

Unai Emery banishes bitter memories to lead Villarreal to unexpected glory



- Having beaten Juventus and Bayern Munich, the Spanish club will face Liverpool in the Champions League semifinal next week

It's 9:30 a.m., and I'm about to interview what is certain to be a beaming Unai Emery.

It's May 2015, and the then 44-year-old Spanish coach had just led Sevilla to a second successive Europa League triumph after beating Ukrainian side FC Dnipro in Warsaw.

At Sevilla's training ground, the ambitious coach, about to head off on a well earned summer holiday, spoke generously and confidently about his ability to improve the club, what it would require and what he demands from players.

Having previously managed Almeria, Valencia and Spartak Moscow, Emery had no desire to coach another team, and the sparkle in his eyes showed a man who believed an even better future awaited Sevilla. He was happy being the right man at the right time in Andalusia.

Despite his success, it would have been hard to imagine at the time that, seven years on, he would find himself eyeing a UEFA Champions League final while the likes of Barcelona, Atletico Madrid and his former club enviously watched from the sidelines.

In hindsight, that he would become one of Europe's most in-demand coaches was inevitable.

A year after our interview, he were celebrating an unprecedented hat-trick of Europa League wins, after defeating Liverpool 3-1 in Basel.

In 2016 he joined Paris Saint-Germain, the latest manager tasked with winning the coveted Champions League.

Not only did that dream not materialize, but Emery presided over one of the most notorious collapses in European football history in his first season. Having beaten Barcelona 4-0 at home in the round of 16 of the Champions League, the French team suffered a meltdown at Camp Nou, losing 6-1 in the most embarrassing of eliminations.

From that moment he was on borrowed time in Paris, and despite winning Ligue 1 in 2017-18, he packed his bags in the summer for Arsenal, where he had the unenviable task of replacing club legend Arsene Wenger.

He lasted just over a year, despite leading the club to a final in his beloved Europa League, where they lost 4-1 to Chelsea.

Which brings us to Villarreal. Once again, home comforts have brought out the best in Emery. As have European competitions.

In his first season at the Estadio de la Cerámica, Emery led his new club to fourth in La Liga and to a triumph in — of course — the Europa League, against Manchester United.

Belatedly, Emery was getting the acclaim he deserved as he banished the negativity and ridicule he attracted at Arsenal.

Today, Emery's stock has never been higher.

Having guided Villarreal to second place in a Champions League group that included United, Atalanta and Young Boys, Emery pulled off one of the finest achievements of his career by beating Juventus on 4-1 on aggregate in the round of 16, after an astonishing 3-0 win Turin.

Things then got better, beating heavily-favoured Bayern Munich 2-1 over two legs, after a last-gasp equalizer in the return fixture at the Allianz Arena.

It was arguably Emery's finest hour and a half of football.

Now, Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool again stand in the way, this time of a dream Champions League final.

Emery's legendary status at the club nicknamed the Yellow Submarine is secure.

Villarreal is a small city with a population of just over 50,000, and few of them would have expected a march to the Champions League semifinals, never mind further.

Emery's Villarreal and Carlo Ancelotti's Real Madrid now carry Spain's hopes against England's Liverpool and Manchester City when the penultimate round of the world's biggest club competition kick off next week.

As Villarreal head to the cauldron of Anfield, Emery will no doubt remain calm, as is his style.

He is known for his pragmatism and flexible tactics, depending on his opponent, as Bayern and star forward Robert Lewandowski found out to their cost when met with Villarreal's rearguard action in that remarkable second leg in Bavaria.

With a mixture of ambition, realism and humility, Emery won the day.

The bitter memory of loss to Barcelona 2017 will probably never leave Emery, but after yet another season where his former club PSG — now with Lionel Messi, Kylian Mbappe and Neymar — have failed to win Europe's ultimate prize, he has proven himself one of European football's enduring survivors.
