

Wenger underlines his faith in the young Gunners

At the canal side hotel where John Lennon and Yoko Ono staged their bed-in for peace almost 40 years ago, Arsène Wenger found himself promoting a rather different ideal yesterday.

It was not the presence of Jose Mourinho, the Internazionale manager and an old adversary from Chelsea, who, like him, is in town for the four-team tournament that prompted the hardening of his heart, rather the bitter memory of a failing from last season.

Arsenal might have ended a campaign which had promised so much with a trophy or two had not they lacked the clinical ability to see the games out against their major rivals. They had led against Chelsea and Manchester United in the Premier League only to stumble and lose, while they also ceded the initiative in both legs of their Champions League quarter-final against Liverpool to bow out. The more aesthetic virtues of Wenger's team must be underpinned by mental toughness and more ruthlessness this time around.

Those on the outside of the Emirates Stadium wonder how it can be different this season. The squad has been shorn of four established names - the first-team regulars Mathieu Flamini and Alexander Hleb, and the seasoned back-up players Jens Lehmann and Gilberto Silva - while Wenger has as only made two significant signings. Aaron Ramsey, 17, and Samir Nasri, 21, both strangers to the Premier League and who will need time to impose themselves.

Yet the manager's faith is

unswerving. The Gunners might last have tasted success in 2005, with the FA Cup final shoot-out victory over United, but within each of his players, he believes, is the capacity to take responsibility. Their youth, he feels, should not be mistaken for inexperience.

"First of all, I believe we were only just short last year, we only lost three [Premier League] games," he said. "We have kept the basis of the team and the frustration we got from not winning in the end will come out for the good. We need to show strength and resolve, but we have that."

"We've lost Gilberto, who was very experienced and important in the dressing-room, and we've lost Hleb, who we've replaced with Nasri, but we have many young players who are one year older and have learned. We made a big improvement from two years ago to last year and we want to continue. If we get into the same position again [in March], then I believe we will show the needed resilience."

It is inevitable that great responsibility will fall on the shoulders of William Gallas, the only outfield player to have passed his 30th birthday; he is 31 on Sunday week. Wenger has announced that the central defender is to remain as captain, overlooking the claims of Kolo Touré and Cesc Fàbregas. The Frenchman, after the tantrums of last season, has promised to learn from his mistakes and "change my way to speak to the players".

Gallas's worst moment of last season was his unravelling at Birmingham City after the 2-2

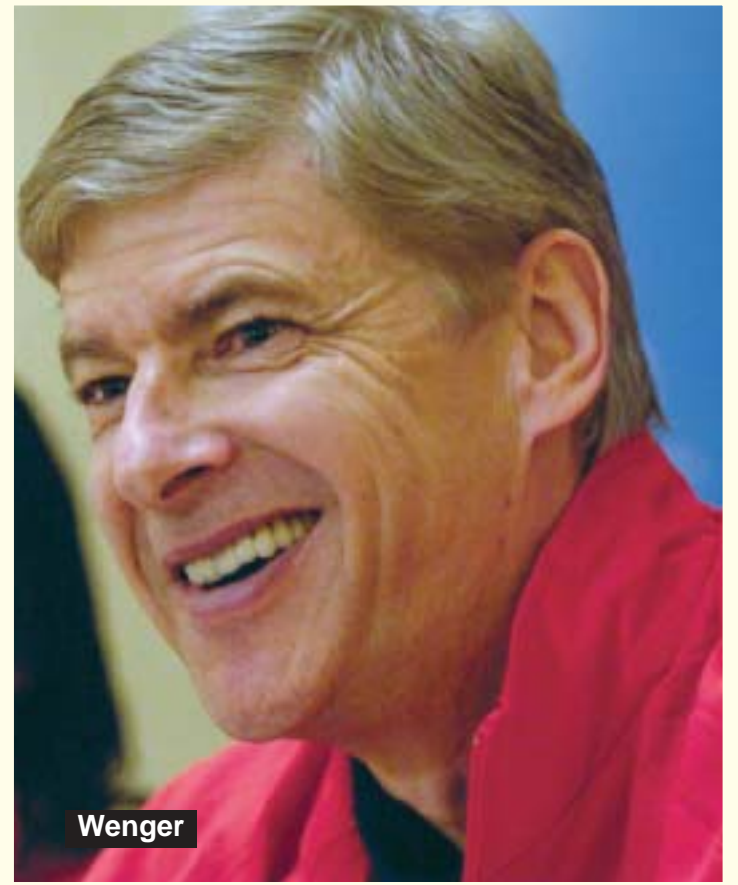
draw, when he staged a bizarre sit-in protest. It did not last quite as long as John and Yoko's, but various players have since cited that afternoon as when the club's problems began. "We had a month and a half after that game, where our heads were not right," said Fàbregas. Gallas was also criticised by Wenger for a lack of "defensive authority" in Chelsea's comeback victory while the Frenchman's abrasive manner rubbed some of his team-mates up the wrong way.

"William has acknowledged that he made some mistakes and he has learnt from them," said Wenger. "He is an important player and he plays in a position where it is easy to be the captain. Some of the other players who could be captain are still a bit young. I believe at the moment that Kolo will be his assistant."

"William got a lot of criticism after what happened at Birmingham but, until then, everyone said he was a fantastic captain, so I think he deserves another go to show his commitment and then [we'll] see where we stand at the end of the season."

"He was not the most gifted player when he was a young boy and he has a good evaluation of his own performances, that's what makes the big players. William has analysed what he has done right and wrong himself."

Arsenal arrived on a day of freakish electrical storms and without Nasri, who has a knee problem, and Abou Diaby, who has a more serious thigh complaint which makes him a doubt for Wednesday's Champions League qualifier



Wenger

against FC Twente. Arsenal play Ajax here tonight and Sevilla tomorrow.

Ronaldo is right to stay. Arsène Wenger has expressed his happiness at the news that Cristiano Ronaldo is to remain at Manchester United. He said: "I am pleased because he brings something to the Premier League. We want it to be the best league in the world, therefore the best players in the world have to play there. Common sense and contracts have prevailed. You wouldn't want to think that one of the best players in the world just walks out and does-

n't respect his contract."

Meanwhile, the Real Madrid president, Ramón Calderón, has admitted he had not known that Ronaldo had snubbed a move to Real. Calderón said he had no idea it was coming and, asked about the player's decision, replied: "I don't want to talk about Ronaldo. He is a United player." Real's coach, Bernd Schuster, said: "It's a shame he is not coming because he's a player who would really have improved us, but it doesn't matter - we have a great group of players."

McManaman: Liverpool will never have a better chance to win the title

By Martin Lipton

Steve McManaman claimed last night that Liverpool finally have what it takes to end their title drought as he told Rafa Benitez' men: "You'll never have a better chance."

A teenage McManaman was a rookie member of Kenny Dalglish's squad when the Anfield outfit were last kings of England back in 1990.

For nearly two decades, the Kop has been forced to watch on impotently as Manchester United have taken an iron grip on domestic domination, with Liverpool's bids for the crown fading away.

But with Benitez having captured Robbie Keane to form a "mouthwatering" front duo with Fernando Torres, Gareth Barry set to join plus other summer acquisitions to give the squad strength in depth, McManaman believes this could be the year the Spaniard takes his place alongside Bill Shankly and Bob Paisley in the

pantheon of Anfield managerial greats.

He said: "Liverpool have the best chance they've had in a long time."

"The introduction of Robbie Keane makes them stronger instantly, but for the first time they've got a nice balance."

"They've certainly got a huge amount of quality players. They've lost Crouchy but have brought in Robbie, Torres is a superstar and he's got Daniel Agger back from injury, plus a couple of players in from Italy, who have experience and will add strength to the defence."

"Plus the fact that Steven Gerrard will probably slip back into the centre of midfield where he wants to play, while they've got Javier Mascherano and Xabi Alonso already and are looking to bring in Barry, so they will be packed with quality."

"Liverpool will be a lot closer this

time. They were 21 points adrift two years ago, 11 points last year. This is their most realistic chance. They were strong at home and I expect them to do a lot better and get closer and challenge."

McManaman (right), speaking at the launch of Setanta Sports programming line-up for the new season, accepts that the Reds cannot afford the nightmare spells in October and November that have cost them dear in recent campaigns.

The former England winger added: "They have to make sure they do not throw their chances away by October or November again."

"Last season it was even more frustrating because they had a great start, and then lost their way."

"Rafa is aware how important the title is and I think he will pick a more consistent team this time."



McManaman