

Owen's still got it

Football

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Michael Owen's predatory instincts are still intact. That's the message he sent after scoring the winning goal on his Manchester United debut.

The 29-year-old striker came on as a second-half substitute in United's opening game of their Asia tour and pounced on a loose ball with five minutes left after Ryan Giggs had been tackled in the penalty area.

His decisive finish handed the team a 3-2 victory over a tough Malaysian XI after Wayne Rooney and Nani had put them two goals in front.

"You train for weeks in preparation for that all-important first game and to score on your debut feels great," said Owen, who joined the club this month on a two-year deal after his contract at relegated Newcastle expired.

His move to Old Trafford was met with scepticism by some after a series of injuries robbed the former Liverpool and Real Madrid star of the lightening pace that had been such a crucial part of his armour.

But he is optimistic that he can forge a successful partnership with Rooney and Dimitar Berbatov and confident Saturday's goal will be the first of many.

"It's always nice to get off the mark, not just when you join a new club but any time," he told the club website.

"I was sat chatting to Wayne (Rooney) in the dressing room afterwards and he feels the same

way after getting off the mark for the season.

"It's obviously doubly good for me with it being my first goal for the club, and even though it won't really count in the grand scheme of things, it does make you feel better. Hopefully I can score a lot more."

Sir Alex Ferguson has handed Owen the club's famous number seven shirt, worn by star players such as George Best, Eric Cantona, David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo.

He said Owen had enough experience to handle any baggage that may accompany the honour.

"It's been worn by high-profile players at our club over the years," Ferguson, who saw both Ronaldo and Carlos Tevez leave Old Trafford in the close season, said Sunday.

"But Michael is a high-profile player and he has the experience to handle that honour."

"Not all our players would relish that challenge but it was no problem for him. And it was an easy decision for me."

Ferguson took a big gamble in hiring Owen, with Hull and Stoke the only other clubs showing any interest, but judging by the manner in which he executed his goal it could be a punt that pays off.

"It was a typical Michael Owen goal," he said.

"When Ryan went through the first man to react to Ryan's penetration was Michael. It's a good start for him."

"Michael is different to the other strikers we have here," he added.

"He's always searching for that space in and around the box and he reacted really well to take his goal."



Real Madrid midfielder Jose Maria Guti goes airborne to receive a pass during a training session in pre-season camp at Maynooth, Dublin yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Hamburg sign starlet Berg

INTERNET, undated

German Bundesliga club SV Hamburg have hired promising Swedish striker Markus Berg from Dutch club Groningen. Hamburg said on their website that Berg, 22, joins them on a five-year contract until 2014. The transfer fee is estimated at around 10 million euros (14 million dollars).

Berg scored 32 goals in 56 matches for Groningen and also made headlines last month as top scorer (seven goals in four matches) and best player at the under-21 European championships in his home country.

"I am happy that the transfer has been completed. Hamburg are a Bundesliga top club. I want to help us to be as successful as possible with good showings and goals," said Berg.

Hamburg coach Bruno Labbadia said: "I am delighted that we could sign Marcus Berg. He has the will to score goals."

'Rooney is maturing'

Football

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Wayne Rooney is starting to mature but still has plenty of room for improvement, according to Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

With Cristiano Ronaldo and Carlos Tevez leaving over the summer, the spotlight has turned on Rooney who will be expected to score more goals this season after getting 20 in all competitions during the last campaign.

He got his first in United's 3-2 friendly victory over a Malaysian XI here on Saturday, and Ferguson said he was confident the 23-year-old can cope with the extra pressure.

"You are seeing maturity from Wayne now, which is what you expect from younger players, but there is a still a lot of improvement to come. He's not the finished article yet," he said.

"The expectation on Rooney is always high. It is a natural situation as it is the standard which he has set for himself."

His comments echo those of England manager Fabio Capello who recently said he believed Rooney would be a more devastating striker by the time the 2010 World Cup kicks off in just under a year.

"Wayne is young and he can improve," Capello said. "I accept it is more a case of going upwards a little bit from 90 percent rather than 70 percent but he can improve three or four percent and that is very important."

Rooney will lead the United attack this year with Dimitar Berbatov, new signing Michael Owen and fast-improving teenager Federico Macheda.

Becks tips Chelsea

AFP, London

England star midfielder David Beckham insisted Sunday that he believes new Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti can bring the Premier League trophy to Stamford Bridge next season.

Chelsea last won the title under former boss Jose Mourinho in 2005 and 2006 with subsequent managers Avram Grant, Luiz Felipe Scolari and Guus Hiddink failing to deliver.

Former Manchester United player Beckham worked under Ancelotti during a loan spell at the San Siro last season and is sure the Italian will be a success in the Premier League.

"Chelsea are so lucky because Carlo is a great man and a great manager," the LA Galaxy player told the News of the World.

"He can definitely make Chelsea champions again. No doubt about it. And I say that even though everybody knows I have Manchester United in my heart."

"Yes, it will be difficult because the Premier League is totally different to the Serie A but he has great experience and I am convinced he will be a great success in England, too."

"You don't do what he did at Milan and suddenly lose it overnight. So I say good luck to him, he deserves it."

He added: "The players can expect to work with the ultimate professional. He works so hard and is so organised and dedicated."

"Carlo will be the first on the training pitch and the last off it because he just loves working with the players himself."

"That's his passion. You won't find him sitting in his office leaving it to someone else. He is very hands on."

"That's how he was at Milan and I'm sure that's how he will be at Chelsea, leading by example, leading the team."

"But while he is serious about his work and his football, he is also a lot of fun to work with. He is very relaxed, very down-to-earth and likes a joke. He is very approachable."

Lyon rope in Cissokho

AFP, Lyon

French left back Aly Cissokho is on his way to Lyon after agreement was reached between the French club and FC Porto, a source close to the dossier said Saturday.

The player is set to sign a five-year deal worth at least 15 million euros.

The deal was sealed on Saturday in Porto after Lyon team doctor Emmanuel Ohlari gave the player the all clear during a medical.

Piracy hits Man City

Football

AFP, Polokwane

New signing Carlos Tevez watched from the sideline as Manchester City lost 2-0 to Orlando Pirates Saturday in the opening Vodacom Challenge tournament match.

City manager Mark Hughes said was "too dangerous" to field Argentine Tevez and another close-season striking purchase Paraguayan Roque Santa Cruz in this northern city as they lacked match fitness.

Former Manchester United striker Hughes, under pressure to break into the English Premiership "big four" after a close season spending spree that also netted England midfielder Gareth Barry, offered no excuses for the loss.

"It was a good workout against a Pirates team that played very well. I was pleased with the day, but not the result," he admitted after a goal in each half gave the "Buccaneers" a deserved victory before 20,000 spectators.

"We are in the conditioning phase of pre-season preparations and today you could see that the players are at different levels. A few more games and they will all be up to speed."

"Carlos (Tevez) and Roque (Santa Cruz)

were not considered for this match as it would have been too dangerous given their level of pre-season fitness," stressed Hughes.

Pirates coach and former Netherlands World Cup star Ruud Krol had sympathy for City: "They have just travelled from Dubai and this does not make it easy. Believe me, City are a good team."

The English Premiership outfit lacked at least half its likely first choice line-up and were under pressure from the kick-off with goalkeeper Stuart Taylor forced into a low save just 14 seconds after the kick-off.

Lucas Thwala put Pirates ahead on 36 minutes from the penalty spot after Ben Mee was guilty of shirt tugging and City had Craig Bellamy and Martin Petrov booked during an opening half in which they wasted several scoring chances.

Botswana midfielder Pheny Mongala added a second goal on 56 minutes as his cross flew over Taylor into the far corner of the net and although City made a number of substitutions they never threatened to wrest the initiative.

City face Kaizer Chiefs Tuesday in the Indian Ocean city of Durban before meeting the winners of a play-off between the South African clubs in the Pretoria final next Saturday.

Milan keen on Hernanes

SOCCERNET

Milan have reportedly identified Sao Paulo midfielder star Hernanes as their next summer signing.

The midfielder is viewed as the right man to fill the boots of Italy international Andrea Pirlo, who could leave the club to reunite with Carlo Ancelotti at Chelsea.

But Joao Paulo de Jesus Lopes, the technical director of the Brazilian team, mocked the Rossoneri's financial muscle last month, claiming that Hernanes would only be released for a fee in excess of €40million.

Press reports, however, have suggested that Sao Paulo could settle for €25m, but the player's agent Frederico Pena is adamant there is room to negotiate a much lower price.

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Ivanschitz signs for Mainz

AFP, Vienna

Austrian international midfielder Andreas Ivanschitz is on his way to promoted Bundesliga side Mainz from Greek outfit Panathinaikos, the German team's manager Georg Stangassinger said Saturday.

The 25-year-old former Austrian team captain will sign a three-year contract worth 1.5 million euro on Sunday.

Ivanschitz arrived at Panathinaikos in 2006 after playing for Rapid Vienna and Salzburg, but failed to feature last season.

In three years he has played some 50 league games.

Ivanschitz was national skipper from 2003 until early this year but has been sidelined from the side by new coach Didi Constanini.

Abu Dhabi beckons for Oliveira

AFP, Abu Dhabi

Brazil international striker Ricardo Oliveira has signed for the Abu Dhabi-based Al-Jazira club from Real Betis for a country transfer fee record of 14 million euros.

The fee for the deal move believed to be between three and four years will be split between Real Betis and Zaragoza, where the 29-year-old Oliveira played between 2007 and January.

Oliveira, who has 11 Brazil caps, has 11 Brazil caps.

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Chelsea solid as ever

Football

AFP, Seattle

Teenager Daniel Sturridge wasted no time in making his presence felt for Chelsea, scoring one goal and helping create another in Chelsea's 2-0 victory over the Seattle Sounders in a friendly match Saturday.

Sturridge, 19, was making his debut after moving from Manchester City to Stamford Bridge, and he helped make a winner out of new manager Carlo Ancelotti following his switch from AC Milan.

Sturridge's 12th-minute goal match bequeathed the 65,289 fans - most in Seattle green - who turned out to see the first of two friendlies against overseas clubs that the Sounders are hosting this Major League Soccer season.

The match was Chelsea's first on-field test since they defeated Everton 2-1 in the FA Cup final on May 30.

Their four-match tour of the North America will also include matches against Italy's Inter Milan, AC Milan and Mexico's Club America. They'll open the Premier League season on August 15 against Hull.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard (R) slots home past the diving Seattle Sounders goalkeeper Kasey Keller (L) to score in their friendly match at the Qwest Field in Seattle, Washington on Saturday.