



PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool's new recruit Craig Bellamy (R) tries to shrug off a challenge from Sheffield United's Phil Jagielka during the opening match of the Premiership season at Bramall Lane in Sheffield on Saturday.

Reds start with a stutter

AFP, Sheffield

Robbie Fowler salvaged a 1-1 draw for Liverpool with a dubious second half penalty to deny Premiership newcomers Sheffield United a shock victory at Bramall Lane on Saturday.

Fowler converted from the spot on 70 minutes after referee Rob Styles adjudged Chris Morgan to have tripped Reds skipper Steven Gerrard to cancel out Rob Hulse's opening header just after the break.

Hulse, who cost the Blades 2.1 million pounds (3.9 million dollars) from Leeds in the pre-season, nodded home David Unsworth's accurate free-kick on 47 minutes as Neil Warnock's side threatened to make a dream start to the new season.

Recently-installed England manager Steve McClaren was in the

stands to run the rule over some of his international stars and also take a look at highly-rated Blades players Phil Jagielka and Michael Tonge.

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez handed a Reds Premiership debut to Craig Bellamy following his six-million-pound switch from Blackburn while England forward Peter Crouch was left on the bench.

Likewise, opposite number Warnock handed a debut to Hulse, who partnered former Manchester United forward Danny Webber in attack.

Hulse almost forced an early breakthrough after just six minutes when he looked to have got the better of Jamie Carragher only for the England defender to recover his poise.

Warnock's men didn't look over-awed and looked dangerous when going forward, with Webber and Michael Tonge causing the visitors'

defence problems.

Webber just missed a pacy cross from Derek Geary before Tonge skipped past two defenders but saw his goalbound shot well blocked by Reds centre-half Sami Hyypia.

But the Blades got a taste of how dangerous Benitez's side could be on nine minutes when Jan Kromkamp sent Bellamy racing clear and his shot flashed across the face of Paddy Kenny's goal.

Liverpool threatened again on 21 minutes when John Arne Riise beat the onrushing Kenny to a bouncing ball but saw his cross snuffed out by Chris Morgan's diving header with Bellamy lurking at the back post.

It was Riise's last action of the game after he fell in a heap and had to be stretchered off with a twisted ankle.

Benitez suffered another blow on 35 minutes when Carragher too limped off with the same injury, to be

replaced by Daniel Agger.

Fabio Aurelio came close to breaking the deadlock on 37 minutes when his curling free-kick was superbly tipped over by Kenny before Gerrard lashed a volley wide as the visitors began to dominate.

The Blades were living off scraps but Hulse thought he had put his side ahead just before the break when he latched onto Webber's pass before beating goalkeeper Jose Reina -- but his effort was ruled offside.

But Hulse was not to be denied one minute after the break when the Blades broke the stalemate with the first attack of the half.

Unsworth delivered a precise free-kick which found Hulse, who had slipped away from Hyypia before planting a firm header past

SEE PAGE 18 COL 8

Diarra delighted with Madrid move

INTERNET, undated

Mahamadou Diarra said he was "the happiest person in the world" after his club Lyon accepted a 26-million-euro (18-million-pound) bid for him from Real Madrid. The Malian international midfielder will complete his transfer on Monday subject to a successful medical after a protracted transfer saga.

Lyon finally accepted a bid significantly lower than their 35-million-euro asking price after the player threatened to go on strike if not allowed to move.

"It has been my dream to play for Real Madrid and at last I am going to fulfil it," said Diarra.

He becomes Madrid's fourth major signing of the summer, joining Fabio Cannavaro, Emerson and Ruud van Nistelrooy at the Santiago Bernabeu, along with new coach Fabio Capello.

"We closed the deal for a figure that was considerably less than Lyon wanted," said Madrid president Ramon Calderon, who said the Spanish club's spending spree was not over.

"We can still sign more players and I think we will do so before the transfer deadline expires," he said.

Diarra has won admirers for his discipline and work rate in a defensive midfield role, becoming a key component of the Lyon side that won five consecutive league titles.

He is the second African to leave Lyon for big money in as many summers, following Michael Essien's departure to Chelsea last season.

Rooney will play tough

Football

INTERNET, undated

Wayne Rooney has admitted he is gutted by the Football Association's decision to uphold the red card he received in a pre-season friendly.

The Manchester United striker, along with teammate Paul Scholes, saw red in the game against Porto in Amsterdam earlier in the month and as a consequence, the pair were handed three-match bans.

Both players elected to appeal their respective bans - reportedly confident that they would be overturned - but The FA's independent disciplinary commission have instead decided to support the decision made by the match referee Ruud Bossen.

Rooney was sent off for a trailing arm that appeared to strike Porto's Pepe, but the influential 20-year-old insists that there was no malice in the challenge, continuing to confirm his utmost disappointment at the verdict.

"I'm gutted with that decision," he told The Sun.

"I'm extremely disappointed to miss any games over that. It was the wrong decision to send me off.

"I never want to miss a game and certainly not for a harsh decision like that.

"You only have to look at the video to see I only had eyes for the ball."

While Rooney will be able to take part in United's opener against Fulham, he will be forced to sit out their next three games.

Rooney is of the opinion that this decision is indicative of a desire to drive combative styles of play out of

the game.

"Unfortunately, football is getting more and more where you cannot touch an opponent," he added.

"You see red cards now that would not even be fouls in years gone by.

"It's disappointing the way it has

gone, but you have to get on with it.

"The way I play football will not change. I'm determined. I want to win every ball and every challenge I go into."



WAYNE ROONEY

Juventus appeal turned down

AFP, Rome

Disgraced Italian giants Juventus have failed in their bid to convince Italian football federation bosses that their demotion to Serie B, the country's second tier football league, should be overturned.

Juventus, one of several clubs sanctioned for being involved in a match-fixing scandal which rocked the country shortly before Italy's World Cup triumph, met with bosses from the Italian football federation (FIGC) in arbitration with the national Olympic committee (CONI).

"The result of this meeting was not a positive one, but at least we had the opportunity to explain our position," said Juve president Giovanni Cobolli Gigli.

"We pointed out how our punishment was disproportionately damaging to us financially and in terms of prestige.

"We proposed to be allowed back into Serie A with a points penalty, but now our Board of Directors will meet on August 21 to decide the next step."

Juventus were stripped of their title, penalised 30 points and demoted to Serie B.

The points penalty was then cut to 17 on appeal, but the relegation was still insisted upon.

Juventus will continue their fight.

"Our options are arbitration, but there is also the TAR administrative tribunal and the European Court," said Cobolli Gigli.

"We want the correct penalty for our club."

Pizarro accepts Roma switch

INTERNET, undated

After talks seemed to have hit an impasse, David Pizarro flew to Rome last morning to finalise details on a move to the Giallorossi.

The Inter midfielder had been on the verge of completing the transfer earlier this week, but it collapsed at the last hurdle when he "changed his mind."

However, negotiations continued through the night and this morning the last piece of the puzzle seemingly fell into place.

The official Inter website confirmed Pizarro had flown back to Italy from Mallorca, where the team were preparing for a friendly match in the Trofeo Pirelli, to deal with his transfer status.

It is reported the Chilean has agreed a four-year contract worth 1.3 million pounds per season and Roma will pay 4 million pounds for a co-ownership deal.

Pizarro will be reunited with Coach Luciano Spalletti, who had him in his Udinese side from 2003 to 2005.

Haan in charge of Cameroon

AFP, Yaounde

Dutchman Arie Haan was on Friday named as the new coach of Cameroon charged with reviving the fortunes of the indomitable Lions who failed to reach the World Cup finals.

Haan, 57, spent his playing career with Ajax Amsterdam, Anderlecht, Standard Liege and PSV Eindhoven and was capped 35 times.

The appointment of Haan was announced on national radio by sports minister Philippe Mbarga Mbova who added that Theo de Jong will be assistant coach with Jules Frederic Nyong and Thomas Nkono also joining the coaching staff.

Former tennis player Yannick Noah was also added to the backroom staff as an advisor to the national team.

Haan takes over from Portugal's Artur Jorge who resigned in March, a month after Cameroon had been knocked out of the African Nations Cup at the semifinal stage.

Simao sticking with Benfica

AFP, Lisbon

Benfica skipper Simao Sabrosa, reported to be close to signing with Spanish outfit Valencia, has opted to stick with the Portuguese side, club president Luis Filipe Vieira said Saturday.

"The Simao soap opera is over, he'll continue playing for Benfica," Vieira told RTP radio, adding that the striker could play Tuesday's Champions League third round qualifying match against Austria Vienna.

Spanish press reported earlier this month that Benfica and Valencia were set to sign a deal which would keep the Portuguese striker in Spain for six years with an annual salary of 1.8 million euros.

Benfica were also reported to have received offers from French champions Lyon and Premiership side Arsenal.

Mourinho rules out quadruple

Football

THE GUARDIAN

Jose Mourinho says his side face an immediate disadvantage as Chelsea begin their Premiership defence and that, despite signing Germany's captain Michael Ballack and the top-scoring Andriy Shevchenko, he does not have the squad backbone to challenge for all four competitions in which they compete.

Mourinho's gamble in releasing players such as Eidur Gudjohnsen and Glen Johnson could backfire after injuries to Joe Cole, Claude Makelele, Petr Cech and Ballack. Chelsea will thus rely on their new young blood to make an impact.

He said: "Modern football means a lot of matches during the season and an unbelievable calendar for the national teams. Players are here from different continents and we have a lot of competitions with a lot of travelling. You have to rotate players and decide which games and competitions are more important. I don't think it is possible to win everything because in England many teams have the same ambitions to win the same thing.

"In Porto we won everything in the same season. We won the European Cup but the other competitions in Portugal were only between Porto, Benfica and

Sporting. In England you can have up to 14 clubs fighting for a trophy and even in the Premiership you have a minimum of four clubs going for the title.

"We don't have second-line players like we have had in the last few seasons. Scott Parker, Eidur Gudjohnsen, Tiago, Damien Duff and Glen Johnson have left, meaning a different way to approach the season and prepare for the future. The doors are open for Salomon Kalou and Mikel John Obi. Are they ready like Gudjohnsen and Duff? We will see. They have to be ready to play for 90 minutes. We cannot lose the qualities that made us champions."

Mourinho is an unhappy man heading into today's opener against Manchester City because his team needed more preparation time. World Cup demands had forced Mourinho to allow the majority of his squad an extended break to recover from a long season for both club and country. Most of the players were united only for the first time when Chelsea flew to the United States at the end of last month for a pre-season tour and have not had enough time to prove their fitness for the new campaign.

Mourinho added: "I like to play competitive matches but only when I feel my team are ready for them and that is not the case. As a result of that I feel the challenge is bigger. It is a funny situation because I am

having to prepare a team without any matches.

"When you start pre-season you need a minimum of a month to get your team ready. You need your body to re-adapt to train in the first week and then work properly to improve your physical and tactical areas. You then have to compete and play matches, delete your mistakes and bring the last things together. We will have only 15 senior players for the first game and I know Manchester City had the same problem when we faced them last season. It is a difficult situation."

Despite these problems Mourinho remains confident his side will produce exciting attacking football and can win their third consecutive title.

He said: "We have a lot of quality in attack and have two attacking midfielders in Ballack and (Frank) Lampard who can add different qualities to our game. Our first match is at home and the statistics give us hope that we can start again doing well. Since I arrived at the club we have won the opening matches 1-0 over the last two seasons. They were both difficult matches but I hope we can do it again.

"I have a contract and want to stay at Chelsea. If I win three titles, then I want to make it four."



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid superstar David Beckham rides on the back of Ruud van Nistelrooy to celebrate a goal against Real Betis during their semifinal match of the Carranza trophy at Ramon de Carranza Stadium in Cadiz on Friday. Real Madrid lost the game on penalties.

United optimistic of Hargreaves capture

Football

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United defender Gary Neville said Saturday that he was still hopeful that agreement could be reached with Bayern Munich for midfielder Owen Hargreaves.

Hargreaves, 25, is suddenly one of the hottest properties in Europe, just months after his presence in Sven-Goran Eriksson's World Cup squad was greeted with derision.

And Neville thinks what Hargreaves has done is show the English public what he has been doing in Germany for the past five years.

"I think people in England have been ignorant of Owen for a long

time," Neville told MUTV.

"We have not accepted the fact he plays for a huge club in Germany like Bayern Munich. They are one of the biggest clubs in the world, yet Owen has not been given the credit he deserves.

"I have seen a lot of him with England and he is playing with a lot of confidence.

"I don't know what is happening as regards the speculation but I am sure it is something the two clubs will try to sort out."

Bayern have said they are not interested in letting Hargreaves go, even though it seems clear the player, who is under contract with the Munich side until 2010, would like to take up the offer of joining the Red Devils.

"The boy wants to come to us, which helps and now we are trying

to find a mechanism to get the deal done," said United boss Sir Alex Ferguson.

Bayern issued a statement Friday stating that the player must honour his contract.

"FC Bayern has informed the player and his agent in no uncertain terms that the contract with the club until June 30, 2010 is to be honoured," said the club.

"To this day, we have not discussed a transfer with Manchester United or any other club and there will be no future talks over a transfer of Hargreaves.

"FC Bayern Munich have informed Manchester United that they must end their advances for Owen Hargreaves."