

It's pointing the Real way



THAT'S THE HINT? Liverpool coach Rafa Benitez stands on the touchline while striker Michael Owen watches the proceedings from the substitutes' bench at Graz on August 10.

Sick Magpies!

AFP, London

Newcastle could see their first matches of the 2004-2005 Premiership season, starting with the opener at Middlesbrough on Saturday, severely compromised following a health scare at the club.

Premier League bosses are closely monitoring an outbreak of conjunctivitis at the club's training ground which could force Newcastle to apply to have Saturday's opening match postponed.

Five players - Shay Given, Lee Bowyer, Andy O'Brien, Tony Caig and Laurent Robert - are all sidelined, with the latter the latest to withdraw from training on Monday.

The situation has led to the club's training complex being closed down, with players forced to change in their cars, while fans have been banned from collecting autographs.

The Premier League are currently looking into the public health issue and it is understood if there is a high-risk factor then it is almost certain the match at the Riverside will be called off.

If it is deemed a low risk Sir Bobby Robson's side will be asked to play the game, or make a special application to the Premier League Board to have the game postponed.

A League spokesman said: "We are monitoring the situation and we are liaising with both clubs.

"We are also seeking expert medical advice, although we have no definitive view from them as yet, with regard to the public health connotations of the game, not just for the Newcastle players, but also the Middlesbrough players."

Newcastle officials are worried about losing further key members of their squad in the next few days, believing the virus is particularly contagious.

"We are very concerned our players are having to train together but this is something they will have to continue to do to prepare for Saturday's game," said a United spokesman.

"There is an eight-day incubation period and it is possible more of our players could have the virus without them knowing about it.

"Medical experts have told us in cases like this, 70 to 80% of the workforce are usually affected by the virus and this is worrying.

"Not only that, but we have been told a small percentage of people who get this do have long-term eye problems and this is also a concern."

Football

AFP, Graz

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez refused to be drawn on the growing speculation that Reds favourite Michael Owen is on his way out of Anfield following their 2-0 win against AK Graz on Tuesday.

Benitez kept Owen on the substitutes bench throughout the match, the first leg of the third qualifying round which gives entry to the lucrative group phase of the Champions League.

Owen's absence from the field meant that in the event of being transferred to another club playing in the competition, such as Real Madrid - who are being touted to sign him - he would still be eligible to play.

After watching club skipper Steven Gerrard produce a goal in either half of the game to virtually secure Liverpool's entry to the next phase, Benitez played down talk of England striker Owen's anticipated departure.

"When I decide on 11 starters for the match it's because I have confi-

dence in them, and tonight we had four forwards available," said Benitez, who deftly dodged the Channel Five reporter's questions about Owen.

"He's (Owen) here, no?"

Benitez on Monday evening only named Owen in his squad for Tuesday's match, and not in his starting line-up, thus adding to the speculation that he was being saved from being Cup-tied for another club.

On Tuesday the British newspapers reported that Owen is set to quit the club with whom he has spent his entire career for Spanish giants Real Madrid.

Real Madrid are reported to be locked in talks with the 24-year-old striker over a cut-price 10-million-pound transfer that could also see Fernando Morientes or Samuel Eto'o going to Anfield.

Owen in recent weeks has stalled on signing a new three-year deal at Anfield, and with 14-million-pound signing of French international Djibril Cisse, who on Tuesday partnered Czech sensation Milan Baros up front, Liverpool could be looking to cash in.

If Owen had played on Tuesday,

his value would have dropped significantly because he would effectively rule himself out of all UEFA club duty action for any other team.

Benitez has also showed that when there's surplus to requirements at the club, no mercy will be shown.

Midfielder Danny Murphy, a close friend of Gerrard, has found that out in recent days, the Englishman being first offered to Tottenham before that deal fell through and he finally joined Charlton on Tuesday.

Gerrard admitted he had been disappointed to see Murphy leave, but admitted he knew nothing more about Owen.

"I'm obviously disappointed personally to see Danny leave. It's sad to see, he was good for the club," said Gerrard after his winning brace on Tuesday.

He added: "I'm not sure what's happening with Michael. But as far as I'm concerned he's still a Liverpool player."

Owen is one of Liverpool's most prized assets, having played 297

Vieira deal done almost

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid will pay Arsenal 33 million euros for unsettled Gunners skipper Patrick Vieira, Spanish sports dailies Marca and As reported Wednesday.

"It seems a done deal and the only thing missing is the green light from the English club's board," said Marca.

The 33-million-euro transfer fee is more than the Spanish giant's original offer of 30 million, while still less than the 42 million Arsenal are seeking for Vieira, widely regarded as the finest midfield holding player in world football.

As reported that Real Madrid wanted to unveil Vieira on Thursday while Marca said that that could come on Friday or the start of next week.

Vieira had accepted a yearly salary of just under five million euros over five years, Marca said, while As said negotiations were ongoing, particularly over the percentage of image rights the Frenchman would likely retain.

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger said Sunday that Vieira, who is under contract with the English champions for another three years, had until this weekend to decide whether he wants to stay at Highbury.

Wenger confirmed that Arsenal would not force Vieira to see out his contract if he decides to leave. Highbury sources indicated that they expect the Frenchman to make a decision before the club's Premiership opener at Everton on Sunday.

Bet on Chelsea!

AFP, London

Sir Alex Ferguson insists the Premiership title cannot be bought but that is not a view shared by English football fans who make big-spending Chelsea favourites to lift the title this season.

In a survey carried out by Nationwide, sponsors of the England national team, 42,482 fans were asked who would win the 2004/05 Premiership.

Chelsea came out on top with 32.1 percent of the vote, pipping champions Arsenal (28.9 percent) and well clear of Ferguson's Manchester United (17.7 percent).

And only 8.9 percent of fans believe new Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez will get his hands on the trophy in his first season in charge at Anfield.

Eto'o wants Barca move

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

African Player of the Year Samuel Eto'o says he is determined to move from Real Mallorca to Barcelona and has attacked Real Madrid for trying to scupper the proposed deal.

In a letter published in the Sport newspaper on Wednesday, Eto'o, who is co-owned by Real Mallorca and Real Madrid, assured Barcelona fans that he would be joining in the near future.

"Today I feel like a Barcelona player," said the 23-year-old Cameroon striker. "For reasons that have nothing to do with me the deal has been delayed for a few days, but don't worry because joining Barca is still my overwhelming desire."

Barcelona are reported to have offered 22 million euros (\$27.01 million) for the striker, but Real Madrid have yet to decide whether to accept a 50 percent share of the fee or to exercise their option to buy out the player's contract in full.

Madrid-based sports papers Marca and AS have both reported that Real are



WHERE DID THE BALL GO? Glasgow Rangers' Ignatio Novo (L) and CSKA Moscow's Elvir Rahimic get tangled up during their first leg Champions League third preliminary round match in Moscow on August 10.

Benitez's winning start Juve stumble

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AP, London

Liverpool left star striker Michael Owen on the bench, increasing speculation about a possible transfer, but still downed Austria's Grazer AK 2-0 in Champions League qualifying Tuesday.

England midfielder Steven Gerrard scored twice, beating 'keeper Andreas Schranz with a 25 yard (meter) shot in the 23rd minute and making it 2-0 in the 79th to give manager Rafa Benitez a win in his competitive debut.

But Juventus, another traditional soccer powerhouse, could only manage a 2-2 draw against Sweden's Djurgarden -- at home. Juve, a finalist four times in the last eight years, trailed 2-0.

Liverpool, which has won the competition four times, had plenty of chances at the Arnold Schwarzenegger stadium without Owen. Czech striker Milan Baros, who led Euro 2004 in scoring, was stopped by Schranz on a breakaway and missed a free header in the 31st minute. Baros partnered new signing Djibril Cisse.

Owen, linked with Real Madrid in a 10 million pound (\$US18.4 million) transfer, was an unused substitute. He's been in negotiations over a contract extension for months, although talks reportedly stalled Monday.

If Owen made an appearance, he won't be allowed to play for any other club in European competition in 2004-05.

"I'm not sure what's going to happen with Michael," Gerrard said. "No one has said anything to me."

Owen is a free agent at the end of the season.

"We have four good forwards, and I picked two of them," said Benitez, who led Valencia to a league and UEFA Cup double last season.

Andreas Johansson's penalty gave Djurgarden the lead in the 45th minute, and Tobias Hysen doubled it in the 49th. French international David

Trezeguet made it 2-1 a minute later before Brazilian Emerson leveled in the 59th minute.

"The 2-2 draw means that we must absolutely win in Sweden, against a tough team," Emerson said. "However Juventus will be in a better form by then, and this gives us some hope."

Djurgarden is eighth in the 14-team Swedish standings and fired its manager last month.

"We deserved more than a draw, but our defense was less than perfect on both Swedish goals," said Juve manager Fabio Capello, who joined from Roma in the summer.

In other games, two-time winner Benfica beat Belgian champion Anderlecht 1-0 at home, CSKA Moscow doubled Rangers 2-1, Trabzonspor rallied to beat Dynamo Kiev 2-1 away,

and Maccabi Tel-Aviv won 2-1 away, at Greece's PAOK Salonika.

Ten games, featuring the likes of Real Madrid, Manchester United and Inter Milan, will be played Wednesday. The return legs are Aug. 24-25. The teams have to qualify after not finishing high enough in their respective leagues.

Sixteen clubs advance to the main draw, with defending champion FC Porto, AC Milan, Arsenal, Bayern Munich and Barcelona among 16 already in.

Before 55,000 fans at the Stadium of Light in Lisbon, Slovenian international Zlatko Zahovic scored in the 12th minute against Anderlecht. The game marked Benfica manager Giovanni Trapattoni's debut -- he was Italy's coach at Euro 2004.

Jiri Jarosik scored the go-ahead goal early in the second half in Moscow's home win.

The Czech international's shot from the left side of the box went past 'keeper Stefan Klos in the 46th minute, 10 minutes after Spaniard Nacho Novo tied the game.

Brazilian Vagner Love, who threatened throughout, gave the home team a fourth-minute lead.

"It was unbelievable that we should give ourselves an uphill struggle like that at the start of both halves," Rangers manager Alex McLeish said.

Latvia star Maris Verpakovskis gave Kiev the lead in the 21st minute before Gokdeniz Karadeniz (34) and Ibrahim Yattara (65) scored.

Ishmael Addo (13) and Erez Mesika (43) had goals for Maccabi, with Yiassoumi Yiassoumakis responding in the 49th minute.

Real, a nine-time winner, plays Wisla Krakow away. The Spanish club's roster includes standouts Zinedine Zidane, Luis Figo, Ronaldo, Roberto Carlos and David Beckham.

Manchester United, the 1999 champ, is at Dinamo Bucharest.

Group matches begin in mid-September, while the final is scheduled for May 25 in Istanbul.

Korea carry Asian hope

AFP, Athens



South Korea's young guns will be eager to make up for their senior side's quarter-final exit from the Asian Cup when they kick

off their Olympic Games campaign with a match against hosts Greece on Wednesday.

Several top Korean players were rested from the recent Asian Cup, where the 2002 World Cup semi-finalists were defeated by Iran, and will be under pressure to perform well on the Olympic stage.

Veteran Yoo Sang-chul, a commanding presence in midfield for Korea at the 1998 and 2002 World Cup finals, has been included in the under-23 squad as an over-age player while 22-year-old playmaker Lee Chun-soo was held back from the Asian Cup so he would be fresh for the Olympics.

Rugged defender Kim Nam-il was named as Korea's second over-age player despite turning out for his country in China but will miss the Olympics after breaking his foot in a warm-up match in France during the weekend.

Kim, who would have given Korea strength at the back, has been replaced by Chung Kyung-ho from the Asian Cup squad.

Park Ji-sung and Song Chong-gug, who shone at the World Cup, had been tipped to do double duty in in the Asian Cup and Olympic Games but have been omitted from the Athens squad.

The Koreans are making their fifth consecutive appearance in the Olympics and have the ability to mount a strong challenge in a group which also contains Mexico, the top team in the CONCACAF qualifiers, and Mali, who defeated Sydney 2000 gold medallists Cameroon in the African elimination series.

Yoo will give the side a solid foundation with Lee orchestrating play from midfield. Rangy strikers Cho Jae-jin and Kim Dong-hun, who impressed during the qualifiers, pose a threat in the air and on the ground.

Greek football is on a high after their famous win at Euro 2004 and the Olympic team will be given huge support by their passionate home fans.

Greece have resisted the temptation to draft in any of their conquering heroes instead going for some trusty hands to support the youngsters, who all play their football in the home league.

2002 Asian Player of the Year Shinji Ono and Yoshito Okubo, the AFC Young Player of the Year for 2003, will spearhead Japan's challenge in the Olympics.

Ortega back after a year

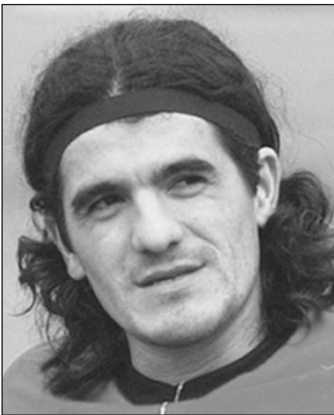
Football

AP, Buenos Aires

Striker Ariel Ortega is returning to professional soccer with the Argentine club Newell's Old Boys, ending a year-long suspension after he walked out on his former team, officials said Tuesday.

Newell's acquired the 30-year-old forward after agreeing to pay 3.5 million (\$4.28 million) to the Turkish club Fenerbahce, where Ortega played before he abruptly quit last year, Newell's spokesman Jose Garcia said.

"It's a done deal," Garcia told reporters. "This is a very important accomplishment for our club."



ARIEL ORTEGA

Ortega, who played for Argentina in the 1994, 1998 and 2002 World Cups,

was suspended by FIFA last year and fined after he quit Fenerbahce, opening a lengthy arbitration with the club.

The payment by Newell's, a mid-sized club based in the central city of Rosario, was expected to be taken as an indemnization for Ortega walking out on his contract, Garcia said.

Ortega played six months in Turkey, scoring five goals in 20 games, his second stint in European play. From 1997-2000, he played for Spain's Valencia and Italy's Sampdoria and Parma, after starring at Argentina's River Plate.

He is expected to be formally presented on Thursday and team officials said Ortega is likely to be in the starting lineup when Newell's opens play in the Argentine championship this weekend.



WORTH THE WAIT: Fans who had been waiting to catch a glimpse of Real Madrid's superstars are ecstatic as they get to shake hands with Brazilian ace Ronaldo (R) after the team's arrival at Krakow's airport on August 10. Real Madrid play Polish club Wisla Krakow in the Champions League qualification match on August 11.

Di Canio sorry to leave

Football

AFP, London

Paolo Di Canio on Wednesday publicly apologised to Charlton fans over his decision to quit the London club after being offered the chance to end his career with Lazio in Rome.

The Italian striker said the decision to request the cancellation of a one-year contract he signed only last month had been the most painful of his career.

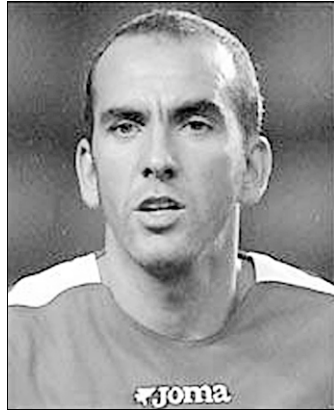
Di Canio, 36, who is expected to tie up his deal with Lazio in the coming days, said his decision had been motivated by his family's desire to stay in Rome, where the veteran forward began his career.

"This is possibly the most difficult career decision I have ever had to make and I can only apologise to Alan Curbishley and the supporters of Charlton, for whom I have the greatest affection," Di Canio told the club's website.

"I have often said I wished I joined Charlton earlier in my career, and whatever has happened I will always

believe this to be so.

"The supporters were always right behind me and I hope they will not be angry with me and will understand that, where your family is involved, you



sometimes have to do things which are very painful."

Di Canio joined the Addicks in August 2003 from West Ham. He made 33 league and cup appearances last season, scoring five goals to finish as the club's joint third top scorer.

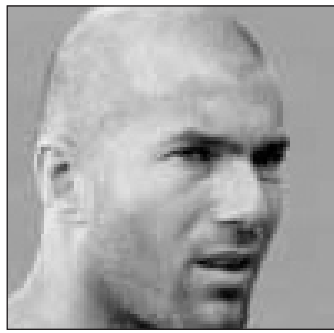
Zidane decides today

Football

AFP, Paris

France's inspirational play-maker and captain Zinedine Zidane will announce on Thursday whether or not he will continue his international career.

The Canal Plus satellite television channel said Zidane would reveal all during an interview from Madrid that will be broad-



ZINEDINE ZIDANE

cast at 1745 GMT.

New French coach Raymond Domenech said Monday he had not given up hope of persuading Zidane, 32, to continue an international career which has seen him win 93 caps.

Experienced French players Lilian Thuram, Bixente Lizarazu and Marcel Desailly have all recently announced their retirement from international football.