

**"So far they (Arsenal) are the best team in the Premier League. We felt it a couple of weeks ago. The commitment, they are sharp. It will be a big, big battle. In the departments, you have to be ready."**

Manchester City Coach  
PEP GUARDIOLA



## DOES ARSENAL'S REJUVENATED arsenal run deep enough?

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SAMAMA RAHMAN

When Reiss Nelson's shot rippled the back of the Bournemouth net in the 97th minute and secured an unlikely 3-2 win at the start of March, it seemed that Arsenal had begun to harness the resolve of champions.

Across previous campaigns, the Gunners developed a reputation as a team that would contend for the top spot to start the season before trailing off near December or January and shifting their focus to securing a European spot.

It was a trend many expected Mikel Arteta's side to continue this season after they lost Gabriel Jesus, their defining player at the start of the season, to injury during the World Cup in Qatar last December.

The Brazilian had started all 14 of Arsenal's Premier League games and played a pivotal role, helping the side go five points clear. Arsenal, expected to implode in the aftermath, showed the fire in their belly when they refused to give up an inch, instead adapting perfectly.

Eddie Nketiah became the solution from within while Leandro Trossard was bought in the winter and began to contribute immediately. Others continued to grow

remarkably. Gabriel Martinelli, Bukayo Saka, and Martin Odegaard have all hit double figures for league goals, a feat only matched across Europe's top 10 leagues by the Parisien trident of Neymar, Lionel Messi, and Kylian Mbappe.

Aided by all that, Arsenal remain five points clear after 13 more games, and Jesus back on the cusp of the starting eleven.

There was a moment to remember just ahead of the clash against Bournemouth as well, with Arteta naming a starting XI



that featured no players who had played under Arsene Wenger, the first time since January of 1986.

Yes, Arsenal conceded the second-fastest goal in Premier League history and continued to leak chances in defence. But, when crunch time came, all that went out the window as it has done so this season for the Gunners. In fact, Arsenal have fought back from losing positions to claim 15 points this season, more than any other side.

Despite having one of the youngest first-team squads in the top flight and one of the youngest managers, the team has certainly not shown that 'soft underbelly' that more physical teams

often took advantage of in the past. Such a young group should ostensibly also have been more susceptible to crumbling under pressure in a battle to win the club's first league title in 19 years.

But while implementing broader changes at Arsenal has been an arduous process for Arteta, there was one clear moment when the mentality of the team changed.

Arsenal were chasing a top-four spot with three games to go at the end of last season when losses to Newcastle and Tottenham ended their hopes.

"We all have this fire burning inside because of what happened at the end of last season. The experiences at the end of last season are adding to our team spirit and mentality," goalkeeper Aaron

Ramsdale said. "The day I returned to pre-season, the standard of training had increased. People were demanding more of each other. There were always certain people who were upset when losing in training but now it is a collective."

With their sights on a prize so much greater, the path was bound to be tougher. And, as a cursory look at the fixture list and a precarious five-point lead shows, Arsenal's most trying days are yet to come.

They must first ensure that they do not drop points during their upcoming matches against a struggling Crystal Palace or relegation candidates Leeds United, West Ham (A), and Southampton. During that stint, they will also have to travel to Anfield to take

on Liverpool.

But over the last six games of the season, the task becomes truly monumental.

The Gunners must first travel to the Etihad and face Manchester City, a clash that could potentially define the season, before hosting Chelsea for a London derby. Immediately afterwards, they will be challenged by Newcastle and Brighton, both teams hoping to finish in the European spots.

By that time, they should have their full complement of players. But whether they can latch onto the burgeoning belief that they have discovered and find the fuel for the hard yards will determine if their title challenge will remain just that, or finally translate to something greater.



## Race for top four hot up

SHABAB CHOWDHURY

League leaders Arsenal and their biggest competition of the ongoing season, Manchester City, have headlined the title-winning talks in the Premier League for the most part of the 2022-23 campaign but the next two spots that have Champions League qualification at stake have spurred on much more interesting discussions with as many as eight teams currently eyeing the coveted top-four spots.

EFL Cup champions Manchester United currently sit third with 50 points after 26 matches, followed by Tottenham Hotspur, who have 48, having played a match more.

A revitalised United under Erik ten Hag have made their mark on the Premier League but their resurgence has kept them in contention for each of the competitions they've played in. Having won the EFL Cup earlier, ten Hag will have his work cut out as his

side is competing for the Europa League, the FA Cup, and will also have to grind out results to keep their hold of a top-four position in the league.

On the other hand, a recent dip in form has had many question Tottenham's credentials for the top four, and a sucker punch from AC Milan which saw them crash out from the Round of 16 of the Champions League has only intensified those doubts doubled with the lack of urgency, and at times excitement, that Antonio Conte has struggled to deliver. With Liverpool and Newcastle breathing down their neck, Spurs, who have traditionally struggled to perform under pressure, will be feeling the heat while trying to maintain a Champions League spot. Crashing out of Europe perhaps came as a blessing for Conte, who can now channel all his expertise into securing a top-four spot.

Inconsistency has become



synonymous with Liverpool this season. A host of injuries combined with a fresh attacking line has made adjusting difficult for Jurgen Klopp's side, who are sixth on the table. The Reds handed rivals Manchester United a 7-0 mauling and the following week went down 1-0 to bottom-placed Bournemouth. Creating chances hasn't been an issue for Liverpool



but the finishing has. They are second to only City when it comes to creating big chances and top the charts for chances missed. They've hit the woodwork most times this season so far, with 15 coming off the bars and have had the most shots on target per game.

Klopp's men, who are six points off fourth-placed Tottenham, have a difficult run of upcoming fixtures

as they will take on Manchester City, Chelsea, and Arsenal in successive game weeks, which could eventually decide whether the Reds would make the top four or not. But facing the top-six sides haven't been an issue for Liverpool this season as they have thrashed Manchester United, and drew against Chelsea in the league but have given away points to Brighton, Wolves, Brentford, and of course, Bournemouth.

Fifth-placed Newcastle under Eddie Howe have been a revelation as things seemed to have fallen in place for The Magpies who, with the influx of some much-needed fund and the pathway of a project, have been able to turn things around. They have had the tightest defence in the league so far, with only 18 conceded in 25 games and have kept the joint-most clean sheets, 15 with Arsenal. They have not scored many but Howe's side have been stubborn and hard to beat. With technique

and pace upfront, with the likes of Miguel Almiron, Anthony Gordon and Callum Wilson, and an adept back four, it wouldn't be a surprise if Champions League football returns to St. James' Park.

While Brighton, Fulham, and Brentford make up 7th, 8th, and 9th positions on the table, Chelsea, who are 10th after 26 games, seem the most likely to push for at least a Europa League spot considering the sheer quality they have on their side. And with back-to-back wins against Leeds United and Leicester City, Graham Potter's side seems to have found that spark. Resorting back to a back-three has helped the Blues to click but it has to be the forwards who must carry their weight if Chelsea are to make a realistic push for a European spot as they have conceded 26 goals in the 26 matches played, which is only one behind league leaders Arsenal.