

Premiership preview
Catch the Magpies

Football
AP, London

Few people would have bet that Newcastle would be the Premier League leader going into the busy, halfway stage of the season.



BOBBY ROBSON

With everyone playing four games in an 11-day spell, someone usually makes a break in the title race. While Newcastle, whose last league title triumph was in 1927, holds a three-point advantage after back-to-back victories at Arsenal and Leeds, Robson's team aren't expected to be in the same position when May comes around.

Arsenal teammate Emanuel Petit. Chelsea has hit a spell of sparkling form which included a 4-0 beating of Liverpool nine days ago although manager Claudio Ranieri admitted he had to give his team a verbal roasting at half time of its beating of Bolton.

"The first 35 minutes were awful," said the Italian, whose team fell 1-0 down early before hitting back with five. "In fact, it was unbelievable as the players forgot everything. I said that the warmup had finished and 'now please play football.'"

Liverpool, hot favorite to win the title just two weeks ago, has slipped from first to third after its losses to Chelsea and Newcastle and, with Michael Owen stuck on 99 career goals during that spell, seems to have forgotten how to score.

By contrast, Manchester United crushed Southampton 6-1 on Saturday not long after its 5-0 beating of Derby. Written off just three weeks ago after sliding to ninth and 11 points off the lead, the defending champion has hit form with Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy taking his tally for the season to 21.

The Reds have turned it round despite leaving England captain David Beckham on the bench, citing with a back problem. After five games without starting, Beckham may be back against Everton although French goalkeeper Fabien Barthez may be out because of an injury he suffered when he collected with a goalpost.

Down at the foot of the standings, Ipswich hopes to follow up its surprise 2-1 win at Tottenham by beating next to last Leicester at Portman Road and climbing away from last place on goal difference.

Second from last Derby goes to fifth from last West Ham while Southampton has a tough game at home to seventh place Tottenham.

Other games on Wednesday are Blackburn-Sunderland and Fulham-Charlton.

Division one leader Burnley holds a four-point lead going into its visit to lowly Rotherham while second place Wolves, which announced the hiring of Leicester striker Dean Sturridge on Monday, hosts mid-standings Preston.

In a full schedule of Scottish Premier League games, Celtic hopes to bounce back from its first loss of the season by beating third place Livingston at home.

Martin O'Neill's team tumbled 2-0 at Aberdeen on Saturday and its lead over second place Rangers was cut to 10 points even though the Hoops have a game in hand.

Rangers visit struggling Hibernian which means manager Alex McLeish must return to Easter Road barely three weeks after leaving for Ibrox Park.

Table with 2 columns: Fixture, Kick-off time. Includes Arsenal (2) v Chelsea (6), Aston Villa (8) v Liverpool (3).

Richer than the rest

Football
REUTERS, London

In terms of income, English soccer has never been healthier.

This year came the news that income had surpassed the one-billion-pound mark and, fuelled by new television deals, was likely to reach 1.5 billion for 2001.

In 1983, BBC and ITV combined to pay 2.3 million pounds (US dollars 3.31 million) for the rights to televise their pick of the matches played by the 92 clubs in the football league.

A three-year BSkyB and ITV deal, which came into effect this season, is worth 1.6 billion pounds for the premier league, while the football league will receive 315 million pounds over the same period from ITV Sport.

There are seven English clubs in the top 20 richest clubs in the world, according to a list published this month by British accountants Deloitte and Touche, with three more hovering just outside.

Manchester United are the richest club in the world with a turnover of 117 million pounds in the 1999-2000 season and Chelsea are eighth with 76.7 million.

Some observers saw the huge cash boost as a chance for English football clubs to finally shake off decades of debt and even start making profits.

The worst news for football, however, is that the golden teat that is television may be about to dry up.

"Everyone I know who runs a TV operation in this country, whether free-to-air or pay, knows we are paying too much for football and we are determined we are not going to pay this much again," said BBC director general Greg Dyke in November.

"There is no chance of anyone paying such large sums again," he said.

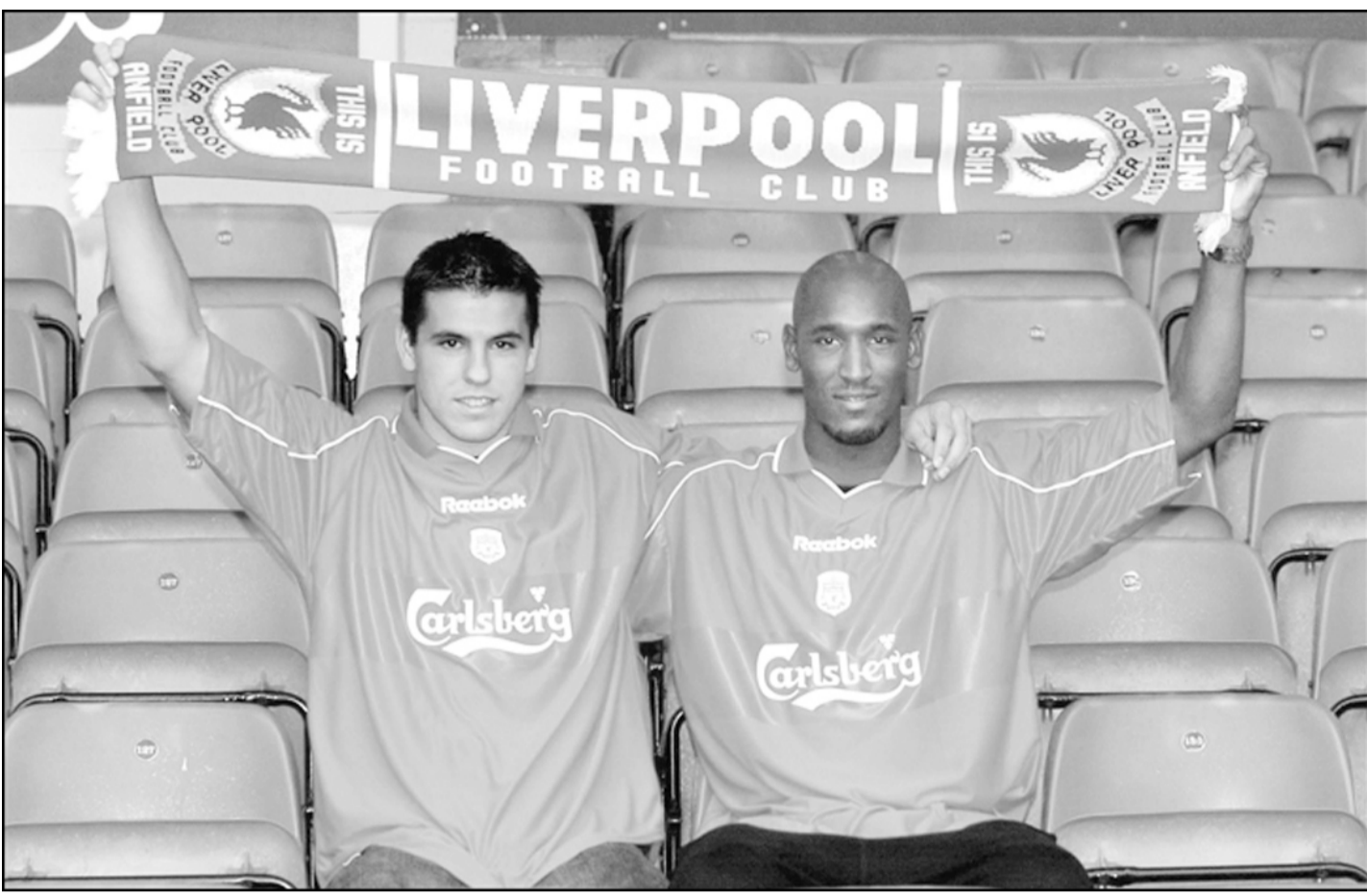
ITV saw live football as the ideal way to get subscribers to sign up for their digital channel but coverage of the sport may have reached saturation point.

In one week in December, a dedicated fan could have watched 17 live matches -- more than 25 hours of football ranging from Arsenal's 3-1 Champions League defeat of Juventus to Exeter's 0-0 draw with Dagenham and Redbridge in the FA Cup second round.

Pay-per-view has hardly been an unqualified success, with some matches being watched by more people in the stadium than on television.

The two companies which own ITV Digital, Granada and Carlton, have promised to fulfil their obligations for the period of the Football League deal but both are deeply in the red having also been hit by a recession in advertising.

The service has already cost its owners some 788 million pounds and needs a further 360 million to keep it going until 2004, when it is due to break even.



Liverpool's latest signings, Czech Republic international Milan Baros (L) and Frenchman Nicolas Anelka, display a club scarf after they were unveiled at Anfield on December 24.

Anelka couldn't wait

Football
INTERNET, Liverpool

France striker Nicolas Anelka completed a move to Liverpool from Paris St Germain on Monday and said he had jumped at the opportunity to join the UEFA Cup winners.

Anelka, who won the league and FA Cup Double with Arsenal during a two-year spell from 1997-99, has joined Liverpool until the end of the season with a view to a permanent transfer.

"I decided I wanted to leave Paris St Germain, and when I knew I had the opportunity to come to Liverpool I could not refuse," the 22-year-old told a news conference.

"When I left Arsenal, I never said I did not like England. My problems were all in my head.

"In your career, you cannot be

always at the top and sometimes things do not go as you want. You have to be strong mentally to overcome those things," said the striker, who has a reputation as a moody but highly talented player.

Czech forward Milan Baros was also unveiled at the same news conference as Liverpool look to provide support for England striker Michael Owen in the goals department, particularly after the departure of Robbie Fowler to title rivals Leeds United.

Assistant manager Phil Thompson, who is standing in for Gerard Houllier as the French manager recovers from emergency heart surgery, said: "Gerard Houllier rang me on Friday and asked what I thought about signing Nicolas.

"I thought about it for a few seconds and told him I thought it was a great idea.

"Robbie Fowler left a few weeks

ago and, although Milan has also joined us, he is a non-EC player and takes our quota up to five. We knew we needed someone else and, when the opportunity came to sign Nicolas, it was too good an opportunity to miss.

"Everybody knows that, when he played at Arsenal, he almost single-handedly won the title for them.

"That shows he can cope with the quality needed to play in the Premiership and, like Milan, we are delighted to have him here."

Baros said: "It was always my ambition to play in England and to achieve that ambition with a club like Liverpool is a dream."

Anelka, who left Arsenal for Real Madrid, has had problems settling in at all three of his previous clubs.

"Some things that happened at Madrid and Paris did not make it easier, but it is something that happens in many careers -- not just mine," the striker said.

"Now I hope to recover the level I was playing at earlier. Although this is only a loan, I hope I can make an impression and stay in Liverpool for a long time.

"The premier league seems to be more suited to my qualities because, when I played at Arsenal, I was with players who could give me the ball quickly and let me use my pace.

"Liverpool have some outstanding players and I am particularly excited about the prospect of playing alongside Michael Owen."

After a difficult time at PSG, scoring just two league goals this season following his 218-million franc (US dollars 29.61 million) move from Real Madrid, Anelka needs a good run of form to play himself into France's World Cup squad.

Table with 2 columns: Fixture, Kick-off time. Includes Blackburn (12) v Sunderland (11), Bolton Wanderers (14) v Leeds United (4).



Superstar Ronaldo sending a video message wishing his fans across the world Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Ronaldo wishes fans

Football
INTERNET, Rio de Janeiro

Inter Milan's Brazilian superstar Ronaldo arrived in Rio de Janeiro with one and a half hour's delay on Tuesday, happy to meet wife Milene, his mother Sonia and above all little Ronald who welcomed him at the airport.

During his short meeting with the journalists he declared himself very happy to be able to spend his Christmas vacations with his family in Brazil and expressed his satisfaction for his present physical condition, thus reassuring his supporters after last Sunday's muscular problems.

He also highlighted his team's good performance in the Italian league, due to the good relation-

ships among the players, all strongly determined to get to the final target: the "scudetto".

After the press conference at the airport, Ronaldo went home to rest and then take part in the forthcoming Christmas celebrations.

For Christmas, Ronaldo finds two presents: Inter who are on the top of the table at the end of 2001, and the reassuring diagnosis about the injury from the last match.

El Fenomeno left a video as a present, where he wishes a merry Christmas and a happy New Year to the fans of all the world, making an appointment for 2002: the Championship and a lot of goals.

Here you have an autograph in French. Ronaldo doesn't forget anyone:



Bowyer may be offered new contract

Football
INTERNET, Leeds

Leeds look set to offer disgraced midfielder Lee Bowyer a new contract despite fining him four weeks wages (US dollars 88,000) for his drunken behavior on the night an Asian student was brutally beaten in a street attack.

After two trials that put Bowyer's England career on hold although he continued playing for Leeds, a jury cleared the talented but fiery midfielder of charges causing grievous bodily harm to 19-year-old student Sarfraz Najeib and affray, or fighting.

Najeib, attacked by a gang in a street fight, suffered fractures to his nose, cheekbone and left leg, and his family has announced they will take civil action against Bowyer, Leeds and all those accused in the trial.

While declaring his innocence of taking part in any violence, Bowyer admitted being drunk on the night and the case prompted calls for Leeds to fire him.

But Leeds owner Peter Ridsdale and manager David O'Leary have said they are in favor of offering Bowyer a new contract. Bowyer has only 18 months to run on his current one and, at the very least, a new one would increase his value in the transfer market.

"Lee Bowyer was found not guilty of all charges in court," Ridsdale said. "As a player who has 18 months on his contract, it makes sense to negotiate a new one, given the ramifications of the Bosman ruling."

O'Leary had already declared his desire to keep Bowyer at Elland Road.

"Do I want him to stay and sign a new contract? Yes," the Leeds manager said. "And, if there is anything about him, he will."

Leeds fans Murder trial adjourned

Football
REUTERS, Istanbul

Turkish fans accused of involvement in the killing of two Leeds United supporters last year have had their court case adjourned until February.

Leeds supporters Kevin Speight and Christopher Loftus were stabbed to death in street brawls ahead of a UEFA Cup semifinal match against Galatasaray in April 2000.

being charged with offences ranging from murder to assault.

A Turkish court on Monday adjourned the trial to February 15.

The six charged with murder face up to 30 years in prison if convicted, though under Turkish law they may serve only 12 years of their sentences if they get time off for good behaviour.

All but one of the accused have been released on bail during the hearing. A presiding judge had previously hinted that a verdict might be reached before the end of the year.

An overloaded judicial system means many cases in Turkey can last years.



Turks (L-R) Kazim Dalga, Emrah Kaygusuz and Murat Yakis, who are accused of involvement in the killing of two Leeds United supporters last year, attending the court trial at Istanbul on December 24.

Big Phil's philosophy

2002 FIFA WORLD CUP KOREA JAPAN
REUTERS, Sao Paulo

Brazilians, spoilt by a rich past which has given them talents such as Garrincha, Pele, Rivelino, Zico and Socrates, believe that watching their national team should be an uplifting experience in which they are treated to exhibitions of style and artistry.

The four-time world champion, it is often said, should play with happiness.

For Brazil coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, however, happiness is a more mundane manner of scoring more goals than the opposition.

"You play happily when you get the right result," the man known as Felipeao (Big Phil) told Reuters in an interview. "How can you play happily if you lose? You play to win."

"Imagine if we go to the World Cup and we play three wonderful, out of this world games in the first round -- and we don't qualify."

"If we have to play ugly football to reach our objective, we will play ugly. What's the point of a cup? To be champions."

Scolari, for example, cannot understand why Brazilians still rave about their 1982 World Cup team -- which set the tournament alight only to crash out in the second round to Italy -- yet have dispatched the victorious 1994 side to the dustbin of football history.

Carlos Alberto Parreira's team, which ended a 24-year wait for Brazil's fourth title in the United States, has been rudely dismissed as being not attractive enough to watch.

"It amazes me," Scolari said. "I think that Parreira's determination in 1994 should be revered."

"Parreira demonstrated the importance of having belief in your work. Everybody was against him, but he was determined to achieve his objective and he did. And he made the players believe in it as well. I give great value to that win."

Scolari added: "I don't want to say that I don't value what we did in 1982. It was a spectacular team -- but at the moment when we could have used the rules to our advantage, we kept on attacking, trying to please the crowd."

through the final stages of a turbulent qualifying campaign to make sure it maintained its record of reputation as a coach who wins championships without worrying about whether he pleases the purists.

In the past, he has publicly chastised his team for not committing enough fouls or even failing to waste time.

But he says gamesmanship happens everywhere -- the only difference is that in South America it is almost seen as a virtue.

"I think everybody does it, but the

have always been a club coach and when I got to the national team it was different," he said.

"You have to know a few things, it takes three months to get to learn how things work...there are always interests here and there, there are people who prefer one player, not the other, that sort of thing."

As Brazil struggled to qualify for the World Cup and was knocked out of the Copa America by modest Honduras, Scolari said his two sons -- aged 10 and 17 -- were goaded at school and asked him if it was worth it was carrying on.

"In time and as I began getting the taste for the Selecao, I told them it was worth it," he said. "It got to me a bit as well, I was dying to speak my mind but I had to bite my tongue."

Scolari is now looking ahead and says he has decided on 15 or 16 of his 23-man squad for Japan and South Korea.

The emphasis, he said, will be on harmony and unity and there will be little place for temperamental big name players -- known in Brazil as "Big Medals" -- demanding special privileges.

"In my opinion, a football team, including a national team, has to be a big family. Everybody has to get on with everybody else."

"Teams which have a good squad, are well-organized and no big stars are getting to the front," he said, citing the examples of Spanish club Alaves, Italy's Chievo and Brazil's own Sao Caetano. "It's the same with national teams."

"The problem here is that our players think you can decide a game with one moment of the unexpected. So they don't need to train. This is a pure aberration but it is our culture."

Scolari says that Ronaldo, just getting over a two-year injury lay-off, remains Brazil's big uncertainty for the World Cup and refuses to discard 35-year-old striker Romario, despite his reputation for being difficult to get on with.

"Ronaldo is an incognito because he has to play, he has only just started playing more than 45 minutes. We have four months to observe him and maybe pick him for some friendlies, but it depends on how he reacts."

There is no veto on anybody," he added. "If I had a veto, Edilson would not be with me," he added, referring to the striker with whom he has fallen out with in the past.

"I want the best for Brazil. And the best for Brazil is not necessarily the best for me."

"At first, I felt the pressure and I felt difficulties in adapting because I