

# Arsène Wenger needs taller, stronger players – not small-mindedness

The Arsenal manager should have bitten his tongue instead of belittling the contribution of Chelsea's Didier Drogba

Arsène Wenger threatens a fusillade of statistics to mow down critics dismissive of Arsenal's efforts in the 3-0 loss to Chelsea. The only hope for his audience today will lie in getting off the first shot. It might be worth taking aim at his team's record against the other members of the usual top four since they last grasped the title in 2004.

In that period Arsenal have completed 32 matches against Manchester United, Chelsea and Liverpool in the Premier League, winning just eight of them, drawing 11 and losing the other 13. Given that context, anything Wenger said on Sunday was bound to sound specious or self-serving. It would have been too much to hope for magnanimity, but he ought surely to have been able to bite his tongue so he did not lapse into the small-minded downgrading of Didier Drogba.

The Chelsea attacker was certainly not over-

whelming throughout, but he had no need to be. It will always suffice if a forward can improvise a finish to open the scoring and then round off the victory by placing a free-kick into the top corner. Wenger is not the first manager to be afflicted by magnanimity deficit, but there was desperation lurking below the surface of those eccentric arguments.

He had nothing of substance to say on behalf of his squad. The team, for that matter, literally suffered from a lack of substance. They were, on average, far flimsier and shorter than their opponents. No Arsenal fan could have mustered an affectionate smile for the idiosyncrasy of a centre-half pairing in which neither William Gallas and Thomas Vermaelen, the men asked to marshal Drogba, are above six feet.

Wenger may have put an emphasis on nimble, darting footballers but that cannot be an article of faith for him.

Although aggressive figures such as Martin Keown and Tony Adams were already on the books before his appointment, Wenger had requested the £4m purchase of Patrick Vieira from Milan prior to starting work officially for Arsenal in the autumn of 1996. There was a hardiness, too, about signings such as Sol Campbell, Emmanuel Petit and Gilberto Silva.

The manager has surely not developed a taste for flimsiness, but the Brazil holding midfielder Felipe Melo left Fiorentina for Juventus in the summer despite reported interest from Arsenal. Wenger's club has the burden of paying for a remarkable stadium that will not enrich them for a while yet and footballers, of course, have grown more burdensome in terms of both wages and transfer fees.

Such factors still do not provide a full explanation of Wenger's situation in the transfer market. It was his preference to devote almost

£15m to the acquisition of Andrey Arshavin at the beginning of this year. No one will carp about the arrival of so accomplished a footballer, but another lightweight creator did not seem the priority.

Wenger will have been bearing in mind the potential of Alex Song, who is over six feet. The 22-year-old is having an encouraging campaign overall, but he is no great barrier and did not stop Chelsea in their tracks. With the side already 2-0 down, Song was withdrawn at the interval.

The club's difficulties are familiar. For a couple of months at the start of this year, Arsenal were in fifth place. They did, of course, overcome that challenge from Aston Villa to ensure Champions League qualification. The European scene is virtually a respite from the most intense domestic fixtures and it took Manchester United to eliminate them in last season's semi-finals.

Continued involve-

ment in that tournament cannot be taken for granted at Arsenal or, for that matter, Liverpool. The Premier League could be entering a period of change because of Manchester City's wealth as well as the general feeling of progress at Tottenham and Aston Villa. Wenger has, of course, been attempting to prepare for the challenge and the currently injured Abou Diaby does complete a tall pairing in midfield when beside Song.

Even so, Arsenal have far to go before they achieve the durability essential to any side hoping to take the title. They have conceded 18 goals in 13 league games. With no great budget at his disposal, Wenger will have to wheel and deal. He has done so brilliantly in the past, but now has to show that he retains the old gift for identifying hardened competitors who can be assimilated into the fast, smart style that often makes Arsenal a delight.



Wenger

## Arsene's Ruud awakening



Van Nistelrooy

At the start of the season, I got loads of stick from some Arsenal fans. My prediction was that they wouldn't win the Premier League.

A few of those supporters said Thierry Henry was still a legend, unlike myself, because he reckoned Arsenal could clinch the title.

Sometimes, though, the truth hurts. After the 3-0 battering by Chelsea, it's a sad fact that Arsene Wenger's team will come up short. Again.

They used to be a team that wins things - but not any more.

There's no point in trying to find excuses, either. Arsenal were beaten by a better team and I found it extremely difficult to watch the final 30 minutes of the match.

Despite a game in hand, the 11-point gap is too big for Arsenal to close.

Manchester United are five points behind Chelsea and I think they, too, will be unable

to get past Carlo Ancelotti's team.

Right now, Chelsea look unstoppable.

The key difference for me on Sunday was that the visitors had a prolific main striker and Arsenal did not. They were clearly lacking in that department. Robin van Persie being out for several months is obviously a major blow.

But I don't believe Wenger's team has a player up front who could bring 15 to 25 goals to the table. Those days have gone and I would certainly love Didier Drogba, who has now scored 10 goals in 11 matches against Arsenal.

The team desperately needs some experience up front.

A couple of years ago, Alex Ferguson signed Henrik Larsson for Manchester United to beef up his squad with a player who had been round the block.

Arsenal need to do that

and, in January, I'd love to see Arsene Wenger finally spend some money and bring in Ruud van Nistelrooy, who has already indicated he might be interested in a move back to England.

At least he knows where the goal is and he would be a decent influence on someone like Eduardo, who needs help. I'd even welcome Thierry back.

I think our midfield and defence is fine but the goalkeeper situation still worries me.

Manuel Almunia is a good No 2 but not a first-choice keeper for a club looking to win titles.

At times, he looks out of his depth. Arsenal need a top-drawer keeper but the problem is whether they could attract one.

A player like Gianluigi Buffon is unlikely to be desperate for a move to the Emirates.

Arsenal can bully teams like Blackburn at home and hit

them for six.

But that is of no use if they lose away at Sunderland and cave in against their title rivals like they did on Sunday.

I still believe - and hope - Arsenal can win a cup this season.

But it's a shame that the club are only just into December and the league already seems to be drifting away.

The situation is just depressing.

The other fear is that the team could finish below Tottenham, although I am confident that will not be the case.

But the one thing I would say is that under Harry Redknapp, Spurs are now a solid unit.

They fought hard at Aston Villa in a match they would have lost 12 months ago but ended up leaving with a deserved point.

My final point from Sunday's game is that I was pleased for Ashley Cole.

Despite getting all that

abuse, he was extremely professional and the match went off without incident.

The fans at the Emirates only hate him because he is such a great player - the best left-back in the world - and is now at another London club that regularly beats Arsenal and wins trophies.

Although he won the league with Arsenal twice, Ashley has yet to do that with Chelsea - but I think he could be celebrating the championship at Stamford Bridge in May.

Arsenal do frustrate me and a lot of their fans sometimes as they can play some really brilliant football. They have qualified from their Champions League group extremely easily and I think they have a good chance of beating Manchester City in the Carling Cup tomorrow.

Yet a team is judged on their defining games and, this season, they have not delivered when they have really needed to.