

STARTING WITH REAL MADRID

Chapter 13: The Invisible Boss and the Glass Man

The morning training session began amidst protests from Real Madrid fans.

Nearly 300 fans gathered at Valdebebas, all protesting against the club's high-handed policies. They made considerable noise and commotion on the sidelines, severely disrupting the players' training on the field. Raul and Guti attempted to pacify the fans, but their efforts were in vain.

Since it was a recovery-focused training session, Gao Shen delegated its supervision to Maqueda while he silently observed, paying particular attention to Woodgate, who had suffered another injury a few days prior.

The English central defender has been playing sporadically recently. Carlo preferred to use Raul Bravo rather than risk relying on Woodgate, not solely due to his poor performances—quite the contrary, as he had shown strong performances—but because of concerns over his fragile physical condition.

During the 90-minute training session, Gao Shen silently observed throughout, once again surprising the Real Madrid players.

Could it be that this rookie head coach only intends to act as a figurehead?

Raul, especially, who could discern his thoughts, was even more puzzled.

With the intra-city derby approaching, shouldn't we begin targeted tactical drills by now?

Unlike his departure immediately after the previous day's afternoon training session, Gao Shen remained after the morning session, waiting to talk to Zidane.

In the Real Madrid team, the Frenchman had always been a man of few words, but that did not diminish Zidane's influence.

On the contrary, it was widely acknowledged that Zidane's words carried more weight than Ronaldo's.

Ronaldo was often seen as self-centered, frequently calling Florentino at any hour. Despite his frequent exchanges, did Florentino truly favor this superstar who complained incessantly and even challenged authority?

Zidane, on the other hand, maintained a calm demeanor. He rarely disturbed Florentino unnecessarily, which only served to heighten his standing in the Real Madrid dressing room. He was considered the invisible boss.

Regardless of whom he faced, Zidane always remained composed, as if nothing could disturb him.

Gao Shen understood Zidane's character well and didn't waste words. When they were alone, he went straight to the point.

"We've received a call-up fax from the French national team."

Upon hearing this, Zidane raised his head and regarded Gao Shen with a hint of mockery in his eyes.

"Don't misunderstand. I'm just following protocol to get your opinion. If you want to go, I'll send the fax later. If you have other plans, I can assist with that too," Gao Shen said casually.

His words showed full respect for Zidane's personal wishes, implying that he was on Zidane's side. If Zidane chose not to go, Gao Shen could take the blame.

Zidane was sharp. He immediately grasped the subtle implications. He looked at Gao Shen with a changed expression.

"Since Domenech took charge, there's been a push for youth reform in the national team. The average age has dropped, and they've become more aggressive. Recently, they've called up a group of experienced veterans to help with the transition," Zidane explained.

After the 2004 European Cup, Zidane had initially retired from international duty but was later persuaded by Domenech to return.

It was clear to everyone that Zidane's goal was the World Cup in Germany. The humiliating group stage exit in the 2002 World Cup in Korea and Japan was unacceptable for a superstar of his caliber.

"You've seen that from November to May, we only have this friendly," Zidane added casually.

Gao Shen nodded. "Understood. I'll send the fax when I return."

"Thank you," Zidane replied evenly.

As the French superstar turned to leave, Gao Shen spoke again unexpectedly.

"You played for France at the World Cup in Germany to leave no regrets. What about Real Madrid?"

Zidane frowned and stared at Gao Shen suspiciously. "What do you mean? Are you questioning my professionalism?"

"No, you've misunderstood," Gao Shen replied with a gentle smile. "I never doubted your professionalism. I was simply considering whether you're willing to end your career at Real Madrid like this."

Zidane fell silent, touched by Gao Shen's words that resonated deeply with him.

What kind of superstar was he?

In the past decade, alongside Ronaldo, he had been among the most dominant players.

Such superstars were often proud and even arrogant, which was understandable.

Without this self-respecting aura, how could they perform at their best in crucial moments?

"I believe you've noticed that we're currently ten points behind Barcelona and two behind Valencia. Yet, Celta, Celta, and Osasuna are right behind us. If

you step up and help us challenge Barcelona's top spot, it's not impossible," Gao Shen continued after a pause.

He reminded Zidane again, "There are still thirteen league matches and the second leg of the Champions League. What are your thoughts?"

Zidane understood Gao Shen's intention and was taken aback. He had initially thought Gao Shen would suppress the superstars, including himself. Yet, Gao Shen had taken the initiative to talk to him.

"Didn't you declare war on the superstars just yesterday?" Zidane asked calmly.

Gao Shen smiled and said, "The media always likes to spin stories like this. What I'm saying is that not every player deserves to wear the Real Madrid jersey, but that doesn't apply to you. I know you have a deep affection for this team. It's where you reached the pinnacle of your career, and it will be a lifelong memory for you."

Zidane fell silent again, acknowledging Gao Shen's words.

While his international career had been illustrious, Real Madrid was where he truly reached the peak of his career, especially under Florentino.

"I believe you wouldn't want this memory to end on a sour note, no matter what," Gao Shen posed a profound question that left Zidane speechless.

Why had he decided to retire this summer?

It was because he was deeply disillusioned with the current state of Real Madrid. Continuing to play felt like repeating the mistakes of the past three years. For him, instead of enjoying the game, it had become a form of torment and humiliation.

Gao Shen's words struck a chord with him, but so what?

"What do you think you can change?" Zidane retorted with his characteristic mix of arrogance and confidence, challenging the core of Gao Shen's argument.

Gao Shen didn't take offense; instead, he felt a sense of satisfaction at having identified Zidane's vulnerability.

"I'm not sure what changes I can bring. Many say I won't last long in this role, but I believe there's always something to be done. What Real Madrid lacks isn't just a great manager, but someone who can unify the team and work towards a common goal."

After finishing, Gao Shen smiled freely and added, "Maybe I'll be sacked after losing to Atletico this week, or maybe I'll win. Either way, as long as I'm here, I'll do what I can and leave no regrets."

Zidane fixed Gao Shen with a searching gaze, as if trying to discern something in his eyes. Finally, he left with a cryptic remark.

"Let's talk when you've firmly established yourself in this position."

Watching the French superstar depart, Gao Shen smiled deeply.

He had seen it: Zidane remained neutral.

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After seeing off Zidane, Gao Shen headed straight for the medical room.

As expected, the team doctor was there conducting medical exams on several injured players, a routine procedure after training.

Gao Shen casually inquired about the conditions of several injured players, particularly focusing on Woodgate.

The team doctor expressed satisfaction with the physical condition of the English central defender, noting there were no significant issues.

Woodgate had sustained an injury in the ninth minute of the first leg of the Champions League round of 16 against Arsenal.

Joining Real Madrid in August 2004, Woodgate had been plagued by injuries since April. Even the day before signing, he was undergoing treatment in Munich. Despite this, Real Madrid had chosen to sign him, underscoring his importance to the club.

His rehabilitation upon joining had not gone smoothly; he suffered repeated injuries in training. His debut was delayed until September 2005, during the fourth round of the season against Athletic Bilbao at home. Unfortunately, he scored an own goal in the 25th minute, putting the team at a disadvantage.

Subsequently, Woodgate's playing time became sporadic, with Carlo showing caution in his use due to his extended absences.

This pattern persisted until the end of January, when, during the league's twenty-first round, a match against Celta Vigo away saw Danish midfielder Gravesen injured. Woodgate came on as a substitute, shifting Elgra into midfield. This adjustment significantly bolstered Real Madrid's defense in the second half, resulting in a 2-1 victory over Celta Vigo.

Following this, they achieved a 4-0 victory over Espanyol at home and a 2-0 win against Athletic Bilbao away, securing clean sheets in consecutive games. With Woodgate playing a prominent role, Real Madrid's defense notably improved.

A standout performance came in the Copa del Rey, where after losing 6-1 to Zaragoza in the first leg, the combination of Ramos and Woodgate in the second leg resulted in a 4-0 victory at home, achieving redemption.

The games at the end of January and beginning of February underscored Woodgate's strength, convincing everyone of his reliability in Real Madrid's defense.

Unexpectedly, in the first leg of the Champions League against Arsenal, Woodgate sustained an injury after just nine minutes, contributing to Real Madrid's 0-1 home loss.

In the subsequent matches, Woodgate failed to make the squad, with Carlo opting to use Raul Bravo as a central defender.

Many are unaware that apart from the Arsenal game, Woodgate had played 13 matches for Real Madrid that season, totaling 891 minutes, with 11 wins, one draw, and one loss. They conceded three goals in a 3-1 away loss to Deportivo but only two goals in the remaining 12 matches.

Notably, one of these goals was an own goal by Woodgate himself.

Without injury, Woodgate was considered a world-class central defender.

Gao Shen also vividly recalled how this "fragile" player, who struggled at Real Madrid, transformed into a defensive stalwart at Middlesbrough and earned a recall to the England national team.

What made his performances so divergent between Real Madrid and Middlesbrough?