

Premiership News, Gossip & Rumours

PREMIERSHIP CLUBS FACE TOUGH TIES IN EUROPE

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FIFA, world football's governing body, has insisted that Australia and France be allowed to name full-strength squads for their friendly international on 11th November, despite last week recommending a compromise whereby each country would select a maximum of one player per club.

The FIFA decision drew criticism from UEFA, their European counterparts, many of whose leading clubs had campaigned against the involvement of some of players on a long-haul round trip at a busy stage of their domestic and European seasons.

Premiership clubs Arsenal, Chelsea and Manchester United are affected by the ruling, and a UEFA statement said they were seriously concerned over the confusion and uncertainty created by the recent actions of FIFA.

The call for just one player per club to be released for what will be France's eighth friendly of the year was orchestrated by Arsenal, who must now release four players to France - Thierry Henry, Robert Pires, Patrick Vieira and Sylvain Wiltord. Manchester United must release Fabien Barthez and Mikael Silvestre, while Chelsea also have two players affected - Marcel Desailly and Emmanuel Petit. Leeds United will be releasing Mark Viduka and Harry Kewell to Australia.

The same four clubs, along with Liverpool and Ipswich Town, experienced mixed fortunes in European competition last week. Manchester United and Arsenal had already qualified for the second group phase of the Champions League, and rested key players for their matches away to Lille and Schalke 04, respectively. United achieved a 1-1 thanks to another goal from Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, while Arsenal maintained their poor away form in the competition, losing 3-1 to the Germans. Sylvain Wiltord scored their consolation goal - the first by an Arsenal player in five Champions League away games.

Liverpool, needing a point to qualify, secured all three with a 2-0 win over Borussia Dortmund at Anfield. The result confirmed Liverpool as group

winner and was another boost for manager Gerard Houllier, whose recovery from open heart surgery is such that on Friday he was able to leave hospital. Assistant manager Phil Thompson, deputising for Houllier in the Frenchman's absence, has led the team to a four-match unbeaten run. His next challenge is one of the Premiership's most eagerly awaited fixtures – a showdown at Anfield against champions and great rivals Manchester United (who are able to call on the services of Juan Sebastian Veron following FIFA's ruling that the Argentine could travel to South America after the Liverpool match for Argentina's World Cup qualifier against Peru).

Liverpool's reward for topping their first group phase in the Champions League was to be drawn in a tough group with Barcelona, Galatasaray and AS Roma for the second phase. If anything, Arsenal's draw is even more daunting. The Gunners must face Juventus, Deportivo La Coruna and Bayer Leverkusen. United's group includes holders Bayern Munich, Nantes and Boavista.

In the UEFA Cup, Chelsea endured the embarrassment of another early knock-out by unfancied opponents. Hapoel Tel Aviv's players and fans were absolutely thrilled to beat the Londoners 3-1 on aggregate, following up their 2-0 victory in Israel with a heroic defensive display at Stamford Bridge.

Another heroic performance in the UEFA Cup was provided by Ipswich Town. Held 0-0 at home by Helsingborg in the first leg, and struggling to find any sort of rhythm in the Premiership this season, Ipswich fell behind to an eighth-minute goal by the Swedes. But their battling spirit was rewarded by three goals in the second-half – one by Hermann Hreidarsson followed by a double from Marcus Stewart – to give the Suffolk side a deserved 3-1 aggregate victory.

Leeds United came close to humiliation in Troyes. Leading the French club 4-2 from the first-leg at Elland Road, Leeds found themselves 3-1 down on the night shortly after half-time. Had the aggregate score of 5-5 stayed the same, Leeds would have lost on the away goals rule. However, Robbie Keane headed home with 14 minutes remaining to add to Mark Viduka's first-half strike. So Leeds eased into the next round 6-5 on aggregate.

While Chelsea contemplate the substantial financial cost of failing to progress beyond Round Two in European competition for the second season in succession, Ipswich can look forward to an attractive Third Round tie against Internazionale of Milan, while Leeds will face Grasshopper of Switzerland.

In the transfer market, the new Southampton manager, Gordon Strachan, has been back to his former club Coventry City to sign Defender Paul Williams, and is also close to signing Coventry's Paul Telfer – both on free transfers. Strachan has also allowed German striker Uwe Rosler to join West Bromwich Albion on loan.

Sunderland, still keen to bring West Ham's unsettled midfielder Trevor Sinclair to the Stadium of Light, are thought to be willing to offer £1 million for Grimsby Town's Welsh international goalkeeper Danny Coyne as cover for Thomas Sorensen.

Leeds midfielder Lee Bowyer has undergone surgery after breaking his nose during last week-end's 1-1 draw with Manchester United. Bowyer, who suffered the injury in an aerial challenge with Nicky Butt, is still involved in a court case that prevents him leaving the country to play in UEFA Cup away legs for Leeds. Central defender Jonathan Woodgate is in the same predicament. Both are pleading not guilty to charges arising from a fight outside a city centre nightclub in January 2000 in which a man was seriously injured.

That Manchester United v Leeds United clash at Old Trafford resulted in match referee Dermot Gallagher being demoted by the Football Association. Gallagher chose merely to caution Robbie Keane of Leeds for shoving his hands into the face of David Beckham after Beckham, who was also yellow-carded, had fouled him. Gallagher's leniency contrasted with the action of Mike Halsey who sent off Middlesbrough's Paul Ince a week earlier in almost identical circumstances. The inconsistency prompted the FA to take swift and decisive action against Gallagher, who will not officiate in Premiership matches until further notice.

Both managers – Sir Alex Ferguson and David O'Leary – agreed that a red card was the only punishment for Keane. Beckham's high tackle on Keane should probably also have warranted a red card.

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