

## **Greatest 23**

### **Chapter 23 - First Match In Europe IV**

As the game progressed, it became apparent to Kristin that Yann-Erik was losing his influence in the game. His every run into Rosenborg's half was interrupted by Zachary. The African boy was doing a good job even in the defensive role of the midfield.

Zachary didn't just mark the winger tightly and shadow his every move like what Landu-Landu was doing to Ole. He would move quickly into position when Rosenborg lost the ball and place himself between Yannick and his team's goal. When the winger ran ahead of him, he would use a sliding tackle to sweep away the ball.

His free reign in the midfield allowed him to help both wings when the Viking under-19s were attacking. The game reverted to a stalemate in the midfield after he stopped the runs of the agile winger.

Rosenborg played well with their wingers moving forward and flanking Mushaga, the formerly lone central striker. The two wingers were using their speed on the wings before cutting in towards the goal. They managed to threaten the Viking goal several times but were unable to seal the deal and score.

The 4-3-3 formation was working out well for the Troll Kids of Lerkendal.

But what worried Kristin the most was the score. The Rosenborg under-19s were still a goal down, yet the clock hand was already approaching the 80th minute.

If Rosenborg didn't score in the next few minutes, they would lose the game. That wouldn't look good on Zachary's CV and might affect his confidence.

"Your boy seems to be good at defending." She heard Coach Eggen say. "He has very sharp instincts and is reading the young winger like a history book. He would make a good center-back."

Mr. Stein sighed before saying: "That's not why I brought him to Rosenborg. He has something else—even much better?"

"Really?" Coach Eggen seemed surprised.

"Yes." Mr. Stein nodded. "He hasn't even displayed a quarter of his abilities. Coach Johansen is just using him in a position that doesn't suit him."

"What is his natural position?"

"The midfield," Mr. Stein replied. "But he should be in the attacking role rather than the defense. His passing abilities are simply phenomenal. He might even be better than Ole."

"It has been long since I heard you rate a player that highly." Coach Eggen smiled. "Now my interest is piqued," he added before returning his focus on the game.

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As the match progressed, a chant grew from the stands behind Rosenberg's goalposts until it was a full-blown war song intended to fuel the performance of the Rosenberg players.

"Ohh. Shalalalalala..., oh Rosenberg..." The fans sang as they jumped and danced to the rhythm defined by the clapping of their hands.

Zachary, on the pitch, was impressed by the passion of the Nordmenn in support of their team. The cheers of the fans excited his zeal to perform at his best and win the game.

He looked around and started observing the entire width of the pitch. The Viking keeper was about to take a goal-kick. The ball had just gone out after another failed attempt at goal by Rosenberg. The forwards of the Troll Kids had already missed more than a dozen clear chances to score.

The Viking goalkeeper kicked the ball high and sent it deep into Rosenberg's half. One of the center-backs of Rosenberg headed it back high into the midfield—towards Zachary's position.

He was the only one with any space to receive the ball since the Viking under-19s were marking all the other midfielders tightly. It seemed they had taken him for a mere defender with no ability to attack and left him unmarked.

Zachary shot forward and leaped up towards the incoming ball. He controlled it with his chest as a shiver erupted through his body. His feet hit the ground—and he took off towards the other half of the pitch.

He'd just noticed a clear white line running from his position through the pitch—towards the opponent's box. His A+ game-intelligence attributes (spatial-awareness and risk assessment) had just made him aware of a safe route to run with the ball. Zachary was determined to exploit the gap left by the Viking players in between the midfield.

Sweat poured down his face as his heart pounded in his chest. His lungs screamed for air as his feet flew across the green towards the box of the Viking team.

Two defenders in blue jerseys sprang in front of him. Zachary slowed down his pace a little before faking to the left but then accelerating and moving to the right with the ball remaining close to his feet. His dribbling was not anything fancy, just an occasional change of pace in his long strides allowing him to weave past the defenders. Zachary simply slowed down, getting the defenders to relax a second, then took off like the wind.

He managed to wriggle past the two defenders and continue towards the goal, shrugging off one chasing player before getting past two incoming sliding challenges.

Zachary unexpectedly found himself stepping into the 18-yard box with only one defender between him and the goalkeeper. A deft touch took him around the defender before he fired the ball in from an acute angle. He had nothing else in his vision but the goal.

However, he noticed the fingertips of the keeper brushing the ball and shoving it a little higher off its intended path. His heart leaped into his throat as he regretted not going for a carpet shot instead of a looped ball.

[Please go in.] He prayed inwardly.

However, his mood sank when he saw the ball hit the crossbar and rebound back into the pitch.

By reflex, Zachary turned around to chase it.

Then out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mushaga pounce on the loose ball near the penalty spot—and fire off a low shot into the middle of the empty net. Goal. 1:1.

The Rosenborg under-19s had managed to equalize in the 82nd minute.