

# Why Wenger and Benítez no longer pose a threat to top two

Neither Arsenal or Liverpool have the strength in depth to challenge for the title

By Kevin McCarra

**A**rsène Wenger is as stubborn as he is suave. It is one of the many reasons Arsenal have to be grateful to him. The manager's obstinacy was triumphant in 2004 when the club took the Premiership title with an unbeaten record. "Since I have been in football there has been a basic question," he said. "Are you pretty or are you efficient? It's as if you have got to choose."

He had indeed transcended all that but no one rises above the uncooperative realities of football for long. Arsenal's single trophy since then came from the undeserved win over Manchester United after a shoot-out in the 2005 FA Cup final. Wenger, rightly, is under no pressure at all. Who could have felt disgruntled, for instance, when a preposterously young line-up almost beat Sevilla in the Amsterdam tournament on Saturday?

It was fun to see the La Liga team becoming flustered by the indignity of lagging to juvenile opponents until a late equaliser. Factors of that nature, though, will not put Arsenal in contention with Manchester United and Chelsea for the Premier League title. The top four in the table looks predictable and so too does the fact that it is divided into two compartments. The connecting door is locked.

Unless something unexpected happens Arsenal and Liverpool will have one another for company. Rafael Benítez is more given to rattling the door handle than Wenger and his exasperation is laid bare by the Gareth Barry imbroglio. Liverpool's owners, having apparently missed the Aston Villa deadline to buy Gareth Barry, seem to be behaving as if that was a lucky escape. Completion of the transfer now will probably depend on raising some of the

£18m funds through the sale of, say, Andriy Voronin and Jermaine Pennant.

You can nearly make out the film of sweat on Benítez's brow. He will need to be inspired in his future work in the transfer market. Robbie Keane alone cannot close last season's 11-point gap on the champions United and the manager will have to pray that a buy such as Andrea Dossena brings impetus.

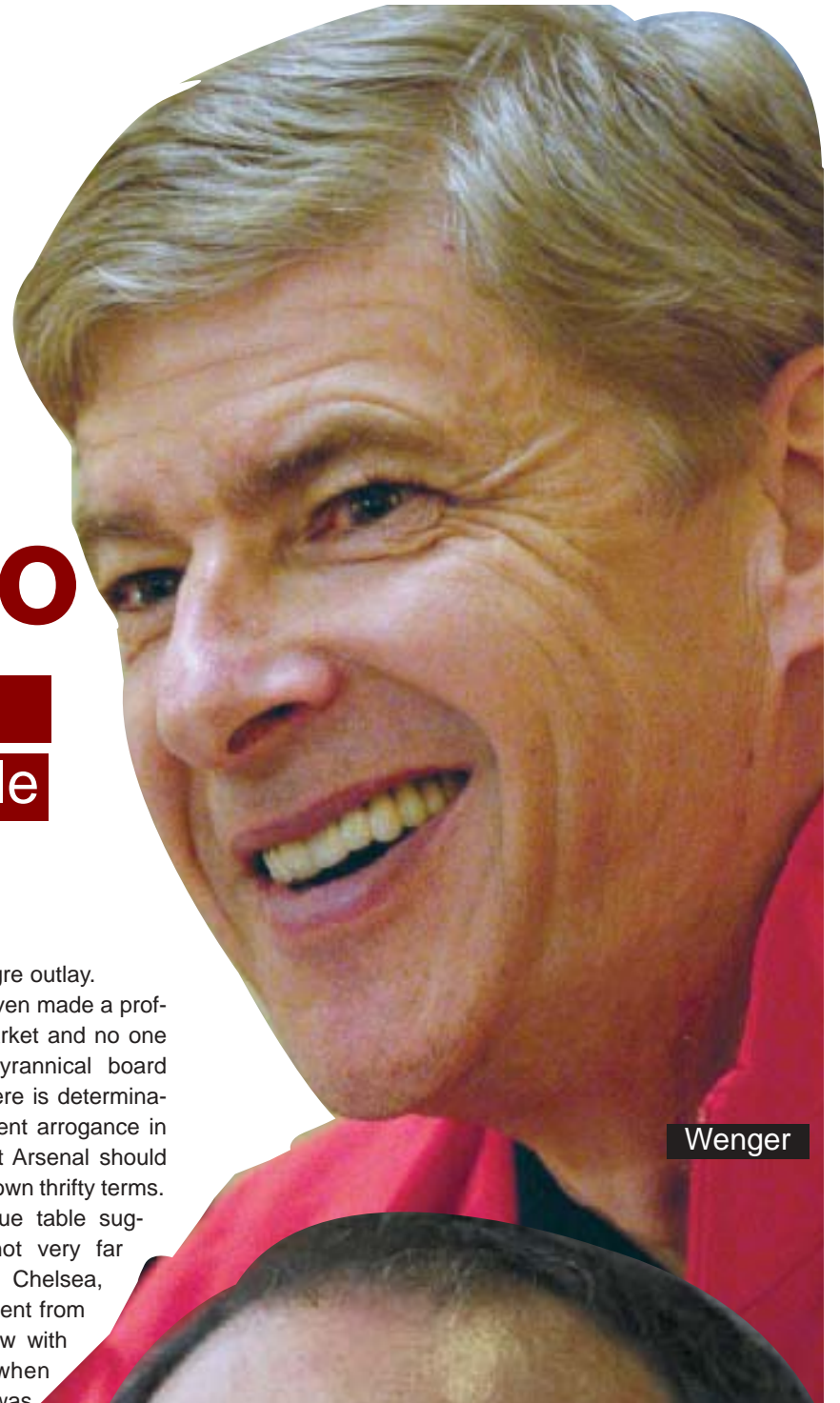
Liverpool's difficulties are conventional, Arsenal's are distinctive. They stand fifth in the Deloitte Money League of the world's richest clubs, with a turnover of £177m. Wenger himself agrees that Arsenal will be very affluent in due course. First, however, they have to come through the angst of the contemporary property developer. It was inspired of Arsenal to build the £357m Emirates stadium but the associated move into housebuilding must have been made queasily. In *Arsenal: the Making of a Modern Superclub*, Alex Fynn, with co-author Kevin Witcher, has produced a shrewd and well-informed book about the challenges and terrors of a club still in the throes of transformation. Arsenal are waiting to see how many people who have put down deposits on the 711 apartments at Highbury Square pull out of completing the purchase.

Buyers, of course, are not keen to write off the money they have already spent and the properties continue to have an allure not on offer at orthodox sites. If Arsenal do make a great profit and rid themselves of debt, Wenger may be in a quandary. His record fee, of around £11m for Sylvain Wiltord, was paid eight years ago. While the manager alludes to budgetary constraints at Arsenal, he does not seem incensed by them. His own temperament

tends towards meagre outlay.

Last summer he even made a profit in the transfer market and no one supposes that a tyrannical board demanded that. There is determination and a magnificent arrogance in Wenger's belief that Arsenal should prosper only on his own thrifty terms. Last season's league table suggests they were not very far behind United and Chelsea, but it had been evident from February's ugly draw with Birmingham, when Eduardo da Silva was so badly injured, that they would fall short.

Arsenal, like Liverpool, could contend forcefully for the European Cup. Nonetheless, the financial restrictions make it improbable that Wenger's team will take the Premier League and if cash ever does flow freely one doubts whether the ascetic Frenchman's pride will allow him to spend it so gaudily in the transfer market as Manchester United or Chelsea.



Wenger



Benitez