

Premiership preview Pompey pack a punch

Football

AFP, London

New boys not whipping boys has been the message emanating from Premiership newcomers Portsmouth in the opening weeks of the campaign.

Two wins and two draws from their first four games have left Harry Redknapp's team sitting pretty in third place in the league and confirmed their pre-season credentials as the most likely of the three promoted sides to stay up.

The season is still young but whether Portsmouth can realistically entertain aspirations beyond survival should be a little clearer by the time Arsenal have finished with them on Saturday afternoon.

Spending constraints prevented Arsene Wenger from making significant additions to his squad in the close season, his financial embarrassment made all the more painful by the freespending antics of their London neighbours Chelsea.

But Wenger's success in persuading his compatriots Thierry Henry, Patrick Vieira and Robert Pires to sign new contracts nevertheless made it a hugely significant summer for Arsenal and there has been an ominously determined edge to their performances since the start of the season.

Four straight wins speak for themselves and it would represent a major surprise if Portsmouth were to prevent them making it five at Highbury.

The visitors will however have the advantage of a relatively fresh squad following a week of international football during which the bulk of Arsenal's first team was scattered across the globe.

Wenger will definitely have to do without midfielder Gilberto, who was only due to return to London on

Friday after playing for Brazil in midweek.

"Gilberto won't be available. Apart from that, everyone has returned in good shape," a relieved Wenger reported.

Portsmouth's Serbian defender Dejan Stevanovic acknowledges the south coast club, bankrolled by the millions of his compatriot Milan Mandric, still have some way to go before they can travel to places like Highbury expecting to pick up points.

But he is confident about their ability to consolidate their place in



STEVE McMANAMAN

the top flight.

"I don't think we should simply talk about survival," he said. "We need to be looking at mid-table. The team is capable of that and if we pick up the points where we should we achieve that."

Manchester United will seek to get back to winning form at Charlton following the unexpected reverse at Southampton a fortnight ago which allowed Arsenal to pull clear at the top of the table.

After a turbulent week in which chief executive Peter Kenyon announced his shock departure for Chelsea and manager Alex

Ferguson revealed he had been approached by the London club, United fans could do with the reassurance of a good performance on the field.

Chelsea boss Claudio Ranieri's attempts to blend the 100 million pounds of talent acquired this summer into a championship winning force continues with the visit of Tottenham to Stamford Bridge.

Former England winger Steve McManaman is expected to make his Premiership debut for Manchester City in Sunday's clash with Aston Villa.

Having been used in a variety of roles during his time at Real Madrid, McManaman says he is ready to slot into the City side wherever manager Kevin Keegan can find a place for him.

"You talk about Luis Figo being a great right winger but he is playing on the left at the moment," McManaman pointed out. "Zidane has played up front but he is playing centre midfield currently and was playing on the left last season.

"You don't want to be labelled a utility man or anything as derogatory as that but I think good players can and will play anywhere," he said.

"I have performed well in the centre of midfield for Real and Liverpool and played on the left and on the right for England and for Liverpool before that."

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT kick-off unless stated)

Saturday: Arsenal v Portsmouth, Blackburn v Liverpool, Bolton v Middlesbrough, Charlton v Manchester Utd, Chelsea v Tottenham, Everton v Newcastle, Southampton v Wolves

Sunday: Birmingham v Fulham (1505 GMT), Manchester City v Aston Villa (1300 GMT)

Monday: Leicester v Leeds (1900 GMT)

TUESDAY: Liverpool v Manchester United (1900 GMT)

WEDNESDAY: Chelsea v Newcastle (1900 GMT)

THURSDAY: Manchester United v Arsenal (1900 GMT)

FRIDAY: Manchester United v Liverpool (1900 GMT)

SATURDAY: Manchester United v Newcastle (1900 GMT)

SUNDAY: Manchester United v Arsenal (1900 GMT)

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