

Football 237

Chapter 237 Vs Valencia (1)

The match was set to kick off at 17:55 and that meant the players had a lot of time to train, rest and do anything they wanted to do before the match as long as it wasn't going to affect their form in the match.

The Celtic contingent arrived at the Mestalla Stadium at 10:30 am for a short practice before the match. They had the stadium booked for 2 hours before the home team would come for their session closer to the time the match started. Stling into the away bench the players quickly got dressed into their training gear ready to begin.

Walking around in their training tracksuit the players started taking pictures and videos around the stadium. Walking around the park had become a tradition for the players whenever they played at a new stadium. Thus the coach wasn't mad at them and simply started discussing things with his coaches.

After taking a few pictures and videos for his socials Rakim put his phone in his pocket and started taking in the atmosphere. As he stepped onto the meticulously manicured grass of the Valencia Mestalla Stadium, the rich scent of the freshly cut turf filled his nostrils, invigorating him with a sense of anticipation.

The stadium, steeped in history and tradition, loomed large around him, its grandstands reaching up towards the sky, encircling the pitch in a protective embrace. The sun cast a golden hue across the field, making the vibrant green of the grass shimmer like an emerald sea.

Rakim walked along the touchline, feeling his boots sink slightly into the soft ground, each step resonating with the muted crunch of the turf. He glanced up and saw row upon row of seats, the iconic orange and black of Valencia CF, where countless fans had cheered, roared, and sighed over the years. The stands, though currently empty, still contained an intimidating atmosphere.

Rakim could almost feel the energy of the crowd, the wave of sound that would surge through these stands once the match started. His heart subconsciously started to beat with excitement as he was so close to his goal. 9 years of hard work had led him to this moment and never had he been so close to his gale as he was now.

He had played in stadiums some of which were even filled to the brim but now he would be officially a professional player. Smiling as he felt the rays of the sun hit his face he followed the rest of the players around the pitch. He made his way towards the centre circle, and paused for a moment taking in the moment of peace.

Taking off his headphones he closed his eyes and just stood still for 3 minutes taking the time to catch his breath. Saying a prayer asking for health and strength calmed his bumbling emotions. When he opened his eyes he was ready for whatever needed to be done.

jogging to the side he joined the rest of his teammates as they started preparing for today's match. Going through the motions they went through a light training session aimed at getting them acclimated. Working on raising their body fitness to an acceptable match fitness Rakim was sweating by the time training was done.

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The anticipation was palpable as the fans packed into the stadium, their chants and cheers creating a pulsating atmosphere. Valencia's Mestalla Stadium was a cauldron of noise, the orange and black of the home side blending with the green and white of the travelling Celtic supporters. The evening promised high drama as Marcelino Garcia Toral's Valencia side prepared to take on Brendan Rodgers' Celtic in a crucial European knockout match.

Just as the TV screens switched to show the scenes inside the stadium a charismatic voice spoke up. "Hello and welcome to live coverage of the UEFA Europa League second leg tie between Valencia and Celtic at the Mestalla." Callum McDonald said as his familiar voice was heard on all BBC channels covering the match. He was one of the best Scottish commentators in the business, thus he easily got the job for this match.

"Let's hope for a thrilling match as both teams strive for victory," Roy Townsley his co-commentator spoke up in a joyful voice excited for the match to begin. "Valencia came out on top in the first leg of the tie with a 2-0 away victory over Celtic, leaving them in a great position of qualifying for the next round of the tournament." He continued as he started talking about the superb performance the Spanish side had shown in the away game.

"In did they come into the game on a run of good form as they remain unbeaten in their last seven games in all competitions (W3 D4). Celtic are also enjoying a strong run, having only lost one of their last nine in all competitions (W8), which was in the reverse fixture." Callum McDonald stated reading from his information sheet with an interested gaze. He wanted to continue but the teamsheet for both teams quickly appeared on the screen and he started reading that off for the viewers.

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SUBS: Denis Cheryshev, Alex Centelles, Jose Gaya, Jaume Domenech, Lee-Kang-In, Francis Coquelin, Kevin Gameiro.

VALENCIA STARTING XI (4-4-2): (GK) Neto; (LB) Toni Lato, (CB) Mouctar Diakhaby, (CB) Ezequiel Garay, (RB) Daniel Wass; (LM) Goncalo Guedes, (CM) Daniel Parejo, (CM) Carlos Soler, (RM) Ferran Torres; (ST) Ruben Sorino, (ST) Santi Mina.

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CELTIC STARTING XI (4-2-3-1): Scott Bain; Kristoffer Ajer, Jozo Simunovic, Dedryck Boyata, Jeremy Toljan; Scott Brown, Jonny Hayes; James Forrest, Ryan Christie, Callum McGregor; Oliver Burke.

SUBS: Timothy Weah, Scott Sinclair, Mikael Lustig, Craig Gordon, Odsonne Edouard, Michael Johnston, Rakim Rex.

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As the teams emerged from the tunnel, the roar of the crowd reached a deafening pitch. Roy Townsley, the veteran commentator, could barely make himself heard over the din. "Marcelino Garcia Toral makes a total of five changes to the Valencia side that drew with Espanyol on Sunday, with Lato, Diakhaby, Guedes, Soler, and Mina all coming into the starting line-up," he observed, noting the strategic adjustments aimed at giving Valencia an edge.

On the opposite side, Brendan Rodgers had made his own tactical tweaks. "Rodgers makes just two changes to the Celtic team that got a last-minute win over Kilmarnock on Sunday as Simunovic and Burke come in to replace Sinclair and Edouard, who both drop down to the bench," Townsley noted. The Celtic manager's decisions were a blend of necessity, aiming to shore up a defence that would need to be resilient against Valencia's potent attack.

"Celtic haven't won a knockout game away from home in European competition since April 2003 (1-0 v Boavista in the Europa League). They have lost each of their seven such games since (D1), while failing to score on all eight occasions," Callum McDonald reminded the viewers, highlighting the enormity of the challenge facing the Scottish side. Given that they still had to overcome the 0:2 deficit things seemed insurmountable for the Scottish Overlord.

"The teams are out on the pitch now, with kick-off just moments away." Callum McDonald said as both sides lined up on both sides of the four-man official team.

Going through the pre-match pleasantries the Celtic players walked past them shaking hands with each person they passed before heading to their side of the field. The teams lined up, the captains exchanged pleasantries going through the coin flip.

[1] Moments later both teams were ready to begin as Burke stood over the ball waiting for the official's whistle. "Celtic gets the first half underway at the Mestalla." Callum McDonald Stated in excitement as the ball was kicked back into the Celtic half.