

Stam rules out exodus fears

REUTERS, Manchester

Dutch defender Jaap Stam has dismissed fears that the current Manchester United team could break up when manager Sir Alex Ferguson retires in 2002.

Earlier this month, United defender Gary Neville warned that players may want to leave Old Trafford once Ferguson leaves his post.

But Stam, who tied himself to the English champions for another five years by signing a new deal on Friday, said none of his team mates were keen to quit the club when their contracts come up for re-negotiation.

"Andy Cole has already signed because he wanted to stay here, and nobody in the dressing room is talking about changing clubs or moving abroad," said Stam.

But Stam admitted United "would find it difficult to find a suitable candidate to take over from Ferguson."

"Ferguson is a major influence on everyone at the club. He knows the players so well and exactly what they can do."

"That means we need a top class manager to take over, but one who understands the game well. It won't be easy to replace the man we have now," he added.

Stam will be 33 when his new contract expires and expects to play out his English career with United.

But he hinted he may return to play in the Netherlands before hanging up his boots.

"You never know how my fitness will be at the end of this contract," he said.

"But as I look at it now it seems that I will end my career over here at United."

"I can't see a bigger team to play for than Manchester United. I certainly won't be interested in playing for a lower division team in England when my contract finishes."

"But I may go back to Holland and play over there before ending my playing days."

Slovakia start with Germany

AFP, Frankfurt

Germany will play Slovakia in a friendly on May 29 in Bremen, the German football federation announced on Friday.

The match will serve as preparation for Germany's World Cup qualifying matches against Finland and Albania in June.

Keown to miss Spain friendly

AFP, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger told new England coach Sven Goran Eriksson on Friday to forget about picking centre back Martin Keown for the Sweden's first international in charge against Spain at Villa Park a week on Wednesday.

The 35-times capped defender, who skipped England in the last World Cup qualifier against Finland in Helsinki in October, will be out of action for at least two more weeks with a knee ligament injury.

"He's still at least two weeks away yet (from recovery) and for the next England game I think they can rule him out," said Wenger.

With Keown missing, Eriksson may decide to give an opportunity to at least one of his young hopefuls - Leeds United's Rio Ferdinand and Manchester United's Wes Brown.

Numan thinks positively

AFP, Glasgow

Glasgow Rangers defender Arthur Numan believes his side can overcome their flagging title aspirations by returning to winning ways in the fourth round of the Scottish Cup on Sunday at First Division Ross County.

Numan, a Dutch international, believes the Ibrox club can go all the way in the competition to restore some much-needed pride following their Old Firm agony last Sunday.

The reigning champions lost 1-0 to bitter rivals Celtic at Parkhead last weekend, a defeat which left Rangers 12 points behind Martin O'Neill's men at the top of the Scottish Premier League and appeared to end their faint title hopes.

"I think we have to focus on winning the Scottish Cup because it is the only prize open to us now," said Numan.

"That would give us a real boost at the end of the season and allow us to go on holiday with a little bit of satisfaction achieved from the season."



West Ham United's Frederic Kanoute (L) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Sunderland in their fifth round F.A.Cup match yesterday.

FA Cup Kanoute helps Hammers

REUTERS, London

West Ham United chalked up another superb away win in the FA Cup on Saturday when Frederic Kanoute's goal was enough to beat Sunderland 1-0 in the fifth round.

After beating Manchester United at Old Trafford in the fourth round West Ham faced another stiff task with a trip to fourth-placed Sunderland, who had lost only once at home in the league.

But they attacked from the start at the Stadium of Light and created a stream of chances, while rarely looking threatened at the back.

Kanoute missed half a dozen of his own before finally hitting the target 14 minutes from time.

The Frenchman was involved in most of West Ham's opportunities in the first half but, with eight offside decisions against him in 45 minutes, he was also responsible for ending them.

"Poor control let him down

when he was through after five minutes while Thomas Sorensen got down well to save his snapshot just before the break.

Paolo Di Canio shot into the side netting early in the second half but Sunderland gradually fought their way back into the game.

However, for all the muscular aggression on Niall Quinn and probing of Kevin Phillips, they were unable to fashion anything resembling a clear chance.

They certainly seemed to miss the creative touch of Scottish international midfielder Don Hutchison - one of three players suspended - and even the usually vocal home fans were subdued.

Instead it was West Ham who continued to look the more dangerous and Frank Lampard should have done better in the 70th minute when he was clean through but could only

manage a weak shot that was gratefully gathered by Sorensen.

Lampard made amends six minutes later with an excellent through ball into the path of Kanoute, who on this occasion timed

his run correctly to slot the ball past Sorensen who had, inexplicably charged outside the penalty area to leave an inviting target.

West Ham's defence, with 38-year-old Stuart Pearce and Igor Stimac both outstanding, were able to deal reasonably comfortably with Sunderland's remaining attacks as the Londoners' held on for a deserved victory.

"We had a lot of chances today but didn't put the ball in the net but I think we deserved it," said Pearce.

"There's something special about the FA Cup but it was a scrap and it was brilliant to have so many fans coming up to support us here.

"The whole competition has been tough for us but we're in the hat - maybe we'll get an away draw for the final," added Pearce, looking ahead to the showdown at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium.

The fifth round continues later on Saturday but the pick of the remaining ties takes place on Sunday when Arsenal host Chelsea.

Batistuta happy as Argentine

REUTERS, Rome

AS Roma's Gabriel Batistuta said on Friday he has no desire to use his Italian ancestry to gain EU citizenship -- and was happy to play on an Argentine passport.

"I know where I come from and what my roots are," Batistuta said. "I could have become an EU player if I'd wanted to but I am, and prefer to remain, Argentine."

Batistuta's great, great grandparents were both Italians from the northeastern Friuli region who emigrated to Argentina around 100 years ago.

Argentina's all-time top scorer has been playing in Italy for 10 years and could easily obtain citizenship.

Batistuta has consistently refused to consider taking EU status, despite having been asked several times by his club sides, formerly Fiorentina and now Roma, to allow them to sign another non-EU player.

Numerous Serie A players, and many from other European clubs, born outside the European Union have recently been caught up in a major scandal over forged passports.

Many have obtained EU status to ease their transfer from South America, Africa and Eastern Europe to the 15-nation bloc.

The Italian league allows clubs to field only three players without EU passports at any one time and clubs can only have five non-EU players on their books.

"I'm sorry for what's happening to some players," Batistuta said. "But I think the majority of them have got their EU status in good faith, without knowing that their documents weren't valid."

Sugar wins his case

AFP, London

Tottenham chairman Sir Alan Sugar won 100,000 pounds (150,000 dollars) in High Court libel damages on Friday over a newspaper article which dubbed him miserly in his stewardship of the club.

The 53-year-old multi-millionaire businessman sued the Daily Mail over a December 1999 story which said he must come out of his "counting house" and give manager George Graham the cash to buy high class players.

Sugar denied in evidence that it was his fault that Spurs had not won the Premiership title.

He said that during his time at White Hart Lane, nearly 100 million pounds (150 million dollars) gross had been spent on the club, with Graham appointed in October 1998 to build a successful side.

"All I've ever tried to do is my best for this football club."

"I can't help it if managers went out and bought the wrong players. I can only provide the money."

"To see this rubbish here - and it's total rubbish - has just devastated me," Sir Alan said.

A spokesman for the newspaper said afterwards: "This case was about freedom of expression. The Daily Mail were defending their right to comment in hard-hitting terms on a matter of public interest."

Mancini may manage Fiorentina

AFP, London

English Premiership side Leicester confirmed on Friday that Italian striker Roberto Mancini will miss their bid to reach the FA Cup quarter-finals for the first time in 20 years amidst speculation that he is set to take over as coach of Italian first division side Fiorentina.

Leicester have given Mancini, who has signed a short-term contract until the end of the season, permission to remain in Italy for the weekend ruling him out of Saturday's fifth-round tie at home to Second Division Bristol City.

Publicly Mancini, who left Italian champions Lazio when coach and mentor Sven Goran Eriksson departed to take up the England national coaching post, is only saying that he is back in his native country "to sort out family problems" and that he is "looking forward" to playing for Leicester again.

But reports and sources in Italy suggest that Mancini is being lined up to replace Fiorentina's Turkish coach Fatih Terim.

Terim joined Fiorentina after steering Galatasaray to last season's UEFA Cup final triumph over Arsenal.

But the indications are that he will not be renewing his one-year contract and Mancini could be lined up to take over next season.

Banks to sell WC medal

REUTERS, London

Former England goalkeeper Gordon Banks is to auction memorabilia from a glittering international career including his World Cup winners medal from the 1966 final against West Germany at Wembley.

Auction-house Christie's said Banks will sell a number of items from his personal collection including two England caps representing the games he played in the 1966 and 1970 World Cup finals.

The World Cup winners medal, presented to Banks by Queen Elizabeth after England's 4-2 extra-time win, is expected to fetch between 70,000 and 90,000 pounds (101,600 to 130,700 dollars).

Also for sale is the black West German goalkeeper's shirt Banks was given in a swap with Hans Tilkowski at the end of the 1966 final, and a football signed by the

1966 England team and manager Sir Alf Ramsey.

The collection is expected to raise more than 100,000 pounds (145,200 dollars) when it goes under the hammer in London on



GORDON BANKS

March 23.

The 63-year-old Banks has followed the lead of Sir Geoff Hurst, still the only player to score a hat-trick in a World Cup Final, who sold the red shirt he wore in that match for 91,750 pounds (133,400 dollars) in a Christie's auction last September.

Banks played his club football for Chesterfield, Leicester City and Stoke City, winning the FA Cup and the League Cup, and was named Footballer of the Year in 1972.

His save from a Pele header during England's 1-0 defeat in a group match against Brazil in the 1970 World Cup brought him worldwide fame and has been described as the 'Save of the Century'.

Banks kept 35 clean sheets in 73 England internationals.

He was awarded the OBE in 1972 before retiring after losing the sight in one eye following a car crash.

No place like Rome

REUTERS, Liverpool

There is something in the air at the Stadio Olimpico that brings the best out of Liverpool. It was in the vast arena on the outskirts of Rome that they captured two European Cups, the second of which came in 1984 via a penalty shoot-out.

Thursday's UEFA Cup 2-0 defeat of AS Roma, the team they beat in that thrilling European Cup triumph 17 years ago, suggests Liverpool are no longer a mere shadow of the side which dominated the domestic and European game in the 1970s and '80s.

Roma, after all, are six points clear at the top of Serie A and were unbeaten at home this season until Thursday.

In place of Liverpool's '80s

strike-master Ian Rush, was two-goal hero Michael Owen, enjoying his own resurrection as a world-class forward after persistent hamstring problems temporarily robbed him of his pace and confidence.

But manager Gerard Houllier's rebuilding of Liverpool is not centred on one player.

Owen is no longer a first choice pick in a squad that boasts the goal-scoring class of Finnish international Jari Litmanen and England strikers Robbie Fowler and Emile Heskey.

It is not just the front line that has seen a complete overhaul. Finnish defensive rock and captain Sammi Hyppia has been teamed up with German internationals Christian Ziege and Markus Babel to great effect.

The midfield has been strengthened by the likes of Croatian Igor Biscan, Czech Vladimir Smicer and a rare English signing, Nick Batmy.

After spending over 50 million pounds (72.7 million dollars), former French national team coach Houllier has finally begun to mould a team capable of challenging Manchester United and the best in Europe.

Houllier says the team still has some way to go before reaching its full potential.

"We are not at the same level as Manchester United yet. We are getting closer but we need more time," he said.

Liverpool have come a long way since Houllier took over in 1998.

On the night arch-rivals United qualified for the Champions League final in 1999, Liverpool were losing at home to unfashionable Leicester City before going on to finish a lowly seventh in the Premier League.

The knowledgeable Liverpool supporters stuck with the Frenchman and refused to criticise a fact Houllier appreciates.

"The Roma result is for our fans. They have stuck by me since I came here and we all appreciate their support," he said.

Another pleased to have supporters on his side was Owen, who has been criticised in the media over the past two seasons for failing to live up to the wonderkid tag he was labelled with after scoring a sensational goal for England against Argentina in the 1998 World Cup.

But after victory in Rome the 21-year-old was euphoric.

"It's a fantastic feeling to come to a stadium like this, to score two good goals and to leave with such a great result," he said.

"I have had some criticism but I have not had a proper run of games because of injury. It's only now that I am starting to feel good again."



Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier (L) shakes hands with AS Roma's Fabio Capello after their UEFA Cup match in Rome on February 15.

Francis quits QPR

REUTERS, London

Queens Park Rangers suffered a fresh blow on Friday when Gerry Francis stepped down as manager of the struggling English First Division side.

Francis's contract expired at the end of this season but the club said it had been mutually agreed he should step down as manager after Saturday's home game against Barnsley.

"Gerry has been asked to remain with QPR until his contract expires and will work with the new manager on planning for next

Coke not interested

REUTERS, London

Soft drinks giant Coca-Cola has ruled out of football sponsorship talks with English

Premier League hot on the heels of commercial rivals Pepsi.

"Coca-Cola has a long history of supporting sport but we looked at the Premiership and...decided the valuation was not right for us," said Coca-Cola's UK director of communications, Andrew Coker.

Pepsi confirmed on Wednesday it was no longer interested in bidding for the multi-million pound sponsorship, saying it was already well covered in the Premier League through its partnership with Manchester United and association with David Beckham.

season," the club said in a statement.

"Discussions with candidates for the managers' job have already started and the board hopes to be in a position to make an announcement as soon as possible."

The west London club are currently bottom of Division One and still recovering from the news that multi-millionaire owner Chris Wright is quitting as chairman.

QPR have sunk to the foot of the table after winning only four of their last 30 matches.

In January they were humiliated 6-0 at home by Arsenal in the FA Cup and last weekend they lost 5-0 at Preston North End.

A despondent-looking Francis told a news conference he would be happy to help the new manager. "There are a lot of things to do and obviously I will give any help I can to whoever the manager might be," the 49-year-old said.

"Obviously I've got a quite a lot of experience in football. I've known the players now for two years."

"At the same time the new person coming in will have full responsibility for team affairs."

Francis's joined QPR in October 1998 for his second spell as manager at Loftus Road having been in charge previously from 1991 to 1994. In between the former England captain managed Tottenham Hotspur from 1994 to 1997.

His decision came after QPR fans this week launched a campaign to dissuade Wright from resigning as the club's chairman.

The Chrysalis media group owner blamed abuse from sup-

porters for his decision to leave after four-and-a-half years.

Wright pumped 20 million pounds (29.08 million dollars) into the club after their relegation from the Premier League in 1996.

But the hoped-for return to the top flight did not materialise and QPR now face slipping into the third tier of English club football for the first time since 1967.

Brazil rely on the Rs

AFP, Pasadena

Flamboyant forwards Ronaldinho and Romario are among a top-flight Brazilian roster that will face Mexico and the United States in friendly matches next month before World Cup qualifying.

Diminutive striker Romario, the outstanding player of the 1994 World Cup, has scored seven goals in Brazil's past three qualifying matches, including three times against Bolivia and four against Venezuela.

The Vasco da Gama forward and Ronaldinho from Brazilian league rival Gremio will be supported by eight standouts from Europe among the 18 players named by coach Emerson Leao for matches here March 3 against the US squad and March 7 against Mexico at Mexico City.

The four-time world champions' also lineup includes defenders Cafu from AS Roma, Silvinho from England's Arsenal and Roque Junior from AC Milan plus midfielder Emerson from AS Roma.



UEFA secretary general Gerhard Aigner arrives to resume talks with European Commission in Brussels on February 16.