

Sport

Absent stars defended

MELBOURNE, July 14: Manchester United officials defended the decision not to include midfielder David Beckham in their squad for the two-match tour of Australia, reports Reuters.

Beckham, who married 'Posh Spice' Victoria Adams earlier this month, was among five leading players missing when the United squad arrived in Melbourne today for two pre-season matches against the Australian national team.

Others absent were Roy Keane, Paul Scholes, Gary Neville and Henning Berg and also manager Alex Ferguson.

The Australian promoters have dropped their threat to withhold half of Manchester United's £4 million Australian dollars (US\$ 2.6) if Beckham and Ferguson failed to appear.

United's assistant manager Steve McLaren said Beckham had a slight hamstring injury and had been advised against travelling, while Keane and Neville were preparing for the start of the forthcoming English season. Scholes was awaiting the birth of his first child.

"All five players would rather be here than in the treatment room," McLaren told reporters at a media conference today.

"It isn't a case of not wanting to come, or us not wanting to bring them ... at the end of the day, what we have here is the Manchester United team and no one player is bigger than the team."

McLaren said the United players were looking at the matches as part of their buildup to the new home season.

"Anyone who plays against Manchester United will not be holding back and we're expecting two very tough games," he said.

United chief executive Martin Edwards also backed the club's decision not to defend their FA Cup title this year and instead represent England in the inaugural World Club championship in Brazil in January.

"We didn't want to come out of the FA Cup really but once it was put to us that it would help England's bid to host the 2006 World Cup if we did go to play in Brazil, and the government was requesting it and the FA, we said we'd need to consider that."

"Obviously we're disappointed, we're the holders of the FA Cup and it was a big wrench not to go in it, but something had to give."

Edwards also denied speculation he was ready to sell his 14 per cent stake in the club to new investors.

"People get carried away with that," he said. "I've had approaches but I've made no decisions whatsoever."

United will play Australia in Melbourne on Thursday before a second meeting at Sydney's Olympic Stadium on Sunday.

Zidane looks forward

MILAN, July 14: Juventus ace Zinedine Zidane wants to put a miserable season behind him and re-discover his winning touch as the Italian football season gets underway next month, reports AFP.

Club chief Martin Edwards Wednesday spoke of his famous Red Devils as a world-wide brand as 'Manchester United Inc.' arrived here for two pre-season matches against Australia.

The football world's richest and most glamorous club has long transcended the divide between sport and business with the English league and cup champions making 29.6 million pounds profit last year after excluding players' transfer fees.

United, who have legions of supporters throughout the world, are looking to capitalise on their phenomenal success during their four-match tour of Australia and China over the next week.

"We always try to expand, we make no secret of that," Edwards said here at the start of United's first tour of Australia.

United season also ended with a knee injury and surgery for the Frenchman, who hasn't fully recovered.

"It still needs time, a couple of weeks for it to be fully back to normal," he said.

Juventus, meanwhile, need to recover from a dismal league season which left them with this summer's Intertoto tournament as their only chance of reaching the UEFA Cup.

"I'm encouraged by what I've seen so far," he said. "It's going to be tough to win the league -- AC Milan, Lazio, Fiorentina, Parma and Inter have all strengthened their teams. But we are at their level."

The important thing will be to not make the same mistakes again. But I reckon that a kick in the head every so often does you good. It brings you down to earth."

He told sports newspaper Tuttosport: "I want to put last season -- and my problems, and Juventus' problems -- behind me and to start winning. That's what I'm staying for; to win."

Strongest on strike

LA PAZ, July 14: Players with top Bolivian side The Strongest have gone on strike Monday as they have not been paid since May, reports AFP.

The club, managed by Argentina's 1978 World Cup winning scorer Mario Kempes, is in dire financial straits and on Friday adopted stringent austerity measures.

The La Paz club, over 90 years old, could be relegated if a solution is not found to the problems.



Manchester United's England international striker Teddy Sheringham obliging fans with autographs during a practice session at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) yesterday. — AFP photo

Rugged MCG greets MU

MELBOURNE, Australia, July 14: Manchester United's players were taken by surprise Wednesday at the bumpy Melbourne Cricket Ground pitch they will play on against Australia here Thursday, reports AFP.

The European Cup and English league and cup champions arrived here early Wednesday for their two-match Australian tour and had a light training run on the famous MCG in the late afternoon before 1,000 local supporters.

"We're not going to make an issue of playing on a cricket pitch," said star striker Dwight Yorke.

"We're here to play a football game and if it's good enough for them, it's good enough for us."

Yorke, who is good friends with West Indian great Brian Lara, said he had played football on cricket pitches back in the Caribbean.

"We've watched lots of Test cricket over the years and it's great to actually run out here, it's not too bad," said Yorke, who joined United in August last year from Aston Villa for 12.6 million pounds.

Assistant manager Steve McLaren, who is deputiesing for team boss Sir Alex Ferguson

who stayed at home for his July 21 Buckingham Palace investiture -- said of the MCG: "The players were obviously a little bit surprised, seeing what they are used to, but at the end of the day it's just like going to Wimbledon and playing at Selhurst Park."

Welsh wing Ryan Giggs said with a wry smile: "You can tell it's a cricket pitch anyway ... yeah, it's bumpy, but you get that in pre-season games, the pitches are hard, but you've just got to adapt to it."

"I'm a fan of cricket and to play in a stadium like this is a great honour," said Giggs, who has had just three weeks off since his last game for Wales on June 10.

"You don't lose much fitness in three weeks and we've been back a week now (in pre-season training), but obviously with the long flight we're a bit tired."

"We don't think about injuries going into a game, if you did that you'd go mad, you just hope that you don't get injured, but usually in pre-season games, lads don't get injured."

Yorke said United were treating the two matches against the Socceroos over the next four days as intense preparation for the new English season, which kicks off on August 8.

"It's been a very successful

year for us, but to come back from what we have achieved and getting back into the thick of things will take some time," he said.

"But we are treating this game and the one in Sydney on Sunday as very intense game and preparation for our campaign back in England."

Giggs said the first few games of a new season were about attaining a high fitness level.

"It's also about getting a feel of the ball after being away, getting used to playing games again, so we just use it as a base to get ourselves fit and obviously it's a bonus if we win," he said.

Norwegian striker Ole Gunnar Solskjær stood out of Wednesday's training run, but McLaren said there was no concern.

"He slept in the wrong position on the plane on the way over and he's got a stiff back today, so we left him out," he said.

McLaren said he had yet to decide on the starting line-up for Thursday's opener.

"We're going around the players after today's session, after flying for such a long time, they are feeling a little lethargic and hard to get going, but after a good night's sleep and another session tomorrow we'll make a judgment about lunch-time," he said.

"I can't allow that so he's going to have to pay 5,000 marks (2,600 dollars)," said McLaren.

Hitzfeld also had a "private audience" with Markus Babbel, who has made public his dissatisfaction at not being allowed to transfer to Liverpool, saying that Bayern did not "play fair" on letting him leave.

Midfielder Mario Basler's grumbles about his position on the team have led to speculation about a lack of unity in the ranks. Basler is holding out for a reputation for primadonna behaviour and are still struggling to pick the pieces after a last-minute defeat in the European Cup final by Manchester United and then losing the German Cup to Werder Bremen on penalties.

First to feel the lash was Brazilian striker Giovane Elber, who said he felt indisposed on Sunday and decided not to take part in training.

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Goalkeeper Oliver Kahn criticised veteran Libero Lothar Matthäus about his plans to move mid-season to the United States to play for the New York New Jersey Metro Stars, further contributing to a revival of the "FC Hollywood" tag.

South Australia can't afford Hooper

ADELAIDE, Australia, July 14: Former West Indies batsman Carl Hooper is expected to seek an English county cricket contract after a deal with South Australia broke down over money, reports AP.

South Australia's cricket manager Greg Chappell said Sheffield Shield rules governing pay rates meant the state team could not afford Hooper, who lives in Adelaide with his Australian wife.

Under the agreement, the most a state player on a top-level contract can be paid is 40,000 Australian dollars (26,000 US dollars) with match payments bringing the total to 70,000 Australian dollars (46,000 US dollars).

Chappell did not say how much Hooper had asked for, but said the 32-year-old probably had offers to play county cricket in England.

"It would appear that there are options for him in England in county cricket and the money that they talk about over there is a lot different from the money that's available here," Chappell said Wednesday. "I would think it would be pretty difficult for any Australian state to meet the competition of the sort of money that's around in county cricket."

Chappell said the SACA's door was still open if Hooper wanted to accept the deal.

Hooper missed the first two tests of Australia's tour of the West Indies this year to stay in Adelaide to care for his sick baby son. At the end of that tour, he announced his retirement from international cricket after a 12-year career which included 80 Tests and 182 one-day internationals.

Chappell said Hooper approached the SACA.

"It would have been nice to have him if he'd been available, it basically would have dropped in our lap, it would have been a bonus from that point of view but one door closes another door opens," Chappell said.

Champions Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund meet today in Augsburg in the other semifinal of the lucrative pre-season tournament featuring six teams -- the top five in the last Bundesliga standings and the German Cup winners.

Star forwards Dwight Yorke,

Andy Cole, Ryan Giggs and David Beckham are expected to take the pitch.

Apart from Keane, Norwegian defender Ronny Johnsen, England midfielder Paul Scholes and defender Gary Neville stayed at home to recuperate from off-season injuries.

United, who have legions of supporters throughout the world, are looking to capitalise

L'pool deny Babbel deal

LIVERPOOL, July 14: English Premiership side Liverpool have Monday denied they have a pre-contract deal to bring German international defender Markus Babbel to Anfield, reports AFP.

Babbel's present club Bayern Munich believe the player will move to Liverpool at the end of next season on a free transfer, when his current deal expires.

But Liverpool Monday denied any such deal exists. Club spokesman Ian Cotton said: "We have no agreement with the player."

Cotton was responding to claims by the German champions' vice-president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge that Babbel had rejected a 7 million pounds bid from Real Madrid in favour of Liverpool.

"We believe that there is an agreement between Babbel and Liverpool," Rummenigge said.

"You cannot see his refusal for a move to Real Madrid in any other way."

"We would have let him go to Spain for their offer of 7 million pounds. It would have been foolish to refuse that with only a year left on his contract."

"The previous offer from Liverpool was for half of that and that was not enough."

Babbel denied that the Spanish club had approached him but admitted he wanted to play in the English Premiership.

"The fact is that I never had an offer from Real Madrid but my dream has always been to play in England," said Babbel.

Hitzfeld plans to act tough

BONN, July 14 (Reuters/Internet): Bayern Munich trainer Ottmar Hitzfeld on Monday sought to restore team discipline as players again engaged in the public bickering which has earned the club the nickname "FC Hollywood".

"I am tightening the screws and from now on I will be taking action not talking about it. The standards will be tougher from now on and anyone who doesn't like it can watch from the stands," Hitzfeld said.

A number of incidents again brought attention to the German champions, who have a reputation for primadonna behaviour and are still struggling to pick the pieces after a last-minute defeat in the European Cup final by Manchester United and then losing the German Cup to Werder Bremen on penalties.

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Hitzfeld also had a "private audience" with Markus Babbel, who has made public his dissatisfaction at not being allowed to transfer to Liverpool, saying that Bayern did not "play fair" on letting him leave.

Midfielder Mario Basler's grumbles about his position on the team have led to speculation about a lack of unity in the ranks. Basler is holding out for a reputation for primadonna behaviour and are still struggling to pick the pieces after a last-minute defeat in the European Cup final by Manchester United and then losing the German Cup to Werder Bremen on penalties.

Goalkeeper Oliver Kahn criticised veteran Libero Lothar Matthäus about his plans to move mid-season to the United States to play for the New York New Jersey Metro Stars, further contributing to a revival of the "FC Hollywood" tag.

Membership rocketed as Botham and Dilley provided the final pieces in the jigsaw of an emerging side as back-to-back County Championship and Sunday League titles were won.

Now Worcestershire are looking to McGrath, who is set to sign a two-year deal, reported to be worth 100,000 pounds a season, making a similar kind of impact.

The last major obstacle was removed when the Australian Cricket Board gave clearance on Monday for McGrath to play county cricket.

The imminent capture of McGrath will be a timely boost as the county's 5,000 membership has dropped this season by about 300, with fans citing a haphazard fixture list and lack of home Sunday fixtures in the National League.

Worcestershire secretary

Unpleasant return for Argentina



self admitted.

The Independiente forward, clearly unhappy at not playing in the Copa, had voiced his displeasure in his situation and Bielsa remonstrated with Calderon for his remarks, calling him a 'rotter'.

Calderon then called Bielsa "the son of a whore".

At this point Argentinian players Roberto Ayala and Diego Simeone separated the two men before blows could be exchanged.

Back in Buenos Aires Calderon confirmed the incident had taken place while Bielsa initially denied the bust-up before eventually admitting it.

Calderon said he would not play under Bielsa. "If Mr. Bielsa continues in the national team and calls me up again, I'm not going."

"Now I understand why the players from Europe didn't come," said Calderon referring to the top players whom Bielsa agreed to rest following a long season with their clubs.

"What I most lament is to have not played and to have spent 15 days wasting my time in Paraguay," he fumed.

"(On Monday) he told me that my style of play didn't fit in with his team, so I asked him why he picked me up in the first place."

The truth always hurts. I am not sorry, I am very calm. I say what I think but without offending anyone," said the player.

Argentinian lost a group match to Colombia. striker Martin Palermo missed three penalties in that game - before their last eight defeat by Brazil.

COPA SC