

TRANSFER SPECULATION MAKES FANS UNEASY

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The current Premiership season is not yet over, but already clubs are looking to the transfer market in an attempt to consolidate their latest successes or improve their chances of making a real impact next season. As a result, every day brings fresh rumours and speculation about which players are wanted by whom; about who might be leaving this club or joining that one.

For the fans, this speculation is a double-edged sword. It's exciting to read that your club is being linked with one or more high profile stars. It heightens expectations and adds interest to the summer fantasy about how your club will challenge for the top honours when the new campaign kicks off next August.

Yet at the same time it can be very unsettling to hear that one of your team's greatest assets may be on the verge of leaving the club for newer pastures and greater riches – especially if the player (or manager) concerned is being targeted by one of your rivals.

Consider, for example, how Celtic fans must have felt when they opened the sports pages to read that Manchester United had decided they wanted Martin O'Neill to succeed Sir Alex Ferguson as manager, and would be meeting O'Neill within days to open the negotiations. O'Neill left Leicester City last summer to take up the manager's post at the club he had supported all his life. He has just steered Celtic to the Scottish Premiership title and, having already won the League Cup, is currently preparing his team for the Scottish FA Cup final. If they are successful, O'Neill will have captured an historic treble for Celtic in his first season in Glasgow.

The thought of losing so quickly this managerial wizard, who has finally ended the dominance of bitter rivals Rangers, was almost too much for many Celtic fans to contemplate. Fortunately for them, O'Neill wasted no time in insisting that he had no intention of joining Manchester United (not yet, at least) because he had only just embarked upon a wonderful adventure with Celtic that still offered enormous potential.

Newcastle United fans were similarly anxious, then relieved, to learn that Manchester United were also planning a swoop for their talented young midfielder, Kieron Dyer. Although his season has been disrupted by injury,

Dyer has been a revelation in the black and white stripes of Newcastle, whose fans have taken him to their hearts. Those fans would be devastated to see him leave – especially if it was to strengthen Alex Ferguson's already formidable squad. Again, however, Dyer reassured them that he loves life on Tyneside and wants to stay, despite being flattered by United's interest.

Someone else flattered by another club's attentions is Mark Viduka of Leeds United. The Australian is wanted by Real Madrid, and has said that a move to the best club in the world would be a giant step for his career. Hardly calculated to make Leeds fans comfortable.

At Arsenal, meanwhile, the fans continue to read of Barcelona's determination to lure Arsene Wenger to the Nou Camp as coach. To make matters worse, they are also faced with persistent speculation that various Spanish and Italian clubs (most notably Juventus) are preparing to buy Patrick Vieira. Vieira is regarded as the most valuable player at Highbury, the natural successor to Tony Adams as captain and the midfield maestro who makes the team tick. His loss would do incalculable damage to the club's ambitions.

Wenger has repeatedly stated that he will honour his existing contract at Arsenal – though the club are anxious to persuade him to sign a new one that will keep him at Highbury for much longer. As for Vieira, he hinted that he was considering a move when expressing his disappointment at the Gunners' Champions League exit. But he has since reiterated his commitment to Arsenal, reassuring the fans that he wants to stay – at least until his contract expires in 2004, and adding that he believes success is just around the corner for the club.

Vieira's former team-mate, Emmanuel Petit, has been linked not only with a move back to Arsenal, but also with a transfer to their neighbours and fiercest rivals, Tottenham Hotspur. One scenario has Petit returning to Highbury with Nwankwo Kanu moving to Catalonia. Gunners' fans, who were unhappy to see Petit sold, would love to have him back; but they would also be disappointed if Kanu were to leave. Kanu's outrageous skills and unpredictability have endeared him to all at Highbury, even though his performances this season have fallen short of those established in the previous two.

The prospect of Petit becoming a Spurs player is a nightmare one for Arsenal fans, who know how good he can be. They will hope that the Frenchman remains a Gunner at heart, as emotionally incapable of joining the enemy as they themselves would be.

As Glenn Hoddle seeks to make his own mark on Tottenham, he is also reportedly close to bringing Barcelona's captain Josep Guardiola to White Hart Lane. Although the midfielder is 30, his undoubted class has Spurs fans licking their lips in anticipation.

However, Guardiola's apparent wish to compete again in the Champions League could yet see him move elsewhere and so shatter some Tottenham dreams. Spurs fans are also having to contend with the comments of captain Sol Campbell's agent this week. He said that Campbell, whose Spurs contract expires in the Summer, may leave White Hart Lane but wants to stay in London. That could only mean Arsenal or Chelsea – enough to drive a Tottenham fan to despair.

Back at Old Trafford, the arrival of Ruud Van Nistelrooy has generated much speculation about what will happen to Manchester United's current strike force. The weak link is thought to be Dwight Yorke, who has had a rather disappointing season by his own high standards. The rumour is that Yorke may return to his old club, Aston Villa. That will create mixed emotions at Villa Park.

Yorke was hugely popular there before opting to join United, whom he described at the time as a much bigger club. Such comments, and the mere fact of deserting Villa Park for Old Trafford, instantly transformed Yorke from hero to villain. If he re-joins Villa, he will have to re-confirm his commitment to the fans, who in turn will have to revise their opinion and go back to chanting his name in praise rather than derision.

Ultimately, of course, the fans' feelings (at every club) are intertwined with their perceptions of loyalty. Real fans regard their allegiance as an enduring, lifelong obsession – almost a life sentence. They simply cannot switch their support to another team. Yet the players who represent them do this all the time, usually for money. It's a footballing paradox, but it doesn't stop us idolising the stars – welcoming them adoringly when they sign, and despairing when they depart. Nor does it dampen our endless enthusiasm for the transfer market.

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