

*Strategic Change*  
*Strat. Change*, 8, 435-444 (1999)



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## Managing strategic breakthroughs— Lessons from the football industry 1997–98

- *Events at Arsenal Football Club are used to illustrate the strategic breakthrough approach.*
- *This is a practical bridge between the concepts of deliberate and emergent strategy.*
- *The article gives guidance on the application of the concept. Copyright © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

### **Introduction**

In April 1998 Arsenal Football Club won the English Football Association Premiership. In May 1998 they then went on to win the FA Cup. This was only the second time in Arsenal's history that they had won the double in the same season, making it a 'double-double'. Perhaps this has now been surpassed by Manchester United's treble of the Premier League, the FA Cup and the European Cup in 1999. These wins have important lessons not merely for football clubs but also for strategic management, as we hope to show.

Football is a volatile and unpredictable sport where outcomes are determined by a combination of skills and by the interaction of both strategy and tactics—and luck. Some ten years ago, leading English clubs had predominantly English and frequently local players.

Increasingly football Premiership teams have adopted different kinds of strategies for sourcing and developing their players, and also varying styles of play. For instance, Chelsea is renowned for its deployment of Italian players; Manchester United has sought still to 'home grow' its players, topping up with stars from elsewhere for in-fill positions. Since the arrival of new manager Arsene Wenger from Nagoya Grampus Eight in Japan (and prior to that Monaco), Arsenal has introduced a number of French players to add to its Dutch collection. One of these, Nicholas Anelka, came to be valued at £20 million (having been acquired for a mere £0.5 million). (Anelka has since joined Real Madrid for £23 million.)

But for the first few seasons of the new Premiership League one particular team—Manchester United—stood out as being dominant (Grundy, 1998). Winning three out of four

Premiership titles (prior to the Arsenal double) and a further one since, Manchester United were also the most successful team off the pitch too. United exploited its brand aggressively, generating considerable merchandising and media revenues (Grundy, 1998). Manchester United's success is an example of 'cumulative competitive advantage', that is where competitive advantage feeds upon itself making the strong get stronger whilst the weak get weaker.

In the UK Premier League a number of critical success factors now prevail. These include:

- Consistently high performance in the Premier League giving regular access to the European Cup tournaments.
- Or, winning other UK trophies which give similar access to European tournaments.
- Strong, positive cash flow based on high ground attendance and solid revenues from merchandising, media coverage and from sponsorship.
- Attracting, integrating, nurturing and developing excellent players.

Clubs that have consistently been able to fulfil these critical success factors in the mid/late 1990s include: Manchester United (a world-famous side), Chelsea and Arsenal. Clubs aspiring to this strategic group include Liverpool, Newcastle and Aston Villa.

This paper primarily examines some of the factors which lay behind Arsenal's 1998 season's success in overtaking Manchester United. We also briefly touch on the 1999 season's reversal of fortunes with Manchester United taking the treble. It also draws out a number of important general lessons for strategic management; more specifically it examines how effective strategic breakthroughs can be mounted. We therefore first need to explore the significance of strategic breakthrough management. This argument is now set out as follows:

- The role of strategic breakthroughs in strategic management.
- The Arsenal double, 1997-98.
- The Manchester United treble, 1998-99.
- Nine key lessons for strategic management.

In the article we make the following major points:

- Focusing on strategic breakthroughs provides a way of reconciling the tension between deliberate and emergent strategy. Whilst deliberate strategy is needed for key strategic breakthroughs, the remainder of the strategy can be managed in a more open and emergent way.
- Strategic breakthroughs (like those in the Arsenal double) often materialize gradually. But at some stage they have to actually crystallize, ignited by a combination of intent and alignment of circumstance.

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### *Strategic breakthroughs often materialize gradually*

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- Effective delivery of strategic breakthroughs often occurs when the organization achieves a kind of 'strategic flow': where all the independent parts fire off each other organically. (Successful 'deliberate strategy' thus needs to be natural rather than forced strategy—'natural' here meaning something which the organization is both able and spontaneously able to do.)
- Small differences in competitive play and unexpected innovation contribute to this strategic flow in a disproportionate way; they can also captivate the attention of customers (here the fans) *and* unsettle the competition.
- Competitive success (Arsenal 1997-98) may also cause a competitive see-saw (Manchester United 1998-99). The football industry dramatically highlights this see-saw effect over shorter time-scales than in other industries.

### ***The role of strategic breakthroughs in strategic management***

Most standard texts on strategic management emphasize the holistic nature of understanding

competitive positioning and strategy, frequently known as the 'design' school of strategy (Mintzberg, 1994). The design school portrays strategic management as essentially a logical approach and set of frameworks for creating competitive advantage and for programming management action. Typically, a key output of assumed strategies is the well thought through and mutually consistent strategic plan. The better texts also give equal weight to influence of emergent strategy or the way in which strategies tend to be formulated and implemented in an incremental fashion (Johnson and Scholes, 1989). 'Emergent' strategies give more weight to the more fluid nature of strategy and the way in which it tends to crystallize in a more haphazard manner.

The strategic reality of most organizations is likely to be a confusing patchwork of islands of deliberate strategy and of more fluid or emergent strategy. In some situations companies might deliberately have an emergent strategy, in other cases this emergence may itself just be allowed to happen (Grundy, 1997). Strategy might be deliberate at, say, business unit or at project level and may be simultaneously emergent, say, at corporate level, or vice versa. This patchiness may lead to cynicism within management (especially at the middle levels where management are seeking to implement the strategy) about the relevance of strategy.

Nevertheless, the mind-set of many managers may continue to be that of waiting for a reasonably complete, fleshed out, overall deliberate strategy. This mind-set may well be coupled with the simultaneous anxiety that 'we don't really have a strategy'—in which the organization feels a generalized discomfort through being in some kind of strategically semi-naked (or fully naked) state.

The very embarrassment of this nakedness may itself be a major barrier to formulating a more holistic, deliberate strategy—assuming that one was both appropriate and helpful. For to admit that this state exists is in effect to admit error, which is counter to the defensive routines of most organizations.

Also, the perceived scale of the task to produce 'the total strategy' may act as a

deterrent to the mental effort of its very formulation. And we have not even mentioned the hurdles of implementation. Following 'expectancy theory' in social psychology, why expect managers to do something if the perceived pay-offs are so limited, difficult and which provide a further barrier to evolving deliberate strategies?

In my article I will argue that the notion of strategic breakthroughs represents a practical bridge between the polarities of deliberate and emergent strategy. By applying deliberate (or 'designed') strategies to a relatively small number of strategic initiatives, strategic management can therefore provide more focus during strategy implementation, otherwise emergent strategies may threaten to dissipate resources and dilute managers' attention on too many unrelated initiatives. Arsenal's breakthroughs in the season 1997-98 help us to explore this process more deeply.

Managing by strategic breakthrough offers some promise of surmounting this impasse. For in strategic management *it is explicitly permitted* for managers to be highly selective in their strategic attention. This selectivity extends to:

- The *number* and *range* of businesses and markets which will be analysed.
- The *amount* of strategic data to be collected.
- The small number of *cunning things* which will form the basis of these breakthroughs.
- The *number* of strategic breakthroughs which will be attempted during implementation.
- The *timing* of implementation of breakthroughs. These are prioritized over time and introduced in a staggered progression.

Dealing with the first two bullet points, it is not clear to many managers that workable strategies can be developed based on selective analysis and a selective data collection. Frequently managers collect a tremendous amount of data—spread thinly—and then fail to actually process it effectively because it is just too wide-ranging. But if you are only going

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*Managers collect a tremendous amount of data and fail to process it effectively*

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to focus on a small number of breakthrough areas within a particular plan cycle, you are permitted to be selective in your strategic attention. For instance, one major brewing group launched a new beer which was very smooth, quite strong and in extra large sizes. The product climbed steeply in the market, then fell back. Extensive market research failed to detect this upset, whilst staff from the company drinking in bars detected consumer dissatisfaction—the product was simply too potent for them.

Strategic breakthrough management itself is derived from the Japanese planning technique of HOSHIN. Unlike KAIZEN, which focuses on a considerable number of smaller, continuous improvements, HOSHIN emphasizes a very small number of big steps.

With HOSHIN, between one and three strategic breakthroughs are initiated at any point in time in a particular part of the organization. This means that in a large organization, say of nine business units, the absolute maximum that can be accommodated is 27 (or three times nine). This would be a very theoretical maximum, however, as the chances are that 27 different breakthroughs would cause confusion and overload.

HOSHIN as a planning process is perhaps better known outside academic circles than within them. Surprisingly, the strategic management literature has not majored on studies of HOSHIN. (Perhaps its very simplicity as a technique makes it less interesting for those on the hunt for complexity.)

The number of simultaneous breakthroughs which could be accommodated realistically depends upon a number of factors:

- Their inherent difficulty.
- Their duration.

- The degree of interdependency with other breakthroughs.
- The organization skill in coordination and project management availability.
- The management energy available.
- The degree of commitment existing.
- The intensity of need (to implement the breakthrough).

Strategic breakthroughs allow managers who might otherwise be condemned to emergent strategies to develop at least *partial* deliberate strategies for their organizations. HOSHIN also helps prevent deliberately *formulated* strategies from becoming unduly emergent during implementation. Strategic breakthrough management is most helpful in overcoming the strategy implementation droop observed frequently in strategic planning. However, a caveat is that it also needs to be accompanied by a real commitment to overcome strategic embarrassment.

Now that we have elaborated the role of strategic breakthroughs in strategic management, it is time to return to our story of the Arsenal double, an historic breakthrough for the club. We thus use the case study as our core methodology in this article. Data for the case study were drawn essentially from a 'real-time' study of Arsenal's progress within UK football over the period December 1997 to May 1998.

In our case study we unravel this macro-breakthrough into the selective micro-breakthroughs which made it possible.

### ***The Arsenal double, 1997–98***

The 1997–98 season began with Manchester United rapidly taking the lead. Arsenal were, however, in hot pursuit. This was Arsene Wenger's second season at the club. Initially Wenger had made few changes to his core team but gradually and incrementally he began to bring in new players—from France and elsewhere. These acquisitions would, it was hoped, in themselves bring forth a strategic breakthrough, but subsequently it transpired that a number of further innovations were needed.

	Manchester United	Arsenal	Gap
August	2nd	4th	4 points
September	2nd	1st	1 point (to Arsenal)
October	1st	2nd	1 point
November	1st	5th	7 points
December	1st	6th	12 points
January	1st	5th	8 points
February	1st	2nd	12 points
March	1st	2nd	3 points
April	2nd	1st	4 points (to Arsenal)
May	2nd	1st	1 point

Key United injuries: September: Keane (out all season)  
March: Pallister and Giggs

Figure 1: The strategic gap.

Frequently breakthrough management means letting go of things which have worked well in the past. Wenger's sacrifice was to make way for the new by losing some of the old. England player Paul Merson was sold to Middlesbrough in the early 1997-98 season where he had an outstanding season (albeit in the First Division). Welsh international forward Hartson was sold to local rivals West Ham, where he too had a prolific goal-scoring season (although his subsequent form at Wimbledon, to whom he was sold for £7 million was a disappointment). Whilst Arsenal began the season well (see Figure 1), by autumn the team's performance weakened. As the 1997-98 season wore on some commentators began to feel that perhaps the sale of Merson and Hartson had been premature. Arsenal faltered and then suffered significant defeats in the autumn and early winter months. Looking at that very short-term snapshot this could have been construed as a mistake. But the sale of Hartson (and subsequently of striker Ian Wright) gave Arsene Wenger the chance to trial Nicholas Anelka, who, by 1999, had produced an unrealized capital gain of £19 million (or several years of Arsenal's average profits).

In December 1997 Arsenal then suffered a telling defeat at home to Blackburn Rovers, losing 3-1. There were rumours of a divide between the old (mainly British) and the newly arrived players (foreign). A further issue was that the famed (but no longer so youthful) Arsenal back-four defenders seemed to be weakening. Would Wenger need to dismantle and discard the line that had been the

backbone of Arsenal's strength for nearly ten years? At this time, Tony Adams, a lynch-pin defender, even thought of retiring from the game entirely because of exhaustion and deteriorating form due to injury.

The prospects for Arsenal winning the Premiership were now looking extremely bleak, Wenger faced a turnaround situation to get Arsenal into a European competition during the following 1998-99 season. Arsenal were knocked out of the European Champions League Cup early on (but thus reduced the numbers of businesses it was in) and then struggled against non-Premier League sides in the FA Cup through replays. Arsenal faced a very steep uphill task to secure a successful season. However, very often in football, and in industry generally, organizational breakthrough frequently follows some form of breakdown or disappointment.

By this point Manchester United looked set to make it four titles out of five. By December they were 12 points ahead of Arsenal (see Figure 1), making their position seem impregnable. In the new year some bookies even *paid out* on the assumption that Manchester United had already won the league.

The Arsenal line up now ran like this. The Dutch international Bergkamp was paired up as Arsenal's strike force with Ian Wright, Arsenal's top goal scorer in their entire history. Wright however suffered a series of injuries in the autumn and suspensions which put him out for the rest of the season. Wright, a prolific goal scorer now had stand-in's in the French player Anelka and Wreh. In late 1997 neither of

these new players looked confident in filling the gap left by Wright, who was a very hard act to follow. Overmars, a Dutch winger bought by Arsenal in the summer, seemed unsettled in adjusting to the English League. In acquisition terms, Arsenal seemed to be suffering significant integration difficulties.

In midfield two new French players, Vieira and Petit, had been introduced over the past and current season. This partnership had yet to fulfil its potential. Parlour, a British player who had often been a regular substitute in recent seasons, was beginning to improve his play but the Arsenal midfield had yet to gel. In defence, Adams had weakened and he was to be rested for several weeks. The England keeper Seaman was injured for a large number of games. All in all, Arsenal's early season promise faltered through imperfect alignment of its playing system. However, a new and remarkable alignment was about to occur, some of which was deliberate and some of which was emergent.

According to the *Independent*, 3 May 1998, some serious talks began in December 1997 in the Arsenal team. Arsenal had just lost their third Premiership game—this time against Liverpool. Some home truths were apparently (according to the press) expressed by Arsenal's English defenders on what the rest of the team needed to do. The back four wanted the midfield players and forwards to work harder particularly to close down the opposition. According to commentators, whilst the overseas players needed to understand the physical toughness of the league—and to be committed through all of the match, the English players needed to understand how best to exploit the flair of the overseas player.

Arsenal's playing strength improved dramatically in a number of key ways over the January–March period:

- Anelka and Wreh improved their game and a new flow of goals emerged.
  - Overmars, the winger, found his feet and became an unstoppable force against most defences, beginning another flow of goals. This breakthrough appeared to come by removing factors constraining his play, allowing him to achieve his full potential.
  - The world-class Dutch striker Dennis Bergkamp created goals from 'no chance' situations, becoming FA Player of the Month not once but several times over.
  - The Vieira–Petit axis in midfield became generally acknowledged to be the strongest midfield pairing in the league. Both Vieira and Petit also became active goal scorers in late season.
  - Parlour went from strength to strength in midfield, almost making it into England's World Cup Squad (in the previous season he had typically been on the Arsenal bench as a substitute).
  - The back four remained solid. Even Arsenal's defenders began to seek out goal-scoring opportunities, with England player Adams becoming a 'virtual centre forward' for corners.
- The above were easily observable improvements in team performance. However, it is perhaps even more interesting to identify some underlying strategic breakthroughs in the form of team infrastructure. These breakthroughs included:
- Arsenal now had a *credible strike force* (sourced from Bergkamp, Anelka and Wreh) which was not dependent upon Ian Wright. Their very young striker Anelka almost made France's World Cup team on the back of his outstanding late season performance for Arsenal. They had also gained a *speed and fluidity* of play through the runs of Dutch winger Overmars and the English Parlour so that defences would find it hard to predict how and where the attack would come from.
  - They had *strength and tightness* of play in midfield through French players Vieira and Petit (who both went to the 1998 World Cup). Petit scored the third goal in the final against Brazil, the pre-tournament favourites.
- Arsenal's defence also regained its *impregnability*. Whilst not being a 'breakthrough' as such this was an important defensive factor

which supported the Arsenal double. Arsenal had a clean sheet during their unbroken run of wins in March–April 1998. A further breakthrough was Arsenal's reserve goalkeeper, Alex Manninger, who stood in for many games (without letting in any goals or keeping a 'clean sheet') for the England goalkeeper David Seaman, who was injured.

- The team had *revitalized energy*. In late season they appeared to gain more energy the more they played. By contrast, Manchester United's players—it was generally agreed by the press and television commentators—appeared exhausted, especially after their European Cup matches. Although this breakthrough appeared simply to emerge, it was skilfully directed by Arsene Wenger's special training and player support measures. (Not surprisingly, my own humble efforts to suggest novel ways of injecting energy into Arsenal's late season efforts using the Japanese techniques of Reiki (Parkes, 1998) were felt to be redundant by Arsene Wenger, whom I wrote to in May 1998.)
- In its closing Premier League games, the team seemed to be *operating almost at a psychic level* in its passing and created new patterns of play that were hard to defend against. These patterns of play included incisive runs at the opposition, and very fast ball movement from defence to attack. If Manchester United had been masters of the sudden offensive, Arsenal had evolved new ways of achieving surprise. (Obviously these 'psychic' patterns were not psychic at all—they were clearly one-off training ground manoeuvres being practised as surprises.)
- Instead of the previous season where Arsenal lost games to the leaders Manchester United, in 1997–98 Arsenal *won* both games. The effect was a 12-point swing to Arsenal.

The above breakthroughs were multiple, complementary and self-reinforcing. The overall pattern of Arsenal's play had changed—and as part of a deliberate strategy by Arsene Wenger. And perhaps more importantly, this

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*Strategy was being implemented with great effect*

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very strategy was being implemented with great effect. At a less visible level, however, Arsene Wenger had been using some new and innovative techniques with the Arsenal players. These included:

- Diet: this was closely monitored with the emphasis being on foods such as pasta, chicken and fresh vegetables.
- Training sessions: these became short and less tiring, preserving players' energies.
- Coaching: this became minimalist, with players being helped to express themselves to develop their individual style of play.
- Alternative approaches to keeping and regaining fitness, including regular osteopathy checks to look for structural imbalances and warm-weather rehabilitation were implemented (for example in treating defender Adams' ankle injury).
- Team spirit: this obviously received a fillip after the December discussions, and with Wenger's leadership and support of the players which appeared unconditional—in the public domain at least.

In a game where results are settled by often fine differences, Arsenal's late season rejuvenation thus appears to have been inspired by a number of innovations both on and off the pitch. These innovations resulted in an inter-related number of breakthroughs which came to the fore just at a time when its main opposition, Manchester United, was weakening.

Our examination of Arsenal's success also highlights the need to invest in human resources to *deliver real strategic breakthroughs* at core. But it also underscores the importance of *behavioural* factors in aligning strategic performance. Unless the team (and its manager) had dealt openly and firmly with its problems in late 1998 it is unlikely that it would have achieved the 'double-double'.

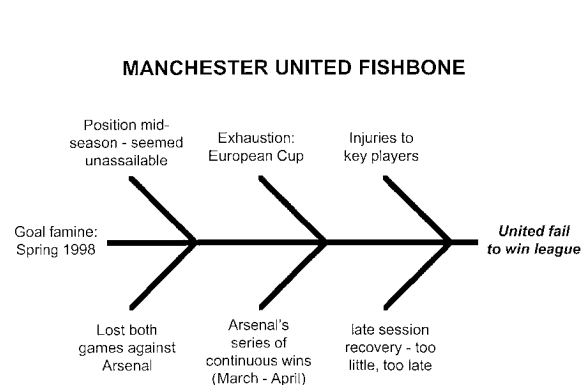


Figure 2: Manchester United fishbone.

Arsenal's proven ability to find, acquire and to integrate overseas players (who generally cost less like-for-like than home-grown players) also provides a continuing real source of competitive advantage. Arsenal surely needs this competence, as Manchester United's larger financial resource enables it to acquire expensive players without financial strain.

Figures 2 and 3 now summarize the main reasons for Arsenal's 1997-98 Premiership win at the expense of Manchester United. Figure 2 shows a 'fishbone' analysis of why United lost the Premiership. The problem symptom is shown at the head of the fishbone and the inferred root causes are its bones. Whilst fishbone analysis is typically associated with total quality management, its potential for use in strategic analysis is not so widely appreciated generally. Fishbone analysis helps managers to deal with more micro-issues which are hampering strategic performance without getting lost in detail. Fishbone analysis involves considerably more than brainstorming: it involves systematically teasing out the causal chain which has led to a particular strategic effect.

Figure 3 now looks at things quite differently. This looks at what had to go right for Arsenal to become Premiership leaders. We call this a 'wishbone' analysis, as it is founded on things going right, rather than going wrong, as in a fishbone. The wishbone is shown as going from left to right, to depict some future state—the opportunity. We therefore draw from left to right, as if we are going into the future. Our wishbone identifies *all* the key things which need to be aligned to deliver the entire breakthrough.

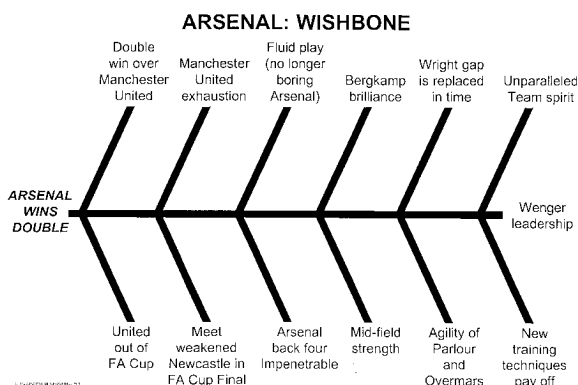


Figure 3: Arsenal wishbone.

Notice that in the wishbone some things occur over which you yourself have little or even no influence. These are included deliberately a) to highlight *all* the conditions which need to line up to deliver the vision, and b) so that a debate begins on *how* these points *can* be influenced, either directly or indirectly, or both. Wishbone analysis is not merely a brainstorm: indeed it necessitates imagining the interaction of both internal and external systems which need to be aligned to deliver value (sometimes called the 'business value system' (Grundy, 1998)).

Figure 3—the Arsenal wishbone—is most interesting as it highlights just how many positive factors were aligned to achieve this turnaround. But at the same time note the things which Wenger *did not do*. For instance, he did not dismantle the Arsenal back four, nor did he sell Wright or any other players. Some continuity often provides *more scope* for strategic breakthrough rather than for less.

Finally Figure 4 now plots the interdependencies of the various breakthroughs, as a single system of strategic development. In summary, even a Manchester United fan would admit (and I count myself as an ex-United fan) that Arsenal had not only managed to achieve a number of breakthroughs, but also achieved them in a very short period of time indeed.

### ***The Manchester United treble, 1998-99***

Manchester United's treble in 1999 might be argued to have reversed the Arsenal strategic



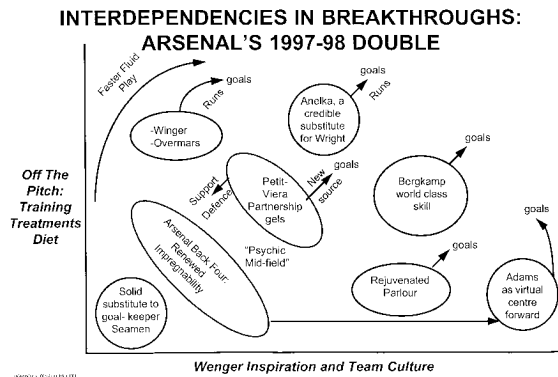


Figure 4: Interdependencies in breakthroughs: Arsenal's 1997-98 double.

breakthrough, but this would be to misunderstand the nature of football. A season's play is equivalent to a military campaign and is thus, unequivocally, 'strategic'. Also, each season is a platform for the next—not merely in terms of financial but also for player resource, team-building and, of course, the brand.

In 1998-99 Arsenal marginally lacked the all-round skill that Manchester United possessed *in-depth*. Whilst Arsenal sometimes struggled to replace its strongest players (absent through injury or by getting too many red cards), United were able to field international players as substitutes. Probably United stole both the FA Cup and the League Premiership due to extra depth and, perhaps, the relative weaknesses of one or two players alone. Of course, United were able to do this by splashing out £22 million on two players alone—on just one defender Stam and on one striker. Arsenal, lacking in cash flow from non-football activities could not match these acquisitions.

But Manchester United and Arsenal are in danger of producing a duopoly of dominance over the British game (or a tri-opoly, if we include Chelsea) due to the effects of well-focused breakthrough strategies over the last three to five years.

This sequence of events also highlights the influence which organizational energy and spirit has on breakthroughs. Arsenal's French midfielder Petit (who now intends to stay at Arsenal) said in mid-1999 that it made him sick to see United win everything. Perhaps in 1999-2000 United should beware the Arsenal counter-attack.

### Nine key lessons for strategic management

We can perhaps distil nine key lessons for strategic management from our analysis of Arsenal's unexpectedly outstanding 1997-98 season. These include:

- 1) Managers should look hard for sources of cumulative competitive advantage—and then align these vigorously and obsessively. They should seek out virtuous cycles of success or feedback loops (for example, football success builds your brand, facilitates merchandising, pays for world-class players). Use 'wishbone' analysis to stretch your visionary thinking—and map and manage the linkages between different areas of breakthrough to achieve even greater leverage.
- 2) Competitive advantage can often be gained (and lost) quickly, whether you are Manchester United or Arsenal. Indeed, Arsenal struggled to retain their exceptional form in the first half of their 1998-99 season. This has been attributed to post-World Cup exhaustion by some but Arsenal's shine may have been dulled by emerging breakthroughs within Chelsea and Manchester United, its key competitors.
- 3) Try to combine deliberate and emergent (or unexpected) strategic breakthroughs simultaneously—not all breakthroughs have to be highly designed or deliberate, they can be seized during the fluid competitive interplays of the moment. Strategic management (to borrow a footballing analogy) suffers sometimes from being just a little too 'set piece'.
- 4) Seek out not just the tangible but also the behavioural breakthroughs—especially team work and team spirit.
- 5) Strategic breakthroughs depend on continual experimentation, and upon learning and discarding the old mind-set. (Arsenal, once thought of as a defensive team, and widely known as 'Boring Arsenal', are now anything but that. In the 1997-98 season Arsenal fans began to chant—with



irony—'1-0 to the Arsenal'—in happy memories of the days when 1-0 was thought sufficient to win. In late 1997-98 season, scores of 3, 4 or even 5 goals by Arsenal were not unknown.)

- 6) Successful strategic breakthroughs demand continual injection and generation of much energy. Organizations should strive to avoid trapping strategic energy in breakthrough efforts not thought through, under-resourced, or not pursued with enough stamina.
- 7) Also, strategic breakthroughs require spontaneity and thus have a different 'feel' to them than more set-piece, 'deliberate' strategies. Arsenal's breakthrough momentum faltered perhaps in the early 1998-99 season due to the very loss of this spontaneity.

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### *Strategic breakthroughs require spontaneity*

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- 8) Managers should focus their breakthroughs within a manageable domain—and not on too many fronts. (Arsene Wenger once said that it was Arsenal's good fortune that it did not play in the tiring European Cup in 1997-98, unlike Manchester United who dissipated considerable energy on Europe).
- 9) The most effective strategic breakthroughs appear to come more through 'natural strategies' (that is, ones which are grounded in what is most naturally likely to work best, rather than by 'contrived' strategies). Many deliberate strategies appear to be doomed to failure from the start simply because they contain in-built flaws, contradictions and disadvantages. Natural strategies are ones which create and capitalize on strategic flow—where organizational energies are spontaneously mobilized and aligned to discover new and

effective methods of competitive play which unsettle the opposition.

To amplify the point about the importance of concentration of energy within strategic energy, let us end with a brief quotation from Sun Tzu:

So when the front is prepared, the rear is lacking, and when the rear is prepared the front is lacking. Preparedness on the left means lack on the right, preparedness on the right means lack on the left. Preparedness everywhere means lack everywhere.

Perhaps Manchester United's recent debate about whether or not to play in the FA Cup (so that they can play in the World Club Championship in Brazil instead) is at least in part a realization of the need to focus breakthroughs onto a narrower terrain.

### **Biographical note**

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