



This was the first ever victory for Arsenal over Barcelona and it was quite a feat for Wenger's boys.

Nasri was a good welcome back to the squad and the rest of the Arsenal team was what was expected.

Carlos Puyol was absent and Abidal moved in to his place as Maxwell took up the left – back position.

Last season, watching this match – up was like watching a play station wiz controlling the Barca side so, it was a surprise to see Arsenal make such a good start. They must have learned their lesson. The players without the ball moved with a swagger and attitude that so many teams don't display against Barcelona. They forced a Barca side to give up the ball in the first sixteen seconds of the game and though Barca had spells of dominance they never seemed to be comfortable nor did they enjoy the level of control the wielded a year ago.

Arsenal

Arsenal played with a sense of urgency and the increased pressure on the Barcelona players meant they won the ball up high the field. For any team to succeed with that strategy, the three lines of defense, midfield and attack have to be at most fifteen yards from each other. What this does is it forces the team that presses to have a high defensive line. A high defensive line against a team like Barca can be a boon or bane. If Van Persie had converted his chance and if the passes at the final third could have been more precise that would have been quite a boon for Arsenal.

To make sure their high defensive line was not exploited, Nasri and Walcott played deep and the whole team played more compact with Van Persie always dropping into deep positions and being closer to the midfielders than usual and then making himself more available for a quick forward pass as soon as the ball was won. The strategy worked well but they needed to score for Barca to have become more unsettled.

Barcelona

When Arsenal missed converting on their chances in those first few crucial minutes, Barcelona slowly and surely regained their footing and started passing with the fluidity that they've come to be known for. Messi should have scored when Song's pass was intercepted by Iniesta and a quick exchange between Messi and Villa put Messi through. That is the bane of a high line. When you let Barcelona to start passing the ball around casually, bordering on the lazy then they will strike with a deadly blow and that's just what happened in Barca's first goal. A sequence of lazily looking passes finds Messi and a split second he finds Villa and Arsenal are a goal down. Arsenal was then bailed out by the line ref when Messi scored and the goal was disallowed. To try to define the roles of the three forwards of Barca is somewhat pointless since they play like they have no roles. Villa starts on the left Pedro on the right and Messi as the main point man. Since Messi always dropped back to a deep position to link play with the midfielders, Barca creates what I will term a hole to be filled by Pedro, Villa or Messi's penetrating dribbles.

Midfield Play

Arsenal coped well with Barca's midfield maestros as Messi was watched by Song and Wilshere. Arsenal's two central defenders were disciplined and Clichy helped Nasri to make sure Xavi did not have many opportunities to turn and face up field. Walcott did well with his speedy counter attacking runs that made Barca a little honest with Iniesta helping out Maxwell more than usual thus taking away from his creative attacking play. Song's game suffered after he got the yellow card. Wilshere's poise with ball was good for Arsenal's mid and Fabregas didn't just want to loose to his friends.

Instincts

Impulses are twofold. They either make you a genius or duper at the end. Who was the genius and who was the duper?

Wenger in this case was the genius. First he had to take Song out because another unintended infringement would have maybe resulted in a second caution and therefore matching orders. Taking out Walcott was a good move too since his defensive forays had taken its toll on him. With Arshavin in meant Nasri went to the midfield which he likes. Those were brilliant substitutions.

Pep in this case was the Duper. Taking out Villa for Keita meant Iniesta had to move to Villa's position Busquets moving to Iniesta's position or there was confusion on who played the defensive midfield maybe two defensive midfielders and when Clichy was chipping in to Van Persie for the equalizer it was Messi who was trying to pressure Clichy. The game did open up after the equalizer Barca put some pressure on the Arsenal team but where sucker punched again by a counter attack that Nasri kept a cool head for a deadly pass and a deadly finish by Arshavin.

Conclusion

Arsenal had less possession but their tactics were largely correct though they had to endure some nervous moments which is to be expected against a team as good as Barcelona. As we have all seen no amount of tactics can prevent Messi from creating just pray and hopefully ride on luck and Arsenal did ride on luck more than a couple of times. Arsenal pressing worked and that is what kept them in the game.

The duper took off a goal scoring threat and at a time when they seemed likely to have chances on the break while the genius stepped up his attacking threats by introducing poaching wide player for cautioned holding mid. Fabregas, Nasri and Wilshere did well in those final minutes to create that last goal.