

Get serious boys

Football

REUTERS, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier has urged his men to show some fighting spirit as they bid to end the club's worst league run since 1953-54.

Looking back on the failure to win any of their last 10 games, Houllier was quoted as saying on the Liverpool website on Friday: "Some of the players didn't show the same championship-winning attitude that I am expecting from them."

"Now is maybe a time when they have to stand up and get counted and be more fighters."

"I think the players in general will believe they can turn things round. They are probably as hurt as we are and the fans are."

But he added: "We have to stick together and work harder. This is now the time to sharpen the commitment to what we want to achieve and check out who is able to come through and deliver for us."

One of Europe's most respected coaches, who guided Liverpool to the FA, League and UEFA cups in 2001, Houllier's own position has not been called into question.

The Frenchman's belief that his team can still turn their season around if they stick together has been publicly shared by Liverpool chief executive Rick Parry.

Parry watched Liverpool slump to a 1-0 defeat at Newcastle United on Wednesday, but told the club's website the following day: "When times are tough it's all about pulling together."

"Obviously it was a setback last night, but it's not the end of the world. When you hear our fans singing 'You'll Never Walk Alone' with just five minutes left you realise they're behind us. Our message to them is: We will turn it around."

Houllier said he welcomed Parry's comments.

"When you go through a difficult period you can count the people you rely on," the manager added.

"I must say that Rick, the Chairman and the Board of Directors have been very supportive. We celebrate together and we suffer together."

Houllier admitted Liverpool's worrying run was more than a crisis ahead of the FA Cup third round tie against premier league rivals Manchester City on Sunday.

"We have only taken four points out of 30 and when you go 10 games

heavy criticism and it has already happened to Terry, (Manchester United's) Alex Ferguson and even Arsene Wenger after Arsenal lost four games in a row."

Houllier says he does not mind if it takes one, two or three games for Liverpool to get that elusive victory.

"Don't get me wrong, I am not happy with the results and I have shared this with all the players, but equally 2003 will be better," he said.

"I know we have the quality and it is just a matter of time before we turn the corner."

Down to seventh in the Premier League table on 34 points, a full 12



GERARD HOULLIER

without a win it is more than a crisis," he said.

"I am quite prepared to accept that, but working in this job is all about stability."

"Look at Leeds manager Terry Venables - he got a vote of confidence after going through a difficult period."

"Throughout a season, every manager goes through a period of

adrift of leaders Arsenal, Liverpool will at least have England midfielder Danny Murphy back from suspension. But England strikers Michael Owen (hamstring) and Emile Heskey (ankle) are unlikely to return from injury.

The side's next chance to get back to winning ways in the premier league comes on January 11 at home to Aston Villa.

Dugarry debut delayed

AFP, London

French World Cup winner Christophe Dugarry will have to wait for his first taste of English football after a delay in his international clearance denied him the chance of a Birmingham debut against Fulham in the FA Cup on Sunday.

Birmingham manager Steve Bruce had hoped Dugarry would receive clearance from the French Football Federation by Friday's noon deadline but it was not forthcoming.

Senegal's Ferdinand Coly will be in the squad for the trip to London for the third round tie.

Dugarry and Coly have been signed on loan from Bordeaux and Lens respectively until the end of the season.

Michael Johnson is ruled out of Sunday's match with a hamstring injury while Senegalese midfielder Aliou Cisse and striker Geoff Horsfield are suspended. Centre-back Steve Vickers has a 50-50 chance of returning from an ankle injury.

Kanoute goes to Canada for help

AFP, London

West Ham's French striker Freddie Kanoute is to fly to Canada in a bid to resolve the long-running groin problem that has restricted him to seven Premiership appearances this season.

Kanoute will miss the Hammers FA Cup clash with Nottingham Forest on Saturday to consult Vancouver-based consultant Alex McCatney, who has worked with other players at the club.

"He is a physiotherapist that specialises in rehab and he has a worldwide reputation," West Ham manager Glenn Roeder said.

"We are taking the view that this is the final push to getting Fredi 100 percent so that when he returns he stays fit and stays in the team."

"We need his ability, we need his physical presence - and we are going to have to wait longer, as painful as it is."

With Kanoute's striking partner Paulo di Canio also out injured, Roeder is hoping to sign three players during the January transfer window to boost the club's fight against relegation.

Tottenham's former England forward Les Ferdinand is one of the names touted but Roeder admitted finalising the deals was proving difficult.

"We are working as hard as we can but until you get anyone signed up you just have to show more patience than you intended because I wanted players in on January 1st," Roeder admitted.

"Things take longer than you want them to - but we are still very positive we will get the couple of players that we are working on in the next seven to 10 days."

Kanoute first injured himself in the win over Chelsea at the end of September and has not completed a match for the Hammers since.

Club captain Steve Lomas is doubtful for the match against Nottingham Forest because of an ankle problem.

It's Robert's fault

AFP, Newcastle

Newcastle's fiery French winger Laurent Robert insisted Friday while he had lost his temper with a local journalist following Sunday's 2-1 win over Spurs he had not assaulted him as alleged by the newspaper.

The 27-year-old former French international, who scored the goal in Wednesday's 1-0 win over Liverpool, said he could not understand why the journalist in question, Alan Oliver, had turned against him this season after supporting him throughout the last campaign.

"In my first season with Newcastle, I was for this journalist a very important member of the team," Robert said on his website.

"This year, I don't know why I became a target for him."

"After our defeat in Bolton (4-3) he went too far in his remarks. He said I didn't know what it meant to wear Newcastle's black and white colours."

"I accept criticism on my performances, but when I'm told things like that, I lose my temper. I went to him and told him."

lance of publicity he is beginning to receive and has indicated he feels a senior call-up might be too much too soon.

Beckham refused to enter that particularly debate. However the Manchester United midfielder is convinced Rooney will eventually make the breakthrough and has praised Moyes' handling of his ascent to stardom.

Late Ronaldinho

Football

AFP, Paris

Brazilian World Cup winner Ronaldinho returned to training on Friday almost a week late amid rumours that he could be on his way in the summer.

Ronaldinho's excuse was that he wanted to have dental treatment in his homeland. But PSG were not impressed with his argument.

"Ronaldinho benefits, as do the other players, from regular and quality dental treatment," a club statement read Friday afternoon.

"At issue is an orthodontic problem known about on his arrival at the club and which constitutes nothing urgent."

Although Ronaldinho has been one of the club's better players in a poor season to date there was no evidence that his teammates wished to speak up for their errant colleague.

"There's a colleague who was supposed to return on December 28 and only turns up on January 2. So it's normal to ask for an explanation," one opened on condition of anonymity.

PSG bought the 22-year-old Brazilian for 6.5 million euros from Gremio Porto Alegre, who had initially asked for 28 million, two seasons ago in a move which FIFA had to arbitrate.

Although his time at the club has not brought PSG any silverware Ronaldinho has still grown in stature, becoming a regular with Brazil and playing a starring role in their World Cup success in Japan last summer.

He knocked England out in the quarterfinals with a long-range freekick which caught out veteran keeper David Seaman, who strayed from his line and watched helplessly as the ball sailed over his head.

But returning to Paris looks to have blunted his edge.

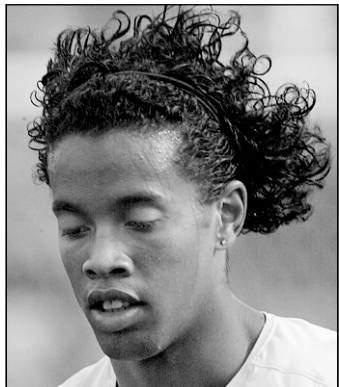
And now Ronaldinho could be heading for pastures new if one associate is to be believed.

"What Ronaldinho is perhaps feeling is that he is not embedded in a structure which favours his game," said the source close to the Brazilian squad who requested anonymity.

"Come June 5 (when the French season ends) he will be on his way."

According to the source, Brazilians should have a licence to return when they feel like it - within

reason - as Christmas and New Year celebrations lie at the heart of their culture.



RONALDINHO

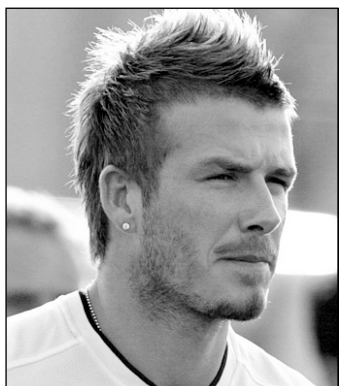
"In Brazil we are very attached to the family, fiestas, Christmas, New Year and carnivals. People should allow Brazilian players to return a little late. That would win their hearts

Raving about Rooney

Football

AFP, London

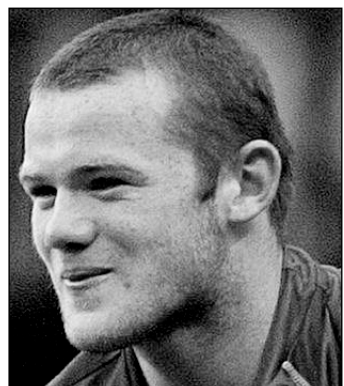
England skipper David Beckham has predicted Everton striker Wayne Rooney could become one of the nation's greatest players, Manchester United television reported on Friday night.



DAVID BECKHAM

The scintillating skill shown by Rooney for the Toffees might even bring him inclusion in Sven-Goran Eriksson's squad to face Australia next month at Upton Park.

Toffees boss David Moyes has been desperately trying to shield the young Merseysider from the ava-



WAYNE ROONEY

"Wayne has done remarkably well since coming into the Everton side as a 16-year-old," said Beckham.

"It is up to Sven and his back-room staff when they bring him into the squad but if he carries on the way he has, Wayne is going to be one of our greatest players."

Keegan supports Liverpool

Football

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City boss Kevin Keegan has backed Gerard Houllier to stem the current crisis at Liverpool - but he also believes his side can add to their woes by knocking them out of the FA Cup on Sunday.

Liverpool go into the third round tie on the back of a 10-match winless run in the Premiership and with their league title ambitions effectively dead and buried.

But Keegan was quick to leap to Houllier's defence.

"The doom-mongers can say what they want and the critics can jump on the bandwagon because they have a big story but Liverpool have a great manager, a great squad of players and are still a great club," he said.

"Every top side has a bad run at some stage. Arsenal have had one this season and so have Manchester United."

"Liverpool are a side packed with talent. It's only a season ago that they won three trophies."

"They will finish in the top three or four this season and Gerard will believe they are only one game from turning the situation around - we just have to make sure it doesn't happen on Sunday."

Keegan will be looking for a special

performance from Nicolas Anelka, who has a point to prove after being offloaded by Liverpool at the end of a loan spell at Anfield last season.

The French striker has emerged as City's on-the-field leader this season and his 10 goals have put the Manchester club on the verge of a challenge for a place in Europe.

Midfielder Djamel Belmadi, signed this week on loan from Marseille, has not been registered in time to play in Sunday's match.

But Keegan is confident the Algeria international can have an impact once he finally hooks up with Anelka again.

"He can play in the same position as Eyal Berkovic or Ali Benarbia but he has also proved in the past he

can play up front with Nicolas Anelka," said Keegan.

"They played together at PSG when Nicolas was very young and Djamel created a lot of goals for him, so hopefully he will do the same again."

Keegan has already suffered this season at the hands of Houllier's men - a Michael Owen hat-trick gave Liverpool a 3-0 win on their Premiership visit to Maine Road.

But he insists things will be different this time around.

"We were far better than the scoreline suggested that day," he said. "We gave them a test and I would like to think we can give them a harder one on Sunday."



FEMALE RONALDO! Milene Domingues, wife of Real Madrid's Ronaldo, juggles the ball during the half-time show of United Arab Emirates player Adnan Talyani's testimonial match between Juventus and an All Stars team in Abu Dhabi on January 3.

Bowyer deal turns sour

Football

AFP, London

Birmingham's hopes of signing Leeds contract rebel Lee Bowyer look to have fallen through after the player rejected the Premiership club's package on Friday.



LEE BOWYER

Blues manager Steve Bruce was seeking to persuade Bowyer to join the club on a loan deal until the end of the season under which he would get a huge bonus for helping Birmingham stay in the Premiership.

The combative midfielder, also linked with moves to Tottenham Hotspur and Newcastle United, however rejected their proposals.

A Birmingham spokesman told PA Sport: "Following negotiations with representatives of Lee Bowyer and Leeds United, it now seems highly unlikely that Lee Bowyer will be joining Birmingham City."

"The club are naturally disappointed but we will continue to strive to improve the squad with this calibre of player."

"The club and the manager Steve Bruce have already signalled their intentions by signing Ferdinand Coly and Christophe Dugarry - two World Cup players."

His short-term capture would have followed the trend that Blues have so far adopted since the transfer window re-opened.

Bowyer, who has made one appearance for England, almost joined Liverpool last summer but his wage demands are believed to have triggered the collapse of the deal.

While Bowyer, who turned 26 on Friday, is arguably one of the most effective midfielders in the Premiership on his day, his career has been dogged by controversy.

Fowler too greedy

Football

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City manager Kevin Keegan's hopes of securing his second signing in two days looked in doubt Friday as England international striker Robbie Fowler refused to lower his wage demands.

According to the Manchester Evening News both the 27-year-old's cash-strapped club Leeds and City have agreed a 7million pound (10.5million dollars) transfer fee but he is refusing to take less than the 50,000 pounds a week he receives at the moment. However his demands are way above the top wage paid at City where French star Nicolas Anelka is paid 35,000 pounds a week and Keegan is apparently concerned other players would want to be paid a similar amount to Fowler were he to cave in to his demands.

Anelka has certainly proved a better buy at 13million pounds (20million dollars) than Fowler, who cost 11million from Liverpool last season, with the Frenchman scoring 10 times this season while Fowler has been beset by a hip injury and he has scored just twice this term.

Despite needing to offload several players, were Fowler to leave, Leeds would be left up front as Robbie Keane has already been sold to Spurs and Michael Bridges is out for the season leaving just Australian Mark Viduka, England international Alan Smith and teenager James Milner as their out and out strikers.



Adnan Talyani (L) of the All Stars team fights for the ball with Juventus' Pavel Nedved (C) and Gianluca Pessotto (R). Juventus won 4-2.