

PREVIEW

WENGER CONFIDENT ARSENAL READY FOR BORO BATTLE

LONDON: Arsene Wenger has insisted his Arsenal players have the character to halt a run of four successive away defeats when they visit Middlesbrough as they look to revive their bid to finish in the Premier League's top four.

Wenger's team could be at 10 points off a place among the leading quartet by the time they kick-off at strugglers Middlesbrough today. But whatever the outcome of that match, Arsenal know they need a dramatic improvement if they are to qualify for the Champions League for a 21st successive season.

The dismal 3-0 defeat at Crystal Palace last time out highlighted how far the team has fallen since the period before Christmas when they were viewed as genuine challengers for the

Premier League title. Theo Walcott's admission after that loss at Selhurst Park that Palace "wanted it more" reflected badly on a group of players who have lost their way and strengthened the belief of all those who believe veteran French manager Wenger should leave Arsenal when his contract expires at the end of the season.

Jack Wilshere, the Arsenal midfielder currently on a season-long loan to Bournemouth, offered his view that the players must take their share of responsibility for the club's current problems.

"Sometimes a manager can only do so much, as in prepare a team and then the team have to go out there and perform," Wilshere told Sky Sports. But despite the recent setbacks, Wenger has backed his players to turn the situation

around. "When things don't go your way you are tested on the mental front more than on technical quality," he said. "Our test at the moment is there-can we be united and not divided?"

"Top level sport is about character. I can find you hundreds of players with technical ability at the same level as our players, "What makes the results is the character. These players are at this level because they have the character."

ARSENAL BANK

The manager has remained tight-lipped about his future although he did comment on speculation Alexis Sanchez could be offered a new £300,000 (\$375,630; 353,958 euros) per week contract to remain at Arsenal by insisting the Chile forward would not be

allowed to hold the north London club to ransom. "Some people tell me 'just give him what he wants', but then you cannot respect anymore any wage structure and you put the club in trouble as well," said the Arsenal manager.

Meanwhile Steve Agnew said second-bottom Middlesbrough could yet avoid relegation, despite not having won in the Premier League for four months, a run spanning 14 games.

The top flight's lowest scorers with 22 goals still have to face Chelsea, Liverpool and Manchester City in the remaining six games after hosting the Gunners, and the caretaker manager said: "We're still confident we can stay up, we will keep believing we can get out of the bottom three." Arsenal loan defender Calum Chambers is ineligible

against his parent club, but midfielder Gaston Ramirez is available after an ankle problem, and full-back George Friend is set to make his first appearance for six weeks after recovering from an calf injury.

Boro have taken six points from the last 42 to put them in grave danger of an immediate return to the Championship, but Agnew feels his side can earn a much needed victory, with Arsenal conceding three goals in each of their last four consecutive away league defeats. He added: "It's massive to have George back, he brings great energy and ability to the side. He's a solid performer and an infectious character around the dressing room who we have certainly missed so his return helps us go into the game in positive mood." — AFP

Spanish La Liga Table

Spanish La Liga table after yesterday's early matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Real Madrid	31	23	6	2	82	33	75	Valencia	32	11	7	14	47	54	40
Barcelona	32	22	6	4	91	30	72	Alaves	31	10	10	11	29	38	40
Atletico Madrid	32	19	8	5	59	24	65	Las Palmas	32	10	8	14	51	57	38
Sevilla	32	18	8	6	56	39	62	Malaga	32	8	9	15	36	49	33
Villarreal	31	15	9	7	45	24	54	Real Betis	31	8	7	16	33	51	31
Athletic Bilbao	32	16	5	11	45	37	53	Deportivo La Coruna	32	7	10	15	35	50	31
Real Sociedad	32	16	4	12	48	45	52	Leganes	32	6	9	17	26	49	27
Eibar	31	14	8	9	52	42	50	Sporting Gijon	32	5	7	20	34	64	22
Espanyol	32	13	10	9	44	42	49	Granada	31	4	8	19	27	65	20
Celta Vigo	30	12	5	13	45	51	41	Osasuna	32	3	8	21	32	73	17

MESSI KEEPS BARCA ALIVE AHEAD OF EL CLASICO

MADRID: Lionel Messi kept Barcelona's title hopes alive with two goals and an assist to see off Real Sociedad 3-2 as Spain's top two edged five-goal thrillers ahead of next weekend's El Clasico. Earlier on Saturday, Isco struck at the death to keep Real Madrid three points clear and with a game in hand at the top of the table after twice coming from behind to beat Sporting Gijon 3-2.

Barcelona will need Messi on this form if they are to produce another miracle Champions League fightback against Juventus on Wednesday from a 3-0 first leg defeat suffered in midweek.

"I am more than happy with the performance of the players and their ability to manage the frustration after what we experienced in the Champions League this week," Barca boss Luis Enrique told Spanish TV station Movistar. The Argentine is now just two off his 500th Barca goal as he smashed home an effort from 25 yards to open the scoring.

Messi then took his tally to 45 goals in 44 games this season with a far less spectacular finish as he bundled home from close range after Geronimo Rulli had saved from Luis Suarez.

However, Barca passed up the chance to enjoy a comfortable evening in a three-goal spell in as many minutes just before half-time. Firstly, Samuel Umtiti turned Inigo Martinez's driven effort into his own net. Paco Alcacer, deputising for the suspended Neymar, briefly restored Barca's two-goal lead with a composed finish from Messi's pass. Yet, Sociedad scored again almost straight from kick-off as Xabi Prieto cushioned William Jose's cross into the bottom corner.

FIRST LEAGUE TITLE

Madrid can all but secure a first league title in five years with victory when they host Barca next weekend.

But not for the first time this season they needed a late show after Duje Cop and Mikel Vesga put Sporting in front early in both halves. Isco's fine individual effort and a towering header from Alvaro Morata ensured neither lead lasted more than a few minutes. And Isco sealed the comeback when he drilled home from the edge of the box.

"This is the spirit of Real Madrid," said Isco. "It is in the DNA of this shirt and this badge, we have shown it so many times and again today. Until the referee blows the full-time whistle it is not over."

The Spanish international is yet to agree a new contract with his current deal expiring at the end of next season.

And Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane insists he wants Isco to stay despite his lack of starts and interest from Barcelona.

"You know what I think of Isco, he is a player I like a lot and his place is here,"

Isco's late intervention bailed out his coach after Zidane made nine changes from the side that beat Bayern Munich in the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final in midweek.

Cristiano Ronaldo and Karim Benzema were left out of the squad entirely alongside the injured Gareth Bale, while Toni Kroos, Luka Modric and Marcelo had to settle for a place on the bench.

"I feel like I am unfair with those that don't play," added Zidane. "There are 24 players that can play in all positions. It is the difficult part of this job."

Atletico Madrid warmed up for the second leg of their Champions League quarter-final against Leicester City with a comfortable 3-0 win over rock bottom Osasuna despite missing two penalties in the same game for the second time this season.

Coach Diego Simeone also left out a number of his first-team regulars with top scorer Antoine Griezmann on the bench for the full 90 minutes. Yannick Carrasco's low strike and back-post header put Atletico comfortably ahead either side of half-time.

Left-back Filipe Luis then added his third goal in five games. However, Atletico's problems from the spot continued as they have now failed to score any of their last six penalties in La Liga. Carrasco was denied his hat-trick by a fine save from Salvatore Sirigu before the Italian 'keeper made an even better stop to deny Thomas Partey seconds later.

Victory takes Atletico four points clear of Sevilla in third. — AFP



VALENCIA: Sevilla's Italian midfielder Franco vazquez (L) vies with Valencia's Argentinian defender Ezequiel Garay during the Spanish league football match Valencia CF vs Sevilla FC at the Mestalla stadium in Valencia yesterday. — AFP

SOCCER

SEVILLA STUMBLES AGAIN WITH 0-0 DRAW AT VALENCIA

BARCELONA: Sevilla drew 0-0 at Valencia yesterday as it continues to fade in its bid for an automatic Champions League berth.

Sevilla was mounting an outside challenge for the Spanish title through the first seven months of the season, but its goal now is just to secure a place in Europe's top competition for next season.

The draw meant fourth-placed Sevilla fell three points behind third-placed Atletico Madrid, which beat Osasuna 3-0 on Saturday. Sevilla has only one win in its last seven league matches, a slump that overlapped with its elimination by Leicester from the Champions League Round of 16.

The decline has also coincided with rumors regarding the future of coach Jorge Sampaoli, who tried to quash speculation this week that he was

linked to the newly vacated job in charge of the Argentine national team. The closest Sevilla went to scoring at Mestalla Stadium was when substitute Stevan Jovetic hit the post in the 17th minute, shortly after he replaced injured Victor "Vitolo" Machin.

Valencia likewise mustered very little beyond a header by Munir El Haddadi that Sevilla back Mariano cleared from his goal line before half an hour was up. Nani returned to the pitch for Valencia as a late substitute in his first match since recovering from a muscle injury that had sidelined him for almost two months.

The draw ended Valencia's streak of three consecutive victories, but extended its unbeaten run at home to seven matches under caretaker coach

Salvador "Voro" Gonzalez.

The top three finishers in la Liga go directly to the next season's Champions League, while the fourth-placed team faces a playoff to join the group phase

LEGANES 0, ESPANYOL 1

Substitute Leo Baptistao scored a stoppage-time goal to keep Espanyol in the running for a Europa League berth. The Brazilian forward returned in the last round after a heel injury had sidelined him for four months. Baptistao scored the winner by starting a counterattack with Gerard Moreno before chipping Leganes goalkeeper Iago Herrerin. Leganes was left clinging to the last spot above the relegation zone. — AP

RELIEF FOR MAN CITY GOALSCORER KOMPANY AFTER INJURY NIGHTMARE

	Southampton	0
	Man City	3

LONDON: Vincent Kompany's first Premier League goal for 20 months prompted an outpouring of relief and frustration after two injury-ravaged seasons for the Manchester City defender. The 31-year-old's 55th-minute header in a 3-0 victory at Southampton, in front of adoring City fans, sparked an emotional celebration from Kompany, who has started just 21 of City's last 102 games.

"For me it's always a long journey back," Kompany told BT Sport. "I would've liked to be injured less in my career but every single time I've put in the hard work (to get back).

"When this happens I feel I'm giving something back to the fans. I'm finally giving something back to the team and that's what you see in that moment..."

"It's ups and downs in football, but ultimately what gets you up is you keep looking towards your objective. If I had to work 15 years to have just one moment like this I would do. "I scored in front of the away fans and for me it was a great feeling. I feel like I want to give so much but I am restrained at times, but I keep positive and keep going no matter what." Kompany will have garnered many headlines for his goal but it was his calming, imperious and faultless defensive display that will have been most pleasing for City manager Pep Guardiola. Despite spending heavily in recent seasons, City's title aspirations have been hampered by an inability to build a consistent, reliable central defensive partnership in Kompany's absence.

John Stones and Nicolas Otamendi have arrived and, though each has shown glimpses of their undoubted quality, both are susceptible to the kind of mistake that was so rare for City when Kompany was at the peak of his powers. "Every manager Vincent Kompany has played under knows what an important player he is," Guardiola

told the BBC. "Finally, in recent games he has played he has delivered performances and hopefully he can stay fit. I want him fit enough to play every week-he has suffered for long periods but he

is a real, real central defender." After a run of four league games without a win City have registered back-to-back league victories and face Arsenal in the FA Cup semi-final next week. — Reuters

EPL results/standings

Manchester United 2, Chelsea 0; West Bromwich Albion 0, Liverpool 1; Crystal Palace 2, Leicester City 2; Everton 3, Burnley 1; Southampton 0, Manchester City 3; Stoke City 3, Hull City 1; Sunderland 2, West Ham United 2; Tottenham Hotspur 4, Bournemouth 0; Watford 1, Swansea City 0.															
Chelsea	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts	Stoke City	33	10	9	14	37	48	39
Tottenham Hotspur	32	24	3	5	65	27	75	Leicester City	32	10	7	15	41	53	37
Liverpool	32	21	8	3	68	22	71	West Ham United	33	10	7	16	44	59	37
Manchester City	33	19	9	5	69	40	66	Burnley	33	10	6	17	33	47	36
Manchester United	32	19	7	6	63	35	64	Crystal Palace	32	10	5	17	44	52	35
Everton	31	16	12	3	48	24	60	Bournemouth	33	9	8	16	45	63	35
Arsenal	33	16	9	8	60	37	57	Hull City	33	8	6	19	34	67	30
West Bromwich Albion	30	16	6	8	61	39	54	Swansea City	33	8	4	21	37	68	28
Southampton	33	12	8	13	39	42	44	Middlesbrough	31	4	12	15	22	37	24
Watford	31	11	7	13	37	40	40	Sunderland	32	5	6	21	26	58	21



BARCELONA: FC Barcelona's Luis Suarez, left, duels for the ball against Real Sociedad's goalkeeper Geronimo Rulli, center, during the Spanish La Liga soccer match between FC Barcelona and Real Sociedad at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona, Spain, Saturday. — AP



SOUTHAMPTON: Manchester City's Yaya Toure, left, and Southampton's Dusan Tadic battle for the ball during the English Premier League soccer match at St Mary's Stadium, Southampton, England, Saturday. — AP