

Greatest 161

Chapter 161 - Against Hønefoss Ballklubb

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The referee blew the whistle at exactly 7:00 PM, and the match commenced immediately.

Coach Johansen's face was all smiles as his players managed to dominate the game, starting from the very first minute. Even the fact that they were playing at an away ground seemed not to matter to them as they dictated the tempo on the playing field.

They were totally tearing the Hønefoss formation apart with their passing on multiple occasions. Whether it was the three forwards, the three midfielders, or the four defenders—they all played as if their lives depended on the game.

In particular, Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's center-forward, was on fire. In the 31st minute, he tore through the Hønefoss defense like a knife through butter and unleashed a right-footed shot to score Rosenborg's first goal of the day.

Coach Johansen could hardly contain his glee as he celebrated the goal. He felt like the squad was finally shaping up under his guidance. Even the bench players on the Rosenborg squad at that moment could rise to the occasion given a chance to start in an official game. He felt he could go places and win many trophies with such a team. His hopes had already soared.

After the goal, the Rosenborg players gained more momentum. They played creative flawless one-touch or two-touch football and managed to push back all the Hønefoss players into their own half. Whenever they lacked options in the middle, they would switch to using wing play and delivering crosses into Hønefoss' box to create scoring chances.

For the next few minutes, the Hønefoss keeper made a couple of incredible saves, and several shots smashed off the goalposts as Rosenborg continued to apply more pressure on their opponents.

Nevertheless, the score remained 1:0 until the 43rd minute when Tarik Elyounoussi, Rosenborg's left-forward, latched on to Ole Selnes's defense-splitting pass close to the 18-yard box of Hønefoss. Without

any hesitation, he fired home with his left foot from around the left corner of the box and scored Rosenborg's second goal just before half-time.

At the Aka Arena, it was all Rosenborg for the moment.

Zachary followed the proceedings on the pitch from the bench within the visiting team's technical area. He thought Rosenborg would win the game for sure since his teammates on the pitch had been bullying the Hønefoss players for the entire 45 minutes of the first half.

But he changed his view as soon as the second half started.

Team Hønefoss was like an entirely different side after half-time. The players in green and white managed to turn the pressure on Rosenborg by using the long and high ball strategy. They used wing play and high balls to deliver balls to their two forwards until they managed to score in the 50th minute, just five minutes after the start of the second half.

Riku Riski, one of the two forwards in Hønefoss' 4-4-2 formation, was the man that managed to convert and reduce Rosenborg's lead. Zachary could only sigh as the game that'd seemed like a sure win for Rosenborg before half-time had turned into another tough fixture.

For the next twenty minutes, the Rosenborg players struggled to hold possession. Even worse, they failed to get shots on target as they'd done during the first half. They seemed to have left all their skillful ball-handling and creativity in the dressing room at half-time. Zachary could hardly believe what he was witnessing on the pitch. But since he was on the bench, there was nothing much he could do to change the game situation. He could only hope that the coach would be quick to react before Rosenborg conceded an equalizer.

Hønefoss continued giving Rosenborg a hard time until the unfavorable game situation forced Coach Johansen to call for two substitutions in the 75th minute. He substituted in Zachary for Mix Diskerud, the Rosenborg defensive midfielder, and Tobias Mikkelsen for Borek Dockal on the right flank.

Coach Johansen noticed the change immediately after making the two substitutions. He let out a pent-up breath as Rosenborg managed to stabilize the game once again within a short while.

Zachary played like usual and managed to settle in his new defensive midfield role within a minute after entering the game. He won several aerial and ground duels by relying on his tall physique, thereby sealing off team Hønefoss' long-range ball strategy. After that, he began unleashing passes left and right—into the wings like a true Maestro. That way, Rosenborg started dictating the tempo for the first time during the second half.

Coach Johansen could only sigh at Zachary's on-pitch tactical ability and game awareness, especially in the midfield. Even in a relatively newer position, he could still play like usual and outsmart opponents much more experienced than him. Coach Johansen was quite thankful to have such a phenomenal player on his squad. But at the same time, he felt gratified. He wondered how Rosenborg would manage to keep such a talent with such uncanny consistency.

In the 88th minute, Zachary intercepted another one of the Hønefoss long-range passes deep in Rosenborg's half. He chested the ball to the ground and skipped past an opponent with a deft second touch. Before the opposing midfielder could react, he unleashed one of his signature defense-splitting through-passes towards the right-wing where Tobias Mikkelsen was lurking.

Tobias latched on to Zachary's incredible pass before dashing past a few opponents with his astonishing pace. The right-forward raced along the touchline like the wind and soon stepped into the final third. In some miraculous way, he cut into the pitch, slalomed his way past a couple of more opposing defenders—and soon was one-on-one with the keeper. Tobias had managed to create Rosenborg's best chance during the entire second half by just relying on his incredible pace.

For a second or two, silence fell across the Aka Arena. The Hønefoss home fans believed that the Rosenborg right forward would surely convert the goal. But a moment later, they started jubilating once again as the Hønefoss keeper managed to save Tobias' effort with an outstretched foot.

Coach Johansen couldn't accept the situation. He couldn't believe how a professional forward could miss such a chance after dribbling through the whole defense. He shook his head and made a mental note to include shooting drills on the weekly training menu of all his forwards and midfielders.

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The referee blew the whistle and pointed to the corner flag.

Mikael Dorsin, the Rosenborg left-back, took the corner-kick and floated a teasing ball into the crowded box. Tore Reginiussen, the Rosenborg captain, out-jumped the rest of the players and connected with the corner ball to plant a header towards the goal from around the penalty spot.

But once again, the keeper jumped high and shoved the ball away from his goal. As luck would have it, the ball moved straight towards Zachary, who'd positioned himself close to one of the goalposts. Coach Johansen felt his heart start to race as he realized it was yet another clear goal-scoring chance. There wasn't a single player between Zachary and the open goal.

"What!?" Coach Johansen yelled after a moment. He couldn't believe what he'd witnessed on the pitch once more.

Zachary had just failed to direct the ball into the back of the net with his head—even when there was no opposing player to defend the goal. The coach shook his head once again and could only sigh with regret after the ball sailed past the left goalpost by mere centimeters. His players seemed to be having a spell of bad luck in the final minutes of the game. They'd failed to convert two clear chances into goals within a span of two minutes.

However, they managed to hold on to their narrow 2:1 lead until the final whistle. Coach Johansen's mood lightened as the victory had lifted his team to 19 points and sealed their position as second on the Tipeligaen table. Strømsgodset IF was only ahead of them in the first position due to a superior goal difference.

Chapter 162 - Against Sarpsborg-08 I

Three days later, on a rainy Thursday evening, Zachary was on the bench once more as Rosenborg faced off against Sarpsborg-08 at Lerkendal Stadion.

He watched the game free from any worries since the coach had already promised that he would be in the starting line-up for the next fixture against Molde. So, he leaned back into his chair within the home team's dugout to enjoy the proceedings on the field of play.

Backed by the cheering of the enthusiastic home fans, the Troll Kids put up quite the performance to steadily tear the formation of their opponents apart in the first half. They possessed the motive to strike from the first minute and once again played flawless passing football under the millions of rain droplets falling from the sky that evening.

Zachary judged that they'd executed coach Johansen's game plan to perfection in all areas of the field. They'd shaped up in the 4-3-3 attacking formation to mount attack after attack in waves, never giving the Sarpsborg-08 any second to rest throughout the entire first half.

Nicki Nielsen was on fire once again. He skillfully connected with Mix Diskerud in the 33rd minute, latching on to a pinpoint pass before firing and scoring Rosenborg's first goal for the day. A minute later, in the 34th minute, he expertly skipped past the Sarpsborg center-backs and connected with Mikael Dorsin's cross from the wing—to beat the keeper with a header from around the edge of the penalty box.

Within a span of two minutes, Rosenborg had extended its lead by two goals. The home fans in Lerkendal went wild as their team seemed well on their way to furthering their winning streak to five matches in a row.

But at the start of the second half, Zachary was astounded as the Rosenborg players started underperforming. They became a mess in the midfield and started giving away possession more frequently. Although they would manage to create a few chances in the final third on a few occasions, they still couldn't convert them into goals. They couldn't extend their lead and found themselves in a situation similar to the one they'd been in during the second half of the game against Hønefoss.

As a result, the Sarpsborg-08 players capitalized on the laxity in Rosenborg's playing intensity to settle down and become more comfortable in the game. Their defense and midfield stabilized in a short while as they turned the tables on the underperforming Rosenborg squad in the first few minutes of the second half. They steadily built up momentum and managed to hit Rosenborg on the counter using the long-ball strategy to their two forwards on multiple occasions.

In the 52nd minute, Magnus Olsen, one of the Sarpsborg-08 forwards in their 4-4-2 formation, completed a lightning-fast switch of play from defense to attack by getting on to the end of a long ball deep inside Rosenborg's half. He showed his class as a Tippeligaen professional forward by skipping past Stefan Strandberg, one of the Rosenborg center-backs, with his deft footwork before firing home and scoring Sarpsborg-08's first goal.

But that wasn't the end of Rosenborg's troubles for the day. In the 64th minute, Martin Wiig, the other Sarpsborg-08 forward, latched on to a through-pass from one of his teammates in the final third—before trying to dribble past Stefan Strandberg, the Rosenborg's center-back.

However, Stefan was having none of his nonsense. He slid in wholesale and tried to tackle the ball away from the Sarpsborg-08's forward's feet. But as bad luck would have it, he missed the ball by mere centimeters and caught the speedy forward on the left ankle. The referee immediately blew his whistle and awarded Sarpsborg-08 a free-kick only a couple of yards away from Rosenborg's box.

Gudmundur Thórarinsson, Sarpsborg-08's left-winger, stepped up and successfully converted the free-kick to score the second goal for the visitors. The stands of Lerkendal with the seats of the home fans went quiet for a moment as Rosenborg was once again in a precarious situation after conceding the equalizing goal.

Coach Johansen immediately reacted after Rosenborg had conceded the second goal. But that time around, he didn't opt to bring Zachary into the game.

The boy had played four consecutive games over the span of 12 days and needed to rest his legs. That was the only way he would be ready and in good shape for the Molde fixture in four days.

So, the coach substituted in Ole Selnes and Mix Diskerud to strengthen his team's midfield. He then brought in Tobias Mikkelsen, the speedy winger, to boost Rosenborg's attacking play.

A few minutes after Coach Johansen had made the substitutions, the situation for Rosenborg on the pitch stabilized. Tobias Mikkelsen started cutting across the wing and delivering crosses into the box until Tarik Elyounoussi, Rosenborg's left forward, connected with one of them to score Rosenborg's third goal.

The cheers of the home fans rose to a crescendo, seemingly almost blowing off the roof of Lerkendal Stadion. The Rosenborg players had managed to get themselves out of a precarious situation. They'd scored in the 84th minute to secure their lead once again.

Coach Johansen was all smiles as he celebrated the goal in the technical area. But he made a mental note to find an immediate solution for his team's usually lackluster performances, especially at the beginning of the second half.

In the previous few games, Rosenborg had been dominating during the first half. But after halftime, it always seemed like his players had left their playing boots in the dressing room. That was the reason Rosenborg conceded most goals during the first twenty minutes of the second half.

"Should we tell the players to shape up and defend our one-goal lead?" Trond Henriksen, his assistant, inquired from beside him. "We should be doing our best to avoid conceding another goal in these remaining minutes."

"Don't worry," Coach Johansen replied, shaking his head. "Our players play at their best when on the attack. So, telling them to defend would be like taking away their best quality, which is their creativity when hunting for goals."

"But isn't that too risky?" Coach Trond Henriksen probed.

"Not at all," Coach Johansen responded. "We're the better team. So, we'll not play the type of football that is conservative against a weaker team. Moreover, attacking is the best—" He stopped mid-sentence, his eyes fully focusing once more on the proceedings on the field.

Chapter 163 - Against Sarpsborg-08 II

Coach Johansen felt his heart racing as he watched the action in Sarpsborg-08's half. Tobias Mikkelsen, the substitute right forward, had just cut into the pitch from the wing before delivering a grounded through pass to Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg number-9, just outside the box.

Nicki managed to latch on to the beautiful through-pass, skipped past a Sarpsborg-08 center-back, and soon stepped into the box. But just as he raised his leg to shoot, another center-back came sliding in to win the ball and sent him tumbling to the ground. The referee immediately blew his whistle and pointed to the penalty spot.

"Yes, yes..." Coach Johansen yelled and celebrated like a kid after letting out a pent-up breath of air. His team's performance had declined during the second half, and he'd been on tenterhooks.

He'd been under immense pressure the entire second half to the point that he was about to call on Zachary's services once more. But since his team was about to widen the lead again, he could finally relax.

Zachary continued following the game from the bench within the home team's technical area. He watched Nicki Nielsen make an angled run towards the ball before shooting and beating the keeper from the penalty spot. The Rosenborg number-9 was burning hot and had managed to score a hat-trick for the day.

Zachary was happy for him as he was one of the players close to him on the squad. But on the other hand, he felt a bit disappointed as he couldn't join in on the action.

Missing a game meant that he was a step closer to failing to realize one of the system's Tippeligaen mission milestones. He'd to play 21 of the 30 league matches to accomplish the first milestone of the serial challenge. But he'd missed seven already and was only remaining with two to go to fail that part of the mission. So, he was feeling conflicted on the inside.

Nevertheless, he didn't show any displeasure on his face. At that moment, he was happy that his team was winning and keeping the hopes of the trophy very alive. So, with a soft smile on his face, he continued watching the game until it ended with Rosenborg still leading by four goals to two.

After the game, he immediately left the pitch, intending to head back to the dressing room to take a quick shower and then head back home. But along the way, he ran into Olav Brusveen, the TV2-Sporten reporter, as he was about to enter the tunnel. He was together with his camera crew, seemingly waiting and ready to interview some field players.

But Zachary was at a loss concerning why Olav had intercepted his trek back to the dressing room since he hadn't even played a single minute of the just-concluded game. Instead, the reporter should have long been on his way to the area designated for the press to interview Nicki Nielsen, the man of the just-concluded match.

"Good evening, Zachary," the reporter greeted, extending a hand to him. "How is your evening?" He added, motioning for his camera crew to start recording or to move closer, whatever the case may be. Zachary couldn't ascertain what the hand signal of the man of the press implied.

"Good evening to you too, Olav," Zachary replied, smiling and taking his hand. "The evening is as fine as it can be. What can I do for you?" He was slightly on guard in front of the reporter after seeing the edited video he'd posted on his social media pages.

"Do you have any comment about today's match?" The reporter probed, holding up a microphone towards Zachary.

"We won the game," Zachary said, smiling. "The team played well, and we managed to win by a whole four goals to two. We've gained three more points and are a step closer to the top of the table. So, I'm quite excited."

"You're excited even if you didn't play?" Olav probed, looking at Zachary's face pensively.

"Of course, I'm in quite a jolly mood," Zachary replied, half-smiling. "It's always about the team. As long as we keep winning, I'll be able to ride the wave and win the double. That's good for both the team and me. So, why shouldn't I be happy?" He added, hoping for the reporter to end the interview as soon as possible.

"Have you noticed that Rosenborg tends to underperform and concede plenty of goals at the start of the second half?" Olav inquired.

"Well," Zachary said, trying to organize his thoughts. "We have had several moments at the beginning of the second when we have performed below par. That is for sure. But we are working together as a team to rectify this problem. We should be able to improve as the season progresses."

"You were on the bench during this match," Olav said, smiling slightly. "Some of your fans are wondering whether you're injured or if there's another issue with your health. Were you not given a chance to play because you missed that chance at the open goal during the match against Hønefoss BK? We're all in doubt and would like to know the reason you're not playing."

"Oh," Zachary said. "Rosenborg has the best and most diverse squad in the whole Tippeligaen. With the high number of talented players on the line-up, it's inevitable that I'll have to sit on the bench during a few of the games. But, I'm neither injured nor facing any other troubles."

Olav smiled, nodding. "In four days, you face Molde," he continued, oblivious to Zachary's impatience. "Do you think you can win?"

"How did Molde perform in today's game?" Zachary countered with a question instead of replying directly.

"Molde lost at home by five goals to one against FK Haugesund," Olav was quick to reply.

"Then the match before!" Zachary continued probing the reporter, his face taking on a stern expression. "How did they perform?"

"They tied 0:0 in an away game against Sandnes Ulf," Olav replied dutifully, seemingly not minding that Zachary was hijacking his role as the interviewer.

"Then, what is their current position on the Tippeligaen table?"

"16th, the bottom of the table."

"Then, let me ask you my last question," Zachary said, the corner of his mouth curling into a smile. "Considering all that, do you think we can lose at Lerkendal? Think about that. I know you know the answer deep in your heart." He said before walking past the reporter and his camera crew towards the tunnel. He didn't want to risk staying with Olav longer than necessary since he could unknowingly end up saying something improper and jeopardize himself.

Chapter 164 - Big Money Around The Corner

"You've made the headlines once again," Emily said to Zachary when they met at a cafe near Trondheim square on the morning after the Sarpsborg-08 game. "You've got a unique charisma about you that is

characteristic of celebrities. Everything you say makes waves on social media sites and sports blogs all around Norway. I'm amazed by your charms." She added jokingly.

"Stop kidding around," Zachary said, sipping on his warm cappuccino.

He didn't buy the whole part of having a natural charisma. In his previous life, he'd faced the booing of TP Mazembe fans back in his home country—until he couldn't lift his head in any public place. So, there was no way he possessed the kind of natural magnetism that could easily turn him into a celeb as a person. That quality was for a select few in the world, like the Kardashians, for instance.

He was well aware that his budding fame was the sole result of his football. As long as he continued playing well, people would feed off every word he said. But if it so happened that he lost his skills, he would end up like his previous incarnation, alone and helpless. That was why he was so focused on training and advancing his skills to avoid facing the same predicament in his new life.

"Tell me why I'm making headlines again," Zachary probed after taking a moment to savor the incredible flavor of his cappuccino. "Is it my interview with Olav that is making waves? Or is it my being on the bench for the past two games?"

"It's your interview after yesterday's game," Emily replied, flashing him a smile from across the table.

"Did I come out like an arrogant-got-it-all player in the video once again?"

"Not at all," Emily said before also sipping on her coffee. "It's quite the opposite this time. You projected a good image as an unselfish player who cares about the team. The Rosenborg fans loved everything you said and are even calling for the coaching staff to start using you in every game. You've got the favorable impression of the fans on your side. That's quite the achievement."

"Oh," Zachary said, placing his coffee cup back onto the table. "It seems like the interview with Olav was good for me this time around."

"From what I'm hearing from Ryan and a few of my other colleagues here in Norway, that seems to be the case," Emily said, still beaming. "But not everyone liked your post-match interview. The Molde fans are out for your blood on social media. That reporter, Olav, has been setting you up against them. Some

of them are calling you arrogant, and some other not-so-friendly names. A couple of times, they've even mentioned the goal you missed against Hønefoss BK. They claim your spell of good luck is over, and they'll handle you when you face Molde next week."

Zachary smiled, shaking his head. "As long as the Rosenborg fans don't have a problem with me, I don't mind what anyone else says. Moreover, they'll shut up if I manage to play well in my next game."

"Well said, Zach," Emily replied, her voice animated. "I'm glad that you're confident. As long as you maintain your focus and keep playing well, then they can't take anything from you, however much they blabber on—on social media. They'll all go silent if you continue performing well. I'm rooting for you to shut them up with your incredible skill." She added, pumping her fist into the air between them.

The corners of Zachary's mouth twitched a bit on witnessing how Emily was trying to cheer him on. She could be the most spirited of fangirls if she so wished. Zachary sighed, shaking his head to stop himself from laughing out loud.

"But this Olav keeps focusing on me even when I'm on the bench," He said, lifting a brow. "Yesterday, he should have interviewed Nicki, who was clearly the man of the match and also scored a hat-trick. But he still ended up pursuing me—the person that didn't even get to play for a single minute in the game."

Emily chuckled. "I'm only guessing that the fans and the press are fascinated by you only because you're an anomaly in the league," she said. "Think about it. You are only 18 years old. Yet, you have already made a debut for Rosenborg—the top club in Norway. You have even netted five goals in your first three games. Those stats are crazy—and because of your incredible performance, the Norwegian football community is expecting a lot from you. But, try to avoid being pressured by what everyone is saying. Instead, focus on improving yourself and let everything else be background noise. If you do that, you won't face any problems."

"Exactly," Zachary concurred. "I've been trying to keep myself away from the media. I don't want the press to influence my life, and that's the reason I have no social media accounts at the moment."

Emily smiled, leaning back into her seat to lock gazes with Zachary. "But hiding from the fans and what the public is saying about you is not a solution in the long term," she said. "Most of the celebrities and even professional athletes out there read articles about themselves, maybe for motivation or some other reason. But in so doing, they also get acclimatized to facing public opinion and handling negative criticism. You should try doing the same. What do you think will happen when you get extremely popular and can no longer hide?"

"I'm not hiding," Zachary countered. "I merely don't see a need to read about myself in the news or follow a post on social media criticizing my game. I don't want such distractions."

"If you say so," Emily said, sipping on her coffee. "But that reminds me. Have you set up that Twitter account we talked about?"

"Not yet," Zachary replied, smiling ruefully. "I was busy with training these past few days."

"But opening an account takes a few minutes," Emily countered, sighing. "We can do it even now, that is if you agree. With a Twitter account, you'll be able to get ahead of what the press is saying about you and make some clarifications to shape public opinion. That's good for your public image, and that translates into more endorsement offers."

"Oh," Zachary said. "We're turning the good football career into showbiz. It's quite weird when you think about it. I'm only in wonder whether the likes of Pele and Maradona had to think about such issues in their times."

"Of course, they had to," Emily replied confidently. "And they had to do it the hard way by visiting their fans to make public addresses or spare a day for an autograph session. But in your case, all you have to do is tweet something from the comfort of your home, and your fans will grow close to you and remain happy. Tell me: aren't you one lucky bastard compared to them?"

Zachary could only smile wryly at that.

"Zach, you've got to believe me," Emily continued in a tone similar to a preacher ministering to a group of believers in doubt. "It's a good thing to keep in touch with your fans. Social media is the best way to do it as it won't cost you anything. So, should we go ahead and open an account right now? It won't take more than a couple of minutes."

"Why not first discuss the business at hand," Zachary said, smiling at her. "You called me here to discuss the endorsement deal. Didn't you? We can think about Twitter and the other issues afterward."

Emily sighed. "There you go again, trying to bail out of opening a social media account," she said, shaking her head. "But okay, let's discuss business first. So, where should I start? The good news, the better news, or the best news?"

"You can start with anything you like," Zachary replied, his shoulder lifting in a casual shrug. "I don't mind."

"What a bore," Emily said, pouting a bit. "Well, the deal with Audi has finally shaped up. Over the past week, I've been working together with Susanne and Camilla to draft the final contract document. We've already added and revised all the clauses that matter to put together the final contract. And all I can say is that this endorsement deal is the best we can get at this moment."

"Thanks for your hard work," Zachary said, leaning back into his seat and smiling at her.

"You're welcome," Emily replied, beaming.

"So, how much are they offering this time around," Zachary asked after a moment.

"I was just about to get to that," Emily said, placing her coffee cup on the table. She then sank a manicured hand into the handbag beside her seat before fishing out a folder of documents. "Susanne didn't relent in the slightest regarding the money they are offering us. So, their offer still stands at 7.5 million Norwegian Kroner per year for three years. Does that match your expectations?" She probed, first inclining her head to study Zachary's face.

"The money is quite okay on my side," Zachary said to assure her. "It's more money than I'd expected to make in the whole of my first season as a pro footballer. So, don't mind about me and go on."

Emily smiled. "Then, I'm glad," she said. "So, their offer still stands at 7.5 million per year, but Susanne has agreed to pay us a whole six million instead of the previous 4.5, right after you've signed the deal."

"Six million right after signing," Zachary exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear. "That's some good money. I think I'll be sleeping on a bed of Norwegian Kroners soon."

Emily chuckled. "Cut down the excitement, will you? We'll be getting much better endorsements in the future. This deal is just the beginning."

Zachary sighed. "Then, I need to start thinking hard about where to put all that money," he said.

"But you have to remember that on that six million, there are taxes and my 6% commission as an agent," Emily said, holding Zachary's gaze. "So, you'll end up getting around 5 to 5.2 million. But that is, of course, after you agree to the offer and sign your name on the contract."

"Of course, I'll sign," Zachary was quick to reply. "Why would I reject such a lucrative deal? Five million is still a good amount, and I'm glad that you can finally make some money when helping me. Did any of the other terms in the contract change?"

"No," Emily responded, smiling at Zachary. "All the terms are quite similar to what Susanne described in our meeting last Thursday. Audi will offer you another vehicle right after you sign the deal. Furthermore, they've added several wage-increase provisions into the contract—that is to factor in your growth potential. All I can say is that this deal is a juicy one. We should take it."

"Then, why can't we go ahead and complete the signing today," Zachary queried, lifting a brow.

Emily chuckled. "That'll depend on how fast you can read through this document," she said, handing Zachary a set of papers from across the table. "Here is a copy of the contract document. Endeavor to read it and understand it quickly. As soon as you finish, we can arrange to meet the Audi representatives and negotiate the deal."

Chapter 165 - Agreeing To Open A Twitter Account

"How many pages?" Zachary inquired after receiving the contract document from Emily.

"Don't worry," Emily replied, smiling. "It's just sixteen pages and much simpler in context than your contract with Rosenborg. So, you can even read it in less than an hour. That's, of course, if you manage to concentrate."

"And we can complete the signing of this contract as soon as I finish reading it, even if it's today morning?" Zachary queried, taking a quick scan through the pages of the document. "Is that right?"

"Yes, that's true," Emily replied. "Susanne has already promised that we can get in touch and complete procedures right after you finish going through the terms. So, if you wish to receive millions of money quickly, you better get to reading."

"When there are millions at stake, I can even fly a rocket," Zachary said, grinning. "So, give me a few minutes to read through the terms. I'll be lightning fast."

"But please make sure you understand everything," Emily advised. "If you don't, please ask me. We do want you to sign anything you don't understand either now or in the future."

"Don't worry, I'll do that," Zachary concurred before concentrating on reading through the contract document.

Like Emily had said, it was a much simpler version compared to his contract with Rosenborg. It had clauses that allowed Audi to utilize Zachary's name for advertising purposes in both Norway and the rest of the world—if there was a need.

Additionally, it specified the amount of annual income Zachary would get and the commitments he needed to fulfill while under contract as the brand ambassador. It also outlined the conditions under which he could apply and receive wage increments from Audi during the contract period.

A soft smile grew on his face as he continued reading through the document. In addition to the favorable annual income, there were more detailed provisions to factor in his growth potential. If he made any achievements in his football career during the three years under contract, he would get more monetary benefits from Audi. For instance, if he managed to become the top scorer or the best player in the Tippeligaen, his annual income from the German car brand would more than double.

Zachary was quite contented since all he had to do was drive an Audi model, take part in the production of a few ads—and then, he would get millions at the end of each year. He was satisfied with every clause of the contract and had yet to find any reason to reject it.

"I've finished reading," He announced after reading all the paragraphs in the document a few minutes later.

"You're done?" Emily exclaimed, her eyes widening. "It has only been a little over twenty minutes. Did you understand everything?"

"Since you had already explained most of the clauses, I managed to understand them without much effort," Zachary responded, smiling at her. "The only thing I don't understand is the section about Force Majeure. There's no explanation for it throughout the whole document." He drawled a little, trying to pronounce the last word.

"Oh, Force Majeure!" Emily intoned, nodding. "That section solely explains what would happen if an unforeseeable catastrophe that is natural or unavoidable interrupted the expected course of events and prevented you or Audi from fulfilling obligations in the contract. It removes liability for such an event for which not a single party is the cause—and thus, no party in the contract can be held accountable. For instance, if you get into an accident—both on and off the pitch—and fail to meet obligations, then there's no way Audi can hold you accountable."

"But remember that events that constitute Force Majeure must be unforeseeable, external to the parties of the contract, and unavoidable," Emily continued explaining with a slow but steady voice. "For instance, if you get into an accident while driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, then you'll still face the consequences of breaching the contract. That's because your actions are the cause of the very accident that stopped you from fulfilling the terms of your agreement with Audi. Is my explanation clear enough?"

"Yes, I understand now," Zachary replied, smiling. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Emily said, beaming back at him. "Anything else you haven't understood in the contract? Don't feel pressured into making a choice. A slight delay on our side won't affect the deal that much. So we've got until Monday to make a decision."

"I don't have any problems with any of the clauses," Zachary responded right away. "So, you can go ahead and contact the Audi representatives. Let's complete this deal so that I can get back to training and you can also travel back to England. I'm guessing you've got a lot of responsibilities there. Isn't that right?"

"Don't worry about me," Emily said, brushing off his question. "This is my job, and I have to do it well, no matter how long it takes. Moreover, I've already freed up my entire schedule this month so that I can negotiate your deals without any distractions. So, I'm still in Trondheim until the beginning of June."

"Then, I'm glad," Zachary said, flashing her a smile. "I enjoy having you around. I rarely get bored when you're around—in Trondheim."

"Oh," Emily said, the corners of her mouth lifting into a charming smile. "But don't fall for me. You're my client and somewhat like a younger brother to me." She added humorously.

"Cut it out," Zachary said, shaking his head. "And to be honest, I think you're not my type. So, you would be dreaming if you ever find yourself thinking that I'll make a pass at you."

"Ouch, that hurt," Emily said, her deep blue eyes crinkling at the corners. "And what is this type of yours? Camilla, that hot neighbor of yours, or the mature Susanne?" She chuckled, her pretty face slowly morphing into a smirk.

"That, I can't tell you," Zachary countered, wondering how Emily even knew about his neighbor. He was pretty sure that he'd never talked to her about Kristin.

"Why?" She queried, pouting a bit.

"It's a secret," Zachary replied, glancing at his watch. "Anyways, can you try calling the Audi representatives? It's already 10:08 AM. If you intend for us to meet them before the day ends, you'd better act now."

"Okay, then," Emily intoned, her voice taking on a formal tone once more. "Give me a moment to call Susanne. I'm pretty sure that she'll want us to complete the deal today. She seems like someone that moves very fast while doing business."

"Okay," Zachary said. "Please go ahead. I can't wait to swim in dollars."

Emily chuckled at that before fishing out her phone and starting to make the call. Zachary left her to her work and beckoned a waitress over to their table. He ordered two more cappuccinos, one for himself and another for Emily, before leaning back in his seat to await the news from the Audi representatives.

He didn't have to wait long, though. A minute or two later, Emily ended the call and placed her phone down on the table before smiling at Zachary.

"Well, what did Susanne say?" Zachary probed, not masking his enthusiasm.

"Susanne agreed to meet us at two in the afternoon to complete the deal," Emily replied, smiling. "She seemed quite pleased by how fast we had responded to the offer."

"That's great, then," Zachary intoned, also smiling. "So, I guess I should go put in some few hours of practice to pass the time before the meeting. We can then link up at around 1:00 PM and head to the Audi outlet together."

"Don't you have a day off today?" Emily queried, lifting a brow.

"Well, officially, yes," Zachary answered. "But since I didn't get to play yesterday, I've got fresh legs and can put in a few hours of training."

"But aren't you forgetting that we have to finish up something before you leave?" Emily inquired.

"We have to finish up something!" Zachary probed as he was momentarily at a loss of what she was implying.

"Twitter," Emily whispered, grinning.

"Oh, that," Zachary said, sighing.

"Yes," Emily said. "Let's register that account for you right now. It'll give you a platform to connect on an individual level with your fans. They'll soon become heavily invested and loyal and get a chance to see that you're actually human and relatable by getting a glimpse into you as a person. That'll make them closer to you than ever before. And I can promise that you'll be able to reap both monetary and non-monetary benefits out of the account. If it gets too much for you to handle, we can get someone to manage the account for you. So, please take out your phone."

"Well, I do hope that opening this account will be worth it," Zachary said, fishing his Motorola G-phone from the side pocket of his trouser. Even in his previous life, he'd not been a technically savvy person.

He didn't like sharing information about himself on the internet. But since his agent had assured him that the account had the potential to make him money, he, of course, had to give it a try.

"Do you need some help?" Emily queried from across the table.

"No need, I can handle this myself," Zachary replied, his eyes still focused on his Motorola Moto-G phone. He then typed the word "Twitter" into his Google play search bar to look up the app.

Chapter 166 - Name Already Taken

The internet speed in the cafe was quite fast, and within a second, the Twitter app page populated his screen after searching for it. He wasted no time quickly installing it and starting the procedure of registering for the account.

But he ran into a problem just after completing the signing up process. Twitter didn't give him his own name but was instead forcing him to use handles like @ZacharyBemba22, @ZacharyBemba23, and so on. He even tried to change it to @ZacharyBemba_33, but that handle, too, was already taken.

He couldn't help but wonder how his name had become so common and widespread to the point that it was no longer available on Twitter. He sighed, shaking his head as he'd lost all the motivation to open the account.

"What happened?" Emily queried on seeing him place his phone on the table. "Did you open the account?"

"Not yet," Zachary replied, a wry smile outlining his face. He then went ahead and told her about the problem he'd run into when signing up for the Twitter handle.

"Oh," Emily said, smiling, on hearing his account. "Those must be people that are trying to make a quick buck using your name. That will be easy for us to handle. We only have to prove that the people using your name are scammers and parodies with no connection to it. That way, Twitter will verify your account and offer the handle with your name back to you."

"Oh," Zachary said, lifting a brow. "People can use other people's names to make money on Twitter! How's it even possible to make money on Twitter?"

"They really do," Emily replied, voice confident. "If they can use a celebs name to get a lot of followers, then they can use the account to make some good bucks through marketing gigs, among other things. As long as their handles are famous, other people will offer them cash to Tweet about their businesses so as to market them." She paused a bit as the waitress had finally brought their two cappuccinos.

Both Emily and Zachary thanked the waitress and sipped on their warm flavored cappuccinos before resuming their discussion.

"So, since your fame is still budding, I was quite sure that some people would use your name for such purposes," Emily continued, placing down her cup. "That was one of the few reasons I was so insistent that you open the Twitter account and get it verified as quickly as possible. When it's out there on the web, all your fans will become aware of it in a short time and become followers. That way, you'll cripple those fake accounts that might harm your reputation in the future."

"Then how should we handle this?" Zachary inquired, leaning back into his seat.

"Don't worry," Emily said. "I'll use your details and ID to get you a verified account on Twitter. You'll be able to acquire a handle in your real names in just a couple of days, at most. Which handle do you wish to use, by the way?"

"ZacharyBemba_33," Zachary replied.

"Oh," Emily said, lifting a brow. "Why the 33, though? Do you intend to wear shirt number-33 for the rest of your footballing career?"

"If possible, yes."

"That's quite strange," Emily replied. "I thought that footballers preferred the smaller jersey numbers. Why is your preference so different from the rest?"

"Shirt number-33 is rare," Zachary replied. "Not many famous players use it. So, I'll be able to get it easily anywhere in the world. That way, I'll have my unique brand of a name such as Zachary-33 in the future."

"I suggest we go with just ZacharyBemba," Emily said, smiling. "This is from purely a marketing point of view. Clubs usually make better jersey sales with the smaller shirt numbers. So, I'm pretty sure that any team will want you to wear the numbers from 1 to 18 as long as you're a star on their team. Even your current team, Rosenborg, may suggest that you change to a shirt number eight or six soon. That's if you continue performing well."

"Oh," Zachary said, leaning back into his seat. "Then, let's go with ZacharyBemba if that's the case."

"That's much better," Emily said, her face blossoming into a smile. "I'll send Twitter an email right away from my work account. We should be able to get you a verified handle within a few days, or even sooner."

"Okay, then," Zachary said, placing down his cup. "I'll now be moving to Lerkendal to put in two hours of training. I can't let myself relax since I will probably be starting in the next game. I have to say goodbye for now."

Emily smiled. "Then, I hope you enjoy your training. You'll still find me here after your training. In the meantime, I'll start on the procedures to have that Twitter account of yours verified. But please come back before 1:30 PM as the meeting starts at exactly 2:00 PM. We don't want to be late for our first endorsement contract signing."

"Don't worry," Zachary replied, smiling back at her. "I won't be late."

"Okay, then see you," Emily said, shooing him away from the table.

"See you in a bit," Zachary said before standing up and heading out of the cafe.

When out of the cafe, he pulled his cap's visor further down and pushed through the human traffic in Trondheim Square as he made his way towards Trondheim Torg, where he'd left his vehicle. He got there in a little less than five minutes—and without any dilly-dallying, got into his R8 GT and cruised to Lerkendal Idresspark like the wind. Only twelve minutes later, he parked his machine within one of the free spaces in the stadium's parking lot before heading towards one of the training grounds and beginning his physicals.

He hoped to enhance his speed so that he would gain more flexibility on the pitch. He was sure that he would acquire the ability to beat most defenders in the Tippeligaen if his agility stat could breakthrough to the S-grading. So, over the previous few days, while he'd been on the bench, he'd began going through a few agility enhancement drills.

It was just another day of his training regimen, and he didn't want to relax his practice just because he was about to sign a deal. So, he spent the next two hours going through a few fitness drills to enhance his sprinting speed, body control, and reaction speed.

Be it forward-running-high-knee drills, lateral-plyometric jumps, and shuttle runs—he went through them all with an intensity befitting of the exercising maniac he was. By the time Emily called him to remind him about the meeting, he was already sweating and out of breath. So, he quickly cleaned up and hurried back to Trondheim Square in his R8 GT to link up with Emily once again.

Chapter 167 - Preparations For The Game Against Molde

Zachary signed the endorsement contract with Audi that very afternoon. It didn't involve much fanfare. Susanne, Camilla, and Emily were the only other people present when he put pen on paper. Nonetheless, he was as happy as a punch after having managed to secure his first endorsement contract in both his lives.

Susanne had already promised that Audi would wire the six million NOK to his account within the week. He was about to start swimming in a pool of Norwegian Kroners.

That wasn't the only benefit he'd gotten out of the deal, though. Audi had also offered him the opportunity to select another car from their 2012 models once more.

At first, he had thought of requesting that Susanne offer him money in place of the vehicle since he already had the convenience of an R8 GT in Trondheim. But after a bit of deliberation, he decided to grab himself an Audi Q7-SUV and ship it back home to Lubumbashi.

The Q7-SUV was the perfect machine for the bumpy roads back in DR Congo. It had a Quattro four-wheel-drive system as standard and a turbocharged engine to power it through the trickiest situations one might encounter on the road. He would be able to use it himself whenever he traveled back home

or gift it to his grandma—if she would accept it. Thus, he contacted Ryan to help him with the shipping details right after picking it out from the dealership.

When he finished signing all the necessary papers for the car, he hurriedly said his goodbyes to the Audi team and left the Müller Bil dealership. Emily was still polishing the details of some of the addendums to the contract—so he left her there. Without dilly-dallying, he got into his R8 GT and drove to Lerkendal to recommence his training.

The match against Molde was Monday, three days later. He needed to remain in top shape and maintain a perfect match condition in order to perform at his best in the game. He couldn't afford to get distracted and miss another clear goal-scoring chance as he'd done during the match against Hønefoss. He was intent on using every second of free time for training.

Sunday, May 20, 2013

"Tomorrow, we'll be facing Molde," Coach Johansen said to the Rosenborg players seated in the tactics room at Lerkendal. "This is a game we must win. We can't afford to slip up and lose points when we're so close to returning to the top of the table. So, I need us to be solid and remain highly focused during the game tomorrow. I won't tolerate any amateur mistakes. Are we together, guys?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary and the rest of the Rosenborg players replied, more or less in unison.

As usual, Zachary was seated at the very back of the tactics room. He listened intently to the pre-match briefing since he didn't want to miss any details.

He had already noticed that the coach appeared to be more agitated than usual and knew better than to test his patience by losing focus right in the middle of the session. So, he remained on his best behavior throughout the session, like an A-grade student attending class.

Coach Johansen took a moment to sweep his gaze across the entire tactics room before continuing. "For the game against Molde, I won't accept anything other than a win," he said, his tone somber. "We're now a point behind Strømsgodset since they managed to pick up a draw from their game in hand against Brann. If we lose points in our fixture tomorrow and they happen to win theirs, the gap between our positions will have widened by a large margin. We can't afford to let that happen since our aim is to become champions."

"Over the past two games, we've developed a habit of relaxing and losing concentration at the start of the second half," he continued, his brows drawing together. "Against both Hønefoss and Sarpsborg-08, we conceded goals within the first twenty minutes after the break. We started the second halves of both games playing like real amateurs. We had no zeal, and we lacked focus. I was disappointed that you lost all your professionalism in just the span of a few minutes. We were merely lucky to win those two games."

"I know that I've talked about this a lot during training over the past few days," the coach continued, a half-smile outlining his face. "But I feel that I should remind you once more because I don't want to see the same thing happening in tomorrow's fixture. The laxity in our game approach at the start of the second half is caused by you, yourselves, prematurely thinking that you've won the game before hearing the final whistle."

"When you manage to score a goal or two during the first half, you become overconfident. You then relax and lose concentration. That's when we start conceding. That is the sort of habit that I wouldn't have expected to see in a professional team that is supposed to be the best in Norway." He paused, letting his intense gaze settle momentarily on some of the players in the tactics room.

"Tell me," he continued after a moment, starting to move slowly around the room. "Have you seen the players of teams like Barcelona or Bayern relaxing after scoring a few goals? Have you?"

"That's a big no," the coach immediately replied to his own question, shaking his head. "The likes of Messi, Iniesta, Franck Ribéry, and Arjen Robben will never relax before hearing the final whistle. They'll continue attacking like madmen even when they're four goals ahead. That's how players in big teams handle games, and we should learn from them. We shouldn't assume that the three points are already in the bag after netting only one or two goals. That's the way of amateurs, and I won't tolerate that kind of unprofessionalism on this squad. Are we together, guys?" He asked, his voice stern.

"Yes, coach," all the players replied in chorus.

"That's good," Coach Johansen said, nodding. "I'm glad that we're on the same page. But please heed my words. I'll regard any player that acts in such an unprofessional manner, especially during tomorrow's match, as an enemy of the entire team. And be warned: I never treat my enemies kindly. Is that clear?" He swept his gaze across the room once more.

"Yes, coach."

"Then, I'm glad," he said after a moment. "Now, I'll go ahead and announce the line-up for tomorrow's game." He stepped towards the flat screen at the front of the tactics room, where white shirts in a 4-2-3-1 formation had already appeared.

"I'll begin with the starting eleven for tomorrow," the coach announced. "Lund Hansen will be our goalkeeper, as usual. Mikael Dorsin, Tore Reginiussen, Stefan Strandberg, and Cristian Gamboa will handle our defense. Mike Jensen and Jonas Svensson will act as our two double-pivots or holding midfielders—just in front of our defensive line." He added, pointing to the two positions on the screen.

"Zachary Bemba will be our only attacking midfielder, just behind the center-forward for this game. Tarik Elyounoussi and Tobias Mikkelsen will play on the wings. And finally, Nicki Nielsen will play as our center-forward to complete our 4-2-3-1 formation."

"Moving on," Coach Johansen said after a moment. "On the bench, we'll have Daniel Rørlund, Per Verner Rønning, Jon Inge Høiland, Ole Selnaes, Mix Diskerud, Borek Dockal, and John Chibuike. That's it for the starting squad for tomorrow."

"Do you have any questions regarding the line-up?" The coach asked, sweeping his gaze across the room.

None of the players dared to question the coach's final line-up. They all remained silent, waiting for the coach to continue. Zachary, on his part, was very excited since he'd managed to make Coach Johansen's starting eleven once again. He wished the hours could go by faster so he could play the game he loved so much once more.

Chapter 168 - Pre-Match Excitement

Zachary felt at ease as he steered his R8 GT through the streets of Trondheim towards Lerkendal Stadion the following afternoon. He was on his way from his apartment in Stjerdalsveien to partake in the pre-

match conditioning routine for the game between Rosenborg and Molde scheduled for later that evening.

A faint smile outlined his face, softening his features as he savored the feeling of the fresh breeze circulating through the car from the outside. It blew against his face, bringing with it the freshness of late autumn. He felt like he was living in a dream.

Nice car, steady income, and professional football in Europe—he already had it all despite being only eighteen. He was in a good mood that day—a sentiment compounded by finally being able to start another home game in Rosenborg's colors.

Everything about him projected a relaxed air. His head swayed in sync to the beat of the Gym Class Heroes' hit song—the fighter, playing on the five-speaker stereo system of his R8 GT. He looked more like a tourist on a countryside vacation rather than a player heading for one of his team's toughest fixtures of the season. He was a player completely unburdened from pre-match pressure due to the confidence born of his skill and growing experience at the professional stage in Europe.

Zachary cast a glance at the digital clock on the dashboard of his car and noticed it was already 2:57 PM. Only a little over three hours were remaining to the kick-off of the game. So, he stepped on the accelerator and dashed through the streets to Lerkendal, only making sure to maintain a velocity slightly below the speed limit. After a few minutes, he slowed down again as he joined the lane leading straight to the gates of Lerkendal Stadion.

He was surprised to find that the passionate fans had already started flooding towards the stadium in droves. The majority of them were in Rosenborg's traditional white and black colors. They sang and chanted as they slowly made their way towards the gate under the guidance of security personnel. The excitement that preceded the game between Molde and Rosenborg was at levels Zachary had never experienced during Rosenborg's prior fixtures.

One of the security guys soon noticed his vehicle and waved him over, perhaps intending to guide him into a lane reserved for players. But that was a mistake on the security guy's part. The special treatment made the fans aware that the car of a Rosenborg player was passing by.

The passionate crowd wasted no time swarming around his vehicle. They even tried to peer through the tinted windows to see who was inside the R8 GT. What followed was the sort of chaos no one had expected before the stadium's gate as the supporters struggled to inch closer to the vehicle.

The stadium security personnel tried their best to clear the way for Zachary—but the fans were already agitated and didn't relent in the slightest. Since they were within arm's reach distance of one of their stars, they all hoped to get an autograph, at the very least, before they could free the vehicle.

Zachary liked their enthusiasm and didn't want to disappoint them. He could see that they were the most dedicated and hard-core of fans—the kind that would cheer Rosenberg to victory during the toughest fixtures. But after stealing a glance at the digital clock on the car's dashboard and noticing that it was already 3:15 PM, he resisted the urge to move out and greet them.

He needed to get to the pitch a.s.a.p. and start his pre-match conditioning with the rest of his teammates. So, he sat quietly in his vehicle with all the doors locked and waited for the police and stadium security personnel to clear away the fans.

He didn't have to wait long, though. In about five minutes, they cleared a narrow path for him through the sea of fans, all the way to the stadium's gate.

Zachary didn't waste any time. He immediately stepped on the accelerator and guided the vehicle to the gates of Lerkendal at moderate speed. Under the guidance of the security personnel, he managed to arrive at the parking lot reserved for players in only a minute.

He let out a breath of pent-up air at managing to make it to the stadium before 3:30 PM—the scheduled time for the start of the pre-match conditioning session.

But just after alighting from his vehicle, one of the security guys, who'd first noticed his car before the gates, approached him. He was a huge guy and seemed more like a wrestler rather than the usual security officer.

"Hello, Zachary," he greeted, smiling.

"Hello," Zachary replied, nodding at him.

"You really made our job quite difficult out there," the security guy said, his tone formal. "The lane you just used to enter the stadium is specifically for the fans on match days. So, you being there is not a wise

decision right before a match. The fans could have gone out of control and possibly injured you during the resulting chaos."

"Oh," Zachary said, his eyes widening. "Sorry about that. I didn't know that players weren't supposed to use that lane. I've been using it to enter the stadium daily."

"I understand," the security guy said, smiling. "But if you arrive a few hours to the start of the match like today next time, use the other gate below. That would make our work easier."

"Okay, I'll do that," Zachary replied, nodding. "Thank you for reminding me. But now, I've got to get to the pitch as soon as possible. Otherwise, the coach will roast me alive." He added before turning around and starting to pick his gym bag from the passenger seat.

"One more thing," the security guy said after a few moments.

"Yes," Zachary replied, turning around to face him once again. "Is there anything else?"

The big fellow first looked left and right, then front and back, before leaning forward—towards Zachary. "Is there a possibility that you can take a selfie with me?" He whispered, his tone imploring. "It'll make my young son happy since he's a huge fan of yours. He's already in the stands, eager to watch your match today."

"Oh," Zachary said, first stealing a glance at his watch. "Okay. But please hurry. I'm about to run late for the pre-match dynamic session."

"Thank you," the security guy said excitedly. He hurriedly fished out his phone, inched closer to Zachary, and then snapped a selfie with him in a matter of seconds. He then took a look around their surroundings before mouthing another thank you to Zachary and stepping away. It seemed he didn't want his colleagues to notice his actions.

Since Zachary was in a hurry, he put the security guy's antics at the back of his mind. He threw his gym bag over a shoulder and walked further into the stadium with all the haste he could muster.

A few moments later, he arrived in the locker room and quickly changed into the all-black warming-up outfit for the day. Without wasting any time, he joined his teammates on the pitch for a light exercise session.

He spent the next hour going through a dynamic routine of leg lifting, jogging, and stretching with the other Rosenborg players that had managed to make Coach Johansen's squad.

He went through all the exercises with the highest concentration he could muster since he wanted to warm up his muscles adequately. He didn't want to perform below his best or, worse, get injured just because he hadn't focused during the pre-match dynamic session.

About an hour later, at around 4:30 PM, the Molde players, too, arrived on the pitch in their light blue training kits. Zachary observed them for a while as he continued going through his stretching routine. They were an intimidating bunch and exuded the confidence characteristic of the reigning Tippeligaen champions.

Of course, the passionate home fans were not impressed and started booing them right away. However, the traveling Molde fans also rose to the occasion and began pitting their cheering against the booing. Together, the two groups formed a chaotic, noisy harmony that caused the entire stadium to vibrate like it was experiencing an earthquake.

Zachary was at a loss for words after feeling the energy exuded by the supporters. But he didn't let all the cheering distract him. He remained focused, going through the dynamic warm-up until Rolf Aas, the fitness coach, called for a halt to the session.

By then, the gigantic clock on the stadium's big screen was already pointing to 5:05 PM, indicating that only fifty-five minutes were remaining to kick-off. Zachary trailed after his teammates as they left the pitch to prepare for the start of the game. But just as he was about to enter the tunnel, he noticed Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, the coach of Molde, standing on the sidelines and supervising the warm-up session of his players.

Zachary felt a stroke of excitement ignite within him as he was about to face a coach that would come to manage one of the best clubs in the world in only a few years. He couldn't help but wonder how his skills would fare against the defensive tactics developed by such a manager.

Nonetheless, he didn't halt his trek out of the pitch for the meager purpose of taking a look at the future Manchester United manager. Instead, he forced himself to calm down and continued towards the tunnel to prepare for kick-off.

Chapter 169 - Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer In Action

When the Molde players concluded their pre-match dynamic warm-up session, they, too, headed back to the dressing room to prepare for kick-off. Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer did not give his players even a minute to dress before starting to go through the game plan for the umpteenth time that week.

"Listen up, lads," he said, his brows drawing together. "If we hope to end our spell of poor performances this season, we need to start with this game. If we manage to beat a team like Rosenborg, we'll build up an unstoppable momentum. We'll acquire the sort of confidence that can destroy our remaining opponents throughout the season."

"I know that we're at the bottom of the table. Most of you have started losing a bit of your confidence because of that. But, please don't give up and play this game as if your life depends on it."

"Play smart," the Molde coach continued, his tone somber. "And please remain focused and keep your heads in the game for the entire 90 minutes. If you do that, I can assure you, lads, that we'll emerge victorious with three points from this fixture. Are we on the same page, lads?"

"Yes, coach."

Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer nodded. "Moving on: Olav, Even, Martin, and Kristoffer, I want you to stay compact in defense throughout the entire game. That Nicki Nielsen has been on form for the past few games—so please mark him tightly and don't allow him even an inch of space when he's near our goal. I do not want to see us conceding five goals once again, even if it's against a team such as Rosenborg."

"Magnus and Magne," he continued after a moment, his voice growing spirited. "You two are our double-pivots in this game. You're the holding midfielders and the people who're supposed to shield our defense from their creative midfield. So, I want you to create a pressing zone around that Zachary Bemba to reduce his impact on the game."

"Hmmm..."

A wave of murmurs washed across the visitor's dressing room as soon as the coach announced the plan to seal Zachary. It seemed the Molde players didn't see the need to tight mark an 18-year player fresh out of the academy.

"Quiet," Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer yelled, clapping his hands for emphasis.

All the Molde players shut up and switched to the convenient poker face mode as they waited for the coach to continue.

"I know what you might all be thinking," the coach said, shaking his head. "Most of you believe that Zachary Bemba is just another budding teenage player who only got lucky and managed to score in a few of his matches. But let me tell you this: He's the kind who'll punish us if we make any mistakes in our defensive third."

"I have watched some of his past performances and noticed that he almost has no weaknesses in midfield. He's very clinical and quite creative with the ball, especially in the final third. That's one of the reasons he has managed to enter Rosenborg's starting line-up at only eighteen. He has even scored five goals within a little over a week after making his debut."

"And don't get me started on those free-kicks of his," the coach continued, starting to move around the visitor's dressing room. "If we concede a set piece near our box, we're goners. That is for sure, considering how efficient he's on set-pieces. Are you guys aware of that?"

All the players remained silent, waiting for the coach to continue. They were all at their best behavior since the coach was agitated after their 5:1 loss to FK Haugesund the previous Thursday.

Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer swept his gaze across the room before continuing. "Please don't get fooled by his young age and grow lax while marking him. That would be a mistake that would end up costing us dearly. You should, instead, treat him like the most dangerous of opponents."

"We can't let such a dangerous player get his way with us at any point in the match. So, my advice to you lads is to destabilize him before he settles into the game. Make it hard for him to receive or

distribute the ball by pinching and narrowing down the spaces around him. That should start right from the very first minute. And however hard it may be, please try to avoid conceding unnecessary free-kicks in our final third. We don't want to gift him any goals and fuel his confidence. Are we on the same page?"

"Yes, coach."

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer nodded. "It'll be easy for us to kill Rosenborg's momentum if we manage to destabilize their midfield. So, you also have to apply pressure on their holding midfielders. Our forward players and wingers will be responsible for the counter-pressing strategy. Please do your best to run at both their double-pivots and defenders when they're on the ball. That way, we'll be able to break Rosenborg's spells of possessions and hit them on the counter. Any questions?"

"Coach," Jo Inge Berget, a midfielder with a huge beard, said, raising his arm.

"Yes, Jo," Coach Solskjaer said, pointing towards him.

"Mine is not a question but more of a suggestion," the bearded fellow said.

"Suggestions at this time, only twenty minutes to kick-off, Jo," Coach Solskjaer exclaimed, shaking his head.

"This won't affect the game plan," Jo chipped in. "I'm only suggesting that you let me mark that Zachary Bemba. Instead of using three of our players to make pressing zones around his position, why not let me guard him. I'll not allow him even an inch of space. He will not manage to settle down and get any peace of mind on the field of play if I keep on watching him like a hawk throughout the entire match."

"What about your attacking responsibilities?" Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer queried, raising a brow.

"Hoseth is there," Jo replied, grinning.

Solskjaer turned towards Magne Hoseth, the captain of Molde FK, seated at the other end of the dressing room. "Are you up for this?" He asked.

"Yes, of course," Hoseth replied, a soft smile outlining his face. "Since Rosenborg has changed its formation to using one attacking midfielder and wing play, we can target Zachary and reap some benefits. If we can properly seal him, we'll surely kill off Rosenborg's momentum and dictate the tempo. And the best man for the job is either me or Jo."

Coach Solskjaer nodded, caressing his chin as if he was deep in thought. "Okay, you can go ahead with that plan since it almost doesn't have any adverse effect on our entire game plan," he said after a moment. "Jo, you'll be responsible for marking Zachary Bemba. But remain on guard and ready to switch back to attacking midfield at a moment's notice. Okay?"

"Yes, coach," Jo replied, grinning. "I'll do that. Thank you for putting your trust in me."

Coach Solskjaer nodded. "That's great, then," he said, stealing a glance at his watch. "It's almost time. So, let's go out there and perform at our best. Remember, we defend as a team and attack as a team. Okay?"

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

"Then let's go," the coach said once more before leading his players out of the dressing room. It was finally time for the match between Rosenborg and Molde to commence.

Chapter 170 - A Lightning Fast Counter-Press

Under the fire of the setting sun, Zachary stood in his position outside the center circle, eagerly awaiting the referee's whistle to kick off the match. He was already in a highly focused state as the longing to kick the ball had already soaked right through his bones. Remaining on the bench for the previous two fixtures had birthed a burning hunger and desire for the game.

As the kick-off time drew closer, his anticipation grew until he could feel the muscles in his legs tingling with excitement. He had long developed an intense urge to wage war with the ball and defeat whoever stood in his way.

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The referee finally gave the go-ahead at 6:00 PM sharp. The match started immediately with Molde's kick-off. Daniel Chima Chukwu, Molde's center forward, immediately kicked the ball back to his teammates in the midfield.

Nicki Nielsen, Rosenborg's center forward, chased after the ball as if his life was on the line, trying to gain possession as quickly as possible. However, Magne Hoseth, Molde's captain and defensive midfielder, controlled the ball with ease and passed it on to Jo Inge Berget before he could make it there.

Zachary sprang into action as soon as he noticed that Jo Inge Berget, Molde's attacking midfielder, was about to receive the ball. Heart thumping fast, he pushed forward like the wind, stepping past the centerline—towards the attacking midfielder at his fastest speed. He intended to follow Coach Johansen's strategy to the letter—by helping his team win possession as soon as possible using counter-pressing tactics.

Jo Inge Berget didn't panic when he noticed Zachary quickly approaching. He even managed to look up briefly to flash Zachary a toothy grin before flicking the ball towards Magnus Eikrem, the other Molde midfielder.

Zachary outright ignored Jo's antics and continued tracking after the ball. His legs pumping like the pistons of an Audi R8 GT, he changed directions immediately—and started bolting towards Magnus Eikrem even before he could receive Jo's pass.

With his high game intelligence, he'd already deduced that he would make it to the midfielder's position before he could manage to control the ball properly. He was intent on winning possession for Rosenborg there and then.

"L?p mot ballen..."

"Skjerm ballen med kroppen..."

Zachary seemed to hear some of the Molde players yelling in Norwegian as he raced towards Magnus. But he ignored them and continued rushing towards the direction the ball was heading like a bullet train

on the rails. The desire to win back possession had flickered to life within him, growing into a burning hot fighting spirit that fueled his sprint.

Without any surprise, Zachary made it to Magnus' position in a couple of seconds, just as the defensive midfielder was pushing out a leg to receive the pass from Jo Inge Berget.

Zachary didn't allow the midfielder even a second to bring the ball under control. With his eyes locked on the ball, like a hawk tracking prey, he slid in wholesale to sweep it with a sliding tackle, sending Magnus tumbling to the ground in the process.

"Aaahhh, foul, foul..." Zachary heard Magnus yelling from the ground. But he didn't even cast a single glance towards the Molde defensive midfielder. He was sure he hadn't incurred a foul since he'd caught the ball before sweeping the midfielder off his feet.

So, he picked himself up from the ground with the agility of a cat that had sensed some catnip. Without any delay, he brought the ball under control with a deft touch as he swept his gaze across the pitch, looking for suitable passing options. Since he'd managed to win back possession, he intended to make it count before the Molde players could settle down into the away game's hostile atmosphere.

In a flash, he managed to pick up the position of Nicki Nielsen, who'd long opened himself up, just on the border of the final third, seemingly anticipating a pass from him.

So, Zachary flicked the ball onto his left foot, skipping past a sliding tackle to create a yard of space for himself. Without any dilly-dallying, he dug his boot under the ball, chipping it over the zone of intense rival pressure—towards the Rosenborg number-9.

Zachary's cheeky pass managed to catch the Molde players unawares, giving Nicki Nielsen enough time to control the ball in the final third. With skillful handling befitting the professional center-forward he was, Nicki chested it to the ground and flicked it towards the right flank where Tobias Mikkelsen was lurking.

Tobias controlled it mid-sprint and fed it past Martin Linnes, the Molde left-back, trying to beat him for pace. The Rosenborg right-winger raced after the ball, possibly intending to cut into the pitch and deliver a cross into the box.

But Martin Linnes managed to turn around and retrace his steps quickly enough to slide in and halt Tobias' run before he could penetrate further into Molde's defensive third.

The referee immediately blew the whistle and awarded a free kick to Rosenborg, close to the touchline on the right flank.

"I got the ball," Zachary heard Martin Linnes trying to argue his innocence. "That was clearly not a foul," the Molde left-back argued.

"No, you didn't even make any contact with the ball," the referee replied, showing the Molde left-back a yellow card. "I was right behind you. You caught Tobias on the shin with a high boot instead. That can't go unpunished. You should understand that."

A few more Molde players also arrived at the scene and tried to argue against the referee's decision. But the referee was having none of their nonsense and shooed them away without considering their arguments.

Zachary stayed away from the chaos. He instead picked up the ball to ready himself for the free kick. He couldn't help but wonder why professional players were wasting time disputing a free kick that was very far away from their goal. Instead of protesting the referee's decision, they were better off organizing their defense to ensure that it was in good shape before the set-piece.

[Is their defense in proper shape before the set piece?] Zachary mused, a light bulb going on in his head. He hurriedly looked around the pitch and noticed that most Molde players were still out of position. They were still unprepared to defend against the free-kick.

Zachary could already smell an opportunity as he turned his gaze towards the edge of Molde's box, where Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg number-9, was lurking. He narrowed his eyes slightly as he made eye contact with the forward from over twenty-five yards away. In that moment of locking gazes, they managed to understand each other's intent immediately—without a need for words.

So, Zachary sprung into action right away. While trying his best to remain calm and composed, he swept his gaze around the pitch once more to assess the game situation. He immediately noticed that the linesman was attentively watching the position of the free-kick. On the other hand, the Molde players were yet to shape up properly.

So, he hurriedly placed the ball on the ground before raising his leg and unleashing a grounded through-pass towards just the inside of Molde's 18-yard box.

Nicki Nielsen went into action right away on noticing Zachary taking the lightning-fast free-kick. He stepped away from Even Hovland, the Molde center-back, and met the incoming ball on a half-volley with his right boot. He fired home from just inside the 18-yard box and managed to beat the keeper and score Rosenborg's 1st goal for the day in the fourth minute after kick-off.

Zachary first stole a glance at the linesman to see whether the goal was valid or not. A moment later, his smile blossomed into a toothy grin as the linesman's flag stayed down. Even the referee was already pointing to the center spot, indicating that the goal would count. So, he joined Nicki in his celebration as a wave of mad cheering washed over the stands of Lerkendal Stadion.