

## Champions 201

### Chapter 201: Forest in The Transfer Market Part 2

Ribéry suddenly let out a loud scream, alarming all the tenants in the house. They stood on the stairs and looked in puzzlement at the lad with the knife scar on his face, who was spinning in circles and screaming repeatedly. The fat landlady squeezed to the front from behind the crowd and shouted in a louder voice than Ribéry to calm him down. Ribéry finally stopped his madness.

“Franck, what is wrong with you?” asked the landlady.

Ribéry shouted, “I’m going to Britain, I’m going to the United Kingdom!”

“Britain? Isn’t it just across the sea? What are you going to do over there?” asked a tall, lanky man who was in his underpants.

“Play football! Play professional football!!” Just from thinking about that call and a future in England, Ribéry’s face was bunched up in excitement. “I... I’m going to invite you all to dinner! And drinks! I want to celebrate!”

The landlady spread her hands and said sternly, “Well, Franck, since you have money, pay me last month’s rent first.”

Upon the mention of the matter, Ribéry’s face fell again. “Can I owe you first, Aunt Emma?” You know I’m...”

Seeing his embarrassment, the landlady smiled as she ambled down the stairs and gave Ribéry a hug. “Okay, don’t worry, Franck. I wish you good luck.” Then she gently kissed Ribéry’s forehead. After her, the tenants who lived under the same roof also came up to Ribéry and congratulate him on finding another team.

“Do your best, Franck! Become a star player! Just like Thierry Henry!”

“Let all of France know that we can produce a superstar if we work hard!”

“Franck—Ribéry!”

“Olé! Olé!”

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Ribéry felt lucky that a Premier League team was keen on him even though he was only a young, unknown footballer playing in the Championnat National. His biggest problem had been resolved.

And Tony Twain felt that he was lucky too. Either FC Metz had not approached Ribéry yet, or something unexpected had happened. Either way, the future France national team’s main force in the midfield, the extraordinary Scarface warrior in the World Cup held in Germany, now belonged to him. Extremely fast and an exceptional dribbler, Ribéry would be like a sharp blade on the Forest team’s left wing; he was also capable of playing as an attacking midfielder, right winger, and forward. To get such a well-rounded midfielder for free? Where else could one find such a bargain?

The deal was finalized four days later, and Nottingham Forest obtained the twenty-one-year-old French midfielder, Franck Ribéry, for free. When the Forest team announced their confidence in the deal on their official website, even the English correspondents and commentators with the most encyclopedic knowledge of football did not know who Franck Ribéry was. However, his scarred face became a point of interest for the media. With regards to him joining the team, the media's general view was that, because Twain did not spend a single penny, he had simply increased the number of substitutes on the bench.

Since Twain had cast his net for targets in France, there is one person who should not be left out. One day later, the Forest team announced a deal with the French Ligue 1 team, SC Bastia. For a price of one million pounds, the team reeled in Bastia's main right back, Pascal Chimbonda. As Bastia's main right back, Chimbonda had appeared in thirty-one games last season and scored a goal. With his outstanding performance, he had already attracted a lot of interest from various teams. And that time, Twain was, once again, ahead of his competitors.

In terms of center backs, although the Forest team already had Gerard Piqué, Clint Hill, and Wes Morgan, it was far from enough. They needed to fight on multiple fronts.

Entering into July, the latest news on the Forest team's official website about transfers was constantly refreshing.

On July 1st, Nottingham Forest announced an agreement with Birmingham City F.C. to sign Birmingham's main center back, Matthew Upson, for four million pounds. Upson, who came from Arsenal's youth camp, was not a top defender in the Premier League, but he could still play a major role in a Premier League mid-stream team. And the main reason that Twain had his eye on him was that the 25-year-old Upson had more experience than any other center backs on the team, and had played for many teams. In addition, the transfer to Nottingham Forest was, to some extent, revisiting an old haunt for Upson. He had been on loan to the Forest team by Arsenal during the 2000-01 season, but unfortunately he had only played one game.

On the front line, Twain gave up Gareth Taylor, who had joined the team last season, giving him two options: either accepting being a substitute, or being transferred or on a loan. Taylor chose the latter option, and the Forest team was now in contact with several teams who were interested in Taylor.

Eoin Jess ended his contract with the Forest team and chose to return to Aberdeen Football Club for his retirement. The Forest team was now short a player in the midfield who could organize attacks and place kicks as well.

Twain had initially been interested in Mikel Arteta, who had just returned to Spain from Rangers Football Club in Scotland. He had hoped to persuade him to join the ambitious Forest team. But Arteta was not interested in the newly promoted Forest team because La Liga's Real Sociedad had invited him. As a Spaniard, a team from his motherland was clearly better suited to Arteta. He turned down Twain and chose to go to Real Sociedad.

Twain sighed after learning about Mikel Arteta's choice. Even though he had changed the trajectory of Piqué's future, he had not managed to change Arteta's. Mikel Arteta was another fine product of the FC Barcelona youth camp. He was once regarded as the successor to Guardiola, Barcelona's jersey #4. As a

central midfielder, he was good at organizing attacks, and his footwork was also good at placing kicks. These were the reasons why Twain was interested in him.

But instead, he chose to join Real Sociedad, exactly as Tang En remembered. With no opportunities to play in matches while he was in Barcelona, Mikel Arteta had had no choice but to be on frequent loans to other teams in order to play. In the 2000-01 season, he had been put on loan by Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain. Even though he had only played six games, he'd managed to score a goal. In the 2001-02 season, he continued to be on loan to Paris Saint-Germain, and his performance was average. When he returned to Barcelona, he found that there was no place for him. Having no other options, he chose to terminate his contract with Barcelona and went on a free transfer to the Rangers in Scotland. His two seasons in Scotland were wonderful. He played fifty times for the team and scored ten goals. Then, Real Sociedad took a liking to Mikel Arteta in Scotland and sent him an invitation. He proudly returned to Spain only to find that things were not as simple as he'd imagined. In Real Sociedad, he still did not receive opportunities to play, and after half a season in January 2005, he was put on loan to the English team, Everton, by Real Sociedad. Half a season later, he would be permanently transferred to the Liverpool team. After one big circle, he would finally find a stable home. By that time, he would already be twenty-three years old. He would have wasted his youth, wandering ceaselessly.

Tang En had wanted to bypass Real Sociedad at this juncture and bring Mikel Arteta, who had become accustomed to the British-style football, from the chilly Glasgow to Nottingham. What to do...

This is fate, everyone has their own lives and must embark on their journey...

Mikel Arteta was not the first person to rebuff Twain in the transfer market, and he had not given up the idea of looking for a player who could organize offense in the midfield. This time, he had his eye on Xabi Alonso. However, in terms of the Forest team's financial strength and influence, it was too difficult to successfully pull in a midfielder who was coveted by Real Madrid.

Alonso refused to even talk to the Forest team because he felt certain that he would not go to a newly promoted team. If he had to leave Real Sociedad, he would be going to a big team. In the end, Liverpool got him at a price of 10.5 million pounds.

After meeting with a succession of setbacks while he was looking for a midfielder, another piece of news added to Twain's woes – the Forest team received a fax from the distant east, Ukraine. They had made an offer of three million pounds to the Forest team, requesting to purchase Sergei Rebrov.

## **Chapter 202: The Old Soldiers Part 1**

Tang En had long forgotten about what he had said to Rebrov in December of last year, during the half-time interval of the game against Crystal Palace FC in City Ground Stadium: "I will put your name on the list of transfer players." After half a season of integration, Rebrov was already completely able to ensure a spot on the team. As such, Tang En had never considered fulfilling his promise.

So when he received the fax from FC Kyiv Dynamo, his initial reaction was one of shock; he had never considered selling Rebrov. The Ukrainian was one of the few experienced players on the team. Currently, young players made up the majority of Nottingham Forest. Although they were undoubtedly very talented, they lacked the most important thing: experience. The English Premier League and League

One are two completely different types of leagues. Lower tier leagues were usually like “Home Alone,” where young people had most of the power. As such, large clubs were willing to loan out their young players to League One teams as a form of training. However, in the Premier League, there were very few teams that were comprised largely of young players, as most managers dared not shoulder the responsibility of losing a match because of sending out too many young players onto the field.

There were two reasons for Tang En’s purchase of so many young players. The first reason was due to his love of young players that he had gotten from playing the Football Manager game. The second reason was that he did it out of helplessness. There were really very few players which fulfilled his requirements of being experienced and still being at the peak of their professional careers.

For Nottingham Forest, although he did not have many chances to play in the second-half of the season due to his fitness and his injury, Rebrov’s wealth of experience was still very helpful to the team at crucial moments.

Tang En snapped out of his daze and took another look at the name on the fax. Without hesitation, he rejected the transfer request from Kyiv Dynamo.

The next day, Rebrov went to find Tang En before training. “Sir, Kyiv Dynamo’s chairman just gave me a call.”

Tang En sighed. It turned out that the Ukrainian Football Club was prepared on both ends.

“Chairman Surkis told me that Dynamo needs me. And I believe him.”

Tang En looked at Rebrov and said, “Then, Serhiy. What if I told you that I need you too? Would you believe me?”

Rebrov smiled. “Of course I believe you, sir. But Kyiv Dynamo promised me a core position on the team. Sir, can I get the same promise from you, for this season’s Premier League matches?”

This question struck at Tang En’s core. He had indeed not considered giving Rebrov a core position. In highly-intensive matches like the Premier League’s, Rebrov’s ageing knees had become the biggest restricting factor for his performance. If Tang En gave a core position to an old player that might sustain frequent injuries, it would be quite irresponsible of him.

However, Tang En knew that if he told Rebrov his plans, there would be a very high probability of losing him.

After pondering for a while, Tang En finally opened his mouth and asked, “Serhiy, if I say that I promise to give you a core position on the team, will you stay with Nottingham Forest?”

Without hesitating, Rebrov nodded his head. “I will, sir. Being able to play under your management is my honor.”

Lying could retain a player that was useful to the team, but once he discovered that he had been lied to, his relationship with Tang En would be beyond salvation.

Tang En sighed. “I really want to lie to you, Serhiy, but I have to tell you the truth. When this season begins, you definitely won’t be a core player.”

This was a reply that was within expectations. As an old professional soccer player that had played for many different clubs, Rebrov had gained a clear understanding of his future a long time ago. He nodded his head and smiled. "Thank you, sir, for being honest with me. And even more so for your guidance during my most difficult times."

Is this a farewell speech? Tang En thought to himself. In the past, Collymore had spent two million pounds to bring him from London to Nottingham, and now Nottingham Forest had the opportunity to sell him for three million pounds, ultimately earning them one million dollars. No matter how he looked at it, it was definitely a profitable transaction. The price also revealed how highly Kyiv Dynamo regarded Rebrov.

The player wanted to leave, and there was another team that wanted him. Nottingham Forest would lose a veteran player, but could earn one million pounds.

Tang En nodded his head. "if you think that returning to Ukraine will be better for you, then I'll allow you to leave the team. But Serhiy, I want to remind you for the last time... The moment you return to the freezing cold of Eastern Europe, you will be saying goodbye to the mainstream European football world..."

Upon getting the manager's approval, Rebrov was in an extremely good mood. He chuckled. "Sir, do you think that I'm still fantasizing about being able to join a powerhouse club, and winning the championships? I'm already past the age of dreaming. Now is the time for me to seriously consider how I'm going to spend the little time that I have left before I go into retirement."

He was right, and Tang En could not say anything more. Talking about glorious ambitions and achievements at Rebrov's age was indeed not very practical.

"Alright, you win. I wish you luck, Serhiy," Tang En said, waving his hands.

"I wish you good luck too, Sir."

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One day later, Serhiy Rebrov became the first person of the summer to confirm his departure from Nottingham Forest. Kyiv Dynamo had, for three million pounds, bought the Ukrainian player who had found his confidence and his forte while playing the midfielder position.

Through this, the media confirmed Tang En's ability to guide and nurture players. Rebrov had only displayed his truly exceptional performance for half a season, and that was right after Tang En had taken over and became the manager of Nottingham Forest. For a player's value to not dip but instead rise over one season was more than enough on its own to display Tang En's ability.

Rebrov's departure fortified Tang En's determination to find another experienced veteran player for Nottingham Forest's midfield. Currently, the team severely lacked players that could play in the middle lane of the midfield. The only players that were confirmed to be in Tang En's plans were George Wood and Brynjar Gunnarsson. The rest of the players would most likely be purged: either loaned out or sold to other teams.

The team needed veteran players, and Nottingham Forest, which was comprised mainly of young players, was essentially crippled. In that case, who were the veteran players out there that fulfilled Tang En's requirements?

He suddenly thought of someone.

Tang En thought that he might have to make another trip to Italy with a translator.

It was really nice to be the manager of a professional football team, as he could use the company's funds to go on a "vacation."

After he had informed Evan of his destination, the club immediately made all the necessary arrangements for Tang En. Bringing an Italian translator with him, Tang En flew to Milan, Italy in the afternoon of that same day.

At night, when Tang En was eating at the restaurant appointed for the meeting, there were two people seated opposite him. The first was the agent Branchini, and the second was the target who Tang En had specially flown to Italy for: Demetrio Albertini, a curly-haired man who did not look like a football star, and always had a plebeian smile on his face.

When Tang En had still been a football fan, he had not been a diehard supporter of any specific club who would support his team no matter what. Instead, he loved many teams, but would never quarrel with someone over Real Madrid and Barcelona's hundred-year feud. He liked many football stars, but he was not one to hate on other football players just because he liked some other ones.

He was not a supporter of AC Milan, and therefore would not shed tears of joy just because they won the Champions League. Still, he liked the man sitting opposite him.

He was the ex-vice captain of the powerhouse AC Milan, and was highly reputable among football fans. He was AC Milan and the Italian national team's absolute core, and had even been deemed by Maldini as someone who "could make all of Italy catch a cold when he sneezed." The number of glorious titles he had gotten and the number of grand occasions he had experienced were so many that they could not be listed even in a span of two days. However, all those were already things of the past.

By now, he had already been gone from AC Milan for a long time, and was currently intending to annul the contract with Lazio because the club, which had gotten into a financial crisis, could not afford his salary—one million, two hundred and fifty-thousand pounds after taxation.

For SS Lazio, which was badly battered by their financial issues, this was no small amount of money. They had just signed a two-year contract at the start of the year with Albertini, who had been deserted by Milan. With an annual contract salary of one million, two hundred and fifty-thousand pounds, two years' worth of salary would be two million, five hundred thousand pounds. However, this amount of money was still affordable by Nottingham Forest, which had resolved its financial crisis and was a newly-promoted team in the Premier League.

That was the reason why Tang En had chosen Albertini.

Tang En believed that Albertini was not so old that he could only earn his salary on the bench while he silently waited for his retirement. He wanted to give both this Milanese man and Nottingham Forest a chance—a chance to become more mature, to become stronger.

However, it was not like there were no competitors the time. Atlanta United FC's transfer market supervisor, Larini, had also met with Albertini's agent, Branchini, just a day before Tang En arrived in Milan. This was an incident that taken place in the original timeline, from before Tang En's meddling.

"Deme, we all know Lazio's current situation, and I also know that Atlanta is very interested in you. But please don't doubt Nottingham Forest's sincerity. You really believe that this is the end of your professional career? You really think that you've stooped as low as playing for a Serie A team that was at the bottom of the league?" Tang En started showing off his glib tongue in hopes of convincing Albertini to stop his negotiations with Atlanta and turn to Nottingham Forest instead.

After the Italian translator translated Tang En's words, Albertini fell into deep thought.

When he had been abandoned by AC Milan during the 02-03 season and loaned out to Atletico Madrid, he had still been hopeful that he could return back to Saint Siro Stadium. However, it was only after he spent one season in Spain and returned back to Italy that he realized that there was no place for him in Milan.

### **Chapter 203: The Red Forest Chapter 11 The Old Soldiers Part 2**

In the previous season, he had been loaned out by Ancelotti to Lazio in exchange for Pancario. During the winter break, Galliani explicitly told Albertini, who still held some hopes in his heart, that "the current AC Milan doesn't have a position for you, Deme. Pirlo, Gatusso, all these young players are doing very well in your position. Moreover, we still have Kaka..."

Albertini finally decided something: perhaps he still did not know where he would be during the final moments of his professional career, but it was definitely not Saint Siro.

Just like that, in the freezing cold of winter, Albertini left Milan alone and signed a new contract with Lazio—a contract for two years, with an annual salary of one million, two hundred and fifty pounds after taxation. From then on, he completely took off the red and black AC Milan jersey, changing into SS Lazio's blue eagle jersey.

What he hadn't expected was that his career at SS Lazio only would continue for one season before coming to a premature end. Due to the financial difficulties of the club, Lazio had to put many players up for sale. Hence, Albertini, who had been deemed "old and frail," naturally became part of their purge list as well. Even if Lazio had not intended to let Albertini go, his agent, Branchini, had already intended to leave the club.

After all, Atlanta United, a team that had recently been promoted to Serie A, had just sent an invitation to his player.

If the Englishman had not appeared, perhaps they would have had to agree to Atlanta United's terms.

But now that Tony Twain had brought his Italian translator along and given them an even more alluring invitation. This included a core position in Nottingham Forest, an annual salary that was no lower than the one he was promised in Lazio (not inclusive of the various cash prizes), the chance to participate in the UEFA Europa League, and a "2+1" contract (which spanned two years and could possibly extend for

another year) that was subject to both the player's condition and the number of matches played in the final year of the contract.

Albertini and Branchini whispered to each other before his agent raised his head and spoke to Tang En. "Deme wants to know, why did you specially come all the way from England to invite him, a player who is already preparing for his retirement, to join your team?"

The fact that the agent had dared to ask that question showed that Tang En stood a chance. Elated, Tang En said, "Although we are a newly-promoted team, the same as Atlanta United, Nottingham Forest's goal is not merely to remain in the Premier League. We have greater plans. Does Atlanta United have the participating rights to this season's UEFA Europa League? We do! Moreover, Nottingham Forest is currently made up mostly of young players. Therefore, I strongly believe that your experience is what Nottingham Forest needs the most, Deme. Moreover, I think that... Deme, considering retirement at thirty-two years-old is simply too early! The thirty-two year-old Paolo Maldini is still the team captain of AC Milan, and the thirty-two year-old Rijkaard once led a group of youngsters to win the Champions League...And you, Deme, will have these kinds of chances now, too. I'm not lying."

Tang En had used two of the most important players in Milan's history to illustrate his point. Since they were realistic examples that Albertini was very familiar with, they had a considerable impact on him.

Albertini remained silent for a while longer before saying, "I've heard that Italian football players tend to be unhappy in England."

"Oh, no." Tang En shook his head and continued. "Just think about Zola and Vialli. Zola was the best foreign player in Chelsea's history, and in the ten years that he played in the Premier League, the number of times that he received the "best foreign player" award was second only to Cantona. That kind of achievement can't be considered poor, Deme. I believe that you won't fare any worse than them. Moreover, what does Atlanta United have that attracts you? Their jerseys will only remind you of AC Milan."

Although that reasoning might appear trivial, it really could be the deciding factor.

Tang En was right; Atlanta's jerseys for their home games were black and blue striped. If they changed the sponsor's name that was imprinted on the front of their jerseys, there would be little difference between the jerseys of AC Milan and Atlanta United, especially from a distance. Albertini was an ardent supporter of AC Milan. Even when the club made clear to him their decision to abandon him during the 02-03 season, Albertini still said, "If I must leave, I hope that I can continue playing in another country. I don't wish to fight against Milan." In the end, he went to play for Atletico Madrid.

Even though Albertini still ended up going to Lazio the next season, Tang En believed that it was because he simply had no choice. No other foreign clubs wanted him, so in order to continue playing football, he could only choose to be loaned to Lazio by Milan in exchange for Pancario, whom Ancelotti had taken a liking to. That was perhaps the last contribution he could make to AC Milan.

With better terms than Atlanta United, the manager's high opinion of and trust in him, as well as not needing to deal with the psychological burden of facing off against AC Milan, Tang En firmly believed that Albertini already belonged to him. So Tang En said no more as he quietly waited for a reply from the person seated opposite him.



Upon hearing Tang En finish, Albertini shut his eyes. For Albertini, the future, which he had thought was fixed, was suddenly met with new changes. How should he actually spend this last stretch of his professional career?

If Albertini went to Atlanta, he would not have any ambitious goals. Perhaps he would wear the captain's armband and play for two years before discreetly announcing his retirement. Only at that time would people remember; Ah, so it turns out that Albertini from Milan's glory days is still playing!

Going to an unfamiliar team in a foreign country, taking on a new challenge, leading a group of young lads, working hard towards a championship title of more importance than the Europa League... In three years time, what kind of comments would he receive when he decided to retire?

Albertini had only two options: to end his professional career without anyone knowing, or to take on a new risk. Perhaps he would succeed, or perhaps he would still leave the professional football scene without anyone knowing.

It might have been a long while, or it might have just been a thirty-second pause. But Tang En finally got a reply from Albertini.

The Italian, who had a slightly pale face and a head of curly hair, nodded lightly and said, "I think... Mr. Twain, although I'm not very familiar with either your team or English football, I feel that... this might be a choice that is worth taking a risk over. You believe in me, so I won't let you down!"

In that split second, that dejected Albertini vanished into thin air. What replaced him was an ambitious young man that was exuding limitless vigor and youthfulness from his entire body. Tang En was right. Thinking about retirement at the age of thirty-two was simply too early!

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Three days later, the list of players that were going to Japan for an exhibition match, which was announced by Lazio's officials, did not have Demetrio Albertini's name on it. The next day, Lazio announced that they had annulled their contract with Albertini. The club thanked Albertini for his contributions to the club over the past year, and wished him good luck in his future endeavours.

On that same afternoon, Nottingham Forest's official website announced at once that they had, by means of a free transfer, recruited the Italian midfielder Demetrio Albertini, who had just annulled his contract with Lazio. Both parties signed a contract that would last for two years; on the last year of the contract, the extension of the contract for another year would be subjected to Albertini's performance and the number of matches he played.

The picture shown on the news was that of a curly-haired Italian man standing next to Tony Twain with a Nottingham Forest jersey in his hands. The number on the jersey was the same number that had been on Albertini's jersey when he was still in Milan: number 4. The only difference between the two was that, with the red color of the jersey, there was no trace of black left.

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After settling the administrative matters of Albertini's transfer, Tang En continued to set his sights on experienced old soldiers because they were the people who Nottingham Forest needed the most at the moment.

Another person that caught his eye was Hierro, the ex-captain of the Spanish national team and Real Madrid.

Unlike Albertini, Hierro's reason for leaving Real Madrid was not his slipping skills due to old age. Instead, it was because he had offended the upper echelons of the club. As such, during the summer of year 2003, on the second day after Real Madrid had obtained their twenty-ninth league championship title, Hierro had been kicked out of the club by Florentino.

When this news was first announced, it had garnered quite an uproar. Hierro, who had left the team, heeded his agent's advice and went to play for the Qatar Stars League. However, after one season, he was no longer able to tolerate his days at Qatar, where he had played football purely for the sake of money. Or rather, it could be said that Hierro felt that he wasn't so down-and-out that he had to resort to playing only for money at Qatar Stars League. Therefore, after one season, he decisively ended his contract with the Qatar Stars League team and decided to find a stronger European team to join.

Upon catching wind of this, Nottingham Forest and Bolton contacted Hierro's manager at almost the same time. The results of this competition were no different from the past few times. Nottingham Forest, which offered much better terms than Bolton, won Hierro's favor. The ex-captain of Real Madrid felt that Tony Twain's Nottingham Forest really had large aspirations, and that going there would not be a waste of his talent. It could also be said that only by joining a team like Nottingham Forest could he have the chance of getting back at Real Madrid's chairman, Florentino.

There were many different views regarding Albertino and Hierro's choices. Among these, the most popular explanation was that these two people were nearing the later stages of their professional career, and that they therefore hoped to simply expend whatever fight they had left in them on a team before going into retirement. Nobody believed that they still had any ambition left, or that they still dreamed of achieving success at this point.

That was completely understandable. After all, losers always think that everyone else is the same as them.

They would never get the chance to hear the words Tang En said when he introduced the two old soldiers during the team's training session: "Lads, from now on, if you don't work hard, your positions might get snatched away by these old guys!"

## **Chapter 204: Get Ready Part 1**

The entry of the two champion players, Demetrio Albertini and Fernando Hierro, was a great boost to morale. In general, the current Forest team could be regarded as a young team. The players were dynamic, energetic and motivated, but lacked experience. And Hierro and Albertini, two veterans who had led big-name teams to victory in the UEFA Champions League, could bring the experience and stability that the young players required. Tang En believed that having the older guys on the team would benefit the team a lot, both in training and in the games.

He had to admit that when he went to look for those two old guys, he was somewhat motivated out of the selfish interest as a fan who used to like them. Nevertheless, the difference between having the veterans in the Forest team and not having them was pretty obvious. It could be seen during the

training. Young players always liked to imitate the famous players and Albertini and Hierro were willing to teach these kids during training.

Although Piqué was a Barcelona player, Hierro, the former Real Madrid captain, took great care of his fellow Spaniard junior.

And as for Albertini, Twain specifically asked George Wood to learn from Albertini. Not only to learn his defensive stance and route running, but also to learn his ability to organize offense. Albertini was not just a defensive midfielder.

Twain had high hopes for Wood and wanted to make Wood more well-rounded. He could not lose his defensive gift and talent, but his offensive capability should not be nil, either.

He would often praise the achievements of Hierro and Albertini in front of all the team members, hinting at the players that they were their role models.

Privately, he also hoped that Hierro and Albertini could help these young men on the team, and that the two veterans would not refuse to do so.

That summer, Manchester United and Arsenal had not been as active in the transfer market, so Chelsea, with its newly appointed manager, and the high-profile promoted Nottingham Forest attracted a lot of attention.

Since the arrival of José Mourinho at Stamford Bridge, Chelsea had brought in several strong players such as Arjen Robben, Mateja Kežman, Petr Čech, Didier Drogba, and many others. In addition, Mourinho also brought in his players under his direct command in FC Porto: Ricardo Carvalho, Paulo Ferreira and Tiago Mendes.

As Chelsea's new manager, Mourinho came at the heels of his championship title of the UEFA Champions League. That title was much more luminous than Twain's.

What interested the British media was that Mourinho was clearly not an easy man to deal with. When he started work at Chelsea, his speech to the players on the first day of team training was leaked to the media.

“Standing in front of me is a group of outstanding players. But boys, you have to remember—there is a great coach standing in front of you. I, José Mourinho, am a European championship manager!”

Prior to this, during a press conference held by Chelsea to welcome him, he looked directly at the cameras and said point-blank, “Please don't call me arrogant, but I'm European champion and I think I'm a special one.”

No matter what other people thought, the media was happy. Tony Twain had just led the Forest team to their promotion to the English Premier League, and everyone still remembered the scene where he had made Mark Lawrenson shave his beard in front of the entire British television audience. And now came a Portuguese man who completely held his own next to him, spoke in fluent English, and exuded the mature charm of a successful man. He would become an excellent media figure in every aspect.

The only regret the media had was that, by the middle of July, the two most individualistic managers had not directly faced off against each other in the transfer market. The Forest team repeatedly blocked

Manchester United and Arsenal from getting the players they liked in the transfer market, with only Chelsea seemingly being left alone.

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Allan calculated and provided Twain with an account of his spending during the transfer period. At the end of it, Tang En was surprised to find that he had not spent much money. Could it be that he was too accustomed being poor?

Up until now, the Forest team had bought a total of seven players. Ushering in Piqué only cost two hundred and twenty thousand pounds, the introduction of Bendtner had only cost two hundred thousand pounds, and buying Lennon had only cost one million. Then, he had obtained the three players—Ribéry, Albertini and Hierro—for free. One million pounds were spent to buy Chimbonda from SC Bastia. The center back Matthew Upson was the Forest team's biggest expense: four million pounds.

Saving money was good, but Allan hoped that Twain would continue to increase their investment in the transfer market. Although Albertini and Hierro were championship-level players in Twain's eyes, they were older, and their appeal was not as big as before. Twain had previously focused on how to maximize the ability of the team, and had ignored the needs of the market.

Allan specifically told Twain that he expected Twain to consider bringing in a popular player and said that, if possible, it would be best if he was a striker.

In Tang En's view, the only players in the Forest team currently qualified to be in the English Premier League were Freddy Eastwood, Peter Crouch, and Nicklas Bendtner. The latter was young, and was expected to be a substitute while developing progressively. As for David Johnson... Tang En initially had planned to loan him out, but Johnson wanted to stay with the Forest team.

Having only three strikers was not very reassuring to Tang En. It was imperative to bolster their forward strength.

He picked up his list of candidates for players; this list was specifically used to record the names and information of the players he was interested in. Originally this function should have been replaced by the "Player Database System" that Twain had proposed last Christmas. However, when he received the beta version sent from the United States this summer, he had only used it for fifteen minutes and decided to break off their cooperation with that American I.T. company. The system was idiotic and not user-friendly at all. There were a lot of problems using it and there were so many bugs that Tang En had lost count. At that time, he had so many matters to attend to that he did not have the time to handle the matter. He had put it aside for the time being. Now he had to replace the computer program with the most traditional method, pen and paper.

Tang En went through the names one by one and circled the names of the players that he was interested in. Putting aside whether the Forest team could afford them in the first place, Tang En would circle the names of the players he felt good about and then refine the list after he had completed this step.

Hernán Crespo, the Argentinian national footballer, was one of the top players in terms of both strength and market appeal. Furthermore, Hernán Crespo's relationship with the Chelsea manager, Mourinho, was not very cordial. After Mourinho had been in office for several days, when Crespo was mentioned,

the self-important Portuguese man said, "I haven't seen Hernán Crespo since I came here. Have you seen him?" It seemed feasible to make a transfer request to Chelsea at this time. But the reality was that Carlo Ancelotti had long promised Hernán Crespo. AC Milan had already gotten in touch with Chelsea, hoping to get the Argentina's main striker.

Tang En crossed out Crespo's name.

Patrick Kluivert, the Netherlands national footballer, was the striker for Barcelona. But his days at the Camp Nou seemed to be coming to an end ever since the introduction of Samuel Eto'o and Ludovic Giuly. In addition, with the gradual rise of Lionel Messi, Kluivert had lost his groove and position as the main striker. It would naturally be a wise choice to leave Barcelona at this time. But would he come to the Forest team? Apparently not; Newcastle had just announced that Kluivert was their man.

Kluivert's name was also crossed out.

Nwankwo Kanu? He was abandoned by Arsenal, so obviously Tang En would not want him too.

After reviewing the list, Tang En's eyes locked on two people from the same team.

Leeds United was finally relegated to League One last season, and it was heartbreaking for fans of Leeds United. But for the managers of other teams, it was a good opportunity for big purchases.

Tang En was not a fan of Leeds United, so he was delighted to see Leeds United being relegated and going bankrupt as he had expected, and to see them forced to sell their team's star players to repay their debts.

He had his eye on Leeds United's two strikers: Alan Smith and Mark Viduka.

Strictly speaking, Smith was not a striker. He was more of a midfielder than a striker. But Tang En thought that a striker like Smith could raise the Forest team's potential for offense on the front field. He knew that with certainty. According to his memory, Smith would go to Manchester United this summer, but since he had already taken Piqué from Manchester United, why not try his best to snatch Smith?

The only problem was the player's individual aspiration. The contract between Smith and Leeds United was up. Come summer, he would be free to choose to go to his favorite team, rather than be at the mercy of the club. This had left the Forest team at a disadvantage at the start of a competition with Manchester United.

Actually, Tang En really wanted to tell Smith that going to Manchester United did not mean that his career would reach a peak, but that it was a honey trap. But then again, he could not say that. Why? Because even if he had said that, Smith would not believe it. He might think that this was a way to persuade him to join the Forest team.

Wouldn't there be more opportunities for glory on a big-name club than a recently promoted team? Even if I'm not going to Manchester United, why would I choose Nottingham Forest?

In the campaign for Smith, Nottingham Forest's Tony Twain lost to Manchester United's Sir Alex Ferguson. Nottingham Forest could not match the allure of a big club.

As far as young players go, he could still attract them with opportunities for steady appearances in games. However, for those mature players who had no need to develop their skills through regular appearances and longed for glory, Tang En was out of ideas.

## **Chapter 205: Get Ready Part 2**

After losing Alan Smith, Tang En could only wish the ingenious striker, known as the successor of Mark Hughes, good luck. If Smith could not escape his fate in the end, then Tang En could only sigh helplessly.

The second person that Tang En was interested in was Smith's front-line partner at Leeds United: Mark Viduka. That name was deeply ingrained in Tang En's mind. When he was still in school in China, he had already heard the Australian's name. That time was probably the most glorious period of this young Leeds United player's life, and the whole world knew that Australia had two talented players, one named Harry Kewell and the other named Mark Viduka.

During that time, Tang En still remembered a local football magazine describing Mark Viduka as an "Australian Bull," because he was so strong. As a result, Tang En had always figured that Mark Viduka was a quintessential British-style striker who relied on his bodily strength to play, had crude footwork, and was only good at headers.

Later, he discovered he was very much mistaken. Mark Viduka's strong physique was his advantage, but he was, at the same time, a very well-rounded striker, and his footwork was nowhere near as crude as Tang En had assumed.

In the Forest team's frontline, all three strikers had a common trait: they were too young, and lacked the experience of the European arena. On the other hand, Viduka had exactly that type of experience. At that time, when he had been on the Leeds United team, they had eliminated AC Milan.

Mark Viduka was currently the most suitable striker for the Forest team in every aspect. Having made up his mind, Twain made Leeds United an offer of 4.5 million pounds to purchase Mark Viduka. The Forest team quickly received a response: Leeds United had refused the offer.

There were, after all, a lot of teams pursuing Mark Viduka at the same time. For example, the team closest to the Australian was Middlesbrough, who had also offered 4.5 million pounds. Leeds United was harsh towards Twain because the Forest team was the most active club in the transfer market this summer, and they thought that their offer of 4.5 million pounds was too little.

This was a clear ripoff, but Twain was happy to have Leeds United jack up the price. That was not because he wanted Leeds United to make more money and get themselves out of their financial crisis as soon as possible; he was not so kind-hearted. Rather, he was feeling generous because Forest was in good financial shape, and Allan had hoped that Twain would be able to pull off a "massive deal." If Leeds United felt that 4.5 million pounds was not enough, then Allan too would find it inadequate.

Consequently, the Forest team made a second offer right away. Twain increased Mark Viduka's value by 1.5 million pounds, offering to buy him for six million pounds.

That price was beyond the benchmark of the other pursuing teams. Even Middlesbrough, who had initially been determined to win, hesitated. Middlesbrough was furious at the way Nottingham Forest

liked to barge in when others were nearing the end of their negotiations. Last season, Twain had seized away their opportunity for qualification for the UEFA Europa League. And now, a player that they were interested in was going to be snatched. It was incredibly aggravating.

No matter how furious they were, the Middlesbrough team had no other options. Compared to the triumphant Nottingham Forest team, which just received an injection of funds and had been promoted to the Premier League, Middlesbrough was very poor. Their annual transfer budget was pathetic. If it was not, why would they have to wait for discounts before they were able to buy players?

With a team that was able to compete in Europe wanting him to join, the Australian would naturally not refuse. Between Middlesbrough and Nottingham Forest, choosing a team was hardly worth hesitation. Upon learning that the Forest team had raised its offer a second time, Mark Viduka immediately notified his agent to terminate negotiations with Middlesbrough regarding his contract and to wait for Leeds United to respond to Nottingham Forest. He believed that the club, which was in a financial crisis, would not reject the opportunity to sell him without losing a penny, and Leeds United would have made a profit: four years ago, when Mark Viduka had transferred from the Scottish Premiership's Celtic F.C. to Leeds United, the latter had spent six million pounds.

As per his expectation, the Leeds United team had no reason to refuse the offer. They agreed to allow the Forest team and Mark Viduka to further negotiate individual salary and benefits. Things had progressed very smoothly up to this point. Three days later, Nottingham Forest's official website updated their transfer news again. The Australian national footballer, the famous striker Mark Viduka, appeared on the latest transfer list.

The fans cheered when Mark Viduka joined, as he had amply proved himself in the Premier League for the past four seasons. Everyone believed that his arrival on the Forest team would improve the team's attacking power and, at the same time, provide valuable experience to the young Forest team's frontline.

Allan was very pleased with the deal as well. Mark Viduka's popularity in Australia was comparable to Kewell's, and his long experience of playing in the English Premier League had made quite an impact in the United Kingdom. A power striker like him was sure to be more newsworthy and produce faster results than Bendtner and Piqué.

The excited marketing manager even had the team magazine cover all figured out. They would use the photographs of four players: Viduka, Hierro, Albertini, and Eastwood. The first three players were new to the team this summer and were quite prestigious. Eastwood's selection was necessary to please the fans; the Romani Gypsy was "the most popular player" selected by the Forest fans last season.

After buying Viduka, Twain told Evan and Allan that he had no need to buy another player in the transfer market. Except for those players who were determined to leave the team and were not in his plan, the Forest team's lineup had essentially been fixed. If any problems were to be found during the league championships, then they could adjust when the winter transfer window opened.

Nottingham Forest, which had just been promoted to the English Premier League, had burned through 12.42 million pounds in less than two months. Still, Tang En did not think that they had spent much money. He felt that every cent was spent on necessary areas, and that the strength of the team had already dramatically changed compared to six months ago.

After confirming the halting of all transfer activities, Twain brought together all the players whom he had bought over the summer and held a press conference and a meet-and-greet with the fans.

He stood in the middle. On his left were the former Spanish national team captain, Fernando Hierro; the Barcelona youth team's main center back, Gerard Piqué; the Frenchman, Pascal Chimbona; and the center back from Birmingham City, Matthew Upson. On his right were the former Italian national footballer, Demetrio Albertini; the young player, Aaron Lennon; the Danish star player, Nicklas Bendtner; the unknown French player, Franck Ribéry; and the Australian striker, Mark Viduka, the latest to join the team.

Some of these players were veterans with rich experience that had won countless championships. Some were strong, outstanding star players of their time, and some were young players who represented the future and hope.

Surrounded by these players and faced by the cameras held up by the reporters, Twain grinned with delight under the continual flashing lights of the cameras.

This was his team. Every player was bought according to his exact wishes. With these players, he could look forward to much more. They did not only want to maintain their position in the Premier League; the Forest team's goal was more ambitious than anyone could imagine.

#### **Chapter 206: The List For First Team**

Goal keeper: Darren Ward (1), Barry Roche (12), Paul Gerrard (25).

Full Back: Davy Oyen (2), John Thompson (3), Clint Hill (16), Wes Morgan (5), Leighton Baines (22), Pascal Chimbona (23), Gerard Piqué (24), Matthew Upson (33), and Fernando Hierro (6).

Midfielder – George Wood (13), Demetrio Albertini (4), Brynjar Gunnarsson (8), Eugen Bopp (31), Kris Commons (20), Ashley Young (18), Aaron Lennon (17), and Franck Ribéry (7).

Forward: Freddy Eastwood (11), Nicklas Bendtner (21), Peter Crouch (9), Mark Viduka (10), and David Johnson (30).

Above is the final list for Nottingham Forest this season, with their jersey numbers inside the parentheses. When the list was announced, everyone was focused on Franck Ribéry. This youth, who had not even managed to play in the Championnat National and had been at risk of losing his career, was actually wearing jersey number seven for Nottingham Forest!

Everyone knows that that the lower the player number in a team, the more likely they are considered for main positions. What did it mean for Tang En to give Ribéry number 7? It meant he valued scarface. Tony Twain never disappointed when it came to his judgment. Was there indeed something amazing about Ribéry?

Outsiders were sceptical of Ribéry because they did not understand his ability. However, internally, the team had no objections to the number arrangement. Since the first day he had come to the team for training, Ribéry showed immense ability in the wings. His dribbling and speed were weapons he could



use to dominate the wings. Beyond that, his shooting was good as well. After a week of training with him, even his direct competitor, Kris Commons, had to admit that the French guy was better than him.

“Do all players at the Championnat National play this well?” he asked.

Tang En smiled. “No, Franck is an exception.”

When Scarface had first entered the team, he was always quiet and did not like talking. He seemed worried that his teammates would mock his appearance. But the truth was that although they were surprised by the scars on his face, the team did not mock or shame him at all. That was not something that would happen on Tony Twain’s team.

In the locker room, after Tang En intentionally got Ribéry to talk about how his scars came about, everyone became sympathetic for him.

Upon realising that his teammates did not look down on him because of his scars, Ribéry finally let go of his anxiety. He gradually started talking more, quickly returning to his lively self. Although he still could not speak English, he worked hard at learning in the hopes of assimilating as quickly as possible to the team.

Ribéry knew how difficult it was to get this job. Not everyone had the experience of living with an allowance of only 150 Euros and being unable to afford rent. Precisely because he knew how hard his life had been, he developed a special attitude towards money. Now, his weekly salary was 6500 pounds. This wasn’t a particularly high salary within the team. At most, it was mid-range. But to Ribéry, who had had enough of being poor, it was much more than what he gotten from any other club he had played for. He also knew that if he performed well, even greater rewards awaited him. The better he played on the field, the faster that day would come.

He was valued by the manager, was treated well, and had good relationships with his teammates. A new environment, a new league... What was there to worry about? Right now, he only wished for the Premier League to start quickly, and for him to prove to everyone that though he, Franck, from the Championnat National, was worth every penny he was paid, and was worth the trust of his manager!

Although Tang En did not know Ribéry’s thoughts, he could tell that the Frenchman always worked hard during trainings. He remembered seeing such zeal before in George Woods. Those who had been through poverty would especially cherish any opportunity to earn money. They had no right to any slack.

There are many successful people, but there is only one quality that is shared by all of them: a successful person is always a thousand times more diligent than someone who fails. This is regardless of where that diligence stems from; whether it is from their own willingness or from forced circumstances in life.

George Woods had succeeded, and his debut had scorched the people with a deep impression. Tang En believed that Ribéry could be the same.

He’s no joke. During the 2006 FIFA World Cup, France’s national team manager Domenech will definitely try to recruit him from us!

With the advancement of England’s media, Ribéry would certainly become famous even earlier than when he had played in France. Now, Tang En could only hope that Ribéry would still remember where his heart was even after becoming famous.

After confirming the First Team's formation, Tang En cleared some of the members who were not needed on the team. They could choose to join the Reserve Team or be either loaned or sold to other interested clubs.

This was different from the achievement he felt from buying players. Tang En still harboured great affection for the team that he had led for half a year. Faced with the departure of players who had fought with him for the championship and promotion rights, he still had no choice. The team had to improve, so those who could not keep up had to be eliminated. The original formation for Forest had many players with limited skills who were already unsuitable for the Premier League. Forest could not afford to let them goof around on the team and pay them for nothing.

Although there is kindness within professional football, most of it remains cruel. When you are unable to satisfy demands, no one pities you. Only your own lack of ability is to blame.

The good thing as that everyone knows about this; no one had unrealistic expectations about staying on the team. After seeing Forest's signings over the summer, everyone knew their situation; Forest had no place for some of them. Rather than staying with the team and only playing in Reserve Team Competitions, scrapping up whatever status or fame they had left, they might as well take this time to look for another road out while they still had worth.

Rebrov, Eoin Jess, Gareth Taylor, Chris Doig, Matthew Lewis Rang, and George Robertson were all gone. Danny Sonner was loaned out, and Gareth Williams left too. The team was no longer the same one that Tang En had taken over.

The people who should be there had come, and the people who should have left were gone. With their team stabilised, Tang En and David Kerslake could finally dive into tactical training. He had realised his ideas from the UEFA European Championship.

The success of the Greek National Team had stirred him up. Even though Nottingham looked like a high-profile team on the transfer market, Tang En knew that defense was the key to getting a firm footing in the Premier League. If there were no surprises, Nottingham should be retaining the same configuration for the midfield, with two defending midfielders and two side midfielders with outstanding abilities. The main mission of the defending midfielders was defense: to build a wall in front of the Defensive Line, and pay little heed to attacking. Meanwhile, Tang En expected more from the two side midfielders. Not only did they have to actively defend, they also had to be able to switch to offense at any point. In addition, they also had to go one-on-one with opponents; in these moments, their technical ability would become exceedingly important. They were not merely side midfielders who passed the ball to support the offense; they were also wingers who had the ability to score and create a decisive win.

Kris Commons, Franck Ribéry, Ashley Young, and Aaron Lennon; Tang En believed that the four of them would be able to match up to his demands, or he would not have needed to buy them in the first place.

This was different from the finals of the EFL against Middlesbrough. Tang En's defense emphasised the importance of midfield control and would not easily yield the midfield to their opponents. That ran the risk of letting the opponents lay siege to Nottingham's goal, which was too dangerous.

Whether it be offense or defense, the midfield is territory that Tang En needed to claim. A chain reaction resulting from a loss of control in the midfield was terrifying. This was also why Tang En put in so much effort into the midfield compared to the forward line.

George Wood and Albertini should both be starting midfielders. Defense was entrusted to Wood, who was young and exceptionally strong. While supporting Wood in defense, Albertini would mainly be using his experience and passing to facilitate movements in the midfield. He had done the same for Italy's national team and AC Milan. Tang En trusted that he would have no problems with it at Nottingham.

On the defensive line, one of the main positions was sure to go to Hierro. Despite being already 36, Tang En had no doubt that Hierro would be able to take up the role. His experience was what the team needed most on the field. For all his slowness in turning and his other weaknesses, Wood would be there. What was there to be afraid of?

Hierro's partner should have been Matthew Upson. Wes Morgan and Piqué were still too unskilled. Clint Hill's problem with defensive positioning resulted in him only being able to play as a substitute. The good news for Piqué was that although the center back is unable to act as the main force, Tang En intended to let him try out being a right back instead. In Tang En's recollection of history, when Piqué was initially on loan to Real Zaragoza FC, he was unable to be fielded at all. It was only when Diogo got injured that Piqué was arranged to play as a right back. He ended up performing well in the new position.

At the beginning of that season, to make up for the 20 matches for Piqué under competition regulations, Real Zaragoza FC wasted no time in casting Piqué as a jack-of-all-trades. He played as center back, side back, and even Defending Midfielder. In all of those positions, Piqué did well. From that, Tang En realised Piqué's ability as an all-rounder. Although he would not intentionally push Piqué to be a jack-of-all-trades simply to fulfil the promise he had made, any manager would love to have a few all-rounders on their team.

Whenever the team is down a member because of injury or sickness, having one more well-rounded player means having another option and some buffer time. Of course, Tang En's focus for Piqué would still be the Center Back position. This was both his favourite and best position.

Before and after their summer training, they played a number of friendly matches. Most of their opponents were teams from England, since Nottingham was still not well-known enough to be invited overseas for friendly matches.

There were both wins and losses. At that point, Tang En did not really care about the results. Friendly matches were not designed for the pursuit of victory. To managers, there were usually two main functions of friendly matches: To check the physical conditions and forms of the players upon their return to the team after the rest period (this way, any issues discovered would be quickly resolved), and to allow the manager to observe any difficulties between old and new players, test tactical strategies and their actual results in implementation, find the most suitable strategy for the current team and make progress with it, etc.

Friendly matches belong to the classic trope of "the process is more important than the result." In such matches, Tang En would be most concerned about the performance of the new players and how well

they were assimilating into the team. Then, based on how they did, Tang En would decide if he should give them more opportunities right from the beginning of the League.

Although Nottingham would participate in multiple leagues, Tang En had no intention of using a rotation system. The stability of the formation was more important than anything else. Additionally, his team did not have the luxury of doing that. Tang En needed to determine the main formation for the new season through the friendly matches and then do further adjustments.

It would be impossible for Hierro to hold out through the entire season. Though he would be part of the main force in the beginning, Tang En was considering gradually giving more playing opportunities to Piqué. The future still depended on the young.

In Albertini's case, things were different. From his age and condition, it would not be too difficult for him to be one of the main midfielders throughout the season... Unless he got injured. Tang En intended to stabilise the center of the midfield, which fell to the partners George Wood and Albertini. Throughout training, he nurtured their ability to work together. Even though one spoke Italian and the other English, they still had the common language of football.

The feedback Tang En received from training filled him with confidence in his plan. Albertini and Hierro were both amazing players and great older brothers. As Tang En hoped, they did their best to guide the children on the team.

Even though Piqué came from Barcelona and Hierro from Real Madrid, they were both Forest players with red Forest jerseys now. Several times, Tang En witnessed Hierro taking the initiative to stay back and lead Piqué through additional training, and to share his own successful experiences in learning when he should take opportunities to advance, when he should pull back, and how he should box out his opponents.

And Albertini and George Wood were a match made in heaven. George Wood was a little quiet, but had a kind of arrogance along with his low self-esteem. Such a character is not usually well-liked, yet Albertini was able to get along well with the unsociable person. Tang En even made the effort of casually asking Albertini his thoughts about his little partner in the midfield. Albertini liked Wood very much as he felt that Wood was serious, hard-working, and not at all lazy.

Even when Albertini had been in the renowned AC Milan, he had not liked much publicity. Rather, he was approachable and helpful, winning the respect of his teammates. Otherwise, how could he have become the vice-captain of AC Milan? Understanding that, Tang En chose to give the Captain's armband to Albertini on his second day after joining the team. To make someone who had only been on the team for two days, and who did not even know how to speak English, the captain of the team—the media was incredulous. But Tang En stuck to his guns, and the results were not bad at all.

After putting on the Captain's armband, Albertini seemed even more motivated. He was always taking the initiative to help out members of the team, regardless of if they were old players or new. He did not seem at all hesitant about whether or not was appropriate to do as a new member himself. Perhaps this was what it was like for a born leader.

When Tang En asked Wood to learn more from Albertini, he asked, "What should I learn?"

At first, Tang En wanted to list out Albertini's strengths for Wood to take note of, but after thinking about it, he realised it would be too cumbersome to list them out one by one. There were simply too many. Instead, Tang En replied, "Learn everything about him, whether it is on the field, or off."

Since that was what Tony Twain had said, George Wood naturally did it.

Although Tang En only had only intended to look for an experienced veteran for the team to strengthen the deployment in the midfield, he had unexpectedly found a great teacher for Wood. It was fantastic. Tang En then decided to develop George Wood's leadership ability.

As the manager, he also needed to nurture a supporter. Otherwise, in times of crisis, who would willingly stand up for him?

With George Wood brought into professional football by Tang En himself, he was the best candidate.

While Tang En led the First Team in their final preparations before the new season, Dunn's work in the Youth team also took off slowly. Unlike Tang En, Dunn still was not trusted by the rest of his colleagues on the youth team. But soon, through his hard work, he would make them look at him differently. After all, this work was all too familiar to him.

He spoke fluent English and was familiar with everything in this country. He was as familiar with Nottingham as with his own house. He almost knew all the names of those on the Youth team... After he was brought back to Nottingham Forest, he could feel memories sleeping somewhere deep inside of him begin to stir.

To be brought back to Forest by Tang En was a great opportunity for him. His passion for football and dream of being an extraordinary manager had never died. The Youth team was only his first step.

## **Chapter 207: The Premier League Kickoff Part 1**

By the time July turned into August, Nottingham Forest had quietly withdrawn from the transfer market. While the media was still conjecturing Tony Twain's next target, the Forest team had completed the formation of the team and set the lineup. The remaining time was spent on preparing for their opponents in the new season.

In order to do this, in addition to the usual training, Tang En refrained from going to the pub every night to drink. Instead, he and Dunn stayed at home to watch the video profiles of all their opponents in the English Premier League. Apart from that of the Forest team itself, they studied the summer transfer data of all nineteen Premier League teams to understand whether their opponents had been strengthened or weakened.

Tang En's advanced three-year knowledge of the world played an important role at that time. For the summer transfer market, there were many things that no one could be certain of, such as whether a player bought by a team was worth the price, or whether some unknown kid would perform beyond everyone's expectations. One could also never know which players would exceed their value and which players would not live up to their reputation and become a washout after one season.

However, Tang En knew. He had knowledge of who had made the right purchases and who had made poor purchases.

When he discussed the Premier League with Dunn, he would mention some names, but he would not clarify too much. He was afraid of arousing Dunn's suspicions. After all, he was from the future; but Dunn just possessed his body, but had remained in the same time period.

Even though they had the same experience and an extraordinary tacit understanding of each other, there would still be secrets that Tang En would not tell Dunn, and that Dunn would not tell Tang En.

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Based on the scores, the twelve-million-or-so pounds that Tony Twain had spent to create the new Forest team was clearly unsatisfactory.

The results of the five friendlies were one victory, two draws, and two defeats. The biggest problem they exposed was that there was not enough rapport in their cooperation, and that their physical strength recovery was less than ideal. There were other conventional issues as well. He discovered that the team lacked techniques when turning defense into offense and did not have the most effective means of attack. Albertini was the midfield core of the Forest team, but he had not completely adapted to English style football; the one word which could sum up his style was "fast." Fast offense, fast defense, fast to turn defense into offense. Maintaining that fast-paced momentum during an intense confrontation proved to be a bit difficult for Albertini, who was accustomed to Italian football.

Nonetheless, Twain placed a lot of trust in him. Even when it was obvious that he had not played well and had caused the team to lose, he would not criticize the Italian veteran at the post-match press conference. If the reporters pushed the issue, he would state with a serious expression that Albertini was still at the stage of familiarizing with the team, and it was very normal for his state to be unsteady or less than ideal.

He did not doubt Albertini's ability and competence. The only problem was adapting to the football style, which required time. And he believed that at Albertini's age, there was no need to spur him on. The player himself would want to prove himself more pressingly than anyone else would.

A veteran as well, Hierro performed quite well on the defense, but due to his age, he had completely abandoned his ability to attack and concentrated solely on defense.

In the friendlies, perhaps the most satisfying player who had just joined the team this summer was Viduka, the Australian striker. After all, whether it was his adaptation to the Premier League, his competition experience, his age, or his skills, he was very much in sync with the Forest team. Compared with the 02-03 season, Mark Viduka's last season in Leeds United had slightly declined, because he had been affected by the club crisis. In truth, there had been very few players who had still been in the state of mind to think about playing. Despite that, he had still appeared in thirty matches in the League Championship and had scored eleven goals.

Viduka scored three goals in five friendlies, and was the team's highest scorer in those games. As a result of his outstanding performance, Crouch could only be a substitute for him. And partnering with him was the nimbler Freddy Eastwood.

Nicklas Bendtner and Peter Crouch would be substitutes for the front line. When necessary, Twain would consider rotating, and, in the case of not being able to break through, bringing on Crouch with his unique skill; the tall Bendtner with outstanding headers would also be an excellent choice. After all, their Premier League rivals were more familiar with Viduka and less familiar with Bendtner.

The Forest team's biggest advantage was not that the players were young, but that they were so unknown to their Premier League opponents. Half of the team was rookies and some of the others had not played in the Premier League before. They needed to adapt to the Premier League, and the other Premier League teams needed to get to know them as well.

In August, the Premier League would have four rounds of matches. The Forest team's competition schedule was arranged such that the opening match was against a weak opponent, and things would become progressively more difficult. In the first round, Forest would be playing against Blackburn Rovers in an away match. They would return to their home ground in the second round and play against Aston Villa; their opponents' strength had already begun to rise. The real battle would start in the third round, against the defending champions, Arsenal, on their home grounds! And the fourth round would be an away challenge against Everton.

In reality, the "weakness" of the opponent mentioned earlier was relative. Tang En looked at it, and he did not even think that any of the four opponents were truly weak. Now that they were in the Premier League, any opponent would be stronger than the Forest team. The days when they would just play as they pleased against the lower ranking teams in League One were gone forever.

On August 8, Twain announced a day off for the team, and dragged David Kerslake on a trip to Cardiff, the capital of Wales, to watch a game at his lucky spot, the Millennium Stadium. It was the 04-05 season's Football Association Community Shield. He was not going as a fan either team. He was there to get a closer look at and understand the Forest team's two opponents this season.

Tang En dared not flippantly vouch to become the Premiership champion. The English Premier League and League One were two totally different types of tournament; it was almost like they were from two different worlds.

Last season, Arsène Wenger had led Arsenal to create an incredible record of being undefeated in the thirty-eight-game league, and took the title. Although this was not the first unbeaten record in a top English League, it was not easy to remain undefeated for a season in today's more competitive and intensely confrontational environment. With Arsenal around, would Twain dare to say that he would take the league title this season?

Arrogance did not equate to idiocy. He knew when to be arrogant and when to be low-key.

Arsenal and Manchester United had been the biggest pair of rivals in the Premier League ever since its inception. In the past, the relationship between Manchester United and Arsenal might not have been as tense as it was in the last decade. The man who changed everything was the Gunners' boss, the Frenchman Arsène Wenger. After winning the Premier League's first two seasons, Ferguson started to yearn to become the master of his dynasty in the Premier League. Blackburn Rovers was widely considered to be an upstart and flash-in-a-pan team trying to seize the title mid-way, and could not pose any threat to Manchester United. Indeed, in the ensuing season, Manchester United successfully overtook Blackburn Rovers.

In the first five years of the Premier League, Manchester United had won four titles, all of which belonged to Sir Alex Ferguson and his Manchester United Football Club. Just as Ferguson thought that he had established the foundation for his Manchester United dynasty, and the next step was consolidation, the Frenchman, Wenger, arrived. Arsène Wenger, who was still managing a team in Japan, was unknown. Nobody had heard of his name or ability. There were even people who mocked the Frenchman; Britain and France had always been at odds with one another.

And the result? The first season Wenger had come to Arsenal, he had won the Premier League title, and they were named the season's double crown, having won the FA Cup too. Wenger dealt a blow to the triumphant Ferguson, which had led the two managers and two teams to be nemeses ever since.

Until the end of the 03-04 season and the following six years, the Premier League was basically a power struggle between the two most powerful teams, Manchester United and Arsenal. They both won and lost at different times. Liverpool completely sank into oblivion and Chelsea was not stable enough. With the two traditional goliaths and the two charismatic managers, coupled with their teams heavily marked by the managers' personal imprint, the rivalry between both sides ran throughout most of the Premier League.

Therefore, whenever these two teams met, it would be explosive both on and off the field, which the spectators and media found immensely enjoyable but was a huge source of worry for the Football Association.

Even though it was a Community Shield game, it was also a battlefield that they were vying for. Tang En earnestly watched the game in the stadium and greedily absorbed everything he could learn: how the two veteran managers made substitutions during the game, their starting lineup, the actual tactics in the game, and so on. The outcome of the competition was secondary.

It was not until the end of the game, when Tang En saw the score, that he realized that the result did not deviate from this period of history in his memory; Arsenal beat Manchester United by 3:1 and won the first championship trophy of the season. Even the players who scored and the way they scored were the same: Arsenal's Gilberto Silva scored the opening goal for Arsenal and then Alan Smith, who had turned down the Forest team this summer and transferred to Manchester United, scored his first official goal after joining the Red Devils. He helped his team draw the game to a tie. Then the young Spanish player, José Antonio Reyes, helped Arsenal take the lead again, and in the end, Manchester United's Mikaël Silvestre became Arsenal's top contributor, scoring a goal which helped Arsenal secured their victory.

After the game, the Arsenal players excitedly picked up the shiny silver trophy plate to celebrate their first championship victory of the season. The Manchester United players left the stadium earlier. They did not want to serve as the backdrop for their opponent's celebration, with their own loss in contrast to the other party's joy.

Twain had no interest in Arsenal's championship celebrations either. He and David Kerslake followed the surge of the crowd out of the stadium and planned to return to Nottingham by car.

The Arsenal fans were still in the stadium, unwilling to leave. They wanted to celebrate victory with their team. Almost all of the crowd leaving now appeared to be frustrated Manchester United fans. Tang En was surrounded by fans wearing Manchester United jerseys. They were silent, and so depressed that their heads were lowered as they hurried home. There were still others, unable to accept the defeat,



chattering and arguing with the people around them about the game that had just ended. There was a fat man next to Twain and Kerslake, who had complained to Twain about the unfairness of the result as they exited the stands. Finally, as they were about to part ways, he shrugged and said, "This is good. The Community Shield can be theirs, but the Premier League will be ours!"

## **Chapter 208: The Premier League Kickoff Part 2**

In English football, there were a few tiny rules, or minor curses, like the fact that a team could not win if they used the South locker room in the Millennium Stadium. Of course, this had been broken by Nottingham Forest's Tony Twain, and Arsenal had used the South locker room for today's game. Another curse was that the team that won the FA Community Shield at the beginning of the season would lose the Premier League championship. In 2000, the FA Community Shield champion was Chelsea, and that season they were only placed in the sixth place. The Premier league championship was taken by Manchester United. In 2001, after brilliantly winning five championships, Liverpool had won the Community Shield in the new season but did not win the Premier League championship. Then, in 2002, Arsenal fared the worst. They had won the Community Shield, but their success was reversed by Manchester United after they had been leading for half of the league. In 2003, the Community Shield belonged to the Red Devils team, but Arsenal was unstoppable that season and took the championship with an impressive record of being undefeated in the 38-rounds. And Manchester United even lost to Chelsea at the last minute, and only placed third.

As for the 2004 Community Shield champion, what would their outcome be at the end of the season? Tang En remembered very clearly.

After hearing the Manchester United fans' never-ending complaints and self-deprecating remarks, he laughed, "That's not certain yet, maybe this season's Premier League champion will be Chelsea!"

That fat man looked at Twain in surprise and dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "How could that team of mercenaries be our opponent? Just because they were the runner-up last season doesn't mean they'll be able to take the first place this season... don't you know anything about football?"

It seemed that his words had provoked the man's temper, and Tang En did not want to argue the issue with a belligerent fan. So, he and David Kerslake quickly left the Millennium Stadium.

On the way back, Kerslake also talked about the issue. He felt that Arsenal's current state was very good, and that their winning streak had not declined due to the long summer.

"Why can't Wenger's team break the curse that a Community Shield champion can't get the Premier League title? You mentioned Chelsea, but I don't think they're that good. Like us, they brought in too many new players over the summer. The team manager and the players are all new, and breaking in the new team is going to take up a lot of their time. I don't believe they can pose any threat to Arsenal and Manchester United this season. I'm more optimistic about them for next season."

Twain was not willing to bet with Kerslake. This was not because he was uncertain as to whether the future would be the same as he remembered, but rather because they had joined the Premier League as well. "This year is the best chance for Chelsea to win the championship," he said, shaking his head.

“Why?” Kerslake was puzzled.

“Because...” Twain turned to look at his partner and laughed mischievously. “Starting next season, we’re in.”

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The FA Community Shield was precursor to the English Premier League, meaning that the league tournament would be fully opened a week later.

During that one-week period, Twain and the Forest team accepted an interview with Sky TV. This was a feature segment that Sky TV, which was in charge of broadcasting the Premier League, would produce every season; through it, their audience could see the new season’s twenty teams. Besides the winning favorites, the most important portion of the program was the newly promoted teams. After all, for the majority of the audience, the three newly promoted teams were brand new and unfamiliar. Because the Forest team was the most unique one among the three promoted teams, they received more attention.

As they were a newly promoted team that had to take part in a European tournament, the media’s main concern was what the Forest team’s goal was this season. For almost all newly promoted teams in their first Premier League season, the goal would be to simply maintain their status; this was because it was a qualitative leap from League One to the Premier League. Many teams which had been formidable in League One were badly battered when they entered the Premier League.

Twain obviously did not want something like that to happen to him, but he did not state his exact goal. He just said, “We want to win every game that we think is necessary to win.” That was the goal of the Forest team.

The Sky TV reporter tried to decipher the hidden meaning of his remark, so he followed up excitedly with more questions. “For example, last season, Arsenal...”

This was a dangerous sign. Journalists always liked to use this approach of thinking out loud and using a seemingly inquiring tone to reel people in. Twain firmly shook his head. “Arsenal is Arsenal and Nottingham Forest is Nottingham Forest. I’m not going to repeat the path that others have taken.”

The disappointed journalist thought of another related question. “The longest unbeaten record in England’s top leagues was maintained by the Forest team, forty-two games...”

“The past record has nothing to do with the current Forest team. Just like no one thinks that the Forest team is a European champion right now.”

Twain’s answer was completely uncooperative, but the Sky TV journalist still did not give up. He rolled his eyes, and suddenly thought of a very exciting topic. “According to the competition schedule, the Forest team will play against Arsenal on its home grounds on August 26.”

Twain nodded, not knowing what the rather annoying journalist was going to say.

“If Arsenal wins the first two rounds of the league tournament, did you know, Mr. Twain, that Arsenal and the Forest team’s third round of the league will be Arsenal’s forty-third game after their record of being undefeated for forty-two consecutive rounds?”

Twain was stunned to hear the reporter say that. When he had first focused on the competition schedule, he was already vexed that they had to encounter such a strong team at the beginning, but he did not think that there was another hidden meaning within.

Twain got a little impatient now that he was entangled with this journalist over one record. He frowned and said, "A record is meant to be broken by others, I don't think that's a bad thing. In addition, I think I need to remind you, sir... Are you certain that Arsenal isn't the subject of today's segment?"

The journalist was slightly embarrassed by Twain's counter question, and had to switch to some very ordinary and common topics that were mundane and uninteresting to the audience. Twain managed with a few remarks, left the crew, and ran to the training ground to focus on the team's training.

For him now, appearances on television were completely incapable of satisfying his sense of achievement and ego. He cared more about the team's victory and glory. Furthermore, it felt awful to be belittled by this blasted journalist. Now that Arsenal had won the Community Shield, all of England was concerned about when the record would be broken by Wenger's team. Hence, having created this record previously, the Forest team had been dragged out of history and dusted off to be used as a backdrop for Arsenal's brilliance.

The feeling of being a supporting actor to others made Tang En uncomfortable.

When will the damned media and fans talk about the Forest team as a leading character rather than as a supporting role?

Ah, it looks like I still have a long way to go!

When the new season's Premier League was about to kick off, the lower level league tournaments were already up and running. The opponents that Tang En was familiar with were struggling in a completely different world, and he no longer wished to go back.

At the same time, the Football League First Division had been renamed the EFL Championship since the start of the new season because of new sponsors, and the corresponding lower-level leagues had also been renamed. The name "championship" sounded flashy but, in fact, it was just a change in name, not in substance.

After being promoted to the Premier League, Tang En did not care about the miscellaneous matters of the lower-level leagues. But the league's name change did make him a little rueful.

Perhaps there would never be an "EFL Championship" trophy in the Forest team's trophy room.

## **Chapter 209: Record Part 1**

A week after the FA Community Shield, the 04-05 season of the English Premier League officially began.

At the moment, all of England had their eyes on Arsenal. They were only two matches away from breaking the undefeated record that had been held for 25 years. From the overwhelming victory over Southampton with a score of 6:1 on 7th May 2003 in a rescheduled Home match in the 02-03 season, Frenchman Arsène Wenger's football team broken a series of records in English football: Preston North End had maintained a no-loss streak through the 1888-89 season, which was an incredible achievement

despite only having 22 matches in a season; Burnley had maintained a 30-match streak with no defeat in the 1920-21 season, losing only three matches at the beginning of the league before revitalising themselves and rampaging to the end of the season (that was also the first time in club history that they became league champions); Leeds United had won 29 matches with no losses in the 1973-74 season; and Liverpool had had an unbreakable 29 matches without defeat in the 1987-88 season.

At the beginning of the season, Arsenal already had a stunning streak of 40 league matches without defeat. Today, the only record that stands in their way is the undefeated no-loss record of 42 games by Nottingham Forest led by Brian Clough between the 1977-78 season and the 1978-79 season!

If they locked down the first two matches in the season, Arsenal would already be on par with this record. After that, they just need one more match to break the old record and set a new one for undefeated matches.

At this point, Arsenal was in great condition. Even if they had to face Everton in their first match as an away team, there was little to worry about.

And as expected, Arsenal easily triumphed over Everton with a score of 4:1 in the away match and maintained a streak of 41 victories!

On the other side, Tony Twain's Nottingham Forest appeared to have met with a little trouble...

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During the summer transfer, Nottingham Forest was constantly in action. Their activity was even comparable to Chelsea, who was owned by a Russian tycoon; they were in the limelight. People had high hopes for Tang En's team, and even the local media in Nottingham looked well upon the new Forest.

In their first round, Forest was to challenge Blackburn in an away match. Before the match, Tang En spent a lot of effort researching their opponent—the team, the players, and the manager. He investigated and analyzed all of them. As such, he believed that he was already familiar with Blackburn. As usual, he led his team to the home of Blackburn Rovers, Ewood Park, with great confidence.

After 90 minutes, the Forest team, who had been filled with hope for the new season, lost 0:1 to Blackburn.

Although it appeared to be very good, based on the score, for a newly promoted team to lose by only one ball to a veteran team, it was not really so. The scores would never be able to fully show the difference between the two teams.

For this match, Tang En had used the 442 formation, which was most practiced one during trainings. He also sent out the 11 players who he felt were in their best conditions. The goalkeeper was Darren Ward. The two center backs were Fernando Hierro and Matthew Upson. The right back was the frenchman Pascal Chimbonda, whose performance had completely surpassed John Thompson during trainings, while the left back was Leighton Baines, who held a strong footing as one of the main positions through the last half of the previous season. Midfielders were positioned side-by-side, with Frenchman Franck Ribéry on the left, Ashley Young on the right, and George Wood and Albertini steadfastly guarding the path through the middle. Finally, on the forward line were the partners Freddy Eastwood and Mark Viduka.

Additionally, on the substitutes bench were goalkeeper Paul Gerrard, full back Wes Morgan and Gerard Piqué, midfielder Kris Commons, and forward Peter Crouch.

This formation was Tang En's strongest. In the trainings before the season, it was also shown to be the most stable starting line-up. Tang En believed that it was comparable to Blackburn Rover's.

But Blackburn, who had only been ranked 15th in the previous season, taught Forest a good lesson. It was naïve to believe they would become a strong Premier League team because of the new players bought over the summer. The Premier league was a completely different world from the EFL.

Failure is inevitable when you compete in the Premier League with the same attitude as when playing the EFL.

Many promoted teams did not perform as well as expected. Although part of this was due to a lack of investment in the transfer market, a big part could also be attributed to their mentality.

From what happened on the field, the problem with Forest clearly lay in their transition between defense and offense. Albertini seemed to have difficulty getting used to the intense speed of the playstyle in English football, resulting in a lag in rhythm. For Wood... other than defending, he could not be expected to do anything else.

Tang En knew about these problems. To counter them, he asked the two side midfielders to be more active and try for breaks when they had possession, opening up a path from the wings. At the same time, the two forwards were to frequently switch their positions and constantly move back and forth to attract the attention of Blackburn's defensive line. This would create space for the side midfielders to break through.

The idea was good. Only 10 or so minutes into the game, Forest's wings had already begun creating difficulties for Blackburn. But Blackburn's manager, Mark Hughes, quickly realised Tang En's intention, and that the greatest danger from Forest came from the wings. Due to the player allocation in Forest's midfield, there was no way they could threaten Blackburn's goal from there. Hughes then strengthened his defense on the wings. Therefore, although Ribéry and Ashley Young tried to breakthrough several times, it was to no avail. At times, they could not even turn after receiving the ball. They were completely suppressed.

Forest's offense was dependent on the two wings, so when Tang En noticed that Ribéry and Ashley Young were closely marked by their opponents, he decided to activate the second-level offense manoeuvre and have the side back join in to support the offense. Pascal Chimbonda and Leighton Baines were both side backs that liked and excelled at supportive offense. In the usual trainings, Tang En also requested for both side backs to actively go on offense, creating greater depth in Forest's offensive ability.

The engagement of the side backs in offense livened up Forest's offensive maneuvers, and the teams went back and forth with each other, switching rapidly between offense and defense. However, the first half still ended with a score of 0:0. In the second-half, after Mark Hughes had familiarized himself with Forest's attacking strategies, he found a method to completely cripple Forest's wings: he requested for his team to strengthen their offense in the wings, going head-to-head with Forest on both ends. To

counter offense with offense; to defend by going on the attack. With a lack of experience and still-developing coordination, Forest's wings were gradually suppressed. And then... the Blackburns scored.

When Blackburn's veteran full back Craig Short took a corner kick and scored the only goal of the entire match, Ewood Park went into a frenzy. The Blackburn Rovers had a good start, and Forest tasted a bitter defeat.

Despite losing the first match of the league, Tang En did not behave as people expected and rage at the players. Instead, during the press conference after the match, he admitted that his team did not do very well, but that was because, he said, "You cannot expect a team that swapped out nearly half of its main players over the summer to be able to make exceptional plays or have offense that is natural and fluid. I am very satisfied that we lost only one ball to the home team."

That's right. Tang En did not even come close to losing his temper with his players after the match. Losing was within his calculations. He took it as payment for his first lesson in the Premier League. And if he was right, he still needed to pay the fee from time to time. Nottingham Forest was not Arsenal, and Tony Twain was not Arsène Wenger. He had no interest in glorifying the past record set by his own team 25 years ago. Those who wished to maintain an undefeated streak should continue, as should those who wished to stake a claim on being champions. Tang En's goal was simple: To stand firm in the Premier League and continue on.

Rather than blaming the poor performers on the team after their loss, he'd rather think about what could be improved on the team. He still had a week's time. He could collaborate with the managerial team to further improve during their training.

After the first round of matches ended, the media commented on each team's performance. The remark given to Forest was "disappointing." The media felt that Forest had failed to give them a good show after spending 12 million pounds during the summer and buying 11 players. Instead, they stuck to a boring routine of attacking from the wings and played into a dead-end.

Yet, Tang En strongly believed that persisting in the direction of attacking from the wings was the right move. He only needed to sort out the coordination between the midfield and wings when going on offense, such as the players' positional awareness and other small details. At the same time, he hoped Albertini would get used to playing in the Premier League quickly. If Albertini could display just half of his prowess from his prime at AC Milan, it would be enough to bring Forest's midfield to life.

Seven days after August 22, City Ground welcomed its first home match for Forest, four years after their last time hosting a match in the Premier League. To numerous fans of Forest, it was a significant and memorable day.

On match day, City Ground, with a spectator capacity of 27 thousand, had no empty seats. Though the fans were disappointed by their loss in the first match, they still remained fervent supporters of the young team. Since they had entered the stadium, the entire place was filled with endless waves of singing.

When Tang En was still a fan, he had often watched the La Liga, mainly for Real Madrid and Barcelona. Watching this, Tang En could not help but sigh at the cultural differences in football between England and Spain. Directing a match in such an environment was the dream of nearly every manager.

For the loyal fans, they absolutely had to win this match.

## **Chapter 210: Record Part 2**

After another week of polishing their coordination, Forest welcomed Aston Villa on their home ground.

In that match, Nottingham forest started with the same formation as the previous away match against Blackburn Rovers. But Tang En saw new hope during the match; the players were improving in their positional awareness and coordination during give and go. This meant that he was right to persist in this direction during their trainings.

However, it was not all smooth-sailing during the match. Surrounded by the deafening cheers of their fans, Forest initially intended to take advantage and launched a fierce attack on Aston Villa in hopes of nailing the first goal.

But the first goal was made by the away team instead! Only four minutes into the match, the Swedish National team's Olof Mellberg from Aston Villa took a long kick that blasted through the posts guarded by Darren Ward. In an instant, the whole of City Ground lapsed into silence.

The song had only begun, and Forest had already lost a ball. Spectators without seats only turned to look at the scoreboard when they heard fans from the away team cheer, becoming surprised by the score.

0:1! The home team Nottingham Forest was behind!

Would this end the same way as the previous match? Would Forest's return to the Premier League after four years begin with two straight defeats?

The cameras turned to focus on Tony Twain in the manager's seat. Since the beginning in January 2003, this man had rapidly become the favorite coach of Forest's fans. His secret lay in how he could always manage to bring victory to Forest's fans when it was most needed. As the youngest manager in the current season of the Premier League—a mere 35-year-old—many people were sceptical of his ability and whether or not he could lead the team in their battles in the Premier League.

Turning to look at David Kerslake beside him, Tang En said nothing. Out of habit, he still thought the man sitting there would be Des Walker. When Walker had left, he had said that he felt his abilities were not enough for the Premier League, which was why he needed to go train on his own.

What about Tony Twain, then? He did not doubt himself. His confidence was necessary, even if he may appear ignorant at times. But the situation was forcing his hand to prove himself again. So, he turned again to Kerslake and said, "There's nothing to worry about. We still have 86 minutes to level the score and overtake it."

Assistant manager Kerslake nodded. Tang En was right. It was much better to lose a ball in the first four minutes of the match than in the last four minutes. As a foregone conclusion, this was much better than the alternative. Aston Villa, who was leading, became more reserved. Clearly, they had not expected to be able to lead the match by a point as early as the first half of the game. Olof Mellberg was a center back; for him to rush forward and take a long shot was unusual.

As Aston Villa relaxed momentarily, Forest grabbed hold of the opportunity and counter-attacked, putting the flow of the match entirely in their control.

Finally, at the 38th minute, under enormous stress with wave after wave of attacks from Forest, Aston Villa's defensive line made a mistake. A sharp break on the left wing from Ribéry allowing a pass to the center caused center back Martin Laursen to slip up under pressure, heading the ball into his own goal!

An own goal!

City Ground exploded into resounding cheers.

Ribéry, who had led the attack, was surrounded by his excited teammates congratulating him for his outstanding display. From playing in the Championnat National to being one of the main players on a team competing in the Premier League, Ribéry had risen with a speed that rivalled his dribbling on the field. And even faster than that, he had won the hearts of his teammates.

"Beautiful!" Assistant Manager Kerslake looked even more excited than Tang En, running out of the technical area and jumping around.

Tang En only stood and raised his arms. Ribéry's performance was within his expectations. For someone who was a future candidate for France's national team, and who was to become Zidane's successor as France's core player in the midfield... of course he could deal with a match at this level.

Sky plc's commentator was shouting Ribéry's name and praising Tang En. "God! Where did he find this genius? Franck Ribéry! Just half a month ago, he was unheard of! But now, he is 'Scarface'!"

Combining the scars he saw on Ribéry's face with a well-known action movie he knew from Hollywood, the commentator created "Scarface," a name that would follow Ribéry throughout his entire career!

It sounded good. Ribéry himself was very fond of it too.

The final score for the match was 1:1. Ribéry's impressive performance in the left wing dissipated much of the Forest fans' skepticism. They could only bow down to Tony Twain's eye for talent.

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The news of a newly promoted team getting their first point of the current Premier League season was only sellable within Nottingham itself. Outside of Nottingham, no one cared if Forest had lost again or about Ribéry's brilliant performance. At that point, almost the entirety of England was singing praises of only one team and one man. On the August 22 2004, at the same time as when Forest was levelling the score with Aston Villa, Arsène Wenger's Arsenal won a home match 5:3 against Middlesbrough and was neck-to-neck with the undefeated record of the highest streak of no-defeats in the Premier League created by Forest in Clough's time.

Before this match, the Executive Chairman of the Premier League had given Arsenal a Premier League Champion Gold Cup to commemorate their undefeated performance in the season. "Arsenal, 2003-2004 Champions, 38 matches, 26 wins, 12 draws, 0 losses" was etched on the cup. At the same time, Henry received the "Golden boot", denoting him as the best forward of the previous season.

All of it looked like a celebration for Arsenal, and the trouble caused by the people of Middlebrough was quickly forgotten in the cheers for Arsenal.



Arsène Wenger rode on the crest of success. Arsenal seemed perfect, and conquering them appeared an impossible task. Their opponents could only bow down to them.

The feeling of standing solitary at the top of the world... Had Wenger, the Frenchman, experienced it yet?

After the match ended, Arsenal's official site posted a special article. They listed the opponents, scores, and timing of all 42 matches, in commemoration of the glorious path walked by the team. And then there was a line of red beneath " Arsenal 5, Middlesbrough 3, 22-08-2004; 42," which read, " Nottingham Forest—Arsenal, 25-08-2004; 43?"

"43" and the question mark at the end were magnified and bolded. But perhaps it was not truly a question at all.