

Ronaldo's rage

UNDATED, June 23 (AFP): A furious Ronaldo has hit out at gossip-mongers he claims are trying to derail his World Cup dreams.

The world's best player insists that the growing number of rumours about him are all part of a plot to destabilise him and wreck Brazil's bid to win a record fifth World Cup.

In the past week there have been claims that the superstar needs to take pain-killing injections before each match and that he had broken up with his girlfriend Susanna Werner.

"The story that I had a knee injection before the last match is nothing but a joke in reality bad taste," said the 21-year-old multi-millionaire.

The Inter Milan star was equally annoyed by reports that he and Werner had split-up and that he had thrown away the ring she had given him.

"The news about me and my girlfriend is another bad joke which is meant to break my concentration. I'm still wearing my ring and I intend to keep on wearing the same ring."

France fired up

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Djorka Arfanovic or Marseille bound Robert Pires acting as the creative force, and the latter is bursting to get into the action.

"If I play I want to be judged on my qualities," said Pires, who has scored twice in his 15 appearances for France to date.

In attack, Jacquet said he wanted to rest David Trezeguet, on target against the Saudis, and might bring back Stephane Guivarch after his recovery from a knee injury sustained in the opening win over South Africa.

But Arsenal target Thierry Henry, on a high with three goals already, now appears a fixture in the side.

The Danes, who dryly commented that they were going to hold a party for Jan Heintze as he was the only substitute not to be sent off in their match against South Africa, look likely to bring in Derby County central defender Jacob Laursen in place of Soren Colding.

Heintze is set to keep his place on the left side of midfield with Michael Schjonberg moving into the centre of midfield, but it is to the Laudrup brothers that Denmark will be looking to turn on the necessary flair to ensure they get the three points.

The Laudrups — Brian and his older brother Michael, looked superb in the first-half of the South African encounter but once the 'bafana bafana' clamped down on Michael, the last survivor from the exciting team that got to the second round in 1986, the Danes looked an ordinary side.

France without Zidane still look a good side and their class should see them top the group. The Danes will want to ensure they get the point that will see them play Nigeria in the second round.

Spain vs Bulgaria

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wrath of coach Hristo Boney for staying out overnight in Paris on Sunday without permission — maybe not the best way to prepare for Wednesday's make or break battle.

Boney had expected the team to appear for a morning discussion on the match only to discover the two strikers had disappeared.

They appeared in the early afternoon saying they had overslept.

Both now face a heavy fine. Whatever his indiscretions — and there have been a few — the surprise 1994 semifinalists still rely heavily on the 32-year-old Stoichkov for inspiration.

He was a width of the post away from scoring a precious goal against Paraguay, but looked sluggish in the 1-0 defeat by Nigeria.

Yet his 36 goals in 73 international appearances still qualify the 1994 European player-of-the-year for a place in the line-up four years after he was joint top-scorer with six goals alongside Russia's Oleg Salenko.

Stoichkov slammed the Spanish for over-confidence, repeating a weekend allegation that they "think they are the best."

He added for good measure that "the Spanish have no chance of winning the World Cup."

But if Spain reign on Wednesday, the controversial Bulgarian will walk off the world stage for the last time.

Can Chilavert

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all the way to the final," said the Super Eagles' centre-back Taribo West.

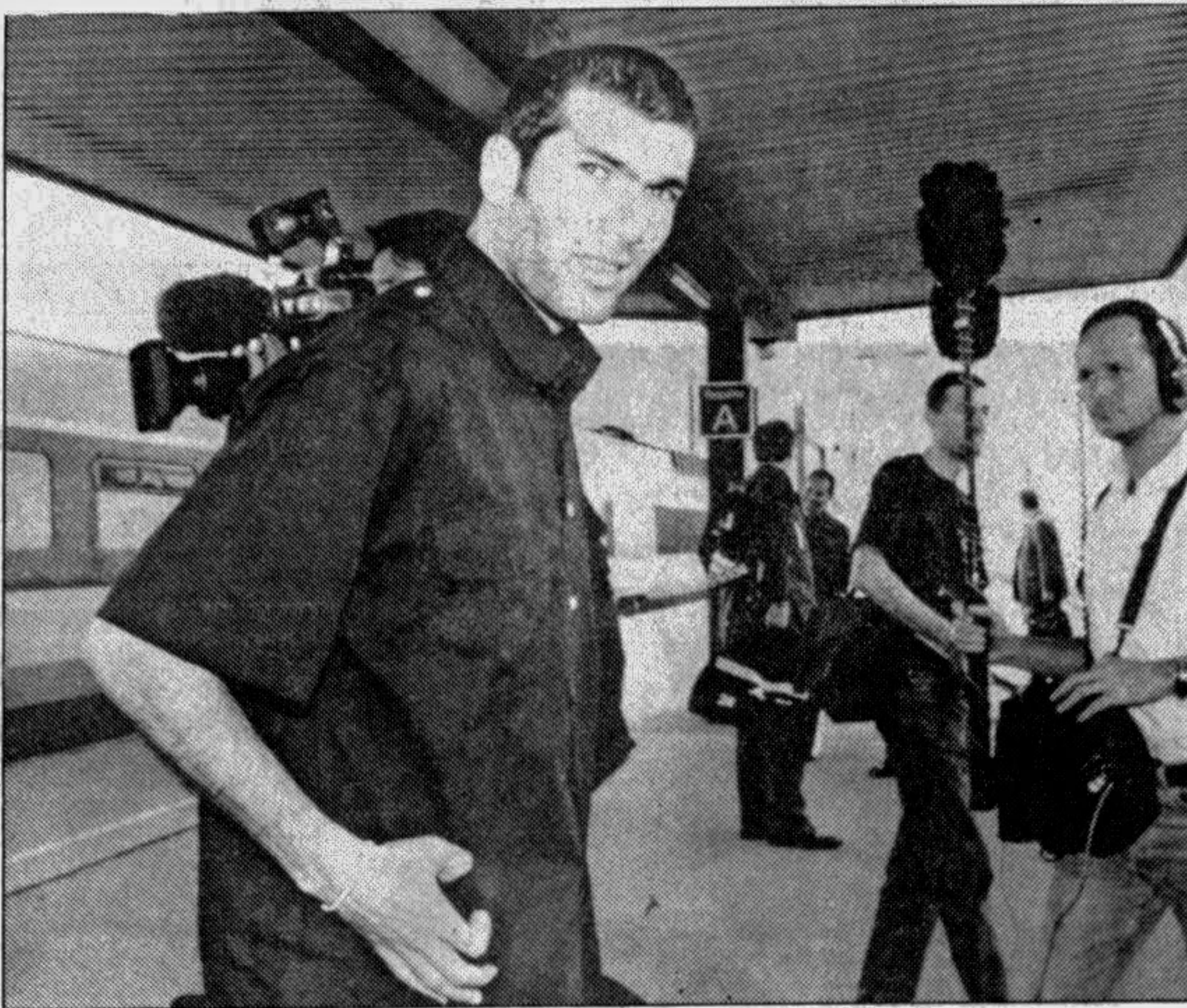
"It's true our preparation was not good but that's normal after a long, tiring season."

Undoubtedly if Nigeria are focused on the task in hand in Toulouse, Paraguay will face the stiffest test of their defensive resolve yet.

The 1996 Olympic champions combine physical power with Brazilian-style ball skills and searing pace from all areas of the pitch.

Monaco striker and African-player-of-the-year Victor Ikpeba's deft finish that won the match against Bulgaria was typical of the confidence currently coursing through the veins of Milutinovic's players and on their day the likes of Sunday Oliseh, scorer of the 25-yard screamer which sealed the victory over Spain, Finidi George and Jay Jay Okocha are a match for anybody in the tournament.

The Africans, however, will have to make do without defender and captain Uche Okochukwu, who is suspended after picking up two yellow cards.



Zinedine Zidane, the suspended French superstar arrives at the Macon Station with the national squad on June 22. — AFP photo

Gabriel gunning for Golden Boot

PARIS, June 23 (AFP): Goal machine Gabriel Batistuta's second hat-trick in successive finals in Argentina's 5-0 thrashing of Jamaica has propelled him into an elite club of World Cup legends.

The 29-year-old Fiorentina striker, who ruled out a goal feast in comments leading up to the match, scored the 32nd hat-trick in the history of the finals.

Batistuta, who has said he will take a month off after France '98 to consider his many transfer possibilities, also scored three goals in Argentina's 5-0 thrashing of Greece in USA '94.

In fact, statisticians would lap up the figures thrown up by this phenomenal striker whom coach Daniel Passarella left out for nearly a year saying he didn't fit into their system.

Passarella has denied there was a rift and said his omission was for tactical reasons.

Batistuta has now scored 47 goals in 61 matches for his country.

He was also topscorer in Italy in 1995 with 26 goals with Fiorentina, where he is said to be unsettled because the club never win as many big prizes like more illustrious rivals such as Inter Milan and Juventus.

In the 1995/96 season, Fiorentina did lift the Italian Cup however, with Batistuta scoring eight goals in as many matches, including two of his side's three goals in a final over two-legs with Atalanta.

And his life in Florence is comfortable from a financial standpoint.

He earns about 3.3 million dollars a year and his wages are only second to Brazilians star Ronaldo who earns in the region of 4.7 million dollars at Inter Milan.

Batistuta is in an elite club of hat-trick heroes, including

England's Geoff Hurst, who hit three in the 1966 final, Germany's Gerd Muller, who has the World Cup record of 14 goals in total, and Just Fontaine, who fired home 13 goals in Sweden in 1958.

Batistuta also proved his thirst for goals with a hat-trick against Bosnia in Argentina on Monday.

The policeman attacked in Lens before Germany's match with Yugoslavia on Sunday has irreversible brain damage.

Belgian concern

CALLOUX-SUR-FONTAINES, France, June 23 (AFP/Internet): Belgium coach Georges Leekens is poised to bring in the inexperienced Philippe Van de Walle to replace injured keeper Filip De Wilde for his side's crucial Group E clash with South Korea.

The 37-year-old Van de Walle has only been capped twice for his country, the last time coming at the end of the 1996 season.

De Wilde is suffering from a groin strain and despite undergoing intense physiotherapy still remains doubtful.

Also struggling to be fit in time is defensive midfielder Franky Van der Elst. The 37-year-old ball winner is still feeling twinges from a thigh injury picked up last week in training.

His place will go to 24-year-old Philippe Clement, like Van de Walle a novice in international football.

Stoichkov slapped

BONDOUFLE, France, June 23 (Reuters): Bulgaria's football federation decided to slap a fine on wayward striker Hristo Stoichkov on Monday after he was found absent from the team hotel without permission two days before a crunch World Cup game.

But the federation appeared to have opted for discretion rather than discipline in dealing with its soccer diva and his striking partner Lyuboslav Penev, saying they had not been out all night, as a senior official had told journalists.

"There's going to be a severe fine. We can't say how much yet," Exerov, a spokesman, said at the team's evening training session, where both players were present. Asked where they had gone during their absence, he added: "No one knows and no one is asking."

Earlier the general secretary of the Bulgarian Football Union, Ivan Vutsov, had said the pair had headed for Paris and not returned by morning. The players themselves then told journalists they had overslept in their rooms and had not been woken.

Things up it's Hristo Stoichkov. So far, Stoichkov has been proven correct in dismissing the Spaniards.

After coming into the World Cup with an almost impeccable 8-2-0 qualifying record, Spain has done little but disappoint. They lost their opener 3-2 to Nigeria after twice holding a one-goal lead. Then, after promises of revenge, they managed only a dismal 0-0 draw against lowly Paraguay in possibly the dulllest match of the tournament.

"The Spanish think they're the best and have underestimated their opponents," Stoichkov said this past weekend in his latest taunt.

"Superiority has to be shown on the field, and now they're under pressure because they have to win."

Spain and Bulgaria have just one point each, and another loss Wednesday for either means elimination. A draw for Bulgaria also spells farewell. A victory would leave the winner dependent on group-winner Nigeria beating or drawing with Paraguay, which has two points.

"Stoichkov's words won't affect us," said Spanish defender Carlos Aguilera, who also admitted that the team was growing weary of being criticised.

"We are not going to give him any special treatment... We're not obsessed with him."

The 32-year-old Stoichkov rose to fame as a member of FC Barcelona's "Dream Team" in the early '90s under the legendary Johan Cruyff. With Cruyff, he won several league titles and the club's first and only European Champions Cup in 1992. He left the club earlier this year and is expected to play in Japan after the World Cup.

Known for his tough cowboy image, Stoichkov is notorious for his arguments — and at times fistcuffs — on and off the

Big bonus for Iranians

YSSINGEAUX, June 23: Iranian players will receive 7,000 dollars apiece from their government for the important 2-1 victory over the United States, the team's spokesman said Tuesday, reports AP.

That's in addition to the 1,500 dollars they got for losing only 1-0 to highly-rated Yugoslavia in their first World Cup game in 20 years, Khosrow Valizadeh told The Associated Press.

With 20 years of tension between Iran and the United States, Sunday's game in Lyon was the one all Iranians wanted to win. Millions celebrated and danced in the streets of Tehran after the game.

The combined dirr 8,500 reward isn't in the same league as the 100,000 dollars and Mercedes car that each Saudi player got from their oil-rich government four years ago when they qualified for the World Cup in the United States.

It's nonsense

NICE, June 23 (AFP/Internet): Bert Vogts has hit out at suggestions Germany should have pulled out of the World Cup after German fans left a French policeman fighting for his life.

"I was furious when this was raised," said the Germany coach. "I was rung up at two o'clock in the morning and I phoned the federation president Egidius Braun to thrash out the question."

FIFA president Sepp Blatter immediately dismissed the idea when it was brought up informally as one possibility on Monday.

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Hodge-podge Hoddle out of favour

TOULOUSE, France, June 23 (AFP/Reuters): England coach Glenn Hoddle played down England's last-gasp defeat by Romania insisting his side will still march into the second round.

Ironically the killer blow to England came from Dan Petrescu, the player signed by Hoddle when manager of Chelsea nearly three years ago.

His goal virtually ended England's hopes of topping the Group and if Romania avoid defeat against bottom placed Tunisia in their final match. Second place is all England can manage and on almost certain confrontation with Argentina in the second round.

But Hoddle insists England still have reason to be optimistic for the remainder of France '98.

In the final analysis England paid the penalty for two pieces of sloppy defending with Viorel Moldovan losing his marker Tony Adams for the opener and then Petrescu getting the better of Graeme Le Saux to tuck away the 90th minute decider.

Hoddle said, "What we can't do is defend like that again. The concentration level has to be there for the entire 90 minutes."

"We have to take the overall picture and we still think we can qualify, and if we continue to play like that over 90 minutes we'll win more matches than we lose."

But Hoddle also with Michael Owen, also with David Batty, was England's best performer and that prompted Hoddle to say, "Maybe that has answered a few critics. I thought he was outstanding."

Meanwhile English Bookmakers William Hill quoted odds on a likely successor to Hoddle after his team's 2-1 defeat by Romania.

"Glenn Hoddle may have just four days left in this current job," said William Hill spokesman Graham Sharpe.

"And punters are already speculating about who should replace him."

Middlesbrough manager Bryan Robson is a 2-1 favourite to succeed Hoddle with Blackburn's Roy Hodgson a 4-1 second favourite.

Press criticism today focused on England's two defensive blunders, which led to the Romanian goals, and Hoddle's decision to leave teenage striker Michael Owen out of his starting lineup. Owen scored England's only goal after coming on as a late substitute.

"Going to stop thinking you know best now, Glenn?" asked Steven Howard in the Sun.

"After steadfastly and stubbornly refusing to play Michael Owen from the start, England boss Glenn Hoddle paid the full price here last night."

The England manager blamed the defeat on two sloppy goals. Whether he will be big enough to admit to sloppy and one-eyed team selection will be interesting to see."

Nigel Clarke voiced similar opinions in the Daily Mail. It is not only Hoddle's reluctance to start with Owen that asks questions about his management at the highest level, it is his insistence to operate with a back three and a system England cannot play," Clarke said.

David Miller, writing in the Daily Telegraph, said the myth that England were "in some way a formidable side was embarrassingly exposed last night."

"Also disconcertingly revealed was the doubtful judgement of Glenn Hoddle as coach," he said.

"It has been evident for some while that England's brightest and probably best hope in the finals lay with young Michael Owen, whose pace is such as to frighten anyone."

The Independent's Ken Jones condemned England's approach as showing a marked absence of cohesion and wit.

Inferior both in individual technique and in team work, England's witless policy, based on aerial attack from the flanks, never promised to give them the initiative," Jones said.

Signs that the tabloid axes are being sharpened if England do make an ignominious exit from France came in a front-page headline in the Daily Star. Although the text praised Owen's equaliser the headline read: "Two bad Hods."

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Super sub Owen shots into history

TOULOUSE, June 23: Michael Owen became England's youngest World Cup scorer on Monday when he came on as substitute against Romania and put the ball away within 10 minutes, reports Reuters.

The 18-year-old replaced Teddy Sheringham and carved up the Romanian defence to slide in and ram home a close-range equaliser.

Then, well into injury time, after sloppy defending had allowed the Romanians to grab a last gasp 2-1 lead, Owen let rip a shot from 25 metres out which hit Bogdan Stelea's post and bounced agonisingly to safety.

"It was great to score but it was disappointing to end up losing. I would definitely like to start the next game (against Colombia)," said Owen, who became the youngest ever England international this century when he appeared against Chile in February.

Late last month the diminutive striker became England's youngest scorer this century when he steered his side to a 1-0 victory over Morocco with his first international goal.

Owen's confident performance against Romania belied his lack of international experience — just two starts and five appearances as substitute.

The season before last he flicked home a goal in his first senior game for Liverpool and last season ended up as top scorer.

But none of this appears to have gone to the young man's head. "I enjoyed the game from a personal point of view but the team comes first as always," he said.

"You can't expect miracles but I would like to start a game. Everyone wants to play in the game but it's the manager who decides. When he gives you the chance you have to try to take it," said Owen.

Despite his difference Owen must know the future is rosy, especially given the pedestrian performances on Monday of strikers Alan Shearer and Sheringham.

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