

Wayne Rooney and Michael Owen (at the back) find something amusing during a practice session at Champney's Springs Hydro in Ashby de la Zouche in Leicestershire on June 2.

Owen and Wayne's world



AFP, Leicester

Stand-in England captain Michael Owen is confident he can forge a deadly strike partnership with new kid on the block Wayne Rooney.

Speaking ahead of England's friendly clash with Serbia Montenegro on Tuesday and next week's Euro 2004 qualifier against Slovakia, Owen voiced confidence that he could form an understanding with Rooney.

The Everton teenager may not start in Tuesday's friendly having only just recovered from a knee ligament injury.

But he is certain to line up alongside Owen for next week's crucial qualifier after an outstanding display in the 2-0 win over Turkey in April.

As Owen is still only 23 and Rooney just 17, the two strikers could have a lot of England matches in front of them but it remains to be seen if their combined threat is as great as the sum of their individual talents.

"I played with Wayne against Turkey but after about ten minutes I had a knock and I was never the same really," Owen admitted.

"I had to come off in the second half so it wasn't able to link and play the game I should have been able to play because of the kick I got in my back.

"So it was hard to form a proper understanding but he did well on a personal level."

There have been suggestions that Rooney and Owen, both relatively small strikers, could be less effective a combination than pairing one of them with a more traditional target man, like Owen's Liverpool team-mate Emile Heskey.

But that theory was dismissed by Owen, who will captain the side in the absence of the suspended David Beckham.

"I don't go along with people who say two players who are too similar or too different can't play together," the Liverpool striker said.

"It's all down to play and practising with them and spending time with them.

"Some partnerships click quicker

than others but I certainly think you can make it work with anyone. Whether I play with Emile Heskey or Milan Baros or anyone else, I still think I'd score around about the same goals per year.

"It's just a matter of time and if Wayne was to play then hopefully the partnership would form quite quickly."

England will go into the two matches without five first-choice players, forcing coach Sven-Goran Eriksson to reshuffle his defence and midfield.

But Owen said the mood in the England camp remained confident.

"There are always injury problems whether you are playing for your club or at international level.

"We have got a long list for these two games but I'm sure we can cope without them.

"We are playing two good footballing nations but nothing we should be afraid of. With the players we've got I'd be disappointed if we did not win on Tuesday and again the following Wednesday."

Month of qualifiers



REUTERS, London

The majority of European leagues have ended for the summer but the international calendar is no respecter of holidays with 37 Euro 2004 qualifiers scheduled for the next 10 days.

After 19 games next Saturday and another 18 the following Wednesday the qualification picture should start to look much clearer, with most teams down to their last two or three fixtures.

Having failed to impress in any of its three qualifiers to date, three-time champion Germany can nevertheless take a stranglehold on Group Five by beating Scotland and the Faroe Islands in two away games.

Germany, Scotland and Lithuania are all on seven points but the Germans, held to a 1-1 home draw by Lithuania last time out after scraping a 2-1 home win over the Faroes, have games in hand.

They warmed up with an easy 4-1 win over Canada on Sunday but will be wary of Scotland, managed by their former coach Bert Vogts.

Spain, the consummate qualifiers, is in a better position. A home win over Greece and an away success at hapless Northern Ireland -- who has yet to score in the competition -- will have Group Six just about done and dusted with two games to spare.

Defending champions France, away and clear with a maximum 15 points in Group One, is not in action so the interest is in the scramble for second place, which Israel's home game against Slovenia could go a long way towards settling.

In the other seven groups things are much tighter.

Norway, leading Group Two on 10 points, makes the short trip to Denmark (second on seven) before hosting Romania (third on six).

Fourth-placed Bosnia is also on six and could further muddy the waters when it visits Romania on Saturday.

Russia started its campaign with two big wins but shock defeats to Albania and Georgia have

allowed Switzerland to take the initiative in Group 10.

The top two meet in Basel on Saturday -- the Swiss on eight points with the Russians on six.

Ireland, who lost its first two games, and Albania, are also still in the mix. To stay in the running Ireland, on four points, must win its back-to-back home games against Albania and Georgia. Albania (five points) faces the difficult task of moving from Dublin to face the Swiss away four days later.

Group Seven leaders England's only game is a home match against Slovakia on June 11 -- exactly a month after the end of the premier league season.

The team will try to keep sharp with a home friendly against Serbia and Montenegro on Tuesday and hopes that second-placed Turkey drops points on Saturday away to the Slovaks.

England has 10 points while the Turks, World Cup semifinalists last year, have seven. They also host Macedonia next week.

Latvia, surprise leaders of a wide-open Group Four on 10 points, faces a test of its credentials when the team travels to Hungary (five points) on Saturday.

Sweden (five) against Poland (seven) on June 11 is another huge game for the group.

Wales, seeking to reach its first major finals since 1958, can put its feet up, relieved that the ban on Azerbaijan has been lifted and that the six points and six goals the team took from them remain safe.

Wales leads Group Nine on 12 points and Italy, second on seven, cannot afford a slip on its trip to Finland on June 11.

Bulgaria (10 points) can tighten its grip on Group Eight with a home win against Belgium (third on six) while Croatia (second on seven) faces an awkward trip to Estonia (fourth on five).

The Czech Republic and the Netherlands, locked together on 10 points at the top of Group Three, each play one.

The Dutch visit Belarus on Saturday then sit back as the Czechs try to match them at home to Moldova -- four games four defeats -- four days later.

Bobby goes to bat!



THE SUN, Newcastle

Sir Bobby Robson has spent most of his life entering the cauldrons of the world's great sporting venues.

Yet, for sheer pride and memory-jerking emotion, his visit this week to the Riverside in Chester-le-Street will equal any of his journeys to Wembley, Nou Camp, San Siro and beyond.

Test cricket, you see, is coming to Geordieland.

Sir Bobby has two reasons to be moved by the prospect - the match is in his own backyard and he is a cricketer.

On Thursday, the Riverside will become England's first new Test venue for 101 years.

And, when Robson talks about his delight at Durham hosting the Second Test against Zimbabwe, his recollections come faster than a Steve Harmison bouncer.

Like how he used to bowl underarm to the four-year-old Alec Stewart, his idolising of Tom Graveney and the times he dashed home from London to County Durham simply for a game of club cricket.

Until 1992, Durham were still a minor county and the Riverside was an expanse of wild grassland. Two years later, it was a first-class cricket ground.

Robson said: "The concept of building the Riverside was a masterful stroke by the men who kept alive the dream of first-class cricket in this region.

"What a backdrop. The stadium is superbly-appointed with wonderful views of Lumley Castle. It's been the perfect place to build a ground and take cricket away from the established Test match centres.

"I'm proud as punch that we have a Test match - it's incredible for this cricket-mad region.

"People such as Don Robson (Durham's president) and the Caller brothers have worked so hard to make their dreams come true.

"I remember the first one-day international at the Riverside three years ago. England beat West Indies by 10 wickets and it was blowing a gale.

"It was a magnificent occasion and I know the players enjoyed it.

The support they were given from the crowd made a lasting impression on our boys."

The 70-year-old Newcastle and former England boss has enjoyed a lifelong love affair with willow and leather.

And, as a young man, he was a decent cricketer.

Robson recalled: "When I played for Fulham, I'd rush back to play for

tors David Graveney, was a graceful artist of a batsman who scored 122 first-class centuries, 11 for England.

Robson said: "I used to love watching Tom so much. He had grace, timing and stature as a batsman which put him up there with Peter May, Ken Barrington and Ted Dexter.

"He was also a gentleman on and off the field, a man who never forgot his roots. When first-class cricket was brought to our region, Tom was here promoting the area. Would you believe my hero contacted me just this week to ask me to speak at a dinner later this year? What an honour!"

Other Test cricketers to emerge from Durham include Bob Willis (born in Sunderland), Peter Willey (Sedgefield) and the never-to-be-forgotten Colin Milburn (Bishopcleeve).

Milburn might have played only nine Tests but, weighing around 18st and with the ability to destroy any bowling, he became a legend.

Tragically, he lost his left eye in a car accident in 1969 and died in 1990, aged 48.

Robson added: "Everyone will remember the fun 'Ollie' Milburn brought to the game. His accident and death were tragedies.

"It's great to see Paul Collingwood and young Steve Harmison breaking through at international level, and don't forget Simon Brown, our Cleardon-born left-arm quick bowler, who played for Durham and England with such honesty and endeavour. And, from what I gather, there are others coming through and showing plenty of promise."

Robson added: "When Durham first joined the county championship, the interest generated by the arrival of Ian Botham, Dean Jones and David Boon was fantastic.

"They all came to the North East as the county took those first, tough steps.

"For decades, it's been Middlesex, Surrey and Yorkshire who have dominated and attracted the big matches. But now it is our chance.

"This cricket-mad region will make us all proud of the Riverside as a Test venue. And nobody will be more proud than me."



SIR BOBBY ROBSON

Langley Park in 40-overs games. It was my passion every summer. Some clubs had a professional who, if he scored 50 runs, would have a hat passed round so the crowd could toss in some coins. If he also took some wickets, it became a profitable afternoon!

"I can assure you Durham, with its many village teams and bigger town sides, has a fervour for cricket as strong as anywhere in the country."

Robson added: "I hope it doesn't sound big-headed but I was good at both sports.

"When I was a kid, it was always football in the winter and cricket in the summer. They wouldn't get in each other's way and some played both professionally. But it couldn't happen now and that's a pity."

During his time at Fulham, Robson became close friends with Surrey batsman Micky Stewart, who played soccer for Charlton and won an England amateur cap. When Robson visited the Stewart house, he would often bowl in the lounge or back garden to young Alec Robson's cricketer hero, though, was born in Riding Mill, Northumberland. Tom Graveney, uncle of current chairman of selec-

Hate Hoeness!



REUTERS, Berlin

Uli Hoeness is a man many Germans love to hate because of his reputation for having a big mouth.

The Bayern Munich commercial manager brought down designated Germany coach Christoph Daum with public charges of drug use, scolded Bayern players for indulging in shrimp feasts after losses and says loudly that Bayern are too good for Germany.

The outspoken manager knows he is disliked around Germany for his blunt talk but insists -- despite death threats against him -- that those who know him well like him.

"I'm willing to bet that you won't find five people close to me -- players, staff or friends -- who would say: 'Hoeness is an ass,'" Hoeness said in a recent interview with Bild newspaper.

Hoeness is possibly the most successful football executive in Germany, having helped to shape

cocaine use.

Daum lost his job at Leverkusen and was discarded for the Germany job. But Hoeness won only a partial reprieve.

"I knew I wasn't wrong," Hoeness said in a recent week-long series of interviews in Bild. "Sometimes I think: what would have happened if Daum's drug test had not been positive? He would have ended up as Germany coach and I might not be Bayern's manager any more."

Hoeness admits he has made mistakes -- such as when he accused Bayern players of being spoilt after a dismal performance against bottom-placed St Pauli last season.

"The players don't appear to understand that football is a full-time job, seven days a week," he told German television. "Half-an-hour after the match they're playing cards again and making big-shot comments. They go and eat their free scampi after the game, while I go home with indigestion watching them play like that and am up all night because I can't sleep."

He later said sorry for the remarks but such apologies are rare. After losing a battle with arch-rivals Dortmund to sign Sebastian Kehl, Hoeness was quoted in German newspapers calling Kehl "a snotty young kid."

He has also tried to belittle Beckenbauer's role as executive board chairman at Bayern Munich, saying he no longer had anything relevant to say.

"A Beckenbauer who isn't interested in anything can be replaced," Hoeness told Kicker magazine.

Beckenbauer, the World Cup-winning captain and coach, has always eclipsed Hoeness, who is perhaps best remembered for missing a penalty in the shoot-out that gave Czechoslovakia victory over Germany in the 1976 European championship final.

Hoeness recently made eyebrow-raising remarks about Real Madrid, telling a Munich news conference: "Our friends in Madrid know that there is only one club capable of beating them -- Bayern Munich."

He disparaged the rest of the Bundesliga, telling Bild newspaper: "Our team are simply too good to play only in Germany."

Hoeness was quoted in Bunte magazine criticising Stefan Effenberg's girlfriend, Claudia Strunz, after she left her husband Thomas Strunz for Effenberg.

Hoeness's anger also exploded over a long-simmering row with former Bayern captain Lothar Matthaeus, who was suing the club for money he said was owed from his testimonial.

"It's like he's trying to attack five tanks with a popgun," Hoeness said of Matthaeus's suit.

Hoeness called Matthaeus "a real quitter" for asking to be substituted with 10 minutes remaining in Bayern's traumatic last-gasp 2-1 defeat by Manchester United in the 1999 Champions League final.

"He was a real expert about opening his big, fat mouth everywhere he went," Hoeness said of Matthaeus.



ULI HOENESS

Bayern Munich into a soccer dynasty over the last two decades.

Germany's biggest draw has won 18 German crowns -- 13 since he arrived -- and four European titles. They lifted the German Cup for an 11th time on Saturday by beating Kaiserslautern.

Yet Hoeness is also the most controversial club official in the country with a long track record of biting comments that have infuriated rivals and fans.

"I tell everyone my opinion whenever I feel like it," the 51-year-old Hoeness told Bild. "That goes for everyone -- from Franz Beckenbauer, to the German chancellor or the Bavarian state premier. I've earned that right over the last 30 years."

Hoeness, who had 35 caps for Germany as a rough-edged midfielder, caused outrage in 2000 when he suggested that Daum, Bayer Leverkusen trainer and Germany coach designate, had a drug problem.

That led to a heated month-long investigation into Daum, who took steps to sue Hoeness for libel, and a massive outpouring of anger against Hoeness.

Hoeness faced deafening boos and whistles and needed bodyguards for a while -- until Daum took a voluntary drug test that confirmed

Super-dad Kaiser!

AFP, Hamburg

German football legend Franz Beckenbauer is expecting his fifth child this November, with a former secretary of the Bayern Munich club, the Bild newspaper reported Tuesday.



FRANZ BECKENBAUER

Beckenbauer, 57, and his companion Heidi Burmester already have a son together, Joel Maximilian, who will be three in August.

The former champion, who is also the organizing committee president for the 2006 World Cup, shocked fans last year when he announced he was leaving his wife of 12 years to devote more time to his son by Burmester.

"We want this child. Little Joel should not grow up alone," Beckenbauer told Bild, which splashed the story on its front page.

"We have a big house, we still have plenty of space, even for a whole kindergarten."

Beckenbauer said after four sons he now hoped to have a baby girl.

Batistuta Qatar bound?

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentine striker Gabriel Batistuta is set to sign for Qatari club Al-Arabi, the Argentine press reported on Monday.

Batistuta, 34, finished this season on loan at Inter Milan from AS Roma but is set for a move to the oil-rich Gulf state which has already tempted Brazilian veteran striker Romario and former German international Stefan Effenberg, who has signed for Al-Arabi, among other European stars.

"Gabriel hasn't yet agreed to the move," his agent Settimio Aloisio told sports daily Ole.

"We're close to completing a deal but there is still a chance he might go to England or Dubai."

English Premiership club Chelsea are believed to be interested in signing Batistuta, whose 54 goals in 78 appearances make him Argentina's leading scorer in history.

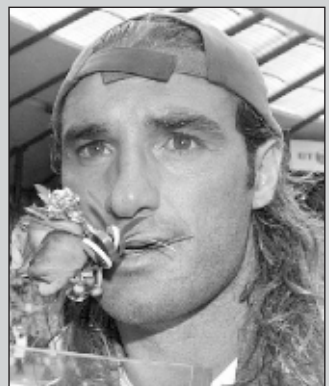
ENGLISH BRIEFS



AFP, London

English football briefs on Tuesday, June 3:

BIG TWO AFTER AMORUSO



LORENZO AMORUSO

Rangers defender Lorenzo Amoruso says Manchester United and Arsenal have joined Blackburn in the race to sign him.

"Yes, it's true, I have been told that both of these clubs are interested in signing me," Amoruso told Scotland's Daily Record.

"I didn't want to say anything about it because it's very early

days and we don't know what is going to happen but they have spoken to my agent. It is obviously very flattering but, as I have said all along, my dream would be to finish my career in Glasgow and I really mean that - no matter who wants to sign me."

Amoruso is expected to be sold to help Rangers cut their wage bill and debt mountain. Blackburn have tabled a firm offer in the region of 1.5 million pounds.

Hammers escape police action

LET OFF FOR HAMMERS DUO

West Ham players Joe Cole and Rufus Brevett will not face criminal charges over their involvement in a post-match fracas after the club's defeat by Bolton in April.

Bolton won the crucial relegation battle 1-0 which concluded with West Ham's Ian Pearce being sent off for a foul on Pierre-Yves Andre and an ugly melee in the tunnel.

Police have decided not to pursue the players involved but the Football Association is likely to now charge the two Hammers with misconduct.

NEVILLE DREMS REGULAR SPOT

Manchester United utility man Phil Neville is hoping England's injury crisis will give him the chance to secure a regular return to the fold.

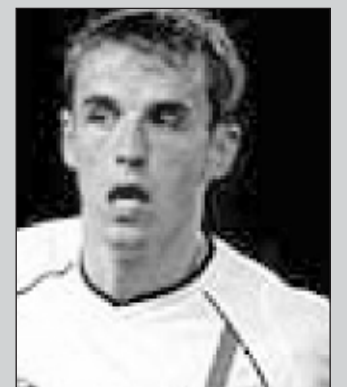
Neville's international career

looked as if it was over after a year out of the international picture.

But injuries have seen him return to the squad for the summer games as a midfielder rather than as a fullback, where he has earned most of his caps.

"You want to be involved and I am hoping that I will get another chance in these next couple of games coming up," Neville said ahead of Wednesday's match against Serbia-Montenegro, a warm-up for next week's Euro 2004 qualifier against Slovakia.

"The game against Slovakia is massive and these games beforehand are good and important preparation and if you win it breeds confidence." (AFP)



PHIL NEVILLE

Trap wants Totti to drive!



AFP, Campobasso, Italy

Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni said Tuesday that AS Roma striker Francesco Totti can be the driving force behind the Azzurri's 2004 European championship campaign.

Although they trail Group Nine leaders Wales by five points after four matches, Trapattoni is backing Totti to guide Italy to Portugal next year.

"Totti can do for the national team what (Alessandro) Del Piero does for Juventus and what (Paolo) Maldini does for AC Milan, without doubt," said Trapattoni ahead of Italy's friendly here against Northern Ireland.

Trapattoni's words will be of comfort to Totti whose temperament was called into question following his sending-off in Saturday's Italian Cup final second leg against Champions League winners AC Milan.

Totti scored two spectacular goals from free-kicks before being shown the red card as Roma drew 2-2 at the San Siro to lose 6-3 on aggregate.

But despite blotting his copybook, Trapattoni feels Totti was the victim on this occasion and that he has nothing to prove to the sceptics who believe he can't keep his head under pressure.

"I didn't think Totti was particularly stressed in Milan," Trapattoni added.

"It just confirms that all great players come in for particular treatment and fouls, just like Maradona and Pele.

"In any case, Totti in this form can be a driving force. It's good news for



FRANCESCO TOTTI

Roma, the national team and Italian football."

Totti, along with several other key players were left out of the squad to play Northern Ireland so that they could rest properly ahead of Italy's next group match away to Finland in Helsinki next week.

The decisive match in the group could be Italy's home match against Wales on September 6.

Serie A Reggina staying, Atalanta gone



REUTERS, Milan

Emiliano Bonazzoli scored an 85th minute winner as Reggina came from behind to win its Serie A relegation playoff, second-leg match 2-1 against Atalanta on Monday.

After the first leg in Reggio Calabria had ended goalless, the win was enough to secure top-flight football next season for Serie A's only southern club and send Bergamo side Atalanta back to Serie B after three seasons in the top division.

Atalanta went ahead in the 18th minute when defender Cesare Natali fired in a low shot from a

corner but Reggina pulled level in the 33rd minute when Francesco Cozza squeezed a shot over Atalanta keeper Massimo Taibi.

A 1-1 draw would have been enough for Reggina to secure an away-goals win.

But, against the run of play, Bonazzoli, on loan from Parma, made survival safe with a left-foot strike five minutes from the end.

The playoff was needed after the two teams finished level on points as goal difference is not taken into account in the Italian league.

Torino, Como and Piacenza had already been relegated from Serie A while Sampdoria and Siena have won two of the four promotion places from Serie B.