

Vermaelen Return is One Fewer Worry for Wenger

The cliché can sometimes ring true.

When Thomas Vermaelen returns to first-team football this weekend for Arsenal against Cup finalists Stoke, I dare say there will be a few brave souls in the home crowd who will turn to their long-suffering mate next to them to declare *“it’ll be like a new signing!”*

Vermaelen has missed almost eight months of football with an Achilles injury picked up on international duty. Despite initial reports suggesting it might only keep him out for a week, further setbacks resulted in surgery and a lengthy spell on the sidelines.

His absence is without question one of the low points of a season that Arsene Wenger admitted to have been his toughest since he took over at the club in 1996.

From the treatment table, Vermaelen has seen his side have yet another up-and-down season, that once again looks to end without a trophy.

Conceding three goals at home against both West Brom and Spurs as well as throwing away a four goal lead to draw at Newcastle were seemingly forgotten about, as the Gunners were still challenging in four competitions as February drew to a close.

However, over a spell of seven games, Arsenal’s season collapsed. In one telling moment their defensive frailties were captured in a moment that seemed almost like it was happening in slow motion. In the last minute of the League Cup Final, Laurent Koscielny missed a call from his goalkeeper, swiped wildly at an attempted clearance, only for the ball to trickle to Birmingham striker Obafemi Martins who slotted the ball home, sending the trophy to the Midlands.

Things were to turn from bad to worse following this for Arsene Wenger. An exit in the Champions League to a mesmerizing Barcelona was followed by another cup elimination following a lacklustre display to Manchester United. In-between these games, untimely draws against Sunderland, West Brom and Blackburn all but ended their title chances.

Now, it would be impossible to say that if Vermaelen had completed in those games, the outcomes would have been different. However, his absence has certainly been felt over the season.

His debut season last year was a highlight of the campaign. A strong, commanding left-footed centre-half with plenty of big game and international experience would be a big loss for any team, let alone one that can contribute eight goals over the course of the season.

Whilst injuries, goalkeepers and every other worry Arsene Wenger may have, any worries over his defence will be lifted upon the Belgian’s return. Whilst it may be too late for this season, having him back to playing 30+ games for next season could go a long way into breaking Arsenal’s current trophy drought.

Admittedly yes, claiming the 25-year-old to be *“a new signing”* may result in a few rolling eyes amongst those nearby, but if his return helps strengthen a defence that is clearly missing a commanding figure, then it’s a cliché that I’m sure Arsenal fans can tolerate just this once.