

## **Greatest 20**

### **Chapter 20 - First Match In Europe I**

Zachary left the Death Valley right after Coach Johansen had finished naming the line-ups for the game. A weight had been lifted from his shoulders when the coach mentioned his name as part of the team. He walked taller. His stride was lighter, more carefree.

He was looking forward to the game against Viking FK.

The cold evening gave him a reason to rush back home—to his new apartment and enjoy the warmth of the heating system in his room. He quickened his step and reached Moholt within less than fifteen minutes.

"You're back." Kasongo flashed him a smile when he entered the small kitchen, also serving as their living room. Zachary noticed that he'd just placed some French fries and chicken breasts in the oven. The boy was someone who enjoyed his chicken. That was a conclusion made by Zachary after spending the past few days with him.

"How was it?" He asked, looking at Zachary expectantly.

Zachary grinned and said: "What do you think? I'm on the team."

Kasongo sighed. "Man, you're a lucky bastard. You're already going to play a match in Europe, whereas I'm stuck with physicals at the gym, day in day out."

"Just cut down on your meat consumption," Zachary advised. "You wouldn't need the physicals if you had no excess fat."

"Who's says that chicken increases fat? It's just because of my height that I've issues with my body fat percentage." Kasongo argued.

"Are you in the starting eleven?" He asked.

"I don't know yet. The coaches will name the starting team players tomorrow before the match. But I'll most likely not be starting." Zachary replied.

"That's understandable. You're a newbie on the team." Kasongo intoned. "Is the match going to be played in the main Lerkendal Stadium?" He asked.

"Yes," Zachary replied. The Lerkendal Idrettspark, owned by Rosenborg, consisted of the main stadium and three training pitches. They were well managed and strictly controlled by the club's management. Their under-19 game against Viking Stavanger would take place in the main stadium.

"If you play, I will be there to cheer you on. Go and showcase the spirit of African football." Kasongo smiled. He then focused on cutting onions in preparations for their dinner. The two had resolved to cook in turns during their stay together in Trondheim. That day was Kasongo's turn.

Zachary didn't talk at length with Kasongo that night. He washed up, ate dinner, and headed back to his room to sleep by 9:00 PM. He was tired mentally and physically. The training had emptied his energy reserves.

However, he was glad that he'd taken another step towards achieving his dream of becoming a pro soccer player on the international stage.

Zachary felt good as he crawled beneath the sheets. He slept well that night, dreaming of himself lying in a bed of dollars.

The day of the match finally arrived.

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The Nordmenn loved their soccer, or rather, their football teams. The people of Trondheim were no exception. Rumors about Rosenborg's under-19 match against Viking Stavanger had spread fast in the small city of Trondheim over the previous few days. They attracted a large number of fans that had arrived at the stadium two hours before the start of the match.

By 2:30 PM, the stands behind one of the goalposts were already fully occupied. That was the section of the stadium that often housed the staunch fans—also members of Rosenberg's supporter club during matches.

Kasongo could feel the adrenaline from the pitch to the stands and flowing right around the stadium. It was the sort of tension mixed with excitement that should not have occurred for a simple under-19 match. He was glad that he'd tagged along with a group of new friends to the stadium. And this was a particularly overzealous group of fans.

He looked expectantly towards his friend, Zachary. He was among the Rosenberg under-19s warming-up between the goalposts that stood sentry at either end of the perfect pitch. He looked the part of a real pro in the black Rosenberg training kit.

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For Zachary, it was the perfect day with the ideal conditions in which to play his first match in Europe. The weather was gorgeous that afternoon. Blue skies, no wind, ambient temperature—it was more like an absence of weather. The usual autumn coldness was absent that Tuesday.

Lerkendal Stadium was millions of perfect grass strands as eager for the start of play as the fans who had already brought the stadium to light. Zachary could hear their loud cheers fueling his eagerness to perform. But at the same time, he was a bit overwhelmed by the atmosphere. It had been a long time since he last played in front of a crowd.

Zachary stretched his legs and watched the Viking FK players march into the other half of the pitch. Their light grey-training kits seemed somewhat dull to Zachary.

As they took the field in perfect formation, a slow, steady booing filled the air. The Rosenberg home fans were already giving the Viking team hell even before the match started. Although the stadium was only a quarter full, the cheers of the fans were deafening.

"All players stop the warm-up exercises and head to the dressing room..." The assistant coach, Bjørn Peters, yelled as he moved around the half of the pitch occupied by the Rosenberg team.

"Zach! Zach!"

As Zachary jogged towards the dressing room, he heard someone calling out his name from one of the emptier stands. He looked up only to find Kristin, Mr. Stein, and another old gentleman sitting just beside the stadium tunnel entrance.

"We are rooting for you," Kristin yelled when he cast his sight towards the trio.

"Thank you." Zachary mouthed the words. He waved to his acquaintances before moving on towards the dressing room.

"You know Kristin Stein?" A voice sounded from behind him once he stepped into the tunnel.

Zachary turned around and noticed that the substitute goalkeeper had arrived behind him at some point. He was Grant Anderson, a tall Caucasian with blue eyes and a chiseled jaw. The combination of his blonde hair, tied into a ponytail, and booming voice made him seem intimidating.

"Yes," Zachary replied. "But just casually," he emphasized.

Grant observed him with narrowed, rigid, and cold eyes before saying: "I hope what you say is true. Otherwise. Hmmm." He harrumphed before continuing to the dressing room.

"Is old Grant giving you a hard time?" Ole Seln's inquired. He'd come up to him right after the goalkeeper left.

"Nope. He was just saying hi," Zachary replied honestly. He had not taken Grant's words seriously. Thoughts about the match were what occupied his mind at that moment. He wouldn't bother about the ravings of a teenager before his first game.

"That's great." Ole patted the back of his shoulder. "Keep your head in the game. I'm sure the coach will give you an opportunity today." He gave Zachary a thumbs up before continuing to the dressing room.

Zachary found the dressing room in a state of chaos. Hoots, hollers, and laughter sounded back and forth through the air, ricocheting off the lockers like metal bullets. Most of the players were slowly putting on their white t-shirts and black shorts. That was the official home jersey of team Rosenborg.

"Zach," Mushaga, the only other black fellow in the room, called out to him after seeing Zachary standing by the entrance. He was the player with an afro haircut. The coach had named him as one of the forwards for the game.

"Your jersey is there," he said, pointing to one of the hooks beside a locker. He seemed like a friendly person to Zachary.

"Thank you," Zachary said before picking up the jersey. Since Zachary was not yet officially on the team, he received a numberless jersey for that match.

Coach Johansen and his assistant soon came in. The room fell into silence. The Rosenborg under-19s, dressed in their full jerseys, turned their focus on to the coach.

"We'll play the 4:5:1 formation..." He started explaining the tactics right away while inscribing the squad on the whiteboard fixed to the wall.

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Goalkeeper; Even Barli.

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The center-backs; Simen Wangberg, Espen Schmitz.

The right-back; Ulrik Balstad. Left-back; Christoffer Aasbak.

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Central-midfielders (Defensive); Ole Selnø, Fredrik Midtsjø.

Central-midfielder (Attacking); Gjermund Asen.

Right-wingers; Jonas Svensson. Left-winger; Markus Henriksen.

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Forward; Mushaga Bakenga.

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In a few minutes, the coach expounded on the formation and tactics for the first half. The team would play with four defenders, five midfielders, and a single forward. Coach Johansen intended to shut down every passing opportunity of the opposition. Thus, the players would attack and defend together like a pack of wolves.

Zachary was left on the bench together with Grant, Emil, and Jonas. The other three players seemed unhappy about it. However, Zachary was different. It was his first game with the club. He wasn't expecting to be in the starting line-up for the game in the first place.

With his mind at ease, Zachary left the dressing room and headed to the technical area to watch the start of the game. He had to analyze every moment of play to search for opportunities he could exploit when he joined the game as a substitute.

The two teams didn't keep the fans waiting for long.

At exactly 3:45 PM of that Tuesday, two armies of eleven walked onto the green to pitch war in the way of civilized societies.

The match between Rosenborg U19 versus Viking U19 was finally starting.