

Owen completes MU move

Football

AFP, Manchester

Michael Owen has joined English champions Manchester United on a two-year contract, the club announced here on Friday, in a remarkable turnaround for the injury-prone striker.

England forward Owen, 29, a free agent after his Newcastle contract expired last week, underwent a medical at a Manchester hospital on Friday before returning to United's Carrington training ground to complete the shock deal.

The move came after the only clubs interested in signing the former Liverpool and Real Madrid striker appeared to be Stoke and Hull - both teams for whom staying in the Premier League is an achievement in itself.

Owen underwent an examination Thursday on the knee injury which sidelined him for much of his time at Newcastle.

But United manager Sir Alex Ferguson, who has seen both Cristiano Ronaldo and Carlos Tevez leave Old Trafford in the close season, insisted signing Owen did not represent a gamble on his part.

"Michael is a world-class forward with a proven goalscoring record at the highest level and that has never been in question," said Ferguson.

"Coming to Manchester United with the expectations that we have is something that Michael will relish."

It has been reported that Ferguson has signed a pay as you play deal with Owen, whose weekly wage at Newcastle was believed to have been as high as 120,000 pounds (197,000 dollars).

Owen, who scored just 10 goals for the Magpies as they were relegated from the Premier League last season, said he'd been as stunned as anyone by United's interest in him.

"I had just begun to talk to other clubs when out of the blue Sir Alex phoned me on Wednesday afternoon, invited me to have breakfast with him next morning during which he told me that he wanted to sign me," Owen revealed.

"I agreed without a moment's thought. This is a fantastic opportunity for me and I intend to seize it with both hands."

He added: "I am now looking forward to being a Manchester United player and I am fortunate that I already know so many of the players here."

"I missed pre-season last year and am pleased that I will be starting at Carrington from day one."

"I want to thank Sir Alex for the faith he has shown in me and I give him my assurance that I will repay him with my goals and performances."

Owen joined Newcastle from Real

Madrid in 2005 but his time at St James' Park was blighted by a litany of injuries, including foot, concussion, knee, thigh, groin, ankle and calf problems.

Former Newcastle manager Joe Kinnear, who had to quit the club last season because of heart problems, rarely enjoyed having a fully-fit Owen during his time with the north-east club.

But Kinnear, who made his name as a player in the 1960s with Tottenham, was in no doubt of Owen's quality.

"I like to think I played with one of the best strikers in the world in Jimmy Greaves and Michael has similar attributes," Kinnear told Sky Sports.

"He's a great pro, he's very dedicated, he's a really nice lad and I'm sure Alex will get the best out of him."

Before the deal was confirmed, former Liverpool striker Ian Rush said the move would benefit both Owen and the Merseyside club's fiercest rivals.

"It's a chance for Michael to get back and score some goals," Rush insisted. He'll get chances for Manchester United and will score goals."

Owen, who has scored 40 goals in 89 England appearances, has yet to persuade England coach Fabio Capello he has a future at international level.

But his career could be rejuvenated by playing alongside the likes of England striker Wayne Rooney at Old Trafford.



England striker Michael Owen (L) leaves after a medical at the Bridgewater Hospital in Manchester on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Karim has mixed feelings

Football

SOCERNET

Outgoing Lyon striker Karim Benzema has confessed to mixed feelings over his impending move to Real Madrid. The 21-year-old is set to join Kaka and Cristiano Ronaldo in signing a six-year contract at the Bernabeu after his French employers agreed to a 35 million euro (£30million) approach from big-spending Madrid.

Benzema is Lyon through and through, having been born in the city and come through the youth ranks at Stade Gerland.

He burst onto the scene in the 2007-08 season with 31 goals in 51 games, and averaged a goal every other game in the season just completed.

Such form attracted the attentions of Madrid president Florentino Perez, who has vowed to return the Spanish club to former glories by signing a new breed of galacticos.

Benzema's inclusion in that bracket is an indication of how high the France interna-

tional's stock has risen in the past two years, but the player is aware of the debt of gratitude he owes to his hometown club.

"I'm sad and happy at the same time," Benzema revealed in an interview with club website.

"I'm happy because I'll be signing for a great club, which is one of the biggest in the world."

"But I'm sad because I'm leaving behind my friends, the people with whom I grew up here in Lyon - I love all these things. But I will always follow Lyon because this club made me grow."

"I owe them everything." While sad to be leaving Lyon behind, Benzema - whose move to Madrid is still waiting on the formality of a medical - is eagerly anticipating what awaits him in the Primera Division.

"That's all I wanted when I was young [to play for Madrid]," he continued.

"Around where I'm from we all followed Madrid - that's a true story."

"When I was 16-18 this is the team I dreamed of above all. Now, in a few weeks, I'll be

there. I am very happy."

Benzema is aware that at 21 he is far from the finished article, and admits he will have much to learn from his more experienced, and costly, galactico colleagues.

"They are big stars," he said of Kaka and Ronaldo.

"These two are great players, Ballon d'Or winners. I must learn at their side."

Questioned as to whether he felt he could emulate the achievements of his future team-mates in winning the Ballon d'Or, awarded to the best footballer in Europe, he replied: "Yes, I have thought about this."

"I must just keep having good seasons with many great matches whether with the club or the French national side."

"For me, this must be a player's goal in his head, even if it's an individual trophy."

"But if you want to be a somebody in football, and be recognised, you need to win the Ballon d'Or at least once. It's always in the back of my mind."

"All that's happened to me so far has been a dream, but I must keep working to make others come true."

Press split on Owen

AFP, London

Britain's newspapers Saturday could not decide if Michael Owen's surprise move to Manchester United represented another canny swoop by Sir Alex Ferguson - or a waste of money on an injury-prone player.

Owen, 29, was snapped up after becoming a free agent when his Newcastle contract expired last week. The injury-prone star, who scored just ten goals last season, is reported to be on a "pay as you play" deal.

Ferguson has insisted the move is no gamble given Owen's high calibre history but there was some scepticism among commentators.

"He simply cannot sustain a run of games," the Daily Mail said. "He plays, he gets injured, as an ankle heals, a groin muscle rips. When he returns, a knee ligament goes."

But the Guardian hailed the signing of a "proven poacher" which Old Trafford had lacked since the days of Ruud van Nistelrooy and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer.

"For all the efforts of the departed Cristiano Ronaldo, United do not score as freely as they once did," it said.

The paper also highlighted Ferguson's history of gambling on players such as Eric Cantona - who ended up becoming an Old Trafford legend - and Laurent Blanc.

The Daily Express thought Owen could be used "as a more than useful back-up striker to Wayne Rooney and Dimitar Berbatov and one whose presence buys Ferguson a bit of time while he develops young talents such as Federico Macheda".

Former Arsenal and England striker Ian Wright wrote in the Sun that Owen had seemed to "lose his desire" in recent years.

"He needed a kick up the backside and Alex Ferguson will provide that," Wright wrote. "He is going to United to salvage his career for club and country."

I'm worth £80m: C'Ron

Football

INTERNET, undated

Cristiano Ronaldo has said the £80million Real Madrid paid for him is a "fair price" and he is delighted to be the most expensive player in the world.

Ronaldo will put the finishing touches on his move from Manchester United on Monday night when he is officially unveiled as the Spanish giants' latest signing.

"I think that it's a fair figure," he told Marca. "If Manchester United and Real Madrid agree this amount, then there is nothing more to say. I'm happy to be the most expensive player in the world."

Kaka and Raul Albiol have

already been presented following their respective moves from Milan and Valencia, while Lyon striker Karim Benzema is closer to completing his switch to Madrid as their spending spree rapidly approaches the £200 million mark.

It is the signing of Ronaldo that has captured everyone's attention and imagination, though, as Madrid finally got their man this summer to end a transfer saga that has lasted more than two years.

It took an astronomical fee to persuade United to part with the winger, and Madrid have come in for a fair amount of criticism from both inside and outside the footballing community for spending so much money in the current global financial crisis.

However, Ronaldo believes Madrid are justified in paying the fee - and also feels he can live up to the price tag.

"The great players cost a lot of money, and if you want them you have to pay it," he added.

In response to those who have qualms about so much money being spent on one footballer, he added: "I respect everyone's opinions, but I don't agree with these people."

"If Real Madrid have paid so much money, it's because they wanted me and have considered it a fair price."

"I'm going to try to do everything in my hands to play very well and I will show that the money they are paying for me has been a good decision."

Perez needs two more signings

INTERNET, undated

Real Madrid need to sign two more players and off-load about 10 to round off their summer transfer dealings, club president Florentino Perez has said.

The nine-times European champions have already splashed around 215 million euros (£185m) on bringing striker Karim Benzema, winger Cristiano Ronaldo, playmaker Kaka and defender Raul Albiol to the Bernabeu.

"Now we need to calm down a little because squads usually have around 25 players and ours now has some 35," Perez told Spanish television station Cuatro.

"We need to concentrate our efforts on convincing some players that they will have to leave. It should not be forgotten there is a World Cup next summer and all our players want to play in it."

"If players aren't going to have the chance to participate here they'll want to do it somewhere else, to be able to make it to the World Cup."

"As to new signings, I think with two more we would have sufficient."

Perez was asked about Real's interest in Bayern Munich winger Franck Ribery and Liverpool midfielder Xabi Alonso.

"They are both great players but their clubs don't want to sell them, though in the world of football situations can change," he added.

Real have already sold Javier Saviola, and the Dutch contingent of Ruud van Nistelrooy, Arjen Robben, Wesley Sneijder, Rafael van der Vaart, Royston Drenthe and Klaas Jan Huntelaar are all reportedly on the market.

Chelsea snap up Sturridge

AFP, London

Chelsea announced Friday they had signed teenage striker Daniel Sturridge from Premier League rivals Manchester City on a four-year deal after the player's contract at Eastlands expired.

Although the two clubs could not agree on a fee, the 19-year-old Sturridge's age means City are entitled to receive some money as part of his move and a fee will now be settled by a tribunal.

England Under-20 international Sturridge, the nephew of former Derby County forward Dean, scored four goals in 26 appearances for City last season.

Dalglish back at Anfield

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool great Kenny Dalglish is returning to Anfield to take up a role in their academy and become a global ambassador for the club, the Premier League side announced Friday.

Kenny Dalglish is returning to Liverpool to take up a senior role in their academy and as a global ambassador for the club.

Dalglish became a revered figure at Anfield after joining from Celtic in 1977 and he is

often cited as Liverpool's greatest player.

The Scot subsequently became the Merseyside club's manager.

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez wanted to get Dalglish back at the club, as new managing director Christian Purslow explained.

"In our very first meeting Rafa and I agreed that we wanted to try and bring Kenny back to the club."

"That would help Rafa really drive forward our academy, which is at the heart of our plans for the future."

"We are delighted he has agreed to join us and I am sure

he will be very successful in his new role back at the club."

Dalglish 54, was Liverpool's manager the last time they won the English title in 1990.

He also achieved that feat in 1986 - when the club won the double - and 1988, all three triumphs coming when he was still registered as a player.

The FA Cup was secured in 1989 but he stunned Liverpool by resigning in February 1991.

Dalglish then went on to manage Blackburn, where he also won the title, Newcastle and Celtic.

He arrived from Parkhead

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PHOTO: AFP

Brazil president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (R) and football captain Lucio pose with a national jersey autographed by the team and the Confederation Cup during a meeting at the Bank of Brazil's Cultural Centre in Brasilia on Friday.

Rovers to sign Vieri

AFP, Rome

Former Italy striker Christian Vieri is set to sign for Blackburn Rovers, according to the Gazzetta dello Sport.

The 35-year-old left Atalanta before the end of last season by mutual consent after he tired of abuse from fans expecting more from him than two goals in nine league appearances.

According to reports, former France forward Ibrahim Ba has been instrumental in the deal to sign 'Bobo' Vieri.

Ba played for current Blackburn boss Sam Allardyce at Bolton in 2003-04 and now helps African players find clubs in Europe.

Should the deal go through it wouldn't be the first time Allardyce has succeeded in bringing a seemingly faded star to an unlikely Lancastrian backwater.

Whilst at Bolton he signed the likes of Youri Djorkaeff, Jay-Jay Okocha, Ivan Campo, Fernando Hierro, Hidetoshi Nakata and Nicolas Anelka.

In most cases he also managed to motivate those players into enjoying an Indian summer to their careers.

He will need to work his magic once again, though, if Vieri does make Rovers his 14th professional club.

The former Juventus, Inter Milan and AC Milan player has only once played more than 10 league games in a season since leaving Inter in 2005 due to a succession of injury problems.

OPEN SECRETS

INTERNET, undated



London bookmakers were breathing a massive sigh of relief after avoiding a financial bath thanks to the Wimbledon semifinals loss of Andy Murray. The four-set loss to Andy Roddick cost enthusiastic British punters up to two million dollars, with more money placed on the Scot than any other player in Wimbledon history.

"It was the biggest anti-climax of the betting year. Loyal fans are in disbelief and we have escaped what would have been our biggest payout in tennis betting history," said a spokesman from Ladbrokes.

The patriotic punting was reminiscent of the glory days of Tim Henman, who reached four Wimbledon semis but got no further.

"Tim Henman cost British punters more cash than any other sportsman but Murray might just have pinched that unwelcome title in the past few weeks."

"Murray-mania is over for one summer and we have lived to tell the tale but we suspect he'll be back to give us more sleepless nights for many more years to come. His following is phenomenal."

For the final, Ladbrokes gives the edge to Federer over Roddick, with the Swiss a 1/8 red-hot favourite for a sixth title form the past seven years. Three-time finalist Roddick is a 9/2 outsider with Murray 5/2 to win Wimbledon next year.

BRITS HEARTBROKEN

Andy Murray's Wimbledon semifinal exit at the hands of Andy Roddick brought back memories of Tim Henman's four unsuccessful attempt to reach the final during his career.

"Different Brit, same outcome. There is no end to it," said the Guardian while the Daily Mail added: "Rod's Too Hot For Sad Andy".

The Daily Express put the boot in with its headline, "Murray Mauled." Other tabloids said the Scot had "broken the hearts of a nation."

Murray's Sottishness came up as an issue again for the Dunblaine-born 22-year-old. But for the Financial Times that would only be a problem in one rare instance.

"The English will wish to ensure that the Scots don't declare independence before then and turn Murray into yet another foreign winner."

Britain last had a men's champion in 1936 through Fred Perry while the last man to reach the final was Bunny Austin two years late