

# Curtain raiser today

**Football**

AFP, London

Sir Alex Ferguson will sacrifice the chance to land a psychological blow against Chelsea because he believes it is more important that Manchester United are ready for the start of their title defence.

Ferguson will leave out his three new signings and may rest several other stars for Sunday's Community Shield clash at Wembley to avoid any unwanted injuries just a week before the Premiership begins.

Owen Hargreaves and Anderson are still catching up with their new teammates after injury and international commitments respectively, so neither will be risked, while Nani has not been named in the squad for the annual clash between the champions and FA Cup winners.

Carlos Tevez won't feature either despite the resolution of the legal wrangle over his transfer from West Ham because he doesn't officially join until next week.

The bitter memories of last season's FA Cup final defeat at the same venue will provide plenty of motivation for United.

But Ferguson is more concerned that the players who won him a first league title for four years are in prime

condition for the Premiership opener against Reading on August 12.

"It is always difficult to assess the importance of this match because we have to use it as a steppingstone for next week," he said.

"Nevertheless, I don't think you can avoid the fact it will be competitive. That is bound to happen when you are playing against a team you expect to be competing with for top honours.

"We all know it is essential to have a good preparation but I just want to get started right now.

"We have a new team, and, including Tevez, we have made four good acquisitions. It is difficult to say how we compare with everyone else but there is no doubt we expect to be better."

The first skirmish of the season between the leading contenders for the Premiership will be something of a phoney war as Chelsea also come into the match at less than 100 percent.

Jose Mourinho will be without injured trio Michael Ballack, Wayne Bridge and Salomon Kalou and the Portuguese coach must also decide whether it is worth risking Frank Lampard and John Terry.

The England duo, who both suffered a broken toe in pre-season, are so competitive that both try to persuade Mourinho to let them play through the pain barrier. But it would be foolhardy to expose them to further damage in a

relatively meaningless match.

Mourinho is likely to give a first outing to the 4-3-3 formation that served Chelsea so well in his first two seasons at Stamford Bridge.

The move represents something of a gamble because Didier Drogba, who flourished alongside a strike-partner last season, will now plough a lone furrow up front.

Mourinho hopes new signing Florent Malouda and Joe Cole will supply plenty of ammunition for Drogba.

He would also like to see England left-back Ashley Cole reproduce more of the rampaging attacks that were his trademark at Arsenal.

Cole should play a full part on Sunday and insists he is determined to improve on his first injury-hit campaign with the Blues.

"I came to Chelsea and wanted to prove that I could play," he told the club's website. "I didn't want to let the manager and the players down when I needed an operation right at the start of the season.

"I had restricted movement and could really move the ankle anywhere. I'll never make excuses but in a way it wasn't worth me playing because I couldn't kick a ball.

"But hopefully this season I can prove to people that it was my ankle and not just me."

## Benitez elated for Torres

AFP, Rotterdam

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez praised record-signing Fernando Torres who scored his first goal for the Merseysiders in the 2-0 friendly win over Chinese side Shanghai here on Friday.

Benitez believes the 20-million-pound man will go into the new Premiership season next week full of confidence after an impressive 13th-minute strike.

Substitute Steven Gerrard bagged the second goal on 64 minutes in what was Liverpool's penultimate pre-season friendly.

"Getting off the mark will give Torres a lot of confidence heading into the new season," Benitez told the Liverpool website.

"I was very pleased with Fernando, it was very important for him to score his first goal for Liverpool. He has had chances in every game he has played in pre-season, and for him to get this first goal is great for his confidence.

"I remember when Peter Crouch first joined us and everyone was asking when he was going to score. Torres has now got that and that takes the pressure off."

## England doubt for Beckham

INTERNET, undated

Los Angeles Galaxy coach Frank Yallop admits David Beckham is a doubt for England's friendly with Germany at Wembley later this month.

The former England captain has missed the American side's last three games with an ankle injury and has made just one brief appearance for the MLS club - in a friendly against Chelsea last month - following his move from Real Madrid.

The 32-year-old will travel with the team for Sunday's game with Toronto but is unlikely to make his MLS debut and his participation in England's clash with Germany on August 22 must be in doubt.

Yallop told The Sun: "David has not mentioned England to me. I don't think he is worrying about England at the moment.

"He wants to get fit and start playing for us.

"I am sure England will give him every chance to get fit for their game.

"But he has not been playing, he has not been in full training yet - so it would be a lot to ask.

"We will just have to see how it bears up."

## Deco quits Asian tour

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Portuguese midfielder Deco has quit the Spanish club's Asian tour to travel to Brazil where his wife has given birth to their fourth child.

"His wife Jacciara and son David are in good health," the Spanish giants said on their website.

The Brazilian-born Deco "will resume training in Barcelona in the coming days", said the club, whose first-team squad is currently in Beijing and will move on to Japan and Hong Kong before returning to Spain on August 11.

## Bojinov joins Man City

AFP, Manchester

Sven Goran Eriksson's transfer market spree continued Friday when Bulgaria striker Valeri Bojinov signed for Manchester City from Fiorentina.

Bojinov signed a four-year deal and becomes Eriksson's fourth signing in 24 hours following Thursday's captures of Javi Garrido, Vedran Corluka and Brazil midfielder Elano. He is Eriksson's eighth signing since taking over as City boss just over a month ago.

The youngest foreign player ever to appear in Serie A, Bojinov's career has stalled over the past two seasons.

After an unhappy spell at Fiorentina, the 21-year-old spent last season on loan at Juventus but failed to make enough of an impression to persuade new manager Claudio Ranieri to offer him a new contract.

His arrival at Eastlands draws a line under City's transfer activity for this week at least and is also set to trigger a mass exodus of players, with Darius Vassell and Georgios Samaras among those likely to leave for pastures new.

In total, Eriksson has spent around 30 million pounds since succeeding Stuart Pearce as manager, with City fans set to get their first glimpse of their new-look side in tomorrow's friendly with Valencia.

And, while club owner Thaksin

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PHOTO: AFP  
AC Milan midfielder Kaka (L) is impeded by PSV Eindhoven midfielder Timmy Simons during the Railways Cup football match in Moscow on Friday.

### MILAN LOSE ON PENALTIES

# Madrid bounce back

**Football**

INTERNET, undated

Real Madrid produced a strong second-half comeback to come from two goals down at the break to chalk up a convincing scoreline against Lokomotiv Moscow in the Russian Railways Cup.

Bernd Schuster's boys looked dead and buried as they trailed their Russian hosts 2-0 at half time, but in a manner reminiscent of last season's La Liga triumph, they hit back with five second half goals to blitz their opponents.

Guti scored twice while Gonzalo Higuain, Javier Saviola and Javier Balboa all scored to lift confidence in los Merengues' camp and set up a final against PSV, after the Dutch outfit beat AC Milan on penalties.

Real did not make the ideal start as they looked nervous and were made to

pay for that early on when Lokomotiv took the lead after just three minutes when Marco Ivanovic headed home from a corner.

The central defensive partnership of Pepe and Christoph Metzelder looked uncertain, but the Russians netted a second following a mistake from one of Madrid's most reliable players in the 21st minute.

Iker Casillas looked to control a high ball with his knee, but after hitting the keeper it bounced away and Dramane Traore stole in to tuck the ball into an empty net.

At the start of the second period, Schuster made a number of changes and they had an immediate affect on his new look side.

Guti forced the first goal in the 52nd minute and 60 seconds later the visitors were level when Higuain beat Sergei Rhyzykov.

Despite the flurry of goals, clear

chances were at a premium and it was not until Madrid's next meaningful attack that they forced Lokomotiv into another mistake.

Saviola attacked a low cross and was brought down in front of goal by Emir Spahic and won his team a penalty, before standing up to tuck home his first goal for Madrid since joining the club FC Barcelona.

Lokotmoiv appeared to be ready to settle for a draw as they maintained their defensive stance until the closing moments of the encounter when a sudden push forward saw them punished at the other end.

With all the home side's players pushed up for a corner, Guti was quick to exploit the space and he raced away on a counter-attack before dummying the keeper and defender and steering the ball inside the near post for Madrid's fourth.

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## 40 million for Chelsea duo?

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid have offered Chelsea around 40 million euros for German midfielder Michael Ballack and Dutch winger Arjen Robben, Spanish media reported on Saturday.

The transfer could be settled in the "coming days", sporting dailies AS and Marca and Cadena Ser radio said.

Real Madrid coach Bernd Schuster has been on the record as saying that the Spanish giants needed the likes of Robben and Ballack.

Robben, 23, has two years left on his contract with Chelsea and has been in long drawn-out negotiations with the London club over a contract extension until 2012 but has not always been in favour with the club's Portuguese coach Jose Mourinho.

German captain Ballack has not played since he was injured playing for Chelsea in their Premiership match against Newcastle in April and had an operation to remove a loose bone from his ankle shortly after.

The 30-year-old missed his club's Champions League semifinal with Liverpool, the FA Cup final win over Manchester United and this month's Euro 2008 qualifiers.

## Owen's injury curse continues

AFP, Newcastle

Newcastle striker Michael Owen, who has been cursed by injury in the last two years, will likely miss his club's opening game of the season with a thigh injury, according to manager Sam Allardyce.

Owen played just three times for Newcastle last season and has failed to respond to treatment on an injury that has wrecked his pre-season programme.

The 27-year-old now looks set to sit out United's season opener against Allardyce's former club Bolton next weekend, paving the way for new signing Alan Smith who has arrived for 6million pounds from Manchester United.

Allardyce told the Daily Mail: "It doesn't look as encouraging as we first thought.

"The tear in the muscle hasn't healed as quickly as we would like, so there's no point in making any rash decisions just to get him fit for the start of the season.

"It's about getting him 100 percent for playing matches on a regular basis. That's why it has been more disappointing for him that he's missed pre-season games more than training.

"He's done enough training to last him a lifetime."

Owen broke his foot at the start of the 2005-06 season after joining from Real Madrid and then damaged his knee at the 2006 World Cup which kept him sidelined until the last few games of the 2006-07 campaign.

## Real after Rafael

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid are interested in signing Dutch international midfielder Rafael van der Vaart from German side Hamburg, Spanish sports daily AS reported on Friday.

The 24-year-old, who signed with Hamburg from Dutch giants Ajax in 2005, is the prototype offensive and creative player which Real Madrid's new German coach Bernd Schuster wants to bring to the club, the papers said.

Van der Vaart, whose mother is Spanish, told German daily Bild in June that he would like to stay on at Hamburg "unless Real calls me".

Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon has promised several new signings after the reigning Spanish champions were beaten 3-0 by Bundesliga outfit Hanover in a friendly on Tuesday.

Calderon indicated to Spanish sports dailies AS and Marca that

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## Lampard injury not serious

AFP, London

Chelsea insist Frank Lampard's broken toe is not as serious as first feared.

Scans this week showed that Lampard has been playing with the injury since the club's American tour three weeks ago, sparking suggestions the England midfielder would miss the start of the season.

But Chelsea claims it is only a minor problem that should not keep him out of action.

Jose Mourinho will have to decide whether to risk Lampard in Sunday's Community Shield clash against Manchester United at Wembley, but it seems likely he will

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PHOTO: AFP  
Barcelona forward Ronaldinho spins a football during a training session at the Fengtai stadium in Beijing on Friday.

# Party carrying on

**Football**

AFP, Baghdad

Celebrations over Iraq's Asian Cup football victory continued for a second day with music and dancing on Saturday but most players were set to quit the country 24 hours after coming home.

Youth and Sports Minister Jassem Jaafar hosted politicians and dignitaries at a party for the team at a luxury hotel inside Baghdad's Green Zone, the often-shelled city district that houses the Iraqi government and US embassy.

Guests cheered to the beat of folk music, waved giant Iraqi flags and congratulated the squad on last Sunday's victory that has been celebrated as a rare moment of national solidarity by most of Iraq's war-weary population.

But as with homecoming festivities on Friday, ordinary Iraqis were kept at bay. Instead government officials, members of the Iraqi Olympic Committee, football officials and lawmakers were prominent among the crowd.

President Jalal Talabani expressed

hope that the victory would encourage politicians to unite against the disunity that saw the largest Sunni bloc withdraw from the Shiite-dominated government on Wednesday.

"This victory will help to patch up and strengthen alliances between groups on the basis of national reconciliation," he told a news conference with Defence Minister Abdel Qader Jassim Mohammed.

But the deadly violence that has exacerbated political distrust among the country's rival sectarian parties continued.

A roadside bomb blew up next to an Iraqi military patrol, killing one civilian and wounding five others, four of them soldiers, in Bab-al-Muadam, northern Baghdad, security officials said.

In Kirkuk, gunmen shot dead police Lieutenant Colonel Ismail Salam Khalaf as he was leaving home to go to the office, said police Colonel Adel Zain al-Abadein.

Khalaf worked at the internal affairs directorate, which investigates wanted insurgents and police corruption in the ethnically mixed oil hub which Kurds want to join the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq.

In Baghdad, an Iraqi Football

Federation official told AFP that most of the cup-winning team would head back to Jordan on Saturday.

"Those leaving today will use the same plane as yesterday," said Tariq Ahmed referring to the chartered plane that brought the team from Jordan on Friday.

Five of the 22-man national side are to remain in the country, two of whom have contracts with a club in the northern city of Arbil, in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, Ahmed said.

"Some of the players will return to Amman for various reasons. Some have contracts in Jordan, or in Syria, or elsewhere. The others, who don't have contracts or external commitments, will remain in Iraq," said Ahmed.

Around a third of the players did not return to Baghdad even for Friday's official festivities held under thick security in the Green Zone, including captain Yunis Mahmoud who scored Sunday's winning goal.

Mahmoud, a Sunni Arab, had said he feared death if he returned to Baghdad. Owing to the danger in Iraq, the national squad trains in Jordan and many team members play their club football abroad.