



Rooney

# Rooney pours his heart out, but in the wrong places

By David Hytner

**A**s Wayne Rooney prepared to enter his fifth season at Manchester United, Sir Alex Ferguson made the admission that he had not helped the development of his attacking tyro by asking him to play in too many different positions.

Rooney being Rooney, the manager said, in an interview over the summer, he would always do as he was told and put his heart and soul into every role. But the undertone to Ferguson's words was that he himself had not worked out how best to harness the talents of arguably the most gifted player of England's latest generation.

It was tempting to wonder last night, as the rain tumbled down on Fabio Capello and his team was jeered off the field after a disjointed performance in the draw with the Czech Republic, that if Ferguson was still struggling, what chance did the Italian have after a mere five games?

Capello betrayed his relief when Joe Cole scrambled in the injury-time equaliser, pumping his fists wildly as the emotion took hold, yet the Italian pragmatist will not lose sight of the bigger picture. If he is to drive England to the World Cup finals in South Africa and onwards to a serious tilt at glory, he has to find the optimum position for Rooney. And fast.

The player's performance here at Wembley mirrored so many of those he has put in for his country in recent times. The commitment was full-blooded, the energy levels non-stop. He tried so hard to make things happen for his team that he put his blood vessels in danger. Yet when stock was taken, and Capello will now begin the analysis in earnest as his first competitive fixtures loom, the sum total of the damage that Rooney inflicted in the final third was negligible. In cold, hard terms, it was limited to a header straight at Petr Cech on the half-hour and a long-range shot moments later that the Czech goalkeeper made a meal of saving.

Those who wish Rooney would play or could be played up alongside a strike partner, preferably a mobile target man - the prospect of Dimitar Berbatov arriving at Old Trafford is mouth-watering - were disappointed for much of the evening. Capello said that he started Rooney behind Jermain Defoe and alongside Steven Gerrard in a 4-3-2-1 formation but from the first whistle he dropped even deeper in an attempt to link the play or tiptoed wide as England wanted sorely for penetration.

The sight of him almost on the toes of his central defenders or charging into tackles across midfield was disconcerting and not only because there is generally a sharp intake of breath whenever 50-50 balls fall in his vicinity.

The effect was less than splendid isolation for Defoe in the first half and the sense that Rooney might be better advised to leave playmaking duties to those behind him, although Frank Lampard, in central midfield, did little to convince that he could prise the Czechs apart.

One moment summed up Rooney and England's toils. Defoe broke alone on the left and Rooney immediately sprinted 60 yards, flat-out, to overlap him. Defoe rolled the ball to him but Rooney, having hastily applied the brakes, got it tangled under his boots and it squirted off for a goal-kick. There was nobody in the penalty area for the cross anyway.

The second half brought Emile Heskey, the big centre-forward, but again Rooney frequently occupied deep and wide areas. The sight of him picking up possession in the centre and barrelling forward is one of the more exhilarating in the English game and there was one occasion when he quickened the pulses, taking a pass from Gerrard and accelerating forward before playing in Heskey for a shot that he did not connect cleanly with.

It was a mere flicker, though. The Czechs were delighted, in large part, to see Rooney roaming in non-threatening spaces and before he was substituted, his last action was to make a sliding tackle in the first third of the field.

Rooney has not enjoyed a full pre-season because of illness and Capello later revealed that it was always his plan to substitute him after an hour. As he trudged off, though, his body language was laced with exasperation. The next two years are of massive importance to Rooney, individually and for his teams, at club and international level. England's most explosive talent must not fall victim to his own versatility.