

Keane stares into abyss

AFP, Sunderland



Roy Keane, the former Manchester United midfielder, has learnt a series of painful lessons in his first season as a Premier League manager, but none could have hurt quite so much as that he was forced to endure at the hands of his one-time employers.

After 12 years patrolling the Old Trafford beat, the Irishman will always be guaranteed cult status among those who support the biggest club in the world but such outstanding service merited no more than a rousing reception from the travelling hordes on Wednesday.

On the field the reunion was merciless as Manchester United eased to a 4-0 victory and brutally exposed the gulf in class between the top flight's haves and have-nots.

Sir Alex Ferguson later conceded Sunderland were suffering their 'stickiest patch of the season so far' but the Scot will lose little sleep over the fact that his slick side made things even more uncomfortable for Keane.

The discomfort will only intensify should the Wearside club fail to win against Bolton Wanderers at the Stadium of Light on Saturday. "We're in a sticky patch," admitted Keane, echoing his former mentor's assessment of a club in decline. "We're in a massive fight. That was a harsh lesson. But if you're going to get beaten 4-0 at home then why not to a very good team?"

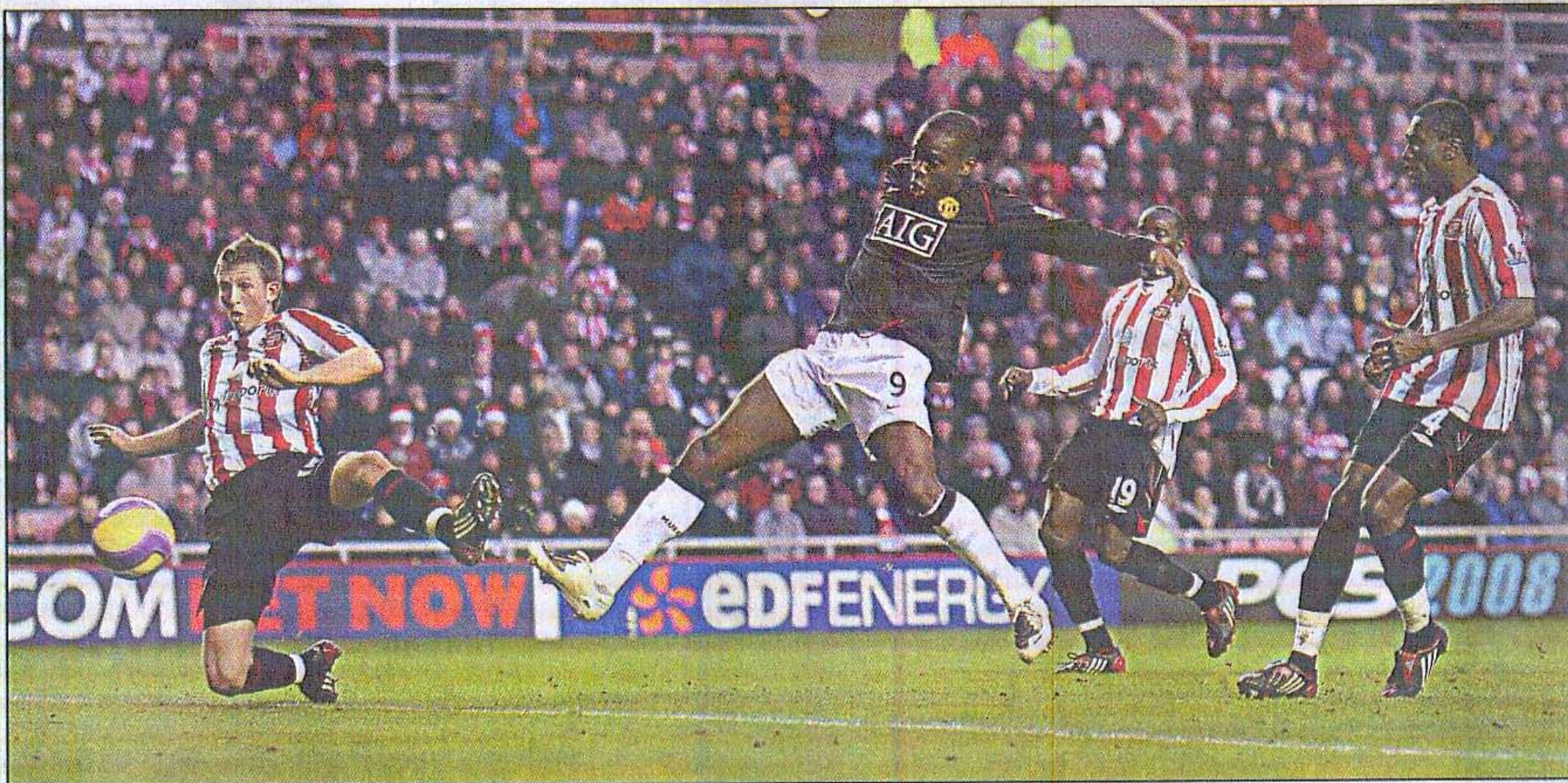
"My old club will win the league. I said it earlier this season and I've seen nothing to change my mind. Manchester United were missing players but they still flexed their muscles. We could say they took their foot off the gas after half-time but the game was already lost by then."

A neat exchange of passes between the full back, Wes Brown, and Cristiano Ronaldo allowed Wayne Rooney to open the floodgates.

Ten minutes later Keane's task became almost impossible as Rooney turned provider to double the visitors' lead. His pinpoint cross landed at the feet of Louis Saha and the France international could not have asked for an easier opportunity.

It was Ronaldo who capped a

SEE PAGE 22 COL 1



Manchester United striker Louis Saha (C) gets in ahead of a pack of Sunderland defenders to poke home his second goal in their Premiership match at Old Trafford on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Red is the colour

Football

INTERNET, undated

The season of goodwill was cut short yesterday as a record number of red cards, 19, were shown in England's four divisions.

Horror tackles and petulant behaviour overshadowed an otherwise enthralling Boxing Day programme. When the dust settled Manchester United had returned to the top of the Premier League with a 4-0 win at Sunderland, a point clear of Arsenal who were held 0-0 at Portsmouth.

Chief villain of the day was Chelsea defender Ricardo Carvalho, who was forced to apologise for a two-footed challenge on Aston Villa's Gabriel Agbonlahor. The Portuguese star, one of three players dismissed in a seesaw 4-4 thriller at Stamford Bridge, said: "It was never my intention to hurt Agbonlahor with the tackle. I was going for the ball and I don't want people to think I tried to hurt another player. I didn't see him after the game to apologise but I asked for a message to be passed on to him."

Chelsea manager Avram Grant, who saw Carvalho's fellow defender Ashley Cole sent off for deliberate handball late on, was quick to defend his players. Grant said: "For me what's important is that Carvalho did not intend to hurt the player. I didn't see any intention. The red card was the decision of referee Phil Dowd and I respect it."

Grant will appeal against Cole's red card. The manager added: "I saw it again on the television and it was not a penalty." Villa centre half Zlat Knight was also sent off for a professional foul moments before half-time.

The dishonour of being the first man to see red yesterday went to Reading's Brynjar Gunnarsson, whose two-footed lunge on Hayden Mullins in Reading's 1-1 draw at West Ham was a further example of a worrying trend. His manager Steve Coppell at least accepted that he deserved to go.

Derby boss Paul Jewell confronts Liverpool counterpart Rafa Benitez during a hot-tempered clash at Pride Park. West Ham manager Alan

Curry, commenting on Gunnarsson's foul, said: "At the start of the season the referees' leader, Keith Hackett, told us in no uncertain terms if you leave the ground with both feet in a challenge you're off no matter if you get the ball."

In another shameful display, managers Rafael Benitez and Paul Jewell squared up to each other on the touchline and had to be separated by the fourth official as Liverpool earned a late 2-1 win over Derby at Pride Park.

Derby boss Jewell was angered by the reaction of Liverpool striker Andriy Voronin to a challenge from home full back Jay McEveley, prompting a confrontation with his Spanish counterpart.

Jewell said: "McEveley never touched him. If he had, then Voronin would never have got up. I just didn't agree with it." Liverpool won the game with a last-minute Steven Gerrard goal after McEveley had cancelled out Fernando Torres' opener.

Benitez said: "It was a bad tackle but we clearly had different points of view on it. But it's OK. At least he

SEE PAGE 22 COL 1

Wenger left fuming

AFP, Portsmouth



Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger blasted Portsmouth for their negative tactics in a 0-0 draw which cost his side top spot in the Premier League.

Arsenal failed to score for the first time in the league this season against a defence containing former Gunners star Sol Campbell.

Wenger claimed Pompey neglected playing any football in the second half, instead favouring a blanket defence.

"It was surprising to see them making up the numbers with ten men at the back. They have an experienced defence and their midfield was focused on defending," said Wenger whose side are now second behind champions Manchester United who beat Sunderland 4-0.

"I'm not disappointed with (Portsmouth coach) Harry Redknapp because what his team did, they did well but they are not going to be able to play like that every week."

"They conceded four goals at Liverpool (at the weekend) and the team was just ready to concentrate on defending."

Portsmouth were worth their point and may have had two more when Benjani went cantering through the Arsenal back-line 15 minutes from time only to lose his footing after rounding goalkeeper Manuel Almunia.

In a poor first-half at Fratton Park, Niko Kranjcar first tested Almunia from range before Tomas Rosicky sent Portsmouth goalkeeper David James sprawling to save.

The second period was more satisfying as Kranjcar turned Bakary Sagna and forced Almunia into a low diving stop.

Arsenal's Aleksander Hleb wasted a golden opportunity to tee up Cesc Fabregas when he burst down the left but opted to wastefully shoot instead of crossing.

Benjani's unfortunate miss was the last Pompey saw of the Arsenal goal as the home side retreated into

their defensive shell.

Rosicky went close again, ducking in between Lauren and Benjani before skipper William Gallas spurned Arsenal's best chance by ballooning over from just five yards.

SEE PAGE 22 COL 5



PHOTO: INTERNET

WHAT THEY DO IN THEIR SPARE TIME: Barcelona stars Lionel Messi (L) and Ronaldinho pose for photographers before a friendly match in San Luis, Argentina on Wednesday.

Villa appeal red card

AFP, London

Aston Villa have launched an appeal against Zlat Knight's controversial red card at Chelsea.

Knight faces a one-match suspension after referee Phil Dowd dismissed the defender following his foul on Michael Ballack in Wednesday's 4-4 draw at Stamford Bridge.

But Villa boss Martin O'Neill is convinced Ballack dived to win the penalty and has asked for the suspension to be overturned.

A statement on Villa's website confirmed: "Villa have officially appealed against Zlat Knight's debatable red card at Chelsea."

Knight will learn his fate when the case is heard by the English FA on Friday December 28.

Chelsea midfielder Ballack insisted O'Neill was wrong to accuse him of diving.

"For me there is no discussion about this," he told the Evening Standard. "I had the ball and two guys, not just one, came and one pushed me. It was a clear penalty."

Maradona draws flak

AFP, Buenos Aires

Families of victims of a deadly 1994 bomb attack on a Jewish centre have hit out at Diego Maradona after the Argentina football legend said he wanted to meet Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

"I have already met (Venezuelan president Hugo) Chavez and (Cuba leader Fidel) Castro. Now I want to meet your president," Maradona told an Iranian diplomat here, according to reports in the Argentina media.

Relatives of the 85 people who died in the attack on the Jewish Argentine Mutual Association (AMIA) community centre in Buenos Aires in July 1994 have fought a long battle to bring the killers to justice.

Iran has been accused of being behind the attack which Jewish groups insist was carried out by Islamic militants. The Tehran government has vehemently denied any involvement.

"I believe Maradona is wrong and I would like it a lot for him to meet us," Sergio Burstein, a member of the victims support group formed in the aftermath of the blast which also left 300 people injured, told the Jewish news agency in Argentina (AJN).

Maradona had met Mohsen Baharvand, the Iranian charge d'affaires in Argentina, on Saturday following a game of indoor football.

"I am with the Iranian people," said Maradona.

Nashat secures City trial

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City have invited Iraq international midfielder Nashat Akram for a ten day trial, the club told AFP on Wednesday.

Akram was cleared to try out for Sven-Goran Eriksson's side by his current club Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates and will join Asian Player of the Year Yasser Al-Qhatani who has also secured a trial at Eastlands.

The 23-year-old Akram was runner-up to Saudi Arabia skipper Al-Qhatani, who arrived in Manchester last week, in this year's Asian footballing awards.

GUNNERS FIRE BLANK

MU decimate Sunderland

AFP, London



Manchester United beat old boy Roy Keane's Sunderland for the second time this season to take top spot in the Premier League as Arsenal were held to a drab 0-0 draw at Portsmouth.

A double from Louis Saha and one apiece for Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo allowed United to stroll to a 4-0 win at the Stadium of Light that sent Sir Alex Ferguson's men above Arsenal with a one-point lead.

"It was an excellent performance, I thought the passing and movement was excellent," said Ferguson.

"The first goal put us in the driving seat because we knew Sunderland were going through a bit of a sticky patch."

The champions also have a seven-point advantage over Chelsea, who were held to a 4-4 draw at home by Aston Villa in a Boxing Day thriller that had three red cards, two penalties and an injury-time equaliser.

Liverpool needed a last-minute winner from captain Steven Gerrard to claim a 2-1 win over bottom side Derby that lifts them back into fourth place, a point behind Chelsea but having played a game less.

Derby had looked set to claim at least a point after Jay McEveley had cancelled out Fernando Torres' first-half goal.

Everton returned to winning ways following Sunday's defeat at Old Trafford with a 2-0 win at home to Bolton, Phil Neville and Tim Cahill getting the goals.

The match of the day came at

Stamford Bridge, where Shaun Maloney's double gave Villa a two-goal lead with barely quarter of an hour gone.

The visitors had defender Zlat Knight sent off in first-half stoppage time and two goals from Andriy Shevchenko, the first from the spot, had Chelsea level within five minutes of the restart.

Brazilian centre-half Alex then put Chelsea ahead only for Denmark centre-half Martin Laursen to volley in an equaliser.

Chelsea's Ricardo Carvalho was sent off for a two-footed tackle on Gabriel Agbonlahor before a Michael Ballack free-kick in the 88th minute appeared to have secured the three points.

But there was still time for another twist.

In stoppage time, Ashley Cole was sent off for a handball on the line and Villa captain Gareth Barry equalised from the resulting penalty.

Chelsea boss Avram Grant refused to condemn Carvalho.

"For me what's important is that Carvalho did not intend to hurt the player - I didn't see any intention," said Grant.

Arsenal failed to score for the first time in the league this season when they could only draw 0-0 with Portsmouth.

Czech international Tomas Rosicky and skipper William Gallas could have won it for Arsene Wenger's team but both wasted late chances.

"They defended very well, they were organised not to concede," said Wenger.

"It was a very good defensive performance; their minds were completely on defending. We were not at our best but gave absolutely everything."

Jorge is new Iran coach

AFP, Tehran

Iran has chosen Portugal's Artur Jorge as the new coach to revive the fortunes of its beleaguered national football team, the student ISNA news agency reported on Wednesday, quoting an informed source.

"Artur Jorge has been chosen as the new head of the Iranian national football team," the source told the agency.

"His assistant and co-coach will be Mansour Ebrahimzadeh," it said, adding that Ebrahimzadeh would announce a 50-member national squad in the next few days.

Jorge played for top Lisbon side Benfica as well as the Portuguese national team. Moving into management in the 1980s, he enjoyed great success at FC Porto and then went on to coach sides including Paris St Germain and CSKA Moscow.

Known as "King Artur" by his fans, Jorge has also coached the Portuguese, Cameroon and Swiss national sides.

If the news is confirmed, he faces a tough challenge in resurrecting the fortunes of the national side which was bundled out of the 2006 World Cup in the first round and has shown indifferent form since.

The selection also comes during a tumultuous period in Iranian football, which has seen FIFA warn Tehran over government interference in the game.

In a bid to placate the world football authority, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has pulled the conservative candidate he was promoting to be the new head of the Iranian football federation.



BULLFIGHT! Arsenal centre-midfielder Cesc Fabregas (L) and his Portsmouth counterpart Richard Hughes clash for the ball during their Premiership clash at Fratton Park on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP