



England striker Michael Owen watches his goal-bound shot going past Slovakia's goalkeeper Miroslav at the Riverside Stadium in Middlesbrough on June 11.

## Eng celebrate Owen-day! Spain stumble again



AFP, Paris

Michael Owen celebrated his 50th appearance for England by leading from the front scoring twice in a come from behind 2-1 victory over Slovakia in their Euro 2004 qualifier on Wednesday.

It may take as many matches for Northern Ireland to score one goal - it has been 10 games since they did - but they produced one of their better recent performances to hold Spain 0-0 in Belfast and give the European giants another jolt to their confidence.

With just one point from their last two matches Spain now trail their conquerors from Saturday, Greece, by a point in Group Six.

At 23, the youngest player ever to win 50 caps for England, Owen showed that the skipper's armband had the same inspirational effect on him as the suspended David Beckham, slotting home a penalty and then a brilliant header.

However, it was a far from convincing team performance that could have seen the visitors 4-0 up at the half.

Owen's goals were all the more important as Group leaders Turkey also came from behind to beat Macedonia 3-2 and it looks odds on that the English will travel to Turkey for the final match for what promises to be a heated winners-take-all clash.

Slovakia coach Ladislav Jurkemik, however, accused Owen of conning the referee into awarding the penalty.

"The penalty put the English team back on its feet and I do not think it

was a fair decision," Jurkemik complained.

"It was a mistake by the referee. Owen played for it and the referee bought it."

His England counterpart Sven-Goran Eriksson - who said it had been an excellent performance in the second-half - disagreed.

"I don't know if it was a penalty but I also saw a push on Gareth Southgate a few minutes later and I saw a goal by Frank Lampard that I don't think was offside."

Another of Europe's powerhouses Germany were scarcely more impressive as they needed two goals in the dying minutes to beat minnows Faroe Islands 2-0 in their Group Five match.

Substitute Miroslav Klose reignited memories of his scoring feats for the Germans in last year's World Cup by heading home two minutes from time and Fredi Bobic added a second in injury-time - though the former testicular cancer victim had contrived to spurn a series of glorious chances throughout the encounter.

Germany head the group by three points from Iceland - impressive 3-0 winners over Lithuania - while Scotland are another point behind.

Italy delighted coach Giovanni Trapattoni with their 2-0 victory away in Finland, goldenboys Francesco Totti and Alessandro del Piero netting for them to keep the pressure on group leaders Wales.

Trapattoni insisted Italy can still grab first place in the group with the key home match against Wales still to come in September.

"It's not impossible if we continue this way," said the coach after the game, whose side trail Wales by two points though the Welsh have a game in hand.

"The goals of Totti and Del Piero were two pearls but now we must chase first place."

There was no such delight for Serbia and Montenegro's coach and former playmaker Dejan Savicevic, who resigned after his side went down to an embarrassing 2-1 defeat by Azerbaijan in Baku.

The Azeris showed the Germans that anything they could do they could do also as they equalised in the 87th-minute through Gurban Gurbanov and an injury-time winner from Farrukh Ismaylov.

"It's all over, I resign," Savicevic was quoted as saying on Yugoslav radio bringing a sad end for the 36-year-old to a largely distinguished association with the national side.

While their hopes of qualifying for the finals next year disappeared, the Republic of Ireland's renaissance continued apace as they beat Georgia 2-0 to record their second successive home victory in five days.

Having lost their opening two matches in Group Ten the Irish can now progress if they beat leaders Switzerland - who beat Albania 3-2 - and Russia in their last two clashes.

Their scoring heroes were Spurs duo Gary Doherty and Robbie Keane - his 16th for his country - and left opposing coach Ivo Suzak favouring them to qualify.

"Ireland played much better than against Albania on Saturday. I had not expected them to raise their game so much after just three days," said the Croatian-born handler.

"I do believe now that these last two results for Ireland have put them in a serious position."

## STANDINGS

AFP, Paris

Standings in the Euro 2004 qualifying competition after Wednesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

<b>Group One</b>	France 5 5 0 0 19 2 15	Slovenia 5 3 1 1 10 7 10	Israel 5 2 2 1 6 3 8	Cyprus 6 2 1 3 7 11 7	Malta 7 0 0 7 3 22 0	Greece 6 4 0 2 6 4 12	Spain 6 3 2 11 0 3 11	Ukraine 6 2 3 11 0 8 9	Armenia 5 1 1 3 6 11 4	N. Ireland 5 0 2 3 0 6 2
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**Remaining fixtures:**  
06/09/03: France v Cyprus, Slovenia v Israel  
10/09/03: Israel v Malta, Slovenia v France  
11/10/03: Cyprus v Slovenia, France v Israel

**Group Two**  
Denmark 6 4 1 1 12 6 13  
Norway 6 3 2 1 8 4 11  
Romania 6 3 1 2 15 7 10  
Bos-H'vina 5 2 0 3 4 7 6  
Luxembourg 5 0 0 5 0 15 0

**Remaining fixtures:**  
06/09/03: Bosnia-Herzegovina v Norway, Romania v Luxembourg  
10/09/03: Luxembourg v Bosnia-Herzegovina, Denmark v Romania  
11/10/03: Norway v Luxembourg, Bosnia-Herzegovina v Denmark

**Group Three**  
Czech Rep. 5 4 1 0 14 1 13  
Holland 5 4 1 0 11 2 13  
Austria 6 3 0 3 9 8 9  
Moldova 6 1 0 5 3 13 3  
Belarus 6 1 0 5 2 15 3

**Remaining fixtures:**  
06/09/03: Holland v Austria, Belarus v Czech Republic  
10/09/03: Czech Republic v Holland, Moldova v Belarus  
11/10/03: Austria v Czech Republic, Holland v Moldova

**Group Four**  
Sweden 5 3 2 0 12 2 11  
Hungary 6 3 2 1 3 4 11  
Latvia 5 3 1 1 6 3 10  
Poland 5 2 1 2 7 4 7  
San Marino 7 0 0 7 0 25 0

**Remaining fixtures:**  
06/09/03: Latvia v Poland, Sweden v San Marino  
10/09/03: Poland v Sweden, Latvia v Hungary  
11/10/03: Sweden v Latvia, Hungary v Poland

**Group Five**  
Germany 5 3 2 0 8 3 11  
Iceland 5 3 0 2 9 5 9  
Scotland 5 2 2 1 7 5 8  
Lithuania 6 2 1 3 4 9 7  
Faroe Isl. 5 0 1 4 4 10 1

**Remaining fixtures:**  
20/08/02: Faroe Islands v Iceland  
06/09/03: Scotland v Faroe Islands, Iceland v Germany  
10/09/03: Germany v Scotland, Faroe Islands v Lithuania  
11/10/03: Scotland v Lithuania, Germany v Iceland  
**Group Six**

\* Group winners qualify automatically for finals with group runners-up meeting in play-offs to decide five spots.  
\* Hosts Portugal qualify automatically



LOOK, I'VE ALREADY CAUGHT HIM IN THE NET! Barcelona's presidential candidate Joan Laporta shows an image of Manchester United superstar David Beckham on his PC during a press conference on June 11.

## Laporta confident

Football

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona presidential candidate Joan Laporta insisted Wednesday he can persuade England captain David Beckham to join the club despite the midfielder insisting he has no intention of leaving Manchester United to play for the Catalan side.

United announced Tuesday they had reached agreement with Laporta to sell the 28-year-old glamour figure of English football for a reported 30 million pounds (50 million dollars).

Laporta has made Beckham's capture the central promise of his electoral campaign, which comes to a head with a vote of Barcelona's 103,000 members on Sunday.

"It's been complex negotiations, but what's important is that we've finally reached agreement between Manchester United and Barcelona," Laporta told a press conference.

He added afterwards: "We are trying to have conversations with representatives of David Beckham in order to arrange this deal."

"We understand they are trying to defend the interests of their player and I respect this position," Laporta told Sky Sports News.

"I have confidence that I will speak to them in order to convince them the best for the player is to come to Barcelona. He'll enjoy playing in Barcelona."

On Tuesday, Beckham's man-

agement company SFX issued a curt statement accusing Laporta of using the player as a "pawn" in the presidential election and said they had no plans to talk to him.

British newspapers claimed United were forcing Beckham into a money-spinning move to Barcelona he does not want, but Jules Spencer, chairman of the Manchester United Supporters Association, said most fans would back the judgement of Alex Ferguson, the manager who has made United the dominant force in English football.

Spencer said: "If he is being sold for financial reasons then there will be an outcry."

"But if he is being sold to strengthen the team, then most fans will back Ferguson's judgement."

Laporta, one of five men vying for the Barcelona presidency, has seen his election chances soar since revealing his attempts to land Beckham, whose haircuts, outrageous fashion sense and marriage to former Spice Girl Victoria widen his appeal way beyond the boundaries of sport.

The 40-year-old lawyer still trails advertising magnate Lluís Bassat, who was second to outgoing president Joan Gaspart in the last election but is fast gaining ground on his rival.

Laporta insisted he wanted to restore Barcelona to their glory days when they won the 1992 European Cup, and that Beckham was the man to reinvigorate the team which

will not be playing in the elite European Champions League next season.

"With Beckham we can win titles," Laporta said. "We will recover the mentality of the dream team."

Laporta's election campaign mirrors that of Florentino Perez's election-winning deal to bring Luis Figo - from Barcelona - to Real Madrid in 2000.

And the Spanish press reported Wednesday that Real Madrid would enter the race to sign Beckham at the end of the month - and the player was willing to join Real.

Beckham's father Ted told Wednesday's London Evening Standard any move abroad was conditional upon his wife's support but insisted his son would not be joining Barcelona.

"David has to talk to her (Victoria) about it," Beckham senior told the newspaper.

"One of the things they have to talk about is the children - Brooklyn is at nursery school up north." As well as Brooklyn, the Beckhams have a younger son, Romeo.

"David's definitely not going to Barcelona, he's got two years of his contract left to run and he doesn't want to go."

"He loves Manchester United and has supported it since he was a child. This is about one man trying to force him out but I can tell you he won't be forced," Beckham senior explained in what appeared to be a reference to Ferguson.



Nigeria's Udezue Ifeanyi (R) is airborne as he attempts a lunging tackle on Brazil's Kleberston at Abuja on June 11.

## Brazil clip Eagles' wings

Football

AFP, Abuja

Strikers Gil and Luis Fabiano scored on their debuts to propel world champions Brazil to an easy 3-0 win over Nigeria on Wednesday ahead of the Confederation Cup later this month.

But the game, which the Nigerians had dubbed the "Match of the Century," against the five-time world champions, was marred by crowd problems before kick-off.

Police fired canisters of tear gas to disperse angry fans who had valid tickets for the game but could not gain admittance to the stadium because of shambolic handling by local officials test-running facilities for the All-African Games in October.

The tear gas wafted into the stadium as Brazil were doing their pre-match warm-up routines, which they swiftly curtailed.

Apart from that, the match went according to plan for the world champions, who had only arrived in Nigeria on Monday night after a 20-hour flight from Brazil.

This was Brazil's first victory since coach Carlos Alberto Parreira took charge in January. Their goals were scored by Gil and Fabiano in the first half and Parma striker Adriano late on in the second period.

Despite their defeat, Nigeria drew

praise from Parreira. "Nigeria should not be ashamed that they lost to the world champions," he said.

"We have worked hard and long to be where we are today."

It was a remarkable win for Brazil's makeshift side, who had only one 40-minute training session on Tuesday after their marathon journey from South America.

Players such as Rivaldo, Ronaldo, Roberto Carlos and Gilberto Silva were all rested after a long season in Europe.

Parreira's Nigerian counterpart, Christian Chukwu, said he was still building a new team and should be given a chance to continue with the work he has started.

"It was not a bad match for us because we are still trying to build a new team. We paid dearly by losing concentration and not capitalising on the chances we got in front of goal."

"Brazil has shown that they are the world champions. The Brazilians capitalised on their chances, while we failed to capitalise on ours."

The lively Gil, from Corinthians, never looked like a player only winning his first cap and his industry was fittingly rewarded after 33 minutes when he drove through the otherwise solid Nigerian defence from the left flank before smashing past an onrushing goalkeeper Vincent Eneama.

Fellow debutant Fabiano, leading scorer in the Brazilian championship,

headed the world champions further ahead four minutes later after he nodded home off a cross by Bilelet from the right flank.

With 10 minutes left, Adriano stabbed home another cross past Eneama to see off the dispirited and disorganised Super Eagles and maintain Brazil's 100 per cent record against African opposition.

A disappointed home crowd, many of whom were denied the chance to watch the match from kick-off because of poor crowd control by the stadium officials, then showed their displeasure by throwing stones and other missiles on to the pitch.

Before the goals, Nigeria had done well enough even though the Samba stars enjoyed the better of the early exchanges before the host team gradually settled into the game.

Arsenal forward Nwankwo Kanu's snapped shot from outside the box on 19 minutes missed the target narrowly and a few minutes later defender Romanus Orjinta's low driven free kick after Kanu was brought down outside the area did not miss by much.

And in the second half, the Nigerians fought hard to get on the scoresheet. Kanu and substitute Chris Obodo all came close to grabbing some consolation for the home team but poor marksmanship let them down.

## Libya 2010?

Football

AFP, Paris

Saadi Kadhafi, the son of the Libyan leader, said on Wednesday that he believes that the right to host the 2010 World Cup will come down to a straight fight between the Arab nation and South Africa.

"Libya's chances of hosting the World Cup are the best thanks to its

riches and infrastructure," said Kadhafi.

"I can only see South Africa directly competing with Libya, with all due respect to the other candidates."

Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria and Tunisia are the other nations bidding for the World Cup which will definitely be held in Africa under the FIFA scheme to alternate the tournament from continent to continent.

"We are currently undertaking a feasibility study with a German

company which estimates it would cost four to six billion dollars to organize the World Cup.

"Libya is ready to spend this sum," added the 29-year-old Kadhafi who, as well as playing for the Al-Itihad club and the national team, is also vice-president of the Libyan Football Federation.

He is also bidding to become the president of the African Football Confederation.