

Football 571

Chapter 571 Kampf Sport(2)

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Kerem Demirbay planted the ball on a tuft that suited him and took five neat steps back, eyes sweeping the penalty area beyond the four-man wall. Taking a deep breath, he debated whether to take it on himself or deliver a cross into the box. Personally, he would rather go for the goal, but upon spotting a hand raised amid the chaos, he knew what to do.

Following the referee's whistle, he raised his right hand, showing a two, letting his teammates know what he was about to do. Demirbay's run-up was almost lazy as he closed in on the stationary ball, but the strike carried so much whip he cleanly shaved a chunk of grass.

He wrapped his left foot around the ball and sent it screaming into the air on an arced trajectory. The ball curled in the air, sailing above the leaping crowd that had sprinted towards the near post. With the reds attacking the nearpost, they dragged all their markers with them, so when Weiser spun off towards the back post, no one was there.

His marker was too busy watching the sailing ball to notice, and by the time he realised it was too late. Pavlenka, on his line, scrambled across his line trying to get in the ball's way, but it was too late. Weiser took the ball on the volley, needing to do nothing more than redirect the ball towards the goal.

The net bulged with a satisfying thud that echoed around the empty stadium like a gunshot. Weiser's arms shot skyward instinctively as he jumped up from the ground, but the wild shouts from the crowd never came. That only dampened his mood slightly as he raced off to the side to celebrate at the camera at the corner flag. His teammates quickly joined him, making sure to maintain the protocol distance as they joined in his celebration.

[Bremen 0 Vs 1 Leverkusen]

"Clinical from Weiser!" Derek Rae's voice carried a hint of admiration. "The set-piece routine worked to perfection, and Bremen are punished for their lapse in concentration."

"They studied it during tactical sessions, they practised it during training, and now they have utilised it in the game," Robson added, his analyst's mind already dissecting the goal. "Draw the defenders to the near post, then exploit the space at the back stick. It sounds easy, but it's much harder to do in a real game. Kohfeldt won't be happy with how easily his players switched off."

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The goal seemed to deflate Bremen momentarily. They kicked off with renewed urgency, but their passing lacked the crispness of the opening exchanges. Selke dropped deep, trying to link play, but found himself isolated as Leverkusen's midfield trio closed down space efficiently.

Bargfrede attempted to break the lines with a long diagonal pass to Rashica, but Aranguiz read it perfectly, intercepting with a well-placed slide tackle. The Chilean's received a hasty return pass from Demirbay, who was sent tumbling from Eggestein's shoulder tackle. His first touch was sublime despite having just jumped up from the ground, cushioning the ball away from pressure before pivoting to find Amiri.

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Amiri's movement in the middle third was becoming increasingly problematic for Bremen. The playmaker drifted between pockets of space, linking both midfield and attack as he connected passes between his teammates. The moment he received the ball from Aranguiz, he had already spotted the run.

Havertz timed his run perfectly as he peeled away from Moisander, leaving the Bremen captain a step behind. The pass split Bremen's defensive line, rolling perfectly into Havertz's path as he bore down on goal. Pavlenka rushed off his line, arms spread wide to narrow the angle, but Havertz remained composed.

The young German lifted his head for a split second, spotted the keeper's positioning, then delicately chipped the ball with the outside of his right boot. The ball arced gracefully over and around the keeper's desperate dive, spinning toward the empty net with cruel precision. The ball bounced on the goal line, piercing the net with a dramatic thud as Havertz raced off to the sidelines in jubilation.

Havertz's celebration stopped immediately as he turned to see the linesman with his flag pointing toward the Bremen goal. The away side tried to protest the call, but referee Tobias simply double-checked with the VAR team through his earpiece. The verdict came moments later; Offside and he did not need any convincing.

"Offside," Derek Rae confirmed, his voice carrying a hint of disappointment. "Marginal, but the assistant got it right. Havertz was just a fraction ahead of Veljkovic when Amiri played the pass."

"That's the beauty and cruelty of VAR," Stewart Robson added. "In the old days, goals like that might have stood. Now, there's nowhere to hide from the technology."

The near-miss seemed to spark something in the Bremen side, causing them to become more aggressive. Kohfeldt's voice carried clearly across the pitch, urging his players forward with animated gestures from the touchline. The home side began to press higher, forcing Leverkusen to play quicker passes and build up play from the back.

This noticeably put more pressure on Tapsoba and Bender, who had to act as the link between defence and midfield. Hradecky rolled the ball to Bender, but Selke was already charging forward, looking to lock him down. The Bremen striker's pressing forced a hurried pass out wide that Eggstein managed to intercept with a well-timed lunge. The ball bobbed loose in the Leverkusen half, and suddenly Bremen had a chance.

Bittencourt pounced on the loose ball, his first touch taking him away from Demirbay's desperate slide tackle. The former Bayern man had space to run at the Leverkusen defence, and he used it ruthlessly. This forced Tapsoba to step out to meet him, but Bittencourt had already spotted the movement of Rashica on the left wing.

The pass was weighted perfectly, threading between Weiser and the retreating Aranguiz as Rashica collected it in full stride. The Kosovo international's pace was electric as he ate up the ground, leaving Weiser trailing in his wake. This time, there was no hesitation – Rashica cut inside sharply, his left foot whipping across the ball with vicious intent.

The shot cannoned off the inside of the near post with a metallic clang that echoed around the empty stadium. The rebound fell kindly for Bremen, but Selke's follow-up was blocked brilliantly by Bender's outstretched leg on the six line. The ball ricocheted back toward the penalty spot where Eggstein was lurking, but Hradecky had recovered quickly, smothering the loose ball with both hands.

"Oh my goodness, that was quick, vicious, and dangerous," Robson commented as he could already imagine the Leverkusen fans behind the screen breathing a sigh of relief. "Now this is the Bremen side we came to see."

"That's more like it from Bremen," Rae observed. "They're starting to find their rhythm now, creating chances through their pace and movement."

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Bremen rode the adrenaline of that double-chance, pressing in waves that directly crashed with Leverkusen's for every yard. It quickly became a midfield battle with Vogt and Demirbay becoming the protagonists. The two took control of the flow of the match, jumping into tackles after tackles with no hesitation.

At one point, Demirbay even shoved Amiri aside just to shoulder-tackle Bargfrede aside at the edge of the centre circle. For a few moments, the match seemed like a street fight as neither side could focus on executing their tactics. Vogt thundered through Demirbay in the centre circle, the thud of shoulder on sternum ringing in the rafters.

This earned him a yellow card, but the former did not even flinch at that as he stared his opponent down. Minutes later, a rough slide tackle from Aranguiz sent Rashica flying to the ground, but the tackle was clean. This did not matter to the home side, though, who went on to intensify their pressing.

Referee Tobias Stieler became the busiest man on the field as he worked his lungs to capacity. His whistle and cradles became more pronounced as he booked six different players in a matter of 7 minutes, and plenty of players were warned. When Diaby was fouled at the edge of the box in the 44th minute, he finally had enough, calling both teams' captains for a talk.

"Ruhe genug ist genug, wir spielen Fußball, nicht Kampfsport. (Calm down, enough is enough, we're playing football, not a combat sport.)" He told the two captains without even letting them get a word in warning that he would no longer be lenient if they continued pushing the needle.

Chapter 572 Bubble (2)

"Welcome back to the Weser-Stadion, where the second half is almost upon us," Derek Rae's voice rolled through the empty bowl as the players jogged out from the tunnel, breath clouding faintly in the cool Bremen air. "Leverkusen with a narrow 1–0 lead thanks to Mitchell Weiser's guided volley, and Stewart, it finished with a real edge before the interval."

"It did, Derek," Robson replied, the camera sweeping across masked staff and disinfected benches. "Tackles flew, cards flashed, and Tobias Stieler gave both captains a proper lecture. I suspect that if the next big challenge comes at the wrong time, it will lead to a booking, possibly worse. Keep your timing right, or you won't finish this game."

Down on the touchline, Peter Bosz could be seen whispering something in the ear of assistant Fredrick Bauer as they watched the players move into position. He did not look happy despite his team leading, and that showed in the fact that he had subbed Aranguiz out for Baumgartlinger to act as the defensive pivot, urging Demirbay to play box to box. Not to be outdone, Florian Kohfeldt had also made two substitutions, looking to strengthen the right wing and midfield.

Bargfrede left the stage for Eggstein, and Bittencourt was subbed out for 18-year-old Woltemade. It didn't take long for the match to resume as Bremen kicked off another 45 minutes of football. Bremen didn't start off slow; they literally stormed into the second half following a pass back to their defenders.

Veljkovic clipped the ball to the side, dogging Havertz's attempt to pressure him as he slotted the ball a couple of yards forward to Vogt. The midfield pivot calmly collected the ball using a quick heel flick to turn past the eager Wirtz. Without bothering to play it safe, he looked up and zipped a crisp pass feeding Rashica, who sprinted past the halfway line on the left flank.

The winger latched onto the ball with a deft piece of control, directly circumventing Amiri, who tried to get in his way. Without breaking stride, he quickly started eating up yards, closing the distance between him and Weiser as he crossed into the final third. Weiser backpedalled palms out, waiting for help as he showed the winger wide, but help didn't come.

The Kosovan dropped a shoulder wide, before abruptly pulling right, cutting across in one fluid movement, sending the right back skidding. Not hesitating, he whipped his laces through the ball before it could roll past his reach. Tapsoba couldn't get close and could only watch as it arched for the near post in a low, rainbow-like arc.

Hradecky sprang, fists first, beating it clear as Selke crashed the six-yard box with Bender shoulder to shoulder. The rebound zipped away to the corner flag, and the echo of studs and shouts rolled around the empty tiers. "Rashica looks a menace, Derek," Robson's voice clipped in, the cameras catching Kohfeldt's clap and a barked "Weiter!"

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Bremen smelled blood and stayed on it, attacking the visiting side in waves. From the clearance, Friedl threw quickly down the line, Selke bullied Bender just enough to lay it back, to the subbed on Johannes Eggestein. He arrived on the half-volley, snapping his leg forward as his boot connected with the ball in the next second.

His shot skidded off the ground around the penalty spot before bouncing upward, taking an awkward angle. Hrádecký, who had been going low to block the shot, read it late, but somehow he managed to get there. He sprang late, performing an awkward jump as he sent his glove to the ball, managing to kiss the underside of the ball with his glove.

It clanged, on the underside of the ball and spat down with force, but before anyone could get any ideas, he smothered it. "World-class reactions from Hrádecký!" Derek Rae's voice ricocheted around the studio.

"That's pure instinct," Robson agreed. "Bremen are hammering at the door."

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Friedl's corner arced to the penalty spot; Moisander battled through bodies to fight for positioning, only for Tapsoba to rise even higher and thud clear. The ball broke to Vogt thirty yards out, and he touched it down before smashing it forward, but Bender's ribcage blocked it, the veteran gasping for breath as he crashed to the ground.

Baumgartlinger cleared the loose ball out for a throw-in before checking in his teammate. "Looks like he had the wind knocked out of him," Derek commented as the referee allowed the medical team to come and check on Bender. Luckily, nothing major was wrong, and he simply needed a moment to catch his breath.

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The throw-in fell to Woltemade on the right touchline, the young substitute showing no nerves as he collected the ball with his back to goal. Sinkgraven closed him down quickly, but the teenager's first touch was sublime, cushioning the ball before spinning away from the challenge. His pace carried him past the halfway line as he looked to link up with the overlapping run of Gebre Selassie.

The pass was perfect, rolling along the touchline just ahead of the advancing fullback. Gebre Selassie collected it in stride, as he glided down the right flank. Diaby tracked back desperately, his lungs burning as he tried to match the older defender's surprising burst of pace.

The Bremen captain spotted the run of Selke peeling away from Tapsoba in the penalty area and whipped in a dangerous cross that curled toward the near post. The German striker timed his leap perfectly, but just as he prepared to make contact, Bender lightly nudged his shoulder, doing just enough to put him off balance. The ball sailed harmlessly over the crossbar, as Bremen failed to convert yet another chance.

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Around the 60th minute, Bremen's moment noticeably slowed as Leverkusen settled into the second half. It became harder for the home side to break them down with sheer momentum. Amiri once again got to work with Demirbay, fully taking control of the midfield as he pinged passes everywhere.

Bosz used this moment to call for two players who had been warming up to get ready to come on. "Who are you thinking of bringing on?" Fredrick asked with a concerned smile, knowing that their next change could drastically impact the outcome of the match.

The manager furrowed his brows as he watched Amiri ping a ball down the left flank into the path of Diaby. The winger would usually look to get by him, but for some odd reason, he seemed to be playing it safe. "Leon and Rakim, our wings are sluggish." He said as he watched Gebre muscle the French man off the ball after he took a heavy touch trying to turn back after failing to sell a feint.

"Are you sure, Rakim's performances have been, how do I put it, all over the place following his break?" Fredrick commented with clear apprehension as this had been something the coaching staff had been dealing with since the resumption of training. "One moment, he performs like the wunderkind who tore

apart Juventus, and in the next moment, he makes basic mistakes, failing to connect passes or taking a heavy touch when dribbling."

"Hmmm, you know how worried I was when I heard he was in the hospital for COVID a couple of weeks ago, Fredrick?" Peter asked with a light from, causing him to remember the hundreds of calls they had with the club. It especially became serious when the players' side went radio silent, and they only later found out that he had been in a coma-like state.

"How could I not remember? My wife kicked me out of the bedroom after the fifth 2 am call," he responded with a wry smile.

"I'm not sure what he went through, but the way I see it, he is redeveloping his entire playstyle," Bosz commented with a contemplative gaze as he rubbed his chin. "Have you noticed that he makes more passes than before, playing less selfishly, which is major considering that what he did before was enough to boost our attacking force by 15%."

He could see that his assistant manager wasn't convinced. "My friend, let's just see how he transforms within the game. I still believe that he has that kind of potential and was not far off from seeing him fully showcase it."

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The substitution board went up, and Derek Rae's voice cut through the stadium silence. "Here comes the changes for Leverkusen. Leon Bailey and Rakim Rex are being introduced, with Diaby and Wirtz making way."

As the two wingers jogged toward the touchline, Bosz grabbed Bailey's arm and whispered something urgent in his ear. The Jamaican nodded sharply, his eyes already scanning the pitch as he prepared to enter the fray.

Rakim bounced on his toes, shaking out his legs as he waited for Wirtz to reach the sideline. The young German looked disappointed to be withdrawn, but he elbowed tapped his replacement with professional grace before heading to the bench.

Chapter 573 Bubble (3)

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The fresh legs made an immediate impact. Bailey collected the ball on the right touchline, his first touches sharp as he seemingly joined the flow of the match. He jokeyed Friedl inward before breaking past him along the touch line, setting a chase. Instead of swinging in a cross, she pulled the ball back, seizing up Friedl, who had managed to recover.

The Jamaican's feint was masterful, dropping his shoulder as if to go inside before exploding back toward the byline. Friedl committed to the movement, his weight shifting just enough for Bailey to exploit the gap. With a delicate touch, Bailey nudged the ball past the recovering defender and into the space behind him.

This time, Bailey had options. Havertz was making his run toward the near post, while Rakim had drifted into the penalty area from the opposite flank. The Jamaican whipped in a low cross that skimmed across the wet grass, but Moisander read the danger perfectly, sliding in to intercept before either forward could pounce.

The ball ricocheted off the Bremen captain's shin, and before Amiri could pounce on it, Pavlenka smothered it. The Czechian took a moment before getting up, giving his team a chance to relax and

gather themselves. "Bailey's already making his presence felt," Derek Rae observed. "That direct running will cause Bremen problems; they need to stop him early."

"Yes, Derek, they don't want him to give him a chance to get going, because just like 911 GT3 once it's warm, there's no stopping it," Robson commented as the keeper launched the ball up the field with a powerful throw.

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For the next few minutes, the game entered a stalemate with neither side being able to mount a meaningful attack. Demirbay and Amiri became the most active on the Leverkusen side, managing to win the battle of possession in the middle of the pitch. They dictated the tempo with patient passing, probing for weaknesses in Bremen's increasingly compact defensive shape.

Bremen sat deeper now, their energy reserves depleting after the intense pressing of the second half's opening exchanges. Kohfeldt could be seen pacing his technical area, occasionally shouting instructions that echoed clearly around the empty stadium. His players had fought valiantly but were beginning to show signs of letting up against Leverkusen's superior technical quality.

Rakim hadn't done anything drastic since his introduction in the match as he seamlessly slotted into the left wing. He played clean, efficient one or two-touch football, keeping his marker on his toes. He seemed to be doing the bare minimum to help his team retain control, but despite this, the passes out to his wing continued to increase.

The change came in the 72nd minute when he received a pass, the ball thirty yards from the goal. He didn't immediately look to beat his man - instead, he held possession, drawing Woltemade toward him before releasing simple passes inwards to the approaching Baumgartlinger. Before the Bremen youngster could react, Rakim sped past him from the outside, latching onto the Austrian's return pass.

"Oh, oh, he 's on the move, Derek," Robson commented as Rakim picked up speed, causing a chain reaction from his teammates. His movements were sharp and clean as he cut inwards, moving across the chasing Woltemade, heading into the area between Gebre and Veljkovic.

He performed a rapid set of steps over as the distance neared, his body swaying side to side, keeping the two defenders at bay. A sudden scissors right over left froze Gebre; a drop of the shoulder sent Veljkovic leaning the wrong way. Rakim slid the ball through the narrow seam, an elastico that kissed the chalk at the edge of the box.

Veljkovic lunged forward in an attempt to steal the slightly airborne ball. Rakim reacted instantly as he lifted the ball higher with his right boot, which seemed glued to it. He rode the momentum forward as he vaulted over the downed defender, barely using half a touch to kill the bounce.

He used another touch to drag the ball across his body as Pavlenka charged out of his goal, arms outstretched. "Can he do it?" Derek Rae exclaimed, but Rakim did not panic as he shaped for the near post, then snapped his ankle and whipped the shot across goal instead.

The keeper's left arm struck the underside of the ball, managing to smack it just beyond the far post. "Big save, Pavlenka!" Robson commented. "Rex sold him the eyes, but Pavlenka somehow managed to pull out a save."

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From the resulting corner, the ball swung invitingly toward the penalty spot where Havertz had stationed himself between two green shirts. His leap was perfectly timed, rising above both Moisander

and Eggestein to meet the ball with his forehead. The header was goalbound, but Pavlenka produced another stunning save, somehow getting his fingertips to it and diverting it onto the crossbar.

The rebound dropped kindly for Tapsoba, but the recovering Selke charged down the Burkina Faso international's follow-up shot. Bodies crashed into each other as both teams scrambled for the loose ball, but it was Johannes Eggestein who eventually cleared with a desperate hack that sent it sailing over the touchline.

The game had entered a critical phase. Bremen knew they needed something special to find an equaliser, while Leverkusen sensed that one more goal would kill the contest entirely. The intensity ratcheted up another notch, every tackle contested with increased ferocity, every pass made with added urgency.

Rakim was beginning to show flashes of the talent that had caught the footballing world as he settled into the match. His movements became increasingly unpredictable, as he was almost always on the move once the ball entered his area of influence. When he received the ball thirty yards from goal, two green shirts immediately closed him down.

His first touch was sublime, cushioning the ball away from Vogt's challenge before flicking it over the head of the approaching Eggestein with his next. The young winger was through the gap and piercing into the middle channel before either midfielder could react. A quick one-two with Kai at the edge of the box and he let loose a rocket with his left boot before the nearby defenders could react.

"Oh, he shoots!" Derek exclaimed, his voice reverberating through the viewers' speakers as the ball blazed across the turf like a guided missile.

The shot had power and precision, as it veered to the right side of the goal, but Pavlenka managed to react in time. The Czech keeper's reflexes were lightning-quick as he shimmyed to his left twice before

launching into the air, his left palm clenched in anticipation of the shot's power. The ball stung his glove, but he held out as he redirected the ball outward.

"What a save!" Derek Rae shouted, his commentary tinged with genuine admiration. "Rakim is searching for that goal, but Pavlenka is having none of it!"

"I know I've said it before, Derek, but that young man is special," Robson added as the replay showed the intricate set of footwork in slow motion. "The way he glides past players, it's like watching silk in motion. But credit to Pavlenka - that was keeper's instinct at its finest."

[75']

The near miss seemed to electrify the evening. Bremen pressed forward in a wave of green as the red lions retreated just enough to be able to spring a counter. Vogt slipped defence, splitting through the ball down the channel, and Rashica latched onto it immediately, giving Weiser trouble.

Their duel found them at the side of the box in a matter of moments, and the winger found a gap just big enough to send a low cross into the box. The ball came in hot, skittering low across the six-yard box, bouncing a couple times, causing Selke to mis-time his swing. Hradecky also misjudged his lunge as it slipped towards the back of the box.

Tapsoba pounced on it, holding off Woltemade before shovelling it to safety. The clearance wasn't pretty, but it was perfect: dropping at the centre circle where Demirbay and Eggstein fought for the header. They both met in the air, clashing like rams as the ball hung in the air, then Kerem arched his back and won it, steering a clever header into space rather than straight up.

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Chapter 574 Bubble

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But Bailey had learned from his previous encounter with the Austrian defender. This time, he didn't try to outmuscle Friedl - instead, he showed him the inside, enticing the defender to commit before flicking the ball around the outside with his weaker right foot. The move was so unexpected that Friedl was left grasping at thin air as Bailey burst into the final third.

The cross that followed was sublime, curling in from the right with pace. It found that Havertz, who had little time to react as he fought off Moisander, somehow managed to twist his body enough to angle his boot to the oncoming ball. The German's boot connected with the ball, firmly thundering it towards goal.

Pavlenka rooted on his spot, he couldn't even react, but lady luck still favoured him as the sound of the ball skimming the side of the post resounded a second later. "Oh my days, that could have been it," Rae exclaimed as the German stood in front of the goal in disbelief, watching the still reverberating post. "He did everything right to get into that position, but simply couldn't execute."

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In the 77th minute, veteran Bartels replaced Vogt on the Bremen, moving up to act as a second striker as their formation shifted to a 4-4-2. Rashica also made his exit as Osako replaced him on the left flank.

On the Leverkusen side, Paulinho replaced Amiri at the centre of the field, and Havertz made way for the veteran Alario.

The game that had been rather balanced now quickly turned tumultuous following these changes, as both sides mounted efficient attacks. Bremen's tactical shift injected a new energy into their press as they played more direct football. Bartels acted as the target man, nodding down a high ball into the path of Selke.

In one such instance in the 79th minute, Eggestein lofted a ball forward to the edge of the Leverkusen 18-yard box. Bartels rose above the figure of Bender, twisting his head as he nodded the ball downwards into the path of Selke. The Bremen Striker latched onto the ball, killing its bounce with a deft first touch before unleashing a fierce half-volley toward goal.

The ball flew like a cannonball, but Hrádecký was equal to it — the Leverkusen keeper diving sharply to his left, palming the shot out for a corner with both hands as he grunted on impact. The resulting corner was taken quickly, with Osako stepping up to take it. The forward whipped in a delicate cross that flew towards the penalty spot.

Tapsoba, Bender, Veljkovic, and Bartels fought in the air using their bodies to collide with one another as they stretched their necks to reach the ball. None of them managed to reach it, though no matter how high they stretched their necks. Around the back, past just as the ball began to dip, the figure of Gebre Selassie could be seen soaring into the air, his knees reaching the side of Sinkgraven's head.

(Boom) A loud thud reverberated as the defender's head smacked the ball downward, redirecting it goalward. Hardeckey had no more pixie dust left and could only helplessly watch as the ball pierced the back of the net as the Bremen defenders landed on top of the downed Sinkgraven.

Derek Rae's voice resounded over the speakers, matching the energy of all the Bremen fans at home who jumped for joy. "And Bremen have clawed one back! It's 1–1 now and what a header from Gebre Selassie!"

The replay flashed across the screen, showcasing how Gebre had last his marker, allowing him to make his run up. His leap caught Sinkgraven off guard, but the defender did not care as he smashed the ball down with such violence that it knocked off the wet droplets on the net, zipping past Hrádecký before he could even twitch. The Bremen bench erupted in joy as if they had just scored a Champions League winner instead of an equaliser.

"Well, Derek, when they give him that much space, they shouldn't expect anything else. Sinkgraven just happened to be the victim this time, but the mistake wasn't his." Robson Cooley analysed, pointing out that Pulinho failed to track his man.

[Bremen: 1 vs Leverkusen 1]

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A sense of belief swelled from the Bremen bench as their players re-centred for kickoff, the equaliser breathing new life into a side that had looked out of ideas just ten minutes ago. Leverkusen didn't panic, but their rhythm gained more urgency, their spacing tighter. From the touchline, Peter Bosz barked a sharp string of German/Dutch orders, motioning for an aggressive press reset.

Hearing the man's shout from up close, Rakim promptly decided to switch flanks with Bailey just before the restart. The confused Jamaican figured it was the coach's instructions and simply nodded bumping shoulders lightly as they passed each other. He only realised it wasn't when the coach asked him why he was here, but by then it was too late and Alario had kicked off the match.

The ball rolled back to Baumgartlinger, who lightly flicked it forward, remaining composed despite the onrushing defenders. He picked out a red figure blitzing up the right flank and immediately sent a weighted through ball into his path. Almost like a wide receiver catching the ball from his QB, Rakim turned towards the ball, his back facing Friedl, who stepped up to mark him.

His left foot lashed towards the oncoming ball, flicking it backwards towards the back line. The ball took a hop, causing Friedl to turn to chase it as Rakim spun past him from the other side. The winger's first step proved faster as he exploded past Breman's leftback, catching the ball before it could roll out of bounds.

Turning to face Friedl, he performed a step over with his left foot, feinting backwards before his right foot nudged the ball through the defender's open legs. The crowd noise from the substitutes' bench and scattered staff spiked as Rakim burst through, the ball glued to his stride. Friedl spun desperately to recover, but his heels slipped on the damp turf. That half-second stumble was all Rakim needed.

He drove toward the byline with the pitch opening before him, the Bremen defence shuffling in panic. Veljković stepped across to cover, but Rakim cut inside sharply, the ball swept under his sole in one smooth drag. Veljković lunged, studs grazing leather, but the winger's weight shift carried him away in a blur.

With two defenders now chasing across, Rakim whipped in a low delivery toward the six-yard box. It zipped through the corridor of uncertainty, skimming the turf just beyond Alario's lunge and grazing Moisander's shin before Pavlenka parried awkwardly at his near post.

The rebound spilled into the arc. Paulinho steamed onto it and lashed first-time, the strike cannoning off Eggstein's thigh and spinning out for another corner.

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The set piece came to nothing, Bremen clearing long, but Leverkusen reset quickly. The ball came back down Rakim's flank and this time he didn't wait for help. He shaped to drive straight down the line again, baiting Friedl into angling his body wide, then rolled the ball inward and snapped into a diagonal run toward the corner of the box.

Eggstein tried to clamp the space, stepping in just as Rakim's studs rasped over the ball in a tight double scissors. His body swayed with his movements, completely hiding his intentions as the midfielder's foot missed by inches. Rakim slipped between him and Friedl, his stride now head-on with the retreating Veljković.

Veljković planted hard to stop him, but got sold—Rakim faked the strike, let the ball run across his body, then accelerated into the space left behind. The Bremen centre-back recovered enough to clip his trailing foot just as he crossed the white paint of the penalty area.

The whistle shrilled instantly as Rakim tumbled, to the ground rolling forward to kill the momentum. The referee's decision was unchangeable not bothering to cater to the complaining Bremen players who attempted to change his mind. There was a debate on whether it was a penalty but a quick VAR check confirmed the referees decision of a free kick.

Chapter 575 Little Targets

[85']

The free-kick was placed just outside the right edge of the D. Demirbay and Rakim stepped up to take it. They debated on what to do for a few moments as the four-person wall got set up. Neither could agree on who should take it, but they decided on one thing: they should go for the goal.

The whistle blew, and Demirbay made his run up, hopping over the ball at the last moment, acting as a decoy, his motion freezing the wall as one of them hesitated whether to chase him. For the briefest heartbeat, they stood rooted, barely managing to react to Rakim, who bore down on the ball a second later.

His left foot wrapped viciously around the ball, whipping it up and over the left side of the wall with a snap of his ankle. The players in the wall barely managed to hop, trying to stretch their heads, but it wasn't meant to be as the ball glazed past the head of Eggstein. It dipped a little later due to the contact, the ball's spin dragging it down toward the top-left corner like a string pulled it.

Pavlenka barely managed a step before he realised that he wouldn't reach it in time, but the loud clang from the bar quickly jolted him back to life. The ball bounced off the bar violently, hitting the ground around the six-yard line as both teams' players pounced upon it. Veljkovic was the first to reach it, but with Alario breathing down his neck and the ball's awkward bounce, he barely managed to divert its path with the top of his thigh.

The ball flew behind them, skipping past a few players who tried to get their feet on it. Osako and Bailey both swung their feet at the ball that bounced in front of them. Both hit the ball almost simultaneously, but Bailey was slightly faster and hit the leather dead centre, skimming off the top of Osako's foot.

Pavlenka, who had been on high alert during this entire turmoil, jumped to his left using both hands to palm the ball away. The save proved useless as the ball rebounded into the path of Rakim, who stood a couple of yards from the near post with his foot already drawn back. Without hesitation, he took the shot on the half volley, catapulting the ball goalward.

The strike was pure violence wrapped in precision. The ball rocketed off his boot, skipping off the slick turf once before slamming into the roof of the net at the near post. Pavlenka hadn't even gotten up from his previous save as the sound of the ball hitting the net cracked through the empty stadium like a whip.

"OH, he has done it!" Derek exclaimed as Rakim raced off towards the corner flag. "When at first you don't succeed, then try, try again."

"That goal was a thing of beauty but easily preventable." Robson analysed as he watched Pavlenka shoot a dirty glare at his teammates. "If I'm the keeper, I'm asking them whether they even want to win. Leaving a player of Rakim's calibre unmarked inside the box is simply asking for trouble."

[Goal Rakim '86': Bremen 1 vs 2 Leverkusen]

[87]

They say when it rains, it pours. That was what one would use to describe the current match that was unfolding. The scoreboard that hadn't changed much during the entire game had now shifted for the fourth time as Alario could be seen racing off to the corner flag in celebration. The replay showed him racing into the box following a through ball coming in from Rakim as he fought off his marker.

He spun on his axis the moment he received the ball, turning past Moisander, who tried to keep hold of his shoulder. The forward's movement was swift, allowing him to get loose enough to take aim, and the Bremen keeper couldn't stretch enough to reach the ball.

[Goal Rakim '88': Bremen 1 vs 3 Leverkusen]

[90]

Still, they weren't, as in the last minute of regular time, Baumgartlinger intercepted a Bremen throw-in. He chested the ball down and, in one motion, poked it into the path of Paulinho, and the Brazilian took it in stride, dragging it along with him. Dribbling past two opponents, he played a clever one-two pass sequence with Leon Bailey on the wings.

Their give-and-go tore apart the shape of the nearby Bremen fans, and he suddenly had more space as he bore down on the box. He fed the ball to the inside channel into Demirbay's run, who flicked it wide to the feet of Rakim. He didn't bother controlling it and instead swung his left foot, lobbing a through ball over the defensive line towards the left side of the box.

Leon slipped past Gebre and managed to touch it down, but the pressure was soon upon him from both the keeper and nearby defenders. Instead of taking it himself, he squared it across the face of the goal, managing to find Alario, who slid in to tap the ball into the empty net.

[Goal Alario 90': Bremen 1 – 4 Leverkusen]

The final whistle was almost a formality after that. Bremen's shoulders slumped as they trudged back to the centre circle, the fight that had burned so brightly after their equaliser now reduced to embers. The Leverkusen players didn't gloat and were simply content with enjoying their lead.

They expected the win; achieving it convincingly was simply a cherry on top for them. As the saying goes, when you keep winning, it becomes a habit, which perfectly describes the mindset of this Leverkusen side. The board went up — three minutes added on.

Bremen tried one last hopeful push, a long ball slung toward Bartels, but it was cut out in mid-air by Tapsoba's towering leap. His header found its way to Rakim out wide, who took it on the bounce, cushioning the ball into his stride with ease. He didn't charge up the wing this time, though, but instead chose to calmly play it out with Baumgartlinger, who proceeded to ping passes backwards.

They were simply content with knocking passes around and running out the clock, and the home side was content with letting them do that. The final seconds ticked away with Leverkusen stroking the ball in triangles, pulling green shirts into pointless chases. When the referee finally lifted the whistle to his lips, the sound was more like a call to freedom to the home side, who were relieved that their nightmare was finally over.

"Well, there you have it, Derek. After a fairly contested 93 minutes, Leverkusen walks away with 3 points after a 1:4 victory." Robson commented as the players went through the post-match routines of congratulatory messages and some interviews, which consisted of a press area and a camera. "What can we expect from both sides moving forward in this now compressed second half of the Bundesliga season?"

Derek Rae's voice had that wrap-up cadence now, the one that framed a match in hindsight rather than heat. "Well, Stewart, it was cagey for long stretches, but the floodgates opened once the visitors found their rhythm—particularly down that right-hand side in the final fifteen minutes."

Robson nodded, eyes still scanning the slow-motion montage rolling on the feed. "Absolutely, Derek. That switch on the flanks midway through the half changed everything. Suddenly, the home defence was being pulled apart at will with runs into space, late balls across the box, and, of course, that finish for the second goal. A thing of beauty, how he managed to be there."

Down on the pitch, masked staff hustled the match balls and water crates toward the tunnel. Rakim was surrounded by a couple of cameras in the designated press area, straining to listen to the speakers set up by the ZDF sports pundits.

"You had a phenomenal impact on this match, 1 goal and an assist with many more threatening runs, would you say that's mission accomplished?" Lothar Matthäus asked from behind the pundit podium, leaning forward slightly out of interest as he gazed at the live broadcast of Rakim.

"Hard to say if I'm being honest, a win is always welcomed, but I'm sure some of the fans and coaches would have preferred we put the game away much earlier," Rakim responded with a calm gaze after taking a moment to think over his response. "I personally would say our performance was acceptable if you consider the circumstances we now live in. Our mindset going forward will be all about hitting those little targets and continuing to focus on our game."

Chapter 576 Attack Attack Attack!

[23/05/2020 | Time: 14:29 AM | Location: BORUSSIA-PARK | Attendance: 0]

Walking the pitch, a tingling sensation coursed through my body. Well, that might be the light drizzle, but I was still excited to lace up again, even without fans. "Wait, are those cardboard cutouts of fans?" Wirtz suddenly exclaimed, pointing towards the north stand where a sea of fans' faces could be seen covering nearly all seats and standing sections.

"I guess, that's kinda cool, we should have done something like that," Kai responded from the front of the group, genuinely considering the idea.

"Heck no, that's creepy as fuck, imagine having to clean this at night with all these faces just staring at you." Diaby retorted, rubbing his biceps in mock shiver as he glared at the stands.

"(Sigh) I agree with Moussa, this feels like a B-rated horror movie, let's just focus on winning as quickly as possible and get out of here." Sven retorted and subconsciously quickened his steps, wanting to walk around the pitch as soon as possible.

"I'll ask your dad to buy two dozen and set them up all over your house for you," I told him as I also quickened my steps out of excitement, of course, not because I was weirded out or anything.

"Hey, I don't want these things in my either!" Wirtz exclaimed as he quickly chased after the pack of players who wanted to get back to the changing rooms as soon as possible.

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"I know these times are weird, and trust me, I've had a couple of conversations with my family on whether it's even safe for us to continue playing." Coach said as he paced in the middle of the changing room. "But we don't get to complain, lads, we get paid the big bucks for a reason. We carry the hopes of millions of Leverkusen fans and many of your own fans who spend their hard-earned money to watch you play the game we all love."

The room fell quiet as he delivered his pre-match talk, still visibly angry at players who had refused to participate due to health concerns. "We are doing everything to make sure you can play safely, so trust us like we trust you to perform every match day." He firmly stated, letting the silence linger, once again locking gazes with a few players who felt compelled to nod in response.

"Okay (Clap clap clap) let's get down to business, we have a match to play after all," he said as he gave the floor to Fredrick Bauer, his assistant manager, letting him take over the tactics portion of the pre-match talk as he calmed down.

"(Ahem) let's start with the starting eleven gentlemen." He started rubbing his short beard as he moved to the whiteboard. "The name of the game today is blitzkrieg, attack, attack, and attack some more.

Let's unleash our full offensive firepower and let the fans feel our determination in this derby, and to that extent, we will utilise the 3-4-3 formation."

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Starting Xi: 3-4-3

GK: Lukas Hradecky

CB: 12 Edmond Tapsoba

CB: 5 Sven Bender

CB: 6 Aleksander Dragovic

RM/RWB: 23 Mitchell Weiser

CM: 20 Charles Aranguiz

CM: 10 Kerem Demirbay

LM/LWB: 45 Daley Sinkgraven

RW: 22 Rakim Rex

ST: 29 Kai Havertz

LW: 19 Moussa Diaby

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"Charles and Kerem, I want you two to hold when moving forward, stagger your movements up the field, and light up the flanks." He stated, gazing at the two midfielders before proceeding to give them a few instructions. "If one of you charges forward, the other needs to hold the line, don't get caught on the counter, that would be embarrassing."

"For the wing-backs, your job today is to run, as simple as that." He stated, causing a frown to appear on the two. "You run forward to provide support, cut inside, overlap, and chase back. Get active and make your presence felt on the field, forcing them to adapt. If you're out of gas, we have plenty of players ready to play, so give us a reason to keep you on."

"For our wingers, Diaby, and Rakim beat your man and create problems. I want us bombarding that goal to the point the net bulges and tears apart." He instructed us to attack before proceeding to draw paths

on the whiteboard. He was what one would call a tactical specialist who saw the game like a chess board to be broken down piece by piece.

"(Clap clap) Alright, do what you need to do, it's almost time to head out." The gaffer interrupted after four minutes of tactical breakdown from the assistant manager, giving us time to just relax.

Taking the time, I switched out my training boots, slipping into a new pair of Apex11s that were moulded to his foot shape. The company was so attentive to his needs that they sent a staff member every 3 months to retake moulds of his feet just so they wouldn't hinder his performance, which is kinda funny considering that Adidas had fumbled the bag, losing players like Maradona, Lothar Matthäus, and Thierry Henry, to mention a few.

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Stats:

U-23 -> Peak Projection

>Physical Fitness: A++

Balance and Coordination: S+

Speed: S = 91

Agility: S = 90

Strength: A = 84

Stamina: A+ = 87

>Football Technique: SS+

>Game Intelligence: A

>Mental Ability: SS+

Talents:

[Invictus]

[Spatial Goal Scent]

Singularity Trait: [Sponge Body]

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"Hmm, let's get this over with," I muttered to myself, wiping my forehead with a hand towel. Tightening the laces of my boots, I quickly got up from the bench and did some stretches, ready to go.

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[23/05/2020 | Time: 15:29 AM | Borussia Mönchengladbach and Bayer 04 Leverkusen | Location: BORUSSIA-PARK | Attendance: 0]

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the 27th round of the Bundesliga in this Rhine derby between Borussia Mönchengladbach and Bayer 04 Leverkusen here at the BORUSSIA-PARK." Derek Rae's voice resounded as the screen showed both sides' players lining up in their respective formations. "Both sides got off to a good start last week at the resumption of the fixtures, each earning a victory, and will want to make winning a habit."

"Bayer Leverkusen arrive today just four points behind current league leaders RB Leipzig in the table," Robson commented, his tone sharp as he assessed the weight of the stakes. "A win here would not only leapfrog them into second place ahead of defending champs Bayern Munich, but it would also send a clear message to the rest of the league that they mean business."

Beside him, Rae continued his train of thought. "And they've gone with a very attacking 3-4-3—Havertz leading the line, with Diaby and young Rakim Rex providing width. That's a front three with pace, skill, and an eye for goal. If they click, Gladbach's backline is going to have a long afternoon."

The camera panned over the cardboard cutouts in the stands, rows upon rows of frozen smiles under a light drizzle, before swooping down to the centre of the field where the referee did the final checks. "The home side, Mönchengladbach, is set up in a more conservative 4-2-3-1 formation," Rae finished, his voice sliding over the roll call of Gladbach's XI. "Sommer in goal, Bensebaini, Elvedi, Ginter, and Lainer forming the back line. Strobl and Neuhaus anchoring the midfield, Pléa and Hofmann out wide, Stindl as the creative hub behind Thuram."

Robson cut in, "They've got stability and they've got outlets. Thuram's pace, Pléa's movement — those will be their release valves when they try to spring from deep."

Moments later, amid their commentary, the referee's whistle pierced the drizzle. Havertz rolled the ball back to Aránguiz, officially signalling the start of the match.

Chapter 577 Firstblood

[23/05/2020 | Time: 15:29 AM | Borussia Mönchengladbach and Bayer 04 Leverkusen | Location: BORUSSIA-PARK | Attendance: 0]

[1]

The referee's whistle cracked through the drizzle, and Kai Havertz rolled it back to Charles Aránguiz, who instantly opened his hips and sent it sideways to Kerem Demirbay. The surface was slick and fast underfoot, each pass zipping with that extra bite you only get on wet grass.

Derek Rae's voice rose over the quiet hum of players' calls: "We are underway in this Rhine derby — Borussia Mönchengladbach versus Bayer Leverkusen. No crowd, but still plenty riding on this one."

Leverkusen spread their formation early, directly attacking the wings as they got into their possession game. The three centre-backs fanned out at the back, Weiser and Sinkgraven pushing high to pin the Gladbach full-backs. Rakim Rex stood wide on the right, his eyes locked on Ramy Bensebaini like a sprinter staring at the lane next to him before the gun.

The early exchanges revealed Leverkusen's intent immediately. Peter Bosz had clearly instructed his side to stretch Gladbach's compact 4-2-3-1, using the width of Weiser and Sinkgraven to create overloads. Within the first three minutes, Demirel had already switched the play twice, his passes cutting through the damp air as he connected with his targets.

Moussa Diaby collected the ball on the left touchline, his first touch immaculate despite the greasy surface. The young Frenchman chopped inside, his studs finding grip on the wet turf, before laying the ball back to Sinkgraven, who had overlapped with speed. Sinkgraven pushed the ball to the byline before whipping in a dangerous cross that Marcus Thuram had to head clear at the near post; the ball spun awkwardly off his forehead.

Yann Sommer leapt into the air, collecting gratefully before another red shirt could get to it. Sommer's throw was quick, almost too quick for his own teammates. He tried to spark a counter, rolling it out to Bensebaini on the left, but Rakim was already charging back, closing the angle, forcing the left back to play a hasty pass forward.

Bensebaini's hurried ball up the line skidded off the surface, for Jonas Hofmann to latch onto. However, before the Gladbach winger could latch onto it, Dragovic came sliding in cleanly, sending the ball out of the pitch.

Dragović popped straight back to his feet, brushing the droplets from his kit, while Hofmann glanced toward the assistant referee in faint hope of a foul. None came. The throw went to Strobl, who shielded under pressure from Havertz and knocked it centrally to Neuhaus.

Gladbach tried to build through midfield, but Leverkusen's shape pressed in unison. Aránguiz stepped high on Stindl, forcing the ball back to Elvedi. Elvedi switched play toward Hofmann, yet the right-back's first touch ran slightly ahead of him. Sinkgraven pounced on the loose touch, stealing in to poke the ball down the line for Diaby.

The winger darted past Lainer, glancing up once before fizzing a low cross toward the near post. Havertz darted in front of Ginter, but the centre-back got the faintest touch to divert the ball away. It rolled loose at the edge of the box where Demirbay arrived, leaning over the strike, sending it on target. Sommer read it, though, dropping low to smother before the bounce could cause trouble.

"Early warning there from Leverkusen, and Rakim Rex getting involved straight away," Derek exclaimed as the players retreated back into position.

[14]

The home side got a chance to settle into the match as they slowly adapted to Leverkusen's offensive rhythm. Though they adapted, it didn't mean they were safe as the visitors continued bombarding the Gladbach goal. Sitting deep, they absorbed the pressure and looked for chances to counter. One such chance came in the 15th minute.

Ginter intercepted a through ball meant for Haverts and immediately scanned the field for options. Neuhaus opened up an option a couple of yards up the field, spinning away from Charles. Turning with the ball's momentum, dribbling up the field, picking up speed, and quickly crossing the halfway line as the home side exploded forward.

Neuhaus accelerated into open space, his boots splashing through shallow puddles as he threaded a sharp pass to Hofmann. The Gladbach winger took it on the half-turn, immediately looking for Plea, who had drifted wide to escape Bender's coverage. "Now here comes Gladbach, this might be the spark they need..." Robson exclaimed as the striker latched onto the ball as he stepped into the box.

Dragovic and Bender converged on him, trying to reach him as quickly as possible, but Plea slowed his stride just enough to roll the ball inside onto his right boot, shaping to shoot. The rain made the surface treacherous, and as Bender slid across to cover, Plea cut the ball back toward the penalty spot. Stindl arrived late, timing his run perfectly, and side-footed a low drive toward the bottom left corner.

"Big chance!" Rae's voice lifted.

Hradecky reacted instantly, flinging himself low and strong to palm it away. The ball skidded off his gloves, straight back into the six-yard box, where Thuram lunged in an attempt to poke it home. Tapsoba got there a fraction sooner, stretching his long frame to hack the danger clear.

The camera panned to Marco Rose, clapping sharply on the touchline, urging his men to keep going.

[18]

Gladbach restarted with a throw on the left, Bensebaini finding Neuhaus under pressure. The midfielder shielded from Aránguiz and dropped it inside to Strobl, who lifted a diagonal toward Hofmann. Sinkgraven tracked him, cushioning the ball out for a throw before Hofmann could bring it under control.

Leverkusen regained their rhythm, Demirbay drifting deeper to collect from Dragović. The playmaker pinged a sharp pass toward Havertz between Gladbach's lines. Havertz cushioned it deftly with his right instep, Rakim already peeling wide to offer. Havertz slid it into his path, Rakim instantly sped up towards Bensebaini, forcing a one-on-one.

A couple of step-overs shifted the defender back on his heels, just as he was about to react. Rakim darted past him to the byline before firing a cross toward the penalty spot. The ball skipped over the crowd in front of the goal, landing in the back area, into the run of the incoming Diaby. Holding off Lainer, he took the shot on the half volley, catching it on the bounce, booming it towards goal.

"Diaby!" Rae exclaimed as the shot rocketed through the misted air, spinning wickedly off the slick turf. Sommer shuffled sharply to his right, his gloves snapping around the ball, but there was too much power behind the shot.

His arm snapped backwards, and the ball reverberated inside the goal, rattling the net. Leverkusen's bench leapt to their feet as the ball hit the back of the net. Diaby raced off toward the corner flag, arms wide, as his teammates swarmed him in joy.

Rae's voice cut through the drizzle: "And Bayer Leverkusen draw first blood here at Borussia-Park! Moussa Diaby with a clean strike, but credit to Rakim Rex for carving open that flank."

The celebration was brief but electric. Diaby slid on his knees through a puddle near the corner flag, his teammates piling on top of him as the rain continued to spatter against their backs. Peter Bosz stood motionless on the sideline, hands buried deep in his coat pockets, but his eyes betrayed the slightest hint of satisfaction.

Marco Rose immediately gestured frantically to his players, clapping his hands above his head. "Come on! Straight back at them!" His voice carried across the empty stands, echoing off the vacant terraces. The absence of crowd noise made every shout, every instruction seem magnified in the wet air.

Chapter 578 Rhine Derby 2

[23/05/2020 | Time: 15:53 pM | Borussia Mönchengladbach 0 and 1 Bayer 04 Leverkusen | Location: BORUSSIA-PARK | Attendance: 0]

[23]

The restart was brisk; Gladbach wanted to get back in the match and didn't want to waste time. Stindl clapped his hands furiously as he urged his teammates higher up the pitch. They were all professionals, and after a moment of feeling sorry, they all quickly got back into formation, ready to do their jobs.

"Now, how do they respond?" Rae's voice pressed through the drizzle. "They've been second best in possession, but they had that one chance earlier through Stindl. They'll know there are spaces if they can break Leverkusen's press."

Following the restart, Gladbach worked the ball back into rhythm, Neuhaus finding Strobl, who rotated possession through Ginter. They were patient now, dragging Leverkusen's pressing triangle back and forth. They aimed to slow down their energetic opponents and slowly find openings which they could exploit, and it was working.

The release came in the 25th minute when Hofmann tucked inside and slid a neat ball between Sinkgraven and Dragović. Thuram latched onto it with explosive strides, his powerful legs tearing up the wet surface. The slippery surface limited his agility, allowing the chasing defender to get close.

Tapsoba was the man as he dove in foot first, almost as if he was doing the split. His long frame extended like a crane arm, cleanly poking the ball away at the last second. "Brilliant recovery, Tapsoba," Robson praised. "His timing has been immaculate."

[28]

Leverkusen didn't slow down after their opener. Demirbay continued to orchestrate in midfield as he got more comfortable. His head could always be seen glancing over his shoulder before receiving the ball. With Strobl now stepping higher to close him down, he could not afford not to know where the ball would go after receiving it.

His football IQ really showed as he made adept use of the gaps that began to open behind Gladbach's double pivot, which decided to press higher. Rakim also spotted it and immediately darted inside from the right flank, motioning with a subtle flick of the arm. Demirbay didn't need to think twice before sending a weighted pass his way, but the winger did not receive it, instead letting it pass through his legs.

Havertz, who was holding off the last man, reacted quickly and flicked the ball behind him into the left side of the box. "Oh, this could get dangerous!" Rae exclaimed as they watched Rakim latch onto the ball as he held off Stefan Lainer, who had switched onto him.

The angle was tightening as Matthias Ginter, the other centre back, was now also closing in. Rakim didn't force a shot, though. Instead, his right foot flashed over the ball and back-heeled it back out towards the edge of the box. Almost as if planned, Diaby was there locking in on the ball, and he took it first time, not bothering to take an extra touch.

The Frenchman leaned into it, his body coiled like a spring, and his right boot connected with a crisp snap. The ball screamed through the drizzle, chest-height, arrowing toward the near top corner.

Sommer shuffled furiously, but his dive was late. The strike whistled past him, crashing into the stanchion and sending water droplets exploding off the net.

"OH, it's another from Diaby! No—wait—off the side netting!" Rae's voice cut sharply, the camera panning to reveal that the ball had bulged the wrong side of the goal. For a split second, even the broadcast graphic operator had started to flash the scoreboard.

Relief washed over Sommer's face. He bellowed at his back line, hands slicing through the air. "Wake up!" His voice rang out, clear in the hollow stadium.

The replay looped, showing how close it had been. "The disguise on that from Rakim Rex," Robson added, "the audacity to let the ball run across and back-heel it out... he's making Gladbach's defenders look silly out there."

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[31]

The match began to stretch, like elastic about to snap. Gladbach, stung by conceding, no longer sat back. Neuhaus pushed higher, trying to connect with Stindl, while Hofmann hugged the right touchline to test Sinkgraven. The rain, instead of dampening the game, seemed to fuel it — players skidding into tackles, passes pinging faster than dry turf would ever allow.

Gladbach's turn to carve out danger came when Bensebaini angled a neat ball down the left flank. Thuram shouldered off Weiser with his raw power, sending the latter skidding. He surged toward the byline, his long legs eating up ground. Inside, Stindl gestured furiously, pointing to the penalty spot.

Thuram obliged, cutting a low delivery into the mixer. Stindl darted across Bender, flicked his boot, and the ball ricocheted goalward. The shot was too central, though, as Hradecky dropped his body weight low, kicked it away instinctively with his right boot. The rebound skidded out to Neuhaus, who took it first-time.

His curling effort, soaked by the ball's weight, floated narrowly over the bar. "Gladbach showing they've got teeth," Rae remarked. "They might just need to be a little more clinical in this final third."

[36]

Leverkusen responded by upping the tempo using the slick surfaces as a medium, and the ball was fizzed amid their ranks.

Following a one-two to gain separation from his marker, Charles Aranguiz sprayed a diagonal switch from deep. The ball fizzed like a skimming stone across the wet grass, beaming to the feet of Rakim. He barely brought it under control with a shaky first touch, as the ball was more slippery than he had expected.

He managed to bring it under control before Bensebaini could close him down enough to become a problem. Without even thinking, as the defender was already within the meter, he shifted his hips left, right, then burst inside.

The defender was left slipping, but managed to clutch onto his jersey, yanking him back, causing his jersey to tear slightly. The sudden, abrupt pause in his momentum and the jersey that pressed against his neck caused him to gasp for breath as he crashed backwards.



The referee's whistle shrilled instantly as Rakim lay on the slick grass, clutching at his throat where the damp fabric of his torn shirt clung. The referee's arm shot upward without hesitation, brandishing a yellow card at Bensebaini, whose palms spread wide in protest.

"Clear tug there, no argument," Rae's commentary cut through the drizzle. "Rex had him beaten all ends up — and Bensebaini knew it."

Robson chimed in: "It's ok for defenders to panic, but a foul in that area is never the answer, especially against a team full of deadball specialists."

Rakim sat up, shaking his head, one hand tugging at the ragged neckline of his shirt. Weiser helped him up with a pat on the back, while Demirbay claimed the ball, positioning it carefully on the right channel some thirty yards out. The Gladbach wall lined up just inside the penalty arc, Sommer bellowing orders with both arms waving in frantic semaphore.

[39]

Demirbay's delivery arced perfectly toward the penalty spot. Bender rose first, crashing through the spray, but his header lacked sting, bouncing tamely into Sommer's gloves. The keeper wasted no time launching the counter — a booming punt sent Thuram racing into the opposite half, the ball spinning viciously in the rain.

Tapsoba tracked him stride for stride, the two long-legged athletes duelling shoulder to shoulder. Thuram tried to muscle his way inside, but Tapsoba nudged his shoulder, pushing him away, and his leg sent a calm pass back to the waiting Hradecky on the six-yard line.

"Outstanding again from Tapsoba," Robson noted. "He's been a wall."

[41]

The rhythm refused to dip. Leverkusen pushed forward with their usual vertical ferocity. Aránguiz stole possession off Neuhaus, springing a lightning counter. One touch, two touches, and suddenly the Chilean had Rakim streaking free on the right.

The pass found him in stride. Rakim darted forward, rain spraying off his boots, Bensebaini once more his victim. This time, he didn't overcomplicate things using pure speed, one heavy push, then an electric burst down the touchline. His stride opened fully, shoulders pumping, leaving the left-back lunging hopelessly behind.

He swung a vicious low ball across the face of the goal. Havertz launched himself forward, sliding with studs stretched, but Ginter arrived at the last instant, toeing it out of play for a corner.

[42]

"Leverkusen are suffocating them down that right-hand side," Rae observed. "Rakim is running riot against Bensebaini. Marco Rose might need to consider adjustments, especially since his man has already been booked."

The corner was played short. Demirbay squared to Rakim at the edge of the box. The winger fainted a shot, then dinked a delicate ball toward the back post. Diaby ghosted in, leaping above Lainer, but his header skimmed the roof of the net.

[45]

Halftime loomed, but Gladbach wanted one last hoorah. Stindl dropped deep to collect a pass from Elvedi. After dribbling up a couple of yards, he threaded a pass through Dragović's legs into Pléa's path. The Frenchman got loose, adjusting his stride as he locked onto the ball. His strides were measured as he shot across Hradecky with his first touch.

The Leverkusen keeper, without a moment's thought, managed to sprawl low, fingertips brushing the ball wide of the far post. "Vital save!" Rae shouted. "That could've changed the complexion of this first half completely."

The corner that followed was cleared with authority by Bender. The referee glanced at his watch, the rain now pelting in heavier bursts. Moments later, the halftime whistle blew.

[HT]

Chapter 579 579 Smooth Criminal

[23/05/2020 | Time: 16:30 pM | Borussia Mönchengladbach 0 and 1 Bayer 04 Leverkusen | Location: BORUSSIA-PARK | Attendance: 0]

[46]

The teams emerged from the tunnel with steam rising from their warm bodies into the cold, damp air. The rain had intensified during the break, turning Borussia-Park into a slick battleground where every touch would be magnified, every mistake punished. Marco Rose had clearly been animated in the dressing room — his players jogged out with renewed purpose as they took their positions.

Peter Bosz, on the other hand, stood motionless in his technical area, hands deep in his coat pockets, watching his players settle into their positions. He had given them instructions on goals he wanted them to meet in the first 10 minutes, and now it was all about trusting them to execute. The referee did a quick check on both sides, prompting handraises from each keeper before blowing his whistle to signal the start of the match.

Stindl rolled the ball back to Neuhaus, who instantly sprayed it forward and wide into Hofmann's run. The winger had clearly been instructed to test Sinkgraven more directly, and he did so with a burst of pace that sent the Dutch full-back scrambling. In such weather, it was often the one without the ball that struggled with finding the timing to make a tackle, and the winger made good use of that.

Baiting him in as they approached the side of the box, he feinted inwards before taking a long touch to slip past the outside. However, his resulting cross was overhit, sailing beyond Thuram and out for a goal kick. "Gladbach showing early intent," Derek Rae observed. "Rose has clearly told them to be more direct."

[52]

The match had settled into a ferocious rhythm as both teams adapted to the increasingly treacherous conditions. Leverkusen in particular had grown comfortable protecting their lead, dropping slightly deeper than in the first half, but their countering threat remained razor-sharp. When Dragović intercepted a loose pass from Strobl, he immediately looked upfield where Rakim was already beginning his run.

The pass was weighted perfectly, skimming across the wet surface like a stone across water. Sadly, it picked up too much speed, missing the winger by mere millimetres. Normally, Rakim would have reached it, but like most players here, he was only moving at around 80% of what he would in dry weather. Suffering an injury was the last thing any of the players wanted, so unless they were sure, none forced things.

[56]

Following a rough tackle outside of their box by Demirbay, who had just mistimed his slide tackle, the home side had a free kick in a favourable area. Hoffman was the one to step up to the plate, setting the ball down just outside the D slightly to the right.

The free-kick routine was clearly something Gladbach had worked on in training. Hofmann stood over the ball, wiping the rain from his forehead, his eyes narrowing as he measured the distance. A cluster of players jostled inside the box, Thuram tangling with Tapsoba while Pléa tried to lose Bender's attention.

The wall ignored Lainer's first dummy run, focusing entirely on Hoffman, who followed after as he struck the ball firmly. They stepped forward on contact, jumping into the air and craning their necks in hopes of deflecting the shot. But it was not meant to be as it curled past Diaby on the right side of the wall, clearing the obstacle.

The strike dropped dangerously, skimming the wet surface, taking an awkward angle just before Hradecky. The goalkeeper dived low, his gloves stretched wide, and for a split second it looked like the ball might squirm under his body. Instead, the Finn somehow managed to adjust mid dive to smothering it with his chest as the rebound fizzed harmlessly away.

"That's not easy at all," Rae remarked, his tone tinged with respect. "A skidding ball in those conditions can make even the best look foolish." Hradecky popped back to his feet, instantly barking at his defenders to push up, his voice echoing across the empty, soaked arena. Meanwhile, Marco Rose clapped his hands furiously from the sideline. His side had begun to lean on Leverkusen's defence, and though the ball hadn't gone in, the pressure was starting to mount.

[61]

That growing intensity nearly broke Leverkusen's defence as mistakes started to appear. A heavy touch from Dragović allowed Neuhaus to steal possession thirty yards from goal, and with a single shimmy, he was driving directly at the heart of the back line. His low pass split Bender and Tapsoba, releasing Thuram into space on the left side of the box.

The Frenchman surged forward, his long strides eating up the wet grass as he squared his shoulders to shoot. At the last possible moment, Tapsoba recovered, launching into a desperate sliding challenge that deflected the shot wide of the near post. The roar from Marco Rose on the sideline was guttural, a mixture of frustration and belief that his side was edging closer to breaking through.

"Gladbach knocking hard on the door!" Rae cried. The corner that followed was whipped in with menace. Hofmann's delivery dipped into the six-yard box where Ginter rose highest, thundering a header downwards but couldn't get it under the bar.

[66]

Sensing the momentum slipping, Peter Bosz made his first changes. With a nod toward his assistant, he beckoned Florian Wirtz and Nadiem Amiri from the bench. He aimed to control the midfield with fresh legs whilst adding a dose of creativity. Rakim, who had just been about to take a quick throw-in, was baffled when his number glowed red, indicating he was coming off.

Double checking he wasn't dreaming he sighed in frustration, letting out a puff of steam as he placed the ball down and jogged across the field to the bench. This was probably the first time in his life where he felt like he was being substituted early, but he could do nothing to change the coach's decision. Elbow tapping Wirtz on his out, he wished him good luck before heading for the bench, barely able to remember what seemed like encouragement from the manager as he walked by.

Kerem Demirbay was the one to make way for Amiri in the midfield, joining Rakim on the bench. At the same time, Marco Rose reacted, unleashing Breel Embolo to replace Lars Stindl in the CAM position, who had been quiet all game, firmly neutralised by Charles Aranguiz. László Bényi slotted into the holding midfield role, relieving the tired Tobias Strobal.

"What a shift from Rakim, though not as prolific as we have become accustomed to. He has created a fair number of chances for his side," Rae said, his voice full of admiration. "But now it's Wirtz's chance — just seventeen, a couple of months older than his teammate, and just as trusted to deliver in a Rhine derby."

[69]

It was Gladbach who struck first blood in this new phase of the game. From midfield, Neuhaus drove forward with an assertiveness that had been missing earlier. The substitutes had changed the energy completely — Embolo bullied his way into pockets of space, dragging Bender too far forward and creating gaps between the centre-backs. Neuhaus saw it, threading a crisp pass into the channel.

Thuram accelerated, his boots splashing water in arcs as he brushed off Dragović with ease. With one glance at the near post, he lashed a venomous low cross that skimmed past Hradecky's outstretched gloves. Pléa arrived in a blur, sliding across the slick grass to stab the ball into the net before Tapsoba could stretch a leg to block.

The ball struck the back of the goal with a sodden thump, sending spray flying upward. "And there it is!" Derek Rae's voice surged. "Borussia Mönchengladbach are level! Alassane Pléa, with that poacher's instinct, gets them right back in this Rhine derby!"

"It is a thing of beauty to watch a team just feed off each other's movements to create a spectacular goal," Obson added with excitement. "As for the visiting side, there is only one word for why they conceded: 'lazy' They were only winning by one goal and dared to play relaxed, arriving second to every challenge."

His sharp critique roused some resentment in the Leverkusen fans who were watching from home, but Rose on the field couldn't care less. His substitutes were already paying dividends, and his only focus was to maximise their effectiveness. In the adjacent visiting team technical area, Bosz's forehead wrinkled in a frown, his lips muttering something sharp under the pouring rain. The game was alive again, and Gladbach's spirit was roaring louder than the storm.

**\*\*Gladbach 1–1 Leverkusen | Pléa 69'\*\***

[72]

If Gladbach thought the equaliser would deflate Leverkusen, they were mistaken. The visitors responded instantly, fueled by the sting of conceding. Amiri got to work in midfield, making good use of his fresh legs following the restart.

His high energy compelled his teammates to match his pace, as he began to dictate the midfield's flow. Wirtz, to get on the ball, drifted wide, opening up a passing option for Amiri, who had just scrambled



past two defenders. Not holding onto the ball and attempting more than he could handle, he sent the ball out wide into the winger's feet.

Wirtz, who had his body turned inward with his back to the line, deftly received the ball with his first touch immaculate. Seeing Neuhaus, who had been zonal marking, now close in, with a sharp twist of his hips, he faked a cut inwards, getting the midfielder to bite. In the last moment, he powerfully poked the ball through his legs and escaped on the outside to chase after it.

He drove forward his metal studs, digging into the wet grass as he picked up speed, trying to beat both Bendebaini and Elvedi to the rolling ball. "Oh, this could get tight, can he reach there first... Oh, what audacity, and he's through." Derek Rae exclaimed as it looked like Wirtz suddenly glitched past both players, completely skipping by them.

In reality, he had managed to reach the ball a fraction earlier and immediately knelt the ball to his left foot with his right. Not slowing down in the slightest, he followed the ball, side-stepping the charging left-back before knocking the ball back to his right foot to avoid the centre-back as well. "Oh, he's through on goal and Sommer is not expecting him to beat his defenders so easily. He's late to react. Can he go all the way?"

Chapter 580 Victory

[Gladbach 1 vs 1 Leverkusen - Second Half]

[73]

Wirtz burst through the last line with speed, the ball skipping perfectly into stride off his deft touches. Sommer had hesitated for a moment too long, surprised at how effortlessly the teenager had sliced through his defence, and that half-beat was fatal. Wirtz squared his body after entering the box and coolly slotted into the bottom far corner.

The ball curved past the keeper's outstretched leg and nestled into the side netting, kissing the post on its way in. "Florian Wirtz!" Rae bellowed, his voice rising with the theatre of the moment. "The seventeen-year-old is showing us just why he is so special!"

Robson's tone carried awe. "The composure, the bravery, the audacity to run at defenders like that, it's unbelievable." Wirtz sprinted toward the corner flag, sliding knees-first through the puddled grass, arms out wide, before teammates mobbed him in celebration.

\*Gladbach 1–2 Leverkusen | Wirtz 73'\*

[78]

The rain had calmed down, creating an almost mystical atmosphere reminiscent of the players under-16 days when they played on the roadside pitch with their boy clubs. Back then, there were also really few fans in attendance, quite like today, as the players could quite literally hear each other shout instructions.

Gladbach's response to Wirtz's wonder goal was immediate and furious. Embolo, who had been a battering ram since coming on, dropped deep to collect the ball off Neuhaus. With one swift turn, he muscled past Amiri, dragging Leverkusen's midfield backwards. Herrmann sprinted wide on the right, stretching the pitch, while Thuram lurked between Tapsoba and Dragović, waiting for the kill.

The ball went out to Herrmann, whose first-time delivery skipped wickedly on the wet turf. It was too quick to judge, too heavy, and too clear to be easy. Bender lunged to intercept but only managed to get the faintest touch, enough to flick it toward the penalty spot instead of safety. Embolo, continuing his charge, burst between two defenders, the ball bouncing invitingly into his path. Without breaking stride, he lashed his laces through it.

The sound was thunderous — leather smacking waterlogged ball — and in an instant it rocketed high past Hradecky into the roof of the net. The goalkeeper had no chance, arms barely lifting before the ball bulged the back of the goal. Spray shot upward from the soaked net as Embolo sprinted away, sliding on his knees, hammering his chest with a primal roar.

"Back again!" Rae roared. "Gladbach will not die in this match! Breathe Embolo, with sheer power and determination, drag them level once more!"

Robson added, his tone reverent: "Some players help build play and others execute it. Embolo does it both here in spectacular fashion." The Gladbach bench leapt to their feet, Marco Rose pumping his fists skyward, his drenched coat clinging to him like armour.

\*Gladbach 2–2 Leverkusen | Embolo 78’\*

[84]

Leverkusen didn't linger on the goal and instead got back to work as if deciding the winner would be who scored the most, not who defended their lead. Amiri dropped deeper, orchestrating possession with the precision of a surgeon, spreading the play from left to right despite the waterlogged pitch. He somehow managed to get not only his teammates but also their opponents to move in his desired direction.

Gladbach's defensive line shifted one way too many times, and he immediately seized the opportunity by sending a lofted throughball up the right flank. Wirtz, brimming with confidence after his goal, raced past his marker to stretch out his foot high in the air to bring the ball down. Facing the recovered

Bensebaini at the side of the box, he coolly stood him up, his right foot, touching behind the ball, just waiting for a reaction.

The left-back lunged forward, and in that precise moment, Wirtz rolled the ball delicately inside before bursting into the penalty area. Elvedi rushed across to cover, but the teenager was already shaping to shoot. Instead, he disguised a clever cutback toward the edge of the box where Havertz had ghosted into space, completely unmarked.

The German international didn't hesitate. With the outside of his right boot, he curled a sublime effort toward the far corner. Sommer flung himself across the goal, fingertips straining, but the ball arced beautifully around his desperate dive. The wet ball kissed the inside of the far post before nestling into the side netting with a satisfying squelch.

"Oh, what a finish! Kai Havertz with the outside of the boot!" Rae's voice cracked with excitement. "Leverkusen have found their winner in the most exquisite fashion!"

Havertz sprinted toward the corner flag, arms outstretched like an aeroplane, before diving belly-first through a puddle. His teammates swarmed him as Peter Bosz finally allowed himself a smile, his hands emerging from his coat pockets to applaud the sublime football from his young stars.

Gladbach 2-3 Leverkusen | Havertz 84'

With time running out and the rain beginning to ease, Gladbach threw everything forward in desperation. Marco Rose made his final substitution, bringing on forward Oscar Wendt to replace Thuram on the left flank. The formation shifted into a 4-2-4 with Embolo also moving up to form a dual striker role with Plea.

The home side abandoned all pretence of defensive stability, instead choosing to bombard their opponents with long balls. From a corner on the left, Hofmann whipped in a dangerous delivery that caused chaos in the Leverkusen box. Bodies collided, boots flailed, and for a moment the ball ricocheted between three different players before Tapsoba finally managed to head it clear.

The clearance fell to Neuhauser thirty yards out, who took a touch to stabilise it and then simply struck it from range. "Neuhauser from way down town," Rae exclaimed as the shot screamed through the night air, dipping wickedly as it approached the goal.

Hradecky backpedalled furiously, his gloves clawing at the air, but the ball crashed against the crossbar with a reverberating clang that echoed around the empty stadium. The rebound bounced kindly for Leverkusen as Sinkgraven hooked it away to safety. "So close to a dramatic equaliser!" Robson exclaimed. "The crossbar denies Gladbach what would have been a spectacular leveller!

[90+2]

In the dying moments, with three minutes of added time displayed on the fourth official's board, Gladbach launched one final assault. Hofmann battled for a long ball with Dragović, using his physical presence to shield possession before laying it off to the onrushing Embolo. The Swiss striker, with his last reserves of energy, drove forward with purpose.

His cross from the right was dangerous, skipping off the wet surface as it arrowed toward the penalty spot. Pléa rose highest, outmuscling Bender in the air, but a pair of fists appeared before he could get to

the ball, powerfully punching it out of the box as they all crashed down. The rebound fell outside the box where Oscar had tracked it back, but before he could chest it down, Aranguiz appeared at his side and shoulder-checked him out of the way.

The midfielder brought the ball down with a deft thigh flick, spun out of danger before launching a long ball into the hinterland. "Heroic defending from Leverkusen!" Rae shouted above the drama. "They're clinging on here as Gladbach throw the kitchen sink at them!"

"The kitchen sink, cupboard and even the washing machine, but sometimes no matter what you try, you just can't succeed," Robsone noted as they watched the final seconds of the match tick away with the Leverkusen squad charging upward so their opponents would be offside. The rain had stopped completely now, leaving the pitch glistening under the floodlights like a mirror. When the final whistle pierced the night air, Leverkusen's players bent over on their knees in exhaustion.

FULL TIME: Borussia Mönchengladbach 2-3 Bayer Leverkusen

Goal scorers:

Pléa 69', Embolo 78' | Diaby 18', Wirtz 73', Havertz 84'