

Keane for big games only

AFP, Manchester
Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson admits he will only use captain Roy Keane for the big games this season.

The former Republic of Ireland star played a full part in Sunday's 0-0 draw with Arsenal but Ferguson admits Keane's suspect ankle might not stand up to a full season of English Premiership and Cham-pions League football.

"We'll gauge the right things to do with Roy. He won't play every game this season, there's no doubt about that," Ferguson said.

"I'll be leaving him out of a lot of games because the important thing is to have him when it really matters. If I can't do that, then there's something wrong with my squad.

"It isn't a matter of him taking it, he'll just have to accept it. There isn't going to be a halfway house where I'm going to have to go to Roy and get him to pass the verdict whether he's playing, I'm going to make the decision because it's going to be for his benefit.

"If I can get him playing in the important games in May, then we'll know we're right."

Romario foresees career's end

INTERNET REPORT

Fluminense striker Romario has admitted it is nearly time to bring the curtain down on his glittering career.

"The moment of the retirement is very close," he told 'O Globo'. It's time to leave room to someone else. I'm in a very bad moment, perhaps the worst of my career: too many injuries and some personal problems don't allow me to play with continuity. However I'm satisfied and proud of my career."

Happy 27th

INTERNET, Madrid

Real Madrid's Brazilian superstar Ronaldo celebrated his 27th birthday on Monday and vowed to give his fans a fabulous year.

As he no longer needs to prove that he is the one and only 'Phenomenon' in world football, Ronaldo is simply enjoying his time on the football field.

"I am living a very special moment. Thanks to my fabulous team-mates, I am doing what I like most, the way I most prefer: good performance, score,



win and, above all, have fun.

"If we keep on like this, I am pretty sure that this year our supporters will have great satisfactions from us," said Ronaldo in his birthday message on his website.

In his second year with the Spanish aristocrats, the three-time world player of the year has started the season in terrific fashion. His goal over the weekend against Malaga meant he has netted seven goals in eight competitive matches for Real and Brazil (three in the Primera División, two in the Champions League, one in the Super Cup and one in the 2006 World Cup qualifying match).



FATAL FOOTBALL! This photo taken on September 20 showing Sergio Ercolano lying unconscious after a heavy fall from the upper tier of the away supporters' enclosure shortly before kick-off of Saturday's second division evening match between southern rivals Avellino and Napoli at Avellino. Ercolano died in hospital on September 22.

Tragedy sparks govt action

Football

AFP, Rome

The Italian government has vowed to introduce tough new measures to combat football violence following the riot at a second division match which left one fan dead and scores of police injured.

They include stadium closures for teams whose fans misbehave, a ban on ticket sales for away fans on match days, an increased number of security cameras inside the stadiums and improved stewarding.

Interior minister Giuseppe Pisanu has even threatened to scrap matches which present a high security risk, like the one at Avellino on Saturday where 19-year-old Napoli fan Sergio Ercolano lost his life.

"Starting from now, we are working

briskly to eliminate any loopholes that make our stadiums unsafe and allow violent fans to misbehave," Pisanu said.

Pisanu wants clubs to take more responsibility for security at matches to alleviate some of the burden on the country's overstretched police force.

"At this point everyone must assume their responsibilities and I will take mine," he said.

"I know that economic problems exist for the clubs, but we have to face these problems every Sunday to guarantee the security of the public, who want to enjoy themselves at a football match."

Pisanu said he wanted Italy to follow the example of the English authorities of giving the courts more power to punish offenders, including banning orders for known hooligans.

Ercolano, 19, died in hospital on Monday from injuries he suffered after falling from the upper tier of the away

supporters' enclosure as trouble broke out before the start of the southern derby between Avellino and Napoli.

The teenager fell through a sheet of plexiglass before hitting the ground as scores of ticketless fans forced their way into the stadium.

The police's failure to get aid to the stricken supporter quickly provoked an angry response from around 100 Napoli fans, who ran on to the pitch and attacked officers at random with bars and belts.

Several officers and ambulancemen claimed they would have got to Ercolano sooner had they not been assaulted by visiting fans.

The match had to be abandoned before a ball was even kicked and is likely to result in a stadium closure for Napoli, whose fans have been in trouble before.

Up to 200 fans have been identified

by closed circuit television cameras although only one arrest has so far been made.

The ugly scenes at Avellino have sparked fears of further violence on Tuesday night when Napoli travel to Verona, a fixture which has a history of crowd violence.

Many matches in Italy were overshadowed by violent incidents last season with the worst scenes at Torino's home match against AC Milan.

Hundreds of home supporters went on the rampage inside the stadium, attacking police with masonry, sticks and flares and forcing the game to be abandoned.

Torino were hit with a five-match stadium ban and had to play their home matches at a neutral ground. Despite calls for tough action, very few Torino fans were charged despite being identified by television pictures.

Rivaldo breaks silence

Football

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian World Cup winner Rivaldo said on Monday he was being humiliated at Italian club AC Milan, where he was left on the substitutes' bench once again at the weekend.

Rivaldo said he knew why he was being repeatedly overlooked by coach Carlo Ancelotti and said he would reveal the truth at an appropriate moment.

"It's not because I'm out of form or out of shape, you can be certain about that," he said in an interview with the Sao Paulo-based newspaper Jornal da Tarde.

"I know the real reason why I'm not playing and everybody else will also know at the right moment. "Everyone here at Milan knows that my physical fitness is among the best in the squad. I always stand out in the tests. And that story about my not being well psychologically isn't true, either. "I'm going through a humiliation."

Rivaldo joined Milan from Barcelona at the start of last season but has struggled to make an impact and played little more than a bit part in his side's victorious Champions League campaign.

He said: "I know when I'm going to play because he [Ancelotti] says good morning. When he's not going to pick me, he doesn't talk to me for the whole week."

"I'm sad about the situation but I've got another two years of my contract to go and I intend to see it through."

"I've heard people say that if I leave, I'll go to Qatar. But you can take note: if I leave Milan, I'll continue in Europe for another three years or so."

Milan's vice-president Adriano Galliani said last week that Rivaldo would be allowed to leave if he asked for

a move, adding that there was no problem between the forward and the club.

Rivaldo was picked for Brazil's opening two World Cup qualifiers earlier this month, although his lack of match fitness appeared to hold him back.

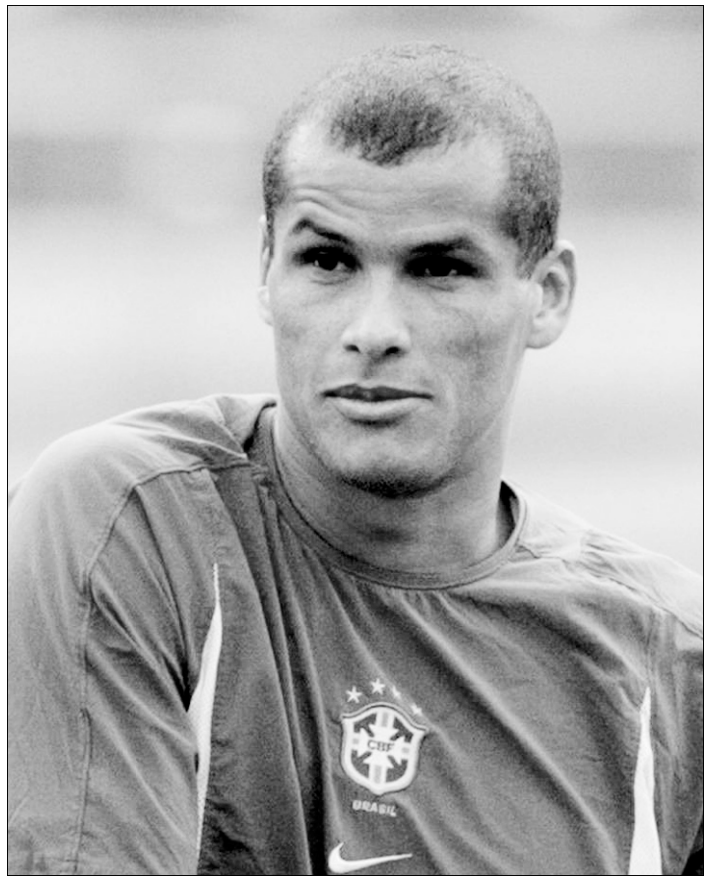
But he said he still intended to be in the team when the 2006 World Cup comes around.

"I'm proud to have played 14

matches at the World Cup with the number ten shirt and to have scored eight goals. The problem is that in Brazil people forget very quickly about what I've done," he said.

"I think it's ridiculous to carry out polls to see if I should carry on. [Midfielders] Kaka, Alex and Diego will probably go to the World Cup in 2006, in Germany."

"But I'm Rivaldo and I intend to go as well."



RIVALDO

Toppmoller linked with Spurs

AFP, London

Former Bayer Leverkusen coach Klaus Toppmoller was reported Tuesday to be Tottenham's first-choice to take over from sacked Glenn Hoddle as Spurs manager.

Toppmoller, 52, guided Bayer Leverkusen to the 2002 European Cup final but it all went wrong last season and he was sacked in February.

He had previously been linked with the Fulham job when they sacked their French coach Jean Tigana.

Tottenham have also been linked with ex-Barcelona coach Raddy Antic, who was a player at Luton Town when Tottenham director of football David Pleat was manager.

Pleat has been made caretaker manager at Spurs while they look for a permanent successor to Hoddle.

Charlton's Alan Curbishley is the bookies' second favourite after Antic, followed by Celtic's Martin O'Neill and Portsmouth's Harry Redknapp.

The 54-year-old Antic is currently without a club after being sacked by Barcelona this year despite taking over the side during their terrible campaign last season and managing to steady the ship, even leading the Catalans to a UEFA Cup place.

He had replaced Dutchman Louis van Gaal at Barcelona in January but he was a victim of the regime of new Barcelona president Joan Laporta who appointed former Dutch international star Frank Rijkaard.

Antic has also coached Atletico Madrid, Real Madrid, Oviedo, Partizan Belgrade and Real Zaragoza.

The former Yugoslav international midfielder led Atletico to a league and cup double in 1996.

Bend it like Iran!

Football

AFP, Tehran

Mystery is afoot after Iran scrapped billboards featuring English soccer star and golden boy David Beckham, interrupting his reign as the first foreign celebrity advertiser since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Has Iran's latest engine oil promoter and Real Madrid's newest recruit fallen extratime.

The posters "were taken down without warning," the company's Tehran office told AFP.

Television adverts showing a back view of Beckham, recognisable from his trade mark number seven and his ponytail, bending a well-oiled ball out of reach of a goalkeeper, have also been pulled.

Castrol, affiliated to British Petroleum (BP), says it has no idea why Beckham -- one of the most magnetic stars among the young in Iran -- has fallen from grace.

It has received no threats, reporting only that an effigy of the player has been "vandalised".

The company staged a television, billboard, press and leaflet campaign across the country, hoping to tap in on his glamour rather than the local appeal of footballer Ali Daei or weightlifter Hossein Rezazadeh.

As far as most people here can remember, Beckham was the first foreign celebrity used to sell a product in the near quarter of a century since the Islamic revolution.

Authorities in the Islamic republic are notoriously hostile to personality cults, particularly one so wealthy and Western as the English captain.

Tehran-London relations nosedived after the arrest in Britain last month of a former Iranian ambassador to Argentina, Hadi Soleimanzadeh.

But as for Islamic decency, Beckham's legs are hardly different from those of other players seen regularly on television in a country crazy about football.

Still, the company is determined to plough on: "Since we have obtained official authorisation from the relevant ministries, we will continue this campaign" said the Tehran office.

The only thing that is certain is that Beckham, who scored the 100th top flight goal of his career on Sunday, has been removed from three huge billboards at major traffic junctions in Tehran knocked up at the end of August.

Castrol GTX, the British oil company that used his charms to advertise engine oil, has confirmed its campaign is out of

Di Stefano's golden jubilee

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid will take on River Plate of Argentina here on Tuesday night for the Santiago Bernabeu trophy, a traditional friendly against a top rival to honour the memory of the club's late former president.

This year's match has added spice as it will mark 50 years to the day since Real's Argentine hero Alfredo Di Stefano notched his first goal for the club in a friendly on September 23, 1953, against French side Nancy.

The Buenos Aires-born star, now honorary president of Real and nicknamed the Blond Arrow, inscribed his name in sporting history as part of the Real side which won five European Cups on a roll from 1957.

Santiago Bernabeu, whose name the club stadium bears, was the president who brought Di Stefano

to the club from Colombian side Millionarios at a time when Real were light years from the household name they became with the striker in their line-up alongside the likes of Hungarian wizard Ferenc Puskas.

Di Stefano had earlier starred for River Plate between 1945 and 1948 and briefly coached the club in 1981.

When he joined Millionarios his registration remained in Argentina, so that when Barcelona came calling they sought buy him from River while Real made an offer to Millionarios.

Ultimately, Spanish dictator Franco decreed he should play two seasons for Real - the darlings of the regime - then transfer to Barcelona. Eventually, Real just kept him and Di Stefano never played for Barca.

Di Stefano would win eight Spanish league crowns, as well as the first Intercontinental Cup in 1960 with Real, alongside his five European Cups and was the first player to be twice voted European

Footballer of the Year, in 1957 and 1959.

The Santiago Bernabeu trophy was introduced in 1979 and ironically it was invited German guests Bayern Munich who won the first two editions - as well as last season's.

Now coach Carlos Queiroz's side, with the likes of David Beckham, Ronaldo and Zinedine Zidane in the side will look to recover the trophy for Real, who have been beaten in 10 of the 24 gala matches to date.

A doubtful starter is Spanish international striker Raul, who received a blow to the ribs in Sunday's 3-1 win at Malaga.

River Plate, coached by Chilean Manuel Pellegrini, are likely to be without top striker Marcelo Salas and will rely on the predatory instincts of Fernando Cavenaghi, who hit a hat-trick in last week's 4-1 win over Independiente.

Solskjaer's season under threat

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer might be out of action for the rest of the year after the English champions said Tuesday the Norway international would have a knee operation.

"Ole Gunnar Solskjaer is to undergo a knee operation on Tuesday. It is something we have tried to correct over the last few weeks but it is important Ole now has this operation so he can concentrate on the rest of the season," United said on the club website.

"Ole will be assessed after the operation to determine how long he will be out for."

Solskjaer, 30, was a 1.5 million pound signing in 1996 and has held onto his place in the side despite a number of big signings -- the first being the 12 million pound signing of Dwight Yorke in 1998.

Gunners' stupidity!

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal chairman Peter Hill-Wood has branded his players "stupid" after the Old Trafford bust-up that followed Sunday's draw at Manchester United.

The Football Association has launched an investigation and the London club could see several players banned. Officials said they would study the video replays of the incidents as well as look at the referee's report.

Several Arsenal players surrounded and jostled Ruud van Nistelrooy after he missed a penalty in injury time, with Martin Keown appearing to strike the Dutch forward on the back of the neck.

"There are no excuses," Hill-Wood told The Sun. "We were guilty of stupid behaviour."

Arsenal players were incensed when their captain Patrick Vieira was sent off after clashing with Van Nistelrooy and later taunted the

Dutchman following his penalty miss.

"The players concerned were rather silly when you would hope they would show more intelligence," said Hill-Wood.

"What makes matters worse is the fact it was senior players who were involved, experienced professionals who have played more than enough games to know not to react like that."

"All I can say in our defence is we are not a dirty side and nobody was hurt."

The red card was the eighth of Vieira's Arsenal career and the 52nd in manager Arsene Wenger's seven-year reign.

Champions United looked set to take all three points when Keown threw himself on Diego Forlan in the box in stoppage time.

But van Nistelrooy crashed his penalty against the bar and Arsenal escaped with a point that puts them back on the top of the league.

"I have said before that our disciplinary record is not good and it does concern me," said Hill-Wood.

"Things did improve slightly last

year but already this season we have had three red cards, one FA disciplinary charge and now the possibility of more.

"I did not see the incidents after Sunday's game because I left my seat immediately on the final whistle."

"But I have seen the replays and will talk to Arsene about what went on, as I always do."

While the Gunners should escape the same sort of points deduction with which they were hit in 1990 after a brawl in the same fixture, they could still receive a hefty six-figure fine if found guilty of failing to control their players.

However, the matter is not expected to end there, with the FA also poised to look at whether to individually charge up to five Arsenal players for their part in the scuffles which surrounded van Nistelrooy.

The Dutchman, who angered Arsenal with his reaction to Vieira's attempted retaliation as he earned a second yellow card, is not set to be investigated himself.

However, Keown, Ray Parlour

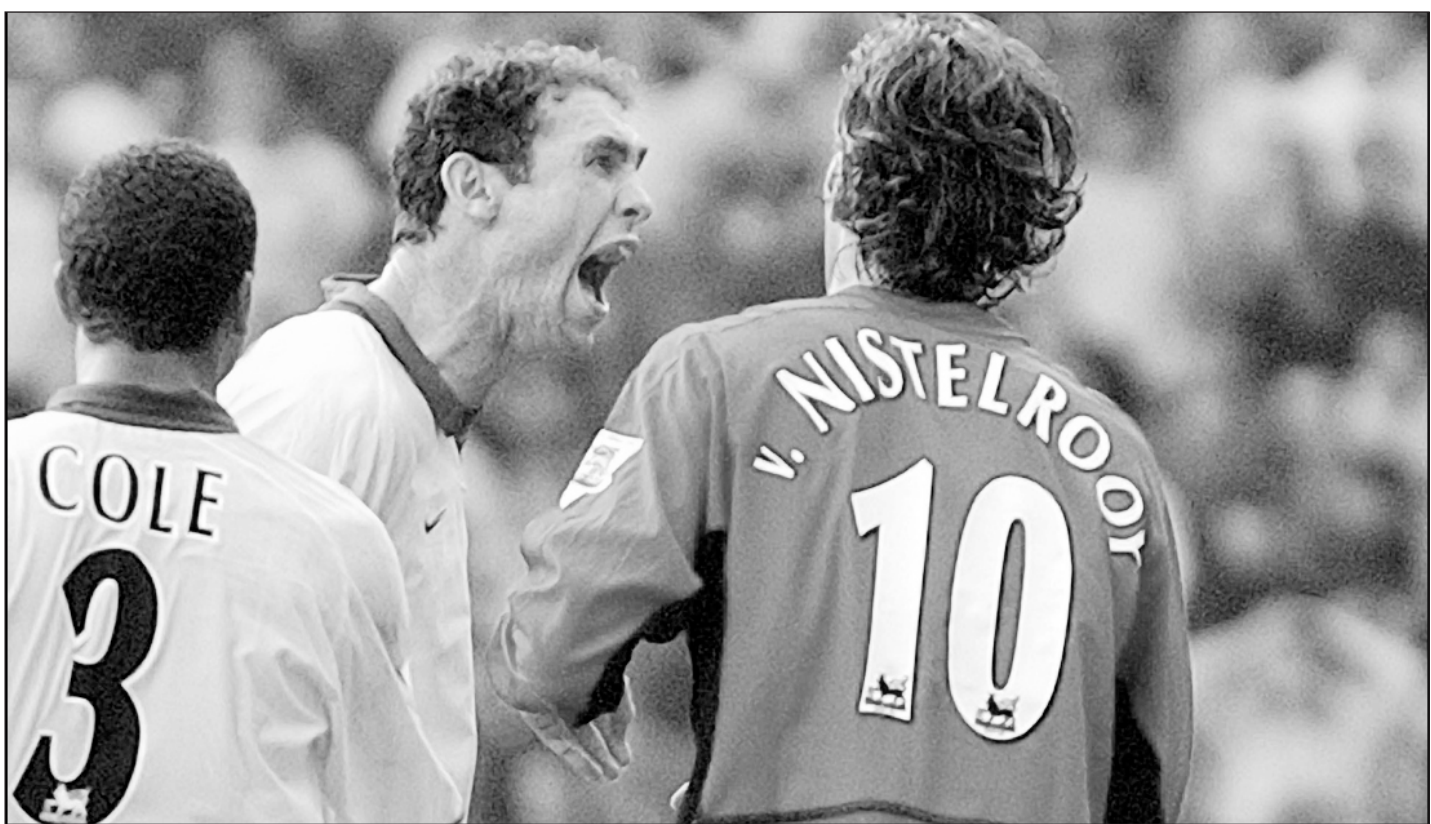
and Lauren, who all raced over to harrass van Nistelrooy and celebrate in his face, are all at risk of receiving FA charges that could lead to suspensions or fines.

The roles of Ashley Cole and Jens Lehmann are also understood to be under review by the FA, with some reports suggesting that Cole may have attempted to throw a punch.

In a worst-case scenario, that could leave Arsenal, who have already claimed there is an FA vendetta against them after Sol Campbell was charged following the Community Shield, with a disciplinary nightmare encompassing their entire defence.

Campbell is facing a possible ban of up to three games if he is found guilty of retaliation in Cardiff, while Vieira now misses next month's game at home to Chelsea because of his red card at Old Trafford.

However, if Keown, Cole and Lauren must also face disciplinary action, Arsenal could soon find themselves seriously undermanned in a defence that has already shown signs of weakness.



YOU LIKE MY SINGING? Arsenal's veteran defender Martin Keown taunts Manchester United's Ruud Van Nistelrooy after he missed a penalty given away by Keown in the final minutes of Sunday's Premiership clash at Old Trafford.

PHOTO:AFP