

## Champions 161

### Chapter 161: Wall Part 1

Inside the Cardiff Millennium Stadium's VIP suite, a golden-haired beauty, who was dressed fashionably, could not help but yawn, as she changed her sitting position somewhat uninterestedly. She was not a professional fan. In fact, she could not even be considered a football fan at all.

She felt that, the more important the match was, the more exciting the match should be. However, the match situation a mere ten minutes in, was so dreary, that it had made her extremely disappointed. In the eyes of this beautiful girl, this match was extremely tasteless and boring.

Actually, this beautiful girl was not the only person, who presently found the match boring. The football fans, who were seated on the stands and in front of the television, felt this way as well.

As this was an extremely important finals match, playing conservatively and steadily was the way to go. The commentators, Martin Taylor and Andy Gray, knew this very well, and therefore, did not complain during their commentary.

Instead, Gray questioned Nottingham Forest's concentrated defensive play style — defending like, ever that since the match started, how much longer could Twain's team continue on? Forty-five minutes? Ninety minutes? Or... One hundred and twenty minutes?

"Massimo Maccarone attempts a distance shot! It had hit the body of a Nottingham Forest player, before going out of bounds. This is a corner kick. The Italian has appeared to be very excited, ever since the match started. In a mere eleven minutes, he has already attempted two shots at the goalpost!" remarked one of the commentators.

For this match, Middlesbrough sent out an offensive lineup. Evidently, McClaren did not think that crucial matches should be played conservatively, or at least he didn't choose to play conservatively, when facing off against Nottingham Forest.

Actually, ever since Robson had become the manager of the team, Middlesbrough's tradition tactic was to use technique-centric, offensive football. Among the Premier League teams, they were nicknamed the "giant slayers", as they had a lot of experience playing against strong teams. However, when playing against teams, which were adept at snatching and had players with exceptional physiques, they would become somewhat at a loss for what to do.

Their greatest characteristic was having a strong offense and a weak defense. Although McClaren did not know what Tang En's plans were, he still decided to launch an unrelenting offense, right from the start of the match. He hoped to make use of this momentum in order to secure a leading advantage, as this would make things easier for Middlesbrough, which had more skilful players, in the rest of the match.

His plan for the match was the complete opposite of Tang En's. McClaren did not intend to fortify his defences during the match, but instead, chose to maximize their offensive advantage. He hoped to completely destroy this League One team's fighting spirit, by consecutively blasting balls into Nottingham Forest's goalpost.

As a result, McClaren had chosen to dispatch his most offensive lineup for this match. The frontline consisted of the power duo of Massimo Maccarone and Joseph Job. The former was the most accurate with shots, while the latter was extremely proficient with dribbling.

The four people in the midfielder positions were Middlesbrough's stars of hope. From left to right, they were: the nineteen-year-old genius football player Stewart Downing; Juninho, the 1.65metres tall Brazilian midfielder with exceptional techniques; the Dutch midfielder George Boateng, who defends aggressively, runs fast, and was not afraid of body rams; and finally, Gaizka Mendieta, the Spanish midfielder, who was on loan from Lazio.

The lineup for Middlesbrough's full backs did not have much change, but McClaren also did not have much choice in the selection of players. The French left back, Franck Queudrue, was a player that posed a huge threat to Tang En, as he was a player that could execute both defense and offense seamlessly.

Although he was only 1.83 meters tall, Franck Queudrue possessed exceptional header and free kick skills. In the two most recent seasons, he was one of the most outstanding left backs in the Premier League.

The right back position was assumed by Danny Mills, an England national team player on loan from Leeds United. The two center backs were thirty-one-year-old veteran player Ugo Ehiogu and the young twenty-three-year-old Chris Riggott. The goalkeeper was Australian national team goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer.

With this lineup, aside from Juninho, almost everyone else was part of Middlesbrough's main line-up in the English Premier League. Among the four midfielders, only Boateng was a defensive player. The other three midfielders were all better in terms of offense. McClaren's intentions were extremely obvious — and that was to go on the offense!

Playing defensively was never a style that Middlesbrough adopted. They liked executing give and go, a type of offensive football that was seamless. But today.... They still did not know that, the offense, in which they took so much pride, was about to hit a major wall.

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Juninho kicked off the ball, but Queudrue, who was being heavily marked by Nottingham Forest's players, was unable to receive the ball. As a result, Middlesbrough's offense was temporarily stopped.

Very quickly, Middlesbrough players, in their yellow jerseys, went on the offensive once again, because Nottingham Forest did not have any means of counterattacking at the front. Only Crouch was there, so even if he managed to snatch the first point of contact with the ball, using his height advantage, the goalkeeper could easily run over, and there was nothing Nottingham Forest could do to stop their opponent from regaining possession of the ball during the second point of fall.

Although Nottingham Forest's formation, which had been decided prior to the match, was supposed to be 442, during the actual match, only Crouch was positioned at the forefront. In the past, Tang En would arrange for Eastwood to roam around Crouch, keeping a lookout for the second point of fall. However, he did not ask Eastwood to do this today. Instead, he positioned the Gypsy slightly backwards in the field, for defense.

Nottingham Forest had almost completely given up on offense. This was done precisely to build a high wall in front of its goalpost, and to completely shut down all of Middlesbrough's offenses.

Italy had a tradition of adopting "Catenaccio", which referred to the entire team being focused on defense, and being closely-linked together. Prior to this match, Tang En had spent over a week devising a new defensive system for Nottingham Forest, which he had named the "wall defense". It was a well-rounded, reinforced and concrete defensive system.

The back defensive line would definitely not pressure forward and would definitely not go out of position, with the three lines maintaining a close proximity and perfect formation at all times. In the area within a thirty meters radius from the goalpost, they were able to force a situation, whereby they would outnumber their opponent. It required the entire team to assist in defense, in order to reduce the amount of space their opponent had for their offense.

With your superb ball control, you might be able to continuously pass the ball around horizontally, when you are outside my defensive line. However, my players will not chase after you because you did that. No! No matter how you passed the ball around, as long as you don't make a direct pass, I will continue to watch your ball possession from behind the defensive line. It doesn't matter, even if you had an eighty percent ball possession by the end of the match.

But, if you decide to change your offensive direction from horizontal to vertical, and wish to directly penetrate my defensive region... then I'm very sorry, I'm unable to let you get what you want. Fierce tackles, two to three people's encirclement, impenetrable penalty area.. those are the situations that you will have to face.

Such was the thought process of the coach, as he devised his fierce game strategy!

Nottingham Forest's defensive area was like a muddy swamp. If you didn't step into it, you wouldn't face any issues. But once you stepped into it, it would be difficult for your offenses to advance a single step!

The majority of the people perceived defense as being something that was within the job scopes of the back defensive line and the defensive midfielders. In this mindset, while the rest of the team was focused on defending, the forwards and offensive midfielders could simply stand at the front and wait for their chance to counterattack.

This type of defense was just like a three-layered plywood. Although it seemed as though it could keep out rain and wind, one small poke was all it would take to pierce through it, as it did not possess enough strategic depth. A brilliant direct pass would be enough to tear through this paper tiger-like defensive line.

However, the idea behind Tang En's defensive system wasn't like that.

What was a "wall"?

A wall was something that had sufficient height, length, and thickness, something that was built using boulders, and that was difficult to overcome.

Height —

George Wood was 1.86 meters tall, possessed exceptional jumping power, and was not too bad at headers. Robert Huth, who was 1.90 meters tall, was tall enough, and was good at headers. Wes Morgan, who was 1.88 meters tall, was adept at air defense.

Length —

The entire field, from its left wing to its right wing, was within the control range of Tang En's overall defense. The role of the two left and right midfielders on the starting lineup, Kris Commons and Ashley Young, was not to pass the ball to Crouch's head, but instead, to double up as left and right backs.

Thickness —

Could a wooden board that was 1cm thick be called a wall? Everything in between its forwards and full backs was within the defensive area for Nottingham Forest's moving wall. Ever since Crouch and Eastwood had faced off against Middlesbrough's offenses, Nottingham Forest's defensive system could be considered to be in place already.

This, with all these above critical components, was a true wall that was 2.5 meters tall, 60 meters long, and 30 meters wide!

Middlesbrough's offense gradually weakened, after the fifteenth minute mark. It wasn't that they gave up on offense, but it was simply because, against Nottingham Forest's defense, they had consumed twice the amount of energy that they usually would have.

Tang En told the team that, during defense, they had to be more daring, when it came to tackling. They had to do it swiftly and fiercely, and were told not to stop, when closing in on their opponents. Even if they were unable to successfully execute a tackle, they still had to follow through with the action, because that would affect the opponents' subsequent receiving and passing of balls. As time passed, and as their opponents began to make more mistakes, Nottingham Forest would have achieved its aim of playing defensively.

Tang En firmly believed that, no matter how much of a technique-centric faction Middlesbrough was, their players' individual skills and the overall coordination of the team would still be inferior to teams like Real Madrid. When playing against teams, which snatched for ball possession fiercely and played extremely defensively, even Real Madrid could not do much about it, much less Middlesbrough, which was merely a mid-tier team in the English Premier League.

Juninho was a player, who displayed outstanding skills with his feet. However, he had come to Middlesbrough thrice. In spite of his first appearance, which had left a deep impression, Middlesbrough was still relegated. In the next two times, when he returned to this team, Juninho was no longer as good as he had been before. This was especially true after he broke his legs, which saw a huge dip in his performance as a result.

McClaren's original rationale for letting Juninho on the field was in order to make use of his personal skills to create some trouble for Nottingham Forest's back defense line. He looked at Nottingham Forest and Bolton's semi-finals matches, especially the first match.

McClaren felt that Bolton's manager, Allardyce, had made one of the greatest mistakes, in that he did not completely make full use of Okocha's individual techniques. During that match, George Wood was

extremely active on the field, but McClaren had felt that Wood lacked the experience to adapt to different situations. Therefore, if Allardyce had given Okocha sufficient freedom, from the start of the match, to make a mess out of Nottingham Forest's defense, Bolton would have completely crushed that newcomer Wood's debut match.

## **Chapter 162: Wall Part 2**

Although McClaren had guessed correctly that Wood was still too inexperienced, he did not expect Tang En to make the entire team focus on defense in order to dispel this unstable factor. However, inside Nottingham Forest's walls, any mistake of letting his opponent get past him, by any player, would not be a fatal one. That was because there would always be someone beside him to fill in for him.

Think back to the match played between France, the host, and Paraguay, the weakest country among the top sixteen teams, during the 1989 World Cup quarterfinals: Paraguay had played their defense almost to perfection, but in the end, it was all for naught.

Tang En felt that this result was because Paraguay's defense had been too passive, and overly reliant on the individual skills of the goalkeeper, Chilavert, and the full backs, which were few in number. In contrast, the current Nottingham Forest was truly relying on the entire team for defense. Tang En would never leave the deciding factor of the team's defense to the goalkeeper, because by the time the opponent's forward made his shot at the goalpost, it often meant that ninety percent of his defense would have already failed.

Nottingham Forest would not give Middlesbrough's players the opportunity to comfortably control and retain possession of the ball. As soon as they entered Nottingham Forest's defensive region, they would immediately feel that the match's pace had been raised by more than hundred percent! If they did not quickly pass the ball, stop the ball, and dribble the ball, it was highly likely that the ball underneath their feet would be snatched away from them.

The <2002 FIFA World Cup Technical Report> once pointed out that, the deciding factors that could break the balance of top matches were possibly: the manager's decision during the match, the performance of the individual star players, a counterattack, a place kick and a crucial mistake. Aside from the factor of "the manager's decision during the match", Tang En hoped that the utilization of the "Wall defense" could reduce the risks of the other four factors to a minimum.

In Tang En's eyes, the only player in Middlesbrough's lineup that could decide the match's outcome with his individual skills was Juninho. However, his current condition was not as great as it once was. Moreover, past experiences had already proven that most Brazilian players were incompatible with English Football, and Juninho was no exception to this. His fluctuating performance during English football matches was also largely caused by this.

During this sort of intense ball-snatching that almost resembled a foul, Juninho was not even able to display thirty percent of his usual performance, much less change the match outcome.

As for the other star player, Mendieta, who used to be extremely famous.... Ever since he decided to leave Spain and venture overseas, he no longer possessed any form of threat. He belonged to the category of players, who could only perform to their full potentials under a specific football

environment, with a specific team, and with a specific manager. Italian football did not suit him, and the same could be said for English football.

Perhaps Downing's speed and momentum could bring some changes, but he too, lacked experience. In addition, his passing and shooting skills were far lacking, when compared to his speed.

Against Middlesbrough, this was the best strategy that Tang En could come up with. As for the actual situation during the match, that would have to depend on both team managers' decision-making during the match...and this was something that Tang En was least worried about.

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When Juninho finally dribbled the ball past Nottingham Forest's defensive midfielder Gunnarsson, he was knocked down by George Wood from the side, along with the ball. However, seeing that the referee did not call a foul, the Middlesbrough fans on the stands finally could not take it, and started jeering. From their points of view, almost every single action of Nottingham Forest could be considered a foul, hence, the referee's decision made them extremely displeased.

However, when they were jeering, did this problem ever cross their minds? If the 1.65 meters Juninho and the 1.86 meters George Wood made body contact, Wood would have nothing to gain from fair charging at Juninho? The referee was right beside the two of them, and he was able to see this ball very clearly. Wood did not commit a foul, but had simply kicked out his foot faster than the Brazilian.

When dribbling the ball, Juninho felt the pressure created from Wood charging at him. Hence, he decided to avoid Wood by going to the sides, but Wood was able to quickly kick away the ball under his feet. Afterwards, he could not brake in time, causing him to accidentally knock over the Brazilian guy, who wanted to get a front positioning ball.

The referee's eyes were extremely sharp, causing the furious Juninho to hit the turf angrily. At the same time, Tang En provocatively pointed a thumbs-up to the field.

"Nottingham Forest's defensive organization is very successful. At the very least, looking at the first twenty-four minutes of the match, it is like this. Middlesbrough, which had sent out their strongest offensive lineup, had only made four shots at the goalpost by the halfway mark of the first half, and all of them were not within the goalpost. Most of the time, they would lose their ball possession under the Nottingham Forest players' forceful snatching. Taylor, I feel that, if manager Twain had switched in a faster forward, the current score should have been 2:0, with Nottingham Forest in the lead!"

Martin Taylor smiled and said, "You're right. But if manager Twain intended to go on the offense, then his team would also be unable to completely devote themselves to defense. This match was not interesting at all, but this is still a very crucial match. I think that neither parties are willing to make any mistakes. After all, this match could very well determine who could go to Europe next season..."

Tang En stood by the side of the field. Till now, he was very satisfied with the team's performance, as they had completely played to their usual training standards. Even though there were still some gaps during the start of the match, they were able to quickly adjust accordingly. From the looks of it, this bunch of young lads did not feel nervous for their first EFL Cup finals match. This really had to be credited to the coaching performance he gave prior to the match.

Although the players performed outstandingly, Tang En did not feel surprised. It was because this was his team, a football team that was created according to his thoughts and wants. Whatever his character was, this team would have the same character as him. He, Tang En, had never been afraid of anyone, so Nottingham Forest would also be fearless.

Tang En allowed his mind to further bolster his positive thinking and game tactics:

Being known as the Premier League's "giant slayers" doesn't mean anything. The title of England's young and successful manager also doesn't mean anything. As long as we are able to advance into the finals, we have the strength to defeat you and claim the championship trophy!

McClaren sat at the technical area as he stared at the field without any expression on his face. It seemed like he almost did not take to heart, the predicament that his team was currently facing. However, deep in his heart, he was trying to assess the match's development situation.

It is obvious that the manager from Nottingham Forest wishes to restrain our team's offense by deploying a concentrated defense. By doing so... should I say that he is smart, or dumb? Will playing defensively definitely yield results? Or does he have some other tricks up his sleeves for the second half? By concentrating his defenses during the first half, he intends to deplete our players' stamina. By provoking my players with rough defensive actions, he wants to make them lose their calm and become more irritable...Afterwards, he will start to make some adjustments to his players in the latter half of the second half, and play a quick counterattack strategy....And what about that Ukrainian?

McClaren turned his head around and looked in the direction of Nottingham Forest's substitution bench, hoping to find Rebrov, the player who had been reborn ever since Tang En took over the players and changed his position on the field. However, McClaren had accidentally discovered that Tony Twain was currently looking at him. When Twain saw that McClaren was looking at Twain, he even smiled at McClaren. Seeing this kind of reaction from the other party, McClaren could only choose to avoid it. He turned his head back, and continued to watch the match.

At a glance, Nottingham Forest's side of the field was almost full of people...Juninho had lost possession of the ball once again. He furiously protested to the referee, saying that Wood's tackle was a foul. However, the referee continued to ignore him.

This Brazilian! Instead of wasting time debating with the referee, the time would have been better off spent trying to snatch the ball back! From the looks of it, Juninho's condition was still very poor. Damn it! His performance had clearly been outstanding during trainings!

There was almost no hope left for that Brazilian guy. He did not even dare to engage in a one-versus-one at the sides... His confidence had been eroded by his illness and injury in Italy. He was no longer the Mendieta the world had seen shine in Valencia.

Only Downing...Looking at Downing, who tirelessly sprinted back and forth on the field and tried to break through, McClaren's heart was somewhat comforted slightly. Juninho and Mendieta were definitely going to leave the team after this season. Moreover, Downing's rise would also squeeze Zenden onto the substitution bench. Downing was the true hope and future of Middlesbrough.

The only thing was that, he was overly excited, and was too quick with his actions. As a result, he also made more mistakes than usual. He was simply too young!

After taking a look at all the players on his team, McClaren had discovered that he currently had no means of dealing with Nottingham Forest's well-rounded defense — when he knew what Tang En named this strategy as, McClaren would definitely agree with it as well.

McClaren covered his forehead with his hands. This time, he had really bumped into a wall!

### **Chapter 163: A Crack Part 1**

Middlesbrough, who was driven far away from the penalty area by the Forest team's defense, was able only to attempt to breach the Forest team's goal with long-range strikes, which might have been the best way to break the intensive defense. However, their team lacked a player with excellent long-shot ability. Sometimes, the shots might make the Forest fans break out in a cold sweat, but they did not threaten the security of the Forest team goal.

Tang En remained unmoved. He felt that his team's current tactics were very good, and could restrain Middlesbrough's attacks. As long as McClaren did not make a move, he had no need to adjust his original intentions.

The two managers sat in their seats, plotting their tactics, and the fans in the stands thought this final was very boring. The first half was almost over, and the Forest team had only attempted one shot. Although Middlesbrough seemed to be fierce in their offensive, there was no good opportunity. More often than not, they could only cross, pass, and pass the football to each other in front of the Forest team's defense line. If they moved forward, they would soon be cut off.

Nottingham Forest's defense had left the Middlesbrough players helpless. Without further instructions from their manager, they could only play according to the formation set before the game ... But the tactics laid out before the game were obviously unsuitable to deal with the current Forest team.

Only Downing was working hard. This was the EFL Cup final. Like what Tang En had said, this was the best opportunity for a young rookie to make his mark and become famous with one shot. At this time, if he did not perform, what was he still waiting for?

But he, who wanted to be famous, had picked the wrong opponent. The heavily defended and compact Forest team was definitely not the best opponent for Downing to bring his strengths to play. His two rivals, which he currently faced, were the Forest team right back, John Thompson, and right midfielder, Ashley Young, the more imposing of whom looked to be the right back.

Ashley Young was fast and physically flexible. He was definitely on par with Downing one-on-one. While John Thompson was inferior to his opponent with his personal ability, he had a very good advantage, which allowed Tang En to buy so many players during the winter transfer period, that he had not introduced a right back.

For Thompson, who had switched playing as a center back to now playing as a right back, his assist ability could not compare with Leighton Baines, who played on the other side, and his personal skills could not be compared with Ashley Young, who was now in front of him. It looked as if he did not seem to have any essential skills. But, he had been the Forest team's unwavering, main right back, ever since Tang En took over.



He was chosen for this position, because he played cleanly and played his defender position very well. If the passing was inaccurate, or the pass speed was slow, he would not go in for an assist. If his technique was not good, he would just kick the ball out. With him around, the Forest team's right wing was safe. Therefore, Ashley Young could do several passes in the game, because he knew that if he lost his ball, Thompson would be behind him.

In this game, because Ashley Young came back to play defense, Thompson's position was closer to the midsection of the penalty area, in order to prevent the opposing striker and offense from taking advantage of this gap to make a breakthrough. Of course, he was really here to increase the defense of the wing.

Downing's personal ability was excellent, and Tang En knew that Ashley Young, the interim defender, was absolutely unable to mark him, so he arranged for Thompson to be the second guard. When Downing dribbled the ball over, Thompson would help Ashley Young defend. When faced with such a dedicated and unyielding right back, Downing really had no other good ideas.

"Downing was closely marked by Ashley Young and John Thompson. In this way, all of Middlesbrough's offensive tactics were rendered ineffective. Does McClaren have a new plan?" Even Martin Taylor and Andy Gray, who were in the press box, could see it, and they believed that it was impossible for McClaren not to see it also.

In fact, it was not difficult to figure out the problem, as even fans who had watched football for more than a few years could see it. The difficulty lay in how to solve this problem, and this was the manager's job.

"Actually, to break the intensive defense, there are several ways to try it. One of them is a long shot, and the other is to let a player with outstanding foot technique come forward, and then use this player to break through and disrupt the Forest team's defense, which would expose the gap ..." Andy Gray gave McClaren some advice in the press box.

McClaren understood all these principles, as he was also a manager. The problem was ... he knew that this method might be possible to break the Forest team's intensive defense, but he did not have such a player in his team, who could do so. The player in his team with the best technique was Juninho, but he was closely marked by George Wood on the field, who was also making fierce interceptions and tackles, regardless of his physical strength. Thus, he was completely out of action.

Adding to this, there were no players on the substitutes' bench, who could take on this important responsibility. Boudewijn Zenden was quite skillful in breakthroughs, but he could only play on the wing, and he also had to replace Downing. McClaren thought Zenden could not be as effective as Downing. If he brought off Downing, it was a clear waste of a substitution quota.

Maybe... if he let Juninho come off the substitutes' bench, it would be more effective than his starting lineup. Just when the Forest team's defensive lineup had adapted to the Middlesbrough starting lineup, to suddenly bring on a player with outstanding personal skills, excellent foot technique, and the ability to dribble past several players to create opportunities for his teammates, could completely upset the balance of the field ... Unfortunately, such a player could not be found on the Middlesbrough substitutes' bench.

The skill level of the Middlesbrough's substitutes was the biggest factor in restricting their ranking with the Premier League. In this important final, it had unexpectedly put McClaren in a difficult predicament.

McClaren now regretted his initial decision. His idea of having a strong offense at the outset, trying to break the deadlock and establishing the tone of the game as soon as possible, was proving to be a mistake now. He had no idea that Manager Tony Twain would be so hard to deal with.

The Bolton Wanderers manager, Sam Allardyce, had an encounter with him, which should have sounded a warning to him. But the League One team, the south locker room ... all this nonsense had caused him to lose his guard. He overestimated himself and Middlesbrough, and underestimated Tony Twain and Nottingham Forest, with its mostly young players.

The first half of the match calmly passed. Apart from both sides' hardcore fans, no one was satisfied with this first half. Filled with much anticipation, what kind of game did they see? There were no brilliant shots at the goals, let alone the actual making of an exciting goal. Middlesbrough did its best, yet failed in its attacks, and Nottingham Forest was so conservative, that it dared not attack at all. In this way, forty-five minutes were all used up, without the referee giving any injury stoppage time. He simply whistled at the end of the first half.

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Besides George Wood, all the other Forest players, who returned to the locker room, were gasping for breath, without exception. The first half's forty-five minutes was really tiring for them, with the non-stop running, sprinting, slide tackling, then climbing up and repeating the same series of actions.

This set of tactics was very physically demanding on the players. Hence, the intensity of Tang En's training in this one week was not minor. In addition to the tactical training, the physical training was essential every day. One must know that it was easy to play for forty-five minutes, but it was not as easy to play for one hundred twenty minutes as one might think.

Looking at these exhausted players, Tang En smiled, then asked, "How is it? How are you feeling in the first half, guys?"

"Not bad, boss. They don't stand a chance!" Wes Morgan, gasping for breath, replied in high spirits. This was reassuring to Tang En.

"I can also see that they don't have a chance. I think McClaren certainly would not have thought we would play with them in such a way in this game. They must have thought we were going to press on and counterattack, but that's what a fool would do." Tang En shrugged, "We will continue to play like this in the second half, and they are going to get more impatient. You guys all saw it ... A Premiership team is only so-so. Nothing to worry about, listen to me, we can win our first championship! We will take more and more championships in the future! Do you believe me?"

"We believe it, Boss!" The players answered in unison.

"Excellent." Tang En nodded, "Now it's your free time, so have a good rest. The game will become tougher after this."

He rarely made any adjustments or tactical arrangements during the halftime interval, and especially because the team was currently in good shape, no adjustment was obviously required. It would help the

players to relax, instead, during this time, by leaving them alone to rest. Sometimes a manager was required to keep talking, but sometimes it was better for the manager to keep quiet.

Now, the one who should be talking nonstop would be ... perhaps the one next door.

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McClaren looked at the players in front of him with a dark expression. No one had expected before this game, that the team would be confronted with Nottingham Forest's stubborn resistance. Some even thought it would be the most relaxing EFL Cup final ever played. Would anyone still think that now?

Like the Nottingham Forest players, the Middlesbrough players were also out of breath. In fact, their fatigue was more a result from the psychological burden. The game was far from what they had imagined before. Their opponents' tenacious resistance, the crisis of not being able to score ... Over time, this pressure had only increased.

Perhaps it was inconceivable to some people, how the dominant teams would be more pressured than the inferior teams. But this was football, and there were many things on the field which could not be analyzed with simple common sense.

If it was possible, McClaren wanted very much to put pressure on the team. But this was not possible. At this crucial moment, when the team was already nervous, if he said to the players, "Hey, guys! Don't be so nervous, it doesn't matter if we don't win this game. Even if we lose, it's ok, as long as we do our best. Don't worry about the result, just enjoy playing football!", it would not to lessen the pressure on the team. Instead, it would discourage the team.

After all, which manager would say such words to his players at such an important final? He would be an idiot. If he did this often, it would also make the players feel that the manager lacked the desire to win, and even perhaps had no confidence in the players. As time passed, his days as the leader of the team would also come to an end.

## **Chapter 164: A Crack Part 2**

McClaren was in a difficult predicament now. He could not lessen the pressure on the players, nor let these men relax. He also could not continue to provoke these players' tense mental states, for fear that someone's psychological quality would be weak. He would be in trouble, if that player broke under the pressure and ended up making a mistake in the game.

At this time, he could not tell these players "be indifferent to the outcome of the game", and he also could not say "we absolutely must not lose". It was a real headache that he could not use the halftime interval to inspire his players. In fact, McClaren knew that, in order to reduce the players' psychological burden, and to liberate them from this vicious circle of their current psychological state, there was only one way, and that was to get a ball into the Forest team goal.

As long as they scored a goal, there would be no problem. The must-win pressure, and their opponents' fierce interceptions, all that would vanish. However, this was a difficult problem for McClaren. If it was so easy to score a goal, the scores in a football match would be on par with a basketball game.

It did not seem feasible now, to try and change the situation by bringing on a substitute. What else could he expect? He began to run through the current situation in his mind, in all its possible scenarios:

A. The game currently had eleven players on the field; B. The rival manager became muddled, and made a wrong decision; C. The opposing players made a mistake, and sent the ball their way; D. A well-placed kick would be made..

To tell the truth, McClaren did not hold too much hope that his players would bring any of these to bear on the field. This was constant, not a variable. What would be the variable? Tony Twain, being dazzled by the atmosphere of the championship finals, wrongly judged the situation on the field and made inexplicable adjustments. Under Middlesbrough's continued offense, the opposing players' pressure to let go and the psychological stress became stronger, till they were overwhelmed, made mistakes, and then collapsed ...

At the thought of this, McClaren's eyes lit up. Why not? My players are under immense pressure, because they are unable to break through. Why would the opposing players not feel pressured, because they constantly need to be on guard against our offense and always think that they can't lose the ball? Look at the way they bent their backs and were out of breath when they left the field. Tony Twain's tactics are too demanding for the players. Whether it was the aspect of their physical strength or psychological quality, McClaren did not think that the Forest team could consistently execute this tactic.

In that way, as long as we have enough patience, and constantly make use of the offense to harass the Forest defense line, we'll wait until their confidence and resolve begin to waver, and then, we'll suddenly strike the fatal blow!

Then, the game will be over ...

McClaren, with a clear tactical intent in mind, was visibly relieved. He now knew what to say to these players.

"Is there anyone beginning to doubt that we can win this final? Have your confidence and fighting spirit shaken earlier than our rivals?"

Upon hearing his voice, the initially crestfallen players looked up at their manager, the young manager Steve McClaren, who had also convinced them with results, and their confidence was restored. Their spirits were further raised when they saw their boss' smiling face again.

"No, boss. No one has given up on the game!" The team captain and their goalkeeper Schwarzer stood up and said.

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As the second half began, Tang En realized that Middlesbrough had stepped up their offensive. They seemed to be going up against Nottingham Forest's "Wall Defense". McClaren did not let his team slow down and do multiple passes, but instead, he sped up the offense. High-speed passing, faster interception, fast attempt shots to the goal, all of this was performed, plus the direction of their passing went from crossing to vertical, and the forward passes significantly increased.

That was also a way to do it, but Tang En was not worried. The advantage of a wall was not in speed, but in its depth and in the stability of the formation. Immoveable, like a mountain, was the best description

of this defensive tactic, allowing play to remain constant in order to deal with changing conditions of the game.

As long as they were able to hold the defense for the first ten minutes of the game's second half, the momentum would gradually fall into his control for the remaining game time. The ones who should worry about not scoring a goal was McClaren and his team.

However, ten minutes into the second half of the game, he jumped from his seat.

After Middlesbrough intercepted the ball and shot out a long pass from its own half of the field, the ball went directly behind the Forest defense line. John Thompson, who had always performed calmly, missed the ball with his head! The swift Downing got into action behind him at the same time, when his teammate had passed the ball. When Thompson missed with his head, Downing rushed past the Forest team's last line of defense!

The Middlesbrough fans in the stands jumped up from their seats, cheering with their arms raised! This was the perfect opportunity that they had waited for in the last fifty-five minutes.

Downing had just stopped the ball, and intended to seize the opportunity to break through inwards. Suddenly, he felt a gust of wind in front of him, and a dark shadow flashed past. Immediately, the ball underneath his foot had disappeared, and he was suddenly knocked out. At that moment, he felt as if he had been hit by a boulder. He was writhing in pain on the ground, and the football had already flown out.

"It's a f\*\*king foul!!" All the Middlesbrough fans were shouting.

"Damn your bloody rules!!" This was the Nottingham Forest fans' comeback.

Both managers stood up from their seats, almost at the same time, nervously waiting for the referee's decision.

The referee ran forward, pointing with the corner flag—"This is a corner! It's really an incomprehensible ruling... Look at the faces of the Middlesbrough players, and there's a loud booing in the front field of the stadium!"

Because Nottingham Forest's goal in the second half was close to the Middlesbrough fan area, this spot was suddenly drowned out by hissing. The Middlesbrough players rushed around the referee, and they could not believe their eyes! How could this ball be a corner ball?! This was clearly a collision! And it was absolutely unreasonable!

McClaren turned around in anger, and smacked the awning of the technical area. He could not understand the referee's decision any more than his own players could. Did the damn referee not see Downing flipped twice in the air? He had rolled from inside the field to past the sidelines! What's wrong with his eyes? The fuming Middlesbrough manager pointed to his own eyes with two fingers in protest.

Twain let out a long breath and sank down to his seat. Although Wood was young and had not played in many official First Team games, he was the core of this defensive tactic. His tireless running and rough defense were important deterrents to the opponents. If he were to be sent off with a red card, his defensive system would collapse. Without him running and intercepting in the wide middle, this wall would be nothing but a hollow wall. One jab, and it would come crumbling down.

The referee must have been baffled by Wood's speed, or perhaps his active performance in the first half had caused some inertia in the referee's mind. But this danger had passed, and there was a greater danger waiting for Tang En and his Forest team.

"George Wood had made a dangerous defense. Fortunately, the referee did not pursue it. From the replay, Wood did touch the ball first, but his defensive move was too big and very aggressive. McClaren had enough reason to complain – this could have been a turning point in the game, leaving the Forest team without an absolute defensive core, and at a disadvantage, both on the field and in terms of player numbers. But now, his team has only been given a corner kick, and Downing, who had been the most active so far, since the first half, is still under treatment! Listen to the booing at the Millennium Stadium!" Even with a soundproof headset, Andy Gray could barely hear himself. He had to raise his volume during his commentary, just to compete with the roar of the raving Middlesbrough fans.

As a matter of fact, Steve McClaren did not have to be so angry. Even though he did not reduce the Forest team's numbers, at least he had finally split open a crack in their thick and hard wall in fifty-five minutes. Would this be the beginning of a full-scale collapse of the Forest wall?

Perhaps the two managers, Steve McClaren and Tony Twain, would have to reconsider things carefully in their minds.

### **Chapter 165: Who Is Afraid Of Who Part 1**

Because Wood collided into the other party, Tang En stood up from his seat and walked back and forth a few times, before finally returning to his seat. He looked at Walker, but did not say anything before turning back.

Folding his hands by the side of the field, Tang En stood still with his lips tightly puckered. Deep inside, Tang En was somewhat worried. However, he could not say it out, and he could not let others know that he was worrying, hesitating, or wavering.

Downing's breakthrough served as a wakeup call for Tang En. Theoretically, this "wall defense" of his should not have any problems...however, the most unreliable thing in a football match was "theory". When it came to the execution of a strategy, there were many things that were changing by the second.

Like just now, when, before the match, he asked the back defense line to not overextend, and to stay as far back as possible at all times, in order to prevent their opponents from passing the ball over them. But what happened in reality? Didn't they just let their opponents pass the ball over them?

It was impossible for the back defense line to stick to the end line at all times, and that was also not the correct way to defend. There would definitely be gaps, and it was just that Middlesbrough was unable to seize the opportunity in the past. This time, they happened to be able to seize this chance. However, just because it was by accident, it did not mean that Tang En need not take it to heart.

As long as there was a first time, there would definitely be a second time. McClaren himself must have noticed this as well. With Nottingham Forest's left and right backs both being of a relatively young age, each of them had their own weaknesses. The left wing was still alright, but Thompson and Ashley Young on the right wing were under immense pressure, because of Downing's presence. If McClaren made the

team focus their offenses here, and had the players take turns to attack here, would Thompson and Ashley Young be able to fend them off?

Very soon, Tang En would know the answer to this question...

As expected, Middlesbrough intentionally strengthened their offense on the right wing. Downing had tried to break past Thompson three consecutive times, and if not for the combined efforts of Thompson and Ashley Young to prevent against it, he would have definitely gotten past.

But they were finally unable to surround him on his fourth attempt. Ashley Young was slightly slow to react, and Downing managed to get in between the two of them, knocking the ball past them!

A sudden loud cheering noise erupted from the Middlesbrough fans. This time, that abominable George Wood was still in the center, and he could not rush over in time!

“What a beautiful breakthrough! Downing’s speed has caused Nottingham Forest to have a tough time! In the second half, he is becoming more and more active. The person with the biggest headache should be Manager Twain... A cross!”

The German player Robert Huth immediately rushed in front of Maccarone, kicking the ball out of bounds. It was yet another corner kick. Over the past few minutes, Nottingham Forest had been even more passive than the first half, and that was all because of one person — Downing.

Walker, who was seated at the technical area, stood up and walked towards Tang En. Standing beside Tang En, Walker said worriedly, “Tony, things are not looking too good.”

Tang En nodded his head and said, “I know... McClaren made some adjustments, and we also have to do something... Call Bopp over here.”

Walker turned around to call Bopp, while Tang En walked back to the technical area and grabbed a bottle of water to drink. Although he did not say much, Tang En could already feel that his throat was parched. Nervousness... These feelings once again returned to him.

This is the EFL Cup finals...Damn it, how could I let this become your chance to become famous, Downing?

“Boss?” Bopp, who was standing beside Tang En, called out in a slightly bewildered tone. He was standing there, but Tang En had not seen him.

“Ah...Eugen.” After Tang En calmed down his inner feelings, he turned to face this German player, who could only play as a substitute, ever since Wood appeared out of nowhere. “You will replace Ashley, and tell George to switch positions. Tell him... to mark Downing closely, that number 28.”

“Mhmm.” Bopp nodded his head.

“And you will partner up with Gunnarsson, and become the defensive midfielder. Defend against Juninho, that Brazilian guy. Be more ruthless when you strike, let him know that you, who have just entered, are also not someone to be trifled with!” Tang En said, as he clenched his fists.

“Understood, Boss.”

“Then go!” Tang En patted Bopp’s shoulders and encouraged him, “Don’t think too much, just play as you always do during trainings. Just perform to your usual standard, and that will be enough. You can do it.”

After sending off Bopp, Tang En continued to watch the match from the side of the field. Walker also did not return to the technical area, and instead, stayed with Tang En at the side.

“Tony....” Walker said hesitantly.

However, Tang En knew what Walker wanted to say. “You are worried that we might lose this match, Des.”

Walker did not make any noise, and that was the equivalent to agreeing with Tang En.

“Des, in terms of age, you are older than me. So, I think that saying something like this might not be too appropriate. But, I still want to give you a piece of friendly advice — regardless of whether you’re helping Bowyer, or you intend to become the manager of some other team in the future, you have to remember this.” Tang En stared at the field and said, without even turning his head around, “As a manager, even an assistant one, no matter the occasion, you must never lose hope and confidence. Because these players in front and behind you... they are all looking at you. You understand what I mean? We will win this match.”

Although his heartbeat was no slower than Walker’s, Tang En still turned his head around and gave him a confident smile.

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“Nottingham Forest has made their first substitution of the game. The defensive midfielder, Eugen Bopp, will replace Ashley Young. Manager Twain’s intentions are very obvious. After the consecutive waves of offense by Middlesbrough, he wants to continue to strengthen their defense. It seems as though he wants to defend until overtime?”

“No, Andy. He intends to defend until the penalty kick,” Martin Taylor corrected him. “Till now, throughout the entire of this boring match, the most eye-catching person was Middlesbrough’s winger, Stewart Downing... His sharp breakthrough on the left has applied a huge amount of pressure on Nottingham Forest’s defense! It’s a pity that he lacks that little bit of good luck.” Taylor was referring to Wood’s foul, which had not been called out by the referee. Being able to reduce the opponent team by one player through his performance, would at least be considered as doing the team a big favor tactically-wise.

Downing’s performance was very active, which was something that Tang En did not deny. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have made such an adjustment like that. However, to say that he was the player with the most outstanding performance in this match.... You would still have to ask one more person if he agreed with it.

Ashley Young ran to Tang En, heavily panting. Tang En gave him a hug, thanking him for his performance during the match.

On the other side, on the field, Wood heard Bopp’s words, and raised his head towards the side of the field. Tang En nodded his head at Wood. Hence, he obediently ran to the side. Even though he had



never played this position before, as long as his job was to mark other players, it made no difference to him wherever he was positioned!

Upon seeing that the player that now stood in front of him was number 33, the person who once knocked him over, Downing frowned.

I was just about to settle my score with you, and you came on your own accord..Very good. I'm currently in tip-top condition, and I'll let you witness my prowess!

Wood, expressionless, looked at the opponent standing opposite him, who suddenly clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. Wood did not know what Downing was thinking about, but he also did not care about it. No matter the case, you are the same as those people, who I once faced in the past, opponents and enemies who wanted to impede my obtaining the championship prize money. I don't care if you are some left wing genius in English Football, or if you are Middlesbrough's hope, or any other thing... Since Twain made me mark you, you can forget about running away.

McClaren, who was by the side of the field, already stopped caring if Juninho in the middle would have a better performance after George Wood had gone to the side. Now that Downing's condition was becoming more and more stellar, McClaren made his team pass the ball to this young man, as many times as they could.

Standing on the stage of such an important finals match, only two types of people could perform well. One type was the veteran player with a lot of experience under his belt, while the other type was the new star, who was filled with hope towards his future.

Downing was the latter. He hoped to be able to become famous through this EFL Cup finals, which was broadcast live to the entire country. Hence, he decided to work harder than he had in the past, for this match.

Come on kid, let me see what you've got!

In order to get more balls, Downing took the initiative to run backwards and ask his teammates for the ball. Very quickly, the ball was passed to him. Afterwards, he turned around in a somewhat flowery manner, which attracted a wave of clapping sounds from the stands.

Seeing this, McClaren finally revealed a heartfelt smile on his face. If he still had the mood to play around, it meant that there was nothing wrong with his current condition.

Walker, on the other side, frowned. "Wood did not follow up in time..."

"Don't worry, Des." Tang En consoled him by the side and said, "That kid will very soon discover that he chose the wrong side..."

As for Wood, perhaps there were only two people in the entire world that placed boundless faith in him. One of them was his mother Sophia, who did not know anything about football. The other one was Manager Tony Twain, who watched him grow, step by step.

Andy Gray, the commentator, also had the same opinion as Walker. "What a beautiful receive. George Wood did not close up in time, giving Downing the space required for him to raise his speed and do his tricks. Nottingham Forest's backline defense is in danger again!"

As Downing dribbled the ball down the wing, the distance between him and Wood became smaller and smaller. Downing began to sway the upper half of his body, hoping to be able to confuse his opponent. When they got much closer to each other later on, Downing would kick the ball to the right side of Wood, while he would attempt to accelerate and break past from the left side, knocking the ball past Wood!

Upon seeing this, Tang En, who was at the side of the field, smiled, thinking: This fool, do you really think that Wood is a wooden pile? You want to compete with him in terms of speed? You are not the first idiot to lose to him in terms of speed, and you won't be the last!

Seeing that the ball and his opponent were suddenly headed in two different directions, Wood did not hesitate at all, and immediately turned around to chase the ball, completely ignoring Downing, who was on the other side. Downing, who had painstakingly attempted to break past from the wing, soon discovered, to his shock, that by the time he had done so, the ball was already out of his range of control!

That number thirty-three player, his turning around speed was actually much faster than Downing's dash. He had turned around, boxed out, and intercepted the ball, all at one go! Downing could not stop in time, causing him to bump into Wood's back. A strong repulsive force struck him, causing him to grimace in pain.

"Downing's attempt to knock the ball past.. Ah! It failed! George Wood's reaction is much faster than he expected! Beautiful defense!"

John Motson, who was at home watching the live broadcast on the television, laughed out loudly and happily, after hearing Andy Gray shouting. Gray was not the first commentator to be shocked by George Wood's speed. He remembered those words, which he had told this kid after his first match — Well done, kid! Just continue playing like this, you have a bright future ahead of you!

From the current looks of it, what John said was not exaggerating at all. This kid...as long as Nottingham Forest could be promoted to the English Premier League this season, would definitely be known by many more, and he would also make more people exclaim:

"God! This kid is really fast!"

"Gosh! His body is really strong!"

"My god, this is already the ninety-third minute, and he is still able to sprint back and forth! Is he the terminator?"

And so on and so forth...

Unknowingly, Motson had actually started looking forward to Nottingham Forest's performance, after being promoted to the Premier League. What kind of force would they become? What kind of drive would this manager, a man of character, bring to this stagnant pool of water?

**Chapter 166: Who Is Afraid Of Who Part 2**

Downing, who had been rebuffed twice by Wood, refused to give up. Instead, his strong desire to win had been ignited as a result of this. Downing did not believe that he would suffer a third setback by the same person today.

It was yet another attempt at a breakthrough from the wing, and Downing decided to stop playing any tricks or flowery actions, and instead, relied solely on his speed to overpower this opponent. He attributed his previous failure to the fact that he had kicked the ball too softly, causing the ball to be too slow. As a result, Wood happened to be able to intercept the ball right after he turned around.

This time... I won't make any more mistakes!

"Downing dribbles the ball and attempts to breakthrough. He is very fast! It's really praiseworthy...." Gray was so engrossed in this young man's performance, that he almost overlooked another young man.

Seeing that his opponent intended to dribble the ball and break through from his side, Wood naturally would not let him past. Hence, he also turned around and tried to catch up.

Perhaps the most regrettable thing for Downing this match was the lack of understanding regarding his opponent — George Wood. But it was not a big deal. After this match, Downing would become familiar with Wood, and he would know what he should do in the future. Thus, the next time he met this quiet mixed-blood, he would definitely attempt to break through from the other side instead.

Downing once again raised his speed. He was in top form, and in possession of the ball. The ball was at a suitable distance away from his feet, making him feel as though he was flying...This was his favorite style of playing. When I am in my best form, I am the only master on the field. When I spread my wings and soar, nobody can stop me, nobody!

Suddenly, Downing caught a silhouette out of the corner of his eyes... a wave of an oppressive feeling surged forth!

Who is this? That stupid Thompson? I've already reached somewhere near Nottingham Forest's penalty area so quickly? It seems like I've long shaken off that number thirty-three, that useless guy!

However, McClaren, who was at the side of the field, suddenly shouted, "Bastard! Pass the ball!"

Although he was not on the field, McClaren could sense the impending danger much earlier than Downing. That black shadow only swayed for a split second, before disappearing. Have I also passed Thompson? Great, I shall seize this opportunity and go all the way into the penalty area!

Just as Downing intended to do this, he suddenly felt that his center of gravity became unstable...

George Wood decided to stop running together with this person. The opponent's dribbling had always been on point, causing Wood to be unable to grasp any chance to steal the ball. Currently, Downing seemed to have the intention to change the pace. This was evident from the way he kicked the ball, as it became slightly more forceful. This was the sign of Downing intending to raise his speed once again. However this time, Wood would not let Downing do as he wished.

When he was still in the youth team, Wood had been told by Tang En that the best timing to perform a tackle was at the moment when the opponent kicked the ball away from himself. As long as he could

seize the right timing, even if he tackled the other party from behind, it would not be considered a foul, as that would be a perfectly clean tackle!

Just like a cheetah, Wood sprinted forth, and his center of gravity shifted downwards very quickly. Making use of the momentum from his high-speed running, Wood tackled the football right in front of Downing. This was the best timing.

Right now!

Wood's leg kicked the ball, causing it to bounce up. As a result, the ball happened to hit Downing's right calf, which was raised in the air, before changing direction and flying out of bounds!

On the other hand, Downing, who was completely caught completely off guard and could not stop in time, had habitually tripped over Wood's body, causing him to fall flat on his face... this was his third time suffering a setback.

"Dang it, another foul!" the Middlesbrough fans once again shouted furiously.

"As if it was a foul!" the Nottingham Forest fans replied them in the same heightened manner.

Even the commentator was on Nottingham Forest's side. "What a beautiful tackle! What a beautiful tackle! A perfect defense! Stewart Downing has suffered three consecutive setbacks by George Wood. He is really very unlucky!"

Lying on the ground in an embarrassing position, Downing turned his body to face the referee, asking for a foul card to be given to Wood. However, the referee and the linesman both made an unanimous decision, with the hand and the flag both pointing towards Middlesbrough's side of the court — that was Nottingham Forest's out-of-bounds ball!

The displeased Middlesbrough fans in the stands started jeering, but this unpleasant noise was soon interrupted and drowned out by an even louder song...

"Pitiful McClaren, chose the wrong opponents for the finals! Pitiful Stewart Downing, chose to race the wrong opponent! Wood! Wood! Wood Wood Wood! Long Live Forest! Forest! Forest! Forest — Victory! Oh la la! Forest Forest! Let us go to Europe!"

The plump John stood amidst the crowd and started clapping, like the people around him, to provide the beat for themselves. At the same time, they loudly sang praises for Nottingham Forest and George Wood. This song was composed by himself, and was originally meant to be used during the youth matches to show support for George Wood, the player whom Tang En held in high regards.

Later, alongside with Wood's promotion to the first team, as well as his exceptional performance, they decided to bring this song over to City Ground Stadium. Once they started singing this song, it soon spread like wildfire across the stands. Now, they had managed to bring this song over to Cardiff Millennium Stadium and, through the live television broadcast, the entirety of England would hear their singing, and everyone would know of that person's name in the song.

Ladies and gentlemen, please remember, he is George Wood, and he will become the King of the Forest!

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Wood's tackle was so beautiful, even Motson, who was seated at home, almost jumped up from his sofa. Needless to say, the fans watching the match live had even greater reactions. Countless people dedicated their ovations to this young player wearing the number 33 shirt, who had made Juninho and Downing suffer setbacks, one after another.

Gareth Bale, who was in the stands, turned his head around and asked his father excitedly, while clapping, "Dad! Can I be like him? Being cheered on and clapped for by everyone here?" Wood had been promoted to the first team from the youth team, and his immediate outstanding performance led to his signing of a contract with the first team thereafter. Wood, therefore, naturally became Gareth Bale's idol and goal that he worked towards, as Gareth Bale was also playing for the youth team.

His father smiled and said to him, "Of course you can! My son is a genius!"

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The three consecutive failed face-offs against Wood had a very negative impact on Downing's confidence. This kind of setback could take quite some time before its effects could be dispelled. He had always thought that he was the best, but the best him was actually unable to break past that quiet number 33.

He was suddenly somewhat afraid of facing that guy one-on-one. So, when his teammates passed the ball to him, he always passed it away very quickly.

McClaren, who was off the field, noticed this and sighed. Afterwards, he shouted Downing's name loudly, and made a hand gesture to him, signalling for him to switch positions.

Letting Downing switch positions with Mendieta, who was on the other side, and using the experienced Spanish person to deal with that young brat. was his original intention. Since Downing was destined to be unable to perform well on that side anymore, McClaren wanted to simply switch his position and let him try to break through as usual. This was no big deal. This match's outcome would have to depend heavily on how this kid performed now...

Tang En noticed McClaren's actions at the side of the field, and just as expected, Downing indeed went to the other side.

You're afraid? Very good!

"Geor — ge!" Sucking in a deep breath, Tang En also shouted Wood's name loudly. After Wood turned his head and looked at Tang En, Tang En extended his hands and pointed in Downing's direction.

Wood understood what Tang En meant, and he turned around to switch positions with Commons as well. When Downing discovered that the person in front of him was still that detestable number 33, he even helplessly shot a look to the side of the field, hoping that McClaren could give him some new instructions...Should he change back?

McClaren was completely at a loss of what to do. It was obvious that the other party wanted to completely freeze out the most active player on the team. No matter what position you made him play, it was believed that George Wood would not be too far away from him.

Damnit!

McClaren did not want to resign to it, but he did not have any means to deal with it. What else could he do? He could only wait silently, and hope that the other party would soon crumble under the pressure. Would Tang En let him get what he wanted?

George Wood's exceptional performance strengthened his teammates' confidence and fighting spirit. Wood used his actions to tell his teammates, who had already been battered and worn out from Downing's breakthroughs, that they could completely hold off their opponent's relentless waves of offense. Wasn't Wood a live example?

This match was currently back on Tang En's tracks once again, and was in the midst of slowly inching towards the outcome he had hoped to see...

### **Chapter 167: Penalty Shootout Part 1**

With their confidence boosted by Wood's wonderful performance, the forest team players united to form a stronghold, defending against Middlesbrough's frenetic attack at the last moment. Despite looking like they were dejected and depressed, and battered and exhausted, they successfully kept the score at 0:0, then went into overtime in the end.

This was a watershed moment. Before this game, Middlesbrough did not think this match would be dragged into overtime, and thus, they launched a frenetic offense in the last few minutes of the game. Although Tang En's heart beat wildly, and his pupils suddenly shrank as he watched the game, he sensed the deathbed struggle within the crazy Middlesbrough ranks.

This is their last madness, and when the game goes into overtime, according to my expectations, the Middlesbrough players will not have any strength left to pose a threat to my goal. This is what happens, when you underestimate me and my team!

Because they had expended too much physical and mental energy in the first ninety minutes for the offense, Steve McClaren did not manage to wait for the moment when the Forest team was unable to hold on any longer. Instead, his own players were under more and more pressure, that they kicked the final shot directly into the stands, which only helped the Forest team out of the siege.

There was a five-minute break between the ninety-minute match and the half-hour overtime. It was not too long, but just enough for the players, who had played hard for ninety minutes, to sit down to catch their breath, drink some water, and listen to their manager chatter on about the tactical layout at the same time. Then, immediately, they had to stand up and continue on into battle.

Such little time was not suitable for a detailed tactical arrangement to be launched. Tang En let everyone sit around him together, and then told them, "In the overtime, we will continue to defend. Once we enter into the penalty shootout stage, we will certainly win!"

Everyone understood the simple and straightforward tactical arrangement that he had explained. He no longer needed to give encouragement. Currently, the team confidence was high, and their morale was flourishing. There was no need for him to say anything more.

After the game went into overtime, as both sides' strength was in deep decline, Middlesbrough could no longer besiege the Forest team, and Tang En intended to delay the time by planning to bring on substitutes. In the first half of the overtime, he brought off the exhausted Crouch, bringing on Rebrov, and at the last moment of the second half, Clint Hill replaced Gunnarsson, who was so physically maxed out that his legs were cramping.

Until the last moment, except for the goalkeepers, only George Wood was still able to sprint back and forth. This was also the most important guarantee that the Forest team had not lost the ball during the overtime. His physical strength was completely astonishing.

McClaren also used his last substitution quota during the overtime in order to try and make a last-ditch attempt. However, Zenden, who had just come on, encountered the same problem as Downing, as he tried to use speed to break through George Wood.

Like McClaren, he thought that Wood, who had run for one hundred minutes already, would not have the physical strength to tangle with them. But, alas, they were wrong. It was as if George Wood was being brought on the same time as Zenden. There was no problem with his physical strength, and his running speed was not affected. He also caused Zenden, who was in front of him, to tumble.

"George Wood, a perpetual motion machine!" In the end, Andy Gray simply gave this indefatigable guy a fitting moniker.

Guided by "the Perpetual Motion Machine", the Forest team persisted, until they obtained what they most wanted to see – amidst the loud booing of the Middlesbrough fans, the referee finally blew the whistle to officially end of the 120-minute game!

"The game is over! Of course, it's just the 120-minute game that has ended! After a long battle, both sides entered the penalty shootout stage! This is the moment Manager Tony Twain wants to see the most. But, can his team beat Middlesbrough in a penalty shootout?" Gray was skeptical about this. Among the managers, who deliberately dragged the game into situations which they liked to see, but then realized that the outcomes were not what they wanted, well, these types of incidents were quite common. "A penalty kick largely depends upon luck to determine the winner ..."

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Tang En squatted on the turf, the players sitting around him, gasping for breath. He held the name list for the players, who were going to represent the Forest team in the penalty shootout. The game had finally reached the moment of his plan. He, who had held on till his opponents' last moments of madness, had never been more confident. Yes, I can win! I can win my first championship trophy, ever since I have been a manager! If you want to ask me the reason, my answer is: No reason! I just believe I can win!

Gazing at the players sitting around him, who were being massaged by the medical team, Tang En shook the list in his hand and said, "I've heard this argument numerous times, that they think a penalty kick is a competition of luck, and the winning side is luckier than the loser. Now, I want you to know what a load of crap this is! If a penalty kick is just relying on luck to determine the result, why do we have to repeatedly practice it every day for one week? Let me tell you what the factors are that determine the final result of a penalty kick: Confidence and willpower! Just these two! Do you believe you can win this

final battle? We've endured 120 minutes of difficult challenges, and we've successfully come to the end. Now, is there still anyone who doubts that we can win?"

"No, Boss!" the players answered loudly, despite their exhaustion.

"Very well! I know you have never doubted, because you are my players and you strongly believe as I do that the final victory must belong to us. You are all strong-willed warriors, who are never easily shaken! Close your eyes and think about the path you've gone through so far this season, then recall about the opponents we've overcome and the difficulties we have faced. When we were at our worst situation, in the away challenge against Millwall, what kind of game was that?" Tang En guided the players patiently and systematically. With their eyes closed, the players scowled and clenched their fists, remembering. The players who had not experienced that game also closed their eyes. Tang En did not care what they thought, because none of his players came from Millwall.

"From the traffic jam, riding the subway, the encounter with the football hooligans, all of this, then we finally won! 7:1! We shut everyone up, those who had laughed at us and humiliated us! A Premier League team couldn't stop us, and we have reached the finals. Before all these things, how many people would have thought we'd end up at the Millennium Stadium? No one, except ourselves. We have made so much effort to defeat one opponent after another, stomp on their bodies to get to the throne, and now we are only one step away from that glittering crown! What reason do we have to fall down here? I know you're all very tired, someone's even got a cramp in his legs." Tang En looked at Gunnarsson, wearing a team jacket, while he was being massaged by the team doctor on one side. He was bought by the former Manager Collymore, but his professional spirit and attitude had made Tang En choose to continue trusting in him, and he was glad had not misjudged him.

"But now ... Even if we have to climb, we will climb up, too! There's no difference whether we lose in the last step or in the first step, we will all be losers! We must win! We must certainly win!" Tang En clenched his fist and growled. His gritted teeth and fierce look made everyone also feel his thirst for victory and the championship.

Walker quietly watched Twain do these special "penalty kick tactical arrangements". According to common sense, most managers would try their best to lessen the pressure on the players before such an important penalty shootout, telling them to be normal or to let go of the outcome. Only Tony tried his hardest to make everyone understand that winning was the only way out, to let them know that they must win this game, and to give them increased pressure, so that they may rise to the occasion. Was he not afraid that the players would be crushed by the pressure? Or was it...he believed in his players more than most managers would?

Suddenly, a thought came to his mind, and he boldly stated, "I trained them, and they will be able to do it when I need them to." Tony's voice was filled with pride, like a general watching rows of well-trained soldiers walk past him into the battlefield. He trained them, and trusted them, and they had repaid his trust with real actions.

The boss said that we can win, then we will definitely win! The boss said we can do it, then we can certainly do it!

Why? You're asking me for a reason? Why? I can't tell you, because we don't know, but we believe in him, just as he believes in us. It doesn't need any reason!



Walker thought, perhaps this was a manager's charisma. Just like his boss, Brian Clough. Although he rarely appeared on the training ground, and he would only see him a few times a week, everyone was willing to follow him, believe his every word, and even obey his arrangements. If the boss had said, "Guys, we need a win", then they would fight to win the next match.

And this kind of manager was becoming more rare nowadays. It was the age of a player's outsized personality now, and the manager was becoming an unqualified worker. They directed the game, but could not discipline the team. They could be dismissed by the boss at any time, thus becoming the team's scapegoat for a poor record. Without saying anything else, would a manager now dare to slap the team's main players? Would he dare to punch a player in his stomach, due to poor performance? Risking being late for the UEFA Champions League final, just to get a player to return to the hotel to shave his beard?

No, there would never be such a manager anymore. Because, such men would absolutely not last long in today's football environment!

Though Tony would not dare to slap his own players, and would never let the players shine his shoes, he was really like "The Boss" in some areas! It was no wonder Bowyer said that there would be people who would compare Tony with "The Boss".

A manager, who could win the hearts of the players, and made them willingly to follow him, was truly admirable!

## **Chapter 168: Penalty Shootout Part 2**

Walker saw Twain stand up and walk towards him. He knew it was time for him to work, so he took over the list from Twain's hands and walked to the middle of the players, to explain the list of appearances and some things to take note of. Twain and the entire coaching team were well-prepared for the penalty shootout.

They had studied the videos of all the Middlesbrough players' penalty kicks, that is, if the player had played a penalty kick in a game. In addition, they also studied the Australian, Schwarzer's, who was the Middlesbrough main goalkeeper's habits in regards to his saving penalty kick shots. These were all passed onto the players during the usual training. Now, he just repeated it, to remind them to pay attention.

Twain had already gone back to the technical area for a drink of water. After using his voice to shout so many words, his throat must be very strained. Tony's voice was now hoarser than it had been when they first worked together. This was because they repeatedly roared on the sidelines, in the locker room, on the training ground, and so on.

Walker could also clearly feel the excitement of the players, especially when he was pointing out the things to take note of to the players, who were like the manager, eager for the championship trophy, and hungry for glory. After all, these were the players trained by Tony Twain.

His work went well, and the players were called by the referee. The penalty shootout was about to begin. Walker did not feel even the slightest bit of "nervousness" from these players. Instead, they only

seemed to exude immense confidence. He looked at Twain, who was gulping down water, then laughed and said, "Tony, we can win!"

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Wood, who was not good at shooting, was placed at the bottom of the list, at the eleventh spot. The goalkeeper, Darren Ward, was even placed a spot before him. He had wanted to stand outside the crowd in order to watch the penalty shootout that seemed unrelated to him, but Wes Morgan pulled him in.

Then, two arms, each from a different person, hung over his shoulders, as all of them hugged the shoulders of their teammates next to them and stood side by side. They used this approach to convey trust and courage to each other, proving that they were a team that could not be defeated.

In the middle of the wall, Wood was a little overwhelmed at first. But, he soon felt that, in such an environment, it felt very awkward for his arms to still hang by his side, so he simply followed the others, placing both his arms over the shoulders of his teammates' shoulders on both sides. Then, he watched the first penalty player from the team, Kris Commons, step forward.

The Cardiff Millennium Stadium, which could accommodate seventy-five thousand spectators, was suddenly silent, with everyone nervously watching the square in front of the South Stand. Kris Commons was one of two best players in the team's penalty practice, and the other was the Romani player, Freddy Eastwood. Therefore, Tang En arranged for him and Eastwood to appear first and last respectively, like bookends. Kris Commons would shoot the first penalty kick, and Freddy Eastwood would kick the fifth.

In addition to having excellent penalty kick techniques, these two penalty players must also have outstanding psychological qualities. If the opening shot was unsuccessful, it would affect the performance of all the players thereafter. Once again, Tang En demonstrated his unquestionable attitude by entrusting the heavy responsibility to Commons, who had only joined the team during the winter transfer.

Commons placed the football carefully on the penalty spot, then withdrew from the penalty area, his eyes locked on the Middlesbrough goalkeeper Schwarzer. He was not afraid to look directly at the goalkeeper, because those tricks were ineffective on him now!

He never regretted coming to the Forest team, and he did not want to be just a transient player in this team. He wanted to make his mark on the Forest team's honor list, and to become a star player of the Forest team. This was the perfect stage to do so!

"The first player to come up for Nottingham Forest is Kris Commons, who has just moved from Stoke City. This transfer deal cost Manager Tony Twain three hundred thousand pounds, and now it's time to show everyone if that three hundred thousand pounds is well-worth the money spent!" the commentator was getting the crowd's excitement at peak.

Pop!

"A long distance ... powerful run-up! A shot to the goal! The ball is in! Kris Commons! He withstood the pressure of the first penalty kick, and fooled Schwarzer! An energetic volley from the middle!"

A great cheer erupted in the stands, where the Forest team fans gathered. Below the stands, though he was not as excited as the people around him, Tang En brandished his clenched fist.

The Forest team got off to a good start, and now, the pressure was on Middlesbrough. McClaren's first appointed penalty player, Mendieta, had the best penalty kicks in the team. So, it seemed when he brought him on, McClaren had already made plans to play a penalty shootout with the Forest team.

Mendieta was experienced. Such a penalty kick was not difficult for him, and he also shot the ball into the goal easily. It was the Middlesbrough fans' turn to cheer. After a battle round of penalty kicks, they equalized the score with the Forest team at 1:1.

Next, the players from both sides did not make any mistakes, and the cheers rang out in the South Stand and the North Stand correspondingly. After four rounds of penalty kicks, the score was tied at 4:4.

Tang En was well-prepared for this penalty shootout, and it appeared that Middlesbrough was no soft touch either. The fifth player to appear from the Forest team was Freddy Eastwood. If he did not shoot the ball in, the pressure would completely shift to the goalkeeper, Darren Ward, which would be dangerous for the Forest team. He had to enter this penalty kick to the goal, so the pressure would be shifted to their opponents, and not his teammate.

"Freddy Eastwood .... he was just an amateur player, selling used cars three months ago, and now, he's standing in front of the penalty kick at the Millennium Stadium, readying for a crucial penalty kick."

Martin Taylor spoke out loud Eastwood's inner thoughts at this moment. Three months ago, he did not know if he would be able to play professional football again at all, and now, not only had he received a professional contract from Nottingham Forest, but he had also come to stand on the field of the EFL Cup final, as a key player for this important penalty kick!

Once again, he recalled the future that Manager Twain had promised him. Before the EFL Cup semi-final, he had said that they would definitely win that match. As evidence that he did not lie, it turned out that they had won the game, and that they had also made it to the finals.

It sounded like a fairytale story, but it really happened. Since that game, Eastwood no longer doubted this manager's words. He always seemed to have a mysterious power, as if he could really see the future.

He said, "We can win! And we will win!"

So..... We can really win, and we will win!

Tang En had no idea what Eastwood was thinking now. He stared at the Romani Gypsy's back, his fists clenched. His body even slightly trembled involuntarily. This was a critical moment, and his heart was beating faster and faster ... Damn it! Why hasn't the referee blown the whistle yet?!

Just as Tang En was grumbling, the referee finally blew the whistle, allowing the penalty kick. Standing in front of the ball, Eastwood took a two-step run, then swung his leg and kicked!

Schwarzer judged the direction correctly, but Eastwood's shot was trickier than he'd imagined! The football swiped across the turf, brushed past the goalpost, and rolled into the net!

“What a beautiful corner! Freddy Eastwood! He scored the crucial goal!” Andy Gray yelled amidst Forest fans’ louder voices at the Millennium Stadium. It was a cathartic goal, and Eastwood deeply knew it. After scoring the goal, he stood on the same spot, leaned back, and raised his head to roar at the sky, which led to all the Forest fans in the stands, following suit, letting out a long howl skyward at the same time. That force, it was enough to make any opponent tremble in fear!

Differing from the excited players and fans, Tang En was extremely tense before the goal was shot in. But when Eastwood really kicked the ball in, he only just swung his fist hard, and there was no other exaggerated display of emotion, because he knew Middlesbrough had another player, and that the game was not yet over.

If the opponent also scored, then the penalty shootout would continue, except the rule would change to a sudden-death penalty, which was even more brutal. The psychological pressure on both teams’ players would also be far greater.

What was in his favor, was that Eastwood had withstood the pressure of being the fifth penalty player and had scored a goal. Now the enormous pressure had shifted to the last Middlesbrough player, Massimo Maccarone.

Italians ... They’ve never been good at penalty kicks ...

The Forest fans were making an enormous ruckus, hoping to create more pressure on Maccarone. But would it go their way?

This was a critical moment. Although the key to determining their fate was not in Tang En’s hands, this was the moment that would truly define it. Thus, this was his most intense moment.

He felt the time was at a standstill, and all the voices in his head were gone. Only his heart was still beating. The sound of his heartbeat reminded him that he was still alive, and not a hollow shell.

His heartbeat was getting faster, almost bursting, till he could not withstand the tremendous pressure coming from his left chest. He could not even complain about the opponents delaying their shot, because he was afraid that, once he opened his mouth, he would explode due to the pressure!

Will this be my first championship? Will this be the starting point of a path full of glory and trophies? Will this... be my destiny?

Suddenly, a crisp whistling sound rang out in his ear, as if it was the sound of nature. Then, he saw Maccarone do a quick sprint, then vigorously kick the football, which shot into the sky!! Over the beam!! Flying–straight–into–the–stands!!!

Seemingly quiet just a moment ago, the stadium suddenly erupted in massive cheers, as if barrels of gunpowder had been detonated, and the earth-shattering sounds came roaring towards Tang En.

Boom!

“Maccarone overshot the penalty kick! The League One team, Nottingham Forest, has won the championship! They are the English Football League Cup champions for the 03 to 04 season!! Fourteen years later, this Red Forest tapped into what they used to be best at, and finally returned to the spotlight. Welcome back, Nottingham Forest! Congratulations to the EFL Cup Champions!!”

## Chapter 169: Want To Make A Bet? Part 1

The capital of Wales, Cardiff City, Cardiff Millennium Stadium. Everything that took place there on that afternoon, down to the most minute details, would still be remembered by Tang En clearly, even after many years. That was because this was his first championship title, the starting point of his glorious journey.

He stood at the sideline blankly, and there was already no one around him — all of the Nottingham Forest staff and players rushed onto the field, celebrating their victory with the other eleven players. He felt as though his entire body had been emptied, and he had been completely drained.

He couldn't even go forward and celebrate the victory with the rest of the people, even if he had wanted to. What did he want to do the most at the moment? It would definitely be to find a quiet place alone to sit down, then slowly relishing and savoring the joy from his victory.

But evidently, it was something that he couldn't do at the moment. Tang En was surrounded by loud cheering noises all around him, and the broadcast system in the stadium was still in the midst of announcing the current season's EFL Cup champions. Each time it was announced, it would always be able to cause the Nottingham Forest fans on the stands to echo loudly.

"The champions for the 03-04 EFL Cup are..."

"Forest Forest! We are the champions!!"

While Tang En was still staring blankly by the side of the field, his players and coaching staff ran off the field and raised the defenseless Tang En high up over their heads. This victory belonged to Nottingham Forest, but if not for Tony Twain, and all the hard work that he put in for this match, then perhaps they would be looking at other people's celebrations instead. Therefore, who was the person they should be most thankful for, after attaining this victory? Everyone knew very clearly the answer to that question.

The people standing at the periphery of the crowd were unable to squeeze in, and could only splash their unfinished water at Tony Twain, who was in mid-air. He had been drenched from head to toe, and his suit resembled a wet rag. But he no longer cared, this was the moment for him to enjoy himself to the fullest.

Nottingham Forest players used this method to express their gratitude towards Manager Tony Twain. When Manager Twain first took over the team, this was a team that could not see any semblance of hope, as they were ranked fourth in the League, with six consecutive losses, and their morale was at an all-time low.

But now...they were the champions of the EFL Cup! Congratulations to them, as Manager Tony Twain has managed to nurture a team into one that is now full of fighting power. This is something that his predecessor, Collymore, was unable to achieve, even before he left. This became the line of demarcation of these two managers' fates.

Fourteen years ago, during the 1990 EFL Cup finals, Nottingham Forest had claimed their last championship trophy under the lead of their legendary manager Brian Clough. Today, they have, under

the lead of another young manager, once again snatched back the EFL Cup championship title, which has eluded them for fourteen years.

What's more, Nottingham Forest fans have reasons to look forward to more to come. Under Manager Tony Twain's lead, this Nottingham Forest team has given everyone a refreshing feel. A League One team defeating a Premier League Team, what a complete upset! If Nottingham Forest continues to stay in League One by the end of this season, then all will be fortunate enough to see a second division team participate in the UEFA Europa League!

"Martin, why is it that Nottingham Forest will not be promoted to the Premier League by the end of the season? Regardless of whether it is through direct promotion or the play-offs... after seeing today's match, I firmly believe that Nottingham Forest has the ability to do so," Andy Gray said, as though he had become Tony Twain's ardent supporter. "Because they have a very exceptional manager."

At this moment, he recalled what John Motson had said to him previously, "Manager Twain is a very interesting person, in all aspects."

He is indeed very interesting!

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Nobody cared about the fates of the defeated, or about their feelings at the moment. After shaking hands with Tang En, out of routine, McClaren walked back to the changing room. When the match organizers began setting up the podium in the middle of the football field, his team had already finished changing, and appeared by the side of the field.

At that moment, Nottingham Forest's celebration was still ongoing near the Nottingham Forest fans' stands. They were simply too excited to care about how their opponents felt at the moment, as they unleashed their inner joy to their heart's content. The television reporters and staff carried their cameras, and ran after them around the field.

However, Tony Twain was not with them. He had been blocked off by even more reporters by the side of the field, answering the interview their countless questions. Pearce Bruce was also amongst them. This was a treatment exclusive to the victors, and Tang En loved this kind of treatment.

"...Yes yes! We are currently the champions! The south changing room's curse has no effect on us! Why? Because I dispelled it! I'm not afraid of some curse, and reality has proven everything...An upset? No no, not an upset! Any team that has advanced into the finals has the ability and possibility to win the championship title. I don't think that English Premier League teams are necessarily much stronger than League One teams, all these are just nonsense! Who is stronger than who? Whichever team that triumphs over the other is the stronger team!"

Once the big mouth of the excited Tang En opened, all the reporters around him laughed. This kind of manager, one who did not give the losers, his opponents, any face, how long has it been since they last saw someone like this? He was really arrogant...but they loved it!

Without his arrogance and his personality, how could there be news? Without news, how could the reporters earn a living? Not only did this publicize and promote a manager, it also allowed countless news reporters to make a living. If such a schtick could kill multiple birds with one stone, why not?

Nottingham Forest's celebration was very soon restricted to a very small area. That was because the prize ceremony had already started. In order to express sufficient respect to their opponents, no matter how happy they were, Nottingham Forest had to wait until the runners-up collected their medals on the podium, before they could continue with their celebration. So, they had to slightly suppress their emotions for the time being.

There was nothing special with the runners-up collecting their prizes. They accepted their silver medals amidst the Middlesbrough fans' clapping, before walking down the podium sullenly. What ensued was the moment that excited everyone!

The broadcast system in the stadium shouted, "Let us welcome... the champions — Nottingham Forest!!"

"Forest, Forest!" the crowd chanted.

The Nottingham Forest players got onto the podium, one by one, amidst the cheering sounds of their supporters. Against the banner in the background, which had the words "03/04 EFL Cup Champions" printed on it, they received their gold medals from the chairman of the organizing committee, Sir Mosine. This was a moment that many people dared not even dream about — them, becoming the EFL Cup champions, and qualifying for the UEFA Europa League next season!

When they felt that their futures were bleak during the first half of the season, could they have ever thought that they would have such a day? Who was the one who brought them this kind of glorious moment?

When Tony Twain walked up to the podium, the cheering noises from the stands erupted forth, louder than before. All of the Nottingham Forest fans obviously knew the person who brought such a tremendous change to the team. They thanked him and respected him by this showing of support.

After Tang En walked up to Sir Mosine, Sir Mosine grabbed hold of Tang En's hands, and said with a smile, "Well done, Mr. Twain. You have raised the public image of League One matches. Congratulations, champion manager!"

These words made Tang En feel extremely good, especially his last sentence, where he called Tang En a "champion manager".

"Thank you, Sir Mosine." Tang En bent over, allowing the other party to hang the gold medal around his neck. Tang En, with his head lowered, saw a flash of golden light, as soon as his neck sank from the weight of the medal. This was a genuine glory that was hanging around his neck!

I also have a championship title under my belt!

The people lining up behind Tang En to receive the medals were the coaching staff. They had contributed greatly to the team's championship title with their hard work, and therefore, were entitled to gold medals as well.

After the coaching staff received their medals, the person who got on the podium was George Wood. When Tang En was clapping for Wood, he was also rather amused by the sight of Wood, who stood in front of Sir, not knowing what he should do. The other party grabbed his hand and said something to

him, but he did not know what kind of expression he should respond with, evidently in distress. After all, he was still a somewhat shy big boy! Ha ha!

After Wood lowered his head and allowed Sir Mosine to hang the gold medal around his neck, Wood walked off the podium, but was soon pulled by Wes Morgan into the group of excited teammates.

“This is very good,” Tang En thought, as he smiled.

The last player to get onto the stage and receive his prize was the current team captain, goalkeeper Darren Ward. When he received that delicately crafted trophy from Sir Mosine, the atmosphere in Cardiff Millennium Stadium reached its peak. Red confetti and colored ribbons began spraying out from behind the backdrop, as the stadium started playing that classic song, <We Are The Champions>.

This was Tang En’s favorite song from his favorite band.

We are the champions!

“Congratulations to Nottingham Forest! They are the champions of the 03 to 04 season EFL Cup! They are fully-deserving of this title!”

Tang En and Ward each grabbed onto one side of the trophy, raising it high up in the air!

This was really a wonderful afternoon...

## **Chapter 170: Want To Make A Bet? Part 2**

Nottingham Forest winning the EFL Championships was a big deal in Nottingham. Even though their archenemy was still in the same city, the Nottingham Forest fans escorted the Nottingham Forest coach bus all the way from Cardiff back to Nottingham.

This was considered a very grand welcome ceremony. It had to be known that in the past, this scene had happened only when Nottingham Forest had won the UEFA Europa League; the fans had spontaneously assembled outside of Derby County’s airport, and later drove their cars behind the team’s coach bus.

Now, the weakened Nottingham Forest had long forgotten the feeling of attaining a championship title, and even the past glory of being the UEFA Europa League champions had been gradually forgotten. Right then, Tang En was making them relive that classic moment. How could the fans not go wild? Therefore, although it was the most lightweight championship title among the three English championship titles, the Nottinghamians still showed ample enthusiasm.

Championship titles! No matter what they are, we only want championship titles! The Nottinghamians have had enough not having any championship titles!

On that same afternoon, Pearce Bruce had published a passionate article on the extra edition of Nottingham Evening Post. In the article, this was what he wrote: “...Only championship titles could make us remember once again that we were once the king of Europe! We were once glorious! But the only difference is that the current us no longer needs to indulge ourselves in past glories. We have a new symbol of pride: Tony Twain and his Nottingham Forest!”



Almost all of the local Nottingham media (except for the ones which supported Derby County) reported Nottingham Forest's spectacular feat on their front pages. For Nottingham Forest, which had been on the brink of relegation during the first half of the match season, the fans could be said to have gotten on an exciting roller coaster ride. They had had their ups and downs, experiencing both agony and joy, the two extremes of the spectrum.

Because Nottingham Forest had clinched the first championship title in England this season, other media, not limited to Nottingham's local media, also gave significant coverage on their victory. Miss Barbara was so busy that she could not maintain that professional smile of hers. Nottingham Forest Football Club had received requests from a total of fifty-six different media companies within a span of two days, and there were a few overseas ones among them.

If these media companies were to line up for their interviews one by one, they might have to wait all the way until the current season ended. Moreover, if the time allocated for such celebratory activities was too long, it would severely affect the team's preparation. After Tang En discussed it with Allan Adams, they decided to hold a press conference instead to satisfy all the requests in one go.

The press conference had a very positive effect, and Nottingham Forest's image was improved. The young and capable manager and the American-styled boss were focal points, not to mention the legendary feats of Nottingham Forest this season. For a period of time in England, "The rising Nottingham Forest" became the conversation topic of many people during their free time.

Of course, not everything that Tang En and Evan heard was nice.

The football commentator who posted a review article on the ESPN official website, Mr. Jon Carter, was an example. In his post-match review, he complained about the unfairness of the match towards Middlesbrough. He felt that Nottingham Forest won the championships using a very ugly method. They had not shown any signs of initiative during the match, and played very conservative, slow-paced football. In spite of this, they actually won the championships. That was the blot of the EFL Cup finals. At the end, he ridiculed Nottingham Forest's ranking in League One:

"Can anyone imagine a team not in their home country's top league representing that country in the UEFA Europa League? If we let Nottingham Forest participate in the UEFA Europa League, how will the people from other countries see us? They will laugh at England for being unable to produce a more competent team! Don't believe me? Just wait and see!"

In addition, Mark Lawrenson, who was not optimistic about Tang En from the previous season, once again spoke about Nottingham Forest's prospects on the Match Of The Day program. He still did not think that the team would be able to be successfully promoted to the Premier League by the end of the season. The reason appeared to be ample and convincing: because Nottingham Forest spent too much effort in the EFL Cup, a smart manager would definitely give up the league. After all, they had already gotten the qualifications to participate in next season's UEFA Europa Cup. The UEFA had never said that a team belonging to the country's second division league could not participate in the Europa Cup.

Tang En had never heard of Jon Carter prior to this. He rarely appeared on the ESPN websites, and the traditional media did not have his name either. Tang En felt extremely displeased that he, the "Champion Manager," had been scolded by a nameless grunt. As a result, he asked Bruce Pearce, "Where did this bastard come from?"

Bruce told him the answer.

Jon Carter did not have much fame to speak of in the English Football commentary circle. This was perhaps also his first time commenting on actual football; the articles that he had been previously publishing on the ESPN webpage were about various football video games, such as what FIFA07 could do in order to surpass Pro Evolution Soccer, which game was more fun to play between the Championship Manager series and the Football Manager series, and other articles of the sort.

His understanding of reality football and his severely outdated arguments were perhaps all based on information that he had gotten from playing football-related games, and he published these arguments soon after basing them on these assumptions.

Tang En may have been a loyal player of various football games, but that did not mean that he would feel any sense of familiarity with a stranger whom he had never even seen. Now that Tang En had garnered quite a bit of fame, he suddenly felt like venting all of his pent-up frustration towards the media on that pitiful Carter. So he wrote a "China style" open letter, which English people were new to and did not have much of an understanding of. It was a satire that was filled with cold humor and exaggeration, and Tang En let Bruce publish it in the Nottingham Evening Post. This was Tang En's one-time retaliation towards that guy, who knew nothing but still spouted nonsense, spitting on anything that did not conform to his own thinking. He gave Mr. Carter the nickname "spouter."

Jon Carter, after being mocked by Tang En, was naturally unwilling to be humiliated that way. So, he retaliated by publishing another article on ESPN. But Tang En was in no hurry to reply; if he did, it would seem as though he was urgently looking forward to bickering with him. He waited for a few days before throwing another short article that was a few hundred words long on the Evening Post, continuing to mock and ridicule Mr. "spouter," who claimed that Nottingham Forest was playing football that was behind the world football scene by an entire century.

The real reason behind the two men's battle of words in the media was pretty lame. Tang En had said himself that the debate between offensive football that was nice to watch and utilitarian football that could bring championship titles "had already been debated non-stop for half a century," and there was no need to continue discussing it. But Tang En's replies were full of rhetoric and humor, which was quite a treat for readers. Hence, this became another focal point of the English Football scene for a period of time.

People who played football generally tended to be less well-educated, and there were even many people who were unable to speak fluent, standard English. So a manager like Tang En, who could write an article in such a sharp-tongued manner, and at the same time utilize various rhetorical devices, received the support of many people.

For instance, England's Plain English Campaign announced that the people in the English Football scene could learn from Tony Twain, because his analogies were often used aptly, and left a deep impression on readers. This was because they were always complaining that the Football scene had many people who could not speak in a comprehensive manner: "The 'philosophy' of the people in the Football scene has always brought a great amount of obstruction to our goal to advocate proper English. They are too used to speaking before they think."

Amidst the commotion between both parties' bickering, the president of Nottingham Evening Post saw an opportunity that he could make use of. So, he borrowed Bruce Pearce's voice to extend their invitation to Tang En, offering him a special column in their newspapers. There was no fixed format, no fixed word count, no fixed time. Whenever Tang En wanted to express his personal opinion on certain things or a certain person, he could publish an article in his own special column. The company would pay him a fee according to the word count, and should the contract expire, both parties could continue to renew the contract if they felt that they could continue the partnership.

Tang En thought that this was a great idea; he had been earnestly hoping for a platform through which he could express his views. Holding a press conference for every small thing was very inefficient.

After coming to terms with the contract, they immediately signed the agreement. This would be the first time in Tang En's life that he would have a special column belonging to him, and he could even get draft fees from it.

After receiving the support of Nottingham Evening Post, Tony Twain went all-out in the argument, and Jon Carter lost very quickly. Therefore, this battle of words, which had a very lame reason and only served to one-sidedly showcase Tang En's proficiency at mocking, officially came to an end. Just like on the field, Tang En won his battle in the media.

Jon Carter was not a prominent figure, and his words held little influence. As for his other critic, Mark Lawrenson, Tang En had to use another method to deal with him. He did not criticize Mark Lawrenson's opinion towards his football team, but he spoke to Mark Lawrenson very clearly in his article:

"...Just like how many people once said that it was impossible for Nottingham Forest to obtain the EFL Cup championship title, and just like how many people asserted with certainty that Nottingham Forest was bound to be relegated a few months ago, now there are people jumping out to say that it's impossible for Nottingham Forest to be promoted. I usually ignore these kinds of comments, but I don't want my players to think that my silence is affirming these groundless statements. Therefore, I am very serious and sincere in inviting Mr. Mark Lawrenson to make a bet with me: I bet that my team will appear in the English Premier League matches in the next season. If I win...do you still remember what Mr. Lawrenson said in the previous season? I am very willing to see him shave his beard. And if I lose, I will shave my entire head!"