

EXCLUSIVE: Manager Avram Grant forced to unload star players in January to save Portsmouth from administration

Portsmouth are facing up to the nightmare scenario of selling yet more players to avoid becoming the first Premier League club to go into administration.

Avram Grant is desperate to add to his squad when the transfer window opens in January in a bid to guide them away from relegation danger. Instead, Pompey have to pay their debts, leaving Grant limited to loan signings at best.

That will not impress England goalkeeper David James, who on Thursday stressed how important it was to bring in new players.

It is imperative we sign players in January,' said James.

The troubled club have denied they are about to go bust, issuing a statement on their website to challenge reports that the financial crisis at Fratton Park had deepened further.

But deepened it most certainly has, with Premier League officials preparing to withhold yet more of the television revenue that should be due to the club next month to pay off their debts.

Even then there might not be enough money to keep the club afloat.

The Premier League have the right to make projections of a club's finances up to 60 days into the future and they estimate the Pompey's liabilities will be around £8million by the end of January. Normally in that time, Portsmouth could expect to receive about £10m in TV money.

But £3m has already been paid directly to creditors, leaving them unable even to pay what they owe.

Their failure to pay debts has, as Sportsmail revealed, already led to a Premier League transfer embargo

and they appear to have no chance of having that lifted.

When Grant was appointed as Paul Hart's replacement last month, he was told there was money to pay off the club's debts and so persuade the Premier League to remove the ban.

It was an assurance the ex-Chelsea manager sought before accepting the job, having recognised how important it is to strengthen a side currently bottom of the table.

But the money clearly is not there, as was demonstrated again last week when they were late paying their players for the second time in three months.

Portsmouth are paying for the years of excess when the annual wage bill ballooned to £56m.

Now they are acting like a club resigned to being relegated, having trimmed their monthly wage bill from £2.7m to £1.8m in an effort to avoid administration.

In a strongly-worded statement yesterday, Portsmouth reiterated new owner Ali Al Faraj's determination to tackle their financial problems.

They also insisted chief executive Peter Storrie was not leaving.

The statement read: 'Ali Al Faraj and his associates took over the running of the club and inherited a business that had substantial debts.

'Dealing with the finances has been the priority since Al Faraj came in to pay the players before taking over the club from Sulaiman Al Fahim.

'The owner remains committed to the club and has shown that through his investment to date.

'Despite media rumours Peter Storrie remains chief executive and has been holding talks on behalf of the club in other parts of the world.'

James pointed to the problems

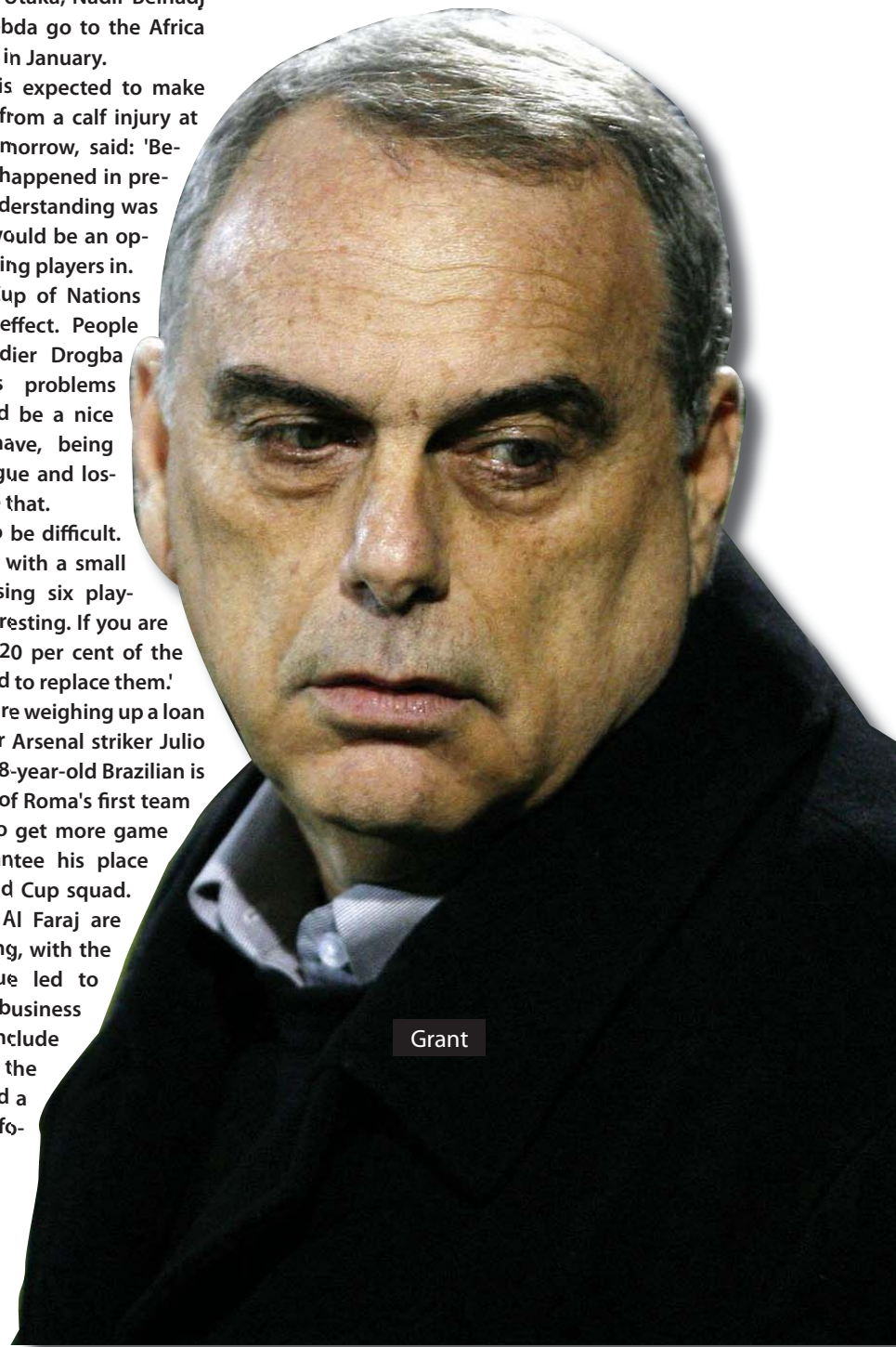
Grant will have when Nwankwo Kanu, Aruna Dindane, Kevin-Prince Boateng, John Utaka, Nadir Belhadj and Hassan Yebda go to the Africa Cup of Nations in January.

James, who is expected to make his comeback from a calf injury at Sunderland tomorrow, said: 'Because of what happened in pre-season, the understanding was that January would be an opportunity to bring players in.

'The Africa Cup of Nations will have an effect. People talk about Didier Drogba and Chelsea's problems but that would be a nice problem to have, being top of the league and losing players like that.

'It is going to be difficult. We started off with a small squad and losing six players will be interesting. If you are going to lose 20 per cent of the squad you need to replace them.'

Portsmouth are weighing up a loan deal for former Arsenal striker Julio Baptista. The 28-year-old Brazilian is on the fringes of Roma's first team and is eager to get more game time to guarantee his place in Brazil's World Cup squad. Details about Al Faraj are slowly emerging, with the Premier League led to believe his business interests include contracts with the Saudi army and a property portfolio in London.



Grant



Why everything points to Aston Villa getting their first ever Premier League win at Old Trafford this weekend

Aston Villa have never won at Manchester United in the Premier League but perhaps that sorry statistic will finally end this weekend.

Villa go to Old Trafford on Saturday on the back of a five-game unbeaten run which has taken them to fifth and the Carling Cup semi-finals.

And there can surely be no better time to face United that during their present injury crisis.

Sir Alex Ferguson's resources have been stretched to breaking point due to injuries in defence

to Rio Ferdinand, Jonny Evans and John O'Shea.

United's plight was so dire they had to play Michael Carrick and Darren Fletcher out of position as centre-backs in the Champions League in midweek.

And now Villa are in ideal form to take advantage when they visit the Theatre of Dreams.

Last term United overturned a 2-1 deficit at home to Villa with 10 minutes remaining to win 3-2 with late goals from Cristiano Ronaldo and Federico Macheda.

And the hurt of that match in

April may well drive Villa on to exact revenge this weekend.

Villa's defence, who badly missed Martin Laursen that day, is now much stronger following the addition of Richard Dunne and James Collins.

And I have been really impressed with the recent form of Spanish stopper Carlos Cuellar, signed from Rangers for £7.8million last summer.

So with England trio Stewart Downing, James Milner and Ashley Young all proving they can play in the same midfield line-up, I

wouldn't be at all surprised to witness an away win this weekend.

Milner was outstanding in the centre of midfield alongside Stilian Petrov at home to Hull last weekend.

And teetotal Milner certainly has the energy and youthful enthusiasm to play that role.

So Villa will not lack pace and invention at Old Trafford and their defence should be solid enough to avoid conceding many goals.

Consequently I will stick my neck out and go for Martin O'Neill's side to win 2-1.