

Godfather Of Champions

Chapter 21: Coventry City Part 1

The English media described the Football Association with regard to Twain as “Rapegate”—the British media’s name for this incident. Twain described it as “unimaginative” because it sounded as if he had raped someone. The punishment seemed to tickle Tang En. The outcome only made Tang En more comfortable. And as for the matter of Twain cursing West Ham’s relegation, the Football Association completely ignored it. Roeder kicked up a huge fuss for a long time and his argument got him nowhere. He was so furious that he accused the Football Association of incompetence. The Football Association’s response was swift. They immediately fined the poor West Ham manager a penalty of £5,000.

The other victim was the referee, Winter. For that FA Cup match, he seemed powerless over the matter, but he did not make any statement and refused to accept any media interviews. He was much cleverer than Roeder on this point.

Twain was not severely punished, which also became the focal point of the next segment of Match of the Day. When Gary Lineker, the host, spoke to Mark Hansen about this issue, Hansen’s sarcastic speculation was that Twain was Palios’s brother-in-law. After the show was aired, BBC received a letter of protest from the Football Association, but they ignored it.

As the party to the entire incident, Twain had long since been out of the picture. It was the media’s business to hype it up, and Tang En now put his all his focus on training. The team’s daily training was still supervised by Des Walker and Ian Bowyer. Tang En wore his sunglasses every day standing on the training ground, but without saying much. He still had to continue with his learning. What made Tang En most happy was that Bowyer and he seemed to let bygones be bygones. Even though they still did not communicate much, he did not deliberately make things difficult for him in his daily work. On the contrary, he behaved quite cooperatively.

Tang En had been worried that Bowyer would be the last straw to crush the Forest team. But it turned out that he was over-thinking. When he was drinking at Burns’ Forest bar that day, Walker had mentioned some things about Bowyer. It was only then that Tang En came to understand what a brilliant career this 51-year-old man once had. He was the main force that championed the Forest team to win the UEFA Champions League twice!

His experience would surely become his greatest help. Tang En decided to have a good relationship with the man.

The Forest team's next match was on the afternoon of January 18th, after which the English Football League Championship had already gone through the first round. Because the Forest team had to play the FA Cup, their 28th match was postponed to the 25th. It also gave them a fourteen-day rest period. On the 18th they would go to the away match to challenge Coventry City, which would be a tough battle. First of all, the Forest manager was suspended and would not be able to direct the match in the technical area. Secondly, Coventry City was now ranked sixth in the league points table. After their home ground defeat of 1:2 to Preston North End during their 21st match, they had remained unbeaten for seven consecutive matches. The team's current morale was at an all-time high, plus this was their home ground. What gave Tang En an even bigger headache was this team's playing style. This was a tenacious team with a kind of diehard attitude. It was this temperament that let them remain undefeated for seven consecutive games. This record could have been ended several times, but was saved every time by their own grit.

Tang En hated such a team because he also had the same style. This match was totally different from the FA Cup. West Ham would not lay down their pride and pit themselves against the Forests. But Coventry City would, because this concerned whether they would stay in League One or go to the Premier League after the end of the season. Never mind that he did not go to Burns' Forest bar these days. It was as if he had returned to the Puritan lifestyle. He would take his work home at the end of team training each day. He must thoroughly study this team before the match and understand each player. If possible, he would even like to watch all seven undefeated matches. Unfortunately, the Forest team's intelligence work did not meet his requirements.

"I'm sorry, Tony. The only match video we have on Coventry City is the match in the first half of the season when they were at City Ground, and we won them 1:0." Looking at the apologetic Walker, Tang En felt that maybe he should specifically look for a football analyst to oversee the analysis of every upcoming match's opposing teams. One who could put all the relevant information he could learn and understand about the opponents on his desk in time before each match. Just like the Football Manager 2007 game he played.

But the team currently had only three full-time scouts, two of whom were constantly out on the road, looking for talented kids all over Britain, and then trying their best to recruit them for the youth training camp in Wilford. The other was mainly responsible for the analysis of the players in the Nottingham area. There was no one to help him with the task.

Tang En rubbed his temples. It seemed that there were a lot of areas within the team that needed to be changed, but unfortunately he did not have the energy right now to dare try. A manager who did not know his future, would naturally be afraid to try his splinter his focus like that. Tang En felt a little like the Chelsea manager, Ranieri. The difference was that Ranieri was only fiddling with the team's tactics. He was trying to mend an entire team just a little and did not dare make any big moves, for fear that his best laid plans would be unraveled by a poor record, that any effort would be in vain.

Since he was now a manager, when Tang En looked at a team's profile, he got used to finding out who the manager was first. In a sense, a manager had a great influence on the team's style, tactics, temperament, and performance. The best way to get to know a team was to start with the manager. Tang En was currently looking at the manager of Coventry City. He saw a somewhat familiar name: Gary McAllister.

Tang En looked at this English name for a long time, then hesitantly translated it into Chinese: Jiǎlǐ Mài kǎo lì sī tè.

McAllister?!

Tang En almost jumped from his chair. He remembered this guy was still at Liverpool last season! The 2000-01 season was Liverpool's most glorious moment in 14 years! Ever since they achieved their first treble in 1984, when McAllister scored a penalty goal in the UEFA Champions League final that year with a free-kick at the last minute during overtime, "assisted" by Alavés player Geli who screwed up. It became the most magnificent scene of Houllier's era at Liverpool. That season, they won five championship titles in total.

It had only been two years; how did you get to Coventry City in League One?

The data showed that the Scotsman returned to Coventry City at the end of the 2001-02 season, and that his role was player-manager.

Tang En knew that McAllister was very good as a player. His free kicks often helped to score goals for Liverpool, but he did not know anything about McAllister as a manager.

Tang En stared at this name for a long time and seemed to be able to see what he needed from this name. Indeed, it was the case as he began to chuckle a few minutes later.

"Player-manager?"

Coventry was once one of the four major cities in Britain, with a thousand-year history, but that was of yesteryear. And to a Chinese like Tang En, a so-called "major city" in Britain, would perhaps only be a county-level city in China. The city was once devastatingly bombed by the German Air Force in World War II, and almost all of it became ruins. The post-war reconstructed Coventry became the center of the British automobile industry, which produced cars specially designed for use by the British royal family.

Tang En's knowledge of this city was almost nil, and he had no intention of devoting his energy on the guidebook. For football managers, knowing the history of a city was far less important and useful than understanding the history of a team.

Although Nottingham, home of the Forest team, was only about 30 miles away from Coventry and could be reached in less than an hour by car, the Forest team arrived a day early to this city to prepare for the next day's match, as this was an away match.

Tang En sat on the team bus and looked at the gloomy sky outside and the newspapers that were blowing in the air. He turned to Walker sitting next to him. "What's the weather forecast?"

"There'll be rain tomorrow and low temperatures."

Tang En thought of Kenny's description of England, and he couldn't help swearing. He hated playing in the rain, hated all the bad weather, the rain, snow, gales, hail and lightning strikes.

At this time, outside the bus window, a cheese-colored building slowly emerged from behind the layers of houses by the street as if it were the rising sun.

"Highfield Road stadium." Walker introduced Twain. "The home ground of Coventry City."

Listening to Walker, Tang En could not help but look again at the building that his team was going to play at tomorrow. United Kingdom's stadiums were mostly small, unlike those imposing and grand stadiums in Italy, Spain, and Germany. Four squat stands with the roofs barely shading the stands, and a green lawn made up the entire stadium. The Forest team's City Ground, which could hold 30,000 people, was built by the river and looked as if it were a stadium attached to a middle school. The same went for Coventry's stadium.

The Santiago Bernabéu Stadium, home of the Spanish titan, Real Madrid, had a six-story stand, equivalent to the height of a 20-story residential building, and the stands were designed to be steep. Tang En had not been, but he could tell its grandeur from the television broadcast. When one was standing at the top of the stands, there was no way to distinguish the numbers and movements of the players when one was looking down; there was an illusionary effect that one might fall at any moment. This vertigo sensation was rarely felt in British stadiums, with most of them having only two or three-story stands, Manchester United's home ground Old Trafford Stadium was currently the largest professional football field in England, but it could only accommodate 60,000 people and had three-story stands.

But the design of the English stadiums had a huge benefit. It allowed the fans to be closer to the field and to develop good relationships between the fans and the players. Therefore, there were two contrasting feelings while playing football in England: The home team would think of it as heaven. They could hear the fans singing the songs and supporting them with slogans, and they could also celebrate their goals with the spectators; the visiting team would think of it as hell. They had to constantly suffer the

boos and jeering of the home fans, clearly hearing every word of abuse hurled at them by those people, and visibly see every upright middle finger.

Although Tang En had only experienced one match, he also felt it deeply. That FA Cup match at the City Ground gave him a deep sense of these two feelings. In the first half, he felt like he was on an away match and like he had returned to home ground in the second half.

I wonder if the fans in Coventry are friendly...

The match was held at two o'clock in the afternoon, and it was already hard to find an empty spot in the parking lot outside Highfield Road at one o'clock. The drizzle under the gloomy sky did not dampen the fans' mood. They were tipsily waving the sky-blue flags of Coventry City and loudly singing songs extolling Coventry City, coming from all directions to gather at the stadium. From the air, they would look like a large swarm of ants rushing toward a big piece of fragrant cheese.

The Forest players were obviously used to this. They were all doing their own thing in the bus, listening to music, resting their eyes, or just looking around. Tang En still had not quite adapted. This was the first away match he was leading. When he was at City Ground 11 days ago, he did not feel that the atmosphere of the stadium was anything special. Now he really felt like he was on an away match with completely unfamiliar city, fans, stadium, and opponent.

Realizing that Twain's attention was on the fans outside the bus, Walker decided to say something to ease the tension in this manager's mind.

"Tony, don't worry. Do you know Old Trafford?"

"Of course, it's famous."

"The Old Trafford stadium has a special security system. They use historical data to classify the different security levels of the visiting fans. Liverpool and Leeds fans are rated as class C, requiring a high level of security and many policemen; Coventry City is class B, only needing a small number of policemen. So, they are nothing to be afraid of." Walker pointed to the Coventry City fans passing by the side of the bus.

Evidently, Tang En was more interested in the security system at Old Trafford, "So who are the class A fans?"

"Wimbledon."

After hearing Walker's reply, a guy's name flashed through Tang En's mind, and then he laughed. "That's funny. The fans of Vinnie Jones, Crazy Gang are the most civilized? Did those guys at Old Trafford count the Wimbledon spectators as football viewers and input them into their computers?"

In 1988, Wimbledon, who beat Liverpool and won the England FA Cup, had the nickname 'Crazy Gang' in English football. Just by looking at the nickname, one would know the style of the team. Not to mention that they had two madmen leaders. The leader of the gang was the famous English footballer and a hard man, Vinnie Jones. The deputy leader was the equally rough and aggressive Dennis Wise. That year, 10 minutes before the FA Cup final kick-off, the team captain, Vinnie Jones, led his men through the player's corridor to yell and hurl abuse at Liverpool's big-name players. And less than a minute into the match, Jones took out and put Liverpool striker McMahon on a stretcher. In the end, Wimbledon won a legendary 1:0 victory over Liverpool in their heyday. Jones and his team also went down in the annals of history.

There were countless other such similar 'Crazy Gang' incidents before the FA Cup Final. Interestingly, the season when Wimbledon had just been promoted to the First Division, after Liverpool's visit to Wimbledon home ground Plough Lane, the proud Reds' players almost cried running back to the lounge. After the match they told the media: The Wimbledon fans are too scary! This stadium is absolute hell!

Hell was the impression that other clubs had on the Wimbledon stadium and its fans.

How could these "hellish fiends" fans be civilized Class A spectators? Tang En thought it was inconceivable.

"So, I don't believe in the security system at Old Trafford right now, and I think it's better to experience it myself than to believe the data that some computer churns out." Tang En suddenly realized Walker's intention in saying all this to him. He smiled and said to Walker, "Des, thank you for your kindness, but I've never been afraid of anyone."

Walker smiled, "Me, neither."