

STARTING WITH REAL MADRID

Chapter 14: Bad Boy

Playing football sometimes feels like being in an office.

Joining a wealthy family is akin to joining a prestigious company, with a handsome salary that everyone envies. It appears glamorous on the surface, but it also brings immense pressure. The fierce internal competition can crush countless individuals.

If you can withstand it, congratulations! With the platform of such a renowned enterprise, your career is set to soar.

However, not everyone can adapt to the intense competition and rigorous training of these giants.

Woodgate is one such player.

Technically, Woodgate has few apparent weaknesses, which is why Real Madrid was willing to pay nearly 17 million euros for him—a hefty sum among central defenders.

Psychologically, Woodgate also seemed solid.

Yet, what prevented him from establishing himself at Real Madrid was his fragile physique.

In a club like Real Madrid, competition is unprecedentedly fierce, and often, training is more intense than actual matches.

Gao Shen still recalls Woodgate's interview with Marca after retiring, where he lamented his tough experience at Real Madrid. He cited language barriers and injuries as key reasons hindering his value to the team. His frequent injuries stemmed not only from physical factors but also from the relentless competition within the club.

"When you're at such a big club, you can't afford to slack off in training. Losing a game feels like losing a war!"

Woodgate's start at Real Madrid was nothing short of disastrous.

After a prolonged injury spell, his debut for the Bernabeu faithful ended with an own goal.

If a good start is half the battle, then Woodgate's poor start sealed his tragic fate.

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Gao Shen intercepted Woodgate just outside the medical room after his examination.

The once young English central defender, a former "bad boy" in the Premier League, now bore the scars of years of injuries and immense public pressure.

Some might call this emotional intelligence maturation; others might see it as resignation after being repeatedly beaten down by reality.

To Woodgate's surprise, Gao Shen addressed him directly in English.

Since joining Real Madrid—from Camacho to Raymond to Lusenberg to Carlo—no coach had understood his English, creating a significant language barrier between him and the coaching staff.

This communication gap was a major factor in his frequent injuries.

Without effective communication, he couldn't understand the coach's instructions, nor could the coach grasp his thoughts.

After a brief exchange, Gao Shen produced an old photograph.

The man in the picture looked youthful, clad in the England national team jersey. Woodgate recognized it instantly: June 8, 1999, Bulgaria, a European Cup qualifier. He had made his debut for England alongside Gareth Southgate and Sol Campbell. Notably, Rio Ferdinand, who would later become the world's most expensive defender, sat on the bench that day.

That year, Woodgate was nineteen.

It was also the year when Chelsea captain John Terry struggled to break into the first team.

Woodgate stared at the photo, lost in memories, then turned to Gao Shen with suspicion.

"What are you getting at?"

The rookie head coach, criticized by the locker room, fans, and media alike, had just presented him with a cherished photograph. What was his angle? Was he trying to portray himself as a fan, seeking closeness through nostalgia?

Had this been a few years earlier, Woodgate might have fallen for such a ploy. But now... he scoffed inwardly.

Gao Shen smiled gently. "You know, I studied sports at Loughborough University. I have a classmate from Leeds—a die-hard Leeds United fan and your admirer. This photo is from his collection, treasured to this day. He still believes you're England's finest center-back, perhaps the world's."

Woodgate remained silent, unsure if Gao Shen's story held water or if the photo was genuine.

But Gao Shen's next words elicited a reaction from Woodgate, his face betraying surprise.

"He's been watching you all along, waiting."

Woodgate found himself inexplicably believing Gao Shen.

Attention and expectation—these were what he yearned for, what he had lost.

Once a high-profile star, he had reveled in the limelight and ambition, especially upon joining Real Madrid, where he sought to reach new heights and become a global superstar.

All of that had slipped away.

Over the past year and a half, his dream of making an impact at Real Madrid had faded, and with it, the ambition that had driven him for years.

His peers, Ferdinand and Terry, whom he had once eclipsed, had now surpassed him, likely for good.

No one understood the ache and disappointment in his heart. Few paid attention to his journey anymore.

Initially, the media had covered his injuries, but gradually, interest waned.

Even the coaching staff at Real Madrid seemed to have forgotten about him.

"In the UK, and around the world, many fans like my friend from Leeds haven't forgotten you. They've been watching, waiting. You just didn't know."

As Gao Shen spoke, he noticed Woodgate's hand tremble slightly as he held the photograph. He knew he had struck a chord.

There's a management concept called the Hawthorne effect, where individuals change their behavior when they realize they're being observed.

While Gao Shen's friend and the photograph were real, whether the friend still followed Woodgate was irrelevant now and impossible to verify.

Gao Shen's intention was clear: through this encounter, he wanted Woodgate to understand that many fans silently followed and believed in him.

It wasn't important whether Gao Shen's friend still followed Woodgate; the impact of the message mattered more.

Guiding through storytelling often proves more effective than blunt directives.

Especially when Gao Shen spoke to Woodgate in fluent English.

"I've let them down, you know... My body..." Woodgate's frustration surfaced.

Gao Shen shook his head. "I just spoke with the team doctor. Physically, you're in good shape. It's the pressure and tension that get to you, causing nerves and mistakes, which lead to injuries."

"You see, others like Ronaldo have faced more injuries and longer recoveries than you. Yet, he remains one of the world's top strikers."

"If Ronaldo can do it, why not you?"

Woodgate grasped the implication.

And he felt a stirring inside.

"You know, Ramos will be suspended for accumulating yellow cards in this weekend's derby. There's an opening for a central defender. I want you to step in alongside Elgra."

"Me?" Woodgate was taken aback.

"Yes. You've seen the shortage of center-backs. You're the best option right now. But if you don't perform well or get injured again, I'll have to reconsider."

Gao Shen recalled an intriguing psychological experiment: given two options—take 20 dollars immediately or gamble on a coin toss for a chance to win 100 dollars—most people prefer the certain 20 dollars. It's because once they have it, they fear losing it more than they desire the possibility of winning more.

Effective management often harnesses this psychology to motivate employees.

Gao Shen had offered Woodgate the starting position but warned that failing to perform would mean losing it, igniting a competitive drive within him.

Woodgate took a deep breath. "Don't worry. You won't get that chance."

With that, the English defender turned and walked away.

He took the photograph with him.

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Watching Woodgate leave, Gao Shen felt relieved.

Managing personalities in a high-profile team was a complex puzzle.

Each player possessed a unique personality and background. Integrating them into a cohesive unit seemed simple but was incredibly challenging.

Especially for an inexperienced rookie like Gao Shen—why should they listen to him?

For now, everything seemed to be on track.

As *** once said, the thrill of battle lies in the fight itself.

Returning to his office after the medical room, Gao Shen immersed himself in preparing afternoon training materials.

The previous night, he had delved into Benitez's double-back tactics from Valencia and Liverpool, focusing on formations, positions, and defensive systems—a labyrinth of complexity.

For now, Gao Shen could only sketch out a tactical framework quickly. It needed to be effective in the upcoming derby, allowing time for further refinement later.

Yet, there was much to do. First, he needed the players to grasp his tactical vision.

As Real Madrid players, tactical understanding wasn't an issue. If they understood and committed to executing it, his tactical approach would succeed—it was part of their professional literacy.

The next challenge for Gao Shen was ensuring the players understood and adapted to his tactical demands.

With the weekend derby looming, time was short.