

Liverpool tell Benítez league title is a must

Hicks is confident club can qualify for European Cup, but says manager must justify £40m outlay.

By Paul Kelso

Liverpool's manager, Rafael Benítez, will have to guide his team to the Premier League title to justify the £40m the club invested in new players in the summer, according to the club's co-owner Tom Hicks. Speaking 24 hours after Liverpool's prospects of qualifying for the knock-out stage of the Champions League were severely dented by a 2-1 defeat by Besiktas in Turkey, Hicks said the domestic trophy remained the club's priority. Benítez based his pre-season approach to the American owners of the club on a challenge for the Premier League title, impressing on them the need for more strength in depth if he were to mount a credible challenge to Manchester United and Chelsea.

Hicks and George Gillett acceded to his wishes, investing £26.5m in Fernando Torres and £11.5m on the Ajax winger Ryan

Babel. Hicks pledged his support for a coach who has often seemed more at home in European competition than the domestic fray. But in comments that will increase the pressure on Benítez to deliver a title the club have not won for 17 years Hicks implied he and Gillett are expecting a swift return on their investment.

"One of the reasons we made the signings we did in the summer was to create the depth we now have. Rafa explained to George and me that is how you win the Prem, because you have to play every team twice," Hicks said. "We totally support Rafa, nobody wants to win more than Rafa. But I know when we committed the resources for signings in the summer the whole idea was to have a team that could compete for the Pre-

mier League. We've not had the depth previously to do that.

"This squad is good enough to win things. It should be winning things. If it doesn't we'll have to look at the circumstances and have a meeting at the end of the year to understand what happened. I don't want to predict failure, I want to predict success."

Benítez demanded extensive investment from Liverpool's new owners after May's defeat by Milan in the European Cup final, a second final appearance in three seasons that he claimed represented an over-achievement for the squad at his disposal. The Liverpool manager said dithering in the transfer market had cost the club major targets in recent seasons - including Daniel Alves at Seville, the former Benfica captain Simão Sabrosa and Florent Malouda this summer - and it was against this backdrop, plus an implied threat from the Spaniard that he would consider his future if finances were not forthcoming, that the Americans eventually acted.

Liverpool's struggles in Europe this season contrast with their success in winning the tournament in 2005 and reaching last year's final but Hicks acknowledged that the supporters crave the Premier League title.

"Our fans, I can tell from just talking to them, want to win the Premier League. They haven't won the top title in 17 years and I know their passions really are that they want to win the Premier League.

Hicks remains confident that Liverpool can qualify for the Champions League knockout round but said failure would not impact on current attempts to refinance the club. The Americans personally guaranteed a loan of £298m from the Royal Bank of Scotland to buy the club but a recent attempt to refinance the loan collapsed. Hicks said he was close to agreeing a deal and Champions League failure would not impact on negotiations.

"The package will be completed within 30 days, but I don't want to comment any further on the details," he said. "In terms of budgeting we've got it covered either way, and we've got our work cut out [to qualify]. If we didn't qualify, it would be terribly disappointing but I'm an optimist and I think we're going to win our next two at home and then we have a big match in Marseille. I think we can get out of the group," he said. - *The Guardian*



Benítez



Ferguson

Fergie: We'll rule the world

ALEX FERGUSON has told his young stars: You can rule the world.

Manchester United's boss declared: "The last time we had a youthful squad like this, back in 1999, we won the Treble.

"Now it's time for a new Reds dynasty to step forward, to achieve even more.

"My mission, our mission, is to make United the undisputed No 1 club in England, Europe and the world.

"We want to be challenging, and winning, on all fronts.

"That's the United way. Never

standing still, always striving for higher and higher standards."

Ferguson is thrilled by the contribution of new boys Carlos Tevez, Nani and Anderson, who starred in Tuesday's 4-2 Champions League win over Dynamo Kiev.

Of Tevez, he added: "He's only 23 and already mentioned in the same breath as one of the all-time greats, Maradona."

United already believe teams are running scared of their four-midable power. They have now scored four goals in each of their last three games.

Defender John O'Shea said: "I

think you sense some teams are maybe scared of us.

"I think nights like in Kiev really make teams aware what we are capable of.

"When teams come to Old Trafford, they like to play five in midfield and try to play for the draw.

"But with the attack we have, they are going to be very wary of just trying to defend.

"It seems every time we attack, with the pace and power of Wayne Rooney, Cristiano Ronaldo, Carlos Tevez and Giggsy, we can score."

-THE SUN