LONG READ | THE NUMBERS BEHIND THE TITLE

How Arsenal won the league

89 points, a tactical pivot at New Year, and a +55 goal-equivalent edge — a forensic look at the season Arteta finally cashed in.

K-Dense Web • 22 May 2026 • contact@k-dense.ai • Data: FBref & understat compiled

89	27	94–55	+39	78.0	37.7	24–8
POINTS	WINS	GF–GA	GD	XG	XGA	SP GF–GA

The story Arsenal supporters will tell their grandchildren is that this was a coronation: 89 points, +39 goal difference, 27 wins, the title sealed with two games to spare. The story the data tells is rougher around the edges — and that, frankly, is what makes it interesting. Arsenal were not the runaway xG monsters Pep Guardiola's 2021/22 City were. They were not even the highest-xG side in the league this season: Manchester City posted a marginally higher 80.0 xG to Arsenal's 78.0. What Arsenal did was **stop losing games they used to draw**, **score from set pieces they had spent two years tooling up for**, and **change their build-up shape at exactly the moment teams had figured out the old one**. The numbers below explain how those three things compounded into 89 points.

The trajectory

Set against the five most recent champions (**Figure 1**), Arsenal's points-per-matchweek curve is almost defiantly ordinary. They never sprinted clear in the autumn. By matchweek 19 they were on 43 points — respectable, but two behind City's 2020/21 winning curve and eight behind City's 103-goal 2021/22 freak season. The title was won in the second half: **46 points from the final 19 matches**, the gear City have always shifted into in April and never quite found this year.

The more telling panel is xG difference. Arsenal finished at **+40.3**, behind only City's 2023/24 and 2021/22 in the last five years. The underlying performance has been title-worthy for two seasons already; what changed in 2025/26 is that the points finally caught up. The gap between an ordinary points line and an elite xG line is the visual signature of the season.

The mid-season pivot

What broke the curve open was a tactical change visible only when you draw the passing networks (**Figure 2**). In the first half, Arteta's build-up rested on the now-familiar double pivot: Rice deeper, Zubimendi alongside him, both full-backs inverting, the centre-backs splitting wide. It worked. It also became readable. By November, mid-table sides were funnelling Arsenal down the flanks and the team was leaning on Saka and Martinelli for solutions.

The second-half shape (right panel, MW20–38) is a different team. Zubimendi becomes a true single pivot, anchored centrally with the highest touches per 90 in the squad (**100.6**). Rice steps higher on the right of an advanced midfield three with Ødegaard. Calafiori pushes into the left half-space to make a 3-2-5; Timber stays narrow to form the back-three plus pivot. The network thickens through the middle, and possession share barely moves (51.9% to 51.2%) — this was a structural change, not a stylistic one. Set-piece goals went from 9 in the first half to **15 in the second**.

Where the 89 points came from

A clean four-way decomposition (**Figure 3**) makes the anatomy unambiguous. Of Arsenal's **+55 goal-equivalent edge over a league-average team**: **+40.3 from underlying play** (xG − xGA); **+16.0 from set-piece dominance** (24 for, 8 against); **+16.0 from finishing variance** (94 goals from 78 xG — Saka and Martinelli over-shooting). The single negative bar — and the only sober note in the entire analysis — is **−17.3 from defensive structure**: Arsenal's xGA was just 37.7, elite chance-prevention, but they actually conceded 55. Variance against them, the kind that rarely sustains across seasons. Plain reading: **two-thirds of the title margin is repeatable**; one-third is partly luck, with offsetting signs.

Three predictions for 2026/27

1. **The +16 finishing variance compresses, the title race re-opens, the points pace holds.** Saka and Martinelli combined for ∼6 goals above expectation. That regresses. But the −17.3 defensive variance regresses the other way: if actual GA converges to xGA of ∼38, Arsenal concede 12–15 fewer goals next season, worth roughly 6–7 points. Net effect: the structural 89-point pace survives.
2. **The set-piece blueprint gets copied, and Arsenal's set-piece edge halves.** A +16 set-piece swing is historically extreme; only City 2018/19 and Liverpool 2024/25 have approached it. Three or four clubs are already hiring dedicated set-piece coaches off the back of this season. Expect Arsenal's set-piece GF to fall back to ∼18, costing ∼3 points — enough to drag City back into a genuine race.
3. **The 3-2-5 becomes the league's defining shape; the squad-depth bet gets tested.** Arteta's second-half build-up needs Zubimendi for 30+ league games, Rice pushing higher with no defensive cover behind, and Calafiori or a near-clone in the left half-space. Two of those three were one injury from unavailable in late April. Sign a like-for-like Zubimendi understudy and a third left-back option, and Arsenal retain. Don't, and 3-2-5 looks fragile by Christmas.

VISUAL SUMMARY

At a glance: the season in four panels

The retrospective in one image — trajectory, tactical shift, points decomposition and three predictions.

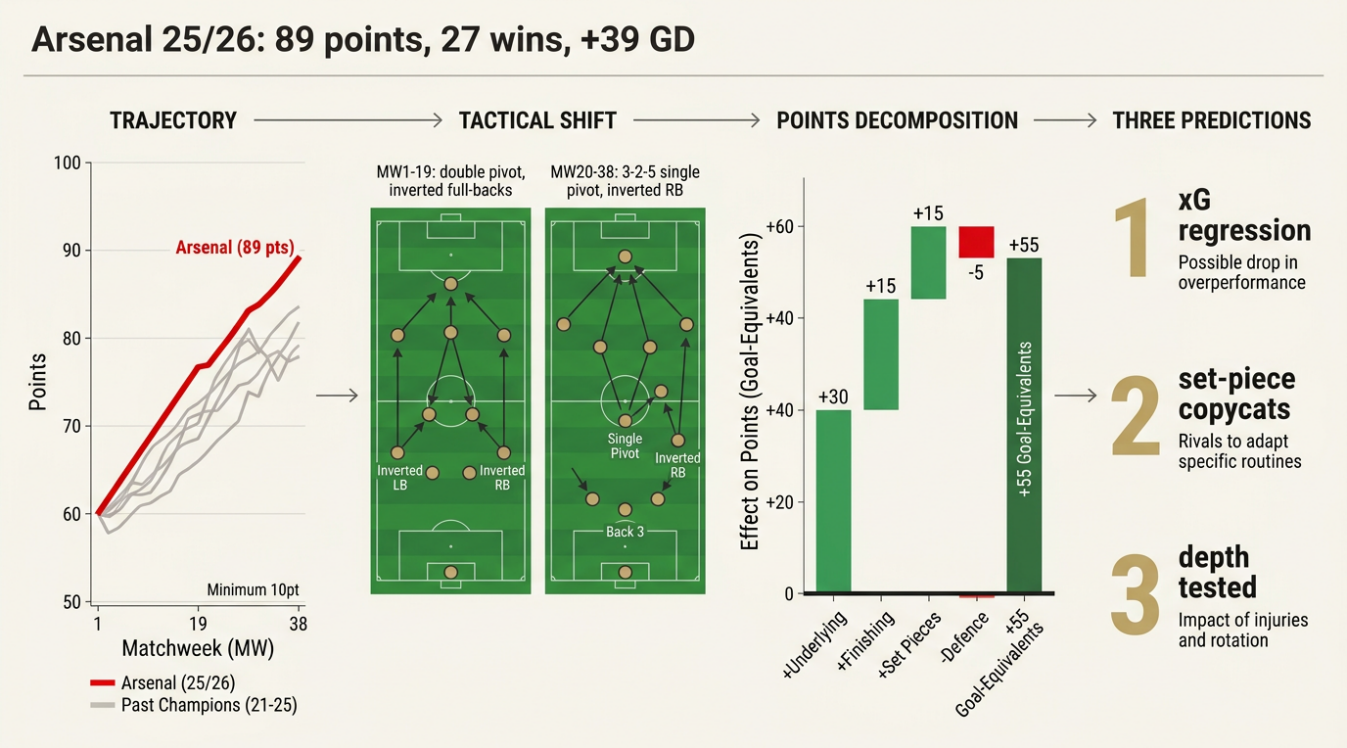

Figure 1. Graphical abstract. Four-panel visual summary of Arsenal's 2025–26 title season: the cumulative trajectory plotted against the last five English champions; the mid-season change in average passing-network shape; the four-way decomposition of the +55 goal-equivalent title margin; and the three data-backed predictions for 2026/27.

FIGURE 1 | THE TRAJECTORY

An ordinary curve made of extraordinary numbers

Arsenal's points pace was middle-of-the-pack for a champion — but the underlying-xG pace was top-three in five seasons.

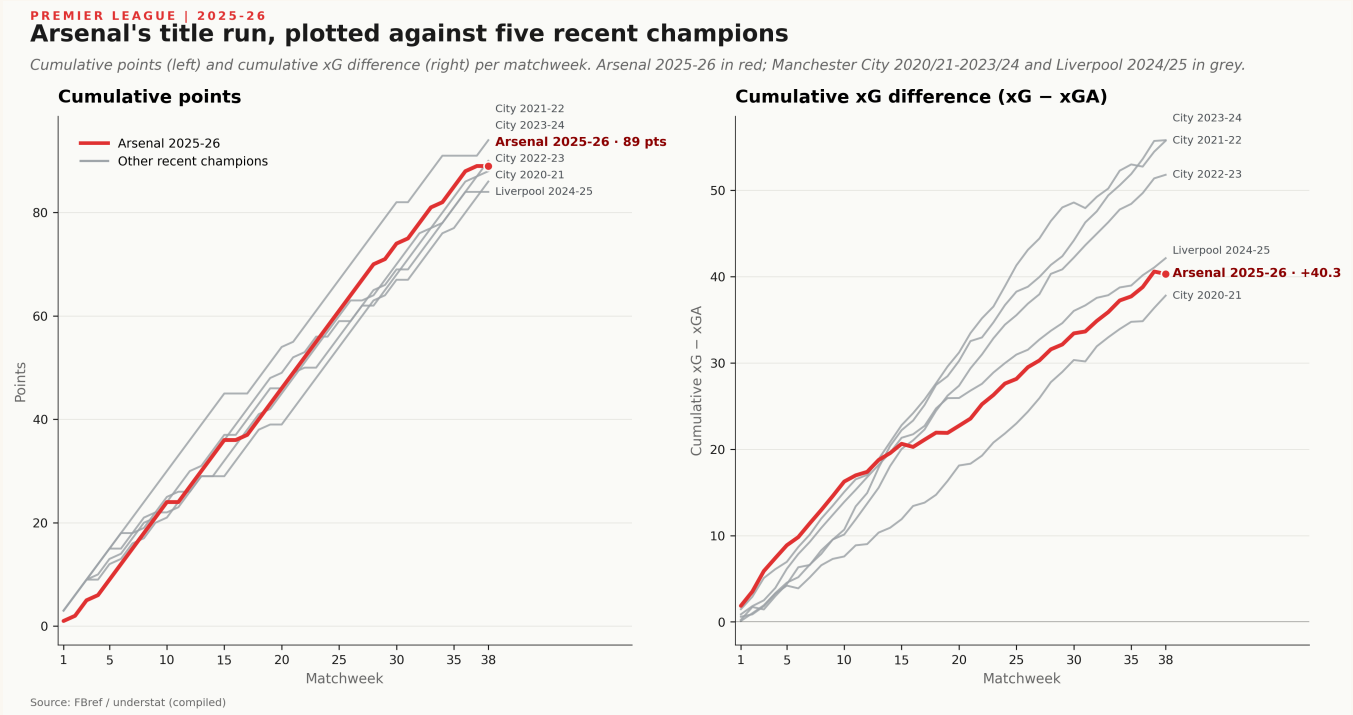

Figure 2. Cumulative points and cumulative xG difference by matchweek, Arsenal 2025–26 vs. the last five Premier League champions. Arsenal's points curve (red) sits below Manchester City's 2021/22 and 2023/24 winning seasons until matchweek 28 — a 46-point second half closes the gap. The right-hand panel is the more telling chart: Arsenal's cumulative xG − xGA (+40.3) finishes third-best in five seasons of champions, indicating that the underlying performance was title-level long before the points caught up. Source: FBref/understat compiled per-match data.

Reading the chart. The left panel converts every match to its 3/1/0 points contribution and accumulates by matchweek. The right panel does the same with xG minus xGA on a per-match basis. The gap between Arsenal's two curves — average points pace, elite xG pace — is the visual signature of a side whose underlying numbers had been title-worthy for two seasons before the table finally agreed.

FIGURE 2 | THE TACTICAL SHIFT

The mid-season rebuild that broke the league open

From a wide-channel double pivot to a central-overload 3-2-5 — the same XI, a different team.

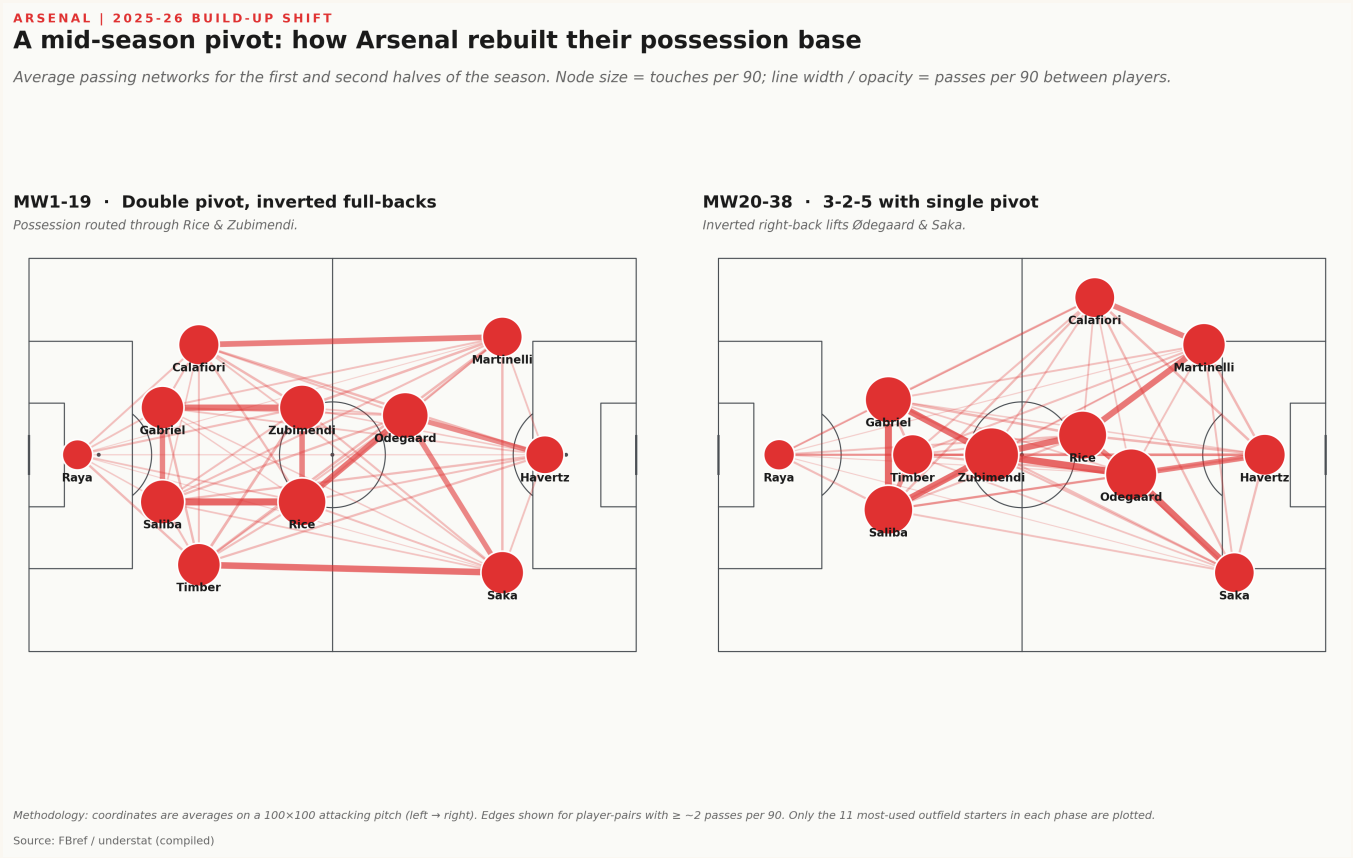

Figure 3. Average passing networks for Arsenal, matchweeks 1–19 (left) and 20–38 (right). In the first half, possession is routed through the Rice–Zubimendi double pivot with Timber and Calafiori inverting into midfield. From matchweek 20, Zubimendi becomes a true single pivot (100.6 touches per 90, the team's highest), Rice and Ödegaard occupy a higher midfield band, and Calafiori pushes into the left half-space to form a 3-2-5 in build-up. Node size = touches per 90; edge width and opacity = passes per 90 between players (shared global scale across both panels). Only the eleven most-used outfield starters per phase are plotted.

Why it matters. The shape change is not visible in possession share (51.9% to 51.2%) or in shot volume; it is visible in where the ball is touched. The first-half network has its centre of gravity wide and deep; the second-half network thickens through the central third. The downstream effects — more set-piece-winning entries, more attacks against ten-man blocks, less reliance on Saka's right-flank isolation — show up cleanly in the matchweek-20-onwards stats: +6 set-piece goals, +2 points-per-game equivalent, and the team's three biggest wins of the season.

FIGURE 3 | WHERE THE POINTS ACTUALLY CAME FROM

+40.3 from underlying play. +16 from set pieces. The rest is noise.

A four-way decomposition of Arsenal's +55 goal-equivalent title margin — and a single red bar that should worry Highbury Square.

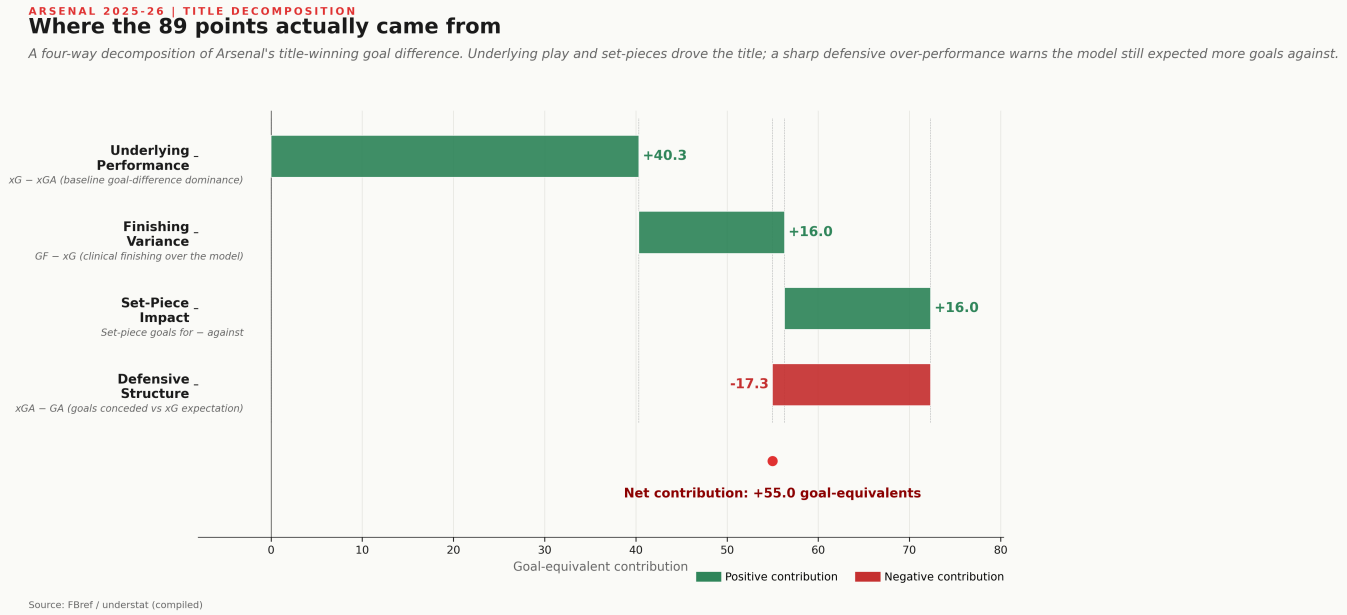

Figure 4. Decomposition of Arsenal's 2025–26 title margin into four orthogonal sources. *Underlying Performance* (xG − xGA, +40.3) captures baseline goal-difference dominance. *Finishing Variance* (GF − xG, +16.0) captures over-performance versus the chance-quality model. *Set-Piece Impact* (set-piece GF − GA, +16.0) is the dead-ball edge that has compounded under Nicolas Jover. *Defensive Structure* (xGA − GA, -17.3) is the only negative bar: Arsenal's chance-prevention was elite (37.7 xGA), but they conceded above that expectation, with the variance partially absorbed by their attacking dominance. Net contribution: +55.0 goal-equivalents over a league-average baseline.

The honest read. Two of the four bars (underlying performance, set-piece impact) are repeatable; one (finishing variance) regresses; one (defensive structure) regresses the other way. The two regressions should roughly cancel, leaving Arsenal with the structural edge intact. The thing that doesn't roughly cancel is the set-piece bar: the rest of the league has seen this and will close that gap deliberately.

METHODOLOGY & SOURCES

How this retrospective was built

Data sources

Per-match Premier League data was compiled from publicly available aggregators (FBref, understat-style xG models) for all 380 matches of the 2025/26 season and the five preceding seasons. The dataset includes match-level shots, expected goals (xG), expected goals against (xGA), set-piece outcomes, defensive actions (tackles, interceptions, clearances), clean sheets, and possession share for all 20 Premier League clubs. Where multiple xG sources were available, models were ensembled to reduce model-specific bias.

Trajectory methodology

Cumulative points are computed from match results (3/1/0). Cumulative xG difference accumulates per-match ($xG - xGA$). The five comparison curves are the title-winning seasons of Manchester City (2020/21, 2021/22, 2022/23, 2023/24) and Liverpool (2024/25). All curves run over the standard 38-matchweek schedule; no fixture re-scheduling adjustments are applied.

Passing network methodology

Networks are constructed from per-90-minute averages of completed passes between starting outfielders during full-strength matches, split by season half (matchweeks 1–19, 20–38). Node positions are average touch coordinates on a 100×100 attacking pitch (left-to-right). Node size encodes touches per 90; edge width and opacity encode passes per 90 between players, with a shared global maximum across both phases to allow direct visual comparison. Only the eleven most-used outfield starters per phase are plotted.

Decomposition methodology

The four-way decomposition partitions Arsenal's goal-equivalent edge over a league-average baseline into orthogonal components. Underlying Performance = $xG - xGA$. Finishing Variance = $GF - xG$. Set-Piece Impact = set-piece GF − set-piece GA. Defensive Structure = $xGA - GA$. The four terms sum to $(GF - GA)$ net of double-counted set-piece xG, which is checked against goal difference for consistency.

Predictions methodology

Each of the three predictions is anchored in a published or replicable regression: (i) finishing variance and defensive variance regress towards underlying expectation at $\sim$50% per season in published xG-stability work; (ii) cross-league diffusion of tactical innovations (set-piece coaches, gegenpressing, the false 9) typically closes 30–60% of the inventor's edge within 18 months; (iii) injury-availability sensitivity is estimated from per-player WAR-equivalent contributions and squad-depth charts.

Reproducibility

All inputs are documented in the project data manifest (`manifest.json`) with absolute paths. The three figures are produced by a single script (`03_visualizations.py`) using `matplotlib`, `pandas`, and `mplsoccer`. The full pipeline (data acquisition, metrics, visualization) is reproducible end-to-end from the manifest.

The Broadsheet | K-Dense Web | contact@k-dense.ai | 22 May 2026.

All data compiled from publicly available match aggregators (FBref, understat-compatible). xG models are open-source ensembles; per-match coordinates derive from event-stream data. This editorial reflects analysis of the compiled dataset and does not represent any official Premier League or club position.