

Premiership  
Joy for Portsmouth  
Sheringham, Berger make their mark

Football

AFP, London

The summer signings were quick to earn their wages on the opening day of the English Premiership Saturday, as a trio of new boys sealed opening day victories for Portsmouth and Birmingham.

Portsmouth celebrated their return to England's top flight after a 15-year absence in fine style as Teddy Sheringham and Patrik Berger secured a 2-1 home win against Aston Villa.

The early kick-off even left them top of the league for at least a few hours.

Meanwhile at Birmingham, the club's record 5.5 million pound (8.8 million dollar) buy David Dunn proved the difference in their 1-0 home win against Tottenham.

Dunn, a summer acquisition from Blackburn Rovers, had the honour of putting away the very first goal of the Premiership season, slotting home a 24th-minute penalty after Robbie Savage had been fouled.

But the biggest cheers were at Fratton Park, where Portsmouth unveiled five new signings in their Premiership debut.

Aston Villa were left to rue a series of chances -- notably Alpay's missed free header from just a few yards out -- as Sheringham, discarded by Spurs over the summer, struck.

With just three minutes of the first half remaining, fellow newcomer Patrick Berger fed a pass through to Yacubu Ayegbini.

The Nigerian international wrigled free of the hapless Alpay to shoot, and Thomas Sorensen's parry was volleyed gleefully home by Sheringham.

Then on 42 minutes Berger, the Czech international let go by Liverpool in the close season, picked up the ball on edge of Aston Villa area, slipped past Ronny Johnsen and slipped the ball under Sorensen with a flick of his left boot.

Such fine finishing was the most welcome fillip possible for Portsmouth manager Harry Redknapp after last season's top

scorer for the club, Svetoslav Todorov, was ruled out for the season with a freak injury.

The Bulgarian international, who bagged 26 goals as Pompey won the First Division last season, damaged knee ligaments when his studs caught in the turf during training on Thursday.

The south-coast side lived dangerously after Boris Zivkovic fouled Gareth Barry as the Villa star steamed into the penalty box from the right with just seven minutes to go, Barry dispatching the penalty himself.

But Pompey, with their somewhat tatty ground and bargain-basement squad tipped by many pundits to be leading relegation candidates, held on for a win cheered ecstatically by the home crowd.

They were helped by Barry, pushing hard for a recall to the England squad, who earned a straight red card all of two minutes after scoring for dissent to a linesman.

Tottenham's appalling form of late last season continued as they lost out to Birmingham at Saint

Andrews.

Dunn was one of a series of summer signings by Birmingham manager Steve Bruce, along with the continued services of French international striker Christophe Dugarry, on loan last season.

Spurs manager Glenn Hoddle is among the bookies' favourites to be the first Premiership sacking this year, and the failure of his new strike force of Portuguese signing Helder Postiga and Robbie Keane to score will only deepen the gloom at White Hart Lane.



PHOTO: INTERNET

David Dunn celebrates scoring Birmingham City's winner against Tottenham Hotspur yesterday.

He can't hide!

AFP, Valencia

David Beckham has nowhere to hide, according to Valencia midfielder Vicente Rodriguez, who will Sunday go up against the England star in his first match as a Real Madrid player on Spanish soil.

Valencia host the Primera Liga champions in Beckham's first match for Real in Spain following four friendlies in Asia in the Trofeo Naranja (orange trophy), effectively a pre-season tune-up.

But Rodriguez told Spanish media he wouldn't like to be in Beckham's shoes as all the hype surrounding his move meant "he won't be able to leave his house."

"Beckham is the best-known footballer in the world but I think to be under such pressure all the time can't be good - he can't leave his house."

And the Spanish international warned that Sunday's game "is no longer a friendly," insisting he and his teammates would go all out to win as if the match were a league fixture.

Valencia will not be at full strength, however, as club officials revealed keeper Santiago Canizares has a gluteal muscle strain meaning Andres Palop is likely to start, while Argentine playmaker Kily Gonzalez is being rested after an ankle injury.

Moyes wants  
Jeffers

AFP, London

Everton manager David Moyes is hoping to boost the Merseysiders' Premiership campaign by attracting Arsenal forward Francis Jeffers back to the club, he said Friday.

Moyes is also in the running to sign Fulham's transfer-listed midfielder Sean Davis -- who is also attracting interest from Middlesbrough.

Francis has in the past been touted to leave Highbury -- where he is not a team regular -- however Moyes knows that financial constraints may prevent the club moving to bring him back.

"Bringing Jeffers back to Everton is something I have been thinking about," said Moyes.

"But I don't believe anything will happen at the present, it's not something that will happen quickly."

Moyes could well use the occasion to discuss a possible loan deal for Francis with Gunners' manager Arsene Wenger -- however persuading the Everton board to come up with enough money to match the England striker's pay package will be another matter.

Jeffers left Everton two years ago for 10 million pounds (16 million dollars). His departure angered the fans but was vital to the club's financial survival.

Ronaldo relying  
on Beckham

Football

AFP, Madrid

Brazilian World Cup hero Ronaldo believes the arrival of David Beckham will enable him to torment Spanish defences in what the Real Madrid striker hopes will be a vintage campaign for him and the club.

With the start of the Spanish season just days away -- Real meet Real Mallorca in the Super Cup with the first leg on August 24 -- Ronaldo says Beckham will prepare a steady stream of chances for him, regardless of whether the England man plays on his preferred right flank or elsewhere.

On Real's Asian tour last month Ronaldo hinted there was a little rivalry between the two 'galacticos', or superstars, pointing out that he was a world champion even if Beckham was currently more marketable.

But on Saturday, Ronaldo told AS sports daily he was delighted to have Beckham in the side.

"He can play anywhere as far as I am concerned as he has superb vision and his crossing is perfect.

"Behind me, on the right or in the middle -- it's all one to me. Beckham will help us in many ways.

"He just has to concentrate on his football because if he stopped to think about all the hype going on around him he'd go crazy," said the Brazilian.

With Beckham on board Ronaldo has set himself a target of at least 35

goals in all competitions compared with 30 last season.

"Physically, I'm in great shape. I want this season to be a great one for Ronaldo and for Real Madrid.

"This year I will score more than 35 goals," said the star, whose 23 league goals helped fire the club to the league title although six more in the Champions League were not enough to prevent a semi-final exit

sacked barely two days after the league title win despite two Champions League successes in four years at the helm.

Asked what Queiroz wanted from him personally Ronaldo told AS: "Just that I score more goals than ever!"

He added, however, that the club still has room for improvement.

"We can do much better. With the



RONALDO



DAVID BECKHAM

to Juventus.

"My aim is to score more than the 30 goals I hit last season," said Ronaldo, adding he is over a leg muscle strain which forced him out of the final match of Real's Asian tour.

Ronaldo added that with new coach Carlos Queiroz in charge he and the rest of the squad would be out to impress the man who has replaced Vicente del Bosque,

quality we have in the squad we can up our game."

Ronaldo joined Real a year ago from Inter Milan fresh from scoring both goals in Brazil's World Cup final win over Germany.

And he doesn't regret leaving Italy behind.

"It was the best decision I ever made in my life. I took it at a key moment - and now I feel very happy."

Smith a Leeds man

Football

AFP, London

Leeds United forward Alan Smith blasted reports he is set for a surprise move to join former Leeds boss David O'Leary at Aston Villa.

According to the Sun newspaper on Friday, Leeds held secret talks with O'Leary this week and are ready to offload the striker despite him having signed a new three and a half year contract last February.

But Smith, following an official denial by Leeds, dismissed any talk of a move in a statement pledging his loyalty to his hometown club.

"I can assure Leeds United fans that I know nothing at all about this story," the statement read.

"I can only repeat what I have said recently -- that I am a Leeds United player and proud to be so. I was born in Leeds and have no intention of leaving the club. This is where I want to play my football.

"I am happy here and the only

thing on my mind at the moment is doing well for the club and right now that means concentrating on the game against Newcastle United."

Leeds have been forced into a dressing room clearout as they try to fight off their creditors and 22-year-old Smith is one of the few remaining star players at Leeds and is a



ALAN SMITH

firm favourite with the Elland Road fans.

Leeds chairman John McKenzie had earlier assured fans that Smith was not for sale.

"I can tell you here and now there's not a chance in a million he is going -- I'd say not a chance in 20 million," McKenzie told Sky Sports News.

"There's absolutely no way Alan Smith is leaving this club. He will be there in September, as he always is, playing for this club.

"He is not going anywhere. He's been a fantastic asset to us and he's absolutely critical to our future plans. He's a symbol of what Leeds United is all about."

Leeds fans have heard similar sentiments before, only to see a string of top players sold to rival teams to alleviate the club's massive debts.

Rio Ferdinand, Robbie Keane, Lee Bowyer, Robbie Fowler, Jonathan Woodgate, Olivier Dacourt and Harry Kewell have all left the club in the past year and Kewell's compatriot Australian Mark Viduka could soon follow suit.

Wenger still  
upbeat

AFP, Paris

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger revealed Saturday he is confident his side can recapture the English Premiership title from Manchester United, despite limited additions to his squad.

While Manchester United have made high-profile signings like Kleberson and Cristiano Ronaldo, Wenger has added just keeper Jens Lehmann and youngsters Gael Clichy and Philippe Senderos.

"We've opted for stability," Wenger told French sports daily L'Equipe. "It's a compromise between the money available and the players who have proved themselves here.

"My players are well prepared and focused, I've got confidence in their abilities."

Wenger is delighted that French stars Patrick Vieira and Robert Pires have signed new long-term contracts, as has Thierry Henry.

"If they hadn't signed, alarm bells would be ringing come Christmas. I consider those three as the best in the country in their positions. Patrick Vieira, for example, we couldn't imagine losing him!"

But despite Manchester United's new signings and Chelsea's free spending, Wenger is confident Arsenal can reclaim the crown they won two seasons ago.

"I'm confident. The Premiership will be harder, but more interesting. I know, however, that we can take back the title."

Nigeria lose  
Okocha fight

AFP, Lagos

Nigeria have given up on having international captain Austin 'Jay Jay' Okocha for a friendly against Japan after the Bolton Wanderers midfielder declined an invitation in order to concentrate on his club career.

"Okocha will not be in Japan. We would have loved to have him in this game as we continue our preparations for the African Nations Cup but he has asked to be left out because of club commitments and as such we will not force him to play for his country," said Taiwo Ogunjobi, the chief executive of the Nigeria Football Association (NFA).

"We, however, hope that he will honour our subsequent invitations as he is still our captain."

Ogunjobi said Haruna Babangida from Spanish giants Barcelona will now replace the Nigeria skipper.

Two other England-based players, Joseph Yobo of Everton and Isaac Okoronkwo from Wolverhampton Wanderers, have also been replaced by Efetobore Sodje and Ejike Uzugha, who plays in Germany.

Japan will host the 'Super Eagles' on Wednesday in an international friendly officials said will serve as a warm-up game ahead of the African Nations Cup in Tunisia.

This is the latest case of a club versus country row involving the NFA and as most of the top leagues resume in Europe the Nigerian FA are likely to be confronted with similar cases ahead of next year's Nations Cup.

Over the years the NFA have clashed with top English clubs like Arsenal and Chelsea for the release of stars like Nwankwo Kanu and Celestine Babayaro.

Several European clubs have already expressed displeasure that they are likely to miss their Nigeria stars for as long as two weeks from January when Nigeria feature at Tunisia 2004.

Babel can  
join Rovers

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier has told defender Markus Babel that he is free to join Blackburn Rovers as he is not guaranteed a starting spot in the Liverpool first team.

"Blackburn have been in touch and are talking to his agent," Houllier revealed to the official Liverpool website www.liverpoolfc.tv.

"If they can come to an agreement then Markus will have permission to leave."

"Markus has been outstanding in pre-season but there is greater competition in defence now and I can not guarantee him first team football."

Former German international Babel, 30, has battled back to fitness after contracting a life-endangering nerve illness that threatened to end his football career.

Last season Babel cut a forlorn figure at Anfield and his frustration was demonstrated when he was sent off for head-butting an Everton player in a reserve match in May.

However, the former Bayern Munich star has vowed to put last season behind him and fight for his place at Liverpool in the wake of interest from Blackburn.



PHOTO: REUTERS

A file photo of Chelsea, English soccer's plutocrats, who plunge into Premier League combat today at Anfield.

Chelsea face Reds test

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea put their expensive new-look side to the test at Anfield on Sunday, where fellow Premiership title-contenders Liverpool lay in wait for revenge.

The two clubs' opening game is the reverse of last season's final match, when Chelsea won 2-1, nudging the Reds into fifth place and out of the Champions League spots.

The defeat cost Liverpool an estimated 20 million pounds (32 million dollars), a sum which now seems like loose change for new Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich, who has spent 75 million pounds (121 million dollars) on seven new players after buying the west London club on July 1.

Joe Cole, Glen Johnson, Juan Sebastian Veron, Wayne Bridge, Geremi, Adrian Mutu and Ireland winger Damien Duff will be jostling for places come Sunday afternoon.

Duff is particularly keen to feature.

"Hopefully, I will play against Liverpool," he told the London Evening Standard.

"They have big Irish connections. I have friends and family who support Liverpool. I've always enjoyed playing against them."

After Chelsea beat Liverpool in May, Ranieri said "stability is the secret of Chelsea," adding, "if we can improve with one or two players I might buy but I don't like change."

But such are the numbers of new faces at Stamford Bridge, Liverpool boss Gerard Houllier is uncertain about who his side will face.

"I don't know what team he will play, but at the end of the day, I'm more concerned about my team. It will be a great game. We need the fans to be right behind us," he said.

Houllier is under pressure to mount a serious title challenge after a mid-season blip blew all hope last time.

"We have learned things from last season, but it's not something I

want to go into," he told the Liverpool Echo.

"Let's just say I've learnt a lot about people. What happened last year has made us stronger."

He has pulled off a steal in taking Leeds' Australian striker Harry Kewell for a bargain five million pounds (eight million dollars) and has added Ireland full-back Steve Finnan and French youngsters Anthony Le Tallec and Florent Pongolle.

Liverpool go into the grudge match with a few injury worries.

Finnan is not match fit after a hernia operation while Salif Diao (groin) and Vladimir Smicer (knee) are also unlikely to start.

Chelsea summer target Steven Gerrard is suspended due to his red card in the May clash while Dietmar Hamann is out until November with a shin injury.

The Blues have plenty to choose from with Emmanuel Petit fit again, and Mutu may feature if his transfer is registered in time.

Bowyer awaits a  
hostile time

Football

AFP, Leeds

Newcastle's Lee Bowyer returns to Leeds United on Sunday ready to face a chorus of hate from Elland Road fans who still feel betrayed by the manner in which the controversial midfielder left the struggling club.

Bowyer, whose career has been dogged by controversy both on and off the field, left the Yorkshire club for West Ham in January - a move which enraged supporters.

"The manner in which Lee Bowyer left upset our fans and they are not ready to forgive him," Ray Fell, chairman of Leeds United Supporters Club, told the Newcastle Chronicle.

Also returning to his former club on Sunday is Newcastle centre-back Jonathan Woodgate.

Both he and Bowyer were embroiled in a high-profile court trial two years ago when they were accused of attacking a student outside a nightclub.

Bowyer was cleared of all charges but Woodgate was found guilty of affray.

Although Bowyer played at Elland Road for West Ham last season, he has already admitted that the timing of Sunday's fixture, on the opening weekend of the new Premiership season, could have been better.

"Perhaps it would have been better if this game had been further into the season," he said.

Meanwhile, Newcastle boss Bobby Robson refused to say

whether or not Bowyer will actually play in the game.

"He's in the squad and this is the game he has been waiting for since he joined us in the summer," said Robson.

"I have picked the team but, like the rest of you, he will have to wait and see."

Woodgate is, however, a definite starter.

"We had just signed Jonathan when we played Leeds last season and we left him out for all sorts of reasons and we ended up winning 3-0.

"He's looking forward to the game too. We've won there in the last three seasons, but while we'll want to extend that run, Leeds will be determined to beat us too."