

A far-sighted bet!

THE GUARDIAN

The most famous bet in British football paid off yesterday when bookmakers wrote a cheque for almost 10,000 pounds to the family of Chris Kirkland, England's substitute goalkeeper against Greece.

The 98.10-pound stake in 1994 that Kirkland would play for his country was designed to encourage the boy, then 13, when he enrolled in Coventry City's centre of excellence. His father, Eddie, and mother, Marie, bet 10 pounds at 100-1 and seven other family members stumped up the rest.

The gamble was a family joke until 2003, when he was first named as one of the England squad. The jackpot seemed within reach, but was frustrated by injuries and Sven Goran Eriksson's decision to stick with tested goalkeepers until Wednesday night's game. Eddie Kirkland said: "It's been a long time but it has been

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Reggina docked 15 points

Football

INTERNET, undated

Reggina have avoided relegation to Serie B, but will start the new campaign with a 15-point penalty for their part in Calciopoli.

Italian Football Federation prosecutor Stefano Palazzi had asked the sporting tribunal to hand the club such a points penalty, but in the Second Division.

However, the Amaranto also fined around 70,000 pounds have survived the threat of following Juventus into the second tier of Italian football.

President Pasquale Foti will breathe a huge sigh of relief for his club, but he's been severely punished after he was indicted as part of

the investigation.

Foti has been suspended from footballing activity for two years and six months, as well as being fined 20,000 pounds.

As part of the second Calciopoli probe, which also centred on intercepted phone calls from the 2004-05 season, Serie B side Arezzo could have found themselves in Serie C.

But the minnows, who were facing the possibility of also starting the new campaign on minus three points, keep their divisional status but will start at minus nine.

Referees Dondarini and Pieri have been cleared of wrongdoing, but linesman Stefano Titomanlio and his designator Gennaro Mazzei were slapped with three year bans.

All of those found guilty do have the option of appealing against the sentences in an effort to reduce or wipe out their punishments.

United step up Hargreaves chase

REUTERS, Manchester

Manchester United hope they can persuade Bayern Munich to sell England midfielder Owen Hargreaves to them, manager Alex Ferguson said on Friday.

The German champions have said Hargreaves is not for sale but with the 25-year-old keen to move to Old Trafford, United are pursuing a possible deal.

"We have been trying to negotiate with Bayern Munich for quite a while and it's at a bit of a deadlock," Ferguson told a news conference.

"But there's no hiding the fact now that the boy has said he would like to join United and we would like to have him.

"How we find the mechanism to get the deal done is in (chief executive) David Gill's capable hands. He is doing his best. Hopefully we can get something done."

Kuyt flies in to Anfield

INTERNET, undated

Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez finally captured the signature of Dutch international Dirk Kuyt from Feyenoord on Friday, saying the striker will "score a lot of goals for us."

The Reds' capture of the 26-year-old ends a long hunt for Benitez, and he could now be in line for an immediate debut, against Sheffield United on Saturday as the new Premiership season kicks off.

"I am really happy," said the boss. "We were looking at Dirk for a long time and I'm pleased we have signed him because he will be a good player for us."

"He's a player with good game intelligence. He knows what to do with the ball and without the ball and he's also a very good worker."

"His movement is good, his finishing is fantastic and I know he will score a lot of goals for us because we now have more possibilities in the wide areas and also between the lines."

Kuyt, who appeared for the Netherlands in this summer's World Cup, becomes Liverpool's sixth close-season signing.

"It was important for us to strengthen this season and I'm really pleased with the backing we've had from the board," Benitez continued.

"We've signed players who haven't been really expensive but who are of good quality and who we know will do a good job for us."



Liverpool coach Rafael Benitez (L) and new signing, Dutch striker Dirk Kuyt, pose with a team scarf at the Melwood training ground in Liverpool on Friday.

Bremen's first big test

AFP, Berlin



Werder Bremen's title credentials are given a stiff early examination on Saturday when they host Bayer Leverkusen at the Weserstadion.

Bremen and Leverkusen both go into the match full of confidence having won their opening fixtures last weekend.

Last season's runners-up Bremen came from 2-1 down to beat Hannover 4-2 with Brazilian international midfielder Diego, a record six million euro signing from FC Porto, a revelation on his debut.

"He gets better with every minute," said Croatian international striker Ivan Klasnic.

"I hope he carries on that form in the next game."

Leverkusen, a disappointing fifth last season, will hope to put the shackles on Diego and continue their free-flowing attacking football. Despite losing Bulgarian inter-

national striker Dimitar Berbatov to Tottenham Hotspur in the summer the goals have not dried up for Bayer who beat promoted Alemannia Aachen 3-0 in their first league outing.

All the promoted clubs tasted defeats on their return to the top-flight and it does not get any easier with the trio all facing title contenders.

Aachen face Schalke 04 on Saturday while Energie Cottbus host SV Hamburg on the same day.

Hamburg, third in the last campaign, are looking for a morale-boosting win ahead of their crucial Champions League qualifier in Osasuna next Wednesday.

The north German side drew 1-1 with Arminia Bielefeld in their season opener that left manager Thomas Doll seething.

"I can't remember us playing so poorly in all the time I have been coach here," fumed Doll. "If we continue playing like that we will not win anything."

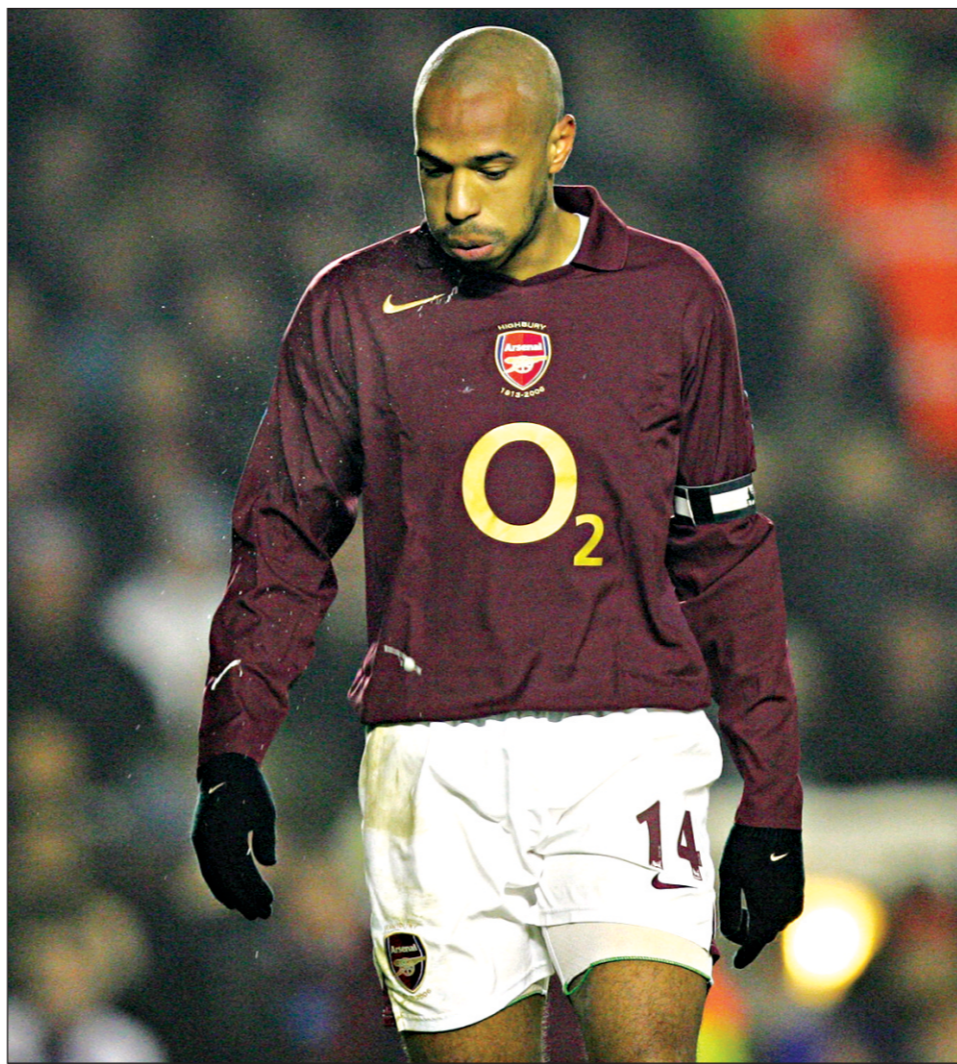
The third newcomer VfL Bochum, entertain reigning champions Bayern Munich on Sunday.

Bayern, 2-0 victors over Borussia Dortmund in the season curtain raiser, have seen their preparations disrupted by key players being away on international duty.

It has been a miserable week for the champions with French defender Valerien Ismael ruled out for six months through injury.

England international midfielder Owen Hargreaves then rocked the Munich boat by saying he wanted to leave the club claiming Manchester United had made a substantial bid.

However, Bayern are used to such dramas early in the season and Bochum could face a backlash on the pitch.



From (L-R) Arsenal's hopes for the season will rest on the weary shoulders of Thierry Henry while Liverpool, bolstered by numerous signings, will still look to talismanic captain Steven Gerrard to provide the spark.



PHOTOS: AFP FILE

Foreign flavour set to dominate

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM



Almost exactly ten years to the day, that a swing of one David Beckham's right boot from beyond the halfway line in Selhurst Park sent the ball sailing towards Wimbledon goalkeeper Neil Sullivan's net, the English Premier League embarks on its 15th season by ushering in a new era through the influx of a breed of foreign footballers who look set to change the way the game is played in the land of its creators.

England, and the English Premier League in general is much changed since that sunny day when a floppy haired Beckham looked up, took aim and sunk the ball beyond the despairing reach of an unbelieving Neil Sullivan.

For one, Beckham himself is long a forgotten memory, his adherence to England and the Premier League now stuff of folklore. Wimbledon too, now languish in the lower echelons of the English game with but a bleak future to look forward to.

But it is hardly doom or gloom in the Premier League. As far as the top tier in the English game could be concerned, it may never have been better.

And it is primarily because England is now a hugely lucrative destination for players around the world. Chelsea may have a lot to do with it but lets not be too pessimistic. The last few years have seen more foreigners grace the English game than in the preceding decade. The likes of Ruud van Nistelrooy, Juan Sebastian Veron, Robert Pires and Hernan Crespo have all plied their trade in the land north of the Mediterranean with varying degrees of success. All three have since moved on but there seems to be no lack of talent flowing in. And the simple reason for this is that, in spite of regular complaints of the dreary English weather, the Premier League is as inviting as it has ever been. The football is fast paced, the tackles full-blooded and the myth of 'typical' English ping-pong tactics well and truly lived down.

Credit for this should go to the clubs for experimenting and looking beyond borders.

Take the case of Liverpool for example. They are as English as a club gets but their gamble in appointing Spanish coach Rafael Benitez paid off big time. He may be known as 'pildora para dormir' (the sleeping pill) in Spain but the *Rafalution* has already delivered the European Cup. And this could well be the season for the Merseysiders. Liverpool's style is distinctly continental and has Benitez's mark stamped right over it. The swift interplay and quick counter-attacking football that proved so successful in Europe may not have won over the Premiership but Benitez is close to finding a winning formula. Lack of speedy players have proved their undoing but that

has been remedied with the arrival of Mark Gonzalez (aply named Speedy) and Craig Bellamy, the Welshman looking to step into the considerable shoes of Michael



JERMAINE DEFOE

Owen. The new arrivals led admirably by the darling of the Kop, Steven Gerrard and his dynamic play and aided by a rock solid defence marshalled by Jamie Carragher may become eventual challengers.

However, we have drifted from the topic in question. The influx of foreigners (or which Mark Gonzalez is one) only just begins there.

There have been two more significant arrivals this summer and both could prove pivotal in the grand scheme of things.

It is unsurprisingly due to the glitz of London and Roman

midfielder the highest paid player in the Premiership when he signed him for Chelsea on a free transfer. Thrice German Player of the Year and an immense presence in the center of the park, Ballack is also a goalscorer as evidenced by his 14 strikes in the Bundesliga last season.

Both men will add class and charisma to the Chelsea side and thereby the Premiership. You may not like Chelsea but when you've whitewashed the rest of the Premiership for the past two seasons and can buy any player you set your sights on, that there will be bad-mouthers is something taken for granted. And it is a sign too, of being the best.

Their success this season though depends largely on the ability of the "Special One" to mould his superstars into a formidable unit. One thing is for sure though: the Blues have only become stronger.

But therein lies the critical question. What does this do for competitiveness in the Premiership?

The jury is well and truly out on that one.

Many regard the Premiership as an actively competitive league. A lesser, but no less vociferous number are of the opinion that Chelsea's dominance will only continue and watching the Premiership could well be an act of eventuality unfolding (Eventuality being Chelsea's triumph).

It matters not which group you belong to but the doomsday predictors have atleast some form of truth in their bleak predictions.

Points wise the gulf in the EPL is worryingly enormous. The gap between champion and bottom team last season was a whopping 76 points. Italy was second with 70 points but the French, German and Spanish leagues all recorded differences in the fifties. Even looking at differences within the top four place finishers, the EPL recorded a 24 point gap which was equalled by the Ligue 1; but then Lyon have won that five years running. That's no fun is it?

But then again, this trend might ominously continue.

Manchester United look a spent force, their glory days of Treble championships long in the distance. The players have changed and Old Trafford's hallowed turf is now home to more Darren Fletchers than Roy Keanes. How the mighty have fallen. But lets not count them out. The Red Devils are looking to build from within and Sir Alex Ferguson is as good a judge of youth as anyone. Their gaping central midfield problems - long a concern, have been partially addressed, although the arrival of 17 million pound Michael Carrick is seen by many as an act of desperation. Ruud van Nistelrooy has swapped to sunny Spain and with no readymade replacements Fergie will look to a rejuvenated Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, Louis Saha and starlet Giuseppe Rossi for his goalscoring. However, Wayne Rooney's prodigious talent and Cristiano Ronaldo's flamboyance alongside Ji Sung Park's tireless

running could yet carry United. But let us not forget the other genuine contender. Arsenal have moved into their new multi-million dollar home and having secured the



WAYNE ROONEY

services of Thierry Henry they will look to the future. Robert Pires has jumped ship and Ljunberg is only a shadow of his former self. Sol Campbell moved to Portsmouth and Philippe Senderos is out for a few months. Add to that the fact that Ashley Cole is all but certain to leave and they find themselves in a bit of a pickle. But they have been rejuvenated by the arrival of the silky Tomas Rosicky, the Czech playmaker looking to add finesse to a midfield comprising of Cesc Fabregas and Gilberto Silva. But the weight of the burden is well and truly on Thierry Henry's shoulder

and the Frenchman will be subject to a true test of character. And maybe just maybe we will get a glimpse of Theo Walcott's apparent prodigious talent. Arsene Wenger's teams at their best play football from a different planet and even if they are not necessarily covered in glory at season's end, they will win many fans over.

And so we come to the Pretenders.

Tottenham Hotspurs look the most likely team to cause an upset. Bolstered by the signings of Didier Zokora and Dimitar Berbatov, Spurs will look to make light of Michael Carrick's absence. Having missed out Champions League by a whisker last season, they will look to do atleast one better this time around. Berbatov is a fantastically instinctive striker and his partnership with Defoe and Robbie Keane will prove crucial to Spurs success. Edgar Davids stays on for a year more and Zokora could be the next Vieira. Aaron Lennon of the World Cup fame could establish himself this season.

Glenn Roeder at Newcastle has also built himself a formidable team. The former West Ham boss has roped in Damien Duff and is desperately in search for a striker to replace Alan Shearer. Michael Owen has not yet established himself but once he does that headache might be resolved

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FIXTURES

Saturday
Arsenal v Aston Villa, Bolton v Tottenham, Everton v Watford, Newcastle v Wigan Athletic, Portsmouth v Blackburn, Reading v Middlesbrough, Sheff Utd v Liverpool, West Ham v Charlton
Sunday
Chelsea v Man City, Man Utd v Fulham.

Abramovich's millions that Chelsea managed to lure two of world football's true superstars to Stamford Bridge for this season. Step forward Andriy Shevchenko and Michael Ballack.

Both men captain their countries and look to have completed owner Roman Abramovich's transformation of the west London club from fashionable also-rans to the most powerful team in the world.

The Ukrainian has been one of the strongest players in the Serie A for years, his lethal goalscoring abilities and striking instincts making him one of the most feared players around. He is the highest scorer in the history of the European Cup (52 goals) and there is no doubting of his pedigree. What is questionable though is how well he can adapt to the English game at 29 and following a sub-par World Cup, "Sheva" still has something to prove.

Ballack is even more of a conundrum. Half the world reckons that he is a world-beater, the other half quick to consign him as just another average German. Jose Mourinho possibly belongs to the first group because he made the ex-Bayern



Chelsea's new recruits, Andriy Shevchenko (L) and Michael Ballack will add distinctive class to the Premiership.