

Champions 321

Chapter 321: Work Permit Part 2

Evan decided to learn from AC Milan, to learn their culture of a “big family.” If possible, he hoped to bring back all those who had played for Forest before and have them continue contributing to Forest from outside the field, whether it was as a manager, a scout, or in the administrative field.

Of course, having a plan was wonderful. But, there were many other factors to be considered in carrying it out. They would start with managing the daily needs of the players.

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After the confirmation of Pepe’s transfer, the Forest Team submitted his information to the English Football Association for record-keeping and the application for a work permit.

However, they received two pieces of bad news four days later.

The English FA rejected Pepe’s work permit application as Nottingham Forest’s newly signed player. The reason was what Tang En had been worried about all along: Pepe’s citizenship issue.

According to Portugal’s legal regulations, so long as the individual applying had resided in Portugal for a full six years, they would be able to pass the series of reviews and obtain Portuguese citizenship. However, the process required time. Based on the procedures listed out by the Portuguese government, Pepe did not have any hope of obtaining citizenship before the closure of the summer transfer window.

Jorges Mendes related the situation to Tang En apologetically over the phone. The news had caught Mendes unawares. Originally, he had thought that he would be able to “expedite” Pepe’s application with his influence. Unexpectedly, the Portuguese government intended on reviewing and passing a new set of “Nationality Laws.” The reviews of Portuguese citizenship applications from foreign immigrants had been tightened to the point where there was no space for negotiation; they could only do it step-by-step as required by the procedure.

Mendes politely said that he would try to think of a way, but Tang En had already lost hope in the matter. After putting down the phone, he cursed. “F**king bureaucracy.”

Dunn, who had been watching tapes, turned around to give him a strange look. Without paying him any heed, Tang En dipped his head and made a call to Evan Doughty.

“Evan. I’ve got bad news. Do you want to hear it?”

Evan laughed wryly on the other side. “I already know, Tony. FC Porto just called to inform us. We have to either cancel the transfer or delay it to the same time next year. What are your thoughts?”

From all appearances, the second option sounded good; it was only a delay of a year. However, from a practical perspective, those two options were unacceptable. Disregarding the double impact caused to the teams by suddenly announcing the delayed transfer by a year, Forest was going to go into battle in the new season of the Champions League. In the new season, with Hierro’s retirement and the situation of Tang En being unable to entirely trust Matthew Upson, what was the use of delaying the entry of a

player who he planned to be included in the team? They had to waste an entire season waiting for a single person?

“Both are unacceptable.” Tang En said decisively. “The transfer has to be done by this summer. I have to get Pepe. I’ve decided to use the Exceptional Talent Clause for Pepe to apply for his worker permit.”

Dunn, who had been listening in, was shocked. He knew what it meant for Tang En to activate the Exceptional Talent Clause, which could only be used once in an entire season. To activate that precious clause for a defender? Was Tang En crazy?

Over the phone, Evan evidently had the same thoughts as Dunn. Shocked, he said, “Are you crazy, Tony? He’s only a fullback!”

“Can’t fullbacks also be geniuses, Evan?” Tang En shot back. “We can search in the EU players for the other positions. But for Pepe, if we don’t take him now, I guarantee we’ll regret it. So long as we give him an opportunity, groom him, and trust him, he will become a world-class fullback! Then, we can proudly announce that this world-class defender came from Nottingham Forest Club!”

The other side of the phone fell into silence. Dunn waited quietly as well.

After a long while, Evan Doughty’s voice sounded. “Alright, Tony. You have full say over the matters of the team. If you think doing this is worth it, then go ahead.”

“Thank you, Evan.” Tang En realized that he had seemed overly forceful before his club’s chairman. After gaining the result he wanted, he made sure to get a good gauge of Evan’s feelings. “In two years’ time, I believe you’ll be very happy.”

Ending the call with the chairman, Tang En found Dunn staring at him.

“What’s the matter?”

“You’re that sure this Brazilian would become a world-class fullback?” Dunn asked.

“No, I’m not certain. Not at all.” Tang En answered with a shake of his head. “I’m only betting. His chances of success and failure are both 50%. It’s half-and-half.” This was the truth. Even Tang En, who had transmigrated, could not be certain that the players he was familiar with could be as successful in this world. His arrival had, in most instances, created too many variables.

“I don’t like to gamble,” Dunn said, returning to his never-ending stream of videos.

Tang En shrugged behind him. “I like the thrill of making a bet.” Then, he dipped his head again to dial Pepe’s agent, Jorge Mendes.

“Mr. Mendes. We’ve decided to use the Exceptional Talent Clause to apply for Pepe’s work permit. We need you to provide all the information you have on him.”

Like the other two, Mendes was taken aback. He had heard about the two suggestions provided by FC Porto. Wouldn’t a more normal person pick the second option? But if he could seal the deal now, he would be more than happy to. After all, Forest was the one who had to go through the trouble, not him. So, he nodded and said, “No problem. We have all the information; even during his period of play in Corinthians Alagoano.”

Tang En was glad of Mendes' cooperation with him. "Thank you, Mr. Mendes. Additionally, if possible, it'll be best if you are able to find someone with considerable influence in the scene to testify to Pepe's capabilities. That way, his chances of getting through will be much better."

"Someone with considerable influence?" Mendes said, pondering. "I have someone in mind. Whether it is his influence, ability, or qualifications... he's exceptional."

Chapter 322: An Exceptional Talent Part 1

José Mourinho was considering the new signing plan for Chelsea's new season in London. Being the head of a powerhouse squad like Chelsea was a matter of envy to other managers, but it also carried tremendous pressure. Because the Russian boss spent a lot of money, he had to see results. Those Rubles could not be thrown away money.

He did not have to worry about whether Chelsea had the ability to buy a player. He just had to think about whether the player's arrival would increase Chelsea's strength by another level.

It was not an easy job.

At that moment, he received a call from his own "agent," Jorge Mendes. Although Mourinho would not admit that he had an agent, his relationship with Mendes was as such.

What Mendes told him came as a surprise to him.

"I need to testify in court? For Nottingham Forest?" He thought he was dreaming. "Jorge..."

Mendes interrupted him. "I know what you're going to say, José."

"I'm glad you know, Jorge. I'm afraid it will be very awkward for me to meet the Forest team manager..."

Mendes smiled, "I know how you are, José. Just help me this once."

Mourinho was silent for a moment. "Is it because Pepe can't get a work permit?"

"Yes. I had a little trouble when I helped Pepe apply for Portuguese citizenship."

"You want me to help you add another strong opponent against Chelsea?"

This remark interested Mendes greatly. "Since when do you put Nottingham Forest on your list of opponents? I remember what you said last season. 'They were just plain lucky!'"

Mourinho pulled a face. "I just don't like them. But that guy, Twain, does have some ability."

"Since you think Pepe's joining will enhance the strength of the Forest team, why didn't you ask me for Pepe this summer? You insisted on Porto's purchase of Pepe at the time."

"I have Terry and Carvalho. Pepe isn't up to their level yet. And..." Mourinho looked at the transfer list he had been working on just now. "Mr. Abramovich prefers beautiful football. He does not like defensive players."

“Since that’s the case... we don’t know if Pepe can reach Terry’s level. Maybe he can succeed in the Premier League, maybe not. Who knows? Do me this favor, José.”

Mourinho felt that the Portuguese super-agent must have his reasons to be so eager to do this. However, he knew that it was Mendes’ personal business. He and Mendes were friends. Those business matters were not his concern. After being silent for a long time, Mourinho asked, “When is this hearing?”

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Mendes passed all the information about Pepe to Twain. He even included the transfer offer that the Turkish Süper Lig top-flight team, Galatasaray S.K., proposed to Marítimo when he had played for Marítimo. This could also prove Pepe’s ability.

However, Twain frowned when he read the information. The details of the materials were meticulous, but there was still a lack of strong conclusive proof that could convince the officials in the Football Association of Pepe’s abilities. Pepe had not received any awards with an intercontinental reputation. He did not represent the Brazilian national youth team in the FIFA U-20 World Cup or the UEFA U-17 European Championship. He had not received any Portugal Rookie of the Year award, the World’s best youth team, or any other honors. His title of the captain of the Marítimo youth team was not even worth mentioning in front of the English Football Association.

Like Twain, Manchester United’s manager, Ferguson, faced the predicament of a work permit. He wanted to usher in from PSV Eindhoven the South Korea national footballer, Park Ji-sung. However, because of Park Ji-sung’s injury for the last two years, he had not represented the South Korean national team in at least 75% of the competitive “A” team matches. There he could not obtain a work permit. Now Manchester United was conducting a search for people to gather information in their preparations to use the “exceptional talent clause” for their appeal. They were said to be in contact with the PSV Eindhoven coach and former South Korea national coach, Guus Hiddink. As long as Hiddink could testify, then by virtue of his position and influence in international football circles, Park Ji-sung’s title as an “exceptional talent” would be affirmed and his work permit would be a cinch.

Manchester United could get Hiddink for Park Ji-sung. But who could the Forest team find for Pepe?

Mendes said yesterday that he could find someone to testify for Pepe, but he did not state who it was. This made Twain doubtful. The vague answer did not assure him.

The cell phone on the table rang, and it was a call from Mendes. Twain grabbed the phone. “Mr. Mendes?”

“Good news, Mr. Twain. I found someone willing to testify for Pepe. The former Porto boss, Mr. José Mourinho.”

After he heard the name, Twain held the cell phone for a long while without moving. But Mendes had anticipated his reaction. As one of the closest people to Mourinho, how could he not know the relationship between Mourinho and Twain?

The only regrettable thing now was he could not appear in front of Twain and see the look on the young manager’s face. It must be very interesting.

On one end of the phone, Mendes regretted that he could not see Twain's expression. And on the other end, Twain rested his forehead in one hand while he held the phone in another. He had never thought it would be Mourinho. Although it could have been deduced from some of the previous data, he would always involuntarily bypass this every time he came close to this subject.

He did not need Mendes to tell him. He was well aware of what Mourinho thought of him. As last season's champion, Chelsea almost swept all the teams in England during their championship season. Only two teams were unbeaten when they faced Chelsea. One was Arsenal, led by the French manager, Arsène Wenger, and the other one was Nottingham Forest. Arsenal only tied with Chelsea for two rounds, and Nottingham Forest was the only team that won against Chelsea in the entire season. Mourinho initially had been very hopeful that Chelsea would be unbeaten again for thirty-eight matches for another season after Arsenal, but it was destroyed by Nottingham Forest.

If Mourinho could still have cordial feelings towards Tony Twain who always opposing him, hell would have frozen over.

Why would such a person be willing to step out and help testify for a player whom Forest was interested in and help Pepe to obtain a work permit?

Twain was perplexed, his head full of questions.

However, on the surface, he was still grateful for all the efforts made by Mr. Mendes. "That's terrific, getting a European championship coach to testify for Pepe. I don't think there should be a problem. Thank you, Mr. Mendes. Oh, and please thank Mr. Mourinho on my behalf."

Mendes laughed and interrupted Twain. "If you want to thank José, you can do it in person. The two of you will definitely meet at the hearing."

At this end of the phone call, the corner of Twain's mouth twitched. Such a meeting was really not what he wanted.

But he would endure it for Pepe's work permit.

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The call with Mendes quickly ended after he confirmed the hearing time. Twain got up to head upstairs and find the club chairman, Evan Doughty, to inform him of the latest developments.

Evan was surprised to hear that Mourinho had agreed to attend the hearing for a Forest team player. He was aware of the story between Tony Twain and José Mourinho.

He thought about it for a while and asked distrustfully, "Could it be that Mourinho is going to stir trouble up at the hearing?"

Twain did not expect his words at all. It took him a while to respond. He shook his head. "I don't think so. But one thing is certain. His willingness to attend the hearing is not to help us. It must be to help his friend Jorge Mendes."

Speaking of Mendes, Evan smiled. "This agent is an interesting guy."

Twain knew what Evan's "interesting" meant, and Allan, who was not around, was probably even more aware. The unanimous view of the three of them was to make use of what they could, and whatever they could not make use of they would discuss when the time came.

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Now that Mourinho had agreed to attend the hearing, Nottingham Forest submitted all of Pepe's information to the English Football Association to appeal Pepe's work permit.

The next thing was to wait for the Football Association's reply.

During this time, the Forest team and Twain were not idle. They still had to continue with the many jobs required for the purchase and sale of players and not delay the team due to a single player like Pepe.

Eastwood's injury did not just cost the Forest team a good striker, but it also served as a wake-up call to Twain—He realized that his players were not robots which would never get hurt, get tired, or be in a messy state. Although fate had been very good to him these two seasons and his team had not been plagued by extensive injuries, who could guarantee what would happen in the future?

The Forest team's most important target this summer was the striker. With Eastwood still injured, it was likely that he would not recover in time to return at the start of the new season. The remaining three strikers on the Forest team were mainly center forwards now. Therefore, the Forest team tactics would become unvaried. This was not what Twain wanted to see. What he advocated was the idea that "water shapes its course according to the nature of the ground over which it flows; the soldier works out his victory in relation to the foe whom he is facing," and not being a one-trick pony.

The Forest team needed a fast striker to match up with the center forwards.

Eastwood did not rely on his speed. He was stronger in his overall skill. Now, Twain much preferred to organize around a player's distinctive skills.

The Forest team's first target was Inter Milan's Obafemi Martins. But Martins' loyalty to Inter Milan would not be moved by the English pound. Inter Milan told the Forest team that Martins did not want to leave the Giuseppe Meazza stadium because he was very happy here.

When he heard this reply, Tang En scoffed. After this season, Martins' loyalty to Inter Milan would be worthless. No, maybe it was still worth ten million; that was the amount Newcastle United paid to Inter Milan in transfer fees when they brought in the Nigerian striker. After a season, Inter Milan had hoarded six strikers and a housecleaning was needed, so the lowest-status Martins were forced to move to the United Kingdom.

But Tang En could not use a future matter to persuade Martins to leave the Meazza stadium ahead of time to avoid watching the celebratory scene of the newcomers Zlatan Ibrahimović and Hernán Crespo scoring a goal at the sidelines of the training ground. Martins would definitely not believe it if he were to say that now. Currently, he and Inter Milan were in the "honeymoon period". The combination of him and Adriano was the main striker partnership in Inter Milan.

Twain also knew that if he were to poach Martins now, he would have to pay a very high price. He did not want that. The Forest team was not a wealthy club now and did not have the ability to spend large sums of money. They should save in areas where they could.

Just after the transfer plan for Martins was abandoned, the Nottingham Forest team received a notice from the Football Association summoning them to the Football Association headquarters in London to attend a special hearing for Pepe.

Chapter 323: An Exceptional Talent Part 2

The meeting with Mourinho was outside the English Football Association building located in Soho Square, a small embankment where many London Plane trees were planted.

This time he did not look around at the skyscrapers while in the car. Even though the last time he came here was two and a half years ago, that one time had left him with a very deep impression.

Representing the Forest team for the appeal was Jack Landy, the lawyer who had defended Twain the last time. They met again without any of the tension of the first meeting. When Landy shook hands with Twain, he smiled and said, "I knew we were going to meet again, Mr. Twain."

Twain squinted and said, "I don't often get into trouble. I was afraid you were going to be unemployed."

In view of everyone, the two men laughed as if there was no one else around.

Mourinho stood next to them without expression; or more accurately, he wore a straight face with slightly pursed lips and a crease in his brow. He clearly was not happy to see Twain acting so smug in front of him.

Next to him, Jorge Mendes lightly cleared his throat to introduce Mourinho to Twain.

On hearing the cough, Twain's expression quickly changed, as if he was already adjusting his face. His smiling expression towards the Landy quickly disappeared, and his smile immediately became warmer and more cordial. However, no matter how one looked at it, it felt overly enthusiastic and too friendly.

He turned to Mourinho and extended his hand. "I never thought we'd meet this way, Mr. Mourinho. Anyway, thank you very much for being able to attend this hearing for Pepe."

Mourinho did not intend to extend his hand. He continued expressionlessly, and his voice sounded a little cold. "Don't get me wrong, Mr. Twain. I'm just as disgusted with the English Football Association as you are."

His answer made the people present feel a little awkward. There was a momentary silence. Twain's hand was still hanging in mid-air. He did not know what to do with it.

But soon Mourinho had a smile on his face, and he clasped Twain's hand. "I also did not expect for us to collaborate in this way, Mr. Twain."

After that momentary silence, the atmosphere returned to normal. Mendes was in a pleasant conversation with the Forest Football Club chairman, Evan Doughty. Evan introduced Jack Landy to Mendes. Although the lawyer was sometimes inflexible and stubborn, his service was impeccable. If Mendes had any disputes in England, he could employ his services.

Intentionally or otherwise, everyone seemed to be distancing themselves from Twain and Mourinho to give them space to talk alone.

It was June, and the London Plane trees were luxuriant and leafy overhead. The mottled sunlight spattered at their feet. The breeze was gentle, the light shimmering.

Mourinho looked around and turned his gaze towards the agent, Mendes, but he did not look at Twain. "I have a very good relationship with Jorge, so I agreed to help him."

Twain looked up at the fragmented sky, divided by leaves overhead, and nodded. "Of course. I know."

"But don't be happy too soon. Nobody knows if the work permit will be successfully obtained. I've never heard of a successful application for a center back using the 'exceptional talent clause.'" Mourinho's tone showed clear disdain.

Twain returned his gaze and looked at Mourinho. "Then I'll be the first to do it."

Mourinho grunted and said nothing.

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The hearing on Pepe's qualification for the work permit was held inside the Football Association building. It was the same room that Twain had been in the last time. However, the secretary who received them was not Faria Alam, who walked around with her hips swaying. She was replaced by a capable male secretary. And in the boardroom, the Chief Executive of the English Football Association waiting for them was not Mark Palios. The two of them, him and Miss Alam, had both resigned a year ago after the "Zippergate" scandal. As for the more disgusting details behind the scandal, there's no need to discuss them here.

The male secretary, leading the way, was surprised to see José Mourinho and Tony Twain together with his own eyes, so he said, "I didn't expect Mr. Mourinho and Mr. Twain to be here at the same time."

Without waiting for the two managers to speak, Jack Landy stepped forward. "Why? Is Mr. José Mourinho testifying for Pepe from the Forest team, not in compliance with the rules?"

The secretary realized his gaffe and quickly shook his head. "Oh, so sorry. I was just a little surprised. Please, come this way."

As he turned to lead the way, Twain and Mourinho shook their heads at the same time. This damn lawyer! Count your luck, kid!

Landy looked back and smiled at the two of them. Mourinho looked up at the ceiling and Twain seemed more interested in the photographs in the corridor.

According to the rules, the judge's panel must be made up of the English Football Association, a British government official, a member of the Professional Footballers' Association, and three experts during an appeal for a player's work permit. Their opinions determined whether a player could obtain a special work permit.

Apparently, the members of the judging panel were somewhat surprised when Mourinho and Twain appeared at the same time.

It seemed that the disagreement between Twain and Mourinho was well known.

The entire appeal process was very procedural. The members of the judging panel read Pepe's personal information first, including documents and images. The judging members from different departments would have different appraisals of Pepe's ability. Twain and Mourinho were here mainly to deal with their questions.

First up as the "mentor who discovered Pepe," Mourinho testified that Pepe did indeed have outstanding ability and limitless potential. His words clearly carried more weight than the data.

Twain sat on the side and watched Mourinho stand in the middle of the room to answer one question after another in correspondence to his wishes. He felt that aside from their mutually competitive relationship, Mourinho was actually a good person.

When it was Twain's turn, the questions were mainly focused on Pepe's position.

"Mr. Twain, obviously Pepe is a center back..."

Twain forced a smile. He actually gritted his teeth and asked in return, "Yes, what's the issue?"

"What I am more interested in is this: in using this "exceptional talent" quota for a center back, is the Forest team not planning to bring in a striker this summer? Eastwood's injury has not healed yet, has it?"

Twain looked at the other members of the panel and asked, "Is this a question that must be answered in accordance with the procedure?"

Someone in the panel stood up. "Don't misunderstand, Mr. Twain. It's just a little bit of curiosity from some of us." The man who stood up and said this was one of three experts, Gary Lineker, who had retired long ago and now worked in television. He had agreed to serve in the judge's panel at this hearing because it was Nottingham Forest's appeal and Tony Twain was bound to come.

Twain glanced at Lineker. It had not been his question, but he guessed that the man must have had a part in coming up with it.

"When people talk about talent, the first thing that comes to mind is the striker, the midfielder, or the attacking midfielder... how can it be that there are no talented defensive players?" Twain spat out the words that had been in his heart for a long time. "Is there anyone who thinks that Rio Ferdinand is not a genius? Does anyone think George Wood is not a genius? If I can apply for an attacking player under the 'exceptional talent' label, why can't I apply for a center back, who truly has great potential and is really a genius, as an 'exceptional talent?' Pepe's ability is described in detail in the information. I'm sure you haven't forgotten Mr. Mourinho's statement just now. I don't want to prove whether Pepe is an exceptional talent or not. I just want to ask: Mr. Lineker, what do you consider genius?"

After he finished speaking, the three experts on the judge's panel put their heads together and whispered. Other than their three voices, no one else asked Twain a question. Twain waited quietly.

After about five minutes, more and more members of the panel joined in the three-person discussion. The Football Association official had to stand up to announce the end of the hearing. The judging panel

would need to continue to their discussion and review. They would notify the Nottingham Forest Football Club whether Pepe would be eligible for a work permit two days later.

“So that’s it?” As they came out of the Football Association building, Twain shrugged his shoulders and asked Landy, “Is this always the case with the FA? Will they take another two days to finish the discussion when everything is clear?”

Landy shook his head in puzzlement. “No, this is the first time I’ve ever seen it. Mr. Twain, perhaps your player has divided their opinions.”

“And does that mean there’s no difference between our current situation and yesterday’s as far as whether Pepe is able to receive a work permit?” Twain asked again.

Landy nodded and did not speak. Beside him, Mourinho smiled and took over the topic. “Mr. Twain, it’s not easy to be the first. There are still matters to be taken care of in the club. Sorry, I have to make a move first.”

After that, without waiting for Twain’s response, he slightly nodded to the other people and then left. He did not even shake hands with Twain. It did not look like the two men had just fought against the Football Association shoulder to shoulder. It looked more like they had just ended another match against each other.

Mendes smiled at Twain and shrugged.

Twain admitted he had no such luck.

Mourinho was so adamant in leaving that he did not give him a chance to fight back.

It looked like he had to wait until the new season began to get him back.

Chapter 324: Forward Line Problems Part 1

Two days later, there was finally a piece of good news from the English Football Association. Tang En and the Forest Team heaved a sigh of relief. Brazilian player Pepe was granted his work permit; he could sign with Forest and represent the team in various competitions. From this point on, Pepe truly became a member of Forest Team.

This was certainly fantastic news to Tang En. Like he was a piece of meat that had yet to land in his mouth, it was difficult not to be anxious about Pepe’s transfer. Now that the final obstruction to Pepe’s transfer to Forest was eliminated, the only thing left was for Forest to wire the transfer fee over to FC Porto’s bank account. With that, Pepe would officially become a member of Forest Team. In truth, he had already joined the Forest Team for their training in Nottingham. The vacation period for Forest’s players had come to its end, and everyone reassembled to prepare for the new season. They were also paying special attention to the upcoming qualifying match in late August on their home grounds for the Champions League. Their opponent was Villarreal CF, whom they had lost to during the UEFA Europa League Group Stage.

After resolving Pepe’s work permit issue, Nottingham Forest again tried inquiring about the possibility for Martins’ transfer from Inter Milan. The inquiry ended the same way as Tang En expected it to. Inter

Milan very resolutely turned down Forest's asking price. On Martins' side, he also accepted an interview from 'La Gazzetta dello Sport' and expressed his loyalty to the team. He claimed to only belong to Inter Milan, regardless of the interest of any club. He had been trained there as a youth, made his mark there, and stepped into the European tournaments from there. It was the place where he had become a true, professional footballer. He did not think it would be possible for him to leave such a great club.

Seeing that interview, Tang En did not wish to make further remarks. He informed the club to cancel their offer for Martins, as well as other plans for the transfer. He had originally thought that he might be able to loan Martins even if a transfer were not possible. Since it was now evident that Martins wanted to express himself as a loyal subject of Inter Milan, Forest would give him that chance. Tang En just hoped that things would not develop the same way they had in his recollection: over the next year, Martins would continue to be loyal to a heartless Inter Milan.

Though it was already impossible for Martins to join Forest, Tang En still continued his pursuit of a speed-type forward.

Allan suggested that Tang En consider England's golden boy, Michael Owen, who had been rather unhappy in Real Madrid. From a timing perspective, it was doubtless a great opportunity to bring in Owen during the summer this year. From a commercial perspective, Owen had incredible value. However, Tang En told Allan to dismiss the idea of having Owen join them unless the Forest Club owned a professional medical institution at the same level as the Milan Lab. Otherwise, spending over ten million on a glass man... Tang En did not want to become a laughing stock.

With Martin's deal falling through, Tang En's substitution of choice was Darren Bent, the number one shooter from Ipswich, an English Premier League team in the previous season who had gotten relegated. Whether it was his price, ability, or potential, Darren Bent satisfied all of Tang En's requirements. However, among the many clubs interested in him, Bent leaned heavily towards Charlton. Charlton's manager, Curbishley, was the first person to see potential in him, constantly expressing his interest in recruiting Bent. To provide a main position on the team after his entry, Curbishley even let go of two of the team's forwards, Jeffers and Lisbie.

Furthermore, on their team were two former teammates of Darren Bent from his time with Ipswich. When choosing which club to go to, he even called them for their opinions; they certainly would have pushed him towards joining their own team.

As a result, Darren Bent turned down Nottingham Forest, Tottenham Hotspur, Sunderland, Aston Villa and several other clubs to join Charlton.

Currently, Forest was in an awkward position. On one hand, Forest had attained the qualification to participate in the season's Champions League, becoming a source of much allure to numerous football players. On the other, Forest was still no powerhouse; in the eyes of many football stars, Forest would not be their first choice. In this way, the situation became one in which players sought after by Tang En were not willing to come, while those who were keen were not within his considerations.

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But that was not all. While Forest was worrying over which forward to acquire, they were also faced with the problem of head hunters going after their players.

Following Forest's meteoric rise in the English Premier League last season, several players on the team were viewed as stars by various managers; George Wood especially was. If not for Forest's new contract with him, there would probably be enough European clubs coming for him to storm through the gates of Forest. Based on his outstanding performance last season, he was chosen as the Professional Footballers' Association's Young Player of the Year.

Several other young players on Forest also performed brilliantly. Chimbonda, in his position as right back, played through all the matches of the season. Although the lad was not as eye-catching as Wood or Eastwood, his steady performance was something indispensable to Forest. While fans might not notice him, professional managers and scouts did. In the summer, Manchester United put in an inquiry to Forest about Chimbonda's price. Of course, Tang En did not hesitate to stamp a "not-for-sale" tag onto Chimbonda.

Despite Chimbonda's excellent performance, he was not considered Forest's most successful transfer of the season. After the season ended, his French comrade, Franck Ribéry, was widely regarded by the media to be the best transfer in England for the 04-05 season. Comments by the media were as follows:

Manager Tony Twain has a pair of eyes that warrant our inquisition. He did not only find players like George Wood and Chimbonda; the most exciting transfer in the last season was the young man he brought back from Ligue 2: Franck Ribéry. It was a free transfer that did not cost Forest a single penny. Now, a conservative estimation of his value has already risen to ten million euros. Assists, scoring, as well as the speed and demeanour he displays when he takes the ball on a breakthrough in the wings; those are the qualities that placed Ribéry on the same star-player level of discussion as Giggs in the Premier League. When Forest qualified for the Champions League, Manager Mourinho commented that Forest and their manager had ridiculous luck. But looking at it now, is it mere luck to be able to gather up so many young players with such potential?

After Arsène Wenger, we now have another manager to look out for during the yearly transfer market. In this year's summer transfer, Tony Twain pulled out all the stops, activating the "Exceptional Player Clause" to bring Brazilian center back Pepe in. What kind of player will he be? No one has heard of him before, but he will surely show us something new in the upcoming season. Why? Because he's valued by Tony Twain.

Rumour has it that SI, who has a cooperative relationship with the Forest Club, would consult Tony Twain on some of the players' abilities and potential in the making of the FM game series! This is astonishing. Everyone knows that SI has around 2500 data researchers gathering information on various players. This is truly a marrying of the strong.

It was a glorious time for Ribéry. Ashley Young, on the other side of the wings, also received a commendable evaluation. Although he had only scored three goals throughout the entire season, including the EFL Cup matches, his total passes to the center took first place on the team. Compared to scoring goals, it seemed that he preferred assisting.

A few other young men like Piqué and Bendtner performed in a less striking manner, but were still similarly remarkable. Piqué did not showcase any spectacular performances, conforming to the norms and expectations and instead displaying the most important quality of a defensive player: stability. He performed and grew steadily, with much anticipation accompanying each of his steps.

Bendtner's performance mid-season was brilliant. Following that, his appearance on the field was reduced due to Forest's strategic requirements; among the four forwards, he was last in line. However,

the five goals he scored, his incredible physique, and his exquisite technique revealed his unlimited potential.

With so many outstanding players, it was natural for them to attract the attention of wolves.

Ribéry, Chimbonda, George Wood, Bendtner, Ashley Young, Crouch... All of them received invitations from other teams.

Among them, Liverpool's reported offer of 7.5 million pounds to buy Peter Crouch came within Tang En's expectations. In his memory, it was this summer that Liverpool ended up purchasing Crouch. Crouch's performance in the last three months of the league had managed to capture Benítez's attention; after Eastwood's injury, Crouch had managed to score several crucial goals. However, this was not the real reason behind Benítez's resolution to buy him.

Just like Tang En had, he saw value in Crouch because he was a tall center-forward who possessed top-notch footwork. With that, his presence could greatly enrich the strategy of the team. He was essential to enabling greater variation in a team's offense. Liverpool was lacking exactly such a center-forward. After becoming the recent victors of the Champions League, The Reds hoped to be even better in the new season; such a center-forward was indispensable to their goal.

Forest's initial purchase of Crouch had cost 1.8 million pounds. After a single season, his value had risen to 7.5 million! However, that increase was unable to satisfy Tang En. He rejected Liverpool's offer. After the rejection, he immediately contacted Nottingham Evening Post's reporter, Pierce Brosnan, for an interview. In the interview, the two naturally segued into a conversation regarding recent news of Crouch's transfer. Tang En then made a big splash about the unique abilities of Crouch. He made it sound as if all of England's clubs required such a "tall, technically outstanding, and selfless player who could pass to his teammates as well as score goals on his own." Finally, after listing out Crouch's various positive attributes, Tang En stated that the player was an important member of the Forest Team. Under the situation where Forest had to play in multiple leagues, Tang En was not prepared to give up a player with such unique abilities.

But honestly? Upon receiving Liverpool's first offer, Tang En had already decided to sell the towering player. On one hand, Evan was no Abramovich, and Nottingham Forest was no Chelsea. The finances of the club could not possibly be only incurring losses without any profit. After purchasing so many players two years in a row and hardly selling any of them, Forest needed to adequately cost-save through such sales.

On the other, Tang En was also aware that he had too many tall center-forwards on the team: Viduka, Bendtner, and Crouch. Having all three of them was a bit excessive. The best way to resolve that was to sell one. In the current transfer market, there were not many parties interested in Viduka. Bendtner was a player Tang En absolutely refused to sell because of his youth; he could still represent Forest for a very long time. Crouch was the only suitable candidate.

Tang En was just a little disdainful about Liverpool's offer of 7.5 million.

Chapter 325: Forward Line Problems Part 2

After rejecting Liverpool, Tang En was not worried that Benítez would simply let things go; he knew that Liverpool badly needed a forward like Crouch.

As expected, Liverpool's second offer swiftly appeared before Tang En and Evan. This time, their offer was irresistible to Forest: 11.5 million pounds!

Upon seeing the offer, Tang En looked up at Evan with a grin. "The new Euro Champions are indeed generous."

Evan nodded. "What about Crouch's side?"

"I haven't asked, but I don't think Crouch and his agent would refuse Liverpool's offer. Their terms of contract are much better than what we currently offer."

As they started discussing wages, their attention moved from Crouch's transfer to an adjustment of the pay structure of the team.

"What's restricting the growth of the team now is no longer the question of whether their transfer fee is enough, but their wages. Evan, if we can't offer a higher salary to the players, we won't be able to attract them to join us no matter how many promises I make about becoming champions. The football world is very practical. I'm sure you know this better than I do. For professional footballers, playing football is their work. It's for earning a wage to feed their families."

"Yes... I have been thinking about that too. The club approves raising the salary ceiling. Regarding players who have already signed, we'll slowly adjust when we renew their contracts."

After coming to an agreement on an appropriate rate for the highest pay, they also agreed to sell off Crouch.

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The next day, Nottingham Forest replied to Liverpool Club, agreeing to their offer. Now, Benítez could speak with Crouch and his agent regarding the details of their contract. There was nothing else more to do with Forest and Tang En.

Crouch's departure from Forest had become set. Benítez's expenditure of 11.5 million pounds resolved Liverpool's issue with their forward line. Meanwhile, Tang En continued to be troubled over his forward. He now had lots of funds, but nowhere to spend them.

Forwards were closely related to the scoring of goals of a team and their results. It is a critically important position. As a result, Tang En's requirements for it were equally harsh. They could not just bring in any second-rate player from the domestic leagues. Since Forest's intention for this season was to battle in the UEFA Champions League, it was best for them to find a forward who had experience playing in Europe. The player could not be too young, as Forest team was not lacking in youth forwards. What the current Forest team wanted was a forward who was in his prime and did not need additional grooming from the team. He needed to come ready for battle.

There were plenty of forwards within the European and international football scene. However, not many would be left after sifting them through with Tang En's requirements.

If the Forest Team was not fighting in the Champions League, Tang En could even buy Harewood back from West Ham United. He was, after all, also a speed-type forward. Furthermore, if it was the Forest team who called him back, he would be more than happy to return to City Ground and work under Tang En.

Yet, in Tang En's view, Harewood was still lacking a little compared to his requirements.

Just as Tang En was at his wit's end about the signing of a forward for the team, Nottingham Forest Club received a phone call. The man on the phone claimed to be the agent of French forward Nicolas Anelka. He hoped to speak with Tony Twain about Anelka's interest in transferring to Forest.

Tang En was stumped for half a day after hearing that news. In his initial search for a suitable forward, he had cast his gaze all around the international soccer scene but had not for a moment thought about the name Anelka. The Frenchman, who had been estranged from European's football mainstream circle, seemed to already have been forgotten by the world.

He vaguely remembered that Anelka had transferred from Man City to Fenerbahçe S.K., a team in Turkey, just last season in the final moments of the winter transfer window.

It had only been half a season. Could Anelka's older brothers, his managers, no longer stand the loneliness?

Chapter 326: About Anelka

With regards to Claude Anelka and Didier Anelka, the two brothers and agents of the French striker, Nicolas Anelka, everyone's bad comments about them could go on for three days and three nights and still not finish. Almost all the coaches, club chairmen, and managers abhorred them. The French Football Federation officials treated the two Anelkas as if they were dealing with frauds and thieves, full of contempt and disdain. The English media were more direct and called them "parasites living off Anelka."

In the football world, it was common for players to make their relatives and immediate family members agents, such as the French superstar players Zidane and Djorkaeff, the Brazilian star players Ronaldinho and Kaka, "The Flying Dutchman" Robben from the Netherlands, and so on. They had chosen their brothers or fathers to be their agents to handle the contracts with the club as well as to negotiate various endorsements.

In doing so, there were obviously cost savings. After all, even if there was no common saying in other countries for "keeping the money within the family," the meaning was the same. But compared with those professional agents, the players' families lack of experience and knowledge often led the players astray and ruined their future.

A living example was right in front of everyone's eyes.

Starting from the transfer from Arsenal to Real Madrid in 1999 until 2005, there had been five transfers in six years with Arsenal, Real Madrid, Paris Saint-Germain, and Liverpool. Four of the powerhouses in Continental Europe had his footprints. However, being in so many big clubs had not helped Anelka's career. His football resume was filled with glorious names, but the only honors he had won were double Premier League titles and a UEFA Champions League title. The lack of personal honors was not the most

fatal. The most fatal was the string of frequent transfers that gradually exposed the greed of his two agent brothers. Now, almost no club dared to ask for Anelka. After the conflict with Keegan last season, no team would venture to take on such a player in the winter transfer period.

In the end, the Turkish Süper Lig team Fenerbahçe S.K. announced the deal of seven million pounds to bring in Anelka at the last moment of the transfer window closure.

Seven million! Did it sound like a lot? It was not when Anelka's several transfer prices were reviewed: when he decided to leave his training place, Arsenal, and his mentor, Wenger, Real Madrid paid twenty-three million pounds for him, which was the most expensive for a young player at that time. He was brilliant then and on top of his game. He was hailed as the only talented striker who was comparable to Ronaldo and the most gifted talent in French football in a decade. Later, he commented on his fellow countryman, Henry: "He's playing at Arsenal now, which I, Anelka, did when I was nineteen years old."

Later, he went to Paris Saint-Germain. Holding a high salary, he became a "cancer" that only caused trouble for the team. When he went to Liverpool, he had a brief recovery. However, due to his two elder brothers' insatiable greed, Houllier dumped him. Later on, he settled in Manchester City for a price of thirteen million pounds. He thought he had finally found his base. He did not anticipate that he would clash with the manager again after one season. This time when he was leaving, his two brothers sprang into action and put him in touch with Arsenal, hoping to increase his price through speculation. But it did not work this time. Wenger and the Arsenal chairman came out to deny the rumor and that they did not intend to purchase the Frenchman. In the end, they could only go to Turkey with their tails between their legs. The price of being away from the center of European football and away from everyone's line of sight was just seven million pounds.

"...And now, after being in Turkey for half a season, did they finally find something was wrong?" With this call record, Twain looked at the caller's name, Claude Anelka, with disdain. "With their dear brother far from the center of attention, they can't get more money, can they? I remember that just five days ago, the Fenerbahçe club seemed to have rejected Newcastle United's offer for him."

Evan Doughty sat in his seat and reminded him, "It wasn't a refusal. Newcastle United asked for the price, and they listed the Frenchman at twenty million pounds, which scared off Newcastle United."

Twain shrugged his shoulders. "A covert refusal, just like us. You state that a certain player is not for sale, and everyone continues to attempt to an inquiry, testing your patience. Consequently, you give a price that the buyer can't afford or is not willing to pay to so that the houseflies know to back off. Didn't we give George a price of two trillion pounds?"

Speaking of which, Evan laughed. "Tony, you know what? In SI's latest release of the FM series, the George Wood's price is listed as two trillion."

Upon hearing that news, Twain was momentarily stunned. He then shook his head and smiled. "Is that special treatment for a partner?"

Evan brought the conversation back to the point. "What do you have in mind, Tony? You're the manager. Allan and I are still going to refer to you for any signings in the team." As he said this, he glanced at Allan.

Twain put the call record back on the table, leaned back on the chair and answered simply, "Nothing. I'm going to reject this. I don't want to deal with those bloodsuckers."

Just as Evan nodded, Allan suddenly reached out his hand. "Wait a minute."

In Evan's office, there were currently only three of them: Twain, Allan, and Evan. Allan, who had been frowning and in contemplation since he had come in, suddenly spoke up. That attracted the attention of the other two men.

"Why not give it a try?" Allan looked up at the two men, and all three of them looked at each other.

"Give what a try?" Twain looked away first after looking at him for a while.

"Talk to Anelka's brothers."

Twain waved his hands, moving somewhat exaggeratedly. "Allan, do you think this is some kind of free Turkish shish kebab? Do you know what kind of people Anelka's brothers are?"

Allan nodded. "I know. I studied the both of them before I came."

His reply was somewhat unexpected for Twain. He had not even considered it when he received the news. He had already refused in his heart. He had no idea that Allan would look into Anelka's two brothers, especially for this matter.

With his mouth agape for a moment, Twain could only give a forced laugh to dispel the awkward silence in the room.

Allan asked in return, "Tony, do you have any good candidates for the team's forward line?"

Twain helplessly shook his head. "No, the forwards who I'm interested in won't come, and those who would I'm not keen on."

"If that's the case, why don't we give this a try? The new season is getting closer and closer. Instead of wasting time in the transfer market, let's try to get in touch with Anelka's agents. I think something must be going on since they took the initiative to contact us after they had just arrived in Turkey for half a season. Perhaps this is better for us."

"What else can be going on? Not getting along with the manager? Or the club chairman? But five days ago, the Turkish chairman of Fenerbahçe showed the close relationship between Anelka and himself."

"Tony, do you know Figo and Redondo?" Allan again surprised Twain with his question.

"Yes... Of course, I know them. The former is a Real Madrid player, and the latter is recovering from an injury with AC Milan.

"Then do you recall the how they moved to their new clubs despite being satisfied where they were?"

The question stumped Twain. He frowned as he searched carefully in his mind, and then said uncertainly, "It seemed that Figo left Barcelona to move to Real Madrid because he had previously promised Real Madrid's president that if he was elected, he would transfer to Real Madrid. As for Redondo, I heard that it was because he chose to stand on the wrong side in the Real Madrid presidential election. He chose to support Lorenzo Sanz instead of Florentino?"

Allan chuckled and said, “No, I’m not talking about that. I mean, do you know the attitudes and opinions those people and clubs had shown before and after the transfer?”

This time, Twain simply shook his head. “How am I supposed to remember that?”

“It was a coincidence that I turned to these old events yesterday when I checked up on the information about Anelka’s agents. On July 14, 2000, Figo, who had just performed well in the UEFA European Championship, publicly told the Barcelona fans that he would not transfer out of Barcelona, much less go to Real Madrid. His original words went like this—” Allan rummaged through his own folder and read, “I’ve made an irrevocable decision. I will not be a member of Real Madrid. If the fans are disappointed and upset by the rumors about me, then I ask for their forgiveness. But they should believe what I said.”

After he read, Allan looked up at Twain. There was no need to say what happened next. He believed that as a professional football manager, Twain would know the ending of this matter better than himself.

“And ten days later, Figo signed a 56.1 million transfer contract with Real Madrid...” Twain continued Allan’s thread and soon after he sighed, “All right, I know what you mean. Both the club and player were good at lying. The thing is — the chairman of the Fenerbahçe club said that Anelka now enjoys living in Turkey, perhaps to create a reason for their price increase. And they really wanted to drive that troublemaking Frenchman and his two greedy agents out of the club, but the Turks were just trying to get a little bit more out of Newcastle United. They had not expected to shoot themselves in the foot by scaring the Newcastle United chairman away.”

After he heard Twain’s story, Allan laughed. “That’s a possibility. It could also be those two greedy agent brothers using us as a cover to try to get a higher salary for their cash cow. All of Europe knows that Nottingham Forest is looking everywhere to buy a striker. In order to negotiate with the Fenerbahçe club, they could be using this as a bargaining chip to ask for a sky-high price.”

Evan Doughty applauded after Allan had finished speaking. “Those are both wonderful stories. Which one is closer to the truth?”

“There are other possibilities, but that’s not the point.” Allan looked at the club chairman and his old partner. “The important point is that since they got in touch with us, we’ll talk to them, no matter what their purpose. We’re short speedy forwards now. Is Anelka fast?” He turned to Twain again.

Twain nodded.

“Since Anelka is the type of striker we need...”

Twain interrupted Allan’s words. “He is not necessarily what we need. A player like Anelka is very difficult to control. He’s recalcitrant and does not play well with others. Even managers like Wenger and Bosque could not take him. I think a manager who is able to train him well may not have been born yet. He’s a ticking time bomb in the locker room, a bad example in the training ground and a negative factor. He’s a risky investment and the club finance doesn’t know whether he will be a profit or a loss.”

Again, Allan interrupted Twain. “But we have you, Tony. Remember Rebrov? What did everyone call him before you came on board? A parallel import! And then what happened?” He beamed at Twain.

Twain scratched his head. “Do you really trust me that much?”

Evan also spoke. "Tony, honestly, Allan and I admire the way you manage the team. There have been no scandals or disputes in our locker room so far. The overall mood on our team is good, and we have a good rapport with the fans. I think that's all to your credit."

Twain had long been accustomed to such barefaced flattery. He was so impervious that his expression remained unchanged. "That's because the players on the team have a good disposition."

"George Wood is not an easy kid. Except for you, I'm afraid he won't even listen to me." Evan saw through Twain's ploy.

Allan cleared his throat, "Look, we are in agreement on your standard. Very well, since Anelka is the type of striker we need, why don't we try getting in touch with his agents just once? I feel that aside from his character and two brothers, Anelka is still a very powerful player."

"Compared to him five years ago, it's already night and day," muttered Twain.

"But he fits your requirements now. He must think highly of us if he wants to come." Although Allan still had a smile on his face, his stance was tougher. He was not going to budge.

Twain made a face. "I don't want to deal with those two agents."

"Don't worry about it, Tony. I'll take care of Anelka's agents and be responsible for getting in touch with them. But you have to promise me that if I can successfully sign the Frenchman, you won't refuse."

Twain sighed as he conceded, "Okay, since you want to give yourself trouble, I'm not going to stop you, Allan. I promise you, as long as you can sign him, there will be a position for him in the team. I will not make things difficult for you. But... there is a common saying in China: 'Ugly words must be said first.' Whether he can play the main position and be the core of the team or not, it all depends on him and his performance."

Allan nodded with a smile. "Of course." Then he turned to Evan.

Evan Doughty thought about it. "Selling Crouch will get us ten million. So, the target that I give you is that the transfer fee cannot be higher than that figure."

"Seven million to buy him and ten million to sell after half a season. It's already very lucrative for the Turks." Twain grumbled next to him, "I'd still like to warn you, beware of those two agents ... I get a headache when I think of them."

Allan smiled. "They're just two greedy pigs. Plus, they're amateurs."

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Thus the plan to get in touch with Anelka's agents was determined. Twain dumped all the hassle on Allan and was busy coaching the team and continuing with the job of bolstering other positions. Regardless of Allan's progress, he had already made plans to rely on the three forwards till Eastwood returned from his recovery. Anyway, he did not have any hope for Anelka. Even if he came, there were still his brothers to consider. Twain could not count on anything.

Allan had just returned from the United States and brought good news to the Forest team. He had negotiated a sponsorship contract with Nike. In the next five years, Nike would be the sponsors for the

team's jerseys. Allan thought that it was fitting for the Forest team, which was stepping into the UEFA Champions League. If the team was still wearing the British domestic sports brand, Umbro, on the one hand, it was not international enough and, on the other hand, Umbro also gave less money than Nike.

In fact, Twain was more inclined to sign a jersey sponsorship contract with Germany's well-known sports brand, Adidas. However, Adidas's reaction to a collaboration with the Forest team was lukewarm. Twain was not willing to be snubbed when an overture was made. Both Evan and Allan were from the United States and favored American sports brands.

This contract brought a five-year income of twenty-five million-pounds to the Forest team, which had undoubtedly given the Forest team, competing for higher honors, a boost to their investment confidence and more clout in the transfer market.

There might be small disagreements like how to deal with Anelka, but Twain felt that the cooperation among the three of them was clearly successful. Allan brought him a lot of money, and Evan regulated the entire club's business. In turn, he played various roles between Twain and Allan. He was a mediator, friend, and a listening ear. Most importantly, of course, he was the decision maker.

After he saw the new sponsorship contract that Allan had brought, Twain sometimes thought that maybe Allan could successfully subdue Anelka's brothers. Just like Allan himself had said: One is a professional player; the other is an amateur player.

Chapter 327: Impressions Part 1

Tang En handed over the matter of Anelka to Allan Adams to deal with. He did not ask further questions. Allan would let him know whether it went through or not.

Meanwhile, Tang En threw himself into the team's training and other signings.

As Tang En could find no better alternative as a substitute for Forest's defensive midfielder, he decided not to let Gunnarsson go. Despite his abilities being much too lacking in comparison with George Wood and having a very limited effect on the field when he was required as a substitute, Tang En took into account that his plan barely involved fielding Gunnarsson. Unless Wood was rash, Gunnarsson would likely have very few chances to play. Letting him remain in the team was only to deal with any accidents that might occur.

Although Forest had spent four million pounds to acquire Pepe, Tang En's reformation of the defensive line was not yet complete. For a team that wished to conquer the UEFA Champions League, Tang En deeply understood the importance of defense. In fact, in the recent decade, almost all the final victors of the Champions League depended on their defense, and not offense, to win. In such league competitions, only a team possessing great defense would go far.

Tang En felt that Forest was still lacking a well-rounded player who could play several positions; in other words, a utility player. Such players did not need particularly outstanding abilities. Instead, they had to be able to quickly adjust to whatever position they were playing and perform at their usual level.

It was challenging to find someone capable of that.

Even after racking his brain and agonizing over it, he could not think of any suitable person to play as a substitute for Forest.

At first, he had had his eye on younger players. Due to Tang En's habits when playing FM, wherein he often preferred using younger players, he became somewhat youth-oriented in his management. He hoped that the players he purchased were young and talented, with the ability to serve Forest for a long time. However, wasn't it wasteful to designate such a person as a substitute? Furthermore, if it was truly some football genius, which club would easily give them up to their opponents?

Tang En had been keen on Man City's young defender, Micah Richards. The youth, turning 17 next year, was still on Man City's Youth Team. Despite this, he had already attracted a lot of attention. Forest Team communicated their hopes of buying Richards to Man City and immediately got turned down. No matter how good the relationship between Stuart Pearce and Tang En was, it was beyond negotiation. Richards was to be the future star of Man City. Tang En had seen something in him that Stuart also saw.

Over the phone, Pearce honestly told Tang En that he could not sell Richards to any other team; the lad was going to become Man City's future. Currently, he was the captain of the Youth Team. In the future, however, he might just take on the same position on Man City's First Team.

Hearing this from Pearce, Tang En knew that he could dismiss all ideas of owning Richards. If he wanted to make a purchase, he might have to wait a few more years. But at that time, whether Richards could still perform up to the same standard and whether Forest would still be interested were both uncertain.

"...If that's the case, Pearce... I would like to purchase another player from Man City: Sun Jihai."

Pearce's brows tightened when he heard the name. "But he's one of our main players now."

"Pearce, it's either Richards or Sun Jihai. You've got to at least give one of them to me, right? Or, you could loan Richards to me..."

Pearce paused briefly, and said, "I'll need some time to consider this, Tony. Wait for my call."

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Sun Jihai was a name that Tang En casually had brought up. Of course, he knew that Sun Jihai was a main player in Man City. Other than having played only nine matches in the previous season due to his injury and illness, he had always been the leading choice to fill Man City's position of right back from the EFL to the Premier League. However, his recent comeback from recovery caused some doubt in his ability.

Tang En's aim was really to add the statement, "or, you could loan Richards to me." He felt that Pearce would not agree to sell Sun Jihai to him; after all, Man City still needed him right now. Richards, on the other hand, was on the Youth Team. It was not a bad idea to loan him out to Forest.

Tang En's mind was relentlessly fixed on Richards. However, the news of his intended purchase of Sun Jihai became known to the all-pervasive media. China's media, naturally, had the biggest reaction to it:

A team who has attained the qualifications for the UEFA Champions League is intending on bringing in Chinese player, Sun Jihai, to enhance the positions of their left and right back. This is something worthy

of Chinese pride – should the transaction be successful, Sun Jihai will become the first Chinese player to appear on the European competition scene.

As such, the transaction, which had yet to even be decided, was already being stirred up by the Chinese media. Within a remarkably short time, it had already gotten to the point of the Chinese being utterly convinced that Sun Jihai was going to join Nottingham Forest.

From this, Tang En managed, once again, to experience the passion of China.

“Just this afternoon alone, I’ve had 17 phone calls requesting an interview. There were some who wanted to interview me directly, and some who wanted to get confirmation from the club about the news... On their end, they’re almost at the point of reporting that ‘Sun Jihai has already joined Nottingham Forest.’ Only now do they remember to learn the actual news!”

Tang En patted the stack of papers in his hands as he spoke to Dunn beside him. “Your Chinese comrades are sure full of passion...”

Dunn smiled. “Aren’t they also yours?”

“Ah. My apologies. I got too much into the role.” Tang En scratched his head.

Dunn turned back to retrieve a videotape from the recorder labeled “Sun Jihai” on its side. He passed it to Tang En.

“He fits your requirements very well indeed. He can play almost all the positions on the defensive line, as well as defensive midfielder and side midfielder... If you’re willing, he can even play as a forward.”

Tang En took the tape and shook his head. “Of course, I know all that. I watched him play earlier than you did... But, I don’t think that Pearce would be willing to give Sun Jihai to us. They don’t have that many player options for right back.”

After a look from Dunn, Tang En hastily raised his hands in surrender. “Okay, fine. I’ll be honest. I didn’t want Sun Jihai. My mind is set on Richards. I only want to make Pearce understand that while they can’t do without Sun Jihai for now, they are able to loan Richards to us...”

“Then what are you frowning about?”

Tang En pursed his lips. “I’m worried about how I should manage the Chinese media. Their passion is hot. Should I tell them honestly that I was just kidding?”

“Deal with it perfunctorily,” Dunn said as he busied with choosing a tape. In response, Tang En just shot him a look.

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The next day, Tang En called on Barbara Lucy. She was the person in charge of managing media calls.

“There are so many of them... We can’t possibly hold a press conference over a transfer that hasn’t even come to pass. Why don’t you pick one of the media companies and invite them to Wilford? I’ll speak to them on my own. You can just turn down all the other requests.”

“Alright, Mr. Twain.”

Barbara Lucy was extremely experienced and decisive. What she had promised Tang En to do in the morning was accomplished by afternoon, with two Chinese reporters arriving at the Wilford Training Grounds. They showed their identification to Old Ian at the guardhouse and were let in after Ian's confirmation over the phone with Ms. Lucy.

The two reporters walked into the training grounds and looked around curiously. They were probably the first two Chinese reporters to step foot in Forest's training area.

Ms. Lucy did not let their Chinese guests wait for too long and swiftly came out of the building, bringing them to Tang En's office.

Tang En was not present when they arrived. Lucy arranged for them to sit while they waited. After serving them both tea, she left.

The two Chinese reporters, a man and a woman, rose from the sofa immediately after Lucy's departure. They scrutinized the modestly-sized office. An entire wall was filled with books, all sorts of books related to soccer. The office desk appeared rather messy and on it sat a computer currently in sleep mode. The computer case emitted a soft whirring sound.

A glass cabinet stood on the side of the wall where the sofa was. The numerous honors received by the manager of the team were displayed there: three "Football League First Division Manager of the Month" (now EFL Championship), two "Premier League Manager of the Month," and last season's "Premier League Local Manager of the Season."

On seeing the final trophy, the male reporter laughed.

"Last season's 'Premier League Manager of the Season' was Mourinho. I heard that many people in the English football circle then believed that Tony only lost to Mourinho because he was not famous enough; because Nottingham Forest was not as influential as Chelsea..."

The female reporter on his side replied, "If Forest had the same kind of influence as Chelsea, but only attained fourth in the League, I'm afraid Tony Twain would be fired by the board of directors."

The man looked back at her and laughed dryly. "I say, Tang Jing, you're a football journalist now, not Mourinho's groupie. Maybe you should take note of your own status."

The female reporter referred to as "Tang Jing" ignored her colleague and walked to the front of the enormous French window. She looked towards the training grounds not far away. From her position, she could clearly observe the team's situation during training. Tang En's back was to the window. As usual, he did not demonstrate personally on the field but stood by the side supervising.

The male reporter walked over to Tang Jing. He gave the group of people a quick scan and pointed out a tall, bald player, saying, "That's Pepe. He cost four million pounds and used up the sole 'Exceptional Talent Clause' quota per season for Forest. I wonder what kind of performance he'll have in the new season."

The woman's focus, however, was not on the team. She had been looking at Tony Twain, whose back was to them.

Ms. Barbara Lucy, who had led them in, made her appearance at the training grounds. She walked over to Tony's side and said something; she was probably informing him about the arrival of the media's representatives. Tony nodded, but did not turn to look at the office behind him.

She left after relaying the message. Tony continued standing at the sidelines, supervising the training. It seemed like he did not have any intention of leaving the grounds to return to his office.

"That's George Wood. He looks so stern; it fits the media's evaluation of him. It's not so easy to get an opportunity to observe Forest Team's training this close up."

The man seemed more interested in Forest's players.

Tang Jing interrupted him, saying, "Wang, you're already an old football journalist, not some small-time football fan. Maybe you should take note of your own status."

The middle-aged man called "Wang" chuckled embarrassedly. "So, you've learned! I say, if you don't like this manager, what did you come along for?"

"For work."

"If it's for work, I would be enough on my own."

"Wang!"

Uncle Wang coughed and changed the topic. "To be honest... this Tony Twain is pretty interesting. He likes Chinese culture, and the rumor is that he can speak fluent Mandarin. It could get interesting if his team becomes linked with Sun Jihai. If Sun Jihai really comes to Forest, it might turn out to be a great opportunity for him. Think about it. How helpful would a manager who is able to communicate directly in Mandarin with Jihai be to him?"

"Sun Jihai plays a main position in Man City. Why does Forest want to buy him? I think it's to make him a substitute for the French fullback. Moving from a main position to be a substitute – I don't think that would be any help to Sun Jihai's career."

"But Nottingham Forest is qualified to enter the Champions League this season."

"It's only the qualification matches of the Champions League. Whether or not they can play in the Champions League itself remains uncertain until after they win Villarreal CF. And who was the only opponent they lost to in the Europa League Group Stage last year? Villarreal CF."

Tang Jing was not optimistic about Forest's future in the Champions League.

Wang made no comeback to Tang Jing's words. He was twelve years older than this girl; there was no need to compete with her. She had just been sent to the UK by the agency for the long-term. Of course, the most important reason was that Tang Jing was the president's daughter. Many times, he still had to give in to her a wee bit for appearances' sake.

Tang Jing had some real ability and was professionally trained as a journalist. Since she was young, she had followed in her father's footsteps, his influence nurturing her interest in football. While she had taken the back-door to get into the agency, to get to London, she was not going to just be a gold-plated

vase. But who knows what she would tell her father when she returned home? And how would her doting father interpret what she said? All in all, it was much better for him to act prudently.

Chapter 328: Impressions Part 2

The room lapsed into silence. As Uncle Wang turned his attention back to Forest's players, his mind churned, thinking about how he should interview the manager of Forest, who was said to be rather erratic, to successfully extract the news he wanted to hear. Meanwhile, Tang Jing continued staring at Tony's back, as if she could see right through him.

At that moment, the sound of a whistle pierced through the silence in the office.

Tang Jing noticed that it came from Tony; a whistle was in his hand when he put it down. Following that, he waved to the Assistant Manager on the training grounds and exchanged some words before turning to walk to the exit of the training grounds.

The manager was finally coming to speak to them.

The two reporters went back to their seats. Uncle Wang even lifted the teacup to his mouth in an act of sampling the tea.

Swiftly, hurried steps rang from the corridor outside the door. It swung open. The manager, who was said to only give exclusive interviews to Nottingham Evening Post, at long last appeared before the two Chinese reporters.

"You guys act quickly. I didn't think I would see you before the team's training ended."

A fluent conversant in Mandarin with a less-than-appealing tone was the first impression Tang En gave to them.

"Let me introduce ourselves. We are London-based journalists from Titan Sports. I'm Wang Huasheng, and she's Tang Jing."

It was Uncle Wang who responded quickly. He hurriedly stood and introduced them, smoothly getting past the awkward opening lines.

"You speak Mandarin well, Mr. Twain."

Tang En beamed and said, "Thank you. Of course, I am fond of China. As you know, I very rarely accept interviews from other agencies. My interviews are usually published only on the Nottingham Evening Post, but for the sake of guests who have come from afar, I'll make an exception."

Tang En said that without a red face or any unevenness in his tone.

"Mr. Wang, Ms. Tang..." Tang En shook their hands one after another before walking over to his desk. "Welcome to Wilford. I apologize, however, that we only have 15 minutes. In a while, I'll have to return..." Tang En said as he indicated to the training grounds behind him.

Wang Huasheng nodded his understanding while Tang Jing maintained a professional smile but said nothing.

In that manner, the interview officially began.

“First, I have a question that I hope can be answered by you. Forest’s interest towards Sun Jihai is something I made mention of over the phone to Pearce. How did the media get hold of that news so quickly?”

Tang En sat on a corner of his desk and looked to the two Chinese reporters.

“Stuart Pearce approached Sun Jihai’s agent. And then the matter got discovered by us.” Wang Huasheng answered honestly.

Tang En was shocked to hear that answer; Pearce actually went to look for Sun Jihai’s agent?! What did it mean? Did Stuart really want to sell off Sun Jihai?

Oh, no. How could this be dealt with?

“Ah... This is indeed the age of information...” Tang En laughed dryly. “Regarding Sun Jihai... I like him very much. His technique is excellent, and most importantly, he can play in many positions. I believe no manager would refuse to have such a player on their team.”

While it sounded like Tang En was praising Sun Jihai and he gave off an impression that Forest coveted him, he said it in truth for Pearce to hear: Look, Sun Jihai is that important; he can play any position! He could be moved to anywhere that needed him. It would be better for you to hold onto him and give us Richards!

“But Sun Jihai is a main player in Man City. Isn’t Forest’s current main right back Chimbonda?” Tang Jing, who had been quiet, finally spoke.

The subtext of that question was, “Aren’t you just buying Sun Jihai to be the substitute of the French lad? You’re using our national team player as a substitute for someone who isn’t even playing for their national team?”

Tang En took notice of the woman. He felt that she was somewhat familiar, but could not place where he had met her before.

“Ms. Tang... do you know what’s most important to a team playing in multiple leagues? Which team would play an entire season with only a single line-up? For an English Premier League team, just playing in the league itself would include 38 matches in the season. In addition to that, there are still two domestic cups, warm-up matches pre-season, and the Champions League; that’s a total of about 60 matches. Do you think just a fixed line-up of 11 players would be able to play through all those matches?”

Maybe it was because Tang Jing was the daughter of the agency’s head, but Wang Huasheng was always polite in the way he spoke to her. Even when he was criticizing her, he would do it tactfully and in a joking manner. But Tang En did not care for that. He did not know who this Tang Jing was, and even if he did, it would not be enough to counteract his displeasure towards this reporter who liked flaunting her tiny bit of soccer understanding.

Catching the scent of gunpowder in Tang En’s words, Wang Huasheng quickly made a move to change the topic.

“Would Forest be using a rotation system?”

Tang En glanced at Huasheng, nodding. “That’s right.” He replied, letting the female reporter off.

“Sun Jihai is an extremely helpful addition to our line-up. With his presence, I have greater leeway in reselecting players when deciding on the formation and strategy. Additionally, Sun Jihai has a streak of toughness found in the Chinese; he’s grounded and hardworking. I am fond of such players.”

Tang En suddenly felt disturbed. The more he talked, the more he felt that Sun Jihai was more suitable than Richards... He was mature, experienced, and did not have many ridiculous demands... An old veteran who had already seen through both glory and dishonor; wasn’t he better suited to the current Forest team than a mere boy?

Wang Huasheng was tremendously satisfied by Tang En’s answer. From it, he heard Forest’s sincerity... As for Tang Jing, she fell silent after the bout of admonition from Tang En. Following that, practically the entire interview process took place within the conversation of Huasheng and Tang En. It made Tang Jing look rather irrelevant.

The topic after Sun Jihai moved towards Tang En’s personal interests. The two of them began chatting about Tang En’s fondness for Chinese culture. Wang Huasheng was surprised to find that Tang En was practically a China expert. His understanding of China was not shallow; instead, he had his own comprehensive views about everything in China. After coming to know that Tang En liked Chinese culture, Wang Huasheng had assumed that it was the gimmick of one of those foreigners who liked eating Chinese cuisine – the kind that thought themselves able to speak Mandarin if they knew how to say “hello.”

He was completely taken aback by the situation. “Mr. Tony, your knowledge of China is as if you have lived in China for several decades, or perhaps you were originally Chinese!” Wang Huasheng said, sincerely expressing his admiration at the end of the interview.

Tang En smiled, replying modestly that he barely knew the tip of the iceberg. In truth, he was beaming happily in his heart:

Your sixth sense is truly on point, Mr. Wang! Originally, I was Chinese!

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After sending away his guests, Tang En stood in his office watching the team, who had already begun training. Thinking back on his own words about Sun Jihai, his brow tightened even further. His heart was starting to waver – should he be pursuing Richards, or buying Sun Jihai?

Richards was a future investment, but Pearce was unwilling to hand over Man City’s future to Nottingham Forest.

On the other hand, Sun Jihai’s edge came from his experience. If Tang En wanted to buy him, now was the time. It would stabilize the team greatly. Tang En did not know which the better choice was. From a perspective of ease, Sun Jihai was much easier to attain than Richards. For the time being, the question had no answer. Tang En massaged his temple as he walked out to the training grounds.

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On the other side. Wang Huasheng looked back at the gates of Wilford Training Grounds. Meanwhile, Tang Jing was rushing him as she sat in the car.

“Wang, what are you doing? We should go.” She had arrived in high spirits but was returning in disappointment.

“Oh... yes, yes.” Uncle Wang opened the side door and entered, pulling on his seatbelt. As he fiddled with it, he asked casually, “Tang Jing, do you still remember... when we attended the reception organized by the League Managers’ Association two years ago?”

Tang Jing nodded. “Of course. That was when I came to play in the UK during my vacation. I became very interested after hearing about the reception, and you went to great lengths to obtain a reporter’s pass for me to get in.”

“Do you remember that we had interviewed Forest Team’s legendary manager, Brian Clough, at that time?”

“Wasn’t it that old man with a flushed face, holding a wine flute? I remember. He’s quite unique. He is completely worthy of the title of ‘legendary.’”

Wang Huasheng laughed as he listened to Tang Jing’s description. “Back then, we asked him why he chose not to be England’s National Team Manager despite so many voices in favor of it; he let Robson take the job. He waved over a young man and asked him to get Robson for us... do you have any memory of that?”

Tang Jing’s brows furrowed in thought. Then she nodded. “Yes. I thought that the young man was Clough’s son or some supervising physician from the hospital. Hadn’t Clough just undergone a liver transplant surgery?”

Huasheng looked at Tang Jing and said, “That was Tony Twain, Nottingham Forest’s current manager. He’s thought by the English themselves to be the person most like Brian Clough.”

Saying that, he turned again to glance at the gates of Forest’s training grounds before dipping his head, starting up the car. He purposefully avoided looking at Tang Jing’s expression.

“Let’s go. We’ve got to hand our report in!”

Chapter 329: China Sun

When Wang Huasheng sent the draft to China, he divided the single interview into two articles.

One of the articles was briefly on the news about Nottingham Forest’s interest in Sun Jihai. The other article was their conversation with Twain re-organized as an interview, which naturally included some of Wang Huasheng’s own material. He stated that it was to introduce the British manager, who was very fond of and knowledgeable about China, to the Chinese readers.

Tang Jing did not say anything when she saw that he had concocted this exclusive interview on his end.

She had heard of such a thing: a certain Chinese reporter had gone to Spain and taken a photograph with a star player. When he returned, he had fabricated an exclusive interview and then sent it with the photograph back to China, where it was published in the newspaper.

In comparison, Uncle Wang had exercised restraint in his conduct.

No one would know what kind of response the report would cause in China. However, Wang Huasheng was convinced that the newspaper sales would certainly increase by a lot. A British coach, who had a lot of connections with China, was linked up with a Chinese player this time. It was worthwhile to continue following up on the hype.

He took a risk this once. It was just like when Li Xiang established a close relationship with Milutinović; the result was that she immediately became the most valuable reporter, with influence and money rolling in.

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Regardless of the uproar that that half-truth “interview” might cause in China, Twain had forgotten about the matter the next day after he had sent the two Chinese reporters off.

Pearce had returned with an answer, but this time his answer had put Twain in an awkward situation. Pearce had agreed to loan Micah Richards to the Forest team.

Twain was embarrassed that after these days of careful deliberation, he did not want Richards.

The Forest team’s defensive line was generally young: 18-year-old Piqué, 26-year-old Chimbonda, 26-year-old Matthew Upson, 20-year-old Leighton Baines, 22-year-old Pepe...

If a younger Richards were to come in, Twain felt that it would not be ideal for the defensive line, which needed experience and stability.

Therefore, after being quiet on the phone for a while, Twain still wanted to suggest to Pearce that the Forest team was very interested in Sun Jihai and he hoped that Manchester City could seriously consider the transfer arrangement of Sun Jihai.

“This puts me in an awkward position...”

When he heard Pearce say that, Twain was delighted because he knew the matter had legs. At least Pearce had not rejected it right away. It meant he had considered Sun Jihai’s departure. He decided to strike while it was hot, “Loaning Richards to us is to train him and for him to accumulate experience. Keeping him in Manchester City and giving him the main position are also training him and letting him accumulate experience. Both results are the same. I think it may be more beneficial to Richards’ development if you keep him by your side.”

“Tony, this does not sound like you.”

Twain chuckled. “I’ve given it serious consideration, and I think Sun Jihai is more suitable for the Forest team. Help me, Pearce. You also know that, according to Richards’s growth rate, he will be able to completely replace Sun Jihai in the next two or three years. At that time, Sun Jihai’s position in Manchester City will become rather tricky. And the Forest team needs him now. You can use Richards to

play as the main force. Put your trust in him and the kid will repay you generously. Maybe the best young player in the new season is him.”

“The future is unclear.”

“This is a win-win situation and a good thing, Pearce. You may rest assured that the Forest team will make it up to Manchester City in the transfer fees.”

After a long silence on the other end, Twain thought Pearce was gone. Finally, the Manchester City manager spoke. “All right, the club will send you a fax on the transfer fee. If you can accept that price, you can go and talk to Sun’s agent.”

“Oh, thank you so much, Pearce!”

“If you really want to thank me, lead the team to play well in the UEFA Champions League! The Forest team has only competed in the Champions League three times and won two trophies. To return after all these years, I do not want to see a loss like the 2:7 defeat to Bayern Munich again...”

Twain knew that Pearce was referring to the 95-96 season. Nottingham Forest had returned to the European arena after eleven years and broken into the UEFA Europa League quarter-finals. But they were ultimately humiliated by the dominant Bundesliga team, Bayern Munich, by 7:2. Perhaps in the eyes of others, Nottingham Forest had performed well enough after they had returned to the European arena after so many years. But in the hearts of those Forest players, it was still a shame in their lives to have lost so miserably and to be so powerless to fight back even if they were facing a Bundesliga leader like Bayern.

The soul of Nottingham Forest had vanished when Brian Clough left.

“Rest assured, Pearce. Nottingham Forest is like a rock in the toilet.”

“What does that mean?” Stuart did not quite understand the Chinese allegory.

“It is smelly and hard. Those Continental European teams will have to be careful of their teeth if they think they can bully the Forest team.

Pearce paused for a second and then guffawed.

“What a good piece of smelly rock we are!”

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The next day, Manchester City Football Club sent a fax to the Nottingham Forest Football Club, starting with a price that Manchester City could accept as the transfer fee for Sun Jihai, which was four million pounds.

Originally, Manchester City had bought Sun Jihai from Dalian Shide for two million pounds, which made the highest transfer fee for a Chinese player’s transfer to a foreign club. And now, apparently, as long as Tony Twain nodded his assent, Sun Jihai would once again create the highest record in value for a Chinese player.

Twain cursed Stuart Pearce’s shamelessness on the inside while he nodded in agreement to the price.

For four million pounds, Nottingham Forest officially requested the purchase of Manchester City's right back and a utility player in the backfield, Sun Jihai.

Officially confirmed, this news caused a stir in China once again. Like Twain, the Chinese media knew what that price signified. No Chinese player had ever been able to command such a high price. This figure allowed Sun Jihai to be ranked among the mainstream players in the Premier League.

In the past, Chinese people always had the idea that when a Chinese player moved out of the country, he would be an outlier. Even when Sun Jihai was able to play as the main force in Manchester City, his countrymen still lacked a sense of security about him. If the Chinese media promoted how a Chinese player had made good overseas, soon a lot of people would exaggerate and believe in their own lies.

Just as the news hit the Chinese online network, many comments called the validity of the news into question. Of course, these questions could only lead to one result, which was quarrels and abuse between different regions in China. This characteristic was global, not just unique to China. It was the same as how Northerners in Britain thought that the Southerners were fools, and Southerners thought that the Northerners were hillbillies and uncivilized buffoons.

Later, many major websites and newspapers had published the news which included screenshots of the official websites of the two football clubs. This quelled the doubts of the Chinese fans.

Sun Jihai was indeed likely to join a team that was going to participate in the UEFA Champions League!

As a substitute or a main force? After the online debate over one issue, a new round of controversy began on the Chinese network.

Twain did not care about those things. When he was free, he would surf online on Chinese websites, but he never read the people's comments.

Would Sun Jihai accept the invitation from the Forest team?

This seemingly simple question contrived to cast some doubts. Which team should he choose; a team that could only play in the domestic league or a team that could participate in the UEFA Champions League? Was it not obvious?

However, Sun Jihai hesitated.

He liked Manchester City and his life in Manchester. He had lived there for five years and had a deep bond with the fans. Perhaps in today's football world, there were fewer people who believed that a player could have feelings for a team and fans because there was no commitment or trust in the face of money. But Sun Jihai was that kind of person.

His traditional Chinese thinking was deeply rooted. There was an old saying: East or West, home is still the best. The same meaning could be applied to football clubs.

Even if Nottingham Forest could take part in the UEFA Champions League, what about it? Sun Jihai liked Manchester City and had bought a house in Manchester. His wife and children lived there. The place was his home. The Chinese people put family and home first.

Furthermore, he had another reason for hesitation. He did not know Manager Twain's attitude towards him. Many Chinese media analysts said that the Forest team just wanted to buy a substitute player. Why

did Twain stress that Sun Jihai was “strong in every area?” Was he not just looking to find a substitute player for Chimbonda, Leighton Baines, and the others? If he transferred to Forest but was not valued by the team, and had also abandoned his Manchester City fans, he would feel like a real fool.

Twain decided to personally call Sun Jihai to give him a reassuring boost.

When the call was connected, Sun Jihai habitually greeted him in English, but Twain spoke fluently in Mandarin, which stunned him.

“There’s no need to speak in English. You can speak Mandarin, which I can understand.” He even learned a little Northeastern Chinese accent.

It was hard for Sun Jihai not to laugh when he realized who had called him. “Your Northeastern dialect is highly irregular, Mr. Twain,” he said in jest.

“I’ll learn from you eventually. Then I won’t be afraid that my accent is inaccurate. Do you know why I called you?”

Sun Jihai nodded. “Yes.”

“What are you hesitating about? Are you worried that there’s no position for you, going to the Forest team? Do you believe the Chinese media? Four million to buy a substitute for occasional play?! I’m not crazy!”

Twain was aware of the matter. The Chinese media’s analysis thought that Nottingham Forest’s purchase of Sun Jihai was just to increase the abilities of its team’s substitutes. Their analysis seemed reasonable and, as a result, they had a confusing effect on the readers.

But Twain just wanted to curse and swear when he read it. It was just as he had said to Sun Jihai: Even if the Forest team wanted to burn money, they would not burn it by spending four million pounds on a substitute.

“The Forest team is competing on multiple fronts this season, and the team does not have a differentiation for main forces or substitutes. Whoever is in good condition and performs well, I’ll put that player in the starting lineup. Whoever’s stamina and condition are not good will rest. It’s that simple. But the media had to create a whole list of reasonings.”

Sun Jihai’s hand shook as he held the phone. He was trying to hold back his laughter, but in the end, he could not suppress it.

“Mr. Twain, you have to be the funniest manager I’ve ever met.”

“Actually, I’m very easy to get along with.” Twain continued while he was ahead. “You’ll find out when you join.”

Sun Jihai was silent for a moment.

“Sun” To tell the truth, it was somewhat awkward for Twain to address Sun Jihai like this. He really wanted to call him “Ah, Sihai,” but it felt too unnatural to address him that way in their first encounter. “Why did you become a professional player? To make money? To prepare for retirement? There will come a time when you can’t make money anymore, right? When you decide to retire, don’t you want to

leave a different legacy for yourself? I'll be honest, you've reached your limit in Manchester City and that's how it's always going to be. Manchester City is a team with no ambitions. But I have ambitions, and so does Nottingham Forest. I'm sure you can see that from the transfer market over the past two years. The reasons I want to buy you from Manchester City is not to spend four million to buy a substitute to sit on the bench as a spectator. Secondly, it is not to open up the Asian market or the Chinese market. I'm interested in your ability and think it will be very helpful to the team. What are you still hesitating about?"

Another silence ensued. Twain did not speak either. He had finished what he wanted to say. What else was there to say? If Sun Jihai still did not want to join, there was nothing more he could do. He just had to suck it up in private and then grow a thicker skin to ask Pearce for the loan of Richards again.

But he did not believe that Sun Jihai could refuse an invitation from him. In any case, there was nothing to lose for a player like Sun Jihai by transferring to Nottingham Forest. The Forest team gave more remuneration than Manchester City. In terms of honor, the Forest team had the ambition and goal to strive towards glory. He would not only increase his value, but he would also gain fame and four million to join a high-profile team that was going to participate in the UEFA Champions League.

Twain quietly waited for Sun Jihai's answer. Soon, he received the answer he wanted.

"Okay, Mr. Twain. I'll go with you."

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So Twain settled the matter of Sun Jihai. There was no problem with his agent. The only obstacle to the transfer was the player's individual will. Now everything was ready. The Forest team and Sun Jihai's agent quickly negotiated his personal contract and signed the contract with the fastest speed.

A day later, Sun Jihai and his agent were at the Nottingham Forest City Ground Stadium, holding the red Forest team jersey to meet with the fans, media and the Nottingham Overseas Chinese Students Association. He gave a bashful smile, standing beside Twain and Evan Doughty,.

When he stepped into the stadium from the press conference, he looked up and saw the banner that the fans had put up in the stands: "China Sun, welcome to Forest!"

Twain also noticed the banner, which was not made by the Overseas Chinese Students Association. The people holding the banner were purely British fans. It was easy for Twain to spot Fat John and Skinny Bill. It must have been their idea.

While the cameras flashed repeatedly in the hands of the reporters, Twain turned to look at Sun Jihai, who was looking at the banner, and said, "You see, when there's sunlight, the Forest can carry out photosynthesis. With photosynthesis, the Forest can flourish."

Perhaps Sun Jihai could not know what kind of brilliant achievements he would have in his career after he came to the Forest team. However, one thing was certain: there would be a big difference between here and Manchester City. He would have something different in his career.

When he heard Twain's words, Sun Jihai smiled as brightly as the sun.

Chapter 330: From Youth Team to First Team Part 1

Although Tang En had told Sun Jihai over the phone that the team was going to play on a rotation, his first choice of candidate for the right back would still be Chimbonda when the new season began. Buying Sun Jihai was to increase the depth of the team, not create problems for Tang En when deciding on his deployment and strategies.

The reformation of the defensive line had yet to end. Left back had Sun Jihai and Chimbonda rotating; Center back had Piqué, Matthew Upson, Pepe, Wes Morgan, and Clint Hill. Many options. But left back still only had Leighton Baines.

It was difficult to find a left back on the transfer market and even harder to find an outstanding one.

The good mood brought about by Sun Jihai joining the team lasted only a day. Tang En began to fret over the rotation candidate for the left back.

Dunn knew what Tang En was worrying about. Over dinner, he intended to recommend someone to Tang En.

“You only looked at the transfer market. Why not look downwards?”

“Downwards?” Tang En asked, confused.

“The Youth Team,” Dunn said, rising from his seat to walk to the television.

“Are you going to show me some recordings again?” Tang En had found Dunn’s favorite hobby: not shopping, pursuing girls, or drinking; he just liked to watch those football recordings of his.

“Recordings are good. They allow you to directly see a player’s growth.”

Dunn walked to the shelves just behind the TV. Several rows of videotapes and DVDs were neatly arranged on them. Brushing his finger across them, he picked one and removed it, putting it into the DVD player.

Dunn treated these videotapes and DVDs like they were his children. Not only did he categorize them and give them sequential labels, he even made an introduction for each of them. At its moment of play, the introductory recording would display the footballer’s name, time of the shooting, location of the shooting, age at that point, team, and position played.

Such an introduction appeared on the screen:

Gareth Bale; 16 years old; Nottingham Forest Youth Team; Left midfielder, left back; 23/04/05; Filmed on Wilford North Training Grounds.

It was him! Tang En recalled him the moment he saw the name; if it was the position of left back, Gareth Bale would be able to play, but...

“Isn’t he a little too young? He’s not even 17.”

Dunn did not answer Tang En’s question, instead stepping to the side to allow him to watch the video.

It showed a Youth Team match. Nottingham Forest against Sunderland. Gareth Bale took up the position of left back. However, he did not just defend. He assisted numerous times in their offense forward; the entire left wing was his domain. Breakthroughs occurred one after another, his passes to the center generating an immense threat to their opponents. At last, Forest team gained an opportunity to take a direct free kick in the front field.

Gareth Bale stood before the ball.

Watching up to this point, Tang En had already forgotten about dinner. His hands were still holding on to his cutlery, but his eyes were completely focused on the TV screen.

He had been waiting for this scene for much too long. Ever since he brought Bale to Forest team, he had been waiting in anticipation to see it.

As Bale stood in front of the ball, his teammates consciously paved a path for him. Evidently, he had already established his own capabilities as the kicker in such set pieces.

At the referee's whistle, Bale took off in a run, pulling back his leg in a shot towards the goal.

The football went beautifully around the wall of jumping Sunderland players, finding its way precisely into the upper corner of the goal!

Tang En could not help but whistle as he watched the ball fly across the goal line.

"Beautiful!"

The lad truly had the talent for free kicks.

Following that were similar matches of the Youth Team. Bale showed a stable performance. Whether it was in defense or offense, he displayed a maturity that was discordant with his age.

"This is a recording from two months ago. He's even better now. He's currently the most brilliant player on the Youth Team. If you don't sign him on now, I can't guarantee that he will stay in Wilford."

Tang En gave his own brain a hard tap. Even though he had been insanely busy recently, how could he have forgotten about this?

Gareth Bale had just celebrated his 16th birthday. He could sign a professional contract with any team. If Forest did not sign him on and the left wing genius from Welsh was taken away for free, Forest would become a fool, having wasted money grooming him for years only to give him away.

"We're signing! We're signing him first thing tomorrow morning! I want him. Starting tomorrow, he'll be moved up to the First Team. I don't need to find anyone else for the left back or left midfielder," Tang En said, rubbing his hands in excitement after ditching his cutlery.

He was finally going to reap the growth of the seed he had sown two years ago. Gareth Bale, I have high hopes for you!

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The next day, Tang En and Dunn together made their way to the Youth Team Training Grounds. He had not visited the Youth Team for a long period. The matters of the First Team had him worrying so much, he really could not afford to be concerned about the Youth Team.

The players on the Youth Team became excited when they saw the First Team manager appearing on the sidelines with their assistant manager; they threw themselves fervently into training. Tang En understood what this group of boys was thinking in their hearts, but knew he would inevitably disappoint them. He had come here today for only one person.

As the Forest Team's fame continued climbing within the English Premier League, and as Tony Twain's eye for players became better, the surrounding spectators around Forest's Youth Training Grounds also grew. On Tang En's way over, he saw quite a few scouts lurking around the training area.

Back then, it was him who had run over to Southampton to headhunt Bale. Now, the same scene was being replicated in Wilford. Except, the only being headhunted this time was his own. Tang En began considering discussing with City Hall about sealing up both entrances of Wilford Lane which ran between the North and South Wilford Training Grounds. Blocking the entrances with gates, they could prevent outsiders from coming in and out as they wished.

It's okay for me to headhunt your people, but there's no way you're doing the same to mine!

Tang En believed that most surrounding the Youth Training Grounds were here for Bale. Gareth Bale. Although he was only 16 years old, he already had a good reputation among Youth Team players. Thanks to his outstanding performance in Youth Team matches, he had attracted the interest of numerous football teams. Currently, the scouts from those teams were waiting for an opportune moment to take him away from Forest.

But Tang En was not going to give them that chance.

Ian Greenwood, the main manager of the Youth Team as well as the Youth Ministry, stood next to Dunn and Tang En. Their focused gaze fell on a single person.

Gareth Bale was working hard in training, his face brimming with a confident smile. Compared to when Tang En had first seen him, he seemed like a different person entirely.

When people gained confidence, it was not only their mental appearance that changed.

"Actually, there are still many problems with Bale playing the left back..."

Greenwood knew the reason for Tang En's appearance. The First Team was currently lacking a good left back, and there was little progress made on the transfer market. Naturally, he would come to the Youth Team to acquire what he needed. The presence of the Youth Team was specifically for grooming outstanding players for the First Team, helping to inject fresh blood into the team. Despite the joy of having the First Team manager appreciate a player, Greenwood himself had trained up in the Youth Team; he still had to be honest about some things.

"His body is a little frail, and defending is not his strong suit. For example, he's almost never won a fight for headers. He's also overly fond of attacking; after cutting forward for an assist, he might not return in time to defend, overly relying on the center back to close the defensive gap. Besides that, tackling is also a weakness of his because of his thin and frail physique."

After relating that many weaknesses in a single breath, Greenwood was beginning to worry that Tang En would not want Bale anymore. So, he hastily tried to add on Bale's good points but was stopped by a wave from Tang En.

"At his age, he's already more than outstanding. And about those weaknesses... he isn't a main player on the First Team, so he can slowly learn and grow. And although I am looking for a left back, I won't rule out the possibility of letting him play left midfielder if his abilities and characteristics better suit another position."

Greenwood nodded. "I think he's actually more suited to play as a left midfielder. His desire to participate in the offense is very strong." After saying so, he waved his hand at Bale to get him over.

"Bale!"

Under the envious looks of his teammates, Gareth Bale ran towards the three managers standing at the sidelines.

"From today onwards, you don't have to train here."

Greenwood pointed at Tang En who stood beside and said, "Go with him, Bale."

Tang En winked at Bale from behind Greenwood.

Bale beamed. "Yes, Sir!"

Just like that, they completed the handover of the player with ease. Greenwood gave a few simple instructions to Bale, doubtlessly something along the lines of "continue working hard".

Following that, Dunn and Greenwood continued with their work on the Youth Team while Bale carried a backpack stuffed full of his possessions and jerseys as he followed Tang En in the direction of First Team's South Training Grounds.

Tang En purposefully took Bale on a route that went around the outside instead of taking the internal tunnels. He took him through all three training areas, just as he had done back then when he brought Wes Morgan to the First Team. However, although the Youth Training Grounds were a lot more crowded now—there was a group of scouts following Bale and Tang En's movements with their gaze—the Michael father-and-son duo could no longer be found here.

"Bale, there are many people greatly disappointed by your departure." Tang En said, indicating the group of scouts on the side of the road.

Bale laughed. "I've been waiting for you, Sir. Recently, many people have approached my dad. Some even went to my house, hoping for me to join their team. But, my dad turned them all down. He said that it was Forest Team who gave me a chance, so I must repay the team.

Tang En looked at the boy before him, who still had a face full of youth, and felt shame weighing down on him. It was he who had neglected his duty; he had forgotten such a brilliant youngling on his own Youth Team. If not for Dunn's reminder yesterday, he almost would have missed such an opportunity in Bale.

He reached out to ruffle Bale's messy hair. "Work hard, Gareth. Don't let your father down."

“Yes!”

Bale nodded vigorously.