

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 Geovanni's deflected effort off Nemanja Vidic caused them to lose the Manchester derby against Sven-Goran Eriksson's side on 19 August.

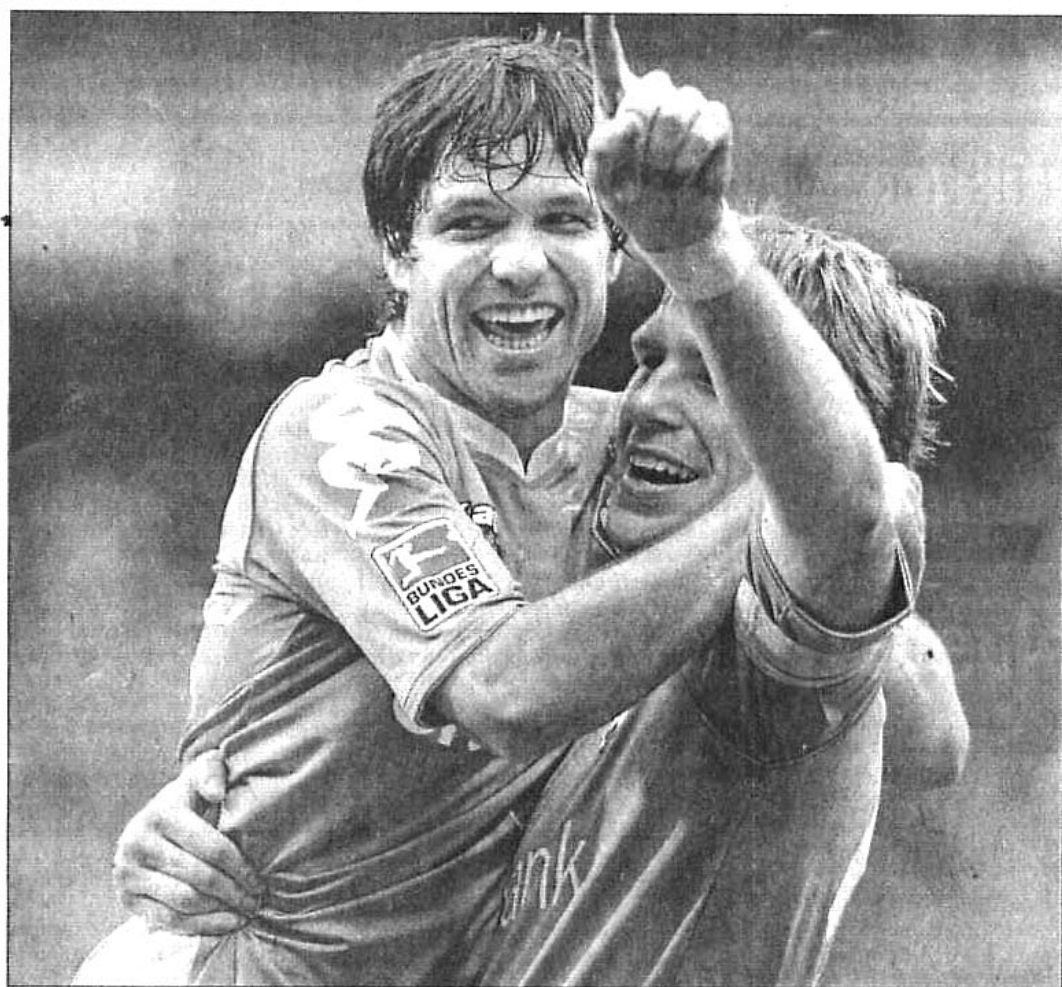
Tomasz Kuszczyk, signed from Championship side West Bromwich Albion permanently in the summer and who replaced van der Saar for the second half against Birmingham, has been placed on stand-by for his Champions League debut.

"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 Cristiano 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.



Werder Bremen defender Per Mertesacker (R) celebrates his goal with midfielder Diego during Bremen's emphatic 5-1 rout of Arminia Bielefeld in their Bundesliga clash at the Weser Stadium in Bremen on Saturday.

BREMEN NET EIGHT GOALS

Toni keeps Bayern atop

AFP, Stuttgart



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.

"We did not find our rhythm in the first half and lost too much possession."

"Klose and Toni worry defences, which is good from our point of view, but we have to work harder to supply them with good possession."

"In the second half, we were more organised and played better."

"That was a hard fought victory against a strong opponent."

There was an upset when defending champions VfB Stuttgart were humbled by resurgent Hansa Rostock.

This was a third straight win for Rostock, runners-up in the second division last season, having lost their first five games, and Stuttgart's fifth defeat in eight games.

Rostock took the lead when midfielder Tobias Rathgeb smashed home his free-kick on 16 minutes and Stuttgart were 2-0 down when Brazilian defender Orestes Alves scored two minutes later.

Germany's player of the year Mario Gomez hit a consolation goal in the 73rd minute, but it was a poor performance from the side who face Barcelona at home in the Champions League on Tuesday night.

There was a goal fest at Werder Bremen as they warmed up for their Champions League clash with Olympiacos on Wednesday night by hammering Arminia Bielefeld 8-1.

Bremen were 4-1 up at half-time and two goals from Hugo Almeida

and two headers by Boubacar Sanogo, both of which were created by in-form midfielder Diego, who scored the last goal, sealed the rout. The win puts Bremen fifth in the table.

Bremen coach Thomas Schaaf was delighted with his side's performance ahead of their Champions League game.

"I can only congratulate the team," said Schaaf.

"It was good for us to show what we can do up front, it is very good for our self-confidence and it's good for the goal difference."

Hamburg conceded a late equaliser to draw 2-2 with VfL Wolfsburg, while VfL Bochum slugged it with Nuremberg until a late goal by Nuremberg midfielder Zvezdan Misimovic gave the German Cup holders a point in the 3-3 draw.

Last season's second-division champions Karlsruhe are now up to third in the table and earned their fourth win from four games with a 3-1 win at home to Borussia Dortmund.

On Friday night, Schalke 04 maintained their unbeaten record with a 1-0 win over Hertha Berlin.

But it came at a price with their Turkish striker Halit Altintop limping off with a leg injury and will miss the next three weeks, including the Champions League game against Rosenborg on Wednesday.

Hleb seriously injured



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 lunge 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.

His fury 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 his leg 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 far 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 of 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 as 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.

Rafa will keep rotating

AFP, Wigan



Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez saw Yossi Benayoun clinch a 1-0 win at Wigan

and then defended his controversial policy of rotating his Anfield squad. Benitez brought Israeli international midfielder Benayoun off the bench and he justified his manager's faith with a spectacular 75th minute solo effort, the only goal of a keenly-contested victory at the JJB Stadium on Saturday.

The Liverpool manager also handed a start to the club's record signing, Spanish striker Fernando Torres, who had sat out the two previous league games which ended in disappointing goalless stalemates against Portsmouth and Birmingham.

"If you can't find a solution then you need creativity and quality and that's what Yossi gave us," said Benitez.

"He played well the other day and we needed him here this afternoon. We had chances and you need to take those chances if you want an open game."

"Because we couldn't, we needed to bring on players with different skills and that was good. I wanted to use different players, with different skills, and Yossi has the intelligence for this kind of game."

"In this case, I needed to do different things. I wanted to rotate. I changed Yossi because I needed fresh legs."

"Wigan were working hard in midfield and working hard to win second balls but, in the end, when you have different players in different areas with quality that's the key when you are talking about a top side."

The victory brought Liverpool to within four points of the top of the Premier League table and, despite a growing army of critics, Benitez is optimistic that his team can launch a concerted title challenge as the season progresses, especially given

his policy of resting players.

"Last season, we were talking and saying we weren't good enough to be near the top of the table," said Benitez.

"Now, we're near the top with one game in hand. We're in a very good position, better than last year and, hopefully, we will be better at the end of the season."

Torres, who scored a hat-trick in the midweek League Cup win at Reading to earn a start at the JJB, missed a handful of half-chances but also earned the defence of his manager.

"It's easy for me on the bench but difficult for him on the pitch," said Benitez. "But you have to analyse them. One was bad luck, one was difficult."

Wigan could count themselves unlucky, having had a first half "goal" by Marcus Bent ruled out for offside before wasting a glorious chance in injury time when the unmarked Julius Aghahowa headed wide with the goal at his mercy.

"I expected everything to end up in the back of the net when that cross went over and I wasn't too pleased that it didn't," said Wigan manager Chris Hutchings.

"But in the second half, I was pleased with our performance. We can take positives out of the game, not least they had to change things around to hold onto the three points."

"They have a fantastic squad with quality players and with their rotation system, they are still getting results. I don't know why people are knocking them."

"This is a team that won the Champions League a couple of years ago and got to the Final last year. They're a tough nut to crack."

"People have criticised them but sometimes you've got to give other teams' credit for doing their homework."

"We aren't just lambs to the slaughter. We had a game plan to keep things tight for the first 20-25 minutes and it worked."

AFP, London



Chelsea manager Avram Grant refused to criticise his players after they failed to overcome Fulham at Stamford Bridge.

The home players left the field to a chorus of boos after this Premier League stalemate and there is deeper frustration after the sending off of Didier Drogba and injury sustained by captain John Terry.

Terry will undergo an operation on a cheekbone fracture on Sunday and is set to miss his side's trip to Valencia in the Champions League this coming week.

Chelsea trail early league leaders Arsenal by seven points already, but Israeli manager Grant is refusing to show too much concern as the pressure mounts on him to reproduce the record of Jose

Mourinho.

"We had seven or eight chances, which is good, but we did not score," he said. "I think it was not our best game. We created enough to win, but unfortunately we did not score."

"We need to score, and then we need to win, I can't argue with this. This gap there, anything can happen, but we need to score goals and play better."

"The players want to do that. We need to improve a few things, and then we can speak about the gap."

Terry's injury came after a first half collision with Clint Dempsey. He will now become a doubt for England's upcoming Euro 2008 qualifying matches.

"He wanted to continue," Grant said. "But we did not want to take the risk. The players said it (the challenge) was an elbow, but I have not seen a replay of it."

Lyon in familiar ground

AFP, Lyon

Champions Lyon resumed their traditional place atop the French league with a 3-0 victory over Lens at their Gerland Stadium on Saturday.

Lyon coach Alain Perrin had been under intense pressure to take the three points from the delayed match and move up from fourth place in the league.

And his side duly delivered as they warmed up for Tuesday night's Champions League game here against Scottish side Rangers with goals from Brazilian Fabio Santos, Swede Kim Kallstrom and Karim Benzema.

The win puts Lyon joint top with Nancy on 19 points after nine games. Nancy have a game in hand, however. Perrin expressed his delight that his strategy is falling into place.

"Everything is running like clockwork. We wanted a victory to give us a confidence boost but also to win in style. We did what we wanted ahead of meeting Glasgow Rangers," he said.

"The team are beginning to gel and work well together, which gives me confidence for what we are trying to put in place. Now we have to focus on Tuesday's Champions League match which will be difficult to win."

Lyon made most of the early running, missing three goal chances through Czech striker Milan Baros (10), Albulkader Keita (18) and Santos (31).

But Santos hit back four minutes before the break with his first goal since joining the club in January, beating the offside trap to finish off a pass from Baros.

Kallstrom scored their second nine minutes from time with a long shot from the left, as the league's top scorer Benzema, netted his ninth this term just before the full-time whistle.

Lens with just one win from eight games stay stuck in the relegation zone in 18th position, as their new coach Jean-Pierre Papin tries desperately to find the winning formula.

Papin complained bitterly at the refereeing and particularly Santos's opening goal which he considered to be offside.

"The refereeing made the difference, notably the first goal. There were other arguable decisions. Lyon don't need that to win."

"It's never nice to lose 3-0. I'm frustrated."

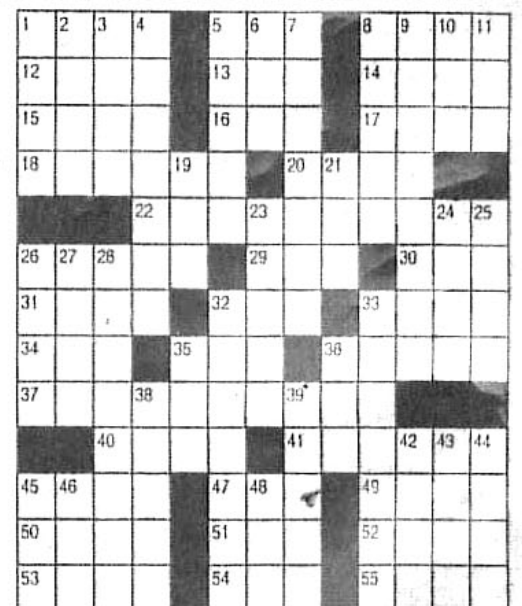
Lyon have not finished outside the top three in the league since 1999 and won their sixth consecutive championship last season.



Bayern Munich striker Luca Toni (R) attends the traditional Oktoberfest festival with his girlfriend Marta Cecchetto wearing traditional Bavarian attire in Munich on Sunday.

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CRYPTOQUIP

RUP AENUD ZYELP Z IZLMPX
 DCFDBCX QEAZM QRE ILAJH
 EOO EO HIBUMKYEZBFH:
 "FUNUMK AUHH FZUHX."
 Yesterday's Cryptquip: BEFORE THE WORLD LEADER WAS ABLE TO CALL A CEASE-FIRE, HE DISAPPEARED WITHOUT A TRUCE.
 Today's Cryptquip Clue: O equals F