

Greatest 551

Chapter 551 The International Aspect of Football

As planned, Mr. Omar Sangare picked Zachary up immediately after breakfast. The clock hands around Abidjan had just pointed to the 8:10 o'clock mark when they drove out of the gates of Hôtel Ivoire and joined the busy streets of Côte d'Ivoire's largest city that doubled as the economic capital.

Mr. Omar Sangare's car was a Toyota Landcruiser. Lorenzo, the bodyguard, sat in the front seat beside Sangare, the driver. As for Zachary, he had made himself comfortable in the back seat of the spacious vehicle.

While conversing among themselves, the car moved quickly, and they passed by many high-rise buildings, large shopping malls, two bridges, and an extensive golf course. Then, after cutting two final corners, they eventually arrived at the Abidjan-M'pouto training complex, which was the venue for the Ivorian National Football Team training that day.

After finding a parking spot, Zachary said his goodbyes to Lorenzo and walked into the training facility with Mr. Omar Sangare. The complex was well-maintained, with clean walkways and extensive gardens adorned by meticulously mowed natural grass.

Zachary followed Mr. Sangare along one of the walkways. They passed by a few of the facility's staff maintaining the gardens and finally arrived at a two-story building that housed the offices and conference area. They walked into the building and stopped before a door.

On the door, there was a plaque with the words conference room. Mr. Sangare knocked once on the door before pushing it open and stepping forward into the room.

Zachary followed him inside, and his eyes immediately landed on three men in orange and green tracksuits. They were seated around a long table, and it seemed they had been in the middle of a serious discussion.

The man seated closest to the door was all too familiar to Zachary. He was Yaya Touré, the captain of Côte d'Ivoire's National Football team and a Manchester City legend. The second man was someone Zachary had only gotten to know recently after deciding to switch his international football allegiance. He was Hervé Renard, Côte d'Ivoire's National Football coach, who had just helped them win the African

Cup of Nations a few months prior. As for the third man, who sat at the far end of the table, Zachary didn't recognize him.

"Zachary! Let me introduce these fellows to you," Mr. Omar Sangare spoke in French as they walked into the room. "I guess you already know Yaya Touré and Hervé Renard. They are your captain and coach. As for the gentleman at the far end, he is Sidy Diallo, the Ivory Coast Football Federation president." Omar then turned to the three and continued in a formal tone, "Gentlemen! This one here is Zachary Bemba in the flesh. He's here to report for National team duty."

Yaya Touré chuckled at that and got up from his seat. Extending his hand to Zachary, he said, "Zachary Bemba! The wonderboy and number 10 of Juventus! I have heard a lot of good things about you. Welcome to the Ivory Coast National Football Team."

Zachary smiled and took the hand for a firm handshake. "Thank you, Mr. Yaya Touré. I have also heard a lot of incredible things about you. It's really an honor to make your acquaintance."

"Is that so?" Yaya Touré smiled.

"Indeed!" Zachary smiled back. He had the utmost respect for the Ivorian midfielder, who happened to be one of the most underrated playmakers of the generation. Zachary was really looking forward to teaming up with him on the national football team. He also hoped that Yaya Touré's career wouldn't follow his previous life's trajectory, which saw the midfielder retire from international football before the 2018 World Cup.

"I have a feeling that we might just be good teammates," Yaya Touré said while releasing Zachary's hand.

"I have the same feeling," Zachary said before turning to the other two gentlemen. He followed the same etiquette and exchanged greetings with both the Ivory Coast Football Federation president and Hervé Renard, the coach. Then, after some more small talk, they settled around the table and started discussing the important stuff.

"So, Zachary!" Sidy Diallo, the Ivory Coast Football Federation president, breached the topic of Zachary's nationality switch. "What are your goals for joining the Ivory Coast National Football Team? What do you hope to achieve?"

Zachary smiled and replied with confidence, "My goal is simple. I wish to work with everyone on the team to win and continue winning. With my skills, I hope to contribute positively to all endeavors of our national team. Hopefully, with my addition, we can become a team that can overcome all opponents to achieve big things in upcoming World Cup tournaments."

"Those are lofty goals," the Ivory Coast Football Federation president remarked. "But I like them. Once again, welcome to the National Football team again. We'll discuss more later. But now, let me first leave you in the hands of your captain and coach."

"Thank you," Zachary replied.

The president nodded and said a few words to Hervé Renard, the coach. Then, after saying his goodbyes to everyone, he walked out of the conference room with Mr. Sangaré, who had been quiet for a few minutes.

"Well..." Coach Hervé Renard said. "Since the outsiders have left, let's get down to team business. Zachary! You're new on the team. So, I'll briefly introduce to you how we usually go about our training before international games. First and foremost, let me bring to your attention that training approaches for international football are vastly different from club football due to the limited time teams have before games."

"For instance, we'll play Angola tomorrow and Equatorial Guinea three days later, on March 29th. That leaves us with only a day of training before the first match and only two before the second if we're to squeeze in the one day of recovery after the first game."

"As you can see, we have fewer days to train as a team and learn away from the pitch with coaches and teammates. Due to the limited training time, establishing a stable game plan becomes significantly more challenging. How do we overcome this, though? We focus only on the crucial elements of the game, including the tactics, the player roles on the squad, and the dynamics of our playing formation. We utilize our limited time to refine those crucial aspects so that we can refine our chemistry as a team and put up a decent performance. As for squad selection, we usually base it on the recent performances at the club level and a player's readiness to adapt to our game plan. That implies that you'll always have a high chance of being considered for the starting line-up if you continue putting up consistent and impressive performances for your club. Are we together, Zachary?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied.

"Good." Coach Hervé Renard smiled and glanced at his watch. "It's already coming to a quarter past nine. The others should have arrived. Let's wind up here and head to the tactics room for our pre-match tactics meeting. Touré! You can take Zachary to meet his new teammates before we begin official business. I'll be there in a few minutes with the other coaches."

"Okay, coach," Yaya Touré responded and turned to Zachary. "Zachary! Let's go. The others should already be waiting in the tactics room."

Zachary nodded and followed Yaya Touré out of the conference room. They walked quickly while conversing and finally arrived at the tactics room, where Zachary met up with his new teammates.

Players like Eric Bailly, Gervinho, Max Gradel, Wilfried Bony, and many others were in the room. They didn't put up any airs but welcomed Zachary warmly to the team.

After briefly interacting with his new teammates, Zachary was even more delighted with his decision to join Ivory Coast's National Football team. As such, he was in high spirits when the tactics meeting commenced. He listened attentively as Hervé Renard introduced the game plan for the game against Angola.

The coach went straight to the point with his address. He talked about how the team would utilize a 3-4-3 formation for the game and emphasized the need to take a safe approach while on the pitch. Then, after about an hour of explaining the tactics and game plan, he finally ended his speech by reading out the starting eleven that would feature in the game.

Except for the missing Kolo Touré, who happened to have just announced his retirement from international football, the line-up didn't vary from the one that won the African Cup of Nations final two months prior. Boubacar Barry was in goal, the four players - Eric Bailly, Wilfried Kanon, and Simon Deli were in defense, while Serge Aurier, Serey Dié, Yaya Touré, and Siaka Tiéné were in midfield. Finally, the coach named Max Gradel, Wilfried Bony, and Gervinho as the three strikers to complete Ivory Coast's 3-4-3 formation.

As for Zachary, who had just joined the team, he was left out of the starting squad for obvious reasons. Like in all football teams, it didn't matter whether a player was a superstar, but he had to earn his place

by putting up impressive displays for any given team before joining that team's starting eleven. Zachary was in the same situation. He would start on the bench for the game against Angola. Nevertheless, if he came into the game and impressed, the coach would not hesitate to select him as one of the starters for Ivory Coast's following match against Equatorial Guinea. That was just how football worked since it was a team sport.

After reading the line-up, Coach Hervé Renard didn't continue wasting time with meaningless talk. He led the players to the training turfs, where they spent the next few hours working on the tactics for the game against Angola. They focused on the individual roles of each player in the game plan and then refined their set-piece plays during the later stages of training. They ended the session at around 4:00 PM in the evening, and with that, the coach sent them back to their respective places of residence.

Zachary didn't return to his residence, though. After leaving the training facility, he linked up with Eric Bailly, his former teammate, who gave him a brief tour of Abidjan. They then ate dinner together while catching up before parting at around 8:00 PM to head back to their respective hotel rooms for the night.

On returning to his hotel room, Zachary followed his customary practice and went through a pre-bedtime yoga routine. Finally, after ensuring that he had stretched all his crucial muscle groups in a proper manner, he washed up quickly and then went to bed.

He had completed all his preparations, and what remained was to wait for the following day to arrive. If all went according to plan, he would debut for Ivory Coast as a substitute and kick-start the international aspect of his football career.

Chapter 552 International Debut I

Thursday, March 26th, 2015

Stade Félix-Houphouët-Boigny, Abidjan, Ivory Coast.

Time 7:59 PM

The kick-off time for the friendly game between Ivory Coast and Angola was only a few seconds away, and more than 45,000 enthusiastic Ivorian fans had already filled up every nook and cranny of the stadium.

Some fans were already singing famous Ivorian football chants while others were hammering drums, jerricans, buckets, or any other improvised excuse of the instruments they could get their hands on. There were also those blowing vuvuzelas like mad and a few others in weird costumes who continued dancing to the beat of the reverberating drums within the stadium.

All in all, the excitement was already soaring to the skies as the kick-off time drew near, and there seemed to be a magic spell cast upon the stadium. The voices, vuvuzelas, dances, and whatever else the supporters were doing all blended together to form a weirdly beautiful and chaotic ensemble. And then, the resulting chorus abruptly rose in volume and hit a thunderous crescendo when the clock hands around Abidjan pointed to the 8:00 PM mark.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle, and the friendly game between Ivory Coast and Angola commenced.

The opening fifteen minutes were uneventful as players of both teams struggled to find their rhythm. The football on display was anything but neat, especially since there were several players making blind passes and a few others who tried out dribbles but failed to beat their opponents. And without organization, the two teams could neither settle into the game nor create meaningful chances during the opening stages.

But, of course, there were always a few players who would perform above the norm even when their teams were performing below par. Yaya Touré was such a player, and he abruptly came alive during the 23rd minute.

After intercepting a loose pass from one of the Angola midfielders, Yaya Touré drove forward like a Ferrari driver on a formula one race track. He skipped past two opponents with a swift change of pace before threading a pass to find Gervinho, one of the three strikers.

Gervinho, on his part, cut in from the left side of the pitch and linked up with the ball from Yaya Touré. His speed was like the wind, and a few more strides allowed him to step into the box. He squared his body and unleashed a curling shot goalward, hoping to catch the keeper off-guard and find the inside of the far post.

However, Gervinho's luck was on the low side that evening. Landú Mavanga, the Angola keeper, by some miracle, managed to get his fingertips on the ball. The shot-stopper pushed the shot away from its intended trajectory, and the ball bounced out of play for a corner kick.

FWEEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle, and the Ivory Coast players took the corner kick shot. Gervinho quickly flicked the ball to Serey Dié, who, in turn, unleashed a teasing cross toward the already crowded Angola box.

It was a clear chance for the Ivorians to take the lead, and the players in orange jerseys went into action. They battled the Angola players for aerial superiority as they tried to connect with the incoming corner ball.

But at the end of it all, Eric Bailly, the Ivorian center-back, came out on top. He relied on his impressive jumping power to tower over his marker and guide the ball toward the goal. His heading technique was outstanding, and he effortlessly beat the keeper to score Ivory Coast's 1st goal during the 24th minute.

The game was then 1:0 in favor of Ivory Coast, and the home fans turned more frenzied. They sang, drummed, and cheered like crazy as the players celebrated the goal.

A minute or so later, the game recommenced. The Ivorians, who had just scored a goal, finally settled in the game. Their passes became more uncluttered, and they started hoarding the ball possession.

But even then, the attacking aspect of their game was still lacking, and they couldn't create any other meaningful chances. They had no shots on target for the rest of the half, and as such, the score remained 1:0 until they matched out of the pitch for the half-time break.

After the break, the same situation continued. The Ivorian players continued dictating the tempo with their neat passing. But they were still not attempting to make those teasing forward passes that could break down Angola's defense.

They just continued moving the ball from defense, then to the midfield, and back to their defenders repeatedly without showing -----

the intent to launch any attack. It was as if they were already satisfied with their 1:0 score, and because of that, they weren't willing to take any risk and commit bodies forward.

Hervé Renard, the Ivory Coast coach, couldn't feel at ease with the situation on the pitch. His tension was mounting as his players had started showing a clear lack of drive and passion to push forward and attack. Moreover, due to their laxity, they were slowly but surely inviting trouble by allowing the Angola players to settle into the game.

As an experienced coach, Hervé Renard understood that permitting such a situation to continue was akin to playing with fire. With how the game was going, maybe it wouldn't be long before the opponents started creating their own chances. And with that in mind, the coach decided to turn to his bench to revitalize his team by making a few substitutes.

"Zachary Bemba! Salomon Kalou!" He called out to the two players. "Start warming up. I want you on the pitch in five."

"Yes, coach," the two players replied in unison. They then changed into their bibbs and took off to go through warm-up routines on the sidelines.

During the 57th minute, the ball went out of play for a throw-in, and the Ivorians finally made their two substitutions. Zachary substituted Siaka Tiéné, a midfielder, while Salomon Kalou replaced Max Gradel, one of the forwards. Immediately after that, the whistle sounded, and the game restarted.

Zachary adapted quickly after stepping onto the pitch. He settled into his midfield role and started playing simple but neat football.

As he was new to the team, he didn't do anything extravagant, like taking on the entire defense with his dribbling. Instead, he stuck to the basics of passing, giving, and going to help his team stabilize the situation on the field of play.

His playing style was none-contact football that day. He would run into an unmarked pocket of space and receive the ball. And before any opponent could approach his vicinity, he would thread a pass to a teammate in a strategic position. Everything about him on the field of play was tidy, and he didn't draw any foul or an aerial duel from an opponent for minutes.

As more minutes passed, he slowly but steadily grew into the game. His ball skills and high game intelligence gradually came into play as he made more touches on the ball. His movements became sharper, and he started exchanging lightning-fast one-twos with Yaya Touré and the other Ivorian midfielders. His impressive use of the spaces allowed his teammates to regain their wits, and they slowly began to look sharper on the attack.

Zachary, though, remained patient and continued sticking to his none-contact football style. He continued floating around the midfield like an assassin waiting for a chance to go in for a kill. Then, finally, during the 81st minute, he found the perfect opportunity to break through.

A misplaced pass from an Angola defender saw the ball float into an unmarked pocket of space close to the final third. Zachary, who happened to be nearby, immediately pounced forward with the agility of a predator going in for the kill.

His long strides nibbled up yards of space like nothing, and he reached the loose ball in a short span of a few seconds. He controlled it midstride and then executed a Marseille turn to skip past an approaching opponent.

His movements on the turn were elegant and refined, like those of a true-blue gentleman dancing with a fair lady. But those graceful motions still rendered the opponent totally helpless and left the pitiful guy crying for his mama.

Zachary finally completed his 360-degree turn and left the opponent in the dust with the swagger of a ball wizard. His SS-grade spatial awareness and risk analysis worked like a charm at that moment, and with a single glance forward, he assessed the situation between him and the goal.

At that same exact instant, something within Zachary's mind tingled, and his long-refined football instincts took over. He tightened his core and drew his leg back before swinging it down and hard like a whip.

His SS-grade body control allowed him to utilize his newly-enhanced SS core strength like a grandmaster. He followed through with his swinging motion and smashed the ball goalward with all the leg power he could muster.

"BAM!"

His boot connected with the ball with a bang. However, it didn't rise but just barely skimmed over the grass while darting toward the goal with the swiftness of a lightning bolt.

Before Landú Mavanga, the Angola keeper, could react and initiate any movement whatsoever, the ball flickered past him like a bullet. And within anything but an instant, it smashed off the post with a bang and homed into the back of the net.

Chapter 553 International Debut II

"GOAAAL..."

Zachary raced to the corner flag as the cheers around the stadium exploded to almost unimaginable levels. Happiness glowed inside him as he had just scored a monumental goal on his debut day for the national team. His mood continued elevating as the Ivorian fans sang his name, and he finally slid on his knees for a good few meters to celebrate.

Of course, the other Ivorian players couldn't stop their urge to join the celebrations. They quickly gathered around the corner flag and started hugging and congratulating Zachary.

Zachary noted that the smiles and words from his teammates were genuine and really from their hearts. It seemed they had totally accepted him as a teammate after he showcased his abilities on the field of play. As such, the stares they directed at him contained that boundless respect deserving of a world-class footballer that could rival once-in-a-generation talents.

"Nice goal!" Yaya Touré patted Zachary's back as the celebrations were about to end. "But I have to confirm something with you. Were you really intending to go for a Daisy Cutter shot from outside the box when you were going for the goal? Or was the shot just a lucky effort born from an accident?"

Zachary smiled on hearing Yaya Touré's question. A Daisy Cutter in football was a shot similar to what Zachary had just utilized to score the 2nd goal for Ivory Coast. It would skim the ground at high speed while heading for the back of the net.

"Guess!" Zachary said to Yaya Touré.

Yaya Touré grinned. "Impressive! You intended to unleash such a shot from the get-go. Don't tell me you're also a master of high-powered and accurate Daisy Cutters from outside the box?"

"I can't say I'm a master," Zachary responded. "I'm just a player who practices my shooting a lot. That allows me to perform at my best during crucial game moments."

"Well..." Yaya Touré said. "I'm glad that you have joined our team. Let's head back into the pitch for the game."

"Okay..." Zachary agreed. He bowed to the fans to thank them for their support and then headed back to the middle of the pitch.

Within the technical area, Coach Hervé Renard's mood was a bit complicated. With his experience, he understood how difficult it was to join a new team and continue performing at one's best. But Zachary had just done 'exactly' that and performed impressively on his debut for his national team.

The boy wonder took only a short while to make his presence known after stepping onto the pitch as a substitute during the 57th minute. Through his brilliant utilization of space, he quickly settled into his role and resolved Ivory Coast's tricky midfield situation. But he didn't just stop at that. Minutes later, the young playmaker came alive again with a dazzling show of dribbling skills. He beat an opponent with an elegant Marseille turn before going for the spectacular and scoring Ivory Coasts' 2nd goal during the 82nd minute.

Judging from the way Zachary handled himself right before going for the goal, Coach Hervé Renard could tell that the boy was the real deal. He was a player with well-balanced physical fitness, incredible ball skills, and an insane level of composure during crucial moments. He was the sort of player that could determine the game's outcome with just a few seconds of brilliance.

Coach Hervé Renard could feel his hopes soar to the heavens after such a player joined his side. He had been entertaining the thought of resigning from his position as head coach of Ivory Coast so as to accept an offer from the top-division French side - Lille. But after getting to experience for himself how monstrous his new player could be, the coach cast out all such notions from his mind. He immediately resolved to stay with the Ivorian National Football team.

"With Zachary Bemba joining us, maybe this team can finally achieve big things during upcoming football matches. Qualifying for the next AFCON and then the 2018 World Cup will not be difficult."

Optimistic thoughts passed through the coach's mind. He took a deep breath and continued following the proceedings on the field of play.

The game had just restarted with an Angola kick-off. The Angola players were moving the ball among themselves on their side of the pitch. They played short and straightforward passes as they tried to stretch the Ivory Coast team shape.

But just as they were beginning to get comfortable, the high press from the Ivorians arrived abruptly. The first to go into action were Gervinho, Salomon Kalou, and Wilfried Bony, the three forwards. The three men ran at the Angola defenders as if their lives were on the line, and it wasn't long before they forced an error.

The powerful, energetic, and highly agile Gervinho was the forward that finally got lucky during his high-pressing endeavor. He zeroed in on an Angola right back with boundless momentum, forcing the helpless defender to panic and try to play a long ball forward.

However, due to the pressure from Gervinho, the clearance from the defender was anything but tidy. Instead of kicking the ball high and far toward Ivory Coast's side of the pitch, the man hammered it

hurriedly and sent it straight to the area just before the border of the final third, where Zachary was lurking.

Zachary, who had been marking the space in the middle, was surprised when he saw the ball from the defender approaching his position. However, no matter how astonished he was, his reactions remained extremely swift.

He rushed forward like the wind and quickly controlled the flying ball with his chest. At that same instant, his spatial awareness worked its magic, and he mapped the positions of all teammates ahead of him within his mind.

The next moment, the gears in his highly-powered mindscape whirled and turned before falling into place. Something seemed to click within him, and his incredible football instincts took over. As the ball descended to the ground, he kicked it forward first-time and sent it back toward Gervinho, the Ivorian striker who had just forced an error.

Instant through-pass!

Everything happened almost in an instant. The defender who had made the error had not even settled down when he saw the ball flying back toward his side from a tricky angle. Before he could align his posture and intercept the ball, a highly agile figure in an orange jersey beat him to it.

Of course, it was Gervinho in action. The striker connected with Zachary's first-time teasing ball with a swiftness of a predator hunting its prey. He prodded it forward and skipped past the defender who had initially made the error. Then, before any of the other Angola defenders could react, Gervinho squared his body and dinked the ball over the approaching keeper to score Ivory Coast's third goal for the night during the 86th minute.

Ivory Coast 3 : Angola 0

The cheers around the stadium hit another thunderous peak after the ball homed into the back of the net. The fans were really excited by their team's performance against Angola. They didn't stop singing, dancing, and jubilating for minutes.

Meanwhile, the game restarted again while the fans were still celebrating. The Angola players, who had just conceded a goal, seemed to lose all morale and motivation. Their wits were at an all-time low, and they committed more errors, which invited more trouble to themselves during the game's final minutes.

The Ivorians, who had already gained all the momentum, couldn't let go of the opportunity to destroy their opponents. They high-pressed the Angola players and forced even more errors. Eventually, their efforts paid off during the 92nd minute when Yaya Touré intercepted another loose ball just outside the box and hammered it home into the top right corner to score Ivory Coast's 4th goal for the night.

The score was then 4:0 in favor of Ivory Coast, and the game slowed down into a spectacle of game management during the last three minutes of injury time. Neither team attacked the other, and as such, the score remained the same until the referee blew the final whistle during the 96th minute.

Chapter 554 Another Solid Performance

Three days later, on Sunday, March 29th, Zachary played his second match for Ivory Coast's National Football team. The game was another friendly face-off, and it was against Equatorial Guinea, another African country. It kicked off at 3:00 PM within the grounds of the Stade Félix-Houphouët-Boigny, which happened to be the same venue that hosted the match against Angola.

Zachary, who had just performed impressively during his debut against Angola, made the starting eleven as a central midfielder that afternoon. He played another impressive game against Equatorial Guinea by putting up a solid performance that wowed teammates, supporters, and fans alike.

His outstanding midfield play was especially a spectacle for the textbooks. He kept everything simple throughout the game and didn't do anything flashy. But even then, his tidy routine of passing and finding spaces while linking up with the other Ivorian midfielders like Yaya Touré and Serey Dié allowed his teammates to dictate the tempo. They hoarded the ball possession, and it wasn't long before they began creating clear-cut goal-scoring chances.

During the 38th minute, a swift exchange of one-twos between Yaya Touré and Zachary saw the two of them break through the middle and penetrate deep into Equatorial Guinea's defense. As Coast's 1st goal during the 39th minute.

The score was then 1:0 in favor of Ivory Coast, and the game they approached the box, the ball returned to Yaya Touré, who readily released a pass toward the right to find Max Gradel, the forward cutting in from the right flank.

Max Gradel, on his part, remained composed. He connected with the ball from Yaya Touré and took a touch to rush into the box. A one-versus-one battle against the keeper soon followed, and Max Gradel came out on top. He pulled the trigger early without fear or favor and unleashed a curling shot past the keeper to score Ivory Coast's 1st goal during the 39th minute.

The score was then 1:0 in favor of Ivory Coast, and the game continued after a minute or so of celebrations. The Ivorians continued dominating the proceedings on the field of play with their stable passing, and as the game progressed, they continued creating clear goal-scoring chances.

They were dangerous on the attack and even came close to scoring during the 43rd, 55th, 63rd, and 69th minutes of gameplay. However, on all those occasions, the Equatorial Guinea keeper performed as if he was inhuman and saved all those goal attempts. As such, the score remained 1:0 in favor of Ivory Coast as the game proceeded into the late stages.

The 74th minute arrived, and something no one expected transpired in the game. The Equatorial Guinea players, who had remained on the back foot all afternoon, came alive and flew forward on the counter after a failed Ivory Coast corner kick. With the lightning-fast turnover, they effortlessly broke through the ranks of the Ivorians, who were yet to array themselves back into a proper defensive shape.

Eventually, after a series of highly accurate one-twos, a square pass from the wing saw the ball arrive at the feet of Iban Salvador's feet. The striker chested it forward to rush past Simon Deli, one of the Ivorian defenders, before stepping into the box. He remained composed and hammered it on the half-volley to find the top left corner and score Equatorial Guinea's first goal on the afternoon.

The score was 1:1, and the proceedings were back to level terms. The game continued, and the Ivorian players reacted as they should after conceding the goal. They increased the intensity of their attacks and soon started asking all the crucial questions on the field of play. Their offensives grew increasingly threatening as the game progressed until they finally found a breakthrough opportunity during the 78th minute.

Zachary was the player that came alive in midfield by unleashing an outside-of-the-boot 'trivela' of a raking pass toward the left flank. And with that one ball, he took all the Equatorial Guinea midfielders out of the equation and found Salomon Kalou, Ivory Coast's left forward.

Salomon Kalou reacted quickly and connected with the intelligent pin-point ball from Zachary. The Ivorian forward chested it forward before realigning his posture and taking off towards Equatorial Guinea's box like a raging hurricane.

A few seconds of insane sprinting saw Salomon Kalou initiate a face-off against one of the Equatorial Guinea defenders. He remained composed and tried to rush past the defender with a simple change of pace. But just before he could complete his intended actions, the defender stretched out a leg and tripped the sprinting Salomon Kalou, who, in turn, tumbled to the ground with a thud.

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle and immediately awarded a free-kick to Ivory Coast. Zachary stepped forward to take the set piece from twenty-seven yards away without facing any antagonism whatsoever from the other Ivory Coast players.

At that crucial moment, Zachary remained composed and did what he usually did best. He dispatched a simple but fast shot that made a perfect parabola over the defensive wall before bouncing right on the mouth of the goal and then homing into the back of the net.

With that, Ivory Coast regained the lead, and the score was then 2:1 in their favor. Even then, the Ivorians, who had already learned their lesson after conceding once, didn't relax after scoring the second. By relying on their impressive midfield that consisted of players like Zachary and Yaya Touré, they dictated the tempo and continued launching more offensives against the visiting Equatorial Guinea side.

Zachary was even more impressive during the final stages of the game. He had already gained an initial understanding of all the nuances of his teammates after training with them for days. He effortlessly utilized that knowledge to unleash razor-sharp forward passes that caused a lot of difficulties for Equatorial Guinea's side.

But his brilliance didn't just stop at the passing. During the 87th minute, he also decided to go for glory and skipped past two Equatorial Guinea defenders with his potent dribbling. He effortlessly arrived at the edge of the box and tried to go for the top left corner with an outside-of-the-box missile of a snapshot. But alas, an interception from a defender diverted the ball away from the goal for a corner kick, and Zachary could only place his hands at the back of his head with regret.

The referee blew the whistle, and Ivory Coast took the resulting corner kick a dozen or so seconds later. However, nothing came of it, and the game continued.

The rest of the game was uneventful. The Ivory Coast players, of course, relied on their already soaring momentum and continued attacking. But they still couldn't find another real breakthrough, and as such, the score remained 2:1 in favor of Ivory Coast when the referee blew the final whistle after three minutes of injury time.

Ivory Coast had achieved yet another victory. Zachary, who had just scored his second goal for his national team, was in very high spirits. He spent minutes hugging his new teammates before walking around the pitch to wave to the fans.

As he moved around, his ears continued picking up the voices of the Ivorian supporters passionately yelling his name. An honest smile outlined his face, and he even waved at the supporters with more favor.

At that moment, he could really feel the flavor of international football. A complicated feeling emerged deep within his heart as he could also feel the sincere sentiments and expectations the Ivorian supporters had for him just from their excited yells. He took a deep breath and vowed to do his all to help his national team achieve glory.

Minutes later, Zachary attended a mandatory post-match press conference. He talked about his first experience with the Ivorian national team and also mentioned the goals he wished to achieve with his new teammates. After the session with the journalists, he enjoyed an early dinner with his teammates before returning to his hotel room to rest for the night.

Chapter 555 End of First Expedition to Ivory Coast

Zachary spent the following day in a relaxed mood. He woke up late, at 8:30 AM, went through his morning yoga routine, washed up, and then enjoyed a splendid African breakfast at the hotel's

restaurant. Then, with Lorenzo as his shadow, he spent the rest of the morning touring the city of Abidjan before linking up with Eric Bailly, his former teammate, toward noon.

The two of them enjoyed a drink together before readily deciding to utilize their noon hours for their number one passion. They returned to the Abidjan-M'pouto training complex and joined the ASEC Mimosas players for a light football session.

There was no intensity whatsoever in the game they played. As such, Zachary and Bailly both let loose and had the time of their lives while taking turns to play for their respective sides on the training ground.

Whether it was elegant sombreros, flashy nutmegs, elastico dribbles, or step-overs and feints, the two players were not shy to execute them on the training ground. Their exceptional skills that showcased their status as professional footballers based in Europe were on full display, and they wowed all the ASEC Mimosas players that afternoon.

Zachary, on his part, also found a lot of pleasure from playing the game. He had long gotten used to professional-level football and had almost forgotten the beauty of playing football just for fun. Of recent, the game had started becoming 'simply work' to him, and he just regarded football as just a chore he had to do to earn money. But that afternoon, after enjoying that light football session with the ASEC Mimosas players, that feeling of simply playing to relax on the football field returned to him.

By the time the session ended, his mood was lighter, and it was as if he had just taken a week-long vacation. He felt pretty stress-free, without any signs of fatigue that were usually obvious in players who had traveled thousands of miles and played two back-to-back international games within a short window of four days.

But of course, he knew that the marvelous feeling was just an illusion born out of a relaxing light football session. He understood that he still had to take strict measures to recover from post-match fatigue before returning to tip-top shape. He had to ensure he regained full match fitness before playing Juventus' game against Empoli, which happened to be only five days away.

As the clock hands around Abidjan were about to point to the 2:00 PM mark, Zachary said his goodbyes to the ASEC Mimosas players and parted with Eric Bailly. He returned to his hotel room and enjoyed a late lunch before spending the rest of the afternoon asleep in his room.

In the evening, Zachary woke up feeling even more refreshed. After washing up, he headed to Hôtel Ivoire's restaurant, where he linked up with his biological mom, who happened to be in Ivory Coast.

Céleste Kouame, the lady who was Zachary's biological mom, was as graceful as he remembered. She had long braided black hair that hung rich and black about her shoulders, and her stature was tall and elegant. Her pretty smile also seemed genuine as she enjoyed dinner with Zachary. Anyone could tell that she was really having a great time.

Zachary, on his part, still didn't know how to deal with the affection from his biological mother. He remained polite and only replied to her queries with short and precise responses. As such, an awkward atmosphere hung about their table until they finished their dinner at around 8:00 PM.

While departing from the restaurant, she asked whether Zachary could find some time in the near future to visit his maternal grandparents, who were long-time residents of Yamoussoukro, the capital city of Ivory Coast. Zachary didn't agree, as that was too much of a hustle for him. He simply gave some random excuses of being busy with football training and matches before parting with his biological mom.

While returning to his room, Zachary bumped into Kristin, his personal assistant, in the hotel lobby. She had had a busy past few days helping Zachary complete all the miscellaneous things he had assigned her. Whether it was finalizing the citizenship paperwork for Zachary, finding out the prices for mansions for sale in Abidjan, or signing for match bonuses from the Ivorian Football Federation, she worked tirelessly to complete all the tasks with remarkable professionalism.

On seeing her, Zachary's eyes lit up, and he immediately walked toward her. He greeted her and then pulled her to a nearby bar area to ask about the progress of some tasks he had assigned her.

"So, did you make any progress with searching for suitable houses in Abidjan?" Zachary asked. As a citizen of Ivory Coast, he, of course, had to get himself an address in the country. Accordingly, he had already started looking for a house to purchase.

Kristin smiled on hearing Zachary's question. "I contacted a few real estate brokers, who showed me a few presentable houses in good neighborhoods around Abidjan. They are in price ranges of 400K to 1.8 million Euros. If you wish, we can look at them before we depart tomorrow."

"Those prices are a bit too expensive," Zachary remarked. He wasn't looking for something too extravagant, especially since he would not spend many days in Ivory Coast in the future. He just hoped to buy a presentable house in the range of less than 150,000 Euros, which would only act as his residence during those few days when he would be in Ivory Coast to play games for the national team.

"Aren't there cheaper options?" He asked Kristin.

"There are those options with an asking price of less than 200,000 Euros," Kristin answered. "But from what I have learned, they are in neighborhoods where your security cannot be guaranteed."

"Oh!" Zachary narrowed his eyes and sighed. "Okay, then. So be it. Compile a list of suitable houses and send it to me. Send the information with pictures, so I can decide which one to purchase."

"Don't you wish to inspect the houses yourself before the purchase?" Kristin asked. "You must understand that what is portrayed in the pictures can vary greatly from what's on the ground."

"Don't worry about all that," Zachary said with a smile. "I trust your judgment. Just recommend a few suitable ones to me, and I will choose from those. End of story."

"Okay," Kristin said, inhaling deeply. "I will do my best to find the best houses for you. Thanks for putting your trust in me."

Zachary nodded in acknowledgment. He then made some more small talk with Kristin and especially asked about her granddad - Mr. Stein, the scout who brought him to Europe. After learning that the aged scout was okay, he wished Kristin goodnight and returned to his hotel room for the night.

Minutes later, after lying in bed, he thought about his first trip to Ivory Coast. He had performed remarkably and scored twice during his first two games for Ivory Coast. He had also not shied away from bonding with teammates and was thus confident that he had left a good impression on them. He felt that his expedition was a success, and all that was left was for him to set off for the trip back to Turin, where he would continue his club career.

Chapter 556 Returning to Turin and Investment Considerations

After a night of deliberation, Zachary didn't choose to buy a stand-alone mansion as his home in Ivory Coast. Instead, he decided to go for an entire three-story apartment block priced at around 980K Euros

in one of Abidjan's residential suburbs. He tasked Kristin with finalizing all the purchase procedures in his stead before boarding an afternoon flight together with Lorenzo, his bodyguard, and setting off for Turin.

Their plane touched down on the runway of the Turin-Caselle Airport at around midday the following day. It was a pretty busy hour within the famous transport hub of Turin, and there were floods of people waiting to board the planes and other swarms going through immigration checks and other procedures.

Zachary and his bodyguard utilized one of the airport's 'arrival meet and assist' fast-track VIP services to avoid all the commotion and the lines. They went through the required procedures in less than ten minutes before boarding their Audi RS 7 and returning to Zachary's villa in Pinerolo, Piedmont.

Zachary had coughed out ample sums of money to have his mansion renovated over the past few months. Its walls were more polished, and its gardens were lush and green with towering trees. Its aesthetics, both on the inside and outside, were pleasing to the eye, and Zachary felt pretty relaxed after returning to its safe confines.

He entered the house through the front door and greeted the other residents. He later washed up and enjoyed a fulfilling lunch prepared by Inger, his chef, before returning to his room and descending into a long slumber.

His fatigue levels were already high after his long journey to and from Ivory Coast. On top of that, he'd also played two intensive international football matches in hot weather that drained his stamina. So, after returning to the haven that was his villa, he relaxed and forgot about everything else. He slept until evening and only woke up because of the aggravating sound of his phone vibrating from his bedside table.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

Turning to one side, Zachary extended his arm and picked up the still-vibrating phone. The next moment, his expression softened when he realized that the call was from Emily Anderson, his agent. He tapped the accept button and immediately held the phone against his ear.

"Hello, Emily," he spoke into the phone.

"Hello, Zachary!" She replied in a cheerful voice. "Welcome back from Ivory Coast, and congratulations upon accomplishing a successful debut for your national team."

"Thanks, Emily," Zachary answered. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," she replied. "What about you? How are you doing?"

"I am also doing great. But, of course, I can't escape the fatigue after playing two back-to-back international games."

Kristin chuckled. She then spent the next minute or so exchanging some more small talk with Zachary before finally breaching the topic that was the reason for her call.

"Zachary," she continued, "I was just in touch with Kristin. She just informed me that you tasked her with finalizing the purchase procedures for a villa in Abidjan."

"Yes," Zachary confirmed. "She's helping me with the purchase. I informed her to contact you so that you can help her with the legal end of matters."

"That's what she said," Emily said. "But why are you buying an apartment block in Ivory Coast? I thought you initially only wanted to buy a small house that would act as your temporary home when you're in Abidjan! Why did you change your mind all of a sudden?"

"Well..." Zachary replied, "I was studying Ivory Coast's real estate market the other day and realized it's really promising. For instance, people who purchased prime plots of land at around 40,000 Euros five years ago are now able to sell them for twice or thrice the amount. With such profits up for grabs, I was tempted to take action, and that was how I ended up buying the apartment block. The apartment itself is in a strategic place, which happens to be a junction between three busy roads. If I develop the property well, there's a high chance that I'll reap bountiful profits in the future."

"All that I understand," Emily said with an audible sigh. "But you should understand that any investment needs hands-on management to make a profit. Real estate might be a high-return venture in Abidjan, but the possibility of you making losses exists, especially if you don't have suitable personnel to manage the property. And don't tell me that you can manage it yourself. Considering your busy schedule as a

footballer, you might not get time to visit the property for months or even a year. So, Zachary! Tell me! How do you expect to reap profits under such circumstances? For all I know, some connen or corrupt officials could conspire to sell your property without your knowledge at any time. Then, you would descend into a world of sorrow that would, in turn, affect your football career."

"The risk is there," Zachary agreed with Emily's analysis. "But as we all know; you'll never progress without taking risks. People must go out of their comfort zones to develop. Honestly, I'm just testing the waters in Ivory Coast. But if the investment works out, I'll purchase more land and property in the country. I understand that doing all that comes with risks. However, I also know there are ways to minimize those risks to the bare minimum. I'm no business specialist to conjure sure-proof ways to manage the property. But I'm already paying Miss Heather Miller for that. As my investment consultant, she should be able to come up with appropriate plans to manage my property, and in so doing, she can help me avoid incurring losses due to mismanagement. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, that's true," Emily said. "Bringing an investment consultant on board would work wonders. She can even help you set up a company, which will employ skilled workers to manage your investments in your stead."

"Then, let's do exactly that," Zachary said. "Let's bring Miss Heather Miller on board so she can set up the company that will manage my investments."

"Are you sure?" Emily asked. "Setting up a company requires a lot of capital and time. And even though you'll have employees, there will be times when you'll be required to appear in the company in person. All that might divert your attention and affect the future progress of your football career."

"That won't happen," Zachary said with confidence. "Investments won't divert me from my career. They will give me another goal in life, thus allowing me to remain focused. A case in point is that I will not have to spend most of my money on distractions like supermodels, designer clothes, and vacations but on buying property."

"I guess you've thought everything through," Emily intoned. "Let's hope you're right. I'll contact Heather and have her start the procedures for setting up your company. She's also the right person to help Kristin finalize the procedures for the property purchase in Abidjan."

"True," Zachary agreed. "Just finalize everything with her and inform me about the outcome. I'm really looking forward to setting up a company."

"All that aside," Emily said, "your decision to reject the Vector X endorsement deal was right on the money. Your patience has finally paid off, and Nike just forwarded a new endorsement deal proposal to me earlier today."

"They have?" Zachary's eyes lit up. "Tell me the details."

"Well..." Emily said. "They are proposing a ten-year endorsement deal which will see you pocket an annual income of roughly 13 million Euros. Moreover, that's just the 'basic' earnings. There are clauses in their offer that will increase your income to roughly 18 to 20 million if you can accomplish feats that market your name globally. For instance, your annual earnings could increase by a significant margin if you won a Champions League Trophy, the Serie A, and the Ballon d'Or. And if you were to win a World Cup during the contract period, your annual income might even double."

"Ten-year deal!" Zachary exclaimed. "That means I'll be under contract with them until I hit thirty. What do you think? Is it a good offer?"

"I can't say for sure," Emily replied. "At the moment, it seems like a more than good offer. But with how fast you're progressing as a footballer, I'm not sure that it will still be the best deal, let's say, in five years. By then, you might have just achieved so much, and many companies would be willing to offer you double the money Nike is offering."

"So, what do you suggest?" Zachary inquired.

"My suggestion is simple," Emily said. "You still have more than a year on your contract with Nike. So, we have some leeway to slow the negotiation procedures while waiting for Nike to make a better offer. In the meantime, you might also be able to accomplish more memorable feats on the field of play, thereby increasing our bargaining power."

"So, your suggestion is to take it slow until Nike caves in and makes a better offer?"

"Yes, exactly." Emily nodded. "You don't lack money at the moment. So, let's take our time and negotiate the best contract possible. Let's remain patient and do things right so that we can push for a deal that will elevate you to the status of one of the highest-earning footballers in the world."

"I like the sound of that," Zachary said. "Go ahead and do exactly that. But keep me in the loop in case something major happens."

"Okay," Emily agreed. "We have talked a lot. I guess I have to say goodbye now."

"Sure! I have also just returned to Turin earlier today. I'm still feeling fatigued. Let's end our talk here. But please don't forget to contact Miss Heather Miller about the company stuff."

"I will do that," Emily promised. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Zachary ended the call. He didn't continue sleeping after that but descended the stairs and enjoyed dinner with Inger and Bjørn Peters. After the meal, Zachary watched the sports news for an hour or so before returning to his room. He utilized only about fifteen minutes to shower before jumping into bed for the night.

Chapter 557 SS-Grade Stamina & Endurance

Zachary slept like a baby and woke up feeling refreshed the following morning. The clock hands around Turin had just pointed to the 6:30 AM mark when he jumped out of bed before quickly washing his face. He donned a clean tracksuit and exited the bedroom before descending the stairs and heading to the kitchen area.

As he walked through the doors, his eyes landed on Lorenzo, his bodyguard, who was already waiting for him. The buff man was in his training gear and had settled on one of the chairs around the kitchen table to enjoy a cup of warm milk. Surprisingly, he wasn't alone at the table but was deep in conversation with Jaslene, one of Zachary's maids, who was beside him.

The atmosphere around them was really harmonious. But on seeing Zachary walk into the kitchen, the two of them got up from their seats like two startled rabbits.

"Boss! Good morning!" Lorenzo was the first to overcome his awkwardness and greet Zachary.

"Good morning to you too, Lorenzo!" Zachary pretended to have seen nothing and returned their greetings one after the other. He picked a glass of juice from the fridge and gulped it down. Then, after placing the dirty glass in the sink, he turned his gaze back to Lorenzo.

"Are you ready to head out?" He asked, just to make sure.

"Almost," Lorenzo replied before downing his milk in a single gulp. "Now, I'm ready. We can head out at any time."

Zachary smiled. "Let's go! I need to finish my morning jog before seven."

"Okay, boss!"

With that said, the two of them departed from the house. They quickly ran out of Zachary's estate before joining the streets of Pinerolo, Piedmont.

The sun was just rising from the eastern horizon of Turin. It gave way to the dawn and the morning brightness that upgraded the world to a higher definition.

Zachary ran like a marathon champion on the streets while enjoying the morning sun rays shining down upon him. With Lorenzo as his shadow, they maintained a pace of four minutes every kilometer until they rounded a roundabout and started their return journey to Zachary's estate.

Zachary, who had long gotten used to fast-paced morning jogs, was still full of energy even after covering more than three kilometers. His breathing was stable, and only a few beads of sweat had begun rolling down his face. It was as if he had been taking a morning walk instead of a high-paced jog.

Lorenzo, on the other hand, was in a totally different condition. It seemed that he was yet to adapt to Zachary's fast-paced running. As such, he was already taking in air in rapid gasps while trying to keep up with Zachary.

Zachary noticed his bodyguard's condition and slowed down his pace. Instead of simply running forward, he started mixing other routines into his jogging.

He would run for about fifty meters and then do push-ups, moving squats, or any other exercise to strengthen his lower body. And because of that, Lorenzo managed to keep up with him, and they arrived back on the road that led back to Zachary's estate without any difficulties.

Zachary started jogging forward at a constant pace without mixing in any other routines. And just as he was about a kilometer from his mansion, he met a familiar beautiful girl jogging on the road. Her facial features were exquisite, and her figure red hot, especially in the tight jogging apparel. She smiled at Zachary just as they were about to pass by each other.

Zachary returned a smile of his own out of politeness and then accelerated past the lady. At that moment, his heart was as clear as a mirror and without ripples.

He had already gained immunity against beauties, especially after dating a lady as hot as Camilla. All that was on his mind was to train and train so as to elevate his skills and progress his career. There was no way he would fall for a lady he had met four or five times while jogging around the neighborhood of his estate.

Zachary quickly approached his mansion at a constant pace after passing by the lady. Then, when he judged that there were only five hundred meters to go, he took off like the wind and continued towards his house at breakneck speed. He soon left Lorenzo in the dust as he cut through the morning breeze like a 400-meter sprinting champion.

300 Meters! 250 Meters! 200 Meters!

Zachary's long strides ate up meters of space like nothing. His breathing quickened, and more and more beads of sweat started rolling down his face like tap water.

The sprinting was already sapping all his energy, and he could feel his limit approaching. But he hardened his resolve and continued sprinting forward until he dashed through the gates of his estates and reached his mansion.

As he slowed down and came to a complete halt, he felt a bizarre sensation washing over his entire being. His body and mind achieved a state of total relaxation, and he felt some energy returning to his

body. His breathing and heartbeat slowed to normal levels, and it was as if he had just taken the most potent energy drink to refill his depleted stamina.

"DING!"

A system notification sounded in his mind at that moment.

"Congratulations!" The system AI intoned. "The user has completed another hidden system mission by shattering through another barrier and achieving SS-grade stamina and endurance mainly through consistent training efforts. As a token of support, the system has rewarded 40,000 Juju points to the user for accomplishing the feat. Please, continue working hard and attain more breakthroughs without relying on the system elixirs."

Zachary's eyes lit up on hearing the notification. He couldn't believe that he had achieved a breakthrough in stamina in just eight days after pushing his core strength to the SS-grade level. He inhaled deeply and summoned the system interface before beginning to peruse through his attributes.

*USER STATS

->Physical Fitness (Av. Rating: SS)

Balance and Coordination: SS

Agility: SS

Strength: SS

Stamina: SS

Endurance Points: 17,300/72,000 (SS)

->Soccer Technique: [Av. Rating: SS]

Ball Control: SS

Dribbling Skills: SS

Passing Accuracy: SS

Body Control: SS

"Finally, I have reached this stage..."

Happiness danced through Zachary's thoughts. After toiling tirelessly for years, he had finally brought all his physical fitness and soccer technique stats to the SS grading.

His skills had developed at the pace of a rocket escaping Earth's gravity, and even at just the age of twenty, he was already a football sensation in his own right. Moreover, going by his well-balanced attributes, he wasn't just any run-of-the-mill talent but a once-in-a-generation player that could match the best footballers in the world. He was finally a player who could join any league, no matter how challenging, yet continue performing like a ball wizard.

"With SS-grade stamina and endurance, I can finally go all out and utilize all my abilities on the field without worrying about exhausting myself quickly."

Joy sparkled inside Zachary as he continued thinking about his latest breakthrough. Contentment flooded his entire being as he understood that he finally had all the fuel and qualifications to run wild on the pitch without worrying about exhaustion.

Stamina and endurance were both parameters of time for physical activity. But even then, there was a crucial difference between the two concepts.

According to what Zachary had learned, stamina was the maximum time the body, or a specific muscle group, could exert 'maximum' or 'near maximum' force for a particular physical activity. That implies that with stamina graded at SS by the system, Zachary could sprint at his highest speed for much longer. He could sustain both his potent dribbling and maniac running for more seconds than before, and as such, he would become more effective during counterattacks or one-versus-one scenarios. That was how crucial stamina was to footballers.

Endurance, on the other hand, was an attribute that determined the maximum time the body or a specific muscle group could exert force or perform physical activity. Compared to stamina, the exerted force did not have to be at maximum, as the goal for endurance was to maximize time. As such, Zachary, who happened to have just experienced an upgrade in stamina, would last longer during matches. Moreover, he would not easily suffer from accumulated fatigue after playing many games in a season. He would remain fresher than most, even during the season's closing stages when all teams would suffer from depleting energy levels. That was how crucial endurance was for a professional footballer playing for a top club like Juventus.

man looked totally exhausted, and it was as if he had just run a marathon of 40-plus kilometers.

Smiling slightly, Zachary dismissed the system interface. Right then, he noticed Lorenzo, his bodyguard, coming through the gates. The man looked totally exhausted, and it was as if he had just run a marathon of 40-plus kilometers.

"Boss!" He exclaimed while gasping for breath. "Aside from football, you can maybe consider going for professional athletics. With your pace, you should be able to give the 400 and 800-meter champions a run for their money."

Zachary chuckled and shook his head. "Aside from possessing world-class sprinting talent, those professionals spend all their time training for those sprinting events. After years of targeted training, they have already sharpened their bodies and minds to perform specifically on the racing track. Their acceleration, stride frequency, and sprinting rhythm are all honed to a level beyond words could describe. Do you expect me to win against such dedicated professionals?"

"I haven't seen anyone, including sprinters, maintaining a speed like yours over a distance of half a kilometer," Lorenzo said. "Maybe, you can win."

Zachary shook his head. "Success in sports is not that easy. No matter how talented, one must dedicate ample time to training before achieving success in any given discipline. There's no way around that."

Zachary didn't continue talking to Lorenzo after that. Instead, he stepped to the side and quickly began executing his warming-down routine. He was in a hurry to finish his exercise session before heading to the Vinovo to attend Juventus' team training that was scheduled to start at nine that morning.

Chapter 558 Preparations for the Game Against Empoli

Having taken breakfast, Zachary headed to the Vinovo. He arrived a few minutes before nine and quickly donned his training attire. Then, after stepping into his green Nike Mercurial Superfly boots, he exited the dressing room and set off for the main training turf, where the coaches would conduct the official team training that morning.

His teammates, who had left Turin to play international games for their respective national teams, had already returned. Even players like Martín Cáceres, Carlos Tevez, Roberto Pereyra, and Arturo Vidal, who had traveled all the way to South America to represent their respective countries, were already back on the training ground. They were all in groups of fours and fives performing rondo drills when Zachary arrived on the training ground.

"Zachary! You're almost late," Patrice Evra, the French left-back, yelled out on seeing Zachary. "Hurry and join us."

Zachary smiled and nodded in Evra's direction. He first took a minute to say hi to his other teammates, who were also in the midst of performing rondo drills in the other groups. Then, after greeting some of the coaches and technical staff, who were already on the training ground, he tightened his laces and joined Evra's group on the far side of the pitch.

"Hello, to you all," Zachary said after he arrived before the group.

"Hello, Zachary..." The other players in the group, including Patrice Evra, Andrea Pirlo, Carlos Tevez, and Leonardo Bonucci, high-fived him, one after the other while returning his greetings. Then, they talked about their respective international escapades for about five minutes before finally returning their focus to the rondo drill.

"Zachary!" Patrice Evra said. "We're playing a one-touch 4-versus-1 rondo. Since you're the last to arrive, you will be the monkey in the middle."

"Ouch!" Zachary said, pretending to be hurt. "You have just utilized a racist term. I'll sue you for that."

"Do you have any witnesses?" Evra asked.

Zachary didn't reply but pointed at the other three players in the group.

Evra turned to the others and asked with a grin, "Comrades! Are you going to sell out a teammate for this latecomer?"

The others laughed at that and made a few jokes to taunt Zachary and Evra before starting the rondo drill.

In simple terms, a rondo was a keep-away style drill where one team with more players 'would try' to keep possession against a smaller number of defenders trying to take the ball away. It was similar to the children's game - monkey in the middle. That was why Evra had asked Zachary to become the monkey in the middle since he would be the player trying to win the ball as the others played single touches among themselves to keep the ball away from him.

Zachary, of course, was against remaining as the monkey in the middle for a long time. Within seconds after the drill started, he utilized his SS-grade agility and reflexes to corner Patrice Evra. He won the ball from the Frenchman fair and square before taking his position in the drill.

With that, Patrice Evra was the monkey in the middle, and he started chasing the ball while trying to win it from the others who continued passing it around him. He eventually cornered Leonardo Bonucci after a minute or so, and the drill continued at a fast pace.

The five players soon immersed themselves in the drill as they played faster and faster touches while different players took turns taking on the role of the monkey in the middle. The morning sun shone upon them as they passed the ball around, and beads of sweat started rolling down their faces. But they didn't stop the rondo drill until the 'very moment' Coach Max Allegri arrived and summoned them to the center circle of the training ground.

"Good morning, lads!" The coach said after all the players had settled down on the green within the center circle.

"Good morning to you too, coach," the players replied, more or less in unison.

Coach Allegri smiled. "Let me take this opportunity to welcome you back from the international break. Some of you traveled as far as South America, others to Africa, and the rest to various parts of Europe to play international games for your national teams. If you managed to win, congratulations. If, by some chance, you lost any of your international games, work harder so you can win in the future. That's football! We don't give up even after losing. We instead work harder and go all out to accomplish a better result in the next game."

"Now, let's put the international games aside and return our focus to our Serie A matches," the coach continued with a smile. "As you're all aware, we only have two days before playing our next Serie A home game which happens to be against Empoli. Empoli is a relegation zone. But all that doesn't matter to us as Juventus. Even if the opponents have been performing poorly up to this point of the club in the bottom half of the table. It has only amassed 33 points from the 28 Serie A games they played this season. It's ranked 14th out of the twenty Serie A teams and only four positions above the relegation zone. But all that doesn't matter to us as Juventus. Even if the opponents have been performing poorly up to this point of the season, we still cannot let our guard down and underestimate them. We must continue doing what we have been doing all season and go all out to defeat them. We must not lose our focus and falter during the game! We must prepare adequately today and tomorrow and ensure we don't lose the game. That's all I'm asking of you. Clear?"

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

Coach Allegri's expression turned solemn. "I know we're are only four points away from winning the title. One win and one draw from the next two games, against Empoli and Parma, will allow us to become the 2014-15 Serie A Champions. But does that mean that we should relax? Does that mean that we should take things easy and save our energy? The answer is a big NO. In professional football, there's no taking it easy. We have a big responsibility to the fans, the sponsors, and all the other parties supporting us from the background. We cannot just go through the motions and start playing lackluster football simply because we're on the cusp of winning a title. We must continue doing our best off and on the pitch. We must continue doing what we have done all season and make all our supporters proud. Aside from the word victory, nothing else should be in our vocabulary simply because we're Juventus. Are you with me, guys?"

"Yes, coach!"

"Are you with me?"

"Yes, coach!"

"Good!" Coach Allegri smiled. "Since we have our priorities right, let's start training. We have limited time. So, we'll go through a simple dynamic warm-up first. Then, we'll delve straight into working on the tactics, formations, and game plan, as a whole. I need you all to remain focused during today and tomorrow's sessions so we don't waste time on simple stuff. Let's not waste any more time. Training starts now!"

The coach clapped his hands for emphasis, and with that, the preparations for the game against Empoli began. Under the supervision of the coaches, the players went through drills targeted toward refining their tactics as a team. They trained for long hours over the next two days while also taking some time to attend the theoretical lectures touching upon the game by Max Allegri and the other assistant coaches responsible for the tactics.

Most players were still showing signs of fatigue on the training ground, especially after traveling to various parts of the globe to play intensive matches for their national teams. But as professionals, their wills were tenacious, and they didn't let the fatigue bog them down. They pushed through with their all and persisted in training until the eve of the game against Empoli arrived.

That evening, on the eve of the game against Empoli, Coach Max Allegri held a strategic meeting with his assistants. The likes of Marco Landucci, Maurizio Trombetta, Luca Stefanini, and Matteo Fabris all met in one of the conference rooms at the Vinovo to discuss the status of their players and the Juventus team as a whole.

"Colleagues!" Max Allegri was the first to speak. "You must have noticed that most of our players who traveled to play Internationals showed clear signs of fatigue during today's and yesterday's training sessions."

"Boss!" Maurizio Trombetta, the assistant in charge of the first team, said. "You're right. That's the case. Those who traveled to South America, like Martín Cáceres, Carlos Tevez, Roberto Pereyra, and Arturo Vidal, are in even worse condition. But they are not the only ones. I also noticed that Stephan Lichtsteiner, who traveled to Switzerland, Kwadwo Asamoah, who traveled to Ghana, and Andrea Pirlo, who played for Italy twice during the past week, all showed signs of fatigue. I fear they might not be able to handle more than 45 minutes of intensive physical activity if we field them during our game against Empoli tomorrow."

"Indeed," Coach Max Allegri said with a sigh. "I'm still debating whether to include them in the starting line-up."

"Coach, can I say something?" Luca Stefanini, the head of the medical team, interjected. "If you can, it's better you don't include the exhausted players on the starting line-up. Accumulated fatigue will put them at risk of injury during the heat of the game. So, why not rest them for the next matches instead of risking them against Empoli?"

"I'm with Luca on this," Matteo Fabris, the other assistant coach, said. "We still have ten games to play this season, but we're only four points away from claiming the title. So, why should we risk playing our fatigued players when we're in such a commanding position on top of the Serie A table? Moreover, we shouldn't forget that we'll soon be playing against Fiorentina in the second leg of the Coppa Italia semi-finals. After that, we'll face off against Parma away from home before playing Real Madrid in the UEFA Champions League quarter-finals. We'll play all those vital fixtures in a short window of less than two weeks. So, why not rest our crucial players now, so they can be a hundred percent match fit when we play those important fixtures?"

"Maybe, we can go with your suggestion, Matteo," Coach Allegri said. "But we don't have to rest all our crucial players as some aren't suffering from accumulated fatigue. For instance, Zachary Bamba has been in tip-top condition during training over the past two days. There are also others, like Claudio Marchisio, Fernando Llorente, Patrice Evra, Giorgio Chiellini, and Leonardo Bonucci, who haven't shown

any signs of fatigue over the past two days. They can all start and help us salvage a win against Empoli. Of course, if the need arises, I'll substitute them long before the end of the game."

"That works," Luca Stefanini, the head of the medical team, said. "I'm only against playing the players showing clear signs of fatigue. As for the rest, there shouldn't be a reason for them not to partake in the game."

Coach Allegri smiled. He then discussed a few other issues concerning the team with his assistant before ending the meeting and heading to the tactics room for the pre-game tactical meeting.

Chapter 559 Coach Maurizio Sarri's Targeted Strategies

At least seventy-five minutes before the time fixed for the kick-off of any league match, a representative of each participating club had to submit a team sheet by methods approved by the Serie A governing body. The submitted information would contain particulars like the names and shirt numbers of all the team's players (including the substitutes), the color of the team's jerseys (including what the keeper would wear), plus the names and job titles of up to seven officials that would occupy the technical bench during that league match.

The time that Saturday was 8:00 PM, and only an hour remained before the scheduled kick-off of the highly anticipated Serie A league match between Juventus and Empoli. Maurizio Sarri, the head coach of Empoli, had already submitted the mandated team sheet for his club and, in turn, received the one for Juventus. At that moment, he was seated beside Francesco Calzona, his assistant, in the visitor's dressing room of the Juventus stadium. The 'two of them' were reviewing Juventus' team sheet together while waiting for their players to return from their pre-match dynamic warm-up.

A solemn expression particularly outlined Coach Maurizio Sarri's face as his eyes took in the name after another name of Juventus' starting eleven. As expected, Coach Max Allegri had rested most of his starting players and fielded a team almost full of second-stringers. But as far as Maurizio Sarri was concerned, that weaker Juventus team was still enough to give Empoli a big challenge.

Angelo Ogbonna, Leonardo Bonucci, and Andrea Barzagli were the men in Juventus' defense of three. Then, Stefano Sturaro, Zachary Bemba, Simone Padoin, Patrice Evra, and the young Federico Mattiello made up the midfield of five. And finally, Coach Allegri fielded Fernando Llorente and Álvaro Morata as the two strikers to complete Juventus' 3-5-2 formation.

It was not the best squad according to Juventus' usual standards. But, with a player like Zachary, the Old Lady's starting eleven still had strong enough tactical prowess and individual brilliance within their ranks to overpower Empoli and go home with the three points. With all that in mind, Maurizio Sarri had not stopped working out strategies to ensure a win for his players against such on-form opponents.

"What we expected happened," Francesco Calzona, his assistant, remarked beside him. "They rested most of their players who played international games over the past seven days. The only surprise listings in their starting eleven are Zachary Bemba, Patrice Evra, Leonardo Bonucci, and Fernando Llorente."

"Yes," Maurizio Sarri grunted a response. "Zachary's presence is a surprise. But it's good that we prepared tactics against him beforehand. At least, without Pirlo and the other Juventus regular starters to support him, we'll find it easier to execute those tactics and contain him on the field of play."

"Yeah!" Francesco Calzona agreed. "We're lucky to face off against a much weaker Juventus team. If we stick to the game plan and remain focused, we'll definitely come out on top against them today."

Maurizio Sarri nodded. His team, Empoli, was only eleven points above the relegation spots. As such, he would be in even deeper shit and closer to the red zone if he failed to at least go home with a point after the match. More than anything, he needed to find a way to overpower Juventus even while playing away from home. He had to encourage his players to go for a desirable result and, in so doing, increase the gap between him and the teams occupying the relegation spots.

The time passed quickly as the two coaches reviewed the match sheets, and when the clock hands around Turin were about to point to the 8:30 PM mark, the Empoli players returned to the dressing room after their warm-up. They settled on the seats around the dressing room and began their final preparations for the game.

A few more minutes passed, and after Coach Maurizio Sarri judged that the time was right, he took center stage. He spent the next quarter of an hour talking about the main points of the game plan, which included playing with a 4-3-1-2 defensive formation with three holding midfielders. He also emphasized the need to remain focused during the game before touching upon the importance of taking advantage of set pieces, like corner kicks, to create golden opportunities against a much stronger Juventus side. Eventually, the coach ended his speech with encouraging words to boost his players' morale before summoning his three defensive midfielders to one side.

"Croce! Valdifiori! Vecino!" The coach looked at his three defensive midfielders with a solemn expression. "As we discussed, you have vital roles during today's match. You three will take turns marking Zachary Bemba throughout the entire duration of the game."

"I have disclosed plenty of information about Zachary during the past few preparatory tactical meetings. He is a genius of a creative playmaker who thrives when you allow him to move freely between the lines and pick out passes and shots as he wishes. He has sublime ball technique, exceptional passing, superior vision, rock-solid composure, and world-class flair, especially with the ball at his feet."

"All those qualities allow him to remain cunning and press-resistant, even at crucial moments. If you lose sight of him for even a minute, he will not hesitate to immediately carve out beautiful through balls and smart forward passes, which can be a thorn to deal with. Moreover, Zachary also possesses potent dribbling abilities, okay physical power, impressive work rate & aggression, plus world-class decision-making and anticipation. He's really a handful of a playmaker, but we can still stop him today if you three work hand in hand to limit his impact on the game."

The coach's voice turned more vibrant. "By using specific man-marking strategies and sticking close to him, you can reduce the time he got to do some purpose with the ball to the bare minimum. By staying 'particularly' close to him, you can make it more challenging for him to play forward passes or cut through the middle wherever he wants."

"Judging from past performances, Zachary always favors playing forward passes to a wing-back cutting in from the flanks or setting up the strikers darting forward through the middle with defense splitting passes between the lines. Other times, he can go at it alone and cut in from the wing while dribbling toward the goal. So, how do you three stop him?"

"You tight mark him to the very end. You deny him space and time to pick out the passes while blocking his vision and the most obvious passing options. However, remember not to panic at crucial moments. You only have to hold your position and stop him from driving forward and past you with his dribbling and speed. If you accomplish that, your teammates will have all the time in the world to fall back into shape and help combat against the danger."

"Take my word for it," the coach continued, "Any player, no matter how talented, will not perform at his best when he has someone constantly breathing down his neck. For instance, if you tightly mark Zachary, he will most likely always receive the ball with his back toward the goal and then fail to turn and lay off passes to players in the spaces ahead of him. And with that, you three will have achieved your goal of making him unable to advance play into the final third in a manner he would have wanted. Clear?"

"Yes, coach! We understand." The three holding midfielders replied solemnly.

The coach smiled and continued. "Remember, tight marking alone isn't enough to contain a player as skilled and talented as Zachary. You three have to go all out and quickly turn the game from a battle of skill to a contest of physicality and aggression whenever he receives the ball. You can tackle him hard, bump into him with such force and momentum that he shudders, or pull his shirt when the referee's line of vision is blocked. I'm not encouraging you to behave like foolish rogues by committing silly and outlandish fouls that will bring us trouble. All I am saying is that you remain patient while using your intelligence to nip at his tenacity. Use your strength against him, trip him a little when there's a chance, or execute other inconspicuous fouls until they pile up to the point of frustrating him and affecting his performance on the field of play."

"Moreover, by constantly harassing him, you'll tire him out fast. At first, he may beat you with his superior ball skills. But if you remain have said in your heads?" The coach looked at the three players before him.

tenacious and torment him like a parasite, his stamina reserves will drain fast, and he will quickly turn into another run-of-the-mill midfielder on the field of play. Have you guys registered all that I have said in your heads?" The coach looked at the three players before him.

"Yes, coach," the three holding midfielders replied.

"That's good, then." Coach Maurizio Sarri nodded. "At any given time, one of you three must remain with Zachary to tight mark him while the other two cover the other spaces in the defensive midfield. You must not allow him to leave your sights even for a second on the pitch. Is that clear?"

"Yes, coach," the players replied solemnly again.

The coach smiled and glanced at his watch. He stepped away from his three holding midfielders and said a few more last-minute encouraging words to his other players. Then, when the clock hands around Turin pointed to the 8:50 PM mark, he dismissed his players from the visitor's dressing room and sent them toward the pitch for the match.

Over the past week, he had done his best to develop targeted strategies for the match against Juventus. He had spent many hours at night watching past match videos featuring players like Zachary Bemba, Andrea Pirlo, and the other creative Juventus players before conjuring plans to limit their influence on the pitch. He had passed all the details of the approaches he had come up with to his players in the best way he could over the past few days of training. Now that the time of the game had arrived, he only yearned to see them execute his game plan in a perfect manner before going on to defeat the Italian football giant that was Juventus.

Chapter 560 Fox in the Box

FWEEEEEEE

The referee blew the whistle at 9:00 PM, and the game between Empoli started immediately after. The Juventus players were the ones to kick off the game. They sent their home fans into a frenzy of excitement and boundless expectations as they quickly settled into a comfortable rhythm of slow build-ups during the opening stages.

The Old Lady players continued passing the ball among their defenders and holding midfielders while trying to stretch Empoli's defensive shape. They didn't try to force anything and only arrayed themselves into their traditional 3-5-2 formation while hoarding most of the ball possession during the opening minutes.

But as the proceedings moved forward and the 14th minute arrived, most of the Juventus starting eleven on the night demonstrated why they were usually on the bench. The second-stringers who had made the starting line-up showed tendencies toward being impatient. They began rushing and trying out complicated plays and consequently became prone to making amateur mistakes.

The young Juventus players, like the 18-year-old Federico Mattiello and the 21-year-old Stefano Sturaro, even made blind passes within the defensive third that almost cost the team dearly. Their negligence really did invite immediate counters from the well-disciplined Empoli players during the 16th, 21st, and 24th minutes.

Fortunately for Juventus, Gianluigi Buffon, the experienced keeper, was on fire again that night. He performed beyond expectations on all occasions and kept the score deadlocked at 0:0 with stunning saves that wowed the fans, commentators, and players alike.

The game was on, and after profiting from the mistakes of the Juventus players and coming close to scoring, the Empoli players, who had been on the backfoot all night, grew into the game. They quickly settled into a dynamic 4-3-1-2 system and played intricate and brilliant football against Juventus for the next dozen or so minutes.

One of the main trademarks of their play was the highly-organized four-man back-line, which remained disciplined at all times to allow Empoli to play a high defensive line and consequently adopt the offside trap strategy against Juventus' forwards. With that strategy, Empoli's defense managed to thwart three waves of lightning-fast offensives, which would have otherwise turned into goals if the Juventus players who had gotten the opportunities were to be onside as they connected with the final through balls that set them up for perfect one-versus-ones against the Empoli keeper.

The other trademark for Empoli's game was their zonal marking system that required their defensive players, including the holding midfielders, to remain synchronized in their movements, anticipate plays, and look at the ball as a point of reference, not their opponents. Except for Zachary, who got special tight marking treatment, Empoli utilized that strategy to create many challenges for the other Juventus players, who were having an increasingly more challenging game as the minutes flashed by.

The Empoli players showcased their mastery of the zonal marking strategy as the 30th minute approached. Disregarding the keeper, nine of their ten field players didn't match the Juventus team man-for-man. Instead, they concentrated on creating a defensive structure in which horizontal and vertical compactness was the focus. They compressed the distances between each position of their players and prioritized controlling and defending spaces at all times.

Their zonal-marking approach was a bull's eye on that night. It allowed them to delay and frustrate the underperforming Juventus players without allowing any sort of penetration whatsoever within their defensive block. Moreover, an even more demoralizing fact was that they were not taking risks to embark on sudden attacks against Juventus while executing their tactic. As such, the Juventus players didn't get any opportunities to launch any of the terrifying counterattacks they had come to be known for over the past few months. Evidently, Maurizio Sarri, the Empoli coach, had done his homework, and his well-thought-out strategies were enough to give his team a fair chance against the flying Juventus team.

Zachary, on his part, was also not having it easy. From the first minute, he had been getting 'special treatment' from Empoli's three holding midfielders, who annoyingly took turns to stick on him like superglue. Their tight-marking approach was a nuisance for his game, especially since the coach had left the other creative Juventus midfielders like Andrea Pirlo on the bench.

Zachary found it challenging to escape his markers on numerous occasions since he could not easily link play with the less creative on-pitch Juventus midfielders. Even worse, going at it alone and using his dribbling to break through was not an option. His markers were going all out to torment him, and they would not hesitate to kick his shin, step on his foot, bump into him, or execute some other dark arts if he as so much showed the intent to hold onto the ball and advance an attack. The opponents had isolated him in such a way, and his impact had been minimal the whole evening.

The first half passed quietly, and the second half commenced after to constantly move around the pitch.

He would be in the midfield at one moment, but a few seconds a fifteen-minute break. Zachary, who had just gotten well-thought-out instructions from his coach, settled down and started floating around the pitch to tire out his markers. He relied on his newly acquired SS-grade stamina and endurance attributes to constantly move around the pitch.

He would be in the midfield at one moment, but a few seconds later, he would take off abruptly and position himself in the wings. At other times, he would be on the striking line, and then he would suddenly fall back and settle in the defensive midfield zone.

His movements and switch of positions became more erratic as the game progressed. He didn't make many touches on the ball, but he repeatedly managed to draw his markers out of their holding midfield positions, thus allowing the other midfielders to come alive on the field of play.

His impact on the pitch became apparent during the 54th minute when he initiated a sudden and spirited run out of the midfield. At the very instant when Juventus was transitioning from its slow build-up to a full-blown offensive, he took off from the center circle and bolted forward like a raging whirlwind toward the left side of Empoli's box.

But even though his speed was quite impressive, he still couldn't shake off Mirko Valdifiori, the holding midfielder who happened to be marking him at that moment.

But even then, Zachary didn't lose hope. His strides were spirited as ever as he was sure that drawing away an important Empoli holding midfielder from his position would benefit his team even if he didn't get involved in the attack. He just continued dashing forward without any care while the midfielder shadowed him.

Simone Padoin, the Juventus midfielder, who had just received the ball, spotted Zachary's run. His instincts almost took control, and he was an instant away from playing the ball to the young number 10. But just then, Coach Allegri's half-time words sounded in his mind.

"At crucial moments when Zachary makes sudden runs and draws away the holding midfielders marking him," the coach had said, "all our other midfielders should work quickly and try to utilize the gaps he leaves behind with the sole intent to score..."

Lightning-fast thoughts raced through Simone Padoin's mind, and he made a decision within an instant. He took off like a rocket before Empoli's zonal defense could shape up again and drove straight into the space left by the midfielder marking Zachary. His speed was impressive, and in only mere seconds, he was already stepping into the final third.

However, more work still awaited him as he approached the box. The Empoli back-four had already compacted their defensive line to deny him passage. As such, he couldn't force his way through their ranks, even if, by some chance, he acquired skills that would match those of Zachary.

A glint passed through Simone Padoin's eyes, and his instincts tingled. And right then, he spotted a shadow in Juventus' white and black striped jersey about to cut into the space behind Empoli's back-line on the right flank.

Simone Padoin didn't hesitate even in the slightest before threading the ball through a gap between the Empoli left-back and the opposing center-back. With that well-timed pass, he caught the defenders napping and played the ball into the space just behind the opposing left-back.

"Whoosh..."

On the right flank, the young Federico Mattiello, who was Juventus' wing-back for the day, dashed past the dazed Empoli left-back at the exact moment when Simone Padoin was releasing the ball. His run was well-timed, and he smashed through Empoli's offside trap by a split second before connecting with the immaculately placed through-pass.

Though still only eighteen years, Federico Mattiello was a player who could remain composed at certain crucial moments. He drove the ball further toward Empoli's side of the pitch like a true-blue incarnation of a one-hundred-meter champion. On arriving in the space a few meters from the goalline, Federico did what any wing-back should do. He immediately swung his leg down and sent a hell of a cross towards the box.

"Whoosh..."

The ball from Federico Mattiello tore through the air and soared toward the box like a surface-to-surface missile. At that moment, the Empoli center-backs were already in action, tightly marking the two Juventus forwards in the area while also anticipating the incoming cross. Their positioning was perfect. As such, everyone watching the game must have thought they would come out on top and clear the danger.

But then, something unexpected transpired when everyone's eyes were still glued on the incoming cross. Just when the ball started to descend into the box under gravity, a tall silhouette rushed in from the space beyond the left side of the box.

It was Zachary, and he had just initiated a sudden run to leave his marker in the dust before racing to meet the incoming cross. Like a true-blue fox in the box, he floated into the unmarked space before Empoli's center-backs and pushed off the ground with all the momentum he had accumulated.

He rose into the air like a Ninja and made the subtlest of touches with his head to brush the ball and guide it goalward. His heading technique was world-class, and he effortlessly found the inside of the far post to score Juventus' 1st goal during the 55th minute.

As for the Empoli defenders and keeper, they couldn't even react. They seemed to know not what was going on, and they were still struggling to mark the other Juventus strikers when Zachary was already outwitting them and finding the back of the net.