

= 1996 ? 97 Arsenal F.C. season =

The 1996 ? 97 season was the 99th season of competitive football played by Arsenal . The club dismissed manager Bruce Rioch in the close season , who spent a year in @-@ charge . After much speculation , Frenchman Arsène Wenger was appointed as his replacement ? the club 's first manager born outside of the British Isles . At the end of the campaign , Arsenal finished third in the Premier League and missed out on UEFA Champions League qualification . They made exits in the fourth round of both the FA Cup and Football League Cup to Leeds United and Liverpool respectively . In Europe , the club were eliminated in the UEFA Cup first round to Borussia Mönchengladbach of Germany .

Arsenal sold several fringe players in the transfer window , notably David Hillier to Portsmouth and Paul Dickov to Manchester City . Midfielders Rémi Garde and Patrick Vieira were purchased from RC Strasbourg and AC Milan respectively . John Hartson moved to West Ham United in January 1997 ; he was replaced in the squad by teenager Nicolas Anelka , who joined Arsenal a month later from Paris Saint @-@ Germain .

A strong start to their league campaign , with one defeat in their first 12 matches saw Arsenal begin November in first spot . Although the club were winless during the Christmas period , their chances of winning the title remained intact . A run of two draws and losses in February was more severe , as it moved Arsenal down to fourth spot . Draws in April prompted Wenger to rule his team out of the title race and make priority to second spot , which came with a qualifying spot for the Champions League . Defeat to Newcastle United in the penultimate game of the season all but ended Arsenal 's chances of finishing second , given Newcastle 's superior goal difference . A win on the final day against Derby County meant the club finished third , level on points with Newcastle and Liverpool .

28 different players represented the club in four competitions and there were 12 different goalscorers . Ian Wright was Arsenal 's top goalscorer of the season ; he scored 30 goals in 41 appearances .

= = Background = =

In June 1995 , Arsenal appointed Bruce Rioch , who had just guided Bolton Wanderers to the League Cup final and promotion to the top flight , as manager . Under his stewardship , the club broke the English transfer record by paying Internazionale £ 7.5million for Dutch striker Dennis Bergkamp and the new signing formed an impressive partnership with Ian Wright . Arsenal reached the League Cup semi @-@ finals and finished fifth in the Premier League at the end of 1995 ? 96 , securing a place in the following season 's UEFA Cup .

= = Managerial changes = =

A week before the start of the league season , Arsenal sacked manager Rioch and cited the decision was in the " best long @-@ term interest of the club " . It was alleged that a dispute over transfer funds with the board of directors prompted his departure ; his relationship moreover with David Dein according to an insider was " no longer cordial " . Stewart Houston was once again put in temporary charge , with Pat Rice serving as first team coach . Johan Cruyff was considered the favourite for the job ; George Graham , Terry Venables and David O 'Leary were other names linked to the managerial position . Houston put his name forward for the job , but upon being told that he would not be considered , resigned to take over as manager of Division One side Queens Park Rangers , leaving Rice as the team 's second caretaker manager of the season . Arsenal would eventually select Frenchman Arsène Wenger as their next manager , but did not officially announce his appointment until September 1996 , once his contract with Japanese club Nagoya Grampus Eight was terminated by mutual consent . He became Arsenal 's 19th and highest @-@ paid manager , on a three @-@ year , £ 2 million contract .

= = Transfers = =

===== In =====

===== Out =====

== Pre @-@ season ==

Source :

== Premier League ==

=== August ? October ===

Arsenal began their league campaign on 17 August 1996 , at home to West Ham United . Three minutes before the half @-@ hour , Hartson gave Arsenal the lead , after his initial shot came back off the post , for a tap @-@ in . West Ham conceded a penalty in the second half when Marc Rieper handled Lee Dixon ' s cross ; Bergkamp , in the absence of designated penalty taker Wright , struck the ball low to Lud?k Miklo?ko ' s right , to score the team ' s second goal . Arsenal suffered their first loss of the league season two days later away to Liverpool ; Steve McManaman scored twice in six second half minutes . The team responded with a 2 ? 0 win at Leicester City in a game where Wright started as a substitute but scored the decisive goal . A 3 ? 3 draw with Chelsea in the first week of September was described as " outstanding " by Houston after the team had recovered from a two @-@ goal half @-@ time deficit . Although Linighan scored an injury time equaliser for Arsenal against Aston Villa , The Guardian match report suggested their most obvious problem in the match was " ... despite Merson ' s valiant efforts , a lack of invention in midfield " . Wright scored a hat @-@ trick against Sheffield Wednesday on 16 September 1996 , to record 100 league goals for Arsenal . The game marked the debut of Patrick Vieira , who came on as a substitute for Ray Parlour . Goals by Hartson and Wright earned the team victory against Middlesbrough and the team won a third consecutive match ? at home to Sunderland ? to draw level on points with league leaders Liverpool .

Wenger ' s first match in charge of Arsenal was against winless Blackburn Rovers on 12 October 1996 . Two goals , both scored by Wright extended Arsenal ' s winning league run to four matches and helped consolidate their position . A goalless draw at home to Coventry City was marred by an incident involving Wright and Coventry goalkeeper Steve Ogrizovic that resulted in the latter having a broken nose . October concluded with a home fixture against Leeds United ; a 3 ? 0 win for Arsenal marked defeat for former manager George Graham , who made his managerial return to Highbury . The team ended the month joint top of the table with Newcastle United , both on 24 points having played 11 games .

=== November ? February ===

Arsenal ' s first fixture of November was against Wimbledon . Wright after six minutes gave Arsenal the lead , only for Vinnie Jones to head in the equaliser , close to half time . Merson scored Arsenal ' s second , but Marcus Gayle replied immediately , " bund [ ling ] the ball past ( David ) Seaman " . An own goal by Nigel Winterburn against Manchester United ended the champions run of three matches without a win and extended a barren run of Arsenal failing to score at Old Trafford since the creation of the Premier League . Wenger told the press he was not despondent about his first defeat as Arsenal manager : " Obviously , the way we lost was difficult to accept , but I ' m happy with the way we played . Our organisation was excellent , we kept fighting and I am very optimistic

for the future . " Attention soon turned to the North London derby , where Arsenal faced Tottenham Hotspur on 24 November 1996 . Arsenal had not beaten their neighbours in over three years and Tottenham were unbeaten at Highbury since September 1991 . The match had ramifications in the league : a win potentially placed Arsenal in a position to move into first spot , if other results went in their favour . In the match , Wright put Arsenal into the lead through a penalty , but after 57 minutes , Sol Campbell headed on a long throw for Tottenham and the ball fell to Andy Sinton , whose shot " cannoned off the inside of the near post , then hit Lukic on the head and rebounded into the net " . Two minutes before the 90 @-@ minute mark , Tony Adams scored the winner and in injury time , Bergkamp added a third : he controlled a high ball with his left foot and evaded his marker Stephen Carr in a tight area to shoot . A 2 ? 1 win against title challengers Newcastle United , having played three @-@ quarters of the match with ten men , moved Arsenal back to the top of the table .

Arsenal moved three points clear at the top of the Premier League with a 3 ? 1 win at home to Southampton in early December . Against Derby County Vieira scored his first goal for the club to earn Arsenal a point . The team then faced Nottingham Forest , which marked Stuart Pearce debut as caretaker manager . Arsenal , without Seaman , Adams , Dixon and Vieira , succumbed to a 2 ? 1 defeat , following the dismissal of Wright . The poor form over Christmas continued : Arsenal were held to a goalless draw away to Sheffield Wednesday on Boxing Day and twice let their lead against Aston Villa slip , in spite of playing " ... the best 45 minutes of football the Premiership has seen this season . " On New Year 's Day , Wright scored his 200th English league goal in Arsenal 's 2 ? 0 win against Middlesbrough ; he began a three @-@ game suspension thereafter , because of his red card against Nottingham Forest . Disciplinary problems continued to beset the club : Bergkamp 's dismissal , in the team 's defeat to Sunderland on 11 January 1997 , was Arsenal 's fifth in ten matches . Wenger admitted the disciplinary record was in danger of damaging their title challenge , adding , " The other strange fact is that three out of five dismissals have been strikers , when that sort of thing normally happens to defenders . To me , that shows our strikers must be taking their fair share of kicks . When teams play Arsenal , the games are physical and we have to defend ourselves . " Arsenal kept up with Manchester United and Liverpool with a win over Everton on 19 January 1997 ; the result kept them three points behind top spot , with a game in hand . At Upton Park , the team recorded their sixth victory in seven visits to West Ham and moved second , behind " the advancing Manchester United " .

February saw Arsenal 's title challenge take a turn for the worse , as the team went on a four @-@ match winless run . Back @-@ to @-@ back draws against Leeds United and Tottenham Hotspur , was followed by defeat to Manchester United . In the latter match , television footage showed Wright aiming a two @-@ footed challenge on opposition goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel , who was advancing to gather the ball in his half . The police stepped in to keep the players apart after the final whistle and informed the referee of the incident , which was to be later included in his report . Wright protested his innocence and complained he was subject to racial abuse by Schmeichel ? at which point the FA intervened and met with representatives of both clubs . Both players eventually agreed to end their feud and by April released statements highlighting this . The month ended with a home defeat to Wimbledon , which prompted Wenger to rule out their championship hopes : " ' Yes , for the title of course , ' he replied when asked if the result had ended the team 's interest in the Premiership , ' but for Europe , no . ' " After 28 games , Arsenal were in fourth position having played two more games than Newcastle in third and one more than Manchester United , who were six points clear in first .

= = = March ? May = = =

Bergkamp and Wright scored a goal apiece in Arsenal 's 2 ? 0 win against Everton on the first day of March . The team won by an identical scoreline at home to Nottingham Forest a week later and kept a third consecutive cleansheet against Southampton ; midfielders Stephen Hughes and Paul Shaw both got themselves on the scoresheet . Defeat at home to Liverpool on 24 March 1997 was marred by a dubious penalty awarded to striker Robbie Fowler . The player himself " stood and mouthed : ' No penalty ! ' " given Seaman made no contact in the penalty box , but the referee

unaltered his decision . Although Fowler 's spotkick was later saved , the ball rebounded to Jason McAteer , who scored . Wenger ruled the team out of the title race again , by saying after the match , " Everybody knows now that it was not a penalty , but I can understand that a referee took a wrong decision . That 's football and it eliminates our chance of the championship . "

Wright scored his 27th goal of the season , away at Chelsea in the first week of April ; it took him seven goals short of breaking Cliff Bastin 's career record at Arsenal . A win against Leicester City was Arsenal 's fifth league win in six matches and boosted the club 's chances of finishing second , which came with a spot in the Champions League . Wenger assessed that it was " not impossible to win the title " , adding " but when you see Manchester United winning again , realistically you would like to be in their position . " A last @-@ minute equaliser for Blackburn Rovers against Arsenal on 19 April 1997 was controversial given the manner the opposition had scored ; with Hughes cramped , Vieira kicked the ball out in order for his teammate to be treated . It was anticipated " by the game 's conventions " , Blackburn should have thrown the ball back unchallenged , but striker Chris Sutton forced a corner . The result prompted Wenger to rule out any chance of winning the league : " The best team [ Manchester United ] has won . But the race for second place is still open and for many weeks I have thought that was the best we could achieve . " A further draw against Coventry City , who were fighting to stay another season in the top @-@ flight , moved Arsenal to within four points of Manchester United . They had however played two games more than the incumbent champions and one more than Liverpool sitting in third . Robbie Elliott scored the winner for Newcastle United against Arsenal on 3 May 1997 , which reignited their chances of finishing second . Arsenal ended their league campaign against Derby County , who staged their final match at the Baseball Ground . In spite of winning by three goals to one , having played with ten men for the majority of the game , they missed out on second by goal difference to Newcastle .

= = = Match results = = =

= = = Classification = = =

Source :