

Owen: Whatever I Say is twisted



Owen

SUDDENLY I am being portrayed as a football rebel — someone who wants to take on the world in general and Sam Allardyce in particular.

Nothing could be further from the truth. I can honestly say, hand on heart, I have never, ever set out to cause a single problem for any of my managers. And I'm sure I've succeeded in that aim.

But over the last few weeks, I have been misrepresented in a way that has made me feel very frustrated and, at times, angry.

It all stemmed from my recent double stomach operation in Germany which enabled me to be fit and ready for action again in eight days.

Now you might have thought that was a cause for celebration, having worked hard to recover in record time.

It was certainly a positive episode as far as I was concerned but it soon became a massive negative with accusations that I had rushed back too soon so I could play in the England games against Estonia and Russia.

The spin was put on it that I was more concerned about playing for my country than my club.

As a result of that people have tried to drive a wedge between myself and Sam Allardyce.

I was even told about one headline which quoted me as saying "Shut It Sam". If you look at my actual comments I did not use the words "shut", or "it" or "Sam".

Someone with a very vivid imagination dreamed that one up.

Let me now try to clarify the situation.

I recognise that my club manager wants me to be fit and available for every game for Newcastle. And, believe it or not, so do I.

What I must also point out, though, is that I am fortunate enough to play for two teams — England and Newcastle.

And as long as I am fit, I will try my hardest to play well and score goals for both.

It was in Sport of the World two weeks ago that I stated quite clearly that my priority after the two operations lay with Newcastle.

I explained that my original comeback target was to play against Spurs, in the game immediately after the international break.

And that anything ahead of that would be a bonus.

In fact, it was Sam Allardyce who first raised the possibility of me being fit for the game against Everton after he had spoken to the surgeon who carried out my operations.

As it turned out, I was fit for that game — albeit as a substitute — but it was never a case of me rushing back for Newcastle just so I could join up with England.

You can imagine how I felt then when I was warming up before the Everton game to hear one Newcastle fan shout at me: "Come on Owen, it's about time you put us before England."

That hurt me almost as much as pushing myself through the pain barrier in the days immediately after my surgery.

No one but me knows what that involved.

And, it seems, no one wants to believe I was doing it for both my club AND my country.

I have missed far too much football in recent seasons to be able to afford to pick and choose which matches I want to play in.

I will repeat: I want to play in EVERY game, whether it is for Newcastle or England.

A footballer's career is short enough as it is without deliberately missing out on big matches.

But sometimes I cannot win. I have had games for England when I haven't done particularly well and suddenly I am labelled a bad player.

Then, if I score a few goals for the national team, as I did against Russia at home and away in Estonia last season, I'm accused of putting my country before my club.

It's a good job I am a fairly level-headed person or it would drive me mad.

But I have been in the game long enough to know how things can just spiral out of control. While I was away with England last week, there were comments about release clauses in my contract, how I needed to prove myself at Newcastle and even my team-mate Joey Barton was dragged into the debate.

He said he wanted to get fit again for Newcastle before considering a recall for England — and that was perceived as an attack on me.

I will ignore all that for now and get on with my job.

I suppose I should be used to all this.

It happened to me before when I was a Liverpool player.

I broke into the England team and did well internationally almost before I had properly established myself at Anfield.

The Reds fans didn't like that because they thought I was only interested in my international career.

But I did manage to turn them around by scoring loads of goals in helping Liverpool to win an unprecedented cup treble in 2001.

For the first time the fans started chanting my name on a regular basis and I was referred to as "Liverpool's Michael Owen" rather than "the England striker Michael Owen".

I guess that is the way to win over public opinion at Newcastle as well.

If I can score the goals that will help them win a trophy or two, that will prove how much I am committed to the club.

I would love to do just that. But at the same time, I want to help England to win something as well.

And I still reckon it is possible to enjoy the best of both of those worlds.

Interview: David Harrison

Gunners pass the acid test

By Ian Wright

SO many are telling me Arsenal have yet to meet a real test in the Premier League but for me they have already passed the crucial one.

It's Liverpool up next for the Arsenal and straight after that Manchester United at the Emirates, two top-flight heavyweights who will be hellbent on stopping Arsene Wenger's unbeaten table-toppers.

Those games, I'm told, will put Arsenal's magnificent start to the season into proper perspective after they've put one over teams near the bottom — Bolton, Derby, Tottenham and Sunderland.

The reality is that it's just as big a test for Rafa Benitez and Sir Alex Ferguson as it is for Wenger — and don't forget I tipped Liverpool to win the title.

If I'd done the obvious and gone for Arsenal, I'd have been accused of bias after my long association with the club, but surely no one can argue when I say they are playing the best football in the Premier League.

The test Arsenal have already passed is winning without the influential Robin van Persie in the side. I was worried his absence would disrupt the consistency but it's still there.

Even though Cesc Fabregas catches the eye in the middle of the park, it is Van Persie who has become the team's talisman now Thierry Henry has departed.

Crocked

So six weeks is a long time to be without him — he was crocked on international duty — and while Arsenal have already had the win against Bolton, a lot more questions will be asked before he returns.

But I believe that, even at this early stage of the campaign, injuries are the only thing that can stop Arsenal winning the title this season.

I'm sure Wenger has his fingers crossed William Gallas and Kolo Toure don't get crocked.

Their experience underpins the team but, because of where they play and how they play, it's asking a lot to stay injury-free from now until May. Gallas and Toure have no fear. They will put their heads into a forest of studs or throw bodies in to block shots when boots are flying.

It used to be said teams could bully Arsenal. But I don't believe any amount of physical intimidation can prevent them from playing their brand of total football executed at turbo-charged pace.



Fabregas

Batistuta: We're Batty for Tevez

CARLOS TEVEZ can become Argentina's greatest player since Diego Maradona following his move to Manchester United.

That is the belief of former World Cup ace Gabriel Batistuta — the man who scored more goals for Argentina than any other player.

Batistuta — who bagged an astonishing 56 international goals in 78 appearances — has been carefully monitoring events in England from the other side of the world and is convinced Tevez will become an Old Trafford legend.

He said: "Carlito is definitely at the right club at the right time in his career.

"Playing alongside Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo, he can achieve everything he wants.

"It is much better to be playing with other world-class players than just to be the best player in your side.

"At West Ham last season, Tevez did a brilliant job and helped the club to stay up. But he had to do a lot of the

hard work on his own.

"At Manchester United, having players of the quality of Rooney, Ronaldo, Giggs, Vidic and Ferdinand to help him will make his life much easier.

"Don't forget that Tevez is still quite young and has only been in Manchester for a few months.

"It will take him a bit more time to show everyone what he can really do. But he is already a fantastic, world-class talent and at his new club he has every tool required to become a true Argentine great."

Batistuta, 38, finally retired from football three years ago after scoring 184 Serie A goals during his 12 seasons in Italy with Fiorentina and Roma.

And he admits he envies Tevez's opportunity of playing in England and believes the striker, 23, could pave the way for more Argentines to move to the Premier League.

Batistuta added: "I've always loved the atmosphere of English soccer and often thought of coming here during my

career. But when I was at my peak, the Premier League was not of the same standard as it is now.

"Then there were only one or two teams who stood any chance of winning the title and that was not very exciting for me. That is why I always stayed in Italy.

"But now I watch the English league and it has improved so much. Many of the world's best players are over here now and there are no longer any guarantees that Manchester United or Liverpool will win the title.

"Before, all the Argentines went to Spain or Italy. But with Tevez going so well at Manchester, others might now think about also going to England."



Batistuta

By Mark Irwin

Batistuta's admiration for English football is not just limited to the Premier League — and he is saddened to see our national team in such dire straits.

He said: "Argentina and England have been rivals for many years but nobody in my country likes to see England struggling like they are at the moment.

"Argentina, Brazil, England, Italy and Germany. They are the biggest football nations in the world and no major tournament is the same without them.

"It is better to go to a World Cup and play Brazil or England than to face teams who nobody knows."

Batistuta ended his international career with a 1-0 defeat by Sven Goran Eriksson's England during the 2002 World Cup finals in Japan.

Even though his country are currently top of the FIFA world rankings, he still has concerns that Argentina's best young players are not fulfilling their potential.

He added: "The main problem in Argentina is we have fantastic players everywhere in the country but we don't have the tools to help them succeed at big clubs.

"In a lot of cases they don't know how to behave when they arrive. A lot of them get to the first division, play some matches and then disappear. Most of the best Argentine players sign for European clubs at a very young age. Lionel Messi was still only a boy when he came to Barcelona.

"In many ways that helps the Argentine team because these players like Messi, Tevez, Mascherano and Riquelme get a better knowledge of tactics and discipline.

But the other side of the coin is that the people in Argentina do not get the opportunity to enjoy their talents.

"I think the clubs in Argentina should try to keep their best players for a bit longer.

"But I understand that it is all linked to finances and the best players will always end up with the richest clubs."

BATISTUTA was speaking at the British launch of World Football Idol, a global search for the best young football prospect.

The competition, open to boys aged 14 and 15, will assess the talents of thousands of young players from England, Argentina, Spain, Italy and Germany.

Six players per country will go forward to the grand final in Argentina on December 29, with a first prize of around £50,000 for the eventual winner.

British heats will be held in Welwyn Garden City on Sunday, November 4. First 500 applicants to register will get their chance to impress the judges.