

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.

It was Ronaldo who capped a

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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 Zat 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

Curbishley, commenting on Gunnarsson's foul, said: 'At the start of the season the referee's 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 McInerney, prompting a confrontation with his Spanish counterpart.

Jewell said: 'McInerney 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 McInerney 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's Maradona's draw flak.

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Villa appeal red card

AFP, London

Aston Villa have launched an appeal against Zat 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 Zat Knight's debutable 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 goals, not just one, came and one pushed me. It was a clear penalty.'

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

The first goal puts 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 McInerney had cancelled out Fernando Torres's 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

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 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.

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

The visitors had defender Zat 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.

Wenger left fuming

AFP, Portsmouth



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.

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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.

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.



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.