

Football 234

Chapter 234 Forced Decision

The boardroom remained charged with an electric tension as Ian Bankier addressed Brendan Rodgers with a finality that brooked no further discussion. The Thrashing at their home stadium in the Europa League round of 32 was a bitter pill, and Ian's words reflected the mounting pressure from all sides.

Brendan Rodgers maintained his composure, though the strain was evident. He couldn't argue regarding the result of the European League game as none of his tactics worked and his teams were firmly outclassed. Honestly, it was a wonder that they only lost by 2 goals which had a lot to do with luck. The boardroom, adorned with his beloved club's rich history, now felt like a battlefield where the stakes were no less than the future direction of Celtic FC.

Despite loving his time at the club he longed for the competition of managing a team like Liverpool. After helming clubs in the Premier League having to deal with a team content with winning a small league trophy each year isn't enough for him. The only reason he took this job was the desire to win his first trophy in his managerial career. However, after getting a taste of it he yearns for a bigger stage with more glory.

Trying his best to keep his mounting frustration under check after listening to the chairman's critique. He knew the weight of expectations from the fans, but the constant pushback without adequate support was becoming increasingly disheartening. "Ian, I understand the need for results, but it's important to recognize the challenges we're facing. A lack of investment in experienced players limits our ability to compete at the highest level."

A board member shifted in his seat, clearly uncomfortable with the escalating conflict. "Perhaps we should focus on the immediate goal, how to best manage Rakim's promotion and the team's current performance. The transfer budget can be a separate discussion."

Ian nodded, though his gaze remained fixed on Brendan. "Agreed. We need to address Rakim's role and our performance going forward." With his words, the tension in the room eased allowing the others to breathe a sigh of relief. The conversation on Rakim's call up to the senior team went rather smoothly after a decision was reached.

Ian's face softened slightly, though his eyes remained steely after receiving an answer that satisfied him. "Let's move on to discuss our social media campaign to increase our fans' engagement with our player. I propose we leverage Rakim's buzz along with other notable players to get their fans engaged in our club activities. This should lead to an increase in match attendance, shirt sales and a boost in our image."

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The training ground buzzed with anticipation as the senior team prepared for their morning session. The recent 1-0 victory over Kilmarnock had done little to lift the spirits of the players, who were still reeling from their Europa League setback. The upcoming clash against Valencia in the second round of the Europa League was looming large, and the pressure was palpable.

There was an undercurrent of tension and anxiety amid the usual pre-training routines—stretching, light jogging, and tactical discussions. Rakim's call-up to the senior team had sent ripples through the club, and today was the day he would step onto the pitch with the first team for the second time. His promotion had been the topic of much speculation and debate, and now, the young winger was back.

Brendan Rodgers stood at the edge of the training pitch, clipboard in hand, watching as his players warmed up. The past week had been a whirlwind for him, juggling boardroom disputes with the practicalities of preparing for an important European tie. His mind was preoccupied with the tactical adjustments needed for the upcoming match, but today's session had an additional layer of significance: Rakim's integration into the senior squad.

Rakim arrived at the training ground early, doing his own workout session before the main team. By the time the rest of the squad arrived, he had completed his morning routine and had his body fully warmed up. Now dressed in the senior team's training kit, he followed along a warm-up drill led by Callum McGregor the team's captain.

The senior players greeted Rakim with varying degrees of acknowledgement. Some offered nods and brief smiles, while others remained cold, their disapproval evident. His comments in his recent interview and promotion didn't sit right with some of them. The intensity of the situation was not lost on him. He had faced similar scrutiny in various camps and national team sessions, but the environment at the senior team level felt more charged.

Brendan called the team into a huddle, his voice firm but encouraging. "Alright, lads, today we're focusing on high-intensity drills and tactical work for our upcoming match against Valencia. I want us sharp and ready. Rakim's re-joining us today, so let's make sure we give him a warm welcome"

The huddle broke, and the players dispersed to their respective stations. Rakim took a deep breath, shaking off the nervous energy that had settled. He joined the group for the high-intensity drills, focusing on ball control, quick passes, and rapid changes of direction. The drills were gruelling, but Rakim gave it his all, not only to fight for a spot on the main roster but to improve his skills.

As the session progressed, Rakim's performance started to turn heads as he calmly executed what was asked of him. Despite training with older players he was holding his own making good use of his skills. His speed and agility in attacking scenarios were evident as he darted around the pitch.

During a tactical exercise, Brendan focused on the team's defensive shape and attacking transitions. Rakim wasn't within the main lineup but the one used to test them as they worked on their defence. However, that quickly became a problem for the coaches when he started weaving past players.

Brandon Rodgers was finding it hard to continue the session on defensive shapes when the winger continued to break them apart. He rubbed his temples, trying to keep his frustration in check, and observed the winger in question use a sombrero to skip past a defender. He couldn't fault him either as he continued to connect with his teammates mounting effective attacks that left the first team struggling.

The drills were meant to sharpen the team's defensive organization, but Rakim's presence was skewing the exercise, making it difficult for the players to focus on the tactical points being emphasized. "Hold up!" Rodgers finally called out, his voice cutting through the clamour of the training ground. "Everyone, let's take a break."

After the 5-minute break, the session resumed but this time Rakim and a couple of others weren't part of the session. They were taken to participate in a strength and conditioning course aimed at getting them match-ready. Karamoko Dembele was also part of this group as the young players especially would benefit from this.

This was Rodgers's solution to the problem Rakim had become with his defensive drills. Although it allowed him to see the problems some of his starting players had, he needed them to gain some confidence for Thursday's game. What he failed to realise was that a nosy reporter had snuck onto the training complex and had captured the winger's performance.