

EXCLUSIVE | ARSENE WENGER

Arsenal boss wants to boost mainland ties

Q: Any special memories from your visit to Hangzhou last summer? What do you like the most about China?

A: The reception we received last year from supporters in Hangzhou was very special.

It seemed football — like China — was booming when we were there, and the passion and the knowledge that supporters had of the Premier League and of Arsenal surprised me, I must say. You'd meet fans and they'd know every minute detail. It was incredible — I had a press conference at Hangzhou and people in the room knew more about Arsenal than I did.

It showed how good the communication of information is, that it can permeate to that level.

Overall, it was a very positive trip and, of course, we're happy to be following it up with another visit this year.

What other activities will you participate in in Beijing besides the match itself?

Well, we will have a very busy couple of days planned, I can assure you.

Like in Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong, we will be looking to engage as much as possible with our supporters in Beijing.

They watch the team play on TV at all hours of the night and show remarkable dedication, so we want to show that we are appreciative of that by meeting as many fans as possible.

We have fan parties organized and some big events planned with our tour partners, Nike and Emirates. I will also be taking part in some speaking events. So, we are trying to make the most of our time — to give something back to supporters and to spread the message of our club and its values as widely as we can. It will be a fantastic trip, that is for sure.

Based on the match against Hangzhou last year, what are your thoughts on the competitive level and quality of the Chinese Super League?

My thought is that it is competitive but that it has the potential to go much further.

Last year's game with Hangzhou Greentown was played at a good intensity. They defended very well and made it hard for us, in the first half especially.

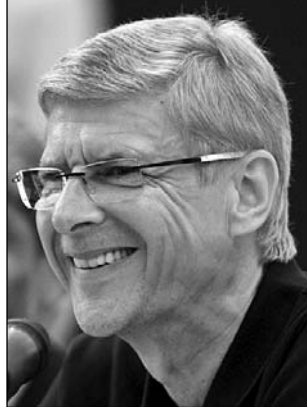
We were able to dominate in the second half of the game but the score was 1-1, so you must say it was a good test for us. And they finished that season in eighth position, so it shows there is quality in depth in the Super League.

The China league is now at a similar stage to where the Japan league was when I was there in 1994 (as manager of Nagoya Grampus Eight). Then, Japan was in its third year of professional football and it is similar in China now — it has not gone far enough yet.

Chinese clubs are becoming ambitious in buying world-class players and managers such as Nicolas Anelka, Didier Drogba and Marcello Lippi. Do you think it is the right way to raise the quality and profile of Chinese soccer?

To make a sport popular you need the elite, so you can understand the motivation for bringing high-profile figures into the league. What is important is what happens next.

The elite can give the appetite to the others to play, but after (that) you need to support that and have the coaches to create the practice in the



younger generations.

My advice would be more to educate players. Why? Because if you are a developed country, it means you have manager material in your country.

You have that in China, but what you do not have is the quality of the players. Why in a country of (1.3) billion people is there no Messi or no Ronaldo? That is the real problem, and that is just down to education and grassroots football.

My advice to Chinese football is more to structure the coaching system between five and 12 years old because football is a technical sport and you need to have access to technique at a very early age.

After 12 years of age, if you have no technique, then you will never have it. That is very important and that goes through the schools and the football clubs.



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ARSENAL MANAGER

Usually, sport follows the economic power, and the economic power is moving at the moment from Europe to China and Brazil.

These countries, if they have the desire, they will have the players. The history is in Europe — but how long can we resist the power of China if it really wants to develop football? The future will tell.

Is Arsenal in talks with other Chinese soccer clubs and the sports authorities about future cooperation? For example, youth development, player exchange programs, etc?

We believe that we can make a positive contribution to football in China, yes. The way we play football, the way we develop players and the way the club is managed, we are confident that we can form some constructive relationships here.

We are speaking to certain people about how we can do that. But it is still early, and I do not have too many concrete details on this for the moment.

How do you see the potential of the Chinese market for Arsenal? Do you have any long-term plans in China? What are your thoughts on building the Arsenal fan base in China?

China is a very important market for the club. The Premier League has grown massively in popularity, and Arsenal now has a big name here. We need to make the most of that opportunity — to reach out to fans and make sure that they feel part of the club. That is what we try to do and why we are here for a second year in a row.



Sergio Aguero of Manchester City (right) shoots past Arsenal's Thomas Vermaelen in the Winoly Cup on Friday night at the Bird's Nest, the main stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. City, the Premier League champion, defeated Arsenal 2-0 with goals from Pablo Zabaleta and Kolo Toure.

WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY

Wenger likes what he sees from China's young players

Arsenal manager spends time with youths before Man City

By CHINA DAILY

School was in session. Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, known as "the Professor", offered some useful advice to dozens of young Chinese players on a soccer pitch in downtown Beijing on Friday before the Winoly Cup international soccer tournament, in which Manchester City, the English Premier League champion, won 2-0 with goals from Pablo Zabaleta (41st) and Kolo Toure (44th).

After watching some matches, Wenger said he saw a passionate group and encouraged

them to push forward.

"I saw the passion, and it's the basic ingredient in soccer ... I know soccer in China is developing quickly, and you have the time to play more and you may be the future of Chinese football," he said.

The Gunners are known for ball control and passing skills — two qualities Wenger values most in upcoming players.

"Don't forget that the most important ingredient of soccer is technique, and if you want to achieve that, you must practice it," he said. "The ball must be your friend, and you have to master the ball in every situation at the first touch. The first



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touch is the secret for games. And vision. Never forget (what you see) is what makes that team win. You have to work on it, but the more you practice with your friends, the more you will improve that.

"All the great players I know,

they play every day, and they play every day with passion and with the desire to improve their technique."

Wenger believed setting up a youth academy is important for the development of young players but says the period before the academy is even more important.

He said he looks for a desire to make a career of the game.

"His own desire to become a better player (is essential)," Wenger said. "Don't forget that the coaches are people who can only help those who want to be successful, but what's more important is what's inside the players."

Friday's match was the second stop on Arsenal's Asia tour this summer and the second time the manager has led his team to China. Arsenal faced

Greentown FC last year in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, and the game ended 1-1.

Upon the team's arrival in Beijing earlier last week, the manager sent his condolences to families hit by the catastrophic rainstorm.

He also shared his thoughts on the clash with Manchester City.

"We have a strong squad here with many international players and some young, up-and-coming players who will be looking to make a big impression this season," he said. "The players and I are excited to play in front of our Chinese fans here."

Arsenal had a packed schedule in Beijing. Wenger also attended a forum and shared his soccer ideas with young people at Tsinghua University.

Time for Drogba to earn that big van

By WANG ZHENGHUA

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Didier Drogba will be in his element on Saturday.

The Cote d'Ivoire striker will be on display in one of the Chinese Super League's most eagerly-anticipated games this season when his Shanghai Shenhua side confronts league leader Guangzhou Evergrande.

The biggest foreign star ever to play in the CSL will be joined by former Chelsea striker Nicolas Anelka and the rest of his teammates to face a squad coached by Italian World Cup-winning coach Marcello Lippi.

Drogba skipped his side's high-profile friendly against Manchester United with what was reported to be a back injury, though it might have been part of Shenhua coach Sergio Batista's strategy of resting key players in preparation for the trip to Guangzhou.

The 34-year-old already left his mark on his new club on July 22, setting up the equalizer in a 1-1 draw at Guangzhou R&F. He started the game on the bench but came on at half-time, almost scoring with his first touch — an outrageous 40-yard free kick the Guangzhou goalkeeper tipped wide.



Didier Drogba (left) of Shanghai Shenhua — the biggest overseas signing in CSL history — tries to control the ball in the match against Guangzhou R&F on July 22 in Guangzhou. The Cote d'Ivoire striker set up the equalizer in the 1-1 stalemate.

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"I am happy that everything went right in my first 45 minutes here," he said. "It was a little bit hard for me to get into the game at the beginning, but when I got used to the rhythm, I began to enjoy the game."

I am feeling good now and am getting accustomed to all the new things in China. It is very comfortable playing alongside my former teammate (Anelka)."

Drogba joined the Shanghai club in June on a two-and-a-half year contract reported to be worth about 200,000 pounds (\$314,000) a week, which would make him the highest-paid player in China

and in the top bracket globally.

But the striker said he was lured to China by the challenge of playing in an unfamiliar land and vowed to stay with Shenhua for the entirety of his contract.

"Really, I didn't come here with the idea of making a lot of money. I came here because it is a completely different challenge from what I have seen in Europe," he told a news conference when he touched down in Shanghai earlier this month.

"I decided to come here because when the club and the president approached me, I looked at the project and it came with ambitious ideas

and (the club) wants to help football develop in China. I know China is a great sports country, so for me it was also a big challenge because it could have been easy for me to stay in Europe and go to another team, another big team."

"Every time I signed a new contract with Chelsea I would commit to it seriously. I will still be here in two years' time. I came here to fight for the title and win, not retire," he said.

"With my teammates, we are going to perform as well as we can. And I came here to win the league, I am not coming here as the beginning of my retirement or something like that. I want people to make sure and understand that I am here to win. I am not here to sit and relax."

Drogba is the latest in a fast-growing number of foreign stars lured to the country with enormous salaries funded by Chinese business tycoons.

Shenhua signed Anelka to a two-year contract in December. The Frenchman is reportedly receiving 200,000 euros (\$291,000) a week and was expected to lead the club to the top of the CSL table.

Shenhua has struggled badly instead, winning four of 17 games, but it played with an increased level of confidence when Drogba and Anelka stepped onto the pitch together. Shenhua, bankrolled by

online gaming tycoon Zhu Jun, arranged a luxury reception when Drogba landed in Shanghai, though it said he had not been overly demanding.

That's not to say the club hasn't gone out of its way to make sure he's comfortable.

Even the hotel Drogba stays in was selected by the club, said Shanghai Shenhua publicity official Ma Yue.

"We selected a location popular among foreigners and he promptly consented," Ma said.

The club offered a more spacious Mercedes-Benz van as his Shanghai transportation, compared with the GMC van and fulltime chauffeur it offered to Anelka when he joined the club in February.

"It was out of concern that Drogba had brought his family," Ma said. "A spacious vehicle would serve as a nanny van."

The club selected a well-known French-language school for Drogba's three children in Shanghai.

The club's training center in Shanghai's Kangqiao, which was subject to a major renovation when Anelka arrived, also was given a minor facelift for Drogba. While the rooms of most of Shenhua's major players are located on the third floor of the players' dormitory, Drogba was accommodated in a room neighboring Shenhua boss Zhu Jun on the second floor.