

MANCHESTER UNITED V ARSENAL

Gunners plot an upset

AFF, Manchester



Kolo Toure believes the youthful current crop of Arsenal stars can emulate the battle-hardened class of 2006 and book their ticket to this season's Champions League final.

The Gunners face Manchester United in the first leg of their semifinal at Old Trafford on Wednesday with Toure the only survivor from the 'Invincibles' squad that went through the 2003-04 Premier League campaign unbeaten.

That squad, constructed around the French trio of Thierry Henry, Patrick Vieira and Robert Pires, broke up after the 2006 Champions League final defeat by Barcelona but Toure believes the north London club is once again on the verge of something special.

"True we lost Thierry Henry, but Emmanuel Adebayor is playing really well; we lost Robert Pires, but we have Samir Nasri," the Ivory Coast defender said.

"All those players have been replaced. The good thing about this team is we have a lot of young players who want to show they have the quality."

"I remember that a team like Ajax - nobody was expecting them to win, but they won (in 1995) and had a really young team as well."

Arsenal will miss the creative edge provided by top-scorer Robin van Persie, who is ruled out by a groin injury, and cup-tied Russian playmaker Andrey Arshavin.

But they will take heart from the fact that they have already beaten United this season (2-1 at the Emirates in November) and by the current form of captain Cesc Fabregas, who has been revelling in the role of a deep-lying forward akin to that in which Steven Gerrard has thrived at Liverpool this season.

The brace Fabregas claimed against Middlesbrough on Sunday were his first goals since October and Toure is confident the Spaniard's guile, combined with the presence of Adebayor and the pace of Theo Walcott, will pose the holders problems. The key, he believes, will be matching their offensive contribution with equal vigour in defence.

"We know when we play football against Manchester United, they struggle a lot," Toure

argued. "They're a really good team going forward, but, like us, at the back they have conceded a few goals."

"We have the same type of team - we both like to play, but sometimes you can be caught out at the back. The team that will win will be the one which defends the best."

United's performance against Tottenham at the weekend would not have reassured their fans on that score, although their forwards more than compensated as they turned a 2-0 deficit into a 5-2 victory.

The half-time introduction of Carlos Tevez proved critical and the Argentinian forward will hope to have earned a starting slot in a United side that looks certain to see Ryan Giggs make his 800th appearance for the club.

The veteran was rested for the Spurs match and is relishing the prospect of another high-stakes showdown with Arsenal, against whom he scored the goal of his career in the 1999 FA Cup semifinal.

"They don't come bigger than that - a Champions League semifinal at Old Trafford," said the newly-crowned players' Player of the Year. "I can't wait."

"But I'm more interested in beating Arsenal rather than the 800th appearance. They are things I'll look back upon when I finish and I'll be proud. But first and foremost, hopefully I'll be celebrating with a good result."

Toure could have former United defender Mikael Silvestre as his centreback partner at Old Trafford but the French defender has only a 50-50 chance of playing against his old club, because of a back spasm while the daunting task of containing Cristiano Ronaldo looks set to fall to teenager Kieran Gibbs, as regular left-back Gael Clichy has his own back problem.

"Kieran is intelligent and I think he is going to perform very well on Wednesday," Toure said. "But it is not only about him, it is about all the players. If we are focused and defend together, then nobody can beat us."

The performance of United's left-back, Patrice Evra, could be just as critical. The Frenchman was given a torrid time by Aaron Lennon on Saturday and Arsenal supporters will expect to see Walcott test him in similar fashion.

John O'Shea's experience should ensure he gets the nod at right-back ahead of Brazilian teenager Rafael.



Arsenal defender Bacary Sagna (2nd from R) practices a shot during a training session at London Colney on Tuesday. Arsenal will take on Manchester United in the Champions League semifinal at Old Trafford tonight.

MU to tour Malaysia

AFF, Kuala Lumpur

Manchester United will play against the Malaysian national team on July 18 as part of their pre-season Asian tour, organisers confirmed Tuesday.

"The team will arrive in Kuala Lumpur one day before the match," San Boon Wah, managing director of Proevents, the match promoter, was quoted as saying by Bernama news agency.

San said Kuala Lumpur would be the first destination for the Red Devils in their Asian Tour 2009 before the team heads to Indonesia on July 20, South Korea (July 24) and China (July 26).

Manchester United has a huge fan base in Malaysia.

Azzuddin Ahmad, general secretary of the Football Association of Malaysia, said the Malaysian team would put on their best performance against Manchester United.

"We are looking forward to the match because it will be one of the best exposures for the national team against a quality team such as MU," he said.

It will be the Red Devils fourth tour to Malaysia since 1991. In 2001, they hammered the Malaysia selection 6-0.

The national side has fallen a long way since the heady days of the 1970s and 1980s when they regularly beat Japan and South Korea and reached two Olympics.

Getafe appoint Michel

AFF, Madrid

Former Real Madrid star Jose Miguel Gonzalez, known as Michel, has been named manager of Spanish first division side Getafe, the club announced on Tuesday.

Previous coach Victor Munoz was sacked by the struggling La Liga side on Monday.

"With only five games left we are in the hands of the players. Michel has the experience to get this job done," Getafe president Angel Torres said at the new manager's unveiling.

"Michel knows the team, has attended some training sessions and is a member of the club. If it all goes well, and he saves us, I will offer him the chance to continue."

Michel, 46, was an integral component of the great Real side of the late 1980s, helping them to six Spanish league titles and back-to-back UEFA Cup crowns. He also won 66 caps for Spain.

The former midfielder had been employed as a youth coach by Real, but left in December, citing a difference of opinion with then-president Ramon Calderon.

Getafe have endured a difficult season in the Spanish top flight.

The club from the Madrid suburbs are 17th in the table, one point above the relegation zone with five matches remaining, after losing 2-1 at home to Villarreal on Sunday.

Italy losing top talent

Football

AFF, Rome

Teenage striker Federico Macheda's staggering impact at Manchester United has sparked a raging debate in Italy on how to stem the exodus of the country's brightest talents.

Macheda's startling goal-scoring start to life as a United senior player has fans here wondering what's so wrong with their own football that their best young players move away.

Once the predator, Italy is now feeling what it's like to be the prey and the economic muscle of the English Premier League is largely responsible for that.

It was for financial reasons that Macheda left Lazio to sign for United while just 16, but now Italy want UEFA to intervene to stop other young players being poached.

According to Ciro Ferrara, a former rugged defender with Juventus but now head of the club's junior section, it's not Italy's fault that top players are being poached.

"You can't talk about a failure of Italian football, international rules have changed," he said. "(UEFA president Michel) Platini has to intervene. UEFA have to stop the exodus of our young footballers to foreign shores."

"Players are often taken away by paying off their families but the rules shouldn't allow it."

Macheda is not the only young player to have been tempted by United as they also pinched midfielder Davide Petrucci off Lazio's city rivals AS Roma.

But according to another player seduced by United, it is Italian clubs who are at fault for not giving young players enough of a chance.

Giuseppe Rossi left Parma for United at 17 before being sold to Spaniards Villarreal. But for spending half a season on loan back at Parma in 2006/07, the 22-year-old has spent his entire senior career playing outside the country he represents at international level.

"Why don't I play in Italy? It's not my fault."

Clubs make their decisions and I make my own," he said.

"The important thing is to show off your skills in front of a big crowd. And when you play you have a chance to be seen."

"Italian football is changing, giving more chances to young players. That's the right decision because the talent is there."

"In England and Spain everything is different, they have more patience. Barcelona have three or four 20 year olds in their first team."

An example of the apparent unwillingness to give youth a chance can be found at AC Milan, who last season saw the emergence of two teenage forwards - Brazilian Pato and Italian Alberto Paloschi.

But while Pato has gone on to become an established first team regular, Paloschi was allowed to leave for Serie B Parma during the close season.

With marquee signings Ronaldinho and Andrei Shevchenko failing to make an impact, and Marco Borriello injured, Milan have instead turned to veteran 35-year-old forward Filippo Inzaghi to lead the line.

In fairness, Inzaghi has been enjoying an Indian summer to his career with 10 goals in his last seven matches, but Milan have been criticised for not taking a chance on youth and kept hold of Paloschi rather than Inzaghi.

It may not be a bad thing for his career, though, as he has seen plenty of first team action in Serie B, scoring nine goals in 32 appearances.

He may well be playing his trade regularly in Serie A next season and getting more playing time than he would have done with Milan.

But even so, Ferrara thinks teams in Italy need to take more risks on young players.

"It's a mistake not to spend much money on the youth system and give players a chance to emerge, even to go on the pitch and make mistakes," he said.

"It takes time for them to develop. But teams have an obligation to win and they choose a less risky path, but even that doesn't guarantee victories."

Giggs gets knighthood backing

AFF, London

A British minister and senior opposition politician threw their weight behind a campaign to secure a knighthood for Manchester United midfielder Ryan Giggs on Monday.

Their backing for the honour - which would mean the 35-year-old would become Sir Ryan - lends weight to an internet campaign launched in recent days by political blogger Tim Montgomerie.

"Ryan Giggs, as well as an outstanding record on the pitch, has a proud record of voluntary work off the pitch, including with young players in Salford," said local government minister Hazel Blears, whose Salford constituency borders the northwestern English city of Manchester.

"He is a positive role model in so many ways that he deserves the recognition of a knighthood."

Opposition Conservative Party home affairs spokesman Chris Grayling, a self-confessed Manchester United fan, chimed in, describing Giggs as "the outstanding British footballer of the last generation."

"His achievements deserve to be recognised with a knighthood."

As part of the internet petition, which he launched through unofficial Manchester United fan site www.mustbered.com, Montgomerie has listed 11 reasons why Giggs should be knighted, ranging from his footballing accomplishments to his charity work.

Giggs was on Sunday evening named the English Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) Player of the Year for the first time, despite starting just 12 league games this season.

The Welsh midfielder, who could win his 11th league title with United this campaign, had twice won the Young Player of the Year award but can now add the ultimate mark of esteem from his fellow professionals to his long list of prizes.

Villarreal snap up Ecuador starlet

AFF, Madrid

Villarreal announced on Monday they had secured the services of promising Ecuadorian midfielder Jefferson Montero on a five year deal.

"He is one of the big hopes of Ecuadorian football," claimed the Spanish side who are coached by Chilean Manuel Pellegrini.

Montero, 19, will feel at home at this year's Champions League quarterfinalists who already have a clutch of South American-born players on their books including Brazilian-born naturalised Spaniard Marcos Senna and Mexico striker Luis Guillermo Franco.

Pompey frustrate Magpies

AFF, Newcastle



Newcastle's chances of clinging on to their place in the Premier League suffered a serious setback as Alan Shearer's side were frustrated by a resilient Portsmouth on Monday.

A goalless draw left the Magpies three points adrift of fourth-from-bottom Hull with just four matches left to stave off relegation and a daunting trip to face title-chasing Liverpool at Anfield on Sunday.

The point edges Portsmouth closer to securing their own top flight status with Paul Hart's side now seven points clear of the drop zone.

The stakes involved in a match that Shearer had described as both a must-win encounter and the most important of his players' careers, were reflected in the presence of all three of the club's leading strikers - Michael Owen, Mark Viduka and Obafemi Martins - in the starting line-up.

That helped to ensure a buzzing atmosphere at the outset but the final whistle was to be greeted with a chorus of jeers from the home fans as Newcastle's big guns failed to produce the moment of quality required, with Owen squandering a glorious chance just after the hour mark.

Portsmouth had to weather some early pressure but once

they began to hit their hosts on the counter-attack they started to look dangerous, although Newcastle came closest to breaking the deadlock before the interval when David James did well to turn a Damien Duff strike around the post.

From the resulting corner, Viduka sent a looping header over the bar and the home side also had claims for a penalty for handball against Hermann Hreidarsson waved away after Alan Smith had blasted a shot against the Icelander's arm.

Five minutes into the second half, there was a real let-off for Newcastle when Peter Crouch went to ground in the box under a challenge from Fabrizio Coloccini.

That was a sign that Newcastle were starting to leave space at the back for Pompey to exploit but the home side should have taken the lead just after the hour mark when Viduka, despite having been wrestled to the ground, played Owen into a one-on-one situation with James.

The England goalkeeper came out on top in the duel with his international teammate, saving with his legs, and that was to prove Newcastle's last real chance of claiming all three points.

It could have been worse for Shearer's men with Portsmouth also guilty of wasting opportunities to clinch victory.

With 11 minutes left, Crouch fired straight at Steve Harper and, three minutes

later, Scotland midfielder Richard Hughes headed against the foot of the post.

Scholl to coach Bayern reserves

AFF, Munich

Former Germany midfielder Mehmet Scholl was appointed temporary coach of Bayern Munich's reserve team on Monday as his predecessor Hermann Gerland was promoted following Jurgen Klinsmann's sacking.

Ex-Germany boss Klinsmann was sacked as head coach on Monday after just ten months in charge and has been temporarily replaced by Jupp Heynckes, with Gerland to act as his assistant for the last five games of the season.

Scholl, 38, has been promoted from Bayern's youth team set-up and will be in charge of the reserves until the end of the season.

"Mehmet was a big player for Bayern and he has gained a lot of experience with the youth team, so we know we can rely on him," said Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge.

Scholl spent his entire career as a player at Bayern and hung up his boots in 2007 after making 334 Bundesliga appearances and winning eight league titles and the 2001 Champions League title with the Bavarian giants.

He won 36 caps for Germany and was part of the squad that won the European Championship in 1996.



Newcastle United striker Michael Owen (R) controls the ball under pressure from Portsmouth defender Hermann Hreidarsson (L) during their Premiership encounter at St. James Park on Monday.