

Notes from The Professor – Arsene Wenger

Arsenal's unbeaten run of 49 Premiership games:

“ You cannot achieve this by just wanting to win and having a war every week: you **can only achieve this if the players enjoy playing**. He said he was motivated by his love of football and a desire to share his passion for the game with his players. The satisfaction of my day is knowing that we did a good training session and the players enjoyed it -- it is what I enjoy most in my daily life as a coach.”

A group that does not communicate together has a very low dynamic.

Now we have to create a culture within the club.

Details are very important to him.

The team will have to change and at the same time continue to be successful. During this transition, the challenge is the management of change.

Wenger is authoritative, but in a friendly, accessible way. He seems to be a man of **great analytical intelligence**. Everything he says makes sense and he does not waste words.

A gentleman is someone who can be trusted -- his word is his bond -- good manners and public spirited -- firm principles and unimpeachable integrity -
- an aura of charm and intelligence -- grace under pressure.

I only feel one pressure – the inside pressure to win and do well.

Combine continental sophistication with red-blooded fighting spirit of English football, giving Arsenal the best of both worlds.

Evolution rather than revolution.

Football made of movement, a collective game of quick passing and quick movement. I like modern football – that means compact lines, of zones, of quick, coordinated movements with good technique.

With 3 at the back, you have to come a little deeper, and I like offensive football and winning the ball early. It is much more difficult to pressure up the field with 3 in the back.

There are 2 challenges. The first is for me to adapt to the team and the qualities of English players. The second is for them to adapt to my ideas.

The life of a club never stops.

Wenger came across as a serious technocrat who knew he was accepting a serious responsibility. He hit on exactly the right mix of realism, optimism and humility. He was straightforward, very ambitious, traditionalist, idealistic, comfortable and pragmatic.

Wenger had addressed the team's biggest and most long-standing problem even before he had arrived. (signing of Patrick Vieira)

“ I was attracted by a game of movement, of counterattack, based on speed and dynamism. **The moment when one team loses the ball and the other team gained possession was a moment alive with thrilling possibilities.**

As a player, Wenger greatest qualities were his intelligence and his vision. **Mental speed was his greatest strength.** He was a very strong-minded young man who the other players found to be too sophisticated.

“ The influence I got when I was a child certainly had a big impact on the manager I am today. I learned all the values that my generation had in Alsace -- first work very hard, then work harder again and still maybe it's not enough. I was lucky enough to have a passion for football and dedication was normal when I was growing up.

What makes you sad is when you meet talent and he hasn't the desire to achieve something.

Wenger taught me a lot about discipline and self-belief.

When asked what system they played under Wenger, he responded “ we played the system where you have to win ! With good players you can play any formation.

In Jan. 2001, Wenger stated that bribery and corruption had influenced his decision to leave his native country. (match-fixing scandal)

The Japanese saw sport as entertainment rather than as tribal warfare, so the atmosphere at the games was fresher, more innocent.

Wenger was respected as a cultured technician of the game. He was respected as a team-mechanic, someone who could create a harmonious squad, refine individual players and combine them to create a balanced, efficient unit. He was also known for his diplomacy and his personality was as important as his knowledge. He had an impressive command of detail, but could also see the bigger picture, the landscape beyond the next match.

“ I learned to take hold of something by letting go.”

When one invests himself to the point in football, the only priority is win, win and win. You end up pushing away the rest of your life.

In England everything's based on effort and commitment. That's fine against fools but, when you play against people who have superior technique and are willing to match your courage and commitment, they're gonna wipe the floor with you. We (England) are so insular that we don't even realize what other football nations think of us.

It's time for a revolution in English football. It's totally lacking in imagination, innovation and creativity.

But why is it a different game ? Because of an influx of foreign ideas.

“ I know how I want the team to play – now I just have to wait and see if they can adapt to that. I want to give confidence to the players first. I am someone who needs challenges. I like to win and I try everyday to be better than the day before. “

If he comes across as having good football intelligence there will be no problem. Wenger has an English mind but also a German mind which is very disciplined. He is honest, straight-forward, approachable, but ruthless too if a player stepped out of line.

Arsene made it clear that there would be total change straight away. There was no messing around. “ This is how I run training and this is how I expect you to eat and look after yourselves.”

“ I like players to relax with massage and hot baths. I believe they are helpful, physically and psychologically.” He has studied physiology and was an expert on flexibility, nutrition and the best ways to protect a player’s body against fatigue. He also studied plyometric training. He brought in a dietician to explain the benefits of pasta, boiled chicken, steamed fish, broccoli, raw vegetables and lots of water.

Wenger’s training techniques were the distillation of 2 decades of research, practice, observation and careful thinking. Work on the training pitch became more scientific, with fewer long runs and cross-country runs but much more timed running.

“ He is a thinker, a listener, and he cares a great deal about the welfare of the players, “ Tony Adams said.

For me beauty is **efficiency**. He does the right thing at the right moment.

Being a professional, is trying to be at your best every time. For this, you need a stronger mentality. You need a special attitude.

We couldn’t find the right balance between playing long balls and keeping the ball on the ground and having patience.

“ Coaching is not about what players you’ve got. It’s about what you get out the players you’ve got. “

24 years old is the best age for a football player. The 4 or 5 years he has in front of him are the best ones.

We have 2 departments at Arsenal now who work very hard to improve the quality inside the club – the youth department and the professional department. Arsenal have the best players between 28 and 35, but between 20 and 28 the best players are at Manchester United and Liverpool. If the spirit of the players is right and the ambition is right, you take a chance on that player.

“ What motivates me is an ideal of thinking how football should be -- and to try to get near this way of playing.”

“ He’s a quick thinker, a quick brain in the box and he has the physical power to react. His second quality is that he’s an explosive player, but he’s very quiet in front and calm of goal at the right moment. He has the appetite -- he has a huge one. “

“ I think today that I am better in my job than ten years ago. Because I tired for 10 years to improve every year.”

You have the problem of balancing the whole team when you take the decision to add new players.

“ In 2 or 3 days you can quickly destroy what you’ve built up for a long time. “

Was this the best performance since you took over ? “Maybe the most fluent – with the most speed in ball circulation. That’s what we try to improve on. But I still think we can improve. We can win the ball quicker, we can be better off the ball, we can have more accuracy in our passes in the last 25 yards, we can be stronger in set pieces. “

“ If you want to love what you do it must not be compulsory, it must be something you want to achieve and that you enjoy. “ The importance of player enjoyment is high on Wenger list.

“ What’s important for me is that we have shown a consistency since the beginning of the season. That shows that we have quality. “

“ He’s (Bergkamp) among the best players in the world. It looks so easy for him to score goals. And he doesn’t need 3 touches. All his goals are 2 touches or 1 touch.”

“ I enjoy it when a player keeps a constant focus on what is important, which is his game and his life. --- for me it’s about how much they love their job, and he loves his game. --- for me, that is a characteristic of the big player: he loves to play. “

In any team there are 4 or 5 core players and the absence of any of them can be damaging, but Arsenal had the mental resilience and organization to survive those absences.

“ When you are a manager, you can only be efficient if you respect your own view of football. When change is necessary, it must be very slow. “

“ Because they are good players, and they respect the collective way we want to play. And that’s why we are efficient. “

In football, the 3 principles of play are possession of the ball, supporting the ball and penetration. Wenger’s style of play emphasizes the first and third principles.

Petit was a tremendous strategic player and it was his footballing intelligence, combined with that of Adams in defense and Bergkamp in attack, that allowed Arsenal to play the game so fast and so penetratingly.

Every manager can only be successful if he gets his team to play the way he holds deeply within himself.

But the people who learn from losing win more than those who don’t. The quality of the players and their spirit is the most important.

Wenger built his team’s entire style around pace.

After a long, long season Arsenal were still showing huge hunger, fierce desire and the ability to score devastating goals. Power football played relentlessly with huge authority at a very high tempo.

Wenger’s German heritage had proved invaluable to him as he has the rigor, discipline and sense of order for which Germans are known. He has an intellectual side and has never lost his spirit of enquiry.

He remains what he was when I met him, a student with a passion for football.

Football clubs are driven by ambition, tradition and rivalry.

“ It’s always a bit of a struggle between tradition and innovation. I would say that innovation is to bring in some players who can bring different qualities. My first target was stability. That means to keep the players that we have. I didn’t want to destroy the spirit. “

Arsenal vs Kiev: They (Kiev) defended deep and cleverly, and rarely fouled except in the last third to prevent a shot or killer pass. Their defenders were very cute at pushing up to narrow angles to pinch the ball or catch a striker offside, and their shape was so good that you did not notice how much running they did. They broke using 2 or 3 passes, often 1 touch passes, and the whole team just rolled into the right spaces.

Arsenal 0 - Lens 1: “ My job is not to show anger or frustration, but to arrive at a logical analysis of what happened and try to work out why. There is no normal reaction any more in football. When you lose, it is always too negative. When you win, too positive. I try to give small problems small importance and the right importance to the right problems. “

“ What I like most about Kanu is his intelligence, the way he is aware of teammates and always wanting to bring them into the game.

At this point in the season, Wenger must have felt that he had assembled perhaps the strongest and most skillful squad of players in Arsenal’s history: An English defense that was more durable than Stonehenge, a French engine room, a double Dutch threat in attack, an improving goalscorer who lived on Planet Anelka and an all star bench with a sparky Swede, a Nigerian ball-wizard and an Argentinian who was as versatile as a Swiss army knife.

“ The success culture within the club has inspired the new players. It’s infectious, there is a pressure from the group to do well. They never know when they are beaten and they refuse to give up. If you are a winner, it’s important for you to win throughout your whole life. They try to give everything to win and if they have a chance, they fight for it. “

Wenger’s two and a half years in charge at Highbury have consistently offered the paradox of cerebral football let down by the hole-in-the-head school of indiscipline.

When Wenger philosophizes about his players and lists their qualities he comes across as the head of a science faculty enthusing over the examination results while down the corridor the students are about to blow up the lab for the umpteenth time.

Pace has to be driven by desire. If you really want to win, really want to score, really want to get past defenders, you find another gear.

“ We want to win, and if you want to win you have to survive disappointments. And we have to show that in the next game, that we can react. “

“ ... winning the game always justifies your team selection. “

“ ... they put a superb exhibition of collective commitment, pace and one-touch passing. ----- Spurs were pressing, pressing, pressing, desperately chasing the ball, trying to close the gap in class through sheer energy. ----- never defend high up against pace ----- the key was maybe they played very high and we found space behind them.”

On Arsenal -- “ whatever way you wanna play it, they’ve got the answer to you ----- they have quality running through the side and enormous self-belief which shows itself in their determination to win every game. “

It was Arsene’s fitness regime which probably extended my career by 2 years , maybe more

Wenger knew that the threat of Anelka’s pace had dictated the shape of many Arsenal games, making them less compressed, so that Veiera and others had more space in the midfield. The loss of their speedy striker had a big impact all over the field. If Arsenal stopped attacking at lightning pace and played more crossfield passes, they were more likely to lose the ball in dangerous areas and be subjected to counterattacks.

The plan was to feed Kanu and make narrow runs to support him.
Thierry Henry arrived from Juventus for 8.5 million pounds.
Davor Suker was a patient predator who waited for an opening.
Bergkamp knew how vital a striker’s 1st goal was psychologically.
Suker had proved himself cute at moving away from a defender at the last moment to create a yard of space for a precise shot or header.

It is never wise for a club manager to judge players in international games. Most millionaires can raise their game for a World Cup, but **what are they like in Sunderland in February ?**

“ If you keep scoring late, you believe that you can score late. “

“If you realize your ambitions so quickly, you start dreaming about new challenges. “ (Marc Overmars)

Rivaldo could be stopped by tight marking and tough, fair tackling.

Arsenal vs Barcelona: They (Barcelona) did not support their attacks, did not use overlappers, did not flood the box, and only won 1 corner against Arsenal's 13. Their style was mathematical, geometrical, and economical. Very little energy was wasted, very few passes were wasted, and they seemed to have 13 players to smother every Arsenal move. The way Barcelona played was cool, shrewd, relaxed.

Arsenal vs Fiorentina: “ They play quite deep and wait for the right moment to strike. I expect to be under pressure, but for only short spells, and then it is intense. They are like snakes, they have spurts and in 5 minutes they can kill you. “

For Wenger, every match is part of a sequence, a bigger picture. Performance depends upon fitness.

Wenger loved a certain style of football - a dynamic way of playing which depended on early passes and explosive acceleration. Win the ball and in score 2 seconds later. He prepared his team to play technical power football. **It was fast, skillful, precise, penetrating football.**

The challenge is to put together defensive concentration and offensive efficiency for the entire 90 minutes of play.

It gets easier for defenders to push in on every player if they know that you don't go in behind them. So it's easy for them to hold the line if you don't make the runs.

Wenger almost always talks moderately, never over-reacting, never exaggerating, even when the adrenaline is flowing after matches. He is a natural teacher, always supportive, always encouraging, but always patiently demanding more from his players.

Henry's pace had elongated the game, forcing Derby to sit back more than they would have done against Kanu and that gave Petit room to dictate the play.

What Wenger calls 'our game' is a very fast, precise passing game based on explosive choreography, a game which, for the sake of convenience, we might call 'Bergkamp football' – direct, dynamic, penetrating attacks.

Wenger told us that Henry could not time his runs, so his best position was on the wing. Henry would have to improve his off the ball movement.

There were 5 key partnerships in this Arsenal side:

Seaman – Adams, Bergkamp – Overmars, Bergkamp – Parlour,
Adams – Keown, Petit – Veira

“ Listen, when you lose games you have to accept that negative things always come with out. I've no doubt the state of mind or commitment of the team. It's not about commitment, it's about quality. We had more shots , but we are less efficient. That's about quality. “

The way many teams play against Arsenal is they just drop back and wait and defend deep, and then if we don't score first, we always have a problem. I think we are a little impatient in the back, because we need to score.

When everybody's back and you've got a full team, will you play your best team in every game ?

“ No. **If you say I'll play the same team every time, no matter how they play, the competition inside the squad goes, and that's not right. I'll play the team that has the best chance of winning the game,** and I'll try to create stability in our shape and in the players who play well together. “

“ Because you get more space away, you need more players who will go in behind the defenders, so you will need more pace away. “

Arsenal was expecting a difficult last 25 minutes but their spirit, determination and organization saw them through.

Arsenal started the game without their 3 strategic brains:

Adams, Petit and Bergkamp.

The turning point was Silvinho's goal because its quality lifted the crowd.

The high – tech training complex was designed to Wenger's specifications – A 2,500 square meter glazed building which houses a senior-squad gymnasium, state of the art medical equipment and offices for the coaches, physio, doctor and youth officer. A hydrotherapy unit, with swimming pools, Jacuzzi and sauna. There are 10 immaculate pitches, including 2 designed for high intensity use, and 2 also have underground heating.

A footballer's life revolves around the fixture list, the clock, meal times and travel schedules.

In a cup final, you just try to win it.

To achieve something at the end of the season will give the players the feeling that they did not fight for nothing.

It is good to concentrate on your own strengths.

The team, the facilities, the stadium, everything, just the professionalism in the way the club's run. Everything's spot on. Any problems he sorts out. And he doesn't allow complacency to breed in any part of the club.

As Christian Vieri once said, "only a striker knows what it 's like to score – And not score."

Arsenal were on the back foot right from the kickoff and as the first half wore on they seemed to be too diagrammatic, too shape conscious, broken up into 3 separate units of defense, midfield and attack, players staying in their boxes 15 yards apart.

“ Sometimes the hardest part about being a coach is to do nothing. But, if you keep the faith in your players, it often comes right.”

Arsenal vs Galatasaray:

Galatasaray had been more up for it than Arsenal. They defended deep, broke up the rhythm by diving, worked the angles in midfield, played in little triangles, and always seemed to have an extra player. They got a swarm of players around Vieira and Bergkamp at key moments. Their pressing was backed by players who were resourceful and patient when it came to keeping possession. Their tactics nullified Henry's pace and isolated Bergkamp. Arsenal had looked too schematic, too German, with too little play around the ball and not enough support runs close to the ball, not enough improvisation. Wenger had relied on pace, fitness and subbing Kanu and none of those factors significant on the night.

“ If we had won the penalty shootout it would not have made any difference to the quality of play. “

Wenger was probably the only manager in England who would have said that winning the cup final on penalties would not have changed the fact that they had played badly. It showed how idealistic he was and how high his expectations were in terms of the entertaining football he expected his team to play.

While most managers regarded winning headers and knockdowns in the penalty area as a good way of scoring a goal, Wenger clearly wanted to play a game that was more advanced, less old-fashioned.

Wenger's teams for the past 5 years always had a blend of warriors and technicians. You admire technique and you admire passion, but it is the combination of the two that is exciting – when they play brilliantly from the heart.

We have to do better and we want to do better.

Roberto Carlos is a power player, an elemental force, a rumble of thunder, while Silvinho is a zigzag streak who can deliver a better ball. Silvinho won the ball deep inside his own half, played it infield to Pires and then zoomed off on an 83 meter sprint across the snowy grass and icy mud.

Robert Pires – artful, versatile and consistently constructive. “ He's the closest I know to being a successor to Zidane. “

On the flank, he has shown that he can pass anybody. He's very quick.

When you have a little doubt in your mind, doing something completely unexpected helps you. Just do it, don't think about it.

“ He's never gone through a period where he didn't score. When a player is so desperate to score you can only show confidence in him. They need it to survive.”

The improved passing rhythm suggested that Wenger had put the last 5 days to very good use. The team had recaptured 90 % of their dynamism and 80% of their fluidity.

The geometry of the move was exquisite, the speed stunning.

Arsenal had broken one of the most basic rules of professional football by conceding a goal just after scoring. At that level you know that you cannot lose concentration. “ We were still in the goal we scored, instead of being conscious that it was important in the next 5 minutes not to concede a goal.”

The best side does not always win – (Arsenal vs Bayern)

In studying the video he saw how clever and systematic Bayern's gamesmanship had been. They created nothing in open play. Bayern played for free kicks. Hitzfeld was a pragmatic tactician who was in the results business, not the entertainment business. Wenger was more idealistic, in love with the beautiful game, dreaming of the perfect attacking performance backed by defensive concentration. Wenger, having seen his team lose their shape, focus and nerve, was savagely disappointed.

In most of those games there had been a very fine line between success and failure.

They (Arsenal) were breaking up our attacks and playing very effective two pass, three pass, four pass movements, with the move being finished on the fourth or third pass. ----- no clever passing movements, just effective, simple, early football – got in behind our 2 young center backs.

Wenger had mostly been a model of consistency in his team selections, picking his strongest teams without trying to do anything radical or clever. He obviously believes that tinkering baffles your own team as much as your opponents because it breaks up rhythm, partnerships, angles, understandings.

In their must win home games, Liverpool usually plays very defensively, hitting long balls up to Owens and Heskey and their unit of 6 tall defenders invariably works against Arsenal, who play avenue football, looking to support each other by gliding quickly down the central avenues near the man with the ball.

Wenger is the most cerebral manager, somebody who does nothing but enhance the role of the football manager. The only pressure he knows is the pressure to win when you are supposed to win. He's never really been under the pressure to sort out a losing team.

There is a life-span for a manager, at one club.

Nowadays it's management by personality, by respect. And there's management by intellect. I think Wenger is the best example of that. He is an absolute football nut and that's why he likes it here. Because he's in that culture. In France, that isn't the culture.

Arsenal had failed to support their strikers in the first half, as the manager had said they should, but in the second half, when they played high-energy football, pressurizing ferociously, it had worked because that is their most effective brand of football. Their game is based on speed and energy, skill and momentum, so they are the kings of coming-at-you football, but the dunces of wait and see football.

“ Everything seemed to go against us, but that can happen when your concentration is not right.”

The 90 minutes showed the limitations of Wenger's straight 4-4-2 selection. Most teams who play 4-4-2 depend a lot on crosses, but Arsenal did not hit crosses because Wiltord and Henry play avenue football, dribble and shoot football. If you do not cross the ball, you need a creative half-striker to link the play, giving time for midfielders to make supporting runs, and Arsenal did not do enough of that.

Wenger's strength lies in his close relationship with his players. For him, it is very important that each player keeps developing.

Football is a game of partnerships and Patrick Vieira had no partner. Thierry Henry had no partner either, so he carried too big a burden.

“ All the French players who have come to Arsenal under Wenger have exploded, “ says Pires. “ Certainly he has inspired confidence into my game.” The simple thing is he puts an enormous amount of trust in you. At the beginning, he speaks to you a lot. Then he leaves you, let’s you relax in your mind and become calm about what you are doing. Then, once you are on the pitch, it’s up to you to demonstrate your worth back to him. He does it progressively until something sparks inside of you. He says simple things and they make you want to work for him. He takes only 6 minutes to announce the team line-up and talk before each game.”

We play football based on mobility and technique.

Vieira was Arsenal’s best passer of the ball with 1,500 passes, 300 more than anyone else, and 82% of his passes were successful. He won more tackles than any of his teammates – he was one of the giants of the modern game.

Sol Campbell was a magnificent gladiator. His athleticism and calm temperament were his strong qualities. He convinced me that he is a very ambitious guy who wants to improve and play at the top level.

Wenger talked in glowing terms of the talents of Robert Pires.

“ Personally, I look at the player and what do I see ? He asks for the ball, and then he gives it to a teammate . Then he passes to a player who is in front of him. Lastly, he gives it at the right moment. Not many players can do that. He can also accelerate, he’s a team player, he passes a lot. For me he is a fantastic player. “

The conundrum facing every football coach is this: How do I make my team stronger without making another part weaker ?

Deportivo were well organized, with good ideas. They used the whole width of the pitch and were not scared to pass the ball backwards or sideways, while Arsenal played narrowly and impatiently, always trying to go forward.

You’re in a project or out of it, never in between.

Wenger said that the players each have ambition and it is up to the coach to provide a framework in which they can express themselves.

We have young players, we have potential, we have stability and we have experience. That will help us a lot.

Arsenal beat Juventus and lost to Charlton -- Arsene said that was complacency.

George Graham was wearing a black leather jacket, and looked fit, fashionable, sporty, a bit macho, a working playboy. The poor boy from Glasgow became a footballer, then a Londoner, then a manager, then a millionaire, and now he lives here with Sting, Boy George and all the other Hampstead millionaires.

When the team was motoring, and enjoying their unbeaten run, incoming players were jumping on the moving vehicle and being carried along by the momentum.

Pires on Vieira; “ Patrick is so important to the team. He gives us rhythm, his positional play is excellent and he always makes a good pass. He’s intelligent and he’s the soul of the team.

On Bergkamp: “ what he does is close to genius. I’m always wary of using those kinds of words, but I think in this case they’re justified. He’s a player who gets close to perfection.” Magisterial, razor sharp, always thinking one move ahead, always purposeful, never flashy, never guilty of showboating. With Dennis in the team you expect him to create chance after chance for everybody.

“ I just want to take this club as far as I can and like at every big club it is a construction. There is a scaffolding you build up and up and up. We want to be the biggest club in the world. **The secret to becoming the biggest club in the world is having good players and making good decisions.**”

Arsenal are spectacular sprinters who win games by overwhelming opponents, and Deportivo are canny passers who win by outsmarting them. Deportivo may not have the best players in Europe, but they might have the best shape, the sweetest rhythm, and the most fully realized style of play.

“ You don’t take your foot off the pedal when you are so close. This season is the season of the squad, a mental strength that has kept us together. I can go home knowing this team will give me their last drop of blood. The League is about points, but psychological ascendancy over your rivals is very important.”

It was extraordinary how the match reflected the temperaments of the rival managers: United were spiky and energetic, while Arsenal were also combative, but in a more cerebral manner, more detached and in control of their game. He had seen his men produce a truly heroic team performance, a classic of containment and counterattack.

Tony Adams praised Wenger for his cool leadership and shrewd deployment of the squad. Throughout the season, he has been extremely confident, unflappable. He’s been self-assured, dignified, calm, trusting, faithful and he has given people patience. And a lot of love. Wenger managed his players with tolerance, accepting their mistakes without being punitive or judgmental. He knew that you succeed after you fail, not before. **“ I am convinced that the biggest problem in modern football is impatience with new players.”**

The professor, a master of man-management and mind-management

A man motivated by an ideal of how the game could be, he was now close to creating his perfect football machine: a stylish, athletic, attacking team which could keep clean sheets.

Gilberto, at 16, had to give up the game and work in a quarry to support his mother, father and 3 sisters. He later rejoined his local club.....

‘His job was to win the ball and give it Ronaldo, Rivaldo and Roberto Carlos. Scolari did not want to see Gilberto making sprints into the opposition penalty area. He was his anchor, his insurance man, the players the fans began to call “the invisible wall.”

The most interesting thing about Brazil in 2002 was the way Scolari gambled in the construction of the team. “I’m betting that 21st century football is not about territory or tactical superiority. It’s only about chances and goals and finishing. Big Phil created a team and a style of play which owed nothing to any preconceived blueprint and everything to the odd assortment of talents available to him. Football is about players and players make styles.

Fluent, powerful and confident, as champions (Arsenal) should be, they could now spurt, score, slow it down, spurt again, score another and stroll to the final whistle. They are capable of scoring within 5 seconds of getting the ball back.

Confidence is a fragile thing.

Fabio Capello: “ Arsenal are the strongest team in Europe at the moment. They punish you at the first mistake and are always united. They run for each other the whole game. They never stop.”

Ajax prevented counterattacks by skirmishing energetically just inside Arsenal’s half, the zone from which their killers passes are often launched, and defending in depth in the box against a team which does not score from crosses.

Football is about ensemble play, partnerships, angles, understandings, confidence in the movement of your teammates.

Wenger: “ I won’t be fulfilled if we don’t win the Champion’s League. One of my strong points is my hunger. When I look back on my career, I always think about what we’ve lost rather than what we’ve won.”

On Gilberto: “ A strategic player, he cuts off angles, shadows runners, jockeys dribblers, and makes interceptions. He is a team player, a shape player, a continuity player.”

On Reyes: “ Very few players who are as exciting as Reyes are also economical. He knows where to run, where to pass, when to hold the ball for another split-second, when to dribble from the center circle to the edge of the box, how to pinch the ball on the halfway line and give a simple pass.”

Success in football is fragile. You can lose six months’ work in 4 days.

An amazing team spirit, tradition, stability and harmony made the success possible. You don’t build a team in 1 year.

Wenger: “ **What I look for in a young player is game intelligence, speed, technique,** but even if they have just attitude and technique, you can build on that. What makes you saddest of all is to see talent but no desire to achieve something.”

Mourinho’s team was highly organized, able to frustrate opponent’s tactically, and had the competitive spirit and patience to prevail in games of attrition.

There is more to the game than talent, it’s also about hunger and desire.

Wenger said that Chelsea were efficient matadors rather than great entertainers. They are like a matador – they wait until the bull gets weak to kill him. They have the patience to wait as they have an experienced squad.

What is good in football is that there isn’t just one way to be successful. Everyone has his own way of seeing the game. We have a different philosophy to our game and a different way of playing.

Arsene Wenger has re-invented the wheel with a pace-based style of play which is unique in that it ignores many conventions, such as scoring from crosses, headers, flick-ons and knockdowns. Arsenal pass the ball into the box rather than crossing it.

His team constantly practices a style based on interceptions, quick balls forward from the back third, one-touch passes, sharp movement to support the ball, and exceptional pace to create one on ones with the keeper.

He has transformed boring Arsenal into the most exciting team in the world.

Wenger knows that every team has its shelf life and every style of play has its shelf life. But he also knows that every style can be adapted and that every style evolves naturally, since players do not duplicate each other. They have different talents. Wenger can improve his team without changing his ideas. He could never organize negativity because his heart would not be in it. Somebody once said that genius is the willingness to risk excess in pursuit of your obsessions, and Wenger would not deny that he is obsessive.

The obsession, the challenge to achieve personal fulfillment, the unfinished business of the Champions League odyssey, remains the driving force for the Professor. There are only 13 games and 7 victories can make you kings of Europe. “I won’t be fulfilled if we don’t win the Champion’s League.”

