

Football Digest

Ben Foster says he'll quit Manchester United to realise England dream

Ben Foster last night admitted he may have to quit Manchester United to win a place in England's World Cup squad.

Foster, 25, was a surprise selection in Fabio Capello's squad for the Wembley double header with Slovakia and Ukraine despite playing second fiddle to Edwin van der Sar at Old Trafford.

But the keeper, who has not played a single minute of first-team football since his Carling Cup Final heroics, is realistic enough to know that he cannot be a reserve and go to South Africa next summer.

England boss Capello has already laid down the law about players needing to play regularly to be part of his plans and Foster says he will have to make a tough decision if in the same situation next year.

He said: "You do have to be playing. You can't expect to go to the biggest competition in the world not playing regular football.

"I don't know what the future holds, the next year or so, but I've got to give it my all really.

"It's a balancing act, isn't it? I've got no desire to move away from Manchester United. I love the club.

It's a brilliant team to be at.

"But on the other hand, I've got ambitions. I want to do things in my career. I'm not happy just to sit around and be the No.2 goalkeeper. So I'll see what happens.

"It's a difficult one when you've got Edwin in front of you and he's doing so well. It's quite hard to knock on the door and say: 'Give me a chance please, boss.' "Whether or not they will let me go out on loan is another matter and up to the manager."

Foster was at non-league Kidderminster less than four years ago but, despite getting few chances at Old Trafford, he is constantly talked up as England's next big thing and No.1 for years to come.

Foster, who has just one cap for England, added: "I'd like to think I am good enough. Whenever I go out and play for United I'm always as confident as I can be.

"I don't really let things faze me too much. I just try and enjoy myself, and do what I know I can do."

Rafa Benitez: Steven Gerrard gets my vote for PFA player of the year

Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez believes his skipper Steven Gerrard should be named PFA player of the year.

Manchester United stars Nemanja Vidic and Ryan Giggs are believed to be the favourites for the award, but Benitez is talking up the claims of Gerrard.

The midfielder is in the form of his life and has scored 21 goals this season to play a major part in the revival of Liverpool's title ambitions.

Benitez said: "He would be my vote. If he can continue playing at this level, then why not?"

"For me Stevie is one of the best players in the world. To say one is the best above anyone else is difficult because there are a lot of quality players about, but he is one of the best. That is clear.

"He is more mature, he is still learning and tactically he is improving. He can still play better because he has the potential."

Gerrard is currently with the England squad for the forthcoming games with Slovakia and Ukraine, and Benitez added: "He has quality and always tries to improve in every training session.

"That is very positive. You know when he is on the pitch you have more options to win."

Gerrard has claimed this week he would like to play for England in the 'second striker' role he has at Liverpool.

And Benitez believes his new role playing just behind Fernando Torres has seen Gerrard's game rise to even greater heights.

The Spaniard continued: "Changing his position and seeing him play in a different role has improved a lot. "He scored 23 goals one year and now he has 21 and can score more before the end of this season, so that is very positive for the team and also for him.

"When Gerrard and Torres are together for us, the rest of the team has more confidence. It is good for the rest of the players as they get a lot of confidence when we have those two together on the pitch."

Aston Villa may be stuck in 5th, but they will challenge Top 4 next season

By Mark Lawrenson



No one will be beating themselves up more about Aston Villa's recent slump than Martin O'Neill.

It will be hurting him to see Villa's season slip away - losing their place in the top four, going out of the FA Cup and surrendering their chances in the UEFA Cup by fielding a second string line-up in Moscow.

O'Neill will be searching for answers and solutions because, from getting to know him, he is a deep thinker and his own biggest critic.

But no one should lose sight of the fact that Villa have made progress, even on last season when they finished sixth in the table.

If they had started poorly this term and then come good then everyone would be praising Villa and O'Neill for a good season. But when it happens the other way round there is always a sense of disappointment and regret.

Could he have stayed in the UEFA Cup and played 21 games from start to finish to win the thing? Well, the answer is yes.

But who knows whether that would have taken its toll and seen Villa slip out of the European places altogether and still trip up in the UEFA Cup.

As it is, Villa's season is far from over and the fight for fourth place with Arsenal is also far from being lost.

But what has made me believe all along that the Gunners will finish fourth and above Villa is the size of their squad and the experience gained from the Champions League.

It is a big gap to bridge from being consistent Premier League team to top European team. Arsenal have been remarkably consistent under Arsene Wenger in that regard.

Everton broke the top four's stranglehold one season, but were unable to sustain that level of performance.

Villa's squad has ultimately come up short. They do not have the strength in depth and quality that Arsenal possess.

Also, it's not easy to go through the Champions League qualifiers even if

they do finish fourth. That is a challenge in itself, and if Villa get into the hat they cannot take it as read that they will reach the group stages.

True, they have had a terrific run away from home, even winning nine on the bounce. Villa have gifted forwards with pace who enjoy playing on the counter-attack.

But without a big squad they lack options and the ability to change things. As a result, Villa have been found out to a degree.

Teams now sit deeper against them at home to stop the pace of Gabriel Agbonlahor and Ashley Young hitting them on the break.

Emile Heskey was a terrific signing in January but injuries have held him back, as they have John Carew this season.

That has been a frustration for O'Neill. Injuries are taking their toll now just at a time when Arsenal are getting some of their big players back.

Arsenal have been stretched this season but with the return of Cesc Fabregas, Emmanuel Adebayor and even Tomas Rosicky on the horizon they are looking a different proposition.

Can Villa answer that? Can they draft big players in? The answer is there to see.

Villa have seriously missed Martin Laursen in recent weeks, one of the best defenders in the Premier League.

Laursen is a leader and a terrific defender and he marshals their young players and they have missed that quality.

It's rare that the big four monopoly has been questioned in recent seasons, and Villa need all of their key men to be fit if they are to break into that elite group. Villa have a small squad and when players like Agbonlahor have a dip it's hard for them to be taken out of the firing line, be given a rest and a chance to regroup.

Sadly, the Villa fans have got on his back, forgetting the improvement he

has made from being a novice with an unpronounceable name.

Now Agbonlahor is an England squad member and has pace to burn to go with his huge potential.

He will never be a natural goalscorer. He will never nick goals in the way Ian Rush or Gary Lineker could.

But Agbonlahor has an ability to unsettle defences with his pace and open gaps for Young.

Young is one of the most improved players in the Premier League and he is beginning to look the real deal.

James Milner has been a good buy. He is a dangerous midfielder, setting up chances and getting through plenty of work.

All in all, O'Neill has set up a team which has youth on its side and room for improvement, too. The squad needs strengthening and with an owner like Randy Lerner and manager like O'Neill the only way is up for Villa.

They may end up in fifth place this season and if I were a betting man that's what I would go for.

But no one should forget that is an improvement on last season's sixth-placed finish.

If clubs make a steady improvement like that in the Premier League then, slowly but surely, they will grow and develop.

This time next year, I would fully expect Villa to be knocking on the door of the top four even louder.

O'Neill is one of the best managers out there and Villa are going in the right direction.

Their slump in form may see them lose at Liverpool on Sunday.

And for Gareth Barry, a player who wanted to swap Villa Park for Anfield last summer, that will be hard to take.

But maybe, just maybe, Barry may have a different outlook on his career and be ready to stay at Villa to develop and improve.

There is one way that Villa are going under O'Neill - and that is definitely in an upward direction.