

Gunners' do or die battle

AFP, London



London derby at their Stamford Bridge fortress.

A third straight league defeat could leave the Gunners in freefall and a huge 13 points behind the Blues just 15 games in.

But equally, winning at Stamford Bridge -- where Chelsea have been beaten just once in 89 league games -- would send an impressive statement to the rest of the top flight that Arsenal are back in the race.

Despite the Gunners' dismal league performances on the pitch and dressing-room dust-ups off it, manager Arsene Wenger is relishing the challenge.

"This season we have played better against the top four," he insisted.

"We cannot deny that because we lost against the teams who are not maybe favourites to play in the top four. Why? Maybe because they play a different type of football.

"I believe as well that some teams like

Manchester City and Aston Villa have strengths and can give a game to anybody.

"We have to go with extreme desire and express our strong points and not hide. We can play and win everywhere in the world. We know Chelsea are a great side with great players but we can beat them if we play at our best."

And in his hour of crisis, Wenger has received support from the unlikely of sources going into the Chelsea clash - Blues boss Luiz Felipe Scolari.

"Arsene is a coach who has been there 12 years. He's a man that builds teams. Sells this and that, then puts in other players," said the Portuguese.

"Arsenal are very good every year. And when you change two or three players in one season, you need time.

"The time, I think, for Arsenal and Arsene is now. They can play very well and win many games."

Stamford Bridge could prove to be a hostile venue for players on both sides and Wenger has appealed for calm.

England left-back Ashley Cole is still reviled for making the switch from Arsenal to the Blues, while France defender William Gallas, who went in the other direction, has recently caused a furore for criticising his own team-mates -- an outburst which saw him stripped of the club captaincy.

France striker Nicolas Anelka, the Premier League's top scorer with 12 goals, faces his old club Arsenal, which he left in 1999.

Arsenal will have leading striker Emmanuel Adebayor, attacking midfielder Samir Nasri and right-back Bacary Sagna available again after recent injuries.

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba is banned, while midfielder Joe Cole could miss out after sustaining an ankle injury in the 1-1 draw at Bordeaux on Wednesday.

Chelsea won the last clash between the London sides, two Drogba goals cancelling out Sagna's opener at Stamford Bridge in March.

Last weekend's matches left the Blues top of the table with 33 points and the Gunners 10 points behind them in fifth place.

While the west London side were held to a draw in the Champions League midweek, Arsenal beat Dynamo Kiev 1-0 in a match that will have done much to settle the nerves in north London.

Nonetheless, Arsenal still face an uphill task to earn a first victory at Stamford Bridge in eight attempts -- the last win coming in February 2004.

Indeed, Arsenal have won just one of the last 12 meetings with Chelsea in all competitions.

Bayern set Podolski price

INTERNET, undated

Bayern Munich president Franz Beckenbauer has confirmed his club will allow Germany striker Lukas Podolski to move on for a fee of 19.3 million dollars.

The 23-year-old has struggled to hold down a regular starting spot during more than two seasons with Bayern and has been linked with a return to former club Koln for some months.

Beckenbauer had initially refused to entertain the idea of allowing Podolski to leave, but has now changed his tune.

"Everything in life has its price. Two-and-a-half years ago we paid [\$12.9] million. Now, the fee is [\$19.3] million. You cannot keep a professional if he is unhappy, on the bench and not playing.

"Lukas does not quite fit into our way of playing. He is a top-class striker when he has space in front of him, as he has the pace to run clear.

"But the teams we play against are usually very defensive, so we need players who can get into the penalty area, Miroslav Klose and Luca Toni in particular."

Zlatan snubs Didier move

INTERNET, undated

Inter Milan forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic has poured cold water on reports linking Chelsea's Didier Drogba to the San Siro by claiming the Ivorian's services are not needed.

Drogba has been heavily linked with a move to join his old boss Jose Mourinho at Inter since the Italian media claimed the Ivory Coast star had held a meeting with Mourinho's agent Jorge Mendes earlier this week.

Mourinho has already denied any knowledge of the alleged meeting, and Inter president Massimo Moratti has also told the Italian press his side do not need any more strikers.

Now Ibrahimovic too insists between him and Brazilian forward Adriano the Nerazzurri have more than enough firepower to defend their Scudetto.

"He [Drogba] is a great player, one that thanks to his physical strength scores so many goals," the Sweden international told Corriere dello Sport.

"But when it comes to great strikers we already have plenty. Adriano for example can make a massive difference if he's fit. I really enjoy playing alongside him and he creates a lot of space for me."

UEFA pays for Euro blackout

INTERNET, undated

UEFA has agreed to pay compensation to broadcasters who lost live pictures as a result of a power blackout during a Euro 2008 match, Germany's Spiegel news magazine reported. Football's organizing body in Europe has agreed to pay "a high six-figure sum" to the German public broadcaster ZDF, according to the report released in advance of Monday's publication.

All broadcasters affected will be paid unspecified compensation, according to the report.

A thunderstorm over Vienna led to a power blackout during the semifinal between German and Turkey, with some broadcasters losing sound and pictures for 18 minutes.

Millions of football fans worldwide missed much of a thrilling climax to the match in Basle, Switzerland, as Germany beat Turkey 3-2 to reach the final.

The storm over Vienna caused a power outage in the International Broadcasting Centre in the Austrian capital, and an emergency generator also failed to work.

German viewers missed six minutes of the action before ZDF received a feed from Swiss television which had its own line to the stadium.

ZDF recorded an average 29.46 million viewers for the match, but said it missed out on an all-time viewing record as a result of the blackout.



PHOTO: AFP

Hertha Berlin midfielder Gojko Kacar (R) celebrates after scoring the opening goal against Cologne during their Bundesliga match at the Olympic Stadium in Berlin on Friday.

Hertha edge Cologne

INTERNET, undated



Hertha Berlin striker Marko Pantelic came off the bench to head a late winner and lift the capital club up to second in the Bundesliga table with a 2-1 victory over Cologne on Friday.

The unsettled frontman proved his worth to coach Lucien Favre by scoring four minutes from time as Hertha moved to within a point of leaders Hoffenheim.

The Serbia international is reportedly unhappy with his treatment by Favre, who left him out of the starting lineup for a third successive game

tonight, but his introduction in the 69th minute proved key as he earned the home side its fourth straight win after Cologne's Milivoje Novakovic had canceled out Gojko Kacar's opener.

Hertha has not dropped a point since its 5-1 thrashing at Werder Bremen and look to have transformed itself into a surprise title contender.

The started like an in-form side and Andriy Voronin tested visiting goalkeeper Faryd Mondragon in the 11th minute.

Mondragon had to be alert again to keep out Kacar's header from Voronin's corner, but the Serbia defender did make the breakthrough in the 24th minute, slotting the ball in to the bottom right corner from 12 yards after being picked out by Voronin's

pass. Youssef Mohamad fired Cologne's first chance over the bar, but Novakovic was more accurate on the stroke of half-time when Fabrice Ehret's cross from the left found him in the area and he fired the equalizer into the top corner.

Pierre Wome tested Hertha keeper Jaroslav Drobný with a 30-yard effort after the break, while at the other end Marc Stein crossed for Raffael, whose shot was off target.

But it was left for Pantelic to decide the game in the 86th minute as he strengthened his claim for a recall to the starting lineup.

Patrick Ebert swung in a corner from the right which the substitute headed into the top corner from close range to inflict Cologne's third straight defeat.

Barry will stay till season end

AFP, Birmingham

England midfielder Gareth Barry on Friday pledged his future to Aston Villa until the end of the season, quashing speculation that he may leave in the January transfer window.

The 27-year-old was the subject of four failed bids from Liverpool in the summer after Villa manager Martin O'Neill placed an 18-million-pound valuation on one of his prized assets.

Barry could buy out the final 12 months of his contract but O'Neill knows a top-four finish in the Premier League may persuade him to remain with the club he has already served for more than 10 years.

"Gareth and myself have had a chat and he wants to put all the speculation aside," said O'Neill whose team could move into third place in the table with victory over Fulham on Saturday.

"He is going to see it out here until the summer - at least - see where we all are positioned at that time and so any speculation in January will be purely that."

"I couldn't be more pleased. His form is very good. His form for England is very good at the moment."

"I know it is an old cliché but Gareth is really now just concentrating on the footballing aspect of things."

"Sometimes I might not have been completely sure about what might happen in January because it is a window, a time where transfer speculation is rife."

"So I am so pleased Gareth wants to leave it to summer time and I couldn't be more pleased."

"Does that include contract talks? Everything. I also accept in the summer he has got a year to run."

"Any sort of options are open to him. He will be in the driving seat if he continues to perform in the manner he is doing."

Health scare for Pellegrini

AFP, Rome

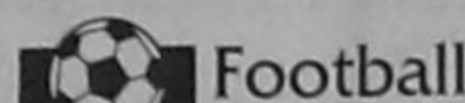
Italian Olympic swimming champion Federica Pellegrini suffered a health scare when she struggled to catch her breath while taking part in the country's winter championships in Genoa, the ANSA news agency reported Friday.

Pellegrini, the 200m freestyle gold medallist in Beijing, was competing in the 800m when she suddenly slowed, climbed out of the pool and experienced breathing problems.

ANSA added that the swimmer would undergo medical tests on Saturday to detect the cause of the problem.

The 20-year-old broke her won world record when she triumphed in the 200m at the Olympics winning in a time of 1min 54.82sec.

New TV deal for Germans



INTERNET, undated

German football has agreed a new television deal over four seasons which will earn the country's first and second division clubs 412 million euros (\$24.6 million dollars) per season. The German Football League (DFL) said Friday the new 1.65-billion-euro deal was an increase of about 7 million euros per season for the 36 first and second division clubs.

The deal from next season retains current broadcasters but will introduce a later Saturday kick-off for one first-division match.

It also enables German armchair views to continue watching Bundesliga highlights early on Saturday evening in the traditional ARD Sportschau.

Pay-TV broadcaster Premiere retains the right to live football in both divisions and will also screen the late Saturday match, which will kick off at 6.30 p.m. (1730 GMT).

The two matches scheduled for Sunday will kick off at 3.30 pm and 5.30 pm instead of the current parallel kick-off time of 5 pm.

A match will also continue to be broadcast live on Friday evening by Premiere.

Public broadcaster ARD not only retains its traditional Saturday evening slot for match highlights but will also show highlights of Sunday's matches in a new show later that evening.

The first match of the season and the first of the year after the winter break will also be played on a Friday evening and continue to be broadcast live by ARD as well as Premiere.

The second public broadcaster ZDF will continue to show Bundesliga highlights late Saturday evening, including the first highlights of the Saturday evening match.

The commercial DSF channel will broadcast highlights of second-division games on Friday and Sunday plus a live game on Monday evening.

"We have come up with a presentable result in a difficult situation for professional football," DFL president Reinhard Rauball said.

The new agreement comes after regulatory authorities earlier this year blocked a central marketing rights agreement between DFL and media mogul Leo Kirch's subsidiary Sirius.

The six-year deal from 2009 would have been worth some 3 billion euros - 500 million euros per season - but the cartel office ruled that the model, in which

Sirius would have produced and marketed the Bundesliga package, was effectively a price cartel.

Rauball said: "In view of the fact that we are dealing with an extremely difficult media market, and have also been put at a disadvantage by incomprehensible rules from the cartel office, the possibilities of growth for the Bundesliga are limited."

"On top of that we have a downward general economic development with a global financial crisis which is also causing a problem for media undertakings."

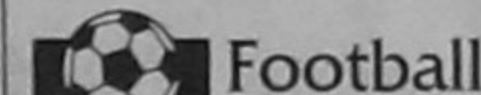
Friday's agreement was welcomed by both broadcasters and club managers.

ARD chairman Fritz Raff said the fact that the Bundesliga remained in the Sportschau was "good for ARD, good for the Bundesliga and very good for the viewers and sports fans."

He said there was hardly a programme in German television that attracted both young and older viewers in the same way.

Michael Meier, chief executive of Cologne, said the football league had achieved an "outstanding result" in view of the financial crisis and the cartel office's ruling which had "put professional football in Germany at a massive disadvantage" against other European leagues.

Made in Japan



AFP, London

When Chelsea manager Luiz Felipe Scolari and Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger go head-to-head in Sunday's Premier League showdown, they will briefly put on hold a friendship forged in Japan a decade ago.

Scolari first met Wenger during a brief spell in charge of J-League club Jubilo Iwata in the late 1990s, while Wenger was running the show at Grampus Eight.

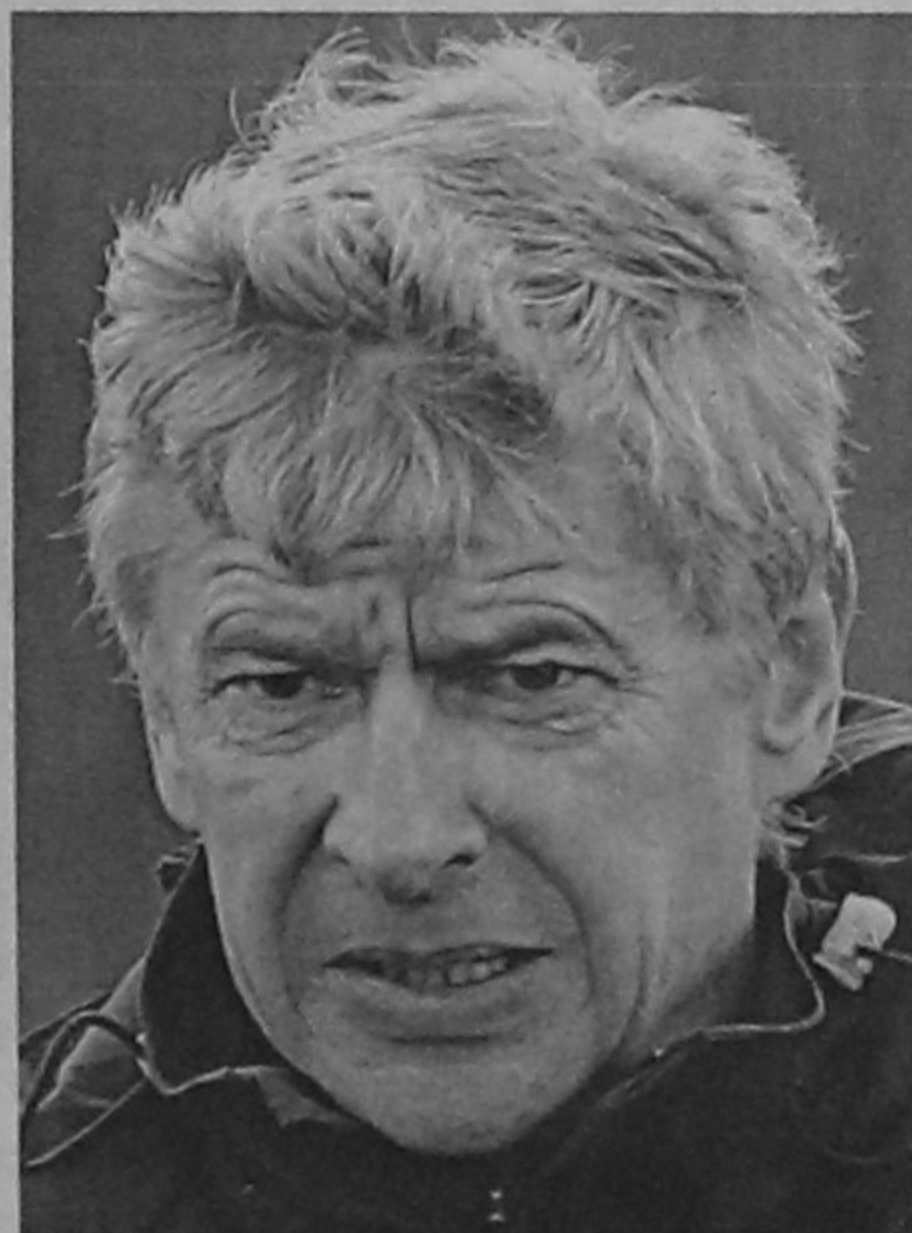
Although Wenger left for Arsenal soon after Scolari's arrival, they met several times and quickly established a bond.

Wenger would go on to mould Arsenal into his own vision of a total football academy, while Scolari won the World Cup with Brazil playing an equally eye-catching style.

Scolari's arrival at Chelsea earlier this season was greeted with pleasure by Wenger and now they will meet for the first time in the Premier League.

"This is the first time I'll have played against Wenger - he's been my friend for 10 or 12 years now," Scolari said. "I met him in Japan for the first time and we are big friends."

"I came sometimes to London to watch Arsenal and, after the game, we discussed



ARSENE WENGER

things in his house.

"He invited me to his home, we had dinner, we spoke about football and what I think about my team and about Arsenal."

"Our personalities are different - I was born in Brazil, him in France, our families are different. But we have the same ideas about football."

The cordial relationship between the managers is a far-cry from the bitter words of words that erupted whenever Chelsea played Arsenal during Jose Mourinho's reign at Stamford Bridge.

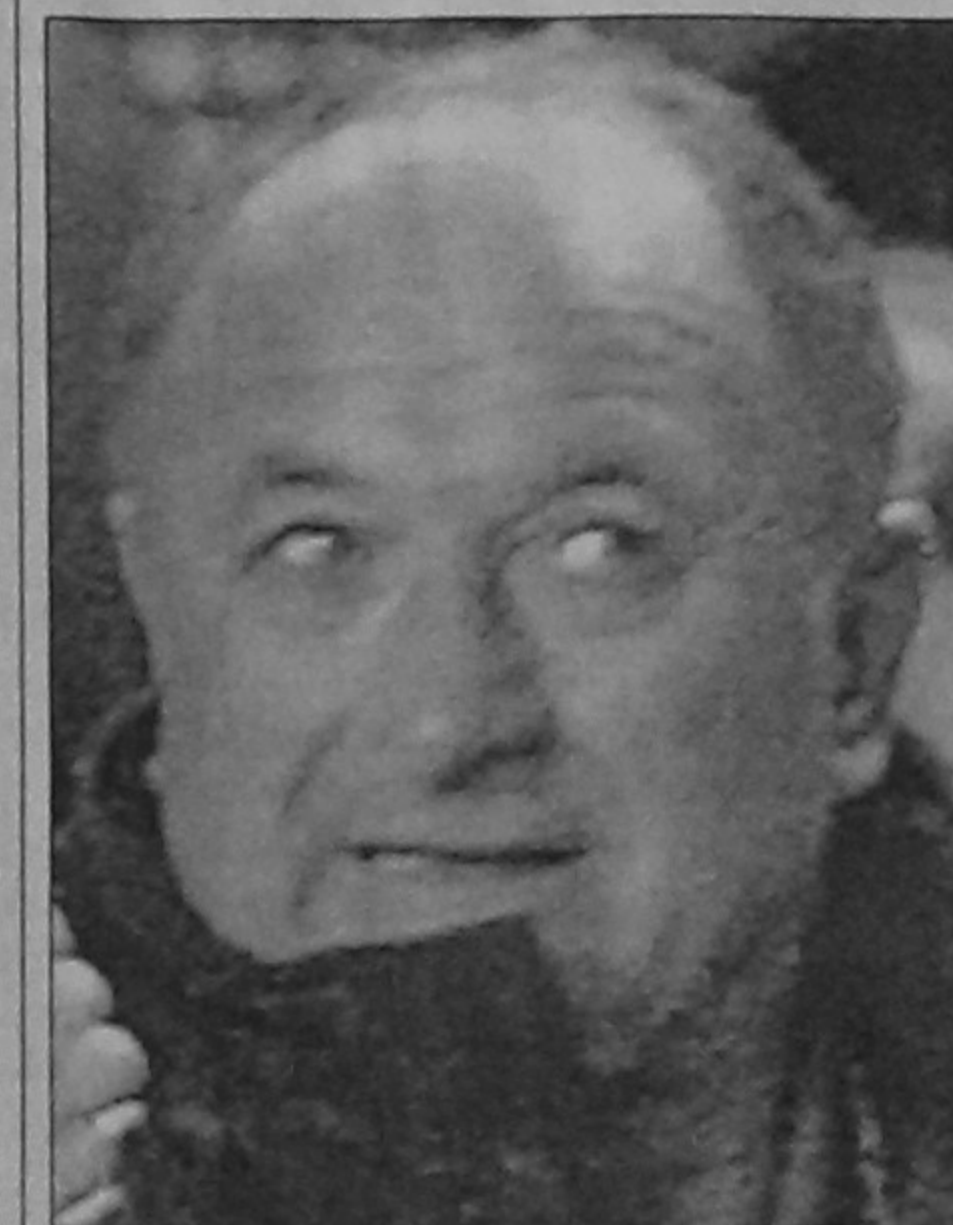
Wenger has always preferred to let his players speak for him and he is delighted with the more civil tone to the pre-match build-up.

"I met him in Japan because he was over there for a while," Wenger said. "After that I met him when he was national coach of Portugal because he had some players in England and we kept good relations."

"He is good for English football. First of all you want managers who have a positive attitude towards the game."

"Is he a breath of fresh air? I don't know. It looks like the press is always in need of fresh air, some fresh oxygen."

"I believe the most important thing is the quality of the job you do."



LUIZ FELIPE SCOLARI