

Greatest 27

Chapter 27 - Life At The Academy I

A year had passed already, almost in a blur as Zachary underwent professional soccer training at the NF Academy.

He had managed to secure a full scholarship from the academy after the match against the Viking FK under-19s. Zachary was then an officially registered sports scholarship student in Norway.

His day usually started with physical fitness training each day, involving gym-work and running exercises, from 6 AM to 9 AM. He would then spend five hours at Trøndelag International School, going through his upper secondary education classes to maintain his sports scholarship. Luckily, the school days were only on weekdays, from 10 AM to 3 PM, and didn't tire him out.

Immediately after his classes, he would practice the agility and stamina drills in the NF training grounds near Moholt before attending the technical and tactical soccer classes conducted by the coaching staff on-field or in one of the auditoriums of the academy.

Zachary was usually as tired as a dog when he ended his day at 8 PM and headed back to his apartment to rest for the night.

His day-to-day timetable was jam-packed except for the small breaks at lunch and dinner or when he was sleeping. Zachary had been made aware of how gruesome a task it was to maintain a strict daily routine over a long time. He had almost failed the system mission during the harsh winter months of December and January.

Due to the extreme coldness, Zachary had lacked the motivation and zeal to wake up from bed and head to the gym or go jogging in those months. He only persevered due to the C-grade Physical Conditioning Elixir.

The elixir was beyond marvelous. With just a dose, Zachary would have enough energy to go through the physical training routines set-up by the system every week.

His weekly tasks often involved weight training—mostly with dumbbells, forward-backward sprints, lateral-band walks, medicine ball push-ups, among other routines. Occasionally, when he trained with either a pair of dumbbells or going through the fitness drills, he would feel his muscles strengthening and becoming more flexible. But most of the time, Zachary felt like he was only tiring himself out.

Nonetheless, he didn't stop his training. The significance of the progressive overload training designed by the system was cumulative—but not always obvious. He had maintained a strict schedule of completing all the system tasks to better himself as a professional sportsman. His goal was to become one of the best in his age group—by the time he debuted for Rosenborg.

On that day, Zachary was going through a routine of physical conditioning to complete the system mission when Coach Boyd Johansen abruptly barged in, surprising all the under-17s that were busy exercising.

"I can't believe that some of you haven't even mastered the basic dumbbell bench step-up exercise," Coach Boyd Johansen grumbled. He pulled at his overgrown red beard in frustration as he walked around the gym, supervising some of the under-17 group of players, exercising with the 25kg-dumbbells.

"The physical fitness coaches have already explained these exercises again and again over the past year," he continued. "You should by now be performing them by reflex. But I see several good-for-nothings who can't even complete a set of bench step-ups!" The coach exclaimed, shaking his head.

"Here comes the cranky old man," Paul Otterson, running on a treadmill close to Zachary, mumbled. "I wonder what he's doing here at this time."

"Shhhhhh..." Kasongo, who was going through a dumbbell squat-and-press routine, sashed him. "Be careful. He may hear you. What awaits you then would be expulsion from the academy."

"Paul. You'll face dire consequences once you keep running your mouth like that." Kendrick Otterson, jumping a rope nearby, emphasized. His long brown hair lay like a second skin over his flushed cheeks—and he looked as if he was just—caught in a sudden storm. He wore the sweat from exercising the same way a hero wears rain.

Paul snorted at his brother. "Stop treating me like a kid. I know what I'm doing. He is busy with those other lazy bums and can't hear us."

"Suit yourself." Kendrick scowled at Paul angrily. "The good thing is that I already warned you multiple times. If the coach cuts you from the program, don't run back home crying." He harrumphed, continuing his rope skipping.

Zachary didn't break his exercising routine to listen to his flat-mates' bickering or his coach's grumbling. He was already used to that over the past year spent with them.

He continued his high-intensity interval training on one of the treadmills in the gym. The sweat cooled his skin and brought a deeper hue to his green jersey, yet that is how he knew everything would work out, that he would remain in good shape and proud of himself as an athlete.

"Zach!" Paul called out as he hopped off his exercising machine and approached Zachary's treadmill. "What are the sprinting speeds and resting intervals for the exercise you are doing?"

"I first set the treadmill at a speed of 2 mph for 5 minutes to warm up," Zachary answered without pausing his jog on the machine. "I then adjusted it to the highest speed at 9 to 10 mph for 70 seconds and later reduced to 3 to 4 mph for 30 seconds. I'll have to repeat the same routine 20 times to complete my training for today." He stammered as he gasped for breath.

"Zach! Aren't you overtaxing your body?" Paul asked, his brows creased. "You shouldn't be running at such peak speeds for more than 30 seconds. Will you be able to train in the evening?"

"Paul!" Kasongo cut in. "Man, leave him alone. The other day, he sprinted from Moholt to Lerkendal in eight minutes. That means he was covering roughly 400m per minute. Do you think that the simple running on a treadmill will faze him?"

"F**k!" Paul exclaimed. "This guy is a monster with such stamina. I'm just wondering why the coaches are not selecting him for the under-17 matches. FIFA wouldn't care whether he played for the academy. He's not part of Rosenborg and just a student studying in Norway." Paul whispered, moving closer to Kasongo. "Do you know why?"

"He doesn't say why!" Kasongo replied as he put down his dumbbells. "I think it is something to do with the arrangements of the Rosenborg officials. I'm guessing they don't want to expose him to their

competitors before he joins the team. I would do the same if I were the coach. I would hate to lose him to some other team before he plays for me."

"The curse of being overly talented," Paul sighed. "Makes me hate FIFA rules even more. The guy should be on the bench of the first team already." He shook his head. "Kasongo! Are you done with your physical training for today?"

"Yes." The short guy nodded, picking up a bottle of water from his backpack. "We have been here since six o'clock. Three hours are enough for me." He grinned before chugging down some water.

"Don't you guys get tired of waking up at such early morning hours? We are only required to be here at 8 o'clock!"

"Man, I'm only trying to copy the training plan from my role model." Kasongo laughed, patting Paul's shoulder. "Although I can't match his crazy work rate, I'm still benefiting from following in his footsteps."

"Oh. Wake me up too when you guys are going for training next time," Paul said.

"Me too," Kendrick also chipped in as he joined the group.

"You want to wake up at six?" Paul laughed at his brother's request.

"I need to improve my fitness," Kendrick sighed. "Grant is already far ahead. He's benching me in all the games."

"Then, you'll wake up at six?"

"Yes." Kendrick nodded emphatically. "Don't look at me like that. I'm serious this time. I'll even be changing to a smaller mattress this week to prevent myself from oversleeping."

"I'll pray for you." Paul patted his brother's back. "I do hope you achieve your dream."

"A dream of waking up at six," Kasongo chimed in before bursting into laughter. Paul joined him. The two had tried to wake up Kendrick at seven o'clock in the morning multiple times. However, the lad would always be sleeping like a log.

"But Zach is a monster." Kendrick sighed, ignoring the irony of the two chatterboxes. "Where does he get all that stamina?" He exclaimed as he glanced towards Zachary's treadmill.