

Premier League Big Four out of Aston Villa's reach despite outstanding win over Arsenal

Aston Villa were absolutely immense at Arsenal on Saturday, individually and collectively.



But when you ask if they are ready to break into the top four, then the answer is probably not.

What Martin O'Neill has done is to establish his team among the 'peripherals' in the Premier League – you know that if any team are going to finish fifth, it's most likely to be Villa. But to push on from there to the Champions League is the very hard part. One result doesn't accomplish what you set out to achieve.

To bridge the chasm of difference to the big four you need money, strength in depth, and the ability to replace quality with quality. If you're a club with grand ambitions who are starting from scratch, then you need Roman Abramovich. But if you're starting from a mid-point like Villa, then you need, in some ways, much more. You need the crowd, the revenue, the turnover, you need to make sure that when a player becomes injured you can buy someone else in January. You have to keep strengthening so that you become bigger, stronger, better.

To an extent Villa have achieved that. Certainly they are in their best position since 1982, when they won the European Cup. That was a time when the English clubs were dominating Europe, and you see now that those who are dominant are those with the money.

Randy Lerner has, to his credit, put his money where his mouth is and there is no disguising the fact that Martin has done a magnificent job with it. He should have been the England manager the last time around and under him Villa play with pace and vigour. But are they as good as Manchester United or Liverpool, Arsenal or Chelsea? Categorically not. In a sense what happened on Saturday did not even matter, and I think Martin would admit that himself, as all he can do is keep trying to make inroads.

Is he closer to reaching the top? Yes, but I wouldn't say he was a lot closer, because that would mean Villa were on the edge of the big four and I don't think they are there yet. Martin has bought slowly, he has bought well, and what he has done really successfully is to go for young players. Buying John Carew from Lyon was a great move and there is a sense that Villa play genuinely as a team. The players want to do well for

the club and you sense their disappointment when they get beaten, so I would imagine Villa Park is a happy place to be.

When you're part of that spirit, that team ethos – and I was part of it at Liverpool – it's exciting. You have camaraderie, you enjoy the training, which all means that you are in front before you start. This can be a massive advantage, and Villa have it. But unless you have the quality then you aren't going to achieve and for quality, you need money.

The transition from ambition to achievement can take anywhere from 10 seconds to 100 years. Manchester City, for example, could go out and buy the 11 best players in the world but if they haven't got a team then they haven't got much. Then again, with endless money it doesn't have to take long to get to where you want to be – Jose Mourinho showed that at Chelsea when they won back-to-back championships.

It might not take Villa long either, but they have not yet shown that they can go out and buy a player for £30 million. You have to entice these players, and the way you do so is by money. At the moment they automatically go for the big four and that creates a problem for the rest. You are really struggling to compete when four clubs have cornered the market through their money and success.

For Villa it will get harder before it gets easier because ultimately, once you are inside the big four life is easier than when you are on the outside. Arsenal might not feel this after their defeat on Saturday because for all the brilliance of their play, they have not yet mastered the art of picking up points when they play badly. They have a passing game that is phenomenal to watch but when they pass the ball badly they don't have anywhere else left to go.

I fear all the headlines about Arsenal's kids winning another Carling Cup match last week was a distraction. They have been beaten four times in the league already this season but they are still going about things the same way. No one is saying that Arsene Wenger is not a genius but he needs to conclude: We can't play any better, but we still need to find something else.