

Barton in the dock

THE GUARDIAN

The Newcastle United footballer Joey Barton will spend new year in jail after being remanded on charges of common assault and affray yesterday.

The 25-year-old was arrested in the Church Street area of Liverpool city centre at 5.30am on Thursday after an alleged altercation with two men inside a McDonald's restaurant, one of whom is reported to have lost consciousness during a scuffle. Paramedics were called and the injured man was taken to the Royal hospital but released later that day.

Barton's lawyer's request for bail was refused by Liverpool magistrates court. The midfielder, who has one England cap, was on a night out in the city in a group including his younger brother, Andrew Barton, 19, and Nadine

Wilson, 27, of Huyton, Liverpool, following Newcastle's Boxing Day defeat at Wigan Athletic, a game Barton, who earns 45,000 pounds a week, missed through injury.

Andrew Barton has been charged with assault occasioning actual bodily harm and affray while Wilson has been charged with common assault and affray.

In a 68-minute hearing, Joey Barton appeared in the dock of the oak-panelled Number 1 court, dressed in a dark grey All Saints jumper and dark blue denim jeans which he had apparently worn on his night out. He spoke only once to confirm his name and address. On hearing he had been refused bail he turned to the prison guard and held his hands out to be cuffed before being returned to the cells.

The case is due to be heard again by Liverpool magistrates on January 3, when it is expected Barton will appear via a video link. By then the midfielder, who cost 5.8 million dollars when he joined

Newcastle from Manchester City last summer, will have missed the club's vital Premier League games at Chelsea today and at home to Manchester City on January 2.

Barton has had a turbulent start to his Newcastle career, missing several months with a broken foot injured in pre-season and then causing a rift with disgruntled fans whom he labelled as "vicious" after abuse meted out to manager Sam Allardyce and his players during a heavy defeat at home to Liverpool.

The latest adverse publicity is an embarrassment for the club and could be seen as another dent to the authority of Allardyce at a time when fans have turned against his style of play after a run of poor results.

A spokesman for Newcastle United said last night that the club would not be making any comment. Barton's agent, Willie McKay, was not immediately available for comment.

\$70 million for C' Ron?

THE GUARDIAN

Spanish champions Real Madrid are prepared to pay up to 70 million euros (102.59 million dollars) for Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo. This is the front-page claim made on Saturday by sports daily AS.

The Portuguese star is under contract at Old Trafford until 2012, but AS claims that Cristiano Ronaldo could buy out his contract for 70 million euros, a sum that Real president Ramon Calderon is prepared to pay to lure him to Madrid.

AS claims that Cristiano Ronaldo has insisted on this "buy-out clause" in his contract because his is "so enthusiastic" about playing for Real one day, and quotes the 23-year-old winger as saying that "I would love to play in Spain."

The report claims that Calderon is keen to liven up Bernd Schuster's hard-working team - which is seven points clear at the top of La Liga - with a "media star", and is now resigned to the fact that AC Milan will not sell Kaka, the player he promised to the fans in the 2006 presidential elections at Real.

Valencia haven't sacked trio

REUTERS, Madrid

Valencia are not looking to get rid of dropped players David Albelda, Santiago Canizares and Miguel Angel Angulo, club president Juan Bautista Soler said on Friday.

"It is a technical decision taken by (coach Ronald) Koeman. They haven't been separated from the squad, or sacked. They simply haven't been selected," Soler told a news conference.

Koeman has told the experienced trio that they no longer featured in his plans after the club fell out of European competition and off the pace in the Primera Liga title race.

"This is the official version from the club. The coach said he did not count on them for now. No one has said they will not be recalled to the side again. I hope they will return to play for the club," Soler added.

Both Albelda and Canizares believed they were being forced out and have asked the club to honour and release them from their contracts so they can seek transfers.

Spain midfielders Albelda and Angulo, and former Spain goalkeeper Canizares, who between them have won more than 100 international caps, are three of the longest-serving members of the squad.

"These types of things have happened in other clubs. Real Madrid decided to get rid of Ronaldo, and dropped David Beckham, Raul and Guti last season and these same players ended up coming back to win them the league," Soler added.

"It is a temporary situation. The people who hold the key to reversing the decision are the players. It is in the hands of the players and the coach."

Valencia are seventh in the standings, 15 points behind leaders Real Madrid.

Return beckons for Japan stars

AFP, Tokyo

The Celtic midfielder Shunsuke Nakamura and Eintracht Frankfurt striker Naohiro Takahara are being hunted back home by J-League clubs, sports dailies reported Saturday.

Yokohama Marinos are looking to re-sign 29-year-old Nakamura, the Scottish Player of the Year, when his contract with the Glasgow giants expires at the end of June, the Nihon Sports said.

Takahara, 28, is wanted by AFC champions Urawa Reds, who failed to retain the J-League and Emperor's Cup titles this season, the Sports Nippon said.

Nakamura left the Nissan-owned Marinos for Italian club Reggina in 2002. He arrived at Celtic in 2005 after being voted most valuable player in Japan's victorious 2004 Asian Cup campaign.

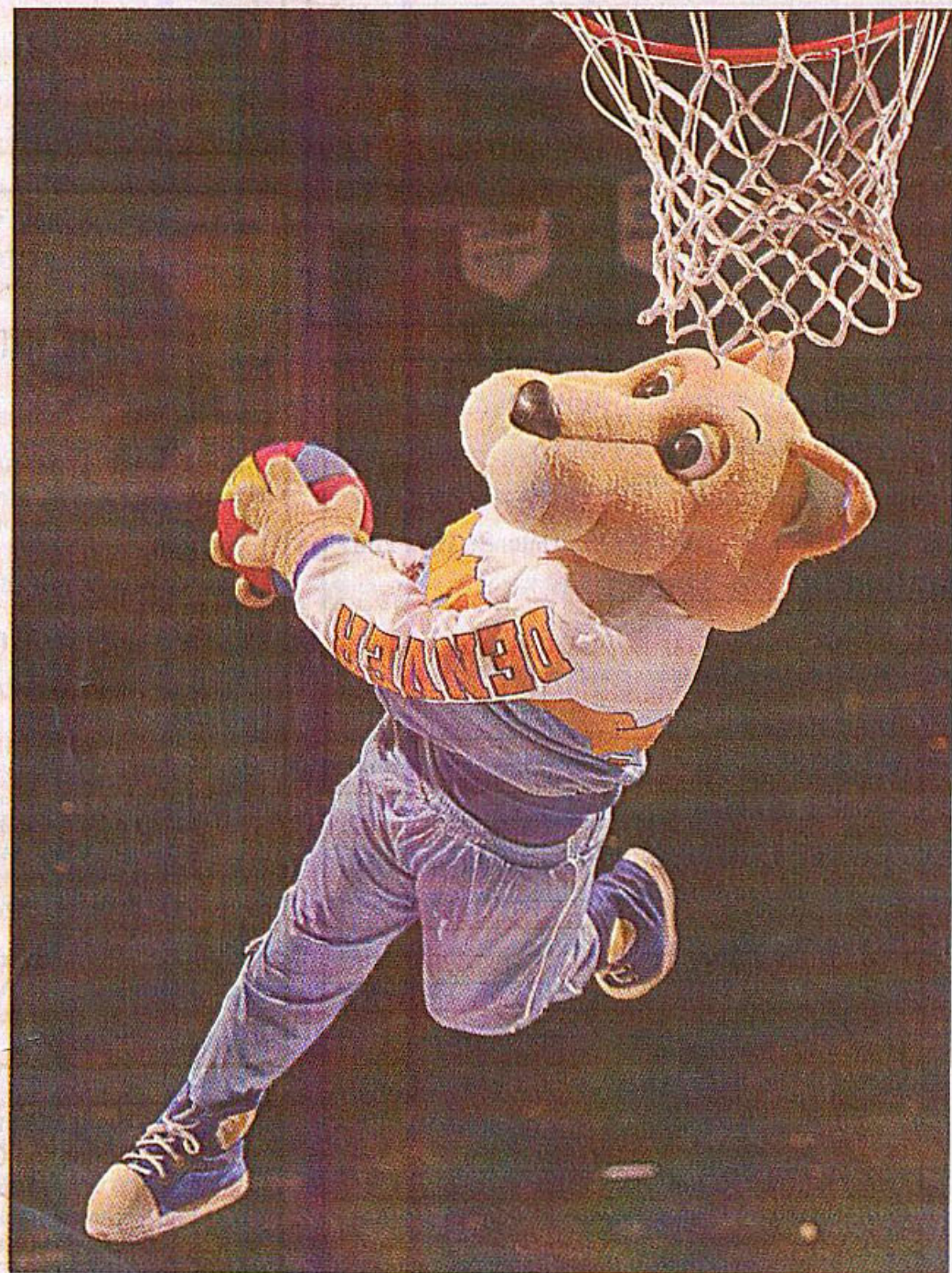
Katsunori Nakamura, Yokohama's director for technical development and not related to the player, plans to visit Glasgow in January to talk with Celtic and the left-footed dead ball specialist about a possible transfer, the Nihon Sports said.

Nissan appeared ready with at least five-million euros (7.4-million dollars) needed for the transfer, the daily added.

Urawa want Takahara from the German club to fill the gap left by Brazilian marksman Washington after he moved to Brazil's Fluminense at the end of the 2007 J-League season last month.

Urawa may need to fork out 120-million yen (one-million dollars) to buy the forward, who scored a tournament-leading four goals in Japan's failed attempt to win a third straight Asian Cup last July, the Sports Nippon said.

PICTURE OF THE WEEK



THE LEAP OF A LION: NBA team Denver Nuggets' mascot Rocky, the mountain lion, brings out all his daring acrobatics to keep the crowd at the Pepsi Centre entertained during a break between quarters in their match against the Milwaukee Bucks in Denver, Colorado on December 26.

Wenger wants Lehmann to stay

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger admitted Friday he would prefer if German goalkeeper Jens Lehmann stayed with Arsenal.

Lehmann, 38, has been out of Arsenal's first team since losing his place to Spaniard Manuel Almunia in September and has been courted by Bundesliga sides VfL Wolfsburg and Borussia Dortmund.

As Germany's first-choice goalkeeper, Lehmann is under pressure to play regular football and the national side's head coach Joachim Loew has expressed his concern.

Wenger said: "I believe first he has to make his mind up: does he want to stay with us or not? I personally would prefer him to stay and he has to make his mind up first and then we will see together."

And the Arsenal manager said that he does not expect to boost his squad during the January transfer window despite losing both Emmanuel Ebou and Kolo Toure when they join the Ivory Coast squad for the African Cup of Nations.

"We knew (about) that before the season started and we expected (Emmanuel) Adebayor to leave, so the good news is that Adebayor doesn't go. But we are not in the market at the moment," said Wenger.

Frankfurt sign Fenin

AFP, Prague

Czech striker Martin Fenin, one of the stars of last summer's under-20 World Cup, has signed for Bundesliga club Eintracht Frankfurt, the Czech agency CTK said Friday citing the director of his current club FK Teplice.

"Neither health or other tests were a problem so signing the contract was today just a formality," said club director Frantisek Hrdlicka.

The 20-year-old's current club will receive around 4 million euro (\$5.9m dollars) and a share of the proceeds if Fenin moves on from Frankfurt.

Fenin helped the Czech Republic reach the final of the under-20 World Cup in Canada and since the autumn has been called up for the senior side.

The young striker has reportedly been the target of interest from major clubs such as Arsenal and Liverpool, Juventus and Werder Bremen.

But he decided to follow in the path of Czech goalkeeper star Petr Cech by starting out playing regularly with a "solid" club before making a bid to join one of the major teams, the Czech daily Sport reported Friday.

Cole loses appeal

AFP, London

Chelsea defender Ashley Cole on Friday lost his appeal for wrongful dismissal against Aston Villa.

The 27-year-old was dismissed for denying an obvious goalscoring opportunity in the final seconds of Wednesday's 4-4 Premier League draw at Stamford Bridge when he was adjudged to have handled the ball on the line.

He will serve a one-match suspension with immediate effect, ruling him out of Saturday's home game with Newcastle.

Aguero's release clause raised

AFP, Madrid

Alejo Madrid announced Friday they have increased the get-out clause for Argentinian striker Sergio Aguero to 55 million euro (81 million dollars).

Alejo said that as 19-year-old Aguero was "considered one of the greats of world football" they had decided to increase the sum from 36 million euro (\$53m dollars) should he decide to break his contract which runs until 2012.

Aguero joined the Spanish club in the summer of 2006 from Independiente in his native Argentina for 20 million euro.

The agreement does not change his salary but bids to increase his income through the use of rights to his image.

"Alejo is a very big club and I feel at home. I want to stay here for many years and help (the team) achieve something important," said Aguero. The club are currently fifth in the league.

Fulham appoint Hodgson

AFP, London



Fulham have appointed former Inter Milan and Blackburn boss Roy Hodgson as their new manager, the Premier League club announced on Friday.

The 60-year-old, who has signed a long-term contract which starts on December 30, takes over from Lawrie Sanchez who was sacked as the club struggle third from the bottom of the league.

"I am delighted to have been offered this opportunity with Fulham," said Hodgson whose first job in charge will be against Chelsea on January 1 with caretaker manager Ray Lewington in charge of Saturday's game at Birmingham.

"After long talks with the Chairman and the board I am

convinced that we can take the club to a new level. I am determined that we will overcome the current position, which I understand will be a challenge, but one that I will relish.

"I am very much looking forward to training with the team on Sunday, and will of course be at St Andrews tomorrow to watch the vital clash against Birmingham City."

Hodgson achieved success on the international stage with Switzerland, leading them to the finals of the 1994 World Cup and 1996 European Championships.

He took charge of Finland for their Euro 2008 qualification campaign and almost guided them to the first major tournament.

Aside from Inter and Blackburn Hodgson also coached another Italian side Udinese.

Fulham owner Mohamed Al Fayed said: "It is my vision to com-

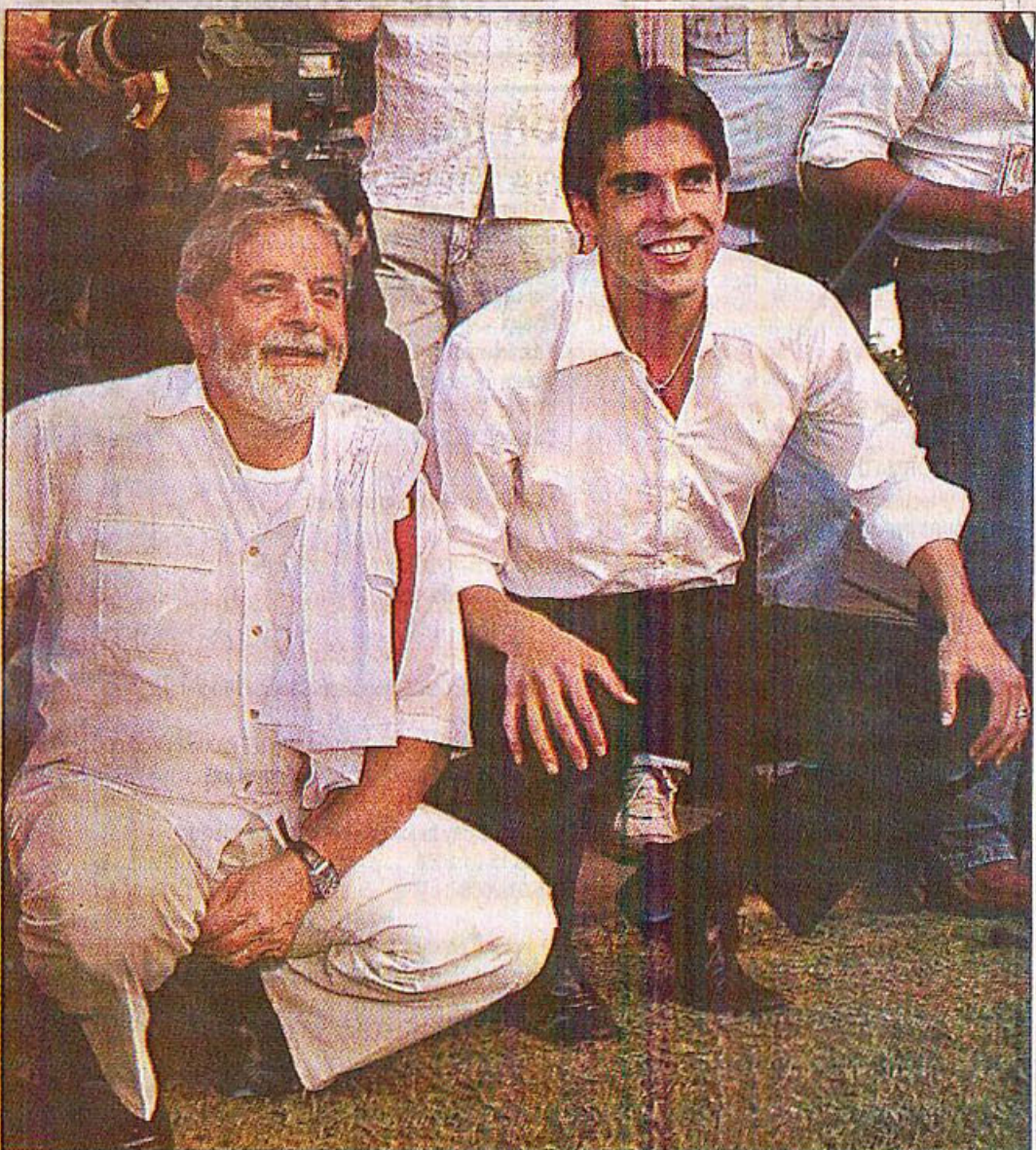
bine the best of the fantastic traditions of the English Premier League with the flair and innate professionalism of the continental game - which I hope will return Fulham to its tradition of playing attractive, passing football.

"I believe that Roy has immense experience in all areas of football and can drive this club forward for the long term."

"My commitment to this club has never dwindled, and I am more than ever determined that we have the right man to turn round our current predicament and build for a successful future."

Cottager's defender Chris Baird had expected former Fulham midfielder John Collins to take over, following his departure from Hibernian last week.

Baird told Sky Sports News: "I'm very surprised - we thought John Collins was going to be the next manager but we were kept in the dark."



Brazil football star Kaka (R) poses with President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva during a meeting at Granja del Toro in Brasilia on Friday.

Bianchi set to pack his bags

THE GUARDIAN



Rolando Bianchi, the £9m Italian striker, has admitted he has no long-term future in English football after six troubled months at Manchester City. Bianchi vented his frustrations in an interview with La Gazzetta dello Sport in which he was scathing about English food and described team-mates looking at him "as if I were an alien" when they found out he was teetotal.

Bianchi, whose potential availability has alerted a number of Italian clubs as well as Atletico Madrid, is the most expensive of Sven-Goran Eriksson's foreign recruits, but his erratic performances and complaints of feeling

homesick have put him in danger of being remembered alongside Corradi Grabbi, Massimo Taibi and Andrea Silenzi among the least successful Italians to play in the Premier League.

Eriksson has already made moves to replace him by signing the Mexican international Nery Castillo on loan from Shakhtar Donetsk and, in a thinly veiled reference to Nicolas Anelka of Bolton, the City manager confirmed last night that he was making strenuous efforts to sign a leading foreign player from another English club.

That places a significant question over Bianchi's future, and the former Reggina forward already seems to have made up his mind that he will not be at the club any longer than the end of the season. "I hope to score at least 10 Premier League goals and

I want to win a place in the Champions League," said Bianchi. "Then I'll pack my bags again and go in search of new adventures. I'd like to wear the shirt of Atletico Madrid and score 15 goals in the Primera Liga."

Bianchi went on to say he should return to Italy because playing abroad was not helping his chances of winning a place in the national team.

The 24-year-old, who has scored only four league goals since joining City in July, said he had found it difficult getting used to the food. "I have raised the white flag with English food. I don't like it. And I think I must be the only teetotal player in the Premier League. My team-mates were surprised when I refused a beer. They looked at me as if I were an alien."

HOPMAN CUP USA edge India

Tennis

AFP, Perth

An untimely bout of cramp for Sania Mirza cost India any chance of a win against the second-seeded United States in the opening tie of the mixed teams Hopman Cup on Saturday.

The United States won the tie 2-1, with Meghann Shaughnessy and Mardy Fish winning their respective singles matches, before Mirza and Rohan Bopanna claimed the mixed doubles rubber.

With American superstar Serena Williams missing the tie due to illness, Mirza was expected to beat substitute Shaughnessy and looked on target to do so when she was up a break and leading 3-1 in the deciding third set.

It was the American who appeared to be wilting in the Perth heat, but Mirza then suffered cramp in her right leg and her game dropped right away, losing the last five games to hand Shaughnessy the win 6-3 4-6 6-3 and the USA an unexpected 1-0 lead. It was Shaughnessy's third win in four meetings against Mirza.

Fish then secured the tie for the Americans with a convincing 6-3 6-4 win over Bopanna in the men's singles.

In the mixed doubles, the Indians made it four wins from as many doubles outings here, winning 6-4 6-4.

Losing the rubber was disappointing for India, who were the surprise packet of the previous Hopman Cup and almost reached the final on the back of their doubles skill and Mirza's impressive singles game.

Matthaus in line for Bosnia job

AFP, Sarajevo

German football legend Lothar Matthaus is among the candidates to coach the Bosnian national side, the country's football association said Friday.

Apart from the German World Cup-winning captain the association is talking with two more candidates - former Croatia coach Zlatko Kranjcar and former Bosnian football star Mehmed Kodro - a spokeswoman said.

The new coach will be announced on January 5, spokeswoman Slavica Pecikoza told AFP.

He is to replace Fuad Muzurovic who had been sacked on December 17 after his team failed to qualify for Euro 2008.



Sania Mirza of India celebrates after winning a point against Meghann Shaughnessy of the US during their Hopman Cup match in Perth on Saturday.