

PREMIERSHIP NEWS, GOSSIP & RUMOURS

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The first week of the new Premiership season has produced a number of lively talking points, both on the pitch and off it – but one of the surprises so far has been the way the Premiership newcomers have performed.

Bolton Wanderers were almost everybody's sure bet for relegation, having lasted just one season at the top level on both previous occasions they were promoted, and having come up in May only via the play-offs. Yet Bolton stunned the Premiership with a breathtaking 5-0 victory away to Leicester City on the first day of the season. And as if to emphasise that it was no fluke, they beat Middlesbrough 1-0 at home to occupy top spot in the League with a 100 per cent record after two matches.

Wanderers have received a further boost with the news that veteran Icelandic defender Gudni Bergsson intends to stay with the club for the whole of this season. Bergsson had been considering leaving English football to pursue a career in law back home in Iceland.

In what was a real baptism of fire, Fulham produced an assured opening-day display against Manchester United at Old Trafford. With two high-class goals from top marksman Louis Saha, Fulham were unfortunate to finish up 3-2 losers. They led the Champions twice and exposed frailties at the heart of United's defence. The West London side – owned by super-rich Mohamed El Fayed, who also owns Harrods, the UK's most prestigious department store – followed up their Manchester debut by beating Sunderland 2-0 at Craven Cottage. Saha was on target again.

Manager Jean Tigana then moved to strengthen his squad further by returning to his native France to sign right-sided midfielder Sylvain Legwinski from Bordeaux for £3.5 million. Legwinski's arrival takes Tigana's spending on new players to more than £20 million this summer.

Meanwhile Blackburn Rovers overcame a disappointing opening day 2-1 defeat at Derby to hold Manchester United to a 2-2 draw at Ewood Park. United were again somewhat fortunate to escape with a point, having trailed 2-1 despite opening the scoring. England captain David Beckham rescued them with a superbly struck, opportunistic free kick – after gifting Rovers their first with a deflected own goal.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson controversially dropped centre-backs Gary Neville and Jaap Stam for the Blackburn game. The pair had been blamed for defensive errors three days earlier against Fulham, and were replaced by Wes Brown and Ronny Johnsen. There was speculation (dismissed by Ferguson) that Stam's omission was partly in punishment for embarrassing revelations he made in his autobiography, which is being serialised in a British newspaper.

The book was written without United's knowledge and in it Stam claims, among other things, that Ferguson illegally approached him before PSV Eindhoven had granted United permission to speak to the player. He also claims that Ferguson instructed his players to 'take a dive' in Champions League matches if challenged in the opposition's penalty area.

Meanwhile, both Manchester United and Newcastle United have denied rumours that the Magpies are preparing to offer £10 million to bring striker Andy Cole back to Tyneside. Cole became a hero at Newcastle with 55 goals in 70 League appearances between March 1993 and January 1995 when he was sensationally sold by then manager Kevin Keegan to Manchester United for a British record fee at the time of £7 million (£6 million plus Keith Gillespie).

Cole's first-team opportunities at Old Trafford appear limited with the arrival of Ruud van Nistelrooy and the return to form and favour of Dwight Yorke. Despite having recently signed a new long-term contract, Cole has said he does not want to waste his time sitting on the substitutes' bench, particularly with England's possible qualification for the World Cup looming. A return to Tyneside, where he is still idolised for his earlier feats, could therefore make sense all round.

United have been drawn in Group G of the first group phase of UEFA's Champions League, along with Lille (France), Olympiakos (Greece) and Deportivo La Coruna (Spain). Arsenal (Group C) line up against Real Mallorca (Spain), Panathinaikos (Greece) and Schalke 04 (Germany). Liverpool, who qualified for the group stage by thrashing FC Haka (Finland) 9-1 won on aggregate, have been drawn with Dynamo Kiev (Ukraine), Boavista (Portugal) and Borussia Dortmund (Germany) in Group B.

Aston Villa qualified for the UEFA Cup by winning one of the InterToto Cup finals. Villa beat Basle (Switzerland) 4-1 for a 5-2 aggregate victory thanks to a virtuoso performance by David Ginola and two goals by Juan Pablo Angel. While Ginola—who has initiated legal action against Villa because of comments about his physique by manager John Gregory

orchestrated the victory, Angel took as leading role. The Colombian had previously managed just one goal since his club record £9.5 million transfer from River Plate last season. But given excellent service by Ginola he at last showed exciting glimpses of his potential.

Newcastle United had fewer reasons for optimism following their InterToto Cup final second-leg at home to French side Troyes. With the scores level at 0-0 from the first-leg, Newcastle took a third-minute lead through Nolberto Solano but were then thoroughly outplayed and fell 1-4 behind. Although they recovered to 4-4 when Troyes relaxed (with goals from Shola Ameobi, a Gary Speed penalty and Aaron Hughes), Newcastle lost on the away goals rule and so denied themselves an eagerly anticipated run in the UEFA Cup.

Southampton's manager Stuart Gray has reiterated that centre-back Dean Richards will not be leaving the club. Tottenham Hotspur's manager Glenn Hoddle – who managed Richards during his spell in charge at Southampton – has again raised his offer for the player. But Gray insists that Richards, who is under a recently signed four-year contract, wants to stay and that the club want to keep him.

Ipswich Town have signed Argentinian Under-21 international midfielder Sixto Peralta from Italian giants Internazionale of Milan, following the capture of goalkeeper Matteo Sereni from Sampdoria. Manager George Burley will be hoping Peralta can make the same instant impact as Nigerian striker Finidi George. George scored twice for Ipswich in their 3-1 home win over Derby County, and Burley described his performance as – one of the best I've seen since I started watching football. I said when I bought him that he was world class and that was a world-class performance.

Chelsea's manager Claudio Ranieri intends to keep faith with Dutch goalkeeper Ed De Goey, whose blunder gifted Newcastle an equaliser in Chelsea's opening match, which ended 1-1. De Goey's place is under pressure from Mark Bosnich, the Australian international and ex-Manchester United and Aston Villa goalkeeper; and also from Italian Carlo Cudicini, who has recovered well from a knee injury.

Chelsea's Dutch international defender Winston Bogarde, meanwhile, says he is desperate to leave Stamford Bridge in order to return to Ajax. Bogarde joined Chelsea from Barcelona last summer but has made only two Premiership starts for the club, plus seven as a substitute.