

THE GAME'S GONE**By Neil Humphreys***The new, regular column for exasperated cynics of modern football*

WHEN Cristiano Ronaldo smashed his Ferrari in a Manchester tunnel on his way to training recently, there was a general consensus of opinion.

Same old Ronaldo. Whenever he makes the slightest contact, he always goes down.

The £200,000 Ferrari (a 599 GTB Fiorino no less, which should mean something to certain people but sounds rather like the town and postcode of an Italian town to me) was rumoured to be rather like its owner – unable to stay upright.

The luxury, limited edition model was high-maintenance and left its rivals in its slipstream, but still wilted in the face of sudden opposition, in this case the walls of the tunnel.

According to reports, the car bounced off the walls for quite a while, clearly playing up for the security cameras in the tunnel, rolled around a bit, before collapsing in a heap.

The melodrama of these continental thoroughbreds, eh?

Ronaldo was shaken, but not stirred and still turned up for Manchester United training that morning.

Reports suggest he may be sent on a driver improvement course, where he will no doubt spend a most productive day signing autographs for the instructors and posing for photographs with their star-struck children.

In the Bloody Dopey School of Driving, Ronaldo was quickly joined by his United team-mate Carlos Tevez.

The striker was stopped near United's Old Trafford ground because police were concerned about the tinted windows on his white Bentley. The police were worried that they could not see Tevez.

His United team-mates know how the police feel.

Tevez has been accused of going missing on the pitch of late, struggling to make an impact in key Premier League matches.

Police now accuse him of going missing every time he steps into his Bentley.

The 25-year-old Argentine was suspected of owning illegal tinted windows.

He did.

Police also discovered that Tevez was not in possession of the correct documents.

West Ham supporters know how the police feel.

Tevez struggled to secure the appropriate playing contract while turning out for the Hammers, now he lacks the correct UK driving licence when turning left in his Bentley.

Police had no choice but to seize the £140,000 car. Tevez had no choice but to look confused.

It has been a common facial expression for the peripheral

United striker.

If the tone of this piece is rather unsympathetic towards those magnificent Man U men and their (almost) flying machines, then it is merely representative of the general mood.

No one gives a toss. Couldn't care less.

Apart from a handful of one-eyed, blinkered United fans, who spend their lives looking through tinted windows, the average football (and sports) fan all said the same thing about Ronaldo and Tevez's driving antics. Ha ha.

It wasn't being callous – as neither player was injured – but merely indifferent. How can one empathise with a multi-millionaire messing up a car that costs, in some cases, 20 times the average annual salary?

The brain fails to compute such incomprehensible, obscene figures. Ronaldo and Tevez do not walk on water, far from it, but they do walk in different worlds; unattainable worlds that increasingly encourage only resentment rather than admiration.

The gap between the working man in the stands and the working man on the pitch is now unbridgeable and it only takes the odd prang in a Ferrari or some ostentatious tinted windows to be reminded of that fact.

Attitudes change with inflated bank balances: not theirs, ours. We expect more, not less.

There is a direct correlation between the verbal abuse England players now endure when they put a foot wrong at Wembley and the rise of multi-million pound wage packets, Baby Bentleys and fake-tanned WAGS.

The fan and footballer do not inhabit the same universe anymore and a connection has been lost. When a supporter cannot identify with a superstar's lifestyle, he cannot empathise and if he cannot empathise, he is less likely to tolerate.

In the early 1980s, I can vividly recall the then West Ham and England centre-back Alvin Martin crashing his car in east London. His car was a similar model to the one driven by my father, who was a plumber, and the accident occurred near a pub where my father used to drink.

Around those pubs and clubs of east London, there was some sympathy for Martin. He was a professional footballer and there was still a lifestyle gap between fan and footballer, but it was by no means a chasm.

Martin was still one of us. Because he never hid behind tinted windows.

● *British author and sports writer Neil Humphreys was born in Dagenham and now lives in Melbourne. His West Ham-coloured website is www.neilhumphreys.net*