

Premiership Profile: TONY ADAMS

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Arsenal's inspirational centre-half and captain, Tony Adams.

Arsenal captain Tony Adams has been battling against a persistent back injury that has necessitated frequent rests, and his absences from the team have been a major factor in the Gunners' erratic form this season.

The inspirational defender, 34 last October, was missing from the team that lost 6-1 to Manchester United recently, but returned for the games against West Ham United and Spartak Moscow, in which Arsenal kept a clean sheet.

Indeed, the Gunners have kept clean sheets in each of the last eight games in which Adams has appeared. Furthermore, of the 25 matches he's played

this season in all competitions, Arsenal have won 18. Such statistics underline not only his defensive abilities, but also his leadership qualities.

Adams is the ideal captain. He leads by example and experience (with 643 Arsenal games to his credit, he is second in the club's all-time list of appearances; only current Leeds manager David O'Leary played more times for them). He demands total commitment from every other player in the team, and is a natural organiser on the pitch.

The looming problem for Arsene Wenger is how to replace him when his body finally says 'enough'. That day may have been postponed by Adams's recent decision to retire from international football after winning more than 60 England caps. He felt that it would be unfair on Arsenal if the demands of the national team restricted his club appearances, given the growing need to rest and recover that his back problem has created.

His philosophy is simple: 'I don't look further ahead than the next game,' he says. 'The first target is to be fit enough to play in Arsenal's next match.'

Adams's attitude reflects the battle against alcoholism that he fights on a day-to-day basis.

Since putting his less sober days behind him, he has developed an interest in poetry, the theatre, and playing the piano. He's also produced some of the best football of a long and glittering career that began when he joined Arsenal as a trainee in April 1983. He made his debut against Sunderland in November that year, less than a month after his 17th birthday.

Tony's career really took off when George Graham became Arsenal manager in 1986 and made him the first choice centre-back. In 1988 Graham made Adams his captain, and no skipper has lifted more trophies for the club. Adams has led Arsenal to three championships, two FA Cup wins, a League Cup triumph and the European Cup Winners' Cup.

'I'm very lucky to play football for a living,' he says, 'and as long as my body lets me I'll continue to enjoy it. But as a recovering alcoholic you never look beyond today.'

Already a legend at Highbury, he has become one of the most respected players in English football. Finding a replacement with the potential to achieve the same stature in the game will be a huge challenge. Adams may be persuaded to stay at the club in a coaching role when his playing days are over. But until then, Arsenal fans are enjoying his performances while they

can and Tony himself feels he could still have another two seasons left in him.

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