

Premiership News, Gossip & Rumours SAINTS MAKE MANAGERIAL CHANGE AS FRANCE & AUSTRALIA ATTACK WENGER

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When Southampton travelled to London to face West Ham United in a battle between two teams already struggling near the bottom of the Premiership, the jobs of both managers concerned were on the line. Following successive away maulings by Everton (5-0) and Blackburn Rovers (7-1), Hammers boss Glenn Roeder was possibly under greater pressure than his Saints counterpart Stuart Gray despite the fact that both men had only been in their respective jobs since the Summer.

In the event, West Ham won 2-0, Roeder's prospects improved and Gray found himself sacked 24 hours later. It was a bitter blow for the likeable Gray just eight games into the season, particularly as it emerged that Southampton chairman Rupert Lowe had made moves to recruit a replacement some five days earlier. Gordon Strachan, himself sacked by Coventry City in the Summer following his failure to save the Sky Blues from relegation to the First Division, was duly installed as the new Saints boss last Monday.

The circumstances of Gray's dismissal and Strachan's appointment are somewhat ironic given that Southampton were highly critical of the way in which Tottenham Hotspur stole Glenn Hoddle from them in March of this year. They eventually received some £900,000 from Spurs in compensation for the loss of Hoddle, but may find that sacking Gray and his assistant, Mick Wadsworth, will cost them a lot more. Both men have rejected the club's first offer of compensation, and if they were to be paid up in full for the remaining period of their contracts the cost could be nearly £2 million.

The 41-year-old Gray's first attempt at management was terminated because Southampton have yet to win a match at their new Friends Provident St Mary's home. The board of directors were seized by panic at the financial implications of possible relegation, and decided to act sooner rather than later in order to give Strachan as much time as possible to turn the team's fortunes around.

Strachan, 45, began his reign as the new Saints boss with a 3-3 draw at home to Ipswich Town. He has promised the fans a more entertaining, attacking

style of play, and when Southampton took a 3-1 lead it looked as though was making a positive start, delivering goals and three points. But inept defending allowed battling Ipswich back into the match, leaving Saints still searching for a first win at their new stadium.

The Gray dismissal (which, ironically, was criticised as unfair by Hoddle) highlights the speed at which the managerial merry-go-round is spinning this season. A total of 19 managers - more than 20 per cent of those who started the season with England's 92 professional league clubs - have already lost their jobs, including three in the Premiership. Patience is now a scarce commodity as directors demand instant success. Winning matches now seems to be the only insurance against the sack.

For Gerard Houllier, of course, the problems are rather different. The Frenchman is making good progress following major heart surgery, but his doctors have warned Houllier and his club, Liverpool, that he will have to cut back on his workload and jet-setting lifestyle when he finally returns to his job at Anfield.

Houllier's players, under the temporary guidance of his assistant Phil Thompson, need just a point to qualify for the second group phase of the UEFA Champions League, following a creditable 1-1 away draw against Boavista in midweek. The Portuguese club has been charged by UEFA following the behaviour of its supporters, who hurled racist abuse at Liverpool's black striker, Emile Heskey, during the game.

Meanwhile, the two other English clubs in the Champions League have already qualified for the second phase. Manchester United booked their place with a 3-0 win at Old Trafford over Olympiakos, while Arsenal secured their progress with a 3-1 home win against Real Mallorca. Ruud van Nistelrooy starred for United with a masterful display that included making one goal and scoring another. Then Thierry Henry produced a similarly influential performance for the Gunners, culminating with the third goal, in stoppage time, that ensured Mallorca could not catch them whatever the outcome of the final first group match against Schalke 04 in Germany.

Van Nistelrooy's performance prompted United manager Sir Alex Ferguson to describe the Dutchman as the best striker in Europe at the moment. The following night Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger responded saying that Henry was better. 'Top, top class' was Wenger's verdict on his French star. Ian Rush, the legendary Liverpool goalscorer, then joined the debate, insisting that his successor at Anfield, Michael Owen, is the best around. All three have impressive credentials so far this season: Owen had scored 12 goals in 12 games before suffering a hamstring strain, while van Nistelrooy has

scored 11 goals in 15 games. Henry has netted 13 in 15, and is currently the leading scorer in this season's Champions League. He has also become Arsenal's all-time top scorer in European competitions.

His manager Wenger, however, has been branded a traitor in France because of his opposition to the Australia v France friendly international scheduled for November. Wenger, together with the managers of 10 other top European clubs (including Manchester United, Leeds United, Bayern Munich, Roma and Parma) feels it is unreasonable to expect leading players from both countries to undertake a 48-hour round-trip for a friendly in the middle of the European clubs' League season.

The clubs pay the players (extremely high) wages and feel they deserve more consideration. The two countries say the match is essential for the World Cup preparations. As holders, France have not been involved in a qualifying tournament so regard friendlies as vital to their build-up. Australia face a crucial play-off to qualify and are keen to test themselves beforehand against top class opposition.

FIFA has proposed a compromise whereby both national federations select only one player from each club for their teams (Arsenal could otherwise have four players involved in the French squad). However, France and Australia have reacted indignantly to this, accusing the clubs – particularly Arsenal – of arrogance, and insisting that they will ignore FIFA's recommendation.

On the transfer front, West Ham have confirmed that they are interested in Milan defender Taribo West, who is keen to return to the Premiership after his loan spell last season with Derby County. Leicester City have accepted a written transfer request from their Turkish international midfielder Muzzy Izzet, who has attracted interest from both Aston Villa and Leeds United. New Leicester manager Dave Bassett will want to use any fee from the sale of Izzet to bring in new players as the Foxes battle to avoid relegation.

Tottenham Hotspur's Ukrainian international striker Sergei Rebrov wants to leave White Hart Lane, according to his agent. Rebrov is reportedly unhappy at not once having made the Spurs starting eleven this season, and is anxious to secure a move to another club – possibly in Italy.

Andy Todd, son of Derby manager Colin, has been put on the transfer list by Charlton Athletic following an incident before the Charlton squad boarded their coach in London to travel to last Wednesday's match against Aston Villa. Todd was allegedly involved in a fight with team-mate Dean Kiely, who kept goal in the match (which Charlton lost 1-0) with a bruised

and swollen face. Todd joined Charlton two years ago from Bolton Wanderers, who sacked him for striking coach Phil Brown during training.

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