

Arsene wants best

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger has warned that only Arsenal's best will give them a chance of beating Barcelona on Wednesday as the two most attractive sides in European football resume their Champions League rivalry.

The English giants welcome the Spanish league leaders to north London determined to erase the memory of last season's masterclass, when Barcelona crushed Wenger's side 6-3 on aggregate over two legs.

Although Barcelona are overwhelming favourites to progress to the quarterfinals, Wenger believes his side have absorbed the lessons handed out in that defeat and are a stronger unit 10 months on.

"When you play a team like Barcelona you need all 11 to be at their best," Wenger said. "For us it is important we play with belief."

"What we have learned from last season is in the first half we gave them too much respect, we were lucky to get away with that (in the home leg).

"We are not favourites in this game but I think we can do it."

"We know from last season's games that what is most important is to play at our level. Barcelona are maybe better this season than last season but so are we. That will make the game even more interesting."

Last season, Arsenal were run ragged in a

scintillating first half display at the first leg, eventually fighting back from 2-0 down to snatch a 2-2 draw.

The return leg at the Nou Camp saw Wenger's men swept aside after a virtuoso display from Lionel Messi, scorer of all Barcelona's goals in a 4-1 win.

Wenger however believes that the presence of Robin Van Persie -- who missed the match last year -- and Cesc Fabregas, who missed the second leg, mean his team will be a different proposition for Wednesday's last 16 clash.

Van Persie scored both goals in Arsenal's win over Wolves in the Premier League on Saturday, and the Dutch striker's form is a source of optimism for Wenger as his side prepare for their biggest game of the year.

Arsenal's teenage midfield prodigy Jack Wilshere, another player who was not involved in last season's tie, hinted that the Gunners will aggressively seek to disrupt Barcelona's metronomic passing game.

"We've got to change our game a bit," said Wilshere.

"We need to get in their faces and win the ball back, if you like, be a bit nasty with them. We have to press them as a team."

Barcelona meanwhile are likely to be without central defender Carles Puyol as they aim to bounce back from the disappointment of seeing their record-breaking run of 16 straight victories in La Liga come to an end in a 1-1 draw with Sporting Gijon at the weekend.



Brazil legend Ronaldo (R) smiles during a press conference to officially announce his retirement in Sao Paulo on Monday. On his lap is his son Alex.

PHOTO: AFP

Ronaldo a class apart

Football

INTERNET

They called him fat and slow and lazy, but as Ronaldo Luis Nazario de Lima the original, brilliant, enigmatic Brazilian waved goodbye to the sport last weekend, he did so with his place in immortality already locked away.

For all the bad news the injuries, the illness, the weight problems, the wild lifestyle that plagued him for much of his career, the fact remains there is only a handful of players in the history of the beautiful game who can claim to have played it at such a high level, and produced so spectacularly on the biggest stage of all.

Discussions about the greatest players of all time are always going to divide opinion and are largely an exercise in futility, such is the way the game has evolved. Yet there will be few who would dispute that Ronaldo is worthy of a place hovering around the top 10, thanks primarily to his impact on two World Cups.

The first was the one he was supposed to win, but didn't. In 1998 Ronaldo was at the peak of his powers, young, lean, hungry and yet to have his knees ravaged by injury. With four goals en route to the final, the then 21-year-old was the star of the greatest show in soccer. Then disaster struck the night before what was supposed to be his

crowning glory.

Ronaldo was struck by an inexplicable convulsion less than 24 hours before the final against France. He admitted in an interview after the game that a doctor told him he should not play. But play he did, poorly, as Brazil crashed to a 3-0 defeat.

Four years later, in 2002, came the World Cup he wasn't supposed to win, but did. Almost single-handedly. Brazil was in the unfamiliar role of outsider heading into Japan and South Korea after a dismal qualifying campaign that almost ended before the finals.

Ronaldo had been particularly disappointing, with the first jibes about his weight starting to flare up. As an antidote to the criticism he refused to take himself too seriously, even sporting a ludicrous haircut that left him with nothing but a crescent-shaped tuft just above his forehead.

Whatever the spark was, it worked. Ronaldo produced one of the greatest individual performances in any World Cup. He scored eight goals in seven games, and Brazil powered its way to the title. Notching two goals in the final against Germany was the perfect way to cap it all off and seal his nation's record fifth World Cup triumph.

Pele had greater longevity, Diego Maradona was more electrifying, Franz Beckenbauer had more grace and Zinedine Zidane more guile. But if

your life was dependent on a scoring chance being emphatically accepted, Ronaldo in full flow would surely have to be the ultimate choice.

Tall and strong, he also had the keenest of eyes for any defensive weakness and an economy of short-range movement that more than made up for a lack of blistering pace.

Some of the world's biggest clubs simply could not resist him, with Barcelona, Inter Milan, Real Madrid and AC Milan all happy to part with millions in return for his magic feet.

Despite that glittering array of employers, hardware did not pile up as much as might have been expected. He helped clinch a pair of Spanish league titles with Real Madrid in 2003 and 2007, but there was no Champions League winners medal. His only European success was the 1997 UEFA Cup Winners Cup with Barca and the 1998 UEFA Cup with Inter.

Physical woes prevented him from achieving great consistency, but there were still flashes of superhuman brilliance. Ronaldo's remarkable hat-trick at Manchester United in a 2003 Champions League quarterfinal may have been the finest technical performance of his career.

In his homeland, Ronaldo will occupy an eternal place alongside legendary World Cup heroes such as Pele and Garrincha. It was fitting that he ended his career, in that land of soccer majesty, after two final years with the Corinthians.



Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi runs during a training session at the Joan Gamper Sport Centre in Sant Joan Despi yesterday on the eve of their Champions League clash against Arsenal.

PHOTO: AFP

Roma shift focus

AFP, Rome



Roma host Shakhtar Donetsk in the Champions League on Wednesday in a match that has taken on extra significance for the Italians.

Claudio Ranieri's team have taken just one point out of the last nine in Serie A, losing to two of their would be title rivals: Inter Milan and Napoli.

Those defeats left them 13 points adrift of leaders AC Milan, albeit with a game in hand, and all but mathematically out of the scudetto race.

Ranieri admitted as much in his post match comments on Saturday following the home reverse to Napoli.

"Fighting for the scudetto at this point to me seems a big ask," he said.

"But it seems that it just takes one defeat for people to say the toy is broken."

"We have to change objectives now, roll up our sleeves and see where we can finish."

"It's true that this year we're not the same team as last season, we're not running like we did before and we have to try to understand why."

Those changed objectives may just mean that the Champions League has become the priority for a team that has often done well in European competition, without ever looking like threatening to win the trophy.

Roma have had a number of quarterfinal appearances in recent years, most notably in 2007/08 when they knocked out Real Madrid before falling to Manchester United.

The problem for Roma, as Ranieri admitted, is that they simply are not as good as last season.

Captain and talisman Francesco Totti is 34 now and no longer an automatic first choice starter.

Ranieri has preferred Marco Borriello as his main front man this season with

Montenegro's Mirko Vucinic and French winger Jeremy Menez the two most frequently used to support him.

But with Daniele De Rossi failing to grab games by the scruff of the neck as he has done in the past, Roma have struggled to win games.

A look at their goal difference tells the story of a team that is scraping victories rather than coasting to them.

Roma have only scored three more goals than they have conceded despite having won four more games than they have lost, meaning that on average their defeats have been heavier than their wins.

They also struggled just to get to this stage, losing at home to minnows FC Basel of Switzerland before needing a 1-1 draw at CFR Cluj of Romania in their final game to be sure of qualifying.

Shakhtar, on the other hand, won five of their six group games with only a 5-1 walloping at Arsenal blotting their copybook, although they still went on to top the group.

Their Croatian captain Darijo Srna is understandably confident that the 2009 UEFA Cup winners can make progress in this competition.

"Roma are a good side with expert players and great forwards such as Totti, Borriello, Vucinic and Menez who can create problems at any time," he said on the club's website.

"Our aim is to score at least one goal away from home and then the match in Donetsk will be a different story."

His confidence is based on Shakhtar having won every one of the 16 matches they've played at home this season, scoring 42 goals and conceding only four.

"However, Roma have an advantage because Italy don't have the winter break but for us Wednesday's game will be the first for two months," he added.

Italy does have a winter break but only just over two weeks, unlike in Ukraine where it lasts a lot longer.

Chelsea's title hopes fading

AFP, London



Fernando Torres had a second disappointing showing for Chelsea at Craven Cottage on Monday night as their

hopes of retaining the Premier League title all-but disappeared.

Torres missed a host of chances for the visiting side after being chosen ahead of Didier Drogba at the head of a three-man attack.

The result leaves Carlo Ancelotti's side 12 points behind leaders Manchester United, with 12 games to play.

While Torres was a shadow of the man

who Liverpool had known in previous seasons, David Luiz, who was also bought on transfer deadline day was excellent - until the second minute of injury time, when he conceded a penalty.

Petr Cech saved the resulting spot kick from Clint Dempsey, but the fact Luiz's push led to the penalty marred an otherwise flawless performance from the Brazilian.

Chelsea switched back to the 4-3-3 formation that had proved so successful in the early part of this season, with Didier Drogba dropping to the bench in favour of Fernando Torres as the central striker.

David Luiz, who arrived at Chelsea

along with Torres on January transfer deadline day, was handed his first start for his new club in the centre of defence.

Fulham, who headed into this match unbeaten at home this year, kept with most of the same team that has brought them three straight wins at Craven Cottage in the league.

Fulham enjoyed the first meaningful attack of the match five minutes in, with Andy Johnson being put through by Damien Duff only to be thwarted by Luiz.

Four minutes later Fulham had to withstand a sustained period of Chelsea pressure, but some good work from Nicolas Anelka on the right ended with Frank Lampard shooting wide.



Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho (R) and his son Jose Jr. attend the Premiership match between Fulham and Chelsea at Craven Cottage on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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WEDNESDAY

ESPN & STAR Sports

ICC WC Warm-up Match
India v New Zealand
Live from 3:00pm
Sportscentre India
Sports News

Live at 11:00pm
TEN Sports

UEFA Champions League

Roma v Shakhtar
Live from 1:00am (Thursday)
TEN Action+

UEFA Champions League

Arsenal v Barcelona
Live from 1:00am (Thursday)

THURSDAY

ESPN & STAR Sports

ICC World Cup
Opening Ceremony
Live from 6:00pm

DAY'S EVENT



ICC WC Warm-up Match
Canada v England
Time: 2:30pm
Venue: Fatullah Cricket Stadium