

## **Premiership Headline Makers: MICHAEL OWEN & ROBBIE FOWLER Contrasting Fortunes in the Liverpool Attack**

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Last week's Cup triumphs for Liverpool threw the fortunes of two of their coveted strikers into sharp relief.

For Michael Owen, the FA Cup Final was a personal triumph, his two late and spectacularly taken goals against Arsenal snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. Yet for Reds' captain Robbie Fowler, relegation to the substitutes' bench for what have been one of the biggest occasions of his career confirmed that he has slipped down the strikers' pecking order and raised questions about his Anfield future.

At Cardiff's Millennium Stadium Owen, 21, proved emphatically that none of the predictions of greatness when he first burst onto the scene had been misplaced. All those superlatives – which multiplied phenomenally when he scored a goal of breathtaking quality against Argentina in the 1998 World Cup – proved to be justified in the closing stages of this season, after a period when many critics had been too ready to write Owen off as an unfulfilled talent.

Those critics had been swift to say he'd lost his touch when Owen was struggling to overcome the effects of persistent long-term injuries and being thwarted by his manager's use of the rotation system among his four strikers. For a while, Owen appeared to be taking one step forward and two back, although the player himself never lost the belief in his own ability and – despite some uncharacteristic failures in front of goal – continued to go single-mindedly about his business.

It seems strange now to recall those difficult days, following a purple patch of eight goals in four games. Yet Owen's pair in the FA Cup Final made it 23 for the season in all competitions (15 in the Premiership, 4 in the UEFA Cup, 3 in the FA Cup and 1 in the League Cup) – hardly the form of a striker who'd lost his way.

Although he didn't get on the score-sheet in the UEFA Cup Final, his astute, unselfish pass set up Steven Gerrard for Liverpool's second; and it

was Owen, bearing menacingly down on the Alaves goal, who was brought down for the penalty which Gary McAllister converted for Liverpool's third.

His record is still a remarkable goal every two games for Liverpool – similar to that of the prolific Ian Rush before him. Fully recovered from injury, he has recaptured both the blistering pace that leaves defenders floundering in his wake, and that unerring composure and accuracy (now with either foot) when shown a sight of goal. These are rare qualities that promise to confirm Owen as the outstanding striker of his generation – which is a blessing for both Liverpool and England.

However, while Gerard Houllier's recent team selections suggest that he feels Owen and Emile Heskey are his best striking partnership, Robbie Fowler has become the odd-man-out at Anfield. Considered by many to be the Premiership's most naturally gifted goal poacher, absolutely adored by the Liverpool fans and emotionally attached to the club he joined as a boy, Fowler was a forlorn figure before the start of the FA Cup Final.

Disappointed and frustrated not to have made the starting line-up, he had to wait patiently for 77 minutes before being introduced to the action. Once on the pitch, Fowler was so desperate to impress that on a couple of occasions he hung on to the ball too long when a pass to Owen might have given the golden boy a hat-trick.

Again at the Westfalenstadion in Dortmund, Fowler was confined to the bench for 65 minutes. However, when he came on this time, he produced a brilliant goal, despatched with venom, relief and pure joy. It was his 15<sup>th</sup> goal of an injury-disrupted season.

Yet the fact remains that the Heskey-Owen pairing appears to be Houllier's first choice. And when Jari Litmanen is fully fit again, Fowler may fall further down the list. The player insists he has no wish to leave Liverpool, and given his strong family ties to the city, he probably means it. His manager has also said repeatedly that he does not want the player to leave, but the suspicion remains that he would be prepared to cash Fowler in for the right price. That suspicion grew when it was revealed that Houllier is interested in bringing French star David Trezeguet to Anfield.

There would be no shortage of bidders for Fowler, with Arsene Wenger probably at the head of the queue, having frequently said the player would fit smoothly into his Arsenal team. Yet this would be a bad time to leave Liverpool, for whom the good times are returning. It will be fascinating to see how Liverpool handle their abundance of attacking riches over the coming months.

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