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.

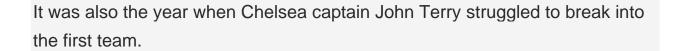
This communication gap was a major factor in his frequent injuries.

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.



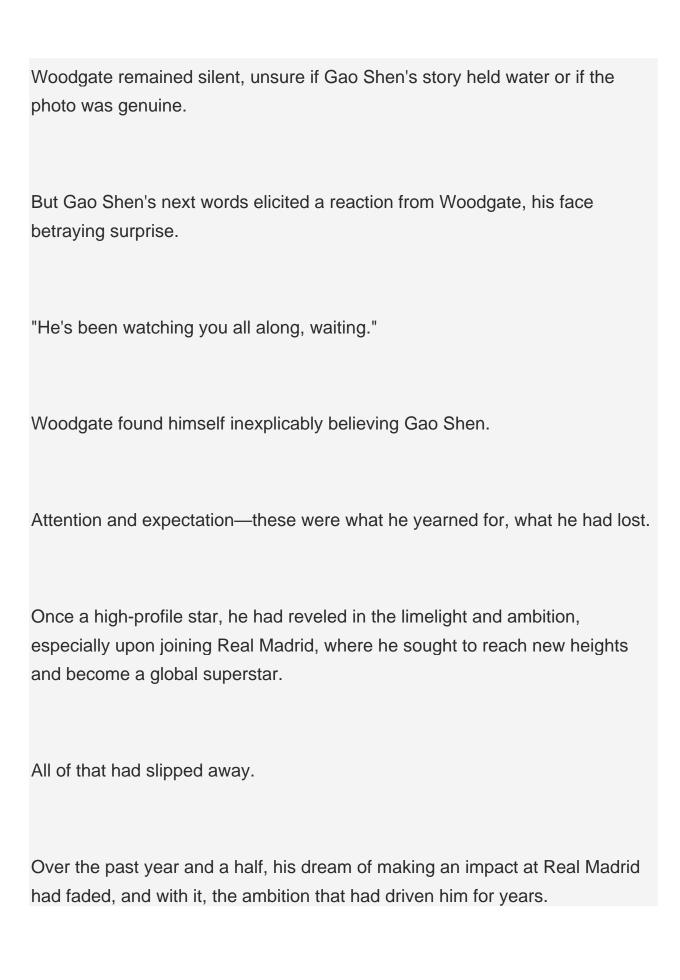
Woodgate stared at the photo, lost in memories, then turned to Gao Shen with suspicion.

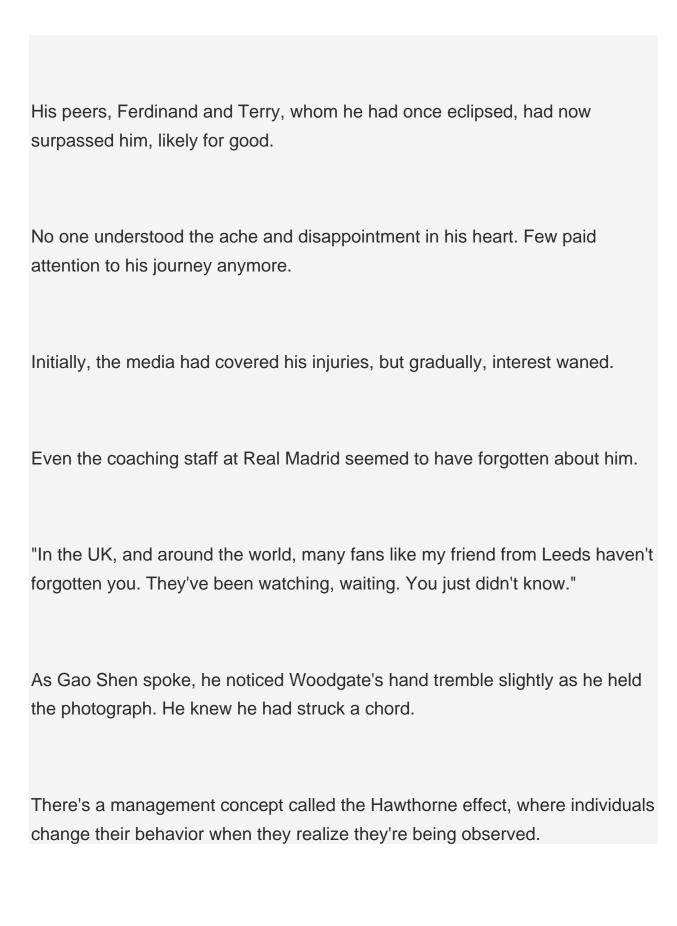
"What are you getting at?"

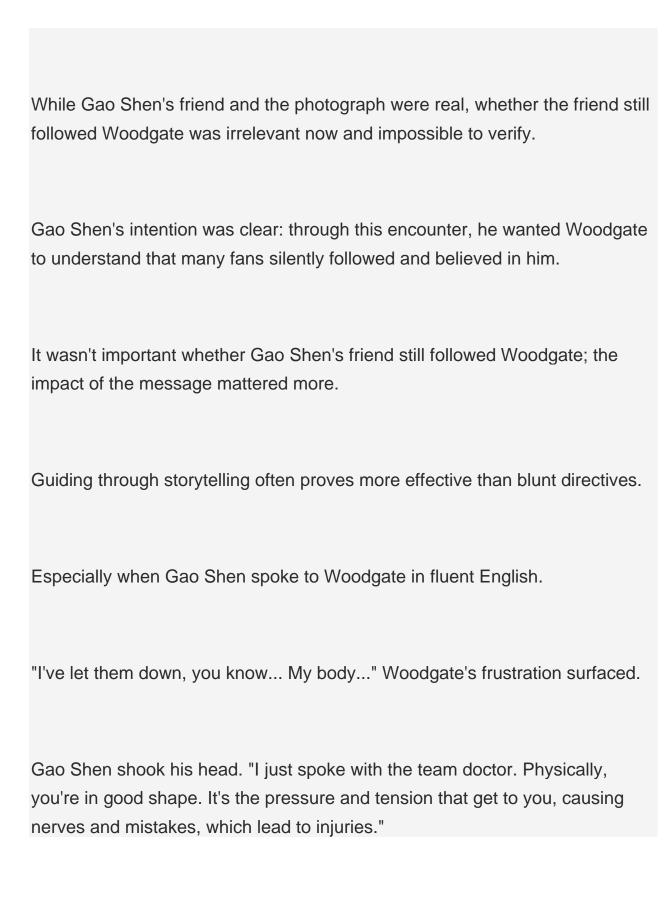
The rookie head coach, criticized by the locker room, fans, and media alike, had just presented him with a cherished photograph. What was his angle? Was he trying to portray himself as a fan, seeking closeness through nostalgia?

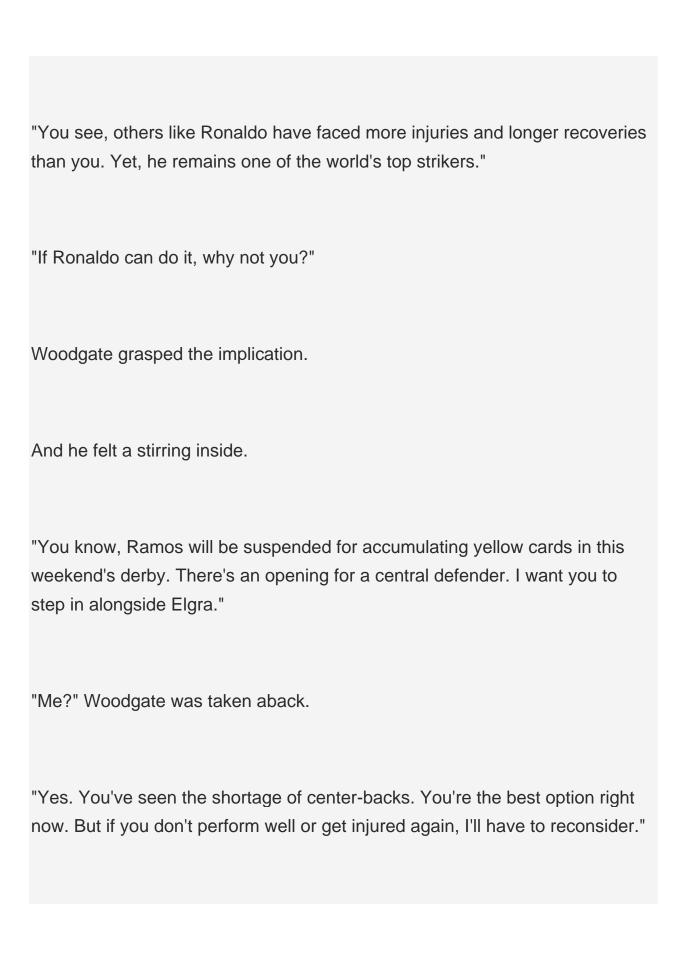
Had this been a few years earlier, Woodgate might have fallen for such a ploy. But now... he scoffed inwardly.

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."









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.

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.