

Premiership

Owen with a bang

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Michael Owen went from zero to hero as Liverpool got back to winning ways with a 3-0 victory against Portsmouth here at Anfield on Wednesday.

Owen netted twice after Dietmar Hamann put Liverpool 1-0 up in the sixth minute with a tremendous strike.

It was a welcome return to form for England striker Owen who had a penalty saved in Liverpool's FA Cup exit against Portsmouth and then saw another spot-kick stopped in a 2-0 league defeat against Pompey's south coast rivals Southampton last weekend.

Wednesday's result also re-ignited Liverpool's Champions League challenge, catapulting Gerard Houllier's men into fifth place, just a point behind Charlton who occupy the fourth and final qualifying spot available to English sides for Europe's premier club competition.

Afterwards Houllier, who received a death threat following the collapse of Liverpool's Premier League title challenge, said: "It was a good victory and a good game of football.

"We had a lot of variety in our game and scored good goals," the Frenchman added. "The first goal from Dietmar Hamann was outstanding. Their keeper was man of the match making save after save against us and I am pleased and proud of my team.

"I am pleased with Michael Owen who scored two good goals."

For Portsmouth, it was another fruitless visit to Liverpool after their 1-0 weekend loss against Everton and meant they remained in the relegation zone with Harry Redknapp's side still searching for their first away league win of the season.

Afterwards Redknapp told Sky Sports: "It was tough. They got off to a tremendous start. But in the first 15 minutes of the second half we played some good football and I felt that the next goal would be vital."

Redknapp added that Owen's return to form had come as no surprise to him. "He's a top player. Everyone gets on his case but he's a world-class striker. They (Liverpool) are full of quality and when they play well they are a good team."

Pompey, who had beaten Liverpool 1-0 at Fratton Park in the

Premiership thanks to a goal from Anfield old-boy Patrik Berger earlier in the season, saw their hopes of a rare 'double' rocked early on.

After the ever-willing Owen pulled back an overhit cross he laid the ball off to Hamann, running in from 20 yards out and the German let fly with a superb volley that flew into the top corner past stationary Pompey keeper Shaka Hislop.

But the visitors almost hit back when Lomana LuaLua's pass found Bulgarian striker Svetoslav Todorov who was playing his first game of the season after having damaged knee ligaments two days before the campaign got underway.

However, as the former West Ham striker was in the act of shooting, Igor Biscan produced a fine last-ditch block.

Serbia international Dejan Stefanovic was then fortunate not to be sent off for a wild challenge on Owen.

But Owen was not to be denied and in the 28th minute slotted in a right foot shot from six yards out following Jamie Carragher's right-wing cross.

Pompey went close to pulling one-back in the 48th minute when Sami Hyypia was penalised for a foul on Steve Stone on the edge of the box. Stefanovic stepped up to take the free-kick but saw his curling shot bounce hit the crossbar with Liverpool keeper Jerzy Dudek beaten.

LuaLua then missed a glorious chance when, unmarked in the box, he miskicked from close range.

It was a miss that was made to look all the worse when Owen put Liverpool 3-0 up in the 58th minute.

Danny Murphy's 25-yard shot was palmed behind by Hislop. But from Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard's inswinging corner, Owen's close-range flick header gave Hislop no chance.

TOP SIX

English Premiership table after Wednesday's match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Arsenal	28	21	7	0	55	18	70
Chelsea	28	19	4	5	50	21	61
Man Utd	28	18	4	6	52	29	58
Charlton	28	12	7	9	39	34	43
Liverpool	28	11	9	8	41	31	42
Newcastle	28	10	12	6	38	29	42

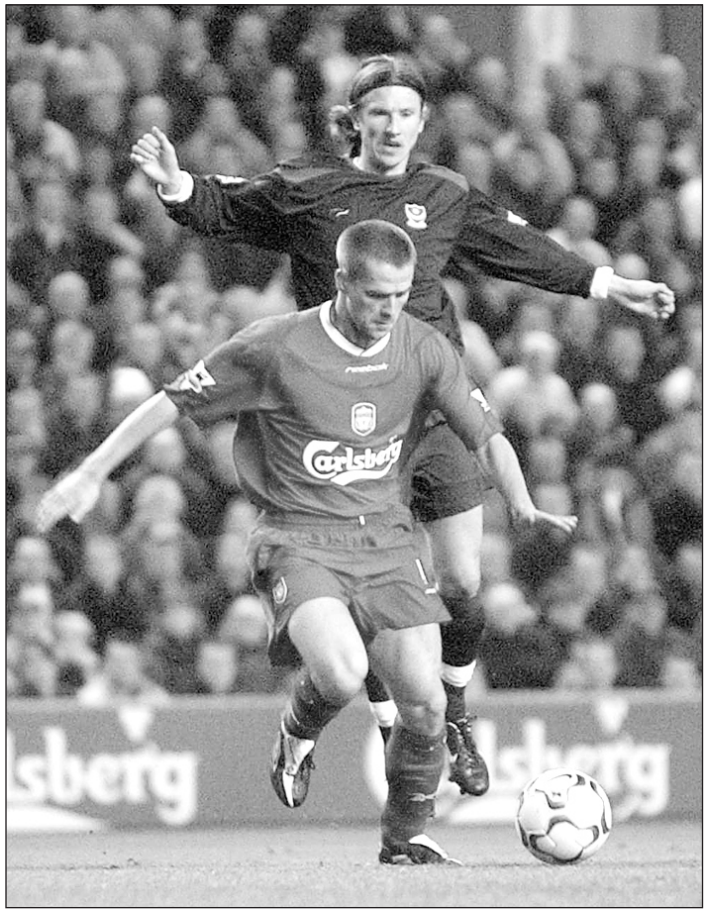


PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool's ace striker Michael Owen (front) keeps possession under pressure from Portsmouth's Dejan Stefanovic at Anfield on March 17.

German Cup

Giant-slayers in final

Football

AFP, Aachen

Second division Alemannia Aachen continued their giantkilling of Bundesliga teams defeating Borussia Monchengladbach 1-0 on Wednesday to reach the German Cup final for the first time since 1965.

After defeating holders Bayern Munich 2-1 in the quarter-finals Aachen showed it was no fluke with Ivica Grlic's goal condemning

Gladbach to defeat and putting underdogs Aachen into the Berlin final on May 29 against Werder Bremen.

"It was not our best cup performance but all we care about is going to Berlin," enthused Aachen manager Jorg Berger.

The Bundesliga leaders ran out 3-2 winners against VfB Lubeck 3-2 on Tuesday and will be firm favourites to win the trophy. Quick-fire goals from Brazilian Ailton and Paraguayan Nelson Haedo Valdez in extra-time capped a fine come-back win after Lubeck had twice gone in front at the Weserstadion.



PHOTO: AFP

Zaragoza captain Luis Cuartero (L) receives the King's Cup trophy from an applauding King of Spain Juan Carlos I (R) at the Olympic Stadium in Barcelona on March 17.

Zaragoza Kings

Football

AFP, Barcelona

Real Zaragoza stunned Real Madrid with a winning goal in extra time to take the Spanish Cup on Wednesday and dash David Beckham's hopes of a first trophy in Spain.

Argentinian substitute Luciano Galletti fired a low shot that flew past Real keeper Cesar in the second half of extra time after the match had ended 2-2 at the end of the 90 minutes.

Madrid's defeat crushed their hopes of winning the trio of Cup, league and Champions League trophies.

Long-range free kicks from Beckham and Roberto Carlos had been cancelled out by goals from Dani and a David Villa penalty before the dramatic finale in the Montjuic Stadium.

Zaragoza survived the sending-off of Cani late in normal time and

when Real lost Guti to a second yellow card early in extra time the underdogs pushed 'los galacticos' in every area of the field before Galletti found the net after 111 minutes of play.

The result was all the more remarkable because while Real are top of the Spanish league, Zaragoza are battling relegation.

With the injured Ronaldo watching from the stands the players observed a minute's silence for the 201 victims of last week's bomb attacks in Madrid.

The silence gave way to a pulsating final in which Beckham continued a remarkable first season in Spain by curling a free kick into the net after 23 minutes.

Zaragoza equalised when Dani smashed a shot past Real keeper Cesar but Beckham almost added a second

goal from a free kick but the ball glanced off the post with five minutes left in the first half.

The underdogs took the lead late in the first half with a penalty won and converted by Villa after he

was tripped by Guti but Real brought the match to 2-2 when Carlos blasted a low free kick around the wall three minutes into the second half.

Zaragoza looked doomed when Cani was sent off for two yellow cards midway through the second half after a foul on Guti but their goalkeeper Cesar Lainez put in an outstanding performance to keep his side in business.

The pace slowed as the second half wore on but Lainez earned his team a chance to fight on in extra time with a superb finger tip save from Zinedine Zidane's header.

The first period of extra time was uneventful but Zidane set the second half alight with a vicious low shot that Lainez saved with his legs despite having already dived in the other direction.

As Real tired, Zaragoza seemed to take heart.

However there seemed little danger when Galletti, who had come on as a 60th minute for Dani, struck a shot from 30 metres out that nestled in the corner of the net.

Italian Cup

Lazio halfway there

Football

AFP, Rome

Injury-hit Juventus are in danger of finishing the season without a trophy after losing 2-0 to financially stricken Lazio in the first leg of the Italian Cup final here on Wednesday.

Two second-half goals from midfielder Stefano Fiore - a close range finish and an acrobatic scissor kick - left Juventus with a mountain to climb in the second leg which takes place in Turin on May 12.

Lazio also had the luxury of missing a penalty kick when Cesar Aparecido's weak shot was comfortably saved by Antonio Chimenti, while Juventus finished the game with 10 men after Croatian defender Igor Tudor saw red for an ugly challenge on Cesar.

Defeat for Juve was their third in eight days following their Champions League exit at the hands of Deportivo La Coruna - 1-0 winners in Turin - and their 3-1 loss to Serie A leaders AC Milan on Sunday which practically ended their hopes of winning a third successive Italian league title.

Lazio's victory meanwhile lifted some of the gloom hanging over them following the suspension of the club's shares on the Italian stock exchange.

The future of the Rome outfit, currently fourth in the league,

hangs in the balance due to their crippling debts.

Despite building a good lead to take into the second leg, Lazio coach Roberto Mancini said the tie was far from over.

"We have done well to win 2-0 and obviously that gives us a better chance of winning the trophy, but there are two months until the second leg and anything could happen," he said.

Mancini's counterpart Marcello Lippi lamented his side's poor defending which has plagued them all season.

"It's a shame because we undo all our hard work by conceding soft goals," he said.

"It is unfortunate, but we will bounce back and try to recover the situation in the second leg."

Juventus were without injured quintet Alessandro Del Piero, David Trezeguet, Gianluca Zambrotta, Alessandro Birindelli, Fabrizio Miccoli and the suspended Ciro Ferrara.

Claudio Lopez was granted compassionate leave for family reasons, so Roberto Muzzi, Cesar and Bernardo Corradi lined up in a trident attack.

Juventus started brightly and twice went close in the opening 10 minutes.

Marco Di Vaio's close range shot was turned around the post by Lazio goalkeeper Matteo Sereni before Czech midfielder Pavel Nedved's low drive sped past the post.

After Sereni had once again denied Di Vaio, the half ended in controversy as Lazio were denied what they believed to be a perfectly good goal.

Corradi rose to meet Massimo Oddo's high cross with Chimenti, but neither player made contact with the ball which crept in at the far post.

Lazio's celebrations were cut short however as referee Pierluigi Collina ruled that Corradi had used his arms to block Chimenti and the goal was ruled out.

Seven minutes after the break, Chimenti tripped up Fabio Liverani to concede a penalty, but Cesar's weak spot-kick was easily caught by the Juventus veteran.

Rather than drop their heads, Lazio rallied and took a deserved lead in the 59th minute.

Giuliano Giannichedda's cross was flicked on by Fernado Couto for Fiore who tucked the ball past Chimenti with the outside of his boot.

Fiore then rounded off an excellent performance by doubling his tally 10 minutes from the end with a close range overhead kick after Gianluca Pessotto had cleared off the line.

Tudor was sent off for an early bath as Juventus let their frustrations show before Dutchman Jaap Stam almost made it 3-0 with a stooping header only to be denied by a brilliant flying save from Chimenti.

Door closes on mercenaries

Football

AFP, Zurich

World football's governing body FIFA on Wednesday announced strict guidelines for players wishing to represent a country with which they have had no previous connection.

FIFA's response comes days after its president, Sepp Blatter, announced measures to counter countries buying in foreign players, like oil-rich Qatar's pursuit of Brazilian striker Ailton.

After an emergency meeting FIFA said Wednesday that players would now have to meet three criteria for playing with a national team:

a) the player was born on the territory of the relevant

Association; b) his biological mother or biological father was born on the territory of the relevant Association; c) his grandmother or grandfather was born on the territory of the relevant Association; d) he has lived continuously for at least two years on the territory of the relevant Association.

FIFA's new measures are a response to the policy followed so enthusiastically by Qatar's French coach Philippe Troussier, who has tried to lure Werder Bremen striker Ailton - one of three targeted Brazilians - to help them qualify for the 2006 World Cup.

Blatter said: "Naturalisation that allows players with no obvious connection to the new country to play for that country's national teams is not the aim and object of the (FIFA) Statutes.

"For that reason, we have to put an immediate stop to such practices. I will also bring this matter up at the Ordinary FIFA Congress in Paris on 20-21 May 2004 with the aim of amending our Statutes accordingly. I am sure that our Congress will also support this point of view."

Qatar have already lashed out the cash in athletics.

Last year, Kenyan-born steeplechaser Stephen Cherono and 5,000 metres runner Albert Chepkirui controversially changed nationality to compete for the Gulf state.

Cherono, under his new name of Saif Saeed Shaheen, won the gold medal for Qatar in the 3,000m steeplechase at the World Championships in Paris in August.

Another Larsson mark

AFP, Glasgow

Henrik Larsson has reached yet another goalscoring milestone after helping Celtic move another step closer to reclaiming the Scottish title in his final season at the club.

Larsson's strike in Wednesday night's 2-1 win at Dundee took his goal tally for the club to 231 and saw him move level with Stevie Chalmers, a member of the 1967 European Cup winning team, as joint third highest scorer in Celtic's history.

The 68th minute strike, the Swede's 30th of this season, sealed the points for Celtic after Stilian Petrov's first half opener, Dundee having to be content with a last-minute consolation effort from substitute Sebastian Kneissl.

As well as moving level with Chalmers, Larsson took his tally of league goals for Celtic to 167, equaling Bobby Lennox's post-war record.

But, in trademark fashion, the 32-year-old was quick to play down the significance of his individual achievements and stress the importance of the 19-point gap Celtic now enjoy at the top of the table.

"People like Bobby Lennox and Stevie Chalmers are legends and it's very nice to be up there with them but against Dundee it was important to get the result," he said.

"I know these things are great to do but the main thing has always been the team. I want to get the points that we want."

It would be a major surprise if Larsson did not take over from Lennox as the leading scorer of league goals in the post-war era before he leaves Celtic at the end of the season.

But he has no realistic chance of matching Lennox's total of 273 in all games.

Celtic's scoring records are likely to be topped for ever by Jimmy McGrory, who scored a phenomenal 397 goals in just 378 league matches in the 1920's and 30's, including eight in one match, a 9-0 thrashing of Dunfermline in January, 1928.

Hitzfeld claim raises questions

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea's reported approach for Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld has been denied by the club but only stoked up more speculation over manager Claudio Ranieri's job.

Newspapers reported Thursday that European champions AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti and AS Roma coach Fabio Capello were top of Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich's wish-list.

Another Chelsea target, England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson, has reportedly decided to stay on to the 2006 World Cup.

Ancelotti, capped 26 times by Italy, has won the European Cup as a player and coach with Milan.

The 44-year-old was regarded as having all the credentials, even if his English was only rudimentary, to turn Chelsea into the new Real Madrid.

Ranieri, who has fielded questions about his future all season, was expected to go even if the Italian won the European Champions League in May.

But he told Chelsea TV: "There are a lot of rumours about me but I just continue in my way."

"I think maybe the newspapers don't have anything to write about so maybe they have to close some space and so its



OTTMAR HITZFELD

'first day this manager is going to Chelsea, second day this manager says no to Chelsea.' This is normal.

"From the beginning there were these rumours. Imagine if I was to give importance to this rubbish. That would be crazy.

"At the moment I continue to build and to think about my team, about my players and how to improve them, that is important."

Hitzfeld's contract at Bayern runs to 2005 when the former schoolteacher is expected to take over as Germany coach.

Hitzfeld, 55, has led Bayern to four Bundesliga titles, two German Cups and the Champions League in 2001 and VfB Stuttgart Felix Magath is being lined up to succeed him.