

Champions 501

Chapter 501: The Role of a Veteran

During training the next afternoon, the team curiously asked some details about Albertini's farewell game. Even though they all played football, they were still very interested in those legendary star players.

Albertini answered everyone's steady stream of questions. Many of the active Forest players considered Baresi, van Basten, Gullit, Rijkaard, Stoichkov, and the rest, legends.

He was happy to tell everyone the stories of these people, but made sure to do so during the breaks so that it did not affect the training.

Twain did not stop them. He felt that the stories of the legendary star players could inspire the young players.

After training, Albertini found Twain to thank him for his attendance the day before, and then he mentioned the text message.

"Thank you, chief, but I think I got a good farewell game. To be able to complete my contract with the Forest team is my biggest wish right now." Albertini was a realistic and direct person. He put forth his ideas in a straightforward manner.

Twain, who was used to Albertini's way of doing things, was not angry. He looked at Albertini with a grin. "You're satisfied? I'm not satisfied yet, Demetrio. How can my captain have such an innocuous farewell game? The best player in the world needs a special stage to take his last curtain call. An exhibition game? I don't think it suits you."

"But..."

"Yesterday's game was just for you to say goodbye to AC Milan. You don't mind me saying that, do you?"

Albertini shook his head. He felt the same way.

"You see, we are on the same page with this. Yesterday, you said goodbye to AC Milan, but it was not your goodbye to Nottingham Forest and the football field. So, it's necessary for the Nottingham Forest Football Club to prepare another farewell game for you. This is a ceremony for the Forest team to say goodbye to its captain. You can't refuse." Twain pointed to Albertini, who had just opened his mouth. "There has never been a team that does nothing when the captain retires."

Twain looked at the quiet Albertini and went on to say, "perhaps because you don't hold any other team in your heart besides AC Milan, Demetrio?"

This time Albertini hurriedly explained, "No, chief. That's not true. It's just that I think if it's only for me..."

“It’s no big deal, Demetrio. Do you think we’re going to search the world for people to come play an exhibition game where the outcome doesn’t matter?”

Albertini agreed tacitly. Twain smiled.

“That kind of farewell game is not what I want to give you. Rest assured that the farewell game for you will never be troublesome or difficult. You don’t worry about that. Just train and play well. As for your farewell game, when that day comes, everything will be ready. It will be the best stage for you.”

Albertini had nothing to say. He looked at Twain’s confident smile and nodded. “All right, I’ll listen to you, chief.”

Twain patted him on the shoulder with a smile. “Go back, Demetrio. Let me worry about these kinds of things. You just enjoy the last half of this season.”

After he walked Albertini out, Twain and Dunn talked about the matter on the way home together. Dunn was also interested in what kind of farewell game Twain was going to give Albertini. He did not expect Twain to be surprised when he asked the question.

“Don’t you know, Dunn? I thought you knew.”

Dunn thought about it and figured it out. “Now I know. But you’re so confident. You have been giving presents everywhere. You’re giving to Albertini, Beckham, Kenny Burns, the club chairman. Aren’t you afraid of screwing up in the end?”

“I have confidence in my team.” Twain stopped smiling and said seriously, “I think it’s time to take the championship title.”

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On January 13th, the league tournament was rekindled after a one-week break. In the twenty-third round, Nottingham Forest ushered in Portsmouth. The opponent was not strong, and the Forest team won easily with a score of 3:0.

Manchester United was still very strong in the league. Because they won this game, the Forest team had a chance to return to the number two spot in the league. They currently only had one point less than Chelsea. Chelsea had fifty-one points; Nottingham Forest had fifty points.

It was fantastic news. A number of people at the club talked about which round they would catch up with Chelsea and pull the old enemy down from its spot.

However, Twain was calm about it. He felt that the good news was a trap for the team if it was not handled well. If the Forest team really aimed to catch up with Chelsea, it was likely to spend too much energy before the Champions League knockout stage. He needed to stabilize the pace of the team.

Therefore, after this round of the league, Twain held a special meeting with the coaching staff to reiterate the team’s goal this season was the Champions League title. The league tournament was not in the plan, so there was no need to go all out for every game in order to surpass Chelsea. What were they supposed to do if a few important players were injured? The First Team currently only had that many players. Losing one player would be a disaster.

With the team's current strength, it was not possible to move full steam ahead in several competitions at the same time as vying for the title.

Even for a historic tournament like the FA Cup, he had put the reserves and youth team to play.

After he unified the views within the coaching unit, Twain highlighted it again among the players.

As the club had a good partnership with the Royal Hospital of Nottingham University, the team's injuries were under control and widespread injury seldom occurred. Still, the issue that Twain was worried about appeared in the next round of the league tournament.

Since he was injured from being shoved in the game against the Reading team, the Brazilian defender — now a Portuguese and a member of the Portugal national team — Pepe started having minor injuries. He had to repeatedly stop playing.

Coincidentally, in the twenty-fourth round of the league tournament, Nottingham Forest's opponent happened to be Reading again, but it was an away game for the Forest team this time.

The English Football Association took this game seriously and sent a number of game inspectors to the scene to closely monitor several "dangerous figures" — like George Wood and Stephen Hunt.

Because of the threat of heavy penalties, both teams' players were a lot more scrupulous. The Football Association was able to manage the players, but they could not control the fans. With the Forest team visiting, they were nearly inundated with Reading's boos and swearing. No matter which Forest player had the ball, the sprawling boos would greet them. Even Manager Tony Twain was not immune either. Every time he walked out of the technical area to the sidelines, he would be booed and abused by the stands behind the visiting coaches' seats.

Twain remained unmoved and stood proudly amidst the frenzy of boos. He looked as cool as a cucumber. Even the game commentator had repeatedly mentioned Twain's good composure.

But only the people in the Forest team's technical area knew what was going on: Twain carried an iPod with him and wore earbuds to listen to music by Rammstein. He turned the volume all the way up. He could not hear the abuses from the outside at all. Of course, he could not hear anything he himself said, either. He could only shout. However, in this environment, if he did not shout, no one else could hear what he said.

As a result, Kerslake wanted to laugh every time he saw Twain posing with a serious face on the sidelines while he listened to the abuse coming from behind the technical area.

Twain was able to shove the earbuds inside his ears and listen to the noisiest music. The players on the field did not have that. Hence, the Forest players did not play very well under the enormous pressure in the away game.

Pepe had to be replaced early in the second half because he twisted his knee when he turned too fast while facing the opposing striker one-on-one.

Twain did not take it to heart. After all, Pepe had been having minor injuries. He replaced Pepe with Kompany and continued to stand on the sidelines as a target for the Reading fans, to help lessen the pressure on the players.

During the halftime interval, Twain thundered at the team, telling them that if they could not take down Reading in this away game, then they had let down Paul Gerrard, who was still recuperating at home. They would also cause everyone in Nottingham Forest to be ridiculed by the Reading people. Therefore, no matter how much pressure they were under right now, they had to win this game.

Propped up by such thinking, Nottingham Forest eventually defeated Reading by 2:1 amid the endless boos.

But on the way back to Nottingham, Twain received bad news.

The team doctor, Fleming told Twain very clearly that Pepe needed at least three months of rest. If he did not want to it to become an irreparable injury and for it to flare up repeatedly in the future, he required surgery immediately.

Twain's face, which beamed with joy due to the victory, suddenly darkened.

Pepe was currently an important defender and he was adept in his partnership with Piqué. Pepe was also especially matured and experienced beyond his actual age. His one-on-one ability had made a number of Premier League forwards suffer. His excellent breakout ability and accurate judgement of ball placement allowed him to take the lead repeatedly in the contest for headers. With his good speed, he was nearly perfect as a center back. Twain had said in front of the media more than once that Pepe was qualified to become a world-class center back in every aspect. All he needed now was to accumulate his competition experience and one or two worthy championship titles.

He did not expect Pepe to become "breakable" after a fight with Reading. This time, it was a complete break.

As the manager, how could Twain not be furious?

"Damn Reading," He swore under his breath, "Is there no other way other than surgery?" Twain asked Fleming again.

"If he does not have the operation, he may take longer to recover, and will often relapse in the future. He probably won't be able to play for more than ten games in a season."

"All right, surgery it is then. I need him back by May."

"If all goes well — If the operation and post-surgery rehabilitation go smoothly, I think there should be no problem."

After he ended his discussion with Fleming, Twain sat alone in his seat and thought about how to make use of the winter transfer period to bolster the defender positions in the team.

There were not that many good center backs they could buy at this time. Twain searched his mind carefully for a long while before he eventually identified a candidate: the unhappy Argentinian veteran, Roberto Ayala, who was currently in Valencia.

Although he was almost thirty-four years old, his ability was still beyond a doubt as an experienced center back. During the past season, he had been banished because of a conflict with the Valencia captain, Amedeo Carboni. Ayala had long wanted to leave Valencia for a change in environment.

At this juncture, it would not be an issue whether it was a transfer or a loan.

Twain decided that once he returned to Nottingham, he would let the club get in touch with the Valencia club. If the price was suitable, they could directly buy him. If the price could not be settled, they could loan him for half a season. Ayala basically could not play much over at Valencia anyway.

With the Forest team's current influence, Ayala would not reject this opportunity.

The only regret was Ayala could not represent the Forest team in the UEFA Champions League because he had already played for Valencia in the Champions League this season.

It looked like the Champions League could only still be shored up by the young men.

Speaking of the Champions League, Twain was about to go to the drawing ceremony. He had been looking forward to this draw very much.

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Back in Nottingham, Twain looked up the information and found that things were not quite the same as he'd imagined, but the problem was small.

The contract between Ayala and Valencia was due by the end of the season. A year ago, Ayala had put forth his desire to the club to renew his contract with Valencia and end his career with the club. But after the World Cup, the announcement he had waited for turned out to be that Valencia did not intend to renew his contract with the thirty-three-year-old, which greatly disappointed him and led to a contradiction with Carboni.

Currently, there were not many teams interested in Ayala. After all, there was the issue with his age. His agent had been in contact with Villarreal last June. Valencia rejected the deal at the time. They did not want Ayala to remain in Spain, but rather wanted him to move abroad to develop. Every Spanish club that coveted Ayala would make Valencia unhappy.

This was not good news for Ayala, but truly great news for Tony Twain.

A foreign football club? Nottingham Forest is one!

Now, after the new year, Valencia was finally unable to continue to obstruct. Ayala's agent was in contact with Real Zaragoza, hoping to let Ayala join this team on a transfer. If nothing unexpected happened, it was believed that Ayala would belong to that club.

But now, the unexpected was happening.

After he obtained Ayala's agent, Gustavo Moscardi's cell phone number, Twain could not wait to dial the number. Firstly, he needed to know the player's views on moving to an English team. If he had no objections, he would talk to Valencia right away. Of course, it was not about a transfer. It would be a loan. Twain did not want to spend millions of pounds on a transfer fee for a player who was about to be free.

This conversation with Moscardi was confidential and the Valencia Club could not find out about it. Otherwise, matters would become tricky.

Over the phone he fully expressed to Moscardi Nottingham Forest's need for Ayala and his personal admiration of the former Argentina national team captain, hoping that Moscardi could convey the invitation of a transfer to Ayala.

The matter progressed as expected. Valencia did not want Ayala to stay in Spain, and several major domestic teams also had little interest in the old and frail Ayala. Left without an alternative, the clubs that Moscardi chose were not strong enough. If he had not been compelled by circumstances and run out of options, why would he be willing to go to Real Zaragoza, a lower tier team that could not even reach the UEFA Europa League?

Under such circumstances, there was a team which was not only foreign, but also strong that expressed admiration for Ayala. What was there to hesitate over?

Moscardi flew to Nottingham the next day to start discussions with the Nottingham Forest Football Club about Ayala's individual contract.

Ayala wanted to end his career at the last football club, so Moscardi gave the Forest team the condition that he had to sign a three-year contract, for which his annual salary requirement could be appropriately lowered.

After three years, Ayala would be thirty-seven years old, and that was the age of retirement. Although Allan Adams did not agree to pay an extra year of salary for a thirty-six-year-old, Twain still said yes right away. Twain was the general manager of the athletics tournament department. Allan could be unhappy, but he could not do anything about it.

The length of the contract was the biggest problem. Once it was taken care of, everything else was simple.

After his individual contract was negotiated, the Forest team began to make a request to Valencia to loan Ayala.

Valencia was happy as long as it was not a domestic club that came for Ayala. The Forest team's loan request quickly received a positive response. Valencia agreed to loan Ayala to the Forest team, but they were required to pay fifty percent of the salary.

That certainly could not work. Allan negotiated with Valencia and eventually managed to persuade them to lower the contribution to twenty percent.

Twain also knew that the Forest team's current defensive line was too young, and problems would definitely surface in the long run. After Hierro, he needed an experienced veteran to hold the ground while imparting his valuable experience to the young defenders. Ayala suited his requirements very well: he was older, experienced, still skilled, and unable to play a full English Premier League season because of his age and decline in his stamina — the English Premier League was widely known for its intensive competition — the young players could be given more opportunities to play, and then a few years later when he retired, the young players he once taught would have grown up. It was a perfect transition.

Whether it was Hierro, Albertini, van Nistelrooy, Beckham, or Ayala, Twain took these factors fully into account when he bought them. The Forest team had nothing when he took over. What were those young players to do without those veterans who were qualified and instrumental? He could only rely on

his own memory that was ahead of time to buy these veterans in succession and help the young players in the team as if it were a relay race.

When Hierro retired, there was still Albertini. After Albertini, there would be van Nistelrooy, Beckham, and now they had Ayala as well.

Being able to fully “squeeze out” their residual value was the little tail hidden behind Twain.

Three days later, Nottingham Forest’s official website announced that Ayala would be on loan to the Forest Team for half a season. Not a word in the press release mentioned that they were going to buy the Argentinian defender.

Once he settled Ayala on loan plus the free transfer, Twain took Dunn Nyon to Switzerland to take part in the UEFA Champions League round of 16 of the draw.

What opponent would be waiting in the scenic Switzerland?

Chapter 502: The Best Draw There Is

The headquarters of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association was in Zurich, the capital of Switzerland, while the headquarters of the Union of European Football Associations was in the small Swiss town of Nyon. Gathered there were the best football managers in almost all of Europe.

The draw ceremony for the Champions League round of 16 this season would be held there, with the media flocking in to eagerly report and wait in suspense for each choice to be unveiled.

The draw ceremony was held in the afternoon. Many luxury cars drove to the hotel entrance in succession where the draw ceremony was held. The reporters waiting at the hotel entrance began to get busy, as the people they had waited for had appeared.

It was as if all these managers had settled it in advance. The ones who had already arrived were the managers of the non-powerful teams. None of the real big-name giants had arrived yet.

That group of people arrived at the last minute.

The first person to appear in front of the media was the Manchester United manager, Alex Ferguson. He gave a brief interview after he stepped out of the car. His arrival brought the long-waiting journalists back to their feet — everyone still liked to see a big-name manager show up.

While Ferguson was in an interview, a white Audi stopped at the hotel entrance behind him and out stepped his old adversary, Arsène Wenger.

Wenger walked straight past Ferguson as if he had not seen him. When the reporters saw the Arsenal manager appear, half of them immediately diverted to approach Wenger, who strode away. He went a distance away from Ferguson before he stopped for an interview.

Having come to cover the draw ceremony, Tang Jing’s eyes lit up when she saw this scene. The feud between these two managers in the English Premier League was often more interesting than the star

players' gossip. In other countries' leagues, where the managers might not have this kind of exposure, the decades-long feud between Wenger and Ferguson was unimaginable.

After Ferguson and Wenger, the other big-name managers took to the stage one by one.

The Bayern Munich manager, Ottmar Hitzfeld, the Inter Milan manager, Roberto Mancini, the Real Madrid manager, Fabio Capello...

Each manager's appearance caused a flurry of activity and commotion with the press.

Twain and Dunn sat in a dark red sedan provided by the UEFA and chatted casually. He noticed that the car had slowed down, so he poked his head out to take a look. He turned his head back to Dunn and said, with a smile, "I think we're almost there."

"It's very crowded," Dunn said as he looked at the cars parked alongside the road.

"It's really bustling with noise and excitement." Twain laughed. When a large group of people with all kinds of hostilities came together, it would be a surprise if it were not lively.

Just when Twain and Dunn could see clearly the reporters around the entrance, the car stopped. The driver turned around and said, "Here we are, gentlemen."

"Thank you." Dunn opened the car door to get out, only to be pulled back by Twain.

"Wait a minute." He pointed outside.

Dunn looked through the car window and saw that the man who had come out of the car parked in front of them was the Chelsea manager, José Mourinho.

Oh, Dunn realized.

Mourinho seemed very popular. From the moment he got out of the car, the flashbulbs outside had not stopped flashing. The reporters swarmed around him, and countless microphones extended toward him. He stood with a smile in the crowd and looked debonair. Some English media outlets stated that Mourinho was the most suave among the managers, and it did not seem to be just flattery.

As Mourinho's interview was not done and Twain was not in a hurry to get out of the car, he just sat in the car and intently watched Mourinho outside.

The driver found it odd that the two men had not gotten out of the car, so he looked back several times hoping to remind the two, but Twain turned a blind eye to it. Dunn knew what the driver meant, but Twain would not get out, so he had to pretend he did not see it either.

This went on for about two minutes before the reporters became interested in the dark red Mercedes, which had stopped at the entrance without any activity. The glass windows of the car were tinted, so no one could see in from the outside, but it was clear to see the outside from the inside.

Someone ditched Mourinho and turned his attention to this side. Furthermore, another car parked behind this car began to press on the horn impatiently, which attracted almost everyone's attention. Even Mourinho, who was answering questions in an interview, turned his head.

In the car, Twain took his sunglasses out of his shirt pocket and put them on. He turned to Dunn with a sly smile. "It's time for us to make an entrance, Dunn."

With that, he took the lead to open the car door and leaned out.

Dunn followed helplessly behind him. He knew what Twain had in mind. If it had been him, he would never have done such a thing to steal the limelight.

As soon as Twain showed his face, no one was surprised by the car's bizarre conduct.

Maybe the first thought in everyone's mind was just so, it turned out to be that guy!

Twain wore a bright smile. He waved to many media outlets and said, "hey, good afternoon, everyone."

The reporters all rolled their eyes

While the reporters were bemused, Tang Jing squeezed in front of Twain. "We meet again, Mr. Twain." She greeted him in Mandarin, and Twain replied likewise.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Miss Tang."

The reporters around them listened in bafflement at the conversation in Mandarin. Tang Jing quickly switched back to English and threw out her question. "What do you anticipate from this draw, Mr. Twain?"

This question was exactly what the other reporters wanted to ask. Once they heard someone had asked the question, many microphones, recording pens and call phones were shoved in Twain's face.

Twain cleared his throat and opened his mouth to answer.

When Twain got out of the car, the Mercedes immediately drove to the carpark. The car lined up behind them immediately pulled over and stopped behind Twain. The car door opened and a man in a dark suit with countless corkscrew curls on his head stepped out.

Someone immediately laughed among the reporters. They were not laughing at the man's hairstyle, as it was pretty common, but rather at the coincidence.

Mourinho was still speaking to several Portuguese journalists in the front as most of the other reporters swarmed to Tony Twain when he appeared, ready to hear what astonishing words might pop from his mouth. Then just as Twain was about to open his mouth and talk, Rijkaard emerged behind him.

The three enemies...

Twain was momentarily distracted due to Rijkaard's appearance, but he quickly turned his attention back to the reporter's question. This time, he raised his voice slightly. "What do I anticipate from this draw? Ah, I'd love to meet an 'old friend.'" As he spoke, he looked down at Rijkaard walking up the steps and held out his hand toward him with a smile on his face. "Hello, Mr. Rijkaard."

Rijkaard originally intended to ignore Twain and just walk straight past. However, now that he had extended his hand to him, it would not look good if he did not return the gesture. He had to smile and briefly shake Twain's hand before he let go.

“Hello, Mr. Twain.”

Rijkaard wanted to go after he had spoken, but he was stopped by Twain. “Mr. Rijkaard, what do you hope for from this draw?”

Rijkaard did not think that Twain would ask such a question. He froze for a moment before he replied, “there is nothing to hope for. The result will be what it is. We just play the game. It does not matter who the opponent is.”

“Well said, Mr. Rijkaard. I think so, too. It doesn’t matter who the opponent is.” With that, Twain pushed the reporters aside and walked in with a playful grin. He stopped answering any questions.

As he walked past Mourinho, the Portuguese, who had finished his interview, seemed to have waited for him. “You’re pretty confident,” he said in a low voice. Aren’t you afraid of what the UEFA secretly have in store? You humiliated the UEFA last season. Think about Chelsea, eh?”

Twain turned to look at Mourinho and laughed. “I’m suddenly keen for the UEFA to do something now.”

Twain laughed as he walked away.

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Twain left confidently, but Dunn was held back by the reporters.

The person who held back Dunn was Tang Jing. She had to make the Chinese assistant manager accept her interview to discuss his thoughts on participating in the UEFA Champions League draw ceremony.

After half a season, the media had also accepted this Chinese assistant manager, who went hand in hand with Twain. Therefore, when the other media saw that he was being held back by Tang Jing to answer questions, they also gathered around. Dunn wanted to ask Twain to take him away, but Twain seemed to have completely forgotten that there was another person who came with him, and had just gone straight in.

“Don’t look, Coach Dunn.” Tang Jing smiled smugly. She had nimbly made this person stay behind. “Can you answer my question?” She felt that the quiet Dunn in front of her was more likeable than the other man, for she had no trouble in prying open his mouth. When she faced Twain, she needed to consider how to discern the veracity of every word that came out of him.

“After last season’s Champions League final, Manager Twain embarrassed the UEFA.” Tang Jing repeated in English so that the reporters around her could understand her question. “As an assistant manager for the team, are you worried about what the UEFA has in mind for this draw ceremony?”

Dunn knew he could not evade today, so he helplessly said, “I don’t know. But we were lucky during the draw for the group stage.”

“But now there’s going to be a new draw.” Tang Jing reminded him what had happened was already in the past and that nothing was definite.

“That is why I don’t know. I don’t know anything about what hasn’t happened yet.”

Tang Jing pursed her lips. The answer suddenly deluded her into thinking that she would rather have Tony Twain standing in front of her.

“In that case, can you make a prediction? Or which team do you want the Forest team to encounter in the round of 16?” She had to ask in a different way.

“Any team will be fine.” Being forced to face this on behalf of Twain, Dunn chose the tactic of passive resistance. He always fobbed people off with the most perfunctory answers when faced with such questions.

“Coach Dunn, don’t tell me you don’t have any team in mind that you particularly want to encounter, or avoid?”

“No,” Dunn replied clearly and succinctly. Tang Jing seethed with anger.

“Is this how Twain teaches you to deal with the media?” She suddenly switched to Mandarin with a frown. The reporters around them were confused again.

Dunn froze for a moment and then shook his head. “No.”

“So, you learned from Twain, is that it? There are so many things to learn, why did you learn from him? Oh, my God. One Twain is enough. I don’t want another one. Please, Mr. Dunn. I can’t write an article when you do this. I can’t write that my interviewee replied ‘I don’t know’ to every question I asked, can I?”

Looking at Tang Jing’s pleading expression, Dunn hesitated and said, “I really don’t have any thoughts on this. Whichever team we draw, we’ll just take out the profile on that team – we have prepared reports for all fifteen teams in advance. That’s why I said that. I’m not trying to mislead you, Miss Tang. It’s the truth.”

Although Dunn spoke sincerely, it did not satisfy Tang Jing. Such an answer would not satiate the readers’ curiosity at all. She looked miserably at Dunn.

Dunn was quiet for a while before he finally sighed. “Okay... Tony did not say anything to me, but I thought... I guess, I think he would love to encounter a team that we had played against before.”

This was the answer that Tang Jing wanted. She immediately perked up and changed the expression on her face. She followed up and asked, “Why did you say that? Is it because you know them well enough and therefore you have the knowledge?”

Dunn shook his head, “No. The teams we have beaten before, he wants to continue to win. The ones we had never won against before, he wants to... get revenge.”

It suddenly dawned on Tang Jing and she smiled sweetly at Dunn. “Thank you very much, Mr. Dunn. Oh, this will be my exclusive.”

They had been conversing in their mother tongue. Next to them, the other reporters did not understand the Mandarin conversation.

“You mustn’t tell anyone else.” Tang Jing turned her back against the others and winked at Dunn.

Dunn nodded obediently and then looked at the Tang Jing. "Can I go now, Miss Tang?"

Hearing this, Tang Jing giggled. "I'm not holding you captive. Why are you asking me?"

"Err..." Dunn also realized that it was out of place of him to say that. "Then... I'm leaving."

Dunn struggled to squeeze out of the crowd and catch up to Twain. The reporters started throwing all sorts of questions at Dunn, but he just walked away without another word – this was what he was best at.

Behind him, Tang Jing looked his slightly stooped shoulders and suddenly thought of a textbook in her high school: The Man in the Case.

There were media outlets in China that currently stated that Dunn was a grassroots hero and a talented coach in the football circles who managed to go abroad. But did anyone know the events behind it?

She used to research Dunn's previous experiences, and people around him all said he was not an easy person to get along with. He was withdrawn and not likeable. In middle school, all the boys would play football. But because he did not play well and had few friends, he would be pushed aside to watch the others play football on the sidelines.

Tang Jing did not know the specific circumstances at that time, but she could make an associative connection and imagined how Dunn would be like at that time. He would just seal himself in a black case and use silence to deal with the whole world.

A special feeling suddenly bloomed in her heart.

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There were not many people inside the hall of the draw ceremony when Dunn pushed open the door, so it was easy for him to find Twain, who was chatting to others. He quickly marched over and then stood noiselessly behind Twain.

The man Twain was chatting with was the Arsenal manager, Wenger. He saw Dunn appear behind Twain and seem to have something that he could not say in front of others. Twain did not seem to know someone was behind him, so he was confused when Wenger found an excuse to end the conversation and left.

"Tony..." Dunn opened his mouth when he saw Wenger leave.

"How does it feel?" Twain asked without turning back.

"What?" Dunn did not understand what Twain was asking.

"What did that female reporter ask?"

"She threw me the question she wanted to ask you." Dunn was a little disgruntled.

Twain smiled. "Sorry, I used you as a shield."

Dunn did not take up this topic. Instead, he asked, "I'd love to know your thoughts too, Tony. What kind of outcome do you want for this draw?"

“I certainly want a weak opponent... the weaker the better.” Twain snickered.

“I think it will be hard for the UEFA to do what you want.”

Twain turned his head and looked at the platform where the staff was still busy finishing up. The UEFA bigwigs would be there to take the round balls out of the clear glass box and open them in front of everyone to prove the draw results were fair.

Behind the platform was a huge television screen that was repeatedly playing some of the highlights of the Champions League group stage. The UEFA and the eight star logo symbolizing the Champions League appeared around the table.

“Dunn, the draw result is not something we can control. Why are you thinking about what will happen? The team that is drawn will be the team we play. Don’t tell me you’re still worried that we will get a strong team and be eliminated early?”

“I’m not worried.”

“Then what else is there? No matter which team we get, we are not afraid. We will deal with whoever is in our way. If the UEFA wants to mess with us, I’ll meet the challenge!”

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An hour later in Nottingham, England.

Eastwood phoned each of his teammates and said, “Hey, guys, turn on your telly! Watch the TV! They’re about to draw the teams now! What? You’re all watching.. Well, then I don’t have to repeat, watch the telly!”

He threw his phone down and clasped his hands under his chin. He held his breath as he stared at the television screen.

Everyone on the Forest team stayed home to watch the live telecast of the draw ceremony. There were countless Nottingham Forest fans just like them.

Kenny Burns’ pub was packed with people. Everyone held a beer mug as they looked up at the television, looking forward to the results of the draw.

Nottingham Forest had been picked, but their opponent was yet to be determined.

The televised broadcast gave Twain a close-up. He was staring intently at the stage, but there was a hint of smile at the corners of his mouth.

The cab driver, Landy James currently wanted the traffic signal light at the intersection in front of him to break down and remain red. The broadcaster’s voice could be heard on the car radio announcing the latest situation of the draw to his listeners.

“Real Madrid’s opponent is Bayern Munich. This is the fourth time in the last seven years that these old foes of the European football has competed with each other. Inter Milan will play against Valencia. This is the fourth time in six years that both teams have competed...”

Landy stared ahead, but his eyes were unfocused. His fingers gently tapped the steering wheel. Cars behind him were honking, but he did not notice.

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Nearly half of the teams had drawn for the competition, and the suspense was now diminishing. Twain looked at Dunn, who sat next to him, and found that he was not nervous at all. He just looked at the people on the stage with the same concentration. Twain smiled and turned his attention back to the draw ceremony.

“The next to be picked is... Nottingham Forest’s opponent in the round of 16.” The host announced. The UEFA’s number two, Michel Platini, walked to the glass box and slowly put his hand out towards the box with only a few balls left.

Half the people in Nottingham held their breath.

Landy James’s fingers stopped tapping but hung in the mid-air. A policeman knocked on his car window from outside the car, but it was like he had been petrified by the devil. He had turned a deaf ear to the outside world.

Eastwood sat on the couch with his body leaning forward. He looked ready to stand up at any moment as he muttered to himself.

Kenny Burns stopped wiping the glasses and looked up at the television like everyone else. The packed bar was quiet except for the sound coming out of the television.

Platini fumbled around the box for a while and grabbed a ball. He took it out and opened it with his head down. He took out a folded piece of paper, unfolded it to take a look. The television broadcast zoomed in on Platini. The Frenchman’s face was expressionless. The answer could not be predicted from his face.

He smiled suddenly as he flipped the note over to face the many managers under the stage. He faced the camera and viewers in front of the television.

He clearly enunciated the name on this note:

“Barcelona.”

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“Barcelona.”

Landy suddenly smacked the horn.

Eastwood held up his fists and jumped out of the couch. The other Forest team’s players and coaches also jumped. Even the regular training ground workers did.

The quiet Forest bar suddenly burst into huge cheers.

“Well done, Frenchman!”

“Cheers! Cheers to this good f**king draw!”

“Woohoo! This is the best result I’ve ever seen!”

On the television screen, Twain pumped a fist and then held both fist up as he rose from his seat to do a circle on the spot as if he were a victorious general. His ostentatious display once again made him the focus of attention in the venue. There was a clamor in the hall with the intermingled sounds of whistles, applause, laughter, and chatter. All the media pointed their cameras at the man who caused the commotion.

Rijkaard was not far from Twain's seat, only four seats apart. He put his arms down and marched over, unexpectedly taking Rijkaard's hand and shaking it.

"Mr. Rijkaard, we meet again!" He had a bright smile on his face which disconcerted Rijkaard.

Even though that the draw ceremony was not over, the scene had become a mess and was as noisy as a country marketplace. The UEFA officials on the stage kept their thoughts to themselves and tried to keep a polite smile on their faces as they looked at the central figure in the commotion.

Meanwhile, half of Nottingham bellowed in madness. "Barcelona, we're back again! Are you ready?!"

Chapter 503: Win Back What Was Lost

"After the draw results came out, Nottingham Forest and Barcelona were drawn together, and they will meet in the Round of 16. Due to Manager Tony Twain's unexpected move at the awards ceremony, there will be a lot to watch for in this pair of competitors from last season's Champions League final. The two managers from both teams accepted our interviews after the draw. Twain admitted that this is the best draw result that he can think of, and he can't wait for the Champions League round of 16 game to start right away. Compared to Twain's aggressiveness, the Barcelona manager, Rijkaard was more low-key. He admitted that he did not expect their Round of 16 opponent would be Nottingham Forest. But Barcelona will not play differently just because the opponent is the Forest team. They will play their own style of football and the key to winning or losing is not the opponent, but how they play."

The next day, media outlets scrambled over each other to eagerly cover the results of the draw. Naturally the English and Catalan media gave the most coverage and made the most effort.

No one was naïve enough to think that the draw was a coincidence. The feud between Barcelona and Nottingham Forest was well known, and the UEFA had killed two birds with one stone. On one hand, it could rely on the strong Barcelona to suppress the detestable Nottingham Forest. On the other hand, a fierce competition coupled with the continued enmity from last season could also let the media maximize the hype and keep the fans interested. In terms of commercial interests, this was free publicity.

It was the media's business for how they liked to hype this, and Twain was not concerned about it at all... even though it was his antics that were the cause.

What delighted him was after his return from Nyon, Switzerland, he was greeted by a high-spirited team at the team's training the next day. Everyone, especially the players who had experienced the defeat of last season's final were all quite happy with the draw result. They eagerly looked forward to the reopening of the Champions League tournament.

Things would be all right when he and his team were of one mind.

Ayala had passed the medical examination and joined the team. Although he was only officially on loan, Twain had already included him in his plans for next season. After Pepe's injury, Ayala's experience could help the team. Although he could only play in the England's league tournament, Twain was quite satisfied.

Twain's current thinking was simple: grab as many points as possible in the league tournament before the game against Barcelona. Whether it was the second or third place, he wanted the team to enter a safe period in the league tournament after the Champions League competition had started again, so that he could have a free hand to go all out in a big fight in another arena.

At the same time, during the points grab, to minimize injuries in the team, the only solution was rotation.

This type of rotation was not about making small adjustments and filling the gaps. It was a major rotation. Everyone in the team would have a chance to play for the team and be the turning point that determined the outcome of a game.

Sun Jihai's performance against Chelsea was a positive example to the team's players, showing them that anyone could become a hero. Whether they were in the starting lineup or substitutes, it was possible as long as they never gave up.

The Chinese media found a way to hype up this matter, which eventually became "The Chinese Sun becomes the spiritual leader of Nottingham Forest." Sun Jihai found the news both funny and extremely embarrassing.

The Champions League draw turned out to be an important motivator for the Forest team to move forward, and the team used this momentum in the domestic league.

On January 30th, during the first league game after the draw, the Forest team easily beat Fulham at home with a score of 2:0.

With the Forest team's winning streak in January, Tony Twain was named the best manager of January and the Forest team was named the best team. Since their loss at home to Manchester United on November 18th the last year, Nottingham Forest had maintained twelve unbeaten rounds, setting in the league tournament, and continued to press in on Manchester United in first place and Chelsea in second.

However, after he received the best manager spot, the Forest team weirdly lost 1:2 to Blackburn Rovers in the first away game in February.

Twain was not afraid to lose. He thought that occasional loss was good for the entire team. It was like if a person was not sick at times, then it might be fatal once he fell ill.

He did not chase after the meaningless record of consecutive unbeaten rounds or wins in succession. The process was not important. The final results were the important part. If losing a game now allowed him to finally get the title, Twain did not mind losing the game at all.

It would come to an end in one month's time.

The first leg of the Champions League Round of 16 game against Barcelona was on the night of February 20th. Before that, the Forest team played only two games in February, an away loss to Blackburn Rovers and a home win over Tottenham Hotspur.

But Twain's players did not get a full break just because they played two games. Due to the national team games, the players had to play the national team competition after they played in the league tournament.

The February results were not ideal, even though the morale of the Forest team was not affected. Everyone placed more importance on the upcoming game than the league tournament.

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After the national team games ended, the players regrouped. By this time the media began to hype the Champions League tournament.

Not only England and Catalonia, but the whole world was watching the Champions League rekindle the competition. But what everyone was most concerned with was Nottingham Forest's battle with Barcelona.

According to the game schedule, the Forest team would play the first leg in an away game. Therefore, after the players returned from their respective national teams, and despite being five days away from the actual game day, Twain simply brought the team straight to Spain.

At the training session on the outskirts of Barcelona, Twain declined all media interviews and only promised to hold a press conference a day before the game to answer all media questions.

Then he took the team into a rented university stadium and began a four-day closed door training session.

They studied Barcelona to develop a countermeasure that would take into account anything that might happen in the game. All the members of the coaching unit worked like a fully powered electric motor at Twain's request.

Even if Twain had not asked them to do so, everyone would still have done so. All the people at Nottingham Forest could not wait for the day they could take revenge.

Time passed quickly, and the four days of training reached their last day. Twain would hold a press conference at the hotel where the team was staying to satisfy the reporters' exuberant curiosity later in the day. Before that, though, he had one more thing to do.

The next day was the game, so there was only half a day of training for the day. They mainly focused on the set-piece practice. In fact, everyone's mind was not on the training.

After the training was done, the team returned to the hotel where the media had begun to gather. Twain did not intend to go to the press conference right away. He took the team to a meeting room where videos could be played.

The players did not know what Twain wanted to do. It didn't make sense for it to be a tactical preparation meeting; they had already had the meeting on the sidelines of the training ground.

Only Dunn and Kerslake, the two assistant managers in the coaching unit, knew what Twain had in mind.

Once they entered the meeting room, Twain turned off the lights and the room was suddenly plunged into darkness. A video began to play on the white screen in front of everyone and the surround sound speakers around the room began to play a commentary.

“To all viewers out there, welcome to the 2005 to 2006 season UEFA Champions League final! The two competitors are the powerhouse teams, Barcelona from Spain, and the dark horse of England, Nottingham Forest!”

When the voice started, someone looked back at Twain, standing at the back of the room. Their manager was staring at the big screen without any expression on his face.

As the commentator said, it was the Champions League final last season. Twain wanted his players to watch the failed game.

When Edwin van der Sar was sent off, the picture on the big screen was chaotic, with sounds of boos and the commentator’s screaming coming out of the speakers.

When Albertini scored, the British commentator roared, and the young players could not help but stand up and wave their fists in the dark meeting room.

Within five minutes of the second half, Barcelona scored two equalizing goals in a row and completed their mission to overtake. The game ended, and everyone from the Forest team took to the stage to collect their silver medals, and Twain in turn gave the medal he had just won to a ball boy on the sidelines. The image faded and the noises from the game and commentary died out. The meeting room was plunged into a brief silence.

After a while, the lights in the room lit up again.

Twain spoke, “do you know why I want you to review last year’s final game?”

No one made a sound.

“Before I reveal this answer to you, I have a question for you.” Twain walked forward, passing among the players. “How do you feel when you lose a game?”

“Awful, chief.” Albertini led the way with his answer. He had somewhat guessed Twain’s intentions and decided to fully cooperate with the manager.

Twain smiled at Albertini. He also knew what Albertini had in mind.

“And everyone agrees with Demetrio?”

No one disagreed.

“Very good. So now I ask you again, what if we lost a very, very important game that should have never been lost?” Twain looked at Albertini.

After a moment’s silence, Albertini replied, “Then it feels like we’re as good as dead...”

Twain nodded. "Looks like we have that in common, Demetrio. That's right, it does feel like that to lose an important game, as if the world has collapsed and our souls are gone... Does anyone think I'm joking?"

The players all shook their heads.

"But we're not dead, and the world is still spinning, right? So the loss of a game feels more like a disgrace to me. Do you feel good when you see our opponent strutting around in front of us?" Twain raised his voice.

"No, Chief!" everyone answered loudly.

"It was a great disgrace for us to lose to Barcelona in the Champions League final in front of the world!" Twain brandished his fist and growled loudly. "They took the trophy that was supposed to belong to us and became the king of Europe. But what about us? We were forgotten by people! No one cared what the loser's name was and what our future would be like. This world will only remember the champion! Don't complain. My dear boys, this is the competition for rule of the world. The winner is the king and the loser becomes nothing! You find it intolerable? We clearly gave as much, or maybe even more, effort, but in the end, we did not receive the due return. When I went on stage to receive the silver medal, did anyone feel like I did? Do you feel anger here?!" Twain punched himself hard in the chest.

"Yes!" Someone got up from his seat amidst the roar.

"Runner-up, silver medal... Ha!" Twain scorned, "They thought giving us silver medals would appease us? For me, if that sh*tty thing hangs on my chest, it will only constantly remind me this: 'You're a motherf**king loser!' What bastard would go through all that trouble to advance to the final, just to get the silver medal?! This kind of thing doesn't deserve to be in our trophy room at all. That sacred place is reserved for the championship trophy!"

Twain paced back and forth agitatedly in the conference room, gesticulating as he imparted to the players the philosophy "except for the championship title, everything else is a piece of dog sh*t."

"Last season's UEFA Champions League runner-up... does that sound good? Pretty amazing, isn't it? Is it worth repeated mentions? No! Only shameless people will feel that getting the runner-up title is a worthwhile thing to show off!"

"Pity... unfortunately, we became such a loser... This is a cruel world. Losing is losing, you can't turn back the clock and have another go with your opponent. No matter how you lose, the result cannot be changed once it is determined. What to do? Do you acknowledge the result? Are you willing to be a loser?"

"No!" The players hollered.

"Of course not." Twain shook his finger and pointed to George Wood. "I once said to George, losing is not a reason to give up. You lose this game and you can still win it back in the next game. What you lose in a game due to defeat, you can win it back in the next game! This is what I want to tell all of you, and I want you to remember — I don't care what you're going to do or where you will be in the future, you have to remember this — this is the kind of football I want you to play! Even if you are knocked to the ground by a powerful opponent countless times and tumble pathetically through mud puddles, you have

to get up the next second! Lose this game and win back in the next game; lose this championship title and win it back the next championship; concede the ball this time and get it back the next time! It's as simple as that."

"Now you know why I asked you to watch this video before the game, right?" Twain swept his glance across the entire room. Everyone was quiet but had a look of determination in their eyes.

"I don't want you kids to forget what it's like to have an unforgettable failure. You guys — including me — all of us have to keep in mind. Remember how humiliating and painful it was to lose the championship title! Fortunately, thank heavens!" Twain pointed toward the ceiling. "We drew a good lot."

Everyone laughed.

"We lose this game, we win it back in the next game. What we lose in this game, we'll win it back the next game! Here's your chance, guys." Twain grinned, like a sly devil luring them to the dark side. "So what if this is an away game? Accumulate your humiliation, unwillingness, regret, and anger! This time tomorrow let's give them hundredfold back to Barcelona!!"

The meeting room suddenly descended into chaos. The players kicked over the chairs and jumped on the table, waving their fists and growling loudly.

Twain looked at the players with satisfaction. He patted Kerslake and motioned for him to sort out the situation. He quietly opened the door and left. He still had to attend the press conference. He was certain that the reporters must be getting a little impatient.

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As expected, when Twain arrived at the press conference, the reporters had waited until they were ready to get up and leave — they thought that they had been fooled by Tony Twain again.

Fortunately, Twain arrived in time. He looked at the disgruntled reporters, and for the first time he did not provoke them. Instead, he smiled and apologized.

"I'm sorry. I was delayed by something. As you all know, tomorrow is the game. I don't deny that this is an important game for Nottingham Forest and for me personally. So, we have to be more well prepared and meticulous. More time is also required. But to make up for my lateness, I promise you will see a very good game tomorrow and you will have a lot of topics to hype up."

"Just a one-sided guarantee?" A Spanish journalist asked in English. "Mr. Twain, an exciting game requires two teams to work together, as if..." He wanted to give an example of the second leg of '04-05 La Liga season where there had been a classic battle between Real Madrid versus Barcelona with a score of 4:2.

Twain interrupted him with a smile on his face. "Is there anything wrong with my promise? This game has already entered my orbit."

As soon as the words came out, the reporters became animated. Although such a pretentious statement was consistent with Twain's character, every time he uttered such words, it still stirred people up.

“This is the home of Barcelona, Mr. Twain.” The same Spanish — or rather, Catalanian — reporter frowned as he continued to ask questions.

“Yes, so what if it’s your home ground?” Twain retorted aggressively.

“It’s just that it’s normally more difficult to play an away game...” This reporter’s voice became softer.

“Convention is useless against my team.” Twain waved. “I said it is in my orbit, so it is in my orbit. If you don’t believe me, you’ll see tomorrow!”

Chapter 504: Come to Collect the Interest

Twain proclaimed that the game had entered his orbit the day before the game. When his remarks were made public, it caused a stir in Barcelona. The Catalan media began to fight back, and they went to the Barcelona players in hopes of getting the team’s support.

The big mouth, Eto’o was the first to jump out in response to Twain’s provocation. In an interview with Mundo Deportivo, he said, “I don’t know what Twain’s orbit is. Maybe it leads directly to a precipice? But I’m not surprised he said that, because he’s the only one who would do such an ungracious thing. Isn’t that what he was like during last year’s final?”

His statement was an attack on Twain’s personality and gentlemanly manners.

The Barcelona captain, Puyol, directly stated that Twain’s action was disrespectful to his opponent.

The Brazilian and the team’s core, Ronaldinho was not worried about Twain’s orbit. With a smile on his face, he faced the reporters and said, “we will play at our own pace, no matter who the opponent is.”

Rijkaard declined to comment on it.

Throughout the Catalan region, the people were aggressive on the outcome of the upcoming game. Barcelona was still ahead in La Liga and their centennial rival, Real Madrid, was at an all-time low. Capello’s team had dared to lose to any opponent and the booing at Bernabéu had sounded more than once, with waves of glaring white handkerchiefs. The Italian’s dismissal seemed to have entered a countdown. Real Madrid players and fans were just as at a loss and did not know where they should go.

The more pathetic their opponent was, the more it highlighted the infinite glory of Barcelona.

The Barcelona team was not worried about the La Liga title at all. They thought that their main focus of the season was not defending their La Liga title because it did not require them to painstakingly defend their title. The glory already belonged to them. Instead, Barcelona hoped to make a historic breakthrough in the European arena: defending their Champions League title for the first time.

The entire Barcelona team is in such a good form. What is Nottingham Forest? A team that was crushed by us!

The Barcelona’s hardcore fan groups even had a chant. “Last year, we beat you once; this year, we will beat you again!”.

The media was still analyzing the idea that Barcelona had a psychological advantage over Nottingham Forest after beating them. Why would they think there was a “psychological advantage?” It was only because Barcelona defeated Nottingham Forest in last year’s Champions League final. It was conventional for the winner to maintain some psychological advantage over the loser, but had they all forgotten what Twain said at the press conference?

Convention has no effect on my team.

“Tony Twain is that kind of person. He is just used to being egotistical. If Rijkaard really thinks that he has any foolproof countermeasures, then he will have been misled by Twain. My friends in England are happy to tell me all sorts of mischief that this man has caused over there. They say it is a pity that this man was not a circus clown. He is up to all kinds of things all day long, making shocking remarks in hopes of attracting the attention of the world. A lot of the time, he’s does even not act like a football manager. He’s more like an entertainment star. When The Sun reports news on him, it’s always in the entertainment section and not the sports edition,” Mundo Deportivo, Catalonia’s representative media described Tony Twain’s character. When they publicized a foreigner in such a manner, their readers would think so, too.

On the day of the game, the media in Barcelona were filled with such reports.

The war of words between Nottingham Forest and Barcelona was already in progress. Barcelona was fully invested whereas the Nottingham Forest players stayed out of it. They did not accept any interviews or discuss their manager’s remarks in front of the media. They kept their minds on preparing for the evening’s game and let Twain be the shield that attracted all the negative attention.

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In the afternoon, as the team was about to board the bus to go to the Camp Nou stadium, Twain was surrounded by numerous reporters at the hotel entrance.

“One last interview before the game,” he said with his index finger extended. “Hurry up and ask your questions. If you don’t, I’m going to leave. You only have...” he looked down at his watch, “five minutes.”

“That’s too short!” A reporter complained.

“My team is going to the stadium soon. Don’t tell me that you want me to hold a forty-five minute long press conference here?” Twain retorted and then added, “there are four minutes left.”

The reporters looked at each other. They had not expected Twain to do that.

Only one person reacted. While the other reporters were still displeased with the way Twain treated them, she tossed out her own question. “Excuse me, Mr. Twain. Your comments yesterday caused a stir in Barcelona. Are you worried that doing so will provoke your opponent and make today’s game difficult?”

Twain was familiar with the person who asked the question. It was the Chinese journalist, Tang Jing, who always showed up wherever they went.

“Hey, I really did not expect to see you here, Tang, the great journalist.” Twain spoke in Mandarin.

“Answer my question quickly. Don’t try to drag it out,” Tang Jing said ungraciously with a cold expression.

Twain shrugged and replied in English, “do you think the Champions League Round of 16 game will be easy? Even if I hadn’t said that, the game wouldn’t have been easier. Not to mention I’m telling the truth, so why should I be worried? Provoke my opponent? What do their feelings have to do with me? If they’re upset, all right, come and beat me. If they beat me, they will be entitled to cut me to the bone and drown me in their saliva. If I win... heheh.” Twain grinned. “They will have to admit they’re wrong!”

While Twain answered Tang Jing’s question, the other reporters finally reacted. They knew that reasoning was not going to work with the man, so they were ready to ask their questions.

Unexpectedly, after Twain answered Tang Jing’s question, he raised his hand to signal for everyone’s silence. “Well, ladies and gentlemen. Time’s up. I should get on the bus and set off. See you after the game!” With that, he turned and jumped onto the bus. Without waiting for the group of reporters to react, the bus door closed.

Everyone saw Tony Twain standing inside the door and smiling at them through the windows. Consequently, these people realized that they had been duped again.

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George Wood, who would wear the captain’s armband in the game for the starting lineup, was quiet all the way from the hotel to the stadium. The others either listened to music to relax or took a nap to adjust their state of mind. Only he sat with a serious face.

Kerslake noticed the kid while they were still on the bus. When he got off the bus, he whispered to Twain, “I always think George is too serious. He has the biggest task in this game... is he nervous about it?”

Twain looked at the team captain, who was walking at the front of the line and shrugged. “Have you ever seen him nervous about a game?”

“Umm...” Kerslake thought carefully. Wood was seldom nervous. Twain used to say that if Stuart Pearce had a heart of oak, then George Wood’s heart must have been made of diamond.

A diamond is the hardest natural matter in the world. Twain’s remark described George Wood’s character as tough and strong with very few big mood swings.

While Twain did not think that George Wood would be nervous about playing in this game, he felt that Kerslake’s concerns were justified. Before an important game, it was better to make sure everything was in order. He decided to speak to Wood alone and figure out his current state of mind.

Therefore, when the team went out to warm up, Twain followed Wood outside.

“George, I feel that there’s something off with you today. You’re quieter than usual today. Do you have anything on your mind?”

“No.”

“Don’t tell me... you’re nervous?” Twain glanced at Wood.

Wood stopped in his tracks and turned to look at Twain. "I'm not nervous. Just don't want to talk."

"You don't want to talk... Can you tell me why?"

"I didn't take part in last year's final, so I want to play this game like it is the final. Just now I've been trying to think back to what it was like on the day of the final last season."

When he heard Wood say that, Twain did not know what to say. He still remembered very well the reason why Wood was unable to attend last season's final.

"George, you... Did you resent me after?" he asked carefully.

Wood looked at him strangely. "Why would I resent you?"

"Because I insisted on getting you on the field, which caused you to accumulate the yellow cards and be suspended. If I had replaced you in advance, you would have been able to play in that final."

Wood thought about it and then replied, "if the team was eliminated because you had me replaced earlier... then I would have resented you."

Twain smiled. He slapped Wood hard on the shoulder and said, "don't take yourself too seriously, son! Us being eliminated after we replaced you? I wouldn't allow such a thing to happen."

"It's already in the past, so you can say anything." Wood was noncommittal about Twain's big talk.

Twain also knew that that hindsight was 20/20, so he changed the subject and said, "You said that you were replaying that final in your head just now. How did that go?"

"If you had not come to me to talk, I would have finished it."

Twain grinned. "Very well, it looks like you're confident. Then I won't say all this crap. I know you want to say that what I'm saying is crap, right? Well, then I won't say anything. But you can use action to prove what you have just said is not crap."

Wood gave a grunt. Twain shoved him a little from behind. "Go out and warm up. Don't let those players from Barcelona wait."

After watching Wood run out, Twain turned and walked back to the locker room. The boos outside were getting louder. If he went out again, it probably would become louder. As "the ultimate boss" that Barcelona loathed, he would lose face if he showed up too early.

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As the team warmed up amid the earth-shattering boos, Twain was busy with the final preparations alone in the locker room. His preparation was not to put the tactics on the tactical board, but to sort out the newspapers — English, Spanish, Catalan, there was even a Chinese newspaper — on a table in front of him.

When the players came back from their warm-up, they saw the various colorful and eye-catching newspapers placed on the table. Everyone was baffled and did not know what the boss had in store for them during the precious time before the game.

As soon as everyone was in, the locker room door was closed and Twain sat beside the table, clearing his throat.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is Tony reporting the news now. Tony Twain will take you through the latest news anecdotes and gossip from around the world.”

Everyone who looked forward to the boss’ antics laughed.

Twain laughed with them. This was the result he wanted. He wanted them to be full of fighting spirit, but not nervous. When everyone’s laughter subsided, he picked up several newspapers and showed them to everyone.

“Mundo Deportivo analyzed and demonstrated from ten perspectives and finally came to an ‘authoritative’ conclusion that we cannot defeat the invincible Second Dream Team in this away game. Sport stated that the Nottingham Forest manager, Tony Twain, is bluffing again. It was a ploy to disguise fears and weaknesses.

“There are also some unpronounceable tabloids which claimed that Nottingham Forest’s entry to last season’s Champions League final was just a spark of luck, because no one taking it seriously would go to Paris. Now Barcelona’s home game is a good opportunity for Nottingham Forest to see how the Second Dream Team will crush the pseudo-strong team back to its original form. Let the powerful Barcelona show the ignorant Forest team what a real strong team and what a real ... f**king European champion looks like.”

Twain added the last foul word himself.

“Guys, these are all genuine media reviews. I’m not making these up.” Twain shook the newspapers in his hand, causing a crunching noise. “These newspapers are on sale in every corner of Barcelona, and they represent what this city really thinks of us. It’s really hostile.”

He threw the newspapers on the table, and some of them slid to the ground, but he did not lean over to pick them up. He did not even glance at the miserable papers. He had just tossed them aside after he made use of them.

Twain got up from his chair, looked at everyone in the locker room and very seriously said, “obviously we have been looked down upon and underestimated! It upsets me. We have been completely disrespected. What should we do?” He laughed again, and the expression on his face changed as if it were summer in Nottingham. “It’s actually very simple. Use our victory to force the haughty Barcelona team to bow their heads. They don’t think we can win, so we’ll show them! They think it’s a great opportunity for the Second Dream Team to teach us, then let’s show them who’s going to teach whom!”

Watching the positive change in everyone’s expression, Twain took advantage of the momentum and roared, “who do they think we are?! We’re their creditor, the Nottingham Forest team!”

Yes, we are Barcelona’s creditor of a high-interest loan and we have come to collect the interest today.

Chapter 505: George Wood’s Final

When Barcelona appeared, Camp Nou broke out in a deafening song. When the broadcast introduced the Nottingham Forest players, the song turned into boos. Luckily, the players were used to away games being like this.

As Twain stood in front of the technical area, the boos and abuse continuously streamed in from the stands behind him. Kerslake came to hand Twain the iPod in his hand. However, Twain waved his hand and refused, "No need, David."

"The swearing..." Kerslake pointed to the grandstand behind him.

"It's nothing. I don't understand Spanish anyway. That's the good thing about not learning a foreign language."

Although he said that, Twain could understand the universally used "fuck," but he did not want to use his earphones today to avoid the boos. It was not an ordinary league tournament and the opponent was not the superfluous Reading team. This was the Champions League Round of 16 game and their opponent was Barcelona. He had to listen with his own ears to how fierce the boos were at the Camp Nou and feel his opponent's fear firsthand.

Indeed, Twain took this as Barcelona's fear. Why were their boos and abuse so fierce? Because fear was hidden in their hearts and they feared that there was a chance their team would lose to Nottingham Forest at home. Hence, they could only use outrageous boos and abuse to disrupt the game with the Forest team.

Twain shrugged at the old trick.

Kerslake took a seat again. He did not want to stand on the sidelines and be a target of abuse for the Barcelona fans alongside Twain. Twain did not care if he was mentally strong enough, he did not train to be at that level.

While Twain and Kerslake talked on the sidelines, the players from both teams had begun to shake hands with each other on the field.

The camera closely followed Ronaldinho. Without a doubt, he was currently the core of Barcelona and the key figure that would determine the outcome of this game.

As he faced this constantly provocative opponent, the normally happy-looking Brazilian did not smile and shook hands with the other party with a serious expression. When he came to George Wood, he deliberately lingered longer on him.

The Forest team had added some new faces since the last time they had played Barcelona, but Ronaldinho knew most of them except George Wood, whom he was unfamiliar with. He only heard from the coaching staff that this player was tough in his defense and for him to be more careful in the game. He did not know anything else.

With his tanned-skin and a head of black curly hair, the rather good-looking lad looked more like an actor than a defensive midfielder with a rough style. In his mind, the English players who played dirty had to look brutal and fierce, with a five-o'clock shadow and a clean-shaven head to fully highlight their characters, and glowered the entire time.

This man in front of him completely upended his previous impression of the English players.

He extended his hand and shook hands with George Wood. His hand was indeed strong...

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“Barcelona hasn’t changed much compared to last year’s Champions League final, while Nottingham Forest has brought in a number of new players. But for this game, Twain has deployed almost all of last season’s old lineup. Both van Nistelrooy and van der Vaart are on the bench. The two men have proved their strength and secured their strong positions after they joined the Forest team half a season ago. What is Manager Twain’s reason for putting them on the bench?”

“This is why: I think the media’s analysis is quite sound. Twain’s boast before the game was nothing more than a diversion of everyone’s attention. This away game will be very hard. He had put the main players on the bench, precisely to protect these important players to prepare for the next round back in Nottingham home ground. After all, he had stirred up this game with his declarations before this game. It would not be worth it if his players were to be injured during the game. Everyone knows that the Forest team has the smallest number of First Team players among the twenty teams in the English Premier League. They can’t afford to sustain any injuries.”

There was some truth in what the La Liga guest commentator said. Taking a look at the Forest team’s current lineup for the defensive line, Ayala was not eligible to represent Nottingham Forest in this game because he already had represented Valencia in the Champions League.

In such an important game, Twain could only send the young center back partners, Piqué and Kompany. This was also the main evidence that made Barcelona’s media think Twain was just boasting. They did not think that these two kids could be relied on to prevent the repeated attacks from Ronaldinho, Eto’o, Messi, and so on.

“Piqué was a good player from Barcelona’s youth training academy, La Masia. We acknowledge his talent, but he is still a bit tender against an opponent like Barcelona in the Champions League. As for Kompany? He has done well in the Forest team for a young man, but he’s not even twenty yet! Tony Twain is really out of players to deploy.” Originally, the special guest only did commentary on La Liga, but because the match was held in Barcelona, he was brought in by the television station to be a commentator. Other than a few game videos, his knowledge of the Forest team was based on media coverage. In terms of real understanding, he did not know more than Tang Jing, who was standing among the press.

“Taking another look at the forward line: in place of the experienced striker, van Nistelrooy, is another young man! The Danish striker, Nicklas Bendtner. He has been selected for the Denmark national team, but what level is the Denmark national team at?” The sardonic tone in this remark was obvious enough. “Eastwood is a good striker, but he has not been in stable condition since he got hurt and he’s only just good. I think in this starting lineup, only Franck Ribéry counts as a real star and the only outstanding player who can decide the direction of this game. Rijkaard also must be able to tell. As long as Ribéry is closely marked, the Forest team’s attack will not be any threat. And in the face of the defensive line manned by the bunch of kids, the Barcelona fans only need to think about how many goals to score and not how to score goals.”

The half-baked commentator completely neglected George Wood who wore the Nottingham Forest captain's armband. Fortunately, it was an explanation and commentary for the Spanish audience. Otherwise the Nottingham Forest fans would have surely hurled abuse at the man in the television.

Right next door, the English commentators and guest pundits were also apprehensive about Twain's lineup.

This lineup was almost the same as last year's final, in which the Forest team did not beat Barcelona. Could this year's lineup beat Barcelona? The difference between them and their Spanish counterparts was that they did not ignore George Wood. They said, "of course, we have George Wood in this game. But what about it? Wood is a defensive midfielder and his job is to help defend. After all, the Forest team's two center backs are too young. Speaking of which, Wood is also rather young, but his steady performance on the field always makes us forget that he is only twenty-one years old. Wood's mission is to defend. But what about the offense? Van der Vaart, the core of offense organization, and van Nistelrooy, the main center forward are not in the starting lineup. This is really a baffling arrangement. Are they depending Ribéry alone? Ribéry's performance this season has declined slightly from his first two seasons. In short, people are very worried about this game. We certainly don't want to see England's representative, Nottingham Forest, lose this away game. No one likes to lose — even if this team is not a likeable team in England's league."

While everyone puzzled over the lineup, Twain stood on the sidelines and endured boos from the rival fans.

Only he and the Forest team's coaching unit knew why he arranged it this way.

Why did he not use the new players who joined the team last summer? Was it because they wanted to preserve their strength for the second leg of the competition, or that they were worried about those players getting hurt? Twain had another consideration. He spent so much effort before the game to stir up his players' hatred of Barcelona and make them understand how humiliating it was to lose to this team last year, but these methods only worked on the old players, and for the new players who had not experienced the humiliating defeat of the last season, such incitement was somewhat odd, so the effect would not be obvious.

In an away game, determination and drive were most important. Twain let the players who had experienced the defeat start, in order not to waste the drive that he had stirred up. Consequently, van Nistelrooy and van der Vaart who were not injured and whose form did not decline, had to sit on the bench.

Only those who had experienced that unforgettable failure were in this game and would try their hardest to win the game to prove themselves again.

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While the commentators chattered on about the analysis on how the Forest team would fail, the game had already begun. As Nottingham Forest kicked off first, the referee's whistle had just sounded before it was quickly drowned out the thunderous boos at Camp Nou.

Eastwood passed the ball that Bendtner kicked to Mikel Arteta and ran forward. Camp Nou could accommodate about 100,000 people. The earth-shattering boos raged against the Nottingham Forest

players, but no one's knees would weaken in this situation. With Twain's tenacity, the Forest team was currently like a spring, the harder the opponent pressed, the more powerful the rebound was.

It might have been better if the Barcelona fans did not boo. The more they hissed, the stronger the entire Forest team's desire for vengeance became.

After Arteta stopped the football, he did not rush to pass it forward. Even if he was eager for revenge, it was necessary that he must remain calm as the central midfield commander on the field.

He shifted the football crosswise to the captain, George Wood.

The information that Barcelona had learned was that George Wood was an excellent defensive midfielder who formed a solid barrier in front of the center backs. His special features were his ferocious interceptions, excellent headers, amazing speed and explosive force, as well as inexhaustible stamina.

All the information was summed up like this. As for his ability to attack, it was not mentioned in the information in Rijkaard's hands.

The football rarely stayed at Wood's feet for more than half a minute. He always quickly passed the ball. He seldom dribbled, crosswise or forward.

The Barcelona coaching staff believed that this man would only cause little trouble with his offense, so they did not need to defend against him. As a result, they put the focus of their defense on dealing with Ribéry.

After Arteta passed the ball, he ran forward, which drew the attention of the Barcelona midfielders. Based on last year's Champions League final experience, Wood, as a defensive midfielder, should pass the ball to Arteta, who was plugging ahead, and leave it to the Spaniard to organize the attack. And as for Wood, he would stay in the back field to prevent the opponent from intercepting the ball and fight back after he passed the ball.

This set piece had been played in the Forest midfield for almost more than two seasons. The only difference was George Wood's partner. The earliest partner was Albertini, which later became Arteta and van der Vaart this season. If Wood was suspended due to a red card, his job would be given to Albertini or the Chinese player, Sun Jihai, and Twain's task for them would be predominately defense. This man was primarily a conservative manager. If he had coached Barcelona, he would have been ousted by the picky fans in less than a month.

Therefore, after they clearly figured out the Forest team's usual routine, they just needed to cut off George Wood's link to the other midfielders and the Forest team's offense would be paralyzed. It did not matter who Wood was going to pass the ball to. It only mattered who would receive the ball.

As this game was a home match, Rijkaard deployed his favorite and best in a 4-3-3 attack formation. None of the three midfielders was specifically in charge of defense. They were all offensive players. This lineup mainly relied on powerful attacks to suppress the opponent's midfield. When Arteta plugged ahead, the three Barcelona midfielders just let him go to be dealt with by the full-backs. They believed that as long as the football returned to their feet, they would be able to fully control the pace of the game.

Ronaldinho ran towards Wood and he looked like he wanted to intercept ball. Wood looked at his opponent and kicked his leg to pass the ball.

Rijkaard saw this scene off the field and leaned back against his chair. It was exactly as the intelligence had stated. George Wood did not know how to do anything else but defense.

Matters became simpler. It changed into how Barcelona would blow apart the Forest team's goal as soon as possible by attacking and defending within half of the field and make them have a chain reaction collapse.

When Ronaldinho saw the football being passed, he did not turn to give chase. Defense was not his job. An artist could not be expected to do a bricklayer's job, could he?

But just as he was about to brush past Wood, he saw Wood running straight ahead.

What...What's going on?

After he received the football, Arteta did not dribble it. He simply kicked the football back and it landed at the foot of George Wood who continued ahead.

"Barcelona wants to crush Nottingham Forest with offense at home, but Twain's team does not intend to defend in this away game! George Wood dribbles the ball as he drives it ahead!"

Indeed, it came as a surprise to Barcelona when Arteta suddenly passed the football back to George Wood. But if they were so easily fooled, they would not be Barcelona. They quickly adjusted their defensive goal and this time, it was aimed directly at George Wood, who was "poor at dribbling the ball."

Their idea was simple. Wood could not dribble the ball well, so it would be easy to intercept his ball. It was even better this way. They could intercept Wood's ball and directly launch a counterattack to avoid facing the ferocious defensive midfielder.

Just as Puyol rushed up, Wood passed the ball again. Instead of passing it to Arteta or Ribéry, who was closer to his side, he made an unexpected long pass of nearly thirty meters diagonally across to the right flank to Ashley Young.

"That... was truly an accurate pass!" The commentator exclaimed after his mouth had been wide open with surprise for quite a while.

He was not exaggerating. The pass was indeed accurate. Ashley Young extended his leg and hooked the football down during a high-speed run.

Seeing the scene, Twain looked back at the substitutes' bench from where he stood on the sidelines. He met Albertini's eyes and the two men laughed. It looked like most of their efforts this season had not been in vain.

Ashley Young caught the attention of the Barcelona players after taking the ball. No one noticed that George Wood did not follow his usual tactic to run back to defend after he passed the ball. Instead, he continue to move forward.

Facing Barcelona's left-back, the new world champion, the Italian Gianluca Zambrotta, Ashley Young greeted him fearlessly. Then at a very close distance, he suddenly jabbed the ball and cut inside. Zambrotta reacted quickly and immediately turned his body to block Ashley Young's path from continuing to break through.

Did he lose his chance?

No, Ashley Young basically did not even think to dribble the ball into the penalty area. He swept his gaze across the middle and sent the ball straight out.

It was not a high ball pass in front of the goal. It was a low-lying pass that swept out of the penalty area.

"George Wood — WOW! That was close!"

The man who had rushed to the middle to directly make a long shot without stopping the ball was not Ribéry or Arteta, let alone Eastwood, but the one who was least likely to appear in this position to make such a move. It was George Wood.

His direct shot was slightly above the crossbar, which made Valdés break out in a cold sweat. He jumped up but did not touch the football. He saw that the football was about to fall into the net. Unexpectedly, that did not happen. The ball flew out in a straight line instead.

Although he was in a bit of pain after he fell from midair, Valdés breathed a sigh of relief. He would have been so embarrassed if he had let in the first opening shot.

"Oh my god! That's too bad! What a shame!" The British commentator wished he were allowed to use foul language to show the intensity of his disappointment. "It is rare to see George Wood take such a terrific shot and see Barcelona so completely defenseless. There was not a single Barcelona player around when Wood shot at the top of the penalty arc!"

Twain walked back, and Kerslake said to him, "it looks like George is in fighting form today."

Twain grinned as he glanced at the Barcelona technical area next to them and said, "of course, he has waited for this game for almost a year. This is the Champions League final that belongs to him."

Chapter 506: Open the First Record

He did not score a goal, but Wood was not annoyed. He turned around and ran back. He even high-fived Arteta who covered him on the way. Ronaldinho attentively watched this man and found his facial expression still as water, without any display of emotions at all.

What was he thinking? Perhaps he did not feel it was a shame that the ball did not go in? Or ... he thought that he still had a chance to threaten Barcelona's goal again?

If you really think so, that would be a grave mistake!

Valdés drove the ball out. After Eto'o received it, he passed it to Ronaldinho.

The Brazilian was the core of Barcelona. He had just gotten the ball and George Wood immediately got closer.

“It’s no surprise that George Wood is in charge of defending Ronaldinho. If there’s anyone in the Forest team who can cause Ronaldinho some trouble, it is possibly number 13 here. This is the first time Wood has defended against Ronaldinho in a game! In last year’s Champions League final, Wood missed the game because of his suspension from accumulating too many yellow cards!”

Ronaldinho certainly knew that George Wood made a name for himself in defense. When he faced Wood’s direct defense, he dared not underestimate his opponent.

After he tried to make a feint, Ronaldinho found the man opposite him remained unmoved. He frowned and passed the football to Messi at the flank.

Messi was specifically marked by another player, so Wood did not follow to get in on the action. He continued to follow not far from Ronaldinho and carefully watched the Brazilian’s movements at all times.

On the right flank, Messi had a one-on-one grapple with the Forest team’s left-back, Gareth Bale. Eto’o was already in the penalty area, ready to take a shot.

It looked like Barcelona wanted to use an offensive routine where they would make the pass from the flank and take the shot from the middle.

Just as the Nottingham Forest players put their defensive attention at the front of the goal, Messi feinted a shot, but sent the football back to Ronaldinho in the middle.

Ronaldinho had wanted to immediately do a long shot after he stopped the ball, but when he stopped the ball, he saw George Wood appear in front of him like a ghost.

His foot, which had swung up for the shot, became a huge weakness, as Ronaldinho briefly lost control of the ball.

George Wood timed it accurately and suddenly poked the ball away from the Brazilian’s foot.

“Terrific tackle! Looks like Ronaldinho has met a fierce rival!”

Ronaldinho was a little astounded. He initially thought his ruse to break through to the inside to provide support had deceived the person in front of his eyes. He did not expect himself he would be marked by him again after having just pulled out to receive Messi’s pass.

This was the second time this season that he had felt this feeling. The first time was in an away game during the group stage with Chelsea, where he had been marked so closely by the opposing Dutch defender, Boulahrouz, that he had nowhere to put his energy.

In that game, Mourinho had had Boulahrouz closely mark Ronaldinho and make a grab for the ball whenever he had it. He did not even hesitate to use foul play to disrupt Ronaldinho’s pace of his ball control. The tactic was a success, and the soul of Barcelona could not play at all, and had lost last season’s Champions League game to Chelsea.

In this game, it looked like Twain intended to copy Mourinho’s tactics. However, George Wood was more aggressive in defense, had a better strength, and better stamina.

The commentator was right in stating that Ronaldinho had encountered a tough opponent this time. As this was the first encounter between both parties due to George Wood's suspension, Ronaldinho had been unhindered by Nottingham Forest and played skillfully in the last game. No one could have posed any threat to him at all.

If the Brazilian still played this game with the expectation of the previous game, Twain believed he would suffer for it.

After he intercepted the ball, Wood passed the football to Arteta. He did not participate in the attack again. He simply waited in the rear for the defense.

"George Wood is a rising defensive star player in Nottingham Forest, and his career is filled with legendary experiences. He has been selected for the England national team as a result of his stable and excellent play in the team and has played in Germany as one of the twenty-three players. Unfortunately, Eriksson believed more in big-name players like Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard. As a young man participating in the World Cup for the first time, Wood did not receive a minute of playing time." The Spanish commentator introduced the young man who was still unfamiliar to the Spanish spectators. "But looking at his performance, it should only be a matter of time before he becomes a main force of England."

While the commentator introduced Wood, Nottingham Forest was attacking, and Ronaldinho did not run back to participate in the defense. He and George Wood stayed where they were. He frowned as he appraised the young man not far in front of him.

Through these two direct confrontations, he could already give George Wood a simple evaluation in his mind.

He had excellent stamina, was fast with his footwork, and decisive. He was calm and steady, and could not be easily fooled. Once he had decided, he would never give up midway. It was really hard to deal with such a defensive midfielder.

He brought to mind the the former captain and current manager of the Brazil national team, Dunga.

It looked like he was going to have to change his strategy.

When faced with such a player, in order to have more ball control, dribbling the ball was not feasible. The result would be either the ball would be intercepted, or he would be met with a foul. That obviously would disrupt the team's offensive pace. What would be the most effective strategy?

It was to pass the ball.

Ronaldinho decided to reduce the frequency with which he dribbled and the amount of time he held the ball. He would pass the football out as much as he could. If possible, he would also pass it as far as possible.

Since Rijkaard had taken charge, Barcelona had gradually formed a set of their own offensive tactics which were currently improving. The lineup of the players was stable and had rapport. Ronaldinho believed it would not be difficult to do it.

Now was a good time for Barcelona to create a new dynasty. How could they be thwarted by an insignificant defensive midfielder?

Nottingham Forest's offense was taken down by Valdés, who threw the ball to launch a counterattack. Barcelona immediately turned defense into offense. Barcelona may not have put out enough forces for its defense, but when they attacked, they were definitely not short of players.

After the football had been passed three times and bypassed twice, it was back at Ronaldinho's feet.

Wood still pounced over. Ronaldinho looked at Wood's right side, which it looked as if he wanted to break through from there. When he saw that Wood's body's center of gravity clearly leaned towards that side, he suddenly moved the football to the other side. Wood did not react. He just stayed where he was and watched helplessly as the football flew over his other side.

The diversionary pass was exactly what Ronaldinho was good at.

When he saw this scene, the Catalan commentator exclaimed, "Ronaldinho's pass has fooled George Wood! This is what a real football magician is! He's just getting warmed up ... Beautifully done!"

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Twain just shrugged his shoulders when he saw Ronaldinho's performance on the sidelines. He was even happy that Ronaldinho did this because the Brazilian, who was afraid and could not dribble the ball, was not a threat anymore. No matter how beautiful that pass was, it still required his teammates to cooperate. Ronaldinho was in a good shape, but he could not guarantee that everyone in Barcelona was in a good shape.

George Wood had brilliantly completed the task given to him.

This kid was growing every day. In the face of the world's number one midfielder, he did not cower at all and was as calm as he was on the training ground.

Although Twain had turned him from a mover to a professional player, these specific qualities were the result of the constant efforts by Kerslake and Albertini. He was thankful to have these good helpers around him, and a ham-fisted manager get to this point today.

Albertini came over and sat down beside Twain. The pair did not converse. Their gazes met, and they turned their attention to the field again.

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Ronaldinho passed the ball to Messi. Barcelona's intention for this game was clear: if Ronaldinho met with trouble in the middle, the offensive focus would shift to Messi because Gareth Bale, the player in charge of defense for Nottingham Forest was younger than twenty years old.

Rijkaard and the entire Barcelona coaching unit, who studied Nottingham Forest's game videos, thought Bale was a typical type of full back who was heavy on offense and light on defense. He liked to go up to assist and would not be back immediately after his assists. In that way, he created a lot of gaps behind him which could be used by Barcelona.

If Rijkaard and his coaching staff were able to study it, why would Twain not do the same?

Twain certainly knew Bale's special trait – he was stronger in offense than defense. In that case, why did he not deploy Leighton Baines who was stronger in defense over Bale? Quite simply, Twain needed Bale's offense and set-piece ability. But to make up for his lack of defense, Twain asked Bale not to rush into attack within fifteen minutes after the start of the game, but to concentrate on defense and withstand Barcelona's repeated offense which made use of their home advantage.

Based on the current situation on the field, Twain's arrangement was correct. After the start of the game, Barcelona launched a series of strong attacks on Bale's side. If Bale also pressed on the assist, the Forest team's defensive line would certainly be scattered by Barcelona. Usually during a competition, George Wood would come over to cover the gap left by Bale, but it was not possible today. He had a more important task.

Similarly, as a young man, Messi was more famous than Bale. The latter was only famous locally, and the former could be labeled as the successor to Maradona, the king of football – though it was a cheap label in Argentina, since there were a lot of appearances of “the successor to the king of football” in the 2006 World Cup in Germany. Messi was currently recognized as the most likely candidate to achieve the level of Maradona.

Bale was very careful in the face of the esteemed Barcelona player. He remembered Twain's exhortation to him before the game, “... Defense is something you need to concentrate on in the early stages of the game. Watch out for Messi.”

Ronaldinho was temporarily unable to perform so Messi took on the responsibility of Barcelona's attack. He was very comfortable in the face of the slightly nervous Bale. After all, he was used to big events.

Messi paced himself and deliberately slowed down to lure Bale to come up and defend. Then while Bale leaned up for a moment, he suddenly poked the ball and accelerated to shake him off.

Bale had no idea that Messi would break through so quickly. He was caught off guard. As he turned hastily, he slipped and fell to the ground.

Just as the Catalan commentator prepared to shout that “Messi broke through Nottingham Forest's defense,” Messi was blocked by a man.

The Catalan commentator stayed quiet for a few seconds when he saw who the man was.

The man in front of Messi was not George Wood, who could run endlessly, but formerly the best player in Barcelona youth academy, the Spain national youth team's main center back, and the former Barcelona vice president's grandson, Piqué.

“Piqué, once the pride of the defensive line in La Masia, is now ... our opponent.”

When Messi was not yet a famous superstar footballer in the football world, he and Piqué played in the same youth team. At the time, they were teammates and along with Fàbregas, had a good friendship. They even talked about their future ideal together during the training, which was to play for Barcelona and win all championships for Barcelona. It was almost the dream of almost all the young players at La Masia during that time.

Messi was a very talented player, but many who were able to get into the Barcelona youth team's main lineup were talented. Was the talent of Arsenal's new core, Fàbregas, worse than Messi's?

Ahead of him was Piqué.

Messi was momentarily distracted, but he immediately regained his cool gaze. He seemed to see Piqué smiling at with an expression that seemed to say, “come on, boy. Just like when we played on La Masia’s training ground. I’m going to defend against you!”

Messi slowed down slightly to protect the ball. He was now on the edge of the penalty area and just needed to break through inside. Piqué absolutely did not dare to act lightly.

Piqué aimed at Messi sideways and was ready to turn around at any moment. He knew Messi’s strength and how good the kid, who had had growth hormone deficiency when he was young, was.

Messi made a gambit to pass, hoping to trick Piqué into losing his center of gravity. But Piqué remained unmoved and continued to stay sideways. He anchored his center of gravity and watched the ball at Messi’s feet.

From the corner of his eyes, Messi suddenly glimpsed Bale getting up to give chase after his fall. He realized that ahead of him, Piqué was only bluffing. The real purpose was to delay the time and wait for Bale to converge an attack in the front and back. He decided not to dawdle there with Piqué, but to force a breakthrough.

Messi jabbed the ball and cut cross inside to break through. Piqué followed suit and leaned his body forward, intending to stop Messi from accelerating.

At this moment, Messi suddenly smashed the ball and stopped hurriedly, in order to change to break through from behind Piqué!

Almost at the same time, Piqué also stopped. With his left foot firmly planted on the ground, he quickly turned around and stretched out his right foot to kick the ball.

Messi saw a leg suddenly appear in front of his eyes and could not react in time. Piqué intercepted the football and he fell to the ground in the penalty area due to the sudden stoppage!

Loud boos broke out in the stands of Camp Nou. They wanted the referee to give a penalty kick. But the referee saw the whole process clearly on the penalty line. Piqué defensive action was clean, and he did not foul at all.

After Piqué intercepted the ball, he got up to kick the football to Bale who came back to help. Bale then passed the football to his teammates in front of him and the Forest team re-organized the attack.

And Piqué, who had completed his defensive task, looked back at Messi, lying on the turf. He hesitated for a moment before he walked back and extended his hand to his former teammate.

Messi took Piqué’s hand and got up. He said nothing and ran back. Piqué watched his back. His eyes quickly shifted away and rested on his Forest teammates. At present, the Forest team had launched another attack. This was what he cared about.

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“Piqué’s beautiful tackle managed to stop Messi. Now it’s a great opportunity for the Forest team to fight back. A number of Barcelona players had rushed up to prepare for the attack just now. They might

not have thought Messi's dribbling could be cut off so easily. There are not many players back to defend yet. Good heavens! The player who is dribbling the ball is... George Wood."

The commentator was startled, but he was not mistaken. At the moment, the player dribbling the ball to participate and organize the offense of the Forest team's counterattack was not Arteta, but the unexpected George Wood.

After Bale passed the ball to Arteta, George Wood suddenly let go of Ronaldinho and rushed forward at full speed. As if their hearts beat as one, Arteta accurately passed the football to his feet.

Wood's pace was still a little messy when he first received it, but he quickly adjusted his pace and strode forward to dribble the ball. He had an advantage, which was discovered by Twain at Albertini's reminder and that was Wood took big steps to dribble the ball. It matched very well with his speed, and he held his head up and rarely looked down at the ball. This kid had not slacked on his practice of basic skills, and it showed.

Xavi wanted to come up and intercept Wood's ball, but his strength was not on the same level as Wood at all. Wood just turned his body and separated Xavi from the football. Xavi kicked Wood in the leg while he ran. Both staggered, but with different outcomes: Xavi staggered and fell to the ground, whereas Wood quickly rebalanced and continued to dribble the ball.

"Stop him!" Puyol shouted in front of Wood as Márquez rushed up.

Puyol was in the back, protecting Márquez at all times. If the Mexican was breached, he would immediately pounce over to aid. He did not believe that Wood's footwork skills were good enough to quickly dribble the ball past two people.

Just as Márquez rushed up, Wood suddenly passed the ball. He did not pass it on to Ribéry and Ashley Young who followed at a high speed on the two flanks. It was passed on to Freddy Eastwood, who was received it in the penalty area.

After Eastwood received the ball, he swung his foot as if he wanted to shoot directly. He had scored a number of goals this season from this position. Puyol dared not ignore it and rushed up to block the shot.

However, Eastwood's shot was fake. The pass was real. He pushed the football to Bendtner who was a little ahead. Zambrotta had been trailing at the back as he knew that Bendtner would be an attack point for the Forest team. He had anticipated correctly. Therefore, the Italian did not hesitate to press toward Bendtner to constrict him so that he could not shoot.

Unexpectedly, Bendtner did not intend to shoot either. He immediately pushed the ball sideways again after receiving Eastwood's pass.

"It's a wall pass!" exclaimed the commentator.

It was a wall pass between Eastwood and Bendtner, and it also began as a continuous triangular pass from George Wood.

Eastwood charged out from the heavy siege and received the ball in the penalty area, but was not offside. Now he did not even have a Barcelona defensive player around him!

Márquez could not get back in time from George Wood's side and Puyol was still at the spot where Eastwood was, but he had come up empty. Zambrotta was entangled with Bendtner, but the football was not there!

Eastwood saw the football roll over and he looked up to glance at Valdés, in a hurry to strike. He swung his leg and made it look like he was going to volley a shot, but his kick became a poke when it came in contact with the football.

"A lob! Gorgeous — and the ball's in! Freddy Eastwood!! He opened the first record for Nottingham Forest! They bagged the Barcelona goal at Camp Nou! The first half of the game only just started ten minutes ago, and Nottingham Forest leads Barcelona by 1:0! What an unexpected start. Tony Twain had said before this game that the match was in his orbit. Perhaps this time he isn't trying to divert the attention, maybe he was... for real!"

Chapter 507: A Powerful Enemy

"A lob! Beautiful — and the ball's in!" Along with the excited voice of the commentator on the television, there was an even greater cheer in Kenny Burns' Forest bar.

"Nice job, Romani Rooney!"

"Let them see what we're capable of!"

"Woo hoo—"

"A toast to a beautiful goal!"

The fans clamored together, and golden beer sprinkled toward the ceiling while Kenny Burns smiled and watched this group of excited fans.

After he watched them for a while, he turned his eyes back to the television set and the image of Camp Nou through the television screen.

The Forest players were celebrating by stacking up like a human pyramid. This was one of their favorite ways to celebrate. Twain naturally had a strict ban against pressing the manager at the bottom of the stack to celebrate after a goal.

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At the Camp Nou Stadium, the home team fans erupted in loud boos after a brief silence, which dampened the Forest fans' cheers.

But the Forest players were not affected by the boos of the home team fans. They were unbridled with joy and acted as if no one else was there as they celebrated at their opponent's home.

It felt good to lead Barcelona by one goal within ten minutes of the game starting and under such unfavorable circumstances!

Twain stood up and kept pumping his fists after his team's goal to show off to the Barcelona fans.

Don't you claim to be "the second Dream Team"? Let me tell you today why this is only "a second dream" instead of "the second Dream Team"!

The referee intervened and finally ended the overly excited celebrations of the Forest players. The Barcelona players had already placed the football in the center of the field and were a little impatient.

The televised footage closely followed Eastwood as the goalscorer. The commentator introduced this player with unique experience to the viewers, "Eastwood's leg was once broken by George Wood, the Nottingham Forest captain currently on the field and was reduced to the point where he could only play in an amateur league. Tony Twain eventually found him and gave him a chance to play in the professional league again. Although he has been injured repeatedly over the past few years, we can see that as long as he plays, he is able to score goals steadily. In Nottingham, he is called 'The Romani Rooney.' It is a pity that he does not represent England, he represents Wales."

When the players rushed up to celebrate Eastwood's goal by piling on top of each other just now, only the goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar and George Wood did not move from their original positions. The former did not move because it was too far away, while the latter was due to a well-known reason.

As the celebratory crowd dispersed, George Wood already stood in his position in the back half of the field, waiting for the other team to kick off. Eastwood also ran to the back, but instead of standing on the center circle line like Bendtner, he ran straight to George Wood, who was standing in the back and held out his hand.

The two men said nothing and just high-fived each other. Then Eastwood ran away again. Eastwood's attitude towards George Wood was much better than before, but the two men's closest interactions were limited to that. They still did not talk to, joke with, or greet each other when they met. They would never high-five each other off the field.

Twain just smiled when he saw this scene. A high five was always better than a scowl.

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The game started again, and Barcelona kicked off. Rijkaard had not expected to concede a goal so soon. Nottingham Forest was more tenacious than he had anticipated.

There was a marked change in the team compared to Nottingham Forest last year. Not only in their mental outlook, but also in their ability — he had to admit that the Nottingham Forest team before his eyes was indeed stronger.

And George Wood's actions were really unexpected. All the intelligence before this game stated that this player was "a defense genius but offense idiot." But looking at the goal just now, the "offense idiot" was able to pinpoint such a passing route during a high-speed run and pass the ball to where he wanted to.

When Rijkaard had been a football player, he had also been a defensive midfielder, and the kind who could defend and attack. He saw some of shades of his former self from the goal just now.

Isn't Barcelona always short of an outstanding defensive midfielder? Why don't I consider buying this number 13 in front of me? I can cultivate him well, and he may well be the second Rijkaard...

The Dutch manager made up his mind that when the game was over, regardless of the outcome, he was going to submit an application to the club in the hope that the top echelon could buy George Wood at any costs. With him, Barcelona's real dominance would not be a problem.

Looking at Nottingham Forest now, Ribery, Ashley Young, Bendtner, Eastwood and the others could boldly attack with George Wood around. And without Wood? Everyone had to bear the dual heavy tasks of offense and defense.

If there was such a player on his team, Ronaldinho, Xavi, Iniesta, Eto'o, Messi and the others could devote all their energy to the offense. Barcelona's offense was already powerful. If they could go all out, he believed there would be not be a team in the world that would be able to resist.

All of the above could now be said to be "beautiful wishes." He still had to regain his composure and put his heart into this game.

What if George Wood's offensive organization this time was not luck, but based on his true strength? How was Barcelona going to respond? Did he have to send someone to keep an eye on him? Barcelona only had three midfielders. Even if the two wingers withdrew and became five midfielders, how many of them could be in charge of defense?

Barcelona's midfield configuration for this game was Iniesta and Deco, as well as Xavi. The three strikers were Eto'o, Messi and Ronaldinho.

None of these six players specialized in defense.

Rijkaard had intended to crush Nottingham Forest with offense at home. The Forest team's toughness went far beyond his expectations. Not only they were not crushed, but they rebounded and retaliated.

Now that the team was behind a goal, Rijkaard had to make a choice as the manager. Should he strengthen the defense, or should he keep attacking?

This dilemma played in the Dutchman's mind for only a few seconds, and the answer was no longer in doubt. The Dutchman esteemed offense and Barcelona was the representative of the art of football; how could he be forced to resort to defense at home because of one player?

This is not my or my team's style.

Rijkaard got up from his seat, walked to the sidelines and whistled to attract the attention of all his players before he told the Barcelona players on the field with hand gestures — don't take this conceded goal to heart, keep attacking!

This was also in line with what the Barcelona players thought on the field. They would not know how to play defense even if he wanted them to....with six offensive players, how were they supposed to defend with four defenders plus a goalkeeper?

The best defense was offense. They could overcome their disadvantage with a more powerful offense.

Barcelona relaunched wave after wave of rapid offensive against Nottingham Forest. After they had taken the lead, Nottingham Forest temporarily opted to withdraw and decided to defend for a period before fighting back after Barcelona's momentum flagged.

There was a saying in the ancient Chinese book The Commentary of Zuo: “in war and courage, the first beating of the drum can drum up the courage, the second beating can lower it and the third beating will exhaust it.”

Twain was well aware that this argument could also be used in the football field. When the opponent was at its peak, they should not directly face it, but take the initiative to avoid. Once the opponent’s momentum flagged, then they should strike to achieve the desired effect.

Not only during this game, but at other times, too. Twain told his players these thing all the time, even during training or when watching the video after the game. Sometimes they would find themselves overtaken after they had just scored a goal. It was because the other team was eager to equalize the score after a goal had been conceded. The opponent’s fighting spirit did not drop immediately. Instead, there was a temporary boost. If the Forest team could not calm down and deal with it, and still think that their opponent was ashamed, the opponent could take this opportunity to score a goal and step up the pressure, and then it would be dangerous.

When would the morale of the opponent be lowered? When the opponent discovered that their countermeasure did not achieve any results and the other side’s defense was so solid and tenacious that they were somewhat despaired, then their morale would decline.

Because Twain continuously instilled this idea in his team, the Forest team was very unified in its thinking and immediately withdrew to the defense after they took the lead over Barcelona. George Wood, who just made a splash in the offense, became the player in the spotlight for defense once again.

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When confronted by George Wood, Ronaldinho chose to pass the ball. However, when he sent the ball out, he realized that his idea was useless. Nottingham Forest, which had gone head to head with Barcelona, suddenly chose to defend to the death — Indeed, they decided to completely defend to the end. The front of the Forest team’s goal was as if it was tightly wound by an iron hoop. It was crowded with players and was piled with people and legs as far as the eye could see. It was difficult for him to send the football to his teammates’ feet accurately.

Sure enough, the ball that was passed was kicked back out by Piqué.

Barcelona had to reorganize the offense.

Ronaldinho was amazed at how a team could make such a huge tactical change in such a short period of time. He was astounded at why the team could decisively give up the offense to defend itself after they took the lead.

He could not understand this tactical change. Could it be that the Nottingham Forest manager was truly a downright conservative as rumored? Did he think that a one-goal lead would let them laugh to the end and be the winner?

Ronaldinho clenched his fists.

The football once again reached the Brazilian’s feet. Due to his first two experiences, George Wood thought Ronaldinho would pass the ball at the first chance, so he did not rush up right away.

But he was wrong this time.

Ronaldinho knew there were too many players in front of him and it was useless to pass the ball. Breaking impenetrable defense generally required a long shot as this method was the simplest. In fact, there was another way and that was to break through individually. Although it was crowded, as long as he was skillful and bold, he could dribble the ball through the crowd to cut a path out of the stronghold.

Ronaldinho had full confidence in his skills. He seized hold of George Wood's momentary inattention to suddenly accelerate and change direction to rush past one side of Wood.

George Wood rushed forward to defend, but Ronaldinho stealthily jabbed the ball and bypassed him. After he skirted around Wood, the Brazilian football magician was not afraid even if there were more people in front of him.

He swerved his upper body and caused the incoming Arteta to lose his judgment, which caused his balance to be tilted. Ronaldinho immediately drew the football away from Arteta's side, and then confronted the looming Piqué. Within a very narrow space, he suddenly thrust the ball away and bypassed him.

Piqué completely did not think that Ronaldinho would dare to use the step over move in the crowded penalty area, where it was impossible to sprint. He was rooted to the spot where he had been bypassed and watched helplessly as Ronaldinho sidestepped around his other side.

"Beautiful! Simply fantastic... He's in the goal area, and Edwin van der Sar strikes! And He shoots—"

Ronaldinho wanted to lob the shot, but Edwin van der Sar was ready. Though his body fell to the ground, his right hand was raised high. Ronaldinho shot the football out and it struck van der Sar in the hand. The ball shot out of the end line off the hand.

"What a pity! He did not score. Edwin van der Sar defused the crisis in front of the Forest goal just in time! Although there was no goal, Ronaldinho presented us with a fine show of a personal breakthrough! Confronted with the Nottingham Forest's impenetrable defense, what other way can it be cracked besides a long shot? And that would be the Brazilian!"

The live television broadcast showed a shot of Ronaldinho's back. He had just got up from the ground and looked at the football that had fallen outside the end line.

"One man had crumbled nearly the Forest team's entire line of defense. And he even dared to attempt the step over in the narrow confines of the penalty box! If it wasn't him, others would be hard pressed to do it! It's just a shame Edwin van der Sar's save was just as wonderful. A beautiful attack and a beautiful defense! For now, just as Tony Twain had said before the game, this is a fantastic game!"

After Edwin van der Sar got up from the ground, he patted his big hands and yelled, "Focus your attention! Don't let him break through so easily! George!" he yelled Wood's name.

Wood turned to look at him.

Edwin van der Sar crossed his arms and shouted, "Lock him out!"

Wood nodded. What happened just now was caused by his carelessness. He had nothing to say to that.

After Twain glanced at Albertini, who was off the pitch, he left his seats and walked to the sidelines. He cupped his hands near his mouth and shouted towards the field, "George! Don't give him more than a meter of space! Stick to him!" He even made a pulling gesture.

Ronaldinho's sudden spurt of energy made the entire Forest team nervous. They came to their senses. Standing in front of them was the last season's Champions League champion, the FIFA World Player of the Year and the world's current number one midfielder. He had the individual ability to change a game. He was not an ordinary football star. He was a real superstar.

Arteta felt it was a little harsh when he saw that everyone seemed to remind Wood to pay attention to his defense, so he ran up to comfort his midfield partner, "Don't take it to heart, George. That man is not an ordinary player. He is very powerful. It's nothing to feel bad about if he bypassed you once, as long as we did not concede the goal..."

He realized that Wood did not seem to hear him. He just stared at Ronaldinho, who ran ahead to the corner flag area to prepare for the corner kick.

Just as he thought he had wasted his breath, Wood suddenly turned his head and asked, "Is he very powerful?"

Arteta almost did not respond. He wanted to roll his eyes at Wood, "Are you really a professional player? How can you not even know if Ronaldinho is powerful or not? He's currently the best player in the world. Even though I'm a little jealous, I have to say that. He's very powerful; he's extremely powerful."

When Wood heard what Arteta said, he nodded. "Then I'm relieved."

"Huh?"

"It's meaningless to win if he is not powerful enough." With that, Wood ran into the penalty area, ready to defend against the corner kick.

Arteta stood on the spot like a fool and looked at Wood's back until Edwin van der Sar yelled his name in front of the goal. "Are you with us? Mikel! Come back and defend! What are you doing standing out there?"

Running back, Arteta continued to stare at Wood, completely unaware of the situation around him. What Wood said to him just now alarmed him. He wanted his opponent to be stronger, but he was not worried about whether or not he could beat such a powerful enemy. Was he even human?

He saw Wood leap high in the crowd and press down on the Barcelona's Mexican center back, Márquez, to head the football out. The players around him swarmed out like the tide, and another crisis was eliminated.

Chapter 508: He Is Indeed Powerful

Defense came easily to George Wood.

“George Wood’s header lifted the siege! Barcelona’s corner kick did not pose any threat to the Forest team goal!”

“I think the reason Tony Twain was so full of confidence for this game must be because George Wood can play now. Wood has demonstrated his ability in the English Premier League, but Barcelona is clearly unfamiliar with him.”

While the commentator praised Wood, Ronaldinho thought about how to get rid of the annoying target in front of him.

It was the time for Barcelona’s counterattack, but George Wood followed the Brazilian like a shadow. Wherever Ronaldinho went, he went. Wood had not left his side since he had gotten rid of him that once time.

Now, Ronaldinho could only organize offense by passing the ball.

He tried to keep the ball as little as possible and send the ball as much as possible. That was Ronaldinho’s current countermeasure.

Was there no other way?

Of course not. What kind of player was Ronaldinho and what kind of team was Barcelona? It would be shocking if they were at their wit’s end because an entanglement with George Wood.

Rijkaard bit his finger as he thought about a countermeasure. Ronaldinho was the core of the team. Almost all offense revolved around him. If he was immobilized by George Wood, how was he going to adjust the team’s offense?

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Twenty-five minutes had passed, and the score was still 1:0. The visiting Nottingham Forest team was temporarily ahead.

Barcelona relentlessly attacked and did not falter in the face of the failures in their successive attacks.

Tony Twain clearly underestimated Barcelona’s energy. They were not demoralized because of their fruitless efforts. Instead, they were in high spirits and continued to threaten Forest’s penalty area. It was a great dishonor in the eyes of the Barcelona people to be behind by one goal at home by the opponent they did not want to lose to the most. How could they be willing to take things lying down?

Ronaldinho realized that George Wood had no intention of leaving his side to go defend against the others, so he suddenly came up with a scheme.

Xavi passed the ball forward and the Brazilian transferred the ball to Deco with his back towards George Wood. He ran towards the side and George Wood followed suit.

Ronaldinho led George Wood away and the center-front area of the Forest team’s penalty area was immediately vacant. Xavi cut in and Deco quickly passed the ball to him. There was less trouble in front of the Forest team’s penalty area without Wood.

Xavi made to look like he was going to pass the ball to the side, but he suddenly swung his leg to shoot instead.

Edwin van der Sar reacted quickly and flew to catch the football.

Even though the attack still had not cracked the Forest team's defense, the Barcelona players saw hope — Ronaldinho was no longer the heart of the offense, but he could divert the defensive hold on Barcelona. George Wood would be wherever he was. Once George Wood was lured away, the pressure on Barcelona's attack in the front would reduce significantly. Xavi's shot just now was the example.

Rijkaard got up from his seat to applaud Xavi's long shot; the team had done a good job.

George Wood stood beside Ronaldinho and looked back at Edwin van der Sar, who was just getting up off the ground.

He knew he had been led away from his defense area by Ronaldinho, which then initiated the opponent's long shot at the goal. He was aware. But what could he have done? Should he remain in his spot and wait for the opponent to attempt another long shot the next time he faced this situation? The Barcelona players were not idiots. They would certainly pass the ball to the unmarked Ronaldinho.

Was this a dilemma of choices?

George Wood did not know. The boss told him to restrict Ronaldinho, so he restricted Ronaldinho. As for the rest, he could only leave it to his teammates. He was not an almighty God and could not take on all the responsibilities for defense.

Who was more dangerous, Ronaldinho or the other Barcelona players? George Wood chose the former.

As a result, Barcelona's offense turned into Ronaldinho taking Wood around a circle and constantly passing in a triangular formation to create opportunities for his teammates. Other than doing quick passes, he had nothing else to do.

Xavi and Iniesta became the team's real offensive organizers. Eto'o was caught up in the Forest team's compressed defensive formation, and Messi became the most active striker.

Gareth Bale put all his energy into defense and still struggled a little against Messi, who was too much of a threat on the flank.

"Messi bypassed Bale, terrific... He has breached the penalty box! And he shoots! The shot is blocked by Piqué! That was really close!"

"Messi dribbles the ball to the side, Bale follows him... Foul! Barcelona receives a free kick in the front of the penalty box. This is a good location, and Ronaldinho comes up to do the kick — we finally get to see him again — Ah, what a pity, the ball brushes past the crossbar and flies out of the end line!"

Such things kept happening in the second part of the first half.

Twain could not sit still and do nothing.

He got up from his seat, went out to take a walk around and returned.

"Tony..." Kerslake looked up at Twain, standing in front of the coaches' seats.

"I don't know if this was Rijkaard's idea..." Twain said as he turned his head to look at Barcelona's technical area next door. "Sacrifice Ronaldinho to drag George out of the fight. They don't have Ronaldinho, but they still have Messi, Xavi, Iniesta, Deco... Damn it! The player who is supposed to freeze the others has been frozen instead."

When he heard Twain speak, Dunn turned his wrist to look at his watch. There were still fifteen minutes before the end of the first half.

Piqué shouted on the field to get his teammates to put their efforts into defense. George Wood was entangled with Ronaldinho and the team's defensive line required everyone's help. After all, Barcelona's offense was just too strong. Any slight oversight would cause them to lose the ball.

"Or... do we just let Wood give up on marking Ronaldinho for a while?" Kerslake suggested.

Twain vetoed his suggestion on the spot. "No, Ronaldinho is an extremely dangerous figure. We can't relax the defense against him. I'd rather sacrifice George... no big deal, we will just go 10v10! Our defense doesn't just rely on George. We won't be paralyzed without George. Piqué is doing a good job. He's in good form today."

"It's exciting for him to come back to Barcelona to play." Kerslake said.

"We'll hold on for fifteen more minutes and consider what adjustments to make during halftime." With that, Twain turned around and returned to the sidelines. The game was really tough to play.

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Everyone could see that Barcelona's tidal wave of offensive threatened the Nottingham Forest goal with wave after wave. If their luck was better, they might have breached the goal guarded by Edwin van der Sar.

Twain adopted a strategy to withdraw the defense to counteract Eto'o's speed. However, as a result, it left Barcelona with a lot of room to maneuver in front of the penalty area.

The Barcelona players passed the ball back and forth in this area, mobilizing the Forest team's defensive line. Then they suddenly passed the ball to the flank while the Forest players focused their energy on one point. Eto'o had already left the middle and repositioned to the flank to play. He and Messi were on the left and right flank, ready to receive the ball and cut inside.

There was a sudden straight pass in front of the penalty area, a move Barcelona was very good at. The Forest team had to raise all their attention to guard against this penetrating pass. Once the football was allowed to pass through, it would almost become a bad situation for the goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar to face the opponent one-on-one. Van der Sar could not be expected to be able to strike in time to defuse the crisis at every instance.

Ronaldinho became a center forward and appeared in the middle time and time again, attracting George Wood and the others' attention, and then would suddenly move away to create opportunities for the others.

As the time passed, the score was fixed at 1:0.

Rijkaard also got up from his seat and headed for the sidelines.

He could not allow this score to continue to the halftime interval. It would be a blow to the team's morale. If they could, they had to try and equalize the score before the end of the first half, which was a good way to tamp down on the Forest team's morale.

Rijkaard, who stood on the sidelines, constantly used hand gestures to indicate to the players on the field to press on again and again. He wanted them to set off a frenzy of offensive at the last minute.

On the other side, Twain yelled to get the players to watch their defense. He also knew that it was best not to concede any points before the end of the first half.

George Wood could not tolerate Ronaldinho pulling him out of his defense zone again, and watched helplessly as his opponent wreaked havoc in front of the penalty area.

When the football was passed to Ronaldinho again, Wood chose to suddenly go around the side of the rear to defend from the front.

Ronaldinho did not think George Wood would move so fast. He could not send the ball out, but had to figure out how to protect the ball from being intercepted by his opponent and directly fight back.

When he felt Wood bump into him from behind, Ronaldinho was smart enough to choose to fall forward. George Wood knocked into him again and extended his leg out to kick out the football, but he heard the referee blow his whistle. He had fouled!

"George Wood has fouled! Ronaldinho protected the football well and Barcelona now receives a free kick at a distance of... about twenty meters from the goal. It may be an opportunity. Ronaldinho had a free kick before that was just slightly above the crossbar."

George Wood felt a little aggravated. When he played in the English Premier League, he did a lot of denying the ball. Even if he had squeezed the opponent to the ground, the referee rarely whistled for a foul. But he did not go to try to reason with the referee. He was good at it.

He took a leaf out of Albertini's book. He stood in front of the football to be on guard against Barcelona from sending the ball out early. But he was overly cautious. The Barcelona players did not intend to take this opportunity to launch a sneak attack. The players ran forward. Ronaldinho and Deco both stood in front of the ball as they quietly looked at the Forest team formed a wall and waited for the referee to blow the whistle.

When Wood saw that they had no intention of kicking off immediately, he returned but did not join the human wall. He stood on the other side and stared at Messi.

Deco stood in front of the ball with his head lowered and discussed with Ronaldinho on how to play this kick.

Xavi huddled in the Forest team's human wall, intending to use this spot as a breakthrough point. The Forest players tried to push him out and both sides had some physical contact, which the referee ran over to mediate. As a result of the mediation, Xavi successfully took a spot on the leftmost side of Nottingham Forest's human wall.

Deco retreated as he did not plan to kick this ball. Now everyone's eyes were on Ronaldinho. This was a direct free kick, so he could choose to shoot directly or pass... But would he choose to pass the ball?

No.

Ronaldinho moved back to open up the distance to run up.

George Wood kept one eye on Ronaldinho and the other eye on Messi beside him to guard against the kid from taking advantage of the opportunity to assist the shot.

Ronaldinho was frozen by George Wood for the entire first half. Other than a wonderful individual breakthrough, he had that nasty fly buzzing around him all the time which was annoying. Now that there was no George Wood around him, he could comfortably put his legs to action.

He looked at the Nottingham Forest's human wall and took another look at the goalkeeper, Edwin van der Sar, waiting behind the wall. Then he glanced at the referee who had retreated to one side, and finally he turned his sights toward George Wood in the crowd.

There was a slight smile on his face when he saw Wood standing next to Messi.

This time you're finally not going to stop me.

"Ronaldinho revealed a confident smile! When this happy football magician smiles, it means he must be in his best form! Let us take a moment of silence to admire his performance."

Nottingham Forest placed lot of importance on the penalty kick and lined up a six-man wall. Clad in the red-and-blue Barcelona jersey, Xavi appeared on the left side of the wall like a gap in the wall. The Forest players pressed towards Xavi, intending to squeeze him out and quickly cover the gap once Ronaldinho kicked.

Otherwise, once Ronaldinho kicked the football, Xavi would run to the side and the Forest team's wall would immediately break in the middle. They decided that half of them would stay in place to stop the football from easily crossing their heads, and the other half would squeeze to the left to seal the gap created by Xavi's departure — they thought Ronaldinho would definitely shoot the football to here. If not, why else would Xavi try to squeeze in here?

However, they all miscalculated. The football did not fly toward the left side of the wall, but directly at the middle to penetrate through the split between the two halves of the wall!

Edwin van der Sar's view was blocked, coupled with the fact that he had no idea that Ronaldinho would shoot the football through there. He could not save it in time and could only watch helplessly as the football bypassed his hands and flew into the net.

"What a terrific goal — Ronaldinho! King of Barcelona!"

Camp Nou instantly erupted in thunderous cheers and applause. Rijkaard held his arms high and jumped.

Whereas, on the other side, Tony Twain brandished his fists in frustration, with only a flash of disappointment on his face. Although he was somewhat disappointed, conceding a goal was well within his expectations.

The Barcelona players heedlessly celebrated on the field. Edwin van der Sar picked up the football from the net and kicked a long shot to the front.

George Wood turned his head to look at Ronaldinho, who was surrounded by the Barcelona players, before he turned around and ran into the center circle.

He is indeed powerful.

Chapter 509: The Victor Has Yet to Emerge

Ronaldinho's goal set off a celebratory frenzy at Camp Nou. The Barcelona fans' bottled-up feelings which had been suppressed for almost half the game, were released. The poor Forest fans were completely drowned out at this moment.

In the stand, Fat John sneered. "What's the big deal? It's only an equalizer. Good for nothings!"

That said, even though he and his companions were now shouting out the Forest team's chant, they could not be heard at all. The Barcelona fans were too loud.

These men waved their arms, stamped their feet, and feverishly yelled out the names of Ronaldinho and Barcelona, like any true-blue English fan.

"Barça! Barça! Bar—ça!"

Twain turned his head to look at the fanatic Barcelona fans in the stands behind him. It was a rare sight. Perhaps the scene could only be seen in Spain's El Clásico. Unexpectedly, Nottingham Forest had been fortunate enough to become such a heavyweight opponent.

This feels...quite terrific!

"After unrelenting efforts, Barcelona finally equalized the score! Ronaldinho is undeniably the king of Camp Nou! His performance was thrilling! Edwin van der Sar could not counter the perfect direct free kick!"

Amidst the commentator's excited commentary, as well as the cheers from the fans in the stands, the first half came to an end.

By the halftime interval, the score was set at 1:1 by Ronaldinho's free kick.

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During the halftime interval, the players' tunnel was full of activity. The sound of footsteps and conversations intermixed to create a buzz. But as soon as the door shut, the sound was cut off. Camp Nou was undoubtedly a five-star stadium. The soundproofing was excellent, something that the City Ground stadium could not measure up to.

Twain looked at the players, who were somewhat downcast because of the equalizer, and laughed. He certainly was sorry about the equalizer scored at the last minute, but he was not too disappointed. Not to mention he was the manager, the chief of this group. He could not show too much negative emotion in front of them.

Therefore, when Twain closed the door, he scratched his head and acted like he did not care about the state of the score. He spread his hands towards the players and said, "I didn't say that we were going to

prevent Barcelona from scoring a goal and keep them at zero in this game. The current score is normal, and the game is still in our orbit. You must know what kind of opponent we are dealing with, right? Barcelona is not just an amateur team from the Spanish countryside.”

“Ronaldinho is not a circus clown either. He is an actual FIFA World Player of the Year. Even though he didn’t play very well at the World Cup, he still can’t be ignored. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

The players in the locker room nodded to show they understood.

“Our opponent is very strong, very powerful. But look at their reaction after they scored at the last minute in the first half? All their fans and players were so excited, as if they had won the game. What does that mean? They only leveled the score, and yet they’re so excited. That means it’s not that easy for them to beat us!”

“Don’t feel down. Have we lost yet? Or fallen behind? Chin up! There are still forty-five minutes left in the second half. If you’re still in this state of mind, you’ll really lose the game!”

After he boosted their morale, Twain began to specifically lay out the strategy for the second half.

“Ronaldinho is a threat, but we can’t focus all of our defense on him alone. George.”

Wood stood up.

“The goal conceded just now is a lesson for you. Don’t give Barcelona the chance for a direct free kick in that dangerous zone. In addition to Ronaldinho, they also have another free kick expert in Xavi. Also, you’re in charge of the defense and have to take part in the offense. Is it too much for you?”

Wood shook his head and said, “no.”

“Then why are you like a tortoise, shrinking in the back field? When necessary, send the ball forward!” Twain’s tone suddenly became severe. He turned his head to look at the other midfielders. “And you lot, my midfielders. Find a way to send the football forward. I don’t care if you are doing short passes and coordinate to advance, or doing long passes, or dribbling the ball yourself, just send the ball out. Don’t always let the Barcelona players buzz around our goal area like a swarm of flies! Buzzing, buzzing! I’m tired of it even if you’re not!”

“I’m telling you, tactics are inert, but people are alive! The layout set before the game is unlikely to cover all aspects of the situation. You have to adjust accordingly to the actual situation on the field. If the opponent pressed too hard and there’s a large void behind you, reduce the ball holding time in the middle of the back field. Do a long or direct pass in time and strike when your opponent is caught unawares!” He slammed his fist in his palm. “When we need to fight back, you guys must go up at the first instance. I don’t want to see anyone taking a stroll on the field when we play defensive counterattack. It’s tiring to sprint back and forth, but we don’t train for the purpose of enjoying ourselves in the game. This is an important game. In order to win, all the costs must be paid!”

“Franck.” Twain directed his gaze at Ribéry. “Don’t always limit your area of activity to just within the flank. You have to lean towards the middle. When George and Mikel cannot charge ahead, you need to be in charge of organizing the attack. If you are on the flank, our passing route can easily be blocked by our opponent. They are living and breathing players, not just NPCs in a live game.”

Ribéry hesitated a little, “If I go to the middle... what about Mikel?”

“How many times did you see him rush up in the first half? Most of the time he was assisting the defense.” Twain glanced at Arteta. “You seldom show up in the middle during the game and I feel we have to do something unexpected in this game. It may produce something amazing. When you’re in the middle, it’s up to you whether you pass the ball, try to break through, or do a long shot. Take action according to the specific circumstances on the field. You don’t need me to teach you this stuff, do you?”

Ribéry shook his head. “No, chief. I know what to do.”

Twain nodded in satisfaction. He had remembered that Ribéry should not be confined to the flanks. He should still be more capable. It was just that he was not set free. This game was an opportunity. Rijkaard and his coaching staff would not anticipate that Twain would let Ribéry organize offense in the middle for this game. The previous impression of Ribéry was that he would always attack from the flank. Since the away game against Everton, Twain had deliberately allowed Ribéry to move toward the middle to become a more comprehensive and decisive midfielder.

From the start of this game, Twain was going to unveil a brand-new Franck Ribéry to the world. Perhaps he would also become an important asset to the French football.

“Franck will be the heart of our offense in the second half,” Twain stated to the entire team. “The attack will be handed over to him to organize. Everyone will cooperate with him in the positional play. Do you all understand this?”

“No problem, chief.”

“Understood!”

“Franck, if you don’t perform well, don’t blame us for not passing the ball to you!”

There was a burst of laughter in the locker room.

When the laughter subsided, Twain went on to say, “You’re still on the flank as usual.” As he spoke, he traced Ribéry’s line of action on the tactical board, “As soon as we get the ball and are ready to attack, you run diagonally across... like this.” He drew a slanted line pointing to the penalty area.

“And then, Ashley Young, you can move your position left and right during the game. Don’t always stay on the right flank. Disrupt Barcelona’s defenses and don’t let them suss out our intentions too soon. Do you understand?”

Ashley Young nodded, too.

After he covered the offense, Twain moved on to the defense. Even though the defense had a heavy task, it was straightforward. “There’s nothing much to say about the defense. Constrict the area to within a range of thirty meters. Do not create any offside situations and pull back the defense. No matter how they pass the ball, keep to our defensive formation and pay particular attention to the defense in the area between the two flanks. We will do zonal defense except for George.”

With that, Twain looked at his watch. There was not much time left. He decided to rally the team one last time.

“Everyone understands his duty and does his job well.” He extended two fingers, which looked like a “V” for victory. “My requirements of you are as simple as that. Our goal is not just to win this game. You all know what the real goal is, right?”

Everyone replied loudly, “the Champions League CHAMPION!”

“Very good.”

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While Twain was impassionedly mobilizing the players in the visitors’ locker room, Barcelona’s locker room was slightly calmer.

Rijkaard was also not the kind of person who liked to express his ideas with too many words. After he had arranged the tactical tweaks for the second half, he did not speak much. The players in the locker room did their own thing. Everything appeared normal.

Ronaldinho chatted with Messi. They had a good relationship within the team. Even though one was a Brazilian and the other was an Argentinian, they were all currently Barcelona players.

The two people touched on the same topic. Their discussion was about one person: George Wood.

During the halftime interval, Rijkaard wanted the three players, Ronaldinho and Messi, as well as Eto’o, to frequently change positions to rip George Wood apart, disrupt the Forest team’s defense and created more chances for the others to score.

If George Wood was going to run after Ronaldinho, they would pass the ball to everyone else. If he did not follow Ronaldinho’s positional play, then they would pass the ball to the Brazilian.

They were disappointed that they let their opponent get away with a goal, but it was not the time to consider that. Rijkaard asked the team to continue to step up the offensive in the second half. If the opponent returned to England with a 1:1 score, then the second leg would be dangerous for Barcelona. They could only rely on their offense to continuously score goals and use an immense goal difference advantage to offset the Forest team’s away goal so that they could have the upper hand in the next round.

Barcelona’s football would never give up offensive style football, not to mention it was their own home ground.

Messi asked Ronaldinho just how powerful George Wood really was.

Ronaldinho spoke truthfully about how he felt. “Don’t let him get close and everything will be easier. You can try to get rid of him with speed, but to be honest, I’m not at all optimistic about the outcome of doing so. He’s physically strong. When I forced my way through, it was like I had hit a wall. The best way to deal with him is to send the ball out as soon as possible.”

Messi pondered for a while.

Maybe because he saw Messi frown that Ronaldinho added, “going up against him one-on-one is quite difficult, but we are skilled in our coordination, so he will be curbed. After all, he only one player.”

Messi nodded when he heard Ronaldinho speak.

"I actually think he'll continue to follow me in the second half. He seemed to have marked me. So, you focus on your positional play in the second half. I will assess the situation before I pass the ball to you."

Ronaldinho patted Messi on the head. In the team, Ronaldinho had always regarded Messi as his younger brother that he took care of. He would naturally think of him first whenever there was a benefit to be gained.

Sitting silently by the doorway, Rijkaard raised his hand to look at his table. The time had come, so he stood up and clapped his hands to signal for everyone to pipe down as he had something to say.

"I rarely say anything at this time." Rijkaard told the truth. He was a man who did not like to say too many things. He and Twain had completely different styles. "But I think it's necessary to say a few words today. We have been provoked by them. If we still do not do anything about it, we will be mocked out there." Rijkaard swung his hand and pointed outside the door. "I'm not happy with the 1:1 score. I hope in forty-five minutes, I'll see the score at 3:1, 4:1, and that we have won!"

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Maybe it was a coincidence that when both teams returned to the field, Tony Twain and Rijkaard bumped into each other at the exit of the tunnel.

At first, the two men seemed to want to be the first to walk out before the other man, only for them to step forward together and cram into the exit. But in the next moment, they both changed their minds. They each stopped and graciously motioned to the other man to go first.

"Please, Mr. Rijkaard, after you."

"It's okay, you go first, Mr. Twain."

After feeling the friendliness of the other party, the two men walked in at the same time.

When their gazes met, Twain smiled. "I think we can fit side by side and pass through this exit."

Rijkaard pretended to size it up, nodding in agreement. "You're right. I don't usually pay much attention."

The two men were, of course, lying. Both teams could go out side by side at the same time with ample space to spare. How could two men not be able to go out at the same time?

"So, let's walk together."

With this, the two men stepped out side-by-side.

The tunnel at the Camp Nou Stadium was not in the corner of the stadium, but below the center of the stadium stands. As soon as they stepped out, the two men immediately parted ways.

Twain warmly took leave of Rijkaard and said, "hopefully the second half will be a fantastic game, Mr. Rijkaard."

"I hope the course of the game and outcome will be brilliant, Mr. Twain." Rijkaard smiled, issuing a challenge.

“Ah, with your words, I look forward to the second half even more.” Twain turned and walked toward the visitors’ bench with a smile.

Behind him, Rijkaard studied his back for a little while before he left.

Both teams’ players had stood according to their respective positions in the formations on the field as they waited for the referee to start the second half of the game.

The televised broadcast apparently noticed the brief exchange between the two managers at the exit. When they returned to their seats, the producer on the scene gave the two managers each ten seconds of special footage. The two men wore smiles on their faces. No one knew just what the smiles meant.

After forty-five minutes, who would laugh in the end?

The victor had yet to emerge.

Chapter 510: The Contest

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome the heavyweight matchup for the UEFA Champions League round of 16 brought to you by ESPN! The competing teams, Barcelona and Nottingham Forest, were rivals in last season’s Champions League final! Due to Manager Tony Twain’s words and actions after that final, both teams have accumulated animosity over this season, and now they can finally resolve this feud on the field!” The China ESPN commentator described the game between the two teams as if it were a showdown in a martial arts novel, but it was suited to describe the current relationship between the two teams.

The Barcelona fans in China would certainly not think of Nottingham Forest as a warrior that could be compared to their own team. A lot of Barcelona fans hated Tony Twain to the core and would clench their teeth at the mention of him.

The inclusion of the Chinese ESPN commentary showed that this round of 16 game had attracted the attention of the entire world. After a long period of media hype, everyone was interested in the sequel to last year’s final.

Not only in England and Barcelona, but also in the rest of the United Kingdom, Spain and other European countries as well as China, Japan, Southeast Asia and South America would be able to watch the live broadcast of the match via satellite.

The score of both teams 1:1 in the first half, but this was far from enough for the spectators.

Up until this moment, the two sides had only scored two goals total. There were no red or yellow cards, no fierce physical confrontations, and no noises of abuse from the stands. There was nothing. It did not do justice to the description given to the game —“The Earthshattering Clash.”

The commentators prepared a wealth of lexicon, ready to illustrate how wonderful and thrilling the game was but had now found them rendered useless.

Tony Twain was certainly not a saint who would sacrifice himself to fulfill others’ wishes. Rijkaard was annoyed by the Forest team’s hardcore defense. Therefore, everyone hoped that there would be

changes in the second half of the game. No matter which party would score a goal, or whoever would be sent off, or be seriously injured, as long as there was an accident that could break the current equilibrium, then needless to say the second half would be wonderful!

“The second half of the game had just started and unsurprisingly, Barcelona has launched a fierce offensive against Nottingham Forest’s goal! They want to get in a goal as early as possible. Let’s take a look at Nottingham Forest’s countermeasure ... Ah, it’s disappointing. They are still lifelessly hanging on to defense! Will Tony Twain be satisfied to leave Camp Nou with only one goal?”

The televised broadcast gave a close-up of Twain, who sat in the technical area.

The smile previously on Twain’s face was gone. The expression on his face gradually became serious.

“Well, it looks like he’s not satisfied.”

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George Wood did not forget what Twain said to him during halftime. He had been told not to blindly cling to defense. He had to find a way to get the football moving forward. But now it was not that he did not want to send it forward, but that Barcelona’s offense was so fierce that he had no way of taking things forward.

Barcelona’s offensive routine in the second half became nimbler. Ronaldinho was no longer the only core. If he marked the Brazilians too rigidly, they would pass the ball to Messi or Eto’o, and then Deco, Iniesta and Xavi would swoop in. The Barcelona’s offensive surged like tidal wave which came in wave after wave, higher than the one before.

No matter how good George Wood was, he could not be on the left flank, in the middle, and on the right flank at the same time. Fortunately, the team gave him enough support in the second half.

It was currently a stalemate and the Barcelona offensive looked fierce but was unable to pose a real threat to the Nottingham Forest’s goal. In most cases, Deco and the others could only helplessly choose a long shot. Eto’o and Messi’s movements in the two flanks were even more tightly guarded. The Forest team was good at this kind of compressive defense.

In the previous final, Barcelona had a taste of the Forest team doing the same technique. That type of defense kept them from cracking open the Forest team’s goal until the end. This time, the Forest team lineup was complete. This time, no one was sent off and the goalkeeper was the mainstay, van der Sar. There was also the defensive core, George Wood to hold down fort. Twain was confident in playing the defensive counterattack against Barcelona.

He wanted to his reinforced concrete-styled defense, which he inherited from Italy, to bind the offense that Barcelona was so proud of, and then strike a fatal blow to them with speed!

For now, it looked like the situation with their defense was fine and they were able to fend off Barcelona’s offense. It was now up to their offense.

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While the team was on the defensive, Ribéry and Ashley Young were also on both flanks, occasionally engaged in defense. Ashley Young came back to defend more often, but Ribéry was not able to do it like his teammate. As soon as he came back, Wood would stare at him. Even though he said nothing, Ribéry understood.

Wood worried that there were not enough people ahead so that when a crucial figure was required to attack, he would not be able to go up, so he was not allowed to come back to defend frequently.

He actually wanted very much to tell Wood that he had no problem with his stamina and was fast enough to support the frequent dashes from the back to the front. But looking at Wood covered in sweat, he opened his mouth and immediately gave up the idea.

All right, I'll just wait in the front for you guys to pass the ball.

When Ronaldinho took the ball, George Wood leaned up. This time, the Brazilian did not dribble the ball to the middle but moved to the right flank. He wanted to coordinate with Messi.

Wood followed Ronaldinho to the left flank and Messi immediately understood what his senior teammate wanted to do. He was ready to receive the ball.

Wood was not a fool. Next to him, he also noticed that Messi was going to run to the middle. Should he follow Ronaldinho or Messi?

"George!" Bale called out behind him. It was clear that the little monkey was also faced with such a choice.

Wood waved his hand behind his back and motioned for Bale to cover the middle and that he would defend this side of the flank. He decided that whether Ronaldinho passed the ball or he himself broke through by dribbling the ball, he would follow him.

After Ronaldinho came to this side of the flank, Messi bypassed him from behind. At this moment, Wood raised his guard and his eyes were fixed on the football. When Ronaldinho rotated the ball, he nearly pounced to intercept the ball. Ronaldinho did not pass the football. Messi did a feint to grab at the ball but fortunately Wood did not move. Otherwise, he would have given Ronaldinho a gap to break through.

Messi ran for nothing and Bale caught up to him. Ronaldinho did not pass in that instance and lost the opportunity to pass again. Even if he tried to pass the football to Messi now, it was not a good choice. It looked like he was going to have a face-off with Wood again on the flank.

In fact, Ronaldinho did intend to pass the ball to Messi the moment he and Messi crossed paths, and then he could break away to receive the ball and position a shot himself. But when he saw Wood closely watching the football, he changed his mind the moment he swung his leg and turn it into a feint.

He won only once during their several face-offs in the first half. He did not want to just forget about it.

He was skilled at doing all kind of feints on the flank, especially the one he was best at: the Gaúcho!

Wood did not know what his opponent had in mind at that moment. He was only focused on the football and did not even look up to see the expression on Ronaldinho's face at this point.

He fixated on the ball. No matter how Ronaldinho circled his feet around the football to disrupt him, he only was only aware of the football. If the football did not move, he did not move. He was not afraid that the time passed just like that. Anyway, he was not the one who should be anxious. It should be Barcelona, which was eager to win. But at the same time, his body seemed taut as string that was about to shoot the arrow out.

Suddenly, the football moved in front of him and was about to tear past his right!

Wood did not hesitate to shove to that side.

But where was the football?

He clearly saw the football come toward that side, so how did it just move a bit and suddenly do a freakish ninety-degree change in midair and fly to the left side of his body?

Without waiting for him to understand the reason, Ronaldinho had already rushed past the left side of his body!

“The Gaúcho! Thrilling! Just thrilling... what else can we say apart from the brilliance of that move? No, words do not do justice in face of this extraordinary performance! Yes, this is a performance! That skill that made this performance a work of art!”

Along with the commentator’s high acclaim, there were loud cheers in Camp Nou and throughout Barcelona. The sound was a demonstration and warning to Nottingham Forest, who had intended to strut around on their turf.

We have Ronaldinho! He’s a football magician that God gave to the world!

Someone on the Barcelona substitutes’ bench stood up to shake his arms and shout for the bypass and in anticipation for the next goal at the same time.

Ronaldinho dribbling the ball to shoot from a tight angle or passing the ball both had great chances for scoring. Eto’o and Messi, and even Deco, rushed to the front of the Forest team goal at first chance.

And because Bale was broken though, Wood was bypassed. Kompany and Piqué, who were supposed to defend those people in the middle, had to split up. One player had to rush to the flank and stop Ronaldinho.

The situation in front of the Forest team goal was in critical danger!

Piqué looked back at Kompany and did not hesitate to charge toward Ronaldinho. However, he had just started when he heard a roar, as if a bolt from the blue exploded in his ear. “Go back! Protect the middle!”

Immediately after, he saw George, who had just been bypassed by Ronaldinho and had lost his balance, turned and pounced. His face looked ferocious, as if he was a black panther who had seen his prey.

He was frightened by Wood’s expression and swift reaction. He did not withdraw to defend but stood frozen in place.

This was a good opportunity for Ronaldinho. The Forest team's defense in the middle defense was ripped apart by his breakthrough. There were three Barcelona players in front of the goal and they were covered on all fronts. As long as the pass was effective, the probability of scoring a goal was high!

He stopped hesitating and prepared to kick the ball.

It was then that he saw Messi, who had rushed to the front, suddenly stop in his tracks and look at him in horror, as if he had seen something incredible.

You stupid bastard. Why are you standing in the same spot? You're right on the same path as Piqué. How can I pass the ball to you?

Ronaldinho scolded Messi internally for dropping the ball at this crucial moment and completely forgot the danger around him.

As Wood sprinted back to defend, he saw Ronaldinho swing his leg high and look as if he was about to pass the ball. His supporting leg was still some distance from the football. This was the best opportunity, and also the only opportunity...

"A ferocious shove by George Wood! Ow!" The commentator yelled as if he had been shoved off of the field by Wood.

Wood shoved the football out the moment Ronaldinho was ready to pass, while the uncontrollable excessive power knocked the Brazilian out of the penalty area. The pair knocked to the ground together just in front of the billboard outside the perimeter.

The Camp Nou Stadium gasped and then immediately roared, "penalty kick!!!"

The same noises came from Barcelona's substitutes' bench. Rijkaard stepped forward and rushed to the sidelines, intending to cheer for the penalty kick.

But what did they see?

The assistant referee and the referee pointed to the corner flag at the same time!

Corner kick?

Corner kick!

Corner kick?!

Rijkaard jerked up. He was furious.

The Barcelona fans gave up and the Barcelona players also gave up. Ronaldinho was still lying on the ground and looking like he was in pain, ready to make Wood take responsibility of the foul. In the end, after he saw the referee's hand gesture clearly, he jumped straight from the ground and angrily waved his arms at the referee to protest this penalty. His teammates had long rushed to surround the referee to dispute this.

"The referee decided on a corner kick... It's unbelievable. George Wood's shove was so fierce and looked lethal. And it was just a corner kick? Let's take another look at the replay..."

The moment was replayed repeatedly in slow motion. It unmistakably showed that Wood hit the ball first, and then because his energy could not be checked, Ronaldinho was knocked out. The referee's decision was not a mistake.

"Well, it looks like it was indeed a clean and beautiful kick. That was really close. If he had been a second later, I bet his foot would have hit Ronaldinho's right foot."

George Wood was pulled up by Piqué. The Spanish kid also patted him on the thigh. He was still had some trepidation as he said, "I didn't think you would really get over there to shovel..."

"Was there another way?" Wood asked in puzzlement.

"No, uh... I mean, aren't you afraid of getting a penalty?"

"I didn't think too much." Wood's answer left Piqué at a loss for words. Should he say that Wood played skillfully and boldly or was he all brawn and no brains?

Bale dashed over in excitement to forcefully embrace Wood and shouted, "You did a beautiful job, George! You knew he was going to leave the football, didn't you?"

Wood pushed him away. "All right, go and guard against that corner kick."

Bale obediently left. Only then, Wood noticed that Ronaldinho had been next to him the whole time and was staring at him with anger on his face. He must still be angry that the shovel was a corner kick, not a penalty kick. He did not want to pay him any mind, but he was halted.

"Hey, hey!" Ronaldinho did not speak much English. He could only grill him in Portuguese., "That was clearly a foul! If you had played more honestly, you shouldn't be celebrating here!"

In fact, it looked more like he was grouching to himself. Ronaldinho also did not expect George Wood to understand his Portuguese.

He did not think that Wood would stop and look back at him when he heard him speak. Apparently, he understood.

Wood just looked at Ronaldinho and did not say anything in the end. He turned around and ran away again.

The Barcelona players were still hounding the referee. Rijkaard drew special attention from the fourth official because he was too worked up just now.

He repeatedly reiterated to the fourth official that he was convinced the tackle had been a foul in the penalty area. A penalty kick should have been awarded. The fourth official replied like he was a robot with ready-made answers and just repeated, "I believe in the referee's decision on the field. Not to mention that this is a decision made by the referee and the assistant referee at the same time. There is no problem. Please calm down, Mr. Rijkaard."

But could he calm down?

As if he wanted to specially provoke him, Twain jumped from his seat, shook his arms and cheered. Then he turned around to the angry fans in the stands of the Camp Nou stadium and extended — not his

middle finger, of course — his index finger over his lips and pursed his lips. His meaning could not have been more obvious. He wanted the noisy Barcelona fans to quiet down.

Could the Barcelona fans quiet down?

Twain was not so naïve as to think that. He was needling them. As a result, just as he wanted, the grandstand behind the technical area erupted like a volcano, and a huge outburst of boos and swearing suddenly broke out against Tony Twain.

Rijkaard certainly saw it. He pointed to Twain and yelled at the fourth official next to him, “You make that scumbag calm down first!”

The fourth official turned around and saw the scene of Twain needling the Barcelona fans, so he put Rijkaard aside and quickly ran to Twain. He stood between Twain and the grandstand fans and drove him back to the visitors’ technical area.

“Please mind your words and actions, Mr. Tony Twain!” With a grim expression, the fourth official sent by the UEFA warned Twain who was still setting himself against the fans. “Don’t cause trouble for us, and don’t get yourself into trouble!”

Twain finally pulled his index finger from his lips. He pointed to the excited fans in the stands and said to the fourth official, “Those fans call my players sonsabitches and cheats. Does the UEFA have any provisions to punish or prevent this kind of situations?”

The fourth official froze for a moment and shook his head, “No, we do not...”

Twain whistled. “And that’s fair?” He shrugged his shoulders and turned to walk back. Behind him, the booing and abuse did not stop. The waves of voices seemed to be urged by the wind and came attacking him as if trying to overwhelm his figure completely.

The direction he went back made him face Rijkaard directly. Their gazes met from afar. When Twain saw Rijkaard, he approached and spread open his hands toward his opponent. He tilted his head with a helpless look. The action made Rijkaard hate him. The Dutchman was not a man who liked to quarrel with others. However, in the face of a scumbag like Tony Twain, he was unable to contain his anger.

“This fucking bastard!” He turned around and punched the awning of the technical area.

“Calm down, Frank!” His assistant manager, the famous Dutch, Neeskens, who was older than him, had to shout to remind him. “You are the soul of this team, its leader. You cannot be infuriated by the other team till you lose your cool!”

“I’m sorry... I’m all right now.” Rijkaard covered his head with both hands as he sat down. His fingers fully inserted in his tight curls and rubbed his head.

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Twain saw everything with his own eyes. Even though he could not hear the conversation between Neeskens and Rijkaard, he knew that Rijkaard could not fully calm down within.

His goal had been achieved.

He could put his attention back on the field next. As for the swearing by those Barcelona fans behind him? Well, he could not understand Catalan.

As for the universal word, “f**k,” the easy-to-understand English word, his ears automatically filtered it out.

The Barcelona players who surrounded the referee did not get the results they wanted. The referee and the assistant referee were in agreement this time. The referee did not even have to run over to ask the assistant referee’s opinion. He uncompromisingly issued the corner kick. He waved away the Barcelona players around him and told them to quickly take the corner kick, or he might have to pull out a yellow card to warn some of those who were still ranting.

This decision had a huge impact on Barcelona’s entire team, which struck their mood and morale in varying degrees.

Ronaldinho’s corner kick was not good. The football flew over the goal and was easily plucked out of the air by Edwin van der Sar.

The Nottingham Forest fans, whose voices had just been suppressed by the boos, were finally heard again. They sang the lyrics made up on the spot in tune with a music that was currently popular. “You have Ronaldinho, we have George Wood! Your footwork looks fancy, our shovel is fierce and direct—and yet not a foul! La, la, la, and yet not a foul! You want a penalty kick but no way! No! Way!”

As the singing voices of the Forest fans reverberated, the Nottingham Forest team, wearing their yellow away jerseys, Edwin van der Sar launched an attack by throwing the ball with his hands.

The Dutch goalkeeper’s hand ball was thrown to a far distance. It almost directly went over the midfield. Franck Ribéry appeared in the middle and received the ball.

The defensive players had done their job perfectly. They had stopped several attacks by Barcelona. Now it was the attacking players’ turn to play their part.

“Although it may be an exaggeration to say this, I’m still going to say it — long time no see, the attacking players of Nottingham Forest!”