

Juninho puzzle

REUTERS, Middlesbrough

Middlesbrough will decide next week whether World Cup winner Juninho needs surgery on a knee injury, manager Steve McClaren has said.

Juninho, who has just joined the Premier League club for the third time, damaged cruciate ligaments in a pre-season friendly last Saturday against Italian side Modena.

"We're taking our time while his knee settles down and we'll make sure he gets the correct treatment and the best specialists in the world to do the operation if he needs one," McClaren told the club's website.

"That will be decided next week and hopefully by then we will have an idea of the extent of the injury and what needs doing."

As for the midfielder's state of mind, McClaren said: "He's obviously not very happy -- it's been quite a devastating blow for him."

But the manager added: "The technology on cruciate ligaments has improved and there's proof now that players can come back as good as ever."

Juninho joined the club for the third time in a 3.2-million-pound deal from Spanish club Atletico Madrid.

Cloud hangs over Serie A

AFP, Rome

The presidents of several leading Italian top flight clubs on Friday threatened to postpone the start of the league season until a dispute over pay television rights is resolved.

The league season is scheduled to open on September 1.

However, the league will meet on Tuesday to discuss the issue according to Enrico Bendoni, founder of Plus Media Trading, the consortium which groups the eight Serie A clubs and three Serie B clubs who do not have broadcast arrangements with Stream et Tele+, pay-TV stations.

Seaman always number one

REUTERS, London

Arsene Wenger has urged Arsenal's David Seaman to forget his World Cup nightmare and prolong his England career.

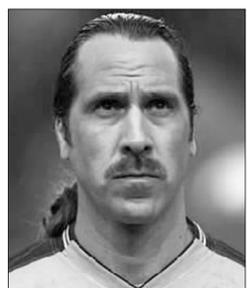
Seaman was widely blamed for the national side's exit from the tournament after he allowed a tame Ronaldinho free-kick to drift over his head for Brazil's winner in England's 2-1 quarter-final defeat in June.

The 38-year-old was distraught at his mistake and refused to confirm in the immediate aftermath whether he would continue as England's number one.

But Arsenal boss Wenger is adamant that his keeper remains the best man for the job as Sven-Goran Eriksson plans for England's 2004 European championship qualifiers.

"David has found something within him in the last couple of years, something that makes him even sharper and fitter and more focused," Wenger told reporters at the English double-winners' training ground on Friday.

"I called him after the World Cup...I can't say what we talked about, but David is someone who takes great responsibility for his work and after the career he has had with England he should be very proud."



DAVID SEAMAN

"He might look relaxed sometimes but he is mentally strong and I have no doubt he will react well to this situation -- he always reacts well when mental strength is needed."

"I encourage my players to play at international level...it is something which pushes you on."

"I know he (Seaman) can go on for as long as he wants, and I hope he will carry on as England keeper."

"He has always been a winner and an exceptional human being."

Seaman faces competition for the England jersey primarily from West Ham United's David James, with Leeds United's Nigel Martyn also in the picture. The long-term successor is likely to be Leeds's Paul Robinson, the England under-21 keeper.

England's next international is against Portugal, in a friendly at Villa Park on September 7. The first Euro 2004 qualifier is against Slovakia on October 12.

Wenger was trying on Friday to revive a bid to secure Uruguayan international goalkeeper Fabian Carini on a year's loan after admitting on Thursday that the Juventus player had not yet officially signed for the north London club.

It's Metsu or else

BBC, undated

Senegal star El Hadji Diouf has launched a sensational strike threat to his country's football administrators.

Diouf said that unless the Senegalese Football Federation (FSF) allow Bruno Metsu to return as Senegal coach after his 10 month contract in the United Arab Emirates, he would lead his team mates into a strike.

"If they do not want to give us Bruno Metsu back why continue?" the 2001 African Footballer of the Year told France Football magazine.

"If it is the only way to make the directors understand our intentions, then we will not play for the national team."

Many of the Lions have very good relations with the French coach, but Diouf is particularly close to the man he has often described as "like a father to me."

The Liverpool star believes Senegal need Metsu at the helm if



BRUNO METSU

they are to continue to fire on all cylinders.

"It is impossible to envisage a future without Bruno," Diouf stated. "It is thanks to him that we got so far, and there is no question of abandoning him along the way."

For the meantime Abdoulaye Sarr and Jules Bocande, Metsu's assistants, have been appointed to take charge, and Diouf is confident they will be able to do a good job.

Nevertheless, in the long term Diouf believes that only Metsu is capable of taking the Lions to the heights they reached this summer.

The Lions have decided to meet for crisis talks in Paris on Sunday, at which FSF President Malick Sy and stand-in coach Abdoulaye Sarr will also be present.

"We are going to talk about the future of our team, and, above all, decide if we are going to stop playing or not," Diouf warned.

French League One

Lyon still unbeaten

REUTERS, Paris

French champions Olympique Lyon held Olympique Marseille to a 1-1 draw to extend their unbeaten league run to three games.

Lyon remain second in the French League One (First Division) after the draw, one point behind league leaders Nantes, who are at Sochaux on Saturday, while Marseille moved up to seventh from 10th with four points.

Lyon, who have scored nine goals in the first three games of the season including six against Sedan last week, were the first into action as striker Sidney Govou opened the scoring in the 13th minute on

Friday. Govou, called up by France coach Jacques Santini to play in a friendly match in Tunisia next week, volleyed home a corner by Brazilian midfielder Juninho to put the visitors in front.

But Marseille, playing their first match in front of their home crowd, struck back when Ibrahima Bakayoko sidestepped France international goalkeeper Gregory Coupet after an unchallenged run through the defence to equalise in the 28th.

Marseille played their season's opener at Lyon as the Stade Velodrome was banned for one match because of clashes between fans during last season's game against Paris St Germain.

Backed by 55,000 supporters, the hosts came close to taking the

lead when former international defender Frank Leboeuf hit the woodwork from a freekick ten minutes before the break.

Lyon, who look in a class of their own when playing at home, lacked inspiration after both Juninho and captain Sonny Anderson were injured in the second half and had to be replaced.

Coupet provided some dramatic saves, stopping a header by Brazilian striker Fernandez on the hour and was lucky when substitute Cyril Chapuis's powerful shot hit the post.

Thanks to this draw, Lyon remain second one point behind league leaders Nantes who are at Sochaux on Saturday while Marseille moved up from 10th to seventh on four points.



PHOTO: AFP

Lyon's Brazilian defender Claudio Roberto Da Silva (R), fights for the ball with Marseille's Brazilian striker Fernando Lucio da Costa in a French League One match on August 16.

Bielsa in charge?

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

An Argentine football director says that terms have finally been agreed for Marcelo Bielsa to continue as national team coach.

Bielsa, who will keep his job despite Argentina's shock first round exit at the World Cup, has been on the point of signing a new contract for the last three weeks and has been declared the only candidate for the job.

"We have agreed on Bielsa continuing, we just need to finish off the last few clauses," said Hector Dominguez, a member of the Argentine Football Association (AFA) committee which has been negotiating with the reclusive coach.

Dominguez, president of first division club Gimnasia-La Plata, said that Bielsa would officially sign next week.

His contract would be to the end of the qualifying competition for the 2006 World Cup and would automatically be extended to the tournament itself if, as expected, Argentina qualify.

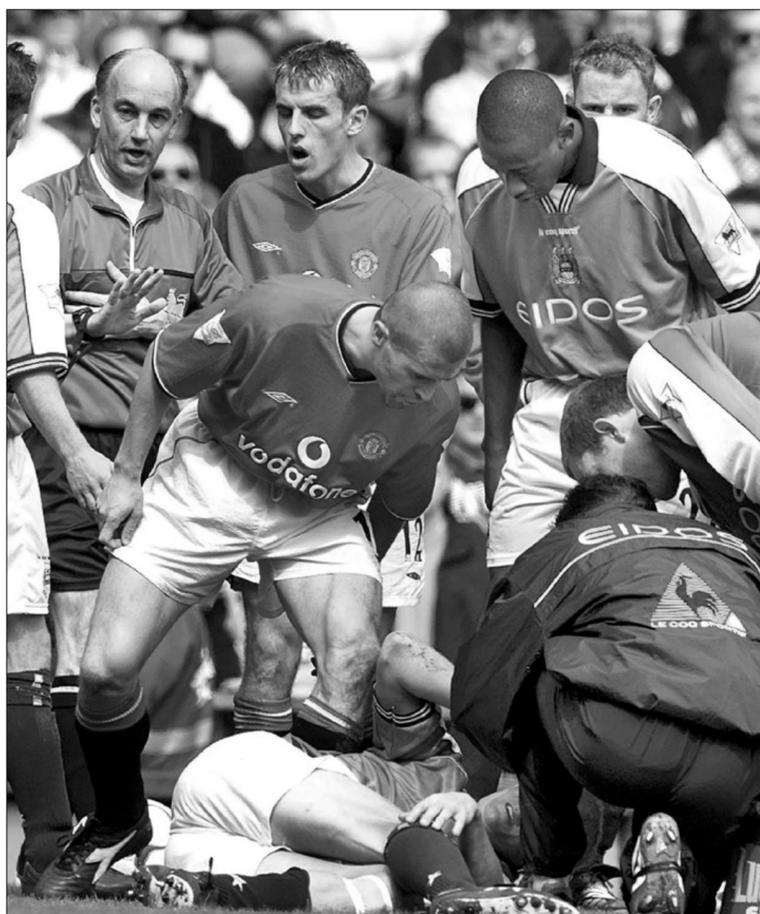


PHOTO: AFP

A file photo shows Manchester United skipper Roy Keane (C) shouting at Manchester City's Norwegian Alfie Haaland (on the ground) after being shown the red card during their Premiership game at Old Trafford.

Effenberg prefers Wolfsburg

REUTERS, Berlin

Former Bayern Munich captain Stefan Effenberg had looked set to retire before he landed a shock deal with German Bundesliga club VfL Wolfsburg.

The club said the 34-year-old, who will probably end his turbulent career at Wolfsburg, had signed a one-year contract with immediate effect.

Earlier on Friday, Austria Vienna said the former German midfielder had turned down an offer to join them.

Effenberg, whose contract with Bayern Munich expired at the end of last season, had said he would either join Austria or quit after previous talks with English Premier League clubs Fulham and Manchester City and Turkey's Besiktas and Galatasaray failed.

"The concept and the ideas of the club have won me over," Effenberg said through a statement released by his new club.

"It's a big sporting challenge for me and I'm looking forward to it."

Wolfsburg commercial manager Peter Pander was equally excited.

"We are delighted to present our fans with the outstanding (German) player of the last few years," Pander

said. "Stefan Effenberg is a major reinforcement for us."

No financial details of the deal were disclosed by the club.

Effenberg will first be eligible to play for his new club when they visit Arminia Bielefeld on August 24, Pander added.

Wolfsburg started secret negotiations with Effenberg after failing to sign another former Bayern Munich player, Swiss international Ciriaco Sforza, who decided on Sunday to

return to Kaiserslautern.

Effenberg has fond memories of Wolfsburg as it was there that he helped Moenchengladbach avoid relegation with a 2-0 victory in the final game of the 1997-98 season.

After the final whistle a tearful

Effenberg fell into the arms of Friedel Rausch, then the Moenchengladbach coach. Shortly afterwards he re-joined Bayern Munich, inspiring them to three successive league titles and victory over Valencia in the 2001 Champions League final.

He was less successful last season, looking sluggish as Bayern failed to win a title for the first time since 1995. The Munich club then purchased three midfielders in Michael Ballack, Sebastian Deisler and Ze Roberto, and decided not to renew their contract with their playmaker, who has courted controversy throughout his career.

Effenberg 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.

The incident effectively ruined his international career, even if he did make a brief comeback to the national team, playing two games for Germany in September 1998 before deciding to concentrate on playing for Bayern.

The Munich club 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.



STEFAN EFFENBERG

Premiership: Never predictable

SHAYAN KHAN

It is the world's favorite football league. Whether it is the best is another matter, but there can be no question that the English Premiership is the most popular and well-publicised domestic competition in the world. And this weekend, it kicked off again and you can be sure millions will be glued to TV sets all around the world to follow the fortunes of the likes of Manchester United, Liverpool and Arsenal.

There is no doubting the quality of English football has improved considerably in recent times. For years, it was typecast as 'ugly' football, with the emphasis on physical strength rather than technical mastery. Now however, most top teams from England have struck a very good balance between the two, retaining the pace and strength from years gone by, and infusing a fair amount of skill. Arsenal, the reigning champions of England, are a perfect example of the evolution of the English league.

For long, Arsenal were the ultimate medicine for insomniacs, particularly under George Graham, when the chants of '1-0 to the Arsenal became so famous'. It didn't stop them from being successful though. Under the genial Arsene Wenger however, Arsenal have found a different recipe for success. Nowadays, their football is built around pace to burn, and pace is the first ingredient Wenger looks for in his players, particularly in the attacking positions.

Arsenal ran away with the title last season, (excuse the pun) and they will try to defend their title with more or less the same set of players this season. Only three new additions have been made, none of them major, but Wenger could have made a mistake here.

The Gunners hit an exceptionally rich vein of form in the run in to the championship last season, when most of their players were in the zone. It is not something easy to maintain over two seasons, but because it is a very fragile state. You could liken it to a bubble in economic terms. Arsenal made the best of it last season, but it will be hard to repeat that act. Don't even think they can go unbeaten away from home all season again. Pires will miss the start of the season, Bergkamp is a year older, Tony Adams, otherwise known as Mr. Arsenal has retired, and Ray Parlour is getting on a bit as well. But there's still Henry, Vieira, and Campbell, all great players in their own right. Look out for young Jermaine Pennant, he may have his real breakthrough this time around. Arsenal will have to work a lot harder this season, but the confidence oozing from Highbury suggests they may well be up for it.

Man United suffered a big blow in midweek when they lost in Hungary, but that was without the man who is expected to make a real difference to their team this season. Rio Ferdinand, the hottest defender in the world, and the most expensive to boot, may just be the link that was missing from the United team of last season. But who will partner him? Wes Brown has not progressed as United followers had hoped he would, Laurent Blanc is too similar to Ferdinand himself, and players like John O Shea still

have a lot to prove. The midfield will surely create enough chances for van Nistelrooy up front to put away, and with Nicky Butt finally looking the superb player he is destined to become, there are no worries at all for Ferguson. Except a certain Juan Sebastian Veron.

Veron's first season was a recognised disaster, and many thought the closest he could get to the United team this season would be in an opponent's jersey. But Ferguson has stuck with him, and he even looks likely to fill the key playmaker's spot behind van Nistelrooy. This is surely veron's make or break year at Old Trafford, and United's performances may well be directly related to his own. They will not finish outside the top two again, but anything less than the Championship will be deemed as failure.

Liverpool complete the trio who, with all due respect to the other teams, will be fighting for the title this season.

Liverpool's long term plan to regain the Championship they last won in 1989 seems to get longer and longer every season, and there is no doubt Gerard Houllier has already reverted to plan B. It was supposed to be a team built around the cream of British talent, with some foreigners to complete the mix. Now it seems Houllier has recognised some of the players he drafted in in his early days in charge are not good enough. And thus, every year, we see Liverpool consistently signing the most number of players. You have to question sometimes whether the management really has any concrete idea about what direction they want their club to take on their way to the title.

Everything looks fine from the

outside, but if everything was so nice and dandy, would so many new signings be required every year? They have an excuse ready that they're 'progressing' every season. But what good is the progress if these players are replaced by others in the starting lineup at the start of every season? What good was the progress Heskey apparently made, when his place is expected to go to the exciting El Hadji Diouf? Exciting Diouf certainly is, but how effective he can be is still to be seen. Remember, for all his eye-catching play in the World Cup, he did not score a single goal. He will not bring back the title to Merseyside, and actually, I don't see anyone who will. Michael Owen perhaps, but even he does not seem to have the ability to carry a team on his shoulders, partly because he is so dependant on others in the team.

The battle for the last Champions League spot will most likely be fought between Chelsea, Newcastle United and Leeds United. Chelsea finally have a lack of hype surrounding them at the beginning of a season, and this will be a big help for them. Claudio Ranieri is slowly building a Chelsea side that can play good, consistent football, and they should be favourites to run the top three close. The pressure of competing in two prestigious competitions will probably be too much for Newcastle, particularly as they have not been able to make too many big hits in the transfer market as well. However, the great Bobby Robson is a man you should never doubt. Leeds can finally look forward to making headlines with their on-field performances rather than their off-field antics. Losing Ferdinand is a huge blow for them,

but ambition is not a priority at Elland Road now. Whereas they were gunning for top spot not that long ago, they will be satisfied with just a European spot now you feel. To that end, they may be able to have a successful season.

Tottenham Hotspurs have been talking big in preseason, and under Glenn Hoddle, they seem determined to return to their glory days. They maintain they are still in the hunt for Fernando Morientes, and how they need him. If they can get Morientes, Spurs will be in Europe next season, and that verdict comes with a note of finality only because all Spurs miss is a big name player who inspires confidence in his teammates to raise their game to the next level. Otherwise, they will be fighting the likes of Aston Villa, Fulham, and newly promoted Manchester City for top spot in midtable.

City come into the season with some big names in their ranks. Peter Schmeichel. Yes, the legendary Peter Schmeichel, the man who was so hated at the City Ground during his time with hated rivals Manchester United. And Nicolas Anelka. The man who could have been a legend, but has turned into a traveller, drifting from club to club. He is still young, and if he can regain his old touch this season, the Anelka saga may take another turn.

Middlesbrough will also be in this region of the table, but with Juninho back, they may pose a difficult away trip to even some of the big sides. Hated rivals Sunderland seem to be on a never ending downward spiral, and this season, it may take them to the First Division. Sad, for a club that has one of the best stadiums in England, but unless they show more fight, they may not be able to

avoid the fate they just about managed to avoid last season.

Everton were long recognised as the 'squatters' of the Premiership, never moving away from midtable, either upwards or downwards. The lack of ambition at the club over the years has been quite shocking, especially when you consider they have a decent history. You rarely move forward when you do nothing about your situation. But you may well move backwards, and that is what is expected of Everton this season, after their dismal show last season. Unfortunately, it may be all the way back to the First Division for the Toffees. These two clubs, along with newly promoted West Bromwich Albion and Birmingham City, seem to be the prime candidates to fill the three relegation spots. If they can surprise us, the prime candidates to will their spots will be Southampton and Bolton Wanderers, who will be in the lower end of the table anyway.

West Ham may surprise a few people, with their excellent youth system continuing to produce quality players, and Joe Cole finally has to come good, and I mean really good, on all the promise he has shown. Blackburn are another such side, with some exciting players like Matt Jansen, Damien Duff and David Dunn. If they can be consistent under Graeme Souness, they may even challenge for a European spot. But consistency is not easily attained.

And consistency will be what makes the difference in every fight throughout the season. For the title, for the relegation battles, for European spots, everything. Consistency will be the key, and he who has this key, will reap the rewards.

Keane to be sued

REUTERS, Manchester

Manchester City and Alf Inge Haaland are planning legal action against Roy Keane after the Manchester United captain said he deliberately fouled the Norwegian defender last year.

Keane said in a newspaper serialisation of his new autobiography that he had intentionally targeted Manchester City's Haaland in April last year, in revenge for a challenge three years earlier which had ruled him out for the season.

"Following discussions at Maine Road between the football club, Alfie and his legal advisers, it has been agreed to jointly instruct a leading firm of solicitors regarding the circumstances surrounding Roy Keane's tackle on April 21 2001," Manchester City said on its website on Friday.

"This action has been taken with a view to commencing legal proceedings against Roy Keane and his employers Manchester United Football Club."

Manchester United declined to comment on City's actions.

Since the tackle on Haaland, for which Keane was sent off, the 29-year-old Norwegian has suffered knee ligament problems and has made only a handful of appearances for his club.

United manager Alex Ferguson said earlier this week that his captain did not have a case to answer and the club had vetted the book before it went to the publishers.

The Football Association said it would wait until the book's publication in order to read Keane's comments in their full context.

Real youth coach quits

REUTERS, Lima

Former Peruvian international midfielder Jose del Solar has left his post as one of Real Madrid's youth team coaches after testing positive for a component of cocaine in a drugs test in June, officials said.

Real, quoting the Peruvian Football Federation (FPF), said the positive test took place during the opening round of the last Peruvian championship when del Solar, commonly known as Chemo, was still playing for Universitario.

He retired last month. Federation sources in Lima said the substance was benzoin ecgonina, which doctors say can be found in a tea made from coca leaf -- the raw material of cocaine -- or preparations of the drug. Peru is the world's second biggest producer of cocaine.

Coca tea is a popular, legal drink in Peru, often used to combat the effects of altitude sickness.

Universitario doctor Jorge Alva said del Solar was flying home to clarify the situation. He said del Solar neither drank nor smoked.

"According to his friends, he (del Solar) drank camomile tea, but some brands contain coca leaf," Alva added.

Real said the former Tenerife, Celta Vigo and Valencia midfielder, who made his final appearance for Universitario in July this year, had been provisionally released from the club, while waiting for definitive results on the test.

The FPF, which waited one month before announcing the results of the test in a statement late on Thursday, did not say what substance was found.

It said only that del Solar had taken the doping test after the Peruvian championship game between Universitario and Melgar on June 23. It said it received the test results from the doping commission on July 17.

"This case will be a big talking point because it is extremely rare for the FPF to announce the results of the doping tests nearly one month after receiving them," said the website futbolperuano.com.

"The most incredible thing is that neither the club doctor nor its directors were told about the matter."

Charlton go after Alex

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan midfielder Alex could complete a surprise move to premier league club Charlton Athletic within the next week, according to Japanese newspapers.

Alex's J-League club Shimizu S-Pulse have been approached by Charlton, who have been monitoring the player's progress and are keen to sign the 25-year-old before the English transfer deadline on August 31, according to a number of Japanese dailies on Saturday.

"There has been no formal offer to date but things could happen very quickly," the Sports Hochi quoted an S-Pulse spokesman as saying.

Brazilian-born Alex, who switched nationalities in November, has attracted interest from Italian club Lazio and Portuguese side Porto since helping co-hosts Japan reach the second round of the World Cup but Charlton appear set for talks.