



Hattrick wedding weekend

Football

AFP, Manchester

Some of England's top footballers woke up as married men Sunday after a clutch of extravagant, glitzy nuptials dubbed the ultimate WAG wedding weekend.

The off-field antics of the so-called WAGs -- wives and girlfriends -- of England's footballers were as much the focus as their husbands and boyfriends' on-pitch performances at last year's World Cup.

And there was an almighty fixture pile-up for those celebrities, WAGs and other assorted hangers-on seeking a place in the glossy magazines as four England stars tied the knot in quick succession.

Footballers often moan about a congested fixture list, and it seems the problem doesn't even go away during the close-season.

England and Chelsea captain John Terry eased the scheduling problem by kicking off early, marrying his long-term girlfriend Toni Poole at a lavish ceremony at former British prime minister Winston Churchill's ancestral home on Friday.

But Manchester United players Michael Carrick and Gary Neville plus Liverpool skipper Steven Gerrard all plumped for a traditional Saturday afternoon kick-off -- reportedly creating chaos in WAG

world. The nuptials have provided a boon for Britain's press, with tabloids and broadsheets alike covering who wore what, who attended, how much the events cost and which celebrity magazine snapped up the photography rights.

Terry's bash -- although described as "low key" by one newspaper -- was rumoured to have cost one million pounds (1.5 million euros, 1.9 million dollars).

Among the guests pictured being driven into Blenheim Palace, near Oxford, south central England, were Chelsea and England players Ashley Cole and Joe Cole.

Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich, with new girlfriend Daria Zhukova in tow, was also there, according to The Sun, as was England boss Steve McClaren and a host of other high-earning English Premiership stars.

Neville's wedding to former shop girl Emma Hadfield was more down to earth, with no celebrity magazine tie-up and the reception back at their six-million-pound mansion.

It took place at Manchester Cathedral -- incidentally the subject of an ongoing row between the Church of England and Japanese entertainment giant Sony, which used the cathedral's interior as a backdrop for a firefight in a violent computer game.

Neville was best man for David

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(From L-R) England and Manchester United defender Gary Neville and newly-wed wife Emma Hadfield leave Manchester Cathedral following nuptials. His clubmate Michael Carrick poses with wife Lisa Roughead after their ceremony while Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard is photographed with bride Alex Curran prior to his wedding date on Saturday.

Random checks proposed

INTERNET, undated



Future transfers in the Premier League will be subject to random spot-checks by investigators.

The move follows the final report by former Metropolitan Police commissioner Lord Stevens into alleged illegal payments.

His findings cleared all Premier League clubs of paying or receiving bungs but raised separate concerns about two managers and a number of agents.

The Premier League said they and the FA have agreed to carry out random spot-checks on future transfers using Quest investigators.

The league said in their report to clubs: 'With regards to the future, the Premier League and the FA have agreed to carry out a random audit of selected transfers from each window in order to further ensure compliance.'

'The Premier League will be

asking Quest to assist them in this and it may transpire that this becomes a joint initiative subject to agreement with the FA.'

Stevens expressed concerns over 'a conflict of interest' involving Sam Allardyce and his former agent son Craig while at Bolton.

He also points to 'inconsistencies in evidence' provided by former Newcastle manager Graeme Souness.

Deals involving Chelsea, Newcastle, Bolton, Middlesbrough and Portsmouth have all been highlighted by Quest in their final report to the Premier League.

The main focus of the report targets agents although the clubs are set to face a further investigation from the Football Association.

Stevens expressed concern about 15 agents and third parties involved in some 17 transfers.

He said in the report: 'The inquiry remains concerned at the conflict of interest that it believes existed between Craig Allardyce, his father Sam Allardyce the then manager at Bolton Wanderers and the club

itself.'

He went on: 'There remain inconsistencies in evidence provided by Graeme Souness a former manager of the club and Newcastle chairman Freddy Shepherd's son Kenneth Shepherd as to their respective roles in transfer negotiations.'

Souness was baffled to be named. He said in a statement issued by his solicitors: 'I cannot understand why my name features in this report.'

'I volunteered full information to Quest as a witness and I have heard nothing further from them.'

Of the 17 transfers named by Stevens, all remain under investigation because of unsatisfactory responses from agents - including super-agent Pini Zahavi.

Four relate to Newcastle signings (Emre Belozoglu, Jean Alain Boumsong, Amady Faye, Albert Luque), four to Bolton (Ali Al-Habsi, Tal Ben Haim, Blessing Kaku, Julio Correia), three to Chelsea (Didier Drogba, Petr Cech, Michael Essien), three to

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Benayoun set for L'pool

INTERNET, undated

The Israel midfielder Yossi Benayoun has indicated to West Ham United that he wishes to leave the club, having been unsettled by confirmation that Liverpool have made a bid of around 3 million pounds for him.

Rafael Benitez hopes to add Benayoun, whom he has tracked since his days at Racing Santander, to his ranks as he seeks further midfield options with Liverpool's chief executive, Rick Parry, confirming that a formal approach was made to West Ham last week. That offer was immediately rejected as the Londoners value the 27-year-old at nearer 5 million pounds.

Benitez remains optimistic of reaching a compromise to land the Israeli but the Merseysiders' long-standing interest in Darren Bent will only result in a transfer if Charlton Athletic radically reduce their valuation of the England forward. The Championship club had agreed to sell Bent to West Ham

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Hamilton seizes second pole

INTERNET, undated

Britain's Lewis Hamilton edged out his world champion teammate Fernando Alonso to take his second pole position in a row for the United States Grand Prix.

The 22-year-old Briton, who claimed his first win last week in Canada, always had an answer to whatever Alonso in the sister McLaren could throw at him in the final part of the session and clinched pole in the final minute of the session with a lap of 1:12.331.

Spaniard Alonso was 0.169 seconds slower, but can take some comfort from knowing that he was the fastest man overall in qualifying, having dipped almost half a second under the pole time in the light-fuel second session.

The Ferraris of Felipe Massa and Kimi Raikkonen locked out the

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Berdych lifts Halle title

AFP, Halle, Germany

Fourth seed Tomas Berdych made up for his 2006 final defeat by winning the ATP Halle tournament at the second attempt to beat eighth seed Marcos Baghdatis in straight sets in Sunday's final.

Having lost last year's final to world number one Roger Federer, the 21-year-old Czech took the first set 7-5, saving two break points, and then proved too strong to win the second 6-4, in the one hour 20 minute long final which proved a miserable 22nd birthday for his opponent.

It was Berdych's third ATP title and the Czech punched the air after victory gave him the 96,000 euros winner's cheque.

Having been in great form all week, Wimbledon semifinalist Baghdatis had little to celebrate on his birthday as Berdych totally dominated him in the second set

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Best buys of the season

INTERNET, undated



His quality has never been in doubt ever since he set foot in the Premiership.

But now, Tottenham striker

Dimitar Berbatov has been named as the best transfer of last season with Chelsea's record buy Andriy Shevchenko labelled a flop.

Berbatov was considered to be worth more than 14 times his weight in gold in a study carried out by a top university professor.

Professor Tom Cannon from Buckinghamshire University and his researchers calculated the true value of last season's signings to their clubs and found that the Spurs striker came out on top, with Shevchenko failing to

make the top 10.

The study was carried out to mark the launch of 'Goal 2' on Disney DVD, which follows the fortunes of a fictional young player in the Premiership who dreams of playing for Real Madrid.

Professor Cannon commented:

TOP 10

1. Dimitar Berbatov (Tottenham) 10.9m
2. Benni McCarthy (Blackburn) 2.5m
3. Javier Mascherano (Liverpool) free
4. Obafemi Martins (Newcastle) 10.9m
5. Michael Ballack (Chelsea) free
6. Idan Tal (Bolton) free
7. Carlos Tevez (West Ham) part of 12m deal from Corinthians, with Mascherano
8. Andreas Isaksson (Man City) 2m
9. Tomas Rosicky (Arsenal) 8m
10. Dirk Kuyt (Liverpool) 9m

'When looking at the true value of a player to his club, the transfer value only tells half the story.'

'To get the complete picture we had to measure the overall contribution they make, the rapport with the fans and their ability to make contributions at the right time.'

'Players like (West Ham striker) Carlos Tevez and Berbatov have been enormously valuable to their clubs because not only do they score crucial goals and make a huge contribution on the field, they also have the intangible qualities that make them a firm favourite with the fans.'

The value of each player to his club last season was calculated on a number of different criteria, including purchase price, transfer costs, number of matches started and total time spent on the pitch.

Other criteria included success brought, key contribution, number of goals, key events, cards received, impact on merchandising, number of points contributed over the season and current transfer value.

As well as the statistics, the research also looked at the intangible 'Football Fan Feelgood Factor (FFFF)', determined by the nature and timing of goals scored, attitude on the pitch and the overall connection between player and fans.

Researchers compiled a team of the 11 most valuable foreign transfers and Berbatov - who joined Spurs from German side Bayer Leverkusen for 10.9 million pounds (\$30.7m) - started 49 matches, scored 23 goals, picked up only one yellow card and sparked a massive demand for merchandise.

He also contributed almost 10 points to the club's total of 60.

His consistent performances and timely goals helped Tottenham finish fifth in the Premiership for the second season running and secured him an 'FFFF' rating of 93 per cent.

According to the study, his value to Tottenham for last season was 12.1 million pounds and weighing in at 79kg, that made him worth 14 times his weight in gold.

Blackburn's Benni McCarthy was second in the table, worth 10 million pounds to his club off the back of his 35 starts, 18 goals, six bookings and his feelgood factor among the fans.

But although they have a reputation for signing some of the world's best foreign players, Chelsea managed to get only one player into the top 11 - Germany international Michael Ballack.

Even though Ballack had a disappointing season by his own standards, he finished fifth with a value to his club last season of 6.7million pounds and an 'FFFF' rating of 66 per cent.

But Shevchenko, who signed from AC Milan for 30 million pounds

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PHOTO: AFP

French midfielder and captain Patrick Vieira gives the thumbs-up sign as he visits a training centre for young soccer players in Saly, Senegal on Saturday. Vieira is the founding member of this centre.

Bayern's gift to league

AFP, Halle



The president of the German Football Federation (DFB) insisted on Sunday Bayern Munich's new signings, World Cup

finalists Franck Ribery and Luca Toni, are a "gift to the Bundesliga". Bayern have spent a reported 36 million euros bringing French midfielder Ribery, 24, from French-side Marseille and Italian striker Toni, 30, from Italian giants Fiorentina in a bid to boost their attack after the 20-times German champions had their worst season for 10 years.

But DFB president Dr Theo Zwanziger insists the arrival of high profile stars like Ribery and Toni, who both played in last year's World Cup final, are a gift to the Bundesliga's profile and will help raise the league's standard.

"For our league, the signings of Ribery and Toni is a gift, the Bundesliga needs international stars," Zwanziger told German paper Bild am Sonntag.

"We will see whether these new signings at Bayern create a boom in interest for the Bundesliga both in Germany and around the world."

Ribery is an uncompromising attacking midfielder, who will fill the role vacated by German captain Michael Ballack's switch to Chelsea, and will play alongside German international Bastian Schweinsteiger, 22.

Likewise, Toni will be competing for a place with, or play alongside, German international Lukas Podolski, 22, voted the best young player at last year's World Cup, and Zwanziger says the onus is on the German youngsters to raise their game.

"It's a challenge for our younger players like Bastian Schweinsteiger and Lukas Podolski," said Zwanziger.

"The youngsters will have to

raise their standards if they want to continue at the top level of world football.

"They can ill afford to rest on their laurels."

"The arrival of players like Ribery and Toni can only help Bayern's youngsters."

Having finished fourth in the Bundesliga and missed out on a place in the Champions League for the first time in 11 years, Bayern have made six signings including Ribery, Toni and 21-year-old German defender Marcell Jansen.

After the biggest spending spree in Bayern's history, coach Ottmar Hitzfeld will also have striker Jan Schlaudraff, plus midfielders Turkey's Hamit Altintop and Argentinian Jose Ernesto Sosa with more expected to join.

Brazilian winger Ze Roberto is set to return after a year with Santos FC and Miroslav Klose, the top-scorer at last year's World Cup, could also be tempted to Munich from Werder Bremen.



PHOTO: AFP

Andy Roddick of United States is at full stretch to make a return against Dmitry Tursunov of Russia in their Semifinal match at Queen's in west London on Saturday.