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Sunderland may twist Brown's arm to take up reins

Louise Taylor: Sunderland may twist Phil Brown's arm to take up reins

The Hull manager and Sam Allardyce offer contrasting options to step into Roy Keane's smouldering shoes

THESPORTBLOG
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Sport blog

Sam Allardyce and Phil Brown in their Bolton days.

Photograph: Gary M. Prior/Getty Images

Roy Keane's car had barely screeched through the electronic gates of his Cheshire mansion on Thursday afternoon when Sam Allardyce made a very public pitch for the job vacated by the Irishman. At around the same time Phil Brown reaffirmed his commitment to Hull City [<http://tinyurl.com/44z9g6>] but still remained high in the betting to become Sunderland [<http://tinyurl.com/4h42wu>]'s next manager.

Brown spent several years assisting Allardyce at Bolton Wanderers and the two remain close confidants. All the indications are that Hull's manager will stay loyal to Humberside while backing his old friend's candidature but Brown would hardly be human if a little part of him did not scream "right job, wrong time".

As Niall Quinn, Sunderland's chairman, sat at his home in Ireland pondering a slew of applications yesterday he will surely have wondered if Brown's arm might be twistable. During a board meeting on Thursday night Quinn and his co-directors opened a debate on precisely who might be capable of stepping into Keane's still smouldering shoes but resolved not to rush into a decision. "We have an open mind about the next manager," he said last night. "We will be professional and will take as long as necessary to get the right man. We're putting together a list and we'll take it from there."

Among the names already in the frame is that of Gordon Strachan. Despite claiming the contrary, Strachan may feel he has taken Celtic as far as he can and would offer Sunderland some of the edgy, quirky factor afforded by Keane. Then there is Dick Advocaat, the experienced Dutch coach who has done such a good job at Zenit St Petersburg, and David O'Leary who played with Quinn at Arsenal and for Ireland.

O'Leary's stock has plunged since he led Leeds to the Champions League semi-finals and kept Aston Villa treading Premier League [<http://tinyurl.com/6yneax>] water but the brand of high-tempo, often highly fluent football his teams



tried to play would suit the squad assembled by Keane, who demanded good passing and movement and did not believe the modern game should be all about height and athleticism.

Allardyce harbours rather different, much more pragmatic, views but boasts an impressive track record of working with awkward players at Bolton and would surely soon have El Hadji Diouf, whom he lured to the Reebok, and Pascal Chimbonda eating out of his hand.

A former Sunderland centre-half, Allardyce is not only very much available, having been out of work since his sacking by Newcastle 11 months ago, but previously rejected an approach from Quinn before Keane's appointment in 2006. Back then, Sunderland were a Championship club and "Big Sam" was hyped as the next England manager but their respective fortunes have since altered significantly.

So, too have Brown's. Indeed Hull's manager has emerged from a brief, and disastrous, stint in charge of Derby as an arguably stronger and more suitable candidate than his old friend. A son of South Shields, Brown is a Sunderland fan even boasting the street cred garnered by being beaten up at St James' Park while cheering the team on against Newcastle.

Heavily influenced by the purist Bruce Rioch during his days as a Bolton right-back, Brown has successfully married Allardyce's meticulous emphasis on sports science, psychology and statistics with his own more creative instincts at the KC Stadium. Moreover he has the knack of handling mavericks such as Geovanni and has turned the on-loan Sunderland player Paul McShane into a decent right-back, something Keane singularly failed to do.

Granted Hull are organised and strong at set pieces but they also play some pleasing passing football. With the recession biting on Wearside and attendances dropping, Quinn will be well aware he cannot afford a return to the dour football which preceded Keane's installation.

Allardyce, however, is less concerned by aesthetics and may not be keen to accommodate the small and stocky Andy Reid, Sunderland's best, most improvisational, passer and a crowd favourite. He also bought badly at Newcastle while assembling

an overblown backroom team. In mitigation, if the signing of Joey Barton was a huge mistake, Allardyce did wheel and deal brilliantly at Bolton, attracting not only Diouf but, Nicolas Anelka, Youri Djorkaeff and Iván Campo.

Such transfer market acumen could pay dividends when it comes to drastically reducing yet somehow reinforcing an oversized Sunderland squad featuring several barely used individuals such as Rade Prica, Liam Miller and David Healy on generous contracts that might deter potential purchasers.

Like Allardyce, Brown had an infinitely less distinguished playing career than Keane but, invariably sharp-suited and equipped with smart one-liners, he is unprecious and possesses humour and a brassy personality which might play well on Wearside. The 49-year-old would not be unduly stressed by the idea of replacing such a big name or the intensity of media coverage in the north-east. While Brown enjoys an excellent relationship with Hull's chairman, Paul Duffen, and feels bound to a club which revived his managerial career, Sunderland offer greater resources and emotional resonance.

Blair's kicks haul misfiring Blues past dogged Biarritz defence Heineken Cup: Cardiff Blues 21-17 Biarritz

Paul Rees at Arms Park

The Blues continued their best start to a Heineken Cup [<http://tinyurl.com/4jev8>] campaign, but they spluttered and stuttered where they had flowed smoothly in October and were fortunate to win after being outscored by two tries to none. If Biarritz [<http://tinyurl.com/59mblj>] felt aggrieved at the standard of refereeing they encountered in Gloucester last month, they had even greater cause for complaint last night. It is an issue that should be vexing the tournament organisers.

The Blues, one of only two sides to secure maximum points in the first two rounds, were fortunate to trail by only 10-9 at the break as they struggled to reintegrate five players who had spent the previous month with Wales. They were not helped by a referee, George Clancy of Ireland, who seemed to blow after every set piece, but there was also a stiffened resolution to Biarritz. The 2006 runners-up played with adventure, although they conceded six points at the end of the half after messing around in their own 22. The Blues struggled to offload in Biarritz's double tackles.

The French side scored the only try of the half after the Blues lost the ball in their own half. Takudzwa Ngwenya sprinted into the 22 and fed his full-back, Benjamin Thiery, who provided Damien Traille with a scoring pass. Ngwenya should have scored minutes later after Julien Peyrelongue weaved his way towards the line, but the wing lost the ball in a robust tackle by Leigh Halfpenny. The Blues reduced the deficit with Ben Blair's two penalties and a Nicky Robinson drop-goal.

The hosts took the lead a minute after the restart with Blair's third penalty and appeared to have taken control when Robinson dropped a second goal. Biarritz grew perplexed at some of Clancy's decisions, including a series of calls for feeding: the Blues' scrum-half, Jason Spice, was not averse to avoiding the tunnel himself.

Peyrelongue thought he had kicked a 40-yard drop-goal,

only for the video official, John Sheehan, to decide the ball had dipped under the bar. The fly-half responded with a solo try that he converted only for a Blair's two penalties to put the home side back in front.

Cardiff Blues [<http://tinyurl.com/5kgo2a>] Blair; Halfpenny (James, 69), J Robinson, Shanklin, G Thomas; N Robinson, Spice; Jenkins, G Williams (T Thomas, 67), G Powell (Filise, 67), Jones, Tito (capt), Molitika, M Williams, A Powell.

Pens Blair 5. Drop-goals N Robinson 2.

Sin-bin Molitika 75.

Biarritz Thiery; Ngwenya, Bidabé, Traille, Bolakoro; Peyrelongue (Cabannes, 79), Cibray; Barcella (Coetzee, 16), Noirot (August, 51), Moala (Noirot, 64), Thion (capt), Hall, Som (Lauret, 50), Dridi, Harinordoquy.

Tries Traille, Peyrelongue. Cons Peyrelongue 2.

Pen Peyrelongue.

Referee G Clancy (Ireland). Attendance 11,206.

Saint-Andre is not finished yet as Sale breeze past Montauban Heineken Cup: Sale 36-6 Montauban

Andy Wilson at Edgeley Park

Sale ended a tricky week in reassuring style last night, responding to the confirmation that their popular director of rugby Philippe Saint-Andre will leave at the end of the season with a routine bonus-point victory that lifts them to the top of their Heineken Cup [<http://tinyurl.com/4jev8>] pool.

Saint-Andre would love to add a European triumph to the Premiership title he helped bring north in 2006 before he decides which French club to join next year – with Biarritz shaping as a more attractive option than Toulon – and although the Sharks will face much tougher tests than this, starting at Munster in January, a win in Montauban next weekend would leave them almost in the quarter finals.

Andrew Sheridan also made a return from the neck injury he suffered with England but his captain Juan Martin Fernandez Lobbe was the star of the show.

Within five minutes Fernandez-Lobbe was driven over from close range for the Argentinian's first try of the season and he did not have to wait long for a second as, after Montauban's fly-half Cedric Rosalen had responded with a drop goal, Charlie Hodgson floated a pass to the right where Lobbe was loitering with intent. Montauban could have cut the deficit to 12-9 had Rosalen landed a couple of very kickable penalties. Instead Hodgson extended Sale's lead to 15-3 by half-time and although Rosalen finally found the target in the 48th minute the Sharks quickly stretched out of sight with the try of the night, as Rory Lamont and Lobbe sent Andy Tuilagi charging clear.

Prop Eifion Roberts rumbled over for his first try in two seasons at Sale to secure a bonus point that could prove crucial come January and Luke McAllister pinched a late chargedown score, but Sale had already made their point – even sans Saint-Andre, life will go on.

Sale Sharks [<http://tinyurl.com/5v4shw>]: Lamont; Cueto, Tuilagi, McAllister, Doherty; Hodgson, Peel (Wigglesworth, 54); Faure (Sheridan, h-t), Jones, Roberts, Chabal (Cockbain, 61) Schofield, Fearn, Briggs, Lobbe (capt). Replacements: Turner, D Tait, , Bell, M Tait.

Tries: Lobbe (2), Tuilagi, Roberts, McAllister. Pen: Hodgson. Cons: Hodgson (4).

Montauban: Riva; Figueiredo, Avramovic, Paku, Cassin; Rosalen, Culinat; Delboulbes (Balan, 53), Arganese (Mach, h-t) Adams (Sa, 53), Murray (capt) (Rolland, 61), Frost, Battut, Clarkin, Soldan. Replacements: Sa, Diarra, Jonnet, Fortassin.

Pen: Rosalen. Drop-goal: Rosalen.

Referee: P Fitzgibbon (Ireland)

Wasps gain strength from Cipriani's sweet striking

Heineken Cup: Edinburgh 16-25 Wasps

Robert Kitson at Murrayfield



Danny Cipriani kicked 20 points against Edinburgh.

Photograph: Warren Little/Getty Images

Danny Cipriani made a successful return to club action following his disappointing autumn at Twickenham as Wasps last night kept alive their hopes of Heineken Cup [<http://tinyurl.com/4jev8>] qualification. Cipriani did most of the damage with a personal haul of 20 points which ultimately settled a disjointed match while Edinburgh's head coach, Andy Robinson, was left raging at the performance of the French referee, Christophe Berdos.

Robinson's evident desire to claim victory over the English champions was scuppered by a controversial 70th-minute incident when Edinburgh's openside flanker Ross Rennie was sin-binned, allegedly for a dangerous tackle. The former England coach could not hide his bitter frustration, describing the decision as "embarrassing" and expressing bafflement at Tom Rees's subsequent 78th-minute try which looked suspiciously like a double movement.

The constant tattoo of fists on the windows of the coach's booth was perhaps the most memorable aspect of an evening which virtually ends Edinburgh's chances of reaching the last eight. They had trailed until the hour when Mark Robertson reacted quickest to Phil Godman's cross-kick and dived on the loose ball just inside the in-goal area. Paterson's conversion put the home side 16-15 ahead in front of a crowd of 7,711, a record attendance for an Edinburgh home game in Europe. With 60,000 empty seats to be filled before the authorities can post the 'sold-out' signs, that has to remain a relative statistic and the faithful did not file home happy.

Monsieur Berdos, in particular, is unlikely to receive the freedom of Edinburgh any time soon. His whistle was also a constant feature of a kick-dominated first half. Wasps, wearing

black armbands in honour of Lawrence Dallaglio's late mother Eileen, struggled to impose themselves early on and players on both sides were guilty of frequent errors, not least Cipriani whose first punt curled straight out on the full. A failure to chase a subsequent up-and-under also led to an Edinburgh penalty for offside but the fly-half had much more joy with his goalkicking, sliding over three early penalties to give his side a 9-0 lead inside 24 minutes.

Edinburgh also lost their Scotland hooker Ross Ford who had to be helped off at the end of the first quarter and rarely achieved the penetration to match their neat approach work. The referee also took a dim view of their work at the breakdown and hands in the ruck allowed Cipriani to kick a sweet 50-metre angled penalty.

The home side's inability to score a try after a period of pressure on their opponents' line further boosted Wasps' confidence against a team who had already beaten them in a pre-season game. Edinburgh, with 12 internationals in their starting line-up and three more on the bench, did manage a solitary 36th-minute penalty from Paterson but it was not until after half-time that they found some rhythm.

Two more penalties from Paterson dragged them back to within three points and it took a last-ditch defensive effort in the left corner from Paul Sackey and Mark van Gisbergen to deny Nick de Luca after he had gathered Godman's diagonal punt. It seemed Wasps might be on the verge of cracking but too often Edinburgh paid the price for getting carried away with the line in sight. Following yet another turnover, Wasps broke up the other end for Cipriani to add his fifth penalty but the subsequent drama was strictly for the connoisseur.

The result, even so, gives Wasps a lifeline in Pool 2. Their heavy defeat to Leinster in Dublin still counts against them but next weekend's reverse fixture against Edinburgh now has a much less doom-laden look. Robinson might just have calmed down by then but, frankly, it would be wise not to bet on it. As for England's international contingent, any sort of victory after three weeks of Test misery is to be celebrated, regardless of how it might be achieved.

Edinburgh Paterson, Robertson, Cairns, De Luca, Webster, Godman, M Blair, Jacobsen, Ford (Kelly, 18), G Cross, C Hamilton (Mustchin, 58), J Hamilton, MacDonald, Rennie, Hogg.

Try Robertson. Con Paterson. Pens Paterson 3.

Yellow card Rennie 70.

London Wasps [<http://tinyurl.com/3se7lw>] Van Gisbergen, Sackey, Waldouck, Flutey, Lewsey, Cipriani, Reddan, Payne, Webber, Vickery, Skivington (Shaw, 55), Birkett, Betsen, Rees (French, 80), Haskell.

Try Rees. Con Cipriani. Pens Cipriani 6.

Referee C Berdos (France). Attendance 7,711.

Maccarinelli fight off

Boxing: Maccarinelli fight off

Enzo Maccarinelli will not reclaim the WBO cruiserweight title at the ExCeL Arena in London tonight after his opponent Francisco Alvarez failed the pre-fight medical. The Puerto Rican stepped in at late notice this week after the unbeaten American Johnathon Banks was forced out of the clash for the vacant title through injury.

Alvarez was brought in to save the contest, which replaced

Nicky Cook's super-featherweight world title defence against Stephen Foster Jr at the top of the bill when Cook pulled out with flu but the Caribbean fighter, after needing two attempts to make the 200lb weight limit, then failed his medical yesterday afternoon. Maccarinelli lost the WBO belt in March when he was outclassed by his domestic rival David Haye, who then relinquished the cruiserweight titles to move up to heavyweight.

Promoter Frank Warren managed to secure the Swansea puncher an immediate shot at the title against Banks, only for an injury in training to rule the American out. And after Alvarez's enforced withdrawal, Maccarinelli will not be able to fight for the belt tonight, though a replacement opponent is being sought.

After both the Cook and Maccarinelli fights were hit by withdrawals, Amir Khan may find the spotlight even stronger when he returns from his first career defeat in London. The 2004 Olympic silver medalist has admitted the pressure is on against Irishman Oisín Fagan after the defeat by Breidis Prescott and with Maccarinelli's title tilt now off, Khan is likely to be the main attraction.

People are out to get Keane and me, claims Ince

Premier League: people are out to get Keane and me – Ince

● Public desperate for us to fail, says ex-United man ● Call for English coaches to be given time to develop

Andy Hunter and Daniel Taylor



Paul Ince and Roy Keane, back in the day. Photograph: Action Images

Paul Ince epitomised a manager under siege yesterday when he claimed to be a victim of English football hypocrisy and of a public desperate to see him and Roy Keane [<http://tinyurl.com/598rnf>] fail because of their notoriety as “snarling” Manchester United stars.

After only 19 games in charge of Blackburn, and with a slender squad beset by injury, Ince finds himself the bookmakers' favourite to be the next Premier League [<http://tinyurl.com/6yneax>] manager to lose his job following Keane's departure from Sunderland [<http://tinyurl.com/4h42wu>] this week. Blackburn entertain the leaders, Liverpool, this afternoon and are without a win in nine league games and on guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2007

the back of a demoralising 5-3 Carling Cup defeat by United, when Rovers' supporters called for Ince's head and the return of the former manager Graeme Souness.

Ince chose not to face the media at Old Trafford on Wednesday night but issued a belligerent response to those clamouring for him to go at Blackburn's training ground yesterday morning. The 41-year-old accused those critics who bemoan the lack of home-grown candidates for the England national job, yet demand his dismissal after less than six months at Blackburn, of double standards and claimed a conspiracy is at work to unseat himself and Keane because of the reputations they cultivated as players. Unlike the more introverted Irishman, however, Ince insisted he has no intention of walking away from Rovers.

“I have been through tough times and I have got a thick skin,” Ince said. “But it winds me up when every day there is something about Blackburn, Blackburn, Blackburn; jobs on the line, jobs on the line, jobs on the line. Joe Kinnear is two points above us with a £70m team at Newcastle and nobody is mentioning him. Nobody is mentioning Harry Redknapp. It has just been Ince, Keane, Ince, Keane.

“I think there are people out to get us. They look at Keane and I in our Manchester United days and see us as snarling old people. But we are not like that. We are nice guys, family men. I think people are envious and don't want us to succeed. That has always been the case through my career and Keane's career. It doesn't bother me. All I want people to understand is the hard facts and not just focus on two young managers who are trying to make their way in football and to kick us around all the bloody time.”

Kinnear and Redknapp have collected 11 points from nine games and 13 points from seven respectively since being installed at St James' Park and White Hart Lane but, despite the contrast with Blackburn's recent form, Ince believes it is imperative that young English managers are given time to develop.

“We have been moaning that we had to go outside our country to find an England coach,” he said. [Fabio] Capello has done a fantastic job but he will only be judged on what happens in a World Cup. It is important that the likes of myself, Gareth Southgate and Tony Adams get their grounding in the Premier League because you'd like to think the next England manager is going to be English. Not necessarily me, but somebody English.”

Ince accused the radio phone-in culture and a local television station, which polled Blackburn supporters on his ability this week, of inflaming tensions at Ewood. “It is terrible, really terrible,” he said. As the travelling contingent at Old Trafford illustrated, however, concerns about the former England captain are not confined to the media. Blackburn's directors are believed to have discussed how long they can allow the present run to go unchecked. On the evidence of last season, the portents are ominous for Ince, whose future is more likely to rest on the fixtures that follow Liverpool – Wigan, Stoke and Sunderland.

Of the eight clubs that went nine or more league games without a win last season, five replaced their manager and avoided relegation: Newcastle, Fulham, Tottenham, Wigan and Bolton. Of the three who showed faith in their managers, two went down. Southgate, under the wise counsel of Steve Gibson at Middlesbrough, was the exception as Paul Jewell and

Steve Coppell were relegated with Derby County and Reading respectively.

Ince has not spoken to Keane since his close friend left Sunderland but has no doubts he will prove himself in management. "I am absolutely devastated but he will be back," he said. Their manager at United, Sir Alex Ferguson, is not so sure.

Ferguson, who faces Sunderland today, said: "We wish Roy well because he was a great player here. It's a pity. It's difficult to say whether he'll be back. He was an incredible, controversial character who always had something to say about the game. He's quite an interesting character."

As for the beleaguered Ince, the United manager added: "I certainly hope he gets time. He has taken over a club that doesn't have the financial backing of a few years ago, so therefore it's a difficult job now. Paul needs time to reshape the club."

Are our cliches in trouble

Barney Ronay: Are our cliches in trouble

Evidence of the global economic crisis's effects can be found in the total dearth of novel and fruity footballing commonplaces

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I experienced a chilling sensation this week while reading the words of Peter Crouch. He was complaining about his reputation, specifically the fact that "people say 'you can whack a ball up to him but that's it'". The thing is, people don't say that about him. People said it about him ages ago. Then for a while people said he had a surprisingly delicate touch for such a big man. And now people say he only ever scores occasional overhead scissor-kicks against St Kitts and Nevis. That's what people say.

Maybe it's not important. But these things always seem like nothing at first. It's a bit like those telltale signs it's about to kick off in an apocalypse-type-scenario TV mini-series: laughing rich people making plans for the future, the not-very-good-looking spouse saying, "It's nothing ... HWWWORRRGGHGH!!! ... just a cough." It's only 20 minutes later, hunkered down in your squirrel-skin jerkin trying to liberate an out-of-date tin of faggots from Kwik Save, that you realise something was terribly wrong all along.

And, true to form, by the end of the week we were being told Cristiano Ronaldo was "fascinated" by the idea of working with Jose Mourinho. This was even more jarring. It's three-years-ago talk. No one's fascinated by Mourinho now. Instead we're vaguely sneery. We see a handsome Howard Wilkinson, Don Howe in a cashmere thong. What's going on?

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In fact, what we're experiencing is a process of regurgitation. We've all wondered how the abrupt frazzling away of our combined global wealth might hit football. It turns out it's the cliches. The cliches have gone. We reach down for an apt and fruity commonplace to express Crouchie's evolution into peripheral beanpole elder statesman. And all we can cough up is the verbal equivalent of last night's meat dhansak, already tart with semi-digested chickpea.

We should have seen the signs. We should have read more into Robbie Keane's goal agony. We heard the talk. He just needed one goal – then he'd be "off on a run". But Keane got his goal. And he's still trapped inside the same enduring personalised goal agony, much like the imperilled pencil drawing of Morten Harket in A-Ha's video for Take On Me.

Here we had a case of complete cliché failure. We pushed the button and there was nothing there. Must be the batteries, we mumbled, flicking switches, uselessly rebooting.

It's hard to take because the cliché used to be superabundant. In the good times we even played fast and loose. We took risks. Like many others I even tried introducing my own unregulated cliches into the mainstream. For a while I repeatedly referred to the Barcelona player Xavi as "a doughty midfield tent-peg". I dropped casual references to "the tent-peg role". Even, once, to "a classic tent-peg display on which the midfield fly sheet strung its rippling canvas". It still seems strange nobody picked it up.



Last season during Rangers' run to the Uefa Cup final I often described the Gers' brand of mass leaping out in front of the ball as "The Tetris Defence". To me this seemed hip and cute. It felt like it would be a goer. Occasionally I would hopefully Google "Tetris Defence" or "a display of what the Italians call 'la difesa Tetris'". But nothing. I didn't get it.

Looking back now it's clear this is no reflection on the quality of my cliches, but the earliest sign of a total falling off. And now we're going backwards, left with nothing but the rusting hulks of football cliches past. If only we had seen it coming. We could have done something. We might have been able to put in a fulminating reducer and pull off a tip-top show of hats-off wizardry. Oh dear.



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Froch craves X Factor billing for world title showdown

Boxing: Carl Froch craves X Factor billing for world title showdown against Jean Pascal

John Rawling

Since being installed as the No1 contender for the WBC world super-middleweight title 18 months ago, Carl Froch has been waiting impatiently for the opportunity to fight for the world crown. He finally gets his chance tonight in front of his home crowd at the Trent FM Arena in Nottingham when he faces Jean Pascal.

Froch, the British champion, is undefeated and has spoken with confidence about how he will knock out the Quebec policeman, who is also undefeated, to take what he hopes will be a significant step towards becoming one of the sport's household names. But the 26-year-old Pascal is a live, dangerous opponent who is likely to provide a searching examination of Froch's credentials.

"I'm a big X Factor fan, and I would have been watching the semi-final this weekend, so I suppose I will have to record it and watch it later," said Froch. "But the good news is that I will be inheriting perhaps the biggest TV audience of the weekend for my fight because I will be on ITV after The X Factor ends. Hopefully millions will stay tuned to watch me win the title.

"I have been waiting for this chance for a long time. First, Joe Calzaghe decided he didn't want to fight me. Then there was the Russian Denis Inkin and the American [former world middleweight champion] Jermain Taylor. They all came up with alternative plans and you have to ask yourself why. It can only be because they didn't fancy sharing the ring with me."

Pascal, like Froch, was an outstanding amateur and looked the best boxer of the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester when he won the gold medal at middleweight. Since turning professional, the Haiti-born fighter has been impressive. His speed and mobility command respect while a concussive right hand has helped him stop 14 of his 21 opponents. Froch, by comparison, has stopped 19 of 23.

"It's better to have speed than power," said Pascal. "I guess I'm quicker than him and this fight will be a mental thing. In that regard I am also stronger. My team knows more about Carl Froch than he knows about himself. I do respect him, as a person and as a fighter. He's a good, solid boxer and a heavy puncher ... but I am confident that I will win."

Home advantage is sure to aid Froch, with a crowd of 7,000 or more expected, and he is likely to justify bookmakers' odds that rate him as the 4-9 favourite. With the exception of Calzaghe, Froch has proved himself to be the top super-middleweight in Britain and now he wants to emulate the Welshman by beginning his own era of world domination.

"What Joe has achieved is brilliant. He's had his ups and downs but has not lost any contest in 20 years. He's done every job asked of him and proved he is the best. That's why I wanted to fight him. I genuinely want to know if I am the best. And there's still no reason why that fight can't happen if I win this, and Joe fights on.

"I am 31, and this is my time," Froch continued. "I'd like to

think I can win and dominate for five or six years, defending the title 10 or 11 times. I want to be like Joe and Ricky Hatton, fighting in Las Vegas and Madison Square Garden. But first it's Pascal. And I don't intend to let all my fans down after waiting so long for this opportunity."

Mismatch of the century propels Pacquiao to the peak

Kevin Mitchell: Mismatch of the century propels Pacquiao to the peak

De La Hoya's size gives him an advantage but he has too many voices in his corner

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Oscar De La Hoya and Manny Pacquiao will face each other in Las Vegas tonight. Photograph: Jae C. Hong/AP

Floyd Mayweather Sr, who moves through boxing [http://tinyurl.com/5ra7ax] like grizzled royalty, leans forward and wheezes slowly, "Listen, Oscar ain't the quickest learner in this business, but he won't need to know too much to beat Manny. He's plain just too big."

And that, for the past several weeks, has been the prevailing view among the fight game's wise guys about the hugely anticipated, title-free collision set at 147 lbs at the MGM Grand Arena in Las Vegas in the early hours of Sunday morning between Oscar De La Hoya and Manny Pacquiao.

The sheer perversity of matching the bigger 35-year-old, six-weight champion De La Hoya and the 29-year-old four-weight champion Pacquiao has proved to be a stroke of genius – and one of De La Hoya's inventions, as he is in on the promotion and 67% of the take.

The fight makes no sense, as the self-proclaimed sage Mayweather Sr rightly points out, yet Las Vegas is talking about little else. And that is a rarity in boxing these days, as genuinely big fights are spaced further and further apart, and the crude

spectacle of cage fighting eats steadily into the sport's core support.

At stake are Latino bragging rights, still the most valuable currency in the business west and south of the Rockies, a potential pay-per-view audience of two million and boxing's fading credibility in a shrinking US market. This is a throwback fight, a match that might have been made in the ad hoc days of bareknuckle challenges.

It is that – coupled with the pedigree of the antagonists – which has created the buzz, and the absence of those lean vultures of the business, the sanctioning bodies, has lent a sense of innocent freshness to the occasion.

There are no alphabet belts on show (although the World Boxing Council has been shamelessly trying to extract \$100,000 from Pacquiao, who is their lightweight champion), and all that is on the line has been generated by a promotional campaign of which either John L Sullivan or Barack Obama would have been proud. Indeed, Bob Arum, who promotes Pacquiao, tried clumsily to compare De La Hoya (a former client) to John McCain at the final press conference as the barkers strained for one last headline.

So, who will win? I shared Mayweather's scepticism all the way up to the final days before his latest work of art, Ricky Hatton, resurrected his career by stopping Paulie Malignaggi in the same ring two weekends ago.

It is hard to argue with the old man's logic. "Listen," says Mayweather, who has trained De La Hoya and would like to again, possibly against Hatton, "Oscar is still a great fighter. He might be slower but I showed him how to throw a right hand after for years he just had a jab and a hook. And Manny, he just can't fill out that frame. Of course he will be at the weight, but he will be fat at the weight. He can't carry 147 pounds."

However, it was Mayweather's following caveat, which he shared the day after the Hatton fight, which struck an arrow of doubt in his own thesis. "I gotta say, Oscar bringing in Angelo Dundee in the corner, alongside Nacho [Ignacio Beristáin], that worries me a little. They both strategists. They thinkers. They not hands-on. He don't need two strategists. That's too much thinking."

It's a good point. All his 44-fight, title-littered career, stretching to 1992 and probably even back to his Olympic gold medal in Barcelona earlier that year, De La Hoya has needed reassurance about his gifts. His father, a middling fighter himself, has been his most unforgiving critic, and the carping has both inspired and inhibited De La Hoya, who like most extroverts, remains essentially a shy man.

He has been through six trainers – including Pacquiao's mentor Freddie Roach in his second last fight, a points loss to Floyd Mayweather Jr last year – several promoters and numerous back-slapping confidants. For a fighter who aspires to greatness, De La Hoya is conspicuously dependent on the acclaim of the hired help. Not so Pacquiao. His energy for the fight – never more so than in this one – derives from the strength of the people he represents. It is elemental and uncomplicated, and, as such, needs no embroidering by encouraging words.

Pacquiao's god-like status in the Philippines is not hyped; they really love the little man who, in 52 mainly frenetic bouts since 1995 when he was just 16, has won world titles at flyweight (1997), super-bantamweight (1999), super-featherweight (2005) and lightweight (last June).

He has beaten the best small men of his era – the outstanding Thai fly Chatchai Sasakul, the then unbeaten Korean super-bantam Seung-Kon Chae, Mexican multi-weight heroes Marco Antonio Barrera, Erik Morales and Juan Manuel Márquez. There have been setbacks – a stoppage defeat at the cruel hands of the peerless Thai champion Medgoen Singsurat and an early-career countout loss to one Rustico Torrecampo, a compatriot of towering ordinariness who can boast in retirement of once beating a legend. But he inspired respect and awe by ignoring those blips, and reinvented himself.

Pacquiao brings all that to this fight, the one for which both men will be best remembered. The Filipino shows nerves but little fear in confronting De La Hoya. He once was remarkable, no question, a fighter who dodged nobody, who took on Rafael Ruelas, an old Julio César Chávez, an unlucky Pernell Whittaker, Félix Trinidad, Shane Mosley, Fernando Vargas, Javier Castillejo, Felix Sturm, Ricardo Mayorga and Floyd Mayweather Jr.

It is a stellar list. He did not always prevail – indeed, in 12 fights since he lost to Trinidad in 1999, De La Hoya has lost four times and been stopped once, by Bernard Hopkins. It is that which counts against him, a period of gradual decline set against Pacquiao's sustained rise. But he will lose gloriously, bloodied and drained of his already failing stamina, but still standing after 12 rounds. It might be one of boxing's truly great fights.

Oscar De La Hoya

Born Montebello Age 35 Height 5ft 10in Weight 147lb Reach 73in Neck 15½in Chest 39-42½in Waist 31¾in Biceps 13¾ Forearm 12in Wrist 7in Fist 9in Thigh 21in Calf 13½in w/d/l 39/0/5 KOs 30

Manny Pacquiao

Born Bukidnon Age 29 Height 5ft 6½in Weight 146lb Reach 67in Neck 16in Chest 38-41in Waist 28in Biceps 13in Forearm 12in Wrist 8in Fist 10in Thigh 20in Calf 15in w/d/l 47/2/3 KOs 35



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Stretch denied second chance as Khan embarks on road to redemption in London

Boxing: Gary Stretch denied second chance as Amir Khan embarks on road to redemption in London

Kevin Mitchell



Amir Khan goes face-to-face with Oisín Fagan. Photograph: John Gichigi/Getty Images

If, as Shakespeare has Cleopatra saying, there is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon, it is not inconceivable that Amir Khan [<http://tinyurl.com/6lg4w8>] will be knocked out in the Docklands of London's east end this freezing winter's night. On the other hand (probably Khan's withering left), Oisín Fagan, visiting from his base in Oklahoma City, is more likely to become the Bolton lightweight's 19th victim in what few could dispute has been a compelling ascent to stardom and wealth for the 21-year-old fighter. Should Fagan prevail against the odds, the tenets of boxing [<http://tinyurl.com/5ra7ax>] will be rendered irrelevant, in this case the one that allows for no spoilsports in the business of making a champion.

That glittering progress was rudely interrupted, of course, in Manchester two months ago when a chin some experts have adjudged in retrospect to be unreliable let young Khan down as he suffered the first defeat of his fledgling career, beaten within 54 seconds.

The interloper that night was the undefeated Colombian Breidis Prescott, whom the promoter Frank Warren declared would figure on his subsequent promotions and would, if all went to plan, be brought back for a rematch with Khan some time in 2009. There have been no recent sightings of Mr Prescott.

Nor have we seen Gary Stretch, the one-time light-middleweight and middleweight from St Helens, a fine boxer who gave Chris Eubank one of his most testing examinations back in 1991, the penultimate of Stretch's 25 contests and only his second defeat. When Khan went to Los Angeles following his shock defeat to Prescott in September to rebuild his career with the esteemed Freddie Roach, the trainer's first call had been to Stretch, whom he had trained towards the end of his boxing days. The plan then – and up until a couple of phone calls were exchanged last week – was for Stretch to be Khan's chief second at the ExCel Arena tonight.

"Freddie rang me a week ago," Stretch said from his home in guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2007

Los Angeles last night, "and said, 'I'm sorry, you're not going.' He said he couldn't say more than that. It seems someone from Khan's camp had intervened. But it's a bit of a mystery."

And a concern. Because, if those close to Khan are meddling in his preparation, they risk repeating the sort of confusion that saw the ring-rich but English-poor Cuban trainer Jorge Rubio stepping in at short notice for Amir's last bout.

"Freddie initially wanted me in Amir's corner because he knows I know how to read a fight," Stretch said. "He wanted someone there with a cool head and boxing experience if things start to go wrong and we need a Plan B. He has Jesse [Arevalo] and that's fine. But Jesse is a hands-on second, not a main man in the corner. Anyway, I am right behind the kid. He's a great talent and I hope he wins."

The one thing that could stop him from doing so is a cheeky, relaxed, transplanted Dubliner who looks smaller in frame than Khan and will do well not to be blown away in the early rounds.

Still, the "Gael Force", as he calls himself, ought not to be dismissed out of hand, despite his age, 34, and a record uncluttered with big names. His best effort, it would seem, was a split-decision loss over 10 rounds to the once highly regarded Paul Spadafora in March last year, two months before the American was sent back to prison for violating the parole conditions he had been given after serving time for shooting his girlfriend in 2004. All that said, if Khan cannot get past Fagan, it is doubtful Roach will want him back at his Wild Card Gym in Hollywood.

Enzo Maccarinelli, stopped by David Haye in March, is also looking for redemption. His chosen foe is Francisco Alvarez, who has been "on the bench" since the withdrawal of Johnathon Banks, and he steps in after negotiations with Herbie Hide disintegrated. Alvarez is 31 but has only been boxing for two years, without shaking the foundations of the sport, either. This is a barely legitimate match-up for the vacant WBO cruiserweight title.

Cash flow crisis at hard-up Hearts Football: Cash flow crisis at hard-up Hearts

Ewan Murray

Heart of Midlothian have insisted their second wage crisis of the season had been resolved yesterday, despite an ongoing issue over the payment of win bonuses.

All but six of the Hearts [<http://tinyurl.com/56uzqz>] playing staff received their weekly pay on Monday, three days late. Those six players, among whom are the highest earners at the club, agreed to have their salaries deferred amid cash-flow problems with the Ukio Bankas Investment Group, Hearts' Lithuania-based parent company.

Basic salary payments for the entire squad are now up to date, but attempts from board level to implement a new, incentive-based bonus structure mean none of them have been paid for the last four of Hearts' five wins in succession.

"The bonuses have not been paid at the moment," confirmed the midfielder Michael Stewart. "The wages have been but the bonus situation is under discussion. At the start of the season, the new management wanted to implement a bonus scheme which the board accepted. Three weeks ago, there

was discussion about renegotiating that. Having spoken to the hierarchy, we have been assured that the bonuses will be paid very shortly.”

Stewart and his team-mates held talks with senior club officials before training yesterday morning in a bid to clarify Hearts’ financial position. The mood thereafter, publicly at least, was positive. “This club pays players weekly, which is different from any other club I know of,” added Stewart. “If you miss your wages one week and receive double a week later, it is no big deal and not all doom and gloom as is portrayed in the media. Money is not the be-all and end-all in life.”

Hearts are adamant the current situation is short-term. It will be remedied in part by an upcoming £350,000 payment from Sunderland when Craig Gordon, the goalkeeper who moved from Tynecastle last August, makes his 50th appearance. Player departures are likely in January and next summer, when 24 of the Hearts squad are out of contract.

Celtic’s manager, Gordon Strachan, yesterday collected the Scottish Premier League [http://tinyurl.com/6nes77]’s manager of the month award for November. The league leaders travel to Hibernian tomorrow.

England to start new season with Holland friendly in Amsterdam

Football: England to start new season with Holland friendly in Amsterdam

Tom Davies

England [http://tinyurl.com/4v7v9n] will open next season with a friendly against Holland in Amsterdam on August 12 next year. Fabio Capello hopes the fixture will serve as a useful warm-up for the conclusion of their World Cup qualifying campaign in the following two months, which includes matches against Croatia and the Ukraine.

The England manager regards Holland, who reached the quarter-finals of Euro 2008, as ideal friendly opponents. England last played in Amsterdam two years ago, when Wayne Rooney scored in a 1-1 draw.

As part of the deal, Holland will come to Wembley in August 2011, with Under-21 fixtures being played before each senior international. Next year’s game will be broadcast live on ITV, with Setanta screening the return.

The announcement means the 2009 fixture calendar is almost complete, with friendlies lined up against Slovakia and Slovenia in March and September respectively. Aside from the November dates, which would be required for any World Cup play-offs, the only one still to be filled is February 12, when England are expected to play Spain. Although the fixture has been agreed, the FA are still waiting to hear where Spain would prefer to play.

Milan [http://tinyurl.com/4azubx]’s playmaker Kaka has defended the club’s decision to sign David Beckham on a short-term loan deal in the winter transfer window. The England midfielder will join the Serie A club in January for two months before returning to LA Galaxy.

“Many people believe Beckham’s arrival will be a negative thing,” said Kaka. “But we players believe that he can really give a lot to this team and contribute to us winning the Scudetto and the Uefa Cup.”

Meanwhile, Kaka admits he and his team-mates are still adapting to playing alongside Ronaldinho. Kaka’s fellow Brazil international arrived at San Siro in the summer from Barcelona and has earned a regular place in Carlo Ancelotti’s starting XI. “Before we were used to playing automatically,” said Kaka. “Since Ronaldinho’s arrival, we still have to adapt. We still have to find a better understanding.” The Rossoneri lie third in Serie A and face Catania at San Siro tomorrow.

Milner backs Delfouneso to rise above the pressures of a prodigy

Premier League: James Milner backs Nathan Delfouneso to rise above the pressures of a prodigy

Stuart James

James Milner knows all about the challenges Nathan Delfouneso will face over the coming months. As someone who once held the title of being the Premier League [http://tinyurl.com/6yneax]’s youngest ever goalscorer, the Aston Villa [http://tinyurl.com/3w7jaz] midfielder is well qualified to talk about the expectation levels his 17-year-old team-mate will need to come to terms with after he marked his full debut in the Uefa Cup on Thursday with a superb volley that has propelled him into the picture for tomorrow’s meeting with Everton.

Martin O’Neill stopped short of claiming that Delfouneso’s emergence could save him a fortune in the transfer market next month, but it is a measure of the teenager’s impact that he has a genuine chance of making his first Premier League appearance at Goodison Park. With John Carew injured and Marlon Harewood making little impression during the 2-1 defeat to MSK Zilina, Delfouneso represents another option in attack should O’Neill seek support for Gabriel Agbonlahor.

“It was a fantastic finish from Nathan [against Zilina] and that was the plus side of the night,” said Milner who will return to the Villa starting line-up against Everton after he was rested until the second half on Thursday. “You are not going to get a better debut than that. He is definitely one for the future and, hopefully, he can kick on from there. He is a quality player. He has shown that in training and when he has come on.”

Milner acknowledged, however, that Delfouneso, who joined Villa at the age of eight and has long been regarded within the club as an exciting prospect for the future, will have to learn to live with the hype that accompanies being a teenage prodigy at a Premier League club. “It is tough,” added the England Under-21 international, recalling his time with Leeds United.

“You see what happens when young players do well early on. They get thrust into the limelight and there can be a lot of pressure sometimes. [Wayne] Rooney came through at a similar time as me, and if he hadn’t have come through there might have been a bit more pressure on me. You need to make sure you deal with [the pressure] in the right way and have the right people around you – and he will have the players, the staff, his friends and family.

“Nathan is a down-to-earth lad and I am sure he won’t let it get to his head. He is training with us 90% of the time and travels with us but he still does his jobs around the training ground, the boots and stuff like that, which is important, and shows he has got his head screwed on. He knows what it is all

about.”