

FA dismisses it

Eriksson quitting?

Football

REUTERS, London

The Football Association has quashed talk of a showdown meeting between Sven-Goran Eriksson and FA chairman Geoff Thompson as bookmakers shorten their odds on the England coach leaving his post.

William Hill cut the odds on Eriksson quitting by the end of the year to 5-1 from 9-1 amid reports that the Swede was planning to meet Thompson on Friday following the resignation last week of FA chief executive Adam Crozier.

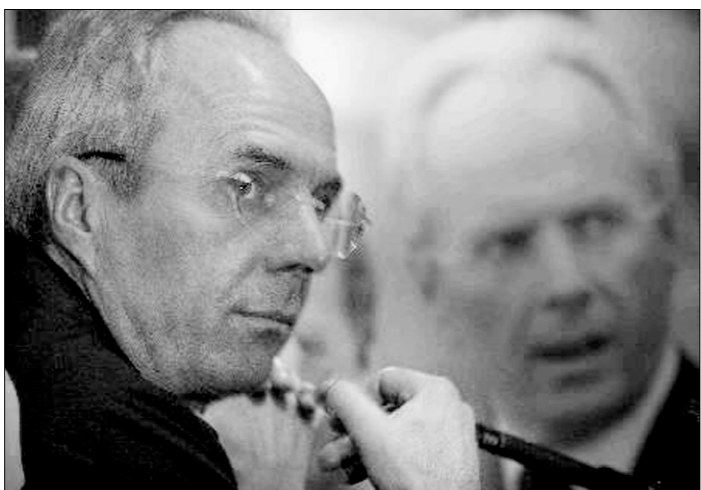
But an FA spokesman said: "Sven would like to make clear that he is not meeting the chairman today. Mr Thompson is in Copenhagen where he is attending a UEFA Executive Committee meeting.

"Sven is focusing himself on selecting his party for the squad get-together which begins on November 18."

Speculation about Eriksson's position has been rife since the shock departure last Thursday of Crozier, one his closest allies, after a disagreement with the premier league clubs over the future running of the game.

The FA is due to hold a board meeting on Monday to discuss the process for replacing Crozier and vice-chairman Frank Pattison, who has also resigned.

Last week Eriksson also lost one of his chief assistant coaches, Middlesbrough boss Steve McClaren, who has decided to



SVEN-GORAN ERIKSSON...trouble

concentrate on his club duties. The FA's technical director Howard Wilkinson also quit last month to become Sunderland manager.

Eriksson's contract runs until 2006 and he has already said he will be staying on in his post, despite the loss of Crozier, who appointed him two years ago.

However, media reports in the past week have linked the Swede with the Italian national team and Spanish club Barcelona.

On Friday, newspapers seized on a comment by Eriksson's assistant Tord Grip as evidence that the coach was considering his position.

Asked if he could end speculation that Eriksson was thinking of resigning, Grip said: "We want to wait and see what happens at the FA."

The future relationship between the premier league clubs and the FA is one of the key issues to be

City prevail in Manchester derby

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City marked the last Premiership derby at Maine Road in style on Saturday by blowing a gaping hole in Manchester United's title ambitions.

A brace from Bermudan international Shaun Goater sealed City's first win over their arch rivals in 13 years after Ole Gunnar Solskjaer had cancelled out Nicolas Anelka's 5th minute opener for the home side.

It was United's fifth defeat of the season and leaves Alex Ferguson's side trailing leaders Liverpool, who were playing later in the day at Middlesbrough, by a margin that is rapidly becoming too big to be made up.

For City, the win was a fitting outcome for the final Premiership derby at Maine Road before the club move to the new Commonwealth Games stadium on the east of Manchester.

It also extended the winning run which has lifted Kevin Keegan's side out of the relegation zone to three matches.

Derby agree pay-off deal

REUTERS, Derby

Cash-strapped Derby County have agreed to pay off one of their highest earners, Argentine defender Horacio Carbonari, while Belgian striker Branko Strupar is also set to make an early exit from the first division club.

Derby, who are in the process of a financial reconstruction after amassing debts of about 20 million pounds, are also negotiating the early departure of another three players, the club said on Friday.

"The negotiations with Horacio and his representatives have gone well and he is expected to leave the club in mid-January once we have met the financial terms," said chief executive Keith Loring in a statement.

"This is a vital deal for Derby County and helps the ongoing financial reconstruction because Horacio's contract had two-and-a-half years to run, making it the biggest at the club," he said.

Carbonari and Strupar are both out of action with injuries.

Portugal hope to have Scolari

REUTERS, Lisbon

Portugal will try to hire World Cup-winning Brazilian coach Luiz Felipe Scolari next week, the head of the national soccer federation said on Saturday.

Portugal want Scolari, who resigned after July's triumph, to head their squad at the 2004 European championships, federation Chairman Gilberto Madail said in an interview on private TSF radio. Portugal are hosting the tournament.

"I was very impressed with Scolari's personality. As you know, he was a person who'd had a tough life until the world championship," Madail said.

The federation head will meet Scolari next week in Brazil to discuss a contract. Scolari might have to agree to keep Portuguese caretaker coach Agostinho Oliveira as an assistant, Madail said.

If Scolari does not agree to a contract, Portugal might try to sign Carlos Alberto Parreira, a former Brazil national team coach, or England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson, a former coach of Lisbon's Benfica club, TSF quoted Madail as saying.

Agostinho Oliveira took over from Antonio Oliveira, who was sacked because of Portugal's disappointing first-round exit from the World Cup.

Keegan's way

REUTERS, Manchester

Very few soccer managers could deliver a karaoke version of 'My Way' with the same hand-on-heart gusto as Kevin Keegan after a lifetime's dedication to attacking football.

Regrets? He's had a few, but too few to mention -- knowing full well

Football

REUTERS, Manchester

After losing 3-0 at home to Chelsea three weeks ago Keegan appeared at his wit's end. "We cannot keep coming away saying we did some good things but lost 3-0," he said.

"I can say as much as I like about the potential of the team and how well we can play. Maybe we need to win without playing well, rather than play well and lose, which is what we've been doing."

Keegan's reluctant response to the problem was to drop midfielder



KEVIN KEEGAN

the media will do that job for him. When he faces the final curtain, something he thought he had already done several times in his up and down career, he will truly be able to stand tall and pronounce that he did what he thought best for the game.

He did it his way. It was how he was as a world class player of verve and unstinting energy with Liverpool and Hamburg SV and as a saviour for Southampton and Newcastle United.

It was how he was as manager of Newcastle, when he came so close to winning the league with one of the most exciting teams seen for years, and with England, when he eventually threw in the tactical towel after his all-action approach was found wanting on the international stage.

Several times during his career he has walked away from the game, but on each occasion his love affair proved too strong and he found a way back.

In 2001, with his year-old England scars still raw, he took on the task of managing Manchester City following their relegation under Joe Royle.

City duly demolished all before them in the first division last season, scoring 108 goals, to surge back to the top flight. Keegan could convince himself that his footballing philosophy was sound and, again, he was cast as The Messiah.

The close season signing of French striker Nicolas Anelka buoyed confidence further and Keegan found himself talking of possible European qualification.

This season, however, has already taken a toll on the manager. The youthful exuberance of his usually smiling face has been too often replaced by lines of worry as his team struggles to punch its weight in the premier league.

The supporters, all too used to false dawns over Moss Side, were phlegmatic as their club slumped into the bottom three with just eight points from their opening 10 games.

After losing 3-0 at home to Chelsea three weeks ago Keegan appeared at his wit's end. "We cannot keep coming away saying we did some good things but lost 3-0," he said.

"I can say as much as I like about the potential of the team and how well we can play. Maybe we need to win without playing well, rather than play well and lose, which is what we've been doing."

Keegan's reluctant response to the problem was to drop midfielder

Auxerre must play again

REUTERS, Paris

AJ Auxerre must re-play their league victory over Sedan following a refereeing blunder, France's Football Federation (FFF) ruled on Friday after throwing out an appeal by the Burgundy club.

The controversy centred on an incident in the game on September 21, when Sedan, who had been losing 1-0 away, scored a 75th minute equaliser.

The referee allowed Auxerre to kick off while two Sedan players were still in the home side's half of the pitch -- with Auxerre making it 2-1 almost immediately and going on to win 3-1.

Sedan lodged a protest, which was upheld last month by the FFF's refereeing commission, prompting the appeal from Auxerre, which was dismissed by the ruling body's appeals board in Paris on Friday.

Auxerre coach Guy Roux, who had threatened on Thursday to take the matter to France's National Olympic Committee (CNOSF), the country's highest sporting appeal body, or to a civil court, was more conciliatory after the verdict.

Robbo keen on Ireland job

INTERNET, London

Former Manchester United star and Middlesbrough manager Bryan Robson has declared his interest in becoming manager of the Republic of Ireland.

The former Old Trafford favourite and England captain has thrown his hat into the ring following Mick McCarthy's decision to resign, but has denied being contacted by the Football Association of Ireland.

Robson told MUTV: "I have not had any contact, nobody from the Irish FA has been in touch. "But if it is true that they would like to talk to me, I would be very interested."

Robson admitted the quality of the Republic's squad, especially of up-and-coming players, would be of particular interest to him.

"They have got some smashing players and it would be a good job," added Robson.

"They have some very good players, good up-and-coming players.

"There is a lot to work with with the quality of player they have.

"That is the type of job I am looking for."

Robson, whose friendship with Manchester United midfielder Roy Keane could count in his favour, has been out of management since leaving Middlesbrough last year.



Manchester United's French international goalkeeper Fabien Barthez watches after Man City's Nicolas Anelka (not in picture) scores during their Manchester derby yesterday.

Ferguson's worst fear

Football

INTERNET, London

Alex Ferguson fears his Manchester United team are being out-muscled in the title race by the powerhouses of Liverpool and Arsenal.

Ferguson desperately needs his injured players back and will raid the transfer market to beef up his squad.

Because, right now, he is not sure if his side are physically strong enough to compete with their challengers.

Ferguson said: "It has to be accepted we do not have as strong a pool as Arsenal or Liverpool, particularly on the physical side.

"Both have built big, athletic squads. We may have to look at how we can inject freshness at the club that balances out the power of Liverpool and Arsenal.

"I'm not talking about ability but sheer physical power and speed.

"Liverpool's main intent is to have a powerful squad, particularly when you look at their midfield, and Arsenal are a big, strong side, too.

"They have come along, and particularly in Gerard Houllier's case, and gone 'bang' and just rebuilt their teams.

"We tend to tweak the team rather than have an overhaul. We have built on the great nucleus of players like Beckham, Butt, Giggs and Keane by adding one or two.

"Whereas Gerard Houllier came in and even this summer brought in four players.

"That is what you are seeing, the building of two teams here with Arsenal and Liverpool."

Ferguson believes he cannot continue to rely on the core of players that have served him so well in their decade of domination and believes United are now going through a transition period.

He added: "There has to be a transition because you cannot think the same players are going to do it all the time."

Ferguson has added Ruud Nistelrooy, Rio Ferdinand and Juan Veron but still believes they have lost good players with Teddy Sheringham, Denis Irwin and Ronny Johnsen passing their peaks at Old Trafford.

Ferguson said: "We built a great team that came together in 1999. Then Teddy left and Denis and Ronny came to the end. You forget how important these players were, they are massive losses.

"If we had a young Denis Irwin we would be a hell of a team and Teddy's experience used to come in at the vital time, too."

Ferguson desperately needs both Nicky Butt and Roy Keane back from injury to add some power. And he hinted at a determined raid during the transfer window in January to pull things round.

But he admits five crunch games - starting with tomorrow's

downs with a realistic shot at the title.

He said: "I still have faith in my team's ability and I still believe the title is up for grabs.

"By the end of this spell of five games we could be right back into the melting pot. I certainly believe we need to be within three points of the leaders by Christmas.

"We have not had good results

Arsene Wenger's Gunners boast the strength of skipper Patrick Vieira, but they have struggled of late with one lucky win at Fulham their only success in six games.

And Ferguson believes Wenger is using a few mind games to paint a rosier picture than might be the case.

Ferguson said: "At the moment Arsene Wenger keeps going on about their phenomenal fighting spirit because they are losing games. He is trying to grasp on something to pick his team up, we all do that when a team is not doing well."

While Liverpool, with the commanding figure of Dietmar Hamann in central midfield, are looking formidable - they have an eight-point lead over United - Ferguson believes they will have a blip.

When that happens, he will be hoping he can finally pick his strongest side and make a push at the vital part of the season.

Ferguson said: "It will be silly to think Liverpool will not have a blip - and if they do we will be on their coat-tails.

"We have had ours, with two defeats, and we have to recover from that.

"Hopefully, by the time we come to the real part of the season I will have Keane and Butt back and that will bring back some power, plus Wes Brown will be back to bolster the squad. At the same time, I may add to the squad to make us stronger for the run-in."

When it comes to the title race Ferguson cannot see beyond the big three. He certainly dismissed any dreams Chelsea might have of joining the party, insisting Everton have more justifiable claims.

He said: "The best performance by a team against us this season without any doubt was from Everton.

"We won 3-0, but it was an unbalanced scoreline because it was tight right until the end.

"You look at teams who have a chance of winning the League and I would put Everton above Chelsea because they have more about them.

"Maybe not in terms of natural ability but in the energy, structure of their team and enthusiasm."

With that Ferguson went out onto the training field to plot his team's title comeback.

After a spell in the company of one of football's greatest-ever managers you realise the desire is still brimming over. He is not ready to see his empire crumble.



ALEX FERGUSON...running out of time?

Manchester derby - will have to be faced without them.

Keane is out until the New Year, while Butt is still on crutches after an operation on his ankle. So Ferguson is left to hope the ability remaining in his team will be enough.

After Saturday they face struggling West Ham away, Newcastle at home, then the double header against their biggest rivals as they travel to Anfield on December 1 and entertain Arsenal six days later.

Ferguson believes his side can still come through these show-

against Liverpool and Arsenal recently but these trends can quickly swing back and, hopefully, it swings back our way this year."

Ferguson breaks into a broad smile when he considers the prospect of Arsenal fans cheering on United when it comes to them facing Liverpool.

He added: "From a point when Arsenal were looking down from their ivory tower saying they were going to be unbeatable and win the European Cup they are now looking at closing a four-point gap."

Defending Dennis

Football

REUTERS, London

Arsenal has said it will defend Dennis Bergkamp after the Football Association charged their Dutch striker with violent conduct for allegedly stamping on an opponent.

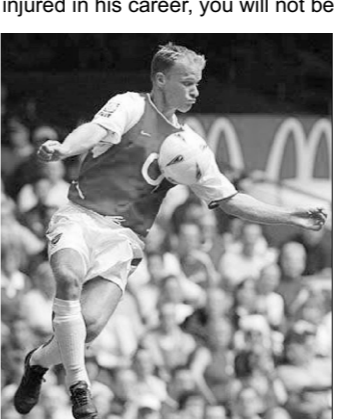
The FA acted after television replays showed Bergkamp stepping on Blackburn Rovers' Swedish defender Nils-Eric Johansson during the English champions' 2-1 defeat at Highbury on October 26.

The 33-year-old former Dutch international has 14 days in which to respond to the charge and faces a suspension and a possible fine if found guilty.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger immediately said the club would be contesting the charge.

"We will defend him," Wenger told reporters at the club's training ground on Friday.

"I believe Dennis did not want to harm the player. If you look at the number of players Dennis has injured in his career, you will not be



DENNIS BERGKAMP

surprised to find it is zero. But he has got a few kicks himself.

"It was just a frustrated reaction. The record of Dennis will speak for us and that will help us get him off."

Wenger believes that because

referee Graham Barber did not punish Bergkamp at the time, the incident should be dropped.

Bergkamp was suspended for three matches in January after being sent off following a similar incident involving Liverpool's Jamie Carragher in an FA Cup fourth round match at Highbury.

But Bergkamp has already protested his innocence over the Johansson challenge, which he says has been blown out of all proportion by television analysis.

"You read about stamping and it is such a serious word," Bergkamp was quoted as saying by the Daily Express newspaper, before the FA charge was announced.

"There was nothing in it. They are trying to make something out of nothing. If it was not on TV then no-one would be talking about it."

Bergkamp is the second Arsenal player to have fallen foul of the FA's use of video evidence to investigate alleged acts of indiscipline this

season. Striker Thierry Henry was investigated but cleared after a clash with Charlton Athletic player John Robinson in September.

The FA also banned Arsenal captain Patrick Vieira for two games last month for insulting a referee.

But Wenger said that Arsenal refused to believe there was a conspiracy against them within the English game when it came to disciplinary matters.

"We are held to high standards but I don't want to compare us with (the way other clubs are treated)," Wenger said.

"I don't try to get into that because you get paranoid and after that comes schizophrenia and then you think the whole world's against you.

"We now try to take the positives out of everything...we have improved our disciplinary record this year and rather than feel victimised, we just improve our record."