

Greatest 531

Chapter 531 Against Inter Milan

Tuesday, January 6, 2015.

Juventus Stadium, Turin, Italy.

Time: 9:00 PM

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle, and the highly anticipated Serie A face-off between Juventus and Inter Milan commenced. The cheers around the stadium hit a thunderous crescendo as Carlos Tevez, the Juventus striker, kicked off the game with a backward pass. He booted the ball all the way to his backline and found Giorgio Chiellini, one of the two Juventus center-backs, for the night.

Giorgio Chiellini, on his part, was pretty relaxed as he linked up with the ball. He then flicked it to Leonardo Bonucci, his counterpart in central defense, to kickstart a period of dominance by the Juventus squad.

Everything was plain sailing for the Juventus players during the opening fifteen minutes. The players in the striped black and white jerseys moved the ball around the field immaculately while effortlessly monopolizing the ball possession. They relied on their exceptional midfield to dictate the proceedings and gained more and more momentum as more minutes flashed by. Their superiority while in their 4-3-1-2 formation was clear for all watching the match, and they looked more and more like the team that would score the opening goal for the night.

But then, the game situation changed during the 21st minute after Roberto Mancini, the Inter Milan head coach, made a surprising first-half substitution. The Italian tactician bravely took Zdravko Kuzmanovic, a midfielder, out of the game and replaced him with Lukas Podolski, an attacking player who could play on both flanks and also as a center-forward. It was a thoughtful substitution on Roberto Mancini's part, and with that, the game changed beyond measure over the next few minutes.

First and foremost, Inter Milan switched from a 4-3-1-2 to a 4-4-2 formation after Lukas Podolski stepped onto the pitch. Danilo D'Ambrosio, Juan Jesus, Andrea Ranocchia, and Hugo Campagnaro continued maintaining Inter Milan's backline of four. Then, Mateo Kovacic and Fredy Guarín adjusted slightly to play as the central midfielders while working hand-in-hand with the freshly introduced Lukas Podolski and Gary Medel to complete Inter Milan's new midfield of four. And lastly, Mauro Icardi and Hernanes maintained their positions as the two strikers to complete Inter Milan's 4-4-2 tactical formation.

The transformations were made in a seamless manner on the field of play as the game continued. And slowly by slowly, the Inter Milan players adjusted to their new roles and started playing meaningful football for the first time that night.

Of course, Inter Milan didn't try to beat Juventus in its 'own game' of slow but steady possession football. Instead, most of the Inter Milan men just sat back and weathered Juventus' relentless attacks while waiting for an opportunity.

Their defense was solid, their midfield compact, and they tirelessly matched Juventus run for run. They were also patient in their approach and only ensured that Juventus would not threaten their goal. But when an opportunity arose, they would not hesitate to play a long ball forward, hoping to find either Mauro Icardi or Hernanes, the two strikers who were the only Inter Milan players without defensive duties on the night. But those times they attacked were few and far between as they were clearly focused on the defensive side of the game.

More minutes passed, and Inter Milan's tenacity on the field of play remained beyond what words could describe. The men from Milan were obviously on the back foot, but they stayed disciplined and performed their duties flawlessly against the much stronger Juventus side. Their hard work evidently paid off, and Juventus only managed to create three opportunities throughout the rest of the first half.

The first opportunity arose when Zachary unleashed a sudden and brilliant through-pass to set up Fernando Llorente for a perfect one-versus-one with the Inter Milan keeper during the 35th minute. However, the Spanish striker failed to beat the keeper and thus missed out—on the opportunity to put Juventus in the lead.

Zachary then created the second opportunity by drifting into the wing and unleashing a teasing cross toward the box during the 38th minute. He managed to pick out Carlos Tevez, who immediately controlled the ball and unleashed a snap-shot goalward. However, nothing came of the Argentine's thoughtful attempt due to the brilliance of the Inter Milan keeper, who spared no effort to save the shot.

The third and final opportunity for Juventus during the first half was initiated by Patrice Evra during the 43rd minute. The left-back sprinted through the wing like a whirlwind before squaring the ball into the middle to find Zachary, who happened to have dashed into an unmarked pocket of space a few yards away from Inter Milan's box.

Zachary, on his part, made the perfect connection with the ball and unleashed a first-time missile of a shot toward the goal from more than thirty yards away. His execution was flawless, and he caught the keeper napping. However, the ball swerved and deviated from its intended trajectory at the last minute before smashing off the post and heading out of play. And with that, the score remained deadlocked at 0:0 as the players headed for the halftime break.

"Guys!" Coach Allegri said to his players after they settled in the dressing room during the halftime break. "Games like this are the ones that will make or break our indomitable success this season. If we don't win, our momentum will lower, and we'll find it hard to attain victory during the next few games. But if we can play brilliantly and defeat Inter Milan right now, at the start of the new year, we'll build up even more momentum to face all our future opponents. We'll gain unlimited confidence, and no other team — whether in Italy or Europe, will be able to match us this season. So, guys! Let's treat this match as a must-win game. Let's treat the match as a final. Let's go out there, utilize all our chances efficiently, and take the lead as soon as possible during the second half. Are you guys with me?"

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

"Are you guys with me?" The coach asked again.

"Yes, coach!" The voices of the players were even louder that time around.

"That's the spirit." Coach Max Allegri smiled and swept his gaze around. "I know that Inter Milan is a good side. They have relatively skilled players in all areas of the field. But again, so what? The strength of their squad and all their preparations don't matter because of one single reason. We're better as a team. We're a stronger team, and if we can play at our best, we'll be able to send them back to Milan crying. So, let's play with confidence during the second half and win this game. Clear?"

"Yes, coach."

"Good." Coach Allegri smiled and said a few more encouraging words to the players. He then assigned a few individual roles to all the players before sending them back to the field of play.

"Zachary! A moment please!"

A familiar voice called out to Zachary as he was about to follow his teammates and return to the field of play. Inclining his head to look, he noticed that it was Maurizio Trombetta, the assistant coach in charge of the first team, who happened to have called his name.

"Coach! Is there anything else?" Zachary said and stopped in his tracks.

"More instructions from the boss." The assistant coach went straight to the point. "During the first half, we noticed your impact on the pitch wasn't high. You're not as sharp as you were during the Supercoppa final! Is there a problem?"

"No, coach," Zachary replied. "I was just growing into the game while studying the Inter Milan players. I'm confident that I'll perform better during the second half."

"Then, that's good," Coach Trombetta said. "Try to take more risks and take on the opponents with your dribbling when you see fit. Additionally, whenever there's a chance, don't hesitate. Try to test the keeper from a distance. Maybe you will succeed and score. Is that clear?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied.

"There's also something else we noticed," Coach Trombetta continued. "There's a lot of space we can use on the flanks. With your speed and dribbling skills, you have a high probability of beating either Danilo D'Ambrosio or Hugo Campagnaro, the opposing wing-backs, during one-versus-one situations. So, try your best to float into the wings and take them on with your dribbling and speed. If you succeed, break into the box and try to score or set up one of your teammates. Is everything clear?"

"Yes, coach."

"Good." Coach Trombetta smiled. "I wish you all the luck during the second half. We have to win this game."

"We surely will," Zachary promised. Then after chugging down some more water, he exited the dressing room and headed to the field as he thought about his first-half performance against Inter Milan.

During the first half, his condition had been slightly off due to the recent rapid growth of his attributes. His timing and reactions had been slightly off, especially since he hadn't gotten used to the SS-grade agility. His body would, at times, move faster than his brain anticipated, and that would cause his actions to be out of sync.

But fortunately, Zachary overcame the slight difficulty towards the end of the first half. His SS grade game intelligence had worked wonders and allowed him to adapt to his recently enhanced attributes during an intensive match. He was now at a hundred percent match fitness and ready to perform at his best during the second half.

Chapter 532 SS-Grade Attributes In Action

The game recommenced after the second-half whistle sounded. But surprisingly, it wasn't Juventus on the front foot during the minutes after the restart. Instead, it was the Inter Milan players who initiated the first attack of the second half.

A minute after the restart, the Inter Milan men flew forward like a pack of predators on the hunt after winning back possession from Juventus. They exchanged lightning-fast passes through the middle as they cut through Juventus' formation at breakneck speed. They made it to the space before Juventus' box within seconds, and the ball naturally found its way to the feet of Mateo Kovacic, their attacking midfielder.

It was the perfect chance to catch Juventus off-guard, and Mateo Kovacic didn't disappoint. He twisted and turned at the edge of the box before threading a teasing and brilliant ball into the box.

"Whoosh..."

A player in a dark blue jersey moved like the wind and dashed into the box. It was Mauro Icardi, the Inter Milan striker, and he had just beaten the off-side trap before connecting with the through pass from Kovacic.

What followed was pretty much what everyone in the stadium expected. Mauro Icardi utilized his skills to bring the ball under control. Then, before any of the Juventus defenders could react, the Inter Milan striker unleashed a powerful drive past Buffon, the Juventus keeper, and scored Inter Milan's first goal for the night. He had drawn first blood and put his team in the lead during the 47th minute of gameplay.

Juventus FC 0 : Inter Milan 1

Roberto Mancini, Inter Milan's head coach, smiled and raised his arms high when the ball nestled into the back of the net. He felt at ease as his players had utilized their first opportunity during the second half to score their first goal for the night. They were now in the perfect position to sit back and play defensive football while waiting for a chance to counterattack.

Coach Roberto Mancini celebrated for a few seconds and then tried to relax. But as the excitement of the goal left him, he realized that he was still tense. He couldn't seem to calm down, especially since he couldn't be sure of the result until he totally neutralized Zachary Bemba, Juventus' playmaker.

The boy's skills were just messed up, to the point of causing opponents misery. Coach Roberto Mancini understood that it was imperative that he bring out all his guns to contain the young playmaker. Or else, the boy would create a goal-scoring opportunity or even find the back of the net before the final whistle sounded.

"What to do?" Coach Mancini started caressing his chin as he thought about the problem. The game was about to restart, and he had to make a tactical switch before Juventus could find a way to crawl back into the game.

"Why not let Mateo Kovacic mark Zachary Bemba throughout the rest of the game," Fausto Salsano, his assistant coach, suddenly suggested. "Although still young, Kovacic is a great technician with excellent motor abilities. He's also highly versatile, and he'll be able to match Zachary's athleticism. Moreover, we don't need him to freeze Zachary out. All he has to do is delay him for a few seconds during crucial moments — and then that will allow his teammates time to regroup and deal with the danger."

"That may actually work." Roberto Mancini smiled. "Thank you, Fausto."

"No need for thanks," the assistant replied. "I'm just doing my job."

Roberto Mancini nodded. "We'll need to make some slight adjustments to give Kovacic the freedom to mark Zachary. Firstly, we must switch from a 4-4-2 to a 4-5-1 formation. The extra man in midfield will cover the gaps left behind by Kovacic while he follows Zachary around."

"So, we need to make a substitution. Right?" Fausto Salsano asked.

"Yes, that's what we must do," Roberto Mancini replied. "We'll bring on Yann M'Vila, a defensive midfielder, in place of Hernanes, the striker. Yann should be able to play well in the midfield and help cover Kovacic when necessary."

"Excellent," Fausto Salsano, the assistant, said. "I'll go and prep Yann as a substitute. He should be able to enter the field in five minutes tops."

"Okay. You do that." Roberto Mancini said and then refocused on the game that had just recommenced.

The Juventus players had already reacted as expected after conceding a goal. They were, at that moment, moving the ball around the field while trying their best to stretch Inter Milan's defensive shape. They were doing their best to create spaces and find the opportunity to launch a deadly attack against Inter Milan.

Coach Roberto Mancini continued watching expressionlessly for a few more minutes. He was only waiting to bring on the substitute before instructing Mateo Kovacic to mark Zachary. So, he remained calm, knowing that the hard times were about to pass even as he watched the much superior Juventus side dominating his team in all areas of the field.

But suddenly, something transpired on the field that caused Coach Roberto Mancini's heart to skip a beat. Zachary Bemba floated toward the right wing and linked up with a diagonal pass from Arturo Vidal. The young playmaker controlled the ball perfectly before taking off like a bullet from a gun's muzzle. His

acceleration was incredible, and before Roberto Mancini could blink, the young ball wizard had already initiated a one-versus-one situation against Danilo D'Ambrosio, Inter Milan's left-back.

"Whoosh! Whoosh..."

Zachary stepped over the ball twice as he slowed down slightly. He then leaned towards the left, seemingly as if he was about to cut past Danilo D'Ambrosio and rush toward the middle.

But just as Zachary was about to complete the move, there was a slight pause in his movements, and he utilized his left boot to scoop the ball back toward himself. He then swiftly changed his center of gravity and fed the ball through Danilo D'Ambrosio's legs before continuing on with his mad sprint toward Inter Milan's box.

"Damn it!"

Coach Roberto Mancini couldn't help but let out a few expletives after witnessing Zachary's skills in action. The boy had performed a series of movements, including slowing down, a side step, and an elastico dribble before accelerating again. He completed everything gracefully and without losing his balance, thus denying the defender any chance to recover. His exceptional sprinting abilities had also come into play, and Zachary had left the helpless guy in the dust. He was now swiftly bearing down on Inter Milan's box, and for sure, Roberto Mancini's team was in a precarious situation because of his wizardry.

"Zachary! Zachary..."

The cheers around the stadium rose to a higher volume as Zachary cut into the pitch like a whirlwind from the right flank. He soon came across the roadblock that was Juan Jesus, the Inter Milan center-back, who was out to mark him.

The defender swiftly approached Zachary, all guns blazing, as if he was about to commit murder. His expression was hideous, and his entire aura explosive as he tried to close down Zachary's run. The

perfect metaphor to describe him was a speeding train, and he looked like he was willing to risk everything and smash Zachary to bits while defending his side.

Zachary, on his part, wasn't the least bit fazed by Juan Jesus' momentum. His SS-grade game intelligence immediately worked wonders, and he utilized his SS-grade agility to perform another series of swift movements.

His two boots became like the rims of a motorbike in motion as he executed lightning-fast stepovers. And an even more surprising fact was that he didn't touch the ball even once as he continued sidestepping and approaching Juan Jesus, the defender, whose body was already wiggling left and right — as if in sync with Zachary's step-overs.

A second or two later, the moment arrived when the two players were just about to collide. But just at the last instant, when Juan Jesus was stretching out his foot to tackle the ball, Zachary's SS-grade agility and game intelligence attributes came into play again.

With the simplest of touches, he utilized the outside of his boot to move the ball slightly to the right, just a few centimeters beyond the reach of the defender's boot. Then Zachary followed that up with another swift change of his center of gravity and an explosive acceleration towards the right. And with that, he seamlessly skirted past the defender and continued on with his insane sprint into Inter Milan's box.

All of Zachary's motions were completed almost instantaneously. And before Juan Jesus could understand what was happening, Zachary had already speared deeper into Inter Milan's box to initiate a one-on-one face-off against Samir Handanovic, the opposing goalkeeper.

Zachary's overly-high mental strength, graded at SS by the system, allowed him to remain composed even at the most crucial moment. He rushed past the keeper with a simple deft touch before hammering the ball into the back of the net to score Juventus' first goal for the night.

Juventus FC 1 : Inter Milan 1

"Oh, my goodness me!" Fabio Crudeli, the commentator, yelled as the score on the stadium's jumbotron changed to indicate that Juventus had scored an equalizer. "What a sensational goal we've just witnessed. Zachary has done it again. He has just slalomed his way from the right wing all the way into the box before scoring Juventus' 1st goal during the 50th minute. This young man is flying, and his timing is just perfect. Just barely three minutes after Inter Milan scored their opening goal, Zachary responded with one of his own. The score is now 1:1, and everything is back to square one."

David Ferrini, the co-commentator for the day, chuckled. "I can say that Zachary's skills are now close to the top of the international football scene. The two Inter Milan defenders stood no chance against his potent dribbling, and he effortlessly left them in the dust with his swift footwork. This goal has the potential to become the goal of the season."

"Indeed," Fabio Crudeli agreed. "There's also something else I noticed. Zachary makes all his dribbles and sidesteps look simple, but they still remain highly effective against defenders. For instance, while approaching Juan Jesus, he didn't touch the ball even once while executing his step-overs. Then, just abruptly, he tapped the ball slightly, and from there on, Juan Jesus couldn't see his shadow. Zachary was already hammering the ball into the back of the net while Juan Jesus was still frozen at the edge of the box, looking around for his trace."

David Ferrini chuckled. "It's always distressing for any defender to face off against a player as swift and skilled as Zachary. The young Maestro has all the qualities to make any defender feel hopeless. He is highly agile and can unleash brilliant game-changing through passes out of the blue. He has nice physicality, and now, he has proven that he can dribble like Ronaldinho. So, how the hell are defenders and coaches supposed to contain him?"

"The match has just recommenced," Fabio Crudeli said lightly. "Let's return to the action on the field of play. Maybe, we'll soon get an answer on how to contain Zachary Bemba from the experienced Inter Milan coach - Roberto Mancini."

Chapter 533 Unparalleled Composure And Skill

Zachary had long understood that the best way to devastate an opponent and make them feel hopeless was to 'hit them hard' when they were down. He knew that he had to destroy Inter Milan's confidence before they could reorganize, so he went into action as soon as the match recommenced.

He floated toward the right wing again right after Juventus won back the ball from Inter Milan. He then linked up with a linear ball from Stephan Lichtsteiner, and from there on, it was as if he was repeating the actions he had performed only a few minutes prior.

He accelerated to top speed within an instant and pumped his legs like the pistons of a Ferrari on a racetrack. His pace was so out of this world — and within seconds, he initiated another one-versus-one against Danilo D'Ambrosio, the very same left-back he had beaten only a few minutes ago.

Zachary was so heartless in his approach. His SS-grade agility came into play, and he ruthlessly side-stepped past the defender, who was already feeling low on confidence. His skills were as potent as ever, and a moment later, he left the helpless defender in the dust. Zachary then accelerated along the touchline before cutting back into the pitch like a predator on the hunt.

A second or so later, Zachary met another barrier. It was in the form of Fredy Guarín, the Inter Milan defensive midfielder who was closing down Zachary with a ruthless sliding tackle. The midfielder's boot was like a serpent sliding over the grass, and his intent was obvious. He was willing to rely on any means, whether foul or fair, to take down Zachary and stop him from continuing his sprint toward Inter Milan's box.

At that moment, Zachary's high mental strength worked like a charm, and he remained composed while facing the sliding tackle from Fredy Guarín. Zachary utilized his high agility and exceptional ball control to scoop the ball up and lift it over the approaching defensive midfielder's body. And finally, as a finishing touch, he leaped over the opponent before realigning his posture and continuing on with his insane sprint toward Inter Milan's box from the right flank.

Zachary completed the entire series of movements and beat Fredy Guarín without losing his balance. His following actions were like sorcery against the opponents due to his high agility and game intelligence. He effortlessly stepped past another opponent a moment later. And then, as the cheers around the stadium hit a crescendo, he dashed into the box and faced off against the Inter Milan keeper, who had rushed out to greet him.

It was at that moment that a peculiar feeling of calmness descended upon Zachary's entire being. His SS-grade game intelligence came into play again, and he judged the actions and intentions of a keeper within a split second. Then, with a smile etched upon his face, he dug his boot under the ball and looped it over the keeper's head to find the back of the net. And with that, he had scored another dazzling goal and put Juventus ahead during the 52nd minute of gameplay.

"GOAAAL.."

The stadium exploded with cheers as Zachary raced to the corner flag and slid on his knees to celebrate. The Juventus fans were yelling like crazy as they had just witnessed more magic from Zachary.

Zachary, on his part, couldn't contain his happiness. He had taken a gamble and floated toward the right wing to attack immediately after the restart. His gamble had paid off, and he had scored Juventus' second even before three minutes had elapsed from the time he netted the first. His dare-devil attitude had obviously worked wonders and allowed him to bag the two goals within a short span of less than three minutes.

Juventus FC 2 : Inter Milan 1

"It's another wonderful goal from Zachary," Fabio Crudeli, the commentator, said as the cheers started dying down. "Just barely three minutes after he scored the first, he has added to his tally with another sensational goal. He has again slalomed his way through Inter Milan's defense before brilliantly beating the keeper and putting Juventus ahead during the 52nd minute. He's truly a sensation on the football field, and considering his form, no one can stop him."

"Yeah, he is a true sensation," David Ferrini, the co-commentator, agreed. "He has caught Inter Milan's defense napping twice within less than three minutes. It takes a dare-devil attitude to achieve such a feat in a highly competitive game of a top league like the Italian Serie A. If he continues like this, he will win both the Serie A Player of the Season and Golden Boot without any challenge."

"But what do you think about Inter Milan's defense?" Fabio Crudeli asked. "Zachary has torn through them twice and scored on both occasions during the past three minutes. Don't you think they aren't doing enough to stop him?"

"Well..." David Ferrini shook his head and sighed. "The Inter Milan defenders are all top footballers on the international stage. They have always been professional and unrelenting on the football field. So,

they should be doing the same in this game and going all out to stop Zachary from making an impact. But the problem comes from Zachary's potent skills. He is so swift with the ball and fast at finding the gaps. He's utilizing everything he has to render the Inter Milan defenders helpless while also finding opportunities for his team. Unless Roberto Mancini can devise targeted tactics to stop the boy's antics, he might even score one or two more goals before the game ends tonight."

"Well, back to the pitch," Fabio Crudeli said. "Roberto Mancini has switched up Inter Milan's tactics. He has just introduced Yann M'Vila, a defensive midfielder, in place of Hernanes, the striker. With the substitution, Inter Milan has switched from a 4-4-2 to a 4-5-1 formation, and surprisingly, Mateo Kovacic, one of their central midfielders, has begun shadowing Zachary's every move. Most likely, Roberto Mancini wants the young Mateo Kovacic to man-mark Zachary for the rest of the game."

"The man-marking strategy might not fully contain Zachary, especially today when he's at the top of his game," David Ferrini hurriedly said. "But at least Mateo Kovacic's presence will delay him at certain crucial moments and stop him from effortlessly cutting through Inter Milan's defense."

On the field of play, the game had already recommenced. The Inter Milan players were on the ball and moving it around with the evident intent to stretch Juventus' defensive shape. They continued playing short passes among the defenders on the backline for the next few minutes. It was as if they were inviting the Juventus players to high press if they wished to touch the ball.

"High press! Go for the ball..."

As usual, Coach Max Allegri couldn't bear to see the opponents holding possession for long. He started roaring from the home team's technical area to encourage his players to high-press and win the ball back.

However, right before the Juventus players could heed their coach's instructions, an abrupt change occurred on the field of play. Inter Milan switched gears through Yann M'Vila, their newly introduced defensive midfielder. The substitute unleashed a sudden defense-splitting pass toward the other side of the field, just behind Juventus' backline.

The pass was so abrupt that it caught all the Juventus defenders napping. Most of them could not react in time as Lukas Podolski came out of nowhere and beat the offside trap to connect with the ball right at the border of the defensive third.

"Lukas! Podolski! Lukas..."

The visiting fans began yelling Lukas Podolski's name after he beat the offside trap and initiated a footrace toward the box. Their voices were filled with boundless excitement since the striker of their team was only a second away from creating a one-versus-one situation against Gianluigi Buffon, the Juventus keeper. Evidently, they were dreaming about the moment the German forward would find the back of the net and bring the game circumstances back to level terms.

But who was Gianluigi Buffon? He was the Juventus captain renowned for his consistent performances throughout his career. His concentration, calm composure under pressure, athleticism, quick reflexes, acrobatic dives, and bravery were insane on the mortal level. For sure, the experienced keeper had outstanding shot-stopping abilities, which allowed him to produce almost impossible saves at crucial moments.

That time was business as usual for Gianluigi Buffon. He raced out of his goal like a force of nature and threw everything on the line while closing down the swiftly approaching Lucas Podolski with a desperado attitude.

Finally, it was as if time had slowed as the moment just before the two men were about to collide arrived. Gianluigi Buffon lunged forward to scoop the ball away from Lucas Podolski's feet. But Lukas, on his part, just shoved the ball to the side, hoping to dodge the keeper's lunge before scoring in an empty net.

But could that be the end of the tense moment? The answer was no!

Just at the last instant, when Lucas Podolski was about to dribble past Gianluigi Buffon, the keeper freakishly contorted his body while mid-lunge. Buffon controlled his lunging speed before kicking out with his left boot to poke the ball away from Lucas Podolski's feet. Moreover, he completed all the actions in a skillful way by tapping the ball first before sending the striker tumbling to the ground.

"Foul! Red Card..."

A thunderous roar sounded within the Juventus stadium immediately after. The Inter Milan fans and players were obviously incensed. They continued yelling for the referee to carry out justice by showing Gianluigi Buffon a red card and offering a free kick to Inter Milan.

Chapter 534 A Performance for the History Books

The referee had been well-positioned and seen what had transpired between Gianluigi Buffon and Lucas Podolski. So, when he heard the cries for a foul from the Inter Milan players and fans alike, he didn't even think twice before waving his arms dismissively to shut them down. He remained totally deaf to their appeals and boldly signaled for the game to continue.

Of course, the Juventus defenders didn't need the reminder from the referee to get on with the game. Leonardo Bonucci, the center-back, was already in action, and he had just smashed the ball toward the middle of the pitch, where Carlos Tevez happened to be lurking.

Carlos Tevez, on his part, dashed away from the defender marking him and connected with the ball. He leaped off the ground and brought it under control with his chest before flicking it toward his right to find Fernando Llorente, his counterpart on the striking line.

Fernando Llorente also took one touch on the ball to bring it under control. He then kicked it backward to find Simone Padoin, the only Juventus midfielder, who happened to be unmarked at that juncture.

"Pa..."

Simone Padoin's boot produced a slight sound as he connected with the pass from Fernando Llorente. Then, as usual, he first looked in Zachary's direction to assess whether the young playmaker was in a favorable situation. But alas, Zachary was already tightly marked by Mateo Kovacic and Yann M'Vila, the two Inter Milan central midfielders, and thus wasn't the perfect outlet for the ball at that very moment.

Lightning-fast thoughts raced through Simone Padoin's mind, and he chose the second-best option after briefly surveying the situation on the pitch. The midfielder twisted and turned to avail himself some more space before unleashing a lofted pass over the entire midfield and toward the left wing. His passing accuracy was spot-on, and he smoothly picked out Patrice Evra, the Juventus left-back who had long initiated a daring run into Inter Milan's half.

"Pa..."

The sound of chest muscles meeting synthetic leather sounded as Evra controlled the ball on the left flank. He chested it forward skillfully and continued sprinting along the touchline to advance Juventus' lightning-fast counterattack against Inter Milan.

Evra was like a true-blue incarnation of Usain Bolt, and a few seconds later, he stepped past the border of the final third and squared the ball toward the space before the box. He was, of course, trying to find either Carlos Tevez or Fernando Llorente, the two Juventus strikers that had the habit of lurking around the area.

"Whoosh..."

In the middle, Carlos Tevez's exceptional sprinting speed came into play. The Argentine moved like the wind and left the Inter Milan defenders in the dust before connecting with the square pass from Patrice Evra. Then, before any of the other players could react, he drew his leg back and unleashed a powerful curling shot toward the inside of the far post.

At that moment, it seemed like the time for Juventus to score the third goal had arrived, and the cheers around the stadium rose up a notch. But the next instant, those cheers turned into dejected sighs when Samir Handanovic, the Inter Milan keeper, executed an acrobat dive to punch the ball out of play. The Juventus fans were obviously feeling down after their team failed to convert an excellent chance and score their third goal during the 59th minute.

"Don't mind! Don't mind! Let's forget about the missed chance and prepare for the corner..."

Coach Max Allegri's loud voice sounded from Juventus' technical area as the players readied themselves for the corner kick. He was obviously reminding his players not to dwell on the past but to focus on the present. He wanted them to forget Carlos Tevez's missed opportunity and then go all out to get something out of the corner kick.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee's whistle sounded a few seconds later, and Simone Padoin took the corner kick. The midfielder sent a lofted ball from the corner spot that cut through the air like a surface-to-surface

missile. Its speed was so swift, and its trajectory teasing as it soared toward Inter Milan's already crowded and chaotic box.

At the edge of the box, Zachary was attentively tracking the ball using his peripheral vision. At the same time, he also observed the reactions of Mateo Kovacic and Yann M'Vila, the two Inter Milan central midfielders who were marking him. Then, a second or two later, after he accurately judged their intentions and impending actions, he sprang into action.

"Whoosh..."

He moved like the wind while utilizing his impressive physical fitness attributes to escape the harassment of the two opponents marking him. He dashed toward the area close to the penalty spot with a death-or-glory attitude and leaped off the ground like a Ninja.

The CR7 Aerial Finishing Juju worked wonders at that moment, and he easily towered over all the players in the box before connecting with the corner ball. He tilted his head slightly and guided the fast-incoming ball toward the top left corner with a skillful but delicate touch.

"Whoosh..."

The ball traveled like a bullet toward the goal, and as expected, Samir Handanovic, the Inter Milan keeper, reacted immediately. The shot-stopper executed an acrobatic dive, hoping to save the situation. But alas, Zachary's header was just too powerful, and the ball brushed by his fingertips before homing into the back of the net. And with that, Zachary had just scored his third goal for the night and extended Juventus' lead during the 61st minute.

Juventus FC 3 : Inter Milan 1

"GOAAL..."

It was as if there were explosives going off within the Juventus stadium after Zachary scored the third goal for Juventus. The Juventus fans couldn't contain their excitement, and they vocalized the famous victory chants of Juventus with their all. Their voices shook the stadium to its very core as the Juventus players gathered at one of the corner flags to celebrate the third goal.

"Well..." Fabio Crudeli, the commentator, said after the cheers started dying down. "I guess that is it for Inter Milan. Zachary Bemba has just obliterated them by scoring his third goal for the night. The young playmaker has extended Juventus' lead after getting to the end of the corner ball and finding the back of the net with a powerful header during the 61st minute. What a night for the young man!"

"Indeed, what a night for Zachary Bemba, the twenty-year-old Juventus playmaker," David Ferrini, the co-commentator for the day, chimed in. "He has just completed another hatrick during a Serie A match and helped his team overcome Inter Milan, one of their most powerful rivals in Italy. His performance this season deserves to go down in the history books."

"David!" Fabio Crudeli, the other commentator, called out. "Do you see any way for Inter Milan to crawl their way back into this game?"

"I really don't see a way!" David Ferrini was quick to reply. "The Juventus players have been exceptional during today's game. They have worked hard and played brilliant football to overpower Inter Milan in all areas of the field. I'm sure they will continue doing just that to achieve their desired result. Moreover, there's also Zachary, who has been beyond exceptional. He is an ever-present threat in front of Inter Milan's goal, and I don't think there's a chance for Inter Milan to turn the situation around while he's still on the field of play."

"Good analysis," Fabio Crudeli commended. "I'm of the same view. Zachary is too much for the entire Inter Milan team. He's at the top of his game today, and I can't visualize just how the men from Milan can turn this game around with him on the pitch..."

The commentators were spot-on with their projections. During the final twenty-plus minutes, Inter Milan devoted plenty of manpower to contain Zachary. They utilized Mateo Kovacic and Yann M'Vila, two of their central midfielders, to shadow Zachary's movements. In doing that, they undoubtedly reduced Zachary's impact on the field of play. But as a negative, they also left a lot of gaps in midfield as the two men kept running all over the pitch while trying to keep up with Zachary.

What followed was pretty obvious. The other Juventus players, including Carlos Tevez, Álvaro Morata (the substitute), Simone Padoin, and Arturo Vidal, brilliantly utilized the gaps left by the two players marking Zachary. They created chances during the final few minutes and allowed Juventus to put two more goals past Inter Milan.

Carlos Tevez scored the fourth goal for Juventus during the 78th minute after skillfully linking up with a pin-point through-pass from Arturo Vidal. Then, Álvaro Morata, the substitute striker, found the back of the net during the 84th minute after a lightning-fast exchange of short passes between him and Simone Padoin, the other Juventus midfielder. And with that, the score was finally 5:1 in favor of Juventus as the game headed into the final few minutes.

From there on, it was all about game management for Juventus. The players in black and white didn't relax even after Álvaro Morata scored the fifth goal. They continued playing short but steady passes while occasionally employing some time-wasting strategies until the final whistle sounded after three minutes of added time.

Chapter 535 Incredible Match Statistics

Beatrice Paretti, the Sky Italia journalist, hosted the Serie A post-match show that evening. Right after the interviews with the coaches and players, she smiled at the cameras and said, "Welcome back, our dear viewers, from that exciting Serie A battle between Juventus and Inter Milan. It was business as usual for the Juventus squad as they thrashed Roberto Mancini's struggling Inter Milan by a score of 5:1."

"Zachary continued his exceptional scoring form and put three past the Inter Milan keeper to complete yet another hat-trick this season," she continued. "Then, as a finishing touch, late goals from Carlos Tevez and Álvaro Morata sealed the pummeling of the team from Milan. What a game we've just witnessed! With me in the studio are two gentlemen who are former professionals that played in the Italian Serie A. They will help us analyze and scrutinize why Juventus was able to thrash Inter Milan by five goals to one. Alessandro Costacurta and Roberto Baggio! Welcome to the Sky Italia studio. We're glad to have you here."

"Thank you, Beatrice," The two pundits replied, more or less in unison as the cameras focused on them.

"Let's get straight to business." Beatrice Paretti smiled at the cameras. "Roberto! You just watched the game. What was the difference between the two teams? Why was Juventus so overwhelming on the field of play to the point of thrashing their old rival, Inter Milan, by five goals to one?"

"Well, the answer to that question is quite simple," Roberto Baggio said while smiling at the cameras. "The difference between Juventus and Inter Milan was one young player - Zachary Bemba. His display was so awe-inspiring during the game, and Inter Milan had no way to handle him. His performance today was a 10/10, and he literally destroyed the opponents just by himself."

"His three goals were quite impressive," Beatrice Piretti hurriedly chimed in as the cameras focused back on her. "I haven't seen such goals in a Serie A match for quite a while."

"Yes, they were quite spectacular goals," Roberto Baggio agreed. "The first and second were pretty much the same. Zachary Bemba escaped his markers and drifted from the midfield toward the wing. He then relied on his swift acceleration to set up a one-versus-one against Danilo D'Ambrosio, the Inter Milan left-back. His unparalleled skills allowed him to dash past the defender and slalom his way past a few more opponents before stepping into the box and finding the back of the net. Those two goals were, in every true sense, spectacles for the record books."

"As for the third," Roberto Baggio continued, "It was a typical forward's goal converted from a corner kick. Zachary Bemba showcased his game reading, timing, and finishing skills by towering over everyone else in the box and finding the back of the net with a powerful header. The goal might have looked simple to a layman's eyes, but to all who have ever played professional football, they would have a different perspective. Zachary did everything right from the time the corner was taken. He utilized his wits to escape the harassment of his markers before timing his run perfectly and connecting with the ball. Zachary did just enough to guide the ball into the back of the net. He didn't apply too much force while heading but merely utilized the ball's momentum to generate enough power to beat the keeper and bag his third for the night. His finishing at that moment was the pinnacle of goal scoring, even at the world-class level."

"Thank you for your analysis, Roberto," Beatrice Piretti said. "I have just looked at the game statistics between the two teams. They are quite astonishing. Juventus dominated Inter Milan in all aspects of the game. Let's have a look as we continue with our analysis."

And with that said, the game statistics appeared on the screens around the studio. Beatrice Piretti and the two pundits immediately focused on the stats before continuing their post-match analysis.

GAME STATISTICS

->Score (Goals)

Juventus FC (5) : (1) Inter Milan

->Goal Scorers

Mauro Icardi (Inter Milan) 47'

Zachary Bamba (Juventus) 50', 52', 61'

Carlos Tevez (Juventus) 78'

Álvaro Morata (Juventus) 84'

->Ball Possession

Juventus FC (72%) : (28%) Inter Milan

->Shots on Target

Juventus FC (9) : (3) Inter Milan

->Shots off Target

Juventus FC (3) : (4) Inter Milan

->Corner Kicks

Juventus FC (8) : (2) Inter Milan

->Fouls

Juventus FC (7) : (11) Inter Milan

->Yellow Cards

Juventus FC (0) : (2) Inter Milan

->Big Chances

Juventus FC (10) : (3) Inter Milan

->Big Chances Missed

Juventus FC (5) : (2) Inter Milan

->Passes

Juventus FC (732) : (271) Inter Milan

->Accurate Passes

Juventus FC (653/89%) : (204/75%) Inter Milan

"This is pretty much what we expected," Alessandro Costacurta, the other pundit present in the studio, said after glancing at the statistics. "Juventus was overwhelming in all areas. Their 5:1 thrashing of Inter Milan doesn't come as a surprise to me."

Roberto Baggio pursed his lips and said, "At least my old team, Inter Milan, didn't lose out against Juventus in all aspects. They have more shots off-target, more fouls, and more yellow cards than Juventus. That should count for something. Right?"

The others in the studio chuckled at that.

"Alessandro!" Beatrice Paretti hurriedly chipped in. "Look at the time for Zachary's three goals. He scored during the 50th, 52nd, and 61st minutes. That implies that he destroyed Inter Milan in a brief span of less than a dozen minutes. Truly surprising!"

"Yes, the fact that Inter Milan conceded the three goals in such a short time period also surprised me," Alessandro Costacurta said. "I think the Inter Milan players switched off for a bit during those minutes, and Zachary being as sharp as he is, took advantage of their laxity. He first scored two goals within a window of fewer than three minutes before adding the third that pretty much sealed the deal. If Roberto Mancini had taken measures to contain him right after Inter Milan scored, the result might have differed greatly from what we see now. Zachary might not have scored those three goals, and Inter Milan would have had a chance to win or draw the game."

"I have a different opinion," Roberto Baggio hurriedly said. "Coach Roberto Mancini tried to contain Zachary Bemba by man-marking him with Mateo Kovacic and Yann M'Vila, during the final twenty-five minutes. But what was the result? Sure, Zachary's impact on the game was reduced. However, it was at

the cost of leaving gaps that were readily utilized by the other Juventus attackers to put two more goals past Inter Milan during the late stages. So, following that reasoning, the result wouldn't have varied from what it is now, even if Coach Roberto Mancini had utilized two players to mark Zachary from the very beginning. Inter Milan would have only contained Zachary, but Juventus would still thrash them overwhelmingly."

"Let's look at Zachary's statistics for the game before we continue," Beatrice said, and the screens around the studio flashed to show a select few of Zachary's stats against Inter Milan.

ZACHARY BEMBA'S STATS

->Minutes played: 90'

->Goals: 3

->Assists: 0

->Shots on Target 4

->Shots blocked 1

->Hit the Woodwork 1

->Dribble Attempts (succ.) 6(5)

->Big Chances Missed 2

->Touches 89

->Accurate Passes 71 (97.2%)

->Key Passes 3

"Look at his passing accuracy," Roberto Baggio hurriedly drew the viewers' attention to that specific statistic on the screen. "Zachary was so flawless with the ball that he achieved a 97.2% passing accuracy statistic against Inter Milan. He didn't lose possession unnecessarily — a feat that allowed him to have a maximum impact throughout the entire ninety-plus minutes of the game."

"The statistic that really impresses me is the success rate of his dribble attempts," Alessandro Costacurta, the other pundit, chimed in. "Zachary attempted six dribbles and succeeded in five of those. Moreover, three of those resulted in big chances for Juventus, implying that his creativity within the opponent's half is truly terrifying. He's really maturing fast and quickly becoming a playmaker that can threaten any defense within the top leagues in Europe."

"Yes, his improvement has been lightning-fast," Roberto Baggio agreed. "His hat trick today has allowed him to push his Serie A tally to 20 goals. Additionally, he previously scored two goals in the Supercoppa and nine in the Champions League. So, as we speak, his season total in all competitions is 31 goals, and he has achieved such a feat at a point just after the mid-season mark."

"I'm just wondering whether Zachary will go on to score 60 goals by the end of the season," Beatrice Paretto said. "If he can score thirty-plus goals right after the mid-season mark, why can't he score 30 more before the end of the season? We might be looking at a player that might break most (if not all) goal-scoring records in Europe."

"Success doesn't come that smoothly in football," Roberto Baggio chuckled. "Sure, Zachary is a once-in-a-generation young talent. I'm sure that he will score more goals before the season ends. But again, we

must understand that coaches and defenders will study and assess him as he continues playing. They will come up with targeted strategies to contain him, and that will limit his goal-scoring opportunities. I'm no prophet of doom, but there's also the question of whether Zachary can remain a hundred percent match-fit for the rest of the season. Going by the norm, there should be more and more days when he feels tired as the season progresses into its late stages. The fatigue would affect his consistency in the long run, and he might not be able to maintain his goal-scoring form."

"We've talked about Zachary a lot today. Haven't we?" Beatrice Paretti said with a smile. "Let's now focus on his team. Juventus has been impressive this season. After beating Inter Milan today, they extended their perfect winning streak in the Serie A to seventeen games. Moreover, they also have six other wins from the Champions League's group stages and one more from the Supercoppa final when they defeated Napoli. They haven't lost or drawn even a single game and are probably the best-performing team in Europe this season."

"Yes, Juventus' form this season is so astonishing," Alessandro Costacurta said with an audible sigh. "In my honest opinion, I think they will win the Serie A without any challenge. They have won all games and amassed all the 51 points they could possibly get from their 17 Serie A games this season. They are already ahead of the second-placed AS Roma by 12 points, which puts them in the perfect position to win this year's Serie A. They are really flying as a team, mostly because of the overwhelming displays by Zachary Bemba, their young playmaker, who is like a magician on the field of play."

Beatrice Paretti smiled. "Juventus will face off against Napoli next Sunday, on the 11th of January, 2015. It will be the second meeting between the two teams this season, and this time around, it's in the Serie A. Juventus won the previous battle between the two sides during the Supercoppa final. Can they repeat the same performance and extend their perfect winning streak in the Serie A this season to 18 games?"

"With the form that Juventus is on, I don't see any way Napoli can defeat them," Roberto Baggio said as the cameras focused on him. "Juventus will head into the fixture with all the momentum to attain victory, especially after having already beaten Napoli in the Supercoppa by four goals to zero. But again, football is sometimes unpredictable. Maybe something unexpected could happen, and we could see an upset by Napoli."

"In that case," Alessandro Costacurta said lightly, "The sun might just set in the east on the day Napoli manages the upset against a Juventus team that is in good shape. The future is always unpredictable."

The others in the studio chuckled and ended their analysis of Juventus. They then proceeded on with the show and started discussing the other teams in the Italian Serie A.

Chapter 536 Another Victory and a New Challenge

Five days later, on Sunday, January 11th, 2015, the Juventus squad traveled to Naples for their away Serie A match against Napoli. The kick-off was at 8:45 PM, and the game between the two sides proceeded as expected.

Despite being at an away ground, Juventus got off to a flying start and showed no signs of relaxing even for a minute as they ran the Napoli defense ragged through the first half. The Old Lady players were exceptional on the attack, and they had a surprising total of thirteen shots on target during the opening half an hour. However, they still failed to break the deadlock until the 38th minute, right after Arturo Vidal came alive with some magic within the midfield.

After winning an aerial duel close to the center circle, Arturo Vidal moved like the wind and flew toward the other side of the pitch at breakneck speed. He then exchanged a couple of quick one-twos with Carlos Tevez through the middle before receiving the ball again and breaking into an unmarked pocket of space before Napoli's box. Then, as a passing angle opened up, the Chilean remained composed and threaded a fantastic through pass to Zachary Bemba, who continued his rich run of goal-scoring form by finishing superbly from a tight angle.

The opening goal calmed the nerves of the traveling Juventus supporters, who had previously feared that it would be one of those evenings where the ball would not just go into the back of the net, no matter how hard the players tried. Their worries were soon proven true as Rafael Cabral, the Napoli keeper, made several impressive saves to Deny Carlos Tevez on multiple occasions. Then, during the 43rd and 45th minutes, Álvaro Morata and Stephan Lichtsteiner missed clear goal-scoring opportunities that could have allowed Juventus to extend their lead before the half-time break.

The second half commenced after fifteen minutes, and Napoli came out of the tunnel as a much-improved side. The men in blue utilized a mixture of foul play and tight man-marking strategies to contain the on-form Zachary while also doing their best to attack. However, their attacking efforts fell short on several occasions, and they didn't really manage to test Gianluigi Buffon even once during the opening minutes of the second half.

The Napoli players were, of course, not just going to give up even after failing to score on multiple occasions. They committed more men forward and launched more and more fierce attacks on Juventus' defense as the game approached the 65th minute. They looked like a totally different version of their side from the first half and even came close to scoring during the 68th and 71st minutes.

But right as the Napoli men were at the peak of their momentum, they faced the challenge most attack-oriented teams face when playing Juventus. As they committed more numbers forward, they attracted increasingly dangerous counterattacks from the highly-technical Juventus players, like Zachary, who almost doubled Juventus' lead during the 76th minute. Napoli only survived due to the brilliance of Rafael Cabral, the Napoli keeper, who again palmed Zachary's grounded shot out of play to keep his team in the game.

Juventus' lead was eventually doubled during the 82nd minute after Raúl Albiol, the Napoli center-back, failed to control a long ball up the pitch on the left side of his goal. Zachary, who happened to be lurking close by, didn't waste any second pouncing forward like a predator and winning the loose ball. He then accelerated to top speed almost instantaneously before squaring a pass to Álvaro Morata, who unleashed a curling shot past the keeper and scored Juventus' second for the night.

The score was then 2:0 in favor of Juventus, and what followed was pretty much an uneventful final few minutes. The Juventus players resorted to time-wasting strategies to kill off the game by playing monotonous but pointless possession football to deny Napoli any chances to create opportunities. And just like that, the men in striped black and white jerseys maintained their two-goal lead and attained victory after five minutes of extra time.

Having won their away Serie A game against Napoli, the Juventus players became more spirited about the season. They returned to training after just one day of rest and turned their focus to the next fixture, which happened to be a Coppa Italia home game against Hellas Verona.

The Coppa Italia was Italy's flagship domestic cup. Over the past few years, it continued to enjoy remarkable growth. Many clubs in all of Italy's top divisions were eager to join the tournament and strive for the sizeable financial and reputational rewards that came hand in hand with lifting the trophy.

As a football powerhouse in Italy, Juventus had never neglected the domestic cup since its inception. That year was no different, and the Juventus coaches were all eager to partake in the competition. They pushed the players to work hard for the following three days in preparation for their first Coppa Italia match against Hellas Verona.

Zachary was among the key players working tirelessly to attain tip-top match fitness before the game. He didn't complain when the coaches pushed him hard but quietly followed their instructions to the

very last detail. He was as focused as ever as he wanted to raise his skills and compete favorably with the best in the world.

In the meantime, the rest of the players couldn't contain their desire to win every competition they participated in. Most of them even gave a training maniac like Zachary a run for his money as they prepared for the Coppa Italia.

Zachary was particularly impressed by the work ethic and determination of Andrea Pirlo, the Maestro who happened to have just returned from injury. Andrea was no longer relaxed during training but worked harder than the rest of his teammates, including Zachary.

Be it gym work in the morning, ball work at lunch break, and extra agility drills late in the evening — Andrea went through them all on a daily basis during those three days before the game against Hellas Verona. He was really going all out to recover full match fitness and return to the squad.

The days went by quickly as the Juventus players trained intensively. And just like that, Wednesday, January 14th, which happened to be the eve of the day when they would face off against Hellas Verona, arrived.

Coppa Italia," the system AI's apathetic voice followed. "The conditions required to initiate the 23:28

2014/15 Coppa Italia Mission have been met."

On that day, the Juventus players trained only up to 3:00 PM. Then, they showered and rested for an hour before heading to the tactics room to attend Coach Max Allegri's pre-match address for the game against Hellas Verona.

Coach Max Allegri, on his part, didn't waste a lot of time on the tactics, as he had already gone through the entire game plan during the past few days of training. He straight away highlighted a few crucial points before naming the squad, which without a surprise, included the just-recovered Andrea Pirlo. Then, the coach assigned individual roles for the game before sending his players back to their homes for the night.

"DING"

The system notification sounded in Zachary's mind right after he stepped into his room later that night.

"The system has detected that the user is now part of the Juventus squad playing in the 2014/15 Coppa Italia," the system AI's apathetic voice followed. "The conditions required to initiate the 2014/15 Coppa Italia Mission have been met."

"DING"

"The 2014/15 Coppa Italia Mission initiated successfully."

"Does the user wish to view the mission details right away?"

"Yes, please bring up the details," Zachary answered. In the meantime, he switched on the light and settled on his bed.

"The user's command has been received," the system AI said. "Mission details will be coming up on the interface in a bit. The user can take his time reading them."

The space before Zachary shimmered with a bright luster after the system notification ended. The crystal-like display that was the system interface manifested out of thin air, and Zachary immediately focused on its contents.

GOAT MISSIONS

#NEW MISSION: 2014/15 Coppa Italia Challenge

->The system has detected that the user is part of the Juventus squad that will play the 2014/15 Coppa Italia. The system has designed an associated mission for the event.

->The user needs to accept the mission first to stand a chance of winning rewards after completing the milestones below.

*Milestone 1: Play 80% of the 2014/15 Coppa Italia fixtures.

*Milestone 2: Help your teammates become the 2014/15 Coppa Italia Champions.

*Milestone 3: Provide the most assists in the 2014/15 Coppa Italia tournament.

*Milestone 4: Become the top scorer of the 2014/15 Coppa Italia tournament.

*Milestone 5: Become the MVP of the 2014/15 Coppa Italia tournament.

*Rewards:

->Milestone 1 completion reward: 100 Juju-points

->Milestone 2 completion reward: 2000 Juju-points

->Milestone 3 completion reward: 10,000 Juju-points

->Milestone 4 completion reward: 20,000 Juju-points

->Milestone 5 completion reward: A random-effect elixir that can increase one of the user's fitness attributes by an entire grade. The specific attributes that can be improved after consuming the elixir include Balance and Coordination, Agility, Strength, Stamina, and Endurance.

NB: There will be additional rewards if the user realizes any other milestones that can unlock hidden missions.

->The user can choose not to accept the mission.

*Accept *Reject

*Punishment if none of the milestones has been achieved after the stipulated time (In case the user accepts).

->Minus 70,000 Juju-points

*The user has to complete at least one milestone before the tournament ends to escape the penalty.

*Remarks: Every little victory counts: Never underestimate the power of small but consistent wins whose effects compound over time.

Zachary immediately accepted the mission after reading the mission details. Then, he spent the next few minutes washing up before jumping into bed for the night. He was eager to get ample sleep so that he would be fresh and well-rested for the following day's game against Hellas Verona.

Chapter 537 Back-To-Back Games Against Hellas Verona

Juventus' Coppa Italia home game against Hellas Verona kicked off at 9:00 PM the following evening. And as expected, it was another night full of excitement for the Juventus supporters who watched the game.

Zachary and his teammates were in total control right from the start. They overwhelmed the struggling Hellas Verona side with their highly-tactical approach featuring slow build-ups using varied passing techniques plus lightning-fast wing-play to unleash sudden crosses into the box. They caught the Hellas Verona defenders napping numerous times before eventually scoring three goals during the final fifteen minutes of the first half.

Roberto Pereyra, one of the Juventus midfielders, scored the first goal during the 31st minute after getting at the end of a pin-point cross from Stephan Lichtsteiner. Then, six minutes later, during the 37th minute, Zachary performed his magic again and put the second past the Hellas Verona keeper by successfully converting a free-kick from twenty-nine yards away from goal.

Finally, the finishing touch for Juventus' incredible first-half performance was completed by Arturo Vidal. The midfielder moved like the wind and connected with a square ball outside the opponent's box. He then unleashed a grounded shot past the keeper and extended Juventus' lead to three goals right before the half-time break.

During the half-time break, Coach Max Allegri made a couple of surprising but thoughtful substitutions. He took off Zachary Bemba and Arturo Vidal, the high-performing midfielders, before replacing them with Sebastian Giovinco, a left-winger, and Andrea Pirlo, the Maestro who happened to have just

recovered from injury. The coach was obviously not trying to malice the players but to rest them in preparation for the busy schedule that was about to come. He couldn't risk them during the rest of the game, especially since his team was already leading by three goals against Hellas Verona.

The second half commenced after the substitutes stepped onto the pitch, and without any surprise, Juventus continued dictating the tempo. Andrea Pirlo was especially impressive, and he effortlessly took control of the midfield by relying on his spectacular tactical awareness. His defense-splitting passes were always spot-on, and by constantly unleashing them, he allowed Juventus to launch a series of increasingly terrifying waves of attack upon Hellas Verona.

Andrea Pirlo eventually created the first opportunity after intercepting a loose pass between two Hellas Verona midfielders during the 64th minute. He drove the ball forward into the opponent's half and unleashed a sudden and deadly long ball over the midfield. He effortlessly set up Álvaro Morata, who made the perfect connection with the pass and scored Juventus' 4th goal for the night.

But that wasn't the end of Andrea Pirlo's magic on the field of play. During the 72nd minute, he came alive again and converted a free kick. His technique was flawless, and he easily beat the keeper from twenty-four yards away to score Juventus' 5th goal for the night.

The rest of the game was pretty much uneventful. Juventus continued launching more attacks against Hellas Verona, hoping to score a sixth goal for the day. However, even while five goals down, the opponents remained solid and thwarted all Juventus attempts before they could do any damage.

Finally, after three minutes of added time, the game ended with Juventus still leading by a score of 5:0. They had destroyed yet another opponent and continued their record 100% winning streak in all competitions. They had beaten Hellas Verona and thus qualified for that year's Coppa Italia quarter-finals.

With the momentum on their side, the confidence of the Juventus players was overflowing. They only rested for a day before resuming their training. They were obviously intent on preparing for their next Serie A home game, which happened to be against Hellas Verona, the same team they had just defeated in the Coppa Italia Round of Sixteen.

Sunday, January 18th, 2015

Three days after the Coppa Italia match between Juventus and Hellas Verona...

Team Juventus once again welcomed Hellas Verona to their home ground in Turin. It was Juventus' 19th Serie A game for the season. The coaches and players were eager to rack up another win that could push them closer to another Serie A title.

But despite Coach Max Allegri's desire to win, he still decided to rest several first-team players, including Zachary Bamba, Arturo Vidal, Stephan Lichtsteiner, Carlos Tevez, and Fernando Llorente. He left them on the bench and fielded another relatively strong Juventus squad featuring players like Andrea Pirlo, Álvaro Morata, Kingsley Coman, and Roberto Pereyra. He also fielded Marco Storari, the second-string keeper, after choosing to rest the experienced shot-stopper - Gianluigi Buffon.

With such highly technical players on the line-up, the game started 'on a positive note' for Juventus. The Old Lady players didn't waste time after hearing the kick-off whistle. They flew toward the other half like a swarm of locusts and launched a terrifying wave of attack against Hellas Verona during the second minute of gameplay. Their teamwork and exchange of passes through the middle were especially impressive, and they effortlessly arrived in the spaces before the opponent's box.

"Pa..."

The ball naturally found its way to Roberto Pereyra, who effortlessly controlled it. The attacking midfielder then launched a powerful drive toward the inside of the far post, hoping to score Juventus' first goal for the night. But alas, the brilliance of the keeper denied his effort, and he could only put his hands behind his head while sighing with dejection.

Fortunately, the chance was not over for Juventus. The referee had already blown the whistle and pointed to the corner spot, meaning that Juventus had another opportunity to test Hellas Verona through a set-piece. As such, most Juventus players gathered in the box, hoping to make the perfect connection and guide the corner ball into the back of the net. I think you should take a look at

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee's whistle sounded, and Patrice Evra took the corner kick. The Frenchman didn't send a curling cross toward the crowded area but instead unleashed an unexpected cut-back pass into the space before the box.

At that moment, the unmarked Andrea Pirlo set off like a whirlwind and connected with the incoming ball just a few yards away from the box. He timed his move perfectly and unleashed a first-time shot that bounded towards Hellas Verona's goal like a bullet.

"Whoosh..."

The ball cut through the crowd of players within the box as it flew toward the inside of the far post. But just at the last minute, a hand appeared in its way and halted its motion. The ball couldn't continue along its intended trajectory but deviated out of play.

"Penalty, penalty..."

A loud call for a penalty reverberated inside the stadium as the Juventus players and fans alike called out to the referee to make a decision.

The referee, on his part, didn't need reminders from the players and fans. He had been in the perfect position to spot Guillermo Rodríguez blocking the ball with his hand. Moreover, the Hellas Verona defender had denied a clear goal-scoring chance, meaning his fate in that game was final. So, without fear or favor, the referee fished a red card out of his shirt pocket and immediately showed it to the player. But he didn't just stop at that. He also pointed to the penalty spot and awarded Juventus a spot kick just after three minutes of gameplay.

Zachary followed the proceedings from his seat on the bench. He watched expressionlessly as Guillermo Rodríguez walked off the pitch after receiving the red card. He didn't feel sympathy for a player who had committed a foul that denied his team a chance to score. That was especially after recalling the incident when Luis Suarez handled the ball and denied Ghana an opportunity to qualify for the World Cup semifinals.

Minutes passed, and Zachary later witnessed how Álvaro Morata stepped forward and converted the penalty to put Juventus in the lead during the 4th minute of gameplay. Zachary then relaxed and continued observing from the bench as his teammates decimated the opponents by relying on their numerical advantage.

The Juventus players seemed to be in the zone. They dictated the tempo throughout the rest of the game and effortlessly put three more goals past the Hellas Verona keeper before the final whistle sounded.

Roberto Pereyra tapped Patrice Evra's cross into the back of the net to score Juventus' second goal during the 14th minute. Then, Sebastian Giovinco headed home a corner during the 23rd minute to bag the third before Kingsley Coman completed the thrashing with a stunning outside-of-the-box shot later on during the 76th minute. The score was then 4:0 in favor of Juventus, and the status quo didn't change until the final whistle sounded.

Zachary watched the entire game from the bench. Immediately after the final whistle sounded, he got up and congratulated his teammates on their overwhelming win before following them down the tunnel to the dressing room.

As he entered the dressing room, he felt a bit empty after not getting a chance to step on the pitch. Moreover, he couldn't stop his thoughts from turning quite complicated as he recalled how his teammates had performed impressively during the game.

Watching from the bench had allowed him to comprehend how Juventus had so many able players on their squad. However, all those players rarely got any playing time, not because they were not innately skilled, but mainly due to their lack of consistency across a long span of competitive games.

For instance, Álvaro Morata was a superb forward who could remain composed and score breathtaking goals on those days when he was at his best. But due to his lack of consistency, Coach Allegri often left him out of the squad and went with Fernando Llorente, the other more consistent striker.

The situation was the perfect example of how football could be merciless to those who couldn't remain consistent. Comprehending all that while seated on the bench allowed Zachary to grow as a player and become more motivated. He had to continue working hard and maintain his form so that he would never face the unfortunate situation of becoming a spare tire on any team, no matter how powerful it was, during his career.

Chapter 538 The Indomitable Juventus Team

The Juventus players headed into their next Serie A fixture with boundless confidence. They played the home game against Chievo Verona on Sunday, January 25th, 2015, and won by another overwhelming margin.

Zachary, who had just returned to the squad, was especially impressive during that game. Firstly, he provided two assists, one to Carlos Tevez and another to Kingsley Coman, who took their chances well and scored Juventus' 1st and 2nd goals during the 14th and 23rd minutes, respectively. Then, much later, during the 73rd minute, Zachary got to the end of a corner ball and headed home to score Juventus' 3rd goal for the night.

Chievo Verona got one consolation goal back during the 78th minute after exploiting a passing error by Angelo Ogbonna, the Juventus center-back. But their relief didn't last long as Juventus reacted strongly and quickly through Andrea Pirlo, who came on as a substitute for Zachary.

The Maestro performed his magic during the 81st minute by unleashing a sudden long ball to find Patrice Evra on the left flank. Patrice Evra, on his part, controlled the ball well before driving forward into Chievo Verona's half. The Frenchman effortlessly stepped into the final third before sending a long cross toward the box where Fernando Llorente was already lurking.

Fernando Llorente acted like a true-blue bona fide center-forward and connected with the ball. He escaped the harassment of the opposing center-back with his first touch before drawing his leg back and unleashing a sudden snap-shot towards the inside of the far post. His powerful drive rendered the keeper helpless, and he smoothly found the back of the net to score Juventus 4th and final goal on the night.

With that, Juventus ultimately won the Serie A game with another staggering score of 4:1. As such, the fighting spirit of the players was already soaring into the skies, and they were even more motivated to prepare for their next fixture, which happened to be an away Coppa Italia quarter-finals game against Parma.

After a day of rest, the Old Lady players utilized the whole of Tuesday to refine the game plan while also working on their match fitness. Then, when Wednesday afternoon arrived, they boarded the team bus

and traveled to the northern Italian region of Emilia-Romagna to face off against Parma in the Coppa Italia semi-finals.

Parma was a team struggling close to the bottom of the Serie A table. They had lost most of their matches and were a team that Juventus could comfortably dispatch and qualify for the Coppa Italia semi-finals. So, with all that in mind, Coach Max Allegri opted to rest most of his crucial players.

The Juventus coach benched Zachary Bemba, Andrea Pirlo, Arturo Vidal, Patrice Evra, Carlos Tevez, and Gianluigi Buffon, among others. He then fielded another team that included players like Angelo Ogbonna, Simone Padoin, Kingsley Coman, Simone Pepe, and Álvaro Morata. On paper, the line-up was not Juventus' best, but the selected players still played impressive football against the struggling Parma side after the game commenced.

Juventus was the first to settle after a frantic start that saw both sides trade early blows. The Old Lady players took only twelve minutes to start playing as usual and overwhelm Parma with their signature slow build-ups and tantalizing wing play. They played well over the next few minutes and even came close to taking the lead when Kingsley Coman unleashed a thunderous effort during the 14th minute. But alas, Juventus was unfortunate, as the attempt was repelled by the Parma goalkeeper, who executed a stunning dive to keep the proceedings on the field of play level.

The game continued, and eventually, the Parma players found their rhythm halfway through the first half. They surprised Juventus with a counterattack that resulted in a clear goal-scoring opportunity for Cristian Rodríguez, one of their two center-forwards. However, the shot from the center-forward smashed off the post and headed out of play, and with that, Parma missed the chance to take the lead during the 28th minute.

The Parma players were soon left lamenting that missed opportunity when some lax defending allowed Álvaro Morata, Juventus' center-forward, the freedom to fire an effort goalwards. The keeper tried his best to save the shot. But despite his best efforts, he instead punched it back into the path of the onrushing Kingsley Coman, who tapped home to score Juventus' 1st goal for the night.

That goal seemed to spur Juventus to life, and the Old Lady players played more intensively. They started mounting relentless waves of attacks through the wing, and in so doing, they continued mounting pressure on Parma's goal. Eventually, they scored the second goal very late, during the 78th minute of the game, when Zachary Bemba, who had come on as a substitute, beat the keeper from twenty yards away with a thunderous effort.

After that, the tempo of the game slowed. The Juventus players didn't continue launching relentless attacks against Parma. Instead, they calmed down and played slow but steady passing football to totally freeze out the opponents. Their tactics during the final minutes weren't captivating since their playing style lacked the intent to attack. But those tactics still did the job and allowed them to win the game by a score of 2:0 after four minutes of injury time.

The win against Parma allowed Juventus to qualify for the semi-finals of the Coppa Italia. As such, the Juventus players were swelling with confidence, and they headed into the February fixtures in fine form. I think you should take a look at

Juventus was already the nemesis of every Italian team they played, and everyone was starting to wonder whether they would ever lose or draw a game. Even the often-critical journalists constantly praised them as they whizzed through the February fixtures. But the players (themselves) overlooked the attention and continued doing their thing on the field.

On Sunday, February 1st, 2015, they played their away Serie A game against Udinese Calcio and won by a score of 2:1. Early goals from Fernando Llorente and Claudio Marchisio, the player just from injury, allowed them to seal the deal early on in the first half.

Six days later, on Saturday, February 7th, they returned to action and thrashed AC Milan at home by a score of 4:1. For that game, Zachary was the star, and he scored twice during the 10th and 21st minutes. The other goals were scored by Carlos Tevez and Álvaro Morata, who were Juventus' two center-forwards for the day.

The win against AC Milan further solidified Juventus' position at the top of the Serie A table. As such, the Old Lady players had all the momentum when they played their away Serie A fixture against AC Cesena eight days later, on Sunday, February 15th.

Zachary, Álvaro Morata, and Andrea Pirlo were the players that made an impact on that day. They each found the back of the net during the 17th, 32nd, and 87th minutes, respectively, and with that, they helped Juventus defeat AC Cesena by a score of 3:0.

Five days later, on Friday, February 20th, Juventus faced off against Atlanta at home. The Juventus players failed to win for the first time during the season and managed only a 2:2 draw against the away side.

For that game, Atlanta was the first to strike and draw blood. They took advantage of corner kicks and scored two early goals during the 3rd and 11th minutes. Fortunately, the Juventus players regained their confidence during the second half. They responded with stunning long-distance goals from Zachary and Andrea Pirlo during the 77th and 92nd minutes and finally managed to avoid a defeat.

The Juventus players didn't lose their confidence after facing their 'first failure' that season. They remained steadfast and trained intensively for the following three days before playing their next fixture, which happened to be an away Round of Sixteen Champions League battle against Bayer Leverkusen. They performed impressively and effortlessly dispatched the opponent from German by a score of 3:1.

Carlos Tevez and Álvaro Morata each scored a goal during the 13th and 43rd minutes to give Juventus a comfortable 2:0 lead before the half-time break. But Bayer Leverkusen almost turned the situation around first with a goal of their own and later with another effort that smashed off the post during the opening minutes of the second half. They didn't lose momentum until Zachary caught their defense napping on the counter and scored another solo goal during the 74th minute.

After defeating Bayer Leverkusen, the Juventus players returned their focus to the Italian Serie A. They played the away fixture against AS Roma six days later, on Monday, March 3rd, 2015. They struggled due to fatigue and only managed a 1:1 draw against the second-placed team on the Serie A table.

A goal from Carlos Tevez during the 63rd minute allowed Juventus to take the lead on a day when most Juventus players performed below par. However, that one goal was later canceled out by a 92nd-minute strike from Seydou Keita, which allowed AS Roma to draw the game and take a point home.

With that, the Juventus players dropped points for only the second time in the Serie A that season. But fortunately, it was only a draw, and their unbeaten run in all competitions was intact. So, they quickly overcame their 'second failure' for that season and focused on their next fixture, which happened to be the first leg of the Coppa Italia semi-finals against Fiorentina.

Chapter 539 Progress And Team Status

Juventus' form didn't diminish over the next two weeks or so. First and foremost, they beat Fiorentina away from home with a score of 0:3 in the Coppa Italia semi-finals. They then returned their focus to the

Italian Serie A and won against Sassuolo by a score of 2:0 at home before defeating US Palermo by a score of 1:3 away from home.

With those wins, Juventus accumulated 77 out of the maximum 81 points they could have possibly amassed from their twenty-seven Italian Serie A games at that point of the season. Their worst results all season were the two draws against Atlanta and AS Roma, meaning that their unbeaten run in both the Serie A and other competitions was still intact.

Moreover, after dropping points only twice in the Serie A, Juventus was already ahead of the second-placed AS Roma by 27 points, meaning they were only three victories away from winning the title. They could potentially become the champions as early as Saturday, April 11th, 2015, if they could win their next three Serie A games against Genoa, Empoli, and Parma. They were flying as a team, and no opponent could stop them from achieving glory that season. But first things first, they had to focus on their Champions League return leg against Bayer 04 Leverkusen before thinking about anything else.

Zachary, on his part, had remained impressive throughout all the games Juventus had played. He was always the crucial man on the pitch, with a fierce ability to determine the game's result.

Zachary had scored a hat trick during the Coppa Italia Serie A game against Fiorentina. But that was not the end of his brilliance. He had also continued his goal-scoring form in the Serie A and put one goal past Sassuolo and two past US Palermo.

His sharpness in front of the goal was really incredible, and he had already taken his seasonal tally in all competitions to 45. He had already scored 28 goals in twenty-seven Serie A matches, 10 in seven Champions League matches, 5 in the three Coppa Italia games, and 2 in the Supercoppa Italiana. His overall total was already above forty, meaning he was already close to attaining all the contract bonuses he could possibly earn from Juventus.

Everything was proceeding smoothly for Zachary, as he was having a great season. And as such, his confidence had already soared to the skies when the time to face off against Bayer 04 Leverkusen in the second leg of the Champions League Round-of-Sixteen arrived.

Tuesday, March 17th, 2015

Juventus Stadium, Turin, Italy.

Time: 8:30 PM

Only fifteen minutes were left before the scheduled kick-off time for the Champions League Round-of-Sixteen second-leg battle between Juventus and Bayer 04 Leverkusen. As always, Coach Allegri stood in the middle of the home team's dressing room, giving a last-minute pep talk to his players. He was trying to ensure that the main points of the game plan hit home before the players could move out of the dressing room and head to the pitch for the game.

"I know that we defeated Bayer 04 Leverkusen during the first leg by three goals to one," he said, sweeping his gaze around. "But that does not mean we should relax and play lackluster football. Our goal is still the same as it has always been during all the games we have played this season. We must play impressive football, create opportunities, score goals, and win the game. We must not allow the opponents to shame us, especially when we're playing at our home ground. We must not only defeat them but thrash them hard simply because..." The coach didn't complete the sentence but glanced around.

Taking the cue, the players replied, "Because we're Juventus."

"We must destroy them and qualify for the Champions League quarterfinals simply because..."

"We're Juventus," the players replied in even louder voices.

"Let's talk about the main points of our game plan." Coach Max Allegri smiled. "As I said before, we'll play with a 4-3-1-2 formation. Evra, Chiellini, Bonucci, and Lichtsteiner are our four defenders. In addition to sweeping balls and clearing dangerous situations away from our goal, they will also be involved in our slow build-ups as we try to stretch the opponent's defensive shape. Our three defensive midfielders will be Vidal, Marchisio, and Andrea Pirlo. I don't need to highlight the role of the three again. Vidal! Marchisio! Andrea Pirlo! You only have to play intelligent football that will conquer the midfield throughout the entire duration of the game."

"Our attacking midfielder is Zachary," the coach continued. "Zachary! As usual, you will act as our attacking pivot. When you're on the ball, try to find the spaces and gaps within Bayer Leverkusen's defense before passing to our strikers. Set them up with well-timed through passes so they can score. But if you also get an opportunity, you can go for glory. You can drive forward or shoot from beyond the box to test the keeper. Are we clear, Zachary?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied in somewhat strained Italian.

"Don't forget to float into the wings and initiate one-on-ones with the opposing wing-backs," the coach reminded. "Whenever there's an opportunity, cut in from the flanks and send the ball forward. I'm sure that with your pace, you'll be able to torture their defenders and create goal-scoring opportunities for us. Clear?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied. "Everything is clear."

"Good." Coach Max Allegri smiled and nodded. He was especially pleased with Zachary finally mastering some Italian. His job was much more uncomplicated, as he could finally give the boy instructions without relying on his assistants to translate.

While maintaining his smile, Coach Allegri inclined his head to gaze at his two strikers for the day. "Morata! Tevez! You're our two forwards today. Morata! Your role is to stay on the front, waiting for a chance to score. I don't want to see you falling back unless we're in a situation where we have to defend against a corner kick or a dangerous set piece. Understood?"

"Understood!" Álvaro Morata replied.

Coach Allegri nodded and turned to the other striker. "Tevez! You, on the other hand, will have to often fall back into midfield to help out Zachary. You two can work together to tear apart their defense with fast one-twos when an opportunity avails itself. Additionally, you will have to fall back and help with defensive duties whenever we're not in possession. So, you must be ready to give your all and run tirelessly during this match. I don't want to see you relaxing and walking on the field of play. Tevez! Is that clear?"

"Everything is clear, coach," Carlos Tevez replied.

"Good," the coach said and swept his gaze around. "Games like this are tricky. Sure, we're already winning by an aggregate of 3:1, and between Bayer Leverkusen and us, we're the favorites to qualify for the quarter-finals. But guys! As you all know, game circumstances can change if we're to relax. We only need to lose focus for a minute or two, and the opponents will score a goal, and then the pressure will be on us. They can then add a second and even a third, and we'll easily lose our rightful place in the quarters. That's how football can change if we lose concentration during a game."

"So, guys," the coach continued. "Don't let your guard down when you step onto the pitch. Don't just play with a lax mindset of assuming that we've already won the game simply because we have a two-goal advantage from the first leg. That would be a mistake on our part as the opponents would take advantage of that and destroy us. What we need to do instead is play at our best. We must overwhelm the opponents with our tactical prowess and aim for a quick goal early in the first half. As long as we accomplish all that, everything else will be straightforward. We can sit back and play on the counterattack as the game progresses. Then, Bayer Leverkusen will be at our mercy. Understood?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied.

"Then, I'm glad," the coach said with a smile. He then said a few more encouraging words to his players before sending them out of the dressing room. He'd finally done his part as a coach to prepare for the game, and all that was left was to see if his players could execute his game plan properly.

The cheers around the stadium hit a thunderous crescendo when the players of both teams walked onto the pitch. The bright floodlights illuminated their glowing jerseys as they went through the pre-match routines, including lining up as the band played the Champions League anthem, then the customary handshake, and finally, the coin toss. The players completed everything quickly, and by 8:43 PM, they were already taking their starting positions on the field of play.

Like the rest, Zachary stretched and warmed up slightly before taking his position just outside the center circle. His frequent scoring of goals had already allowed his confidence to soar over the past few months. He was in tip-top shape and ready to put out his best once again.

Although he was at the moment the top scorer of the Champions League with his ten goals, he still couldn't relax. There were still monstrous players, like Lionel Messi, Neymar, and Cristiano Ronaldo,

scoring goals in the Champions League like there wasn't a tomorrow. So, as a person who didn't wish to lose out, he had to play at his best during every game. He had to continue bagging goals match in, match out, without giving all those players a chance to catch up with him. He had to go all out and do everything possible to win that year's Champions League Golden Boot.

Chapter 540 The Strategy Is The Counterattack I

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle at 9:45 PM. The cheers around the stands immediately hit a thunderous peak as Josip Drmic, Bayer 04 Leverkusen's center-forward, kicked off the game by sending a backward pass all the way to his backline.

"Pa..."

The sound of a boot meeting synthetic rubber sounded as Emir Spahic, Bayer 04 Leverkusen's center-back, connected with the ball from Josip Drmic. The defender only took a single touch before flicking it to his left to find Wendell, the left-back.

Wendell, on his part, connected with the ball close to the touchline on the left flank. Then, before any Juventus player could close him down, he whirled around and fed the ball along the touchline to find Heung-min Son, Bayer 04 Leverkusen's left-back for the night.

Heung-min Son didn't dilly-dally when he connected with the ball. With lightning-fast agility, he whirled and twisted to escape the harassment from Stephan Lichtsteiner before accelerating to his top speed within a second.

From there on, Heung-min Son was like a true-blue reincarnation of the Flash as he cut through the pitch while running along the touchline. Along the way, the winger then exchanged a couple of quick one-twos with Josip Drmic, Bayer 04 Leverkusen's center-forward, to beat a few more Juventus players.

The ball naturally returned to him as he cut into the pitch. He collected it midstride and continued racing towards Juventus' box like a galloping horse on the race track. A few seconds later, he beat Leonardo Bonucci, Juventus' center-back, with a simple change of pace and dashed into the box like the wind.

What came next was only natural. Heung-min Son approached the goal from a tight angle before taking on Gianluigi Buffon, the Juventus keeper. His composure was remarkable, and he effortlessly curled the ball past the keeper, hoping to guide it toward the inside of the far post.

At that moment, everything seemed to slow down. All the fans behind Juventus' goal held their breath as they watched the ball fly past the outstretched hand of Gianluigi Buffon before continuing on its trajectory toward the back of the net. But just as the supporters were at the peak of their desperation, a miracle happened. Maybe it was the wind, but the ball deviated at the last moment and smashed off the post before bouncing back into the box. And with that, Juventus barely managed to avoid conceding a goal during the 1st minute of gameplay.

However, the danger was still at large for Juventus. That was because the just-rebounded ball had landed in an area within the box where Josip Drmic, Bayer 04 Leverkusen's center-forward, was lurking. The striker wasted no time pouncing forward and hammering the ball back toward the goal, hoping to score Bayer 04 Leverkusen's 1st goal for the day.

"Whoosh..."

That time, Gianluigi Buffon, the experienced Juventus keeper, was spot-on with his reactions. He threw himself at the ball and, by some miracle, happened to intercept it. He punched it away from the goal and towards the left flank to clear the danger. He had finally saved Juventus from conceding the first goal during the opening minutes.

"Damn it!" Coach Max Allegri couldn't help but let out some expletives. "I warned these guys not to put their guard down after stepping onto the pitch. But after only a minute of gameplay, they seem to have started ignoring my instructions. I can't imagine what will..."

Coach Max Allegri stopped whining as a situation he couldn't have expected transpired on the field of play. Patrice Evra, the Juventus left-back, had just gotten to the loose ball before turning away from an opponent. The defender then wasted no time playing the ball into the middle to find Claudio Marchisio, one of the Juventus midfielders.

Claudio Marchisio, on his part, didn't waste time as it was an opportunity to counterattack. The midfielder squared the ball towards the left to find Andrea Pirlo, the Maestro, who happened to have just moved into an unmarked pocket of space close to the center circle.

"Pa..."

Andrea Pirlo connected with the pass and controlled the ball with lightning-fast reflexes. Then, before anyone could close him down, he drew his leg back and unleashed a lofted pass all the way over the midfield and toward the other side of the pitch.

Andrea Pirlo was obviously trying to find Zachary Bemba, Juventus' playmaker, who happened to have floated toward the right wing. However, due to his rashness when kicking the ball, he misplaced the pass by a slight margin, and it was heading fast toward the outside of the pitch.

"Whoosh..."

At that moment, Zachary went against all expectations and reacted like the wind. He pounced forward and covered half a dozen meters within seconds. Zachary then pushed off the ground with all his might before leaping up and controlling the ball with his back. He successfully stopped the ball from heading out of play before landing back on the ground and turning to face back into the pitch.

"Whoosh..."

A defender slid in wholesale with a ruthless tackle as Zachary tried to realign his posture. It was Wendell, the Bayer 04 Leverkusen left-back. The man glided forth with boundless momentum as if he wanted to slaughter Zachary.

Zachary didn't seem to panic. He skillfully dug his boot under the ball and looped it over the sliding defender to escape the tackle. Then, with deft motions, he landed back on the ground and realigned his posture before taking off toward Bayer 04 Leverkusen's box like a Ferrari on a formula one race track.

Zachary's swift pace worked wonders, and his long strides ate up yards of space like nothing. Before Bayer 04 Leverkusen's defense could get into shape, he was already bearing down the goal and facing off against Bayer 04 Leverkusen's last defender. He beat the opponent with a few side steps and a slight change of pace before racing forward and finally stepping into the box.

The moment of truth had finally come, and Zachary's high mental strength worked like a charm. He remained composed and skillfully slid the ball underneath the arms of the approaching keeper from a tight angle. His finishing touch was spot on, and he easily beat the keeper to score Juventus' 1st goal for the night during the 3rd minute of gameplay.

Juventus FC 1 (4) : Bayer 04 Leverkusen 0 (1)

"I'll be damned!"

Coach Max Allegri was at a loss for words and could only mumble a few expletives. A few seconds ago, he had started criticizing his players for losing focus and allowing Bayer 04 Leverkusen to attack them and almost score within the first minute. But his players had reacted almost instantaneously and exploited the gaps left by Bayer 04 Leverkusen to turn the situation around. They had launched a lightning-fast counterattack, caught the opponents off-guard, and scored Juventus' 1st goal for the night. As a result, Juventus was already leading by an aggregate score of 4:1 only after three minutes into the second leg of the Champions League Round of Sixteen fixture.

"Congratulations, boss! We're closer to qualifying for the quarter-finals." A voice sounded beside him as he was still processing what had just transpired on the pitch. It was Maurizio Trombetta, his assistant, and he was all smiles after Juventus scored the opening goal.

"Let's not talk about the quarter-finals yet," Coach Max Allegri said lightly. "We're still in the game's opening stages, and anything can happen. We must not let down our guard until we score a few more goals."

"That's a given." Maurizio Trombetta nodded before asking, "By the way, have you noticed that they are not marking Zachary tightly? They didn't assign any player to shadow his movements. That was why he effortlessly caught them by surprise and scored."

"Indeed!" Coach Allegri agreed. "The Germans don't know how dangerous he can be when left unmarked. They are just treating him like any other attacker. Maybe, we can take advantage of that."

"Yes," Maurizio Trombetta agreed. "If he can freely float all over the pitch, then his impact today will be unprecedented."

"That's true," Coach Allegri agreed. "Let's allow him to play a free role. He will then have a greater impact especially on the counterattack."

With that said, the coach wasted no time and called Zachary over. He spent a few seconds giving him new instructions before sending him back to the field of play.

The game restarted soon after the celebrations. The Bayer 04 Leverkusen players, who had just conceded a goal, learned their lesson and didn't immediately push many players forward to attack Juventus. They instead settled into a 4-5-1 defensive formation and focused only on resisting Juventus' relentless attacks. They played pure defensive football for the next twelve minutes and denied the Old Lady players a chance to test their goal.

But as the saying goes, old habits die hard. Fifteen minutes into the first half, the Bayer 04 Leverkusen players couldn't resist the temptation of playing as they always did and committing many bodies forward. They all dashed forward like a pack of wolves and launched another terrifying attack against Juventus.

Their intent was to score and bring proceedings back to level terms. But once again, luck was not on their side, and a final shot from Josip Drmic, their center forward, was saved by Gianluigi Buffon.

Gianluigi Buffon, on his part, didn't waste time after making the save. He reacted immediately and picked himself from the ground before racing toward the edge of the box and throwing the ball towards the left flank. His accuracy was spot on, and he effortlessly found Patrice Evra, the Juventus left-back

Evra received the ball close to the touchline. Then, within anything but an instant, he unleashed a pass into the middle to find Zachary, who was lurking close to the center circle.

The counterattack was on, and Zachary didn't dawdle. After controlling the ball, he dashed forward like a lightning bolt and utilized his high agility to circumvent defender after defender. Then, when a passing angle opened up, he threaded a simple through ball to Alvaro Morata, who remained composed and looped the ball over the keeper to score Juventus' 2nd goal for the night during the 16th minute. The score was then 2:0 in favor of Juventus, and the Italian giants were closer to qualifying for the Champions League quarter-finals.