

Rafa remains with Reds

Football

AFP, London

Rafael Benitez on Thursday began work on a five-year plan aimed at re-establishing Liverpool as the dominant force in English football after finally ending months of uncertainty over his future.

A rush of new deals for key players, possibly including skipper Steven Gerrard, are expected to follow in the wake of Benitez's decision to commit himself to the club until 2014 by signing a new contract that gives him substantially enhanced influence over player contracts and transfers.

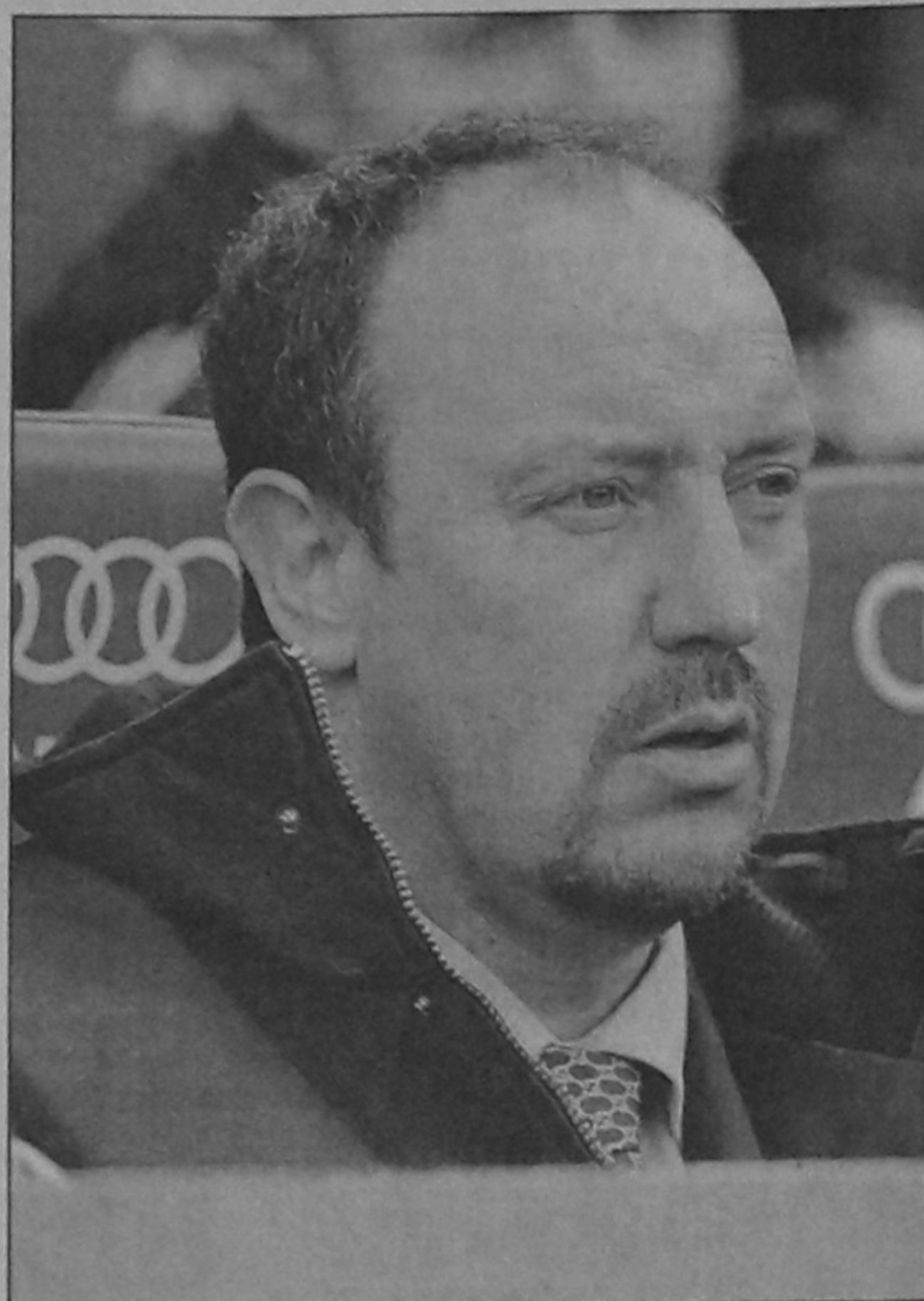
The move ended nearly six months of difficult negotiations during which Liverpool's long-serving chief executive, Rick Parry, announced that he would leave his post at the end of this season, having apparently lost a power battle with Benitez.

Liverpool's American owners, Tom Hicks and George Gillett, had been reluctant to hand Benitez the sweeping powers he had demanded over almost every aspect of the club's business.

But Benitez's position has been greatly strengthened by this month's back-to-back thrashings of Real Madrid, in the Champions League, and Manchester United.

The latter victory has reignited hopes that Liverpool could yet claim their first English title since 1990. It also underlined that, when Benitez has all his first-choice players available, he can field a starting XI as strong as any in Europe.

Liverpool cannot however match United in terms of strength in depth, a fact that was underlined as injuries to Gerrard and Torres contributed to them surrendering their lead at the top of the



RAFAEL BENITEZ

Premier League earlier this year.

With his own future now decided, Benitez's top priority will be to ensure that he has the Gerrard-Torres axis at his disposal for the remainder of his time at Anfield.

Although Torres, who turns 25 on Friday, is under contract until 2013, Gerrard, 28, has only just over two years left on his current deal.

Another key member of Benitez's squad, Dutch forward Dirk Kuyt, admitted recently that he had been advised to wait until the manager's future was resolved before opening negotiations on a new deal.

Benitez's future was also seen as being linked to those

of goalkeeper Jose Reina and right-back Alvaro Arbeloa and the manager will also be keen to see the uncertainty over the future of Danish defender Daniel Agger ended.

"My priority now is to do the deals for my staff and for the players who will be important for this club in the future," Benitez told the Liverpool Echo.

"We want to improve in all departments -- the squad, the mentality, everything that we possibly can."

Benitez's falling-out with Parry had its roots in last year's failed bid to sign Aston Villa's Gareth Barry. Whether that is resurrected at the end of this season could depend on whether Villa manage to make

the Champions League themselves, although another midfielder may not be top of Benitez's priorities.

Xabi Alonso, who was to be sold to fund the Barry acquisition, has been outstanding this season and Benitez knows he must add at least one more striker after off-loading Robbie Keane back to Tottenham. With Benitez's former club Valencia apparently now willing to sell David Villa, what price an expansion of the Spanish colony at Anfield?

Had he opted to quit Liverpool at the end of this season, Benitez would have not been short of offers and he has frequently been courted by Real Madrid, the club where he started his coaching career.

But with his family settled on Merseyside, he said he was committed to finishing the job he started after joining from Valencia in 2004.

"My heart is with Liverpool, so I'm delighted to sign this new deal," the Spaniard said. "I love the club, the fans and the city and, with a club like this and supporters like this, I could never say no to staying."

"I always made clear I wanted to be here for a long time and, when I complete my new contract, it will mean I have spent over a decade in Liverpool."

"The club is greatly respected around the world due to its incredible history and tremendous heritage."

"It is my aim to uphold those values and help create a new chapter in our history."

TOP EPL EARNERS

Table listing top EPL earners: 1 Guus Hiddink (Chelsea) £5.2m per year, 2 Rafa Benitez (Liverpool) £5m, 3 Arsene Wenger (Arsenal) £4.5m, 4 Sir Alex Ferguson (Man Utd) £3.6m, 5 David Moyes (Everton) £3.2m

Fergie rubbishes quintet dreams

AFP, London

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson does not believe his team will win an unprecedented five major trophies this season - even though he reckons the current squad is the best he's had during more than two decades at Old Trafford.

United, who have already won the Club World Cup and English League Cup this term, are currently four points clear at the top of the Premier League and still have chances to win both the FA Cup and the European Champions League.

However, the Scottish boss - who took charge of United in 1986 following a successful spell as Aberdeen manager - was adamant that at least one key result would go against his side.

"The thing about Cup football is you need to be the best but you also need a lot of luck and I think it's asking too much for all the games to go your way," Ferguson said in an interview with the New Statesman magazine.

"The one thing I will say is, this squad is the best I have ever had. Every game we play, I feel confident."

"At the moment, every attack fears our defence and every defence fears our midfield and attack. That gives you confidence but it (the quintuple) is too tough a call."

Werder safely through Marseille thank Mears

AFP, Paris



An Englishman came to the rescue of French giants Marseille's UEFA Cup campaign on Wednesday as the journeyman defender Tyrone Mears scored a goal in extra-time to see them to a 2-2 draw on the night but a 4-3 aggregate success over Dutch side Ajax and a place in the quarterfinals.

Mears, the only Englishman playing in the top flight of French football, headed in the second-half of extra-time to raise French morale after St Etienne had also forced a 2-2 draw at home to Werder Bremen but they went out 3-2 on aggregate.

Marseille coach Eric Gerets, who has revived the fortunes of the club since taking over, conceded that Ajax had been the better side.

"I would like to congratulate Marco van Basten (Ajax coach) on his tactics," said the non-nonsense former Belgium captain.

"It is the first time for a long time that my midfield had so much difficulty."

"We were running like imbeciles after the ball."

"It is painful for a coach to see his players suffering like that."

However, Gerets, who captained Belgium to the 1986 World Cup semifinals, was still proud of his players.

"I saw my guys run themselves into the ground this evening."

"That is what satisfied me: we fought to the end. That is more than a positive thing, it is marvelous. I am proud of them."

The match had got off to a tense start as the stadium announcer had to order a Dutch fan to stop shining a laser in the eyes of Marseille's former Dutch international Boudewijn Zenden which forced the referee to stop the match for around a minute.

Marseille surrendered their overall advantage in the tie when Ajax took the lead on the night and on away goals when Eyoung Enoch

scored in the 32nd minute after the French side's defence opened up beautifully for him and he made them pay as he tucked the ball away.

However the former European Cup winners were back on level terms and ahead overall just two minutes later as Bakay Kone created a chance for Senegalese international Mamadou Niang, who slipped the ball between the legs of young 'keeper Kenneth Vermeer to make it 1-1 on the night and 3-2 on aggregate to Marseille.

The French side lost concentration early in the second-half which nearly cost them in the 53rd minute only for France 'keeper Steve Mandanda to pull off a miraculous save from Luis Suarez.

However, it was a brilliant piece of individual skill from Suarez that created the second goal as he turned on a sixpence in the box completely outwitting the defender and his cross was headed home by Miralem Sulejmani to force extra-time.

Mears was the unlikely hero as he restored Marseille's overall hold on the match when he made it 2-2 on the night in time added on of the first period of extra-time heading past Vermeer.

St Etienne virtually saw their chances of progressing disappear in the first-half as Werder Bremen took a 2-0 lead through Sebastian Prodl and veteran Claudio Pizarro.

Prodl effectively made it mission impossible for the relegation-threatened former European Cup finalists when he headed home in the fifth minute from German international Torsten Frings's corner.

St Etienne goalkeeper Jeremie Janot was helpless to stop Pizarro scoring his fifth goal in European club football this season as the Peruvian headed home from Mesut Ozil's cross in the 27th minute.

St Etienne, though, did give themselves an outside chance of pulling off a miracle when Yohan Benalouane scored in the 64th minute after Frings had conceded a freekick and he headed home past Tim Wiese.

The hosts at least saved face when they made it 2-2 on the night just before the final whistle as Sebastian Grax scored with a shot from the right hand side of the box.

Vidic lauds Prem strength Quarterfinal draw today



SOCCERNET

Nemanja Vidic feels the Premier League can give itself a hefty pat on the back as four of its teams wait to discover their Champions League fate.

Once again the English quartet has made it through to the quarterfinals, with the odds on at least one of them making it to the final in Rome on May 27.

It would be the fifth time on the trot there has been top-flight representation in Europe's biggest club competition. And Vidic is in no doubt the Premier League has earned the right to call itself number one.

"The English league is the best," said the Manchester United defender. "The Premier League is stronger than anyone else in Europe now."

"Once again there are four teams in the quarterfinals. That has to be good for English football. It is good for the players to be involved in the English game."

Given the widely publicised unhappiness UEFA president Michel Platini has at the dominance of English teams, conspiracy theorists wonder whether tomorrow's last-eight draw might consign all four teams to the same section, ensuring there is no repeat of the all-English

showdown in Moscow last season, when United beat Chelsea on penalties.

The Londoners would certainly relish the opportunity of revenge over Sir Alex Ferguson's men, who are also aware Arsenal have a victory at the Emirates this season to fall back on, while Liverpool blitzed them at Old Trafford last weekend.

Not that the other four potential opponents are exactly unknown to United.

The Red Devils have met Villarreal four times in the past four seasons - with not a goal in sight for either side - and FC Porto, with Jose Mourinho as manager, dumped them out of the 2004 competition.

In addition, Barcelona were beaten in last season's semifinal and Bayern Munich have a special place in United's history as the team on the wrong end of that stunning last-gasp triumph in 1999.

Sir Alex Ferguson has already revealed his gut feeling that United will draw English opposition in the knock-out stages for the first time.

And Vidic realises he may not be adding to his air miles this time around.

"There is a chance we could play another English team," he said. "It is three from seven, so the odds are quite good. Whoever we play will be difficult because they are all top teams now."

"We know that any team we play, we will need to give our best."

Nadal dodges a bullet

Tennis

INTERNET, undated

Roger Federer stretched his career domination of Fernando Gonzalez at the Indian Wells Masters while top seed Rafael Nadal dodged a bullet in a close call with longtime nemesis David Nalbandian in a thriller completed early Thursday. Second seed Federer paced defending champion Novak Djokovic into the quarterfinals, winning his 12th out of 13 matches against Gonzalez 6-3, 5-7, 6-2.

But 2007 winner Nadal earned his first win after two defeats against beefy Argentine Nalbandian, saving match points in the second set to escape 3-6, 7-6 (7-5), 6-0.

After a tight start, the top seed ran away with the third set to conclude in the wee hours after nearly three hours on court. The round of golf Nadal had planned for later in the day could well be replaced by some rest after winning the marathon.

Djokovic, seeded third, advanced on a match point decided by the Hawk-Eye electronic line-calling system, narrowly defeating Swiss Stan Wawrinka 7-6 (9-7), 7-6 (8-6).

"It was a big challenge coming back in the second set. Winning the two tiebreakers against a tough opponent was a really good struggle and good fight," said the Serb winner.

"I don't think I played great, but I waited for the chance and used it."

Federer continued his mastery of Gonzalez. "I enjoy playing Fernando because it's so tactical," said the 13-time Grand Slam winner.

"But at the same time it's so brutal, so aggressive. You think you have a slight chance to win the point, and then you realize, no, there's actually none. It's pretty interesting with him."

"At 30-live up, he doesn't care if it's forehand or backhand coming his way. He's just

going to rip it anyway. We have played on many occasions, so we know each other's games very well. I think that's always fun to play somebody like that."

Federer's only loss to Gonzalez came in round-robin play at the Masters Cup two years ago in Shanghai. But the Swiss re-established superiority last year in the Roland Garros quarterfinals.

Fourth-seeded Briton Andy Murray, chasing his third title of the season, had it easy in just 50 minutes as Spanish 15th-seed Tommy Robredo retired due to a wrist injury to hand over a 6-2, 3-0 win to the Scot.

"Mentally, a wrist problem can be tough," Murray said.

"I have been through it. It's not so much hitting the ball that's worrying. It's just the pain that's there and feeling like, you know, something might happen."

Spain's Australian Open semifinalist and 10th seed Fernando Verdasco advanced into the last eight with a defeat of German Philip Kohlschreiber 6-4, 3-6, 6-1.

Verdasco's win over Kohlschreiber came after a 1-3 record against the German.

"The Australian Open helped me so much when I won against Murray and (Jo-Wilfried) Tsonga, and then also the match I did with Rafa. All that made me feel that I can play and I can beat these top players," said Verdasco.

In women's play, Victoria Azarenka denied top seed Dinara Safina the chance to move closer to a possible number 1 ranking with a 6-7 (4-7), 6-1, 6-3 upset, while Vera Zvonareva reached her third semi-final of the season with a defeat of Dane Caroline Wozniacki 6-4, 6-2, 2-6.

"It's my first semifinal of such a big tournament, and I was just very happy, because it was a tough match," said Azarenka. "I was almost losing it, and I pulled it off, so I was just very happy because I was fighting from the first to the last moment."

King Kahn for Schalke hotseat?

AFP, Berlin

Former Germany goalkeeper and captain Oliver Kahn looks set to be named as the new team manager of Schalke 04 after meeting with club officials on Thursday.

The 39-year-old has already had several meetings in Gelsenkirchen, west Germany, to discuss replacing Andreas Mueller who was sacked last week.

"Above all, I want to work with a team," Kahn told Der Spiegel online.

"I would consider that very interesting, but whether one actually takes a role depends on many factors and facets."

Kahn, who captained Germany in the 2002 World Cup final, retired from Bundesliga football at the end of last season having led Bayern Munich to the German league title and German Cup double.

Since quitting football, Kahn has turned his attention to talent scouting and returned early from a trip to China to meet with Schalke chairman Clemens Toennis.

Galliani calls for salary caps

SOCCERNET

AC Milan chief executive Adriano Galliani has called for a salary cap in soccer to cut costs as the sport deals with the global economic crisis.

"I think it would be opportune to have a salary cap, like they do in the United States," Galliani was quoted as saying by Thursday's La Gazzetta dello Sport.

"There are discussions at UEFA to introduce this system in the Champions League sooner or later."

He also said the "wind of crisis" is blowing in the English and Spanish top flights as well as in Serie A, and that the close season transfer market would be affected.

"A weak, pale summer market awaits us, with player swaps but very little money movement," he added. "This is more than certain."

He reiterated that Kaka was not for sale, after Manchester City failed to lure the Brazil playmaker away from the San Siro in January, and that Milan would buy a defender and snap up any bargains that arise.



Werder Bremen striker Claudio Pizarro (2nd from R) stooops low to head past a static St Etienne goalkeeper during their UEFA Cup second-leg tie at the Geoffroy-Guichard stadium in Saint Etienne on Wednesday.

Podolski back in fold

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich forward Lukas Podolski has been recalled to the

Germany squad for World Cup qualifiers against Liechtenstein and Wales, coach Joachim Loew announced Thursday.

Podolski has spent much of this season on Bayern's bench behind first-choice forwards Luca Toni and Miroslav Klose, but injury to the pair has given the 23-year-old his chance with three goals in his last three games.

And with Klose, top scorer at the 2006 World Cup, out of the qualifiers with an ankle injury, Podolski is back in the squad having missed the friendly defeat to Norway last month.

"It is very pleasing that Lukas is playing well for Bayern again," said Loew.

"Regardless, we would have invited him into the squad for the two international matches, because we always said Lukas has the correct rhythm in training and is a valuable striker."

Germany have lost both of their last two home games - for the first time since 1956 - and there is pressure on Loew to get his team back to winning ways after friendly defeats to England and Norway.

Hertha Berlin defender Arne Friedrich and Hamburg's Marcell Jansen have also been recalled with Germany set to face Liechtenstein in Leipzig on March 28 and Wales in Cardiff on April 1.

Hanover goalkeeper Robert Enke is back in the

squad after breaking his thumb last autumn.

And Wolfsburg's Marcel Schaefer and Hoffenheim's Andreas Beck retain their places in the squad.

"It is important to select players for several fixtures," said Loew.

"I am also pleased Robert Enke is fit again, he has found his old form fast."

Having lost his place in the German defence during Euro 2008, Marcell Jansen is back from injury by being named as a midfielder in the squad and made his last appearance against Belgium in August.

"We have named him in the midfield, because his Hamburg teammate Piotr Trochowski has an injury question mark over him,"

explained Loew.

Beside veterans captain Michael Ballack and Torsten Frings, Hertha defender Friedrich is back in the squad following a back injury and stands to win his 65th cap.

"It is an advantage that we can use him to help us organise the defence," said Loew.

"With Hertha, he has proven his class and experience this season, which owes something to his constant performances and has been a large part of their success at the top of the table."

Ebert suspended indefinitely

AFP, Berlin

Hertha Berlin coach Lucien Favre on Thursday indefinitely suspended ex-Germany Under-21 midfielder Patrick Ebert, who is under police investigation after three cars were damaged in Berlin.

Ebert, 22, has helped put Hertha four points clear at the top of the Bundesliga, but was questioned by police early Wednesday morning after three cars were damaged as he walked home from his birthday celebrations.

He will now miss Hertha's Bundesliga clash with VfB Stuttgart on Saturday.

"Patrick will train with the amateur team for a while," Favre told German tabloid Bild.

"I can't yet say for how long for at this stage, but in any case, he will not be in the team against Stuttgart."

Ebert and Tottenham Hotspur midfielder Kevin Prince Boateng, who is on loan to Dortmund, were both questioned by police over the damaged cars and have denied the allegations.

Owen admits WC mistake

AFP, Newcastle

Michael Owen has admitted he should have skipped the 2006 World Cup and concentrated on getting himself fully fit for Newcastle.

The striker won a race-against-time to recover from a broken foot bone in time to join up with the England squad in Germany. But he has been plagued by injuries ever since and, with hindsight, now wishes he had stayed at home.

"If you look at my time at Newcastle, the problems started when Paul Robinson landed on my foot against Tottenham just after Christmas (2005)," Owen said in an interview with the Newcastle Journal.

"Loads of people get metatarsal injuries, but they are normally not as bad as mine. Nobody's foot would not have broken in that situation."

"I then rushed my preparations for the World Cup. I played half a game for Newcastle."

"After being in plaster for so long, my leg was de-conditioned and with hindsight, I should never have gone to Germany with England."

"It's easy to say that now, but if I had my time again, I would still have gone because it was a World Cup."

"I'm not thinking what could have been, but with hindsight, my leg was half as strong as it should have been."

"Muscles support limbs and I twisted my knee awkwardly and that was it. All that came from someone landing on my foot, so I don't think it's my fault."

Owen, now 29, returned from his latest injury - ankle ligament damage - in Saturday's 1-1 draw at Hull and Newcastle are counting on him to provide the goals they need to ensure Premier League survival.