

Premiership Giggs' gorgeous gift

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United underlined their Premiership recovery Sunday by securing their fifth win in a row with a hard-fought 3-2 victory against Londoners Fulham at Craven Cottage to give manager Sir Alex Ferguson an early birthday present as he turns 60 on Monday.

Two goals from Welsh international Ryan Giggs and another from Ruud van Nistelrooy gave United three precious points with French duo Sylvain Legwinski and Steve Marlet replying for the home side.

United stay in fifth position with 36 points from 20 matches but move to within three points of leaders Arsenal.

Ferguson was not overly pleased with his team's performance but happy to see United continue their impressive run of results.

"I think there were periods when we did well and there were periods when we were pretty scrappy," said the Scotsman.

"The pitch didn't help, it was a very difficult pitch, parts of it were very firm and that can make it difficult for you.

"I would have been disappointed if we had thrown that away, but at the end of the day it was a good away win."

Ferguson singled out Giggs for special praise who is enjoying a rich vein of form since returning from injury.

"He has good penetration and he can beat a man and hold the ball for us," Ferguson added.

Ferguson refused to expand on comments he has made suggesting he may be ready to rethink his decision to retire as manager at the end of the season.

But the Scot did pay tribute to Andy Cole, who signed for Blackburn Rovers on Saturday.

"It was proving difficult to keep Andy happy on the bench. He gave seven great years' service to the club. He's not the easiest substitute to have."

Just seconds after Fulham striker Louis Saha had rattled the crossbar, a goalkeeping error by home goalkeeper Edwin van der Saargifted United an early lead.



Manchester United ace Ryan Giggs (C), celebrates the match-winning strike against Fulham at Craven Cottage while teammates Paul Scholes (L) and David Beckham joins in on December 30.

The Dutchman attempted to boot the ball to safety but failed to connect properly, allowing Giggs to roll the ball into an unguarded net.

Fulham hit the woodwork again on 15 minutes when Barry Hayles blasted a shot against the bar from just eight yards out. United's French goalkeeper Fabien Barthez saved superbly from the follow-up by Steed Malbranque.

Barthez also saved well from a Malbranque free-kick, while Laurent Blanc twice went close for United with headers from corners.

United went further ahead in the final minute of the first half thanks to the wizardry of Giggs.

The Welshman took a pass from van Nistelrooy, raced down the left and delivered the perfect cross for the Dutchman to volley past van der Saar from close range.

That looked like it might be the killer goal but within seconds Fulham pulled a goal back.

Malbranque swung in a free-kick and Legwinski stooped to head low past his compatriot Barthez with whom he won the French title at Monaco in 1997.

Giggs restored United's two-goal cushion within two minutes of the restart.

Van Nistelrooy headed on a long punt from Barthez towards Giggs

who appeared to be too wide to get a decent shot on target.

However, the tricky winger wrapped his foot around the ball and his unstoppable half-volley flashed into the net beyond van der Saar.

United looked comfortable after that and could have gone further ahead - van Nistelrooy scuffed a shot wide and David Beckham was just off target with a left-foot volley.

But the champions were forced to suffer an anxious finish after conceding a second goal a minute from time.

Marlet, hampered by injury since becoming Fulham's record signing, tapped home from close range after Rufus Brevett had skinned the United defence.

Fulham threw everybody forward in a desperate bid to snatch a point but United held on for a vital win.

Diving not Pires style

AFP, London

France midfielder Robert Pires on Monday became the latest Arsenal player to defend his reputation against diving allegations by insisting he is not a cheat.

Pires was booked for diving by referee Andy D'Urso during the Gunners' 2-1 win over Middlesbrough last Saturday, the second time he has been cautioned for that offence this season.

However, Pires, insisted he was innocent and was not trying to con the referee. "I do not dive and I didn't look for a penalty," he said.

"That is not the reputation I want to get. I know it is hard for referees but I was very upset to be given those two yellow cards.

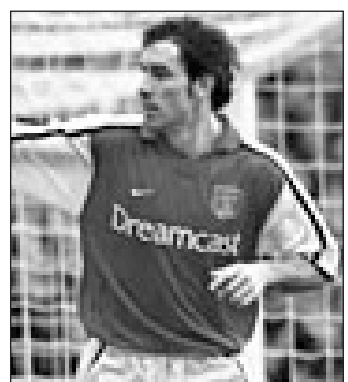
"In both cases, at West Ham and against Middlesbrough, there was contact made on me. At West Ham, I just got up immediately and tried to get the ball."

Referees are increasingly clamping down on any perceived diving, leading to a rash of yellow and red cards in the Premiership.

Arsenal team-mate Giovanni van Bronckhorst was sent off at Anfield just before Christmas, with his second yellow card being given by referee Paul Durkin for diving.

"It was the same for Giovanni at Liverpool. He was very upset to be shown the yellow card because he did not turn round and call for a penalty," Pires told the Evening Standard.

"I want to build my reputation as a footballer, not as someone who dives. And I have never dived deliberately to get an opponent in trouble or to win a penalty for my team. Never. And yet to be cautioned twice for that offence looks bad for me."



ROBERT PIRES

Mighty McAllister year!

Football

INTERNET, London

Liverpool's Gary McAllister has been given an MBE in the New Year Honours - at the age of 37.

In 19 years as a professional before he arrived at Anfield, McAllister had won just two medals - with Motherwell in 1985 and with Leeds in 1992.

But the midfielder's 20th year as a professional saw him play an integral part in Liverpool's treble-winning success.

And in just over one season with Liverpool he went on to win five trophies.

So the MBE is his sixth medal he has received in less than a year.

such an exciting time

"People tell me that at my age you can be going along nicely and suddenly the wheels fall off and you know it's all over."

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier had brought him to Anfield on a free transfer from Coventry in July 2000 to provide experience to his young players.

It was a masterstroke in management as McAllister himself acknowledged.

"I have to dedicate at least part of this award to Gerard.

"He gave me the chance to come to Liverpool at such an exciting time."

Born in Motherwell in 1964, McAllister had four years with his hometown club before joining Leicester for 150,000 pounds in the summer of 1985.

He scored a penalty winner against Barcelona in the Uefa Cup semi-final and a 40-yard free-kick that won the Merseyside derby against Everton.

He followed that with dead-ball crackers against Coventry and Bradford in the run-in that took Liverpool into the Champions League.

But McAllister saved his very best for those two finals last May.

His appearance as substitute turned the FA Cup final, as much as Michael Owen's goals, after Liverpool had seemed to be heading for defeat against Arsenal.

Four days later he was on from the start against Alaves in the Uefa Cup final in Dortmund.

McAllister had a hand in four of the five Liverpool goals in a memorable 5-4 victory.

As well as a scoring a penalty, it was from his free-kick in the 117th minute that Alaves' Delfi Geli scored a golden own goal.

At the start of this season McAllister also scored a penalty in the Charity Shield win over Manchester United.

His success was even more remarkable when you consider his first few months at Anfield had been so difficult.

That was partly due to injury but also because his wife Denise was battling to overcome breast cancer.

As chemotherapy carried a risk to her unborn child, she refused the treatment, and waited two weeks until it was safe to induce the birth and baby Oliver was born safe and well.

She was then able to receive treatment and in remission attended the final in Dortmund.

McAllister won the Man of the Match award at that game.

He subsequently donated his prize money to two breast cancer charities - Christie's Hospital in Manchester and the MacMillan Trust.

That so much of Liverpool's success has been derived from McAllister's penalty expertise is poignant given the painful memory of his spot-kick miss for Scotland against England in Euro 96.

Even though a McAllister penalty took Scotland to the 1998 World Cup finals, he became a persistent target of abuse for a section of the Tartan Army.

When Scotland lost 2-1 to the Czech Republic in 1999 and McAllister was incessantly jeered he announced his retirement from international football, having won 57 caps.

Like that other legendary Scot, Robert the Bruce, McAllister's gong then is a reward for never giving up in the face of enormous challenges.

"Sometimes I just smile at what has happened to me in the past year, it's hard to believe sometimes," he said.

"This award is the perfect end to a perfect year. I couldn't have asked for more."



GARY McALLISTER

Last season McAllister came on as a substitute in both the Worthington and the FA Cup finals and was on from the start in the Uefa Cup final win over Alaves.

Five years later, after 200-plus games, he moved to Leeds for £1m, with whom he won the championship.

This season he also played in Liverpool's Charity Shield and European Super Cup finals' triumphs.

"I feel it is more to mark what has been 20 years for me in the game," said McAllister of his MBE.

"I must thank all the teams I have played for.

"You don't do things on your own in this game and I have been lucky enough to play alongside great players that have only helped me progress.

"All my clubs - as well as the people I have played alongside for Scotland - have helped me."

McAllister was 37 on Christmas Day, and it is likely he will get a new one-year contract in the summer when his current deal runs out.

"How long can I keep going? I just don't know," said the midfielder.

I have to dedicate at least part of this award to Gerard - he gave me the chance to come to Liverpool at

GARY McALLISTER FACTFILE

Born: 25 Dec 1964.

Clubs: Motherwell Sep 81-Aug 85; Leicester Aug 85-Jul 90; Leeds Jul 90-Jul 96; Coventry Jul 96-Jul 00; Liverpool Jul 00-1.

Club honours: Motherwell - Scottish Division One title 1985; Leeds - Division One title 1992; Liverpool - Worthington Cup 2001, FA Cup 2001, Uefa Cup 2001, Charity Shield 2001, European Super Cup 2001.

International honours: 57 caps for Scotland

Premiership preview Magpies' battle-royale

Football

REUTERS, London

Their rivals will fail to see the irony, but the New Year could usher in the same old story at an alarming rate - Manchester United top of the English Premier League.

website.

"Bobby Robson has done a fantastic job there and I think he takes a lot of credit for what's happened up there."

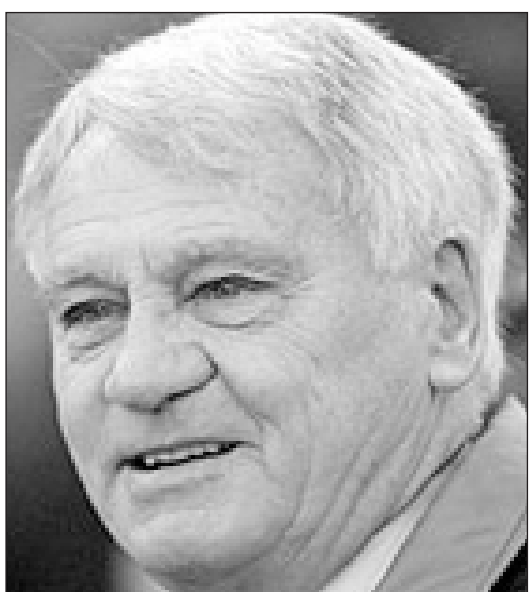
Ferguson has Ryan Giggs flying and Ruud van Nistelrooy gobbling up chances in front of goal, and their defence, while still shaky at times, is much improved.

"But we're at the right end of the table and there's no need to get despondent about (losing to Chelsea)."

Robson's side edged a thrilling match against United at St James' Park in September 4-3, with Shearer grabbing the winner after Ferguson's team had recovered from 3-1 down to level the score at



SIR ALEX FERGUSON



BOBBY ROBSON

For by the time the reigning champions run out at Old Trafford against second-placed Newcastle United on Wednesday, they could have a chance to assume the league leadership, for the first time this season, on goal difference.

It would take a remarkable set of poor results for Arsenal, who lead by three points, Leeds United and Liverpool on Tuesday to let United through that early in 2002.

But as their confidence soars on the back of five straight wins, the growing feeling is that United's assault on this season's summit is a matter of when, not if.

British bookmakers installed fifth-placed United as clear 6-4 favourites for the title following their 3-2 win at Fulham on Sunday and Newcastle, who have never won in seven premier league visits to Old Trafford, face a difficult task in bucking their opponents' upward trend.

Yet manager Bobby Robson has invigorated the north-east club in startling fashion, and their lofty position, built on a sound defence and the dovetailing partnership of Alan Shearer and Craig Bellamy, is no illusion.

"It will be a fantastic game, I'm really looking forward to it," United boss Alex Ferguson told the club's

Ferguson still urges caution when it comes to United's chances, but he knows that United's suitors to the title are doing exactly what he had hoped for earlier this season -- "cutting each other's throats".

He said: "We've got an uphill fight. You see the way the League is now and we can't afford to make any mistakes.

"I said that our opponents have got the best chance of winning the league now and I think that's still right. They recognise that and that's why it's such a fantastic league at the moment."

Ferguson could have Juan Sebastian Veron available again after injury, and must decide whether to bring the Argentina international back at the expense of either Nicky Butt or Paul Scholes.

Newcastle's 2-1 defeat by Chelsea at St James' Park on Saturday ended a run of five straight wins and dented the sense of anticipation on Tyneside.

Robson insists his side will not win the league, but he is nevertheless relishing his Old Trafford test.

"It's come at just the right time," he said after the Chelsea match. "I always thought that the second half of the season would be difficult.

Eric down under

Football

REUTERS, Melbourne

Former Manchester United star Eric Cantona has reportedly agreed to come out of retirement and make a guest appearance in the Australian National Soccer League.

The team manager of the Melbourne Knights, John Sigur, has told Reuters the club had successfully negotiated a deal with the flamboyant Frenchman to make a one-off appearance in the local derby match against South Melbourne on February 9.

"We're going to make a formal announcement later in the week but the players were all told at training last night that the deal's been sealed and they're just over the moon," Sigur said.

"We've been chasing a group of four top players but Eric was right at the head of our list and we're delighted he's agreed to come and join us.

"The club really wants to help promote the game in Australia and by having someone like Eric Cantona come and play for us, we're hoping he'll bring a lot of

media interest to the game."

The Knights employed former England star Peter Beardsley on a similar two-match deal two seasons ago.

Local newspapers reported Cantona had been offered 50,000 Australian dollars (25,000 US) for the guest appearance but Sigur said the club would not comment on how much he was being paid.

Cantona has not played top-flight soccer since he suddenly left Old Trafford in 1997 but has kept himself fit playing on the European professional beach circuit.



ERIC CANTONA

Wenger looks to Africa

Football

AFP, London

Table-toppers Arsenal are to ask the national associations of Nigeria and Cameroon for help in their bid to lift the Premiership title.

Gunners boss Arsene Wenger requested the two countries allow the key players Kanu and Lauren to stay in London for the crucial Highbury clash with Liverpool on January 13 - seven days before the start of the African Nations Cup finals in Mali.

Wenger is resigned to losing Kanu and Lauren to their national sides for up to a month, a period in which Arsenal face tough away tasks at Leeds and Blackburn plus a likely fourth round cup tie.

But he is desperate to keep them on board for the meeting with Liverpool, who will be looking to avenge last Sunday's Anfield defeat by the Gunners.

Wenger said: "I think I will be talking to the African federations some time on Monday and I will tell them both players want to stay here for the Liverpool game.

"That still gives them a week to go to their first match in the finals and it is not as though they are lacking match-fitness and need preparation, unlike some players in the national squads whose domestic fixtures are over."

Wenger is publicly optimistic he will have his stars available for Liverpool even though he was embroiled in a bitter row with Nigeria over Kanu's release for the last African Nations Cup finals two years ago and the Olympic Games tournament last year.

But asked whether he expected Cameroon to be any easier to deal with over Lauren's release he admitted: "Not really. I believe they have a certain way of doing things."

Not unnaturally, both players are keen to represent their countries in the African Nations Cup especially as they have been told that performances in Mali will have a strong bearing on the make-up of the respective squads for next summer's World Cup finals.

And under FIFA rules, both Nigeria and Cameroon have first call on their players for major international events. So Wenger is heavily dependent on African goodwill.