

## Football 351

### Chapter 351 351 Shock

Lukébakio controlled it with ease as he closed in on Neuer the sweeper keeper himself who was already charging towards him. The pressure the world-class Goalie exuded was definitely immense at that very moment however the striker remained composed. This time, his finish would not sail over the bar. Learning from his earlier mistake his shot was much more clinical as he unleashed a low and powerful carpet shot that beat Neuer's outstretched legs.

The ball nestled itself into the far corner of the net. Hertha's bench erupted in celebration as Lukébakio pumped his fists in the air, his teammates swarming him in jubilation. "Unbelievable!" Derek Rae exclaimed. "What a strike from Lukébakio! He had a point to prove, and he's done it in style. We've got a game on our hands, folks."

Stewart Robson added, "Bayern were caught napping there, and you have to say Hertha's counter-attack was brilliant. Grujić's vision was spot-on, and Lukébakio made no mistake with the finish." The score was level at 1-1, and the Allianz Arena was buzzing with anticipation, as both teams seemed to raise the tempo. Bayern was now under pressure to respond, with Hertha proving they were not intimidated by their illustrious opponents.

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[60th Minute]

Bayern had begun to crank up the intensity, pushing Hertha back deep into their own half. The pressure was suffocating, but Hertha's defence stood strong, blocking shot after shot. Just when it seemed like they were weathering the storm, Bayern found their breakthrough. Kimmich found himself in possession of the ball just inside the last third of the pitch.

The German playmaker once again showed his vision as he picked out Müller, who was lurking just outside the box the moment he escaped from his marker. With a sharp turn, the German world champion evaded Grujić's challenge and threaded a ball through to Lewandowski, who was waiting just inside the 18-yard box. The striker received the ball only to feel a tackle from Rekik clipping his legs, not wasting this opportunity he immediately went down under the challenge.

"Penalty to Bayern!" Derek Rae shouted. "It looked soft, but the referee didn't hesitate. Hertha have allowed Bayern to reclaim the lead."

"He's gotta be more composed than that and he knows better than to risk a sloppy challenge on a striker of Lewandowski calibre," Stewart Robson noted as he analysed the replay which showcased the tackle from all angles. "No matter how soft the challenged 10/10 times a striker will go down if you tackle like that in the box."

The Hertha defenders protested, but it was clear that the decision had been made. Lewandowski placed the ball on the spot, and the Allianz Arena fell into a hushed silence. All eyes were on the Polish striker, one of the most lethal finishers in world football. He stepped back from the penalty spot, eyes locked on Jarstein, the tension in the air was palpable.

Bayern fans were on the edge of their seats, while Hertha's defence stood in a wall of disbelief, hoping for a miracle. The whistle blew, and Lewandowski took his usual measured approach, his eyes narrowing in focus. With a stutter-step, he launched the ball with power and precision to the left side of the goal. Jarstein dove the wrong way, but even had he gone the right way, it wouldn't have mattered. The ball slotted perfectly into the bottom corner.

"2-1 to Bayern!" Derek Rae announced, his voice rising with excitement. "Lewandowski does what he does best—cool under pressure. Hertha now has it all to do once more."

Stewart Robson added, "You can't give a player like Lewandowski a chance like that. The way he dispatches penalties is clinical. Hertha will need to regroup quickly if they're to keep themselves in this match." Bayern's players celebrated the goal with arms raised and high-fives happy at their well-deserved lead.

[75th Minute]

Hertha was scrambling now, trying to stay organized in the face of Bayern's relentless attacking pressure. Bayern had found their rhythm after the penalty, and they looked every bit like the champions they were. But just when it seemed like Hertha might crumble, they sparked to life again.

Mittelstädt had been given more space on the left wing as Bayern's defence shifted to chase the ball. With a quick glance, he launched a pinpoint pass to Lukébakio, who was lurking near the edge of the box, his eyes glinting with determination.

Lukébakio controlled it with one touch, and then, before Pavard could close him down, he drilled a shot with his left foot. Neuer, who had been sharp all game, could only watch as the ball thundered past him. The entire Hertha bench erupted into sheer joy as Lukébakio took off running towards the corner flag, arms wide in triumph.

"Unbelievable! Lukébakio strikes again!" Derek Rae shouted, his voice almost breaking with excitement. "This is a young man on fire, and Bayern are being caught out at the back! We've got a whole new game on our hands."

Stewart Robson added, "What a finish! The composure, the power, everything about that goal screams quality. Bayern's defence was caught flat-footed, and Hertha's counter-attacking style is paying off

today." The score was now 2-2, and the Allianz Arena had gone eerily quiet. Bayern's players looked stunned, unsure of how to respond to the sudden surge of energy from their opponents.

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[80th minute]

Kovač on the sidelines seeing his team which was on paper the better team and had around 75% of the possession knew he couldn't hesitate anymore. Looking at his bench he immediately made up his mind to call for his assistant coach to get ready to make some substitutions. Muller came off for Alphonso Davis allowing the young Canadian to make his Bundesliga debut taking up the left-back position pushing Kimich into the midfield.

Gnabry also made his exit for the Portuguese Renato Sanches who took over the left wing position. Seeing his opponent making changes Čović Hertha's coach also made some changes. Lukébakio today's hero came off for D. Selke, P. Skjelbred replaced O. Duda in the midfield and finally A. Esswein came on for V. Ibišević taking on the left striker position.

[85th Minute]

The tactical shifts on both sides had brought a new edge to the match. With both teams now playing with fresh legs, the intensity had reached a fever pitch. Bayern's renewed attacking force with Davis and Sanches added pace and unpredictability, while Hertha's substitutions brought in fresh energy and defensive solidity as they seemed content on taking a point from the Allianz Arena.

The stadium came alive with tension in the dying minutes, every pass, every tackle, became that much more intense. Both teams fought for every inch of yard on the field as Bayern found it hard to execute the chances they created. No opportunity went unchallenged as the Hertha players quit literally threw their bodies in the way of the shots.

[90th Minute]

The final moments of the match were a war of attrition. Bayern pushed forward relentlessly, knowing that they had to find a winner to avoid dropping points at home. With the ball pinging around in the middle of the pitch, Hertha's defence was stretched thin. The Bavarians' movement was slick, but the visitors had become masters of the last-ditch challenge, throwing themselves at every cross, blocking every shot.

Thiago Alcântara danced past Grujić on the edge of the box and squared a ball to Lewandowski, who had a clear sight of the goal. The Polish striker took a touch to set himself up for the shot, but in that instant, a Hertha defender—Klünter—came charging in, diving at Lewandowski's feet and getting a crucial block on the shot. The Allianz Arena held its collective breath as the ball ricocheted to Kimmich, but Hertha's defence was once again there to smother the danger.

"Hertha's defending is heroic!" Derek Rae exclaimed. "How are they holding on against this relentless Bayern pressure? Unbelievable!"

Stewart Robson agreed, "That was world-class defending. Klünter's block was absolutely crucial, and Hertha is throwing everything at Bayern now."

In the dying seconds, Bayern had one last chance, with a dangerous free-kick just outside the box after Mittelstädt's foul on Sanches. The crowd stood in anticipation as Kimmich lined up the shot. With a swift strike, the ball sailed toward the top corner of the net—an unstoppable bullet that would surely seal the

game. But Jarstein, with a leap of incredible reflexes, flung himself to his left and managed to get a strong hand on the ball, pushing it wide for a corner.

"Unreal! How did Jarstein do that? That's world-class goalkeeping right there!" Derek Rae shouted, his voice filled with awe. "They needed a hero, and he rose to the occasion."

Stewart Robson added, "Bayern have done everything but score in these last few minutes, but Jarstein is the hero here."

As the corner was cleared by Hertha's defence, the referee's whistle blew for full-time, and the Allianz Arena, which was a majority Bayern fans felt disappointed at the final score. They had been so sure of their team's victory earlier in the match so they were quite frustrated with the result. Hertha's players collapsed to the ground in exhaustion, but their pride was clear—they had held Bayern to a draw on their home turf.

"Full-time here in Munich, and it ends 2-2," Derek Rae said, his voice tinged with amazement. "What a fight from Hertha, what a performance. Bayern will feel they've dropped points, but you have to give credit to this Hertha team. They came here with a plan, and they executed it perfectly."

Stewart Robson summed it up: "A hard-fought, dramatic contest. Hertha's resilience, combined with some clinical finishing from Lukébakio, earned them a point here today. Bayern, though, will certainly be disappointed not to have claimed all three."

Chapter 352 352 Rumble Time

[Saturday 17/08/2019, 10:20, Hilton Hotel Cologne]

In the penthouse suite, Rakim could be seen with his upper body bare, lying on his stomach on the large white couch in the living room. His gaze was mostly focused on the Sky Sports talk show on TV, where pundits were already discussing yesterday's shocking opener and matches that were played today. They were having a field day as the excitement hung in the air as another season of the Bundesliga began.

On his back, the blond figure of May can be seen dressed in a pair of sports leggings and a sports bra as her hands continued to move on his back. Pressing and kneading his muscles she did her best to help him relax knowing he would have to get to work later on. "I can't believe you sometimes," May stated as she once again massaged his left shoulder causing a soft grunt from her boyfriend.

"Huh, what'd I do?" He asked tilting his head trying to look at her only to have his head pushed down again forced to relax. "You didn't have to join me in the gym as soon as you got back from your morning meeting, even though all I did was Pilates."

"It was a good cooldown plus even though I'll be on the bench it's good to keep my body ready on matchdays," he responded not at all understanding why she was so worried. It was like after their relationship had become truly official, she had started worrying about him more.

Not that he minded it though since it felt like he was on cloud 9, but he couldn't understand why she suddenly started to treat him as if he was made out of glass. "Just don't push yourself too far, everyone is already proud of what you have achieved anything else is just icing." She stated leaning down to place a soft kiss on his left shoulder.

"Icing's the best part, though," Rakim murmured, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. In the next moment, he turned his body in one fell swoop exchanging their positions as she now lay under him. "Since you're worried enough for both of us, I'll have no fear once I step on the turf," he told her before capturing her lips not allowing her to retort as he had clearly only heard what he wanted to.

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[Saturday 17/08/2019, 14:20,]

The BayArena was alive with anticipation, the home fans clad in red and black whilst the away fans in blue colours quickly filled the stands. Their chants already echoed across the stadium as they welcomed their respective teams. This was their own team's opening day of the Bundesliga season, and Bayer Leverkusen was set to face newly promoted Paderborn. Commentators Derek Rae and Stewart Robson were seated in their booth, scanning the lineups and observing the warm-ups below.

Derek Rae: "Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the BayArena for what promises to be a thrilling start to both team's Bundesliga season. Bayer Leverkusen hosts SC Paderborn, and Stewart, the home side will be eager to start their campaign on the right foot, especially with Bayern dropping points yesterday."

Stewart Robson: "Absolutely, Derek. Under Peter Bosz, Leverkusen showed glimpses of brilliance last season, particularly with their attacking style. The likes of Kai Havertz and Kevin Volland will be key today. But let's not underestimate Paderborn. They'll be looking to make a statement as they return to the top flight."

Derek Rae: "Indeed, and speaking of statements, Stewart, one player on the Leverkusen bench who could make an impact if called upon is 16-year-old Rakim Rex. Fresh off a Scottish Cup victory with Celtic after a lone spell, he joined the club this summer with a hefty \$23 million price tag. The nickname Mr Showtime sure suits him with the buzz surrounding him."

Stewart Robson: "Media work is almost a secondary requirement for athletes nowadays. However, you don't often see that kind of money spent on someone so young, especially coming into the Bundesliga, but Rakim's has already proven from a young age that he is worth the investment. In his own words, 'I



am the chosen one,' and continues to live up to that each match he plays, showcasing his flair and versatility."

Derek Rae: "There's no denying the hype, Stewart. But the big question is—will we see him debut today? It's always a gamble throwing a young player into the intensity of Bundesliga football, especially in a high-pressure opener like this."

Stewart Robson: "True, Derek. But if you look at Peter Bosz's history, he's not afraid to take risks with young talent. Havertz was a teenager when he broke through at this very club and look where he is now. If Rakim's called upon, it'll be fascinating to see how he adapts to the pace and physicality here."

Derek Rae: "And it's not just the physicality—it's the tactical demands. Paderborn, despite being underdogs, are known for their high-energy pressing game. Rakim will need to show he can handle that if he's to make an impact."

Stewart Robson: "Absolutely. Still, you can't teach flair, and Rakim has that in spades. I wouldn't be surprised if Bosz uses him in the latter stages, especially if the game's tight and they need a spark of creativity."

Both commentators continued their discussion as the atmosphere in the stadium grew electric reaching a fever point. It was only released when both teams emerged from the tunnel. Leverkusen fans roared their support, while Paderborn's travelling contingent matched them with their boisterous chants.

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Starting line ups:

Bayer Leverkusen XI 3-4-3

GK: 1 L. Hrádecký

RCB: 4 J. Tah

CB: 5 S. Bender

LCB: 18 Wendell

RM: 8 L. Bender

CM: 15 J. Baumgartlinger

CM: 20 C. Aránguiz

LM: 9 L. Bailey

RW: 29 K. Havertz

ST: 31 K. Volland

LW: 10 K. Demirbay

Coach: P. Bosz

Substitutes:

6 A. Dragović

38 K. Bellarabi

22 Rakim Rex

11 N. Amiri

3 P. Retsos

19 M. Diaby

16 T. Jedvaj

28 R. Özcan

7 Paulinho

VS

Paderborn XI 4-4-2

GK: J. Huth

LB: J. Collins

LCB: U. Hünemeier

RCB: C. Strohdiek

RB: M. Dräger

LM: C. Antwi-Adjei

CM: K. Gjasula

CM: S. Vasiliadis

RM: 9 K. Pröger

ST: S. Michel

ST: S. Mamba

Coach: S. Baumgart

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[Saturday 17/08/2019, 14:30,]

(Wheuuuuuiiiit)

[1st Minute]

With the referee's whistle Volland who stood over the ball at centre field wasted no time sending the ball backwards to the waiting feet of Aránguiz. Aránguiz quickly controlled the ball, scanning the field for options. Paderborn's forwards, Michel and Mamba, sprinted forward, eager to press high and disrupt Leverkusen's rhythm. The Chilian midfielder, however, remained composed, sending the ball to his backline.

Wendell received the ball on the left side of the defensive line, immediately finding himself under pressure from Paderborn's energetic forwards. He took a touch and sent a sharp pass to Sven Bender in the centre. Bender, Leverkusen's captain gestured for his teammates to calm things down, pivoting away from trouble before pinging the ball wide to his brother Lars on the right.

Lars Bender controlled the ball expertly, his eyes darting upfield as he assessed his options. Paderborn's left winger, Christopher Antwi-Adjei, charged at him with intent, forcing Lars to move quickly. A sharp touch to the inside gave him just enough space to launch a diagonal ball upfield towards Leon Bailey on the left wing.

The Jamaican livewire brought the ball down with a deft first touch that drew oohs from the crowd. Bailey squared up against Paderborn's right-back, Mohamed Dräger, teasing him with a quick shimmy before bursting down the line. Dräger scrambled to recover, but Bailey's pace was electric.

"Oh, I see Bailey is wasting no time introducing Dräger to the Bundesliga in the most ruthless way possible." Derek Rae commentated with excitement as the Leverkusen fans who had just sat down sprang up from their seats in excitement.

"True he's a nightmare for fullbacks, Derek. Quick feet, raw pace, and a directness that unsettles any defender." Robertson agreed as they watched the Jamaican winger accelerated past Dräger instantly initiating an attack as most of his teammates flooded forward. They were making full use of the attacking tactics that Bosz had drilled into them as none of them ran into the same area.

Bailey reached the edge of the penalty area and whipped in a vicious low cross. The ball cut a curved arc as it sailed into the box right around the six yard line skimming just inches in front of Kevin Volland who battled with Hünemeier.

Chapter 353 353 First Blood

Bailey reached the edge of the penalty area and whipped in a vicious low cross. The ball cut a curved arc as it sailed into the box right around the six yard line skimming just inches in front of Kevin Volland who battled with Hünemeier. Volland's outstretched boot narrowly missed making contact, but the pace of the delivery was enough to cause chaos in Paderborn's box. Hünemeier, the towering central defender, had to scramble to clear the ball, but in doing so, he only succeeded in deflecting it towards the onrushing Kai Havertz, who had ghosted into the space behind him.

Derek Rae's voice filled the air, crackling with anticipation: "What a delivery by Bailey! Havertz lurking at the back post—can he get there in time?"

In a flash, the young German prodigy shifted his weight and lunged towards the ball, timing it perfectly. His left foot connected with the ball just as Huth, the Paderborn goalkeeper, was diving to cover the near post. However, he wasn't needed as 24-year-old Collins Paderborn's left back made his presence known as he slid in feet first kicking the ball away.

The away fan's seeing that they escaped conceding in the first minute breathed a sigh of relief much to the annoyance of the home fans. "If they weren't paying attention before they are sure to do so now," Stewart Robson stated as he watched the relieved expression of the Paderborn players in blue who quickly reorganised.

[10th Minute]

Leverkusen immediately picked up the pace after that near miss, pressing forward with intensity. Paderborn, however, had regained their composure, with the defence quickly falling into shape as the midfielders dropped back to provide cover. It was clear that they would have to be more disciplined if they were to withstand the attacking power of the hosts.

In the midfield, Charles Aránguiz orchestrated the tempo showcasing his years of experience by distributing the ball with precision. He found Lars Bender again, who clipped a ball forward to Volland who had come short just outside the centre circle. The German striker comfortably held up the ball holding back Vasiliadis who tried to close him down.

Not hesitating he released the ball to Havertz on the flank, before turning on his axis looking for an opportunity at goal. Havertz didn't have an easy time taking control of the ball as Antwi-Adjei stuck to him not even allowing him to breathe freely without his permission. With one hand on Kai's left shoulder, he tugged it slightly as he tried to steal the ball from the other side.



Havertz, feeling the pressure from Antwi-Adjei, rolled with the punches as he adjusted his body and cleverly spun away, leaving the Paderborn defender grasping at thin air. The ball stayed glued to his feet as he sprinted down the flank quickly entering the final third. Collins once again stood in his way as the left back calmly tracked the approaching winger doing his best to force him down the wing.

Havertz, with quick feet and even quicker thinking, feinted to the inside, pulling Collins off balance. In that split second, Havertz darted to the outside, cutting past him with ease. Collins, desperate to recover, lunged at the ball but missed as Havertz sent a precise through ball into the box. As the ball zipped across the box, Kevin Volland was ready to pounce as he lost his marker for a moment.

He had been hungry for a chance and wasted no time darting into the space between Hünemeier and Strohdiek. His timing was impeccable as he beat the offside trap latching onto the ball in the area close to the near post. His momentum sent him running a couple steps off track and by the time he turned to face the goal Huth was already charging out.

His angle was closed and Hünemeier was also joining the encirclement not leaving him much time or room to manoeuvre. Aware that he had very little time to make a decision, he remained composed as he looked up scanning the area around him. He wasn't disappointed as he spotted one of his teammates on the other side of the box.

Not hesitating he swung his foot chipping the ball into the air, sending it spinning towards the area around the back post. Huth who was closing in on him immediately sprung into the air, but he was too late to reach the ball. Turning his head mid-air, he saw a figure in red jump into the air smacking the ball with his head. Bailey wouldn't miss this opportunity as he found himself unguarded allowing him to comfortably slot the ball into the empty net.

25,000 Leverkusen fans erupted in euphoria the moment the ball pierced the back of the net as their ultras set off chants in jubilation. "When you keep asking the right questions you're bound to receive an answer," Derek exclaimed with excitement, speaking louder as he felt that the noise from the Leverkusen fans would drown him out.

"GOAL! Leon Bailey strikes as the Red Lions draw first blood in the 10th minute. It's a case of right place right time for the Jamaican winger," he continued as he watched the Leverkusen player join him in his celebrations as they were embraced warmly by the fans.

"Yes, he executed the chance presented to him but let's not forget Havertz and Volland who were instrumental to this goal, A 7/10 in terms of teamwork," Stewart Robson followed up, "Great composure from Volland. Paderborn had several players around him, but he showed calmness under pressure and chose to be unselfish. I'm sure Bosz appreciates his choice."

He wasn't wrong as the Leverkusen manager can be seen at the edge of his managerial area clapping his hands in appreciation. He did not forget to give nearby players a few instructions telling them to not let up.

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[14th minute]

Following their boss's instructions the red lions did not let up as they fiercely pressed forward holding 70% of the possession. Aránguiz and Baumgartlinger became particularly busy as they continued to ping passes around looking for a breakthrough point. Playing a quick one-two with Tah, Baumgartlinger flicked the ball onto Lars Bender at the byline just in time to escape from Michel and Gjasula.

The left mid wasn't given time to think as the Paderborn players locked onto him like rabid dogs. He attempted a hasty Cruyff turn as the blue figures closed in on him and it worked as he escaped Michel

but that wasn't enough. Antwi-Adjei using his body slipped in between him and the ball stripping it free as the left mid lost his balance stumbling to the ground.

Antwi-Adjei didn't even look back as Bender complained calling for a foul as he charged down the wing. "He's calling for a free kick, but Hans Bauer is having none of it," Stewart exclaimed as Hans Bauer in his yellow referee kit simply motioned for play to continue as Antwi-Adjei blitzed down the wing.

Paderborn flipped a switch as they quickly flooded the final third and by the time Antwi-Adjei reached the side of the box 5 blue figures were in the box or in the process of entering. Sven Bender, Wendell and Aránguiz quickly found themselves outnumbered as Tah did his best to try and block Antwi-Adjei. The Paderborn winger wasn't intimidated by his tall muscular frame though as he squared a weighted pass.

Tah reacted instinctively and lunged after the ball but was unable to reach it as it glided along the turf heading towards the penalty spot. Mamba seeing the ball heading towards him instinctively swung his foot trying to take the shot first time. It wasn't meant to be as Sven Bender sliced along the ground kicking up grass in a slide tackle reaching the ball first before sending the striker crashing to the ground.

Chapter 354 354 Wall

[14th minute]

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The referee's whistle immediately followed, sharp and piercing, signalling a decision that set both sets of fans roaring in anticipation and protest. "Wheeeuuuuuit!" The referee pointed firmly to the penalty

spot. Hans Bauer's call was decisive, despite the furious protests of Sven Bender and his Leverkusen teammates.

"Penalty!" Derek Rae's voice carried the intensity of the moment. "Paderborn has a golden opportunity to equalize after a blistering counterattack led by Antwi-Adjei!"

Stewart Robson chimed in with a critical tone: "That was a risky tackle from Bender. He got a piece of the ball, but it's the follow-through on Mamba that's convinced the referee. In the modern game, those are often given. Honestly, it could have gone either way but in my opinion that was a clean tackle he won the ball first."

"I agree but maybe the referee witnessed a different angle and from what I'm seeing the Var team didn't flag his decision," Derek Rae intoned as they watched the Leverkusen fans erupted in disapproval, a chorus of boos cascading down from the stands as Sven Bender pleaded his case.

Arms wide, he pointed insistently to the ball, which had clearly been deflected from Mamba's path. But Hans Bauer stood firm, unmoved by the protests. As a matter of fact, he reached into his pocket and proceeded to show him a yellow card, making the first Leverkusen player to be booked in the 19/20 Bundesliga season.

The Paderborn players seeing this silently celebrated the decision as if they had already scored. Hans Bauer took a minute to bring the match back under his control. When he did Michel stepped up to the penalty spot, placing the ball carefully as the Leverkusen players reluctantly retreated to the edge of the box.

Hrádecký, the Leverkusen goalkeeper, bounced on his toes, trying to psych out the Paderborn striker. The tension in the BayArena was palpable, the home fans jeering loudly, trying to unnerve Michel.

"Steffen Michel has a chance here to silence the crowd and draw his team level," Derek Rae remarked. "But let's not underestimate Hrádecký. The Leverkusen keeper is a specialist in these high-pressure situations."

Stewart Robson added, "True, but Michel looks confident. He'll want to bury this and make a statement that his team can be a contender after their promotion."

Michel stepped back, his eyes locked on Hrádecký. The referee's whistle blew, and Michel surged forward, striking the ball with his right foot. Hrádecký guessed correctly, diving low to his right, but the penalty was perfectly placed. The ball kissed the inside of the post before rippling the net.

"GOAL! Michel makes no mistake, and Paderborn are level!" Derek exclaimed. The away fans erupted in cheers as Michel celebrated, running to the corner flag and pumping his fist in the air. His teammates mobbed him, their joy contagiously fuelling the spirits of the away fans.

"That's the response Baumgart would have wanted from his team," Robson said. "Leverkusen were dominant, but Paderborn have shown they're not here to roll over. Credit to Michel for keeping his cool."

Bosz could be seen on the sideline barking instructions, gesturing for his players to regroup and refocus. The Leverkusen fans, though disappointed, continued to chant in support, urging their team forward.

[20th Minute]

Leverkusen resumed play with renewed urgency, pushing forward in search of a second goal. Aránguiz and Baumgartlinger dictated the tempo in midfield, exchanging quick passes to pull Paderborn out of their defensive shape. Lars Bender, determined to make up for his earlier error, burst down the right flank, receiving a lofted ball from Baumgartlinger.

Bender's cross soared into the box, targeting Volland, who was sandwiched between Hünemeier and Strohdiek. Volland, showing great strength, managed to flick the ball on with his head, sending it towards the far post. Havertz was there, leaping high above Collins, but his header was just wide of the target.

That wasn't the end of it as the Red Lions continued to ramp up the pressure. In the next few minutes, they showcased a master class of attacking football only to fail in the last moments. It largely had to do with on-form goalie J. Huth who was matching the masterclass of attacks through his way.

The German keeper flew across his line with cat-like reflexes defending his goal like a knight on the round table. 23rd minute Leverkusen received a freekick on the right flank allowing Baumgartlinger to deftly float in a ball across the penalty box.

To his delight, Volland rose above the crowd beating the marking of the two Paderborn defenders Strohdiek and M. Dräger. Firmly guiding the ball down towards the goal with his head. He was sure he hit the sweet spot as he guided it towards the far post.

However, J. Huth wasn't so easily beaten as he showcased a rapid piece of footwork allowing him to quickly change direction. In the next moment, he was leaping across his touchline firmly nudging the ball beyond his post.

A couple of moments later, he leapt into the air, channelling his inner Mike Tyson, punching the resulting corner out of his box. It's safe to say the home fans felt frustrated after seeing Huth's explosive

display of skills. However, the away fans couldn't be bothered with them, so they started singing songs showing their appreciation.

[27th Minute]

The frustration among Leverkusen's players was evident, but they remained relentless. Wendell advanced from his position on the left, weaving past Pröger with a quick feint and a burst of speed. As he approached the edge of the final third, Wendell suddenly cut in words leaving the approaching Dräger a step behind.

He wasn't about to wait for him though as he decided to unleash a venomous low shot from about 30 yards aimed for the bottom corner. However once again J. Huth was the hero for Paderborn, diving to his left to parry the shot away with a strong hand.

The ball rebounded dangerously into the box, but before Volland or Havertz could pounce, Hünemeier cleared it with a thunderous kick upfield, drawing cheers from the travelling Paderborn supporters. "Another big save from J. Huth!" Derek Rae exclaimed. "He's single-handedly keeping his side in the game."

Stewart Robson added, "Leverkusen are creating plenty of chances, but they need to be more clinical. This isn't the first time Huth has saved Paderborn in this match, and if they don't capitalize soon, it could come back to haunt them." He paused for a moment before continuing his commentary after watching the blue Paderborn player once again easily give away the ball which resulted in a long shot attempt by Aránguiz. This once again forced the keeper to show his resilience as he firmly blocked the ball with his legs.

"In Paderborn's case if I was Huth I'd be asking my teammates some serious questions. Yes, he is performing exceptionally but he is going to need help otherwise he'll quickly burnout and in a top-flight league like the Bundesliga one person's solo heroics won't guarantee victory."

[30th Minute]

The relentless attacking pressure from Leverkusen continued to mount, but Paderborn's defence held firm, backed by the incredible form of J. Huth. The home side began to look more and more desperate, with Baumgartlinger pulling the strings in midfield, trying to orchestrate an opening. Aránguiz, now deep in the heart of Paderborn's defensive third, received a ball from Bender and flicked it forward to Havertz, who cleverly dragged it back, evading the lunging Hünemeier.

But just as Havertz looked set to unleash a shot on goal, the Paderborn defenders closed him down quickly. Havertz shifted the ball to Volland on the edge of the box, who fired off a low shot. However, yet again, Huth was there to smother the effort, diving to his right and gathering the ball in his arms before Volland could pounce on the rebound.

Derek Rae's voice was filled with disbelief. "How is he doing it?! Huth is single-handedly keeping Paderborn alive here. You've got to give credit to the goalkeeper, but at some point, the defenders need to step up."

Stewart Robson agreed but with a cautionary tone. "Yes, Huth's performance is nothing short of heroic, but it's clear Leverkusen is finding pockets of space. If they keep testing him, eventually something will give. Paderborn needs to close those spaces faster, or Leverkusen will punish them."

Chapter 355 355 Debut

[35th Minute]



Leverkusen was starting to grow frustrated. The home fans' chants intensified, urging their team to push harder. Baumgartlinger, visibly agitated, yelled at his teammates to stay composed, but the Paderborn defence was showing signs of resilience. Wendell determined not to let this one slip away, pushed forward again, combining with Aránguiz in a well-worked 1-2 that freed him on the left wing.

This time, Wendell whipped a low cross into the box, targeting the near post where Volland and Havertz were lurking. Volland got a slight touch to it, redirecting the ball across the six-yard box. However, Paderborn's defence, led by Strohdiek, managed to scramble and clear the ball, this time sending it high into the air.

"It's getting closer," Derek Rae said, his voice rising with anticipation. "But again, Paderborn's defence is just about holding firm. That was dangerous."

Stewart Robson added, "Leverkusen's getting closer with every attack, but Paderborn is playing with fire here. They need to settle down, or it's only a matter of time before Leverkusen finds the breakthrough."

[38th Minute]

With a sense of urgency building, Bosz began to gesticulate more wildly from the sideline, demanding his players to play quicker and with more precision. Aránguiz picked up the ball in midfield and looked up, his eyes scanning the pitch for an opening. He spotted Havertz drifting into space between the lines and immediately played a crisp, pinpoint ball to the young talent.

Havertz, now in full stride, took one touch to control the ball and another to line up a shot. He unleashed it from 20 yards out, a low, powerful drive aimed at the bottom corner. J. Huth, however, was once again alert, diving to his left but he wasn't needed as the ball missed his goal by a meter.

"Huth dives and decides to leave it last minute!" Derek Rae shouted in excitement. "He's truly on fire today, despite not needing to save that shot his reaction speed was top-notch."

"Indeed, he's been absolutely incredible so far," Robson agreed. "Leverkusen are running out of ideas, but they're still finding ways to get these shots off. Paderborn can't keep relying on Huth forever, though."

[41st Minute]

The pressure was building to a fever pitch, but Paderborn was showing signs of cracking under it. After another failed attempt by Leverkusen, the away side attempted to launch a counterattack. Michel, having scored the penalty earlier, had made a powerful run down the right flank and found himself in space, with only Wendell to beat.

The striker feinted a breakthrough further down the wing before unleashing a sharp diagonal ball into the box. The pass was perfectly weighted managing to beat Bender who had dropped back just in case Wendell was beaten. That proved to be a mistake as the ball glided past him into the run of the free Mamba who had gotten rid of the marking of Tah.

"Oh, my day he's beaten the offside trap and is one-on-one with Hradecky," Derek exclaimed as the Slovakian keeper rushed out of his goal. However Mamba was already close to the penalty spot with the ball firmly controlled under his boot.

Not hesitating in the slightest he nudged the ball slightly forcing the keeper to cover the near post tighter, only to unleash a low-driven shot to the far right corner in the next moment. (thud) that was the

only sound that resounded in the Bay Arena that had gone silent for a moment only to erupt in loud jubilation.

"GOAL! GOOAL! GOOOAL!" Derek Rae exclaimed his voice rising with each vocal as the pandemonium ensued for the visiting Paderborn side.

Despite knowing that the game was far from over the players and their fans relished the moment. They were challenging one of the big teams in Germany and weren't just taking a beating. They had earned their spot and were making the best out of the opportunity.

"We were wondering when they would wake up and help the on-form J. Huth, well here you have it folks Leverkusen 1, Paderborn 2, the underdogs lead in their first game in the Bundesliga."

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[45th Minute]

Leverkusen was shell-shocked after going behind not knowing what more they should do. They had tried bombarding the Paderborn goal with a variety of attacks only to fail in the last moment. Especially after falling behind, they found it harder to find a clear breakthrough point.

The away team seemed to have regained their spirit on the defensive end. No longer could the red lions easily break them down, often struggling when reaching the final third. Their only clear chance came in injury time when Havertz found himself in control of the ball just past the halfway line.

The German genius calmly took control of the ball as he started dribbling the ball up the field with a measured pace. With the boys in blue taking a defensive stand he had all the time in the world to decide what to do but he didn't have to think long. Antwi-Adjei stepped up to meet him only to be left grasping at straws as the German played a quick one-two with Baumgartlinger he was off to the races charging down the flank.

Collins stepped up to meet him, but the forward had already built up momentum. A quick feint inward mixed with a stepover is all he needed to skip past the left-back. Using his explosive speed, he created separation as he diagonally entered the box.

Hünemeier stepped up to challenge him, but the forward didn't hesitate to unleash a shot. "He skilfully beats his man, with only one defender to beat... Oh, he takes the shot," Derek Rae excitedly narrated as he watched Havertz's shot fly across the face of the goal leaving the charging Huth rooted in place.

He had been caught off guard and couldn't react in time but before dread could settle in a dull clang resounded. Havertz could only watch in despair as his shot ricocheted off the far post flying out for a goal kick.

The clang of the ball striking the post echoed around the stadium, drawing gasps from the Leverkusen supporters and relieved cheers from the Paderborn faithful. Havertz stood momentarily frozen, hands on his hips, as if trying to process how close he had come to level the match. The Paderborn defenders let out collective sighs of relief, knowing things would be bad for them if they lost their lead late in the first half.

The referee's whistle blew soon after, signalling halftime. The Paderborn players exchanged spirited high-fives and pats on the back as they headed off the pitch, while Leverkusen trudged off, visibly dejected. Havertz, in particular, lingered on the pitch, hands on his hips, staring at the goalpost as if trying to understand why it stood in his way.

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[46th minute]

Leverkusen returned to the pitch with a renewed sense of urgency as they kicked off the second half. The home crowd roared in anticipation, urging their team forward. Peter Bosz had clearly used the halftime break to rally his players, and the Red Lions began the second half with relentless aggression.

Within the opening five minutes, they nearly found their equalizer. Wendell, running with precision on the left flank, overlapping with Bailey skipping past Mamba and Pröger, entering the final third. Accelerating forward he looked up for a moment before delivering a curved low cross into the box. Volland timed his run perfectly, sliding in to connect with the ball.

The shot was good and Huth couldn't react in time but in his attempt to make the shot difficult, it impacted the post heading out for a goal kick. Visible sounds of relief instantly descended from the away fans who immediately felt the pressure almost spilling their freshly bought beer.

"Rex, Bellarabi, go warm up you got five minutes," Joachim Wagner, Peter Bosz's assistant coach told the two players who went ahead to jump up from the bench not wasting a single moment.

Chapter 356 356 Goals Galore

[Ding New Mission Triggered: Fans Darling,]

(It is detected that the host is about to make his debut for a new team, and as a Singularity candidate making a memorable entrance is a must.)

Requirements:???

Reward:???

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'Hmm, almost forgot it existed,' I stated inwardly as I continued going through a couple of cone and ladder drills trying to raise my heart rate. It had been a while since I even bothered looking at the system other than talking to Eva there was no need. Looking at my slowly growing stats was like watching paint dry and became a headache after a while.

{You Excited?} Eva asked causing a small smile to appear on his face. 'Yeah, feel like I'm ready to explode, I just hope I won't make a dumb mistake because of this,' I replied as I proceeded to scoop up a ball and started juggling it with both feet as I continued to jog forward.

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[FOOTBALL SINGULARITY SYSTEM]

USER: Rakim Rex

AGE: 15yrs

TALENT ASSESSMENT: Grade - S

Singularity Points:  $12400 - 10,000 = 2400$

Position: Winger

(Evaluation: A wunderkind in the truest sense, who has proven his ability to the world throw a boulder into a still pond)

[ USER STATS: Under 23 Grade]

>Physical Fitness: A

Balance and Coordination: S

Speed: A-

Agility: A++

Strength: B-

Stamina: B-

>Football Technique: S

>Game Intelligence: A

>Mental Ability: S+

>Singularity Skills: MR ShowTime: Grade -A

>Skills

\*Silver Grade: Eagle King's Goal Sense (Passive)

\*Silver Level Comeback Kid (Passive)



\*Bronze Ankle Brace's (Passive)

\*Bronze Heavy artillery (Active) "New"

- Improve shot power by 15% for attempts taking from outside the box. (4/4)

-Cooldown 4hrs

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'The merger of Bronze Level Goal Sense and Eagle King's View was so random but well worth it.' I thought to myself as I came to stop balancing the ball on my left foot just in time to dodge the game ball that was sent flying off the field after Paderborn's Collins sent it flying with a slide tackle.

Ignoring the fan's dumbfounded reaction, I turned on my axis returning to the coaching area with Bellarabi. "You guys ready, you'll come on at the next dead ball situation." Bosz's stated as I proceeded to take off my tracksuit travelling my crimson kit underneath. Using a hairband, I tide my locks into a short ponytail before going through some last-minute stretching before approaching the side of Bosz.

"You Nervous kid?" he asked me causing me to turn my attention his way watching as the sun's lights illuminated his bald head. "A little, but the good kind boss," I replied seeing no need to lie as the tingling sensation that I'd get whenever I was ready for something big. It was like my mind and body decided to synch at that moment entering an optimal state much like a Formula 1 champion before a deciding Grand Prix.

"Good, I want you to use your speed and creativity down the left wing, link up with Bailey and Aránguiz create triangles just like in training," Bosz stated looking quite serious as he started pointing to different areas on the pitch, he wanted me to exploit. His aggressive attack-based philosophy perfectly suited my strengths, allowing me to integrate with the team rather quickly.

"You got that?" He questioned after finally giving me his last bit of instruction. Not sure why he thought I needed an info dump when all he wanted me to do was break down that left wing and connect with nearby teammates. "Good have some fun out there and welcome to the Bay Arena." He stated with a broad smile after seeing me nod before pushing me towards Bellarabi who was standing next to the fourth official.

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[53rd Minute]

The ball went out for a throw-in near the halfway line, providing the perfect opportunity for the substitutions. The fourth official raised his board: 22. Rakim Rex in, 10 K. Demirbay out and 38. Karim Bellarabi in, 15 J. Baumgartlinger. As the numbers on the substitution board lit up, a ripple of anticipation coursed through the BayArena. The home fans erupted in a mix of cheers and curious murmurs as the announcer's voice boomed through the stadium.

Rakim high-fived Demirbay as the forward stepped off allowing Rakim to jog toward the centre of the pitch, his crimson kit glistening under the afternoon sun. Each step sent a jolt of excitement through his body as the grass beneath his boots felt like a soft carpet. He felt a soft jump spring in his step but didn't get carried away with the feeling as he took his position just a couple of yards in front of Bailey.

The match soon resumed with a Paderborn throw-in, which saw Lars Bender and Tah fight with Antwi-Adjei who tried hard to retain control of the ball. That didn't last long though as the stronger Tah utilised his body to send him stumbling as he slickly took possession of the ball. Calmly passing the ball back to Hrádecký a quick sequence of passes ensued that sent both Mamba and Michel on a goose chase before the ball ended up with Wendell.

Rakim's first touch came almost immediately as Wendell threaded a pass down the wing skipping past the feet of Pröger. He controlled it seamlessly with the outside of his right foot without even looking at it as his gaze remained focused on Dräger in front of him who remained composed as he stood him up. Not panicking Rakim stared him down before performing a quick stepover with his left foot feinting a breakthrough down the left flank.

It worked as he got Dräger to bite before cutting inwards with his right accelerating a short distance before the German right back caught up to him. However, Rakim didn't battle it out with him as he suddenly performed a Ronaldo chop with his right boot sending it down the flank that Dräger had just opened up. He didn't follow after it though as the speedy figure of Leon Bailey appeared taking control of the ball as he raced down the wing.

Bailey wasted no time in driving forward, his blistering pace leaving the Paderborn right-back scrambling to recover. With Rakim shadowing close behind, Bailey cut back just after passing the edge of the box coming to a sudden stop. Ignoring Dräger who came to a sliding stop Bailey sent a crisp pass back to Rakim who was just a foot in front of the box.

Seeing the ball rolling his way and the figure of Strohdiek speeding to close him down he didn't bother taking a touch to control the ball. With a soft thud, he connected with the rolling using the outside of his black boot sending a chipped Trivela pass into the box aiming for the area in front of the far post. As the ball floated toward the far post, Rakim's eyes tracked its trajectory, and he could already feel the crowd's anticipation.

The angle was perfect and with the Paderborn defence scrambling to cover and clear the ball the figure he was aiming for appeared. From the edge of the six-yard box, Volland who had swapped positions

with Havertz's came sliding in at full stretch, reaching out for the cross just as the ball was about to evade his outstretched leg. The connection was perfect, but the power was too much sending it rocketing towards the stands as it scuffed the side of the post.

Chapter 357 357 The Special One

"Oh, that was so close! A brilliant move from the Leverkusen attack, combining that dazzling speed down the left from Bailey and the vision from Rex! It looked like Volland was set to score, but he was a little too eager and put too much power behind that strike. A near miss, but the BayArena is alive with excitement!" Derek Rae stated with excitement still standing as he had also expected the striker to convert the chance.

Stewart Robson also intoned "What a passage of play, Derek. The fluidity, the speed, the precision... In his first few moments on the pitch, Rakim Rex showed us why he is so highly regarded at only 16 years old. He's already found chemistry with Bailey and the rest of the attacking line. In his own words, he is indeed the special one,"

On the field, Rakim felt his heart race as he watched the near miss already feeling a bout of adrenaline sloop love him. Not minding it though he sent an apologetic smile to his team's striker vowing to place it better next time before jogging back into position, his mind rapidly replaying the near miss. He could feel the pulse of the crowd, the excitement and energy that surged through the stands, and he knew that his first few touches had gotten their attention. Now they would definitely be watching him closely wanting to see what he could do.

"Absolutely. That was a statement from the young man," Derek Rae continued. "He's only just come on, but he's already making an impact. You have to wonder if Paderborn can handle more of that." A pause, as if the commentator was considering the implications of what the inclusion of Rakim could mean for the Leverkusen squad. "That £23.5 million price tag is already showing signs of being worth it on the attacking front."

The game pressed on, with Paderborn struggling to regain their composure after the scare. Since they were leading 1:2 they had reaffirmed their determination to hunker down in defence. The tension in the air continued to mount as they retreated into a more defensive shell, their 4-4-2 formation compact and

difficult to break down. Leverkusen's relentless pressure, with Rakim on the left flank and homegrown here Havertz on the right flank.

"Paderborn is definitely feeling the heat now, Stewart," Derek Rae observed, his voice carrying the weight of the situation. "Leverkusen has been throwing everything at them since the introduction of Rex, but the visitors are managing to stay organized. It's clear they know what's at stake here."

Stewart Robson agreed. "They're showing resilience, but this is the kind of moment that can shift the tide. If Leverkusen can just find a way through, Paderborn's lead could evaporate in the blink of an eye. The next goal—whether for Leverkusen or Paderborn—could decide this match."

[60th minute]

By this point, Rakim had already settled into the rhythm of the match playing much calmer than his earlier adrenaline-induced brilliance. That's not to say he wasn't giving his marker a hard time as he could be seen moving whenever the ball entered a 10-meter radius. He found himself breaking free of his marker as he connected in the passing game while trying to find an opening.

However, to the credit of the Paderborn defence, they were holding their own. Quite a few times, their defence would shift across whenever play shifted to the opposite wing. Even the few times Kai and Rakim sneaked past the opposing left and right midfielders, their defensive counterparts were there to fill the gap.

It was during one of these back-and-froths, when Rakim suddenly dropped back down his flank the moment Baily cut inward, trying to create a passing option for Sven. He could feel the warm breath of his marker, who struggled to keep up with him, but he didn't mind, as he still raised his hand, asking for the ball.

Seven who calmly controlled the ball hesitated to give him the ball as he could see the danger behind him. However, the Paderborn players did a good job of closing down all the nearest passing options. In the end, he was forced to give him the ball as he couldn't risk a frontal confrontation with Michel who was charging at him.

Rakim easily received the ball on the halfway line only to feel the presence of Dräger who had followed him the next second. Raising his right foot, he went through the motions of a pass back to Wendell down the line only for his foot to miss the ball. At the next moment, his right foot scooped up the ball with his right foot turning to words the wing directly bypassing Dräger.

The defender had been expecting the winger to play it safe as he had been doing in his most recent touches so when he turned, he found himself flat-footed. By the time he could react and turn around Rakim had already gained 5 yards and continued to pick up pace. Chaos instantly ensued as the Paderborn defence converged on him trying to stop him at any cost, but the winger had an excited smile.

Pushing the ball forward he motioned for Bailey to break down the wing intending to send a through a ball. However, after noticing how the nearby defenders reacted to the change he decided against it. He chopped the ball with his left foot towards Baily trying to bait the two defenders closing him down before swiftly dragging the ball back across his body to his right foot.

His move worked as Vasiliadis took the bait finding himself unsteady but Strohdiek remained more composed trying to stand his ground. Rakim wasn't done though as his right foot chopped the ball across his body again in sync with his left foot propelling him forward. Just as it looked like they would clash his right foot once again snaked around the ball performing a reverse elastico elevating the ball to his right as he jumped after it.

It was just in time to dodge the slide tackle from Gjasula, landing on the ground a second later he found himself slightly unsteady. That didn't stop him from poking the ball through the legs of Hünemeier

before snaking past him as he turned on his axis. Using one of his hands to hold off the experienced defender he latched onto the ball again with a clear sight of goal.

Hünemeier didn't let him get by so easily though as he held onto his arm not willing to let their battle end. "Pass! Foul! Shoot!" Rakim heard a variety of shouts at that moment from teammates, fans and his inner voice. Not having time to weigh the pros and cons he simply decided to trust his inner voice, largely because it said the words that sounded most appealing to him.

Not hesitating he leaned into Hünemeier with his left arm as he let loose a curled shot from the left key just outside of the 18-yard box. Following the shot both of them fell to the ground as they watched the ball fly towards the goal spinning wildly as it soared toward the top right corner of the net. Huth, the Paderborn goalkeeper, reacted quickly, diving with outstretched arms.

The ball dipped just at the last second, grazing Huth's fingertips but not enough to divert its trajectory. It slammed into the underside of the crossbar before bouncing down into the net. "GOAL!" Derek Rae roared as the BayArena erupted in a cacophony of cheers, the sound reverberating through the stadium like a tidal wave. "Rakim Rex with a moment of absolute brilliance! What a strike from the 16-year-old! He's levelled the score for Leverkusen, and the crowd is on their feet!"

Stewart Robson was equally enthused. "That was sensational, Derek. The composure, the footwork, and then that finish! To pull off a shot like that with a defender draped all over him—it's extraordinary." He was breathless for a moment before he continued his commentary. "If anyone doubted why Leverkusen invested so heavily in this young man, they have their answer now. What a way to make his debut for the team by helping to equalise the score, Leverkusen 2:2 Paderborn in the 64th minute."

On the field, Rakim jumped up from the ground and raced to the right corner flag on the north stand behind the goal. Performing his signature Griddy celebration happy that he got to perform this celebration here at the BayArena getting off to a good start. To his delight, Bailey and Wendell joined him in the celebrations performing their versions of the griddy. Soon enough they were engulfed by the rest of their teammates.

The celebrations at the BayArena were electric, with the fans in full voice, chanting the new signing name alongside the team's anthem. The scoreboard now read Leverkusen 2:2 Paderborn, and the momentum had clearly shifted. The energy coursing through the stadium was palpable, and Leverkusen's players knew the opportunity they had been waiting for to seize control of the game had arrived.

The Paderborn players gathered near the centre circle for the restart, their faces a mix of frustration and determination. The equalizer had been a gut punch, but they weren't ready to fold. Their coach, Steffen Baumgart, animatedly barked instructions from the sideline, urging his team to stay compact and exploit opportunities on the counterattack.

[68th minute]

Paderborn kicked off, quickly shifting the ball wide to Antwi-Adjei on the left flank. With his blistering pace, Antwi-Adjei darted past Lars Bender, leaving the Leverkusen captain scrambling to recover. Spotting the run of Strela Mamba cutting between Jonathan Tah and Sven Bender, Antwi-Adjei delivered a precise low cross.

Mamba latched onto the ball with a deft first touch, pivoting to create space away from Wendell. With a sharp turn, he unleashed a powerful strike aimed at the far corner. Lukas Hradecký reacted with incredible reflexes, diving low to his right and pushing the shot around the post for a corner. Derek Rae's voice rose above the din. "What a save from Hradecký! That could have easily restored Paderborn's lead. Mamba did everything right, but the Leverkusen keeper was equal to it."

"This is exactly what Baumgart's side is capable of on the counter. They've got pace and precision, and Leverkusen must be careful not to leave themselves exposed." Stewart Robson chimed in as they watched the disappointed looks of the away side behind the Leverkusen goal.



[71st minute]

Leverkusen took this as a wake-up call, just because they managed to equalise and were the clear favourite didn't mean that they would simply hand them the win. Weak teams had their own pride and Paderborn showcased this as they didn't linger too long on losing their lead. To respond to this the Red Lions piled on the pressure as the midfield duo of Bellarabi and Aránguiz began dictating the tempo, circulating the ball with crisp, short passes to pull Paderborn out of their defensive shell.

Rakim now brimming with confidence, took on Dräger once more, this time using a quick double step-over before slipping a clever pass inside to Volland. The striker having entered the box from the left side retained his trademark composure not forcing a breakthrough as he faced Strohdiek. Just as it looked like he would be bogged down by the centre back he delivered a sublime pass that split the retreating Paderborn defence with the outside of his boot.

Bailey surged onto the ball just outside the box breaking free from Vasiliadis and unleashing a venomous shot that cannoned off the near post. The crowd gasped in unison as the rebound fell to Havertz, who instinctively fired a first-time effort toward goal. Paderborn goalkeeper Huth who hadn't moved at Bailey's shot was alert this time throwing himself to his left parrying the ball away to safety.

"That's two close calls for Leverkusen!" Derek Rae exclaimed. "Bailey with an absolute rocket off the post, and Havertz denied brilliantly by Huth. Paderborn are hanging on by a thread."

[75th minute]

Paderborn refused to sit back entirely and found another opening through Kai Pröger on the right wing. Exploiting a momentary lapse in Leverkusen's defensive shape, Pröger sprinted into space and whipped in a dangerous cross. Michel rose above Tah to meet it, powering a header toward the bottom corner.

Hrádecký was beaten, but Wendell, tracking back, made a heroic goal-line clearance with a sliding tackle to deny the visitors. The ball ricocheted back into the box, causing a chaotic scramble before Sven Bender managed to boot it clear.

"Here comes the cross, he beats Tah and Hrádecký... but would you look at that Wendell to the rescue with a last-minute slide tackle," Stewart Robson marvelled at the sequence. The Bayarena shared his excitement as the home fans breathed a sigh of relief whilst away fans groaned in annoyance.

"That goal-line clearance from Wendell was absolutely vital, not sure the home team could survive going behind again." Derek Rae agreed as he watched the home side scramble to reorganise their lines and stabilise the situation.

[78th minute]

Leverkusen, now fully aware of Paderborn's counterattacking threat, shifted gears. Aránguiz dropped deeper to provide extra cover while allowing the attacking quartet of Havertz, Bailey, Rakim, and Volland to focus on unlocking the resilient Paderborn defence. Lars on the right took a more defensive stance helping the midfield duo to stabilise things as his traditional wing play would do little at the moment.

Neither Rakim nor Volland were eager to flood the box looking for headers. Rakim simply didn't put much practice into this whilst the German striker wasn't a traditional forward who specialised in hold-up plays and aerial bombardment. Like most modern forwards he was best at quick link-up plays and sudden breakthroughs into the box much like the Polish fox Lewandowski.

Thus, the Lions attack focussed on the left wing where the fans were treated to a mouth-watering display of attacking football. Almost as if merging their thoughts through a combination of one to two touch football Rakim Volland and Bailey played rings around the tightening Paderborn defence. This wasn't a tactic that they had trained but something that naturally developed due to their opponent blocking their direct attack which they would normally utilise.

The only common link in this passing display that resembled the Barcelona tiki-taka was Rakim who would naturally receive the ball every second time. He was the only one taking more than two touches utilising his individual flair to dance by Paderborn defenders. It was after using a roll Croqueta to nudge the ball through the lunging legs of Vasiliadis on the byline that he found himself in the box.

However, with the keeper blocking the near post and Paderborn player ready to converge on him he didn't hesitate in the slightest. His right foot crossed the ball looking as if he was performing a stepover only for his left too to swing from behind chipping the ball into the middle of the box. The chip floated delicately into the six-yard box, where Havertz, who had been biding his time ghosted in unmarked as he managed to lose the marking of Collins.

"Havertz Unmarked in the box, what are the defenders doing," Derek exclaimed simultaneously as the German forward rose into the air sending a powerful header redirecting the ball towards goal.

Huth had no chance this time. The ball rocketed past him into the back of the net, sending the BayArena into raptures. The Leverkusen players rushed toward Havertz, their talisman, as the crowd erupted in unison. Derek Rae's voice soared over the jubilation, "Havertz delivers when it matters most! You can't leave a forward of his calibre unmarked in the box, there's no excuse for it and they got punished for it."

Stewart Robson added, "Absolutely, Derek. That was a masterclass in improvisation by Rakim to set it up, and Havertz did what he does best—finding the space and finishing clinically. Paderborn will feel gutted after holding out so well, but you have to admire the quality of that goal. Leverkusen 3:2

Paderborn" None of the commentary mattered to the German forward and the Lions who joined Havertz in his celebrations. They were all smiles now as they fed off the home atmosphere now that they finally regained the lead.

Chapter 359 359 Victory

[80th Minute]

Despite falling behind, Paderborn refused to give up. Their resilience remained evident as Baumgart urged his players to press higher up the pitch. The visitors nearly found joy moments later when Antwi-Adjei combined with Vasiliadis in midfield to slice through Leverkusen's defensive lines. Vasiliadis played a clever one-two with Gjasula before threading a perfectly weighted through ball into the path of Michel.

Michel timed his run to perfection, bursting into the penalty area with Tah in pursuit. The striker feigned a shot, cutting inside to leave Tah sliding past him. Michel then curled a low effort toward the far corner, but he missed the goal by inches despite beating Hrádecký who was caught flat-footed.

"That's a huge let-off for Leverkusen," Derek Rae said, his voice full of tension. "Michel should have done better there. That could have been the equalizer for Paderborn. A razor-thin miss."

Stewart Robson agreed. "You can see why Baumgart is urging his side forward. They're not willing to accept defeat just yet. But Leverkusen has got to tighten up in those moments."

Paderborn, though disappointed by the narrow miss, did not drop their intensity. As the clock ticked down, they continued to pour forward with Antwi-Adjei constantly a threat on the left wing. In the 82nd minute, Antwi-Adjei whipped in another dangerous cross, this time for Mamba, who was well-positioned at the near post. Mamba threw himself at the ball, but Hrádecký was quick off his line, diving at Mamba's feet to smother the ball before he could get a shot off.

"A great intervention from Hrádecký," said Robson. "He's certainly making up for his lacklustre response from Michel's earlier attempt, keeping Leverkusen's slim advantage intact."

[83rd minute]

Bosz aware of the danger Paderborn posed with their relentless pressing, decided to focus on game management. Aleksandar Dragović came on for Baily shifting the home side's shape to a 4-4-2 with Rakim dropping back to the left mid-role as Aleksandar played as a right back, leaving Havertz and Volland as the attacking duo. Leverkusen's reshaped structure began to stifle Paderborn's momentum.

Dragović's introduction added much-needed stability to the backline, and the midfield duo of Aránguiz and Bellarabi started recycling possession effectively, forcing Paderborn to chase shadows. Rakim, though moved to a more defensive role, still found opportunities to showcase his skill as he helped his team retain possession. In one such instance, Rakim intercepted a loose pass from Gjasula in midfield that was meant for Mamba.

With a sharp turn, he skipped past Pröger breaking into the space behind him drawing three Paderborn defenders toward him. Instead of forcing the play, he played a clever diagonal ball across the field snaking past the forest of feet that tried to intercept it. Havertz, who had dropped deep to hold up possession calmly received the ball as he scanned his surroundings.

Not hesitating he flicked the ball over his marker to release Volland into the final third who battled both Strohdiek and Hünemeier as they chased after the descending ball. Not losing his cool the German striker powered through and reached the ball first, shrugging off Hünemeier with a light nudge. Not taking an extra touch, he unleashed a fierce strike toward the right side of the goal.

Volland's shot flew with precision, but Huth had positioned himself well and dived low to his right, getting a strong hand to the ball to deflect it wide. The BayArena erupted in disbelief as the ball flew past the post. Volland clenched his fists in frustration, but the crowd roared in appreciation of his effort.

"Another fantastic save from Huth!" Derek Rae exclaimed, his voice rising in excitement. "That was a top-class stop, and you've got to give credit to Volland for taking that shot on so confidently."

"Volland is looking dangerous, as he yearns for his first goal of the season," Stewart Robson remarked as they watched the Leverkusen side dawdle with their corner eating up precious minutes. They didn't take things too far though after the officials urging as they took a short corner which saw Rakim and Wendell retain the ball close to the corner flag.

They couldn't keep this up though as eventually, the eager Paderborn players regained possession of the ball through a goal kick after a missed timed pass from Rakim. He didn't mind it though as they had wasted enough time earning quite a few throw-ins by playing the ball off the defender's shins.

[87th minute]

As the match approached its final moments, Paderborn began to grow desperate. Baumgart's instructions were clear—attack, attack, attack. Antwi-Adjei once again took the initiative on the left, charging forward with purpose. He evaded Lars Bender with ease and floated a perfect cross into the box, targeting Michel, who had made another intelligent run toward the far post. This time, Michel timed his leap with impeccable precision and met the ball with his head, directing it toward the goal but he couldn't get it to fall as it sailed over the goal.

[91st minute]

With time ticking away, Paderborn's final push saw them press high, hoping for a mistake or a loose ball in Leverkusen's defensive half. But the home side, now fully in control, was comfortable soaking up the pressure. Aránguiz and Bellarabi made sure the ball was kept away from danger as they exchanged short, quick passes to keep possession. Rakim, now stationed in a deeper role to help protect the lead, dropped back to win the ball in midfield before looking for options upfield.

As the final minute approached, Leverkusen looked to kill the game off. Rakim, calm under pressure, flicked a pass to Aránguiz, who in turn found Bender out wide. The winger, still full of energy, sprinted down the right, pulling the defenders wide and creating space. After dragging their opponents up, he came to a stop before passing the ball back killing the attack.

The final moments of the game consisted of a display in possession as the Red Lions played smart passes not forcing an attack as they let the clock run down. Eventually, their opponents lost their hope making things easier, and they didn't have to wait long as the referee blew his whistle after the 94th minute bringing the match to an end.

Following the final whistle, signalling the end of a hard-fought contest, the BayArena erupted into a mixture of relief and triumph. Bayer Leverkusen had held on for a 3:2 victory over Paderborn, despite a valiant late surge from the visitors.

"Leverkusen has done just enough to secure the win," Derek Rae said, his voice still filled with the tension of the final moments. "It was a nervy finish, but they showed resilience and discipline when it mattered most."

Stewart Robson agreed. "Paderborn can hold their heads high, though. They pushed Leverkusen all the way, and you could see the desire to get back into the game. A few more inches from Michel, and we might have been talking about a different result."

As the players made their way to the centre circle for the post-match formalities, Rakim stood with his teammates, catching his breath. Smiling brightly, he joined Wendell and a few of his teammates in shaking hands with their opponents. Following that they went around the stadium to show their appreciation to the fans who eagerly treated him. After all, he had been instrumental to their victory scoring a goal and an assist to bring them the victory.

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[Ding: Post-Match Review]

>Goals scored: (1) = 10Sp

>Assists: (1) = 10Sp

>Cards: 0 = 0Sp

>Final Match score: 3:2 Win: 30Sp

>Match Rating: 8.7

[Ding Mission: Fans Darling, (completed)]



Standing in the press area in the tunnel Rakim stood in front of the league's advertisements as he faced multiple reporters. Since he had made his debut and had been a key player to his team's win the reporters wouldn't let him go without an interview. He had taken out the noble in his hair at this point letting his dreads hang loosely to frame his face.

Adjusting his stance slightly after being almost blinded by a trigger-happy cameraman causing his dreads to sway slightly. Despite the inconvenience of the barrage of flashing cameras and overlapping questions, he retained his composure as he gave the guilty party a deadpan look. That seemed to do the trick as the person in question gave him a sheepish look no longer trying to blind him.

"Rakim, an excellent performance today! How does it feel to have played such a key role in Leverkusen's victory?" one journalist under the banner of ZDF called out. Rakim offered a faint smile, his voice calm as it was quite an easy question. "It feels good to contribute so soon after joining a new team. It was a tough match, but the team stayed focused, and we got the result we wanted. Credit goes to everyone on and off the pitch today."

"Your assist to Havertz was a moment of brilliance. Walk us through what was going through your mind at that moment," another reporter from ARD's sports division said, trying to get his voice heard.

Rakim gave a small nod, acknowledging the compliment. "It was all about timing and trust," he began, maintaining his calm demeanour as he figured out his words. "Bailey, Wendell and I did a good job drawing the defensive pressure to open up some space and it worked. Havertz's got a great nose for goal so the moment I spotted his run I knew I had to deliver the ball, and he didn't disappoint in the execution."

He answered a few more good-natured questions before a Sky Sports reporter stepped forward, his voice sharper than his other colleagues as he spoke in English. The interviews had been in German so far, so hearing someone talk to him in English surprised him but he ignored it as he focussed on his words. "Rakim, this being your debut in the Bundesliga, some sceptics were questioning whether you could adapt to the pace and physicality of German football. Do you think you've silenced your critics today, or do you think they might argue that Paderborn is hardly the toughest opposition?"

"I tend not to focus on the opinions of random people I don't know, all that matters is that we got 3 points, and I fulfilled the mission assigned to me by the gaffer. I hope that answers your question." Rakim calmly responded but the reporter wasn't ready to let things go.

"But considering your move from the Scottish Premiership, where, let's be honest, the level of competition is seen as much lower than the Bundesliga, do you feel you still have something to prove to earn the respect of fans and analysts here?" Despite being annoyed at their English colleague who was taking up the interview the German reporters in attendance who understood English eagerly awaited his response.

"Not really, I believe in myself to an almost unhealthy amount which drives me forward to perform to the best of my ability. Leverkusen saw something in my talent and effort, and I will continue to strive to repay them with my performance on the field anyone else is a moot point. It doesn't matter," Rakim replied with a light-hearted tone not at all flustered.

"Rote Löwen freut euch, denn ich bin hier (Red Lions rejoice for I am here)," he told one of the cameras before walking off ending the interview there as he headed to the changing rooms.

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Rakim had found his team mildly celebrating in the locker room, but they kept it to a minimum since it was only the start of a new season. He joined in some of the dances before heading for a quick shower wanting to get rid of the grime and dirt on his body. Even though the win came harder than expected it was safe to say that everyone was happy with the result.

"Well played mate," Diaby said before handing him one of the nutrient smoothies that the club had prepared for them. They had also prepared a variety of food for the players to get a bit to eat after the game allowing them to recharge some of their energy.

Heck, some of the players were even sitting in one of the two hot tubs in the changing room or the few cold tubs. "Thanks, how long until you get back from injury?" the winger asked as he took hold of the smoothie. All this while his movement didn't pause as he continued to get ready donning his prepared kit.

"The docs say I can get back to training in two weeks," he responded with slight excitement as he raised his left foot which was wrapped in a brace. He had suffered a sprain during training resulting in his current state, but the winger was taking it in stride.

Rakim nodded at Diaby's response, taking a sip of the smoothie. The cool liquid was refreshing, cooling down the heat lingering in his muscles from the intense match. "Good to hear. I'd feel bad about surpassing you on speed if you took too much time off,"

Diaby grinned, tapping his brace lightly. "Don't worry, I'd beat you in a race even now," Rakim chuckled, shaking his head as he pulled on his black Who Decides War jacket, completing his casual post-match look. "Alright, we'll settle this once you're back. No excuses then."

Diaby smirked. "Looking forward to it, mate. Just try not to cry when I smoke you." The banter lightened the mood further, as they two continued chatting with each other. As he adjusted his GLD chain around

his neck the assistant manager Joachim Wagner, entered the room, clapping his hands to gather everyone's attention. "Alright, lads, listen up!" His voice carried authority, but his tone was relaxed, reflective of the team's positive start.

Gaining everyone's attention Peter Bosz took centre stage, "Good job out there today. We didn't play our best, but we fought hard and got the result. We saw some good glimpses of what we worked on this pre-season, and that's the mentality that will carry us through this season. Celebrate tonight but remember we're back to work tomorrow at 13:00 sharp. No excuses."

As the players murmured in agreement, Rakim gave a quick nod and slung his bag over his shoulder. Helping himself to the buffet table he prepared a quick-to-go bag before making his exit. He exchanged a few more words with Wendell and Bailey before heading out of the locker room, the hum of conversation and laughter fading behind him.

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[Ding: Post-Match Review]

>Goals scored: (1) = 10Sp

>Assists: (1) = 10Sp

>Cards: 0 = 0Sp

>Final Match score: 3:2 Win: 30Sp

>Match Rating: 8.7

[Ding Mission: Fans Darling, (completed)]

(It is detected that the host is about to make his debut for a new team, and as a Singularity candidate making a memorable entrance is a must.)

Requirements met: 1 Goal, 1 assist, 7 completed break-through dribbles, and memorable celebration.  
Rating: B+

Reward: 2,000 SP, 1 A Garde Training potion

[Ding: Shop maintenance is complete, new products are on shelves, and the beginner price period is concluded.]

'Well, Shit!' was the only thing that popped into his mind as he read through all the system notifications.