

STARTING WITH REAL MADRID

Chapter 11: I Want to Beat Atletico!

The former president of Real Madrid, Florentino, is one of Spain's most successful entrepreneurs. He has always aspired to become the greatest president in Real Madrid's history, surpassing even Santiago Bernabéu.

To realize this ambition, he implemented a "superstar strategy," signing numerous star players and making Real Madrid the most dazzling "Galácticos" in football history. He also had grand plans to renovate the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium.

In recent years, European football clubs have increasingly recognized the importance of stadium business development, especially giants like Real Madrid. The VIP boxes generate significant revenue annually. Florentino's plan included moving Real Madrid's administrative offices from the Bernabéu to the north of the Valdebebas training base.

Unfortunately, with Florentino's resignation, this plan was put on hold.

So, anyone visiting the gate of Real Madrid's first-team training area can see a large empty space. The surrounding barriers display information about Real Madrid's new office building project, but there is no sign of construction.

However, for two consecutive days, it became extremely lively here.

It's not that the project resumed, but many Real Madrid fans spontaneously gathered at Valdebebas to protest the team's sudden coaching change.

Their appeal was simple: they didn't mind a coaching change, but they wanted a famous coach. How could a 25-year-old rookie fresh out of school take charge of Real Madrid?

Wouldn't it be better to bring back Del Bosque or Hierro?

The players usually arrived at the training base around nine o'clock, but the fans showed up more than an hour earlier.

One or two hundred fans stood sparsely at the gate, holding banners casually. They only shouted slogans in unison when they saw vehicles coming and going; otherwise, they chatted among themselves.

It didn't look like a demonstration but more like a casual gathering.

Of course, Gao Shen knew that many fan protests in Spain were like this.

Media reporters were also on the scene. They didn't need to capture the entire process, just a few photos of fans shouting slogans excitedly to publish in newspapers or online. Who would know what the scene was really like?

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Gao Shen rode his bicycle to the gate of Valdebebas.

Seeing the commotion from a distance, he was taken aback and wondered if he should take a detour.

But he soon noticed that the demonstrators only blocked the vehicle entrance and ignored the pedestrian gate. Even as Gao Shen approached, no one recognized him.

Another car approached, and the demonstrators started shouting again.

"China boy, get out of the Bernabéu!"

"Don't tarnish Real Madrid's history, change the coach immediately!"

"We don't accept rookie coaching!"

"Martín: The stupidest president in Real Madrid's history!"

"Chinese, get out! Martín, step down!"

Gao Shen pushed his bicycle and passed through the small gate. Hearing their disorganized slogans, he felt a mix of absurdity and amusement. Were these people really here to protest?

Even more surprisingly, they completely ignored him.

"Good morning, José," Gao Shen habitually greeted the security captain as he passed.

"Good morning," the security captain nodded.

There was a lot of noise outside, but the Valdebebas staff had a good attitude toward Gao Shen. They knew he was innocent in all this.

At least, Gao Shen was still reluctant to move into the Real Madrid head coach's office.

It was all because of that damn chairman.

"They..." Gao Shen pointed to the protesting fans outside and asked the security captain.

The security captain laughed, "They're here to protest you."

Gao Shen knew the protest slogans included some ugly words, but the problem was...

Sensing Gao Shen's confusion, the security captain laughed again, "I guess they don't recognize you, and you're wearing a hard hat, so..."

His most obvious black hair was covered, making it even harder to identify him.

Gao Shen smiled bitterly, feeling a mix of embarrassment and amusement.

Should he be happy or sad?

He was being protested by over 200 people, and the protesters didn't even know him. What kind of irony was this?

"You might be the first Real Madrid head coach to come to the training base on a bicycle. They don't know, so they block the car entrance. Besides, even many Valdebebas staff don't recognize you."

After listening to the security captain, Gao Shen shrugged helplessly, "Should I be happy or sad?"

The security captain smiled, "Don't think too much. We all know this has nothing to do with you."

Gao Shen sighed and nodded, secretly feeling a bit pleased.

It proved that what he had done in the past two days had some effect.

Humans naturally sympathize with the vulnerable.

At that moment, Gao Shen saw an Audi approaching. Recognizing the license plate, he knew it was Beckham's car, so he said goodbye to the security captain and headed for the parking lot.

Seeing Beckham's car, the protesting fans shouted again, but little did they know that Gao Shen had already slipped through the gate.

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Beckham saw Gao Shen pushing a bicycle. After being blocked by fans, he heard their protests and was curious why they let Gao Shen in but blocked him.

His Spanish wasn't fluent, so he wondered if he misunderstood. Were the fans not protesting against Gao Shen but against the superstars?

After finally getting in, he parked and saw Gao Shen looking at him not far away.

Face to face, Beckham couldn't pretend not to see him. As he walked toward the locker room, he nodded to Gao Shen, "Good morning, Gao."

"Good morning, David," Gao Shen replied.

When Beckham passed by, Gao Shen spoke again, "Why are they blocking your car?"

The England star shook his head, "I don't know," looking puzzled.

"They're protesting against me," Gao Shen smiled bitterly, "But... they don't seem to know me."

Thinking of the absurd scene, Beckham couldn't help but laugh.

But on reflection, it made sense.

Who would think the head coach of Real Madrid would ride a bicycle to work?

Even the sponsor, Audi, provided cars for the first-team players and coaches, but Gao Shen didn't have one.

Even now, he still had an intern contract, not a formal coaching contract.

Beckham suddenly felt Gao Shen was wronged. He was just an intern when this misfortune happened. How unlucky was that?

Gao Shen graduated from Loughborough University near London, and Beckham was also from England, near London, giving them a sense of closeness. They occasionally chatted in English.

At Real Madrid, few could communicate with Beckham in English.

"Don't think too much. We all know this isn't your fault," Beckham detected bitterness in Gao Shen's smile and couldn't help but console him. "I believe it will pass soon, and you can switch teams and start over."

"After something like this, what other team can I go to?" Gao Shen paused, looking at Beckham, "Or, could you recommend one for me?"

"No problem," Beckham readily agreed. "With your education, getting an internship at a Premier League team is no problem. I'll contact you when the time comes."

The England midfielder offered a friendly smile of encouragement.

Everyone who knew him understood that Beckham was a genuinely nice person.

"It's just... I'm a bit unwilling!" Gao Shen gritted his teeth.

"Unwilling?" Beckham was stunned.

"I feel like a pawn, manipulated back and forth. It's not my fault, but everyone blames me." Watching Beckham's reaction, Gao Shen continued.

"It's like you. Since you joined Real Madrid in 2003, the team hasn't won a championship. Everyone blames you. Do you think that's fair? Are you willing to accept that? Don't you feel a bit upset?"

Shifting the focus from himself to Beckham caught the latter off guard, but what Gao Shen said struck a chord.

Like Gao Shen, Beckham was full of resentment.

Why was he being blamed?

Was it all his fault?

Gao Shen noticed Beckham's expression and understood.

In the first half of 2007, despite being sidelined by Capello and deciding to leave for the US, Beckham played his best at Real Madrid out of sheer determination.

For four years, everyone blamed Beckham for the failure of the superstar strategy. How many ridiculed him as a hyped-up star without substance?

That determination allowed Beckham to endure all the pressure and change everyone's opinion in half a year. He won his first championship at Real Madrid, making Capello regret sidelining him and the club regret letting him transfer.

Gao Shen's words ignited the fire in Beckham's heart.

"From Del Bosque's resignation to the departures of Makelele and Hierro, Real Madrid's offense and defense became disjointed. Queiroz's changes were unsuccessful. The team was imbalanced with too many individualistic

superstars in the front. This wasn't your fault, so why should you bear the brunt of the insults and accusations?"

"David, haven't you ever wanted to make all those who insulted and accused you regret it? To prove your strength and worth to the world? Are you willing to let the world continue to misunderstand you?"

Beckham looked at Gao Shen, feeling a profound impact.

Had he thought about it?

Of course, he had.

But was it possible?

He didn't know.

"What do you want to do?" Beckham asked after regaining his composure.

Gao Shen looked at Beckham with determination.

"I need your help. I want to beat Atletico!"