



Manchester United coach Sir Alex Ferguson (R) introduces the club's new Dutch signing Ruud van Nistelrooy to the press at the club premises on Friday.

Van Nistelrooy uncovered

Football

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United's Netherlands hot shot Ruud van Nistelrooy said comparing him to Dutch legend Marco van Basten was unfair at an official unveiling ceremony here Friday.

Van Nistelrooy - who confirmed his dream 19 million pound (\$27 million dollars) move to the English giants this week - said he felt "fantastic" about joining Alex Ferguson's all-conquering outfit.

The 24-year-old PSV-Eindhoven star said he was unflattered by his massive transfer price tag, but said comparing him with van Basten was unfair.

"It is unfair," Van Nistelrooy said. "Such a player as he was will never come again. I am flattered also. With a little bit of him, you can be magnificent."

Van Nistelrooy's signing completes an amazing 12-month comeback for the highly rated striker. He was due to join United last year but the deal fell through when he failed a medical.

Just days later, he ruptured cruciate knee ligaments and has since fought his way back to full fitness. United stayed in touch with the player and Ferguson finally got his man earlier this week.

"It feels fantastic," van Nistelrooy

said. "Last year it was so close to joining and it was a big disappointment that it didn't come true. This is the best thing that has happened to me."

"I was always confident I would sign for the club because when you get support from the people here, it made me determined to fight and come back stronger."

"It is a dream to play in this team."

Having re-established himself in the PSV starting line-up and announced his arrival back in the Dutch squad by scoring the final goal in his country's 4-0 World Cup qualifying win over Cyprus in Eindhoven on Wednesday, van Nistelrooy is looking forward to tying up a few loose ends before completing the move.

"I want to win the double with my own team and then I will look forward to next season."

"The Premier League is the type of football I like, all the teams want to play and it is open. That fits with my thoughts on how football should be played."

"Expectations are high from everybody around but my personal expectations are maybe higher."

"Manchester United want to win every trophy there is. They are one of the best clubs in the world. The goals for success are big but my personal goals are the same."

"I am happy to join a club with so many goals."

"It is not a big price tag, it lifts me

up. When a club like Manchester United want to pay that money it helps my confidence. It is not a pressure, it lifts me up."

"When you look at last year they won so much with good attractive football. It is nice to watch players who have superb skills. In every position they have players who are special."

"It is nice to join such great players. I will make progress here."

United boss Ferguson admitted he was disappointed when the transfer fell through a year ago.

Ferguson said: "It is a transfer I wanted to see going through. I was hoping he would return to fitness."

"We had some discussion but I knew he would get back all right. I had no fears about that."

"It is a difficult injury, but not a career-threatening injury of say 10 years ago. The recovery record is superb now."

"I was confident about that but you have to go along until the minute he starts playing."

"This is a special day for United and especially for Ruud."

As for whether more new players will be arriving at Old Trafford this summer, the Scot added: "Other things may happen, who knows?"

Ferguson also revealed how PSV Eindhoven beat him to Ruud van Nistelrooy's signature, three years before the Dutchman joined Old Trafford in a record transfer deal.

Ferguson told the press conference he had been made aware of van

Nistelrooy in 1998 but did not pursue matters further.

Then his son Darren returned from a few days on trial at Dutch club Heerenveen gushing about the brilliance of a 21-year-old striker he had played alongside.

"It's an interesting story," Ferguson said.

"When we were told about him he was very young, some of our people saw him play and said he had very good potential."

"But the real awareness came when my son was at Heerenveen on trial for a few days."

"He came back and said 'you have got to sign this lad Van Nistelrooy, he's fantastic, sign him right away'."

"I said 'hold on a minute, we have watched him already'. My son said 'just sign him'."

"That Saturday we sent someone to the game but PSV were there and signed him the next day. Talk about slow!"

PSV paid 4.2 million pounds (6 million dollars) for the young striker - then a record between Dutch clubs - meaning United had to stump up almost 15 million pounds more to take him to Old Trafford.

Ferguson added: "I shouldn't admit that, nevertheless he is here and that's what is important."

The revelation was news to Van Nistelrooy, who was as surprised as anyone at Ferguson's confession, saying: "I didn't know that!"

Premiership preview

Chelsea-Leeds vital clash

Football

REUTERS, London

Leeds United against Chelsea matches are always passionate affairs and there will be plenty at stake when the sides dispute three Premier League points at Elland Road on Saturday.

Both clubs have their eyes on the third qualifying spot for next season's Champions League.

Fourth-placed Leeds are in the better position. With 59 points they have a game in hand over third-placed Ipswich, whom they trail by three points.

Anything but a win for Chelsea, currently sixth on 54 points, following last Saturday's surprise 1-0 home defeat by Charlton Athletic, would almost certainly end their hopes of finishing in the top three.

David O'Leary's Leeds United may have one eye on Wednesday's Champions League semifinal first leg against Valencia at Elland Road, but their recent form suggests they can handle playing two games a week.

Despite their European distractions, Leeds are unbeaten in 12 league games, in which they have taken 30 points out of 36 to climb from 12th to fourth in the table.

Defender Jonathan Woodgate is unlikely to figure despite playing a reserve game on Wednesday, his first match since January 27.

"It is going to be a fascinating end to the season both in Europe and the Premier League... we have had some tremendous results lately so we are on a high for the run in," said goalkeeper Nigel Martyn.

Claudio Ranieri's Chelsea have kept four successive clean sheets away from home, winning their last three games on the road after previ-

ously failing to take three points on their travels all season.

Other Premier League matches being played on Saturday (kickoffs 1400 GMT; league positions in parentheses):

COVENTRY CITY (18) v LIVERPOOL (5)

Desperate Coventry have to win this match or they could go down. Gordon Strachan's side are five points adrift of the safety zone and will only have two games left after Saturday but striker Craig Bellamy hasn't given up hope. "The belief is there that we can stay up," he said. Lee Carsley will miss the expected birth of his third child to play. Liverpool, with Coventry old boy Gary McAllister in fine form, need the points to maintain their bid to qualify for the Champions League though, and they should get them after five days rest following seven games in 21 days.

DERBY COUNTY (17) v ARSENAL (2)

Although Derby lost 2-0 at bottom club Bradford last time out, they are strong at home and victory over Arsenal would virtually assure Jim Smith's men of top flight football for another season. Arsenal, who drew 0-0 against Derby at Highbury in November, need to consolidate their Champions League spot, but manager Arsene Wenger may rotate his squad after several players were involved in midweek internationals.

EVERTON (16) v BRADFORD CITY (20)

Two successive wins have come too late for Bradford, who are still 14 points adrift of safety with five games to play. Everton have lost their last three but thanks to the

failings of others remain five points clear of the drop zone. They will be without midfielder Alex Nyarko, who is mulling over his future after being hounded by an irate fan at Highbury last Saturday.

MANCHESTER CITY (19) v WEST HAM UNITED (14)

City are in dire straits despite their battling 1-1 draw at champions Manchester United last Saturday and they will be relegated if they lose to West Ham. Danny Tiatto is still suspended for City. Harry Redknapp's

side, only a point above fourth-bottom Derby, are also in poor form. They have lost seven of their last nine games and haven't kept a clean sheet since January.

MIDDLESBROUGH (15) v MANCHESTER UNITED (1)

Middlesbrough fans were probably dreading this fixture a month ago, but with United already champions and Boro five points clear of the drop zone they might even enjoy it. Saturday's 3-0 win at Leicester was the key result for Terry Venables' side and another three points would virtually guarantee survival. The champions will have other ideas, though, especially strikers Dwight Yorke, Andy Cole, Teddy Sheringham and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, all looking over their shoulders following the signing of Ruud van Nistelrooy.

NEWCASTLE UNITED (13) v LEICESTER CITY (12)

Leicester's alarming slump -- Saturday's defeat by Middlesbrough was their seventh in succession -- bodes ill for next season and they have lost defender Gerry Taggart for the rest of the campaign with a knee injury.

Newcastle have had a disappointing season and morale won't

have been helped by reports linking Kieron Dyer with a move to Manchester United. Bobby Robson's side haven't kept a clean sheet for 29 games but Leicester could be just the opponents to break that sequence.

SOUTHAMPTON (10) v SUNDERLAND (8)

Both sides have seen their hopes of European football fade after poor recent runs. Southampton have games in hand but have not scored in their last three. Peter Reid's side have also struggled for goals, though, and a

repeat of November's 2-2 draw at the Stadium of Light seems unlikely. Sunderland striker Kevin Phillips, the subject of transfer speculation in Friday's newspapers, is doubtful with an ankle injury.

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR (11) v ASTON VILLA (7)

David Ginola says he is looking forward to returning to Spurs, though whether Villa manager John Gregory decides to pick him is a different matter. Villa have improved lately but are unlikely to finish higher than their current position. Glenn Hoddle's Spurs, linked with Barcelona's Josep Guardiola and Emmanuel Petit this week, have lost their last two.

Playing on Monday:

CHARLTON ATHLETIC (9) v IPSWICH TOWN (3) (1900 GMT)

Ipswich now have their sights set on finishing second, which would be a remarkable achievement for George Burley's promoted side. Marcus Stewart, the league's top marksman with 19 goals, will be looking to add to his tally at the Valley. Charlton have also done well after coming up this season, showing their quality in last weekend's surprise victory at Chelsea.

Poyet cautions Ranieri

AFP, London

Uruguayan midfielder Gustavo Poyet has warned Chelsea boss Claudio Ranieri his job could be on the line if the Londoners fail to qualify for Europe this season.

Chelsea, who face Leeds in a crucial match at Elland Road this weekend, are currently on course for a UEFA Cup spot but Poyet insists they dare not slip up in their remaining four matches.

"If you are not there (in Europe), a big club like Chelsea will make changes quickly," the 33-year-old told The Mirror newspaper.

"One morning you are here training with one manager and the following morning it's nobody! Chelsea is one of the teams where the manager has to feel the pressure."

"In England, the foreigners say the pressure is not the same as in Italy or Spain. But when you are manager of Chelsea, I think you feel pressure in every game because you don't know what's going to happen next week."

"It's up to Ranieri to keep turning it around. But getting into Europe would be better than winning the FA Cup or Cup Winners Cup."

"Two months ago it was like a dream, it was too far away. It looked as if the teams in front of us would have to make too many mistakes."

"But now it's there, so it would be one of our best end of seasons. The fans could never have dreamed about it a few weeks ago, but now they wake up and we are nearly there," Poyet said.

Hasselbaink in for a reception!

AFP, Leeds

Former Leeds star Jimmy-Floyd Hasselbaink can expect a hostile reception from the Elland Road faithful when he returns to the club with Chelsea on Saturday.

Leeds fans have warned the free-scoring Dutchman he will be targeted as the two sides clash in the English Premiership with each club needing a win to keep up their hopes of a place in Europe next year.

Hasselbaink was once idolised at Leeds but left amid acrimony after requesting a massive pay increase.

After two successful seasons with Leeds from 1997-99, in which he scored 42 goals from 78 appearances, Hasselbaink demanded a salary of 50,000 pounds (72,000 dollars) per week.

The requested salary would have made him the highest paid player in the Premier League at the time.

But his wage demands were dismissed out of hand by Leeds chairman Peter Ridsdale and Hasselbaink was sold to Atletico Madrid for 12 million pounds.

He was brought back to England by Chelsea, who paid 15 million pounds for him last summer. Leeds Supporters' Association chairman Ray Fell said: "There's no doubt he was, and still is, a great goalscorer, but when he left it was all about money and that's what upset the fans."

"I'm sure there will be plenty of jeering. We just have to be careful nothing else happens. We all abhor that kind of behaviour."

Serie A preview

Derby divides Rome

Football

REUTERS, Milan

Serie A leaders AS Roma face Lazio on Sunday (1830 GMT) in a Rome derby which will have a huge impact on the title race. But both teams have fitness worries over key players.

"The Rome derby has always been a passionate affair but never has the outcome had such a significance as on this occasion, prompting the daily Corriere dello Sport to dub the game 'The derby of Italy' -- a phrase traditionally used for games between Inter Milan and Juventus."

Roma go into the game six points clear of second-placed Juventus and seven ahead of Lazio who are third.

Victory for Fabio Capello's Roma would put them well clear of Lazio, but Dino Zoff's team know a win would move them within four points of the top.

With Roma facing Juve next week the champions could then have a real chance of retaining their title.

But midweek international games have taken their toll on some of the leading players.

Roma captain and key playmaker Francesco Totti is highly doubtful after he picked up an injury prior to Italy's friendly with South Africa on Wednesday.

Striker Vincenzo Montella, who scored the only goal for Italy in that game, is out with a leg injury which means a recall for Marco Delvecchio.

Lazio's Portuguese defender Fernando Couto could hear on Friday he is to be suspended after testing positive in a dope test. Yugoslav defender Sinisa Mihajlovic is also out after returning from Belgrade with an ankle injury.

Also worrying for Zoff is that his trio of Argentine players -- Hernan Crespo, Claudio Lopez and Juan Veron -- had to make two 18-hour flights to Bolivia for Argentina's midweek game which was played at altitude.

Zoff will need to assess the fitness of the trio when they return but all are expected to play.

The game may be a last chance for Lazio but Roma's Brazilian midfielder Emerson says his team have to keep the match in perspective.

"Yes it is a derby. Yes it is important. But the season does not end on Sunday night whatever the result," he said.

"There are three points at stake. We need to keep our perspective and remember there are other important games to come."

OTHER GAMES (Kick off Sunday 13:00 GMT unless stated, league positions in parentheses)

ATALANTA (5) v BOLOGNA (8)

It is over 38 years since Bologna won in Bergamo but Atalanta's home form has been shaky of late and they haven't picked up three points on their own turf since February 3.

Atalanta coach Giovanni Vavassori also has plenty of injury worries with Damiano Zenoni and



Fernando Couto

Couto suspended

REUTERS, Rome

Lazio defender Fernando Couto has been suspended by the Italian Football League after testing positive for the banned steroid nandrolone.

A spokeswoman for the league told Reuters on Friday that the Portuguese international's suspension had "immediate effect."

Massimo Donati among the players likely to be missing.

BARI (18) v PERUGIA (10)

After three successive defeats Bari are now 10 points away from safety and look doomed to Serie B football next season.

Perugia are pushing for an UEFA Cup slot but they could be without key midfielder Fabio Liverani who picked up a strain in his midweek debut for Italy.

BRESCIA (13) v INTERMILAN (7)

Brescia's chances of survival have been boosted by picking up eight points from their last four games, all of which saw former World Cup Roberto Baggio on target.

Inter produced one of their best performances of the year with their 4-2 win over Fiorentina last week but need a good run-in to make the fourth Champions League spot.

FIorentina (9) v Udinese (11)

Against Inter last week Roberto Mancini lost his first game since taking over as Fiorentina coach and he will again be without the services of injured Portuguese playmaker Rui Costa.

Udinese have been poor away from home having picked up just three wins all term and just a single point from their last five trips.

Juventus (2) v Lecce (12)

Juve will be hoping Roma come unstuck in the derby while they beat a Lecce side that ended a run of four

meaning he would miss Sunday's Rome derby against AS Roma.

The announcement was made just a few days after the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI) informed Juventus that a first test on a urine sample given by Dutch midfielder Edgar Davids in March has been found to be "non negative."

Couto, who has denied ever having used any illegal substance, has been suspended pending sentencing. Two Perugia players were banned for 16 months earlier this season after they tested positive in

post-match drug tests. The Portuguese player will also face a hearing from the anti-doping investigation of the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI) on May 8 or 9.

Nandrolone has been at the centre of drug cases in several sports in the last two years. Some competitors have blamed positive tests on food supplements.

Couto tested positive in a sample he provided after Lazio's match at Fiorentina on January 28 but Lazio lawyer Ugo Longo has claimed there may have been irregularities in the post-match testing.

straight defeats with a draw against Milan last week.

Alessio Tacchinardi is suspended for Juve while Alessandro Del Piero is injured so Antonio Conte will return to midfield.

AC MILAN (6) v VERONA (16)

Verona have proved a troublesome side for Milan of late -- they were held to a 1-1 draw at Verona earlier this season and drew 3-3 at the San Siro last term.

But Verona have not won away all season and face a Milan side that welcomes back Gennaro Gattuso and Alessandro Costacurra from injury.

REGGINA (17) v NAPOLI (15) (Kick off Saturday 18:30 GMT)

Reggina will be looking for revenge after a 6-2 hammering from Napoli earlier this season.

Napoli's Brazilian striker Edmundo is doubtful while Reggina forward Francesco Cozza is suspended.

VICENZA (14) v PARMA (4) (Kick off Saturday 13:00 GMT)

Parma are still favourites for the fourth Champions League qualification spot while, Vicenza, despite some impressive showings of late, remain close to the drop zone.

French midfielder Ousmane Dabo is suspended for Vicenza while Parma's Portuguese winger Sergio Conceicao is also serving a one-match ban.

Primera Liga preview

Barca desperate to impress

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona will have a chance to repair their battered reputation in front of their home fans as they play hosts to the form side in Spain, Celta Vigo, at the Camp Nou on Sunday (kickoff 1800 GMT).

It was not just the humiliation of last week's 3-1 defeat at the hands of relegation-threatened Osasuna which sealed the fate of coach Florenc Serra Ferrer, who was sacked on Monday, but also the response of his players to their predicament.

A dangerous two-footed tackle from Simao Sabrosa, an outrageous series of challenges from Ivan de la Pena and a cynical foul from Sergi Domingo the image of a team known for its attractive style of play.

All three players will miss the Celta game together with striker Patrick Kluijvert who received his fifth yellow card in last week's game.

It now falls to new coach Carlos Rexach to rescue the situation. The former understudy to former boss Johan Cruyff has pledged to reintroduce the open, attacking style of play identified with his mentor.

"The people at Barcelona want to see good football and if we play attractive football we will find it easier to win," Rexach said.

After their 2-1, wip against Galician rivals Deportivo, Celta will provide a tough test for Rexach's side. Victor Fernandez's team has gone unbeaten in 12 of their last 13 matches and are on course for a place in next season's UEFA Cup.

Other matches being played this weekend (League positions in parentheses, kickoff times 1600 GMT unless stated):

Saturday, April 28

REAL MADRID (1) OSASUNA (18) 1900

With an 11-point cushion at the top of the table Real look well on course to take their first title in four years.

Striker Fernando Morientes is definitely out with a groin injury, while midfielder Ivan Helguera is almost certain to be rested after he sustained a foot injury in Spain's midweek friendly against Japan.

Osasuna climbed a place after their emphatic 3-1 win over troubled Barcelona, but are still desperate for points in their battle to avoid relegation.

VALENCIA (3) VALLADOLID (15) 1900

Valencia need the points to ensure a place in next year's Champions League and it would be a shock if Valladolid gained their first away win of the season against Hector Cuper's side. All is not well at Valladolid.

President Ignacio Lewin resigned last week after failing to deal with the cash crisis facing the club, while their 3-1 defeat at Real Sociedad meant they on the verge of being dragged into a messy relegation battle.

Sunday, April 29:

ATHLETIC BILBAO (11) ALAVES (7) 1900

Bilbao will hope that history

rather than present form will be on their side as they take on Alaves in the Basque derby. The UEFA Cup finalists will be without influential Romanian defender Cosmin Contra, while Bilbao defender Aitor Larrazabal is serving a one-match suspension.

DEPORTIVO CORUNA (2) ESPANYOL (9)

After their 2-1 defeat at Celta Deportivo have effectively waved goodbye to their chances of retaining their league title, but are keen to stave off their rivals for the runners-up position. Djalminda returns to add some spice to

the midfield after serving his two-match ban, but striker Diego Tristán is suspended.

Espanyol strolled to an impressive 3-0 win over Racing Santander last week, but are without injured leading scorer Raul Tamudo.

LAS PALMAS (14) REAL SOCIEDAD (16) 1700

Despite a morale-boosting 3-1 win over Valladolid, Real are still only two points above the relegation zone and will feel that their visit to the out-of-form Canary islanders provides one of their best chances of banking a few more vital points.

MALAGA (8) REAL OVIEDO (17)

Oviedo, who have only won one match away from home all season, are facing a late season crisis. Despite a hard-fought 0-0 draw against Valencia they are two points above the relegation zone and relations between coach Radomir Antic and his team have reached an all-time low after his comments

criticising the quality of the squad. Leading striker Oli is out serving a one-match ban.

NUMANCIA (20) VILLARREAL (10)

Awin is vital if bottom of the table Numancia want to keep alive their slim hopes of retaining their place in the top flight. They can take some heart from the fact that Villarreal have been in inconsistent form in recent matches and will be missing Argentine striker Martin Palermo after his red card in last week's 2-2 draw against Mallorca.

RACING SANTANDER (19) RAYO VALLECANO (12)

Racing are looking set for relegation after their 3-0 drubbing by Espanyol, but Rayo are still looking for points to make absolutely certain of survival.

Rayo will be missing German midfielder Gerhard Poschner