

FA Cup Frederic fires Pompey into semis

AFP, London

Frederic Piquionne scored twice as crisis club Portsmouth became the first team into this season's FA Cup semifinals with a 2-0 win at home to fellow Premier League side Birmingham City on Saturday.

The French forward scored twice in three second-half minutes for 2008 FA Cup winners Portsmouth, forcing the ball home from close range and then, in the 70th minute, after being played in by Jamie O'Hara, beating Joe Hart when one-on-one with the goalkeeper to the delight of the Fratton Park faithful.

Birmingham, on a day when world football governing body FIFA again ruled out goal-line technology, thought they'd scored through Liam Ridgwell's close-range header with 10 minutes left.

Replays showed the ball had crossed the line but the officials did not let the 'goal' stand and Portsmouth were on their way to Wembley for the semifinals.

Portsmouth, bottom of English football's top flight and facing the prospect of all but certain relegation, are currently in administration and their estimated debts of 76 million pounds could yet see the club go out of business.

Bayern eye Olympic golden girl

AFP, Wallgau

German football giants Bayern Munich could make a signing with a difference - Winter Olympic double biathlon gold medalist Magdalena Neuner.

The 22-year-old golden girl of German winter sport revealed on Friday that she had been contacted by Bayern president Uli Hoeness who had offered her a job in the club's marketing department. "It was incredibly flattering. It's something to think about but I want to keep all my options open," said Neuner at a reception held in her honour in her home village of Baviere.

Pep backs Thierry

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola defended his under-fire forward Thierry Henry on Saturday after fans booed the former Arsenal man for his poor showing in France's 2-0 loss to Spain in midweek.

French supporters and media have rounded on the 32-year-old French captain in recent months over his perceived lack of form and have called for him to be dropped.

"We need him," the Barcelona coach said.

"Without him we would never have got six titles (in 2009) and without him it will be harder this year.

Henry played a key role in the Spanish giants' La Liga and Champions League victories last year, bagging a total of 25 goals in all competitions.

But the Frenchman has scored just three goals so far this season as Barca's young guns such as 22-year-old Pedro stake a claim for his place in the starting XI.

"If he does not play it is, among other things, because maybe there are players in better form than him," Guardiola told the club's official website.

"He is conscious that he has to improve and I think that he knows what he is doing. I want him to have the same desire that he has always had. I am sure that he will be back to his best in the next couple of months," the 39-year-old coach added.

Barcelona teammate and Spain midfielder Xavi also came out in defence of Henry, France's record goalscorer with 51 goals, after the friendly international in Paris on Wednesday.

"It surprises me that some people say he deserves to be in the reserves for the France World Cup Squad. He is always an example for us in the dressing room. On the pitch, his behaviour has been exemplary," he said.



Portsmouth striker Frederic Piquionne (R) stabs home the opening goal during their FA Cup quarterfinal against Birmingham City at Fratton Park on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Diao focused on Drogba

AFP, London



Didier Drogba reckons his diving antics are all part of the entertainment, says Stoke City's Salif Diao, who will be keeping a close eye on the Chelsea striker in Sunday's FA Cup quarterfinal.

Drogba will be looking to fire English Premier League title-chasers Chelsea into a Wembley semifinal when they take on mid-table visitors Stoke at Stamford Bridge.

Diao, who stands in the Ivory Coast hitman's way, said he was well aware of Drogba's reputation - having been a close friend for a decade since their days playing in France.

"Myself and others tell him to stop diving," the Senegal defensive midfielder said.

"But it's part of the show for him: it is not cheating, but part of the entertainment. He has a winning mentality and knows what he wants.

"We call him 'The Project' because we see him as someone who hasn't finished yet.

"He is not the finished striker yet because he always wants to improve.

"He's like Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo. They know they have achieved, but they still work hard every day because they want to get even better.

"But if Didier carries on and 'The Project' goes its full term, then I think he will be the greatest."

Diao is not daunted by the prospect of taking on FA Cup holders Chelsea at their west London home.

Rugged Stoke knocked Manchester City out of the cup on February 24 -- three days before the Champions League spot chasers humbled Chelsea 4-2 at Stamford Bridge in the league.

"The good thing is that every time we play a big game, everyone is up for it," Diao said.

"Nothing is impossible. We have been playing so many games where people write us completely out, but that gives us more motivation to disappoint those people.

"We believe that on our day we can beat anybody."

The statistics are against the Potters in their first FA Cup quarterfinal in 38 years.

Chelsea have won all three Premier League clashes with the Staffordshire side, including a 2-1 win this season at the Britannia Stadium.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 2

Koreans impress Wenger

AFP, London Colney



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger admits the success of South Korean players in the Premier League has made him reconsider the possibility of signing Asian stars.

Wenger knows the qualities of Asian players better than most in Europe after spending 18 months working in Japan as manager of Grampus Eight, but Japanese midfielder Junichi Inamoto has been his only signing from the region since taking over at Arsenal 14 years ago.

Inamoto's failure to make an impact in the Premier League convinced Wenger that Asians were a risky investment.

However, he has been forced to think again after seeing Korean stars Park Ji-Sung and Lee Chung-Yong in action at Manchester United and Bolton respectively.

Wenger now acknowledges the Koreans have proved players from Asia have plenty to offer top English clubs and he wouldn't rule out looking at some of the continent's best at this year's World Cup, which features South Korea, North

Korea and Japan.

"I know that the Korean players in England are doing very well and of course it excites a little bit your curiosity," Wenger said.

"The Korean players have done one important thing. There are very few Asian players who have made it in Europe and especially the Premier League but the Korean players look to adapt very well."

Wenger has been a big fan of United winger Park's since first coming across him in action for Dutch club PSV Eindhoven against Arsenal in the Champions League.

Park has given Wenger some uncomfortable moments after scoring in two of his last three games against the Gunners, including a crucial strike in last season's Champions League semi-final second leg at the Emirates Stadium.

Wenger is especially impressed with the 29-year-old's ability to combine endless energy with a priceless knack of scoring important goals.

"He made his name in Eindhoven first in the Champions League and when you play against him he is a very hard working player who sacrifices for the team but as

well has some good skills.

"He has scored some important goals - unfortunately against us! I am convinced by his quality, he has a top-level attitude."

Park isn't the only Korean to catch Wenger's eye. Lee has been a big hit for Bolton despite the club's struggles and new boss Owen Coyle has kept faith with clever midfielder since replacing Gary Megson earlier this year.

As a self-confessed football addict who spends much of his time at home watching matches from around the globe on television, the World Cup offers Wenger a golden opportunity to cast his eye over potential signings and he plans to travel to South Africa for the finals as a television analyst.

"I will look at every single player I can find but I go more because I love football and it is a good opportunity for me to watch the games, the countries I like and the football I like as well, and to see the evolution of the game," Wenger added.

"Before the evolutions of the game were brought from the World Cup, it is not the case any more. I think the innovations come from the clubs now."

Everton to extend Donovan deal



AFP, Liverpool

Everton manager David Moyes said Friday he was hopeful that LA Galaxy would agree to extend Landon Donovan's loan spell beyond the end of this month.

The United States captain has been a hit since his arrival at Goodison Park in January but had been due to return to Los Angeles at the end of March to prepare for the new Major League Soccer season.

"I'm keen to keep Landon and it sounds initially in America that they might say yes," Moyes said. "I think Landon is keen to stay also so it looks as though all parties are keen. But I have not got that confirmed yet, I can't say exactly if that is going to happen. If we can make it happen we will."

Moyes added: "It is very rare you can bring in someone in January on loan who can make a real difference to you but Landon has. He came in when the team was on the up, so that has suited him, but we cannot deny he has done

well.

"Landon had to be thrown straight in so we had to find out very quickly if he could do a job or not.

"But I think his manager at LA Galaxy would say the best World Cup preparation for him would be to start in their team.

"They will be keen to get him back so we will have to be respectful of their wishes. If we can keep him it would be nice but if not I totally understand it."

If there is no deal to extend Donovan's stay, Sunday's clash with struggling Hull will be his last at Goodison Park.

Moyes is hoping the American can be joined in the team by Tim Cahill, who is battling to overcome a calf injury.

"He is getting closer," Moyes said of the Australian. "He has not trained yet but there is a chance he might train tomorrow. If he does that would give him a chance."

Top scorer Louis Saha will miss the match with a hamstring injury and Phil Jagielka is doubtful with a thigh strain.

O'Neill slates Wembley pitch

AFP, London

Aston Villa boss Martin O'Neill added his voice on Friday to the mounting criticism of Wembley's playing surface after Sir Alex Ferguson blamed the pitch for the injury to striker Michael Owen.

O'Neill, whose side were beaten by Ferguson's team in the League Cup final last weekend, said: "It looked like a rock concert had been held on it the night before."

"It is very poor for a national stadium. There is really no excuse for it. The stadium costs 800 million pounds (750 million euros, 1 billion dollars) to sort out and the one thing you'd think they'd get right would be the playing surface.

"I don't know what the reason for it was but, considering it was a showpiece final, it was in very poor condition," O'Neill said.

Manchester United manager Ferguson claimed earlier on Friday that the sticky surface had "something to do" with the hamstring injury that ruled Owen out for the rest of the season.

'Domenech deserved sack'

AFP, Paris

French Sports Minister Rama Yade waded into the row over the fate of national team coach Raymond Domenech on Friday, saying he deserved the boot after Les Bleus' disastrous showing in Euro 2008.

"We should have replaced the coach after the fiasco at Euro 2008 and judged him on those bad results," Yade told a French radio station, two days after France lost 2-0 to Spain in a friendly match.

"It is a shame to see this poor style of play. We've got some great individual players but the manager has been so far unable to shape a team."

France went into Euro 2008 as one of the favourites but suffered the embarrassment of being dumped out in the first round and finished bottom of their group.

Nevertheless, Domenech kept his job and his side scraped through their World Cup qualification campaign after beating Ireland in a playoff 2-1 at the Stade de France in Paris last October.

Wembley pitch to be replaced again

AFP, London

Wembley's much-criticised pitch is to be replaced for the 10th time since the English national stadium re-opened three years ago.

The English Football Association gave the go-ahead to rip up the surface after England's friendly win over Egypt on Wednesday, although they insist the decision was not a result of the heavy criticism.

The FA say Wembley's ground staff did all they could to keep the pitch in good condition ahead of the final and Wednesday's England international despite the torrential rain that lashed down on north London for much of the week.

A Wembley spokesman said: "The ground staff did very well to stage the League Cup despite conditions in the build-up and employed the use of a canopy to shield the pitch from the rain on Saturday night and Sunday before kick-off."

"They worked round the clock and could not have done more. Conditions were better ahead of the England match but the pitch was still not good enough for our liking."

"A decision was made on Wednesday night to replace the pitch and this will take place this weekend ahead of Johnstone's Paint Trophy final on March 28."

"Ultimately, this pitch has not fared well through what has been an extremely harsh winter and it needs to be replaced."

Ramsey vows return

AFP, London



Teenage Arsenal star Aaron Ramsey on Friday vowed to return a better, stronger player after seeing his season ended by a horror tackle which left him with a broken leg.

The Wales midfielder suffered a fractured tibia and fibula in a challenge with Stoke's Ryan Shawcross at the Britannia Stadium last weekend.

"It is very hard to take but I am young and have time on my side," said the 19-year-old.

"I had an operation last weekend and, while it will take time for my leg to heal, I am determined and focused on overcoming this injury and hope to be back fitter and stronger than before."

Ramsey said he remembered clearly the incident which resulted in his leg hanging off at a sickening angle.

"I remember what happened and after the tackle went in I saw that my leg was broken and hanging at an angle," Ramsey said.

"I have seen images of the aftermath of the collision again but I don't want to dwell too

much on the challenge as I can't change what has happened.

"It is difficult for me to take everything in at the moment. I thought I had been progressing well this season, so of course this is a real setback."

The teenager thanked Stoke's Glenn Whelan for his support, but he made no mention of Shawcross.

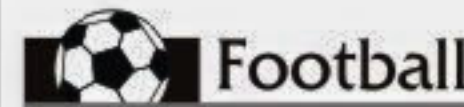
"I have been overwhelmed by the terrific support I have received from so many people, including fans from many different football clubs," said Ramsey.

"In particular, I would like to thank the medical team here at Arsenal for their efforts, as well as the staff at both hospitals."

"Glenn Whelan was especially kind and I really appreciated his immediate assistance on the pitch as well as the medical support from Stoke City. I also want to say thanks to Arsenal for helping my family this week."

"Last but certainly not least, I have been blown away by the fantastic messages of support from the Arsenal fans. I am proud to be an Arsenal player and your support has been incredibly touching."

Fergie blames Rooney



AFP, Manchester

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson has urged Wayne Rooney to curb his enthusiasm after telling the striker he was wrong to play for England against Egypt.

Ferguson was unimpressed his leading scorer played 86 minutes at Wembley on Wednesday just three days after complaining of a sore knee after helping United win the League Cup on the same, heavy pitch.

Rooney, who has scored 23 Premier League goals this season, is now a doubt for Saturday's game at struggling Wolves, where victory will send United two points clear

at the top of the table.

Ferguson made it clear he did not blame England coach Fabio Capello for playing Rooney in the pre-World Cup warm-up game in midweek.

Instead, the long-serving Scot has directed his frustration towards Rooney for putting his knee at risk as United's season reaches crunch time.

As well as the Premier League title, Ferguson's team is chasing Champions League glory and entertain AC Milan at Old Trafford next Wednesday boasting a 3-2 lead from the first leg of the last 16 tie.

"I don't blame Fabio at all. I was disappointed more in Wayne, I can't believe it," said Ferguson, who has lost Michael Owen to a hamstring injury for the rest of the season.

"He told us on Sunday he

was feeling his knee. Then all of a sudden people put an arm around his shoulder with England and he wants to play."

"I don't think he should have played. His own enthusiasm has caused it. He can't say no, that's his problem."

"Of course he should have signalled to the bench he wanted to come off."

Ferguson believes Rooney's "restless energy" and enthusiasm to play in every game will start to diminish as he gets older.

"It's hard to quell players with that kind of enthusiasm because it's a restless energy," added Ferguson.

"His problem is he can't sit down, he can't sit still. He's always on the move, even in hotels. I watch him and he's moving from one table to another."

"When we're away in Europe he's walking about. He's always on the go all the time. He's got that restless energy that you don't want to take away from him."

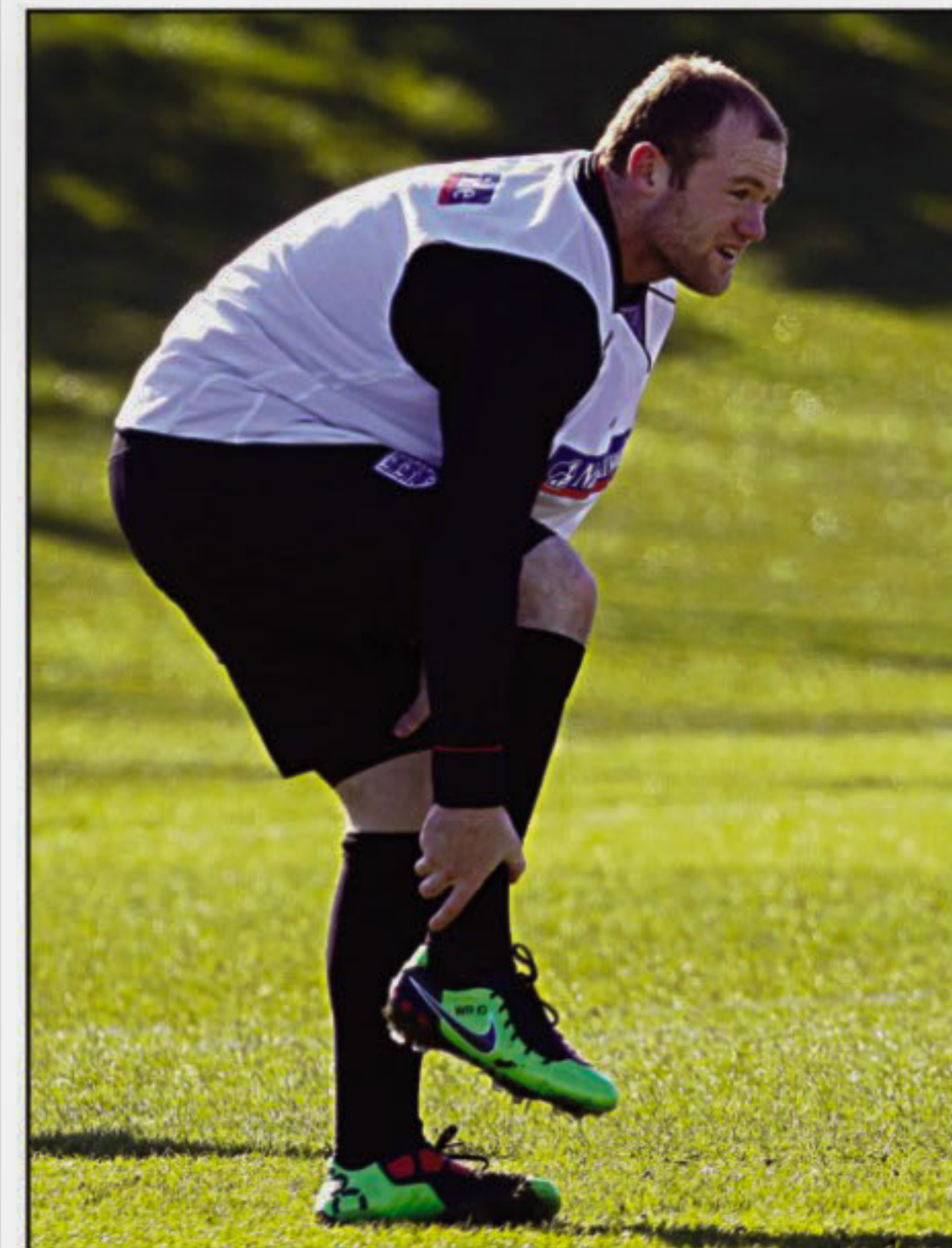
"But age does some good things to you. Eventually you say to yourself 'I can't be bothered running about all the time' and you have to take a rest sometime."

Meanwhile, Michael Owen has promised United fans he will be back for the start of next season after suffering a serious hamstring injury.

Owen will undergo an operation on Monday to repair the damage that has cut-short his first season at Old Trafford since joining on a free transfer from Newcastle last July.

"Unfortunately, the specialist says I will miss the end of the season," said Owen, who scored in the 2-1 League Cup final win over Aston Villa before limping off injured.

"I have loved every minute of my first campaign with United and have already enjoyed some memorable moments. I am determined to come back at the start of next season in peak condition."



WAYNE ROONEY