

Football God 371

Chapter 371 371: AFCON 2025 [6]

"It's the first game of matchday 3 of the AFCON 2025 tournament, and here in the Complexe Sportif Mohammed V Stadium, the Pharaohs of Egypt will be taking on their challengers from Angola".

"It's a must-win game for Egypt".

"Having lost their second group stage game against South Africa, they have only 3 points from 2 games and are now trailing in 3rd position in their group".

"If Egypt are to progress to the knockout stage of the AFCON tournament this time around, a draw is not acceptable. To qualify, they must win!"

"Can they do it?"

"Nobody knows, but Mohamed Salah clearly looks pumped for the occasion!"

"The reigning ballon d'Or winning is warming up at the touchline, clearly in the mode to add to his legend in the AFCON tournament".

"What better way to commemorate an iconic ballon d'Or win than to win the AFCON tournament right after?"

"This tournament, Salah is clearly aiming for glory!"

"On the side of Egypt, they're starting with their customary 4-3-3 formation with Mohamed Salah leading the attacking trio that also has Trezeguet in left wing, and Omar Marmoush in attack".

"The Manchester City striker is also in amazing form this tournament".

"Behind Egypt's attack in midfield is the midfield trio of Fathy, Attia, and Sayed, while their defensive quadruple comprises Hamdy in left back, Abdemmonem and Rabia in center back, and Hany in right back".

"El Shenawy is the man manning the posts for the Pharaohs of Egypt".

"As for Angola, they are lining up in their dynamic diamond-shape 4-4-2 formation again with Neblu in between the posts, and ahead of him Bondo, Buatu, and the Gaspar brothers forming the defensive lineup".

"Ahead of them is Maestro in defensive midfield protecting the defensive line, Banza and Hossi in center midfield, while today Nteka plays as the attacking midfielder for the Angolans".

"As for the offense, Zini and Luvumbo form the attack for Angola".

"Today, Egypt are the favorites but Angola are no pushovers. They're clearly ready to push their opponents to the end and if possible, snatch home the victory".

"And since they're in 2nd position in their group, if they manage to secure a draw today, they would have knocked Egypt out of the tournament, progressing at their expense".

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is a game of high stakes!"

"Peel your eyes and watch, don't miss a moment of this game, or you'd regret it".

As the commentators covered the major event, the players of both national squads finally came out of the tunnel, entering the pitch to a cauldron of noise.

Like the commentators said, this was a game of high stakes.

Nerves were high, and the tension was palpable.

For the Egyptians, it was a must-win situation.

But for the Angolans though, having put themselves in this favorable position due to their impressive performances in their first 2 games, a draw was enough for them to progress to the knockout stage of the tournament.

Despite this though, Angola didn't play a defensive game against the Egyptians. As soon as the referee's whistle sounded, they showed that they meant business even with the high stakes of this game.

FWEEEE!

From the first minute of the game, the intensity of both squads showed.

Omar Marmoush led the Egyptian charge from the front, pressing the opposition defenders with extreme aggression to create chaos.

But prepared for him and Egypt's attack in general, the Angolan defense played a solid game, allowing their midfield and offensive players to thrive.

This was the game of their lives!

They made no mistake.

Bam! Bam!

Once they got the ball, they seemed to transform into a prime Barca, playing quick short passes to cut through the Egyptian formation.

With their diamond 4-4-2 formation, they choked the center of the pitch, the only openings appearing in the wing but even with Salah playing as the right winger for the Egyptians, he failed to make any tangible impact.

Against Salah, Bondo, Angola's left back played the game of his life, following the Egyptian King everywhere he went and man-marking him out of the game.

The first half was extremely frustrating to the Egyptians.

Despite the imperious defense of both nations, desperate not to let a goal in, the game was still extremely exciting as the attackers kept on knocking.

And in the end, Angola shocked the world, getting the goal first.

It happened in the 39th minute of the game, in a counterattacking situation as Nteka, Angola's attacking midfielder received the ball in the middle of the park.

After calming the ball with his first touch, he raised his head to look, and then he froze...

'This...!'

Egypt's goalkeeper was slightly off his lines!

"...!"

The Egyptian goalkeeper noticed the threat immediately but it was already too late as without hesitation, Nteka tried his luck, hitting the ball with venom from the halfway line, sending it with power towards goal.

The full stadium quieted down, spectators holding their breaths in shock.

"...!" Desperate, the Egyptian goalkeeper charged back, looking at the ball but he was not fast enough.

Ping! Pong!

The ball hit the top bar, but then instead of ricocheting outside, it ricocheted off the bar then into the net just in time for the Egypt goalkeeper to arrive, pushing it outside.

"Did it...?!" The commentators roared, then...

FWEEEE!

The referee's whistle sounded, confirming it.

The ball crossed the line before the goalkeeper pushed it outside.

"GOALLLLLLL...!!!"

The roars of the Angolan fans in the stadium did not just represent them, it represented millions of Angolan fans around the world and the Angolan dream.

They celebrated excitedly even as Nteka, the hero of the day charged towards the corner flag, sliding on his knees in celebration passionately.

That goal... deflated Egypt's confidence.

Angola got their goal already, making it 1-0 and yet, they refused to defend still as they continued pressing the Egyptians, playing them pound for pound.

Egypt tried every thing in their knowledge, using every weapon in their arsenal and yet, Angola's defense remained elusive to them.

The Pharaohs of Egypt were frustrated.

The first half came to an end 1-0 in Angola's favor.

During halftime, Egypt's Coach faced his players, a look of rage, frustration, and undaunted determination of his face.

He opened his mouth to address his players; he spoke...

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"You think we can't win?!" The voice of the Egypt head coach boomed through the locker room, reverberating in the bones of all the Egypt players.

"Against Angola?! You think we can't win?"

"Come on!"

"If we can't win even against Angola, then what the hell are we doing here?"

"We may as well forfeit the 2nd half and admit defeat!"

"You, you, you!" He pointed at them. "Look at me!" He pointed at his face passionately. "We can win!"

"We're equipped to win!"

"We will win!"

"Don't give me any of that half-hearted nonsense in the 2nd half. I know you're trying your best, but today, your best is just not enough!"

"Go beyond your best, give me the impossible!"

"The impossible," he nodded. "Yes, that's what I want from you guys today!"

"Go out there and play the 2nd half like this is the final of the AFCON tournament, play like you're trailing behind in the final and you want to win!"

"Go out there and teach the Angolans the essence of football!"

"Come on!" He clapped. "Let's go out there and win!"

That got the blood of the Egyptian players boiling.

With eyes burning with the fire of a volcano, they stood up, approaching the second half with deadly killing intent.

And when the referee's whistle sounded, Egypt started their march to freedom, their march to liberation, their march to the knockout stage of the 2025 AFCON tournament!

FWEEEE!

In the 2nd half, Salah was still man-marked but overridden by the passionate speech of his coach during halftime, Salah took it a step further.

For 45 minutes, Bondo have marked Salah out of this game, harassing him, bullying him, overpowering him, but not anymore!

'Not anymore'. Salah's eyes burned with a fiery zeal.

As soon as the 2nd half started, he took his time, walking, jogging, tracking the ball even as his teammates played on the other side of the pitch.

And when the ball was finally hit to the right side of the pitch where he was, Salah erupted like Akaza, the Demon General in Demon's Slayer.

BZZZ!

Salah moved.

But he didn't just approach it with brute force and at face value like before.

Instead of using brute force, he tricked his marker.

He moved the first time as soon as the ball was hit. In response, the player grabbed at his jersey, running after him. Bondo wasn't even looking at the ball and having noticed this, this was the flaw that Salah planned to exploit.

Watching the ball and timing its trajectory, Salah already calculated it, and that was why he moved, knowing that Bondo would follow without looking at the ball.

His movement was just a feint!

Abruptly, Salah stopped, leaving Bondo to go ahead of him and that was when the ball descended in the position where he stopped.

Bam!

Salah controlled the ball with a perfect first touch.

"...!"

Realizing his mistake, Bondo tried to rectify it immediately, charging back to close down Salah without hesitation but once again, Salah expected this and that was why he moved...

Bzzz!

Salah seemed to turn into a mirage, an afterimage.

Bondo barely moved when with his left leg, the Egyptian King delicately flicked the ball to the right and jumped backward.

By flicking the ball, he took it past Bondo towards Angola's half and by jumping backward, he was able to evade Bondo's hand that would surely fling to have grabbed his jersey.

Bondo did just as Salah predicted but Salah already left him, leaving only a mirage behind.

Whoosh!

Salah hit the afterburners immediately after going past Bondo!

And that was the mistake.

The Angolans were so confident in Bondo's handling of Salah that they failed to account for the scenario where Salah dribbled past him.

'You underestimate me!'

Thinking so, Salah closed in on the 18-yard box with blistering pace.

And just as he entered the 18-yard box, he ran into a road block in 2 players.

Salah slowed down, then with his quick feet and body movement, he mesmerized both players, making them hesitate and stick out their leg and just as it seemed like he was about to run past them, he hit the ball.

Bam!

It was a pass, in between the legs of one of the defenders into open space in the Angolan 18-yard box.

"...!"

The Angolan defenders reacted in panic, trying to clear the ball but someone else got there first.

"OMAR MARMOUSHHHH...!!!"

Marmoush did it, using his long leg to poke the ball into the net.

The stadium in Casablanca erupted, Egyptian fans rising to their feet and celebrating at the top of their lungs even as Marmoush charged towards the corner flag and celebrated by executing a backflip.

A moment of individual brilliance from the Egyptian King turned the game around, but Angola was still fine with a draw.

The goal came in just the 48th minute of the game.

It seemed like Egypt would ride that momentum and score another quick-fire goal, but Angola remained cohesively disciplined, playing their game.

For another 20+ minutes, Egypt saw no sight of goal as the game continued 1-1, that was until the 73rd minute of the game.

Another cross-field pass, another Salah perfect control and this time instead of a dribble, Salah floated a teasing cross into the 18-yard box.

Once again, a scramble started in the Angolan 18-yard box.

But this time, an Egyptian player rose highest. Hamdy, the Egyptian left back was in the right place at the right time to power a header past Angola's goalkeeper and into the net, settling the game.

"GOALLLLLLLLLLL...!!!!!" The commentators and the Egyptian fans screamed at the top of their lungs even as tearing his jersey in ecstasy, Hamdy charged towards the corner flag, waving his jersey in euphoria.

The sheer emotion among the Egyptian fans at that moment was so much that one of them even fainted out of too much excitement.

The fan luckily woke up a few seconds later.

But that was how high the excitement was.

2 moments of individual brilliance from Salah, and it was enough to decide the game. For the rest of the game, Angola tried their best, threatening but they failed to produce anything tangible in front of goal.

Egypt led by Salah pulled off an incredible comeback win.

It was a tight win but a win nonetheless, and it was worth 3 points.

Egypt sank their opponents, eliminating them out of the tournament and qualifying to the knockout stages at their expense.

What a game it was.

Salah won the man of the match award for the game.

Chapter 373 373: AFCON 2025 [8]

(Nations in the Round of 16: Egypt; ...)

Egypt did it, dispatching Angola to join the other countries that already secured qualification to the round of 16 of the AFCON tournament.

Their scintillating game against Angola was just the prelude to an incredible matchday of the AFCON though, other games were played.

Zambia vs Morocco progressed harder than people expected as the Moroccan coach rested some of his players, giving fringe players the opportunity to shine. Afterall, with their 6 points, Morocco already secured qualification.

Their only battle was now to hold on to the top spot in their group, so they could be in a favorable spot for the round of 16 draws.

And against a Zambian side that was fighting desperately for qualification, both nations played an intense game in front of their fans.

Zambia got the first goal, scoring in the 44th minute and stunning the hosts, sending Zambian fans around the world into a world of euphoria, building the hope of qualification inside them.

The first half came to an end 1-0 in Zambia's favor.

In the 2nd half though, led by an imperious Achraf Hakimi from the back, Morocco rallied against the Zambian national team.

After a few early minutes of pressure as Zambia desperately defended their lead, one of the Moroccan center backs raised a ball above the Zambian defense for Morocco's striker to run into.

Omar Marmoush did not miss his mark.

He ran, and swung his leg, then...

WHOOP!

The Zambian goalkeeper didn't even see the ball till it was already in his net. The Zambian players groaned in frustration.

In the 63rd minute of the game, the game became level.

And 4 minutes later in the 67th minute, Morocco completed the comeback, one of the Moroccan midfielders poking in from close range to close the lead, sending Zambian fans around the world into the depths of the abyss of sorrow.

Zambia's run in this AFCON tournament seemed all but over, their light snuffed out by an imperious Moroccan side, but this lasted until the 90th minute.

On the 90th minute of this game, crazy things happened.

Everybody already wrote off Zambia, expecting Morocco to claim another impressive victory to round off a clean sweep of their group stage campaign, but then a Zambian defiance arose.

In the 90th minute of the game, the Zambian captain took the ball outside Morocco's 18-yard box, and then he tried his luck.

BAM!

Hitting the ball with absolute venom, the ball rose and flew like a rocket, accelerating with speed before nestling into the roof of the net.

The ball went straight to the middle of the net, but the power behind it and the fact that it hit the bar before ricocheting into the net left Morocco's goalkeeper with no chance.

"GOALLLLLLLLLL...!!!"

Morocco was stunned; Zambia was shocked.

That night, a nation would tango all night long!

In incredible fashion, Zambia managed to snatch qualification from the jaws of defeat, making it to the knock out stages of the AFCON tournament in 2nd position behind Zambia.

After Morocco's game, on the same 29th December, Zimbabwe took on South Africa in another blockbuster game.

And then, another big upset happened as the Zimbabwe national team rallied to an unlikely victory against the South Africans.

South Africa was knocked out of the tournament!

Crazy scenes..., you just had to be there.

The Zimbabwe players ran the length of the pitch, celebrating wildly with their fans in the stadium. Again, on the same day, another nation was to tango all night long, part of the joy of securing qualification.

After South Africa's game, Comoros took on Mali but it was the only boring game of 29th as both nations played out a boring 0-0 draw.

And then the last big game of 29th.

(AFCON 2025:)

(Uganda – Nigeria)

(Date: 29th December, 2025)

Egypt already played its game, securing qualification. The same thing for Morocco, another of the favorite countries in the tournament this time.

And now, it was Nigeria's turn.

For this game, Eric Chelle finally decided to rest some of his players, giving opportunities for other players in the Nigerian squad to shine.

This did not mean Nigeria was throwing in the towel though.

Far from it, they also wanted to win.

If they won, they would have secured a clean slate of their group stage campaign, winning all 3 of their games and amassing the maximum 9 points.

It was the same 4-2-3-1 formation for Nigeria, but with different faces. Only the defense, midfield and goalkeeper positions didn't change.

Nigeria's offensive lineup changed significantly though.

In attack, Ademola Lookman started again as the left winger but this time, Alex Iwobi was moved, taking the attacking midfield spot. On the right, Samuel Chukwueze was brought to the lineup as the right winger.

Victor Osimhen remained the main man leading the line though.

As for Uganda, they started with their strongest lineup in a 4-2-3-1 formation with the likes of Semakula, Mugabi, Awany, and Kayondo in defense and Watenga holding the fort in between the posts.

Ahead of the defense was the midfield duo of Lwanga and Aucho.

Further ahead in attack, Omedi started as the right winger, Okello in attacking midfield, Mato as the left winger, and Ssemugabi leading the line as the striker.

On paper, contrasted against each other, one of the 2 squads was clearly superior and when the referee's whistle sounded, there was no deviation from popular expectations.

Nigeria dominated the game.

FWEEE!

From the first minute of the game, the Super Eagles hoarded possession, passing their opponents to death even as Uganda sat deep, defending doggedly.

Enjoying the vast majority of possession, Nigeria was able to get their attackers in favorable positions but against Uganda's stalwart and team-defensive efforts, the most important thing failed to materialize, a goal.

For 45 minutes, Victor Osimhen knocked, helped by Lookman, Chukwueze and Alex Iwobi and yet a goal failed to materialize.

Uganda were literally playing with 10 men behind the ball.

They were playing Jose Mourinho football.

And it worked, though it was not pleasant to the eye.

The first half came to an end with a 0-0 draw.

Chapter 374 374: AFCON 2025 [9]

During halftime, Eric Chelle had only a brief word with his players.

"Go out there and get the victory".

FWEEE!

When the players went back to the pitch, the referee's whistle signaling the continuation of the game, Nigeria switched to a different gear.

Ademola Lookman dazzled as the outstanding player so far, turning his man inside out repeatedly with his electric dribbling. Alex Iwobi was also amazing with his playmaking, Osimhen also pressing fiercer than usual.

But still, with a certain man in the lineup, Nigeria failed to tick enough to get over a tight Ugandan defense.

They were missing one man in the lineup, Samuel Moses.

In recent weeks, there was a trend moving online, a question of if Nigeria was becoming too dependent on Sam's brilliance, putting unnecessary pressure on his young shoulders.

The boy was just 20, could he take on so much pressure?

Maybe they had a point and the Nigerian team proved it today as they failed to score in Sam's absence.

Uganda stuck with their ultra defensive approach and it was working.

50 minutes, no goal...

60 minutes, no goal...

70 minutes, no goal...

And then Eric Chelle finally pulled the trigger.

The Nigerian head coach finally made substitutions, taking off Victor Osimhen and Alex Iwobi in the 72nd minute with the intent to rest them for the round of 16 game, introducing Sam and Viktor Boniface.

On the touchline, while Sam was being introduced, the noise came.

BOOM!

The Nigerian fans cheered at the top of their lungs, welcoming their star player to the pitch.

"My goodness. The boy is just 20 but he has the aura of a veteran already".

"Can anyone remind me when last a 20-year-old had such a reception to being introduced in a game?"

"Sam has truly made this Nigerian squad his own".

"But against this Ugandan defense, can he do it today?"

Sam and Boniface jogged into the pitch, Sam quickly meeting some of his teammates to relay instructions from the coach.

And then, it started...

FWEEE!

Tactically, Eric Chelle didn't change anything, leaving his team to play in the way they did normally. The only thing that changed was 2 players.

As soon as Boniface and Sam entered the game, it changed.

This was Boniface's first playing opportunity in the AFCON tournament as he played second fiddle to Osimhen in the squad lineup, and so eager to impress, the Bayer Leverkusen striker pressed the Ugandan defense like a monster.

That aggressive pressing was actually what did it.

Bam!

"Boniface's done it!"

"He's stolen the ball..., now it's a loose ball!"

Boniface pounced having timed it to perfection, intercepting a Ugandan pass. Immediately, Ugandan defenders swarmed around him but instead of going at it alone, he rather backheeled the ball backward.

Behind him was... Samuel Moses.

"...!"

Tens of thousands of Nigerian fans around this stadium immediately rose to their feet as Sam burst into the scene, taking Boniface's pass.

Immediately, they rushed, trying to press him but that was a mistake.

Sam was ultra press resistant.

BZZZ!

With a la croqueta, he exploded through their middle and then with an incredible elastico dribble, Sam cut through the last man in defense.

Nigerian fans around the stadium placed their hands on their head in disbelief, stunned by what they were seeing.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

The Ugandan goalkeeper charged out but keeping his cool, with another la croqueta, Sam rounded the goalkeeper before poking into an empty net.

"GOALLLLLLL...!!!" The stadium roared to life.

7 minutes after coming on, in the 79th minute, Sam broke the deadlock.

Jogging towards the corner flag, he spread his arms, doing the Jude Bellingham celebration and embracing the energy of the fans as they chanted his name. Sam felt on top of the world.

But that was not it, not yet...

3 minutes later, in the 82nd minute, Chukwueze played a corner into the box and Viktor Boniface rose above all the Ugandan defenders.

He was off balance though as one of the Ugandan center backs rose after him, pressing him. Because of this, instead of heading towards goal, Boniface improvised, heading the ball sideways.

Instantly after the ball was pushed by Boniface...

Bzzz!

Filled with adrenaline, Sam's body moved instinctively as he went on a reckless diving header.

Bam!

Sam hit the ball into the net with his head before anyone could react.

"GOALLLLLLL...!!!"

For the second time this game, the stadium roared to life.

A Viktor Boniface brace of assist, and a Samuel Moses brace, Nigerian fans were having a field day as the Ugandan defense was finally unrivaled.

The game came to an end 0-2 as after putting in more of what he usually did into the game for the remaining minutes, Sam secured another man of the match award, pushing Nigeria to the knockout stages of the AFCON 2025 tournament.

Nigeria's game was the last game of 29th.

...

30th December...

Botswana took on DR Congo first, as after a thrilling game across 90 minutes, both countries settled for a point each after playing an incredible 3-3 draw.

On the same day, Tanzania took on Tunisia, another game that ended in a draw as both countries settled for a 1-1 draw after an incredible end to end game for 90 minutes.

Both games were thrillers, but the last game played today was not as thrilling as the others, Senegal going bonkers against a helpless Benin Republic side.

Against their opponents from Benin, Senegal controlled the game from beginning to end, ending the first half 0-1, while a Sadio Mane second half rampage to get a brace settled the game, shooting Senegal to the knockout stage.

...

31st December...

On the first game of 31st December, Equatorial Guinea took on Algeria. After an intense game across 90 minutes, Algeria ran away with a narrow victory, winning 1-0 against their opponents.

On the same day, the last day of the matchday, Sudan took on Burkina Faso only to run away with a 3-1 victory.

Gabon also took on Ivory Coast. The game was harder than expected for the reigning champions, but they managed to escape with a draw courtesy of a stoppage time goal from them to secure a 1-1 draw.

And then the last day of the group stage, Mozambique vs Cameroon.

The Cameroonians went on a rout after Mozambique got a red card in the first half, destroying them for the rest of the game and securing a 5-0 victory.

The Mozambique players closed the game in tears.

And with that, the group stage of the AFCON 2025 tournament was over.

16 countries progressed to the Round of 16 stage in Morocco.

Chapter 375 375: Round of 16; weeding out the pretenders from the challengers

The group stage of the 2025 AFCON tournament was over.

Now, on to the round of 16 stage.

The group stage was like a sieve, weeding out the pretenders in the tournament away from the true challengers who made it through the challenge.

Now, 8 games of unmatched intensity.

16 nations duking it out in a knockout battle.

(AFCON 2025:)

(Round of 16:)

(Zimbabwe – Egypt)

(Date: 3rd January, 2026)

...

(Morocco – Mali)

(Date: 3rd January, 2026)

...

(Tunisia – Benin)

(Date: 4th January, 2026)

...

(Algeria – Ivory Coast)

(Date: 4th January, 2026)

...

(Cameroon – Tanzania)

(Date: 5th January, 2026)

...

(Nigeria – Angola)

(Date: 5th January, 2026)

...

(Botswana – Sudan)

(Date: 6th January, 2026)

...

(Senegal – Burkina Faso)

(Date: 6th January, 2026)

Out of the 24 African nations that competed in the tournament from the first group stage game, these were the 16 that were left standing after the bloodbath of the group stage.

They've won the first battle, but they were yet to win the war.

The next round of the battle was even fiercer and crazier than the first, against much more formidable opponents, the round of 16 stage.

But before the AFCON tournament round of 16 started, the players had 2 more days of rest and training to prepare for the decisive game.

Also, the day after the last group stage game was New Year's Day.

Since they were in Morocco and for such an important reason too, 1st January being New Year's Day didn't mean that the players got a day off though.

They still had a tough round of 16 game to play in just 2 days.

The Nigerian team was not excluded from this either.

Eric Chelle didn't give his players the day off, but he was sensitive enough to limit today's training to the minimum, giving his players all the time they needed to catch up with their family and celebrate the emotion of a new year.

Sam was focused on his football, he was determined to lead his nation to reclaiming the AFCON title, but despite that, he was also a family man.

This was why Sam didn't use the time Eric Chelle gave them for his extra training like usual. Rather, he used it for something else.

Sam had a video call with his family first.

"Hey mom".

"Hey my baby boy!" An enthusiastic Mrs. Moses waved through the camera at her son. "Happy New Year!" She cheered.

"Same to you mom". Sam smiled.

"Son, happy new year". Mr. Moses chipped in.

"Hey, how's new year like in Morocco?"

Sam looked at his sister through the phone, a weird look on his face. "You're still staying with mom and dad?"

"What do you mean?" Sophia snapped.

Sam chuckled. "I mean, after so long, you're in the university already. I thought by now, you'd have relocated to stay with Ian in London".

Sophia snorted. "Apparently, I'm not worth schooling in London, right?" She glared at him. "That's why you didn't sponsor my own overseas studying, right?"

"..."

Sam was speechless, totally stumped as he looked at his sister.

"This...", he was short of words to say, in the end he chuckled. "Really, Sophia? That's so petty".

"Did you tell me and I didn't pay for it?"

Sam looked at his mom, sighing. "Mom, see this..., comment!"

Mrs. Moses shrugged, and smiled. "She's just pulling your legs. I suggested it to her, but she said she wanted to experience at least one year of schooling in a Nigerian government university before making the switch abroad".

Sam looked at his sister again, and smirked, finally understanding. "Hah..., you got me there". He chuckled.

"I remember you having this childhood obsession of going to the university". He chuckled again. "So, how was the experience?"

Sophia tried to stay strong at first, but then it crumbled.

"Horrible". She cried.

Sam laughed. "Is it really that bad?"

"Don't get me started big bro!" Sophia was triggered. "They deceived me. Going to a Nigerian university is the worst move I ever made in my life!"

Sam froze. 'Well, shit..., here we go again'.

Sophia continued ranting.

"They're frustrating as hell!"

"The lecturers are literal embodiments of suffering and frustration!"

"For a simple assignment, they can go the extra mile just to make sure that students suffer to get it done!"

"It's as if..., as if they take joy in our suffering!"

When Sophia was finally done ranting, she was left breathing heavily.

Sam hesitated. "Umm..., sorry?"

"Get lost! I don't need your sorry". Sophia snapped again. "I just wanted to say it out". She shrugged. "Anyways, schooling here sucks".

"Ok, can we talk about the good things now?"

"Yeah, yeah, the good things!"

Sophia's mood suddenly experienced a big change, becoming bubbly. "Apart from the academic and official problems, in terms of the overall school life experience, I'd say its not that bad".

"Sam, did you know, AY and Bovi came to my school last week!"

Sam was stunned. "Who's AY and Bovi?"

Sophia fumed. "They're very famous Nigerian comedians! They're the literal Godfathers of Nigerian comedy. When comedy first started becoming famous around the country, they were the leaders then".

Sam nodded slowly. "Oh..., I never knew".

"Also, also I met a few popular musicians during this period of just 2 semesters. Even Davido came one time!"

Well, Sam called his family to enjoy family time on New Year's Day.

He never expected Sophia to dominate the whole thing.

He sighed. 'Last borns...'

In the end, after Sophia was done talking about her school life, Mr. Moses finally started, focusing on his questions on football and the AFCON tournament.

Mr. Moses was Sam's father, but he was also an avid football fan.

As a lover of the sport for decades, if there was one thing Mr. Moses truly loved apart from FC Barcelona winning the UEFA Champions League again, it was also to witness Nigeria win another AFCON trophy.

This was why he spoke with his son, talking about the tournament even if they were supposed to be talking light-heartedly to enjoy the new year mood now.

Mr. Moses asked about the environment and camaraderie in the squad, he wanted to know that the players were all in their best state of mind.

Afterall, it played a big role in big football tournaments like the AFCON.

After Mr. Moses was done laying out his mind, Mrs. Moses took over again and her conversation deviated towards a certain person, Kayla.

"So..., Sam," she winked at him. "When are you doing to do it?"

"Do what?"

"Tie the knot you dummy!"

"Ah, this....," Sam sighed. "I just feel like its not the right time yet".

Mrs. Moses' face changed. "What are you waiting for you bastard son? I'm telling you now, this old woman wants a grandson!"

"But mom, you're not even old yet".

"It doesn't matter!" She snapped.

In the end, Sam sighed and had to relent. "Don't worry mom. I'll make sure it doesn't stay too long anymore. And rest assured, the moment that I make the decision, you'll be the first person that I tell".

"Ok, good boy". She grinned, now satisfied.

After that, they talked about multiple different topics, the previous year in general and all that happened and then at the end of the video call, Mrs. Moses gave her son one last reminder.

"Go speak with Kayla now".

Sam nodded. "Ok mom".

After cutting the call, he didn't dial Kayla immediately though. Rather, he made a few phone calls and spent some money, arranging Sophia's official transfer from Nigeria to UK to study abroad.

Only after that did he finally put a video call to his girlfriend.

As soon as Kayla spoke, Sam felt like he was suddenly plunged into a pool of flowers and love. "Babe, how are you doing?"

"I'm good Mi Paz".

"Mi what?"

"Mi Paz". Kayla smiled mischievously. "You decided to start calling me Mi Corazon after learning a few Spanish. So I decided to do some Spanish lessons myself, and now I want to call you Mi Paz".

She grinned. "It means My Heart".

Hearing that, Sam smiled brightly. "What I'd do for you to be in my arms right now, on this day". He sighed. "Alas, we have an important game to play".

"It's fine babe. You focus on your football, win, make sure you do!"

"After the tournament, we'll have all the time in the world for ourselves".

"You're right babe". Sam smiled. "Thanks for understanding".

"It's fine, I know you're not cheating".

Sam chuckled. "How are you so sure?"

"I know you". Kayla said confidently. "You're so stuck up with your life and football that you don't even have time sometimes to have a luck, I don't reckon you have the time to spend on another girl".

"Besides, you love me".

Sam grinned. "Well, babe, you're right about that".

"I love you, and I want to keep on loving you more".

"Me too Mi Paz". She smiled.

In the end, the 2 lovers continued teasing themselves on the video call, talking about different topics till they were tired.

Tired and on the bed, they continued their video call till finally, Kayla had to forcibly end it so Sam could rest and focus on his training the next day.

Sam slept soundly that day.

Tomorrow, training begins.

Chapter 376: Round of 16 clash; evidence of the brave

Training, tactical drilling, more training, reset, repeat...

For the remaining days in the build-up to their epic round of 16 clash, Eric Chelle pushed his players to the ultimate level.

The fact that they were billed as one of the favorites did not mean they could become complacent, this was football.

To win, they had to take every single game serious.

From this stage on, it was knock out.

To win, they had to take every single game like it was a final because it was.

To win, they had to respect every single opponent that comes before them and play at their best, utilizing all the weapons in their repertoire to destroy them.

This was why despite their favorites billing, this team trained like hell.

Every day, they broke a good sweat, Sam leading the charge.

Having been overweight at some point of his life after ditching football for 4 years, Sam knew well the importance of hard work and working out. He led the charge for his teammates, pushing them on with his mamba mentality.

Train, train again, never stop training!

Train till the ultimate level is attained!

Train till your body hurts!

Like this, they prepared and in no time, it was D-day.

(AFCON 2025:)

(Round of 16:)

(Zimbabwe – Egypt)

(Date: 3rd January, 2026)

...

(Morocco – Mali)

(Date: 3rd January, 2026)

...

(Tunisia – Benin)

(Date: 4th January, 2026)

...

(Algeria – Ivory Coast)

(Date: 4th January, 2026)

...

(Cameroon – Tanzania)

(Date: 5th January, 2026)

...

(Nigeria – Angola)

(Date: 5th January, 2026)

...

(Botswana – Sudan)

(Date: 6th January, 2026)

...

(Senegal – Burkina Faso)

(Date: 6th January, 2026)

8 clashes, 8 games to decide the 8 teams that would progress from the round of 16 stage of the AFCON tournament to the quarter finals.

3rd January, 2026...

Zimbabwe took on Egypt, the first game of the round of 16 stage.

For this game, Egypt was the clear favorite but things didn't go exactly as planned after the game started. That was the beauty of knockout stage games in major tournaments, players and nations approach the game to die.

They would lose? Who cares?

What matters is that they'd give every single ounce of effort there on the pitch before going out with dignity and respect, that's if they lost in the end.

And that was exactly the mentality that Zimbabwe came with today.

Against the Pharaohs of Egypt, the Zimbabwe players played their best football since the AFCON tournament started, making it by far the most thrilling game of the tournament so far.

Unexpectedly, it became a clash of titans.

Against the Pharaohs of Egypt, the Zimbabweans didn't cower, coming out to meet them in the open field to play a game of pound for pound football.

Zimbabwe's bold strategy surprised Egypt and their coach. Even if it didn't, the passion and energy of the Zimbabwe players definitely did.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

They left everything out there on the pitch.

Running kilometers, chasing after the ball, chasing the Egyptians down, pressing for the ball, and launching their own attack raids, they played like they weren't against a superior team at all.

It was all mentality, and boy was it working for them.

The first half incredibly came to an end 0-0 despite all the chances that were created in this game. Salah especially was locked to just creating as they didn't give him any chances to run free at goal.

When second half started, it continued the same way, Zimbabwe playing Egypt, pushing them to the edge.

It was an intense game.

But..., Zimbabwe could not keep up that intensity for 90 minutes.

They managed 80 minutes, but those last 10 minutes, it was just too much for them. They were already past their limit, and Egypt pounced.

After being pushed all the way by their opponents who were desperate to create an upset, finally, Egypt bared its fangs in defiance.

This time, Omar Marmoush was the hero.

The Manchester City striker pounced in the 83rd minute, jumping highest and lashing into a Mohamed Salah trivela pass, heading it past the Zimbabwe goalkeeper and into the net to the despair of the Zimbabwe players.

Omar Marmoush celebrated his goal with incredible passion.

The Zimbabwe players felt deflated, all their efforts, all gone in just a moment. But they didn't give up, not yet.

There was still time!

Pushing on with that mentality, Zimbabwe attacked, desperate to get the equalizing goal as Egypt was forced to defend their lead.

Mohamed Salah was even taken off, bringing in a more defensive-minded player to help the Pharaohs of Egypt hold on to their lead.

Zimbabwe actually came close, but then, their overzealousness to score a goal left them exposed at the back.

One counter, just one was all Egypt needed to deal damage again.

After intercepting a pass, one of the Egyptian center backs quickly played a straight pass to Omar Marmoush who was the only Egyptian player up field.

"...!"

The Zimbabwe players saw the danger but it was already too late.

Taking the ball in his strides, Omar Marmoush pushed it upward, rushing after it with speed. Zimbabwe's last man in defense tried to wrestle the striker for the ball but flexing his physicality, Marmoush shoved the defender off his feet!

Egyptian fans around the stadium rose up to their feet.

And when Omar Marmoush entered the Zimbabwean 18-yard box, he cut the ball to the right, and then...

BAM!

He hit it perfectly towards the top right corner.

The goalkeeper dived, but no chance, it was a precision shot. The ball nestled into the top right corner, sending Zimbabwean fans around the world to despair and Egyptian fans around the world into a world of euphoria.

Omar Marmoush charged towards the corner flag, sliding on his knees in celebration as he pumped his fists passionately.

He won the man of the match award at the end of the game.

Egypt won the first game of the round of 16 stage, eliminating Zimbabwe and progressing to the quarter finals of the 2025 AFCON tournament.

Next up Morocco vs Mali.

...

Morocco vs Mali was a mauling.

Mali approached the game with the same give it all mentality, but against the Moroccans, they hit a brick wall. Morocco chipped in 4 goals past their opponents, allowing only a consolation goal from them.

All 4 Morocco goals were scored by 4 different players.

The hosts were playing on another level this tournament.

Mali was eliminated, Morocco progressed, and Brahim Diaz got the man of the match award.

Next up was Tunisia vs Benin, a clash of the middle weights!

...

Tunisia vs Benin was a thrilling game.

After playing out a 1-1 draw in fulltime, they went to extra time where both sides failed to score a goal, eventually going to penalties.

Tunisia won the game 4-3 over their rivals on penalties.

Tunisia progressed; Benin Republic was eliminated.

...

Next up was Algeria vs Ivory Coast, another game with a clear favorite, and yet it was the stage for the next big upset of the tournament.

Algeria stunned the reigning champions.

Having scored an early goal at just the 3rd minute of the game, Ivory Coast were seemingly cruising towards an easy victory but Algeria remained defensively disciplined for over 80 minutes, long enough to stage an unlikely comeback.

Algeria stunned Ivory Coast, scoring in the 88th and 90th minutes to eliminate the reigning champions from the tournament.

Absolute cinema!

Next up was Cameroon vs Tanzania.

...

Cameroon vs Tanzania was another tight pound for pound game, but at the end, there was a clear winner as Cameroon prevailed 2-1 over their opponents.

All 3 goals were scored in the first half.

Next up was Nigeria vs Angola.

...

Finally, the Super Eagles were to play.

After the shocker against Ivory Coast, would this be another shocking upset? Well, sit down and enjoy because the Super Eagles cooked on the night.

Sam led the game, orchestrated it, and opened it up, scoring the first goal from a crazy dribble and a beautiful curling shot in the 12th minute of the game.

The first half came to an end 1-0 in Nigeria's favor.

Second half was still all Samuel Moses.

In the 56th minute, he played a needle pass through the Angola defense for Victory Osimhen who outmuscled his markers and scored past the goalkeeper.

Sam did it again, assisting Ademola Lookman for the 3rd goal of the night.

Nigerian won 3-0 on the night.

Sam got another man of the match award for his troubles, and off to the quarter finals they marched.

Next was Botswana vs Sudan.

...

Botswana vs Sudan played a boring 0-0 draw across 90 minutes.

In extra time, it followed the same boring sequence till in the 112th minute of the match, one of the Botswana center backs rose highest, powering a header into the net from a corner kick.

Botswana won the game by the skin of their teeth, progressing.

The center back won the man of the match award.

Next and last in this stage of the tournament was Senegal vs Burkina Faso.

...

Burkina Faso didn't roll over before the giant that faced them, rather, just like Zimbabwe, they played the game of their lives against Senegal.

The first half came to an end 1-1.

And then in second half, Sadio Mane played another super sub role, scoring a brace in the 74th and 77th minute to send Senegal to the quarter finals.

Senegal won 3-1, progressing to the quarter finals.

Sadio Mane won the man of the match award.

And now, off to the quarter finals.

Chapter 377: Quarterfinal matchups; amping the heat

At the end of the round of 16 stage of the AFCON tournament, a few things were established in the tournament.

First, Sam pulled away from his rivals in the golden boot race, establishing himself as the challenger in pole position to win the golden boot with his incredible haul of 7 goals and 3 assists in just 4 games.

Sam's career rise was nothing short of meteoric.

He did it in the NPFL with Enyimba FC, he did it in the English Premier League with Fulham FC, and now he was doing it with FC Barcelona in the Spanish La Liga.

And also now, he was doing it in the AFCON tournament.

Sam was still just 20, but he played with the maturity and skill of a veteran of the game. His game intelligence was far ahead of his real age, just like Lamine Yamal.

No stage was too big for him, no opponent was too big for him.

He could perform anywhere, anytime, and that was what made him special.

After what he did with Fulham last season, lots of football fans around the world learned about Sam, becoming his fans. And with what he was doing with FC Barcelona this season, his fanbase only kept on increasing.

This season, he was the early ballon d'Or favorite but Sam was clearly showing that the pressure of such a position was not getting to him.

Ballon d'Or favorite or not, he was still Samuel Moses, dubbed Zinedine Sam, the boy that was ready to give his all anytime on the pitch to win.

Because of Sam alone, a lot more football fans watched the AFCON tournament this year, him being the center of attention of the tournament.

And being the center of attention, the pressure still didn't get to him.

Sam was balling out in the AFCON tournament, leading Nigeria as one of the favorites to go all the way and win the trophy.

But he was not the only star player balling out in the tournament though.

Mohamed Salah may have dropped off in the golden boot race, but overall, his impact was still synonymous with Egypt's success.

It was his assist that helped Omar Marmoush score in the last game, helping Egypt to finally break the deadlock and get the winner.

The Egyptian King was still very much in the golden ball race, so was Sam, and so was Ismaila Sarr.

The Senegalese forward, Ismaila Sarr was another stand-out player in the tournament, and the closest player to Sam in the golden boot race with 5 goals.

Despite the fact that he didn't score in Senegal's round of 16 game, he was the one who created the assist for Sadio Mane's first goal that ended up being the winner. His influence in the Senegal side was massive.

Also in the golden ball race were 2 stars from the host nation, Achraf Hakimi and Brahim Diaz. Both were balling out for Morocco in the tournament.

In front of their home fans, both star players felt in their elements.

Their numbers may not contend with the 3 others who were favorites for the golden ball award, but if Morocco managed to go all the way in the tournament, there was nothing stopping them from scooping home the award.

The round of 16 battle was over..., 8 countries progressed while 8 were eliminated.

Now, all focus moved to the epic quarterfinal matchups.

The heat was amping up, the pressure was hitting a crescendo.

(AFCON 2025:)

(Quarterfinal:)

(Egypt – Morocco)

(Date: 9th January, 2026)

...

(Tunisia – Algeria)

(Date: 9th January, 2026)

...

(Cameroon – Nigeria)

(Date: 10th January, 2026)

...

(Botswana – Senegal)

(Date: 10th January, 2026)

The round of 16 games ended on the 6th, giving the players at least 2 days of rest to prepare for the next game.

Due to the side of the tournament bracket that they were put in, the first game of the AFCON 2025 quarterfinals was poised to be a blockbuster encounter; a clash between 2 African footballing giant nations, Egypt and Morocco.

Both countries had time to rest and prepare for the epic clash.

The other clash to be played on the 9th was the encounter between Tunisia and Algeria, 2 average African footballing nations who managed to dig themselves all the way to the quarterfinal stage.

And then, the next day, scheduled on the 10th was Senegal and Nigeria's games against inferior opponents on paper.

Due to this matchup, all eyes focused on the first clash of the quarterfinal stage, the epic encounter between Egypt and Morocco.

Sam could not imagine the mood in both nation's camp.

It must be filled with a lot of tension, or maybe not.

But none of that really concerned him, this was because Nigeria had their own game to play just a day after the blockbuster clash between Egypt and Morocco.

Instead of worrying about them, he worried about Nigeria's immediate opponent, Cameroon.

Nigeria was billed as the favorites in that game, but Sam already played enough football at the professional level to know the consequence of underestimating an opponent.

They made it to the quarterfinal for a reason, and Sam respected them for it.

For the next few days after the round of 16, while engaging in recovery measures, they also trained like their lives was on the line.

These days, Eric Chelle had eyebags under his eyes as if he was not sleeping as the coach lived, breath, and saw tactics even in his dreams.

The last thing Eric Chelle wanted was for his team to be eliminated due to an oversight from his side, this was why he gave his all.

Tactically, he drilled his team.

Physically, he worked them to the bones.

Day in, day out, and in no time like this, it was D-day.

9th January, 2026...

In the 75,000+ capacity Grand Stade de Tanger stadium in Tangier, filled to the brim with passionate football fans in red and white, Egypt lined up against the hosts, Morocco in the epic game of the quarterfinal stage.

Both teams were stacked and at their strongest.

It was going to be an epic game.

The Nigerian team watched the game as one in their hotel.

Chapter 378: Quarterfinal clash; Egypt vs Morocco

Ole! Ole! Ole! Ole!

Energetic fans sang around the stadium.

The Grand Stade de Tanger pulsed with raw, uncontainable energy as Egypt and Morocco clashed in this high-stakes AFCON quarterfinal.

The massive arena, perched on the northern coast of Morocco, became a cauldron of passion and pride, with over 75,000 roaring fans igniting the night.

The air was thick with tension and anticipation as waves of red, green, and white flooded the stands.

Moroccan supporters, draped in the Atlas Lions' colors beat drums and waved massive flags, creating a hypnotic rhythm that echoed through the stadium as they went all out to support their nation.

Egyptian fans, clad in the iconic Pharaohs' red, responded with thunderous chants and ululations that reverberated through the concrete walls.

There may be more Moroccan fans in this stadium, but that did not mean the Egyptians were ready to accept defeat as they roared in their few numbers at the top of their lungs to match the Moroccan intensity.

The game was yet to start.

Lined up on the pitch already, the players went through warm-up routines.

And yet, that was enough to leave the stadium going full gaga mode.

Every touch of the ball sparked an eruption of cheers or jeers, while the piercing sound of vuvuzelas added to the electric atmosphere.

The crowd surged with excitement as star players showcased their skill and dazzling footwork with the ball, a way to excite the fans and also to calm their own nerves which were clearly high in the buildup to this blockbuster game.

Egypt and Morocco held nothing back, going all out today.

The Pharaohs of Egypt started in their customary 4-3-3 formation, with the dynamic trio of Trezeguet, Omar Marmoush, and Mohamed Salah leading the line again. Behind them was the midfield trio of Fathy, Attia, and Sayed.

And in defense lined up the quadruple of Hamdy, Abdelmonem, Rabia, and Hany, with the goalkeeper, El Shenawy manning the posts for the Egyptians.

As for the Atlas Lions of Morocco, they came out in their 4-2-3-1 formation.

Al Ek Kaabi led the attack as the striker, while behind him was the regular trio of Ben Seghir in left wing, Hakim Ziyech in attacking midfield, and Brahim Diaz in the right as the right winger.

In midfield was the duo of Ounahi and Sofyat Amrabat, and the defensive quadruple comprised Attiyat Allah, Riad, Aguerd, and Hakimi.

Yassine Bono manned the post for the Moroccans.

Both had star-filled lineups, it was a clash of heavyweights.

The referee didn't waste time.

FWEEEE!

Cutting through the wave of noise around the stadium, the referee's whistle sounded the signal to start the game.

And immediately, peak football started on the pitch.

Both teams played with endless energy, eager to assert authority over the game and attack. Their energy led to an incredible end to end game at the beginning of this game as both sides struggled to balance the game.

It was tight and intense....

...nerve-wracking.

Bam! Bam!

Every play elicited amplified reactions from the fans in the stands.

Every touch of the ball sparked a louder eruption of cheers or jeers. Moments of brilliance drew gasps and applause, while missed opportunities were met with groans of anguish.

It was an extremely intense game.

As the game progressed, the tension became almost unbearable. Fans leaned forward in their seats, hearts pounding, eyes locked on the pitch.

When a certain goal was inconceivably caught by the goalkeeper, the stadium exploded in a deafening roar, accompanied by gasps of shock.

When Hakimi started those overlapping runs, combining to devastating effect with Brahim Diaz, the Moroccan fans broke out in cheers, singing loudly.

And when on the opposite side, Mohamed Salah and Omar Marmoush did it, the Egyptian fans roared with endless energy.

All the stars showed up this game, balling out.

Hakimi took shots at goal, Brahim Diaz did too. On the opposite side, Salah and Marmoush also created chances, unleashing shots at goal and yet, there was no goal. This was because of the elite level of both goalkeepers this game.

The goalkeepers played at an elite level, keeping the game even.

Despite its intensity, the first half came to an end 0-0.

During halftime, no one had any idea what the respective nation's coaches said to their players but the players came out for the 2nd half with even more energy and intensity, Mohamed Salah especially playing like a man possessed.

BZZZ!

Like a bee, the Egyptian King buzzed.

The Moroccan left back marking him, Attiyat Allah suffered the brunt as buzzing about, Salah turned him inside out at a freakish frequency.

The left back was being burnt and stung in this game.

Like this, Salah created countless chances for Omar Marmoush and other Egyptian players who kept on missing, at other times Yassine Bono pulling off incredible saves that left you as a striker rethinking your life choices.

It was an incredible game.

Brahim Diaz was playing good since, but in the 2nd half, he soon also entered a monster level as he burnt the Egyptian players with his energetic dribbling.

This game was end to end, incredibly intense.

But due to the goalkeeper's performances, 90 minutes approached and still no goal.

"What a game we're bearing witness to here!"

"Egypt and Morocco, 2 nations with deep roots in African footballing history. Which of them will prevail today?"

"It's already 82 minutes yet no goal".

"Will it be decided by a penalty shoot?"

"And oh! Brahim Diaz is brought down outside the box!"

"It's a freekick!"

Standing up, Brahim Diaz groaned, wiping away his sweat.

As the Egyptian players set up their wall, the Moroccan attackers converged, discussing who should take the freekick.

They were all sweating and breathing heavily.

They were tired and yet, they kept on going.

"Let me take it". Ziyech suddenly said.

The others turned around to look at the ex-Chelsea player.

Hakimi walked closer. "Are you confident?"

"I'll try my best".

"That's good enough". Hakimi patted Hakim Ziyech's back to motivate him and since no one protested the decision, it was finalized.

In the 83rd minute of the game, about 25 yards away from the goal, Hakim Ziyech stood before the ball, looking at the goalposts.

FWEEEE!

The referee's whistle sounded.

Ziyech looked one last time, then he moved.

One step, two step, three step, then...

Bam!

Inclining his body to the side, Hakim Ziyech hit the ball perfectly, sending it on a delicate curving trajectory through the air.

"...!"

The stadium froze, watching.

El Shenawy, Egypt's goalkeeper moved, diving after the ball.

"...!"

Over 70,000 fans watched.

El Shenawy's hand grazed the ball, but the technique behind the shot was too insidious. The rotating ball rotated past him, sneaking past and into the net.

"...!"

For a brief moment, silence, then...

BOOM!

The Grand Stade de Tanger exploded!

"GOALLLLLLL...!!!"

Moroccan fans screamed at the top of their lungs.

"OOH MY GOD!!!"

"OHHHH MY GOD!!!"

"HAKIM ZIYECHHHHHHHH!!!"

"Morocco prayed for a miracle, Ziyech answered!"

"And Morocco is leading!"

Charging towards the corner flag, Hakim Ziyech tore his clothes apart, throwing them to the side as he pumped his fists passionately, celebrating his goal with exuberant energy.

His teammates jumped all over him, celebrating with him.

The Egyptian players and fans felt deflated.

After giving Ziyech a yellow card for his unbridled celebration, the referee's whistle sounded to continue the game. Egypt tried but it wasn't enough, the game came to an end.

Morocco won 1-0.

Hakim Ziyech was the hero, winning the man of the match award.

What a game it was.

Chapter 379: Quarterfinal clash; Tunisia vs Algeria

Another AFCON tournament.

Another Mohamed Salah heartbreak.

At this point, heartbreak at critical moments was synonymous with the Egyptian King, maybe apart from his UEFA champions league win with Liverpool FC in the previous season.

Salah broke down in tears on the pitch as the Moroccan players celebrated.

'Again!' He growled in his mind, clenching his fists.

Salah was a great player, one of the best of his generation but when it came to the critical moments in football, there was this bad luck that followed him.

As great as he was, an African footballing legend, his legacy in international football paled in comparison to the likes of Sadio Mane, and this was simply because unlike Mane, he was yet to win an AFCON title.

Egypt were always favorites in every AFCON tournament with him on the side, and yet, they always stumbled in the critical stages.

Even in the previous 2 AFCON tournaments, though Egypt didn't do especially well in the last one as he suffered an injury early in the tournament, in the previous one, Egypt did well, going as far as the final where they engaged in an epic final showdown against Senegal.

That game was dubbed the Sadio Mane vs Mohamed Salah game.

Millions of fans tuned in from around the world to watch, and again, under the limelight, Salah failed to lift the Pharaohs of Egypt to the win that they deserved.

Sadio Mane got him on the night.

After playing a draw in fulltime and extra time, they went to a penalty shootout.

Yes, the Senegalese fans may have employed dirty tactics, pointing laser lights at the eyes of the Egyptian players who were taking the penalties.

It was incredibly dirty, yes, but Salah didn't want an excuse.

Rather, he wanted results.

But in the end, that was enough to do it.

Sadio Mane did it, scoring the final penalty in the intense penalty shootout to send Senega to victory over his Egypt, once again dooming him to failure.

Tonight's situation may not have been as painful as that of years ago, but still, this was the quarterfinal stage.

Just 2 more victories and they would have the AFCON title!

Salah bit his lips, trembling. 'Why always me?!'

His teammates noticed him crying and without hesitation, the more senior members of the squad walked towards him, hugging him to console him.

And then, the real moment of solidarity came when Achraf Hakimi noticed the Egyptian King smiling.

It didn't concern him, this was his moment to celebrate a famous victory for his country, but Hakimi was sensitive enough to approach the Egyptian.

He hugged Salah tightly, patting him on the head as he consoled him.

And then he whispered in his ear. "To me, you're still a legend".

It may feel like just superficial words, words to sound hypocritically sentimental, but Salah didn't take it that way.

Those words got to him.

And for the first time since the final whistle, Salah smiled.

He looked at Hakimi and patted him back on the head. "Thank you man". He grinned. "Now go on and win the tournament!"

"You can't eliminate me and not win, got it?"

Hakimi grinned back. "Yes sir!"

And with that, the curtain closed.

Morocco was the country to progress to the semifinal stage of the AFCON tournament, and Egypt was the first country to be eliminated.

On that same night, next up was Tunisia vs Algeria.

...

That same night, next up, the focus left the Grand Stade de Tanger to the Complexe Sportif Mohammed V stadium in Casablanca, Morocco, where the 2nd quarterfinal clash was being played between Tunisia and Algeria.

The Complexe Sportif Mohammed V in Casablanca was a seething cauldron of North African rivalry as Tunisia and Algeria locked horns in a gripping AFCON quarterfinal.

With over 45,000 passionate fans packing the iconic stadium, the atmosphere crackled with intensity and anticipation.

The Tunisian faithful, draped in red and white, filled one end of the stadium with rhythmic chants and beating drums, their voices rising in unison like a battle cry to send an army to war.

Across from them, Algerian supporters, proudly waving the green and white of the Desert Warriors, responded with thunderous applause and deafening whistles, creating a symphony of sound that echoed through the historic venue.

The referee didn't keep the energetic fans and players waiting.

FWEEEE!

Immediately after the whistle sounded, a battle started in the Complexe Sportif Mohammed V in Casablanca.

Two evenly rated African national teams duked it out in a battle to the death in the quarterfinal of the AFCON tournament.

It was a tight and extremely intense game.

The air was thick with tension as every pass, tackle, and shot was met with roars of approval or groans of frustration. The energy of the fans was high.

Flares lit up the night sky, casting an eerie glow over the pitch as the crowd's energy surged and ebbed with the flow of the game.

When a player darted past a defender or a goalkeeper made a spectacular save, the stands erupted in chaos.

Fans clutched their scarves and flags, living and breathing every moment of the intense battle unfolding before them.

The first half ended in a goalless draw.

The second half? It progressed almost just like the first half, both sides creating countless chances but never truly threatening to score.

As the final whistle approached, the noise reached a fever pitch, with both sets of supporters willing their team toward victory.

In this legendary stadium where history and passion collided, the spirit of North African football was alive and burning brighter than ever.

But, in the end, who would win?

Which of the 2 countries would burn brightest?

Tunisia did.

In the 87th minute, Talbi, the tall Tunisian center back rose highest to a corner kick, powering a header past Algeria's goalkeeper and into the net.

"..."

For a second or so, silence, then...

BOOM!

Tunisian fans across the stadium and around the world erupted in ecstasy.

The players celebrated like mad men, giving no care how they looked, the fans went mad in the stadium stands.

With 3 minutes left to fulltime, Algeria could do nothing and even in additional time, they could do nothing.

Algeria was doomed.

And once again, Tunisia did the impossible, climbing one step further in the AFCON tournament to the semifinal stage at the expense of Algeria.

Chapter 380: Quarterfinal clash; Cameroon vs Nigeria [1]

Of the 8 teams that originally made it to the quarterfinal of the 2025 AFCON tournament, 4 already played against themselves, 2 qualifying with 2 being eliminated from the tournament.

Morocco and Tunisia already progressed to the semifinal, where they were automatically matched up against each other in the grouping.

Egypt and Algeria were eliminated.

And with the first 2 games of the first day done, the fans had a moment of reprieve as they rested, preparing for tomorrow's games.

Next up was Cameroon vs Nigeria.

...

10th January, 2026...

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Like usual, that morning, a certain member of the Nigerian squad jogged through the streets of Morocco away from his hotel.

Listening to the 'Not Like Us' jam from Kendrick Lamar that was still making waves in the rap world even in 2026, Sam's body emitted sweat and steam as he jogged through the streets of Morocco.

Yes, it was the AFCON tournament but that did not mean that his system took it easy on him.

To the system, it was just another stage for him to perform and rise to become the Football God like it promised.

At the beginning of the AFCON tournament, like Sam expected, his system lit up with a new notification, informing him of another quest added to his Seasonal System Quest, and the quest was about the AFCON tournament.

The quest had 3 missions; the first being to win the AFCON tournament itself, the second being to win the golden ball award given to the best player of the tournament, and the third and last being to win the golden boot award given to the player with the most goals at the end of the tournament.

For the 3 missions, Sam was making great progress.

In the golden ball and golden boot race, he was already the favorite alongside Senegal's Ismaila Sarr, and Morocco's Achraf Hakimi and Brahim Diaz.

With other favorites in the country already eliminated, the golden boot race was now made narrower. Sam was currently the forerunner, but his main rival to the golden boot award was still Senegal's Ismaila Sarr.

'I'll do it!' Sam thought as he ran.

'I'll carve another legend in this AFCON tournament!'

'I'll keep on announcing my name to the world, at every opportunity, at every given chance'.

'I'll keep on Losing Myself, seizing my moment till I hit my peak'.

'...Till they acknowledge that I'm the new King in football'.

'...Till they all believe that I'm the best'.

A group of paparazzi soon spotted Sam, taking pictures of him indiscriminately which forced him to increase his pace, jogging to the nearest stadium where he completed the rest of his daily system quest.

With that, he finally returned to his hotel room.

That morning, there was no training for Eric Chelle's players. Rather, he invited them to the conference room where he did the last tactical drilling before the game into their heads, and then he sent them off to rest and mentally prepare themselves for the clash in the evening.

Time moved very fast, and in a blink, it was evening.

Nigeria lined up against Cameroon in the 69,000+ capacity Complexe Sportif Prince Moulay Abdellah stadium in the capital city of Morocco, Rabat.

Like expected, both countries started with their strongest lineups.

For the Nigerian squad, nothing changed.

For the Cameroon squad, starting in a 4-1-4-1 formation, the Manchester United goalkeeper, Andre Onana who was also the captain started in between the posts as the last man in defense for Cameroon.

Ahead of him, in defense was the quadruple of Tolo, Wooh, Ngadeu, and Tchatchoua. In CDM (Central Defensive Midfield) was Quomah Baleba.

And then further ahead him, higher up in the field was the quadruple of Bassogog, Hongla, Anguissa, and Bryan Mbeumo as the attacking force.

Leading the line as the striker though was a familiar face, Victor Aboubakar.

Ole! Ole! Ole! Ole!

The Complexe Sportif Prince Moulay Abdellah in Rabat roared with unrelenting passion as both countries faced off in this high-stakes AFCON quarterfinal clash. Nigeria were the favorites, but not by much.

Cameroon was also a giant of African football.

The stadium, packed with over 50,000 fervent fans became a battleground where the fierce West African rivalry unfolded in electrifying fashion.

FWEEEE!

From the opening whistle, even as the game started, the atmosphere in this stadium remained electric.

Nigerian supporters, draped in green and white, filled the air with pulsating drums and rhythmic chants, their voices echoing through the concrete walls in a vivid display of their passion for the sport.

Across the stands, Cameroonian fans, adorned in the iconic green, red, and yellow of the Indomitable Lions responded with thunderous songs and vuvuzelas that blared in unison.

Just like in the past 2 previous quarterfinal clashes, it was an intense game.

The tension was palpable with every pass, every tackle, and every near miss, Victor Osimhen leading the charge for the Nigerians.

Fans leapt to their feet in anticipation, their emotions swinging between ecstasy and despair as the action on the pitch unfolded.

The stadium vibrated with raw energy as flares lit up the night sky and banners waved proudly in support of their heroes.

When either side launched a dangerous attack, the collective gasp of the crowd filled the air, followed by eruptions of cheers or groans, depending on the outcome. Football was just beautiful that way.

But in the end, Nigeria struck, drawing first blood.

It was Samuel Moses who created it.

Receiving a pass from Alex Iwobi just outside the 18-yard box, with his physicality, Sam protected the ball, spinning, looking for the perfect pass.

Victor Osimhen ran into space, including Ademola Lookman as their markers responded but instead of passing to them, Sam threaded the ball through the middle, back towards Alex Iwobi's diagonal run.

"...!"

Noting the threat, the Cameroonian goalkeeper, Andre Onana rushed out but keeping his cool, with his first touch, Alex Iwobi chipped the ball over the goalkeeper.

"GOALLLLLLL...!!!" The stadium roared to life as the Nigerian fans celebrated with passion at the top of their lungs.

The goal came in the 33rd minute, but Cameroon didn't stay still though.

In the 44th minute, they responded, their striker, Aboubakar rising highest in the box to lash into a header, sending it past Stanley Nwabali.

"GOALLLLLLL...!!!" The Cameroonian fans responded in kind.

This game was end to end.

The first half came to an end 1-1.

But when 2nd half came, a certain player stole the stage.

The King showed up.

Zinedine Sam did what he did best, he mesmerized and dominated.