

Premiership News, Gossip & Rumours

RICHARDS MOVES AT LAST

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The long-running and acrimonious Dean Richards transfer was finally resolved on Friday when the Southampton centre-back signed for Tottenham Hotspur for £8.1 million.

Richards had been a target for the North London club almost from the moment Glenn Hoddle left Southampton to become Spurs manager last March. Earlier bids from Tottenham for the player had been resolutely turned down by Saints' chairman Rupert Lowe – not least because his captain had only recently signed an extended contract theoretically binding him to Southampton for the next five years.

But Richards himself made it clear his heart was set on a move to Spurs and a reunion with Hoddle. Tottenham's determination to secure his services was reinforced by injuries to other central defenders. Gary Doherty broke a leg in the recent Worthington Cup tie. Then Summer signing Goran Bunjevcevic sustained a long-term injury in an explosive defeat against London rivals Chelsea. Spurs managed a creditable midweek Premiership win (2-1) at Sunderland with a makeshift defence, but Hoddle knew he had to recruit a high calibre centre-back urgently.

Southampton remained reluctant to do business with Spurs, and eventually the FA Premier League had to intervene, mediating between the two clubs. After finally getting his man on a six-year contract, Hoddle admitted that the fee was probably inflated (it was more than twice what Tottenham had first offered for the player), but said Richards was at the peak of his performance.

Meanwhile Lowe, still furious about Tottenham's tactics during the transfer saga, said the timing and nature of the deal were appalling from Southampton's point of view. He said Richards' decision to go was a slap in the face for all the Saints fans who had recently voted him their player of the year.

Richards is seen as a long-term replacement for Sol Campbell, who controversially joined bitter rivals Arsenal on a free transfer in July. Campbell himself pulled a hamstring in training for the Gunners at the

beginning of the week, and missed the Champions League victory over Schalke 04 along with club captain Tony Adams, who had a foot injury.

Both players are recovering faster than expected, however, and Adams was due to line up against surprise Premiership leaders Bolton Wanderers at Highbury on Saturday. Meanwhile manager Arsene Wenger has dismissed speculation that long-serving England midfielder Ray Parlour is unsettled. Press reports suggested that Parlour is becoming concerned at spending more time on the substitutes bench as competition for midfield places at Highbury intensifies.

Wenger responded that a club like Arsenal is a constant magnet for rumours but they were not necessarily based on facts. Liverpool's manager Gerard Houllier said something similar when denying reports that he had fallen out with first Robbie Fowler (again) and then Jari Litmanen, and that both players wanted to leave Anfield. Litmanen has not been involved in Liverpool's last five matches, and failed even to make the bench for the two most recent games. A player of his talent (and on such a huge salary) may not want to remain out of the picture for long.

Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink, the Chelsea striker sent off in the recent 1-1 draw with Arsenal following a clash with Martin Keown, has had his automatic one-match ban overturned by the FA on appeal. Similarly, Ipswich Town's Italian goalkeeper Matteo Sereni will not have to serve a one-match suspension after being sent off against Leicester City. The FA have decided the red card was too harsh a punishment.

After a 19 year absence, Ipswich made a hesitant return to European football with a 1-1 home draw against Torpedo Moscow in the UEFA Cup. Titus Bramble was at fault for the Russians' goal but made amends with a late equaliser. In other UEFA Cup first round, first leg matches, Chelsea were convincing 3-0 victors over Bulgarian double winners Levski Sofia. In his first match of the season, striker Eidur Gudjohnsen capped a fine display with two goals to stake his claim for a place in the Blues' starting line-up in the Premiership.

Aston Villa were punished by dreadful defending at home to NK Varteks. The Croatians took full advantage of Villa's poor marking and ball-watching to gain a deserved victory. Two goals by Colombian Juan Pablo Angel had appeared enough to salvage a draw for Villa, but Varteks took the lead for the third and final time in the 88th minute.

Leeds United also lost, 1-0 to Maritimo in Madeira. Their below-par performance against the Portuguese was described by manager David

O Leary as 'The kick up the backside my team needed. O Leary has made no secret of his contempt for the UEFA Cup after the experience of reaching the semi-finals of the Champions League last season. He is focused on winning the Premiership in order to get back into Europe's top club competition.

Those clubs who qualified for this season's Champions League Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool all avoided defeat in last week's games. United's unconvincing form continued against Lille at Old Trafford, but a late goal by David Beckham earned them three points.

Arsenal survived a shaky start to take a 2-0 lead through Freddie Ljungberg and Thierry Henry against German runners-up Schalke 04, but were pegged back to 2-1 before half-time. Soon after the restart Henry scored a penalty, but again the Germans hit back and the Gunners endured a tense last ten minutes to win 3-2. In Germany, Liverpool battled to a dour 0-0 draw against Borussia Dortmund.

Back in the Premiership, Bolton Wanderers signed the ex-Leeds United and Southampton striker Rod Wallace after Rangers chose not to renew his contract. Wallace made his debut in the midweek game against Blackburn Rovers, scoring with a header to give Wanderers the lead. Although Blackburn grabbed an equaliser, Bolton's point from the 1-1 draw was enough to take them back to the top of the table on goal difference over Leeds United. Both have 11 points but Leeds have played one game fewer

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