

Premiership Headline Makers: MICHAEL OWEN & ROBBIE FOWLER

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Liverpool's gripping climax to the season threw the fortunes of two of their highly prized strikers into stark contrast.

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 should have been one of the biggest occasions of his career left him a forlorn figure.

When he failed to make the starting line-up for the UEFA Cup Final four days later, it appeared to confirm that Fowler was well down the strikers' pecking order. Questions about his Anfield future were widely raised and vigorously debated. Yet in football, things are not always how they appear.

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

Those difficult days seem a world away now, with Owen's nine goals in five games at the end of the season still fresh in the memory. His pair in the FA Cup Final and trademark shot on the run against Charlton made it 24 for the season in all competitions (16 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 has 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 – a blessing for both Liverpool and England.

Sven Goran Eriksson selected Owen, Emile Heskey and Fowler for his latest World Cup Qualifiers squad. That was a boost for Fowler, who appeared to have become the odd-man out at Anfield. Gerard Houllier's team selections had indicated that Owen and Emile Heskey were his preferred striking partnership. That meant frustration for Fowler.

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 distraught at not making the starting eleven for either cup final.

He had to wait patiently for 77 minutes before being introduced to the action in Cardiff. 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.

For the crucial last-day showdown against Charlton at The Valley, Robbie was picked from the start and worked tirelessly in the first-half when Liverpool were under almost constant pressure. In the second, his scoring instincts were at their sharpest as he produced two goals, one a clever overhead kick, to take his final tally for the season to 17 in all competitions.

Afterwards Houllier was effusive: Robbie is excellent in the position off the main striker because he's a good footballer. When he goes into the empty space between the midfield and defence, he's absolutely brilliant.

Houllier says Fowler realises there is strong competition for places in the team, and insists that Anfield is the place where he can win things. The player himself says he has no wish to leave Liverpool, which is not surprising given his strong family ties to the city. Houllier also insists that he does not want Fowler to leave.

Yet the fact remains that the Owen-Heskey pairing appears to be first choice. And when Jari Litmanen is fully fit again, Fowler may fall further down the list, raising the possibility that Liverpool could cash him in for the right price. Houllier's admiration for French star David Trezeguet seemed to support this view. However, Trezeguet has now committed himself to Juventus, and Liverpool look likely to start next season with the same four quality strikers.

If the situation should change, there will be no shortage of bidders for Fowler, with Arsene Wenger probably at the head of the queue. He has 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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