

Houllier's counting on Owen

GERARD HOULLIER is counting on victory at Yeovil and a self-imposed transfer embargo to reduce the risk of a stormy Liverpool annual meeting tomorrow night.

Houllier believes the return of Michael Owen will help ensure that Liverpool's foreign legion are not psyched out by Yeovil's famous giantkillers, whom he accuses of showing a lack of respect.

And to help appease unhappy shareholders, Houllier last night announced he had decided the club would not spend in the January transfer window.

Despite investing £120m on players, Houllier's side lie 20 points behind Premiership leaders Manchester United.

But Houllier, who will address the annual meeting 36 hours after facing Yeovil, said: 'I trust the players here, that's why I'm not having any recruitment. It's not true the board aren't backing me. The reason for no more signings is that it would cause more problems for the squad we already have.'

'The recruitment will come when Milan Baros and Jamie Carragher are back from injuries.'

Auxerre striker Djibril Cisse, however, has been lined up for a £10m move to Anfield in the summer.

Besides having to deal with persistent speculation that Celtic boss Martin O'Neill wants his job, Houllier also believes Third Division Yeovil have shown a lack of respect.

But, in having Owen available for the first time in five weeks, Houllier knows he has someone as fired up for the FA Cup as the underdogs. The England striker scored both goals in the 2001 FA

By **Joe Bernstein**

Cup final against Arsenal as Liverpool won a unique cup treble and Houllier said: 'When we lined the trophies up, I asked Michael which one he preferred and he pointed to the FA Cup.'

'He then pointed to the UEFA Cup and said: "You prefer that one". I agreed that maybe a European trophy is bigger for us but it showed how important the FA Cup is for English players. He's been like a boy by the Christmas tree. He will either play or be on the bench.'

Houllier knows his appearance at Liverpool's annual meeting will be his last as manager if his side suffer the worst Cup shock in their proud history.

Yeovil have done their best to increase the pressure, with manager Gary Johnson claiming Houllier lives in a mansion where he counts all his money and a couple of players saying Liverpool are the real underdogs.

The sledging has only served to increase Houllier's determination. Houllier said: 'I can't control what Yeovil say, but I can control what we say and how it affects us. I wouldn't do the same in their situation, our players respect the opposition more. Most of these games come down to attitude — and our attitude will be right.'

Owen's return is a psychological boost as much as anything. His season has been restricted to four games after a shin injury against Arsenal three months ago. His last action came against Steaua Bucharest five weeks ago when he sustained a thigh injury.

But Houllier recalled that Owen had an injury-hit start to 2001 and came back to win three cups — and become European Footballer of the Year.



FAVOURITE: Owen

Yeovil v Liverpool, BBC1, 12.40pm (Kick-off 1pm)