



Why Arsenal had no choice but to appoint Renee Slegers permanently

The Dutchwoman was confirmed as the permanent boss after a hugely successful period as the interim manager.

By Kristy Williams
19th Jan 2025, 12:46 PM

Arsenal had no choice but to confirm Renee Slegers as Jonas Eidevall's permanent replacement - with vice-captain Leah Williamson hailing the Dutchwoman's 'calmness' and the way she has 'empowered' the players during a dream run of results.

It had got to the point after the process had dragged on and the dream results just kept coming that appointing someone other than Slegers - with another manager effectively needing to start from scratch - could have put a line through the rest of the season.

As season that can still yield a Champions League, FA Cup and yet another Subway Cup (affectionately known to many as the 'Conti Cup'), with the league looking less likely but, of course, still a chance.

Slegers had forced Arsenal's hand in the best way possible.

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The results are of course well documented.

Eidevall managed just one win, two draws and two losses across the Champions League group stage and WSL to start the season.

This included a horrific 5-2 loss to Bayern Munich and a hugely consequential 2-1 defeat to Chelsea in the league, that he since, inexplicably, has said that he already knew he wanted to leave prior to.

Slegers, brought to the club by Eidevall after working under him at Swedish giant FC Rosenborg, where she won two titles, fortunately didn't carry on with the Swede's oft-criticised rigid playing style that left a team full of world-class creativity unable to score freely.

Against all odds, the Gunners rebounded after their 5-2 loss in Munich to secure top of the Champions League group – vital to a deep run in the competition – with a gritty win in horrendous conditions at home in the last game before Christmas.

They're back up to third in the league with a vastly improved goal differential of +15, and as many players have said, are finally enjoying football again – a pointed criticism of life under Eidevall.

Speaking after Slegers' permanent appointment was confirmed, Leah Williamson said 'the biggest impact she's had was about mentality' and that the Dutchwoman had a special relationship with the players – and that's the core of why Arsenal simply had to keep her on.

Players 'empowered', 'calm' and happy again

To begin this season, Williamson looked so afraid to make a mistake or play an errant pass under Eidevall that she kept on doing both, until Slegers stepped in and paired her with the left-footed Steph Catley - who is the epitome of calmness under pressure.

With the pair at centre-back for eight matches, they've conceded just three goals and freed up players like Emily Fox and Katie McCabe to flourish higher up the pitch as attacking wing-backs.

To an outsider it's looked like Williamson, Alessia Russo, Caitlin Foord and Frida Maanum in particular look like they've had a huge weight lifted off their shoulders under Slegers – and the Lionesses captain is full of praise for life at North London under the Dutchwoman.

"The biggest impact she's had is on my mentality and finding that sort of, not the sweet spot, but being perfectly charged," Williamson told the [Gooner Fanzine](#) after Slegers' appointment was confirmed on Friday.

"I feel like before we used to have a misunderstanding of my passion and the impact it had on people around me, the impact it had on my performance.

"I appreciate it because I feel like she's looked at me, she's seen me and she's critical of me but in a good way.

"She brings an element of calmness to everything and does get involved, which I think is good."



Any vision pitch-side or at training, Slegers, coaches and the players around her seem to always have smiles on their faces.

There is an inherent joy at London Colney at the moment, and Slegers can often be seen in the middle of a 'rondo' or participating in a drill alongside Gunners legend Kelly Smith, the forwards coach, and Lioness great Jodie Taylor.

Williamson said the fact Slegers has been an assistant coach at Arsenal for almost two seasons meant her relationship with the players was very different than Eidevall – in the best way possible.

"In my opinion, I think her (Slegers) greatest strength or quality in that role is the empowerment and the way it has worked naturally ... it's a good way to get everyone to step up and take responsibility, while also empowering people to put in place jobs they have been put in place to do," she told reporters on Friday.

"The position that she's [in] getting to know a group of players as an assistant, you have that less pressurised relationship in terms of decision making, then to be put in that role I think puts you in better stead to make those decisions required by a head coach because you know everybody and you know the players."

It's obviously a huge priority for Slegers – and clearly, it's working.

"I have very clear values...I've tried to create a light atmosphere. Togetherness is very important to empowering players and staff," she told reporters on Friday.

"Empowerment is very important: all the strength that we have in this building, let's get the best out of those people.

"Enjoyment is very important for me too, because if you enjoy things in life, you're going to get the best out of yourself and others."

Quality, not quantity

The defining legacy of the Eidevall era, outside of the 'Conti Cup', will be impressive-looking passing and possession statistics that masked an inability to break down low blocks against much weaker sides.

That has been completely turned around in the 11 matches since Slegers took charge on an interim basis – and something that should only improve given she now has complete ownership on the team and has been able to continue implement on the training track during the winter break.

Let's take a look at the raw numbers.

Under Eidevall this season (WSL and Champions League group stage): 5 matches, 1 win, 2 draws, 2 losses, 6 goals scored, 9 conceded.

Attack, per game: 1.7 xG (expected goals), 26.2 shot-creating actions, 14.6 shots (6.4 on target), 1.8 goal-creating actions, 15.86m shot distance, 3053 progressive pass distance, 693.6 touches, 7.74 successful take-ons, 10.4 carries into final third, 7.8 fouls drawn.

Defence, per game: 10.6 shots conceded (5.4 on target), 46.8 loose balls recovered, 19 shot-creating actions, 3.2 goal-creating actions, 556 touches, 10.2 successful take-ons from opponents, 4.2 carries into defensive penalty area.

Under Slegers this season so far: 11 matches, 10 wins, 1 draw, 31 goals scored, 5 conceded.

Attack per game (+ represents improvement p/90): 2.4xG, 25.8 shot-creating actions, 15.2 shots (4.6 on target), 4.72 goal-creating actions (+2.92), 14.84m shot distance (1m closer to goal), 3106m (+53m) progressive pass distance, 736.54 touches (+42.9), 8.3 successful take-ons, 13.45 carries into final third (+3), 9.18 fouls drawn (+1.38).

Defence per game (- represents improvement p/90): *7.5 shots conceded (-3.1), 2.6 shots on target (-2.8), 50.6 loose balls recovered (+3.8), 12.7 shot-creating actions (-6.3), 0.7 goal-creating actions (-1.1), 499.1 touches (-57.7), 7 successful take-ons from opponents (-3.2), 2 opponent carries into defensive penalty area (-2.2).*

You can see it's about progressing the ball forwards, not sideways, and creating quality opportunities on goal rather than padding out the passing and shooting statistics from poor positions.

It's quality, not quantity, under Slegers - who admitted she first thought about taking on the job full-time after a frustrating draw against Manchester United – the only slight hiccup under her tenure.

"The Man United away game was the first time I thought about wanting the job," Slegers said on Friday after signing a contract to the end of next season.

"I could see how we were really creating something, something positive. We don't get the three points, we get one point, but we played really well and the fans backed us and supported us. That was a critical moment.

"Over the past few months, I've felt such a powerful sense of collective ownership and responsibility across our players and staff – that has been our strength and I know we will make sure we drive and nurture this feeling as we all move forward."



Creative, 'entertaining' football

In an interview with Arsenal legend Ian Wright, one of the biggest supporters of the women's side over the years, Slegers reiterated her desire to connect with the fans with entertaining football in both

The Dutchwoman, who missed the Netherlands' 2017 EURO title with injury and whose career was cruelly cut short by a series of serious knee concerns, was a productive and progressive midfielder in her heyday – and even played with Stina Blackstenius at Swedish giants Linköpings before retiring in her mid twenties.

She is determined that Arsenal will maintain possession – but be far more progressive and productive with it than they were under Eidevall's rigid style that didn't allow for individual brilliance or creativity.

"I grew up in the Netherlands, so that is my foundation ... having the ball is very important, but I don't like us having the ball and not doing anything with it," Slegers said of her footballing philosophy in [an exclusive club interview with Wright](#).

"We want to have the ball, and we want to have a purpose with everything we do.

"It's so important to entertain, as well. I think our football should be entertaining and winning. Those two are the big values for me.

"Also in defending, you can see the crowd reacting when we defend really well, so I think that can be entertaining as well."

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