

# Rooney must rediscover selfish side

By Norman Hubbard

**A**t 22 and the owner of 43 England caps, Wayne Rooney has already achieved more than the majority of players do in their entire careers.

Yet the more he wins, the greater the enigma Rooney becomes. In 2005/06, he was magnificent while Manchester United were, by their standards, mediocre. A one-man source of optimism about the club's future, his coruscating brilliance was the highlight of their season. In a side that seemed to have too few, he was the principal match-winner. If both United's and England's hopes seemed to rest with a player barely out of his teens, it was entirely understandable.

Last season, however, the most startling statistic about Rooney's campaign is that his goals only yielded one Premier League point, in April's draw at Middlesbrough; mathematically, United could have won the title without him. Such a strict mathematical analysis ignores his overall contribution – indeed, it is telling that their defeats tended to occur in his absence; nevertheless, the comparable figure for Cristiano Ronaldo, who superseded him as the club's resident superstar and points-gatherer in chief, is 19.

That illustrates the difference between 'R' 'n' 'R'. Moreover, in the Champions League final, it was Rooney who was replaced while Ronaldo and the tireless Carlos Tevez remained on. In contrast, 12 months earlier, he produced a fine double against AC Milan in the semi-final to accompany an outstanding display against Roma in the previous round.

If that suggests Rooney is at his best in an unsuccessful cause, that is an impression that the 2005 FA Cup final, where the shootout defeat to Arsenal followed a forceful individual display, reinforces. Rooney's international career, meanwhile, is one of diminishing returns. It has only brought two goals in competitive games since Euro 2004 and Fabio Capello, like Steve McClaren and Sven-Goran Eriksson before him, is already accused of failing to get the best from the only world-class attacker at his disposal.

Rooney is far from the only international under-achiever in the current England squad and an overall record of 14 goals in 43 caps is more than respectable, but different standards are applied to him.

And so they should be. While there is an obvious temptation to hype every youngster, he is, along with Steven Gerrard, England's foremost talent. Too much can be expected at too young an age, and growing up has its perils for child prodigies, but Rooney is in danger of underachievement. Not just for the national team, where the majority of his team-mates struggle to replicate their club form, but for Manchester United. Ronaldo, once the junior partner in their alliance, has surged ahead of Rooney. Tevez is at his most destructive

alongside the Englishman but it is the Argentine who forged the reputation last season for delivering the vital goals.

Rooney, the odd metatarsal difficulty notwithstanding, has 41 goals in two seasons. Once again, it is a record that would induce envy from most strikers, but then the majority lack his ability. It is true, too, that his talents extend beyond goalscoring; United's slick football, their fluid movement and interchangeable attacking would not be possible without his blend of creativity and industry. Yet there is a reason why, in pre-season, Sir Alex Ferguson stated the need to use Rooney in his proper position, to grant the No.10 the role and responsibilities the shirt often entails.

With an unselfishness that is alien to Ronaldo, Rooney tracked back diligently in the Nou Camp as an orthodox right-sided midfielder. He has often, especially in Europe, been delegated duties on the left flank, taking him further from goal. The situation is complicated by Rooney's roaming or, as Ferguson termed it, 'overdoing it in the wrong areas of the pitch'.

Far from operating five yards behind the principal striker, his first two appearances of the season were notable for the supposed striker dropping far deeper. It is a sign of a willingness to involve himself in the game and provide inspiration when the midfield cannot, but for Manchester United against Newcastle and for England versus the Czech Republic, he was ineffective.

If Ronaldo, in contrast, is vain enough to channel his efforts towards individual glory, it can be beneficial, as 42 goals last season suggest. Rooney, however, appeared the superior player in 2006, but has not advanced to such a degree. Perhaps the realisation of that leads to the dissent and mis-timed tackles that characterise a frustrated Rooney. The team ethic that he possesses takes him further from goal and, at times, into trouble, depriving him of tap-ins and leaving others, less talented and less qualified, to take up the striker's position.

At 22, he has time on his side. Yet for the past two years, we have been waiting for him to produce career-defining performances, as his fellow Liverpoolian Gerrard did in Istanbul, or to become the ruthless, relentless destroyer Ronaldo has morphed into. A willingness to roam everywhere on the pitch should not obscure Rooney from the fact he is most dangerous in the final third.

Perhaps the paradox is that too many footballers are too selfish; Rooney is a rare example of one who should act with self-interest in mind more often. Few others would be charged with being Manchester United and England's talisman, but few others have his potential. Wayne Rooney is picking up the medals, but now it is time to challenge for the individual honours as well.

