

HAMMERS AT THE CROSSROADS

**By Graham Lister, Chief Football Correspondent,
China Monitor (UK) Sports Division**

Shock-waves reverberated through the Premiership this week when one of its longest-serving managers parted company with his employers just one match before the end of the season. Harry Redknapp, who left West Ham United on Wednesday, was inextricably linked with the Hammers. A player with the East London club between 196 and 197, he returned to Upton Park in 1992 as coach, then replaced Billy Bonds as manager in August 1994.

Having helped Bonds steer West Ham into the Premiership in 1993, Redknapp turned them into a top ten club, guiding them to 8th, 5th and 9th in the last three seasons while maintaining the Hammers proud tradition of playing cultured, entertaining football.

This season, however, was a disappointment. The club started poorly and were bottom of the League in September. During that period Redknapp kept faith with his players and insisted they were in a false position. Results then improved and the team began to prove him right as they climbed steadily up the table. Memorable FA Cup wins away to Manchester United and Sunderland lifted the fans and convinced many – including Redknapp himself – that this would be West Ham's year in the Cup.

A sixth round home defeat by Tottenham Hotspur (ironically in George Graham's last game in charge of Spurs) therefore came as a bitter disappointment. The team never did themselves justice on the day, and the suspicion among some of their fans was that the players were ill-prepared for the tie and less hungry to win it than their opponents. That in turn was attributed to complacency, to the team starting to believe that it was destined to win the Cup irrespective of performances.

The depression that settled on the club after that Cup exit saw them slip steadily down the League with a run of poor results. The threat of relegation was only banished last week-end. In a brief statement posted on the club's website immediately following his departure, Redknapp said that the last eight weeks had not been very enjoyable, and that after talking with the Chairman he had decided that perhaps it was time for a change. The club itself added very little, leaving the football world to speculate on the real reasons for Harry's sudden decision.

A host of ex-West Ham players and commentators expressed their stunned disbelief that he'd gone, and all seemed concerned for the future of the club. Most argued that Redknapp's departure was probably to do with money, or the lack of it. The popular explanation was that the board must have refused to give Redknapp the transfer cash he thought he needed to strengthen the squad. In particular, it was said that the board had made less than half the record £18 million fee received from Leeds United for Rio Ferdinand available for team-building, diverting the rest into the funding of West Ham's stadium redevelopment.

Intriguingly, however, a substantial number of West Ham fans appear to rather be relieved that Redknapp has gone. They had grown increasingly frustrated with his reign, and irritated by some of his team selections and transfer market activities. There was consternation about the sheer volume of player turnover at Upton Park, with players moving in and out of the club permanently or on loan at a bewildering rate.

Undoubtedly a major source of grievance among Hammers' fans was the treatment of Joe Cole, regarded by many of them as the brightest prospect in English football, and by some as nothing less than a young footballing God.

Redknapp had used Cole too sparingly, or played him out of position, or generally cramped his style, in the opinion of these fans. And he had compounded this 'crime' by publicly criticising Cole's contribution and dropping him after the Cup defeat by Spurs.

In contrast, Frank Lampard junior – Redknapp's nephew and the son of assistant manager Frank senior – seemed insulated from criticism and apparently picked himself in midfield. To some, this smacked of nepotism and created a little resentment towards the player. The departure of his father and uncle means Frank junior may quickly follow them out of Upton Park. He has already hinted that his position at the club is now untenable. There would be no shortage of bidders for the talented England international, but probably no great mourning of his departure by the West Ham faithful, either.

One theory gaining currency is that it was the board's desire to cash-in on Frank junior's transfer market value that forced Redknapp to quit in protest. The manager was understood to have been against the sale of Ferdinand earlier in the season. With other assets such as Cole, Michael Carrick and Trevor Sinclair also attracting covetous glances from rival English and foreign clubs, Redknapp may have felt that the board's economic imperatives would steadily undermine his team-building initiatives.

Whatever the real reason for Harry's shock decision – and we will probably never know what this was – the game moves on, as ever. Speculation is now rife as to who will become the next West Ham manager, and what will Redknapp do next?

Regarding the Upton Park hot-seat, the early favourite is Alan Curbishley, a local lad who began his playing career with the Hammers and has won many admirers for his record as manager of Charlton Athletic over the last six years.

Others in the frame include George Graham (an unlikely choice given West Ham's academy tradition, Graham's dour reputation and his largely disappointing time at Spurs). Stuart Pearce, the current captain, is another possible contender; he wants a career in management when he hangs up his boots, but may be considered to be inexperienced for the West Ham job at the moment. Then there are Terry Venables, Glenn Roeder (caretaker for the final match against Middlesbrough), or a talented foreign coach with a proven track record. Whoever is appointed, he will have the task of consolidating the club's Premiership status and then taking them on to the next stage – regular qualification for Europe – without abandoning the traditional Hammers' style.

As for Redknapp, who recently said he could never manage any other club than West Ham, there is a possibility he may become the next Southampton boss. Following the loss of Glenn Hoddle to Spurs, the Saints are anxious to recruit a high profile manager, particularly as the club moves into its new stadium this Summer. Redknapp's £2 million home is just a few miles along the south-coast from Southampton, and he has already indicated that the opportunity to manage Saints would appeal to him.

www.chinamonitor.com