

Wenger: My Life and Lessons in Red and White by Arsene Wenger

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Wenger, Arsene. Wenger: My Life and Lessons in Red and White, Daniel Hahn and Andrea Reed, trans. (Chronicle Prism 2020).

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Arsene Wenger managed 22 seasons at Arsenal Football Club from 1996-2018, winning three league titles, and seven FA cups, and finishing in the top four in all but the last two seasons, when they were fifth, and in the final season before he was pushed out with one year left on his contract, sixth. Yet Wenger covers his time at Arsenal in about one hundred pages in his new autobiography, *Wenger: My Life and Lessons in Red and White*, translated from the French by Daniel Hahn and Andrea Reece. He does, however, give a full chapter to his team's crowning

achievement, the “Invincible” season of 2003-04, in which the Gunners went a full Premier League season without a loss, the only team in the league’s history to accomplish that feat.

I enjoyed reading Wenger’s take on the Invincible team, the meshing together of holdover players from the George Graham era—Tony Adams and Lee Dixon, for example—with those acquired by Wenger after he began managing the club, such as Thierry Henry, Patrick Vieira, Jens Lehman, and Sol Campbell. Wenger had challenged this team before the season by saying they had it in them to go undefeated:

“At the start of the season, I had told the team: ‘I know that you can win without losing a match.’ I was convinced of it and I wanted them to be convinced, to internalize the challenge When setting lofty objectives, it takes time and patience for them to become fixed in people’s minds. But my aim was to win all the time, to defer defeat and make the fear of losing disappear.”

(Wenger, pg 155)

This passage is fairly typical of the “my life and lessons” part of the autobiography, a coach’s distillation of what he sees in his sport and a rationale for how events unfolded. Wenger says his team achieved “a state of grace” that season, “a unique spirit specific to that particular team” (Wenger 156). Wenger’s idealistic view of the world comes through here, his self-belief in what he can get out of his team by predicting their ability to go undefeated in thirty-eight football matches.

As Amy Lawrence showed in her book on that season, *Invincible: Inside Arsenal’s Unbeaten 2003-2004 Season*, the players were less convinced about the merits of this challenge, especially after clinching the league championship with four games left to play. Kolo Toure found the Invincible challenge “stressful,” and Vieira added, “we didn’t want to put any more pressure on our shoulders” (Lawrence 176). As Henry observed, being Invincible was an abstract prize rather than a trophy or a medal: “You are fighting for something you will never see” (Lawrence 177). Yet Wenger is right in the end to take credit for the vision, for pushing his team to see the imaginary as possible. Ironically, though, as bemoaned by many a frustrated Arsenal fan, that team was the last one to win the league championship! The Ferguson era at Manchester United and the financing of Arsenal’s move from Highbury to the Emirates Stadium, among other factors, would see to that.

To be honest, the most interesting reading for me in Wenger’s *My Life* were the chapters leading up to Wenger’s appointment at Arsenal, about his youth in Alsace, his transition from midfielder player to coach, and his time managing Nancy and Monaco in the French leagues. Wenger’s parents ran a bistro in their village of Duttlenheim, near Strasbourg, which was

filled with men who drank one beer after another and smoked unfiltered Gauloises

and talked nonstop football—their team, the neighboring team, the team they would

be up against next, and the team they so admired, Racing Club de Strasbourg, which fired them up, made them smoke more and drink more and then so often shout, and fight, and fall. (Wenger 18)

Wenger claims that from a young age, “I retained their fervor but not their excess,” learning to love football but also to read people: “it gave me strength and an incredible instinct for understanding people” (Wenger 18-19). Certainly, the ability to read people is essential to managing any professional sports club. His colorful description of meeting a player for an impromptu try-out on the way to interviewing to become an assistant coach at Nancy, playing four-on-four with him and then taking him to Nancy to sign a contract is a good early example of player management. In his chapter on his time at Monaco, Wenger discusses coaching philosophies he developed which remained with him through the years at Arsenal, training sessions that emphasize technical abilities, the mixing of zonal and man-to-man marking, the importance of two-way communication between player and coach, and the value of youth training through academy systems such as Monaco’s *centre de formation* (Wenger 84).

The final chapter, “My Life after Arsenal,” describes his life without Arsenal, without “that pitch . . . that was my adrenaline, my drug, my reason for living” (Wenger 216), but he has not rested in forced retirement, having become FIFA’s head of Global Football Development late in 2019. This gives him the opportunity to promote the coaching and development of playing the “beautiful” football he referenced repeatedly in interviews and press conferences over the years at Arsenal. While he will no doubt be a fine ambassador for the game, I think Wenger underestimates the American youth soccer scene for lacking youth development—has he not heard of the Olympic Development Program or academies set up by Major League Soccer clubs? He also believes the greatest challenge for women’s football is in gaining “technical precision” (Wenger 220). I wonder what former Arsenal women’s stars like Kelly Smith or current Arsenal stars Vivianne Miedema and Katie McCabe, who lead the WSL in goals and assists, respectively, think of that comment.

Wenger’s autobiography closes with a 90-page section of statistics, “Career Record,” to please stats-freaks like me. After a 2-page summary of Wenger’s statistics as a player (1969-1981), we get the league records and standings for each team Wenger managed, from his first season at Nancy (1984) to his last at Arsenal (2018), a summary of his accomplishments at Arsenal, a list of every player who appeared for Arsenal during Wenger’s tenure, and a list of the top ten transfer fees paid by Arsenal during his time. I should mention the book also contains some great photos, including a classic one from 2009 of Wenger, arms spread wide, standing amongst the Old Trafford fans after being sent off the pitch by referee Mike Dean—for kicking a water bottle!

In some ways, *Wenger: My Life and Lessons in Red and White* is written particularly with Arsenal fans in mind, assuming they can fill in gaps in the narrative from memory while Wenger tries to mollify their disappointment at the club maintaining a top-four level without ever claiming a league championship during his last fourteen years managing Arsenal FC. For those interested in the history of the Premier League, Wenger’s autobiography is well worth the read,

since he has been so much a part of the League's history, having managed more matches (823) than anyone else. For the same reason, it is a must read for longtime fans of the Arsenal, giving the manager's perspective of their team, a manager who changed the English game, injected a European technical flair, and brought a host of European talent with him.