

Ranieri ups the ante

Football

REUTERS, London

Claudio Ranieri is keeping his cards close to his chest as he plots Chelsea's strategy for Sunday's Premier League showdown at home to Liverpool that will decide England's last Champions League slot for next season.

The teams are locked together on 64 points but Chelsea, with a superior goal difference, need only a draw to secure the coveted fourth place that offers a qualifying place in Europe's elite competition.

Asked if his team would try to hold out for a point or go all out for the win, the Italian sat back and smiled.

"You want to know my ideas? You want my team? I know them but I can't tell you," he told reporters after his players had trained at Stamford Bridge on Friday.

"But I can say that I know Liverpool very well and they don't like to attack. They like to wait and to get a counter-attack.

"On Sunday they must play football and attack us. We are ready for them."

The match is huge for both teams, with Chelsea chairman Ken Bates saying on Friday that Champions League qualification would be worth up to 15 million pounds (24.06 million dollars) to the London club.

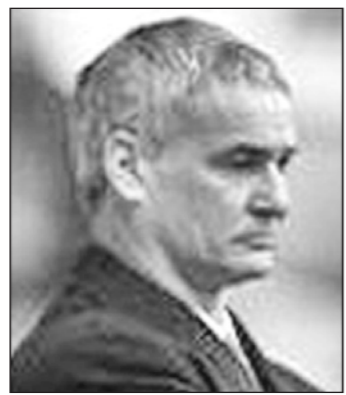
Ranieri has made no secret of the fact that a top-four finish has

been his main priority all season, but he insisted that the financial aspects were more of a concern for the Merseysiders.

"Of course, it is important for everyone at the club but when I go out on to the pitch I don't think of the financial things and nor do the players," said the Italian.

"I want to win but not because of money."

"Many clubs have spent more



CLAUDIO RANIERI

money than Chelsea, including Liverpool. We are like a David and Goliath situation now and the problem is Liverpool's.

"They have a lot of money, they've spent a lot of money, bought players, the pressure is all on them."

"We want to be in the Champions League -- Liverpool

to have to be in it.

"But for me it would be a fantastic challenge - I'm tired of watching it on television."

Having missed out after a late slump a year ago, Chelsea are in danger of doing the same again after a woeful 2-1 defeat at Aston Villa, a 1-1 home draw with Fulham and last week's 1-0 defeat at West Ham United have allowed Liverpool to close in.

Ranieri, who has all of his squad bar the injured John Terry to choose from, said the Fulham draw was the worst result of the three.

"Those defeats can happen, but to be 1-0 up and have chances to get more, then draw... not at home," he said.

Despite the blip Ranieri said he was not annoyed that a top-four slot could already have been in the bag.

"I'm not frustrated -- I think it's fantastic that it comes to this," he said. "It's black or white, all on the match."

"I'm a football manager because I like to feel this sort of atmosphere. It's pressure but a pressure I put myself under and I like it."

"My target each year is to improve. Last season we were sixth and this season the worst we can be is fifth -- so we have improved -- but we want fourth."

"Fifth would make it a good season but it could be a great season. I prefer a great season."



A file photo shows Manchester United's French defender Laurent Blanc (C) is being congratulated by teammates Paul Scholes (L) and Ryan Giggs after he scored against Boavista during the Champions League. Blanc will be playing the final match of his career against Everton today.

Becks not for Real

Football

AFP, Madrid

Manchester United and England star David Beckham has not and is not courting Real Madrid, the Spanish giants' general director Jorge Valdano told Marca sports daily on Friday.

Asked if Beckham had made any kind of overtures to spark the frenzy of speculation in recent weeks Valdano, keen for the Spaniards to distance themselves from all talk of a potential summer transfer, said simply: "No."

Pressed on the issue he added: "The topic sprang up when we met in Manchester (for the Champions League quarterfinal return). It was strange. The whole world was talking about Beckham - save for the clubs, who were eating together."

"And the only word which didn't come up was Beckham," Valdano insisted.

He added that the statement Real put out ten days ago strenuously denying interest in the England midfielder "had the virtue of sapping the intensity of

the debate - and we won't be the ones who rekindle it."

Responding to claims that Real have often denied chasing star names only then to splash out on Luis Figo, Zinedine Zidane and then Ronaldo in the past three years Valdano said that "in various such cases it was the players who began by approaching our club."

A bigger worry for Real currently is the fact that star striker Raul's current contract runs out in two years time and Valdano said efforts would have to be made to ensure the Spain international stays at the Bernabeu.

"If the player is important then all the money in the world won't lure him from Real Madrid," said Valdano, who was unequivocal that the club hopes "that Raul stays with Madrid for his whole life and feels on a par with (Alfredo) Di Stefano regarding his place in the club's history."

Argentine Di Stefano, nicknamed the Blond Arrow, earned his place in the Real hall of fame by starring in the side which lifted five straight European Cups between 1956 and 1960.

Eriksson gets Rooney

Football

AFP, London

Wayne Rooney will travel with England to South Africa this month after Everton boss David Moyes backed down on his demand for the 17-year-old to be left at home.

Moyes had pleaded with England boss Sven Eriksson for Rooney to be left out of the squad to allow him to rest at the end of his first season as a professional.

But Eriksson made it clear he wanted the young striker to be involved and Moyes has reluctantly gone along with his wishes.

"He's had a long season. We don't want him flogged to death," the Everton manager told The Sun newspaper.

Moyes' move means that, barring injury in Everton's final game of the season against Manchester United on Sunday, Rooney will be included in the England squad due to be announced the following day.

While admitting he can do nothing to stop Rooney from going to South Africa, Moyes made it

clear he was not happy about it.



WAYNE ROONEY

"If the boy comes back in tears we are the ones who will have to pick him up," he said.

"But, if he is selected, there is nothing I can do about it and that is the bottom line."

"It has been a long season for such a young player and we don't want him flogged to death."

"Wayne will be a stronger player

next season after he has had a summer break."

Rooney, however, looks certain to have his summer severely curtailed by international duty.

The trip to South Africa will be England's first outing since the 2-0 win over Turkey in a Euro 2004 qualifier on April 2, when the Everton youngster was inspirational on his full England debut.

Twelve days after the Durban clash, England take on Serbia and Montenegro at Leicester City's Walkers Stadium in their final friendly before the qualifier with Slovakia in Middlesbrough on June 11.

That will mean Rooney has barely a month off before Everton resume pre-season training.

Eriksson has already announced that Arsenal and Southampton players involved in the May 17 FA Cup final will be excused the trip to South Africa.

The decision means South African fans will not get a chance to see Arsenal's England regulars - goalkeeper David Seaman, centre-back Sol Campbell and left-back Ashley Cole, as well as Southampton's James Beattie and Wayne Bridge.

O'Neill United's man

Football

AFP, London

Martin Edwards, whose 23-year reign as Manchester United chairman ends this weekend, has tipped Celtic coach Martin O'Neill as a likely successor to Alex Ferguson.

"One person you would have to put in the frame is Martin O'Neill," Edwards told Saturday's edition of The Times.

"He won two League Cups with Leicester City and you see what happened there after he left."

"Then he went on to Celtic and all the success he has had there."

"He broke Rangers dominance and has now reached a UEFA Cup final, so he is doing it in Europe."

Edwards said the one nagging doubt was whether the high achieving Northern Irishman could cope with the star studded cast list at the Theatre of Dreams.

"The only question now is whether he can handle the really big players at United, because there is a big difference."

Edwards stressed that while O'Neill might be in pole position now things can change very quickly.

"A couple of years ago Ottmar Hitzfeld (Bayern Munich's manager) would have been on everybody's list, but I am not so sure now."

Edwards disclosed how a number of the world's top players had rejected United's attempts to lure them to Old Trafford.

"I thought we had a deal with Gazza (Paul Gascoigne) but at the

last minute he chose Spurs," he recalled.

"With (Alan) Shearer, particularly the second time we went for him, we pushed the boat out for him."

"With Patrick Kluyvert, he also turned it down. I had agreed the price with AC Milan but he didn't want to come. I think he said he would only go to Arsenal."

Edwards feels his part in the United success story will eventually be recognised by fans many of

whom he recognises will not be sad to see him heading for the exit.

"One day someone will look back at the history of Manchester United and say 'when did all this start?'"

"And it will be this period just gone (the past 20 years) they will look back at."

"Eight championships, the European Cup, six FA Cups."

"It has been phenomenal. The credit will come."



MARTIN O'NEILL

No time to party

Football

REUTERS, Milan

Juventus coach Marcello Lippi says his team will have no time to celebrate if they secure their 27th Italian league title on Saturday.

Victory over Perugia would earn Juve their second successive Serie A title but Lippi said his players would be back on the training ground on Sunday morning to prepare for Wednesday's Champions League semi-final, second leg against Real Madrid.

Juve trail 2-1 from the first leg in

Spain.

"If everything goes well on Saturday then it will be right to express our joy but it will finish right there," Lippi said.

"We can have a little glass and then that's it - we have to start thinking about Real straight away" he added.

"We have lost two European finals in the past due to losing concentration after winning a title," he said.

Juve lost in the final to Borussia Dortmund in 1997 and Real Madrid in 1998 just days after 'scudetto' triumphs.

"We are not going to make the

same mistake this year," added the silver-haired coach. "We know we have five days in front of us which could be exceptional."

"We hope that we will be able to finally secure the championship on Saturday and then everyone can concentrate everything on the challenge in the Champions League," he added.

With an eight-point advantage over Inter Milan and just three games to go in Serie A, Lippi is likely to leave several key players on the bench against Perugia.

"I have a squad that is made up of players who know how to dig deep at times like this," said Lippi.

Sheringham's swangsong

Football

REUTERS, London

Former England international striker Teddy Sheringham will say his final farewells to the Tottenham Hotspur faithful as he signs off against Blackburn Rovers at White Hart Lane on Sunday.

Spurs fan Sheringham will finish his second spell at the club after being told his services are no longer required at the end of his two-year contract since they have failed to qualify for European competition next season.

"It wasn't an easy one (decision to let Sheringham go) and it was taken at a time when we knew probably that we weren't going to be in Europe," said Tottenham manager Glenn Hoddle, who has worked with the striker at club and international level.

"He did a great job when he went to (Manchester) United and he's done a good job for us here without a doubt and we wish him well wherever his future lies."

Sheringham, who turned 37 in April, went to Manchester United in 1997 for 3.5 million pounds (5.62 million dollars) after his first spell at Spurs. He had joined Tottenham in 1992 for 2.1 million pounds from Nottingham Forest and made his England debut against Poland the following year.

But the north London club failed to match Sheringham's ambition and as the seasons passed without a trophy he decided to join Manchester United in a bid to pick up some silverware before he entered the twilight years

of his career.

He had his frustrations at Old Trafford as he was mostly used as a substitute to transform matches in which United were struggling. He played that bit part with great success, however, especially in their Treble season of 1998/99.

His goals after coming off the bench in the FA Cup final against Newcastle United and the Champions League final versus Bayern Munich were the key to the Manchester club's historic season and made him a firm favourite with

two-year deal to stay at Old Trafford he opted to return to his first love on just such a contract vowing to help Spurs become a better team.

In truth, the material was not there for Sheringham to work with and while Tottenham reached the 2002 League Cup final their 2-1 defeat to Sunday's opponents Blackburn ended their hopes of a UEFA Cup place once again.

Sheringham may one day return to White Hart Lane in a coaching capacity, but for now he still sees his immediate future on the pitch. Portugal's Sporting Lisbon are showing interest and the Spurs captain is considering offers.

"Teddy's obviously looking to continue his (playing) career, and that's rightly so," said Hoddle. "He has always made it clear he wanted to stay here as a player and if that wasn't going to be that he's got other options."

"If he goes into management or coaching that's something he'll need to go into further down the line."

But, whatever the future holds for Sheringham, on Sunday he will take the richly deserved plaudits from the Tottenham fans he has served so well over the seasons in what will be his 275th appearance for the club.

"He's been a very influential number 10. Across the years he's done a fantastic job for the club and it will be lovely to see him go out on a high note on Sunday," said Hoddle of a player who has scored 130 goals for Tottenham.

Every Spurs fan will agree with that sentiment.



TEDDY SHERINGHAM

the supporters.

Sheringham added more Premier League crowns to his medal collection over the next two seasons and picked up the 2001 PFA and Football Writers' Association player-of-the-year awards.

But when he was not offered a

Kewell factor

Football

AFP, Leeds

Peter Reid's first task after being confirmed as Leeds new manager on a permanent basis will be to persuade Harry Kewell to stay at the club.

Immediately after the announcement of his appointment, Reid said he intended to put Kewell on the spot over a new five-year contract he has been stalling on signing since the end of last year.

"I would be delighted if Harry Kewell put pen to paper with this club because he's a quality player," Reid said.

"It's a question that we'll ask him - and hopefully we'll get a positive answer."

Leeds chairman Professor John McKenzie said neither the club nor Kewell himself had been willing to commit to a new deal while there was still a possibility of the club being relegated.

But McKenzie voiced confidence that, with Leeds now safe after their win at Arsenal on Sunday, the issue would soon be resolved.

"I met Harry's agent (Bernie Mandic) and it was a greatly timed meeting, half an hour after West Ham won their game and before we played Arsenal," McKenzie said.

"It wasn't a sensible time for anyone to shake hands on a contract - but it was a very cordial discussion."

"We'll be getting together as soon as Harry and his agent are ready - and I think Harry wants it settled pretty soon."

Reid has won the backing of Leeds' players since taking over from Terry Venables but Kewell is not among those who have spoken out publicly in his favour.

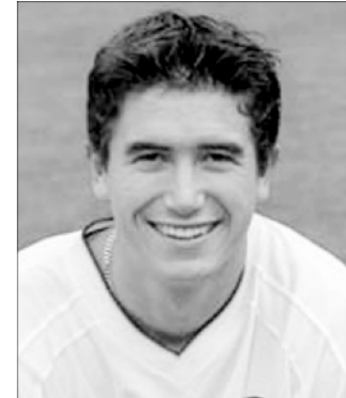
The 25-year-old is undoubtedly the prize asset in Leeds squad and has been linked with Liverpool, Manchester United and Inter Milan.

Although they are reluctant to sell, Leeds' financial predicament means they would not run the risk of the player staying until his contract expires next summer, when he could walk away for nothing.

Selling Kewell would also ensure that Reid has the money he needs to bring in the kind of players he needs to meet his objective of making Leeds much harder to beat than they have been this season.

The former Sunderland manager admitted that he did expect to be wheeling and dealing in the transfer market this summer.

Reid said: "We've (Reid and McKenzie) had a chat about things. I am not telling people what I have



HARRY KEWELL

and haven't got to spend but I expect there will be dealings in the summer with players coming in and players going out."

FIFA punishes Carlos

REUTERS, Zurich

Brazil and Real Madrid defender Roberto Carlos has been banned for three international matches for pushing a referee, world soccer's governing body FIFA said on Friday.

Carlos pushed Israeli referee Alon Yefet in a 2-1 defeat to Portugal on March 29 after being sent off for protesting the award of a free-kick.

FIFA's disciplinary committee, headed by Swiss chairman Marcel Mathier, decided on Friday to impose the three-match international ban on the player.

Carlos, who has three days to appeal the verdict, will now miss the next two Brazil games after sitting out a friendly with Mexico on April 30 while provisionally suspended.

FIFA announced on April 7 that he would be provisionally suspended from all international fixtures for his actions, but he appealed against the decision.

That appeal was rejected eight days after the punishment was enforced after FIFA's appeals committee viewed video evidence in addition to the referee's report.

But Carlos was quoted in Spanish daily Marca as saying: "I never went to push him or to head-butt him. I have never attacked anyone in any game I've played, whether it be a rival player or a referee."