

Champions 151

Chapter 151: The First Half Part 2

In the changing room, the Nottingham Forest players were in a rather good mood at first, since they had managed to equalize the score by the end of the first half. On their way back to the changing room, they were laughing and talking happily. Upon seeing this, Tang En, who was off to the side, scowled at Walker. Walker knew that the players, despite feeling great about themselves, were in for a tongue-lashing.

As expected, once everyone entered the changing room, Tang En's face turned into a glower as soon as Walker closed the door.

When everyone saw the manager's face, their idle chatting slowly died down until the room became completely silent. With the manager in such a bad mood, who would dare to keep talking?

"Who still remembers the first thing I told all of you before the match?" Tang En glared at the twelve players in the changing room, but nobody dared to make a sound. Perhaps they had already forgotten, or perhaps they remembered; but they dared not say because they did not know what their manager's intentions were.

So, Tang En started to call names. "Morgan?"

Morgan hesitated for a split second before answering in an unsure tone, "Well... I think it was about defense, chief."

"Well... I think it was about defense..." Tang En imitated the tone of his young center back. "Are you doubting your memory?"

"It was defense! Defense! That's right, it was defense!" Morgan frantically shouted.

Tang En looked at Morgan and grinned, but it managed to make Morgan even more uneasy and frightened. Morgan felt that he had already been made the target for the boss to vent his anger on.

"Very good, Mr. Morgan. You may take a seat now," Tang En said, waving his hands.

It was only at that moment that Morgan realized that he had stood up from the bench, just like a student who was answering a teacher's question during class.

Tang En turned around and looked at the rest of the players. After that, he unfolded his hands and once again repeated his words from before the match. "'Defense, lads, I want you all to know the importance of defense!' We spent ten minutes talking about how to guard against the opponent's offenses, and in the end we conceded a goal twelve minutes into the game. Now, I know you guys all want to say that that goal had a certain element of chance involved. But a goal conceded is a goal conceded. I don't want any excuses for it. Honestly, we played poorly in the first half. Very poorly. We should feel lucky to have tied with Bolton. Ashley Young performed outstandingly, Freddy as well." Tang En looked at the two players who had contributed significantly to the goal and nodded his head to express his recognition of their efforts. "But this shouldn't conceal the issue. I admit that I'm also partially responsible for our

horrible performance in the first half. My tactics failed and gave the opponent a chance to score. But all of you should also reflect on your performance.”

After that, Tang En walked to the tactics board and drew the actual formation of Bolton and Nottingham Forest during the match. It was derived from what Tang En had observed during the match. Bolton’s was 4312, while Nottingham Forest’s was 4231.

“Rebrov did very well in the midfield, so I want you to continue playing that position.” Tang En drew a circle around the middle of the three midfielders, before drawing another arrow from within the circle, pointing towards the kick-off circle. “But you have to position yourself slightly farther back in the second half. Maintain a sufficient distance away from Wood, but don’t leave his protection range.”

Rebrov nodded his head, showing that he understood.

“And Gunnarsson, very sorry, but you’ll have to rest for the second half. I’m going to let Crouch substitute you. You did pretty well for the first half; you provided effective support behind him. However, there are only eleven people on the field, and we need to go on the offensive in the second half.” Tang En stared at Gunnarsson, trying his best to appear to be as sincere as he could. Being substituted out during half-time was not considered a good thing.

Gunnarsson was slightly unwilling, but he still nodded his head. George Wood’s performance was indeed much better than his, so there was nothing wrong with leaving Wood on the field.

Seeing Gunnarsson nodding, Tang En wiped away the solid circle he drew on the board. Afterwards, he added a symbol beside Eastwood that was meant to symbolize Peter Crouch.

“Crouch, when you’re up on the field, make use of your height and create opportunities for your teammates to score as much as possible. If the opportunity arises, you can try to score yourself. Simply put, you can choose the most appropriate way to deal with the ball according to the situation. Don’t be constrained by my instructions. You got it?”

“Got it, Boss,” Crouch said with a sullen face. This was his first time representing Nottingham Forest in a match. If he played well, his future would be guaranteed. But if he didn’t... He would have to sink yet again into uncertainty. He did not want to return to Aston Villa, as the experience he had had there was like a nightmare. He knew that Nottingham Forest had a loan-to-buy contract with Aston Villa regarding him, but whether he would be bought over by Nottingham Forest would be entirely dependent upon his performance this season. Now was his best chance to prove his worth to his new manager.

Tang En saw Crouch’s expression, and felt that it was too grim. This was not good; it would affect his performance on the field. Tang En smiled and said, “Don’t pull that long face, Peter. Do you like to dance?”

Crouch nodded his head fervently, unsure how the manager knew.

Tang En paid no heed to Crouch’s curious stare. He winked at Crouch and said, “If you score, just dance on the field! Like this...” He imitated Crouch’s robot dance from his memories, which Crouch often did when he scored for the national team. However, Tang En’s imitation was not like it at all. Instead of looking like a robot, he ended up looking more like a marionette puppet. As a result, the changing room erupted into a wave of laughter. The heavy atmosphere from Tang En’s lecturing had gotten livelier.

“Tony, is that a rusty robot man?” Walker seized the opportunity to poke fun at him.

Tang En scratched his head with embarrassment and said, “Anything will do, as long as you guys stop pushing me to the ground. Look, my button...” Tang En pulled on his collar.

This time, even louder laughter erupted within the changing room, and there were even whistling sounds.

Tang En did not interrupt the players’ enjoyment. He smiled and looked at them from the side. After everyone finished laughing, he made a gesture to quiet down the room. “Alright lads, let’s continue. McPhail, your performance in the first half wasn’t good enough. You should be more active later. Where did your imagination go? Dribble past those defensive players. Don’t be afraid to lose possession of the ball. Even if you do, there’s still George!”

Tang En pointed at Wood, who was sitting at the corner of the room expressionlessly. A smattering of laughter resounded throughout the changing room.

“Hey, George, you hear that? Everyone thinks highly of you, so keep on playing like that in the second half!” Tang En took that chance to brief Wood on his task for the second half. “Intercept all the balls that try to get past from your side!”

Upon finishing the player arrangements, Tang En began to talk about the overall tactics to be deployed.

“We managed to equalize the score by the end of the first half. If I were Allardyce, I definitely wouldn’t let the matter rest. I’d search for opportunities to take back the lead as soon as the second half began. So, all the full backs will have to be on high alert for the first ten minutes of the second half, because Bolton will definitely apply pressure and go on the offense. Our formation will have to be more defensive. We’ll need to play counter attack as our strategy. After ten minutes, if Bolton still doesn’t score, they will definitely start to try for a stable game, and hope to maintain this score. They will then play to win back on their home grounds next weekend. We can’t give them that chance! If they retreat, we’ll go on the offense instead! Give them a fatal blow!”

After saying this, Tang En clenched his fists and raised his voice. “Lads, I don’t care whether you transferred over last summer, or if you just joined the team this month; I also don’t care if you were transferred over to the first team from the youth team, or if you’ve been on this team all this time. I don’t care which team you were previously on, which manager you played under, whether you’ve gotten honorable titles or you have nothing to your name... In short, we are now one team, and we trained together. So, I want you all to understand what my football—Tony Twain’s football—is like!” Tang En said, pointing to his own chest.

“I’m sure some of you here already know what happened to Nottingham Forest during last season’s playoffs, so I can tell all of you: what is Tony Twain’s football? It is victory! I hate defeats! Especially those that happen when I’m on the brink of success! I hope that the only thing that you all think about when you’re out there playing, is victory! You must tell yourself, today I must win! Not ‘what if I lose’, or other worthless thoughts like that!”

“Now that we’re already in the semi-finals of the EFL Cup, we’re only one step short of advancing into the finals! Just one month ago, who would have thought that we would be able to accomplish that? At that time, we were ranked fourth from the bottom. Even Crystal Palace ridiculed us, and they were

ranked third from the bottom! That match, we showed Crystal Palace how small they are! Now, we have to show Bolton the same thing! Finish them off on our home grounds! Don't let them have a chance of comeback on their home grounds! It's ours, and nobody can take it away from us!"

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"What kind of person is Tony Twain? How should I say it..." In the resting room designated for announcers, John Motson was currently discussing Twain with the two people opposite him. "I can't define him. It really is impossible to say with any certainty what kind of person he really is. The definitive adjectives used to describe him in the past are completely wrong... It's very complicated. So if you ask me what kind of person he is, I can't answer you. I'm afraid even Twain himself is unable to do so. Hence, in order to understand what kind of person he is, you will have to see for yourself..."

"Hey, John. Why do I feel like you're patronizing us?" Gray said, sounding annoyed.

Motson shrugged. "I can only say what kind of person I feel Tony Twain is. He seems to be very rash, one who speaks his mind. He will use any and all means to achieve his goal, and he is someone that bears grudges easily... But this may not necessarily be your evaluation of him. There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes. The same thing applies to Tony Twain."

Martin Taylor fell into deep thought for a while before opening his mouth. "Andy, I feel like there's a need to repeat what I said to you before the match—exactly what kind of person Twain is, we'll have to see for ourselves."

Motson agreed with Martin. "That's right. You two have to see for yourselves during the match's second half. It will be a good opportunity to do so. According to my experience, Tony Twain's team tends to always start performing after the half time break..."

Chapter 152: Backfired Part 1

The second half of the match had just begun, and it was as Tang En had said: the Bolton Wanderers launched a fierce offense against the Forest team's goal and seemed poised to take the lead again. If Tang En had allowed his team to counterattack the Bolton Wanderers now, there would have to be something wrong with his head.

As a football fan, Tang En had enjoyed watching both sides attack each other with each team alternatively scoring goals one after another. But since he had become a manager, that interest was snuffed out. The only true way to win a football match was defense. A game was like a pyramid; the offense was the most dazzling and eye-catching peak, and the defense was the base and the foundation. If there was no solid foundation, then offense would only be a castle floating in the sky. A beautiful offense must be built on a solid defensive foundation. That was the truth of football.

Without Gunnarsson, Rebrov was asked to defend as well. But the most pressure was on George Wood.

Kevin Nolan and Jay-Jay Okocha battered Wood's defensive zone one after another, and Rebrov's ability to help with defense was limited. A game like this was a good opportunity to toughen him up. Tang En stood on the sidelines with his arms crossed and did nothing as he watched Wood, who had his hands full. He believed in Wood. The kid's defensive talent would not disappoint him.

In the future that Tang En had envisioned for Wood, what kind of defensive midfielder would George Wood be in his prime? He might not become the sort of midfielder who was good at attacking and defending like Roy Keane and Patrick Vieira, and he also might not be the type of midfielder with outstanding scoring ability like Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard. But he could still be the best defensive midfielder in the world. By then, even if Tang En arranged for three attacking midfielders out of the four midfielders, plus two fullbacks to assist, George Wood would still have the ability to firmly hold the Forest defensive zone in a deadlock, as if it were heavily chained... No, it would be a wall, an incomparably tall and sturdy city wall.

But he couldn't know how far away that future was.

Currently, Wood was still very inexperienced; he could not fully cover the defensive zone, and maintaining his stability was still an issue. This championship season still had a long way to go, and his professional career was also very long. How could he be expected to repeat that breathtaking performance from the previous match in every game? It was impossible. Better to take it slow.

In the midst of his busyness, Wood made a mistake and failed to see the agile Okocha. The Nigerian nimbly swung past Wood, and appeared in front of the penalty area!

A loud hiss rang out from the stands. The Forest fans hoped to put psychological pressure on the Nigerian.

"Damn it!" Walker cursed beside Twain. He felt that Twain should not have taken Gunnarsson off at the start of the second half. At the very least, he should have waited for the opponent's wave of attacks to be over before the substitution... But what was the use of saying that now?

"Okocha broke through George Wood! If the Nigerian is allowed into the penalty area, Nottingham Forest will be in danger!" Gray finished speaking when Okocha fell just outside the penalty area.

The referee's whistle sounded, and it was a foul.

This time, the man who had saved the Forest team was not George Wood, but Freddy Eastwood, who had returned to defend the front of the penalty area. He had pushed Okocha over from the side. He was given a yellow card, but he had helped the Forest team resolve a major crisis. The yellow card was worth it.

Walker let out a long-held breath. Tang En looked back at him and laughed. "What are you so nervous about, Des? We're not going to lose. Don't you believe me? Our future is bright."

Eastwood accepted the yellow card, then ran back to the front to wait for the chance to counterattack. Wood turned to look at him; he had helped him.

In contrast to Tang En's ease, Mr. Allardyce was furious about the foul, not only because Eastwood had toppled Okocha and prevented the Bolton Wanderers from a good offense, but also because the referee had only given him a yellow card. He thought that a red card would not have been an overreaction.

Naturally, a manager would always want the penalty to give the advantage to his team.

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Eastwood's foul was a watershed moment in the circumstances of the game. Bolton Wanderers' offense gradually weakened, while the Forest team, like a compressed spring, rebounded strongly as soon as the Bolton Wanderers loosened their grip.

Tang En stood on the sidelines and seemed almost relaxed as the Forest team's offense increased. There were three consecutive shots at the goal within five minutes! He was not anxious, but Mr. Allardyce, in the next technical area, became impatient. He walked up and down between the sidelines and the technical area with a dark, almost frightening expression on his face.

Mr. Allardyce, Tang En thought. Do you have any more moves left? If not, then I won't hold back now... Tang En turned back to the technical area and looked towards Walker. Walker knew that he was going to ask him for the time. Twain had a watch, but he never looked at it. The game time was displayed on the big screen, but he never looked at it either.

"Ten minutes have passed." Walker answered.

Tang En nodded and went back to the sidelines. He shouted Rebrov's name and asked him to move his position forward slightly.

The Forest team, like a compressed barbed spring, was going to fight back.

Tang En believed that once both his wings soared, the Bolton Wanderers would not be able to stop them. Just look at the tall man in Forest's penalty area! If they used two players to guard Crouch, then Eastwood would have more freedom. And if they brought in their fullback to fill the gap to defend it, the space in the wing would be free.

Now, all Tang En had to do was wait on the sidelines for a goal.

He hoped he wouldn't have to wait for long...

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Seventeen minutes had passed in the second half, and the Forest team had the upper hand. They pressed on the Bolton Wanderers with their offense coming in like the tide. Fat John jumped and yelled in the stands, "That's right! That's right! This is how the home team should be playing!"

There were a lot of people who shared his views. The tired and feeble Forest team in the first half greatly had depressed these people. So what if they were playing a Premier League team? As far as the ambitious Forest fans were concerned, any opponents in their way would be beaten.

The Forest team was not even frightened of Liverpool, who had once dominated English and European football in the past.

Brian Clough's team had had such a diehard temperament that they were not even afraid of their strong opponents. Instead, they would only be more motivated. Now, if Tony Twain wanted to achieve the same success as Clough, his team would have to be the same as that Forest team: whether it was against a Premier League team or a big European club, they had to be fearless.

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When Nolan saw George Wood's ferocious interception, he suddenly had an idea. Since the Forest team's only defensive midfielder position is occupied by that stupid boy alone, why not lure him out, and then launch a counterattack to remove the obstacle?

Kevin Nolan marveled at his own ingenuity in finding an effective tactic in such a complicated situation on the field. Taking advantage of a dead ball opportunity, he called Okocha and Giannakopoulos over to tell them about his tactic. They all thought it was feasible. Okocha also detested Wood. It would be really perfect if they could lure him out of the defensive zone.

Therefore, the three men put their heads together and, after a simple discussion, they separated and waited to execute their plan.

Allardyce had always wanted Nolan, the young player, to become Bolton Wanderers' future commander of the midfield. Consequently, he exhorted him during training to use his brain to play. Now, Nolan felt that he already knew how to use his brain to play, because he could set up specific tactics based on actual circumstances during the game.

His heart was filled with a sense of accomplishment, excitedly looking forward to the following scene:

Starting from Okocha, Wood would be slowly drawn out and progressively kept away from the defensive zone. Then, through continuous back-and-forth passing, they would completely pull him apart, and swiftly pass the ball to Okocha to launch a counterattack. After that, they just had for the cheers to come from the south stand. He, Kevin Nolan, would be extolled in the media for personally engineering the strategy, and the birth of another commander of the midfield would be proclaimed! It really was so exciting to think about!

Okocha received Nolan's pass; his back was facing the attack direction. As expected, Wood rushed up. Okocha looked up and saw Nolan's signal to him. It was time for action.

]He used all his efforts to protect the ball and not let it be poked out by Wood, while he slowly dribbled back, giving the illusion that he was tightly pressed on and forced to backpedal. At the same time, he paid close attention to the situation behind him and was relieved to see that pressure was still there.

Now, he had to make his act even more genuine, so that the inexperienced kid would be completely fooled...

He felt the pressure behind him getting stronger, and he hastened to pass the ball to Nolan, who came to his rescue.

Nolan, who had just received the football, looked up and was delighted to see George Wood give up Okocha to charge towards him.

So, he pretended to turn around in a slight panic to guard the ball.

Even Martin Taylor and Andy Gray in the press box were deceived by Nolan's performance: "George Wood is on the go, pressing on Okocha so much that he can only choose to pass the ball back. And now, it's Kevin Nolan's turn!"

If Nolan could have heard the commentary, he would have been pleased with himself. Wood was aggressively hammering him from behind, and he seemed agitated. What an inexperienced idiot, Nolan thought.

Nolan was going to further provoke Wood, so he slammed backwards. Then he passed the ball to Giannakopoulos, who was further behind. Then he saw Wood drop him to rush towards the Greek. The smirk on his face deepened. He could almost see the coming scene: Giannakopoulos would kick a long pass after receiving it, and Okocha would dribble and break through to the penalty area to shoot the winning goal... No, Nolan corrected himself. Dribble the ball into the penalty area, then get tripped up by the opposing defender, and it will be a penalty kick! We lost a point because of a penalty kick, so we need to get back the score through a penalty kick!

Because Giannakopoulos's distance to Nolan was very close, he did not use much strength to make the pass; this was out of consideration for his teammate, and should have allowed him to stop the ball more easily. But the still fantasizing Nolan did not notice how fast Wood was running... running right past him.

Chapter 153: Backfired Part 2

In the box, Evan Doughty watched the scene unfolding on the field. He suddenly recalled the first time he had gone to the youth team to find Tony. He had seen the kind of training that took place on the training ground—a group of players would form a small circle, and Wood would go back and forth in the middle to intercept the other players' passes. Any player whose pass was intercepted would be made to run laps as a penalty. At that time, many players were punished, and he still remembered a young kid running out and saying to the coach, "The distance was too close, Wood intercepted the ball before it could even be passed!"

Ah, it's similar to today....

Giannakopoulos stood in the same spot waiting for the football to be passed, while at the same time he adjusted his legs, intending to continue dribbling the ball forward without stopping. This impulsive, silly boy is so easy to fool, he thought.

"George Wood rushes to the opposing half to force an interception!"

Giannakopoulos soon realized something was wrong; he was doomed to fail at receiving the pass. Nolan's passing was not very powerful or swift, and they did not expect George Wood's to be so fast!

Their plan had backfired!

The panicked Greek's intention was to move forward to receive the pass, but Wood was one step ahead of him. He lowered his body to skate past and, using the speed and momentum of his continuous sprint, rushed ahead of Giannakopoulos and intercepted the ball.

Giannakopoulos risked being injured by Wood's tackle, but the football rolled past his foot.

"George Wood's steal was a success!" exclaimed Gray. "Nolan was too careless! His pass was too gentle... How could he make such an irresponsible pass when his opponent was closing in on him?"

"The Forest team's fighting back! The ball broke through the line of defense... and Eastwood!"

Cheers erupted throughout City Ground again. Their best striker for January received the ball from Wood's interception. Because Nolan's return pass was cut off, the Bolton Wanderers' entire line of defense had no reaction to the seizing of the ball. They just looked on helplessly as Eastwood received the ball without anyone to mark him. He then swung up his right foot as he faced toward the goal...

A legendary manager! A legendary striker! My foot is about to kick open the door to a glorious future!

"What a goal!! A genius strike! This is Freddy Eastwood's second goal in this game, and his fifth goal in three consecutive games since he has joined Nottingham Forest!"

The City Ground was rocking, and Tang En felt as though he was in a volcanic crater about to erupt; he was swaying on his feet.

"George Wood scored consecutive steals from the backfield to the front field, and he finally succeeded in intercepting Nolan's pass! Eastwood shrewdly appeared right where he should be! An eighteen-year-old, a twenty-year-old, plus the nineteen-year-old player, Ashley Young, who made the penalty kick in the first half! Nottingham Forest's young stars are on the rise!"

After the goal, Eastwood had originally planned to find Wood, who had given him the assist, and to take this opportunity to show him friendship. But next to him, Crouch's long legs appeared in front of him as he hugged him tightly. Then, more of his teammates rushed up and surrounded him. He could not see the situation outside. How's Wood? Is he in this group? Or is he standing blankly outside like before?

"Poor Kevin Nolan; his passing mistake in the first half gave the Forest team a chance to equalize the score with a penalty kick. In the second half, it was still his passing blunder that gave George Wood a chance for an assist again! Today is not his day!"

Seeing his highest-valued player continuing to make such low-level errors, Allardyce felt flustered and exasperated. He turned to the Frenchman sitting on the substitutes' bench and shouted, "Djorkaeff, get ready to play!"

He had decided that Nolan was out of form today. His only question was how his gameplay had taken such a nosedive, even though he had scored in the beginning of the game.

If Kevin Nolan had known that he had been brought off because of this misstep, he would certainly have felt aggrieved. It was not a mistake. His plan was flawless! Just blame it on that number 33; he was too fast! If it had been a different team and opponent, his plan would have surely succeeded!

He stood in the same spot with the annoyed Nigerian next to him. And in front of them was Giannakopoulos, who had fallen to the ground. The Greek had bravely clashed with Wood without any regard for his personal safety, and the result was that he had hurt himself instead. He held his ankle as he lay sprawled on the ground with an expression of agony on his face.

They were rendered speechless in the face of the situation.

And who was the culprit behind all this?

George Wood ran towards the celebrating crowd, but after a few paces, he stopped. He really wanted to celebrate the goal with those people... But he did not know how to blend in—how to laugh happily, shout excitedly, pump his fists.

It was he who had created the goal. It was his assist, but now he was like an outsider.

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Trailing behind, Bolton Wanderers replaced the malfunctioned Kevin Nolan with Djorkaeff. Nolan was disappointed with Allardyce's decision. After he was brought off, he went straight to the player's corridor without shaking hands with his manager or returning to the substitutes' bench. Tang En noticed the scene. Was there a rift between the men? This was good news for the Forest team's next round.

Allardyce did not care about how Nolan was feeling now. He had already used one substitution slot, and was faced with the predicament of having to use another; Giannakopoulos was injured, and the team doctor advised that it was best not to let him continue. He had to be brought off immediately.

This gave him pause for a moment. He had wanted to replace Kevin Davies, who was still recovering from his injury. Giannakopoulos's injury had disrupted his entire deployment plan.

He decided to let Giannakopoulos hold on for a while to observe the circumstances of the game.

The team doctor spoke some comforting words to the Greek, showered him with painkillers, and allowed him to return to the field.

The game continued.

Although Nottingham Forest players' celebration on the field was over and the game was back on track, the fans in the stands were still celebrating the recent goal. George Wood was rushing from the back field to the front, relentlessly trying to intercept the ball, and eventually succeeded in cutting a pass to assist his teammate, laying waste to two opposing players—one was brought off, and the other was hobbling. Such exploits were praised by the fans through word of mouth, and unknowingly, Wood had become a favorite of the City Ground stands, even though before the previous game, few people had even heard his name.

Allardyce hoped that the team could quickly regain their morale and resume their offense against the Forest team. How could Bolton Wanderers, a Premier League team, lose to a team which was in the middle rankings of League One?

But only two minutes later, his team was hit hard again; Nottingham Forest had scored another goal!

This time, the Forest team had taken advantage of the bombardment on the Bolton Wanderers and launched a highly effective counterattack. Wes Morgan kicked a long ball to the front, and Rebrov stopped the ball and dribbled it into the Bolton Wanderers' penalty area. Jääskeläinen and Crouch rushed to the ball at the same time.

If Jääskeläinen had been facing Eastwood, then he would have had a more than 50% chance of getting the ball, because he could use his hands; when the ball was shot high, he could jump up and save it directly.

But the man who was fighting with him now was the incredibly tall Crouch!

His chances were far from 50/50! They were 80/20!

The distance between Crouch and the football looked closer than the distance between Jääskeläinen and the football. The Bolton Wanderers goalkeeper must get this ball... but then he extended his leg!

Jääskeläinen saw the football suddenly soar in front of him, and over the top of his head. And then, in the midst of the thunderous cheers of the City Ground, it fell into the goal behind him!

3:1! Nottingham Forest was leading by two goals on its home ground!

What was more lethal than this goal was the time when the goal was scored; it was less than two minutes after the previous goal. Just when Bolton Wanderers was about to raise its spirits and morale to equalize the score, they lost another goal instead.

This third goal came so quickly that the Bolton Wanderers were completely crushed. Even if the veteran Djorkaeff was brought onto the field, it would not change anything in the game; they were sure to lose.

Listening to the singing in the City Ground and looking at the surge of a red tide in stands, Allardyce emphatically spat and reluctantly accepted the inevitable outcome.

Davies and Okocha were brought off, and a defensive midfielder and a center back were brought on. The haughty Premier League manager had to lower his head before the League One team, and bow down to accept defeat.

Chapter 154: New Forest Part 1

After beating Bolton in the first round of the semi-finals, Tang En gained not only a victory, but a better reputation as well. Now, all of England came to know of Nottingham Forest's ingenious manager. Despite his youth, he was able to lead a team that was ranked fourth from the bottom in League One, all the way to the semi-finals. Not only that, but he had also managed to triumph over his semi-finals opponent, a Premier League team.

The scene of Tang En being pushed to the ground by the players as a form of celebration had been published in a small segment of the "Match of the Day" weekday edition called "2 Good 2 Bad." This was a small segment that was only available during the weekday editions. It usually only featured Premier League highlights, and rarely featured other league's matches. However, what happened to Tang En was so amusing that the editors decided to add the scene into the highlights compilation.

The host of the program, BBC's pundit Adrian Chiles, freely described the sight in his own words. In the end, he made it sound very fun, making the already interesting story sound even better.

"Goal! This is too great, hey...hey! Hey! Freddy, you're running to the wrong place... Ah! Can anyone~~save me~~~Alright, Tony Twain may very well be the only manager that doesn't wish for his team to score a goal..."

The host and the guests burst out in laughter.

Everyone came to know what kind of manager he was—he was the happiest person to see his players score, but whenever they did, he was also the unluckiest person.

Tony Twain was not the only one whose reputation improved. His team, as well as the young players who had performed exceedingly well, earned a better reputation as well.

George Wood had only played two matches for Nottingham Forest's first team, and there were already football clubs asking Nottingham Forest for an asking price.

Since this matter concerned the purchase and sale of players, Evan Doughty kept his promise and did not interfere at all. Instead, he let Tang En have full say over the matter. Tang En's stance was firm: he wouldn't sell.

Tang En knew how scarce good defensive midfielders would become in the next few years. As long as Wood continued to play like this, his value would quickly inflate. To sell him just because someone offered? Tang En was no fool. Moreover, the club had just signed an eight-year contract with Wood, and it was definitely not just for show.

In reality, Tang En was not at all worried about the issue of Wood's loyalty. The lad knew that the club had helped him a lot, and he knew full well whether he should choose to stay or leave. But the situation did make Tang En start to worry about Wood for another reason; perhaps George should have an agent to help him settle his personal affairs and manage his finances.

It was true that the Professional Footballers' Association could help players negotiate contract terms on their behalf, as well as settle some financial problems for them. Doing it like that could prevent him from being exploited. But who has ever seen a football superstar who still needed the Professional Footballers' Association's help with their contract?

Tang En felt that Wood was sure to become a superstar, but only under one condition: Wood had to be playing for Tang En, not some other football club.

Tang En was not opposed to the idea of football players finding agents; they required professionals like agents to help them manage their finances and public relationships. Managers were not gods, and were therefore unable to take care of all the players' needs. So, those kinds of things should be handled by agents. Tang En hated agents who prioritized their own benefits instead of the players' benefits, sowed discord between the players and their clubs or managers, endlessly requested pay raises, and threatened the football club on the slightest whim.

The reason for Tang En's hatred was not because he could not stand seeing football players and their agents earn money. No, the only reason was because they would invariably oppose Tony Twain, the manager of the team. They would infringe upon Tang En's profits, and that was something that Tang En could not allow.

So, if Wood were to find an agent, it would have to be someone whom he trusted. If possible, it would be best not to engage with big shot agents. Those without much power in the circle would be unable to create unnecessary trouble. But at the same time, Tang En wanted someone who could put in his best effort to package Wood and was very successful in business operation models. That way, Wood would be able to earn a lot of money, and his entire family could live a carefree life.

Are those conditions too hard to fulfill?

Tang En shook his head, deciding not to think about the issue for now.

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While the search for an agent could be done slowly, matches waited for no one. One week later, Tang En led the high-spirited Nottingham Forest to face off against Bolton on Bolton's home ground, Reebok stadium. This time, although his team lost, they still managed to score a precious goal. The EFL Cup's semi-finals' rules were not quite the same as normal Cups' rules. If both teams were to draw, they would proceed to overtime instead of looking at number of goals scored on away matches. If it still ended in a draw after overtime, the number of goals scored on away matches would then be taken into account. If the number of goals were the same, then a penalty shootout would take place.

Nottingham Forest beat Bolton with a score of 3:1 on their home grounds. On the away grounds, Bolton tried very hard to beat Nottingham Forest, and they managed to achieve it. However, it was to no avail. When the whistle came, signifying the end of the match, the large scoreboard revealed the final score: 2:1. Even though Bolton won the match, they lost the overall semi-finals.

The person who had scored the crucial goal for Nottingham Forest was Peter Crouch, the tall forward on loan from Aston Villa. During his time at Aston Villa, his professional football career had been in peril. Nobody had expected that after coming to Nottingham Forest, he would score in two consecutive matches. Seeing his exceptional performance on the field and his constant use of exceptional techniques to create opportunities for his teammates, Andy Gray, in the commentator's seat, could not help but praise Tang En's ability to train his players. In terms of realizing the players' potential and helping them build confidence, Tang En was indeed in a league of his own. First there was Rebrov, then there was Eastwood, and now Crouch. It was no wonder that he was so well-liked by the players. How could the players not like him, a manager who could make players who had hit rock bottom shine with new splendor?

The sound of the referee's whistle became the overture of the Nottingham Forest players' revelry. They were celebrating their advancement to the EFL Cup finals to their hearts' content. Although the EFL Cup was of little interest to strong, Premier League teams, and was only used for them to train their young football players and reserve teams, it held much significance for Nottingham Forest, a declining team who had once been a powerhouse.

For a team like Nottingham Forest, which had struggled in lower-level leagues for many years, advancing to the EFL Cup finals did not only mean that they had a chance to obtain a championship title; much more importantly, it made people once again remember the old times. Over twenty years ago, Nottingham Forest had swept the English Football scene and the European continental wearing its red football jersey. And now, just as the Nottinghamians became sure that they could no longer see the red Forest, when their old, fearsome team appeared be buried forever under the dusts of time, Tony Twain had managed to bring that team back into the present!

"The match has officially ended! Forming a stark contrast with the dejected Bolton players, are the overjoyed Nottingham Forest players! They will be advancing to the EFL Cup finals! This is their first time entering the EFL Cup finals since they got second place in the 1992 EFL Cup! Twelve years have passed, and the match venue for the EFL Cup finals has also changed from Wembley Stadium to Cardiff Millennium Stadium. The Red Forest is finally back!" Andy Gray's excited comment at the end of his commentary made it seem as though he was a Nottingham Forest fan, even though he was actually an Everton supporter.

The Nottingham Forest fans who were unable to watch the match at the venue, and could only follow the match through their televisions and radios, let out a shout that could be heard throughout England. "Yes, we are back! Nottingham Forest is back!"

"February 29, Cardiff Millennium Stadium! Let's look forward to the EFL Cup finals match between Nottingham Forest and Middlesbrough! Will Middlesbrough obtain its second EFL Cup trophy in its entire club's history, or will Nottingham Forest win the trophy for the fifth time, and become the football club with the second most EFL Cup championship titles? Ladies and gentlemen, we will know when the time comes!"

Nottingham Forest's celebration was wild, but once they entered the changing room, Tang En's face turned sour. Now was not the time for celebration.

"Lads, I'm giving all of you ten minutes to shower and change before we leave this place. If you guys want to pop a champagne and celebrate, wait for the night of February 29!"

After Tang En said this, everyone calmed down and proceeded to shower and change.

Afterwards, Tang En turned back to attend the press conference. As the victor, he had the right to let Bolton's manager Sam Allardyce wait for him in the press conference hall for that short while.

The victor becoming the protagonist of the press conference was almost law. Tang En was bombarded with many questions, and most of them revolved around Nottingham Forest's advancement to the EFL Cup finals for the first time in twelve years. Tang En was in a good mood, so he did not feel irritated by these repeated questions. However, he was also very smart. He did not reveal any plans he had for the finals during the press conference; not even his goal.

It was a given that Tang En hoped to win the championship title. Since they had already made it into the finals, what purpose would it serve to make pretentious remarks like, "We're doing this with a learning attitude," or "We'll just try to do our best, the results don't matter"? Of course we're here to clinch the championship title. And not accomplishing it means failure!

But there was no need to tell the press that.

Although Allardyce was rather sad about his loss, he also commended Nottingham Forest's performance during the press conference. He even put in a few good words for Tang En, saying that it was respectable of Tang En to have achieved such a remarkable feat at such a young age.

As soon as he said this, the reporters once again shifted their focus to Twain's age. Indeed, for a manager who had led his team into the EFL Cup finals, thirty-five years old was really quite young. He was even younger than Bolton's Djorkaeff by a year! Upon noticing this, the reporters became more excited. That was indeed a good topic to sensationalize!

In response to this, Tang En's reaction was quite dull. "If there are fifteen, sixteen years-old players who can represent their clubs and their national teams, why can't managers be younger too? I don't think that age is an issue. What's important is the results of the team. It doesn't matter if he's seventy-six years-old, or twenty-six years-old. As long as he can bring victory to his team, he's a good manager!"

The next day, his words made the news. Soon, everyone knew about him—the manager who only cared about victory.

Chapter 155: New Forest Part 2

Advancing into the EFL Cup finals was undoubtedly a joyous occasion. When it was combined with the postponing of the team's next match, Tang En felt extremely generous and decided to give the team a two-day holiday so that they could thoroughly relax. Before they went on their holidays, Tang En specifically told the overjoyed players this: once they assembled again, they would no longer have the chance to relax like this. If they wanted to relax again, they could, but only after clinching the EFL Cup championship title.

George Wood's condition remained great during trainings. Tang En felt that the kid was born to be a football player, because his psychological qualities were so much better than others of his age. There was no need to worry that his condition would be affected by external matters.

After three highly successful matches, Wood had already completely replaced Eugen Bopp, becoming Gunnarsson's defensive partner in the midfield. Gunnarsson was also fond of cooperating with his quiet but reassuring teammate. Gunnarsson once "complained" after a training warm-up match by saying, "God! This is too crazy! Seeing George's non-stop running, I find myself unable to stop either!"

This was precisely the effect that Tang En had hoped for. The kid was able to spur his teammates into working hard together with him. This was something that even the previous captain, Michael Dawson, had been unable to accomplish.

What made him even happier was that Freddy Eastwood's attitude towards George seemed to be gradually improving. It was no longer as it had been, when they had given off confrontational vibes whenever they met. The two of them could be said to be the team's pillars in the future, and their ability to work together would ensure that the team could continue advancing forward.

Things were gradually changing.

The club chairman's personal secretary and receptionist, Miss Barbara Lucy, discovered that the number of reporters visiting and interviewing the team had increased significantly compared to the past. Among them, there were even some that came from other countries. They were all there hoping to interview the club's manager, Tony Twain.

So, Evan suggested to Tang En that they should just host a small-scale, impromptu press conference after training. This could be used as a platform to inform the press of the team's situation, as well as let a few players show their faces and increase their fame. It was a good way to better Nottingham Forest's reputation, and Tang En did not oppose it.

The club had become different in many ways compared to the past. Allan Adams had adopted some successful traditions from American NBA clubs' operations, such as expanding the outreach and reception department that specialized in welcoming visitors and reporters, as well as handling various interview requests. In the past, Nottingham Forest Football Club only had two staff members in that department, and they utilized a traditional working style that was quite inefficient. Due to Nottingham Forest's poor results in the past, the club had not paid much attention to these "image branding efforts".

Evan and Allan, however, valued all of these highly. The entire office was equipped with computers, and IT professionals were hired to design the company's internal network. They adopted the modern office, which had a full set of digitized office work procedures. Doing so would greatly raise their efficiency. Take, for instance, something that Bruce Pearce, a reporter from Nottingham Evening Post, felt strongly about. Before Evan had become the chairman of Nottingham Forest, whenever Nottingham Evening Post wanted to interview a certain player from the team, it would usually take at least three days before the request sent to Club would be approved. At that time, if Tang En himself hadn't phoned the Evening Post for the picture, giving the Evening Post the opportunity to request an interview from him directly, it would probably have taken an even longer time. After all, almost nobody was in charge of these things. In contrast, one could now receive a reply in the afternoon of the same day on which they sent the request, whether it was through fax, telephone, or through sending an E-mail to the E-mail address provided on the club's official webpage. Moreover, these interview requests would typically be approved; of course, this was partially because Nottingham Evening Post was currently on rather close terms with Nottingham Forest.

Another example was that the outreach and reception department now had four people who specialized in handling various pieces of fan mail sent in from all over the world. The four of them had to open and read each and every letter, before replying to each of them and sending them various souvenirs from the club in a bid to promote the new Nottingham Forest. Each and every letter had to be responded to; not a single fan could be left out. This was the work requirement that Allan gave them. If they failed to fulfill it, their salary would be deducted.

If these people discovered any mail that was slightly more special, they would have to hand it over to the department's supervisor; he would then decide on the appropriate course of action and inform Allan at his discretion. If there was a need for the team to cooperate, Allan would then directly approach Tang En and discuss the matter with him. Of course, this was rare.

After establishing his absolute position as leader of the club, Evan Doughty started to carry out reforms to the club's structure in a bold and decisive fashion. Under him, he split the club into two big departments: the Sports competition department, and Business marketing department. Just from their names, it was clear which department was in charge of what.

Aside from holding the title of team manager, Tang En also assumed another position: manager of the Sports competition department. Now, he could be considered a true "manager." All the players in the club, from the first team to the under-twelve youth teams, were all under his control. He had complete authority over the teams' matters. The buying and selling of players was decided by him, and he just needed to ask Allan for the money after the transfer contract was finalized.

On the other hand, Allan Adams was the manager of the Business marketing department. He was specifically in charge of the club's management and market development matters. These ranged from things as small as the set price for the match tickets and development of merchandise, to important issues such as the club's long term investments, image promotion, commercial tour matches, selection of sponsors, and signing of contracts with them. His mission was to do everything he could to help Evan earn money, and to have sufficient capital to give to Tang En when he needed money to buy players. Of course, Tang En also had his responsibilities, and that was to cooperate with Allan if he needed the team's participation in his business plan. For instance, Tang En had to cooperate with the Asian tour matches and the team's attendance of certain sponsorship events.

As for how to not let these commercial events affect the team's performance, this was something that required discussion between the two of them. Their positions in the club were beneath only that of the club chairman, Evan Doughty. They wielded similar amounts of power, and that was also the reason why Evan arranged things the way he did—he did not want either one of them to have greater power over the other, or to make decisions beyond their intended job scope. Currently, Nottingham Forest could be considered as having many issues to address, and it therefore require everyone to work together. However, Evan had been able to more or less relax after that lunch appointment; Tony and Allan had gotten along with each other rather well.

There were many football clubs in England that had, because of their long and rich history, become gradually eliminated from the world as a result of their lack of flexibility and rigidity in handling matters. A very good example would be those football teams which had their glorious days during the early stages of modern English football. By now, they had either become down and out, or had already dissipated into dust. Evan Doughty hoped that through his efforts, some positive changes could be brought to Nottingham Forest Football Club, even though his aim was not to save English Football or Nottingham Forest Football Club, but simply to earn more money for himself.

Did he love Nottingham Forest? Yes, as long as it could earn him more money.

Evan Doughty's club was gradually steering towards the right track, while Tony Twain's Nottingham Forest team was also taking large steps in the right direction. It seemed like their futures were bright.

Chapter 156: EFL Cup Part 1

On February 7th, Nottingham Forest was back on their journey in the English Football League Championship. After more than a dozen days of rest and reorganization, they scored a modest 1:0 victory against Coventry City on their home field.

While the dozen or so days of break gave Tang En the time to adjust the team's tactics, and once again prepare for a new battle, it interrupted the Forest team's rhythm. It was a tough game for them to play on their home turf, and they finally beat their opponents by scoring a somewhat suspect, offside goal.

After the game, the Coventry City manager jabbered on about the referee's decision, thinking that his team should have been the winner. But Tang En, who got off lightly, insisted that the referee was right, and did not want to further mention the goal.

It was not important for Tang En and the Forest team, whether the ball was offside or not. But, it did matter to the Coventry City manager, who was splitting hairs over this issue. He just needed to know that his team had received the three valuable points in said situation.

Victory was the most important thing, after all, and the process ... was just part of the path towards victory. No matter what methods were used, they just needed to reach the finish line.

A week later, Nottingham Forest's winning streak finally ended. In the 31st round of the League Championship, they were forced into a 1:1 draw with Walsall at their home turf. Because they were one match short, they were still in 14th place. The tied game also did not affect them much. After all, they

did not lose. This went to show that Tang En's insistence on a motto, "Don't lose, even if you won't win", was correct.

On February 17th, in the 24th round of the make up game, Nottingham Forest challenged Gillingham to an away match. Judging from the scene, the Forest team was still at a disadvantage.

The young players' problem of unstable state of play was fully exposed. They could get the better of their opponents in succession, or they could also let the opponents gain the upper hand consecutively. Eventually, the final score was tied at 0:0. Tang En unequivocally relied on his tactics to obtain a point in this away game, finally, with much difficulty. He was most gratified that, in the end, they did not lose.

He was realizing more and more, the kind of pressure that came from being a manager. As in, every time he saw the opponents surrounding his own goal, and bombarding it, his heart would be in his throat. Every time a shot to the goal was attempted, his heart would stop. It was an awful feeling.

February 29th was the EFL Cup final. Before that, Nottingham Forest had one match every three days: three League Championship matches on the 14th, 17th, and 21st. This caused Tang En to make some veiled criticisms at the press conferences. He complained that the League committee did not know how to adequately accommodate the players, especially regarding the fact that such an intensive game schedule was arranged before such an important match, providing his team with no time to rest.

As a matter of fact, the League committee was justified in this arrangement, because one of these three scheduled games was a make up game, and they had also postponed the 33rd round match between the Forest team and Bradford City. If the games were to proceed as usual, the kick-off date of the game would be February 28th ...

On February 21st, the 32nd round of the League Championship, Nottingham Forest continued traveling to away games. This time, their opponent was Rotherham United, and the final score was 1:1. It was another draw. After their winning streak, the Forest team had consecutive draw matches, but, again, at least they did not lose.

Tang En was slightly relieved, but he had to put all his efforts into preparing for the EFL Cup final with Middlesbrough. Now, eight days away from the finals, the media coverage had gradually increased.

Because the Forest team was a League One team, and was back in the final after twelve years, they received more attention. Even Tang En felt a little nervous, as he was watching those media reporters wandering outside the training ground. But this kind of tension could not be shown in front of outsiders, as he was the leader of these players, and the leader could not be nervous, could not hesitate, and could not disappoint them.

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Des Walker gave the new training plan to Tang En. Today was February 23, and they still had six days for targeted training. Before the training session on this day, the coaching team must come together to discuss this plan.

Tang En looked at it, and deleted all the training on offense, except for the "offensive positioning ball drill", then he passed it to everyone present. Walker and the coaches looked at this "new plan", and glanced at each other.

Seeing their puzzled expressions, Tang En smiled. "It's very simple, we're not going to use offense on Middlesbrough in the match. We are going to play defense, and let them attack. Not only that, there's also an additional training program in this list – to increase the amount of training on penalty kicks by twenty minutes at the end of each day's training," he explained.

"Tony, you want to bet on the penalty kicks?" Walker asked.

Tang En nodded, "Yes. Starting tomorrow, the team's training that is opened to the media and fans will be shortened to half an hour. We will continuously practice defense for this one week. Middlesbrough seems to be similar to the Bolton Wanderers, which we have beaten in the semi-final. They rely on lending or buying those star players past their prime in order to support the team. But, their offense ability is stronger. If we play hard, like we did against the Bolton Wanderers, then McClaren (Middlesbrough manager) will be delighted. Did any of you guys pay attention to the media coverage from Middlesbrough?"

Everyone shook their heads. Clearly, few people would care about such things. But Tang En cared, as he said, "I recently collected all kinds of information from there. Although we couldn't go directly to their team's training grounds to observe, I can tell from these media reports that the Middlesbrough team has a positive attitude. I think Middlesbrough must be happy to know that the final match will be against a team from the middle rankings in a second-tier league."

All the coaches understood what he meant. Middlesbrough felt that there would be a greater chance of winning against a League One team.

"If they think that, then that is a big mistake!" Tang En smirked. "When they hope to use offense to end the battle, we will let them hit a wall!" He punched his fist into his left palm.

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After the coaches' regular meeting, the entire coaching team began the "construction of the wall", according to Tang En's requirements. Even Eastwood, who normally did not need to participate in defense, had been specifically asked by Walker in training: If the ball were to be lost, he must counter seize on the spot. If he did not succeed in seizing the ball on the spot, he must immediately turn back to chase, or hand the target over to any midfielder who would head up to defend, and he must return to replace the midfielder's position.

This was not just a requirement for Eastwood alone. All the attacking players must follow this call, too. If someone had performed a token extending of his leg or spreading of his arms after losing the ball, he would immediately hear the sharp ear-piercing referee whistle, and Walker's berate.

In particular, the wingers were almost used as second full backs. When they were carrying out an offense to hit their opponents to the fullest, their defense must be withdrawn to their bottom line.

In addition, Tang En was firm in regards to not practicing to create offside traps. For Nottingham Forest to face Middlesbrough, which was fast in the wings, creating offside traps was tantamount to suicide.

The key to their defense was to constrict their opponent's control of the ball, as well as their space and time for passing. Creating offside traps was not an ideal choice. The Forest team's three sections must

keep a tight distance in the game, so it was not a surprise for the strikers to return to defend the center circle.

For the current football world, it was annoying to ask the team to play such a defense, which was equivalent to playing passively. But Tang En knew clearly that the rest of the world would realize the benefits of this kind of compact defending after this summer. Why? Because the Greek team won the championship. In the German World Cup two years later, the Italian team had had the last laugh, due to their better defense tactics.

The players did not understand, and Tang En would tell them during the training intervals that focusing on the proper defensive was the only way to win the cup. Those who wanted the championship and glory must follow accordingly, and those who did not ... Are you still professional players? Are you still men?

Des Walker fully experienced the true essence of Twain's belief: "There's no tactic which cannot be changed, as long as I can win the game. I don't care whether we use defensive counterattack or offensive football". In order to enter the finals, under the circumstances of losing a goal first, he could decisively abandon the idea of minimizing the loss of ball control and defense, and switch to offense, like in both the home and away matches against the Bolton Wanderers. Finally, he depended on a valuable goal in an away match to gain admission to the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff.

Once they were in a match where victory was certain, he would discard the "offense" unimaginably far away, and use all efforts to defend to the death. He would rather drag the game to a penalty shoot-out, with both sides each having half a chance, than to fight to the death with the opponents within the ninety minutes. This was because that kind of tactic was considered to be "riskier" for him.

Twain once said to Walker, "Des, you know I'm obsessed with the Chinese culture, their cuisine, their traditional customs, their history ... even their military strategy and tactics. Do you know <The Art of War>?"

Seeing Walker shake his head, Tang En expressed his understanding, and then explained, "It's a very famous volume of art of war in China, which specifically talks about military tactics. With more than three thousand years of wisdom, it is no longer just about military tactics. I think it can also be used in football. Football is war. There's a saying in the book: 'Water shapes its course, according to the ground over which it flows; the soldier maps out his victory in relation to the foe whom he is facing. Therefore, just as water retains no constant shape, there are no constant conditions in warfare.'"

Walker was mystified by this sudden emergence of Chinese language from Twain. Tang En smiled and explained, "The translation means that, 'Water will change its flow, based on topography and terrain. The soldiers should decide their winning strategies, according to the different enemies.' Therefore, what it is saying, is that there is not a fixed situation in war, just like there is no constant pattern to a water flow. A football match is no different from a battle. I always avoid being seen through by our opponents. Whether we are playing defense or offense, our strategy depends on what kind of opponents we face, what kind of game, what kind of situation ... I know this kind of expectation may be a bit high for the team right now. But ..."

He pointed to the players, who were currently training on the field, and said with pride, "We will train them, and they will be able to do it when they need to."

Chapter 157: EFL Cup Part 2

Having been a full back, Walker was truly an expert at defense training. Even a player like Eastwood had been trained till he resembled a defensive midfielder, not to mention George Wood, who was extremely talented in defense.

Even if Walker hollered next to his ear, he did not even crease his brows, and he certainly did not complain. He just did what the coach said the next time. Tang En liked this point about Wood the most: he was hardworking and willing to strive for his and his mother's future. Compared to those "prodigies", who became famous at eighteen, he did not give himself the chance to relax and slacken.

Tang En also did not worry that Wood would lose his way in fame and fortune, because the goal he was fighting for on the field and training ground was not the same as those young geniuses whose dreams had already come true. He seemed to always have a sense of crisis in the depths of his heart. And that sense of crisis was like a whip at his back, flogging and inciting him to constantly move forward. Tang En thought this also might be related to the poverty that he witnessed and experienced as a child.

Sophia once told him that the house they lived in, when they first met, already had the best condition, because Wood was able to make enough money. So, he had to wonder, what kind of awful conditions did they live in, in the past? When Sophia did not mention it again, Tang En did not ask. The important thing was that, now, they lived well, as the club found a rental house near the training ground for Wood, and the landlord was a hardcore Forest fan. What's even better, when he heard that it was for a new Forest star player, the rent was reduced by half!

This was not a million-pound mansion in The Lace Market, but it was good enough for the Woods. There were no downstairs tenants returning home late at night. With a lower level and an upper floor, it was spacious and wide, bright and clean. There were no children begging for money, or shady-looking men in the vicinity. Surrounded by nature, such a place was ideal for Sophia, who needed to be near the outdoors, and take care of her health.

Once his mother's condition was stable, and he no longer had to wear himself out with worries about feeding his family of two, Wood would be able to devote himself to the sport of football. Tang En had even suggested to Evan that the club pay for Sophia's treatment, partly out of sympathy and concern for this kind and beautiful woman, and also partly due to "selfish" considerations. I mean, one had to wonder what kind of player would Wood develop into if his worries were all resolved?

The situation was just like when he had asked himself one and a half months ago, "How would Wood play in his debut match?"

He was really looking forward to it ...

As to whether Walker would stay or go, Tang En had never asked him to stay in front of Walker. Even when he was joking, he did not want to make things difficult for Walker.

Everyone had to choose his own path. As to whether this path was easy to walk or not, or the scenery ahead was beautiful or not, one had to personally walk it to know. Therefore, whether Walker's decision to leave was right or not, that was his business.

What Tang En could only put his efforts to, at least while they were still working together, was to try and leave Walker with good memories. In the future, if Walker wanted to come back to help him, he would open the door wide to welcome him.

What gave him a headache was wondering, where was he going to find an assistant manager, with whom he had a rapport and was compatible with? Currently, the division of work in the football world was very meticulous. The managers would throw many specific tasks to the assistant managers. They were unknown and obscure in the media and the public eye, but their role in the team was irreplaceable. There were even incidents of players, who only submitted to assistant managers, and did not to listen to the managers.

The help and support to the manager would be huge, and the team's ability could also be greatly improved, if the right assistant manager could be found. If the right assistant manager could not be found, the situation would be bad.

Therefore, many teams' assistant managers often stayed longer in the teams than the managers, were more familiar with the teams than the manager, and could help the managers to familiarize with the teams faster. They were often cultivated from within the teams, seen as being the real "descendants".

This was particularly the case for the English teams. For example, if a team were to decide to change its manager, their first choice must be the team's assistant manager, and the second choice was usually the youth team manager.

That was why, as a youth team manager twice, Glenn Roeder was able to serve as the First Team manager for West Ham United and Newcastle United respectively. The English clubs were especially loyal, and the managers, who had worked for the teams for years, were more likely to gain the trust of the fans and the top brass, even if their levels were simply not up to par.

There was another position for this kind of loyalty: the team doctor. The professional term for this role was "physiotherapist". Even now, a lot of the English team doctors were unlucky retired players or turf maintenance employees, club guards, and even the manager's loyal friends.

These people did not have professional licenses at all, and relied on the most superficial common sense to treat the injured players. Thus, it was not hard to explain why a lot of English players were unable to recover after suffering from major injuries, since the last century till now. For example, the former Liverpool captain Jamie Redknapp's brother, Mark Redknapp, who was once the hopeful star of A.F.C. Bournemouth, while playing as a full back, his future looked about the same as his brother's.

However, in a game with the Cardiff City reserve team, Mark was toppled over by his opponent, and was carried off. Because he had been treated by the team doctors, he has only been able to walk with crutches ever since. He later became an agent of another defender, Rio Ferdinand. And his younger brother, Jamie Redknapp, unwilling to follow in his brother's footsteps, used his own money to pay a private doctor for his surgery. Although he successfully returned to the stadium, he had to leave Liverpool, because he "broke the rules."

The English clubs were so faithful to these two traditions, that they had been preserved from the last century, without caring if they were right or wrong. Consequently, the English Football Association would prefer to cooperate with the Royal Hospital of Nottingham University if the players were injured,

rather than looking for the Premier League clubs' team doctors. After all, who knew if the "quacks" would recommend a player who had a hernia (a torn muscle in the groin) to undergo an operation to remove his pubic bone?

Naturally, it was thanks to this "tradition" that Twain could become the First Team manager straight from being the youth manager, and to quickly build his reputation among the fans, because he was someone cultivated by the Forest club, and one of "our own". Walker was also "one of our own", but his departure could be said to be an exception. If it were not for the team's broken spirit, Walker would not have any intention to quit. But who knew ... he had just decided to leave, when he heard the news that Twain was coming back. Caught in a dilemma for a while, he still chose to keep his promise, leaving the Forest team to help Ian Bowyer before the end of the season.

After having determined his path ahead, Walker was even more involved in his work. During training, Tang En did not even have to open his mouth, because Walker's voice was louder than his. He knew that it was his goal that inspired this man's entire enthusiasm and fighting spirit.

The EFL Cup, the Premier League qualification, the UEFA Europa League qualification, nothing less! It is a goal that ignites a man's passion!

And now, it all starts with the EFL Cup!

Middlesbrough and McClaren, you're going to hit the wall!

Chapter 158: The Curse of the South Changing Room

When Nottingham Forest was in the midst of training hard for their first EFL Cup championship title in twelve years, an absolutely disadvantageous piece of news was heard from the EFL Cup committee. The committee had announced the allocation results of the two teams' changing rooms.

According to the rule, "Northern teams will use the North changing room, while Southern teams will use the South changing room". Middlesbrough, which was located even more to the North than Nottingham Forest, obtained the right to use the North changing room. Nottingham Forest, on the other hand, could only helplessly accept what fate had arranged for them — to use the "cursed" South changing room at Cardiff Millennium Stadium.

Once this news was announced, Nottingham's local press erupted with complaints. The majority of them lamented about fate not being fair, and placed much emphasis on fatalism.

There were also a minority of them, who felt that this new rule of changing rooms was not logical. And that, instead, it should be abolished, and the allocation of rooms should be decided the "old-fashioned" way, via balloting.

Of contrary opinion, Middlesbrough's side was overjoyed. Aside from the local media's advocating strongly that fate had treated its team well, they also did not forget to seize the opportunity to strike at their opponent's confidence.

They were opposed to the idea of changing this rule, because Middlesbrough City was one of the most northern cities in England. The only two teams, which were located even more to the North than

Middlesbrough, and that also had the abilities to advance into this kind of Cup final, were probably only Newcastle and Sunderland.

The evidence, which they had provided to refute Nottingham's press, appeared to be extremely convincing. Before the 2002 FA Cup finals match, Chelsea and Arsenal had both advanced into the finals. Although both teams were based in London City, which was located in the south of England, Arsenal was based in North London, while Chelsea was based in West London. Hence, with Chelsea being located closer to the south, they had to use that south changing room.

It was noteworthy to know that, in the eighteen months prior to this, Cardiff Millennium Stadium, which replaced the under-construction Wembley Stadium, had hosted finals of various competitions (including FA Cup, FA Community Shield, EFL Cup, League One and below playoffs and elimination matches). Among these, all of the teams that used the south changing room had, without exception, lost in each of their respective matches. Cardiff Millennium Stadium's south changing room was, therefore, deemed to be a cursed changing room.

Chelsea was naturally dissatisfied with losing such an important match, as a result of what was dubbed the "North-South fate", and therefore, protested against the Football Association. The Football Association decided to use a coin toss to determine the allocation of the changing room, and in the end, Chelsea was still allocated the South changing room.

In order to counteract the "curse of the south changing room", all of the Chelsea players had worn their "lucky white socks" during the match. But, in the end, they had lost to Arsenal in the finals, with a score of 0:2, and the players scoring for Arsenal were Parlour and Ljungberg.

By using Chelsea as an example, Middlesbrough's press was trying to tell Nottingham Forest's press that, in the face of the almighty fate, you should just stop struggling on your deathbed! Hence, even if they determined the room allocation by coin toss, you will still get the south changing room, and you will still lose to us, the mighty Middlesbrough!

In their minds, this was a result that was predetermined!

As soon as the changing room allocation was announced, Tang En felt that they still stood a chance — one that he could make good use of. As for how to use it, that would have to depend on the specific situation.

Tang En had heard tales about Cardiff Millennium Stadium long ago, when he was still a football fan. It was truly quite a severe spot. Out of the seventeen matches held there, fourteen of them were won by teams which had used the north changing room, and only three were won by those which used the south changing room.

Among the three wins, two of them were obtained by Arsenal, while the third victory was a promotion playoffs match in League Two, which had little significance. The team that had obtained the victory while using the south changing room was Stoke City. However, three wins were still unable to change the majority mindset that "Cardiff Millennium Stadium's south changing room was inauspicious", and that there was a valid reason for it.

Before Stoke City and Arsenal's victory, Cardiff Millennium Stadium specially invited a Fengshui master from China to resolve the issue for them. In the end, after switching the placement of some of the things

in the room, and inviting Welsh artist Andrew Vicari to draw a seven-inch long wall painting, depicting a phoenix, galloping horses, and a sun to shield against the curse, Stoke City and Arsenal managed to attain victory.

However, right when people thought that the curse had been completely dispelled by Arsenal, they lost to Manchester United in the FA Community Shield. Since then, the lore and legend of Cardiff Millennium Stadium's south changing room curse have continued....

The curse's impact on the team was definitely not something to be overlooked. Football players were mostly superstitious, which could explain why there were many weird rules, such as women not being allowed in the same car as the football team. There were even more instances of small, personal superstitions, such as stepping into the field with the right foot, some managers always wearing their lucky ties... etcetera.

Tang En was originally not a superstitious person, but thinking from the perspective of the entire team, he had to be superstitious for once. At this time, if Tang En said things like "Curses are all bluffs! Those are superstitions not backed by science! Ability is the foundation for winning matches" to the players, nobody would actually believe him.

There was something, in this case, that was extremely advantageous for Tang En — his love for Chinese culture was a fact well-known by the entire Nottingham City, especially within the team. In addition, the person who temporarily dispelled the curse of Cardiff Millennium Stadium also happened to be a Chinese Fengshui master, a fact that was also known throughout England.

Therefore, in order for the team to not lose, in terms of psychological warfare, before the match even started, it was necessary for Tang En to pretend, and put up a show! Hence, when he was being interviewed by the reporters, Tang En appeared to be extremely confident towards the match, and completely showed no signs of worry regarding the south changing room "curse".

Not only that, but he also spoke casually about Cardiff Millennium Stadium's invitation to the Fengshui master to dispel the curse. Pearce Bruce cleverly guessed Tang En's hidden agenda, and therefore, wrote this in the following day's <Nottingham Evening Post> :

"...Manager Twain mentioned inviting a Fengshui master to dispel the curse. On top of that, we all know that he personally loves Chinese culture. It was rumored that his Chinese teacher had brought back from China a mysterious gift for him, and he has never told anyone else what it was. Exactly what kind of "mysterious gift" was it, we wonder?"

In answer to this thinly veiled query regarding the gift, actually, there was nothing mysterious about it! It was merely a set of traditional Chinese costumes. As Tang En told Yang Yan that he liked traditional Chinese culture, Yang Yan went home and decided that buying a traditional Chinese costume for Tang En would be most appropriate.

Moreover, she also wanted to see how a westerner, especially one with such a high nose bridge and white skin, would look when wearing a traditional Chinese costume. However, because of the nature of Tang En's work, he was required to be in a suit almost all-year round. Hence, that set of traditional Chinese costumes was left hanging inside his closet.

Fortunately, the traditional Chinese costume that Yang Yan bought for Tang En was not flowery and bright-colored, or else Tang En would be too embarrassed to use it as a Taoist priest's robe.... Although the westerners would not be able to tell the difference, but, still, an actor's tool had to be slightly more professional.

As for the other important tools which he needed, Tang En had no choice but to ask Yang Yan for her help again, to try and see if there were any Fengshui compasses for sale around Manchester's Chinatown. Tang En thought that some traditional items would be much more well-preserved in places like Chinatown, as opposed to in mainland China. Something like a Fengshui compass should be very easily found in Chinatown.

Yang Yan asked Tang En why he needed a Fengshui compass, so he told Yang Yan his plans. Over the phone, Yang Yan smiled happily, exclaiming, "Mr Twain, I look forward to your shaman dance on the television!"

They were currently able to directly converse in Mandarin, so Yang Yan was not afraid that Tang En did not understand what "shaman dance" meant. After conversing a while, Yang Yan continued to ask, "Can putting up a show, and doing such gimmicks, also help to win matches?"

"Hmm, this question is difficult to answer. But you can treat this as part my job of fine-tuning the team psychologically..."

"Hearing you say it like this, being a football manager seems to be very interesting!"

"Hehe, the team's changing room is even more interesting. However, I'm really sorry that I'm unable to share with you these stories."

Tang En was not wrong in saying such a thing. To an outsider, a changing room was a very mysterious place, and there were many interesting and fun happenings taking place inside it every day.

The players and managers treated this place as their private venue, and no outsiders were allowed to probe into it. There were many unspoken rules in the football industry, and "nobody in the team is allowed to divulge anything that takes place in the changing room" was one.

Although Tang En was the manager of the team, he also could not violate this rule. Otherwise, he would lose his players' trusts, and his colleagues' respects. A manager, who could not control the team, was viewed as being no different from trash.

Two days after speaking to Yang Yan on the phone, right before Tang En was about to lead the team to Cardiff, he received an express delivery parcel, sent from Manchester. Opening the parcel, Tang En discovered that it was exactly the Fengshui compass that he needed.

Chinese characters and the symbol of eight trigrams were engraved all over it. It was a Fengshui compass that appeared very mysterious in the eyes of westerners.

Having obtained such an item, Tang En was confident that he could intimidate everyone by using it. When the time came, it would definitely cause an uproar among the English media. The sheer thought of his impending successful mischief made Tang En chuckle.

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Cardiff, the capital of Wales, was where Cardiff Millennium Stadium, which hosted the EFL Cup finals' match venue, was located. It was not considered as being too far from Nottingham. For Middlesbrough to arrive there for the match, they had to take an airplane, while Nottingham Forest only had to take the bus.

On the bus, the players' morale was low. Evidently, they had been scared by that "south changing room curse". Quite a handful of them felt that this was an inauspicious sign, signalling that the team's defeat was imminent.

A football team was a combined entity. One person with such a thought could very well affect two other people. From there, two people then could easily turn to four people, four people to eight people, eight people to sixteen people...and so on. In the end, no matter if one said "those are just baseless nonsense", they would still question themselves, wondering, "Is the curse real? Will we really lose the match, all because we used the south changing room?"

As the saying went, "Repeat a lie enough times, and it will be believed", this was the same rationale behind the Chinese teams'"koreaphobia". They were originally equally matched, in terms of ability, and it wasn't much of a big deal to lose to them a few times.

However, after the press proposed the idea of "koreaphobia", as well as promoted its propagation, in the end, even the Chinese teams themselves felt that they were born fearing the Korean teams. This was in spite of the fact that they were a team comprised solely of players born after 1989, and they were not even born when "koreaphobia" first started out. This, however, still did not change the fact that they were equally "afraid of Korea".

Tang En knew very well about how terrifying words could be, just from looking at these silent players on the bus. In the past, everyone used to talk a lot and crack jokes on their way to the matches.

He knew that it was impossible for them to win with this mental state. Before the match even started, his team had already lost to the opponent, in terms of its morale and desire for victory. How were they, then, supposed to put up a good fight in the match later on? This cannot carry on, so thank goodness, Tang En had long made preparations for such a situation as this.

The coach bus driver was in the midst of driving attentively, until he suddenly discovered that there was someone else beside him. He turned his head around to see, and discovered that the person beside him was the team's manager, Mr. Tony Twain. He held a disc in his hand, which he was inserting into the bus's DVD player. As he only glanced up for a split second, he could only catch a glimpse of the disc cover, which seemed to have the words "85' LIVE AID" written on it.

After inserting the disc into the player, Tang En continued to dabble with some of its settings. Afterwards, he took the remote controller and stood near the front bus door. At this moment, the players were either keeping quiet with their heads lowered, or they were looking outside the window, as though they had a lot on their minds. Seeing this, Tang En pressed the play button.

Suddenly, the audio system on the bus started blasting loud noises, without any warning. They sounded like the loud buzzing, cheering, clapping and jeering noises heard at the stadium's stands, all mixed together. As a result of this sudden wave of loud noises, everyone in the bus jumped in shock.

After the loud noises gradually died down, what soon followed was a series of drumbeats with a very familiar rhythm. All the players on the bus raised their heads, somewhat shocked.

This was part of the song performed by Queen in 1985 at Hyde Park, during a charity concert aimed at helping Africa and raising public awareness for the African regions, which were the ones that needed assistance the most. That concert had been voted by music critics as being the most noble live rock concert in history.

The song tune which followed closely behind the drumbeats was indeed that famous song, <We Will Rock You>. This was a classic rhythm, one that could make people become excited. By then, Tang En had noticed that there were already some players moving to the beat.

<We Will Rock You> was very short, and the song that came on after that was something that everyone was even more familiar with, <We Are The Champions>. This version of the song was different from the one produced in the recording studio. It was a live version, and was even more passionate, as Freddie Mercury's (Queen's lead singer) delivery was much more explosive.

Afterwards, Tang En spoke with this music playing in the background.

"I intend to add a new rule to the team — in the future, whenever we go to Cardiff Millennium Stadium and Wembley Stadium for matches, we will play this song on the coach bus. Look at all of your shocked expressions.... Do you think that this is the only time in our whole lives that we're going there?" Tang En smiled, then continued, "The EFL Cup is merely the beginning. There will be many, many more matches waiting for us. And there are many, many more championship trophies waiting for us to clinch. Hence, I feel that there is a need to set such a tradition. Alright, lads, stop looking so gloomy. I know what you guys are worried about, but I think that there's completely no need for you guys to worry about that."

He continued, "You think that at Cardiff Millennium Stadium, the teams that used its south changing room cannot win. This kind of curse has already been around for quite a long time. But this curse is not completely infallible. You guys should have heard of Arsenal and Stoke City, right? When they emerged victorious from their matches, the changing room assigned to them was precisely the south changing room."

"But, Boss," the honest Huth raised his hand and said, "that is because they hired that... that.... that...."

He continued saying "that" for quite some time, but was still unable to say the term which came after. In the end, everyone started smiling as a result.

Tang En had originally turned his head around to hear what he had to say, but seeing that the German really could not come up with that term, Tang En could only say it on behalf of him. "Fengshui master. They hired a fengshui master from China to temporarily dispel the curse of the south changing room," he defined.

Huth nodded his head vigorously, expressing that that was indeed what he had wanted to say. The rest of the people on the bus also played along. Tang En unfolded his arms, then whipped out an item from behind his back, as though he was performing a magic trick. "Does anyone know what this is?" he asked.

The item in his hand was indeed the Fengshui compass. There wouldn't be anyone, who would know what that was, so everyone was shaking their heads while looking at it in Tang En's hand.

“I reckon that everyone should know about my finding a Chinese teacher to learn mandarin, and that my results were quite good, right?”

Everyone nodded their heads.

“Very well, as Fengshui is also part of traditional Chinese culture, I happen to know about it as well,” Tang En said unashamedly, as he put on his “Fengshui master” hat. In reality, even when Tang En was still in China, he had little knowledge on Fengshui, and much less now. “This is a Fengshui compass. In china, it is used to assess Fengshui, and to dispel ominous curses.”

Upon hearing Tang En’s words, the look in the players’ eyes also changed. Quite a few people looked at their manager with a shocked look, as though they still had some doubts about it.

Tang En’s face displayed an extremely confident smile. “Why? Have I ever lied to you guys?” Tang En discovered that he was really very well-suited to “act”....and wondered why hadn’t he discovered this talent of his in the past? “Whenever I say that we will win, have we ever lost?” he continued to probe.

“No!” The players replied at the same time. This was something they were extremely proud of. Ever since Tony Twain took over this team in the middle of the season, Nottingham Forest had yet to experience defeat in their matches.

“Isn’t that right? Rest assured, I will definitely be able to dispel the curse of the south changing room by the match day! Therefore, there’s no need for you guys to worry about some curse. Moreover, I think that.. perhaps after the finals, the press might even start reporting about a “north changing room curse”!”

Everyone — including that coach bus driver, who had been attentively driving, started laughing out loud.

“That’s the way, that’s the way! This is the true Nottingham Forest!” they guffawed.

The music was still playing from the audio system, and the passionate voice of the lead singer from the most noble band in English rock history continued to envelop the entire bus.

“We are the champions! My friends! We are the champions! And we’ll keep on fighting ’til the end! We are the champions! We are the — champions of the world!”

Chapter 159: Wizardly Twain Part 1

“Welcome to Wales! Welcome to Cardiff!” The Sky TV reporter stood in a crowded square with a microphone. Behind him was the largest professional football field in the United Kingdom, and one of Europe’s most modern football fields, completed and put to use in 1999 – the Millennium Stadium.

Baring their teeth and waving wildly, the Middlesbrough fans walked in front of the camera and shouted, “The North will win! Victory to Middlesbrough!”

They had just walked past, when a group of fans from Nottingham, wearing red jerseys, jumped out and stood in front of the camera lens. With glowing red faces and beer bottles raised up in their hands, they shouted in unison, “Forest, Forest! We are the champions!” After shouting, they belched from the beer, laughing as they walk towards the stadium entrance.

“Welcome to the venue of the 03-04 season finals of the England League Cup, the Millennium Stadium!” continued the announcer.

Because the Millennium Stadium was located in the city center of Cardiff, whenever there was a game, traffic control would be implemented in several main roads to the city center. No vehicles were allowed to pass through, except for the team buses of both two sides. Consequently, the fans had to walk to the stadium.

Gareth Bale and his father were among the crowd flocking to the stadium. Since the First Team had advanced to the EFL Cup final, all levels of the youth team were not required to train today. His father decided to bring Bale Junior to watch the Forest team’s glorious moment. After all, he was now a Forest player, so he should cultivate his feelings for the Forest team.

Besides, Tony Twain was the one who gave Bale a chance, and now Bale was doing well in the youth team. He was competent both as a left back, and as a left midfielder, and he also had a beautiful free kick. Also, now that he had been leapfrogged to the under-seventeen youth team, his self-confidence had greatly increased.

All of these things were thanks to Manager Twain. Since the game was held in his home city, it would be inexcusable not to come watch and cheer Twain on.

After more than half a year of training and building his self-confidence, Bale was taller and stronger than before. A smile would often be on his face, when he was chatting with his father. He was no longer taciturn with the hangdog look.

While they were lining up outside the stadium and waiting for their tickets to be checked to enter, both team’s buses arrived at the same time. This sparked a commotion among both sides of team fans outside the stadium. Everyone rushed to the side of the bus of the team they supported. They were cheering, singing, and loudly clapping to greet their respective team.

As the official jersey colors of both teams were red, the team bus colors also looked similar. The only real way to differentiate them was to look at the respective team emblem, as well as ... the Forest team’s red color was deeper than that of Middlesbrough’s.

Inside the deeper-colored red bus, everyone did not see Twain’s figure. The cameras swept across all the players’ faces, even the driver’s, and still, the team’s manager could not be found.

Where was Tony Twain?

In fact, Tang En was in the bus, but he hid in the back exit of the bus in order to change his clothes, as he did not want to be seen from the outside in that spot.

I didn’t expect to arrive at the stadium at the same time as Middlesbrough. This made Tang En very happy. The confidence to strike my opponents begins now!

After they had waited for Twain to finish changing his clothes, the Forest players inside the bus compartment looked earnestly at the funny-looking tall man. Tony Twain, the manager of this England professional football team, was transformed into a “Feng Shui master”, wearing a “Taoist robe” and carrying a compass. Furthermore...who could tell that he was an impostor, when they looked at his severe and serious expression?

Obviously, Tang En managed to convince himself, too. On the way from the hotel to the stadium, he stayed silent, and did not speak a word, continually self-hypnotizing to make himself believe that he was indeed a Feng Shui master from China! He seemed more mysterious and profound in the players' eyes, so it was exceptionally quiet inside the bus compartment along the way.

When the two team buses stopped and opened the bus doors, the camera lens respectively aimed at the doors of the two team buses, cutting between the two scenes. The first to alight from Middlesbrough's side was their manager, Steve McClaren, who later became the England national team manager, and his assistant manager, Terry Venables. The media's evaluation of the two men was: "The best person to be the assistant manager is the manager, and the best person to be the manager is the assistant manager."

This statement incisively pointed out what McClaren was good at, and his capability. And Tang En knew he was best suited to the position of the manager, and moreover, the First Team manager. Thus, this was a competition between a manager and an assistant coach.

Next, the Middlesbrough players got off the bus in succession, but there was no movement on the Nottingham Forest side. The deep red bus door was closed. Looking at the inside through the window, the Forest team players were all standing up and looking in the same direction, but did not move.

At this point, despite the fact that the players were still filing out on the Middlesbrough's side, the television camera lenses were still firmly pinned on the Forest team bus. Everyone had the same question: Why Tony Twain was not on the bus, and what were these players doing?

What were they doing? Naturally, they were waiting for a person to get off the bus first.

Inside the bus, Tang En said to the players who were watching him, "All right, guys. When you get off the bus, no matter what you see or hear, don't look surprised. Everything is as normal. Got it? This is no different from you going to the locker rooms in the City Ground."

"Got it." The players answered with taut faces.

Looking at their expressions, Tang En nodded his head to show his approval, and then he said to the driver, "Please open the door."

Because the Forest team was late in coming out, it made people suspicious, so there were more and more people around their bus now. There were even Middlesbrough players, extending their heads to peer over this side. The game had not started yet, and the Forest team had inadvertently stolen all the limelight.

Just when "all eyes were on them", the door of the Forest team bus finally slowly opened, and everyone craned their necks, hoping to see what kind of Forest team would come out after the delay.

Unexpectedly, the first person to appear caused an uproar across the board.

Clad in a traditional Chinese robe, and carrying a compass in his hand, Twain stalked down the steps. He immediately attracted everyone's attention! He became the real focus of the fans, the reporters, the television cameras ... All were attracted by him and firmly directed their attention at him.

And what about him? The silent crowd did not have any effect on him. It was as if he could not see these people or the cameras. He marched evenly and calmly towards the stadium along the separated

passage, as though there was nobody else present. Regardless of the way he dressed, he did really have a bit of “the air of a grandmaster”.

The players behind him looked as serious as he was. They were evidently intimidated by Twain’s appearance. They did not dare to make jokes at this time, laugh loudly, listen to music or send text messages on their cellphones. They obediently followed behind the manager, and the team walked towards the corridor leading straight to the locker room in the stadium, all under the gaze of countless people.

McClaren was so flabbergasted by Twain’s appearance that he stared blankly for a long while without any reaction. Is this still a football match? Can the English Football Association allow a coach to wear such attire onto the field?

In the midst of the uproar in the crowd, Gareth Bale laughed instead. His father looked at him with uncertainty. He pointed at Twain, who was walking in front of the team, and said, “Mr. Twain is very funny! I’ve never seen a manager like him, I want to follow behind him to walk in, as it must be very exciting! So many people are looking at them.”

Again, he pointed to the Forest First Team players, then turned back to his father and said, “Dad, I really want to be inside with them now. I think it must be fun to play for him. Have you heard about it? They took the subway once to a game, and then they encountered some football hooligans!”

His son was speaking excitedly in front of him, and he seemed completely unafraid of the football hooligans. The father affectionately patted his son, and then said, “When you continue to do well in the youth team, I think this day will soon come, Gareth.”

When the father and son looked up again, Twain and his team had entered the corridor. Apart from the media, the ordinary fans did not know what would happen inside. But there were still a lot of people milling around, and they were expecting the media to return with something interesting, and then broadcast it in the evening news.

But maybe they would be disappointed. The television station’s filming could only follow to the locker room door, and then just shoot the inside from outside the door. They did not have the right to shoot inside the locker room.

The Forest team locked the door after they entered the locker room. Then, no one else would know what was already happening, or what would happen inside. Why was Twain wearing such attire? Was it just to do something wacky, to ease the pressure on the players? But his players looked more serious and tense than usual ...

And what did he have in his hand? A compass? But a compass could not be so complicated ... it was engraved with Chinese characters and strange symbols ... Could it be that this was the “mysterious gift from the East” that Pierce Brosnan mentioned in his article?

Did he plan to use this thing to break the curse of the south locker room?!

Steve McClaren, who was leading his team towards to the locker room, suddenly felt his eyebrows twitch. He stopped in his tracks and turned back to looked outside of the corridor. There was a large

crowd of fans and media, who should have completely dispersed to either enter the stadium or go to the bars to watch the game by now.

“What’s up, Steve?” McClaren’s assistant, the Middlesbrough’s assistant coach, Steven John Harrison, saw him stop, and turned to ask.

“Oh, nothing. Let’s go ...” McClaren replied, as he shook his head.

Maybe I’m thinking too much?

Chapter 160: Wizardly Twain Part 2

As soon as Tang En entered the south locker room, he saw the giant oil painting – even if he did not want to see it, it was hard to miss it, as it took up almost half the wall and was very eye-catching. He had no appreciation of the arts, and had nothing to say in the face of such an oil painting. However, he felt it was out of place in the stadium locker room.

Since this was the only place in the south locker room that was different from the north locker room, and other people had used it to write articles, Tang En might as well do it again today...

He pulled out a neatly folded red cloth from his backpack and unfolded it. A huge team flag appeared before everyone. When they saw such a large team flag, someone in the locker room exclaimed, but soon the voice died down. Tang En indicated to Crouch and Ward, the team’s two tallest players, to hang it over that painting.

While the two men were busy doing so, he explained to everyone, “Before me, there was a master, who said that the wall was the source of all the curses. According to my on-site survey just now, I think he was right. At that time the master suggested that the stadium to commission a huge oil painting to block the bad energy, which proved to be successful from the beginning. But... the Feng Shui of this place is terrible! Very hard to change! It’s difficult to change, unless the entire stadium is demolished and rebuilt ...”

Some of the players gasped, and it appeared that they were convinced by Tang En’s words.

Tang En continued his speech: “The master could only choose to use the oil painting as a temporary protection, so today, we will use our team flag to block that energy of ‘resentment’ that has penetrated through the oil painting! Our Forest team’s red flag is our lucky banner. It can break the curse and bring us good luck!”

He finished speaking, he turned his head to see that the team flag had been hung high up and affixed to the wall, just blocking the painting. “Very good! Now for us, there is already none of the ‘south locker room curse’! You don’t have to worry about being cursed. The ones who should worry are our opponents, because we’re going to defeat them!” Standing under the huge team flag, Tang En opened his arms and said loudly with confidence.

“The Boss is right.” Eastwood stood up, saying, “The day before yesterday, when we set out from Nottingham, my wife specially did a divination, and the prediction showed that the result of this game is also our victory!”

Tang En looked at his disciple, who was turning to the players to advocate how powerful his wife's divination was, and that even the local counselors would come to consult his wife about the outcome before the election ... Tang En did not know if what this Romani gypsy said was true, but he did want to thank him.

"Okay, guys!" Seeing that this matter was settled, the assistant manager Walker also spoke, "It's time for you to go out and warm up, we've delayed long enough ..."

Tang En corrected his wording, "We have let those northerners wait long enough."

The locker room broke out with the players' happy and light laughter. Tang En knew his plan had worked. Dressing in a disguise and play-acting could also help the team build up confidence.

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When the team went out to warm up, Tang En was busy working on the tactical board in the locker room. He might not know it yet, because their getting off the bus and warming up were much later than the opponents, but whatever was going on in Nottingham Forest's locker room had become the focus of many media and fans. There was a story that began to circulate among the reporters – Tony Twain had used the Eastern Feng Shui that he had learned in the locker room to help his team break the curse of the Millennium Stadium south locker room. If it succeeded, then his team and Middlesbrough would be on the same starting line!

This was a rumor that got the media excited. If it is true, then Twain will become the first manager to use this unnatural means to help the team. If the Forest team really wins in the end, will McClaren complain about his opponents' use of this practice? If he does not complain, it does not matter, as we can lead the topic in that direction during the post-match press conference....

If the Forest team did not win the championship, the reporters could also ask Manager Twain how he regarded "his get-up and play-acting" before this game – no victory meant that it was ineffective, and that meant he was just hamming it up. Thus, they could then ask him if he should have spent so much effort on this, rather than on the tactics for the team.

In short, regardless of the final outcome of this game, and no matter who would get the title, the media had a topic that they could use. And, at that time, there would be a good show!

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When the Forest players returned from their warm-up, they saw that Manager Tony Twain had already taken off the "Taoist robe" and put on a dark red suit. The compass was nowhere to be found. Both teams' starting lineups were drawn on the tactical board, the wall facing them was a large Nottingham Forest team flag, and all towels were neatly placed in their respective positions.

It looked no different from a regular team locker room. Thus, they did not even think about the matter of the "south locker room curse". There was only a single thought running through their minds now: Middlesbrough, the finals, and the Championship Trophy!

Gazing at the expressions in these people's eyes, Tang En was very satisfied with their mental state. Their gazes were firm, and not so erratic, like they had been two days ago. Back then, with one glance, he could tell that they were too preoccupied, and did not have the heart to prepare for the game.

Now everything was good, his team had entered the best state, and he was smart enough not to mention that curse anymore. When everyone was seated, and the locker room had gradually quieted down, Tang En spoke, "Guys, the moment has come. This is the final, and I hope you understand that. It's not an insignificant pre-season game, and it's not a game that you lose, where there will be a next one. It's the EFL Cup final, that we will to f**king wait for another year for another chance at, if we lose! So, buckle down and chant aloud with me: 'This is the final in the live national broadcast!'"

"This is the final in the live national broadcast!" The beginning voices were still a little jumbled, and not very orderly. Some people were fast, and some people were slow, some people's pitches were high, and some people's pitches were low, but soon, everyone was unified in their chanting pace.

"This is a great opportunity for me to make a mark!"

"This is a great opportunity for me to make a mark!"

"This is the perfect stage for everyone to witness my ability!"

"This is the perfect stage for everyone to witness my ability!"

Tang En vigorously fist-pumped, and the exaggerated powerful body language symbolized him. He swung his clenched fist and pounded into the void, allowing the players to feel an unparalleled, powerful force being smashed into their bodies, along with their boss's action.

"Let us trample on the carcass of Middlesbrough and go to Europe, in the name of the English Football League Cup champion!"

"In the name of the champion!"

After leading the round robin chanting, Tang En watched those impassioned players and laughed, "Does anyone still think that what I'm talking is an impossible joke? Is there still any doubt that we can beat the Premier League team? Does anyone think that a Premiership team is stronger than a League One team? Does anyone think we can't win?"

No one hesitated this time, as everyone loudly replied at the same time, "No one!"

"Very good! Do you believe in me? Do you believe I will lead you to victory?"

"We believe!"

"Fantastic! I believe in you too, I believe you can defeat our opponents and win the championship! We are a team, and we are one. I believe in you, and you believe in me. We can overcome all the opponents in front of us, because they block our progress. Why have we practiced so hard on our defense for a week? Since you first stepped into the world of professional football and received your training, you have shed sweat and tears every day, and even bled and suffered injuries. What is it all for?"

He turned around and erased both teams' starting line-ups on the tactical board, and wrote a big word on it — "CHAMPIONS".

"For the championship! Only the championship can reward everything we've invested, only the championship can satisfy our hunger and make us happy. In addition to this ..." He forcefully swung his hand, and made a knife-cutting action, "... We will not accept any other result!"

