



KILLER BLOW: Leeds United's Australian star Harry Kewell heads past Manchester United goalkeeper Fabien Barthez in their Premiership match at Elland Road yesterday.

Premiership Kewell ruins Rio's day

Football

AFP, Leeds

Leeds' Harry Kewell blew another gaping hole in Manchester United's title Premiership ambitions here on Saturday.

The Australian forward's 66th-minute header was enough to earn Terry Venables' side the three points and ensure an unhappy afternoon for Rio Ferdinand on his return to Elland Road since his 29-million-pound (45-million-dollar) summer move to Manchester.

Some slack defensive work by substitute Luke Chadwick on the right allowed Ireland left back Ian Harte the time to pick out the unmarked Kewell, who headed home from just outside the six-yard box.

The defeat was United's second in four days after the shock mid-week loss at home to Bolton and means they have now made their

worst ever start to a Premiership campaign.

It also marked the first time they had lost an away match since November of last year and Alex Ferguson's side only had themselves to blame after failing once again to convert a string of chances and territorial domination into goals.

To make matters worse for the embattled Ferguson, Chadwick was only on the pitch because Nicky Butt had been forced to limp off, adding to his midfield injury crisis.

Ferguson is already being forced to do without inspirational captain Roy Keane and Paul Scholes, who have both had surgery in the last two weeks and are not expected back until close to Christmas.

Argentine Juan Sebastian Veron has failed to fill the gap left by their absence and appeared to have paid the price on Saturday when he was not even accorded a place on the substitutes' bench.

Leeds goalkeeper Paul Robinson was every bit as much a hero for the Yorkshire club as

Kewell, adding to his rapidly burgeoning reputation with two fine stops to deny Ruud van Nistelrooy and extend the Dutch striker's frustrating start to the season.

Van Nistelrooy, who found the net 36 times last season, has scored only once since the summer and that was from the penalty spot.

United could easily have been two or three goals up after a first half in which they had two good penalty claims turned down and saw the Leeds defence twice scramble the ball off the line.

The first appeal came when Ole Gunnar Soljkskaer skipped past Jonathan Woodgate on the edge of the area and was pulled back by the England defender.

Five minutes later, Woodgate blatantly body-checked Nicky Butt as he attempted to burst into the area, but again referee Jeff Winter failed to take any action.

Beckham was on target with one of his trade-mark free-kicks in the 31st minute which Harte did well to clear from just inside the post.

The England captain, who had been lucky to escape a caution after catching Lee Bowyer with his elbow, then found Ryan Giggs with an inswinging cross from the left. Giggs' glancing header was bound for the far corner before Woodgate hooked it clear off the line.

The impressive Robinson, increasingly seen as David Seaman's natural replacement for England, had denied the visitors the perfect start with a 15th minute save at the feet of van Nistelrooy.

The Dutchman had combined well with Giggs to reach the edge of the six-yard box. Robinson dived the wrong way but managed to clear with his feet as van Nistelrooy attempted to dink the ball over him.

The forward went close again six minutes after the break after picking the ball up just inside Leeds' half. The Dutchman skipped round Woodgate at full pace and fired a low, left-foot shot across goal only to be denied by the sprawling Robinson.

Transfer window still open

AFP, Paris

World soccer's governing body FIFA have bowed to pressure from national football leagues by relaxing the rules on signing out-of-contract players outside of the new transfer windows.

Clubs are now allowed to sign players who were out of contract before the end of the transfer window on August 31.

FIFA had previously insisted that clubs could sign no-one until the transfer window re-opened in the New Year.

But following pressure from national leagues including the English, German and Italy's Serie A the world's soccer authority have decided that the rule should be relaxed.

In a letter to their member associations, FIFA said: "The strict application of the transfer registration periods would cause serious inconvenience to players still looking for a club, since on the one hand they would have no income and on the other they would not be allowed to register for a new club when the official transfer window has closed."

Clubs will not however be allowed to sign players who have their contracts terminated by another club, or who resign from another club, between the transfer windows.

Iranian football chief resigns

AFP, Tehran

Iranian football federation president Mohsen Safai-Farahani, an influential reformist in the country, has resigned from the post following pressure from conservatives, officials said Saturday.

"Mr. Safai-Farahani has handed in his resignation citing 'pressure and external obstacles,'" said federation spokeswoman.

Safai-Farahani, a pro-reform ally of President Mohammad Khatami and an MP from Tehran, last year won an additional four years in the job.

50-game Ronaldo

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid's medical chief Alfonso del Corral expects Ronaldo to be able to play between 40 and 50 games a season, even if he continues to suffer minor injury problems.

Ronaldo plagued by knee injuries during his last four years at Inter Milan but his return to form at the World Cup, where he was leading scorer with eight goals to lead Brazil to the title, persuaded Real to sign him.

Del Corral examined the 25-year-old player before his move to Real was finalised and he is satisfied with the state of his knee, although he recognises it will need constant vigilance.

"When I was told about the signing I was worried," Del Corral was quoted as saying in Spanish sports daily Marca.

"Those fears were reduced, though, after examining the knee. They've done an excellent job."

"Ronaldo won't be the same as he was before. He's going to make fantastic moves and he'll be able to play 40 to 50 games a season but I'm sure he'll suffer small injuries that will keep him out for a week or 10 days."

"We're going to have to look after him day by day."

Del Corral said earlier this week that Ronaldo, whose pre-season was disrupted by the uncertainty over his future, could be ready to play his first game for Real in the week beginning September 23.

That could see him making his Real debut against Genk in the Champions League on September 25.



RONALDO

Outrage over dribbling

Football

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

A Brazilian referee has caused outrage in his country after awarding a free kick against a player for dummifying and dribbling.

Referee Leonardo Gaciba Junior was accused of penalising skill and encouraging violent play after the bizarre incident late in Wednesday's Brazilian championship match between Coritiba and Santos.

With Coritiba leading 4-2 and time running out, Coritiba striker Jaba received the ball near the touchline, cheekily lifted his foot over the ball a couple of times as if he was about to set off on a dribble--only to have a free kick awarded against him.

On Friday, Gaciba told the sports daily Lance that he was trying to protect Jaba by stopping him from provoking the opposition.

"The rule says that a player cannot endanger an opponent or himself," Gaciba was quoted as saying.

"He wasn't being objective so I awarded a free kick to protect him. If somebody had broken his leg, they will say that I was not clamping down on violence."

Former FIFA referee Jose Roberto Wright, who refereed in the 1990 World Cup, led the criticism of the decision.

"What Leonardo Gaciba did was absurd, it can't happen," he said. "What he in fact did was to stamp out the skill of the player and not the violence of the opponents."

"Can you imagine what would have happened if the referee had given a free kick every time Garrinha lifted his foot over the ball? There wouldn't be any football left."

"But at least he (Gaciba) is a young referee, so there's still time to put things right."

Brazilian referees are often accused of failing to show yellow and red cards for bad tackles and allowing violent play to flourish in a championship that has averaged nearly 60 fouls a match, which critics say is one of the highest in the world.

Brazilian midfielders and defenders hate being the victims of tricky, such as having the ball flicked through their legs, as they believe it to be a form of humiliation.

Last weekend, a player in a second division match between Sport Recife and Botafogo-Ribeirao Preto, was attacked by opponents after nonchalantly playing keep-up

while his team were winning 3-0.

Three years ago, a championship final was abandoned because of a brawl which started when striker Edison -- who played for Brazil in the World Cup this year -- began playing keep-up.

But an indignant Brazilian media called on their country's traditions of skill and artistry to be preserved.

"I haven't got the patience to watch a game with 189 fouls and with the ball in play for 22 minutes," said Cesar Seabra in Lance.

"There's no fun left in football," added Roberto Assaf in Jornal do Brasil.

"One little flick is enough to make the opponent lose his head. Modern times only allow for grumpiness, a reflection of rigid tactics and players with no imagination."

Fernando Calazans, in O Globo, wrote: "Where on earth have you seen a player be protected by having a free kick awarded against him?"

"Mr Gaciba has to allow Jaba to play. His Highness has a duty to protect football, punishing the bully-boys with their perverse sliding tackles, their flying scissors kicks and their repetitive fouling carried out on the orders of bully-boy coaches."

Serie A's usual suspects

Football

AFP, Rome

Following are the Italian Serie A title contenders of the new season which started on Saturday:

JUVENTUS

The Italian champions start the season as favourites despite a fairly quiet summer in the transfer market and the injury to striker David Trezeguet which could keep the Frenchman out for several months.

Juve coach Marcello Lippi took decisive action when Trezeguet damaged the tendons in his right knee and snapped up Parma hotshot Marco Di Vaio as cover, one of the club's few buys this summer.

Retaining their crown may depend on their hunger to do well in the Champions League after numerous failed attempts in the past few seasons, but betting against the "Old Lady" is a dangerous business--just ask Inter.

Juventus won the championship last season after beating Udinese 2-0 at Udine on the final day, pipping overnight leaders Inter who suffered a shock 4-2 defeat to Lazio.

ASROMA

Roma will be looking to erase the memory of a hugely disappointing 2001-02 campaign.

Fabio Capello's men failed to reach the last eight of the Champions League, suffering a crucial second phase defeat at Liverpool where Capello was accused of being too negative away from home.

As for the Italian title, Roma paid the price for a poor away record and a lack of goals from Argentine striker Gabriel Batistuta.

It was no coincidence that when

Roma won the championship in 2001 'Batigo' was finding the net on a regular basis.

But the former Fiorentina idol netted just six times last season and his poor displays at the World Cup suggest the 33-year-old is close to retiring.

Capello may now give exciting young striker Vincenzo Montella an extended run in the side.

The loss of injured captain Francesco Totti who is out for up to a month with a knee injury could be crucial.

INTER MILAN

If anger and frustration can be turned into motivation then nobody should stop Inter winning the title.

But whether they have the strength of character to bounce back from the disappointment of losing the championship on the final day of last season remains to be seen.

Herman Crespo has replaced Ronaldo so goals should not be in short supply and the arrival of stylish defender Fabio Cannavaro will shore up a sometimes leaky backline.

The acquisition of Francesco Coco was an astute one. The former Barcelona player can solve Inter's problem position on the left-hand side of their defence.

An important season for Alvaro Recoba who has shown glimpses of his talent but needs to be more consistent. The Uruguayan international may be squeezed out of the side by Crespo but could be used wide on the left in support of the front two.

AC MILAN

Of all the teams competing for the title, AC Milan have arguably made the best signings this summer.

Despite record losses for the third year running, the club broke the bank to satisfy the wage demands of Brazilian World Cup winner Rivaldo who they signed

from Barcelona on a free transfer.

Owner Silvio Berlusconi also brought in outstanding centre-back Alessandro Nesta from Lazio, Dutch midfielder Clarence Seedorf, Danish international Jon Dahl Tomasson and Croatian defender Dario Simic from arch rivals Inter.

If injury-prone midfielders Massimo Ambrosini and Rui Costa can stay fit and Rivaldo can gel with strikers Filippo Inzaghi and Andrei Shevchenko, Milan have an excellent chance of winning 'Lo Scudetto'.

If they start poorly, expect coach Carlo Ancelotti to come under fire from the impatient 'Rossoneri' fans.

LAZIO

With the club crippled by debts, Lazio were forced to sell three of their best players to balance the books this summer.

Nesta, Crespo and Gaizka Mendieta all left to keep the accountants happy but their departure leaves the Roman club short of talent and are therefore only an outside bet to scoop the championship.

Injury-prone goalkeeper Angelo Peruzzi still possesses a safe pair of hands while new boy Juan Pablo Sorin will bring solidity to the back four.

But Mancini's problems will surface elsewhere with the squad lacking genuine width in midfield and a genuine goalscorer. Strikers Kily Gonzalez and Simone Inzaghi only managed 15 goals between them last season and will have to improve if Lazio are to make an impact.

Trebles inspire Independiente

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

A three-goal burst in 10 minutes by Andres Silveira and another hat-trick from fellow striker Federico Insua gave Independiente a 6-2 victory over Chacarita Juniors and a fourth-point lead in the Argentine First Division championship.

Independiente, 7-1 winners against Colon in their previous match, lifted their tally to 26 goals from eight games in the Apertura championship with Friday's win.

Coach Americo Gallego's side lead the standings on 20 points while Rosario Central, who are away to Colon on Sunday, are second on 16.

River Plate, Boca Juniors and Newell's Old Boys were all on 14 points before their weekend games.

Chacarita went in front in the eighth minute through Matias Delgado but, within 10 minutes, Insua equalised for Independiente with the first of his three goals as the floodgates opened.

Insua struck twice more in the 38th and 49th minutes, his second-half goal the pick of the six scored by his team on the night. From a tight angle, the striker hit a cheeky shot from close range between goalkeeper Carlos Navarro Montoya's legs.

Silveira, the first division's top scorer with nine goals, stretched his side's lead in the 29th, 32nd and 39th minutes as Independiente went 5-1 up before the interval after five goals in just 21 minutes.

Chacarita, however, pulled another goal back through Sebastian Pena in the 68th.

Independiente, the only unbeaten team in the competition, will be brimming with confidence when they host River Plate, who won last season's Clausura championship in May, in their next match.

No rest for Vieira

AFP, London

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger is set to name Patrick Vieira in his team to face Charlton on Saturday, despite his captain's plea for a break to help him recover from fatigue.

The French midfielder may be physically exhausted but he says he is far from tired of life in London. In an interview published on Friday he suggested he might end his career at Arsenal.

"I don't have any desire to go anywhere else or test myself anywhere else," Vieira told the Daily Mirror. "I realise now I have found everything I was looking for in this club."

Vieira, who played 66 games last season, stunned Arsenal earlier this week by revealing he felt totally "cooked" just five games into the new season.

Wenger has shrugged off Vieira's comments as the result of playing two matches in four days and ruled out a break.

The Gunners will again be without the injured Ray Parlour and Cameroon international Lauren while Swedish midfielder Freddie Ljungberg is still at least a week away from a comeback following his post-World Cup hip operation.

Charlton are waiting to see if England under-21 midfielder Scott Parker will be fit following the ankle injury which has kept him out so far this season.

The same applies to Gary Rowett, the 3.5-million-pound defender signed from Leicester in the summer who has been out with a hamstring injury.

Deadline day signings Jesper Blomqvist and Robbie Mustoe could be in line for their Charlton debuts.

Houllier knows

AFP, London

Liverpool boss Gerard Houllier has admitted that a World Cup hangover could be behind Michael Owen's lacklustre start to the new season.

The European player of the year has managed just one goal in seven appearances for Liverpool and England and a string of missed chances have contributed to his club dropping points against Blackburn, Newcastle and Birmingham.

Now, with Liverpool entering an intense run of two games a week, Houllier is planning to ensure Owen and the other players who played in Japan and South Korea are allowed enough recovery time.

"With the exception of Dietmar Hamann, all the players who were at the World Cup have been showing signs of fatigue," Houllier admitted.

"It is more mental than physical and the only answer is to leave them out every now and then. If I didn't do that at some stage, I would probably be jeopardising their entire welfare."

"You have to take into account the physical as well as psychological factors involved with Michael. We are entering a spell of eight games in 24 days, and you can't expect him to play in all of them."

Houllier's comments come just days after Arsenal midfielder Patrick Vieira begged for a break to help him cope with fatigue.

In Owen's case, the exhaustion brought on by England's efforts in the Far East has been compounded by a recurrence of the hamstring problems which have dogged him throughout his career.

Moreno faces scrutiny



AFP, Paris

Ecuadorian international referee Byron Moreno, who enraged Italy in their World Cup loss to South Korea, is being investigated by FIFA, world soccer's governing body announced Friday.

"As a result of a number of controversies regarding referee Byron Moreno (Ecuador) in Japan, Italy and South America over the past few months, FIFA has decided to launch an investigation into the affair," a FIFA statement said.

"The FIFA Disciplinary Committee has been entrusted with dealing with the matter," the statement added.

Moreno became a hate figure in Italy after the World Cup last 16 game against the Koreans after he

disallowed a goal from Damiano Tommasi and sent off Italian striker



BYRON MORENO

Francesco Totti. The president of the Italian football federation Franco Carraro

levelled various accusations at the South American saying that he had either been bribed or was completely not up to the job fitness-wise.

The 32-year-old Moreno denied all charges that he had been bribed for the match, which was won by South Korea 2-1 thanks to a golden goal from Ahn Jung-Hwan.

Moreno was suspended indefinitely in Ecuador two days ago following his performance in a local league match when he inexplicably allowed 12 minutes of injury time at the end of the game between home side Barcelona and Liga of Quito.

Barcelona were 3-2 up at the end of the 90 minutes, but eventually lost 4-3 after Liga scored in the ninth and 10th minutes of added time.

Moreno admitted after the game that he had been wrong to allow so much injury time and the country's referee federation said his actions would be subject to a full inquiry.

Chilean strike goes on

Football

REUTERS, Santiago

Chilean footballers, who have already been on strike for 18 days, have said they will continue their stoppage after talks with club and league officials broke down.

With the players saying they were further away than ever from an agreement, Second Division Magallanes fired most of their squad and league officials said they would try and press on with the championship by fielding youth teams.

Chile has already missed two weekends of professional football because players are protesting over unpaid wages and demanding a greater say in the running of the game.

"Football has collapsed, it's out of our hands," said Carlos Soto, president of the players' union Sifup, after two days of negotia-

tions with representatives of the Chilean league (ANFP) ended on Friday.

"We cannot go on sustaining this improvisation, this negligence and this incapability of solving problems," he said.

Chilean football is in a critical state with Colo Colo, the country's most popular club, having been declared bankrupt at the start of this year. Most other clubs are in debt and are struggling to pay their players on time.

But the biggest sticking point appears to be over the new-look championship.

Players are angry at a decision to abolish relegation for the next two years, claiming it makes the tournament uncompetitive. But the ANFP says the players have no right to meddle in the rules.

Officials, who have already threatened to cancel the championship, increased the pressure on Friday when Magallanes sacked most of their players, following the example set by Lota Schwager

and first division Rangers last week.

ANFP president Reinaldo Sanchez said that an attempt would be made to play at the weekend.

"The agreement is to go ahead with the games and we will play with the youth teams or whoever else wants to play," he said.

He added that a transfer window would also be opened so that clubs could sign new players from outside the union.

But Soto said the players would not be intimidated. "Whatever pressure comes to bear, the players are convinced and absolutely firm and so are the coaches," he said.

Of the relationship with the club and league officials, he said: "Sometimes we are their employees, sometimes we are partners and sometimes we are nothing. That's the truth."

"We don't want any more sad spectacles."