

Cup takes centre stage

AFP, London

The FA CUP

The third round of the FA Cup is a time in the knockout competition renowned for shocks and 'giant-killing' exploits.

But the advent of the January transfer window and the pressing financial need for Premier League clubs to avoid relegation have dulled some of the lustre from the world's oldest senior knockout football competition.

This time last year then Reading striker Dave Kitson summed up a growing, if not so bluntly voiced, mood by saying: "We are not going to win the FA Cup and I do not give two shits about it, to be honest."

However, to the delight of some traditionalists, not only did Reading fail to win the Cup, they were also relegated last season from the Premier League.

Instead Portsmouth became the first club from outside the 'Big Four' of Manchester United, Chelsea, Liverpool and Arsenal since 1995 to lift the trophy, defeating Cardiff of the second-tier Championship in a Cup final that defied all predictions.

Pompey's success ought to have encouraged Premier League clubs in a similar position that there's more to life than 'survival'; whether it has remains to be seen.

As for the 'Big Four', they are all in action against lower league opposition with Saturday seeing Arsenal at home to Plymouth, Chelsea welcoming Southend to Stamford Bridge and Liverpool away to Preston.

League leaders Liverpool's tie has been given an added

dimension as it could be the first match club captain Steven Gerrard plays in since being charged with assault this week following an alleged brawl in a bar.

Meanwhile English, European and now world champions Manchester United start their Cup campaign on Sunday away to Southampton, a repeat of the 1976 final where the south coast club, then of the old Second Division, defeated their First Division opponents 1-0 in one of the great Wembley upsets.

A similar scoreline at St Mary's would be an even greater surprise.

But Bristol City of the second-tier Championship will fancy their chances 'down the road' at Southampton's arch-rivals Portsmouth, who've lost their last five matches.

Harry Redknapp, the man who managed Portsmouth to their first FA Cup final victory in 69 years, will be in the

Tottenham dug-out when the Londoners start the third round against Wigan at White Hart Lane on Friday, in one of several all Premier League encounters.

The temptation for Redknapp, whose side are only above the relegation zone on goal difference, will be to rest players.

But if Wigan boss Steve Bruce, in charge of a team seventh in the table, doesn't pick his best-available side it will indicate a sad lack of ambition.

High-flyers Aston Villa and Everton face potentially awkward trips to Gillingham and Macclesfield respectively.

However, the tie which best encapsulates the spirit of the third round takes place on Monday when non-league Blyth Spartans are at home to Premier League strugglers Blackburn Rovers.

Back in 1978, the north-east side's fifth round replay against Wrexham was witnessed by a crowd of more than 42,000 at Newcastle's St James' Park and the Spartans have high hopes of giving their supporters another set of memories to last a lifetime.

"We're absolutely buzzing for it. I've had all my mates on the phone telling us to stick it to them," Blyth captain Gareth Williams told the Newcastle Evening Chronicle. "We always get a great atmosphere at the ground and it's great for the club."

And it seems you can put a price on the 'Romance of the Cup'.

"Win, lose or draw we will be talking about 160,000 pounds just for the televised rights," club chairman Tony Platten explained to the Daily Telegraph.

"Like the FA, we're loving it because we've had a lot of financial problems in the past."

SELECTED FIXTURES
(1500GMT unless stated)

Friday
Tottenham v Wigan (2000GMT)

Saturday
Arsenal v Plymouth, Chelsea v Southend (1300GMT), Hull v Newcastle, Macclesfield v Everton, Manchester City v Nottingham Forest, Middlesbrough v Barrow, Portsmouth v Bristol City, Preston v Liverpool (1730GMT), Sheffield Wednesday v Fulham, Sunderland v Bolton, West Brom v Peterborough, West Ham v Barnsley

Sunday
Gillingham v Aston Villa (1330GMT), Southampton v Manchester United (1600GMT)

Monday
Blyth Spartans v Blackburn (2000GMT)

Senna denies City reports

SOCCERNET

Villarreal star Marcos Senna has rubbished reports which claimed he is eager to join Manchester City in the January transfer window.

The Spain midfielder is thought to be one of the names on City boss Mark Hughes' New Year shopping list as the Premier League side plot big-money signings with the backing of their new owners Abu Dhabi United Group.

Senna, who impressed as his country secured glory at Euro 2008, was recently quoted as saying he is 'interested in the challenge' of the English top flight.

However, the 32-year-old insists he is only focused on life at El Madrigal and knows nothing of any interest from City.

"I know nothing about everything that is being said and I have not spoken to anyone at Manchester City," Senna said in Marca.

"I have read the same things as everyone else and I do not know where it has come from. I only want to think about Villarreal and helping the team to do well."

"I have read about huge sums of money, but the only thing I want to focus on is playing for my team."

"It has all surprised me. I have never said anything to anyone about this and I am calm."

Hammers will listen to offers

AFP, Paris

West Ham will listen to offers for all their players with the January transfer window having opened at midnight, the English Premiership club's chief executive Scott Duxbury admits.

Craig Bellamy, Matthew Upson and Scott Parker are all in the shop window as the Hammers look to ward off the effects of the credit crisis, though Duxbury said that while all offers would be considered, manager Gianfranco Zola would have the final say and not financial officials.

"We must not be afraid of interest in or bids for our leading players," Duxbury told the club's website. "Each approach will be considered in terms of fee, fitness, form and where the manager thinks the player is in his career."

"We have to consider the will of the player and whether he is committed to what we are trying to achieve."

The financial crisis has hit West Ham owner Bjorgolfur Gudmundsson hard and the Carlos Tevez affair continues to hang over the club with a hefty compensation payment potentially due to Sheffield United.

Cologne chase Podolski

SOCCERNET

Cologne are to intensify their interest in Bayern Munich striker Lukas Podolski in the new year as competition grows for his signature.

The Germany international has requested a transfer and is keen on returning to his home-town club, but their first offer earlier this month was rejected out of hand.

After letting the dust settle, Cologne are now preparing to return with an improved bid to lure Podolski home.

"Cologne needs an image and that should be Lukas," explained Cologne's general manager Michael Meier.

"The deal is certainly on the way. Bayern ruined the great story with Lukas and Cologne back then, but now the time has come to move it on."

The greatest stumbling block remains Bayern's demands for the Germany international, who they signed from Cologne for 10 million euros in 2007.

They expect to earn at least as much as that, but Cologne's first offer was reported to be only seven million.

However, Cologne coach Christoph Daum feels his club needs to take a risk in ensuring they do not lose Podolski to a rival club.

"He has many alternatives, but the most important is still Cologne," he told the Cologne Express newspaper.

"That is unique in this day and age. To get such a player, you have got to do absolutely everything."

Bayern have indicated their willingness to sell Podolski next summer but that they would prefer a deal to be done this winter which would enable them to keep hold of the 23-year-old until June.



World number one Rafael Nadal (R) of Spain looks at his nemesis Swiss star Roger Federer during a joint press conference in Abu Dhabi on Thursday. Roger Federer starts the 2009 season on a campaign to reclaim the world number one spot from Rafael Nadal.

Ex-mafia boss alleges fixing

Tennis

AFP, New York

Former mafia crime boss Michael Franzese says top-level tennis matches are being influenced by gamblers and the sport would be his prime focus were he still in the business of impacting outcomes.

Franzese, a former boss in the Colombo crime family, serves as a consultant and speaker regarding his days with the mob and has spoken with ATP players about the methods that are used to spread corruption in sport.

"It's definitely going on," Franzese told AFP. "If I were in this business now, tennis would be my major target because one player can impact the game. That's all you need."

An FBI probe in the 1980s and a decade in prison helped push Franzese to change his ways and help those who safeguard the integrity of sport, but his crime contacts lead him to believe organized crime remains involved in tennis.

"I have to believe they are, certainly from the feedbacks I've gotten since I got

involved with the ATP," Franzese said. "Sports has become such an incredibly lucrative racket, so to speak, for guys on the street."

Franzese, 57, has spoken with National Basketball Association, Major League Baseball, tennis stars and elite US college athletes about the dangers of match-fixers, often counselling newcomers on how to avoid being ensnared in gambling woes.

His talks included a March 2007 session with ATP players.

"They told me there's a problem in the sport. It is something that has to be addressed," he said. "Mainly, I told them how damaging and dangerous it could be for them to get involved in gambling and get around the wrong people."

"Gambling is a very serious business. If you put yourself in a gambling situation, you're most likely going to attract the wrong people because those same people are watching you. They want to find out who's got a gambling problem."

Less than five months after Franzese spoke came a match in Sopot in which unusual on-line betting patterns were registered about Russian Nikolay Davydenko's loss to Argentina's Martin Vassallo-Arquello.

An ATP investigation into the match concluded last September that there was no wrongdoing by Davydenko or his rival.

Franzese remains suspicious.

"He is a pretty top player. Something else is going on there. Somebody has a hook on him," he said.

Franzese claims first-hand expertise at influencing athletes to drop a match to satisfy gamblers, including threats of bodily harm for failure to comply.

"None of these players want to do it. They do it because they're put in a situation," he said. "It's sad because they're doing it against their will. They have no way out. They all regret it. And that's why it's so damaging to their career. Psychologically, it gets to them."

"I've seen it happen so many times. They just can't perform the same. It does affect them. It affects their careers. Sometimes it's irreversible."

The impact on the sport could be as damaging as on the players. If supporters feel betrayed and have no faith the match results are legitimate, interest is likely to fade.

"All of them have a fear of gambling. All of them are not quite sure how to deal with it because they know it can happen at any time," Franzese said.

Arsenal loan out Simpson

AFP, London

West Bromwich Albion, the bottom club in the Premier League have signed striker Jay Simpson on loan from top-flight rivals Arsenal for the rest of the season, it was announced on Wednesday.

The 20-year-old scored twice for a coltish Arsenal team in their 3-0 League Cup win over Wigan in November and Gunners manager Arsene Wenger is letting him leave the Emirates Stadium to gain first-team experience.

Last season Simpson was loaned to League One side Millwall and this latest deal means he could now play for West Brom in their FA Cup third round tie against Peterborough on Saturday.

Honour amongst thieves in Italy

Football

INTERNET, undated

Napoli fans really do look after their players, as Slovakian starlet Marek Hamsik was returned a stolen Rolex as a Christmas present.

The precious watch, with an estimated value of around £25,000, was taken from him on December 18 following a robbery in Fuorigrotta.

"The Rolex is waiting for me at a police station in Naples," revealed the 21-year-old.

Knowing the importance of the watch for Hamsik, President Aurelio De Laurentis had promised he would buy it for the player after New Year's.

"But the fans knew how to

get it first. For them footballers are pretty much like divinity - untouchable," added Hamsik.

This is not the first time that the Azzurri supporters help out their players. Only a few months ago striker Andrea Russotto was returned his BMW a few hours after the car had been stolen.

Hamsik is currently spending his holiday in Slovakia with his teammate Walter Gargano, who is in a relationship with his sister Michaela.

"We have been eating a lot and we may get fined for it," confessed the former Brescia youngster, although his sister has spent the past few days in hospital.

"I went to visit her everyday," noted Gargano. "I even bought her a ring but it's not time for a wedding yet," he assured.

Hull demand enquiry

AFP, London

English Premiership newcomers Hull want an investigation into claims a third party prompted referee Steve Bennett to overturn a late penalty he had awarded in Tuesday night's 1-0 defeat to Aston Villa.

Bennett initially awarded Hull the injury-time spot-kick in the belief Ashley Young had handled the ball on the line, but changed his mind after talking to his assistant Andy Halliday, who correctly told him the ball had struck the bar.

However, chairman Paul Duffen wants an investigation into claims a third party illegally used video replays and the officials' earpieces to advise them.

"All we are saying is that the events bring into question who exactly did influence the referee," Duffen told the Daily Mail.

"I would like a report from the match officials and confirmation of who was talking in the earpiece. There is a concern that somebody (else) was using video evidence."

Premier League rules do not allow third party influence or the use of video replays.

Duffen said he had spoken to Premier League chief executive Richard Scudamore, who "assured me he will ask some questions and come back to me."

He added: "We are most concerned about the integrity of the competition and that some form of video evidence isn't being introduced by officials on a discretionary basis."

A Premier League spokesman told the Mail that video screens have been removed from technical areas so that replays cannot be seen.

"The assistant communicated with Steve Bennett his view of the incident and as a result of that he has made the correct decision," the spokesman said. "As part of the 'Get on with the Game' programme, screens have been removed from the technical area so there is no access to video replays."

C'Ron rejects Real link

Football

INTERNET, undated

Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo insists continued speculation linking him with a move to Real Madrid is not true.

Ronaldo dazzled for United last season, scoring 42 goals in all competitions as the Red Devils won the Premier League and the UEFA Champions League.

That form led Spanish champions Real Madrid to pursue the 23-year-old during an unsuccessful summer transfer saga, which angered United manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

But Real Madrid director Pedro Trapote was quoted in December claiming that his club have a deal in place to sign the Ballon D'Or winner at the end of this season.

Ronaldo, though, has reiterated that the claim is false. "There's always speculation," he said, "not just about me, but about the future of players all around the world."

"People were speaking about me this summer but that was normal because of what I did during the season."

"What people are saying now (the recent speculation about an agreement with Real Madrid) is not true."

"Who says that is a liar because I am happy at the club, I want to stay here. I feel at home here. I feel very happy here."

Meanwhile, Ronaldo admits he felt under pressure to impress after a summer of rumours, but was not worried that fans would turn against him.

"I think the people don't forget quickly what you do for the club," he added. "When I arrived at the stadium, to myself (my first game of this season) against Villarreal, I felt a little bit of pressure."

"But the fans were very good and this is why I feel the Manchester United supporters are amazing."

"I love the fans because they have been brilliant with me, not just this season but every season. Like I said before, I feel at home in Manchester."

Gerrard has full support

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Rafael Benitez will keep faith with Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard despite his arrest in connection with a bar-room brawl earlier this week.

The Liverpool and England midfielder was arrested on Sunday, after scoring two goals in the Premier League leaders' 5-1 win away to Newcastle, and charged with assault 24 hours later by police following his involvement in the incident at the Lounge Inn in Southport, near Liverpool.

A question mark now hangs over Gerrard's immediate future ahead of Liverpool's FA Cup third round tie on Saturday away to fellow north-west side Preston North End, pushing for promotion to the Premier League.

But Benitez has held clear-the-air talks with his star player and assured Gerrard he will be selected for the game if convinced he is in the right frame of mind to play.

It is understood Gerrard has informed the Liverpool manager he wants to play and that leaving him out of the team would only heighten speculation about his Anfield future.

Preston defender Callum Davidson insists Gerrard's problems will have no bearing on Liverpool when it comes to the game.

"People are saying this could be a good time to play Liverpool, but I don't think it will be a distraction," he said.

"I can recall the time when I

was playing for Leicester and the club went into administration.

"Despite the financial implications that carries, we did not let it interfere with how we played. I know the circumstances are different but once players run on to the field their professionalism always takes over."

"And Liverpool have some of the best professionals in the game."

On a more positive note for Benitez, he could be in a position to welcome back leading striker Fernando Torres from a hamstring injury.

Albert Riera believes the



STEVEN GERRARD

Pompey to sell Defoe at right price

Football

SOCCERNET

Portsmouth have confirmed they would be willing to sell Jermain Defoe if they received an acceptable offer.

The striker was benched for the game against Arsenal at the weekend and is rumoured to be interested in a return to White Hart Lane under former boss Harry Redknapp.

Portsmouth's executive chairman, Peter Storrer has promised to back manager Tony Adams in the transfer window, but claimed the club would be willing to sell Defoe for the right price.

"It looks like Jermain wants to go. That is something we will be speaking to him about," said Storrer. "If Jermain goes it will be at our price and if there is an offer which appeals. We have always said we do not keep people who do not want to play for Portsmouth. We do not have to sell anyone but if he wants to go that is a differ-

ent matter."

Tottenham are just one of the clubs interested in Defoe and although Redknapp has said he will not pay "silly money" for anyone, he is believed to be ready to offer £15 million for the England striker.

The struggling south coast club may be forced to cash in on Defoe, but they have already begun to bring in new players to the squad.

Pompey have already secured full-back Nadir Belhadj on a permanent deal for £4.4 million after he impressed during his loan from Lens and despite the fact that Adams brought in £20 million from the sale of Lassana Diarra to Real Madrid, Portsmouth have not confirmed how much of that will be available to the manager.

Storrer told the Portsmouth News: "I never talk about money but Tony will be given the means if he wants to strengthen the squad."

"From talking to him I

know he is looking to do most of his business in the summer. That's when he feels we will get more value for money and more players are available."

"But we are still talking to people now and are looking to bring in two or three during the transfer window to improve the squad."

"All this about selling this player and that player, it's utter rubbish. We are primarily looking to recruit and are planning to bring players in."

"It would take something exceptional or the player wanting to move on somewhere for anyone else to leave."

Storrer also confirmed Lauren and Richard Duffy would be released from their contracts this month if they can find an employer.

He added: "Lauren and Duffy have asked if they can leave in January and we have said they can."

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