

# Wenger's failure to replace key players threatens Arsenal's domestic status

As a manager, there must be nothing worse than suspecting your side have gone backwards, that recent comings and goings have left the team in a weaker position.



Wenger



It's the nightmare scenario. With every supporter pinning their hopes on some kind of improvement, you know as boss it's unlikely to happen.

It would be fascinating to find out, then, if Arsene Wenger felt that same way when the transfer window slammed shut at the end of August. Arsenal's manager, of course, was never going to publicly admit to such a thing. That would be like waving the white flag before the fight had begun. Even so, he must surely have feared his squad had taken a retrograde step. If not, there isn't much room for argument now, with 13 points dropped highlighting the difference between this season and last.

At the moment, Arsenal look anything but genuine title contenders after sobering defeats to Fulham and Hull preceded that damaging draw with Tottenham and an all too predictable capitulation at Stoke.

Any more of this and their domestic challenge will peter out this side of Christmas. If that happens, morale could be affected to such an extent that the club's precious top-four status comes under serious threat.

So how did it come to this? Why have Arsenal failed to build on last season when champions Manchester United only finished four points ahead, when a bit more luck in Europe would probably have had them heading for the Champions League final in Moscow?

To start off with, you've got to do the obvious and look at the players who left this summer. As a super-energetic midfielder, willing to do the dirty work when the opposition had the ball, Mathieu Flamini has not been adequately replaced.

Denilson might have improved, but the little Brazilian is far too similar to Cesc Fabregas in style and stature to complete an effective partnership in the middle of the park, at least when it comes to the Premier League.

Though Alexander Hleb's departure wasn't quite so critical (Arsenal rarely fail to create enough chances), this clever schemer's ability to support a lone striker proved a nice way of bolstering midfield. Staying in this area, Gilberto's best days might well have passed but the calming presence alone of this World Cup winner will have been missed in a young dressing-room.

While Samir Nasri and Aaron Ramsey, at 21 and 17 respectively, bring plenty of technical quality to the table, they simply can't replace what came before. As a result, when it boils down to a physical scrap, Arsenal's engine room can't always compete.

That applies to the centre-halves as well. We didn't need Rory Delap's long throw-ins on Saturday to confirm that Arsenal are vulnerable to the high ball. Forget about talent. That means nothing at all if, as a defender, you aren't prepared, as we used to say, to go and head heads.

The situation only gets worse if the bloke behind doesn't command his box. In truth, Manuel Almunia comes up short as a top-class goalkeeper, the kind every championship-winning side simply must possess.

It doesn't help either to have a hot-head as captain. William Gallas' authority, in fact, has never recovered from that dreadful day at St Andrew's when he completely lost the plot.

In turn, this lack of strong leadership must be connected to a shortfall in mental strength. There's a fragility to Arsenal, with an adverse result knocking them off course more easily than it would Manchester United, Chelsea or Liverpool.

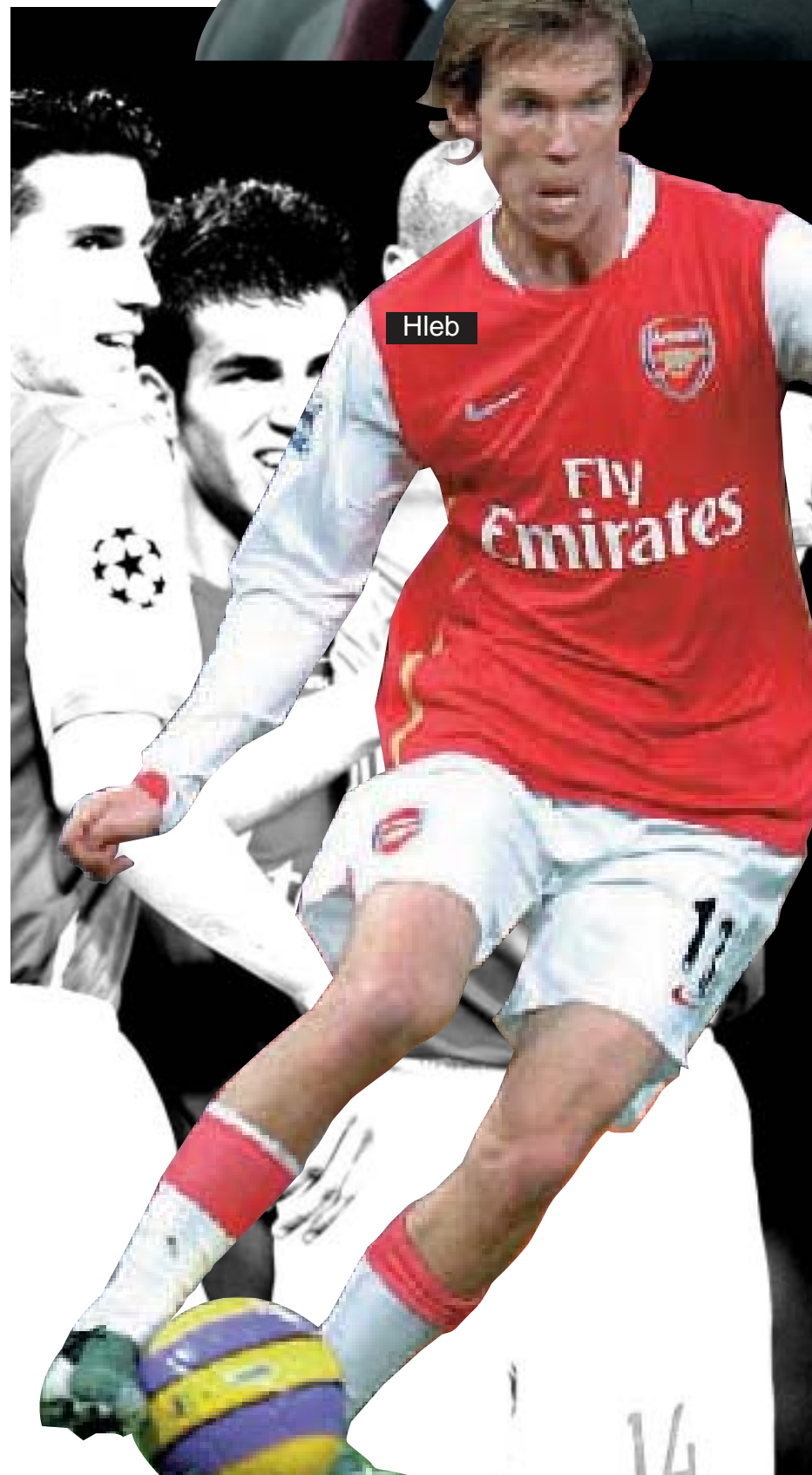
To be honest, team spirit just now doesn't look great, the togetherness of previous campaigns conspicuously absent.

Having said all this, my old club are more than capable of producing a magical turnaround. You wouldn't be surprised, for instance, to see them knock another five past Fenerbahce on Wednesday before going on to beat United at the weekend.

That's how good they can be, how stunning their football can suddenly become. Unfortunately, the package as a whole isn't quite right. It wasn't perfect last season either. But all the signs point to regression since then.

## Points for concern

1. Arsene Wenger's failure to find a replacement for Mathieu Flamini.
2. Vulnerability to the high ball in defence.
3. Manuel Almunia's goalkeeping.
4. William Gallas's captaincy.
5. Lack of strong leadership has led to a shortfall in mental strength and an absence of team spirit.



Hleb