



A lesson from history: never write off United

Fired Up! In a title run-in like this, the only thing on your mind is 'win the game in front of you'

The Premier League title is Chelsea's to lose, but lose it they can. Before anyone starts accusing me of Fergie-esque mind games – just because I am an unashamed Manchester United fan – I acknowledge Chelsea are in pole position, and deserve to be. Winning 2-1 at Old Trafford two weeks ago showed they have the quality of champions.

In my own career I was involved in my fair share of title run-ins, mostly ending in success when I was at United. An equivalent for us of Chelsea winning at Old Trafford was when we went to Newcastle in early March 1996.

That was the Kevin Keegan "I'd love it" season. In January 1996 Newcastle had a 12-point lead. But we had started to close it down. That game in March was vital, and we won. Eric Cantona scored the only goal.

It turned out to be an important victory as we went on to win the Double. We topped the league with 82 points. Newcastle has 78. If that game at Newcastle had gone the other way, it would have been so different. If Chelsea do win the league this season, they'll look back at Old Trafford as pivotal.

But can Chelsea stay ahead? It's the billion rouble question. A look at the four re-

maining games that United and Chelsea face tell me it could be the wire. United are away at City in the Manchester derby tomorrow. Form goes out the window in derbies (thank goodness, given City's great run). United can win that.

They then play at home to Spurs, having a terrific season. But do I expect United to beat them at home? Yes, just as I expect United to win at Sunderland, then at home to Stoke. In other words, it is possible United will win 12 points. No easy games, but they can do it.

Chelsea face Tottenham tomorrow away. They are good enough to win, but Spurs, seeking fourth, should make it tough. They should certainly then win at home to Stoke, and their final game, at home to Wigan. But the penultimate game is at Liverpool. Again, not an easy fixture, especially if Liverpool are still in the chase for fourth place.

Could Chelsea win 12 points from 12? Yes. Do I think they will? No. Six minimum, maybe 10, probably eight or nine. One would have to think eight points would land the title; even if United won 12, they would have 85 in total, and Chelsea with eight more points would have 85 points and possibly a better goal difference. But you never know. Could Spurs or Liverpool

beat Chelsea while the other of that pair draw? Yes. These permutations and possibilities are all part of a thrilling run-in that still has twists left.

United's most tightly fought run-in when I was there was in 1998-99. On the final day of the season, we were at home to Tottenham and needed to win to guarantee the title. Arsenal were only one point behind us and at home to Aston Villa. If we drew or lost while Arsenal won, they would be champions.

We started badly, going 1-0 down to Spurs; Les Ferdinand scored their goal and I could only watch, frustrated, from the bench. David Beckham equalised just before half-time, and then I went on in the second-half, replacing Teddy Sheringham.

In a match like that, even in a run-in like that, the only thing in your mind is "win this game in front of you". The Boss wasn't telling us every day "If you do X and Y, we'll get Z points". He didn't need to spell things out. Your mission is simply to win every game until you've won the title, or mathematically cannot win it.

That day in 1999, Arsenal won their game. Luckily I scored, with my first touch. We won 2-1, and the title. Relief. That was the major emotion.

Fabio Capello pencils in Adam Johnson for surprise England call-up

Fabio Capello is considering a call-up for the uncapped Manchester City midfielder Adam Johnson. The England manager has two May friendlies in which he could test the 22-year-old midfielder, against Mexico and Japan, before the World Cup finals. Johnson, who was at Middlesbrough before a £7m move to Eastlands in the January window, has been almost ever-present in their starting line-up since his arrival, helping Roberto Mancini's side become favourites to secure the last Champions League position.

"He has come up from the Championship, where he played in a different position [on the left]," the England manager told thefa.com, "and he has done well. Now it's important he gets some international experience."

Johnson was not in the provisional 30-man group for last month's friendly with Egypt but, with Aaron Lennon still injured, alternatives for the right flank should interest Capello. He is also warning regular squad members against complacency. Theo Walcott is not always a starter for Arsenal while Johnson appears to have overtaken his club-mate Shaun Wright-Phillips in the pecking order.

On the upper tier of the Premier League smugness has already ceased to be an immediate danger since there is no English club in the semi-finals of the Champions League. "All the clubs," he said, "have sold important players; some went overseas, others moved to new clubs, and went to Manchester City. They got obviously weaker."

The transfers of Cristiano Ronaldo, Xabi Alonso and Emmanuel Adebayor have been harmful, even if Chelsea were not similarly depleted. "If a club is at the top," Capello said, "it

should buy every year one or two high-level players to remain at the top, given that the opposition is getting stronger. The clubs which spent in the summer are now semi-finalists. Barcelona, Internazionale and Bayern only spent less than Real Madrid and Manchester City. It is obvious that the financial crisis has affected the English clubs in Europe."

The Glazers, Manchester United's owners, may not like the implication of Capello's encouragement of a greater outlay but the theory should endear the Italian to a mutinous Stretford End. As the England manager knows, however, there were also random causes for United's defeat.

"They were unlucky because they paid dearly for their mistakes," he said, "like when they presented Bayern with the late second goal in Munich, and the first at Old Trafford when they were 3-0 up. But what really made the difference was Rafael's sending-off, and Wayne Rooney's injury. You cannot go through at this level with such disadvantages."



When Rooney hipped on damaged ankle ligaments, Capello must also have been in pain. "I perfectly understand Sir Alex Ferguson's decision to play Rooney," he said, "because he knows how important Rooney is psychologically for the whole team. I do not think he took an unnecessary risk. If Sir Alex played Rooney after the pre-match tests, clearly his condition allowed him to do so."

The Italian is far too sensible to rejoice that elimination from the Champions League is an excellent development because it will reduce the workload of his men ahead of the World Cup. "The only advantage," he said, "is that all the England players will be available for the start of our preparation in Austria. But it is only a relative advantage. When players win trophies they are happier, and I believe in positive psychology."

With that in mind, he did try to speak reassuringly about the mishaps of the Champions League and reckoned Chelsea had played well when losing 2-1 at San Siro. "As it happened,

Inter played magnificently in the second leg," he said, "but on the whole it was an even tie."

Arsenal's elimination was simpler still. "They had to face a great side like Barcelona," said Capello, "probably in their best form of the season. Moreover, Arsenal have been extremely unlucky, losing key players like Van Persie, Fabregas, Arshavin, Gallas, Ramsey. They would have needed them all to hope to go through."

"I just hope the players who are out injured will recover by the end of the season," he said, although England's medical staff are in touch with the clubs on a daily basis. "If Ashley Cole comes back, it means he's fit. He'll need to play but this is a better problem than having to get someone back to fitness."

All is calm with Capello and he sees "no problem" about seeing out a contract that runs until 2012. He muses on the Wembley pitch and the consequences of other events being staged there but the surface was not a factor in England's matches.

The manager realises, too, that his customary severity will have to be modified when he and the squad are cooped up together. "We'll try to come up with creative pastimes," Capello added, "but do not expect me to send the players to the casinos of Sun City."

There will be no drowning of sorrows either. "Alcohol has always been banned from all our HQs so far," he said. "And that goes for myself and my staff too. It means that we won't need to go to a health farm to detox, we'll do it in-house."

If anyone wants to feel light-headed, they must achieve exhilarating results.