

## The Early Bird Gets the Worm

The last day of August has now passed, which means football's most overhyped and overdocumented day is now behind us, thankfully.

With it goes an unnecessary level of bewilderment and bedlam, over the investment in players that nobody else wants to buy; the footballing equivalent of remembering the girlfriend's birthday on the journey home, regrettably buying the last bunch of wilting flowers left in the petrol station. Alongside the Ginsters savoury selections on Wednesday were names such as Yakubu and Shaun Maloney; misfit players, individuals deemed surplus to requirements, expendable under different regimes or a new direction. Names like Jermaine Jenas and Joe Cole, who have had the protective tag of "*has it in him*" for too long for it to be still considered a valid excuse.

The title rivals made their main enquiries early; Liverpool revamped their midfield, Manchester United replaced retired legends, whilst their neighbours City invested in talent for positions that were being made vacant by departures. All three clubs identified their main targets and made decisive early moves. Along with Chelsea, the league is starting to look all too familiar at the top after just three games, except for one notable absentee.

A handful of new faces have arrived at Arsenal over the summer; Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and Gervinho to name two of the more popular choices to join a promising squad of talented internationals. However, with just one point from a possible nine, including a humiliating 8-2 loss to a team once considered a fierce rival, the real story behind such a turbulent start to the new campaign was evidently elsewhere.

According to the back pages, Arsenal's pre-season was dictated by two want-away players, and no matter what the arguments are now that both have departed, the two players in question were an influential part of a youthful squad of players. Fabregas finally left on August 15<sup>th</sup>, with Nasri's deal finalised nine days later, but to many the deals were over weeks before the contracts were signed. The need for replacements, though obvious amongst the fans and media, was less evident to the hierarchy. Following defeats by two of the three aforementioned swift shoppers, the plan had changed.

The debate is there to be had; was it the sobering result in Manchester or the subsequent media fallout that forced Wenger's hand? Before selling Nasri, Wenger stated that he had not found the quality he required to add to his team. Now he had to buy, there were no other options. The squad lacked depth, but more worrying, also lacked leadership, direction and purpose.

Now though, the issue wasn't with finding quality. Wenger was operating at least five weeks behind everyone else in terms of strengthening his team, and with a transfer window nearing closure. With a good percentage of the transfers settled before July ended, and the majority of players who were once available now located in pastures new, Wenger was forced out of his comfort zone - to bring in players that he may not have considered first choice, and to bring them in quickly.

One particular transfer was the signing of Mikel Arteta from Everton. Reports list that Arsenal offered £5m on Tuesday and £10m on Wednesday afternoon, both of which were rejected. The transfer was judged off until Arteta was made aware of the interest, and four hours before the deadline informed David Moyes his desire to leave for London.

There is no issue with Arteta wanting to compete higher once the opportunity presented itself. He is a graduate of the respected Antiguoko football academy in Spain; the same youth system that produced Xabi Alonso. Despite this, at 29 his personal medal collection peaks at the 02/03 domestic treble at Rangers. A player of his calibre does not deserve to have been limited to just 35 European games, and a chance to play in the Champions League would interest most in his position.

However, considering Wenger's statement about quality, it raises the question of how highly he rates Arteta, a player who had interested him for a while but never enough for an actual enquiry into his services. A desperation buy, or a short-term fix for a long-term problem? Either way, Wenger should never have let it get to that stage.

A leaf should have been taken from Roberto Mancini's book. A little unjust perhaps, to make comparisons to a manager who has unlimited riches to delve into, but the comparison is more for his attitude toward players who no longer class their employers as a priority. Carlos Tevez was spending the majority of the summer declaring he would never return to Manchester; Mancini's solution was not to dwell on the loss of his best striker, but instead go out and buy a replacement. Had Tevez been sold for the reported £40m, it would have covered the £35m used to bring in Kun Agüero. Jerome Boateng was deeply unhappy at being a fringe player considered less useful than Joleon Lescott, so was sold, at a profit, twelve days after his replacement Stefan Savic was brought in for half the fee.

Wenger was not making enquiries for replacements in July. He was sitting in press conferences speaking of his confidence that both Nasri and Fabregas would stay. Optimism was trumping pragmatism. He kept faith in £60m worth of talent who had long since made up their mind to leave. In reply, Wenger spent £26m on the last flowers in the courtyard. It may not be enough to win back the hearts of the Arsenal fans longing for the end of the relationship.