Arsenal’s mean defence faces acid test to shut out Man City again

Manchester (United Kingdom) (AFP) – Arsenal’s Premier League title ambitions face the ultimate test on Sunday when a relentless Erling Haaland aims to fire Manchester City five points clear of the Gunners at the top of the table.

Mikel Arteta’s men managed to stop City scoring twice last season, but still could not deny the English champions a record fourth consecutive Premier League title.

For the past two seasons Arsenal have finished second to Pep Guardiola’s winning machine.

Many believe this is their season to end a 21-year wait to win the title since Arsene Wenger’s “Invincibles” romped to glory without losing a game.

Gabriel Magalhaes (centre) scored the winner in Arsenal’s 1-0 win at Tottenham last weekend © Ben Stansall / AFP

City remain their biggest obstacle, although the path could be cleared should the holders be hit by a points deduction for 115 alleged breaches of Premier League rules by the end of the campaign.

Haaland has struck a record nine times in the first four matches of the new Premier League campaign.

The Norwegian’s stunning form has ensured City are the only side in the English top-flight yet to drop points.

But Arsenal are on their tails again – just two points behind – after proving their title credentials in battling away wins at Aston Villa and Tottenham.

Solid foundations

Arsenal's challenge is built on rock solid defensive foundations.

Centre-back pairing William Saliba and Gabriel Magalhaes are earning comparisons to legendary partnerships of the past, while goalkeeper David Raya has an extraordinary showreel of saves from the past month alone.

In five matches in all competitions, Arsenal have conceded just once – a goal that arrived when down to 10 men against Brighton.

"We all want to achieve something. Winning this Premier League is not easy, but when you finish twice second, you want to win," said Saliba

"We will give everything, even more than last season, because we don't want to finish second, third or fourth. We want to win this league and we'll give everything."

When Arsenal shut out City in a 0-0 draw on the final day of March, there were muted celebrations from the visitors as they left the Etihad still on top of the table.

But City did not drop another point in the final nine games of the season to snatch the title by two points.

"In Premier League history (City) has been the most consistent ever, not only in terms of results but in terms of dominance and consistent top performances," said Arteta on Friday.

"This is the challenge, we have to go there and prove that again we've made another step and we can compete."

If Arsenal are to emerge victorious on a ground where they have not won since 2015, their centre-back combination will be to the fore.

Haaland did not even manage a single shot on target in the two league meetings when up against Saliba and Gabriel last season.

“I’m good, he’s good. We both speak French and we play now in our third season together,” added Saliba on how the pair have formed such a potent partnership.

“We know each other so well and it’s a pleasure to play every game with him. We grow together because he’s young as well, so it’s really good to have him by my side.”

In 65 Premier League games with that duo together at the back, Arsenal have kept 30 clean sheets and conceded just 51 goals.

“William Saliba and Gabriel are on the threshold of joining elite company,” wrote former Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher in The Telegraph.

“Provided they stay together, we will eventually reference Saliba and Gabriel in the same breath as the two stand-out partnerships of my generation; Chelsea’s John Terry and Ricardo Carvalho, and Manchester United’s Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic.”

Yet, to gain that level of recognition, Arsenal need to add silverware to their impressive stats.

For all of the impressive progress over the past three seasons, they do not have a single trophy to show for it.

Ending City’s near two-year unbeaten run on home soil would strike a telling early blow that this time the title race could end differently.

© 2024 AFP