

# Slowly, quietly, Rooney is starting to fulfil his potential

As he celebrates his 22nd birthday, Wayne Rooney is now living up to great expectations.

By Kevin McCarra

**W**ayne Rooney has turned 22. It is hardly a landmark birthday and there is no call for the sort of outing to Aintree that marked his 18th. In any case, the player seems to lead a determinedly dull private life nowadays. Maybe he is getting a taste for the peaceful existence enjoyed by those who are taken for granted.

He has just set a personal record by scoring in five consecutive games for club and country, yet it all happened without any fuss. The daft foul in Moscow that brought a penalty to ignite Russia's comeback may prove to have been his most significant deed over that period, but no one will forget either an opener at the Luzhniki taken with fluid instinctiveness.

In a period when it seems that England will not qualify for Euro 2008, Rooney, considering his relative youth, is the one person who suggests that he can lead a recovery and, in the process, take his place among the handful of truly great players in the world.

Arsène Wenger set the tone for the initial adulation in October 2002. The Frenchman reeled in admiration of the then 16-year-old substitute's goal-scoring, game-changing part in a win for Everton that ended Arsenal's unbeaten run of 30 Premier League fixtures. "He is a natural footballer," said Wenger. "Even if you were playing on the beach - four against four - you would see that."

The beach? Unconsciously, Wenger was presenting Rooney as some sort of pseudo-Brazilian, erupting with flair and technique. Maybe the player did once fit the bill, but it could not last. Football has to be a profession, conducted for the most part in the grind of the Premier League. Having been so adored as a newcomer, Rooney was always destined for a minor anticlimax in his career.

There have been impediments, and not just in the form of foot injuries. The move to United in 2004, for instance, was no fast track to glory. He was enlisting for that period of Old Trafford doubt when English football looked as if it was under the direction of Jose Mourinho. After the first couple of years, Rooney

might have glanced wryly at his solitary medal, gained for beating Wigan in the 2006 Carling Cup final.

There were spells, too, when premature fame was alleged to be undermining a player who could not quite reach sporting adulthood. That, in truth, was unfair. Rooney was untainted by lethargy or complacency in the 2005 FA Cup final, when Arsenal survived his extraordinary efforts and scampered off with the trophy through a penalty shoot-out.

United and the still-developing Rooney were each striving to find themselves in the fog of Chelsea domination. United's re-emergence is a matter of record, but Rooney's own prospects are still at issue to some extent. We are still in the process of being introduced to the grown-up Rooney.

Wenger compared him to Paul Gascoigne on that afternoon at Goodison five years ago. The two players do pair individualism with uncanny technique, but they are not really counterparts. Rooney retains something of the conventional centre-forward about him and it showed at Villa Park on Saturday. At the equaliser in United's 4-1 win he kept going in the speculative belief, which was to be rewarded, that Zat Knight would fail to intercept the cross.

His current sequence of goals began, too, with a purposeful winner against Roma last month. Rooney's team-mate Rio Ferdinand was right to distinguish the Englishman from the allegedly similar Carlos Tevez by highlighting the scoring instinct. Rooney, however, has an aptitude for whatever is required.

Despite the complaints when Sir Alex Ferguson uses him on the left of a trio behind a solitary striker, one of the aims must have been to broaden his education. It is true that Rooney's movement has become more elusive and few rival sides even attempt to man-mark him.

There should, ultimately, be a touch of the classic No10 about Rooney. The improving statistics already point to a booming influence. In his first campaign with United, he set up two goals. Last season the figure was 11. That pattern is echoed in the shaping of opportunities for others that were not taken, with a climb from 29 in 2004-05 to 57 in 2006-07. The progress is far greater than would be expected from the increase in the number of appearances.

The morning after England had been knocked out of the 2006 World Cup, Sven-Goran Eriksson had one last comment to make. "You, more than me, need Wayne Rooney in the next few years," he pleaded with the press, "so, please, pay attention, don't kill him, I beg you." The Swede has seldom been so emotional, but Rooney, despite the vicissitudes and fluctuations, is worth the heartfelt advocacy.

Rooney