He'd become the complete loner—the guy who came to the pitch and trained silently without involving himself in any small talk. So, most of the players kept their distance, only talking to him when it mattered.

Zachary, though, didn't mind the isolation since that had been his intention when he'd made the decision to limit his interaction with the other players. After realizing that he was still prone to the anger issues that had dogged his past life, he'd decided to reduce his interaction with others.

In that way, he would stay a neutral party since he would never get the opportunity to be angry at them. So far, the tactic had worked pretty well and even afforded him a few advantages. Thanks to his loner-type lifestyle on the team, he had more time to train than his colleagues.

Zachary found himself a chair at the very back and started eavesdropping on the conversations around him.

"Most of the referee's decisions didn't make much sense," said Mike Jensen, the starting central midfielder, from one of the seats in the middle of the room. "I can understand Tore's sending-off since it was a last-man professional foul. But, the second yellow of Nicki, that was absurd."

Zachary's ears perked up, wishing to hear more of the midfielder's take on the previous day's Tippeligaen match. He'd watched the game from the stands since he wasn't on the squad. It had been one of the upsets of the season.

Rosenborg BK had lost to Sandnes Ulf 0:1 at home with the entire first-team squad present. Moreover, that was their second consecutive miserable performance. Before that game, Rosenborg had tied 1:1 against IK Start at home. Then, the troll kids had gone on to lose 3:1 against FK Haugesund away from home. Rosenborg's situation wasn't so good with three wins, one draw, and two losses—as the results for the new season. The fans were not happy in the slightest. They'd taken to social media to express their discontent about the club's circumstances and, of course, the poor management.

"But we still underperformed during the game," Mikael Dorsin, the veteran defender, chipped in. "Tore's red card came in the 66th minute. We had not managed to score a goal by then. We have no one to blame but ourselves for losing that game."

"True," Nicki Nielsen said. "During that game, I don't know what happened to me. I couldn't beat the keeper even when I had that clear chance in the 30th minute."

"Let's not dwell in the past," Mikael said, patting the striker's back. "You tried your best in the game, but luck was not on our side. We will surely win next time."

Zachary continued listening silently to the discussion until the coaches arrived. The match video review meeting begun then.

"Good morning to you all," Coach Johansen greeted after placing his folder on the desk at the front of the room. Meanwhile, Trond Henriksen, the assistant coach, started setting up the video equipment.

"Good morning, coach," the players replied in chorus. They all stopped their conversations and focused their attention on him.

"Did you all rest well?" The coach smiled, starting to walk around the room slowly.

"Yes, coach," the players replied, many of them grinning.

"Oh, that's great," the coach intoned. "I hope you all went through post-match recovery. You all need to be ready for the game against Strindheim." He added, continuing to move around the room.

"Daniel, how's the family?"

"They are doing great. How is yours?"

"They're as fine as they could be."

"...Mike, are you settling in well?"

"...Inge, how is that leg of yours? Did you put some ice on it?"

"...Cristian..."

Coach Johansen did not start the meeting right away as he'd always done in the academy. Instead, he first went around the room making small talk and, at times, high-fiving the players while waiting for the assistant coach to finish connecting the video equipment. The coach took great care to ask about the affairs of all the players. Sometimes, it was about the family, at other times an injury, or even a girlfriend. And finally, he came to the back of the room where Zachary was seated.

"Zach," the coach said, bumping fists with him. "How do you feel?"

"Great, and you?" Zachary replied perfunctorily. He'd developed some negative feelings about his coach after being left out of the squad for the first six matches of the new Tippeligaen season. That was even after training like a maniac under supervision for two months. The coach hadn't even called him for a single first-team meeting for the entire period. He couldn't help but feel like Coach Johansen had betrayed him.

"I'm also doing okay, but just okay," the coach replied, inclining his head and studying Zachary with a thoughtful expression. "Are you ready to go into action on Wednesday?" He asked after a moment.

"Of course, I'm ready." Zachary smiled slightly. "I've always been ready ever since graduating from the academy. I only need a chance to showcase my skills." He said, without minding the players around him. He needed to let them know that he would be fighting for a first-team number with all the effort he could muster. Moreover, Coach Johansen should have been using the chance to pressure the senior players by informing them that a new player was joining the regulars. As a result, they would feel threatened and work harder to keep their positions.

"That's good to hear," Coach Johansen said, half-smiling. "I'll be giving you a chance in the Wednesday match. I hope you do use it well."

"Thank you, coach," Zachary replied, finally feeling his mood lighten. He didn't mind whether Coach Johansen was just using him to pressure the players into working harder. Nothing else mattered as long as he got a chance to play professional football.

Chapter 108 - The Match-Video Review Meeting I

"Okay, let's get down to serious business," said Coach Johansen, his tone solemn.

He had just finished moving around the room and making small talk with the players. By then, Trond Henriksen, the assistant coach, had already set up the video equipment and was switching on the large flat screen hanging on the wall in front of the room.

"I welcome you yet again to another post-match meeting where we review our most recent performances," Coach Johansen began. "However, I'm not in a good mood today. I'm still unhappy about our loss to Sandnes yesterday."

"If we had adhered to the game plan, we surely would have avoided it. But we messed up, put on a miserable showing, and lost another game. That's cause for concern." He paused, letting his gaze roam across the players in the tactical room.

For a few seconds, there was utter silence in the room, save for the sound of Coach Trond Henriksen shuffling through some papers at one side of the room. The players on their part, including Zachary, all waited attentively for the coach to continue his address.

"I know that losses can happen in football," the coach continued, his eyes narrowing. "And I understand there is always a winner and a loser in every game. But losing a game because we didn't give our best on the pitch is unacceptable. We had all the possession against Sandnes, but we didn't convert any of it into goals. I'm disappointed with your performance in that game."

Coach Johansen sighed. "Let's first talk about that one goal we conceded in the 23rd minute," he said before turning to look at his assistant. "Trond, can you set the video to the exact moment we conceded," he said to him.

"Okay," Trond Henriksen said, putting his papers down on the chair beside him. He then picked up the remote and started fast-forwarding the match video. In just a few seconds, the assistant head coach paused the motion picture, and a Sandnes player in a light blue jersey appeared on the screen.

Zachary instantly recognized Freyr Thorsteinsson, the winger who'd scored the lone and winning goal against Rosenborg the previous day on the screen.

"That's just perfect," Coach Johansen said, nodding. "We can start watching from here. Thank you, Trond." He added, moving towards the screen.

Coach Trond Henriksen smiled in response before playing the video once more. Freyr Thorsteinsson, the Sandnes Ulf number-23, started dribbling and raced past Mix Diskerud, the Rosenborg starting left-midfielder. Zachary watched as he circumvented two more players in white and went on to deliver a lofted pass into the box.

Then, one of the Sandnes strikers, a black fellow in a number-11 light-blue shirt, out-jumped the defenders and connected with the ball. But instead of attempting to score, he headed the ball back—

onto the path of the sprinting Freyr Thorsteinsson, the left-winger. Freyr managed to keep his composure and unleashed a howitzer of a shot at goal despite being marked by two Rosenborg players.

Lund Hansen, the goalkeeper, was helpless. He could only turn and watch the ball curl into the top corner of the goal. The video stopped there and then as the assistant coach pressed the pause button on the remote.

"Okay," Coach Johansen said, letting his gaze settle momentarily across some of the players in the tactics room. "Can someone tell me what we did wrong before conceding that goal?"

All the players, including Zachary, remained silent. Some were frowning or smiling ruefully. The rest stared at the screen with undivided attention—as if their gazes could pierce through the fabric of reality and get a better view of the goings-on within it.

"Anyone?" Coach Johansen asked once more on seeing his players remaining silent.

Mikael Dorsin, the veteran defender of Rosenborg, raised his hand.

"Yes, Mikael." Coach Johansen pointed at him.

"It's pretty clear that we were not in a proper defensive shape when we conceded the goal. First, we let Freyr run with the ball across the wing and cut into the pitch without closing him down. We also allowed him to meet the return pass from Tosaint Ricketts and score. We didn't even do our best to block his shot. So, we wouldn't have conceded the goal if we had maintained a proper defensive shape."

"Exactly, thank you, Mikael," Coach Johansen said, smiling for the first time since beginning his address. "You took the words out of my mouth. Our defensive shape was a mess before that goal."

"Trond, first rewind a bit," he said, turning back towards the screen. The assistant coach did as instructed, rewinding the video and only pressing the pause button at the moment when Freyr Thorsteinsson received the ball. That was just over a minute before the left-winger netted the goal.

"Take a good look at the Sandnes players," Coach Johansen said, moving a few steps away from the screen as the video started playing once again. He leaned on a table on one side of the room before continuing.

"Observe and see how we concede this goal. If you only take a cursory glance at this, you might decide that the goal was Mix's fault. He lost track of the run. This guy runs across the wing and penetrates our half, and finally delivers a cross into the box." He added, pointing at the sprinting image of Freyr Thorsteinsson on the screen.

"But as the cross comes into the box, the center-backs don't jump to challenge the ball. To make matters worse, Freyr Thorsteinsson somehow manages to make a 30-yard run from the wing and arrives close to our box—before shooting and scoring. None of you tried to track down his run. What the hell?"

"Where were the midfielders?" His voice rose slightly. "Where was the right-back? How could we allow a player to make a run from the wing to our box uncontested? We're supposed to be the best team in Norway, for God's sake."

He sighed, shaking his head. "This is unacceptable for players of the biggest Norwegian club. You've got to read the game. You have to anticipate any changes in the tempo and react accordingly. You have to communicate and stay in a proper defensive shape for the entire duration of the game. That's the only way to avoid conceding such stupid goals in the coming matches."

All the players in the tactics room remained silent, waiting for the coach to continue. Zachary, too, watched the video with a solemn expression. But if he had to be honest, he would admit he was a little happy on the inside that the Rosenborg first team had messed up in the previous three games.

If the club had been on form and continued winning every single match with ease, he was sure that the coaching staff wouldn't have considered him for the squad that soon. Thus, Zachary watched Coach Johansen's presentation with a poker face—only to fit the solemn atmosphere in the tactics room. Otherwise, he would have already started grinning if he was alone.

After a few minutes, Coach Johansen started alternating with Trond Henriksen, his assistant, in making the presentation. The two took turns expounding on several player mistakes in the game against Sandnes Ulf while replaying the match video. They were very detailed in pointing out what the players could have done better to achieve victory. The minutes passed quickly, and before Zachary knew it, it was almost time for the meeting to end.

Zachary, for the most part, was a bit bored. Throughout the entire session, he struggled to keep himself from dozing—since he had woken up early and spent the most part of that morning exercising intensively. He only rose to full attention when Coach Johansen took the stage towards the end.

"If we want to achieve anything this season, we have got to work as a team," Zachary heard coach Johansen say in an animated tone of voice. "If our goal is to win the Tippeligaen or the Norwegian Football Cup, we have to defend and attack as a team when we're out there on the pitch. There's simply no way around it."

"When we get problems in the box—say two opposing forwards on the attack, we must not think our two center-backs will stop them alone. I saw that in the moments before Tore received the red card for his last-man challenge, some of our guys were walking. They were walking." He emphasized, letting his gaze roam across a few of the players.

"The opposing team was attacking our goal, but about five of us were walking," Coach Johansen exclaimed, his tone turning a bit dramatic. "We were playing a 4-3-3, for God's sake. The three midfielders and the two forwards on the flanks should have rushed back and helped in the defense. But, all of you let Tore face two of their forwards alone, forcing him to make a professional foul."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that Tore should have made the tackle." He half-smiled, shaking his head. "I am only emphasizing that you shouldn't have let him fall into such a 1-vs-2 situation alone. If any three of you could have sprinted back the moment their forward picked up the ball, I can guarantee you we wouldn't have been—saddled with the red card."

"You guys should thank Lund for saving the penalty. Otherwise, we would have lost by a bigger margin, not just that one goal."

Chapter 109 - The Match-Video Review Meeting II

Coach Johansen's eyes narrowed as he let his gaze roam across the players in the tactics room before continuing.

"As you can see, we're only missing that little bit of extra effort in our gameplay," the coach said, his voice lowering. Your teammate is in trouble, but you don't give a damn. You shamelessly leave everything to him. What the hell!?"

"We're playing as professionals in the top-tier league in Norway, but we're not putting in the necessary extra effort. We're not defending as a team, and because of that—we concede a lot of shitty goals very often. Where are the levels of concentration that are the hallmark of a pro player?" He intoned, starting to move around the room.

"Where is the focus required to win the league or the double? Because in the last three games, it looked like you were merely playing for fun. But this is not just playing. You guys should know this."

"You have to remember that you're regulars of the best team in Norway." The coach's words came out of his mouth slowly but steadily as his tone turned stern. "You're paid highly to win games. You're not supposed to lose against a team like Sandnes Ulf. You're not even allowed to lose against a team like FK Haugesund, not even Molde. All those clubs don't have a rich history like ours." He paused as if wishing for his words to first sink into the heads of his players.

The coach sighed, shaking his head. "I have already said enough about our past performances," he said, moving back to the front of the room. He picked up his notebook from the desk nearby. "We shall now focus on our future performances. What's the way forward? That's what I'll talk about in a moment." He flipped his notebook open.

"First, I'll start by announcing the squad for the Norwegian Cup second-round game against Strindheim on Wednesday."

"Eehh!" A round of exclamations went off across the whole room. Even Zachary, who had attended the meeting for the first time, was surprised. Customarily, the coaches would announce the match squad on the night before the game. The game against Strindheim was on Wednesday, yet the coach had decided to name the line-up on a Monday morning. That was an unusual occurrence.

"Don't act too surprised," Coach Johansen said, raising a hand to indicate that he needed silence. The players quietened down immediately. "I'll be giving an opportunity to several players who haven't had any first-team football this season. So, I need to announce the squad today. That way, we can refine our game plan and tactics with the selected players during the light training session tomorrow."

"You guys must understand that it's always difficult for me to choose the starting line-up," the coach continued in a solemn voice. "I hate leaving talented players out of the squad."

"But I still have to choose the starting eleven and the seven more on the bench every single game. I understand some of you may have to stay home or watch the match in the stands. I know that you feel bad because of that. Maybe, you might think I've got a bias against you if I don't regularly name you as part of the squad."

"But all I ask is for you to believe in me," the coach said, his tone solemn. "As long as you work hard and perform to the best of your abilities, even if you're an under-19 player, you'll get your chance at one point in time. I work on only one principle: rewarding hard work and merit. So, don't feel down when you find your name missing from the squad. Instead, work harder, try to make it on the squad against Aalesunds FK on Saturday." He let his gaze roam across the players. "Okay?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied, more or less in unison.

"Okay, I'll name the squad now," he said, moving towards the screen.

Zachary felt his heart start to race as Trond Henriksen, the assistant head coach, pointed the remote at the screen. Immediately, eleven white shirts arranged in a 4-3-3 attacking formation appeared on it. But they didn't have any names.

Zachary felt sweat beading on his forehead as every nerve in his body tingled with anticipation. The coach's promise didn't count much for him. He would only relax when he saw his name with his own eyes on the official match squad.

"This will be an away game," Coach Johansen begun, eyes narrowing as he took a casual glance at his open notebook. "But we shall still play using our default 4-3-3 attacking formation."

"In the goal, we have No.12 Lund Hansen."

"The center-backs will be No.4 Tore Reginiussen—the captain, and No.24 Stefan Strandberg. The left-back: No.14 Inge H?iland. The right-back: No.19 Brede Moe. That will be our defense."

"In midfield, we shall have three players as usual. Only this time around, we'll be giving a chance to our younger squad members. We'll field one defensive midfielder to form a triangle with the right and left midfielders." He pointed at the screen to explain his point.

"The defensive midfielder will be No.20 Ole Selnaes. Left-midfielder: No.21 Fredrik Midtsj?. Right Midfielder: No.33 Zachary Bemba."

Zachary let out a breath of pent-up air on hearing his name. He had finally made it onto the squad after waiting for more than two months.

At that moment, he could hardly contain the happiness that streaked through him like a comet. He had been under the impression he would be on the bench, but Coach Johansen had surprised him and named him as part of the starting eleven.

He was intoxicated with joy. Had he been on his own, he could have jumped around and danced like a little kid that had just seen Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. But, since he was surrounded by teammates, he maintained a poker face and continued listening to the coach's instructions.

"We will use three forwards; two on the flanks and one through the center as our spearhead," the coach continued while pointing at the respective positions on the screen. "The left-forward will be No.13 Jaime Alás. Right-forward: No.10 John Chibuike. Center-forward: No.9 Nicki Nielsen. Those are the starting eleven."

Zachary was surprised once again. The coach had left most of the first-stringers out of the starting eleven. Only Nicki Nielsen, Tore Reginiussen, and Lund Hansen remained in the starting line-up for the Wednesday match.

"On the bench," the coach continued after a moment. "We have No.39 Jacob Storevik, No.3 Mikael Dorsin, No.2 Cristian Gamboa, No.42 Mix Diskerud, No.8 Borek Dockal, No.11 Tobias Mikkelsen, and No.17 Tarik Elyounoussi. That's it for the line-up. We'll refine the details tomorrow."

"DING"

No sooner had the coach finished naming the squad than the system notification sounded in Zachary's mind.

"The system has detected that the user has been added to the squad of a Norwegian Football Cup match," the apathetic feminine voice of the AI sounded in his mind soon after.

"Conditions for a long-term serial system mission have been met."

"The 2013 Norwegian Football Cup Serial Mission initiated successfully."

"Does the user wish to view the details of the mission right now?"

"Negative," Zachary replied mentally right away. He would open the system interface once he got back to his apartment. He didn't want to draw unnecessary attention by focusing on the system screen instead of the coach.

Chapter 110 - A Talk With The Coach

Coach Johansen continued discussing the line-up for a few more minutes. He pointed out the individual roles of each player in the squad before concluding the team meeting. He released the players for their lunch break after reminding them about the next training session—slated for later that evening.

Nicki Nielson came up to Zachary's seat right after the meeting. "Congratulations on making the squad," he said, grinning.

"Thank you," Zachary replied, returning the smile.

"Against Strindheim, we'll both be in the starting eleven. I'm counting on receiving many assists from you." He patted Zachary's shoulder gently. He didn't show any hint of the solemn demeanor he was known for on the field.

Nicki Nielson was one of the few squad members that had continued trying to interact with Zachary over the previous two months. That was after he had put in a great effort to distance himself from the rest of his teammates. The striker always tried to make small talk with him even after Zachary made it clear he wished to be alone.

Even met with silence, Nicki would stand by his side and continue talking. He seemed not to mind whether he got a response or not. At first, Zachary had felt uncomfortable, but later, he slowly got used

to the chatty number-9. That way, he became more and more familiar with his presence and even considered him as a friend to some extent.

"Would you like to join us in the game room as we wait for lunch?" The striker inquired, still smiling at Zachary.

The game room was the chamber close to the dressing room where players spent time playing indoor games as a form of relaxation during breaks. It was well-equipped with card and board games. However, none of the entertainment was up Zachary's alley. He preferred to spend the time in the gym doing a light stretching routine instead of sitting through half an hour of a card game.

He decided to reject the invitation in the most polite way he could think of at that moment. Despite not wishing to get closer to the others on the team, he didn't want to offend them. That was why he had maintained a very polite bearing even while trying to keep his distance from the rest of the team over the previous two months.

"Can I take a raincheck for today?" He asked. "I still have to complete some gym work."

"Are you trying to brush me off once again?" Nicki said, raising a brow. "From my understanding, your fitness training should have ended the moment you made the squad. You'd better come and join in on the cards. Over a game of cards, you can quickly get to know your teammates better."

Zachary couldn't find a counter to that. He was at a loss for words, without any way to refuse the skipper's invitation politely.

Over the previous month, he had found it hard to reject the invitations of a few of his teammates—especially when he didn't have much of an excuse. Fortunately, he could still escape before joining the squad since he was undergoing progressive overload training under Coach Bjørn Peters. The training was intense and left him without energy for anything else. All his teammates knew that simple fact and did not try too hard to push him into joining events that they claimed were for the necessary team bonding. But at that moment, he had no excuse to refuse Nicki since he was already part of the squad.

As he racked his brains, trying to find a way to brush off the skipper politely, Coach Johansen's voice sounded, saving him from the awkward exchange.

"Zachary, follow me to my office." the coach said as he passed his seat, heading for the door. "I want to discuss a few things with you."

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied dutifully, feeling thankful for the coach's timely intervention.

Without further ado, he said his regrets to Nicki in the most polite way he could muster before following the coach out of the tactics room. Two minutes later, he stepped into the head coach's office at Lerkendal Idresspark.

He could feel a sense of adventure woven into his nervousness like he was getting the first sure-footing on a great rock climb. He had no guesses on why the coach had sought him out after the meeting. So, when he settled in a chair beside Coach Johansen's desk, he felt his heart start to race. What if the coach had changed his mind once more? He couldn't help but wonder. The two months out of the squad had lessened his confidence.

"Don't be nervous," Coach Johansen said, apparently noticing his discomfort. "I only called you here to discuss your aspirations in the club." He smiled, settling in the chair behind his not-so-organized L-shaped desk. A laptop, a Rosenborg coffee mug, papers, five-by-seven cards with unfinished gameplays, pens, and markers—Zachary could see all that lying haphazardly on top of the laminated surface of the desk.

"Coach Bjørn Peters has already informed me about the hard work you put into your training over the past two months," the coach continued with a faint smile. "I also received a report from Dr. Alexander Øystein yesterday about your fitness. So, we can safely say that we may have partially handled the scare of your growth spurt—to some extent. Since you have finally made it to the squad, I would like to know which role you wish to play on this team."

Zachary nodded but chose to remain silent and wait for the head coach to continue.

"Zachary, let me ask you this," he continued. "Which numbers would you wish to play on the Rosenborg starting line-up? Where do you feel most comfortable?"

"Central Midfield," Zachary replied matter-of-factly. "The best position for me would be attacking midfield, right behind the forwards."

Coach Johansen nodded. He inclined his head and regarded Zachary with a thoughtful expression before saying: "You must understand we have several talented and experienced midfielders in the squad. There is Mike Jensen, Mix Diskerud, Jonas Svensson, Borek Dockal, Ole Selnes, Daniel Berntsen, Fredrik Midtsj , Jaime Al s, and of course, now, there's you." He listed nearly all the midfielders on the team in a single breath.

"All those are remarkable players capable of tearing teams in the Tippeligaen apart with just their passing skills," the coach continued. "We also can't forget the younger midfielders that are also awaiting their chance on the reserve team. They are among the top players of the reserve league as I speak now."

"So, as you can see, we have plenty of midfielders. But you have to remember that for each match, I can only select three or four midfielders for the starting eleven. That creates very fierce competition for the few spots available in the midfield. All the midfielders have to struggle hard through weekly training to get a spot on my starting line-up."

"But if we're to talk about the wings, there is almost no competition. Aside from Tobias Mikkelsen, we don't have any natural speedy wingers on the team that can double as forwards in our regular 4-3-3 formation."

"So, I would like to ask you." The coach leaned forward and locked gazes with Zachary. "Would you like to switch positions and play on the wings? I was your coach for two years in the academy. I understand your abilities and playing style quite well. I'm very sure you would do well on both the right and left flanks since you can use both legs."

"You'll get a lot of playing time because of your speed and your passing accuracy, which could lead to some spectacular crosses. That's enough to help us win more games. So, what do you think about my proposition? Would you consider playing on the flanks?"

Zachary remained silent for a moment, deliberating on the issue. He understood that by the time the coach decided to ask him such a question, he had already started considering him as a player with great potential as a winger.

If Zachary accepted the coach's proposition, he would get to play a lot of football during his debut season since there seemed to be a severe shortage of wingers on the squad.

But he didn't want to play on the wings. He could only showcase his passing skills fully in the midfield. Moreover, playing on the wing had its disadvantages. Since wingers tended to run with the ball a lot more, trying to beat defenders with pace or dribbling, they got injured quite often. As a consequence, it was an unsustainable position to play in the long run, especially for a tall player like him.

"Coach," Zachary said after deliberating for a moment. "I would like to continue playing as a central midfielder. I can play better there than I ever would on the wings. So, I request that you give me some chances in the middle of the park. I will not disappoint you." He added, his voice unwavering.