

Premiership preview

West Brom's baptism of fire

Football

AFP, London

Premiership new boys West Brom could have had an easier introduction to life in the English top flight than a visit to Old Trafford on Saturday.

But playing Manchester United away is the task that confronts the Midlands club, who clawed back an 11-point deficit last season to claim the second automatic promotion from under the noses of regional rivals Wolves.

And their task is unlikely to be made any easier by United's 1-0 Champions League third round qualifying first leg defeat away to Hungarian outfit Zalaegerszeg on Wednesday.

"It was a shock result," United

fanatical support and will look to the example set by the likes of Southampton and Charlton as they bid to become the latest 'small' club to survive in the Premiership.

But West Brom boss Gary Megson, whose side have furthered tough games against Leeds and reigning champions Arsenal immediately after United, is an understandably cautious man.

"We aren't ready yet," said Megson. "The players aren't quite there yet, but they will be by the time we start our season."

"We still have a lot of work to do on set-pieces and organisation, and need to put the finishing touches on a number of things so we are fully prepared for the task ahead."

West Brom, who lack United's spending power, will have to find a

replacement for midfielder Adam Chambers, who will miss Saturday's match and is out for three months with knee ligament damage.

But for Ronnie Wallwork and Michael Appleton this fixture could be a chance to show former side United they were wrong to let them go.

They could find themselves up against a much-changed home side with Fabien Barthez, Rio Ferdinand, Gary Neville and Wes Brown all injured.

Ferguson could decide to draft in Paul Scholes and/or Nicky Butt in the wake of Roy Keane and Juan Sebastian Veron's performances in Budapest.

Saturday's other major clash sees Leeds take on last season's First Division champions Manchester City.

City boss Kevin Keegan has injury worries of his own with goalkeeper and former United favourite Peter Schmeichel out

with a back injury and first choice reserve Nicky Weaver struggling with a knee problem.

That leaves former England boss Keegan with just Carlo Nash to call on from his senior keepers.

"Nicky Weaver unfortunately has had a setback. He may need another operation on his knee and if he does then you are talking three months," Keegan said.

"Everything was going fine with his recovery but then on Saturday his knee blew up. So we have a problem now with goalkeepers if Carlo gets injured."

The match will see the City debut of former Liverpool striker Nicolas Anelka.

An interested spectator at Elland Road will be England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson, who is set to cast his eye over Leeds duo Lee Bowyer and Jonathan

Jardel Barca bound?

Football

INTERNET, Lisbon

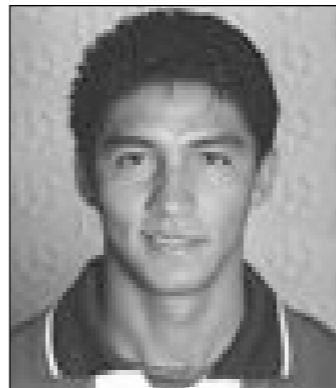
For the past two summers, Brazilian striker Mario Jardel has been a permanent fixture in most newspapers across the world. This year is no different as he first publicly battled a bout of depression and has now hit the headlines once more after it was revealed that he has secured a move to FC Barcelona.

The deal is expected to be announced in the next 48 hours as negotiations between Barca and Jardel's current club Sporting Lisbon continue. It is expected that the Spanish side will offer approximately US dollars 5m plus Jardel's compatriot Geovanni in part exchange.

Two summers ago he courted some of the leading European clubs after announcing his decision to leave the club that made him a household name across the continent. His time at FC Porto was spectacularly profligate. In his four-year stay at the Portuguese giants he won three league titles and finished every season as the top scorer. In fact in his 125 appearances for Porto he scored a remarkable 130 goals!

A transfer to Turkish side Galatasaray followed for a record dollars US28.2, but after only one season his move had turned sour, even though he had scored 22 goals in 22 appearances and been instrumental in the Turks' wonderful Champions League run.

After deciding to leave Istanbul, one club after the other claimed publicly they had the signature of the prolific striker. Jardel's behaviour even led to Galatasaray chairman, Mehmet Cansun, to criticize



MARIO JARDEL

his prized import: "Jardel is a complete pain in the neck. It is certain that he is not going to play for us again and we need to get rid of him as soon as possible."

The 28-year-old Brazilian striker then surprised everybody by returning to Portugal. It was money well spent by Sporting, who in return for their money got a striker who scored a phenomenal 42 goals in 30 outings. With that kind of form it is no surprise that Sporting won the league at such a canter.

Barca's returning coach Louis van Gaal will be hoping that this Brazilian can inspire them a return to former glories. In the past three seasons they have had to watch their bitter rivals Real Madrid hog the limelight. This close season has been no different. Whilst Barca had to contend with the public denouement from the AC Milan bound Rivaldo, Madrid were, and still are, in negotiations to sign their former idol, Ronaldo.

The time has come for Jardel to prove in one of Europe's most daunting arenas the true worth of his talent. The Nou Camp waits with bated breath.

Ronaldo waiting too

Football

AFP/REUTERS/INTERNET, Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian World Cup winner Ronaldo insisted here on Thursday that no agreement has yet been reached over his move from Inter Milan to Real Madrid.

The ace striker, who scored both goals as his country won a fifth World Cup with victory over Germany in Japan in June, hit back at Spanish press reports which suggested that both Inter and Real had already settled on the terms of the transfer.

"There is no agreement. I am a long way off my best form," said the Brazilian who arrived here four days earlier than planned to prepare for Brazil's friendly match with Paraguay in Fortaleza on August 21 having been deemed surplus to requirements by Inter for their Champions League clash on Wednesday night against Sporting Lisbon.

The other Brazil players are not due to report until Sunday and Ronaldo's early arrival was interpreted in Brazil as another slap in the face for his club.

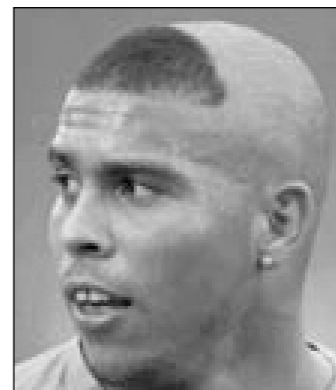
"I'm looking forward to it because it's a game to celebrate our title, I'm happy to take part," he said.

Ronaldo played down his differences with Brazil coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, who last month described Ronaldo as a "spoilt player" who needed to be taught how to play more for the team.

"He was the one who said it. I just defended myself," said Ronaldo, who said at the time that some people did not know how to conduct themselves after they had won.

Ronaldo refused to comment on the impasse with his club Inter, saying only that he wanted the situation to be settled quickly.

"I hope they decide as quickly as possible," he said after arriving at Rio de Janeiro airport.



RONALDO

Meanwhile, the Spanish sports daily Marca had reported on Thursday that the fate of Ronaldo will be decided this weekend during a meeting on the Balearic Islands between Real Madrid president Florentino Perez and his Inter Milan counterpart Massimo Moratti.

It added that the two clubs have already ironed out much of the details of the transfer and all that remains is for the two men to meet to seal the Brazilian superstar's fate.

Perez is currently on holiday in Palma, while Moratti regularly travels to nearby Formentera and it is reported that the meeting will take place on one of the Balearic Islands.

Reports hinted that Real are prepared to stump up 48 million euros for Ronaldo in addition to one or two other players - a long way off the 100m euro price tag Inter have placed around the star's neck.

However, Marca reported that Inter are prepared to reduce their

asking price for the player who has made it clear he wants to leave Italy. "It is not me who will call Florentino," Moratti told the newspaper.

Marca claim that Moratti and Perez are both currently tanning their hides on various Balearic Islands and will meet up over the weekend for a jug of Sangria and a chat about the fate of Ronnie. Exactly which Balearic island the two stately gents will choose for the transfer summit is unclear, but sources suggest that Ibiza might be the right place for such a discussion.

With the summer in full swing on the clubber's island Moratti and Perez could tawl San Antonio taking advantage of free shots of dubious spirits before settling down to talk Euros. With a deal in the bag they could go out clubbing to celebrate. After all, it's not everyday you agree a 100m euro player sale.

That sale has seemed to be inching nearer in the past few days, and perhaps when Moratti has had his inhibitions lowered with a few vodka and red bulls, Perez might find him more suggestible. As Moratti himself recently told Marca: "At present Ronaldo is worth 100 million euros, anything can happen in the future. We will see what happens in the coming days."

With comments like that and the prospect of a meeting between the two, Spanish newspapers are confidently predicting that the Inter striker is on his way to the Bernabeu. Reports suggested that Madrid would offer US dollars 47 million, and could try and throw Claude Makelele or Flavio Conceicao into the deal as well to tempt the San Siro side.

It seems that this weekend will decide Ronaldo's future. If Perez and Moratti emerge for Pacha at dawn clutching a contract and trying to hail a taxi to the beach, we'll know that Ronaldo is finally for Real.



ALEX FERGUSON

boss Alex Ferguson told BBC TV.

"They didn't have a kick in the second half and only one attack on goal. But we only have ourselves to blame because we created lots of chances," said the Scot who will be looking to his players to respond in typical fashion.

"They changed their system, but that's the only thing. They played five at the back and allowed us all the possession. But we should break that down, we've played against that many times," a frustrated Ferguson explained.

This will be West Brom's first match in the Premiership - they have not been members of English football's elite since the days of the old First Division when, on their last visit to Old Trafford, they lost 3-0 courtesy of a Jesper Olsen hat-trick.

However West Brom, founder members of the Football League back in 1888, are a club with

FIXTURES (1400GMT unless stated)
Saturday: Blackburn v Sunderland, Charlton v Chelsea, Everton v Tottenham, Fulham v Bolton, Leeds v Manchester City, Man United v West Brom, Southampton v Middlesbrough
Sunday: Arsenal v Birmingham (1405GMT), Aston Villa v Liverpool (1300 GMT)
Monday: Newcastle v West Ham (1900GMT)



GARY MEGSON

Woodgate.

Both were overlooked for international duty last season because of their involvement in a street fracas, could yet feature in his side for England's friendly next month against Portugal.

Reigning champions Arsenal begin the defence of their title at home to newly-promoted Birmingham on Sunday and hope to have club captain Patrick Viera in their midfield.

That is despite the France star being on the receiving end of a poor tackle from Steven Gerrard during last week's 1-0 Community Shield win over Liverpool last week.

Viera received treatment on his knee but has been back in training this week.

Title contenders Liverpool are also in action Sunday, away to Aston Villa.

Rio was just a cover!

Football

INTERNET, Leeds

Leeds United only paid West Ham a world record fee for Rio Ferdinand to use him as cover for absent defender Jonathan Woodgate, according to club chairman Peter Ridsdale.

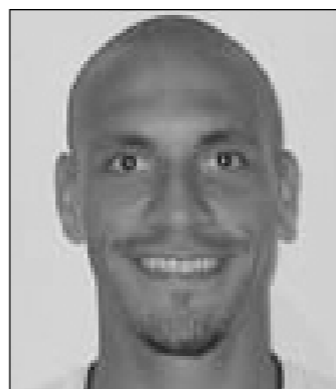
Ferdinand became the world's most expensive defender for the first time when he joined Leeds in November 2000 for £18m, only to smash that mark last month by moving to Manchester United for £30m.

Ridsdale told Friday's Daily Mirror: "We only actually bought Rio in the first place because Jonathan Woodgate's position was uncertain due to his involvement in what turned out to be two trials."

Woodgate was sentenced to 100 hours of community service last December after being convicted of affray following an attack on a student in Leeds city centre in January 2000. An initial trial was abandoned in April last year after a newspaper interview with the student's father.

"Now Woodgate is back, Lucas Radebe is looking sharp again and we've got Dominic Matteo and Michael Duberry and Danny Mills who played in that [centre back] position in some of the European games," Ridsdale said.

"People say we have sold our best player but you have to take a view on whether that is actually the case or not."



RIO FERDINAND

"You could argue what we have done is cover for Woodgate for 18 months in case he was not around."

"Now we have got him back and we have made a healthy profit on a player we only bought as cover in the first place."

Ridsdale also pointed to Leeds' track record of overcoming the loss of key players.

When Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink went to Atletico Madrid [in July 1999] it raised a few people's eyebrows - but we stormed to third in the league that season [1999-2000].

"I don't really want to criticise Rio because he did a great job for us."

"We took a big gamble when we signed him but he was great in the community, great on the field and great for England."

"But the reality is that he has gone and yet there are still a lot of Premiership clubs who would be happy to swap places with us when it comes to strength at the back."

French League One

Tasty tussle at Marseille

Football

AFP, Paris

Champions Lyon travel to Marseille's Cote d'Azur stronghold on Friday in the standout fixture of this weekend's third round of French League One (First Division) games.

With Lyon, lying second, producing nine goals from their first two matches Marseille's defence is bracing itself for fireworks and captain Frank LeBoeuf readily acknowledges the gulf between the teams.

"Lyon are still favourites for the title," the shaven-headed central defender said.

Yet with a Lyon defence that has proved a little leaky with four goals conceded already LeBoeuf feels his side could come away with something, even accounting for the probable absence of Marseille sharp shooter Lamine Sakho.

"Guingamp came back from 3-1 down to draw 3-3 (against Lyon)," he noted.

"And Sedan were leading up to nearly half time, so perhaps there is a way to do something."

Lyon's Juninho, not to be confused with his Middlesbrough namesake, also believes Friday's trip to the Velodrome stadium will be

first round qualifier thanks to a Djibril Cisse goal, travel to Troyes.

One Auxerre player feeling on particularly good terms with himself and the rest of the world for that matter is 20-year-old Philippe Mexes, celebrating being called up for France's friendly against Tunisia next week.

"I wasn't expecting it," said the defender.

"It made me warm inside. What with the win in Portugal this was the icing on the cake."

Paris Saint German travel to Corsica to play Ajaccio once again without their World Cup star Ronaldinho.

Despite training as normal on Thursday the Brazilian is still not 100 percent fit.

"We're all waiting for him but there's no point rushing his comeback," said the PSG stopper Lionel Letizi.

Table toppers Nantes will have to do without their attacking midfielder Stephane Ziani in their tie against Sochaux - Ziani is still struggling with a thigh injury picked up in Nantes' 2-0 win over Marseille.

In other games fourth-placed Guingamp host Rennes, under a cloud at the moment with Julien Escude effectively on strike as he awaits a possible move to Manchester United, with former champions Bordeaux away to Montpellier.



RONALDINHO

FIXTURES
Friday: Marseille v Lyon
Saturday: Montpellier v Bordeaux, Bastia v Monaco, Guingamp v Rennes, Lille v Nice, Paris Saint Germain v Ajaccio, Sedan v Lens, Sochaux v Nantes, Strasbourg v Le Havre, Troyes v Auxerre

Bundesliga preview

Bayern test for Bielefeld

Football

AFP, Berlin

The German league season is only one week old - but it is not likely to maintain its current unfamiliar hue for long.

Unheralded Arminia Bielefeld roared to the summit on the opening day last weekend with a 3-0 win over Werder Bremen.

But stark reality is likely to replace pipedreams on Saturday as they head for a Bayern Munich side which has vowed to put silver-

summer. "We have signed up some fantastic players and they will make us stronger and score a strong quota of goals from midfield," said coach Ottmar Hitzfeld.

Ballack on Wednesday topped a Kicker magazine poll as German footballer of the year, replacing Kahn.

"It's great I was finally able to win a title for last season," Ballack told Bayern's website as he reflected on his season of disappointments with Leverkusen.

Bayern are keen not to display any signs of over-confidence as

Stephane Chapuisat. Defender Sebastian Kehl says February's loss still rankles.

"We've a few things to put right after that 4-0 loss," Kehl told Kicker magazine. "We're dying to show we're up to it this time."

Leverkusen drew at Cottbus in an uninspiring opener and without former playmaker and Bayern new arrival Ballack may struggle to repeat last season's three near misses.

Cup winners Schalke travel to Kaiserslautern hoping to overturn a recent poor run of results there.

It is a quarter of a century since former West Germany striker

FIXTURES
Saturday: Hertha Berlin v VfB Stuttgart, Kaiserslautern v Schalke 04, Hanover 96 v 1860 Munich, Bayer Leverkusen v Borussia Dortmund, Bayern Munich v Arminia Bielefeld, Hansa Rostock v FC Nuremberg, VfL Bochum v Energie Cottbus
Sunday: Werder Bremen v SV Hamburg, VfL Wolfsburg v Borussia M'gladbach



OLIVER KAHN

Klaus Fischer helped Schalke to win at the venue and the 'Royal Blues' have won there just twice in 33 attempts.

Werder Bremen, champions a decade ago, meet Hamburg in the northern derby hoping for better things after their flop at Bielefeld.

Former Rangers star Jorg Albertz scored twice in last week's win over Hanover to give former European champions Hamburg a winning start.

Hamburg came a disappointing 11th last term and coach Kurt Jara has to turn the ship around in the months ahead.

Elsewhere, Hertha Berlin host VfB Stuttgart, Hanover 96 meet 1860 Munich, Hansa Rostock take on Nuremberg, VfL Bochum face Energie Cottbus, whom they beat on the way to relegation for their last home Bundesliga win 16 months ago, and Borussia Monchengladbach travel to VfL Wolfsburg.

Dortmund lost their last meeting 4-0 in February - but still won the title as Leverkusen, who went top that day, collapsed in the final fortnight and let slip the league title despite Ballack's regular star turns.

They went on to lose the Champions League final and German Cup final.

Dortmund, European champions five years ago, last won the fixture 11 years ago with goals from Michael Rummenigge and

Ljungberg sets September target

Football

AFP, London

Injured Arsenal midfielder Freddie Ljungberg said Friday he is hopeful of returning to first-team action in mid-September.

Ljungberg has undergone surgery this summer after suffering a hip injury during the World Cup and has been forced to miss the start of the new Premiership season as a result.

However, he is happy with the progress he had made since the operation and is now waiting to hear an update from his specialist next week.

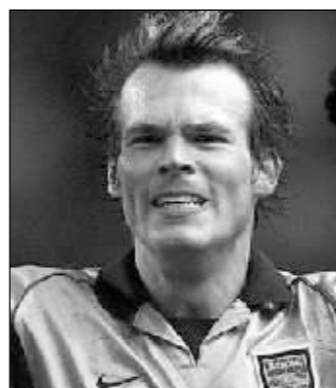
The Swede told the club's website, www.arsenal.com: "The hip is getting better. Of course, when you have an operation it goes slowly but the doctors are happy with my progress."

"I'm seeing a specialist on August 22 and I'm working on

building up all the muscles around the hip."

"I'm aiming (to return) for the middle of September. But at the same time, I've had an operation so I can't be too devastated if the specialist tells me I can't start rotating the hip," he added.

"I'm hopeful, but I'll have to wait and see."



FREDDIE LJUNGBERG

Effenberg's no to Vienna

REUTERS, Vienna

Former Germany and Bayern Munich midfielder Stefan Effenberg has turned down an offer to join Austrian Premier League team Austria Vienna, the club have said.

"Stefan Effenberg will definitely not switch to Austria Vienna," the club said on their website. "The German did not accept Austria's offer and therefore there will be no commitment from him."

The club gave no further details of the 34-year-old's decision, which was originally due to be made public on Thursday.

The club's sport director Peter Svetits had met Effenberg in Duesseldorf on Tuesday after the player said last week he would end his career if he failed to find a new club by Wednesday.

Bayern Munich have not renewed their contract with the playmaker who has courted controversy in the past.

He was dropped from the 1994 World Cup team and sent home for giving German fans a single finger gesture as he was substituted amid boos following a poor performance in a group game against South Korea in Dallas.

Bayern ditched Effenberg for two games last season following his comments that many of the unemployed in Germany were too lazy to look for work because jobless benefits were too high.

Austria Vienna are second in the league standings behind Sturm Graz.

UEFA Cup qualifying round Minnows fight for Euro berth

Football

AFP, Paris

Europe's minnows joined some former greats who have actually tasted continental glory in the first leg of the UEFA Cup qualifying round on Thursday with 1981 winners Ipswich winning 1-0 at Avenir Beggen of Luxembourg.

The Bobby Robson-managed Ipswich side of the likes of Arnold Muhren, Paul Mariner and Frans Thijssen were one of Europe's powers in those heady days.

But even if this year's vintage under George Burley has been relegated from the Premiership the lure of European competition has lost little of its appeal.

With the Champions League a pipedream for the likes of Kazakh debutants Kairat Almaty and Llansantfraid of Wales the UEFA Cup is the chance to feature - just about - on the radar.

But there were few shocks building after the opening leg action with Marcus Stewart scoring with a fine volley in the final minute for Ipswich and former European

Champions Cup winners Red Star Belgrade winning 2-0 at Kairat Almaty.

Almaty's coach Zlatko Krmpotic spent the bulk of his playing career at Red Star but his old side did his new one no favours as Igor Bogdanovic and Dragan Mrda scored in either half.

Another side to have tasted brief European success - 1981 Cup Winners Cup winners Dynamo Tbilisi of Georgia - are set to progress to the first round proper after a 4-1 home success over Estonia's TVMK Tallinn.

It was a miserable evening all round for the Estonian capital as Levadia Tallin slumped 2-0 at home to Israel's Maccabi Tel Aviv.

Ipswich aside there were mixed fortunes for British entrants.

Aberdeen needed a Darren Mackie goal to see off Moldova's Nistru Otaci 1-0 while Bangor City ousted Yugoslav outfit FK Sartin by the same score thanks to a goal from teenage striker Craig Roberts.

But Linfield of Northern Ireland succumbed 4-0 to Norway's Stabek, Croatia's Varteks hammered Ireland's Dundalk 5-0 and Poland's Amica Wronki swept past Llansantfraid of Wales 5-0.