

PREMIERSHIP NEWS, GOSSIP & RUMOURS

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Liverpool, returning to the European Cup for the first time in 16 years, produced a blend of patience and pace to overcome Finland's FC Haka 5-0 last Wednesday in the Champions League 3rd qualifying round first leg in Helsinki. Three goals from Michael Owen and one each from Emile Heskey and Sami Hyypia mean the second leg at Anfield on 21st August should be a formality before Liverpool join Europe's cream in the Champions League group-stage draw two days later.

The Reds' confidence about prospects for the coming season received a further boost when Steven Gerrard, Dietmar Hamann and Jamie Carragher all agreed to commit themselves to the Anfield club until 2005.

In the finals of the InterToto Cup – passport into the UEFA Cup Newcastle United and Aston Villa both drew their first leg matches. Newcastle secured a goalless draw against Troyes in France, thanks to some inspired goalkeeping by Shay Given, and will fancy their chances of progressing. Villa were held 1-1 against FC Basle in Switzerland but Paul Merson's precious away goal gives them a platform to build on in the return leg.

Villa manager John Gregory is close to signing Dinamo Zagreb's Croatian international striker Bosko Balaban for £6 million. Balaban was withdrawn from Dinamo's UEFA Cup tie on Thursday as negotiations continued, and so avoided being ineligible for Villa in that competition if he joins them.

Chelsea have completed the signing of Dutch international winger Boudewijn Zenden from Barcelona for £7.5 million, but have sold promising young full-back Jon Harley to West London neighbours Fulham for £3.5 million. Premiership new boys Fulham have also signed Moroccan defender Abdeslan Quaddou for £2 million, Belgian midfielder Steed Malbranque from Lyon for £4.5 million, and Dutch international goalkeeper Edwin Van der Sar from Juventus for £7 million.

Everton's proposed sale of defender Michael Ball to Rangers for £6.5 million has hit a snag and may not proceed unless the player can prove his fitness within the next ten days following a knee injury. Renewed doubts have been expressed about the future of Everton's ex-England midfield star

Paul Gascoigne. The player spent a month in the United States this summer at a special clinic that treats addictions, but his pre-season training has been disrupted by yet another injury.

One of Gascoigne's previous clubs, Middlesbrough, have finally completed the signings of Manchester United pair Jonathan Greening and Mark Wilson. The two youngsters, who have cost Boro a combined fee of £3.5 million, are well-known to new manager Steve McClaren from his time at Old Trafford.

Derby County's Italian midfielder Stefano Eranio, who left the club at the end of last season and was influential in the recent transfer of Fabrizio Ravanelli to Pride Park, has decided to return to Derby for one more season. Manager Jim Smith was delighted to welcome back a player who is extremely popular with the Derby fans.

Leicester City's winger Steve Guppy and Coventry City striker John Hartson have both left English football to join Celtic's bid to retain the Scottish domestic treble they won last season and progress in the Champions League. In 2000 Hartson had been set to join Celtic's Glasgow rivals Rangers, but the deal collapsed when he failed a medical. His knee remains suspect, but Celtic were prepared to take a gamble on a player who consistently scores goals.

Manchester United have revealed that their players will receive a bonus of around £400,000 (4.8 million yuan) each if they complete a European Cup and domestic treble again in Sir Alex Ferguson's final season as manager. When United won the European Cup, Premier League championship and FA Cup in 1999, each player was played an extra £160,000 (1.92 million yuan), but wages at Old Trafford have more than doubled since then and the incentive payments have correspondingly increased.

United were due to take on Liverpool yesterday in the FA Charity Shield the traditional curtain-raiser to the English season, played between the Premiership champions and the FA Cup holders. Liverpool were the only team to beat United both home and away in the Premiership last season, but David Beckham has revealed that United's players have set themselves a target of not losing a single game next season as a fitting send-off to manager Ferguson.

Ferguson himself has identified Chelsea as the biggest threat to United's Premiership crown in the coming season, following their summer purchases, but also rates the chances of Arsenal, Liverpool and Leeds United.

The Leeds centre-back Rio Ferdinand is now doubtful for the start of the season after picking up a hamstring injury. Ferdinand will almost certainly miss England's friendly international against Holland on Wednesday at White Hart Lane. That match could see Sol Campbell make an early return to his old ground, where he is likely to receive a hostile reception. Police are currently investigating death threats made by disgruntled Spurs supporters against Campbell following his transfer to Arsenal.

Campbell impressed for the Gunners in last week's friendly against Norwich City. Arsenal won 4-2 with two goals from Sylvain Wiltord, one from new boy Francis Jeffers and one from Patrick Vieira, who has been appointed vice-captain and has apparently resolved any differences he may have had with the club.

In other friendly matches, Leeds maintained an unbeaten pre-season schedule with a 5-0 victory at Preston North End (Harry Kewell, Lee Bowyer, Ian Harte, Mark Viduka and Olivier Dacourt getting the goals) and a 4-0 defeat of York City (Alan Maybury, Jacob Burns and Robbie Keane 2). Everton beat Wigan 6-1 (Kevin Campbell 3, Alan Stubbs, Duncan Ferguson and Niclas Alexandersson), and Spurs beat Fiorentina (who have signed Arsenal goalkeeper Alex Manninger on loan for a year) 3-0 with goals from Les Ferdinand, Gus Poyet and Steffen Iversen.

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