



PHOTO: INTERNET

Sunderland striker Michael Chopra (L) is elated after scoring a late goal to sink Tottenham Spurs during the opening day of the Premiership at the Stadium of Light on Saturday.

KEANE'S TRIUMPHANT RETURN Dramatic win for Black Cats

AFP, Sunderland



Michael Chopra handed Roy Keane a winning return to the Premiership as the Sunderland striker's last-gasp goal clinched a 1-0 win against Tottenham on Saturday.

Chopra's stoppage time winner was vindication for the Sunderland boss, who was criticised for paying five million pounds for a player who is a fan of Sunderland's deadly rivals Newcastle.

But anyone who arrived at the

Stadium of Light holding a grudge against Chopra will surely have gone home singing his name.

Keane's decision to send on Chopra as a second half substitute changed the game and underlined why the former Manchester United midfielder hardman is already an icon on Wearside.

He has rapidly assumed messianic status amongst Sunderland supporters after leading the club from the foot of the Championship to promotion in a matter of months and this win only add to his growing legend.

The relentless hype that greets the start of each Premiership sea-

son creates the illusion that the English league has no equal, but for long periods this was turgid stuff.

Opening day nerves undoubtedly played a part, but great things are expected of both clubs and this was hardly a dynamic start for either in front of a crowd of over 43,000.

Jermaine Jenas prodded an early shot wide for Spurs, but that was as good as it got for the next half an hour.

It was a mistake by Younes Kaboul's defensive partner Anthony Gardner that handed Sunderland their first real chance.

Gardner stooped to head clear a Ross Wallace cross but misjudged

the bounce and the ball ran through to Daryl Murphy. The Irish striker had a clear sight of goal, but his heavy touch took him wide and Paul Robinson was able to smother the danger.

Keane made Craig Gordon the most expensive goalkeeper in British football history when he paid Hearts nine million pounds for the Scotland international.

Such a hefty price tag guarantees Gordon's every move is closely scrutinized and he almost gave the doubters an early chance to question the fee when he rushed off his line and allowed Dimitar Berbatov

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Domenech stoking the fire

AFP, Paris

With one month to go before France and Italy meet in their Euro 2008 qualification match the tension has reached boiling point following France coach Raymond Domenech's allegations of match-fixing.

In an interview with French daily Le Parisien this week Domenech alluded to "a referee being bought" during a tie between France and Italy's under-21 sides in 1999. Domenech was coach of the French team at the time.

UEFA president Michel Platini on Friday demanded that fellow countryman Domenech provide proof of his allegations or face sanctions from European football's governing body.

In the interview Domenech threw salt into a very fresh wound adding: "It is not me who invented the refereeing sagas in Italy... There are arrangements made in Italian football."

On Friday Il Corriere della Sera, Italy's most read newspaper, led with a full-scale assault on Domenech with a front page titled 'High tension'.

The paper added: "Italy-France has started one month early. It is the France coach, with a bad habit of provocation, who has ignited the fire."

Il Corriere continued the attacks
SEE PAGE 18 COL 2

Muller bullish about record

AFP, Munich

West German goal-scoring legend and ex-Bayern Munich striker Gerd Muller said Friday that his record of 40 Bundesliga goals in one season will never be broken.

The 61-year-old made 453 appearances for Bayern Munich in a 15-year career and set the record in the 1971-72 season, but says his mark will not be beaten, even though it is easier to score goals now.

Muller scored an incredible 68 goals in 62 games for West Germany.

"The record of 40 goals will never be beaten, I believe," Muller, who scored 398 goals for Bayern, told the Bundesliga website.

"Many people say that it was easier to score goals in my day, but that is wrong."

"With today's defences containing four players, it is much easier for a centre-forward to score."

"In my day, there was a sweeper and a defender to worry about, I was always marked by two players."

Last season, VfL Bochum's Greek striker Theofanis Gekas, who later switched to Bayer Leverkusen, was the Bundesliga's top scorer with 20 goals.

Muller scored an incredible 68 goals in 62 games for West Germany.

"The record of 40 goals will never be beaten, I believe," Muller, who scored 398 goals for Bayern, told the Bundesliga website.

"Many people say that it was easier to score goals in my day, but that is wrong."

"With today's defences containing four players, it is much easier for a centre-forward to score."

"In my day, there was a sweeper and a defender to worry about, I was always marked by two players."

Last season, VfL Bochum's Greek striker Theofanis Gekas, who later switched to Bayer Leverkusen, was the Bundesliga's top scorer with 20 goals.

Alex seals Chelsea move

AFP, Paris

English giants Chelsea finally completed the signing of Brazilian defender Alex from PSV Eindhoven on a free transfer on Friday, the London club announced.

The deal had been held up after the player failed to gain a work permit but with the move now sealed, Alex says he is confident he can adapt quickly to the Premier League.

"I hope to start very soon and to do a good job at this wonderful club," Alex told www.chelseafc.com.

"I am happy for the opportunity Chelsea have given me. It's a wonderful club, I sometimes watch the games and I hear about the club and I hope everything goes well."

"I hope to adapt myself very quickly because Carvalho and (manager Jose) Mourinho will help me with the language barrier, and I hope I can start straight away and won't have any problem to be on the team."

Real bid for Sneijder

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid have reached agreement in principle with Dutch side Ajax to sign midfielder Wesley Sneijder for 25 million euros (34 million dollars), Spanish daily Marca reported Saturday.

The Spanish champions are offering a five-year contract to the 23-year-old international who has yet to make a decision on the move.

If the contract goes through Sneijder will be Real's second Dutch recruit this season after confirmation of the arrival of midfielder Royston Drenthe from Feyenoord on a five-year deal.

'Don't cry for me'

AFP, London



Jose Mourinho expects Chelsea to make a statement to their Premiership rivals as they begin their bid to regain the title.

Mourinho's side go into Sunday's opener against Birmingham at Stamford Bridge with a lengthy injury list, but the Blues manager is refusing to feel sorry for himself and wants his players to follow suit.

John Terry, Michael Ballack and Wayne Bridge are definitely out, while Didier Drogba is a major doubt and Claude Makelele, Petr Cech, Paulo Ferreira and Andriy Shevchenko are carrying knocks.

Losing so many key players before a ball has even been kicked would cripple morale at most clubs.

But such negativity doesn't even enter Mourinho's mind and he believes the situation has presented an opportunity to show Manchester United, Liverpool and Arsenal that nothing can halt Chelsea this season.

"In the Community Shield we played the first half without a single striker and had two kids and two keepers on the bench," Mourinho said.

"We didn't cry. We faced the situation and tried to organise the team the best we can and we played very well. So the natural tendency of things is to improve the situation."

"We have players out but that's football. It's better now than in the middle of the season or the end of the season when everything is crucial."

"The situation is better now than it was last weekend. I have two or three more players than I had for the previous weekend, the situation is better and the tendency is to improve."

Mourinho finds himself in the unusual position of being dwarfed by United and Liverpool's spending in the transfer market. The London club's 13 million pounds purchase of Lyon winger Florent Malouda was their only cash deal this close season, while their rivals splashed out more than 40 million pounds each.

Even Fulham and Portsmouth spent more than Chelsea, but Mourinho is not concerned.

"I don't like to speak about money," he said. "I wasn't speaking when Chelsea were one of the top spenders in the transfer list."

"They spent what they spent and if they did it that's because they have the money. That's not my problem."

Mourinho is confident Frank

Lampard's decision to postpone contract talks until the end of the season will not be a problem, but he did hint that Arjen Robben could be on his way to Real Madrid.

The Spanish club have made several offers for the winger and will get their man if they match Chelsea's 25 million pounds asking price.

"Until the 31 August everything is possible in terms of people to come and people to go," Mourinho said. "I think the situation has a lot of speculation behind it but of course also some truth. And we have to wait a bit more to see."

Steve Bruce has given newly promoted Birmingham an injection of young blood by signing several promising talents including Fabrice Muamba, Liam Ridgwell and Daniel De Ridder.

City winger Gary McSheffrey believes the presence of so many players hungry to make their mark on the Premiership will give them a

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Henry scores in Barca win

AFP, Hong Kong

Spanish giants Barcelona strolled to a comfortable 4-0 win Saturday against a local team in Hong Kong, including a goal by new signing Thierry Henry.

Xavi, Samuel Eto'o and Henry opened the scoring in the first half before substitute Giovanni Dos Santos rounded off the victory with a late fourth against a Happy Valley-Kitchee select team.

The win in front of a half-full Hong Kong Stadium, where just over 23,000 fans braved terrible weather

conditions, helped Barcelona to complete a successful Asian tour.

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard was delighted with his team's performance.

"Of course the difference in strength between the two teams was obvious. But, if you don't keep up a good level of organisation you can give the opponent wings and hope. For that reason I was happy with the game," he said.

The Spanish giants dominated from the start, and a side that also included star striker Ronaldinho needed just twenty-one minutes to break the deadlock, with Spanish international midfielder Xavi finishing off a three-man move.

Andres Iniesta slid through a pass after Eto'o had held up the ball outside the area, with Xavi poking home past goalkeeper Fan Chun Yip.

Barcelona scored their second goal six minutes later.

Thierry Henry, playing in his preferred role as a central striker, passed to Ronaldinho. The Brazilian pulled the ball back to Eto'o from the left, and the 26-year-old made no mistake from the edge of the penalty area.

Henry netted a spectacular third ten minutes before the interval, diverting a first-time Eto'o cross into the top corner with a diving header.

"I am happy that, thanks to the work that he is doing, he is growing in strength physically. He won't lose his head and the goal was just a normal thing for him," Rijkaard said of Henry.

The three strikers left the game in the 61st minute and substitute Dos Santos completed the rout with a well-taken strike with just eight minutes remaining.

The 18-year-old Mexican sensation took a superb through-ball from Xavi in his stride and dispatched with ease for his fourth pre-season goal.

Barcelona showed little signs of tiredness despite the wet, energy-sapping conditions.

Heavy rain made for a slippery pitch although the Hong Kong fans would have been grateful that the match even took place. The city was hit by typhoon Pabuk on Friday causing the game to be moved back by a day.

Barcelona now head back to Spain on the back of a successful tour. This victory followed wins against Beijing Guoan and Yokohama Marinos.

The team did not concede a single goal during the tour and the successful integration of new signings Thierry Henry and Yaya Toure will give them belief that they can win back the Spanish league title from archrivals Real Madrid.

"We still have a way to go, but we can be satisfied. We worked really well," Rijkaard said.

They start their La Liga campaign in just two weeks with a trip to Racing Santander late August.



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona star Ronaldinho (R) signs the jersey of a Happy Valley-Kitchee player after their friendly match at Hong Kong Stadium on Saturday.

Eto'o makes his point

AFP, London

Barcelona and Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o on Friday insisted that Europe's highest profile players are worth every penny of their colossal salaries.

The Cameroon international, who has been a target of clubs around Europe this summer following the arrival of fellow striker Thierry Henry at the Nou Camp from Arsenal, believes that salary capping could ruin the game.

While Eto'o admits that the money divide between the big and small clubs can cause problems, the introduction of a wage limit would not be fair for those players who are a commercial success, he said.

"If you are able to generate a lot of money for your club, I think you are in a position to earn a share of that," Eto'o told www.feelfootball.com's 'What

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

SCHALKE, STUTTGART SHARE SPOILS A pulsating opener

AFP, Berlin



Schalke 04's teenage super sub Ivan Rakitic scored just seven minutes after coming on to seal a 2-2 draw against defending Bundesliga champions VfB Stuttgart on Friday.

Rakitic, a summer signing from Swiss-side Basel, grabbed the equaliser in the 76th minute after Stuttgart had struck twice in four minutes to turn a 1-0 deficit into a 2-1 lead in the opening game of the German season featuring last season's top two.

Schalke opened the scoring when Levan Kobiasvili poached a first-half goal, before Stuttgart's Sami Khedira struck just after the

hour mark and Mexican midfielder Pavel Pardo converted a penalty to put the champions in the lead.

But 19-year-old Croat Rakitic grabbed his moment of glory to slot home a well-struck goal.

Having seen his side squander their lead, Stuttgart coach Armin Veh was less than happy with the final result.

"We played well, but I am not pleased with the result as we had far more of the play," he said.

"We should have finished our chances, especially as there were a few spaces after Schalke opened the scoring."

In contrast, Schalke coach Mirko Slomka was pleased to leave Stuttgart with a point.

"It is unbelievably difficult to win at Stuttgart. They have a class team," he said.

"I am glad to come away with a point, because Stuttgart were far

more active in the second-half and we haven't won here for quite a while."

The home side were crowned German champions for the fifth time last season when Schalke stumbled in the final stages allowing Veh's side to seal the title while they grabbed second spot.

In a game watched by a sell-out 57,500 crowd, Germany striker Kevin Kuranyi picked up the first yellow card of the new season after 11 minutes when he sent Stuttgart defender Serdar Tasci tumbling.

Schalke took a fortuitous lead when Georgian midfielder Kobiasvili hit a 25th minute shot which deflected off the ankle of Stuttgart's defender Roberto Hilbert and spun into the empty

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5



PHOTO: AFP

Stuttgart midfielder Sami Khedira celebrates after netting a stunning equaliser in their opening day Bundesliga encounter against Schalke at the Gottlieb Daimler Stadion in Stuttgart on Friday.

Wenger hopeful about Gunners

AFP, London



Arsenal are only just emerging from one of the most turbulent close seasons of their recent history but, with a new campaign looming large, there is renewed cause for optimism in north London.

Arsene Wenger has confirmed he is confident of finalising talks with the club's board over a new contract and he has backed his young and largely unfancied squad to make their mark on the Premier League.

The club's supporters will be grateful for those words of comfort, particularly with regard to his own future.

The departure of Thierry Henry to Barcelona this summer and, more significantly, the shock resignation of former vice-chairman David Dein towards the end of last

season had raised question-marks over the Frenchman's own position, especially as his contract expires next summer.

Wenger - who has been repeatedly linked with a move to Real Madrid - had remained quiet on his prospects but he broke cover to insist that he expects to agree new terms soon and cited the potential of his current squad as one of his chief motivations.

"We are talking and usually when we talk, there is always a positive outcome," he said. "At the moment, nothing is done but hopefully soon."

"It looks to me that there are more doubts from outside the club than ever before but we have a strong belief, a great desire for success, a great togetherness and we are very hungry. And the fact that everyone doubts about us reinforces that."

"We believe we can win the

league. That's our ambition and it's a justified ambition. We are hungry, we have a great belief and we are ready to go into the season with that desire."

The only cloud on Wenger's horizon is a potentially draining fixture schedule that sees Arsenal face five matches in the first 17 days of the new season.

The Gunners manager is particularly irked at having to squeeze in a double-headed Champions League qualifier against Sparta Prague while his title rivals have the chance of building up a sizeable lead in the Premier League.

"The two teams that have a Champions League qualifier have a disadvantage," he said. "The others play another Premier League game so you are already chasing to get the points back."

"You can be in the middle of the

SEE PAGE 18 COL 8