

## **Greatest 71**

### **Chapter 71 - Battle Of The Underdogs II**

Zachary found himself cornered by two defenders as soon as he stepped into the penalty arc, a couple of meters away from ADO Den Haag's eighteen-yard box. Without panicking, he braked instantly, stopping just in front of the two center-backs. They'd positioned themselves well so that he wouldn't get through.

It was in such moments that Zachary wished for a smaller physique, like the Argentinian star Messi. If he had a smaller size, he would have wriggled his way between them without much effort. But with his tall physique, he wasn't going anywhere.

"You're not going anywhere," one of the defenders bellowed in heavily accented English.

The two of them continued trying to box him in, angling their motions to direct him away from the box. They didn't commit themselves fully to tackling the ball away. They stood their ground instead, blocking his path towards their goal.

He could tell they were good defenders right away. Most defenders that had tried to deal with him in the past would usually come in wholesale, with either flying tackles or big lunges, to win the ball. He found getting past such hasty players much easier than dealing with those who stood their ground.

Zachary kept his eye on the feet of the two defenders as he flicked the ball speedily between his feet. One of the defenders finally stuck out a leg, intending to tackle the ball. He smiled since the reaction from the defenders was what he'd been anticipating.

A face-off between a defender and a forward was like a full game of poker, but lasting only a few seconds. The first to show the intention to fold would expose his weakness, putting himself at a disadvantage.

Zachary didn't waste the opportunity. He flicked the ball past the defender—towards the left, attempting to circumvent him.

However, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a sliding tackle coming in from his left. It was well-directed towards the ball, and if he didn't react accordingly, he would lose possession.

Zachary hardened his resolve, deciding on the burdensome route. There would be very few opportunities to score in a semifinal match. So, he had to create chances for his team to the best of his ability. That involved weathering a little bit of discomfort.

Zachary swiftly stuck out his left foot between the ball and the incoming boot, just before the tackle made contact. He made sure not to plant his foot firmly on the ground to avoid a potential injury. He intended to either protect the ball or win a freekick if the defender went through with his tackle.

The defender made slight contact with his left boot, as he'd expected. Zachary jumped slightly, leaving his body at the mercy of the sliding tackle from the defender. He let the defender's momentum sweep him away before landing back down on the ground. He had controlled his fall with practiced perfection to avoid injury to his body.

"Foul," Zachary heard Coach Johansen bellowing from the sidelines while he was still on the ground.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee's whistle followed, confirming the foul.

"He dived," Zachary then heard the ADO Den Haag defender disputing the referee's decision as he picked himself from the ground.

Zachary did not bother arguing. He'd taken a gamble, risking his body, and come out as the winner. He'd done his best to boost his team's chances of emerging victorious in the semifinal by winning a freekick at the edge of the box. Zachary didn't bother explaining himself to an opponent. He only focused on his left foot, stretching it, and checking whether it had any damage from the challenge.

"Are you all right?" Sigrid Olsen, NF Academy's team medic, jogged to his side and asked.

"I'm okay," Zachary replied, smiling. He was sure he hadn't gotten injured after stretching his foot. However, the team medic seemed not to believe him. She eyed him with skepticism as he wriggled his foot, trying to show that he wasn't injured.

"I'm really okay," he emphasized.

"The rest of you give us some space," she yelled at the other NF Academy players who'd crowded around Zachary. The players followed her instructions and moved a few meters away.

"I'll check that leg for myself," Dr. Sigrid insisted. She placed her first aid kit on the ground before kneeling by Zachary's left foot. "Sit down," she ordered.

Zachary stole a glance at the referee and noticed that he was also waiting for the diagnosis. Referees in youth tournaments would always put the player's safety above everything else. He was sure the referee would send him to the sidelines right away if he refused the check-up.

"I'm fine, really," he repeated once again but sat down to undergo Dr. Sigrid's on-pitch diagnosis. He wasn't the least bit worried since he didn't feel any discomfort in his left foot.

"Why didn't you jump over the challenge?" Dr. Sigrid asked. In the meantime, she took off his boot before starting to apply pressure on various parts of his left foot while watching his facial expressions.

"The tackle came in fast from my blind side. I couldn't react in time." He lied.

Dr. Sigrid raised an eyebrow. "It seems like you're actually fine," she said, nodding to the referee. "But, I do hope you try to avoid the head-on challenges for the rest of the match. Your career will face a long period of stagnation if you get injured. Mark my words." She warned before picking up her kit and jogging off the pitch.

Zachary hurriedly slipped on his left boot. He looked around and noticed that the referee was in the process of showing a yellow card to Steve Van Kesteren, the defender who had made the foul.

Zachary stretched for a bit and was back on his feet in just a few seconds, ready to take the freekick. Some fans booed him, assuming he'd dived. However, Zachary didn't mind. He shut out the noises and concentrated on placing the ball on the ground, right at the edge of the box, while waiting for the referee to finish organizing the wall.

He started observing the line-up of ADO Den Haag players standing between him and the goal. His mind worked swiftly to deduce the height of the players making up the wall, the distance from goal, plus the other parameters that might affect his freekick. He wanted to make sure he would put the freekick in the back of the net.

"You had us worried, man," a voice interrupted his musings.

Zachary turned around and smiled at Kasongo, who'd sneaked behind him. "Why would you worry? Tackles are part of the game. We do our best to protect ourselves from them. We can also benefit from them like I just did." He added, pointing at the ball.

"You better go back and prepare to defend against ADO Den Haag's counterattack," he added before Kasongo could say anything more. He always made a habit of avoiding chit-chat during the middle of matches.

"Okay, and good luck." Kasongo nodded before running back towards the centerline.

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew his whistle, signaling Zachary to take the freekick. He had already finished organizing the wall of ADO Den Haag players.

Zachary didn't panic since he'd been taking dozens of freekicks in the system simulator every night. He moved back a few steps following the bodily motions of the Bend-it like Beckham Juju while taking an occasional glance at the placement of the opposing goalkeeper and the other players in the box.

Zachary decided to go with his gut and take the shot right away. However, as he began jogging towards the ball, he noticed the shadows corresponding to two of the players forming the wall, jumping up and down. The Zinedine-Visual-Juju was in action once again.

Zachary changed his decision instantly, altering his angle of approach as he jogged towards the ball. He then relaxed his body as he took one final long stride towards the ball, only keeping the ankle of his left foot tense to make the shot. He then fired his knee forward and whipped his left foot at the ball, catching it on its mid-upper half.

He unleashed a daisy-cutter shot that skimmed the ground, heading towards the goal. Like a bullet train, it moved with incredible speed, flashing below the feet of the two ADO Den Haag players that had jumped. It homed into the back of the net after a deflection off the right post. The goalkeeper didn't even manage to react.

Emily Anderson, Zachary's agent, was seated in the stands, on the bottom row, close to the pitch. She watched Zachary unleash a powerful carpet shot that found its way into the back of the net.

The fans around her seemed to be momentarily shocked, speechless after watching the goal. The stadium was abnormally quiet as Zachary ran to the touchline to celebrate his goal.

"Once again, Zachary Bemba, NF Academy's captain, breaks the stalemate—scoring from a set-piece in the 18th minute," the commentator announced in a booming voice, breaking the momentary silence in the stadium.

The fans started cheering and chanting Zachary's name. They seemed to have forgotten they'd been booing him only a few seconds earlier.

Emily was glad her client had already garnered a-great-deal of staunch fans in Riga due to his spectacular goals. His fame would translate into a profitable business after she negotiated some contracts for him later on in the year.

"The score is 1:0," the commentator continued when the loud cheering in the stadium died down. "NF Academy has managed to net the first goal in this heavily contested semifinal between the underdogs of the tournament."

## Chapter 72 - Battle Of The Underdogs III

"Even the commentator calls us underdogs," Kasongo grumbled.

"Don't worry about the commentator," Paul replied, smiling. "Let's just do our part and show the people in this stadium that we're top-dogs, not underdogs."

They were in a rare break on the pitch after celebrating Zachary's goal with the rest of the team. They had a minute or two to rest since the ADO Den Haag coach had opted to make a substitution right after conceding a goal.

"That's right." Kasongo nodded. "Winning this match will shut people up. Maybe our juniors will be regarded as top seeds when they travel here for next year's Riga Cup."

Paul smiled. "That's a nice one. Maybe, our academy is about to welcome a golden age. We're playing in the semis."

Kasongo didn't proceed with the conversation. He listened to the cheers instead and felt like they were the most sublime music in the world. There was a fire in his heart that was missing at the beginning of the match.

Not many academy players had been expecting to reach the semi-finals when they first arrived in Riga. The possible exception was Zachary since he played every single game like a champion. Most players, including Kasongo, had merely come along to gain some experience. They didn't expect to be among the top four contenders for the cup.

They were well aware that they were an inexperienced group, competing with several top academies from around Europe. Even 'simply' qualifying for the quarter-finals would have satisfied them. NF Academy had never made it past the group stages in past sessions of the Riga Cup.

However, on making it to the quarter-finals, some, like Kendrick and Magnus, had begun to believe they could emerge as victors. They'd started preaching to the rest of the squad members, trying to motivate them to work towards the same dream.

The rest of the squad had been receptive to their motivational talks, but most—still had an inferiority complex. They felt that winning against strong teams like Zenit was nothing short of a miracle, impossible to replicate. Losing the game against Genoa had reinforced that complex further.

If Kasongo had to be one hundred percent honest with himself, he would have to admit that he'd been part of that group of self-doubting incompetents. But that had ended during the game against ADO Den Haag.

Zachary's goal had riled him up, bringing to the surface several wild ambitions in the deepest recesses of his mind. For the first time since his arrival in Riga, Kasongo felt a hundred percent confident in his squad. He believed it was capable of winning the cup.

In the meantime, the feeling was fleeting, just a spark of hope, a ray of sunshine yet to be born, but he could feel it nonetheless. Perhaps that was merely optimism, the grasping for possible opportunities in the future. But, he resolved to play at his best and win the tournament to cultivate that feeling.

Kasongo cast a cursory glance towards the touchline and noticed that ADO Den Haag's substitute was ready to come on. "Man, you better go back to your position," he shouted, giving a light push to Paul, preventing him from continuing the conversation. "We need to keep our heads in the game," he added.

"Okay, okay," Paul yelled back as he jogged across the pitch towards the left-wing to take his position.

\*FWEEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew his whistle, and the match restarted after the goal and the substitution. ADO Den Haag played with a high tempo right away, switching the ball from wing to wing, seeking to spear into NF Academy's half.

Kasongo noted that their wingers had great pace and dribbling ability. They often dribbled close to the touchline before striving to provide cut-backs or cross the ball into the box so that their strikers could score. They worked together with wing-backs to outflank defenders, posing the greatest threats to Kasongo and his teammates.

As the match progressed, Kasongo noticed that the ADO Den Haag players had shaped-up into the 4-4-2 formation, unlike the 4-3-3 attacking shape they'd utilized in the first quarter of an hour. They dominated the proceedings for the next few minutes, with the wingers and central midfielders showing class whenever they touched the ball.

The substitute, Danny Bakker, a very creative attacking midfielder, boosted their attacking play considerably. He often let loose pin-point passes that homed onto the ever-moving wingers like sniper bullets.

In the 38th minute, Danny Bakker controlled the ball close to the center-circle after receiving a pass from Tyrone Ebuehi—ADO Den Haag's right-back. Without even a pause, he unleashed a lofted defense-splitting pass towards the left-wing, where Calvin Valies was lurking. The switch from central midfield to the wing was so abrupt, leaving the NF Academy defenders momentarily confused.

Those few seconds were enough for Calvin to chest the ball to the ground, uncontested, and bolt through NF Academy's half, relying on his incredible pace.

Kasongo closed down on him right away, trying to intercept the ball and delay the attack. He angled his body to force him towards the touchline, and in so doing, prevent the extremely agile winger from cutting back into the pitch. He committed himself to the defense, trying to create time for the NF Academy defenders to shape up and deal with the incoming attack. Kasongo didn't feel too worried since that was the method they'd been employing to deal with ADO Den Haag's wing attacks throughout the entire match.

However, the ADO Den Haag left-winger didn't dribble as he'd expected. Calvin played a one-two with Robin van der Meer, the left-back, bypassing him on the right-wing before cutting back into the pitch.

By the time Kasongo turned around to give chase, Calvin was already a couple of yards away from him. Kasongo could no longer catch up with the speedy winger.

Pyvind Alseth, NF Academy's right-back, also tried to press him for the ball, but his efforts were futile. He had delayed his reaction for a few more seconds than necessary, gifting the winger enough space to cross the ball.

The winger didn't waste the rare opportunity.

Kasongo winced as he watched Calvin Valies dribble towards the box. He then whipped the ball in a circular arc behind NF Academy's defenders.

Calvin's cross was perfectly slotted in, finding Catalin Tira, ADO Den Haag's center-forward, near the post.



Catalin Tira showed excellent brilliance and composure in the box. He planted a spectacular diving header from a very acute angle, almost beating Kendrick to get an equalizer.

However, the goalkeeper was alert and managed to pull off a spectacular acrobatic save. He punched the incoming ball, guiding it over the crossbar. He had saved NF Academy from ADO Den Haag's deadliest attack so far.

Kasongo ran to him and patted his back. "Nice save, man. You really are a Godsend in our goal."

"Enough with the chit-chat," Kendrick scowled at him. "Get ready to defend against the corner. And, stay focused." The keeper seemed to be in an unusually dark mood with only the game on his mind.

Kasongo didn't mind his friend's tone and dutifully marched to the edge of the box. He understood that tensions often grew high in matches, pushing the players into somber moods. Some of his teammates could finish an entire game without bothering to share a few words with others. They only spoke out to request passes, point out others' mistakes, or in a few rare circumstances solely related to the game. Zachary was that type of player, and it seemed Kendrick was slowly following suit.

"Let's defend, let's defend..." His musings were interrupted by Kendrick's bellows, instructing the players to mark each ADO Den Haag player in the box.

NF Academy successfully defended the corner. Robin Jatta, the center-back, out-jumped the other players in the box, heading the corner ball out of play.

The referee pointed to the corner-flag once again.

Tyronne Ebuehi, ADO Den Haag's right-back, moved towards the flag to deliver the corner kick. In the meantime, the players from both teams pushed and shoved their opponents, trying to outwit them. It took several warnings from the referee to put them in order so that the corner kick could proceed without a hustle.

\*FWEEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle after he finished organizing the players.

Tyronne Ebuehi sent a long raking pass onto the head of Catalin Tira, who'd somehow gotten away from his mark. The center-forward made no mistake from close in and sent the ball into the bottom right corner.

1:1.

ADO Den Haag had managed to score an equalizer in the 41st minute. The goal couldn't be attributed to a mistake by the NF Academy players. It was 'simply' brilliant play on the part of the center-forward. He had outmaneuvered his opponents to head the ball into the back of the net. The defenders had done their best, but it hadn't been enough.

Kasongo stood with his arms akimbo, watching the ADO Den Haag players celebrate the goal. He couldn't believe that they'd still conceded despite having followed Coach Johansen's game plan to the letter. Kasongo had done the best he could, but his team had still conceded a goal. The cup which had been drawing closer seemed to have moved miles away in a short span of a few minutes.

"It isn't over yet guys..." He heard Zachary yell from somewhere at the edge of the box. "It isn't over yet. We're just back to square one. Let's continue doing our best." The captain went around the box shouting at each of the NF Academy players.

Kasongo smiled, his mood lifting. He hadn't lost the game yet. They could still win if they played well and created more chances.

"Let's go for a win," he shouted, joining the other players who were starting to clap to hype themselves up. The game wasn't over yet. It was just beginning.

## Chapter 73 - Battle Of The Underdogs IV

The second half of the semifinal between NF Academy and ADO Den Haag ensued, running at the same tempo as the first. The Dutch team mostly used wing play to attack while the Norwegian team sat back and defended most of the time.

Zachary was impressed with how his teammates managed to maintain a high level of focus throughout the game. They worked together admirably, using teamwork to keep ADO Den Haag at bay by disrupting most of their wing attacks.

Kasongo and Paul, NF Academy's wingers, helped the wing-backs—whenever they were faced with an attack by ADO Den Haag on the flanks. On the other hand, the three center-backs kept a close eye on Catalin Tira and Papito Merencia, ADO Den Haag's center-forwards. They managed to clear most of the crosses that managed to reach the box.

In the 75th minute, NF Academy's defense and midfield were still putting up a good fight. The score was still 1:1, thanks to their efforts.

However, Zachary was feeling frustrated due to the scarcity of balls coming to his position. He was still playing as a half-striker/half-milder in the 5-3-1-1 formation, just behind ?rjan, the center forward. He had to wait for more than five minutes in-between touches on the ball. Zachary fancied playing in the midfield instead. That would have let him be more involved in both offense and defense.

Zachary broke off his thought process when Robin Jatta, NF Academy's center-back, made an incredible interception within the box. He stopped a dangerous cross from finding Catalin Tira, the ADO Den Haag forward. Without losing his composure, he immediately cleared the ball away, towards the left-wing where Martin Lundal, the left-back, was lurking.

Martin controlled the ball beautifully close to the touchline, skipping away from Tyrone Ebuehi with a deft first touch. He followed that up with a perfectly executed cut-back pass towards Magnus, NF Academy's defensive midfielder, on the inside of the pitch.

However, Danny Bakker intercepted the pass before it could make its way to its target. He controlled the ball with an adroit first touch, using the back of his heel to loop it over the towering form of Magnus, who'd closed down on him quickly before he could run away with the ball.

He moved seamlessly like a fish navigating water, bringing the ball effortlessly back to the ground. He immediately unleashed another of his trademark raking passes to the right-wing, where Ibrahim Fofane was waiting. The creative midfielder had managed to catch the NF Academy defense unawares with a sudden switch to the wing once again.

Uncontested, Ibrahim Fofane, ADO Den Haag's winger, deftly chested the ball, propelling it onto the path of Tyrone Ebuehi, the right-back, who'd run into open space. The two of them exchanged short passes, playing one-twos, speeding along the touchline. They weaved through NF Academy players before cutting back into the pitch. Their coordination was flawless.

Before the defenders could close them down, Ibrahim let loose another of his teasing crosses in-behind NF Academy's defensive line.

Catalin Tira, ADO Den Haag's number-9, pounced on the ball, like a cat that'd seen some catnip.

The number-9 had an uncanny capability to lose his marks and slip through the ranks of defenders. He showed the same brilliance at that moment, sliding in-between Robin Jatta and Lars Togstad, NF Academy's center-backs, before tapping the ball towards the goal.

However, Kendrick Otterson, NF Academy's goalkeeper, had been at the top of his game the entire match. He reacted immediately by stretching out his left leg and managed to get a slight touch on the ball, driving it away from the goal.

Zachary felt a shiver run down his spine as he watched the ball smash off the post before bouncing back into the field of play. The threat to NF Academy's goal wasn't over yet. Calvin Valies, ADO Den Haag's left-winger, came speeding into the box with the intent of shoving the ball into the back of the net. Kasongo was close, hot on his heels.

[Will he be able to get to the ball away in time?] Zachary mused while following the proceedings from his advanced position, close to the center-circle. He felt a little helpless since he couldn't return to his half to help defend against the relentless sequence of attacks from ADO Den Haag.

He could see that Kasongo was struggling to keep up with the short ADO Den Haag number-11. However, the goddess of luck seemed to be on NF Academy's side that day. Kasongo made a brave and timely sliding tackle, managing to shove the ball out of play before Calvin could reach it. Zachary let out a long pent-up breath, allowing his body to relax. His team had survived the deadly attack without conceding.

The referee pointed to the corner flag.

Zachary returned to his box to help out against the corner.

"Let's defend, let's defend," he shouted at his teammates. "Man to man. Do—not leave anyone unmarked in the box." He bellowed at the top of his lungs, clapping his hands for emphasis to motivate his teammates.

Zachary had a feeling that if they conceded another goal, they would probably lose the semifinal. He couldn't accept such a fate, not when they were so close to the final. Zachary wanted to be a champion and to earn some Juju-points. He 'simply' couldn't accept a defeat in the semifinals. So, he continued roaring at his teammates, encouraging them to focus as they awaited the corner ball.

Tyronne Ebuehi took the corner kick and sent the ball into the crowded penalty area. However, Magnus out-jumped the rest and headed the ball out of the box, seemingly to safety.

Zachary immediately chased after it.

However, amid his run, he noticed that the ball was moving on a course straight to Danny Bakker, ADO Den Haag's dangerous attacking midfielder, who was waiting on the edge of the box. Danny was in the process of raising his foot to unleash a missile of a rebound back at goal.

"Not on my watch," Zachary roared as he dashed towards the midfielder.

Danny maintained his composure and managed to blast the ball towards the goal, uncontested. But luckily, Zachary had managed to get his body in front of the rebound effort in time. He jumped high and blocked the ball, driving it away from its intended course, away from the goal.

Kasongo pounced on the loose ball and cleared it out of the pitch with a first-time volley. He'd gifted ADO Den Haag a throw-in. Once again, NF Academy had managed to come out unscathed from another deadly attack.

Zachary's teammates, who'd been defending from the start, were under immense pressure. What underdogs? Zachary reasoned that the phrase was utter crap. The Dutch team seemed vastly more threatening than Zenit, especially when they attacked through the wings.

"Zachary," Coach Johansen bellowed from the sidelines. "Head back to the front and leave the defense for the rest. You're causing more difficulties by falling back to defend. Look at that." The coach pointed towards the middle of the pitch.

Zachary turned around and noticed the two ADO Den Haag defenders who had previously been marking him had already moved into NF Academy's half, seemingly to join the attack.

He understood Coach Johansen's reasoning. If he left his half-striker position even for a single minute, he would free-up the defenders responsible for marking him. That would increase the pressure on the rest of his teammates if the freed-up defenders also joined the attacks. So, he quickly ran back to his position without complaint and waited patiently for the ball to come to him.

Tyronne Ebuehi took ADO Den Haag's throw-in. He unleashed a long throw, hoping to pick out Catalin Tira in the box. However, Robin Jatta managed to clear the ball out of the box with a well-timed volley. He sent the ball back to the right-wing where Kasongo was waiting.

The short right-winger controlled the ball like a pro and unleashed a first-time cut-back pass into the midfield, towards Magnus.

Zachary immediately ran away from the two defenders marking him, dashing towards the right-wing, without bothering to see whether Magnus had controlled the ball successfully. He only wished the defensive midfielder could predict his run and release him as soon as possible.

Magnus didn't disappoint. He sent a lofted pass in Zachary's direction.

The counterattack was on.

Zachary used his peripheral vision to gauge the incoming ball's trajectory while running. He noticed that the ball was coming in high and would probably go out of play if he couldn't control it in time. To make matters worse, a defender was hot on his heels and wouldn't allow him any time to turn and control the ball with his chest.

He immediately realized he would have a tough time bringing the ball under control. He had to intercept it within the next few seconds to prevent it from going out of play and turning into another ADO Den Haag throw-in.

Nonetheless, he didn't panic. Continuing his run, he kept track of the ball while his soccer brain quickly worked out the best options to make good use of the situation. Luckily, a solution came to him when he had almost reached the touchline.

#### Chapter 74 - Battle Of The Underdogs V

Without turning back, Zachary jumped high into the ball's line of flight and presented his upper back as the receiving surface. At the same time, he relaxed his back muscles to kill the ball's momentum on contact. And as he expected, he felt the ball hit his back in the next second, while he was at the apogee of his leap.

At that instant, Zachary pushed out his back muscles, cushioning the ball past the chasing defender before he started his descent back to the ground. When his feet touched the ground, he didn't pause—but spun around the disoriented defender who was still searching for the ball.

Zachary smiled when he discerned he'd nudged the ball in the right direction. He had directed it over the defender's shoulder, with his back. Zachary shrugged off the chasing defender—who was trying to foul him and took off with the ball—like the wind, sprinting towards ADO Den Haag's box. His heart pounded in his chest like he was a predator on the hunt as he dashed off, cutting back into the pitch.

A defender sprung up in his tunnel vision, but he poked the ball in-between his legs and circumvented him with his incredible pace. Another defender closed down on him as soon as he passed the first one. He used the same trick. Without slowing down, he nudged the ball a little bit, pushing it between his legs with the tip of his boot. He then bolted past him, leaving him butt-down, on the artificial grass.

The third defender came up soon after with a sliding tackle. Zachary decelerated a little and dug the tip of his left boot beneath the rolling ball at his feet. Without stopping, he deftly flicked the ball over the defender and then leaped over him—before recommencing his mad sprinting across the green.

Zachary had regained the instinctual state of mind once again. His thought process while running with the ball was lightning fast, such that the actions of the defenders seemed like part of a video in slow motion. His eyes were focused on the obstacles—the defenders before him. Yet, in some strange way, he could still perceive and react in time when someone closed in on him from his blind spots.

He continued his advance towards ADO Den Haag's box, weaving past defender after defender before coming face-to-face with the goalkeeper.

Zachary did not slow down when the keeper came out to greet him. He circumvented him with his ridiculous pace and skipped over a challenge he'd noticed in his peripheral vision. He continued his run with the ball all the way to the back of the net.

He only broke out of the uncanny state of mind when ?rjan came up to him to celebrate the goal. Then it all came back to him: How he'd somehow zigzagged through multiple defenders without so much as a conscious thought. That state of focus was simply divine.

He tried to tap on that feeling, to pull at the instinct—the state of mind that had elevated his playing style. However, it was fleeting, ebbing like a tide away from his conscious mind. Soon, it was gone without a trace.

[What was that feeling?] He mused as he came back to himself. He had never felt anything like that in both his lives. He wondered whether the state of mind was something all thriving athletes possessed or something born from the system. Whatever the case, he was determined to find out.

Zachary pushed the weird thoughts out of his mind when the rest of his teammates ran into ADO Den Haag's goal and jumped on him to celebrate the goal. His mood lifted when he remembered that he'd possibly just scored NF Academy's winning goal.

NF Academy was leading 2:1 in the semifinal. The digital watch on the large screen had just ticked to the 82nd minute. Zachary had put his team ahead with only eight minutes of play left, discounting injury time.

"Unbelievable, unbelievable, simply magic," the commentator's deep voice boomed over the loud cheering in the stadium. "Oh my goodness me! What a magnificent goal! The genius! Are we witnessing the birth of a great here in the Riga tournament? Someone, please slap me and tell me that I'm dreaming. That goal was out of this world..."



Emily Anderson, in the stands, was ecstatic after Zachary scored his second goal. The ravings of the commentator sounded like music to her ears. The cheers of the fans in attendance warmed the air around her more than any sun ever could.

In her eyes, Zachary was like a goose that laid golden eggs. Every spectacular goal he scored would translate into a substantial amount of cash later on. There were sure to be several potential endorsement deals around the corner if he could maintain his present form.

"Are you sure he doesn't want to leave Norway?" Jimmy Edwards asked, yelling to make himself heard over the cheers around them.

Emily smiled, shaking her head. "I've talked at length with him about moving. He says he wants to find his legs first in the easier Norwegian League. He'll only think of moving to a bigger stage after that."

Jimmy lifted an eyebrow. "Are you 'simply' going to allow him to waste his time in that league? The Tottenham people just contacted me last night. They are ready to offer him a deal if he wishes to leave for London as soon as he turns eighteen. Do you want to allow him to miss such a golden opportunity?" He queried, locking gazes with Emily. "Why am I not surprised? You are an intern, after all."

Emily frowned. "A decision to move should represent the core interests of the player. I've talked with him, and he really wants to stay in Norway for now." She said, her voice firm.

Jimmy shrugged. "Well, I need to meet him myself before the tournament ends. Try to organize a meeting with him away from the eyes of the others. Only then will I be able to determine whether what you say is true."

"I'll tell him about your suggestion," Emily replied. "If he agrees to the meeting, then well and good. But, if he has reservations, there's nothing I can do."

She smiled softly. "And FYI, the offer from Tottenham is not the only one he has received. Zenit, Atalanta, and Genoa have all shown interest in him. However, he hasn't agreed to meet with any of their representatives."

Jimmy smiled, shaking his head. "That's the problem with young inexperienced agents like you. There's always a price for everyone. Our role as agents is to determine that price and push our clients to take a more profitable deal. Don't bother with the meeting anymore. I'll try to see if I can move things in my own way."

Emily frowned, her mind running through all the avenues Jimmy could take to push Zachary into moving away from Norway. However, she found none, except offering him a very lucrative contract that was hard to refuse.

However, no big club would be willing to offer a big-money-contract to an inexperienced player still in an academy. Players could lose form as they advanced in years. A player who was the best in the academy wouldn't necessarily remain at the top of his game five or ten years later. That was why soccer careers were—often regarded as marathons, not sprints.

A player had to continue doing his best in both training and matches to maintain his form in the long run. Otherwise, he would stumble and turn mediocre before reaching the finish line.

Club executives knew that simple truth, and in most cases, wouldn't allow their scouting departments to offer contracts involving large sums of money to inexperienced players. That was why she'd agreed with Zachary when he said he wanted to first play in Norway for some time before moving on to a bigger stage. If he managed to play well in his debut season at Rosenborg, he could fetch a sizeable transfer fee from the bigger clubs that wanted him.

The higher the transfer fees, the higher her commission would be when she finished negotiating the transfer. Maybe after such a deal, she would be-able-to fulfill her long-time dream of starting her own sports agency. That was her target, and she wasn't going to allow anyone to mess with her first golden goose.

She shook her head, dispersing the daydreams out of her head, and returned her focus to the match. She was glad she'd hired a cameraman for the game rather than doing it herself. She could fully enjoy the 90 minutes of soccer without being distracted by the work of recording Zachary's performance.

ADO Den Haag was still dictating the tempo of the game despite having just conceded the goal. They continued using their signature wing attacks and delivering crosses into the box after every few minutes. NF Academy was under immense pressure and didn't seem able to get the ball away from their half—towards Zachary and the other forward. However, they managed to hold on until the game ended 2:1 in favor of NF Academy.

## Chapter 75 - Feeling Triumphant

Immediately after the final whistle, Zachary and his teammates left the stadium. They didn't even change out of their kits first.

It was already getting close to 1:00 PM by the time their match with ADO Den Haag ended. The other semifinal between VfB Stuttgart and Tottenham youth would be starting at 2:00 PM sharp. The two squads had already occupied the dressing rooms to begin preparations for their match. That left NF Academy players with no place to change out of their match gear.

The squad trekked out of the Skonto Indoor Stadium, still clad in their sweat-laden jerseys. They walked through the brightly-lit tunnel to the gate with a swagger in their steps, looking like they owned the entire world, chattering on about the match highlights.

Zachary, too, walked with a Cheshire cat's grin outlined on his face. His mind went over some of the defining moments of the game. His team had managed to qualify for the final and was only one step away from becoming champions.

He was only a step away from earning a sizeable sum of Juju-points—plus a tournament title that was rare in the youth careers of many professional players.

He couldn't help but recall some bits of his previous life that seemed to be from a century ago.

In his previous life, his grandma had passed on when he was only seventeen, leaving him struggling to keep himself in school. He'd then dropped out and started searching for a local club to take him on. But, he'd still failed due to the recurrent injuries that had started when he got involved in an accident two years prior.

He had then fallen into a period of depression, taking the local brew and drugs on a regular basis to escape his problems. His sports career seemed over, and many had thought him a gone case. However, in a lucky twist of fate, he'd managed to make it to the pro level at TP Mazembe after receiving help from a retired Congolese national team player.

Arthur Afobe, the player in question, had shown him a way to overcome his recurring ankle injury problems by playing smarter. He had managed to develop the unique playing-style of his previous life by following that advice. He had learned to do more with the ball with a single touch rather than running through defenders. That's how he'd managed to develop his high-level ball control and passing ability—two attributes that continued to serve him well even in his new life.

He had been able to sit in the defensive midfield and unleash defense-splitting passes to help his team win games without running around excessively. He had been akin to an upcoming Maestro, showing a lot of promise due to his tactical vision on the pitch. That was the reason TP Mazembe had offered him a contract, even when knowing he was—riddled with both injury and addiction problems.

Nonetheless, he had wasted the opportunity by relapsing back to his old habits. A glass of wine, a little bit of Cannabis sativa was how his fall restarted. And before he could benefit from his success, his career ended abruptly. What followed were events he would rather not remember.

But just when he thought it was all over, he had been given a second chance. Mysteriously, he traveled back in time accompanied by a system, to a time where he managed to grab on to an opportunity.

From then, he had worked relentlessly to achieve his previous life's goal of becoming a pro player in a European league.

Things couldn't have worked out any better. He now felt a deep sense of bliss on the field since he no longer feared injuring a weak ankle. Due to some perks of the system, he was more resilient, more agile, and more clinical with the ball than he had ever been in his previous life.

With his unique playing style, he had managed to secure the promise of a contract from a European team—Rosenborg before turning eighteen. And to top it all off, his youth team had just qualified for the Riga Cup finals. Zachary was on cloud nine.

Even with a system, he understood that the difference between ordinary and extraordinary was that little extra. He needed to continue working to surpass his own limits. He intended to be the sort of athlete who became a better version of his past self as he advanced in years.

Zachary felt like he could rise to the very top with his system at hand. All he needed to do was earn more Juju-points and maintain his work ethic, and eventually, the whole world would be at his feet.

"Those reporters are waiting for us once again." Zachary was broken out of his reflection by his teammate's hollering as they approached the gate.

"What's the point in reporters seeking us out when Coach Johansen is just going to keep turning them away?" Paul grumbled. "What a drag," he sighed, shaking his head.

Zachary inclined his head and noticed a varied bunch, some with cameras and microphones, waiting by the gate. They had begun stalking the NF Academy squad immediately after their win against Zenit in the quarter-final.

However, Coach Johansen always turned them away before they could approach any of the players. He'd even banned players from holding private interviews with any journalist. He said he didn't want any media attention on the team before they even won the cup. Zachary inwardly approved since the team didn't need any more distractions in the middle of a tournament.

The squad continued towards the gate, trudging past the reporters, who'd been pushed aside by the technical team. The reporters in Riga seemed very polite and didn't hound the players as they passed by.

When the squad exited the indoor stadium, Zachary felt a cold wind stroking his skin, chilling him to the bone. The sky above was washed with a grey tone. Watery light illuminated thin patches of it to brilliance.

Zachary alternated between watching his boots move over the frozen sidewalk's perfect concrete slabs, flat and square, and observing the transfixing interplay between cloud and sun above.

The continual slippage of his feet kept returning his gaze earthward, pulling his mind to the present. Zachary was glad all the Riga Cup matches were being—held indoors. He would have had a hard time playing in the cold.

As usual, a group of traveling fans, including friends and family of the NF Academy players, were waiting for them outside the arena. Zachary saw Marta, her sister, and their other traveling classmates in the small crowd. It had become a habit for the squad to greet their 'fans' right after each game. However, on that day, Coach Johansen cut the reunion short.

"Hurry up and enter the bus," yelled Coach Johansen. "You need to get out of the cold as fast as possible. You'll get time with your friends and family after the tournament. For now, I need all of you on the bus."

Zachary grinned at Marta and his other classmates, waving his hand, before boarding the bus. The rest of the players followed suit, with renewed urgency.

After taking their places on the bus, the players shed their boots and shin guards, steaming up the glass windows. Coach Johansen stood up to address them.

"Okay, guys," he said, his voice throaty from yelling out commands at the top of his voice for the entire duration of the game. "I'm proud of you, and I want you to enjoy this win. We have made it to the finals." He raised his voice towards the end.

Cheers erupted.

Coach Johansen held up his hand for silence and got it immediately. "ADO Den Haag was a tough nut to crack," he intoned, half-smiling. "They were a much stronger team than you'd expected—than I'd expected. However, you managed to keep focused despite facing relentless attacks for a full 90 minutes. All of you played as a team, and Zachary played well, as usual, scoring our two goals."

"Kendrick and our center-backs, plus all the others, stopped us from conceding many goals!" Zachary shouted, interrupting the coach. He didn't like being—singled out as the match-winner. There was a chance it could negatively impact their teamwork during the finals.

"And there, our star is scared of being the center of attention once again," Paul chipped in.

"He doesn't even want to be acknowledged for scoring the goals," Kendrick rhymed.

Everyone, except Zachary, laughed.

Coach Johansen smiled and held up his hand. "Zachary has a point," he said in a seemingly amused tone. "All of you played well in this game. Kendrick was superb in goal. Kasongo, Robin, Lars, Magnus, and the rest of you were hungry for a win and played at your best today. You all possessed that hunger—that determination needed to clinch the victory. And that is a lesson for us. As long as we remain focused, we can achieve anything we set our minds to. And that's how we are going to win the cup."

More cheers erupted, and Coach Johansen put up a hand once again. "For now, let's move to the hotel, clean up, pick our takeaway lunches, and hurry back to watch the next semifinal match" He paused, casting a glance at his watch. "We only have roughly an hour left to the beginning of the game. So, you'll need to be quick." He added, his tone turning somber.

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

The coach sat down as the driver put the bus in gear, and they sang all-the-way back to the hotel.

#### Chapter 76 - Tough Opponents

When Zachary returned to his hotel room, he couldn't resist the temptation to open the system interface. Despite only having a small window to clean up and pick his lunch before returning to the bus, he decided to check whether there were any marked changes in the interface.

The magical state of extreme focus that had enabled him to score the second goal was still fresh on his mind. He had only managed to enter it twice; first, during the match against JFC Riga and later in that day's game against ADO Den Haag.

During both instances, he had performed at a level much higher than his baseline. However, he still didn't have any conscious control over entering the state of mind. So, when he went into the shower, away from the eyes of Kasongo, he opened the system interface to search for clues.

Nothing seemed to have changed since the beginning of the match. Most attributes were still in the A grading while the X-factor was still showing an F grade—and 'limited information available' when he clicked on it.

Zachary only saw a significant change under the G.O.A.T Skills tab. His Zinedine-Visual-Juju had jumped from a 72.021% to a 77.072% 1st-level of progress within just a span of a single game. He was shocked by the unusually-large increment.

The advancement of the Zinedine-Visual-Juju seemed to have stagnated when he'd reached 70% progress. Zachary had been seeking ways to enhance its rate of improvement for months. He'd tried watching recorded matches and reading books about soccer tactics to quicken the process of mastering the skill.

Nonetheless, it had continued improving by only about 0.1 - 0.5% each month.

However, in a single match where he had managed to enter the mysterious state of extreme focus, the skill had improved by slightly more than 5%. He was astounded.

Zachary hypothesized that the state of extreme focus was somehow related to the Zinedine-Visual-Juju.

He wished he could master the Zinedine-Visual-Juju to a hundred percent and see whether he would gain control over achieving the state of extreme focus. However, he understood learning a skill was a slow process.

The only skills in the system he'd managed to master to 1st-level 100% completion so far were the Cruyff-turn and his arrow shot. That was because he'd practiced them regularly in his previous life. Otherwise, he would have taken much longer to learn them. Zachary could only wait to enter the mysterious mental state again involuntarily before continuing his investigation.

"Zach!" Kasongo's voice came in from behind the bathroom door, interrupting his musings. "We're almost late for the game. You'd better hurry since we have to pick our lunch before heading to the bus."

"How many minutes do we have left?" Zachary inquired, closing the system interface.

"It's now 1:30," Kasongo replied. "We have to be at the bus in 10 minutes if we wish to go with the rest of the team."

"Okay then," Zachary replied. "I'll be done in five. You can head down first. Please pick my lunch as well on your way. I'll meet you downstairs in less than ten minutes."



"Okay," Kasongo concurred. "But hurry up. I don't know why you're spending so long in the shower." He grumbled.

Zachary quickly finished cleaning up. He then slipped into a fresh dark blue tracksuit and a heavy jacket before running down the stairs to catch the bus to the stadium.

"Zach!" Kasongo hollered out to him, waving an arm as soon as he stepped on the bus. "I kept a seat for you here. Come on."

Zachary nodded at Coach Johansen by the door, mumbling an apology before taking a seat next to Kasongo.

Thirty minutes later, they were seated in the stadium watching the game between VfB Stuttgart and Tottenham, with their lunch boxes in hand.

The NF Academy squad members sat together with their technical team, keeping a close eye on the game's progress. They enjoyed their takeaway lunch at the same time.

The VfB Stuttgart players, dressed in white, were arrayed in the 4-3-3 formation once again. They attacked relentlessly, with three midfielders often committing forward to support the three forwards. They passed the ball quickly through gaps between the Tottenham players, waiting for an opportunity to penetrate the box.

Joshua Kimmich stood out in the central midfield. His positioning on the pitch was textbook perfect, making him the control tower for the whole team.

Zachary could instantly tell why Kimmich had been so good in his previous life, going on to play for Bayern and winning a major competition like the UEFA Champions League. He was a very skilled central midfielder with good spatial awareness.

Both on and off the ball, Kimmich knew the positioning of both his teammates and opponents. Zachary could feel his tenacity from watching his playing style. Other players on the VfB Stuttgart team occasionally lost out one-on-one or misplaced a pass, but not Kimmich.

A single touch would take him around an unsuspecting opponent—and within a matter of seconds, he would initiate an attack with a defense-splitting pass. He could spot runs made by his teammates behind opposing defenders even amid a crowd of opponents.

That was how he managed to launch the 20th-minute attack that resulted in VfB Stuttgart's first goal. He made a yard of space for himself by skipping past a challenge from Joshua Onomah, one of Tottenham's central midfielders. Without even looking up, he sent a lofted pass that beat the entire Tottenham defense. It landed right in the path of a sprinting Felix Lohkemper.

Felix, VfB Stuttgart's forward on the right flank, didn't waste the extraordinary opportunity. He reacted quickly to get ahead of the central defenders and fired a close-range shot that ended up in the top right corner. The German team had taken the lead as early as the 20th minute, giving the impression that they would come out on top after the 90 minutes.

However, the Tottenham players weren't loafing. They lurked like predators, waiting for the VfB Stuttgart players to make a mistake before pouncing on them. They created pressing zones using three players around Kimmich, trying their utmost to destabilize the midfield control tower.

In particular, Harry Winks, Tottenham's central midfielder, marked Kimmich remarkably, denying him breathing space when with the ball. Harry outmuscled the German midfielder with every chance he got, sometimes committing fouls.

His stubbornness helped Tottenham keep the control tower at bay—and his teammates came alive, playing with a spectacular counterattacking flair whenever they won the ball.

They profited from their relentless efforts in the 38th minute. Milos Veljkovic, Tottenham's center-back, won the ball fair and square, dispossessing Felix Lohkemper close to his box. He then quickly set loose Joshua Onomah, who was making a run in the left-wing.

The counterattack was on.

Joshua Onomah, Tottenham's attacking midfielder, looped the ball over the VfB Stuttgart players, sending it onto the path of William Miller, the left-winger.

The left-winger had timed his run perfectly, beating the defenders for pace. He cut back into the pitch and bolted into the box. He quickly looped the ball over the keeper, leveling matters just before half time.

In the second half, both teams continued attacking each other relentlessly. VfB Stuttgart continued using its stable style of passing the ball around the pitch, searching for opportunities. On the other hand, the Tottenham players intensified their counterattacks. Every mistake on VfB Stuttgart's side would translate into a deadly counter that threatened to turn into a goal.

Tottenham came close to scoring several times as the game approached the 60th minute. But the stable goalkeeping of VfB Stuttgart's number-1 kept matters level. He made several superb saves, denying the Tottenham forwards the chance to get on the score sheet in the second half.

The game remained at a stalemate until VfB Stuttgart stepped up to a higher gear in the 70th minute. Joshua Kimmich, Philipp Frey, and Sinan Gümüs (the three midfielders) all came alive, setting up several defense-splitting through-passes to their forwards.

The forwards didn't disappoint.

Timo Werner caught the Tottenham goalkeeper napping with a brilliant, instinctive strike after receiving a fantastic pinpoint pass from Kimmich in the 75th minute.

The forward was close to sealing his position as the top scorer of the tournament with twelve goals. He was already ahead of Zachary by two goals in the scoring tallies.

Zachary could only sigh in dejection as he continued to watch the match.

Felix Lohkemper, one of the other forwards, scored VfB Stuttgart's third from a curling finish after receiving another defense-splitting pass from Kimmich.

VfB Stuttgart then held on to win the second semifinal with a 3:1 score. They would face NF Academy in the finals.

"What do you think about VfB Stuttgart?" Coach Johansen asked Zachary as they left the stadium, heading to the bus after the match.

"They're a better team than us," Zachary replied honestly. "Their style of play is stable, and they will most likely dictate the tempo of the game against us in the final."

Coach Johansen nodded without any reaction. "In which position do you think you would be most effective against them?"

Zachary was surprised since the coach had never bothered to inquire about tactics from any of his players. But he answered nonetheless. "I think I'll play better against Stuttgart if I play as a central midfielder. That happens to be my preferred position. However, I'll need help in the center of the pitch. We need to pack our midfield with five players to stop VfB Stuttgart's mobility—there. Only then do we stand a chance of winning."

Chapter 77 - Eve Of The Finals

Thursday, February 23, 2012.

ADO Den Haag was slated to face Tottenham Youth in the third-place playoff that afternoon. But surprisingly, coach Johansen had scheduled a light training session for the NF Academy squad at the Olympic Sports Center instead.

Zachary and his teammates warmed up by running laps around the indoor artificial turf in the Olympic Center. He was feeling a bit edgy from the expectations that came with the buildup to the final. He was surprised to find out that he could still get nervous on the day just before a youth cup final despite having experienced a lot in his past life.

Zachary had been relieved when the coach had called the squad for the last-minute training session that afternoon. The session would help calm his nerves. That was better than lounging back in his hotel room, waiting for the match.

Exercise had always brought him relaxation. With just a little sweat, he could attain the state of serenity he needed to play at his best. It was his therapy.

He ran along the course with robotic precision—and organic fluidity, stride after stride, nailed to perfection, leaving the rest of his teammates in the dust. The sweat settled upon his skin as newly melted snow crystals, making Zachary feel as if the stress was rising out of his skin with each molecule of water.

After eight laps, he felt stress-free and ready for the training session. He added a few more laps to his tally at the coach's request before joining the rest for the stretching routine.

The squad went through neck circles, shoulder rolls, arm circles, hip rotations, and other simple exercises to stretch their muscles before beginning the training session.

As soon as they completed the warm-up, Coach Johansen blew his whistle, signaling them to return to the center-circle. He was looking pleased.

Zachary had noticed that unbridled confidence had made itself a home in his features since NF Academy's win in the semifinals.

"Tomorrow is the day of the final," said Coach Johansen, letting his gaze roam around the players.

"We'll be facing VfB Stuttgart. They're not easy opponents. They are a better team—at least on paper. In order to win against them, we will have to utilize every opportunity we get in the game to score."

"We have to be clinical in our attacks and make use of our set-pieces. We have to make sure any corner-kicks and free kicks we win threaten their goal. We have got to keep this up for the entire duration of the game. That's how we'll keep the pressure on them and score."

He paused, smiling at the players before continuing. "For freekicks, we're covered. We've got Zachary, who has a good record with them. He'll make good use of the majority of the set-pieces we get. However, we're still lacking in the area of taking corners kicks." He sighed, shaking his head.

"Corner kicks can be a source of great frustration at all levels of soccer," Coach Johansen continued in a somber tone. "As I mentioned in our previous training sessions, they can help you win or push you to lose games. It depends on how you handle them. In the semifinal against ADO Den Haag, we conceded a

goal from a corner because we defended against it poorly. We're here to make sure we don't repeat the same mistake tomorrow."

"Today, we'll go through the corner kick drills we practiced before coming to Riga again. We will concentrate mainly on good delivery, well-timed runs to confuse the defense, being first to the ball, and hitting the target. We'll also work on the signals for communication while taking a particular type of corner."

"For instance, before playing a corner short, whoever's taking it can raise a single arm or finger to signal the rest to get ready."

"By the end of this session, I want everyone to be well-versed with their roles during corner kicks. For example, we'll select four of our best aerial players to always attack the ball directly during corner kicks. Like we did back in Trondheim, they will split their runs, attacking different areas to increase our chances at goal. We'll also choose the people responsible for pressuring the keeper, the ones to target the rebounds, etc. We'll try to go through as many variations of corner kicks as possible to maximize our chances tomorrow."

"That's enough theory," Coach Johansen intoned. "Let's start the corner drills right away."

The players practiced attacking and defending corner kicks for the rest of the afternoon. For the attacking bit, they ended up perfecting only five corner taking routines. Nonetheless, Zachary felt satisfied with the results of the training session. Their chances of winning had improved thanks to their work on set-pieces.

After the training session concluded, they rode the bus back to the hotel. They cleaned up quickly, had dinner, and headed straight to one of the conference rooms for Coach Johansen's pre-match briefing.

"Tomorrow," he began after all the players had taken their seats. "We'll play an entirely different system. We shall play with a 4-2-3-1 formation instead of the 5-4-1 system we've employed so far."

"But before I expound on that, I'll name tomorrow's squad. Then, we can delve into the tactics and discuss the game plan." Coach Johansen said, moving towards the whiteboard.

"The starting line-up will be as follows:

Goal Keeper; Shirt No. 1 Kendrick Otterson,

Center-backs; No.4 - Lars Togstad, No.5 - Daniel Kvande,

Left-back; No.3 - Robin Jatta, Right-back; No.2 - Øyvind Alseth,

Midfield; No.6 - Magnus Blakstad, No.13 - Simen Giðver, No. 8 - Zachary Bemba, x

Right-wing; No.7 - Paul Kasongo, Left-wing; No.15 - Paul Otterson

Forward; No.10 - Ørjan Børmark." He spoke as he inscribed the starting line-up on the whiteboard.

"You should all have a clear comprehension of your positions in the 4-2-3-1 formation since we practiced with it quite a lot back in Trondheim," the coach continued. "But, I'll go ahead and explain it again in case there is anyone who has forgotten or slept through all the training sessions before the Riga Cup."

The players laughed at that.

Coach Johansen waited for them to quiet down before continuing. "We shall split into four bands on the pitch tomorrow. Our defensive unit will consist of the two standard center-backs and two wing-backs. Two defensive midfielders will sit in front of them, screening them as the next unit. They'll play as the double pivot on the pitch to ensure there isn't any exploitable space left in front of our defense." He turned back to the whiteboard, circling the position of the two midfielders.

"I don't need to tell you how deadly the attacking midfielders of VfB Stuttgart can be when left with plenty of space in front of the defense. You watched their game against Tottenham." His tone had turned somber.

"So, Simen and Magnus," he paused slightly, first fixing his gaze towards the corner of the room where the two were seated. "As our defensive midfielders, you'll have to dig in and do your best to keep both Kimmich and their other midfielders away from our box."

"Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach," the two replied in unison.

Coach Johansen nodded, pointing back at the whiteboard. "Ahead of our two defensive midfielders, we will have Zachary playing as the central attacking midfielder and our two wingers Kasongo and Paul Otterson on the flanks. The three of you will complete our midfield together with Simen and Magnus. I expect you to clamp down on any spaces in the middle of the pitch in order to impede their quick passing ability."

"Are we clear?"

"Yes, coach," Zachary replied, nodding along with the rest.

He was glad that the coach had considered his suggestion and brought in a second defensive midfielder from the bench. If the wingers were counted, NF Academy would be able to play with a total of five midfielders. Such a set-up would make it easier to keep the VfB Stuttgart's agile midfielders in check.

Coach Johansen continued his talk for the next hour, expounding on the whole placement of the squad. He assigned roles to every single player in the starting line-up, highlighting what he expected from them on the field the next day. The coach even encouraged Zachary to try to win as many free-kicks as possible in front of the box, even if it involved some theatrics. When he finished explaining the game plan, he answered questions from the players and set them loose for the night.

"I heard that Tottenham demolished ADO Den Haag 4:1 in the third-place playoff," Paul announced to Zachary and a few others walking with him. They were ascending the stairs leading to the second floor of their hotel.

"They managed to get four goals past ADO Den Haag!" Zachary exclaimed. He couldn't hide the surprise in his voice. The Dutch side had given them a hard time during the semifinal. Yet, Tottenham, a team



that lost 3:1 to VfB Stuttgart, had defeated them with a score of 4:1. Zachary could begin to imagine how strong a side VfB Stuttgart was.

Concurrently in one of the conference rooms of the Riga AC Hotel...

The VfB Stuttgart coach and players had just finished discussing some of the tactics for the finals. Unlike in other teams, the coach of the German side encouraged independent thinking among his players. He often let them contribute suggestions during pre-match briefings to shape their tactical prowess on the pitch.

Usually, they were quick to come up with a game plan. However, on that day, they were still debating how they would handle one of the players on the NF Academy side during the final.

"I say we mark him using the same tactics we've been using against other creative attacking midfielders back in Germany," Joshua Kimmich suggested. He was seated in the front row of the room. "Just a textbook man-on-man marking will do."

There were murmurs, most in agreement while a few others in dissent, all around the room.

"Wait, and let me explain," Kimmich continued in German. "If we allocate two of our players to mark him, we'll be leaving a gap in our formation. That gap will impact our playing style negatively. We'll find ourselves in situations where we're unable to pass the ball quickly around in the midfield. If that happens, we won't be able to create many chances to score goals upfront. And, that's unacceptable."

"Moreover, the tactic of marking him with more than one player has been ineffective in the past." Kimmich smiled slightly at the rest of his teammates. "Zenit, ADO Den Haag, and Riga—all tried to double-team him in their games against NF Academy. But he always managed to outwit his minders and score valuable goals. Since most of their attention was on him, they couldn't free up players to commit forward and support their attacks. That's why they failed to score many goals. And, that's how NF Academy managed to win against all those teams."

"But we don't have to do the same. We can and should 'simply' concentrate on playing our style of football. We should focus on scoring goals instead of marking a single player."

He continued, his voice rising. "If he scores three goals, we score five. If he scores four, we score seven. That should be our style, and we shouldn't change it since we undoubtedly have the best-attacking force in this tournament."

Coach Ilija Aracic decided to interrupt the discussion at that point. He had already achieved his goal of making the players think independently before an important match. "Kimmich has a point," he intoned, smiling at his players.

"We'll stay true to our style of play and focus on attacking and scoring goals in tomorrow's final. We shall leave Zachary to Philipp. He'll be responsible for keeping him in check throughout the entire game. In case he gets past Phillip, the defense will have to react quickly and stop him before he reaches our box. The rest of you will play as usual and try to score as many goals as you can. That's the best way to play against a weaker team."

## Chapter 78 - Game Start

"Yeah, you can be the greatest, you can be the best

You can be the King Kong bangin' on your chest

You can beat the world

You can win the war

You can talk to God, go bangin' on his door..."

Zachary hummed the Script's 'Hall of Fame' yet to be released lyrics as he sat on the bus heading to Skonto Hall with the rest of his teammates.

It was the afternoon NF Academy would face VfB Stuttgart in the Riga Cup finals.

The previous night, he had thought he would only grow more nervous as the match approached. Even in his past life, he had always felt agitated and tense right before games.

But surprisingly, he'd woken up that morning in a very tranquil state, at peace, and in harmony with the world. A good night's sleep had calmed his nerves. He had never felt more ready to perform.

"That's a good song you're singing," Paul Otterson commented. He was seated beside him on the furthest seat at the back of the bus. "Who's the artist?"

"The Script and Will.i.am," Zachary replied without thinking.

"Eh!" Paul inclined his head, giving him an arch look. "Are you messing with me? I'm Will.i.am's biggest fan, yet I've never heard that song in any of his albums!"

"Oh!" Zachary was perplexed. He was about to argue but stopped suddenly—as understanding dawned on him. The song had not yet been released or even composed.

"Oh, that was a mistake on my part," he lied, a sheepish smile outlining his face. "I mixed up the artists. Maybe, I heard it on one of the TV shows that I'm watching. I think it might have been a soundtrack. I really can't recall." Words came out of his mouth at the pace of a machine gun as he tried to rectify his mistake. He didn't want Paul to begin thinking he was a freak after the song came out months later.

He had liked the song in his previous life because listening to it gave him a feeling of accomplishment even when he'd failed to succeed in his sports career. It inspired him to dream he could achieve the impossible even after he had reached the lowest point in his previous life. In his new life, just before the cup final, the song seemed fitting. He had started humming the tune by reflex.

"Maybe, we could try Shazaming it," Paul intoned, taking out his phone. "I would really like to download it and add it to my collection." The Swede seemed quite intent on finding out the name of the new song.

Zachary cursed himself inwardly for being careless with his knowledge of the future. Nonetheless, he fixed Paul with his meanest stern look before saying: "Do you really want to search for music when the match is only an hour away?"

"Oh! Sorry captain," he replied in a meek tone, pushing his phone back into his pocket. "I wasn't thinking straight. I'll keep focused on the match. I won't let anything distract me."

Zachary nodded, finally relaxing. He made a mental note to mind his words in the future to avoid leaking any information that wasn't supposed to be available in that period.

He spent the rest of the fifteen-minute bus ride in silence, his eyes closed, his mind solely focused on the match. His mind achieved a state of tranquility that translated into a soft smile on his lips. He couldn't know, for sure, whether they would win the final, but he was very optimistic and ready to play. He wanted to emerge from the match without any regrets.

A few minutes later, the bus pulled into the parking lot of the Skonto Hall. Zachary picked up his bag, alighted from the bus, and followed the rest of his teammates and technical staff into the indoor stadium.

"Hurry up and change into your warm-up kits," Coach Johansen intoned once they arrived in the dressing room. "We only have forty-five minutes left. So, be quick."

Twenty minutes later, the NF Academy players had concluded their warm-up and had returned to the dressing room. After another fifteen minutes, they had finished donning their dark blue jerseys, shin guards, and boots and were listening to his last-minute instructions.

Since he had already laid out the game plan and all the tactics the previous day, he only gave a brief pep talk. He reminded the starting players about their positioning in the new formation—and warned them about remaining focused throughout the entire game before sending them out of the dressing room. He had done his best to prepare the players for the final. The rest would be up to them.

In the stands, Emily Anderson winced at the abrupt noise. The loudspeakers of the stadium boomed, and the live English commentary began.

"Good afternoon, everyone!" The commentator drawled in heavily accented English. "Today, we're here to bring you the minute-by-minute commentary of the Riga Cup final between NF Academy from Norway and the VfB Stuttgart Youth team from Germany. I'm Ricardo Andres, working for the sports magazine, Mundial. I'm here with my colleague, Mr. Vincent McManaman."

"Good afternoon, everyone!" Vincent, the other commentator, intoned in an accent that Emily couldn't place.

"On one side, we have one of the best youth sides in Germany. While NF Academy, a team that has never made it to the Riga Cup finals, is on the other." Ricardo, the first commentator, recited. "Mr. Vincent, what's your take on the two teams?"

"Well, we all know that VfB Stuttgart is quite a tough team. They demolished all the teams in their group and went on to defeat Sturm Graz and Tottenham in the knock-out stages. They're the stronger side on paper since they have Timo Werner, the top scorer, Joshua Kimmich, the best performing midfielder, and lots of other skilled players in their starting line-up. My money is on them."

"The NF Academy, on the other hand, has Zachary Bemba. I have to admit that he may be the best player in this tournament. But, as we have come to see, he's mostly carrying the team on his own. If the VfB Stuttgart players can manage to keep him in check, then they'll surely win the game."

Ricardo Andres, the other commentator, laughed. "So, the main question in this game remains: Can VfB Stuttgart keep Zachary in check?"

Emily continued listening to the pre-match analysis by the two commentators until the cheers exploded in the stadium. The players and the three match-officials were finally entering the pitch. The Riga Cup Final would commence in a few minutes.

\*FWEEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle, signaling for the kick-off. ?rjan did not dawdle in the center-circle. He raised his leg and immediately kicked the ball towards Zachary in the midfield.

In a flash, Zachary gauged the situation on the pitch with his A+ spatial awareness as he controlled the ball. In that instant, he noticed three VfB Stuttgart players, dressed in white, quickly closing in on him. They were fast and would catch up to him in seconds.

However, he did not panic. In his peripheral vision, he had noticed both Kasongo and Paul making runs in their respective wings, spearing into VfB Stuttgart's half.

He raised his foot and unleashed a raking pass towards Kasongo's path on the left-wing. And, without bothering to check whether Kasongo had controlled the ball, he started sprinting towards the VfB Stuttgart's box.

The unexpected long-range pass had caught the VfB Stuttgart players unawares. It seemed they had presumed Zachary would dribble instead of passing the ball. Moreover, it was still the first minute of the game. All the players were still napping and suffering from delayed reaction times. So, the pass made its way to NF Academy's right-winger, unobstructed.

Kasongo controlled the ball beautifully with his chest and immediately cut inside the pitch, like the wind. Phillipp Mwene, VfB Stuttgart's left-back, came to close him down right away.

However, Kasongo didn't try to dribble past him—but instead unleashed a grounded cut-back pass, finding Zachary in the middle of the pitch.

Zachary controlled the ball without halting his sprint. He then dribbled past a defender, who'd sprung up in front of him, making a yard of space for himself. He then continued towards VfB Stuttgart's box.

It was a lightning-fast attack in the 1st minute of the Riga Cup finals.

The VfB Stuttgart players seemed to be well aware of the danger posed by Zachary. They compressed their formation, trying to deny him any running space through the middle.

However, in so doing, they had left a gap on the left flank. Simon Wilske, the VfB Stuttgart right-back, had already moved into the middle to help defend against Zachary, leaving Paul Otterson unmarked.

Nonetheless, Zachary didn't release the ball right away. He continued running at the defenders, drawing their attention away from Paul, on the left-wing. And when they all thought they had cornered him, he dug his left boot beneath the ball and flicked it above their heads, into the box.

He had timed his pass perfectly. It took all the defenders by surprise, leaving Paul Otterson unmarked with the ball in the box.

Paul showed his mettle. He latched on to the brilliant pass and calmly rifled a first-time shot into the bottom right corner.

1:0.

In the 1st minute, NF Academy, the underdog, had managed to get the first laugh, even before the fans could warm up to the match. The stadium erupted into a thunderous roar.

Chapter 79 - Game Progress

"GOAAAAAL..."

Zachary sighed and facepalmed as he watched Paul Otterson howling like a hungry wolf after scoring.

Otterson spread out his hands as he weaved through his teammates like a rugby player and ran towards the corner flag to celebrate his goal. He didn't stop at that. He added a few flamboyant backflips for good measure before settling down to celebrate with the rest of his teammates.

Zachary didn't join in the celebrations. He instead reminded his teammates to get back into their positions. They needed to stay focused on the game since only two minutes had passed on the clock. NF Academy still had a long way to go to defeat VfB Stuttgart.

He knew one of the most-likely moments to concede in soccer matches was right after scoring. Players tended to become complacent after obtaining a lead. They would then end up making mistakes that could result in goals.

In the stands, Emily Anderson felt excitement sparking within her after Paul Otterson scored the goal. The match had just begun, yet NF Academy had already taken the lead. She wondered what the commentators who'd put their money on a VfB Stuttgart win would say after seeing Zachary's assist.

"Ladies—and gentlemen," she heard Ricardo Andres, the commentator that spoke with a heavy Spanish accent, drawling after the cheers had died down. "NF Academy has done it. Oh, my goodness me! What about that? NF Academy is leading in the second minute, no, the first minute. Vincent, what is your take on that goal?"

Emily heard Vincent McManaman, the second commentator, clearing his throat before replying. "As I'd said a few minutes ago, VfB Stuttgart will have to keep Zachary in check if they wish to win the final. This goal is representative of his quick thinking and brilliance in the middle of the field. It took just a couple of seconds for him to take advantage of Kasongo's run in the left-wing. And luckily, Kasongo did not disappoint. He supplied a precise cut-back pass to Zachary. The number-8 did what he does best. He ran at the defenders, drew their attention away from his teammate, and delivered that tricky little ball over the defense. The boy is simply a genius. NF Academy is in the lead, thanks to him."

"I have to say both Kasongo Paul and Paul Otterson were instrumental in the buildup to this goal," drawled Ricardo Andres, the first commentator. "Even ?rjan B?rmark, the center-forward, should be given credit. Don't you think so, Mr. Vincent?"

"Absolutely," Vincent McManaman replied firmly. "Zachary wouldn't have held on to the ball that long if his teammates hadn't made runs at the VfB Stuttgart's defensive line. They gave Zachary Bemba a lot of options to choose from when he delivered his final pass. And in so doing, they confused the defense further, winning time for Zachary to create the chance. And special credit should go to Paul Otterson, the left-winger. He timed his run perfectly, avoiding the offside trap by a hair's breadth. He didn't lose composure and punished VfB Stuttgart."

"Well, let's leave it at that," said Ricardo Andres. "The gameplay has restarted, and it seems like VfB Stuttgart is trying their best to score an equalizer right away. Mr. Vincent, do you think this will be a match of many goals?"



"I really can't tell at the moment," Vincent McManaman replied. "If the NF Academy can manage to score another goal, we may get to see a multi-goal thriller in the finals. However, if they focus on defense—like I suspect they will, we may have to sit through a long, drawn-out match—like their quarter-final against Zenit."

\*FWEEEEEEE\*

The referee blew the whistle, awarding a throw-in. Magnus, one of the two NF Academy's defensive midfielders, had just made a clean sliding tackle, dispossessing Sinan Gümüs and shoving the ball out of play.

Phillipp Mwene, VfB Stuttgart's left-back, took the throw-in, quickly releasing Timo Werner on the left flank. Timo used his incredible pace, bolting past ?yvind Alseth, NF Academy's right-back, and delivered a teasing cross into the box.

Adrian Grbic, VfB Stuttgart's center-forward, out-jumped the NF Academy center-backs to meet the ball. He planted a powerful header towards the goal from around the edge of the box. However, his effort ballooned high over the crossbar.

The referee signaled for a goal-kick.

Zachary let out a breath of pent up air and turned around to head back to the center-circle. His team had survived yet another attack from the relentless VfB Stuttgart attackers.

The NF Academy had been under tremendous pressure for the first ten minutes of the game. VfB Stuttgart's players had come at them like predators chasing prey, starting from the moment they conceded the goal. They attacked relentlessly using both long and short passes, searching for opportunities to spear into NF Academy's box.

However, NF Academy's four defenders coordinated well with the two defensive midfielders to keep the VfB Stuttgart attackers at bay. They remained disciplined and focused on playing with a high defensive

line, often catching the opposing forwards offside. The score was still 1:0 in the 12th minute, thanks to their efforts.

Zachary was surprised as the match progressed into the 15th minute. He'd noticed that only Philipp F?rster, VfB Stuttgart's number-8, was marking him. The rest of the midfielders minded other aspects of the game without bothering to track his movements. For the first time, Zachary felt as free as a bird on the field of play. It had been long since he'd enjoyed the freedom accorded by being marked by a single player.

However, he hadn't gotten many touches on the ball. The VfB Stuttgart players had elevated their playing-style to a higher gear after conceding. They arrayed themselves in a triangular 4-3-3 formation and passed the ball through their midfield quickly, probing for weaknesses.

Zachary noted that Joshua Kimmich was the holding central-midfielder, placed in front of the four defenders. He played behind two attacking midfielders—that in turn played behind three forwards.

Adrian Grbic was the center-forward. Timo Werner and Felix Lohkemper played on the left and right flanks, respectively. The latter, two, made runs in the wings, forming passing triangles with Sinan Gümüs and Joshua Kimmich—the midfielders who were not marking Zachary.

Joshua Kimmich was exceptional as the control tower of the whole VfB Stuttgart's formation. Zachary noticed that he was playing almost like the maverick of the German side that day. He had no defined role in the midfield and was unpredictable on the ball.

Sometimes, Kimmich would shift the ball from right to left, setting his fullbacks free down the wing or searching for the powerful runner Timo Werner on the left-wing. Other times, he would play it cool by slowly passing the ball to his teammates, both in the defense and the midfield. And when the NF Academy players least expected it, he could make a run through the middle.

He managed to cause NF Academy several problems with his uncanny passing ability. In the 18th minute, he made space for himself by skipping past Simen Gi?ver, one of NF Academy's defensive midfielders. He immediately let loose a raking pass that soared over the defense and fell right on the path of Timo Werner.

Timo, VfB Stuttgart's number-11, collected the sweet pass on the edge of the box—and in one movement, smashed a shot towards goal. However, Lars Togstad, NF Academy's number-4, slid in to block the ball and deflect it away from its intended path.

Daniel Kvade, his counterpart in central defense, pounced on the resulting ball and cleared it away from the box—towards the middle of the pitch.

Magnus, the tall NF Academy defensive midfielder, outmuscled his mark and headed the ball towards Zachary in the left midfield.

Zachary controlled it like a pro, bringing it to the ground in a single motion. And without a pause, he spun with the ball hooked to his left foot, skipping past Philipp F?rster, his marker, before taking off like a racehorse towards the VfB Stuttgart's half.

Joshua Kimmich, VfB Stuttgart's number-6, immediately closed in on him, attempting to block his run. However, Zachary didn't try to dribble past him. He raised his leg and unleashed a grounded pass towards the left-wing, where Paul Otterson was waiting.

The NF Academy winger seemed to be on top of his game that day and didn't disappoint. He controlled the ball like a pro, spun around, and dashed along the touchline, bolting into VfB Stuttgart's half like the wind. Meanwhile, Zachary continued running in sync with him through the midfield.

Simon Wilske, VfB Stuttgart's right-back, came up to intercept Paul Otterson once he was about a dozen yards into the opponent's half. However, Paul maintained his composure and unleashed a grounded through-pass towards ?rjan B?rmark, NF Academy's center-forward. ?rjan had just escaped his marker and made a yard of space for himself at the edge of the box.

The center-forward controlled the ball beautifully and tried to skip past VfB Stuttgart's center-backs to step into their box. But the defenders stood their ground and didn't give him any leeway to run with the ball.

"?rjan," Zachary yelled as he ran towards VfB Stuttgart's box. "Pass here."

The center-forward didn't dawdle after hearing him yelling. ?rjan flicked the ball onto his right and unleashed a well-timed cut-back pass towards Zachary.

Zachary didn't even bother to control the ball. He simply whipped it with his left foot on the first contact, unleashing a missile of a shot towards the goal.

## Chapter 80 - A Game Of Thrills

In the technical area, Coach Johansen watched the ball flashing towards the goal. It rose and dipped at an incredible speed, going on to veer past VfB Stuttgart's defense and goalkeeper.

Zachary had spotted Odysseas Vlachodimos, VfB Stuttgart's goalkeeper, off his line. So, he had gone for a first-time shot from thirty-five yards, using the laced part of the boot.

The keeper was helpless and beaten.

The fans in the stands had gone quiet, watching Zachary's long-range effort head towards the goal.

Zachary, still at the edge of the box, raised his arms to start celebrating, expecting his attempt to find its way to the back of the net.

However—

"BAM"

"Goddamn it!" Coach Johansen couldn't help but curse loudly, punching the air before him, as he watched the ball smash off the crossbar and bounce back into the pitch.

Nonetheless, he didn't look away from the field of play since he'd noticed both Zachary and ?rjan chasing after the loose ball in VfB Stuttgart's box. He hoped they'd get there first and give the NF Academy an early two-goal advantage. With the way the VfB Stuttgart players were playing, NF Academy needed a cushion if they wished to hold on to their lead and win the final.

"Yes," he heard Coach Bjørn Peters, celebrating from beside him as Ørjan, NF Academy's center-forward, got to the ball first—before the VfB Stuttgart center-backs. With acrobatic flamboyance, he planted a diving header towards the bottom left corner.

However, the VfB Stuttgart goalkeeper was alert that time around. He dived sideways and pushed the ball with his fingertips away from his goal. He had denied NF Academy the chance to extend their lead.

The referee blew his whistle and pointed towards the corner flag.

"Damn," Coach Bjørn cursed from beside him. "That's a gone opportunity. We missed the chance to extend our advantage."

Coach Johansen nodded without saying anything. Although he could relate to his assistant's mood, he still hoped his team would get something out of the corner kick.

"Øyvind," he yelled at the top of his voice. "Go ahead and take the corner," he added when the right-back faced towards the technical area. He didn't forget to signal to Øyvind and the rest of his players, instructing them on which corner-kick taking routine would be the best at that moment.

A few seconds later, he nodded in satisfaction as he watched six of his tallest players gather at the edge of the box. They intended to make runs towards different areas to confuse the VfB Stuttgart defenders. That would vastly increase their chances of scoring. In the meantime, Magnus, the tall defensive midfielder, got close to the keeper, waiting to pounce on the loose ball that might come his way.

The only tall NF Academy player that wasn't in that box was Zachary. He stood right outside the eighteen, waiting for the rebound.

Coach Johansen was satisfied with the positioning of his players for the corner kick. It was up to Øyvind to deliver a good corner ball so that NF Academy could extend their lead before it was too late. The earlier they improved their advantage, the better their chances at victory.

Øyvind, NF Academy's right-back, didn't disappoint. He whipped the ball in a circular arc—into the rowdy group of players packed within the box.

There was some pushing and shoving within the box as the ball dropped towards the far post. However, Robin Jatta, NF Academy's left-back, timed his run superbly, outwitting his mark to connect with the resulting corner ball. He showed his brilliance in the air and managed to plant a header towards the goal, uncontested. Aall **newest chapters** on [n.o./velbi/n/\(.\)com](http://n.o./velbi/n/(.)com)

Coach Johansen raised his arms, anticipating a goal.

However, Odysseas Vlachodimos, VfB Stuttgart's goalkeeper, pulled off an excellent save to deny Robin the chance of fixing his name on the score sheet. He dived superbly to stop the ball headed towards the bottom right corner, sending it back into the pitch.

Timo Baumgartl, VfB Stuttgart's center-back, got to it first and cleared it towards the left-wing where Joshua Kimmich was waiting.

Joshua Kimmich brought the ball under control with fluid motion like a Maestro. Without even taking a second touch, he unleashed a lofted pass across the touchline—towards the centerline where Timo Werner was lurking.

Joshua Kimmich, VfB Stuttgart's number-6, had just started a deadly counter right after the corner kick. All the NF Academy players seemed to be caught unawares as the lightning-fast switch from defense to attack had taken only a single touch to initiate.

Timo Werner, VfB Stuttgart's number-11, chested the ball down in the left-wing—close to the touchline before bolting off into NF Academy's half.

The VfB Stuttgart forward was very fast, and NF Academy seemed vulnerable. Coach Johansen was about to start yelling at Kasongo to close down Timo but stopped suddenly. He'd noticed that Zachary was already chasing down the speedy winger.

Coach Johansen watched Zachary use his incredible pace to catch up to Timo Werner as he cut into the pitch, leaving the flanks. Without any suspense, Zachary slid in and shoved the ball away from Timo's feet, sending him tumbling to the ground.

Coach Johansen cast a nervous glance towards the linesman standing close to the two players on the left flank. However, the match official kept his flag down, putting him at ease. He let out a breath of pent-up air when he realized that Zachary's tackle hadn't resulted in a foul.

"Zachary must have started chasing down Timo Werner even before Kimmich released the ball," Coach Bjørn observed from beside him. "It's like he can predict where the opponents will play the ball even before they initiate the attack. Doesn't this mean that he always has a complete visual on everyone on the pitch?"

"Maybe," Coach Johansen replied perfunctorily since all his focus was still on the match. Zachary had just picked up the loose ball and passed it back to Kendrick, NF Academy's goalkeeper.

However, the danger wasn't yet over. Timo Werner, who'd just picked himself from the ground, closed him down immediately.

Kendrick could only kick the ball high towards the midfield since there were not many NF Academy players to pass to, close to the box.

However, in so doing, NF Academy lost possession once more. What followed was a period of VfB Stuttgart dominancy. The German side intensified its attacks, passing the ball around, patiently awaiting an opportunity.

Joshua Kimmich continued dictating the tempo in midfield as the control tower. Zachary had tried to mark and dispossess him on many occasions but failed. The number-6 always played it safe, opting to pass the ball before Zachary could get to him. He mostly played two touches on the ball before unleashing through passes towards the VfB Stuttgart forwards. His style was efficient. It helped VfB Stuttgart dominate possession and build up a lot of chances in the following minutes.

Both Timo Werner and Felix Lohkemper, the VfB Stuttgart forwards on the flanks, came close to scoring after receiving defense-splitting passes from him in the 26th and 30th minutes. However, Kendrick had risen to the occasion and produced superb saves. Coach Johansen was pleased with his performance.

The NF Academy defenders were also playing at their best. They managed to block many of the goal attempts made by VfB Stuttgart's attackers.

However, Coach Johansen was still dissatisfied with the score. He knew well how dangerous VfB Stuttgart could be as the match progressed since he'd watched the German side's previous two games.

The only way he could increase his team's chances of winning against the much stronger side was by extending his lead before half-time. So, he decided to call on his most-effective player once again.

When the ball went out of play for a throw-in, he called Zachary to the touchline.

"Try to stay around Kimmich for the rest of the first half," he intoned, patting Zachary on the back after he'd arrived close to the technical area. "I'm sure you've noticed that a lot of action happens around him. If you keep close to him, you should be able to get an opportunity for a counter-attack if he makes a mistake."

"That's is if he ever makes a mistake," Zachary replied, smiling wryly. "But, I'll try to close him down as soon as possible for the rest of the first half," he added before running back into the pitch.

The game restarted, and Zachary followed his instructions to the letter. He moved upfront and stayed close to the VfB Stuttgart number-6, making him uncomfortable in the process. Whenever Kimmich would receive the ball, Zachary would pounce on him instantly without giving him any time or breathing space.

Kimmich managed to keep his composure most of the time. He continued playing quick passes to his teammates without allowing Zachary any chance to close him down.

But Zachary remained patient, waiting around him for an opportunity. And surprisingly, his efforts were rewarded in the 43rd minute.

Sinan Gümüş, one of the midfielders, played a loose pass to Kimmich deep in VfB Stuttgart's half when Zachary was nearby. It was one of those unexpected miskicks that no one could have expected from a player of his caliber. All the players around him, including his teammates, were caught off-guard by his rookie mistake.



However, Zachary managed to pounce on the blind pass, intercepting it before any other player could get to it. He then went on a solo run, weaving past Kimmich and Philipp F?rster. He swept through the midfield so fast that he was bearing down on the VfB Stuttgart center-backs in no time.

The two VfB Stuttgart center-backs seemed to have been alerted on how to handle Zachary's dribbling. They stood their ground before the box, blocking his path without trying to make any wild lunges at the ball.

Zachary, though, did not try to dribble past them. He did the unexpected instead. He whipped the ball with the inside of his left boot from outside of the eighteen-yard box.

Coach Johansen watched with nervous anticipation as the ball curled around the two defenders and spun past the goalkeeper—into the top left corner. Odysseas Vlachodimos, the VfB Stuttgart number-1, could only turn around and watch the ball spinning in the back of the net.

2:0.

The NF Academy had defied all odds to extend their lead to two goals just before half time. Coach Johansen could not help but celebrate like a maniac, waving his arms around and running back and forth within the technical area.