



He can smell danger' - is Merino Arsenal's striker solution?



Arsenal's failed search for a striker was looming large in manager Mikel Arteta's rear view mirror - until he discovered the answer might have been sitting right behind him at Leicester City

The Gunners looked every inch a team without a recognised main forward as they laboured and spluttered to break down Leicester City's game but limited resistance at King Power Stadium.

It was then, after 69 minutes and with Arsenal's title pursuit losing momentum, Arteta put Raheem Sterling out of his misery and turned to Merino, the Spain midfielder signed from Real Sociedad for £32.6m last August., Arsenal started with Leandro Trossard as a false nine. This did not work and it was Merino's arrival and accomplished finishing with both goals in the 2-0 win, that has given Arteta very palatable food for thought and kept the Gunners firmly in the title hunt.

William Saliba offered himself up as a potential striker solution after Kai Havertz suffered a season-ending hamstring injury on Arsenal's sunshine break to Dubai, but this was not an option given his high-class quality in defence. Arteta suggested another defender, Riccardo Calafiori, might be in the frame and the Italian has shown an eye for a goal - but Merino has made his case in Arsenal's state of emergency, scoring twice in a game for the first time since 2016.

It was a tactical switch that had a touch of desperation as well as improvisation, but Arteta and Merino must take the credit as Arsenal extended their unbeaten run to 15 games in the Premier League - 10 wins and five draws. It is their best run since going 16 games unbeaten between December 2010 and April 2011 under Arsene Wenger.

A delighted Arteta said: "Mikel has a sense of danger and great timing in the box. We were composed, scored two brilliant goals and could have scored one or two more. He added: "He has got a goal threat. He can smell danger. He can anticipate the action. He's got really good timing to arrive in certain areas and execute.

"We are going to have various contexts and we are prepared. We have to have the pictures in our heads for these scenarios. We have to see where the game is and what is demanded. In this game we believed it was him. The hardest thing then is to deliver and he did. I think the game started to suit him more because Leicester started to defend much deeper. We had more momentum, more sequences, more set-pieces as well in that period. And we believed that he could impact the game. We were lucky that he did it."