

The odds don't lie when the Big Four shrink to a top two

There are people who see the glass as half full rather than half empty, then there are optimists, then there are paid optimists.

Into the last category falls Richard Scudamore, who argues below that English club football has never had it so good. We shall draw a veil over international football for the time being since this is the start of a new Premier League season, and we shall stop short of implying the League's chief executive is a self-serving propagandist. Much of what he says happens to be true, it is perfectly natural for football followers to look on the bright side at this time of year, and Scudamore did not get where he is today by ignoring promotional opportunities such as the first ever all-English Champions League final.

On the other hand, we would not let the Chinese authorities get away with such a vacuous and selective paean to their own brilliance at organising the Olympics and neither should we permit the Premier League's Great Helmsman to espouse collectivism after the ignominious collapse of last season's proposed Great Leap Forward. Not without looking a little more closely at this most 'compelling' of competitions.

For a start, it is somewhat disingenuous to talk of virtuous circles when the Premier League is by some distance the most linear competition in Europe. You cannot get a bet of 2-1 on either Manchester United or Chelsea to win the title, yet Hull City are available at 10,000-1. You might think that is normal and fair, and you would be right. Hull have no chance of winning the title. But neither have the weakest teams in Serie A and La Liga, yet they are only priced at 1,000-1. The best price available on a Bundesliga team is just 500-1. The ludicrous odds offered on the three newcomers to the Premier League this season fully reflect the bookmakers' conviction that no one outside the top four can possibly win the title and that even within the top four, Arsenal (around 5-1) and Liverpool (around 7-1) can almost be regarded as rank outsiders.

Everton, for instance, the team that finished fifth last season, can be backed at 200-1 to win the title. Many people, including the bookies, fancy Spurs to overtake them this season, yet for all the comings and goings at White Hart Lane and the palpable sense of excitement that Juande Ramos has generated, odds of 66-1 suggest no one expects a 47-year wait for a title to be over any time soon.

I happened to meet a Spurs fan a couple of days ago and he was genuinely excited by the season in prospect. 'This could be the year we finally do it,' he said, acknowledging that Spurs' recent history has been one false dawn after another but pinning a

great deal of faith in Ramos' ability to attract and coach good players. 'I honestly think if we don't manage it this time we never will.' He was talking about finishing fourth. Not even in his wildest fantasies could he envisage his team winning the thing, or even finishing high enough to guarantee qualification for the Champions League group stages.

That is where we are, that is where we have been for some time, and things are getting worse instead of better. Peter Kenyon of Chelsea appears to have some sort of wild fantasy where clubs outside the top four get their act together and give the so-called elite a run for their money, but the reality - plain for all to see - is that even within the top four clubs are struggling to compete with the financial resources of Roman Abramovich. Outside the top four, Everton could be about to implode, West Ham are in danger of becoming the new Leeds, Newcastle are playing money games instead of football and Manchester City's owner appears to be reappraising his desire to fund a challenge to Manchester United's dominance. Teams such as Fulham, Bolton, Sunderland, Middlesbrough and Wigan are not seriously looking higher than halfway up the table and, while improvement may be possible at Aston Villa, Blackburn, Portsmouth and Spurs, it is idle to pretend any of that quartet would not be absolutely delighted to finish fifth.

Better move swiftly to the predictions, before we get too depressed. Anyone in search of cheery optimism instead can find Richard Scudamore at Premier League headquarters.

1) Chelsea to win the League. It's their turn, they have the most money, and they could still bring in a Brazilian or two before the end of the month. All the other foreign owners appear to lose their appetite for football or lose their grip on their wealth within the first couple of years or so. Abramovich is different, probably unique. Massively rich, massively hungry. A title in his first season might be a big ask of Luiz Felipe Scolari, though having seen how far Avram Grant took this squad last time out one has the feeling it practically drives itself.

2) Manchester United to come second. Because Cristiano Ronaldo might not be quite as good as he was last season and because United still haven't found a way to bring the best out of Wayne Rooney. Though should Fergie beef up his front line with Dimitar Berbatov, it could change things.

3) Liverpool to finish third, and to finally beat United in the League for the first time under Rafael Benítez.

4) Arsenal fourth, Spurs fifth, Pompey sixth and Everton nowhere. David Moyes to either leave before end of season or shoot himself in frustration.

5) West Ham, Bolton and Middlesbrough to spend most of the season worrying about relegation, even if they don't actually go down. Two of the three promoted clubs to go straight back down. Hull to stay up on the last day.

6) One last thing to put the above into perspective. I would like to apologise to anyone who took my advice and failed to put a substantial amount of money on Spain to win Euro 2008. Sorry about that, but I suppose they had to come good one day. Could the same apply to Liverpool, who not only boast the same centre-forward but new, improved, £20m Robbie Keane? No, in a word. No one in England at the moment is strong enough to get past both United and Chelsea.

Rip van Fergie just dreaming of treble

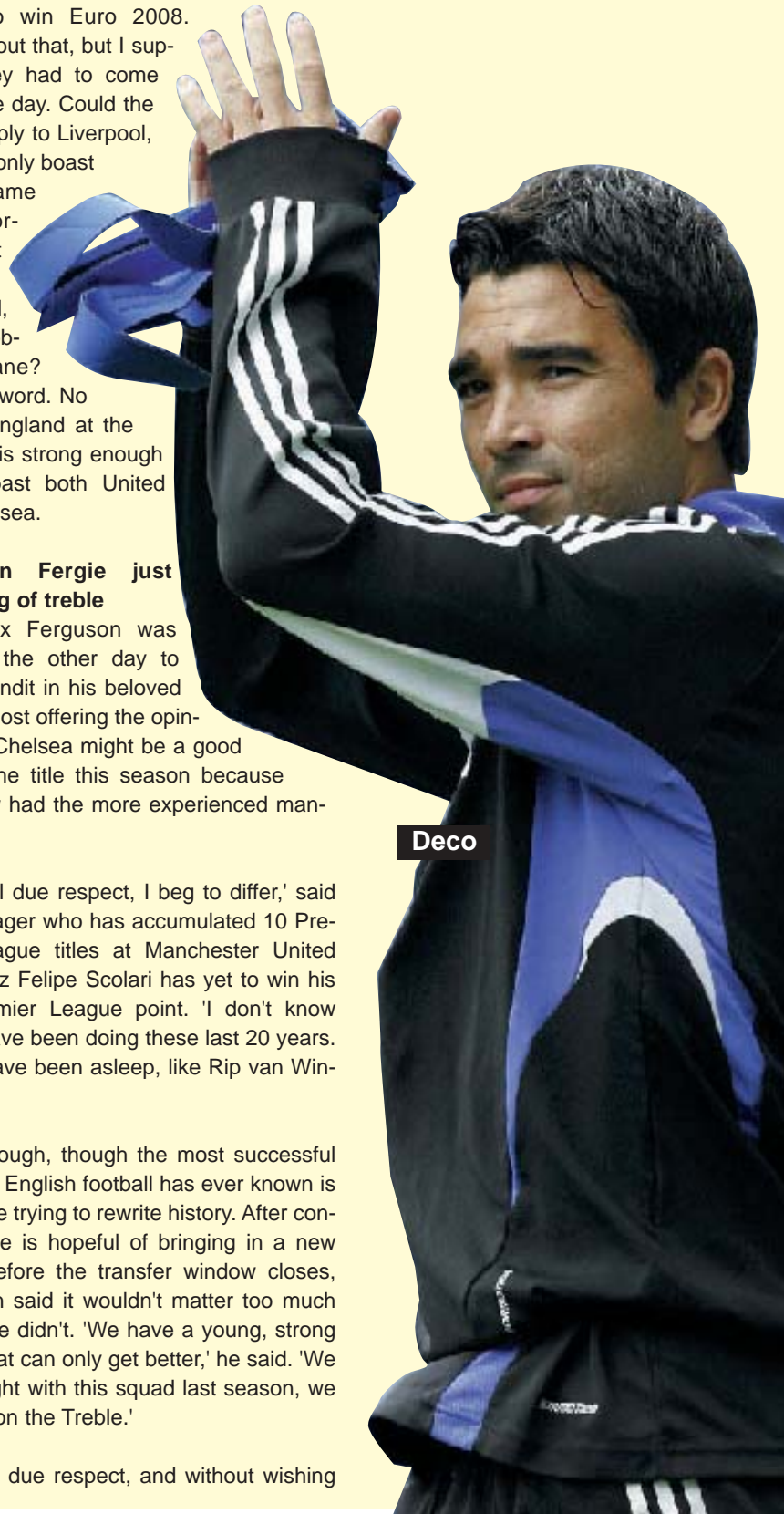
Sir Alex Ferguson was amused the other day to find a pundit in his beloved Racing Post offering the opinion that Chelsea might be a good bet for the title this season because they now had the more experienced manager.

'With all due respect, I beg to differ,' said the manager who has accumulated 10 Premier League titles at Manchester United while Luiz Felipe Scolari has yet to win his first Premier League point. 'I don't know what I have been doing these last 20 years. I must have been asleep, like Rip van Winkle.'

Fair enough, though the most successful manager English football has ever known is not above trying to rewrite history. After confirming he is hopeful of bringing in a new striker before the transfer window closes, Ferguson said it wouldn't matter too much even if he didn't. 'We have a young, strong squad that can only get better,' he said. 'We did all right with this squad last season, we nearly won the Treble.'

With all due respect, and without wishing

to take anything away from the towering achievement of a Premier and Champions League double, surely the only circumstance that counts as a Treble near-miss is losing in the FA Cup final while winning the other two, as Liverpool did in 1977. United only went as far as the quarter-final of last season's FA Cup, when they were so disappointed at being beaten at home by Portsmouth that Ferguson and Carlos Queiroz immediately went on the offensive claiming it was all the referee's fault. Please don't tell me that was just a dream. This Rip van Winkle syndrome is getting out of hand.



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