

Torn apart by Torres

AFP, Liverpool

Fernando Torres piled the pressure on Manchester United at the top of the Premier League as Liverpool bounced back from their Champions League agony to beat Blackburn 4-0 at Anfield on Saturday.

Torres scored two goals, the first a magnificent volley, while Denmark defender Daniel Agger marked his return to the side with an equally impressive effort to send Rafa Benitez's side two points above United, who kick off at Sunderland later in the day.

Substitute David Ngog also found the net as Liverpool produced the perfect response after crashing 3-1 at home to Chelsea in Wednesday's Champions League quarterfinal, first leg.

But Benitez's side will travel to London for Tuesday's return leg with Chelsea at Stamford Bridge with a glimmer of hope that they can produce a remarkable turnaround against Guus Hiddink's side after this easy victory.

They brushed aside struggling Blackburn without influential captain Steven Gerrard, who has been struggling with a groin problem but could start at Chelsea.

This was Liverpool's last home game before Wednesday's 20th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster which claimed the lives of 96 of the club's supporters.

As well as a minute's silence before the game, Blackburn's former Liverpool defender Stephen Warnock laid a wreath in front of the Kop in memory of those who lost their lives at the Liverpool versus Nottingham Forest FA Cup semifinal on 15 April 1989.

Benitez had demanded a reaction from his players following the European capitulation against Chelsea and the Liverpool manager got one as Torres lifted the sombre mood around Anfield with a stunning fifth-minute finish.

The Spain striker controlled a long pass forward by stand-in captain Jamie Carragher on his chest before smashing an unstoppable volley from an acute angle over the head of

former England keeper Paul Robinson. It was a truly breathtaking finish yet Torres's Liverpool fans could not help but feel a slight sense of deja vu.

Less than 72 hours earlier Torres had fired his side into an early lead only for Liverpool to self-destruct and leave their Champions League ambitions in tatters.

Would Benitez's side fail to cash in on an early lead again? The answer this time was an emphatic no as Liverpool proved they had learned their lesson from the other night by cementing the points before half time.

Torres, Javier Mascherano, Dirk Kuyt and Yossi Benayoun all spurned clear cut chances to score against a poor Blackburn side before the game made it 2-0 in the 34th minute with a move made in Spain.

An in-swinging freekick by Xabi Alonso found the head of Torres who beat Christopher Samba in the air before powering his effort beyond the outstretched hands of Robinson.

It was all too comfortable for the hosts. Blackburn had arrived on Merseyside with a five-point safety cushion but they are facing an anxious end to the season as they battle to steer clear of relegation.

Sam Allardyce, the Blackburn manager, made the surprising decision to use Samba, who usually plays in defence, up front as a lone striker while South Africa international Benni McCarthy, the club's 11-goal leading scorer, was left kicking his heels on the substitutes bench.

The tactic backfired badly as Blackburn struggled to cause Liverpool, who have now conceded just once in seven hours and fifty seven minutes of league action, any problems.

There was a first-half chance for Samba after a rare defensive lapse but keeper Jose Reina was on his toes to snuff out the danger.

Blackburn improved in the second half without managing to hurt Liverpool, who could afford the luxury of bringing Torres off 15 minutes from time.

Eight minutes later, Agger found the net with a spectacular 30-yard effort before substitute Ngog capped a fine team performance by making it 4-0 in the dying moments.



Liverpool striker Fernando Torres (R) goes airborne to score his second goal against Blackburn Rovers during their Premier League clash at Anfield on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Gerrard recalls horror

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool skipper Steven Gerrard believes the scars of the Hillsborough disaster, which claimed the life of his cousin, as well as 95 other fans, will never heal.

With the 20th anniversary of the tragedy being marked on Wednesday, the England star, who was only nine at the time, recalled the horror of discovering his 10-year-old cousin Jon-Paul Gilhooley had become the youngest victim of the disaster.

"We got the dreaded knock the next morning to say that a member of our family was at the game and had been tragically killed," said Gerrard.

"Obviously it was a difficult time to know that one of your cousins had been at the game and had been crushed.

"Seeing the reactions of his mum, dad and family helped me drive on to become the player I have developed into today.

"Time has gone by, but the scars will never ever be healed and the fans will never ever

SEE PAGE 18 COL 4

Milan firm over Carlo

Football

INTERNET, undated

AC Milan have reiterated coach Carlo Ancelotti intends to remain at the San Siro next season and brushed aside reports linking Cagliari coach Massimiliano Allegri with the Rossoneri hotseat.

Ancelotti has been strongly linked with a move to Chelsea this northern summer, when temporary manager Guus Hiddink is due to leave the post to return to his full-time job of Russia head coach.

Speculation in Italy has placed Allegri as a possible successor to Ancelotti, but Milan insist there will be no vacancy.

"Milan has never contacted any coach with Carlo Ancelotti at the club," Milan general manager Adriano Galliani told official club website www.acmilan.com.

"Ancelotti is under contract with us through June 30, 2010."

Ancelotti, for his part, has every intention of remaining at the club.

"Galliani spoke very clearly and I have nothing further to add," said the 49-year-old.

When asked about reports linking Allegri to AC Milan, Ancelotti added: "He will have to play the waiting game to coach here (AC Milan)... perhaps he could coach at Chelsea."

Allegri has done a fine job in his first season coaching in Serie A, with Cagliari having secured their Serie A status and currently seventh in the standings.

Ancelotti joined Milan in 2001 and guided the Rossoneri to Champions League success in 2003 and 2007 but has only managed to clinch one Scudetto in his seven-year spell.

Moyes rules out Jo swoop

INTERNET, undated

Everton boss David Moyes has revealed a summer swoop for in-form Jo is financially out of the question, despite the impact he has made at Goodison Park.

Moyes took a January transfer-window gamble on the Manchester City misfit who had scored just three goals in 18 appearances since an £18million move from CSKA Moscow last August.

With his forward line decimated by injuries, Moyes was forced to throw the Brazilian straight into the action, and his response was immediate.

The 22-year-old scored two goals in a 3-0 victory over Bolton on his Toffees debut, and has since weighed in with a further three in six games - all at home.

But as for Moyes making the move permanent over the closed season, he concedes it is only a "maybe" before appreciating the price tag rules his club out of the running.

"It's not worth discussing as he cost a lot of money, and we don't have that sort of money, that's for sure," confirmed Moyes.

Moyes, though, has been thoroughly delighted - and perhaps a little surprised - with how Jo has performed since his arrival just over two months ago.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Fergie hits back at Rafa

Football

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson has cranked up his war of words with Rafael Benitez by voicing surprise that the Liverpool manager took aim at Manchester United while preparing for their Champions League clash with Chelsea.

United boss Ferguson and Liverpool manager Benitez have been embroiled in a lengthy verbal feud since the Spaniard hit out at Ferguson's conduct at a January press conference.

Benitez stepped up the row earlier this month by responding to suggestions by Ferguson that the winners of the Liverpool-Chelsea Champions League tie would prove to be United's closest challengers in the Premier League title race, with a claim that the Old Trafford boss was 'maybe a little bit scared' of Liverpool.

With United and Liverpool still vying for the title, Ferguson has questioned the timing of Benitez's 'scared' accusation.

The Scot said: "If you ask me a question about other teams, I'll give you an opinion. There's no fault in that."

"Arsene Wenger was talking about Manchester

United a couple of weeks ago when he was asked a ques-

Adriano needs help: Prandelli

INTERNET, undated

Adriano's former coach Cesare Prandelli says the troubled striker needs help.

The Inter Milan star, who has announced that he is taking a sabbatical from football after struggling to come to terms with a break-up with fiancée Joana Machado, needs a helping hand according to Prandelli.

"At Parma, Adriano was very motivated, he was in the right environment with many young players," Fiorentina boss Prandelli, who coached Adriano at Parma from 2002-04, told La Gazzetta dello Sport.

"He made a lot of sacrifices, I remember he was a sensitive young lad. I had him at a particular time in his career."

"He listened to my advice with the aim of always improving. He was particularly sensitive, he suffered a lot from his father's death."

"Right now he is suffering from a depression crisis and he needs help. He needs to rediscover the desire to train, the love of the football pitch."

tion and he gave a fair answer.

"But the interesting thing as far as Rafa Benitez is concerned is that he's got a European tie (against Chelsea) and he's talking about Alex Ferguson. Fantastic! I didn't know I was that important!"

With many focusing on the battle between United and Liverpool, Ferguson has warned against discounting the claims of Chelsea, who flexed their muscles with a 3-1 win at Anfield in their Champions League first-leg.

Ferguson said: "Chelsea will be absolutely buoyed up (by the victory at Liverpool). You saw the celebrations at the end."

"They knew it was an emphatic result and they will be flying at the moment. That was a good performance by them. I remember when we won the Treble in 1999 -- you can never forget Ryan Giggs' goal (against Arsenal) at Villa Park."

"That just lifted everyone and from then on we were unbeatable. It does that to you when you get a very important result, but hopefully Chelsea are beatable."

"I'd be happy with the race going down to the last day, though. It would do me fine because we're used to that. We've done it four times."

Theo ready to extend with Gunners

AFP, London

Theo Walcott, whose contract with Arsenal is due to run out in June 2010, has hinted that he's ready to extend his playing days with the English Premier League giants.

The 20-year-old England star, who is in talks about extending his deal, has become a key member of Arsene Wenger's side this season despite missing four months with a shoulder injury and is also a first-choice pick for England coach Fabio Capello.

"I'll let my agents deal with the contract situation and just get on with playing," Walcott told the Daily Mail.

"But I do look around and think what a great team this is. We've got a great squad and some great talents. Some of the things Robin (van Persie) and Eduardo do in training are just ridiculous."

"There are so many examples of players who have developed into great players under our manager, Thierry (Henry) for a start, and I want to be one of them."

Walcott really announced himself on the international stage with a hat-trick in the 4-1 World Cup qualifying win over Croatia earlier this season but he is hoping to return to under-21 level this summer

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Hard work never stops

Athletics

ANNA KESSEL

Usain Bolt lies panting on a rundown track in Kingston. Sweating hard, under a moody Jamaican sky, cubes of red asphalt stick to his bare flesh. He pulls a face. The world's greatest sprinter has never liked training; even the rewards of winning three gold medals in Beijing have not changed that.

Bolt's season starts next month, at the Jamaica Invitational, and his training is already behind schedule. There are medals to be won in Berlin, at the world championships this summer, and coach Glen Mills will not let anything stand in the way. Can he go home yet? Mills shakes his head. Bolt has just completed five 180m drills - his best 19.6sec on what is designated an "easy" day. On a tough day he is expected to break 18sec. Mills is a difficult man to impress.

"Every race I ran I thought it was the perfect race," Bolt says, "then coach Mills told me 'no'. When I ran a world record the first time I was like: 'Yeah coach you see that, that's a good record,' but that was no good. Even in the Olympics I was like: 'Start was good, no? He was like, 'no'. 'Every time I think I do something great he tells me I have more to do. Sometimes it's like ...' the 22-year-old struggles to find the words. "That's just the coach I guess."

When Bolt stunned the world with three gold medals and three world records at the Beijing Olympics last summer, those watching could not believe how easy he made it look. But four years earlier, when Bolt first started



USAIN BOLT

working with Mills, things were not so easy. With his professional career flagging, the critics were gathering.

As a junior he had been sensational, the youngest ever world junior champion over 200m in 2002. He ran 19.93 to break the world junior record in 2004 and set up expectations for the Olympic Games that summer. But there were underlying problems - poor technique and repeated injuries. Bolt was born with scoliosis, a curvature of the lower spine, and the increased workload was playing havoc with his hamstrings.

"It never bothered me as a kid," Bolt says. "It was only when I turned professional. My first year it went crazy because of the work and the pressure it was under. I started pulling my hamstrings and then I got checked out with x-

rays and they told me the problem. They said it was scoliosis. I now have to do back exercises three times a week to get my strength on."

Bailing out in round one of his first Olympic Games with an injury was met by fierce criticism from the Jamaican media. "Jamaicans wanted someone who could get them a sprint title," says Norman Peart, manager and mentor to Bolt since he was a 15-year-old schoolboy, and a full time tax auditor. "People were saying he was faking those injuries."

"The minute he was at a club one night they'd say he's there all week, they'd say he's drinking. You know in your teenage years you have a bottle of Guinness, they'd say he's had a crate."

Mills changed the programme. A specialist was brought on board to work

on Bolt's back, his training regime became a lot tougher and there was a new focus on improving Bolt's technique. In the 2007 world championships his young charge won two silver medals. "My coach is like a second father to me," Bolt says. "He pretty much took me from being really injured to being the champion I am today."

With a year to go before the Beijing Olympics, Bolt was still a 200m specialist. Paradoxically, it was his reluctance to train for a longer event the 400m that convinced Mills to let him try the 100m. At a small international meet in Crete, in 2007, Bolt made his senior 100m debut and ran 10.03. By May the following year he had honed that down to 9.76 and then a new world record that month in New York: 9.72. In less than a year Bolt had eclipsed the achievements of his friend and teammate, Asafa Powell. It is an incredible feat and yet, according to Mills, there is much more to do.

"He still wants me to work on my technique," Bolt says. "He really wants me to get quicker, that's why he's told me to work on my first 30m. My top speed kicks in at 40-50m, if I correct that I'll reach my top speed faster."

It is significant that the one aspect of Bolt's life that Mills, a renowned disciplinarian, has not changed is his appetite for partying. Jamaican TV pundit Oral Tracey, among many others, continues to rail against the late nights Bolt spends dancing in the Quad the athlete's favourite - Kingston nightclub. But those around him refuse to take issue with it. "He partied last year and look at his results, how can you argue?" says Peart. "You saw him Saturday night, he arrived at the Quad at 2am and left at 5am. That's only three

hours." Peart grins at the logic.

Those who know him best say that partying is -synonymous with Bolt. His Olympic gold medal celebrations, the dancehall moves nuh linga and gully creeper, are as famous as the performances that won him those victories. Even as a youngster at the Champs - the Jamaican national schools championships - Bolt was known to salute the crowd. The "party" is what helps him to relax.

Back home in Jamaica, Bolt's father could not share his relaxed approach. Wellesley, who dislikes flying, had not travelled to Beijing and instead called his son ahead of the 100m final. "My dad he was nervous man," Bolt says. "He was like: 'Yo, you not worried? We worried down here.' I was like: 'Why you worried? I'm the one running, you just watching. Come on!'" In the warm-up area, shortly before the 100m final, Bolt could be found rolling around on the floor playfighting with Peart. He refuses to worry about competing. "My philosophy is if I can run faster than you, you not going to beat me. I don't see why I've got to worry about you when you're slower than me," he says.

Where does his confidence come from? Bolt says it was his experience of the 2002 world junior championships in Kingston that laid the "foundation" of his career. Competing in front of a home crowd, as a skinny 15-year-old, he was nervous as hell.

Overcoming that fear to win gold, and two silver medals in the relays, proved a significant turning point. "World juniors made me who I am today," he says. "It was one of the toughest races of my life up to this day. I was so nervous running in front of my home crowd. It's on your mind that you've got to win for them."

During the build-up to the 100m final in Beijing, the American sprinter Walter Dix tried to mess with Bolt's head, a trick he will not try again in a hurry. "This is the first time I've ever said this," says Bolt, leaning in confidentially, "but after the semifinals he said to me: 'There ain't going to be no jogging in the final.' I said: 'What? Then I ran and I shut it down.'" Bolt grins. Dix came away with a bronze medal, but one can only imagine how he felt watching Bolt "jog" those last 10m to claim victory and a world record in 9.69.

There are those who cannot believe what they saw that day. Carl Lewis is among the doubters, but Bolt refuses to be drawn into a debate. "I heard what he said. But it doesn't matter what people say. A lot of these athletes are just jealous. I think, of people doing so well. This year I've been [drug] tested about four times. Last year it was about 30-40 times. I went to my aunt in Florida and they sent someone to test me there."

Post-Beijing, Bolt has again struggled with his training. This time there have been even more distractions - talk shows, parties, and requests to meet everyone from Bill Clinton to Cristiano Ronaldo. Bolt says he lost his motivation to train until a chance conversation with an old friend made him realise he wanted to become a legend - comparable to Tiger Woods or Magic Johnson. Behind the scenes his agents are working on a brand to take him to Beckham-esque levels, something no modern day track and field star has ever achieved. All Bolt has to do is keep on winning. As long as he can hack coach Mills's training regime, the dream may not be as impossible as it sounds.

Anna Kessel is a columnist for The Guardian