

Champions 951

Chapter 951: A Check-up

Early next morning, a black Mercedes set off from the hotel where the England team was staying for Hospital Universitario y Politécnico de La Fe in Valencia, where a woman with a broken hand for 28 years once had a successful hand transplant. The hospital was quite influential in the field of orthopedic surgery.

As the team was heading today to Sevilla, where the next game was being held, time was very tight. To this end, the British Embassy in Spain came forward and contacted the hospital for the team, which made it possible to arrange for an examination in the shortest time. Moreover, this matter had to be kept secret from the news media. Any incident could be complicated when it became entangled with the news media.

Fortunately, the England team's round of 16 opponent was not Spain. Otherwise the Spanish side would not be so happy to oblige with the examination.

The people in the car were Twain, Derek Wright and George Wood, as well as Doctor Wallace, who had been on holiday in Spain during this time. He also followed closely Wood's recovery from his injury. The team also informed him of the hospital check-up this time. He had hurried through the night and arrived at Valencia so as to provide the most professional and authoritative advice.

The Royal Hospital of Nottingham University was the English Football Association's partner hospital. Whenever the national team's players were injured or fall ill, they would be treated by them. The English Football Association had a lot of faith in Wallace.

Apart from the driver, none of the four people in the car spoke. The atmosphere seemed a little depressing. Twain started to make a joke, "Why do I feel like we're going to an execution ground? Can you all not look so grim, okay?"

Wallace smiled, "Why don't we talk about yesterday's game? That was fantastic, Tony. Overtaking Germany, you've caused the always tough Germans at a loss."

Twain gave Wood a glance and said, "It would be really hard to know how things would have turned out if it had not been for George."

Wood was the most resistant to going to the hospital among these people. He said, "I feel like I played well, and I don't have any problems with my foot. I don't have to go to the hospital for a check-up."

"That will not do, George. To ensure your wellbeing, this check-up must be done. Since you think you're fine, what's there to be afraid of?" Twain winked at Wood.

"I'm not afraid..." Wood said somewhat diffidently.

When the group of people arrived at the hospital, they did not caught sight of any press or reporters. It looked like the other side really abide by their promise and did not inform the media.

An examination of Wood's right big toe took half an hour. Twain could not understand the medical jargons while Wright and Wallace were reviewing the X-rays with the Spanish doctors. Twain was not interested in the discussion. He just wanted to know the final result.

So, he waited for Wallace to finish the conversation and went up to ask, "What is the conclusion, Doctor?"

"The good news is that his right big toe wasn't hurt again in yesterday's game. The bad news is that his foot is still in recovery." Wallace looked at Twain and said. The smile on his face was gone and his expression was serious.

"From the looks of yesterday's game, George Wood's right foot still hurts when he touches the ball and uses force. Although his threshold is so strong that people can't really tell, it does not help him during the recovery from his injury. My advice is that for the next game, it's better not to let him..." Doctor Wallace deliberated for a moment as he considered Wood's attitude before he spoke again, "Not to let him be in the starting lineup."

Twain frowned. Wood was resting in another room after he undergone the physical examination and could not hear the conversation between them.

The piece of news was neither good nor bad. England's round of 16 opponent had been announced and it was not a very strong team. But it was not considered weak too. It had a somewhat special relationship with the England team – it was the Sweden team.

Before that, England had not beaten Sweden in 48 years.

George Wood was definitely the core of the team and the most important piece of the game. This could be seen from the last ten minutes against Germany. There was a huge difference between him being on the field and not on the field. Without George Wood, the England team could still overtake Germany, but it was not as reassuring. As soon as Wood came on, everyone's hearts that had jumped to their throats settled back smoothly.

An opponent like Sweden could not be taken lightly. After being humiliated by Wales, Twain could not afford to underestimate their opponent anymore. A team that could break into the knockout stages was not a team that England could defeat with their eyes closed. It included Wales.

Wood was important to the team, but Wood's personal career was equally important too.

Twain thought for a moment and decided to accept Doctor Wallace's advice. He said, "I'm not going to have him in the starting lineup."

A smile re-emerged on Wallace's face as he said, "You have to worry about how to talk to him. He is quite stubborn."

Twain shrugged and replied, "What else can I say? I have to coax him like a child. He's already thirty years old, and yet he's like a seven- or eight-years old kid..."

Men with an Oedipus complex would not grow up and always hoped that they were still the children who could be in their mothers' arms.

Twain rubbed his temple as he went out. He had to look at George Wood in the eyes.

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Wood looked at Twain without an expression on his face. There was not even a look of anticipation. But the look in those eyes gave Twain a headache.

“The results are out, George.” Twain tried his best to make himself smile.

Wood did not follow up with a question of “What are the results?” He just continued to look silently at Twain.

But it would have been better if he did speak up. Twain felt it was difficult to handle when he did not open his mouth to speak.

“There’s good news and bad news. Which one do you want to hear first?” Twain had to attempt with a cliched method.

“Good news.” Wood blurted out the answer without hesitation.

“Your big toe was not injured a second time in yesterday’s game.”

Wood was not surprised by it as he knew his body well. Although the collision against Rolfes was the most intense in the game, he still managed to miss the injured area at the crucial moment. It was the physical instinct of an experienced professional player.

“What’s the bad news?”

After the exchange, Twain’s mood gradually calmed down. He did not hesitate and replied directly, “I won’t arrange for you to be the starting lineup in the game against Sweden.”

There was a change in the expression on Wood’s face. He stared at Twain with widened eyes. There was even some anger in his eyes. He still remembered what Twain had said to him before: he could make a formal comeback when it was time for the elimination round.

Twain certainly knew the meaning of Wood’s expression, and he laughed bitterly, “Your injury has not completely healed. I can’t let you take the risk in the game. I don’t want a repeat of Michael Owen’s incident in the game against Sweden at the World Cup in Germany to happen to you, George.”

What caused Michael Owen’s career to decline to a low ebb began with that injury. He had just returned from recovery of an injury at the time. Just 50 seconds into the World Cup game against Sweden in Germany, he fell to the ground in agony after hitting the ball on the sideline and was carried off the field on a stretcher after. He not only missed the World Cup but was also absent for most of the rest of the season. By the time he recovered from his injury, he could no longer get back the glory of his past.

Twain did not want to take the risk.

What Wood wanted to say was stopped by Twain’s gesture. He said, “Whatever you want to say, George, I won’t change my mind. Yes, I admit I have to go back on my word and cannot keep my promise. But the sake of your health and out of consideration for your future career, I would rather eat my words and break my promise. You can rest assured that we will keep a close eye on your injury recovery every day and, once it is confirmed that you really have no problem, I will let you play in the starting lineup...”

Wood was still reluctant and wanted to open his mouth to fight back, but was interrupted once again by Twain, who said, "Think of your mother, George. Don't let your mother worry about you anymore."

This sentence hit Wood's weakness. He stopped there and did not know how to rebut Twain for a long while. After yesterday's game had ended, he called his mother. Unexpectedly, his mother did not praise his performance on the pitch. The first sentence from her was to ask him how his foot was. At that time, he was not in the least concerned and said it was nothing. But his mother was still very worried and did not seem to believe his words.

But how did the boss know his mother would be worried? Wood looked suspiciously at Twain.

Twain knew what was on his mind and said, "I didn't talk to your mother on the phone, but it's only natural. You may not care about your career, but you have to think about it for your mom. No mother would want her son to spend his life on crutches. I'm not being an alarmist; you should know it."

Wood was completely silent. He bowed his head and fell into contemplation.

Twain knew he had managed to persuade him, so he turned around and went out the door.

Wallace and Wright were waiting anxiously outside. When they saw Twain come out, they looked like they were in a hurry to ask questions.

"It's all right." Twain shrugged and spread his hand, "He accepted it."

The two men were relieved at the same time.

"That's good." Wright was the most relieved. Otherwise he would find it extremely difficult to face George Wood's stubborn look in his eyes every time.

But Twain's next words made him nervous again.

"I hope he recovers as soon as possible, Mr. Wright. This is the work of your team doctors. No matter what, I'm going to let him start in the quarterfinals!" Twain said determinedly and basically did not give Wright a chance to implore at all.

Next to them, Wallace looked at his industry peer, somewhat rejoicing in his predicament. Fortunately, he now had nothing to do with the national team. He merely helped out. Otherwise, it would really be wretched to work for such an unreasonable manager...

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When the four men walked out of the hospital and were ready to get in the car to leave, they were startled by a sight in front of their eyes:

At least 50 reporters crowded the hospital entrance and made it impenetrable. The policemen who were summoned at the last minute to maintain order, were sweating profusely and still unable to control the surging crowd. Especially when Twain and the other men in Twain's party showed up at the entrance of the hospital lobby...

When Twain, Wood and the others came out of the hospital, the reporters no longer cared about the policemen stopping them. They swarmed forward and tossed their questions along with the microphones at Twain and Wood.

“Why did you suddenly come to the hospital for a check-up? Is it because George Wood’s injury has worsened?”

“Mr. Twain, was this examination related to the game with the Germany team? Was George Wood’s right big toe hurt again during the game with the Germany team?”

“Is it possible to reveal what the results of the examination are?”

“Mr. Wood, how are you doing with your injury?”

“Can you make it to the game with the Swedish team, George?”

“Mr. Wright, can you say something about Wood’s foot injury?”

“Doctor Wallace, Doctor Wallace...”

Apparently none of these four men wanted to answer the questions. The policemen at the scene surrounded them tightly with them in the middle and escorted them as they squeezed their way to their car.

Some of the microphones had even hit the four people on their heads. They had to put their hands up to protect their heads, looking like criminals guilty of monstrous crimes, who had to be wary of rotten eggs and tomatoes thrown by angry crowds.

They spent five minutes squeezing before they could get to the car in the short distance of ten meters. After using force to shut the car door, Twain quipped, “Look to see if your wallets are still around, gentlemen.”

Wright was still a little stunned. He said, “How did the media know that we are here?”

Twain shrugged and said, “Who knows? The paparazzi are everywhere. They’re more omnipotent than God.” As he spoke, he also glanced at Wood, who was sitting in the back. Wood had his head down and appeared heavy-hearted.

“Let’s go.” Twain barked out a command to leave. The driver started the car and slowly drove out of the crowd. Then he accelerated the car to drive away.

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Half a day later, when the England team arrived in Seville, the online editions of the various major media had already published the latest news – the morning of that day, George Wood went to Hospital Universitario y Politécnico de La Fe in Valencia for a check-up, accompanied by Manager Tony Twain, the head team doctor, Derek Wright and the renowned surgeon, Doctor Wallace. The details of the exact situation were unknown. But the fact that they had hurried to the hospital for the check-up the next day after the game with the Germany team made people’s imagination run wild ...

For a while, rumors that “George Wood will be absent from the match against Sweden” and even “He will miss the rest of the UEFA European Championship” were swirling about.

With the help of the fiber optic cable buried in the oceans and satellites in the space, such rumors scattered everywhere on the internet and stir up public sentiment with false statements.

You don’t believe it? Maybe that is the truth.

Do you believe it? Maybe it’s all a scam to fool everyone.

In the afternoon’s training during the fifteen minutes of opening to the media, everyone could clearly see that George Wood was with the team for warm-up practice and he even kicked two shots!

In that case, what was going on in the morning news?

Fifteen minutes soon came to an end, and the reporters were a little reluctant to leave. They wanted to ask Twain about what had happened to Wood.

Instead, Twain ruthlessly evicted them and refused to answer any questions.

“We have a right to know the truth about the news!” There were reporters who protested with displeasure.

“I have the right to refuse to answer any questions.” Twain responded, “Get them out of here!” He yelled at the security guard. As a result, the security guards were no longer polite, and even pushed and pulled the reporters out of the gate of the training ground.

“Come on! This again!” The English reporters were disgruntled but could not do anything about the manager who had just led the team to eliminate the Germany team. As long as the results were good, Twain could continue to dominate the national team. There was nothing they could do except to spit on the ground they stood on.

The Swedish reporters thought more complicatedly than their English counterparts – Was there any conspiracy on Twain’s part to refuse the media shooting and interviews so nervously? Did George Wood really go to the hospital for a check-up or was it just a smokescreen?

Would George Wood be in the starting lineup in the game between England and Sweden?

They were desperate to figure this out because it had to do with whether the Swedish team could go any further in the UEFA European Championship.

Chapter 951.1: Mystical Destiny

Twain realized that luck has slowly been slipping away from his team ever since their loss to Wales. The number of players who would not be able to play in the match against Sweden has just increased to three – Bentley, George Wood and Walcott have all picked up an injury and are all ruled out of the match.

Walcott had sprained his ankle and is definitely not going to be able to play in both the Round of 16 match and the quarter-finals.

Fortunately for Twain, he had brought three right midfielders along with him for the Euro Cup. The media might have heavily criticized this action of his in the past, but now it has become England's salvation, because they did not need to worry about which player would have to play out of position and play as a right midfielder instead.

Adriano Moke would definitely be starting in the match against Sweden. As for whether or not he would play in the quarter-finals... That still remains a doubt. If he performs well in the match against Sweden, he might continue to start for the next match, but if he fails to perform, then Twain would have to see how well Bentley has recovered before making his decision.

But, if Moke fails to perform and Bentley also fails to recover in time for the next match... Twain would be given a bad headache.

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The Swedes are especially concerned about George Wood's injury. They did not worry about Walcott since he has been ruled out of the match against them, but there is a chance that Wood might be play. George Wood is the core of the England team, and his effectiveness has been amply shown in the final 10 minutes of the match against Germany.

The manager of the Sweden national team, Lars Lagerbäck, has been closely monitoring the news regarding the England team. He suspects that Tony Twain has been deliberately releasing false information regarding Wood's ability to play in the match to the public. Twain got Wood to undergo a medical examination earlier in the day, and Wood was subsequently pictured to be training with the rest of the team during the training session. Wood did not look troubled when he trained with the ball, and it seems like he would be fit to play in the match against Sweden.

However, based on their research, they know that Tony Twain is a crafty man. One would never know what Twain plans on doing next because nothing is ever what it seems with this man.

Sweden needs to come up with a set of tactics to deal with Wood if he is starting in the match, and they also need another set of tactics to deal with England if Wood is not starting or if he is not even going to play in the match. Lagerbäck needs to decide on the exact tactic that he would use in the match soon. He cannot possibly get his team to practise two different sets of tactics. There is too little time for that.

Twain obviously would not let Lagerbäck know what his plans for the match are. The reporters have only been able to take photos of the England team's warm-ups so far.

In the end, Lagerbäck came up with a set of tactics based on the assumption that George Wood would not be starting in the match. He believes that there must be a reason behind Wood's visit to the hospital, and he thinks it's because Wood's injury has yet to fully recover. In addition, Sweden is no match for England. Lagerbäck was certain that Twain would not risk playing his best player in a match where England has a good chance of winning.

Lagerbäck once explained to the media why Sweden is able to maintain a 48-year unbeaten record against England, "We are very familiar with the England team. The British style of football is very predictable. Their biggest foe is actually themselves. They are always so arrogant and they never spend time to research about their opponents."

Lagerbäck believes that he knows England inside out. This is the case 10 years ago, and it will still be 10 years later. Tony Twain would definitely not start George Wood in the game, and England would definitely not change the way that they play in the match either. His team would be able to keep their unbeaten record against England as long as they stay on their toes and play cautiously.

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Lagerbäck got it right. Twain does not plan on letting Wood start in the match. However, the reason behind his decision is not because he feels that his team can win against Sweden easily without Wood.

Twain has actually become extra cautious after getting punished by Wales previously.

He can't help but be even more cautious against Sweden since the latter is considered to be England's nemesis.

Sweden is a team that is not regarded to be a strong team in Europe. However, they are a thorn in England's flesh. England might not fear France, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Portugal and other powerhouse European teams, but things are different with Sweden.

What the England fans feel towards Sweden is nothing like the hatred that they feel towards Germany. What they feel is a kind of pain that is brought about by the fact that England has not won against Sweden for the past 48 years...

For a self-proclaimed top team like England, whose aims are to become World and European champions, losing to a weak European team like Sweden for 48 years in a row is depressing. England go into every match feeling confident that they will win against Sweden, but the results are never what they expect.

The last time England faced off against Sweden in an international competition was during the Germany World Cup back in 2006. The two sides met in the last match of the group stage. Both teams played well for one half of the match respectively, and the final score was 2:2. The manager of the Sweden team back then was Lagerbäck, and he still remains as their manager even now. In contrast, England has changed their manager four times in this period of time, from Sven-Göran Eriksson to Steve McClaren to Fabio Capello and finally to Tony Twain.

England's last victory over Sweden came in 1968, two years after winning the World Cup in 1966.

The year 1968 was an intriguing year. The England national team that had just won the World Cup in 1966 seemed to have used up all the good luck that they had accumulated over the past century in that one year. It was the last time they ever won Sweden in its history, and it was also the very first time that they lost to Germany as well. Not only that, England has never won the World Cup or the Euro Cup since 1968 either. In fact, they have never made it into the finals since then. Every subsequent England team might have been touted as the 'strongest team England has ever had', but they always ended up disappointing the entire nation in the end.

Ever since 1968, England has faced off with Sweden 12 times. Eight of those matches were draws and four of them were losses. England still has yet to win once against Sweden.

England has not encountered Sweden in an international competition since 2006, and many people have slowly forgotten about England's winless record against Sweden after so many years. It was only when

England and Sweden met in the knockout stages of this year's Euro Cup that people began to recall the fact England has not won against Sweden for the past 48 years.

Sweden not only brought shame to the England football team, they also brought bad luck to them. Every time England loses or encounters Sweden in a particular competition, they would become very unlucky in that very competition. This might sound superstitious, but it is true. One example can be found in the 1990 World Cup. England and Sweden were in the same group during the qualifiers for the 1990 World Cup, and England lost to Sweden when the two faced off with each other. England still managed to qualify for the World Cup in the end, but they lost in the semi-finals. In 1995, England played against Sweden in a friendly match in preparation for the Euro Cup. They lost against Sweden in that match and were subsequently eliminated during the semi-finals of the Euro Cup. During the qualifiers for the 2000 Euro Cup, England and Sweden were placed in the same group once again. This time round, Sweden dominated against England and was placed first in the group. England was still able to qualify for the Euro Cup, but they were eliminated in the group stages. Before the 2004 Euro Cup, England tried to break the 'curse' surrounding them and Sweden one more time, but they failed. They still lost to Sweden, and they were also eliminated in the quarter-finals of the Euro Cup. During the 2006 World Cup, England and Sweden were in the same group, and both sides went away from the match with a draw. England managed to top the group by gaining one point from the match, and they also successfully evaded their bitter rivals Germany in the next round. However, they still lost to Portugal on penalties in the next match, and the 'curse' continues.

Back then, the British stubbornly believed that England would be able to realize their dream of becoming world champions as long as they defeat Sweden.

How embarrassing. It seems like China is not the only country who suffers from some strange curse that prevents them from winning every time they encounter a certain team.

England might have defeated their biggest rival Germany earlier, but the England fans were not able to say that their team would definitely be able to change their destiny against the Swedes this time round. Many of them continued to worry about their team's future in the competition. The fans who had booked their hotels all the way till the finals were also starting to wonder if their money had gone to waste.

Unlike the match between England and Germany, the match between England and Sweden is not etched in hatred, and it is bound to elicit less of a reaction from both the fans and players alike. The England and Sweden players did not talk much about the match during their interviews, and the fans did not react as strongly as they did previously against the Germany team either.

The reason is because both the Swedes and the British are confused about this 'record' that the two countries have with each other.

A Sweden player smiled when he was asked by a reporter why their team has not lost to England for the past 48 years. "This is a question that puzzles all of us. We all don't know why."

The 34-year-old Ibrahimovic is a player who participated in the 2006 World Cup, but he did not play in the match against England back then. However, he still vividly remembers the scenes from that match as he sat on the bench. England had just scored their second goal on the 85th minute of the match, and Sweden was still trailing by 1:2 during the 90th minute. Everyone thought that the match was going to

end up as a loss for Sweden, but Henrik Larsson's queer header leveled the score at 2:2 in the final minutes of the match. It is truly an outlandish turn of events.

The smile on Ibrahimovic's face was quickly replaced by a frown when a reporter asked him about his thoughts regarding the 2006 match between Sweden and England. "I don't know what happened back then. It truly was a strange match. Our team seemed to be full of energy in the second half. The last goal was definitely odd too. I don't know how Larsson managed to head the ball into the back of the net. Maybe with help from God?" A smile emerged on his face once again as he finished his words.

The reporters from Sweden were curious and confused about the record that Sweden has against England. Their country is definitely not on par with England in terms of footballing abilities, and England has also consistently performed better than Sweden in the international competitions as well. So, why is it that England can't beat them for 48 years? There is such a big gap in their abilities!

The England players also found it weird when they were asked about it by the reporters.

Not being able to win against Germany for many years in a row leads to hatred and a strong desire to win in the England players, but not being able to win against Sweden only leaves the players feeling confused. They just can't seem to be able to bring themselves to hate the Sweden players when they know that their opponents are clearly not on the same level as they are.

To the British, their relationship with Germany can be summed up with the word 'feud'. But, the only word that can describe their relationship with Sweden would be 'destiny', because there seems to be some unknown force at play that keeps them from winning against Sweden.

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"I don't know why we can't beat them. Maybe we just have really bad luck..." Rooney could only scratch the back of his head as he recalled about what happened in England's last match against Sweden back in 2006. He played in that very match back then, but he was left feeling very upset at the previous national team manager, Sven-Göran Eriksson, for taking him off the pitch halfway through the match.

Reporters from England, Sweden and several other countries crowded outside the hotel that the England national team was staying in. They were not allowed entry into the hotel, so they could only wait outside. The moment they see an England player walk out from the hotel, they would all flock up to him and hold out their microphones towards him.

"I did not play in England's previous match against Sweden, and I've also not played in any of those 12 matches from before. I don't know why such a record exists." Aaron Mitchell was forced to answer the question after being repeatedly asked by the reporters.

Tony Twain walked out of the hotel, and he frowned when he saw how the reporters had surrounded his players.

He has been repeatedly asked the question regarding the record between England and Sweden for the past two days as well. "Why has the strong England team failed to win against Sweden for the past 48 years?"

Initially, he had dismissed the question as being nothing more than a joke, but now that everyone is asking him the same question, he could not help but be on guard.

The reason was because he glimpsed danger in the fanatic eyes of the reporters.

He was thankful for the fact that England had not faced off with Sweden since 2006, because it meant that most people would have forgotten about the existence of such a record by now, and this is beneficial in helping him prepare for the match. However, he did not expect the media to publish numerous articles about it now. It was as though they were scared that none of the players knew about the 48-year grudge between England and Sweden.

The current situation made him remember how the China national football team suffered from a 'fear of the Korea national football team'. Losing to the same opponent multiple times was not supposed to be a big deal, but the media blew the entire issue out of proportion, and they made the Korea team seem like an extremely strong team that the China team would never be able to defeat. This bred fear in the hearts of the China players towards the Korea team. The China players were never mentally strong players to begin with, and the media's actions put the nail in the coffin. It has led to the China team not being able to win against the Koreans for a very long time...

The media was the biggest contributor to the China team's inability to defeat the Korea team.

Twain did not want the tragedy to repeat itself. People might say that England football is on a totally different level from China football, but in Twain's eyes, England is just like a 'European China football team'. There are too many similarities between the two sides. The England players have all been spoiled by the British media and many of them are mentally weak. In fact, the England players might be the most vulnerable when compared against players from other powerhouse teams in Europe.

If he allows the reporters to keep harassing his players, some of his newbie players might suffer from a mental disorder afterwards... This cannot go on.

The one thing that the media is best at is creating chaos.

Twain turned around and walked back into the hotel lobby. He then walked up to the hotel's security guard, and he pointed at the 'passionate' reporters outside the hotel before saying, "My players need a good rest. I don't want any of them to be harassed by the media. Also, all those reporters are currently blocking the entrance into your hotel. This inconveniences your other guests as well."

The security guard had heard a thing or two from his colleagues about how to deal with the England team. He quickly nodded his head. "Yes, sir. I will get them to leave."

Twain nodded his head approvingly at the security guard before he sat down at a vacant seat in the lobby. He then watched as the hotel's security guards chased away the reluctant reporters.

During the tactical meeting at night, Twain announced a new rule: every single player is not allowed to answer any question regarding the 48-year grudge between England and Sweden during interviews from now on.

"There's nothing to talk about regarding that question. Don't be fooled by the reporters." He reminded his players.

Twain wanted to stop his players from thinking about England's record against Sweden. He did not know how effective his words or rule would be, but it is definitely better than not doing anything at all.

He had everything under his control initially, but the pervasive media just had to come in and ignite a fire within the players' hearts. Twain feared that those fires would get bigger and bigger during the match and become uncontrollable. When that happens, there would be irreversible consequences...

If Twain had the power to decide whether a person lives or dies, then the very first bunch of people he would kill off would be the reporters, especially the reporters who write for tabloid newspapers. He wants to enforce a rule that dictates what the media can and cannot do. You cannot ask me any question that pisses me off! If you ask me those questions I would not answer them! You cannot publish anything that makes me feel uncomfortable! If you publish them you would have to take them down at once!

Tsk... Sadly, those things would never come true.

Chapter 951.2: Extremely Relaxed

There is not much time left for England, who were about to face Sweden in the quarter-finals at the home stadium of La Liga club Sevilla three days after the group stage matches.

Before the match, England's media did not want to hype up the feud between the two teams as much as they did for the match against Germany, they simply mentioned the embarrassing record of 48 years of zero victories in this match-up, hoping that Twain's team could finally end this record.

There was no choice but to end the record, if they do not win, they would be eliminated... No Englishman hopes to be eliminated by Sweden.

It was also clear from the pre-match fans' admission that the two teams did not have a deep feud with each other. Fans of both teams could even put their arms around each other. There were not even one provocative banner against the other team. The media were only reporting the match as an ordinary game, at most they only compared between Ibrahimović and Aaron Mitchell, both had their extraordinary heights, and their ball handling skills were still impressive regardless, Mitchell also had the nickname of "second-generation Ibrahimović".

England's players before the game were not like last game, where they would glare with both pupils enlarged, as if the murderer of their parents were on the other side where they could not wait to charge forward and strike them with their cleavers till they fall, then stomp on them for a billion times, causing the other party to never stand up again.

Twain also specifically did not mention the embarrassing record of "zero victories in 48 years against Sweden" in the changing room. He was worried the players would constantly be reminded about that record.

The feud between England and Sweden was different from the feud between England and Germany.

When England was going against Germany, Twain could still use the feud between the two countries to motivate the English players. But upon facing Sweden, the best way was still hold on mentioning the feud between them.

The reason was simple, between them and Germany was hatred, but between them and Sweden was resignation to fate. Upon mentioning that England has never won Sweden in 48 years, the English players would come up with wrong ideas in their minds – Is this what God has designed? Or else, our capabilities are far better than Sweden, why are we unable to win them? Especially that match against them during the World Cup group stage, scoring a goal in the 85th minute, victory was in sight, but we allowed a long goal against us outside the penalty area to tie the score... That was simply too incredible and unable to be explained using common sense!

The more the players thought about it, the more it would cause their brains to become a mess. This mysticism was a bad thing, it would affect the mentality of the players, which would directly cause them to be unable to perform normally. Twain could not guarantee his own players would not have such thoughts:

No matter how hard we try, the end results would always be that way...

So he may as well not mention the record at all, to prevent those players from producing those weird thoughts.

For this special match, Twain also made the corresponding adjustments.

Chris Cohen, who had his debut starting the last game, continues to start in the next game, and Downing would have to continue staying on the bench. As Bentley and Walcott were both injured, Adriano Moke made his first debut in the starting line in the European Cup.

Twain had arranged for as many Nottingham Forest players as possible to play because he was more confident in the mental qualities of the players he brought up by his own hand than the players who came out from other clubs.

In fact, there are a lot of people in the current England national team who had no special feelings about Sweden, because they had basically not experienced any competition against Sweden, if the media did not use the feud between England and Sweden to bombard the players with questions, then Twain did not have anything to worry, but just needed to regard this game as a regular quarter-finals match.

But now, he had to have an additional matter to worry.

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From the start of the game, England took the initiative and repeatedly threaten the Swedish goalmouth several times.

After all, England were far ahead of Sweden in terms of pure capabilities. The most famous and impressive soccer stars in Sweden was only one Ibrahimović, but this Inter Milan striker was already 33 years old, although his ball handling techniques were more precise, but his physicality was on a downfall.

He was at the most front and did not pose much of a threat to England's defence. Because the Swedish team had no means to get the ball to his feet at all.

England's midfield had press fully on the Sweden's midfield and it was not easy at all to send the ball forward.

The Swedish side also could not find a good way to attack, England's attack was very sound and impressive. As George Wood was unable to play in the game, Gerrard became England's midfield hub. Although Gerrard was old, but his techniques and game sense were still intact, the decline in his physicality would not hinder him from being one of the most impressive midfielders in the world.

Twain, in response to the situation where the Swedish defenders were generally tall, did not arrange for the type of play where the side flanks would cross the ball over to the middle for Mitchell. He knew that with Mitchell's body shape in the crowd of Swedish defenders, he was unable to take any advantages at all. Passing the ball over to him was only wasting opportunities. Hence, playing for possession via ground passes became the main attacking direction that Twain prioritized.

Anyways, Mitchell's dribbling techniques were still as impressive, playing ground passes would still be beneficial for him.

Gerrard passed the ball straight from midfield to Mitchell who was at the front.

Mitchell leaned onto the Sweden's centre-back, Jonas Olsson, and stepped on the football. Olsen, who was standing at 1.96 metres, stretched out his long leg to try and tackle for the ball, but once Mitchell pushed him with an arm, he could not even reach the ball. Just when Olsen was holding up his hands to signal to the referee that Mitchell was pushing, Mitchell pulled the ball backwards with his feet, and passed it to the player who was passing by him and running forward, Wayne Rooney!

"Rooney received a wonderful pass from Mitchell! It is a breakthrough!"

Fortunately, the other Olsson – left-back Martin Olsson came forward at this critical moment. When Rooney had just sent the ball forward, he came out from the side and did a clean slide tackle, kicking the ball out of the field.

When England were going to do a throw-in from the sidelines, Mitchell did not wait right in front of the goal mouth, but instead run towards the side line and made hand gestures to receive the ball.

The right back Richards threw the football to him, he received the ball forward with his chest, as he turned around and broke through! Martin Olsson's slight negligence allowed Mitchell to leave him behind as he gave Mitchell a shove from the back, however this unexpectedly assisted Mitchell – he followed the shove as he pushed the ball forward with increased speed. Afterwards, he stretched his long leg forward to control the ball which was still flying in the air.

Martin Olsson chased immediately, but Mitchell used his left foot to kick the ball slightly to his left while jumping at the same time, allowing him to dodge Olsson's tackle, and just like that, he escaped Olsson's defending.

After getting away from Olsson, Mitchell continued to dribble the ball inside. Sweden's centre-backs were all with a tall build, hence they could easily intercept the high balls, the odds and possibilities of Rooney being able to snatch for the ball was too low.

Just when Jonas Olsson was about to pounce on Mitchell again, Mitchell passed the ball!

He swept the ball through the turf and towards the door, in this pass, as long as someone slightly touch the ball, there would be a high chance that it would enter the goalmouth.

Unfortunately this time Sweden's veteran goalkeeper Andreas Isaksson defended the ball at the right time as he held the ball tightly in his hands.

Although this attack did not end with a shot on target, but Mitchell's previous series of performances won the applause of the England fans in the stands and the praises of the English narrator.

"It was outstanding dribble techniques. It's unbelievable that he's 2.1 meters tall!"

Even the Swedish narrator had to praise Aaron Mitchell, calling that he was indeed "England's Ibrahimović".

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England had been besieging Sweden ever since, as everyone was no longer able to see the defensive counterattack Twain used when he was against Germany and Portugal.

Sweden's tall defenders looked comfortable defending the ball in the air, but they were a little overwhelmed when faced with England's ground coordinations. Adriano Moke was given a very special assignment in this game. Instead of asking him to stay on the sideline, Twain gave him plenty of room for free movement, allowing him to move freely on both the side and the middle route, as well as within the penalty box. Effectively using his ball handling techniques to coordinate with his teammates in a small perimeter, creating opportunities to score.

This play in the first half was quite useful due to Moke's short stature, flexible movement, good ball control technology. This made the Swedish players run in circles.

By the 27th minute, England had finally found a chance. After Mitchell took control of the ball at the edge of the penalty area, Sweden's defence focused on Adriano Moke's on the right side, while England's left side had a serious lack of defensive attention. Chris Cohen did not perform well in this game, so for a long period of time, England were prioritizing on the right side during their offense.

Seeing this scene, the players who all came from Nottingham Forests had a common idea. As Mitchell held the ball and made a fake pass to Moke, he turned and kicked the ball to the complete opposite direction.

"Chris Cohen received the ball and there was no Swedish defender in front of him!" John Mortensen screamed. This was a good opportunity for the England team!

The ever-tight defence finally revealed a gap, just to see if England's players could seize it!

After receiving the ball, Chris Cohen looked up at the penalty area. By right the Swedish right-back, Mikael Lustig, was supposed to be defending him, but instead was in the penalty area as his eyes caught onto the side where Moke was, clearly Moke's continuous excellent performance also attracted his defensive attention.

Cohen no longer hesitated and cut straight into the penalty area. That was when Lestig ran over to prepare to defend.

Any team's defense is a complete system, once a side was neglected, the whole system would be affected. Once Lestig ran over, the center space of the penalty area was left open.

Cohen saw the opportunity to pass the ball straight into the penalty area. Mitcher and Rooney were still behind the Swedish defenders, this pass was not for them, but instead for...

Gerrard slotted in from the back and suddenly appeared on the edge of the penalty area, Cohen's football had just passed onto his feet. Gerrard received the ball as he kicked it fiercely towards the goal. The football whizzed towards the Swedish goalmouth.

Isakson did not expect the man to finish the attack to be Gerrard, he was underprepared for Gerrard's strong shot, when the ball had already hit the back of the net, he then made his diving gesture.

"What a beautiful goal!" Motson shouted, "Stephen Gerrard's powerful shot was unstoppable!"

"It looks like our players have not been affected by the feud between England and Sweden, up till now, the Swedish team had not gotten any chances nor opportunities, England has taken control of the full situation!"

Gerrard waved his fist excitedly after the goal. He was present the last time England lost to Sweden at the World Cup, he was the one who scored the second goal for England, but it was not enough to rescue England's fate, as they still ended with a draw against Sweden.

But this time he would not let this exact same situation happen again!

If the two goals are not guaranteed to beat Sweden, then we will score three goals, four goals, five goals! And even more goals!

Gerrard waved his fist with strength as he vented his frustration.

The Swedes looked a little numb in the face of the loss, it was nearly 30 minutes where they did not have a chance at all as they were fully pressed down and beaten up by their opponents, it was only time before they loses a goal.

Tony Twain stood up and applauded the team's performance, but he was not as thrilled because he had a similar idea with the Swedes – their performance were perfect for the 30 minutes and if we could not score again, then that would really be paranormal. That was the strength gap, coupled with team team respecting their opponents from the start and not leaving any fatal gaps for their opponents to seize, taking the lead was normal.

The Swedes must have not thought that England would be so determined to hold up the attacking flag, as it could be seen from their bewildered reaction. The Swedes must not have thought that this England would seem completely unaffected by their fate which lasted forty-eight years.

"England's performance allows us to see hope, the hope in seeing the end to that ridicule of such a fate!" Motson spoke the minds of the several English soccer fans.

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After taking the lead, Twain did not loosen up, he instead got up from the coach's box and stood on the sidelines, constantly signalling that the players should continue to strengthen their attack and not give the Swede a chance to bounce back. England's players faithfully carried out Twain's tactical intent, committing a brutal attack on Sweden in midfield, then defending hard in the backfield, not giving Ibrahimović too many chances to receive the ball, and not letting him turn around easily. That way

Ibrahimović 's room to play is minimized to the point where the narrator wonders if the Swedish tower was even playing...

In the face of England's surge of attack, the Swedes could only shrink the line of defense, temporarily avoid attacking at the front. Sweden coach Lagerbäck's idea was to consider it a win even if they were behind a goal in the first half, and as long as the score gap was not widened, he could make adjustments during the half-time break and then go on a full-on attack in the second half. With his knowledge of the England team, the psychological quality of this team was not flattering, their first half of the play was good, but it did not mean that they could maintain their performance in the second half. They just needed to add a little pressure onto them, then they would mess up eventually.

Think back to the World Cup group stage ten years ago. England played perfectly in the first half, but in the end?

Lagerbäck sat back down with confidence, it was as if everything was under his control.

It was as what he predicted as he heard the whistle that ended the first half. Sweden was down 1:0 against England.

Lagerbäck, who left the pitch, had no qualms about the team's backwardness, and he glanced at Twain, who smiled at his opponent's face, seemingly satisfied with the team's one-goal lead.

Lagerbäck smiled inside.

Proud and arrogant Englishman, it would be soon before I'll let you all know what resigning to fate means!

Chapter 951.3: Reappearance

Lars Lagerbäck, the manager of the Sweden national football team, was in relatively high spirits even though Sweden was trailing behind in the match.

"It's time to counter-attack, lads!" Lagerbäck clapped his hands and said with a raised voice.

The Sweden players all lifted their heads to look at him.

"We gave them too many chances in the first half. We cannot continue to do that in the second half. We have an advantage over them in terms of height. Why aren't we making use of it during aerial duels? We should make full use of every corner that we are given. I want all of you to be even more proactive in the second half. You all also need to be more aggressive in the midfield as well!" He clenched his fist and pounded it once against the wall.

The group of Sweden midfielders led by Jesper Karlström hung their heads in shame after hearing their manager's words. They all knew that they had performed poorly in the first half. They had been completely overwhelmed by England's midfield, and they did not contribute much to the team's defense either. The reason why England managed to dominate in the first half is due to their midfield's inability to perform.

“We are going to make a change in the second half...” Lagerbäck glanced at the team’s captain, Ibrahimović, who had kept silent all this while. “Zlatan.”

Ibrahimović looked at his manager.

“How was it like for you at the front of the pitch?”

“Their defenders are always closely marking me. I’m not given much space to move around in.” Ibrahimović answered honestly.

Lagerbäck nodded his head to signal that he understood Ibrahimović’s words. “You won’t be playing as the center forward in the second half. Your new position would be right behind Goitom as the second striker or the attacking midfielder. I want you to use your footwork and spatial awareness to organize attacks for the team. You can also shoot for goal if there is space.”

The change in position meant that Ibrahimović no longer has to directly confront both of England’s center-backs every time he got the ball, and it also provides him with more space and time to carry the ball forward. Not only that, he would also be able to utilize his techniques much better as well.

Ibrahimović was not surprised by his manager’s arrangement. He nodded his head to show that he understood.

Lagerbäck decided to boost his team’s morale after he finished assigning new tasks to his players for the second half of the match. He did not want them to be depressed over what had happened in the first half.

“Do you all still remember the clip that I showed you yesterday night?” he asked.

It was a clip of the group stage match between Sweden and England in the World Cup 10 years ago. England performed well in the first half, and Sweden’s performance in the second half was nothing short of perfect.

“Our match today is just like the match that we played in 10 years ago. I am very confident that we would come out of this match as the victors! Let us initiate a counter-attack in the second half! England has yet to win against us for 48 years. There is no reason why we should end this record today! As long as we score a goal early in the second half, the nightmare that has haunted the England players for the past 48 years would definitely persist. As we get closer to the end of the match, the England players would definitely start to panic, and that would be the best case scenario for us! We would definitely be able to win the match as long as we have more patience than them!”

Lagerbäck’s face was brimming with confidence as he spoke to his players. He firmly believed in his judgment. After all, they know the British inside out!

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George Wood did not follow his teammates back into the locker room. Instead, he carried out his warm-ups alongside the rest of the substitutes on the pitch. It seems likely that he would play in the second half.

Wood has no idea what Twain said to his teammates at halftime. But, the looks on all their faces appeared to be normal when they walked back out onto the pitch.

Wood noticed the team captain, John Terry, standing at the tunnel. He ended his warm-ups and made his way towards the bench slowly. When he passed by Terry, he heard the man who is filling in as the captain ask, "Hey, George! Did you warm up sufficiently?"

Wood stopped in his tracks and looked at Terry with confusion written all over his face.

"My instincts tell me that you'd get to play in today's match." Terry smiled at him before walking away.

Wood furrowed his brows and averted his gaze towards the tunnel. He hoped to catch a glimpse of Tony Twain. Did the manager make some kind of adjustment at halftime?

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The second half of the match kicked off with neither side making a change. At the start of the match, Ibrahimović stood at the center circle with Goitom, but as the match progressed, Twain was able to tell that Ibrahimović's position on the pitch had been shifted backwards to where a second striker or attacking midfielder would typically operate in.

If Lagerbäck thought that Twain would be taken aback and be at loss over the change in Ibrahimović's position, then he would be in for a major disappointment.

Ibrahimović raised his hand and asked for the ball. He was going to vent all his pent-up frustrations from the first half and show England what he's got!

Ibrahimović received the ball from his teammates a moment later. He was just about to make his way into the penalty box and search for a chance to shoot for goal when Gerrard appeared before him.

Ibrahimović quickly turned around and stopped the ball at his feet to prevent it from being taken away by Gerrard. However, by turning around, he was now facing the opposite direction from where England's goalpost lies. Ibrahimović was stunned. Why would Gerrard be here? This is so close to their penalty box, and it should be an area that is defended by their team's defenders instead. Michael Johnson should be the player who is marking him now, not Gerrard. Gerrard should be higher up the pitch since his main role is to attack!

Ibrahimović raised his head and scanned his surroundings. He realized that Johnson was positioned on the other side of the pitch and he was marking Karlström, who looked like he was keen on making his way into the penalty box, instead.

Is Gerrard specially here to mark him, or is this simply a coincidence?

Ibrahimović decided to conduct a test to find out. He passed the ball to his teammate and ran to a new spot away from Gerrard. He then raised his hand and asked for the ball.

The ball was passed back to him, and Gerrard appeared before him once again.

When something happens once, it can be passed off as a coincidence. But, when it happens twice...

Ibrahimović did not even bother to perform a feint when he passed the ball back to his teammate. He ran away from Gerrard and asked for the ball for the third time.

The ball was passed over to him again, and lo and behold, Gerrard appeared before him shortly after.

When something happens three times in a row it is definitely not a coincidence!

It looks like Gerrard is marking him.

Ibrahimović did not pass the ball away this time round. Instead, he chose to make use of his footwork to shake Gerrard off before making his way into the penalty box. However, he was not able to make much progress as Gerrard was hot on his trail. Gerrard did not allow Ibrahimović to get away from him, and a struggle ensued between the two for a while. Ibrahimović eventually came to realize that England's defense was airtight and that there was no way through for him. Gerrard had clearly given up on attacking Sweden's goalpost to defend against him. Left with no other choice, Ibrahimović passed the ball over to his teammate reluctantly.

Lagerbäck was shocked to see what was happening on the pitch. England's adjustment was too prompt! They should not have been able to come up with a plan to defend against Ibrahimović this quickly. It should have taken Twain at least 10 minutes to realize what is happening, to come up with a plan and to relay the plan to his players. His team should have been able to make use of those 10 minutes of chaos in the England defense to score a goal.

But, it seems like things had not gone according to plan and his team would not get those 10 minutes now. Did Twain guess that he would make such an adjustment in the second half? How is that possible?

There was a twinge of a smile on Twain's face as he stood by the side of the pitch. Lagerbäck had clearly underestimated England's ability to research about their opponents prior to the match. Twain knew that Lagerbäck would shift Ibrahimović's position backwards, because this is a change that Lagerbäck has consistently made whenever Sweden fails to score in a match. He first made such a change during the qualifiers, and he repeated it once more during the friendlies. Not all centre-forwards would be able to perform well when they are positioned further behind, but Ibrahimović's technique and experience allows him to thrive in his new position.

During the break at halftime, Twain came up with a set of countermeasures to deal with Lagerbäck's adjustment. He got Gerrard to mark Ibrahimović, and he left the team's attack to the wingers. England did not have to worry about scoring a goal since they scored one in the first half. Only having a one-goal lead in the match might be risky, but Twain did not mind the risk as long as his team is able to solidify its defense.

Ibrahimović had asked for the ball three times earlier, and his teammates had passed the ball to him all three times that he asked for the ball. It was clear from the players' actions that Ibrahimović had become the core player for Sweden in the second half, and this was proof that the information England had collected against Sweden was accurate.

It seems like Lagerbäck is keen on winning the match in the second half. Sadly, Twain does not intend to let him have his way.

Twain was right in his judgment, and he also came up with the right set of measures to deal with Sweden's adjustment. All that was left for him to do was to see how the game unfolds from here on out.

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Sweden did not expect England to react to their adjustment this quickly. They were at a loss over what they should do next.

How could the England players not capitalize on this moment of chaos in the Sweden team? They went on the counter-attack straight away. The England players knew that Sweden would strengthen their midfield in the second half, so they did not let the ball stay in the midfield for long. They did a series of quick passes and passed the ball all the way to the edge of the penalty box!

Gerrard did not charge to the front of the pitch to join in the attack. Instead, he stayed behind at the back to mark Ibrahimović. The only players who went on the offense were the two forwards and the two attacking midfielders in the team. All four of them were very fast at moving the ball forward even though Gerrard did not join them in the attack. Before the Sweden players even knew it, Mitchell had received the pass from Moke at the edge of the penalty box.

Mitchell's weakness is that he is not able to put much strength behind his shots at times. Thus, he rarely shoots at goal from outside the penalty box. Even if he does shoot, his shots usually end up being miles away from the goalpost as well.

The Swedes knew the England team inside out. Lagerbäck has an excellent understanding of every single England player's quirks, strengths and weaknesses, and this has also led him to believe that his team is able to win against England. Before the match, he relayed all the information that he knew about the England players to his players. The players who need this information the most are the defenders, because they need to be very familiar with the attacking players on the other team to be able to defend well against them.

The Sweden players quickly recalled the traits regarding Mitchell that had been relayed to them by their manager when they saw Mitchell receive the ball. One of those traits that surfaced in their minds was that Mitchell would not shoot from the distance.

Sweden's center-back, Peter Larsson, was the player who was positioned right across of Mitchell. Just like the rest of the players on his team, he was also familiar with Mitchell's traits as a player. He decided that the best thing to do now is to retreat backwards and maintain a safe distance between him and Mitchell so as to prevent Mitchell from making his way into the penalty box. He knew that if he were to run up to Mitchell to defend against him, Mitchell would just make use of his footwork to get past him. But, he did not expect Mitchell to suddenly raise his right leg after lifting his head to glance at what was before him.

He intends to shoot from there?!

Larsson was taken aback. He wanted to run forward to block Mitchell's shot, but he could not get there in time.

The Sweden goalkeeper, Andreas Isaksson, did not expect Mitchell to shoot at the goal from outside the penalty box either.

Mitchell's shot did not have much power behind it, and the speed in which it traveled was not very fast either. But, it was aimed right at the top corner of the net that was furthest away from Isaksson...

"Mitchell has suddenly shot at the goal!"

The ball slammed against the crossbar and ricocheted into the back of the net. Isaksson stretched his hands out and leapt into the air, but it was too late. All he could do was to watch as the ball flew into the net...

The England fans at the stands erupted into deafening cheers after the ball went in. Their cheers were so loud that people thought an earthquake had occurred at the Ramón Sánchez Pizjuán Stadium. The cameras at the stadium began to shake as the fans bellowed, "Long live England!"

"What a great gooooooooooal! An unbelievable goal! Mitchell has fired the ball into the back of the net from outside the penalty box! The ball flew in a beautiful arc before making its way past Isaksson! England lead Sweden 2:0 on the 60th minute of the match!"

"A two-goal lead! Things can't get any better! The Swedes are trying to counter-attack, but we are the first to score! Aha!" Motson almost danced in joy. He was not only happy that England had taken a two-goal lead over Sweden. He was also happy about how England seemed to be dominating the match so far.

However, the fans were not able to get a nagging feeling out of their minds as they celebrated.

This is not the first time that England has taken a two-goal lead against Sweden for the past 48 years. But, England has never come out of the match as the victor in any of those matches. Will this match end up being any different? There seemed to be a pair of hands that was playing with England's fate. You want to win against Sweden? Try again next time! I can make Sweden level the score against you on the 90th minute of the match!

Can Tony Twain and his team triumph over the pair of hands known as 'destiny' this time round?

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Twain turned his head to glance at the bench after celebrating Mitchell's goal with the people around him. He noticed that Wood had just finished his own celebrations. He then walked over towards him.

"George."

Wood turned around to look at him.

"Go and do your warm-ups. I'd give you five minutes." Twain spun around and left after finishing his words.

Wood heard Twain's words clearly. He did not falter and neither did he cheer. He simply grabbed his vest that had been tossed onto the seat, and he put it on as he ran to do his warm-ups.

Five minutes later, Wood appeared before Twain and waited for his instructions.

"Sweden is trailing by two goals," Twain told Wood, "and they will definitely attack us with all they've got for the next 30 minutes. I need you to get out there and defend the midfield for us."

Wood nodded his head.

"You'll take over Gerrard's role. I need you to defend against Ibrahimović."

"Yes." Wood continued to nod his head.

After delegating Wood's task, Twain glanced at Wood's right foot.

Wood noticed Twain's glance. He tiptoed and jumped a few times. "I'm fine."

Twain gave an embarrassed smile after being found out by Wood.

"Get on the pitch, George."

The fear and worry in the England fans' hearts dissipated the moment they saw George Wood stand beside the fourth official. They all knew that Wood was going to play in the match right then.

The man known as 'England's guardian' was going to play in the match. There was nothing for them to fear any longer.

Gerrard noticed that it was his number that was being displayed on the board. He did a series of hi-fives with his teammates before jogging off the pitch slowly. He was not acting this way because he was upset with Twain's arrangement. He just wanted to waste time by dragging out the substitution.

The Sweden players were very upset at how long Gerrard was taking to get off the pitch. They kept raising their hands to protest to the referee. However, the referee decided to be lenient after seeing that it was only the 60th minute of the match and that there were still 30 minutes left for the Sweden players to level the score.

Gerrard walked to the side of the pitch and raised his hands into the air to applaud the England fans at the stands. When he was done, he embraced Wood, and the substitution was finally completed.

The moment Wood stepped onto the pitch, the England fans cheered even louder than they had been earlier.

John Motson's ardent voice boomed amidst the deafening cheers, "Let us welcome England's captain... George Wood!"

"St. George! Bless England!"

The England fans cheered in unison right as Motson finished his words. It was as though everything had been pre-arranged.

Wood raised his hands to acknowledge the cheers, and the cheers got even louder.

Despite the cheers and the lively atmosphere in the stadium, the expression on Lagerbäck's face was glum. He knew the reason why Twain had put George Wood on the pitch. Twain did the same thing during the final 10 minutes of the match against Germany as well, and England managed to secure a 2:1 victory in the end.

It looks like Tony Twain intends to hold onto the two-goal lead with half an hour left to play in the match.

Chapter 951.4: Opponent for the Quarterfinal

Lagerbäck thought that Twain subbed George Wood on to defend, but he soon realized that he was wrong.

After intercepting the ball from Ibrahimović, George Wood did not just clear the ball. Instead, he started to run forward with the ball. Ibrahimović tried to tackle for the ball from behind and gave Wood a push, however, he did not manage to push Wood to the ground, helping Wood to get away from him instead.

Wood running with the ball disrupted Sweden's defensive plans. They did not expect that Wood was not here to defend, but to attack.

Wood eventually passed the ball to Chris Cohen when facing the defense of two Swedish players and Cohen scored from that.

For the rest of the match, Sweden realized that they could not go all out for a goal. That was because the England midfield became even more penetrative after George Wood's introduction and it caused so much trouble for the Swedes.

Just like it was during the match against Germany, one could not tell from Wood's performance that he was a "casualty" who had not fully recovered from his foot injury yet.

Tireless running, unyielding defense and stable mentality. He organized the midfield so well that the England fans felt doubly safe. This was the change that George Wood's introduction brought to the people.

At that moment, nobody thought about something as trivial as, "We've not beaten Sweden for 48 years already".

England had shown them with their performance that concerns like these were unnecessary.

England appeared to have the overall advantage. Even though Sweden changed to a long ball tactic and launched many high balls in an attempt to disrupt England's defensive line, John Terry and Steven Taylor marshalled their defense well. And the 1.96 meters frame of Joe Hart increased his area of command so much that many of the high balls were collected by him. Goitom, who was also 1.96 meters tall, did not have many chances in front of goal.

Time passed very quickly and no matter how Lagerbäck adjusted his tactics, Sweden had no answer to England's compact defense. As the match went on, instead of the England players, the Swedish players were the one who became more and more anxious. After all, they were trailing by two goals now.

So what if "we have not lost to England for 48 years!" Things like this were unable to allay their fears. There was not much time left in the match and they were still trailing by two goals. Coupled with England's solid defense, even if God came to earth and played as the 12th man for Sweden now, they would probably still lose.

The Sweden team became more and more irritable as the match went on and their attacking qualities dropped. Lagerbäck could not stop himself as he shouted angrily on the sidelines for his players to remain calm. However, the more he shouted, the more his players panicked, and it became a vicious cycle.

This England team was not affected by destiny at all, which surprised Lagerbäck. Their mental strength was way beyond Lagerbäck's imagination too. In the past, England's mental strength was probably one of the worst in Europe...

That annoying guy changed all this.

Lagerbäck looked at the other side. The England manager was now seated on the manager's seat with his legs crossed.

Just look at how at ease he looks, that's so unbearable.

"The match has entered injury time. There will be three minutes of injury time! Looks like Sweden is done and dusted!" John Motson said excitedly, "We're only three minutes away from breaking this damn destiny!"

Facing Sweden's final frantic attack, England had the whole team defending within the penalty area for the final three minutes. The Sweden goalkeeper, Isaksson, even came forward for the corner that they had during the second minute of injury time. But to what effect? Even if they scored a goal then, they would still be trailing by a goal, it would not change the result.

The England fans were already singing and cheering in the stands. They could finally be rid of the nightmare in their minds for the past 48 years.

The corner from Sweden did not pose any threat to the England goal. The Swedish player who had already lost hope kicked the ball straight out of play for a goal kick. Joe Hart took his time placing the ball and the final whistle went off the moment he kicked the ball!

"The match is over! The match is over! We've beaten Sweden! We've beaten Sweden for the first time in 48 years!" Motson shouted in excitement. To him, ending this dreaded destiny was more exciting than reaching the quarterfinals. "Tony Twain's team has defeated destiny! This damn destiny has finally ended!"

The Swedish commentator appeared rather disheartened, "Our psychological advantage over England that lasted 48 years has ended just like this..."

The three long whistles had just ended when the England bench rushed into the field to celebrate their victory.

Tony Twain did not do that. He did not forget to shake the hands of the opposing manager this time.

Lagerbäck appeared to be a little depressed. He shook his head slightly while completing the procedure of shaking hands. He then went straight towards the tunnel without staying long. On the other hand, Twain was surrounded by reporters. As the victor, it goes without saying that he would receive more attention.

"I have nothing much to say. I'm very happy that we have reached the quarterfinals. I've said it before, our target is to be champions and we're currently heading towards the correct path. 48 years without beating Sweden?" Twain laughed, "That's because I haven't been managing England for the past 48 years."

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As Twain was being interviewed by the media, the team doctor, Derek Wright rushed onto the pitch to look for George Wood and asked, “How does your right big toe feel?”

Wood applied some pressure to the tip of his foot and told Wright, “No problem at all.”

Mister Wright gave a sigh of relief, “That’s good.” Based on his observation on the sidelines, Wood had a much easier time during these 30 minutes than the 15 minutes against Germany. It appeared as though his foot injury had almost fully recovered.

In that case, he should be able to meet Twain’s request to start the next game.

Wright felt that he was finally going to be freed once he thought about it...

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England defeated Sweden and ended their destiny of not beating Sweden for 48 years. They also reached the quarterfinals and the English fans were exceptionally excited over these events. They partied the whole night after the match and drank to their fill. All the beer in the Seville bars were “emptied out” by them and there were naturally conflicts wherever people drank too much. The Seville police had their work cut out for them that night.

Twain did not bother himself about all these. He met up with Wright in the hotel and confirmed that Wood’s recovery from his injury was going well. He should be fit to start the next game. This made him very happy.

Even though Twain led the team to taking the lead against Germany and Sweden without George Wood, he was still indispensable if they were going to become champions. It did not mean that Twain was incapable when he placed so much importance on Wood. Any manager would have a favored player. A manager could not bring his team to victory alone, he also needed players supporting him on the pitch. Jacquet had Zidane when he led France to their first World Cup. Just look at how hard France had to fight for their victory when Zidane was suspended for two games. Then look at the France team who dominated Brazil in the final. That was the difference that Zidane made to the team. Zidane became the hero of France, but nobody ever said that Jacquet was incapable.

A meritorious manager would pair up with a meritorious player and become legends together. If Twain was to write his own legend during this European Championship, then he would require George Wood’s help.

England’s quarterfinal opponent was decided the next night—France. They defeated Netherlands 2:0 in the round of 16.

Ever since the “Group of Death”, England had been meeting strong teams every game. The only weaker team that they played against was Wales, and they lost. It was strange but England had performed very well against strong teams. Twain did not have much concerns even though they were facing France next.

The English media was a little concerned though. It was good that Twain had repeatedly mentioned in public that his target was to be champions. However, just look at the opponents that England had faced so far: Portugal, the “Brazil of Europe”, Wales, who was the only team to defeat England, their sworn enemy Germany, Sweden, whom they had never beaten in the past 48 years, and now France, the technical team of Europe... What other strong teams did they have to meet next?

If England were to defeat France and reach the semifinals, they would most likely meet the host country, Spain. And what about their opponents? The team that had the best route to the finals was Italy. They did not really face any strong teams at all. Wales were in high spirits after reaching the last 16 but they eventually lost to Italy. Greece and Croatia were teams that basically could not pose much threat to Italy. If the Italians deal with them with caution, they should not have much problems reaching the finals.

Of course, the English were hoping that Greece or Croatia would perform an upset and eliminate Italy. If that were to happen, the biggest threat to England winning the competition would be gone. Too bad chances of that happening was too low. The Italians had always been steady, and they were a team that would never lose to a weak team, but they might lose to a strong team...

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There was a five-days break between the round of 16 and the quarterfinals. Twain gave the team a day off the next day after the match against Sweden. It looked like he was not worried about France as he actually allowed the players to go shopping on the streets.

In truth, he had already flown to Barcelona with his assistant, Des Walker, to watch the match between France and Netherlands at the Nou Camp.

The French ace striker, Benzema, was the best performer in this match. He scored all the goals for France in this game, a brace, and Netherlands could not deal with him at all.

The midfield core of France, Gourcuff also did well in this match. He assisted Benzema for one of his goals and started the move for the second goal.

And there was also the new generation of goalkeeper for France, Lloris. Netherlands had their chances in this match, but they were all saved by Lloris.

France was filled with talented players, they were strong and definitely not a team to be underestimated. This batch of French players were basically the leading players of Europe in their respective age group a few years back. Benzema, N'gog, Nasri, Gourcuff, Ben Arfa, Clichy, Lars Diarra, Sagna...

Twain frowned as he watched their impressive performance against Netherlands.

"This is a very strong French team. No wonder they were one of the hot favorites even before the competition started," Walker remarked as he organized the recording devices in his hands.

"We're also one of the favorites," Twain said without batting an eyelid.

Walker looked at him happily.

"Let's go Des," Twain ignored him as he stood up and walked away with his hands in his pockets. The two of them were lost in the crowd as they left the stadium and returned to Seville overnight.

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When Walker woke up in the morning and knocked on Twain's door to invite him to breakfast, he found out that Twain was seated in front of the television with his eyes glued to the screen. He went closer and realized that it was a recording of yesterday's match that he recorded.

"You've been watching this the whole night?" He asked, shocked.

"How is that possible?" Twain turned to look at him, "I just woke up not too long ago." He turned back to watch the match on the screen.

"France's style is quite pleasing to the eyes..." Des Walker muttered next to him, "They have many different attacking methods and various ways to attack. They also have technically good players. If we talk about talents, they have way more than us... This is not an easy team to deal with."

Twain shrugged his shoulders, "They're just a bunch of protected players."

Walker laughed as he heard Twain say that, "You're found a way to deal with them?"

Twain shook his head, "Not yet."

He stood up and said, "Let's go for breakfast. I'm hungry."

Walker made a face at him behind his back and followed him out.

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"Our team is filled with talented players! It won't be a problem defeating England!"

The French media was filled with such opinions. The French were full of confidence after defeated a strong Netherlands team.

Even Benzema said that he believed France would definitely defeat England and it would not be a problem for them.

As the leading goal scorer for the competition for now, many people agreed with what he said.

For a moment, there was a wave of optimism in France and everyone felt that France had already reached the finals and were going to revive an old rivalry with Italy as they avenge the 2006 World Cup final. They did not even think about England or their semifinal opponents anymore.

However, there was still some people who would act as wet blanket at this kind of times.

Benzema's previous teammate at Real Madrid, the retired ex-Nottingham Forest star, Ribery appeared in front of the media and expressed his concern regarding their optimism.

"...I don't think it is wise to think about the final now. If France underestimate England, we will definitely be on the losing end. I have no doubts about it and the reason is simple. Their manager is Tony Twain. He just led the team to a victory over their rival Germany and ended their 48 years winning drought against Sweden. This proved that England had always been a very scary opponent... I've played for Nottingham Forest for many years and I understand what kind of manager Tony Twain was. Whoever looks down on him or underestimates him will end up very badly..."

However, his opinion was drowned out by the optimism of the public very quickly. Who cares about what a retired football star had to say?

Chapter 951.5: The Powerful French Team

“Let’s take a look back at all the games that the French team had played since the first game in the group stage.”

Twain’s room was a standard room which was fully packed at the moment. All the members of the coaching unit were here, looking at the laptop screen and listening to Twain explain.

Playing on the laptop was a collection of the best French team’s matches that had been edited by Twain.

“In the first game, France defeated Croatia by 3:1 and won it easily. Their goal concede was even considered an ‘accident’ by the French media after the game.” Twain leaned back in his chair as he spoke to his colleagues. At this point, he gave a dismissive snort through his nose.

“They thought it was a surprise for Croatia to score a goal. In the end, not only did Croatia advance out of the group stage but also made it into the top eight.”

Twain clicked on the mouse and moved to the next segment.

“For the second game, their opponent was Poland, which they won 2:0. It was also a very easy game for them. Although they only scored two goals, the French team dominated the entire game. They played against Russia in the third game. The French team had already won two games and advanced from the group ahead of schedule. So, they arranged for the substitutes to play in this game. Despite this, they still beat Russia 1:0. The match pleased the French people after the game.”

“They had three victories for all three games in the group stage with only one goal concede. They did have a reason to be happy...” Walker picked up.

“They also played beautifully. The media say that the current French team plays football with full artistic flair, which is delightful both physically and mentally for people.” The oldest in age out of all the coaches, Tony Carr also expressed his opinion.

Twain smiled without saying a word and continued to let everyone watch.

“In the quarterfinals, their opponents are the Netherlands team. The Netherlands team did not do well in the group stage and finished second in the group. But I’m not surprised by it because the overall level of Dutch football for the past two years has been declining. Their talent feels a little lacking, and it will not be a surprise for them to lose to France. All right...” Twain turned off the video and spun around to look at everyone.

“Now the French people believe themselves to be infallible.” He said with a smile, “It’s a good sign, and I hope they’re going to be even more conceited. Isn’t there a regular press conference this afternoon?”

Everyone knew what he was going to do, and there was a burst of laughter in the room.

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After the meeting with the coaches ended, Twain knocked on the door of Wood's room. When he went in, he found two people in the room. George Wood was having a chat with Aaron Mitchell.

Seeing Twain walk in, Mitchell immediately realized who the boss was looking for, and got up hurriedly. He said, "I'll go out for a spin." Then he said to Twain, "Boss."

Twain nodded.

Mitchell went out and closed the door, leaving the room with the two men, Twain and Wood.

"What? Aren't you going to invite me to sit down?" Twain joked with Wood.

Wood then got up and made a gesture as he said, "Please have a seat."

Twain could understand Wood's lukewarm attitude, as he did not tell him the news that he had decided to let Wood start in the next game.

Twain sat down and looked at Wood. He was about to open his mouth, when Wood learnt to speak first.

"My foot injury is fine. I feel like I have fully recovered."

Twain chuckled. There must have been a lot of people who cared about Wood asking him the same question over the past two days. He must not know how many times he had given such an answer.

Seeing Wood like this, Twain wanted to tease him. He said, "Is it really fine?" He asked with a frown in disbelief.

"Do you want me to kick a few shots for you?" Wood got up.

Twain laughed and said, "No need. I'm afraid you'll kick and damage the things here and we will have to provide compensation. Tell you what, George, I came to you regarding a matter... What do you think of the French team's recent performance?"

Wood stared blankly for a moment. He felt that Twain's thoughts tend to jump around too much. What did the recent performance of the French team had to do with him? Why did he want to ask him that?"

"Didn't you pay attention to the performance of the French team?" Twain followed up to ask.

Wood shook his head and said, "I've heard that they haven't lost yet till now. I don't know anything else."

"It's not just that they haven't lost a game yet. They have won all their games. They are the only team to have won all their games other than the host team, Spain." Twain said, "Their performance in the first four games were described as perfect. They played flawlessly. With eight goals scored and one goal concede, Benzema is currently the best goalscorer in the tournament. Lloris is likely to compete for the best goalkeeper and the likelihood of Gourcuff becoming the best player is very high. The French people believe their national team will definitely win the title because they are the 'generation of geniuses.'" Twain slowly introduced Wood to the characteristics of the French team.

"For instance, they are as popular as a beautiful flower."

Wood did not respond to Twain's evaluation.

If it happened to someone who was not familiar with Wood, that person would think that it was painful to communicate with someone like Wood. Because he was a man of few words and would not give enthusiastic responses. If one wanted the communication to continue, then he would have to try to find new topics, which could be tiresome and boring.

Twain knew Wood well, so he was not unhappy with it. He leaned forward and winked at Wood as he said, "But it's only a flower in the greenhouse."

Wood was sensitive enough to sense the overtones in Twain's words. Because whenever the boss was deliberately mystifying, he would find something for him to do.

"For the game in three days' time, I hope you can turn into a strong gale and blow down to the greenhouse shed that protected them." Twain looked at Wood with a serious expression.

Wood reacted after being taken aback for a moment. He said, "For the game against France ... I'm in the starting lineup?"

Twain nodded his head.

Wood did not cheer loudly, nor did he jump up from his seat. He just raised his fist.

The action had already revealed his mood at the moment.

Twain stood up and was ready to leave. "Study the videos of the French team's games well. I'll have Des send them to you. You have an important task."

Wood was not afraid. He was more worried about not getting a mission.

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While Mitchell wandered around outside and returned to the room after, he found Wood looking at something on his laptop and was in deep concentration, so he quietly crept over. He discovered it turned out to be a video of the French teams game.

"Why are you watching this, George?" He thought it was a little strange.

"To understand my opponent so as to beat them better." Wood replied without turning his head.

An idea suddenly lit up in Mitchell's mind and he said, "Can it be that... you're going to be in the starting lineup for the game against France?"

"Yeah." Wood nodded.

"YES!" Mitchell was more excited than Wood himself. He jumped on the bed and almost knocked his head. "Haha! I'm so relieved by this! To tell you the truth, George, I don't like the French team. Do you see how they're hyping them up out there now? It's as if the UEFA European Championship title is already theirs. What's up with the terms 'generation of geniuses', 'the most beautiful football', 'the most compelling team in this tournament' ... I'm going to throw up just listening to that!"

As an Englishman, it was normal to look down on even the French people. Wood was not surprised by Mitchell's behavior.

"It's great that you're playing. Teach the bunch of arrogant Frenchmen a good lesson!" Mitchell rolled around in bed and then sat up again, waving his fists next to Wood and shouting.

After being happy for Wood, Mitchell was also a little depressed. As the team's main striker, he was in the starting lineup for every game, but had only scored two goals. He had been called England's best center forward for the next decade, but his performance was poor.

"It turned out that the boss was specially here to assign you a mission... So, what's my mission?"

Wood added, "You are a striker and the striker's mission is to score goals, isn't it?"

"I think I'm too weak physically, George. . . Is there anything you can think of for me to strengthen?" Mitchell felt that the main factor that led him to score fewer goals than Rooney was his lack of strength and his inability to compete with the strong center backs in the penalty area. Many times, he had to come out in order to get the ball. But could a striker still score goals, far from the penalty area?

Wood finally took his eyes off the computer screen. He looked back at Mitchell, sitting on the bed behind him. "Beef up by eating." He said simply and turned back again.

Mitchell rolled his eyes and made an exasperated sound before lying back down.

"I'll be out of shape if I get fat!"

If it had been a person with the gift of gab, he would definitely respond to him in this way, "You have an appearance of someone who's addicted to drugs. How can you be out of shape?"

But George Wood ignored Mitchell's complaints and focused on the video of the French team's game. He quickly found his target, and several of the French midfielders were highly skilled individually. He was thinking that the boss would not ask him to mark a player. That would be too wasteful. If there was no surprises, it should be zonal marking instead.

Wood closed his eyes and imagined the game in his mind. He had not played an entire game in a long time, and the game against France was going to be tough. He also had to pray that his right big toe would not be hurt during the game. In fact, he had just lied to the boss. His right big toe was still slightly sore and could not be considered as completely healed. But in order to make the boss feel assured enough to let him play, he must hide this tiny injury.

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Twain did not know what was on Wood's mind. George Wood's performance was normal during the afternoon training. He was comfortable whether when he was running or in contact with the ball. It gave the team a lot of confidence for the game against France.

Although the reporters at the scene only had 15 minutes of photo shoot, they saw a vigorous and healthy George Wood.

At a routine post-training press conference, Twain did not let George Wood attend it with him. He called Gerrard instead.

At the press conference, in the face of a large number of reporters throwing out the question of “whether George Wood will be able to play against France”, Twain did not give any affirmative answer. He continued to obfuscate, “I cannot confirm on the matter. We’re all working hard in that direction. We all want to see the best result.” He spoke nonsense for a long time which was equal to not giving away any detail at all.

The French reporters did not seem to care much about whether George Wood would be playing or not. They just wanted Twain to talk about the French team’s performance in recent games. Twain was aware of what they were playing at. These vain Frenchmen!

But it was exactly what he wanted to happen.

“The French team played very well. It is natural for them to be in the top eight. Their football impresses me... At the same time, they also have a lot of talented players, which I’m really envious of...” Twain’s reaction greatly surprised many English reporters. He was so stingy with words for his own country’s reporters and even had an awful attitude toward them. They did not expect him to answer the questions from the French reporters frankly with assurance. Furthermore, the words which he had spoken were all praises for the French team. Did he not feel that his words were cringeworthy? What about his remark that he was “envious of the French team for having a lot of talent?” Did he mean that the England team’s players were not good enough? Was he British or French?

“... I think it’s absolutely right of the media to say that the French team is the favorite to win the title before the game. I have to deal with the French team seriously. They are very strong... we might lose if we’re not careful. I’m not speaking highly of anyone. I’m telling the truth. The football that the French team plays is very modern and advanced. They can secure both the championship and win over the audience. To be honest, this has always been my goal...”

Twain spoke these words so seriously that it made the French secretly rejoice and the English people unhappy. Even Gerrard was taken aback. Although he had not played for Twain at the club level, he had always felt that the boss was a fearless person through the two years of interaction in the national team. No matter how strong the opponent was, he dared to go head to head with the opponent. For instance, as with the Germany team before, he did not show any fear, and it was why the team could finally beat their foe, Germany. Because the players saw the courage to beat the strong enemy from the manager.

But what happened to the boss today?

It was not the boss’s style, was it? What was he thinking? Gerrard made up his mind to definitely ask the boss after the press conference. He was eager to find out what the boss was thinking.

Twain’s words even gave the French reporters the urge to applaud – it’s so good! Fantastic!

The French people could not hide the joy on their faces, and the British reporters did not want to hide their displeasure. Following which, the press conference immediately became the French reporters’ domain. They kept raising their hands to ask questions and wanted to hear some more good things about the French team. While the British reporters were collectively quiet, using a silent treatment as a way to protest against Twain’s “working for someone’s benefit at the expense of his own people” behavior.

Twain also knew when to quit while he was ahead. The other party would become inured if he said too many good things, so he became diffident again in the next moment.

After the press conference, the French reporters left the England team's training camp with satisfied smiles, while the British reporters gritted their teeth and cursed Tony Twain as well as the French.

Gerrard frowned and appeared preoccupied. He decided to ask for an explanation.

"Boss."

Twain looked back at Gerrard behind him and he was not surprised. "Yes?"

"I don't quite understand why you said those things at the press conference... I don't think the French team is as strong as you said."

Twain frowned and said, "Don't underestimate the opponent, Steven."

Gerrard thought at first that the boss was joking, but when he looked at Twain's serious expression, he felt he had thought wrong.

"It's the quarterfinal. Once we win, we can reach the semifinals. It is a step away from the final. We can't take our opponent lightly. Any opponent has to be taken seriously and I don't want a repeat of the game against Wales to happen again." Twain once again played the "Wales" card and Gerrard had nothing to say.

Losing to the Wales team seemed to have become England's nightmare. As long as the team appeared to act proud and underestimate the opponent, Twain would mention that game again. Not only that, he also specially made a video clip of the game and showed it to the players. It was to remind them not to underestimate their opponents.

But the problem was the French team was not Wales. The England players would not take the French team lightly in any case ...

"Moreover, the French team is really strong. I did not tell any lies, Steven." Twain continued to add. His earnest look and heartfelt words look left Gerrard without a doubt. "Their midfield is very strong and does not just rely on one person. Such an opponent is our biggest headache. We can't stop their offensive by freezing one player alone. And... with George's injury..."

Twain wished to speak but stopped on second thoughts.

Gerrard increasingly felt that the boss was not putting smokescreens. It was indeed worrying that they did not know yet whether Wood would be able to play when they were up against a strong opponent. After playing a few games, he also knew that his 36-year-old stamina could not keep up until the final.

Although what the boss said was very reasonable, Gerrard's heart still slightly unconvinced. We have beaten the mighty Germany team and ended our 48 years of ill-fated inability to conquer the Swedish team. Don't tell me that we don't even have the strength to stake all against France? That the boss would look down on us!

Although he's also considering the team, I feel upset by it. I admit that the French team has been in the limelight recently and even share in same odds of being in the top spot to win the title as Spain. But did we come to Spain just to praise the strength of the opponent?

Gerrard stopped asking and followed behind Twain in silence. He only raised his clenched fists.

Twain, who was walking in front of him, did not look back, but the corner of his lips curled up.

Chapter 951.6: Never Return Until the Battle is Won

Even though the fastest news media had not published the contents about the press conference yet, the England players heard about what their manager said very quickly.

That was because Gerrard told his roommate, Rooney, about what Boss said. Even though one of them was a Liverpool player and the other, a Manchester United player, and Rooney even used to be a player of Liverpool's city rival, Everton, this did not affect the friendship between the players.

Rooney was shocked by the Boss' attitude. He could not understand the reasoning behind it, and he decided to tell another teammate, Chelsea's John Terry.

Very soon, news regarding this press conference spread amongst the players and naturally, the Nottingham Forest players would know about it too. However, none of them could understand why the reason why their Boss would say that. The Nottingham Forest players were more familiar with Twain and they thought that there must be a reason for such an abnormal behavior. They just did not know what the reason was exactly.

The players who were not from Nottingham Forest felt aggrieved that their Boss would look down on them——They also made it to the quarterfinals, why did their Boss think so highly of the French team and had so little confidence in them?

While they felt that they were being looked down upon by their manager, they could not possibly vent it out on Twain directly. But they had their way of proving that their Boss was wrong. That was to defeat France in the match and show their Boss which team had a high probability of becoming champions!

The England players who were angered gave their all during training. Twain watched everything and was secretly happy.

Assistant manager Kerslake might be the only one who knew about Twain's plans. He was a little concerned and asked, "Aren't you afraid that you would lose your popularity in the changing room? Or that it might backfire and make them lose their will to fight instead?"

"This is a proud bunch of people, they won't lose their fighting spirit just like this. And popularity? When they defeat France, my status in the changing room will only be even stronger," Twain said with conviction, "This is a goading tactic. Furthermore, I can numb the French team by saying that. The French are a bunch of arrogant people. I like it when they are arrogant."

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Twain was right. The French were indeed arrogant. Twain's humble words appeared on all the French media very quickly and the reports spread like wildfire. The readers felt extremely good reading them— —The Englishmen are saying good things about us now, and it's that arrogant Tony Twain! Looks like our football team has really conquered the other side of the Pacific.

Twain was not interested in the views of the French fans though, he was only interested in the opinions of the French players.

Benzema did not disappoint him with his reaction. This prideful striker appeared to welcome Twain's words, "...I'm very thankful for Tony Twain's praises. I believe we deserve praises like these... What's better than the praises from your opponent?"

Ben Arfa did not really get along with Benzema, but he agreed with him, nonetheless. He felt very good to receive praises from an opponent.

The other players thought the same. They did not take into consideration whether the opposing manager had any other intentions as they really did perform very admirably recently, and it did not surprise them that they would receive praises.

What Twain said during the press conference filled the French with utmost confidence in their national team. The feeling of optimism filled their hearts. There were even media writing this as their headline, "Thank you very much, Tony, but we'll definitely be the ones going to the Bernabeu in the end!"

Ribery was the only one who thought there was something wrong. The Tony Twain that he knew would never praise his opponent for no reason, even if they really deserved it. The moment he started to praise someone, it meant that that person would be in for a bad time soon...

Therefore, he continued to "boost the enemy's morale while reducing their own" and kept reminding France to be wary of England, be wary of Tony Twain. However, it all fell on deaf ears.

The manager of France, Claude Puel, was also worried that Tony Twain was playing mind games initially. However, he paid some attention to the English media for the past couple of days and realized that they were all criticizing Twain, so much so that the insults almost escalated to include his ancestors.

Puel did not think that Twain was someone who would deliberately do something for the media to criticize him, therefore, he must have meant it when he praised the French team. That arrogant man did not care that the media was criticizing him, and it was also Twain's favorite pastime to go against the English media.

Besides, according to the resourceful English media, there were many players within the England camp that were unhappy with Twain's words. They believed that they were looked down upon by their own manager and Tony Twain was losing his changing room.

If this was all part of Twain's plans, then the price of it would be too steep. If it backfired and he lost the trust of his players, then he would not be able to execute any of his plans. Nobody in his right mind would risk angering his own players.

After that analysis, he concluded that there was no possibility of any plotting by England. He believed that the revolutionary tactics that he brought to the French team had indeed gotten the recognition

from the world. France could lift their heads up high and accept any praise without feeling the need to be ashamed.

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“Claude Puel is a very thoughtful manager, but his experience managing a national team is only about the same as me. In terms of results, his club management career could not be considered as a success. Before he joined Lyon, they were the dominant team of the French Ligue 1. After he became Lyon’s manager in 2009, Lyon was never in the title race anymore. Even though his team played some beautiful football and received a lot of praises from the media for it, what use is beautiful football without winning?”

Twain was analyzing the French manager for his coaching staff during the staff meeting.

“He started off with Monaco in 1999 as their coach and a year and a half later, he became a scout. A year later, he became the manager of Lille and he stayed there for seven years. In the summer of 2009, he became the manager of Lyon. After the 2014 World Cup, he replaced Deschamps as the manager of the France national team. They performed very well during the qualifying stage, however, ever since Mr Puel started to manage Lyon, he had never won any championship before.”

Twain sounded condescending, totally different from the admiration that he showed during the press conference.

“I think Mr Puel lacks the heart of a champion. It has been so long that he has forgotten how to be a champion. Besides, France has had a very easy path here, ever since the qualifying stage. They are like a flower growing in a greenhouse. A team like this won’t be able to react when they are faced with a crisis. Puel also lacks the experience of handling such pressure. This is something that we have to take advantage of.”

“The team is in high morale now and they can’t wait to get on the pitch. This is something that will shock the French. Once they fall into chaos, that’s when we’ll have the opportunity to win the game,” Twain clenched and waved his fist as he said that.

“We have to be invasive in the match! But I’m not concerned about that...” Twain wanted to laugh when he thought about the angry looks he got from his players during training, “We cannot be afraid of committing fouls. Against a team like France, the rougher we are, the worse their performance will be. I have lots of experience dealing with beautiful football.” Twain laughed.

His coaches laughed with him as they knew him very well. When he was still managing Nottingham Forest, he faced off with teams playing beautiful football numerous times. Whether it was Barcelona, Real Madrid or Arsenal, he defeated them a few times each. Meeting France in the quarterfinals was an opportunity given by the Gods.

If they were facing Italy, Twain would seriously consider the chances of them making it to the semi-finals.

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On the day before the match, Twain heaped praises upon France again when interviewed by reporters, saying that the football that they were playing were “revolutionary football, beautiful football”. At the

same time, he praised their manager, Claude Puel, for bringing such revolution to France and claimed that he brought a breath of fresh air to the footballing world and that he was becoming a fan of Puel himself. The English media were very unhappy with what he said of course, while the French were understandably very happy with it.

During the team meeting at night, Twain could still feel the unfriendly looks coming from the players. To them, he must have already been labelled as a “traitor”.

However, he still wanted to add fuel to the flame.

“We’ll be facing a very, very strong team tomorrow,” He paused deliberately after saying that. The meeting room was silent, but Twain knew that the players were surely booing him in their minds.

“We’re facing a team which has won all their previous games. The football that they are playing can both excite the fans and bring them victory. Even though this is a match that determines whether we make it into the semi-finals, I don’t want to put too much pressure on you.”

Twain sounded very serious and nobody could tell whether he was joking.

“I wish all of you good luck. We do need a little bit of luck against a team like France...”

Twain stopped saying things to piss the players off after that. He knew not to overdo it. If he kept mentioning about the strength of France, he might just really drop the morale of his team.

After he stopped talking about the strengths of France, Twain started to explain the tactics they would be using for the match tomorrow. England’s tactics were very simple, and they were similar to the ones used before. Twain merely emphasized the need to be bolder and more open when defending.

The players were not thinking about this. They were all feeling pissed off and could hardly wait to start the match and defeat the proud and arrogant French players to make them beg on all fours!

After the team meeting ended, the players left the meeting room one by one. Only George Wood was asked to stay by Twain.

“You don’t look like you’re angry about being looked down by me George,” Twain sat on the meeting room table casually as he looked at Wood opposite him.

“I know what you’re doing,” Wood said.

“Ha!” Twain laughed, “I asked you to stay back to tell you not to tell the rest about this. Looks like I was worried over nothing.”

Wood stood up and prepared to leave. If it was just this matter, there was no need to waste time, he needed to go back and rest. Before he left, he stopped at the door and asked Twain, “The match tomorrow, will we win?”

Twain shrugged, “Of course. We’ll win for sure!”

Wood opened the door and walked out without asking anything else.

Twain stayed back in the empty meeting room in a daze for a while before leaving.

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At almost the same time, during the team meeting for France, Puel was asking his players to use the same tactics for the match tomorrow.

The tactical deployment for France was very simple and there was no urgency on the faces of the players. There were smiles on everyone's faces and there were even people chatting about things that had nothing to do with the team meeting.

Of course, Puel saw everything, but he did not think that it was a bad thing. He was proud that his team could remain calm on the day before the quarterfinal match with England. He became even more confident about the match tomorrow.

"As long as we maintain our form and performances from the previous matches, it won't be a problem to defeat England," Puel added after he finished explaining the tactics, "Remember, our target is to become champions!"

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On that night, the England players slept with anticipation of the match against France the next day as well as their anger for Boss. The France players slept with a carefree mind leading up to the game on the next day.

Twain, who was full of praises for France, stayed up until three-thirty in the morning. He watched the games of France again and again in his room, going through the notes he made again and again to ensure that he did not miss anything, to look for new weaknesses in their team.

Actually, he should not be staying up so late with his current health status. However, Shania was not with him and there was nobody else who could watch over him. He was going all out to be champions.

Twain did not know whether he could continue doing this for another four years and wait for the next European Championship and he did not have a habit of giving up on the chance now to consider about what would happen four years later.

Football is a game that involves luck. Nobody would be able to tell him that his luck would be better next time. It would be stupid for him to pin his hopes on what was going to happen four years later. He believed that George Wood would perform to his best abilities in the final and for that, he had to ensure that he could provide Wood with the stage to do so.

Besides, as the manager of a football club, he had already achieved all the club glories there were. He had not achieved anything as the manager of a national team yet. He did not want to go for the worthless Olympics gold medal. As a national team manager, there were only the European Championship and the World Cup.

The England team then was the strongest England team ever, there was no need to set their target as runners-up.

This time, they would not return until the battle was won!

Chapter 951.7: Starting Lineup

The fans and media focused their attention on those footballers from France with attacking flair as their goals and assists brought upon excitement to the fans. However, people who really understood football knew that the key to France's winning streak was not Benzema or Gourcuff, but the little black man in midfield with not many eye-catching moments—Lassana Diarra.

Diarra was 31 years old and in his prime now. To him, this European Championship was his best chance of winning an international honor. However, to do that, there was someone that he could not avoid.

George Wood was one year his junior, and the one recognized by the world as the best defensive midfielder in the footballing world now. Even though the terrible results of his club affected his performance, he was still the undisputed core of the England national team. He had not started a game in the current European Championship yet, and the time he played in the two previous games added up to be not more than 45 minutes. However, that short amount of time was enough to prove how good George Wood was.

The media was not interested in a dialogue between defensive midfielders, but Diarra knew very well how good his opponent was.

He did not know whether George Wood would be in the starting lineup for tonight's match or would he be sent in as a substitute. If Wood was going to be playing, then he would have to pay close attention to him. That was because George Wood was no longer the blue-collar worker who could only defend now. He also shouldered the responsibility of organizing the attack, otherwise how could he be known as the core of England? A boorish brute who could only defend would never be able to become the core.

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The match was still eight hours away, but the media was especially interested in England's starting lineup. Twain did not seem to have any intention of releasing it yet and it seemed like he was going to wait for the team to enter the changing room before releasing it.

Media from all over the world gathered outside the hotel that the England team was staying in, hoping to get some valuable inside information from the players. However, even the players themselves did not know anything about the starting lineup.

Naturally, there was only one reason why the media would pay so much attention to the starting lineup—Would George Wood be part of the starting lineup in tonight's match?

When Twain insisted to bring Wood to Spain, he said that Wood's foot injury would fully recover after they reach the knock-out stage of the competition. Therefore, the round of 16 was supposed to be the day when Wood came back from his injury. However, his first match was the last game of the group stages against Germany, meaning he actually came back earlier than expected. However, this delayed his official return and he continued to sit on the bench during the match against Sweden, only coming on in the second half.

Would he be starting in the match against France?

The England players shook their heads and said that they did not know.

Mitchell actually knew about it, but Wood had already reminded him not to tell anyone about this as Boss requested. As he admired Boss so much, Mitchell naturally kept his mouth shut.

The media knew that he was sharing a room with Wood and they came to question him. He merely smiled and shook his head, "I don't know, I haven't heard anything like that... Of course, I hope that George can play but I'm neither the team doctor nor the manager... That's all I can say."

Twain was resting in the hotel lobby with a coffee in his hand, but not a single media personnel thought of interviewing him. They knew that if they could not get any newsworthy information from the players, they could forget about getting any from this manager's mouth. This was a person who had so much prejudice against the media that if he did not want to say anything, even "press freedom" would not scare him into saying anything. The media only got whatever he wanted to say. When one thought about it that way, the media was pretty sad, and they were like a dog that Twain kept. If he was in a good mood, he would feed them something and they had to act happy with some tail wagging. If he was unhappy, he would stay indoors for half a month and they could not complain about it at all, or else he would stay even longer.

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Unlike England, France's starting lineup was already released when they were setting off to the stadium, and it was exactly the same as the previous matches as Puel did not make any change at all.

France was playing a 451 formation with Benzema at the front as the striker. Behind him, there were three attacking midfielders in a line, Gourcuff in the middle, Nasri on the right and Ben Arfa on the left. Behind the three attacking midfielders were two central midfielders, Flamini on the left and Lassana Diarra on the right. The left-back was Clichy from Arsenal and right-back was Sagna, also from Arsenal. One of the center-backs was 26-year-old Mamadou Sakho from Serie A giants, Juventus, and the other was Mexes from Roma. The goalkeeper was Lloris.

The French felt superior even though it was just the timing of the release of the starting lineup. They claimed that releasing the starting lineup early indicated that Puel's team was confident and they were not afraid of any other teams, a mentality that a championship winning team should have. On the other hand, Tony Twain's insistence on keeping the starting lineup a secret demonstrated his fear and helplessness. Did it mean that George Wood had not recovered from his foot injury yet since he did not dare to release the starting lineup?

The French started to dream about them beating England and reaching the semifinal, then beating the host nation, Spain, and meeting Italy in the final before defeating them 3:0, avenging the World Cup final defeat 10 years ago.

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"England's starting lineup is not released yet and I believe that George Wood's injury is the only reason why that is so. From our analysis, we can conclude that Wood has not recovered from his foot injury yet." In the pre-match special program on the French television, they invited two professional pundits to analyze the match for the French viewers. In general, they were praising France and claimed that all uncertainties were gathered on England's side.

“If George Wood has really recovered from his foot injury, I believe that Tony Twain would have released it as early as possible to serve as a morale dampener for his opponent, “Another pundit who claimed to understand Tony Twain very well said that, “But, we don’t have any news about that up till now. This can only mean that Wood has not recovered from his foot injury sufficiently to be in the starting lineup. I think Twain plans to do the same thing as the two previous games and bring Wood on in the second half. Therefore, we have to establish a lead in the first half and getting the first goal as early as possible is key...”

On the big screen television in the broadcasting hall, there was a live broadcast of the scenes of the teams’ arrival at the stadium. Naturally, France’s bus appeared multiple times on screen while England only appeared for a few times when they arrived at the stadium.

The host and the experts were discussing the match that was about to start with a smile on their faces. It did not look like they were affected by the anxiety and uneasiness of going into a big match. Maybe they were experienced, or maybe they thought that their team was stronger than England and there was no problem defeating England.

However, the host’s smile froze when he received England’s starting lineup from the reporter on the scene.

An awkward silence is really bad for a live show, and there was an awkward silence from the host now...

He was still in a daze while holding the starting lineup in his hand and the two experts next to him did not know what was going on and they could only smile.

The host tried to cover up for his mistake very quickly as he coughed and said, “We...we’ve just received the starting lineup for the England team...” He looked at the two experts who gave him an expression which meant “tell us about it, we want to know”.

“George Wood is starting,” the expressions on the experts’ faces changed instantly after the host said that, as if their faces were stuffed with a bunch of live flies.

“Um...” One of them was stunned on the spot, but the other reacted well by saying, “Looks like Tony Twain is going to go for it...”

The big screen showed England’s starting lineup. George Wood sits right in the middle of England’s midfield with Gerrard partnering him.

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The people who were shocked, just like the host and experts on this French show, included the media from all other countries. The English reporters could not believe it when they saw the lineup. However, after they reacted to it, they did not dare to think too optimistically and they thought that Twain was taking a risk with Wood, who had not recovered yet, because he had no choice if he wanted to defeat France.

“Even if we defeat France, how can we beat Spain if we aggravate Wood’s injury?”

“Twain did not think through it properly by doing this!”

“Did Wood volunteer or did Twain force him into it? We have to look into this...”

When the reporters were deep in discussion, the players in the English changing room were similarly shocked.

They looked at Twain standing next to the tactics board, then looked at Wood sitting at one side. Boss had just announced that George Wood was part of the four starting midfielders.

“Is your foot okay? George?” Rooney stood up and asked. This was the question that everyone was concerned about.

“There’s no problem,” Wood replied.

In fact, the team doctor, Wright, specially did another examination for Wood that morning and he believed that Wood’s recovery was very smooth, and he was able to start the match. Twain could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

Wood’s return should have been something that they were happy about, but when they thought about the strange behavior that Boss exhibited the past few days, everyone’s mood dropped to a new low again—Could Boss be worried that the current lineup would not be able to defeat France, that was why he forced Wood to start this match?

There were new doubts in the looks that these people gave Wood. They did not really believe that Wood’s right toe had recovered now.

Of course, Twain knew what his players were thinking of. However, he acted as though he did not see and did not give them any explanations. The players were unhappy with France now, and with him too of course. However, this unhappiness could turn into their motivation and if he explained his actions, all these would be for naught.

After introducing the starting lineup, he repeated the tactics that he explained the day before and then clapped and said, “Good luck.”

He ended the final pre-match preparation just like that, without any passionate speech.

However, nobody cared about his strange behavior. They were all angry at him now so the lesser he spoke the better.

Twain did not continue to stay in the changing room. There were a few minutes before the start of the match and he left the room with assistant manager, Des Walker, leaving the room for the players.

Once Boss left, the players started to become active and they surrounded Wood, “Are you really okay, George?”

Wood nodded with conviction, “I’m fine.”

“I’m very unhappy about Boss’ performance during the past few days...” Someone frowned and said as he looked at the changing room door, “He’s obviously looking down on us, aren’t you mad about that, George?”

Wood shook his head and said, “If you think he’s wrong, then prove it by beating France.”

Wood knew what Twain was planning and as captain, he had the responsibility to help the manager fulfill his plans and that included lying.

As the English players surrounded Wood and questioned him, over in the French changing room, they received the news that George Wood would be starting too.

Puel was a little shocked as he did not expect Wood to start the match. However, this also proved his analysis before—Tony Twain's fear of France was real and not something that he made up. Otherwise, he would not have taken the risk of starting Wood. George Wood was the only trump card in Twain's hands. In order to defeat France, he had no choice but to start a half-fit Wood.

Puel calmed down very quickly once he thought of that. George Wood was not omnipotent and there was nothing that the mighty France needed to worry about.

He continued to explain to the players about the things to look out for in the match, but he noticed that there were people getting distracted...

There were probably not many French players who were happy that Wood would be starting the match. Lassana belonged to this minority.

Seated next to Diarra was midfielder Feghouli who was not in the starting lineup. He noticed the strange behavior of Diarra very quickly.

Diarra was trembling as he looked down and his fingers turned white from clenching his fists.

"Hey Lars, are you okay?" Feghouli touched Diarra and asked with concern.

Diarra stopped his trembling, looked up and smiled at Feghouli while exposing his white teeth, "It's nothing. I'm thinking about defeating England and getting into the semifinal and got a little excited..."

Feghouli thought that Diarra's answer was hilarious. He was 31 years old and not a newcomer anymore, would he be so excited about getting into the semifinal?

Diarra ignored Feghouli. Not everyone could understand the feeling of desiring to meet his opponent so there was no need for him to explain himself. He was very happy that George Wood was going to start. This match had become even more meaningful.

Chapter 952: The Storm Approaches

When George Wood appeared on the pitch, the England fans in the stands let out a huge cheer. They chanted Wood's nickname "Saint George" over and over again, completely quashed the French fans' bluster.

They could not help but get excited. It had been more than two months. Even though George Wood came on as a substitute in the games against Germany and Sweden, it was his first time in the starting lineup. What did it mean for George Wood to be in the starting lineup? Saint George's right big toe had completely healed! They did not have to worry about anything in the next game.

But to those opponents who were observing the two teams in the stands and collecting first-hand intelligence, they were not focused on Wood's comeback, but on Twain's actions. Wood's comeback was to be expected. Twain had brought the disciple which he was most proud of to Spain and it was not to keep him on the bench, so it was not surprising. But Twain's unusually low-key style before the game kept his opponents on guard.

The opponents watching the game between two teams in the stands included Spain and the Czech Republic, which were the two teams likely to encounter in the semifinals, as well as Italy, which were likely to meet them in the final.

They were all coaches in their respective teams, and they arrived at San Mamés Stadium on a mission to spy on the competition. Few of them would have believed that Twain was really afraid of the French team even though the French team's performance in the first few games were really eye-catching. But no matter which angle they analyzed from; Twain was not the kind of manager who would fear the opponent. On the contrary, when the opponent was stronger, the more combative he would be. Look at how he had led an unknown Nottingham Forest team to create a dynasty... It was almost a classic battle collection of David versus Goliath.

They were so concerned with Twain's various abnormal behavior before the game that they treated the matter of George Wood in the starting lineup as inconsequential. It was as natural as where water flowed, a canal was formed...

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Puel was no longer thinking about what Twain said and did before the game. Now his mind was completely focused on the game – the madness of the English people was something he could never predict...

At the start of the game, it was the French team that kicked off. It was reasonable to say that the French team should have taken advantage of the opportunity to keep the football under their feet, and then launch wave after wave of successive attacks to threaten England's goal. By right, they should score a goal first and drag the game into the familiar orbit of the French team.

However, their attack was not close to England's goal and was blocked by George Wood and Gerrard working together to intercept it. Next, the French team had wanted to take back the ball in the midfield – Lassana Diarra and Flamini were in the central midfielder positions, which was closer to the other team's penalty area. The adjustment from these positions showed the French team's intention. They intended to use the offense in this game to completely suppress the England team. The ideal result would be the England team could not even go beyond the midfield.

This was in fact the reason why the French team had been very successful so far. Puel was not an idiot who only knew to attack. After the two powerful interception midfield positions were moved up, the French team's attack was more oppressive, and made it convenient for them to counter press. Their tactic would really be effective and decisive when they encountered those teams which were not good or ill-prepared.

It was a pity they met with a combative and well-prepared England team today.

After seeing Gerrard take the ball, Flamini quickly responded and rushed up. While waiting to enter the stadium before the game, Diarra found his partner and told him that his target was George Wood, so he asked Flamini to stay out of the way.

Gerrard saw Flamini pounce toward him and simply passed the football to Wood, not far from his side.

Almost as soon as he passed the ball, Diarra made his move as well. Like a black panther, he pounced toward Wood who was ready to receive the ball. He was going to intercept the ball at the same time Wood was going to receive it. It was a good opportunity for him to take advantage of when Wood had not steadied his footing yet.

“Diarra goes up to defend against Wood ... Beautiful!”

Motson cried excitedly.

At the same time when Diarra pounced over, Wood used his heel to directly knock Gerrard’s pass directly to Terry at the back. It was fine that Diarra pounced on the empty space. The important thing was that after he and Flamini had rushed up, the French team’s central backfield came apart, so there was a wide gap in the middle! It was because the French team’s two attacking midfielders’ positions were farther up front...

It was apparently what Twain specifically pulled Wood aside to specially advise him before the game: he must be good at exploiting the gaps in the opponent’s formation.

Terry also did not delay and immediately sent out a long ball directly to the feet of Moke, who had already rushed to the front!

“England’s quick attack!”

When Stewart Downing stopped the ball, there were only three French defenders in front of him, while England’s two strikers and another winger, Agbonlahor, had already rushed to the front of the penalty area. Gerrard rushed up again after passing the ball to Wood. It was Wood who continued to hold tight in the backfield after passing the ball back to Terry.

Twain’s starting lineup was different from the first two games. Chris Cohen and Moke, the two Nottingham Forest players did not continue to be in the starting lineup. Instead, they gave up their places to Downing and Agbonlahor. The latter two players shared a same feature – fast speed.

Twain expected the French team to press heavily and strive to score a goal first. At this time, the most important thing for the England team’s offense was not the possession of the ball but speed. Cohen was balance in offense and defense and had good endurance, Moke was excellent in ball control and his technique was skilled. But they were not players who had speed. Downing and Agbonlahor had excellent speed and quite good during counterattacks.

Furthermore, the squad was a big surprise to the French team. Puel certainly did not expect Twain to give up the only real right midfielder when the England team’s right midfielder was in danger and opted for Agbonlahor, who first played as a striker.

Downing did not stop and stay when he got the ball. Instead, he passed the ball across. Rooney, who came back, picked up the ball and sent the ball over to Agbonlahor’s side. The French team’s left back,

Clichy, who had rushed up to participate in the attack just now, were still running back to defend at this time.

Agbonlahor also did not hold back. After receiving the ball, he directly cut inward to plug into the penalty area!

The French team's center back had wanted to defend against Mitchell and Rooney, but he did not expect the England team to move the football to the other side so quickly. He also did not think that Agbonlahor would be so determined to plug into the penalty area that he did not hesitate at all...

After Agbonlahor broke through the penalty area, he then swung his leg to make to look like he was going to shoot which tricked Sakho to tear in to block it, only for him to pass the ball across to Mitchell in the penalty area...

"Aaron Mitchell is now unmarked... and he shoots..."

The football flew straight toward the goal, and the goalkeeper, Lloris flew to save. But unfortunately, the distance was too close, and Mitchell used all his might to shoot. No matter how strong the goalkeeper was, he could also do nothing at this time...

"GOOOAL! GOOOOOAL! GOOOOOOAL!!!" John Motson, BBC 5 station's trump card commentator jumped from his seat.

He might have been the first to react, because when the shot that Mitchell had sent out hit the net, neither the fans in the stands nor the viewers in front of the television had registered it in their minds yet – what was going on? The game had only started a little more than a minute. How did this happen?

Equally surprised were all the members of the French team. The coaches sitting in the technical area as well as the French players who were just desperately defending on the pitch, they were all looking at their own goal at this moment. In there, the football was spinning and rubbing against the net.

Meanwhile, in all the big and small pubs in England, on the big screens in the squares and on the radios of taxis, only John Motson's voice was shouting, "This is the fastest goal in the tournament. It is also the second-fastest goal in the history of the UEFA European Championship! One minute and thirty seconds, Mitchell takes the lead for England! We're ahead! The lead comes as a surprise, but we are really in the lead!"

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After a few seconds of standstill, huge cheers broke out from the stands at San Mamés Stadium.

The commentators of all the countries also declared England 1:0 ahead of France in the way they were good at in succession.

To be honest, even the England team's own people did not expect their opening to be so smooth, taking the lead in just over a minute and a half once the game started. It was Tony Twain reacted the fastest. He rushed out of the technical area with open arms and did a provocative butt twisting dance near the French team's technical area, as if to deliberately annoy Puel.

Agbonlahor, who passed the ball, rushed up and toppled Mitchell. Then more England players stacked on top one by one. Even the goalkeeper, Joe Hart ran up from the back. It could be seen how excited the English players were.

Indeed, they were excited because they not only were ahead of the French team, they also showed the boss, the French team which he had lauded as a strong opponent, the stuff they were made of! They were simply unable to withstand a single blow!

“Benzema, Gourcuff, Ben Arfa... the group of geniuses from the French team are at a loss over the goal concede!”

They were really at a loss. They were still standing motionless in front. Who would have thought that their first offensive failure would lead to a goal concede?

Twain walked back after he finished his butt twisting dance in front of the French team’s technical area. He walked toward Des Walker with a look of anticipation and smiled as he said, “A storm is approaching, Des.”

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Yes, the storm had come. The first gale toppled the roof of the greenhouse above the French team’s head, and those delicate flowers shivered with cold and faltered amid the howling wind and torrential rain.

In fact, at this time, the French team very much wanted to get support from their grandstand. However, at the present moment, the French fans chose to be silent. Even if they wanted to make a sound, they were silenced by the singing of the England fans. Only the England fans’ singing could be heard at San Mamés Stadium, and only England fans’ voices could be had. They turned Deportivo de La Coruña’s home ground into a Premier League stadium.

Twain’s compliments to the French team before the game not only angered the England players, but also angered the England football fans. Seeing their own team take the lead over the French team so quickly, they were happy to embarrass Twain with their singing.

As the game went on, the French team could not lift their morale amid the singing voices of the England fans. They wanted to attack but found the England team’s backfield invulnerable to attack. More importantly, they lacked the experience to deal with such a situation. Their manager did not tell them before the game how they were supposed to play next should they concede the goal in the opening minute and a half. Should they continue to attack as per the original plan, or should they slightly withdraw to pay attention to defense?

After the goal concede, Sakho loudly berated his teammates in the front field, asking them to actively come back and defend. Otherwise they would not be able to defend and hold with just four defenders. Not to mention that out of the four defenders, two full backs liked to assist in offense. But the players in the front field did not listen to him. Now their minds were filled with ideas on how to equalize the score. The French team’s front and back fields gradually came apart.

Puel also lacked a counter tactic. He watched powerlessly on the sidelines. Because he could not make up his mind – was the goal concede an accident or was it the opponent’s premeditated ruse?

In the end he thought it was just an accident, and eventually instructed the team to continue to attack and try to equalize the score as soon as possible to get the game back on track again.

But he thought wrong.

The stronger the gale from the England team, the more torrential it rained. The big beads of rain hit the faces like hail.

In the 23rd minute, the England team seized on a chance and fully pressed on while the French team was in a hurry to equalize the score. Through a quick counterattack, the lead was extended to two goals with a goal personally scored by Agbonlahor.

After the goal, Agbonlahor opened his arms wide and ran towards the corner flag. But he did not escape the fate of being crushed by people.

“2:0! England has completely taken the initiative and they are two goals ahead of France! It’s a situation that we really did not think would happen before the game... France, once considered the favorite to win the title, is beaten twice by England in 20 minutes and unable to fight back!”

“I can’t believe what I’m seeing here. Our team is two goals behind ... What’s going on? Have Benzema, Gourcuff, Ben Arfa and Nasri all disappeared? And what about our defensive players? It’s shocking that the talented goalkeeper, Lloris, who had only conceded one goal, actually lost two in a row within 20 minutes.” The French commentator was absolutely gutted. He himself could not understand why the French team had such a performance. The French players and coaches did not understand it as well.

The England players in front of them were almost like lions who had been starved for days. Not only did they not lose their strength, they became even more ferocious and dangerous. Even their exhaled breath had a strong smell of blood, as if they had just come out of the depths of hell.

They were fighting with all their strength in every corner of the pitch against the French players. Even if the shots fired were not 50-50, they would also try to tackle it, which caused the French players to be very afraid. Not only that, when they got the opportunity to attack, they would do their best which made it very difficult for the French defenders to defend. It was a completely irrational style of playing and the French team still had no way to take them on.

After England took a two-goal lead, they did not stop there. Instead, they got more and more energetic. With wave after wave of attacks, the French team could only withdraw their defense and they had no way to threaten the England team’s penalty area.

But it was also because of this reason that the French team did not continue to concede the goal in the later part of the first half. When the referee blew the whistle at the end of the first half, all the jittery Frenchmen breathed a sigh of relief – they were safe for at least the next 15 minutes.

Chapter 953: A Two-Goal Lead Is Not Enough

The England players could not hide the smiles from their faces when they made their way off the pitch and into the locker room. In truth, they never had the intention to hide their smiles from the start. Their smiles would definitely irritate the French deeply, and that was their aim.

They could not wait to show their smiles to their boss. They wanted to make him embarrassed and make him blush.

Of course, their smiles did not go unnoticed by Twain. Every single England player who walked into the locker room looked as though they had just won the lottery.

Twain had deliberately made his team look weak prior to the match, and his actions had angered the players and also propelled them to give their all in the match so far. Twain was quite pleased with what his team had managed to achieve in the first half. However, he could not let himself get carried away and become complacent just like the players are right now, because that could possibly lead to them squandering their two-goal lead in the second half. Look at what happened in the match against Portugal. They had also gone into halftime with a two-goal lead. But, had it not been for his team's hard work and the Portugal team's bad luck, Portugal might have come out of that match as the victors.

Hence, this halftime was very important to Twain.

There were three things that he learned from the first half. Firstly, there was nothing wrong with his tactics for the match. He definitely got everything right, if not his team would not have been able to go into the lead or dominate the match in the first half. Secondly, his attempt at manipulating the players' psychological states before the match had worked, and players from both teams had been affected. The England players were upset because they thought they were being looked down on, whereas the France players became smug after getting praised by their opponents. Thirdly, England's abilities as a team definitely did not pale in comparison to France.

The three aforementioned points made Twain feel extremely confident about his team's ability to win the match.

Every single one of the England players looked at Twain expectantly when they entered the locker room. It seemed as though they were waiting for Twain to praise them for their performance.

Twain laughed inwardly at their actions, but he did not let any of his happiness show on his face.

"You did well in the first half." The team was able to dominate France and get a two-goal lead over them in the first half, but the only praise they got from Twain for their performance were the words 'you did well'. "But, do you all think that that's enough to win the match?"

Twain's words left the players dumbfounded.

They were able to take a 2:0 lead over France on the 25th minute of the match, and they also dominated the whole of the first half! Is this performance not enough to win the match? What else does the boss want from them?

Twain looked at the looks of shock upon the players' faces and continued to laugh inwardly. However, he maintained a stern face before the players. "Look at all of you. What do you all find hard to understand? We are a team that is going to become champions of this competition. Are you guys really going to be satisfied with such a performance? I need to point out to all of you that you actually only

played well for 23 minutes of the match. What did all of you do after we went into the lead? You all got complacent and stopped going on the attack, right? After seeing how you guys performed in the latter half of the game, I think I have to tweak my words a little. The most dangerous situation in this world is not having a one-goal lead in a match. It's when you have a two-goal lead in a match!"

The players who had been in a state of disbelief over how Twain had not praised them for their performance earlier all lowered their heads after hearing his words. Twain had hit the nail on the head. The players had certainly relaxed after taking a two-goal lead over France. One reason for it has to do with France's poor performance in the first half, and another reason is due to a change in mindset.

"If you are satisfied with what you have right now and you think that you can go take a nap with a two-goal lead in the second half, then I hope you are all ready to be slaughtered by the French in the next 45 minutes of the match! I am definitely not trying to scare you with my words. Every single one of you here is a professional football player who has played in countless matches in the past. I'm sure all of you know it better than I do. No one here is some amateur football player who has only played football for barely a month! Surely you must know what will happen when you underestimate an opponent who has nowhere to vent his pent-up frustrations!"

Twain's voice got angrier and angrier as he spoke. It was as though England had performed terribly in the first half and he was chastising them for their poor performance.

"All of you were smiling at the France players at the end of the first half. How do you all think they will react to that? Do you think they will panic and not know what to do at halftime? Wrong! Gentlemen, you are up against France! Just like us, they are also a team whose aim is to become champions of this competition! They are not some semi-professional football team that is playing in the National League! If you all continue to be complacent in the second half, then I can help all of you make a couple of phone calls right now! One to cancel your hotel rooms, and the other to book flight tickets! The tickets won't be for you to fly to Barcelona, they'd be for you to fly back to England!"

Barcelona is the venue for the first round of the semi-finals. If England manages to defeat France, they would fly over to meet with the winner of the match between Spain and Czech Republic.

"Is there anyone here who still thinks that I should have praised you for your performance in the first half?"

No one breathed a word.

"If you want to prove to me that I was wrong for not praising you, or if you want me to praise you for your performances, then you better win this match! Are you all satisfied with a 2:0 score? Because I am not satisfied with just that! 3:0, 4:0, 5:0... Who could possibly hate scoring a lot of goals in a match?"

Actually, the England players' smiles at the end of the first half helped Twain out. Their smiles must have led the French to think that they are gloating over their first half performance. The France team manager, Claude Puel, would definitely think that his team has a good chance of making a comeback in the second half, because he would expect the England players to not play at their best due to their cocky attitudes.

Unfortunately for Puel, it would all just be a trap laid out by Twain. He is destined to become just like the Monkey King, who is never able to escape from the Buddha's palm.

“I don’t want any of you to think that the match is over. Pull yourselves together for the second half! Continue to pile the pressure on the France team! Our tactics have worked very well in the first half, and we won’t do anything different in the second half. The France team would definitely crumble if you are able to score a goal in the second half! Remember, never go easy on your opponents! It doesn’t matter how many goals you have scored, I want you all to keep scoring! If you go easy on your opponents, then the ones who would be sent packing would be you guys! Don’t you guys think that all the press talks about is how the France team are the favorites to win the Euro Cup? This is a perfect opportunity to prove them wrong!” Twain pointed at the door and yelled, “Let us thrash France and show the world what we’ve got! Let us tell the stupid press who are the real favorites to win the Euro Cup!”

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While Twain was giving his players a pep talk, Puel was giving his own pep talk to his dispirited France players in their locker room as well.

“... There’s nothing frightening about England. They are just a team that goes on the counterattack fast. All we need to do is to pay more attention to their counterattacks in the second half and not let their two fullbacks get to the front of the pitch that easily. What’s most important right now is for all of you to regain your confidence. What’s so scary about England? We are here to become champions. How are you going to do that if you can’t even beat England? I admit we underestimated them in the first half, but luckily for us, we still have 45 minutes left to play in the match. The momentum of the match would definitely shift in our favor as long as we score a goal early in the second half.”

Diarra opened his mouth. He wanted to ask, “What if we don’t manage to score a goal early?”

But, the words were stuck in his throat and he could not get himself to ask the question. He was feeling very depressed over his performance in the first half. His actual performance differed too much from what he expected of himself. He had paid too much attention to George Wood in the midfield, and that has led to England’s first goal. He was contemplating if he should stay at the back of the pitch and solidify the team’s defense when Puel called his name.

Diarra raised his head to look at his manager.

“I want you to pressure England’s midfield with Mathieu in the second half.” Puel did not want Diarra to retreat backwards. He wanted him to continue moving forward so as to pile pressure on England’s midfielders. George Wood and Gerrard are both playing as defensive midfielders, so they are positioned slightly towards the back of the pitch. This meant that Diarra needs to move upwards in order to pressure both Wood and Gerrard.

Diarra did not object to his manager’s arrangement. He nodded his head to signal his assent.

“No problem, manager.” Flamini, who sat next to Diarra, nodded his head as well.

“Gentlemen, our tactic for the second half is still to go on the offense. We’d never be able to win if we don’t attack England. I hope all of you remember that well. Pressure England from the start of the match! Make more runs at the front of the pitch! Intercept their balls! I don’t want to see all of you sleepwalking around the pitch just like the first half, understood?”

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"I don't think the France players would retreat backwards and play defensively in the second half since they are trailing by two goals. They absolutely have to score goals in order to win the match. But, I think one adjustment that Puel would make would be to decrease the number of times that their fullbacks go on the attack. Thus, we shouldn't go on the attack straight away at the start of the second half. What we should do first is to solidify our defense. France would definitely attack us ferociously at the start of match, and we could end up letting them score a goal if we are not careful. If our lead is reduced to just one, then I'm sure all of you understand what that entails. All in all, we must never let our guard down. Every tiny mistake that you make could end up putting the team in a dire situation."

Twain conveyed his tactics to his players in detail. Once he was done, he looked at his watch. The halftime break was almost over, but Twain was in no hurry to leave. He wanted the France players to get out onto the pitch first and wait for his players to arrive.

"There's still a bit of time left. Let's talk about what I said prior to the match..."

The England players lifted their heads and looked at Twain in astonishment.

"I know some of you must have been very upset with what I said. You must have thought that I had belittled you... Or perhaps... Insulted you?" Twain laughed as he looked at his players who had looks of confusion all over their faces.

Did we get it wrong? The players thought inwardly.

"Haha!" Twain laughed even louder. "Look at the current score for the match! I don't think my words were for naught..."

Twain did not make himself clear, but the discerning players would definitely understand what he is getting at. As for those who cannot make sense of what he meant, they would definitely come to understand once the match ends. There is no use explaining to them now.

The eyes of the Nottingham Forest players lit up after hearing Twain's words. They immediately understood what Twain meant. In contrast, Gerrard and Terry had their heads lowered and they seemed to be deep in thought.

Twain glanced at his watch once again. He figured that the France players should all be standing on the pitch right now, and that is when he stood to his feet. He then opened the door and waved to his players, "Get out there, lads. Don't forget every single word that I said earlier. My words would definitely become the key to our victory!"

Just as Twain expected, the France players have already made their way onto the pitch, and they have been waiting for England for two whole minutes. These two minutes would have gone unnoticed usually, but not this time round. The France players felt like idiots to have waited for the England players for two minutes in such a cacophonous environment.

When the England players appeared at the tunnel, the France fans immediately started booing and chastising them. The British and the French have never seen eye to eye all this while, and football has only amplified the animosity that they hold towards each other. When the French booed the England team, the England fans immediately retaliated by singing a song that insulted the French. Both sides kept getting in each other's faces relentlessly.

The players did not appear to have been emotionally affected by the fans' actions. They got into their respective positions on the pitch quickly and waited for kick-off.

Twain did not return to his seat in the dugout after walking out of the tunnel with his players. Instead, he stood by the side of the pitch with his arms folded before his chest. He wanted to direct his players from the sidelines, and he would only return to his seat if he does not notice any issues after 15 minutes.

He wanted his players to know that he, Tony Twain, the manager of the England national team, is standing right by the side of the pitch!

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The France team kept attacking England's penalty box ferociously the moment the second half commenced. However, the England defense that is led by George Wood did not crumble. Wood's interceptions in the midfield acted as a shield against France's attacks. Any attack by France that had a chance of threatening England's goalpost were all stopped by Wood.

Neither Gourcuff nor Nasri were able to win against Wood in the middle of the pitch. All they could do was to bring the ball forward via the flanks and try to find a chance to break into England's penalty box from there. However, the England players were all well-prepared to deal with France's attacks down the flanks.

In the end, France had to rely on the individual abilities of their star players to break through England's defense. This type of attack was the kind that Twain feared the least. His team's defenders are good at holding the line, and he was confident that they would be able to defend against all the France players who come their way.

In addition, France's star player, Benzema, appears to be in a poor form for the match, and he has wasted numerous chances to score a goal so far. Twain felt relieved to see Real Madrid's top striker hug his head in frustration time and time again.

Did you think that you can perform well after falling into my elaborate trap? Well, I hope you keep on daydreaming!

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France attacked relentlessly for 13 minutes, but they did not gain anything from those attacks. The score remained 0:2, and France still trailed by two goals. Diarra did not get many chances to face off with Wood, and it seems like Wood saw through their plan to pressure him and steal the ball from his feet. He did not maintain possession of the ball for a long period of time, and he always passed the ball to his teammates quickly. A reason for his ability to make such quick passes is due to his ability to observe where his teammates are on the pitch before making each pass. Diarra realized that he was just wasting his energy every time he ran up to Wood, and eventually he decided to just not run towards Wood at all.

Puel was upset with Diarra's performance. He kept yelling Diarra's name by the sidelines. He wanted Diarra to be even more proactive and go after Wood more.

It was clear that the ex-manager of Lyon lacks the ability to deal with situations like these whereby his team is trailing in a match. Things have always been smooth-sailing for his team over the past two years... Perhaps a little too smooth-sailing.

All he cared about was the 0:2 scoreline. He kept wanting his team to go on the attack, but he did not sense the danger that lurked behind England's rigid defense.

Diarra sensed it, and that is why he has gone against his manager's demands. He did not go after George Wood every time he received the ball. Instead, he took a few steps back and waited quietly at the defensive midfielder's position.

"You bastard!" Puel chided Diarra angrily after seeing his performance. If France lost this match, he would definitely teach Diarra a lesson in the locker room. He is blatantly going against his orders! This is something that cannot be condoned!

Diarra proved to his manager that he was right to not chase after George Wood soon after.

Wood noticed that Diarra did not pounce at him after he received the ball. He then passed the ball over to Gerrard. Gerrard suddenly carried the ball forward down the middle of the pitch, and he caught Flamini completely unaware. If Diarra had rushed up to Wood to intercept the ball earlier, then Gerrard would definitely have been able to break through France's midfield by now. But, fortunately for France, Diarra was positioned at the back and he was able to get to Gerrard in time. He ran up to Gerrard and intercepted the ball from his feet. Diarra was able to stop England's attack successfully.

Both Twain and George Wood raised their brows in unison after seeing Diarra's performance.

It looks like there is one man they can't get past in the second half.

Chapter 954: Watch out for the England Team

After Diarra blocked one of Gerrard's attacks, he looked defiantly at Wood opposite him. His meaning was obvious – don't shrink behind like a coward. Bring it on, boy!

George Wood certainly saw what Diarra meant, but he was unmoved and continued to stay in the backfield to establish his position.

Initially, Puel was still complaining that Diarra did not follow his command. But he fell silent after seeing Diarra intercepted England's attack in succession. The back of the French team had obviously stabilized...

Twain certainly could not let that situation happen. Once the French team's defense was stable, they would attack again. At that time, it would be their turn to bear the pressure.

Gerrard was clearly the underdog in his fight with Diarra. His age and physical disadvantage had left him less able in physical confrontations than he used to be. Twain thought about it. He decided to let Gerrard move back to replace Wood and let Wood plug in to get involved in the offense. The two players belonged to the category of midfielders who were good at both offense and defense. Interchanging of positions would not create chaos.

Twain walked to the sidelines and whistled toward the inland. Wood turned his gaze over, and he made a hand signal to change positions, which Wood immediately understood.

Then, taking advantage of a dead ball, Wood and Gerrard completed the handover of positions.

Following which, Diarra was pleased to find that the man who came up this time was not Gerrard, but George Wood!

Although Wood did not take the ball, Diarra remained on high alert against him. He knew Wood was the core of the England team. Although he did not know why he was hiding in the backfield in the first half and not come up, it did not matter for now he had no choice but to finally come out of his bolthole.

Sure enough, Agbonlahor quickly passed the ball to Wood. He met with some trouble on his side. He was unable to play to his speed advantage after his attack was being blocked by the French full backs. So, he could only hand the ball over to Wood to reorganize.

Diarra stuck close when he saw Wood take the ball. Wood did not seem to have the intention of getting rid of him with speed. Instead, he turned around to protect the football and waited for Diarra to come up.

The two great defensive midfielders faced off each other, and Diarra lost on strength.

He only felt that Wood leaned back, and his own body lost its balance to tilt toward the back at the side. He grabbed Wood's clothes with his hand at the crucial moment and regained his balance.

Wood did not give him the chance to continue to pester himself and leaned back again. When Diarra focused all his attention on keeping his balance, he passed the ball to Gerrard, who came up to receive. Next, he turned around and charged forward. Gerrard once again sent a straight pass just in time. The tacit cooperation between the two midfielders freed them of Diarra.

As Diarra rushed up again to tangle him, Wood suddenly sped up and got rid of him. He also went straight into the middle of the penalty area!

"He's going to break through from the middle! Stop him!" The goalkeeper, Lloris yelled behind the defenders.

Wood's sudden breakthrough caught the attention of all the French defenders. Sakho crossed in front of him, and Clichy was moving closer to the middle. Seeing that the two sides were about to meet, Wood gave his ankle a jerk and turned the football to the side!

While Mitchell and Rooney were still under the close watchful eyes of the French defenders, Agbonlahor was not marked by anyone at the side...

After seeing Wood pass the ball to the sideline, Mitchell and Rooney moved toward the ball in sync, while Wood stopped at the edge of the penalty area and did not rush forward.

The center backs' attention were all attracted by the two strikers breaking through and ran into the penalty area one by one.

A three to five-meter-wide gap appeared in front of Wood.

Diarra was the first one to be perceptively aware of the other party's intentions. He hurried toward Wood ten meters away.

Meanwhile Agbonlahor made a move and crossed the ball over! Instead of the football flying towards any of England's strikers, the football was rolling diagonally towards George Wood!

Diarra guessed right!

Wood stood in place and turned his body sideways toward the ball. He picked up his right foot, and he was going to directly shoot!

Would Diarra give Wood what he wanted? Even if he risked getting a card, he had to stop the shot!

Once his mind was made up, Diarra slide tackled Wood's legs from the side and Wood sensed the danger. If it were to be during normal times, he would definitely kick and force a shot toward the goal. But at the moment, he thought of his right foot, and also thought of the next two games ...

At the thought of it, Wood gave up his intention to shoot directly and allowed the ball to cross in front of his feet while he jumped.

He was still a little late. Even though his right foot managed to dodge, his left foot was hooked by Diarra and he lost his center of gravity.

Everyone heard the referee's whistle as Wood fell to the ground.

They became nervous. Was it a penalty shot or a free kick?

Wood himself fell into the penalty area. But was the location of the foul in the penalty area?

The referee ran to the location of the foul and stopped. He did not continue to run into the penalty area, nor did he point his finger at the penalty spot.

"It's not a penalty shot!" The French people breathed a sigh of relief.

The Englishmen were a little disgruntled and complained, "It was enough of a foul for him to be sent straight off the pitch!"

The referee only showed Diarra a yellow card, prompting boos from the England fans in the stands.

Wood was pulled up from the ground by Gerrard, which made it awkward for Diarra, who was supposed to have gotten ready to show some goodwill himself. He went up and patted Wood on the shoulder before he walked away. Although the fight was fierce, he did not have to start a feud with Wood. His special feelings for Wood were limited to the pitch.

"Are you all right?" Gerrard asked after Diarra had gone.

Wood shook his left foot and shook his head, "It's all right."

It looked like he was really okay, because Wood was walking normally when he left Gerrard's side. But he was stopped by Gerrard who shouted out, "George, stay."

Wood felt strange, but he stopped in his tracks and looked back at Gerrard.

Gerrard stepped forward and said, “You just stand here. We can coordinate to do a free kick...”

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Under the situation of Bentley’s absence, Gerrard was in charge of carrying out direct free kicks. He scored several times at Liverpool using free kicks. The French players clearly knew it, so when they saw Gerrard standing in front of the ball, the human wall looked very nervous – on the one hand, they were afraid that he would score. On the other hand, they were scared of being struck by Gerrard’s powerful shot... It would not feel good.

Wood stood five meters away from Gerrard, but no one paid any mind to him, including Diarra. Everyone in the world knew that George Wood did not carry out free kicks, whether at Nottingham Forest or in the England national team. He would have nothing to do with free kicks. He did not even qualify to act as a cover.

He just stood at present and people treated it as he was just standing there. If they were to consider it at a deeper level, he was going to counter press at best after Gerrard’s free kick hit the human wall so as to regain possession of the ball.

Gerrard carefully placed the football in the penalty spot designated by the referee, which was just right on the line in the penalty area!

This position made the French players afraid, but also caused the English people to be extremely displeased – it was almost a penalty shot!

“A free kick on the line of the penalty area ... is not really a good position. Playing here requires better technique, otherwise the probability of the football hitting the human wall is very high.” Motson frowned. The position was really not considered good. Not to mention that it was almost a penalty shot, it was not good that it was too close to the goal.

Gerrard’s free kick never scored based on the radian. It was unsuitable for him to carry out the penalty in this spot.

The onlookers had little hope of the free kick succeeding, but Gerrard did not see it that way. Standing in front of the ball, he stared at the goal with shining eyes. After putting the football in place, he stepped back and prepared to kick.

Wood stood five meters away from him and was looking at the penalty area. As they had to defend against the free kick, the players in the penalty area were mainly concentrated in the human wall, in order to block the goal as much as possible to share the burden with the goalkeeper. This time, seven players lined up in the French team’s human wall. It almost blocked the half of the goal. Lloris, on the other hand, was nervously laying out the defense on the other side.

The England teammates mostly wanted to squeeze among the human wall, but they were pushed out by the French players. So, they simply stood directly in front of the human wall, which of course caused the French players’ displeasure. They pushed back hard while raising their hands to protest to the referee: “Do you see what they’re trying to do here?!”

The referee had to signal for Gerrard to wait a while. He ran over to mediate the contradiction between the two sides, warning the cunning English players not to stand in front of the human wall and that it

was fine to stand beside it... while he also warned the French players not to get started. Neither side was allowed to have a conflict, nor were they allowed to push.

After a minute of effort, England finally managed to squeeze one man into it. Downing was stuck in between Sakho and Mexès. Although the other team was upset, they could not do anything about him since he managed to squeeze in.

With the disturbance from the England players, everyone put their focus on the direct free kick. In fact, even the England players thought so too. They thought that Gerrard would shoot directly. Except for Gerrard himself and George Wood.

The referee finally moved back and signaled that Gerrard could play.

As soon as Gerrard started to run up, the French team's human wall was particularly tense. One by one, they leant their bodies back with one hand to protect the chest and the other hand to protect the crotch area. They got ready to jump and were also worried that the football Gerrard shoot would roll from under their feet covered with grass. Just as they were at odds about it, Gerrard ran to the football and lifted his leg...

Is he going to shoot?!

The French players cried in their hearts.

Gerrard passed the football to the side instead!

"It's ... George Wood!!"

Whether it was the English commentator or the French television commentator, they were all stunned by it.

As the football rolled, George Wood appeared on camera. This time, he lifted his left foot up and his body slightly to the side and adopted the same posture as just now. But this time no one came up to interfere with him...

"... A long shot ——!!!"

Wood's left foot hit the ball hard, and the football ball whizzed into the bottom right corner of the goal like an artillery shell!

No one had reacted to this sudden change yet. The human wall of people who were nervous just now, were looking at the ball flying to the other side of the goal in amazement at this time. Lloris did not even pounce to make the save. He just stood there and watched helplessly as the football roll past his side into the goal...

"Huh?"

It was the first reaction of Lloris and the other French players.

Thunderous cheers quickly struck, scurrying their doubts away – they were three goals behind!

"A beautiful long shot! From a positional play between the two players, Gerrard and Wood! England leads France by three goals!" Motson exclaimed.

After the goal, Wood was hugged by Gerrard before he could make his celebratory action. Then more teammates rushed up to surround the two of them to celebrate the goal.

The goal was scored in a fairly timely manner and completely demoralized the French team and killed their fighting spirit. In an international competition like the UEFA European Championship, few teams could reverse the situation in which they were three goals behind.

The England team's substitutes' bench was also a scene of jubilation. Their victory was basically sealed with a three-goal lead. It was only a matter of time before they reached the semifinals.

The French players could not believe everything their eyes saw. They had intended to have a showdown to fight back in the second half but did not expect England to score another goal... Such a blow drained almost all of their power. Watching the English players embrace and celebrate the goal, they just wanted to fall to the ground and not get up.

Twain was as excited as his players. But this time he did not go to Puel and twist his buttocks to dance in front of him because he did not need to do that anymore. The French team was about to become the past. Was there still a need for him to take another look at a loser who had been trampled in the mud by him?

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After the game resumed, the French team was a little distracted, or to put it more accurately, they were dazed. When the score was still 0:2, they could still tell themselves that it was necessary to fight. But how about now when the score was 3:0?

Puel did not know what to do as well. Trailing behind by three goals, the possibility of reversing the game was too small. And most importantly, was there any solution when they were up against such a situation?

The England team was no philanthropist and would not give the French team the time. Now that the French team had suffered a heavy blow and appeared to be in a dazed state, it was the England team's wonderful chance to go on a large-scale offensive. Without needing Twain to remind them on the sidelines, the England players naturally knew what to do.

England scored again after a flurry. The England fans even became a little numb, and some of the French fans even began to leave the stadium early with more than 20 minutes to go.

This time it was still Mitchell, who scored the goal with a header into the goal after he received Downing's pass from the sideline. It was clear from this goal conceded that the French center backs were distracted and not present-minded. So much so that Mitchell, the tall center forward, could easily leap in front of goal to score with a header. Lloris was unable to turn around a hopeless situation no matter how good he was. After failing to save the goal, he did not even have the energy to scold his center backs. He just frustratedly kicked the rebounded football back into the goal.

"The game was over, and the French players are finished." Twain said as he opened his arms and turned to his partner, Des Walker. The game turned out to be like this, which even Walker did not expect that the England team could beat France so easily...

“4:0...” Motson could not believe his eyes and said, “The French team that was named as the hottest favorite to win the title before the game, was so vulnerable in front of England... Was it because the French team was too weak, or were we too strong?”

No one could answer his question at this time, because even the most hardcore England fans could not believe the scene that was happening right in front of their eyes, and their brains could not comprehend...

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Although there were still twenty minutes to go before the end of the game, it was already clear that the French players had no heart to play further. Only Diarra was still working hard, but he could not find a target with some of his efforts....

After England’s 4:0 lead, Twain brought on Michael Johnson to replace George Wood. He was still worried about Wood’s right big toe. Now that the win was locked in, there was no need to continue to let Wood be on the field. It was just in case a French player flew into a rage out of humiliation and had a go at Wood bearing a destructive attitude, then it would be too late for him to have any regrets.

Twain’s move to replace Wood also meant that the game had ended early. In the ensuing game, the French team had been unable to organize an effective attack. The offensive lineup which everyone placed high hopes on before the game, ended up ineffective. The French commentator was somewhat dismayed to claim that no one in the French team played well in the game.

He said it right, especially for those players who had been touted as a front-field attack cluster. Under George Wood’s iron curtain, all the star players were dim.

The England fans sang non-stop in the stands once the England team scored its fourth goal, until the referee blew the final whistle of the game. The singing suddenly turned into thunderous cheers to send the French players off.

“The French team ended their tour in Spain with this humiliating score ...With the England team’s surprise crazy win, they are the first to reach the semifinals! Tony Twain has made one thing clear to all of Europe – his team is very powerful! Very strong indeed!”

The Spanish coach, who was in charge of watching the game and observing the opponents, wrote only one thing in the final summary of the game in his notepad:

Watch out for England.

Chapter 955: If You Hate Me

The major victory of four goals made the England players wild with joy and they were also made feted by many media outlets. After Twain dealt with the reporters, he waited for them in the locker room. He had waited for twenty minutes before people came back in succession. Ten minutes later, the players had all returned.

No one was willing to sit properly on the benches. As soon as they entered the room, they took off their drenched jerseys and tossed them on the floor. They jumped around the locker room, either naked, or just in their underpants as if they were a bunch of drunk monkeys.

“WOOOOOOW—” Rooney even jumped on a table with drinks on it and other miscellaneous stuff and let out a long yell with his head thrown back.

“4:0! 4:0! 4:0! Oh, oh!” The teammates below were chanting the final score of the game in unison as they splashed him with water.

“I’ve never played such a smashing game! It’s so f**king sweet!” Even if he was drenched from head to toe by the others, Michael Johnson did not care either. He wiped the water off his face and shouted at Chris Cohen next to him.

Despite the fact that Twain and the members of the coaching staff were in the locker room, the players did not stop their frenzied celebrations. There were even people who splashed water at the coaches, making them look like wet dogs.

Twain did not speak up to stop it. Instead, he happily stood at the door and looked at the players making a scene. But he was careful to hide behind Des Walker to dodge a “stray bullet.”

What was the saying for it?

“You can hide for the present, but you can’t run forever.”

Poor Tony Twain was still spotted by the sharp-eyed players. The strong and tall combination of Rooney and Mitchell rushed up to pull Twain out from behind Walker, and then everyone swarmed up and poured water on Twain’s head. They finally let off some “steam.” This would show the boss for looking down on them before the game. Look at the results now – 4:0! 4 for England and 0 for France, the team that Twain said was the strongest team!

“Well, guys... Enough!” Twain felt chilly from being drenched but luckily it was summer, and not the World Cup in South Africa. Otherwise, he would definitely catch a cold outside. The players ignored Twain’s plea for mercy. They poured the water from all the water bottles in the locker room over Twain’s body, leaving him completely looking like a drowned rat.

After the players dispersed in a rush, everyone saw Tony Twain looking like he had just been fished out of the water and burst into laughter in the locker room.

Twain wiped the water off his face with his hand. Looking miserably cold with his neck curled against his shoulders, he gave the players a stern glare. But no one was scared of such a boss because his current appearance was so comical.

There was even a distinct smile on George Wood’s face. Those who were lively in nature were bent over with laughter on the floor.

Twain stared at those people who laughed the hardest and said, “Look what you guys have done. How am I supposed to go to the press conference?”

There was another burst of laughter.

Amid the sounds of laughter, Twain's expression also changed, from pretending to be angry into a helpless smile, and finally a wide grin, revealing a row of white teeth. He smiled exceptionally bright.

"You did great, guys. I'm sorry to have made you feel wronged before the game. The whole English media scolded me for not being confident in my team. But actually, it was not a lack of confidence. It was a strategy to make the French opponent underestimate us. And now... does everyone see the results?" He clapped his hands and was pleased to see the surprised expressions on the many faces of the players.

He laughed more happily.

"All right let's put aside what happened and enjoy the night to the fullest. That's the reward you've won! After tonight, forget this game. You have to face even more serious challenges. We are only two games away from being the king of Europe. I will not allow you to fall until you touch the championship trophy! Listen well, before you win the championship title, tonight is your last chance to relax. So, enjoy it to the fullest!"

Having said that, Twain took Des Walker along with him and walked out of the locker room.

He only saw Twain wipe the water from his head with a towel he had brought out, while he reached out to him.

"What's the matter, Tony?" Walker was puzzled.

Twain stuffed the used towel into Walker's hands and said, "Your clothes, take them off quickly."

"You want me to undress? Over here?" Walker turned his head and looked around, feeling a little awkward.

"I'm not asking you to strip naked. What are you thinking? I'm in a hurry to go to the press conference, and in fact I'm already late... I can't go, dressed like this." He did not know whether to laugh or cry as he pointed to his suit, which had been ravaged by water and the players.

It would indeed be an insult to the winner's status if he were to be dressed like this to meet the reporters.

Walker laughed and obediently took off his jacket to hand it over to Twain while he took Twain's suit at the same time.

"Do your best, Tony. You're the winner!" He said to Twain, who was wearing his clothes.

"Of course, when have you seen me make the loser feel good?" Twain winked at Walker and walked out wearing Walker's suit.

"Damn, I've been working so hard and yet I've put on weight..." Walker laughed happily after hearing Twain muttering to himself.

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The French team manager was being interviewed when Twain rushed to the press conference hall. But it was almost at the tail end. The French reporters were rather dejected. Even so, someone had to be

responsible for the fiasco. Seated on stage, Claude Puel naturally became the target of public criticism – holding all the good cards in his hands, yet he did not know how to play them. As a result, Tony Twain played all the cards in his hands, and Puel was still holding the original cards, dumbstruck.

When Twain saw Puel at the press conference, he was already exhausted by the flurry of questions from the French reporters.

“... I’m responsible for this loss...” Puel glanced at Twain, who stood waiting at the entrance. The expression on his face changed and very soon returned to normal. He said, “... However, I will not resign unless the French Football Federation sacks me. I think the achievements of my team for more than two years are obvious to all. But football matches are always full of all kinds of surprises...” Seeing Twain, Puel suddenly felt energized, and spoke more words. The press conference, which was due to end, was extended.

“I’m proud and please with the lads’ performance. We were just unlucky.”

The corners of Twain’s lips curled up as he listened below: from this game alone, the French players’ performance did not deserve the slightest bit of pride and dignity. They did not lose because of bad luck.

“... I repeat, I will not resign. I am satisfied with my work. My contract will run until the end of the 18th World Cup and I will stay to work there until then. I think the French team will accomplish much at the World Cup.”

After saying his piece, Puel rose angrily from his seat.

Seeing his action, Twain immediately stepped onto the stage, reached his hand out, and intended to shake Puel’s hand. He did not expect Puel to walk off from the other side without even giving him a glance.

The scene surprised the reporters. Claude Puel, who had always lived as an authentic French gentleman and maintained a charming manner, had ignored Twain’s invite to shake hands and rudely walked away.

Twain was shunned on stage by Puel but fortunately he reacted quickly. He shrugged it off and then sat down. He said to the numerous microphones on the table, “Obviously, Mr. Puel is a little flustered and exasperated.”

Since the other party did not give him face, he did not have to give the other man any face. He was a lot more skilled than Puel when it came to humiliating people.

“I understand how he feels at this moment. I apologize for even wanting to shake his hand just now. As an authentic English gentleman, I shouldn’t have appeared in front of him to provoke him. For that, I’m guilty.”

Although they were unhappy with Puel’s last words, after all, everyone was people of the same country, and no French reporter could keep smiling in the face of Twain’s blatant taunts. Although they had roundly abused Twain before the game, adhering to the principle of “everything is okay once the game is won”, the English reporters were all laughing, especially happily. Some people even applauded Twain.

Having led the team to a 4:0 win over France, it could be predicted that Tony Twain’s popularity at home in England would be unmatched. It would be wise to say good things about him at this time.

Only The Sun asked the question why Twain had thought the France team was better than England before the game, when in fact it was proven that France was not as good as England. His question caused the faces of the French reporters to look grim again.

For a rare moment, Twain did not make things difficult for The Sun reporter this time. Instead, he grinned and said, "That was just a trick of mine before the game. More than two thousand years ago, China's great military expert, Sun Tzu once said: there can never be too much deception in war. It applies the same to football for me as well."

The Chinese reporters present were thrilled to hear Twain mention Sun Tzu's Art of War, but they were no longer surprised by it. Now the whole world was aware that Twain could speak Mandarin and love China.

The British reporters finally understood Twain's actions. Although such a trick was not deployed for the first time in the world of football, Tony Twain was definitely top of the list for having acted so realistically and being so committed.

The faces of the French reporters looked even worse at this point. It turned out that Twain's praises for them before were all false and only to deceive them. How could they endure the "humiliation" ... It was as if a man saying "I love you" to a woman just to trick her into sleeping with him and taking her money before leaving.

Tony Twain not only cheated them of their bodies, but also their feelings. For the French people, it was extreme shame and humiliation.

A young French reporter stood up impulsively, trying to regain the last trace of dignity for the failed French team.

"Mr. Twain, don't you think it's very rude of you to say that? To be honest, I had disliked you before, but your words before the game made me decide to change my mind about you. I thought maybe I was wrong and that you were a nice person. But now I want to take back my previously childish thoughts! A person like you..." He pointed to Twain's nose while his lips trembled, and he did not know what to say.

The young man's impulsive behavior surprised everyone present, except that different people had different surprised reactions. Everyone looked at the young man differently. The French reporters were surprised while at the same time felt some admiration and delight. They certainly thought that the impulsive and reckless young reporter had said what they wanted to say but dared not say, which gave vent to their frustration. His courage was commendable, and his actions must have made Twain feel very embarrassed. Then let us take a look at how Tony Twain is going to respond to this brave man's accusations!

The English reporters were surprised as well as angry at the French reporter's action. Now that Twain was England's national treasure and hero, how can you scold and point at Twain's nose? Is it not equivalent to scolding us and England? Who do you think you are, boy? You accuse Twain of being rude. Shouldn't you take a look at how impolite you are being with your action of standing up and blaming others? But the English reporters were not too worried about Twain because they knew that as someone who was cursed and abused by other people every day, Twain must have a wealth of experience to deal with such a sudden scene.

The reporters from other countries were thrilled — A, it was a face-to-face clash between France and England. A brave young man who openly challenged the authority of the world's famous manager, like Don Quixote, who carried a lance to meet with the windmills head-on. B, Tony Twain paid the price for his previous hubris, and now how would he end it? C, whatever the outcome was, they would benefit from it! Such a good show like a face to face clash between a reporter and the manager was not staged every day. Come on, come on! Let the anger burn more vigorously!

The young Frenchman who accused Twain was still standing, feeling somewhat manifestly superior, which gave the young Frenchman the illusion that he was the only hero here who dared to confront the King of the Great Demons. While his colleagues had their heads between their legs and quaked in fear, only he stood up to challenge. Even if the demon king was a hundred times taller than him, and the great shadow descend from the sky to completely overwhelm him, he was not afraid. And what he stretched out was not a finger, but a sharp sword, pointing directly at the heart of the king with the sword slightly quivering and flashing a chilling brilliance.

The evil demon king, Tony Twain was on stage, looking at the French reporter who stood up and accused him. But he did not angrily shout "Security! Where's the security?" Instead, he looked at the other party and smiled.

The chilliness of the smile suppressed the sword in the hands of the young French man, making the young man feel a little cold.

Twain pulled back his lips to reveal a row of white teeth. Only in the eyes of the young man, it was the ferocious mouth of a predator with the broken body of the French team hanging from its white teeth and bursts of stench spewing from it, which was disgusting.

"Young man, I have a phrase which I want to share with you." Twain did not abuse him roundly but rather his look of smiling face was a little kind. And what he said was also surprising. What did he mean by "sharing?" Someone else had scolded him, and what did he want to encourage him for? Furthermore, listening to his tone, it sounded like he was proud of his age and experience and letting him off lightly...

"First of all, I want to explain a little that I have never wanted to win your hearts and favor. You have misunderstood me on this point. I regret and apologize for the misunderstanding caused." Twain got up, which was a precursor to his departure.

"Next ... what I want to say something to share with you, young man. The most important thing on the path of life is not what you want to do or what you get, but that you stick to your principles. Nothing is more important than that." Twain repeatedly used the "young man" term to give the other person a lesson, which confused people. What was it about sticking to principles? Where was this heading? Besides, what principles was he insisting on? What did this have to do with the young man's accusations?

Fortunately, Twain solved the mystery very quickly.

"If you hated me before, then please hate me now, too. If you hate me now, then please hate me in the future. Thank you."

After saying this, Twain smiled at the young man and then waved to the reporters who were shocked by the remark. He turned and walked away. He disappeared out of the door before everyone could react.

It was a while before the reporters in the room responded. Suddenly it boiled over like a heated frying pan.

“What did that bastard mean?!”

“Who does he think he is? I’ve been at for thirty years, interviewed countless superstar managers, and no one was as arrogant and condescending as he is! Maradona? Cruyff? Beckenbauer? No one acts like he does!”

The people who ranted were the French.

A few English reporters who understood French sneered at the side, “That’s because you haven’t met him before in 30 years, mate.”

More English reporters clapped their hands in applause for Twain. As the winner, such a scene was so cool! No wonder Pierce Brosnan would say that as long as he was standing in the same trench as Twain, he would find him adorable. Now the English reporters thought Twain was very cute and could not wait to hold his face to kiss him hard.

The neutral media were just enjoying themselves as they watched the lively scene and full of praises for Twain’s performance at the end.

A group of Chinese reporters gathered to discuss Twain’s previous performance, and the topic quickly changed from Tang’s reference to Sun Tzu’s Art of War to the last sentence: “If you hated me before, then please hate me now, too. If you hate me now, then please hate me in the future.”

“Look what he said, it was so impressive! Although it did not contain a dirty word and his attitude was also very kind, it made people feel that he just gave the Frenchman a slap in the face! That’s so cool!”

“Yeah, yeah! This is the art of language!” A few years ago, due to the then moronic French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, the Sino-French relations were once very tense, and many people in China also developed unfavorable toward France as a result. Seeing Twain insult the French media, the Chinese reporters also felt happy.

“Unfortunately, ... Such a person can’t come to China to coach...” Someone suddenly sighed.

“Are you crazy? What can he get out of it by going there? Stop dreaming!” He was immediately awakened from his daydream by someone next to him. “If he really came to China, it’s not that there’s something wrong with our brains. It would be Twain whose head has a problem...”

“What if there’s nothing wrong with him?”

“Then the world’s going to be destroyed!” The same man answered earnestly.

“But I think it’s pretty good. . . We are short of such a big mouth in our football. Let him come to give some people slaps in the face. I think that would be so cool ah...” This person was still dreaming.

The colleagues next to him all shook their heads and ignored him. The man was hopeless.

But an irrepressible memory emerged in everyone’s mind.

Eight years ago, Twain took his wife to China for a visit and accepted an interview from Tang Jing, the then star reporter of Titan Sports. The content of that interview did not appear in any media but was well known to the world. This was certainly thanks to Tang Jing's move to choose to resign so as to make it public. But this was not the important part. Rather, it was Twain's words. Even thinking about it now, one would feel stirred up. Everyone who had verbally taunted his colleague's naivety had to admit how he felt when reading the interview at the time, the panic and excitement, surprise and helplessness. Although they had to please the upper management and had to write articles to attack Twain after the matter to submit their work, every Chinese reporter who still cared about and loved Chinese football, would give a big thumbs-up in their hearts to the British man who had nothing to do with China –

Twain is the man, a real man with nerves of steel!

Chapter 956: Change

“If you hated me in the past, then please continue to hate me now. If you hate me now, then please also hate me in the future...”

While having his breakfast and reading the papers, the middle-aged man could not help but laughed. As the next opponent of Tony Twain, he did not appear hostile towards Twain like Powell was and did not underestimate Twain like Lagerbäck. It was because he roughly understood how Twain, as a popular coach in Europe, worked. In fact, they even used to work together.

During the summer of 2004, Nottingham Forest just returned to the Premier League. They needed a professional, competent coach with good experience to lead them and just like that, Twain got promoted from being the coach of the Qatar team to being a coach in the Premier League.

“What are you laughing about, Fernando?” His assistant, Luis Milla rushed to get a glimpse of the newspaper. He happened to see the picture of Tony Twain on the papers and immediately understood the situation. “Oh, him... I was not surprised that England could beat France but the ease of the victory and the four goals executed really got me dumbfounded...”

Fernando Hierro put the papers away as his smile disappeared, saying, “I did think about that possibility... However the times have changed. The Tony Twain now and the Tony Twain twelve years ago are basically two different people. The experience that I have accumulated are no longer useful today. But...” Hierro stared at the newspaper and commented, “That quote truly captured his character! Ha!”

After that, Hierro turned his head and asked his assistant, Milla, “Have you watched the game between England and France?”

“Of course! I watched it for a first time when it live streamed and watched the recorded version for another two times.”

“Have you come up with any conclusions?”

“I think the France team lost because they underestimated their opponent. If they had properly prepared for the match, the victory of the England team wouldn’t be as decisive. The tactics used by the English players were nothing new. The upper hand that Twain possess is in his strategic commands in game as well as his last minute changes...” Milla openly spoke of his thoughts with Hierro. “... and what is more important is that, previously, regardless of whether it was with France or Sweden or Germany, Twain always had the habit of switching his strategy around to confuse his opponents such that they wouldn’t be able to get the better of him and all of his tricks. But this game with France has completely exposed of his capabilities to us. His trump card, George Wood, has also been used. I feel that, for us, this means that Tony Twain and his England team have nothing else to hide. The game with us would really be a test of the players’ true capabilities. Personally, I feel that in terms of actual capabilities, we are much stronger than the England team...”

After hearing what Milla had analysed, Hierro nodded his head thoughtfully.

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“All of us now need to realise this very fact.” Twain gestured with his index finger. In front of him stood the members of the coaching team.

Just as they finished their breakfast, Twain gathered every member of the coaching team in his room for a meeting. The coaches knew that meant the strategizing against Portugal had started. Three days later, they would be up against Spain, the host, at the Nou Mestalla Stadium.

“Whether it was against the Portugal team or the Germany team, Sweden, France teams or even against the Welshs, we always had something secretive that no one can predict. For example whether George would be playing... We have leveraged on that to win against Germany and Sweden teams. However, after our game with France, we no longer have such an advantage — we don’t have anything else to hide. While it was amazing to have won 4:0 against France, it has exposed all of our capabilities and strategies to our opponents.” Twain solemnly explained the severity of the issue at hand.

“Spain has already thoroughly analysed us so there is no point in trying to pull any tricks. That’s why I will not be trying to use any obnoxious strategies that is unusual, instead I will be focusing on your trainings and preparation for the game...”

His words delighted everyone in the room. Before this, it seemed Twain was playing all kinds of tricks without any considerations? Now that they thought about it, it does seem that way.

“Spain is a team with good strategy and this is something that remains to be true even if they changed their coach. The essence of the Spain team lies with Iniesta and Cesc Fabregas. In that game, we have to stay close to both of them and ensure that we defend against them at all times. We mustn’t let them have easy control of the ball. If we happen to let them possess the ball for more than thirty seconds, then we have failed. However we cannot only pay all of our attention on the mid field. Spain has the tradition of playing along the wing expertly. They have always been skillful in their wing line attacks. We have to pay close attention to that.”

While Twain spoke in front, the members of the coaching team were fervently taking down notes in their notebooks. These coaches were looking out for what parts of their training they should be focusing

on moving forward, aligning to what Twain had mentioned, so that they could arrange for more targeted practice.

“In this next game, George remains in the starting team. But I would like to make some changes to the lineup...” Twain paused when he reached this part, as if he were pondering about something then he turned his head to ask his assistant coach Des Walker, “How’s the health and injury status of everyone?”

Walker flipped through his notebook to check before replying, “Bentley has already recovered and can get back on court. But Walcott isn’t ready yet... Derek expects to be ready by the time we get into finals, if we are getting into finals that is.”

Twain held his chin and thought deeply for a while. Walcott’s absence from the game posed a huge headache for him because in their game with Spain, the team would need Walcott’s speed as an advantage. In terms of ball control in midfield, England team can hardly be compared to Spain. If England team were to pit themselves against Spain in the midfield, it would be shortchanging themselves and giving Spain the upper hand. It would be foolish for Twain to do that. Fundamentally, football is a game that consists of teams trying to limit their opponent’s strengths and create all opportunities to maximise their strengths. Since we cannot compete with Spain in the midfield, we should leverage on our speed to break Spain’s line of defence. Perhaps the traditional England strategy can be used as reference.....

“I want to change the lineup.” Twain said.

Some of the members of the coaching team were shocked. However, Des Walker was not surprised at all. Twain did not preempt Walker about this arrangement but Walker knew Twain well enough to know that he was someone to change his plans all the time.

In reality, for international matches like these, it was rare that any head coach would make changes to the formation because that was too much of a risk. Most of the teams would stick with a single formation for the entire season which either makes or breaks their reputation.

As for Tony Twain, the starting formation had constantly changed ever since the first match in the preliminary round and this had everything to do with George Wood’s slow recovery. But of course, Twain had his own intentions for that. The formation, used in the first match, was similarly used in the second match but only yielded a serious challenge for the England team. Twain immediately dismissed Glen Johnson, the main right back player, whom then on only sat by the bench. Glen Johnson was replaced by Micah Richards. Following which Downing was represented by Chris Cohen and Bentley was replaced by Walcott due to his injury. It looks like, Twain was still trying to put together the most suitable team.

However, despite any changes, Twain had never altered the 4-4-2 traditional English formation. His tone today seemed to indicate that there was a possibility that that may change.

“Let’s abandon 4-4-2 and change our formation to 3-5-2.” Twain announced the change. “I bet the Spanish team wouldn’t have predicted that drastic change!” Upon saying that, Twain became evidently excited.

The coaches mumbled silently among themselves: Don’t mention the Spanish. Even the English themselves were not anticipating this.....

“If nothing goes wrong, The three centre back players should be Terry, Taylor and Richards. They will be mainly responsible for the defence and will not be advancing forward, not even past the center line. As for the defensive midfielders... Michael Johnson and George Wood. Gerrard will be pushed forward as an attacking midfielder.” Twain wrote the names of the players in their respective positions on the tactic board, “For our attack, Rooney will be at the forward left and on the left, it will be Agbonlahor. As for the strikers, Mitchell will be at the front, and James Vaughan will be slightly behind him.”

After reading out everyone’s names and positions, Twain dropped the marker and dusted his palms. Strictly speaking, the 3-5-2 formation should be renamed as 3-2-3-1-1 with Rooney, Gerrard and Agbonlahor lined behind Vaughan. It would resemble a three attacking midfielders formation only that Rooney and Agbonlahor are slightly more to the sidelines.”

“Mitchell has good tactics and Vaughan has the sprinting power. They should be able to capture the attention of the defence of the opponent. However, our main line of attack doesn’t only consist of the two of them. There are three people.” Twain circled Rooney’s, Gerrard’s and Agbonlahor’s name on the board.

“At the same time, Rooney and Agbonlahor have the task of taking care of the defence. But I believe that shouldn’t be a problem.” Twain understood Agbonlahor very well since Twain brought him into the team. In addition, Rooney had also played as the winger back in Manchester United and also his defence was promising and that was all thanks to Ferguson.

“The main thing is that they have substantial sprinting power by the side lines which can pose a threat near the goal post. They can effectively prevent the attacks by Spain along the side lines. Leaving the task of scoring to them three will definitely throw the Spanish off guard. The head coach of the Spanish team would never have expected this.”

“Wood and Johnson will take care of the defence but for Wood, he also has to tend to his midfielder duties. We will need his long pass so Johnson has a bigger role to play for defence. I don’t need Johnson to focus too much on attacking. His responsibility is similar to the three centre back players.”

After arranging everyone into their positions, Twain added, “During training, we need to train more of contact defence. During the game, we can afford to use more tackling and collusions. I encourage all of you to play cheap tricks and a little rough here and there. As long as we can win the possession, I don’t really care what means were taken.”

Lastly, Twain looked at his colleagues, “All in all, these are my requests. This is my strategy against Spain. We have the advantage of a day’s rest more than them. Moreover, they have been using the same old formation for every game so their physical fitness is definitely not as robust as ours. Being the host as well as playing from home are to both their advantage as well as their disadvantage. The fans of the Spanish team harbour high hopes of the Spanish team taking home championship for the European Cup and this is an immense pressure on them. I don’t think the Spanish team can handle that kind of pressure well. In terms of mental strength, they are way less strong as compared to us.” Twain gloated delightfully. Ever since he became their head coach, all his preaching had helped to develop the players psychologically which would be put to good use now. The English today was just like Nottingham Forest — psychologically invincible.

“Sirs, do you all have any opinions?”

Des Walker pondered for a moment before discussing his opinion, "Is this strategy too risky? We have previously never practiced the 3-5-2 formation... Three days of practice may not be enough."

"Time may not be on our side but there's a need to try. This is because if we were to go along with the original formation, we are practically giving ourselves to the Spanish, with nothing to hide or use against them. The Spanish has already analysed everything about us. From our game with Portugal onwards, the Spanish coach was there to observe our every move. They are very clear about our strategy and dynamics. That way, we will lose any advantage from the beginning. Hence there is a need to take this risk."

The other coaches could only agree with what Twain had said. The game with France had significantly pulled the weight for the England team and presented the latter as a competent team for the championship. After winning the recognition from all over the world, they naturally became a team that their opponents look out for. Besides, Twain had shown everything on his hand in that game which justifies the need for some changes.

"I don't have any objections. I think we can give it a shot." Tony Carr, the most senior coach in the coaching team, nodded to signal his agreement with Twain's arrangement.

The most senior coach has spoken and there followed the agreement by the other coaches. There and then, the strategy to use against Spain was determined. What came next would depend on the training and how the coaching team approached Twain's strategy and intentions. Most importantly, to properly familiarise the players with the new formation, positions and strategy in the coming three to four days. This was something that must be physically realised and not just words.

Deep down, Twain knew of his own strengths and weaknesses. If it wasn't for the assistance of his coaching team, he was basically a second Zhao Kuo with all talk and no action. But it was his cleverness that he knew not to ever flaunt about his weaknesses. He would not interfere unnecessarily in the matters of the coaching team or even in the regular practices of the team simply to prove that he was an outstanding, all knowing head coach. Humans are neither robots nor the calculator. It is impossible that we know everything and are capable of doing everything in the best way possible. There are some things that can only be accomplished when others come together to help. Only when a person has a strong self-awareness can he truly attain success.

The coaching team told the players about Twain's new strategies on the training field, many were surprised. However, they did not raise up any opinions nor discontent, the leaderships brought them success against strong opponents, everyone were used to the head coach being right. Working together with the head coach was easy as they only needed to know what they were supposed to do, the head coach would take care of everything else.

When the players were still warming up on the playing field, the all-knowing head coach was aiding the security to chase away all those persistent reporters, telling them the fifteen minutes of free filming was long over, it was a privilege that he even gave them an additional few minutes...

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When England was training hard to challenge the best of the east, Spain was also preparing for war under the leadership of the coaches.

The media of Spain and England had a huge volume of reports about this competition, it was as if this match was in the finals. No matter the tone of whichever the side, it was as if winning the opposing side would allow them to win the championships.

At Barcelona's Estadio de Mestalla stadium, the clouds inciting war was gathering.

The French people has already went home devastatingly, and starting an "exercise" against Puel. The French loved this type of "exercise". Some media started to put up the content of Ribery's interview, proving how they were all-knowing, but Claude Puel turned a deaf ear to all of that, disregarding all our warnings, and at the end it turned into such a devastating ending, he needed to take responsibility of this!

The French's denouncement of Puel was getting worse and worse, there were even radical French fans who gave direct insults to the French Football Association, wanting them to fire this head coach who gave huge disgrace to the French team.

The French media was even more overwhelming with their reports about the French team's failure, the statements Puel said after the match was brought out to be strictly criticized.

Under such circumstances, Puel, who was stubborn on saying how he would definitely not resign on the news conference, was fired by the French Football Association.

The English media was exhilarated about that, as the "Coach Killer" Twain finally destroyed a head coach in a national team. Claude Puel transformed into a new badge on Twain's chest.

Chapter 957: Failure Is Disgraceful

"It'd be a cloudy night with occasional rain. The temperature would be..."

A beautiful and sexy weatherwoman was presenting the weather forecast in Valencia for the upcoming match day. The temperature in Valencia has finally dropped after being immensely hot for five straight days. This is good news for the fans who intend to head down to the stadium to watch the match.

However, the news caused Spain's manager, Fernando Hierro, to furrow his brows slightly.

A cooling weather would definitely help his players perform better, but if it were to rain, then his team's coordination would be affected during the match.

Contrary to Hierro, Twain desperately wished that there would be rain during the match. If possible, he wanted it to rain heavily. The heavier the rain, the better it would be for his team. His players are very used to playing in the rain, and this would give them an advantage over Spain during the match.

Sadly for him, the skies in Valencia remained sunny at dusk, and there were no signs that it was going to rain anytime soon. It was not until the sun had descended beneath the horizon that there were visible clouds in the skies. The clouds covered half of the sky, and their edges were gilded by the setting sun.

England's bus set off right as the sun set. The England fans who did not manage to get their hands on the match tickets congregated outside the hotel to see their team off. The upcoming match is extremely important to the fans. The team needs to play in a total of two matches regardless if they win or lose in

the match against Spain, but no one would want the second match that they have to play in to be a fight for the third and fourth place. They are only one step away from success. It would be an absolute tragedy to fall down right before the finishing line.

The England fans who were waiting by the sides of the road became excited when they saw the bus carrying the England team drive by slowly. The flashes from their cameras illuminated the bus windows, and they could see the players waving at them clearly. The fans screamed in response, and they began to wave the St. George's flag at the bus.

"Champions! Champions! Champions!"

The England fans hollered at the top of their voices in unison.

The players in the bus all rose to their feet and raised their hands to acknowledge the fans' gestures. The only one who did not react in any way was Twain. He simply leaned against the chair with his eyes closed. He wanted to make use of every minute before the match to rest up so as to keep his mind clear during the match later on.

Twain is talented when it comes to sleeping. He has the ability to block out all sounds when he falls into a deep sleep, and that allows him to sleep through even the noisiest of environments. If not for this talent of his, he'd definitely be suffering from neurasthenia due to his job as a football manager by now.

Twain realized that Spain was the very first thought that had surfaced in his mind after he closed his eyes. He did not know if he should laugh or cry at that. Has thinking about Spain become some kind of conditioned reflex for him now?

Twain has to think about other things if he wants to relinquish Spain from his thoughts, and he eventually thought about his wife. He has not been able to meet his wife ever since they last dated in Barcelona due to his busy work schedule. He misses his wife, even though he knows that they are actually not that far away from each other since she would watch every match of his from the stands.

At the moment, his biggest wish is to take a one-month-long holiday with Shania in a remote but beautiful place after leading the England national football team to become champions of the Euro Cup.

Twain drifted off to sleep amid his thoughts of Shania. When he was woken up by Walker a while later, he could already see the Nou Mestalla stadium from the bus window on the right.

"I know you wouldn't wish to let your players see their manager asleep before such a big match," Walker said.

"Ugh... Thank you, Des." Twain rubbed his eyes a few times before wiping his face with his hands, and he instantly felt refreshed afterwards.

It took the bus 20 minutes to reach the parking lot of the Nou Mestalla stadium after Twain saw the stadium outside the window earlier. There might be police officers at the scene to maintain order, but the fans were simply too passionate and the bus was forced to travel slowly as a result of the crowd.

The fans' cheers were not able to attract the players' attention once they neared the stadium. All that was in their minds then was the match that they were going to play in soon. The expressions on their faces became solemn as well.

The veteran players were the only ones who could manage a wave and a smile to the fans when they alighted from the bus. The other players all walked by the crowd hastily with their heads lowered and their bags in their hands. Most of the players in the current England team are playing in their first ever semifinals of a major international competition. It was a day filled with new experiences for them.

Ever since England lifted the Jules Rimet Cup on their home soil in 1966, their best performance at a major international competition was a fourth placed finish. During the Euro Cup that was held in England in 1996, England made its way to the semifinals, but they were eliminated by Germany, who went on to become that year's champions, on penalties. Several years later, at the Africa World Cup in 2010, Capello and his team defeated Spain, and England once again made its way to the semifinals. Sadly, they were not able to achieve a historic breakthrough. England lost to Italy during the semifinals, and they also lost to Brazil subsequently during the third place playoff.

If the team manages to defeat Spain later on, they would be able to achieve what many of their predecessors were not able to. They would make it into the finals of a major international competition for the very first time in 50 years! It would also be the second time that England is able to make its way into the finals of a major international competition.

That being said, England's performances at the international competitions have certainly been pathetic... So much for being called the 'Founder of Modern Football'!

Twain was the last to get off the bus. He did not behave like his jittery players before him, and he was even in the mood to accept a short interview from BBC5 at the entrance to the stadium. The reporter asked him if he was confident of leading his team into the finals. Twain gave a response that every British wanted to hear, "There's no doubt in my mind that we're going to be the ones who make it into the finals."

When the Spain team arrived at the stadium earlier, Hierro had said the exact same words to the press as well. There was no need to be humble at a time like this.

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George Wood attempted a long shot. The ball went higher than he had intended and flew straight towards the stands. The ball was just like a pebble that had been thrown into the lake. It created a disturbance and was never to be seen again.

"We don't have an infinite number of balls to practise with, George." Walker said from the side.

"I'm sorry..."

"I'm just joking. Ha!" Walker laughed. "How are you feeling?"

"Very good. I feel..." Wood clenched his fists. "... Like I'm full of energy."

Walker nodded his head contentedly. He then walked away and did not get in the way of Wood's warm-up any further.

"Hey! Look at them!" Joe Mattock approached Wood the moment their assistant manager left. He gestured for Wood to look at the Spain team that was warming up on the other side of the pitch.

The Spaniards looked relaxed. Their striker, Bojan Krkić, was juggling the ball during warm-up, while several other players had formed a circle and were performing a series of quick passes amongst themselves. It was clear that the Spain players possessed much better footballing technique as compared to the England players...

“I think they are deliberately showing off their skills to us!” Joe Mattock was upset with what he saw. “Why don’t they copy what Maradona did back then and juggle a bottle?”

“Why are you paying attention to what they are doing?” Wood glanced at the Spain players. He had only taken a quick glance, but it was enough for him to notice that Fàbregas was looking at him from afar.

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“Be careful of George Wood during the match.” Fàbregas averted his gaze from Wood and said to his teammate, Iniesta, who was next to him. He then did a backheel pass and passed the ball that he received from David Silva over to Lago behind him.

“More like we have to be careful of their entire team...” Iniesta laughed. “Mr. Twain has brought the whole England team together. We must not let our guard down.”

“Both the England team and George Wood would be hard to deal with,” Fàbregas said.

“Agreed.”

Hierro had warned his players ahead of time about the England players that they needed to pay close attention to. These players include Gerrard, Wood, Rooney and Mitchell.

The Spain team was not the kind of team that would change its playing style based on its opponents. Their tradition has always been to play an attacking style of football, and they would also rely on their players’ techniques to help them win games. They have never thought about changing the way that they play in a match before. It is impossible to change their playing style in a single match anyway. Hierro hopes that his players would be able to take the initiative in the match. He wants them to dominate possession of the ball from the very first minute of the match to the very last minute of the match and make it difficult for the England players to go on the counter-attack. To prepare his team for the match, Hierro got his players to watch an edited clip of the match between England and France twice. One reason for his action was to get his team to be wary of England, and another reason is to familiarize his players with England’s playing style. The star-studded France team that was regarded to be the favorites to win the Euro Cup did not even stand a chance of winning in the entire match against England. In the words of Hierro, “France was doomed to fail from the very first second of the match.” Hierro hopes that his team would be able to shut England out of the game just as England did to France.

“We have an advantage over them in terms of technique, and we need to ensure that we make full use of it. We have to try and maintain possession of the ball throughout the entire match. I do not wish to see any of you making long passes blindly during offense and defense! If you run into situations whereby there are a large number of defenders positioned before you, then I want you to make use of teamwork and quick passes to pry open their defense. You have to be fast when there is a need for you to be fast, but you also need to be stable when you have to control the ball at your feet...”

Those were the words that had been reiterated by Hierro numerous times during their tactical meeting yesterday night. Every Spain player has to remember his words by heart, because his words provide the action plan that they need to follow during the match.

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Spain finished their warm-ups ahead of England as they had gone onto the pitch earlier than them. The Spain players were already walking off the pitch when the England players were still in the midst of their warm-ups.

Fàbregas looked up at the sky right before he walked off the pitch. The night had fallen completely and the crimson afterglow of the sunset had vanished from the skies. However, it was still considered early for most Spaniards. Most of them would not even have eaten their dinners by this time.

If the Euro Cup matches were held based on the Spaniards' daily routine, then most of the matches would be played at midnight. However, due to live television coverage, most Euro Cup matches are either played in the afternoon or during primetime.

The dark skies made it hard for Fàbregas to tell if it would rain later. He quickly averted his gaze away before following his teammates into the tunnel.

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"Do you think it would rain just like the weather forecast said it will?" It was the England players' turn to be concerned about the weather after the Spain players left.

"Who knows?" Two England players stood at the middle of the pitch and had their heads raised to the skies. It was as though there was a UFO above them.

The two players snapped out of their reveries when a ball hit them on their backs.

"What are you two looking at? Warm up!" Gerrard might not be the captain of the team anymore, but he still had the authority to order people around because he was a well-respected veteran player on the team.

"We are wondering if it would rain later..."

"Why do you care about that? It's not like we can make it rain if we wanted to. Hurry up and get back to your warm-ups. If you don't warm-up properly, you could get injured later," Gerrard said to them.

The two players shrugged. "It's not like we have a chance to play later on. We are just substitutes..."

"You still have a chance to play even if you are just substitutes. Go and warm up." The two players turned around and ran back to where they were supposed to be at under the watchful eye of Gerrard. Gerrard noticed that Wood was looking at him right as he finished persuading the two players to go back to their warm-ups, and he smiled at him.

The players were not the only ones who were concerned about the weather. The managers for both sides were also equally concerned about it. The weather stations in Spain specially provided their football team with real-time weather reports so as to help them with their preparations for the match. They want to do what they can to help their team achieve a win over the strong England team.

The England football team did not get to enjoy the same privileges as the Spain team. They were not playing on their home soil, and they would not get to enjoy any home advantage during the match either. The England coaching staff could only guess if it would rain later on based on how the skies look like, and the entire England team would also have to put up with the boos from the fans during the match as well. The Anglo-Spanish war that started 500 years ago might not have led to feelings of animosity between the football fans of both countries, but the Spain fans were still going to treat the England fans with hostility purely based on the fact that they are their opponents for today.

It did not look like it was going to rain when the England players finished with their warm-ups, and the players returned to their locker room thereafter.

Twain, who had stayed in the locker room all this while, went up to Des and asked him if it was raining outside currently. When he heard Des say no, he immediately clapped his hands and said with a raised voice, "All right, lads. Don't think about the weather anymore. The rain has no bearing on our game. What we should worry about is our opponent Spain. I want all of you to collect your thoughts for now... And I want to ask you all a question. Are you all ready to play in the match later on?"

He looked at his players. He saw looks of determination, hesitation, excitement, passion, anxiety and even fear in their eyes...

Twain was relieved by what he saw. His players were behaving in a way that every normal footballer would when they know they are about to play in a big match. They did not only exhibit passion or anxiety. They exhibited a variety of emotions.

"Of course, boss!" The players who had looks of determination in their eyes were the first to reply to Twain's words in a loud voice.

Twain did not encourage them. He waved his hands and said, "I only know if you are truly ready for the match when I see your performances on the pitch. Do you still have any questions about our tactics for the match? This is your last chance to ask."

No one raised a question.

"Looks like you all know what you have to do. That's good. I hope no one gets confused on the pitch. Remember, all of you have to play in not just one, but two matches. These two matches might be the most important matches you'd ever play in throughout your entire career. Oh, I'm not talking about the third place playoff, of course."

His words amused several players.

"If you win these two most important matches of your career, then we'd be able to trample the whole of Europe under our feet! But, if we lose... Then all the hard work that we've put in previously would be for naught. No one will remember that you once defeated Germany, and neither would they remember that you ended your 48-year winless streak against Sweden. They would not remember that you humiliated France by scoring four goals against them either. They would only remember all of you as failures! Look at what happened to the France team! Do you see anyone bringing up how they used to be the favorites to win the competition? No! That's because they are all mocking them for failing right now!"

Twain raised his voice by a few more decibels.

“Remember, lads. In football, failure is disgraceful! Remember these words well when you get out on the pitch!”

Chapter 958: The Powerful Royal Navy

Hierro and his coaching staff expected Twain to make use of crude fouls to deal with a team like Spain that played technical football. However, what they did not expect was to see a completely unfamiliar England team before their eyes...

It was not just them. Even the England fans and commentators had to rub their eyes to ascertain that the 11 players donned in a white jersey and blue shorts before them are truly players playing for England.

The England players all stood on their own half of the pitch as the Spain team prepared to take the kick-off. It was clear that England was going to play in a 3-5-2 formation based on the players' positions on the pitch. The sight of their formation surprised numerous people who were familiar with the England team, because England rarely went with a different formation from their standard 4-4-2. But, if one is well-read or has a good memory, they will remember that England once made use of a similar formation 20 years ago under Terry Venables. It was during the match against Scotland, where Paul Gascoigne scored an iconic goal.

However, this is the only example where England played in a different formation from their usual 4-4-2.

The change in formation caught the Spaniards by surprise. They did not have the time to research about how England played 20 years ago, and they have only practised on how to deal with the England team that plays a 4-4-2 formation whereby there are four defenders at the back. They were not prepared to deal with the 3-5-2 formation whereby there are only three defenders at the back. There is a huge difference between how one plays against four defenders and how one plays against three defenders. Not only that, there was no player playing in the 'attacking midfielder' position initially. But now, Gerrard is taking up that very position.

The Spain players on the pitch were left at a loss over what they should do next after seeing England's change in formation. They would leave a lot of space for England to exploit if they played according to the game plan that they had set up prior to the match. However, if they want to change their game plan, how exactly should they change it?

What are we supposed to do now?

The Spain players looked at each other for an answer, but all they saw was the same look of confusion on everyone's faces.

Hierro knew that now was not the time to be dilly-dallying. He still has yet to figure out why Twain had suddenly changed his team's formation, but he has to make sure that his players stay on their toes for

the time being. He walked to the side of the pitch and yelled at the players, "Be careful of Gerrard! Gerrard!"

Hierro's thinking was simple. Gerrard must be the player responsible for organizing the team's attacks since he is playing at the attacking midfielder's position. This was a role that he played in previously at Liverpool as well, and he would certainly not find his role to be difficult or foreign.

The task of defending against Gerrard naturally fell on Ignacio Camacho's shoulders, since he was the only defensive midfielder in the team.

Twain noticed the adjustment that the Spain team made, and he smiled in response.

It was exactly what he wanted to see happen.

Gerrard tried to organize an attack a few times subsequently, but with Camacho closely marking him, he was not able to make good passes to his teammates. Both Camacho and Hierro were convinced then that Gerrard was the core of the England team.

George Wood was fully committed to the team's defense in the first 15 minutes of the match, and he led his teammates to stop each and every of Spain's attacks. The player that he paid the most attention to was Fàbregas. The match had only commenced for barely 15 minutes, but Wood had already committed two fouls in this short span of time. Fortunately, he still has not been given a yellow card by the referee for his actions just yet. Twain did not wish for Wood to commit so many fouls in such a short period of time. Wood was given a yellow card from a previous match, and if he were to get another yellow card in this match, he would have to miss out on the finals if England goes on to defeat Spain later on. This was something that Twain wanted to avoid at all costs. Twain wants his team to progress to the finals and he also wants Wood to be a part of the team that plays in the finals as well.

Spain is playing a single forward in this match, and Bojan is positioned all the way at the front of the pitch alone. Torres picked up an injury in a previous match, and the Spain coaching team decided to put him on the bench so as to ensure that he can play in the finals. The player playing behind Bojan is Iniesta, and the two players positioned behind Iniesta are Fàbregas and Camacho. Lago plays on the left wing, whereas David Silva plays on the right wing. Their left back for the match is Álvaro Arbeloa and their right back is Sergio Ramos. Their two centerbacks are Gerard Piqué and Raúl Albiol, and their goalkeeper is Sergio Asenjo.

This was the strongest possible team that Spain could send out. The only player that was missing was Torres.

It has taken Hierro a lot of time and effort to get the Spain team to play in a system whereby there are two core players in the team, and he has finally reaped what he sowed in this year's competition. Fàbregas and Iniesta are both players who can help the team to organize an attack, but there are differences between the playing styles of both players. Iniesta is better at dribbling the ball, and he is also good at making short passes and crosses to his teammates. His threat magnifies exponentially the closer he gets to the opposition's penalty box. Fàbregas, on the other hand, is better at dictating the tempo of the match. He is able to make good passes, and he also helps to organize the team's midfield from the back.

Spain's usage of two core players in the team helps to ensure that their attacks are not severely affected when one of their core players is tightly marked by the opposition during the match, which is exactly what is happening on the pitch right now.

Fàbregas has been effectively kept out of the game due to Wood's man marking, and the onus of organizing the team's attacks has fallen onto the shoulders of Iniesta.

Twain chose not to implement the 'zonal marking' strategy that he made use of in the previous matches. Instead, he chose to implement the 'man marking' strategy in this match instead. Wood is responsible for marking Fàbregas, whereas Michael Johnson is responsible for marking Iniesta. This arrangement was made after careful consideration of the players' strengths and weaknesses. Fàbregas and George Wood have faced off with each other numerous times in the Premier League before and they are very familiar with each other's playing style. There was no better player to mark Fàbregas than Wood. Iniesta, on the other hand, has gotten on with age and is prone to injury. Thus, it is more appropriate to get a younger player such as Johnson to mark him since he would win in a battle of stamina.

As for the two wingers on the England team... Both Rooney and Agbonlahor have been playing more like the fullbacks of the team so far and their focus is primarily on defense rather than offense. England's defense is also made up of three burly center-backs who are positioned at the back to deal with Spain's quick passes.

England began to go on the counter-attack after withstanding Spain's attacks for the past 15 minutes.

Michael Johnson and John Terry worked hand in hand to intercept Iniesta's pass. Gerrard, who was playing as the attacking midfielder, retreated backwards to receive the ball from Terry, but Terry did not pass the ball over to him. Instead, he passed it to the team's defensive midfielder, George Wood, who had run towards the front of the pitch.

Wood then ran past Gerrard with the ball at his feet, but he did not pass the ball over to Gerrard either. Gerrard noticed that Wood was intent on carrying the ball forward by himself, and he immediately turned around and ran forward alongside him. Both Rooney and Agbonlahor also stopped being fullbacks and reverted into wingers the moment they saw Wood and Gerrard run forward.

Camacho did not know if he should pounce at George Wood or if he should continue to mark his initial target Gerrard. Eventually, he decided to run towards the player who has the ball at his feet.

However, right as he ran towards Wood, Wood passed the ball over to Gerrard. After completing his pass, Wood began to slow himself down. Gerrard carried the ball forward for a while before passing it over to Rooney on the flank.

Spain's defenders were busy marking Mitchell and Vaughan, who had suddenly become active after England went on the counter-attack, and they ended up providing Rooney and Agbonlahor with a lot of space to run in.

Rooney made his way into the penalty box after receiving the ball from Gerrard. He then lifted his leg and kicked the ball towards the goalpost without even a twinge of hesitation in his movements! This was exactly what Twain wanted him to do by playing him on the left wing!

Rooney's powerful long shot was blocked by Asenjo, and England was awarded a corner.

England made use of a different tactic when they took the corner kick. Instead of crossing the ball directly into the penalty box, Gerrard passed the ball over to Johnson who had run up to receive the ball. Johnson then passed the ball over to George Wood who was waiting at the middle of the pitch. Wood adjusted his posture a little before shooting at the goalpost from close to 30 meters away. The ball flew over the crossbar and landed at the stands behind the goalpost.

“England cannot make its way into our penalty box, and so they are relying on long shots to try and threaten Asenjo’s goalpost! Sadly, their last shot was not very accurate!” The Spain commentator was optimistic and he believed that the Spain team’s defense was impregnable.

His opinion was one that quite a number of Spain fans agreed with. Based on the current situation on the pitch, it was clear that Spain had the upper hand. They had a far higher ball possession rate as compared to England, and their football was much more pleasant to the eyes as well.

The fans believed that it was only a matter of time before Spain scored a goal. It would definitely not be difficult for them to secure a victory for the match.

Some of the England fans who were less discerning began to get worried. They did not know what to think about the England team before them, because they have never seen the team play in a 3-5-2 formation before. They knew that it was a strategy that Twain had devised to deal with Spain, but the team has never played in such a formation before, and they could not help but be worried that this sudden shift would backfire on them before it even deals any damage on their opponents...

Will that end up happening in the match later on?

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Spain launched another attack after England’s failed counter-attack earlier on. It was clear from the way the Spain players passed the ball that Iniesta was still the player responsible for organizing the Spain team’s attacks this time round.

Michael Johnson had learned a thing or two about defense from the more senior players on the England team. He learned that the first thing he had to do was not to lunge at the player with his feet. Rather, he had to lunge at the player with his hands first instead, and that was exactly what he did. He grabbed Iniesta by the shoulder before making his way next to him. He then leaned towards Iniesta and made use of his body to hinder the latter from making a turn. Thereafter, he began kicking at the direction of the ball wildly. If his kicks land on the ball, he would be able to kick it away from Iniesta. If his kicks land on Iniesta’s ankle, he would be able to make things difficult for him. Not only that, he would also be able to remind Iniesta of how good the England team is and make sure his ankle hurts a little the next time he receives the ball.

Unfortunately for Johnson, his kicks were taken advantage of by Iniesta. Iniesta timed his run perfectly and made his way past Johnson right at the moment he stretched his leg out to kick the ball away. Iniesta then began to run towards the penalty box and he was just about to pass the ball to Bojan at the front of the pitch when the entire England defense took a step forward at the same time. None of the England defenders communicated verbally with one another, but it was just like they knew what they had to do. It was this one crucial step that caused Bojan to be deemed to be offside by the assistant referee.

The whistle sounded right as Iniesta passed the ball away.

The England coaching staff all broke into cold sweat at the sight. It was a close call. They had not instructed the defenders to take a step forward at the same time, but they were lucky that they had all done the same thing at the same time. If one of them had been a little slower to take the step, then Bojan would have been able to make his way past the defense line and it would have been a one-on-one situation where Bojan only needed to face off with the goalkeeper, Joe Hart.

England might have escaped unscathed, but Terry still made sure to criticize Johnson for his mistake that almost led to a goal for the opposition. He told the younger player not to go all out during his defense, because he needs to give himself a little time to react if the player manages to get past him.

Johnson nodded his head in response to Terry's advice and he accepted his criticism. After all, Terry is a veteran player on the team who has a lot of experience when it comes to defending.

Terry saw a flaw in the way Johnson defended, but Wood saw something entirely different. He knew that Spain would definitely see Johnson as the weak spot that they can exploit in England's defense, and they would definitely keep attacking down Johnson's side from here on out. The best way to deal with this situation is not to put more people at the back to defend against Spain. Rather... It is to go on the attack and find the opportunity to score a goal!

It is time to stop putting on a disguise.

England did not perform a long pass and send the ball to the front of the pitch when play resumed. Instead, they passed the ball over to Wood who had retreated backwards to receive the ball.

There were no Spain players marking Wood since he was playing further back as a defensive midfielder. All Fàbregas could do was to pay attention to Wood from afar, since he was playing as a defensive midfielder as well and could not run up to Wood to mark him either. If he were to run up to him, there would be a space left behind at the back that would be unguarded.

Twain knew that Spain would not get its players to mark Wood if he was further back on the pitch, and his decision to change the formation for this match was to take advantage of this fact. Why else would he place Wood at the back of the pitch? After all, Wood's threat would increase substantially the closer he gets to the penalty box.

Twain entrusted the task of organizing the team's attacks to Wood due to the latter's keen awareness of what is happening on the pitch. Not only that, Wood is also gifted at making long passes, and he is also able to move around the pitch without being marked by the opposing players most of the time.

Wood passed the ball over to Agbonlahor after seeing that none of the Spain players had run up to snatch the ball from him. He then ran forward and waited for the ball to be passed back to him. Agbonlahor was not able to make his run forward, and he was forced to pass the ball back to Wood. Fàbregas ran up to Wood to defend against him, but sadly, Fàbregas was not very good at defending, and he allowed Wood to get past him. Wood began running down the left flank with the ball as his feet, and he suddenly passed the ball over to Rooney before he reached the penalty box.

Mitchell and Vaughan both made a gesture that suggested that they wanted to go and receive the ball from Rooney, just as they had done previously. All the Spain defenders stayed within the penalty box,

and no one dared to act recklessly. This allowed Rooney to continue his run forward without any Spain player defending against him.

The task that Twain had assigned to Rooney for this match was to score goals. Twain did not want Rooney to think about passing or providing assists. He just wanted him to score goals. Now that there are no defenders around him, Rooney would naturally chose to shoot for goal himself...

Rooney lifted his leg upwards, but it was all a feign. Sergio Ramos ran up to him and tried to block his shot, but he was duped. Rooney passed the ball next to Ramos and then made his run into Spain's penalty box...

Rooney did not hesitate once he was inside the penalty box. He raised his right leg and shot for goal.

The ball flew towards the edge of the goalpost, but Asenjo was quick to react. He pounced towards his right and was able to get a hand on the ball. The ball then flew away from the goalpost.

"A wonderful save!" The Spain commentator shouted loudly. The Spaniards were all stirred up after seeing Asenjo's save. "It is a save that is probably just as good as the one made by Gordon Banks all those years ago!"

The Spain fans were just about to cheer, but someone stopped them from doing so.

"Aaron Mitchell!" John Motson yelled at the top of his voice.

Piqué tried his hardest to pull back the tall center-forward from Nottingham Forest. He had jumped a little too slowly, and now all he could do was to use his body to try and stop the other player from getting to the ball. However, Mitchell was dead set on reaching the ball. How could Piqué possibly stop him when he is this determined? Mitchell raised his leg and kicked the ball towards the goalpost right as he lost balance in mid-air. It looked like the ball was going to go into the net this time round!

But!

The ball crashed against the crossbar and bounced backwards...

In that very moment, the Spaniards' hearts must have all stopped beating. Just when they thought they had narrowly escaped and were about to relax, they saw something that sent their hearts racing once again...

James Vaughan, who had been ignored by the Spain defenders during the flurry of attacks earlier, appeared right before the ball. He raised his leg and was preparing to shoot for goal!

Albiol dashed towards him and planned on using his body to block Vaughan's shot.

The ball dropped to the ground, and Vaughan smashed his leg against the ball...

The ball flew towards the net in between Albiol's legs!

Asenjo had climbed back to his feet. He was quick to react to Vaughan's shot, but sadly, Vaughan had kicked the ball in the direction that was opposite to where he was facing...

All he could do was watch as the ball went through Albiol's legs and into the back of the net...

“The ball has gone in! The ball has gone in! The ball has finally gone in after three consecutive shots!”

The England fans all jumped off their seats and threw their hands high up into the air. Their team has gone into the lead on the 27th minute of the match!

Twain’s change in formation had paid off. Spain did not know how to deal with this unfamiliar England side. Their castle has finally fallen after a series of artillery bombardments by England’s army.

Some of the pessimistic Spaniards felt as though they were seeing a scene from 500 years ago unfold before their eyes once again. 500 years ago, the Spanish Armada set sail to invade England, but it was ultimately defeated after suffering constant bombardments from the Royal Navy.

Chapter 959: Move Forward

The Spaniards could not have imagined that they would concede the goal in this way. With three consecutive shots, their defenders did not even snapped up a point of fall. They were all grasped by England.

It was very clear that England had thoroughly studied Spain and made the right tactics.

Twain celebrated the goal with excitement not far from the sidelines, while Hierro sat in a chair without even lifting his buttocks once. He was pondering a question – England’s change in deployment must have held great meaning, but what was the specific meaning?

From the looks of this goal... was it a coincidence or a premeditation?

It was a far cry from the previous way England had attacked. Rooney and Agbonlahor were two strikers playing as wingers while Gerrard, the former attacking midfielder did not carry out his responsibility as the playmaker... What did Tony Twain exactly have in mind?

“It looks like we bet right!” On the other side, Tony Twain said excitedly to Des Walker, “The Spaniards didn’t think we were going to make such a jump in tactics. They couldn’t react in time and find a way to deal with us!”

“If they find a way to deal with us, what are we going to do then?” Walker was not as excited as Twain. He always thought the change in maneuver was too risky.

“I don’t think that Hierro will be able to think of a way to deal with us until the end of the first half. . . Even if he has gotten it, he can’t implement it.” Twain laughed complacently. He was confident in that. “He has to substitute players if he wants to deal with us. In the semifinals, he will not dare to make a substitution before the end of the first half. If you look at Spain’s current starting lineup, how many players can be replaced?”

Fàbregas and Iniesta were Spain’s dual-core players and certainly could not be replaced. Moreover, both players were better at offense and made little contribution to the defense. On the two sides, Silva nor Lago were the kind of players who were good at defense and like to defend. Their task was to attack and attack again. Spain, which was proclaimed to have Europe’s strongest midfield, had only Camacho who was a defensive midfielder. But how could he defend against the repeated impacts in turn from Gerrard, Rooney, Agbonlahor and Wood? The goal concede just now spoke for itself: Camacho ran positions with

Gerrard, so Rooney was unmarked. Once Rooney took the ball, it attracted the attention of the Spanish defense. Then Vaughan quietly left the Spanish defender's sights. No one noticed him, partly because the defenders were keeping a close eye on Rooney's next move at the point in time, and partly because it was Vaughan's first time in the starting lineup in the tournament. Compared to the rest of England team's players, he was not very famous and lacked a sense of presence in the minds of the Spanish defenders...

Ultimately, Twain's tactic was to use Mitchell to attract the attention of the Spanish defenders. The three midfielders with exceptional attacking ability, Rooney and Agbonlahor, as well as Gerrard, were the real killer move. If Rooney had been lucky, the first shot should have been scored just now, but Asenjo made a world-class save. Instead, it was Vaughn who picked up the bargain.

If Spain were to make adjustments targeting England's tactics, it would be not a question of who should mark Rooney or Agbonlahor, but that they must find someone to entangle with George Wood. Because England's brain was him, and not everyone else. If Wood could not pass the ball properly, England's attack would be paralyzed.

However, Wood's position was as the defensive midfielder, which was positioned far back. Even if he could not move up, he could also achieve the purpose of organizing the attack through long passes. If they wanted to find a person who could defend against him, it could not be said that there was no such player in the world of football. But at least currently in the Spain team, ...it was very hard to do so.

"It's like this... I remember Hierro saying in an interview before the UEFA European Championship that he would give the Spanish fans the best UEFA European Championship to watch. That means he's going to stick to his attacking tactics, and he has brought a lot of attacking players for the reason. Whereas for the defensive players, he only has ..." Walker said contemplatively to this point and suddenly stopped to twist his head to look at Twain.

Twain smiled at him and said, "That's right. The only midfielder who can really defend is Camacho. Surely Hierro can't have his center back rush to our half to defend against George?"

Once Twain said that, Walker could finally lay his worries to rest. He sat back in the technical area and looked at the players running on the pitch, thinking that Tony was right. Everything about the Spain team is currently within our calculations, and we shouldn't be surprised if they make any adjustments. At least we are safe in the first half.

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The game that followed happened just as Twain had predicted. The Spanish team tried hard to fight back. In fact, they did pose a lot of threats to England's goal in terms of the offensive. But no matter how many shots they did, they did not result in goals. And considering England's offensive, Spain's two full backs were afraid to rush up to assist in the attack. Hierro had specifically instructed them on the sidelines. It was a top priority not to concede the goal anymore until the end of the first half.

The England team was also active in their search for attacks. A one-goal lead was not secured enough. If they could, it would be nice to have a two-goal lead at the end of the first half. Everyone from the coaches to the players thought so.

The game became even better to watch after England's goal, with the Spain team, adept at offense and the England team, eager to attack, having explosive clashes at the Nou Mestalla Stadium.

Both sides played wonderful set pieces, but everyone's luck was just a little worse. The score was still at 0:1 until the referee blew the whistle at the end of the first half. The host, Spain trailed behind for the time being.

Although the 1:0 score was still not very satisfactory, to be able to be in the lead was considered a good result. So, Twain did not show any displeasure when he came off the field.

And the Spanish players were not particularly depressed. After all, they were only one goal behind. The manager would certainly make adjustments during the halftime interval. The second half was the real decisive battle!

The two teams left the field in different moods. The Spanish fans in the stands were not as confident about the second half as their team was, with the vast majority of Spanish fans worried about the team's fate. And the favorite thing that the England fans wanted to do now was talk about the naval battle that happened 500 years ago.

It was in that naval battle that the Royal Navy defeated the then world's number one invincible fleet of Spain, thus allowing Britain to replace Spain as the maritime overlord and laying a solid foundation for Britain to establish the "the empire on which the sun never sets" in the future.

The glorious history was familiar to every Englishman, and it was just too fitting when put together with today's game.

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"We're one goal ahead, but now is not the time to celebrate, guys." In the locker room, Twain was talking to the team, "You know..."

"A one-goal lead is the most dangerous score in the world!" Some of the players already helped him to yell out the words.

Twain laughed, pointing to those players and saying, "Good, good, you have learned to answer first..."

There was a burst of laughter in the locker room. Although it was a semifinal game, the mentality of the players was good, and Twain was very happy with that.

"In the second half, Spain will definitely make adjustments to their tactics to counter our tactics. You have to be mentally prepared – the second half will not be as easy as the first half. We could be engaged in a bitter fight – if you can't widen the gap in the score at the start of the second half. What kind of adjustments will they make? It won't be defense but offense. They will step up their attacks on the sidelines. Fàbregas and Iniesta will frequently pass the ball to the sidelines, or simply go to the sides to make their moves. They can only suppress our attacks in the sides by stepping up their offensive on the side..." At this point, Twain pointed to Rooney and Agbonlahor as he said, "Pay attention, you will need to return to defend in the second half."

Agbonlahor nodded, while Rooney had a question which he asked, “Boss, since their aim is to suppress our attack on the sidelines, and if Gabriel and I were to return to defend, wouldn’t it just serve their purpose?”

Twain smiled and said, “We still have George. If they suppress our sidelines, we will go to the middle. After playing for 45 minutes in the first half, the Spaniards must have thought that our main offensive direction was the two sides, and that Mitchell and Vaughan were merely facades to attract the opponent’s attention... If they really thought so and adjusted accordingly, then the second half...” Twain pointed to Mitchell and Vaughan to say, “You two let the Spaniards know who the real set-up are!”

“No problem, boss!” Mitchell answered with a loud voice.

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“I must admit I did not expect England to make such a change...” In the Spanish team’s locker room, the first words out of Hierro’s mouth was to apologize to the team and admit the mistake in his tactics. “I apologize for the overall weakness in the situation in the first half.”

The Spanish players did not expect the mighty manager to bow his head in public, but it made them feel like they had not done their part instead. The reality of falling behind by one goal should not be borne by the manager, because it was not just one person’s responsibility in the team trailing behind, but the entire team’s responsibility.

The atmosphere in the Spanish team had always been good. Even though there had been a long-running fight for independence by Catalonia in Spain, it would not affect the friendship of the players within the national team. Today they were a whole, without the differences between the Madrilenians, Basques and the Catalans.

“We must make adjustments in the second half. Unfortunately, we don’t have too many defenders in the midfield.”

Camacho felt everyone turn their gazes over at him. He knew that his task would be a heavier one in the second half as the team’s only defensive midfielder.

“We can’t make too many adjustments defensively and I can’t ask Camacho to cover from the front field to the backfield. We can only find a way through offense.” Hierro muttered contemplatively for a while, “England’s tradition is to attack on the sidelines. The speed of their midfield passes are quick and rely mainly on the sidelines to push the attacks. George Wood is only responsible for dispatching the ball, and there are very few deadly passes near the penalty area. To suppress their attacks on the sides, we have to step up the attacks on the sides. The Spanish tradition is also to launch attacks on the sidelines. Don’t forget this, gentlemen!”

Hierro decided to place heavy forces on the sidelines. Whether it was Iniesta or Fàbregas, they all had to be more active on the sidelines and launch more interchangeable attacks with Lago and Silva.

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“In terms of offense, our midfield has to pass the ball quickly so as to reduce the frequency of ball contact and the time it takes to control the ball. You have to admit that technically we are not as good as Spain.” Seeing someone showing a look of displeasure, Twain immediately pointed over and said, “If

the Spanish team strengthens their control and defense in the midfield, then we will make more use of the long pass in the backfield ... Mitchell and Vaughn are the two beacons in the front field. The long passes are for them. Gerrard, your job is to control the second point of fall while they control the high points. If you're close to the penalty area, try your best to shoot!"

Gerrard nodded and raised his fist. In terms of long shots, he would not lose to anyone. His increasing age did not affect his explosive power to shoot. Furthermore, his long shot angle was currently sharper, and he was subtle when he made a move.

"If we do not score at the start of the second half, we will slow down our pace for a while and withdraw the formation to solidify the defense. But under such circumstances, you must not forget to attack. You must firmly grasp any offensive opportunity! I'm telling you; you will pay dearly for any wasted opportunities on the football field!"

"I only stress one thing – you must act fast during an attack! Run fast, receive fast and pass the ball fast. You must be fast even when shooting! This kind of fast pace is what Spain lacks, but it is also what they fear. It is our advantage, so we must make good use of it."

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"What do we do if England fights back? They're fast, and if you're certain that you can't intercept the football, then you foul! Foul far away from the penalty area, the sooner the better! Don't think I'm just talking about the defensive players. Starting with the forwards, once the ball is lost, you counter press and block. Even if you can't intercept the ball, you must also force them to pass the ball back. You can't let them launch their attacks quickly. Once England's speed is picked up, it's going to be hard to stop them... None of our players had a card in the first half and that's our advantage. The referee is partial toward us, which is our advantage, so we have to make good use of it. Also, in physical confrontation with England, we can fall to the ground more. Remember we are the host, and this is our home ground!"

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"Pay attention during defense. Be subtle with your moves, be subtle! Do you know what it means to be subtle? That is, don't let the damn referee see any petty maneuvers! Let the Spaniards suffer in secret! You must know that we are playing in an away game, the referee will definitely be a little bit biased towards the Spanish team. There's no doubt about it. I know how the UEFA works." Some people were secretly laughing on the inside when Twain said so. Nottingham Forest was given a hard time by the UEFA every year. As the former manager, he certainly knew how the UEFA functioned.

"If a foul was determined, do not attempt to justify it to the referee. Any of your actions under those circumstances may be interpreted by the referee as a provocation to his authority. I definitely don't want to see a situation where you get a yellow card for a foul and a second yellow card through a verbal protest."

Twain looked serious. He wanted the players to know what an important thing it was.

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"Well, I've said all that I need to say. Do you want more than 60,000 fans see their favorite team play for the third or fourth place in the finals? Do you want to miss the chance to lift the championship trophy at

home? It's no big deal to fall behind by one goal. We are Spain, we are a complete whole!" Hierro showed his style as the captain of Spain during that time and loudly motivated at the players, "We are the host and there are so many fans watching us. No matter what, we cannot lose!"

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"Guys, with 45 minutes to go, we're going to reach the finals for the first time in 50 years. Think about that number, 50 years! Half a century! What a great thing it will be if we can do it! Does any one of you want to write your name in history? You can become a hero by taking a step forward now. Does anyone want to step in place or even step back? No, no one wants to! So, now..." Twain pointed to the door of the locker room and said, "All of us – move forward!"

Chapter 960: One Step Further

Shortly after the second half started, Spain took advantage of their powerful ball possession in the midfield to push back England. As it was well within Twain's expectation, so the England team did not panic. Instead, it withdrew the defense and patiently contend with Spain.

Fàbregas remembered that before coming on the game, Hierro had specially instructed the team:

"There's one piece of intelligence that may be in your favor – George Wood has a yellow card on him..."

Hierro did not go on, but many people, including Fàbregas, fully understood.

As England's captain and core, Wood would be disqualified from playing in the final if he were to receive another yellow card in the game. The same thing had happened once to Wood. During Nottingham Forest's return to the English Premier League in the 05-06 season, Nottingham Forest had reached the UEFA Champions League final game, playing against the opponent, Barcelona, which had trained Fàbregas. In the semifinals before that game, they competed against Arsenal which Fàbregas played for. George Wood missed the final game as he received a yellow card at the last minute which results in the accumulation of two yellow cards. Had it not been for his absence, Nottingham Forest might have lifted the UEFA Champions League trophy a season earlier.

Since the incident, Wood had been rather disgusted by having to be in the stands while his team competed. So even with a serious injury, he strongly urged Twain to take him to Spain so that he could be ready to play at any time.

The news was indeed beneficial to Fàbregas.

George Wood, who had a yellow card on him, was certain to have some misgivings in the second half. He would not be able to play to his full ability. As long as he thought about getting another yellow card and kissing goodbye to the UEFA European Championship, he could not be nonchalant about it.

It was well worth taking advantage of.

At the thought of it, Fàbregas raised his hand for the ball and ran forward at the same time. He wanted to get closer to Wood and force him to foul.

Iniesta passed the ball to Fàbregas as he knew what Cesc was going to do. In fact, he also had the same intention. But he was entangled with Michael Johnson. He would be walking right into a trap if he went up to Wood.

When Fàbregas received the ball, he dribbled the ball straight toward Wood.

Wood did not shy away. He waited for Fàbregas to come up. As the last line of defense before the center backs, he could not escape at all costs.

Fàbregas suddenly flicked the ball to the left as he approached Wood. Then he turned around and waited for Wood to lean forward.

Wood did not disappoint him. He stepped to the right and stuck closer while he extended his leg to tackle the ball at the same time. Fàbregas was faster at his feet, knocked the ball away and hit against Wood's leg. Next, he lost his center of gravity and fell to the ground. He did not forget to cry in pain!

The sound struck fear into Twain's heart – if Wood fouled, how would the referee decide? A verbal warning or a card?

He stood up nervously, staring unblinkingly at the black clad referee who ran to the spot of the incident.

Fortunately, the referee just put his hand forward and did not mean to take a card out of his chest pocket. In the end, there was not even a verbal warning. He only gave a free kick to Spain.

Twain breathed a sigh of relief and sat down again.

Four minutes later, the Spanish team made a comeback. This time, it was Fàbregas again. He had come to Wood once again. But this time after Fàbregas fell to the ground, Wood raised both his hands to show that he had no movement. The referee did not pay any heed to the protesting Cesc Fàbregas lying on the ground and signaled that the game would go on instead.

The third time, Wood faced Silva's sudden cut to the inside. He used his body to knock the thin opponent away and a whistle was blown for the foul. Silva, Fàbregas and Iniesta were all around the referee and making gestures to him to pull out the card.

Twain, who saw the scene, abuse roundly on the spot, "F**k your motherf**king card!"

Luckily, the referee was not affected by the Spanish players this time. However, because Wood did not receive a card for his successive fouls, it had caused the Spanish fans in the stands to boo with displeasure.

Twain could see that the Spaniards had planned this in advance. They knew Wood had a yellow card and deliberately wanted Wood to hold back during defense. He must remind Wood.

Thinking of it, Twain got up and walked to the sidelines. He yelled Wood's name toward the field. After attracting Wood's attention, he shouted, "Watch your movements, George! Don't foul easily! Don't give them a chance!"

In fact, without Twain shouting, Wood was also aware what the other side wanted to do. He admitted he was currently at a loss – he was not willing to give in, but he also did not want to miss the final by getting another yellow card. As an England player, it was not common to reach the final. He did not

want to miss such an opportunity, not to mention he wanted to lift the championship trophy with his own hands. How could he become a spectator on the bench?

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After the England team fought back once, the Spaniards launched an attack again. The target was still George Wood, but this time it became Iniesta who came up. After a series of short passes and switching positions with Fàbregas, Iniesta came to Wood. This time I must make you back down!!

Wood saw that Iniesta was getting closer and closer. He finally made up his mind not to let the other side pass. But just as he was about to make a move, a person charged out from the side and knocked Iniesta out along with the ball. Iniesta, who flew out, heard the referee's whistle. However, to his surprise, when he glimpsed from the corner of his eye, George Wood was still standing in front of him...

Still on the ground, Wayne Rooney played along and held up his right hand, indicating that he had committed the foul.

Wood looked a little surprised at Rooney, who was sitting on the ground without care.

After Rooney got up from the ground, he patted Wood on the shoulder and said, "Defense is not your job alone."

The Spanish players deemed Rooney's foul as a provocation. They angrily surrounded the referee and motioned to the referee to give the card. This time, however, the referee only verbally warned Rooney and did not take out a card. The Spaniards' booing in the stands grew louder.

Twain decided to make an adjustment and a bold adjustment at that. He decided to move Gerrard to the back and let Wood play as the attacking midfielder. It might have sent Wood to the front of Camacho in that way, but at the very least it would reduce the likelihood that he would get a card for defensive fouls. Anyway, the England team was a goal ahead. Even if they eventually won with one goal, Twain would not think that there was anything to be embarrassed about. The loser had no right to criticize. Moreover, Wood's long shot ability could be put to more important use in the attacking midfielder position.

Twain's adjustment this time surprised the Spanish team...

Hierro turned his head around several times to look at Twain, wanting to find out what he had in mind – it was clear that the England team had largely abandoned the sidelines amid Spain's aggressive attacks. Their few attacks were all launched by Wood from the backfield, using his ability to assess the general situation and long passes to create chances for Mitchell and Vaughan in the front. Now he was pushing Wood to the front field to directly face Spain's defensive midfielder, Camacho. Would it not be self-defeating?

Camacho turned his head on the pitch and looked at Hierro, who gave him a gesture to go mark Wood. They could only use this method at the moment. But it was also an indirect way to achieve their own goal – anyway, George Wood was no longer in the position of a defensive midfielder. The 36-year-old Gerrard's contribution to the defense was certainly not comparable to Wood. In a way, it could be considered that Spain had cleared the way for its offense.

Now they could ignore Wood and fully press ahead to attack!

The Spaniards wanted to blow the bugle horn toward the counterattack, but they did not expect that the England team was the one to take the lead.

After Gerrard was placed in the backfield, he could also organize the attack like Wood did. When the football reached Wood's feet, he took advantage of his strong body and explosive force to squeeze Camacho behind him. Following which, after he did a one-two pass combination with Mitchell who came back to assist, he directly made his shot!

Asenjo basically did not react to the sudden shot. It was a pity that the football deflected off the goalpost.

Although he did not score, he stunned the Spaniards who broke out in a cold sweat.

Hierro only realized at this point that in terms of long shots, the England team had more than just Steven Gerrard alone...

He walked to the sidelines and nervously instructed Camacho to step up the marking of Wood. Now he could only think of such a counter measure. He was at a loss on how to further adjust his team.

After Hierro gave the instruction, he went back. He suddenly felt a little reluctant: in the end, he was still in a disadvantageous position and led by the nose by Twain all this time in competition to the manager who had coached him before. He had never once mastered the initiative ... Including the adjustment he made during the halftime interval, he now found that the other party also long expected it.

He instructed his players to try to get as much place kicks as possible, which was an effective way to break the impenetrable defense. But the England team was sly and always tried to foul in the non-dangerous areas, far away from the penalty area. He asked the team to suppress the England team's sidelines. As a result, the England team gave up the sidelines on its own accord. George Wood became active in the middle and became the England team's main point of attack.

And while the England team did not have the upper hand since the start of the second half, their goal did not face too much danger. That was what Hierro was most worried about – from the way the game was going, it would only be better for the defense. They must score, the sooner, the better. To achieve the aim, even if they... even if they temporarily ignore the defense, it was worth it!

Hierro had been thinking in his seat for a while and decided to bring on two full backs to strengthen Spain's offense to put pressure on England's rear defensive line. From there, they could force Wood and the others to retreat to defend and achieve the aim of reducing pressure on their own defense.

England's defense was very tight, and the Spaniards' attack was hard to penetrate. Furthermore, when England counter pressed, they also encountered the Spanish team's besiegement in the front field, making it very difficult for them to send the ball to the front field. Michael Johnson also did not have a superb long pass ability. It was all down to Gerrard alone and he was vulnerable to being targeted.

For a time, the two sides were caught in a deadlock, with both sides unable to cope with the other.

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Both managers got up from their seats in succession and stood on the sidelines to inspect the game. The players of both teams on the pitch fought bitterly and refused to give in at all. Wood had another foul,

while Agbonlahor was shown another yellow card. The Spaniards had a very good chance once during the period while the England team's three defenders made a minor error between them, allowing Bojan to slip in between the three of them and had the chance to face Joe Hart alone. But the opportunity seemed too easy, and Bojan kicked the ball straight into the stands.

This shot made Hierro mumbled to himself for a long time. He certainly had reason to complain. He had seen Bojan charged in, and watched Fàbregas pass the ball in, only to eventually see Bojan kicked the ball skewed. He also jumped up as if he was the one being kicked and not the football.

"This is almost Spain's best chance in the second half and Bojan kicked the ball too high! What a shame..." The Spanish commentator said with annoyance.

John Motson breathed a sigh of relief, "It looks like Heaven is on our side today..."

Hierro made a mistake during the halftime interval. He could see it now. He had asked the team to strengthen the offensive on the sidelines and passes from the sides were naturally one of them. But Bojan was short and thin. He could not get the upper hand in the contest for headers against England's center backs. The side pass had become a useless set-up.

Hierro could not agree to such a waste of offensive resources.

In the 20th minute of the second half, Hierro gritted his teeth and replaced Bojan with a more impactful Torres. Even if Torres was injured, he had to play. Because if they lost the game, it would become meaningless even if he recovered from his injury. Who would want to play in the final for the third or fourth place?

Torres ran energetically on the pitch. He hoped to be the one who could become the hero to save Spain.

The 32-year-old Torres was not as fast as he was when he was young. But his experience and awareness, as well as his footwork used to kick the ball toward the goal, were a step up from his youth. Now he was considered "a veteran."

Seeing him on the pitch, the England defenders were collectively nervous. As someone who also played in the English Premier League, everyone knew the level of striker Torres was. A player who had been hovering in the top three of the English Premier League's goalscorer list all year round could not be underestimated.

Sure enough, Torres gave England an initial show of strength as soon as he came on the pitch. His shot from outside the penalty area was deflected out by Joe Hart after much difficulty. His long shot also rekindled the enthusiasm of the Spanish fans. Having not seen a goal scored for a long time, the Spanish fans in Nou Mestalla stadium were a little deflated, but the English fans' singing became more resonant.

George Wood returned to the defensive midfielder's position in the end. After all, once the Spanish team gave its all to attack ferociously, the England team's rear defensive line became hard pressed. Naturally, he also became the target of the Spanish team's breakthrough point once again. Even Torres, who had just come on, would look for opportunities to have a face-off one on one with Wood. This time Wood stopped the ball without a foul.

Twain applauded Wood's defense this time off the field. His move at this time was a good blow to Torres's arrogance and showed him who was in charge in front of the penalty area! The results were

pretty good. They just had to look at the England fans in the stands who clapped so hard and cheered loudly to know it.

Saint George was a big mountain in front of England's goal. Any storm that came to him had to stop, and the goal behind the mountain was always sunny.

It was just that this mountain did not just keep out the elements...

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The game went on to the 75th minute. After Torres's shot was blocked by Hart, the goalkeeper from Manchester City did not kick the ball out but used his hand to throw the ball to Gerrard outside the penalty area.

As soon as Gerrard received the football, Iniesta rushed up. The Spanish players still remembered the manager asking them to actively surround and grab in the front field.

Gerrard also naturally remembered Twain instructing them to send out the ball fast.

He turned around and passed the football to Michael Johnson next to him. Gerrard ran forward and pretended to be involved in the attack when in fact he only wanted to attract the attention of the Spanish midfielders.

As expected, instead of passing the ball to him, Johnson gave it to Agbonlahor on the right. Once Agbonlahor received the football, he directly knocked the football forward without a second delay and started to accelerate to pursue the ball.

It was the form of attack that the Spaniards feared worst. If they did not stop him at the start, it would have been big trouble. Upon seeing the situation, Camacho also dropped Wood and sprinted toward Agbonlahor. The player from Nottingham Forest was not a fool who only knew how to play with brute force. Seeing Camacho pounce toward himself, Agbonlahor passed the ball cleanly to George Wood, who plugged in from the middle. It was a ploy to lure the enemy away from his territory!

Wood picked up the ball, and Camacho was not there. Only the center back rushed up.

Piqué motioned to Albiol to wait at the back. He wanted to meet his former captain in person.

Wood never used fancy footwork when he dribbled the ball. He had the advantage of his explosive force. Indeed, he just needed to pull the ball away and accelerate to overtake. Piqué understood this point, so he did not suddenly pounce on him. He kept a certain distance and followed Wood to retreat. At the same time, he slowly pushed him toward the sideline. As long as he made Wood go to the side, it would be counted as a success. Because Wood did not know how to do a cross pass. His cross passes were terrible in quality.

Piqué thought so, but Wood would not give him the chance to do so. After seeing Piqué's attempt, Wood passed the ball straight to Vaughan in front of him.

Piqué gave pause and immediately turned around to pounce on Vaughn. That was when Vaughn sent the ball back to Wood, who passed the ball directly without stopping to Mitchell who was waiting in front.

Mitchell returned the ball again. Albiol knew that the front of the penalty area was where Wood was good at launching, so he hurriedly dropped Mitchell to pounce on Wood. At the same time, Piqué also turned and pounced on him. The two men rushed toward Wood one after the other, and they had the same idea – even if they were being sent off with a red card, they could not allow Wood to shoot the ball!

Wood knocked the back pass to the left and appeared to want to evade Albiol, who was coming directly at him so as to take advantage of an opportunity to shoot and score. It was exactly what Albiol and Piqué thought, and the two men slightly changed their direction to continue to press on Wood.

In fact, what Wood did happened to be in their favor. The idea of two men was to force Wood to the sideline in time, so that he would not pose a threat at all. But just as the encirclement from the two men was about to close, the football sprang out of the gap between the two of them!

No one thought that Wood would actually knock the football behind him with his heel...

Mitchell was already in an offside position and he was unconcerned with Wood's pass.

But another person was in an exceptionally good shape today...

James Vaughan had scored a goal in his first appearance in the starting lineup for the UEFA European Championship and was still actively looking for a second chance to score again.

Now, the opportunity was right in front of his eyes!

George Wood had attracted two of Spain's center backs for him and sent another pass of reasonable strength to get him facing the goal head-on. Could there be a better chance in the world?

Of course not!

Vaughan fired straight into the ball coming at him and the ball drew an obvious arc. If it was viewed from Vaughn's point of view, perhaps it could be thought that the ball would fly straight out of the end line because... the radius was too wide...

But just as it approached the goal, the football suddenly began to spin!

Even though Asenjo tried to make a save early, the football turned in a wide arc...and bypassed Asenjo's hands to spin straight into the top corner of the goal!

"James Vaughn... YES! YES! YES!!" Motson was thrilled and shouted, "England is two goals ahead!!"

The football flew into the goal from a dead corner. Asenjo could only look at the ball and sigh. Then he fell heavily to the ground, even forgetting to do the action of rolling over to reduce the impact. It was no wonder as the blow was too heavy for the Spaniards.

2:0! England was in the lead!