

The Icarus Boot Room



Talking tactics: Arsenal

Arsenal has at times played some of the most technically brilliant football in Europe this season. Like Man Utd, they play with a pace and fluency that is great to watch but unlike Man Utd they're not always so effective.

Depending on the opposition's approach, they can play both possession and counter-attacking football equally well. But despite all the pace and fluency, Arsenal's finishing has at times been horrendous, as was the case against CSKA Moscow in Europe and West Ham Utd in the Premiership. Arsen Wenger said that the performance against CSKA had been Arsenal's best ever – how so when they could not score against an average European side?

If we analyse which players are key to Arsenal's control and poise, many would point to Fabregas, Silva, Rosicky or maybe even Hleb. But despite all of them having the ability to change the point of attacks and create space, it is surprising to discover that Jens Lehmann begins most attacking moves. His ability as a distributor has made him extremely valuable to Arsenal. Unlike many goalkeepers, he doesn't boot the ball into a general area towards his strikers, but sets attacks in motion deliberately. More often than not, he picks the best pass.

Lehmann's weight of pass, disguise and decision-making are often as good as many outfield players. He also starts counter-attacks by coming for crosses and immediately throwing the ball out to team-mates.

It is surely no coincidence that the two most attractive sides in the Premier-

ship have the two goalkeepers that are the best at using their feet. United's Edwin van der Sar and Lehmann provide their sides with the confidence to switch

play and the ability to keep moves flowing.

You have to plan very carefully to get the better of Arsenal. They can make

sides look inferior with their passing game and air of arrogance. However, in the last couple of years, Arsenal has not always achieved the results the quality of play suggests they deserve. I believe this could be down to poor finishing, defensive lapses and, importantly, a lack of a British back-bone.

Unlike Chelsea, Liverpool and Man Utd, who all have a Terry, Lampard, Cole, Gerrard, Neville, Giggs, Scholes or Rooney (I could go on!), Arsenal have Hoyte and Walcott. Hardly Sol Campbell or Tony Adams! Is it then a coincidence that they have struggled against teams like Sheffield Utd and Bolton? Recently against Liverpool it was 4 crosses and 4 goals, 3 from Crouch and one from Agger that caused most damage. Arsenal just could not cope with Liverpool in the air.

Most teams who have achieved home success against Arsenal have played a high-intensity and direct style of play. They have pushed their wide

players and full-backs up against their opposite numbers to deny them time. This has forced Lehmann to chip balls to his front men, which Thierry Henry (when fit) does not always relish or compete for, thus denying Arsenal easy possession. However, if teams fail to pressurise the Gunners, they will have large areas behind the defence for Henry or Van Persie to exploit.

The other tactic used by teams at the Emirates has been to drop deep, make Arsenal play wide and then defend in numbers, knowing they do not score too many goals from crosses.

Arsenal are a fantastic team to watch, and I am sure that with his amazing youth policy and scouting network, Wenger will solve the problems. If they can add some steel, goal scoring and even some British players to the mix, they could be unstoppable!

“Lehmann’s weight of pass, disguise and decision-making are often as good as many outfield players. He also starts counter-attacks by coming for crosses and immediately throwing the ball out to team-mates.”

