

## THE GREATEST OF ALL TIME

### Chapter 13 - The Trial Match Ends

The match resumed after Coach Mande blew the whistle.

Zachary and his teammates in red marked the forwards of the green team immediately after gameplay resumed. The midfielders in green bibs like Wagaluka and Mpoku had no option but to pass the ball back to their defenders.

Zachary's red team was pressing their opponents within their half.

At some point, droplets of rain had started falling from the sky. Most of the scouts returned to the pavilion to find shelter from the drizzle. But, a few remained close to the pitch, intently watching the match.

Coach Damata, on the sideline, was speaking with Mr. Benard Christophe, the head scout of FC Nantes Youth Academy. He was responsible for deciding the results of the ADTA trials in Lubumbashi. The other French officials in the delegation had merely come to earn some per diem and sightsee in Africa. Only a few like Mr. Benard were intently watching out for young potential recruits in the trials.

"That Mangala boy is good," Christophe began. "As you mentioned before, his dribbling and finishing skills are impeccable," he added, his eyes never leaving the pitch. He didn't seem to mind the rain one bit.

Stephen Mangala had just dribbled past Awax Bondeko, the right-back of the red team. He dashed into the box and unleashed a low shot which was saved by Baraka, the keeper. The boy prodigy seemed to be the only one still alive on the green team.

Coach Damata creased his brows before replying. "What about the Zachary boy. He is the tall guy in the number-8 position of the red team." He pointed towards Bemba's position on the pitch.

Christophe frowned, looking towards Zachary. "I see that he's a skilled distributor of the ball," he observed. "But we already have many such boys at the academy. His imposing physique is an advantage over those at the same age. What do you think will happen in the future when the others mature into stronger players?" He queried.

"I choose to go with the Mangala boy. Kayembe, the winger of the green team, is also an option." He intoned.

"Our scouts have been observing Zachary since he was twelve, and I assure you that he's a talented young man," Coach Damata argued. "His game intelligence is at another level. That, coupled with his strong body, makes him a good product to shape into a professional center-back or a midfielder."

Damata, as a local coach, wanted to see several young Congolese talents joining the French youth academies. That way, DR Congo would perform better in future international competitions.

"My dear coach," Christophe said, squinting up at the African in the slight drizzle. Damata knew that his efforts to forward the young talent to the Nantes Academy had met a roadblock.

"Do you doubt my vision? Do you think we would be here in this backwater if it wasn't for the sponsorship from the ADTA?" Christophe smirked.

"We promised to select about four players from the trials. Be satisfied with that. We have gathered enough information about the Zachary boy to make a decision." The left side of his red lip tugged upwards, creating a sort of sinister smirk on his aged face.

Damata remained silent for a while, watching the proceedings of the match before asking, "Mr. Benard, aren't you watching the match?" Damata questioned, pointing towards the pitch.

Zachary had just released another through pass to Emanuel Luboya. The tall striker braced himself and unleashed a mid-range shot that went just over the crossbar. The green team had a goal kick.

"We know that your boy had his left foot wasted in an accident," Mr. Benard intoned, gently shaking his head.

"What?" Coach Damata frowned. He had heard about Zachary's accident from one of the TP Mazembe scouts. But, it didn't seem to be anything serious. The French scout's focus on such an unimportant detail bugged him.

"We wouldn't take anyone prone to injuries, no matter how talented they are. The boy having his ankle ligaments torn ended his path to becoming a professional soccer player." Mr. Benard stated.

"Can't you give him a chance by letting him take a medical?" Damata pleaded. "Players do get hurt, but they heal and return to the pitch."

"Enough," Christophe frowned. "We have already done enough background investigations to decide his fate. We even went to the CMC community hospital, where the boy was formerly admitted after his accident, to verify the details. From the x-rays, we all concluded that his left foot is a goner." The scout added before focusing his attention back on the match.

"You African coaches are all the same," Coach Damata heard him mumble in a voice just enough for him to discern. "You never try to check the background information about the players. All you do is sign finished products when they play a good game or show some skill in one of your trials. You never research chronic injuries, background, family history, or how these factors might affect the career of a player. All you do is end up wasting valuable resources on players that will never make it. That is a weakness of the African soccer talent development system." The scout sighed, shaking his head.

"We do have players who have recovered from such injuries even at the international level," Damata argued.

"That is the case of one time in a million," Christophe interrupted. "Those are usually rich players with access to the best doctors in the world. Their clubs give them access to the right medical treatment immediately after they get injured. What did you do for a potential young talent after he suffered an injury? You left him to tend to his wounds without any support in a hospital." Christophe scowled, his voice turning dramatic towards the end.

He spread out his arms and asked, "Coach Damata, what did you expect to happen?"

A grin spread over his face, wide and open, showing his over-whitened teeth. At that moment, his motives were laid bare; he was a mocker, one who enjoyed tormenting others. That was Damata's conclusion.

He left the scout to his own devices and started thinking about how to help the boy.

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Zachary was unaware of the discussion taking place between the coach and the scout. The only thing on his mind was winning the game.

It was still a stalemate. Two minutes remained to the end of the game, with the score still 2:2.

Both Mpoku and Wagaluka were double-teaming Zachary to stop him from distributing any passes to the red strikers and wingers.

He had been giving the forwards, Luboya and Beni, several deadly through passes. However, they had failed to convert them into goals.

[I cannot lose right now.] He resolved.

The others were all about individual performance and did not care much about the result of the game. They only wanted to catch the attention of the scouts, nothing more. But, Zachary had much more to lose since the system would go offline for a year if he lost the match. He could not afford to pay that price.

He started surveying the pitch for any openings he could exploit. The ball was still being passed around by the defenders of his team in red bibs, steadily advancing towards the centerline. He turned towards the opponent's half and instantly noticed something he had neglected.

[Maybe I can try that.]

He grinned before signaling to Kasongo and the strikers to rush to the other half.

Like a rugby player, he feigned forward movement but reversed directions and lost the two bodyguards (Wagaluka and Mpoku) that had been shadowing him for more than five minutes. They were reluctant to follow since he was running back to his half. They became even more confused when they saw the strikers and wingers jogging towards their goal, in the opposite direction.

"Here, pass here!" Zachary hollered out to Luyinda who had just received the ball.

Luyinda stayed true to his promise and instantly kicked the ball towards him. But, Wagaluka was on his heels right away, tackling him and trying to win the ball.

Zachary made a swift turn, pulling the ball with his right leg, and spun past the midfielder. He then accelerated and dashed off into the opponent's half, dribbling past Mpoku and Edo Kayembe along the way. Zachary found himself in space with no one marking him before stepping past the center circle and penetrating the other half. He noticed that the forwards in red, marked by the

green team's defenders, were eagerly awaiting his pass just outside the green team's 18-yard-box.

"Mark him, tackle him," Zachary thought he heard Mangala yelling from behind him as he continued running with the ball. However, he ignored everything behind him and focused on the goalkeeper. Zachary had noticed that Jackson Lunanga tended to stray away from his line whenever the ball was at a distance from him. He intended to exploit that error.

From forty-five yards away, Zachary struck with his right leg, unleashing the ball on an arching path towards the goal.

[Please go in.] He prayed.

Everyone in the stadium watched the ball zoom over the other players towards the goal. They sighed at the impatience of the young player probably brought about by the approaching end of the match.

However, not everyone shared similar thoughts. Lunanga, the keeper of the green team, had started running back towards his goalposts the moment Zachary hit the ball. But, he could not make it in time. The ball floated over his bare head, into the back of the net: 3:2.

The red team had clinched a lead for the first time that day.

The whole stadium was silent.

The spectators turned white as chalk as their faces froze in expressions of stunned surprise. Although they were staring straight at Zachary, they appeared not to notice him at all.

"Shit!" Wagaluka swore from behind him. "What dog shit luck does Bemba have today?" He mumbled.

The din soon returned to the stadium as the people finally reacted, oohing and aahing at the spectacular goal.

But on the sidelines, Christophe sighed. "What a pity. He would have grown into a good player." He shook his head and returned his attention to the match.

The goal seemed to have set off a spark in the green team's ranks. Mangala, Wagaluka, and Kayembe all attacked like there was no tomorrow for the next minute. However, Zachary's red team held out until the final whistle, with Baraka making two more spectacular saves.

3:2 was the final score.

"Zachary, man," Kasongo ran up to him after Coach Mande blew the whistle. "That was quite the show. There's no doubt you'll be selected by the scouts." He stated, smiling.

Baraka and some of his other teammates also came along and celebrated with him for a while. Even Luyinda bumped fists with him for the first time in their history, spanning two lives.

[This is soccer. A game that should build unity among teammates rather than hatred.] He smiled as he soaked in the praises from his teammates. He felt accomplished.

"Next time, I won't lose," a familiar voice sounded from behind him.

Zachary turned around and found the boy prodigy, Mangala, standing behind him. A smirk grew over his face like a lazy teacher's checkmark, the faded "red ink" stretching up into his dimple.

"Are you sure?" Zachary grinned.

"Yes."

"I'll be waiting."

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Coach Damata hurried away from the touchline towards the dressing room right after the final whistle. He felt dejection wash over him when Zachary scored the third goal.

All his efforts at convincing Mr. Christophe Benard to give Zachary a chance had proven futile. A talented player was about to be neglected by a conservative scout due to an unverified latent injury.

He had to find another opportunity for the boy before things went wrong as they usually did in Congo. He could see Zachary becoming a pillar of the Leopards in international competitions a few years in the future.

"Excuse me, Coach Damata. Can we talk for a minute or two?" Damata heard a familiar hoarse but mellow voice from beside him. He turned back only to find an aged Caucasian man in a sunhat and a blonde girl standing behind him. [Visjt novelbin\(.\)com](http://www.novelbin.com) for new updates

"Hahaha," Coach Damata laughed after seeing the Norwegian.

"Mr. Martin Stein, nice meeting you again," he said, extending his hand for a handshake. "I was about to come looking for you. I need a favor from you this time."

"Oh, same here," Mr. Stein smiled, shaking Damata's outstretched hand. "Can we talk in your office?" He said.

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