

Crisis is over for the Gunners, now it's the Red Devils turn

WELL, that's the Arsenal crisis over — for a week or so.

The only way to judge a team is how it kicks on from a great result like the thrilling 2-1 victory over Manchester United at the Emirates.

And with a young side like Arsenal, it's a little difficult to predict.

In fact, there was no better side for the Gunners to have played themselves out of a hole against on Saturday than Alex Ferguson's.

It was a day when Arsenal desperately needed to come up against a footballing team rather than one sent out either to stop or kick them. Or both.

True to their attacking principles, United took on Arsene Wenger's side at their own game in a match Ferguson described a little ruefully as "fantasy football" and "playground stuff".

It was the best meeting between the two old heavyweights since the epic FA Cup semi-final replay at Villa Park in United's Treble-winning season of 1999.

If we are unsure where it actually leaves Arsenal, the same also applies to United.

Had Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo taken the simple chances that came their way in the opening 49 minutes, we would probably not be having this debate.

But those misses, along with others, reveal the emergence of a pattern in the light of some profligate finishing against Everton, Hull and Celtic.

At the centre of it all is Dimitar Berbatov, an actor still in search of the right part.

Behind orthodox central strikers like Robbie Keane and Jermain Defoe at Tottenham, Berbatov fitted neatly into the sort of puppeteer's role filled so artistically and effectively by Dennis Bergkamp at Arsenal.

Behind Rooney, though, there is some confusion with both players wanting to drop back and do the string-pulling. Consequently, there is a doubling up.

Certainly, Berbatov is playing considerably deeper than he ever did at White Hart Lane and, with just one league goal in nine games, seems less effectively.

Compare this with Arsenal's Samir Nasri, four goals in seven, six years younger and half Berbatov's price.

At the moment, Arsene Wenger appears to have the better deal.

Then, again, Ronaldo took 10 games to score his first United goal and he didn't turn out too badly.

While Ferguson ponders how to get the best

out of Berbatov, his position with Carlos Tevez is far more extreme: How to get the Argentine in the side.

The United manager has talked wistfully of the days when Dwight Yorke, Andy Cole, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and Teddy Sheringham all contested just two places, with Yorke and Cole generally first choice.

But Ferguson was extremely fortunate to have a player like Solskjaer with such deep-rooted loyalty to the club and another in Sheringham of such stoicism.

Tevez, with his more volatile Spanish blood, is not likely to sit happily on the bench for too long.

As such, there is already talk United may find Tevez's eventual £30million transfer fee far too high. All this is compounded by injuries to Paul Scholes and Owen Hargreaves that are leaving a club of even United's resources relatively light in midfield.

Considering all the talk in Germany of Hargreaves' long-term fitness problems at Bayern Munich, his signing was always going to carry a risk.

Finally, there is the form of 33-year-old Gary Neville.

Any player his age sidelined for 16 months will have problems readjusting to the cut and thrust of Premier League football.

It was never more obvious than at the Emirates where Red Nev failed to cut out crosses from Gael Clichy and Nasri in the opening 13 minutes that Nicklas Bendtner should have converted.

Unlucky

Yes, Neville was unlucky with the deflection that gave Arsenal their open-

er but he was then skinned by Nasri on the edge of the box for the second.

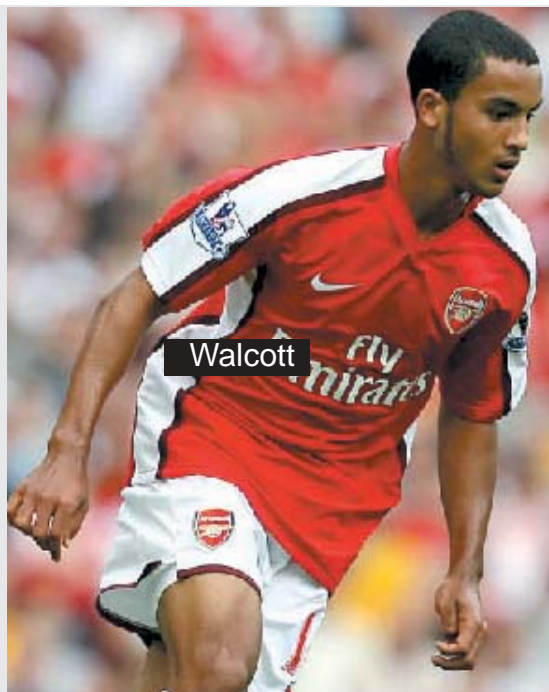
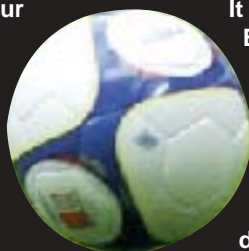
So there's much for Ferguson to contemplate with a difficult Champions League trip to Villarreal on the horizon followed by next month's debilitating World Club Championship fixture in Tokyo, one game United really could do without.

Yes, United have matches at Liverpool, Chelsea and Arsenal out the way by early November. But, as Fergie admits, the gaining of just one point from these against the four they picked up last season is "a big concern".

Harold Wilson once said a week was a long time in politics. It is an even longer in football.

Come next Saturday night, Manchester United may well have put five past Stoke at Old Trafford and Arsenal dropped points to Aston Villa at the Emirates.

It is this unpredictable state of affairs that is making this season's Premier League the most intriguing for years.



Gunners should be loan stars

STUART PEARCE has warned Arsenal's wonderkids they must leave the Emirates to become England internationals.

The Three Lions Under-21s boss insists the youngsters need to be playing regular, first-team football - even if it is on loan outside the Premier League - to be considered for call-ups.

Arsene Wenger's kids thrashed Wigan 3-0 in the Carling Cup on Tuesday night.

But despite the impressive display, not one Arsenal player has been included in

Pearce's U-21 squad for the friendly with the Czech Republic at Bramall Lane next Tuesday.

Chelsea trio Michael Mancienne, Jack Cork, and Ryan Bertrand, who are out on loan at Championship sides, have been given the nod however.

Pearce told SunSport: "It's vital that young players get experience playing football."

"I was thrown into first-team football when I was 16, albeit as a non-league player, and played week in, week out."

"That's where my experience came from - by learning from

my mistakes and learning from senior pros.

"The good thing at the moment is that I have three players who represent Chelsea that are out on loan at Wolves, Southampton and Norwich."

"I think the loan system is vitally important."

"If players are connected to the bigger clubs in the Premier League and they are not playing, they can get out on loan and get their first-team experience."

Pearce has the opposite message for young hopefuls

plying their trade outside the Premier League.

He would prefer the likes of Sheffield United's Kyle Naughton and Leeds United's Fabian Delph, who both received U-21 call-ups after becoming first teamers, to stay put.

Pearce added: "There's a few players who are playing regularly for their club."

"The important thing is first-team experience."

"Whatever league they play in is irrelevant, they need to play regularly."