

MU really miss Rio

Football

REUTERS, London

Manchester United need Rio Ferdinand's return next week to prompt an upturn in fortunes for the club every bit as marked as the decline that began at the start of his eight-month suspension.

Ferdinand, who was banned for missing a drugs test a year ago, is available for the first time for Monday's match against Liverpool, by which time United could trail Arsenal by 12 points in the Premier League.

The contrast with the time when the Ferdinand last took the pitch in the famous red shirt, at Wolverhampton Wanderers on January 17, could not be greater.

United were champions, led the Premier League and had eased into the last 16 of the Champions League. They had won 15, drawn two and lost two of the 19 league games in which the England defender featured.

It took just 17 minutes from Ferdinand hobbling off injured at Molineux to start his ban for United's season to take a turn for the worse when Kenny Miller scored a goal that proved to be a match-winner for Wolves.

The next day Arsenal beat Aston Villa to leapfrog United and take a lead in the standings they never relinquished.

United fell at the next hurdle in the Champions League, knocked out by a late Porto goal at Old Trafford and failing to reach the quarter-finals for the first time since 1996.

In their remaining league matches, a series of shambolic defensive performances meant they won seven, drew five and lost four, ending up in third place behind Chelsea.

This season has been worse with

just one win, three draws and a defeat in their first five league matches.

Add to the mix the loss to injury for a month of another England defender in Gary Neville, and a stuttering 2-2 start to their Champions League campaign against Olympique Lyon and Ferdinand's return takes on a huge importance.

Expectations have always been high, however, for the 25-year-old Londoner, whose pace, comfort on the ball, strength in the air and ability to read the game make him a rare



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Div II chess

SPORTS REPORTER

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