

## Football 401

### Chapter 401 401 Goal

[Saturday, 26/10/2019, 19:50, Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, Poland]

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"Germany still applying pressure after that close call," Paul Gartner remarked as Japan struggled to clear their lines following Bella-Kotchap's header that rattled the bar before flying out for a goal kick.

Kosei Tani placed the ball down carefully, scanning his options. Germany's high press loomed menacingly, with Lenn Jastremski and Kevin Schade lurking near the edge of the box, ready to pounce. Tani opted for a short pass to Tomiyasu, who instantly found himself closed down by Rakim Rex.

Tomiyasu, composed under pressure, played a sharp diagonal pass to Yasui, who pivoted swiftly to avoid the onrushing Angelo Stiller. Yasui threaded a pass up field to Takefusa Kubo, the diminutive playmaker spinning away from Niklas Tauer with a deft first touch. Kubo surged forward, evading another challenge with a clever turn before releasing the ball to Ritsu Doan on the right wing.

Doan accelerated, driving at Noah Katterbach, who backpedalled cautiously. A quick step-over from Doan created enough space for him to whip in a low cross toward Ayase Ueda. "Ueda's in the box—can he get to it?" Gartner exclaimed.

But Armel Bella-Kotchap anticipated the danger, sliding in with perfect timing to intercept the cross. The ball ricocheted off his foot and rolled back into the path of Hiroki Abe, who unleashed a fierce strike

from the edge of the area. "Blocked! Bella-Kotchap again!" Gartner shouted as the German defender threw his body in the way, deflecting the shot out for a corner.

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The Japanese contingent crowded the box for the corner, with Tomiyasu and Kobayashi adding their aerial presence. Kubo stood over the ball, surveying his options before curling in a dangerous outswinger. Bella-Kotchap like a man on a mission rose highest once again, powering a header clear out of the box.

The ball fell to Rakim who cleverly put himself between the ball's landing spot and the Japanese player he was marking. He controlled the ball with his chest nudging it down as he spun past Hiroki Abe launching a counterattack. Rakim burst forward with the ball, his eyes scanning the field as he accelerated towards the left channel.

The Japanese defenders scrambled to get back, but Rakim was already in full sprint gaining speed by the moment as he ate up yards of grass. With little time to organise Riku Handa who had stayed behind during the corner was forced to step up and face him at the halfway line. Riku Handa braced himself, lowering his centre of gravity as Rakim bore down on him.

The crowd buzzed in anticipation, ready to see what would happen and they didn't have to wait too long. Rakim slowed slightly, teasing the ball with a series of rapid stepovers. Handa, trying to read his movement, shifted his weight to his right. Rakim exploded to his left, effortlessly breezing past Handa with a burst of acceleration. "Rakim is away!" Paul Gartner's voice echoed over the roar of the crowd.

Handa left in his wake, turned in vain as Rakim continued his surging run. Reaching the edge of the Japanese defensive third, Rakim spotted Jamie Leweling making a diagonal run toward the right wing.

Breaking into the box as 2 more opposing defenders had tracked back at full speed, but he wasn't going to let them stop him.

Nudging the ball lightly with his left foot he faked a breakthrough down towards the corner only in the next second to have his foot flash over the ball in a rapid step over. Takehiro Tomiyasu took the bait stepping back slightly ready to follow only to see Rakim sidestep backwards as his foot snapped the ball back across him. Before Takehiro could react Rakim took a rapid sidestep just past the corner and unleashed a fully powered curler to the far-right corner.

The ball spun through the air like a missile, curling viciously toward the far top corner. Kosei Tani, already diving at full stretch, barely managed to graze the ball with his fingertips. It wasn't enough to keep it out. "GOOOOOOAL!" Paul Gartner roared, his voice competing with the explosion of cheers from the German fans. "Rakim with a piece of absolute magic! A solo run, a breathtaking move to beat Tomiyasu, and a finish that is nothing short of world-class!"

Rakim turned sharply, sprinting toward the corner flag with his arms outstretched. He didn't even do his signature celebration as he simply slid knee-first along the ground slapping the corner flag when he reached it. His teammates swarmed him, led by Jamie Leweling and Lenn Jastremski, who practically tackled him as they also slid on their knees. The German fans in the stands erupted into chants of "Rakim the Dream...Dream!"

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While the German players were celebrating their opponents hung their heads in disappointment. However, their captain Tomiyasu didn't let the situation persist for long as he clapped his hands and barked instructions, urging his team to stay composed. Meanwhile, on the German bench, the coaching staff exchanged nods of approval.

"This is exactly why Rakim Rex is being touted as the next global superstar," Gartner continued. "The vision, the skill, and that ruthless finish—this young man has everything in abundance."

The stream viewers hearing his comment proceeded to flood it with a bunch of comments. Most were still engrossed in watching the replays but those that had come over due to the hype built up by the organisers and Rakim's own fame didn't have that problem. Many comments could be seen either praising him with words or using emojis.

Japan restarted quickly, trying to catch Germany off guard. Kubo, now more determined to provide a goal for his country received the ball in midfield and immediately drove forward.

His quick touches and low centre of gravity allowed him to weave through the German midfield, evading Rakim and Angelo Stiller with a subtle shimmy. He flicked the ball forward to Ritsu Doan before Niklas Tauer could close him down.

Ritsu didn't hold onto it sending it back with his first touch creating a slick one-two that bypassed the German midfielder. Kubo charged toward the box, his eyes scanning for Ayase Ueda, who was making a run between Bella-Kotchab and Ehlers.

He let loose a deft pass splitting the defenders, finding Ueda in stride. However, just as he took his first touch to steady himself Luca Unbehaun came sliding out knees first knocking the ball out of the box. The rebound fell to Hiroki Abe, but Noah Katterbach arrived just in time to block his follow-up attempt, with a sliding tackle.

Despite the miss, Japan continued to pile on the pressure, determined to respond quickly. Takefusa Kubo reached into his bag pulling out every bit of his skill to connect with his teammates as he battled with German midfield. They refused to relent, using their quick transitions and fluid movement causing the German defence to tighten their lines.

Kubo, orchestrating from the centre, dropped deeper to collect the ball from Takuya Yasui. With a deft flick, he turned away from Angelo Stiller and surged forward, scanning for openings.

The ball found its way to Hiroki Abe on the left flank. Abe, under pressure from Simon Asta, feinted inside before cutting sharply to the outside, delivering a low-driven cross into the box. Ayase Ueda stretched to reach it but just missed as Armel Bella-Kotchab intercepted with a last-ditch clearance, sending the ball high into the air.

The attack wasn't over though as Kubo found himself free, tracking the descending ball and attempted a first-time volley from just outside the box.

Chapter 402 402 Peneka

[Saturday, 26/10/2019, 20:00, Zdzisław-Krzyszkowiak-Stadion, Poland]

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The attack wasn't over, though. Kubo found himself free, tracking the descending ball, and attempted a first-time volley from just outside the box. Takefusa Kubo timed his strike perfectly, his body angling as he connected cleanly with the descending ball. The shot rocketed toward the top corner, its trajectory fierce and precise.

The crowd collectively held their breath as Luca Unbehaun launched himself into the air. The German keeper's fingertips brushed the ball, redirecting it just enough to send it clanging against the crossbar. The rebound bounced back into the crowded box, where chaos erupted.

Players from both teams scrambled to gain control, feet flying in desperate attempts to clear or strike the ball. Niklas Tauer emerged victorious from the melee, hammering a clearance upfield to relieve the pressure. Riku Handa who had stayed back picked up the ball but did not immediately launch an attack but chose to retain possession instead.

He held the ball, allowing Japan to regain their shape as the German players retreated to their positions. He played a simple pass back to Kobayashi, who assessed his options under light pressure from Lenn Jastremski. Kobayashi sent a diagonal ball toward the left flank, aiming for Hiroki Abe.

Abe controlled it expertly with a first touch that drew applause from the Japanese fans. He cut inside, evading Simon Asta, before slipping the ball into the half-space where Takefusa Kubo was waiting. Kubo quickly turned and delivered a perfectly weighted cross over the top of the German defence, seeking Ayase Ueda.

Ueda raced toward the ball, his pace threatening to beat Bella-Kotchap, but Kevin Ehlers rose above both of them heading the ball out. Niklas Tauer one of Germany's two central midfielders, received the ball close to the boundary of the defensive third. The midfielder only took a single touch on the ball before flicking it back to Angelo Stiller who was coming up for their box.

The two-midfield trio linked up with Rakim and started moving the ball amongst themselves. This allowed their team to get back into a rhythm as they started utilising the shapes they had been working on. They started passing the ball around in the backfield as they applied pressure on their opponents.

Now that they were playing their possession game their opponents formation compacted in the middle and at the back managing to keep Germany at for most of the first half. However, the German's weren't discouraged by the defensive prowess of the Japanese. They continued pushing and knocking on their door while being urged on by their fans.

Finally, in the 43rd minute, a goal-scoring opportunity appeared. Rakim who'd remained silent after scoring in the 23rd minute, suddenly dropped away from the middle and overloaded with Jamie Leweling on the right flank. He soon received a through pass from Niklas Tauer before racing towards Japan's goal like mad.

He just exploded forward with speed, without any fancy movements, as he cut across the pitch towards the opponent's goal like a bolt of green lightning. His approach was straightforward as he merely utilized his speed and ball control to weave through a couple of defenders trying to get in his way. Before long, he found himself at the edge of the box with only a couple of defenders in white jerseys between him and the goal.

Not losing composure, he took a page out of Ozil's book and sent a bounce pass into the box hoping to connect with Lenn sneaking into the box. However, just after the ball had left his foot, and bounced up it met an obstruction in the form of a defender's arm. Yuki Kobayashi one of Japan's centre-backs, had just tried his utmost to block what he assumed was a shot but, instead, ended up handling the ball.

(Fweeeeet)

The referee blew the whistle almost instantly and pointed at the penalty spot, thereby sending the entire Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, into an uproar. The Japanese fans immediately booed the decision unwilling to accept it while the German side merely cheered in glee at the sudden pie that dropped from the sky. The referee didn't care about any of this though as he proceeded to show Yuki a yellow card since he'd committed a direct handball offence within the boundaries of the 18-yard box.

The German contingent wasn't going to miss this chance to double their lead as Rakim stepped up to take it. He was the team's set-piece taker as his technical ability and confidence was the highest. Even if he wasn't the set piece taker, he wouldn't let anyone wrestle the ball from his hands.

He was having fun in this game as despite feeling the pressure of representing an entire nation it also felt empowering. For him wearing the Germany colours made him feel like Steve Rodgers after they put that shield in his hand. Yes, he was already a super-soldier but carrying his country on his back gave him that swagger.

With that same swagger he picked up the ball and placed the ball on the dot. Sending a cheeky wink at Kosei Tani as he took five steps backwards while he pointed towards the right side of the goal. Kosei gave him a scowl probably debating whether to take him seriously but, in the end, decided to focus on his own game.

(Fweet)

"A chance to score a brace and put his team up by two," Gartner stated as Rakim took a deep breath before proceeding to sidestep 3 steps to his left.

Takin a large step forward he decelerated suddenly taking 3 short step's that resembled a ladders drill before taking long lunge forward his left foot landing nest to the ball. While he was doing all of this his gaze remained fixed on Tani who remained rooted on the line.

At that moment, an abnormal wave of silence descended upon the entire stadium as the fans waited with bated breath to see the outcome of the penalty shootout. It was the moment of truth, and Rakim didn't disappoint as he riffled a right-footed shot towards the top right corner. He rendered Tanis action mute as before they could even spring into action the ball pierced the back of the net with soft thud.

The silence didn't last long as the Germany fans jumped up in joy as all their players all ran to the corner flag. This time Rakim performed his signature Griddy as he shook his dreads with a bright grin. By then, the cheers all around the stadium had already exploded into a mild crescendo.



"He stepped up and did not disappoint Germany is up by two so close to the end of the half 0:2," Paul Gartner exclaimed in excitement as he proceeded to add his own sound bites to the commentary.

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The pressure the German side faced a barrage of attacks the moment the game resumed as for the first time in the match they found themselves budged down in their own third.

Ritsu Doan was the first to try his luck as he decided to fire a rocket out of nowhere after a cut inside. However, the German woodwork came to their rescue as the ball was deflected out for a goal kick.

It didn't end there as the German side quickly lost possession following their goal kick as their opponents launched another attack. This time it was a one-two between Hiroki and Kub that saw the latter dancing past Angelo and try his luck at a 30yard pop. Luca was ready though as he jumped into the air fist first punching the ball out of his box.

The rebound landed at the feet of Ayase Ueda just outside the box, but the striker wasn't lucky enough to get off a shot. He was quickly smothered by Bella-Kotchap who used his defensive acumen to wrestle the ball loose. Not taking the risk, he put his boot through the ball sending it up the right flank.

(Fweeeet Fweeet)

Chapter 403 403 Halftime Talk

[Saturday, 26/10/2019, 20:15, Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, Poland]

Masanaga Kageyama the head coach of the Japan U-20 National Football Team walked into the changing room with a serious gaze. If he was being honest, he wasn't expecting this team to lose to even a powerhouse like Germany that's how much trust, he had in this golden generation. All the players were some of the most talented to come out of their country and were appearing simultaneously.

Yes, they've had some great players, with the likes of Kazuyoshi Miura, Hidetoshi Nakata, and Shinji Okazaki who represented their country. While the 3 of them might be standout talents they didn't have the support staff to shine truly. So having a player like Kubo in his team was something he was grateful for, especially with the brimming talent his teammates have displayed in domestic and foreign leagues.

However, at this very moment, he found himself at a crossroads as their future talisman was struggling to beat his first real challenge. Rakim Rex was a name anyone in the footballing world has heard at one point or the other as his talent shown from a young age. He seemingly only got better with each year that passed and despite facing his share of drama he faced in his young career.

The problem lay with the fact that his presence was so overwhelming that Kubo was struggling to play to his full potential. Clenching his right fist, he decided to kick his team into another gear and make them realise what this tournament represented. "Okay, guys," he said after the players had settled down and hydrated themselves.

"Did you have fun out there?" He asked them as he let his gaze travel across every one of them. "I for one didn't enjoy that game. You were not beaten by Germany, you were beaten by one man, No one boy."

His voice caused the players to hang their heads in disappointment as none of them dared to meet his piercing gaze. "(為せば成る) If you do, you will succeed! this is something we have been saying all throughout the training camp but I've yet to see any of you play to your full potential." Masanaga Kageyama paused, allowing his words to settle in the heavy atmosphere of the locker room. His sharp

eyes scanned the group, lingering on each player for a moment as if willing them to rise to the challenge he was about to lay before them.

"Germany didn't outplay us as a team. They relied on the brilliance of one player to control the game," Kageyama continued his voice firm but not unkind. "Rakim Rex is exceptional, yes. But he is not invincible. You made him look untouchable because you allowed yourselves to be intimidated."

The players shifted uncomfortably in their seats, the weight of the coach's words pressing on their shoulders. Takefusa Kubo, seated in the middle, clenched his fists, his head still bowed. Kageyama's gaze fell on him, softening for just a moment.

"Kubo," he said, his tone gentler now. "You have been given the privilege of wearing our beautiful nation's number 10, this makes you our heartbeat given the position you play. When you hesitate, everyone hesitates. I need to see better from you, this tournament is not like any other youth tournament you have played in."

"Practically every nation has managed to get their brightest talents to sign up for the tournament. What this means for you is this is your golden ticket to join a team in one of the big five leagues because they are all watching. So, keep this in mind and show them your worth as players by displaying a football worthy of our proud nation." Listening to his words the player's gazes became more solemn as they started to realise how important this tournament could be for them personally.

Seeing how seriously his players were taking his words Masanaga moved on to practical stuff as he started laying out how he wanted them to play in the second half. He wanted them to focus on playing their counter-attacking game by drawing their opponents into their own half. When the opportunity presented itself, they were to use their pace and quick transition to create goal-scoring opportunities.

Masanaga Kageyama walked to the tactics board at the centre of the locker room, the sound of his marker squeaking against the white surface cutting through the tense silence. His movements were rapid almost resembling a mad painter whom the onlookers wouldn't know what he was painting until he was done. He drew two formations, highlighting the weaknesses he had observed in Germany's setup during the first half.

"Look here," he said, pointing to the space between Germany's midfield and defensive lines. "This is where we will hurt them. They are leaving gaps when they push forward, especially on the flanks. Due to their love of possession play they remain fluid and start to struggle once they can't find a quick opportunity." He stopped and turned to the rest of the team checking to see if they were paying attention to his words. Seeing their unflinching gazes as they waited for him to continue, he subtly nodded to himself before continuing.

"Usually, we could wait for their attack to fizzle out, but with a player like Rakim and his creativity with the ball odds are he might decide to go on one of his solo runs. So, we will exploit those spaces after forcing them to stagnate and use quick one-touch passing and off-the-ball movement, catching them out of position."

He turned to Ritsu a talent in his own right and the team's agile right winger. "Doan, I need you to hug the touchline. Drag their fullback out wide, and when the moment's right, cut inside to overload the midfield. You're quick enough to pull this off, and you've got the technique to deliver when it counts." Doan nodded, his jaw tightening as determination flared in his eyes.

"Kubo," Masanaga said, turning his attention back to the young playmaker. "I need you to own that space in the middle. Stop second-guessing yourself. Trust your instincts and play with freedom. You have the vision to dictate this game. You see things others don't—use that to your advantage. Rakim is not a natural central midfielder, and you should feel offended for letting him step into your domain, teach him what it means to be a number 10."

Kubo finally lifted his head, his eyes meeting Masanaga's. There was a flicker of fire in his gaze now with such intensity that even Masanaga felt slightly pressured. However, the glimmer of belief that rekindled quickly washed over him as he could see a way forward for his team.

"Takuya and Ao" Masanaga continued, addressing the team's central midfielder. "I want you two to be the engine. Press them relentlessly. Win the ball back and feed Kubo or the wingers as quickly as possible. If you tire them out, those gaps will widen, and we'll punish them."

As he spoke, Masanaga made deliberate eye contact with each player, ensuring they understood their role in this new plan. The air in the locker room shifted, the players sitting taller as a sense of purpose took root.

"Now," he said, stepping back from the board and folding his arms, "about Rakim Rex. I know how dangerous he is—he's already shown that. But he's still just one player. Don't focus on him. Focus on our plan. If we execute it right, he won't get the space to do what he did in the first half."

He motioned to the defenders, giving them a stern look. "Yuki and Takuya you are both marking Rex when he drops into midfield Takuya will mark him but if he stays up, He will be Yuki's assignment. Stay tight, but don't be reckless. If he pulls you out of position, communicate immediately. If we isolate him, we take away their main threat."

The room was quiet, but it wasn't the heavy silence of earlier. It was the kind of stillness that comes before a storm, the calm before an explosion of energy and Victory.

"Remember why you're here," Masanaga said, his voice lowering, almost reverent. "You are representing Japan, but you're also playing for your dreams. This is your stage to show the world what you're capable of. So, when you step out there for the second half, leave everything on that pitch. No regrets." As he finished, a staff member came knocking on the door signalling the end of the halftime

period. Masanaga stepped aside, watching as his players stood, their expressions now more resolved with a hunger for victory.

#### Chapter 404 404 Japans Counter Attack

[Saturday, 26/10/2019, 20:30, Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, Poland]

The players jogged back onto the field, the crisp October air tingling against their skin under the floodlights of Zdzisław-Krzyszowski Stadium. The scoreline glared from the digital board: Japan 0-2 Germany. The Japanese players looked sharper now, their expressions focused, a stark contrast to the tentative energy they'd shown in the first half.

The referee blew his whistle, signalling the start of the second half. Japan kicked off, with Ao Tanaka playing a short pass back to Takehiro Tomiyasu. From the sidelines, Masanaga Kageyama stood at the sidelines with his arms crossed as he watched the game unfold.

Germany, full of confidence from their dominant first-half display, immediately pressed high up the pitch. Rakim led his midfield lineup the field as they maintained a compact formation as he gestured for his teammates to close down the Japanese midfielders. Tanaka calmly sidestepped Leweling's press, shifting the ball wide to Daiki Sugioka on the left flank.

Sugioka took a touch and scanned the field, spotting Ritsu Doan darting into space on the opposite side. Sugioka's cross-field ball soared through the cool night air, arcing toward Ritsu Doan. The Japanese winger controlled it with a deft touch, drawing a smattering of applause from the crowd. He immediately faced up against Noah Katterbach, feinting left before darting down the right flank.

Katterbach, quick to react, stuck out a leg and deflected the ball out for a throw-in, breaking Japan's momentum. From the touchline, Masanaga Kageyama clapped his hands together, shouting encouragement. "Stay sharp! Move the ball faster!"

Germany's defensive structure shifted slightly, their backline marshalled by Armel Bella-Kotchap, whose booming voice carried over the hum of the crowd. Rakim Rex drifted into a pocket of space near the halfway line, positioning himself to intercept any loose passes. Since he wasn't defensively inclined, he aimed to just excel at zonal marking as he drifted into the blind spots of the nearby players.

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Japan began to build from the back, Takuya Yasui receiving a short pass from Tomiyasu. Yasui turned quickly, evading Angelo Stiller's attempt to close him down. With a flick of his foot, he sent the ball through to Takefusa Kubo, who found a seam between Germany's midfield lines.

Kubo spun around Niklas Tauer with a touch so smooth it left the German midfielder flat-footed. The crowd gasped as Kubo drove forward, his pace quickening as he reached the edge of the final third. Spotting Ayase Ueda making a diagonal run between Bella-Kotchap and Kevin Ehlers, Kubo threaded a perfectly weighted through ball.

Ueda latched onto it, his first touch setting him up for a shot. He let fly with his right foot, but Luca Unbehaun dived low to his left, palming the ball away with a firm hand. The rebound rolled toward Hiroki Abe, who had charged into the box, but Simon Asta reacted first, clearing it upfield to safety. A collective groan from the Japanese fans echoed through the stadium.

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Germany, unshaken, regained possession and shifted into their methodical build-up play. Angelo Stiller dropped deeper to collect the ball, gesturing for his teammates to spread out. The German players moved like clockwork, as they formed little triangles and moved into the passing lanes they had

practised. They slowly but surely started to chip at the defences of the Japanese players moving from flank to flank as they didn't force an attack.

Being up by two goals allowed them the luxury of taking their time as they tried to bait their opponents to make a mistake. Their short precise passes started to frustrate Japan's attempts to disrupt their rhythm. The crowd murmured in anticipation as Rakim picked up a hospital ball that was meant for Niklas by Jamie.

Leaning on Kubo who tried to pick up the loose ball he turned with the motion of the ball escaping the midfielder as he dribbled into the centre of the field. He wasn't moving fast in fact he was barely half jogging as he scanned the field like a predator debating his next move. For a short moment, he was completely unmarked at the centre of the field as the nearest players were in a 3-meter radius.

The stadium seemed to hold its breath as Rakim Rex advanced, the ball glued to his feet as if tethered by an invisible string. He moved with an aura of calculated menace, his eyes darting between his teammates and the defensive line in front of him. He seemed to be debating whether to unleash his inner Hanma and take on the entire team with just his sheer skills.

Japan's midfield hesitated for a fraction of a second, unsure whether to press him or fall back to protect the space behind them. Takefusa Kubo, recovering from his earlier challenge, sprinted back into position, shouting at Yasui to close the gap. Yasui stepped forward, trying to cut off Rakim's angle, but the German playmaker shifted his weight imperceptibly and glided past him with a quick flick of the ball to his left foot.

The Japanese defenders tightened their lines, Tomiyasu barking orders as he gestured for his teammates to stay compact. But Rakim's movements were hypnotic, his rhythm unpredictable. As he approached the final third, Kevin Schade made a darting run down the left flank, pulling Riku Handa out of position. Rakim saw the opening and, with a sudden burst of acceleration, drove straight toward the heart of Japan's defence.



Drifting closer towards the left flank he performed a few step-overs drawing the nearby defenders in. Takehiro Tomiyasu stepped up to cover the area that Handa had just left and didn't hesitate to go in for the tackle. However, he hit nothing but air as Rakim performed a Roll Croqueta to skip past him.

What followed was a deft reverse Elastic that allowed him to skip past another defender as he cut into the ranks of the Japan defence. The crowd held its breath as the Japanese defence converged on him as it looked like he would go all the way. That's why what he did next left them all baffled, his right foot scooped up the ball sending a chipped pass over the head of Ao Tanaka.

The ball arced gracefully over Tanaka's outstretched foot, its trajectory perfect as it descended into the path of Jamie Leweling, who had been hoping for a pass. He wasn't free to think of his next action as Riku Handa clung to his side but the fact they entered the box worked in his favour. Fouling here was as good as gifting the Germans a goal and Riku wouldn't risk it.

"Oh, he runs, is that a Roll Croqueta? Rakim is through, what's he going to do next... Oh my, he sends a pass...Jamie Leweling" Paul Gartner could barely control his emotions as he watched the play unfold eager to see what would happen. He didn't have to wait as the German winger controlled it with his chest, letting the ball drop in front of him as he was already swinging his foot.

The ball touched the ground, and his boot connected with it as a loud dull thud resounded at the Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion. "Riku Handaaaaa!" Paul exclaimed again his voice cracking at the end as the viewers watched Japan's right-back Riku Handa dive feet first.

Just like Jamie was aiming to hit the ball the moment it landed so too was Riku who bet his entire career on this piece of heroics. It worked in his favour as both of them hit the ball at the same time but with his foot looking the way forward it sharply rebounded out of the box. Japan's fans breathed a sigh of relief at having escaped concerning what would have been the proverbial nail in the coffin.

However, their sighs of relief quickly turned into gasps of anticipation as Hiroki Abe went to pick up the ball that was zooming his way. The winger approached the ball followed by Simon Asta who had his number the entire game not letting him see the goal with the ball at his feet. What followed could only be described as cartoonish as Hiroki suddenly fainted turning left as the ball neared before letting it slip through his legs whilst turning right.

Rounding the dumbfounded Simon who was left unbalanced and slipping to the ground he turned on the jets. He chased after the ball barely managing to latch onto it before it could go out for a throw-in, but he was in the clear. A white tsunami bearing the flag of the rising sun was immediately released as they all charged forward for the counterattack. The stadium roared to life as Hiroki Abe sprinted down the left flank, the ball under his command and the Japanese supporters on their feet.

Chapter 405 405 Takefusa Kubo

[Saturday, 26/10/2019, 20:42, Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, Poland]

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The stadium roared to life as Hiroki Abe sprinted down the left flank, the ball under his command and the Japanese supporters on their feet. His burst of speed had created a precious pocket of space, but Germany's defenders were already scrambling to recover. Armel Bella-Kotchap and Kevin Ehlers shifted toward the danger zone, their imposing figures moving like twin towers converging on the lone runner.

Abe glanced up, noting Ayase Ueda charging into the box, his arm raised to signal for a cross. Kubo, slightly behind, was streaking toward the top of the penalty area, whilst Ritsu Doan was on the other side looking to cut into the box. The German defence was overrun by their pace as they created a 4v2 situation before they could even react.

Now Hiroki just needed to be clinical enough to either finish it off himself or set up his teammate to do so. He didn't hesitate in passing the ball to Kubo who was running to the top of the box forcing Bella-Kotchap to sharply turn towards Kubo and step back to cover the area. Hiroki Abe's pass was sharp and precise, skimming just above the turf as it reached Takefusa Kubo at the top of the penalty area.

Kubo controlled it with his right foot, his first touch immaculate, cushioning the ball into his path as Bella-Kotchap closed in like a freight train. The Japanese number 10 had only a split second to decide—shoot, pass, or dribble. Bella-Kotchap lunged, attempting to block any forward movement, but Kubo anticipated the move. A subtle shift of his body weight was enough to fake Bella-Kotchap out of his stride, and Kubo slipped the ball to his left foot, opening up a new angle.

He slipped a short pass into the box sending the ball back to Hiroki who had continued his run. Now with no one in front of him, Luca was forced to cover the front post as Hiroki composed himself. Hiroki steadied himself, his eyes locked on Luca Unbehaun, who had shifted to the near post in a desperate attempt to narrow the angle. The crowd at Zdzisław-Krzyszkowiak-Stadion was electric, a mix of Japanese chants urging Hiroki to finish and German supporters bracing for their goalkeeper to make yet another save.

He feinted to shoot, his quick dip of the shoulder causing Luca to flinch and commit slightly to his left. With that tiny opening, Hiroki calmly slid the ball across the face of the goal toward the far post. Time seemed to slow as the ball rolled agonizingly close to the line before slamming against the inside of the post.

Cheers erupted from the Japanese fans as the ball ricocheted into the back of the net. Japan 1:2 Germany. Hiroki Abe sprinted toward the corner flag, arms outstretched, his teammates flooding toward him in celebration. They had fought hard for this goal, and nothing could stop them from relishing this moment.

"Hiroki is the man of the hour...Japan finally shows signs of life in this game as the score shifts to 1:2," Paul commented with excitement as the replay of the build-up play that led to the goal was shown on the screen. "Now we have a competitive game of football,"

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[60]

The energy at Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion was electric, as the Japanese fans found their voices again after Hiroki Abe's stunning goal. The chants of "Nippon! Nippon!" rang through the crisp October air, creating a pulsating atmosphere that reverberated across the stadium. On the touchline, Masanaga Kageyama was animated, barking instructions and gesturing for his players to maintain their intensity.

Germany restarted the game, with Lenn Jastremski rolling the ball back to Rakim outside the centre circle. He didn't hold onto it as he distributed it to Noah as the German backline started their possession game. No unnecessary risks and with the midfielders moving in and out of space they retained possession of the ball.

After the Shok goal they conceded, none of them wanted to risk anything and decided to play it safe as they played keep away from their opponents. Their opponents wouldn't let them have an easy time though as they played with even more fighting spirit and energy. Ayase Ueda and Takefusa Kubo led the charge, harrying Germany's midfield and forcing hurried decisions.

Tanaka and Yasui, positioned in the heart of the midfield, snapped into challenges with newfound aggression, disrupting Germany's rhythm. However, the German midfielders were no pushovers as they also got into the thick of it. For the next few minutes the middle of the field became chaotic as no one managed to retain possession of the ball.

No single player was able to hold onto the ball for more than a moment before being besieged. The match had turned into a chaotic frenzy, the midfield becoming a battlefield where possession shifted with every second. Players lunged into tackles, intercepted passes, and fought tooth and nail for control. Every challenge drew gasps and cheers from the crowd, the intensity of the game pushing the atmosphere at Zdzisław-Krzyszowskiak-Stadion to a fever pitch.

Quite a few times the referee had to stop the game and give out cautions and even to occasional yellow cards. This tussle culminated in the 70th minute when Takefusa Kubo was taken down just a few yards in front of the Germany box. He had managed to shimmy past Niklas Tauer and Rakim Rex after stealing a loose pass only to be taken down by Angelo Stiller in a late slide tackle.

The referee didn't hesitate in blowing his whistle mirroring the displeased whistles of the Japan fans. He didn't stop there as he reached in his pocket showing the German midfielder a yellow card marking his entry into his book. Manuel Baum on the sidelines could only sigh in displeasure as he whispered something to his assistant coach. Moments later a group of players could be seen warming up on the sidelines as the referee regained control of the match.

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The air was heavy with anticipation as Takefusa Kubo stood over the ball, just outside the German penalty area. The free-kick position was ideal—centre-left, giving the right-footed Kubo a chance to curl it around the wall and into the top corner. The Japanese fans erupted into chants, their faith in their young talisman unshaken despite the uphill battle they faced.

Kubo took a deep breath, his gaze locked on the ball, then shifted to Luca Unbehaun, who barked instructions to his wall. Germany's players, led by Armel Bella-Kotchop, stood resolute in their line, arms linked and ready to leap in unison. The stadium's atmosphere slowly lulled as Kubo stepped back to prepare for his attempt.

All eyes in the Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion were focused on this boy who now carried the burdens of man. This was his chance at a coup de grâce that would not only level the game but also unsettle the German players. "Kubo with a chance to level the game. He runs, he shoots, and he scores." Paul Gartner exclaimed with an excited expression as he watched the ball float over the wall.

The ball sailed past Bella-Kotchap's head curving dangerously towards the far-right corner. Luca never had a chance to reach it, not for lack of trying as he stretched to his max. It wasn't enough though as the ball curled past his fingertips and pierced the top corner.

Almost immediately the Japanese fans erupted from their seats and wildly celebrated. "We were wondering when he would step up and he did so exceptionally. Takefusa Kubo remember the name."

The Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion burst to life with unbridled energy. Japanese fans sang and waved flags as though Kubo's stunning free-kick had erased the memory of the first half entirely. The players on the pitch felt the momentum shift in their favour, adrenaline coursing through their veins.

On the touchline, Masanaga Kageyama clenched his fists, nodding in approval at his team's resurgence. Meanwhile, Germany's coach, Manuel Baum, wore a grim expression as he quickly discussed tactical adjustments with his assistant. He no longer hesitated as he signalled for a substitution in the form of Yannik Engelhardt who replaced Angelo Stiller who had just caused the free kick.

Despite being at fault for his team conceding a free kick the travelling German supporters clapped in appreciation for his performance. Even his teammates on the pitch gave him a pat on the back telling him to keep his chin up. He wasn't the only one coming off as Kevin Schad joined him moments later for the young Florian Wirtz making his debut for the under-20 national team.

The young number 17 jogged to the centre of the field before proceeding to shove Rakim to the left wing. "Don't give me that look, we both know you prefer the wing."

"True true, but I was lowkey enjoying walking a mile in your boots. Though I can't say it's as easy as I had imagined, it's a lot tougher when your opponents don't whether they injure you." Rakim retorted with an amused chuckle before he jogged to his position on the left flank vacating the middle without argument.

Chapter 406 406 Pressure Mounting

[71]

Seeing his German colleague making changes, Masanaga also made a change. He brought on the lethal Shoji Toyama for Ayase Ueda, letting the 17-year-old use his energy to cause more problems for the Japanese backline. They had the momentum, and he wanted to ride it all the way to the finish line.

The changes from the Japanese manager received a warmer welcome than Baum's changes. Since he had just equalised and the fact Ayase Ueda had put up a solid performance brought a warm feeling to the fans. The advantage of having more fans travel to watch them was shown as to the German players it felt as if the entire stadium was cheering them on.

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The roar of the crowd at Zdzisław-Krzyszowskiak-Stadion had barely begun to settle when the match restarted, the score now level at 2-2. Germany kicked off, with Yannik Engelhardt sending a composed pass back to Kevin Ehlers. The German backline began their customary possession play, moving the ball with calm efficiency as they adjusted to the fresh legs on the pitch.

They followed Baums instruction to slow the game down as they let Wirtz and Yannik settle into the rhythm of the match. None of Baum's tactics mattered to the Japanese's fans as their crowd energized

by their team's comeback, cheered every moment of pressure applied by their players. Shoji Toyama, brimming with youthful enthusiasm, immediately set the tone by pressing Ehlers and Bella-Kotchap whenever they received the ball, forcing a hurried pass.

In one such situation, Ehlers was forced to send a hurried pass out to Simon Asta after facing Toyama's pressure. Asta was met with Hiroki Abe, who lunged forward with a determined challenge, the ball ricocheting out of play for a German throw-in. Seeing this Baum urged the midfield to get involved as he could be seen shouting "Energy," on the sidelines.

The midfield trio was injected with a dose of enthusiasm as they started using their physicality to dominate the midfield. Utilizing Florian Wirtz in his new central playmaker role as he was dropped into the deep end. Forced to adjust to the rhythm quickly he started off slow by connecting a few passes with Rakim and Niklas.

[75]

Germany's left flank began to find its rhythm, with Florian Wirtz, Rakim Rex, and Niklas Tauer orchestrating a controlled build-up. The trio formed tight triangles, playing short, precise passes to evade the pressing efforts of Yasui and Doan. Rakim, now operating as a left winger, showcased his versatility by drifting into central spaces, creating additional passing lanes for his teammates.

Wirtz though young started to slowly dictate Germany's pace as he glided across the midfield, surveying the pitch with an almost predatory awareness. Spotting Simon Asta making an overlapping run on the opposite flank, Wirtz launched a diagonal ball that sliced through the Japanese midfield like a blade.

Asta had to stretch his leg up into the air to bring the ball down, but he managed to bring it under his control mid-sprint. He surged forward, drawing Daiki Sugioka out of position. Sugioka hesitated for a



split second, enough for Asta to whip a low cross into the box. Lenn Jastremski was already in motion, timing his run perfectly to meet Asta's cross.

The ball zipped across the penalty area, low and dangerous, but Takehiro Tomiyasu read the situation expertly. Sliding in with impeccable timing, he intercepted the cross just before Jastremski could connect, sending the ball skidding out toward the edge of the box.

Yannik Engelhardt was first to react, collecting the loose ball and taking a quick touch to steady himself. Skipping past Takuya Yasui's slide tackle he lined up a shot from the top of the box and let it rip. Engelhardt's strike was venomous, cutting through the air like a missile. The crowd collectively gasped as the ball rocketed toward the top corner. Kosei Tani, alert and composed, launched himself to his right, his outstretched fingertips stretched to the max.

He wouldn't reach it in time though and he knew it, but lady luck was on his side as a second later the loud dong of the ball impacting the crossbar resounded. The stadium erupted in surprised gasps as the German fans held their heads in disappointment. Engelhardt was the most disappointed as he could be seen rooted to the ground staring at the goal in disbelief.

Engelhardt remained frozen, his hands resting on his head in disbelief as the ball flew into the stands. "He had a try, and he came so close but lady luck the fickle lady she is, chose another champion." Paul Gartner commented as he watched the Japanese players below breathe a sigh of relief.

Following that narrow miss, both teams entered a new deadlock with none willing to give up. Yannik joining Niklas as Germany's double pivot used his physicality to dominate. Already more physically gifted than their Asian counterpart he made full use of it.

For a good while it seemed like Yannik was everywhere as he would tackle Takuya one second and fly into a slide tackle on Ritsu next. He fought with such efficiency that each time he won the ball for his

team the travelling German fans cheered in jubilation as if he had scored a goal. Ao Tanaka wasn't one to be beaten either as he became Japan's midfield anchor.

The ball couldn't slip past him without a fierce fight as he fully embodied the spirit of the samurai. Rakim tried to help from the wing, but he quickly found out that this duel was to be settled in midfield. As the moment he called for the ball and received it, he was swarmed by white jerseys.

They closed him down so fast and tightly that he wasn't even able to attempt an effective dribble. Ao Tanaka and Takefusa Kubo pressed in unison, Yasui lurking just behind them in case Rakim attempted to spin out of trouble. With no time to manoeuvre, he instinctively flicked the ball backwards to Kevin Ehlers, resetting Germany's possession.

The Japanese crowd roared in approval, sensing their team's growing control. Masanaga Kageyama clapped his hands on the touchline, his sharp eyes scanning the pitch. His side had finally found a way to neutralize Germany's most dangerous player.

Germany, now visibly frustrated, tried to slow the tempo again, shifting their play towards the right side where Simon Asta continued to push forward. Wirtz, seeing an opening, drifted to the flank, providing a short passing option.

Asta played a quick give-and-go with Wirtz before attempting to send another cross into the box, but Daiki Sugioka was wise to it this time. He threw himself in the way, blocking the delivery and deflecting it out for a German corner.

From the corner flag, Rakim jogged over to take the set piece. His gaze swept across the box, his mind already calculating. He whipped in a sharp, dipping ball toward the near post, where Armel Bella-Kotchap surged forward like a battering ram.

The towering centre-back met it cleanly with his forehead, sending the ball toward the top corner. However, the ball was too close to the centre not troubling Kosei Tani, in the slightest. Despite the ball deflecting off Yuki's shoulder Tani still managed to react and firmly grasp in his arms.

"Bella-Kotchap took to the sky, but Kosei Tani had an answer for him," Paul Gartner exclaimed following the powerful header. "Oh, looks like they are playing it quick this time."

Tani wasted no time after securing the ball, quickly scanning the field before rolling it out to Daiki Sugioka on the left flank. The Japanese left-back, sensing an opportunity, immediately surged forward, his powerful strides eating up the ground as he bypassed the first pressing wave of Germany's forwards.

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Hiroki Abe read the play perfectly, darting into space as Sugioka released a well-weighted pass down the line. Abe, whose energy had been relentless all night, controlled the ball in stride and turned toward goal, forcing Simon Asta to backpedal. With a sharp cut inside, he slipped past Asta's desperate reach before threading a delicate pass to Kubo, who had found a pocket of space just outside the box.

Kubo controlled the ball smoothly, his head up, eyes scanning. For a moment, the entire stadium seemed to hold its breath. Kevin Ehlers wary of committing early, held his ground, while Yannik positioned himself between Kubo and Shoji Toyama, denying a direct passing lane.

With a quick flick of his right foot, Kubo feinted a shot, forcing Kevin to shift his weight. In that instant, he shifted left, creating the smallest opening. Not hesitating he broke through the gap created and immediately lined up for a shot. His shot came in a flash, a powerful low strike aimed for the bottom right corner.

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Kubo's strike skimmed off the turf, rocketing towards the bottom right corner like a guided missile. Luca Unbehaun, Germany's last line of defence, had been stepping forward ever so slightly as he watched the counter develop, instinctively reacted, diving low with lightning reflexes. His fingertips met the ball, barely grazing it, but it was enough to alter its course.

The ball struck the inside of the post and spun wildly along the goal line giving the German fans the scare of their lives. Luca came to the rescue though as he jumped up from the ground firmly grasping the loose ball. The stadium gasped, hearts collectively stopping for a split second.

Luca clutched the ball to his chest, his heart pounding as he rolled onto his back, momentarily staring up at the floodlights. The collective sighs of relief from the German fans washed over him, quickly replaced by roars of encouragement as he scrambled to his feet. He wasn't going to waste time. He took a few deep breaths before stepping forward and launching a long, driven throw toward Simon Asta on the right flank.

Germany moved with urgency now, sensing the danger of Japan's counter-attacking momentum. Asta controlled the ball smoothly, resisting Hiroki Abe's immediate press with a quick turn inside before shifting possession to Yannik Engelhardt. The midfielder took one touch before launching a raking diagonal pass toward Rakim on the left wing.

He lightly hopped into the air flicking his left leg behind his left leg he deftly touched it down. His move drew gasps from the stadium as he took control of the ball with nearby fans hoping to see something special. Ritsu immediately latched onto his back ready to stop him as he carefully watched for the slightest movement.

Rakim didn't attempt a dribble though as he simply fainted turning outward before dropping a short pass to Wirtz in the centre. Not stopping though he casually drifted behind Ritsu who followed the ball to close down Wirtz. Wirtz, sensing the pressure from Ritsu Doan, took a sharp touch to his right, shielding the ball with his body as he turned away from the Japanese midfielder. He didn't dwell on possession, however, as he quickly rolled the ball back toward Niklas Tauer, who was sitting deeper to orchestrate play.

Tauer, taking a moment to assess the field, lifted his head and pinged a precise switch of play toward the right flank, where Jamie Leweling had begun to accelerate. The ball sailed through the crisp night air, Leweling already on the move before it even arrived.

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Leweling controlled it beautifully with his chest, allowing it to drop at his feet as he turned toward goal. Daiki Sugioka sprinted across to meet him, keeping his body low as he anticipated the winger's next move. Leweling, known for his direct style, pushed the ball forward, forcing Sugioka into a full sprint alongside him.

With a sudden feint, Leweling cut inside, dragging his trailing foot to flick the ball toward the centre. Yannik Engelhardt had timed his run perfectly, arriving at the edge of the box. Engelhardt took one touch to steady himself before hearing the voice of Rakim shouting here causing him to halt his shooting motion.

His head quickly snapped to his left just in time to spot the winger feint a run-out word before breaking into the box. Not hesitating he sent a crisp ball into the box aiming for the space behind Riku.

Rakim anticipated the ball's trajectory and timed his run to perfection, ghosting in behind Riku Handa with a sharp burst of acceleration. As the ball zipped toward him, he let it roll across his body, using the momentum to take a deft touch with his left foot. The Japanese defender scrambled to recover, but Rakim had already made his next move.

A quick shimmy of his shoulders sent Riku lunging to block a potential shot, but Rakim had feinted. Instead, he chopped the ball back onto his right foot, opening up a shooting angle. The goal was in his sights, and the German supporters roared in anticipation. Kosei Tani, Japan's goalkeeper, surged forward, narrowing the angle, his arms spread wide.

With ice-cold composure, Rakim opted for precision over power. He shaped to curl the ball toward the far post, his posture selling the shot perfectly. Tani reacted, shifting his weight in preparation to dive, but at the last second, Rakim adjusted, cutting his shot low toward the near post. Tani, completely wrong-footed, flung himself down in desperation. The ball skidded off the slick grass, slipping just beyond his fingertips. The net rippled. GOAL!

The stadium erupted in a cacophony of cheers and stunned gasps. The German bench exploded in celebration, players rushing to the touchline with fists pumping the air. On the pitch, Rakim wheeled to the corner flag already doing his griddy only to come to an abrupt stop at the sound of the referee's whistle. "He scored to make it a hat-trick in a last-minute winner, but it looks like the linesman had other Ideas.

Paul Gartner was right as on the left side of Japan's half the linesman can be seen holding up his flag signalling an offside. "This one is sure to hurt... Having a late-minute winner ripped from your arms is something I wouldn't even wish on my worst enemies."

Rakim froze, his celebration cut short as the reality of the situation sank in. The crowd's roar shifted into a wave of groans, the German fans voicing their frustration while the Japanese supporters erupted in relieved cheers. The linesman stood firm; his flag raised high, unmoved by the protests from the German players.

"This is heartbreak for Rakim Rex! The youngster thought he'd sealed his hat-trick and sent Germany through with a last-minute winner, but the assistant referee disagrees!" Paul Gartner's voice crackled over the commentary as the camera panned over the player's stunned expression. "Looking at the replay his hand did indeed land him offside, it happened during Yannik's hesitation before slipping in the assist."

Rakim tried to plead his case to the official, arms spread wide in disbelief. "No way, man! No way I'm offside!" he shouted, his voice barely cutting through the chaos. Wirtz was already by his side, gesturing emphatically toward the referee. "Check it! VAR, check it!" he demanded, motioning toward the giant screen in the stadium.

The referee, a composed figure amid the swirling emotions, raised his hands to calm the Germans and Japanese players trying to influence his decision. "Kid this is an under-20 youth competition there is no VAR. This means it's my prerogative and I chose to trust my colleague to do his job the decision stands Offside." The man quickly explained before blowing his whistle and signalling for a Japan freekick to be taken.

Rakim could only clench his fists, barely able to contain the frustration boiling beneath his skin. This was football though and he had to deal with this reality, even though the goal would have sealed his hat trick and the win for his team. Shaking off his distracting thoughts he quickly dropped back to his position 4 minutes were still enough time to score another goal.

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Japan wasted no time restarting play. Kosei Tani placed the ball down for the free kick, allowing his teammates a moment to regain their composure. The Japanese defenders took deep breaths, some exchanging nods of encouragement, while their coach signalled instructions from the touchline. With a short pass, the ball was back in motion, and Japan looked to run down the final minutes of the match.

That goal had not only surprised Germany but had more importantly rattled them. Feeling the possibility of having their lead cut down at the final step made them much wearier, especially of the opposing left flank. Thus, from the moment they restarted the match, they subconsciously played it safe opting to turn back rather than try a risky match.

Germany recognized Japan's change in tempo immediately. They were sitting back now, playing cautiously, killing seconds rather than pressing forward. Rakim, still simmering from the disallowed goal, snapped his gaze to Florian Wirtz.

"Press them!" he barked, urging his teammates forward.

Wirtz, who was meant to set the midfield tempo in this formation agreed as he read the situation the same way. Waving both hands forward he indicated his decision to the rest of the team he immediately charged forward. This ignited the rest of the Germans to push up field putting pressure on their opponents as they dropped back further.

Their tactic worked as very quickly they forced the Japan midfield to make hasty passes. In one of these hasty passes, Ao Tanaka was forced to send the ball out to the wing trying to escape a double team from Jamie Leweling and Niklas Tauer. Hiroki Abe who was hugging the sideline was caught off guard by the sudden pass and since he was out of position, he was not able to react in time.

Simon Asta didn't miss this chance and surged forward poking the ball free and immediately accelerated down the wing. Daiki Sugioka tried to get in his way just as he reached the area parallel to the penalty box, but Simon never planned to take him. Looking up he squared a pass across the face of the box to the on-rushing Rakim who had overlapped with Wirtz as he broke into the middle.



"Riku Handa is hot on his trail, but Rakim's got another chance, and he is not one to miss these twice," Paul Gartner exclaimed with excitement as he watched Rakim flash to the ball's location. He had some space after Takehiro Tomiyasu and Yuki Kobayashi had dropped into the box in preparation to defend a cross.

Chapter 408 408 Bitter End

"2:2 is the verdict of this exciting clash, both teams deserved the win and had the opportunity to make it happen, but it was not to be." Paul Gartner commented as the live stream camera panned over the exhausted looks of both sides. They had given it their all but, in the end, couldn't bring it over the finish line.

The most affected by the score were the German players who had managed to squander a 2-goal lead and now had to contend themselves with a single point. Most of them were already professionals or in the process of getting there so they quickly brushed the bitter taste aside.

This was only game one for them, and they still had all the chances in the world to win the group and qualify. Captain Luca wasted no time going around his teammates, giving a few encouraging words before motioning for them to shake hands with their opponents. It wasn't a requirement for them to do that, but it wouldn't hurt them to show some sportsmanship, especially in a match that had tested them.

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[Ding mission Future Great's progress:]

#Don't lose a match: L0/D1/W0

#Beat Javier Saviola's all-time Goal scoring record of 11 set in 2001: 2/11

#Win the Golden Boot: 0/1#Lead your team to win the Mini World Cup: 0/1

#Win the MVP award: 0/1

Rewards: Calculated based on Performance and achievements.

(Note: through a butterfly effect some of your future rivals who will herald the new era of football will be representing their country. As a singularity candidate, you must rise above these geniuses and declare your supremacy or be devoured by one of the challenges becoming their stepping stone.)

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"It's not the best of starts but it's something," Rakim quietly muttered to himself as he checked over the mission screen. If he was being honest, he was disappointed that they couldn't pull out a win in the end, especially given the fact he came so close to scoring a hat-trick.

{Indeed, for a tournament start it can be considered average, but not getting those 3 points might hurt you in the end.} Rakim knew she was right given that Italy had convincingly beaten Mexico 2:1 earlier during the day. Now they were firmly sitting in first place after gaining their 3 points.

"We will just have to win the next one," he firmly stated as he made his way into the tunnel heading for the changing room. "Yes, sir next game it's 3 points or bust," Florian stated from behind as he had just overheard his words.

Turning around to face him, he was just about to say something, but Wirtz beat him to it speaking up first. "Sorry I missed that last shot, I don't know what happened I've scored plenty of those in training," he said with a sullen expression clearly still hung up on his mistake.

In the 87th minute when Rakim received the ball from Simon Asta at the top of the key, he had the option to shoot. Tomiyasu and Yuki Kobayashi had after all dropped back far enough that with his technique, he could have forced a shot. However, out of the corner of his vision, he spotted Wirtz with whom he had just swapped positions to sprint into the box.

Riku Handa was hot on his trail leaving Wirtz virtually unmarked and with the two Japanese defenders scrambling forward to close him down he opted to pass. It was the most logical option and thus he performed a Ronaldo chop sending the ball into Wirtz's path just in time to beat the off-side trap. The young Leverkusen hopefully had done everything right as he deftly took control of the ball and lined up for a shot just a couple of steps ahead of the five-yard box.

Kosei Tani could barely rush out with his arm spread wide he pulled the trigger. However, he was too excited in his action and his boot hit a good chunk of the turf as he sent the ball forward. What was meant to be a shot to the far post veered off course and impacted the near post before flying out for a goal kick. He slapped Wirtz on the shoulder, shaking his head. "Forget it. I've heard these things happen not that I would know though. You just gotta score two more goals for the one you missed or better yet assist me more."

"You are something else you know that" Wirtz shot back with exasperation. "Was that meant to be a pep talk for me or for yourself."

"I don't know, in Florida, we don't need someone else to motivate us we just get back up on the gator," Rakim replied with a slight smile and shrugged his shoulder before putting an arm around his friend's neck and pulled him along.

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[Short while later]

[Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, Media room]

The press room at Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion buzzed with camera flashes as reporters from both German and Japanese outlets took their seats. Japan was considered the home team and thus went first for their interview. However, despite using up the full 20 minutes to bombard the representatives from Japan with questions they weren't stated yet.

The result had left plenty of talking points—Germany's squandered lead, Japan's spirited comeback, and Rakim Rex's electric performance. Just on the first day of the competition they had received all the drama and action they were promised. So, they wouldn't miss this chance to get some more sound bites from the German side.

At the front of the room, Coach Manuel Baum took the central seat with Rakim sitting on his right and Armel Bella-Kotchap sitting to his left. Both players were now dressed in the training kits, doing their best to remain composed in front of all the eager faces that looked like they wanted to eat them up. Rakim, despite his disappointment at not securing a win, held a calm and confident air having grown used to media attention.

Bella-Kotchap, on the other hand, looked frustrated, still replaying the defensive lapses that had cost them their lead. Not caring for either of the player's internal turmoil a German FA media officer stepped up to the microphone. "We'll take questions now. Please state your name and affiliation before asking."

A seasoned German journalist from Kicker was the first to speak. "Coach Baum, your team played an excellent first half but struggled in the second. What changed after halftime, and how do you plan to address this moving forward?"

Baum sighed, running a hand through his hair before leaning forward. "First, credit to Japan. They're a well-drilled side, and their response in the second half was strong. We had control early, but football is a game of momentum. The biggest issue came in our defensive structure not adapting fast enough in response to our opponent's change in attacking focus. We became too passive, allowing Kubo and Doan too much space between the lines. Once they started exploiting those gaps, it became difficult to reset. Going forward, we need to manage our intensity across 90 minutes, not just 45."

A reporter from Nikkan Sports raised his hand next. "Coach, what are your thoughts on Japan's performance, particularly Takefusa Kubo's impact?"

Baum nodded, a small smile forming. "I wasn't surprised by his performance. Kubo is a talented player with a high football IQ. He found the right pockets of space, and his free kick was exceptional. Japan has a strong generation coming through, and they will be a threat in this tournament."

A younger journalist from Sport Bild leaned in. "Rakim, two goals tonight, almost a third, but the offside call denied you. How are you feeling after that match? Do you think the team deserved more?"

Rakim exhaled sharply, scratching the back of his head before responding. "Of course, I wanted that goal. But that's football, sometimes the fine margins don't go your way. We should've put the game

away earlier instead of letting them grow into it. We have learned from this and will strive to make sure we kill games off when we get the chance."

Chapter 409 409 Petty Be Thy Name

A female journalist from The Asahi Shimbun took the next question. "Rakim, you faced a tough challenge against Japan's defence. What was your impression of players like Tomiyasu and Riku Handa?"

Rakim who had been preparing to give a neutral answer that would place the foreign media was left speechless. He had run through their team with ease scoring two goals whilst playing out of his usual position and here she was asking about the tough challenge he faced with their defence. In the second half, they had to swarm him with bodies to block his breakthrough routes and force him to lean into possession football.

"They showed great teamwork and coordination working well within their team's tactical framework." He simply responded with a neutral tone causing Bella-Kotchop to do his best to keep his facial expression straight.

From the training camp, he had faced his young teammates quite a few times and the one thing he was sure about him was his belief in his attacking prowess. He didn't mind if you made fun of his defensive weakness but one time Kevin boasted he could take him on one-on-one and shit hit the fan. For a full 3 days, Rakim used various ways to face Kevin in training and each time he used the most efficient way to get past him.

No matter what position he was put in be it as a midfielder, winger, striker, and even left back he would cut inwards and face him. Things only stopped when Kevin bribed him with a pack of Knoppers and proclaimed him as the best attacking player he had ever faced. From that day onward the two became the best of friends training together, with Kevin giving him advice in defensive positioning and Rakim telling him the best ways to stop players like him.

Not willing to give up on getting such a neutral answer that didn't highlight their player's abilities she asked another question. "Ahem, what is your opinion of their prospects of breaking into the top leagues in Europe,"

"I honestly couldn't tell you I'm not a prophet," Rakim simply answered gaining a few chuckles from those present and frustrating the reporter. "Where they end up would depend on their own efforts and choices they make, not all players excel in the premier league but thrive in LaLiga and vice versa."

Whether she was satisfied with the answer or not didn't matter as the German press secretary immediately motioned for the next reporter to ask his question. A deeper, more serious voice followed. "Armel, defensively, you and Kevin Ehlers looked solid in the first half but struggled against Japan's pressure later. What went wrong in the second half?"

Bella-Kotchap sighed, his jaw tightening before responding. "We pushed too high in our attempts to apply pressure and were unlucky to not capitalise on our chances. Their speedy counterattack played a role, and they punished our mistake with a goal. As for the free kick that was a piece of individual brilliance from Kubo."

Bella-Kotchap's answer gained a nod of approval from the Japanese reporters and the Germans alike as he had perfectly outlined their mistakes. However, most understood that such a tactic would only work once against a side like Germany which would adapt should they meet again in the tournament. Following that question they asked the 3 a few more talking about everything from pre-tournament preparation to their living standards in Poland and overall team morale.

A final question came from a German media outlet who asked a more personal question to Rakim. "Rakim, your national team journey has been well-documented, well with you growing up in the American youth system and even representing them in a few tournaments. The switch to Germany came suddenly and many are wondering whether this move was pre-planned or done out of desperation to play in the tournament."

The room quickly went silent as quite a few reporters perked up their ears ready to jot down Rakim's response. This was a topic that could quickly make headlines as half the hype of the tournament was caused by this controversy. Many American news outlets when they had nothing better to do used this news to create buzz at the expense of his image.

Rakim took a moment before answering, he leaned forward with his hands intertwined as his elbows on the table propped them up. "If I was being honest, I never expected my move either after all I grew up in Florida and have been a part of Team USA since the age of 7." He started his voice sounding quite sombre as he looked into the camera that was filming the interview.

"After winning the Scottish Cup with Celtic I was preparing to join the team in Brazil, but the call-up never came. When my team asked for the reason, we were informed that I wasn't wearing the right boots on the field. I honestly never knew there was a right shoe brand to winning matches, maybe we should all look into that if we want more matches." He continued stopping a light joke towards the end but by the serious look on his face, one could easily tell that he was unamused.

"On the bright side, Germany embraced me with open arms, allowing me to not only grow as a player but also thrive in my personal life. Plus representing my father's home country is something I'm very proud of, He grew up admiring the Kaiser Beckenbauer, and the likes of Gerd Müller and Lothar Matthäus telling my sister and me stories growing up." After speaking so far Rakim took a small break taking a sip of the bottle of water in front of him.

He continued speaking before any of the reporters could interrupt him, he continued his speech.

"England was also an option but yet again my shoes weren't quite right not that I'm complaining since I've been playing the best football of my life since becoming an Apex player." The room murmured with the noise of discussion among the reporters as they took in the explosive news.

All of them could easily read between the lines on who had blocked his entry into Team USA as both America and England were sponsored by NiKi. Plus, it was well known that the company had been trying



to move heaven and earth to get him to resign with him after they stupidly activated a clause that allowed him to leave for free after his shooting. They wanted to ask more questions and dig deeper to add some more TNT to this bomb they were handed but the German media officer interrupted.

"That's all the time we have. Thank you, everyone." Without needing a prompt, the three who had been under a magnifying glass immediately stood up and took their leave.

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[Czosnek i Oliwa, Bydgoszcz Poland, 21:00]

The warm glow of candlelight flickered against the polished wooden tables of Czosnek i Oliwa, a charming restaurant tucked away in the heart of Bydgoszcz. The scent of freshly baked bread and slow-roasted meats filled the air, blending with the soft hum of Polish jazz playing from the speakers. Seated near the window, Rakim found himself in the company of the two stunning blonde women.

The older of the two sported light blonde hair and dressed in a cream-coloured blouse and high-waisted black trousers. She exuded an effortless air of maturity and elegance as she listened to her son talk about his adventures in Germany. The girl sitting next to her matched her height of 5'10 but exuded a more relaxed presence as he twirled a strand of her peach-blonde hair as she scrolled through her phone, probably looking at the media reactions to the match or handling her own business. She wore a simple fitted black sweater with a neck zipper loosened showing off her long neck and white jeans with a brown belt.

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"You really set the internet on fire with that interview, you know," May said, grinning as she flipped her phone toward him. "People are calling you the Pettiest footballer in history since Zlatan. You sure you don't want to become an entertainer instead?"

Rakim let out a dry chuckle as he leaned back in his chair. "I just told the truth. If people want to run with it, that's on them. Plus, they are not wrong I've learned from the best when it comes to being Petty"

May leaned forward with an amused smile, "And who might that be? Don't you dare say me because I'm everything but Petty!" her response caused Rakim to burst out laughing not at all minding the glare she was sending his way.

"Of course it's not you, you're just a little vengeful, headstrong, Vindictive, and the most charitable but petty you are not," he responded with a light smile as he met her gaze which started to warm before freezing up again. "Just because you say one nice thing at the end doesn't mean I didn't hear the bad stuff, Rakim Simon Rex,"

Hearing her say his full government Rakim stopped joking least he detonated a powder keg that would ignite World War 3. "Ok, Jokes aside all the great athletes growing up which one wasn't pettier than the last, especially my personal Goat's Kobe and King James."

Lisa at the side hummed in agreement as she stopped relishing her steak that looked mouth-watering. It was a tender piece of roasted beef topped with a creamy white sauce, with a drizzle of green oil. Thinly sliced, orange-hued vegetables, carrots along with butternut squash and with roasted mushrooms. Six small cubes of herb-infused gnocchi pincer the steak along with red spheres of tomato reduction, and small green leaves for added freshness and decoration.

"The truth is powerful son, and you answered those questions perfectly in my opinion. There is no good reason for you to take the blame for not playing for Team USA when it's not your fault. Plus, this gives Apex the needed buzz and more eyes will be watching the tournament." She quickly analysed almost off-handedly before taking another bite of her meal.

Rakim smirked at his mother's ability to turn everything to relate everything into a business move. "I can hardly believe you were hesitating whether to become my official agent more than at the start of the year. Now you are basically a shark in water, I've even heard rumours that Simon Rolfes tries to avoid you as much as possible."

His words gained a light chuckle from his mother, "You are not wrong, if not for the fact he has to run media plans that include you past me he would dodge me like the plague." She retorted before telling them how they would always be bogged down in negotiations for days on end when the Leverkusen Managing Director tries to pitch her advertisement proposals.

It's not that she doesn't want her client who is her son to appear in these ads it's just that she fully researches the companies to the slightest fault. And if they do something that doesn't align with his brand direction, she declines it, and they negotiate for hours or simply pivot to a different company. Thus, every time Simon Rolfes has to deal with her, he prepares as if he is heading out for a battle, with PowerPoint slides, excel data and even bar graphs.

"You should really think of becoming an agent full-time Mum, I know you love your gym and working with different athletes, but you could easily use this to your advantage. Especially since most of your clients will need a place to work out or a good dietary plan that your gym franchise can handle," he suggested with a genuine expression as he could see just how much his mother enjoyed being his agent and most importantly, she was good at it.

"Yes Lisa, you should really consider it, I would love to be your next client," May said from the side genuinely wanting her to be her agent as she found it difficult to balance both being a content creator, a full-time student and having to handle the business side of being an influencer.

Lisa wiped her mouth with a napkin before leaning back in her chair, a thoughtful expression settling on her face. "I won't lie; the idea has crossed my mind. But representing you and handling these negotiations is one thing—turning this into a full-time career is something else entirely."

Rakim shrugged, picking at the remnants of his meal. "You are already doing that with me, not to mention all the drama and trouble I've caused you. It's just about going all in plus Dad already handles the business side of your gym you just have to set the guidelines for hiring skilled trainers."

May nodded enthusiastically. "Seriously, Lisa. You have the connections, the experience, and let's be real, the intimidation factor. And as Rakim said, your gym franchise would only benefit. Imagine it—top athletes and influencers signing with you, training at Titan-Fit, exclusive dietary programs... you could build an empire."

Lisa hummed, clearly considering it. "I'd have to think about it carefully. I built Rex's gym which later became Titan-Fit from the ground up, and expanding into the representation business would require a different kind of dedication." She glanced at Rakim. "Besides, my number one client is already a full-time headache."

Rakim grinned. "And yet, I'm your most profitable headache."

Lisa rolled her eyes, "Sorry to break it to you son, but I earn twice what I make with you in a year from taking on one of my star clients through a 2-month training program. You do keep me on my toes, I'll give you that."

May leaned forward with a smirk. "Trust me you're not the only one whom he gives a headache to," May commented with a light chuckle. "But from what I'm hearing is... you're considering it."

Lisa exhaled through her nose, then took another sip of wine. "I'll consider it. But no promises."

"Good cause I could really use a saviour to handle the business sides of the industry," May said as she pulled her into a short hug before asking her advice on an offer, she received to promote a fashion brand and appear in their pop-up store.

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[28/05/2019, DFB Camp, Bydgoszcz, 20:00]

The first round of the 2019 under-20 World Cup came to a close and the German contingent after spending two days resting and training were excited for their clash with Italy tomorrow. Right now, they could be seen seated in a conference room going over Italy's match tape. They had been there for about 40 minutes as they analysed their own gameplay and the way the Italians managed to overcome the resilient Mexicans.

It was mainly the Italian's strong defence and fluid attacking play that allowed them to score a late winner. Sandro Tonali acting as the team's brain in midfield expertly ignited the attacking quartet of Wilfried Gnonto, Giacomo Raspadori, Moise Kean, and Sebastiano Esposito. This allowed them to play stable football, launching quick and strong attacks truly showcasing the peak of Italian football.

"All right, pay attention to this sequence here," Baum said, pointing at the frozen frame of Sandro Tonali receiving the ball in midfield. "Look at how he positions himself—already scanning the pitch before the ball arrives. This is what makes him dangerous. He's the engine of their midfield, dictating the tempo."

Rakim, seated near the middle of the room, rested his chin on his hand as he watched Tonali turn on the ball with one touch, evading pressure before threading a pass between two Mexican defenders. Wilfried Gnonto sprinted onto it, forcing the opposition to retreat as Italy transitioned seamlessly from defence to attack.

"We have to disrupt Tonali early," Baum continued. "If we allow him time to dictate play, he will carve us open. That means whoever is our double pivot one of you is always pressing him. Do not let him settle."

Baum didn't wait for a response as he fast-forwarded the clip to Giacomo Raspadori, who was receiving a pass just outside the penalty box. "Their front four have an excellent understanding. Raspadori, Kean, Gnonto, and Esposito—each one of them can create something from nothing. We cannot let them operate freely. Armel, Kevin, this is where you two need to be disciplined."

Bella-Kotchap and Ehlers sat up straighter, watching as Moise Kean used his body well to shield the ball, holding off a Mexican defender before laying it off for Esposito, who smashed a low shot past the keeper.