

Gunners-box

REUTERS, London

Factbox on English Premier League champions Arsenal:

Founded: 1886 under the name of Dial Square by workers at the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich.

1891: Team turned professional and changed name to Woolwich Arsenal.

1893: Joined Football League.

1913: Moved to Highbury, north London, played their first game at the "Arsenal Stadium", as it is officially known, against Leicester Fosse on September 6.

1919: Voted into top division when league football resumed after First World War and have retained top flight status ever since -- the longest unbroken run of any English club.

HONOURS

English Champions (13 times): 1930/31, 1932/33, 1933/34, 1934/35, 1937/38, 1947/48, 1952/53, 1970/71, 1988/89, 1990/91, 1997/98, 2001/02, 2003/04.

FA Cup Winners (nine times): 1930, 1936, 1950, 1971, 1979, 1993, 1998, 2002, 2003.

Domestic league and FA Cup doubles: 1970/71, 1997/98, 2001/02.

League Cup winners: 1987, 1993

European Cup Winners' Cup winners: 1994

Fairs Cup winners: 1970.

Manager: Arsene Wenger, appointed September 1996.

Previous managers: 1995-96 Bruce Rioch, 1986-95 George Graham, 1984-86 Don Howe, 1976-83 Terry Neill, 1966-76, Bertie Mee, 1962-66 Billy Wright, 1958-62 George Swindin, 1956-58 Jack Grayston, 1947-56 Tom Whittaker, 1934-47 George Allison, 1925-34 Herbert Chapman, 1919-25 Leslie Knighton, 1908-15 George Morrell, 1904-08 Phil Kelso, 1899-1904 Harry Bradshaw, 1898-99 George Elcoat, 1897-98 Tom Mitchell and 1894-97 Sam Hollis

All time leading scorer: Ian Wright -- 184 goals

Most capped player: David O'Leary (Ireland) -- 672 appearances

Biggest league win: 12-0 v Loughborough Town (12/03/1900)

Biggest league defeat: 8-0 v Loughborough Town (12/12/1896)

Lampard may leave Chelsea

AFP, London

Frank Lampard is leaving Chelsea after the club refused to meet his pay demands, his agent announced Sunday.

The 26-year-old has proved outstanding this season but feels he is undervalued at Stamford Bridge and is eyeing a move to Inter Milan or Juventus.

"There are no more talks planned because all the talking has been done. That's it. It's over," Steve Kutner told Sunday's edition of The People.

'Gerrard is Keane'

AFP, London

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson spelled out Sunday just why he wanted to see Liverpool's Steven Gerrard at Old Trafford next season.

Fergie told The Sunday Times that he regarded the Liverpool ace as the natural successor to his midfield general Roy Keane.

"If you were looking for the player you would replace Keane with, it's Gerrard, without question."

"He has become the most influential player in England, bar none."

"To me, Gerrard is Keane; he is now where Keane was when Roy came to us in 1994. I've watched him quite a lot, and everywhere the ball is, he seems to be there."

"He's got that unbelievable engine, desire, determination. Anyone would take Gerrard."

Ferguson conceded it would be a "complicated" transfer, and said he would opt for Gerrard over Arsenal captain and midfielder Patrick Vieira.

"Not that Vieira lacks anything, but I think that Gerrard does more for his team than Vieira does."

"Vieira has done that job for Arsenal for two or three years. But you can see Gerrard rising and rising."

Premiership

Arsenal untouchable

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal defied Leicester's spirited attempts to tear up the script as they booked their place in history by completing an unbeaten sweep through the entire English Premiership season.

A 2-1 win at Highbury on Saturday ensured Arsene Wenger's champions finished the season with 26 wins, 12 draws and not a single defeat -- a feat that had not been achieved since Preston North End's 'Invincibles' stayed unbeaten through a 22-match campaign in 1888/89.

The other big issue of the final day of the season was resolved in Newcastle's favour, a 1-1 draw at Liverpool enough to secure fifth spot and a place in the UEFA Cup as rivals Aston Villa slumped to a 2-0 home defeat to Manchester United.

Chelsea marked what was almost certainly Claudio Ranieri's final match in charge with a 1-0 win over Leeds, courtesy of Jesper Gronkjaer's 20th-minute goal.

Leeds escaped the ignominy of

finishing the season bottom of the table. That dubious distinction went to Wolves, whose final game in the top flight ended with a 2-0 home defeat to Tottenham and Paul Ince being sent off in possibly his last game for the club.

Arsenal's performance at Highbury was far from convincing but history will not record that Leicester had looked like crashing the party in spectacular fashion after captain Paul Dickov headed them into a first-half lead.

The goal left Arsenal rattled and they never looked like equalising until Frank Sinclair upended Ashley Cole in the box two minutes after the restart.

Thierry Henry slotted the spot-kick low to the right of Ian Walker for his 30th Premiership goal of the season.

Normal service was resumed thereafter and Patrick Vieira booked the Gunners' place in history by rounding Walker after a sublime through-ball from the outside of Dennis Bergkamp's right-boot.

Newcastle salvaged something from a miserable season after taking a first half lead at Anfield through Shola Ameobi, who finished well

after a strong run and neat pass from Lee Bowyer.

Michael Owen equalised midway through the second half after a superb through ball from England teammate Steven Gerrard.

United crushed Villa's dreams of a return to Europe with two goals in the first ten minutes, Cristiano Ronaldo and Ruud van Nistelrooy doing the damage.

The game ended less happily for United after Darren Fletcher and Ronaldo received late red cards but they came too late for Villa to salvage the point that would have put them into Europe.

Blackburn and Birmingham shared the points at Ewood Park.

Brian McBride ensured Fulham secured their highest-ever Premiership finish -- ninth -- with a double in a 2-0 win at Bolton.

Manchester City finally produced a performance worthy of their new stadium as they thrashed Everton 5-1 to leapfrog the Merseysiders and finish the season 17th.

Portsmouth also rounded off their season in style with a 5-1 win over Middlesbrough at Fratton Park.

Charlton clinched sixth place with a 2-1 win over Southampton.

FINAL TABLE

English Premiership table on Saturday after the final round of matches of the 2003-04 season:

Arsenal	38	26	12	0	73	26	90
Chelsea	38	24	7	7	67	30	79
Man Utd	38	23	6	9	64	35	75
Liverpool	38	16	12	10	55	37	60
Newcastle	38	13	17	8	52	40	56
Aston Villa	38	15	11	12	48	44	56
Charlton	38	14	11	13	51	51	53
Bolton	38	14	11	13	48	56	53
Fulham	38	14	10	14	52	46	52
B'ham	38	12	14	12	43	48	50
M'brough	38	13	9	16	44	52	48
Shampton	38	12	11	15	44	45	47
Portsmouth	38	12	9	17	47	54	45
Tottenham	38	13	6	19	47	57	45
Blackburn	38	12	8	18	51	59	44
Man City	38	9	14	15	55	54	41
Everton	38	9	12	17	45	57	39
Leicester	38	6	15	17	48	65	33
Leeds	38	8	9	21	40	79	33
Wolves	38	7	12	19	38	77	33

TOP SCORERS

REUTERS, London

Leading scorers in the English Premier League after Saturday's final round of matches:

- 30 -- Thierry Henry (Arsenal)
- 22 -- Alan Shearer (Newcastle United)
- 22 -- Louis Saha (Manchester United, includes 13 for Fulham), Ruud van Nistelrooy (Manchester United)
- 17 -- Mikael Forssell (Birmingham City), Nicolas Anelka (Manchester City)
- 16 -- Juan Pablo Angel (Aston Villa), Michael Owen (Liverpool), Yakubu Aiyegbeni (Portsmouth)
- 14 -- Robert Pires (Arsenal), James Beattie (Southampton), Robbie Keane (Tottenham Hotspur)
- 13 -- Kevin Phillips (Southampton), Jimmy Floyd-Hasselbaink (Chelsea)
- 12 -- Les Ferdinand (Leicester City)
- 11 -- Mark Viduka (Leeds United), Andy Cole (Blackburn Rovers), Paul Dickov (Leicester City)
- 10 -- Hernan Crespo (Chelsea), Jason Euell (Charlton Athletic), Frank Lampard (Chelsea)

Judge declares Diego unfit!

AFP, Buenos Aires

A judge on Sunday declared that ailing Argentine football legend Diego Maradona was unfit to decide his own fate.

After visiting Maradona at the private clinic where he is being kept against his will on Friday judge Norberto Garcia Vedia said: "He's not in a condition to decide on his interment at the moment."

"He's still experiencing the effects of a crisis, even if he is getting better."

Maradona, who came close to death last month with heart and lung problems, was admitted to the Parc private drug rehabilitation clinic attached to Buenos Aires' Italian Hospital on the orders of his family.

According to his family if he continues to accept treatment he will be given permission to leave the centre in a week to pursue help for his cocaine addiction abroad.

Thaksin will buy elsewhere?

AFP, London

Thailand Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra will approach another Premiership club should his bid for a stake in Liverpool fail, his spokesman Chakrapot Penkay told the BBC here Sunday.

Thaksin has offered to put a 30 per cent stake in Liverpool, his bid worth some 100-115 million dollars to the Merseyside team.

Earlier this week his chances of success appeared to have increased when Liverpool rebuffed a rival offer from local businessman Steve Morgan, long-standing critic of the current board, worth some 128 million dollars.

But Penkay said if talks with the Anfield club broke down, Thaksin would look elsewhere.

"It is not just Liverpool we are interested in. Our desire is to pursue any British soccer team," Penkay told BBC Radio 5 Live's Sportsweek.

"We are still pursuing Liverpool. There is someone in Britain who initiated the meeting between the club and the Prime Minister so there is mutual interest -- it was not a one-sided approach."

Only the beginning

Football

REUTERS, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger is in no mood to rest on his laurels after his team became the first top-flight team in 115 years to finish the domestic football league season unbeaten.

"We were invincible this year but we start at zero points next year, along with all the other teams," Wenger said, after Arsenal eased out relegated Leicester City 2-1 on the last day of the premier league season.

Clearly relishing the moment, Wenger recognised that the London team had achieved something 'special' that would probably never be repeated.

"We can win more trophies but to do as well in the league as we did this season will probably be impossible," he said.

For a while it looked like the champions might choke within sight of the finishing line after Leicester took a first-half lead on Saturday.

"The signs were there before halftime, the heavy legs, lack of concentration, not looking sharp, and it was the resolve (shown) in the dressing room that got us going

again," the Arsenal boss said.

Fittingly it was player of the year and top goal scorer Thierry Henry and captain Patrick Vieira who got the two goals for Arsenal.

"This team will be remembered forever," Vieira said, as he jiggled in



ARSENE WENGER

celebration on the sun-blazoned Highbury pitch to the thunderous singing of the Arsenal faithful.

Arsenal have not had it all their own way over the 2003/04 season though.

They were knocked out of the Champions League quarterfinals by London rivals Chelsea, lost to Manchester United in an FA Cup

semi-final and to Middlesbrough at the same late stage of the League Cup.

But unlike England's only other 'invincibles', the moustachioed Preston North End of 1888-89, Arsenal have done it at a time when soccer is a global business and competition is far more intense.

The season was also much shorter back then, spanning 22 games in what was the Football League's inaugural season. Arsenal played 38 games, winning 26 and drawing 12 to clinch their latest title.

By winning against Leicester, Arsenal also extended their unbeaten league run to 40 games, including two matches at the back-end of last season.

Their next target is Nottingham Forest's 42-game record unbeaten run, which ran over two seasons in 1977-78 -- a fact which Wenger said would spur the team on to start strongly next season.

"It should help us to stay switched on," the Frenchman said.

The Champions League title also still eludes the 13-times champions. "It's going to be difficult (to get better) but we'll keep trying," said Dutch veteran playmaker Dennis Bergkamp.

Time to say goodbye

Football

REUTERS, London

An emotional Claudio Ranieri acknowledged roars of support from Chelsea fans and the applause of his players and said he would love to stay and finish the team building job started at Stamford Bridge.

The 52-year-old Italian coach, who said he still did not know whether billionaire owner Roman Abramovich would ask him to stay or not, added he felt he had done a good job steering his expensively assembled side to second in the Premier League and the Champions League semifinals.

Chelsea's second-place finish, 11 points behind runaway champions Arsenal, was their best for 49 years.

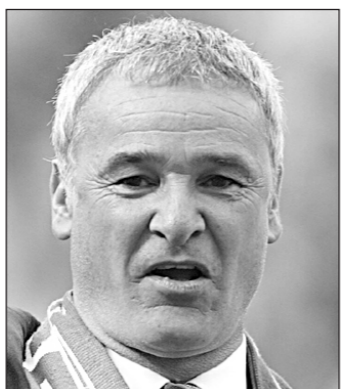
"I don't know what is going to happen to me but it was important to do my best this season," Ranieri said after his side beat Leeds United 1-0 in the last game of the season on Saturday.

"I think my plan was right, the foundation of the team is good, the spirit of the group is also good and the football has been good," Ranieri said, adding his one regret was the loss of the semifinal Champions

League tie to Monaco.

"Now I can only pass the ball to Roman."

Ranieri has been dogged by speculation all season that Abramovich and chief executive Peter Kenyon want to replace him and bring in a coach with a higher profile and plenty of titles under his belt.



CLAUDIO RANIERI

Both Porto coach Jose Mourinho and Monaco's Didier Deschamps, who meet in the Champions League final on May 26, have been linked to the media with his job. Kenyon said earlier this week that no decision had been taken.

Ranieri, hired before Abramovich bought the London club last July and spent more than 200 million dollars on new players, has three years to run on his contract.

Saturday's 41,000 crowd enlivened a lacklustre game against already relegated Leeds with chants of "There's only one Ranieri".

After players and coach jogged a lap in the sunshine to applaud the crowd, the team formed a guard of honour to see Ranieri, struggling to hold back tears, into the tunnel.

"When the players clapped me I was very emotional and when the crowd shouted my name...I said goodbye just in case I don't have another opportunity," he said.

If he was fired he said he would be sad "because I'd like to enjoy another year here. I'd like to finish the job...and try to improve on last season."

"In front of us was only an extraordinary Arsenal. (Thierry) Henry made all the difference. But with me or without me I think the team can improve," said Ranieri, who has been at Chelsea for four years.

Ranieri, whose good humour and lively turn of phrase amid all the speculation have endeared him to football fans at Chelsea and beyond, is going on holiday immediately.

Waking up to a new dawn

AFP, Zurich

South Africa will wake up on Sunday with a celebration party hangover and the daunting task of delivering Africa's first football World Cup in six years' time.

The Rainbow Nation thanked world football body FIFA for entrusting it and the African continent with its showpiece event after it won the right to host the 2010 finals here on Saturday.

"What the president has done through that announcement is to find Africa worthy after 100 years," said bid chief Danny Jordaan.

"The Economist (magazine) said two years ago that Africa is a hope-

less case but FIFA has shown we deserve this chance."

Now FIFA and its president Sepp Blatter will expect stadiums to be built and renovated and ticketing systems to be swiftly arranged.

Former president Nelson Mandela had made winning the right to stage the tournament one of the causes of his life, but the 85-year-old will play little role in its organisation from here on.

Once a pariah of world sport because of apartheid, South Africa has caught up quickly and successfully hosted the 1995 Rugby World Cup and the cricket equivalent last year.

Football's World Cup however is on a much greater scale.

Because of its multi-centre basis, distributed in cities around the

country, the World Cup is arguably a bigger organisational undertaking than the Olympic Games -- a total of 2.78 million people attended matches at the last finals in South Korea and Japan in 2002.

South Africa's preliminary plans allowed for 13 stadiums in 11 cities, topped by the 98,000-capacity Soccer City venue in Johannesburg.

Five venues are due to be built and five to be renovated to bring them up to international standards.

A nation struggling with crippling unemployment is desperately hoping that the finals will create jobs -- the estimate is 150,000 -- but the initial investment will be heavy for a far from wealthy country.

FIFA inspectors noted that the construction of the promised Port

Elizabeth stadium alone will cost around 36 million dollars.

Spending by visitors, and income from foreign investment and sponsorship should however generate several billion dollars.

One glance at the intense scrutiny of Athens' lagging preparations for this year's Olympics will give the South African organisers cause to put their plans into practice as soon as possible.

FIFA's inspection report criticised South Africa's provisional budgeting as insufficient and said it needed revision. And it added that the predicted 467 million dollars in revenue from ticket sales -- the highest of any of the five African bids -- would be "very difficult to reach".

What support can South Africa

expect from the rest of the continent in its mammoth task?

"We have come this far not just because of our efforts, others have helped us," said the bid chairman Irvin Khoza.

Yet unconfirmed rumours after Saturday's vote here indicated that all four African members of FIFA's 24-strong Executive Committee had voted for Morocco, which received 10 votes to South Africa's 14.

President Thabo Mbeki tried to extend the hand of friendship to South Africa's neighbours in the face of Morocco's disappointment in its fourth failed bid and the humiliation of Egypt, which did not gain a single vote.



TASTY! Arsenal captain Patrick Vieira holds the English Premier League trophy after winning their final game against Leicester City on Saturday.

Money versus class

Football

REUTERS, London

English football may never be quite the same again after a season in which the heights of Thierry Henry's talent and the depths of Roman Abramovich's pockets set new standards in the game.

Arsenal's mesmerising striker helped them win a league championship in which their skills proved literally unbeatable and set a fresh benchmark by which success is judged.

Off the pitch, the 200 million dollars invested in Chelsea by billionaire Abramovich fuelled them to second place and sent shockwaves through a Premier League in which Manchester United are clearly no longer the dominant force.

Together, the French striker and Russian business tycoon shaped a season which looks like a turning point, with Arsenal, Chelsea and Manchester United destined to compete for honours in a mini-league of their own.

The extent to which Liverpool, Newcastle United and Aston Villa were left behind was dramatically revealed by the gap between third and fourth place.

By November, with only a third of the season gone, it was an ominous nine points. By the time Arsenal clinched the title in April, it had ballooned to a whopping 18.

Liverpool, still the most successful club in English history with a record 18 league titles and four European Cups, eventually sealed fourth slot and a place in the Champions League qualifiers.

However, they finished an astonishing 30 points adrift of the champions and were closer to relegation --

the bottom three clubs ended on 33 points -- than Arsenal's title.

All that was of no concern at Highbury, where Arsene Wenger's side savoured their moment on Saturday.

Arsenal became the first team since Preston North End's 'Old Invincibles' in the Football League's inaugural 1888-89 season to remain unbeaten in the top flight.

Henry