

THE GREATEST OF ALL TIME

Chapter 8 - First Day Of The Trials

FWEEEEEEEEEE!

In the blazing midday heat, Zachary and the other participants in the fourth group set-off as soon as Coach Mande blew the whistle. The last race in the Lubumbashi trials had started.

Zachary did not bother to spy on his other opponents but just took off at half of his top speed. It was a race of 32 laps totaling approximately 8 miles. He needed to save his energy by slowing his pace at the beginning.

However, the noteworthy players like Miché Mika and Nike Kabanga were in a class of their own. The two were unparalleled when they found clear space during the second lap. They shot forward at their fastest pace and soon led the entire pack of the 30 players. Stubbornly sticking to them was Stephen Mangala, the springy boy prodigy from Kinshasha.

To Zachary's surprise, a short boy he hadn't encountered in his previous life was also part of the leading group.

The group of four started to break away from the others, a feat that caused Zachary to worry. So, he accelerated.

He increased his pace until he was only a few meters behind them during the sixth lap. However, the four stubbornly stuck to their lead despite all his efforts.

For the next twenty laps, their group accelerated ahead of the rest, taking an average of 70 seconds per lap. Their time was only about 10 seconds behind the top runners in the world. They came close to doubling the rest.

Miché Mika led wearing an Olympique Lyonnais jersey. Nike Kabanga and Stephen Mangala shadowed every stride, both wearing arsenal t-shirts. The unknown boy also stuck to the group. However, he had begun losing his stamina and Zachary easily overtook him.

He maintained his acceleration and went past Kabanga and Mangala as well. By the 28th lap, only Miché Mika was still ahead of him.

With only 3 laps to go, Zachary Bemba started closing the gap. Miché Mika dug, pushed harder, and did everything to shake his competitor. But, he was also overtaken by Zachary towards the end of the 29th lap.

Zachary was giddy with excitement but maintained his swift pace. He continued dashing along the brown clay tracks of the stadium. He had no intention of losing his lead.

The spikes underneath his boots gripped the earth in a rhythm. His strides became lyrics to an original track he had gotten a chance to play for the audience of the coaches watching from the sidelines. Droplets of sweat had long started to run down his skin.

Zachary had been jogging an average of five miles each day for the two weeks preceding his journey to Lubumbashi. His fitness could hold up against the remaining few laps around the pitch.

However, at the start of the penultimate lap, Zachary saw a shadow flash by, leaving him in the dust. The boy prodigy, Stephen Mangala, had overtaken him with only 800 meters to go.

[Shit!]

He also accelerated but failed to catch up with him.

[Am I going to lose?]

He labored to increase his pace. The pain in his limbs was an ocean of unknowable depths and lurking beasts. But, he ignored it and continued chasing Mangala's shadow.

A feeling of dejection washed over him. He felt his legs become heavy like they were weighed down by lead.

[I have to win this no matter what.] Nnêw n0vel chapters are published on [n0v/e/\(lb\)i\(n.\)co/m](http://n0v/e/(lb)i(n.)co/m)

He tapped into energy reserves he never thought he had and accelerated instantly.

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Coach Damata stood on the sidelines watching the race. He had taken a keen interest in the fourth group that included two interesting boys who had formerly been noticed by the TP Mazembe scouts. They had all participated in regional under-14 tournaments. Stephen Mangala had been the best player in the secondary school competition held in Kinshasha at the start of the year. The other boy, Zachary Bemba, had been the captain of a primary school in Lubumbashi. He had won the 2008 best player award in the Lubumbashi under-14 regionals.

The boys did not disappoint him.

"Mangala, the new boy will take this race," Coach Mande announced from his left. "Zachary and the rest are spent and have no chance of catching up," he added.

"Let's wait and see," Coach Damata smiled. "A competition is never won until the very end," he intoned. He focused back on the running forms of Mangala and Zachary.

The race's results looked like a foregone conclusion after the last bend. Mangala flew gleefully towards the finish line while Zachary desperately

chased. But, with half a lap to go, Zachary contorted his body and sprinted, pulling off a schoolboy imitation of a galloping horse.

With 30 meters remaining, Zachary miraculously accelerated past Mangala before dashing to the finish line. He looked back at neither those behind him nor the coaches on the sidelines. His eyes remained locked on the finish line until he won the race.

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"Beni Badibanga, Paul Kasongo, Patrick Luamba, Tony Majembe, ...Chris Luyinda, Miché Mika, Fredric Luamba, Stephen Mangala, and Zachary Bemba." Coach Mande closed his counter book after reading out the names of the players with the best times in the race.

As promised, the coaches only selected 26 boys among those gathered. Those whose names had been called by Coach Mande entered the center circle of the pitch as part of the group selected to return for trial matches the following day.

Zachary was the last to be called since he had the best time in the whole group. Coach Mande had been reading the list in descending order.

Zachary swaggered into the center circle, earning a few frowns and harrumphs from the likes of Chris Luyinda and his former classmates Tony and Patrick.

He noticed that the eyes of most of the selected players were fixed on him, unlike before. But he ignored them and found an unoccupied spot to sit. He still had to check out his results of the system mission.

At the end of the race, Zachary had been too tired to even lift a finger. He had resolved to rest for a few minutes; however, the coaches had called everyone to partake in a post-race assembly.

Only then did Zachary get time to open the system user interface. He had already confirmed that it was invisible to others. So, he boldly opened the missions tab and perused through his achievements.

*G.O.A.T MISSIONS

#4 new messages

CONGRATULATIONS

->You have completed 1st task in the serial mission - Lubumbashi Soccer Trials (Become the first in the physical fitness testing at the soccer trials).

->Mission-Rewards

1) B-grade agility enhancing elixir (Available in system-shop; temporarily unlocked. The user must consume the elixir within 5 seconds after being removed from the system shop.)

->Mission Summary

*Task 1: Become the first in the physical fitness testing at the soccer trials. (Finished race in a record time of 39.12 minutes; Rating A+)

->Overall Mission Rating: NA (available at the end of the trials)

->Bonus rewards

You have earned 2 bonus juju points

Zachary finally confirmed that he had completed the mission task with an A+ grade.

However, he did not open the system-shop to access his reward. He closed the interface and looked up only to see the boys that had not been selected marching out of the pitch with dejected expressions. He couldn't help but recall the times he had been part of such a group during his previous life.

He sighed in sympathy.

At this point in his past life, he had returned to his former school in western Lubumbashi with no hope of becoming a professional soccer player. He had been rejected by the school team later due to a recurring ankle injury. But now, he had gone through the first stage of the ADTA trials. His fate was starting to change for the better.

[I only have to perform well in the matches tomorrow. I can then move to Europe and seriously develop my career.] He thought.

"Listen up, everyone," Coach Damata bellowed once the unsuccessful players had left the stadium.

"Congratulations on passing the first test of the trial. Tomorrow, several renowned scouts will be here to watch you perform. Make sure you are here by eight. Otherwise, you will face immediate disqualification." The coach warned solemnly.

"Any questions?" He asked, looking around.

The strange boy who had also been part of the leading group in Hugo's race instantly raised his arm.

"Yes," Coach Damata pointed at him. "Tell us your name first before asking your question."

"My name is Paul Kasongo, sir," the boy stammered. "What will be involved in the trials tomorrow? How should we prepare?" He asked.

[So, he is Kasongo, the player murdered before he left for Europe in my previous life.] Zachary mused.

He finally understood why he didn't recognize a highly fit player like him. Paul Kasongo had died at the hands of a local prostitute in Lubumbashi after being selected by one of the high-performance academies in Europe. All the coaches in Lubumbashi had sighed in regret at the loss of such a budding talent.

[I should help him this time. DR Congo needs more players like him for international tournaments.]

"There will only be trial matches tomorrow," Damata replied. "Eat well, rest well, and come prepared to perform tomorrow morning. That's all."

"Any more questions?"

All the players remained silent.

"Okay, you're dismissed," Coach Damata waved impatiently. "We'll see you all tomorrow."