

ARSENAL S AMBITIONS UNDERMINED BY INCONSISTENCY

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Appearing in a showpiece FA Cup Final, reaching the quarter-finals of the Champions League and probably finishing as runners-up in the Premiership – so guaranteeing a further Champions League adventure – would represent a successful season for most clubs. Yet for Arsenal and their fans, such a performance during 2000/01 has left them with a distinct feeling of failure.

Honourable defeat by Valencia on the away-goals rule in mid-week, despite having looked the better team over two legs, cannot disguise the fact that Arsenal s latest Champions League campaign has lacked conviction and a cutting-edge in front of goal. And the fact that Manchester United were able to claim the Premiership crown a week ago – earlier than ever before, with a 16 point lead over the Gunners – merely confirms the feebleness of the Londoners domestic challenge to the Red Devils.

Even if Arsenal triumph over Liverpool at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff on 12th May to lift the FA Cup for the eighth time in their history, the season will still be judged one of underachievement, because the Premiership is what matters most to all Gunners fans.

Last season and this, Arsenal have been undone by their own inconsistency. They have comfortably occupied second place in the Premiership, but rarely threatened to dislodge United from top spot. Arsenal fans are becoming frustrated, which means the weight of expectation on manager Arsene Wenger and his squad of highly talented but inconsistent players will be greater than ever next season.

The club is struggling to reconcile some fundamental contradictions. For example, the Gunners have regularly seen good runs punctuated by surprisingly heavy defeats (0-4 at Anfield, 1-6 at Old Trafford and 0-3 at home to Middlesbrough). And until last week s inexplicable collapse against Boro, they had become virtually impregnable at Highbury, yet utterly unconvincing on their travels. Only 14 goals scored in 16 Premiership away games tells its own sorry story. To win the League a team must be unbeatable at home and win more than half of its away games. Travel sickness of the sort that Arsenal have shown means the title will remain out of reach.

Yet the Arsenal tradition is one of triumphing against the odds, of winning when their backs are against the wall; above all, it is a tradition of never giving up. Too often this season the team has appeared to lack the necessary will and fighting spirit that the fans expect to see. The problem, as far as most fans are concerned, is that the balance of the team (and squad) is wrong.

In attack, for example, no-one seems quite sure about which pair from Arsenal's four international strikers (Thierry Henry, Dennis Bergkamp, Kanu and Sylvain Wiltord) is the best striking partnership. It would certainly include Henry, but all four have consistently failed to convert enough of the many chances the team creates. Too often they seem to want to score beautiful goals rather than the scruffy tap-ins from inside the six-yard box that can be decisive over a season. That's why many fans yearn for a striker in the Ian Wright mould, always getting on the end of things.

In defence – the basis of Arsenal's successes in the past – Wenger must find effective replacements for heroes like Lee Dixon, Martin Keown, David Seaman and captain Tony Adams, who are all well into their 30s. These legends are nearing the end of their careers, yet still consistently out-perform more recent additions to the squad such as Oleg Luzhny, Igor's Stepanovs, Alex Manninger and Nelson Vivas.

The exception is at left-back, where the form of Brazilian left-back Silvinho was good enough to displace veteran Nigel Winterburn. Ironically, youngster Ashley Cole has now emerged in the same position, giving Wenger an abundance of riches here but a headache elsewhere in defence.

There has also been a lack of balance and blend in midfield. The sale of Emmanuel Petit to Barcelona last summer proved to be a major blow. His partnership with Patrick Vieira was one of the Gunners' greatest strengths and has been sorely missed. Lauren, Gilles Grimandi and Freddie Ljungberg – as well as newcomer Edu from Brazil – have struggled to match Petit's contribution, either in the tackle or in passing the ball. As a result, the burden on Vieira's shoulders has increased. Vieira is a superb player whose spirit and commitment are in the finest Highbury traditions. He is the one current Arsenal player identified by Ferguson as truly world class.

Yet ominously for Arsenal fans, Vieira was ambiguous when asked about his future in the wake of the Valencia defeat. Good question, he said. I have a contract with Arsenal until 2004 but you know in football anything is possible so from today I should say nothing.

The French midfielder made no attempt to hide his frustration about the club's transfer market activities. We need some more players, he said, But to let Petit and Marc Overmars go was a mistake by the club. Of course it was good business but for me it was a big disappointment because if we kept the pair we would be even stronger. The team needs them. We have a good side but with Petit and Overmars we'd be fantastic.

To lose Vieira would be considered a catastrophe by every Arsenal fan.

But the fans would also like to see more of the club's promising youngsters given a first team chance. That is another Arsenal tradition, which Cole has maintained this season; but Wenger too often seems to overlook the home-produced talent in favour of foreign imports. A solid core of players who have grown up with the club can create an indomitable team spirit, as Arsenal have proved in the past and Manchester United are continuing to prove.

Although revered for what he has already achieved, Wenger now faces the biggest challenge of his Highbury career. His transfer activity this summer and in particular his powers of team-building and motivation will be crucial to Arsenal's immediate future.

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