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throughout the world. He remembers a young Stuart Taylor training with England before Euro 2000 but later years were spent in the shadows at Arsenal and, following a move to Villa, he is now on loan at Cardiff City in the Championship.

Circumstances were different when Martyn was emerging after Crystal Palace had made him the first £1m goalkeeper in England when buying him from Bristol Rovers in 1989. He had enduring talent and, despite having to go the World Cup finals of 1998 and 2002 as back-up to David Seaman, collected 23 caps over 10 years. "I was fortunate to be picked up by Palace and given time to mature," he said.

The stress on him lay in the rivalry for international recognition not merely with Seaman and James but also with others including Chris Woods and Tim Flowers. "If you were in the England squad on merit one minute you could just as easily be out of it the next."

Access may look disarmingly simple for someone like Foster now, but inclusion imposes strain on goalkeepers who have had so little opportunity to prepare.

Capello must decide whether to build team around Gerrard

Refreshingly honest as Steven Gerrard often is, he should probably give Rafa Benítez a little more credit for finding a way for Liverpool and their captain to play as devastatingly as they have been doing this month.

"My relationship with Rafa has got stronger," Gerrard explained this week. "Maybe when I was younger I was a bit selfish, thinking of myself a bit too much when he was playing me out of position. I should have realised he was doing that for the team. But at the moment he's playing me in my favourite position. I'm captain, we're winning, things are good."

Perhaps there is still too much of the "Stevie Me" in that statement for some tastes, though it would be churlish to deny that Gerrard is currently in the form of his life and fully entitled to point to the success of his present role as deep-lying striker behind Fernando Torres.

What he cannot say is that he has always coveted that role. Until this season Gerrard's "favourite position", the one he not-so-secretly wanted to fill when being asked to play wide right for Liverpool or stay back for England, was advanced central midfield. He wanted to be in the thick of things but with a licence to get forward whenever possible. The idea of Gerrard being a forward, full stop, appears to have come from Benítez. It appears to have been a recent one as well, otherwise there would have been no need to go to all that expense and trouble over Robbie Keane.

Benítez wants Torres, when fit, to operate as a solo striker with support from the wings from players such as Dirk Kuyt, Albert Riera or Yossi Benayoun. Defences are organised to cope with that sort of threat though, so he also wants a player to operate between the lines, a direct attacking presence that defenders and midfielders are never quite sure whose responsibility it is to pick up. Keane might have made that role his own, though in the event he suffered from having to play at the point

of the attack when Torres was injured.

Now Torres has returned, Gerrard has not only claimed the role but shone in it. He can play ahead of Torres or behind him. He can play his fellow striker in, or be played in himself. He has great positional awareness, a physical presence and an exceptional turn of speed, and with other players locking the base of midfield has no need to chase all over the pitch as of old, trying to do everything himself.

Gerrard might have finally found his perfect position, and the question is, what is Fabio Capello going to do about it? Will it be back to midfield duties with Frank Lampard on Saturday, or are England going to try and harness some of the current Liverpool feelgood factor? Perhaps Emile Heskey deserves a loyalty vote against Slovakia, for while his form for Aston Villa has not been outstanding, his performances for England at the end of last year were among the best of any of Capello's squad. Neither should Wayne Rooney be dropped on a whim, even if he is capable of starting a fight with a corner flag. But Gerrard himself is wondering what he might do up front in tandem with Rooney - "I'd love nothing better than the chance to play in that role for England" - and what are friendlies for if not to try out new ideas? It will be a disappointment, given that Gerrard is now being talked up as the world's best by a previous holder of that title in Zinedine Zidane, if England do not try to play at least part of the game with him in his most effective position.

There is no guarantee that it would succeed. Rooney is not quite as quick or as mobile as Torres and when England have tried similar schemes in the past he has ended up unhappy up front on his own, playing with his back to goal and too easily isolated to be effective. But then again the Gerrard-Lampard midfield axis does not come with any guarantee of success either, and though both players ought to be good enough to impose themselves from



Gerrard

almost anywhere on the pitch, that has not always been England's experience. The one thing one hopes Capello avoids is the half-way house solution, whereby he asks Gerrard to play a bit on the left but mostly upfront, and the player gets caught between defensive and attacking duties so that Harry Redknapp ends up suggesting England are killing him.

What has launched Gerrard so spectacularly at Liverpool this season is the solidity of Riera on the left and Kuyt on the right. Before that, Gerrard had to help out in those areas, and as a result his impact through the middle was weakened. England have the personnel, they should give it a try sometime soon. Though as Capello undoubtedly realises and Benítez has elegantly proved, the switch is more than a mere positional tweak. It is not just a question of sending one man further forward into the hole, it is about the whole team making the hole work. Liverpool, quite literally, have built their team around Gerrard. Capello must decide whether or not to do the same.

McClaren snub almost wrecked his career



Not least because on so many occasions the often turbulent love affair appeared to be over.

First came the tearful resignation as England captain; then McClaren's decision to drop him; then the announcement that he would be going to the United States; and then Capello's decision to drop him at Madrid, and what seemed to be the Italian's decision to ignore him once he had replaced McClaren as the manager of England.

Even when the opportunity presented itself to join AC Milan on loan, he was not convinced he could succeed at the San Siro.

"When I went to Milan I didn't know whether I was going to play a game or whether I'd be able to keep up with the pace of some of the players in the team," Beckham said.

"But I surprised myself. In that first

start against Roma, and then in the games that came after that. The confidence returned with the realisation that I can still play this game."

Beckham is one of the great survivors and someone who now seems to possess enough humility to adapt to his surroundings.

He accepts that he is no longer among the first few names on the England manager's teamsheet, and accepts, in his own words, that he is best used as an 'impact player' - someone, should his country require it, who can come on and offer a unique threat with a right foot that remains the best in world football.

Capello regards Theo Walcott and Aaron Lennon as the future and rightly so, but if England need a goal with 20 minutes to go then Beckham is exactly the kind of player who could make it happen against a tiring defence.

As he held court in the team hotel yesterday, proud and resplendent in his England tracksuit ahead of tomorrow's game with Slovakia at Wembley, he denied he was hindering the progress of England's young flyers and that he was wrong to want a 109th cap - a record for an England

outfield player - and many more.

'I don't think I'm getting in their way,' he said. 'If anything, I can help them with my experience. That's been one of the exceptional things about Fabio Capello coming in as manager. He's played people like Theo, having seen them play well for their clubs.'

'It's up to other people to determine what I bring to the squad. I hope it's more than experience.'

'I'd hope that people see that if I come on in a game, I can set up goals from crosses, freekicks, corners. I've still got that work-rate there as well, as I've shown with Milan.'

'Form-wise, being at Milan has taken me to another level. Fitness-wise, it's definitely taken me to another level. Playing at a club like Milan, and with the players we've got, has improved my confidence and my form. I'm in the best shape I've been for a long time and, if I'm in shape, I can perform.'

He just forgot that after taking a telephone call from McClaren.