

Shooting Blanks

Arsenal played PSV Eindhoven yesterday in the first leg of the round of 16 of the UEFA Champion's League. It was the first matchday of this year's knockout stage and there was a lot of hype surrounding the games. Arsenal have remained undefeated thus far in 2007 but they were coming off an anemic 0-0 tie in the FA Cup fourth round against Bolton Wanderers. Tommy Smith, the mainly idiotic ESPN announcer who has ridden his Irish accent to some measure of respectability in this country, actually had a point when he said, "You don't know which Arsenal club will show up. The one that plays well and scores goals or the one that plays well and doesn't."

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Sadly, neither of those clubs showed up. The one that showed up was the one that plays shitty, doesn't score, and loses. Arsen Wenger tried to put his best healthy line-up on the field, and has said very publicly that the Champion's League is Arsenal's top priority now that they are out of contention for the English title. Senderos, Toure, Gallas, Clichy in the back. Rosicky, Hleb, Gilberto, Fabregas in the middle. Henry, Adebayor on top. This is just about as good a team as we can field on paper. It didn't look very good. It was a boring game all the way around. PSV sat in and defended. They pressured the ball well and competed for everything. Arsenal passed in harmless triangles, produced very few chances, and then gave up a goal off of a really nice 25 meter shot from Mendes. Lehmann was leaning the wrong way and that was enough.

After the game Arsenal were saying it was just a 1-0 loss away from home and that they can make it up and then some at home. There are a couple of problems with that prognosis, the most obvious being that away goals are worth 2 in Champions League so if PSV happens to score at all again, then Arsenal are down 3-0 aggregate. Another problem is that PSV's most dangerous player, Jefferson Farfan, didn't play yesterday. He was 25 goals already this year, which is about as much as Henry and Adebayor combined. The worst problem with that prognostication is that Arsenal are going into their heaviest load of matches all year and they don't look like they can score, which means they will be revving very high, low on oil, going up hill at a moment when they need to perform best.

What was the problem yesterday? I think it is both my duty and my right to groan horribly and make drastic conclusions about the game. Here are some. First of all, we looked very slow. We were very slow. The only players who won foot races on a regular basis were Rosicky, Toure, and Clichy. It was very obvious out there on the field. PSV is not a very Dutch team. They are actually a very Latin American team. They had four Brazilians, an Ecuadorian, and a Mexican on the field. English clubs will generally not buy players directly from South America or Africa, preferring to poach players from smaller European clubs who have taken risks. African players come most often by way of France, and the South Americans play in Spain or Holland before they come to England. What was clear watching PSV was that they had managed to put a lot of athleticism on the field for a very low price tag, which is usually Wenger's trick. What I saw yesterday was that in a game with more time and space than an English Premier League game, there was a much greater need to battle athletically and we lost it.

The most worrying thing about the match was how easily PSV shut down Henry and Adebayor. Conclusion: Henry while still an amazing player, needs someone fast and dangerous next to him. We miss V. Persie very much. I really like Adebayor as a player but he was terrible yesterday. Why? Because he made no mistakes. He, like Kanu before him, is a skillfull and rangy African who passes first and finishes well. Yesterday, he had the ball with time and space and never ran at anyone. He laid the ball back on his first touch over and over again. This slowed the game down. Henry was often and not running much off the ball. The only hope for a goal was when Rosicky made space and ran at the defense, his eyes searching for angles to slip people through. We still have not found out how to best deploy him.

Arsenal need V. Persie back. They also need a fast winger on the right side of the field. This can be Ljunberg, Walcott, Aliadiere, but none of them has shown any consistency in the role. Hleb is a great player and should be on the field, but he needs people running behind people to be dangerous. Adebayor and Henry were just simply not busy enough against PSV, and the PSV back four was able to watch them in front the whole game and then challenge them physically.

Arsenal, as Wenger said, are in a crucial stretch, one which will decided whether they will win the FA Cup, Carling Cup, and advance into the last rounds of the Champions' League. They are a young team and they need to hunt the hardware out. I will risk the ire of the master by saying I think Wenger is controlling this team too much, because the young guys look scared. We are so predictable that when we score it looks inevitable, and when we don't it looks just as inevitable.

Arsenal Best 11:

Almunia

Eboue, Toure, Senderos, Clichy

Walcott, Gilberto, Fabregas, Rosicky

V. Persie, Henry