

ALDRINE NSUBUGA

ARSENAL ON THE VERGE OF CREATING EUROPEAN HISTORY

The Arsenal is back! After claiming supremacy over Manchester City, Manchester United, Liverpool and Chelsea – all former European champions – in the Premier League, Mikel Arteta's team have switched their guns and now aiming at a target beyond English borders; Paris St. Germain. The 34th edition of the champions league final. The euphoric scenes at Selhurst Park last Sunday as Arsenal celebrated their 14th league championship melted hundreds of millions of fans across the globe, not least because of the 22-year-drought. A first ever European Cup win could cause a total meltdown. Cheered on by ecstatic teammates, a visibly emotional Martin Odegaard was in dreamland as he lifted the premier league crown for the first time. It could be the first chapter in a beautiful memoir that Arteta is scripting but Arsenal's celebrations seemed like a blaze of glory instead. A moment no gunner wanted to end.

The two-horse race has been stiff and at times, grueling. To exchange places with Pep Guardiola's City, no matter how briefly, is nail biting. Sceptics were awash with bottling criticisms when City went on top, many believing that it signaled the end of Arsenal's title interests. Tension grew even more when City won their second round fixture after beating Arsenal in the Carabao cup final. The manner of recovery after; winning the last five games, and collect 15 maximum points where City only collected eight, has redeemed the club's reputation. They have passed the test of character. Beating City to the championship by seven points is asserting dominance. In Arteta's words, "these are the new standards we have set for ourselves. We can no longer settle for less." Champions league trophy next.

When PSG beat Inter Milan last season in the final, it was to win their first ever trophy. Only their second final in history, having lost to Bayern Munich in 2019/20. The French are back to play a second successive final for the first time. Like PSG, Arsenal will be playing their second champions league final after their first appearance in 2006 when they lost to FC Barcelona. They are meeting a previous winner of the trophy, just like PSG against Inter. The two finalists are the newly crowned champions of their respective leagues in France and England. While PSG will be looking to become only the second team after Real Madrid to defend the champions league trophy, Arsenal are seeking for their maiden win in the competition. Bukayo Saka, Viktor Gyokeres, Declan Rice, Martin Zubimendi, Gabriel Marghaeles, William Saliba and David Raya want to achieve where the Invincibles failed; to win in Europe. The Patrick Vieira led team were knocked out in the first knock out stage by Bayern. It's scary to think that Arteta's team could achieve what Jens Lehman, Sol Camp-



bell, Ashley Cole, Vieira, Robert Pires, Edu, Gilberto Silva, Freddie Ljungberg, Denis Bergkamp and Thierry Henry couldn't under the legendary Arsene Wenger.

Yet, there are telling signs that the mission is not impossible. Arsenal had a perfect run in the group stage and got to the final without losing a single game. They have played the semi-finals for the second successive season and have beaten great European teams over the period; including Real, Inter, Bayern and PSG themselves. Winning the premiership ahead of City, Liverpool, United and Chelsea means that they carry a different mentality into this year's final. Tactically, they have been the most difficult team to face in Europe. Their unpredictability also means that PSG will find it hard to second guess their starting line up, system or tactics. The greatest motivation for Arteta will be the opportunity to have one on Arsenal's greatest manager of all time; Wenger, and win the trophy that eluded the Frenchman. That legacy will undoubtedly be extended to the team, which, technically, is inferior to many Arsenal teams of the past. Luis Enrique and PSG have their own mission however. They want the Qatar backed club to become the first French club to win the champions league more than once.