

Venables after to Kleberon

AFP, London
Leeds boss Terry Venables is reported to be planning a January swoop for Brazilian World Cup winner Kleberon as the transfer rumour mill swings into top gear ahead of the reopening of the transfer window.

The defensive midfielder wants to move to Europe and his club Atletico Paranaense are willing to let him go for around five million pounds (7.5 million dollars), according to Friday's Daily Mirror.

To fund the acquisition, Venables is likely to offload unsettled Frenchman Olivier Dacourt, who was fined by the manager earlier this month after publicly criticising the club.

Dacourt has attracted interest from Roma but the current financial squeeze in Italian football means it is doubtful whether they will be able to come up with sufficient cash to allow a deal to be done.

Kleberon, 23, has previously been linked with a possible move to Scottish champions Celtic. He was a regular in Brazil's World Cup line-up, sharing the defensive duties in midfield with Gilberto Silva, now at Arsenal.

Euro 2004 Zidane's last?

AFP, Paris

Real Madrid midfielder Zinedine Zidane hinted on Thursday that the Euro 2004 championship could be his last challenge as a French international, thus ruling out any part in the 2006 World Cup finals.

"I want to give everything for Euro 2004," the 30-year-old told France Football.

"With the French team, it is my next challenge. Is it the last? I don't know. If I am talking in this way, it is perhaps because it is a possibility."

The magazine on Thursday voted Zidane as the top French player of the year with Arsenal's Thierry Henry in second place and fellow Real Madrid player Claude Makelele in third spot.

A Spanish coup?

REUTERS, Madrid

A group of Spanish businessmen are attempting to set up a new European-wide soccer competition to rival UEFA's Champions League, Spanish press reported.

The group, headed by entrepreneur Carlos Garcia Pardo, said it is aiming to establish a 16-team competition involving Europe's leading clubs, which it hopes will get underway in September 2003.

"This is an inevitable development," said Garcia Pardo. "If we don't do this someone else will. I am sure it will get off the ground because UEFA will not be able to compete with us."

But Pardo, who is the group's president, also admitted the idea would face significant problems in getting off the ground.

"Although it is an idea that appeals to lots of clubs, it will be difficult for them to take the first step," he said.

The organisers say they have already issued invitations to 26 clubs from Spain, Italy, England, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Scotland to join the competition which they have christened the "European Golden Cup".

The group's plans envisage a closed league-style competition with no relegation in which teams will play each other in home and away fixtures on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursdays - the same days used by UEFA for their own competitions.

Giggs loses his cool

INTERNET, Manchester

Manchester United winger Ryan Giggs was involved in an ugly bust-up with team-mate Roy Carroll at the players' Christmas party, according to reports.

Giggs was allegedly restrained by fellow stars, including 30-million-pound defender Rio Ferdinand and England international Nicky Butt, after the incident in a Manchester hotel.

Reports in the Daily Mirror and the Daily Express newspapers say the pair squared up to each other in the early hours of Thursday morning.

However, the players were separated before any punches were thrown.

United's Christmas party began in the afternoon in an Irish bar in Manchester city centre, and moved to the Living Room bar before ending at the Rosetti Hotel.

Giggs later apologised to Carroll, Northern Ireland's first-choice goalkeeper, and the players appeared to be on good terms when they left.

It is not known whether Sir Alex Ferguson will take any action over the alleged incident.

Phenomenal Premiership

Football

INTERNET, Madrid

European and world-footballer-of-the-year Ronaldo on Saturday revealed his awe-struck admiration for the Premiership.

And the Brazilian hinted that once he finally conquers Madrid he will look to English football to provide him with the final challenge of his career.

In an exclusive interview with the Daily Mirror, Ronaldo extolled the virtues of the Premiership and expressed his keen regard for both Manchester United and Arsenal.

International teammate Gilberto has given him the low down on the intensity and excitement of the English game - and Ronaldo admits he likes what he hears.

"Of course I know all about English football. I have great admiration for Arsenal and Manchester United and what they have achieved," said the Real Madrid superstar.

"They're both big clubs with strong tradition. Gilberto has told me about England and how exciting it can be and how tough too."

"I'd like the excitement of the game there, and my team-mate Steve McManaman tells me that if I ever play in England, I would get lots of chances."

First though, Ronaldo has a more pressing mission. Despite picking up the two highest individual accolades in world football, the Brazilian has not been a success since he arrived in Madrid.

And he admits he has a tough job winning over the fans - and his new team-mates.

He said: "It has been difficult for me because of the injury I have had, but my aim now is to let the Real fans see the real Ronaldo."

"It is time for me to deliver my promise to them."

The extent of his task became clear in the Bernabeu on Wednesday night. It was supposed to be the coronation of the new regent of world football, the young prince finally accepting his succession to the throne.

Never an organisation to miss a trick, FIFA hijacked the club's centenary celebrations to add some glamour to their announcement of Ronaldo as world footballer of the year.

Amid the firework and entertainment extravaganza, led by none other than Placido Domingo, the young Brazilian stepped forward to accept his crown, along with a dazzling jewel of the Balon D'Or, the award for the European footballer of the year.

Furore in Portugal

Four of the 10 stadiums that will be used for Euro 2004 are owned by Portuguese league clubs.

In a written statement late Friday, the Portuguese Soccer Federation, which together with UEFA and the Portuguese government is part of the joint-venture organizing Euro 2004, asked for moderation.

"We reaffirm our solidarity to the clubs and to its leaders but we ask them that they weigh their actions carefully because besides the realisation of Euro 2004, the credibility of Portuguese soccer may be on the line," the written statement said.

Portugal will host Euro 2004 from June 12-July 4. Seven new stadiums are being built and three others are being refurbished across the country.

Machado was released on a one-million-dollar bail on Monday for the charges of pocketing money for the 2000 transfer of midfielder Fernando Meira from his club to Benfica. He was also charged of forging club documents.

Earlier this year, former Benfica president Joao Vale e Azevedo was convicted for taking 1.1 million dollars from Benfica's sale of Russian goalkeeper Serguei Ovchinnikov. He was sentenced to four-and-a-half-years in prison.

Portugal will host Euro 2004 from June 12-July 4. Seven new stadiums are being built and three others are being refurbished across the country.

Machado was released on a one-million-dollar bail on Monday for the charges of pocketing money for the 2000 transfer of midfielder Fernando Meira from his club to Benfica. He was also charged of forging club documents.

Earlier this year, former Benfica president Joao Vale e Azevedo was convicted for taking 1.1 million dollars from Benfica's sale of Russian goalkeeper Serguei Ovchinnikov. He was sentenced to four-and-a-half-years in prison.

Portugal will host Euro 2004 from June 12-July 4. Seven new stadiums are being built and three others are being refurbished across the country.

Machado was released on a one-million-dollar bail on Monday for the charges of pocketing money for the 2000 transfer of midfielder Fernando Meira from his club to Benfica. He was also charged of forging club documents.



RONALDO... eager to play in England?

Even his most loyal supporters have their doubts. His colleague and close friend Roberto Carlos said recently that Ronaldo must realise that Madrid, with their firmament of stars, will not dance to his tune, he must dance to theirs.

And McManaman, in his regular media column, wrote bluntly: "He probably hasn't worked as hard as he could do, and the fans have certainly let him know that."

On Wednesday night, Ronaldo looked sluggish and almost sluggish. He still appears overweight and a yard slower than the player who took the World Cup by storm last summer.

But after receiving the awards he admits have reduced him to tears, the Brazilian has vowed to prove to Madrid what the rest of the world knows - that he is the rightful heir to the throne of soccer greatness.

The young striker cheerfully admits that one day, the attractions of Manchester United or Arsenal may lure him to England... but not before he has turned the Bernabeu boos into cheers. "I know I have not shown the best of me, I know the

fans in Madrid are still doubting me, but believe me, they won't for much longer," he insisted.

"I have come to Madrid to show myself, to prove that I am the best playing with the best. It is my challenge here now.

"Slowly I am getting there and I will emerge as the player the fans demand. The accolade of world-footballer-of-the-year means so much to me because it is confirmation of what I have done.

"But now there is more to achieve. I am happy in Madrid, I want to stay here and show the true Ronaldo.

"I want to achieve even more with this club. I want to lift the Champions League trophy to add to the World Cup trophy."

Ronaldo might also mention that he would like to add the trophy to the two awards that adorn his mantelpiece (if Brazilian superstars have such a thing) of his sumptuous villa in the Madrid suburbs.

Being recognised as the king of world football means so much to him - largely because it has finally exorcised the demons of that horrendous evening in Paris when he broke down before the World Cup final of 1998.

His goals against Germany in Japan this summer went some way to redressing the balance. But the news of the award was final confirmation that he is back to his rightful level no matter what the Madrid fans believe.

"I cried when I heard the news. I cried because this award is for what I have received since that day in France," he said.

"My world collapsed then, but I have rebuilt it, brick by brick, and I had tears of joy that my efforts are recognised.

"It is an award that I am proud of, and I am proud of what I have achieved. Now I want the people of Madrid to share in my pride."

And then? The striker whose touch turns everything - eventually - to gold may want to bring those skills to the Premiership.

"Madrid is the biggest club in the world, and I am happy to be here. But we know about Manchester United and Arsenal," he said.

"They are great clubs too, and great rivals in the Champions League for Madrid. Their reputation is everywhere and I think there are few teams who want to play them in the competition."

And to play for them? That famous grin appears from nowhere. "Who knows?" he said, those tombstone teeth somehow managing to sparkle as he flashes his mischievous smile.

Lauren quits Cameroon

REUTERS, London

Arsenal defender Lauren has retired from international soccer, the Cameroon World Cup player said.

"I have now cleared everything in my mind and I have made the very difficult decision that I am not going to play for my national team anymore," he told Arsenal's official website.

Lauren has made 25 appearances for Cameroon, helping them to win the gold medal at the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000 and the African Nations Cup this year.

"That's definite. Even though we have the Confederations Cup to play in during the summer which has the world's best teams like France, Brazil and Germany playing in it, I have decided that I am not going to play," Lauren said.

"You sometimes have to make big decisions and even though I am still young at 25, I feel I have made the right decision."

Lauren talked of his decision in an interview that will be published in the programme for Arsenal's English premier league match at home to Middlesbrough on Saturday.

Park moving to PSV

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's World Cup star striker Park Ji-Sung has grabbed a 4.5 million-dollar deal to move from Japan's Kyoto Purple Sanga to PSV Eindhoven of the Netherlands, his agent said Saturday.

"We have reached a final agreement with PSV Eindhoven on Park Ji-Sung's transfer," said Lee Chul-Ho, Park's agent, who travelled to the Netherlands to conclude the deal.

Park will sign the contract next week when an Eindhoven official visits him in Japan.

Under the contract, Park will receive 4.5 million dollars in wages over the next three and a half years. It deal was the largest sum for the transfer of a South Korean football player.

Eindhoven is coached by Guus Hiddink, who led South Korea in advancing to the quarter finals of the World Cup co-hosted by South Korea and Japan.

Merseyside hotshots

Football

REUTERS, London

Michael Owen, used to the tag of being English soccer's most exciting young striker, may find himself upstaged by an even more precocious talent in Sunday's Merseyside derby.

Having turned 23 last Saturday, Liverpool's frontman is positively middle-aged compared to 17-year-old Wayne Rooney, the Everton sensation who is currently the talk of English football.

Rooney exploded on to the scene this season when his audacious long-range goal ended champions Arsenal's 10-month unbeaten league run in October.

Although he may not even start the match at Anfield on Sunday, Everton manager David Moyes is likely to turn to him at some stage and, judging by his displays so far, the youngster will not be fazed.

Rooney was still 16 when his sweetly-struck 25-metre shot embarrassed 39-year-old Arsenal goalkeeper David Seaman in the dying seconds at Goodison Park on October 19, ending the Londoners' 30-game unbeaten league run.

That goal alone was probably the reason Rooney won the BBC's young-sports-personality-of-the-year award. His appearance at the ceremony in London, with tie loosened and chewing gum lodged in his cheek, reminded everyone just how young he still is.

Everton manager David Moyes is well aware of the dangers of over-exposing his prodigy who is banned from giving media interviews and used sparingly as a substitute.

"He's more mature as a footballer than as a person," Moyes told his club's website this week.

"Between 17 and 20 is an age when you don't want to be in the

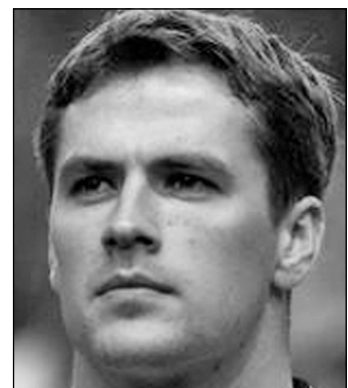
spotlight. It is a period where we want to try to take his adolescence away from him; to deny him the opportunity to do the sort of things everyone else has done at that age. I don't think he's got a big ego. He's very down to earth and just

phenic season, which they started by romping clear at the top of the league table.

Now, after five defeats and a draw in their last six league games, Liverpool are mired in their worst league run for 19 years and down to



WAYNE ROONEY



MICHAEL OWEN

wants to be left alone and we have to be careful how we continue to watch his development.

Superb winners against Leeds United and Blackburn Rovers have confirmed Rooney hero status, although the early signs are that Everton's wonderkid is a different type of player to Owen.

Both have an instinctive eye for goal. But whereas Owen relies on electric pace and cool finishing for most of his goals, Rooney possesses more sleight of foot, relying on balance and trickery to fool opponents.

It may be that Rooney ends up playing a link role between midfield and attack, in the mould of Manchester United's Paul Scholes, rather than as an out-and-out striker.

On Sunday, Owen will be under a great deal more pressure than his younger pretender.

The striker has netted a healthy 15 goals in Liverpool's schizo-

five in the table, a place behind Everton.

The England striker's eye for goal has long been Liverpool's most lethal weapon but his record in Merseyside derbies is relatively poor.

Owen has scored only once in eight appearances against Everton - from the penalty spot in last season's 3-1 win at Goodison Park.

Wednesday's thrilling 4-3 League Cup quarterfinal win over Aston Villa lifted spirits at Anfield. With 44 international caps and two World Cups behind him, Owen knows confidence is the key ingredient Liverpool need to rediscover.

"Individuals can lose confidence at different times of the season and then there's the team confidence that goes with it," he told Liverpool's website last week.

"If too many players are not on form at the same time then the team is going to suffer."

League One Marseille's happy holiday

Football

REUTERS, Paris

Olympique Marseille reached the winter break at the top of the French first division (League One) despite a 1-1 draw at home with Monaco.

Monaco, who were looking for their first win at the Stade Velodrome in 23 years, opened the scoring through Croatian striker Dado Prso after 41 minutes.

But Marseille received a Christmas gift in the 62nd minute when Daniel Van Buyten equalised with a powerful 30-metre free kick on Friday.

"When a team are top of the league, they have to play as leaders and we just didn't do that in the first half. We rushed into attack and forgot to defend," said Marseille coach Alain Perrin.

"We opened a lot of space to their strikers and we were late all the time all over the field. Fortunately,

the boys had guts and they came back into the game."

"We were disappointed by the result when we went back to the dressing room," said former 1998 World Cup captain Didier Deschamps, who is now coaching Monaco.

"We lost concentration for a few minutes when they scored the equaliser but we mustn't forget how well we played during the rest of the game."

Marseille were crowned middle-of-the-season champions last weekend but they only had a cushion of one point over Nice, who made the running for most of the early season, and two over Monaco, the in-form team of December, and Olympique Lyon.

Promoted Nice were held to a 0-0 draw at Strasbourg after a game marred by a brawl and the sending off of Nice defender Cedric Verrault and Strasbourg striker Christian Bassila for violent conduct.

Defending champions Lyon dreamed of a top-spot Christmas until the dying seconds of their game at Sedan. They were leading 1-0 thanks to a 48th-minute Sonny Anderson goal when Henri Camara equalised in injury time.

Marseille will spend the break until late January 11 on 35 points, one ahead of Nice and En Avant Guingamp, who crushed AC Ajaccio 3-1.

Monaco are fourth on 33 points, ahead of Lyon and Sochaux on goal difference.

Sochaux sent last season's runners-up RC Lens crashing to a 3-0 defeat with a double from Brazilian striker Dos Santos and a third by Pierre-Alain Frau.

The year ended in a nightmare for Montpellier, sent to the bottom of the table by the postponement of their game against AJ Auxerre because of a flooded pitch.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Monaco's Dado Prso (L) celebrates with his teammate Patrice Evra after scoring against Marseille in their League One encounter on December 20.

Trust old boys

Football

AFP, Blackburn

Blackburn Rovers boss Graeme Souness believes his Old Trafford old boys could stop Manchester United in their tracks just as their title challenge is gathering a head of steam.

"I'm happy with their game and I think they are with the way they have been playing in the last few weeks. They have had similar seasons - both worked hard pre-season, got injured and only now are they looking as sharp as they would want to be."

"Andy's form has been excellent in the last three or four games and that is down to one thing only - he's now managed himself to get fully fit, to get the fitness strikers need to have if they are to score goals at the highest level."

Ferguson, who insists United are in top form, admitted that Cole and Yorke could be trying extra hard on Sunday. "Players always want to do well against their former clubs, especially when that former club is

Manchester United.

"Plenty of players have come back and scored against us - going back to my early days we had Peter Davenport and Norman Whiteside who came back and scored."

"It happens and you have to accept that as part of the game. We are going into this game in a great frame of mind, our form is terrific and hopefully I'll have everyone available for Sunday."

Whatever the result on Sunday, the sides will meet again next month in the first leg of their League Cup tie.

David Thompson is suspended for Blackburn but otherwise Souness has a full squad to choose from. Turkish international striker Hakan Sukur is included in the squad for the first time since signing from Parma.

United will have club captain Roy Keane on the bench after he came through a reserves match on Thursday. It was his first competitive action since late August, when he decided to have surgery on a persistent hip problem.



PHOTO: AFP

A file photo shows South Korean footballer Park Ji-Sung in action.