

## Football 411

Chapter 411 411 Gli Azzurri

[28/05/2019, DFB Camp, Bydgoszcz, 20:15]

"They're not just fast—they're smart," Baum emphasized. "Italy will test your patience. If you dive in recklessly, they will punish you. So, keep your shape, and don't let them pull you out of position."

The German coach let the clip run for another few minutes before finally pausing the footage on the match's final goal—Italy's late winner in stoppage time. "This is where they thrive," Baum pointed at the screen. "They're relentless. Even in the dying minutes, they keep pushing for a goal. That's the mentality they bring, and we have to match it."

The room remained silent as the players absorbed every detail. Italy had quality all over the pitch, and after their opening win against Mexico, they were brimming with confidence. Baum turned back to the players letting them take in the information, as he folded his arms. "Now, let's talk about our approach."

He nodded toward Rakim. "Rakim, you'll be playing on the left this time. You saw how Mexico struggled to penetrate Italy's defence? That's because their fullbacks don't push forward recklessly. You won't get as much space as you did against Japan, but that doesn't mean we can't break them down."

Rakim leaned forward nodding in response as he pulled back his Titan-hood slightly. "So, I'll have to draw them out, force them into uncomfortable positions?" he asked wanting to make sure that his conjecture was aligned with what the coach had imagined.

Baum nodded. "Exactly. If you isolate their fullback, you can create space for Wirtz or Malik to exploit in the half-spaces. Italy will double-team you, so your movement off the ball is just as important as when you're on it."

Rakim tapped his fingers against the table as he processed the information before dotting down notes in his notebook. He wasn't writing down what the coach was saying but was actually writing down the movements of the Italian defence and midfield in different situations on the pitch. The way they would quickly contract their formation whenever a Mexican winger had the ball and subtly encircle him by blocking passing lanes.

The midfield battle was even tougher as the strong Italian midfielders are liable to treat you like English defenders. They would quickly get physical and use their defensive instincts to wrestle the ball away. If you are too fast for them, they are liable to hit, you with a few tough tackles that will teach you to fear them.

A great example came in the form of Diego Lainez Mexico's electrifying dribbler and arguably their biggest talent in recent years. Since he played for LaLiga side Real Betis he managed to develop his quick feet, boosting his creativity and ability to take on defenders one-on-one. With such a player Mexico should have had a better attacking game but at the start of the second half he was hit with a few tough hits.

The midfielders were smart enough to swap out who would tackle him and in doing so only one of them received a yellow card. They had already achieved their purpose though as Diego's fangs had been curbed. While Rakim was deep in thought Coach Baum had moved on and gave instructions to a few other players in different positions.

"As for our pressing structure," Baum continued, "we are not sitting back. Mexico gave them too much respect. We're Germany—we play on the front foot. That means pressing from the first whistle, making them uncomfortable. We force turnovers high up the pitch and transition quickly." A low murmur of agreement spread through the room.

This was their identity—aggressive, high-intensity possession football. Baum clapped his hands together. "Final thoughts?"

Luca Unbehaun, the captain and goalkeeper, was the first to speak. "If they attack in numbers, we need to be aware of late runs into the box. Their midfielders are not fast but are deadly from long-range, they arrive late to finish off plays."

Baum nodded approvingly. "Good observation. Communication will be key. Our attacking midfielder when tracking back will have to hold it and look to intercept that cut back or at least pressure the shooter."

Bella-Kotchak cracked his knuckles. "I'll make sure Kean doesn't get comfortable. If he wants to hold up play, he'll have to fight for it." A few players chuckled at Arnel's confidence, but there was no doubt that his physicality would be a crucial factor.

Finally, Wirtz spoke up. "Mexico didn't exploit the spaces behind their midfield as much as they could have. If we move the ball quickly enough, we can find openings before they settle into their shape." Baum smile. "That's exactly what I want to hear. We play smart football, attack with intelligence, and most importantly we play to win."

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[28/05/2019, Private Lounge, Bydgoszcz, 20:30]

Rakim found himself relaxing on one of the many couches alongside Wirtz and some of the other boys. Some of them were playing a game of billiards using 10 euros as a buy-in price as they played for fun. Most of them weren't millionaires given their age and the fact they were still trying to break into their respective first teams, but they did all right for themselves.

Many of these players had been paid to play football since the age of 16, and some were even younger, with youth contracts at the age of 10. So now that they were all on professional contracts, the buy-in price of 10 euros was almost negligible. They could pay more, but the coaches quickly told them that gambling in the camp wasn't allowed, and most importantly, they did it for fun.

They didn't just bet on money though some put goal celebrations on the line, others used dares which is the reason that Bella-Kotchap found his braids dyed blonde. Rakim gave up on these games after realising that other than when playing darts he was a sheep ready for slaughter. He could give these people so many shoutouts without his followers asking if he was crazy. Some of his followers even started asking if he was hacked after he posted a story with Niklas Tauer calling the most handsome teammate in team DFB.

"Yo, Rakim, look, these are the standings after the first match day," Wirtz told him as he handed him his phone—something Rakim personally wouldn't do, even if you threatened to cut his hand off. It's not that he had something to hide, but it was a dangerous precedent. Plus, other than his family, no one else should be on his phone to begin with. Pushing that aside, he looked at the FIFA page decorated in Polish font, which showcased the first-day results.

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Group A:

1) Colombia U-20, W: 1, D0, L0, GF: 2, GA: 0, GD: 2, Pts: 3

2) Senegal U-20, W: 1, D0, L0, GF: 3, GA: 0, GD: 3, Pts: 3

3) Poland U-20, W: 0, D: 0, L: 1, GF: 0, GA: 2, GD: -2, Pts: 0

4) Tahiti U-20. W:0, D: 0, L: 0, GF: 0, GA: 3, GD: -3, Pts: 0

#### Group B:

1) Italy U-20, W: 2, D:0, L:0, GF: 2, GA: 1, GD: +1, Pts: 3

2) Germany U-20, W: 0, D: 1, L: 0, GF: 2, GA: 2, GD: 0, Pts: 1

3) Japan U-20, W: 0, D: 0, L: 0, GF: 2, GA: 2, GD: 0, Pts: 1

4) Mexico U-20. W: 0, D:0, L: 1, GF: 1, GA: 2, GD: -1, Pts: 0

#### Group C:

1) New Zealand U-20, W: 1, D: 0, L: 0, GF: 5, GA: 0, GD: +5, Pts: 3

2) Uruguay U-20, W: 1, D: 0, L: 0, GF: 3, GA: 1, GD: +2, Pts: 3

3) Norway U-20, W: 0, D: 0, L: 1, GF: 1, GA: 3, GD: -3, Pts: 0

4) Honduras U-20. W: 0, D: 0, L: 1, GF: 0, GA: 5, GD: -5, Pts: 0

Group D:

1) Nigeria U20, W: 1, D: 0, L: 0, GF: 4, GA: 0, GD: +4, Pts: 3

2) England U-20, W: 1, D: 0, L: 0, GF: 2, GA: 1, GD: +1, Pts: 3

3) USA U-20, W: 0, D: 0, L: 1, GF: 1, GA: 2, GD: -1, Pts: 0

4) Qatar U-20. W: 0, D: 0, L: 1, GF: 0, GA: 0, GD: -4, Pts: 0

Group E:

1) France U-20, W: 1, D: 0, L: 0, GF: 2, GA: 0, GD: +2, Pts: 3

2) Mali U-20, W: 0, D: 1, L: 0, GF: 1, GA: 1, GD: 0, Pts: 1

3) Panama U-20, W: 0, D: 1, L: 0, GF: 1, GA: 1, GD: 0, Pts: 1

4) Saudi Arabia U-20. W: 0, D: 0, L: 1, GF: 0, GA: 2, GD: -2, Pts: 0

Group F:

1) Argentina U-20, W: 1, D: 0, L: 0, GF: 5, GA: 2, GD: +3, Pts: 3

2) Portugal U-20, W: 1, D: 0, L: 0, GF: 1, GA: 0, GD: 1, Pts: 3

3) South Korea U-20, W: 0, D: 0, L: 0, GF: 0, GA: 0, GD: 0, Pts: 0

4) South Africa U-20. W: 0, D: 0, L: 1, GF: 2, GA: 5, GD: -3, Pts: 0

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"If this was Germany and we had lost the first game against a team like Columbia, we would hear the end of it," Kevin said, having obviously also seen the first phase of the tournament's standings. They had been in Poland for six days now, and for three days after their match, despite Poland's loss, there wasn't any criticism of them in the newspaper.

"Well, who told us to play for a football powerhouse where winning is considered a standard?" Lenn stated with a bitter smile remembering how some news outlets back home dared to write articles doubting their abilities after a draw. He also caught some starts for not scoring a goal as the team striker, however, it was Rakim catching the most since many believed he could have done more given the hype.

"Sigh just don't lose to Italy tomorrow or pigs will fly and the media back home will take a page out of the BBC's book," Youssoufa remarked from the side with a light chuckle but no one took this as a joke realising that tomorrow was a must-win match if they wanted to retain their mental health.

Chapter 412 412 Gli Azzurri (2)

[Wed, 29/05/2019, 16:45, Zdzisław-Krzyszkowiak-Stadion, Poland]

The tension in the air was palpable as the German U-20 squad stood in the tunnel, awaiting the signal to step onto the pristine grass of Zdzisław-Krzyszkowiak-Stadion. After their dramatic 2-2 draw against Japan, the pressure was on. Germany needed a result against the group leaders, Italy, who had comfortably dispatched Mexico in their opener. A loss would put them in a precarious position, while a victory would catapult them into serious contention for a knockout stage berth.

The weather was mild as the late afternoon sun was still on the horizon with an occasional light breeze flowing through the stadium. The no-nonsense Uruguayan Andrés Matonte will be officiating this match trying to keep things fair and clean. With football history, both countries possess emotions are bound to



be high throughout the game meaning he has his work cut out for himself to keep things under control. As the players emerged from the tunnel, commentator Paul Gartner's voice rang through the stadium speakers, guiding viewers through the line-ups.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion for this crucial Group B clash between Germany and Italy. The stakes couldn't be higher for the Germans, who will be desperate to secure their first win of the tournament, while Italy looks to consolidate their position at the top of the table."

The camera panned across the Italian squad as they strode onto the pitch, their navy blue kits gleaming under the stadium lights. "For Italy, who were outstanding in their opening win over Mexico, between the posts, we have Alessandro Plizzari, who made some key saves in that match. At right-back, Raoul Bellanova brings pace and aggression, while the centre-back pairing of Matteo Gabbia and Edoardo Bove will look to keep Germany's attack in check. Alessandro Tripaldelli starts at left-back, completing the defensive line."

"In midfield, the experienced Sandro Tonali will dictate play from deep, partnered by Niccolò Rovella, whose composure in possession was crucial against Mexico. Emanuele Vignato, the attacking midfielder, will look to pull the strings behind the forwards. Out wide, Wilfried Gnonto on the right and Moise Kean on the left will provide pace and directness, while leading the line is Giacomo Raspadori, who found the net in their opener."

"As the Italians lined up, the German squad also took their positions lining up in a 4-3-3 formation. The camera now shifted to them. "Germany, still searching for their first victory, have made a few changes today. In goal, we have Luca Unbehaun, who will be hoping for a more assured defensive performance from his backline. At right-back, Simon Asta starts again, with the centre-back pairing of Armel Bella-Kotchap and Kevin Ehlers tasked with stopping Italy's dangerous forwards. Noah Katterbach completes the defence at left-back."

Paul took a short break as the viewers watched the camera pan over the figures of the German midfielders. "In midfield, Niklas Tauer and Yannik Engelhardt form a double pivot, offering protection to

the defence while trying to build from deep. In the attacking midfield role, Florian Wirtz makes his first start of the tournament, looking to make up for his missed chance in the last match."

"leading the front Oliver Batista Meier makes his tournament debut on the right wing, and the phenomenal Rakim Rex plays on the left flank. He leads the goal-scoring race with the brace he scored in the last game with Japan and will be looking to add to it. Up front, Youssoufa Moukoko leads the line, looking to trouble the Italian defence with his movement and finishing on his tournament debut."

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[Wed, 29/05/2019, 16:45, Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, Poland]

[1]

Youssoufa Moukoko wasted no second in passing the ball back following referee Andrés Matonte's whistle to begin the match. The Germans, in their familiar white and black kits, immediately looked to establish control, with Engelhardt spraying a short pass to Tauer in midfield. Italy's defensive line held its shape, their blue kits forming an organized barrier against Germany's advancing players.

Paul Gartner's voice remained steady as the match took its first steps. "Germany with an early spell of possession, and you can see Florian Wirtz already looking to find space between the lines. Rakim, on the left wing, is always a threat, and his duel with Bellanova will be one to watch tonight."

They didn't have to wait long as in the 5th minute Rakim, received a quick diagonal pass from Katterbach, and controlled it with ease. A delicate first touch killed the ball's momentum before he

flicked it forward and took on Bellanova. The Italian full-back was quick, but Rakim was quicker, shifting the ball past him with a sharp Revers-Elastico and a burst of acceleration.

"Rex, already looking lively—he gets past his man!" Gartner's voice rose as the winger blizzed past Bellanova. he didn't get far though as the Italian defender rapidly turned stretched out his hand taking hold of his shoulder as he bullied Rakim of the ball sending him falling to the ground.

Rakim hit the turf hard, his palms scraping against the grass as the whistle blew sharply. The German fans in attendance immediately booed the Italian right-back not at all happy with the player's action. The German winger immediately pushed himself up, a glare in his eyes as he turned toward the referee.

Bellanova on the other hand didn't mind it though as he was already pleading his innocence to Andrés Matonte. It worked as he got away with a warning as the referee probably didn't want to book him this early, Rakim was awarded a free kick for his troubles.

Not bothering to argue with the referee Rakim simply picked up the ball placing it down however he decided to let Wirtz take it in the end. The free-kick was positioned just outside the left flank, a few meters from the penalty area. Florian Wirtz stood over the ball, eyes scanning the Italian box, where Moukoko and Engelhardt jostled for position. The towering figures of Bella-Kotchap and Ehlers had also pushed forward, ready to contest the delivery.

Paul Gartner kept the audience engaged. "Germany with an early set-piece opportunity, and with the likes of Wirtz and Rakim on the ball, this could be dangerous. Italy needs to be careful here."

The whistle blew. Wirtz took a short run-up and whipped the ball into the area with his right foot. It had pace, curling towards the six-yard box. Matteo Gabbia leapt highest, heading it away, but only as far as Niklas Tauer, who controlled it outside the box.

Tauer quickly laid it off to Oliver Batista Meier, who feinted past Tripaldelli and squared it toward the penalty spot. Moukoko lunged, stretching to get a boot on it, but Plizzari reacted quickly, diving low to smother the ball. Loud cheers erupted from the Italian supporters as they jumped to their feet celebrating their goalkeeper's heroics.

"Excellent goalkeeping from Plizzari!" Gartner remarked. "Quick off his line to deny Moukoko his first goal of the tournament."

Italy wasted no time transitioning into attack. Plizzari rolled the ball out to Sandro Tonali, who orchestrated the tempo with an elegant touch before firing a long diagonal ball toward Moise Kean on the left wing.

Kean took it in stride, surging forward as Simon Asta scrambled back. The Italian winger was brimming with confidence, having tormented Mexico's defenders in the first match. A couple of yards after crossing the final third, he cut inside, then quickly shifted back to his left foot. Creating a yard of space he didn't waste a second before unleashing a curling shot toward the far post.

Luca Unbehaun dived, stretching full length, and managed to get his hands on the ball palming the ball out for a corner. "A fantastic save from Unbehaun!" Gartner praised. "Kean looked certain to score, but the German goalkeeper keeps his team level!"

Chapter 413 413 Gli Azzurri (3)

[10]

The Italian players jogged toward the German box, setting up for their first real set-piece opportunity of the match. Emanuele Vignato placed the ball down, adjusting his socks as his teammates jostled for space in the box. The tall figures of Gabbia and Bove positioned themselves near the penalty spot, waiting for the delivery.

Vignato took a deep breath, his eyes scanning the crowded penalty area. The Italian players were on their toes, shifting subtly to evade their markers as the German defenders braced for impact. Unbehaun shouted instructions, his gloves clapping together as he urged his teammates to remain alert.

Paul Gartner's voice carried through the stadium. "Italy have a real chance here. Their aerial presence is strong, with Gabbia and Bove both capable of attacking this ball. Germany will need to be disciplined in their marking."

The whistle blew, and Vignato delivered a whipped cross with his right foot, curling it toward the near post. Gabbia was the target, but Bella-Kotchap matched his leap, getting the first touch to flick the ball away. The clearance, however, was not ideal—it fell to the edge of the box, where Niccolò Rovella was waiting.

Rovella didn't hesitate, stepping forward and striking the ball on the half-volley with his laces. The shot was clean, rifling through the bodies in the box toward the bottom corner. For a split second, it looked destined to nestle into the back of the net—but Unbehaun reacted swiftly, diving low and stretching out his left hand to parry the ball away.

"Unbehaun again with a crucial save!" Gartner exclaimed. "That was a venomous strike from Rovella, but the German keeper stands firm!"

The rebound fell dangerously inside the six-yard box, where Giacomo Raspadori pounced. Before he could react, though, Kevin Ehlers threw himself in the way, making a brave block to send the ball out for another corner. Cheers erupted from the German supporters, appreciating the defensive effort of their team.

Ehlers, still on the ground, received a pat on the back from Bella-Kotchap as they got back to their feet. Meanwhile, Raspadori clapped his hands, urging his teammates to keep up the pressure.

Vignato went to retrieve the ball for the second corner. This time, instead of an in-swinger, he played it short to Moise Kean, who quickly laid it back to Tonali near the edge of the box. The Italian captain, spotting a gap, attempted to thread a low pass toward the near post where Bove was making a late run, but Engelhardt anticipated it, lunging forward to cut it out. Without hesitation, Engelhardt booted the ball forward, releasing the pressure on the German side as they got back into position.

After that scare, the German players didn't waste time dictating the tempo and controlling the flow again. By relying on their versatile 4-3-3 formation, they soon hoarded a large percentage of the possession as they searched for that opening goal. However, their efforts were rendered futile again and again by the defensive tactics of the Italians.

They adapted quickly and responded well to Germany's tempo using their defensive awareness and tactics to stop any attack before it could develop. They followed their coach's tactics to a T by slowing down the match and letting Germany fall into a passive state. They knew once their opponents who were known for their possession games became deadlocked, not being able to move the ball forward past a certain point they would get adventurous.

This habit had cost the German senior team in recent years, as despite having all the possessions in the world most of it was spent looking for a breakthrough point. A good defence had become their bane, and it was this very same tactic that the Italians decided to implement today. They would be satisfied with a draw since they had one in the first round, but they believed that they would get at least two good counter-attacking opportunities in this match.

However, what they failed to account for is that this German side has something the senior team doesn't and that is Rakim Rex. A layer that can effectively break through tough defences with surgical precision without fail. This miscalculation caused their strong formation to collapse in the 25th minute when Rakim decided to go on a run.

He had been probing on his left win whenever he received a pass from his back-court teammates or his midfield, but it would usually end with him relinquishing the ball. The occasional time he would skip past his marker but then choose to pass the ball back as the Italian defence was too dense for him to risk it. Not this time though as his left foot that looked like it was going to pass back to Bella-Kotchap flashed over the ball turning it into a feint as he accelerated past Wilfried Gnonto.

Gnonto reacted late, his body shifting in the wrong direction as Rakim blazed past him, using his explosive first step to gain some acceleration. The German winger surged down the left flank, his quick strides eating up the turf as Bellanova stepped forward to intercept.

Paul Gartner's voice rang through the stadium. "And here comes Rakim Rex! We've seen him do this to Japan on opening day, but can he do it to this Italy side, o—oh and he can nutmeg."

Bellanova lunged with his right foot, attempting to poke the ball away, but Rakim anticipated it. A deft touch pushed the ball forward he slipped it through the right-back's open legs as he used his long strides to skip past him. Latching onto the ball again he burst into the box with his first touch forcing the turning Bellanova to be careful.

"Oh, brilliant footwork from Rex! He's left Bellanova behind!" Gartner shouted.

Now, with only Gabbia and Bove between him and the goal, Rakim charged toward the box. The Italians scrambled to surround him; their defensive shape momentarily thrown into chaos. Tonali tried to cut him off, but Rakim kept his composure, shifting the ball to his right as he performed two quick stepovers forcing him to step back and stand his ground.

Rakim used this chance to knock the ball forward from behind using his left foot as he took a large step forward manoeuvring past Tonali. Bove stepped up, lowering his stance as he prepared to engage, but Rakim's touch was too quick. He sent an Ozil-style bounce pass flying towards the back post, Bove tried to lunge at the ball, but it was too late.

"Yousseoufa Moukoko!" Paul Gartner exclaimed as Moukoko timed his run to perfection, slipping past Gabbia at the far post. His instincts kicked in as the ball bounced in front of him, the perfect height for a decisive finish. With his weaker left foot, he met it first-time, striking it low and hard toward the bottom corner.

Plizzari, reacting in a split second, threw himself across the goal, his outstretched right arm reaching desperately for the shot. The ball whizzed past him, grazing the tips of his fingers before rippling the net. "GOAL!!!"

The stadium erupted. The German fans in attendance leapt to their feet, their cheers drowning out the stunned silence from the Italian supporters. Moukoko wheeled away in celebration, arms spread wide, his face alight with joy. Rakim sprinted toward him, leaping onto his back as the rest of the German squad swarmed around them.

Paul Gartner's voice was nearly drowned out by the noise. "It's in! Yousseoufa Moukoko opens the scoring for Germany! What a play from Rakim Rex! A sensational assist and the Germans have broken through in the 25th minute!"

Replays flashed on the big screen, showing Rakim's dazzling footwork from different angles—first the nutmeg on Bellanova, then the composure to outmanoeuvre Tonali and Bove before executing the perfect assist. Moukoko's finish was clinical and raw power, beating Plizzari with a bang out of the blow.



As the German players celebrated near the corner flag, the Italian defenders exchanged frustrated glances. Bellanova shook his head, visibly frustrated after being beaten twice in the same sequence, while Tonali barked instructions to regroup. Gabbia picked up the ball from inside the net, his jaw clenched as he walked back toward midfield.

Gartner continued his analysis as the celebrations subsided. "Italy were doing everything right defensively, but one bout of brilliance and they are lagging behind. He was patient all game, waiting for his moment, and when it arrived, he tore through them like a hurricane. That's exactly what makes him so special. And full credit to Moukoko, his movement was brilliant, and his finishing? Flawless."

Chapter 414 414 Gli Azzurri (4)

[Wed, 29/05/2019, 17:26, Zdzisław-Krzyszkowiak-Stadion, Poland]

The celebrations had barely ended before Italy were back at the centre circle, eager to restart the match. Sandro Tonali, visibly irritated, grabbed the ball and placed it down before looking up at his teammates. He clapped his hands, shouting instructions as if demanding an immediate response.

Paul Gartner's voice carried over the noise of the crowd. "Italy will need to find an answer, and quickly. There's still plenty of time, but they can't afford to let Germany dictate the game from here."

With a sharp blast of his whistle, referee Andrés Matonte signalled for play to resume. Tonali tapped the ball forward to Rovella, who immediately spread it wide to Bellanova. The Italian right-back, still fuming from his earlier humiliation at the hands of Rakim Rex, took a deep breath before advancing down the flank.

However, Rakim was waiting for him, and while he may not be the best defender he has good enough instinct and most of all the confidence to try. The moment Bellanova attempted to push forward, the German winger pounced, pressing him aggressively and forcing a back pass.

"And look at that! Rex is still harassing Bellanova. The Italian right-back will be having nightmares about him if this continues!" Gartner chuckled.

Italy's play slowed as they shifted into their patient buildup, looking to stretch the German formation. Unlike Germany, whose attacks were direct and fluid, Italy relied on methodical possession, carefully moving the ball between midfielders, waiting for the right moment to penetrate the final third. But the German defence was well-drilled, moving in sync, blocking off passing lanes and pressing at the right moments.

[30]

In the 30th minute, Italy finally found a gap. Vignato, dropping deep, received the ball under pressure and quickly spun away from Engelhardt, breaking free into space. Before the German midfield could react, he released a piercing through-ball between Bella-Kotchap and Ehlers, right into the path of Raspadori.

"Beautiful pass from Vignato! Raspadori is through!" Gartner's voice rose in excitement.

Raspadori, with only Unbehaun to beat, took one touch before pulling the trigger. He aimed low, trying to slot it past the German keeper. Unbehaun, showing incredible reflexes, threw himself down, his right leg extending just in time to block the shot with his shin. The ball deflected upward, spinning wildly before Ehlers hooked it away. The German fans breathed a sigh of relief before roaring in approval.

"What a save from Luca Unbehaun! That was a huge chance for Italy, but Germany's goalkeeper comes up big once again!" Gartner exclaimed.

Raspadori buried his head in his hands, knowing that was a golden opportunity. Meanwhile, Tonali simply shouted at him to get back in the game and put the next one away. However, Baum at the side seeing his team being beaten so easily started shouting instructions on the sidelines trying to get them to step it up.

It worked as the German side sensing Italy's growing frustration, slowed the pace of the match, controlling possession with short, precise passes. Engelhardt and Tauer dictated the rhythm in midfield, while Florian Wirtz positioned himself intelligently between the lines, constantly looking for an opening.

In the 36th minute, Germany nearly doubled their lead. Moukoko, who had been silent since his goal, dropped deep to receive the ball, linking up with Batista Meier before turning sharply and accelerating forward. With his explosive pace, he shrugged off Bove and surged into the box.

With Gabbia closing in, Moukoko quickly played a disguised cut-back pass to Wirtz, who was making a late run into the penalty area. Wirtz let the ball roll across his body before striking it first-time with his right foot. It flew towards the right side of the goal like a cannonball, but Plizzari was there fully stretched, and managed to get a fingertip on the shot, pushing it just past the post.

"Oh, my word! That was inches away from being Germany's second!" Gartner gasped. "Plizzari keeps Italy alive with a crucial save!"

The Italian goalkeeper, still on the ground, exhaled sharply before being pulled up by Bove. He clapped his gloves together, urging his team to refocus. As halftime approached, the match's intensity remained high. Italy pressed harder, looking for a late equalizer before the break, while Germany stood firm, disciplined and unmoving as they tightened the defence.

Italy just wouldn't stay down though as they came agonizingly close to levelling the game in the 40th minute. Kean, who had been relatively quiet, finally got his moment. Receiving the ball on the left flank, he used his strength to brush past Asta before cutting inside on his right foot. With a quick shift, he unleashed a thunderous curling shot toward the near post that almost tricked Luca into jumping to the far post.

The ball rocketed off his foot, travelling like a missile as it curved like a boomerang towards the top left corner. Unbehaun barely managed to react to jump but even though he knew he wouldn't reach it in time, God was on his side though and the ball ricocheted off the post. The shot struck the post with a deafening clang, bouncing back into play.

The shot struck the post with a deafening clang, bouncing back into play fought with Giacomo Raspadori to reach the ball first. The German defender sensing the danger, reacted instinctively, throwing his body in front of Raspadori. The two players clashed, their boots meeting the ball simultaneously, sending it spinning into the air. For a brief moment, time seemed to slow as the ball hovered near the penalty spot.

Then, out of nowhere, Sandro Tonali arrived. The Italian captain had been lingering on the edge of the box, anticipating the rebound. As the ball descended, he lined up his strike, planting his left foot firmly before swinging his right boot through the ball. "Tonali goes for it—!" Gartner's voice crackled with excitement.

However, he was met with a strange resistance as the ball seemed to bend before throwing him backwards. He wasn't the only one as Noah Katterbach who had also performed a side volley was also thrown to the ground as they hit the ball simultaneously.

The stadium collectively held its breath as the ball rebounded off both players' boots at the exact moment of contact, sending it spiralling high into the air. A clash of sheer force and determination had rendered the ball momentarily weightless, spinning wildly above the penalty box.

Paul Gartner's voice was a mixture of amazement and disbelief. "I've never seen anything like this! Tonalì and Katterbach strike the ball at the same time, and it's up in the air—who's going to claim it?"

Unbehaun had been on edge throughout this sequence of events and didn't waste this opportunity while the ball was floating in the air. He quickly assessed the ball's unpredictable descent. He shuffled his feet, adjusting his stance as he prepared to leap. The German keeper was not the tallest, but his reactions were razor-sharp. As the ball finally began to drop, he launched himself forward, punching it clear just as Emanuele Vignato leapt in for a header.

The clearance, though decisive, was not entirely out of danger. It fell to Wilfried Gnonto, who chested it down just outside the box, his eyes locked onto the goal. "Gnonto—on the volley!" Gartner roared.

The Italian winger didn't hesitate. He adjusted his footing and struck the ball with venom, aiming for the bottom corner through the sea of bodies. It was a textbook half-volley, sweetly struck and arrowing toward the goal. But just as the Italian fans jumped to their feet in anticipation, a flash of white intervened—Armel Bella-Kotchap.

The German centre-back threw himself across the path of the ball, his massive frame absorbing the impact as it struck him square in the torso. The force sent him reeling back, but he held his ground, quickly scrambling to his feet to ensure the danger was fully averted.

"Unbelievable defending from Bella-Kotchap!" Gartner praised. "Germany is throwing everything at Italy to protect this lead!"

With the ball still loose, Engelhardt reacted first, getting his body between Gnonto and the ball before sending a clearance upfield. The Italian pressure had been relentless in these last moments, but they

had survived finally allowing the supporters to come up for air. Baum on the sidelines also breathed a sigh of relief as he had been expecting any of those shots to go in.

He couldn't even have blamed his players if they had conceded as those were good chances that the Italian side had created. Lucky for him his players dug deep and showed what they can do, defending their lead at any cost. As the clock ticked toward 45 minutes, the fourth official raised the board: 2 minutes of stoppage time.

Chapter 415 415 Tactical

[Wed, 29/05/2019, 17:46, Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, Poland]

Germany had weathered the storm. Their goal remained intact, but the Italian side had made their intentions clear—they would not go into the break without a fight. With two minutes of stoppage time left, Italy were still pushing, determined to find the equalizer before halftime.

Paul Gartner's voice carried the tension of the moment. "This has been an intense last ten minutes for Germany. Italy have thrown everything at them, but so far, the defence has stood strong. Two minutes of stoppage time—can Germany hold on, or will Italy finally break through?"

Germany restarted play with a goal kick, Unbehaun signalling for his team to push up the field. He sent a long, powerful punt toward Moukoko, who leapt for the header against Gabbia. The Italian defender won the aerial duel, but his clearance only reached Engelhardt, who immediately switched play to the right, finding Batista Meier.

Meier controlled the ball with his chest and quickly flicked it toward Wirtz, who turned sharply to evade Rovella's pressing.

"Germany looking to break just before halftime. They've absorbed a lot of pressure—now can they dish some back?" Gartner asked.

Rakim Rex had been lurking on the left flank, waiting for his moment. As Wirtz lifted his head, he spotted the winger making his move, sprinting in behind Bellanova. Without hesitation, Wirtz sent a lofted through-ball toward him.

"And here comes Rex once again! Can Italy handle him this time?" Gartner's voice rose in anticipation.

Rakim's first touch was immaculate, cushioning the ball perfectly into his stride as he cut inside. Bellanova desperately tried to recover, but the German winger was already gone, ghosting past the right-back with frightening ease. With space opening up in front of him, Rakim accelerated toward the penalty area, forcing Bove and Gabbia to collapse on him.

Instead of forcing a shot, Rakim spotted Moukoko making a darting run toward the six-yard box. He feinted as if to shoot, then at the last second, slid the ball across the face of the goal. Moukoko stretched—just inches away. The ball rolled past him, flashing across the goal line before skipping out of reach at the back post.

"So close! Rakim Rex with an inch-perfect ball, but no one can apply the finishing touch!" Gartner shouted.

The Italian fans exhaled in relief as Plizzari gathered the loose ball. He wasted no time, hurling it forward to Tonali in midfield. Italy had one last chance before the whistle. Tonali charged forward, skipping past Engelhardt before spreading the ball wide to Kean. The Juventus winger, desperate to make something happen, took on Simon Asta, driving toward the byline. Asta held his ground, staying tight to Kean, forcing him into a difficult angle.

But Kean had other ideas. Instead of crossing, he cut inside at the last second and rifled a low, drilled shot toward the near post. Unbehaun had been facing that way as his positioning was perfect and didn't waste time dropping down quickly and parried the ball away with both hands. The ball rolled out of the box toward Niklas Tauer, who booted it into the stands just as the referee blew his whistle.

[Halftime Germany 1:0 Italy]

The players let out deep breaths, some bending over with their hands on their knees. The first half had been gruelling—tactically intense, physically demanding, and emotionally charged. The Germans jogged toward the tunnel with their heads held high, knowing they had executed their game plan well. Meanwhile, the Italians exchanged frustrated glances, their expressions filled with determination to turn things around in the second half.

Paul Gartner wrapped up his halftime analysis. "A fascinating first half here in Bydgoszcz. Germany took the lead through a brilliant Rakim Rex assist and a clinical Moukoko finish, but Italy tested them with wave after wave of attacks. A post, a last-ditch block, and a fantastic performance from Luca Unbehaun have kept the Azzurrini off the scoresheet. Can Germany hold on, or will Italy find a way back into this match? We'll find out in the second half!"

As the players disappeared down the tunnel, the cameras panned to the fans. The German supporters were jubilant, singing and waving their flags, while the Italian fans remained hopeful, urging their team on with passionate chants.

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[Wed, 29/05/2019, 18:00, Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, Poland]



"Here we go once again another chance for glory for both sides as Malik Tillman is set to kick off for the German side. He replaces Youssoufa Moukoko today's goal scorer due to injury reasons, Im yet to be told the specifics." Paul Gartner stated as he tried to hype up the viewers on the stream as both sides got into their formation.

From the looks of it, Germany shifted into a more defensive 4-2-3-1 formation from their previous attacking 4-3-3. Baum opted for stability since they were already leading as he prompted the midfield pivot of Angelo Stiller and Niklas Tauer to stay back more. Breaking IP the Italian counters and supporting the attacking quartet became their primary role.

With the added fresh set of legs from Malik Tillman their attacks should become more threatening or energetic at the least. In the Italian's case, they adopted a more attacking strategy focused on spreading the Germans wide which was doomed to fail if their opponents followed Baum's instructions. The German Coach had repeatedly emphasized for them to narrow the midfield on the counter.

Was he worried about crosses? the simple answer was yes but he trusted his two central defenders Ariel Dominance more. The whistle blew, and the second half commenced with Italy pushing forward looking to press early in search of an equalizer. However, the German sides didn't let the pressure rattle them as they kept possession calmly letting their opponents run after the zipping ball.

The two defensive pivots dictated the flow of passes like clockwork as the rest of the team reacted like a well-oiled machine. Running into space, pass repeat unfolded as the players manoeuvred around their opponents effectively retaining possession of the ball. The only common sequence in this was the fact that Yannik Engelhardt and Niklas Tauer remained in the middle of the pitch.

The other players worked around them often switching positions with their teammates as they treated their opponents like obstacles. The Italians, growing frustrated, began to press more aggressively, hoping to disrupt the Germans' rhythm. Sandro Tonali pushed higher, attempting to intercept passes

from Engelhardt and Tauer, while Rovella and Vignato tried to block the passing lanes to Wirtz. This change in intensity led to a few scrappy moments, with both sides engaging in physical duels across the pitch.

In the 52nd minute, Italy finally forced a turnover. Moise Kean dispossessed Asta on the right flank and surged forward, cutting inside with a burst of speed. He slid a precise pass into the feet of Giacomo Raspadori, who attempted a first-time shot, but Bella-Kotchop was quick to react, throwing himself into a vital block that sent the ball spinning out for a corner.

From the resulting set piece, Tonali whipped in a dangerous cross. Matteo Gabbia rose highest, connecting with a powerful header, but Unbehaun reacted swiftly, stretching out to parry the ball away with a firm hand. The Germans cleared their lines and attempted to slow down the tempo, unwilling to get dragged into a chaotic end-to-end battle.

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Baum, sensing that Italy was beginning to find their momentum, gestured for his side to compact their shape even further. Rakim Rex and Oliver Batista Meier were instructed to drop deeper, helping out in midfield while Malik Tillman operated as the lone outlet in attack. This was the plan until they weathered the attacking onslaught from their Italian opponents.

Despite Germany's disciplined defensive approach, Italy remained persistent. Wilfried Gnonto began to find space on the right, testing Katterbach with his quick feet and direct dribbling. In the 56th minute, Gnonto managed to break through, cutting inside and unleashing a fierce strike from just outside the box.

Chapter 416 416 Who Wants It More

[Wed, 29/05/2019, 18:00, Zdzisław-Krzyszowski-Stadion, Poland]

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The other players worked around them often switching positions with their teammates as they treated their opponents like obstacles. The Italians, growing frustrated, began to press more aggressively, hoping to disrupt the Germans' rhythm. Sandro Tonali pushed higher, attempting to intercept passes from Engelhardt and Tauer, while Rovella and Vignato tried to block the passing lanes to Wirtz. This change in intensity led to a few scrappy moments, with both sides engaging in physical duels across the pitch.

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Despite Germany's disciplined defensive approach, Italy remained persistent. Wilfried Gnonto began to find space on the right, testing Katterbach with his quick feet and direct dribbling. In the 54th minute, Gnonto managed to break through, cutting inside and unleashing a fierce strike from just outside the

box. The ball swerved menacingly, towards the far post leaving Unbehaun rooted to the ground unable to react fast enough.

Already prepared to fish the ball out of his net as the Italian fans screamed in jubilation the loud clang of the ball bouncing off the bar resounded. The ball rattled the crossbar and bounced back into play, causing a moment of chaos in the German penalty area. Moise Kean was the quickest to react, lunging forward to strike the rebound. However, Unbehaun, now fully alert, dove bravely at Kean's feet, smothering the shot before Bella-Kotchap cleared the ball into touch.

The Italians groaned in frustration. They had come agonizingly close to an equalizer, but luck was not on their side. Meanwhile, Germany took the opportunity to slow down the game, methodically passing the ball around their defensive line, making Italy chase shadows once again.

In the 60th minute, Germany looked to capitalize on Italy's aggressive positioning. Engelhardt intercepted a pass intended for Rovella and immediately released Wirtz with a quick ball through the middle. Wirtz surged forward, skipping past Tonali with a clever feint before sliding a precise pass to Rakim Rex on the left wing.

Rex, having been relatively quiet in the second half due to his defensive duties, now had a chance to stretch his legs. He drove at Bellanova, using his long strides to eat up yards of grass keeping the ball under close control shifting the ball rapidly between his feet. With a sudden burst of acceleration, he cut inside only to backtrack to the outside once Bellanova moved to unlock him.

Accelerating to the side of the box he sent a curling cross into the box aiming for the area around the penalty spot. Malik Tillman leapt for the cross, challenging Matteo Gabbia in the air, but the Italian defender did just enough to put him off. The ball skimmed off Tillman's head and fell to Oliver Batista Meier's feet at the box's edge.

Batista Meier struck a first-time shot without hesitation, but his effort was wild, sending the ball piercing into the stands behind the Italian goal. Alessandro Plizzari breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing this knowing that his team could not afford to fall behind further. Not scared by the near goal they conceded Italy responded with renewed urgency, pushing forward once again.

In the 64th minute, Sandro Tonali orchestrated another Italian attack, spraying a diagonal pass to Moise Kean, who had switched flanks in search of more space. Kean controlled the ball expertly and took on Simon Asta, using a quick step-over to create a yard of space before whipping a low cross into the box. Asta was there though with an outstretched leg to send the ball flying out for a throw-in.

Italy continued their assault, keenly aware that time was running out. Baum shouted instructions from the touchline, urging his players to remain disciplined, but the intensity of the match was rising with every passing minute. The Italians were beginning to take more risks, committing more bodies forward in search of an equalizer.

In the 67th minute, Italy's persistence finally paid off. Niccolò Rovella, who had been operating in deeper positions for most of the match, made an intelligent late run into the final third. Vignato spotted his movement and threaded a delicate through ball between Engelhardt and Tauer. Rovella took one touch to control before dinking a perfectly weighted pass over the German defence into the path of Giacomo Raspadori. The striker took it on the half-volley, smashing the ball past the out-rushing Unbehaun and into the top corner.

The Italian supporters erupted as the scoreboard flashed 1-1. Raspadori sprinted towards the sideline, celebrating wildly with his teammates. Germany had been breached at last, and now the game was back in the balance. They could be seen staring at their celebrating opponents with dejected expressions not understanding where things had gone wrong.

"When you ask you shall be answered, and this Italian side has defiantly been knocking on this German gate. Rovella perfectly placed through ball set up Giacomo Raspadori who shot a canon into their goal." Paul Gartner exclaimed with excitement his voice barely audible over the more than 7,000 Italian supporters in attendance.

Baum reacted swiftly, making tactical adjustments to regain control of the match. He instructed Engelhardt to press higher, attempting to break up Italy's build-up play before it reached dangerous areas. Meanwhile, Rakim was given more freedom to attack, pushing further forward and looking to exploit any defensive gaps left by Italy's more aggressive approach.

The tactical shift had an immediate impact as the German side who had just lost their lead seemed to wake up from their slumber. Their passes which had been solely to retain possession now carried more danger as Rakim and Oliver attacked the wings with more aggression. Their aggression paid off in the 69th minute when Oliver Batista Meier could be seen breaking through on the right flank.

Snaking past Moise Kean he cut inwards just before Alessandro Itallys left-back could step up to challenge him. He gained speed and looked like he would go all the way as he neared the box, but it was then that Sandro Tonali came sliding in from behind. He miss-timed his slide tackle taking out the speeding Meier sending him crashing to the ground.

Chapter 417 417 Bing-bop-boom-boom-boom-bop-bam

[Wed, 29/05/2019, 18:00, Zdzisław-Krzyszkowiak-Stadion, Poland]

Andrés Matonte, the Uruguayan referee, did not hesitate to blow his whistle as he reached for his pocket. The Italian players swarmed around him, protesting the decision, but Tonali's challenge had been reckless, and there was little room for argument. The referee raised a yellow card, booking Tonali for the foul as Germany was awarded a free kick in a dangerous position just outside the box.

This could barely appease the angry Germans who would have sent the Italian midfielder off if it were up to them, he would take a walk off the pitch. Luckily Meier wasn't injured and was seen hopping on the pitch moments later after a quick check by the medical team. Florian and Rakim decided to execute the set piece and could be seen discussing who to execute it just behind the ball.

"I think we should go with a woosh, the swish and finally bang," Wirtz said to his teammate, donning a contemplative expression as he eyed the four-man wall being set up. Rakim, hearing his words, simply nodded his head, acting as if he understood what the guy was saying.

Not willing to give up he responded with an equally confident tone. "Naw we should try a Boom, bat, boom, or maybe a Bing-bop-boom-boom-boom-bop-bam," He responded as he pointed to one of the opposing players standing in the wall looking like he was genuinely pointing out something they could use.

"Alright we will go with the second one, I'll be player two just make sure you don't miss," Wirtz responded with a smile, but this time covered his mouth with his hand. "When have I ever missed, the day that happens god must be sick, or the dimensions of the goal don't match official standards." Rakim simply responded with a smile as he took a hairband from his wrist to tie his loose dreads into a ponytail.

The referee blew his whistle, and the stadium fell silent in anticipation. Rakim took a few measured steps back taking a curved run up looking like he would bend it like Beckham with his left foot. While Wirtz positioned himself in a straighter line looking like he would either shoot or make an in-swing cross. The Italians braced themselves, eyes locked onto the ball ready to face this calamity.

Wirtz took a deep breath as he scanned the wall pushing his focus to the max as he felt the pressure of the moment. Closing his eyes for a second, he sent a glance to Rakim who simply looked at the wall with a neutral smile not at all rushing him. Spitting to the side he was finally ready, taking a measured run up his gait opened up as he picked up speed.

The players in the wall already realised that he wasn't performing a feint and looked to want to smash the ball into the goal. Whether they became collateral damage this young 16-year-old didn't seem to care as he smiled brightly. When he reached the ball with his foot raised all of them jumped into the air ready to put their bodies on the line.



However, the shot never came as they watched in dismay as young Havertz skipped over the ball leaving them floating in the air for no reason. What worried them though was the cold face of Rakim closing in on the ball and he would definitely take the shot, after all, there wasn't anyone else left. So, the players who had just landed immediately jumped into the air with even more power than before knowing for sure that Rakim would shoot.

(Thud) Sure enough, the sound of the ball being hit resounded, but in the next moment, they were left stupefied once again. The expected shot never arrived. Instead, they watched in horror as Wirtz, down the side of the 18-yard box just a couple of steps away from the byline, calmly received the ball without anyone around him.

He took a calm touch and geared up to send a cross into the box as he slowly dribbled inward. Seeing this, the players in the wall who had just jumped up scrambled to land and all rushed his way just as he dribbled into the box. Wirtz remained composed despite having Italian players converge on him from all directions.

Just as he reached the five-yard box from the side and Alessandro Tripaldelli, Italy's left back, was about to pounce on him, he squared a no-look pass to the top of the box. All players had converged on him, from the 4 in that wall to the defenders who were already in the box, moved to block passing lanes and rushed to close him down.

The ball rolled perfectly into the path of Rakim ghosted in unmarked to the edge of the D at the top of the box. He didn't adjust his stance as he was already geared up to strike the oncoming ball, with a sharp exhale, unleashed a venomous strike. The ball rocketed through the air, swerving past a lunging Tonali and an outstretched Plizzari.

Time seemed to slow as the ball thundered into the top left corner of the net sending it bulging with power as it looked like it would pierce through any moment. The German fans erupted, their deafening

cheers drowning out the stunned silence of the Italian supporters. Rakim turned away, arms spread wide, a bright smile on his face as he sprinted to the right corner flag.

Pointing his finger at Wirtz, he put an arm around him, dragging him to celebrate with him. They were quickly joined by the rest of their teammates, who were rushed to embrace the duo. It was then that Rakim pushed everyone away, forming a semi-circle and bent down as if to pick up something. He acted as if it was heavy and beckoned Wirtz over, and the latter came to help him, acting as if he was putting something in the imaginary tube Rakim was holding.

Only then did Rakim dig deep to pick it up and slung it over his shoulder, and Wirtz, as if realising it was pointed at him, comically fell to the ground. Rakim, confused at this, turned to look at him, inadvertently pointing his rocket launcher to the right half of the semi-circle. Passing the vibe check, they also proceeded to dodge by throwing themselves to the ground or doing their best to shimmy out of the way.

Confused again, Rakim looked to the left half only for the same to occur, and only then did he seem to realise what was going on. Smacking his head with his free hand, he turned towards the German crowd behind the corner flag and crouched down to aim at them. A second later, he comically fell backwards as if suffering from the recoil, and the crowd exclaimed, "BOOOM," also passing the vibe check.

Paul Gartner's laughter echoed in the commentary box. "Now that's how you celebrate a crucial goal! I think we've just witnessed the youngest tandem to ever fire an imaginary rocket launcher at the crowd!" he chuckled as replays of the audacious celebration flashed on the stadium screens.

"I don't fault them though after orchestrating a goal like that they can celebrate as wild as they want without receiving shade from me. 70th minute the score changes once again as Germany leads with 2 goals, and Italy trails with 1 goal." He continued saying doing his job of hyping up the crowd as the players finished their celebrations.

Chapter 418 418 Late Drama & Cards

As the German players finished their rocket-launcher celebration, they jogged back to their half of the pitch with renewed energy. A quick glance at the scoreboard confirmed it was the 70th minute, Germany now leading 2-1. The Italians were clearly rattled, and their frustration seeped into their body language as they prepared to restart the match.

Almost immediately from the kick-off, Moise Kean attempted to spark a response by pressing the German backline aggressively, urging his teammates forward to try to seize control again. Several passes flew around the midfield in quick succession, with the Azzurrini desperate to find an immediate route back into the contest.

Sandro Tonali, despite his recent yellow card, still acted as the orchestrator in midfield, barking instructions at Niccolò Rovella and Emanuele Vignato to push higher. Italy's shape began to morph into something more akin to a 4-2-4, as Bellanova advanced up the right flank and Tripaldelli hugged the left, eager to provide overlap.

On the German side, the second goal brought a surge of confidence. Yannik Engelhardt and Niklas Tauer tightened their grip on midfield, snuffing out Italian attacks before they could truly spark. Baum, arms folded on the sideline, seemed content with a more compact structure. He repeatedly gestured for his team to keep their shape, especially whenever Kean or Gnonto tried to burst in behind.

In the 73rd minute, Italy forged an opportunity. Tonali picked out Vignato with a neat through ball between Katterbach and Bella-Kotchab. Vignato's first touch was promising, but he was immediately sandwiched by the towering centre-backs. The ball ricocheted loose, and Simon Asta stepped up to clear it convincingly back into the Italian half, wiping out the danger.

"They're chasing the game, and they know it," Paul Gartner commented as the Italians stepped up their attacking urgency. "Not much time remains for Italy to salvage at least a draw. But if Germany remains this organized and calm at the back, it'll take something special to find a second goal."

"Undeterred, Italy's front three continued to press. Gnonto especially seemed fired up by the deficit, buzzing around the edge of the box, testing the footwork of Katterbach with his nimble dribbling. In the 76th minute, Gnonto took advantage of a slip by Katterbach, darting past him along the byline. As he squared the ball into the six-yard box, Raspadori—who had already scored once—lurched forward, but Ehlers got there first with an outstretched foot that poked it safely behind for a corner.

Alessandro Plizzari stepped off his line, waving the Italians forward for the corner. Tonali trotted across to deliver the set piece. He whipped in an in-swinging cross that soared toward the near post, where Gabbia attempted a flick-on header. The ball rattled around in a chaotic scramble, pinballing off legs and chests before it finally fell to Bella-Kotchap, who blasted it decisively upfield.

The Germans nearly sprang a counter from that clearance. Oliver Batista Meier collected it near the halfway line, turned swiftly, and slipped a pass ahead to the surging Rakim Rex. The newly minted goalscorer lost his man with deft movement and acceleration as he used his long legs to eat up yards of grass. Racing toward the penalty area, the ball continued to alternate from both of his feet as he started to pick up speed.

He didn't get far though as just as he skipped past Bellanova and Niccolò through a deft display of footwork he was sent crashing to the ground. Bove slid across to meet him with a crunching tackle, his timing impeccable as he dispossessed him cleanly to the roar of the Italian fans. Some German fans called for a foul but the referee was having none of that and motioned for them to play on.

As the clock edged towards the final ten minutes, the match took on a frenzied pace. Italy threw more bodies forward, with Tripaldelli occasionally tucking into midfield to allow Gnonto free rein on the flank. Germany, for their part, stuck to a disciplined approach, closing down spaces and snapping into tackles, determined to preserve their hard-earned lead.

In the 79th minute, tensions rose once more. Tonali and Tauer clashed in a bruising 50-50 challenge, leaving both men on the ground. The referee blew for a foul on Tauer, and he quickly hopped to his feet, offering Tonali a hand in a grudging show of sportsmanship only to have it knocked away by the Italian.

Tauer didn't mind it and simply shrugged his shoulders as he jogged back into position ready to defend this set piece.

Matonte kept his cards in his pocket this time, opting instead for a firm warning on both players but especially there German Midfielder. From the resulting free kick, Tonalì floated the ball into the area. The German defence, anchored by Bella-Kotchab, rose to meet it, heading clear with authority.

The deflected ball fell near the centre circle, where Engelhardt sent a pass wide to Oliver Batista Meier to try to ignite another counter. It didn't lead to much though as the winger already fatigued from all the running failed to latch onto the speeding ball. Baum on the sidelines took this as a prompt and called for Jamie Leweling to finish his warm-up.

By the 82nd minute, both managers were pacing in their technical areas as they both made their substitutions. Jamie on for the fatigued Oliver adding some more energy to the right flank. Meanwhile, Italy also shuffled the deck. Edoardo Bove (the centre-back) made way for Andrea Pinamonti, a more traditional striker, in an effort to bolster the attack.

Emanuele Vignato left the pitch as well, replaced by Davide Frattesi to add more drive in midfield. The Italians reorganized into what looked like a 3-2-3-2 shape, intent on throwing numbers forward in search of an equalizer. Baum on the sidelines gestured for his team to punish them on the counter using their speed and efficiency.

As Italy pressed forward, leaving spaces behind, Germany saw an opportunity to exploit the gaps. In the 85th minute, Rakim Rex picked up the ball near the halfway line and immediately drove forward on the middle channel, gliding past Frattesi with ease. Spotting Jamie Leweling making a run down the right flank, he threaded a perfectly weighted pass into his path.

Leweling surged forward, his fresh legs giving him an advantage over the weary Italian defenders. He took a touch to steady himself and squared a low cross into the box, aiming for Malik Tillman, who had positioned himself between the centre-backs. However, Matteo Gabbia anticipated the danger, stretching out a leg to intercept and clear the ball just as Tillman was about to pounce.

The Italians regrouped and launched another desperate attack in the 87th minute. Tonalì played a quick one-two with Rovella before lifting a lofted ball into the box for Pinamonti. The substitute striker outmuscled Ehlers and managed to get his head to the ball, directing it towards goal. Unbehaun, however, reacted swiftly, diving low to his left to smother the attempt.

As the game entered the 89th minute, the tension in the stadium was palpable. Germany remained disciplined, maintaining their defensive shape and denying Italy any clear opportunities. Baum continued barking instructions, urging his players to remain focused until the final whistle.

Italy's last real chance came in the first minute of stoppage time. Gnonto picked up the ball on the right, danced past Katterbach, and fired a venomous shot toward the near post. Unbehaun was equal to it, parrying the ball away. The rebound fell to Pinamonti, but Bella-Kotchap reacted quickest, lunging in to block the follow-up effort.

With time running out, Germany slowed the pace, keeping possession and forcing Italy to chase. In the 93rd minute, Simon took the ball to the corner, shielding it from Bellanova before drawing a foul, effectively running down the clock. As Matonte checked his watch one last time, he blew the final whistle. Germany had held firm, securing a 2-1 victory in the second round of Group B.

"Well, folks there you have it Germany rises to the occasion and archives their first victory in Poland rising to second in the group. Japan's 3:0 thrashing of Mexico puts them firmly in the lead in this highly contested group." Paul Gartner stated with a grin as the German fans jumped in jubilation celebrating their victory

Chapter 419 419 Haaland?

[20:00]

The air in the Germany U-20 dressing room was thick with sweat and adrenaline. The echoes of the roaring crowd outside had barely begun to fade as the players crashed onto the benches, some laughing, others still catching their breath. "Eight to one!" Kevin Ehlers shook his head in disbelief as he wiped sweat from his brow. "We massacred them, I think I even saw one of them crying after Wirtz banged in number 7."

"Hey, don't blame it on me unlike Mr bogeyman over here who bagged 5 and decided to assist one just because he could even though he was one on one with the keeper." Wirtz quickly defended himself causing another bout of laughter to ensue in the changing room. "Like for real what did they say to make you crash out and drop a nightmare on them."

All gazes turned towards Rakim who was taking out his worn-down Apex11's World Cup edition which had been new at the start of the match. They had all seen him try more than he would usually as he actively called for the ball and seemed to appear whenever they needed an outlet for passes. The guy was everywhere taking his free-roaming role to the next level as at some point he was dropping down to their own box to collect the ball.

That was when they were winning 6:0 and he had already scored a hat trick, so despite no one dare to ask during the game they all believed that one of the Mexico players had killed his dog or something. That was the only way to explain it as the winger had been ruthless performing his signature griddy after each goal even when it wasn't him that scored. "Huh I just love scoring goals," Rakim responded with a straight face causing his teammates to send their dirty socks flying towards him.

"Yeah, and I love ice cream don't mean I'm gonna start a war to get it," Angelo said in exasperation not willing to accept that response as the reason for what he had just witnessed. he had made the starting lineup for this match and had a front row seat to what had quickly turned into the Rakim show.

"Fine the guy said something about my limited-edition Naruto Kimono, my card collection and something about my girl, but it was the comment on my Pj's that pushed me over the edge," Rakim explained with a serious expression as he began packing up his stuff ready to hit the shower. "Oh, by one of them thought he could get a rise out of me by talking about my dread, what a rookie."

The room fell silent following his words as Rakim Headed for the showers, but no one dared to speak a word. They all looked into each other's eyes with a mixture of surprised, baffled, stupefied and incredulous expressions. One thought quickly settled in everyone's minds, but it was Youssoufa Moukoko who voiced it. "This N\*\$a Crazy with a capital C. Wirtz you might want to move room he the type sleepwalk and hold conversations with himself."

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[20:30]

Half an hour later all the players had taken their turn in the shower as they cleaned up and freshened themselves. The windows and mirrors were steaming from the hot vapour almost misty as the players sprayed their deodorants as if they were banishing the sweat. None of them minded this though as they listened to music and relished in their victory and the completion of the group stage.

It was at this moment that Coach Baum barged into the changing room and started coughing violently as he waded through the dense fog of deodorant and sweat, swatting at the air as if he were trying to clear a battlefield of smoke. "Jesus Christ, you lot trying to fumigate the place?" he wheezed, his voice gravelly from years of shouting at players.

A few chuckles broke out as the players exchanged glances. Kevin Ehlers fanned his nose dramatically. "Blame Wirtz, he went overboard after his third spray—suffocating all of us."



"Unlike you lot I have a girl whom I have to smell nice for, can't be picking up bad habits just because they grouped me with the smelliest players in all of Germany." Wirtz shot back.

Coach Baum ignored the banter and clapped his hands twice, snapping everyone's attention back to him. "Alright, listen up, I've got the final group standings and your next opponent.

"Silence fell over the dressing room, as they all craned their necks to hear what their gaffer would say. Baum smirked. "First off, congratulations, boys. Topping the group. Unbeaten. 12 goals in three matches. That's how you send a message. But don't get ahead of yourselves, the knockout rounds are a different beast."

Angelo Stiller leaned forward, rubbing his hands together. "Alright, spill it. Who's next boss?"

Baum pulled out a folded piece of paper from his tracksuit pocket and straightened it. "We're facing Norway in the Round of 16." A few murmurs broke out.

"Norway?" Jamie Leweling scratched his head. "Didn't they finish second in Group C?"

"Yeah," Malik Tillman chimed in. "Uruguay topped it, but Norway were solid. Two wins, one loss. They beat New Zealand and Honduras but lost to Uruguay."

Baum nodded. "Exactly. They're a physical team, they fight for every ball, and they've got that kid Haaland up top—"

"Haaland, does anyone know that kid?" Wirtz's eyes widened slightly.

"Bro he is like 3 years older than you and If I'm not wrong that kid is the current top goal scorer with 11 goals after dumping 8 on Honduras yesterday." Rakim cut in, shaking his head causing quite a few in the room to scowl with more serious demeanours.

A hush settled over the room as the gravity of the name sank in. None of them had ever seen this Erling Haaland fellow but could already imagine a giant after finding out he had bagged 8 goals just yesterday. Lenn Jastremski scoffed, cracking his knuckles. "Eight goals against Honduras? That isn't impressive. Y'all saw what we did to Mexico, right?"

"Yo, weren't you on the bench?" Youssoufa Moukoko mercilessly commented barely containing his snicker. Angelo and Wirtz on the other hand weren't as polite as they directly burst out laughing, "Ahaha, but he's right though, we could have doubled our goal tally if we had played Honduras today."

Lenn wanted to retort but Baum was quick to put an end to the discussion. He flipped over his tablet showcasing all of the brackets, "Now that I have your attention, here's the full bracket. The top two teams from each group have gone through, just like in a senior World Cup. We're about to see some heavy clashes.

The dressing room, once filled with post-match euphoria, now quieted as all eyes locked onto the bracket displayed on Coach Baum's tablet. The tension shifted from celebratory to focused in an instant.

"Alright, listen up," Baum began, scanning the team. "We know our opponent—Norway. But before we get into that, let's go over the full bracket. The group stage is done, and these are the sixteen teams moving forward."

He adjusted the screen, and the tournament tree became visible:

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Round of 16 Matchups:

1) Senegal vs. Nigeria

2) Uruguay vs. Columbia

3) France vs. USA

4) Germany vs. Norway

5) England vs Panama

6) Argentina vs Mali

7) Japan vs South Korea

8) Italy vs Poland

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"Looks like your boys had some bad luck and pulled franc and here I was looking forward to playing against them" Wirtz whispered to Rakim upon noticing who exactly USA was playing and quickly coming to the conclusion that France would smash them.

"You know what I'm going to lose either way. If they don't make it, I get blamed, if they do and we beat them I get blamed, and if god forbid, they managed to get a one-in-a-million opportunity and beat us I get mocked for being an idiot." Rakim replied with a neutral smile as glanced at his friend. "I am a lot of things, Handsome, Talented, insufferable, annoying and a walking cheat code but an idiot I am not."

Chapter 420 420 King Matteo

[USA U-20 Training Ground – The Night Before Facing France]

The air was thick with anticipation. The floodlights cast long shadows over the training pitch, where the figure of Matteo Smith could be seen dribbling a ball across the empty pitch not minding the light drizzle of rain. His dark locs despite being wet fluttered in the wind as he picked up speed, the ball remaining glued to his feet.

Just as he entered the box from the left side, he looked up at the empty goal but in his eyes the figure of a keeper was visible. Nudging the ball lightly he drew back his foot and then fired a monstrous shot towards goal. The ball cut through the light rain and pierced the top right corner spinning wildly only settling after 3 seconds.

Despite his breathing being dragged he sprinted back to the other side of the field and picked up another ball. With methodical footwork he dribbled past the maze of cones he had set up and once again charged at goal this time from a different angle. The result was the same as the ball once again pierced the top right corner. Tomorrow, they faced France—one of the tournament favourites.

If he was being honest, he did not understand why he was saddled with representing USA in this tournament. Just because he was one of the new young faces for NIKI they made him play for the country all in an attempt to drum up revenue and hype. Yes, they needed him to crush their wunderkind they somehow managed to fumble and now expect him to clean up after them.

Matteo exhaled sharply, rolling a new ball under his feet before flicking it up as he proceeded to juggle it. At first, he didn't care about what they did off the field as they spun a narrative of him being better than Rakim because he genuinely believed it to be true. The fact he was able to move to a better team and the money he received wasn't bad either, only when the comparisons started did things go left.

He went from being the hottest striker to not being skilful enough or suddenly not being social despite his shooting efficiency increasing each game. No matter what he did some netizens or media personalities found ways to nitpick on his play style and even his choices in food. Only later did he realise that he got dragged into the war between Niki and its competitors. With his agent Oliver having made more than his fair share of enemies, those also started to stoke the fire distracting from his on-the-field performance.

Still, Matteo wasn't one to complain as long as he continued to work harder to chase his own dreams. But as NIKI's pettiness with Rakim started affecting his game he had inwardly made a decision he wouldn't resign with them after his contract expires in two years. He had given Oliver an ultimatum to sort out all this BS by the end of this season or find some other dummy as he no longer had the patience for it.

The English man had agreed only asking him to play for the US in this tournament as he was working an angle with Sky in that direction. If not for that request Matteo would have represented his mother's country and joined the super team that is the 3 Lions. Pushing this thought aside he flicked up the ball and immediately volleyed it to the middle of the goal. Crisp. Clean. Ruthless.

"Better than him? I have always been better than him and will crush him under my boot like the bug he is proving once and for all who the king is." He exclaimed as he imagined his shot piercing through Rakim's smiling face, shattering it as the ball pierced the goal.

Matteo stood still, chest rising and falling as he watched the ball settle at the back of the net. The rain drizzled lightly over the empty training ground, the floodlights above flickering slightly in the mist. His pulse was still racing—not just from the drills, but from the fire that had been building in his gut for months.

He hated the way Rakim's name always found a way into his story like an annoying fly that didn't know its place. No matter how much he trained, no matter how much he improved, there was always that unspoken comparison. The media had latched onto it like leeches, sucking the joy out of every goal he scored.

"The new golden boy of American soccer."

"The future No. 9 of the U.S. Men's National Team."

"But can he ever match Rakim Rex's flair and dominance?"

"Canon over grace full flair is this the future of US Soccer,"

These voices needed to stop and the sooner the better otherwise someone would have to pay. Matteo walked to the sideline, grabbing his water bottle and squeezing it too tightly before taking a sip. "Hey Matteo, get in here right now, are you trying to catch a cold before tomorrow's match?" Tab Ramos USA's head coach exclaimed from the entrance of the sports centre looking quite livid.

He had done a room check and everyone was in attendance except this eccentric striker who was never where he was supposed to be. If not for his goal-scoring efficiency and ability to create goals he would have benched him a long time ago. But he couldn't fault the kid's dedication as he always went above and beyond whether it was training or in games.

His only fault is that he cared more about his own accolades rather than the team's success. As long as he was performing to his own insane standard he wouldn't care if the team was losing by six goals as long as he had scored a hat trick. "All good coach I've trained in worse weather in Manchester and never got sick," Matteo replied nonchalantly but still jogged over after picking up all the loose balls putting them back in their place.

"Sigh just go get a hot shower and see the doctor at the first sign of a cough," Ramos stated as he pulled the striker into the door not willing to let him stand in the cold any longer. Matteo simply nodded as he took off his soaked-through pair of NIKI superfly boots placing them on a designated rack as he slipped don a pair of sliders.

"Don't worry coach I will score as many as you need me to, it's what I do after all," Matteo stated with a confident smile before making his way towards his room not waiting for a response.

Matteo walked down the dimly lit hallway of the team hotel, his damp locs still clinging to his forehead despite the quick towel dry. His footsteps were light, but his mind was anything but. His fingers clenched into fists. "Tomorrow, I bury France and whoever else comes in my way."

Just as he turned the corner toward his room, a familiar voice called out from behind. "Yo, Matt!" Matteo glanced over his shoulder. Giovanni Reyna and Yunus Musah. Two of the few guys in the squad he actually respected. Like him, they both played for big teams in Europe with Giovanni even making his debut for Dortmund.

The sight of Yunus irritated him more than it should have as the guy always found a way to get under his skin. Yunus leaned casually against the hallway wall; arms crossed. Reyna had his hands shoved into the pockets of his sweats, looking utterly bored like he didn't want to be here despite starting the conversation.

Matteo barely held back the urge to just walk past them like they didn't exist, but he needed these foot soldiers if he was going to achieve his goals of conquest. "You were out there training in the rain again, weren't you?" Yunus asked, shaking his head.

Matteo shrugged. "You already know the answer to that."

"Man, we play France in a few hours. Don't gas yourself out before the real fight," Reyna said, stepping closer.

Matteo rolled his eyes. "You think I don't know my limits? If you guys weren't to hang up on some dude who turned his back on his country I wouldn't have to carry us through the group stage."

Yunus visibly enraged by his words stepped up getting right in his face. "This isn't about him, and you know it, we want to win more than anyone, but it gets hard linking up play when you don't follow the game plan,"



Matteo burst out laughing upon hearing his words. "Hahah, I don't think you get it, my job is to score whatever chance the team creates no matter how good or bad. So, if you want to win figure out your job and do it don't go poking your nose in my business. I am not Rakim, I am not your friend and most importantly I do not care as long as I score goals if we win that's just a by-product."