

# Barthez makes big difference

**BY JEREMY BUTLER**

in Manchester

**M**anchester United defender Gary Neville believes goalkeeper Fabien Barthez has made the United defense stronger than in 1999, when it won the Champions League.

Barthez, who won the 1998 World Cup and 2000 European Championship with France, joined United at the start of the season for \$11.3 million, a British-record fee for a goalkeeper.

United manager Alex Ferguson targeted Barthez after Mark Bosnich failed to convince him as a replacement for former keeper Peter Shmeichel.

Neville believes the colorful Barthez's presence has led to a massive improvement in the team's backline.

"Fabien Barthez has made a very big difference behind us," said Neville after United's 0-0 tie with Valencia. "He has given us a lot of confidence. He is very sharp off his line, and anything that gets through us he usually sorts out."

Barthez came up with two big saves on Kily Gonzalez early in the second period of the Valencia game and the French keeper later had to make saves at the feet of Gonzalez and substitute Diego Alonso with his defense nowhere to be found.

Neville says United is defending better than it's done in the last three or four years. United has given up only 17 goals in 27 Premier League games and eight goals in nine Champions League matches.

"Last year was unacceptable defending," said Neville. "The year before that, in the European Cup when we won it, our defending was poor at times. But this season we have got back to the old ways, like when Steve Bruce and Gary Pallister were at the back." (*Reuters*)



**Manchester United is defending better than it's done in the last three or four years thanks to French keeper Fabien Barthez.**