

Champions 431

Chapter 431: The Arsenal Style

“Thierry Henry! WOW!”

The football flew out of the goalpost and the Arsenal team captain missed his shot.

“In the seven minutes since the start of the game, Arsenal has already shot thrice. Two of their shots were within range of the goalpost and this time, the shot missed the mark. Arsenal appears to be very active and energetic on their home ground.”

“Henry is in top form. I think Nottingham Forest is in trouble.”

While the commentator said that, Twain and Kerslake were having a discussion in the technical area.

“No matter how I look at it, it does not look like they’re playing defense,” said Kerslake with a frown.

“What are they defending when there’s no goal?” Twain looked at the field and said, “We have a chance to change Wenger’s plan. As long as we break into their goal before they can score, we can force Wenger to give up his plan to use defensive counterattack, and let the game return to our track.”

Just as Twain finished speaking, the Forest team got a chance to attack. Arteta made a wonderful pass in the front field and Viduka acted as a cover for Anelka. After Anelka broke into the penalty area, he made a shot, but Lehmann quickly vaulted to pounce on the ball.

Lehmann’s performance won applause from the Arsenal fans, but there was still the sound of hissing in the stadium. This hissing was not aimed at Lehmann, but dedicated to Anelka who had made the shot.

Anelka turned and ran out of the penalty area as if nothing had happened. He was used to it. Of course, he did not forget to give a thumbs up to Arteta, who had passed the ball to him.

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Lehmann threw the ball to start the attack and Cesc Fàbregas turned to receive the ball while George Wood followed closely. He did not care what his position was, because Twain had told him that he must follow Fàbregas whenever he withdrew to receive the ball. He listened to Twain’s bidding, which made Fàbregas a little uncomfortable.

“Cesc Fàbregas and George Wood! The two of them are at it again! This is one of the things we look forward to when we watch a game between Arsenal and Nottingham Forest. Those two outstanding young men are fated to be arch enemies. I know it’s corny to say that, but can you find a more suitable description?”

Number 13 from the Forest team had tangled with him for two seasons, starting with the first youth team game. He had initially treated that time as an ordinary youth team game. With his level at that time, he already did not need to participate in the Youth FA Cup of the same age group. He had the ability to be promoted directly to the First Team. But in order to test his condition before a real First-Team game, Wenger had put him on the youth team to play a few games.

He had not paid much attention to his English peers before the youth team game with Nottingham Forest. For him, that kind of game was as casual as playing in the streets. It was something he could have easily won. After all, he was a world-wise and accomplished child. Besides giving him a warm-up, what other purpose would such a game serve? He was tired of the seemingly endless youth team games and was eager to go to the First Team to participate in the real league tournament and to feel the genuine victory and defeat...If he continued to play with that mindset, who knew if the brilliant young genius Cesc Fàbregas could still be seen in the future?

The game with the Nottingham Forest youth team changed his future. That was his first defeat after joining the Arsenal youth games. What bothered him was that the opponent, who had crushed him, was a nobody. He had no idea who the person was before then. When he closely followed any information related to George Wood, he discovered that Wood was actually a rookie who had trained for less than a year!

He was very angry and wanted to completely defeat Wood. He worked hard in training to adapt to the cold and damp weather in London as fast as possible. He made all these efforts so that he could defeat Wood in his next encounter with the Nottingham youth team. He wanted him to be crushed as well. However, there was no chance. More than a month after that game, he was transferred to the First Team by Arsène Wenger. Perhaps Wenger could also see that participation in the youth team games did little to elevate Fàbregas. He became a member of Arsenal's First Team and the youngest player to represent Arsenal in the league. He even became the youngest player to score an official goal on behalf of Arsenal.

For a time, numerous praises such as "genius," "prodigy," and so on were showered on him. He became the object of everyone's attention. Football legends, television commentators, and fans all raved about him. However, within that omnipresent success, he was not as lost as he was in the youth team. He had a clear presence of mind because he knew that there was one person who he wanted to prevail over, but he had not had the opportunity to do so.

But then, Nottingham Forest was successfully promoted. He finally had the chance to compete with George Wood in an official match. He believed that one game could end all the enmity between himself and Wood, which he had not expected to continue to this day. George Wood was not a coward who would be knocked down by a single failure, and Francesc Fàbregas was not one either!

He could hear George Wood's heavy breathing from behind and constantly feel the impact of repeated bodily collisions. He had to try his best to protect the football and not let it be snatched by the guy behind him. At the same time, as a midfielder in charge of the team's rhythm, Fàbregas also had to look up to watch his teammates' running positions as well as his opponents' formations to search for loopholes to exploit and send the football through. If there was no opportunity, he still had to divert the football, then run to shake off Wood for nothing and re-organize the offense.

He spotted a gap that could be used. But Wood pressed on so hard behind him that he was not confident that the ball would fly to where he wanted it to go. If the ball was intercepted halfway, what should he do if Nottingham Forest had the chance to counterattack instead?

Fàbregas quickly weighed the pros and cons in his mind and gave up the chance for a direct pass. Instead, he passed the football to Edu Gaspar beside him. Then, he turned and ran to another spot. George Wood did not give up and continued to follow suit.

Edu passed the ball to him again. Wood continued to press up right away and Fàbregas had no choice but to pass the ball again. This time, he passed it to Ashley Cole and the English national footballer dribbled the ball to break through.

Next, Fàbregas purposely noticed Wood at his side. He saw Wood turn around to look at him and then took another look at Ashley Cole, who was dribbling the ball forward. He finally chose to run back to defend. He ran quickly. It was not a normal fallback speed, but more like the backfield only had a goalkeeper left; then he had to run desperately to retreat. In a twinkling of an eye, he ran until he was a distance away from Fàbregas.

The Spanish teenager shook his head. He really did not know what he was supposed to feel. He had actually thought that such a slow-witted player was the opponent he wanted to defeat. Suddenly, a feeling of stupidity surged within, but soon the feeling disappeared without a trace.

Because he saw Ashley Cole get defeated by Wood in speed.

This monster!

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George Wood successfully restricted Fàbregas. However, Fàbregas soon learned how to deal with it. He no longer monitored his teammates' running positions after he received the ball. Instead, when he raised his hand to ask for the ball, he would pinpoint his teammates' running routes and his opponents' defensive positions in advance and then immediately send out the football. Or he would immediately make the next move after receiving the ball. He did not need to stop to think about what to do next.

This caused a lot of trouble for Wood's defense. Even if he was faster, Fàbregas would still be able to catch hold of a gap to send the ball out.

Fàbregas came alive and Arsenal's offense perked up too.

Edu passed the football to Fàbregas, and without not waiting for George Wood to press up, Fàbregas passed the ball to Bergkamp ahead. The Dutch veteran passed the football to Henry again, and then Henry took his shot. Although the offense did not score a goal this time, Wenger saw hope.

Fàbregas had completely replaced the position and role which Vieira had once occupied on the team, and Arsenal now had to revolve around him as the core. He was the team's central nervous system. As long as he could figure out a way to deal with George Wood, Wenger was not afraid of Forest.

The game was now in a stalemate, and Forest wanted to be the first to break through to Arsenal's goal at all costs. Arsenal had the same idea. It looked like both sides were attacking each other but to no avail.

Just like what was said before the game, the two teams were so familiar with each other that this game did not feel like a Champions League game at all. It was more like how they usually competed in the Premier League. Arsenal was aware of the habits of every Nottingham Forest player, and Nottingham

Forest was familiar with Arsenal's. Twain did not need to repeatedly exhort George Wood to closely mark Fàbregas and did not have to instruct Anelka to look for gaps in Arsenal's defense. He did not need to tell the defensive line too much on how to deal with Henry and Bergkamp. They all knew what they should do.

Playing against such an opponent was quite tricky, especially in the context of the Champions League semi-final. It was not exciting enough.

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The Forest team launched another attack. Ribéry boosted the ball into the penalty area. Viduka tried his hardest to fight for a header while Anelka cruised at the back, ready to quickly plug in. The football was not headed by the two of them but was headed out of the penalty area by the fullback, Kolo Touré.

Fàbregas, who had retreated to the edge of the penalty area, received the football. This time, George Wood was not near him. He quickly rushed towards him.

The young Spanish leader glanced at Wood and then passed the football to the incoming Henry. Everyone's attention turned to the world-class striker. If everyone still remembered, they would feel that the way Henry took the ball now looked familiar.

On November 17th, 2002, in the North London Derby, Henry had scored the best goal of the Premier League that season in the first half of the game. He had hijacked the ball along the perimeter of his team's penalty area and then began a sixty-five-meter long lightning raid. He had bypassed several people. From one restricted area to another, he shot the football into Tottenham Hotspur's goal.

Was he going to do it again?

Henry began to activate his plan.

George Wood ran halfway and changed his target to chase after Henry. Presently, he was the only one in the backfield who could catch up with Henry with his speed.

Henry did not dribble in a straight line but dribbled the ball across. As a result, George Wood was able to easily catch up with him.

However, Henry used his experience and skill to shake off Wood and then to change his course to directly spearhead the attack against the Forest team's penalty area.

Wood was not shaken off at once. He turned and sprang. At that moment, Reyes already quickly came up to support. George Wood did not notice him as all his energy were on Henry, who was dribbling the ball.

Henry certainly knew that Wood had targeted him. He had played against Wood several times and was familiar with it. He was well aware that it would be trouble once the kid managed to stick to and entangle with him. Therefore, he did not tangle with him. While everyone was focused the direction ahead of him, he suddenly made an astounding pass.

At that moment, Wood threw himself in front of Henry, forcing him to slow down. It appeared that Arsenal's breakthrough was ended. Henry moved as if he was going to directly pass the ball to the goal

area so that George Wood and the left-back, Leighton Baines, behind him would put all their attention in the penalty area.

Henry's feint was so convincing that he even deceived the television broadcast cameras. The camera shifted its focus to the penalty area when Henry swung his right leg but did not capture the football flying out after the kick. It was at this time that the television producer realized that he had been fooled as well. The camera angle quickly switched and cut to see that there was nothing at Henry's right leg. And the toes of his left leg, which originally should have provided the support, poked the football to the right flank, where Reyes swiftly plugged in from behind.

"Reyes! What a beautiful pass, just creative! Another exciting performance from Henry!"

Thunderous cheers erupted in the Highbury stadium. Henry played a beautiful hand. It not only won the applause from the stands but also boosted Arsenal's morale.

And the so-called slightly playful nature of his passing made the defensive side of Nottingham Forest look somewhat awkward in comparison.

George Wood was completely fooled by Henry. When he turned to help Baines to defend against Reyes, it was too late. Reyes did not stop the ball; instead, he directly crossed the ball. He used his weaker right foot to send the ball to the middle of the Forest team's penalty area.

The football skirted around Pepe and Piqué's defense and fell to the back where no one was around.

Who was going to show up there?

George Wood turned to look.

"Fàbregas!!" The commentator screamed.

Wood saw Arsenal's number 4. That slightly thin figure stealthily appeared at the point where the ball had landed and suddenly turned up in the front of Edwin van der Sar. Then he calmly lifted his left foot and gently tapped the ball passed from Reyes.

The football bypassed Edwin van der Sar, who jumped up to defend with both hands, and then fell into the empty goal!

All the Arsenal fans in brownish-red jerseys on the stands of the Highbury Stadium jumped up from their seats with their hands raised high.

"What a wonderful combination! A terrific goal! This is a classic example of the Arsenal style of offense. They played Nottingham Forest like a fiddle! Fàbregas, Henry, Reyes, and Fàbregas again! The perfect cycle, Arsenal leads with 1:0! They have an amazing start!"

All the Arsenal players ran up to embrace the ecstatic Fàbregas, Henry and Reyes. They ran past George Wood with open arms. Wood stood in the same spot and still turned his body to look back. He bit his lips hard as he watched their backs. He had failed to spot the kid.

At the same time, Twain threw a glance at Arsène Wenger, who was celebrating with his assistant manager. After Arsenal had taken the lead, it meant that the game was going to be on a track that Wenger would most hope to see in the rest of the game.

The situation was far from good.

After he had celebrated with his assistant manager, Wenger, also noticed that someone was looking at him. He turned his gaze to the Forest team's technical area and smiled at Twain.

Twain turned his gaze away.

Wenger turned back to his assistant manager, Pat Rice, and said, "You see, Pat. As I've said before, we need to incorporate some of other people's strengths, but at the same time, we have to maintain our own style. This is the Arsenal goal style. Our old friend is in trouble."

Rice burst into laughter.

Chapter 432: Make A Guess

With their lead of one goal, Arsenal could officially begin playing the defensive counterattack they had been preparing such a long time for. Tang En did not think that Arsenal was unsuitable or inept at playing defensive counterattacking. He just had to look at the Arsenal in his memories, the team that got into this season's finals for the UEFA Champions League. To Wenger's team, it was not a question of their abilities, but an issue of their desire to win.

If Wenger had truly hardened himself to play defensive counterattacking against him in this match, then Henry was doubtlessly an important figure in it.

Tang En briefly considered and decided against making any adjustments for now. Henry could be trapped by the entire defensive line. Wood's target continued to be Fàbregas.

However, the goal loss earlier could not be blamed on Wood having lost his mark. At that time, his decision to guard against Henry was correct. After all, Henry posed a greater threat. It could only be said that Henry was truly a world-class player. He alone could change everything. Of course, manager Arsène Wenger's contributions could not be dismissed either. It was he who had molded Arsenal from a team without any positive attributes to speak of into one that was this pleasing to the eye. This attack had a clear sense of Arsenal's style. The exquisiteness of the goal was extremely difficult to put into words. People could feel a poetic pace in the running of the three Arsenal players; it was clear, smooth, and made people feel carefree and joyful.

In comparison, Nottingham Forest's football had not much artistry to speak of.

Truly, the main manager of the team determined its character. The genteel manager, Wenger, put in charge of Arsenal, immediately made it a synonym for grace and artistry. Meanwhile, after the mercenary Tang En became Nottingham Forest's manager, the team's utilitarian nature became stronger.

Tang En stood up from his seat. He knew that the match had already fallen in step with Wenger's plan; he must go along with it now. But he was unwilling to let the match continue like this to its end. There was no such thing in the world as an impenetrable defense and no goal that was invulnerable. So long as Forest continued attacking, a single chance grasped would be enough to once again tilt the scales of victory.

In the past, he had habitually depended on defending to solve the problem. Today, in this match, the key to resolving the problem was attacking instead.

How strong exactly were Nottingham Forest's offensive capabilities?

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Arsenal gradually began retreating and focusing on their defense. Forest also started pressing forward. Even George Wood advanced enough to cross the half line, moving closer to Arsenal's penalty area.

In the front field, Arteta dribbled past Edu and suddenly drew back his foot to shoot at the goal. Jens Lehmann leaped beautifully but was unable to maintain control over the football. In his haste to initiate the jump, he could only choose to bump the ball outwards. But Forest's offense did not stop there.

Ashley Young, in the wings, received the ball that was knocked out by Jens Lehmann. He stopped it from going out of bounds and turned to pass the ball center. The football flew again to the front of Arsenal's goal. Under Touré's close marking, Viduka managed to head the ball. Regrettably, his header was just slightly off the mark.

"Forest's offense is, in fact, extremely monotone," Wenger said to Pat as he sat in the technical area. "Throughout Tony's management, he's always spent tremendous energy defending. In their first season playing in the Premier League, Forest getting fourth had nothing to do with their offensive capabilities at all. The most goals they scored were only when they played an away match against Crystal Palace, who wasn't in good condition. They scored four goals in that match. They depended on their defense to get into this season's Champions League. Mid-way through the Premier League, they once maintained a streak of eight rounds without losing a single goal. And in those eight rounds, the highest score they had gotten in any singular match was no higher than 2:0. 1:0, 2:0, 1:1... those are the most commonly seen scores in the season."

Pat Rice looked somewhat incredulously at Wenger. He did not expect the Frenchman to have such a deep understanding of the opponent's data. Even Twain himself might not have been able to casually verbalize those things.

"There's been no change to the situation this season. Tony's reformation of Forest's defensive line is extremely successful. Although a young defensive line would often commit mistakes, he made use of the cohesive unit to make up for that weakness. Currently, they have lost 33 goals. Most of them were lost in the recent few rounds due to Forest being distracted by the Champions League. The team was somewhat unable to catch up. However, although Arteta is being slowly guided, Forest's offensive routes remain largely unchanged. They are still breaking through from the flanks and strengthening their attacks from the middle; it's a standardized pattern. And, in contrast to their emphasis on the cohesive unit in their defense, Forest's attacks appear to rely more on the individual performance of a few players..." Wenger said, stroking his chin.

"Arsène..."

"Hmm?"

"Your understanding of Nottingham Forest has probably surpassed Tony Twain's."

Wenger only smiled.

“My understanding of that team is only in terms of the numbers. The data is right there. Anyone who wishes to understand can certainly get to my level of understanding. But, Tony Twain... What he understands is something deeper. For example, the soul of a team.”

Rice stared at him.

“And that is the reason why, despite my understanding of Forest, I continue to be Arsenal’s manager while he is Nottingham Forest’s.”

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While Wenger was analyzing Nottingham Forest as skillfully as a butcher dismembering an ox, Tang En stood by the sidelines, supervising the battle. Unlike Wenger, he would not analyze everything so methodologically. Although Dunn might do such a thing, Tang En would only use that for coaching the team.

Whereas Wenger brought to Arsenal a graceful artistry in their concept of football strategy and technique, Tang En gave to Nottingham Forest the trait of a willpower in striving for “victory, victory, and more victory.”

Nottingham Forest’s players were just like their manager. They had a crazed persistence and thirst for victory. They were lofty and unwilling to lose to anyone. So what if they were behind by a point? It was just a single goal. Their Boss always spoke of how the most dangerous situation was leading by a goal. This applied not only to the Forest Team themselves, but also to their opponents.

George Wood pressed forward. On seeing him, Arteta passed the ball over.

Scattered jeers sounded all over Highbury when Wood received the ball. Just as it was said during Inter Milan’s match, George Wood was a person who would be unwelcomed everywhere except Nottingham.

Wood remained unaffected by the animosity of the audience towards him and passed the ball over to Ribéry on the other side. It was not the end yet! Wood did not stay behind to prevent the opponent’s counterattack as he usually would. Instead, he unexpectedly cut forward!

Albertini, who watched the scene from the sidelines, smiled. This boy is finally beginning to show some initiative to participate in the offense.

Lehmann saw Wood moving forward and naturally understood the lad to be joining in the offense. But he shouted to remind his own teammates, “Ignore him! Mark down the others!”

In the German goalie’s heart, this midfield engineer was no threat at all. Perhaps his foray could even generate a ridiculously high shot at the goal and help Arsenal out of their pinch.

Seeing Wood cut in, Ribéry did not hesitate and immediately passed the ball center. Touré was currently engaged by Viduka while Senderos kept an eye on Anelka. They had both seen George Wood move forward from the back, but listened to Lehmann’s instructions.

Only one person ignored his direction and followed Wood, retreating into the penalty area for defense. That was Fàbregas.

Ribéry’s pass was not to Viduka or Anelka. It was to Wood. As he ran, Wood leaped up high.

With a sudden sprint at the last moment, Fàbregas got left behind by Wood. There was no time for him to jump, and he dared not reach out to pull at him. He could only watch helplessly, looking up from behind, as Wood dashed out from among the crowd!

“George Wood!”

In that instant, sudden regret surged from the depths of Lehmann’s heart – why did he have to tell his team to ignore Wood? At this distance, there was not a single defending player. What if he managed to head it in? At the same time, his body tensed. Like a compressed spring, he was ready to leap at any time.

As Wood watched the football, what appeared in his mind was not “I want to score.” Rather, it was, how can I make sure I accurately head the ball, and in a way that wouldn’t make it ridiculously high? The second part of it was the basic of the basics. When he was in the Youth Team, the managers then had already repeatedly drilled him on that, so he could effectively maintain air control during defense. Today, he applied something he had learned for defense in offense. It felt wonderful!

“A header!”

It was very powerful. Wood’s abdominal muscles initiated a strong movement that hurtled the ball towards the goal.

Smack!

Before Lehmann had any time to leap out, the ball had already flown into his arms.

“The header was too straight. Although it was powerful, it didn’t threaten Lehmann in any way! However, I believe Arsenal’s players should really consider this. How did their tight defense allow George Wood to head a ball without any interference at all?”

Wood scratched the curls on his head. His mind was so filled with how he should head the ball that he had forgotten to observe the position of the opponent’s goalkeeper. It slipped his mind that the objective of this header was not to resolve any danger, but to score a goal... He saw someone in front wearing a light-colored jersey and headed the ball over; it was a habit from defending.

Viduka came over and patted his shoulders. “Beautiful one. You gave them a fright.”

“But I didn’t score.” Wood said.

“No need to be anxious. You’ll have your chance.” Viduka pointed to Lehmann.

“Observe his position next time before you shoot. Calm down a little.”

Wood nodded.

Lehmann was currently engaged in a discussion with Fàbregas regarding the ball earlier. From the unnatural expression on his face, it was probably no simple discussion.

“He is certainly not someone we can ignore, Lehmann. I understand him very well. Although his abrupt cut forward also surprised me somewhat...”

Lehmann shrugged. “His shooting is atrocious...”

“Even if he used the tip of his foot to nudge the ball, there is the risk of scoring a goal. He’ll get lucky at some point. What if the ball goes in? Don’t let down your guard.”

“Alright, I got it.” Lehmann patted Fàbregas’s shoulders. “I’m kicking off.”

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On the sidelines, Albertini stood up from the substitutes’ bench as he watched Wood jump high and head the ball in the attack. He had even gotten ready to raise his hands in celebration. Unexpectedly, Wood headed the ball with power but made it much too straight. His hands, already raised midway, suddenly dropped as he cursed quietly to himself.

Tony Twain did something similar, but he did not just curse inwardly. Instead, he loudly swore.

“Dammit! This is the best opportunity we’ve had since the beginning of the match! When we get back, I’m going to set additional shooting drills for him!” He waved his hands unhappily.

Hearing Tang En shout that, Albertini laughed.

Tang En was exactly right. This had been the best opportunity since the start of the match. It was also the best chance in the first half for Forest. George Wood’s abrupt advancement threw Arsenal’s defense into chaos. No one had expected Wood, who very rarely cut forward, to take such an initiative. But also, because it was Wood who hardly went up, the header did not manage to secure a goal. If it was Viduka, Anelka, or Arteta heading it, it might have scored. However, would it still be as astonishing?

When the first half came to its end, the famous red screen showing the scores of the two teams in a corner of Highbury remained at 1:0, with the home team leading.

If it were already the end of the 90-minute match, that would be Wenger’s desired result.

During halftime, Tang En reviewed what had been done in the first half. Conversely, he said little about the goal loss. In fact, there was nothing much to say about it. It was a classic “Arsenal-style” goal. Depending on the intricate positioning of two players through passing and cutting, they tore apart Forest’s defense, forcing them to attend to one thing and lose focus of the other, until finally, a fatal loophole appeared.

“Throughout the whole process, we were being played with like toys. But this is nothing. Football matches are like that. In the second half, let’s return the favor with a “Forest-style” goal!” Tang En winked at the players.

What was a “Forest-style” goal like? It was one from a defensive counterattack that passed through the midfield rapidly and reached the opponent’s goal in two or three passes; it was a goal scored using the simplest and most efficient method.

Everyone believed that was the kind of goal Tang En was talking about.

Tang En turned to say to George, “About that shot... you did pretty well. Continue that way in the second half.”

But Wood shook his head. “Continuing like this means I’ll continue failing to score.”

“Hah!”

Tang En rolled his eyes as someone on the side started snickering. He glared at him, and the laughter immediately ceased.

“I’m referring to your cut forward. It was resolute, decisive, and unexpected. It’s very good, and strong! Do you understand what I mean?” Tang En waved his arms with each sentence he spoke.

Wood nodded. “I got it.”

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In Arsenal’s locker room, everyone did their own things; some listened to music, some lay on the floor dozing. Wenger did not care. He was not only used to it, but he also respected the personal habits of this group of professional footballers. Sitting at the door, he rested quietly, conveniently running through the first half of the match in his mind at the same time.

When time was almost up, the players started becoming quiet. Those listening to music took off their earphones, and the ones napping returned to their seats. Everyone was waiting for the manager to speak.

Wenger raised his head and looked at them. His speech was short as always. “We all know how Forest Team is going to attack. Don’t give them that opportunity.”

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The second half of the match started. Overall, Arsenal could be said to be continuing to hold a defensive stance while Forest Team persisted in their attacks, hoping to equalize the scores. However, Arsenal could somehow always manage to see through Forest’s attack routes. Each attack from Forest was successfully resolved by them. It seemed that Wenger’s analysis of Forest was not a bluff. He truly had gotten them down to a science.

Before Arsenal, Nottingham Forest could practically hide no secrets.

If the match continued progressing in this manner without any incidents, Arsenal would be set to exchange this unimpressive scene for a precious home-field victory.

Wenger did not care about the media commentary after the match. They had gotten to such a crucial point, what was losing a little face compared with the victory of the match? When Arsenal lifts the Champions League Cup in a historic moment, who was going to care about the unseemly scenes in one or two matches? Everyone would be looking at the first ever UEFA Champions League Cup in Arsenal’s history; under lighting, in all its silver shining glory, it would sparkle with starlight. That was the highest goal a club manager could pursue throughout his life.

Wenger was no exception. He looked up at the sky. With all the lights, London’s night sky shone red, so much that he could see nothing.

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“This can’t go on.” Tang En stood up from his seat. “Wenger has analyzed us to the bones. In front of him, there isn’t any secret to speak of. He can’t be any clearer about what I’m good at.”

“Are we admitting defeat?” Kerslake asked.

Tang En glared at him. “Nonsense. I don’t know how to spell defeat. Are you going to teach me?”

“Relax, Tony. I’m just kidding.” Kerslake said, laughing.

“You’re still able to laugh...”

“Wasn’t it you who said that, as managers, we have to give our players confidence no matter what situation we face?”

His words made Tang En speechless.

“Are we making changes?”

Tang en nodded.

“Who are we changing out?”

“We’re not changing out anyone,” Tang En said, shaking his head. It was as if he was mumbling to himself. “For the time being... not changing anyone. Didn’t Wenger research us thoroughly? He must know what we already have. But what we don’t... he may not know!”

Hearing Tang En say that, Kerslake was at a loss to respond. Wasn’t that just crap? How could Wenger possibly know what they did not have? Even they themselves did not know.

Tang En walked to the sidelines and, taking the chance of a ball going out-of-bounds, he stopped Leighton Baines on his side of the flanks and spoke to him. As Baines listened, his eyes grew wider and wider until it looked like they were going to pop out. He turned to look at the field suspiciously, and then again at Tang En, disbelieving every single word he had just heard.

The Fourth Official noticed that Tang En had spoken to Baines for too long side and intended to interrupt them.

Tang En patted Baines’ shoulders. “Go. Tell him exactly what I told you. Ask him not to doubt anything and do as I say. If it succeeds, it’s his success. If it fails, it’s entirely on me.”

Baines looked into the manager’s eyes, nodding firmly before running back.

Tang En turned his head and saw a UEFA official walking towards him, so he headed back to the manager’s seat. Seeing that there was nothing occurring on this side any longer, the official also walked back.

“What did you say to Baines? His expression was abnormal,” Kerslake said when Tang En returned.

Tang En sat down and turned to him with a grin. “Make a guess.”

Chapter 433: The Core

Kerslake sat in his seat and looked up at Twain, who had walked back. “What did you say to Baines? I can see something isn’t quite right from his expression.”

Twain sat down and turned his head to smile at him. "Take a guess."

"How can I guess?" Kerslake opened his hands.

"You'll find out soon, David."

Back on the field, Leighton Baines did not have a chance to locate his target. He did not dare to leave his position when there was no dead ball. What if the opponent counterattacked?

Therefore, Kerslake did not see what Twain's so-called adjustment was. He could only patiently wait.

Finally, when George Wood made Fàbregas fall to the ground, the referee whistled for a foul. Arsenal was awarded a free kick in the center circle. Boos rang out against the offender, but the boos were not as loud as the ones Wood had heard at the Meazza stadium. Arsenal was different from Inter Milan in that they had been entangled with Nottingham Forest for nearly two seasons. The Arsenal fans were familiar with George Wood. They had long known what kind of player he was.

Wood looked at Fàbregas on the ground and did not go to pull him up to show good will. Instead, he turned and ran back.

That was when Leighton Baines came running up.

"George, George."

Wood stopped his tracks. "What's up?"

"The boss asked me to pass a message to you."

Wood turned his head and looked at Twain sitting in the technical area.

"He asked you to shift your position to the front a little."

Wood turned his head again to look at Twain.

"He said you need to be more active in offense and take the initiative to raise your hand for the ball, and then do as you see fit."

Wood turned his head back and stared at Baines.

Baines was a little unnerved by Wood's glare. He nodded hurriedly. "Yes, yes. That's what he said. I haven't changed a word. He asked me to tell you his exact words so that you wouldn't doubt anything. He also said... the credit is yours if you succeed, and the responsibility is his if you fail."

"Okay, got it." Wood believed Baines's words, as he had no reason to lie to him.

Leighton Baines breathed a sigh of relief and was going to run back. He had just turned around when he remembered something. He turned back again to ask, "George? You've been practicing offense these days, haven't you?"

Wood nodded.

Baines smiled. "Then I'm sure you can do it. Press ahead! Show Arsenal what you've got!"

When he saw his teammate's smile and heard such encouragement, Wood still said nothing. He just turned and ran off.

Arsenal took advantage of the free kick to launch another series of attacks with the intention to improve the situation. If they were lucky enough to score another goal, they would completely lock in the win. Now, with nineteen minutes to go until the end of the game and with a two-goal advantage, the Forest team basically had no chance for another equalizer. And at that time, when they had to go to the City Ground stadium for another game, they could also relax a little with their 2:0 advantage.

After he saw Baines gave the message to Wood, Twain got out of his seat again and walked towards the sidelines.

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Because it was a defensive counterattack, Arsenal did not have many forces for the attack. A few players could not pose much of a threat to the Forest team's goal. Nottingham Forest quickly regained control.

The football was handed over to George Wood. Arsenal's defensive focus was the players such as Arteta, Ribéry, Ashley Young, Anelka, and Viduka. Wood took the ball in the backfield, but none of the Arsenal players went up to scramble for the ball with him. Henry just appeared to do so and ran back.

Wood had possession of the ball at his feet, and he did not hurry to send it out. Leighton Baines's words echoed in his mind.

"...He said you need to be more active in the offense and take the initiative to raise your hand for the ball, and then do as you see fit... The credit is yours if you succeed, and the responsibility is his if you fail..."

Easier said than done! Do as I see fit. How do I do as I see fit?

Now Wood could only "do as he saw fit". He saw that there were no Arsenal players pressing on him ahead. Arteta got the brunt of it with Edu stuck to him.

Albertini had once told him that if he did not know who to pass the ball to, he could pass it to the teammate nearest to him. Arteta was currently the nearest player to him. But could he pass the ball to Arteta? It was evident that he could not pass it to him. Under that level of defense, it was easy to lose the ball. Although this had more to do with the receiver, how could he still send the football out irresponsibly, knowing that the ball would be intercepted?

What he was sending out was not just passing a ball; it was also a form of responsibility. That was something Albertini had repeatedly told him during training, and he had kept it in mind. It was irresponsible to simply send the ball out to pass the football to a teammate whose position was not good. This type of behavior might result in a big mistake. George was the defensive midfielder and he knew what that kind of big mistake would entail. He would not allow this type of situation to happen. If his teammates were to lose the football easily, he would be very angry. So, how could he behave that way?

Since it was not possible to pass it to Arteta, who could he pass to?

Wood looked around. Ashley Young was trying his best to plug in ahead and Ashley Cole was not that close to him. This might be an opportunity. The only problem was that he was too far away. Wood was not confident in being able to deliver the football to his teammate's feet accurately at a distance of more than thirty meters. His level of passing could only guarantee that he was able to accurately pass the football to his teammates within ten meters. As for the long pass of more than thirty meters, it was not part of his job before.

Ribéry was not tightly bound to the flank but drew closer to the middle. Unfortunately, he had the same problem as Arteta. He had hit the big-time last season, and this season, he had continued to rise higher, so he became a closely marked target in this game.

George Wood did not have much time left to consider the situation clearly before he could send the ball out again. He had to do something. There was no suitable target to pass the ball to, so in that case...

Wood chose the simplest way: He dribbled the ball forward himself.

"It's unbelievable. George Wood, who normally pass the ball as soon as he gets it, is actually dribbling the ball and plugging ahead! Did Albertini wear the wrong jersey?" The commentator mocked Wood, who was somewhat overly cautious with his dribble.

George's dribble was a little clumsy. It was not that he could not dribble, but that he rarely dribbled the ball ahead in a game.

Henry hesitated for a moment. Just as he thought about whether to go up and defend, George Wood had already run past him. The distance between the football and his feet was so fitting that Henry could not find the right moment for his foot to intercept the ball.

Wood's basic skills were very good. Even if George Wood was now the stalwart First Team main force, Twain still asked him to persist with practicing the fundamentals. Because Wood started out late, he could ignore the fundamentals and had to continue to practice in order to accomplish greater achievements in the future.

Wood dribbled the ball past Henry. The French striker hesitated for a moment and immediately turned to give chase. He already realized that Wood had become the offense's real initiator.

"George! Behind you!" Arteta loudly warned him in the front.

Fàbregas turned to look around and charged up towards him too. With one ahead of him and one at his back, it looked like the converging attack was going to stop the ball.

When Wood saw that there were people in front and at the back, his mind suddenly went blank and he did not know what he should do. When Henry extended his foot from behind to poke at the football, Wood was caught off guard. He watched the football roll out and was received by Fàbregas who came up. Arsenal had turned the defense into an offense.

When he saw the football fall at Fàbregas' foot, the blank space in his mind suddenly cleared and his mind returned to normal. He understood what he should do and did not hesitate. He quickly jabbed Fàbregas' ball out.

Fàbregas had not expected that Wood, who was just in a daze and seemed at a loss, to move so quickly, as if he had become another person in an instant. He froze in place for about a second, and in that second, George Wood skimmed past him and regained possession of the ball.

Henry, who was behind Wood, could not see the situation between these two players. He knew he had poked the football and that Fàbregas was over there, so he should have received the ball. Therefore, he was about to turn around and run ahead to counterattack. When Wood ran off, he then realized that the football was back at this kid's foot!

Twain, who saw this scene on the field, rubbed his temples and muttered to himself, "This bastard... Does he only know what to do when he's at his defensive position?"

Upon hearing this, Kerslake turned his head and stared at Twain. "Tony, did you push him up?"

"It's not as if you don't know what we've been drilling him on during training these few days, David. Don't look so surprised."

"I'm just surprised you put it into practice so soon. Surely you know his current standard."

"What else can we do? Wenger is familiar with what we have. If we want to break the deadlock on the field right now, we have to do something different, something aggressive....Do you know a catalyst is needed in a chemical reaction, David? This play is the catalyst."

"If you stake your bet on him, I really don't know what to say about you. Are you crazy or confident?"

"I'm both."

"But if we are eliminated because of this, Tony, you know..."

"I take full responsibility." Twain grinned. Seeing his grin, Kerslake was completely speechless.

"All right, do what you want..."

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Wood regained control of the football. Because he suddenly plugged in, a gap emerged on Arteta's side. He saw it at a glance. Without hesitation, Wood passed the football.

Arteta used his skills to shake off Edu's defense and passed the ball to Ashley Young who did not pass. Instead, he cut inside and shot. The football struck Senderos on the leg and was slowed down enough for Lehmann to catch it.

The attack by the Forest team ended just like that.

When he saw Ashley Young's shot saved by Lehmann, Arteta turned to give George Wood a thumbs up as an encouragement and praise and to tell him how well he had done. But he did not expect to only see Wood's back. Nottingham Forest number 13 had sprinted back to defend.

Looking at his hasty retreat, Arteta could not help but laugh.

The Arsenal's attack this time also ended in the hands of the Forest goalkeeper. Edwin van der Sar's steady save neutralized any threat that Reyes' shot had posed.

Edwin van der Sar threw the ball to launch another attack. This time he threw the ball straight across to the midfield. Closely marked by Edu, Arteta headed the football directly to George Wood.

This time, Wood did not carry on dribbling the ball. Instead, he passed the football out again after he received it. It targeted Leighton Baines who plugged in from behind.

The Forest team's offensive firepower on the flank was fully launched. The two fullbacks frequently plugged in to assist.

Naturally, Arsenal had anticipated that. Wenger was well aware that the flanks were the Forest team's sharpest means of offense, so he had already heavily laid out his forces there. Baines' breakthrough was contained. In desperation, he could only pass the football back to Wood in search of another way.

Without thinking, everyone treated Wood as a transition point for offense and defense. Arteta was too closely marked by the opponents. Wood was currently the most uninhibited player who could easily receive the ball without disruptions before deciding where it should go.

Wood was forced to become the core of the Forest team in the game's final moments.

Regardless of whether he was willing to or not, he could not unload his burden until the game was over.

Wood got the ball and Fàbregas pounced on it. The two of them completely swapped their roles. Before, it was Wood defending against Fàbregas. Now it was Fàbregas' turn to defend against Wood.

When Wood was uncertain what to do in the face of Fàbregas' defense, he saw Arteta run towards him as he signaled to him to let him pass the football over to him and then run across to the right flank.

Wood did not hesitate to pass the football over. After that, he did as he was told and ran across towards the right flank. Arteta's back faced Arsenal's goal. Edu pressed on so fiercely that he could not turn around. But he did not intend to turn around.

After he saw Wood run over, Arteta passed the football back and then turned and ran forward. It appeared that he wanted to combine forces with Wood.

Wood instantly thought the same. He had initially wanted to immediately pass the football to Arteta, only to find that Edu was still pressing on tightly. Wenger knew that Arteta was the Forest team's offensive core during Albertini's absence. The Brazilian midfielder thought that the Forest team's offense would be paralyzed as long as he was able to restrain the Spaniard.

Generally speaking, that was the right idea and arrangement.

However, today's game was a little different.

George Wood had lifted his leg when he saw that Edu was still stuck on Arteta, so he could not just send the football out because Arteta could not receive it properly.

Wood temporarily changed his mind when Anelka came back. He passed the football to him.

When the Frenchman received the football, it set off another round of loud hissing in Highbury. In fact, the booing had already started from the moment Wood took the ball. It only reached the climax after Anelka received the ball.

Once Anelka received the ball, the Arsenal defensive line immediately tensed up. They knew that the man in front of them could threaten the goal guarded by Lehmann. He was different from George Wood, who could not shoot. Touré followed and intended to stop Anelka from shooting.

Arteta turned and came up to support his teammates. The Forest team's intention to take the middle by storm was now clear.

Anelka tried to force a breakthrough via Touré, but his ball was intercepted by Touré.

That ended the Forest team's attack.

"What a pity, Anelka is too independent! It would have been better to pass the ball to Arteta."

"If he did pass the ball, then he would not be Anelka."

Touré snatched Anelka's ball and was ready to pass the ball to fight back. The football was passed forward, but it was not received by an Arsenal player. Instead, it was received by George Wood.

When Wood saw Anelka's dribbled ball being snatched, he was already on the path of Touré's pass to Fàbregas. Just as Fàbregas understood him, he was also well aware that Fàbregas was Arsenal's tactical core. That type of defensive counterattack pass would surely be dealt with by him.

George Wood immediately passed the intercepted ball to Anelka, who examined the situation in front of him. This time, he did not choose to force a breakthrough; instead, he made a breakthrough action and then passed the ball to Arteta, who came up to receive. Then he quickly plugged in ahead to do a wall pass with Arteta.

The Arsenal defensive players were well aware of his intentions. Touré was not fooled and followed Anelka back into the penalty area. As long as he closely marked the man, the Forest team's offense would be put to a halt again. Arteta turned his head to look at Anelka, which reinforced the idea in the minds of Touré and the others: mark Anelka closely so that the Spanish kid with his back facing our goal will be a threat!

Arteta looked at Anelka but did not pass the ball to him. He chose an unexpected route instead. He drove the football straight back to George Wood.

Then just as he kicked the football, he shouted to Wood, "Just shoot! George! Don't Stop!"

Wood heard Arteta's shout because they were very close. He had not known what to do, but Arteta's shout reminded him: just shoot directly into the goal!

No one followed George Wood around. Arsenal's defensive attention had just been drawn to Anelka and Arteta. Even this time around, Fàbregas just marked Anelka, who cut inside.

From the sidelines, Twain clenched his fists when he saw Arteta pass the football back to Wood. "Just hold your f**king nerve, you bastard!"

Wood swung his right leg on the spot without having to run up. He aligned with the football and gave it a ferocious kick!

At the same time, Arteta bent over, leaving only the astonished Edu who saw the football fire towards him like a cannon and whizz past him in a gust of wind with a few strands of grass blades.

“George WOOO—”

It was powerful and astonishingly fast. The ball flew towards Lehmann in a flash. The only regret was it was the same as his header: it was too straight on!

However, Lehmann was afraid of receiving when faced with this ball directly slamming into his arms. Why? Because he suddenly gave rise to a fear that he would drop the ball.

The only thing the German goalkeeper finally chose to do was to hit the football out. He punched and struck the football. With a boom, he and the football flew out.

Lehmann fell inside the goal and the football flew back into the middle of the penalty area.

It did not go in! Though embarrassed, Lehmann had managed to save the sudden shot.

But was that the end of the Forest team’s attack?

No!

Anelka, who had cut inside the penalty area just now with the intention to pick up Arteta’s pass, appeared in front of the football like a ghost. He did not have any defenders around him. The Arsenal players’ attention was drawn by Wood’s sudden volley.

“Nicolas Anelka—YES!”

Anelka faced the sprawling sea of middle fingers and lips mouthing the “F” word in the north stands, set his position, and then swung his right leg to sweep the football into the air and into the empty goal.

Judas had incarnated as the devil to strike his former master a fatal blow.

Chapter 434: Nothing Is Too Deceitful In War

“George Wood is shooting... it’s been stopped!” The radio rang with the commentator’s shriek.

As he watched the red light at the junction in front, cab driver Landy James smacked his steering wheel in a sudden movement, startling the customer sitting at the back.

“Nicolas Anelka!”

Following immediately after, an excited shout from the commentator emerged from the radio.

“GOOOOAL! It’s a GOOOOOOOOAL!!”

This time, Landy smacked his palm onto the horn.

During the long beep of the car horn, the commentator’s voice sounded again.

“Nottingham Forest’s counterattack! They scored a goal! Nicolas Anelka, a former Arsenal player, has given a most powerful stab to his previous club! He’s running hard towards... The manager’s seat! Look at how excited Tony Twain is!”

“Haha! Tony! Beautiful!” Landy shouted hoarsely as he blasted the car horn, in no mood to care about the terrified and trembling customer sitting behind him.

Just as he was continually smacking the horn in excitement, a traffic officer walked over.

“I’m sorry, Sir. The use of car horns in this area is prohibited.”

As he warned him, the traffic officer was preparing to take out a notebook from his shirt pocket to note it down.

Landy was momentarily stunned. The car horn stopped and the sounds from the radio became even clearer.

“... Who could have imagined that George Wood would suddenly appear in that position? It’s incredible, something that was completely out of Arsenal’s expectations!”

“We scored?” The traffic officer asked Landy James, after cocking his ear to listen.

Landy smiled. “That’s right, we scored!”

“Who scored?”

“Anelka.”

“That bastard... beautiful job!” the officer praised him and shook his head.

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Highbury Stadium, filled with the sounds of people, was suddenly assaulted with a wave of jeers. But Anelka heard nothing. In fact, he did not even put a finger to his mouth and make a provocative celebratory move. Opening his arms wide, he ran towards the technical area of the Forest Team. There, Tang En was on one knee on the ground, pounding the ground heartily.

This season and his eruptive return to the UK were thanks to one person.

Tang En had just stood up from his own crazed celebration when he saw Anelka jumping towards him. In fact, he did not even manage to hold out his arms in time to welcome the hug before he was slammed into by the French forward and got squashed beneath him.

Without waiting for Tang En’s struggle, more Forest players leaped on them, pressing them down.

“Ha! Nottingham Forest’s celebratory tradition!” The ESPN English commentator said, laughing happily. “We haven’t seen this in some time. This only happens when the players are extremely excited.”

This time, not even George Wood stayed back as a spectator. He took the initiative to leap up, stacking atop them. He was so thrilled that he only knew to open his mouth wide to shout continuously.

“Nottingham Forest has equalized the score; this is a tremendously valuable goal! They have gotten a precious away field goal. Perhaps, after the next 90-minute match, this goal will become a crucial key in deciding victory or loss! It is little wonder that Forest’s players are so thrilled. Think back on the scene in the Champions League quarter-finals, Forest Team was able to successfully advance precisely thanks to their away field goal!”

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Wenger stood at the sidelines and walked back and forth, his face ashen. He could not muster up a smile.

Originally, the match had fallen into the pace he had planned for. This goal changed everything up. All their previous efforts had disappeared like bubbles.

What a jerk! He had already researched into all aspects of Nottingham Forest Team. That included the personality and habits of their manager. He believed that this team, when faced with him, did not have any secrets left; that he had already found a way to forcefully control Forest. Unexpectedly, at the final moment, he was defeated by Tony's abrupt change in strategy. No matter what, Wenger had not thought that Tony would push George Wood to the front field and make him the strategic core, to allow him to participate in the offense.

He had calculated innumerable paths, but just not this one.

But, how could this be his fault? The deeper his research on Wood, the firmer his belief became that the boy could do nothing else but defend. Letting him attack? Wouldn't that be helping the opponents? Even if his shot this time assisted Anelka in a successful rebound shot, everyone would probably assume it was because Wood got lucky and did not send the ball flying too far.

An away goal... even though the situation was not so terrible that Arsenal would be eliminated, there were still 15 minutes in the match. What if Nottingham Forest offered up what they were best in? Buckling down and waiting to counterattack?

Since Forest had already gotten a goal, Wenger believed Tony would surely command his team to return to a tight defense until the end of the match. He understood his opponent. Results were everything. It was nothing to Tony Twain if the situation looked bad or even if they looked sorry. The current score was a result that fit exactly what Tony would hope for.

"Arsène?" Pat Rice walked out and stood next to Wenger. He wanted to ask what strategy he had to deal with this.

"Pat. This time, it's our turn to be in trouble." Wenger said, biting his lip and furrowing his brow.

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It was not easy, after the referee interceded, for Tang En to finally be "rescued." The first thing he did was not to tidy up his suit, but to hold back George Wood.

"Great job, George!"

George grinned at him.

"How did it feel when you were shooting?"

"Very good."

Tang En winked at him. "Finally, you're not saying 'not bad' anymore."

Wood tucked away his smile and asked, "Are we going to defend next?"

“Defend?” Tang En asked.

“They’ve lost a goal on their home field, and we’ve equalized the score. They must be thinking...” Wood pointed to the Arsenal players who had already set the football in the center circle, preparing to kick off.

Wood had not expected Tang En to shake his head. “No. We’re not defending.”

Wood was shocked.

“We’re going to continue playing like this. I can’t really explain too much to you now. Anyhow, just remember... play exactly like you’ve been playing. When you have a chance, cut forward and suppress Fàbregas!”

Wood’s face lit up with understanding and he nodded. “I got it.”

“If you understand, then hurry up and get back.” Tang En saw a glimpse of the Fourth Official walking towards him again and hastily pushed Wood back into the field.

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Before restarting play, Wenger’s newest instructions to his players were to give up on their defense and enhance their offense. They were to score as soon as possible. Nottingham Forest had already gotten one away goal. They could not allow them to take another point from them.

But as soon after the match restarted, Wenger had no choice but to change his decision.

Before Arsenal could even threaten Forest’s goal, Anelka shot off a long shot that almost blasted open the gates guarded by Lehmann.

“Arsenal’s players seem to be a little unfocused; perhaps they have yet to recover from that loss earlier. Anelka reminds them that the match isn’t over yet!”

What annoyed Fàbregas was that although he originally wanted to take the chance in the final ten over minutes of the match to help the team lead again, he quickly discovered that he needed to put a stop to George Wood first.

Outside the field, Tang En was shouting and yelling while waving his arms furiously. He was reminding the other team members to work with Wood’s positioning and movements, preventing him from getting trapped in a pincer attack from Arsenal.

Speaking of pincer attacks, Fàbregas successfully managed to again steal the ball from Wood’s average dribbling. However, he discovered that the situation was perhaps better whenever the ball was under Wood’s foot. Once the ball moved to be under Arsenal’s possession, it was as if Wood’s entire being became possessed by God; he was immediately energized, and he transformed into another person during the defense. He stole the ball whenever he could, and when he could not, he would immediately foul without hesitation.

That style of his truly caused Arsenal’s players tremendous suffering. Even if they could steal the ball from him, they had to immediately face his disruption at proximity. Whenever they were on the offense, Arsenal’s players always hoped to be as far as possible from that monster...

With George Wood attracting the majority of the focus of Arsenal's players, the defensive pressure faced by his other teammates subsequently reduced. Arteta had more energy to put into passing to his teammates. This caused Wenger a headache and he was left without a choice but to make another adjustment. He asked his players not to press forward too fiercely to prevent gaps opening at the back that could be used by Forest. In that manner, Arsenal was unable to fully focus on the attack.

That was equivalent to using another path to resolve the defensive pressure on Forest. Arsenal, who was unable to fully focus on offense, was greatly reduced in their abilities. In fact, by the time the main referee blasted the whistle signaling the end of the match, Forest had yet to carry out any concrete attacks. However, they successfully managed to make Arsenal assume that Forest would make use of the gaps left behind by them when they pressed forward. Tang En utilized Wenger's understanding of Forest Team and checkmated him instead.

As a result, when the match crept close to its end and Wenger raised his head to look at the huge screen above with the score of 1:1, he abruptly realized he had been played by Tony. Twain had pretended that he had wanted to score another goal in the last minutes, but it was only a front! His true aim was not to attack, but to defend!

In that same moment, even though Wenger already saw through it, he knew that there was no time to do anything about it. There was not much time left in the match; the main referee had already raised his hand thrice to look at the watch. He was going to blow the ending whistle for the match any time now.

Seeing Wenger pace back and forth on the sidelines, Tang En smiled at Kerslake beside him, saying, "China's Sun Tzu said this in The Art of War: Nothing is too deceitful in war. We've won, David."

Just as he finished speaking, the referee blew the ending whistle of the match.

"The match has ended! Up until the last moment, Arsenal did not manage to score again. They drew with Nottingham Forest with a score of 1:1 on their home ground! For Twain and his team, this result is very satisfying. However, this score does not signify certainty for Forest to acquire a ticket to the finals. Arsenal still has a very good chance. After all, Nottingham Forest only has one away goal. I believe, based on Arsenal's strong offensive capabilities, that getting an away goal in City Ground should not be a difficult matter. And they are no stranger to that stadium. In fact, two months ago, Arsenal got a victory over Nottingham Forest in that very stadium, with a score of 2:0. This match's score is not the end of the world for Wenger's team."

While it sounded somewhat reasonable, those words, when articulated, only made people feel that it was for comforting the loser.

Wenger would probably dislike hearing that.

At the end of the match, Tang En immediately turned and walked towards the technical area for the home team. He took the initiative to put out his hand when he was still five or six meters away from Wenger. His face was beaming.

"A brilliant match, wasn't it?"

Wenger also put out his hand, the two clasping hands.

"A brilliant match. Congratulations, Mr. Twain."

“There’s still 90 minutes. Our victory or loss still remains unknown.”

“You’re right. It is much too early to laugh or cry about it.”

“Let’s meet in City Ground.”

After bidding goodbye to Wenger, Tang En did not walk back to the corridors. Instead, he turned and walked back towards the field. The players of both teams were not exchanging jerseys with a friendly atmosphere after the match; they were each other’s opponents in both the Premier League and the Champions League, there was not much friendliness to speak of.

Arsenal’s players hurriedly departed the field while Nottingham Forest’s players lingered in it as if they were the victors. They raised their hands in thanks to their audience even though most of them had left or were leaving the place.

“Alright, guys. Go back and take a shower, change your clothes. We’re going home!” Tang En called out to them, worried that the players were too excited and might fall ill.

Eastwood, who had been sent into the field in the last stages of the match with the objective of wasting time, came over to him, grinning. He hugged Tang En and continued walking along to the players’ corridors. He was not even sweating.

Hearing the call of their manager, the players all left the field one by one, coming down to give Tang En a hug before returning to the locker room.

Albertini stood together with Tang En on the sidelines. When the players came off of the field to hug Tang En, they also smacked palms with him.

Anelka walked into the stadium with his head high and left in the same way.

When George Wood came down Tang En said nothing; he just hugged him a little tighter. On the other hand, Albertini held him back to say a few words.

Only when everyone had left did Tang En turn and walk back together with Albertini.

“What did you say to Wood?” Tang En asked casually.

“Oh, nothing much... I just complimented his performance.”

Tang En smiled. “That’s right, Demi. I need to thank you. If it wasn’t for you telling me that George had the potential for offense and that you hoped for me to nurture him into a well-rounded midfielder, I might not have been able to win this match.”

“I only provided a suggestion and a possibility, Boss. The one who decided was still you.”

“If you were in my place, you would also make this decision, right?”

Albertini smiled and did not answer.

“You’re right, Demi. George... indeed has some talent in attacking. And it’s been buried deep. Fortunately, it didn’t stay that way.” Tang En reached out to pat Albertini. “I’m looking forward more and more to his future. Let’s go.”

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In the press conference after the match, Wenger admitted that George Wood's sudden move forward was not a change he had expected. He somewhat regretfully expressed that if not for Wood's shot, the match may not have ended this way.

Meanwhile, Tang En delightedly praised Wood's performance and believed he had stepped up exactly when the team needed him most. Of course, faced with the astonishment of the reporters, he insisted that this was an adjustment he had been planning for a long time. It was something that had been repeatedly practiced during the usual training, and certainly not some kind of helpless last resort he had suddenly come up with.

As he said this, Wenger turned to look at him. Tang En finished what he was saying without a blush or uneven breaths. He could even smile at Wenger.

Naturally, Wenger did not believe the bulls**t Tang En sprouted during the press conference. Based on his understanding of Tony, he could not have been practicing this for too long before he burdened Wood with being the offensive core during the match. If that was truly the case, Arsenal was also unlikely to be its last victim.

Watching Tang En's smiling face as he bragged unblushingly, Wenger was even more certain that the man before him was a jerk.

Chapter 435: Three Days Later

Nottingham Forest brought back a goal from the away game. The Forest team already had the psychological upper hand for the second leg of the competition.

Twain obviously still had some remembrances. He recalled that this season, Arsenal had relied on defensive counterattacks to eliminate Villarreal with a total score of 1:0 from the two rounds, and then advanced into the Champions League final. It was the first time in their club history.

But for his own benefit, he had to brutally wipe out the most brilliant Champions League results in the Arsenal club history.

It must be Nottingham Forest that would go to the finals!

But before they could advance into the finals, there was still one thing that Twain needed to worry about.

"Dunn, what kind of work are you mainly responsible for on the youth team now?"

"Foundation training."

Hearing his answer, Twain snapped his fingers. "That's fantastic. Can you come over to my side after practice tomorrow?"

"What's the matter?"

"I'm going to ask you to help me train someone. Starting from scratch and practicing from the basics."

Dunn guessed who it was. "George Wood."

"Yes, him."

"But...." Dunn recalled Wood's performance in the youth team, "His basic foundation has always been good."

"That depends on which areas his basics are. I want you to help me practice his shooting. It's not about whether he can shoot into the goal. I want him to at least get seven out of ten shots within range of the goal posts."

"Okay, but that's not something that can be done in one or two months."

"It's all right. Either way, you're going to transfer to the First Team next season. Just treat it as if you've started work early."

Dunn was somewhat shocked to hear Twain's remark. Previously, Twain had not told him that he would be transferred to the First Team coaching unit so soon.

"Oh. I forgot to tell you." Twain remembered when he saw Dunn's expression. He scratched his head and said, "I've decided to transfer you to the First Team coaching unit next season to help me. We don't have enough manpower. The team lineup is expanding day by day and I need more coaches. What's the matter?" asked Twain when he saw that Dunn did not say anything.

"I didn't expect it. That's all."

"How come you didn't expect it? Why did I find you in Chengdu in the first place? Wasn't it so that you could come here and partner with me? I'll never find a person who has such a rapport and can work as well with me as you can in the whole world. Only you, Dunn."

Dunn looked up at Twain. "Do you really think so?"

Twain nodded without hesitation.

"All right."

Seeing Dunn agree, Twain had a smile on his face.

"You're really meticulous when it comes to Wood."

"Fate brought him and me together."

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The next day, Twain had Wood stay behind after practice.

The players chuckled and walked past Wood in groups of three or more. Some of them even winked at him. Everyone knew that Twain asked Wood to stay back for extra practice, which was an extracurricular activity that everyone disliked.

Wood stood where he was and looked at his teammates walking past him with a placid expression. He considered additional practice to be a recreational activity that he enjoyed.

When everyone was gone, Twain brought Dunn to the field.

“I don’t have to introduce you both, seeing you know each other.”

Wood had not expected for the person training him to not be Twain, but Dunn. He stared blankly for a moment.

“What? You haven’t met for half a month and suddenly you don’t know him?” Twain teased Wood.

“No... What are we practicing?” Wood shook his head.

“Well, you’ll practice shooting.” Twain surprised Wood for a moment.

“George, do you know why you could shoot within the range of the goalpost during the game against Arsenal?” Twain asked.

Wood carefully considered it for a moment. He no longer remembered what it felt like when he had shot at that time. All he knew was that he was very happy, and nothing beyond that.

Twain shrugged and turned to look at Dunn.

“You still don’t know why you can shoot the football within range, George,” Dunn said. “Just give it a shot again.” He kicked a football over and then pointed to the goal in front of him.

Wood stopped the football and took a few steps back so that he could sprint and run up. He lifted his thigh and swung to kick, and volleyed.

Twain and Dunn looked up at the football that flew towards the horizon, and Twain whistled.

“All right, I’m pretty sure that the shot he made in that game was a lucky shot.” Twain patted Dunn on the shoulder. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Dunn stepped forward and got hold of Wood. “George, shooting doesn’t require the strength of the entire body. Besides, why are the tips of your toes sticking up? Do you still remember how you practiced shooting on the youth team?”

Wood shook his head. “I didn’t practice shooting on the youth team.”

Twain explained to Dunn, “When he first came, he said he wanted to be a striker. So, I put him on the front line and the coaches trained him as they would a striker. But it soon became apparent that he was not cut out to be a striker at all. I made him a defensive midfielder, and they never trained him to shoot again.”

After listening to Twain’s explanation, Dunn shook his head helplessly. “And the youth team manager at the time was David Kerslake?”

Twain nodded.

Dunn did not say anything. He turned to look at Wood and said, “Let’s start from scratch. George, this training is going to be long and repetitive. There are no shortcuts. Are you sure you want to practice?”

Wood turned to look at Twain standing at the side, and then said to Dunn, “Demetrio hopes I can be a player like him.”

Without waiting for Dunn to open his mouth, Twain spoke first. "Let's put aside other people's expectations first. George, what do you want to be? Do you want to keep playing in the midfield engineer position, or make some changes? I'm not going to force you to do something you don't like. A simple midfield engineer is also very important to the team. It's remarkable to play to your best in that regard."

Wood bowed his head and pondered for a moment. Then he looked up and said, "I think... I like the feeling of shooting and being involved in the offense."

Twain exhaled. That should be Wood's real thinking.

"Good. Starting today, you'll practice half an hour with Dunn every day after training, and we'll do other offensive drills for you during your usual training as well."

Wood nodded.

"Let's get started, Dunn." Twain patted Dunn on the shoulder and backed away. He could not meddle with that kind of training. He was not good at running it. The coaching staff were in charge of it in the First Team. However, he could take this opportunity to take a closer look at Dunn's training and have a more direct understanding before he was transferred to the First Team. In fact, this was the first time he had watched Dunn train a player up close.

Wood was very cooperative with Dunn. He was not as stubborn as he was when he had first come here. Dunn was also very patient, more patient than the average person. No matter how outrageous Wood's shots were, he did not show any impatience. He repeatedly explained to Wood the main focal points he needed to pay attention to during shooting. He also broke down one of the simplest and most basic shooting moves and demonstrated it bit by bit for Wood to see. He just did it over and over again until the sun had set.

"Okay! We've exceeded the time!" Twain raised his hands and pointed at his watch. He'd lost track of the time while watching the training. In reality, the course of the training was rather boring and monotonous; but Twain was riveted.

Soaked in sweat, George Wood simply took off his jacket in the setting sun. With his arms bared, he kept shooting at the goal, again and again, repeating the simplest action. Dunn blew the whistle repeatedly but did not reprimand him.

That was not something Twain would be able to do, as he was not a very patient person. Seeing Wood like this, he probably would have resorted to foul language by now. Why the hell are you so stupid? This is the simplest and most basic, it's an action that can't be any simpler or more basic!

However, Dunn did not do that. There were no emotional fluctuations in his speaking tone, no disappointment or joy.

Hearing Twain's shout, Dunn stopped training and calmly said to the wheezing Wood, "We'll continue tomorrow, George."

"Ok... sure." Wood gasped for air as he replied.

“Go home, George. Send my regards to your mother.” Twain and Dunn said goodbye to Wood at the gate, each walking in a different direction.

“This is the first time I’ve seen Wood gasping to speak after training. I didn’t think there was a lot of training...” Twain said Dunn on their way home.

“Doing the same action over and over again will make people feel tired.”

“Is there really only one move?”

Dunn nodded.

“Not bad; train that boy well and try to drill him every day until he collapses! By the way, do you think he has a gift in that area?”

Dunn shook his head. “So far, not yet.”

“Well...” Twain muttered to himself for a long time. “Take it slow, we still have one more year.”

“A year? Oh, Albertini.”

“I have to make full preparations.”

The two men walked side by side into the distance.

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Wood’s training program went on every day, rain or shine. It was not as if Twain was deliberately trying to make Wood to become King Muscle. It was simply because he did not have much time. It was time for Albertini to retire next season. If Wood could not produce any results at that point and his performance on the field was still as green as it was in the last two games, Twain would give up the idea and focus on finding a replacement for Albertini in the summer transfer market.

However, at that time, it would be another thing to be able to find the right player. Twain did not want to think too much right now. He still had about a year until then.

As the game drew closer, the media that gathered in Nottingham also increased. Some wanted to see if Arsenal could make their first historic entry to the Champions League finals, and others wanted to see if the leading dark horse in this tournament, Nottingham Forest, would be a dark horse to the end.

This was an English civil war, but it attracted the media’s attention in countries outside of England, too. The Catalanian and Spanish media wanted to see which team would become Barcelona’s opponents in the finals, and the Italian and Milan media wanted to immediately know which team AC Milan’s opponents would be.

Would it be Arsenal or Nottingham Forest?

It would be revealed in three days’ time.

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Between those two Champions League matches, the Forest team would welcome Manchester United in a league game at home. To encounter an opposing team which was close at its heels at this juncture was really unfortunate.

“It’s very simple; there’s nothing difficult about it.” Facing the miserable-looking Kerslake, Twain discussed their planning arrangement and schedule with the coaching unit in his office. “We give up the game against Manchester United.”

The members of the coaching unit all looked at him.

“Some of you must think that I’ve given up the Premier League tournament, right?” No one answered. Even if they really thought so, they could not voice it.

Twain smiled a little. “I’m glad we have Manchester United at this point, and not any other team. The reason is simple. In order to win the Champions League, we are incapable of giving our best for that game in between two semi-final matches. It’s almost certain that we have to abandon it. If we are destined to lose, I think losing to Manchester United is better than losing to any other team. Right now, Manchester United is four points behind us. Even if they beat us, we’re still one point ahead of them.” Twain put up his index finger. “This one point is very important. There are still two rounds left in the league. Who are our next opponents?” He looked at Kerslake.

As the assistant manager, he needed to answer. “Middlesbrough and Sunderland, and both are away games.”

Upon hearing that answer, the coaches in the office laughed and the atmosphere relaxed at once.

Middlesbrough was the team that Nottingham Forest worried least about. The Forest team knew how to play Middlesbrough very well, whereas Middlesbrough seemed to have a mental block when it came to Forest. The other opponent, Sunderland, was also not a threat. They had already been relegated with only twelve points for their thirty-five rounds in the league tournament. That was a terrible result, and their players were too dispirited to fight. They only wanted to finish the season early and go their separate ways.

Even though both matches were away games, it was not difficult for the Forest team to obtain six points.

That was why Twain said that. A game would be delayed in their preparations for the Champions League. The game that was delayed just happened to be the game against Manchester United, which was going to be lost. They did not need to worry about being distracted and upsetting their balance due to the intensive schedule and being forced to compete against Manchester United. That would be detrimental to them.

Everyone knew what Twain had in mind and no longer had any doubts about the arrangement.

“We will deploy our substitutes for this league game. The main force can rest and go all out to prepare for the second leg of the Champions League semi-final.” Twain stood up and pressed his hands on his desk. He looked at his colleagues and clearly said, “We must advance to the finals!”

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Everything went according to Twain's plan. With the match against Manchester United coming up, Nottingham Forest boldly started to prepare for the second leg of the Champions League semi-final. They sent almost all of their substitutes so that they could give the vast majority of their main players a chance to rest.

For his part, Ferguson sent all of his main force and was very clear about his intention to win this away game. He must have known that Twain was bound to give up the game. Whether he could overtake the Forest team in the future or not, they must secure these three points in this game.

Ninety minutes later, Ferguson and Twain both got what they wanted.

Manchester United got the three points they wanted in this away game and narrowed their point difference with Nottingham Forest to just one point. That one-point gap could motivate them further.

And Tony Twain got the much-needed break at the expense of a game loss. At that moment, for the highest goal in the hearts of all the football club managers, he could not care too much anymore.

Would he be able to get what he truly wanted three days later?

Chapter 436: Round Two

25th April, Evening.

Nottingham, Trent Bridge.

A police car with flashing sirens was stopped by the roadside. Policemen in groups of two or three wore yellow reflective vests and walked around, patrolling. The receivers on their shoulders were constantly emitting rustling static sounds.

"Forest! Forest! Nottingham Forest!"

A group of Nottingham Forest fans in red jerseys waved the scarfs in their hands as they walked by, loudly chanting their slogan.

The police kept their eyes on the group of football fans who had just walked past, turning their heads to report the latest update of their assigned areas into the receiver.

"The situation here is good, nothing unusual. Over."

"Northern Gates of stadium... Normal, over..."

The police officers who finished reporting cast their gaze to the group of fans, following them with their eyes as they walked far, crossing the Trent Bridge, before turning left to finally merge into a stream of countless people just like them. They meandered towards the structure standing on the riverbanks, City Ground.

A helicopter flew over their heads, blowing up a gust of wind.

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“For fans of Nottingham Forest, tonight is like the celebration of a major festival. It’s the UEFA Champions League semi-finals! It’s been a long, long time since they’ve experienced this sensation. City Ground has no empty seats. Perhaps Nottingham Forest Club’s chairman, Evan Doughty, feels somewhat dissatisfied by the stadium’s capacity... In truth, on such an important night, even more fans can only sit in the bar to watch the match because City Ground is unable to take them all in. Arsenal will be experiencing a tenacious fight in here while they face tremendous pressure on the away field... Welcome to round two of the 05-06 UEFA Champions League semi-finals!”

The sounds and noise from outside were cacophonous; fans’ singing and a mess of other noises drifted in from the crack in the door.

Tang En walked to the locker room’s doors and shut them. The noise immediately fell in volume; at the very least, everyone would be able to hear him speak now.

“Everyone. In 90 minutes, our fate for this season will be revealed.” Tang En cleared his throat, so his voice would not sound so scratchy, but to little avail. His voice had long been damaged from these few years of constant yelling.

“This is a match that will decide our destiny.” He leaned down and pressed his hands down on the table, looking at the players before him. Everyone’s faces were serious.

“The semi-finals of the Champions League. I don’t want to talk to you about how important it is. I’m sure you all already know it better than I do. Listen to the sounds outside. Our fans have never looked forward so much to a match as they have today. And, we can give them even more...” Tang En raised his hand and suddenly slammed it down. “Victory!”

He looked at his watch. There was still some time before their appearance in the field. But he had nothing else much to say.

“I wanted to say just that. Take a rest and prepare to get on the field.”

He turned and pulled open the door, the noise from the outside finding its way in again in that instant. After he walked out and closed the door, the locker room resumed its quiet state.

Tang En walked directly towards the dedicated washrooms for them. He was very familiar with the path there. Before leading his first match with the Forest Team, he had hidden in the bathroom alone to calm himself down like this. He told himself that it was no big deal. Even if it were not a game, he was still going to carry on playing.

Now that he had carried on, he had gone on to become even better. He had gotten all the way to the semi-finals of the Champions League. That feeling of nervousness from back then returned. The second round was not the same as the first. This was the final 90 minutes. If they succeeded, they would be made. But, if they failed, there would be no opportunity to make up for it.

The pressure he had been feeling intensified significantly.

In front of his players, he made it seem as if he cared about nothing, that he was well-planned and had had everything prepared for a long time. He did not mind playing that character, but the pressure deep inside his heart also needed some release. Prior to the match, it was sometimes not a bad idea to curse

at his opponents in front of the media. But he could not just casually scold his opponent for this match; Wenger and he still had some personal ties.

As a result, Tang En could only get the pressure off his chest by smoking a cigarette in the dedicated washroom.

He took out a cigarette from his pocket and lit it up, drawing a deep breath. As he breathed deeply, his heart also calmed.

From the left pane of the glass windows, he could see the field outside brightly lit with lights.

A group of children were currently trying to drag an enormous round banner with the UEFA Champions League logo towards the center circle of the field. The fans were already seated, while reporters were gathered on the two sides of the players' corridor all the way to nearby the midline. Armed with their cameras, all lenses were aimed at the players' corridor.

Everyone was anticipating this night and this match.

As one of the main leads, how could it be any other way for Tony Twain?

After finishing his cigarette, Tony, whose mood had completely calmed, walked out of the washroom. He walked through the narrow tunnels that led toward the home team's locker rooms.

When he turned the corner, he saw Wenger, who was also standing outside the doors. Hearing footsteps, Wenger turned and caught sight of Tang En.

"What a coincidence." Tang En took the initiative to greet him.

"Yes, what a coincidence," Wenger said blandly.

Wenger was not at all nervous, or at least he appeared that way. Tang En believed it could be because Wenger was a veteran general; he had already seen so much, he did not feel any nerves. However, from another perspective, this was also Arsène Wenger's first time leading a team into the semi-finals of the Champions League.

Bumping into each other like that was quite awkward. Both men were at a loss for what to say because they were opponents. They knew nothing about the destinies awaiting them.

Tang En walked to the doors of the home team's locker room. He turned to Wenger, who stood before the away team's locker room door, and said, "I'll see you after the match."

"Goodbye," Wenger said concisely.

Tang En turned the knob and opened the door. His players all looked up at him.

"Everyone, are you ready?" He asked, leaning on the door frame.

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"They're coming in!" Someone in the stands shouted. Everyone around him shifted their gaze towards the exit of the players' corridors. Like casting a pebble onto the calm surface of a lake, the actions created a ripple through the entire spectators' stand.

The players from both teams walked in two files into the stadium amid cacophonous cheers. The ones leading Arsenal and Nottingham Forest were captains Henry and George Wood respectively.

Albertini continued sitting on the substitutes' bench for the match. As the season neared its conclusion, his body condition were unable to keep up. More often than not, he could only sit on the substitutes' bench, fielded only when the team needed him.

The condition he had displayed in the match against Inter Milan could not be sustained for long. As he aged, his body began struggling to keep up. Consciously, he started sitting closer to the technical area. During the match, he could overhear the voices of the managerial team discussing their strategies. From this moment on, he had to begin preparing for his own dream of being a manager in the future.

Each time Henry shook hands with Wood before the match, exchanging pennants and guessing for the coin toss, he would feel extremely intrigued; the captain before him was truly too young. Among the top six teams in the Premier League, Wood was the youngest of the captains. While Wenger had been said to value young people highly, Tony Twain was even more so. On the Forest Team, several players appeared more suitable than Wood to be the captain, such as Edwin van der Sar, who was a starter for every match.

In fact, it would not be so astonishing if it was merely about his youth; what was more surprising was that Wood was doing rather well in his position as a captain despite his youth.

"Tails." The referee had placed the coin in front of Henry, indicating the side facing up.

Flipping the coin, the referee presented it to Wood. Wood nodded.

The coin was tossed up high before falling back onto the grass. The main referee bent over to look while Henry and Wood exchanged glances.

"Tails!" Picking up the coin, the referee pointed to Henry, indicating he had the first choice.

"Kick-off rights." Without hesitation, Henry chose the more advantageous choice for them.

What was left was hardly a choice. Wood chose the side of the field where his team warmed up to be their half.

Both captains shook hands with the three referees and parted ways after.

At that point, Tang En acknowledged that he had completely disregarded what he was to do if they successfully advanced from the semi-finals. In his eyes, this was the finals.

He adjusted his sitting posture and waited for the referee to blow the whistle signaling the beginning of the first half of the match.

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"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the second round of the UEFA Champions League semi-finals in the 05-06 season. The two teams opposing are Nottingham Forest and Arsenal! This is a civil war in England. I believe the English would hope even more for these two teams to meet in Stade de France (where the finals of this season's Champions League were to be held). Let me take this opportunity to introduce you to the starting line-up of both teams..."

Kenny Burns sat in the bar, his head looking up at the huge television screen that hung below the ceiling. The whole bar was filled to the brim with people taking the same posture as him.

The Forest Bar had used to be a place Tang En frequented. Everyone here knew what kind of person Forest's manager was. They were also his most loyal fans. These people idolized not some football star, but a manager instead. Even though Tang En very rarely came back here to drink and chat now due to his work, his spot continued to be reserved only for Tang En's use; no one else was allowed it.

Today, within the crowded bar, only that seat was empty.

The introduction of Forest's list of starting players began on television. Just like fans watching it live, the people in the bar started shouting the names one by one. After they got to the last name, Anelka, everyone added in: "... and Tony Twain!"

After the shout, everyone guffawed and raised their beer mugs, drinking heartily.

Burns raised his cup in a toast to everyone. The charisma that only Brian Clough had had was now reflected in Tony Twain.

The racket gradually eased. Everyone looked up at the television, waiting for the match to begin.

A clear whistle emitted from within the television, sounding in every corner of the city.

The match was beginning!

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"Right off the bat, Arsenal has opted to take the initiative of an attacking stance. It's a necessary move for them. If they want a ticket to the finals, Arsenal, who have lost a goal on their home field, needs to go on the offensive in this match. They need to score and upset the advantage that Forest has. Only in that way would the match return to Wenger's control... however, the team they are faced with is the third-best team in defense in the current season of the English Premier League."

"I don't really agree with what you're saying. The Premier League and Champions League are not quite the same things. Being able to defend well in the EPL does not mean they can do the same in the Champions League."

Arsenal's Henry dribbled the ball in an attack and quickly got trapped in a two-player encirclement. Tang En had asked the team to use a pincer defense against Henry, taking extra caution protecting their fronts and backs; when defending, they needed to make sure there was depth in their defense. They must not allow him to break through easily. Henry himself was no stranger to such defense against him. After all, they had played against Forest for almost two seasons.

After attracting the attention of two defending Forest players, Henry passed the ball outwards.

Following, Fàbregas received the pass. At the same time, George Wood also came forward to press him. Without killing the ball and observing, the Spaniard champion directly passed the ball to Reyes upon seeing Wood run over.

Reyes then passed center. He kicked a low pass, attempting to create confusion in front of Forest's goal. But Pepe kicked the ball out of the sidelines first.

Wood waved to his teammates in front of him, indicating for them to return to participate in the defense.

Something that had recently delighted Tang En was George Wood becoming more and more initiative in telling others his thoughts. For example, those actions during a match would be a rare occurrence a season ago.

If he wished for his teammates to return for defense or go on the attack, he would now use his own methods to inform them rather than keeping his silence and not speaking a word.

Donning the Captain's armband had truly made him grow a lot.

Wood could tell that the initial stages of the match might need defense, so he got everyone to return to help.

His actions were correct. After kicking off, Arsenal had indeed intended to use the time in that period to launch ferocious attacks. They hoped to break the stalemate as early as possible.

Three minutes, five minutes... Arsenal surrounded Forest's penalty area in a continuous streak of attacks. Forest could only depend on a tight defense to put a halt to their offense.

However, no one on the spectators' stand felt dissatisfaction about that. Forest's fans had long gotten used to this style of football from Tang En. To them, it did not matter how they kicked so long as they could win.

Forest's players were also used to it; first, defend, and then attack. Many times, this was Nottingham Forest's basic strategy.

Henry forcefully broke through into the penalty area, igniting a storm of turbulence. Amid the mess, his shot landed on Piqué's body, changing direction. It flew straight towards the corner, the far corner of the goal! But Edwin van der Sar was blocking the corner closer to them instead. Was it already hopeless?

Arsenal's fans watching this scene before their televisions were all too ready to begin celebrating and cheering in advance. In this instance, a streak of shadow dashed out. With a stretch of his leg, he kicked the football out!

"George Wood resolves the danger; he saved Forest! Arsenal's attacks are too ferocious, Nottingham Forest is beginning to stumble!"

Piqué patted Wood, still feeling some trepidation in his heart from the shot earlier, thanking him for his save.

Tang En, sitting outside the field, looked towards the away team manager's seat. Like him, Wenger was seated and seemed impassive.

Arsenal put in a lot of effort for this match; they must score. That was why Wenger discarded the idea of a defensive counterattack, changing to make use of Arsenal's greatest strength to deal with Forest.

Such an Arsenal was, in fact, the scariest. At first, they had tried changing strategies, playing defensively as Forest did. They were thinking of depending on it to advance to the finals, but they were taking it too lightly. They should just stick with whatever they were meant to be.

On the contrary, Tang En was not afraid of Arsenal attacking. In the previous round, he had to try so hard to force them to attack because Arsenal did not want to. Now that Arsenal took the initiative to go on the offense, Forest could play defensive counterattacking more comfortably.

Faced with Arsenal's tidal wave of attacks, Tang En decided against making a move, continuing to observe instead.

He had seen many such scenes. It was no big deal.

Chapter 437: Weigh the Options?

"Nottingham Forest's defending their home ground, and the situation on the field does not look good, which is a scene we're not new to at all. Arsenal wants to score as soon as possible, and the Forest team's current job is to stop them. As the captain of Nottingham Forest for this game, the young twenty-year-old George Wood is also the defensive core of Nottingham Forest. The talent that he has shown is amazing. He was the Nottingham Forest Football Club's biggest discovery in its youth training program, after Michael Dawson. At the age of twenty, he performed beautifully on the arena of the Champions League semi-finals, exceeding the maturity and steadiness of his age. This is why Manager Tony Twain thinks so highly of him."

The commentator introduced Wood with so many flattering words, not because he had nothing else better to do, but because Wood had performed terrifically during the recent period. As the youngest captain in the Champions League semi-finals this season, he had also garnered attention from many more teams.

During last season's Premier League, when Wood became a rookie for whom Manchester United and Chelsea had competed in their offers, his influence was only confined to within England. The Premier League clubs snooped around while secretly nursing their envy: How did Nottingham Forest produce such a monster?

Now, as the Forest team's performance in the Champions League took hold in people's minds following the team's improved performance as they progressed towards the semi-finals, more eyes from the European continent were on George Wood, the team's first captain for most of the time.

The UEFA Champions League was a perfect stage where good players achieved success and recognition, and poor players were cruelly eliminated.

"George Wood!"

After he took the ball, Fàbregas had wanted to turn around and launch but was tripped by Wood from behind. The referee was unquestionably unrestrained in ruling Wood's action as a foul. Although Arsenal was awarded a free kick in the front field, the position could not directly threaten the goal, and the Forest team traded a foul for the safety of the goal, which was considered a bargain.

Therefore, when Fàbregas fell to the ground after being tripped by Wood, he looked helpless while he knelt on the ground with open arms. If Wood had not committed a foul, he could have simply broken through and then looked for loopholes in the Forest team's defense to send another lethal pass. Now all that could only be said in hindsight.

However, Twain frowned as he watched the field.

He used to be happy to see Wood perform actively, but now he would rather see Wood disappear.

“David, have you told George?” He turned to Kerslake.

Kerslake nodded. “I reminded him to pay attention to fouls. But I don’t think those reminders work for him during the game.”

Twain looked at Wood, who was fully engaged in the game, and muttered, “It’s better to have said it than not at all.”

The thing was, the reason for Twain’s nervousness was that Wood now held two yellow cards. According to the UEFA rules, a player who accumulated three yellow cards in the Champions League would automatically be suspended for one game.

In short, if George Wood received another yellow card for any reason in this game, he would be forced to be absent even if the Forest team could reach the final.

That was not at all what Twain wanted.

The consequences for the Forest team that Wood’s absence would bring had been substantiated during the first two games of this season’s Champions League group stage.

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After Arsenal’s free-kick was coordinated, the shot was completed by Robin van Persie, whose header was thrown out of the crossbar by Edwin van der Sar.

Taking advantage that the players were back to defend and being the team’s most experienced player on the field, Edwin van der Sar got hold of Wood and said, “George, don’t forget what the coach said to you before the game. Be careful.”

Wood nodded. “I remember.”

“That’s good. Sometimes it’s okay to let them go. Don’t worry, I’m here!” Edwin van der Sar patted Wood on the head.

Wood looked up at the tall Dutchman. “It would be remiss of me if they passed under my watch.”

Edwin van der Sar had nothing else to say. “Good luck to you.”

After Arsenal’s header was shot, Pepe gained the upper hand as he competed against Senderos for the header and headed the football out. But the football was not headed too far away. Fàbregas was outside and immediately volleyed the ball.

The shot was precise, and George Wood, who rushed into the crowd, did not reflexively dodge. Instead, he used his chest to block the shot.

A muffled thump was heard, and the football slashed across to fly out of the sideline. Wood did not even crease his brows; he just ran over, ready to defend.

“What a monster. He just took it there, and he’s still fine?” Robin van Persie, next to Fàbregas, could not help sighing and rubbing his chest as if the football had struck him.

The young Spanish player turned his head to look at his teammate and thought that Robin van Persie had made a fuss about nothing. He already knew that Wood was a monster. Perhaps he understood him so well because he had treated him as an opponent. His stamina, body, speed, reaction... His inherent conditions were so good that it made people jealous. If he had received professional football training since he was young, what would he have achieved by now? It was unimaginable.

Fàbregas was startled by that crazy idea of his and hurriedly shook his head to place his attention back on the field.

Robin van Persie went up to receive the Arsenal's throw-in. Under Chimbonda's tight defense, he passed the football back to Lauren, who did the throw-in.

The Forest team launched a fierce scramble for the ball near the sideline. Lauren spied Fàbregas, the team's midfield commander, in the between the cracks among the crowd.

He passed the football over.

George Wood sprang up as if he had received the signal.

Fàbregas did not stop the ball. He spread his legs apart and the football slipped between his legs.

"What a nice slip! George Wood was deceived!"

The player behind Fàbregas was Alexander Hleb, who received the ball and swiftly broke through ahead. When the Belarusian played in the Bundesliga, he had relied on his consummate skill. In VfB Stuttgart, he often staged a show with that kind of individual dribble to bypass many players and put the ball into the opposing goal.

This time, Wood hesitated when he saw him dribble the ball. He deliberated whether he should go up to defend or guard Fàbregas.

It was at this point that Arteta suddenly went up to block Hleb's way forward and neatly cut off the ball.

"George!" He gave a shout.

Wood saw that he was diagonally behind him and looked ahead again. He no longer hesitated and chose to plug in ahead.

Arteta did not dribble the ball. Instead, he passed it to George Wood, who had already run ahead before the Arsenal players had had time to react.

Wood received the ball and continued to dribble forward. Behind him, Arteta assisted him as Fàbregas gave chase.

"This is Nottingham Forest's counterattack! After being held down for so long, they finally decided to do something! It's rare to see George Wood dribbling the ball."

Without turning back, Wood knew that the troublesome Spanish kid must be following him. When he attacked, he also followed him like a shadow. Now that it was his turn to attack, he became his shadow too.

“To your left, short pass.” Arteta’s voice directed Wood, who listened and passed the football. Sure enough, he immediately saw Arteta dribbling the ball and charged up.

Watching Arteta dribble the ball over, Wood slowed down. He completely switched his role in an instant and became Arteta’s “bodyguard” at that moment.

The two players worked in sync and Arteta was not worried about the Arsenal players swarming around him, eyeing the football covetously. He knew that even if he lost the ball, Wood would try to snatch it back.

He passed the football to Viduka. The Australian striker turned and leaned against the fullback, Touré. Then he turned around and hastened to shoot, and Lehmann easily caught the football.

When he saw the scene from off the field, Twain stamped his foot in anger. “What’s his hurry? Stop the ball, hold, and protect it. Anelka, Arteta, and Ribéry were all running towards him. He had countless ways to deal with this ball! He’s really...”

Unsurprisingly, Twain was angry. Suppressed by Arsenal, the Forest team had very few opportunities to attack, so every opportunity was particularly precious. They would suffer divine retribution for wasting this chance so easily...

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The first half came to the end with Arsenal’s barrage and the Forest team’s pathetic defense, as well as the occasional sneak attack.

The score on the electronic scoreboard was still in red with 0:0. This was the final score that Twain wanted to see, and it could become a reality in forty-five minutes.

“At the end of the first half, Nottingham Forest has held their goal. No matter how hard Arsenal attacked, there was no way to break apart their defense. George Wood, the most active player in the first half, used four fouls and eight tackles to safely protect the front of the goal. This twenty-year-old captain has used his actions to demonstrate that he deserves the captain’s armband on his left arm.”

The commentator still gushed about Wood. But outside the home team’s locker room, Twain got hold of him with a grim expression and said, “George, have you forgotten what the assistant manager said to you?”

“Try to not to foul as much as possible.” Wood shook his head, “No, I didn’t forget.”

“Look at your performance stats in the first half.” Twain stabbed at the paper in his hands, “Four fouls! Eight tackles! If this wasn’t our home ground, you would have been given a damn yellow card! Do you not know how important you are to this team?”

Wood did not speak and just looked at Twain.

“If we make it to the finals and you’re absent, what’s the point? You must know how powerful Barcelona’s offense is!”

“How do you know that Barcelona will reach the finals?” Wood suddenly asked, which made Twain break out in a cold sweat. His mind immediately calmed down. He had just let slip something about the future ...

“Uh... that’s just my prediction. They look very much like they’re fully capable of getting into the finals. Well, even if it’s not Barcelona, how can AC Milan’s attacking prowess be underestimated? If we don’t have you, that means we don’t have a barrier in front of the center back. At that point, whether it’s Ronaldinho or Kaka, they can easily penetrate our defense and do whatever they want!” Twain slammed his fist into the palm of his hand. “You’d better behave in the second half.”

Wood nodded. “I know.”

“Go on, then.” Twain waved his hand and Wood ran back to the locker room.

Looking around, Twain swore under his breath and turned around to walk to the locker room.

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George Wood’s yellow card problem was raised by the coaching unit after the first leg of the game. Twain had not given it much consideration before. It was not until someone in the coaching unit reminded him that Wood was in a precarious situation now and that he would automatically be suspended if he received another yellow card, that he realized the gravity of the problem.

The Forest team had always relied on Wood’s aggressive interception and tireless running in the middle to contain the other side’s attacks, which naturally included using fouls.

Since his debut, Wood had not been the type of player who defended civilly and moved efficiently and with ease. His fierce defensive style had made a lot of opponents suffer, but also caused him to be “favored” by a lot of referees. It was unrealistic for Wood not to have a single foul in a game. All Twain could do was to repeatedly remind him to pay attention to his actions, to foul as little as possible, and try not to get a yellow card needlessly.

However, the decisive factor ultimately laid with the player himself. At the very least, George Wood did not look like someone who could keep those words in mind.

What made Twain feel a little relieved was the forty-five minutes in the first half had already passed by safely. As long as he held his nerve for another forty-five minutes, George Wood would safely return to base.

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In the visitors’ locker room, Wenger used the short period of time to lay out a new tactic for the team. This time, it was no longer just a few words that popped out of his mouth.

“Manager Twain is worried about Wood because he now has two yellow cards on him and will automatically be suspended for one game if he gets another. He would surely warn his favorite player to pay attention to his actions in the second half. Wood will be constrained when he defends.”

The eyes of the Arsenal players lit up.

“This is our chance to force an attack in the middle during the second half; the target is George Wood!”

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“Listen to me, guys. In the first half, you did...” Twain stood at the door, with his arms wide open as if to praise his players, and the players expected that. “...terribly!” No one had expected that.

“We have precious few opportunities, so we have to treat every offense well.” When he said that, Twain glanced at Viduka. “We should not be contented with a score of 0:0 for this game. Arsenal is a strong opponent who knows us well. A total score of 1:1 is very dangerous, and I think you all know that. The only way to make sure we can advance is for us to score goals. In the second half, don’t be contented to just hold onto the tie. Guys, we have to win! Strive to score early and snuff out Arsenal’s hope.” He made a pinching gesture.

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The two managers’ arrangements during the halftime interval were brief, based on their mutual understanding.

After the first leg of the competition, Wenger certainly knew that George Wood could be used as an offensive midfielder at a critical moment. He would inevitably make special arrangements to deal with that, so there was no need for Twain to repeatedly exhort Wood to attack during the halftime interval. The Forest team’s offensive routine for this game was not that. Wood was still a defensive midfielder.

The fifteen minutes went by in the blink of an eye. The players had to step foot on their journey again.

Watching the players walk out one by one, Twain once again stopped Wood at the end.

When he saw that he was able to speak, Wood spoke first. “Try not to foul, right?”

Twain nodded.

“Do you want us to advance to the finals at the end of this game?” asked Wood again.

Twain continued to nod.

“I’m important to the team, aren’t I?”

Another nod.

“In that case, if I’m constrained in my playing, the team will definitely be affected. What if we lose this game because of this?”

Twain was dumbfounded by his remark. He had no idea that Wood would say such a thing. “George ... are you, are you possessed by an alien?”

Wood ignored Twain’s words. “You got something wrong, chief. The team’s victory should be placed before me not getting a third yellow card.” With that, he turned and ran out of the locker room.

Twain looked at his back and could not say a word for a long while. He even forgot that he had to return to the technical area.

Chapter 438: Arsenal’s King

“Now, it’s Nottingham Forest on the attack. Since the beginning of the second half of the match, they’ve been showing incredible initiative. They’re beginning to threaten Arsenal’s goal more frequently!”

Wood did not participate much in the attack. He was placed by Tang En in a position requiring defense. His function was to prevent their opponents from attacking. So, there was nothing requiring him now. He stood at the back as if watching a show.

Arteta crossed the midfield with the ball. Following that, he cooperated with Ribéry in a positional swap. Ribéry moved into the center while Arteta ran into the wings. But whose foot was the ball under?

Neither of theirs.

While Arteta and Ribéry were switching positions, the ball was passed to Ribéry. Then, as they ran into position, Ribéry directly passed the football towards the right wing of the field, Ashley Young’s, domain.

“Ashley Young, he kills the ball beautifully!”

Ashley Cole moved forward to defend against this small champion bearing the same name as him. He did not dare to slight him.

Meanwhile, Chimbonda was moving forward from behind, readying to cross over from behind Young. Ashley Cole saw it, and so did Ashley Young; he dribbled the ball inwards, creating space for Chimbonda to come in from the back. Ashley Cole hesitated briefly, but still followed beside Young. As for Chimbonda, he would leave him to his other teammates to take care of.

Ashley Young continued dribbling the ball as Chimbonda whizzed by him. Young had neither the intention of passing the ball nor of making use of a directional change to breakthrough into the penalty area. He continued dribbling the ball towards the middle. Arsenal’s rear-guards formed a wall in the penalty area; on one hand, they could prevent him from suddenly doing a direct pass; on the other, they could prevent him from taking a shot at the goal.

Ribéry was in proximity to him. The two again exchanged their positions. This time, it was Ashley Young who switched into the middle while Ribéry went into the right wing. While exchanging their positions, the ball got under Ribéry’s foot instead. Then, just as everyone thought Ribéry would continue dribbling into the wings, he suddenly lifted his right foot and passed the ball center!

Viduka jumped up high and attacked the goal with a header! Lehmann performed admirably, managing to hold off such a powerful shot from the goal. It went out and over the crossbars.

Forest Team was awarded the first corner ball in the second half of the match. This was also their second corner kick in the entire match.

Piqué and Pepe had both run up, ready to compete for the header. Meanwhile, George Wood and Leighton Baines stayed at the back, preventing any counterattacks from their opponents.

“Watch them!” Lehmann shouted as he raised both his hands high. It was a scene of chaos in front of the goal.

“Push out!”

Arteta stood at the corner flag, preparing to kick the ball into play.

“This is Nottingham Forest’s corner kick and their opportunity.”

The main referee whistled, indicating his approval for the corner kick.

Arteta ran up, took a swing, and passed center!

The ball took off speedily and flatly. There was only a low arc to it as it flew directly to the front.

While the defenders in Arsenal’s penalty area were focusing their attention on all the taller and bigger players, like Pepe, Piqué, and Viduka, Ribéry suddenly dashed in from the diagonal, rushing forward. Then, he swiped the ball with his head.

“GOOOOOOAL!!”

City Ground erupted. The home team scored!

“Franck Ribéry! A sudden dash up with nobody guarding him. He executed a powerful header! Nottingham Forest takes the lead on their home ground!”

Tang En shot up from his seat, throwing both his arms into the air. They had scored a goal just as they needed it, right on schedule. What could be more perfect than that?

Corner kicks, free kicks... all set pieces were repeatedly rehearsed during their usual training. Especially before an important match, they would practice it even more. Today, they finally reaped their rewards.

It was as if he was seeing the gates of Paris’ Stade de France already slowly opening, right before his very eyes.

“2:1! Nottingham Forest takes the lead in their overall score. And, they still have an away goal. They are getting closer and closer to the finals!”

Deafening cheers rang through the spectators’ stands. Nottingham Forest fans were enveloped in a great cloud of bliss.

Ribéry sprinted towards the corner flag and launched into a tight hug with Arteta, who had passed the ball to him. Scoring in the semi-finals of the UEFA Champions League was not something Ribéry had even dared to think about two years ago.

On the other side, Wenger sat on his manager’s seat, waving his hands vigorously when he saw the loss of the ball. He was tremendously upset. However, he did not become anxious. The second half had only been going for five minutes; they still had at least 40 minutes to equalize the score. In Highbury, Nottingham Forest had only scored one goal. That was now considered good news to Arsenal. In this way, so long as Arsenal makes another goal, they would not only equalize the overall score, they could even neutralize the advantage Forest Team got from the away goal they scored. Both parties could again return to a true, level starting line.

But right now, all those things only existed within Wenger’s mind and his predictions.

He needed the players to realize them.

Wenger stood up from his seat. There was no need to shout anything. The Arsenal players on the field already knew what to do. Everything had been arranged during halftime.

It was just a single ball loss. They were not yet at their wits' end.

Nottingham Forest's players were heartily celebrating the goal. Ribéry and everyone else were huddled in a circle, and then Ribéry ran back again to hug their manager, Tony Twain.

Tang En smiled and congratulated him. He then got the players to return to the field so the match could resume.

"Well-done, everyone. Go back into the field and defend! Remember, defend! Our next mission is to defend. We must not let Arsenal get any chances. Don't let them score. Hold on to the final second!"

Even Tang En felt he was getting to be a bit of a nag. But he could not help it. The nearer they got to success, the more nervous he got. If he could, he really wanted to light up a cigarette and relieve some pressure. But the place prohibited smoking.

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The players obediently returned to the field. Arsenal's players had already set the ball in the center circle, ready to kick off.

"If Arsenal wants to advance to the final match, they need to go all out in their offense and try to equalize the overall score as soon as possible. It is their only option. I believe... Wenger would already have a solution."

Indeed, he did have a solution. After the match resumed, Arsenal's players unexpectedly gave up on attacking from the wings. Instead, they switched to trying to forcefully attack through the center. That was a seemingly irrational method. Even the commentator felt incredulous about it. Yet, the one sitting on the manager's seat of the home team, Tang En, was thoroughly cursing Wenger for being so sly.

Wenger knew of Wood's current situation and what Tang En was most worried about in his heart.

By forcefully attacking through the middle and making Wood the target, the concentrated firepower would cause Wood to attend to one thing and lose sight of the other. By increasing the defensive pressure on him, it also increased the chances of Wood committing a foul.

Wenger must believe that Wood would be worried about getting a card and start playing more reservedly in his defense, not daring to use all his power. That way, Wenger's team would gain more opportunities to break through the defensive line and equalize the score.

Perhaps, Tang En would feel the same if the exchange in the final moments of their halftime did not occur.

But... Arsenal's strategy worried Tang En precisely because he knew Wood would not change his own style of playing in fear of a yellow card.

Wenger hoped that Wood would become their point of breakthrough, where they could score a goal and equalize the score. On the other hand, Tang En was only worried that Wood would end up eating yellow cards from facing the constant stream of attacks.

Arsenal's players intentionally leaned toward Wood, trying to seek opportunities to break through from his spot. In fact, they even showed some intent in baiting him.

Wood did not retreat. He received all of them, dealing with them as was appropriate.

Off the field, Tang En could only watch this all happen while biting his lip anxiously.

“That bastard...” Tang En gnashed out.

Beside him, David Kerslake was unsure who Tang En was cursing. Was it Wenger, Arsenal’s manager? Or was it George Wood, who did not heed his advice?

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When Wood fouled yet again to stop Arsenal’s attack, Wenger stood at the sidelines gesturing unhappily into the field. He was extremely displeased that the main referee held back so long from giving out a card. Wenger was also using that method to pressure the referee, hoping for him to penalize Wood with a card.

Arsenal’s players were, at the same time, attempting to pressure the referee. However, the referee only verbally warned Wood without any intention of giving him a card.

“George!” Edwin van der Sar called out from the back. “Don’t forget what the coach said...”

Wood ignored Edwin van der Sar. Keeping his back to the goalkeeper, he said nothing.

The next time, when Arsenal’s army pressed in on them, Arteta took to tripping Henry first, without waiting for Wood to move up and defend.

The referee’s whistle blasted again. Recently, his whistle had been blown much too frequently. With Arsenal’s fiery attacks, Forest’s defense in the middle was facing tremendous stress.

Wood looked at Arteta with some surprise.

“Don’t think I can’t defend, George. I’m a defensive midfielder too. Don’t look down on me.” Arteta turned to smile at Wood.

Then, taking the chance while they were assembling the human wall, Arteta turned to shout at his teammates around him. “George needs support, everyone. Defense is not just for him! Those without cards should be more conscious of that!”

Pepe laughed from behind. “George alone has locked down the door. Even if we wanted to perform, we can only head some balls, that’s all.”

“Then, move up a little, Pepe. Arsenal’s goal is obvious. They want to make use of George’s yellow cards to pressure us and create problems in our defense. Don’t give them that opportunity! If they want to play, we’ll play with them!”

George Wood stared at Arteta as he said that.

After instructing them, Arteta suddenly realized Wood was looking at him. He laughed and said, “In the past, it was always you who protected me. For once, it’s my turn to protect you.”

Henry’s free kick landed on the human wall and posed no threat to Edwin van der Sar’s goal.

After that, Arsenal made a clear discovery of Nottingham's change. Whenever they wanted to break through Wood, they would end up meeting with others like Arteta, Ribéry, or Pepe. In other words, they could not make Wood directly face the opponent's firepower. Arsenal's attacks, once again, entered a stalemate. Wenger's calculations did not turn out to be sound.

Tang En, who watched the scene from outside the field, laughed. This was his team. This time it was his Nottingham Forest.

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The time in the match passed swiftly amid the entanglement of the two teams. While people were still immersed in the possibility of whether Arsenal could equalize the scores, no one noticed that there were only ten minutes left until the end of the match.

George Wood fouled less now. The defensive pressure on him was shared with the rest of his teammates. Faced with Forest, who had already set their hearts on playing defensive counterattacking, Arsenal did not have any good solutions. They could pass around their players in the outer circle and play out beautiful give-and-go combinations, but Nottingham Forest remained unmoved. They simply defended from within their own camp without leaving. They allowed Arsenal to pass around on the outside, occasionally trying long shots.

Wenger chose a forceful attack through the middle to make Wood feel the pressure of the yellow cards. But, in football, such forceful attacks through the center were unwise. It would only cause all the other attack routes to get jammed. If this went on, there was no point in talking about equalizing the score; there was a real possibility of Arsenal losing the match entirely.

Wenger knew that this could not go on. Although he was a little regretful of not being able to use this against Wood and make some news, what was urgent now was to even the score. They needed to change this terrible situation and get the match back on track.

Wenger stood up and made a hand signal towards the field.

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Tang En changed out Viduka, who had performed averagely, and put in Eastwood. In contrast to the first round of the match, that switch was not for wasting match time.

As Arteta needed to help Wood with defending, Forest's midfield had lost some control. Tang En wanted to regain control over the midfield by sending in Eastwood. By pushing Anelka right to the front, Eastwood's responsibility was to connect the mid and front fields.

Without having time to regain control over the midfield with Eastwood only just entering, Forest suffered a severe blow.

Henry suddenly burst into action near the center circle, stealing the ball from under Ashley Young's foot. Going with the momentum, Arsenal immediately counterattacked from the front field. Forest's defense was taken by surprise and failed to defend. Faced with Henry's breakthrough, they appeared helpless.

To protect George Wood, Arteta was the first to rush up to stop him. But Arteta was, after all, not a player that specialized in this; Henry easily passed him.

George Wood then tackled Henry from the side. This time, Henry had no intention of trying to bait him into a foul. He simply moved the football gently to the side before jumping up to avoid the side tackle from Wood.

“A beautiful dodge! This is Henry’s level of play!”

Wood did not give up. He scrambled up from the ground and quickly chased after him.

It was as if Henry had suppressed it for nearly an entire match; the despondency within his chest was finally being vented.

Before the match, news of issues concerning his contract renewal with the club was publicized worldwide by the media. Arsenal’s fans even began doubting his loyalty. He, as well, was starting to feel sick of his time in Arsenal. On one hand, they were being suppressed by Manchester United in the EPL. On the other, they were also unable to become champions in the UEFA Champions League... was it the time for him to change a place? However, he was Arsenal’s captain at the same time, Highbury’s King. He was not someone who could leave just because he said so.

He told his agent to continue discussion of the contract renewal after the Champions League ended. The results of the Champions League would decide if he stayed or left.

This was Arsenal’s best result. It’s our first time getting into the semi-finals. We absolutely cannot stop here!

Henry dribbled the ball forward at maximum speed. He hurtled towards Nottingham Forest’s penalty area. George Wood was chasing behind him while Pepe and Piqué formed a two-man defensive line before him.

He lifted his foot, faking a shot. After deceiving Piqué and causing him to go off balance, Henry passed him with a nudge of the ball! At the same time, George Wood, who had caught up, stuck close behind him. They entered the penalty area!

“Alone, Henry has surpassed Nottingham Forest’s entire defensive line! He’s entered the penalty area. George Wood does not dare to foul!”

Pepe dashed out from behind Piqué and blocked Henry’s path forward. Switching up his directions, Henry easily changed the angle of his shot. Under Wood’s disruptions, the French forward lifted his foot to shoot at the goal!

His shot was extremely difficult to defend. Edwin van der Sar used all his might to leap towards the far corner but did not even manage to touch the ball. He could only watch as the ball flew right into the goal behind him.

“Oh, oh, oh! Thierry Henry! An incomparably brilliant breakthrough and goal!! With Arsenal stuck in that stalemate, he alone managed to pull his team back from the abyss of elimination!”

Regardless of the numerous exaggerated words used by the commentator to compliment the goal, they were not at all an overstatement. This was indeed a goal that had people dumbstruck with admiration.

It was not difficult for Arsenal's Henry to get past four people in one go. However, this was a scene happening right at the most crucial point of the Champions League semi-finals; in that, it became something of a legend.

"He is Arsenal's King, he saved the team! He is Thierry Henry!"

Chapter 439: The Last Option

"He's the king of Arsenal, and he's saved the team. Thierry Henry!"

The Arsenal players ran towards their captain. This goal came at the right time and was incredibly important. As the game was six minutes into the injury stoppage time, Arsenal equalized the score of the game and tied the total scores for both teams.

Wenger leaped from his seat and opened his arms to hug Pat Rice.

The two thousand Arsenal fans who followed the team to Nottingham erupted into loud cheers. Amid their cheers, Nottingham Forest fans were caught in a brief silence.

Twain's heart fell from high in the clouds down to the bottom. It was an unspeakable feeling. He bit his lip hard and stared at the Arsenal players celebrating on the field.

We were just about to win and progress into the final, and Henry scored a goal at the last minute! That f**king...

What were my players thinking at that moment? Did they think they were definitely winning? Their reactions were like a ninety-year-old man in the instant when the offense turned to defense!

The Forest players held their heads low and watched the other side celebrate.

George Wood looked down at his feet.

Just as he was about to tackle Henry from behind, he suddenly recalled Twain's warning that with two yellow cards on him, he was likely to get a third yellow card for this foul, or even a red card. As a result, he reflexively retracted his foot a little.

And that little distance let Henry evade him.

He should not have retracted his foot. He should have directly tackled the opposing striker to the ground so that he could not break through and make the shot. However, his body did not listen to him.

Dammit, I said it so nicely and in the end, I'm still a coward.

He raised his head again and saw his dejected teammates around him. As his anger over his performance filled him with anger, he blurted out, "What's the matter with you guys? We haven't lost yet!"

Arteta looked up at Wood, who clenched his fists and roared loudly. Everyone turned their heads towards him.

"We haven't lost yet! We still don't know who's been eliminated. What are you all doing?!"

Then he went to Arteta. "Don't protect me, it's not necessary."

"But, George--"

"We'll talk about this once we enter the finals." He turned and ran towards the goal. He took the football out of the net and then ran all the way to the center circle, holding the football. He then placed the football on it.

"Let's kick off!"

Twain, who saw the scene on the field, turned to Kerslake and said, "Whether or not we actually make it to the finals... At least we gained a real captain."

Kerslake smiled but did not know what to say.

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The game started again and Arsenal wanted to seize the last moments to wipe out the Forest team again while Forest wanted to score another goal in the remaining few minutes to get the advantage back. Both sides were at odds with each other and engaged in a fierce scramble in every corner of the field.

As a result, when the referee blew the whistle at the end of the ninety-minute game, the score between the two sides remained at 1:1.

"The total score stands at 2:2. Both sides have an away goal each, and it's a tie. Now they have a thirty-minute overtime to decide the winner. If that still does not work, then a penalty shootout will be needed. It really is a dramatic game. Just when Nottingham Forest thought they were going to win, Henry tied the score at the last minute."

Neither team entered the locker room to prepare for overtime. They were either sitting or lying down on the sidelines as the team doctors massaged them and they listened to the manager's latest instructions.

"We are pressed for time, so I won't criticize your distraction at the last minute." The Nottingham Forest players gathered in a circle as Twain crouched in the middle with a grim expression and said, "In overtime, defense remains our primary objective while you look for opportunities to fight back. Luckily, we've been training for penalty kicks. If you can't resolve the fight in thirty minutes, then drag out the game till then."

On the other side, in Arsenal's half of the field, Wenger stood in front of his players and paced back and forth as he said to them, "During overtime, just concentrate on attacking half of the field and ignore the other half. Try your best to score. If we can't force it, we'll compete against them with penalty kicks."

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With just a short five-minute break between the ninety-minute game and overtime, many players only had enough time to even out their breathing before they had to get on the field again to play the game.

George Wood stood up from the ground and Twain looked at him. Then he watched him return to the field without saying anything. He did not know what to say. It was pointless to say things like "don't get

another yellow card” when they did not even know if they could make it to the finals. What was the use of reminding him not to get a yellow card?

He just let everything take its natural course.

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Once the first half of the overtime game started, Arsenal took advantage of the momentum from their recent equalizer to launch a siege on the Forest team’s goal, as if to settle the battle within those thirty minutes.

On the other hand, Nottingham Forest laid out their best and most familiar defensive array to greet Arsenal’s frenzied attack.

Twain made one last substitution. He replaced Leighton Baines with Gareth Bale. Baines had a muscle cramp from running and Bale’s stamina was good enough to stabilize the defense.

Throughout the first half of overtime, the Forest team’s counterattack was basically nowhere to be seen. Anelka wandered alone in front for a while and found that the football could not be passed over there. He looked at the tense situation in the rear. He hesitated a little before he decided to go back to participate in the defense.

Generally speaking, even though there was no rule that stated that it was necessary, overtime in football matches did present a very interesting phenomenon. During the thirty minutes of overtime, the performances of the two teams would be divided into two extremes in the first and second half of the overtime. Taking this game as an example, Arsenal aggressively attacked now in the first half. Then Arsenal would not have any spare energy to carry out another attack in the second half. It would be Nottingham Forest’s turn to attack.

This might be because when the game was at this point, the stamina of both sides prevented them from carrying out another thirty minutes of offense. They could only choose to rest for one half or attack one half of the field.

Arsenal attacked for fifteen minutes and did not gain anything. The Forest team’s defense was very well organized. The score remained at 1:1. The Forest players knew that their time had come.

There was no break in between the first and second halves of overtime. The teams directly exchanged sides and the players could only buy some time to give themselves a break by slowly crossing the field.

At this juncture, both Arsenal and Nottingham Forest players had reached the limit of their stamina. The intensive competition schedule and successive challenges left everyone exhausted. They slowly moved their pace across the field. Only one person was the exception.

George Wood ran with his head held high to the other half of the field. As he brushed past Fàbregas, the Spaniard could even feel a gust of air sweep past his cheeks.

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At the start of the second half of the game, the Forest team pressed on to attack according to convention. No one really wanted to drag the game to the penalty shootout, which was a risky way to determine the winner.

Everybody pressed ahead and Gareth Bale was frequently involved in the offense. Only George Wood remained in the back to protect everyone's rear.

Almost everyone thought that Arsenal would not have any extra energy to pose a threat to the Forest team's rear defensive line after fifteen minutes of frenzied bombardment. George Wood looked a little silly, watching the other people play from the back. Looking at Nottingham Forest's offensive momentum, Arsenal would deplete all the physical energy they had left just on defense alone. How could they jeopardize the Forest team's goal?

Eastwood's shot was saved by Lehmann. The German goalkeeper did not choose to drive an ineffective long pass ahead. He threw the ball with his hand to launch an attack!

The football came to Fàbregas' foot in the blink of an eye. Without waiting for the Forest players to react, Fàbregas passed the football to their captain, the most trustworthy striker, Henry.

Then while most of the Forest players, still in the front field, were stunned by this sudden change, Henry had already adjusted the direction of the football and began to dribble the ball towards the Forest team's goal!

"This is Arsenal's counterattack! The Forest team's too aggressive in their attacks. They forget that Arsenal still has Henry, a speedy and extremely dangerous player!"

"Dammit!" Twain jumped up on the sidelines, "I told them to find the time to fight back! Not to press up for a siege!"

"Don't worry, Tony. George's at the back," Kerslake consoled.

"That's what worries me the most," Twain muttered.

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Henry glanced back. His teammates could not run anymore and there were very few people who followed. At the same time, even though the Forest team was desperately running back to defend, they were clearly out of energy, just by looking at their running postures. In that case...

Henry turned his head back to look at George Wood up ahead of him.

Just the two of us left?

"Thierry Henry and George Wood! The clash of the captains..."

Wood did not have to look around to know the situation. There was no one else on the rear defensive line other than him and two other center backs. When the Forest team was in the thick of its offense, everyone rushed up without regard, hoping to be the hero who helped bring the team to the finals in the last moments.

He did not go up, not because he could not run anymore or because he was not interested in offense, but because he saw Henry cruising near the center circle. Why was Henry not leading by example as the captain, the only one there when everyone went back to the penalty area to defend?

He could only think of one possibility, and it might soon become a reality: Henry was the ultimate weapon in Arsenal's counterattack. His return to Arsenal's side would be tantamount to giving up.

The cunning Wenger wanted to use this opportunity to score the goal that could reverse the score right up until the last minute!

Henry was well aware of George Wood's capabilities. He would be entangled with him once he got nearer to him. At that time did not know what this attack would become. Therefore, the key to this counterattack was to absolutely make certain not to get close to Wood. He could not give him a chance to entangle with him.

Wood knew Henry was fast and physically strong. When he looked at his current running posture, his running legs were still powerful. He knew he could still speed up, and break through him with speed. He must not let him pull away from him. Once he was allowed to widen the distance, he could use his speed to force a breakthrough. He must get closer to him to tangle with him.

Henry jabbed the football to the left and wanted to slash across for the breakthrough. George Wood moved parallel to meet him.

Henry began to accelerate and Wood began to accelerate too, following Henry close at his heels so that he would not escape from his range of control.

Suddenly Henry made a sudden stop as if he were going to break through in another direction. Wood braked as well and was cautious of the other party's next move. Henry did not change direction. It was only a change in his pace. He saw Wood slow down and immediately sped up to make use of the opportunity to shake off the other player.

However, Wood's physical condition was so good that he almost started at the same time as Henry. He did not manage to evade this time.

"Henry's going to be entangled with Wood! The distance between them is very close. The Nottingham Forest players are on their way. As long as he is able to slow down Henry, Wood's defense will succeed... Whoa!"

Just when everyone thought Henry had no other way, he suddenly pushed the football diagonally in between Wood's legs!

Immediately after, he stopped and turned to break through from the other side of Wood's body!

"He knocked the football past Wood! Terrific!"

Wood was not prepared for Henry's move. When he finally reacted, the other man had already bypassed him.

What did it mean to let Henry just break through like that?

There were still Pepe and Piqué. Perhaps things were not bad enough for him to have to do that. Wood thought hard as he looked up to see Fàbregas and Robin van Persie, desperately running forward.

Three against two?!

Wood knew what this meant.

He quickly turned and saw Henry's back. It looked like the other man had not completely thrown him off. This was his last chance. He saw Henry preparing to speed up.

Wood clenched his teeth and rushed up. Without waiting for Henry to speed up, he slammed hard from the side at the back.

Unable to protect himself in time, Henry was completely knocked off balance. As he stumbled, he kicked the football out by ten meters. Then, he could no longer maintain his balance. He staggered and ran a few steps before falling to the ground.

Boos broke out from the Arsenal fans in the stands as they desperately tried to silence the Nottingham Forest fans' shouts.

When Twain saw Wood knock Henry to the ground, he stood up from the technical area. More agitated than he was, Assistant Manager David Kerslake kept muttering unclear obscenities.

"This was a foul! No doubt about it!" cried the commentator. "When faced with Henry's sharp breakthrough, George Wood could only stop him with a foul."

Henry helplessly sat on the ground while Fàbregas ran to the referee and did a gesture of pulling out a card.

The Forest players ran over and surrounded the referee. Arteta even rudely pushed Fàbregas out while the Arsenal players came to Fàbregas' aid.

The scene suddenly became chaotic.

Wood stood out of the crowd and looked at Henry, who was still on the ground, pulling up his socks. He then looked at his teammates bickering with the opponents in the crowd. He did not go up to defend himself. He did nothing except stand outside and watch as if he had had nothing to do with the incident and was just an indifferent spectator.

The players on both sides finally separated after some difficulty, and Henry also got up from the ground. Wood's collision had not hurt him.

Kerslake was still swearing under his breath next to Twain, who had calmed down. Like Wood, he was mentally prepared for what was about to happen.

We can't escape this, no matter how hard we fight against the referee, blame Fàbregas for adding fuel to the fire, or swear. It won't change a thing.

The referee separated the crowd and saw Wood standing outside. He lowered his head to pull a yellow card out of his trousers pocket and presented it to Wood.

Wood raised his eyes to glance at the yellow card, and then turned to walk away.

The close-up footage of the televised broadcast followed Wood's back, with the captions at the bottom of the screen: "With the yellow card, George Wood will miss the next game."

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Kerslake stopped swearing and covered his face. On the other hand, Twain still stood on the sidelines, with his arms across his chest. With a dark expression on his face, he looked as cold as an ice sculpture.

Anything that could go wrong would go wrong—Murphy's Law.

Twain had had this hunch; he'd always had it, but he had been unwilling to admit it and reluctant to think about it for fear that it might become a reality just from thinking about it. Therefore, he had tried to think about the positive side of things. But this terrible outcome had still happened.

"George Wood had succeeded in stopping Henry from this deadly breakthrough. But... the price that he paid was his absence in the next game. If the Forest team can really beat Arsenal and make it to the finals, he will have nothing to do with it. Look at the expressionless look on his face, doesn't he know that he's got a third yellow card?"

How could he not know? But this was his own choice. Since he had done it, why would he regret it and be too worked up to control his emotions? He chose to accept the price calmly.

He certainly wanted to have the opportunity to be in the finals. After all, that was the highest pursuit a professional player could have besides the World Cup. But if he had to choose between losing the Forest team's ticket to the final or losing his personal ticket to the finals, he would rather choose the latter. If the entire team lost its qualifications for the finals, it would make no sense for him to avoid a yellow card. This was not really a multiple-choice question. It was obvious that this was cause and effect. If the team did not qualify, he did not qualify individually. To give up the team's interests for his own benefit, the result would be a ridiculous outcome where nothing was left to be gained.

Twain sat down and turned to see Albertini punch the back of his seat.

"Demetrio." He waved his hands to beckon Albertini over. "Don't infect others with your mood. See, George is calm. The game isn't over yet. This isn't the time to be distracted."

Albertini sat next to Twain and looked at Wood on the field. "Chief, do you know what the UEFA Champions League finals mean to a professional player?"

"Of course, I know. But you should say that to George instead," replied Twain without turning his head. His tone did not fluctuate the slightest. "Demetrio, I have to thank you. You're an excellent team captain and now you have brought out an equally good team captain for the Forest team."

Albertini was not pleased with Twain's compliment. He bit down hard on his lips and stared at the field.

Chapter 440: Penalty Shoot-Out

"George Wood has just eaten his third yellow card. This means he will be automatically barred from the next round of the competition. If the Forest Team... and we're saying 'if' Forest Team truly eliminates

Arsenal and gets into the finals, they would lose an outstanding defensive midfielder as well as a captain.”

The commentator’s voice sounded from the television in the luxury box. Evan Doughty turned to look at the person on his right.

There sat George Wood’s mother. She was staring at her son on the field in a daze.

Could she understand what her son was thinking when he had slammed into Henry?

“Ma’am...” Evan said to her, “Your son is outstanding and remarkable. I’m very regretful about his yellow card...”

Sophia turned to look at him and shook her head, politely smiling. She replied, “It’s no matter, Mr. Chairman. This is just his job.”

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George Wood seemingly forgot in a hurry about getting the yellow card.

As Tang En said, the match was still ongoing. It was not yet the time to be depressed or pained about being absent from the next match. They did not even know if there was going to be a next match. If there was to be pain, there first needed to be a reason for it.

Arsenal’s free-kick did not pose any threat to Nottingham Forest’s goal. Henry’s shot was off the mark.

Following that, Nottingham Forest’s players absorbed their lesson and did not press forward on offense blindly. Arsenal, on the other hand, mustering up their last energies along with the earlier gusto, launched into a series of attacks on Forest.

Only this time, Forest’s defensive line performed stably under George Wood’s leadership. There were not many opportunities for Arsenal to directly threaten Forest’s goal. Most of the time, they were forced to take long shots from the outside.

If they wished to get a goal from such attacks, they could only be pinning their hopes on two things: one, that Nottingham Forest’s defensive players would make a mistake on their own; and two, God’s assistance.

The first was unlikely, and the latter even more farfetched.

Both Wenger and Tang En were standing at the sidelines now with their assistants busying themselves behind them. The two teams had started preparing for the penalty shoot-out.

After George Wood headed Ashley Cole’s pass to the center out of the sidelines, the referee finally blew the whistle signaling the end of the match that had already been extended 30 minutes.

“The match has ended. We’re officially headed into the penalty shoot-out segment! Neither party was able to defeat the other in a 120-minute match. So, they will have to undergo this cruel trial to decide the victor.”

The players lay on the grass and grabbed every bit of available time to rest. The team doctors were currently massaging the players who would be fielded for the penalty kicks.

Wood sat on the ground. He was the tallest among them now; everyone else besides him was lying on the ground. He was not on the penalty kicker list, so he did not need to undergo the massage to help with recovery. In front of him was Tang En, busying away. He was counseling each of the players who were preparing to take the kicks, helping to ease some of their pressure and build their confidence.

At the same time, the goalkeeper coach grabbed Edwin van der Sar and explained in detail about the penalty kicking habits of Arsenal's players. Perhaps feeling that saying it was not enough to help Edwin van der Sar remember, he even shoved a piece of paper into his hands.

"This is..." Edwin van der Sar was confused.

"The Boss's idea." The goalkeeper coach pointed to Tang En behind him. "He made us research in detail everyone's unique habits in penalty kicking and then wrote it down here. If you can't remember, or can't match their numbers, just look at this. Anyway, the rules don't say anything about not being able to look at notes."

That's right. This was Tang En's idea. And the one who inspired him was Arsenal's main goalkeeper, Lehmann.

Prior to this match, Tang En's plan had already included a segment called "penalty kicks." He prepared to go up against Arsenal in a penalty shoot-out and included more penalty kick practice in their training sessions. Later, when he saw Arsenal's player list, he suddenly remembered that Lehmann had been the main goalkeeper for Germany's National Team during the 2006 World Cup match. He had taken over Kahn's core player position. From this, Tang En thought back to the quarter-finals between Germany and Argentina. The victor of that match was decided upon through a penalty shoot-out. And, the secret to Germany's victory lay in the small piece of paper given to Lehmann by his goalkeeping coach. On it were the quirks of all Argentina's players when taking a penalty kick. Based on the points written on the note, Lehmann matched them to the players and adjusted accordingly. He successfully blocked out consecutive penalty shots and ushered Germany into the top four in the end.

After that match, the note became a major topic many media groups fought to report and stir up stories about.

That was how Tang En recalled this particular story. Today, he decided to copy it exactly the way it was and use it to deal with Lehmann and Arsenal. For that, he instructed the goalkeeping coach to research Arsenal players' unique points when taking penalty kicks. After summarizing all the results, he wrote it on a note. If they truly got to the point of a penalty shoot-out, he was to give it to Edwin van der Sar and ask him to use it.

It turned out to be of use.

After hearing his goalkeeping coach explain, Edwin van der Sar opened the note. In it were some simple words describing the penalty kicking tendencies of each Arsenal player.

He thought it was amazing and could not figure out how the Boss had managed to think it up. He did not know if using small notes in a penalty shoot-out was considered cheating; anyhow, he had never tried this method in the past. Everyone used to say that stopping penalty kicks depended on a goal keeper's experience and reaction speed. But now it was turning out to be a precision test on the backstage work

carried out by the managerial team earlier on. He only needed to leap out as it was written on the paper; low left, high right, middle...

He was uncertain if this was good or bad for a goalkeeper, but he could not afford to care so much now. Winning was more important.

Edwin van der Sar carefully placed the note in his sock, not daring to let anyone else catch sight of it; he was not sure if doing this was against the regulations.

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Tang En finally finished mentally prepping every player on the list. As he got up, he saw George Wood sitting on the ground, resting.

He walked over and squatted in front of Wood.

“Hm... George, you know, I was not in the least bit angry watching you foul and get that yellow card.”

Wood looked at Tang En and said nothing.

“Thank you.” Tang En patted Wood’s leg and stood up, walking away.

He had just left when Albertini walked over. He sat down cross-legged in front of Wood.

“George, I’m extremely curious. At that point, what were you thinking... no, don’t tell me.” He stretched out a hand, asking Wood not to speak. “That’s the path you chose... Do you know how many players there are in this world dreaming of being able to participate in the finals of the Champions League? Even when I was playing in AC Milan, when I had numerous remarkable teammates by my side with superior abilities and who were world-class football stars, many of them could not even get through the gates of the Champions League finals.”

“I’m... I’m sorry, Demi...” Wood stuttered a little, seeing Albertini with such a stern face.

Seeing him that way, Albertini unexpectedly smiled instead.

“What are you afraid of? You’re a little brat who isn’t afraid of anything... If it were me, in that sort of situation, I would have done the same thing as you. Good job, George.” He ruffled Wood’s hair and smiled at the boy before him. Just like watching a child grow up day by day, his heart was filled with pride and a sense of achievement incomprehensible to outsiders.

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The assistant managers of both teams submitted their list of penalty kickers. After the referee counterchecked each of the names to ensure no mistakes, non-relevant personnel would be removed from the field.

George Wood stood up again from the ground. Together with Henry, he walked toward the main referee. They were going to carry out a coin toss to determine which team would kick first. While Henry and he were coin guessing, his teammates had walked to the center circle. Over there, they had their arms over each other’s shoulders, stuck closely next to one another. They used both their arms to convey their strength and faith in facing an unknown future together.

Wood emerged the victor in the battle against Henry. He chose to take the kicks first.

The first person fielded by Nottingham Forest was Eastwood. Forest had no lack of penalty kickers, and Eastwood was the first candidate in line. So long as he was on the field, the penalty kicks awarded to Forest in matches must be taken by him.

Faced with Lehmann, Eastwood kicked a steady and straight shot down the center. He kicked it in.

Following Eastwood's fist pumping into the air, City Ground rang with cheers.

Arsenal's first player was a fullback, Lauren. Although Arsenal's number one penalty kicker was Henry, he had a habit: he never took a penalty kick that was awarded because of him. So, in the majority of the situations, Arsenal's first kicker was, in fact, this Cameroonian defender. In penalty shoot-outs, putting Lauren first and Henry last was a double insurance.

Edwin van der Sar saw Lauren walk up. Taking the opportunity when his opponent was lowering his head to set the football, he dug out the slip of paper and speedily scanned it once. Then, he stuffed it back in.

"Lauren is taking the kick... and the ball goes in!"

Two thousand Arsenal fans cheered. Edwin van der Sar furiously slammed his fist on the ground. He had gone according to what the paper said. Though it was the correct direction, it needed just a bit more to bump out the ball...

However, that moment also made him resolute in following what was written on the paper.

The second player representing Nottingham Forest was the forward, Anelka. He shot at the lower left corner of the goal. The ball rolled rapidly across the grass. Lehmann got the direction right but was helpless against the difficult angle. The football hit the goalpost and bounced into the goal.

"The score is currently 2:1! Nottingham Forest takes the lead temporarily..."

After scoring, Anelka waved his fist aggressively at Lehmann before retreating.

Edwin van der Sar took out the slip of paper again. The second person to come forward for Arsenal was the Dutch champion, Robin van Persie. Van der Sar glanced up at Robin Van Persie and looked down at the paper again. It said, "Bottom right."

The right side for shooters meant the left side for goalies.

Edwin van der Sar stuffed the paper back in again. He knew what to do.

Standing in front of the goal and gazing at his own comrades, Edwin van der Sar stretched out both of his arms slowly. He was like a wall.

Robin van Persie glanced at the referee. Upon the whistle, he took off running, and shot! The instant his foot contacted the ball, Edwin van der Sar threw himself to the left. As expected, the shot from Robin van Persie flew directly towards him.

"Edwin van der Sar! He takes out Robin van Persie's penalty shot!! Beautiful!"

On the sidelines, Tang En, who was closely watching the goal, leaped up. Their work was reaping some success. His idea was showing effect! Most importantly, Nottingham Forest had gotten the upper hand both in the score and psychologically. The scales of victory were gradually beginning to tilt towards him.

Robin van Persie looked despondently at Edwin van der Sar, who had successfully defended his penalty kick. He was different from Henry. His penalty kicks often lacked change. He did not know how to use Panenka kicks or fake movements to deceive the opposing goalie. His shooting was just like his temper – straightforward and direct. This time, it was caught by Edwin van der Sar, or, in actuality, Forest’s managerial team.

Nottingham’s third player was Franck Ribéry. The Frenchman’s performance against Lehmann stayed stable. His direct shot made Lehmann err in judging the direction.

“The ball went in! Now, the pressure is on the side of Arsenal’s players...”

Arsenal’s third representative was Fàbregas.

The Spanish champion calmly kicked the ball in. Although Edwin van der Sar got the direction right, he was a bit too slow. The ball slipped right past his fingers and got in.

This time, however, Edwin van der Sar did not pound the ground in frustration; he was confident.

The fourth player for Forest was the young champion, Gareth Bale. This was his first time participating in such an important match. From how he looked, his expression seemed a little too severe. This child, who could make such a calm breakthrough in the match with Chelsea, appeared to be a little nervous when faced with the Champions League semi-finals penalty shoot-out.

Bale shifted the football twice. Seeing him do this, Tang En could not help but drop his jaw. He could even hear his own heartbeat in such a noisy environment. A forbidding sense slowly crept in.

Bale ran up and drew back his leg. Shoot! Lehmann got the correct direction, but he was too far from getting the ball, much too far...

“Ah– Young Bale has kicked this ball straight towards the spectators’ stands! He misses the penalty kick!”

From the side of Arsenal’s substitutes’ bench came a wave of cheers. Evidently, their joy was built on their opponent’s pain.

Bale raised both his hands, clutching at his hair on the back of his head. His eyes shone with tears. No matter how one looked at him, he was still a young child who had yet to grow up.

Edwin van der Sar came up to him and rubbed his head. “Don’t worry, kid. Go back and wait to celebrate our victory.” As he said that, he saw the fourth penalty kicker walking over. It was the Brazilian, Gilberto Silva.

He was switched in by Wenger at the final moments of the match to take this penalty kick. Before Lauren, Gilberto used to be Arsenal’s number two penalty kicker. His level of penalty kicking could not be underestimated.

But Edwin van der Sar was not afraid. He had a card up his sleeve.

Bale walked back to the team with tears in his eyes. Naturally, it was warm hands that welcomed him back. No one blamed him for missing the kick.

Edwin van der Sar stood before the gates and tightened his gloves.

Gilberto began his run-up as soon as he heard the whistle from the referee. Edwin van der Sar stayed there, unmoving.

The Brazilian raised his foot and shot!

Edwin van der Sar did not leap out. He dropped down at where he was standing. The ball hit his legs and rebounded out!

“Edwin van der Sar! An incredible save! His judgment was right on the money! Right in the center, Gilberto’s shot was saved by the Netherlander door god!”

City Ground rang with loud cheers again. This time, it was almost deafening.

Having missed the shot, Gilberto hung his head. In front of him, Edwin van der Sar put up both his arms, looking as if he was a general returning in victory.

“The situation isn’t looking good for Arsenal. If Nottingham Forest scores the next one, then Arsenal’s fifth person won’t even need to come forward. They would have been eliminated.”

Henry stood right in front of the team, prepared to step up and take the crucial shot. But he could not move up yet. It still depended on Lehmann’s performance.

The final player sent out by Nottingham Forest was their second-best penalty kicker, Mikel Arteta. If he could send the ball in, then the match would end here with Forest Team attaining the qualification to enter the finals of the UEFA Champions League. If he did not get it in, Arsenal would then have one opportunity to decide their fate — if Henry scored, both teams would end in a draw, and they would need to continue the shoot-out; if Henry missed, Arsenal would be eliminated.

Suddenly, everyone could feel the tension in the air. This atmosphere emanated from the penalty spot and spread through the entire stadium.

Arsenal’s fans quieted. Nottingham Forest’s fans also held their breaths and fell silent. They were terrified they would somehow disrupt Arteta’s performance.

“This could be the ball that decides the future of the two teams. Arteta is currently shouldering a thousand pound burden...”

Tang En stared at Arteta, wishing he could perceive every single tiny action he made. But Arteta did nothing. After setting the ball down in position, he stood up, awaiting the referee’s whistle.

Arsenal’s main manager, Wenger, was as nervous as Tang En. Both stared hard at the front of the goal, their expressions curiously similar.

If it went in, it would be heaven for Forest’s Team.

If it did not, it would be Arsenal’s redemption.

In or not?

Arteta turned to look at the main referee. He was like a car waiting for the signal lights. A crisp whistle sounded. It sounded particularly clear within the silence in City Ground.

“Arteta takes his run-up... and shoots! The ball goes in—It’s a goal!!”

City Ground, which had just been silent, erupted like a volcano following the commentator’s shriek.

Lehmann had predicted the right direction, but it was a pity that Arteta’s shot was much too tricky. It was beyond his abilities.

“Nottingham Forest enters the final of the Champions League! They did it! After their promotion from the EFL Championship, they attained the qualifications to the Champions League. A year later, they managed to fight their way into the UEFA Champions finals! Everything seems just like that summer 26 years ago. From here, Brian Clough’s Red Forest walked towards an era of glory!”

The spectators’ stands started shaking; everyone was jumping and cheering with their arms in the air.

The players from the substitutes’ bench could not help themselves, all of them were already rushing up into the field. Tang En was also grabbed in a sudden hug from Kerslake.

“We did it, Tony!”

“This is unbelievable. The biggest dark horse for this season’s Champions League is going dark all the way. On their journey, they have eliminated countless strong opponents; Benfica, Rangers Football Club, Inter Milan... And now, Arsenal! Tony Twain’s team has achieved what some people would not even think of...”

The Nottingham Forest players on the field had already rushed straight into the penalty area, crushing Arteta and Edwin van der Sar beneath them, celebrating their tremendous victory in a frenzy. As the previous season’s newly promoted team, they became the dark horse in the English Premier League then. This season, they were also the darkest dark horse in the UEFA Champions League. This group of young players were creating a future that no one dared to dream of.

“Congratulations to Nottingham Forest. This familiar name shall once again appear at the finals of the UEFA Champions League... I feel as if time is turning back. The young manager Tony Twain has made history again. He’s the youngest manager ever to lead a team into the finals of the Champions League!”

After ending his hug with Kerslake, Tang En walked into the field. With his arms raised high, he enjoyed the moment of glory that belonged to him. At his ears, the cheers were loud enough to shake heaven and earth. Looking up, the night sky had also seemingly become incomparably brilliant.

No, it’s not just seemingly. It truly was incomparably brilliant... bursts of resplendent fireworks shot up into City Ground’s skies. Crackling loudly, the fireworks lit up exhilarated and smiling faces.