

## Gerrard pleads for Owen

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard has appealed to the Reds board to do everything to keep England striker Michael Owen whose agent has warned he might leave if they do not qualify for Champions League action next season.

Gerrard spoke out after Liverpool achieved their best win of the season at Chelsea on Wednesday night, with Owen on the bench after his injury troubles.

"People do not appreciate Michael enough," Gerrard said.

"I play with him all the time and train with him every day. I know he is our main man, and we need to keep hold of him."

Gerrard hinted Owen has yet to make up his mind where he wants to play.

"It is an important decision for him," he said.

"I would love Michael to stay, obviously. I have committed myself for another four years and I am sure Michael will too.

"I have spoken to him a couple of times, and nobody really knows what he is thinking - only himself."

Owen's contract runs out in 16 months, and Liverpool want to sign him up again to a new four-year deal.

Gerrard insisted Owen would make the decision and not his agents.

"The all-important decision is down to Michael, and he will make it. Nobody can question Michael's loyalty to Liverpool. He has been here since he was eight.

"He has scored a lot of goals for the club and pulled us out of so many games when we have been struggling."

## P'ship players cleared of rape charges

AFP, London

Two English Premiership soccer players have been cleared of rape charges, The Sun newspaper reported Thursday.

Chelsea striker Carlton Cole and Newcastle defender Titus Bramble had been accused of raping a 17-year-old in a London hotel last September but legal sources told The Sun the case had collapsed because police admitted they could not disprove the players' arguments the girl had consented to sex.

Police were called in when the girl claimed she was gang-raped.

Bramble, Cole, currently on loan to Charlton, party organiser Nicholas Meikle and engineer Jason Edwards were arrested.

At one point the 17-year-old was having sex with three men at once at Londons Grosvenor House Hotel, The Sun says.

A legal source close to the case told the paper the players treated the impressionable teenager, who had just left convent school, as "just a piece of meat to boost their egos".

The source added: "What happened to her was incredibly sordid."

But the legal source said: "They all insisted she had consented to having sex with them. And it was impossible to prove otherwise. It is very difficult to get corroborating evidence in such cases."

The orgy was triggered when the scantily-dressed teenager met the men at London's Funky Buddha club in the early hours of Saturday, September 28.

She agreed to go to another club with the group and then on to the hotel, where six rooms had been booked by the players and their friends.

## Fill it up Totti!

AFP, Rome

Roma captain Francesco Totti will appear on television on Thursday in the less glamorous role of a petrol pump attendant.

The 27-year-old Italy international agreed to work for a few hours in a Rome petrol station for a programme to be shown by state broadcaster RAI in which celebrities swap their regular roles for more mundane jobs.

Totti, who is seen wearing grubby overalls and a cap, is quizzed about his identity by several customers but never gives the game away.

One curious patron asks him: "Are you Francesco Totti?", to which the Roma star replies: "If I was Francesco Totti, do you really think I would be working in a petrol station!"

Totti proved he was game for a laugh last year when he authorised the publication of a book of jokes poking fun at his perceived lack of intelligence.

'All the jokes about Totti: my collection' became a best-seller in Italy and raised thousands of euros for childrens' charity UNICEF, for whom the talented striker is an ambassador.

One famous example of Totti's alleged lack of brainpower was when he was asked by a reporter if he believed in the Latin motto 'Carpe Diem', meaning 'Seize the day', to which he replied: "Sorry, I don't speak English."



PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea's Glen Johnson (C) watches helplessly as Liverpool's French recruit Bruno Cheyrou scores past custodian Carlo Cudicini (R) at Stamford Bridge on January 7.

### Premiership

# Perfect Red Devils' day

### Football

AFP, London

Manchester United took full advantage of stumbles by title rivals Arsenal and Chelsea to pull further ahead at the top of the Premiership on a night which saw Liverpool's season take a dramatic turn for the better.

A 2-1 win over Bolton was enough to send United three points clear of Arsenal, who were held to a 1-1 draw at Everton.

Chelsea now trail Ferguson's men by seven points after slumping to a 1-0 home defeat by Liverpool, who eased the pressure on beleaguered manager Gerard Houllier by moving up to fifth place thanks to Bruno Cheyrou's 33rd minute winner.

Houllier, who came under fire from fans at the club's annual general meeting earlier this week, admitted it had been a desperately needed morale boost.

"This is a good omen for the future and it comes at a good time after a difficult week," the Frenchman admitted, refusing to apologise for his side's negative tactics.

"Today was an ugly win but a very good win nevertheless."

Sir Alex Ferguson paid Bolton the compliment of fielding a near full strength side and the Manchester United manager's policy paid dividends in the form of first half goals from Paul Scholes and Ruud van Nistelrooy.

But Bolton refused to lie down and their pressure ensured a tense

finale after Youri Djorkaeff's header was deflected into the net by Gary Neville a minute from the end.

"It has been a good night for us but we have done our bit because we had to battle and show our quality," Ferguson said. "The other results were a bonus for us."

Liverpool suffered the second half loss of goalkeeper Jerzy Dudek to injury and El Hadji Diouf to a controversial red card but still held out for a victory that may have fatally compromised Chelsea's title ambitions.

Blues boss Claudio Ranieri spent an unusually long time talking to the club's Russian owner Roman Abramovich after the match but emerged to insist he had no fears for his future.

"Don't worry - you will still see me on Thursday and for a long time yet," the Italian joked.

Ranieri admitted Chelsea had hit their roughest patch since Abramovich began injecting his money into the

club in the summer, but insisted they could ride it out.

"There isn't any team that can stay at a high level for 11 months. When we were at the top of the table, I said it was not important, that we had to continue to build."

To make matters worse for Chelsea, they will now have to do without Hernan Crespo for at least a week after the Argentinian striker limped off with a calf strain in the 12th minute.

Arsenal looked to have weathered the worst of Everton's storm when Nigerian playmaker Nwankwo Kanu ran on to Thierry Henry's pass and skipped round

Nigel Martyn to put them ahead, totally against the run of play, in the 29th minute.

But Everton's tenacity finally paid off with a quarter of an hour remaining when Canadian striker Thomasz Radzinski equalised.

Newcastle could have scored five or six in a first half onslaught against struggling Leeds.

But Sir Bobby Robson's side had to settle for a 1-0 win courtesy of Alan Shearer's 4th-minute strike and were very nearly made to pay for their profligacy as Leeds mounted a spirited second half fightback.

Paolo di Canio ensured Manchester City's winless run was extended to 13 matches with a late equaliser for Charlton.

To add to the agony for the City

### TOP SIX

English Premiership table after Wednesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Man Utd	20	16	1	3	40	14	49
Arsenal	20	13	7	0	36	13	46
Chelsea	20	13	3	4	36	17	42
Charlton	20	8	7	5	28	23	31
Liverpool	19	8	5	6	29	21	29

faithful, the Italian striker's goal came on the rebound after David Seaman had saved an 84th minute penalty awarded for what appeared to be an unintentional hand ball by defender Richard Dunne.

Up until then City had looked odds on to finally end their miserable streak thanks to Robbie Fowler's 39th minute opener.

Goals in either half from Joseph Desire Job and Szilard Nemeth earned Middlesbrough a 2-1 win over Fulham that pushes the Londoners down to seventh.

French winger Stephane Dalmat helped fire Tottenham out of the relegation zone with a first half double as the beleaguered north London club bounced back to form with a 4-1 win over Birmingham.

Welsh midfielder Simon Davies, in his comeback game after hip surgery, also got on the scoresheet as Spurs raced to a three-goal lead before the break.

Robbie Savage notched a consolation effort for Birmingham from the penalty spot mid-way through the second half but Robbie Keane's seventh goal of the season restored the home side's advantage in the 79th minute.

Leicester ensured they did not drop into the relegation place vacated by Spurs by holding out for a goalless draw at Southampton. The point was enough to lift the Foxes above fellow Premiership newcomers Portsmouth on goal difference.

Bottom side Wolves continued their fight for Premiership survival with a battling 2-2 draw at home to Blackburn.

A rare headed goal from skipper Paul Butler and Alex Rae's 8th of the season put Wolves ahead after Andy Cole's 14th minute opener but Dwight Yorke rescued a point for the visitors 11 minutes from time.

## Marcos injured riding

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian World Cup goalkeeper Marcos is likely to miss the start of the new season after suffering cuts and bruises in a motorcycle accident, his club Palmeiras said on Wednesday.

"It was a minor fall and nothing serious happened," team doctor Mauricio Bezerra told the Sao Paulo-based club's official website.

"They are superficial injuries but do not heal overnight. He suffered cuts and bruises to his back, right leg and right foot and they will take seven to 10 days to heal."

The club said the accident happened on December 24 during the close season, but did not give any further details.

## Rijkaard targets night revelers

REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard is promising a get-tough policy on players breaking club rules on late nights out.

"If I receive word that players have been out late, then the sanction is going to be very, very tough," Rijkaard said at a news conference in Barcelona on Wednesday.

"It's the responsibility of the players (to behave). If they don't, they will be hit in both sporting and financial terms."

Rijkaard is having a tough first season in charge at Barca. The team are currently 12th in the league standings, 18 points behind leaders Real Madrid and four points off the crucial fourth Champions League qualification place.

Spanish media reported this week that Rijkaard had asked club president Joan Laporta for help in cracking down on players breaking club curfews.

### King's Cup

# Real held

### Football

REUTERS, Madrid

A second-string Real Madrid side claimed a 1-1 draw away to second division Eibar in an entertaining King's Cup third round, first leg clash on Wednesday.

Real took the lead through Guti after 37 minutes, with Eibar equalising with a Roberto Cuevas header in first-half injury time.

Eibar had the better chances throughout the game but could not find a second goal and had to settle for a result that will see Real go into next week's second leg as strong favourites.

Struggling Celta Vigo eased the pressure on coach Miguel Angel Lotina with a 1-0 win away to Malaga.

Celta, through to the knockout stage of the Champions League but in the relegation places in the Primera Liga, got the only goal nine minutes into the second half when Vagner cracked in a 25 metre shot via the bar.

In other all-first division ties,

Real Zaragoza beat Real Betis 3-1 to give themselves a handy lead to take into the away leg next week, while Valencia drew 2-2 with Osasuna.

Barcelona, looking for a good Cup run after a poor start to the league season, face a tricky game away to second division promotion favourites Levante on Thursday.

Real Madrid coach Carlos Queiroz, denied the services of David Beckham and Zinedine Zidane because of injury, opted to do without most of the rest of his first team, with goalkeeper Iker Casillas the only regular making the starting lineup.

Casillas was in outstanding form early on, turning a Cuevas shot round the post after seven minutes and then blocking a weak shot from the same player after he had been put through on goal.

Real capitalised when Guti, making a rare start, brilliantly controlled a cut-back from Juanfran and tucked in his shot.

Eibar managed an equaliser from a corner but Casillas continued to deny their forwards after the break to give Real the advantage going back to the Bernabeu.

## Bundesliga's no to morning show

AFP, Berlin

Calls for the *Bundesliga* to follow the English Premier League by introducing morning kick-offs have fallen on deaf ears with managers, fans and football experts forming a chorus of disapproval.

German Football League (DFL) president Werner Hackmann claimed noon kick-offs would help to sell the *Bundesliga* product more effectively to Asian markets, highlighting how the English Premier League clubs had benefited financially since its inception. Early Bundesliga kick-offs would enable Asian fans to watch stars such as SV Hamburg's Japanese striker Naohiro Takahara and Chinese midfielder Jiayi Shao of 1860 Munich in the evening instead of deep into the night.

"Only two *Bundesliga* games are screened live and both are well after midnight," said former German international Pierre Littbarski, now coaching in Yokohama. "More Asian fans would watch if they were earlier."

But 82 per cent of 1,276 participants voted against the idea in a survey held by German magazine Kicker.



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid's captain for the day Guti (L) under pressure from Eibar's Saizar during their Spanish King's Cup match at Ipurua stadium, in the northern Spanish village of Eibar on January 7.

# Violence a concern



AFP, Lisbon

Portugal must be ready to combat fan violence during the European football championship it will host this summer because the risk of hooliganism is real, the country's deputy interior minister warned Wednesday.

"We must be conscious that since 1980 wherever championships have been held, even in nations with high security measures, there have always been some problems with public order," Nuno Magalhaes told reporters following a meeting with police chiefs in the southern Algarve resort province.

"The times of greatest risk are normally not during or after matches but before, even days before, when fans start congregat-

ing," he added.

At the last Euro football finals, which were jointly hosted by Belgium and the Netherlands in 2000, some 850 mostly English fans were arrested following hooliganism in the centre of Brussels and in nearby Charleroi, Belgium's third biggest city.

In an effort to avoid a repeat of such scenes during Euro 2004, which will take place between June 12 and July 4, Portugal has cancelled all police leave for what will be the biggest sports event ever held in the country.

The Portuguese government is spending 16.5 million euros (21 million dollars) to equip police with seven water cannon vehicles - the country's first - as well as batons, riot gear, pepper spray and other security equipment.

Portugal has also drawn up plans to set up round-the-clock courts that will have the power to

quickly expel potential trouble-makers and is mulling an alcohol ban around stadiums on game days.

Euro 2004 organizers meanwhile switched the venues of two first-phase group games which were deemed "high-risk" by European ruling body UEFA to stadiums in bigger cities where it would be easier to offer a strong police presence.

The Group D match on June 14 between Germany and the Netherlands was moved from the central fishing town of Aveiro to Oporto, Portugal's second-largest city, while the June 20 encounter in Group B between England and Croatia was moved to Lisbon from the university town of Coimbra.

Portugal is hoping a peaceful Euro 2004 will give its key tourism industry a big boost. Up to three million people are expected to travel to the country this year because of the football finals.

# MU's first Chinaman

### Football

AFP, Shanhai

Chinese teen football star Dong Fangzhou will become a Manchester United player within 48 hours, his club's general manager Lin Lefeng said Thursday.

"Dong's contract will be signed in one or two days," the Dalian Shide manager told AFP. "We are still discussing some of the details, but what's for sure is his transfer."

Lin declined to confirm speculation that United will shell out 3.5 million pounds for the 18-year-old forward, following his trial at Old Trafford earlier this season.

Initially, Shide reportedly wanted their star player only to go

out on loan and were said to be resisting a permanent sale.

But an agreement is now imminent and Dong will join a growing line of Chinese players moving to English clubs, with other European clubs eyeing up more potential recruits from the developing football nation.

Lin said three or four more Dalian Shide players were under review for possible trial agreements to English and French clubs.

"Another three or four of our players are under appraisal, preparing to go to some English or French clubs," he said, without naming names.

One of them however could be Chinese international youth skipper Feng Xiaoting, who in December had a week-long try-out with French first division club

Nantes.

The 18-year-old defender is contracted to Dalian Shide and currently plays with Sichuan, a club belonging to Dalian.

While English Premiership clubs may be looking to tap China's huge marketing potential, transfers also bode well for China's cash-strapped football teams.

Midfielder Li Tie at Everton and defender Sun Jihai at Manchester City are already established in the Premiership while Beijing playmaker Yang Pu could be on his way to Southampton. Striker Qu Bo is currently on trial at Blackburn.

"It (Dong's and others transfer) is a good thing, which demonstrates that Chinese players are valuable," Lin said.