

Desperately seeking Owen



AFP, Paris

Liverpool striker Michael Owen has rediscovered his scoring touch just in time to help put the English giants' Champions League challenge back on track when they host Spartak Moscow on Wednesday.

pushed Senegalese World Cup star El-Hadj Diouf out of contention at Anfield.

Spartak lost their first two matches of the competition and will still be without Ukrainian international winger Dmitry Parfyonov and



MICHAEL OWEN

FIXTURES

Champions League first phase group fixtures on Wednesday:

Group A

At Eindhoven PSV Eindhoven (Ned) v Borussia Dortmund (Ger) At Auxerre Auxerre (Fra) v Arsenal (Eng)

Group B

At Liverpool Liverpool (Eng) v Spartak Moscow (Rus) At Valencia Valencia (Spa) v FC Basel (Swi)

Group C

At Athens AEK Athens (Gre) v Real Madrid (Spa) At Genk Genk (Bel) v AS Roma (Ita)

Group D

At Milan Inter Milan (Ita) v Lyon (Fra) At Rosenborg Rosenborg (Nor) v Ajax (Ned)

skipper and playmaker Yegor Titov, who are both sidelined until the end of the first group phase.

Group leaders Valencia host Basel in the group's other match. English champions Arsenal have blown away all memories of poor Champions League starts in the past, taking full points from two matches and scoring six goals.

In a double boost ahead of their Group A clash with Auxerre in France on Wednesday, influential Swedish midfielder Fredrik Ljungberg could return for Arsene Wenger's side while they will be spared facing 21-year-old French international Djibril Cisse. Cisse has suffered an inflammation of a broken bone in his foot but his continuing absence should hand Zimbabwean striker Benjamin Mwaruware a chance to add to his record of six goals in six matches.

Wenger, himself a Frenchman in charge of a team packed with French players including Thierry Henry and Sylvain Wiltord, said: "It is a big game for us and for France. "Arsenal are seen as a French team playing in London."

PSV Eindhoven meet German champions Borussia Dortmund in the other match in the pool.

In Group C, AS Roma are in the same position as Liverpool after defeat to Real Madrid and a goalless draw with AEK Athens.

Fabio Capello's side need to beat modest Belgian side Genk away on Wednesday to salvage their challenge.

"Many things will be settled in the match against Genk," said Capello. "My team is having difficulty scoring and we must put that right."

Reigning European champions Real Madrid top the group and a point at AEK would virtually book their ticket to the second phase.

The top two teams in Group D, Inter Milan and Lyon, meet at the San Siro on Wednesday while Ajax, on three points like Lyon, need at least a point at Rosenborg of Norway to keep pace.



PHOTO: AFP

WHERE'S THE POLICE! Bayern Munich goalkeeper Oliver Kahn (R) grabs Bayer Leverkusen's Thomas Brdaric by the neck during their Bundesliga match in Leverkusen on September 28.

Kahn's open approach



AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich goalkeeper Oliver Kahn said he is prepared to give up the captaincy of the national team after a clash with fellow international Thomas Brdaric in a Bundesliga match on Saturday.

"If anyone thinks I can no longer fulfil this exemplary role then naturally I will give up the job," Kahn said in Monday's Kicker magazine.

Kahn was heavily criticised after grabbing Brdaric by the neck during Bayern's 2-1 defeat to Bayer Leverkusen.

The Bayern keeper, voted the best shotstopper at this year's World

Cup finals, was upset that Brdaric had shot the ball into the net despite the whistle sounding for a foul. Both players received yellow cards and Brdaric was later sent off after receiving a second booking.

Brdaric said he had felt he was "in danger of death" but Kahn retorted: "We were on a football field and football is a man's sport and not a comedy show."

Bayer Leverkusen's general manager Reiner Calmund gave Kahn a vote of support.

"There were fifty fouls on this Bundesliga weekend that were worse and we haven't talked about them."

He told Kahn to "take a cold shower, have a chat with national coach Rudi Voller and remain captain."

Velappan blames Europe



AFP, Busan

Asian football chief Peter Velappan said here Tuesday that live television coverage of European football is slowing the growth of the game in the region.

Velappan, in Busan for the opening matches of the Asian Games tournament, is considering a plea to FIFA to stop the saturation coverage of English, Spanish and Italian matches via satellite television.

The general secretary of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said he hoped companies broadcasting the English Premiership and UEFA Champions League in Asia would eventually start showing more football from the region.

"We (the AFC) have nothing against foreign football but there is a limit and we have reached it," he told AFP. "Satellite broadcasters like ESPN should have an obligation to Asian football as they broadcast to the continent. They must remember they are in Asia."

"The coverage is nearly all European football, including replays, and we have to move to cut

it back." Velappan said that the football associations in Hong Kong and Thailand had written to the AFC pointing out that televised matches from England and elsewhere in Europe were hindering efforts to promote their local leagues.

"Live television broadcasts are having an effect on the supporter base for the local matches," he said. "We are looking for a bit of goodwill and co-operation from the broadcasters so as the expansion of Asian football is not slowed."

Velappan added that if the television companies did not cut down the number of live matches shown from Europe, and increase the coverage of the Asian game, he would ask FIFA to act.

"In Asia, we have a golden product and the broadcasters should team up with us to market it," he said. "It is time there was more coverage of the AFC Champions League and other events rather than just European matches."

"A lot of the viewers in places like Thailand and Vietnam watch the games just because they have a bet on the outcome, not for the football. Real football fans in Asia should be able to watch matches from the region."

Bergkamp denies



INTERNET, London

Dennis Bergkamp has dismissed reports that he will leave Arsenal at the end of the season. The denial follows an article in the News of the World yesterday, which said Bergkamp would quit Highbury when his contract expires in June.

"Despite what you may have read elsewhere, I have certainly not decided that I will quit Arsenal at the end of this season," Bergkamp told his personal website, icons.com, earlier today.

"With the way I and the team are playing at the moment, retirement is the last thing on my mind. I am only thinking of winning matches and trophies for Arsenal right now."

A spokesman for the Arsenal also called the reports "somewhat premature." "Dennis would like to stress that

he has not actually stated that he will be retiring at the end of this season," they added.

Yesterday the Dutchman, who joined Arsenal in 1995, reportedly told the News of the World: "I can smell the end of my career. I know the end is coming."

"My family and I are very happy in England, but when my contract ends I will go back to Holland. I left there ten years ago but it will always be my home," he added.

"I have to be realistic. I am 33 now and although I think I am still getting better as a player, I also know I will not be faster as a player if I continue."

"And the thing I want to do is to stop at the top and with the biggest club I have played for - Arsenal. I certainly won't want to go from Arsenal to a smaller club - I'm a top player and I will stop playing at a top club."

'Mama Mia'



INTERNET, London

Paolo Di Canio has revealed how he deliberately taunted Chelsea fans at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

The West Ham striker was sick of the abuse being dished out by Blues fans.

When his 12-yard strike put West Ham 3-2 ahead, the Italian charged over to home supporters to make his point.

Di Canio, 34, who also hit a stunner for the second goal, said: "When I scored the winner with only about five minutes to go I clearly wanted to challenge the Chelsea fans because they had broken my balls the whole game."

"So I ran to them and began to yell 'I'm the man, I'm the man. So what now? Who is the winner now?'"

"To me it was really a beautiful, beautiful moment and I really enjoyed it so much."

"At the Olympic Stadium in Rome they threw bottles at the weekend when they treated the return of a Lazio legend, Alessandro Nesta, disappointingly."

"But the maximum risk you have in England is someone might spit at you. So it was very, very funny to keep yelling 'I'm the man' at Chelsea fans."

Di Canio was abused by Chelsea fans during the surprise West Ham victory, just as he was last season when he was sent off during a 5-1 defeat.

The FA are keen to discourage players from taunting opposing fans - even though they may have been abused themselves.

Soho disciplinary bosses have

yet to receive a report from referee Mike Dean so are unaware whether it contains reference to Di Canio's antics.

Yet the Italian insisted London derbies are extremely tough matches which get the pulses racing.

He added: "We know how much it means to the fans if we beat our neighbours."

"And we want to prove to the fans we care just as passionately as them to get the right result."

"After my first goal I just yelled 'Mama Mia' because of my delight."

"As soon as I touched the ball for that shot I knew it was going to be a fabulous goal because I struck it right in the sweet spot and it just took off."

Di Canio also admits he is still pushing himself through the pain barrier for his club.

He has three pain-killing injections in his foot before every match. Di Canio said: "The anaesthetic numbs my foot for about an hour but, after that, I can still feel pain."

"Rest is probably the only cure for this problem - but there is no way I am going to rest at the moment, especially at a time when the team needs me to be a leader."



PAOLO DI CANIO

Senegal in mourning



INTERNET

Senegalese football has been counting the cost of the ferry disaster that has taken several hundred lives.

When the Ziguinchor-Dakar ferry "Le Joola" sank on Friday it took with it several of Senegal's most talented young footballers.

Two football schools based in Ziguinchor were transporting their players to a youth tournament in Fatik, near the capital Dakar.

Almost all the players from the

Mamadou Marieme Diallo and Edouard Diatta schools are believed to have died.

Diallo was a former Senegal international, and his international and club partner in central defence, Michel Diatta, was in charge of Diallo's academy boys on the boat when it sank.

Senegal's current internationals have been quick to show solidarity with their countrymen in this difficult time.

Sedan pair Moussa Ndiaye and Henri Camara wore black armbands as they took on Rennes at the weekend, and an inspired Camara scored an early and emotional goal.

Souleymane Camara's gesture

of support was even more obvious.

The Monaco striker scored a goal for his club, and lifted his shirt to reveal a message to all those who died or lost loved ones.

"In memory of the victims of the Joola," said the words on Camara's t-shirt.

In an emotional article daily newspaper Le Soleil saluted Camara's action, and paid homage to the young footballers who died.

"These young men who wanted to become the Souleymane Camara of the future have been halted in full flow, and died in the middle of the sea without knowing why."

An enquiry into the reasons why the ferry sank is under way.

Pape's world has changed



INTERNET

Pape Bouba Diop says he is a marked man in European football following his World Cup exploits for Senegal.

Diop scored the winner against France and a double against Uruguay in the tournament to elevate himself from a virtual unknown to one of the World Cup's star performers.

But midfielder Diop, who is set to miss his French side Lens' Champions League visit to Deportivo la Coruna on Tuesday, has found that opposing teams now pay him a lot more attention.

"Since the World Cup, people know me," Diop said.

"When we went to play AC Milan

a couple of weeks ago in the Champions' League, they were all talking about me before the game."

"And when we played Bayern Munich they put Ballack further forward to mark me."

After my goal against France, my

confidence was so high I thought I could do anything

"So the World Cup has changed a lot."

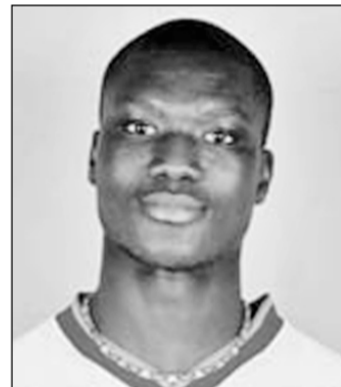
Diop spent most of the first half of the year on the bench, having failed to convince Lens coach Joel Muller of his quality following a January move from Swiss club Grasshoppers.

Now he is one of the first names on Muller's team-sheet, but Diop says he always knew he wouldn't be on the bench for long.

"I arrived in the middle of the season, so I understood why I wasn't playing."

"I said to the coach, no problem, but that next year I was going to play. I was determined to show everyone at the World Cup that I know how to play football."

"After my goal against France, my confidence was so high I thought I could do anything."



PAPE BOUBA DIOP

Stars head for Libya!



INTERNET

Cameron striker Patrick Mboma has joined the Libyan club Al Itihad in what has been described as a surprise move.

No fee has been disclosed for the transfer from Parma.

Mboma last played for Sunderland in England on loan from the Italian club.

Mboma has signed a two-year contract with the Libyan side headed by the famous son of the country's head of state, Saadi Kadhafi.

Mboma is reportedly delighted about the move and has said he wants to help Al Itihad win the African Champions League in 2003.

After playing in France and Japan, the 2000 African footballer of the year said he is happy coming back to play in Africa.

He will make his debut this weekend in the second week of the

Libyan championship.

Meanwhile, Al Itihad have also lured Nigerian striker Victor Ikpeba on a free transfer from German club Borussia Dortmund.

"I think everybody's surprised," Ikpeba said of the proposed move.

"We are at the point where we will reach an agreement in the next few days. I should know what is going on by tonight (Monday)."

Dortmund bought Ikpeba in 2000 from Monaco in a high-profile move, but after just one season he was dropped from the starting line-up.

"I would have loved to stay in Europe, it is where my family are," Ikpeba said.

"But going back to Africa is like a challenge for me."



PATRICK MBOMA

Ronaldo starts normal training

AFP, Madrid

Brazilian star Ronaldo, who is expected to make his Real Madrid debut against Alaves next weekend, started training again with his teammates on Monday, the team's sporting director Jorge Valdano said.

The World Cup winner returned to normal training after a week of gym sessions to overcome a muscular problem in his left leg.

The former Inter Milan striker, whose leg problem prevented him from making his debut in the 6-0 Champions League win over Genk last week, will not be travelling to Athens where Real meet AEK on Wednesday.

Should Ronaldo's recovery stay on course, he should appear as a substitute in the Spanish league match against Alaves on Saturday.

Nedved's Premiership thoughts



AFP, London

Czech international playmaker Pavel Nedved admitted Tuesday he would like to finish his career in the English Premiership after a glittering career in Italy.

The 30-year-old will first of all turn his attention to ensuring current side Juventus take all three points at home to Newcastle United in the latest round of Champions League matches in Turin on Tuesday.

However Nedved, whose spectacular goal grabbed Lazio the last ever Cup Winners Cup trophy in 1999 over Real Mallorca, told the Sun it was his ambition to end his career in England.

"My dream is one day that I'll play there in the Premiership," he said.

"I don't have a huge experience of English football but I know about the famous English atmosphere."

"It is after all renowned throughout the world," added Nedved, who was an integral part of the Lazio side that did the double in the 1999-2000 season.

Nedved was also a member of the talent-filled Czech squad - Patrick Berger, Karel Poborsky and Vladimir Smicer being others - that sprang to prominence in Euro 96 where they were beaten in the final by Germany thanks to a golden goal.

Moratti backs Cuper



REUTERS, Rome

Inter Milan president Massimo Moratti has offered strong support to coach Hector Cuper who has been under intense scrutiny in the Italian media since Ronaldo's abrupt departure from the club in August.

"As a coach, Cuper doesn't need defending," Moratti was quoted as saying in La Gazzetta dello Sport daily. "I'll defend him when attacks descend to a personal level."

Inter top both Serie A and their Champions League group. But

Cuper's managerial style has been questioned after Brazilian striker Ronaldo named the Argentine coach as the reason for his decision to move to Real Madrid.

In an interview in La Gazzetta dello Sport last week, the Brazilian striker said 60 per cent of Inter's players disliked Cuper. He named his ex-striker partner Christian Vieri as one of the players who frequently clashed with the coach.

Moratti praised Cuper's restraint during the controversy.

"Cuper has responded very well to a difficult moment, with responsibility and professionalism, without sticking the knife in," he told La Gazzetta.

He shrugged off Vieri's gloomy on-pitch demeanour which has been seized upon as evidence of the striker's discontent.

"Vieri seems to be in a sulk, but that's not the case, I can assure you," he said. "It's just the way he is. On the outside he seems one way, inside he's something else entirely, a positive person."

Last season Cuper brought Inter close to their first Serie A title since 1989 only to see it slip through his fingers as Inter lost 4-2 to Lazio in their last match.

The team play Olympique Lyon in the Champions League on Wednesday.

Premiership Blackburn burn West Brom



AFP, London

Dwight Yorke and Damien Duff hit the goals for Blackburn in a 2-0 Premiership win at West Bromwich Albion on Monday though celebrations were tempered when Yorke limped off injured.

Yorke came on for the second half and scored a 72nd minute penalty for the opening goal but had to go off with five minutes remaining. Irishman Duff clinically scored the second four minutes later.

Duff's finish at least gave the home crowd something to remember when he was put clear by Yorke and coolly rounded keeper Russell Hoult before making sure of the three points for Souness' men.

Yorke had given them the lead in rather controversial circumstances. Ronnie Wallwork pulled back Duff and although television replays suggested the initial contact was outside the Albion box the referee pointed to the spot and Yorke name no mistake with his lofted spot-kick.

Until the late setback of Yorke's injury it was a good night for Souness' substitutes with Keith Gillespie also adding an extra dimension to the visitors' attack after his introduction in the 65th minute.

Before he and Yorke got it together a dour match that had looked like it might remain in a stalemate.

Albion boss Gary Megson had given 35-year-old Bob Taylor his first start of the season but his side, while typically solid at the back, showed no teeth up front.

Their best chance fell to central defender Darren Moore in the 15th minute but he headed over the bar and for the rest of the match Jason Roberts was left to plough an increasingly lonely furrow up front.

When Scott Dobie failed to finish from 12 yards after Martin Taylor got a leg in the way, and then Gillespie cleared off the line in a

goalmouth scramble, the points were in Blackburn's bag.

Lucas Neill had had their first chances in a grim first period but saw two low shots blocked by the legs of Moore.

After Moore's miss from Igor Balis' set-piece Souness introduced Cole - like Yorke returning

form injury - for the injured Flitcroft and the tide began to turn.

Albion made a more lively start to the second half and Balis forced a stretching save from Friedel before Gillespie's introduction coincided with the spell of dominance which provided the deserved three points for Rovers.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Damien Duff (R), the Blackburn Rovers star, is being congratulated by teammates Dwight Yorke (Top) and Keith Gillespie after scoring against West Bromwich Albion on September 30.