

Premiership News, Gossip & Rumours **LIVERPOOL FACE TEST OF CHARACTER**

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Liverpool face a stern test of their character in the coming months following the temporary loss of their inspirational leader Gerard Houllier to illness. Manager Houllier was taken ill immediately after delivering his half-time team talk during the Reds 1-1 Premiership draw with Leeds United last week-end.

He was taken to hospital complaining of chest pains and immediately underwent 11 hours of major heart surgery. Although he is making satisfactory progress after the operation, and is out of intensive care, he is expected to be unfit to return to his role at Anfield for at least three months, possibly more.

Assistant manager Phil Thompson – an ex-Liverpool and England centre-half and captain – has taken charge of the team as caretaker manager in Houllier's absence. Thompson's unplanned managerial career got off to an excellent start as Liverpool beat Dynamo Kiev 2-1 in a Champions League clash in the Ukraine. Adhering to Houllier's game-plan, which the Frenchman had previously outlined to Thompson, Liverpool became the first English club to win in Kiev, thanks to goals by Danny Murphy and Steven Gerrard.

During what has been an emotional week on Merseyside, the Liverpool players and coaching staff were determined to achieve a good European result for their stricken manager. Having successfully overcome that first hurdle, however, the challenge now is to maintain their unbeaten Champions League record while hitting a consistent stride in the Premiership. Then Thompson can make good his promise of handing the team back into Houllier's care in a strong position in both competitions.

It will not be an easy task. Despite winning an historic cup trteble last season and following that up with the Charity Shield and European Super Cup in August, Liverpool's results have been less impressive than Houllier would have wanted. Premiership defeats against Bolton Wanderers and Aston Villa, and a surprise giant-killing at the hands of unfashionable First Division Grimsby in the League (Worthington) Cup suggested that Liverpool's notorious inconsistency had not been eliminated. Thompson

will be demanding total focus and commitment from his multi-talented squad to address this problem.

Another manager looking for greater concentration is Sir Alex Ferguson. Few would argue that his Manchester United team are not still the best in Britain, but United have exhibited some alarmingly naïve defending so far this season. The latest examples came in the mid-week Champions League match at home to Spanish League leaders Deportivo La Coruna. In an exciting game of open, attacking football, United gifted their opponents two goals in a 3-2 defeat. Both were the result of unforced errors from top goalkeeper Fabien Barthez – the first caused by a total misunderstanding with young centre-back Wes Brown.

Critics still question the sudden sale of Dutch defender Jaap Stam to Lazio, and the ability of veteran Frenchman Laurent Blanc to adjust to the Premiership pace. Ferguson's problems in this part of the team have increased with the loss of Ronny Johnsen to injury against Deportivo. The Norwegian will be out for several weeks. However, if United's strategy of relying on their midfield and forwards to outscore the opposition continues to deliver, their defensive frailties may be accommodated – at least domestically.

Leeds United, who lead the Premiership by a point from Arsenal and United, also showed uncharacteristic sloppiness in defence to allow the French team Troyes to score twice in their UEFA Cup first leg at Elland Road. Leeds still won 4-2 and should progress, but have made the task unnecessarily harder for themselves. Their main target, however, remains the Premiership title, and manager David O'Leary has improved their chances of maintaining a strong challenge by signing midfielder Seth Johnson from Derby County.

Johnson joins for £7 million, with a further £2 million payable to Derby according to how many appearances the England international makes for Leeds. Derby's new manager Colin Todd admitted the financially troubled club is under pressure from its bank to sell its brightest playing assets.

However, Todd has been given permission to bring in cut-price reinforcements. He has therefore signed Pierre Ducrocq, a midfielder from Paris Saint-Germain, on a one year loan, and recruited Argentine defender Luciano Zavagno from Troyes. Todd has also brought in Italian forward Benito Carbone on a three-month loan from Bradford City to partner compatriot Fabrizio Ravanelli in the Rams' attack. Whether these moves will be sufficient for Derby to avoid relegation remains to be seen.

Because of the tense international situation, Chelsea allowed their players to decide whether they wished to travel to Israel to face Hapoel Tel Aviv in the UEFA Cup. Six internationals declined to make the journey – Graeme Le Saux, Marcel Desailly, Albert Ferrer, William Gallas, Emmanuel Petit and Eidur Gudjohnsen. Chelsea's unfamiliar team were further handicapped when Mario Melchiot was sent off early in the second half, but appeared to have secured a useful away draw until the final minute, when they allowed Hapoel to score twice.

There was no criticism of the absentees, although chairman Ken Bates suggested there would be more to fear from the visit to Leeds at the weekend than from this trip to the Middle East.

Aston Villa's midfielder Lee Hendrie, enjoying his best season at the club he joined as a trainee, has ended speculation about his future by signing a five-year contract that ties him to Villa until 2006.

Sunderland are close to signing Irish international Jason McAteer from Blackburn Rovers for £1 million, and have increased their offer for West Ham United's unsettled midfielder Trevor Sinclair to £7 million.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger is offering long-serving goalkeeper David Seaman a new career as the Gunners' goalkeeping coach when he retires from playing. The England international joined Arsenal in 1990 and has made more than 500 first team appearances – more than any other Arsenal goalkeeper – but is currently injured. His deputy, Richard Wright, a summer signing from Ipswich Town, has kept a clean sheet in both his Premiership games so far and saved a penalty in Tuesday's 2-1 Champions League victory over Panathinaikos. Wenger has also offered to help club captain Tony Adams learn the football manager's trade. Adams is due to give up playing at the end of this season.

Last week's 2-0 victory over Southampton was significant for being the first time since December 1985 that Arsenal have fielded a team that did not include any of their famous six defenders: Seaman, Adams, Lee Dixon, Martin Keown, Steve Bould (now retired) or Nigel Winterburn (now at West Ham).

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