

Wenger supremely confident

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger expects Arsenal's youngsters to underline why he is happy to build a team without major investment by producing another display of their precocious talent against Portsmouth on Sunday.

Arsenal's finances have been in the spotlight this week after Russian billionaire Alisher Usmanov bought David Dein's stake in the club for 75 million pounds, sparking inevitable speculation that a takeover was imminent.

If Dein, who was forced off the Arsenal board in April, does return to the Emirates Stadium, Wenger could find himself with an unprecedented amount of money to spend.

Dein and Usmanov believe Arsenal must invest to compete with Chelsea and Manchester United but, while Wenger would hardly turn down the chance to splash out in the transfer market, he insists it is not essential to his long-term plans.

Wenger has established a well-deserved reputation for spotting young players with the potential to become world stars and his current crop are already proving he hasn't lost his eye for an unpolished gem.

With Cesc Fabregas, Robin van Persie and Kolo Toure to the fore, Arsenal have made an unbeaten start in the league and easily qualified for the Champions League group stages.

That is all the evidence Wenger needs that his philosophy is right.

"Nobody knows for how much longer people will continue to pump 40, 50 or 100 million pounds into football every year without natural resources and any dividends being paid back," he said.

"I believe I can compete and be successful because I have a team that can win the Premiership and do well in the Champions League. That's why I'm here.

"There are many ways to work in the game. We buy good players when they come onto the market, but generally we have gone for a different solution and we will continue to do that.

"I'm not saying other clubs have got it wrong. Instead we're doing it our way and are happy with that. It's my decision to take this route.

"If I want to buy a player today then I have money available."

Wenger's current contract expires at the end of the season and it had been suggested he may decide to leave after Dein's acrimonious departure.

But Wenger will be encouraged by this week's developments and insisted he is keen to stay at the Emirates Stadium.

Easy draw for Bayern



AFP, Monaco

Former champions Bayern Munich and the four English Premier League clubs in the UEFA Cup have all been handed comfortable ties in the first round, the draw for which was made here on Friday.

Four-time European champions Bayern Munich, who won the UEFA Cup in 1996, will start their campaign with a tie against Portuguese outfit Belenenses.

The German club, which last won the Champions League in 2001, missed out on a spot in European football's showcase tournament after finishing fourth in the Bundesliga last season.

As for the English Premiership sides, last season's losing UEFA Cup semi-finalists Tottenham will play Cypriot side Anorthosis Famagusta while Bolton take on Macedonia's Rabotnicki.

Blackburn Rovers are up against Greek club Larissa, while Everton face a trip to Ukraine to play Metalist Kharkiv.

The same fate awaits Scottish

Premier League team Aberdeen, who were drawn with Dnipro Dnipropetrovsk.

Everton chief executive Keith Wyness said: "There is no such thing as an easy draw in Europe.

"Ukraine is a well-known footballing nation but Everton are very focused on taking the club further in Europe this year.

"We hope to be in Europe more consistently," Wyness said.

Bolton manager Sammy Lee said: "They (Rabotnicki) are an unknown quantity and we will do our homework near the time.

"The priority now is to focus on the Premier League campaign and make sure we are winning matches. I'm sure it will start to sink in nearer the time."

Blackburn manager Mark Hughes said: "We could have had worse draws. The likes of Zagreb were in the mix and we could have come up against them. There were more difficult opponents that we could have had so we are reasonably pleased with it."

Although on paper Bayern appear to have an easy tie, Turkish midfielder Hamit Altintop believes their Lisbon-based opponents, who finished fifth in the Portuguese

league last season, will not be a pushover.

Belenenses have previously failed to get past the UEFA Cup's second round, but are packed with creative Brazilians - and Altintop says the Germans can't afford to make any slip-ups.

"I have never heard of Belenenses or ever seen them play," said the Turkish international.

"But whether or not they are a big name doesn't matter - often the teams without a big history are the most dangerous to play against, because they have nothing to lose.

"We will have to be on our guard."

The home and away ties will be played on September 20 and October 4.

The 40 teams that progress from the first round go into a group phase, comprising eight groups of five clubs.

The top three teams progress through to the round of 32, at which point eight sides finishing third in their Champions League group will join them.

The final will takes place at the City of Manchester Stadium on May 14.

Kahn to set Bundesliga record

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich captain Oliver Kahn will set the record for the most Bundesliga appearances by a goalkeeper when the German giants face Hamburg on Sunday.

The 38-year-old will be making his 535th Bundesliga appearance having spent seven years at Karlsruhe and has been at Bayern since 1994.

When Bayern hammered Hanover 3-0 last weekend the former German captain drew level with Borussia Dortmund and VfB Stuttgart goalkeeper Eike Immel, who set the previous mark of 534.

Kahn already has the record for the goalkeeper who has won the most Bundesliga titles, seven, and also has the record of the most clean-sheets, 188.

And he also has the record for the most consecutive clean-sheets, having gone 19 games without conceding a goal.



PHOTO: AFP

Sevilla supporters hold up a giant banner depicting recently deceased player Antonio Puerta during the UEFA Super Cup final against Milan on Friday.



AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson insists calling time on Roy Keane's Manchester United playing career was a tough task.

Keane takes his newly promoted Sunderland side to Old Trafford on Saturday for his first visit to his former club since moving into management.

United manager Ferguson has been generous in his praise of the job his former captain has done since taking charge at the Stadium of Light and steering the club to promotion in his first season.

But he admits the decision to release Keane from his playing contract in December 2005, after a clash over the Irish midfielder's public criticism of several United players, was a painful move to make.

"It's happened to me so many times here, with players coming to the end of their careers," said the United manager.

"It's a difficult time because you get attached to them, they're

almost family and when you see that moment they have to leave it's not easy, because they've been great servants for you.

"The only thing that assisted me was that I'd had to do it a few times before, but it's never easy."

Ferguson insists relations between the pair are now fine and is convinced his ex-player - who spent 12 years working alongside the Scot - will make a success of his new role and is more than capable of handling the expectations of Sunderland's demanding support.

"We keep in touch, not regular, but from time to time" Ferguson added. "I wasn't surprised at how well he did last year.

"I think it was a surprise they won the league, but I thought he would get them into the play-offs. Sunderland are one of those clubs with a long history of disappointment for their fans, because the expectation never changes for them.

"When they won that league, I bet they thought they were going to go on and win the Premier League. That's what they're like.

"But Roy can handle the pressure there. What Sunderland

have is a fantastic base, fantastic support. But if you look at their history over the last 40 to 50 years, it's been disappointing. You have to say that.

"He'll get a great reception. It tells you what a great club we are that when we have players who come back to play or manage against us, they get a fantastic reception."

Wayne Rooney will be absent for Keane's return, but Ferguson hinted the England striker could be back quicker than expected from his broken foot.

Rooney was told he would be out for eight weeks after suffering the injury against Reading on the first day of the season, but he is making a quick recovery.

"Wayne's still got a bit to do yet, but he's not far away," Ferguson said.

"He's been working really hard in the gym and he won't have a lot to pick up when he comes back, in terms of his fitness because he had a really good pre-season.

"He's going for a scan at the end of next week and hopefully that will give us a good result."

Ferguson has demanded action before Manchester

United's Champions League clash in Rome on December 12th to ensure there is no repeat of the violent scenes that marred the club's visit there last season.

The English champions will again face AS Roma in the Olympic Stadium and the manager warned lessons must be learned to prevent a more dangerous situation emerging.

"What disturbed us at the times, when we watched the video footage, was that all the police were in the Manchester United section," Ferguson said.

"There were no police in the Roma fans' section, so they were therefore free to hurl all sorts of objects at our fans.

"There was some story that the Rome police were scared to get among their fans. Well, I find that quite incredulous. I think they should be keeping control of both sets of fans.

"Hopefully lessons have been learned about what happened last time, because someone could have been killed.

"In fact, when you saw some of the scenes, it was amazing no one was killed."

Record transfer spending

AFP, Berlin



The Bundes liga's 18 clubs have passed the 200 million euros mark on summer signings for the first time in the league's history just hours before the transfer window closes at midnight on Friday.

According to calculations by German sports agency SID, Germany's top clubs have spent a staggering 203.71 million euros (277.8 million dollars) during the close season.

This figure smashed the previous mark of 147 million euros (200 million dollars) spent in 2001.

Bundesliga giants Bayern Munich helped massage the figures by splashing out 69 million euros (94 million dollars) during a summer spending spree to recruit the likes of French star Franck Ribery, Italian World Cup winner Luca Toni and German striker Miroslav Klose.

VfL Wolfsburg, who are coached by ex-Bayern boss Felix Magath, have also been very active on the transfer front with 17 new players

brought in.

The club is controlled by German car giants Volkswagen and spent 29.5 million euros (40 million dollars) this summer.

It was the Lower Saxony club who broke the 200 million barrier when they signed Brazilian midfielder Grafite for eight million euros (10.95 million dollars) from French side Le Mans on Friday.

And Bremen spent the 12 million euros (16 million dollars) they made on Klose's transfer to Bayern when they bought Brazilian midfielder Carlos Alberto from Corinthians for a club record 15 million euros (20.5 million dollars).

They also added Germany's Under-21 international Sebastian Boenisch defender to their squad on Friday afternoon for three million euros (4 million dollars) from Schalke 04.

The Royal Blues, last season's runners-up, have limited their expenditure to 10.5 million euros (14.3 million dollars), like defending champions VfB Stuttgart who spent 10.5 million (14.7 million dollars).

Hamburg must stop Bayern

AFP, Berlin



German World Cup winning captain Lothar Matthaus insisted on Saturday Hamburg are the "last hope" of stopping Bayern Munich's march to the Bundesliga title when the sides clash on Sunday.

Even though there are still 30 rounds of the Bundesliga left, Matthaus, who captained Germany's 1990 World Cup winning-side, says Hamburg are the last chance to stop Bayern on their march to their 21st crown as German champs.

If Bayern pick up their fourth straight win of the season and protect their 100 percent record, Matthaus believes the German giants will have built up so much momentum they will be unstoppable.

"If Hamburg win, they will stop

Bayern in their tracks and put some much-needed suspense back in the championships," Matthaus told German tabloid Bild.

"Bayern are the clear favourites by a long way and if they are beaten in Hamburg, it will give hopes to their rivals like Schalke 04, Eintracht Frankfurt and Arminia Bielefeld," said the former midfielder who spent 12 years at Bayern.

The German giants have seen an immediate return on their 69 million euro summer recruitment drive having won all four of their opening games and scored ten goals without reply.

Star midfielder Franck Ribery has been receiving some rough treatment from frustrated opponents, but Matthaus has little sympathy for the French star.

"Players like him are much better protected by referees than in my day," said Matthaus.

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