



Fergie offered Keane iconic shirt

AFP, London

Former Manchester United captain Roy Keane claims he was offered the club's iconic No7 shirt by then manager Alex Ferguson so as to prevent David Beckham getting it.

Keane, who left United in acrimonious circumstances in 2005 after year's of dedicated and inspirational service, reveals the incident in his updated autobiography The Second Half, which is published on Thursday, but which embarrassingly has mistakenly already gone on sale in a supermarket in Manchester.

Maverick French star Eric Cantona had left the club in 1997 and Ferguson according to Keane was determined England captain Beckham would not get to don the No7 shirt.

"At United, '7' was the iconic number," Keane wrote.

"When Eric Cantona left there was debate about who was going to be the next captain. I was quite relaxed about it. But there was his number, too - '7'.

"Bryan Robson had had it before Cantona and, of course, it went back to Georgie Best.

"The manager pulled me into his office and said that he wanted me to wear the '7'.

"I said, 'No, I'm not bothered.' And he said, 'I know Becks will f**** want it and I don't want him to have it'."

However, Keane did not give in and Beckham -- with whom Ferguson enjoyed a stormy relationship -- went on to lay his hands on the shirt.

Brazil set friendlies date

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Five-time world champions Brazil have scheduled friendly matches against Turkey and Austria in November, the Brazilian Football Federation (CBF) confirmed on Tuesday.

The team, who crashed out of the World Cup they hosted last July in the semi-finals against eventual champions Germany, take on Turkey on November 12 before playing Austria six days later in Vienna.



Germany midfielder Toni Kroos takes a shot during a training session in Frankfurt yesterday. Germany take on Poland in a Euro 2016 qualifier on Saturday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Europe gets into full swing

REUTERS, Berne



Europe is preparing for UEFA's first full-blown "week of football" as the marathon Euro 2016 qualifying competition gets into full swing - although it promises to be a distinctly underwhelming experience.

UEFA has heralded the new setup as "great news for football fans" but there is risk that the six solid days of international football could end up making it like background music in a shopping centre, always being played somewhere but with nobody really paying much attention.

Albania, who kicked off with a 1-0 win in Portugal, will try to pull off two more surprises when they host Denmark and visit Serbia.

Portugal themselves will start life under new coach Fernando Santos, although he will not be on the touchline for Tuesday's visit to Denmark as he starts an eight-game ban.

Santos, who led Greece to the round-of-16 at the World Cup, has replaced Paulo Bento, who left by mutual consent following the Albania debacle.

World champions Germany visit neighbours Poland on Saturday in arguably the top clash of the six days, while neighbours Romania and Hungary, who met in the World Cup qualifiers, do battle again in Bucharest

on the same day.

Apart from that, there is precious little to get excited about in the 52 games which feature the usual mismatches, such as England-San Marino on Thursday, Belgium-Andorra on Friday, Luxembourg-Spain on Sunday and Malta-Italy on Monday. Only one match, Bosnia-Belgium on Monday, features two teams who were both at the World Cup in Brazil.

International matches have traditionally been concentrated into one or two days per month, creating a certain sense of occasion and anticipation, although that has gradually diminished over the years due to the sheer quantity of games played.

For the Euro 2016 qualifiers, however, UEFA had decided to spread the games evenly over six nights between Thursday and Tuesday. There was a small taste of what was to come in September when there were three days of action, but this will be the first full week.

UEFA has arranged it so that

FIXTURES

(all kick-offs 1845 GMT):

Thursday

Belarus v Ukraine, Macedonia v Luxembourg, Slovakia v Spain, England v San Marino, Lithuania v Estonia, Slovenia v Switzerland, Liechtenstein v Montenegro,

matches in Groups C, E and G are played on Thursday and Sunday, matches in Groups A, B and H on Friday and Monday and Groups D, F and I on Saturday and Tuesday.

The excitement has been further diminished because the top two in each of the nine groups, plus the best third-placed team, qualify directly for Euro 2016 and the other eight third-placed sides go into a playoff round, which may provide the only real excitement of the competition.

Of the top teams, defending champions Spain have a moderately tricky trip to Slovakia on Thursday in Group C, then visit Luxembourg 72 hours later.

Italy, who have made a promising start under new coach Antonio Conte - and with playmaker Andrea Pirlo returning from his short-lived international retirement - are at home to Azerbaijan on Friday and then travel to Malta on Monday.

Germany follow Saturday's trip to Poland with a straightforward-looking home game against Ireland on Tuesday.

Guus Hiddink, who began his second stint in charge of World Cup semi-finalists the Netherlands with a friendly defeat to Italy and qualifying loss to the Czech Republic, should get his first win at home to Kazakhstan on Friday in Group A before heading to Iceland on Monday.

Australia amble

AFP, Dubai



Steven Smith scored a maiden one-day hundred while paceman Mitchell Johnson took three wickets to help Australia beat Pakistan by 93 runs in the first day-night international on Tuesday.

Smith, who had never scored a half-century in one-day games before, managed a sedate 118-ball 101 to guide Australia to a challenging 255-8 before bowlers exposed Pakistan's fragile batting to bowl them out for 162 in 36.3 overs at Sharjah Stadium.

Johnson (3-24) combined with off-spinners Glenn Maxwell (2-29) and Nathan Lyon (2-33) bowled with venom and guile to derail Pakistan's chase for Australia's 1-0 lead in the three-match series.

Only Umar Akmal 46 and Sarfraz Ahmed (34) offered some resistance in a poor batting display.

Pakistan lost opener Ahmed Shahzad early for four but make-shift opener Ahmed and Asad Shafiq (13) put on 50 for the second wicket before Pakistan lost three wickets for just four runs.

Lyon had Sarfraz caught behind off a miscued sweep and the next ball had Pakistan skipper Misbahul Haq, playing in his 150th one day international, caught at leg-slip by a diving David Warner.

Johnson, who had recovered fully from a rib injury, then had Shafiq off a rising delivery to leave Pakistan reeling at 63-4.

Akmal and Fawad Alam (seven) were all at sea against some vicious spin from Lyon as runs were hard to come by.

As the pressure built up Alam fell to Glenn Maxwell while Shahid Afridi made just five before holing out off Sean Abbott.

SCORES IN BRIEF

AUSTRALIA: 255 for 8 in 50 overs (Warner 43, Smith 101, Bailey 18, Maxwell 21, Haddin 23 not out, Johnson 21; Riaz 2-61, Afridi 3-46)

PAKISTAN: 162 all out in 36.3 overs (Sarfraz 34, Akmal 46; Johnson 3-24, Lyon 2-33, Maxwell 2-29)
Result: Australia won by 93 runs.

Ozil out for 3 months

REUTERS, Frankfurt

Germany midfielder Mesut Ozil has been ruled out for up to three months after he was diagnosed with a partial tear of a knee ligament, the German football association said on Wednesday.

Ozil will miss the World Cup winners' upcoming Euro 2016 qualifiers against Poland and Ireland as well as matches against Gibraltar and Spain later this year.

"The 25-year-old complained about pain in his left knee when he arrived in Frankfurt (to join the Germany team) on Tuesday," the DFB said in a statement.

"The scan today revealed a partial tear of his exterior ligament in his left knee. He will be out an expected 10-12 weeks."

Ozil, who played the full 90 minutes in Arsenal's 2-0 Premier League defeat to Chelsea on Sunday, is the latest big name absence from coach Joachim Loew's squad.

Chelsea's Andre Schuerrle also missed team training for the second day in a row, undergoing an individual session, but officials were hopeful he could be fit in time for Saturday.

Di Matteo out to steady Schalke

AFP, Berlin



Schalke's new coach Roberto Di Matteo said Wednesday his priority is to improve the Royal Blues' defence as he sets his sights on a Champions League showdown with his ex-club Chelsea.

The 44-year-old was officially unveiled in Gelsenkirchen as Schalke's coach with his new team 11th in the Bundesliga and low on confidence after just two wins in 10 games this season.

The Swiss-born Italian will take charge of his first training session on Thursday and his first match as coach is at home to Hertha Berlin on October 18.

Di Matteo says his goals are to qualify for the Champions League knock-out phase and to secure their place in next season's competition by finishing in the top three in the Bundesliga.

"It's a good team, which has a lot of potential going forward, but it has some problems in defence," said Di Matteo, who has replaced fired predecessor Jens Keller.

"We have to work on our defensive organisation and I have a lot of work ahead of me."

Di Matteo is Schalke's eighth coach in six years and he knows the importance of stamping his authority on the team.

"There is only one boss in the dressing room," he told reporters.

"We have to work on getting more organised and work on the players' confidence. There is no miracle cure, we need patience and time."

Schalke sit second to Chelsea in Group G after drawing their first two Champions League games, including a 1-1 stalemate at Stamford Bridge.

Di Matteo even took some tips from Germany coach Joachim Loew before taking the Schalke job, his first coaching appointment since being sacked by Chelsea in November 2012.

