

The magic of Cesc Fabregas

If and when the deal to take Cesc Fabregas from Arsenal to Barcelona is finalised, it will bring to an end one of the longest-running transfer sagas in Premier League history.

But while Fabregas will revel in returning to his boyhood club and Barca hail the homecoming of a player they produced, the 24-year-old is sure to be sorely missed by the team and country he departs.

Fabregas arrived in England eight years ago known by precious few outside Catalonia. He leaves as one of the most celebrated footballers on the planet.

Undoubtedly one of Arsene Wenger's greatest signings, Fabregas scored 57 goals in 303 appearances and has established himself among the finest playmakers in recent memory.

Despite lifting only one trophy with Arsenal, the 2005 FA Cup, he helped Spain win Euro 2008 and the 2010 World Cup. More honours are almost certain to follow with Barca.

The reigning Spanish and European champions know exactly what they are getting - and they ought to be delighted.

Fabregas has created more chances than any other player in Europe's top five divisions (England's Premier League, Spain's La Liga, Italy's Serie A, France's Ligue 1 and Germany's Bundesliga) since 2006-07.

With 466 chances to his name, he eclipses the likes of Barca's Xavi, Frank Lampard of Chelsea, Roma's David Pizarro, Steven Gerrard of Liverpool and Roma's Francesco Totti.

Last season, he spent four separate spells on the sidelines, yet only Bayern Munich's Arjen Robben, Mesut Ozil of Real Madrid and Barca's Lionel Messi provided more assists for league goals.

There has, however, been much talk about how Fabregas will fit into a Barca squad that already includes the likes of Xavi, Andres Iniesta, Sergio Busquets and Javier Mascherano as midfield options.

Interestingly, while Fabregas made the 10th most passes in Europe's top five leagues last season, five Barca players - Xavi, Busquets, Mascherano, Iniesta and Dani Alves - all averaged more per game than him.

Keeping everyone happy is a problem Barca must cope with, but Arsenal's main concern is how to replace their talismanic skipper.

After becoming the Gunners' youngest first-team player and youngest goalscorer in 2003, Fabregas signed his first professional contract a year later and inherited Patrick Vieira's number four shirt in 2005.



So keen were Arsenal to protect their asset that a new eight-year contract was signed in October 2006, and the following season his stock rose with a superb strike in the Gunners' 2-0 Champions League victory at AC Milan.

"It was one of the best moments of my career and I went straight to the boss [to celebrate] because without him I would never have had the chance to play in a game like this," he said at the time.

"My future belongs to Arsenal, and it is the truth. I have always said I want to play for Arsenal."

Fabregas won the 2008 Professional Footballers' Association young player of the year award and soon succeeded William Gallas as captain before enjoying his most impressive season in 2009-10.

It came as little surprise when Barca made their first bid for his services - a £29m offer on 2 June 2010 which was rejected - and ever since then his return to the Nou Camp has seemed inevitable.

Since the start of the 2004-05 Premier League season, Arsenal have scored more goals, conceded fewer, won more matches and collected more points when Fabregas has featured.

They average 2.04 goals per league game with him in the team but 1.52 without him, concede 0.92

when he plays and 1.07 when he does not, win 59% of games with him and 44% without him, and pick up 2.01 points per match with him but only 1.65 when he is absent.

Fabregas actually created fewer chances per league game last season than in any of the previous four, but he was still comfortably Arsenal's biggest supplier and second only to Chelsea's Florent Malouda in the division.

All of which is fairly remarkable when one considers the injury lay-offs he was forced to endure.

Arsenal's rivals will probably be pleased to see the back of Fabregas - he drew more fouls per game last season than in any of the previous four - and it is Wenger's job to ensure he is adequately replaced.

The obvious candidate is Samir Nasri, who tended to assume a more central role and perform far better when Fabregas did not play last season, but he is on the verge of joining Manchester City.

Wenger is an admirer of Lille's Eden Hazard and Mathieu Valbuena of Marseille, while Aaron Ramsey has shone in pre-season.

But are any of them fully capable of stepping into the magical boots of Cesc Fabregas?

(Source: BBC)

Hargreaves offered chance to return to Premier League with West Bromw

Owen Hargreaves has been offered a return to top-flight football by West Bromwich Albion. Hargreaves was released by Manchester United after struggling with tendinitis but Albion's manager, Roy Hodgson, believes the midfielder's "knee is OK".

Albion manager Hodgson, his technical director Dan Ashworth and their medical staff met Hargreaves on Tuesday.

"He didn't go through a stringent medical, but he was looked at by our doctor, Mark Gillett, who is quite an eminent person in his field. We had all the test results that he [Hargreaves] brought with him. And we spoke to his



man, Alex McKechnie [a physio for the LA Lakers], who had been rehabilitating him for the last year."

Hodgson added: "We made it clear: 'Look, we've done the test, we agree with you, and your man Alex, that the knee's OK and you can play football. And of course if you'd like to come and play for us that would be lovely.'"

Ashworth then emailed a proposal to Hargreaves. "Owen was bitterly disappointed the way he had to leave English football, but he didn't speak badly about anybody," continued Hodgson.

"He was just more concerned to convince us - or maybe other teams - that 'listen, I'm a fit player, you can use me.'"

Hodgson, who was in London yesterday lending his support to the Pre-

mier League's "Get on with the Game" campaign, added that he would be interested in the England job in the future but only if he had the backing of the supporters and the media.

"I would rather hope if I was ever going to be offered the England job, it would be with the backing of the important people. And that would be of course the people like yourselves [media], who represent the fans and the people watching football.

"It's the most important job in the country for English football. It's a thankless task in some ways because your chances of success aren't great."

(Source: Telegraph)

Bernie: We could have 21 races

Bernie Ecclestone says the F1 calendar could increase to more than 20 races despite several teams insisting that 20 should be the limit.

Next year's calendar is already set at 20 grands prix with the United States joining the fraternity and Turkey making way.

However, with more countries wanting a place in Formula One, which will see Russia added to the list in 2014, Ecclestone says the calendar could be extended.

"We could have 21," the F1 supremo told the Daily Express. The F1 supremo also believes he could force the teams to agree by threatening to remove one of



the grands prix that they want to have in order to make space for a new venue.

"It depends where. If we say we have got to get rid of Monaco, they would say we would rather not."

One team that would back an extended schedule is Williams with chairman Adam Parr in favour of more races but shorter race weekends.

"I think the number of races can increase a little bit. We might have to look at the format of the weekend but we could do a couple more races," Parr recently told Reuters.

"There are ways of increasing revenues."

(Source: PlanetF1)

Tour de France winner Cadel celebrates in Melbourne

Thousands of fans thronged Melbourne's city centre on Friday to hail Cadel Evans as Australia's first Tour de France champion took a special ride into town.

Three weeks after his champagne-soaked ride to the finish line along the Champs-Elysees, the slender 34-year-old once again donned the yellow jersey, grinning as he shook hands with applauding fans banked five-and-six deep along the roadside.

Evans is the only Australian to win the Tour since the first edition in 1903 and his victory has been feted as one of the country's greatest all-time sporting achievements by local media.

For the steely BMC Racing Team rider, who calls the Swiss Alps town of Stabio home for most of the year and fiercely guards his privacy, the attention has been a happy, if somewhat overwhelming, surprise.



"I can say overwhelmed but that would be understatement for this month at least," an emotional Evans told a crowd gathered at Federation Square.

"It's an honour just to be able to be here today, enjoying being here in yellow. It's just been a great ride and it's not over yet."

After being escorted by a team of

bike-riding children to the square, Evans was congratulated by Australia's Prime Minister Julia Gillard in a video message beamed on a big screen before fans in the crowd unveiled a huge banner emblazoned with the yellow jersey.

Evans has signed a contract extension with BMC and has been joined in the stable by world champion and

sprint specialist Thor Hushovd for 2012.

Hushovd snatched Evans's title on the Australian's home turf at the world championships in the port city of Geelong last year and wore the leader's yellow jersey at the Tour de France for several stages this year.

Evans played down concerns the partnership with the burly Norwegian might spark a destabilising clash of egos that could harm his Tour defence.

"Regarding Thor coming to the team, the main objective of (team president) Jim Ochowicz was to get some guys onto the team to get some results early so they wouldn't rely just on me for race wins at the start of the year," he said.

"I said 'Look Jim, you want to bring a sprinter to the team, I don't want to ride with a sprinter, because I've done that and I've done my share.' 'If I do the Tour I want to do it for the win.'"

(Source: DailyMail)

TENNIS

Tsonga ousts Federer in latest Montreal upset

Jo-Wilfried Tsonga hit Roger Federer with an unpleasant Wimbledon flashback, brushing aside the Swiss maestro 7-6 4-6 6-1 to book his place in an unlikely quarter-final line-up at the Montreal Masters.

Federer came into the third round encounter seeking revenge on the Frenchman who had dashed his bid for a seventh Wimbledon crown five weeks ago by storming back from two sets down to steal a shock last-eight win.

The venue may have changed but the result was the same, as Tsonga again proved stronger in the closing stages than the world number three, winning an entertaining contest packed with dazzling rallies that delighted a packed centre court crowd.

"He beat me at Wimbledon, so I don't know how much of a surprise it is," Federer, a two-time winner in Canada said. "He's playing well.

"I thought if he was going to play well again and me not at my best, he could do it again. He's confident right now."

Federer's exit capped a surprising few days on the Canadian hardcourts with three of the world's top four failing to reach the quarter-finals.

World number two Spaniard Rafa Nadal, a double winner in Canada and number four Briton Andy Murray, the two-time defending champion, both lost their opening matches to leave Novak Djokovic as the only former champion left in the draw.

Djokovic, winner in 2007, continued to settle into his new role as world number one with a business-like 7-5 6-2 third round victory over Croatian Marin Cilic that extended his season record to a spectacular 50-1.

Federer and Tsonga appeared on centre court wearing almost identical blue shirts and white shorts but their play was a dramatic contrast in styles, the silky smooth Swiss sparing with the beefy Frenchman.

Playing with the supreme confidence mined from his Wimbledon upset, the 13th seeded Frenchman landed the first blow by taking the opening set in a tie-break 7-3, finishing off Federer with a vicious forehand.

But Federer, who celebrated his 30th birthday on Monday, showed he was still up for a fight, hitting back with an early break then holding on to level the match at a set apiece.

Tsonga was in no mood to back down, though, and broke Federer at the next opportunity, putting the 16-time grand slam tournament winner in hole he was unable to climb out of.

"I really played well tonight," Tsonga said. "I was opportunistic, able to break before he did. I'm very happy the way I won this match.

"But all the players keep improving... I believe that no player can be spared. Look at Rafa who lost, and Murray.

"The only one remaining above everybody else is Djokovic."

Making his competitive debut as number one in Montreal, Djokovic said the position carried added pressure and responsibility but instead of wilting under the weight of expectation, the Serb has embraced his elite status with vigour.

Djokovic's third round performance was more functional than flashy as he tamed the big-hitting Cilic with a combination of solid tactics and groundstrokes on a blustery centre court.

"It wasn't really a beautiful match to play and to watch," Djokovic said. "But I guess in the right moments, I was trying to keep the ball in court, make my opponent make an unforced error."

(Source: Reuters)

Eriksson keen on Keane

Leicester manager Sven Goran Eriksson is preparing a £3 million bid for Tottenham striker Robbie Keane to finally end his remarkable spending spree.

Eriksson will table an offer for Keane in the next 48 hours and is confident of persuading the Republic of Ireland international to join his Championship promotion mission.

Leicester have missed out on Reading's Shane Long, who joined West Bromwich Albion in a £7 million deal, and seen three bids for Bristol City forward Nicky Maynard rejected.

And Eriksson is now ready to turn his attentions to Keane, 31, and offer him an escape route from his frustration at Tottenham Hotspur.

Keane spent a disappointing loan spell at West Ham last season and has been touted around rival Premier League clubs in an attempt to get his substantial £80,000 wages off the books.

Eriksson is prepared to offer the former Liverpool player a lucrative salary and take the transfer fees paid out for him in his career towards the £80 million mark. "I always said if we can get a striker with a good goalscoring record, we are going to try," said Eriksson.

"If there is a proven striker who can score 20 goals then we will work hard to bring him in."

Eriksson has already signed 11 players this far this summer and luring Keane to the King Power Stadium would complete his business in this transfer window.

(Source: Telegraph)

