

Age-old wisdom of Wenger can help Big Phil

Luiz Felipe Scolari should ask Arsène Wenger for tips on dealing with Sir Alex Ferguson

By Paul Wilson

When Alex Ferguson, as he then was, first came to England all those centuries ago he defined his task simply as knocking Liverpool off their perch. The challenge in front of Luiz Felipe Scolari is subtly different. Yes, he must establish superiority over Manchester United if he possibly can, but in the shorter term he needs to do what José Mourinho did remarkably quickly and shut Ferguson up with some personality projection of his own. Contrary to the impression that may be formed from perusing the English media, Ferguson does not know everything. Initially he dismissed Arsène Wenger as a 'guru', only to be shocked when the Frenchman won the Double in his first full season. Considering it took Ferguson a nervy four years to win the FA Cup, and another three to add a League title, he had little choice but to respect the Arsenal manager from then on even if relations never became cordial.

Ferguson knew more about Mourinho in 2004, having been knocked out of the Champions League by Porto that year, but he was still reluctant to believe a limitless chequebook and a cocky young manager could deliver a title at the first time of asking until Chelsea went and proved otherwise. That is a hard act to follow, and Ferguson is presently making sure Scolari knows it. The Scot's reasoning that Chelsea are too old to match United's youthful hunger for more titles is utterly specious - should Gary Neville make a comeback this season the average ages of the sides will be virtually the same and Cristiano Ronaldo is still threatening to take his youthful hunger to Spain - but casually mentioning that Scolari will find it almost impossible to reach Mourinho's mark was masterful. Ferguson gets more credit for mind games than he deserves, but in this instance the hoary old cliché may be justified, and from the sound of Scolari's reaction he scored a hit.

Clearly there are ways Scolari could improve on Mourinho. He could win a European Cup, or the sort of significant double that United managed last season. Yet while Chelsea would never dream of putting that sort of pressure on a manager in his first season, they are powerless to prevent the Old Trafford publicity machine cranking up the expectation. This is the sort of thing Scolari needs to pre-

vent, for while he may be personally dismissive of noise emanating from Manchester, it is all too easy for the Ferguson agenda to become lodged in the minds of players and fans. So that every game becomes a pressure game, and an exit from Europe or slippage in the Premier League means Scolari is perceived to be failing.

Until Scolari can set his stamp on Chelsea through competitive results and performances, Ferguson will have the field to himself, even operating from Africa. Scolari insists from the Far East that everything is normal and that a World Cup winner need not lose sleep over managing Chelsea. While that may be the case, at least until his first league defeat, one fears he still has to appreciate that sparring with Ferguson requires a whole new bag of tricks. It should make for an interesting season, though the first thing Scolari should do on returning to London is take Wenger out for a pint and ask him for a few tips on how to rebuff a grumpy Glaswegian. The Arsenal manager has come up with a few highly effective ripostes in his time, and Scolari may even be interested in a book on Wenger published next month (*The Glorious Game: Arsène Wenger, Arsenal and the Quest for Success*, by Alex Fynn and Kevin Whitcher) in which he discusses the ideal ages of professional players.

According to Ferguson's favourite guru, goalkeepers reach their peak between 30 and 35, which rules out Edwin van der Sar and Petr Cech. Central defenders should be aged between 26 and 34, and all Chelsea's and United's are. Midfielders are best between 26 and 32, and strikers should be aged between 24 and 30. So there you have it. Paul Scholes is too old, Wayne Rooney too young, and Chelsea are the perfect age to win the treble next season. Wenger doesn't quite say that, in fact he queers his own rather generous guidelines with the proviso that early developers and exceptional talents can make their own rules and play at any age, but Scolari does not need to get bogged down in such detail. The Premier League runs on basic playground rules. Assailants must not be ignored or appeased, they must be faced down, while a gleeful media runs around shouting: 'Fight!' It's too late now for Scolari to suggest Ferguson adds

Wenger to his bedtime reading list, but let's hope the Brazilian is a quick learner. The next opportunity for constructive retaliation will be coming along sooner than he thinks.

Don't count on Capello's excuses

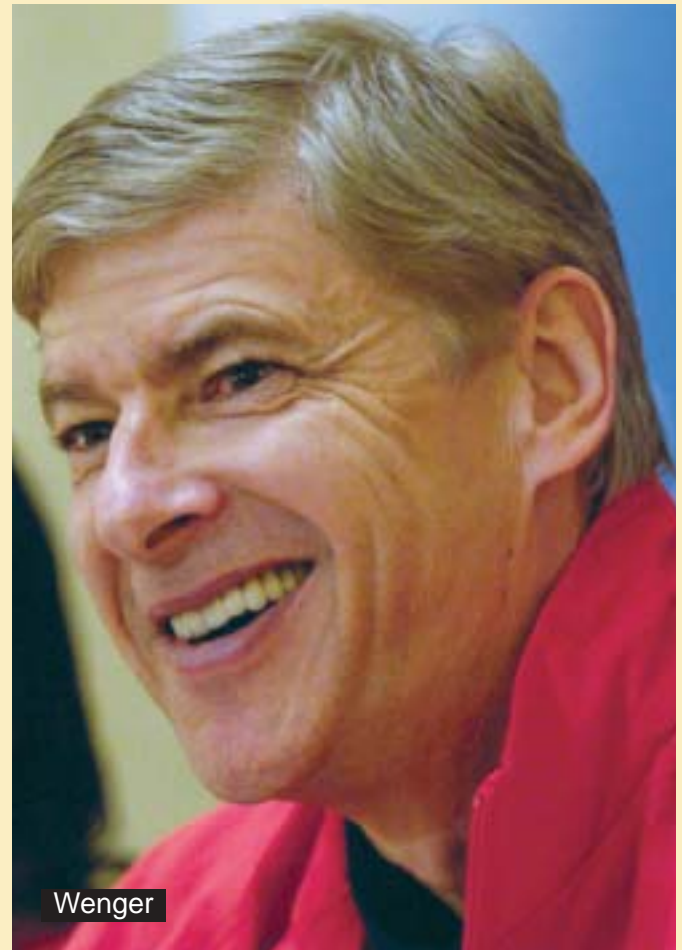
Vacillation is rarely a desirable quality in a manager and, after earning praise at the start of the summer for his positive outlook on English football, Fabio Capello seems to have been overcome by doubt.

During Euro 2008, Capello said that as long as the quality was there - and he thought it was - then the actual numbers did not matter so much. A club manager does not need many more than 14 or 15 good players, he explained, and a national coach could work in the same way. Any manager would prefer an abundance of talent, and pressure put on regulars by players trying to break into the squad, but Capello might not have been recruited in those circumstances and he seemed to be diplomatically seeing the glass as half-full rather than half-empty.

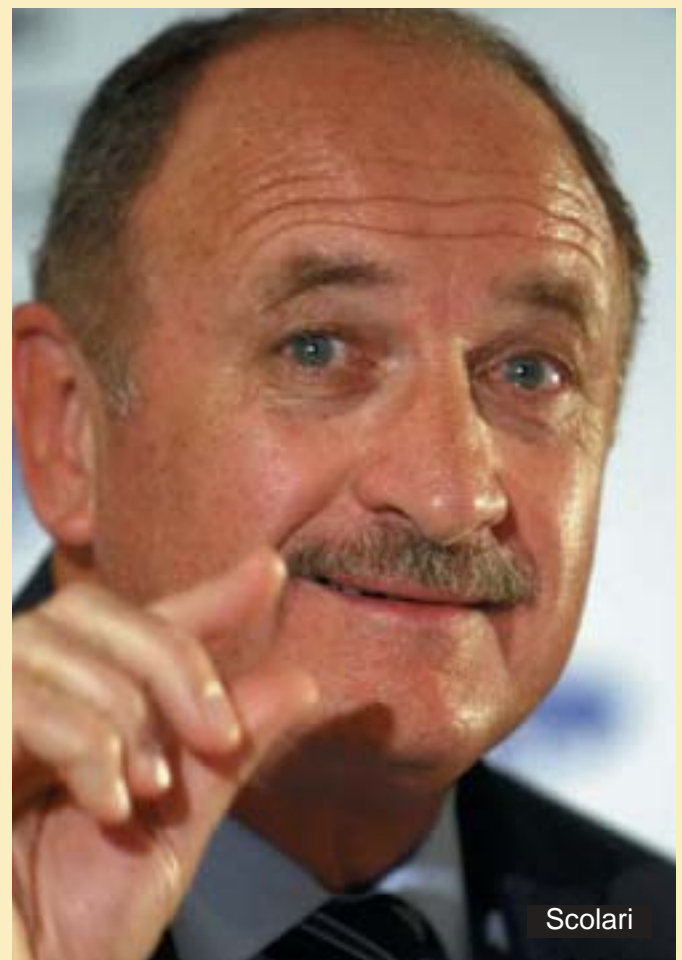
Now he has told an Italian paper that he is working in the worst conditions of any national coach and that the Premier League's 35 per cent figure of players he can use compares unfavourably to the 72 per cent of Serie A available to Italy.

Capello could just be trying to get his excuses in early, though one wonders why he has backtracked before the season has even started. He of all people must know the Italian league has always had an enviable number of home-grown players, and the fact that Premier League clubs are heavily reliant on foreign imports is not exactly a state secret. If anything has changed for England over summer, it appears to have changed for the better. Peter Crouch will get more games at Portsmouth and his partnership with Jermain Defoe could be productive. Gareth Barry going to Liverpool would not harm his development, Paul Robinson and Shaun Wright-Phillips could also benefit from moves, and Frank Lampard is being fought over by two leading coaches.

The glass is still half-full, in other words. Capello has a core of decent players to work with. His part of the deal is to provide strong leadership, not send out mixed messages.



Wenger



Scolari