

The big man is back

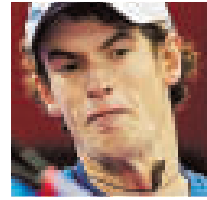
Rooney flexes muscles as United go for goals

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Murray flashes the cash after long-awaited victory

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What would the old boy think of his new centre?

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Chelsea to drop demands for Hunt action

Champions yet to submit letter to FA over Cech**Goalkeeper improving but will not play again this year**

Stuart James

Chelsea last night appeared to have dropped their demands for punitive action to be taken against the Reading midfielder Stephen Hunt following the collision which caused Petr Cech to undergo neurosurgery on Saturday.

The Football Association has yet to receive any correspondence from the Premiership champions after a statement released on Sunday indicated Chelsea would be writing to the FA with their observations; it is understood the letter has not yet been drafted.

Although Chelsea might still decide to submit their grievances, it is highly unlikely that they will expect Hunt to face any disciplinary charges. Having reviewed

the fallout from Saturday's fixture it appears the club no longer wish to adopt an aggressive stance. There are still misgivings about Hunt's challenge on Cech, and the referee Mike Riley's handling of the Chelsea goalkeeper's injury, but any documentation sent to the FA will seek explanations rather than request that charges be brought.

The FA will not look into the matter any further until any paperwork is received from Chelsea although privately officials at Soho Square have dismissed the possibility of Hunt being punished. Jose Mourinho had described the midfielder's challenge as "a disgrace" but Riley did not mention the incident in his report and the FA believe there are no parallels between Ben Thatcher's forearm smash into Pedro Mendes which earned the Manchester City defender an eight-match suspension after the offence was reviewed.

The FA would have great difficulty proving that there had been any intent on Hunt's part – something which was more obvious with the Thatcher incident – despite Mourinho initially suggesting that the Irishman moved his knee towards

Cech's head. There will also be no action taken against the Reading defender Ibrahima Sonko, who Mourinho felt should have collected a second booking after he collided with Cech's replacement, Carlo Cudicini, in injury time, leaving the Italian unconscious.

Cech, who suffered a depressed fracture of the skull, was visited by several of his team-mates yesterday at Radcliffe Infirmary's specialist neurosurgical unit in Oxford. A club statement released last night indicated that the 24-year-old, who is not expected to play again this year, is "improving" and "fully conscious". He is likely to receive a letter from Hunt this morning after the 25-year-old made a statement yesterday, expressing his concern for Cech and maintaining that the incident was "a complete accident".

"I can guarantee that I did not attempt to injure Petr," said Hunt. "I am very upset that the collision has resulted in such a bad injury. When Petr slid in to collect the ball, our momentum meant that a collision was unavoidable. I think the TV pictures show that the collision was a complete accident, and I'd like to think

Cudicini ruled out

Carlo Cudicini has ruled himself out of Chelsea's Champions League match against Barcelona tomorrow night despite making a quick recovery from concussion. Cudicini was knocked out during a challenge with Reading defender Ibrahima Sonko during the 1-0 win at the Madejski Stadium on Saturday. Although he was back at the club's Cobham training ground yesterday, he said he was not fit enough to face Barcelona, leaving third-choice keeper Hilario to make his Chelsea debut. Cudicini said: "I hope next Saturday [when Chelsea play Portsmouth at Stamford Bridge] will be a good day for me to return. For the next two days I'm doing a couple of tests with the doctors and hopefully Wednesday I will start to train again." But he was still shaky yesterday and only able to manage a gentle half-hour in the gym.

that my team-mates and opponents would say that I'm not the kind of person to deliberately hurt an opponent.

"I feel terribly sorry for Petr. I have written to him to wish him a full recovery." Hunt has received the full backing of his club. A statement released yesterday said: "We respect the right of Chelsea Football Club to ask the Football Association to review the incident and we would fully cooperate with any inquiry that may take place. We have nothing to hide and believe that the evidence fully vindicates Stephen Hunt."

Riley, meanwhile, has rejected claims that he ordered Cech to leave the pitch for treatment. Chelsea are believed to be deeply unhappy with the official's actions but Riley has told Keith Hackett, the head of the referees body in England, that he followed the guidelines set out for head injuries. The official did include a mention of Chelsea's Mikel John Obi and Reading's Andre Bikey in his report, both of whom were reluctant to leave the field after receiving red cards.

Gudjohnsen returns, page 4 »

Drugs storm Shoab and Asif test positive**Steve Bierley Jaipur and Omar Waraich**

Pakistan's coach, Bob Woolmer, yesterday blamed injections given by doctors unconnected with his team for the positive tests for steroids that saw Shoab Akhtar and Mohammad Asif sent home in disgrace from the Champions Trophy.

The opening bowlers, pictured leaving Lahore airport yesterday, have been suspended from the team and if their B samples confirm positive tests for nandrolone, both will face a two-year

ban. Doping tests were carried out on 19 Pakistan players three weeks ago at the request of Woolmer. The results were then produced and analysed by a World Anti-Doping Agency accredited laboratory in Malaysia.

"We have asked both players about it. They have both been treated for injuries in Pakistan for which they had injections that may have contained the substance," Woolmer said yesterday. "We're hoping that is the reason. I certainly know it wasn't one of my medical staff that treated them and I'm pretty sure it wasn't someone to do with the PCB. Now there is nothing we can do about

this apart from carry on with the cricket and focus on that."

"The matter is still under investigation," a source close to the Pakistan Cricket Board chairman, Nasim Ashraf, said. "The PCB are putting together a group of local legal and medical professionals to review the evidence. Depending on what happens, they will take the matter forward. If it turns out that Shoab Akhtar and Mohammad Asif had been taking banned substances, the PCB will apply international standards as set out by Wada."

This is the first time that the use of

anabolic steroids has surfaced in international cricket. Previously, Shane Warne was banned for testing positive for two diuretics, while Ian Botham, Phil Tufnell and five South African players were disciplined for the use of cannabis.

Shoab has, however, protested his innocence. While following instructions from President Pervez Musharraf to not offer any details, he did issue the following denial through his web diary: "I have always played the game fair and I give 100% and do not feel that I need to take drugs to help my bowling."

Speed warns Pakistan, page 9 »

English players overhyped and not as good as Irish says O'Gara

Martin Pengelly

The Munster and Ireland fly-half Ronan O'Gara has fiercely criticised English rugby. Contemplating Munster's first match as defending Heineken Cup champions, at Leicester on Sunday, he said: "I honestly think that both for Munster and Ireland, we've got more talented players than the English in many positions.

"Maybe that will surprise a few people in England – but our Celtic League is looked down upon because it isn't covered by Sky Sports. I watch some Premiership rugby and the way they hype these English guys is unbelievable. Some of the people they're trying to put on a pedestal just don't deserve to be there.

"At the minute I don't know many of the English players on a friendly basis and I'd say a few think they're better than they actually are in reality."

The 29-year-old, who has won 63 caps,

Ronan O'Gara will play for Munster when they begin their defence of the Heineken Cup against Leicester on Sunday

toured twice with the British and Irish Lions and helped Ireland to three wins over England in a row, said his aim for this season was to prove himself the top fly-half in Europe.

"If you look around, it's obviously up for grabs," he said, citing Stephen Jones of Wales and Charlie Hodgson of England as key rivals to outplay.

O'Gara, who said Munster "produce seriously good rugby" and have players who "are simply better than others in England or France", also questioned the common perception that injuries created by the intense physicality of the Guinness Premiership has contributed to England's poor performances since winning the World Cup in Australia in 2003.

"It's a convenient excuse, isn't it?" he said. "They like to think Munster are taking it easy in-between European matches. It's a lot of rubbish."

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