

# Owen boost for England

BBC ONLINE, London

England striker Michael Owen appears to be fit for Saturday's World Cup qualifier against Wales after looking in good form in training on Thursday.

Owen, who had a muscle strain, was moving easily as he took part in the main session with his teammates.

The Real Madrid star has virtually proved he is over his injury and must now wait to see if he is selected.

Keeper David James was unable to train after waking up to find a build-up of fluid on his knee.

With Owen seemingly available, coach Sven-Goran Eriksson may decide to employ three strikers - with the Real Madrid star playing alongside Jermain Defoe and Wayne Rooney slotting in just behind the pair.

In training on Wednesday, Eriksson included all three forwards in the same team and opted for a diamond formation in midfield.

The strategy could provide a solution to how Eriksson replaces the injured Steven Gerrard.

Rooney may slot into the attacking point position, with Frank Lampard occupying a holding role.

Eriksson's other midfield options include bringing in Joe Cole or Jermaine Jenas, who has been operating on the left of midfield for Newcastle recently.

Manchester City winger Shaun Wright-Phillips is another alternative.

In defence, Eriksson appears to be set to start with Rio Ferdinand and Sol Campbell, despite impressive recent performances by John

Terry and Ledley King. England captain David Beckham believes it is a big plus for England to have Ferdinand available again after his eight-month ban for failing to attend a drugs test in Manchester. "Having Rio back in the team is massive for the players, the team and the fans," Beckham said. "He has been out a long time but

you can see what he has done for the Manchester United team since he has come back in. "We are hoping that is what he is going to do for us. To have four defenders available like Rio, Ledley, John and Sol is immense. "There are not many defenders around better than them."

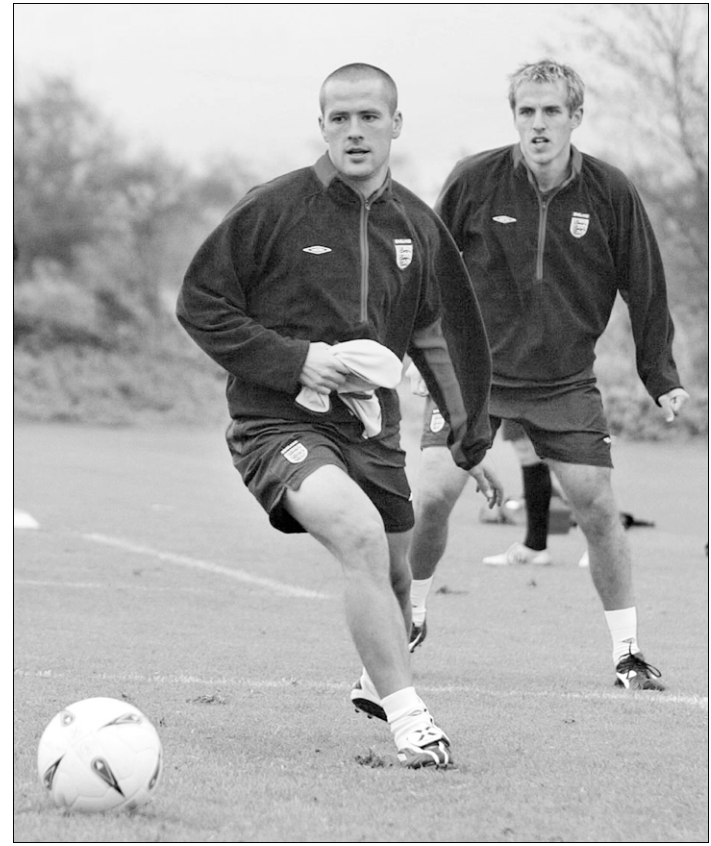


PHOTO: AFP  
England striker Michael Owen (L) trains while teammate Phillip Neville watches closely in Manchester yesterday for their World Cup qualifier against Wales on Saturday.

# An Asian sponsor please

AFP, Bangkok

Manchester United, the world's richest football club, has launched a roadshow in Southeast Asia to find new corporate sponsors and strengthen its fan base, officials said Thursday.

The club's commercial director Andy Anson met executives from electronics companies, airlines and a telecommunications firm founded by the Thai prime minister, during the show's stop in Bangkok.

"The club is looking for new general Asian sponsors as Manchester United has a strong fan base in Southeast Asia," according to an official from the public relations company hired by the club.

"It will be a two-sided benefit - sponsors receive branding while the club broadens its exposure in Asia."

After Bangkok the roadshow will head to Malaysia. Last year team executives visited China and Japan.

The tour comes as the club confirmed on Monday it had received a preliminary takeover approach, following reports that an American sports tycoon was plotting a 650 million pound (1.17 billion dollar) bid to seize control.

# Cafu, Kaka's sigh of relief

REUTERS, Teresopolis

Brazil captain Cafu and midfielder Kaka are relieved to be back with the world champions after being caught up in a club-versus-country row which caused them to miss last month's match against Bolivia.

The AC Milan pair were overlooked for the World Cup qualifier in Sao Paulo after their Italian Serie A club had refused to release them for a friendly international in Haiti in August.

AC Milan goalkeeper Dida and Bayern Munich duo Lucio and Ze Roberto suffered the same fate after failing to make the trip to Haiti for a game dubbed the 'Peace Match'.

"I hope it doesn't happen again on the part of Milan or the CBF (Brazilian Football Confederation)," said Cafu on Tuesday as he prepared for Saturday's World Cup qualifier in Venezuela and the home game with Colombia next Wednesday.

"Refereeing is neither coherent nor consistent. The interpretation of the game isn't in harmony," Blatter insisted.

Decisions taken by the various working groups will be discussed by

# Giggs has other ideas

REUTERS, London

Ryan Giggs will try to tie Manchester United teammate Gary Neville in knots and score a goal to send the Old Trafford

crowd home in tears when his Wales side play England on Saturday.

A United stalwart since Alex Ferguson went to Giggs' Manchester home on his 14th birthday to get him to sign schoolboy forms, Giggs will be familiar with more than just the venue of the World Cup Group Six qualifier.

The Welsh winger's trademark runs down the left flank will bring him face to face with England right-back Neville, with whom he has played the best part of 400 games for United.

Other United players facing Wales will be teenage striker Wayne Rooney and central defender Rio Ferdinand, playing his first international since completing an eight-month ban for missing a drugs test.

Two former longstanding teammates will also seek to check Giggs's progress, fellow midfielders David Beckham, in his second season at Real Madrid, and Nicky Butt, now at Newcastle United and tipped to replace the injured Steven Gerrard.

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson, faced with a problem slot on the left side, has long singled out Giggs as the domestic player he would most like to see in a Three Lions shirt, worn briefly by Giggs for

England Schoolboys.

The 30-year-old Giggs, though, has no doubts about where his allegiances lie.

"I may speak with a Mancunian accent, but I'm still 100 per cent Welsh and proud of it - end of story," he told the Daily Mirror.



RYAN GIGGS

"The pictures of me wearing the England shirt have encouraged the misguided belief that I could have gone on to play for England at senior level. But it was an England schoolboy team made up of boys who went to school in England.

"The fact is I would rather go through my career without qualifying in a major championship than play for a country in which I wasn't born and had nothing to do with my parents."

Instead, Saturday will be all about furthering Wales's ambitions of reaching a major tournament for the time since 1958, having come agonisingly close to getting to Euro 2004.

For a player who has won everything at club level - with eight league titles, four FA Cups, one League Cup and the 1999 European Cup - the international disappointments could not provide a bigger contrast.

"Ever since I've been in the team, the aim has been to qualify for a major championship," he told a news conference. "The only way I can look at my career and be happy with it is if Wales qualify."

"If we don't qualify it will be seen by a lot of players in the team as failure. That's what we play for. We compete to make World Cups and European Championships. And failure is something I'm not used to."

Wales, lying fourth in the group after disappointing draws with Azerbaijan and Northern Ireland, certainly need Giggs to be at his best against England.

# France's green phobia

AFP, Paris

France are fearful of drowning under a tide of green support at the Stade de France in Saturday's World Cup qualifier against Ireland.

Around 35,000 Irish fans could descend on the 77,000-seater stadium built for the 1998 World Cup despite the Irish Football Association's original ticket allocation being set at just 8,000.

"This could feel more like an away match for us," Manchester United defender Mikael Sylvestre predicted.

"The Irish fans will be there in great numbers and they will make themselves heard - like they always do."

"It's not when you are world champions that you need supporters."

"It's when you are struggling. If the French fans want to see us in the 2006 World Cup finals, they have to come on Saturday."

"I'm aware that a match against Ireland doesn't have the appeal of one against Brazil. But if we want to play Brazil again we first have to beat Ireland. We can't skip steps," he told the Irish Independent.

Sylvestre is eager to take on his United teammate Roy Keane, who was back training with Brian Kerr's Irish side in Dublin Wednesday after sitting out Tuesday's session.

France coach Raymond Domenech, in his fourth match in charge since taking over from Jacques Santini, has had to shuffle his options after injuries to key players David Trezeguet and Ludovic Giuly, who are set to be replaced by Marseille's Peggy Luyindula and Daniel Moreira of Toulouse.

Captain Patrick Vieira is also ruled out after his red card in France's last qualifier against the Faroe Islands although the Arsenal midfielder will be back in business for Les Bleus' next step to Germany 2006 against Cyprus on Wednesday.

After an uninspiring goalless draw against Israel and a 2-0 win over the Faroes, France are level on

points with Switzerland and Ireland in Group 4, but only third on goal difference.

"The team's eager to show what it's capable of," said Domenech, who has had a modest start to his reign as coach as he rebuilds the former World Cup and European champions after the retirements of stars Zinedine Zidane, Lilian Thuram, Marcel Desailly and Bixente Lizarazu.

Ireland, meanwhile, continued their preparations at their home training camp north of Dublin in Malahide Wednesday before flying to Paris Thursday.

Manchester United's John O'Shea and Chelsea's Damien Duff, both of whom like Keane sat out training Tuesday as a precautionary measure, were back in the fold Wednesday leaving Richard Dunne as Kerr's sole injury doubt.

Goalkeeper Shay Given has yet to link up with the squad but the Newcastle player's absence is nothing to do with injury but the imminent arrival of his first child.

# Diouf on a mission

AFP, Johannesburg

Fallen star El Hadji Diouf is set to begin his international rehabilitation Sunday when Senegal play Liberia in a 2006 World Cup Africa zone qualifier.

French coach Guy Stephan chose Diouf after the Bolton Wanderers striker completed a four-match ban for violent conduct at the end of an African Nations Cup quarterfinal loss to Tunisia this year.

He was voted African Footballer of the Year in 2001 and 2002 as Senegal made a mockery of the form book two years ago by shocking defending champions France and Sweden en route to a last-eight finish in the World Cup.

But little has gone right since for a footballer instantly recognisable due to his peroxide blond hair and Liverpool lent him to less fashionable English Premiership club Bolton in mid-year.

The fortunes of Senegal after those heady nights in the Far East have mirrored those of Diouf with just two wins in four Group 1 fixtures and a shock loss to unexpected leaders Togo.

Teranga Lions beat Congo and Zambia at home, slumped in Togo and came from behind twice to hold Mali last month, a draw that brought Senegal level on seven points with Togo, who have a better goal difference.

Given a modest away record, Stephan will not relish visiting Liberia, who remain a formidable force at home despite failing to plug the gap left when inspirational superstar George Weah retired several years ago.

Togo are flourishing under the coaching of former Nigeria star Stephen Keshi and can collect another three points at home to surprise strugglers Mali while Congo should edge Zambia in a Brazzaville showdown of two more cup hopefuls.

Senegal are not the only top seeds battling to establish control and South Africa need to end a dismal away record in Group 2 and beat Uganda to keep in touch with pacesetters Ghana and Democratic Republic of Congo.

Defensive frailties cost Bafana Bafana (The Boys) deary in Ghana and DR Congo and English coach

# Burnout worries FIFA

Football

AFP, Zurich

World governing body FIFA insisted on Wednesday that the number of matches played throughout the world needs to be cut.

"There is too much football, the players are tired," admitted FIFA president Sepp Blatter who has ordered a number of working parties to be formed to examine, amongst other things, the international calendar as well as the standard of officiating at matches.

"Refereeing is neither coherent nor consistent. The interpretation of the game isn't in harmony," Blatter insisted.

Decisions taken by the various working groups will be discussed by

the next meeting of the FIFA executive committee on December 18 this year.

Blatter said he was concerned that the coordinated international calendar, in place since 2002, was not being applied correctly.

"We want fewer matches," said Blatter.

"We can't tell a federation how they should organise their competitions but we can suggest, even impose, the maximum number of games a club should dispute each season."

Other matters to be examined in December are the introduction of a coordinated international match calendar and FIFA competitions to ensure adequate rest days (at least eight) and training days (at least 17) for international players before the 2006 World Cup in Germany.

The UEFA Cup final in 2006 will be brought forward from May 17 to May 10 with the Champions League final being held on May 17 and not May 24.

A panel will also look at ways of improving the list of international referees as well as the age limit (currently 45).

It was also recommended by Wednesday's meeting of the Strategic Studies Committee that after 2007, the Women's World Cup will be staged in even years every four years as from 2010 to allow a space of two years between the Olympics and the World Cup.

The confederation champions from Europe and South America will no longer be obliged to take part in the controversial Confederations Cup.

# Cool it, Kahn

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen striker Miroslav Klose has stuck the boot into Bayern Munich goalkeeper Oliver Kahn following their fracas on Saturday, claiming his German international teammate should learn to curb his temper.

Kahn, 35, raced towards forward Klose in the 43rd minute of the 2-1 win over Bremen at the Weserstadion and pushed his gloves into the nose of the Polish-born striker.

Kahn claimed Klose landed a late blow to his kidney but television replays showed no evidence.

"I did not touch him and television replays confirmed that," Klose told Kicker magazine.

"He started talking about higher powers and tried to make me look like a fool. That is not on."

"I could have pulled his cap down into his face, bit his finger or done a thousand other things."

# Pires goes ballistic

REUTERS, Clairefontaine

Midfielder Robert Pires launched an angry attack on Spain coach Luis Aragonés on Thursday over racist comments apparently aimed at his France and Arsenal teammate Thierry Henry.

"He should be sued for racial aggression," Pires told reporters at France's training ground.

"He shouldn't be allowed to get away with it. He needs to be cornered on this."

Television microphones picked up the Spanish coach trying to convince striker Jose Antonio Reyes in training on Wednesday that he was a better player than "that black shit", seemingly referring to Reyes's club teammate Henry.

Aragonés later said his comment was "a joke" aimed at motivating Reyes but Pires said: "What he said is not funny at all."

Henry is the English Premier League's leading scorer with seven goals, one ahead of his closest rival Reyes after eight games.

The jibe made back-page news in tabloids in Britain, where a former

manager, Ron Atkinson, resigned as a soccer television pundit in April after making racist comments over the performance of Chelsea's captain last season, Marcel Desailly.

Reaction to Aragonés's comments in Spain, however, was relatively muted although one sports daily, As, criticised him for "obscene" language.

Aragonés, interviewed later by Radio Marca on Wednesday, insisted the comments were in no way racist. The 66-year-old did not deny that his comments were made in reference to Henry.

That was accepted by all Spanish newspapers on Thursday but As was nevertheless strident in its criticism of the coach.

"Luis used inappropriate words, more inappropriate still when he was in front of millions of eyes and ears hidden behind the television cameras," As editor Alfredo Relano wrote.

"I'm aware that Luis is not a racist ... but you cannot speak as he spoke. I'm sure he chose his words without any wish to offend ... but his obscene, outdated language gives him, and us, a problem."

"A national team coach has a representative role and he has to

know this. He must also know that speaking like this is out of order, whether it is in private or in public, whether the cameras are present or not."

Other newspapers came directly to the coach's defence.

"It goes without saying that Aragonés's intention was not to bring racist overtones to the matter," Spain's bestselling newspaper Marca wrote.

"The coach expressed himself in his own way, with vehemence, to get the message through loud and clear to Reyes."

Sport newspaper stressed that the tone of the comments was humorous.

"Out of context, the comment might sound aggressive but everyone understood immediately the tone of humour that Aragonés wanted to use to motivate the player," Sport said.

The country's two leading daily newspapers made no comment on the affair.

El Pais relegated the story to a few lines, while El Mundo had a picture of Aragonés talking to Reyes on its front page but declined to make any comment.

# What makes Henry tick?

AFP, Paris

Thierry Henry's standing as one of the most phenomenal strikers of recent times is undisputed - so why does his seemingly effortless ability to find the back of the net for Arsenal desert him the minute he dons a France shirt?

The schizophrenic nature of Henry's form - seven goals in eight matches for Arsenal this season compared to two from ten run outs for Les Bleus since the start of the year - was taken up by L'Equipe on Thursday 48 hours before France meet Ireland in a World Cup qualifier.

"Henry's fantastic for the Gunners, but a lot less so or almost not at all for Les Bleus," L'Equipe wrote.

"How can he be exceptional when playing on a Saturday, off-colour when playing (for France) midweek, and return to his best the following Saturday?" the paper asked.

His Arsenal teammate Dennis Bergkamp put forward the following theory.

"With Arsenal, Thierry evolves in a system where everyone knows what he's got to do."

"Obviously France play less instinctively - without that cohesiveness all you're left with is the players' ability."

"On top of that a striker always depends on the service he gets - Thierry's never more dangerous than when we give him the ball on the first touch."

"That's when he finds space - to line up a second striker with an attacking midfielder is a mistake."

The Dutch striker added: "Thierry has talked a lot about the France team. He's not happy with their system of play - he'd prefer if it was more like ours."

Another Arsenal teammate, Robert Pires, told the paper: "A striker is reliant on the output from

the rest of his team. "At Euro 2004 we tried to find our balance throughout the whole competition without success."

"The way the ball was moved around wasn't fluid - and 'Titi' never stronger than when he's being served the ball quick and low."

The 27-year-old player himself remains silent on the issue - preferring to keep his own counsel especially having been stung by suggestions that he was the

orchestrator of an anti-Zidane campaign.

Former France great Jean-Pierre Papin meanwhile believes he has the answer.

"To solve the problem all you have to do is put all the Arsenal players in the France team!"

On a more serious note the ex-Marseille and AC Milan striker said: "France needs time to rebuild - but she doesn't have any."



THIERRY HENRY



PHOTO: AFP  
French midfielder Robert Pires talks to the press at the team's training base in Clairefontaine, outside Paris yesterday. The 1998 winners face Ireland in a 2006 World Cup qualifier at the Stade de France tomorrow.