

'Reds moving in right direction'

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez insists his team can live with Arsenal and Manchester United in the Premier League title race despite being 10 points off the pace.

Benitez has had his toughest season since arriving from Valencia in 2004 with a difference of opinion over the January transfer window seemingly causing a rift between him and the club's American owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett.

"In my mind there is no doubt we have a better squad now than twelve months ago, we have more quality all over the pitch and I am convinced we are continuing to take the club in the right direction," Benitez told www.liverpool.tv.

"It has been a year which has seen us again qualify for the Champions League through our league position, we've reached another European final and of course we have recently booked our place in the last 16 of this season's competition.

"We have been able to improve the squad by bringing in a number of top-class players, all of whom have shown their ability and their desire to play for this great club."

Keane to carry on taking spot-kicks

AFP, London

Tottenham striker Robbie Keane said he will not shirk penalty-taking responsibilities despite missing a crucial spot-kick in the 2-1 defeat at Arsenal last weekend.

Spurs face Fulham on Wednesday and the veteran Irish international wants to immediately make up for the pain of missing the penalty at the Emirates Stadium when the scores were level.

"Of course I will, no question," said the 27-year-old. "You just have to get on with it - there's nothing else you can do."

Keane's recent suspension stopped his purple patch of form as saw him score 27 goals in his last 37 Spurs appearances, a run that started against Fulham in the FA Cup last season.

The methods of new boss Juande Ramos have changed fortunes for the White Hart Lane team and they have only lost two games under the Spaniard.



PHOTO: AFP

Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda (R) smiles as he receives a uniform of AFC Champions League champions Urawa Reds from captain Keita Suzuki at Fukuda's office in Tokyo on Wednesday.

Political football!

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, suffering a sharp fall in public support, tried to show his soft side Wednesday as he basked in the glow of the celebrated Urawa Reds football team.

The prime minister tossed a football in the air in front of the cameras and shyly posed for photos with star players including midfielder Keita Suzuki, who sported a stylish stubble.

Such flashy scenes were common for media-savvy Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi during his 2001-2006 tenure.

The lion-man Koizumi entertained the public by hobnobbing

with Hollywood stars; playing air guitar to Elvis Presley songs and showing up to work on a Segway two-wheel transporter gifted by US President George W. Bush.

Koizumi's successor Shinzo Abe tried to keep up the technique when he put on a sleek pair of sunglasses at a meeting with U2 frontman Bono, but Abe faced ridicule for looking awkward.

Koizumi, who took over from the beleaguered Abe in September, has seen his popularity plummet recently in the wake of a bribery scandal at the defence ministry and a feud with patients infected by hepatitis-tainted blood.

"But I've been working hard in training and I know my qualities. I've been round long enough and I think everyone knows what I can do."

"I love playing football and I want to do well for the club and win back my place in the team," Viduka told the club's official website.

Newcastle are currently ninth in the Premier League and face second-from-bottom Wigan on Wednesday desperately needing three points after being booted off St James's Park on Saturday.

"After the game the dressing room was like we had lost the game," said Viduka whose goals were his first since the win against West Ham in September.

Beckham gets 'starstruck'

AFP, London

David Beckham said on Tuesday he was "starstruck" when he met Stevie Wonder, and told his wife that he wanted to take a picture with the musiclegend.

The England national soccer star told BBC Radio that he was also left in awe by Nelson Mandela and Muhammad Ali, and added that Wonder's 1972 hit "Superstition" was his favourite song.

After explaining his music selection, Beckham said that when he met blind singer Wonder, "He turned round to me and said, it was quite funny, he said: 'If you could teach me to play football, then you'd be some player'. You know, those sort of moments you cherish."

"It's quite embarrassing because I was like turning round to (wife) Victoria and saying: 'I really want a picture but I can't task him'."

Victoria Beckham -- "Posh" in the Spice Girls -- eventually had to ask for the photograph.

"I still get very starstruck by many people that we still meet," the LA Galaxy midfielder said, adding that Ali and Mandela had that effect on him.

"It's a great honour and we will do everything we can to qualify for the World Cup 2010 finals," he said.

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Djukic named Serbia coach

Football

REUTERS, Belgrade

Former Yugoslavia defender Miroslav Djukic was named Serbia's new coach on Tuesday after sealing a two-year contract with the country's Football Association (FSS).

Djukic, who steered Serbia's under-21 side to the European Championship final in June, officially takes over on Jan 1 and will also be in charge of the team that qualified for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, the FSS said.

He succeeds Spaniard Javier Clemente, who was sacked earlier this month after failing to qualify for Euro 2008.

"The FSS executive board made a unanimous decision to appoint Djukic as the national team's head coach and we have complete faith that he will take Serbia back to

winning ways," FSS spokesman Aleksandar Boskovic told a news conference.

"The contract will be automatically extended by another six months if Serbia reach the World Cup 2010 finals in South Africa," he said.

The 41-year old Djukic, who steered down at Partizan Belgrade last week after steering them to the top of the Serbian first division at the winter break, was upbeat about his chances of doing well.

"To do that, we need to bring in young prospects who will play their hearts out for our country, sing their national anthem with pride and win the hearts of all fans."

FSS president Zvezdan Terzic said he was confident he got the right man to replace Clemente after admitting he had originally wanted the 57-year old Basque to stay in charge.

"We needed a coach with character, enthusiasm and zest to take the national team forward and that's exactly what we got in Miroslav Djukic," he said.

Neville attacks players' attitude

Football

THE GUARDIAN

Veteran striker Mark Viduka hopes his two-goal salvo against Derby will convince Newcastle boss Sam Allardyce that he should be a regular starter in the struggling Premier League side.

The 32-year old Antoniall took his season's tally to five from just nine starts with his brace in the 2-2 draw with Derby and now wants to keep his place having been out of the side since November's home loss to Liverpool.

"Every player wants to play and it's hard being out of the side," said Viduka.

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training and I know my qualities.

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do it again. I look at young kids at

clubs now and they don't seem to

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There's a softness coming through,

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"I know when I was an appren-

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"I find it incredible there is that

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Neville, though, also feels that

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tunes at clubs have it far too easy.

"As footballers, we need to look

at ourselves," Neville said. "Eighty

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