

O'Leary's prayers guide Leeds United

BY ROBERT WOODWARD
in London



The kids from Leeds United who were put to the sword by Barcelona on the club's return to the Champions League in September have developed into battle-hardened veterans over the past six months.

But the power of prayer may have something to do with David O'Leary's team reaching the quarterfinals.

Few teams in the competition's history have survived such a tough run to the quarterfinals as Leeds — in the two group phases it has played Real Madrid, AC Milan, Lazio and, of course, Barcelona.

The Catalan giants tore Leeds apart, 4-0, at the Nou Camp Stadium on opening night in September, and few gave the English Premier League club, in the competition for the first time since 1992-93, a chance of reaching the second phase.

"We had young kids playing against world-class players," O'Leary said after Barcelona's romp. "I felt we were paying them too much respect."

A loss to promoted Ipswich Town in the Premier League the following weekend called for desperate measures, and the Irish manager turned to his mother for help.

"I lit a few more candles at mass on Sunday," O'Leary said.

"They say when you go to church, you should never pray for things. But I have to admit that I had a few

quiet words, and my mother lit some more candles as well."

FORTUNES TURN. The fortunes of Leeds certainly took a turn for the better in its next Champions League home game, against AC Milan.

In the dying seconds of a game played in torrential rain, Milan goalkeeper Dida somehow allowed a long-range shot from Lee Bowyer to squirm out of his hands and into the net.

The 1-0 win was the tonic injury-plagued Leeds needed, and it thrashed Besiktas, 6-0, in its next match.

Ties with Barcelona and Milan followed, allowing Leeds to reach the second phase behind Milan — and ahead of Barcelona.

Assistant coach Eddie Gray, a Leeds veteran of the 1970s, believes that O'Leary's talk to the Leeds players after the Barcelona loss was the making of his team.

"He told them he expected certain things from them," Gray said, "one being that they must be confident in their abilities regardless of who or where they were playing."

The second phase began as badly as the first when

Real Madrid beat Leeds, 2-0, at Elland Road. But the English club again showed its mettle by traveling to Rome to upset Lazio, 1-0, then beating Anderlecht twice, 2-1 and 4-1.

RIO ARRIVES. Leeds, quoted at 8-1 to win the Champions League, enters the final stages in good order.

Pivotal players such as striker Harry Kewell and midfielder David Batty are back after long-term injuries, and the kids in the squad have acquired a wealth of European experience.

The defense in front of goalkeeper Nigel Martyn has been greatly strengthened by the arrival of Rio Ferdinand, the world's most expensive defender, from West Ham United.

Taking Irish striker Robbie Keane on loan from Inter Milan was an inspired stroke by O'Leary.

With Australians Mark Viduka and Kewell and promising Englishman Alan Smith also vying for a striker's berth, O'Leary has an abundance of goal-scoring prowess to pick from.

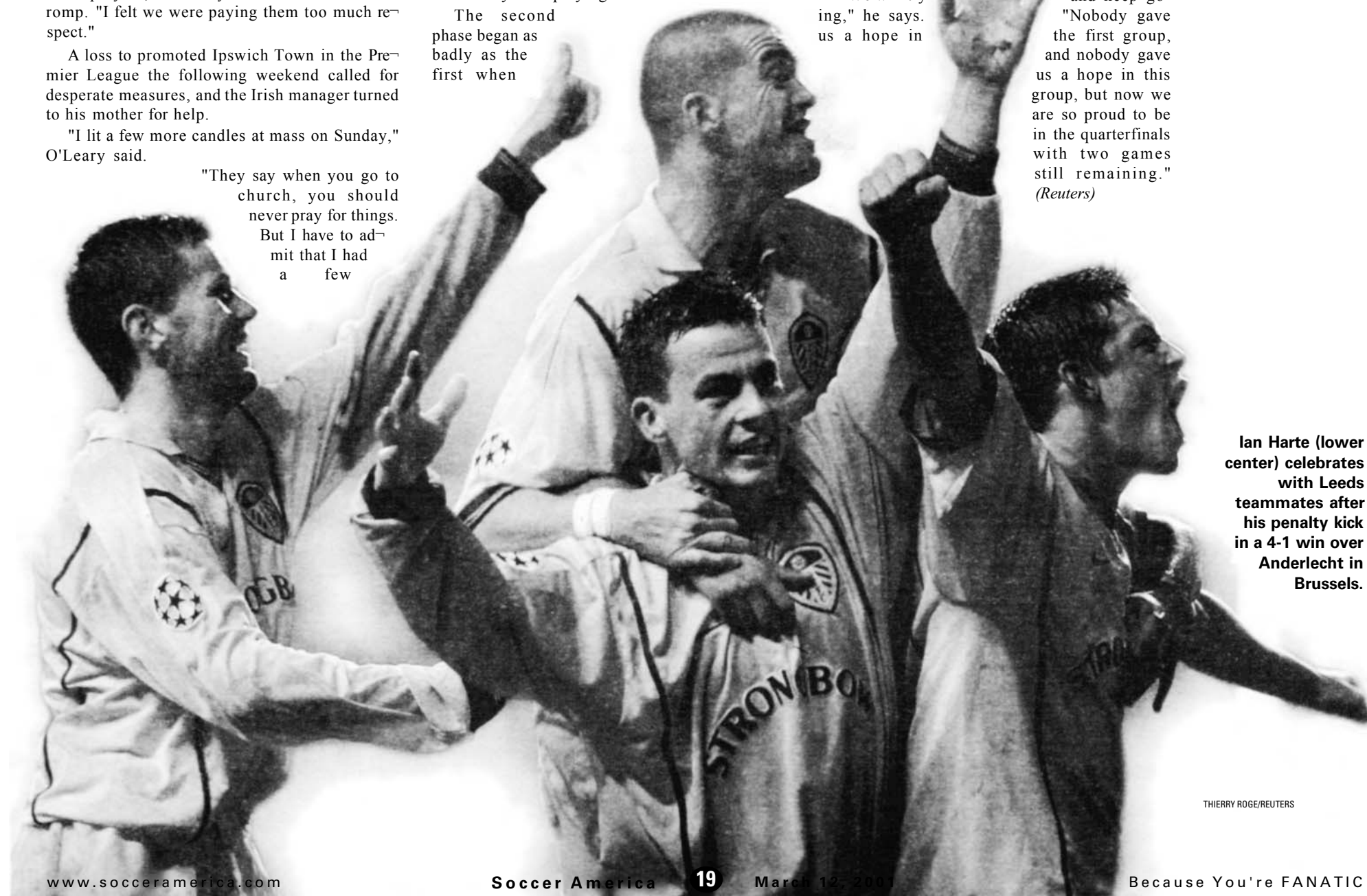
O'Leary is confident there will be more surprises.

"We will try and keep going," he says. us a hope in

and keep going. "Nobody gave the first group, and nobody gave us a hope in this group, but now we are so proud to be in the quarterfinals with two games still remaining." (Reuters)

The English club's European campaign got off to a poor start in Barcelona, but Irishman David O'Leary guided it past some heavy hitters en route to the quarterfinals.

Ian Harte (lower center) celebrates with Leeds teammates after his penalty kick in a 4-1 win over Anderlecht in Brussels.



THIERRY ROGE/REUTERS