

Arsenal 1-2 Manchester United - Where the Match Was Won and Lost

A Danny Welbeck close-range strike nine minutes from time helped keep Manchester United three points behind leaders City, whilst reducing Arsenal to their third league defeat in a row.

In what is increasingly emerging as another league season of “what-ifs” for Arsene Wenger, his side find themselves 15 points behind a team that he could once upon a time claim were title rivals; matches between the two were often the yardstick for who would end the season as champions. The grim reality for the home fans as they leave the Emirates this evening is just how far the current team are from reaching anywhere close to that level.

- Keeping van Persie Quiet

Sir Alex said before the game that “It has become a case of stop Van Persie and you stop Arsenal,” and his side did a pretty impressive job of it. The defensive pairing of Evans and Smalling were solid throughout; the latter especially showing he is far more suited to centre back, compared to the right-back slot he found himself when they teams played in August. That’s of course if the passes got as far as the back four - caps are to be doffed for Michael Carrick and Ryan Giggs, who can both drop deep when not in possession and snuff out much of Arsenal’s passes towards the Dutchman. Odd to think that it was the Giggs/Carrick pairing that struggled so much against Newcastle earlier this month.

Limited to just one shot on target - his goal - van Persie was snuffed out of the game, with ten of his 18 passes not reaching a teammate. Regardless, he is still Arsenal’s game-changer - mentioned by Ferguson alongside such names as Messi, Ronaldo and Drogba as a player who can drag his teammates back into games, claiming points when all seemed lost, but when he’s silenced such as yesterday afternoon, the lack of a plan B from the North London side would be enough to worry even the most optimistic of supporters.

But there are sparks of one forming.

- Promising Chamberlain

It’s telling when a young teenager, starting ahead of a seasoned professional, is met with a sigh of relief instead of a worried rub of the beard. A game against an old foe such as United would perhaps be ideal for a player of the ilk of Arshavin, who should be a player who wants to dictate games, not one whose season to date has been plagued with the age-old argument that he lacks effort or even interest at times.

Chamberlain, making his first Premier League start, began very brightly; running unafraid towards Evra, finding space and using it well and most significantly, being able to use his pace effectively and efficiently instead of solely relying on it. He swapped at one point in the first half to try his luck against substitute Rafael, and considering how rusty the young Brazilian must be after his lengthy injury, was a smart move that would produce results on any other day.

Leading up to the equaliser, his shot wide of the right hand post after an hour was a highlight in a period of Arsenal dominance; it shows that his positional play and composure is already rivalling Theo Walcott, who in recent months appears to have gone backwards despite being one of the most experienced players in the starting line-up. With van Persie’s goal; an aesthetically pleasing counter-attacking build-up with an equally smart finish, Chamberlain’s involvement highlighted his acute awareness for such a young man - with Rafael still tracking back from a foray into the Arsenal box, Arsenal’s counter attack found its way towards the vacant right back slot. With Valencia still tracking back, then later forced into the middle of the pitch, Chamberlain’s reverse pass was ideally weighted for van Persie to slot home.

The crowd reaction to his substitution said it all. There's promise for the future, but then again, the same words were probably once uttered of Theo.

- **Arsenal's Full-Back Issues**

It's not a revelation, but it's definitely been hammered home now - Arsenal are in dire need of some fit full-backs. It's a position that you wouldn't assume to be vital to the outcome of a game, but today it's been shown that you cannot treat it as a position to fill up with 'any old squad player'. Both Djourou and the returning Vermaelen looked uncomfortable at times - something even United have found out themselves with Chris Smalling, who has filled in at right back on occasion, including the 8-2 game in August, but still far from his most comfortable position.

If you have weakened full backs, the one team you don't want to face is United. Their wide play, which is arguably their most effective attacking method no matter how many times they've tried to change it, is highlighted best by two players - Valencia, the "old-fashioned" winger, and Evra, who for the majority of possession will play just as far forward, leaving Nani to wander and disrupt in other areas, sometimes in the areas left empty by the deep lying Rooney.

To counter this, full-backs often need a helping hand: Silencing Valencia can often frustrate Rooney, who through lack of service will drop deeper than usual to get involved. Yennaris settled a few nerves once he came on at right-back, with only one stray pass from a defensive position, out of the 34 he made over the whole pitch. Back in August, it was Carl Jenkinson and Armand Traore. Perhaps the less said about their games, the better, but what is worth highlighting is the complete lack of support they received from Walcott and Arshavin.

The winning goal, perhaps inevitably, came from the Russian's mistake; a Scholes cross-field pass from the centre circle found Valencia hugging the touchline. By this stage, Vermaelen preferred to stay almost as a third centre back, meaning covering duties fell solely to Arshavin. One misread feint, and a heavy-footed attempt of a tackle later led to Welbeck's winning strike.

Perhaps it's the formation, or perhaps it's bad luck, but no matter how inexperienced the full backs are, they can't always do it alone.