

Football 381

Chapter 381 381 Vs a King

[Tuesday, 01/10/2019, 20:50, Allianz Stadium, Torino, Attendance: 34,525]

Juventus (4-3-1-2) Coach: Maurizio Sarri

(GK) 1 Wojciech Szczęsny

(LB) 12 Alex Sandro

(CB) 4 Matthijs de Ligt

(CB) 19 Leonardo Bonucci

(RB) 16 Juan Cuadrado

(LM) 14 Blaise Matuidi

(CM) 5 Miralem Pjanić

(RM) 6 Sami Khedira

(CAM) 33 Federico Bernardeschi

(LST) 7 Cristiano Ronaldo

(RST) 21 Gonzalo Higuaín

Bench:

77 Gianluigi Buffon

8 Aaron Ramsey

10 Paulo Dybala

24 Daniele Rugani

25 Adrien Rabiot

28 Merih Demiral

30 Rodrigo Bentancur

VS

Leverkusen (4-2-3-1) Coach: Peter Bosz

(GK) 1 Lukáš Hrádecký

Left Back: 18 Wendell

Centre Back: 5 Sven Bender

Centre Back: 4 Jonathan Tah

Right Back: 23 Mitchell Weiser

Right Defensive Midfielder: 15 Julian Baumgartlinger

Left Defensive Midfielder: 20 Charles Aránguiz

Central Attacking Midfielder: 10 Kerem Demirbay

Right Mid: 29 Kai Havertz

Left Mid: 31 Kevin Volland

Center Forward: 13 Lucas Alario

Bench:

Goalkeeper: 28 Ramazan Ozcan

Centre Back: 3 Panagiotis Retsos

Centre Back: 6 Aleksandar Dragovic

Central Midfielder: 11 Nadiem Amiri

Left Winger: 22 Rakim Rex

Right Winger: 19 Moussa Diaby

Forward: 7 Paulinho

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"Well, there have been a lot of talks on what happened on their flight here but let me set the record straight Leverkusen is alive and well." Derek Rae commented the moment both teams walked out of the tunnel as the UEFA pre-match proceedings got underway.

It didn't take long for them for both teams to shake hands and take the official pre-match photos. Volland Leverkusen's Captain for the day shook hands with the officials and Leonardo Bonucci Juventus captain for the match. Volland won the coin toss and chose to shoot into the goal in front of the home stand just in case they needed that extra push in the second half.

Following the coin toss the Leverkusen squad didn't drop into their positions but instead stood hand in hand around the Centre circle. The Juventus players joined them on their side of the field followed by both sides bench and coaching staff standing arm in arm on the sidelines. "Fweeet" Following William Collum today's ref's whistle the entirety of the Allianz Stadium went silent.

For an entire minute in the heart of Turin and even in millions of viewers' homes and watering holes there was nothing but silence. During the silence, the broadcast showed pictures of Captain Mike Caster and Paul Wagner the pilots of flight FB869. Next was the picture of a family of 3 the Meirs who had tragically died during the crash leaving an 18-year-old son and 1-year-old daughter who hadn't been on the flight.

They were just the few who died on flight FB869 as after extensive rescue efforts from the 32 souls on board 10 had died on impact. 4 more died en route to the nearest hospital and 6 were currently in critical condition, meaning only 12 survived with minor injuries with only 2 stewardesses coming through unscathed. However, both had probably the most traumatic experience of everyone on board as they watched passengers die left and right. Their high school level first aid didn't help them in that situation and no matter what they did it wasn't enough.

"Fweeeet Fweeet Fweeeet....Fweeet" William Collum blew his whistle 10 times in honour of the 10 confirmed deaths bringing the minute of silence to an end. Following that a wave of applause descended from the stands before the players proceeded to take their spots on the park.

"That brings an end to the sombre proceedings, but it will surely not be forgotten by the visiting players for the rest of their lives" Stewart Robson said as he watched the Leverkusen players take their seats with sombre expressions. Normally one would simply think they were focused on facing a superior side like Juve, but everyone knew better.

"It sure will, it's not every day that one comes so close to death, but for right now they must rise above and deliver a convincing performance here at the Allianz Stadium," Derek Rae commented as they watched both Ronaldo and Higuaín stand over the ball just waiting for the referee to blow his whistle. They didn't have to wait long as the moment William Collum completed his final checks, he blew his

whistle signaling the start of the match prompting Higuaín to nudge the ball to Ronaldo who sent it back to his midfielders.

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The Juventus midfield wasted no time asserting control. Miralem Pjanić orchestrated the play, threading passes with precision as Blaise Matuidi and Sami Khedira pushed forward, testing Leverkusen's defensive structure. The Allianz Stadium buzzed with anticipation as Juventus looked to capitalize on their early dominance.

As the game unfolded, Juventus pressed high, forcing Leverkusen into rushed clearances. Pjanić, playing the role of a deep-lying playmaker, switched the ball to Alex Sandro on the left flank. The Brazilian surged forward, skipping past Mitchell Weiser with a deft touch before delivering a dangerous cross into the box.

Jonathan Tah leapt high to clear, but the ball fell to Federico Bernardeschi lurking at the edge of the area. Bernardeschi struck it first time, his left-footed effort curling narrowly over the bar.

"That's the intent Juventus needs," Derek Rae remarked. "Bernardeschi wasn't far off there, and Leverkusen must be wary of those second balls."

Leverkusen tried to respond, with Charles Aránguiz and Julian Baumgartlinger working to disrupt Juventus's rhythm in midfield. Kai Havertz, showing flashes of brilliance, collected a quick pass from Kerem Demirbay and danced his way past Blaise Matuidi. Spotting Lucas Alario making a diagonal run, Havertz threaded a through ball that sliced the Juventus defence.

"Here comes Leverkusen! Alario's in!" shouted Rae.

But Wojciech Szczęsny was quick off his line, diving bravely to smother the ball at Alario's feet. The Polish goalkeeper rose quickly, shouting instructions to his defenders, ensuring there would be no repeat of the lapse.

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Following the first 10 minutes of chaos with both teams looking for an early goal, both teams entered Juventus's Defensive possession rhythm. The Red Lions could only look to attack on the counter when they managed to stop the 2 lethal strikers. Ronaldo despite his age proved once again why he was in that conversation as his sheer presence unsettled Bender and Tah.

It was in the 17th minute following a failed Leverkusen attack when Pjanić found himself in possession of the ball in the middle of the field following Bonucci's precise slide tackle dispossessing Lucas Alario. Pjanić wasted no time rotating past Demirbay with a display of nimble footwork before unleashing a defence-splitting ball forward sending Matuidi running down the left flank.

The French midfielder wasted no time turning on the jets as he skipped past Haverts entering the final third. Baumgartlinger stepped up to meet him, but he was too late as Matuidi sent a sharp through ball into the Leverkusen box. The Red Lions fans seeing this held their breath, but their hearts dropped further upon seeing who was on the other end of the ball.

A black number 7 in yet another iconic white jersey took control of the ball with his left foot as he held Tah off with his right hand. The most clinical finisher the modern game of football has ever birthed now barreled towards their goal. Despite Tah being on his side no one in the Allianz Stadium believed there existed a man who could stop Ronaldo from scoring in the Champions League.



Tah definitely felt the pressure at this very moment, but it was too early to risk getting sent off with a dirty tackle. He knew he had to make a decision soon or it would be too late but before he could even decide he saw Ronaldo draw his left foot back. Having no choice, he slid in front of him trying to block the shooting path, but the shot never came.

The Portugues legend didn't shoot and instead back-heeled the ball sending it zipping diagonally to the top of the box. His action left everyone stupefied not believing his actions but upon seeing who was on the end of that pass the Juventus fans rejoiced. Federico Bernardeschi took a short touch stepping into the box before rifling the ball into the far corner of the goal.

Hrádecký who had been blocking the near post due to Ronaldo's threat, could not react in time as he watched the ball skip past Bender's outstretched leg piercing the back of the net. "Yeahhhhh," The home fans exclaimed instantly drowning any other conversation as their players proceeded with their celebrations.

Chapter 382 382 SUUUUUUU

The Allianz Stadium erupted as Bernardeschi sprinted toward the corner flag, arms outstretched in celebration. His teammates rushed to join him, led by Ronaldo, who gave him an approving nod and a firm clap on the back. Juventus 1:0 Leverkusen 04.

"That's a textbook Juventus move!" exclaimed Derek Rae. "Ronaldo creates space and Bernardeschi finishes with precision. Leverkusen will need to regroup quickly if they want to stay in this contest."

"There is not much you can do when you have a player like Ronaldo enter your box, he will draw attention and the smart players around him will make use of the space created and now Bernardeschi has a goal." Stewart Robson commented with a thoughtful expression as they analyzed how the Number 7 drew the Leverkusen box towards him.

As the celebrations died down, Juventus settled into their rhythm again, maintaining defensive discipline as they retained possession dictating the tempo. Leverkusen, however, refused to back down as both their wings reached into their bags of tricks to pull off threatening attacks. Kai Havertz, on his right wing, continued to showcase his skill and creativity, trying to spark something for his side.

In the 23rd minute, Leverkusen launched a swift counterattack. Volland intercepted a stray pass from Khedira in midfield and immediately found Demirbay in space. The midfielder turned sharply and lofted a ball over the Juventus backline toward Havertz who had timed his run to perfection as he broke past Sandro.

Havertz deftly brought the ball down expertly with his chest and accelerated forward, breaking into the box. Szczęsny didn't waste a moment to break out of his line sprinting forward looking to close down the distance. Havertz wanted to shoot but wasn't sure from the angle Szczęsny offered him and taking any more touches was dangerous. Looking up he spotted Volland on the other edge of the box also breaking into the box, not hesitating he squared the ball across the box into his path.

Volland deftly took control of the ball mid-sprint and didn't waste time unleashing a shot under the pressure from Cuadrado. The Juventus right back timed his slid tackle perfectly but was only able to skiff the back end of the ball diverting the shot angle slightly. "Oh, he shots, the goal is wide open... (Bang) Oh my goodness Stewart he's hit the post. That is one he will want to quickly forget." Derek exclaimed as he watched Volland drop to his knees with his hands over his head.

Volland sat on the turf for a moment, his face a mask of disbelief as the ball ricocheted off the post. His teammates also shook their heads in disappointment knowing they wouldn't get such a golden chance again. When you play a team like Juventus you must convert every chance and they all knew it, Havertz in particular felt disappointed after placing the ball on a Silva platter.

Still in the end he walked over to his captain offering him a few words of encouragement, but it was clear that the missed opportunity weighed heavily on him. "That was a golden chance," Stewart Robson remarked somberly. "You can't afford to let those slip by at this level. The buildup was brilliant, but Volland will be kicking himself for not finishing."

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Juventus players seemed unfazed by the scare. They quickly regained their composure, with Bonucci and de Ligt exchanging calm passes at the back, while Khedira urged his midfield to press higher. Meanwhile, Leverkusen pushed forward to meet them with a sense of urgency to level the game.

A long ball from Jonathan Tah found the head of Lucas Alario, who flicked it on toward the run of Volland. This time, however, Juventus were more alert, with Matuidi tracking Volland's movement and disrupting his touch just outside the box. "Juventus are doing well to keep their shape," Derek Rae observed. "Leverkusen's attacks are coming, but they're being thwarted by solid defensive positioning."

The ball was cleared out to the halfway line, where Bernardeschi took a brief moment to regain his breath. As he looked up, he saw the Leverkusen midfield sprawled across the field, and an opening appeared for him to exploit. With a quick, decisive turn, Bernardeschi passed to Ronaldo, who immediately surged forward.

"Here comes Ronaldo again," Stewart Robson noted, his voice rising with anticipation. "This is where he thrives, in open spaces with defenders trailing behind."

Ronaldo surged down the left wing, drawing defenders toward him as he cut inside, looking for options. He spotted Higuaín making a run toward the box and fed him a perfectly weighted ball. Higuaín controlled it with ease, shifted onto his right foot, and let loose a curling shot aimed for the far post.

Hrádecký, the Leverkusen goalkeeper, was quick to react, diving full stretch to his left, pushing the ball around the post with a fingertip save that left the Allianz Stadium groaning in disbelief. "Brilliant save from Hrádecký!" Derek Rae exclaimed. "That's world-class goalkeeping to keep his team in this game."

Following that save Juventus players continued to apply pressure, but Leverkusen's defence remained resolute, with Bender and Tah recovering quickly to clear any threats that came their way. The tempo of the game slowed momentarily as both teams caught their breath, but the tension in the stadium remained palpable. The home team played like the stars they were keeping the flow of the game firmly under control.

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The game came to an abrupt halt as Charles Aránguiz found himself in William Collum's books as he was shown a yellow card. Pjanić had found himself in control of the ball at the top of the key and Aránguiz was in a dis-favorable position to stop him. In the end, the only thing he could do was take one for the team as he yanked Pjanić's shoulder sending him stumbling to the ground.

Pleading the 5th with Collum didn't help much as the official ruthlessly showed him his yellow card. Peter Bosz couldn't even fault him, choosing instead to show him a sneaky thumbs-up when the camera wasn't pointed at him. However now they faced another dilemma as both Khedira and Ronaldo stood over the ball debating on what they would do with the ball.

The angle was favourable and was close enough to go for goal, so both set-piece takers sensed an opportunity to add to their team's goal tally. Thus, it came as no surprise when both lined up from two different angles looking to go for the goal. Khedira took a curved 3 steps looking as if he'd curl the ball into the far corner whilst Ronaldo directly took 5 steps back.

The four players in the wall could only face him as he took deep breaths looking like a cannoneer ready to pierce their wall. "fweet" Collum blew his whistle giving the go-ahead as all eyes rested on the two in front of the ball. Khedira held up his hand signaling the number two before making his run-up causing the wall in front of him to tense in anticipation.

However, Khedira suddenly stopped just a step from the ball before jumping back. The wall didn't even get to reach before the imposing figure of Ronaldo appeared over the ballet drawing his right leg back. (Boom) The ball dented slightly as the top of his boot connected with it before it propelled forward.

Following the sound of his boot connecting with the ball Havertz, Alario, Aránguiz, and Baumgartlinger jumped into their ready to put their body on the line. It never came to that though as the ball sneaked below them in a carpet shot slicing along the ground. (thud) That soft thud was heard throughout the stadium followed by the uproar of the Juventus fans who let loose in celebrations.

"Was there ever any question? It was always going to be him, and he didn't let them down... (SUUUUU!!!) Now he gets to reap the rewards of yet another goal to his long tally. Juventus 2:0 Leverkusen," Derek Rae stated with excitement as pandemonium ensued around the Arena.

"His lethality in set pieces is something every team needs to be wary of, so when you give a Cristiano Ronaldo such an opportunity you can expect to be punished," Stewart Robson intoned with equal excitement as the scoreboard once again shifted in the home teams Favour.

Chapter 383 383 Mister Mario

The Allianz Stadium was alive with energy as the chants of "Cristiano Ronaldo! Cris-Tiano Ronaldo, oh oh oh..." echoed through the stands. The Portuguese superstar jogged toward the corner flag, arms outstretched, basking in the adoration of the Juventus faithful. His teammates swarmed him, Higuaín and Bernardeschi sharing congratulatory pats on the back. The celebration was loud, but the message was clear—Juventus was in control.

Peter Bosz, standing on the touchline, motioned frantically to his players. Leverkusen needed to respond quickly, but they had been rattled. Despite their attempts to stay composed, the weight of a two-goal deficit was evident in their body language.

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As the game resumed, Leverkusen tried to mount a response. Baumgartlinger and Aránguiz worked tirelessly in midfield, attempting to string passes together and find gaps in Juventus's compact defence. Havertz was forced to drift inside more often, looking to help his team break down the tight Juventus defence.

In the 44th minute, their persistence nearly paid off. Wendell surged down the left flank, showing impressive pace to evade Cuadrado. The Brazilian whipped in a dangerous cross that sailed over Bonucci's outstretched leg and found Alario at the near post. Alario twisted his body to meet the ball with a firm header, directing it toward the bottom corner.

Szczęśny was at full stretch, diving to his right. The stadium collectively held its breath as the ball seemed destined to find the net. But the Juventus goalkeeper was equal to it, his fingertips brushing the ball just enough to send it skimming past the post.

"Fantastic save!" Derek Rae exclaimed. "Szczęśny proves his worth yet again, keeping Juventus firmly in the driver's seat."

Robson chimed in, "That was a superb header from Alario, but Szczęśny's reactions are world-class. Leverkusen will be wondering what they need to do to beat him."

[45+1]

The first half ended with Juventus maintaining their two-goal lead. The home fans applauded their team's dominant display as the players walked off the pitch. Sarri stood by the tunnel, his face full of smiles clearly pleased with his side's clinical performance.

[Half-Time Analysis]

In the studio, the pundits dissected the first half. "Ronaldo and Bernardeschi have been superb," said one. "Leverkusen are struggling to cope with Juventus's balance between aggression and discipline."

"I feel letting this Juventus side take control of the match so easily has led to their current state. Added to the quartet failing to convert the critical chances it's easy to see why their performance has been so lacklustre." A well-dressed bald man named Marco stated with a confident grin as he analyzed where the visiting side failed on both attacking and defensive ends.

Another chimed in with a more neutral tone looking to bring down the biased analysis of the game. "But Leverkusen are creating chances. They just need to capitalize on one to get back into this game. The next goal will be crucial."

"Be realistic Clara, are you expecting this Juventus side to easily concede or allow another clear-cut chance like Voland had in the 23rd minute," Marco retorted not at all having any hope for the German side to mount a comeback in this game.

"Safe to say we've had an exciting 45 minutes of football and can look forward to more as Juventus look to secure their lead and Bayer 04 seek a comeback. I'm your host Luigi and this has been the Sky Sports

Italy half-time talk." Luigi the lead pundit stated as the camera zoomed in on him showing off his luscious flowing black locs as he leaned forward on the table. Following his words, the outro for their show began playing as the scheduled adverts started rolling in front of the screens around Italy.

"Camon guys I've told you to tone down the hostility towards the visiting side today, with the drama surrounding their rivals we cannot afford to receive any backlash due to stupid comments," he stated to his co-hosts with a sterner expression trying to get his point across.

He had received stern instruction from the regional head to tone down the favouritism they showed to Italian teams especially Juventus in this match. With the world practically thinking they came back from the dead it wasn't a good look for their branch to harshly criticize them on poor performances. After all what better excuse is there than almost dying on the way over to the game?

"I know but that was pretty chilly in my opinion for commentating on a Juventus match where they are destroying their opponent. Plus, it's not like German pundits don't do the same with Bayern Munich, or England with Manchester United despite them not making it past the Quarterfinal since winning in the 2010/11 season." Marco retorted with an innocent look as he rubbed his bald head not quite understanding why the execs decided to suddenly ask them to be fair when it was their directive in the first place that led to biased reporting.

"(Sigh) You know Marco is right, even I find it hard to pick out good points in that Leverkusen side other than them not conceding more goals. If not for needed to contradict him for the sake of the show I would have joined hands with him in praising the old lady," Clara also said backing up Marco.

"I get it but it's just one match so just tone it down whether Juve adds another 2 or 5 goals look for some positive points and praise them to kingdom come. Understand?" Luigi quickly interjected not finding it within himself to argue about right and wrong with these two shameless glory hogs. How he got the job of having to play mediator to the two of them baffles him but as long as the checks don't bounce, and the Euros don't smell funny, he'll do his job.



"Understood," Clara quickly responded before pulling out a handheld mirror to readjust her lipstick which had been tarnished by the 5 minutes of speaking, she had done.

Rolling his eye at her action Marco also responded in a mock salute, "Aye aye Mister Mario,"

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As the second half began, Peter Bosz wasted no time in shaking things up. Moussa Diaby, who had been performing exceptionally after coming back from injury replaced Kerem Demirbay, pushing Kai Havertz into the central attacking midfield role. The tactical shift was clear—Leverkusen needed more pace and directness to challenge Juventus's disciplined defence.

With the younger Alario championing the attack Leverkusen's pressure intensified with both substitutes making their presence felt. The younger attacking quartet utilized their pace to push the older Juventus guards sweating. For the next 5 minutes, they found it hard to breathe a sigh of relief as they utilized their pace to unsettle them.

28-year-old Alex Sandro faced the brunt of this as 20-year-old Diaby turned on the jets not giving the Juventus left-back a moment of rest. In the 43rd minute, he got his first clear-cut chance after a sharp pass from Havertz who danced by Bernardeschi in midfield. The French winger latched onto the laser of a pass as he skipped by Sandro who turned to chase after him, but it was too late.

Diaby had already created space between them and cut into the box releasing a weighted pass into the box. The ball cut across the penalty box into the path of Paulinho who had accelerated past Bonucci. The Juventus old guard tried to hold the young striker back, but he was not to be held as he slid forward to the ground pulling Bonucci with him. Angling his foot with the oncoming ball he connected with the zipping ball redirecting it past the grasp of the watchful Szczęśny.

Allianz Stadium was silent for a moment with only the sea of red behind the Juventus goal jumping into the air, celebrating as the ball pierced the back of the net. "Can you hear the Lions roar," Derek Rae exclaimed with a broad smile the moment he saw the play unfold. "They've been counted at halftime, but that goal quickly reminded the viewers of their existence."

"The men of the hour are the two substitutes Paulinho and Moussa Diaby, helping their team get back into the game," Stewart Robson commented, "5 minutes into the game and they have cut the lead down to one. 50th minute and the score reads Juventus 2 and Leverkusen 1."

Chapter 384 384 King Volland

The Leverkusen bench erupted, fists raised and shouts echoing from Peter Bosz and his coaching staff. On the pitch, Paulinho was mobbed by his teammates, his celebratory scream drowned out by the jubilant cheers from the travelling Leverkusen fans. Bosz gestured animatedly, urging his players to maintain the pressure and capitalize on Juventus's momentary lapse.

Sarri, on the other hand, paced the sideline, visibly annoyed. He barked instructions at Alex Sandro and Bonucci, demanding composure and tighter marking. The Old Lady had been caught off guard, and Sarri knew his team couldn't afford to let the visitors build any more momentum.

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Juventus sought to restore their dominance. Matuidi and Khedira worked diligently to reassert control in midfield, spraying passes to stretch Leverkusen's defensive line. Pjanić, the orchestrator, dropped

deeper to dictate the tempo, launching a long ball over the top toward Ronaldo. The Portuguese forward outjumped Jonathan Tah, nodding the ball into Higuaín's path.

Higuaín, with his back to goal, expertly shielded the ball from Sven Bender before laying it off to Bernardeschi, who charged forward. The Italian rifled a shot from the edge of the box, but Hrádecký was equal to it, diving low to his left to palm the ball away for Wendell to collect.

Seizing the opportunity Leverkusen counterattacked with purpose as Wendell sent a crisp pass up the flank to Volland. The forward wasted no time dropping the ball off to the centre where Havertz lurked ready to initiate an attack. He didn't disappoint his teammates, only taking one touch to steady himself before unleashing a defence-splitting through ball down the right flank.

With how far forward the old lady had pushed forward to put pressure on them it had left quite a bit of yard behind their back lines. Thus, it came as no surprise when a crimson thunder sped along the right touchline chasing after the ball trying to reach it before it went out. Sandro was once again forced to turn abruptly but this time had more time to make up for his mistake.

Chasing back, he caught up with Diaby by the time the winger had managed to halt the ball on the line. Facing him with his back to the box behind him he regained his composure not willing to let his opponent beat him once again. He did not believe Leverkusen's 19 could beat him now that they were stationary.

Diaby glanced over his shoulder, surveying the box as Leverkusen's attackers swarmed forward like a crimson tide. Sandro crouched lowering his centre of gravity, his body poised to block any move. Diaby, unfazed, performed a few stepovers debating how to sell his next move as he made brief eye contact with the defender ahead of him.

"It's all about the eyes and shoulders bro, any defender worth their salt reads that to stop you so if you can sell it half your job is done." He remembered Rakim's words when they discussed how best to get by players both stationary and on the move without implementing fancy skill moves.

Thinking of this his left foot flashed over the ball pulling his centre of gravity in the same direction, looking as if he'd cut back. His right shoulder pulled across his body as his head movement followed, but the very moment his foot connected with the ground his right foot that followed suddenly knocked the ball down the line. The very next moment he disappeared from Sandro's vision as he exploded down the wing latching on the ball before it could reach the corner flag.

The Leverkusen fans roared as Diaby surged past Sandro, leaving the Juventus defender scrambling in his wake. Diaby's pace was electrifying, and the space ahead of him seemed to open up like a runway. He reached the edge of the box and, with a quick glance, spotted Paulinho darting into the six-yard area. Haverts and Volland also surged into the box from their respective angles as they battled their markers.

He had many options and wasted no time picking out a player as he delivered a lofted cross into the box. Time seemed to halt as Paulinho came to a sudden halt on the 6-yard-line with a baffled look as the ball was too high for him to reach. Turning to see the ball that seemed to just hang in the sky as it travelled out to the area around the back post.

He wanted to ask his French brother whether he was setting him up or trying to link up with Jesus. After all, he was barely 5ft7 and even if he had hops like Ronaldo he wouldn't reach that ball. Watching as the ball dropped slightly, he watched two majestic figures rise to meet it in the air.

Volland faced Bonucci in the air as they both struggled for dominance, but the German striker came out on top managing to hang in the air a bit longer. He did not disappoint as he swung his towards goal connecting with the ball cleanly only messing up his perfectly gelled hair slightly. Not willing to waste this opportunity like he did in the first half he put his all behind that header.

Volland's header surged toward the far corner of the goal, and for a moment, the stadium held its breath. Szczęsny, aware of the threat, dove toward the ball, fully extending his right hand in a desperate attempt to keep it out. His fingers grazed the ball, but it wasn't enough. With a dull thud, the ball ricocheted off the post and rebounded into the net.

The Leverkusen players erupted in celebration once more, rushing toward Volland who slipped to the ground following his mega jump. "he's hit the post once again but this time the outcome is in his favour. Kevin Volland equalizes the score for the Red Lions, the score reads 2:2 here at the Allianz Stadium," Dereck Rae exclaimed as the camera panned over the celebrating visiting fans and the players swarming towards Volland.

The Visitors who had been prepared for their team to suffer a major thrashing after the first half were now jumping for joy. Bears were flung into the air as the Lions fans embraced each other already smelling the comeback. However, their jovial mood was quickly halted as a few spotted their player's worried look's. They didn't run off to celebrate and instead stood over the groaning figure of Volland who clutched his left ankle in pain.

"Oh my, Volland remains on the ground and from the looks of it he seems to be in pain." Stewart Robson commented as the camera showed the worried figure of Baumgartlinger calling for a medic. The Juventus players, seeing this, thought he was simply trying to waste time, but the referee was unconvinced and called for the medic to enter after allowing the goal.

The Juventus players were quickly silenced upon gazing at how Volland's standing foot twisted on his descent. The striker had practically crash-landed as his ankle

gave out from under him. The Allianz Stadium was filled with tension as the Leverkusen players huddled around Volland, who grimaced in pain, as Thomas Muller the team's head doctor jogged onto the field with an assistant.

Volland's face contorted in pain as he grimaced, clutching his left ankle tightly. Dr Muller quickly knelt beside Volland, inspecting his ankle. His assistant also assisted after placing his medic bag on the side, but his expression became grave the moment he caught sight of the striker's ankle. It was swelling fast, already turning blue on some part and the only serving grace was the fact it didn't look dislocated.

"Sir..." he began saying but was quickly cut off by the older doctor. "Spray it and wrap it up, Simon," following his sombre words he looked to the side of the field where his worried friend was waiting for his verdict.

In response, he could only shake his head causing Peter Bosz's expression to sink further as he turned to his assistant manager Fredrick Bauer to make the pre-discussed changes. Volland was always meant to come off if his performance didn't pick up, but he had seen a positive change since the beginning of the second half. Added to that he managed to score a wonderful goal proving just why he was his favourite forward, but now he was coming off with an injury just when his performance was picking up.

"Sigh, let's just hope it's not too bad," he muttered under his breath as Fredrick Bauer called for Rakim who was watching the ongoing on the field with worry along with the other players.

Chapter 385 385 7 Seconds

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The signal from the bench was clear—Kevin Volland's night was over. Rakim Rex removed his warmup jacket, revealing his crimson jersey, the number 22 gleaming under the Allianz Stadium lights. Despite the sour circumstances a mix of anticipation rippled through the Leverkusen supporters. The substitution board lit up, displaying Volland's number alongside Rakim's.

Rakim clapped his hands as he waited on the sidelines for the medics to carry Volland off the field after placing him on their stretcher. It didn't take long, and he exchanged a few words with the striker wishing

him well and taking the captain's band from him. Jogging on the field among polite applause he calmly placed the band around the arm of Havertz simply because he was the closest.

As Rakim Rex took his position on the left wing, the Allianz Stadium buzzed with anticipation. Leverkusen's supporters, though fewer in number, made their presence felt, chanting and waving flags in support of their team. The scoreboard displayed a 2-2 deadlock, and with thirty minutes remaining, the match was poised for a thrilling conclusion.

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Juventus, determined to reclaim their lead, pressed forward with renewed vigor. Pjanić orchestrated the midfield, distributing passes to stretch Leverkusen's defence. In the 65th minute, he found Ronaldo on the left flank. Ronaldo, with a deft touch, cut inside, evading Weiser, and unleashed a curling shot aimed at the far post. Hrádecký, showcasing exceptional reflexes, dived to his right, tipping the ball just wide of the post. The Juventus fans sighed in unison, the near miss a testament to the razor-thin margins at play.

Leverkusen responded with a counterattack a couple of moments later after a failed set piece that saw Tah rise above the crowd to clear the ball. Havertz, now wearing the captain's armband, displayed remarkable composure as he advanced through the midfield. Spotting Rakim making a run behind Cuadrado who was frantically retreating, Havertz delivered a precise through ball.

A foot race ensued but Rakim's speed was evident as he outpaced the Juventus right-back as he hugged the side of the field. Controlling the pass with a delicate first touch just as they reached the final third he came to a sudden stop. Faking a cut inward just as Cuadrado turned to face him he once again accelerated past him down the flank.

Cuadrado was left a step behind and could only chase his shadow as Rakim charged forward poised to break into the box. De Ligt who had tracked back, was the first of the central defenders to stand in his

way, remaining composed as the winger neared. However, Rakim had no plans of taking him on as the risk of being stopped rose exponentially the closer to the box he got.

Thus, just as he stepped into the box, he faked a run towards the front post before swerving a curved pass into the box. Bonucci, who had been following Paulinho ready to stop him, could only lung his leg backwards in an effort to try to knock the ball away. He couldn't reach it though no matter how hard he stretched and could only watch in horror as Diaby, who had beaten Sandro calmly swung his foot.

Diaby was never going to disappoint from that close a range. The French winger connected perfectly with the ball, sending it rocketing past Szczesny at the near post. The net rippled with force, and the Leverkusen supporters erupted in cheers, their voices echoing through the Allianz Stadium. Diaby darted towards the corner flag, sliding on his knees as his teammates swarmed him in celebration.

"Well, Derek Juventus might have a problem because that counter-attack was completed in under 7 seconds from the time Tah cleared the ball." Stewart Robson commented with excitement as he watched the red Lions celebrate at the corner flag waving at their fans.

"Indeed, my friend, I dread to see what this offensive quartet will turn into now that Diaby is back from injury and young Rakim is growing into his own. That's not to mention homegrown Witz who's looking for this chance to break into the starting lineup." Derek analyzed with an equally excited grin as the Juventus players surrounded the ref claiming an offside, but the ref was unmoved.

Even after checking with his earpiece, the verdict stood that none of the Leverkusen players were offside during the build-up of the goal. In the end, the verdict stood Juventus 2:3 Leverkusen with the home side going behind for the first time.

Juventus was forced to kick off the match for the 4th time in today's match as Sarri paced along the coaching area. Ronaldo the man of the hour stood at the Centre spot as he calmly surveyed the field not letting the pressure get to him. He could see some of his teammates warming up on the sidelines, likely looking to ignite a spark in this game but none of that mattered to him at this moment.

He needed to help his team score a goal for there even to be a possibility for a comeback and that is something he has perfected over the years. The saying big players perform in big moments is true to some extent except for the fact Ronaldo is a player who has made those moments his livelihood. The adrenalin rush one feels after rescuing your team from a certain defeat is something he has spent the better part of his career chasing.

As the game resumed, Ronaldo passed the ball back to Pjanić, who quickly distributed it to Khedira in the Centre of the pitch. Juventus began moving the ball with urgency, seeking a quick equalizer. Sarri's animated gestures from the sideline only served to spur them on to look for that quick equalizer.

In the 71st minute, Juventus earned a free kick just outside the penalty area after Aránguiz fouled Bernardeschi during a quick transition. The Allianz Stadium fell into a tense silence as Ronaldo stepped up, placing the ball down with meticulous precision. The wall was set, and Hrádecký positioned himself, ready for the inevitable.

Ronaldo's signature stance followed—a deep breath, a step back, and the iconic wide-leg posture. "he's already punished them once with a set piece let's see if he can do it again," Dereck shouted mirroring the excitement that the home fans were feeling. Having learned from their earlier mistake Weiser laid behind the wall with his back facing Ronaldo.

"Here we go another moment for him to claim his glory," Stewart said as the camera panned over Ronaldo following the Ref whistle. It felt as if the world was watching this moment as he took another deep breath before quickly closing in on the ball.

The next moment Ronaldo unleashed a thunderous strike, sending the ball curling over the wall. Hrádecký reacted instinctively, diving to his left, and managed to parry the ball with his outstretched fingertips. The rebound fell into the path of Higuaín, who attempted to convert, but Tah's heroic block deflected the shot wide.

"Not meant to be as Hrádecký and Tah come to the rescue," Derek exclaimed voicing the disappointed groans from the home side. Hrádecký had come in clutch doing everything right from wall positioning and timing his takeoff.

The resulting corner saw chaos in the box as Bonucci leapt high to meet the ball, his header narrowly missing the target. The tension only continued to increase as the home side no longer played counter-attacking football but actively pressed forward.

[75]

Sarri made his changes after seeing the lack of forward creativity, despite preferring conservative tactics he understood that only the winner got to have an opinion. Paulo Dybala replaced Higuain upfront and Arraon Ramsey came on to replace Federico Bernardeschi in midfield. The final change came in the form of Uruguayan Rodrigo Bentancur who replaced Sami Khedira in the middle of the field.

Maurizio Sarri was sending a message to his team to continue attacking as he not only added creative-minded players but also calmer players to stabilize things. His changes had immediate effects as the redlines faced a suffocating pressure mounting towards them. They could hardly leave their third of the half when they faced the Juventus wolf pack-like defence who dispossessed them and launched an attack.

Chapter 386 386 Is it a Bird?

Leverkusen was being pinned back, struggling to clear the ball beyond their half. Juventus applied relentless pressure, with Ramsey and Dybala adding fresh energy and creativity to their attacks. The Allianz Stadium roared with every pass, urging the home side forward as they sought an equalizer.

In the 78th minute, Ronaldo received a clever pass from Bentancur just outside the penalty area. With his back to goal, he turned sharply, evading Aránguiz with a flick before firing a low-driven shot toward the bottom right corner. Once again, Hrádecký was alert, diving quickly to smother the ball. The Leverkusen goalkeeper was proving to be clutch in the final moments of the game as he had been put to the test 4 times in the last 2 minutes.

Seeing his team being locked down in their own third, Rakim decided to drop back further calling for the ball from the keeper. Since all other players were marked, he was a natural choice, and Hrádecký didn't hesitate in throwing the ball his way. Rakim deftly jumped into the air before touching the ball down with his right heel after his left foot flashed across his body.

Dybala and Bentancur were on him in the next moment, but the winger did not panic in the slightest as he stared them down. With a sharp shift of his body weight, Rakim sent the ball rolling to his left, drawing Bentancur toward him. Then, with a flick of his right foot, he nutmegged the Uruguayan midfielder, slipping the ball through his legs and darting past him exciting the field in the process.

The Leverkusen supporters roared in approval, at his cheeky display of skill as he once again collected the ball. Dybala didn't let this chance get away as he turned and latched onto his side trying to shove him off the ball. Rakim didn't face him head-on though as he turned with the press scoping the ball towards the line before cutting behind Dybala.

Escaping from him Rakim wasted no time playing a short pass with Havertz, who had gained a little room from Pjanic's marking before floating into space. Kai didn't hesitate to ping the ball back his way just in time for him to escape another defender who tried to close him down with a swift Cruyff turn.

Before he knew it, he was ping-ponging quick passes with his teammates as he helped them retain possession. Almost like a true maestro, he'd pick the perfect passes that would give his teammates just enough time to react and pick a good pass. Since they were all in the top 85th percentile of professional footballers, this much was easy enough for them to do.

Thus, despite the mounting defensive pressure that the Turin side mounted on them, they retained control of the ball on the left wing. They didn't cross past the halfway line, but it wasn't required of them as long as they held the ball. Since they were in the lead there was no need to force an attack and just waited for the Juventus side to get frustrated.

[81]

They didn't have to wait long as Havertz found himself with a bit of space on the wing after Rakim dragged 3 defenders inwards after utilizing a dizzying piece of footwork and skill. After completing that he just calmly locked the ball back to the German forward who was free after Wendell dragged a defender up the wing. Havertz used the breathing room to look up only to see a hand in the distance instantly making up his mind.

Without hesitating he drew his leg back channeling most of his power before launching a lofted pass across the pitch. Aaron Ramsey tried to intercept it with a jump, but he was too late as Havertz's pass gained wings as it sailed towards the right flank. Immediately a foot race ensued as both Diaby and Sandro raced down the flank towards the ball's landing point.

Diaby only looked up once and instinctively knew where it would land and Sandro, who is a world-class full-back, judged the landing point from the winger's body movement. Keeping a hand out both battled for position as they accelerated forward with Sandro surprisingly keeping up with the speedster. As the ball neared its landing point, Diaby's pace was undeniable. His legs seemed to stretch further with every stride, his eyes locked on the ball. Sandro, on the other hand, wasn't backing down.

The Brazilian's defensive instincts were sharp, and despite Diaby's burst of speed, he managed to stay within striking distance. With a final surge, Diaby was the first to reach the ball, his foot meeting it just a split second before Sandro could close the gap. That is as far as he could go as the moment, he landed a pair of feet came sliding hooking the ball and sending him stumbling in the process.

Sandro had timed his slide tackle perfectly for the moment he landed with the ball, giving him no time to react. "That's a fantastic tackle!" Derek Rae stated as the Allianz Stadium erupted in applause. He wasn't done though as he sprung up the next moment picking up the loose ball as he began his charge forward.

Leverkusen barely had the chance to initiate an attack before it was stopped in its track and Sandro wasted no time to initiate a counter. Juventus, who hadn't had a chance to touch the ball for a good few minutes, immediately exploded with the ferocity of lions protecting their pride. It was as if they flipped a switch as Pjanic collected the ball from Sandro before swiftly dribbling up the field.

As he advanced forward he wasted no moment in sending a weighted pass forward into the feet of Ronaldo. The striker held off Tah before flicking it to his right into the run of Matuidi as he pinned off towards the middle. Tah couldn't follow him as he had to back up Weiser to stop Matuidi from breaking through or launching a cross.

It worked as Matuidi didn't find a clear passing lane into the box, but in the end, he was forced to perform a fake shot before abruptly turning back. Seeing Sandro running up the flank he quickly unleashed a pass back to the Brazilian full-back. Sandro, having gained some space, took a touch to steady the ball before whipping a curling cross into the box. A second later Baumgartlinger came sliding in just barely missing the ball and could only watch it as it flew into the box.

The ball curved sharply, sailing into the box with a lot of spin completely bypassing the players around the near post. It descended around the back post but even then, it was too high as it floated around 4.40m from the ground. Bender who was marking the area around the back post didn't even attempt to jump as no above-average player could reach that ball.

However, as he turned his head just as the ball sailed past him, he saw a scary sight that reminded him of the day he wanted superpowers as a little kid. This was real though and the figure wore a black and white Juventus kit jumping well over 2 meters into the air. He almost looked board up there as he waited for the ball to reach him and when it did it was game over.

Hrádecký standing on his line didn't even get a chance to react as the ball comfortably nestled itself into the right side of the net. The wasn't even a moment of silence as the second Rinaldo landed a tsunami of cheers erupted from the stands. The home fans who had seen their lead be robbed screened in elation as they watched the man of the hour sprint to the corner flag.

"SUUUUUUIIIIIII,"

Chapter 387 387 Disrespect

"SUUUUUUUUUUUUU," A thundering exclamation that has become iconic all over the globe resounded within the Allianz Stadium as Ronaldo celebrated with the rest of his team. "Well they needed a hero and he came in clutch, Ronaldo with a brace and Juventus with the equaliser." Derek Rae exclaimed as the scoreboard changed to 3:3.

"Equalising this late in the game must be demoralizing for the Leverkusen side who have clawed themselves back into this game and even took the lead," Stewart Robson intoned just as the camera panned over the now demoralized figures of the Leverkusen side who could only watch the home side celebrate.

"Coming back from a 2:0 deficit really shows character but like my under-13 coach used to say, the match is not over until the ref blows that whistle," Derek responded sounding genuinely impressed with the away team's performance after the break.

The two commentators continued to talk amongst themselves whilst the referee took control of the match. Ronaldo and the gang didn't celebrate for long as there was still enough time to fight for a lead. As for the red lions they were in a dazed state for a minute but upon hearing Peter Bosz's animated shouts on the sidelines quickly put them back in gear.

[82]

The atmosphere inside the Allianz Stadium was electric, with both teams now fueled by the adrenaline of the game's late drama. Juventus pushed forward straight from the restart, their players reinvigorated by Ronaldo's equalizer. On the other hand, Leverkusen, though shaken, showed no signs of giving up. They regrouped quickly, shifting into a compact defensive formation as Bosz barked instructions, gesturing wildly for his team to focus and maintain discipline.

For the next few minutes both teams battled for possession as they seemed to be debating whether to go for broke or simply cut their losses. The home team seemed content with a draw seeing as they had already won their first group stage match they didn't worry as a draw would keep them comfortable. Some Leverkusen players were content with the draw as it still gave them hope for qualifying but for the attacking trio that came on nothing but a win would satisfy them.

Thus a subtle stalemate ensued for a couple of minutes the moment the game resumed. Possession of the ball continued to change sides as a fierce battle in midfield ensued. Despite both teams being content with a draw none would say no to a win.

[86]

Bentancur, receiving a quick throw-in from Cuadrado, surged down the right flank. He skipped past Volland with a clever stepover before launching a diagonal ball into the box. The Leverkusen defence scrambled to clear it, with Tah managing to head the ball out, but only as far as Pjanić, who stood 25

yards from goal. The Bosnian midfielder lined up a shot but hesitated, instead opting to thread a pass to Ramsey on the edge of the area.

Ramsey tried to flick the ball toward Ronaldo, but Wendell showed impeccable awareness by intercepting the ball. His quick reaction stopped what could have been a lethal chance. With no time to waste, he sent a crisp pass to Rakim on the flank who immediately initiated a counterattack. He weaved through Bentancur and Ramsey with surprising ease, his footwork leaving both Juventus players trailing in his wake. The Leverkusen fans, who had been subdued moments earlier, erupted into cheers, their hopes reignited as their wunderkind who started eating up yards of grass.

He stormed down the left wing, his electrifying pace catching Juventus off guard. A race between him and Cuadrado ensued, but he managed to hold the Juventus right-back off because he kept control of the ball with his left foot. Despite both of them battling with each other for the ball, their speed did not slow down in the slightest.

In a matter of moments they crossed into the final third at high speed and despite the pressure Cuadrado exuded Rakim remained composed. His eyes continued to scan his surroundings never once looking down towards the ball. He was intently watching Cuadrado body movements waiting for the chance lunge in or make a mistake. However even by the time he reached the edge of the box the Juventus right back remained composed not letting him out of his sight.

Running out of time Rakim no longer hesitated as he slightly knocked the ball forward before sending a trivela pass across the box. Cuadrado was late to react and the ball curved beautifully toward the penalty spot, where Paulinho, surged forward looking for another goal.

Since the ball floated around knee height he decided to lunge forward leg first but a blond figure beat him to the punch. De Ligt reacted expertly using his long legs to boot the ball into the stands for a corner.

Paulinho could only clap his hands in frustration, but he quickly jogged to take up position for the ensuing corner. Leverkusen had a golden opportunity, and the tension in the stadium was palpable. The Leverkusen fans in the corner of the Allianz Stadium roared in unison, urging their team forward as Rakim stepped up to take it.

[88]

"OO-OOO-OOO-AA-AAA-AAA," Standing at the right corner flag Rakim was taken aback by the deafening sounds of monkey chants the moment he placed the ball down to take the corner.

If he was being honest the emotions he was currently feeling weren't one of anger but more of annoyance. He'd heard of how racist Serie A fans can be under the guise of sportsmanship but he didn't expect it from a team like Juventus. After all they were basically the face of the entire league as arguably the most iconic club in Italy.

When you think of the Bundesliga you think of Bayern Munich, La Liga you think of Real Madrid and Barcelona, Premier league and you think of the big 6 but most importantly Man United. So facing such a scene from Juventus fans when they also have black player in their squad baffled him. Yes they were trying to put him off but more likely they would put off their own players.

Unlike him they most likely didn't grow up in a white house hold and would have psychological pressure that every black person inherits. The amount of time he had heard his black teammates talk about having to be nothing but excellent or needing to uphold their pride are countless. Sighing at this a neutral smile appeared on his face, he took a curved run up looking to deliver an outswing cross into the box.

Seeing That Rakim was ignoring them the near by Juventus players decided to up their antics. Shouts aimed at him and his race descended but it was only when a few mentioned his family that they had an effect on him. He couldn't remember what the guy shouting had said but he knew he didn't like it one

bit. Luckily his peripheral vision was good enough to see who had said it and was looking to punish him with his next actions.

"Fweeet," The ref didn't care about this and simply wanted to clock off as he blew his whistle signalling for him to take his corner. Not that Rakim cared as the moment he heard the whistle he closed in on the ball having barley scanned the box.

looking for a header would be risk given the fact Ronaldo was standing within the middle of the box. So he decided to go for goal instead, by turning his cross into a Trivela, adding as much power and curve into his shot as possible.

Chapter 388 388 Bitter Sweet Meeting

The ball spun fiercely off Rakim's outside foot, curling wickedly through the air. For a moment, the stadium held its collective breath. The chaos within the box continued as players battled for position ready to take off the moment the ball got closer.

However, the ball that had been curving outward just as it entered the box took a sudden turn upward. The height and power wasn't the problem as despite not having hops like Ronaldo most could still reach it if they tried hard. However, it was the curve it took that surprised them all as its outside curving angle suddenly sharply turned inwards.

The Juventus defenders froze as the ball gained velocity and flew towards the back post. The ball dipped unexpectedly, and Szczęsny who had stepped up slightly when Rakim tock the cross jumped across his box. He was caught off-guard, and no amount of stretching was going to save him as the ball grazed the underside of the crossbar and it nestled into the top corner.

"RAKIM REX!" Derek Rae shouted, his voice breaking with excitement. "From an impossible angle! What a strike!" As the moment became clear, the camera panned over to the boy in question, but he was already facing the home stand behind him.

As a matter of fact, the moment he hit the ball he had turned to face the fans who had been jeering at him. His arms were raised wide as he closed both hands in Shut Your Mouth jester before bringing both hands together to his left cheek performing the Curry Good celebration. It was only when watching the replay that both commentators realized what he had done.

Stewart Robson could hardly contain himself after watching this. "That's one way to shut the crowd up, but after his destruction of Düsseldorf in the Bundesliga I'd figure teams would have learned not to provoke Leverkusen's little lion king."

"I guess not given the fans here decided to poke that bear," Derek Rae added as the rest of the Leverkusen players who had been stupefied by his goal swarmed their goal scorer.

It wasn't just them as the Leverkusen bench erupted, players and staff alike spilling onto the sidelines in celebration. Rakim still stood in the same position staring down at the section of Juventus fans that had jeered him despite being enveloped by his celebrating teammates.

Their celebration took quite a while much to the home team's displeasure as they were now trailing 3:4 with only a few minutes to go. The referee was forced to break off the celebrations in the end, urging the Red Lions back to their own half. Luckily, he wasn't trigger-happy with his cards and no one got booked for excessive celebrations.

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"There you have it folks after a hard-fought 99 minutes it is the visiting Red Lions who take away the 3 points," Derek Rae exclaimed the moment the final whistle of the match was blown after 9 minutes of added time.

Volland's injury had eaten up quite a lot of time and the ref naturally had to add it on. The fact the home team was trailing made the officiating team even more generous in the added time. Despite this, the lions fought like warriors as they defended their lead. In the end, the first meeting between Juventus and Leverkusen ended in a 3:4 victory for the visiting Leverkusen side.

The roar of the Leverkusen supporters filled the air, a mixture of relief and jubilation after a hard-fought victory. The players warmly embraced each other as they walked towards the away stands where a sea of red awaited them. While the Juventus side stood in stunned silence, hands on hips, their heads hanging low.

No one could fault them as they had done everything possible to win this match. Had they played any other team their performance today would have been enough to put things to bed. Sadly, it wasn't enough in this match that had become surprisingly fierce in the second half.

Derek Rae's voice cut through the atmosphere, his tone filled with the excitement of a match that had delivered drama from start to finish. "What a game we've witnessed here today, folks! Leverkusen have stunned the home crowd with a thrilling 3:4 victory, and what an incredible turnaround in the final minutes after they looked to be on the ropes!"

"Absolutely, Derek," said his co-commentator, Stewart Robson, his voice still tinged with disbelief. "Juventus threw everything at them in that second half, but Leverkusen showed tremendous resilience. That late goal from Rakim was a real sucker punch for the hosts. But if I had to pick anyone's performance that stood out the most it would be the French man Diaby who contributed 2 assists and a goal for his team."

"Yes, he was indeed the spark the Lions needed to get back into this game," Steward agreed before they delved deeper into dissecting both team's performances during the match. "Despite Ronaldo pulling off another Steller performance Leverkusen steals the win in a late moment of brilliance by their Rakim Rex."

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Despite only playing for around half an hour Rakim definitely felt fatigued after the match. Still, the smile on his face didn't vanish as he embraced Bosz into a bear hug on the sidelines. The man had gone through a rollercoaster of emotions only to land in bliss by the time the final whistle blew. If he still had hair, he would have gone bald from all the stress he had been feeling throughout.

Picking up a sharpy pen from one of the coaches he walked over to his Hero who despite the bitter loss was cheering up his teammates. A professional in the truest sense, he took care of the younger teammates first before dealing with his own emotions. Waiting until he was done chatting with Dybala Rakim stepped up to approach the man.

"Ei, Sr. Ronaldo, P'posso pegar U'um autógrafo. (Yo Mr Ronaldo can I get an autograph.)" Rakim said in broken Portuguese as he stepped up to the man. Ronaldo who had been expecting to hear English was caught off guard causing his eyebrows to rise in surprise.

"Sou um grande fã de sua ética de trabalho e estilo de jogo. Isso me inspirou em minha jornada no futebol. (I'm a big fan of your work ethic and playstyle. It has inspired me over my football journey)." He continued speaking in Portuguese as he handed the pen over to the superstar who had become one of his heroes in the game.

"Yes of course, but do you not want to swap shirts?" Ronaldo questioned as he took hold of the marker as Rakim removed his kit for him to sign. "That was the plan when I circled this game at the start of the

season but I don't want to have a Juve kit hanging in my house after the trip," Rakim answered him honestly gaining a wry smile from Ronaldo who took hold of his kit and proceeded to sign it at the front.

"That was a good response you gave them, if you keep doing what you are doing, I can see you dominate in your craft in the years to come," Ronaldo told him before posing for a photo with Rakim sharing a few short words. He had just lost a match and still had media duties to complete so they had to wrap it up quickly.

Chapter 389 389 Business

[Thursday, 03/10/2019, 12:00, Leverkusen]

2 days after Leverkusen clashed with Juventus in Italy headlines in the sporting world still reported on the match. After all the redlines practically created an underdog story that even plywood couldn't script better. They had almost died on the way there, fell 2 nothing during the first half and had their lead levelled by one of the best players in the world.

Usually, a goal like that would end in a team either winning the game or ending it in a draw but not in this one. Juventus lost their lead in one of the most unexpected goals in this Champions League, a goal from a corner. However, it was Rakim's refusal to accept Ronaldo's kit because it was a Juventus kit that the football media decided to make news.

It seemed that while he was talking to Ronaldo a camera managed to pick up his words and the Italian media decided to push it. For them, it was a matter of protecting their league which was seeing an uptick in interest when Ronaldo joined in 2018 the previous year. So, like any organization running an entertainment league like the Serie A perception is all they care about and depressing racist allegations in one of the flagship teams became paramount.

Thus, Rakim spent his off time trying to dodge a couple of paparazzi trying to interview him on his bad sportsmanship. Luckily it wasn't too bad as neither Juventus nor Serie A wanted him to really speak his

mind with the news. After all, they had gotten so used to putting a plaster on a pig and shining more light on it wouldn't do them good.

Rakim didn't have to personally say anything as the Leverkusen media team was running a full-court offensive. The German reporters also got in on the action as they sent their own reporters to interview foreign players writing exposes on their treatment in the league. However, none of this was published in major media outlets as only a few minor online publications didn't care about politics enough to stop criticizing Juventus and the Serie A.

However, most were quickly suppressed by the powerful influence of Italian football organizations, eager to protect their image. The one publication in Germany that didn't care about playing nice and even regularly criticized their own government decided to throw a punch the very next day after the game. "Red Lions Wunderkind Rakim Rex score's group stage winner among Racist abuse." That was how Rakim achieved his second cover appearance in any German publication after his destruction of Dusseldorf.

None of the controversies mattered to Rakim at this very moment as he heeded his team's advice to let them handle the media war. According to Marcus the head of marketing there is nothing better to unite the fans than a common enemy, especially one that seems like a giant like Juventus and Serie A. It became a pastime for the player to browse his socials to read the support he received from his fans and the keyboard war they fought with Italian fans.

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While all this was going on Rakim was fighting another war in a board room as he did his best to appear as if he was interested in the discussion. He had been sitting in this conference room for about an hour just listening to his mother and Uncle William discuss things with a group of well-dressed suits.

They had already discussed the main bits of the deal and just needed to hammer out little details. This was prone to be the biggest deal Rakim would sign in his young career and would be significant for at least half his playing days. It was a shoe deal that saw him tied to the company for a decade until he turned 26.

However, the payoff was well worth it as what they offered is unprecedented for any athlete. Since the company had struck gold with recent investments with drivers in motorsport, and some up-and-coming footballers, they wanted to make their mark. They were currently a medium-scale apparel company that mainly focused on streetwear and sneakers.

Their Career in producing football boots had been about a decade breaking into the industry in 2008. They did well adapting to trends and improving their R&D departments aiming to stockpile ideas to continuously innovate their boots. It went well for a while until they started eating too much of the market share gaining the ire of more established companies.

Since they are a US-based company, they managed to monopolies a good bit of the womans soccer market. However, that's where their problem started with women's football gaining traction big players like Niki and Adidas heavily invested in this niche market, making it a proper market. From having a dominant position, they found a lot of their clients being poached with the two giants outright buying out their penalties when possible.

This change forced Apex Apparel and Co. to make drastic changes as some of the shareholders gave up and started selling their stakes back to the CEO. Since they had gotten money from all the compensation Grant Jones had to make a drastic choice. Thus, while he was debating whether to give up on the sports shoe market and focus more on apparel and streetwear, he saw his chance.

He had been jealous of how Niki and Adides managed to pick up young stars with their brand image alone, but one of the biggest up-and-coming stars was currently unsigned. Niki had managed to drop the ball and Rakim was without a signature but that didn't mean he had a chance to sign the wonder kid given his current value at such a young age. Added to the fact the young star was already so prolific in the eyes of the media at only 16 as he walked the walk and backed it up with talk.



He had expected one of the other big 3 to pick up his signature like Puma had done with the Brazilian prince. None of that happened as from what he heard they seemed to blockade any company from offering too much to the kid's agent. It seemed they had reached an agreement giving NIKI the chance to recruit the kid back into their fold.

Jones didn't give a \$hit\$ about whatever agreement they reached and decided to reach out to his agent Lisa. It was only later he found out she was his mother and understood why she was so careful with this deal after being burnt with Niki. Thus, he didn't hesitate and decided to swing for the jugular, especially after seeing Rakim wear his company's boot to destroy Düsseldorf in the Bundesliga.

That match gave him goosebumps since he had never seen any of the athletes his company had signed ever perform like that. He was in Germany for a business deal and the person he was negotiating with took him to watch the match at a high-end sports bar. That day is when he knew for sure that he had to give it his all to at least try gaining his signature, and when his team showed interest he was delighted.

They talked for a few months with talks intensifying when Niki blocked Rakim's entry into Team USA under-17's. They held the talks secretly with Jones only utilizing his most trusted employees as he was ready to bet big one more time for the 2022 World Cup. Thus, he was ready to offer Rakim a deal he couldn't refuse which led to today's final meeting to finalize things.

"Let's go over the deal one more time," A bespectacled woman stated with a serious face gaining the attention of everyone present even Rakim who had mastered the art of zoning out but looked like he was paying attention.

"Rakim Rex will sign a 10-year deal with Apex Apparel & co, exclusively wearing our boots in official matches. Becoming our flagship Ambassador of the Apex brand, he will be required to appear in at least 2 commercials a year with Apex planning commercial shoots around his working schedule. He will be required to post a minimum of 2 pictures a month wearing our boots earning \$5,00 for each additional

post." She stopped speaking after this, taking a moment before stating all the media and brand events they would like him to attend but these were optional.

After completely stating all the obligations he would have to adhere to, she finally moved on to talk about compensation. Feeling the shift Rakim paid more attention wanting to understand what his mother and uncle had negotiated. "In exchange for this Apex agrees to a one-time compensation of 1 million USD as a signing bonus or the equivalent in Shares amounting to 3% as of today. Apex agrees to launch a signature shoe if Rakim Rex meets certain targets both on the playing field and off it this season automatically triggering this clause. This would officially launch the Rex brand which would be a Collab between Apex and Rex Fashion & Sport."

Chapter 390 390 Apex Your Welcome

[Rakim's Pov]

Looking at the contract before me and reading all the points both sides had agreed to brought a slight smile to my face. It was a deal that could see him become the next Jordan with a little bit of luck and effort if he played his cards right. What they were offering in a nutshell was either a million dollars upfront or 3% of Apex, which wasn't a hard decision for even the dumbest fool.

Taking those shares goes without question if you want a long-term deal with the company and if you chose the money, it would send the opposite message. Grant had likely put this offer forward to try and gauge my commitment to the company. I didn't mind it though as we did the same with the proposal of the Titan line which would be my signature shoe.

The deal would see me earning a 15% royalty on every boot sold under the Titan line Allowing me to expand the Titan brand in the future. In exchange for this Apex gained a 5 per cent stake in Titan-Fit with Dad's company buying 25% of open market Apex shares to get rid of any other major shareholder. The remaining 5% worth of shares in the open market wouldn't make much of a difference even if they were unified.

That wasn't the end of it though as Dad decided to split off the Titan-Fit from Rex Fashion & Sport, making it a subsidiary. The man didn't stop there as he decided to split the shares in the company further offering 1% to Uncle William and his law firm as their retainer fee. The other 4% went directly to the man himself as a present for all the help he had given them over the years. He handed 20% to Emma and another 20% to me directly, keeping the remaining 50% to himself.

He wanted this part of his growing enterprise to be run in the family with everyone contributing to its success. The main point was that this was a big gamble requiring me to continue shining in order for it to pay off. Especially since I wouldn't gain any monetary compensation for the first year until I accomplished the goals Apex set out.

The goals were simple:

- Win one major trophy either the Bundesliga, the German Cup, Europa Cup...
- Gain a combined social following of 15 million (current 5M)
- Win 7 Man of the Match awards (current: 2)
- Score a minimum of 17 goals and provide 20 assists (Goals Bund/Camp: 7/1, Assists: 5/1)
- Boost Apex Brand visibility by a minimum of 15% by the end of the 2019/20 season.

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"I don't mind the deal, but I would like to be involved in the R&D process when creating the shoes, especially match boots," I told the people present after internalizing the details of the contract and realizing I was more than happy with all they had settled on. Grant Jones raised an eyebrow slightly after hearing my words but proceeded to smile brightly at hearing my words.

"That is fair, if you are involved in the creation of our boots it will allow us to gather the more targeted data not only for your personalized boot but for the rest of the brand," he responded with a smile as he directly instructed the lawyers to add the clause to the contract.

Happy at getting the okay I didn't hesitate any longer as everything else was acceptable and this clause gave me the needed say to veto boots that were just ass. Since I've been cycling through different brands over the year, I realized that there are good boots and utter garbage. Some brands genuinely put effort into their shoes and succeeded in making solid boots that wouldn't break someone's leg while playing.

On the other end of the spectrum, companies would just follow the trends of the giants creating visually pleasing shoes. However, wearing them was like stepping into death traps as they could burst open at any moment when you played. Your ankles twisting while you were running wouldn't be so far off, and the company going bankrupt and being bought by another shell company wouldn't be uncommon.

"Happy cooperation," I finally said the moment the new contract was placed before me after being rechecked by both side's lawyers. Grant's hand met mine in a firm handshake before I proceeded to sign the contracts.

As I placed the signed contract neatly into my folder, a sense of accomplishment washed over me. Finally, I signed my first professional shoe deal, which honestly was a long time coming.

"Congratulations, Rakim," Grant said, with a bright smile. "I do not doubt that together we will create something special."

What followed next was a whirlwind of pictures and even more discussion between both sides. Unlike before it wasn't boring as the talks focused more on practical marketing. They showcased to me their new line of Ace 11s which would be the brand's main line.

For the moment I would be wearing them until I could get my own line released. Luckily the shoes weren't bad as they resembled Niki Hyper venoms released in 2013 taking a similar design style, but there were clear changes as the boot looked more aerodynamic. The material they opted to use was an in-house researched synthetic leather.

The synthetic leather gave the Ace 11's a sleek and modern feel, with just enough flexibility, a firm base and a supported heel ankle to ensure maximum control, comfort, and safety. They had brought me two of the boots to look at and I was not disappointed by the final product. I slid my hand over the boot's surface, noting the faint texture that promised better grip on the ball.

From that detail alone I could tell that they weren't just copying the industry leaders and were genuinely innovating for themselves. The studs were arranged in a hybrid configuration, designed for both speed and agility, which suited my playstyle perfectly.

"This isn't bad," I admitted, holding the boot up to the light. "Feels solid. Lightweight but durable."

Grant beamed at my approval. "We've taken inspiration from the best designs but made them distinctly ours. We're also open to any tweaks you might suggest after testing them on the pitch."

"Good, because I'm not holding back if something feels off," I replied with a smirk. "I've missed my fair share of goals and passes from poorly designed boots. I'll be your best tester—and your harshest critic."

The room chuckled, but I meant every word. Mum was probably the only one who knew how serious I was as even during my Niki days I would change boots the moment even the slightest thing fell off. If I am putting in all the work the least, I can do is make sure that the tools I use are up to an acceptable standard. Heck even F1 drivers have to change tyres after a couple of laps going at maximum speed so this was no different.

Grant handed me a box containing a pair of the Ace 11s in a White and gold colourway—resembling my OG Titan-Fit Hood. "Try these out in your next training session," he said. "We moulded them to your feet after receiving the data your agent provided to us. We'd love to hear your feedback and are planning to send you more the moment the kinks are worked out."

Taking the pair, I checked them out turning them a full 360 degrees trying to ingrain every detail. They had a bold A at the outside of the boot with a golden crown on its head. The boot had an ankle sock that would snugly hug my foot providing both comfort and safety. The best feature by far was the material as whoever was designing them deserved a raise.

The material felt 10 times better than the base material I had felt from what they had shown me first. This simple fact made the deal worth it as the base boot's material was already of high quality, at least at the level the big brands sell their boots at \$120. Smiling at this, I picked up a black marker and proceeded to dot my signature on both boots with today's date dedicated to Grant Jones.

"Congrats Mr Jones, this will be the best business deal you have made in this century." I told the man as I handed the boots back to him, "I love the boots by the way can't wait to try them out."