

James Lawton: Why is Capello succeeding? Because he is tough and adult – and has cleared away so much rubbish



The England manager has impressed because he knows football and, crucially, he trusts his instincts

Why is Fabio Capello making the job that so absurdly was deemed impossible by so many for so long seem like such a satisfying embrace of professional weight and hitherto grievously unfulfilled potential? It is because he is tough and adult. It is because he has cleared away so much accumulated rubbish. Rubbish thinking, rubbish attitudes, rubbish juvenilia, that is.

He knows that teams do not just happen. They are the result of craft and knowledge and constant reappraisal of performance and possibilities. He knows that there is only one sure reality in the making of a football team. It is that the job is never done, that there is always something new demanded of the man who has to accept the ultimate responsibility, always a new problem the moment the old one has been resolved.

Capello has accepted the mantle of leadership so easily because he did not achieve his reputation by deferring to anyone's instincts but his own.

It is because – and when you think about all that has happened to the national team since Sir Alf Ramsey led it to a single triumph 42 years ago, it might seem like an absurd simplification – he knows what he is doing. But of course it isn't so simple, it only seems that way in the hands of a man who understands so well the game that has been his life – and the men who play it. He has encountered some of the best professionalism the game has ever known and, when he arrived in England, some of the worst.

For him it is not a business of chance and speculation. It is not about currying

favour with the mob or the media, of diamond formations and, if we draw for a moment a veil over the bizarre aggrandisement of the fag end of David Beckham's played-out career, of creating a hierarchy of celebrity players. It is about the provision of continuously maintained attention to individual performances as they affect the performance of the team.

Against Kazakhstan at the weekend Wayne Rooney was the object of Capello's most pressing attention. Rooney's performance was transformed. In Minsk, against the dangerously adept passing and skill of Belarus, Steven Gerrard was the one who most demanded guidance, and, he too, achieved a new level of effectiveness at a pivotal point.

The key to the remarkable growth of a team which in the last two World Cups collapsed under the weight of its illusions – and the football illiteracy of involving key players who were plainly far from fit – is the team's ability to think its way through the heat of the action.

It is the gift of certainty that can only come from true leadership and wherever it carries Capello's team we can be pretty sure it will not be to the appalling angst that inevitably followed the World Cup failures and the abject inability to come to terms with the demands of a European Championship qualifying campaign.

Watching Capello operate is to feel both exhilaration and anger.

Exhilaration at the evidence of genuine growth in the confidence of players like Rio Ferdinand and Frank Lampard and Emile Heskey and, most dramatically, Rooney, a player who is finally delivering for England the blaze of possibilities

he presented as a man-child of precocious strength and vision. The anger comes when you remember days like the one in Japan six years ago, when England had their best chance of winning the World Cup since Wembley in 1966, and Sven Goran Eriksson sat in his dugout so passively as England, with a man advantage over Brazil, failed to marshal a single shot on goal.

The anger is intensified when you consider how the message of that failure was discarded by Eriksson's employers.

Certainly, it should be no hardship acknowledging the contribution of the departing chief executive, Brian Barwick. He and his colleagues made a fiasco of the succession to Eriksson. All the things to get wrong, he sought them out quite relentlessly, right up to the catastrophic appointment of Steve McClaren. But then there had to be a point when the men who ran England accepted the scale of their misadventures, their shunning of the responsibility commonly accepted in front-rank football nations, the one that says you do not build on failure but cut your losses and seek out, as surely as you can, some kind of guarantee of improvement. Barwick, to his great credit, saw that in the aura and the achievement of Fabio Capello and he was unswerving in this.

It doesn't mean that Capello is going to win the World Cup, but it does suggest more strongly than at any time since '66 that they may well now have the quality of leadership to make it a possibility. It means that England are learning to compete with a degree of self-belief that in the past was so plainly as superficial as the image of a phoney golden generation.

This, anyway, is the suspicion of Sir Bobby Charlton, who with the likes of the late Bobby Moore and Alan Ball, listened – and believed – when told by Alf Ramsey, "Gentleman, we will win the World Cup."

Capello is unlikely to go public with such a declaration, but on his first working day as England coach – when he watched Rooney brilliantly transform an FA Cup tie at Villa Park – he offered the great England player some considerable encouragement to believe that he and the nation might once again experience the elation of great achievement.

"Charlton," he said, "it is my wish to take England to the World Cup final in South Africa."

Charlton was impressed by the cut of Capello right from the start. He said, "I have to say he reminds me of Ramsey in many ways. He is direct and sure of himself. He knows what he wants. I don't think he will confuse the players for a minute, no more than Alf did. He will let them know what he wants and he always makes it clear when he is not satisfied."

That was before a run of indifferent friendly performances and some biting lectures, not least from Harry Redknapp. Before, also, it was quite so clear that Fabio Capello was so sure about precisely what he had to do to remake England. He had both to re-educate and lead and then maybe there would be some first vital evidence of a team in the process of growing up.

We have that evidence now and what does it say about the impossible job? It says that's so only when you don't know how to do it.