

Champions 921

Chapter 921: Entrapment

Emerging victorious in their game against Macedonia, the underdog with 4:0, and their game against Wales with 2:0, the team also won against Australia in their friendly match. The New England team led by Tony Twain had competed in three of the international Grade A competitions and had yet to lose any. With only three matches, Twain was able to prove himself worthy of the title “Godfather of Champions” that had been given to him. Apart from that, he received renewed recognition from his fellow Englishman on his stance to always pursue victory under any circumstances. Indeed, he was not simply a paper tiger but truly capable of this role.

However, not everyone agreed with this.

Macedonia, Wales and Australia were not outstanding teams. Notwithstanding that the game against Australia was merely a friendly match, these three matches did little to highlight any shortcomings of the team. Matches against such teams were definitely not the way to assess the actual standard of a team. Instead, the team should be challenging themselves with formidable opponents such as Serbia, who they would be playing in four days.

Unlike their previous opponents, Serbia had always been a force to be reckoned with in the realm of European football. Being a team with former Yugoslavia, they have always prided themselves on their high standards. Just take a look at the Serbian players who were playing in major European teams today.

There was Vidić who played the central defender for Manchester United and was undoubtedly the most well known Serbian player. Apart from Vidić, there were also defenders Ivanovic who played in Chelsea, Stankovic who played for Inter Milan, goalkeeper Stojkovic who played for Atletico Lisbon, and Stepanov, who played in Porto, Portugal. Defender Lukovic playing in Udinese, defenders Tasic and Katzal of Werder Bremen, striker Lazovic as well..

Being the highly experienced and seasoned players of this game, their presence in their clubs had a vital, symbolic purpose. The Serbian team, by virtue of having these accomplished players, sufficiently curbed the arrogance of the England team, causing the latter to feel wary of its competitor.

Vidić, the central defender for Manchester United and captain for the Serbian national team, claimed in an interview that he was not a tad bit afraid of dealing with the England team regardless of how intimidating they were. “I am very familiar with them since we get to play matches together every weekend. I will not be daunted by whatever players they have on their team no matter how accomplished they are because the deal in football isn’t just in the value of the player. This is our home match and we definitely have the upper hand.”

While the captain showed absolute confidence, Serbia’s head coach, Radomir Antik, kept a rather low profile. He conveyed to the media about England being a noble team as they were made up of many world-renowned star players. Besides, they also had with them a very competent coach who had led Nottingham Forest in achieving the title of Triple Crown. Serbia was nothing compared to England hence his goal for the upcoming game was for Serbia to attain a draw with England.

The English fans were happy to hear these words coming from the coach of the opposing team. However, Twain, unlike the fans, did not trust that Antik was actually intimidated by England.

“He’s a veteran. Do you know what it means to be a veteran, Des? It simply means that he has a lot of experience and can be extremely sly. Apart from the England team, I have only coached two other teams — Nottingham Forest and the Nottingham Forest Youth Team. On the other hand, Antik has coached six different teams. In his time of coaching in prestigious teams like Real Madrid and Barcelona, he has achieved success as much as he has experienced embarrassing failures. So in terms of experience, I truly pale in comparison. Do you really believe that their goal is to draw with us? Serbia’s goal is similar to that of Spain in 2016. However, they have lost in an away match with Denmark with a score of 2:3 in the previous round. What is the point of drawing with us? I might have still believed him if this was an away match and he wanted to aim for a draw” Twain explained with an apparent expression of doubt and skepticism.

As of then, the England team was on a flight from London to the capital of Serbia, Belgrade. All of the players were engrossed in their own activities — some of them were listening to music, some of them were playing video games, some of them were reading magazines and newspapers, some of them were enjoying a movie while the rest were taking the opportunity to catch some sleep.

Twain and Walker sat together to discuss the opponent they were about to face.

“Their center back has strong players hence I don’t think it is strategic to let Mitchell start. Mitchell’s body is not stable enough. After so many years, he has only been obsessed with his dribbling tactics without much improvement in his physical strength. I feel like that is all there is to him. When Nottingham Forest was met with strong central defense, his performance becomes compromised. It would be the same for this upcoming game.”

Walker asked, “So who are you going to use?”

“A striker with remarkable speed. Serbia’s centre-back doesn’t have much speed or agility. We can then break through their defense by using our fast and clever forwards.” At this point, Twain shifted his sitting posture and beckoned to Walker to come closer. The plane was making extremely loud noises and Twain did not want to strain his voice on his following sentences.

“We have to make some adjustments. I think this would throw Antik off guard,” Twain said with secrecy. “I plan to use Walcott as forward. He has good speed and agility which is apt for us to use against Serbia’s centre-back.”

Walker thought about it and felt that this plan could work and hence nodded his head in agreement, though he was still a little concerned. “Walcott did not really play as forward in Arsenal but...”

“That’s not a problem. He has played forward before. Besides, I will not be limiting him to the right side of the field in this game which will allow him freedom in his play.”

Twain laughed, “I know that the players from Nottingham in the England team think that I would treat them differently since I used to be the coach for Nottingham Forest. I am sure they are not the only ones who think that way and that the rest of the team shares that thinking as well. This started when I decided to substitute the captain Terry for Gerrard to George Wood. This game will serve as a great

opportunity to show all the players I don't play favorites. Even for George, it was his consistent, good performance and compliance with the tactical commands that earned him his status today."

"I thought that you'd already taken control of the team on your forty-sixth birthday."

"Not complete control." Twain opened up his right palm before clenching it again. "It seems like some people still doubt me even though they don't always show it. If I want them to work hard for me, I mustn't let them doubt me. Besides, there is something else troubling me, Des. The players in the national team are less driven than those in the club. At every training, some players whom were not at the previous training would appear. I need to rethink the way I portray myself in front of them..."

"I rarely see any coaches who put in as much effort as you do, Twain."

"It will be better in the future when the media helps with the publicity." Twain adjusted the pillow to his back and mumbled, "I'll take a quick nap. Wake me up when we're there, Des."

"Sure."

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When the plane touched down at the Belgrade Nikola Tesla Airport, it was already 8.30pm. There was little interruption by the media at the airport and the players managed to take the bus straight back to their hotel. Since it was late, they were unable to catch a glimpse of the sight people referred to as the crossroads of the Western and Eastern worlds.

The entire team visited Serbia's national stadium, the Maracana Stadium, the next day for some warm up training in order to adapt to the field that was foreign to the England team, which his attracted media attention.

There were even some Serbian fans who were holding Premier League jerseys and asking the England players for their signatures. Due to the extensive influence of the Premier League, the England national team had received much fame despite its mediocre results.

After Wood gave his signature to a fan who seemed no more than 10 years old, Twain gestured with his arms and cracked a joke with Wood, "George, can you imagine if he pointed his middle finger at you from the podium at tomorrow's game?"

Wood ignored Twain and walked straight into the locker room.

"How boring!" Twain grumbled.

The press conference was just as boring. This time, he attended the press conference with the opponent's coach, Antik, who complimented Twain non-stop. Antik spoke of Twain as if he were the celebrity of football today, which made some of the English reporters cringe.

"Tony Twain is an extremely outstanding coach, which makes it hard to believe that he had only just turned forty-six... Being so accomplished at such a young age has subdued the entire of Europe. Honestly, I'm his loyal fan. If I were the chairman of the club, I would definitely keep him at all costs... England is a formidable team and we have to be extra cautious even though this is our home game..."

Twain almost yawned in public at his patronising words.

I must a bigger idiot than Antik if I let these meaningless, stupid words boost my ego, Twain thought to himself.

But Twain did not translate his thoughts into his expression. He accommodated the conversation Antik has started and talked about his team but barely mentioned anything about Serbia. He had only politely expressed that Serbia was a team to be taken seriously when asked by the reporters. When the reporters demanded for elaboration as to why Serbia was to be taken seriously, Twain talked at length about the players "Vidic" and "Ivanovic" as if he had no clue of who else was in the Serbian team outside of the Premier League.

His response was unsatisfactory among the Serbian reporters. What an arrogant Englishman! This was no longer the eighteenth or nineteenth century ruled by the empire where the sun never set! Just wait and see, you snob!

However, Antik had a smile on his face the entire time and did not let Twain's words that underestimated the Serbia team affect him. To him, Twain's eleven years of experience was not the impressive part, but the fact that he was forty-six was really something. He had achieved much merit for his age and became the saviour for the England team, leading the team to three victories. His pride was not uncalled for. As a proudly successful professional, he must think that there was nothing in this world he could not do and nobody that he could not defeat. Serbia was such an insignificant team in Eastern Europe, so why would Twain let that bother him?

I was already sixty-five years old. I had encountered so much more in life than you have; people like him were a common sight.

He was half accurate about his analysis of Twain. Tony Twain was indeed a proud man and definitely arrogant in his ways, but he was surely not an idiot with negative IQ.

Upon completing the press conference, Twain called Pierce Bruce to ask about how the media reacted to his responses during the press conference.

"How was it, Mr 007? Do you feel like I was being an unbearable, arrogant braggart who was narrow-minded and could not see anyone else above him?"

"Honestly speaking, Twain. When I saw that you were putting on a pretense, I was slightly doubtful. How is it possible that you only mentioned the star players Vidic and Ivanovic from the Premier League? But I understood why later... If I didn't know you as well as I do,, I admit that I would have fallen into your trap."

Bruce's reply made Twain very satisfied. "That's great, you shall watch me to bear the frustration of the Serbian media. Ha!"

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The Serbian newspapers published the following day criticised the arrogance of the English men; Antik must be laughing at this news.

However, the match that night was completely out of his anticipation.

Before the match started, Twain told Mitchell in front of the entire team that he would not be playing as forward in this game. This decision totally threw Mitchell off and left the entire team in shock. Mitchell's performance in the recent games had been rather striking and basically secured himself the position of England's main center, so why did Twain not let Mitchell play when they were competing against such a strong team like Serbia? What exactly is the reason?"

Twain explained that Mitchell's strengths and techniques were incompatible to the strategy used by the Serbian team so Mitchell should take a break this round.

At the same time, Twain used this opportunity to bring across the message he always wanted to convey to the players: players from Nottingham Forest could also be taken off the main team just like Gerrard; no one has any kind of special privileges here. My team has never had any special privileges. What determined who was able to play as forward was contingent on your attitude as well as the strategy I employed.

After going through the strategy, Twain altered the arrogant front he had put up at the press conference and solemnly reminded his players that this match was a test for all of them. The Serbians were playing at home and would not go easy on them. For this match, they should be more attentive towards the counterattacks by Serbia and simultaneously put more pressure against Serbia in order to leave them with no way to counterattack. In addition, the players should strengthen their tackle and close defense in the first half of the match and most definitely not let Serbia have it easy in the midfield.

After all these were done, the rest of the game would depend on which team performed better.

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In the first half of the match, England had relatively better performance.

Antik had not expected that England in fact did not underestimate their opponent but instead played extremely aggressively in the first half of the match that Serbia was not used to. They had hoped that England would attack but they did not want England's midfielders to tirelessly tackle to steal the ball.

From the very beginning of the match, the Serbian players were continually tackled by the England players, rendering them helpless and confused as to how to continue playing.

The England team took advantage of this situation. Walcott had secured the score of 2:0 by the end of the first half of the match with a goal and an assist to goal.

Twain's arrangement in this game was beyond Antik's anticipation. Walcott and Mitchell were completely different types of players. Initially the Serbian team planned their strategy to target the play of Mitchell, but Twain unexpectedly substituted Mitchell with a highly agile and fast forward who disrupted the Serbian's defense from the wing to the midfield. The thirty-three year old Vidic was easily outdone by the stamina of Mitchell and Rooney who took turns to break the Serbian's defense.

In the second half, Serbia made some adjustments, specifically defending against England's agile striking. Their counterattack also started to look more impressive as they were able to get back a goal in the second half.

However, before the end to the cheers in the Maracana Stadium, England started to return the favour. This time, the scorer was the center back Whitley, he took an opportunity of a corner key to score with a header. The score became 3:1.

It was only a short time before they lost a goal, this adverse outcome impacted the morale of Serbians, and taking advantage of the mess, England scored another goal — 4:1, almost securing the win.

In the last phase of the competition, Serbia used a free kick to score against Joe Hart's goalmouth, but that was futile.

England, by their surprising sturdy attitude and initiation tactics, taking down their first strong opponent in their group on a 4:2 win on away ground.

Having three consecutive wins in the group and scoring ten goals, the team was extremely high in morale. It was as if Twain wanted to use consecutive victories to prove that even though it was his first time coaching a national team, it was still not an issue to him.

At the end of the match when Antichi and Twain shook hands, he looked very helpless.

After Twain shook hands with him, he patted him on the shoulder, he did not say anything. But he knew Antichi already understood the meaning, since the start of the match — he fell for Twain's trickery and is played around by him.

Chapter 922: Top of The Group

England's three-match winning streak in the qualifiers had greatly boosted the confidence of the English fans. Now they were beginning to feel that the media's proclamation that "this is the strongest England national team in history" was finally credible.

In particular, the away game of a major 4:2 victory over Serbia showed the offensive strength of the England team.

The England team had won big points consecutively, and the happiest people were not the fans, the media, and not even Tony Twain himself. The happiest person was Shaun Harvey, the English Football Association chief executive, who first contacted him.

Although Twain was not his first choice, he was a candidate whom he found. His good results meant that he had a discerning eye for talent. Furthermore, since Tony Twain took the job, he had not been spouting nonsense everywhere with his big mouth, with the exception of bickering with the media about the team captain role. Which made Harvey who was worried about it, sighed with relief.

Truthfully, after choosing Twain to be England's manager in the beginning, there was a time when he was really worried about getting up in the morning and finding his house door being fully blocked by the media, who came to ask him what he thought of Tony Twain's latest comments.

If such a thing were to happen every day, then it would not be a wonderful experience.

Everything was good now. Twain was focused on his work with the team and rarely started a war with the media or be provoked into a quarrel with other people. He also did not criticize the work of UEFA or FIFA.

Perhaps the reason for Twain's silence was due to the recent results? Once the results were not good, who knew what kind of universally shocking things the mad dog would do...

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Tony Twain was flushed with success working as the manager of the England national team. Even the UEFA's official website had dedicated an article to reintroduce the young "Godfather of Champions." He had previously been questioned by some pundits for having no experience in coaching the national team. Now those voices of doubts had disappeared.

But the more he was in the limelight, the more the Nottingham Forest fans would miss him.

The months of August and September were considered the honeymoon period between Flores and Nottingham Forest. He led the team to third place with five wins, one draw and one defeat after seven rounds of the league tournament.

The media which went where wind blew, touted Flores as the new hope for Nottingham Forest. The Forest team would be back on its path of glory under the helm of the Spaniard. To prove that they were not talking nonsense, they also gave many examples. One of the examples given was rather silly and pointless – Flores was a "madman coach" in Spain, which made him similar to Tony Twain's character. If Twain with the same character could be successful at Nottingham Forest, why could Flores not be as successful too?

But now the good luck was over.

Nottingham Forest had lost two games in a row under Flores' leadership before England's match against Serbia. After the national team's game had ended, the league tournament resumed. In the end, the Forest team tied the game with the "weak team", Middlesbrough. They did not achieve a single victory throughout October.

However, it was not over. Going into November, Flores's team beat Everton after much difficulty and Bentley was injured. Bentley left during the game with a serious injury and bad news came from the hospital the next day. He had to be sidelined for at least three months.

Bentley was seriously injured while the team captain, George Wood was suspended for two games after being red carded for a match against Manchester United. The game against Manchester United was widely watched. As the result, the two teams played an explosive game. Mourinho came on strong in the game against the Forest team while Flores was also not willing to lose to Mourinho, who was also an individualistic manager.

A violent physical collision happened from the very minute the game began.

Twain also visited Old Trafford to watch the high anticipated game, which he called the "rugby game" after.

Moke, who was the substitute for Bentley in the starting lineup, was fouled against twice in the opening ten minutes, which ignited a fury among the Forest players.

Following which, the referee became the protagonist in the ensuing match. He showed a total of thirteen yellow cards and two red cards.

Nottingham Forest won 7:6 on the number of yellow cards, while the two teams tied in terms of the red card count. George Wood and Anderson were both sent off for a red card each.

In the end, Manchester United beat the Forest team 2:1 at its home ground based on a somewhat controversial penalty shot and returned to the top of the points table. Nottingham Forest, on the other hand, dropped to the seventh place.

After the game, the commentator said, "Flores is in a big trouble."

Tony Twain would agree with him on this.

He was supposed to be here to observe the players for the next game against Denmark. However, both teams played really badly for the game and Nottingham Forest was even worse. The players whom he wanted to inspect did not play at the level which they were supposed to. It frustrated him. He had intended to follow the deployment of the squad which he had used for the previous game against Serbia, but now it looked like he might have to be forced to make adjustments.

Bentley's serious injury put him out of the running for the national team. Wayne Rooney's alleged assault charges from beating someone in a bar caused him to be plagued by the media and legal battles recently. Michael Carrick was injured during the game and the Manchester United football club did not want the national team to mobilize him for the match against Denmark because it would aggravate his injury.

The national team manager looked more relaxed than the clubs' managers because he could pick the right player from the entire country without having to consider the transfer fees. But there were not many players in the country who could meet Twain's requirements, especially in some positions. In a country such as England, where professional football was highly developed, no more than forty people could qualify for the national team.

Any major position that needed to be changed was a source of headache for Twain.

Therefore, Twain must be cursing both Mourinho and Flores at the very moment.

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On Wednesday, November 17th, the day of the national team's international match.

England was back at its home ground after two away games, welcoming the second-placed team, Denmark at the Wembley Stadium.

The twenty-six-years-old, Nicklas Bendtner, Denmark's number one star player, was repeatedly asked by the media, attempting to find out what he thought of Twain in interviews days before the game. He refused to answer all of these questions. For him, Nottingham Forest and Tony Twain were a thing of the past.

As of now, he had also left the unpromising Manchester City in the summer to join Everton. Although it was still a team with little hope of winning the championship title, at least the team had a desire to take a stab at winning honors. He rediscovered the joy of playing football in this team.

Twain did not use Bendtner to incite a psychological warfare. That once-talented kid was one of the biggest regrets of his coaching career. But now it ceased to matter a long time ago.

He was already a manager who had won the Treble. What else could he not let go of?

So, this game was just an ordinary qualifier for him. It was impossible for the media to hype things up through the feud with Bendtner.

If they hyped up the game as the fight for the top spot in the group, he would go along with a few remarks.

It was really a battle for the top spot in the group, with Denmark and England accumulating the same number of points and both teams had three wins with nine points each. But Denmark had fewer net goals and smaller goal difference than England, so they occupied the second place.

In fact, the top team in the group was just to fight for face. As long as a team was in the top two spots in the group, it could directly advance to the final stage of the competition. Even if a team was in third place, as long as it had the best result among the third-place holder in the group, there was a chance to go to Spain.

With the expansion of the 2016 UEFA European Championship, the number of teams allowed to participate in the competition had increased from sixteen to twenty-four teams, giving many mid-tiered European teams hope. The qualifiers for this time were also divided into ten groups. With the exception of England's group, which comprised of seven teams, the other nine groups had five teams. The top two teams in each group would advance directly to the next level. Then the third-placed teams with the best results in the top six teams would play two playoff games at home and away, where the final three teams would head to Spain.

England had done well for the group draw and it would not be a problem for the team to advance to the next level. But to advance as the top team in the group was more in line with the English Football Association's desired requirement. It would also make the English fans proud.

Twain made some adjustments to England's squad list for the game. Walcott would be in the right midfielder position while James Milner was on the left. Gerrard and George Wood were in the middle. Mitchell would start in the forward line while Rooney disappeared from the starting lineup. His replacement was Agbonlahor.

Both left backs, Leighton Baines and Joe Mattock were not in the starting lineup. Lescott, who could play as both center back and left back, was starting.

The right back was Glen Johnson, who had not appeared in the national team for quite some time.

In the press box, media from all over England gathered to discuss Twain's starting lineup list.

"He hasn't had a fixed lineup since he took over!"

"It's normal, he has only just taken over. How many games has the team played?"

“He’s trying hard to find the same feel of the Forest team, isn’t he?”

“It’s not just Tony. I’m not always happy with England’s selection in several positions, such as the right back...”

It’s great that he can lead the team to three straight wins in this kind of situation.”

“Denmark is not Serbia. The team is absolutely capable of creating trouble for us at home. I think the many changes that Twain makes, is not conducive to the results.”

For the reporters to be able to have the time to chat in the stands, it was obviously because the game was not good to watch.

The game played at the Wembley stadium was dull. Denmark’s tactic for the away game was very conservative and England had no other idea to deal with it in the face of such tight defense.

And Twain was not too interested in competing with Denmark for the first place in the group. He did not care as long as they could advance to the next level.

Having to face the Christmas period’s devil’s calendar in the league tournament soon, the players appeared to be weak and dispirited. They were afraid of injuring themselves. It was only natural for people not to be able to lift their spirits when the game was being played like this.

In the end, the “fight for the top spot in the group” that was hyped by the media before the game, dully concluded with a 0:0 score. The Asian fans who had waited to stay up in front of the television to watch the game must have been disappointed. But Tony Twain was not here to serve them.

Although the result was a 0:0 draw and the game was extremely dull, Twain was still satisfied. In the post-match press conference, he praised the performance of the Danish team. In fact, the performance of the Danish team had nothing to crow about. He also praised his team’s performance, which sounded more like a bald-faced lie. As long as one was not mentally challenged or brain damaged, anyone could tell that the England team did not perform well. Twain did this only so as not to put too much pressure on the players.

With the game against Denmark over, the two teams were tied in the points. England continued to rely on its advantage in the goal difference to come out ahead of Denmark and was ranked first in the group. Holding on to the top spot in the group, the English fans and the media would not make things too difficult for Twain.

After this match, the UEFA European Championship Qualifying tournament would not resume until April next year. In between, other than playing in friendly games, Twain would be flying around to pay attention to the performance of those players on the squad list.

This was the source of the biggest headache for him – unlike at the football club where he was able to closely inspect each player’s form every day, the national team’s players were scattered all over the place and they might not be able to maintain their forms, so he needed to be a “frequent flyer” in order to keep abreast of the latest status of those national footballers.

The most hateful thing was that the English Premier League did not have a “winter break” which meant that if he were a manager of another country’s national team, he would be able to have a break of more

than a week during the Christmas period which he could spend the Christmas holidays with his wife. But in the English Premier League, the games were more frequent especially during this period. So, he could only fly around to follow the teams, with his feet off the ground all the time.

“Maybe I should have bought a private jet...” complained Twain.

“You should be glad that you don’t have to pay for the accommodation and expenses for all the trips out of your own pocket, Tony.” Walker dampened his enthusiasm. Like Twain, Des Walker also had to fly around as the assistant manager. He was Twain’s most trusted man.

“I’d better be thankful that we’ve had no problems with the flights taken so far...” Twain rolled his eyes.

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During the competition schedule in November, Nottingham Forest had two losses, one draw and one victory which led to a further decline. More and more negative news about the Forest team could be seen in the media. There was also talk of discord in the locker room, with Gareth Bale openly questioning Flores’ coaching standards. In addition to him being previously blocked by Flores, his questioning caused a stir in the media.

Despite Flores’s strong denials that he was at odds with the players, it was clear that he was losing control of the team.

It was Evan Doughty who came out to voice his support of Flores, saying his manager position was solid regardless of the performance.

But only half a month later, he had to eat his own words that he spat out.

Before Christmas, the Forest team suffered three straight defeats and it was a mess inside and outside the team. Evan Doughty announced the suspension of Flores’ contract with Nottingham Forest. Flores became the first manager to be dismissed in the English Premier League’s new season.

Flores was also unhappy with the club’s top brass going back on its word. In an interview with the Spanish media after his dismissal, he lashed out at the club’s top brass, saying, “... They said they wanted to support me the day before yesterday, and then pushed me into the abyss when their backs were turned... I thought the managers in the English Premier League would have room to implement a long-term plan, but obviously I was wrong. In a team like this, you can’t get the time you need...”

Some people cheered Flores’ departure because they could not stand Flores’ botched performance long ago. They were looking forward to the new manager leading the team to a path of new glory. The other people felt that Flores was nothing more than a poor scapegoat. Nottingham Forest had been unable to find a suitable manager since O’Neill’s departure. Constant change of managers could only accelerate the team’s decline.

The locker room was very quiet with regards to the change of manager. No one came forward to comment on Flores’ departure, even if it was to say a good thing about him. It could be another indication of the terrible relationship between Flores and the players in the locker room.

Evan Doughty appointed the assistant manager, David Kerslake as the team’s interim manager before a new manager was found. But no one thought that Kerslake was competent enough to take on the

position. He had been living in the shadow of Tony Twain all along. In many people's view, he was famous because it had a lot to do with him being Tony Twain's assistant manager. As to what he was capable of as a person... Who would really care?

Tony Twain did not care if there was a change of personnel at Nottingham Forest that could shake up the English football world. For him, Nottingham Forest had really become a thing of the past. Pierce Brosnan once called Twain after Flores' dismissal, hoping to hear what he thought of the incident.

However, Twain felt that there was nothing to say. He said, "... It's quite normal. His results were not good, naturally he would be dismissed. Evan Doughty is unlikely to pay for the team's results. Flores must have forgotten the words on the wall of the players' tunnel at the Crimson Stadium. 'In addition to victory, it's still victory.' This is the Forest team's tradition ... When you can't bring home victory, then you have to go. What's the future for the Forest team? I don't know, I'm not a prophet..."

Now he was flying over the European continent. Before the arrival of Christmas, he had to go to Milan to watch a game and pay some attention to some of Lennon's recent performances. Lennon had inherited the traditions of Paul Ince and Gascoigne since his transfer out of the Forest team. He showed the signs of an English player not being able to acclimatize to playing in Italy. He had not been selected for the national team for a long time and hoped his performance would impress him this time.

Chapter 923: End of the Season

Lennon did not get much game time. As a result, Twain was not particularly impressed with the performance that he saw from him.

After the match, Twain met with Lennon.

Lennon viewed Twain as his mentor and a man whom he respected. Thus, he unreservedly told Twain about all his troubles.

He told Twain that he was a player who was brought into the club by Mourinho earlier. Mourinho was a manager who liked to play wingers and he was able to get game time under him. But, ever since Zola took over at the club, he has not been able to get much game time at all, because Zola did not think highly of him, especially since he was carrying an injury.

Since he is unable to play in games for long periods of time, he cannot guarantee that he would be able to perform well in matches when he does play. Twain would not be able to see his best performances even if he continues to spend time to observe him in Milan.

Twain told Lennon earnestly that he needed to fight for a chance to play in games if he really wishes to play football in Spain. He suggested that Lennon should consider going on loan or transferring to another club if he really cannot get any game time in Inter Milan.

If it had been any other person who had told him those words, Lennon would definitely not have listened. He would have refused to admit that his time in Italy has been a complete failure. However, the person who had said those words was his ex-boss Tony Twain. All he could do was to nod his head and accept Twain's words.

Lennon has to think things through carefully and decide if he should continue to fritter time here in Inter Milan.

Perhaps, footballers from England are truly not suited to play football in Italy. It's not just Italy, they do not seem to be able to perform well in other countries as well. The footballers who managed to continue playing well after leaving England are few and far between. The media might praise those footballers as being the best in the world, but their performances after leaving England have all proven that they are not good at adapting to a different environment.

The only time the England national team was crowned champions of a major international competition was back in 1966, during the World Cup that was hosted in England.

Perhaps the same goes for the England national team as well. The players become incapable to play football the moment they step out of England.

This is a curse that Twain is keen on breaking, not because he is patriotic, but because he wants to prove that he is an outstanding manager who is capable of leading an awful football team like the England national team to become champions.

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Lennon might not have surprised Twain, but his ex-assistant manager definitely did.

Twain spent the Christmas on the plane with his assistant Des Walker. However, he did not feel depressed over it, because Nottingham Forest has been performing well, and that has lifted his spirits.

Nottingham Forest's recent good form has also allowed him to find more topics to talk about with Walker.

It was not just Twain and Walker who were discussing about Nottingham Forest's new manager. All the media outlets in England were as well.

No one thought that he would be able to stay at the helm for long when he took over as the manager of Forest. Some people had not even heard of his name before...

It couldn't be helped, given how brightly Tony Twain shone. His ex-assistant manager was just like a star that was hidden behind the sun. It did not matter if he was a first-magnitude star. As long as he was near the sun, humans could not see him with their naked eyes.

A man like that who no one paid attention to previously was able to lead a seemingly exhausted Nottingham Forest team to three consecutive victories during the hectic and notoriously tough Christmas schedule.

The opponents that he won against were not bottom teams either. They were mid-table teams that were difficult to beat.

The man who no one paid attention to previously has pulled Forest up from the slum in which they had continued to sink deeper and deeper into. He had also cleaned up the mud from their bodies, and is now leading them to take big strides forward in a new direction.

Even Twain admitted that Kerslake's performance had surprised him during his conversation with Walker. Among all the people who had worked with him previously, Dunn was the person whom Twain thought the most highly of. He did not expect Kerslake to have improved so drastically without him noticing.

Kerslake was a manager who could never stay still during a match. He would always blow on his whistle and gesture with his hands animatedly as he stood by the side of the pitch. His behavior during matches gave people the impression that he was a very passionate individual, but he came off as being very humble during his interviews. He told the press that the players deserve all the credit for the team's consecutive wins, and that all he did was to reignite their desire to win.

Frankly, Forest had become a team that had lost all interest in winning after achieving the treble and going through all those struggles in the past.

To most of the Forest players, they have achieved almost every possible glory that a footballer can hope to achieve in his career. What other reason is there to continue to fight like they did back then? They were already standing at the pinnacle. Where else could they possibly go?

If Twain was still Forest's manager, he would have told the players that they have to keep fighting if they wish to retain their spot at the top. There are countless challengers who are trying to climb to the top to take their place from them, and they would never be able to eliminate all of them because they are just like ants and they would only keep on coming. Hence, they must never stop in their fight, and they must defeat all the challengers who come their way.

However, Quique Sánchez Flores did not say any of those words to the players. All he was concerned with was getting rid of Twain's influence over the team and leading them to further glory. In the eyes of the players, his vision for the future lacked persuasiveness. Every single one of them had already achieved almost every possible glory there is to achieve. If every Champions trophy they had achieved had turned into a ring, then all the players would have worn a ring over their every finger and their every toe... Why would they work hard to attain even more glory with you?

As an outsider, Flores was unable to truly become a central figure in the tight-knit Nottingham Forest team.

But, Kerslake was different. He was able to ignite the players' desire for victory because he has been working at Forest for a long time, and he was able to gain their trust much more easily. In addition, he was also more familiar with the players and he knew what they were looking for.

The players might not want to attain further glory, but they have to retain the glory that they have attained so far at the very least. No one wishes to become a team that could not even qualify for the Europa League despite attaining the Treble in the previous season.

What Kerslake said during the interview was very true. The current Forest team was a team that still had its main structure in place, and their strength could not be underestimated. The reason for the team's consecutive losses was not due to a lack of ability. It was due to psychological issues instead.

Having followed Twain for so many years, Kerslake was able to pick up a skill or two about how to manage the players' psychological state, and his methods were able to bring about a positive change in the players almost immediately.

The reporters also asked Twain about his thoughts on Forest's recent performances when he was watching a match in other stadiums as well.

Even though Twain hardly talks about Forest after his resignation, he could not help but praise his former assistant Kerslake now that he is the new interim manager and is performing quite well at Forest.

"He has done well, and I hope he would be able to keep doing what he does, not just as the interim manager, but as the manager instead. He has the ability to lead Forest out of their predicament... At least that's how I see it. David is a humble man, and I think that the good results are a good way to pay him back for his efforts..."

Of course, Twain did not forget about his current identity. To prevent others from thinking that he was being too explicit with his concern towards Forest, he added another statement at the end, "I am very happy that Forest's national goalkeeper is able to play football in a stable environment. This would be beneficial in helping him maintain his form."

He might say that, but the media knew very well that Nottingham Forest was the team that he paid the most attention to among all the Premier League teams. They know that because he has gone to watch Forest's matches numerous times...

Twain was clearly showing favoritism to Forest. His actions would be overlooked if they brought glory to the England national team. But, should England fail to perform in the Euro Cup, then Twain would definitely become the butt of criticism, and the various Nottingham Forest players who play in the national team would also get dragged down with him as well.

Twain's act of showing favoritism to Forest players is puzzling. He has always given others the impression of being someone who would fiercely protect his players. He would always choose to shoulder all the pressure alone, and he would never direct it onto his players. He even suffered a heart attack because he carried all the burden upon himself. So, why is he constantly putting the Nottingham Forest players under the spotlight now that he is the manager of the England national team?

If he falls, then everyone else falls with him too?

It sounds just like the kind of rationale that a lunatic would have.

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Christmas and New Year were becoming less and less significant to Twain since he has to work on both days either way. In fact, he has to work even more during those two public holidays because Shania is not around him. He would rather spend all his time working so as to dilute the loneliness that is induced as a result of him missing her.

Time passed by quickly. It was already June 2015 by the time Twain had a good understanding of everything that was happening in the Premier League.

The England national team played in three matches during this period of time. One of them was a friendly against Israel, while the other two were qualifiers for the Euro Cup.

England was able to win all the matches that they played in.

They won Israel at home 3:0.

They won Ireland away 2:0.

They won Armenia, who is the weakest team in their group, by a big margin of 4:0.

The England national team has never lost a match ever since Tony Twain took over. His titles of being a 'Treble Winner' and the 'Godfather of Champions' helped to lessen the animosity that the media held towards him due to his arrogant personality.

That is how the footballing world is. Results are everything. When you can produce results, you are treated like the God. When you are unable to produce results, you are treated like dirt.

Of course, there are also people who did not view Twain's results favorably.

Carl Spicer, who has always been a resolute anti-Twain, casted doubt on Twain's achievements as the manager of the England national team.

"Macedonia, Armenia, Australia, Ireland, Israel and Wales are not regarded as strong teams. They have to be classified as 'weak teams'. Both Serbia and Denmark are teams that Twain regarded as strong teams as well, but to me, they are weak teams too. We have a very good draw in the qualifiers. We might be in the group that has to compete in the most number of matches, but all our opponents are weak. Isn't it natural for us to win comfortably against weak teams? Why are there so many people cheering for Twain? He should only get on the headlines if he can't win against teams like that. Personally, I think that everyone should reserve their praises for Tony Twain until the day we play against a truly strong team. Until then, people should not think that Tony Twain would definitely lead England to glory..."

Which teams are regarded as a truly strong team?

"... I would consider teams like France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Brazil, Argentina as strong teams I suppose..."

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June is the time where many football clubs reap what they sowed throughout the past season. Most league competitions have entered the final stages of competition, and most of the football clubs should know their fates for the next season after working hard for the past few months. For the teams who are fighting to be crowned champions, for the teams who wish to qualify for next season's Europa or Champions League, for the teams who are fighting to avoid relegation... June is the month where they know the answer to their respective fates.

In the past, Twain would have been under the most psychological stress during this period of time. It would also be the period of time where he is the busiest and most exhausted. However, the tides have turned and now he is able to sit at the stands with his hands before his chest and simply observe what happens without a care in the world. He no longer cared about the Premier League title that so many different football teams fought for. He did not care about who won the other competitions and neither did he care about which teams were going to be relegated... He was just there to watch it all unfold before him as a spectator.

David Kerlake has proven that he has what it takes to become a good manager of a football team. Nottingham Forest might not have been able to become champions, but they were able to successfully

qualify for the Champions League under his guidance. This is a really good result considering what Forest was doing in the summer before the season started.

Coming in at fourth place would mean that last season's Champions League winners have to play in a qualifier to get a spot in next season's Champions League. However, no one associated with Nottingham Forest saw it as a form of humiliation. All the Nottingham media outlets were elated at how things have turned out.

Forest went through a turbulent and unforgettable season. They changed managers midway through the season, and they were also kicked out of the FA and EFL Cups early. They were even positioned outside of the top 10 in the Premier League once, and they were also eliminated from the Champions League after scraping their way into the Round of 16. Despite all those bad results, Kerslake was still able to lead the team to fourth place in the Premier League, and that was ample proof of his abilities as a manager.

It is rumored that Evan Doughty is considering giving Kerslake a long term contract as the manager of Nottingham Forest. To Twain, that would be the most correct decision that Doughty has ever made in the past season.

It is true that Kerslake is not some reputable manager who has achieved stellar results in the past. But, he is a part of Nottingham Forest, and he is able to get along with most of the players easily due to this status. In addition, he is also able to communicate well with the players as he is familiar with them and they are also familiar with him.

To Evan Doughty, Kerslake is a suitable candidate for the managerial position. He must definitely be regretting how he has failed to notice such a talented manager who was right there in front of him the whole time. He only knew to look in the distance, and that is why he has failed to see the pebble at his foot, and it is also why he has fallen on all fours afterwards.

Kerslake is not the kind of manager who has an immensely unique personality. He is also not the kind of manager who would talk back to his superior, even if his superior threw a temper and lashed at him. One would have a good idea of his temper by looking at how he served Tony Twain back then.

Kerslake, who is known as the 'Good Guy', would certainly not say a word about the chairperson's interference in the club's footballing matters either, and that is also his greatest strength. Additionally, he loves Forest more than Tony Twain, and he would never leave the job like Twain did even if he was unfairly treated.

It is even rumored that he rejected Twain's offer to become his assistant manager for the England national team. It would be hard to find another obedient manager like Kerslake who could still lead the team to victory.

Forest's chairperson has regained his confidence after experiencing consecutive setbacks over the past few months. He was certain that the Nottingham Forest fans would definitely forget the name 'Tony Twain' in a season's time.

11 years ago, he viewed Manchester United as his role model. But now, his new role model is Florentino Pérez, who is the president of Real Madrid Football Club. Pérez is known as 'Real Madrid's Godfather', and he also has the ability to deceive the masses with his words.

In Evan's eyes, Pérez epitomizes what a successful chairperson or president of a football club should be like.

He has long forgotten about the bitterness and humiliation he received at the Bernabéu Stadium a year ago.

The reason why he looks up to Real Madrid is because they would still be one of the most influential football teams in the world even if they failed to become champions of the Champions League.

Transfer news associated with Real Madrid would always hog the headlines and seize the attention of football fans all over the world. Additionally, the players are able to stir up a storm wherever they go. They are seen and treated as idols by countless people, and they are also able to make an entire country go crazy over them.

This is exactly the kind of influence that Evan Doughty dreams of having.

When Twain left Forest, Evan Doughty reflected about why his team was less influential than Arsenal globally. In the end, he figured that the blame was on Tony Twain. It was because of Twain that they were not able to have many superstar players in the team. After all, Twain was the biggest superstar in the club. Why would he allow others to come in and steal his spotlight?

Every time Evan hoped to bring in a superstar player with lots of influence into the team, Twain would always say that his current team structure is flawless, and that he did not need those superstar players to come in and ruin the atmosphere in the locker room.

Twain's words have really caused him to miss out on acquiring numerous superstar players for the team all these years...

Look at how Real Madrid is raking in so much money in Asia!

So what if they can't win the Champions League? They have the money and the power!

Evan Doughty could only sigh at those thoughts.

Forest has finally found a new captain for their ship. Manchester United, on the other hand, has finally reclaimed the title of Premier League champions under the guidance of Mourinho after missing out for so many years.

Mourinho has proven through his results that he is not inferior to Tony Twain, and that he is a manager who is capable of leading his team to become champions.

The finals for the Champions League was played in Milan. Real Madrid might have lost to Nottingham Forest the previous season, but they successfully lifted the tenth Champions League trophy in their club's history by beating Italy's powerhouse team, Juventus, at the San Siro Stadium.

Real Madrid waited for a total of 13 years just to lift the Champions League trophy once again. They have gone through a transformation to bring the number from 'nine' to 'ten', and now, they are the unprecedented ten-time champions of the Champions League.

To Evan Doughty, Real Madrid is no longer just a team that is rich and powerful. They are now a team that is rich, powerful and that has just been crowned champions.

Chapter 924: The Drama

The managers of the football clubs had already started to enjoy a short holiday. Only those managers of the powerhouse teams were required to appear in the media from time to time. Players with national team assignments were not yet able to take a break because when the league tournament was over, the national team's games were still waiting for them.

On June 11th, the England team would play a friendly match at home with the former South American powerhouse, Uruguay. Four days later, they would face their competitor in the qualifier, Serbia at the Wembley Stadium.

After playing this game, those national footballers were then able to go on their holiday.

In the game against Uruguay, England won with a score of 2:1. Gerrard and Rooney contributed the goals. The Uruguayans relied on the Palermo striker, Cavani to score one goal in the 90th minute.

They played a rather difficult game against Serbia during the home match. After Mitchell scored the first goal in the opening eleven minutes, Serbia launched a frantic counterattack that left the tired England team only able to ward off the attacks but without strength to hit back for a time. The 1:0 lead gave the Serbians hope, so they kept launching attacks for a while.

It was not until the last minute of injury stoppage time that Agbonlahor, who came on as a substitute in the second half, made use of the gaps left by the Serbians who fully pressed ahead in hopes of equalizing the score. He dribbled the ball over a long distance to wage a long-range raid and scored the decisive winning goal. The England team continued to hold on to its top spot in the group with a solid 2:0 victory over Serbia at its home ground and took another firm step toward Spain.

Next, the European football world entered the summer transfer period.

The countless exciting scenes which the fans looked forward to, were played out in front of everyone's eyes.

But for the Nottingham Forest fans, there were not many good memories this summer.

No matter what kind of banners they put up outside the football club, no matter how much they protested, they did not manage to make the team's main goalkeeper and the Russian national goalkeeper, Akinfeev stay in the team. The Russian national goalkeeper who once earned a lot of glory for the team with his own two hands, was deemed as the best successor to Peter Shilton in the Forest team, had gone to Manchester United for a fee of twenty-five million pounds.

Mourinho finally got the stable goalkeeper he had dreamed of, and the Forest fans once again staged a protest against the club's top brass.

Although the club subsequently signed on Schmeichel Jr., Kasper Schmeichel could not be compared with Igor Akinfeev on the same level in terms of both strength and fame.

Following which, it was not long before Woodgate left the Forest team for a transfer fee of thirteen million pounds and returned to Middlesbrough.

Of course, the most popular Forest players in the transfer market were still the trio of George Wood, Gareth Bale and Aaron Mitchell. If Evan Doughty was willing to, these three players could have brought him at least a transfer fee revenue of at least one hundred and thirty million pounds.

But Evan Doughty still was a little more rational. He had indicated more than once that George Wood was not for sale in the team, and a standard bearer that no amount of money could buy.

As for the other players... as long as the other party could make a crazy offer that he could not refuse, then they could all go as far as he was concerned.

Of course, some people also suspected if there was a club which would make an offer that drove the world crazy for George Wood, then Evan Doughty would not hesitate to push the Forest team's standard bearer into the transfer market.

Unfortunately, Wood was a defensive midfielder. Those clubs that were willing to spend big money on the attacking players were not willing to waste too much euros on a defender.

Instead, Mitchell and Gareth Bale were the ones who received a number of tempting offers.

Barcelona had made a bid for Mitchell for a fee of thirty million pounds as well as throwing in the German "Super Mario" Gomez, which enticed the Forest team.

Even Mitchell wondered if he should change to a different environment to play. The sale of Akinfeev by the top brass had made him unhappy. Moreover, Barcelona was a powerhouse club, so it was not a step down for him to go there.

But Twain did not want the team, which he had personally built, to fall apart so soon. He indirectly told the tentative Mitchell in his column that the players he was considering mainly competed in the domestic leagues. After all, the foreign leagues were too far away. He could not determine the condition of the players playing abroad in time. In addition, he used Lennon as an example, telling Mitchell that going abroad to play for a powerhouse club might not really be as easy and smooth.

The people at Barcelona must have hated Twain to the core because even if he no longer held the position as the Forest team manager, he would still try to go against Barcelona.

No one could have more influence and status than Twain in the minds of the Forest team's old players.

Now that Twain had indirectly expressed that he did not want Mitchell to play abroad, then Mitchell also listened and chose to stay. His agent was very disappointed but powerless because the player's personal will had the final say anyway. Even if the Forest team had agreed to Barcelona's offer, the transfer would not have been possible unless he could persuade Mitchell to accept Barcelona's offer. But it was clear that Mitchell's agent, who had been with him for a long time, did not hold more sway than Mitchell's mentor, Tony Twain.

With another loss of a huge income, Mitchell's agent must have hated Twain so much that he might have even cursed Twain in his heart during sex with his lover.

Gareth Bale's situation was more complicated.

Like his teammates, he had received a number of offers of interest from numerous football clubs. But he was not an English national footballer, so Twain had no right to beat about the bush and interfere with his going or staying.

Only he himself could decide whether to leave or stay.

A left back who was very good in offense and defense, was extremely popular, especially the said left back was also good at positional play.

Bayern Munich, Juventus and AC Milan were hoping to get such a good left back.

But none of the three teams could be considered generous clubs. The highest offer was from Bayern Munich for eighteen million pounds.

For Evan Doughty and Allan Adams, the highest offer was simply an insult to them. So, they turned down the offers from all three clubs, but did not close the door to any further transfer negotiations. It was still the same stance – as long as there was a crazy offer that would satisfy them, they would not be above selling.

While Gareth Bale still did not know where he would play in the future, another familiar Forest player chose to leave.

Matías Fernández had left the Forest team for a fee of twenty million pounds. He was heading to Atlético Madrid in La Liga.

Evan Doughty was not worried that his departure would affect the strength of the team because he still had Nicolás Millán who had grown up. But for the fans who followed the team through its most glorious years, every player's departure was like an old friend bidding farewell, which they were reluctant to part with.

There were also angry fans in Wilford who had put up protest signs that said, "Mr. Doughty, how many more talents do you have to sell?"

Their protesting voices were not done yet when Jonjo Shelvey in the team was sold for eight million pounds.

Until the start of the new English Premier League season, Gareth Bale was still embroiled in the transfer maelstrom.

Although Bayern and Juventus, as well as AC Milan chose to step back in the face of Evan Doughty's demand for an exorbitant asking price, a new buyer came in to fill the void they left.

The rich and imposing Real Madrid, the best club in the last century which had traditionally spent any money it had to repeatedly break world records in transfer fees, had made an offer of twenty-seven million pounds for Bale.

Evan Doughty was keen to build a good relationship with Real Madrid through the deal, but Allan told him that if they were to accept the offer of twenty-seven million, it would make them feel that they were too easy to deal with and the other party would lose interest. As a result, the Forest team countered with an asking price of thirty-four million pounds.

The asking price was not low for a defender... But it was not an appalling sky-high price. This amount of money was nothing with Real Madrid's overbearing wealth.

Therefore, the Forest fans panicked. They knew they might lose another favorite player. They recognize that going to the club to demonstrate no longer worked because no one cared about the fans' protests, especially when Evan was still the sole owner of the football club.

This time they turned to entreating the player himself.

Outside the apartment where Bale lived, the football fans began to gather on their own. Then, they sang the Forest team's song as well as sang songs of praises which they wrote for Bale. They held up signs and posters of Bale asking him to stay.

Meanwhile, Real Madrid had already accepted the Forest team's asking price.

It was a bad sign.

Because it meant that Real Madrid could already talk to Bale's agent about the contract. As soon as Bale signed the contract, he would leave Nottingham Forest forever, leaving the team he had been with for twelve years.

The pleas for Bale not to go became even louder. Many Forest fans used various ways in hopes that their favorite "little monkey" would listen to the fans' voices and not choose to leave even though they were aware that the current Nottingham Forest team held no appeal to make someone stay.

"The document for the contract came from Real Madrid." Bale's agent, who was also his father, told him.

In the past, Bale lived alone in Nottingham, with his father and mother living together. But throughout the summer, his father had to be with him.

The sound of the fans singing and shouting continued to be heard outside the tightly closed window.

"Gareth! Gareth! Gareth!"

Bale sat on the couch, listening to those voices and feeling somewhat lost.

"The terms offered by Real Madrid are very attractive." As a father and an agent, he always thought about his son. He looked over the contract.

His father turned to look at his son, and apparently he had not heard what he had said just now. He gave a sigh and said, "If you can't make a decision, I think you can give a call to Mr. Twain first."

Bale finally looked up and looked at his father.

"Well... I think maybe he has some advice, which may be better than my advice as your father." He winked at his son.

An idea seemed to light up in Gareth Bale's mind as well. Previously when the boss was still in the team, he would always ask him when he had anything that he could not make up his mind about. Why did he forget now?

Twain was sitting on the bed on the side, reading a book with a lamp on his bedside table. He wore black-rimmed glasses with a slight frown on his face. That appearance made him look much older than his actual age.

At this time, he and Bale were in the same city. He had also heard a lot of rumors about Bale's transfer, but he did not expect that he would receive a phone call from Bale.

"Boss, I need help." That was the first sentence that Bale spoke after the phone call was picked up.

"What's the matter, Gareth?" Twain asked despite knowing what it was about.

"I'm very confused right now... I don't know what choice I should make." Bale's voice sounded low and his mood was depressed.

Twain was not in a hurry to answer. He cocked his ear to listen, and found a faint noise coming from the other end of the line.

"Haven't the fans left yet?" He turned over to take his watch on the bedside table. It was almost eleven o'clock in the evening.

Apparently, Bale also looked at the time, and he replied, "They'll dispersed in another half an hour." It had been like this these few days, and Bale was used to it.

Twain smiled quietly and said, "Gareth, would you like to stay with the Forest team?"

Bale shook his head and replied, "I don't know. I used to be very determined to stay on... But after a season, I'm undecided..."

"Do you want to hear my opinion?"

"Yes, I suppose."

Twain was silent for a moment as he removed his glasses off the bridge of his nose and put them aside. Then he closed his eyes.

He seemed to be reminiscing about his time with Bale, how he had a chance encounter with the Welsh kid, and how he brought him to Nottingham... And his interesting and nagging father.

"Gareth..."

"I'm listening, boss."

"If I were an ordinary Forest fan, I think maybe I'd sing by your window tonight to try to make you stay..."

"So, are you saying you want me to stay?" Bale's tone held a hint of anticipation.

"Listen and let me finish, Gareth. However, I'm a football manager and some things can't be completely decided based on emotions. Of course, it stands to reason that it does not mean that it will be necessarily better than in the Forest team if you go to Real Madrid. There may be a better possibility than here, but there is a worse possibility than here. There are many possibilities ahead in the future, and I can't tell you which one might be better. If I ask you to stay and the Forest team does badly, then I

will be doing you harm. If I let you go and you lose yourself in the locker room of a powerhouse club, I will also be hurting you.”

Bale listened patiently.

“So, I think you should follow your original thinking. But you’re only twenty-five years old. It’s normal to want to go out and experience what’s out there.”

Twain did not give his choice because it was not any of his business.

After listening to him, Bale asked, “Boss, in terms of feelings, you don’t want me to leave, do you?”

The remark touched into what Twain had in mind. Truthfully, his feelings could not accept the reality since the first Forest player he knew was sold. So, he was trying not to pay attention to the transfer rumors associated with the Forest team.

Kompany, Pepe, Akinfeev... These people were the players who contributed and helped him forged his legacy. As a manager who had devoted all his energy to the team, he valued the attachment.

“If it were possible, Gareth, I mean if it were possible... I’d rather you all don’t go.” Twain said these words with a lot of deep emotions. It was not fake at all, because that was what he really thought deep inside. “But...” He emphasized his tone and made a turn in the conversation.

Just as he was about to get ready to go on, he was interrupted by Bale quickly saying, “No more buts, boss, I know how I should choose!”

Then he hung up.

Twain stared blankly at the phone in his hand. He thought he had already guessed what Bale would do. Although he felt a little selfish, he was also very happy.

Indeed, he was very happy.

He laughed.

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One day after the night, the same place, the first light, when the night wind has not yet blown away the heat of the day, here has gathered no less than a hundred people. They held up banners and portraits of Bale, sang and shouted to save Bale’s heart with the feelings of the fans.

Today’s daytime sports news and media reported that Real Madrid’s negotiations with Bale had reached a critical stage. Perhaps it might be possible to announce the matter of Bale’s signing to the team by the end of the week.

As the current vice-captain of the Forest team, Gareth Bale enjoyed a high prestige among the fans. He came out of the Forest’s youth camp and was an iconic figure like George Wood. He was optimistic and cheerful. Even when he was seriously injured, he did not give up football. He was the main player during Tony Twain’s brilliant era. The “little monkey” moniker reflected everyone’s love for him. If such a player were to leave the Forest team, then what kind of confidence could the Forest team still give the fans?

As more and more fans gathered and their singing grew increasingly louder, some people noticed that the window that had been closed for the past several days had been opened.

More and more people noticed this change, and they stopped their singing and shouting as they looked up at the window.

“Are you certain, son?”

Bale’s father stood inside the house, holding his cell phone and asked.

Bale was standing at the window. The night breeze blew and flapped the curtains. It fluttered his hair and his heart. The black figures of the crows below looked like there were more people than there were yesterday. They all lifted their heads up at him.

“Yeah, Dad. I’ve made up my decision.” Bale nodded.

He walked to the window and shook out the item he was holding in his hand. A breakout of cheers erupted below.

Because what he held in his hand was the Nottingham Forest red jersey.

Behind him, his father dialed Valdano’s number and said, “... Mr. Valdano? I am... Yes, I have his answer... My son...” He turned his head toward Bale standing at the window. He was waving to the fans below, and there was another burst of cheers.

“He is very grateful to Real Madrid for their interest in him. It is the dream of any professional player to play for a great team like Real Madrid... But my son has reiterated his love for Nottingham Forest to me. He will not sign the contract and will remain at Nottingham Forest.”

Bale put the team emblem on the Forest jersey on his mouth and kissed it. The cheers below became even louder.

“Gareth! Gareth! Gareth!”

“Forest, Forest, Nottingham Forest!!”

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The next day, Bale’s father contacted the media to announce Bale’s decision to stay in the team, which completely put the Nottingham Forest fans’ minds at ease.

Perhaps the most disappointed person was the Real Madrid president, Florentino because the player whom he was interested in had turned down his offer.

The most unhappy person was probably Evan Doughty.

Bale pledged his allegiance to the Forest team, and the Forest team’s first-in-command did not appreciate the kindness in his heart. His rebuff had cost him the chance to build a good relationship with Real Madrid and also caused the loss of a lot of money...

But on the face of it, he also issued a statement, saying he was very pleased that Bale had finally chosen to stay, proving that loyalty was priceless. He assured Bale would bring glory back along with the Forest team.

But perhaps everyone was hissing him in their hearts...

Kerslake later said he was pleased that he was still able to see Gareth Bale's name on the new season's roster. The manager's delight was from the heart, compared with the chairman's hypocritical show of affection. Bale was definitely an irreplaceable player in the team. With him around, they did not have to worry about the left side of the field.

The Forest team's most dynamic transfer drama of the summer was over, and the new season had begun...

Chapter 925: Qualified for the Next Round in Advance

The new season has commenced for half a month, and it was time for the England national team to play in games once again.

However, Twain has an issue on his hands. He has trouble coming up with the list of players that he should call up for international duty.

Only three matches have been played in the Premier League so far, but there were already quite a few players who have picked up an injury. Wayne Rooney injured his thigh and has to rest for a week. Michael Carrick twisted his ankle and needs to rest for two weeks at the bare minimum. Bentley pulled his ligament yet again after recovering from his previous injury and would be out for at least a month. Stewart Downing strained his calf during the match against Wales on 24th August and would be unable to play for two weeks. Additionally, John Terry also picked up a red card in that same match against Wales, and has been suspended for two matches.

All the players who picked up an injury have to be substituted. Twain has to find suitable players to fill in their roles.

Thus, Chris Cohen received his very first call from the national team. They told him to pack his bags and make his way over to London to meet up with the national team before they set off for Macedonia.

Cohen might be a regular first team player for Nottingham Forest when they won the Treble, but he has never been selected for the England national team before since the position that he plays in is typically occupied by Stewart Downing and James Milner, who are much better players than he is. Cohen is much more average across all aspects of his game, and his only strength is that he is very eager to track back to defend.

Twain showed favoritism towards Forest once again by selecting yet another Forest player. This time however, the criticisms directed at him were significantly lesser, because his team has been winning all the matches that they played in so far. As long as the England national team continues to win, who cares if he swapped the entire national team for Nottingham Forest?

Cohen felt flattered after receiving the call from the Football Association. He was then certain that it had not been a dream or a prank done on him by some reality show when he received a subsequent call from Twain.

“Chris. I was the one who promoted you from the reserves to the first team back then. Now, I am also going to be the one to bring you over to the national team from Forest. Honestly, I am under a lot of pressure. If you don’t perform well, I would receive a lot of flak from others. I don’t care about getting scolded, but if you guys don’t perform well, it’d definitely lead to discord in the England national team...”

Cohen understood what Twain was getting at. He replied, “Rest assured, boss. I will definitely not embarrass you!”

Cohen was brought into the national team as a potential replacement to the injured Downing. Twain could not guarantee him the chance to play in the match, because competition for the position that he plays in is fierce.

Adriano Moke was envious of Cohen for being selected for the national team. He has never received a call from Twain at all so far despite becoming a regular player for Forest recently. Twain also chose to play Walcott instead of him when Bentley picked up an injury previously.

Manchester City’s Micah Richards is the player selected to replace John Terry. Richards is a gifted player and there are many people who wish to see him play for the national team, but Twain refused to bring him into the team because his performances have been inconsistent recently. Twain would rather anger half of the Mancunians than to take a risk with Richards.

Richards rose to fame when he was still a youth player and he is well-known in the Premier League as well as the European footballing scene. He stood out among other players of his same age, and as a result, he was frequently selected for the national team when Capello was in charge.

However, his experiences since young have caused him to become proud and arrogant, and that has affected his performances on the pitch as he often loses his focus when he is playing. Thus, Twain refused to pick Richards for the national team even though there were many people who wanted to see him get picked. He did not want the vice-captain of Manchester City to get too ahead of himself.

Ever since Twain took over, Richards did not even get picked once for the England national team, and that has led to speculation among the Manchester media outlets that there could be a possible conflict between Richards and Twain.

Twain never admitted that there was any conflict between them, and Richards would only complain here and there about not getting picked for the national team.

Now that Terry is absent however, Richards has finally gotten his ticket into the national team for the very first time.

When there is a first, there would also usually be a second. Richards just needs to know how to make full use of the opportunity that he is given.

Michael Carrick was unable to participate in the international competition due to an injury, and Tottenham Hotspur’s Fabian Delph was the reinforcement that Twain brought into the team to replace

him. The player who replaced Wayne Rooney was Everton's top striker James Vaughan, and the player who replaced Bentley was Blackburn Rover's Matt Derbyshire.

Twain then set off for Macedonia's capital Skopje with a team comprising of all the aforementioned players.

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Macedonia would not be able to threaten England in any way despite having the home advantage. That was how the England fans thought prior to the start of the match.

The England players thought the same way as well. England was able to achieve nine wins and one draw in the ten qualifiers that they played in thus far. Qualifying for the next round in advance was not an issue at all. None of the players cared about their other opponents in the group stage anymore.

After the match against Macedonia started, it looked like England was en route to their tenth win. Nothing seemed to suggest anything of the contrary.

It had only been seven minutes into the game when Walcott made his way into the penalty box and then crossed the ball into the middle. Mitchell then jumped into the air and comfortably headed the ball into the back of the net.

England led Macedonia by 1:0.

The England players began to relax after they went into the lead early in the game. They lost their focus and began playing with their heads in the clouds.

Twain was extremely upset with what he saw. He paced about the side of the pitch and kept gesturing and yelling for his players to continue to attack.

Macedonia performed much better than they did when they played against England previously in an away game, and they threatened England's goalpost numerous times.

England was only able to score their second goal on the 72nd minute of the match. Richards headed the ball that had been sent in from the corner into the net, and England ended the match with a score of 2:0.

Richards was thrilled after scoring the goal. He ran in front of the cameras and yelled at the top of his lungs. He was happy that he has finally proven his worth after being treated coldly by Twain for an entire year.

Twain did not commend the team's performance after the match ended. Instead, he mercilessly derided the players in the locker room.

"There was a total of 16 shots in the entire match, but only three were on target!" Twain definitely had reason to be angry based on the statistics. "Should I be happy about how we are so efficient because we are able to score two goals with just three shots on target? Or should I feel regret at how you have missed nine of those shots? There were also 4 shots that had been blocked... These are your statistics for the match, gentlemen! Look at how you guys played against a small and weak Macedonia team! Do you all think that you have what it takes to face bigger and stronger opponents?"

None of the players dared to breathe a word. They knew that what their boss was true, and that they had put in a mediocre performance for the match. They just could not pump themselves up for the game when they know that they are up against a weak team like Macedonia.

Twain looked at the players before him. He knew very well that his words would only fall on deaf ears whenever the team faces a very weak team. The players all have minds of their own, and they would not listen to everything that he says. They would inevitably look down on opponents that they deem to be weak, and they would then play according to their own judgement.

After all, they are human beings with a life. They are not puppets on a string.

“I don’t ever want to see a match like this one ever again.”

Twain said those words and left the locker room.

The players looked at each other incredulously after Twain left. They could not understand why their boss would be so angry. They might have looked down on their opponents, but they still won the match anyway.

They did not know that what Twain valued the most was spirit and willpower. Twain did not mind if the team lost a match, but the players must never lose the fight and determination in them.

Looking down on one’s opponents is not terrible. Having a lax attitude towards any match is. If the players continued to behave and think in such a way, it could gradually become a habit that is hard to break, and it could then end up delivering a fatal blow to the team.

Only the Forest players understood why their boss was so upset, because those were the same exact demands that he made on the Forest players when he was the manager.

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England won against Macedonia. It was a good result, even if Twain was not very pleased with the way the match had played out.

England now has a total of 25 points and they are first in the group. Denmark was only able to end up with 20 points because they drew with fifth-placed Ireland 1:1 in the latest match. There was now a five point gap between the first placed team and the second placed team.

England’s next match was against Denmark away. The winner of the match would get six points, and thus, if England manages to beat Denmark, they would be able to qualify for the next round of the competition with two games left to play.

To the England press, the ticket to Spain is already firmly in the grasp of the England national team, because defeating Denmark away would not be an issue at all. England had played against Denmark previously during the qualifiers, and the press was certain that neither Denmark nor any of the other teams in the group would cause any problems for Tony Twain and his team.

Denmark and Serbia might have been regarded as strong teams in the past, but now, both teams seemed weak and vulnerable against the strong and powerful England.

The clamorous England press started calling the current England national team as the strongest team in the country's history, and they bragged about how the team would dominate the whole of Europe. Neither Serbia nor Denmark would be able to stop the team in their tracks, and Tony Twain's unbeaten record would only persist.

Twain was sick of hearing comments like that.

The press being overly positive would definitely affect the team's emotions. Look at what happened in Skopje. They were lucky that they were only up against Macedonia. What if they had been up against Denmark instead? The team known as the 'Northern European Pirates' would certainly not miss out on a golden opportunity to defeat England.

Twain could not help but feel a twinge of nervousness over England's next match. What worried him even more was that the press's arrogance and pride would lead to disastrous outcomes during the Euro Cup.

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The players noticed that their boss was not smiling as much as he did in the past ever since the day he criticized their performance in Skopje.

He was also much more cautious during his interviews when he discussed about Denmark. He kept emphasizing that Denmark was a strong team and that he respected the team.

No one could believe that an arrogant manager like him would suddenly become so humble.

His behavior set the players' tongues wagging.

"The boss is behaving oddly..."

"What's odd about that? He's just putting on a show before us!"

"Putting on a show?"

"He doesn't want us to underestimate our opponents."

"But Denmark isn't a team that we would underestimate."

"Not everyone might think that way. After all, our team has been on a winning streak. Even I don't think we'd have a problem winning against Denmark..."

"Yeah, that's right! We are definitely going to qualify for the next round in advance. I don't know what the boss is worried about..."

"They are a team that we can win against comfortably! I really can't get myself pumped up for the game."

"Look at you! You just underestimated our opponents!"

"Ah..."

Discussions like that occurred frequently among the players.

The day before the match, Twain gathered the entire team over for a tactical meeting at the hotel that they were staying in. However, when the meeting started, Twain did not discuss his tactics.

The first few words that came out of his mouth startled the players.

“I wonder if we should lose to Denmark on purpose.”

Twain rubbed his chin as he said those words and he did not look like he was joking. All the players and staff members were shocked and they stared at him with their eyes bulged and their mouths agape. They did not know why their boss would say that.

“We are definitely going to qualify for the next round anyway. It doesn’t matter if we lose a match. I don’t really care about my unbeaten record either. It’s meaningless to me. I’d rather dampen the press’s mood a little by losing the match... But, are you guys willing to do that?”

Twain stared at the players as he asked the question.

As the captain, Wood stood up and replied to Twain, “I don’t like doing that, boss.”

“And your reason is?”

“I don’t like to lose. And I especially don’t like losing on purpose.”

Several players concurred with Wood and they echoed his words.

“Boss, actually...” Mitchell stood up to speak as well. “I don’t think you need to worry about us being affected by the press’s words. We are not kids who don’t know anything.”

Mitchell’s words was met with approval by several players once again.

Twain threw out his hands before him. “Do you think I’m worrying for nothing? I can already see from some of your faces that you guys are underestimating Denmark. Some of you must be thinking that Denmark is a team that we can win comfortably against, right?”

A few players scrunched up their necks and lowered their heads.

“I’d have to make some changes to the starting line-up, since all of you do not wish to lose the game...”

Thereafter, Twain included all the Nottingham Forest players into the starting line-up.

Joe Mattock, Chris Cohen, Mitchell, Agbonlahor and the captain, George Wood were all named as the starting players.

Twain then faced his team that was comprised mainly of Nottingham Forest players.

“You all know what I want!” he bellowed.

“Victory!!”

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Denmark tried their best to put up some form of resistance against England’s attacks, and that is also how they managed to score a goal.

Still, England proved too strong and powerful for them. England was just like a raging storm, and the Danes could not even lift their heads amidst the pouring rain.

The final score for the match was 2:1. England beat Denmark away and their victory has allowed them to qualify for the next round of the competition in advance with two games left to play.

When the referee blew on the whistle to signal the end of the match, the England players ran onto the pitch to hug their team mates who had played for 90 minutes. They knew that they were guaranteed of a spot in the Euro Cup that would be held in Spain, and nothing was going to change that.

Twain heaved a long sigh of relief before standing to his feet. He then balled his fists and waved them in the air. His colleagues soon had him in their embrace.

The very first goal that was stated in the contract had been accomplished.

From now on, all he had to think about was the Euro Cup.

Shaun Harvey, the chief executive of the England Football Association, stood up to applaud Twain and his team at the stands. He then smiled proudly at the person next to him before going on to brag about how he has a discerning eye.

“If I hadn’t been the one to give him that call back then, would we even be seeing these sights today?”

“They say that Tony Twain is a recalcitrant man. But, I can’t tell that at all now that he is working under Mr. Harvey.”

Twain has become rather submissive and obedient for the past year after becoming the manager of the national team. There were quite a few people who believed that his change in behavior would not have been possible if not for Shaun Harvey’s charisma.

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The news of England’s qualification into the next round of the competition became a form of motivation for some of the other teams who were hoping to qualify just like them.

One of the matches that took place the next day was between Wales and Serbia. In the end, Wales defeated Serbia 2:1 away after a grueling match. Since Denmark lost to England earlier, Wales was able to move up from fourth place to second place in the group and they led Denmark by two points.

Wales now had a good chance of qualifying for the next round by coming in at second place in their group.

One point worth mentioning is that both of Wales’ goals in that match had come from the same person.

Gareth Bale scored two goals from free kicks, and he single-handedly sent Wales into the second place in the group.

His goals also sent the whole of Wales into an uproar, because their football team finally has a chance to participate in an international competition. Bale’s fame skyrocketed, and the entire country extolled his performances. However, none of those things mattered to Bale. The only thing that was on his mind was the promise that he made with Twain by the side of the pitch.

I have to go to Spain!

Chapter 926: The Group Draw for the Final Series

Gareth Bale finished all the qualifiers with the conviction to go to Spain as Wales resisted the comeback pressure in the last two matches to earn its right to qualify for the European matches as the second seed.

The result had a huge response at home in Wales, who finally reached the European Cup matches again after 1976. They finished in the top eight at the then European Cup as the Welsh media hoped that this time, under the leadership of Bale and Ramsey, would at least match its best results back in history.

On the night when they were leaving, Bale called Twain. Although it was extremely noisy on his side, but Twain could still hear Bale's hissing roar, "Coach! We are going to Spain! We are going to Spain!"

Next to it, there seemed to be someone echoing loudly, "Spain! Spain!"

Twain knew that they were celebrating this rare victory, hence he did not bother Bale much. That, coupled with Bale's current condition, meant that he probably would not listen to anything Twain said. Thus, he just gave a simple congratulations and hung up.

Although Wales reaching the series this time round, was thanks to the European Cup expansion from 16 slots to 24, the Welsh still had their reasons to celebrate.

Unlike Wales' national revelry, England were calmer on being able to leave the group stage. After all, they were regulars at the European Cup and should only be on the headlines if they could not go to Spain. Twain being able to lead the team out of the group stage should count as his first duty accomplished.

The actual European Cup elimination series was the real test.

At the end of November, the last three qualifying teams were awarded a two-round home-and-away play between the top six teams, to decide the last three teams which was going to qualify for the European Cup.

Then in Nyon, Switzerland, the head coaches of the twenty-four teams gathered for a group draw ceremony organized by Union of European Football Associations.

Twain participated in several group draw ceremonies. Even if it was for a country team, there was not much difference. At most, he would just need to meet more head coaches for the country teams. However, he himself was still the focal point for the media.

Two days before the draw, a list of The European Cup groups was reportedly leaked from within Union of European Football Associations. Regardless of the authenticity of the list, it quickly caught and attracted the attention of the media, so the internet and the social media news immediately became the main voice of the mainstream media.

Reporters who came to interview also took this question to ask Twain, because England's grouping on the list was not fortunate – they were allocated into an extremely strong group.

The group ingress in the final stages of the European Cup would first identify the seeded teams and divide all the teams into the ABCD four tiers according to the total points of their last World Cup qualifiers, the previous and the current European Cup qualifiers. The hosts and defending champions would qualify directly for the seeded team, with the rest of the seeded teams coming from the first-tier teams.

In the group list, which is rumoured to be an “internal leaked version”, England was placed in Group D as a seeded team, along with Sweden, Germany and Denmark.

Germany being the second tier team was not surprising as they did not perform well in last year’s European Cup qualifiers between Poland and Ukraine, so they were only able to qualify for the finals in the final round through extra time. However, as it was rare that there would be strong teams at the second seed like Germany, it was England’s misfortune that they would still meet Germany.

Reporters were keen to hear what Twain thought about the leaked version of the group list. Before this, they had previously interviewed Germany’s head coach, Sammer, who thought that the list was made up by journalists and was not worth evaluating. Then they went to interview Sweden coach Roland Anderson, whose answer was the same as Sammer.

But it was common sense that they thought this way.

The group draw was an important thing and now that there was a “leaked version” even before the start of the group draw, which head coach would dare to evaluate it? They did not even know if the version was real, how would they even form an opinion about it?

But the reporters knew what kind of person Twain was — his talkative mouth had been dormant for more than a year and it was time it would light up again.

Twain did not disappoint them either.

He did not seem to doubt the authenticity of the list as he followed it with some opinions on his “group opponents”.

“Germany is a strong team, I know all about England and Germany’s feud ... There is nothing worthy to praise about the matchup results between England and Sweden either, so we need to be careful in handling that ... Denmark is a very tough team and I played against them during the selection matches but I didn’t know we would meet again this time. They are a tough team, and you will realize this when you analyze our matchup results during the selection matches, as those ended in a victory and a draw, we need to be careful...”

A reporter finally could not hold back, as he asked bluntly, “Mr Twain, why are you prepared to express your opinions on this group draw list?”

Twain purposefully acted surprised, “Is there any issue with this list?”

“It is alleged that this is a leaked version ...”

Twain's laughter interrupted the reporter, "Whether it's the European Champions Cup or the European Cup, when is there not a 'leaked version' out before the game? And we would always find out after the draw that the leaked version will be always a bit similar to the final official version..."

"Mr. Twain, do you mean that the results of the draw have long been determined by Union of European Football Associations?"

The reporters roared with excitement, and at last they heard the voice they wanted to hear most.

Twain's face was immediately darkened, as he stared at the reporter while asking, "I didn't say that, if you reported that I said that on the news, I'll insist on my right to accuse you of slandering me, Mr. Reporter."

The atmosphere at the scene immediately cooled down.

Twain took the opportunity to get out of the reporters' circle and walk into the conference.

In there, he met with his boss, the FA's chief executive, Shaun Barclays.

"There are so many reporters surrounding you outside, what are they asking?" He glanced a little warily at the excited reporters outside. He was worried Twain said the wrong things again.

"What else other than the leaked version of the lottery result?" Twain asked as if it was not very important.

"You didn't say anything, did you? Mr. Twain." Mr. Barclays was clearly nervous.

Twain grinned, "What are you worried about, Mr. Barclays?"

Barclays could not easily said what he was thinking as he frowned and patted Twain on his shoulders, "Let's go, Mr Twain. The group draw ceremony is about to start."

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Unlike the leaked version, England was not placed in Group D but instead they were placed in Group C. This made several people more convinced that the leaked version of the team lottery results were fabricated, because as there would always be several similar rumors before every match, everyone was accustomed to this."

After the seeding team was done, it was time to draw for the second-tier teams.

When it was the turn of Group C, the draw guest, former Madrid flag bearer Raul Gonzalez from Spain, held up the ping-pong ball in his hand. As he pulled out the note from within the ball and read out the name on it, the note appeared on the big screen behind him.

"Germany."

There was a burst of jeers at the scene.

The camera swept through the positions the coaches were sitting and found Tony Twain, only to find that he had put his finger in his mouth and was happily jeering at the results too.

If it were not for the image everyone already had for Tony Twain, they would think that he was a passerby who only wanted to join in the crowd, and not one of the parties involved...

“Mr. Twain!” Barclays, who was sitting beside Twain, was glaring at him.

Twain glanced back at him and booed a few times. His sharp boos were clearly heard on the television.

Having done this, he then took his hand out of his mouth and wiped it on his suit without any regard on his image. “What’s the matter, Mr. Barclays?”

“Watch your image...” said Barclays weakly.

Twain smiled, “Okay, Mr. Barclays.”

The uproar over the draw lasted a long while before it went away, and when someone looked back at the England manager’s indication of the result, he was always seen booing. Who knew if he was actually booing because he was excited or unhappy... but that was alright, the media would always arrange a speech for him to say out.

I believe the senior Union of European Football Associations officials sitting on the podium must have seen this. There was no choice, who wanted Tony Twain to be the main focal point during the ceremony?

The German, Sammer was discontent about this result as he frowned with a heavy face. Maybe he was unhappy about Twain’s attitude — this Englishman was too flippant!

The snobbish Englishman sat in his seat and smiled as he looked at Beckenbauer, the German football legend who was walking up to the draw.

He was going to draw the third-tier team for Group C.

The result he drew was somewhat disappointing for the excited media, as it was not the predicted Sweden but it was Portugal instead.

Twain smiled for a while from below, as Portugal was stronger than Sweden was. If not for their poor performance during the selection matches and not being able to enter the Brazil World Cup, how would they even be allocated as the third tier team...

The team that appeared in the fourth tier gave Twain a somewhat surprised look for the first time.

“Wales,” The host read this somewhat boring name.

But Twain’s eyebrows jumped up.

He did not expect himself to be reunited with the little monkey so soon.

As a result of the expansion of the European Cup, the group stage has been increased from four groups to six, making it much less likely that the “strong teams would go against each other”. Hence, the group that England was in would be labelled as the “group of death”.

It was a far cry from the previous “leaked version.” But at the very least, England and Germany were indeed drawn into the same group.

As soon as the draw ceremony was over, the media surrounded Twain again.

Barclays saw that he was about to be crowded out by the reporters, he hurriedly reminded Twain in his ear, “Don’t speak foolishly, Mr Twain!”

“I’m not a child anymore...” Twain muttered disgruntledly as he welcomed the media.

Twain knew that England and Germany had always looked at each other badly in football, and that modesty would not get a good response.

“... We are not afraid of Germany, ‘The Group of Death’? I’m not worried. It’s the European Cup, there would be strong teams everywhere, I don’t think there’s anything wrong being drawn in the same group with teams like Germany, Portugal or Wales ... Our goal is to win the championship, and there would be no champions who would get lucky consistently in their journey...”

He sounded really impressive, especially as he publicly stated that his team’s goal is to “win the championship”. There was a burst of discussions within the crowd of reporters.

He could already see tomorrow’s eye-catching headline: England aiming for the championships from the start, self-admitted by Tony Twain himself.

However, the reporters still had a lot to ask about the results of the draw. “Mr Twain, there were some similarities between the leaked version before the draw and the actual results, and England was also drawn into the same group as Germany, I would like to ask—”

Twain knew what the reporter was trying to ask, as he immediately hardened his face and said, “Isn’t that normal? There were only six groups so the probability of Germany being placed in Group C as a second-tier team is one in six, which I think is normal. There’s nothing wrong here. ”

The reporters were not impressed as they wanted to hear something groundbreaking from his mouth. Twain was not willing to be a scapegoat for others, hence for similar problems it was as if he was a Taiji master, he beat around the bush several times and was not willing to answer the question straight to the point.

Reporters blocked Twain for a long while, but as they were not able to get their desired answer, they could only give up and let him go.

But simply that phrase “Our goal is to win the championship” alone was enough to attract tons of attention. Yes, England had always been considered a strong European team, but there were several people who looked down on them, many thought that strong team had to be referred to with inverted commas and should have only been called the pseudo-strong team. What’s more, the results of this group draw only just came out and there was still six months before the start of the European Cup.

Twain so loudly shouted “our goal is to win the championship” slogan, did he not consider the possible changes in the next six months? What if the core players were not in form? What if the main players were unable to participate due to their injury? Doing this only created enemies for himself and himself only...

But those were only troubles for Twain himself, us as the media just need to create eye-catching content to attract attention.

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On the next day, the major sports media really began to hype Twain’s talkative mouth, as his big framed photograph coupled with that line “our goal is to become the champions” was really groundbreaking.

“If it was someone else saying that line, people might have regarded it as a joke, but if it was him, people would not even have dared to laugh.”

People who were familiar with Tony Twain, would definitely have had the same thought upon reading this headline.

England’s fans were also delighted that they could have such a confident manager that perhaps it would no longer be a dream to lift the La Liga cup in the English capital at next year’s European Championships.

Twain was in the headlines, but Shaun Barclays was having a headache.

Just as Twain’s title-winning manifesto appeared in the headlines, Barclays also received a call from Union of European Football Associations president Michel Platini.

The call was simple, where Platini, as a personal friend, reminded Barclays to take care of Tony Twain’s talkative mouth. The things Twain said during the draw ceremony to the reporters was well-heard. The Union of European Football Associations was not deaf; they did know about this. He hoped that Twain would never speak things that would doubt the Union of European Football Associations’s fairness.

Unlike the previous presidents, the new Football Association chief executive was looking for ways to repair the relationship between the English Football Association and Union of European Football Associations, as the Union of European Football Associations was always targeting England, there were several incidents of sabotaging plots in the past few years.

He naturally did not want Twain’s talkative mouth to affect his “friendship” with Platini and damage the relationship between the Football Association and Union of European Football Associations.

A few months ago in Denmark, he was boasting how successful his control on Twain was, and now he has learned how a terrible headache it is to have such an unruly head coach that cannot be disciplined or tamed.

If someone could get Tony Twain extremely humble, make him listen to instructions, being meek like a sheep, then this person has to be God ...

Chapter 927: An Old Enemy

How many people still remembered what Twain said in the newspaper six years ago after the World Cup in South Africa?

While the major media outlets and famous names in the football world congratulated the Argentinians for winning the World Cup, Twain made a statement at odds with everyone else.

“I admit that Messi has won the Treble, but it is too premature to name him the ‘new king.’ Argentina is able to win the World Cup because they haven’t meet the England team. Barcelona is able to win the Champions League title because Nottingham Forest is not around...”

He questioned Messi’s status as the “new king” even though Maradona himself had given Messi the crown of the football king. In Twain’s view, the player who could be called the king of the football must have absolute dominance in his time. His brilliance would overshadow everyone else and become a benchmark of the times.

Messi had not reached that position as of yet.

Because there was still George Wood to be considered. Nottingham Forest, which owned George Wood, could end Barça’s dynasty early. With George Wood around, the England team could do the same.

It was just a pity that while Twain had proved his point at the football club level, the England national team never had a chance to play against the Argentina national team.

But not to worry, the opportunity had come now!

On April 4th, at Nottingham Forest’s Crimson Stadium, the England team would face Argentina, their opponent in the friendly match!

The English Football Association listened to Twain completely when it came to the UEFA European Championship Qualifying round. As a result, Twain drew the name of the Argentina national team.

Maybe someone else had already forgotten what he had previously said but he himself remembered it.

“I’m going to show them whether I’m talking big or not.”

The match attracted a lot of interest from the fans in both countries. It also attracted the attention of fans all over the world. Because their feud was known to the world.

Originally, the football worlds of English and Argentina each minded their own business and had nothing to do with each other. But at the 1986 World Cup, a man formed a decades-long feud between the two sides.

And this very same man was now Argentina’s manager, Diego Maradona.

As a result of the 1982 Falklands War, the two countries formed an enmity. The hot-blooded young men who played football were always patriotic, so they also wanted to prevail over their sworn enemy on the football field. The World Cup in Mexico gave both teams such a chance – in the quarterfinals, Argentina played against England.

It was a game that would forever go down in the history of the World Cup, giving birth to too many classic moments.

Argentina had scored their first goal. Maradona, a man who stood at 1.68-meter-tall, had actually succeeded in his fight for a header against the tall England national goalkeeper, Shilton to head the football in ... Unfortunately, it was a handball. The referee did not see Maradona's furtive action and declared the goal to be valid. Although the England team players argued to their best but to no avail. They had no choice but to accept the result.

Following which, Maradona scored the most exciting goal in World Cup history – he bypassed five players in a row. While the other fans relished and enjoyed the goal, the English people were outraged – they thought that without the previous handball, England's players would not have been disturbed and naturally there would not have been a "bypassed five players in a row" after that.

Unfortunately, what-ifs never existed on the football field.

As the Falklands War intensified the rivalry between the two countries, Maradona did not admit to the handball. In the end, he was forced to simply say "that it was God's punishment of the English people. A little with the head of Maradona and a little with the hand of God." His refusal to admit it made the English people very upset, and the two football teams became enemies in this way.

Although the Falklands War was long over, the feud on the football field was inherited and continued.

People liked to say, "football is a war during peacetime." This saying was right. For the England and Argentina fans, it was a death match every time their teams met.

England and Argentina met again at the 1998 World Cup in France. Beckham's red card, Simeone's sly eyes and exaggerated performance, as well as Owen's breakout performance and Argentina's exquisite free kick play were the highlights.

At the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea, England and Argentina were placed in the group of death. As a result, Argentina, which had been seen as the favorite to win the title did not even advance past the group stage. Many people saw Batistuta's tears on the live broadcast in front of the television screens as well as Beckham's unbridled venting after he redeemed himself at the penalty shootout.

It was always explosive every time the England and Argentina teams met.

They were famous foes in the world of football.

When Twain was just an ordinary Chinese fan, he was interested in the games between these kinds of foes, such as between England and Argentina, England and Germany, Brazil and Argentina... not to mention the old enemies at the football club level. Just the examples alone could take one day and one night to list them.

He felt that what best embodied the nature of football was games with these kinds of intense confrontations and filled with countless stories. Therefore, when the English Football Association gave him a list of teams to select from, he did not even look at the other teams and just drew a tick on the Argentina team's name.

The probability was not high for some teams which wanted to meet with them in the international competition arena. It was overly dependent on luck. Since it was a friendly match, he could pick his opponents at will. Twain naturally picked the team that could stimulate his interest.

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Even though it was just a friendly match, the English and Argentinian media were closely watching the big game between the England and Argentina teams.

As the game drew closer, the English media brought out the “Hand of God” incident to rehash matter. The vehemence of it was far more powerful than ever before.

In the past, the Argentina manager was not Maradona and the past incident was nothing more than just teatime gossip. It was now a different story. The Argentina manager, who was leading the team and had landed on English soil, was Diego Maradona, the Argentine national hero, who had used the “Hand of God” and “bypassed five players in a row” to humiliate England thirty years ago.

An English reporter went to ask Diego. What did he have to say about the handball of that time after thirty years?

Maradona pretended to be surprised and said, “Has it already been thirty years? Ah, that is a beautiful memory that feels good even as I think of it now...”

“Don’t you feel guilty about scoring a goal in such a deceptive way?”

Maradona shook his head and said, “No. You and we are enemies on the football field. Defeating the enemy by any means to achieve victory is the ultimate goal. I still feel that I did the right thing at the time.”

The former king of football was already fifty-five years old. But his temper and character were still a headache.

“If my handball was seen by the referee and the goal was declared invalid, I wouldn’t have any objection. But he did not see it, so the goal was valid. It was as simple as that.” Maradona shrugged and spread his hands in front of a large number of English reporters.

An English reporter could not stand Maradona’s “shameless” attitude. He asked a pointed question, “Mr. Maradona, do you ever think that you have set a bad example for a lot of Argentine players? Consequently, we can often see the famous Argentine stars on the pitch use their hands instead of their feet and heads to help their team score goals. Like your son-in-law, Agüero, and your favorite Messi...”

Maradona was a little unhappy, but fortunately he did not have a shotgun at hand. His face became serious-looking as he said, “‘The Hand of God’ is common in South America. It’s not patented by Argentine players. And I don’t think it’s common for Argentine players to use handball...”

He refused to answer any other questions. He pushed the reporters aside and turned to enter the building. Then he used force to close the door hard.

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Twain held a newspaper in hand. There was a reporter on the reporters “besieging” Maradona. The English reporters were delighted to describe him as a shameless scoundrel which would make all English people abhorred. For example, he refused to admit that he had scored at the time with his hands which was against the spirit of sportsmanship in the competition. He had also repeatedly declared that he would still choose to do it again.

Surely any Englishman would gnash his teeth when he read this?

However, Twain was laughing.

“I like him, ha!” Twain did not care what expression Shania had next to him. His remark sounded ambiguous.

“Then you can go and hug him to show your love in person.” Shania pouted.

“But I’m not going to be friends with him.” Twain shook his head and said, “Two unconventional and unyielding people get together, both sides suffer. I can only look at this kind of person from afar.” He looked at Shania next to him and asked, “You’re not jealous of a man, are you?”

“I’m even jealous of football. What more of a man?” Shania pouted.

Twain smiled and put her in his arms.

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The English media even went to Argentina to ask Maradona what he thought of what happened thirty years ago, which made the Argentine media feel “it was persecution” and “preposterous.”

Therefore, they also “happily” recalled the despicable things Tony Twain once did. For example, how he messed up the City Ground stadium like it was a rotten vegetable patch in his attempt to sabotage their core player and newly crowned king of football, Messi and using vile means to eliminate Barcelona and treated the undeserved win like it was nothing.

He also declared that “he could make Messi be sent off the field with a broken leg in five minutes.” Of course, it was refined by the Argentine media. His original words were, “If I really wanted to deal with Messi with that kind of method, I can guarantee that he won’t be able to stay on the pitch for even five minutes.”

Look, even the Dutch could not stand it. Cruyff had once publicly criticized Twain’s action and words as killing football and the art of it. He also called on FIFA to take care to protect the declining number of football artists today. “Why are there fewer and fewer players who can bring us pleasure now? It obviously has to do with everyone copying Nottingham Forest...”

After the Champions League final, Twain publicly backed Pepe, who was sent off for frenziedly beating someone up. He declared, “If there was a reason to beat up someone, I don’t think it’s a problem to hit someone. If it were me, maybe I’ll do it too.”

The Argentine media relished Tony Twain’s “sullied bad record.” In fact, they usually did not pay any attention to Tony Twain. If it were not for this game, they would not care about what Twain had said or done.

Just as the Argentine media went on a rampage to smear Twain, a new advertising billboard appeared in the heart of Buenos Aires.

It was an advertisement for Ray-Ban Wayfarer. The man in the image was no stranger to the Argentines, because his photographs had been seen regularly in the street newspapers during this time – Tony Twain was dressed in black and holding a pair of Ray-Ban Wayfarer as he leaned against the iron bridge railing. His eyes gazed into the distance and he appeared very cool like a mafia godfather.

Next to him was advertising copy: Ray-Ban, the real man's choice.

A few days later, in the same downtown center, not far from the advertising billboard, a new advertising poster was also put up. This time the brand that appeared on it was the Gillette razor. The spokesman was still Tony Twain. He held a Gillette razor, gleaming and brilliant and put it next to his lips, while he looked at the bustling crowds and traffic below the advertisement. The black-and-white poster had a "cool" factor to it.

The advertising copy was: "The best man can be."

Then a third billboard was erected as well. This time, it was by Dr. Martens, a famous British shoe brand. Tony Twain was the spokesperson too. Wearing Dr. Martens' specially designed distinctive shoes, Twain did not look like a football manager, but rather an adventure explorer. He was not wearing the black suit of the first two advertisements. His look was far from an underworld boss. With a casual jacket and jeans on, he looked perfect for Dr. Martens men's shoes. The getup made him look much younger than his actual age, and Twain liked the youthful outfit he wore.

On the other hand, the advertising copy commensurate with Twain's style of handling things as well as his individualistic temperament. No wonder Dr. Martens would sign up Twain for an endorsement:

Confidence. Tenacious. Never compromise.

The advertisers were not worried about Tony Twain's bad reputation damaging both world renown brands. Because the main sales strategy of both brands was to highlight the distinctive personality in this mediocre society. A recent topic of interest in Argentina like Twain, was really a good spokesman there was. Just like the villains in the movies which tend to find favor with a lot of fans, Tony Twain must also be able to find his audience here.

In fact, Maradona's character was also very much in line with the requirements, if his size and appearance were better ...

The Argentine media must have been frustrated when they discovered the advertisements, because their efforts to hype the issue had brought more advertising revenue to Twain instead...

Even the English media had repeatedly published social news of the large-scale advertisements of Twain appearing in Buenos Aires as a counterattack.

This matter did make onlookers laugh, but not everyone thought the matter was funny.

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In the past, when Twain was the football club's manager, such a situation happened less. It only happened to the players who left Nottingham Forest for the other teams.

And that was: when Twain and the opposing team engaged in a war of words, the former Forest players found it hard to bear ...

For example, before the game between the Forest team and Barcelona, Piqué was put in an awkward position when the two sides attacked each other.

And now, most Nottingham Forest players had the opportunity to “enjoy” such treatment.

As long as they were not the England national footballers, they would have the opportunity to play for their national teams against England. If Twain decided to act crazy again and provoked a war of words, then any player, who had once played on the same side as Twain, would feel awkward.

This time, it was the unlucky Gago’s turn.

There were very few Argentine players in Nottingham Forest. Gago was the only one. How could he have been forgotten as the only Argentine to have been taught by Twain during this media battle on both sides?

But fortunately, he did not have to suffer through the ordeal because he was not called up to the national team by Maradona. He did not have to play in this friendly match. Since he did not have to play, he did not have to take any questions that would make things difficult for him. He refused to comment on the game because he was not going to take part in the match.

Those headaches were left to his national teammates to face ...

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The Argentina team did not fly to England together as a team. Maradona would bring the players from Argentina’s domestic leagues and arrive in Nottingham. Then the national footballers, who played for various European leagues would fly to Nottingham to meet with the team after the European league tournaments ended.

As Argentine players who played alongside in Spain, Messi and Higuaín arrived in London with Agüero and were immediately surrounded by “enthusiastic” reporters.

“Messi! Messi! Can you answer a question?”

“What do you think of Tony Twain, Messi?”

“It is said that he once tried to break your leg during a game. Is there really such a thing?” These rumors were terrible...

“Messi, will you play in the game against England? Is it true that Barcelona only want you to play half a game?”

If people who did not know the inside story, they would think that those who surrounded Messi were crazy fans.

Messi did not want to answer such questions. He bowed his head and covered his face with his hands, as he squeezed out of the crowd quickly. The two teammates who arrived with him on the same flight were like his bodyguards, sandwiching him in the middle.

After much difficulty, they were able to get rid of those frantic reporters with the help of the airport security. Messi was a little shocked after.

“It’s just a friendly match. It’s not even a World Cup game. Why are those people...”

“Have you forgotten who our opponent is? England and Tony Twain.” Agüero complained beside him. Messi was so popular that he also suffered as a bystander. Initially he looked like a flashy celebrity but when he managed to squeeze out of the crowd, his sunglasses almost broke amid the squeezing. Now the sunglasses were a skewed no matter how he wore them. He looked slightly disheveled. After trying to adjust the sunglasses for a long while, he simply put the sunglasses into the backpack.

Higuaín also said next to him, “This game cannot be seen as a normal friendly match no matter what ... it’s a home game in England, so we must be ready to be booed at for the entire game.”

They hurriedly got into the car sent by the Argentina team to pick them up before they could breathe a sigh of relief.

“Anyway, I’ll only play for half the game...” Messi did not care about the booing.

“Well, so those media rumors are true?” Higuaín was a little envious. For the manager to make such a request, it implied that he was extremely valued and the irreplaceable core of the team. He himself obviously did not belong to that category of player.

“Mr. Guardiola is afraid that I’ll get hurt.”

Agüero gave a laugh at the side and said, “Isn’t it better not to let you play for even a single minute? Have you forgotten which player your opponent has?”

A name popped up instantly in the minds of the other two men. His inert face also appeared along with the name and looked lifeless like it was carved out of wood, which one could not take lightly. There were a lot of people who fell at his feet. If he did not want to get hurt in such a friendly match, he had to be careful.

Messi became excited instead.

“George Wood!” He clenched his fists.

Chapter 928: This Is Counter-Attacking Football

It was going to be the very first time that Messi plays a match at Nottingham Forest’s new stadium. Messi was a little curious to see what the stadium was like. After all, there were not many stadiums in the world that could be regarded as a ‘five-star stadium’.

Messi bent over to touch the grass beneath his soles the moment he stepped onto the pitch to do his warm-ups.

People might think that Messi was doing some kind of ritual when he touched the grass. However, those who are familiar with him would find his behavior odd, since he never touches the grass when he steps onto the pitch.

The only ones who understood Messi's actions were Messi's teammates, who were very familiar with him. They teased him at once, "The quality of the grass is great. It's definitely not like that rotten field that we played in previously."

The horrendous way in which Barcelona was treated at the City Ground Stadium a few years ago is well-known around the world, and it is still a topic of idle conversation even till this day.

Messi's teammates knew very well what Messi was trying to do.

Messi ran forward by two steps. That bumpy feeling that he experienced before did not emerge. The ground was smooth and the quality of the grass was superb. The only flaw that he observed was that the grass was a little short.

Three seasons might have passed since that ill-fated match at the City Ground Stadium, but Messi has never once forgotten what it felt like to play on that horrible pitch. He spent half of his energy trying not to pick up an injury in that game.

Tony Twain is the most rotten and despicable manager he has ever met in his career. He would never play under a manager like him who would come up with that kind of idea just to win the match. To Messi, Twain's every action insulted the holy and beautiful image he had of football.

As for George Wood, Messi had mixed feelings towards him. He admits that it would be great to have Wood as a teammate, but the way Wood would lunge at his feet whenever he tries to defend made him feel very uncomfortable.

Messi would feel chills at his knee every time Wood charges at him. However, he also felt exceptionally excited every time he has to battle with Wood, because Wood is the kind of player that he has to go all out to defeat.

Besides winning the championship, a big source of pleasure to all good football players like Messi is to battle with other good players on the pitch.

Ever since that match, Barcelona has never faced off with Nottingham Forest a second time. This is the very first time that Argentina plays against England as well.

Messi was eager to finally face off with Wood once again and defeat both him and Twain this time round.

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The fans got to work the moment they entered the stadium. First, they put up banners and portraits of the players at the stands. Thereafter, they began to sing songs at the top of their voices. Most of them were singing songs related to the England national team, but some were singing songs that were meant to cheer on the Nottingham Forest team.

Twain had chosen to play the match at this stadium because he wished to pile immense pressure on the Argentina players by drawing on the enthusiasm of the football fans in Nottingham.

It might just be a friendly match between the two countries, but Twain certainly did not want his team to lose to Argentina.

His desire to win has nothing to do with the Falklands War or the 30 year feud between England and Argentina.

He just wanted to deliver his promise. Nottingham Forest defeated Barcelona in the past, and now it was England's turn to defeat Argentina.

The captain of the England national team, George Wood, held onto a small triangular-shaped country flag as he stood in the middle of the pitch. He was waiting for Argentina's captain, Messi, to come over and initiate the exchange of country flags.

John and his gang could not help but praise Wood as they watched him from the stands. "He really looks and acts like a leader..."

"Ha! I knew he would be successful when I saw the way in which he kept Fàbregas out of the game at Wilford that day!"

"Stop boasting! I knew this lad would be a brilliant player in the future when I saw how he had the guts to raise his fists at the first team manager Collymore back then..."

The group of men began to brag about how they had the foresight or the discerning eye. The only person who did not join in their discussion was Fat John.

He smiled as he listened in on their conversation. He reminisced about the scenes from 12 years ago. Back then, George Wood was still a youth player that no one knew about. Nottingham Forest was struggling in the EFL Championship, and Tony Twain was a miserable youth team manager.

Who would have thought that there would come a day where Nottingham Forest would become a Treble-winning team, and that Tony Twain would become a famous manager who is now leading the England national team?

Who could have expected to see George Wood shake hands with Messi while being dressed in the jersey of the England national team and with the captain's armband over his sleeve?

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Wood felt the grip on his hands tighten. He looked at the short man before him.

Excitement gleamed in Messi's eyes as he raised his head to stare at him.

Wood understood what Messi's gaze and gesture meant. Thus, he tightened his own grip on the latter's hand as well.

Kaka is already 34 years old this year and has already grown old. Unlike him however, Messi is only 28 years of age and is right in his prime.

The pair's silent battle ended quickly. They could not possibly hold onto each other's hands forever after all. The press would start circulating bad rumors about them the next day if they did.

Wood lost during the coin toss and England was going to be the team to take the kick-off. That was exactly what Twain wanted for his team.

The night was windy and cooling. It was the perfect weather to play football in.

Players from both teams have already gotten into their respective positions on the pitch. Everyone was waiting for kick-off.

Likewise, Twain was waiting for the match to begin as he stood by the side of the pitch. Another man who was waiting by the side just like him was the manager of the Argentina national team, Maradona.

The referee blew his whistle once, and the match between England and Argentina that has garnered much attention worldwide commenced.

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Twain's tactic for the match was to play counter-attacking football. He wanted his team to sit deep and hit Argentina on the break.

His decision to play counter-attacking football surprised many. He might have played counter-attacking football often when he was in charge of Forest, but ever since he became the manager of the England national team, he has generally gone with an attacking style of football. The team often ended matches with scores like 4:0, 3:2, or 3:1, and they also scored a total of 32 goals throughout all the qualifiers that they played in so far. These results all highlighted a shift in Twain's playing style.

Twain completely changed the conservative image that people had of him from his days as Forest's manager, and he successfully won over the picky fans by playing attacking football.

Yet, he chose not to continue with what he has done so far in this match against Argentina.

Is he perhaps scared of the Argentina team that is made up of players like Messi, Agüero, Higuaín and Mascherano?

Let us take a look at England's starting line-up for today.

In the front half, Twain chose to go with Rooney, Agbonlahor, Walcott and Stewart Downing. All four players are players with pace, and they were also the players responsible for the team's offense. Both Rooney and Agbonlahor are players who would not track back to defend during a match. They would always stand at the front of the pitch and wait for the ball to be passed over to them from the back.

Twain did not get any of his defenders to mark any of the Argentinian players. Even Argentina's most threatening player, Messi, was not constantly marked by George Wood either.

England chose to make use of a defensive strategy known as zonal marking in the match instead. Whenever an Argentina player picked up the ball in England's defensive third, he would definitely be surrounded by at least two England players. One would be in charge of snatching the ball from him, and the other would be on stand-by by the side. If the Argentina player kicks the ball slightly further away from himself, the other player would be there to intercept the ball at once.

This was a strategy adopted by Forest back then. It was a strategy that frustrated their opponents to no end, and its effectiveness did not seem to have diminished now that it is being utilized by the England national team.

Argentina's players were troubled by England's defense. The tiniest mistake that they make could lead to them losing the ball, unless they somehow managed to glue the ball to their feet.

Higuaín learned that first-hand when he tracked backwards to receive the ball. He was not able to receive the pass from his teammate perfectly, and the ball bounced off the tip of his foot and flew about five meters ahead of him. Usually, Higuaín would be able to regain possession of the ball easily by taking one big stride forward. But, his method did not work this time round, and the ball was quickly intercepted by England's fullback, Richards, who had been on his trail.

Messi initially thought that it was going to be a contest between the captains and that he would get to battle it out with George Wood one-on-one today. However, he did not expect Tony Twain to deprive him of that opportunity to face off with Wood.

When Messi picked up the ball, the players closest to him all charged at him. He tried his best to get past the first defender, but the second one suddenly appeared near him. He quickly retrieved the ball that he had kicked in front, but the first player suddenly turned around and lunged at him, and that caused him to keep going around in circles at the same spot.

He tried his best to shake off the defenders again and he succeeded in making his way into England's penalty box. But, once he was inside the penalty box, he realized that he could neither pass the ball nor move forward. After a moment of hesitation, he soon found himself surrounded by England's players.

When he finally found a gap that he could make use of to pass the ball forward to his teammates, the assistant referee raised his flag.

Offside!

Messi then tried to make his way into the penalty box and shoot for goal himself during his subsequent attempts. However, a brick wall stood in his way every single time. A total of three defenders would mark him every time he got close to England's penalty box.

Messi might get past the defenders here and there, but even he could not repeat the same feat every single time.

Hence, he decided to change his strategy and attack down the flanks instead.

Some of his teammates, such as Higuaín and Agüero, chose to shoot at goal from an angle after receiving the ball. Of course, those shots were all easily saved by Joe Hart, because all he needed to do was to narrow the angle in which the shot can be made.

Sometimes the Argentina players have to run over to the flanks to receive a pass from Messi when he puts too much force behind it. After they receive the pass, they would choose to cross the ball into the middle of the pitch. This is a very common attacking strategy used in football. However, most of their shots were all intercepted and kept out of play by the big and burly England center-backs, because Argentina lacked the players who could put the strategy to good use. Agüero is 1.72m and Tevez is 1.68m tall. Both are too short and they can't receive the crosses from their teammates. Higuaín might be 1.84m tall, but he is not good with headers. Thus, he is unable to score from those crosses as well.

If Argentina wants their forwards to be able to reach the ball, the height of the crosses have to be lowered. However, if they lower the height, the crosses cannot make their way past England's defense. Conversely, if they increase the height, the crosses might be able to make their way past England's

center-backs, but the forwards would have to spend a lot more effort to reach the ball, and that will make their resulting headers much weaker and ineffective.

Many of their headers are also either too high or are not even on target.

Clearly, the Argentines are not well-suited to play such an attacking strategy.

Argentina then tried to make short and quick passes down the middle of the pitch. However, they once again encountered obstacle after obstacle.

England's defense has two layers to it, and the fans are able to see that clearly from the stands. Their defense was just like a water filter. They are able to clean out Argentina's attacks till there was nothing left.

In the end, Argentina had to resort to long shots at goal. Most of their shots were on target and there were only some that had been blocked by the defenders with their bodies. It was the most decent form of attack that Argentina was able to make, but sadly, Joe Hart was in a good form for the match, and he was able to save each and every shot that threatened his goalpost.

Of course, once in a while, a golden opportunity would emerge right before the Argentina players.

"Joe Hart did not manage to keep the ball in his hands!!"

Agüero sprinted forward like a cheetah. He nearly got a leg to the ball if it had not been for George Wood's tackle...

Agüero slammed into Wood's leg and then fell onto the ground. As he laid on the ground, he hit the grass repeatedly, visibly upset at how he had missed the opportunity to score a goal.

40 minutes had passed in the first half. England barely had any shots on goal, and the spectators spent 80% of their time watching as Argentina surrounded England's goalpost and attacked them furiously.

Argentina was clearly way ahead when it came to shots made in the match so far.

The commentator was displeased with what he saw. England and Argentina are bitter rivals. How can they allow Argentina to have all the momentum of the match?

"There Tony Twain goes again... England is definitely not the underdog, but neither is Argentina a pushover. Twain can't just give up on attack completely and focus solely on defense. Argentina might not have scored after 15 shots, but that does not mean that they would not score after 20 or 25 shots. There's no future for England if all they do is defend but not counter-attack!"

Right as the commentator finished his words, the camera zoomed in on Twain. He was expressionless as he stood by the side of the pitch. No one knew what was on his mind at that moment.

Twain is confident in his team's defense. But, does he really intend to come out of the match with a 0:0 score? Does he think that everyone would accept such a result?

The commentator was upset with Twain, but the fans at the stadium were not. They have grown used to watching Twain play in such a way, and they knew very well that their team is inching towards victory every time the match goes into a stalemate.

Cheers would erupt at the stands every time England went on the counter-attack. It did not matter if the counter-attack was successful or not.

The atmosphere at the Crimson Stadium pleased Twain.

This is exactly why Twain chose the Crimson Stadium as the venue for this match. He knew that the fans here understood him, and that they would not boo their own team easily.

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Messi soon realized why the grass at the Crimson Stadium was short...

England intercepted Argentina's ball once again towards the end of the first half.

They have gone on the counter-attack numerous times in the match so far, but they did not make many shots on target and they hardly threatened Argentina's goalpost as well.

However, things were different this time round.

The England players did not make a long forward pass straight away. They decided to slowly build up play from the back.

Wood observed the situation on the pitch after receiving the ball. He noticed that the Argentina central midfielders positioned near him were hesitant to charge at him and snatch his ball away. Wood then turned his body and made a move that suggested he wanted to pass the ball towards the flanks.

Mascherano saw Wood's body movement and instantly turned his body towards the flanks. He wanted to charge at the player Wood was going to pass the ball over to.

But, the movement from Wood was a feign. He quickly retrieved the ball with his right foot before kicking it forward with his left. He then began running down the middle of the pitch!

Wood was very fast with his run. He was at the center circle in an instant.

Argentina's players immediately scrambled backwards to defend, whereas the England players all ran forward to provide support for Wood.

Deafening cheers erupted at the stands once again. The England fans finally saw the scene that they have all been waiting for.

"Run straight for goal, St. George!!"

Downing, Walcott, Rooney and Agbonlahor all ran towards four different points on the pitch. Argentina's defenders had no choice but to disperse to try and mark each and every of them.

Wood observed the situation before him as he ran forward at breakneck speed. He noticed that there were quite a few players marking Walcott. It couldn't be helped since Walcott is too famous as a player.

Wood passed the ball over to the left flank with the outside of his left foot. Mascherano slid towards the ball to try and intercept Wood's pass, but he underestimated the speed in which the ball would travel.

The short grass on the pitch had caused the ball to travel faster than usual, and the ball had already rolled past Mascherano before his foot got to it.

The ball then rolled over to the left flank, and Downing was the one to receive it as he ran up from the back.

Mascherano wanted to climb back up to his feet and continue with his defense, but he knew it was too late.

Wood had accomplished his mission. However, he did not stop running forward. He wanted to assist his teammates in their attacks, and he also wanted to put pressure onto Argentina's helpless defenders by creating the misconception that he is looking to do a long shot at goal.

Downing went head on with Argentina's burly center-back Federico Fazio, who had run up to him to defend against him.

Fazio was physically strong and was also good with headers, but he was not a player with a lot of pace. He stuck a leg out to intercept the ball and he managed to get a touch on the ball. The ball bounced upwards and hit Downing on his leg before flying forward towards goal.

His touch ended up helping his opponent in his attack...

Downing ran forward at the fastest speed that he could muster. He successfully regained possession of the ball and kicked it towards the middle of the penalty box!

But, neither Rooney nor Agbonlahor could get to his pass.

Is this going to be yet another futile counter-attack?

The ball made its way towards the area near the penalty spot. There was not even a single Argentina defender near it.

Downing fell to the ground after completing his pass. However, he did not appear to be disappointed that Rooney and Agbonlahor could not get to his pass. He stared at the penalty box with excitement gleaming in his eyes.

"It's George Wood!"

He was right to have continued his run earlier.

Wood appeared right before the ball, and there was not a single Argentina player near him right now.

That is to be expected. Why would the Argentina players mark a player who did not even have the ball?

Wood smashed his leg against the ball!

Argentina's goalkeeper Óscar Ustari got a hand to the ball. However, he was not able to change the trajectory of the ball because there was too much power behind Wood's shot.

The ball swerved slightly and flew into the back of the net!

1:0!

Argentina had 64% possession and 17 shots in the first 42 minutes of the match, but they did not manage to score a single goal. Conversely, England only had 5 shots in the game so far, and they were already leading by a goal.

This is what counter-attacking football is all about!

The proud former World Cup champions could only hang their heads in shame as they watch the England players embrace each other and celebrate their goal.

The goal might have come as a surprise to the Argentina players, but the England players knew all along that it was only a matter of time before they would score a goal. In fact, they actually thought that the goal had come a little too late...

Chapter 929: Win the Game Like the Forest Team

“George Wood!! YES! A beautiful coordinated counterattack! Wood started the attack, and he ended it again this time! England leads Argentina by 1:0! Well done!”

Goals scored in a friendly match might not have caused the English commentator to be so thrilled, but it held a different meaning when it was scored in Argentina’s goal.

Seeing Wood score the goal, the Crimson Stadium erupted with huge cheers, roaring in the air over the stadium and stirring everyone’s hearts.

After Twain finished hugging his colleagues around him, he turned to applaud Wood.

Nowadays, Wood’s offensive talent was fully on display. He not only had become the initiator of the offensive but could also complete the attack. He was a completely different player than the reckless teenager who only knew about defense a decade ago.

He had scored a number of goals since becoming the England team captain, some of which were important key goals. It certainly had something to do with Twain who was familiar with him and knew how to use him well. But more importantly, Wood himself had the belief that he wanted to use the best performance to prove that he deserved The Three Lions’ captain armband.

After he scored the goal, Wood no longer looked as aloof as he had been before. He waved his fists vigorously and welcomed his teammates’ hugs.

Twain wanted him to not look so grim and unapproachable, so he acted accordingly. It was a good opportunity after the goal.

It seemed that Wood had matured a lot during the period after Twain had left the Forest team.

He ought to have matured a long time ago... He was already thirty years old and getting older.

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Looking at George Wood celebrating the goal, Messi raised his fists. Although the two men did not have a direct conversation, he still saw Wood’s goal as a challenge to himself.

Which he accepted.

After the game resumed, Messi came alive and tried several times to force a breakthrough, but there was not much time left for him... The first half was over!

Messi's face collapsed when the referee blew the whistle to end the first half. He recalled that before he had set off for the game, Guardiola told him that he could only play half the game in this friendly match.

The England players walked into the players' tunnel with excitement, while he stood outside for a moment before walking back with his head lowered. Within one short minute, he had made a decision.

In the Argentina team's locker room, Maradona was making adjustments for the second half. First of all, he needed to switch out the players who had clear instructions not to play the entire game. Luckily, there were not many players with such special treatment. Otherwise he might have a problem on his hands – although this was a friendly match, the number of substitutes was still three spots.

"Messi." Although Maradona was unhappy with being a goal behind, he had to abide by his agreement with Guardiola and bring off the most precious asset shared by the two teams. The La Liga tournament was in the final stages of the campaign and the Barcelona football club did not want Messi to waste his fitness in such a friendly match.

Messi shook his head and said, "I want to keep playing, coach.

All eyes in the locker room were on him. The remark came as a surprise to everyone.

Maradona did not expect it as well. He looked up at Messi.

"We have an agreement with Barcelona." Maradona said as he looked at him.

"I know." Messi nodded, but the look in his eyes showed that he would not back down. "I'll call Mr. Guardiola after the game to explain."

Maradona knew the reason why Messi was so insistent – his performance in the first half was average. Although he was the core of Argentina's offense, he did not help Argentina score goals and create several threatening opportunities. England's defense was too successful.

He wanted to prove himself, at least to show that he was just as good under the circumstances that Wood had scored a goal.

Maradona was an unruly figure during his time as a player. After his retirement, he increasingly showed more of his unique personality. Since becoming the manager, he somewhat toned it down, but it was only limited to him stopping to threaten to kill the reporters with a shotgun.

Although we have an agreement with Barcelona, ... since the player himself insists, I can't stop him, can I?

"Okay." Maradona finally nodded his head and said, "But you only have fifteen minutes. I can't mess up the relationship with Barcelona for your personal feud with Wood..."

His last words were a little redundant. He basically did not care about those things at all.

Messi laughed and sat down again.

Since Messi did not have to be replaced, there was nothing to be adjusted and it was business as usual.

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In England's locker room, Twain did not praise the England team's performance in the first half, but he asked the team to continue to play in this way.

Of course, he made adjustments too. He knew that Messi could not play in the second half. After the biggest threat had been lifted, England's defense did not need to be as tight as it was. England could put in a lot of force into the offense majority of the time.

But in the second half, he and the England players were stunned.

Argentina's number 10 stood right there on the pitch...

"Didn't Guardiola say to only allow him to play for half the game?" Twain asked Walker next to him, "Is it a smokescreen that Argentina has cast? Damn it! Do they need to resort to colluding with Barcelona to play a friendly match?"

Walker did not know why as well. A few days before the game, the media reported that Barcelona did not want Messi to play full-time in the friendly match. Guardiola further reduced the time to half the game at forty-five minutes.

As a result, when they saw Messi start in the first half, they did not take the second half to heart. But they did not expect this to happen. They really did not think of it...

Wood stared blankly for a moment when he saw Messi opposite. At the same time, he found Messi staring at himself too. As an old rival, he clearly knew what that look in his eyes meant.

He was just surprised, but not afraid.

Bring it on, boy.

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After the start of the second half, Messi became the focal point of attention once again. The commentator also wondered why Messi was still on the pitch, and guessed that Guardiola was probably desperate to fly to Nottingham to drag him off the pitch...

Messi, who took the ball, faced being wedged between two England defenders. He quickly jabbed the ball and turned his body so that he could drilled past the two men to break through!

"What a beautiful bypass! He's a magician on the football field!" The Argentine commentator exclaimed.

Unfortunately, in the next second, Messi's nimble body was bogged down.

Because Wood struck him without mercy. Messi stumbled at his feet and was knocked off course. The threat to the goal was greatly reduced.

Faced with Wood's close marking defense, Messi tried several times to shake him off but to no avail. When he saw the England player whom he had just shook off, came up again to circle him, he had no choice but to pass the ball to the sideline.

"Ah ha! Don't think that Wood, who scores frequently, does not know how to defend! 'Saint George' is good at both offense and defense. He's guaranteed to be every opponent's nightmare!" The English commentator was pleased with the result.

Messi was indomitable and soon made a comeback.

This time he did not meet Wood head-on but was forced out the side of the penalty area by three England players. So, he could only kicked the ball for a cross pass. The result of the pass was unsurprising. It was headed out by England's tall center backs.

But it did not matter. The football fell at the feet of the Argentine player, Higuaín.

Seeing that Messi was still in the penalty area, Higuaín directly sent a straight pass over!

Terry raised his arms to signal that Messi was in an offside position, but the assistant referee did not raise the flag.

"Offside position!" The English commentator roared in a fluster.

"Beautiful! He's not in an offside position! A gorgeous straight pass!" The Argentine commentator stood up excitedly from his seat. Six minutes into the second half, Argentina finally had their best chance of the game so far!

Messi received the ball from the side of his body and England's right back Glen Johnson was trailing at the back. He was really not in an offside position!

Now Messi had no defenders around him. He was completely unguarded!

Terry, who realized that he had misjudged, quickly pounced toward Messi.

Messi just had to swing his leg and he could shoot straight into the goal. But he spied Terry from the corner of his eye, and he decided to choose a more secure way – he feigned a shot and moved the ball. He easily bypassed Terry who rushed up. Then he picked up his feet again and this time it was for real!

Even though Terry did not stop Messi from shooting, he had bought valuable time for those players behind him.

When Messi's supported foot was a little further away from the football while he swung his other leg for the shot, the football was completely unpossessed. It was at this point that George Wood took advantage of the gap to come in. Like a fierce tiger coming down from the mountain, he slid and shoveled the ball out of the end line before Messi could kick the ball. While Messi's powerful kick struck the outside of his thigh at the same time.

Messi felt as if he had kicked a piece of iron. He inadvertently allowed his body to fall forward and pressed right on top of Wood.

"A penalty shot!!" The Argentine commentator who stood up, poked his body out, desperately wishing that he could reach for the referee's collar with his hands and yelled at him with spittle flying.

The English commentator was hesitant. He could not really see clearly from high in the stands. The small television screen in front of him had not replayed the scene yet. "Messi fell into the penalty area. Maybe Wood got to the ball first?"

It was not that the television broadcast was deliberately not showing the replay. It was just that there was not enough time to replay for the audience what just happened again. Messi fell in the penalty area

and the Argentine players held up their hands to demand for the penalty shot. While the England players desperately waved their hands to show that it must not have been a foul. They even thought that Messi had dived.

The referee made the final decision at the next minute. He held out his right index finger and wagged it in front of the Argentine players. The meaning was obvious – George Wood did not foul!

Then he made a hand gesture for a corner kick, completely shattering the Argentines' idea.

Messi had not gotten up yet. If Guardiola was watching the live telecast at this time, he must have rebuked Maradona, George Wood, the referee, and Tony Twain in his mind – "Do you know what Messi means to Barcelona?! If he gets hurt, we're done for this season! Who is going to take the blame for this?!"

Fortunately, Messi soon got up from Wood's body and looked normal. He appeared as if he were unhurt.

That was when the television broadcast finally caught the chance to replay what happened just now. Everyone could see from the television screen that even though Wood shoveled ferociously, it was clean and brushed past the tip of Messi's toes to shovel the ball away. It did not even touch anyone. If Messi did get hurt, it must be because he kicked himself on the outside of Wood's thigh.

Guardiola and Maradona were worried about whether Messi would be injured, while Twain was also worried about whether Wood was injured. Messi's kick was powerful...the strength of the kick was to volley a show. With such a hard kick to the outside of Wood's thigh, how could it not hurt?

Wood followed Messi and got up from the ground. He appeared to be all right.

Terry also came over to ask in concern, "Are you okay?"

Wood knew what he was asking about and said, "I'm all right." He rubbed his hand on the spot where he was kicked by Messi. It was sore and painful, but it would not affect his play.

His thigh muscles were naturally tight when he shoveled the ball, so Messi felt as if he had kicked a piece of iron.

Wood looked at Messi beside him. He was looking down and rubbing the tip of his toes.

Agüero came up and asked Messi a few words in Spanish. Messi shook his head, which should be similar like the conversation between Terry and Wood.

Although Messi shook his head to indicate that he was fine, there was still some pain in the arches of his feet. He gave Wood a sideways glance next to him. The other man also happened to be rubbing his leg.

He suddenly thought the scene was somewhat funny. No one got the better of the situation.

It was the first time he saw Wood suffer in front of himself and was injured – albeit it was only a surface wound – Messi was still in good spirits. The previous atmosphere of mutual hostility dissipated at this moment.

He reached his hand out to Wood and waved in front of him.

Wood was rubbing his thigh when he saw a hand enter his field of view with his head lowered. It was waving at him, so he looked up at the owner of the hand.

Messi was having fun with him.

Wood put down the hem of his shorts and put his hand out.

The two men's hands lightly patted and separated.

This might be the only time they had a physical contact that was not explosive in all the years they had competed against each other... One must know that the two men would even match their strength against each other on the sly when they shook hands before a game.

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Messi eventually failed to help Argentina equalize the score within the fifteen minutes. He did not score a goal and create good opportunities for his teammates. Perhaps the recent continuous competition had made him physically tired. He always slightly staggered and went a bit soft in the knees after barely bypassing two people.

By the 15th minute of the second half, Maradona had replaced Messi on time and watched him come off the pitch healthily, which would be a relief to Guardiola in front of the television.

Once the core player was replaced, Argentina's strength was affected. The England team still played the defensive counterattack strategy as they did in the first half, but their counterattacks became more frequent and increasingly sharper.

The Argentinians liked to equalize the score, which was an opportunity in the eyes of the England team. Taking advantage of the Argentina team full pressing, England made use of a quick counterattack to score again in the 27th minute of the second half. Rooney score his 40th goal for the national team.

Maradona was clearly not equipped when it came to counter such defensive counterattacks. He was not a strategic master. To be able to lead Argentina to the World Cup title, half the credit was because his players were so good...

Moreover, the number of managers in the world who could break through a steadfast defense and quickly counterattack could be counted with one hand. Maradona was clearly not on the list. It was a worldwide problem. The game was ugly to watch but it could win the game.

And what Twain wanted was results.

As long as he could defeat Argentina, he could shut up the opposition, which was still questioning his ability to this day.

It was more than just a friendly match. Messi, Agüero, Higuaín and Tevez, all four of the attacking players in the front field came, which showed the importance the Argentina national team attached to the game.

But the previous World Cup champion, which had such a luxurious attacking lineup, were unable to break through England's defense. Instead, the England team took advantage of the gaps left behind by their offense and was able to score two goals against them through counterattacks.

In terms of ball possession ratios and number of shots, it was the Argentina team which dominated and ought to win. However, the result turned out like this, which made the proud and arrogant Maradona extremely unhappy. Looking at how worried he was about the Argentina team's offense at the sidelines, it was as if he wished he could be thirty years younger and be able to personally go on the field to play. At that time, it did not matter that the England team had a few people blocking in front of the goal, he would still ride alone for a thousand miles and bypassed five players!

With the exception of Messi, who was already brought off, Agüero and Tevez, currently on the field, had also been called the successors to Maradona. But they were not really the king of football. They were out of ideas in the face of England's impenetrable defensive wall...

Towards the end, the Argentinian commentator had already lost hope that they could beat England. He only hoped that Argentina, which had Higuaín, Agüero and Tevez, could score a goal to save some face for the previous World Cup champion.

Twain would not let them get what they wished. The team defended to the last and did not let up just because they had a two-goal lead. He wanted the Argentina team to completely lose all hope. In the last ten minutes of the game, Argentina turned out in full strength and the England players still did not forget to fight back, making the Argentinians furious.

The Forest fans cheering on the England team in the stands were a little distracted. Was the team in front of their eyes that had rendered Argentina powerless their national team, or was it Nottingham Forest?

In today's game, the Argentina players wore their blue and white striped jerseys, while England wore the red jerseys, which was rather to Nottingham Forest's home jersey.

Later on, the Forest fans even sang Nottingham Forest's team song in a collective moment.

"Forest! Forest!... We've got the whole world in our hands and we are the best team in England! We are invincible and undefeated! And we have nothing to fear! Because we are the best team! Because we've got the whole world in our hands..."

The familiar song rang out above the Crimson Stadium, and Twain could not help but turn his gaze from the field to the stands.

The singing became louder and clearer. The Nottingham Forest players in the England lineup were inspired by the singing and their performances became more and more active. The Argentinians, on the other hand, were getting more and more anxious amid the singing. They hastily sent out long shots, made errors in stopping the ball, dribbled the ball out of bounds... It was simply too horrible to watch.

The game ended amid the singing. The powerful Argentina team in the face of the England team, which clung fast to defense and counterattack, did not obtain the slightest advantage. Maradona was so unhappy that he lost. In the post-match interview with the reporters, he said he did not expect England to choose such a tactic, because this was not the World Cup final. There was no need to care so much about the result ...

It was to mock Twain that he could be so shameless just because he wanted results.

Twain did not care. He just wanted his result. He did not care if he was being barefaced about it. With one layer of face taken off, there was still another layer. He had plenty of that where it came from.

In fact, today's set of tactics was also what the England team would use in the future when faced with a strong enemy. Today's game was just a preview.

Bullying a weak team required them to attack freely and play beautiful offensive football to please the fans. In the face of a strong team, it was time to withdraw and lure the opponent out, just like how he lured the Argentina team out today.

Twain was cunning.

"We won and that's what counts. I'm happy!"

The only regret was that Messi had come off too early. He had wanted to test whether his set of tactics could withstand it under the circumstances that Messi played the entire game.

At the end of the interview, Twain walked toward the tunnel. At the mouth of the tunnel, a passionate Forest fan handed a red scarf to Twain, who thought he wanted him to sign an autograph. But he did not expect that the other party just waved his hand to him and said, "It's for you, Tony! A memento for you!"

He ran off after he said it.

Twain held the red Forest team scarf in his hand. It was an ordinary scarf, which could be bought for fifteen pounds in the souvenir shop outside the Crimson Stadium.

That spectacular singing in the final stages of the game seemed to still linger in his ears. The eleven years of time was like a mark carved in his heart, brought up again and again to be repeated in his mind. Every time when he thought he no longer cared about the past eleven years, there would always be people reminding him of it in different ways – don't forget the Forest team, don't forget the Forest team...

Twain hung the red scarf around his neck and walked into the tunnel.

How could he forget the Forest team?

Chapter 930: Grave News

The match against Argentina was considered the most important friendly match before the UEFA European Championship because it was the strongest team out of the many friendly match opponents. In the end, England beat Argentina 2:0 at home and Tony Twain's team had yet to lose a game.

After the game, many English media were touting the achievements of Twain's team. Many English fans cheered. England finally produced a good manager after so many years, so they did not have to envy Scotland anymore.

Twain very much wanted to laugh on the inside when he read such a report. He himself was a real Chinese man through and through. In the end, the English people still could not lift their heads up high in front of the Scots in terms of coaching.

After the match against Argentina was over, Twain continued to prepare for the UEFA European Championship. He and his assistants were gathering information on their opponents in the group stage of the UEFA European Championship, as well as information on the teams which could potentially become their opponents. The work on this area had been slow-going. His coaching staff was not as good as the one at the Forest team. It was not to say that their level was not up to standard, but it was an indication that they were not used to doing this kind of work.

In addition, the information on the national teams was not as easy to collect as the football clubs, especially intelligence on the Eastern Europe national teams. After the expansion of the UEFA European Championship, there were eight more teams in competition, and many more countries that had not been in the topflight tournaments in the European football in the past. They were mysterious to an island country team like England. But the presence of such teams in the UEFA European Championship finals could also increase the potential for upsets, making the game more suspenseful.

“We can’t dismiss them because they’re unfamiliar and weaker. We have to know the tactics and styles which they’re good at, their past results, which are the players who can pose threats in the team ... I can’t feel reassured without getting these details clear.” Twain explained to the coaching staff why he valued intelligence research on the weak teams so much. “You can’t guarantee that they won’t advance from their group and show up in front of us. If we don’t know anything about them, we will be the ones in trouble. I don’t want to see that happen.”

To all the football fans, the opening of a major tournament like the UEFA European Championship was always something that they looked forward to. With great anticipation, they began to think about how to plan their time based on the schedule of the UEFA European Championship, so as not to miss every wonderful game. They would be able to discuss enthusiastically with friends which star players would be amazing in the UEFA European Championship and which star players would win success and recognition. In an apprehensive state, they expected the team they supported to be able to lift the championship trophy, beat all the strong enemies, and stomp their bodies under their feet.

They would buy cartons of beer, coffee and snacks in advance to put them at home. They would put together all their annual leave they had saved for this period and appease their wives, girlfriends and children so that for the next month, they would just let football be their companion.

How happy it was to be a football fan...

As a manager, there was no such romance at all for this period. They did indeed need to appease their wives and children or girlfriends, and they could only let football be their companion. Because when they were busy till they were dizzy, home was just a symbol for them.

Shania had returned to their home in England to spend time with her husband, but Twain did not have much time to go home. He had to spend with his coaches and study the opponents with them. At the same time, he had to keep a close eye on the national footballers’ condition. If someone was injured, there would be a specific person to call the football club to inquire about the player’s injury and decide if he needed to call in the substitutes. Just after the game against Argentina, Twain also specially called several big clubs in the hope that they would give full consideration to the importance of the UEFA European Championship to England. With the country as a priority, he hoped that they would minimize the appearance time for the England national footballers in the games. On the one hand, it could help

avoid the possibility of injuries. On the other hand, Twain did not want to end up with a group of exhausted national footballers.

As the manager, Twain needed to appear in public regularly. He would be surrounded and watched by the media wherever he went, as if they had seen a talking gorilla.

He also had to answer idiotic questions a lot. Such as, would a certain player be call upon to the national team? Was there a contradiction between a certain player and another certain player? What did you think about a certain club chairman who was upset that a certain player was not called upon to the national team? A certain gentleman thought that his team had played too many games this season and complained that his players were injured in the national team, but the club was expected to be responsible to pay for the treatment. Furthermore, the national team did not pay a salary to the club. What are your thoughts on this statement? This is the strongest national team in history. Do you have the confidence to win the championship?

Twain was in terrible mood during this time and had a bad temper. He could not help waging a war of words almost every time he encountered the reporters. The media were happy to publish such news. Harassing Twain seemed to have become a commonly used method for the media across England to attract attention. The chief executive of the English Football Association, Shaun Harvey had been having headaches recently, which were caused from being tormented by Twain and the media.

You bastards, can't you stop for a moment?!

Mr. Harvey weakly groaned deep down.

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On April 16th, in the 34th round of the English Premier League tournament, Nottingham Forest took on Newcastle United, which was fighting to avoid relegation, in an away game. The match would affect the fate of the two teams in the next season, with the Forest team needing to qualify for the Champions League so that they could make more money. They currently ranked sixth in the league table and was six points away from the fourth-placed Liverpool. They needed to scramble for points in the next five rounds of the league tournament to avoid playing in the UEFA Europa League. Newcastle United, on the other hand, needed to stay in the Premier League and avoid relegation. They were currently on the brink of the relegation zone and could fall off at any time.

It was a life-and-death game, so it was a fierce competition from the beginning. The two sides constantly had physical contact, rough movements and lots of foul language were spouted too.

As the core of the team, George Wood naturally became the focus of his opponent's attention. The Forest team needed to control the rhythm through Wood in terms of both offense and defense. He was the team's "metronome."

Now he could not pass the ball straight out after he received the ball and then handed the attack to his partner like before. He now needed to control the ball and then observed the situation on the pitch before he could decide how to attack. That way, the football stayed at his feet for a long time, giving the opponent opportunities to take advantage.

Wood was knocked down six times in the first half. Even if his body was strong and sturdy, he could not stop his opponent's defensive moves like a log... his red jersey had even changed color. Kerslake yelled on the sidelines. As soon as Newcastle United fouled against Wood, he would roar at the fourth official. It was like he was possessed by the spirit of Tony Twain.

But such a rant was of no use because his players were also dealing with the Newcastle United players in the same way.

The fourth official knew exactly what the game meant to both teams, so he could not interfere too much with these movements. He would keep one eye open and one eye closed as long as there was no accident.

Things did not improve in the second half. It was even getting increasingly combative. The players of both teams did not put scoring a goal as the priority, but rather they focused on which opposing player to knock down.

Wood was annoyed that his opponent's constant fouls kept him out of the game. He had to focus all his energy on dealing with the offending players.

However, he had not hit anyone so far, which was considered a huge improvement. His temper was finally less fiery when he hit thirty years old...

In the 73rd minute, George Wood was knocked to the ground by his opponent once again. This time instead of getting up as quickly as he had done in the previous eleven times. He laid on the ground and did not move.

Kerslake was still loudly denouncing his opponent's despicable behavior when the look on his assistant, Eastwood, beside him showed that something was wrong.

Wood did not roll on the ground in pain, nor did he raise his hand weakly to signal to be replaced. He laid so quietly on the ground as if he were asleep.

His teammate nearest to him was Gago, who rushed up to see what was going on, but was taken aback by Wood's expression.

The team captain, known for his strength, was lying on the ground. His hands were pressing the tip of his right foot. His face was pale, and his brows knitted together with his face sweating profusely.

But he gritted his teeth and did not say a word.

"George!" Gago called him.

Wood did not answer him.

Gago knew there was trouble. He hurriedly got up and made a hand gesture to signal for a stretcher and a substitute toward the sidelines.

"That looks bad..." Eastwood muttered after he saw Gago's gesture. Fleming had already dashed over along with the stretcher.

Kerslake stopped yelling at the fourth official. That action was now pointless because Wood was already injured...

Fleming rushed to Wood's side and did a quick scan. Then he took off the boot off his right foot and began to check.

When Kerslake saw Fleming go up, he quickly turned around and gestured for a change of player. He had a sudden realization – George Wood had never been injured before, and was never brought off by an injury...

A bad thought emerged in his mind.

George Wood was eventually replaced by John Bostock. He had to be carried off on a stretcher, which was probably the first time he had been treated like this. He was a little dumbstruck lying on a stretcher. He was no stranger to the scene of a player getting injured and being carried off the pitch. But it was the first time this had happened to him. He was unable to accept it.

The media had always thought he was a steel warrior. He himself had thought so too, but he did not expect the steel warrior to rust in his thirties...

The television commentator also did not know what to say in the face of such a scene. He was silent for a long while before he opened his mouth because he felt that it would not do if he did not say something. He said, "... George, George Wood has left the game with an injury and it looks like he won't be able to play in this game. ... It is an unexpected development. George Wood, who has never been injured, is actually hurt... Let us take a look at what happened just now..."

Newcastle United's Spanish left back, José Enrique rushed up from the side and shoveled Wood to the ground. It did not look like the collision was powerful, but after tackling the ball, Enrique naturally turned his body, and Wood's right foot was caught between Enrique's legs. With his right leg scissor in between his legs,... the supporting leg bore all the force of it. If he was still not injured by that, then Wood should have been dragged to the laboratory for an autopsy.

As "Saint George", the patron saint of the England team, the Newcastle United fans stopped cheering and booing after they saw Wood leave the game with an injury. Enrique desperately tried to explain to the referee and the Forest players who had swarmed to him, "I did not mean it, I did not mean it..."

Was it useful to explain it at this point?

The referee gave Enrique a red card!

Kerslake stared at the fourth official and said, "If you had intervened earlier, then this wouldn't have happened! Now we can only pray that George's injuries are not serious, otherwise..." He and the fourth official both remembered Tony Twain's angry face.

Kerslake left the fourth official and turned to run to the other side, where he had gone to see how Wood was doing.

Fleming shook his head as he faced his searching look, "The situation does not look good, David."

"How bad is it?" Kerslake's heart sank.

“It looks like a broken bone...”

Kerslake only heard a “boom” sound in his head.

The team captain and core player had fractured his bone at the crucial moment in the battle for the Champions League qualifier. It meant that he would not be able to play in the next four rounds. He could almost predict his fate at the end of the season. Evan Doughty was not a patient club chairman.

He had come up empty-handed this season and did not win any titles. The Champions League was his last lifeline.

It looked like he’d better start planning what to do next season...

He also had another thought and it was this...What about the England team?

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Twain only heard the news about Wood’s injury after this round of the league tournament because he and Walker did not watch the game at Newcastle. They went to Manchester instead.

When the news reached Twain’s ears, he still did not believe it. He thought he had misheard, or that Walker was joking. He said, “Are you sure it’s George Wood who was hurt? And not some other George?”

Walker shook his head and replied, “Which other George is there in the England team?”

“How did he get hurt?” Twain did not first ask “how’s his injury” because he felt that it should not be a big problem even if Wood was injured. He would just cough out some blood at the most. He was more interested in how he got hurt.

“He was knocked down by the opposing defender and the weight bearing foot was injured.”

Twain tried to recreate the scene in his mind, but he found it hard to imagine. So, he asked, “How’s the injury?”

“The big toe on the right foot is broken.”

Twain turned to Walker and looked at him in astonishment. His expression was as if he heard that the Martians had invaded Earth.

“It’s true. I just spoke to Fleming on the phone.” Walker could understand why Twain made that expression. He had a similar reaction to Twain in the beginning.

Twain turned his gaze away and looked around everywhere, never resting his eyes at any point.

“F**k!” He suddenly swore, “F**k! Motherf**king!”

It was as if he had gone crazy. String of dirty words spew out of his mouth. Fortunately, there was no one else in the room but Walker. Otherwise other people would have been shocked by it. But it was not surprising that his old partner, Walker, was familiar with Twain’s temper.

“I had f**king called the English Premier League coaches specifically before, hoping that they would have arranged less lethal tactics for the national footballers... The bunch of Newcastle United bastards

treated my words as one ear in and one ear out? Does Kinnear (the Newcastle United manager) that old bastard not know what George Wood means to England? Our main core player had a fracture in his big toe! This is not some f**king common cold!”

Twain walked circles in his hotel room, waving his arms in agitation and shouting abuse.

Walker also did not advise him to calm down. He knew that Twain was under immense pressure and had a bad temper. It might be good to take this opportunity to let him vent for a while. Perhaps it could be beneficial.

After he abused all the people who should be scolded, Twain calmed down slowly. He asked, “Did Fleming say how long it will take for him to recover?”

“... three months.” Walker said somewhat diffidently. He was worried that Twain was going to have another round of abuse.

This time, it was better. Twain stared blankly for a while when he heard the amount of time needed, but the word “f**k” did not fly out of his mouth the moment he opened it. He glanced past Walker toward the blue sky outside the window.

Three months later, the UEFA European Championship would already be over, and it would have been too late...