

Rooney targets 25

Football

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Wayne Rooney is aiming to fill the void left by Cristiano Ronaldo by scoring 25 goals for Manchester United this season.

Sir Alex Ferguson has promised to hand Rooney a more central striking role for the champions after Ronaldo made the switch to Real Madrid.

The England man was regularly dispatched to the flanks to accommodate the Portuguese last season but still notched 20 goals for United.

And Rooney is convinced he can better that in 2009/10. "Of course 25 is a target which I hope I'm going to reach," said Rooney. "I've always said I should score more and hopefully I'll do that this season."

"I've got what I wanted. I like to play through the middle. The manager has come out now and said I am going to play there throughout

the season so I'm delighted with that. He may change his mind and whatever he says goes, but I hope he will play me there for most of the season. If I keep scoring goals I will justify it."

He added: "I am comfortable with the extra responsibility now Cristiano has gone. There have been big expectations on me for the last seven years so whether he was here or not I would still have that."

"But I have never looked at myself as being the main man. It is a team game. I won't win a trophy on my own."

Rooney has also backed strike partner Dimitar Berbatov to shine after he had a quiet first season at Old Trafford: "You can see in training and games during pre-season that Dimitar has looked sharper," said Rooney.

"He looks like he is more determined. He is tracking back with the full-backs in pre-season and is definitely working harder and trying to impress. He is a brilliant player. He has so much quality he has got and we all want him to show it."

'Masche not for sale'

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Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez insists Javier Mascherano is now fully focused on the Reds after having his head turned by Barcelona this summer.

The Spanish giants have been constantly linked with a swoop for the Argentine midfielder but Benitez has told Mascherano he is going nowhere.

Liverpool sold Xabi Alonso to Real Madrid for £30m last

week and Benitez is keen not to lose two star players in the same transfer window.

"Javier knows he is staying," the Liverpool boss said. "He has accepted his future is here and that he is going to be a key player for us once more."

"Mascherano is now fully focused on us and what we might achieve together this season, I can guarantee that 100%."

"We've spoken about his situation before and we spoke again. Before, it was difficult and he could see Xabi Alonso was on his way."

"There has been a significant improvement in his game

over the past 10 days. He has been a lot more focused, and we are seeing the real Mascherano again."

Mascherano's performances since return from international duty have been below par, but Benitez is confident his performance in the 2-1 pre-season defeat to Atletico Madrid on Saturday shows he will once again be a key player this season.

"He played much better against Atletico than he has before," added Benitez. "I am confident he is more focused now. The last week has changed the situation a lot and he is playing much better."

Defence key to MU

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Darren Fletcher has predicted a more rigid Manchester United will be on show this season.

With Cristiano Ronaldo now settled in at Real Madrid and Carlos Tevez moving down the road to Manchester City, Sir Alex Ferguson has had a bit of adjusting to do this summer.

And, according to Fletcher, the outcome is an orthodox 4-4-2 formation that he believes will be good enough to terrorise opposition at home and abroad.

"We have always been tight at the back because we have a great defensive record but maybe we have been a little bit too expansive at times," he said.

"The ethos of the club is about attacking football. However, you can't be wide open and attacking all the time."

"You also have to be disciplined and I think you are going to see a more rigid 4-4-2 formation this season."

At Wembley on Sunday, Fletcher was right at the heart of that formation, partnering Michael Carrick in the centre of midfield.

Maybe it should not have been a surprise. For, as the close season dragged on, so Fletcher's abilities grew as reasons for United's lamentable Champions League final display were unearthed.

The inescapable conclusion to draw was that United were passed to death by Barcelona duo Andres Iniesta and Xavi because Fletcher was suspended for the Rome show-down, consigned there due to the needless red card he picked up when the semi-final at Arsenal was already won.

Not that Fletcher is about to let the adulation go to his head. "The only thing people have said to me this summer is that

United missed me in Rome," he said.

"It is nice to hear and I did feel I made a big step forward last season."

"But sometimes you become a better player by not playing. People notice you because you are not there. It is easy to sit in the stand. I was desperate to be out there."

Undeniably, last season's was Fletcher's best and most consistent.

The 25-year-old made 42 appearances last term and the vast majority of his contributions were telling ones in a season that ended with a third Premier League title if not a place in Rome.

"There are some great midfielders at the club but I managed to get into the team for the start of the season and stay there for most of it," he said.

"My performances improved because of the continuity of playing most weeks."



PHOTO: AFP

Espanyol midfielder Francisco Javier Rufete holds a bouquet during teammate Dani Jarque's vigil at the Cornellà-El Prat Stadium in Barcelona on Tuesday.



PHOTO: AFP

Wolfsburg's new signing Nigerian striker Obafemi Martins poses during his presentation in Wolfsburg on Wednesday.

Police take care of Kaka

INTERNET, undated

Brazilian football star Kaka may be able to deliver a perfect 30-yard pass, but his sense of direction deserted him in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, Tuesday. The 27-year-old playmaker went for a morning stroll around the historic city on the Baltic Sea coast but soon found himself confused by the cobbled streets and winding lanes of the medieval Old Town, police said.

Estonian police confirmed that they found Kaka and a masseur from the training staff wandering near Tallinn's ferry terminal, where boats leave frequently to Helsinki, 80 kilometres away across the Gulf of Finland.

As the group was having some trouble deciding how to get back to the team hotel, police obliged by giving them a lift in exchange for an autograph.

Speaking to reporters, Kaka said he had simply been exploring.

"It is my first time here and I am pleased to know another city and another country. This morning I went for a walk to the port to see some things," he said.

Brazilian web portal Folha Online quoted Kaka as saying that Tallinn is "very beautiful."

"I even got to ride in a police car for the first time in my life," Kaka said.

Estonia hosts Brazil for a friendly match Wednesday evening.

Roma reject De Rossi bid

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AS Roma have rejected a big-money offer from Chelsea for midfielder Daniele De Rossi, according to the Italian club.

Giallorossi official Bruno Conti claims Blues boss Carlo Ancelotti made an approach for the Italy international as he scoured his homeland for players who could improve his squad in the Premier League.

"I've personally had a call from Ancelotti to take the player to Chelsea. But Daniele is untouchable," Conti told Radio Radio. "The offer was of a lot of money, but it has been refused."

Roma president Rosella Sensi has also moved to distance the club from any suggestion that they would be prepared to part with the 26-year-old.

"De Rossi isn't and won't be for sale. He remains with us," she said.

But Roma sold Alberto Aquilani to Liverpool for £20m earlier this month and the club's transfer chief Daniele Prade has not ruled out further departures.

He said: "Will there be other sales? We care about this club and if there will be important offers then yes, there could be more sales. The financial balance is important and if necessary we will bring in more money."

"Chelsea wanted [Daniele] De Rossi, but we turned down their offer," Prade concluded.

Cruz won't be rushed

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Manchester City boss Mark Hughes expects to be without

Roque Santa Cruz until the end of August.

Hughes spent £17m to lure the Paraguayan down the M61 from Blackburn, but was already aware his City debut would be put on hold due to knee surgery.

With Emmanuel Adebayor having since been recruited from Arsenal, Hughes has no need to push the 27-year-old back into action too soon.

And the City chief intends to let Santa Cruz recover at his own pace in the hope his side will gain long-term benefits.

"We knew Roque would have a period of rehabilita-

tion when we signed him, but we have good options up front," Hughes told www.mcfc.co.uk.

"If we can, we want to give him the time he really needs, rather than getting him back early and having him at 70%."

"Rather than bring him back too soon. I would rather give him the time that he needs. We are hoping by the end of the month he will be available."

With just three days to go before his new-look side visit Blackburn, it promises to be a busy time for Hughes.

It is expected City will lodge another bid for Joleon Lescott, although Everton are giving no sign of being interested in doing a deal, even if the Eastlands outfit increase their most recent £18million offer.

Toffee boss David Moyes

was unequivocal in his response to Lescott's official transfer request yesterday, and the Scot is showing no sign of softening his stance.

"I have said all along that I have no intention of selling my best players," he told www.evertonfc.com.

"Joleon is simply not for sale."

It means Hughes will almost certainly have to utilise his present squad at Ewood Park, although, like Santa Cruz, neither Vincent Kompany nor Michael Johnson will be involved.

Kompany underwent a toe operation last month, while Johnson is still two weeks away from a return to action after suffering a minor setback in his recovery from an abdominal complaint that ruled him out for most of last season.

Promoted clubs braced for survival battle

AFP, London



Most of the pre-season attention is focused upon potential champions yet recent history suggests the most tense - and financially damaging - competition will be at the other end of the Premier League table.

Around 40 million pounds is the estimated cost of relegation for the three clubs who finish at the foot of the standings and this season, as in most, the three promoted sides are also hotly-tipped to return directly to The Championship.

Wolves, as champions, Birmingham City and play-off winners Burnley are the clubs who graduated to England's top-flight and all face a monumental task in consolidating their new found status.

A key factor in being able to stave off a swift relegation is the calibre of players recruited by a newly-promoted club and, consequently, Wolves and Birmingham will perhaps feel more confident than Burnley, even though all three have broken their transfer records this close season.

Wolves have brought in players such as the experienced forward Kevin Doyle, a record 6.5 million capture from Reading, as well as midfielder Nenad Milijas from Red Star Belgrade and goalkeeper Marcus Hahnemann, also from Reading.

It is the combination of experience and new-found enthusiasm that is so often the key factor in a side managing to stay up, as Hull City proved with their impressive opening to the campaign 12 months ago.

Equally, Birmingham have so far recruited eight new players, which is firstly a tacit admission that their

Championship squad was not big or talented enough to survive the rigours of the Premier League and also suggests they believe their stay in the top flight is a long-term venture.

Attracting players such as Lee Bowyer, Joe Hart, on loan from Manchester City, former Scotland captain Barry Ferguson and nine million signing Christian Benitez will all significantly strengthen the west midlands club and they will be quietly confident they can avoid the fate of relegation, which they endured in May 2008.

Burnley have spent significantly less than their promotion partners, primarily because more money simply does not exist.

Manager Owen Coyle has admitted he has just 16 million to spend on both transfers and wages, with the three million invested in Hibernian winger Steven Fletcher his largest investment.

As a result, the Lancashire club has an almighty mountain to climb, not that Coyle himself is too concerned.

"In terms of Premier League salaries, we will be the lowest payers, but equally, they will still be good salaries in life, so players have to be aware of that," he said.

"We were one of the smaller clubs in terms of finance in the Championship, so small fry does not even sum it up when it comes to talking about the magnitude of the Premier League."

However, it is not all gloom for the new sides.

All three will take huge spirit from the fact that last season, two of the promoted teams - Stoke City and Hull - both managed to keep a foothold in the Premier League while two supposedly more established clubs did not, in the forms of Newcastle United and Middlesbrough.

Very few people backed north-east giants Newcastle for relegation 12 months ago, nor were their near neighbours Middlesbrough favourites for the drop, underlining how much predicting survival is an inexact science.

This year, Bolton Wanderers, whose manager Gary Megson can still not win the fans over, could be a strong candidate.

Portsmouth are racked by financial troubles and an unhappy squad which could also be an issue and both Stoke and, especially given their second half to last season, Hull will again face seriously challenging seasons as they look to survive.

Wigan Athletic could be an outside choice to struggle as they head into the season with a new manager, Roberto Martinez, who has never managed at this level while West Ham and Fulham will only feel comfortable once safety is a mathematical certainty.

Paul Jewell is one of the game's most experienced managers in life at this end of the table, having steered Bradford and Wigan to safety and taken Derby County down into the Championship in his career.

He has no doubt that it will be a major surprise if, as has happened only once before in Premier League history, all three newcomers survive.

"When you have spent a while in the Championship, operating on simple budgets with no big benefactor, making that leap into the Premier League is massive and you don't have to be a genius to work out why new clubs fail," said Jewell.

"It is luck if one survives, incredibly unusual if two do and it will be a miracle if all three make it."

Serb starlet poised for Chelsea

AFP, Belgrade

Premier League giants Chelsea are poised to sign talented Serbian youngster Nemanja Matic from Slovakian club Kosice within days, the player said in a report here Wednesday.

"The London club are very interested about seeing me in their ranks this summer," the 20-year-old midfielder was quoted as telling the Serbian daily Press.

"I've left the whole matter up to my agents. The talks are being conducted on a daily basis and I think that everything will soon be finished."

"All in all, there's a bid possibility that I'll become a Chelsea player in the next few days," he said.

Matic, who has represented Serbia at the youth level, added that other clubs including Middlesbrough had been keen on signing him but that Chelsea was the most attractive option.

"It's important that my club Kosice, where I won recognition as a player, is satisfied," the 20-year-old told Press.

"I have a contract with them for another one-and-a-half years and I hope that it will end in the best possible way."

Spurs wait on Woodgate

AFP, London

Tottenham centre-back Jonathan Woodgate is back at the London club to start his recovery programme after groin surgery in Germany.

"Jonathan Woodgate underwent minor surgery on the groin problem that has prevented his participation in our pre-season preparations," a statement from Spurs read on Tuesday.

"Jonathan will now begin a rehabilitation programme with our physios."

Tottenham have set the former Real Madrid player specific targets to achieve before moving on to his next stage of recovery, meaning they are not putting a time frame on his return at this point.

Manager Harry Redknapp is short on cover at the back because Michael Dawson is also out, with an Achilles injury.

Ledley King should be able to face Liverpool on Sunday in the first weekend of the Premier League but is unable to play matches in quick succession.

Sebastian Bassong has been brought in from Newcastle to bolster the defence.

Redknapp has plenty of options in attack, however - with Peter Crouch, Jermain Defoe, Robbie Keane and Roman Pavlyuchenko fighting for two places.

"I've played with Roman, Robbie and Jermain in training - and they are all fantastic players," said Crouch.

"We've four strikers battling it out for two spots. That is healthy competition and has to be good for the club."