

CLUB VERSUS COUNTRY IN INTERNATIONAL WEEK

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



Steven Gerrard, whose Liverpool career has been hampered by injury, attempts to prove his fitness for England in an Anfield training session ahead of Saturday's World Cup clash with Finland.

With the race for European qualification as well as Premiership, FA Cup and Champions League glory moving towards a climax, international calls on clubs' players might be viewed as an unwanted distraction. Yet at the international level, the contest for World Cup qualification is also underway. The fixture list is now so crowded with significant matches that players and coaches have no option but to try to accommodate the various demands being made on them.

In England, the recent innovation of keeping certain Saturdays during the season clear of Premiership fixtures in order to give international coaches a

week to assemble and train their squads has eased the situation a little, but there is always a potential conflict between club and country.

International football – and the World Cup in particular – has always been seen as the pinnacle of the game; but that may be changing. Players' wages are paid by their clubs, and most clubs feel that players' first loyalty should be towards their employers. However, the influx of overseas players into English football has made the Premiership a very cosmopolitan place, and growth in the number of competitive and friendly internationals on every continent means that clubs are increasingly obliged to release several of their expensively-assembled squads to various national associations.

The problems this poses to clubs are obvious. Firstly, the regular pattern of training and preparation for League and Cup matches is disrupted. Secondly, a club coach may be deprived of a large proportion of his squad ahead of a crucial fixture, with players returning from international duty perhaps on the other side of the world – only hours before a big club match. Thirdly, players may be injured while on international duty and thus be unavailable to their employers for a vital period of the season.

One response to this scenario has often been the announcement by a club manager that one or more of his players has picked up an injury and will be forced to withdraw from the international squad in order to receive treatment. In most cases, the player or players concerned then make a full recovery in time to appear in the club's next fixture.

Such practices have thwarted the team plans of successive England managers and forced them to call up late replacements.

Of course, without club competitions to nurture and develop players, international managers would have no basis for squad selection, and indeed no squad at all. Furthermore, clubs are the heart of the game, providing a weekly spectacle and focus of allegiance to the fans, and a coherent, income-generating framework for professional football.

Some now believe that the commercial factors driving club football forward – most apparent in UEFA's lucrative Champions League – are creating a situation in which club football will supersede international football at the peak of the world game. As global TV and merchandising rights make the big clubs even bigger, they are coming to dominate their domestic leagues. The next step – already evident across Europe – is to start looking abroad for an appropriate level of competition and the associated money-spinning opportunities.

The tensions between club and country are therefore likely to grow rather than diminish.

In a week like this one, Premiership clubs such as Manchester United, Arsenal, Liverpool and Leeds United, whose squads are composed largely of international players, keep their fingers crossed and pray that their stars will return fit, uninjured and not too jaded by their World Cup exertions.

Such clubs and their fans are desperate to see the strongest possible squads doing battle for the top honours as the domestic season reaches a crescendo.

At the same time, most people in football recognise that a successful national team is football's most powerful recruiting sergeant both for talented young players and captivated fans with their growing spending power.

Inevitably, the important factor is compromise. Cynics might say that self-interest will always dictate what happens, but there was evidence of compromise from leading English clubs ahead of the World Cup clash with Finland.

For example, Sir Alex Ferguson rested David Beckham for Manchester United's last two (very important) games. The decision was no doubt motivated by United's best interests, but it helped England by delivering a refreshed captain to Sven Goran Eriksson.

Similarly, Arsene Wenger took no chances with David Seaman's back problem, resting him for Arsenal's 0-0 draw with Aston Villa and so improving the goalkeeper's chances of playing for England. And Eriksson and Liverpool boss Gerard Houllier have co-operated closely on the problem of trying to get Steven Gerrard fully fit to face Finland.

When all the England players return to their clubs towards the end of this week, and prepare to do battle for more precious Premiership points, their employers will be keener than ever to ensure that they are physically and mentally ready for the job in hand.



In training for the game against Finland, England's first choice goalkeeper David Seaman tries to shake off the back injury that kept him out of Arsenal's last game.

www.chinamonitor.com

*** *ALL IMAGES SUPPLIED BY EMPICS* ***