

Fabregas and Messi lift artistry to a new level



Fabregas



Messi



Is there anything better in football, or in all of sport, than the sight of an old master again capturing the best of his talent? It was hard to think so after Alessandro Del Piero this week ushered in a blaze of brilliant European action with a superb strike for Juventus against Real Madrid but then long before the end of an extraordinary burst of virtuosity, stretching from Old Trafford to the banks of the Bosphorus, he was besieged by challengers.

Del Piero's goal may not have been dislodged from the top spot – not in this corner, anyway – but then long before Barcelona completed their exquisite carnage in Basle on Wednesday night there was a growing sense that the Champions' League might just be involved in a new and potentially thrilling phase of its brief history.

It may be an infant suspicion but it seemed to be saying that the sheer power exhibited so formidably in the all-Premier League final on the banks of the Moscow River last spring is about to be challenged, if not surpassed, by a different and potentially more beautiful game.

Ruud Gullit, who should know about these things after his contribution to Milan's domination of the old European Cup, advanced the theory while watching the performances of Arsenal and Barça in Istanbul and Switzerland. Naturally, he was rebuked. Where were the masterful defenders such as Rio Ferdinand and John Terry and a dreadnought like Nemanja Vidic as Arsène Wenger and Josep Guardiola attempted to translate their artistic vision into ultimately competitive football? Where was the sinew to go along with the style?

Gullit's reaction was intriguing. Maybe there was an alternative route. Maybe there was football so mesmerising in its fluidity and touch that new rules were already being drawn up. Maybe Wenger and Guardiola were working towards another kind of game, a process which, after all, would not exactly be novel. What is football if it doesn't move, take on new light – and what was it becoming before Fifa reacted to the nightmare of Italia '90 and banned the back-pass?

Maybe indeed there were glimpses of new rules this week shaped potentially by the two players who operated on a level that at times went beyond anything else we had seen, including the superbly predatory instincts of Dimitar Berbatov and Wayne Rooney.

Lionel Messi and Cesc Fabregas were, plainly, the players Gullit had in mind. Though born two months apart in 1987, and separated by half a continent in this week's action, Messi and Fabregas might have been joined at the hip.

It is a disconcerting image no doubt for Wenger, painfully aware of the pressure now building on Fabregas to return to the embrace of his native Barcelona and the club from where he was taken as a boy in an act of larceny so audacious and brilliant it is probably unrivalled in the history of professional football. Yet when Fabregas on one night cut the defence of Fenerbahce into a thousand pieces and then, on the next, Messi toyed with Basle so utterly, a uniting of these talents seemed like a command from the football heavens.

Wenger naturally will fight it with all the means he has because if the departures of such as Anelka and Vieira and Henry could all be rationalised in one way or another, the loss of Fabregas – we could see more plainly than ever on Tuesday night – would not much cloud the future as dismantle it. No one player is indispensable, they say; no one is bigger than the team. Do not tell Wenger because in this case his reaction would be withering.

This week Fabregas and Messi were twin riders of football dreams. They made so much of the rest of football seem prosaic.

True, despite Fenerbahce's tough reputation at home, they do not belong anywhere near the highest class and Basle on the best of the days would be unlikely to make even token resistance to the genius of Messi. But what he had was an underlining of the depth of talent, and touch, rather than any new announcement. Messi's neglect by Argentina coach, Jose Pekerman, in the 2006 World Cup is a still vivid scandal and if there is talk of Atletico Madrid's Sergio Aguero being the new Maradona, the great man himself is already on the record, saying, "I have seen the player who will take my place in Argentina's football and his name is Lionel Messi." The player made a statement of his own while visiting the home of allegedly the world's best player, Cristiano Ronaldo, in last season's Champions League. He produced an imperishable master-class that, with a little more help from his team-mates, might have defaced Manchester United's mighty season.

Fabregas's own portfolio is beginning to bulge with such achievement – a haunting reality for Wenger as he strives to end the years of drought. Breaking it seemed so close to fulfilment when the player so brilliantly carried Arsenal into a commanding position in last season's title race and was as dominant against the reigning European champions, Milan, as he was this week in Istanbul.

Much of the football cognoscenti insist Wenger is doomed if he doesn't shore up his defence, pointing out that if there was some sublime work from Fabregas, and brilliant contributions from Abou Diaby, Theo Walcott and Aaron Ramsey, there was still a fine line between glory and doubt, and that it was drawn by the goalkeeper Manuel Almunia.

Some may say that Gullit is a flawed witness to the Arsenal adventure. He is, unforgettably, the man who promised Newcastle sexy football at a time when the birds and the bees were flying on another planet, but at the end of a week when the beautiful game was more than an empty phrase there had to be a strong temptation to believe.

Most inviting of all was the idea that Lionel Messi and Cesc Fabregas, joined or as separate as the brightest stars in the sky, are indeed the future of football.