

Manchester United will Phil the force of Chelsea this year

By Mark Lawrenson



Tevez

Sir Alex Ferguson can expect a tougher ride this season after two years of Premier League dominance.

The Community Shield has become something of a meaningless curtain-raiser and provides few clues to what the season will hold.

But United will face an even tougher test from Chelsea this season - and I think Luiz Felipe Scolari will knock them off their lofty perch.

There are a few worries for United after a summer dogged by the Cristiano Ronaldo saga and, sadly, the Portuguese winger's future is far from secure - saying he'll stay for one more year is rather like a manager saying he will leave at the end of the season. It never works.

Ronaldo is so important to United and it's hard to see how he can be 100 per cent committed if he is thinking about leaving next summer. Wayne Rooney has been struggling with a virus and they definitely need one more striker.

It seems as if Dimitar Berbatov will come to Old Trafford and such a deal would be a major boost. Berbatov is a top, top player who will thrive in a team like United. He is one of those players who you would pay good money to see.

But even if United get him, they rode their luck to an extent with injuries last season and maybe that will catch up with them this term. When you consider that Chelsea had a crippling injury-list and still pushed United close domestically and in Europe then you realise what a force they can be.

Plus on top of that, Roman Abramovich has appointed the most attack-minded manager he has ever appointed in Scolari, who has already signaled his intentions by signing Jose Bosingwa and Deco.

They are two attacking players whose first instinct is to go forward and Chelsea promises to be a more exciting team this season.

Scolari knows that he is expected to win the title - and do it in style. It will be harder for United, without a doubt.

The fact that United have not spent big like last year when they signed Nani, Anderson and Owen Hargreaves does not concern me so much.

Hargreaves missed a lot of the campaign through injury and he'll be like a new signing, and if they should get Berbatov in the ranks that will be a major addition.

They do look strong even though it will be interesting what happens at right-back and to see whether Gary Neville - such a superb full-back and professional - can return after last year's injury nightmare.

But they have Wes Brown and Hargreaves in reserve and they can provide invaluable cover and strength at right-back.

They already have a solid base but last season Ronaldo gave them an extra gear and edge. Can he do that this season?

His mental state and apparent desire to join Real Madrid either this summer or next, is a major worry.

Nani will have to step up and become a major performer and Carlos Tevez will also have to deliver.

Tevez found himself playing all over the pitch last season and across the front line. But now, more than last season, he'll want to play through the middle and be the main man.

It will be a tougher season for United,

but an exciting one for Portsmouth after Harry Redknapp's busy summer in the transfer market.

The signing of Peter Crouch is a good one as Redknapp looks certain to pair him up with Jermain Defoe.

Redknapp has made a career out of finding good strikers and partnerships, all the way back from John Hartson and Paul Kitson as well as reviving Paolo di Canio's career.

Harry spots strikers, gets them scoring goals and working well for the team.

Apart from David Nugent, he rarely makes a mistake on strikers because he has that knack and clever eye.

Pompey now have some good established players like David James, Sol Campbell, Lassana Diarra, Glen Johnson and England strike duo Crouch and Defoe.

Redknapp has also pulled off a surprise in signing Glen Little, clearly to provide some width and crosses for Crouch and Defoe.

Portsmouth can thrive in Europe, get stronger and don't be surprised if Redknapp buys again before the start of the season.

But United should win the Community Shield even if the annual fixture has become a very much devalued game. They have already played each other in Nigeria and this game is pretty meaningless apart from a day out for some fans and a pre-season friendly for the players.

COMMUNITY SHIELD: MAN UTD v POMPEY Sadly, the Community Shield is not what it was. But United can shade it in a very tight game, possibly 2-1.

4-3-2-1 United are strong in midfield with the likes of Michael Carrick, Paul Scholes and Owen Hargreaves. But up front with Rooney struggling and Ronaldo injured, comes Sir Slex Ferguson's dilemma. They could go Nani, Carlos Tevez and Ryan Giggs providing the attacking three in their familiar 4-3-3 shape.

4-4-2 Harry Redknapp often favours a 4-4-2 with Peter Crouch and Jermain Defoe now the two up front. With the signing of Glen Little, Pompey have someone who can interchange and work with Glen Johnson. Lassana Diarra is a terrific midfielder while Sol Campbell and David James are rocks at the back. Crouch and Defoe already have an understanding from England duty and Crouch can provide the knock-downs for Defoe to get on the end of and score as he is a proven goalscorer and poacher.

Key man: CROUCH

The England striker has a great touch, is good in the air and his goal ratio makes it surprising that he did not get more of a look-in at Liverpool. Redknapp has a knack of giving players a chance when they have a point to prove, and Crouch will be determined to show he is a top-class striker.

Key man: TEVEZ

The Argentinian showed his quality last season, even though he was not always main man. Tevez clearly wants to play through the middle and now, with Rooney and Ronaldo struggling, is his chance to shine. He must also do it quickly with United in the hunt for Dimitar Berbatov.