

United fighting fit for Manchester's other heavyweight bout

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Race for the title

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David Lacey

Manchester United will seek to resume normal service against Arsenal at Old Trafford tonight as if Rio had never happened. In some respects there may be those at United who would rather it had not.

Scorched more by the media than the Copacabana sunshine, Sir Alex Ferguson's players sloped out of the Fifa World Club Championship looking less like masters of the universe than a team of red dwarves. Ferguson's eccentric assertion that United were the best side in

the tournament was at odds with the results.

Yet those among Manchester United's rivals who are hoping that the Premier League champions have been chastened by the experience will surely be disappointed. It is far more likely that United will be refreshed by a mid-winter break which has given them the best part of a fortnight's rest before meeting Arsenal in what is always one of the season's crucial fixtures.

Manchester United, moreover, will continue to benefit from their decision to withdraw from the FA Cup in order to go to Brazil. The top of the Premiership has changed little in their absence; United are still lying second and they now have three games in hand over Leeds United, the leaders, and Arsenal.

There is no danger of a fixture backlog either, unless

there is a big freeze. By the middle of next week Manchester United will have played two of their three outstanding games: at home to Middlesbrough on Saturday, FA Cup day, and away to Sheffield Wednesday four days later.

Uncluttered by cup ties and replays, United will spend the next five weeks attempting to amass a sufficient number of league points to strengthen their position in one of the top two places, which will guarantee them direct entry to next season's Champions League should they fail to retain the trophy. By March 1, when Bordeaux visit Old Trafford, Ferguson will want to have a Premiership cushion to lean back on.

So it is important from Arsenal's point of view, not to mention Leeds, Liverpool, Sunderland and others hoping to keep the contest open, that Manchester United

do not win this evening. A win for Arsène Wenger's team would be a surprise — Arsenal have won only once in eight league visits to Old Trafford and lost 2-1 to them at Highbury in August — but a draw would at least give United a lukewarm homecoming.

Not that the prospects of Arsenal taking even a point are particularly strong, far from it. Their away form has been patchy this season — four wins and four defeats with the defence at times showing uncharacteristic generosity.

Wenger may even have offered Gilles Grimandi a silent vote of thanks for missing a penalty in last Wednesday's shoot-out at Filbert Street to send Leicester City through to the last 16 of the FA Cup while at the same time easing Arsenal's fixture list but the team's tepid performance contrasted sharply with their

ebullient form in the 4-1 victory over Sunderland at Highbury four days earlier. Tonight's outcome will depend to a large degree on who takes control of the midfield — Roy Keane for United or Patrick Vieira and Emmanuel Petit for Arsenal.

Still without Paul Scholes, United will be looking to Ryan Giggs to torment an Arsenal defence now relying more than ever on Martin Keown. Dwight Yorke's form did not improve in Rio but at least Ferguson is not

suffering from Wenger's chronic shortage of strikers. With Dennis Bergkamp and Marc Overmars unfit and Nwankwo Kanu away on African Nations Cup duty for Nigeria this is a bad moment for Davor Suker to be serving a one-match suspension.

Thierry Henry, whose successful conversion from winger to central striker has done much to offset the loss of Nicolas Anelka's pace through the middle, will lead the Arsenal attack tonight but the Frenchman will find Jaap Stam a rather different proposition from Steve Bould, the old Gunner he consistently beat for speed in the Sunderland match.

Wenger's assertion that Mark Bosnich, the Manchester United goalkeeper, is no Peter Schmeichel sounded like a rather desperate mind game. David Seaman is more likely to be given a searching examination this time. Denis Irwin, Manchester United's 34-year-old full-back, has announced his retirement from international football after winning 56 caps for the Republic of Ireland.

TV: Live on Sky Sports 1 at 8pm

Key clashes of the 90s

Oct 90 United 0 Arsenal 1
David Seaman is the only player not involved in a 21-man brawl between the sides. Both clubs are charged with bringing the game into disrepute. Arsenal subsequently have two points deducted, and United one.

Mar 94 Arsenal 2 United 2
Eric Cantona is sent off and Roy Keane booked in a fierce battle at Highbury. Twice United take the lead through Lee Sharpe; twice Arsenal fight back.

Nov 96 United 1 Arsenal 0
Nigel Winterburn's own goal leads to Arsène Wenger's first defeat on English soil as ugly clash between Ian Wright and Peter Schmeichel turns into racism row.

Feb 97 Arsenal 1 United 2
Three goals, six bookings, a manager on the pitch and a scuffle in the tunnel that requires police intervention. Wright and Schmeichel clash once more.

Mar 98 United 0 Arsenal 1
Marc Overmars scores the only goal to hand Arsenal the edge in the two-team title race.

Apr 99 United 2 Arsenal 1
Ryan Giggs's wonder goal in extra-time books United's place in the FA Cup final at Wembley but captain Keane is sent off for a crude challenge on Overmars. Dennis Bergkamp has chance to seal victory for Arsenal but his 90th-minute penalty is saved by Schmeichel.

Aug 99 Arsenal 1 United 2
Frederik Ljungberg scores for Arsenal but two strikes from Keane give United a vital win at Highbury.
**FA Cup semi-final replay*

Overall record in the 90s
Arsenal won 7 United won 9 Draws 7

Top of the table this time last year		P	W	D	L	Pts
Chelsea	22	11	10	1		43
Aston Villa	22	12	7	3		43
Man Utd	22	11	8	3		41
Arsenal	22	10	9	3		39
Leeds	22	9	9	4		36