

Sport Football

How City got their man



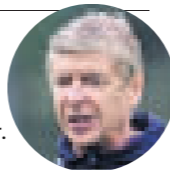
5.6.11 Samir Nasri casts doubt over his Arsenal future by admitting he may not sign a new contract. Manchester United are thought to lead the chase for him.

11.7.11 Sir Alex Ferguson says Nasri "has agreed to go somewhere else". City immediately emerge as front-runners for him.



12.7.11 Arsène Wenger says Arsenal "can't be called a big club" if they sell Cesc Fàbregas and Nasri. "You can't convince people you are ambitious after that."

14.7.11 Wenger says he is prepared to lose Nasri on a free transfer rather than sell him this summer.



All systems go at Etihad Stadium after eventual capture of Nasri

Manager confident as epic spending spree reaches conclusion

James Ducker Northern Football Correspondent

Manchester City were so eager to sign Emmanuel Adebayor that, in an attempt to ensure the Togo striker's proposed move from Arsenal did not run into any unforeseen problems, Brian Marwood, the club's football administrator, spent one night sleeping on the player's sofa. That was two years ago. These days City cannot get rid of Adebayor quickly enough.

It says much about the speed of change, and rate of progress, at the Etihad Stadium that a player who was considered a huge coup not too long ago could now be flogged for free if it means extracting him from a spiralling wage bill.

Success, or rather the pursuit of it, has come at great cost to City, but as Roberto Mancini prepares to welcome his fifth (and probably final) signing of the summer to the club in the form of Samir Nasri, the owners who embarked on a project of epic scale three years ago will hope the France midfielder player represents the crucial, final piece of the expensively assembled project entitled "Mission: Title".

The strength of City's squad can be measured as much in terms of the talent Mancini will pick from over the next ten months as the £65 million-worth of players he is prepared to omit from his 25-man squad and let fester in the reserve team should they fail to secure new employment elsewhere before the close of the transfer window a week today.

Mancini may not have seen eye to eye with Adebayor and Craig Bellamy and been untrusting, as players if nothing else, of Roque Santa Cruz, Wayne Bridge and Nedum Onuoha, but that quintet are victims as much of City's insatiable quest to be No1 as the manager's own ruthlessness.

Can they do it? They certainly have the players and options, while Mancini's apparent willingness to curb some of his naturally defensive tendencies to utilise better his team's attacking impulses augurs well. The club, with victory in the FA Cup Final last season, have also expunged any psychological affliction that lingered from 35 trophy-less years.

Weaknesses? Despite the £38 mil-



Endgame: Nasri in his final appearance as an Arsenal player, against Liverpool, before his move to the Etihad Stadium

lion spent attempting to address the problem, they still look susceptible at left back; the players may have individual experience of winning the big honours but, as yet, not a collective one. Keeping players happy, as Sir Alex Ferguson seems to do so effortlessly at Manchester United, is far from easy, particularly given that Carlos Tévez (if he stays), Sergio Agüero, Edin Dzeko, Mario Balotelli, David Silva, Yaya Touré and Nasri will be expecting to start. It will be impossible to find room for them all at any one time.

In fairness, the days of widespread dressing-room dissent appear to be behind City, although the prospect of Adebayor and Bellamy hanging around should proposed moves to Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool respectively fail to come to anything may be unhelpful at best, damaging at worst. But then Mancini is nothing if not confident, and as someone known for having an especially big ego as a

player, the Italian insists he will have "no problem" keeping mutiny at bay. "It is no problem for me," Mancini said when asked how he intends to keep his squad happy. "The problem is



if you don't have good players. For the manager, it is not easy because all the players want to play every game. But when you play in four competitions and have a match every three days, there is space for everyone. Sometimes it is important that you rest. It is impossible to play a top game every three days."

If Mancini has his way, City might yet make another foray into the transfer market, but rumours of a move for Scott Parker, the West Ham United and England midfielder player, are wide of the mark. Mancini admires Sebastián Coates but seems unlikely to be given the money to rival Liverpool for the Nacional and Uruguay centre half, with the City hierarchy underlining the need to offload a glut of outcasts. Indeed, the best Mancini could probably hope for is a loan signing, although it is highly debatable whether he could get one of sufficient calibre at this late stage.

Costing a packet

EMMANUEL ADEBAYOR Manchester City would have to subsidise a healthy chunk of his £185,000-a-week wages if the Togolese striker is to join Tottenham Hotspur on a season-long loan.

CRAIG BELLAMY The Wales forward is interesting Liverpool, one of his former clubs, although it remains to be seen if they are prepared to meet his £95,000-a-week salary.

WAYNE BRIDGE Newcastle United retain an interest in the left back, who has turned down a loan move to Celtic. He earns a jaw-dropping £92,000 a week.

ROQUE SANTA CRUZ Rayo Vallecano, the La Liga club, have expressed an interest in signing the injury-plagued Paraguay striker, who is willing to take a cut to his £75,000-a-week wages.

SHAUN WRIGHT-PHILLIPS Bolton Wanderers have agreed a £2.5 million fee for the England winger but hope to persuade him to lower his £65,000-a-week wages.

NEDUM ONUOHA Queens Park Rangers, Blackburn Rovers and West Bromwich Albion are interested in the defender, who is on £38,000 a week. Total drain on the wage bill: £550,000 a week

WHO'S ALREADY LEFT? Jérôme Boateng (Bayern Munich, £17.5 million), Shay Given (Aston Villa, £3.5 million), Jô (Internacional, undisclosed), Javier Garrido, Shaleum Logan, Javan Vidal, Scott Kay, Andrew Tuttle, James Poole and James Wood (all released), Patrick Vieira (retired), Michael Johnson, David González, Ben Mee and Kieran Trippier (loaned out). Saved: £300,000 a week AND THEN THERE'S CARLOS TÉVEZ...

The Argentina striker has made plain his desire to leave City but so far no club have been willing or able to meet the £50 million asking price and his £250,000-a-week wages.

City's wage bill for the year ended May 31, 2010 stood at £133.3 million, second only to Chelsea's £172.5 million in the Barclays Premier League, although conservative estimates suggest the club's next accounts, due to be released in October, will show they have exceeded £150 million after a glut of big-money signings during the intervening period.

Words by James Ducker

Mancini has dizzying array of attacking alternatives with final piece of the jigsaw

Analysis Tony Cascarino

Yet another attacking player? For a club with Manchester City's resources, Samir Nasri is an affordable luxury and his arrival at the Etihad Stadium is highly significant for two reasons.

There is the practical benefit of adding a player who is as good at breaking from midfield as anyone in England and there is the symbolism of a manager with a reputation for conservative tactics adding another flair footballer to his collection. Nasri's running power is

formidable and in the first half of last season he was a leading contender for player of the year until he faded in the new year. He scares defences because he dribbles boldly at them, yet he has tricky feet and a quick brain, so there is subtlety to accompany his directness. He is also a capable finisher and ought to be good for a dozen goals this season.

Gareth Barry, James Milner and Adam Johnson will be at risk of reduced playing time, especially Barry because he is the most defensive-minded. Nigel de Jong

provides adequate protection to the back four and Nasri offers so much more than Barry going forward.

With nine goals in three matches already this season, including the Community Shield, there is early evidence that Roberto Mancini's managerial philosophy is evolving. City were too defensive too often last term, but now, with the abundance of creative talent available to him, he is making his team more adventurous. It is the best way of bridging the gap between City and Manchester United — a difference

that has narrowed even farther with the capture of Nasri.

City should offer dazzling movement up front, with midfield players and forwards baffling defences by interchanging fluidly across the final third, as Barcelona do and as United did when they could call on Carlos Tévez, Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney. Nasri must surely be the final piece of the attacking jigsaw for City — who else could they possibly need? Unless they sign Lionel Messi.

Mancini will hope that the depth

of his squad will mean players fight for the shirt and respond to the threat of limited playing time by producing consistent excellence rather than sulking if they are victims of rotation. Buying Nasri weakens Arsenal, but that is a secondary consideration. For it is hard to imagine Arsenal will be anything more than contenders for fourth place in the Barclays Premier League and City's sights are now far higher. They are firmly focused on first and adding Nasri makes that goal even more realistic.

15.7.11 Roberto Mancini admits City's interest in Nasri for the first time. "It is a difficult situation. I hope this player [Nasri] can arrive before the end of the month. We need other players."



16.7.11 Wenger criticises Mancini for talking about Nasri as talks between the parties continue.

15.8.11 Fàbregas signs a five-year contract with Barcelona in a deal worth £35 million.



21.8.11 Wenger threatens to select Nasri for the Champions League play-off, first leg against Udinese as Mancini warns Arsenal the deal could be off if the player becomes cup-tied.

23.8.11 The clubs agree a £24 million fee for Arsenal are due to fly to Italy for the key game.

Football

The Professor under pressure

The season is only a fortnight old but Arsenal already appear to be in a huge mess. Gary Jacob asks some key figures, past and present, whether Arsène Wenger is still the best man for the job



Nigel Phillips

BOARD MEMBER OF THE ARSENAL SUPPORTERS' TRUST

Contrary to stereotype, most fans are not kneejerk reactionaries who demand change at the first bad result. Six years without a trophy is one of our members' concerns, alongside rising ticket prices and a lack of communication from Stan Kroenke. Every fan appreciates the transformation Arsène Wenger has overseen but they also understand that Arsenal have (and did have last year) substantial funds to invest in the squad. Our members tell us they want a change in football philosophy, this means buying players who can do the

job now and not in a few years' time. This means players with Premier League experience and we all know the names, eg, [Gary] Cahill, Jagielka, Samba, Parker, Barton. Greater emphasis on defending, including a new defensive coach, is high also on the wish list. The club is at a crossroads and not the brink. Udinese is a massive game both for revenue and recruitment because top players want Champions League exposure. Arsène can still be the man to take the club forward but does need to change. He needs to relinquish control of every aspect of the club's work, from taking training to negotiating transfers. By doing that, he can stimulate fresh thinking and re-energise himself as the manager we remember.

George Graham

ARSENAL MANAGER FROM 1986 TO 1995

They have big signs at the club saying "Arsène knows". Well, I hope he does. I think he's going to be there this season. He's under a little bit of pressure just now from the fans, but I think Arsène, if he sits down and is honest with himself, he'll put it all back together again. But he needs to do some hard thinking. Please get the

chequebook out. Arsène. They need another centre half. I think they still need a strong, outstanding, experienced midfielder player and I still think they need an out-and-out striker, like a [Thierry] Henry. They need experienced, outstanding players and I think they need about another three in the side at the present time. They've got the money, let's sit down, get some of these players in [that] he's supposed to be after and let's see if they can start winning trophies again.

Nigel Winterburn

PLAYED MORE THAN 500 GAMES FOR ARSENAL FROM 1987 TO 2000

I understand why the supporters are angry but I would look at it from a slightly different angle. Everyone is asking questions. What happens if they lose against Udinese and are knocked out of the Champions League? What happens if they lose against Manchester United? But, by

the same token, what happens if they get a result against Udinese and go through? What happens if they pick up points against Manchester United? If they do, it will give them a decent start to the season. We all know that Arsenal need to strengthen but Arsène Wenger knows what he is doing. He still does everything at Arsenal, from training sessions — when he's the first one out in the morning — right through to the end of the day. He deserves the chance to put it right.

Lee Dixon

PLAYED MORE THAN 600 GAMES FOR ARSENAL FROM 1988 TO 2002

It is so important for Arsenal to be in the Champions League proper, not least for recruiting players, and there is huge pressure on Arsène Wenger. He is no fool — he knows what matters and I don't think anyone can put him under more pressure than he does himself. Cesc Fàbregas and Samir

Nasri have been pretty much two of the best midfield players in the Premier League over the past couple of years so it is little wonder Wenger has spent so long trying to keep them. They are losing two top-class players. Wenger will be hugely frustrated, but it is too easy to be critical of how he has handled this summer. If he spends money before deals are done, it could jeopardise the club's financial position. The way the club is run financially is something close to Wenger's heart.

Lady Bracewell-Smith

DIRECTOR OF ARSENAL UNTIL 2008

It is a privilege to have Arsène Wenger. Arsenal are lucky to have him. He has brought so much to the club, supported by a structure and platform that we provided to allow his ideas to flourish and come to fruition. We protected him. He had complete control and freedom over the football side, we never interfered, and that helped the club's success over a sustained period. But I've never seen the recent reaction to him and the club before. The club need to get back on track. Arsène is the man to take things forward; we don't want the kind of reaction that Chelsea have and change managers often, leading to instability,

but there need to be some difficult changes. What he needs now, under huge stress, is support from the board to relieve some of the pressure. I don't know whether the set-up nowadays suits Arsène. He loves the club, but maybe his heart is not in it. He loves to develop a young team and turn them into world-class talent. But what is lacking is that mix of experienced players and "chemistry" that Thierry Henry said was missing when he left in 2007.

Myles Palmer

AUTHOR OF THE PROFESSOR, THE FIRST BIOGRAPHY TO BE WRITTEN ON ARSÈNE WENGER

Since 1996, Arsène Wenger has revolutionised the Arsenal brand. He runs a one-man show, trying to do everything himself, which explains his erratic behaviour and bizarre decisions. If Wenger changed his approach, he would have to admit his strategy has been wrong for six years. Ideally, he needs a young, tactically aware No 2 who can teach defence and make effective substitutions. Arsenal's abundance of soft-tissue injuries suggests flaws in his training/medical practices. The loss of Champions League income would not cripple the club but top players would be discouraged from signing. And if you don't win trophies and you lose Cesc Fàbregas and Samir Nasri, some fans will stop coming. It's possible that if Arsenal lose heavily to Udinese and Manchester United, a new manager could be appointed during the international break. Wenger, a football consultant to al-Jazeera and someone the Qatar executives [who own Paris Saint-Germain] know well, could find

Online today

Webchat Can Arsenal cope without Nasri? Ask Oliver Kay from 1pm Commentary Udinese v Arsenal from 745pm

thetimes.co.uk/football

a new lease of life as coach of the French club. A new manager could make Thomas Vermaelen captain and create a less one-dimensional style of play. Since Arsenal's five-a-side possession style didn't win trophies with Fàbregas and Nasri, it certainly won't win trophies without them.

Arsenal left reeling as Wilshere injury adds to series of blows

Continued from back page didn't want. Nasri is a situation where the player didn't want to extend his contract with the proposals he had somewhere else. What kind of commitment can you have when the player is not there long-term? "In football, a player can be worth a lot of money today and nothing in six months. We were forced into a decision for psychological and financial reasons." Wilshere wished Nasri good luck for the future on Twitter, but his generous farewell got short shrift from Emmanuel Frimpong, the Arsenal midfielder player. "Pffff come on Jack,"

was Frimpong's dismissive response on the social-networking site. Wenger will attempt to sign several new players in the coming days, but he is likely to face more tortuous talks despite having received £60 million from the sales of Fàbregas, to Barcelona, and Nasri. Michel Seydoux, the Lille chairman, said yesterday that Eden Hazard, the Belgium playmaker, is not for sale, while Rennes and Everton are refusing to negotiate despite Arsenal's interest in Yann M'Vila, the defensive midfielder player, and Phil Jagielka, the central defender, respectively. Arsenal's players can lift the mood

by successfully defending a 1-0 lead to qualify for the Champions League group stage this evening, but Wenger is expecting a difficult game. He received one piece of good news yesterday when Uefa, the European governing body, ruled that he will be permitted to sit on the bench this evening, with his appeal against a two-match ban due to be held tomorrow. Johan Djourou has recovered from a hamstring injury to partner Thomas Vermaelen at centre back and Tomas Rosicky will have a late fitness test on his thigh, with Frimpong standing by. "What's at stake is for us to qualify

● Arsenal and Newcastle United have been fined £30,000 after being found guilty of failing to control their players in their opening Barclays Premier League match on August 13. Gervinho, the Arsenal striker, was sent off after 76 minutes at St James' Park after an altercation with Joey Barton. Barton had confronted the Ivorian to accuse him of diving but Gervinho slapped him, leading to a tussle. Alexandre Song, the Arsenal midfielder player, will also serve a three-match ban for an incident involving Barton. The clubs appealed against the original decision.

and I think we can only do it with the players we have at the moment, who are good enough to achieve that," Wenger said. "After that we'll see what we can do, but we're working very hard in the transfer market, of course. We're short in midfield and that's where we want to strengthen. "You're always concerned of the consequences this can have on the team, but it can as well have a positive consequence. If you're strong mentally, you can increase the solidarity, knowing you'll have to fight more. And that's what you ideally want from the players."