

= 2003 ? 04 Arsenal F.C. season =

The 2003 ? 04 season was the 106th season of competitive football played by Arsenal . It began on 1 July 2003 and concluded on 30 June 2004 , with competitive matches played between August and May . The club ended the Premier League campaign as champions without a single defeat ? a record of 26 wins and 12 draws . Arsenal fared below par in the cups , eliminated in the FA Cup and League Cup semi @-@ finals to Manchester United and Middlesbrough respectively , and at the quarter @-@ final stage of the UEFA Champions League to Chelsea .

Arsenal did little business in the transfer market early in the season due to the financial demands that came with the club 's new stadium project . The main addition to the first team was goalkeeper Jens Lehmann for £ 1 @.@ 5 million ; striker José Antonio Reyes was later purchased in the winter transfer window . Arsenal retained their best players and successfully negotiated new contracts for captain Patrick Vieira and midfielder Robert Pirès . The stability of the squad meant Arsenal were considered front @-@ runners for the Premier League , along with Manchester United , and Chelsea who were taken over by Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich .

A strong start to the season saw Arsenal top the league table after four matches . The team 's draw at Manchester United in September marked an unsavoury episode between both clubs : several Arsenal players were charged and fined accordingly by The Football Association for their part in a mass brawl that occurred after the match . In November , Arsenal beat Dynamo Kyiv by a single goal and more impressively scored five past Inter Milan at the San Siro ? two results which kick @-@ started their Champions League campaign . At the turn of the year , the team won nine league matches in a row to consolidate first position . In the first week of April , they were eliminated from the FA Cup and Champions League , but by the end of the month had secured their status as league champions , with a 2 ? 2 draw against local rivals Tottenham Hotspur .

34 different players represented the club in five competitions and there were 15 different goalscorers . Arsenal 's top goalscorer for the third year running was Thierry Henry , who scored 39 goals in 51 games . The Frenchman was given the accolade of PFA Players ' Player of the Year by his fellow peers and the FWA Footballer of the Year by football writers . Although the Arsenal team were unsuccessful in cup competitions , their dominance in the league was regarded by many commentators as a standalone achievement . They acquired the nickname " The Invincibles " , much like the Preston North End team that went unbeaten in the inaugural Football League season . The club was awarded a golden replica trophy by the Premier League once the season concluded and they remained unbeaten for 49 games , setting a new record . In 2012 , the Arsenal team of 2003 ? 04 won the " Best Team " category in the Premier League 20 Seasons Awards .

= = Background = =

Arsenal had finished the previous season as runners @-@ up in the Premier League , overhauled by Manchester United in the final ten weeks of the season . The club did , however , retain the FA Cup , with a 1 ? 0 win against Southampton . Such was Arsenal 's effective start to the 2002 ? 03 campaign , manager Arsène Wenger suggested his team could remain the whole season undefeated in all competitions : " It 's not impossible as AC Milan once did it but I can 't see why it 's so shocking to say it . Do you think Manchester United , Liverpool or Chelsea don 't dream that as well ? They 're exactly the same . They just don 't say it because they 're scared to look ridiculous , but nobody is ridiculous in this job as we know anything can happen . " The team lost to Everton a month after Wenger 's proclamation ; teenager Wayne Rooney scored the match winner , which ended a run of 30 league games without defeat . By February 2003 , Arsenal moved five points clear of Manchester United at the top of the league table , but injuries to key players , not least captain Patrick Vieira , had destabilised the team . Draws in April , coupled with a defeat to Leeds United at home , mathematically ended Arsenal 's chances of retaining the title . Wenger refuted opinions from the media that their season was a failure and said :

Of course we want to win the league , but I think the most difficult thing for the club is to be consistent and we have been remarkably consistent . We lose the league to a team [ Manchester

United ] who spends 50 % more money every year ? last year they bought a player for £ 30m pounds when they lost the championship . They will do the same next year and we [ have ] done miracles just to fight with them .

In the close season , Chelsea was sold to Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich for £ 140 million , the biggest takeover in British football history at the time . The takeover was welcomed by journalist Daniel King , who commented the club were better able to " break the Manchester United @-@ Arsenal duopoly " in the league . Arsenal vice @-@ chairman David Dein however was displeased , and quipped that Abramovich had " parked his Russian tanks on our lawn and is firing £ 50 notes at us " , Abramovich was said to have placed a bid for Arsenal striker Thierry Henry , which was turned down at once .

Arsenal 's transfer activity in the summer was relatively quiet , given the financial constraints that came with the club 's new stadium project . The club were able to keep the core of its team , successfully negotiating new contracts for Vieira and winger Robert Pirès . German goalkeeper Jens Lehmann was the only major addition to the first team ; he replaced David Seaman who joined Manchester City . Ukrainian defender Oleh Luzhnyi ended his four @-@ year association with the club by joining Wolverhampton Wanderers on a free transfer , while striker Graham Barrett moved to Coventry City . Striker Francis Jeffers , who found opportunities limited in the first team , joined his former club Everton on a season @-@ long loan . Giovanni van Bronckhorst moved to Barcelona on a similar deal , with a view to a permanent transfer at the end of the season . Several young players were acquired from academies abroad , namely Gaël Clichy from Cannes and Johan Djourou , formerly of Étoile Carouge . In January 2004 , Arsenal signed Spanish striker José Antonio Reyes from Sevilla and in April agreed a deal with Feyenoord for winger Robin van Persie .

Wenger at the start of the season prioritised regaining the league title : " I feel it is very important in our minds to do this and I know the hunger is strong to do it , " and named Newcastle United and Liverpool , along with Manchester United and Chelsea to be Arsenal 's main rivals for the Premier League . Former Arsenal midfielder Paul Merson asserted that his old club were favourites because they had the " best players ? If they all remain fit week @-@ in week @-@ out then they will not be beaten . " Glenn Moore of The Independent wrote of Arsenal 's chances : " They will be thereabouts , but unless Wenger finally puts his faith in youth , and the likes of Jérémy Aliadière , Jermaine Pennant and Phillipe Senderos repay him , they may lack the depth to sustain a title campaign . " Defender Sol Campbell however believed the squad was " strong enough for the league and FA Cup " , but doubted their chances of winning the UEFA Champions League .

The club 's home strip remained unchanged from the previous season ; a red jersey with white sleeves , shorts and socks . The new away kit , a retro yellow jersey with a blue collar trim and shorts , was based on the Arsenal strip worn in the 1979 FA Cup Final .

= = = Transfers = = =

= = Pre @-@ season = =

In preparation for the forthcoming season , Arsenal played a series of friendlies across Western Europe . Their first match ended in defeat against Peterborough United of the Second Division ; goalkeeper Stuart Taylor was forced to come off the field after colliding with Peterborough substitute Lee Clarke in the second half . Arsenal then played out a draw against Barnet , where trialist Yaya Touré ? the brother of Kolo , was included in the team . In a 2011 interview , Wenger recalled Yaya 's performance as being " completely average on the day " and noted his impatience stopped him from joining Arsenal ; Touré went on to play for Barcelona before joining Manchester City in 2010 . Arsenal undertook a tour in Austria , a year after crowd troubles forced their match in Eisenstadt to be abandoned . Wenger was absent with a stomach upset so assistant manager Pat Rice took charge of Arsenal against SC Ritzing on 22 July 2003 ; the team came from two goals down to draw their second consecutive friendly . Rice was pleased with Philippe Senderos cameo in defence and said : " Still some rough edges but he will only get better working with Martin Keown and Sol

Campbell . "

Arsenal recorded their first win of the pre @-@ season against Austria Wien . Bergkamp capped off a " superb individual display " by scoring the first goal and setting up the second for Jeffers . The final match of the tour was against Beşiktaş , which required security to be tightened given the history between English and Turkish football supporters . Bergkamp scored the only goal of the match in the second half , " a cheeky effort through keeper Óscar Córdoba 's legs " . An Arsenal XI in England two days later faced St Albans City , where they won 3 ? 1 . The main squad then travelled to Scotland to play Celtic on 2 August 2003 . Both goals in the one @-@ all draw came in the second half ; the match marked the return of Vieira after three months out with a knee problem . Wenger revealed afterwards that he intended to use the pre @-@ season as an experiment for his defence . He partnered centre back Campbell with Touré , who for much of last season played in midfield . Wenger was pleased with Touré 's performance against Celtic and said : " He has quality . He was originally a central defender and , because we have kept a few clean sheets recently and he 's played well , I thought we 'd keep him there . " An Arsenal XI travelled to Belgium for a game against Beveren and conceded two goals in the final five minutes to draw the match 2 ? 2 . Arsenal rounded off their pre @-@ season preparations with a 3 ? 0 win against Rangers on 5 August 2003 .