

## Owen unsure about return

AFP, London

Michael Owen admits he may have to miss England's crucial Euro 2008 qualifiers if his recovery from two operations takes longer than expected.

Owen, 27, had the surgery in Germany on Friday to cure a stomach problem which could have caused a hernia. The Newcastle forward is also recovering from a torn adductor muscle in his groin and was initially ruled out of England's matches against Estonia and Russia in October.

Newcastle manager Sam Allardyce hinted on Saturday that Owen could be back for the qualifiers, but the former Liverpool star is taking a cautious approach.

"I shall cling to the hope I can play for England but people must accept that Newcastle have to come first at the moment," Owen told the News of The World. "I don't want to tempt fate by making a premature forecast."

"Medical advice will decide how quickly I will be back in action. I'd rather remain cautious at this stage than set any unrealistic targets."

"But in the back of my mind, before I had the surgery, I had focused on Newcastle's October 22 Premier League game against Tottenham - the first after the international break - for a possible return."

"Anything before that, including England's two Euro qualifiers against Estonia and Russia, would be a bonus."

"I know it is going to be the subject of national debate as to whether I will be fit to help England qualify for next year's European Championship finals but let's adopt a little bit of caution and see how the next 10 days unfold."

"Newcastle pay my wages and I have missed far too many games since joining them to put them at the back of the queue as far as priorities go."

## Van der Saar to have tests on foot injury

AFP, Birmingham

Edwin van der Saar will have precautionary scans on the foot injury he suffered in Manchester United's 1-0 victory over Birmingham City this weekend which kept the Premiership Champions within two points of leaders Arsenal.

The Dutch international goalkeeper was unable to continue after half-time, after falling heavily during the first half at St Andrews and United have already ruled him out of taking part in Tuesday night's Champions League Group game against AS Roma at Old Trafford.

"Edwin has a problem with his foot and our medical people are taking care of the situation. They will have a better idea of the problem after tests, but he is unlikely to be fit to play against Roma," said Sir Alex Ferguson, the Manchester United manager.

The loss of the experienced goalkeeper is a major worry to Ferguson ahead of the meeting with the Serie A side, who are determined to avenge their 7-1 humiliation against the English Premier League Champions in last season's competition.

Van der Saar has not conceded a goal in seven hours and 44 minutes since he was beaten by Manchester City's Brazilian striker Gervinho's deflected effort off Nemanja Vidic caused them to lose the Manchester derby against Sven Goran Eriksson's side on 19 August.

Tomasz Kuszczak, signed from Championship side West Bromwich Albion, permanently in the summer and who replaced van der Saar for the second half against Birmingham, has been placed on stand-by for his Champions League debut.

"Tomasz made one very good save and showed why he is a Manchester United player. It is very hard for him behind a player as good as Edwin and he has had to wait for his opportunity, but we are very confident in his ability and we have no worries," said Ferguson's assistant manager Carlos Queiroz.

The loss of van der Saar was the only real negative for United as they recorded their fifth successive Premier League victory, as Portuguese winger Christiano Ronaldo marked his 100th Premiership appearance with the decisive 51st minute goal.

Ronaldo ensured that it remains 29 years since Birmingham last beat United, an emphatic 5-1 victory back in November 1978, with his first Premiership goal of the season, after registering his first goal of the campaign against Sporting Lisbon in the Champions League.

And Ferguson believes that his side could not have been given a better examination ahead of returning to Champions League duty, by the side managed by his former Manchester United captain, Steve Bruce.

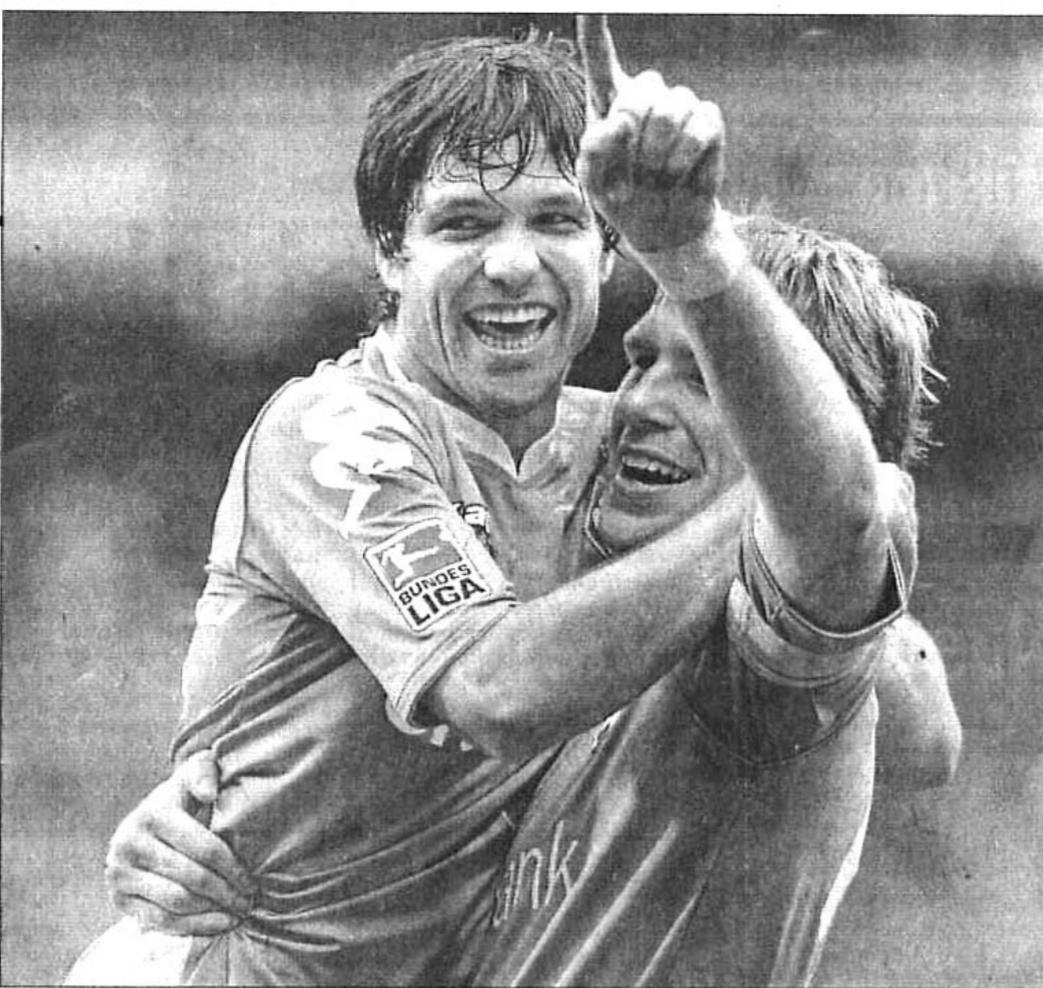


PHOTO: AFP

Werder Bremen defender Per Mertesacker (R) celebrates his goal with midfielder Diego during Bremen's emphatic 8-1 rout of Arminia Bielefeld in their Bundesliga clash at the WeserStadion in Bremen on Saturday.

## BREMEN NET EIGHT GOALS

## Toni keeps Bayern atop

AFP, Stuttgart



BUNDES LIGA

Bayern Munich are now four points clear at the top of the Bundesliga as the Miroslav Klose-Luca Toni double-act struck again to seal a 1-0 win over Bayer Leverkusen on Saturday.

The duo now have 14 league goals between them after eight games and the pair combined again when German striker Klose's pass just before half-time gave Italian World Cup winner Toni his sixth goal in just seven games.

The win leaves Bayern undefeated after eight games and with a goal difference of 19 already, it is looking more and more likely they will be crowned German champions for the 21st time at the end of the season.

But Bayern's chief executive Karl-Heinz Rummenigge showed his ruthless side after the game when he called for specialist goal judges after he insisted Bayern were denied a late second goal by the referee's decision.

"We need goal judges, who signal to the referee whether it was gate or not," said the former German international.

And despite their sixth win from eight games, coach Ottmar Hitzfeld was not entirely satisfied with the performance.

## Hleb seriously injured

Football

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger admitted a serious injury to Alexander Hleb had stripped the gloss from Arsenal's 1-0 victory at West Ham.

The Belarusian international was stretchered off mid-way through the first half at Upton Park after being felled by a crude, shin-high tackle from Mark Noble.

The referee Alan Wiley awarded just a yellow card to the West Ham midfielder, a decision that triggered angry remonstrations from Wenger on the touchline.

Hleb had barely abated when he addressed the media in his post-match press conference and, while he stopped short of accusing Noble of deliberately attempting to hurt his opponent, Wenger suggested that the collision was not entirely accidental.

"It looked very nasty, although I haven't seen it again on the replays," he said. "If it was an accident, it is a very bad accident, because if you see it again it is unbelievable."

"It is red and bruised from the knee down to the toes. We are quite optimistic because Noble is usually a fair player. I don't know if it was an accident or not, but he caught him very well."

Hleb left Upton Park on crutches and has been ruled out of Tuesday's Champions League encounter with Steaua Bucharest, although speculation last night that he had suffered a broken leg proved unfounded.

Alan Curbishley, the West Ham manager, claimed not to have seen Noble's challenge, although he did suggest Arsenal's Mathieu Flamini had been guilty of an equally reckless first-half challenge on Scott Parker.

The former Newcastle midfielder failed to re-appear for the second half, with Curbishley confirming that he had aggravated a

long-standing knee injury.

Wenger's mood may have been soured by Hleb's injury, but this was still an immensely satisfying afternoon for his talented young side.

A first victory in four attempts over their east London rivals maintained Arsenal's position at the head of the English Premier League and stretched their unbeaten run this season to an impressive 11 matches.

Their latest success was sealed by Robin van Persie's well-taken 13th-minute goal, the Dutchman nodding in at the post after Hleb had crossed from the right.

Arsenal should have built on that advantage in the second half, but Robert Green, the West Ham goalkeeper, made a string of fine saves to deny Emmanuel Adebayor, twice, and van Persie.

"We had a bit of apprehension because we lost here last season and this was a big test," Wenger added. "We started with the handbrake on but the goal helped. We didn't make the same mistake we made at Blackburn: we continued to play and move forward and try and score the second goal."

"Unfortunately we didn't get that but we deserved it. There's room for improvement but I am very proud of what the team is achieving at the moment."

"We are very young but we have to show we can eke out results. We did that today and I think that shows the team is maturing tactically."

West Ham could have snatched an equaliser, first when Dean Ashton headed straight at Manuel Almunia and then when Freddie Ljungberg, playing against his old club for the first time, saw a goal incorrectly chalked off for offside, but a point would have been generous reward for a laboured performance.

Defeat, however, was the least Curbishley's concerns. In addition

to Parker's injury, the manager saw his centre-half Anton Ferdinand limp off with a hamstring strain, while Craig Bellamy is still struggling to recover from a troublesome groin injury.

"It's been this way ever since I have been at the club and we'll just have to cope with it," he said. "But I've said to the lads that they worked hard as they could."

"We're disappointed we couldn't get back in it if we had, it would have been anyone's match."

## 'Only results have changed'

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona goalkeeper Victor Valdes does not believe his in-form side are doing anything hugely different now to when they were being criticised earlier in the season, just that the results are better.

Barca thrashed Levante 4-1 on Saturday night to pick up their fourth convincing victory on the trot, following on from triumphs over Lyon, Sevilla and Real Zaragoza.

Barca's current spell of success is in contrast to the start of the campaign when they were held to two goalless draws in their opening three matches by Racing Santander and Osasuna, but Valdes insists that no dramatic shift has taken place at the Nou Camp.

"I think that the team hasn't changed. I think that the media have talked a lot, but we have been the same and the results have arrived," said Valdes, who had little to do against Levante as a Thierry Henry-inspired Barca tore the strugglers apart.

Henry scored his first league goals for Barca since his summer move from Arsenal with a hat-trick, while Lionel Messi added his side's fourth just after half-time.

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## Rafa will keep rotating

AFP, Wigan



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