

THE WEEK S NEWS & GOSSIP FROM THE PREMIERSHIP

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Better news for Manchester United fans following their defeat by Bayern Munich in the Champions League was the club s securing of Ryan Giggs on a new contract that will keep the Welsh international forward at Old Trafford beyond his 32nd birthday.

Giggs has signed up to a new five-year contract worth £10 million, insisting that despite the attractions of playing in Italy or Spain, he had always been happy at United and saw no reason to change things. However, he has expressed the hope that Sir Alex Ferguson will take steps to freshen up the squad at the end of the current season. I don t think there is any doubt that new players will be coming in, he said, pointing out that the summer before United won the Treble, Ferguson bought Dwight Yorke, Jaap Stam and Jesper Blomqvist.

The announcement by the world s richest club of a 43 per cent increase in half-yearly pre-tax profits paves the way for squad strengthening by Ferguson, who is expected to be allowed some £60 million to spend on new players ahead of his final season as manager. Top of his shopping list remains Ruud van Nistelrooy, who has made an impressive comeback from the career-threatening injury that sabotaged his completion of an agreed £18 million transfer to United from PSV Eindhoven a year ago.

Van Nistelrooy, who last week scored two superb goals against FC Twente in the Dutch League, would add a new dimension to a United attack that has begun to look a little less convincing at least in the Champions League. If he does finally come to Manchester, Yorke s position with United could become vulnerable. The Trinidad & Tobago star s frequent absences from Old Trafford on international duty together with his bachelor lifestyle have increasingly irritated Ferguson.

Another United striker, Teddy Sheringham, has been offered a one-year extension to keep him at the club. Top scorer so far this season with 20 goals, Sheringham turned 35 last week and, despite hoping for a two-year deal, accepts that at his age one year is a reasonable offer. If, as seems likely, he agrees the new terms and signs, Glenn Hoddle may be disappointed. The new Spurs boss was understood to be considering a bid to bring Sheringham

back to Tottenham. Hoddle is an admirer of Sheringham's intelligent play, often picking him for England when he was the national team boss.

Meanwhile, a number of rows of seats at United's Old Trafford stadium may be closed by the local council after fans repeatedly refused to stay seated during the home match against Bayern Munich. Earlier warnings have been ignored by those United fans who prefer to stand.

Leeds United pair Jonathan Woodgate and Lee Bowyer faced an anxious week-end as the jury at their trial in Hull needed more time to consider their verdict. The two players and two other men are accused of affray and causing grievous bodily harm with intent, to which they have all pleaded not guilty. Woodgate and Michael Duberry, the Leeds centre-half, were earlier cleared of conspiring to pervert the course of justice. The jury are expected to deliver their verdict on Monday regarding the charge of violence.

The Leeds captain, South African international Lucas Radebe, looks likely to miss the rest of the season because of an injury that can only be rectified by surgery. Also out for the remainder of this campaign is Liverpool's Finnish star Jari Litmanen. X-rays have revealed that Litmanen broke his wrist in eight places during Finland's recent World Cup defeat by England at Anfield.

Ipswich Town striker Marcus Stewart moved to the top of the Premiership scoring charts when he grabbed a hat-trick in last Sunday's game against Southampton. Stewart has now scored 18 Premiership goals so far this season. Their 3-0 win put Ipswich firmly into contention for a Champions League place, elevating them to third place in the table and confounding the pessimists who were sure Town would be relegated at the end of their first season back in the Premiership.

One of Stewart's strike partners, Jamie Scowcroft, improved the mood of optimism at Portman Road by agreeing a new contract that will keep him at the club for several more seasons.

Leicester City have also offered a contract extension to goalkeeper Simon Royce, who joined them last summer from Charlton Athletic. Manager Peter Taylor praised Royce's contribution since bringing him into the first team in place of the injured Tim Flowers. His excellent form means that Taylor has not had to rush back first-choice Flowers, whose injury has therefore been allowed to heal properly.

In other respects, however, Taylor is not a happy manager. Defeats last Sunday and Wednesday, to Charlton Athletic and Aston Villa, respectively,

mean that Leicester have lost each of their last nine away games in the Premiership form that has seen them slip from third to ninth in the table.

Spurs Swiss centre-half Ramon Vega, on loan to Celtic and on the verge of winning a Scottish Premier League Championship medal with the Glasgow giants, has expressed a desire to play for Spurs again now that Glenn Hoddle is in charge at White Hart Lane. Vega says he loves Tottenham and would jump at the chance to be part of a successful Spurs team under Hoddle.

Speaking before Sunday's FA Cup semi-final clash between Tottenham and neighbours Arsenal, the Gunners French striker Sylvain Wiltord said that one of the main reasons he came to England was the prospect of playing in the FA Cup. Wiltord joined Arsenal earlier this season from Bordeaux, and said the Cup captivated him when he was growing up in France. He believes the competition generates its own special atmosphere and that a semi-final in front of a passionate, capacity crowd at Old Trafford will be a great experience. Wiltord has already scored in every round so far, and has six FA Cup goals to his credit. The last player to score in every round including the final was Peter Osgood, Chelsea's centre-forward when they beat Leeds in a final replay in 1970 at Old Trafford.

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