

Champions 631

Chapter 631: Mr. Ten Percent

After they took down Chelsea in the away game, the Forest team continued to follow closely Manchester United's heels. The Nottingham Forest team returned to Nottingham in a lighthearted mood, but as soon as they returned to Nottingham, Tony Twain's good mood vanished.

Ribéry's agent, Bruno Heiderscheid came knocking. Without waiting for him to speak, Twain knew what he wanted.

At the end of last year, after Franck Ribéry had just won the Ballon d'Or, Heiderscheid had come to Twain in the hope of improving terms for Ribéry. Since Ribéry joined the team, he had signed a total of two contracts. One was signed when Ribéry first joined and was not famous yet. He did not even have a decent agent at the time, so the terms of the contract were average, but Ribéry was satisfied. Later, as the team's results climbed and Ribéry's personal performance stood out, he was no longer satisfied with this amount of salary. He found an agent: Bruno Heiderscheid. The first thing that Heiderscheid did as his agent was talk to the club about improving the contract terms.

At the time, the Forest team was on the rise, so Ribéry's salary requirements were fully satisfied. As a result, everything was to everyone's satisfaction and Ribéry continued to stay in the Forest team.

The timing of the third pay rise was not too long ago. It was just before the start of the season. Despite financial constraints, the Forest team gave most of the First Team players higher salaries. Twain thought the contract extension would allow the team's squad to be stabilized for at least another three years.

He did not expect this. He did not expect that just half a season later, Ribéry's agent would show his face again, taking advantage of the fact that Ribéry had just won the Ballon d'Or to ask for another pay rise.

Twain had not spoken to Heiderscheid, but in his mind, the agent's insatiable greed had surpassed Billy Woxx and Anelka's two stupid brothers. How could he pop up to ask for a change in the contract after it had just been renewed six months ago? If he agreed to it, he was afraid that agents of other players would follow suit. The Forest team would recreate the economic crisis by trying to satisfy the insatiable group of "Mr. Ten Percent."

Bruno Heiderscheid had thought that since Ribéry had just won the Ballon d'Or, he was on a roll. Therefore, he went to Twain, thinking that he would not dare not to comply. Twain was tougher than he anticipated. The first few dealings between the two sides had been cordial and negotiations had been smooth. The outcomes satisfied him. He thought Twain would always be like that.

The club refused to talk to Heiderscheid again, and the matter was shelved just like that.

Why did Twain care so much about the rumors of Ribéry's transfer to Real Madrid? Because he was well aware of what kind of character Ribéry's agent was. Billy Woxx was nice compared to him.

That was why he insisted on talking to Ribéry before he was willing to face the media's questions. He was reassured by Ribéry, because Ribéry did not want to leave, and did not take the opportunity to bring up a pay raise. That was the end of the matter.

But was Twain stupid enough to think that Heiderscheid would let this rest? He had been waiting for this day to come.

Ribéry would not mention a salary increase. There were few players in the world who would step out to talk about it. Otherwise, there would be no jobs for the agents. After Twain closed the door on him the last time, Heiderscheid learned. He did not rush to approach the Nottingham Forest Football Club for a new contract as soon as the transfer rumors came out. He studied Tony Twain and found that he was amenable to coaxing but not coercion. He might have met with a rebuff again if he had approached him at that sensitive moment.

After half a month, he felt the time was ripe to look for Twain again.

“Mr. Heiderscheid, I remember clearly the last time I said that we had just signed a new contract, didn’t I?” Twain smiled insincerely at Ribéry’s agent.

The Frenchman, Bruno Heiderscheid, sat opposite him on the couch with a smile on his face, as if he had not discerned the unwelcome meaning of Twain’s remark at all.

All agents needed to be thick-skinned like Heiderscheid. The same was true of Billy Woot. But why did Billy Woot’s impudence make Twain furious, but Heiderscheid only made Twain feel disdain?

“I’m doing this for the good of the club.” Heiderscheid laughed. “There are a lot of rumors about Franck’s transfer, and I’m worried about what you will think, Mr. Twain. So I took the initiative to come here first, lest Mr. Twain think I’m pulling some tricks.”

As expected, he used Real Madrid as a bargaining chip.

Twain smirked for a moment. “Did Franck not say himself that he wouldn’t leave Nottingham Forest?”

Heiderscheid spread his hands. “Yes, I also believe he will not leave the Forest team. But you know, Mr. Twain, there will always be flies in this world, and they like to bother their targets. If Franck doesn’t have something that can firmly reject, my player will be pestered endlessly, and that will affect his form. Also, I think if Nottingham Forest wants Franck to be loyal, shouldn’t the club do something about it?”

What he said was true. It was unreasonable for the club to ask the players to pledge loyalty to the club, and for the club to be unwilling to pay. It was no longer the outrageous period when the players would be paid twenty pounds a week.

There was a clear threat within Heiderscheid’s words. Twain admitted that he was threatened, but could not do anything about it. Neither he nor the club actually wanted Ribéry, a Ballon d’Or recipient, to leave Wilford. The unwillingness was multifaceted. In terms of popularity, Ribéry was the Ballon d’Or winner developed by the Forest team. He was the team’s top star player and was easily comparable to Beckham. From a tactical point of view, Ribéry’s presence enriched the team’s offensive routine, and he was an important part of the Forest team’s victory.

Ribéry could not leave.

He nodded. “Well, Mr. Heiderscheid, I admit there’s some truth to what you’re saying. Ribéry’s current 8,000 pound weekly salary is indeed low as compared to his level and reputation, but we need to carefully consider it. How about I give you an answer in three days’ time?”

Heiderscheid did not expect to take care of everything on the first day, so he nodded. "After three days, when you have carefully considered, please give me a ring, Mr. Twain."

He left after he shook hands with Twain. Twain stood in his office, momentarily lost in thought. Then he went out to look for the chairman, Evan Doughty, and Allan Adams.

While he was lost in contemplation, he thought about what Allan Adams would think of the matter. When it came to money, Allan would immediately become "the devil," which gave everyone a headache.

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Evan Doughty was in a work discussion with Miss Barbara Lucy when Twain pushed open the door to walk in. The two smiled at each other warmly, somewhat surprised to see Twain appear at the door. Their smiles froze, but only for a moment, immediately returning to normal. Their faces that were close together, slightly parted.

Twain was sorry when he saw that Barbara Lucy was there after he opened the door. He should have knocked on the door first, but his relationship with Evan was more familiar, so he normally just opened the door and walked straight in. His voice would have traveled into Evan's ear before he had gone in. This time he did not say hello in advance because he was thinking about the problem.

If Twain had closed the door and left, he would look even sillier. So he froze and pretended he did not know anything. He watched as Barbara Lucy calmly packed up the folders in front of Evan as she got up to slowly come up to him. "I'll go and make you coffee." She smiled at Twain when she walked past Twain's side.

Twain smiled back. "Thank you, Miss Lucy."

He went in, and Evan looked at him with a smile on his face, as if nothing had happened. "What's the matter, Tony?"

"Ah, um..." Twain scratched his head. "Right, Franck Ribéry's agent, Heiderscheid, came to me again, hoping to get Ribéry a pay raise."

"Aren't you in charge of the team?" Evan's words meant that "you can make your own decisions."

"Well, I think for any issues regarding money, isn't it better to listen to Allan?"

Evan smiled. "You think it's important to listen to Allan's opinion too, don't you, Tony? If I had told Allan about it, he would have been very happy."

Twain chuckled.

"But it's a pity that you can't hear his opinion now."

"Huh?" Twain was a little surprised.

"He's in China now."

"Oh!" Twain was even more surprised. "Did that talent show make him fall in love with China?"

“He fell in love with the Chinese market.”

Miss Barbara Lucy walked in with a coffee tray and put two steaming cups in front of the two men. They thanked Lucy, and she left, closing the door behind her. The three behaved calmly, without the slightest bit of embarrassment.

Evan sipped the coffee and continued, “the club plans to go to China this summer for a tour of competition. Partners over there have been found. Allan is there to confirm some details.”

Twain knew the club had a plan to make a fortune in China — no, it was a plan to make a fortune in East Asia — but he did not expect it to be so fast. Then again, it was normal. With the new stadium in construction, the club needed money in every aspect, so going to East Asia where there was lots of money to be made was a good way to ease the financial pressure on the club’s capital.

He nodded to indicate that he knew.

“So, the matter about Ribéry’s salary, you can deal with it yourself, Tony. You should know what the club’s bottom line is.”

Twain nodded again. “I’m aware, Evan.”

Though he appeared to be leisurely sitting there and drinking coffee, he was actually a little restless. After he spoke to Evan, he was not in the mind to discuss the plan to go to China for money, so he took his leave.

It was embarrassing to encounter that incident. Even a blind person could see what his boss was doing with Miss Lucy. What kind of work discussion required their faces to be so close? Evan’s wife, who hated Britain’s climate and diet, had insisted on staying with their children in the United States. She only occasionally visited her husband in the United Kingdom. A normal, middle-aged man was a young and vigorous age. With his wife not around for a long time, it was possible to imagine what would happen...

Miss Barbara Lucy was attractive, fair-haired, and blue-eyed, but her most attractive feature to men was her figure. When Twain first saw her, his eyes were caught by her breasts, and he forgot his manners. Evan Doughty spent long periods alone with Miss Barbara Lucy. Although Miss Lucy was the head of the Forest club’s outreach department, she was also Evan Doughty’s secretary.

Lucy was brought over from the United States by Evan. Maybe the two of them already had had an affair while they were in America.

Twain’s guesses were confirmed today, but Twain did not want to be the person who confirmed it.

Would Evan develop a barrier against him in his mind? Would this incident affect the good relationship between the two of them?

Twain muttered to himself as he walked away, “I have to make sure I knock first the next time.”

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Three days later, Bruno Heiderscheid received Tony Twain’s call, asking him to go to the club to discuss Ribéry’s new contract.

Twain's terms for the new contract was a weekly salary of 90,000 pounds for a period of five years. The signing bonus, goal awards, assists awards and the others would be counted separately.

Heiderscheid believed the conditions were still a little low and wanted to continue negotiations with the Forest team.

A day later, Twain drew up a new contract, with a 100,000-pound weekly salary for five years, as well as the signing bonus, goal awards, assists awards, and others counted separately.

Heiderscheid was still not satisfied and even thought the club's weekly salary was not enough to reflect the club's sincerity. He brought up Real Madrid's pursuit of Ribéry once again, which only caused Twain to smack the table.

"Mr. Bruno Heiderscheid, I think it is enough to reflect our sincerity to offer a one hundred thousand pound weekly salary contract in light of the club's current tight financial situation. I am willing to revise the contract, but that does not mean you can ask for sky-high prices! Nottingham Forest is not a bank, and I'm not some idiotic ATM where you can take out as much as you want. A player's loyalty requires the club to pay the price, so we pay the price that we think is appropriate. Shouldn't you show the sincerity that the player really wants to stay here as well?"

Accordingly, Heiderscheid put forward his own "sincerity."

A weekly salary of 130,000 pounds, the number of years in the contract reduced to four years, as well as a signing bonus, goal awards, and assist awards significantly improved from the figures given by Twain, and finally the salary had to be increased by fifteen percent every year.

In Twain's view, it was robbery. "You might as well rob the bank, Mr. Bruno Heiderscheid. The money might come a little faster that way." He sneered.

He would rather burst into obscene language, but he was Ribéry's agent and falling out with him might affect the relationship with Ribéry, so he had to hold back.

The negotiations once again parted on bad terms.

Twain announced that Ribéry's contract with the team was three years away. Before it expired, the revision of the contract had to be shelved.

Although he had won a temporary reprieve in the struggle with Ribéry's agent, the matter greatly affected Twain's mood. He smiled less and was a little short-tempered.

With his age just reaching thirty years, it was a difficult exercise to stay normal under pressure.

Chapter 632: Change in Dominion

"The Champions League semifinal games are about to begin. England once again has three teams breaking into the top four this season. This is a great revival of English football. Although our national team was knocked out of the UEFA European Championship qualifier, the English Premier League teams are still strong, which shows that our league tournament is still the world's top league." The Sun did a Champions League outlook and was back on track after some pointless compliments. "Manchester

United and Chelsea will stage an English derby in the semifinal game of the Champions League, and Nottingham Forest is not having it easy either. Their opponent is Barcelona!

“Chelsea’s league title dream for this season is hopeless. They can put all their energies into the Champions League, which is bad news for Manchester United. In the league tournament, Nottingham Forest is close at their heels, and the two teams are only one point apart, with Manchester United temporarily in the lead.

“Nottingham Forest is challenging another powerhouse team from La Liga after they eliminated Real Madrid. Barcelona is suppressed by Real Madrid in their domestic league, and Rijkaard’s only chance to save himself is the Champions League title. Not to mention, Nottingham Forest and Barcelona still have their old grudge?”

In the end, the Sun did not let go of Tony Twain’s team.

Even though there were still a few days before the Champions League semifinal opener, it was apparent that the focus of the three English teams that had advanced into the top four had moved to the Champions League. Although the competition was fierce in the league tournament, there were still four rounds. The Champions League was based on the home and away matches elimination system. Making a mistake in any one of the games was likely to be fatal.

It was against that background that the 35th round of the Premier League went into an all-out battle.

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In the already-finished game, despite the impending Champions League, Chelsea won 1:0 against Moyes’s Everton team in the away game by rotating the lineup.

Immediately after Arsenal’s game against Reading, Arsenal got a home win of 2:0.

Before Nottingham Forest, Liverpool, and Manchester United played, the league table showed this:

Manchester United remained in the top spot with 80 points. Nottingham Forest was still number two with 79 points. Arsenal was in third place with 73 points. Liverpool remained in fourth with 72 points. Chelsea was in fifth place with 67 points, thanks to their win against Everton, and widened the point difference with the league’s sixth placed Everton.

There had not been any changes in the rankings. Apart from Nottingham Forest and Manchester United, the point differences between the other teams were just one or two points. Although Arsenal won their game, there was still a gap of at least six points between the top two teams. Their hopes of winning were slim.

It had not been easy to be able achieve that result because of Henry’s departure, changes in the club’s top echelon, and the first season of generational change in the players.

The Forest players watched the first half of Arsenal’s game against Reading on the bus and the second half in the City Ground stadium locker room.

The victory over Reading was not a surprise at all, and the players did not exclaim at anything. After they watched the game, Kerlake urged them to go warm up and get ready for their game.

Tottenham Hotspur was not considered a weak team. One of the more favorable things for the Forest team was that they were on their home ground this time.

It was April 19th. Nottingham Forest's away challenge against Barcelona was on the night of April 23rd. By all accounts, Twain should have used rotation like Chelsea, but he did not.

He did not know how Ferguson arranged his team. Manchester United's game would be held later than Nottingham Forest. Just as Forest's game ended, the kickoff would start over there. He had not yet gotten the starting list for Manchester United, but the Forest team had already sent someone to the scene. When there was any news, he would inform Kerslake via his phone, and then Kerslake would update him.

The intelligence gathering on the enemies was becoming more and more important in the league tournament.

Back to this game at the City Ground stadium, Tony Twain deployed the main force lineup on his home ground. If everything went according to plan, the squad would be the starting lineup that would go to Camp Nou stadium.

The goalkeeper was Edwin van der Sar. The center-back partners were Pepe and Piqué. The left-back was Gareth Bale, who was stronger in offense, and the right-back was Rafinha, who was equally strong in offense. The midfield parallel positions were occupied by George Wood and van der Vaart in the middle. One was focused on defense and the other one emphasized offense. The left midfielder was Ribéry, and the right midfielder was Beckham. The strikers were van Nistelrooy and Eastwood.

Rotation was used to give the players a better rest, but it did not mean they could put it all at stake when it was time. It was time because Twain did not want to lose the league tournament and the Champions League.

He believed the same was true of his players. Who would not want honor and money?

The Tottenham Hotspur manager, Jol, did not expect Tony Twain to send the entire main force to play in a home game in the face of an impending Champions League semifinal. He was caught off guard.

Nottingham Forest scored two goals in the opening twenty-five minutes. The Forest players were in a high fighting spirit. Making use of their advantage, they pursued and attacked amid the surge of thunderous cheers from the home fans. By the end of the first half, they were 3:0.

It was the second time that Jol had been surprised. After seeing Twain deploy his main lineup, he froze for a while, but he soon smiled again. He thought that if Twain had sent a rotated lineup, it was actually worse for him. At least that group of players would play to two hundred percent of their strength in front of the manager. If it was the main force, there would be players worried about getting hurt ahead of the Champions League semifinal and play at their minimum level. In that case, he would have a chance.

But how would he know what Tony Twain had said to his players before the game?

"Ah, I know you're going to worry about getting hurt before an important game, and I'm worried, too, but I don't want to lose the league title. So, what can we do? It is very simple. As soon as you go out, actively look for opportunities, and strive to end the game in the first half, so that the opponent does

not have the idea of a deathbed struggle. We will be safe. The longer the game time drags on, the more we can't score to establish an advantage, the more the opponent will become threatening, and the greater their resistance will be, which is bad for us. So what would be the safest thing for us to do? We will not hide or evade, but as soon as you go out, use your mightiest force to crush them completely! The only ones in the world who won't pose a threat to us are the dead."

Therefore, the poor Tottenham Hotspur team was beaten without the strength to retaliate in the first half. After a storm of raids, they realized with a shock that they were three goals behind.

Martin Jol was livid on the sidelines. Tottenham Hotspur was considered a traditional powerhouse team but played like a newly promoted, inexperienced team at the City Ground stadium. The club's top executives had invested a lot of money this season, but his results in leading the team was inversely proportional to the investment — thirty-four rounds of the league tournament had passed, and they ranked twelfth with more than twenty-one points from their UEFA Europa League goal. They were doomed to a dismal end this season — a fact that left the club's top brass very unhappy. He knew the upper echelon meant to fire him, and they were actively reaching out to Juande Ramos, the head coach of the La Liga elite team, Sevilla Football Club, with the intention to replace him at the end of the season. But he refused to quit, and still wanted to prove himself. How would he prove himself? He should at least win a few rounds so that he could leave on a high note, right?

During halftime, he chewed everyone out in the locker room. He wanted to emulate Ferguson's or Twain's bellowing to stir up the players' fighting spirit and sense of shame, but he was an amateur. He was not that type of manager at all. Instead of motivating the players' fighting spirit, he made the locker room atmosphere even more awkward. Some people knew Jol's time at Tottenham Hotspur was not long, so they did not listen to the manager at all.

After the start of the second half of the game, Tottenham Hotspur still did not show any morale, skills, or tactics that could turn the game around. There was nothing at all. Besides Jol repeatedly getting up from the technical area and growling on the sidelines, he had no hope because he knew that he had lost control of the team. It was sad, and even more sad that he could only accept this fact.

Twain began to replace his players according to his plan to allow the important players to rest and avoid injuries. He brought on the keener rotating players to continue to destroy Tottenham Hotspur.

The players were full of fighting spirit, but because Twain changed the core players, the offense seemed a little chaotic and lacked coordination. George Wood took over the task of organizing the attack after van der Vaart left the field. He shone a few times, but it was just a blip. For a long-time defensive midfielder, he still lacked his own tactical ideas. His offensive organization was very casual and undisciplined.

The Forest team did not score again in the second half, but the Tottenham Hotspur managed to score a face-saving goal in the final minutes. Without any impact on the outcome of the game, the Forest team easily won a home win.

In another game held at the same time, Liverpool won 2:0 against Fulham and accumulated 72 points to catch up with Arsenal and shake off Chelsea. Although they had no hope of winning the title, given the predicament that Liverpool was only able to play in the UEFA Europa League in previous seasons, the current fourth place in the league was enough to solidify Benítez's position.

Benítez was known as the “King of Cups” as Liverpool’s recent nearly twenty years of performance had proved they were better at playing the cup competitions. The rapport between the team and the manager was quite high. No wonder Benítez helped Liverpool regain the Champions League the first season he arrived at Liverpool to establish his place at Anfield in one fell swoop.

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At the end of the game, Twain gave plenty of compliments to the team. Like his previous admonishment due to a loss, he was equally exuberant when he praised people. His forte was making his actions, words, and tone extremely exaggerated, making everyone who listened very happy. The only difference was the degree of strength in their pleasure.

After he said goodbye to the players, Twain and Dunn, as well as Kerslake, remained in the locker room of the stadium. They were going to watch the live broadcast of the game that was about to start — Manchester United in an away challenge against Blackburn Rovers.

Rushing back to the hotel or their own homes to watch would cause them to miss part of it, so they watched it in the locker room. There was a television set in the locker room and moreover, it was their club’s stadium. It proper that they, as the team manager and assistant managers, were there to watch the TV.

When the game began, the crowd at the City Ground stadium gradually dispersed and the lights went out one by one, the hustle and bustle disappeared as the fans left, calm was restored in the stadium. The victory already belonged to other people’s topic of idle conversation. For the three in the locker room, it was the past, and now they were more concerned about another team’s win or lose.

One hundred and fifteen minutes later, the locker room door was knocked open.

Before anyone came out, Twain’s excited voice could be heard. “I’ll buy you guys drinks! Haha, that was so awesome!”

The sound from the television mingled with his laughter. “... The game is over... Ferguson’s face looks so ugly that his players are going to suffer again... to be forced into a draw in the away game by what was seen as the non-threatening Blackburn Rovers. Manchester United moved to the second place just as Nottingham Forest had already defeated Tottenham Hotspur!... Eighty-two and eighty-one, it’s still a one-point difference, but the order of the first and second places has changed... At this moment, I’m afraid the happiest person in the world is Tony Twain...”

The song sung by the home fans at the Ewood Park stadium from the television set was the best contrast to the commentary.

Kerslake smiled from ear to ear. Although he was not as blunt as Twain, he was just as happy. No one actually expected Manchester United to suffer a setback at the hands of Blackburn Rovers. The draw was an unexpected gift for the Forest team. The coaching unit had thought that as long as they kept winning, the final outcome should be in the final round of the league, when Nottingham Forest challenged Manchester United in an away game.

Unexpectedly, Manchester United could not carry the pressure of being the front-runner and ran into a big problem with Blackburn Rovers, which was least likely to go wrong. A draw was enough to make Ferguson furious.

When the three watched the live game on the television, the television station repeatedly showed a close-up of Ferguson growling on the sidelines. Twain laughed every time.

Though not as exaggerated as the two men, Dunn still had a smile on his face.

After working hard for a season and biting hard at Manchester United, no matter what kind of opponent and situation they faced at the final stages, their efforts were not given in vain. Finally, the bellwether, Manchester United, has stumbled and our team will complete our reversal! As long as we win the remaining three rounds, the league title will be in our hands!

The opponents for the next two rounds of league tournament, Reading and Aston Villa, were not strong teams. Provided that the Forest team worked in unison and carefully dealt with them, the six points would not be an issue. Then it was going to be a tough away challenge in the final round against Manchester United. It would be explosive, but Dunn was confident of winning. Nottingham Forest was born for victory and championship. The stronger the opponent, the more dangerous situation was, the more amazing the energy they exploded with.

It really was a game worth celebrating.

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Half an hour later, in Kenny Burns' Forest Bar, plenty of excited fans who found it hard to sleep gathered after they watched the game between Manchester United and Blackburn Rovers. Tony Twain and his two aides were among them.

Twain climbed up the table with a full glass and stood where everyone's eyes looked upward. A group of fans below him also raised their glasses in anticipation.

Kerslake also held up a glass, and Dunn had a glass of soda in his hand — he still did not drink, and Twain did not try to persuade him.

Smiling from ear to ear, Twain lifted his glass, and whooped as the people below looked up at him.

“Guys, this toast is... for Blackburn Rovers! Cheers!”

“To Blackburn Rovers, cheers!” The people, whose faces were filled with smiles like him, cried in unison. These were the same people who cursed at Blackburn Rovers, who defeated Nottingham Forest, a month ago.

The clinking of the glasses could be heard and golden beer showered the entire room.

In the last Premier League game of the day, the Manchester United team was unexpectedly forced into an away draw by “the end of season's giant killer” Blackburn Rovers and handed over their top spot, which they had held since the league's 29th round on March 9th, to Nottingham Forest, led by Tony Twain.

With just three rounds left before the end of the league tournament, the throne of the English Premier League changed owners.

Nottingham Forest was three rounds away from the second top-flight trophy title in their club's history.

Chapter 633: Fierce Competition

With the excitement and joy of sitting on the throne of the league, the Nottingham Forest team flew to Barcelona for the game against the La Liga powerhouse team, Barcelona.

The Barcelona fans had yet to forget Tony Twain's arrogant performance against Barcelona in the Champions League final, and they did not put behind the hatred of Nottingham Forest for eliminating them. Now they had a chance to return all the resentment that had accumulated over two years to Nottingham Forest.

It was fantasized by the Barcelona fans, but the Barcelona players might not think so.

It was Rijkaard's last chance to save himself. He had been empty-handed for two seasons, firmly suppressed by their archrival, Real Madrid, and had lost the first leg of the battle of the century at the Camp Nou this season. There was basically no hope of a league title, and the reason for not expecting it was not that Real Madrid was too strong, but that they failed to live up to expectations. Having been eliminated from Copa del Rey and only advancing into the Champions League semifinals, all their failures of the season would be nothing if they could pick up the "Big Ears" trophy. The shame of being defeated by Real Madrid at the Camp Nou would be drowned in the sea of joy from the victory.

However, in the face of Nottingham Forest, Rijkaard was at his wits' end because he did not have a good solution.

Under normal circumstances, when a strong opponent approached, the team should band in opposition to the adversary and unite to overcome the opponent.

But today's Barcelona was not. Catalonia's media constantly speculated about Ronaldinho's enemies in the locker room, Eto'o's big mouth, the weak Rijkaard losing control of the locker room, the core Barcelona really needed between Messi and Ronaldinho, if Henry was worth his purchase value, Rijkaard's successor, Mourinho, and so on. It looked raucous, and the readers saw new stunts every day, except more news about the game — no, there was still news. In the battle for the core position on whether Messi or Ronaldinho should be the one that Barcelona trusted, it was mentioned that Messi was injured and that he would miss the first leg of the Champions League semi finals against Nottingham Forest.

It was a great irony.

Twain and his coaching staff, as well as the team, had made careful preparations and were afraid to take it lightly. But after they arrived, they realized that their opponent's mind was on the internal discord and completely did not take them seriously.

Consequently, he was not afraid of Barcelona.

By the day before the game, Puyol came forward and declared that they had to beat Nottingham Forest at home because it was the Champions League semi finals. After he read this story in his hotel room, Twain slightly sarcastically said to Dunn, “did they only just realize that this is the Champions League semi finals?”

Twain attached great importance on the unity of the team and the atmosphere and harmony within the locker room. Deeply educated by Chairman Mao, he was aware that “the easiest way to capture a fortress is from within.” In addition to the hard work by the entire team, Nottingham Forest’s results were based on unity. Real Madrid’s failures in previous years and the fall of Barcelona stemmed from their internal divisions.

Therefore, he never allowed the farce that was happening in Barcelona to happen to him in the future.

He would guard against it with the history as a guide.

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Puyol came forward to speak as the team captain, but to little avail. Barcelona was divided internally. Even though he was the captain, not everyone would listen to him.

This game at the Camp Nou was moving very, very drearily.

Defensive counterattack was naturally Twain’s first choice in key games, while Barcelona did not show a high quality of offense. Messi’s absence due to injury had a very big impact on the team. Ronaldinho was once again on the bench — he rarely sat on the substitutes’ bench in his four seasons in Barcelona, but the number of times he sat on the bench this season far exceeded the number of times for those first four seasons.

Although Rijkaard had never publicly criticized Ronaldinho and always said he trusted the Brazilian, he put him on the substitutes’ bench every time. The attitude was worth people’s examination. In addition, on a tactical level, Ronaldinho had gone from being the “phenomenon” of Barcelona to a “cancer.” His attacking results on the field depended entirely on his personal form. He had been in a very bad form this season and too much ball taking led to too many mistakes. His attacking speed was not as fast as Messi. If he and Messi appeared in a game at the same time, they would interfere with each other. As a result, in games with Ronaldinho confirmed, Barcelona’s results were very good. Once he appeared, Barcelona did not lose or draw.

At first, some people even called out in the Catalan media. “Why don’t you let Ronaldinho play? You always say he has an injury, but has no problem at all.” Eventually, the voices faded.

In the game, Ronaldinho sat in the back row of the substitutes’ bench. People surrounded him, filling the space in front and to the left and right, but he looked very lonely. His only good friend, Messi, was recovering at home to prepare for the second leg of the game. What about him? He might not even be brought to England for the second leg.

Barcelona’s offense was messy. Even so, Nottingham Forest held fast to defense, and the number of players invested in the counterattack was low, as if they were afraid of being caught off guard after being tackled.

Could a game like that be satisfying? Boos rang out at the Camp Nou stadium. The hissing was not aimed at a particular team, but at both sides. They were deeply dissatisfied with Barcelona's inability to attack and did not forget that Nottingham Forest was its own enemy as well.

The two sides did not enter a goal for ninety minutes and the game was utterly dull. Many television viewers who were originally excited in anticipation of "an explosive game" lamented that they had wasted a night. As for the fans who stayed up to watch the game in the Far East, the posts campaigning against Barcelona's "inability to forge ahead" and Nottingham Forest's "habitual passive defense" were rife online.

Twain did not care about them. He left Camp Nou and the beautiful city of Barcelona because he got the result he wanted before the game: a draw without any goal conceded to spend Barcelona's home-field advantage.

It would be a bonus if they could score a goal, but it was not bad if they did not earn it.

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Returning to the top seat of the league tournament and getting away from the first leg of the Champions League semi finals put Twain in a good mood. As the end of the competition approached, his emotions oscillated between highs and lows. He was frustrated when they were forced into a draw at home by AC Milan. He had roundly abused the Blackburn Rovers when they lost to them and had needed to apologize to the team the next day because he had to rely on them to strive for the top, after all. When they won the game against Tottenham Hotspur, he praised the entire team generously. After Blackburn Rovers tied with Manchester United, he excitedly bought drinks the entire pub in celebration.

For him, every minute of his life was spent in great joy or sorrow. When there was neither exultation nor great sorrow, he was always on the edge and afraid to relax for a moment.

No other season had made him as nervous as this season. They had a shot in the two championships, but both were uncertain. They could eventually win the Double or end up empty-handed and watch other teams celebrate.

Back in Nottingham, the team did not even have a half-day break before they had to set out to prepare for the 36th round of the league tournament against Reading at home.

The timing was very close, just two days later. Tony Twain and his team had to win the game at all costs. A draw would be a failure.

Manchester United had been pushed to the brink. They were forced into a 1:1 draw with Chelsea at home in the first leg of the Champions League semifinals. Ferguson's roars continued. In the 36th round of the league tournament, it was unfortunate and coincidental that their opponent was still Chelsea. In the game, no matter what method was used, Ferguson would not allow his team to lose to Chelsea again, even if it was an away game for them and that it would be the second leg of the Champions League semi finals against Chelsea when the league game was completed.

Manchester United was certain to fight to the death against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge. It was the perfect opportunity for Nottingham Forest to continue their lead advantage. Nottingham Forest would benefit, whether Manchester United or Chelsea won or lost. If Chelsea won, Nottingham Forest gained

in the league competition. If Manchester United won, Nottingham Forest would benefit on the Champions League battlefield.

It was a golden opportunity..

“So, we must win!” Twain set the tone for the game at the end of the tactical layout meeting on the day before the game.

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A day later, the seats in the City Ground stadium were filled. The stands, which could accommodate up to 30,000 people, were full of fluttering flags. The Forest fans were aware of the situation for each team in the league tournament and that it was most advantageous for the Forest team. Their enemy was weak and their competitors were fighting each other to the death. As long as they won the game, they could scoop up the handle of the championship trophy with one hand.

Everyone wanted to come and watch the historic moment — the Nottingham Forest Football Club had only won a single top-flight tournament in its history, the English Football League Championship title during Brian Clough’s time. They took advantage of the championship title to win the two Champions League titles. They were the only team in the Champions League history to have won only one domestic top-flight championship but won the Champions League title twice. So if the Forest team could finally pick up the league title this season, they made history again.

When the Forest players came out, they were greeted by a tsunami of cheers in the stands. It was the city Stadium’s function as a home, but it was just a bit more exciting today. The Forest team’s supporters hoped to put extra pressure on Reading, leaving them at a loss and raising their hands to surrender.

Tony Twain was like the head of state and commander in chief of triple armed forces, standing high in the city tower, smugly inspecting his troops marching in front of him, and enjoying the deafening cheers and praise from his subjects in the stands. The pinnacle of his coaching career was coming soon.

Unquestionably, there was one more person who felt the same as him: Evan Doughty, the club owner standing in the VIP box above. He was the one who should really enjoy the sense of regency because he was the real owner of this club. As for Tony Twain? He was just a wage earner, albeit of a slightly higher standing.

The great excitement of the impending glory struck the senior wage earner’s mind, causing a wide smile to form on his face. In the eyes of other people, he did not stand on the sidelines before the game but stood on the sidelines after the game. As a result, his team won big.

With their tactics on the right track and the opponent’s weaker strength, there was no reason for the game to go wrong.

Having just concluded an important game, Manchester United put on a strong attack in the away game and beat Chelsea 2:1 at the cost of a red card. They temporarily overtook Nottingham Forest in the rankings, leading by two points, but Twain believed that after their game was over, the lead was bound to be them with only a one-point difference.

When the players from both sides stood in their formation in their respective halves, the referee stood outside the center circle and put the whistle in his mouth. The noisy City Ground stadium quieted down. The silence made it seem like everyone was gone, and Twain looked back at the grandstand behind him and was relieved that everyone was still there.

“Beep—”

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One hundred and twenty minutes later, nearly half an hour had passed since the end of the game.

Tony Twain sat alone in the empty technical area. The stands of the City Ground stadium and the green field in front of him were equally empty.

He sat there quietly, with no ecstatic or dejected expression on his face.

Sounds of footsteps came, but he did not pay them any mind.

“Tony.” The sound of footsteps disappeared, and Dunn’s voice could be heard.

“Yes?” Twain did not even lift his gaze.

“Want to go back?”

“I’ll sit here a little longer.”

“You’ve been sitting here for fifteen minutes.”

Twain finally took his eyes off the field to look at Dunn. He did not speak, but the expression in his eyes sent shivers down Dunn’s spine.

Tony Twain looked like an angry beast that had just lost its child, as if he might jump up and pounce on him to devour him at any moment.

He was really, really angry.

“You...” Dunn paused for a moment, “did not say anything. Everyone thought you were...”

“Not angry?” he asked with a cold voice.

In the past, it was Kerslake who was unlucky enough to come near Twain. But Kerslake was the one who led the team away today. Only Dunn, who lived next door, was there with Twain.

“How can I not be angry?” he asked again. This time, no hint of explosiveness could not be heard at all.

“But who am I supposed to vent this anger on? Just after the game, when I was pressed by a group of reporters at the press conference, I really wanted to rush straight into the locker room and give everyone a dressing down, but when I thought about what happened after that loss to Blackburn Rovers, I put up with it. But I did not want to look at them again, so I sent them away early. I came here myself to sit down for a while. I did not think I could vent my anger at them... No, I can’t vent at them. You know why?”

Twain looked at Dunn, who looked back at him but did not answer.

“Because I think if I trace the source of the reproach, it is me who should be reprimanded the most. But I cannot scold myself, even more so especially in front of other people.” Twain got up from his seat. “It was the Champions League semi finals three days after the league game, and it was the league tournament again three days after the semi finals of the Champions League. And three days later after the league game, it will be the Champions League semi finals again. The players’ forms fluctuate because they are too tired.

“If I had been a little bolder in this game, it might not have been this outcome. I did not rotate when I should have rotated. I wanted to tear up Reading with the strongest squad, but I did not think it wasn’t the strongest squad that determined the outcome of the game...

“Then I sat here thinking... the people all left and not a single person was here. Not even a fly-like reporter was here to annoy me. I could have a good think and did not have to pretend in front of others. I wasn’t thinking why I stumbled. I was just thinking a thing like fate was amazing. One moment I was in heaven, and the next, I was in hell...

“As I thought, I stopped being angry.” The look in Twain’s eyes changed, and a smile emerged on his face. He opened his arms. “I’ll admit that my eyes and mind were blinded by the performance in front of me. Some people may find this outcome is a cruel joke played on me by fate. But in fact, I think it is good, the best result!”

“I’m not mad! What was our original plan? Whether we’re ahead of Manchester United or not, the end result won’t change. We always had to contend with them in the final round to decide who the champion is. Right? So what does it matter who’s first or second? It’s also good to throw the pressure of being the front-runner to the other side.”

“Besides.” He winked at Dunn. “I even thought of how to get Barcelona to capitulate at home. We’re going to advance to the Champions League finals for the third time.”

He stretched his back. “Come on, Dunn, let’s go home. It’s nice to have someone listen to me.” He took the lead to walk over to the tunnel. Then he stopped and looked back at Dunn. “You know what? I suddenly feel like it was great to contemplate things, sitting in an empty stadium. The office and my house are too small and restrict my thinking. It’s just nice here.” He pointed to the stadium.

“It’s big enough, but it’s not boundless, otherwise I’d be distracted.” Then he muttered again, “compared to a noisy pitch, I suddenly quite like such a quiet pitch... That’s strange.”

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On April 2008, three days before the second leg of the Champions League semifinals, in the 36th round of the 07-08 English Premier League season, Nottingham Forest unexpectedly tied with Reading at home. Neither team scored.

Manchester United took the opportunity to complete the reversal. With a one-point advantage, they temporarily returned to the top spot.

For Tony Twain and Alex Ferguson, there were still two rounds to go before the league title trophy. There was one more round of league games before the final showdown at Old Trafford. What would happen?

Only the devil knew.

Chapter 634: Messi's Confusion

On the night of the game, the pubs in Nottingham city center were dismal. A number of pubs stocked up on beer to celebrate the victory, but almost did not sell any after the end of the game. Sales were slow moving — a tied game caused the team's ranking to go from the first to the second, and nobody was in the mood to drink. Once the game ended, the fans who went to watch the game live went home, washed up, and went to bed.

Fortunately, the Nottingham Forest fans had not yet learned to shout "heroes" after a victory, so they also did not yell out "cowards" and accepted the outcome of a draw.

There were concerns on the team that Twain's unexpected calm behavior after the game was a precursor to a storm. They were apprehensive at training the next day, but Twain behaved as usual and joked with everyone, without any signs of taking his anger out on the team.

By the end of the training session, during the analysis of last night's game on the video, Twain reassured the entire team.

"You think I'm going to get mad? But why should I get mad? It's common to win and lose, it's even more normal to tie a game. I know this is a critical moment, but the more critical the moment is, the more we should stay normal, shouldn't we? So let bygones be bygones. We should consider how to play the last few games. The strong opponents are here. It would not do us any favors to keep thinking about Reading, would it?"

Laughter burst out in the video screening room, and the matter blew over.

Of course they could not ignore the game against Reading. They had to review the game, so they still had to study the video of the game.

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The strong opponents had indeed arrived.

Barcelona sent the strongest squad they could to Nottingham with the intention of eliminating Nottingham Forest in the away game.

Messi returned to the team after he recovered from his injury, and Ronaldinho was left in Barcelona, as expected. The Brazilian's days in Barcelona were numbered.

Even on his own home ground, Twain did not intend to rely on momentum to attack and play a rip-roaring offensive against Barcelona. He would be a fool if he did that. Therefore, even though he had the home-field advantage, he intended to use the usual tactics of defensive counterattack.

That day in the empty City Ground stadium, Tony Twain told Dunn that he thought of a way to deal with Barcelona. It was actually very simple: rotation.

Generally speaking, no matter how powerful a team was, it would often deploy the strongest squad in the Champions League finals and use rotation for the league tournament. The difference between a powerhouse team and a wannabe powerful team was that the powerhouse team's two sets of rotating lineups were similar in strength, while the two lineups of the wannabe team might have a large gap. Nottingham Forest was not yet considered a powerhouse team, but it was not a wannabe top-ranking team either. They were a top-rated powerful team. Therefore, the strength of their two sets of lineups were not comparable, but the gap was not very big. Even in rotation, they could still fight against Barcelona.

Twain was a bit helpless to consider a rotation in the Champions League. He saw the exhaustion and shaky state of the first lineup against Reading, so he was afraid to use the same squad in the second leg of the knockout Champions League semi final. Because the game against Reading was just three days before this game. He was not confident that the team's first lineup could have a dramatic transformation in just three days. Fatigue and instability were the entire team's biggest enemies.

The draw against Reading made Twain determined to rotate in the Champions League, and he was confident that the lineup would surprise Rijkaard.

As the first lineup was famous in Europe, everyone believed that with Twain's conservative style, he would rely on the lineup in such a crucial game. Besides, what normal person would use rotation just because of a draw in a league game?

But Tony Twain's mind was not normal.

He decided to rotate. The only question was how to explain to the players why they did not appear in the starting lineup against Barcelona. He valued the locker room atmosphere. A thing that could trigger divisive forces within the locker room had to be avoided.

Van Nistelrooy suffered a minor injury in the game against Reading, so that was a compelling reason to rotate him. The league tournament was equally important now that they were forced into a draw by Reading.

Eastwood would also be rotated. He was easy for Twain. Twain would tell him that it was okay for him to rest in the game due to the tactical requirements.

Van der Vaart also had to be replaced. He was limited in his help with the team's defense when he was not in a good offensive form. Twain decided to take a gamble in this game. He was going to push George Wood to the position of the offensive core.

His partner in the midfield was Sidwell.

As for the Dutchman, he should know that his recent form was not very good.

There would not be any adjustments in the center-back positions. Neither Pepe nor Piqué had any issues with their physical condition. Otherwise, the Forest team would have conceded a goal in the last two games.

The full-back, Gareth Bale, was replaced by Grosso. After he gradually adapted to the Premier League, Grosso's performance picked up slightly. Although there was still a gap between his form in the Italian national team, he could just about meet Twain's expectations.

It was easy to tell “little monkey” Bale as they were familiar. He could say “tactical need.” Leighton Baines had a slight issue with his stamina, so it was normal to not bring him on.

On the right side, Twain decided to deploy Chimbonda, who had not played recently and was better at defense than Rafinha.

The goalkeeper remained the experienced Edwin van der Sar. Twain had originally planned for Akinfeev to gradually replace van der Sar, who was getting older, but he did not expect Edwin van der Sar to be tougher as he grew older and stay in an exceptional state. Faced with Edwin van der Sar, who was in a good and stable condition, experienced, and more familiar with the team’s defensive system, Twain naturally would not risk using Akinfeev. As a result, poor Akinfeev had a better time playing in Russia than after he was back there.

The midfielders were still Ribéry and Beckham. The two players had different characteristics, so the Forest team’s offensive tactics were richer and more diverse, an advantage during the game.

There was a slight physical advantage to rotating, but the main thing was the substitutes’ hunger for competition and eagerness to show their desire to win.

Due to the lack of appearances in games, they were like a bunch of crazy wolves that ogled every opponent with a glint in their eyes, as if hunting a fat piece of meat,, their white teeth bared as if they were grinning. It was a warning to their opponent:

This is our territory. It’s up to us whether we gobble you up or not. If we are not in a good mood, we will eat you, and we are not in a good mood most of the time!

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“Compared to the first leg of the competition between the two teams, Tony Twain has replaced nearly half of his starting lineup, which is a little hard to comprehend. Van Nistelrooy may not be able to appear because of some minor injuries, but why did he replace van der Vaart? Can it be that Twain is not thinking about the offense at all in this game? If that’s the case, is it too conservative to cling obstinately onto defense at home?”

The guest pundit next to him chuckled. “He’s that kind of manager. As long as he can make it to the finals, an ugly game is nothing.”

“I think... it doesn’t work to blindly defend against Barcelona. I’m afraid that he may not manage to advance to the finals, and will also be criticized for the conservative play at home. Few people can accept losing the game with such a passive stance.”

“I have a slightly different view. Maybe his team can? He allowed Barcelona to attack for ninety minutes without a goal scored at Camp Nou...”

“That’s because Barcelona did not have Messi at the time.”

“Ah, Messi...”

Messi just took the ball.

The practice of finding a successor for Maradona had not stopped since his retirement. There had been a number of Maradona successors in Argentina, some of whom were picked by the king of football himself, and some of whom were dubbed as such by the media or fans. Riquelme, D'Alessandro, Aimar, Saviola, Ortega, Tevez, and Agüero had been "the Second Maradona." As for the result, nobody could be certain.

For now, the most promising possibility to reach Maradona's height was the diminutive man in front of him. He was no longer the eye-catching rookie. Now, he was Barcelona's and Argentina's "phenomenon." He was also a "phenomenon" in international football world.

Rijkaard thought Tony Twain would make George Wood, the best in Nottingham Forest's defense, defend against Messi, thereby saving the other defensive forces to contain Barcelona's overall offense. However, the player who appeared in front of Messi surprised him. Even Messi was a little shocked.

The current Nottingham Forest team was no longer the dark horse that advanced into the Champions League finals two seasons ago. As their opponent, Barcelona had to have studied everyone on the team. There were two players they focused on: Franck Ribéry and George Wood, the core of the offense and the defensive core.

Before the game, Rijkaard told Messi that the man who would mark him was bound to be George Wood, because only George Wood was likely to stand up to Messi in a one-on-one face-off. It was just a possibility...

He instructed Messi to use his nimble positional play to get rid of Wood, while he lured Wood to foul with his quick footwork to at least get him a yellow card. In that way, Wood would be afraid to get another yellow card that would cause him to miss the Champions League final and become timid for the rest of the game. That would be a good thing for both Messi and Barcelona.

Barcelona won that final match against the Forest team because George Wood was suspended, which led the Forest team to be utterly defeated. Leaving aside George Wood's importance to the team, George Wood himself was reluctant to lose the qualification for the final again.

Rijkaard felt that his move was a stroke of mastery, until this moment.

The man in front of Messi was not the number 13 wearing the captain's armband, but Sidwell.

The man defending against Messi was not George Wood!

Messi turned his head to look and found that Wood's position was in the middle. He did not intend to come up and defend, except to throw glances to the side.

What's... What's going on?

Hey, do you underestimate me, Messi? How can you find such a player to defend against me?

He looked at George Wood again. The two men had a staring contest. George Wood was tall and sturdy. He stared down at the short but plucky Messi.

Wood still had no intention of coming up to help.

Messi decided to break through on his own. He did not know what Nottingham Forest meant by that. But since you will not use the strongest defensive player to mark me, don't regret it when I break through your defensive line and let Barcelona score a goal!

As it turned out, Iniesta outflanked from behind and Sidwell's attention was distracted by Iniesta's positional play. Messi grabbed ahold the empty gap and made to look like he was going to pass, which deceived Sidwell into shifting his center of gravity, and then he suddenly launched a breakthrough in the opposite direction!

It was too late for Sidwell to stop him. The two men were too close, and he could not react in time.

Nottingham Forest's defensive formation contracted tightly, and the distance between the midfielders and the rear defenders was very close. The defensive formation could fully compress the space in front of the penalty area when dealing with most teams and not give the opposing forwards the chance to take the ball easily. Additionally, due to the contraction of the formation, the distance between the three defensive lines was not far. When there was the need to fight back, they could quickly and accurately send the football to their teammates and not have the predicament of blindly kicking. Just like a spring, the tighter the compression, the stronger the recoil. It was one of the hallmarks of Nottingham Forest's defense.

But now, it had become the best stage for Messi's showdown.

Because the defensive players were so close, once someone broke through and entered, then the defensive players in the back often had to tackle the ball or block instantly. A moment of hesitation might let the opponent penetrate. That was to the benefit of Messi, who was very swift. He could rely entirely on his own reactions to maneuver and duck out of the opponent's encirclement to forge a bloody path ahead.

After he brushed past Sidwell and faced Grosso, who came up to tackle the ball, his right foot gently clipped the ball and his body moved crosswise to dribble the football away from Grosso's feet. He made an emergency stop to lock down his position to block Sidwell, who gave chase behind him. Piqué came up to block and defend but made the incredible choice to knock the ball past him within the narrow space. The football shifted to the right, and he moved to the left and cut around in the narrowest radius to flash past Piqué, who just locked in his position and could not adjust his balance in time. Since the back of Nottingham Forest's entire line of defense received the football he had just kicked, he did not hesitate to shoot vigorously!

Fortunately, Edwin van der Sar's blocking angle was timely, knocking Messi's narrow angle shot out of the end line. Otherwise Nottingham Forest would have conceded a goal in the first three minutes of its home game.

Sound of gasps could be heard in the City Ground stadium. They were alarmed by the magical performance of the diminutive player. A single player went up against three Nottingham Forest defensive players. Furthermore, the distance from his starting point to the shooting location was not more than ten meters. The technique shown in the small space was fantastic!

Even the commentator repeatedly marveled that Messi, who returned after his recovery from an injury, was without a doubt Barcelona's number one player.

At the same time, the doubt in everyone's mind loomed larger. What was Tony Twain thinking? Why did he not let George Wood come up to prevent him?

Although the shot was blocked, Messi did not show how annoyed he was. He did not even look at Edwin van der Sar. Instead, he turned his head to look at George Wood.

Just like before he broke through, George Wood looked at him. After a stare down, George Wood averted his gaze and ran back to get ready to defend against the corner kick. His face did not show the expression that Messi wished to see. He neither looked surprised nor annoyed and then afraid. His face was calm.

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Twain laughed after he noticed the two staredowns between the two men on the field. He did not let George Wood defend against Messi because he obviously had his arrangement. Messi, you can guess all you want. If you are enraged by it, then it is an unexpected bonus.

Anyway, Rijkaard, don't even think that George Wood will mark Messi this time because he has a more important task to fulfill. It's just that these few minutes are for Barcelona's offense. He hasn't had a chance to flaunt his mission yet...

Defend to the death? Which bastard said I was going to defend to the death at home?

Chapter 635: The New Playmaker

Barcelona's corner kick was launched but did not pose any threat to Nottingham Forest's goal. Up against tall players like George Wood, Pepe, Piqué, and Bendtner, Barcelona, who was not good at headers, could not take advantage of it.

Barcelona knew it as well, so their corner kick was low and fast, but George Wood still bumped it out as he rushed forward to the front.

It was the first time he had appeared on a television close-up. He successfully defended but did not defend against Messi. It was the poor Mexican center-back, Márquez, who was kept behind by him.

Messi was outside the box and did not go in to join in on the action. He knew Barcelona was not good at the header shot in the set-piece. The shot was likely to be hit out by the Forest team, with the worst case being the ball being confiscated by Edwin van der Sar. But if it came out, he could grab the second point of fall and form the second attack to continue the pressure on the Forest goal.

The football did bounce to his side, but a faster man bumped it out with his head.

Franck Ribéry was on a roll. He snatched Messi's ball and made the City Ground stadium cheer for the first time. Messi's wonderful performance had caused the Forest fans to feel oppressed. Things had turned for the better now that they also had a player to be proud of!

Ribéry used his head to bump the football and then accelerated to pursue the ball himself. He instantly shook off Messi. By the time Messi reacted and turned to give chase, it was too late.

Ribéry successfully tackled the ball and the Forest team instantly turned from defense to attack. Rijkaard and Messi clearly saw George Wood, who had headed the ball in the box, shoot out like an arrow from the bow to run to the front field!

Ribéry had not dribbled the ball for a few steps before he faced Barcelona's black defensive midfielder, Yaya Touré's defensive block. He did not entangle with Touré. Instead, he diverted the football to the side and continued to plug ahead on his own.

The person who received his pass was Arshavin, who came back. Although he received the ball, his back was against the direction of the attack. Under Abidal's close marking, it was not easy for him to turn around.

He did not want to turn around. Yaya Touré was taken away from the area by Ribéry, who was waiting for a man.

Like Ribéry, after the football was sent out, he turned around and ran forward. As it was a counterattack after the corner kick, the Barcelona players had not had time to run back to form a defensive line, so Abidal did not go after the ball. He followed Arshavin as he retreated. Suddenly, the gap in the midfield was ripped wide open.

So who was the target that Arshavin and the others had passed the ball to?

"Wow, George Wood!" the commentator exclaimed.

He did not expect that George Wood would rush so far forward during the counterattack. His current position was no different from an attacking midfielder. After he received Arshavin's pass, he did not pause. Instead, he rushed forward and dribbled the ball in a straight line.

"Van der Vaart used to take this job... during which, George Wood was in the back, protecting him, and now..." The commentator suddenly understood. "It turns out that Tony Twain wants George Wood to be the midfield playmaker for this game!"

"This is kind of crazy..." the guest pundit exclaimed.

It was indeed somewhat insane to use a player who was best at defense to attack the powerful Barcelona.

Yaya Touré saw that Ribéry had almost entered the area where the defenders were in charge and abandoned the Frenchman without hesitation. He turned around to face the sprinting George Wood and pounced.

He knew that the man was the defensive midfielder, in charge of defense like himself, and that organizing the offense was not his specialty. As long as he put some pressure on him, he would be flustered...

He had just pounced when George Wood passed the ball. He stabbed his toes and passed the football on to Ribéry in front of him.

When the three people transferred and coordinated, neither the Barcelona players nor the Nottingham Forest players had time to run to their positions. Arshavin stayed at the forefront when the Forest team defended the corner kick, and only Yaya Touré, Abidal, and Gabriel Milito were near Barcelona's box.

After Ribéry received the ball, he pretended that he wanted to pass the ball and waited for Milito, who was in front of him, to sidestep a little before he immediately lifted his leg to shoot.

The football quickly rolled on the turf toward the goal. Fortunately, Valdés had been wary of Ribéry and was not surprised at his direct shot. He fell to the ground and pressed the ball firmly under his body.

Seeing that the attack did not succeed and that the football had been confiscated by the opposing goalkeeper, George Wood, who had just rushed to the front of the penalty area, turned and rushed back without hesitation. He had to get ready to defend. Though he was not defending against Messi, he had to defend against the rest of Barcelona.

He was not van der Vaart or any other midfielders he had ever partnered with. He could not rest and stay in the front field to wait for another attack opportunity after the previous attack. Sidwell could not have helped him intercept the football before handing it to him to launch the offense. All his energy was to be used to defend against Messi. Hence he had to rely on himself for offense and defense.

Valdés saw George Wood galloping and realized that Nottingham Forest's key figure for the game had to be him, not Ribéry. Now that Wood had not had time to get back to his defensive position, he threw the ball to launch a quick attack.

Yaya Touré received the ball and next to him, Ribéry did a defensive stance and gave up. He did not want to waste his strength there. Touré passed the football on to Xavi, who had just run back, and his task was considered done. George Wood had run past the center circle.

Xavi also clearly knew Wood was the key. He would not give the other side a chance to return to his area to organize the defense. While Wood was still running back, he quickly sent the football out.

Messi received the ball again, and the few Barcelona fans in the stands cheered. They wanted to see Messi put on another good show, where he consecutively bypassed a few players.

Messi did not satisfy their wish. Such performances could only be achieved under extreme conditions. Most of the time, the offense still relied on the give and go positional play to threaten.

He passed the football to Iniesta. There was an unspoken reason he did not choose to break through on his own — he really could not lift the interest in a breakthrough through Sidwell...

Iniesta's straight pass was intercepted by Pepe. George Wood had just run back, and the ball that Pepe blocked out rolled to his feet. He twisted and turned his attention on the offensive.

Without any time for rest, George Wood ran back and forth between both ends of the field. Such a midfielder playmaker like him was a rare sight.

"The pace between attack and defense from both sides is very fast! This game becomes thrilling to watch!" When the commentator discovered that Tony Twain's team did not intend to cling fast to defense on home ground, he got really excited.

Judging by the past few minutes of the game, the Champions League semifinal game did appear to be exciting. But as for their expectations of Tony Twain, the commentators should have reserved some cautious optimism.

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After five minutes of Nottingham Forest attacking Barcelona, they withdrew, and Barcelona gained the upper hand in the game. The ball possession time became 67% once again. Nottingham Forest brought out their defensive counterattack magic weapon.

The commentator wanted to slap himself. The game might have looked good for the Barcelona fans, but for the vast number of neutral fans, a one-sided game would not have held much interest for them.

Tony Twain sat in the technical area and stroked his chin as he spoke to his two assistant managers. "George Wood still needs to accumulate more experience as a playmaker in the game... At first, he played pretty well. When the team withdrew to defend as a whole, he did not know what to do. If Demetrio were to watch George's performance now, that guy would hate me, wouldn't he?"

Kerslake grinned.

Dunn said, "with van der Vaart and Ribéry around, he did not have more access to this kind of task. I don't think the cultivation of him can be rushed."

Twain nodded. "This is just the beginning, not the end."

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While the three Forest coaches were exploring George Wood's future, Rijkaard frowned, and knitted his brows tighter still.

Tony Twain's tactics were no secret. Everyone knew he would defend and use defensive counterattack. Therefore, he let the team do targeted training on how to break the compacted defense before they came to Nottingham.

He did not expect Tony Twain to make special use of George Wood. In terms of defense, he was no different from how he usually played, other than not defending against Messi, which meant that Nottingham Forest's midfield defense still depended on him. But when it came to the attack, he repeatedly and actively decided to plug in to participate, which gave Rijkaard a headache.

When Barcelona did their defensive exercises, the imaginary opponent was either van der Vaart or Ribéry, and at most, Arshavin. Who would have thought George Wood would be pushed by Twain to be the midfield playmaker in this game?

Wood's basic skills were very solid after a long period of practice. The results of his training were reflected in the games, which caused great headaches for the opponents because his technique was good. Opponents could not easily intercept his balls. His dribbling and passes were simple but effective in actual combat because he would not waste fleeting opportunities to flaunt fancy skills. As long as he saw an opportunity, he would send the football out of without delay. It was easier said than done; skillful players tended to naturally want to show off their skills.

Originally, George Wood's set of skills would be average at times. If an opponent were to closely mark him for a change, he could be contained. However, the present situation was very suitable for Wood's play. Because Nottingham Forest was all about defensive counterattack and their offense only paid attention to one word: fast!

If it had been ingenious midfielders with outstanding skill, they might hesitate when they took the ball to counterattack or show off a beautiful technique to obtain loud cheers from the spectators. As for the opponent? They would have quickly returned to their defensive positions and then a quick attack would turn into a siege of positional play.

George Wood did not give the coaches that kind of worry. When the Forest team counterattacked and he had the ball, his first choice was always a pass. He would always use his fastest speed to pass the ball through the midfield and hit the opponent's hinterland whenever there was a chance. If there was no way to pass, he would dribble the ball forward on his own while he observed his surroundings to seek a passing point.

Unlike some midfielders, he did not wait in place for his teammates to plug in if he did not have a suitable place to send the football. When his teammates came up, the opponent would also be in position. Moreover, he might also drop the ball because he was robbed by the opponent for holding onto the ball for too long.

His way of dribbling the ball messed up the opponent's defensive plan. An opportunity would naturally present itself.

That was the reason Twain used George Wood as a playmaker in the game. There was not a more suitable candidate than George Wood for such a defensive tactic, opponent, and game.

How did such a player that was every manager's dream, who was faithful to the manager's tactics, had excellent physical fitness, calm psychological quality, and stable play appear in Nottingham Forest?

As soon as Rijkaard thought about it, he clenched his fists. His own locker room was factious in great numbers. The talented players always had problems. Ronaldinho loitered around red-light districts and Deco had a greater demand. Why did he not have a George Wood?

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Barcelona was powerful, and their offense crushed Nottingham Forest, so they could only defend without the power to attack. Nottingham Forest's overall defense was not fragile, which caused Barcelona's offensive to be largely ineffective.

Messi was strong, but he was only one person. In the Copa del Rey against Getafe CF, he bypassed five consecutive people to repeat Maradona's classic goal. But it was also because Getafe's defensive line took too long to form, which allowed Messi to calmly bypass them one after the other. Nottingham Forest was not stupid enough to widen the front and rear defensive lines to create an opportunity to the point where Messi bypassed several people.

They tried to compress the defensive lines to the greatest extent possible. Sidwell followed Messi around closely, with one or two people around at any time in the flank to protect. If Messi planned to single handedly face Nottingham Forest's entire line of defense, then let him smash to pieces against the thick "Western Wall."

If he was smart and did not have the delusion to beat the entire opposing team on his own, Nottingham Forest's overall defense was not just about Messi alone either.

The first half returned to calm after a fierce bout of attacks from both sides. The game was back on track to what Tony Twain was most familiar with and best at.

Both sides were in a deadlock and the score was 0:0. The referee blew the whistle at the end of the first half.

As soon as the whistle rang, Twain got up to leave the technical area. He had no expression on his face in front of the television cameras, making it hard to discern his thoughts at the moment.

“There was no goal in the first half, and it is 0:0 for the home game. Is Tony Twain satisfied or dissatisfied?”

Chapter 636: The Amazing Forest Team

At first, Nottingham Forest’s locker room was raucous, and everyone was busy resting or listening to music to relax. When Twain got up from the corner, the room calmed down again.

“In the first half... I’m not going to talk nonsense. The issue we have to solve now is not how to prevent Barcelona’s offense, but how to score a goal.”

When he said this, he turned to look at George Wood. Some people followed his eyes and turned to the back.

“George, you have to attack and defend as well. Is it too difficult for you?” Twain smiled.

George Wood shook his head. “It’s okay.”

“Okay?” Twain glared at him and asked, “What does it mean ‘it’s okay’? It’s barely okay or easy enough?”

“Um...” George Wood thought about it. “When I return back to defend, I might have missed some chances because I was at the back. As for the other areas, it’s nothing.”

“Use more passes, you idiot.” Twain pointed at him. “You ran back and forth like a shuttle in the first half. I wondered if you had any extra energy and time to look up at the surrounding situation. A midfield playmaker does not rely on endless stamina. You have to observe the situation on the field, watch the positions of your teammates and opponents, and then decide how to manage the offensive. The midfield playmaker does not depend on physical strength. He uses his brains.” The tone of Twain’s criticism was not harsh, but he let everyone know that he was criticizing George Wood and not joking.

Wood nodded. He felt that he was up to his ears from running in the first part of the first half. How was he supposed to organize an attack? The question did not stay in his mind. He waited to get the ball before he looked up to find a passing route. If there was a chance to pass, he would. If there was no chance, he dribbled the ball himself. He rarely deliberated like van der Vaart. Therefore, up until now, most of his passes were sent directly to his teammates, rather than the empty spaces in front of them. It was not easy to make mistakes with that kind of pass, but it also did not create good opportunities. Such penetrating passes made for threatening attacks during an offensive. If the passes always reached fixed spots at the feet, they would force the attacking momentum to a stop. It would be easy for the opponent to stop an attack as long as their rear defensive line stood in a good position.

In the second half, he did not have to run back and forth between the front and back of the field, but he needed to put more energy into the defense because Nottingham Forest was carrying out the defensive counterattack tactic. If they did not defend, how could they counterattack? Wood was at the heart of the midfield defense. He was really not used the kind of play where when the other side attacked, he watched while he waited for his teammates to tackle the ball to pass it to him to organize the attack.

“In addition, while we’re playing defensive counterattack, defense is extremely important, but if it’s just defense without the counterattack, then we will just be clinging to defense to the death.” Twain did not intend to let Wood go yet. He pointedly raised his criticism of Wood’s problems with the defense.

“You’ve been a defensive midfielder for too long, George. Actively defending is a good thing but consider your mission first. What’s your purpose here?” He forcefully asked as he looked at Wood.

“To organize the offense,” Wood replied.

“It looks like you’re not confused from all the running. If you always keep defending, defending, and defending, how do you organize the offense? You’re just one player, not a monster that can split up your body at any time.”

“So what should I do?” George Wood asked in return.

Twain looked at the others in the locker room. Some listened attentively to his conversation with George, some shut their eyes to rest, and some listened to music.

He cleared his throat and then said, “it’s very simple. Trust your teammates.”

George Wood turned and looked around. He found a number of his teammates looking back at him.

“All right, guys!” Twain left Wood alone and clapped so hard that everyone looked up at him. “In the second half, we must score. This is not an away game where a draw is acceptable. We can’t relax in our defense and must be bolder in our offense. If we lose the ball, I don’t want to see you turn around and run back. You counter-press, intercept the ball, and attack. If you can’t tackle the ball, interfere with the speed of their advance. You know what to do.

“The first part of the first half was fine, but we put too little pressure on Barcelona in the latter part. That’s not going to work. In the second half, show them all you’ve got!” He slammed his fist in the palm of his hand.

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On the other side, Rijkaard was writing and drawing on the tactical board. He was instructing his players on how to break through Nottingham Forest’s impenetrable defense.

“George Wood clearly needs to organize an attack. If I were Tony Twain, I wouldn’t let him continue to focus on defense in the second half. In that case, there will be gaps within Nottingham Forest’s defense for us to penetrate. Their overall defensive formation is kept well and there was no way to rip it apart by passing the ball. Sidwell’s not a threat to you, Messi.” He looked at Messi, who sat on one side.

“Increase the breakthroughs in the second half and charge forward to find opportunities to mess up their defensive formation. What that type of overall defense fears the most is that there is one or

several individual breakouts that are excellent.” He indirectly criticized Messi for not being motivated enough in the first half.

With the exception of the one moment where he bypassed three players, Messi’s performance tended to be bland. There might be speculation that he had just returned from his recovery and that his form had not adjusted to his best. But in fact, Messi only lost some interest because of the big contrast between his expectations and the reality.

After all, how could the sense of accomplishment in overcoming George Wood be compared to Sidwell?

Messi knew what the problem was. He had to take it seriously in the second half. Whatever the reason, George Wood was not defending against him, which was a good thing for him.

Recently, the media criticized Barcelona for developing “a dependency on Messi” after having just cast off “the dependency on Ronaldinho.” They were saying that Rijkaard was incompetent and praised Messi for being too strong.

When Barcelona attacked, everyone would try to give the ball to the diminutive man, hoping he could do wonders.

So since Nottingham Forest doesn’t respect me, I’ll make you regret it! He clenched his hands.

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After the second half of the game resumed, Barcelona wanted to score, and Nottingham Forest also wanted to score like the first part of the first half. The two sides attacked each other, and the game changed.

Nottingham Forest obtained three opportunities to breach the goal, and Barcelona had two chances to invade the Forest team’s hinterland. It was a pity that no one grasped them, even though they startled the two managers. No matter which team got a shot at the goal, the two managers would rise from their seats. Rijkaard just got up slightly, while Twain jumped straight out of the technical area.

After fifteen minutes of thrilling attacks, Nottingham Forest and Barcelona realized at the same time that the attacks put their goals at risk, as evidenced by both teams’ five chances to threaten the goals.

Subsequently, both teams chose to play conservatively at the same time.

It was not surprising, since stabilizing the defense was Nottingham Forest’s usual style. However, it was perplexing that Barcelona also steadied their defense to counterattack.

“Barcelona wants to play Nottingham Forest’s defensive counterattack?” the commentator exclaimed.

Twain laughed. He knew why Rijkaard suddenly became conservative. Due to an attack, he had realized Nottingham Forest’s offensive prowess, and being conservative would help with victory. The manager, renown in the football world for his artistic and offensive style of football, had to succumb to reality and choose a more secure game defense when his position was shaky.

What delighted him more was not actually Barcelona’s performance, but George Wood’s transformation.

One of his favorite things about Wood was that he listened most of the time. Wood's performance had a specific change after he criticized Wood's performance in the first half during halftime.

He no longer let himself get terribly busy between offense and defense. He had learnt to "stand and kick." Twain always emphasized running to play football, but there were exceptions. As the conductor for the midfield, he hoped that his playmaker would act as the general and show some steadiness. Moreover, for a defensive midfielder, there was no need to charge and break through enemy lines every time. More often than not, they needed to launch the attack from the backfield. Learning how to judge the situation on the field was something George Wood had to do.

The Forest team attacked and threatened Barcelona's goal three times. One was directly started by Wood, and the other two were indirectly initiated by him. One of his straight passes from the flank gave Ribéry the chance to break into the penalty area for a shot. Although Valdés fended it off, Wood's 30-meter straight pass left everyone with a deep impression. He was still in the middle and the Forest team had switched from defense to offense. If he had continued to dribble, Barcelona's rear defensive line would have been organized soon, and then there would have been no way for him other than a cross pass. He glanced ahead. He found that Barcelona's rear defensive line was still in retreat and had not had time to organize the defensive formation while Ribéry skimmed along the side. There was enough space in front of him and with his speed...

With a decisive straight pass, he sent the football directly from the center circle to the flank between Barcelona's center-backs, Milito and Puyol.

Like a hot knife cutting through the butter, he passed the football through Barcelona's two defenders. It was empty in the penalty area. Just when people thought it was a missed shot, Ribéry appeared behind the entire rear defensive line and received the ball!

He immediately shot at the goal, but he emphasized strength too much, and his angle was too straight, so the shot was blocked out by Valdés.

The City Ground stadium still burst into a round of applause for Ribéry and George Wood.

Even Twain, who was off the field, could not help but stand and clap for George Wood when he saw the scalpel-like penetrating pass.

If George had just sent the ball straight to Ribéry, Barcelona's Puyol would have been happy to single-handedly face off with Ribéry, and the Forest team's attack would have been pushed to a dead end. The ball that reached ahead of the attacking player seemed to dig a diversion channel downstream for a pool of dead water, and the entire attack was alive in an instant.

"That's what Demetrio said about the talent he saw in him!" Twain boastfully said to the people around him.

"Unfortunately, it's still too little." Kerslake shook his head.

"It's okay" Dunn said, "He was occasionally brilliant at first, and now the occasions have become many. Eventually..."

Twain continued, "Eventually, he will be brilliant, always!"

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Wood was slightly annoyed to see that Ribéry had wasted the opportunity, but he was more excited inside. When he saw the football roll from his feet, to accurately penetrate through Barcelona's two defenders, and Ribéry intuitively plug in to receive, the feeling was completely different from when he shoveled and overturned his opponent as a defensive midfielder. One was destructive, and the other was constructive.

But there was one thing in common — whether it was destructive, or constructive, he was excited once he succeeded.

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Because of Wood's sudden enlightenment and activity, Rijkaard discovered that although there was no van Nistelrooy, Eastwood, or van der Vaart, Nottingham Forest's attack was still powerful. He feared that the Forest team would sneak attack against him if he continued to attack. Not conceding a goal was the most important thing. Hence he ran to the sidelines to instruct the team to slow down its pace a little and take it slower.

As he retreated, the Forest team followed because Barcelona rarely counterattacked, but it would be a big mistake if anyone thought they did not have the ability to fight back. Twain did not want to such a folly like bombarding his opponent for eighty-nine minutes and be defeated with a sneak attack in the ninetieth minute" to happen to him.

Messi did well in the first part and got a shot at the goal, but while his shot bypassed Edwin van der Sar, it was fended off by the undaunted Pepe who used his body to block on the goal line. It was one of the best scoring opportunities that Barcelona had in the game so far.

As Barcelona withdrew, the man who was really liberated was George Wood. He did not have to focus on the backfield to defend. He started trying to shift his position forward again. Sometimes he looked more like an attacking midfielder than a defensive midfielder.

The game gradually came to a conclusion in a standoff. If no one could score a goal, then Barcelona and Nottingham Forest would have to play into overtime to determine which team would advance to the finals. If the outcome was still undetermined after the overtime, there was only one last move — the penalty shootout!

No one wanted the game to get to that point. Even overtime would be a huge test for both teams' stamina.

Consequently, the two teams powered up again and launched attacks in the last ten minutes of the game.

Messi was active again. George Wood received more balls from his teammates, already feeling like a "midfield command tower."

Messi broke through Sidwell's side of the penalty area and directly passed to Eto'o, who inserted crosswise into the penalty area, but Eto'o's shot was thrown out by Edwin van der Sar.

On the other side, George Wood suddenly forced a breakthrough with his speed on the flank and attracted the attention of two people, Abidal and Yaya Touré, but passed the football back to Beckham. When Beckham instantly passed the ball, Bendtner pressed on Barcelona's tallest defender, Márquez, to do a header shot to the goal but it smashed and rebounded on the crossbar by Valdés, who pounced on it.

Toward the end, when George Wood found that Barcelona was especially guarding against his passes, he decisively made a long shot from thirty meters. Although it flew straight toward the grandstand, Twain and the others could tell what was in George Wood's heart — he did not reject being an offensive player.

As time passed, the score was still 0:0.

Rijkaard had long been standing on the sidelines to direct the game, and Twain could not sit still and got up from his seat.

He turned to look at the big screen. The time was 84 minutes and 58 seconds; the score was nil-nil for Nottingham Forest and Barcelona.

Beckham was a little tired, so he decided to bring him off. Lennon's force of impact might work wonders at the last minute...

Sidwell could also be replaced to bring van der Vaart on for a final sprint, but then George Wood would have to go back to the position of a defensive midfielder. Moreover, he did not know what van der Vaart's form would be like. There was not much time left for them, unless they were going to play overtime.

He was very satisfied with George's performance. He had not yet been able to bring a victory to the team, and it was not his fault. He still had a long way to go as a midfield playmaker.

He summoned van der Vaart and Lennon from the warm-up area and got ready to instruct them on how to attack.

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George Wood glanced at the two teammates who were listening to Twain on the sidelines. One was the team's original playmaker: van der Vaart. It took him only a second to understand what Tony Twain thought.

He did not want to play overtime. He wanted to resolve the battle in the last few minutes, and his own offensive performance obviously did not satisfy him. Otherwise he would not have brought on van der Vaart to replace his task.

What did that mean?

It meant that he did not complete his mission.

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Messi faced Sidwell again, intending to break through after he lured Pepe to assist with the defense, and passed the football behind Pepe to let Eto'o insert.

When he easily bypassed Sidwell and looked up to find someone, the ball under his feet was shoveled away by George Wood.

For nearly ninety minutes, George Wood had not dealt with Messi once, no matter how Messi stirred up havoc near the Forest team's penalty area. Messi almost forgot who he once considered the most dangerous opponent.

As a result, after he bypassed Sidwell, he only thought of Pepe and did not notice that the danger was around him.

George Wood saw at the precise moment when he looked up and neglected to guard his feet. He suddenly charged out from the side and shoveled the ball from under Messi's feet!

Nottingham Forest did not give Barcelona time to react. Pepe, who had initially come up to prevent Messi, received the ball that Wood had shoveled just in time. He intended to pass it to the others, but as soon as he saw Wood, who had just gotten up, he beckoned to him. His action was hidden, but he saw him motion for him to pass it over.

Pepe faced Messi and faked a stance to dribble the ball forward to break through. He deceived Messi to sway his center of gravity, and immediately followed by passing the football to George Wood, who ran in front.

"He's the playmaker, stop him!" Puyol yelled in the backfield. Wood basically organized the offense for the entire game. Any fool would know who the most dangerous character was and the one who should be prioritized the most during the Forest team's counterattack.

Without waiting for Yaya Touré, Xavi instantly pounced. He intended to wait for George Wood to pass him and intercept the ball or force Wood to slow down and turn so that the Forest team's quick attack would fail.

George Wood did not plan to bypass Xavi and did not intend to turn around either. He watched Xavi but passed the football to Beckham on the right.

Then he bypassed Xavi and continued to run forward.

Meanwhile, Nottingham Forest began their quick counterattack. Gareth Bale, who was brought on at the 25th minute of the second half, plugged forward from the left flank with Ribéry.

Xavi turned his head to look at George Wood's back, and, at the same time, glanced at the other Forest players who ran forward. Then he looked at Beckham and decided to tangle with the Englishman, who had average ball possession skills, and left George Wood to his teammates.

Beckham saw Xavi rush up and knew his intention: to intercept his ball or trap him in place so that the football could not be passed out.

He did not give Xavi a chance. He immediately passed the football. The man who received his pass was George, who had just passed him the ball!

He had already moved from the middle to the flank. Wood had not dribbled a few steps before Yaya Touré rushed over. All the Barcelona defensive players had the same idea: intercept the ball and break the offense or thwart the offense.

George Wood did not give Touré a chance to take advantage of it. He directly sent the ball to Ribéry's feet in the middle.

Ribéry went from the left to the middle because he wanted to receive Wood's pass. Barcelona's defensive line grew nervous when they saw him take the ball. As the Ballon d'Or recipient, he could not be ignored. Whether he sent a threatening pass or took a shot of his own, Ribéry was a good player.

Iniesta, who was not good at defense, came up in the wing to prepare to outflank him, and the man in front of Ribéry was the Argentinian center-back, Milito.

If Ribéry wanted to shoot directly, Milito would block it. If Ribéry wanted to break through, then Iniesta could give him pause.

Ribéry neither shot nor broke through. He passed the ball.

The figure that was familiar to all Barcelona players, George Wood, who received the ball.

George Wood, who was near the sidelines and had moved quickly to the flank, received the ball. Abidal unceremoniously came up to mark him. Now that he was basically in front of Barcelona's penalty area, how would there be a space that he was not pressed harder?

Abidal rushed up and leant against Wood on one side while he extended his leg to poke Wood's ball to force Wood to turn around.

Wood turned around but knocked the football with his heel toward the gap behind Abidal.

"David!"

Beckham ran up with all his might and appeared behind Abidal just in time. He was not offside! Because Gareth Bale plugged ahead and suppressed Puyol, Beckham was alone in front of Puyol, even though he appeared behind the other people.

Abidal was so focused on tackling Wood's ball that he did not notice, but Márquez saw everything clearly. Beckham had run just before George Wood got the ball. He suddenly sped up when Wood received the ball.

At first, Márquez thought Beckham wanted to receive George Wood's return pass, but he quickly realized he was wrong. Beckham did not rush toward Wood but went around the two men. He moved forward, trying to put Beckham in an offside position. He did not see the situation at the far end as he felt reassured with Puyol.

Puyol was clearly aware of the point too. He wanted to move forward to create an offside, but he was late.

He was only half a step away when Beckham received the ball while unmarked!

Having just interfered with Márquez up ahead, Bendtner and Arshavin did not care about Márquez, who raised his hands and looked at the assistant referee, and uniformly rushed to the goal!

"Watch out for his pass..." Before Valdés finished, he saw Beckham swing his right leg.

Abidal turned to Beckham in a panic and sprung over, and George Wood stood where he was waiting to watch the show.

Márquez and Milito went back to chase after Bendtner and Arshavin.

Valdés looked at Beckham, but he glimpsed the two strikers from the corner of his eye and focused on them.

Beckham kicked. It was not a curveball pass from the inside of his foot, but a volley on the outer instep!

At the same time, Valdés pounced to the side, ready to stop the pass. He had just flew out when he saw the football fly past his other side. The speed was so fast that he was too late to turn his head around to see what happened behind him. But it was not necessary; he heard the impassioned cheers from the whole stadium.

“Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! The ball’s in!”

Five passes ended the fight.

David Beckham pointed both hands at George Wood and bounded at him with an excited smile on his face.

George Wood’s excellent performance throughout the game, as well as acting as the passing relay point to continuously pass and organize the offense for the attack, made him a key target for marking by the Barcelona rear defensive line. Franck Ribéry was also famous for the fact that whenever he took the ball, Barcelona also had to guard against him. No one took notice of the veteran, Beckham, who could not run and only pass, at best. Our defensive lines are so well organized that even if his passes get through, Bendtner would only have a few chances...

As a result, Beckham came with a plug-in and shot!

“Some people say that Nottingham Forest is a nursing home. After Hierro’s departure, there were old guys like Albertini, van Nistelrooy, and Edwin van der Sar. David Beckham came along once Albertini retired. But who did they rely on for last year’s Champions League title? Albertini, the old bastard! What about this year? The Nottingham Forest fans can look forward to David Beckham!” the commentator cried excitedly. That was equivalent to him announcing that Nottingham Forest had won the entry to the Champions League final.

However, the game still had three minutes before they entered the injury stoppage time.

Twain did not to celebrate the goal with those around him. He pulled over the excited van der Vaart and Lennon to seize the moment to hand over the tactics. He had waited for a dead ball to change players, but now he definitely had to change the tactics.

The trailing Barcelona was like a wounded beast. They could erupt with amazing energy at the last minute. If they lowered their guard, they would be eaten. Barcelona only needed one goal to equalize the score and the team going to Moscow in Russia would go from Nottingham Forest to Barcelona.

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After they celebrated the victory, Twain brought on van der Vaart and Lennon to replace Sidwell and the goalscorer, Beckham. When Beckham came off, the fans stood up and applauded.

Tony Twain hugged Beckham and gave George Wood a thumbs up, which affirmed his contribution to the goal.

He was afraid that Wood would think otherwise, because van der Vaart did indeed take over Wood's offensive command. He needed to do the job he was best at, defending.

Messi's finally came face to face with George Wood towards the end of the game, but he was already worn down by the Forest team's overall defense earlier in the game — he had just returned from his recovery. How could his fitness be good?

In the face of the physically perverse George Wood, his spirit was willing, but his body was weak.

A speedy striker like Eto'o had a limited role to play without more space to play. What about Henry? How much of a threat could he be when he was stuck near the sidelines and could not get in?

Although the injury stoppage time was up to five minutes, there was a flurry of disgruntled boos at the City Ground stadium. Nottingham Forest's Western Wall showed no sign of collapsing. The physical advantage guaranteed by the rotation was evident.

When the referee blew the whistle at the end of the game, the entire City Ground stadium, and half of Nottingham, was inundated with cheers.

Tony Twain walked to the sidelines, intending to rally and celebrate the victory, but caught unawares and lifted up by the players around him. He was lifted above their heads!

"They broke into the UEFA Champions League final three times in a row! Tony Twain etched his team's name in the history of the Champions League, to be mentioned on equal terms as Real Madrid, Ajax, AC Milan, Juventus, Bayern Munich, Benfica, and the best managers in history! They are the first to achieve this in the new century... This is truly crazy!"

"This is incredible! Truly unbelievable! They really did it!"

Tony Twain was carried above the players' heads and held out his hands to receive the cheers from the crowd. Although they had yet to win the Champions League title, he had done enough for now to accept the courtesy. To be able to lead a small team that had been unknown for nearly thirty years back to the top was not something the average person could do easily.

"I have to say... even though Tony Twain is not likeable, his results make everyone green with envy. For those who criticize him, don't they want the team that they support to have such a magical manager? Most of the players he dug up from around the world were all unheard of. And now, they have grown into the pillars of Nottingham Forest. The young saplings have grown into towering trees!"

"Wood! Wood! Grow into a big tree! Forest! Forest! Nottingham Forest!!" None of the Forest fans left the City Ground stadium stands and sang another song they came up with for George Wood.

"Yes, Franck Ribéry, who played in the French lower league in the beginning, became a Ballon d'Or winner. Pepe, who faced the predicament of not being able to play in Portugal, is now at the heart of the Forest team's rear defense. Gareth Bale, who was nearly turned away by Southampton, is now the

youngest national footballer and goalscorer in Welsh history. Eastwood, who played amateur football because of his injury and almost gave up, has become the main player of the Forest team. Of course, we cannot forget George Wood. Who would have thought of him, a layman who only started to come into contact with professional football at the age of seventeen? His performance in this game today deserved nine points!”

“Why not ten points?” his partner asked.

“Ah, he is still young. There’s plenty of room for growth, and we look forward to his future. I don’t want to give him a shocking eleven points when the time comes.”

The players gathered around Tony Twain to celebrate their victory with him. Who cared about the mood of the Barcelona people?

Twain did not even have a chance to shake hands with Rijkaard. He saw Rijkaard walk away alone. He knew that Rijkaard’s position was shaky, but did not feel the slightest sadness on his behalf. He only watched Rijkaard’s back gradually disappear into the crowd and warned himself countless times.

If I had lost the game, I would be him.

Chapter 637: About Professional Ethics

When Nottingham Forest broke into the Champions League final for the second time in a row, Nottingham Evening Post printed “Athens” on their extra to show their excitement. This time, Nottingham Evening Post did not make a move like this. The merriment had already taken place on the night of the game. They had to face the league tournament at the start of the next day, which was really not the time for unbridled celebration.

The beer in the pubs where the Forest fans gathered was sold out, with large numbers of policemen waiting in the streets and near the pubs to watch out for the fans who drank too much and made trouble. Fortunately, with the exception of a few small-scale brawls, more people were persuaded with words.

Because they were all supporters of the team, their verbal conflicts were nothing more than who deserved the most credit for the game. Some said it was George Wood, while some said it was Beckham who scored the goal, while still others said it was Tony Twain. But no matter how much they argued, the more sober people helped smooth things over, and everyone laughed together and put their arms around each other and drank.

“What’s there to fight about? Aren’t they all part of our Nottingham Forest?”

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Nottingham Forest’s match against Barcelona took place on the night of April 29th. Early the next morning, Twain took Dunn to London, while Kerslake stayed behind to oversee the team’s training. The two of them went to Stamford Bridge to observe their opponent in the finals. The Champions League semifinal battle of death between Manchester United and Chelsea would unfold.

Chelsea had a slight advantage ahead of the game, as they scored an away goal against Manchester United in the first leg and tied 1:1 with Manchester United.

Grant's team was able to force Manchester United to a draw at Old Trafford, which was completely unexpected. Even Twain had to admit that he did not expect Chelsea's result when Grant came to power.

It was somewhat unfair to say that Grant made it to the semifinals on what Mourinho left. After the game, Twain re-acquainted himself with the man he had despised.

Chelsea tied 1:1 at home with Manchester United. The two sides played into overtime but could not determine an outcome. In the end, they had to go with a penalty shootout. Terry missed the ball in the penalty shootout, but Cristiano Ronaldo, who had done well all season, also missed his shot. The penalty shootout moved into sudden death. Kalou succeeded, and the stadium erupted with deafening cheers. When Nani came up with the ball, the cheers at Stamford Bridge immediately turned into boos, which brought a huge pressure on the Manchester United player. he, who was brought on during overtime to replace Rooney, emphasized too much on the angle and missed his shot.

Chelsea knocked out Manchester United to successfully advance!

Tony Twain and Dunn were surrounded by cheering Chelsea fans, their arms raised high in celebration. The stands trembled slightly. Twain had no intention of participating in the celebration of his future enemies, so he and Dunn put on their sunglasses and crept away.

He was a little disappointed with the result.

He had hoped that Manchester United would beat Chelsea and advance to the Champions League finals. He would not have to prepare an additional opponent's profile and targeted tactics, and Manchester United would inevitably be distracted. Anyway, I am already distracted, so you have no reason not to be affected. This makes everyone even.

Now the results were out. Manchester United was eliminated. With only the league title available to them now, they would not let Nottingham Forest go at Old Trafford. Although they would not have spared the Forest team anyway, they would be more desperate now. When the time came, Chelsea had the most to gain when his team was in tatters in the competition against Manchester United for the league title?

"I did not like Grant from the start, and sure enough, there was a reason..." On the way back to Nottingham, Twain complained endlessly to Dunn.

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Despite the disappointment and complaints, the game still had to be played. In the 37th round of the league tournament, the final battle before "the Duel." There were many possible outcomes in the round, but only one would have a decisive impact — Nottingham Forest's away loss to Aston Villa and Manchester United win in its game. In that case, Ferguson would win the title a round ahead.

Ferguson hoped to appease people with a league title, as the team had just been knocked out of the Champions League. However, he could not decide. It depended on how Forest and Aston Villa played. What Manchester United could look forward to was that it was an away game for Nottingham Forest.

Having just played in a couple of intense games, their form could not be guaranteed. Furthermore, Aston Villa was not weak.

Manchester United's home game against West Ham United was the first game in the round of the league tournament. Their defeat in the Champions League made all of the Manchester United players become hungry wolves and the poor West Ham United team was in the wrong place at the wrong time. For the pack of Manchester United wolves, the right opponent came at the right time and place.

Powerless to fight back, West Ham United lost 4:0 to the Manchester United star players.

The Manchester United fans began to keep a close eye on the Forest team's game against Aston Villa.

Unlike Manchester United fans, the Nottingham Forest fans were not at all concerned about the outcome on Manchester United's side. Whether Manchester United won or lost, the result was the same provided they won — the final battle would be at the summit of Old Trafford at the 38th round.

Twain did not arrange for anyone to report to Nottingham Forest from Old Trafford. It was unnecessary.

Twain continued to use the lineup he deployed against Barcelona in the second leg of the game.

At Aston Villa's home ground, Villa Park stadium, Nottingham Forest efficiently took down the home team with 2:0. Bendtner scored two goals and became the best in the game.

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"The Champions League final is May 21st. The final round of the league tournament is May 11th." Twain looked at the schedule and then circled the days in red on the calendar. He tossed the pen aside, put his hands together, and turned to Dunn. "The last two games of this season will determine whether we will be heroes or cowards."

"Don't exaggerate, what cowards..."

"That's the case. There is nothing more disgraceful in the world than a first runner up twice over... No, there is." He discarded his own claim. "And that is first runner up three times, four times, five times, six times over." He extended three, four, five and six fingers in turn.

Dunn grimaced. Sometimes his and Twain's football philosophies were really different, but he was always able to cooperate with Twain's work and suppress his opinions.

He thought that being the first runner up was not bad. It was better than failing in first place. Twain's thinking was the opposite. They had to win the championship since they were in the final. If they were doomed to fail, it would have been better to be done for in the beginning. Allan Adams would not approve of his crazy thinking, because even if they were the first runner-up, the post-season dividends would still be more than the lower-ranked teams, whether it was the Champions League or the Premier League. There was also an extra bonus for every game they played in the Champions League.

"It's not too bad. There are ten days between the Champions League final and the final round in the league tournament. We have plenty of time to prepare for each match," Twain said as he turned on the television to study Manchester United's game video with Dunn. Although they were old rivals and the mutual understanding was there, targeted observation was still imperative.

“Brosnan called and wanted you to give some comments on the Champions League opponent,” Dunn reminded.

“Him?” Twain shook his head. “Either there’s something wrong with his brain or his boss came up with the idea. With so many days to go before the Champions League final, what can I talk about?”

“Maybe it’s because of some personal feud between you and Grant...”

“In that case, I can’t talk about it even more. Not now, not later.” Twain shook his head resolutely. “Chelsea did not do well in the league tournament and their qualification in the Champions League final was called into question. With their morale currently strong, no one dares think about and mention their loss of not being able to compete in the Champions League next season. I cannot provoke them with my words and add fuel to the fire. I won’t provide support in another team’s hour of need and make the matter any bigger, just in case I stir them up into PowerMAX mode, and then we would be stupefied. So...” He looked at Dunn. “We don’t mention them. No matter the hype out there, we’ll ignore it. Doing our own thing is the top priority.”

He finished speaking, only to find Dunn looked at him with a smile.

“Do I have something on my face?”

“No.” Dunn shook his head and smiled. “It’s rare to hear that you have decided not to take part in a war of words. I’m surprised, that’s all.”

“Hey, don’t actually believe I’m a mad dog that bites whenever I see someone.” Twain rolled his eyes at him.

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Twain called Pierce Brosnan back the next day. He told him that he was not going to weigh in on Chelsea’s entry to the Champions League final. He did not repeat to Brosnan what he had said to Dunn. He only said that the team’s focus had been the league tournament, putting aside their Champions League final opponent for now. By the time they were finished with the league game, the question would become a non-issue. Once they won the league tournament, the whole city would be busy celebrating. Who would care about what was going with Chelsea? If they did not get the league title, Twain would be in a bad mood. Who would dare to ask about the matter? Of course, Twain did not want the second result to come true.

Like Twain said, the other media outlets’ top headlines were the fierce battle for the Premier League title, since the Champions League had not yet begun.

Both BBC Five and Sky Sports were working on a special feature on the final game in the hope of attracting television audience.

The other media outlets kept watch at the training bases of the two teams all day long, wracking their brains on how to trigger a war of words between the two teams.

Everyone knew that Ferguson was a veteran of psychological warfare, while Tony Twain was a rising star in the aspect. If the two men could have a brilliant verbal war before the game, it would be a big selling point.

However, the biggest selling point this time was not the two managers, but a player named “David Beckham.”

The last time Nottingham Forest took on Manchester United in the league tournament at home, Beckham was absent due to his injury. Therefore, it was the first time he would face his previous club in the English Premier League and his first return to Old Trafford as an opponent.

He had just scored a key goal in the Champions League semifinals and helped Nottingham Forest break into the Champions League final. Manchester United was eliminated by Chelsea, so it was a matter of course that some Manchester United fans were displeased.

The game was far off, but all kinds of voices about him were rampant.

Some people said they wanted to give Beckham a warm welcome back to Old Trafford, while others said they wanted to show Beckham who’s boss. Some fondly remembered his loyalty to Manchester United, whereas others thought he was more repugnant than Judas due to his empty words. He stated how loyal he was to Manchester United, but joined Nottingham Forest!

Even when Ferguson was interviewed at a regular press conference, he was surrounded by numerous reporters asking questions about Beckham.

Everyone knew for whom Beckham left Manchester United in the first place. What kind of sparks would fly now that the two enemies were going to meet again?

Ferguson had no expression on his face. “I wish him good luck.”

“Sir Alex Ferguson, Beckham helped the Forest team break into the Champions League final while Manchester United was knocked out by Chelsea. Do you regret not recalling David?” a reporter asked bluntly.

“Why should I regret it? Manchester United currently has many outstanding and more promising players. As for the people who left Manchester United, they are gone. I will not hang onto the past. Otherwise Manchester United will not win many championships.” Ferguson’s expression changed for the worse.

What he said was true, and made a lot of sense, but in the ears of Beckham’s supporters, it did not sound good. No wonder there were still people who thought Ferguson and Beckham were enemies.

So what about Beckham?

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“Mr. Twain. The press hopes that Beckham will be able to attend today’s press conference,” Miss Barbara Lucy reminded Twain that as head of public relations, she agreed that it would be good to have Beckham present, but Twain had given her George Wood’s name and himself.

“Why?” Twain pretended to be amazed.

“Mr. Twain, you know the reason...” Miss Lucy smiled. She did not buy Twain’s antics.

“Yes. But no way.” Twain rejected the request. “To let David be pulled in for the questioning? I don’t want those flies to affect the state of my main players before an important game.”

The matter was up to Twain, and Barbara Lucy had no power except to make suggestions. Since Twain disagreed, there was nothing to be done. She nodded and left.

Back on the training ground, Twain took a moment to observe Beckham. Nothing odd could be seen, but was that really the case? Twain did not think so. Beckham’s heart had to be in turmoil.

He had been at Real Madrid for four years and never returned to Old Trafford as an opponent to rival Manchester United. Therefore, today’s experience would be his first.

Beckham had some injuries before the home game against Manchester United in the first half of the season, so Twain took him off the squad list to avoid that kind of awkwardness. Now Beckham was in good shape. He had no reason to rule him out.

Although the two men had taken the situation into account when they signed the contract, it had not been imminent. Twain suggested the clause that Beckham did not need to compete against Manchester United to be written in the contract, which Beckham refused. It went against his professional ethics, but it did not mean that he would be happy to return to Old Trafford as an enemy.

In between breaks during training, the players gathered around to chat and joke, but Beckham walked up to Twain alone.

“Can I have a quick word with you?” he said.

Twain nodded, not at all surprised that Beckham had come to him.

The two men found a slightly quieter corner. Everyone else stole glances from the corner of their eyes because they all knew who the real person of interest was in this game.

“Can you take me with you to this afternoon’s press conference?” Beckham got right to the point. His request surprised Twain.

“You know what? I just turned down Miss Barbara Lucy’s request to arrange for you to appear at the press conference.”

Beckham nodded, not surprised that Twain had done so. However, he insisted on his decision. “I know what you think, Tony. But I still want to go.”

“Being repeatedly asked stupid questions by a swarm of flies like: ‘what do you think of the return to Old Trafford and becoming an enemy of your old club?’”

“If I don’t answer, I’m afraid there will be more rumors.”

“Do you really want to go?” Twain looked at Beckham.

“I really want to go.” Beckham met Twain’s gaze.

“Fine, you’ll go with me and George.” Since Beckham wanted to, there was no need for him to stop him, but he added, “if the situation gets out of hand later, I’m going to step in.”

Beckham smiled at him.

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The media at the press conference had learned that Beckham would not attend the press conference and had planned to leave once Twain arrived to embarrass him. But they saw Twain with George Wood and... David Beckham appear in front of everyone.

"I know the leading character today is not me." Tony Twain said as he viewed the excited faces below. He sat down and stopped talking. The media was allowed to aim at Beckham.

Most of the questions were nothing new. It was just as Twain said to Beckham in the morning. No one cared about how the questions were asked, they only cared about how the man was going to answer the questions.

But so far, Beckham had answers that took into consideration both the Forest fans' feelings and majority of the Manchester United fans. He was not as hard pressed as Twain had imagined. He was a big star player and had faced all sorts of tricky questions before.

Someone threw out the question "will you take the initiative to apply to shun the game?" to which Beckham smiled. "I don't have any physical problems. If the manager needs me, then I'll go on. If he doesn't need me, I can accept being a substitute."

He shifted the anger of the diehard Manchester United fans, at Twain's behest. Before he came, Twain repeatedly cautioned Beckham that he could push anything to him as a manager when he ran into any tricky problems.

As a result, Twain came forward. "Any questions about the squad list and the starting lineup cannot be made public before the game." His remark silenced all the reporters who had just turned to ask him.

If they were allowed, the reporters would have loved to hiss at Tony Twain in return. Instead of continuing to entangle with Twain, they turned back to ask Beckham all sorts of questions about facing his old club.

"Have you thought about what kind of treatment you will get for returning to Old Trafford, David?"

"I don't know." Beckham shook his head. "I'm just a little apprehensive."

"Do you still bear any grudge towards Ferguson now?"

"He's a manager I have a lot of respect for." Beckham did not want to dwell on the topic.

"How does he compare with Tony Twain?" The reporters did not want to let him go.

Beckham wanted to open his mouth, but Twain took over the question. "This question is obviously for me. We each have our strengths."

Evaluating old and new managers was a dangerous thing for players, who would become sinners no matter what they said. Consequently, Twain did not let Beckham speak.

As if it were a signal, the media's questions became increasingly specific and demanding.

“If you score a goal against Manchester United, will you celebrate?”

“I don’t know... I’m not trying to avoid the question. It’s complicated, and I do not know how I’ll be until it happens, so I can only say ‘I don’t know.’”

“If you help Nottingham Forest beat Manchester United and snatch the league title from Manchester United, will you celebrate it? Do you think the Manchester United fans will accept it?”

“I don’t know...”

Twain stood up. “All right. Remember your professions, you are reporters, not police officers from Scotland Yard. This is the end of today’s press conference!”

“We haven’t finished asking...”

“By the time you’re done asking questions, the lands of Great Britain and the continental Europe will have been connected as one.” Twain ridiculed. He just did not like to see a reporters lay siege to and ceaselessly interrogate his players like they were prisoners. He turned around to take his men away.

The reporters stood up from their seats one after another, ignoring the rule to only ask questions when pointed to. They raised their hands in a scramble to ask the questions that they had not had time to ask.

“David! I still have a question...”

“David, David... Rumor has it that returning to Old Trafford can affect your form. If you do play, will it shake the hearts of the Forest team? Will it lead to a more serious... Uh.”

The question stopped the three people in their tracks, and they turned around to look at the person who asked the question.

Tony Twain said, “David Beckham is now wearing the Nottingham Forest red jersey.”

George Wood said, “Shake the hearts of our team? We’re not idiots.”

David Beckham replied, “I’m a professional player.”

The trio turned to leave the venue and allowed the reporters to shout behind them, without a backwards glance.

Chapter 638: The Target for The Double

Although Beckham was specifically present for the press conference, and he, Tony Twain, and George Wood had pledged to Beckham’s professionalism, the media had the ability to “change something rotten into something magical.” They selectively ignored some things or distorted words to completely change their meaning.

The feud between Beckham and Manchester United had to continue because the masses liked it. The media would dig deep into what the masses loved to hear and see.

Twain smiled at Beckham, a variety of newspapers published the next day in his hands. “It’s totally useless.”

“Anyway, I said what I wanted to say. It’s up to them how they want to interpret it.” Beckham was unruffled. “Focusing my energies on being entangled with them may really affect my state.”

Twain smiled and wondered if Beckham was really unaffected at all, but he could not ask. He was afraid of being perceived by David as distrustful of him.

“It’s just a... typical league game.”

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At the start of the season, Roy Keane led the newly promoted Sunderland back to Old Trafford and was warmly welcomed by the fans across the stadium. Apart from his position in the minds of and popularity among the Manchester United fans, it also had something to do with Sunderland not being a real threat to Manchester United. People always had the habit of showing grace to opponents that were not as strong.

But if the opponent was a team that competed with them for the league title and could likely beat them, it was believed that the treatment they received would be different. Besides, David Beckham’s departure had always been controversial. The landing point for his return to the Premier League had sparked even greater controversy.

Why was Keane so popular? Was it because he turned down Nottingham Forest’s invitation and would rather choose the Scottish Premiership further afield in order not to fight Manchester United? Why did Beckham not do that?

The number of reporters crowding the gate of Wilford did not decrease. They still wanted to interview Beckham, but Beckham no longer accepted any interviews, wanting to keep a calm frame of mind before the impending crucial game.

Accordingly, he arrived in a hurry and hurriedly left again every day. Under the reporters’ writing, he suddenly became conflicted, ill at ease, and showed signs of fluctuations in his form.

Fortunately, the Nottingham Forest team was on Beckham’s side. When the other players were interviewed by the reporters and asked about Beckham, they said, “everything is normal with David. He was just joking with us at the training ground, and I don’t think anything is different.”

“He’s normal. You came up with the abnormal stuff yourself.”

“I don’t think there’s anything unusual. We’re the ones who have the most interaction with David. If you don’t believe us, who do you believe in?”

“A rather normal league game is hyped into this big deal by you. We are calm about this.”

Even Dunn was pulled back to talk about his view. Dunn did not want to speak but the media would not let him go, so he used Mandarin to quickly make a remark. “The eunuch is more anxious than the emperor.”

“What do you mean?” The British reporters did not understand.

“Excuse me, could you translate that?”

Tony Twain smirked. “What he meant was: the Queen of England is not in a hurry, but you ball-less guys are more anxious.”

Some of the reporters who did not like Tony Twain thought he was taking the opportunity to insult them, so they peevishly complained to Twain for the attacks. Twain laughed when he heard them.

At first, he just threw his head back to laugh. Then he used Dunn’s shoulder for support and slowly squatted down to continue to laugh when he held his stomach.

He laughed until everyone around him was confused.

“You guys wanted the translation. I translated it for you, but you did not believe it.” Twain stood up.

Tang Jing, who was among the press, came forward. “Mr. Tony Twain’s translation was right. That was what Coach Dunn said.” She explained it carefully again, and of course, her tone sounded less acrimonious than Twain’s.

“‘Emperor’ can be translated as the Queen. A eunuch was a kind of servant in ancient China that specialized in serving the emperor and his queen... Before that, they had to cut off the thing... that is, to be castrated.” She made a cutting gesture.

The male Britons could not help but look down between their legs.

Twain laughed again. “The Chinese proverb means that the parties involved are not in a hurry, but the bystanders are. Beckham stated he doesn’t have any problems, yet you’re still unwilling to let go, which I find it very boring. Also, it will be Nottingham Forest, not David Beckham, that plays against Manchester United. My team will refuse to answer all questions about this topic in the future.”

Twain once again showed off his unreasonable side and rebuffed all the reporters’ questions.

He was fed up from entangling with the flies. They clearly had a lot of important things to do, but how could his mood improved when he had to face such a group of people every day during the start and finish of work?

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Ferguson would be happy to offer conversational topics to the news media if the frequent hype about Beckham’s return to Old Trafford could cause Nottingham Forest’s entire team to lose its cool and get caught up in the fuss, but he did not know if it would work, because Tony Twain was clearly a coach who was very focused on the players’ mental state. He had just announced that he would no longer accept any interviews about Beckham. Apparently, he recognized the downside of being so entangled with the media.

As the day of the game approached, he did not want to talk about Beckham anymore. He approved of one thing in Twain’s remarks. The game was between the two teams and did not have much to do with a certain player. It was no use for everyone just put their focus on one player.

Consequently, he ignored the media and dedicated himself to the preparation work for the decisive battle.

When Tony Twain led Nottingham Forest back into the Premier League, he already robbed a young player from him — Piqué, who was now a defensive mainstay at the Forest team. Was robbing him of Piqué a one-time off chance or would it develop into robbing him of more things in the future?

Now, the answer was undoubtedly clear.

Nottingham Forest had changed from robbing Manchester United's players to robbing the title.

Although Manchester United was on its home ground this time, Ferguson did not state that they would be certain of winning. He was aware of what type of team Nottingham Forest was — the stronger the opponent and the tougher the conditions, the greater the energy they exploded with. If they let their guard down, the advantage that originally belonged to them would become an incumbrance instead.

The game in which the Forest team eliminated Barcelona was a good point of reference. George Wood was no longer a negligible player when it came to the Forest team's offense.

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Time passed very quickly, and the Nottingham Forest team set off to Manchester on May 10th. A day later, the final round of the English Premier League would start together at the same time. Whether it was for the league title or to avoid relegation, it would attract countless eye.

It was rare in recent seasons to have no idea who would emerge the winner in the final round like this year. Nottingham Forest's away challenge against Manchester United was naturally set for a live broadcast across the country.

The broadcasting station hoped that the two teams would end up with another war of words before the game to heat up the game even more.

Ferguson only talked about Manchester United's title goal. Twain said, "I think this game is hot enough and doesn't need to be hyped up."

Neither side wanted to be used by the media as a weapon.

When Beckham arrived at the hotel where the team was staying in Manchester, he was received two very different types of treatments. A group of Manchester United fans chanted his name as they held up posters. They cheered and applauded him, and even made a "Welcome Back, David" banner. It touched him, but when he turned around, another group of Manchester United fans ruined his posters and shouted abusive chants to brand Beckham as a traitor.

The situation made him feel awkward, but he was an experienced star player and accustomed to these upheavals. Whether they were there to welcome him, or to call him a traitor, he waved and acknowledged them with a warm smile on his face.

When he transferred to Real Madrid, no one knew if he would still have a main position due the brilliant Figo on the right of Real Madrid's midfield. His wife, Victoria, warned him, "there will be cameras everywhere around you. So when you get to Madrid, keep smiling, whether you're playing on the field or sitting on the bench. Don't let anyone see your real inner thoughts."

At Real Madrid, a place that was followed by the international media twenty hours a day, he did incorporate that into his life. No matter what, he would not let the people know what he really thought.

He had to learn this skill to be a star, otherwise it was not so easy to make it in this line of work.

Beckham looked like his normal self. He smiled and waved to the crowd, leaving nothing that would make the media stir up trouble. Twain had to admire the professional star player from him, a person who was untrained. It maintained his image in front of the general public and would not affect making money or big fortune. People had to be able to endure hardship to achieve great success. Those who made the big bucks also needed to be able to endure hardship.

Twain could not withstand it, so he had few commercial contracts, and the biggest source of his income was his salary from the club.

But he was not going to change his temper. He had transmigrated after much difficulty. How could he let down the Heavens that sent him there by not living life to its fullest?

To have enough money to spend was enough. Money could not buy his happiness. That was the most important.

Countless reporters flocked toward Beckham, just shy of putting the microphones in his mouth as they scrambled to ask, "how does it feel to be back in Manchester, David?"

"All right." Beckham replied with a smile, showing no impatience.

"What's the outlook for tomorrow's game?"

"That can only be known after the game starts. I don't want to predict such things before the game."

"Are you surprised by the Manchester United fans' attitudes towards you?"

"I am very grateful to the Manchester United Football Club. I have wonderful memories from here and have a lot of good friends here too..." He said a lot of nice words, but didn't answer the reporter's questions.

As the group of reporters continued to ask, Beckham entered the hotel. When they saw Tony Twain's grim expression, they wisely shut up.

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Tony Twain and Ferguson met at the last press conference before the game, and there was no fireworks from a war of words like other days. The two only talked about their own teams' preparation. There was only a little spark when the championship title was mentioned.

"I believe Manchester United will be the league champion this season." Ferguson looked confident, a flush of color and a smile in his face.

It was obviously not possible to avoid the topic. Twain did not want to appear weak, so he also said with a grin, "Nottingham Forest is aiming for the Double this season."

As the words came out, Ferguson turned to look at him. The expressions on the reporters' faces changed.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Twain. Did I hear you correctly? Are you saying that Nottingham Forest is going to take the Double this season?" A reporter raised his hand and stood up.

Twain nodded and spoke in a confident tone, “yes, you heard correctly. At the beginning of the season, I said the Forest team wanted the league title, but now my plan has been revised. Since we have a shot at the league title and the Champions League title, why don’t I take both?”

He did not consider Ferguson, because his tone seemed as if he had already secured the two championships.

Ferguson glanced at Tony Twain, and his expression — a smile yet not a smile made — his thoughts unfathomable. When Twain finished speaking, he smiled at Ferguson, and there was not a hint of disdain.

“It’s good for young people to have drive. If my team had beaten Chelsea, I would also want to get the Double.” Ferguson did not respond in a confrontational manner as the media had hoped for. He just nodded and continued, “however.”

As soon as the topic shifted, everyone got excited.

“A championship title is not won with words.”

Interesting. Twain thought, is this a different way to issue a challenge? I accept!

“I had said last season that Nottingham Forest would win the Champions League title, and at first no one believed it. What was the result?” He spread his hands. “Some said I had spoken without thinking and some thought it was personal hype. But the results showed everything clearly. Don’t tell me that Nottingham Forest’s UEFA Champions League title last season was hot air? I declared today that the Forest team’s goal is the Double. If there’s anyone who thinks I’m bragging or joking, it will be revealed tomorrow after the game!”

With that, he nodded to Ferguson and got up to leave first. He left the room of startled men and the old Sir Alex Ferguson, who looked at his back thoughtfully.

Chapter 639: The Final Showdown at The Top of The Theatre of Dreams

“We’re going to take the Double.”

A large photograph of Tony Twain was below the caption, his head slightly tilted up, mouth open, and one hand aloft, arrogance undisguised on his face.

The photograph was not taken of Twain at the press conference the day before. The reporters selected it from photographs previously taken of Twain to complement the caption. The effect was just right.

Many football fans stood in line for admission outside the noisy Old Trafford, and almost all of the Forest fans had a copy of the newspaper.

They loved to see Tony Twain’s arrogance. Especially in the face of the well-known team, Manchester United, he was so arrogant. It made them feel steady before the game.

It was unknown if the Nottingham Forest players had the same idea.

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The Nottingham Forest players were warming up on the field as the steady stream of fans entering the stadium made Old Trafford more raucous.

Tony Twain did not wait in the locker room this time. He stood on the sidelines and watched the Manchester United team warm up with interest. The other coaches led the Forest players in their warm-up.

Twain rarely came out when the team warmed up. He generally prepared himself in the locker room and would choose to rest there even if there was nothing to do. But he wanted to see Old Trafford before the game and observe Manchester United and Ferguson in passing.

Ferguson was in front of the home team's technical area. Like Twain, he had his hands in his pockets as he watched the players warm up on the field.

Intuition told him that someone was watching him. He turned his head to find Tony Twain looking at him.

The two men's line of sight collided, and neither wanted to be the first to avert their eyes. They eventually looked away at the same time because it felt weird to look face to face continuously...

Kerslake came off from the field and walked up to get a drink of water beside Twain.

"There are so many people." He found that Twain was looking at the grandstand.

"With a capacity of sixty thousand people, it's really much larger than the City Ground stadium..." Twain offhandedly added. It was not the first time they had come to Old Trafford to play, so there was no need to be so surprised.

Kerslake turned to return to the field.

Twain turned to walk back to the locker room. Judging from his observation, Cristiano Ronaldo's form was as good as ever. It was going to be a big problem in the game.

Portugal's Ronaldo had already scored thirty goals in the league tournament this season. With only the final round left in the league tournament, he was mostly set to win the Premier League's top goalscorer of the season.

This season, Ferguson transformed Cristiano Ronaldo's success to become the core of the team's offense. Even Wayne Rooney had to make sacrifices for it. But Rooney had learned how to assist his teammates and was not as solitary as he used to be.

Manchester United had been incredibly strong and could have created better results than they did. Pity...

Twain had just returned to the locker room when he heard footsteps sound from outside. The players had finished their warm-up.

He straightened his back.

The door was pushed open. George Wood was the first to walk in, and the others streamed in behind him.

The last one to come in was Dunn, who closed the door.

As soon as the players came in, they began to change their jerseys. Everyone was focused on taking care of their own matters, and Twain was not in a hurry to speak.

When he saw that everyone was close to done taking care of their things, he got up and pressed his hands downwards. "Quiet, guys. I have something to say to you."

The locker room gradually quieted down. Everyone looked at their boss standing by the door.

"In ninety minutes, this season's league tournament will be over. We have worked hard for a season. These ninety minutes will show us what we will gain. Our team, regrettably, has yet to win the league title. Now is our opportunity." Twain pointed to the door.

"Yesterday I said the Forest team's goal this season was the Double, which shocked a lot of people. They thought I was bragging again, because our opponents in league's final round and Champions League's finals are strong teams. But I think this is nothing. If the opponents are not strong enough, maybe I'm not up to it."

The players burst into laughter.

"When the opponents are strong enough, there's more meaning to winning the titles... I mean, does the Double target scare you?" He looked at his players.

"What's so scary about it?" Eastwood stood up. "We'll all be laughed at when it gets out that we are intimidated by the number of championship titles."

"Yes, yes, the Double is exactly what we have been fighting for. How can we be frightened?" The others echoed along.

Hearing the answers, Twain laughed. "We are truly a team! When I said I wanted to take the Double, people out there said 'Tony Twain is crazy. If not crazy, then he's stupid.' They don't believe it... No, it's not that they don't believe, they're scared..." Twain pulled his lips back.

"What are they afraid of? Afraid that if we really take the two championships, it makes them look bad. It must be the end of the world for them to have such an arrogant man like me to take the Double."

The players laughed upon hearing his remarks.

Tony Twain never hid his arrogance, whether he faced the press or his players. The players smiled knowingly when he said he was an arrogant man. The boss was really arrogant, but if they stood by his side in battle, then they felt that his arrogance was a massive dose of stimulant.

"Whether you can take the two championships titles, today's game is the key. If we take the Double, it's going to scare some people... Let them be afraid!"

"That's right, boss!" They became excited, like a pack of wolves. The league title was their only regret. They were so close to the target and could not let go.

“I don’t know what the future holds! Maybe we’ll win a lot of championships together in the future, but that’s for the future. Now, since the league title is only ninety minutes away from us, we have no reason to let it go. Grab it tightly. If other people want to come and snatch it away? Let them pay the price!”

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“I definitely won’t accept a home defeat.” In Manchester United’s locker room, Ferguson mobilized his players for the last time before the game. “It is not up for discussion. We lost too many important games during the final stages of the league tournament. Otherwise, we could have considered the Double. What’s lost is lost, but we must not lose this game! You know what it means for us to lose this game?”

Most of the players were silent. Ferguson’s moniker as “locker room hairdryer” was not without merit. Everyone was aware that they would have been the first in line in the league to win the title and the most promising team to reach the Champions League finals. In the end, they were reduced to competing for the league title with Nottingham Forest. Sir Alex Ferguson was in a bad mood, so no one wanted to try their luck.

“Do your best to take down Nottingham Forest! This is our home ground, so there’s nothing to worry about. I don’t want anyone to think they can take the title with a draw. We’ve played against them more than once. What kind of opponent is Nottingham Forest? I think it should be very clear — remember, you can’t give them the slightest chance!”

Ferguson clenched his fists. At sixty-six years old, he did not look old. His face shone, his eyes sparkled, and his movements were wide and powerful.

Speaking to a French radio station late last year, he stated that he might continue for another three years before retiring. Later, it was not known why he denied that he had said such a thing. Recently, after Manchester United was eliminated from the Champions League by Chelsea, he once again mentioned his retirement in an interview. He did not state the exact time. He just said it was possible — could be four years later, could be the next day. He wanted to find the right time to leave, such as for health reasons, or finding a qualified successor, or winning the UEFA Champions League again.

The last condition was most likely due to his disgruntled venting over the recent elimination by Chelsea. No one thought he was going to leave because he won the Champions League title once. When Keane was still at Manchester United, it was rumored that he wanted to retire to abdicate to Keane. What was the result? When it came to the year he stated, he suddenly announced that he had renewed his contract with Manchester United to stay on again.

He was reluctant to leave the Manchester United team, so he said he was looking for a qualified successor. Otherwise, he would only consider leaving his position if he was physically unable.

It was normal for a manager to have the idea after more than twenty years in a team.

It was just that he was old. Seeing how worked up he was today, it was enough for people to break out into a cold sweat over the state of his heart.

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The stands in “the Theatre of Dreams” Old Trafford set off a thunderous clamor. The starting lineups on both sides were still waiting inside the tunnel. Only the substitutes and coaches came out.

Ferguson came out impeccably dressed in a suit. When he came out, chewing gum with a flushed face, his appearance drew cheers from tens of thousands of Manchester United fans in the stadium.

Countless world-renowned players performed in “the Theatre of Dreams.” Even famous players like Beckham had to eventually bow down in front of this man. He got rid of Paul Ince, Jaap Stam, David Beckham, Roy Keane... None of those things affected his place in the minds of the “Theatre of Dreams” spectators. Because the English fans knew one thing better than other fans — a good manager was more valuable than a good player.

Not to mention Ferguson had worked there for twenty-one years.

For twenty-one years, Manchester United had gone from an inebriated club during the Atkinson era to one of the most famous football clubs in the world. In 1986, when Ferguson had just come to power, the once brilliant Red Devils lacked spirit. The management was in chaos, and even their bus driver was a fan of their same city’s nemesis, Manchester City. Now, the Manchester United Football Club had become an operations model of European professional football clubs. Manchester United footprints were seen from the Far East to the Caribbean and around the world. Even when Evan and Allan talked to Twain about the future of Nottingham Forest, their point of reference was the current Manchester United team. To be studied by their opponent was an amazing thing. For the last twenty-one years, the “Red Devils”, Manchester United had changed bosses, faced crisis, had star players come and go, but one person’s name remained throughout.

The man stood on the sidelines, listening to the cheers for him.

Tony Twain came out slightly behind Ferguson. He had not heard what the cheers were, but he knew they were not for him. No fan would cheer for the enemy who was about to compete against his own team for the league title.

Ferguson raised his hands and waved to the surrounding grandstand. He did not make any more stops and headed straight for his own technical area.

Twain did not follow to his own technical area. He stood where he was and turned his head to look at the man’s back.

That man had won eighteen trophies of all kinds as the manager of Manchester United, but he would not be soft today because he had won too many times. His Nottingham Forest team wanted to pick up the league title trophy for the first time, and it would not be possible to get through the game without working hard. As for the Champions League final in ten days? No one was going to think about that!

After a few years of arduous training and hard work in the circle of professional coaches in England, Twain suddenly discovered that he had set himself the goal of “constant victories and championship titles.” The target that he should have set was not Brian Clough, who was mentioned all the time, or Arsène Wenger, who had a good relationship with him in private. It was not even Mourinho, his cherished rival, but the old man in front of him, who was not very striking and even had somewhat of a Scottish country bumpkin air to him.

He had won the most championships. His team started a ten-year dynasty in English football. He changed the Manchester United Football Club and English football. He was the worthy godfather of Manchester United.

Could he be such a figure one day?

To win more trophies that he could even count, turn Nottingham Forest from a fallen team to a famous powerhouse, and sweep across the football world everywhere...

At the thought, Twain suddenly felt hot-blooded and impassioned.

He seemed to see the huge stadium in front of him where the people got up from their seats, stretched out their arms and shouted at his name, "Twain! Twain! Twain! Twain... Don!"

Twain could not help but raise his hands to greet the crowd in the stands.

A shrill boo broke through the illusion and pulled him back to reality.

Looking at the hostile Manchester United fans around him, his interest waned. He pouted as he put his hands down and walked to his seat.

Well, wait until I defeat you in ninety minutes, then we'll see the expressions on your faces. Even if you break your voices from hissing, the trophy will not go back to your side!

Chapter 640: The Older the Ginger, the Spicier the Ginger

According to the principle of defensive positions, George Wood's defensive target was supposed to be the Manchester United midfielder, Paul Scholes. The player opposite him was exactly the "Ginger Prince."

But Wood eyed Cristiano Ronaldo.

Twain did not ask Wood to mark and defend against Ronaldo. He just placed Wood towards the right side. Once Ronaldo took the ball, Wood could go over to support the defense. After he studied Ronaldo's performance this season, he found it impractical to have the only defensive midfielder dedicated to defending against Ronaldo, since he was not fixed on any side. Ronaldo's position was flexible. To be able to score so many goals was not based on playing on a certain side.

He was in the wing when they lined up in the formation before the game. His position was much more flexible as soon as the game was started. He could be on the left, on the right, or even properly become the center forward!

Ronaldo did score a lot of goals this season, but he scored as a midfielder. He had not played as a center forward yet. Not only that, Wayne Rooney, who was supposed to be Manchester United's official center forward in the game, appeared on the wing.

Scholes had no choice but to fight to the death with George Wood. When Wood entered the England national team, he had announced his withdrawal from it. However, he was well aware of the ability of the younger player. He passed the football to Wayne Rooney on the side.

Usually the striker for Manchester United, Rooney played as side midfielder for the game, which nobody could comprehend.

Even the commentator animatedly questioned, “what is Ferguson thinking? He pulled Rooney, who is suited to be a center forward, out of the box, far away from the Nottingham Forest goal. Then he put Ronaldo, who is normally the winger, to play as the center forward, which would cause him to be caught in the middle among the Forest team’s tall defenders. He can’t play to his strengths.”

Manchester United had never had such a change of formation. Maybe they did during training, but it had never appeared in a game.

Seeing Rooney take the ball, Twain moved his eyes off the field to Ferguson. Sir Alex was directing the game on the sidelines. There was no need to command, so he just put his hands in his pockets as he stood on the sidelines to watch.

What did he have in mind with these player adjustments?

Twain mulled it over.

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Nottingham Forest used the 4-2-2 formation they were best at for the game. The goalkeeper was Edwin van der Sar. Gareth Bale, Pepe, Piqué, and Rafinha were on the rear defensive line, from left to right, while Ribéry, van der Vaart, George Wood and Beckham were in the midfield, from left to right. On the front line were van Nistelrooy and Arshavin as partners.

It could almost be considered the strongest squad.

On the other side, Manchester United used a 4-5-1 formation.

The goalkeeper was the young Ben Foster. Evra, Vidic, Rio Ferdinand, and Brown were the rear defensive line. There was something different about the midfield formation.

The left side of the midfield, which should have belonged to Giggs or Park Ji-sung, was occupied by Wayne Rooney. Giggs and Park Ji-sung did not receive the opportunity to start. Park Ji-sung did not even make it on the squad list.

Carrick and Scholes were in parallel positions, but O’Shea, the extra defensive midfielder, was behind them. O’Shea was supposed to play as a full-back, but he was stronger in defensive than Carrick and Scholes. For Ferguson to place him behind the pair and in front of the center-back, his meaning could not have been more obvious — he was to help defend and block the Forest team’s offense.

Hargreaves appeared on the right flank. He was strong in every area and capable of any positions in the midfield. The most important thing was he had a certain defensive ability, and his offensive ability was not weak either.

The striker was the well-deserved Cristiano Ronaldo.

It was a strange formation for the spectators. The person who was supposed to play as the center forward was not playing as the center forward, while the player who was supposed to play as the side midfielder was not playing as the side midfielder. And the defender who was supposed to play as a full-back was not playing as a full-back... Was Ferguson’s brains muddled by the stress?

Twain obviously did not think so.

Who was Alex Ferguson? He shouldered through the thrilling scene of the 1999 Champions League final. How could he be befuddled by a league tournament final showdown?

Therefore, Ferguson had to have his reasons for the arrangement.

It made sense for a center-back like O'Shea to play as the defensive midfielder, as Ferguson hoped to increase the defensive strength in the midfield to prevent the Forest team's counterattacks. Ever since Roy Keane's departure, Ferguson could no longer find a world-class midfielder who was good in defense and offense like the Irishman. Carrick originally joined the team as "Keane's successor," but he was better at controlling the pace and managing the dispatch in the midfield. His defense was far worse as compared to it.

In that case, what was exactly going on with the exchange of positions between Rooney and Ronaldo?

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While Twain was pondering to himself, Rooney had begun to dribble and break through with the ball in the wing.

Rafinha's defense was not as good as his offense, so he struggled to face up to Rooney. Beckham ran back from the front and tackled Rooney down from behind.

There was a flurry of boos in the stands. The only gratifying thing was that it had not yet reached an earthshattering point. It showed that although there were people who hated Beckham, not everyone did. It was the one time that Beckham had ruined Manchester United's attack. Even the Manchester United fans who did not hate him could not stand and applaud the player who ruined their attack.

The boos reached Beckham's ears, and he heard them, but he did not even cast his eyes at the stands.

The referee ruled that Nottingham Forest had fouled, and Rafinha returned to form the human wall. Beckham stood in front of the ball and Rooney, blocking him from sending out a swift free kick. He also took time to turn around and signal to his teammates to speed up the formation of the defense within the box.

Rooney got up from the ground and looked at Beckham, who was standing in front of him. When Beckham left Manchester United, Rooney was still making his mark at Everton. He transferred to Manchester United after the 2004 UEFA European Championship in Portugal and had never been teammates with Beckham. He had experience playing football with him on the England national team, and he had a small contradiction with Beckham during the competition.

He had a variety of impressions of the man. He was England's captain, the star player of Real Madrid, the superstar spanning across the world of commercial football, and so on. The impressions did not include him wearing a Manchester United jersey.

Ronaldo ran over to replace Wayne Rooney for the free kick. Beckham still did not step aside, so Manchester United's No. 7 motioned to the referee. Was Beckham's action a violation?

The referee came up and made Beckham move away. Only then did Beckham slowly move back to Rafinha to form a double human wall with him.

When Ronaldo ran up to pass the ball, the football quickly streaked across the front of goal. No one touched the ball.

The football sailed over the penalty area where most people were and landed on the other side.

Hargreaves appeared at the football's point of fall and stopped the ball. The Forest defenders, who had wanted to press out collectively, saw Hargreaves get the ball and could only stay in front of the goal to defend against Manchester United's second attack.

They could not let Hargreaves get the ball so easily. Someone had to rush up. The left-back, Gareth Bale rushed out and threw himself straight at Hargreaves.

Hargreaves did not get entangled with Bale. He passed the ball to Scholes, who pulled out to assist him. After Scholes dribbled across, he shot decisively toward the goal, and Edwin van der Sar did not have time to confiscate the football, but it was blocked out in the crowded penalty area.

Unfortunately, the man who fended off the shot was Manchester United's own player, Carrick.

The Manchester United fans could only hold their heads in their hands and lament the bad luck of the attack.

The football popped out and was grabbed by Forest players. Nottingham Forest took the opportunity to launch a counter-offensive, but their ball was stopped by O'Shea just after it went half of the field. Meanwhile, both Rio Ferdinand and Vidic retreated to defend at a high speed. Ferguson did not have to worry about the Forest team's quick counterattack because O'Shea's performance was a testament to his ingenuity in arranging such a figure in the midfield.

Nottingham Forest's quick counterattack did not happen, and they could only helplessly continue to withdraw to defend.

The more the game progressed, the more difficult the Nottingham Forest players felt the game was.

The tactic arranged before the game was that Ronaldo was a dangerous player and needed to be heavily marked. As a result, the Forest team's two sides became heavily guarded places. Rooney was the second most dangerous player. Moreover, because as a center forward, Rooney liked to retreat to get the ball, George Wood and the center-backs also needed to take care of the middle.

But now that Rooney and Ronaldo had switched positions, they were a little at a loss.

Furthermore, the pressure did not just come from the two dangerous players. Ferguson's team adopted a full-attack stance at home! Even O'Shea had to press past half the field. Manchester United was not a nobody team. If they went on full offensive, it would put a lot of pressure on the defense.

Twain did not expect the second point.

He thought that in such a crucial game, Ferguson would be steadier and more cautious. He would first firmly stabilize the defense and then contend with the Forest team.

He did not expect that the old man had no intention of doing so. He boldly instructed the team to go an all-out attack to crush Nottingham Forest at home.

As to guard against the Forest team's counterattack, O'Shea was the brake, but it was more important to suppress the Forest team's attack with their offense.

Twain thought to let the Forest team use defensive counterattack in the away game first to test the ground. He did not think they would face with such tremendous pressure the moment the game started.

He could not sit still.

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Although Ronaldo was the center forward, he did not stay in front of the goal. His position was flexible. He was just closer to the goal than when he played in the midfield. In his current form where he continued to score goals, being closer to the goal meant he was closer to scoring a goal.

Ronaldo had outstanding footwork skills and, at 1.89 meters tall, his header skills were not bad either.

Twain knew that, so he decided to pay no attention to Rooney at first, and squeeze Cristiano Ronaldo out of the penalty area instead.

He walked to the sidelines and indicated aloud to the defenders not to let Ronaldo enter the penalty area.

Ronaldo did not enter. After he received a pass outside the box, he kicked a direct long shot, which brushed the post to fly out. The close call made everyone on the Nottingham Forest team break out in a cold sweat.

Twain realized that his attempt was futile. Ronaldo did not have to be fixed in the box either. Ferguson arranged that because he liked his form and feel for his successive goals and thought that he might score in the game. Therefore, he put him in the forward position, which led him to be a little closer to the goal. A good player had a lot of methods to score goals. He could not be stopped by just keeping him out of the box. Moreover, Ronaldo used to be a midfielder, and a lot of those thirty odd goals were scored outside the box. In any case, he definitely had a way to score a goal.

Twain scowled. How could he prevent Ronaldo? Let Wood deal with him one-on-one? It was not in the wings but in the middle, in front of the box. It was impossible for Wood to check Ronaldo and not foul once for ninety minutes.

Ronaldo had scored six free kicks in various competitions this season. Almost every goal was brilliant and beautiful. Twain was deeply impressed by the free kick he scored in the game against Portsmouth.

Even if they relied on fouls to stop Ronaldo's breakthrough in the middle, he could still make use of a free kick to breach the goal to score. If it had been two seasons ago, no one would be concerned about his free kicks. Now, he could not disregard him. If not, they would concede the goal...

Twain bit his lip in silence.

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Impacted by Manchester United, the Forest players' performance on the field was unsatisfactory. Pressed under Manchester United's powerful offensive, they could only stay in full defensive stance, too occupied to fight back.

On the other hand, Manchester United launched a tidal wave of attack on the Forest team's hinterland amid the cheers from the home fans, wave after wave and each wave higher than the last.

Ferguson's objective was clear — use the home-field advantage to try to lock in the win in the first half with a tactic that Twain did not expect, while bringing the game to the pace that Manchester United was best at. Providing that enough leading advantage was established, and the players were in form again, how could Manchester United not be in charge of the game? Coupled with the deafening cheers in the Old Trafford stadium, the home-field advantage was not to be trifled with.

Ferguson watched on the sidelines for a while and found that the game was still within his control, so he turned and walked back.

As he turned around, he discovered that Tony Twain looked vexed as he stood at the other end. An indiscernible smile emerged on his face.