

PREMIERSHIP NEWS, GOSSIP & RUMOURS

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Aston Villa's sale of two current English internationals last week convinced many of their fans – and some of their playing squad – that the club is falling behind in the competition to attract and keep top players. But Villa responded by announcing the signing of one of the biggest names in the game.

Captain Gareth Southgate finally had his wish to leave Villa granted when the club accepted a £6.5 million bid from Middlesbrough. Southgate had been on the transfer list for a year and had made no secret of his desire to seek a new challenge away from Villa, whom he said were lacking in ambition. The England central defender has therefore taken the same route out of Villa Park that Ugo Ehiogu took last season. Their sale to Boro, following on the departure of coaches Steve Harrison and Paul Barron to the Riverside, has frustrated many Villa fans. They perceive their club to be bigger than Middlesbrough, but no longer willing to compete financially and therefore in danger of sliding into permanent mid-table mediocrity – or worse.

Their disillusion increased when, on the same day that Southgate's transfer was agreed, goalkeeper David James was sold to West Ham United for £3.5 million. James, another current member of the England squad and widely regarded as one of the country's best goalkeepers, had previously expressed dissatisfaction about the direction in which Villa appeared to be heading. But he had subsequently made his peace with manager John Gregory and his sudden sale was a surprise to many – particularly as no replacement had apparently been lined up.

For 24 hours Villa were the target of intense criticism from supporters and the media, with influential Dutch midfielder George Boateng articulating the fans' frustration by saying the club would find it increasingly difficult to bring in quality players if its established stars were intent on going elsewhere. Boateng claimed there was huge unrest within the dressing room, and that he had never been at a club where so many players wanted to leaving.

Then Gregory stunned English football by unveiling Peter Schmeichel as his new goalkeeper. Suddenly the sale of James to West Ham made sense. Schmeichel won five Premier League championships, three FA Cup

winner's medals and a European Cup winner's medal with Manchester United where he became the undisputed king of Premiership goalkeepers. Many regarded him as the best goalkeeper in the world before he left United in 1999 for Sporting Lisbon saying that he could no longer meet the fitness demands of the Premiership.

His dramatic return to the Premiership at the age of 37 – described as the best-kept secret of the summer – suggests that he no longer regards fitness as an obstacle, and indeed the Danish international says the Premiership is the only league to play in and prove yourself. He has signed a one year contract with an option for a second year.

Ironically, Schmeichel's departure from Manchester two years ago prompted United to sign Villa's Mark Bosnich as his replacement. But Bosnich failed to make the goalkeeper's jersey his own at Old Trafford, and earlier this year he joined Chelsea, where he is yet to make an impression. Now the arrival of Schmeichel at Villa Park has thwarted the ambitions of Finnish international Peter Enckelman, whom James had recommended as his successor.

It has also ended speculation that Tim Flowers might move from Leicester City to Villa to combine the roles of goalkeeper and goalkeeping coach. Flowers' position at Filbert Street appears uncertain following Leicester's signing of Ian Walker from Tottenham Hotspur for £2.5 million. Walker, who will face competition from both Flowers and Simon Royce, is determined to re-establish himself among the country's leading goalkeepers after enduring an unhappy time at White Hart Lane after Neil Sullivan took his first-team place. Spurs have now signed Blackburn's Alan Kelly for £600,000 as Sullivan's understudy.

The flurry of goalkeeping transfer activity also puts a question mark over the future of Shaka Hislop, whose position at West Ham now appears vulnerable with the arrival of James.

As expected, Manchester United duly completed the purchase of Juan Sebastian Veron from Lazio, but the fee eventually paid for the Argentine midfield star was £28.1 million – nearly £10 million more than the previous record fee paid by a British club. That was also United, who set the record two months ago when signing Ruud van Nistelrooy from PSV Eindhoven. Manager Ferguson believes that the addition of these two world-class players to the Old Trafford squad will provide the stimulus for another season of glory (Ferguson's last) in the Premiership and Champions League. Highly rated young central defender Wes Brown has also signed a new contract, and United are still being linked with Bixente Lizarazu, despite the

fact that the French World Cup winning full-back appeared to have decided to stay at Bayern Munich.

Meanwhile, United's former assistant manager is busy in the transfer market. Having already bought Southgate, new Middlesbrough manager Steve McClaren is looking to strengthen his defence further by completing the £3 million signing of centre-back Francois Grenet from Bordeaux.

Boro's near-neighbours Newcastle United are experiencing less satisfaction. Manager Bobby Robson has admitted that their £9 million deal to bring striker Laurent Robert to St James' Park looks like collapsing because Robert's present club, Paris St Germain, want a single payment for the player whereas Newcastle want to pay the fee by instalments. The Magpies have also been frustrated so far in their attempts to sign Zenden from Barcelona.

Arsenal are close to completing the signing of Japanese midfielder Junichi Inamoto from Gamba Osaka. The deal, which could make Inamoto the first Japanese player in the Premiership, could proceed when the first phase of the J-League is completed on 21st July. The Gunners' Swedish midfield star Freddie Ljungberg has signed a new five-year contract with the club.

But Patrick Vieira continues to be linked with a move to Real Madrid, who would like the Frenchman to partner compatriot Zinedine Zidane in a formidable new midfield that also includes Luis Figo. Zidane joined Real from Juventus last week for a staggering world record fee of £48.8 million, prompting Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson to say that British clubs could not compete with fees of that magnitude.

Everton are preparing to make a final offer to Anderlecht for striker Tomasz Radzinski, but if the bid fails they could target West Bromwich Albion's prolific goalscorer Lee Hughes instead. Everton's neighbours Liverpool have so far been quiet in the transfer market but suffered a blow when key midfielder Steven Gerrard was injured in a friendly match. Gerrard is expected to be out for at least six weeks, which would rule him out of Liverpool's start to the season, as well as England's crucial World Cup qualifier against Germany.

Southampton set a new club transfer record by signing Rory Delap from Derby County for £4 million. The fee doubled their previous highest payment of £2 million for Sheffield Wednesday striker David Hirst in 1997. Hirst subsequently had to retire from the game because of injury.

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