



VICTORY TASTES SWEET: Two German supporters kiss each other after the hosts won against Argentina at the Berlin Olympic Stadium on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Owen's knee surgery in US

AFP, Newcastle

England striker Michael Owen revealed on Friday he will undergo surgery on his knee ligament injury in America next week.

Owen, 26, was forced to fly home from England's World Cup campaign in Germany after rupturing an anterior cruciate ligament in the second minute of his side's Group B draw against Sweden.

The Newcastle star has set a date for his operation and will travel to Colorado with club doctor Roddy McDonald, where the procedure will be carried out by world-renowned surgeon Dr Richard Steadman, who has treated the likes of Alan Shearer, Craig Bellamy and Henrik Larsson.

The former Real Madrid and Liverpool player will remain in the US for around a fortnight before returning home to continue his rehabilitation.

He told the club's website: "It's just coming up to a couple of weeks now since I did it, and at the minute it is just dead time really while I'm waiting to have the operation."

"The last few days has just been trying to get the swelling down and trying to get the knee as healthy as possible so we can get it operated on."

"I'll go out on Monday, be examined on Tuesday, then we'll do the operation as quickly as possible and get straight into the rehab."

"As soon as we get the operation out of the way, we will be looking forward to a fixed date or a fixed time to come back."

It was initially feared Owen would be ruled out for the whole of next season, but he hopes to be back in action by the new year.

He added: "The operation needs to go according to plan first. If all goes well after that, I'd like to think I will be playing as soon as possible in the new year."

Klinsi wants

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Ballack cross for Miroslav Klose to score his fifth goal of the tournament.

"I never felt we had a problem when we went 1-0 down," Klinsmann said. "I hoped the equaliser would come quickly but I never doubted that we'd get it."

Klinsmann, who is in his first coaching job, is already looking beyond the semifinal in Dortmund on July 4.

"The players are performing magnificently and they want to discover just what their limit is. Maybe we'll reach it on the day of the final on July 9."

"We're enjoying the moment," he added. "Now we want more."

Sheva laments

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saying they had already achieved their pre-tournament aim of qualifying from the group stage and so go home with their heads held high.

With Ukraine eliminated, Shevchenko -- who won many hearts during his time in Milan -- had no doubts about who he would be supporting to win the World Cup.

"I'm rooting for Italy now," he said.

Lehmann the toast of Germany



AFP, Berlin

Germany's victorious goalkeeper Jens Lehmann had his picture plastered over German newspapers on Saturday after saving two spot-kicks in Friday's 4-2 penalty shoot-out triumph over Argentina as the hosts reached the World Cup semi-finals.

With extra-time failing to separate the teams at 1-1 penalties were called upon and the 36-year-old Lehmann was the hero, saving two penalties from Roberto Ayala and Esteban Cambiasso to spark wild celebrations in the host nation.

"The party goes on! Penalty hero Lehmann and our hand of god," headlined Bild, the country's best-selling newspaper, in a reference to Diego Maradona's infamous 'hand of god' goal for Argentina.

Maradona, who watched Argentina's defeat from the stands, scored a controversial goal in a 2-1 quarter-final win over England using his hand as Argentina went on to lift the 1986 World Cup in Mexico.

"A hero called Lehmann,"

Germany warned

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the backdrop of a Serie A match-fixing scandal with a tribunal due to deliver its verdicts on July 10 after charges against four leading clubs.

Corriere added that coach Marcello Lippi, after making a mess of his tactics in the previous game against Australia, had finally got it right against Ukraine.

Lippi put the team on the pitch with intelligence, care, and with that ferocious fighting spirit that had not been seen so far.

Tuttosport also praised Lippi's willingness "to correct himself", while La Repubblica said Italy had played "a perfect match".

"Now it's the Germans' turn to be scared of Italy," it said.

La Gazzetta dello Sport was less tub-thumping, but joined in the celebrations by hailing a complete performance by Italy.

It said the attack -- spear-headed by two goals from striker Luca Toni -- finally matched the defence which has only conceded once, and that was an own goal, so far in the tournament.

"After the exhilarating 3-0 win over Ukraine Italy need not be scared of anyone -- not even the home side," said Gazzetta.

"Italy has shown it is a complete side, capable of holding out in defence, but also of imposing its own game."

declared the Berliner Zeitung. "Germany rejoices and after the Argentina win we are favourites for the World Cup title."

Italy, who defeated Ukraine 3-0 on Friday, will face Germany in Tuesday's semifinal in Dortmund.

"You have beaten Argentina, now go and win the thing," urged Bild. "If you play like that against Italy on Tuesday you will win again."

With home support driving them on, Germany will start as strong favourites against Italy particularly as they have never lost in Dortmund.

"The country reaches a new level of euphoria after Argentina win," said Die Welt. "It is above all a triumph for manager Juergen Klinsmann."

In two years as manager Juergen Klinsmann has turned a team that flopped at Euro 2004 -- where they failed to win a single match -- into genuine World Cup contenders and they are now just two wins from the ultimate prize.

"We want to be world champions and we have said that all along. Now people are starting to believe us," Klinsmann said.

"The players are obviously celebrating, but we have two tough games ahead and we want to win both."

Italy can't spoil

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Significant too that Totti should play a part in one of those strikes; has Italy's playmaker woken from the torpor that has understandably affected him in recovering from the double break of ankle and leg in February? His performance reflected a greater sense of purpose and influence that may be required in the semi-final against the hosts.

Lippi can take great heart from the improving performances of his leading players. Cannavaro, still without Alessandro Nesta alongside him and having to play alongside his third partner this tournament in Palermo's Andrea Barzagli, dominated Ukraine's attack with a masterclass in tackling and interception that rendered Shevchenko a negligible side issue. Nesta will be with his partner of nearly a decade in Dortmund and that could spell trouble for Germany's highly popular striker pairing of Klose and Podolski.

For the Ukraine and the visibly depressed Blokhin, their first World Cup is over, though they can take strength from recovering from that terrible opening thrashing from Spain, whom, of course, they eventually progressed a stage further than.

Their slow start in this match though was fatal, leaving us with a repeat of the semi-final of 1970, the final of 1982 and a chance for revenge for a 4-1 friendly thrashing of Germany earlier in 2006.

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sure in the early part of the second half, Italy's job was completed with some ease, giving them less of a footballing war to recover from than their German counterparts for whom signs of fatigue and injury were worryingly wracked over the face of Michael Ballack in Berlin.

Though that will not dim the spirits of the good burghers of Hamburg for whom the party down the Reeperbahn was sure to be continuing until well into the small hours. Pity a World Cup Quarter-Final prevented some of us from taking a fuller part in the festivities.

"I was just trying to get in between the players," Bierhoff said. "I didn't want any of them to get in trouble and then be suspended."

"It is a pity. The fans in Germany have shown that they can interact in a friendly way, so players and team officials should set an example."

German midfielder Torsten Frings said: "They gave us a few kicks. Argentina are unfair and can be bad losers."

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French seek to spice up domestic action

AFP, Paris

French football chiefs on Friday revealed a plan to make their country's top two divisions more entertaining.

The French League of Professional Football (LFP) directors are determined to increase the number of goals scored in the first and second divisions and have suggested rewarding high-scoring teams with cash prizes.

Reports say a ghost table will run alongside the actual league standings next season.

In the ghost table, teams who win by more than one goal would be given three points, while two go to a team winning by a single goal, and one for a draw.

The ghost table will then be published alongside the actual league table at the end of each week.

At the end of the season, the team in each division that wins the ghost championship will be given a cash prize.

In the first division the winner will receive 2.4 million euros (3.06 million dollars) and in the second the prize will be 542,348 euros (692,000 dollars).

Former France manager Michel Hidalgo, who led his country to victory at the 1984 European Championships, recommended the idea in a report.

Dosek joins FC Thun

AFP, Thun, Switzerland

Swiss club FC Thun confirmed on Friday they have signed Czech Republic international defender Lukas Dosek from Sportfreunde Siegen.

Former Slavia Prague star Dosek, 27, has agreed a two-year contract with Thun after deciding to quit German team Siegen.

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Defeated, not disappointed



AFP, Kiev

Ukraine on Saturday forgave its footballers a 3-0 thumping at the hands of Italy in a World Cup quarterfinal, just grateful the team had gotten to the last eight in their debut appearance.

"The end of a fairy tale," headlined the Gazeta po-Kievsky daily. "Ukraine's squad couldn't extend the fairy tale in Germany having lost to the Italians 0-3. But it doesn't matter. The only thing we can say is: Thank you!" the paper wrote.

A hopelessly outclassed Ukraine may have been crushed by the Italians, but to their fans at home the only thing that mattered was their appearance in the last eight -- the best result of any ex-Soviet republic at the Cup since the fall of the Iron

Curtain. "For the first time, even though the squad lost, there is no bitterness of defeat," Yuri Rybchinsky, a poet, said on "Third Time," a late-night sport talk show immediately after the match in Hamburg.

"We ended up in the last eight while ranked 45" in FIFA world rankings, he said.

"We were among the eight strongest teams in the world," said Olexander Chubarov, a former national trainer, on the same show. "That's something."

President Viktor Yushchenko, who flew in to Hamburg for the match, went to the locker room after the game and congratulated the players on their accomplishments.

"Today each Ukrainian can be proud of our team," his office quoted him as saying.

The feeling was shared by the thousands of fans who had gathered to watch Friday's match on giant screens throughout Ukrainian

cities. "Of course I'm disappointed," said one 20-something in central Kiev, a Ukrainian flag wrapped around his shoulders. "But they defied all expectations to get this far. So I'm not crushed. Next time."

In the western city of Lviv, the crowd erupted following the defeat in a rendition of the classic Queen song "We are the Champions" and "Get Up!" by Ukrainian band Okean Elzy.

Ukraine's head coach Oleg Blokhin was likewise philosophical. "I'm disappointed at losing but completely satisfied with our performance considering it was our first World Cup," he told reporters in Hamburg.

"We were among the best teams, we made it to the last eight, as a coach I have to be very happy with that. The sides which have made it to this stage are worthy of being world champions, and we almost made it."

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