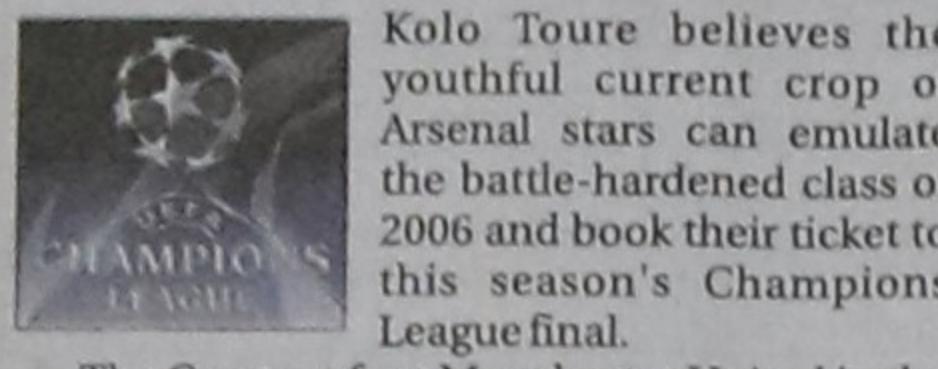


MANCHESTER UNITED V ARSENAL

Gunners plot an upset

AFP, 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 compensation 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.



PHOTO: AFP

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

AFP, 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.

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