

## THE WEEK'S NEWS & GOSSIP FROM THE PREMIERSHIP

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George Graham – unceremoniously sacked as Tottenham's manager by the club's new executive vice-chairman, David Buchler.

On Sunday he steered **Tottenham Hotspur** into the FA Cup semi-finals; by Friday he'd been sacked for not being a team player. So ended **George Graham's** two-and-a-half-year reign as manager at White Hart Lane. The timing of Graham's dismissal stunned British football, coming just three weeks before Spurs face arch-enemies **Arsenal** at Old Trafford in the biggest game of their season so far; but the fact of his departure from the club was less surprising.

The Scot who will forever be associated with Arsenal had been under pressure from many Spurs supporters for most of the season – partly because they never forgave him his Highbury background, but increasingly

because they disliked the team's style of play under Graham. Although the club has won the League Championship only twice, most recently 40 years ago in 1961, Spurs were traditionally among English football's glamorous big five, with a reputation for playing bold attacking football with high profile stars.

That aura has disappeared in recent years, while neighbours Arsenal have overtaken them in terms of both success and star quality. Spurs fans are tired of living in the past, and ex-Gunner Graham's principles of a sound defence and a strong team ethic rather than talented individualists made him a convenient scapegoat for their dissatisfaction. They were incensed when he sold their hero **David Ginola** to **Aston Villa**.

The advent of a new era at Tottenham under **ENIC**, who recently bought previous chairman **Alan Sugar's** controlling interest in the club, was therefore widely thought to herald a vulnerable time for Graham. Yet Spurs' new executive vice-chairman, **David Buchler**, insists that the removal of the manager was not pre-planned. According to Buchler, the decision was the result of Graham giving an interview to the media in which he disclosed what were supposed to have been private discussions about players' contract negotiations and transfer policy.

This apparently outraged Buchler, who demanded an explanation from Graham but found the manager in defiant mood. Buchler quickly decided they couldn't work together and ended the relationship. He subsequently told the media that he was attempting to build a cohesive team at White Hart Lane from the boardroom downwards, but that Graham had his own agenda.

While his dismissal seems an odd reward for winning the League Cup for Spurs in his first season and taking them to two FA Cup semi-finals, the intriguing questions now concern who will replace him at White Hart Lane and what Graham will do next.

Speculation has been rife for months that ex-England boss **Glenn Hoddle** – a Tottenham idol during his playing days – will be the next Spurs manager, although he recently signed a new contract with his present club **Southampton**. Others in the frame are thought to include **Gianluca Vialli**, **Joe Kinnear**, **Jurgen Klinsmann** and **Steve Perryman**. Meanwhile, director of football **David Pleat** is taking temporary charge of the team, and may still be filling that role for the semi-final.

As for George Graham, his lawyers have indicated that his next step will probably be to sue Tottenham for unfair dismissal. His managerial track

record – two League Championships, two League Cups, an FA Cup and a European Cup Winners Cup, all won with Arsenal – suggest that he will not be out of work for long. But he has endured a dramatic fall from grace since May 1994, when he led the Gunners to European glory against **Parma**.

Within nine months he had been sacked by Arsenal for financial irregularities which prompted the **FA** to ban him from football for a year. He began his rehabilitation with **Leeds United**, but was lured back to London, and the Tottenham job, in October 1999. Now that has ended controversially too.

Another surprise during the week was the omission of **David Beckham** from **Manchester United**'s starting line-up for the Champions League game against **Sturm Graz**. **Sir Alex Ferguson** had publicly rebuked his team for their unconvincing performance against **Panathinaikos** in their previous game, and made it clear that changes would be made. The dropping of Beckham, who had been well below his best in recent matches, was logical but still unexpected. Ferguson explained that the new England captain needed a rest to get his game back together, while to his credit Beckham himself has played down the incident, saying nobody should read very much into it.

In the transfer market, **Newcastle United**'s French central defender **Alain Goma** has joined First Division **Fulham** in a £4 million deal. He links up with ex-France midfield maestro **Jean Tigana**, now manager at Fulham, who look certain to be playing Premiership football next season. They currently lead the First Division by ?? points. In a parting shot at Newcastle, Goma said the Magpies lacked ambition and forecast that Fulham would finish higher than United in next season's Premiership.

Other transfer activity saw **Dean Windass** complete his £1 million move from **Bradford City** to **Middlesbrough**, whose coach **Terry Venables** has also been linked with a bid for **Lazio**'s ex-Boro striker **Fabrizio Ravanelli**. Venables himself is rumoured to be a target for **Valencia**, whose present coach **Hector Cuper** is moving to Italy at the end of the season. Middlesbrough have dismissed the rumour. Lazio's city rivals **Roma** have expressed a desire to sign Leeds United's Australian striker **Mark Viduka**, but the player, though flattered by the interest from the Serie A leaders, insists he is staying at Elland Road for the time being, believing Leeds are on the verge of achieving big things.

Meanwhile the clear-out at Bradford continues as **Jim Jeffries** prepares for next season in the First Division. Midfielder **David Hopkin** has now left

Valley Parade, rejoining First Division **Crystal Palace** (whom he left for Leeds United in 1997) for £1.5 million.

**Sunderland** s **Niall Quinn** has been ordered by a doctor to rest his injured neck and back for a full month, increasing the urgency with which manager **Peter Reid** is conducting his search for a long-term replacement for the big target man.

Chinese star **Zhang Enhua** continues to make an impact for First Division strugglers **Grimsby Town**. He grabbed a vital last minute equaliser for the Mariners, rescuing a precious point against **Wimbledon** last Tuesday. Crystal Palace, one place above Grimsby in the Division one table, welcomed back Enhua s compatriot, defender **Fan Zhiyi**, at the week-end after his recovery from a hamstring injury.

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