

Bitter booters will play



AFP, St. Albans

Angry England players launched a bitter attack on the Football Association after agreeing to go ahead with Saturday's crucial Euro 2004 clash against Turkey despite their rage at the axing of Rio Ferdinand.

The Manchester United defender was dropped from the team after he failed to undergo a drugs test last month, but his teammates accused the FA of letting them and coach Sven-Goran Eriksson down.

The squad insisted there had never been any serious question mark over their participation in Saturday's match in Istanbul where they need at least a draw to qualify for next year's finals in Portugal.

However, they made it clear just how badly they feel Ferdinand was treated, saying he was "entitled to confidentiality and a 'fair' hearing in front of an independent commission".

"We believe the people responsible for making that decision did not

give Rio Ferdinand that due process, which has disrupted and made the team weaker against the wishes of the manager and the players.

"All the England players are proud to wear the England shirt and would never have let England, Sven-Goran Eriksson or our magnificent fans down," the statement said.

"We apologise to our manager, staff and fans for any concerns that may have arisen over the last few days - in our minds there's never been any question as to whether we would play in this game."

The players had been demanding that Ferdinand be reinstated but that request was dismissed out of hand by the FA.

Had England refused to play the match, they would have been disqualified from the European championships but Ferdinand is believed to have called on his teammates to play the game.

"Rio has had a number of telephone calls with his England team mates and he has begged them to go ahead with the game in Turkey," a source told Channel Four news.

Mark Palios, the chief executive of the FA, said the players had made it clear how unhappy they were with

the situation. "This is a big match and Rio is an important player. We have held several meetings and discussed the issues with Rio being left out of the squad," said Palios.

"We have heard what the players have had to say on Rio's situation and the general situation of anti-doping rules. We've listened carefully to them - and they have some very strong views.

"I have to work with the procedures currently in place and we've already started a comprehensive review of these.

"Some people have raised issues regarding confidentiality - rightly a key issue.

"We are very well aware of our duties in this respect but we have no doubt we have acted entirely properly during this difficult and complex issue."

Eriksson said he was pleased the saga had come to an end.

"I am very happy that everything has been sorted out and that from tomorrow we can focus 200 percent on football. The players have shown their strength as a group and I think we will see that on Saturday in Turkey."

The decision to go ahead with the match came at the end of a day

of brinkmanship. Although the senior squad, with the exception of the injured Michael Owen, trained as scheduled on Wednesday morning, embarrassed FA officials scrapped an earlier press conference while efforts to negotiate a resolution to the dispute continued.

Ferdinand has claimed he forgot to provide the urine sample required by anti-doping officials because he was preoccupied with moving house on the day of the tests.

He said he was devastated by the decision to omit him and denied ever taking drugs.

A preliminary hearing in Ferdinand's case will only take place on Monday, two days after Saturday's match.

According to media reports earlier on Wednesday, four of Ferdinand's Manchester United team-mates - Paul Scholes, Nicky Butt and the Neville brothers, Gary and Phil - plus captain David Beckham, Michael Owen, Sol Campbell and David James met Palios late Tuesday.

After they failed to convince him to reinstate Ferdinand, the reports said rest of the squad voted unanimously to pull out of Saturday's match.



PHOTO: AFP

IN CASE BECKHAM AND CO. WERENT INTERESTED! Some fans demonstrate outside Sopwell house hotel on October 8, where the F.A. was having a press conference about the England team which was threatening to boycott Saturday's match against Turkey.

Gunes' wry smile!



AFP, Istanbul

A Turkey coach Senol Gunes said on Wednesday that an English team in disarray would play into the hands of his side in the decisive Euro 2004 qualifier in Istanbul at the weekend.

The England players have threatened to boycott Saturday's match if the English Football Association refuses to reinstate Rio Ferdinand, who has been dropped from the squad after failing to take a routine drugs test.

"We would be happy if they (the English side) come onto the pitch troubled and in disarray," Gunes told reporters in Istanbul.

"But the English should resolve their own problems themselves.

There is only one thing that is on our minds and that is to get onto the pitch and win."

Nonetheless, Gunes cautioned that the English team would lose none of its strength if one or two players were dropped from the squad.

"Our rivals are very strong. I do not think they would feel the absence of one or two players," he added.

The English Football Association on Wednesday ruled out the reinstatement of Ferdinand to the national squad, but admitted that they could not guarantee the players would back down and get on the plane to Turkey.

European football's governing body UEFA, meanwhile, announced that England would forfeit the match if a boycott went ahead, with Turkey awarded a 3-0 win.

The manager of the Turkish team, Can Cobanoglu, meanwhile played down the English players' boycott

threat as a "tactic to change the agenda".

"The English always cause incidents in a bid to change the agenda and then they come and play the match," he told AFP.

"I would prefer playing the English side in Istanbul and defeating them to winning because of a no-show. That would be a nicer way to go to Portugal."

England need to at least draw the match to finish top of group seven and qualify directly for next year's European Championship finals in Portugal. Turkey must win to finish top of the group, otherwise they will finish second and must enter the playoffs for a place in the finals.

Despite coming third in last year's World Cup, Turkey have never beaten England and have drawn only once in nine matches since 1984.

Owen ruled out

BBC, London

England striker Michael Owen has conceded defeat in his battle to be fit for the crunch Euro 2004 qualifier against Turkey.

The shin injury Owen sustained in Liverpool's 2-1 home defeat by Arsenal failed to respond to intensive treatment.

Owen's absence is a second body-blow to England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson, who has already lost defender Rio Ferdinand following the drugs test rumpus.

Football Association spokesman Adrian Bevington confirmed: "Michael Owen will not be travelling to Turkey with the team this afternoon.

Even when Owen joined up with the England squad on Tuesday, Owen was given only a 50-50 chance of playing.

He left the team hotel on Thursday morning to return to Merseyside for further treatment.

"After receiving treatment from our medical staff - who have been in consultation with the medical team at Liverpool - over the past three days, it was felt that, despite Michael making excellent progress, he would not be fit for Saturday's game," Bevington added.

Eriksson had anticipated Owen's withdrawal by calling up Aston Villa striker Darius Vassell as cover.

The England coach's striking options now are Emile Heskey, Wayne Rooney, James Beattie and Vassell - while he may well also consider midfielder Paul Scholes in a more advanced role.

Chelsea's John Terry is expected to partner Arsenal's Sol Campbell in central defence in the absence of Ferdinand.

England skipper David Beckham, who sustained a dead leg making his comeback from injury in Real Madrid's La Liga clash with Espanol, is expected to be fit.

Ronaldinho injured

REUTERS, Barcelona

Brazilian forward Ronaldinho will miss his side's friendly international against Jamaica in Leicester on Sunday after suffering a leg strain in a King's Cup match this week.

The 23-year-old World Cup winner sustained the injury shortly after scoring the winner in his side's 1-0 victory over third division Gramanet in the first-round match on Tuesday and had to leave the pitch before the end of the game.

Club doctor Lluís Til said that the Brazilian Football Federation had given permission for the player to remain in Barcelona for treatment.

The club said that Ronaldinho was likely to be out of action for between seven and 10 days and was a serious doubt for the return leg of their UEFA Cup first-round match against Puchov next Wednesday.

Barca drew the first leg in Slovakia 1-1 on September 24.



RONALDINHO

Meikle arrested

Leeds suspend Morris



AFP, London

British police arrested a man Wednesday in connection with claims by a teenaged girl she was gang raped by several English Premiership footballers in a London hotel last month.

Nicholas Meikle, a party organiser, attended a central London police station where he was in custody on Wednesday night.

"A 29-year-old man has attended a police station by appointment today," a London police spokesman said.



NICHOLAS MEIKLE

"He was arrested in connection with allegations of rape and sexual assault by a 17-year-old woman. He remains in custody and it would be inappropriate to comment further at this stage."

The man is the first to be arrested in connection with the allegations.

Meikle told a British Sunday newspaper that he was with a group of Premiership players being investigated in the alleged attack, and insisted that the girl had consented to have sex with him, another man and two Premiership players.

The girl, who cannot be named for legal reasons, has reportedly told police she agreed to have sex with one Premiership star, but was then attacked by up to seven others in Room 316 at the Grosvenor House Hotel on September 27.

News of the arrest comes as English football has been left reeling by a string of scandals which threaten to rip up the foundations of the game's unprecedented growth over the last decade.

In the space of barely 24 hours, it has emerged that England defender Rio Ferdinand had skipped a doping test, Newcastle striker Craig Bellamy was convicted of being drunk and disorderly and that Leeds United have suspended midfielder Jody Morris while they carry out an internal investigation into allegations of a serious sexual assault.

Morris has been released on

Police bail pending further enquiries after being held overnight by detectives investigating allegations of a serious sexual assault on a 20-year-old woman in Collingham.

The club said in a statement: "Leeds United AFC have had a meeting with Jody Morris and his solicitor this morning.

"In accordance with the standard provisions of the players' contract of employment he has been suspended for up to 14 days to enable the club to conduct an internal investigation."

A second man, who is not believed to be a footballer, has also been released on bail pending further enquiries into the allegations of an assault on Monday night



JODY MORRIS

Ronaldo blasts Cuper



AFP, Rome

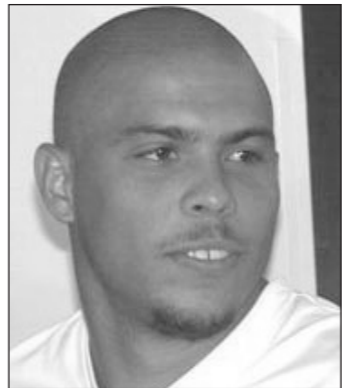
Real Madrid's Brazilian superstar Ronaldo reopened old wounds with his former coach Hector Cuper Wednesday by blaming him for Inter Milan's recent slump.

Inter have taken two points from the last nine and trail joint Serie A leaders Juventus and AC Milan by five points after five games.

Sunday's 3-1 defeat against Milan has turned the heat on Cuper, who has failed to win any silverware since taking the helm in the summer of 2001.

Several Inter players have rallied

round their beleaguered coach following club president Massimo



RONALDO

Moratti's warning that further slip-ups will not be tolerated.

But Ronaldo, who played for Inter between 1997 and 2002 before falling out with Cuper and joining Real, believes the buck stops with the coach.

"I had a problem at Inter and it's still there," the Brazilian World Cup winner told the Gazzetta dello Sport's website on Wednesday.

"Someone has to be responsible for a team that doesn't win. Inter are a squad of quality with great players and I don't understand why they are not successful and don't play good football.

"I'm certainly not happy as I will always be an Inter fan - it hurts me when they lose."

Dutch eyes on United



AFP, Manchester

Dutch television mogul John de Mol has increased his holding in Manchester United, the club said on Wednesday, a day after a pair of Irish racing tycoons sparked takeover rumours by doubling their own stake.

De Mol, whose company Endemol created the hit reality TV show "Big Brother", now owned 4.1 percent of the English Premiership champions, the club said in a statement.

The increase in stake is relatively small -- De Mol previously owned 3.5 percent -- but any share dealings are being closely watched amid a series of rumours that predators are circling the world's richest football club.

On Tuesday, John Paul "J.P." McManus and John Magnier used their joint holding company to

double their stake to 23.15 percent, making them the club's biggest shareholders by some way.

The bulk of the extra shares were bought from British satellite broadcaster BSkyB, which announced earlier in the day that it had sold its 9.9-percent stake.

It remains unknown what McManus and Magnier, a pair of super-rich and publicity shy businessmen and racehorse fanatics, plan to do with their stake.

The pair were close to Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson, but a recent wrangle over the ownership of champion race horse Rock of Gibraltar led to a split.

Last week it was announced that US tycoon Malcolm Glazer, who already owns the Tampa Bay Buccaneers American football team, had doubled his holding in United to 5.9 percent.

Takeover rumours have swirled around a series of English

sides since Russian oil billionaire Roman Abramovich snapped up Premiership side Chelsea over the summer.

Industry analysts say that another, as yet unnamed, Russian tycoon is rumoured to be interested in Manchester United.

Manchester United are seen as a particularly attractive proposition due to the combination of their success on the pitch and huge commercial revenues from sponsorship and merchandise sales.

It was not announced who had sold the shares to De Mol's private holding company, Talpa, but in a separate announcement Manchester United announced that their main institutional investor had unloaded some of its stake.

London hedge fund Lansdowne Partners, which previously owned 5.2 percent of the club, now held 3.7 percent, the club said.

Please behave!

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish football officials have called on fans to be on their best behaviour at Saturday's potentially explosive Euro 2004 qualifier with England.

"A single ugly incident in the spectators' seats, no matter how small, could leave big marks on history which we do not deserve and which will be hard to erase," the Turkish Football Association said in a statement.

"Any ugly act directed against rival players would overshadow a victory achieved on the pitch."

Mobile phones, coins, lighters, umbrellas, sticks, plastic bottles and even confetti have been added to the banned list which includes inflammatory or explosive materials.

All 42,000 tickets for the match at the Sukru Saracoglu stadium on Istanbul's Asian side have been sold out.

Trouble would prompt sanctions. Turkey were fined 50,000 Swiss francs (32,000 euros, 37,000 dollars) by UEFA after Istanbul fans threw bottles and coins at Macedonia players when the visitors took a 2-1 lead in a Euro 2004 qualifier in June.

World Cup semi-finalists Turkey twice came from behind before winning the Group Seven match 3-2.

Turkey have a history of crowd misbehaviour.

In 1999 they were in trouble when fireworks were thrown and the pitch invaded in a game against Ireland.

They were also punished three times in 1998 for disciplinary offences, including the throwing of missiles and pitch invasions during games in a match against Finland, Germany and Northern Ireland.

At June's Confederations Cup in France, Turkish fans invaded the pitch during the match against Brazil at St Etienne which finished 2-2 and led to the world champions being eliminated.

The English Football Association has not taken up any tickets and has urged supporters to stay at home in light of the fighting that has broken out between English and Turkish fans since two Leeds fans were stabbed to death in Istanbul in 2000.

British police are worried a hard core of hooligans will travel to Turkey, but Istanbul police chief Celalattin Capa said Wednesday that all border gates and airports had been told to bar fans on a list of 1,000 known English troublemakers passed on by British officials.

Five British security officers will help Turkish police identify hooligans arriving at Istanbul airport.

Turkey will put 5,000 police officers both inside and outside the stadium and only fans with ID cards will be allowed in.

New Liverpool ground planned

AFP, London

English giants Liverpool are planning a new 60,000-seat stadium to be built just 300 yards from their current Anfield home - at a cost of 80 million pounds (133 million dollars).

The club has now applied for planning permission for the development and are hopeful of moving into their new home in summer 2006.

"We believe we have covered every possible angle in terms of the planning application and it's a critically important day for us," Liverpool chief executive Rick Parry told the club's official website, www.liverpoolfc.tv.

"We are delighted to have reached this stage but things will get much harder from here on in as the project gets bigger."



PHOTO: AFP

ENGLAND'S FLIGHT IS THEIR DELIGHT: Turkey's Yildiray Basturk (R) and Okan Buruk in a cheerful mood during a training session in Istanbul on October 8.

'Violent' Campbell fined

AFP, London

Arsenal and England defender Sol Campbell was on Wednesday fined 20,000 pounds (33,000 dollars) by the Football Association for violent conduct in the Community Shield match against Manchester United.

However, Campbell escaped a ban for his kick at United's Cameroon international Eric Djemba-Djemba in the match at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff in August.

It was widely expected that a three-match suspension would be handed down but it appears that the player escaped a ban because of the degree of violence deemed involved in his flick at his opponent.

The incident was not picked up by referee Steve Bennett during the game but included in his official match report after he saw it on a video recording.

150,000 pounds for Best's best



AFP, London

A football fan Wednesday paid more than 150,000 pounds for the European Player of the Year trophy awarded to George Best in 1968, a British auction house announced.

The trophy, awarded to Best the same year he won the European Cup with Manchester United, was sold for 167,000 pounds (278,000 dollars) to an anonymous British phone bidder described as "an avid football fan", Bonhams auctioneers said.

An English Footballer of the Year trophy, also won by Best in 1968, failed to reach the minimum asking price of 150,000 pounds and was returned to the former United and Northern Ireland star.

"It's sad that the second trophy did not sell as this is an important piece of football memorabilia," said

a spokeswoman for Bonhams.

"We will now have to speak to Mr Best to see what he wants to do."

Best, 57, has said he would use proceeds from the sale to buy a holiday home in Greece.

"I feel sheer pride when I look at them and I will shed a tear when they go, of course. It will be very emotional for me," he said ahead of the sale.

The auction comes only a few weeks after Best's 31-year-old wife, Alex, walked out on him following reports he had started drinking again and was having affairs.

Best had a life-saving liver operation just over a year ago to help combat the damage done by years of alcoholism. He is also known to be a big gambler.

Best was one of the stars of the Manchester United team that won the European Cup in 1968 and a combination of talent and good looks made him Britain's first 'superstar' player.