

United like the look of Benzema and begin their homework on Lyon's £45m striker

By Daniel Taylor

Sir Alex Ferguson is to recommend to Manchester United's board that Karim Benzema, the outstanding France striker, should be their primary transfer target this summer, although he is deeply aware that not only is there competition from a clutch of Europe's leading clubs but that Lyon might price him out of the Glazer family's reach.

Benzema's performance in Wednesday's Champions League fixture at Stade de Gerland, when he scored a superb individual goal and gave Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic as torrid a time as they have endured all season, has reinforced Ferguson's belief that he must explore the possibilities of putting him alongside Carlos Tevez, Cristiano Ronaldo

and drawn-out transfer saga surrounding a player Jean-Pierre Papin has described as combining the qualities of the two best Brazilians

of the past decade. "His power is reminiscent of Ronaldo," the former France striker said. "The stepovers and speed at which he runs with the ball is like Ronaldinho."

Those attributes were evident against United and it is understood that the English champions will sound out Lyon after the teams have played at Old Trafford on Tuesday week. Ferguson has already done some groundwork after

and Wayne Rooney in what might become the most feared forward line in the world.

Unfortunately for United, the secret is out and Lyon's president, Jean-Michel Aulas, has set the fee at around ?60m (£45.3m). When it was put to him that United might have the financial muscle to tempt away a player L'Equipe has started referring to as L'Etoile Benzema (the star Benzema), Aulas seemed unfazed. "Fine," he said, "they can give us the money - and we will take Cristiano Ronaldo too."

Aulas went on to claim that Benzema, 20, will not leave until Lyon have won the Champions League but his remarks have been widely interpreted in France as the beginning of what promises to be a long

being invited to watch one of Lyon's games with Aulas this month and the United manager is also thought to have spoken at length with Gérard Houllier, a former Lyon manager.

Ferguson has been trying to find out about Benzema's personality and will be encouraged by the reports. "I'm optimistic for Karim because he knows what he wants and he has

as he is in France, but Ferguson knows all about him and told us to be particularly wary of him," said Patrice Evra.

"The manner in which he took his goal shows that he is really strong and a huge talent. It is important not to build him up too much but, after [Zinedine] Zidane, he could go on to be one of the greatest French players."

The problem for Ferguson is that Lyon are talking amounts of money which it is unrealistic to expect the Glazers to produce. Indeed, if Aulas is to be believed, the only club who might be able to afford Benzema is Chelsea. Arsène Wenger is another confirmed admirer but Arsenal, like United, might struggle to generate the cash. As always, Real Madrid are

good people around him," said Houllier. "He reminds me a bit of Steven Gerrard - not the way he plays but because of his character and background. Karim, like Steven, will be among the world's top 50 players one day."

The class of Benzema's left-foot shot on Wednesday suggests he may already be there, and it was notable how United's defenders singled him out for praise after the game. "Benzema is not as well known across Europe

lurking in the background.

If necessary, Ferguson could use Louis Saha in a possible player-plus-cash exchange but he is also aware that he has to strengthen his defence as a priority, particularly at right-back. Gary Neville has been out for almost a year with injury problems and Wes Brown could leave on a free transfer this summer after rejecting a new contract, a situation that Ferguson has told him is "ridiculous".

Brown has asked for more money and the conflict has strained the relationship with his manager. "I just cannot understand why he has not signed," said Ferguson, who questioned whether the defender had been badly advised.

- *Dailymail.uk*



Sir Alex Ferguson salutes Manchester United's fighting spirit

David McDonnell

Sir Alex Ferguson last night saluted the fighting spirit of his Manchester United stars after a late Carlos Tevez goal put them on course for the Champions League quarter-finals.

United's players overcame attempts by Lyon fans to distract them by shining laser pens from the stands to take the upper hand ahead of the return leg at Old Trafford in a fortnight.

Tevez's 87th-minute strike cancelled out Karim Benzema's earlier goal and Fergie was full of praise for his battling players.

The United boss said: "Lyon scored a good goal and that knocked us back a bit but we made the right changes and deserved the result."

"I thought Tevez was fantastic when

he came on and he scored the important goal. The big difference this season is that we've got a lot of strength in depth as we showed by bringing on Tevez and Nani.

"Now it's down to us to finish the job at Old Trafford." United striker Wayne Rooney said: "It is always crucial to get an away goal."

"I felt we controlled the game for most of it. They had a few chances and stuck the ball in. So now we know we have to concentrate 100 per cent."

It emerged after the game that United made an official complaint to UEFA about the laser pens and an investigation has been launched.

United were last night cut to 9-2 with Ladbrokes to win the Champions League.

Betting: 7-2 Barcelona, 9-2 Man Utd, 6-1 Chelsea, 7 Liverpool, 9 Real Madrid, AC Milan, 14 Arsenal, Sevilla, 16 Inter, Roma, 28 Lyon, 250 Celtic.