

Owen denies Argentina

Football

AGENCIES, Geneva

Michael Owen wrote another incredible chapter in the history of England's clashes against Argentina as he led a remarkable last-gasp fightback to secure a morale-boosting victory ahead of the World Cup finals.

England looked to be bound for a depressing defeat in Geneva with just four minutes left on Saturday, with Argentina having exposed their weaknesses in defence and only keeper Paul Robinson having kept the scoreline down.

Owen, who in two previous World Cup encounters against Argentina had scored a wonder goal and won two penalties, struck with two headers in the friendly at the Stade de Geneve.

Argentina led twice with goals from Hernan Crespo and Walter Samuel but England roared back with goals from Wayne Rooney and Owen before Owenscored the winner.

"To come back twice was great," Owen told the BBC.

"These are what these warm-up games for the World Cup are for. Maybe we can go in the lead in the next game and learn how to defend a lead as well."

"It was cracking excitement, there was so much more to it than a friendly. Even when they scored you see their fans and players going mad."

Crespo, who plays for English champions Chelsea, put the Argentines ahead after 35 minutes with a close range effort after poor England defending only for Rooney to equalise with a snap shot four minutes later.

Argentina took the lead again early in the second half when Samuel rose to a Juan Roman Riquelme free kick at the far post and headed across goal, although the ball was already over the line when his central defensive partner Roberto Ayala helped it into the back of the net.

Jose Pekerman's team then appeared to be holding out for a win to boost them after two defeats in their last two away games in the qualifiers but they were crushed by England's strong finish with substitute Joe Cole having a big impact.

Both of Owen's goals came from headers as the Newcastle man took his England tally to 35 goals from his 75 internationals.

In a high-octane opening quarter there were agonisingly close misses at both ends with Riquelme having the first shot on target, a drive from outside the box in the fifth minute that keeper Paul Robinson turned over.

Both teams also had the ball in their opponents' nets early on with Owen's fine header from Rooney's lob

into the box being ruled out for offside.

At the other end seven minutes later, England right back Luke Young turned a corner into his own net under pressure but was awarded a foul close to the post.

Robinson saved from Tevez in the 10th minute and Rodriguez a minute later.

As the exchanges became less frantic, Sorin blocked an attempt by

have gone ahead.

Gerrard robbed Zanetti on the left and sent in a superb low, diagonal ball to the middle that Rooney touched past the advancing keeper Roberto Abbondanzieri only to see it come back off the far post.

Argentina went ahead less than four minutes later when Riquelme stole the ball after a mix-up deep in the Argentines' half between

Abbondanzieri's right-hand post with a 25-metre drive minutes later as England sought a quick reply.

This came within five minutes. Ayala's attempted clearance inside the box went up in the air and Beckham beat Sorin to the ball to nudge it wide where Rooney raced in to thump it in close to the base of the near post for his 11th goal in 28 games for England.

Abbondanzieri made some good



PHOTO: AFP

TOAST OF ENGLAND: England's Michael Owen (R) celebrates one of his two late strikes against Argentina with teammates Wayne Rooney (L) and captain David Beckham during their international friendly in Geneva on Saturday.

Rooney in front of goal just outside the box, Argentina cleared a dangerous left cross from Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard headed Beckham's corner tantalisingly wide of the far post.

Even closer was Rooney chance on the half hour when England should

Beckham and Rooney. Riquelme's diagonal ball found Rodriguez on the right whose low cross was slightly deflected by Rio Ferdinand and Crespo turned it home from close in for his 29th goal in 53 internationals, though his first in four games.

Gerrard was just wide of the diving

saves in the second half when England probed for the equaliser but was beaten when Owen ghosted in behind the defence to head home Gerrard's right cross and headed an almost carbon copy winner two minutes later.

Iran's answer to Korea

AFP, Tehran

Furious over Seoul's opposition to their nuclear programme, Iran has ditched the South Korean sponsors of a friendly football tournament and are using the event to promote their atomic ambitions.

The event once known as the "LG Cup", backed in recent years by the South Korean electronics giant, has gone ahead with another title: "The peaceful usage of nuclear energy is the definite claim for Iranians".

"No competition will have a (South) Korean sponsor," national sports official Mehdi Ghadami was quoted as saying.

Officials said they were looking for a new sponsor, and the Iranian sports press said the price tag of the tournament was five to six billion rials (550,000 to 660,000 dollars).

The move is seen as punishment for Seoul's decision to vote in favour of an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) resolution in September that paved the way for Tehran to be brought before the UN Security Council over its disputed nuclear program.

Washington accuses the Islamic republic of developing a nuclear bomb under cover of a civilian nuclear programme, charges strenuously denied by Iran.

Goods from South Korea and Britain, which co-sponsored the IAEA resolution, are already the subject of an unofficial ban in Iran.

This year's friendly football competition features just four teams: Iran, Macedonia, Paraguay and Togo. Romania was due to take part, but pulled out after Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be "wiped off the map".

Best loses four stones

AFP, London

Football legend George Best has shrunk to just "skin and bones" in his fight to stave off serious illnesses which led him close to death, his agent told a Sunday newspaper.

The 59-year-old former Manchester United star, still in the private Cromwell Hospital in west London but out of intensive care, has shrunk from more than 12 stones (76 kilograms) to barely eight stones (51 kilograms).

"George is very gaunt. He eats just the odd spoonful of porridge," agent and longtime friend Phil Hughes told the News of the World. Former Northern Ireland forward Best has been sleeping up to 20 hours a day.

"He is unable to hold a conversation and when I ask him if he's hungry, he says no. We need to get vitamins and protein into him." Best was admitted to the hospital seven weeks ago with internal bleeding and a kidney infection. He left intensive care on Wednesday.

Best's illness is believed to be related to the immuno-suppressant drugs he took to stop his new liver -- which he received in July 2002 after decades of alcoholism -- being rejected.

Considered one of the game's greatest players and the first "pop-star" footballer, Best was voted European Player of the Year in 1968 before alcoholism took its toll on his career.

Spain, Switzerland

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Switzerland's win was only their second in the last eight meetings between the two sides and also brought an end to Turkey's unbeaten run away from home during this World Cup qualifying campaign.

CZECH REPUBLIC 1; NORWAY 0

The Czech Republic also scored a 1-0 win over Norway thanks to a superbly executed first-half header from Vladimir Smicer, on a mudheap in Oslo to move a step closer the finals, although that tie is still far from over.

TRINIDAD 1; BAHRAIN 1 Trinidad & Tobago were held to a 1-1 draw despite being the more dangerous team ahead of the second leg in Manama.

Christopher Birchall struck a stunning 25 metre half-volley to equalise with 12 minutes left after Salman Husein had given Bahrain the lead in the 72nd with a powerful header.

URUGUAY 1; AUSTRALIA 0 Uruguay, who won the World Cup twice in 1930 and 1950 but have failed to qualify for two of the last three finals, were made to fight all the way by Australia in a gritty battle for supremacy at home, but only had Dario Rodriguez's 37th minute goal to show for their efforts at the end.

Australia beat Uruguay 1-0 at home in the first leg four years ago before losing 3-0 in Uruguay, and will be hoping to reverse history when they meet again in Sydney next week.

Brazil flood UAE

France hold Germany, Italy sink Netherlands

Football

REUTERS, London

World champions Brazil put eight goals past United Arab Emirates and Germany drew 0-0 in France in Saturday's friendlies for next year's World Cup hopefuls.

Italy were 3-1 winners in the Netherlands, Euro 2004 finalists Portugal beat Croatia 2-0 and Ivory Coast prepared for their World Cup debut with a 2-1 win over Romania in neutral France.

Brazil, even bigger favourites to retain their title in Germany after lifting the Confederations Cup there in

June, outclassed their opponents in an 8-0 drubbing in Abu Dhabi.

Playmaker Kaka gave them a first-half lead but the fireworks came after the break when Olympique Lyon team mates Fred and Juninho Pernambucano scored two apiece, defenders Lucio and Ciccinho got one each and striker Adriano converted a penalty.

Two other World Cup candidates met in Amsterdam, with Marcello Lippi's Italy coming out on top of Marco van Basten's men after going a goal down.

Alessandro Del Piero had a hand in Italy's first two goals, providing the cross for Alberto Gilardino to head an equaliser and sending over a corner

which was turned in by Dutch defender Ron Vlaar in first-half stoppage time.

Luca Toni put the match beyond the Netherlands' reach, catching out their hosts on the break.

In two other games among qualified nations, Armando Petit and Pedro Pauleta, taking his national record tally to 43 goals, scored for Portugal against Croatia, while South Korea, co-hosts and semi-finalists of the 2002 World Cup, drew 2-2 with Sweden.

The United States, appearing in their fifth successive finals next summer, drew 1-1 at Hampden Park against a Scotland side who will not be making the trip to Germany.

Pekerman curses his luck

Eriksson hails Owen

Football

REUTERS, Geneva

Argentina lost a match they led until the dying minutes after a two-goal England burst that did not reflect the bulk of the game, said coach Jose Pekerman.

"The match was no longer tactical, it was just (England) pushing forward and throwing in crosses," he told reporters.

"It hurts to lose like that in the final minutes, it leaves a bit of a feeling of injustice," Pekerman said.

"You have to accept this happens in football and try to find ways to avoid that in the future... cement what we did well and take that to victory," added Pekerman.

In the last 20 minutes the Argentina coach took off centre back Roberto Ayala, playmaker Juan Roman Riquelme and striker Hernan Crespo, who had scored the opening goal.

"There were too many mishaps together. It's not normal and hard to bear losing a central defender, your link man and centre forward," he said.

"We were ready to go 3-1 up and the match was turned around," Pekerman added as he contemplated his third defeat in a row away from Buenos Aires.

"The players that came on did not

have time to settle and (midfielder Esteban) Cambiasso was having difficulty moving."

On the other hand coach Sven-Goran Eriksson hailed Michael Owen as maybe the best goalscorer in world football after the striker fired England's comeback win.

"What more can I say about Michael Owen...if he gets three



JOSE PEKERMAN

chances he will score at least two, that's Michael Owen," Eriksson purred.

"He's a top goalscorer, maybe the best in the world, I'm very happy for him," he said.

"We wanted to win this match... I hope we will be seeded (in the World Cup draw) and I think we will, but nobody can say."

FIFA have yet to decide on the seeding criteria to be used in the draw on December 9.

Paying tribute to England's spirit, Eriksson said: "We struggled in the beginning of the match, they were very aggressive and we had problems keeping the ball in the first 15 minutes."

"But we gradually came into the game more and more and were the better team -- and deserved to win."

Eriksson also praised Wayne Rooney who is one of the manager's big hopes for the World Cup.

"Rooney today is considered one of the best in the world, I only hope he keeps that shape and form next summer," Eriksson said.

"If he starts winning the ball in the air against central defenders that's incredible. He's a complete football player and still only 20 -- not bad."

Eriksson also gave Argentina credit for their performance and, in particular, their impressive playmaker Juan Roman Riquelme.

"One reason we struggled was that Argentina are very good at playing the ball to Riquelme and the two strikers," Eriksson said.

"Against Riquelme, if you want to take him out of the game you have to mark him man-to-man but I didn't want to do that, he's a fantastic player."

"When they have the ball they pick him out, he's not got pace but it's impossible to get the ball off him."

Zidane calls for improvements

REUTERS, Paris

France are falling short of their best and need to improve to do well at next year's World Cup, Real Madrid playmaker Zinedine Zidane said on Sunday.

"It's way too short for the moment. At the World Cup, we'll have to do better, all together," Zidane told French television.

France were held to a disappointing goalless draw by Germany at the Stade de France on Saturday, three days after a 3-2 win over Costa Rica in Martinique.

However Zidane, who missed the two games with a groin injury, said France had improved since coach Raymond Domenech took over from Jacques Santini in July 2004.

"There was a little something missing, a victory, a little bit of confidence. That is what we gained with our victory in Ireland," he said.

Excitement

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expected to join. On the other hand their Motijheel rivals are buying heavily apart from keeping national pool's Bashar and Aftab Ahmed. They are going for national vice-captain Khaled Mashud, who will switch from Victoria as their third pool player, Hannan Sarkar and pacers Alamgir Kabir and Talha Jubair.

Biman as usually are going to make a good side although they have lost ace batsman Ashrafal Javed Omar, left-arm paceman Syed Rasel, Sanwar Hossain, all-rounder Mushfiqur Rahman are the familiar names for the national flag carrier.

Brothers confirmed Nafes Iqbal, Enamul Haque Jr, Nazmul Hossain, Ehsanul Haque, Arafat Sunny and Gazi Salahuddin but unfortunately, two-time champions Victoria are going to fall in the mediocre category this year.

Indira Road, Kalabagan, Orient Sporting Club and Agrani Bank are the other teams in the 12-team competition which starts on December 9.

All-French finale

Sharapova sent packing

Tennis

AFP, Los Angeles

Mary Pierce beat world number one Lindsay Davenport, and Amelie Mauresmo ousted defending champion Maria Sharapova on Saturday to set up an all-French final at the WTA Tour Champion-ship.

Their semifinal victories insured the elite season-ending event will have a French champion for the first time.

"It's amazing," said Mauresmo, but added that neither player could afford to think about historical implications come Sunday.

"We're going to put aside those aspects of the match, and just play our best tennis," she said.

Pierce, the only player to emerge from round-robin play with a perfect 3-0 record, did just that on Saturday as she remained unbeaten with an impressive 7-6, 7-6 victory over Davenport.

Pierce blasted 40 winners - including 10 aces in a superb service effort - and had just 10 unforced errors.

"I like it," Pierce said. "I hope it continues that way."

Mauresmo, playing in the semifinals of the Championships for the third straight year, defeated 18-year-old Sharapova 7-6, 6-3 to book her

second meeting with Pierce in three days.

Pierce posted a three-set victory when they met in round-robin play on Friday night.

She picked up where she left off against Davenport, who quickly found herself in a 5-2 hole in the first set.

"She served so great, and hard when they were in. It was a great display - I could never get a read on where they were going," Davenport said.

Gradually, however, Davenport responded to the challenge, saving one set point in the eighth game and breaking in the next as she took the set to a tiebreaker, which the French player seized with a service winner followed by a blistering forehand that skimmed the netcord.

"I definitely got off to a slow start," Davenport said. "Even when it was five-all, I felt lucky to be in the first set."

Pierce saved the only three break points of the second set, as the two big hitters took their battle to another tiebreaker.

India still

FROM PAGE 12

lift them to 114 points -- overtaking all the above mentioned sides as well as the African nation (who would slip to 110 points), and into third place with only Pakistan and Australia ahead of them.

A 4-1 success for India would raise their rating to 112 points and cut South Africa's to 113, while even a 3-2 success for the home team would take them above New Zealand, England and Sri Lanka, to 110 points (South Africa would drop to 117).

For South Africa, a 3-2 success would see them maintain their current rating of 120 (under that scenario India would rise by one point to 108), a 4-1 win would lift them to 123 points (India would slip to 106) and a 5-0 clean sweep would take Graeme Smith's side to 127 points (India 103), just nine points short of leaders Australia.

Akmal c Trescothick b Hoggard	28			
Sami c Jones b Hoggard	1			
Akhtar not out	10			
Shabbir b Flintoff	0			
Kaneria c Giles b Harmison	6			
Extras: (b-1, lb-7, nb-11)	19			
Total: (All out in 98.2 overs)	274			
Fall of wickets: 1-80, 2-161, 3-166, 4-181, 5-183, 6-238, 7-244, 8-260, 9-260				
Bowler	O	M	R	W
Hoggard	22	4	55	2
Harmison	16.2	5	37	3
Flintoff	23	6	68	4
Collingwood	4	1	15	0
Giles	16	3	44	0
Udal	17	3	47	1

ENGLAND: First innings	135			
Trescothick not out	9			
Strauss lbw b Sami	71			
Bell c Butt b Malik	10			
Collingwood c Akmal b Shabbir	0			
Hoggard not out	28			
Extras: (b-8, lb-6, nb-14)	253			
Total: (For 3 wkts in 68 overs)	253			
Fall of wickets: 1-18, 2-198, 3-251				
To bat: Pietersen, Flintoff, Jones, Giles, Udal, Harmison				
Bowler	O	M	R	W
Akhtar	15	2	48	0
Sami	10	1	49	1
Shabbir	13	3	32	1
Kaneria	16	2	60	0
Malik	14	1	50	1

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

1 Tom Hanks movie
4 Horace contemporary
8 Wield the shears
12 Depressed
13 Suitable
14 Banks of America's Next Top Model
15 Have bills
16 Overly enthusiastic
18 Hackneyed
20 Under-stand
21 Baker's unit
24 Do
28 Disney classic
32 Winged
33 Census statistic
34 Summer or Reed
36 Blackbird
37 Sketched
39 Lively
41 Appeared to the max

DOWN

2 River City site
3 Singer Stefani
4 Empty a truck
5 Through B&B
7 Like a doormat!
8 Mark of shame
9 Big Apple letters
10 401(k) alternative
11 Crony
17 Frank McCourt memoir
19 Elev.
22 Since
23 "Is that your answer?"
25 Verve
26 "Auld -- Syne"
27 Peter, Paul and Mary, e.g.
28 Transitory trends
29 Taj Mahal site
30 Depilatory brand
31 Kournikova of tennis
35 Speech
38 Internet image provider
40 Sailor's assent
42 Parched
45 Kind of hairdo
47 Track circuits
48 Met solo
49 Comic-book super-group
50 Corpulent
51 "All the Things You"
52 Maiden-name indicator
53 Snoop Dogg's genre
54 Ostrich's kin

Solution time: 21 mins.

ACROSS
1 TOM HANKS
4 HORACE
8 WIELD THE SHEARS
12 DEPRESSED
13 SUITABLE
14 BANKS OF AMERICA'S NEXT TOP MODEL
15 HAVE BILLS
16 OVERLY ENTHUSIASTIC
18 HACKNEYED
20 UNDERSTAND
21 BAKER'S UNIT
24 DO
28 DISNEY CLASSIC
32 WINGED
33 CENSUS STATISTIC
34 SUMMER OR REED
36 BLACKBIRD
37 SKETCHED
39 LIVELY
41 APPEARED TO THE MAX

DOWN
2 RIVER CITY SITE
3 SINGER STEFANI
4 EMPTY A TRUCK
5 THROUGH B&B
7 LIKE A DOORMAT!
8 MARK OF SHAME
9 BIG APPLE LETTERS
10 401(K) ALTERNATIVE
11 CRONY
17 FRANK MCCOURT MEMOIR
19 ELEV.
22 SINCE
23 "IS THAT YOUR ANSWER?"
25 VERVE
26 "AULD -- SYNE"
27 PETER, PAUL AND MARY, E.G.
28 TRANSITORY TRENDS
29 TAJ MAHAL SITE
30 DEPILATORY BRAND
31 KOURNIKOVA OF TENNIS
35 SPEECH
38 INTERNET IMAGE PROVIDER
40 SAILOR'S ASSENT
42 PARCHED
45 KIND OF HAIRDO
47 TRACK CIRCUITS
48 MET SOLO
49 COMIC-BOOK SUPER-GROUP
50 CORPULENT
51 "ALL THE THINGS YOU"
52 MAIDEN-NAME INDICATOR
53 SNOOP DOGG'S GENRE
54 OSTRICH'S KIN

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