

RIO FERDINAND: Premiership Player of the Week

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

Another composed and commanding performance against Liverpool at Anfield underlined the growing stature of Leeds United's centre-back Rio Ferdinand.

Ferdinand moved to Elland Road from his beloved West Ham United almost a year ago for £18 million – a British transfer record and, at the time, world record fee for a defender. Yet rather than be burdened by the size of the fee and the weight of expectation on his shoulders, Ferdinand has blossomed.

His all-round game has improved significantly under the guidance of Leeds boss David O'Leary – himself an elegant and much-admired centre-half during 20 years with Arsenal and the Republic of Ireland. But the most striking aspect of Ferdinand's development during the last 12 months has been the maturity he has shown since being handed the captain's armband by O'Leary.

Rio did not look captaincy material at West Ham, but O'Leary clearly recognised leadership potential in his prized acquisition, and Ferdinand has repaid that faith handsomely. He has become a formidable but fluent fixture in a Leeds defence that has conceded just three goals in eight Premiership games so far this season. His partnership with ex-Liverpool star Dominic Matteo has been impressive at the heart of the back-four, with full-backs Danny Mills and Ian Harte giving Leeds enviable strength and consistency at the back.

That defensive solidity has seen Leeds stride to the top of the Premiership while maintaining progress in both the UEFA and League (Worthington) Cups. But the back-four also offer Leeds potent attacking options. Harte, with his guile and shooting accuracy from distance (particularly from free-kicks) is regularly in the shore-sheet; but Ferdinand too relishes the opportunity to bring the ball forward out of defence.

His passing ability and comfort on the ball propelled him into the international arena as the England national team sought to adopt a more versatile, European style. Despite the occasional but increasingly rare lapse

in positional sense, Ferdinand is maturing into an accomplished sweeper-style defender – sure-footed and dependable as a stopper but offering the team a creative outlet when building attacks from the back.

His place in Sven Goran Eriksson's World Cup squad for Korea and Japan is assured, but before then Ferdinand wants to win silverware at club level. He believes it is now time for the Leeds United team to deliver. 'We want to get rid of the potential label and start winning trophies. If we can get one under our belts then the floodgates might open for us,' says the Londoner, who will be 23 next month.

Winning the Premiership and thus securing an automatic return to the Champions League is the top target for all at Leeds, who reached the semi-finals of Europe's top club competition last season and are eager for another crack against the continental elite. But Ferdinand is in no doubt that the Yorkshire club can emulate Liverpool's achievement and lift the UEFA Cup.

'Of course, we would like to be in the Champions League again,' says Ferdinand, 'but there is no better substitute than the UEFA Cup, and we are in it to win it.'

'I said when I came here that I didn't want to be sitting here in three years time waiting for our first trophy. The younger members of the squad want to get started and the older ones want a medal before it is too late. We know it's not going to be easy and we may need to be patient, but from the chairman down to the fans, everybody here wants to see this investment come to fruition with some silverware.'

It was an endorsement of Leeds United's ambition that Ferdinand chose to go to Elland Road last November when clubs with bigger reputations both English and Italian – were ready to match West Ham's £18 million asking price. He obviously saw the potential at the club and believed he could help them consolidate as one of the top four clubs in the country.

Ferdinand believes, however, that they can only claim to have achieved that status when there is a major trophy in the Elland Road boardroom and a medal around his neck.