

Champions 561

Chapter 561: The Young Men of Wilford

Dunn had not yet replied to him, and Twain knew that waiting for him was not the way to do it. The First Team coaching staff was currently still on their vacation and he could not do anything on his own.

He thought of the Forest youth team. He had not been there for a long time. Although a report on the youth team was sent to his desk every once in a while, reviewing the data in the reports was not the same as going to the training ground to observe in person.

If Allan and Evan's new stadium plan was to be implemented, he would not be able to obtain much funding for transfers in the new season. If he wanted to compete with the other strong teams in the transfer market for the star players, he would appear to have a lack of confidence without a strong financial backing. Twain recalled when Wenger, the "Professor" who had to tighten his belt in order to build a new Emirates Stadium. If Arsenal could supplement the squad with the players developed by their powerful youth training system, why could Nottingham Forest not do the same? Nottingham Forest's youth training level could be considered top notch across England as well.

They might not be able to produce a second Bale or Wood, but they could at least produce a few qualified rotating players, right?

With such an idea, Twain went straight to the youth training base to the north of Wilford.

Unlike the First Team, the youth team had resumed training. In addition, the football camps opened for schools were in full swing. Before he entered, Twain already heard the laughter and the whistles.

He wore sunglasses and hid silently in the shade of a tree alone to observe quietly. He did not want to go straight to the youth team manager, Ian Greenwood yet. He decided to observe on his own to determine first.

There were a number of people around the five regular fields at the youth training base. Most were parents of the children playing on the field, while the others were scouts from other clubs.

Just like how Southampton could not stop Twain from poaching Bale, Nottingham Forest could not stop the scouts from the other teams from coming to nose around.

The youth training base was very lively, which could not be seen during the season because more children were scattered in various schools or the training camps in the other areas. Those training camps were not big. Each training camp only had fifty or so children with eight coaches. The training camps were not part of the Forest team's regular youth team. Children who were interested in football could receive basic training. Then, for four days at the end of each month, they would bring these children together to gather at Wilford for the intensive training and competitions. They would select the gifted children from among them and sign traineeship contracts with them. They would officially join the Forest team.

It was summer, and the children of each training camp, led by their coaches, returned to Wilford to participate in the football camp. They would play together to test the results of their year of training. If

their performances were outstanding, they could possibly be seen by the professional scouts, or be promoted to the regular Forest youth team, or... be lured by the other teams' scouts and their silver tongues.

The youngest of these children was six years old and the oldest was eighteen years old. They would play in groups according to ages. Although it was noisy, everything was in order. This was credited to Nottingham Forest's decades-old operating system.

Once upon a time, Jenas, Michael Dawson and Andy Reid were these children's idols. Now their goal was to become George Wood, Gareth Bale, and Wes Morgan, who had won the Champions League title.

Twain watched each age group play, one after another.

For the time being, his eyes had not lit up on any child yet.

He was a little disappointed. He did not know if it was because the Forest team's youth training level was really not as good as Arsenal, Manchester United, Liverpool and Chelsea, or because he was used to watching the world-class star players and could not see the potential in these not yet matured children?

After all, not everyone had the dazzling talents of George Wood and Gareth Bale and could be easily discovered in a large group of people.

After a turn, Twain decided to go look for Ian Greenwood and see if he could recommend any good seedlings.

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Ian Greenwood was leading the Forest Under-18 team in their daily training. These people were closest to professional football. Some of them could be promoted to the First Team in the Forest team if they were lucky. Those less fortunate ones could only go somewhere else to find another way out or mixed in the reserves.

Professional football was not as wonderful as people thought, with opportunities were everywhere, and one could be a big star player just by playing.

In addition to talent, luck was needed to succeed.

George Wood and Gareth Bale were the best products of the Forest youth training system so far. Their success had caught the attention of powerhouse clubs. George Wood had been linked with a few transfer rumors and Gareth Bale also had rumors about many clubs wanting to get him.

Their success had increased Ian Greenwood's pressure.

Both players were discovered and groomed by Tony Twain in the position of the youth team manager. Greenwood might have had a hand in Bale, but the more impressive George Wood was completely developed by Twain.

Following these two players, the expectations for the Forest youth team were very high. The continuous anticipation for a blowout and output of talent and excellent players in the youth team were not easy.

Everyone wanted to have “Busby’s kids” in their hands, as well as “Ferguson’s class of 92,” but a combination of many factors was required for a large number of geniuses to be concentrated within an age group.

The U18 group Greenwood was currently leading had a few good seedlings. If it had been four years ago, they would have been directly promoted to the First Team and play as the main force, but now...

Truthfully, the level of training in the Forest youth team had not kept pace with the progress of the Forest First Team. It was not that the standard of the youth team had declined, but the First Team had shot up quickly...

Twain asked the club to increase the funding for the youth training base, which was definitely not on a whim. He was also very aware of the inconsistency between this. It was impossible for the First Team to slow down and wait for the youth team to catch up. The only way was to rely on the youth team to raise their standards to a very high level. Just like Abramovich’s Chelsea, he threw money to build the most modern youth camp, buy the best equipment, use high salaries to go around and poach the best youth team coaches, and then hire the best youth team and attract the most outstanding young geniuses from everywhere. A combination of these factors made Chelsea’s youth team jump into the top four and keep pace with veteran youth teams such as Manchester United, Arsenal, and Liverpool.

Ian Greenwood did not know that the club was not planning to invest more funds in the youth team right away. What kind of mood would he be in if he did?

There were some players who saw Tony Twain walk into the training ground and they happily greeted the legendary manager who had been promoted from the youth team.

The sound alerted Greenwood, who turned his head to see Twain. He tossed the whistle to his assistant and trotted over.

“Tony, fancy seeing you here,” he said jokingly.

When Twain was the head of the training base, he had been one of Twain’s men. After Twain left, and Twain’s assistant manager, Kerlake, was promoted to the manager of the youth team, he became Kerlake’s assistant coach. Then when Dunn became the manager with his excellent professional knowledge and coaching skills, he became Dunn’s assistant again. Dunn only stayed for one season before he was transferred to the First Team by Twain to work directly as his assistant manager. After many years of moving up the ranks, Ian Greenwood finally became the manager of the youth team.

“I’m here to take a look at the results of your work.” As the superior, Twain did not have to beat about the bush.

“I thought the First Team only purchased players from the outside.” Since it was an old relationship, Greenwood did not have to be so polite when he spoke.

Twain smiled wryly. “How can it be that easy? The player may not come even if we have the money and the player who is willing to come, we may not want him.”

Greenwood looked at Twain’s face and suddenly thought of a possibility. He asked tentatively, “um, Tony. Is it because you don’t have any money, so you’re here for a bargain?”

“Hey!” Twain glared at him. “Listen to what you just said. What do you mean by a bargain?! They are the future hope of our team!” Twain claimed as he pointed to the hardworking and serious young men in training. “But... I’m a little tight recently.”

Greenwood laughed.

“So much is happening out there. Did you see anything good?” He pointed to where the U18 training was being held in the northernmost end of the base and the innermost section. It was a lot quieter than outside.

Twain shook his head. “There are too many people. I can’t find what I want in a short time. But aren’t your people there too? They did not tell you anything interesting?”

“It will be a few days before we know.”

“Well... All right, let’s be direct then. Is there anyone you can recommend to the First Team here?” asked Twain.

Greenwood glanced at Twain, with the corners of his mouth slightly raised. “You’ve got to find him yourself, Tony.”

Here we go again!

Paul Hart’s traditional little game had been preserved among the Forest coaches.

Twain glared at Greenwood and then stood on the sidelines to observe carefully.

His attention was first attracted by a tall kid. It was not because how well the kid played. People always put their attention on those with outstanding statures at first glance, both men and women... For example, the young man was so tall that it was impossible to avoid looking at him.

He whistled and said to Greenwood, “this kid has got to be six foot three, right?”

Greenwood shook his head. “No, six feet and seven inches.”

Twain was startled.

Six foot three was about 1.94 meters, and six foot seven was more than two meters.

He sized up the big guy again. He was taller than everyone else on the field. Two meters was not an exaggeration.

“How old is he?”

“Seventeen years old.”

“Hmm...” Twain continued to observe.

The giant played as the center back on the field. He was doing the drill for headers as his height gave him an aerial advantage. Generally speaking, players with such height usually did not jump very well, because their body structure determined that they could not jump too high. However, this person jumped very well.

After he finished the header drill, he followed his teammates to do a backwards run.

His speed was not slow either.

Twain had some interest in this aerial giant, who was not slow and jumped well. “What’s his name?”

“Aaron Mitchell. He’s currently the core of the team’s rear defense. His physical quality is excellent, but his shortcomings are also obvious — his tackling skills are terrible. His headers are not considered good for his height.”

Twain nodded. “Let him train for two years and take a look at the results. If it is possible, he can go out on a loan to train. His body is his gift, as for his skill... Let’s take it slow.”

The two men let go of this tall giant and searched for the next target.

The assistant coach of the youth team knew what Twain was there to do.

He did not consult with the youth team manager, Ian Greenwood, before he made the decision on his own to change the training plan to get the players to split into teams to play on the field.

Ever since he became the head of the youth training, Twain had set a principle for the Forest team’s youth training base which was “everything is to be based on an actual game as the standard.” Each team had unique features and traditions. The current Forest team’s tradition was “results and competition first.” Therefore, the young players in the youth team training also played in accordance with the standards of a game. If a young man’s fancy header could win acclaims, Twain would be dismissive of it. No one would give any player a chance to play like that in a game. He demanded that the training had to include elements of a game. A training which did not have elements of a game was worthless in his view. Which meant that even if they ran laps, everyone had to dribble the ball as they ran. From the youth team to the adult team, such training principles were adhered to which focused training with the ball, competition, and confrontation.

Twain was pleased with the timely change. He could directly observe and understand the comprehensive abilities of the players — their techniques, psychological qualities, stamina, and competitive state. Be it advantages or disadvantages, they would be exposed in the contest.

After the start of the game, a player quickly caught Twain’s attention. His line of sight followed him.

He wore the Forest youth team’s number 10 jersey.

He dribbled and broke through with the ball on the right flank of the field and no one could block him. Sometimes he would switch to the middle to get in a long shot, but apparently he preferred to move on the flanks because there were too many defensive forces in the middle which made it hard for him to break through. It was a different story on the flanks.

His skills were excellent. He liked to bypass the others and he was fast.

The defensive side often needed to converge on him with two or three players. If it was a one-on, he would get past that player without mercy.

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“Hey, Addy! You’re sly!” the full-back who was defending this number 10 complained as he approached. “Even though the First Team manager is on the sidelines, you don’t have to be so ruthless, do you?”

That number 10 smiled. “James, if you can stop me, won’t you make a deeper impression on the manager?”

The other party froze for a moment. “You’re quite right... Ah!”

While he was distracted, number 10 slipped past him like a fish, and he knocked the ball past him beautifully.

“You sly bastard, Adriano!”

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“That number 10, what’s his name?” Twain pointed to the player on the field with his pursed lips.

“Moke, Adriano Moke. He has the best skills in the team. Although he still looks a bit immature, he’s making rapid progress.”

Twain nodded. This kid was really brilliant and courageous. He knew he was watching it on the sidelines, so he put in a particularly active performance.

However, it was a pity that the position he was used to playing in was the right midfield. And for now, the First Team had Ashley Young and Aaron Lennon in this position. Come July, there would also be Beckham which would make it overcrowded. There might not be a position for this kid in the next few years.

Twain thought about it. “Can he play any other position?”

“He’s okay in the middle of the midfield too, but... he prefers to play on the right flank, and his left foot can be appalling to watch as compared to his right foot technique. Other than the right midfielder and the center-forward positions, he can’t adapt to the other positions.”

Twain shook his head lightly. He would not make it. He could groom him to sell him. On the one hand, he could make some money for the club, and on the other hand... he could avoid delaying this kid’s progress.

Twain and Greenwood watched on the sidelines for a long time. He observed some of the players and then looked for Greenwood to inquire about the specific circumstances of those players before he made any judgment.

The end result: he did not find a player who could be transferred directly into the First Team, but he saw some good potential among them. If they were nurtured well, with some luck, these players could have the ability to become the rotating players in the future for the Forest First Team, and perhaps become the main force in other mid-tiered teams in the Premier League.

He figured this was the reality. How would he be able to find so many geniuses in the world who could shock the world? Firstly, he had no money and secondly, he had no power. What could he use to fight with Arsenal, Manchester United, Liverpool and Chelsea for the gifted young players?

Wenger's Arsenal youth training was famous, and many young geniuses would rather go to Arsenal to be trained under the Professor than to go to the other teams. But little did they know that Arsenal's youth team brought together the geniuses from all over the world, and if they were not exceptional, when would it be their turn? Everyone wanted to be the next Francesc Fàbregas. But was it that easy? When Theo Walcott first joined Arsenal, he was a sensation in England and Europe. And now? Fàbregas was the core of Arsenal's midfield and Walcott was only a substitute. In Twain's view, the kid was nothing other than fast and would not play with his head at all. He only knew to play recklessly with his speed.

He decided to look further afield to let the scouts move around and go to the other clubs' youth team to unearth those who had not yet become famous talents. Perhaps they might have some unexpected gains.

Twain left empty-handed. After he watched the matchup, he chatted with the youth team coaches and departed. The children of North Wilford were very disappointed that he did not ask anyone for a private conversation. Everyone knew that the First Team manager rarely visited. They had a chance to perform in front of him and yet the result was no one made the mark.

This was so frustrating.

Twain clapped as he left. Greenwood was going to have a headache. He was responsible for soothing the wounded hearts of these children. He had to let them re-establish their goals and continued to train hard.

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What the group of children did not know was Twain had a few very promising players in mind, but they were too young and unable to solve his immediate problems.

In the afternoon, Twain went around to inspect the reserves team, and this time he picked a substitute goalkeeper.

Paul Gerrard had retired. Edwin van der Sar was old, but he was still in shape. If everything went well, he could play another year of high-quality games. But who would be able to predict the future? Just in case he was injured, or his form was in a state of continuous slump, Akinfeev had to take over. It was better for a First Team to be guaranteed with three goalkeepers, so that there would not be an embarrassment if there was nobody to guard the goal.

Twain often encountered this when he played the video game. He used to think that finding a substitute goalkeeper was troublesome: a player with strong ability was not willing to be a substitute and as a manager, he did not want those with little ability. The result was always he only had two goalkeepers for the game. If both the main goalkeeper and the substitute goalkeeper were injured, he eventually had to use any player to be the goalkeeper... Fortunately, it was a video game. If it had been real life, he would have been utterly humiliated.

Last season he had worried about where to purchase a substitute goalkeeper. In the end, it was Dunn who resolved the issue and said Paul Gerrard was a good substitute. The good substitute had to miss the entire season since he had a fractured skull after being struck in the match against Reading in October.

Then the Forest team had played the remaining games with two goalkeepers. One was the main goalkeeper and the other was the young goalkeeper who was going back to the First Team from the reserves this time — the barely twenty-years-old Dale Roberts.

A year ago, he was still in the U19 youth team as the inexperienced goalkeeper, but Paul Gerrard's injury gave him the chance to come to the First Team to experience real professional football. He grew up fast during the year, and his several appearances in the cup games made the coaching staff acknowledge his ability. Therefore, he would replace the retired Paul Gerrard in the new season to be the team's third goalkeeper.

He was the first new member of the Forest team in the new season and strictly speaking, he could not be considered "new"... He was temporarily transferred to the First Team last season and he was returning now.

The Forest team's signings had not yet officially begun, but Twain was already on the move.

The list was basically confirmed. They just had to contact the players' agents.

The new season was about to begin, and the vacations of the players and coaches was coming to an end. His idle and boring days were finally over.

Chapter 562: The Tsar's Arrival

The issue of a striker needed to be urgently addressed. Anelka was certain to leave even though no club had publicly made an offer for the French striker yet. Twain was aware that Anelka's two brothers had to be working with a number of clubs in private to dissolve his contract. Twain did not care. They would have to sort it out. There was only one possibly result — the departure of Anelka. He did not care how much money they would make. When he first competed against AC Milan, he already had an awareness. He wanted to teach the rebellious striker a lesson on who was the boss and teach the two gluttonous agents a lesson, as well.

The person who had pushed for the signing of Anelka was Allan. Twain would not consider going easy on the matter of Anelka's transfer just to save Allan's dignity.

Putting Anelka's affairs aside for the time being, Twain went to meet Evan and Allan to have them take a look at his transfer list for the season.

The two men were a little surprised to see only a few names on the list.

"Didn't you say the funds were tight? I'll bring in fewer players. Plus, I put down the players we can sell." Twain motioned for them to turn the list over. There were a few names of the players who could be sold.

Allan reviewed it more carefully. Over the past few years, due to Twain's fiercely protective ways, the team had more signings than departures in the transfer market, which seriously affected the balance of the ledgers.

After reading the list, Evan and Allan both nodded to Twain to express their full support.

Evan told Twain the news that the land for the new stadium had been obtained, which was in Clifton.

Twain knew of the place, which was just southwest of Wilford and also on the southwest side of Nottingham city. He was a little concerned because it was far from the city center.

The current City Ground stadium was in the heart of the city. It was convenient for the fans to watch every home game, since the public transport system was good. But if they put the new stadium in the southwestern town of Clifton, he was worried about the impact on its popularity.

Allan smiled at his concern.

“Tony, it currently looks like it’s a long way off, but once the stadium is built, you won’t feel that it’s far away. With the new stadium as the center, there will be a large residential area, and there won’t be traffic to make it difficult for the fans to travel there.”

Evan smiled and explained to Twain why Clifton was chosen. “Truthfully, we also wanted to choose the city center. But Tony, that takes a lot more money, and the cost of construction is too high. Besides there is no open land in the city center for us to build a large stadium. That land in Clifton was sold to us at a low price by the city government on one condition. The city government wants us to collaborate with the construction and development plan of that area — They decided to take the construction of the new stadium as an opportunity to engage in commercial and residential projects. Allan is in discussion with several construction companies for the bidding in the hope of finding the most suitable one. I think the city government’s plan is quite good. We had worried that we might not find the right company to just build one stadium. If it is a new stadium plus a large commercial and residential area, many developers will be interested.”

Allan nodded in agreement.

“As for the transportation, I think it will be much better than it is now. At the moment, the City Ground stadium is overcrowded for every home game and there are not enough parking spaces. Many people need to park their cars a mile away, and then walk over. Since it’s just by the river, there’s no way to let more fans enter at the same time. That would require squeezing people into the river. At the same time, because it is in the city center, it is not convenient to build more modern transportation infrastructure... The City Ground stadium was built more than one hundred years ago. It’s just so old that it is difficult to even expand on it. The new stadium’s accompanying transport facilities include a direct tram line to the square in front of the stadium, so the fans can take the trams from various locations directly to the gate of the stadium, as well as when they leave.”

Twain was persuaded since he was not specialized in business like these two men. He would go along with what they had planned. If the new stadium included a residential area, perhaps he would go there and buy a house in the future.

“Sounds like an exciting plan.” Twain complimented Allan for his work. “I kind of can’t wait to go to the new stadium to lead the games.”

The other two men laughed.

The transfer plan was approved, and Twain left the chairman’s office. He had to go get busy with bringing in the players on the list and find a way to sell the players on the back of the list.

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The player who fill in the gap on the front line after Anelka left would be the current star striker from Zenit Saint Petersburg, Andrey Arshavin.

This player, who had been hailed in Russia as “the new Tsar,” was not a rookie. He was a late bloomer and already twenty-six years old. He had only been known in European football in the most recent season.

And Twain knew of him because of Akinfeev.

After he decided to return Akinfeev on a loan to CSKA Moscow, Twain hired a Russian scout familiar with the Eastern European football scene, who was responsible for the tracking and observation of Akinfeev’s performance in the Russian Premier League. He would fax him a weekly report so that Twain could keep track of Akinfeev’s status and circumstances.

Twain did not just hire the scout for Akinfeev, he also did it in order to find some cheap football geniuses from Russia.

If the player was young, they could purchase and train him, whether he could play in the Forest team or not. Even if they were to sell him, they could still make a profit. The club was actually doing it before Twain joined the Forest team. The German young player, Eugen Bopp, was the rising star of the Forest team and had been brought in from Germany. They had failed his development in the end, but it had not affected the confidence of the Forest club to continue. It was the way to survive for many small English clubs; like when the Forest team did not know that they would usher in a group of talented players.

Allan was very supportive of his plan. As long as it was a plan that would make money for the team, Allan, the American, was supportive.

In addition to his reports on Akinfeev’s performance, the scout, Dmitri Mendeleev, who shared the same name as a famous Russian chemist, would regularly share his own finds of players who were well-known in Russian football but were still nobodies in Western Europe.

Andrey Arshavin was one of them.

After he watched a video of Arshavin’s play from Mendeleev, Twain instantly liked the young player. He was fast and skillful. He could play in almost all the front positions, and at the same time, he was very smart. He knew how to pass the ball and was willing to assist. He could create opportunities for his teammates and was not a self-centered idiot that did not understand team spirit or how to cooperate.

Such a player would be very suitable for the Forest team.

Therefore, Mendeleev had an additional task: in addition to tracking Akinfeev, he also had to keep track of Arshavin.

This was challenging for him, as he often had to travel between the two places. Fortunately, his tickets were reimbursed by the Forest club. Otherwise he might have had to wash his hands of it and quit.

As the reports on Arshavin continued to be sent to Twain's desk, he was becoming more familiar with the young player from the faraway Russia. He was familiar with what he liked and disliked even though he had not been in touch with him in person.

Twain steeled himself to put Anelka on the back burner because he had already found the best replacement for the Frenchman. If Anelka wanted to leave, let him leave!

Hence before the last season was even over, the Forest club had already established contact with Arshavin's agent, Dennis Lachter.

But Lachter was not interested in such a "small club." They were not interested in a club that was not as rich as Abramovich's Chelsea or dazzling like Manchester United and Arsenal in today's football world. More importantly, they had just defeated Arshavin's favorite team, Barcelona in the Champions League knockout. Furthermore, a number of disrespectful words about Barcelona that Twain had said had been exposed by the media.

Twain did not mind Arshavin and his agent's cold treatment. It was nothing for him to suffer a little for a player that he liked. He knew that Arshavin would be his in the end, because he had a way of getting the other person to look at him and his team differently.

The solution was to win one of the most important championships of the season.

After the Champions League final, the entire club was caught up in the immense joy of it, but some people did not rest. Twain instructed the club to reach out to Arshavin and his agent right away and to propose a plan for a transfer again. He planned to listen to the player's personal wishes first before getting in touch with the club to get in touch.

When he used to play the video game, the rules stipulated that he could only go to the club to make an offer first, and then talk to the players. If the player himself did not want to, all the bargaining with the club would be completely in vain. How could it be so regulated in reality? The dominant move that Twain made for every transfer had been to look for the players first and then the club thereafter.

This time, Arshavin's agent's lips loosened. He had no other choice. Although Arshavin had become Zenit's team captain, the captain of the Russia national team, and known in European football, the big European clubs only spoke of their interest in Andrey Arshavin. No actions were actually taken. His agent, Lachter had no way to bargain with the Forest team with offers from the other clubs.

Moreover, he knew that the Zenit team would not be able to keep Arshavin as Arshavin had said to him, and the Zenit manager, Dick Advocaat, that he wanted to leave Zenit and Russia to play in Europe's highest-level league.

It was the dream of any high-level player, and Arshavin was one.

Nottingham Forest's timely Champions League title also made Arshavin view the team that had once beat his favorite team, Barcelona, in a new light.

He watched the live broadcast of the final, where the Forest team almost completely suppressed the Italian powerhouse AC Milan. Kaka's goal was the embodiment of Kaka's own ability, and had nothing to do with the performance of the AC Milan team. As a team that had just been promoted to the Premier

League for only three seasons, Arshavin truly did not expect before the game that the Forest team could completely shut out AC Milan with a 3:1 score.

It was that game that piqued his interest in the team that had been pursuing him.

When he first heard the name, it was through a teammate of the national team. The main goalkeeper, Akinfeev, had announced that he had joined a team in the English Premier League, but was returned to CSKA Moscow on loan for a season. He knew the name of that team to be "Nottingham Forest."

After that, he kept hearing the name "Nottingham Forest" and their idiosyncratic manager, "Tony Twain," but he did not take note. After all, England and Russia were too far apart. Until he received a call from his agent, Lachter who told him that Nottingham Forest was interested in him.

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After the final, the Forest Club people contacted Arshavin's agent, Lachter, but the other party did not give them a clear answer. He just stated that his player needed to seriously consider the matter of playing abroad.

When he heard the reply, Twain knew that there was potential. Although there was no immediate answer, it was also understandable. Who could immediately nod or shake his head for such an important decision? If that had happened, he had to be stupid, which was not what the Forest team or Twain wanted.

Therefore, he happily went on a holiday with Shania to Brazil. He inquired about the progress of the transfer again when he returned and heard that Lachter had not been in touch with the club. He knew this was Lachter buying time to see if any other teams in the transfer market would make an offer. If there was one, he could at least have some bargaining chips to negotiate with the Forest club.

Twain did some specialized study of the current European transfer market. There were teams which were interested in Arshavin. However, any with enough clout to compete with the club, and had clearly demonstrated the desire to sign Arshavin... there were none.

This completely settled Twain's mind. He knew that this "new Tsar" would not be able to escape from his hands.

After he clearly understood everything, Twain decided not to give Lachter a chance to make waves. He personally called Arshavin's agent, Lachter, to show him his sincerity and his knowledge of Arshavin about his interests. Then once again he asked about Arshavin's intention to move to the Forest team.

Lachter could not refuse a call from the Forest manager. He knew what Twain was like, and he told Twain that Arshavin did have the intention to play abroad, but that if the Forest team's conditions did not satisfy Arshavin, then they would rather remain in Zenit. "After all, Andrey has a lot of regard for the team he has played for most of his youth."

All agents liked to use this method. Twain was not a rookie when it came to dealing with agents. The next day, he sent a fax to the Zenit team in the name of the Nottingham Forest Club to make an offer to buy their number 10 core player, Andrey Arshavin.

The Forest team offered ten million pounds.

Nottingham Forest was the first club to make an offer for Arshavin, and Zenit was not surprised by it. They had been mentally prepared to sell their core player. After all, a lot of small and medium-sized clubs and the teams in the second or third tier European league had to face it.

The star players who were talented and performed well were unlikely to be willing to spend their careers in a league that was not at the highest level. If there were clubs in the top European leagues that invited them, the players would not be in the mood to train and play. Their heads would be filled with thoughts of being in the top leagues.

Arshavin was one of them.

Ten million pounds was nothing to be sneezed at. Zenit pretended to reject it once, and the Forest team offered another million pounds. Allan told Zenit's boss that if they did not accept, this would be their final offer. As the new European champion, they had plenty of better options for the striker position.

The Zenit owner knew that there was no shortage of strikers in the football world. If he let go of this opportunity, who knew if there would be another? The big European clubs had stated that they were interested in Arshavin, but did not make any offers. It appeared as if they had just said it casually. Perhaps they were not interested in Russian players after all.

The Zenit boss hesitated for a moment and accepted the offer after making a show of resistance.

The club had agreed which made it easier to deal with the player himself. Twain was aware that Arshavin liked Barcelona and wanted to play in Barcelona the most. But Barcelona was not interested in the Russian player. The La Liga powerhouse club had too many world-class options in Arshavin's position, and did not need to spend so much money and energy on a Russian league player — Arshavin was not a world-class player in the Catalans' view.

Eventually, after four days of negotiations, Arshavin signed his name on a personal contract.

The next day, on June 23rd, the official websites of Nottingham Forest and Zenit, as well as Arshavin's personal official website, announced this news at the same time.

"Nottingham Forest had signed on Andrey Arshavin, the midfield core and number 10/team captain from the Zenit team in the Russian Premier League for eleven million pounds. The transfer will take effect on July 1st.

This was the first transfer of the new season announced by the Forest team, which attracted a lot of media attention. Arshavin's name and his baby face were splashed across many sports media outlets in Europe for the first time. England's Daily Mirror followed closely on this transfer move by the new European champion. After the deal was sealed, they used this headline on the sports edition to brief their readers on the Forest team's first signing of the season:

"The Tsar's arrival!"

There had also been innumerable reports about him.

The twenty-six-year-old Russian captain finally tasted the sweet taste of joining a top team in a top league.

Following the announcement of this news, Anelka knew that his days at Nottingham Forest had come to an end.

Even though he had picked up the UEFA Champions League trophy for the second time as a player, it was sardonic that he did not have much to do with this second trophy.

Chapter 563: A Strong Base with A Steady Stream of Players

The transfer market would only be opened on July 1st. Before that, even if Arshavin signed a contract with the Forest team, he would not be able to report to Forest. He would remain in Russia.

Twain's heart felt more settled after Arshavin's signing.

The arrival of the Russian let Anelka know that his days at the Forest team had come to an end. Twain did not call his agents/brothers to say, "your brother is not in my plans for next season." He did not want to have any contact with Anelka anymore. The past season, Twain did not speak a word with Anelka, whether in training or in a game. When tactics needed to be instructed, he let Dunn speak with Anelka as he stood on the sidelines and treated the French striker as invisible.

He was that kind of man. When a relationship was good, he would laugh and joke. However, once the relationship broke down, he would just as easily be heartless.

He knew that with Arshavin's arrival, it was time for Anelka's two brothers to show some results.

As expected, the next day, the sports news reported that several clubs were interested in Anelka. But among them, the vast majority were mid to lower tier teams, such as Fulham and Bolton Wanderers Wanderers in the Premier League, as well as Villarreal in the La Liga.

Twain was happy to throw Anelka into these teams that would only play in the UEFA Europa League at the most, so that he could experience the capriciousness of people and harshness of society, but Anelka probably would not want to go there. Maybe Villarreal would not be bad?

When the reporters interviewed Twain, he stated, "as long as the price is right, we are happy to sell Anelka."

On the same day, the Nottingham Forest Football Club received offers from both Fulham and the Bolton Wanderers. Twain refused the Bolton Wanderers' offer of eight million pounds without hesitation. He had used eight million to buy Anelka in the first place. Twain thought that a striker who had been on the team for three years and won a UEFA Champions League title should increase in value.

Fulham was a little more generous with ten million pounds. Twain agreed to the offer, and then the Forest club informed Anelka's agents that they could make a deal with Fulham.

Anelka knew what Twain had in mind. He wanted to get him in the middle and lower tiered teams. He could not let him get what he wanted, so Anelka refused without hesitation. During an interview, he said he loved Nottingham Forest, his teammates and the fans both. He enjoyed his life there. In order to prove it, he even brought up that he had bought a house as proof that he was there to play for keeps. Moreover, he said he and Manager Tony Twain did not have any contradictions at all, and that he was happy to continue to play under him.

Anyone who was aware of the story between the two men scoffed at the answer. So did Twain, but he had no way of dealing with Anelka.

If Anelka did not want to leave, he could not force him to go. He knew that Anelka was waiting for the stronger teams to make their moves. The French striker did not want to stay on the Forest team just to sit on the bench. He was not the kind of person who would be willing to stay on the bench and get paid.

After another day of waiting, it was presumed that Anelka's agents and Villarreal had settled on their discussion, and that the Spanish club had made a formal offer to the Forest team — eight million pounds.

The offer infuriated Twain. He figured that Anelka's agent-brothers had colluded with the club, which had contacted them in private to sound out Anelka's intentions, and then teamed up to put pressure on the Forest team so that they could buy Anelka at the cheapest price.

Twain once again rebuffed Villarreal. In the refusal fax, he bluntly told the Spaniards, "please do not approach us again if the offer is less than ten million pounds."

Anelka knew how to make use of the media to put pressure on him. Surely, Twain knew how to use the media to put pressure on the other side?

He took advantage of Anelka's previous comments to counter the other side.

"Yes, I have a very good relationship with Nicolas Anelka and there is no contradiction between us. I want him to stay in the Forest team and play. As we all know, we are short of a fast striker." Poor Arshavin was "forgotten" by Twain. "But, as Nicolas' good friend, I will not stand in the way of his intention to pursue new challenges. If he wants to seek new thrilling horizons, I'll let him go. However, he's a Nottingham Forest player and a goalscorer who has just taken the UEFA Champions League title. He has to have an offer that fits his status. I don't think the inadequate price of eight million pounds is respectful to my player and my team. If you really want Anelka, please show enough sincerity."

This was just pretty talk. What was considered enough sincerity? It was just to offer enough sterling pounds.

Twain tweaked the words that Anelka had used to block him in the media, which made Anelka and his agent-brothers bitter, but they could only suffer in silence. They could not publicly announce: "We have reached an agreement with Villarreal in private and we promised to let the player help them put pressure on the Forest team to buy Anelka at the lowest price, and then we will receive rebates from this."

In that case, Twain would be happy to charge Villarreal and Anelka's two brothers to FIFA.

He knew that what they had done was something that could not be exposed, so Anelka's brothers were freaked out. They had wanted to use Anelka's comments to put pressure on the Forest club to demonstrate to Twain; they did not expect to be played by Twain.

Villarreal had thought that it would be enough to give eight million pounds to Forest for a player who had been on the bench for a year. They did not think the other manager would so ungrateful as to think that eight million pounds was patronizing! He did not consider what Anelka had become and how he was of no interest to any team in the transfer market! He was not part of the team's main force. How

could he spout nonsense as “please do not approach us again if the offer is less than ten million pounds!”

Villarreal was so annoyed that they did not offer again.

As a result, Anelka and his two older brothers were caught in the middle. They could not leave or stay.

Twain just let them suffer. He was busy with the signings for the other positions.

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Anelka was in a hurry to sell himself to the big clubs, but his few appearances in the last season made a number of teams that had been interested in him hesitant.

The rest of the Forest team was not like him. The values of the players who proved their abilities went up when the Forest team won the Champions League. A number of clubs expressed interest in Forest players.

A few years ago, when the Forest team was not famous yet, no teams were interested in the players. Now the various transfer requests to the Nottingham Forest club had left Twain a little hard pressed.

The list of offers from these teams could empty almost the entire Forest team lineup.

Ribéry and George Wood were the two most popular players in the transfer market. A number of big clubs were interested in the both of them. The most substantial price so far was Real Madrid’s offer for Wood — twenty million pounds.

Real Madrid’s pursuit of Wood was not a matter of a day or two. Although the news had not yet been made public, the media already caught whiff of it.

George Wood was the captain, flag-bearer for the future, and core of the Forest team. Even if Real Madrid had made a bid for two hundred million pounds, Twain would not sell.

Ribéry’s situation was about the same as Wood’s. Ribéry was dug out of the French lower league by Twain himself and brought to England to be given a chance to become a world-class player. A lot of teams were also interested in him, but Twain did not plan to talk to those clubs.

Nottingham Forest was not a small team that had to sell its own star players to survive, nor would fall apart now that it had the title.

Furthermore, it was only one championship title. If he was content with it, then Twain would not be Twain.

Although Twain did not want to sell any players who were useful to the team, it seemed to be wishful thinking on his part in the grander scheme of things.

The morning of June 27th, Twain received a phone call from Mikel Arteta’s agent.

Over the phone, the agent told Twain that Premier League team, Everton, was very interested in Arteta. Moyes wanted to bring in the midfielder, who could not play as the main force in the Forest team. The agent wanted to hear the club’s thoughts on it.

Although conditioned to answer “no way,” Twain calmed down in an instant.

He was aware of Arteta’s situation in the team. Due to the arrival of van der Vaart, George Wood’s development, as well as the unearthing of Ribéry’s talent in the middle, the Spaniard had been unable to find a place in the Forest team’s midfield. He had a slight lack in playing as the main strength and it seemed to be a waste of his talent to put him as a substitute.

Twain had a headache over this player’s chances of playing, but he was reluctant to sell because Arteta could form an effective complement to the team’s lineup. This was from Twain’s point of view as the manager, though. He did not look at it from Arteta’s point of view as a player.

“My thoughts? I want to hear what Mikel thinks first.” He was unwilling to give a direct answer to the other party.

The agent told Twain that Arteta also wanted to leave the Forest team for Everton, where he was promised the main position.

“Mikel likes you very much, Mr. Twain. He thinks you’re the best manager he’s ever seen, but...” the agent changed tack. “He doesn’t have a steady chance to play in the Forest team. Mikel is only twenty-five years old and still has room for development, If he cannot play in games, all this talk is pointless. He wants to stay with the Forest team. After all, he’s been here for three years and is used to life here. But Mr. Twain, can you guarantee him a steady position to play?”

Twain was dumbstruck by the question.

He did not want Arteta to leave, but he had never thought to give Arteta a main position. He had been using the Spaniard as a substitute. And in that regard, he had a different view from Arteta.

After a moment’s silence, Twain shook his head and replied, “no, I can’t make that commitment. I pick out players based on the circumstances and not their names...”

His excuse was interrupted before he even finished.

“That’s right, you see, Mr. Twain, that’s just it. Consequently, Mikel will have to leave his favorite team and go to a team that can guarantee him the main position, such as... Everton.”

Twain kept quiet for a moment and decided to accept reality. A strong base would always have a steady stream of soldiers. A team would always have players coming and leaving. Whether it was Anelka or Arteta, their departures were normal in this circle.

“Very well, just like a breakup between a couple after a love affair, it’s better if we make this amicable. As long as Everton’s offer is not too low, I’ll allow him to transfer,” Twain said with a sigh. “I’ll say the same thing. My player must leave Wilford at a decent price.”

“Thank you, Mr. Twain. I’m sure Everton’s offer won’t disappoint you.”

The agent was right. As Twain’s old friend, Moyes gave the Forest team plenty of face. Unlike Manchester United with Liverpool, Nottingham Forest did not refuse to sell its players to its competitors in the same league. As long as Twain’s reputation and the interests of the club were taken into account, Twain was happy to do business.

Moyes knew his friend well, and in Twain's words, the price offered by Everton this time was "very sincere."

Ten million pounds were used to buy the Spanish midfielder, Mikel Arteta.

Twain did not hinder anything and nodded in agreement to the deal. Ten million pounds was not considered a small amount to put up for a substitute player. Not everyone's current economic situation was good. The Forest team had bought Arteta from Real Sociedad at the cost of only three million euros, which was approximately two million pounds. Two and a half years had passed, and they had made nearly eight million pounds. Once Allan was informed of the news, he would be very happy that Twain completed the deal and did not reject Everton like he did AC Milan.

There was another reason why Twain had readily agreed. Everton had groomed Wayne Rooney. Who knew whether there would be any other geniuses in their youth training? The Forest team's youth camp was about to replenish their new seedlings. For now, the Forest team had expanded their search for brilliant potential across the United Kingdom.

With things settled between the clubs, the contract negotiation between the player and the club was no longer Twain's concern. From his conversation, he knew that Arteta's agent must have been in contact with the Everton people early on. They might have even signed an informal agreement in private and just waited for the Forest manager to assent so that they could complete the deal.

There were plenty of cases whereby the clubs got in contact with the players first in the current football world these days. Did Twain not often do that too? It was just that everyone's quiet mutual understanding.

The pace of the progress in negotiations between Arteta and Everton confirmed Twain's speculation. The next day, Everton did not wait to announce their first deal this summer on their official website — ten million pounds to buy the midfielder, Mikel Arteta from Nottingham Forest.

Moyes excitedly announced at the press conference that he would make Arteta the core of Everton's midfield. He finally got the player he had dreamed of, albeit two and a half years later.

Arteta's departure had become the Forest team's most significant transfer out in the past few years. It seemed to have broken the claim that Twain previously stressed, which was that "the Forest team does not sell players."

Numerous football clubs that had been interested in Forest players appeared to have been encouraged to step up their quests for the players.

On June 29th, two days before the summer transfer market opened, two different clubs put in their transfer applications for two different players on Tony Twain's desk.

The one on the left was from Italy. Juventus, which was ordered to enter Serie B due to the "Calciopoli" incident, and then had been promoted in advance, had offered the Forest team twelve million pounds to buy Anelka.

The one on the right was from England. Thailand's former prime minister, Thaksin, had made a strong bid for Manchester City. Just like Abramovich, he wanted to be powerful in the Premier League. To this end, he had to raise his team's competitiveness. In addition to hiring Eriksson to coach the team, he also

shopped around for talent. This time his target was the newly minted European champion's main right winger, Ashley Young.

Chapter 564: The Loaded Thai

Twain did not expect Juventus' sudden campaign for Anelka. He recalled that there had been no previous information about Juventus' interest in Anelka, and that Anelka's agent-brothers did not appear to be in touch with Juventus.

Naturally, if Juventus really intended to pay that much money to purchase Anelka, Twain was delighted to accept it. On one hand, their purchase price of Anelka was higher than his previous sale. On the other hand, it was Juventus. Anelka would not have any excuse not to go, would he?

He immediately approved this transfer deal, allowing Juventus to speak to Anelka's agents about the details of their personal contract.

As for the other transfer request...

Twain wondered why Manchester City was at their doorstep. Did they think that they had a chance because he had three players on the left flank now? Twain was not surprised that Thaksin Shinawatra took ownership of Manchester City, because all kinds of rumors like that circled every day. The Thai's interest in the English Premier League was long-standing. The English Premier League had a huge following in Southeast Asia. It was not shocking news that the rich and powerful former Thai prime minister bought a Premier League club.

The foreign invasion of the English Premier League had become a common phenomenon.

Thaksin became the owner of Manchester City, and another Premier League football club, Birmingham City, also changed hands. Its owner was a Chinese — Carson Yeung, a wealthy Hong Kong businessman.

At the same time, the powerhouse club, Arsenal was divided into two factions, fighting all day on whether to accept the funds of a rich American businessman and even caused the club's internal seismic change in personnel — the vice chairman David Dein had resigned in anger because of his disagreement with the chairman. Dein had enjoyed a high prestige in Arsenal. The current manager, Wenger, was brought back from Japan by Dein, and was also the chairman of Europe's G-14. His departure was a major blow to the Arsenal club.

The full invasion of foreign capital had left many English clubs in an atmosphere of anxiety and excitement. The coexistence was in a state of flux.

In March, the Liverpool F.C. issued a statement, which confirmed the long-awaited speculation that two Americans, George Gillett and Tom Hicks, had completed the purchase of shares in Liverpool. The two men, who had obtained 98.6% percent of Liverpool's shares, had become the indisputable major shareholder in Liverpool. Following that, the two American bosses then re-registered Liverpool as a club and made Liverpool a private limited company.

This move was exactly the same as when Evan Doughty became the owner of Nottingham Forest.

Fewer clubs in the current English football still maintained a pure pedigree. Most teams in the Premier League were tied with foreign investments.

Manchester United's big boss was the American, Glazer, the Chelsea boss was the Russian oligarch, Abramovich, the Liverpool boss were the Americans Hicks and Gillett, the Nottingham Forest boss was the British with an American passport, Evan Doughty, the Manchester City boss was the Thai, Thaksin, the Birmingham City boss was the Chinese, Carson Yeung, the West Ham United boss was the Icelandic, Eggert Magnússon, the Portsmouth owner was the French-Israeli, Alexandre Gaydamak, the Aston Villa owner was the American, Randy Lerner. The forerunner of foreign investment in the Premier League was Fulham's current boss, the Egyptian Mohamed Al-Fayed, who first became the owner of the Fulham club in 1997. At the time, Fulham was an unknown Football League Second Division team. Four years later in 2001, they rose to the English Premier League and had stayed there ever since.

At the present, Arsenal was divided as to whether they would accept the foreign investment or not. If Arsenal decided to accept the American capital, there would no longer be a pure English club in the Premier League's top five clubs. If truth be told, Arsenal was no longer viewed as an English club because they had too many foreign players. The Gunners were often hated in their country because of the overwhelming French influence.

The present circumstances were truly a great irony in a country steeped in traditions that paid particular attention to pedigree and origins.

Moreover, the summer of 2007 was the busiest summer in the Premier League for foreign investment. It was understood that this summer would not be peaceful.

In order to win favor with the Manchester City fans, Thaksin was quite liberal with money and purchased players everywhere. He pledged to be another Abramovich.

The Brazilian, Elano, and the Italian, Rolando Bianchi, had both joined Manchester City. Now, they had their eye on the brilliant right midfielder, Ashley Young, who had been with the Forest team in the Premier League and European arena for two seasons.

During the two seasons, Ashley Young had always firmly occupied the Premier League's "king of assists" throne. Even though it had something to do with the Forest team carrying out tactics and coordination which emphasized and valued the offense on the flanks, it was inseparable from Ashley Young's own ability.

There was no doubt that Lennon was a very talented player, but he could not easily squeeze Ashley Young onto the bench. It showed Young's ability. He was different from Ribéry. Although both of them were fast and good at breakthroughs, Ribéry preferred to cut inside to shoot, and Young preferred to pass, which was one of the reasons why he had more assists than Ribéry.

In the first half of the year, a famous sports brand and a famous sports analytics company, Opta Sports, collaborated to release a statistical report with a very imposing name: "Premier League's top ten speedsters." As the name suggested, it was the ten fastest players.

Once this list was published, Nottingham Forest became the most conspicuous club. In the column after the speedsters' names, Nottingham Forest's name was the most frequently named team — four times in total.

The fifth to eighth places were occupied by the Forest players. Fifth place belonged to Ashley Young. His speed without the ball was 11.2 seconds but when he pursued the ball, he ran even faster — 10.97 seconds.

The rest of the four players were the sixth-place Aaron Lennon and George Wood, as well as Franck Ribéry.

The list also indirectly helped Ashley Young increase his value.

Thaksin's initial offer was already fifteen million pounds. How much did Nottingham Forest spend to purchase the talented right winger from Watford in the first place?

700,000 pounds!

Three years later, the price had shot up to fifteen million pounds.

Was Twain satisfied?

No. Twain thought it was too low.

How was it possible that the main player who won the UEFA Champions League, chosen in the best lineup of last season's Champions League, nominated as the king of assists for two consecutive Premier League seasons be worth a mere fifteen million pounds?

The Nottingham Forest Football Club swiftly responded to Manchester City. The official line was: "Ashley Young is not for sale. His impact on the team's right flank is great and he is an important contributing factor to the Forest team winning the Champions League title. Manager Tony Twain will not sell a player who contributed so much."

If it had been said a week ago, it might have been convincing. However, people were going to read between the lines.

Arteta had left. Was there any important player on the Forest team that could not be sold?

That was how Manchester City understood it. Forest felt that the money was too little. Why else would they emphasize how important Ashley Young was to the Forest team? These things did not require them to repeat, everyone on Earth knew.

Twain wanted them to understand that, too.

He had wanted to keep Arteta, but he was not concerned about Ashley Young at all.

Out of his preference for Gareth Bale and Aaron Lennon, Twain had little affection for Ashley Young, who had taken them both to visit a prostitute.

While Ashley Young was the first pick for the right midfielder position in the team, it was just "work is work" to Twain. Outside of work, Twain had little interaction with the young man he had unearthed from Watford. He could chat amiably with Bale's father, talk to Lennon about the ideals of life or something similar, joke around with Eastwood, who did his warm-ups on horseback, teach his most valued George Wood with a straight face, and even talk to van Nistelrooy about Ferguson as a man. He just did not have any contact with Ashley Young outside of the work.

Truthfully, it was not like this before. It was only after that incident that his relationship with Ashley Young had cooled rapidly. Twain still brooded about that incident.

Ashley Young brought Bale and Lennon to a brothel. He was certain that Bale and Lennon slept with the prostitutes, but when he asked Young, he did not hesitate to answer that they did not.

From that moment on, Twain lost interest in the young man. He knew that Young had lied and he was so comfortable and calm that Twain was convinced that it was not the first he had lied.

Compared to the old man, Ferguson, Twain was not a manager who interfered with his players' private lives. He did not mind young people taking detours in their private lives, nor did he mind that they spent money on women to meet their physical needs. As long as it did not affect their condition on the field, they were free to do what they wanted.

But he could not allow his players to deceive him and treat him like an ignorant three-year-old.

Why did he not turn hostile and argue right away? Because Twain thought Lennon was still too young and needed to continue to be honed. It would have been hasty of him to let him play as the main force. Lennon was like Bale; Twain had a complete plan for their development, and he did not want to spoil things by being too eager. So many young geniuses had been blown out in the world. Twain did not want such a situation to happen to his men. Another reason was that Ashley Young's performance in the games was still very stable. He was still useful to the team. Therefore, Twain suppressed the matter within. He only expressed his displeasure to Dunn at home and did not mention it to anyone else. It was as if he had forgotten this incident.

When Twain announced that the Forest team had signed Beckham, everyone was worried about the Forest's overcrowded right flank for the next season. Only Dunn knew that the man was not really concerned at all. Even without the generous owner, Thaksin, Twain would have tried to put Ashley Young on sale. Many people were interested in the king of assists.

However, since Thaksin was resolved to play a foolishly rich man, Twain did not mind benefitting from it in the process.

You want to buy the European champion, Nottingham Forest's main force in the right flank, the new right winger of England national team and the two-consecutive king of assists for the Premier League for fifteen million pounds? Are you just trying to beat off a beggar, Prime minister Thaksin?

Twain and Allan carefully analyzed the background behind the player's takeover and thought that there was room for negotiation.

They were not afraid to force a buyer away because Ashley Young was not short of buyers at all. It was just a question of price.

Although it was now a general trend for foreign investment to be in the Premier League clubs, the vast majority of English fans still had strong resistance and were conflicted about the development. The resistance was even stronger against Thaksin, who was from a small Southeast Asian nation.

Thaksin was well aware of it, so he could not wait to announce the team's signing of the former England manager, Eriksson, just to pacify popular sentiments. At the same time, he promised that he would put out at least fifty million pounds to buy strong players and increase the strength of the team.

So far, the transfers to fill in the areas lacking in the team already included the Brazilian midfielder, Elano, and the Italian striker, Bianchi.

The two players had no influence at all in the minds of the English fans. Thaksin would suffer greatly if he intended to appease the hearts and minds of the people by relying on those two players. Thaksin knew it, too. Consequently, after he took care of the two deals, Manchester City immediately launched the chase in the transfer market.

This time, after his discussion with Eriksson, he set the goal of an important breakthrough on Ashley Young, the right winger for the Forest team and England national team. Eriksson was once the England manager and Ashley Young had played in the World Cup in Germany, so Eriksson was aware of Ashley Young's ability.

Another reason was that Ashley Young was a local player whose fame and appeal at home in England was much higher than that of Elano and Bianchi. To increase his standing in the hearts of the Manchester City fans, it was not enough to rely on the two foreign aids or even to pay off Manchester City's sixty million pounds of debt. The fans just wanted to see star players of enough weight join the team.

Accordingly, having just taken the Champions League title and won the king of assists for two consecutive years in England, Ashley Young had become an important piece in his campaign to win over the hearts of the people.

With this analysis, both Twain and Allan were determined to get the most out of this loaded man.

Fifteen million is not enough; show more money!

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Manchester City made a second offer, with the price increased to eighteen million pounds.

This time, Nottingham Forest seemed to hesitate for a bit before they refused again. The reason was still the same: "Ashley Young is an important part of the team. Tony Twain has no intention of selling a player who has contributed so much to the team..."

In the meantime, Twain went to Ashley Young for a discussion. He would not state that the team was trying to sell him. He just asked if the rampant rumors in the media about his transfer were true.

During this time, the media had reported that Eriksson had made contact with Ashley Young's agent. After Manchester City was taken over by Thailand's former prime minister, Manchester City also had the clout to give the players they were interested in packages to touch their hearts.

Therefore, Twain came to Ashley Young with a grim expression and looked ready to send punitive forces against him.

Young denied that his agent and Manchester City had made contact in private, and even said that he enjoyed playing in Nottingham Forest. He had just received an honor. How could he possibly leave? Even if the other party offered an extremely attractive package, he would not waver in his determination to be loyal.

After much had been said, both sides had a "satisfied" farewell.

The next day, Ashley Young's agent sought out the Forest club in the hope of giving his player a raise. The agent's reason was simple: You can see that my player is so red-hot recently. Countless clubs are keen on him. Since you said he is an important contributor to the team, then isn't it unreasonable if you do not give him a higher salary? Furthermore, my player is utterly loyal to the team. That definitely goes without saying! He has remained unmoved even with so many clubs' and even Manchester City's pursuits. So, shouldn't the team give Ashley Young a higher salary package to reward his loyalty?

The man who received the agent was Twain. He grinned and affirmed Ashley Young's contribution to the team and thanked him for staying loyal to the team in the face of such rampant "rumors." When the conversation came to this point, everyone had smiles on their faces. The atmosphere of the discussion was very friendly and harmonious.

But as soon as the subject of money came up, Twain's smile remained unchanged, but his words were not what the agent wanted to hear.

"Salary? As you know, the club recently planned to build a new stadium. There is not ample funding..."

His remark was euphemistic. After the agent repeatedly asked for his player to receive a salary equal to his contribution, Twain told him bluntly that the club would not talk to him about Ashley Young's salary.

"Young still has a three-year contract with the club. We can talk about it when we have one more year left."

This was equivalent to turning the guest out. When the agent heard Twain say so, he got up and said goodbye.

Although everyone was still smiling, both sides knew that all pretense of cordiality was shed.

One day after the agent left, Manchester City's third offer came. This time they looked set to win, because the Manchester City club told the Forest club that if it disagreed, it would be the final offer, and City would not raise the offer on Ashley Young.

Ever since Stuart Pearce stepped down from the Manchester City manager's position, the good relationship between the two clubs was over. Otherwise Manchester City would never have conducted business with such a harsh tone. When Pearce was there, only a phone call from both managers was needed, and the problem was solved.

This time, Thaksin seemed to harden his resolve — twenty-five million pounds!

Twain took the fax to Allan. The two men glanced at each other and laughed.

That afternoon, Manchester City received the Forest team's response: They had agreed to the offer. Manchester City could carry out the negotiation with Ashley Young on his personal contract.

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In truth, Ashley Young did not really want to leave the Forest team at first. What he said to Twain was true, but he wanted to use the recent media hype to fight for a higher salary for himself in the team. The foolish Manchester City was very much in line with the requirements of a supporting actor.

However, Ashley Young and his agent did not expect that Manager Tony Twain, who had always valued him on the football field, to have plans to sell him from a season ago...

Twain took advantage of the situation and let Ashley Young walk away on his own.

Ashley Young was not foolishly loyal. Since he could not command a higher salary in the Forest team, he took advantage of the Champions League win and the big jump in his worth to transfer to a club that could offer a higher salary. There was nothing bad about it. Why did professional players train hard to prove themselves in the games to win the championship titles and suffer injuries? Was it really about taking the gold medal home and putting it in the cabinet for show? Was it really for the glory? If not for the money, who would choose to play football as a lifelong career?

Twain understood this, so he did not obstruct Ashley Young in his pursuit of the happiness that he wanted.

The Forest team's second heavyweight transfer out of the new season was finalized, and at the same time, the most attention-grabbing transfer out so far.

Arteta's departure could be explained away as just a substitute who could not play in games and wanted to go after a team that would put him in the main position, then Ashley Young's departure made it hard for a lot of people to understand. Judging from the field, Ashley Young's importance to the Forest team was self-evident. For the Forest team to be able to win the Champions League title, Ashley Young played an important part.

Perhaps this was to give Beckham a position, some media outlets guessed? Was it because Beckham's sponsors put a lot of pressure on the Forest team? If that was the case, would it not indirectly cause Beckham to create a lot of enemies in the Forest team's locker room? Twain had always said that he did not take fame into account when he picked the main players. He only saw their abilities and forms. If it was really to give Beckham a main position that he sold Ashley Young, then... the media reported in succession that they were not optimistic on David Beckham's prospects in the Forest team locker room.

The case that they had built seemed to be strong: Beckham had been a famous star player for a long time, but he was, after all, an outsider on the Forest team. How was he going to get along with the people in the Forest team locker room? Moreover, there was no doubt that people would be jealous of what Beckham had gained and were thus biased... There were many people like that in the football world. How could there not be people like that on the Forest team? Would Ashley Young's departure make the rest of the Forest team side with the ones in similar circumstances and feel themselves to be in danger? And then it would be followed by a solidarity in opposition to the same adversary?

In that case, would the arrival of the world-class superstar create any waves in the Forest team locker room, which had always been harmonious without any emergence of negative news?

Those readers who like such gossip have much to look forward! We, in the name of the tabloids and paparazzi in England, promise to dig deep into the inside story, to uncover the truth, and to cause pandemonium in the mysterious virgin land of Nottingham Forest's locker room henceforth!

Chapter 565: The Merry Men

On July 1st, the players and coaches returned from their vacation.

Dunn had returned to Nottingham with Tang Jing the day before. He said he ran into Tang Jing at the Beijing airport, but Twain did not believe him and mocked Dunn with his sharp tongue. He only stopped teasing when Dunn blushed like a baboon's bottom.

The English Premier League started earlier than the other leagues and would be fully opened in mid-August. Therefore, Premier League teams started training earlier than other countries' league teams.

Only a stamina recovery program was arranged for the first day of training, given that everyone had just had a month of vacation. As they were a little rusty skill wise, the training was not intense. Dunn was not in charge of fitness training as there was a special fitness coach in charge, so he did not have to worry much about anything.

However, he still had to be present because there was a matter he needed to attend to in addition to leading the team the training.

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After one month of vacation, the players behaved as if they had just woken up from a dream. They were heavy-eyed and yawning. Their energy levels and bodies were not in best condition.

To Twain's satisfaction, no one was absent after a wonderful vacation. Other than Arteta and Ashley Young, who had already announced their departures, even Anelka, who was at odds with Twain, drove there to train. He was still in discussion with Juventus about his personal contract as both sides were in dispute over some issues.

Still in vacation mode, the players were startled awake by the media lying in wait when they drove themselves to the Wilford training base mental.

Perhaps the word "startled" was an understatement. The Nottingham Forest players had never seen so many reporters at the training base on the first day of training before the start of the season.

Not only were the media there, but countless people who appeared to be the fans were also waiting. They were on both sides of the narrow alley, holding banners and shouting out chants energetically.

If they just looked at the media, they probably would not know why it was so lively. But when they looked at the enthusiastic fans, it became clear.

Some of them wore the red Manchester United jerseys and some wore the white Real Madrid jerseys. All of them were holding up posters of a man.

After Ribéry parked his darling car in the parking lot within the training base, he whistled at several of his teammates who arrived at the same time. "How was your vacation?"

"Luckily, I went to Hawaii." Eastwood, who was tanned, pointed to his floral shirt. He had also arrived by car. Now that he was famous and successful, he no longer lived in the caravan at the training base compound. He had bought a small farm and lived there with his wife and children. Of course, he was still doing his warm ups by riding a horse on the morning of every home game. No one would think that he was obstructing the traffic by riding in his own farm.

Ribéry pointed to the gate of the training base, where hordes of media and fans could be seen.

“It’s really lively, isn’t it? Looks like a big shot is coming today.”

“Don’t you know who’s coming?” Eastwood was a little surprised.

“Tut, it’s not fun if I just say the name out loud.” Ribéry rolled his eyes at Eastwood.

The pair were not in a hurry to go to the locker room. They chatted as they looked in the direction of the gate. Soon, more cars stopped beside them, and more people stood alongside them to chat. This formed a strange sight. None of the Forest players first went to the locker room to change and head to the training ground. Instead, they greeted each other and chatted in the parking lot.

It looked like the feeling of the vacation was not over yet.

Wood did not drive. His house was very close to the training base. He usually ran here for the training, which he could do the most basic warm-up running here. No one thought it was strange for the eccentric person.

Albertini had already retired and now he was the team’s official captain. He had decided to get into the role as soon as possible. When Albertini was there, Wood just had to be a field captain, and did not have to take of things off the field. The real captain, Albertini took care of those trivial things. It was now a completely different and new experience.

Wood stood outside the crowd, hesitated for a moment, and coughed a few times to clear his throat.

His unusual move attracted some people’s attention.

“Hey, George, have you caught a cold?” Van Nistelrooy asked in concern. As he spoke, several of the Dutch men who had been chatting with him, turned their heads. The others followed suit and turned their attention to Wood.

“Ah, uh... No, I don’t have a cold,” Wood said awkwardly. “What are you all talking about?”

Ribéry pointed at the gate with a grin. “Talking about the big shot who’s coming today.”

Wood knew who they were talking about, but he was not interested in taking part in the topic. If it were before he had become captain, he would have turned around and left to change and start his warm-up on the training ground. But now, he was the captain, on and off the field. How could he be such an unsociable captain?

Wood remembered what Albertini said when he embraced him before he left, “it’s up to you next.”

This could be considered a kind of trust. Wood was not stupid. He understood.

He moved a few steps but did not retreat. Instead, he squeezed into the crowd.

“Do you guys.... want him to come?” After thinking, he asked a question that made everyone laugh.

“George, if you were a reporter, I’ll bet asking a question like that would get you a lot of closed doors.” Van Nistelrooy laughed. “We would take it as you trying to drive a wedge in the relationships within the locker room.”

"I can't say if I like it or not. My previous understanding of him is through the media, but I basically do not believe what the media says, whether it's good or bad. I don't believe a word of it. Now I have the opportunity to personally interact with him. I'll know whether I like or do not like after we have interacted." Pepe's words received nods of approval from most people.

This was probably the entire Forest team's attitude towards this new teammate. If the media caught wind of it, how would they feel?

Everyone chatted in groups of two or three. Some people talked about the players who were about to join. The others chatted to their friends about their vacations. A few people discussed Arteta and Ashley Young, the two teammates who had left.

They thought about how they had fought together to win the title just over a month ago and now they were about to become each other's opponents. Other than that, no one expressed any outrage at the departure of the two players. They were professional players and had seen many comings and goings. It was not a big deal. If they were friends, they would still be friends no matter where they were. They could just set a date to hang out and have a meal together.

Anelka was the last to arrive. Instead of joining his teammates, he went straight to the locker room. No one tried to keep him. Everyone knew that the French striker was bound to leave. Since his heart was not there, they did not need to retain him.

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Twain and Dunn walked to the training base, so they arrived a little later than the players.

Twain and Dunn were also a little surprised to see the media and enthusiastic fan groups along the way.

"Look, look. Things are definitely different for the king of popularity. Since when has it been this packed on the first day of pre-season training for Nottingham Forest?" Twain said to Dunn, pointing to the fans on both sides. He also waved to the crazed fans in greeting.

If those gathered were the diehard Nottingham Forest fans, Twain's waving would have received a surge of responses, which would have greatly stroked Twain's ego. But his waving did not get any reaction.

The people just held up posters and turned their gazes to the end of the alley, the direction the players drove in from. Twain and Dunn were completely invisible to them.

"Well..." Under Dunn's silent gaze, Twain was a little embarrassed. "At least it proves one thing. They're not Nottingham Forest fans... But it's okay!" He grinned and spoke louder. "They'll soon be."

When Twain and Dunn walked to the gate of the training base, they found that the iron gate, which used to be open, were closed.

The security guard inside the guard house hurried out to open the gate when he saw the manager and assistant manager.

"What's going on?" Twain asked in puzzlement.

“Umm... ” The young security guard hesitated a moment before he pointed to the noisy crowd outside the gate and replied, “The reporters and fans were so enthusiastic that I was afraid they would rush in, so I closed the gate.”

Twain turned to look at them. He knew a few of the sports reporters. There were also completely unfamiliar faces. The reporters Twain knew turned around and waved to him when they saw him.

But Twain kept a straight face and did not respond. They were all snubbed.

The young security guard thought the serious-looking manager would admonish him and was so worried that he did not know whether to walk away or stay.

He did not expect that Twain turned to smile at him and pat him on the shoulder and say, “you did a good job.”

After the two men walked in, the quiet Dunn suddenly piped up, “it looks like he has perceived your principle of closed-door training.”

Twain crouched on the ground and unbecomingly burst into laughter in front of the media.

“Please... Come on, Dunn. Can you give a heads up the next time you tell a joke?”

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When Twain managed to get up after a while, the pair continued to walk in, and saw the players gathered in the parking lot.

Twain and Dunn looked at each other and saw the doubtful expression in each other’s eyes.

This was a sight they had never seen before.

Could it be there was a fight?

Twain quickly marched over before he realized it was a false alarm. Ribéry waved and greeted him from afar. “Boss, long time no see!” How could there be a fight with such a bright smile?

“Hey, you guys are not changing in the locker room. What are you standing here for?” Twain asked as he stood in front of the crowd. Everyone stopped chatting.

“We all want to see with our own eyes the exciting sight outside when he arrives.” Ribéry pointed to the crowd behind him, and then pointed to the gate.

Turning to the side, Twain found George Wood standing in the crowd. He smiled inside.

“In that case, you might as well go to the gate to watch. What you can see here?”

“We can’t do that. If we go there, it make the media very happy. No, not going to happen.” Ribéry’s head shook like a rattle-drum.

“The media can also see you all standing here. You don’t think the reporters can’t see? All right, all right, there’s nothing to look at. Go and change. I don’t want this to be like a Queen’s inspection when he comes.” Twain shooed the group back to the locker room like a mother hen.

Watching Wood leave with the crowd, Twain turned his head and smiled at Dunn, "What a bunch of amusing boys. It's not like they haven't never seen a big star. They are all star players."

"They probably gathered here for fun." Dunn nodded.

With that group gone, it was now Twain's and Dunn's turn to stand outside the parking lot and wait.

The assistant manager, Kerslake, waited a long time on the training ground before he saw only Anelka. He found it strange because Anelka usually was not so proactive. He looked at his watch and discovered that it was not that Anelka had arrived early, but that no one else had come at all!

Leaving Anelka alone, Kerslake walked to the locker room. The locker room was empty. When he came back out, he saw a large crowd of players trotting in from.

"Did you all take the same bus? Why are you all coming in together?" Kerslake did not say it as nicely as Twain. He asked with knitted brows.

"So sorry, sorry, sir. We were outside talking for a while..." Since it was initially Ribéry's idea to wait outside, it was now up to him to bear the coach's wrath. It was fair and square.

"Stop the crap, hurry up and get dressed. Go to the training ground and wait for me, you all know the punishment of being late!" Kerslake waved impatiently.

Once they heard "the punishment of being late," the large crowd rushed towards the locker room. This was not a joke. Even if they were the European champions, it was still a special tradition of the Forest team to run laps as the punishment for lateness.

Ribéry ran at the front, but was stopped by Kerslake. "Where are Tony and Dunn?"

"They're outside..." Ribéry hurriedly pointed to the exit and nimbly leapt away from Kerslake like he was a skipping mud fish.

Kerslake did not have time to take care of this lad. He went against the current and walked towards the exit.

Kerslake continued to walk until he came to the parking lot and finally found Twain and Dunn, leaning together to chat leisurely.

"What are you doing here?" Kerslake's loud voice startled a flock of birds in the tree.

"Ah, David, you're here." Twain turned his head to see him and beckoned to him.

"What are you doing here? Did you just get here? Why didn't you go to the training ground? All the other coaches have arrived."

Twain patted his forehead. It appeared not only the players had not entered a working state yet. He nudged Dunn. "I forgot. It's enough for me to be here alone to welcome the new players. You go ahead, Dunn."

Dunn dutifully left with Kerslake. Twain no longer waited in the parking lot. He walked to his office and began to prepare.

Arshavin and Akinfeev did not come to the team today because they did not have to. The Forest team was travelling to Russia for the pre-season training in four days. They would join the team in Moscow.

As for why Russia was chosen for training, when asked, Twain said something all his opponents felt was arrogant. "We are there to adapt to and do our warm-up in the field in advance for this season's Champions League final." The 07-08 season's UEFA Champions League final would be held at Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium.

In reality, the reason was that the Forest team had been invited to participate in the Russian Railways Cup. As the newly minted European champion, the invitations for various pre-season friendlies piled up on Twain's desk. Twain eventually picked this friendly. The reason was simple. Twain was particular about the quality of the friendly rather than focus on where to play. Even if the friendly was in Moscow in the distant Russia. The participating teams for the Russian Railways Cup were strong. Other than the host team, FC Lokomotiv Moscow, which was weaker in terms of strength, the two other participating teams in the Railways Cup that were invited were the gold medaled Real Madrid, who had raised its spirits to take the pragmatic route, as well as AC Milan, who had just lost to Nottingham Forest in the final.

What a coincidence!

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Twain did not wait too long in his office. He received a call from the guard at the gate about ten minutes later.

"Sir, he's here!" The young security guard sounded a little excited. Twain could even hear the clamor outside through the telephone line, which was filled with female screams.

He was still young after all and was unable to remain calm.

Twain grunted in reply and hung up the phone. He did not get up to go the gate to meet him. He did not want everyone to think this man was special, so he even requested that Evan and Allan not to leave their offices to join in the crowd.

Twain turned his chair around and looked at the training ground outside the massive floor-to-ceiling window. The players were running laps in training, or rather, punishment. They were penalized with running because the entire team was late.

However, since the training program these days was to recover their stamina, it was not wrong to say it was training.

Twain had long had a plan in mind on how to introduce this new striking teammate to the team.

Five minutes later, there was a knock on the door behind him.

Twain stood up and turned to look at the door. "Come in."

That man, who was much adored by many, came in with an apologetic expression. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry... I'm not familiar with Nottingham's roads and I almost got lost..." Next to him was his agent, Simon Fuller, a well-dressed and seemingly shrewd middle-aged man.

“You just had to drive your own car. It’s all right if you call the club to pick you up, David,” Twain said to Beckham in front of him, and then he briefly shook hands with Fuller, the agent. They did not engage in a conversation as he only knew the agent because they discussed a series of things during the contract negotiation six months ago. They did not need friendly greetings or chat about the weather. The agent was not the protagonist in his office.

“Ha, having lived in Spain for four years, I thought the UK was the same... How should I address you from now on?”

“In private, Tony. In front of your teammates, better call me boss. It’s more familiar.” Twain walked around the desk and stepped forward. “Come on, I’ll take you to meet them.” He pointed to the window behind him.

Beckham glanced over and nodded. He followed Twain out. Fuller followed the pair in silence and deliberately kept a distance to allow Beckham to freely communicate with Twain and not to worry about the awkwardness of a presence of a third party.

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“We’re no match for Real Madrid’s Valdebebas training complex, but the facilities are complete and everything we need.” Along the way, Twain introduced the situation at the Wilford training base to Beckham.

Naturally, Beckham graciously paid a few compliments such as Manager Twain had to be amazing and so on to have created a European champion team at such a training base.

When the Forest team finally finished running laps, the players were tired and out of breath. While they took a break on the sidelines, a few sharp-eyed people saw the three men walk in from the outside, one was the boss they were all familiar with, Tony Twain, and the other middle-aged man was unfamiliar to them, so they automatically ignored him. Everyone’s attention was quickly focused on the one person who walked beside Twain as they talked and laughed — David Beckham.

He was no longer dressed in his casual attire. Twain had taken him to the locker room in the training base and assigned him a locker. He changed into his training attire and came straight there.

Resting on the sidelines, the players did not stand up in a line. They took their break as they were, seated or lying down. Those who stood and chatted just turned around and stopped chatting as they looked at their new teammate.

Twain was pleased with the conduct of the players. It looked like his men were not ignorant groupies.

Only Wood purposefully walked out of the crowd and stood at the front, which was an indication of his identity. He learned from Albertini, who used to receive the Forest team’s new teammates after Twain brought them over.

Beckham knew Wood. He remembered the lovely boy who comforted him when he was brought off the field and wept on the sidelines in the World Cup against Portugal. He smiled kindly at Wood.

When Twain saw that everyone’s attention was focused on them, he pointed to Beckham next to him.

“Your new teammate and the professional footballer, David Beckham.” He purposely stressed the words “professional footballer.”

This was the introduction he came up with. He did not say this was the famous star player or the apple of advertisers’ eyes. He did not care about the players’ status and accomplishments outside of the field. Once they entered Wilford, they were on his turf, which meant that they were all his men and professional players.

With that, he turned his head to observe Beckham’s reaction. Beckham did not show the slightest displeasure. He smiled and greeted the crowd, “Hi, guys, I’m glad we can play together in the future.”

He was grateful that Twain had introduced him like that. Why had he come to the Forest team? It was to prove to the world that his real identity was a player first and not an endorsement model or an actor or anything else.

Everyone, including the players and coaches on the training ground gathered on this spot around Beckham.

Kerslake introduced the Forest team coaches to Beckham one by one to help him get to know the team and know who to look for regarding specific questions.

Following that...

“George.” Twain prompted a somewhat hesitant Wood standing next to him.

Wood finally stepped forward. He tried his best to speak to Beckham with his usual tone. “Let me introduce you... to your teammates.” It came out a little stiff in the end.

Fortunately, Beckham and Wood spent a summer with the England national team, so he knew his character and temperament. He did not mind letting Wood take him around to get to know the Forest players.

Everyone was friendly and did not show any displeasure.

After the mutual familiarizing was over, Twain spoke. “The break is over, guys. Back to the training ground.”

The players got up one by one and made their way to the training ground.

Beckham also had to follow, but he was stopped by Twain. “Wait, David.”

“Yes? What’s the matter, boss?” Beckham quickly got into the role as one of Twain’s men.

“Well...” Twain scratched his head. He had been mulling over the next thing he had to say while Beckham was introduced to the coaches. He was a little worried, but he had to say it, because it was part of the team’s discipline. Discipline was important to Twain. He could not ignore it just because the offender was Beckham. If not, he would have no respect and authority on the team.

He looked up and saw most of the players had not gone far. Apparently these people knew too and were waiting to watch the show. These cunning bastards!

“That’s the thing, David. The Forest team has a tradition that has been established since I became the manager of this team. That is, any player who’s late for training has to be disciplined with running laps.” Twain looked at Beckham in the eye to make the expression in his eyes looked sincere. “Did you see that they were tired and breathless?” He pointed to the players. “They just completed their laps after their punishment and were resting here. They were collectively late because they waited for you in the parking lot.”

He spoke the truth. Anelka was the only person who escaped since he was indifferent to Beckham and was determined to leave.

Beckham turned his head to look at the players and then he turned back to Twain.

“You’re late too, so... you have to run laps. Eight laps.” When Twain finished, he quietly looked at Beckham.

The agent, Fuller, was a little displeased with the remark. His player was the famous David Beckham. Besides, he was not late on purpose. They had no prior knowledge. He thought Twain had gone a little too far. What’s this about? Giving my player an initial show of strength?

As soon as he took a step forward, he saw Beckham give him a meaningful look.

“No problem, boss.” Beckham shrugged. “I had this rule as well when I played at Real Madrid, but we did not run laps.”

“What’s the penalty?” Kerslake, who was interested in the behind the scenes at the powerhouse club, asked first.

“By doing free kicks.” Beckham winked and smiled slyly.

Everyone roared with laughter, and the somewhat awkward atmosphere dissipated.

In the sounds of laughter, Beckham turned to run the laps. His agent waited for Beckham to run far before he walked up to Twain to question him.

Twain spoke first. “I know what you’re going to ask me, Mr. Fuller. But I hope you can understand that David is still a professional footballer and he wants people to think so too. I’m just doing what a manager is supposed to do to a professional player. Do you want the negative news that ‘David Beckham plays the big shot and receives special treatment’ to appear in the media tomorrow?”

“Er... ”

“Of course, I’m not going to blab to the press, but you can’t guarantee that no one among these people will be okay with everything David Beckham has got... ” He pursed his lips. “You need to know, Mr. Fuller, that I’m helping David Beckham. If David were smart, he’d understand... And obviously he’s a smart guy. He did well by not letting people pick faults and winning the support and trust of his teammates as well. What else do you need to worry about, Mr. Fuller?”

His speech made Simon Fuller speechless. He had to admit that it made sense for Twain to do so.

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Beckham ran around the perimeter of the training ground. Eastwood followed, pretending to run with him and then approached him.

“David?”

“Ah, you are... Freddy Eastwood?” Beckham’s memory was quite good. Wood only ran through everyone’s name once and he could remember the names and faces by heart.

“Just call me Freddy.” Eastwood winked. “They still call me the Romani kid, but I’m never angry!”

Beckham smiled.

“Are you free tonight, David?”

“Yes... I am.” Beckham thought about it. Indeed, there was really nothing else he needed to do, and even if he were busy, he would have rescheduled. He was smart and knew what this implied.

“That’s good.” Eastwood snapped his fingers. “The guys prepared a welcome party for you. We’ll have drinks, hang out, and have a good time.”

“For me?”

“Just like running laps as a penalty, it is our tradition.” Eastwood laughed happily. “Any new player who joins will have one. Of course, that new player has to be recognized by all of us.”

This was the truth. Such a welcome party had to have been prepared earlier. But the Forest team normally would not bring in any new players before the closing of the summer transfer market during the training ahead of the season. After a period of time of interaction and familiarization with each other, they would then consider holding a welcome party. If the new arrivals were not welcomed, they would not be invited to participate. Fortunately, for the last several years, only Anelka was not invited. He really was not well-liked when he first arrived.

“Would boss and the others go?” Beckham glanced at Twain, who was talking to his agent on the other side.

“No, neither the manager nor the staff will go. If we don’t invite them, they won’t be allowed to attend. This is this a party for players only. Why would we ask the heads to dampen the mood?”

Beckham nodded. “Very well! I’m happy to be invited to attend. Does that mean I’m... accepted? Like in the Merry Men?”

“Yes! We’re a gang now!”

Both of them laughed.

Kerslake’s loud voice boomed in the distance. “Freddy Eastwood! What are you doing? Training’s over here, come over here!” He waved his arms hard and looked aggressive.

Eastwood was not afraid of him, and responded with a shrill voice, “Ah! I just remembered that I got lazy and ran one less circle during the penalty run just now! I’m making it up now! David is not the only one. I’m also a professional player!”

Everyone on and off the training ground laughed. Even the fierce-looking Kerslake was unable to restrain a smile as he muttered, "this little bastard!"

Watching the laughing players, Beckham remembered that on his way to the Forest team training base, his agent Simon Fuller had asked him if he knew the situation inside the Forest team. He could only say he did not know. Truthfully, he did not know a lot about the inside of this team. His impression of the team came from his good friend Tony Twain. And before he officially became a member of the Forest team, Twain never told him. He could only imagine his life in Nottingham for the next two years using his four years of experience in Real Madrid, which was, after all, the most recent portion of his life.

Now he thought this interaction definitely felt completely different as compared to Real Madrid.

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Twain was still talking to Fuller. He wanted the agent to understand his thinking and made certain that there was no misunderstanding. After all, the agent could influence not just David Beckham, but also Beckham's wife and the unstable factor, Victoria Beckham. He had a good personal relationship with Victoria because he used to be an agent for the Spice Girls.

"Mr. Fuller, I know you've all just come back from Spain. But this is not Real Madrid, full of noble air. This is Nottingham, the Sherwood Forest of Robin Hood and the Merry Men." Twain gave the agent a wide toothed grin. "When you're capable and plain dealing with people, you will get true support. Strength and generosity go a long way."

Chapter 566: Mendes' Gift

The team had returned to the normal training. In the four days before going to Russia, the team only did physical fitness training to reduce the small bellies that a lot of players developed over the holidays and to restore their physical skills so that their bodies could keep up with the intense training and pace of games.

The team was currently incomplete, so there was no need for a joint practice.

There was one matter that had to be done before the departure for Russia and that was the transfer issue of Anelka.

Juventus had made a 12 million pound offer to Nottingham Forest. After consulting with Allan, Twain decided to agree to this price. Although it was three million pounds lower than AC Milan's offer last season, it suited Twain's whims. Twain just treated it as if he had bought Anelka for three million pounds for a victory in the season. Obviously, when this transfer offer was made public, AC Milan would make some veiled criticisms, but Twain did not care. He had already snatched the Champions League title from them, why would he be afraid of them chewing him out?

Anelka's agent-brothers received a phone call from Twain, telling them they could go ahead with their negotiations with Juventus. The two men immediately flew to Italy. They and their younger brother could not wait to escape Nottingham.

As long as there was no hindrance from the club, individual contract negotiations would go smoothly.

Two days later, both sides had hammered out all the details. On the third day, the day before the Forest team's trip to Russia, Anelka was no longer seen inside the Wilford training base, and the label with his name on his locker was torn off in the locker room.

Anelka had already flown to Turin, Italy, with his brothers for a medical examination.

The Forest players did not have much reaction to his departure. Some thoughtless people even discussed the places to go have fun in Moscow.

Due to his eccentric and aloof character, Anelka was not very popular in the Forest team. No one would reminisce after his departure.

The next morning, as the Forest team prepared to board the plane at London Heathrow, a press conference was being held in Turin, the northern Italian city. It was Juventus' first successful transfer deal of the season. Juventus' new manager, Ranieri smiled as he promoted Anelka to the Italian media at the press conference.

"He is a world-class striker, but he was underrated. I think he will be able to play to his real strength here."

Anelka also gave a speech along the lines of "I'm here to prove to you that this deal is right," which made the local reporters and fans happy.

In front of the large number of reporters, the two held up a black and white striped Juventus jersey with Anelka's name and number on the back — 39.

His relationship with Nottingham Forest for the last two years ended there, and the feud between him and Twain was over, too.

If they had a chance to meet in the Champions League later, who knew what the mood would be like for either party?

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When the Forest team arrived in Moscow, they met up with their two new teammates and had a mutual introduction.

In the days that followed, the team trained in a quiet country sports club on the outskirts of Moscow while they struck in the transfer market everywhere.

For the left-back position, Twain took a fancy to Grosso, the Italy national team's main defender, who did not do well at Inter Milan. His injuries caused him to lose the main position. If there was a bid, Inter Milan would be happy to trade him.

So far, Lyon had expressed their intention to buy to Inter Milan, but Twain did not know the exact bidding amount.

Nottingham Forest's offer to Inter Milan was 5.5 million pounds, or roughly 7 million euros. Inter Milan agreed to the offer, and Twain knew that Inter Milan had also agreed to Lyon's offer.

The next thing was simple. It would depend on the conditions of Nottingham Forest and Lyon and which was more tempting. Lyon's advantage laid in the pay package, and Nottingham Forest's advantage laid in the accolades they had just achieved and the bright prospects of more championship titles in the future. The salary was not much lower.

Lyon offered an annual salary of 2 million euros for Grosso. The Forest team offered 1.9 million euros, only 100,000 less. However, it was completely different to join a team that was the UEFA Champions League winner as opposed to the France Ligue 1 champion, and a team that played in the English Premier League rather than the France Ligue 1.

Grosso hesitated over whether or not an Italian player could succeed in the English Premier league, so Twain used Albertini as an example to ease his hesitation.

Finally, Grosso signed the contract with Nottingham Forest because he felt that it was possible to achieve higher accolades in this team. While Lyon dominated in France Ligue 1, it performed feebly in the European arena. Twain hoped with the arrival of Grosso, a member in the World Cup champion team, he would increase the capabilities of the Forest team's defense on the left flank. This was good news for the Forest team, who would be competing in multiple tournaments the next season.

Once Grosso signed the contract, he went straight to Moscow. After he underwent a full physical examination, he entered training with the new team.

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The Forest team's signings were not over. Twain had been wanting to add another player in the right-back position. Even though the utility player, Sun Jihai, could also play as a right-back, he could not play as well as before due to Twain's prolonged usage of him as a utility player, so it was not very safe.

With this in mind, Twain competed with the Arsenal's Professor Wenger in the transfer market over Bacary Sagna from AJ Auxerre, a team in France Ligue 1. With a good performance in the France Ligue 1 and chosen for the best lineup for the season, there were plenty of teams going after the black right-back, though it looked like he was closer to Arsenal.

Twain held the honor of "the newly minted European champion" and strong-armed into the deal. He was keen to get the right-back who was hailed as "the second Thuram" to strengthen their right flank. It was definitely insufficient to depend on Chimbonda alone, not to mention Chimbonda's slowing progress over the past two years made Twain worry.

Arsenal offered 7 million pounds, while Nottingham Forest offered 7.5 million pounds. Both sides had to have him.

In the end, the will of the player played a key role.

Sagna thanked the Forest team for their generosity and expressed thanks to Twain for his compliments, but — the "but" cooled Twain's heart at once — Sagna himself would prefer to play under Wenger because they were both French. He had always loved Manager Wenger, and it was his dream to play under him.

This was considered the end of this matter. In the contest for Sagna, the Forest team lost to Arsenal just because their manager was not as attractive as Wenger.

Twain was a highly competitive man. This reality frustrated him. It looked like he was not popular everywhere.

Soon after, Arsenal announced that Sagna had officially joined the Gunners and the Forest team had to search for another right-back.

Fortunately, Twain and Dunn had several candidates for every position, and they could replace if a player did not work out.

He initially had several candidates in mind, of which Sagna was the most suitable. His price was not high, and he had outstanding abilities. He was also not too famous yet. Now that the plan for Sagna had gone down the drain, he had to look to a few other players.

After repeated screening, only two players on the list were workable.

FC Schalke 04's right-back, Rafinha from Brazil, as well as the Croatia national footballer and the FC Shakhtar Donetsk's right-back, Darijo Srna. The two players were wonderkids, famous for playing well in the FM video game series. Twain had used them when he played the game. They were indeed effective.

He could use every means possible to purchase the players in the game, but it was not so easy in reality.

Rafinha was the absolute mainstay in FC Schalke 04 and his price was high due to his status in Schalke and Bundesliga, which was the only reason Twain gave up on Rafinha in the first place.

As for Srna, the price was not a problem. According to the reports sent back by the scout tracking him and Twain's own observations, Srna's performance was not particularly stable. Sometimes his standards would decline as a result of his agitated emotions stemming from his own errors during the games, which was not very reassuring to Twain.

Since things hadn't worked out with Sagna, these players were the most likely.

Twain believed that as long as he issued a summon, it would be impossible for FC Shakhtar Donetsk to compete with the European champion, and Srna would come. But he wanted to try to work on Rafinha first.

The Forest team began to reach out to FC Schalke 04 and received a "not for sale" answer.

FC Schalke 04 thought this would send a tactful message to the Forest team, but they did not realise that the thick-skinned Twain did not know how to be "discreet." A day later, FC Schalke 04 received an official offer of five million pounds from Nottingham Forest. Based on the exchange rate, it was equivalent to seven and a half million euros.

Twain was determined to enhance the strength of the right flank and decided to spend more money.

Fortunately, after they lured the wealthy Thai and sold Young, the sale brought 25 million pounds of transfer money to the team. Otherwise the Forest team, which had plans to build a new stadium and was financially stretched, was unlikely to provide any financial support to Twain.

The sale of Young earned 25 million pounds, and there were 12 million pounds from the sale of Anelka, as well as 10 million pounds from Arteta's sale. When Twain looked at the money he had spent when he brought in these players, he definitely made a steady profit. With 47 million pounds on hand, minus the

11 million pounds spent on the purchase of Arshavin and 5.5 million pounds it took to buy Grosso, 35.5 million pounds were left. Even if the club's finances could not provide any support, Twain was confident in building a team with a powerful fighting force.

In the face of an offer of five million pounds, FC Schalke 04 remained unmoved. Their answer remained as "not for sale."

The Forest team's second offer came the same afternoon — seven million pounds.

This figure might have been commonplace in terms of sterling pounds, but it was not low when converted to euros. It was approximately 10.5 million.

FC Schalke 04's answer was still a cold "not for sale," and Twain did not intend to increase the price any more. One had to know that in the summer of 2005 when Schalke 04 brought Rafinha from Sport Club Corinthians Paulista in Brazil to VELTINS-Arena, it only cost them 4.5 million euros. Now, in just two short years, they could change hands for six million euros. Twain did not know what the Germans were dissatisfied with. Anyway, Srna was another option. At most, he would approach FC Shakhtar Donetsk to discuss. He believed that it would not cost much money.

Just as he decided to give up, someone called his cell phone. The person who made the call could be considered a "friend" — the Portuguese agent, Jorge Mendes who put in a lot of effort in signing Pepe.

Twain wondered why Mendes was looking for him this time. They had not been in touch for a while. Consequently, Twain was astonished by what Mendes had to say. He was Rafinha's agent.

"He just changed agents, and the new agent is me. Haha, you didn't expect that, did you, Tony?"

Twain did not expect it, but he soon figured it out. Rafinha was the main player in Brazil's under-20 team. After he played for two seasons in the Bundesliga and became famous, how could a man with Mendes' bloodhound-like sense of smell not know his future? Therefore, he looked for ways to make the promising player his "product," which was also normal. Mendes' reputation as a big shot European football agent was not arbitrary.

"I know you're having a bit of difficulty with the right-back position, so I'm here to help you solve your problem. Rafinha is happy to go to a team that won the UEFA Champions League title. To be honest, he has told me more than once that Bundesliga is just his springboard, and he hopes to play in a higher-level league and team one day. FC Schalke 04 has been aiming for the league title and the UEFA Champions League every year, but they have not achieved it once at all. They can't compare with your team at all, Tony. I'm bullish on you and your Forest team, so I agreed to sell Pepe to you cheap. I'm delighted to see his performance on your team." Of course he was happy. Pepe was still his player. Obviously the better Pepe performed and the more honors he received, the higher his price would rise. His original small investment would generate extremely generous returns in the future. But for now, he made it sound dignified and flattering so that he could make the listener feel nice. "Now I'm going to help you again."

These words made Twain rekindle his desire to pursue Rafinha.

“But... this time things are not the same as Pepe. It’s a bit tricky. I thought you might need to raise your offer to impress Schalke 04, and then I’ll put some more pressure on them on my side to try to secure a price that is satisfactory to both sides. What do you think, Tony?”

Twain knew Mendes’s thinking. An agent could draw a 10% commission on a transfer. If the transfer fizzled out, Mendes’ fee would also come to nothing. Why would he help Twain? It was clearly to make money for himself. Why would he raise the price? It was just to increase the amount of that ten percent.

Twain very much wanted to refuse, but at the thought of Rafinha’s ability, he felt as if he had an itch in his heart. He could not bear to let him go. All managers had the idea to have good players perform for themselves. Rafinha was indeed capable and young. Due to his youth, he had more room for development and infinite potential.

To put it bluntly, Chimbonda and Rafinha were right-backs on two different levels. If Rafinha were to join, it would be the best but...

Twain went through the transfer list in his mind and calculated how much of the transfer fund were left. “How much more do we have to raise?” he asked.

On the other end of the line, Mendes smiled as he held a wine glass. “Ten million in sterling pounds. Ten million pounds will be enough. Believe me, my friend, I still have some influence.”

The total price of ten million pounds was not outrageous, only fifteen million euros. The Forest team could afford it.

Twain thought for a moment and agreed with Mendes’ suggestion. If it was successful, it would not be considered a win-win but a triple win, or even a quadruple win — the Forest team, FC Schalke 04, Mendes, and Rafinha.

All players wanted to go to teams that could bring more honor and money to them. The clubs would always consider the overall interest before the players’ personal interests, and the agent would always pursue the interests.

The key word here was interests.

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After Twain and Allan discussed it, the Forest team once again made an offer of 10 million pounds, which was equivalent to about 15 million euros.

When Real Madrid spent 27 million euros to buy Sergio Ramos from Sevilla Football Club, it was the world’s top price for a right-back position. The current offer would not be considered low for a young man who was only twenty-one years old in any case.

England’s The Sun had a vivid metaphor with regards to this offer:

“We all know that in the contest for Bacary Sagna, Twain lost to Wenger. He was said to be very disappointed with the result because Sagna’s reason for rejecting him was not that the pay was low or that the team lacked honor and fame. It was just that he preferred Wenger as a manager and not him. Consequently, Manager Twain was angry. How did he vent after his anger? As we all know, the best way women vent their anger is to go shopping and go crazy with their credit cards. Our dear Mr. Twain has

wonderfully inherited this fine tradition. He launched a massive campaign in the transfer market, waving bills in his hands as if they're a sharp sword and defeated the Schalke Dragon who hijacked Princess Rafinha."

To be honest, the metaphor was quite apt, but Twain did not like it because it made him feel like a shrew throwing a tantrum.

His ill-will toward The Sun went up a notch.

Truth be told, when Twain used to play the video games, he had once been someone else's rich fool because of Rafinha. He had the prestigious Real Madrid spend forty million euros in order to buy Rafinha.

There was an element of Twain acting in a fit of annoyance: he had offered five times and each were rejected by Schalke 04. They were not even willing to discuss. Therefore, in a fit of anger, he made an offer of 40 million euros. That time, Schalke finally agreed, and he managed to close it.

The Forest team's finances would not allow 40 million to be offered for a player. Twain was also not playing a video game and could not throw around money like it was paper.

Twain felt 15 million euros was a fair price that would make FC Schalke 04 loosen its tight grip and was also within the range that the Forest team could bear.

FC Schalke 04 had been in a financial crisis a season ago. If an offer had been made then, Rafinha absolutely would not have cost that much money. Other factors included that Rafinha had only played in the league for a year and was too young. It was different now. Gazprom had had a large injection of funds into FC Schalke 04. At least they did not have to rely on selling players to pay off their debts.

Twain thought that a 15 million euro offer for a young right-back was a price that would make both sides sit down and have a discussion. Besides, there was also Mendes' promise. He believed that FC Schalke 04's answer would not be a cold "not for sale" again.

As expected, the Forest club received Schalke 04's reply to talk about the offer in more detail.

"Not for sale" really did not exist in this world. "Not for sale" just meant the other party's price was not high enough. It was like George Wood. If there was a club that offered 200 million pounds to buy him, even if Twain did not want to, Evan would rather fire this stubborn manager and agree to the deal — even if the offer amount was not 200 million but 90 million euros, he could still be sold.

Schalke thought this was a good price for the young right-back, Rafinha. They could sell Rafinha and then buy other good, young players. Even if they did not buy young players, they could buy a few more currently strong players, which could greatly enhance the strength of the team. FC Schalke 04's goal for the new season was to fight for the league title. Every penny was important.

FC Schalke 04 no longer held the pointless idea of "not for sale" and sat at the negotiating table with the Forest club. They started off the "intense but friendly" negotiations with the issue of Rafinha's price.

Allan was in charge of the negotiations. When he left, Twain told him to find a way to bring in the Brazilian within the total price of 20 million euros.

He knew that Mendes would help things go a little more smoothly, but it would be too risky to put their hope and chips in someone else's hands. Now that he was resolved to buy Rafinha, he did not mind paying a little more. After much thought, Twain told Allan that he could accept a bid of up to 20 million euros and to walk away if it was any higher. He did not wish to be someone else's rich fool.

With the order given to Allan, Twain secretly went to Germany to meet Rafinha in private under Mendes' arrangement. During the talks, the two sides increased their understanding and concluded a collaborative give and take and mutually beneficial pact. Twain wanted Rafinha to continue to pressure FC Schalke 04 to accept the Forest team's offer. Twain was worried that there would be other clubs sniffing around and competing for the same player.

Mendes patted his chest to ensure that Rafinha belonged only to Nottingham Forest, and that they could also initialize an informal agreement if they did not believe it. At the same time, Rafinha also expressed his admiration for Twain as a manager and his yearning for Nottingham Forest. This greatly gratified Twain, who had lost in the "contest for Sagna." He promised Rafinha that when he joined the team, he would be able to take the position of the main right-back — he never had the plans to buy a substitute for Chimbonda, so this favor was done deftly and at little cost.

Everyone was happy. Later in the day, Twain flew back to Moscow to continue the team training. It was only at a regular press conference that he expressed his appreciation of Rafinha, which was a response to the media on news about the transfer.

On the other side, Rafinha announced publicly in an interview that he would like to play in England and his sincere manner was just shy of stating that his biggest dream since he started playing from young was to join Nottingham Forest...

For his part, Allan managed to obtain the best interest he could get for the Forest team at the negotiating table — 18 million euros to be paid in installments with a down payment of ten million and the balance of eight million to be paid monthly within a twelve-month period.

Once FC Schalke 04 agreed, Mendes and Allan flew to Moscow together. The two men launched a new round of negotiations on the plane regarding the pay package for Rafinha. Both of them were businessmen, so they were straightforward enough. On top of the relationship between Twain and Mendes, as well as Mendes' contribution to the deal, the negotiations went well.

When the plane landed at the Moscow airport, all the details of Rafinha's contract had been settled. All Rafinha had to do was to deal with trivial matters such as his property in Germany, then fly to Moscow for a medical examination, and sign the contract. Since Rafinha was a main player for Brazil's U20 national team, his work permit was not an issue.

Three days later, on July 11th, the club officials from Nottingham Forest and FC Schalke 04 also issued an announcement at the same time, announcing that the Brazilian defender Rafinha officially transferred from FC Schalke 04 to Nottingham Forest, with a transfer fee of 18 million euros and a contract of twelve million pounds.

This was the new season and the Forest team's most expensive transfer deal. The Forest team continued to strengthen their fearsome flanks that made their opponents terror-stricken.

Rafinha soon went to Moscow to report to the team. The scene of Twain's cordial handshake with Rafinha at the sidelines of the training ground was captured by the media. What was lost with Sagna had been claimed back with Rafinha, which put him in a good mood.

Chapter 567: Wood's Substitute

The purchase of Rafinha boosted morale. While the fans paid little attention to Bundesliga, both Twain and people within football circles knew that there were a lot of geniuses in Bundesliga, and Rafinha was one of them. His arrival strengthened the team's strength on the right flank. Rafinha was able to cope with both offense and defense.

Since coming to Russia, Rafinha had quickly thrown himself in the team's daily training. Twain was not worried about how the Brazilian would fit in with the team. It should not be a problem with a fellow Brazilian like Pepe around.

So far, most of the players on the Twain's list had basically been signed. The front line, midfield and rear defensive line had the considerably strong players, whether they were the main or substitute players. There was only one problem left that had been bothering Twain all this time that needed to be resolved — the issue of George Wood's substitute.

Last season, Twain deployed Sun Jihai as Wood's substitute. His performance was adequate, but it was also average. Sun Jihai tried very hard, but it could not be helped that there was a huge gap in their abilities. When up against stronger teams, his performance was not very reassuring. Moreover, as he grew older, Sun Jihai's stamina and physical functionalities were declining, and Sun Jihai was plagued by injuries last season. They were not major injuries, but enough to alarm Twain.

He did not sell Sun Jihai because he recognized Sun Jihai's sportsmanship and his ability to play multiple positions as a utility player. If he sold Sun Jihai, he might need to bring in a substitute with similar skills in multiple positions such as the right-back, defensive midfielder, left-back, right midfielder and many more.

After all, Sun Jihai was not specialized as a defensive midfielder. Twain decided to bring in a proper midfielder to strengthen the team. This midfielder had to meet several requirements:

To be able to accept being a substitute player and not get angry with the manager because he sat on the bench for a few games.

Although he was to play as a substitute, he had to have strong abilities and be strong enough. To be a substitute on the Forest team, he had to at least be the main force in mid-tiered teams in the English Premier League.

His salary requirements and transfer fee could not be high so that it would not add onto the team's financial burden. Once Twain decided to let him go, he would not be criticized for losing too much money.

He would preferably be English to facilitate the team's eligibility to register for the Champions League. It would also be an indication that he passed the English Premier League level test and could adapt to the league.

Twain was very strict with these four requirements and would not yield at all. After all, this player's

substitute position was the team's backbone and the most important part of the team. It was more important than both the striker and the goalkeeper. He would prefer to go without than to accept a shoddy option.

As a result, the team had not been unable to find the right person.

Until after the end of last season.

If anyone could recall the time when George Wood represented the Nottingham Forest First Team and who his opponent was, this candidate would not be unfamiliar.

During the 03-04 season, the second half of the Football League First Division (later known as the English Football League Championship), George Wood was transferred to the First Team by Twain and made his debut in the game against Reading. At the time, he wore the number 33 jersey.

Reading was the team that made a deep impression in Twain's coaching career, not to mention that they had played against the Forest team in the Football League First Division many times, or the personal feud between their manager Steve Coppell and Twain. For example, last season's shocking "football violence scandal" that rocked the world in September caused a deep hatred to be forged between the two teams. When the two teams met in the Premier League for the second time, the police force in charge of maintaining order in the stadium was on high alert. Six members of the Referees' Association were sent to oversee the enforcement of the game, despite the fact that it was usually only two people per game.

Even with such a background, the substitute player that Twain was interested in was a Reading player.

A former product of Arsenal youth academy, Steve Sidwell, had not been put in an important position by the Arsenal manager, Wenger, and was always on loan to lower league teams. In January 2003, Wenger formally decided to give up the England Under-21 national footballer and sold him to Reading at a low price. No one expected that playing in the Football League First Division would make Sidwell progress quickly and soon he had firmly won over the Reading manager, Steve Coppell, to become the absolute mainstay of the team's midfield.

During Wood's wonderful defensive performance in his debut, it was Steve Sidwell who was knocked to the ground by him.

Due to his position on the field, whenever the Forest team encountered the Reading team in a game, the poor Sidwell would meet with "the monster" George Wood again and again. The best case scenario would be to lose control of the ball, whereas a worse case would be being knocked over and then helping his team to get a free kick. The worst was he would be knocked to the ground and the referee would also turn a blind eye to it. Because Wood did not foul at all!

Naturally, Sidwell's abilities could not be judged based on the criterion of comparing the two men one-on-one. In fact, to be able to secure the main position at Reading, appear in thirty-five games in Reading's first Premier League season, be in the starting lineup for all of them, and score dead balls were considered remarkable results.

At the same time, he had attracted the attention of English teams because of his performance. Nottingham Forest was one of them.

Although the first game and this season's game against the Forest team produced terrible consequences, Sidwell was not directly involved in the entire conflict and Twain was not afraid that Sidwell would be isolated within the locker room after he was bought.

It was common to purchase players from the enemy ranks in professional football.

When Luís Figo played in Barcelona, he was Barcelona's captain and a leader in the fight against Real Madrid. He breached Real Madrid's goal several times and was a hero in the minds of the Barcelona fans.

And remember what happened after Barcelona won the league title a few years later under the leadership of Rijkaard? At Barcelona's championship celebrations, the striker, Eto'o, who graduated from Real Madrid's youth camp, shouted in front of tens of thousands of people, "Real Madrid's scumbags and cowards, come and pay homage to the champion!"

This remark infuriated a number of Real Madrid people, but in fact it was Luís Figo who first shouted it out. While Eto'o imitated his seniors, Luís Figo had already turned into the embrace of Real Madrid, Barcelona's nemesis in 2001.

Even earlier than Figo to turn to the nemesis' arms was the former Real Madrid midfielder, Luis Enrique. He later became a banner character in Barcelona.

Twain was not worried about Sidwell's Reading background, and because he was a Reading player, he had to find a way to snatch him up.

Why did he want to snatch him up?

Because Sidwell's contract with Reading was up after the end of the 06-07 season. His agent did not renew his contract with Reading. He wanted to find a team with more prospects than Reading for Sidwell.

Chelsea was the first to express their appreciation of Sidwell. Due to the continued deterioration in Mourinho's relationship with Abramovich, Abramovich did not want to continue to invest in the transfer market, forcing the Portuguese manager to search for only free players. Sidwell was one of them.

Once he heard that Chelsea was going to snatch up Sidwell, Twain immediately contacted Sidwell's agent to express to him Nottingham Forest's attention on the twenty-five-year-old midfielder.

Arteta had not left yet and the Forest team did not go all out to work on the signing of Sidwell.

Things were different now. Arteta's departure had left the team short of a good player who could be a substitute in the defensive midfielder position. Sidwell was the perfect fit for Twain's series of requirements. The Forest team had also accelerated the pace of contact with the other party's agent.

Chelsea and Sidwell might have signed a personal contract if the Forest team had not gotten involved. But the addition of the European champion allowed Sidwell's agent to have a good discussion with the clubs in pursuit of his player.

Sidwell was a clear-headed, professional player who knew what he wanted. Initially, when he heard that Chelsea was interested in him, he excitedly told his agent that he was going to Stamford Bridge no matter what it took because it was a powerhouse club with the best group of star players on the planet.

However, when he learned that the Forest team, which had just won the Champions League title, was also interested in him, he immediately changed his tune. Going to Nottingham Forest was also a good option.

Nottingham Forest, which had just won the Champions League, was no longer the provincial team that was despised a few years ago. It was now about to become a powerhouse club.

Franck Ribéry, Ruud van Nistelrooy, David Beckham, Edwin van der Sar, George Wood... Which of these players were not one of the best players in their respective positions?

Coupled with what this team had just achieved, it was hard not to have interest in this team.

The agent did not immediately give an answer to the several teams pursuing Sidwell. He only said that the answer would be given after vacation was over. It was clear that the other competing clubs were not attractive enough in front of Chelsea and Nottingham Forest. Now it was just a matter of choosing between Chelsea or Nottingham Forest.

The Forest team left early for their training in Moscow, and someone in the club continued to be in charge of contacting Sidwell's agent to discuss with him a contract that was satisfactory to both sides.

Chelsea agreed to a re-negotiation, but they did not know the terms given by the other team. Whether they could satisfy Sidwell or not, they could only wait for him to respond.

On July 13th, Sidwell's agent officially announced that his client, the former Reading team's main midfielder, Steve Sidwell, had accepted a 60,000 pound weekly salary contract from Nottingham Forest and would become a member of Nottingham Forest in the new season. He had now flown to Moscow for a physical examination before joining the team for the training.

The Forest team's final weekly salary for Sidwell was sixty thousand pounds whereas Chelsea had offered fifty thousand. This amount of ten thousand pounds became the deciding factor. Sidwell wanted to make more money while undergoing high-level football training and Nottingham Forest met his wishes. Therefore, he chose the Forest team and turned down Chelsea.

Twain was delighted to learn that Sidwell had become his man. This signing was like using a stone to hit three birds. Not only did he not spend a penny to strengthen the team, increase the abilities in the midfield bench as well as to poach Coppell's most valued player from the Reading team, he also struck Coppell's arrogance. Finally, Twain had beaten his old rival, Mourinho's Chelsea, in in the transfer market.

There was no better result than this.

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Sidwell came to the Forest team's training base outside Moscow with some trepidation, because the whole world knew about the feud between the two teams last season. He did not know what his new teammates would think of him as the man who just came out of the Reading team.

Since George Wood was always touted by the media as an overbearing fiend who was simple-minded, all brawns and no brains, short-tempered, only knew how to frequently foul and be sent off, Sidwell did not know if he would be shunned by the captain, Wood, in the locker room.

He eventually arrived at the training ground. After Twain routinely introduced Sidwell to the team, Wood took over and introduced Sidwell to his new teammates in a tone that he had used to try to appear calm, but came off as cold and detached.

No one spoke of the feud between the two teams last season. Sidwell was relieved when Ribéry and Eastwood joked with Sidwell as soon as they met. Sidwell admired the team that had won the UEFA Champions League, and he did not want to be shunned here because of some things connected with his former club.

As the biggest star in the team, Beckham was also approachable and had no airs in front of Sidwell. Looking at the interaction between him and the others, they all got along very well. Sidwell was completely reassured.

The only person who looked unhappy was Pepe, who was injured twice in the games against Reading. The second injury nearly prevented him from playing in the Champions League final. How could he have forgotten such a painful experience? He merely shook hands with Sidwell and said nothing else.

Sidwell did not care. It was impossible to get along with everyone on a team. There was bound to be teammates who were always going to be particularly good and those who were not that great. He was mentally prepared for this.

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Sidwell's signing did not cost the team a penny, but the Forest team, who still had large sums of money left, decided not to continue their search for new players. Twain told Evan and Allan that the Forest team's current lineup was enough, not to mention that they worked well together and did not require any major adjustments. In Twain's words, "this is the championship-class team."

Then Twain set out to renew the contracts with the players in the team. After they won the Champions League title, the Forest team was in the position to raise the players' salaries. Since Sidwell, a substitute player for the Forest team, had a weekly salary of 60,000 pounds, the main players of the Forest team would not be likely to live with their previous salary standards.

Franck Ribéry, Eastwood, Pepe, Piqué, Bale, Baines, Chimbonda and the others were given new contracts, and the salary packages on them were satisfactory to everyone, so they signed them.

Having won the Champions League title, the Forest team was not a poor and lowly team anymore. Twain was also aware that these players had to be offered new contracts that would satisfy them. Otherwise, no matter how loyal the players were, they could still be poached by their opponents' high salaries.

The broad contract extension was actually Twain's response to the swirl of rumors about the transfers.

With the success of the Forest team in the Champions League, the players in the team had also become high-profile targets in the transfer market. Twain did not want his team to be divided by those powerhouse clubs' covetous eyes on them. To the outside world, the way he treated all kinds of transfer rumors was simple and crude — "not for sale."

Just as he said there was nothing in the world that was "not for sale", he had made his entire team "not for sale."

There was really no good way to deal with such a shameless scoundrel. He insisted on not selling and the club was behind him on this. The players' current relationship with the manager was like that of a newlywed, stuck together like glue. How could there be a turncoat? In any case, the Forest team was now at its best. They had a chance to create new achievements that were more brilliant than last season's.

That was what Twain said to his players, and his players believed it.

One Champions League title was not enough. After all, they had not yet won the league title, and had not dipped a finger in the Football Association Challenge Cup championship.

Continuing to motivate them with honor was a means used by Twain internally. Another means was the extensive renewal that had just been mentioned.

Glory would quickly disappear in the future. Contracts were the most effective way.

After all the First Team players were confirmed for the new season, the Forest team officially started to train as a team. Once all the new players got to experience the legendary "madmen originator" Brian Clough's successor, Tony Twain's manner firsthand, they were put into the training for the Forest team's overall tactics. Defense was still a top priority, which was the Forest team's "pièce de résistance." However, the team also paid more attention to the team's offense tactics in the event of positional play.

As the defending champion of the Champions League, the Forest team might face opponents that could choose to use defensive counterattack against them whether in Europe or in the league tournament.

At that time, the issues on how to break the compact defense and how to deal with the other side's quick counterattack after a solid defense were what Twain and his coaching staff needed to address.

But Twain did not worry, as he had confidence in his squad and the entire team behind him. This team was currently so imposing and powerful that there was nothing to stop the Forest team from charging ahead.

AC Milan could not, and neither could Real Madrid.

Chapter 568: New and Former Owners

Despite the fact that it was only July, Nottingham Forest slowly closed its doors on the transfer market. Twain decided to keep his team away from the distracting rumors in the transfer market and single-mindedly prepare for the new season. Last season's Champions League title was not the end point for them. In the face of the achievement, there were higher achievements waiting for them to pursue.

While the Forest team was still training in Moscow, Allan had flown back to Nottingham to assist Evan in dealing with various aspects in the construction of the new stadium.

The Nottingham municipal government and the Nottingham Forest Club had unveiled a real estate development program in Clifton. A large residential and business districts were to be built in the small town of Clifton, southwest of Nottingham, as well as a modernized new stadium that could accommodate up to 60,000 people.

This was followed by a tentative exercise opened for the whole of Europe.

Just as the Russian Railways Cup was about to begin, the Nottingham Forest Football Club's official website announced the tentative results for the construction of the new stadium.

In the end, Wilson Bowden, the fifth-largest housing developer in the United Kingdom, won the bid and would be responsible for the construction and development of the new stadium and residential areas. One of the most attractive factors in their bidding proposal was to save money. By adopting new technologies and working with the city government on the development of a new transport infrastructure, they could reduce the costs by about eight percent. In addition, the residential areas and a football theme park around the stadium could also yield substantial returns to the club after the completion — according to the plans. When the time came, the new Nottingham Forest Stadium would be more than just a football stadium. It would also be a theme park and a satellite city collective of dining, entertainment, residential and leisure.

The early stage funding for the new stadium came from a bank loan and new televised broadcast revenue, as well as the Champions League bonus and the funds provided by sponsors used to maintain the team's daily operations. Therefore, Allan also sought wealthier investors for the huge plan to ease the club's financial constraints over the next few years. Twain, who had always been more hands-off with the club's operations, was also particularly concerned this time. How many hard years did Wenger have to tighten his belt while Arsenal repaired the Emirates stadium? Twain did not want to be a second Wenger. His savings in the transfer market this time made Allan happy, but Twain could not make himself save so much every year. If he had no money to buy good players after he had seen them, Twain would be boiling mad.

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Before the Russian Railways Cup, Twain's team played two friendlies in eastern Germany. One of which was a friendly held in Cottbus against the local Bundesliga team, FC Energie Cottbus. Twain deployed all his reserves, First Team substitutes and young players in the starting lineup.

There was one player in Energie Cottbus that Twain somewhat cared about, and that was the Chinese player, Shao Jiayi, Sun Jihai's national team teammate. Since they were all Chinese, he naturally showed more consideration during the selection of their friendlies' opponents. Therefore, the Forest team chose the Energie Cottbus team, who had kept its status in the Bundesliga every year.

Energie Cottbus used the entire main force, but Shao Jiayi was not in the starting lineup. He was on the bench.

Energie Cottbus, who used all its main players in the first half, led the European champion, Nottingham Forest's "Second Team" by two goals.

The Energie Cottbus team was greatly boosted by this result. It also stirred up the Energie Cottbus fans who came to watch the game live, and the stadium atmosphere heated up. It did not look like a friendly match. It was more like a knockout game in the Champions League group stage game.

During the halftime interval, Twain made several adjustments and changed five players to van Nistelrooy, Arshavin, Petrov, Lennon and Kompany in one go.

After the main force was brought on, the situation changed immediately. The Energie Cottbus players planned to continue to expand on their gains in the second half during the halftime interval. Their success made them forget who their opponents were. The cheers of the Energie Cottbus fans also made them think they were omnipotent at their home ground.

Just thirty-eight seconds into the second half, van Nistelrooy breached the goal after he received a header pass from Arshavin's side on the flank and narrowed the score to 1:2.

Twain did not stand up and wave his fists in celebration. It was just too easy to him to get a goal into a team like Energie Cottbus.

Energie Cottbus wanted to continue to fight. Ten minutes later, the Forest team scored another goal by Petrov which equalized the score.

This goal thoroughly sobered Energie Cottbus up — this was a friendly. There was no need to strive to win this game, and there was no need to be upset about the defeat of this game. They started to change players.

Energie Cottbus changed more players than the Forest team. They switched a total of nine players in one breath and Shao Jiayi was one of them.

Then it was the Forest team's turn to change. Twain also did not care about winning or losing. He mainly chose the games to assess if the new players had integrated into the team after so many days of training.

In the end, both sides changed eleven players each, which switched all the starting players. Nottingham Forest defeated Energie Cottbus by 4:2 which proved that their European champion's strength was genuine.

Next, the team found a local amateur team to hold a friendly. It was a fully closed-door warm-up match. In fact, calling it an internal team match might have been more appropriate. It was played in the training ground with no spectators or media present. Under Twain's constant adjustments, the Forest team eventually crushed its opponent by 9:1. Twain was not quite satisfied because his team had conceded a goal. At the end of the game, he roundly criticized the defensive players on the bus back to the hotel.

After the two friendlies, the Forest team flew back to Moscow and began to prepare for the Russian Railways Cup.

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The draw ceremony was simple because it was just an ordinary pre-season invitation tournament. Everyone knew the purpose of such games. Other than the media from the countries where the four teams were located, it did not attract much attention.

The final outcome was quite interesting.

The managers of the four teams sat side by side on the stage. Twain sat together with Real Madrid's new manager, the German "madman" Bernd Schuster, AC Milan's manager, Carlo Ancelotti, and FC Lokomotiv Moscow's manager, Yuri Pavlovich Semin.

After the host drew lots, the results were released to the media and the managers on stage.

Everyone who watched the Forest team and Real Madrid drawn together laughed knowingly. It was not the first time these two teams had played together. The Forest team's first encounter with Real Madrid in the Champions League led to the dismissal of the former Real Madrid coach, Luxemburgo and the resignation of the former club chairman, Florentino Perez.

In the last few years, there had been talk of Real Madrid's interest in George Wood. Just that summer, Twain had turned down Real Madrid's 20 million euro offer for Ribéry.

At the same time, David Beckham chose to join Nottingham Forest on a free transfer after ending a four-year contract with Real Madrid. No one anticipated that he would meet his former team so soon on the field.

Twain was also a little surprised by the result. He even thought that it was a stunt arranged by the organizers to capture the attention of the media and public and to attract interest.

He glanced at Schuster seated next to him. Everyone knew that the media wanted to watch a good show, but they were not going to give the people below what they wanted.

At the press conference of the draw ceremony, Twain was asked about his opponent in the first round. He did not directly answer the question. Instead, he praised Real Madrid and congratulated them for winning La Liga. The perfunctory answers did not satisfy the media. They asked Schuster, too. As the manager of a powerhouse club, Schuster appeared to be circumspect as well. His answer was the same as Twain's: he congratulated the Forest team for winning the Champions League title and stated that the Forest team was a worthy opponent.

The media was disappointed. Perhaps there might have been more to talk about if the Forest team and AC Milan had been put together.

If the Forest team could advance into the final, then such a scenario would not be too far fetched — no one thought that AC Milan would lose to FC Lokomotiv Moscow, except for their manager, Yuri Pavlovich Semin.

In the face of the three powerful teams, the host was more like a supporting character and of little interest to anyone.

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On July 26th and 27th, the first round of the two Railways Cup games officially launched. The first game was the much talked about highlight — Nottingham Forest versus Real Madrid.

One team was the upstart who had just become the Champions League winner, and the other was the traditional powerhouse club who had won the most Champions League trophies in the fifty-two-year history of the Champions League. Both sides were filled with dazzling star players. Furthermore, with a player like Beckham on the tip of everyone's tongues, the game attracted all the attention. Although the organizing committee scheduled the second game in tomorrow, compared to this, the match between AC Milan and FC Lokomotiv Moscow was doomed be relegated to the background.

It was supposed to be an ordinary invitation tournament. However, due to Beckham's presence, the situation became different. Beckham was shockingly not on the starting lineup list when both teams publicly announced them before the game, which made the media and many fans unhappy.

Therefore, the media took great pains to ask both managers questions about Beckham. They asked the Real Madrid manager, Schuster, “was it a mistake to sell Beckham?”, “did Beckham not contribute to the team at all?”, “what do you think of Beckham as a player? Is he good?”, and “was he treated fairly last season?” The question for Twain was simpler: “why is David Beckham not on the starting list?”

It bothered Schuster because he had nothing to do with the matter regarding Beckham. He had never coached the Englishman. This newly appointed manager had nothing to do with bringing him to Real Madrid or clearing him out. He was a little upset that just because he was now the Real Madrid manager, he had to accept such harassment.

Twain was like Schuster. He did not want the media to focus only on Beckham, which would arouse some people’s adverse reactions in the locker room. Consequently, he refused to answer any questions about Beckham after he replied that the reason Beckham was not on the starting list was due to injuries. If a reporter mentioned Beckham, Twain would turn away and pretend not to hear the question until someone asked “how is Nottingham Forest...” Then, he would smile and answer the question.

Because of Beckham, both the managers and the media were a little unhappy before the game.

Many of the people who came to watch the game live came for the star players. Most were female fans who came specifically for David Beckham. As Beckham was not on the starting list, hisses greeted Nottingham Forest when they came out.

A large number of female fans even held large posters of Beckham and screamed Beckham’s name to demonstrate to Twain. Although the Forest team did not lack superstar players, it appeared David Beckham was the only player with that influence.

Twain did not pay attention to those fans. He was not here to serve those people.

This was not a typical friendly match. This was a competition with an award for the champion. He could not deal with Real Madrid like he did against Energie Cottbus. Twain basically sent out the main squad from the last season in the starting lineup except for the striker’s position. As Eastwood had a minor injury, Twain let Arshavin take Eastwood’s place out of caution. At the same time, he had Bendtner and Arshavin start.

Van Nistelrooy sat on the bench with his good friend Beckham.

Real Madrid did not deploy its main squad that won the title. The new manager had a new lineup. Their captain, Raúl González, was not on the starting list and was replaced by his young teammate, Soldado.

The game entered a fierce pace right from the start. Compared to Real Madrid, who had just finished their physical training, the Forest team’s offensive was more ferocious since they had trained together for nearly half a month. Arshavin was particularly motivated because he was playing in front of Russian fans.

Just three minutes into the opening, the Forest team used a corner kick to break through the goal guarded by Jerzy Dudek.

Arshavin’s corner shot accurately landed on Pepe’s head, and all the center-back, with his outstanding header skills and jumps, had to do was to jump and move his head. The football continued into the net.

Once they led over Real Madrid, the Nottingham Forest fans who had traveled all the way there were very excited. They were few in numbers, but their voices were loud. They were the group of extremely hardcore fans who would follow and cheer for them live at the scene, no matter where the Forest team played. Their leader used to Michael Bernard. Now John and Bill, a fat guy and a skinny man, were their leaders.

After the lead, the Forest team did not give up the attack. Instead of switching to defense, the momentum of their offense became fiercer. The Forest team known for its conservative play in Europe did not appear. Their offense made it feel like Real Madrid was the team that wore the red jerseys instead.

Real Madrid did not enter the pace of the game throughout the first half and trailed behind the Forest team. They could not adjust to the Forest team's quick offensive pace and pressing in the front field. Just as the first half was about to draw to a close, Nottingham Forest's forward push finally paid off. Their pressing caused Real Madrid's rear defensive line to make a passing error. Petrov suddenly swung into action and quickly plugged into Real Madrid's rear defensive line. He intercepted the pass, and then tricked Dudek and successfully shot from the far corner.

With a score of 2:0, Nottingham Forest was in the lead with two goals!

The goal and the first half made the live television commentator exclaim that Nottingham Forest could no longer be labeled as "a dark horse" or "a shooting star." The power chart of the Continental European football had to be redrawn due to the emergence of this strong team.

The two teams switched sides in the second half. Schuster made some adjustments in an attempt to save the situation. He brought on the Argentine striker, "El Conejo – The Rabbit" Javier Saviola, who joined on a free transfer from Barcelona. After the Real Madrid players had warmed up and adapted for forty-five minutes, they got into the zone and their offense began to pick up.

Within twenty minutes, Guti scored two goals in a row to help Real Madrid equalize the score.

Twain began to change players. He sent out van Nistelrooy and David Beckham to play at the same time.

Once Beckham was spotted on the sidelines, the countless neutral fans in the stands directed their cheers at Nottingham Forest. The piercing boos from before turned into enthusiastic cheers and applause. There was even a round of applause from the Real Madrid fans — they had a deep respect for the English player who had helped their team regain the league title. The scene where he had knelt down and affectionately kissed the turf at the Bernabéu stadium during the farewell ceremony remained fresh in their memories.

Beckham became the only one in the spotlight for this game as he stood on the sidelines.

"David Beckham is making his appearance! When he announced his departure from Bernabéu to join Nottingham Forest, no one expected that we would see him make an appearance so soon in a game against his former owner."

Perhaps the neutral fans cheered for him because he was a world-renowned star player, a well-loved idol in the women's hearts, a handsome man, an English gentleman... and because of his fame. But the cheers and applause from the Real Madrid fans were the best affirmation of Beckham's performance

last season. They appreciated Beckham for his dedicated work ethic even when he was abandoned by both the club's board of directors and manager. They were grateful to Beckham for being able to disregard any enmity and strive to turn the tide at the last minute to help the team overtake Barcelona to successfully ascend to the top. They were moved by Beckham's professionalism. In their eyes, David Beckham was not the "entertainment star" on advertising posters and front pages of tabloids, but a real professional footballer.

Twain smiled as he watched the scene. He was pleased with what his friend had achieved.

The happiest person to see Beckham play was not a fan in the stands, nor Tony Twain, but van Nistelrooy standing beside him.

It was the first time in four years that the two men would play alongside in a game wearing the same team's jersey — excluding the friendly game with Energie Cottbus that changed all eleven players.

Since Beckham left Manchester United, the "King of the Six-Yard Box" van Nistelrooy's number of goals scored plummeted. The limelight he received for being in the Premier League's list of top strikers was also snatched by Arsenal's Henry. It could not simply be attributed to van Nistelrooy's increasing age, declining form, and rise of injuries. One reason that could not be ignored was that van Nistelrooy was accustomed to Beckham's passing and at a loss after the departure of his good friend.

Now, it was all good. David was back, and the terrifying "King of the Six-Yard Box" was going to be resurrected.

Twain was well aware of the friendship between the two men and how the friendship could help the team. Therefore, when the rooms were allocated during the team training, he made a point to put van Nistelrooy and Beckham in the same room to let them have a good catch up. Then they would have rapport on the field to help him to besiege the opponents' strongholds.

Beckham replaced Lennon, while van Nistelrooy replaced Arshavin.

Schuster was a little surprised by the second change. He had thought Twain would replace Bendtner, who was also a center forward, with van Nistelrooy. He did not think he would bring Arshavin off... A pair of center forwards? That was really rare...

Beckham's first contact with the ball was when he made a cross pass at a 45° angle into the box that nearly assisted van Nistelrooy. If van Nistelrooy's header had not shot slightly to the side, the score would have been 3:2 with Nottingham Forest in the lead.

Schuster had a sudden realization when he saw this attack. Twain was trying to use Beckham's precise flank pass capability to carry out the tactic of aerial bombardments.

Everyone knew that Real Madrid's rear defensive line was mediocre in aerial defense. Even 2006 FIFA World Player of the Year, Fabio Cannavaro had no way of dealing when faced with a strong center forward with an outstanding header ability. The club was currently still searching for a center-back with excellent headers in the transfer market. However, progress had been slow. For this game, Schuster relied on the partnership of Cannavaro and Sergio Ramos to play the center-back position and handed the right flank to the young player, Miguel Torres Gómez.

It looked like Twain was also well aware of Real Madrid's weakness, so he used the most direct tactic to win. He did not seem to have the intention to use the game to train the team. He did not want anything except victory.

The female fans holding large posters of Beckham in the stands screamed and shouted Beckham's name and cheered for his performance in this attack. Among these people were the local Russian, as well as Beckham's diehard fans who had come from Germany, England and Spain.

Amidst the female fans' ardent cheers, Beckham shepherded his first free kick in the game since he joined the Forest team — the friendly game that allowed eleven players to be changed was still excluded.

Beckham's free-kick did not score but brushed against the crossbar and flew out. The Forest team's previous two goals did not move Twain, but he actually crouched down in frustration on the sidelines because the ball did not go in.

Real Madrid also won a free kick. Beckham and Roberto Carlos had left the team that summer, in addition to the previous departures of Figo and Zidane. Originally filled with players with a talent for free kicks, they were left with none. Guti would take charge of Real Madrid's free kick. As the "Gold Wolf" pursued accuracy in his shot, it lacked speed and curve. It was easily plucked up by the well-positioned Edwin van der Sar.

Next, van Nistelrooy took the ball toward the right of the front of the box. He should have diverted to the side but chose to force a breakthrough. Eventually he was stopped by his opponent with a foul and once again got a free kick for the Forest team. Or rather, another free kick for Beckham.

He personally tucked the ball into Beckham's hands. "Warm up and get the feel."

Beckham shrugged and smiled helplessly. "If you had diverted the ball just now, I would have been able to pass on the right flank. Bendtner was waiting in front of the goal."

"Ah!" Van Nistelrooy scratched his head in surprise. "I only thought of a free kick. We have not played together for four years, I'm still a little rusty. Heh heh."

Beckham gave him a nudge. "Go and wait to make up another shot."

"Don't need to," van Nistelrooy muttered as he walked in the box.

Beckham put the football on the ground and quietly waited for his opponents to line up the human wall.

In front of him was a white wall, and the clothes they wore were familiar. Because just two months ago, he wore that jersey to celebrate the 30th league title in the team's history at the Bernabéu stadium. He was still familiar with some of the faces on the opposite side, as they had played football together for several years.

He really did not think that they would meet again so soon, and as opponents too.

He had never experienced such a situation. After he transferred to Real Madrid, he had not encountered Manchester United in the Champions League, so he did not know what it was like to face a former owner. Now he understood.

He had mentally prepared himself for this when he chose to join Nottingham Forest. Joining the Forest team was not the same as joining Real Madrid. Being in the English Premier League, the Forest team had a chance to play against Manchester United at least twice a season.

Out of consideration for his feelings, Twain put “David Beckham does not need to play in any games against Manchester United” in the contract, but Beckham himself rejected the condition. He said that he was a professional player and professional players should have a professional work ethic.

It was just like what van Nistelrooy said as he tucked the football into his hands, “Warm up and get the feel.”

Beckham stepped back and prepared to take the direct free kick, which was only twenty meters from the goal.

Casillas, who was brought on in the second half, hunkered over the front of the goal line, dropped down his center of gravity, and stayed alert. As a former teammate who had trained and competed with Beckham in Real Madrid for four years, he was familiar with his free-kick prowess and did not dare take it lightly at all.

With up to six people in the human wall, the area in front of Beckham was completely blocked. He stepped back and glanced at the human wall and the goal behind. Then he began to run.

David Beckham’s run for the free kick was not long. He took only two or three steps to get to the front of the ball. He leaned to the left, swung his right leg, opened his arms to maintain his balance, and used his core muscles to turn his body. When his right foot kicked the ball, Beckham’s body tilted until it was almost parallel to the ground, and his left ankle that propped up his entire body looked as if it was going to break... his swinging right leg, as accurate as a whip, drove into the lower part of the football and exploded into a huge ball of energy.

The football soared in the air and bypassed Real Madrid’s jumping human wall to draw an obvious arc in the air and fall to the closest corner of the goal.

Casillas fought to pounce on the football. Unfortunately, when he saw that the football suddenly emerge from behind the human wall, it was too late for him to take action. Furthermore, the slight disadvantage in his height made his outstretched hands not long enough when he leapt and reached out with his hands.

The football wiped the inside of the goal post and touched Casillas’s fingertips before it flew into the goal.

Thunderous cheers erupted in the stands of the stadium, louder than the cheers for any of the previous four goals. There was no doubt that it was the goal that satisfied the audience and was worth the price of the return ticket — the highly-anticipated Beckham had scored a goal and moreover, it was against a former owner.

“David Beckham! Although this is just an invitational tournament, it’s a thrilling goal! He penetrated the goal of his former owner, Real Madrid! Decisive and clean!”

“His excellent form continues from the final stages of last season, but it’s not Real Madrid that benefits now, it’s Nottingham Forest! Tony Twain did not have to pay a single cent to sign a world-class player. This deal was a real bargain!”

Beckham did not celebrate his goal in front of the Real Madrid fans and players. He just opened his arms, clenched his fists and was embraced by van Nistelrooy who rushed up.

“David! David! Ha ha... David!” The Dutchman could only shout.

Looking at the man surrounded by the Forest players celebrating the goal, Schuster thought it was a stupid move on Calderon’s part to let the man go. Everyone else could leave but the departure of this man was a real shame.

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The ninety-minute game was over. The La Liga champion, Real Madrid grudgingly lost 3:4 to the UEFA Champions League winner, Nottingham Forest, and was disqualified from advancing to the final.

Although in the final moments of the game, the Forest team’s van Nistelrooy and Real Madrid’s Saviola each scored a goal, making the game a terrific battle of goals. But in the hearts of everyone who watched this game, David Beckham’s iconic free kick break was the most striking. The fans who bought the tickets to watch the game live left the Lokomotiv Stadium with content expressions. With a total of seven goals and the return of a world-class player, it was truly an exciting night.

Chapter 569: The Business of The English Premier League

Real Madrid’s loss to Nottingham Forest was not considered an “upset.” It was normal for the two teams win or lose in a game with each other. After all, everyone could see the Forest team’s strength.

The next night, Twain brought the entire team to watch the game between AC Milan and FC Lokomotiv Moscow to study their opponents in the final. Twain decided to take it seriously, even if it was just an invitation tournament.

The popularity of the game was assured because of the host team’s participation. The stands were full of spectators, the vast majority fans of the FC Lokomotiv Moscow from Russia. The AC Milan fans were few and far between.

Despite the small number of people, they were generally optimistic that it was not a problem for their team to defeat FC Lokomotiv Moscow. Truthfully, the host team was not as strong as compared to the other three teams.

However, to state that elimination was certain?

The football was round. No one would know the outcome of the game until it was over.

Eighty-five minutes later, Twain stood up in the stands and stretched his back while he said, “go back and rest, guys. There’s nothing more to watch in this game.”

The score on the big screen was “2:0.”

The home team was listed first and the visiting team was second.

AC Milan was behind.

Ancelotti did not deploy all of their main players, while FC Lokomotiv Moscow sent in its strongest lineup. One team wanted to train its players and the other team wanted the honor. The result was conceivable.

AC Milan lost to FC Lokomotiv Moscow, and FC Lokomotiv Moscow would compete with Nottingham Forest for the Russian Railways Cup trophy a week later. AC Milan would play against Real Madrid in a game to determine the third-place team.

This result was a disappointment to many people. Originally, they wanted to see the replay of the Champions League final in Moscow. No one would anticipated that AC Milan would lose in the first round.

A week later, Nottingham Forest took down the opponent with a score of 3:1 at the Lokomotiv Stadium and picked up the first trophy of the season.

Although it was only the title of an invitational tournament, their morale was boosted. Even after having just picked up the Champions League trophy, the Forest players still looked excited at the awards ceremony.

Beckham, who assisted his teammates twice to score the goals in the final, was chosen as the best player in the final.

David Beckham did not have to worry about fitting in with the team. After having played in both games, he was completely one of their own.

Furthermore, Beckham's performance at the invitation tournament had shut some people's mouths.

Previously, there had been talk that Beckham was no longer likely to achieve any more success. His career had entered its final phase early due to his frequent commercial activities. Real Madrid's decision to dump him was absolutely correct, because his final season as a champion was only a dying back. Having only won one title in his four years for a league like Spain, it had to be almost impossible for Beckham to accomplish much if he went to a faster-paced and more competitive Premier League on top of his frequent injuries.

Beckham had been surrounded by controversies since his debut. He had a deep awareness of it. Therefore, no matter what the outside world said about him, he just concentrated on training every day and played at his own level in the games.

Twain did not buy him to help sell the jerseys. He valued Beckham's right flank pass and precise long passes from the middle and back of the field. These were skills that complemented the Forest team's counterattacks well. With Albertini gone, the Forest team midfield lacked a player with the ability for precise long passes. Van der Vaart's short passes were inventive, but his long passes were far off. In that regard, Beckham's ability was unparalleled. When he was at Real Madrid, he had used countless long passes from the backfield ranging more than fifty meters to accurately send the football to his teammates' feet.

Previously, the Forest team's two flanks depended on speed to prevail. However, once the opponents compressed the defensive space, the Forest team's flank attacks would be blockaded. Now with Beckham, the Forest team's flank attack routines would be more diverse, leaving the opponents unable to defend effectively.

In addition, thanks to his four years at Real Madrid, Twain could also allow Beckham to make the occasional appearances as the defensive midfielder and use his long passes to launch attacks, which was much faster than dribbling the ball.

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Nottingham Forest, who had won their first title of the new season, ended their training in Russia and left for the United Kingdom to prepare for the impending English Premier League.

They could not participate in the FA Community Shield since the Premier League champion was Manchester United. The English FA Cup final was a game between Manchester United and Chelsea. Both teams tied at 0:0 in the 120-minute civil competition, which Chelsea eventually won in the penalty shootout. Consequently, the FA Community Shield in the new season would repeat last season's FA Cup final — Manchester United versus Chelsea.

The Forest team had nothing to do with the game. They were just spectators. Their first major championship title game for the new season was on August 31st, to vie for the UEFA Super Cup against the UEFA Europa League winner, Liverpool.

Twain had scant interest in this opponent. It was clearly the UEFA Super Cup, and yet, because the opponent was a team from the league, it felt more like the "Football League Super Cup," nothing novel about it.

He preferred to play against Sevilla.

However, it was a pity that the team, selected by FIFA last year as the best football club, had wanted to defend its title, but was beaten by a goal from Liverpool in the final instead and lost the title.

Nothing could be done about it. If the team did not win a credible title again, Benítez might be dismissed. Other than helping the team magically win the UEFA Champions League in his first season since his arrival at Liverpool, Benítez accomplished little else these few years. Benítez was not good at competing in the league tournament. Following the sudden rise of the Forest team, they further lost their eligibility to enter the Champions League for two years in a row, which made the club's board of directors and fans extremely unhappy.

If he lost the game in the UEFA Europa League as well, the only thing Benítez could do was to admit his responsibility and resign.

Fortunately, the title saved his coaching career at Liverpool.

Liverpool recruited new players in the new season and vowed to return to fight for the title again.

After the signing of the new Premier League televised broadcast contract, more money was given to the Premier League teams. Under the new broadcast contract, the Premier League champion could receive a 50-million-pound bonus, while even the bottom-ranked team could get 30 million pounds, catching up

to the Premier League champion bonus a few seasons ago. No matter what level the England national team was at, the English Premier League remained the most lucrative league in the world.

Against that backdrop, with the exception of Nottingham Forest, who was building a new stadium, the other clubs had only two options: either spend money or be left behind.

No one would choose the latter.

Liverpool spent 11.5 million pounds to buy Ryan Babel, 5 million pounds to purchase Yossi Benayoun from West Ham United, and signed Andriy Voronin on a free transfer from Bayer 04 Leverkusen. Their largest sum was the purchase of Fernando Torres from Atlético Madrid, which took 21.5 million pounds.

The amount of money spent on transfers was an indication of Liverpool's ambition. Twain had reason to believe that with so much money spent, if Liverpool still could not break into next season's Champions League, then a dismissal was the only way to go.

Life was full of all kinds of surprises.

The Liverpool people would not be quick to forget the humiliation that Nottingham Forest gave them in the final moments of last season — kicking them to fifth place in the league tournament and taking their Champions League qualification for two years in a row.

Now their chance for revenge had come.

Benítez's team could rob Nottingham Forest of its first credible title for the new season at Monaco's Stade Louis II. Did Twain not always say that "he is a manager who seeks only the championship title"? Taking away his trophy was the best revenge against him.

Even though the English Premier League had not started yet, the Liverpool media began to hype up the game on the last day of August. For many Merseyside people, they had never longed for the victory in a game like that — to defeat Nottingham Forest.

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According to the competition schedule for the new season, the first round would be fully rolled out on August 11th. In the final friendly match before the start of the season, Manchester United and Chelsea tied again in the FA community shield. They relied on a penalty shootout to determine the winner.

This time, it was not Mourinho who got the last laugh but Ferguson.

The two teams had a Premier League history of playing against each other for thirty games. Out of which, Manchester United was at a slight disadvantage with eight wins, thirteen draws and nine defeats. They were neck in neck with four wins, seven draws and four losses at home. Mourinho had a lot to do with this. When he came to Chelsea, he made the team perform well in their encounters with the Premier League's strong teams, except for Liverpool.

The FA community shield loss to Manchester United was just a small part of the feud between the two men.

Mourinho congratulated Manchester United on getting the FA community shield because that implied that they would lose the league title and Chelsea would win again.

Conversely, Ferguson mocked Mourinho for bringing up an old wives' tale. The curse of the FA community shield was a thing of the past. He added that Chelsea would not have won the league title even if Manchester United had not won the league.

The much-anticipated war of words between the two sides had begun even before the start of the league tournament, which gave the best publicity to the English Premier League in the new season.

This was a brand-new Premier League season with new ways to sell its televised broadcast rights, new televised broadcast contracts, new players, new teams, as well as... a new champion.

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On August 11th, Nottingham Forest would travel to Liverpool, but their opponent was not the "infuriating" Liverpool. Instead, it was Liverpool's nemesis in the same city, Everton.

Moyes and Twain had been friends for years and the game would not be too explosive. The special thing was that it was the first league game the former Forest player, Arteta played for Everton and he would encounter his former owner, Nottingham Forest.

Meanwhile, the game was chosen by Sky TV as a live broadcast. There were two reasons. One was because it was the European champion's first game in the new season; the other was because Beckham was back. It was the first game for Beckham since his return to the English Premier League after four years, which would be in the spotlight. The live broadcast of the game would also bring more advertising revenue to Sky TV.

When Beckham left Manchester United, there were the economic experts who said that it was not just a loss for the Manchester United Football Club, it was also a loss for the English Premier League. There was even an exaggerated suggestion that Beckham's departure meant the decline of the most lucrative Premier League and that the world's top league was going to become La Liga.

Before this season, the Premier League re-auctioned the Premier League's television rights for the next three years, with the broadcast rights divided into six parts. Each part contained twenty-three games, four of which were sold to Sky TV for 1.31 billion pounds! Furthermore, the Premier League's coverage rights of all tournaments over the next five years were shared by Sky TV and Ireland's Setanta Sports, with a total value of 1.7 billion pounds! That did not include the cost of broadcasting rights sold by the Premier League to the foreign television broadcasting corporations — with the television channels in more than two hundred countries paying 1.23 billion dollars to the Premier League for the next three years to broadcast the Premier League, which was about 617 million pounds. The figure put the NBA to shame. Their annual overseas broadcast revenue was only 130 million dollars, which was slightly more than 50 million pounds, equivalent to the bonus for the new Premier League champion team in the new season.

It could not be said that there was no relationship with Beckham's return at all. Beckham's return to the Premier League had given many big corporations the confidence to continue to invest in the Premier League and good for the Premier League's promotion to the world. It was believed that in the next five years, based on the previous results, the Premier League broadcast rights would be offered at higher prices.

Tony Twain was the one to bring him back, but the benefits were shared among the twenty clubs.

It had only taken 191 million pounds for Murdoch to first buy the five-year broadcasting rights for the Premier League games. Five years later in 1997, the amount became 670 million pounds. And in 2004 after the Serie A economic bubble burst and the collapse of KirchGruppe in Germany, the Premier League's broadcast rights still sold at a sky-high price of 1.02 billion pounds. The English Premier League remained the most lucrative league in the world.

Allan and Evan were in a hurry to launch the new stadium development plan this season. In addition to the Forest team's historic Champions League victory after twenty-seven years, it was also due to the new televised broadcast contract was signed before this season. The twenty clubs had a lot of money at their disposal. The Premier League almost allocated all of the 1.7 billion-pound money alliance to the Premier League teams. With that funding, all the clubs could plan and build their futures, including Nottingham Forest.

Twain and Allan might have had a lot of small frictions in their daily work, but they were still responsible for their own areas and did not interfere with the other person's job. However, when it came to the matter of signing Beckham, Allan was so delighted that he could have kissed Twain.

The television broadcast fee in the Premier League was unlike NFL (National Football League), wherein the thirty-two teams received an even distribution. Instead, it was set according to the number of times a team's games was broadcasted and the team's eventual ranking in the season. Teams with good results and more star players would get more live broadcast opportunities, which meant more bonuses when the time came.

As the European champion, they would secure more televised broadcast opportunities. On that basis, because the team had a world-class star player and a popular idol like Beckham, their number of broadcasts would only increase, especially given the vast audience in Asia and the Americas.

Sky TV's decision to broadcast all of Nottingham Forest's live games in the new season was proof that his commercial appeal was impossible to resist

In the 2007-08 season, Nottingham Forest would become the star team that would hold the focus of the world. If they could obtain the results that matched that focus, the goal that Evan had been looking forward to would be achieved ahead of time.

Chapter 570: A Fiery New Beginning

Although Beckham had properties in London and Manchester, he still bought a luxury mansion in the outskirts of Nottingham after he signed a contract with the Forest team. It was left empty for half a year, and now it was finally filled with people.

His wife, children, and helpers came to live in it, which made the initially cold and cheerless mansion feel alive.

It was August 10th. Victoria was already busy in the sunny kitchen before Beckham got up.

When Beckham awoke, he did not get out of bed immediately to wash up. He was lost in thought for a while.

He had been on the Forest team for a month and a half. He had moved to and lived in the city for more than ten days. But he was still a little disoriented and felt as if he was still in Real Madrid when he got up every morning.

Tomorrow was the first round of competition in the Premier League for the new season. He was back after four years, and he really did not know how to describe the feeling.

Beckham rubbed his face with both hands when he heard Victoria's shout from downstairs. He jumped out of his large bed and went to wash up.

He was no longer a Real Madrid player, nor a Manchester United player, but a Nottingham Forest player.

There had been a lot of changes in the English Premier League arena in the time he had been gone. Who would have thought that Nottingham Forest would suddenly rise in 2003? The Forest team was still struggling in the Football League First Division – now known as the English Football League Championship – and no one had heard of Tony Twain. At Manchester United, things had remained the same, but the people had changed. Van Nistelrooy, Roy Keane, Nicky Butt and Phil Neville had all left. Only Ryan Giggs and Gary Neville from the original class of 92 were still in Manchester United. What about the others? They were scattered among the teams in the Premier League. He would inevitably have to compete against his former good friends in the new season. It was also inevitable that he had to compete against Manchester United.

If the game was held at the City Ground stadium, it was fine. If he had to go back to Old Trafford, how would the fans there treat him?

Perhaps he should ask Ruud, who had already returned to Old Trafford and played on behalf of the Forest team. He had to have the relevant experience.

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Twain was woken up by Shania's scream next to his ear. He patted Shania's head, as if to swat at an alarm clock and Shania immediately stopped screaming.

"This alarm clock is pretty smart..." Twain muttered as he sat up in bed. He had the habit of sleeping only in his underwear and not pajamas. Since he had lived with Shania for a long time, both of them were used to it. Shania did not feel awkward when Twain sat on the bed with his torso bared.

"Get up quickly. I made you a Brazilian-style breakfast!" She bounced off and ran out.

Twain washed in the upstairs bathroom in his underwear and then got dressed before he went downstairs. The newspaper was placed on the couch instead of on the table.

Shania disliked Twain reading the papers during mealtimes. Her father did the same, which caused her to always complain that it was a common problem for men. As long as she was in Nottingham, she would take the opportunity to get up early and make breakfast for Twain, put the paper on the couch, and then supervise while eating.

Shania's cooking skills had not improved at all. Twain had said before that her cooking was not good, and she replied that it was because the British food did not taste good. Today's Brazilian breakfast also

had a unique taste. What had improved was the tolerance of Twain's stomach. He did not feel that her food tasted bad. It just tasted a little weird at most.

Ever since Shania volunteered to make breakfast for Twain, he had another reason to read the newspapers at the dining table — as a diversion.

The trick did not work because Shania was very strict. Moreover, Twain knew that reading while eating was not a good habit. It was something his parents repeatedly taught him when he was a child. It was as common washing hands before and after meals.

“Do you not have any assignments?” Since he was not allowed to divert the attention by reading the newspapers, he would just chat with Shania.

Shania shook her head in reply. “I have declined them if there were.”

“Hey, you have started to learn how to act like a big shot at a young age.” Twain laughed.

“Even if I do not walk the runway shows now, I have enough money to not worry about my expenses for a year.” Shania tapped the coffee cup in front of her with a spoon. “After signing endorsement deals with big businesses, I stopped working a lot of the small and irrelevant runway shows.”

“I'm going to Liverpool in the morning and don't have time to spend with you. What are you going to do?”

“I'll go to Liverpool too!” Shania raised her hands and startled Twain.

“Don't get me wrong. I'm not going with you and your team. I'll have Mr. Fasal accompany me to go do some shopping... I'll also watch the game! I have decided that as long as I do not have an assignment, I will watch all your away games live!”

Twain was even more alarmed.

Shania was not an ordinary young girl. She was a red-hot supermodel throughout Europe and her print advertisements frequently appeared in the most bustling commercial areas of the big cities. Her television advertisements ran one after another on major television stations. Even ordinary people who did not know about the fashion industry had seen her face. With such a person tagging along with his team... wouldn't the media be happy? England's most advanced development was not their Premier League, but the pervasive paparazzi

He very much wanted to put on a stern face and say “no,” but on second thought, Shania was still a child. She had given up almost all the hobbies that a child should have for her modelling job. Her childhood was spent in a variety of training rooms. Now that she had money and status, she no longer needed to constantly be on the move and exhaust herself for her livelihood. What was wrong with having fun? It was making up for a lost childhood.

“Uh... then you need to watch out for the paparazzi,” Twain cautioned. “The English media is not like the other countries.”

Shania rolled her eyes, then bit the teaspoon and smiled happily as she nodded. “Don't worry, Uncle Tony. I have a lot of experience.”

Twain felt reassured and continued to eat. He took a few bites, and suddenly raised his head to look at Shania. "Be careful."

Shania froze, then smiled and nodded.

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"George, what time is the team meeting?" Sophia put away the cutlery that had just been used in the kitchen.

Wood packed his backpack in his room and poked his head out to answer when he heard his mother's voice. "Ten-thirty."

The bright sunlight shone through the windows at angle and spread over George's hands and backpack, which made it a little warm.

When he came out of the bedroom with his backpack, his mother came out of the kitchen. "Are you leaving now, George?"

Wood looked at the fine beads of perspiration on her mother's forehead and then put his backpack on the floor. "No, I'm not in a hurry, mom."

He walked past Sophia and went straight into the kitchen. He began to take over his mother's unfinished chore.

"Hey, put it down. I'll do it." Sophia quickly turned around to grab the plate from Wood's hand.

Wood did not listen to his mother's words. He kept Sophia behind him with his wide back and guarded the plates in his hands and in the kitchen sink in front of him just like he boxed out to guard the ball on the field.

Sophia knew she could not persuade the stubborn Wood. She was also glad to see her son help her with the housework.

She stood at the side to watch.

"George."

"Hmm?"

"Tell me the truth, do you have a girlfriend? A big star player like you must be very popular, right?" Sophia said with a laugh.

However, Wood firmly shook his head. "No, mom."

"Find a nice girl, George. It's a good time to fall in love when you're young."

She did not expect Wood to shake his head again. "I don't want to find..."

"Why?" Sophia was a little surprised.

"It's just nice to have you, mom."

Sophia could not help but laugh. "Silly boy, a girlfriend will become your wife in the future and accompany you for the rest of your life. How can I do that?"

Wood kept silent for a moment, then lowered his head and mumbled, "before... that, I will just stay with you, mom."

When she heard the answer, what could Sophia do besides to smile? She did not know whether it was a good thing or a bad thing for a mother and son to be so close, but she could not accompany Wood for the rest of their lifetime. He had to find a girlfriend. Even if he did not get married, he needed to understand what romance was like.

She had a word kept away in her heart that she dared not utter. Every time she mentioned death, George would fly into a rage, glare at his mother, and forbid her from saying the word.

However, his mother's poor health was a fact. Even if the Forest club paid for her surgery, a broken body was still broken, unlike changing a part in a machine. How would George cope on his own once his mother died?

She hugged Wood gently from behind and rested her face against Wood's broad and sturdy back.

"George, George, my silly boy." She murmured in a low voice.

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"Gareth, why are you still dawdling?!"

Outside the door of an ordinary house with red roof tiles, a stout and short middle-aged man stood in the glaring sunlight. He had just raised his head and shouted toward the upper floor. He repeatedly glanced at his watch with impatience.

"You started packing your backpack half an hour ago, and you're still not downstairs! What do you have in there? An atomic bomb? A carbine? Or a bunch of Oasis CDs?"

"Coming! Coming!"

The sounds of footsteps came from the stairs inside the house.

"Goodbye, Mom."

"Goodbye, son."

There was a sound of a kiss.

The door in front of the man opened. A tall young man poked his head out. The man standing by the door grabbed his backpack to pull him out and zipped his backpack open without an explanation.

"Oh, damn it..." He groaned. "Sunscreen, hair gel, mirror, comb... Why don't you just bring a bag of sanitary napkins? You are..." The stout man looked up at his son's appearance and froze for a moment. Then he angrily grabbed the sunglasses off his son's face.

“You’re a professional footballer, not a pretty boy! Look at your hair, as hard as steel needles. Are you going to murder the opposing players on the field? How much hair gel did you use?” He had to reach out to smoothen his son’s hair, but his son nimbly dodged him.

“Hey, Dad. It’s taken me a long time to get this hairstyle!” The little monkey, Gareth Bale argued disgruntledly.

“Have you been doing this for the last hour?” The man sounded angry.

“You just said it was half an hour,” Bale protested cautiously.

“Shut up!” The man gave his son a hard look. “Don’t think that now that you’ve got a European title, you can talk back! I’m telling you, even if you get the World Cup, you’re still my son!”

“Yes, yes, yes...” Bale obediently nodded his head.

“How many times have I told you? You are a professional footballer and should concentrate your energy on how to train hard to improve your ability, rather than on your personal grooming... Looking at your appearance, everyone would think you’re some kind of groupie who worships a pretty boy star. Who’s going to treat you as a footballer? People’s time and energy are limited. When you put too much energy on your outer appearance, you will not have enough energy left for training and competition. You’re still young and have a long way to go. Did you not look up to George the most? Look at him, when did he ever care so much about his image? He is always the hardest working player, you have to learn from him...” Bale’s father began his lengthy lectures again. His lips fired nonstop as if they were a Gatling machine gun. The spit flying in front of Bale made him look up in worry that his father’s saliva would land on his hair.

The action drew more intense “firing” from his father. “What are you doing? Are you rolling your eyes at me? Are you dissatisfied with my words! Why do you think we gave up our house in Cardiff and moved to Nottingham? It’s all for you, Bale! Why is your head lowered? Look me in the eyes!”

Bale raised his head in resignation. “Dad, if you keep talking, we’re going to have to drive to Liverpool ourselves.”

Meanwhile, his mother’s voice rang out from inside. “Honey, haven’t you left yet?”

“Ah...” The stout man raised his wrist to look at his watch. They had indeed delayed long enough. But whose fault was it that they were delayed? He glared at his son and made his way to the car parked by the side of the road. “You spent an hour to fix your hair which will only take thirty seconds on the field to mess up.”

“It was only half an hour, dad...”

“Shut up and get in!” The stout man slapped the car door hard. “If you are replaced mid-game because of a bad performance, watch out because I’ll sort you out when you return!”

“Dad, the starting list hasn’t been released yet...” Bale opened the car door and got in before he reminded his father.

“Shut your mouth! My son must be in the starting lineup! Gareth Bale is a genius! I guarantee you that that Italian will not be able to adapt to the pace of the game and weather here, plus the food. He will be heading home after a season!”

“But there’s still Leighton...”

“Well, he’s a nice kid, but as far as talent is concerned... he’s not as good as you!” His father turned around and grinned at Bale. Then he twisted back to start the car.

“Fasten your seat belt, son. We’re in a hurry!”

The silver-gray Ford charged out like a wild horse, accompanied by the roar of the engine.

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Twain stood next to the red bus with his hands behind his back and sunglasses on his face. The glare of the sun let him wear his sunglasses with confidence as no one would secretly judge him for pretending to look cool.

Sweating profusely, Kerslake outside bus door, checking the attendance. Dunn was already on the bus and enjoying the air conditioning without any regard for the matters outside.

Since Dunn was promoted to the assistant manager of the First Team, Kerslake was in charge of dealing with trivial matters and was responsible for matters to do with the players. He had to collect data on the performance of each player in the games; report on the number yellow cards on each player and if they could be suspended in the next game; supervise the team’s situation during training... It was also his responsibility to check the attendance of the team during assembly.

Dunn’s work was simpler. He was responsible for instructing players, one-on-one, about the tactics and tasks for the games.

“Only George Wood and Gareth Bale are not here yet.” Kerslake checked twice and then turned to update Twain.

Twain nodded. The two men continued to wait in the sun.

Soon, Wood appeared in front of him. He came running with his bag on his back. Once he saw the bus and the two men standing outside the bus door, he quickened his pace, as if it was his final sprint in a 10,000-meter run. It was his special way of warming up.

Wood rushed toward the two coaches like the wind and stopped. Twain looked at him and the soaking wet t-shirt on his body. “Do you still have any clean clothes in your bag?”

Wood nodded. There was another change of clothes for after the game.

“Take this off and get changed.” Twain pointed at the wet t-shirt.

Wood obeyed and took off his shirt, revealing his hard muscles. He took out his clean t-shirt from his backpack as if there was no one else around, and then got changed.

“Very good. Be careful not to catch a cold. Now get up there.” Twain pointed to the bus door.

After Wood got on the bus, he greeted his teammates and sat in his seat.

Twain and Kerslake continued to wait for the last man — Gareth Bale.

The sun was boiling hot in the morning during mid-August, which could irritate people baking in the sun. However, the two coaches stood by the bus under the hot sun without any impatience on their faces.

A piercing sound of brakes and motor roar came from the road ahead, and then a silver Ford sparkled in the sun as it rushed into everyone's view with a terrific drift. Kerslake, who was not wearing sunglasses, squinted as the car flashed past.

Twain whistled. "A father that likes to show off."

Bale did not have his own car, so he was always driven by his father when he came to the training base for training. Everyone was no stranger to the silver Ford.

The small car drifted again in front of the bus to make a beautiful stop. The car door had not yet opened, and the voice of Bale's father could be heard. "Look, we are not late! I told you to believe in Dad's skills, your dad was a former kart racer. I only didn't become a F1 driver because I was chasing after your mom. That was really a loss for the F1 world, as well as Michael Schumacher's good fortune!"

Twain and Kerslake could not help laughing. They all remembered the time when the stout man came to Nottingham Forest with his son to sign the contract, and how he was so fond of showing off and had so much self confidence that they were used to it. That was the case four years ago, and it was still the same four years later. It was likely that he would remain so for the next four years and many more.

Bale tumbled out of the car as his legs went soft, hardly able to stand properly.

"Dad, if I don't play well, it's because I sat in your rollercoaster ride... I'm going to throw up..."

With their attention drawn by the speeding car, the players gathered near the bus door and burst into laughter.

That was when Bale noticed that everyone was there and hurriedly staggered as he ran over.

"Boss..." He gave a wary greeting for fear that the boss would punish him. It looked like he was late.

Twain nodded and did not intend to punish him. "Get on the bus."

Bale breathed a sigh of relief. Just as he stepped on the first step, Twain's devilish voice rang again. "Your starting spot is gone, little monkey."

Those teammates, who stood at the side to watch the show, laughed when they saw the shock on Bale's face.

In the midst of his teammates' hoots of laughter, Bale got onto the bus looking miserable.

Kerslake followed and jumped onto the bus, but Twain was stopped by the zealous senior Bale. "Hey, Tony."

"What's the matter, Mr. Bale?" Twain turned and looked at him.

The short and stout man moved up to Twain and then whispered in his ear, "give him a chance, Tony. He did not mean to be late either. It was my outburst to him that caused the delay. It's my fault..."

Twain interrupted him with a smile. "If he plays well, he will have a chance, Mr. Bale."

This answer did not satisfy the senior Bale. But he did not dare to express his dissatisfaction, so he only muttered, "you're not going to let him play. How can he perform?"

Twain patted him on the shoulder and laughed. "Just wait at home and watch the TV, Mr. Bale." Then he turned around and jumped onto the bus. The bus door closed slowly behind him.

"Guys." Looking at the players, who had returned to their seats, Twain raised his arms. "This is the first game of the new season and we are going to Liverpool with our European champion title." He swept his gaze across and waved his hands down. "Do not screw it up for me!"

Mid-July to mid-August was the hottest period of the year, and the middle of August was the last couple days of it. It was sunny in England. The sun blazed across thousands of miles. The road ahead appeared hazy under the blazing hot sun.

It was in this weather that Nottingham Forest's red bus slowly pulled out of the gate of the Wilford training base and headed north.

The blazing summer was not over yet, but the fiery new season had already begun.

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Note:

The Nottingham Forest team's big list for the new season (26 players):

Goalkeepers: Edwin van der Sar (1), Igor Akinfeev (12), Dale Roberts (25).

Defenders: Leighton Baines (22), Gareth Bale (2), Pascal Chimbonda (3), Sun Jihai (21), Gerard Piqué (5), Vincent Kompany (33), Pepe (6), Wes Morgan (30), Roberto Ayala (4), Rafinha (14), Fabio Grosso (28).

Midfielders: George Wood (13), Martin Petrov (8), Rafael van der Vaart (23), Kris Commons (20), Aaron Lennon (17), Franck Ribéry (7), Steve Sidwell (26), David Beckham (24).

Strikers: Freddy Eastwood (11), Nicklas Bendtner (9), Ruud van Nistelrooy (10), Andrey Arshavin (18).