



David Beckham, the Manchester United superstar, walks gingerly at the end of the game against Middlesbrough in the English Premiership at Old Trafford yesterday.

Premiership Penalty saves MU

Football

REUTERS, London

Manchester United struggled to convert their domination into goals as they laboured to a 1-0 Premier League win over Middlesbrough at Old Trafford courtesy of a disputed penalty by Ruud van Nistelrooy.

But the evening ended on a sour note for United with the news that England captain David Beckham would miss Saturday's friendly against Portugal after pulling up with a calf injury.

It was United's second win from four league games and avenged two defeats by Boro last season, including a 1-0 loss at Old Trafford.

The result lifted them into fourth place in the league, two points behind early season pace setters Tottenham Hotspur.

United welcomed back keeper Fabien Barthez and midfielder Paul Scholes from injury but they missed the urgency of skipper Roy Keane, who has been sidelined for three months with a hip problem needing surgery and faces bans over disciplinary issues.

"We made it difficult for ourselves," United manager Sir Alex Ferguson admitted. "We should have finished them off but they kept fighting, fighting, fighting."

"We created a lot of good openings but tried to put too much icing on the cake, if you like. We lacked

the killer instinct."

Ryan Giggs, playing his 350th league match for United, had the best chance of a tight start to the match when he sprinted down the left from the halfway mark before shooting inches wide.

United went in front in the 27th minute in questionable circumstances when Van Nistelrooy went down as he tussled with Boro defender Ugo Ehiogu.

But referee Mike Riley had no hesitation in pointing to the spot and the Dutchman, making his 50th appearance for United, smashed the spot-kick into the roof of the net.

"I thought we were unlucky to concede the penalty," said Boro manager Steve McLaren. "There are plenty of innocuous challenges like that in a match."

McLaren's side struggled to make an impression in the final third of the field but they snuffed an opening when Robbie Stockdale's cross caused confusion before the danger was cleared by England's Rio

Ferdinand, who was in imperious form.

United grew in confidence as the first half progressed and Giggs almost made it 2-0 when his low drive whistled past an upright.

The second half began quietly with United content just to pass the ball around without ever threatening the Boro goal.

Some penalty box trickery by Scholes almost set up a goal for Giggs but the Welshman miscued his shot with his less favoured right foot.

Boro had two good chances midway through the second period but Massimo Maccaroni sliced his shot wide and George Boateng had his long range effort pushed around the post by Barthez.

The United fans began to voice their impatience at their team's failure to secure the result, but they escaped with all three points and their unbeaten start to the season intact.

Premiership's top six

English Premiership table after Tuesday's match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Tottenham	4	3	1	0	6	3	10
Arsenal	4	2	2	0	10	5	8
Liverpool	4	2	2	0	8	4	8
Man Utd	4	2	2	0	5	3	8
Leeds	4	2	0	2	7	4	6
Chelsea	4	1	3	0	7	6	6

Voeller no Scotland fan!

INTERNET

Germany boss Rudi Voeller has dismissed Berti Vogts' Scotland as Euro 2004 no-hopers.

Voeller was capped 21 times while Vogts bossed his homeland, but the protege says he has nothing to fear from his mentor in Group 5.

Scotland open their campaign in the Faroe Islands on Saturday, with the seeding placing them as Germany's main rivals for qualification.

But Voeller told German newspaper Bild: "Berti and the Scotland team don't even come into our equations."

"We can only see ourselves coming top of our group."

Earlier, Faroe Islands midfielder Julian Johnsson had described the Scots as nobodies compared to the team with whom his side drew 1-1 in June 1999.

Leicester City defender Matt Elliott was infamously sent off as the Scots were surprisingly held in the Faroes during the last European Championship campaign.

Former Hull City midfielder and now trainee teacher Johnsson, who will earn his 45th cap on Saturday, said: "I don't know any of the Scottish players now."

"Of course, I know Matt Elliott and I am a fan of Duncan Ferguson, but I realise neither will be playing against us."

"And Tom Boyd and Billy Dodds are no longer part of the team."

There was a small crowd last month as the Faroes warmed up with a 3-1 win over Liechtenstein, but Johnsson expects a lively atmosphere for the visit of the Scots.

Vieira in endless abyss

Football

INTERNET, London

Arsenal's Premiership challenge took a massive knock last night when it was revealed Patrick Vieira faces a four-match ban for swearing at referee Andy D'Urso.

The Gunners were upset when D'Urso refused to even consider waiving the second yellow card he gave Vieira for his challenge on Chelsea's Jesper Gronkjaer on Sunday.

But it emerged that one of the main reasons behind D'Urso's refusal to rethink was Vieira's four-letter tirade when he brandished the red card.

D'Urso's report to the Football Association alleges Vieira called him a "***** w***** with no personality".

That landed Vieira with a misconduct charge yesterday and seems certain to bring a three-match ban in addition to the automatic one-game suspension for his eighth dismissal in Arsenal colours.

But the Gunners are determined to back Vieira.

A club spokesman said last night: "We have 14 days in which to respond to this charge. We will ask for a personal hearing where we will defend Patrick vigorously."

Match officials were told by the FA before the season that verbal abuse towards them would result in stiff penalties as part of an attempt to curb indiscipline.

The loss of Vieira for four Premiership fixtures will be a huge blow for Arsenal - even at this stage of the season - as they aim to take advantage of Roy Keane's three-month lay-off to open an unbridgeable gap on Manchester United.

Manager Arsene Wenger backed Vieira after the game and has spoken about the France midfielder showing new maturity after succeeding Tony Adams as club skipper.

But although Vieira was supported by Gronkjaer in maintaining the second caution was unjustified, the player will have no legitimate defence.

Even if Vieira denies he used the words, the disciplinary committee will be obliged to accept D'Urso's version of the incident, which implies he would have sent the player off in any event.

It is unlikely any hearing will take place before the end of September.

But the FA, aware of talk that Arsenal are given special treatment, are anxious to speed up the disciplinary process.

Last season, it took more than three months for Thierry Henry to be punished for his verbal attack on Graham Poll after Arsenal's December defeat by Newcastle.

That will not be allowed to happen this season, and Vieira can expect to be given a hearing date by the first week of next month, which would probably see him missing games against Sunderland, Everton and Blackburn if found guilty.

Beck won't be replaced

Football

REUTERS, London

Injured England captain David Beckham will not be replaced in Sven-Goran Eriksson's squad to face Portugal, the Football Association (FA) has said.

Beckham picked up a calf injury in Manchester United's 1-0 Premier League win over Middlesbrough on Tuesday, leaving Eriksson with the option of pressing ahead with the existing squad or calling up an extra midfielder.

But FA spokesman Paul Newman told Reuters: "There are no plans for call-ups - Beckham won't be here ... and he won't be replaced in the squad."

The England manager must now decide who will wear the captain's armband on Saturday, though an obvious choice would be striker Michael Owen, who deputised for Beckham last season.

Beckham's calf problem means Eriksson will yet again be re-

shuffling his midfield after injuries - including the surprise absence of Paul Scholes.

Missing from Eriksson's squad named on Monday due to injury, Scholes unexpectedly played most of United's match on Tuesday - albeit aggravating an ankle injury.

"He struggled in the second half but in fairness he's not played much football and he's been carrying this ankle and knee injury now for quite a few weeks," United manager Ferguson told SkySports after the game.

"We just have to be careful with him, how much we use him. But he got through it, feeling very painful at the end of the match."

"Hopefully we can get him for next week against Bolton," Ferguson said of United's league clash on Wednesday at Old Trafford.

Eriksson has already had to call up uncapped Blackburn Rovers midfielder David Dunn after Newcastle's Kieron Dyer was ruled out of Saturday's game at Villa Park suffering a recurrence of shin splints in Monday's 2-2 draw with Liverpool.

Italian market open till Sept 13

Football

REUTERS, Rome

The Italian Football Federation (FIGC) has voted to reopen the domestic transfer market until September 13, the FIGC has said.

A Europe-wide deadline was imposed at midnight on Saturday but as the Italian league season does not start until September 14, the FIGC opted for an extension.

The Serie A and B seasons were due to start on September 1 but

were postponed for two weeks due to a row over television contracts.

FIFA said they had not given their authorisation to the re-opening of the Italian market.

"The transfer window closed at midnight on August 31 and until now FIFA has given no exceptions," a FIFA spokesman told Reuters.

But FIGC president Franco Carraro said as only transfers between domestic clubs would be permitted it was not a matter for FIFA.

"FIFA has nothing to say about it. The re-opening is on a national not international level," said Carraro.

Zidane for a new beginning

Football

REUTERS, Clairefontaine

Zinedine Zidane says he wants France to make a "new start" for European Championship qualifying after their disastrous World Cup finals campaign.

"Soccer has never been easy to deal with and our duty is now to help the young ones find their place in the squad," he told a news conference before holders France's opening qualifier in Cyprus on Saturday.

"We must give France a new start," added Zidane who missed the first two games of their campaign in South Korea with a thigh injury.

With several key players like Fabien Barthez, Vincent Candela, David Trezeguet and Thierry Henry out through injury and others such as Frank Leboeuf, Christophe Dugarry and Youri Djorkaeff retired, new coach Jacques Santini has banked on young blood to revive France.

"We must prepare for the future now. I think the 'oldies' and the 'newies' can work along together pretty well," said Zidane.

"This is not a new team that we

have. It's just that we needed to renew the squad."

"I can remember when I was a little younger I was happy that guys like (Bernard) Lama or (Didier) Deschamps had welcomed me here."

Ousted in the first round of the World Cup finals without a goal scored, France learned the hard way that they cannot take anything for granted any more.

"We must realise that there are no friendly matches any more. We must snatch points and I'm certain they (Cyprus) are not going to let us play," the Real Madrid playmaker added.

Santini, who took over from the sacked Roger Lemerre, says he will resign if France fail to qualify for the 2004 European Championship in Portugal.

He has implemented a strict new regime within the French camp, restricting visitors and banning evenings out before competitive matches.

"The coach has decided to implement his personal point of view. But I'm a married man and a father of three. So I don't need anybody to tell me what to do."

"Setting rules is good to avoid excess but I don't do anything to excess."

The jinx over?

Football

AFP, Liverpool

England striker Michael Owen has shrugged off suggestions that he is losing his killer touch in front of goal after a lacklustre start to the Premiership season.

The Liverpool forward finally opened his 2002-03 account with a penalty against Newcastle in Monday's 2-2 draw, but only after squandering a series of chances that should have secured three points for Liverpool.

Owen's international partner Emile Heskey was equally profligate, giving England coach Sven Goran-Eriksson cause for concern ahead of Saturday's friendly against Portugal at Villa Park.

But while Owen was disappointed with the way Liverpool allowed a 2-0 lead to slip, he voiced confidence that his own goal supply would start to flow again soon.

"Of course I'm pleased to get a goal but it didn't win us the game so there's a tinge of disappointment there as well."

Vow for a clean Serie A

Football

REUTERS, Rome

Italian soccer chiefs have promised to clean up their debt-riddled sport as television companies put more cash on the table in a bid to persuade smaller clubs to start the new season.

Italian clubs voted last month to delay the opening of the 2002-2003 championship by two weeks, giving eight Serie A minnows until September 14 to secure more lucrative contracts with pay-per-view television stations.

Italy's two pay-per-view channels upped their global offer to the eight teams by almost 50 percent on Tuesday and although at least one of the clubs involved dismissed the compromise deal, sport officials said it was time to move on and dismissed suggestions the season could be delayed further.

"We owe it to our fans to begin the season on the weekend of September 14-15," Italian Football Federation President Franco Carraro told reporters after a tense meeting of club chairmen.

The federation announced after the meeting that it would launch a review of how Italy's favourite sport

was run and warned that any clubs running up big debts risked stiff sanctions, including having championship points deducted.

"There can be no doubt that mistakes have been made with Italian soccer," Carraro said. "The situation is very difficult but compared to the past, at least we are now moving in the right direction."

Italian soccer has been dogged with financial problems this year, partly due to the waning of lucrative television deals.

Serie A teams Atalanta, Brescia, Chievo, Como, Empoli, Modena, Perugia and Piacenza have not reached agreement with either of Italy's two subscription satellite channels Telepiu and Stream, forcing the decision to push back the start date.

The clubs were demanding a combined 80 million euros for the rights to live coverage of home games while the two pay-TV companies were offering only 36 million euros.

"Today we are faced by a great new fact. There is an offer out there that is equal or even bigger than that agreed last year," said Italian League president Adriano Galliani, brushing off questions over the starting date of the new season.

"I've already said a thousand times to Italian soccer fans that the

Championship will start on September 14. Stop always asking me the same question."

However, the new TV offer promised only some 5.7 million euros each to the four teams just promoted to Serie A against the eight million they were seeking. By comparison a top flight team like Juventus has signed a TV deal worth some 60 million.

"Under these conditions our feeling is that we won't take part in the championship," said Enrico Preziosi, chairman of Serie A new boys Como.

Tuesday's pay-per-view offer also does nothing to settle the League's row with state broadcaster RAI over a fee for a free-to-air highlights package, or indeed a cash crunch faced by numerous teams after years of big spending.

Carraro said a soccer delegation would meet Sports and Culture Minister Giuliano Urbani on Wednesday to request government aid for their ailing industry.

Any offer of help would face fierce scrutiny from opposition parties. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi owns Serie A giant AC Milan and government aid for the sport would fuel criticism that he was using his office to help his business interests.

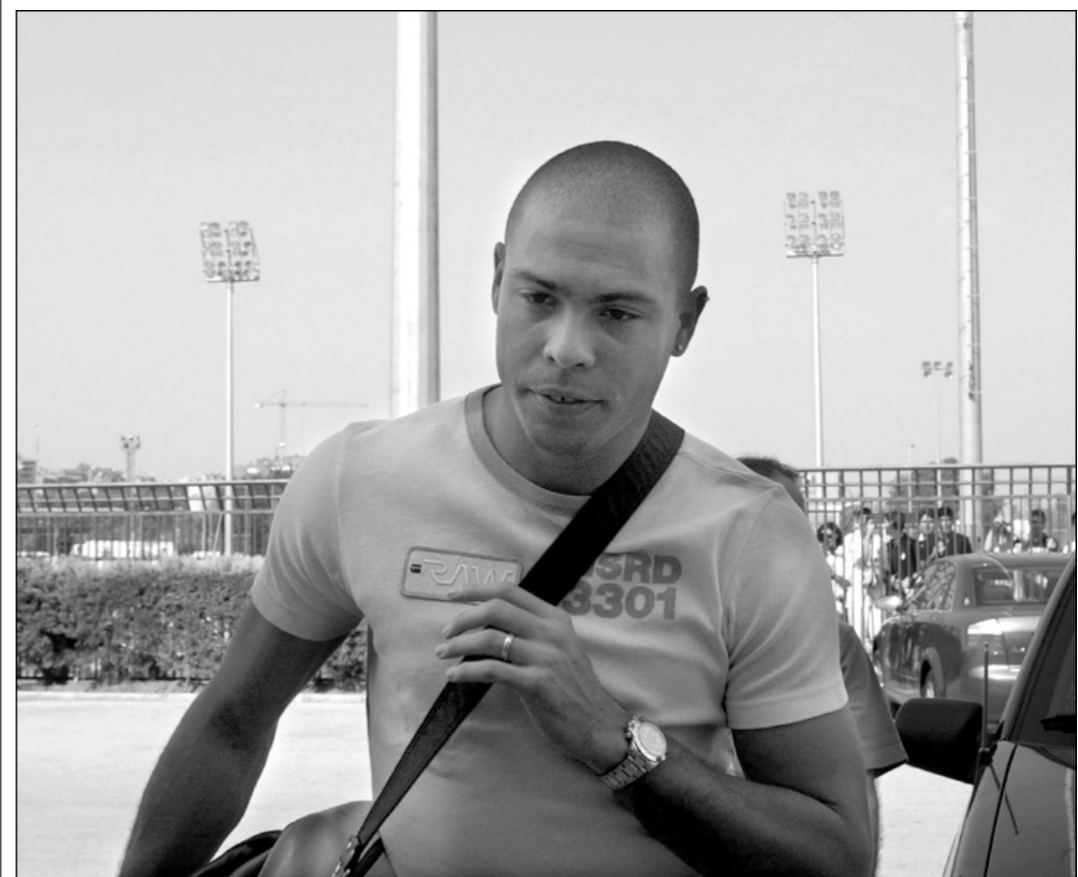


PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid superstar Ronaldo arriving at the club facilities to begin a medical treatment for a thigh muscle contraction yesterday.

Ronaldo won't rush

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid's 47 million euro signing Ronaldo is in no hurry to make his first appearance for his new team and says he is looking forward to fighting it out for a place at "the best club in the world".

"I am going to take my time, make sure I don't rush things and concentrate on enjoying playing again," Ronaldo told reporters during his first official press conference since joining the European champions.

"Real are the biggest and best club in the world, the players have got fantastic technical skill and there will be a lot of competition to play. But that sort of competition is what motivates players."

The Brazilian striker explained that he was suffering from a minor muscle strain in his left leg and that he hoped to begin training next week, but added that he did not expect any repetition of the knee problems that plagued him during his last three seasons at Inter Milan.

"I have got a small muscle strain, but nothing serious," he said. "I hardly did any pre-season training because of the negotiations over the transfer and this sort of thing is not a surprise."

"As for the knee, it is a long time since I talked about it. But it is in very good shape - I showed that in the World Cup and I will be able to keep showing it. I am the first person to have full confidence in myself."

The 25-year-old, who played some of his most spectacular football while at Real's arch-rivals Barcelona, said he also believed that his best may be still to come.

"I am very motivated to do well and it is possible I could play even better here than when I was at Barcelona. I enjoyed myself at Barca and now I want to do the same here."

Ronaldo, who made it clear ever since he returned from the World Cup that he wanted to leave Inter Milan, said he did not want to elaborate on his reasons for wanting to leave the Serie A club.

"I had some very strong reasons for leaving, but I am not going to talk about them. I had some good times

at Inter, but now I am focused on Real Madrid."

He also said that Real was always his preferred destination after deciding to leave the Italian club, and reiterated his belief that the style of football played in Spain was more likely to suit his game.

"I would not have made the effort to leave if it hadn't been for Real Madrid," said the player who is known in Brazil as "The Phenomenon".

"I don't want to talk badly of the Italian style, but here the game is more open, there are more goals and I really think I can enjoy myself."

The Brazilian international, who finally joined Real after they clinched the cliff-hanger

transfer deal minutes before the European transfer deadline at midnight on Saturday, had more words of praise for Real Madrid president Florentino Perez who masterminded the move.

"The president is the real 'phenomenon'," he said with a smile. "What he has done for Real is really historic, but now it is we the players that have the responsibility to perform."

Hero Hiddink back

Football

AFP, Seoul

Former South Korean World Cup coach Guus Hiddink returned to a hero's welcome here Wednesday, lured by lucrative deals with business firms and the Korea Football Association (KFA).

During his five-day stay, Hiddink, the Dutch coach who took South Korea to the last four of the 2002 World Cup, will sign a two-year contract with the KFA to act as an advisor for South Korean football, a deal news reports here say is worth more than 400,000 dollars.

He is also keeping an open mind about an offer from the KFA of a second stint as national coach in two years' time.

"I am happy to be back in South Korea," Hiddink said. "I'll do my best to help with South Korean football."

"When I came to South Korea the other time, I ran into difficulties because of the cultural differences.

But I've come to love this country. Otherwise, I would not have returned so early," he said.

He made the remarks after signing a one million dollar contract to endorse Samsung Card, a credit card operated by the leading business group, until the end of 2003.

He is also set to enter another 1.8 million dollar two-year endorsement deal with Kyobo Life

Insurance Co. and attend a "meet the author" session to push sales of his autobiography "My Way."

On Saturday Hiddink will attend an inter-Korean football friendly at the World Cup stadium in Seoul.

North Korea has agreed to send a 42-strong delegation, including 20 players, for the first inter-Korean friendly match in 12 years.

Hiddink returned to the Netherlands to coach his former charges PSV Eindhoven after completing a dramatic 18-month mission to make South Korea Asia's top team.

Since South Korea became the first Asian team to reach the semi-finals of the World Cup tournament - co-hosted with Japan - Hiddink has become the most popular foreigner in the country's history.

He has been made an honorary citizen and showered with financial rewards and advertising contracts.

Hiddink had earlier promised to stay involved in Korean football as an advisor ahead of the 2004 Olympics and 2006 World Cup.



GUUS HIDDINK