

## **PREMIERSHIP NEWS, GOSSIP & RUMOURS**

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Both Manchester United and Liverpool, two of England's biggest clubs and among the favourites to influence the outcome of this season's Premiership and Champions League campaigns, underlined their ruthlessness and their ambition last week.

In a move that stunned English football, United boss Sir Alex Ferguson sensationally sold Dutch international centre-back Jaap Stam to Italian giants Lazio for £16.4 million. Ferguson insisted that the decision was based purely on football reasons. He was unhappy with the sloppiness at the heart of his defence – evident in each of United's opening three Premiership games – and had controversially dropped both Stam and Gary Neville after just one match in favour of Ronny Johnsen and Wes Brown.

However, the suspicion remains that Stam was also being punished for revealing embarrassing aspects of the club in a book that was serialised in an English national newspaper. The extracts – which Stam feels the newspaper used out of context, deliberately sensationalising his views to maximise interest – included claims that Ferguson had approached him illegally before his transfer to Old Trafford from PSV Eindhoven. Stam also revealed that Ferguson instructed his players to dive in the opposition's penalty area in Champions League games. And the Dutchman made some uncomplimentary observations about some of his team-mates, including the Neville brothers and Ryan Giggs.

Ferguson was apparently incensed by the comments, and the fact that Stam had not obtained the club's blessing for the book beforehand. He subsequently dismissed the episode as an irrelevant distraction, but it is an odd coincidence that within days Stam had been unceremoniously shunted out of Old Trafford.

When Stam arrived at United in 1998 it was for a then world record fee for a defender of £10 million. During his three years at the club, winning three Premiership titles plus the European and FA Cups, Stam quickly became established as the best centre-back in England. He was clearly unhappy about the speed with which he was transferred to Italy, but accepted that once your club wants to sell you, you have to go.

So how does a club replace the best? Ferguson – who had wanted to sign Sol Campbell before he joined Arsenal in July – had targeted Kevin Hofland, PSV's highly promising young centre-half, as Stam's long-term replacement. However, Hofland decided to stay at Eindhoven for one more year. Ironically, Stam is reported to have persuaded Hofland, his international partner, not to go to United. Italian defender Francesco Coco also admitted rejecting the chance to join United in favour of a £9.7 million move from AC Milan to Barcelona.

Needing to secure a replacement before last Friday's deadline for Champions League eligibility, Ferguson's response was to sign French World Cup winner Laurent Blanc from Inter Milan on a one-year contract. Blanc, 35, is a close friend of United goalkeeper Fabien Barthez, and Ferguson admitted he had previously tried to sign the Frenchman on three or four occasions. It will be interesting to see how quickly the classy veteran fits into the United back-four and adjusts to the pace and style of the Premiership.

Meanwhile United's rivals Liverpool signed not one but two goalkeepers in response to a mistake by Sander Westerveld that gifted Bolton Wanderers a late victory against the Reds last Monday. Westerveld – on duty with the Holland squad preparing for Saturday's World Cup qualifier against Ireland in Dublin – was left pondering his future after Liverpool boss Gerard Houllier wasted no time in strengthening the crucial goalkeeping position.

Houllier spent more than £10 million to bring Chris Kirkland and Jerzy Dudek to Anfield. The highly-rated Kirkland, 20, signed from Coventry City for £5 million, rising to £8 million according to appearances – a British record fee for a goalkeeper. Within hours he had been joined by Polish international Dudek, who left Dutch club Feyenoord for £4.8 million. Like Blanc at United, both are eligible for the Champions League.

In other transfer activity, Sunderland's Scottish international midfielder Don Hutchison got his wish with a move back to West Ham United, for whom he had previously played from 1994 until 1996. Hutchison – whose career has also included spells with Hartlepool United, Liverpool, Sheffield United and Everton – had also been targeted by Rangers, but the Scottish giants were unwilling to match West Ham's offer. However, West Ham's attempt to lure Tomas Repka to Upton Park from Fiorentina has failed.

Middlesbrough have completed the signing of 27 year-old Scottish international winger Allan Johnston, previously with Sunderland, from Rangers. The £600,000 move brings to an end Johnston's disappointing spell in Glasgow.

Coventry City midfielder Lee Carsley looks likely to be reunited with Boro manager Steve McClaren. The two worked together at Derby County before McClaren left to coach Manchester United, and a deal seems imminent. McClaren – who has had an unhappy introduction to club management, his team having lost each of their first three matches – has also taken Markus Schopp, 27, the Austrian player of the year, on trial. As well as recruiting the £500,000-rated Sturm Graz midfielder, McClaren is also negotiating a £2.5 million season-long loan agreement with Spanish club Celta Vigo for South African striker Benni McCarthy.

Meanwhile Celta Vigo have themselves been shopping in England. Arsenal's Brazilian left-back Silvinho, who lost his place at Highbury last season following the emergence of Ashley Cole, has joined Celta for around £5 million after a proposed move back to his former Brazilian club, Corinthians, fell through.

Newly-promoted Fulham took their summer spending on new players to more than £30 million with the signing of French striker Steve Marlet for £11.5 million from Olympique Lyonnaise. Ipswich Town have signed Danish Under-21 defender Thomas Gaardsoe from AaB Aalborg for £1.3 million.

On the disciplinary front, Tottenham's Gary Doherty has had the red card he collected against Everton rescinded after match referee David Elleray admitted he had been harsh to send off the player. The video showed Doherty's tackle on Everton forward Kevin Campbell was a clean one although at the time of the incident Elleray sent Doherty off and awarded Everton a penalty from which they equalised.

Leeds pair Ian Bowyer and Danny Mills – both sent off against Arsenal – will escape with just a one-match ban each. They had been told to expect a heavier punishment after abusing officials as they left the pitch. They will now miss the game against table-topping Bolton Wanderers on September 8<sup>th</sup>.

Bolton – almost everyone's strongest tip for relegation this season – have surprised even themselves with a 100 per cent record of three wins in three games to top the Premiership. Striker Michael Ricketts has scored in every match to underline the reputation he made for himself last season. Ricketts scored 22 goals in all competitions, including 19 in Bolton's promotion campaign, and is fast-emerging as the Premiership's latest scoring star.

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