



From a 5-2 thrashing to 'truly special' Champions League glory: The 'Reneevolution' of Arsenal

Stina Blackstenius' goal was enough to secure a 1-0 win over Barcelona in the Champions League final.

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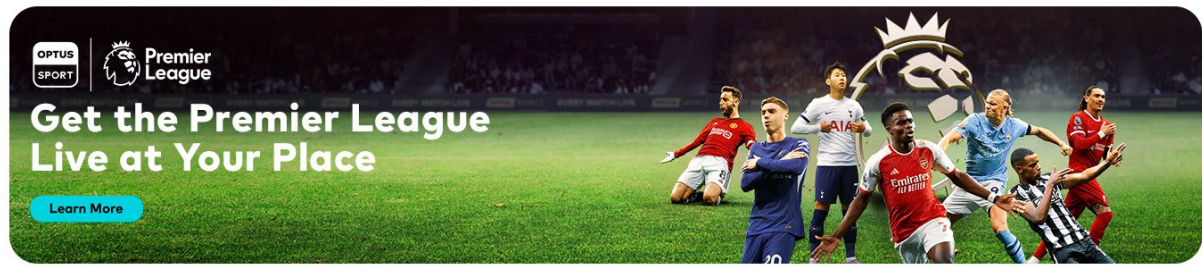
Their campaign began with a 5-2 drubbing at the hands of Bayern Munich, but Arsenal have now won the Champions League after conquering Barcelona in Lisbon, completing a remarkable rollercoaster of a journey.

Stina Blackstenius' 74th minute strike from a brilliant Beth Mead assist was enough to secure a 1-0 win over a Barcelona side gunning for their third Champions League title in a row, with a defensive masterclass from Leah Williamson and Steph Catley guiding the Gunners to an incredible victory.

It ended an 18-year wait to lift the trophy again, with Arsenal still the only English side to ever win it. Captain Kim Little, who joined the year after the Gunners first lifted the trophy, said the victory would go down as one of the club's proudest moments.

"To win a Champions League with Arsenal will definitely go down in history as one of the best moments this club has ever had. To think about that is incredible," the Gunners skipper said.

So how did Slegers complete this remarkable 'Reneevolution' of the club from the pits of despair?



Horror start under Eidevall featuring 5-2 Champions League drubbing by Bayern

Never mind winning the Champions League, Arsenal very nearly didn't even compete in it altogether.

With scars of being knocked out in the qualifying rounds last season still fresh, the nightmares returned with a bang, sneaking past Rosenborg 1-0 in the first round, before losing 0-1 away to BK Hacken in the first leg of the final qualifying round. Fortunately, they recovered to secure their spot in the group stage with a 4-0 thumping at Borehamwood - but things very quickly went downhill from there.

The WSL began with an exciting draw against Manchester City at the Emirates, but danger signs were evident when they could only beat a struggling Leicester 1-0. It was the same old story under Jonas Eidevall, dominating possession, but passing around the box and not creating many meaningful chances; with and the creativity of world-class players not being trusted.

And then it happened. A 0-0 draw with Everton, who would go on to finish eighth was worrying, but a trip to Munich to take on Bayern could not have gone any worse. It was like a training drill for Bayern at times, with Pernille Harder's hattrick guiding the home side to a stunning 5-2 win and making Arsenal look like a Championship side.

"We have no choice but to put this game here behind us – take the necessary learnings from it and get ready for the task (against Chelsea)," Eidevall said after the devastating loss.

Winning the Champions League title had never looked so far away.

WSL title dreams in tatters, Eidevall leaves

Just three days later Arsenal faced what already felt like a season-defining clash against Chelsea, given the reigning champions did not look like slipping while the Gunners had won just one of their opening three league games.

The noise surrounding the club was deafening, with fans chanting for 'Jonas Out', frustrated at the state of players that look demoralised and defeated. A mural even popped up in North London with that exact message.

They got their wish, with a 1-2 loss to Chelsea the final straw. Eidevall jumped before he was pushed as it looked like the league title had already slipped away just a month into the season.

And after what happened in Munich, it seemed both the WSL and Champions League were out of reach and another wasted season looming. Eidevall's long-time assistant Renee Slegers was to step in as manager on an interim basis, and hope was quickly fading for fans.



Slegers makes her mark

They needn't have worried - Slegers was about to remark on a 'Reneevolution' (others prefer the term 'Reneessaince') that saw a completely rejuvenated side gone on an 12 match unbeaten run that was only ended by a shocking refereeing call that gifted Chelsea a 1-0 win.

Immediately, it was like a weight had been lifted off the shoulders of the players.

There were a few tactical tweaks, though nothing hugely major. The biggest one was to put the naturally left-footed Catley on the left of Williamson as the centre-back pairing. Not only did it help the passing game, but it freed up Katie McCabe, who had the best season of her storied career, to go higher up the left wing knowing Catley had her back.

The side played a little bit more direct down the wings, with Williamson back to career-best form with her brilliant long passing game and Mariona Caldentey producing one of the great individual WSL seasons, one that resulted in her being named the league's Player of the Season.

But it was mainly allowing the players' creativity to flourish, with Slegers talking every week about accountability, and that the players had a shared responsibility when it came down to what they produced on the field.

Multiple players spoke about the fact that they were finally enjoying football again, with Beth Mead saying Slegers had been a 'breath of fresh air'.

"She gives us confidence. We are playing good football and as individuals and as a collective we are happy we have got Renee and she deserves the credit for making us feel good and getting the performances on the pitch," she said during the season.

"It has been a breath of fresh air and it has been very good so far."



Comeback queens nab first UWCL final appearance in 18 years

Back on track, Slegers was installed as permanent manager in January - and then came the biggest test: the Champions League finals.

Being drawn against Real Madrid in the quarter-finals was probably the most favourable match-up they could've gotten, and confidence was, quite rightly, high. But Mother Nature had other ideas.

Arsenal were forced to play on a Madrid pitch despite such horrendous conditions they ended Real star Melanie Leupolz's season, and Slegers made her first mistake. Despite the soggy pitch and teeming rain she insisted the Gunners keep playing their attacking, possession-based style and Real called their bluff, shocking them with a 2-0 win.

Needing to claw back a 2-0 deficit, Arsenal did it in fine fashion in front of a packed Emirates, producing some breathtaking attacking football to win 3-0 courtesy of a brilliant double from the in-form Alessia Russo.

Drawing six-time champions Lyon in the semi-final, it was a case of copy and paste. Arsenal went down 2-1 in the first leg in what was a very tight tussle. But on this occasion it was at home, meaning they would need to overturn the deficit away against the most successful side in women's football.

And once again they did it in fine style. Lyon were reduced to a shadow of their former selves as Little and Caldentey ran riot through the midfield, and Russo made a nuisance of herself up front, nabbing two goals in the stunning 4-0 victory that secure a Champions League final appearance for the club.

"It means a lot to this incredible football club. I'm excited and looking forward to representing this club in the final," an emotional Little told [DAZN](#) after the win.

"We have belief in this group and we are very good at executing our game plans. We did it fairly well in the first leg but not well enough -- today we executed it very well and thoroughly deserved to win."



Champions League glory in Lisbon

Just making a Champions League final is an incredible achievement, but not many football fans gave Arsenal hope of actually winning it given how dominant Barcelona have been in this competition over the last few years.

But some tactical genius from Slegers saw an 'incredible disciplined' defence absorb 68 per cent of the possession and not allow one single big chance on goal from world football's best attacking side.

Blackstenius might have been named Player of the Match for her decisive goal, but there is no doubt who the best player on the field was: Williamson.

In what may well be the best performance of a career that includes guiding England to a Euros triumph, the childhood Gunner was everywhere, shutting Pajor and Claudia Pina out of the game; with 14 clearances, two blocked shots, five recoveries and not one single unsuccessful defensive action. Catley, was equally as stout, contributing 10 clearances and one blocked shot.

Slegers said all the 'suffering' they had been through at the start of the season only served to bring the Gunners closer together.

"I think Arsenal have always been leading the way since the start, and they have been working so hard as a club. But definitely you see things, this season, I think, in the team, and that's signs of a winning team," she said after the win.

"You struggle together, you suffer together, you find ways to win, and I think in the critical moments, in high-pressure moments, we've done that this season."

For Little, it was the culmination of a 17-year journey since joining the club, and you could argue there is no more deserving player in world football of winning such a major trophy.

"The club won it in 2007 and I signed the year after that. To still be at the club now and see how much it has done to progress the women's game and invest in us as players and as a club, it is truly special to be sitting here now today off the back of winning the ultimate trophy for club football and it is definitely the best moment of my career," she said.