

Football 461

Chapter 461 461 Goal

The intensity continued to rise, the match shifting rapidly from one end of the pitch to the other. Germany quickly reorganized after Kim Jung-min's attempt. Stiller, acting as Germany's defensive pivot, took control, methodically distributing the ball as he sought to re-establish Germany's tempo. They entered their familiar possession game, moving the ball across both flanks in an attempt to stretch the Korean defence wide.

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In the 20th minute, Wirtz found Rakim in space again, who had now drifted deeper, dropping back slightly from his advanced left-wing position. Rakim pivoted gracefully as he received the ball, immediately turning and driving forward. His first touch allowed him to push past the aggressive press from Eom Won-sang, who chased desperately behind him.

"Rakim's turning on the jets again," Paul Gartner commented, excitement tingling in his voice. "Korea has got to shut down these runs or risk punishment."

Rakim raced down the wing, head up, scanning for his options. Choi Jun cautiously stepped off, wary of letting Rakim cut inwards and turn him into a highlight reel. However, the space he gave was the time Rakim needed to pick out one of his teammates who had gotten active the moment he started driving forward.

He sent a pinpoint diagonal chipped-through ball over the last line of defence, aiming for the area Kevin Shade was running into. The right winger let the ball drop at the rightmost edge of the box before he used its bounce to flick it inwards with the outside of his left boot, cleverly bypassing Hong Hyun-Seok, skipping past his marker as he entered the box.

Shade swiftly glanced up, the goal in clear sight, the angle was tight, but he didn't hesitate to unleash a vicious strike with his stronger right foot. Lee Gwang-yeon reacted instantly, thrusting out his gloves to deflect the shot skyward. The ball soared upwards, spinning wildly before dropping menacingly into the crowded six-yard box. A chaotic scramble ensued, bodies colliding and stretching desperately to reach it first.

"Massive save again by Lee Gwang-yeon!" shouted Gartner, barely audible over the roar from the stands. "South Korea is living dangerously here!"

Amidst the frantic scramble, Moukoko lunged forward, stretching his leg out to tap the ball goalward. Just as it looked certain to ripple the net, Kim Hyun-woo threw his body heroically in the path, diverting the effort inches wide of the post.

"What incredible defending by Kim Hyun-woo!" Stewart marvelled. "He threw himself at that like his life depended on it. You can't coach heart like that."

Germany took the resulting corner quickly. Wirtz whipped in a deadly cross to the area around the near post. Youssoufa Moukoko jumped headfirst muscling Lee Jae-ik out of the way as he brought his head to the ball. The ball rocketed to the near post, smack dab into Hwang Tae-hyeon's face, who was guarding the near post.

He fell backwards following the hit, but he had done his job of stopping the ball's momentum. The stadium collectively inhaled as the ball fell to the ground, and nearby players lunged in trying to reach the ball first. Lee Gwang-yeon was the closest to the ball, though, and he wasted no second leaping across his line, smothering the ball in his hands before it could bounce up.

The crowd let out a collective breath as Lee Gwang-yeon held firmly onto the ball, quickly rising to his feet and signalling his teammates forward. Hwang Tae-Hyeon gingerly stood up, rubbing his face and receiving pats of encouragement from Kim Hyun-woo and Lee Jae-ik for his bravery.

"South Korea is walking a tightrope defensively," Gartner said, still amazed by the sequence. "Their goalkeeper has been phenomenal, but how long can they hold off this relentless pressure?"

"Credit to Lee Gwang-yeon," Stewart responded, "He's single-handedly kept his team alive, but Germany is surely sensing blood."

South Korea attempted to recompose itself, pushing slightly higher as Lee Kang-in urged his teammates forward, eager to relieve some pressure from their backline. However, their attempt to build from the back was short-lived, as Angelo Stiller broke up play again in midfield, immediately launching Germany forward with a quick diagonal pass to Rakim.

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Rakim, isolated once more against Choi Jun on the left byline just a few paces away from the opposing box. He squared his heels, touching the edge of the byline as the ball rested in between his feet.

He feinted once with a quick but subtle shift of his left shoulder as his left leg flashed over the ball, testing the defender's reaction speed. Choi, determined not to be embarrassed again, refused to dive in early, but the subtle shift of his boots on the grass as he dug in, ready to explode, didn't escape Rakim's eyes. Sensing the hesitation, as he was teasingly dragging the ball back and forth across his boots, mixing in a few step-overs as he scanned the area behind him.

His mind was running calculations of how to escape the second and third defenders upon beating his man. Seemingly having enough Choi exploded forward feet first into a mixture of a lunge and slide tackle, forcing Rakim to react in the moment. He did so by subtly lifting the ball forward diagonally with his left foot, vaulting over Choi as the ball connected with his right foot on the ground.

The moment he landed, he used his right foot to pull the ball behind his left leg, turning with the momentum, he used his other leg to drag the ball with him. The McGeady spin went off without a hitch as he broke past Lee Jae-ik, one of the Korean Central defenders, and Kim Jung-min, the defensive midfielder who tried to track back. Turning his head just as Moukoko called for the ball as he made a run towards the goal, to the box as his marker seemed to want to lock onto him.

Seeing this, Rakim's left foot stepped over the ball as he seemed to want to Ronaldo chop the ball. However, just as he was mid-swing, he changed his mind after observing that Moukoko would likely be offside by the time he made the pass. Improvising, his right leg snaked around the ball, manoeuvring it forward and around his left foot as he continued across the top of the 18-yard box.

His sudden decision left Kim Hyun-woo, who had been moving to block off the passing and shooting lane in the wrong position. Rakim was also a little off balance but managed to regain his footing the moment his left foot touched the turf, pushing forward. Without hesitation, his right foot curled a venomous shot around the recovering Korean defender, aiming for the top right corner.

The crowd erupted in anticipation as the ball soared with a wicked spin, slicing through the air toward the far corner. Lee Gwang-yeon, seemingly superhuman tonight, was already airborne, arms stretching desperately, every muscle straining to close the gap. Time seemed to pause as all eyes tracked the trajectory, a mesmerizing curve bending perfectly toward its target.

A thunderous gasp rippled across Motor Lublin Arena as the ball smashed fiercely against the crossbar, rattling the entire goal frame. The rebound rocketed down into the turf, bouncing violently back into the crowded box. Lee Jae-ik lunged, but the bounce deceived him, skipping inches past his boot. Kevin Schade surged in from the far side, sliding in a desperate attempt to poke the ball home.

"Off the bar! Rakim denied by inches!" Gartner's voice cracked with excitement, capturing the intensity perfectly. But Kevin came to the rescue with a violent side volley hammering that ball into the particularly empty net as Lee Gwang-yeon was just springing up.

"Kevin Shade to the rescue!" Stewart exclaimed as the ball pierced the back of the net violently. "All eyes were on Rakim, and Kevin made full use of their oversight, proudly announcing his presence with a crucial goal."

Motor Lublin Arena exploded with jubilant noise as Kevin Schade raced toward the corner flag, roaring passionately in celebration, fists clenched, and arms outstretched. His teammates rushed forward, quickly enveloping him in an ecstatic group embrace near the sideline. Rakim joined moments later, grinning broadly as he wrapped an arm around Kevin's shoulders, playfully tousling his hair.

"What persistence from Germany!" Paul Gartner exclaimed, still buzzing from the drama. "Rakim did everything but score—yet it was Kevin Schade who provided the decisive finish. Lee Gwang-yeon has finally beaten!"

Stewart chuckled appreciatively, adding, "You could feel Germany's frustration building with each denial. This goal has been a long time coming—and now, the dynamics of the match shift drastically."

Chapter 462 462 VAR

[Score Update – Germany 1: 0 South Korea]

South Korea stood frozen, some players with hands on hips, others glancing up at the scoreboard as it flashed the updated tally. For the first time in the match, the Korean backline looked genuinely rattled—exhausted not just physically, but emotionally, after an unrelenting 25 minutes of defending.

Choi Jun bent down, hands on his knees, shaking his head. Lee Gwang-yeon stared up at the crossbar for a moment, then clapped his gloves together, shouting encouragement to his defenders in an attempt to rally their spirits. Even he, the wall for forty minutes, knew momentum had tilted.

"Conceding after putting in so much effort to hold their opponents at bay must sting," Stewart noted grimly, "that's the kind of punch that doesn't just hurt the scoreboard—it can shake confidence."

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the match resumed slowly with neither of the two sides forcing a hasty attack. Germany wanted to maintain the status quo and focused on stabilising things. Korea, on the other hand, used the time to regain their form and look for a way forward as they slowly started gaining more possession of the ball.

They strung together a series of clean passes, working it from Kim Jung-min to Hong Hyun-seok, then out wide to Eom Won-sang. It was in the 31st minute that they managed to launch their first real attack when Eom Won-sang decided to put his dribbling boots on. The winger skipped past Katterbach with a sharp burst of pace, cutting inside toward the edge of the box.

Suddenly, a flicker of danger arose on the pitch and the viewers tensed in anticipation, subconsciously sliding to the edge of their seats. Eom Won-sang didn't shoot as Malik Talabidi closed him down but instead chose to square a pass across the face of the 18-yard box into the feet of Jeong Woo-yeong, who was cutting inward. The Korean left winger turned the moment he received the ball, avoiding Stiller's tackle as he quickly slipped the ball into the box for Oh Se-hun.

"Oh Se-hun!" Paul Gartner loudly exclaimed as the striker's first touch was a piece of beauty instantly killing the ball's momentum with his left foot as he held off Bella-Kotchap.

He turned into space with his back to the goal, rounding Bella-Kotchap who was forced to quickly adjust. But rather than shoot, he flicked it back out to the top of the arc—where Lee Kang-in arrived at full sprint. "Kang-in with a chance to answer back!" Gartner shouted, rising from his seat in the commentary booth.

Lee Kang-in unleashed a blistering strike with his left foot, slicing through the ball with technique and power. The shot dipped violently through the air, arcing toward the bottom left corner. Olschowsky, who had been largely quiet since his first save, sprang to life—diving low, one hand outstretched.

He got a hand to it, but he wasn't able to trap it, but it was enough to send it wide clipping the outside of the post before spinning out for a corner. The Korean fans groaned and applauded all at once—a sigh of near-glory. "Olschowsky matches brilliance with brilliance!" Paul Gartner declared. "You've got to admire that build-up. That was their sharpest move of the half—fluid, composed, and dangerous."

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The resulting corner was taken by Lee Kang-in himself, his left boot curling the ball with venom toward the near post. Kim Hyun-woo surged forward to meet it, but Armel Bella-Kotchap rose higher, powerfully heading it clear. The second ball was recovered by Kim Jung-min outside the box, who volleyed it first-time back toward the goal, only for his effort to cannon off Malik Talabidi's chest and bounce safely into Olschowsky's gloves.

Germany slowed things down again, choosing to possess the ball and pull Korea across the pitch. They moved the ball with precision and intention: Aidonis to Stiller, Stiller to Wirtz, Wirtz to Rakim. Both wingers had now taken up a slightly more central role, drifting inward to force defensive confusion.

Their formation changed from the 4-3-3 to a more defensive 4-1-4-1, allowing the wingers to get more involved in the nitty-gritty of the build-up play. South Korea had clearly adjusted slightly, assigning Hong Hyun-Seok to shadow Rakim more aggressively whenever he touched the ball. They were unwilling to let Choi Jun face the electric winger alone after he had proven that he could easily breeze past the right back.

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The match continued at a simmer, the pace dropping just slightly as fatigue began to creep into legs that had sprinted, pressed, and twisted for nearly an entire half. But inside the tactical lull was an unspoken tension—like a spring coiling tighter. Germany were in control, but South Korea had rediscovered their shape and were pressing higher, looking to turn one mistake into an equalizer.

Inside the centre circle, Angelo Stiller calmly evaded a high press from Lee Kang-in with a slick first-touch pass to Wirtz. The Leverkusen midfielder immediately switched the ball diagonally, sending it skimming toward the left flank—right into Rakim's stride. "Here he comes again," Paul Gartner warned, as Rakim cushioned the ball with his instep and surged down the wing, shrugging off a tired lunge from Choi Jun.

Hong Hyun-Seok scrambled over to help, but Rakim slowed as he reached the edge of the box. He turned inward, dancing just outside the 18-yard line, shifting the ball between both feet. The crowd leaned in. He suddenly dropped his left shoulder, sold a fake shot, and then launched a filthy elastico that left Hong flat-footed. Kim Jung-min slid over to cover, but Rakim already threaded a pass inside to Moukoko, who had checked into the half-space and spun in one motion.

Moukoko backheeled the ball, squaring the ball across the box to Leweling, who was charging in from the opposite flank. Leweling hit it first time just a yard ahead of Hwang Tae-hyeon, who was chasing him. But once again, Lee Gwang-yeon flung himself across his line—catlike and fearless—tipping the ball just wide with his fingertips.

"Gwang-yeon again!" Stewart shouted. "You could write an epic about this kid's saves alone!" Germany earned a corner, and Rakim jogged over to take it, sweat running down his face, chest rising and falling from the effort.

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He whipped it in sharply with his left foot. The ball dipped violently toward the penalty spot. Bella-Kotchap and Kim Hyun-woo rose together, bodies colliding midair. The ball was met, but only partially cleared. It fell outside the box, floating straight to Florian Wirtz, and the midfielder didn't hesitate—he swung through the dropping ball with full force.

A laser. A rocket. A venomous half-volley that screamed toward the top corner. But it was Lee Gwang-yeon again—leaping at full stretch, hand punching it up against the bar. The ball struck the underside and bounced straight down. It hit the line, but the German fans jumped up in joy, celebrating a goal as an avalanche of cheers rained down.

Then it bounced out, Moukoko reacted first, but he was met by Lee Jae-ik, who went to the ground, blocking the second attempt with his body. The ball was deflected out for a goal kick as it rebounded off Jamie's shin, but still the fans were calling for a goal. Seeing this, the Korean players and fans were quick to call for a VAR check, unwilling to accept the goal.

It took a couple of moments for the chaos to calm down as players surrounded the referee, seemingly unwilling to let him leave without hearing them out. Eventually, the referee managed to calm them down and decided to check with his VAR team to see what they had to say. He had been standing at a weird angle and hadn't fully seen the ball land, and his linesman was unsure and habitually called it a goal.

After heading to the side of the field as he watched the plays replay a few times from a different angle until finally coming to a clear decision. Blowing his whistle, as he re-entered the pitch, he pointed to the box, motioning for a goal kick, much to the joy of the Korean contingent.

"No goal!" Gartner gasped. "It didn't cross!"

Chapter 463 463 Flag Stays Down

[45+1]

"Massive moment in this match," Stewart said, his voice tight with tension. "That ball was about as close as physics allows without fully crossing the line. Inches, millimetres maybe—and it's still 1–0."

As the crowd slowly settled, you could feel the collective heartbeat of the Motor Lublin Arena syncing with the tension on the field. The German fans were still reeling, half still believing the ball had gone in, the others left grumbling at VAR. On the other side, the Korean supporters burst into song, rallying behind their team like a dam holding back the tide. Germany, to their credit, didn't protest for long since they were still in the lead.

Lee Gwang-yeon lined up the goal kick and launched it long. Oh Se-hun won the aerial battle over Talabidi, flicking the ball backwards with his head into open space. Eom Won-sang accelerated into the right channel, keeping it in play with a delicate first touch. He curled in a quick low cross—looking for Jeong Woo-yeong cutting inside—but Antonis Aidonis read the danger, sticking out a leg and clearing for a Korean throw-in near the corner flag.

Korea moved quickly now. The VAR scare had breathed new life into their legs. Lee Kang-in dropped into the pocket, calling for the throw. He received it tightly marked, spun off Wirtz with a slick Cruyff turn, then threaded a needle-thin pass between the German lines into Hong Hyun-Seok.

Hong took the ball in stride, then sent a perfectly timed through pass into the run of Jeong Woo-yeong, who had peeled off the shoulder of Aidonis. The ball zipped across the grass—weight perfect. Jeong reached it just outside the box, hesitated for a second, then cut inside on his right foot, brushing past Katterbach.

The stadium buzzed again. Paul Gartner was already half-rising in his chair. Jeong took a quick glance up, then unleashed a curling effort toward the far post. Olschowsky dove. The ball curved and dipped with pace, but just brushed the outside of the upright, grazing the netting on its way out.

"That was nearly the one!" shouted Gartner. "Jeong Woo-yeong had Olschowsky beat! A few degrees closer and we're talking about a thunderous equalizer going into the break!"

The Korean fans groaned—so close, so beautifully close—but it wasn't to be. Shortly afterwards, the referee looked at his watch and finally raised his whistle to his lips. One long blast. Halftime.

[HALFTIME – Germany 1: 0 South Korea]

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[SECOND HALF – 46']

The two teams returned to the pitch with vastly different expressions etched across their faces. Germany looked calm and composed, ready to build on what they had already managed to achieve in

the first half. South Korea, on the other hand, came out with fire in their eyes—the kind that only comes from brushing fingertips against an equalizer and watching it fade into nothing.

The coach had given them an Oscar worthy pep talk that could have made a third-party observer think that his job depended on it. By the time they had exited the changing rooms, everyone's fighting spirit was a blaze ready to give it their all. No substitutions had yet to be made, but no one would be surprised if the coaches started digging into their bag of tricks.

"They've both had time to breathe," Paul Gartner said as the referee blew the whistle to resume play. "Now we find out who wants it more."

Germany reverted to the 4-3-3 formation with which they had started the match with. South Korea mirrored them in kind, sticking with their 4-2-3-1 but pushing their wingers higher, allowing Kim Jung-min to play a more aggressive role as a ball-winner just ahead of the defensive line. It was clear both sides had made tactical tweaks, but neither was ready to throw caution completely to the wind.

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Germany restarted with a crisp series of short passes. Angelo Stiller acted as the deep-lying playmaker under the Korean pressure, as he moved the ball fluidly through the middle, linking up with Florian Wirtz, who had begun finding more joy drifting toward the left half-space alongside Rakim.

The early rhythm of the second half leaned in Germany's favour as they focused on retaining possession and drawing Korea's midfield out of shape. Wirtz and Rakim continued to combine well on the left flank, exchanging short passes to stretch the Korean backline. Rakim attempted to beat Choi Jun down the outside, reaching the byline, but his cross into the box was deflected by Kim Hyun-woo and collected calmly by Lee Gwang-yeon.

Korea responded with a speedy buildup up making good use of their players' pace and agility. The Valencia playmaker turned on the jets and started drilling the ball up the middle lane. He seemed to be running on clouds with the ball stuck to his feet as he dribbled past defenders.

In a matter of moments, Lee Kang-in had advanced into the final third, after gliding past Germany's retreating midfield line. As the defenders closed in, he shifted the ball to his left and found Jeong Woo-yeong in space. Jeong took a touch before sliding it to Cho Young-wook, who had dropped between the lines. With a quick spin, Cho attempted to thread the ball into the feet of Oh Se-hun inside the penalty area, but the pass lacked enough pace. Bella-Kotchop stepped in to intercept and clear the danger efficiently.

Germany quickly transitioned back into possession. Angelo Stiller received the clearance and sent a lateral ball to Antonis Aidonis, who carried it forward under minimal pressure. The tempo instantly dropped from Korea's high speed to Germany's more relaxed pace as they settled the game once again.

[51']

Germany worked the ball methodically across the back line, maintaining composure as they reset their attacking structure. Katterbach offered an outlet on the left, pushing high to support Rakim, while Wirtz shifted centrally to help Stiller facilitate the next buildup.

The midfield trio focused on short, quick exchanges, looking to draw Korea's press before releasing the ball into the flanks. Rakim, operating wide, received a diagonal pass and immediately attracted a double team from Choi Jun and Kim Jung-min. Instead of taking them on, he opted for a one-touch pass back to Wirtz, who sent a floated chipped-through ball into the box.

Yousoufa Moukoko, who had been positioned in between the two Korean central defenders, timed his run perfectly, beating any offside allegations. It dropped around the penalty spot and he rose high to meet it, trying to get there before the onrushing Korean keeper who had vacated his line. However, no matter how high he jumped or how far he craned his neck, he couldn't match the keeper's reach.

Lee Gwang-yeon violently punched the ball out of the box, directly knocking over the keeper in the process. The punch from Lee Gwang-yeon sent the ball soaring past midfield, but the referee quickly blew his whistle—not for a foul, but for a head injury check. Moukoko had landed awkwardly after his aerial contest and was slow to get back to his feet. Medical staff were waved on as both teams took a moment to rehydrate near the touchlines.

"It was a brave challenge from both players," Paul Gartner remarked. "You never want to see players go down after those kinds of collisions, but safety must always come first."

Moukoko was back on his feet a minute later, after a quick inspection. He gave a thumbs-up to the sideline, and the referee restarted play with a dropped ball to Germany.

[54']

Germany resumed possession, once again cycling through their back line. Malik Talabidi sent the ball out wide to the waiting feet of Antonis Aidonis, who was hugging the right flank. The right-back feinted a pass back, tricking the opposing left winger just enough to skip past him and charge up the flank.

Lee Kang-in in the middle of the field tried to close him down, but Adonis did not let him get close as he played a pass up field to Jamie Leweling. The right winger was tracking back and did his best to hold off Hwang Tae-Hyeon as he received the ball just past the halfway line. Seeing Adonis trying to overlap from the flank, Tae-hyeon subconsciously stepped back, ready to intercept the pass.

Jamie didn't act as expected, though and chose instead to send a crisp pass towards the centre of the field. Kevin Schade, who had been speeding up the field looking to contribute to the attack, deftly received the ball, taking care to dodge a nearby Korean defender. He didn't bother looking for the best pass and simply chose the one Infront of him.

Hitting the ball with the outside of his right foot, he sent a grounded traveller pass slicing into the space between the Korean centre and left back. "That pass is a beauty, now the flag needs to stay down, and they are off to the races," Paul Gartner exclaimed in excitement, his eyes shining as he watched the ball curve outward like a guided missile connected with Adonis mid-stride.

"The flag stays down, Choi Jun on the other side got dragged too far back by Rakim," Stewart responded, clearly having paid attention to that minute detail just as Adonis cut inward at the side of the box.

Chapter 464 464 Free Kick

[55']

Aidonis drove into the box with intent, the ball skimming just ahead of his stride as Hwang Tae-Hyeon scrambled to recover ground. The right-back took a quick glance up before cutting the ball across the face of the goal. Moukoko lunged toward the near post, but Kim Hyun-woo intercepted with a sliding clearance that sent the ball bouncing out toward the edge of the area.

Wirtz was the first to react, charging onto the loose ball. "Hyun-woo with the interception, but wait, it's not over. Wirtz has another chance to score Barce here," Stewart exclaimed, but the expected shot never came as the young midfielder faked the shot and simply dragged the ball behind his leg, dodging the desperate slide tackle from Hong Hyun-Seok.

Manoeuvring around the sliding body, he swung his left foot, sending a crisp pass towards the far post where Rakim was lurking. "Rakim and Choi battle to reach the ball first," Gartner exclaimed as both of them could be seen angling their run towards the oncoming ball.

Lee Gwang-yeon had also moved across his line, lowering his body as he closed down the angle at the post. Just as Rakim squeezed in front of Choi, he felt a tug at his left arm, messing up his balance. The linesman's arm twitched, ready to raise his flag as the referees had twitched to his whistle, ready to intervene as Rakim was falling to the ground.

However, the winger was unwilling to give up swinging his right foot down onto the oncoming ball. He hit the ball at an odd angle, as instead of his instep hitting the side of the ball, it hit the top of it, causing it to hop up. He still managed to send it in his desired direction towards the near post, and since Wirtz's pass had enough momentum, the ball shot forward like a pinball.

Lee Gwang-yeon, who had already lowered his stance, reacted instinctively, spreading his left arm and leg wide. However, the ball, spinning with awkward topspin and moving faster than expected due to Wirtz's initial velocity, slipped through the narrowest of gaps—right between Lee Gwang-Yeon's extended arm and leg. For a heartbeat, the entire stadium froze and then came the sound of the net.

The ball struck the inside netting just inside the post, burying itself beyond the keeper's reach before anyone had time to process what had happened. "It's in!" Paul Gartner's voice cracked with disbelief. "Rakim somehow finds the smallest pocket of space, and Germany doubles their lead!"

"That angle was tighter than a needle's eye!" Stewart added. "The keeper did everything right—he closed the space, he got low, he read the strike—but Rakim's touch, even off-balance, was razor sharp."

[GOAL – Germany 2: 0 South Korea | 56' – Rakim Simon Rex]



Rakim didn't rise to celebrate immediately. He stayed on his knees, chest heaving, face caught in a moment of disbelief before the adrenaline took over. Not even he had expected that to go in, but he thought it was better to try than waste the opportunity. His teammates swarmed him, Moukoko lifting him to his feet, and they quickly jogged to the corner flag to celebrate with their fans.

"That is his 11th of the tournament, just one behind the tournament leading goal scorer, Erling Haaland," Stewart commented with a light smile as the replay of the goal was shown on the screen.

"Indeed, his shooting boots have been on fire in this tournament. Wirtz also takes a step closer to that Assist King crown with this being his 7th of the tournament." Paul commented with a light-hearted tone as the referee proceeded to give the Korean player who had committed the offence a warning. "Both of them have been on fire, and if I were Peter Bosz back at Leverkusen, I would start making plans that included Germany's gold and silver duo for the second half of the season."

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[Re-Start – 58']

South Korea resumed play quickly after the goal, determined not to let the momentum spiral further out of control. There was no panic in their touch, but the urgency was now unmistakable. Hong Hyun-seok signalled for his teammates to stay calm as he took the kick-off short to Kim Jung-min, who immediately switched play toward the left, hoping to bypass Germany's central pressure.

The Korean bench began stirring, with several substitutes warming up intensely down the sideline as their coach could ill afford not to make changes when his team was struggling. On the field, Germany looked more compact now. With a two-goal cushion, they began to emphasize structure and control,

pressing selectively rather than relentlessly. Angelo Stiller anchored the midfield with a steady hand, directing traffic and maintaining Germany's rhythm in transition.

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After struggling to move the ball ahead with Germany determined to play defensively, they were forced to think outside of the box. In the 63rd minute of the game, Lee Kang-in dropped deeper to orchestrate possession, drifting wide to drag a marker with him before slipping a disguised pass between the lines to Jeong Woo-yeong. Jeong turned quickly, evading a lunging challenge from Jamie Leweling, and threaded the ball out wide to Oh Se-hun, who was already in motion down the right.

Oh Se-hun didn't waste time. With one touch to steady himself and another to push into space, he accelerated down the flank, drawing the attention of Aidonis. He glanced up, spotting Jeong Woo-yeong continuing his run through the left channel and Lee Kang-in arriving late at the top of the box. Rather than force a cross into a crowded area, he checked his run and pulled the ball back to the edge of the area for Kang-in, who shaped to shoot with his left foot.

Kang-In's shot came low and quick, skipping across the grass with pace, but it lacked placement. Jan Olschowsky, positioned smartly in the centre of his goal, got down swiftly and held onto the ball without spilling. "That was better from Korea," Gartner noted. "Much more calculated. But that finish... it needed more venom, more direction."

[68]

Germany made their first substitution of the match—Yousoufa Moukoko was withdrawn, having worked tirelessly up front, and Malik Tillman came on to provide a fresh attacking option. The change signalled to their opponents to pay attention to their counterattack and not to overextend themselves.

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Two minutes later South Korea responded with a double substitution of their own. Hong Hyun-Seok and Oh Se-hun were replaced by Park Jeong-in and Song Min-kyu, both of whom immediately slotted into attacking roles. Park took over at centre forward, while Song moved to the right wing, pushing Eom Won-sang to the second striker position. Korea's formation shifted to a more direct 4-1-3-2, taking a different approach in hopes of sparking a comeback.

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South Korea's new setup led to a noticeable shift in energy. Park Jeong-in made his presence known almost immediately by pressing hard on Malik Talabidi, forcing a hurried pass out wide that was intended for Aidonis, but the latter could only lunge in vain as the ball flew out for a throw-in. This gave Korea a throw-in deep in the German half. From there, Lee Kang-in picked up the ball again, orchestrating from a deeper role and finding Song Min-kyu on the right wing.

Song's first involvement was promising. He took on Katterbach with a burst of acceleration and managed to swing a cross into the box. It looped toward the far post, where Park had peeled off his marker, but the striker couldn't get the right elevation on his header, sending it looping well over the bar.

[78]

Korea's change in pace and attacking focus bore fruit in the 78th minute as Park managed to earn a free kick just outside the box after a miss-timed tackle by Kevin Schade. "That is rather harsh from the referee," Paul called out as said referee reached for his pocket and held up a yellow card officially marking his entry into his books.

That was just a small interlude, as moments later Germany had formed a four-man wall, leaving them slightly short-handed in the crowded area of players looking for a cross. Lee Kang-in stood over the ball, calmly assessing his options. He had two teammates lurking near the edge of the box and a packed crowd of players waiting to pounce inside.

The referee's whistle pierced the noise. Lee Kang-in took a deep breath, adjusted his stance, and began his run-up. Instead of lofting a delivery into the melee, he went for the goal directly.

Chapter 465 465 On The Line

[79']

The referee's whistle pierced the noise. Lee Kang-in took a deep breath, adjusted his stance, and began his run-up. Instead of lofting a delivery into the melee, he went for the goal directly.

With a clean strike from his left foot, he wrapped it around the outside of the wall. The ball curved viciously through the air, dipping as it flew toward the top-left corner. Jan Olschowsky, whose view was partially obstructed, reacted a moment too late. He dove full stretch, fingertips grazing air, but the ball was already past him. It struck the underside of the crossbar with a thunderous clank and bounced down—this time clearly over the line before spinning back up into the netting.

"GOAL! Lee Kang-in! Outrageous technique!" Stewart shouted; his voice lifted by the roar from the Korean supporters. "He sought glory and was rewarded for his daring attempt."

[GOAL – Germany 2:1 South Korea | 79' – Lee Kang-in]

Park Jeong-in was the first to reach Kang-in, wrapping his arms around the midfielder as the rest of the Korean squad piled in. The coaching staff along the sideline clapped furiously, urging their players back into position. There was no time to bask in it. There was still a game to be chased.

"That single goal has breathed life back into the Koreans' side chances to turn this game on its nose," Gartner added. "Lee Kang-in just cracked the match wide open again, time is not on their side though, and if they want a chance at a comeback, it will have to be now."

[81]

The Germans restarted the match only moments later, intending to slow things down and hold onto their lead. Since they were already ahead, there was no need to take the risk of forcing attacks that would leave them outnumbered on the opposing counter. Just because they weren't willing to attack did not mean their opponents were willing to just sit back and await their inevitable loss.

South Korea, invigorated by Kang-in's goal, pressed higher up the pitch. Their midfield trio pushed tighter together, squeezing passing lanes and forcing Germany to play sideways. Malik Tillman dropped deeper to help maintain possession, but Korea's momentum was at an all-time high since the start of the match.

Every touch from a German boot drew a red shirt rushing in, harrying and swarming. Lee Kang-in became his team's heartbeat once they managed to intercept a careless pass from Talabidi near midfield. Spinning out of traffic, he offloaded to Song Min-kyu, who had taken up a more central role. Song played a one-two with Jeong Woo-yeong to open up the right channel, and suddenly Korea had numbers advancing.

Jeong Woo-yeong slipped a pass toward the edge of the box where Park Jeong-in peeled away from Bella-Kotchap. The striker turned and fired quickly, aiming for the near post, but Olschowsky read the strike and got down fast, parrying it wide with both hands. "Parkkk!" Gartner exclaimed the moment the striker fired the shot, but it was not meant to be.

[84']

From the ensuing corner, Lee Kang-in whipped in a dangerous ball that curled in toward the near post. Kim Hyun-woo made the run again, leaping above Stiller, but his glancing header flew just over the bar. The German bench began to stir in response—assistant coaches barking instructions, substitutes standing with vests half-off. Head coach Baum signalled for a change.

The fourth official raised his board, and a red 22 appeared. Rakim, one of Germany's goal scorers, was being withdrawn to a chorus of applause from the German fans and mixed reactions from the Korean end. Slowly jogging over to the sidelines, he clapped his hands, thanking their fans and wasting as much time as possible.

High fiving Yannik Engelhardt who was replacing him, he quickly took his seat on the bench eagerly awaiting the end of the match. Yannik obviously came on to bolster the midfield, but that alone did not stop the Korean contingent from launching their waves of attacks. The ball hardly stood still as it was either in motion or being struck towards goal from every possible angle, no matter how slim the Korean players were shooting on sight.

Germany, sensing the increasing pressure from the Korean attacks, adapted their shape into a tighter 4-5-1. With Engelhardt now in midfield, they aimed to close down space effectively and keep play away from their box. At this stage, each German clearance elicited cheers from their supporters, while the Korean fans urged their team to push even harder.

South Korea, meanwhile, maintained a high press. Lee Kang-in, conducting the midfield, drifted into pockets of space, always looking to open up the German shape. Jeong Woo-yeong and Song Min-kyu interchanged flanks regularly, hoping to unsettle Germany's defensive structure.

[86]

The Koreans nearly found a breakthrough down the left side. Jeong Woo-yeong slipped past his marker on the overlap, receiving a diagonal pass from Kang-in. He drove a low cross into the six-yard box, where Park Jeong-in lunged in front of his defender. The ball brushed the tip of his boot and skidded just wide of the far post, prompting a collective groan from the Korean supporters.

Germany restarted quickly, but Korea's pressure forced another hurried clearance. With time running low, the match settled into a pattern: Korea circulated the ball around Germany's penalty area, and Germany picked the right moments to step forward and make crucial interceptions.

[89]

With the clock edging toward full time, the atmosphere in Motor Lublin Arena crackled with tension. Kang-in threaded a vertical pass to Song Min-kyu, who found space behind Aidonis. Song drove into the box; instead of squaring the ball across the box, he continued dribbling forward, forcing Olschowsky off his line.

Adonis chased from behind and Malik Talabidi worked to close down the angle as he also held his ground. Song wasn't intimidated, though, as the moment he reached the 6-yard box, he feinted left, forcing Jan to mirror his actions with his arms spread wide. Song though swung his right foot, warping it around the ball and lifting it high towards the far post with a light dink.

"Song Min-kyu with a dream-like touch," Gartner exclaimed, directly jumping off his chair as he watched the ball float above Jan's desperate arms. Malik tried to lunge headfirst to head it away, but was too late and fell into the net.

The Korean fans in attendance were already on their feet watching with bated breath as the ball dropped towards the goal. However, as it looked like it was supposed to be a white figure with the number five jumped feet first. With an overhead kick, he swung his boot with power, catapulting the ball out of the box.

"Armel Bella-Kotchapl!!!," Stewart exclaimed the moment the defender's boot impacted the ball, just as the German fans in attendance jumped up in joy. They had seen their ticket for the finals slip away, so seeing Armel perform heroics on the line, all their pent-up emotions exploded in joy.

The ball rebounded into the open space, just in front of the box where Wirts could be seen waiting for it to descend. Just as the ball was about to reach him, one of his teammates exclaimed, "Man on," but it was too late. The red figure of Kang-In wearing the Korean number 10 jumped ahead of him from behind.

Chesting the ball down, he swung his foot aiming to hit the ball on the volley, but it dropped too steeply. Before his foot could hit the ball it had bounced back up from the ground, creating a powerful but aimless bounce shot. Malik craned his neck just in time to watch it sail into the stands.

[90']

As soon as the ball soared into the stands, several Korean players raised their arms in protest. They sprinted toward the referee, insisting that Bella-Kotchapl's overhead clearance had occurred after the

ball had fully crossed the line. Shouts of disbelief echoed around the stadium as the visitors demanded a closer look.

The Germans for their part, waved off their complaints, simply stating that these kinds of saves were basic for their defenders. A shouting match quickly ensued as both sides vehemently believed they were in the right. The players on their part were calmer as they waited for the referee to make his decision.

The referee, surrounded by animated Korean players, briefly consulted his linesman. The linesman shook his head, offering no definitive signal. With the dispute growing louder, the referee signalled for a VAR review, pressing a finger to his earpiece. Tension rippled through Motor Lublin Arena as the giant screens switched to slow-motion replays from multiple angles, focusing on the split-second moment of Bella-Kotchap's clearance.

One angle showed the ball seemingly on the verge of crossing, but from another view, it appeared that at least part of the ball remained above the line. Both sets of supporters watched in silence, hearts pounding, each replay prompting fresh bursts of either hope or relief.

[VAR CHECK – 90'+2']

Players on the pitch stood in clusters, anxious for resolution. The referee stood near the sideline, listening intently to the VAR booth. Finally, he returned to the centre circle, took one more glance at his watch, and spread his arms decisively. No goal.

He pointed to the six-yard box, indicating a goal kick, confirming the decision. A mixture of celebration and frustration swept through the crowd: German fans let out a roar of gratitude and Korean supporters sank back in despair.

The referee motioned for play to resume, and Olschowsky hurriedly placed the ball for the restart, looking to relieve the lingering tension. Germany's goal kick soared beyond midfield, eating precious seconds off the clock. Kang-in lunged to nod it back into German territory, but the final whistle resounded the next moment, ending this semi-final clash.

Chapter 466 466 Conversations

"We have to take our leave now. It was good meeting you two," Wolfgang said in a warm tone as he retracted his gaze from the field below. The match had been over for 20 minutes, and most of the fans had started clearing the stands.

If it were up to his daughter, they wouldn't leave at all, as the little girl seemed to be having the time of her life. "Is that really him? He looks so nerdy in that picture, so unlike the superhero he is on the field." The little girl questioned May as they hunched over the latter's phone on a nearby sofa.

May giggled softly, her peach-blond hair cascading forward as she swiped through her phone's gallery. "Trust me, Anna-Marie, he's the biggest nerd you'll ever meet," she said playfully, her green eyes sparkling with affection. "But I promise I'll make sure he signs something special for you at the finals. Sound good?"

Anna-Marie's light brown eyes widened in excitement, her dark auburn hair bouncing slightly as she nodded eagerly. "Promise?" May extended her pinkie finger, and Anna-Marie quickly hooked it with her own. "Promise."

Lisa smiled warmly from the side, turquoise-gold eyes watching the interaction thoughtfully. "You two better get going," she said softly, looking toward Wolfgang. "Traffic leaving these events can be a nightmare."

"You're right," he admitted with a sigh, silently wishing he had brought over his helicopter, not at all looking forward to the stadium turmoil. "We should go. But I suppose we'll see each other again soon, in fact, it's just four days. Will your husband be joining us?"

"Absolutely," Lisa said, stepping forward to shake his hand warmly. "He will indeed, wouldn't miss it for the world. It was a pleasure meeting the two of you hope your business here goes well."

"Likewise," Wolfgang replied, turning his attention briefly back to May. "And thank you for entertaining Anna-Marie. She hasn't stopped talking about Rakim since hopping on the plane here."

May laughed warmly, her eyes crinkling in amusement. "Anytime. She's wonderful."

With one last wave, Wolfgang gently took his daughter's hand, leading her toward the exit. Anna-Marie looked back over her shoulder, waving enthusiastically. "See you at the finals, May!"

"See you then!" May called back with a smile.

The door clicked shut behind them, leaving May and Lisa alone in the plush suite overlooking the nearly empty stadium. For a moment, silence enveloped them.

"Seems Rakim has yet another dedicated fan," Lisa noted with amusement, folding her arms casually as she leaned back against the plush leather chair. "It's good to see just some of the impact he has on people who love to watch him play."

"Oh, don't get all emotional, Mrs Rex, or they will think I'm bullying you," May quickly retorted with a teasing tone, instantly breaking the sappy mood, the mama bear was feeling. "But you're right, it's really sweet to see one of his fans as more than just a number on social media or singing their heart out in matches."

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[Valencia, Spain]

The plane had barely touched down at Valencia Airport before Matteo Smith found himself flooded by a wave of texts from Oliver Douglas Burke, each more insistent than the last. By the time he reached the baggage claim, his phone buzzed again. This time, Matteo picked up with a sigh.

"Oliver," he greeted curtly, exhaustion evident in his voice.

"Mateo, glad you landed," Oliver's voice came through firm, with a hint of tension underlying his normally composed tone. "We need to talk immediately."

Matteo groaned slightly, rubbing his temple as he moved toward the airport exit. "What is it now? Can't it wait until tomorrow? I just landed—"

"NIKI hasn't kept their side of the deal," Oliver cut in bluntly. "They were supposed to roll out a red carpet offer that positioned you as the next face of the brand following this tournament, but they have reneged."

Matteo stopped abruptly, causing a couple behind him to nearly collide with his stationary suitcase. "Hey, I'm walking over (Spanish version) a pedestrian exclaimed in a huff before continuing on with his day.

Matteo didn't care, though, as he growled into the phone, "What?" he demanded answers. "After everything? They wasted 1 month of my life, Oliver, with their little powerplays?"

Oliver exhaled sharply. "I know and trust me, I'm mad too. They think you and Team USA's loss to him in the semis changed the narrative. So, they want to push the blame on someone for all the resources they invested. I don't see it as a total waste, though."

Matteo, having reached the side of the taxi bay outside the airport, flagged one down before entering. "A Sant Francesc por favor, (to Sant Francesc please)" he told the driver after sliding his duffel bag onto the seat next to him. The driver simply nodded his head and started the meter as they hit the streets.

"Please do tell me how wasting valuable time I could have been furthering my career is a good thing," He retorted with a measured tone as he looked outside the window, watching the familiar Spanish scenery that passed outside his window.

"Hahah exposure son, I know what you can do on the field and have bet my entire career on what you will achieve. You lacked one thing, though, and that was the spotlight directly shining on you. How you are perceived off the field is just as important as what you do on it's an entertainment sport after all." Oliver responded in a light-hearted tone, no longer feeling worried over the fallout with NIKI.

During his journey back to England he had a lot of time to think and eventually concluded that NIKI had fucked up. They had built up potential starlets but failed to lock them down with a binding contract. It's

as if Marvel only signed Tom Holland for just the Civil War movie without fully capitalising on the actor's popularity gained by his brief role.

"Just focus on fighting for a starting position when you get back. I've been on calls with some interesting offers, and one of them is Valencia looking to extend your contract, but I've been holding them off." Oliver continued in a much more serious tone, letting his young client know about their next game plan.

"You always find a way to change the game when it looks like checkmate, don't you?" Matteo retorted with a light smile as he could practically hear the gears turn in his agent's mind. "Just no more BS that will take me off my path, let my gameplay do the talking, everything else is up to you."

Oliver chuckled warmly, the tension in his voice fading noticeably. "That's exactly what I was hoping you'd say. Let me handle the business—you're best when you just play your game."

Matteo leaned his head back against the taxi's cushioned seat, a small smile forming on his lips. "Alright then, Oliver. Call me tomorrow after I've slept. We'll talk specifics then."

"Rest easy, Mat," Oliver responded reassuringly. "We still got what we were aiming for, so trust in that. Get some rest."

Matteo ended the call, exhaling deeply as the lights of Valencia's familiar streets flashed past his window. His body was weary from the tournament, but his mind was clear, ready to conquer the next stage. The uncertainty surrounding NIKI felt distant now; all that mattered was securing his spot on Valencia's starting roster and showing the world his true worth.

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[London, England]

Rain gently tapped against expansive floor-to-ceiling windows that provided a breathtaking view of the Thames. Illuminated by the soft glow of recessed lighting, a well-dressed figure stood in front of the panorama, hands clasped casually behind his back. The lavish decor around him—rich mahogany furniture, priceless art, and polished marble floors—oozed elegance, yet his attention was fixed entirely on the conversation playing out over the speakerphone.

"—you should have seen him in person," Wolfgang Wagner's voice emanated from the phone, carrying a sense of excitement. "It's uncanny. Like stepping back in time, looking into a mirror from and seeing the past."

A slow, thoughtful frown appeared on the figure's handsome visage as he picked up a glass of wine from a nearby table. His green eyes glowed in the warm light as he took a sip from his glass and let his mind wander. "You're certain?"

"Absolutely," Wolfgang affirmed without hesitation. "The boy is the spitting image of you at that age. Probably more handsome, but the same confidence is definitely there. The talent is unmistakable, but whom he got it from beats me? Certainly not you and your two left feet."

The figure turned slightly, his eyes glinting with quiet intensity as he gazed out at the river below. "Does he suspect anything?"

The man chuckled softly, the rich timbre of his voice resonating warmly against the subtle hum of rainfall. "Careful now, Wolfgang. I may not have dazzled anyone on the pitch, but my strengths always lay elsewhere."

Wolfgang laughed in response, genuine and unrestrained. "Of course, I meant no offence to the King of Finance. Though just because he resembles you doesn't mean he is your son,"

"I just know, you know I only found out about his existence when it was already too late, so even if there is only a slight possibility, I have to chase that chance. I owe her that much," He responded in a melancholic tone as his gaze moved towards the TV on the wall that was currently replaying an interview.

On the screen, the sweaty figure of Rakim could be seen standing in front of the interview area. "We've made it this far, I think we're allowed to dream of bringing it home now," he stated with a bright smile clearly sharing his joy of winning the match and reaching the finals.

Chapter 467 467 A Hair Cut

[Łódź, Poland]

"Yo, what's good, family! It's your boy VicBlends and today we got something real special for y'all," Vic started, grinning into the camera as he paced energetically around the private lounge of Germany's U-20 team hotel. His setup—mirror, clippers, a full barber's kit, and lighting rig—was arranged neatly, giving the lounge an almost studio-like feel.

He flipped the camera towards Rakim Rex, seated comfortably in the barber's chair, laughing as his teammates hooted and teased off-camera.

"Today we're here with none other than the young GOAT himself, Rakim Rex!" Vic announced enthusiastically, clapping Rakim on the shoulder. "He's decided it's time for a fresh start, cutting off the iconic dreadlocks that got ruined in the battle against the USA. Bro, how you feeling about this big chop?"

Rakim chuckled, scratching his head. His damaged dreadlocks, which still contained a hint of pink despite the many washes. "Honestly, no, but it needs to be done. I've had these dreads forever. But it's time, you know? I can't play my best when I don't feel it."

Vic chuckled warmly, nodding understandingly as he reached out to carefully inspect Rakim's damaged dreadlocks. "Yeah, man, I actually watched the match, and you looked lethal coming back from halftime with half your hair drenched in dye. It was almost like you were on a war path, trying to slide for your hair more than doing it for your team."

Rakim nodded, grinning sheepishly as he looked at Vic through the mirror, "Honestly, you might be on to something. I've been growing them since I was six, and while I have gotten them shortened in the past, in that moment, it felt like a journey was abruptly cut short."

Vic chuckled sympathetically, meeting Rakim's gaze in the mirror, his expression understanding and sincere. "Yeah man, I feel you. But look, that's exactly why today's special. It's more than just a cut—it's a fresh start, new energy, new journey. And trust me, we're gonna bless you up."

He turned his attention back to the camera, effortlessly slipping back into his charismatic presenter persona. "Alright y'all, we gonna get right into it. Make sure you like, subscribe, and comment below what you think of Rakim's new look. Let's get it!"

Vic grabbed a pair of scissors, handing them to Rakim to make the first cut, and he did so without hesitation. "That didn't feel as hard as I thought it would be," Rakim said as he handed the scissors back to Vic, who promptly got to work snipping the long dreads one by one.

"Hahah it's always about taking that first step bro." Vic responded with a smile, "Rakim, we always start these sessions by asking a simple question—what's your purpose, man? Like, beyond the field, what's really driving you?"

Rakim paused thoughtfully, eyes fixed on his reflection. "Purpose? At first, it was just something I wanted to do at the age of 6. Players like Ronaldo, Drogba, Zlatan, Ronaldinho and Kaka were heroes I wanted to imitate,"

"Good that you did, 'cause danm my boy, you can play, and I mean that respectfully from a fan who has only recently gotten into the game," Vic responded with slight excitement, "Your family must be supportive since from what I hear you've been balling since a young age?"

"You'd think, right? But naw my mum wasn't having none of it," Rakim exasperatedly responded, resisting the urge to animatedly shake his head. "She was like school first, and you better be getting B's minimum, So I did, but then she was like make some friends, you can't always think about football."

Vic laughed, nodding knowingly as he carefully continued to cut away the dreadlocks. "Yeah, man, moms always got that wisdom. Did you ever figure out why she was pushing you like that?"

Rakim grinned softly, eyes briefly distant. "Honestly, it took me a minute to realize. She just wanted me to have options. She didn't want me putting all my eggs in one basket, especially when football ain't guaranteed. You know, injuries and stuff."

"Facts, bro, that's a wise woman right there," Vic said earnestly, making a clean cut before placing another dreadlock gently on the table. "So, when did she finally ease up?"

Rakim laughed openly this time, causing a few teammates off-camera to chuckle as well. "On day one, really," he joked, causing not only Vic but the nearby players who were listening to pause in confusion. "She is like this amazing PT and nutritionist. So, she decided to help me train even though she knew even less about football than me, but she knew how to train athletes, and the rest of the ball work she picked up along the way."

He paused for a second, letting his words land before he continued, "She would say it was a reward for sticking to the plan, but I could tell she did her best to support my dream. Not just her, but my whole family really. You might not know, but my big sister is quite the dancer and was doing her thing with her dance troupe at 9 years old."

Vic paused briefly, setting down his scissors as he brushed off a few loose strands of Rakim's hair from his shoulders. His eyes lit up with genuine curiosity as he leaned forward, fully engaged in the story Rakim was sharing.

"Hold up, your sister's a dancer? That's dope, man!" Vic said enthusiastically, his voice filled with appreciation. "Talent must really run in the family then, huh?"

Rakim nodded, pride evident in his voice. "For real, man. Emma is killing it, but she is studying law at Cambridge right now. She is the brains in the family for sure,"

Vic's eyes widened with admiration as he carefully set the scissors aside, swapping them for clippers to begin smoothening out the now messy and lumpy hair underneath his recently cut dreads. "Damn, law at Cambridge? Your mom wasn't playing when she talked about having options. Y'all really doing it big."

Rakim laughed warmly. "Nah, for real, man. She always said education opens doors, that football can't always reach. And my sister, she's always been the type to overachieve, motivates me to work on getting my degree."

Vic raised an eyebrow, clearly impressed, as he carefully tilted Rakim's head slightly to the side, expertly fading the sides with precise, gentle motions. The rhythmic hum of the clippers filled the brief pause in their conversation.

"Hold up, degree?" Vic repeated with playful disbelief. "You tellin' me you're out here ballin' on international stages and still thinkin' about getting a degree?"

Rakim chuckled, adjusting his posture slightly to get comfortable. "Yeah, man. Football's my life, but it won't be forever, right? Life happens, and age will eventually catch up with me by the time I'm 50. Plus, it'll make my Mum's happy to see me in that cap and gown."

Vic nodded, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. "50? Is that even legal, bro?"

"I don't know, but when you got players like Lebron and Ronaldo pushing that marker of how long you can be dominant in your sport, it's inspiring," Rakim responded with a smile, closing his eyes just in time as Vic sprayed him with water.

"True, following such titans in their respective games must be inspiring. Who would you say has been the most impactful to you?" Vic stated with a smile as he moved to his front after brushing his short hair forward, ready to do the line-up."

"If I had to pick, I would say Zlatan for his confidence in his abilities and the fact that he delivers. Ronaldinho's joy with the ball has definitely shaped how I approached the game, especially when expressing myself when drilling and that occasional skill move." Rakim responded with a light smile just as Vic finished making his line-up, spraying a dab of enhancements which made him look crispy.

He spent the next few moments applying some pomade that wasn't greasy and seemed to be high-end with a hint of vanilla scent. He once again brushed his hair with the grain before picking up an Akatsuki Durag. What followed was a quick ten minutes under the flame thrower-like hair dryer before it was finally done.

Slowly unwrapping the durag for dramatic effect, Vic leaned back once he was done, admiring his work as he held a small handheld mirror up behind Rakim's head so he could see the back. "Sheeeesh! That's crispy, bro! Look at that wave pattern starting to come in already. You look like you've been brushing for weeks!"

Rakim tilted his head slightly, inspecting the waves as a light smile and a subconscious lick of the lips escaped. "Yeah... I can rock with this. You just made your boy dangerous, Vic."

Vic mearley laughed at that as he turned back to the camera. "Y'all see the vibes! The transformation is complete—my guy Rakim just went from that one dreadheaded dude who can ball, to Mr steal Your Girl and your heart. Y'all better drop a in the comments if you're feelin' this new chapter for him and keeping your girls away!"

Laughter echoed off-camera from the teammates gathered in the background, a few of them clapping or shouting playful jabs. "Ayo, wave check!" one called, earning a round of chuckles.

Vic smiled, dapping Rakim up. "Appreciate you trusting me with this, man. Real talk, I think this look is gonna match the energy you're bringin' to the pitch tomorrow."

Rakim nodded, standing as Vic dusted off the final strands from his neck. "Yeah, feels right. Thanks a lot for doing this, bro. Means a lot."

They shared a quick bro-hug before Vic turned back to his camera to wrap the session. "Alright y'all, you already know what to do—like, comment, subscribe. Big shoutout to Rakim Rex for letting us be part of this moment. Until next time—stay blessed, stay blended."

Chapter 468 468 StarBoy

[Later That Day – German U-20 Training Grounds, Łódź]

The air was crisp and clear as the German U-20 squad gathered on the practice pitch for their final session before the biggest game of their lives. Well, maybe just the tournament, but that is the type of seriousness the coaching staff wanted them to adopt for this match. Coaches paced the touchlines, barking instructions while assistants set up cones, mini-goals, and possession grids.

The players were all in high spirits, especially given how relaxed their day had been. Much like how active Muay Thai fighters in Thailand wouldn't do full contact practice, they simply went through the motions. They worked on getting their bodies primed and ready for what they would face tomorrow.

If anyone had any last niggles or was feeling pain, then the trainers took care of them. It was about preparing bodies and minds for the challenge ahead of them. Rakim, now sporting a black durag over his freshly waved cut, jogged alongside Wirtz and Tillman as they went through their evening low-impact session. The three exchanged light-hearted jabs and laughter between stretches, with no one mentioning the game against England.

Coaches rotated them through rondos, quick-passing drills, and tactical walkthroughs. The idea was to conserve energy but keep mental sharpness at a peak. Oftentimes, Coach Baum would stop the match and ask players to explain why they made a certain pass and why certain players chose to run into a certain space.

When he asked you a question, you better have a good enough answer for him, or your teammates did 10 press-ups in your place. While that may not seem that bad, anyone who has ever played a team sport would know that was a shit place to be at. Being the reason why your team suffered, even if it's just training, can quickly lead to being ostracised and a lack of trust on the field.

Coach Baum's methodical approach meant players weren't just going through the motions but actively analysing every movement. When Jonas Hofmann, one of the assistant coaches, signalled Rakim to explain a particular passing sequence, he broke down the spatial dynamics from his perspective with surgical ease.

"Wirtz's initial move with the ball drew in both Dennis and Kevin, which opened up a pocket of space behind Kevin for me to run into. However, Armel was sneaking too far forward for my liking, and he didn't look like he was gonna give me time to pull a fast one on him." Rakim demonstrated, moving his hands to illustrate the tactical nuance.

"Plus, our goal was to maintain possession, and thus going and drawing Asta out seemed like the safer option," he continued explaining as he moved back out to his position once again receiving Wirtz's pass.

His foot flashed over the ball as if he had exploded down the flank before knocking it back down the line with the outside of his foot. Noah calmly received the ball, leaving Asta, who had charged forward to grasp nothing but air and whiplash.

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[England U-20 Team Hotel – Łódź]

While the Germans wrapped up their final touches under the fading Polish sun, the mood inside the England U-20 team's camp was much more relaxed. The players had already gone through their day of preparation and could now be seen doing their best to relax. For some, that meant hitting the sauna or visiting the hotel's massage lounge, while others relaxed by hitting the consoles set up in the lounge.

In one corner of the lounge, Saka, Jude and Jamal figures can be seen chilling as they buried their heads into their phones. Saka had a pair of cold wraps around his knees while Jamal and Jude had swapped their boots for slippers and sat nestled into the leather couches, idly scrolling through clips and highlights from recent matches.

"Bro," Jamal suddenly called out, breaking the silence as he tilted his phone toward the other two, "Rakim is not the slightest bit worried about facing us tomorrow."

"How you figure that?" Jude absentmindedly asked, already tired of hearing this name that everyone loved to make out as the second coming of Ronaldo.

He knew he was just as good as him and had proven that by becoming the youngest player to ever play for Birmingham at just 16 and 38 days. Now he was representing England for the Under-20 World Cup, which in itself shouldn't be any less than what Rakim had achieved. He was not willing to consider Rakim winning a trophy in a backwards league like Scotland as something impressive.



"He was shooting a YouTube video about his hair with some American YouTuber," Jamal said with a smile as he showed them the snippet of the video that had just pooped up on his Twitter feed.

"Man's got waves now," Saka said, squinting at the screen. "You can't even hate—he cleaned up well."

Jude leaned forward to look but didn't smile. "Cool, I guess, but none of that is gonna help him get past me tomorrow."

Saka merely smiled, "Jealousy doesn't suit you, bro, just keep doing what you're doing, and you will reach my level one day."

Hearing his words, Jude reflexively reached for the pillow next to him and launched it at his face, only for Saka to animatedly head it towards Jamal. "Dang FIFA really sleeping on your heading skills bro, last I saw it wasn't it like 40 with your 65 overall," Jamal exclaimed as he skilfully caught the small pillow with his left foot and proceeded to juggle it as he ignored Saka's displeased expression.

"You shut your mouth with that blasphemy," Saka exclaimed, directly jumping up from his couch. "Mark my words, I will be one of the biggest names for England when I join the senior team, and it's 4,5 not 40"

"Pfft hahah," though his words were meant to regain his image as the two seniors, neither Jamal nor Jude to him seriously and burst out laughing. "Sure, you will, little Starboy,"

Jamal gave Saka a friendly shove with his shoulder, still smirking. "Just don't forget us little people when you've got your own Niki billboard in Piccadilly."

Saka sat back down, pulling his hoodie up dramatically. "You mean when I win the Ballon d'Or before any of y'all? Bet."

Jude rolled his eyes but couldn't help the smile tugging at the corner of his lips. He leaned back into the sofa and stared at the ceiling, his voice more serious now. "Jokes aside... Rakim and Wirtz, yeah, they're trouble."

Jamal nodded, his playful demeanour fading slightly. "That left side? Nasty. Wirtz can thread passes you don't even see coming, and Rakim's got that slippery movement, like... he's not super explosive, but he glides past you."

Saka chimed in, more thoughtful now, "It's the timing, too. They don't force it. They wait until you step wrong, then boom—one-two, and they're in behind."

Jude exhaled through his nose, brows furrowing. "Yeah, I noticed that. The real problem is how damn versatile they both are. Although Wirtz plays as a CAM, he can play anywhere in the midfield and attack. Their chemistry is what is truly scary, though, as Wirtz can pick Rakim out from anywhere instantly sending him on attack mode."

A silence settled between them for a moment. "You scared?" Saka asked, his tone not mocking—just curious.

Jude shook his head. "No. Not scared. Just... excited at the thought of neutralising such an effective attacking duo in our age group."

Jamal leaned forward, elbows on knees, eyes steady. "Yeah, well, that's the mindset we need. This is the finals, everyone on their team is elite, so we can't underestimate them."

"You all worry too much, just keep creating chances and I will put them away," The voice of Maso Greenwood resounded from behind Jude and Jamal, slightly startling them. "We are by far the most talented group of players and dominant team in this tournament, and we just need to continue what we have been doing; it's just business as usual."

Jude turned to see Mason's tall figure standing behind them for who knows how long. The sun filtered through the window, casting a warm glow that highlighted Mason's confident stride. "Business as usual, huh?" Jude replied, a smirk creeping back onto his face. "You make it sound easy."

Mason plopped down on the couch next to Saka, his expression unyieldingly relaxed as he stretched his arms. "Because it is," he stated matter-of-factly. "We haven't come this far to start doubting ourselves now. Tomorrow, it's just another game—and we've been dominating no matter who's in front of us."

"Just don't go missing any more of my crosses," Saka commented from the side, directly ruining the confident expression plastered on Mason's face. "He is right, though, as long as StarBoy is on your team, 'everything is gonna be all right,'"

Chapter 469 469 Biggest Opp

[Łódź, Poland – Serce Łodzi – Stadion Widzewa Łódź]

A wide drone shot glided through the amber-tinted skies of Łódź, casting a golden hue over the Serce Łodzi stadium. Floodlights bathed the pitch in white brilliance, as supporters' chants echoed like waves crashing against the heart of the arena. Inside, nearly every seat was filled. Most of the footballing world was watching for various reasons, with most teams scouting for new talent.

The camera cut to the rooftop studio — a sleek glass-panelled platform suspended above the East Stand. From here, the green battlefield stretched beneath them like a tapestry of fate.

Jessica Blackwood adjusted her earpiece, her light brown hair catching the breeze as she turned to the camera with the confidence of someone who'd earned her place at the table. "Good evening from Łódź," she began, her voice smooth but electric, "We are live from Stadion Widzewa for the final showdown of the U-20 World Cup. England V Germany, it's more than just football tonight—it's a battle of legacy for these two football giants."

Beside her, Ronan Kaye gave a half-smile, leaning back in his chair. He still carried the effortless charm as he looked into the camera. "And not a bad place to settle it either, Jess. This stadium's got a heartbeat tonight. Sixty thousand people, and not a quiet one among them."

Between them sat Thomas Häßler, the German legend, in a dark tailored coat, hands clasped over his lap. He had lifted the World Cup in 1990 and now watched the next generation fight for their own glory. Since his country's 2014 victory, they have not been convincing during international competitions. So, like most Germans, he was also excited by this new generation, especially with prolific players like Rakim, whom they could build a squad around.

Jessica tapped her tablet. "Let's talk about what's at stake. England's youth system has been on fire since the U-17 title in 2017. Many are calling this group the next golden generation. Two of their brightest? Sixteen-year-olds Jamal Musiala and Jude Bellingham."

A slick graphic overlay swept onto the screen—"Jude Bellingham: Ball Recoveries – 4.1 per 90 | Heatmap: Box-to-Box Presence"

Ronan nodded. "He's the heartbeat. Reads the game like someone twice his age, and he's fearless. Musiala—more silk than steel—but the kind of player who can break your shape in a blink."

Jessica continued, "And of course, Bukayo Saka. Mr. StarBoy himself. Popping up in all the right places."

Another overlay followed—"Bukayo Saka: G/A Contributions – 5 in 6 Matches | Pass Completion – 87%"

Thomas Häßler leaned in now, his voice mellow but sharp. "England has pace, power, and intelligence. But Germany... Germany has Rakim Rex." A dramatic pause, then a burst of footage: Rakim dancing past defenders, chopping the ball mid-stride, slotting home a penalty with ice in his veins.

Overlay: "Rakim Rex: 57 Successful Dribbles | 11 Goals | 5 Assists | 85% Dribble Success Rate"

Thomas added, "He's displayed immense talent from a young age, and now at just 16, I can honestly say he is built differently. You can't coach what he does with the ball. It's rhythm. Instinct. And he's got Wirtz beside him—a surgeon in chaos."

Overlay: "Florian Wirtz: 25 Chances Created/5 games | 4.8 Key Passes per 90 | Assists 9,"

Jessica raised an eyebrow, impressed by the numbers. "We've really gotten a chance to see Wirtz in pressure cooker situations and paired with Rakim's unorthodoxy... that's a nightmare scenario for any backline."

Ronan chuckled, arms crossed. "If Rakim's the fire, Wirtz is the scalpel. England's double pivot will have to do more than just shield tonight—they'll need to anticipate brilliance."

The camera panned to a close-up of the pitch, where the teams were in the middle of their warm-ups. Rakim, in his black and red German kit, bounced lightly on his toes at the halfway line. The ball seemed to kiss his feet with every touch, as they played a possession game.

Just as he nutmegged one of his teammates to send a cheeky pass to Bella-Kotchop, one of the trainers called him to the side. Back in the studio, Jessica leaned forward. "We're hearing now that Rakim Rex is pitch-side for a quick word with Sky's James Howden."

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[On the Pitch – Sideline Interview]

James Howden, clad in a thin rain jacket with a Sky Sports badge clipped to his collar, offered a tight smile to the camera. "Thanks, Jess. I'm here with Germany's number 22, Rakim Rex. Rakim—final warm-up, final game—how are you feeling out there?"

Rakim paused, catching his breath as he wiped a droplet of sweat from his brow. His braids were gone—his fresh waves glinted under the floodlights, despite the pattern not being as obvious as it was supposed to be. "I'm calm," Rakim said coolly. "Focused. We've trained for this, and the mood around camp is at an all-time high. Now it is just about delivering ninety minutes of truth."

James nodded, visibly impressed. "You've been electric this tournament—eleven goals, five assists. The world's watching. What do you want them to see tonight?"

Rakim looked straight into the lens. "A couple of good goals, I guess, but I'd settle for a Win," he said, his tone steady.

James grinned. "Simple and sharp—just like your play. Last one, Rakim. You're up against one of the most talked-about youth squads in the world right now. England's midfield is stacked, and their fullbacks love to bomb forward. How do you break that?"

Rakim gave a light smirk. "We focus on playing our own game, we did everything right to get here and now is just about execution."

James smiled at his words, "If I may ask, who on the English team are you most worried about?" He asked in a light-hearted tone as if he didn't realise what he had just said.

"I should have known better than to trust a reporter when they say last question." Rakim retorted with a light sigh as he used his long sleeve to wipe his brow, subconsciously moving his hand to move a dreadlock from his face.

"But to your question, the only player on the English squad we are worried about is the keeper. We are all hoping that he isn't in form or lets the pressure get to him and forgets that he can use his hands." He seriously responded cause if James tried his best to laugh it off. "It's the worst thing when a team works hard to get past multiple amazing players only to have their hopes crushed by a keeper. That is why for every game the guy between the sticks is my biggest opp."

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[16:40 | Serce Łodzi – VIP Booth]

A hush rippled through the crowd as the stadium lights dimmed slightly, signalling the prelude to the national anthems. The teams lined up shoulder to shoulder at the halfway line—England in white and navy, Germany in their sleek patterned green with white stripes kit.

Almost like a concert, all the fans had taken out their phones and turned on their flashlights, adding to the ambience. The streaming organisers, who were the main push that made the tournament famous, had asked the fans to do so. Fans who had bought tickets due to the hype were more than eager to be a part of the moment.

Up in the VIP section, a security guard unlatched the velvet rope just in time for Lisa Rex to step through, heels clicking against the concrete. Her white coat flared behind her like a cape, nerves hidden behind designer sunglasses. Beside her was May Parker, gripping a German flag painted onto her cheek, and Rakim's older sister Emma who had taken a break from college to see the match.

They were all a sight to see, distracting quite a few fans whom they walked past. Because, despite all wearing Rakim's jersey top it somehow made them look all the more beautiful. However, anyone who had the slightest inclination to walk up to them quickly stopped upon noticing the hulking figure behind them.

Ben Michael Rex, at age 36, was still in the prime of his life, as despite not being an athlete, he never skipped a gym day. The perks of having a wife obsessed with the gym and training athletes are that you don't get the chance to let yourself go. Not like he would want to, as he valued his ability to knock out anyone who dared to bother his beautiful wife.



If that didn't work out, he has lived in America long enough to know that it was the one who drew his gun first who was right. Unlike the girls who looked like they had put more effort into their appearance with the necklaces, face paint, hairdo, and so on. Ben had simply thrown on a pair of jeans and his son's game top, with the only effort put in being the wavy hair band that held his short dark hair back.

Not minding the looks, they got the group quickly and took their designated seats in the first row of the VIP area. Just as they stood for the German anthem, a tall well built man dressed in a professional suit joined them. He wore dark sunglasses and gave out quite the pressure to those around him who didn't know him, especially when they noticed the small handheld 8 by 6-inch metal plated leather bag. Those in the know immediately realised that it was a gun bag and his most likely role was to protect the people who had just joined them.

Chapter 470 470 First Blood

England: 4-3-3

GK: Dean Henderson

RB: Reece James

CB: Teden Mengi

CB: Conor Bradley

LB: Ben Chilwell

CM: Declan Rice

CM: Jude Bellingham

CM: Mason Mount

RW: Bukayo Saka

ST: Mason Greenwood

LW: Jadon Sancho

Vs

Germany: 4-2-3-1

GK: Luca Unbehaun

RB: Simon Asta

CB: Armel Bella-Kotchap

CB: Kevin Ehlers

LB: Noah Katterbach

CDM: Angelo Stiller

CDM: Niklas Tauer

RM: Jamie Leweling

CAM: Florian Wirtz

LM: Rakim Rex

ST: Lenn Jastremski

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[Location: Łódź, Poland – Stadion Widzewa Łódź | Time: 17:00 | U-20 World Cup Final Kick-off]

A moment of silence stretched across the Serce Łodzi.

The anthems had faded, leaving behind only the buzzing energy of sixty thousand fans. Camera flashes flickered like fireflies across the stands. On the pitch, boots scuffed turf, captains shook hands, and the referee, clad in neon yellow, lifted his whistle to his lips.

(Peeeeeeep!)

"And we're underway!" Paul Gartner's voice resonated enthusiastically from the commentary box. "Germany in green kicks off from right to left, England in their traditional white attacking left to right. Eddie, it feels like we're on the brink of something special tonight."

"Absolutely, Paul," Eddie Hall responded, eyes locked on the action. "Two footballing titans meeting at youth level. This is as much about pride as it is about potential."

Germany settled quickly into possession, the ball zipping from Bella-Kotchap to Ehlers, then sharply to Noah Katterbach on the left. Immediately, Rakim Rex drifted wide, pulling Reece James towards him and opening a channel inside.

Rakim Rex collected Katterbach's pass smoothly, his first touch deceptive, causing Reece James to back off. He approached cautiously, feet light, eyes fixed firmly on Rakim's hips, adjusting to his minute

movement. Rakim hesitated slightly, shifting his weight to the left, before snapping the ball sharply right. James lunged, caught off balance, leaving Rakim half a yard to accelerate down the touchline.

Rakim surged forward, the crowd roaring approval, the green of his kit blending into a blur beneath the dazzling lights. He lifted his head and curled a teasing cross toward the edge of the penalty area. Florian Wirtz ghosted into space, arriving perfectly timed, meeting the ball with a cushioned volley.

Dean Henderson dove instinctively, fingertips brushing leather just enough to send it inches past the upper right corner. A collective gasp echoed throughout Serce Łodzi as the German fans groaned in frustration. "Germany nearly struck first," Paul Gartner's voice rose sharply. "Rakim and Wirtz are already connecting superbly. England must respond, or this will quickly turn into a one-sided affair."

England regrouped quickly. Henderson barked orders, steadying his defenders as Jamie Leweling geared up for a corner kick. Jamie Leweling set the ball down carefully at the corner flag, took a measured step back, and raised his right arm. Inside the box, players jostled for position, each muscle coiled, waiting to spring. The noise from the stands ebbed momentarily, as though the crowd itself held its breath.

Leweling whipped in a high, curling corner towards the penalty spot. Lenn Jastremski muscled his way past Declan Rice, rising powerfully. He met the ball with force, but it glanced off his forehead and spiralled harmlessly wide.

"Jastremski got away from his marker beautifully, Eddie," Paul Gartner said breathlessly, "but he couldn't get his header on target."

Dean Henderson immediately signalled his team forward, quickly rolling the ball short to Conor Bradley, who calmly brought it out of defence. Bradley fed a crisp pass into midfield, finding Jude Bellingham, who pivoted gracefully away from Angelo Stiller, his touch effortlessly buying him space.

Bellingham took three powerful strides before sliding a perfectly weighted pass forward to Mason Mount, positioned cleverly between the lines. Mount turned sharply, eyes scanning quickly before releasing a threaded ball out wide to Jadon Sancho on the flank. The English winger faced off against Simon Asta, teasing him with quick feints and subtle shifts of balance.

Sancho cut sharply inside, suddenly accelerating and pulling Asta with him. Just as the defender committed, Sancho expertly backheeled the ball into Ben Chilwell's overlapping run. Chilwell surged toward the byline, firing a low, driven cross into Germany's penalty area.

Mason Greenwood reacted quickest, darting toward the near post. He extended his leg, connecting firmly, but Luca Unbehaun reacted spectacularly, diving low to his left and parrying the shot away. The ball rolled tantalizingly across the face of the goal until Armel Bella-Kotchap cleared with authority, thumping it toward the halfway line.

"Fantastic reaction saves by Unbehaun!" Eddie Hall exclaimed. "England's interplay on the wing nearly paid off—Greenwood must've thought he'd opened the scoring there."

[10]

The match entered a subtle deadlock with neither of the two teams being able to create any meaningful chances. After a couple of close calls, in the 10th minute England was given their next big chance when Jadon Sancho was taken down by a late tackle from Angelo Stiller. A piercing whistle quickly cut through the cacophony as Jadon Sancho tumbled across the turf.

The referee's hand, already dipping into his pocket, brandished a yellow card toward the German midfielder. Stiller protested briefly, but the referee's pointed finger towards the spot of the infringement silenced any complaints.

"Free kick, England," Paul Gartner remarked succinctly from the commentary box. "This could be dangerous for Germany. Mason Mount and Bukayo Saka hovering over it."

Mount and Saka exchanged a quick glance and shared a couple of words before they both took a couple of steps for their run-up. Five German defenders lined up shoulder-to-shoulder, tense and unmoving. The crowd's energy tightened into tense silence as Mason Mount and Bukayo Saka hovered over the free kick. Germany's wall stood firm, anchored by Bella-Kotchap, tension rippling visibly in their stance.

Mount's eyes flickered toward the goal as Saka feinted his approach. With precision, Mount lofted the ball in a smooth, curling arc toward the far post. Bodies surged forward as the ball dipped dangerously into the heart of Germany's penalty area.

Jude Bellingham soared above the cluster of green shirts, his timing impeccable. His forehead connected cleanly, directing the ball downward with force, a textbook header bound for the right side of the goal. Luca Unbehaun, reading the play brilliantly, lunged with remarkable agility, managing to bring his foot to the ball with enough force to clear it.

The crowd erupted into a chaotic mix of cheers and groans. Eddie Hall's voice crackled over the airwaves, "Another superb save from Unbehaun! He's keeping Germany in this."

Germany's counterattack ignited immediately, springing from Luca Unbehaun's sharp clearance. The ball landed at the feet of Noah Katterbach at the edge of the box. Noah cushioned Unbehaun's clearance impeccably, spinning deftly past Bukayo Saka's eager press. With his head raised, the German left-back surged forward, the ball glued to his instep.

Declan Rice moved swiftly to close him down, but Katterbach sharply changed direction, slipping a precise pass to Rakim Rex, who had surged up the middle of the field. Rakim received the ball smoothly, just as he crossed the halfway line, doing his best to hold off Jude on his right. Jude stuck his foot out in an attempt to steal the ball; however, Rakim flicked the ball behind him with a sublime touch, spinning swiftly to collect it on the other side.

He didn't hold on to the ball, though, but unleashed a curving through ball up the right flank for Jamie Leweling to latch onto. Jamie Leweling accelerated down the right flank, his boots pounding against the turf as the roar of anticipation from the German fans swelled. Ben Chilwell sprinted desperately to recover ground, eyes wide in urgency, breathing hard to close the space.

Leweling cut sharply toward the goal, shifting his weight subtly, forcing Chilwell into a rash challenge. With a burst of speed, he nudged the ball past Chilwell's outstretched boot, driving into the penalty area. The English defender stumbled slightly, off-balance and helpless, as Leweling raised his head to assess options.

Dean Henderson narrowed the angle sharply, advancing assertively toward Leweling. Just as Henderson dropped into a low stance, Leweling cleverly chipped the ball across the six-yard box, sending a delicate cross floating teasingly toward the far post.

Time seemed to slow, and the collective breaths of thousands of spectators caught in a suspended hush. Lenn Jastremski arrived at the far post, legs pumping furiously, his mind locked solely on the descending ball. Reece James strained to match his pace, neck and neck with the German striker.

The ball hung in the air for what felt like an eternity, spinning lazily toward the far post. Jastremski stretched his right leg out, toe barely kissing the ball's surface, altering its trajectory just enough. Dean Henderson, already committed to covering the near post, pivoted frantically, extending an arm in a last-gasp effort.

The stadium fell into a deafening silence; thousands of breaths held in collective suspense. The ball skimmed Henderson's fingertips, brushing agonizingly past his glove. It clipped the inside of the far post and nestled gently into the net.

The silence was shattered instantly. A volcanic eruption of joy from the German fans surged across Stadion Widzewa Łódź. Lenn Jastremski sprinted toward the corner flag, arms wide open, roaring triumphantly. Jamie Leweling leapt onto his back as their teammates piled in from every direction, a sea of green celebration.