

It is that time of the spring when we brush down again the latest epilogue for Arsène Wenger and the Arsenal he nurses like some delicate plant always at the mercy of a cold snap or a harsh wind.

Again, too, there is more than a whisper of an heretical thought. It is that maybe Wenger has run his course with Arsenal, that maybe he too is tiring of the weight of the demands he makes on both his team and himself.

Of course there is a terrible danger in this time-honoured routine and it should be avoided with some care by anyone not sure of the difference between unfulfilled belief and a dead end.

This may be the fifth year of Wenger's failure to deliver a significant trophy but we cannot forget that in the matter of defeat there are many degrees or that each one of those accumulated on the shoulders of the Frenchman since his team won the FA Cup in 2005 have been accompanied by one supreme redemption.

But how do we describe and itemise this redemption? It should be no mystery, for heavens sake. We are talking, after all, about a man who would rather put his hand in a vat of burning oil than send out a team without any possibility of adding to the belief that football is the greatest of team games because of its capacity to be both beautiful and inspirational.

Along with such virtue no doubt Wenger has a vice and it would have perhaps been asking too much of some Arsenal fans leaving White Hart Lane so mournfully this week for it not to register, however fleetingly. That in some cases it lingered a little more doggedly perhaps explains the ludicrous price of 9-2 offered by one leading bookmaker yesterday that Wenger will not be at the Emirates at the start of next season. The vice is, of course, vanity, the belief that one day he will win entirely on his terms.

He will not speculate unduly in the transfer market, certainly not in the way Sir Alex Ferguson did for Dimitar Berbatov, and, to go to another extreme, Rafa Benitez in the hazard-strewn signing of Alberto Aquilani. He will not gamble on the possibilities of players who have been brought up outside his own regime, or have not shown at an early age the ability to adapt quite seamlessly, to its priorities, and when injuries strike him hard, as they did so again this season, the consequences are maybe inevitable.

The vulnerability was starkly underlined when Robin van Persie went down, a loss which was poignantly advertised when the Dutchman came on with such force and presence at White Hart Lane even while plainly far from full fitness, and the additional injuries to Cesc Fabregas, Nicklas Bendtner, Andrei Ar-



## For the good of the game, Wenger must keep his faith

WENGER

*Wenger's vice is vanity, the belief that one day he will win entirely on his terms*

shavin and Aaron Ramsey inevitably provoked more complaints that Wenger's squad lacked sufficient depth.

But if you were an Arsenal fan this morning would you willingly trade in the idea that you are part of something which might just one day produce an extraordinary triumph for some of the game's best values? Or would you prefer to march beneath the standards of powerhouses like Chelsea and Manchester United, waxing strong in all your expectations?

It is a philosophical question that has no doubt been exercising many of the Arsenal fans for some time. Indeed, it is possible to put a date on it. Oddly, the most serious manifestation came just a few months before Arsenal's last trophy win, an uncharacteristic, pragmatic victory over Manchester United in the FA Cup final. Arsenal were knocked out of the Champions League by Bayern Munich and the call-in shows reverberated with cries that the Wenger caravan had rolled to a halt.

It was ridiculous then and it is ridiculous now. Back in 2005 Arsenal were a year away from the hard-run Champions League final against Barcelona, when the dismissal of the

eccentric Jens Lehmann in the 18th minute tipped the balance so heavily in favour of a team that would soon be challenging for the title as one of the best Europe had ever seen.

Here we had a devastating example of the fine line walked by a man like Wenger dreaming such extravagant dreams. In the semi-final against Villarreal, Lehmann was a giant of defiance, preserving Arsenal's life with an 89th-minute save. In Paris he was Arsenal's fault line and it was also true that Thierry Henry, arguably the greatest of all of Wenger's inventions, failed to pull the trigger on the chance that he might have been expected to convert in his sleep.

The acid test for Wenger now lies in the question that is most properly applied to any man of outstanding achievement and the highest ambition. Did Arsenal regress this last season, did they provide irrefutable evidence, as Liverpool did on so many crucial occasions, that they no longer had either the unity or the panache which once made them what they were? That is hardly the case. Barcelona were awesome in the first half at the Emirates, would have been too much for any team in Europe in the vein they occupied for 20 min-

utes which might have brought them at least three goals, and in the second leg Lionel Messi was rampant against an injury-shattered Arsenal. This was defeat, Wenger admitted, by a team of superior class, but it wasn't quite the undressing it might have been in the absence of Fabregas.

Similarly, defeat at White Lane this week was less than a bonfire of legitimate hope produced by a season in which only United and Chelsea established a clear competitive edge. Tottenham's half-time lead was something of a travesty, Arsenal having played some extremely cohesive football, and in the second half the arrival of Van Persie established a much stronger threat.

All history now, it's true, but any inquest conducted on Arsène Wenger and his team needs to be informed by the old truth that if you don't understand what happened yesterday you will not have much clue about tomorrow.

One line in the epilogue is surely beyond doubt. It is that Arsenal without Wenger would not only be a grievous mistake. It would also be like a meal without wine, a day without sunshine. A wise Arsenal surely waits a little longer for the banquet.

MY Tottenham team pulled off a miracle against Arsenal but we'll need an even bigger one if we hope to send champions-elect Chelsea crashing today.

I've got to take my hat off to the way the players performed against Arsenal, coming off the back of that FA Cup semi-final defeat to Portsmouth and 120 minutes on THAT Wembley pitch.

But as great a night as it was, beating them in the league for the first time in 11 years and young Danny Rose scoring that wonder goal, we'll have to go up another notch or two if we hope to beat Chelsea.

Don't get me wrong, Arsenal are a terrific side, and if Robin van Persie had been fit all season they'd have gone very close.

But Chelsea are another lev-

## Now we need another miracle

By Harry Redknapp

el - so big, strong and quick and the side I think will win the Premier League now. So if beating our North London rivals was miraculous, it's nothing to what's needed now.

The problem we have against the top sides is they tend to play with only one up front, which gives us a real headache controlling the midfield.

Stopping Frank Lampard making those bursts will be the key and, to be honest, we haven't managed it too well in the past. He's always scored goals against my sides, wherever I've been, and I think last year was just about the only

time he's not managed one. It certainly seems that way.

I've got his dad a ticket for the game and if they win - especially if Frank scores - I'll be making sure he pays me for it, too!

How we could do with Manchester United doing us a favour at City a few hours before we kick off.

By the time we run out, the result will be known and in a strange way the psychological side of things will be affected by what has happened 200-odd miles away at lunchtime.

Ourselves and City are hot favourites for fourth now - al-

though I still wouldn't rule out Aston Villa given their run-in - and if you'd offered me this position a few months ago, I'd have snapped your hand off.

I really can't praise my players enough for the way they've performed, especially Tom Huddlestone - who I think should definitely go to the World Cup - and Gareth Bale, as good a left-sided player as there is.

But on Wednesday I think you saw the REAL miracle man in Ledley King, who was absolutely out of this world against Arsenal.

When you think he hadn't played for two months -

hadn't even trained really - it was even more remarkable.

While I think Tom should go to South Africa with England, that's even more the case with Ledley.

Six days between games would give him the recovery time - that tells you about the struggle he has to play tomorrow - and he'd be a real asset.

If Ledley was out there and anything happened to John Terry or Rio Ferdinand, no one should think England are in the you-know-what.

He's proved his ability to go straight back into the side after a lay-off and handle it

against the best.

All of which brings me back to the injuries we've had. At the moment, we're missing the likes of Wilson Palacios, Niko Kranjcar, Aaron Lennon and Vedran Corluka.

Even my bloody horse got injured the other day, for Heaven's sake!

Finally, as disappointing as it was to lose to Pompey, I must offer my congratulations to Avram Grant and his side for making it to Wembley after all their troubles.

Sunday night wasn't the greatest I've ever had - certainly not a patch on Wednesday - although by the time I drove back to Poole at 2am I was so knackered there was no celebrating.

I'll be quite happy if I get the chance to make up for it tomorrow - but it's going to be one hell of a job.