

Stuart Quigley



THE
CORNERSTONE
COLLECTION

Sculpting the Premier League's
Past, Present and Future



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Wayne Rooney

CERTAINTY IS a trap. Conversational camouflage over a black hole of opinion. Some are all too eager to jump down this particular void of stubbornness, carrying with them nothing more than either bad or blind faith and personal bias. The light at the end of this particular tunnel vision lies within an objectivity that is difficult to muster within the moment. Even within that, it defies reason that the most gifted English player of his generation requires a second opinion. Accolades of a certain distinction shouldn't need further investigation. Abandon all hype all ye who enter here.

Aside from the great partisan divide, football demands an ever-increasing instant insistence in regard to consensus. It doesn't make sense to appraise someone's place in history before they've even become it. Like so much when it comes to opinion, there's no exact science. But there does need to be an accepted baseline. Nobody in their right mind could ever put down a playing career that consisted of five English top-flight titles, a European Cup and half a dozen other major trophies. The gripe with Rooney, once you move past the realm that one can exist, is that it's not more.

As is so often the case with footballers, what initially propels them forward can ultimately lead to their undoing: potential.

Used as an arbitrary, imaginary line drawn not once but repeatedly, for every set of subjective eyes watching. The idea that learning and success are both aligned, while reasonable in theory, soon turns sour once one fails to coordinate with the other. For Rooney, this appears to be especially harsh given the frequency with which the records tumbled so very quickly. Bursting on to the scene in such a way, it would have been nigh-on impossible for anyone to keep up with the perpetual motion machine that was the English media. Therein lay the ultimate source of his perceived failure.

Certain players have a buzz even before they've taken to the pitch. To say that things were different in 2002 than they had been before in regard to those on the verge of the first team is to exaggerate slightly;; however, media has played a part in bringing to a boil the hype for a new generation in such a way as didn't happen before the saturation of the game on TV. An ever-increasing showing of youth prospects as they make their way along their early careers as broadcasters scour even deeper for a particular narrative makes for a greater expectation. Everton fans didn't believe, they *knew*. Buzz around the club grew as Rooney's breakthrough in the first team drew ever closer. They were privy to an advance screening of a phenomenon. When the wider world saw him, his A-List status would be confirmed almost instantly.

For all the prestigious highs reached in a career, there were none quite as seismic as that first. He scored a multitude of winning goals over the course of his time in the Premier League. None lit the touch paper quite so spectacularly as that which he scored at Goodison against Arsenal in October of 2002. He had made his debut some two months prior, playing in every game of Everton's season to that point barring one. Those who remember it do so with him doing it in an instant; being summoned off the bench by destiny rather than David Moyes.

Ten minutes was all he needed. Of all that stands out in retrospect all these years later, it's his first touch which underlines

everything else that is to come, both in terms of this game and forever onward. Richard Wright's booming goal kick bobbles in and around midfield, resulting in another indiscriminate poke forward by Thomas Gravesen. Football at this point generally evaporates, the battle between defender and forward so commonplace it could be mistaken for code. Rooney's control of the ball does what the goal itself will, and opens up a world of possibilities. The turn to face goal is effortless, the finish exquisite. With one strike of a football he would be tethered to the future. Whatever happened from here on in, tomorrow had found its main character.

Everton's joy was also their struggle. Developing and unleashing this kind of talent soon led to the conundrum of how they were going to hold on to him. The two years that followed produced almost as many yellow cards as goals and for all the skill and technique that was very clearly there, it became more and more of an inevitability that his career would be more fulfilled elsewhere. What's more, the need that came down from boardroom level to cash in and push him in the direction of Chelsea illustrated part of the problem at Goodison Park during the 2000s. For all the good work Everton were doing in building a team that would very soon go on to challenge for the top four, there would always be the need to sell to buy. With that – along with some behind-the-scenes negotiations with Newcastle in order to inflate interest – he got his move to Manchester United following the conclusion of Euro 2004.

Given the anticipation for Rooney's debut, it would have been hard to meet expectations. He exceeded them to a level that even the most ardent United fan would have struggled to predict. Completing his hat-trick before the hour mark, there was very little doubting the promise that lay ahead. The future appeared to be set in stone for a player who would not be held back from success. This was in contrast with the fortunes of his team as threats to United's dominance became plural. After a

previously unheard of two years without a title, it was clear they would have to adapt.

Alex Ferguson made but one signing in the lead-up to the 2006/07 season, which paid dividends in terms of the team as a whole. Michael Carrick being the only signing that summer didn't capture the imagination, but with a strong defence, a dynamic attack and an ageing midfield it made the most sense. In among that team, a collection of world-beaters, two stood out who were at the very top of the game. Combined, they struck fear into the hearts of every defence they came up against. Few could contain them. Together they were part of the same unstoppable force. Under the surface, however, they were two very different people.

Playing for the same club does not exclude treading different paths. At the time they were together, only one of them had to shake off the tag of having no end product. Even after an international dispute the two put everything aside in order to win. It was never a competition between the two of them, until Cristiano Ronaldo moved on and made everyone an opponent. His devotion to marginal gains and the player he became at Real Madrid was at odds with a force of nature who made things happen. Rooney did everything he could, scoring goals at a rate and with such impact that his place at the top of English football was assured. Yet somehow a team-mate went on to bigger and better things.

Not all of it revolved around Ronaldo, yet it most definitely began in Portugal. Before Rooney's move from Goodison to Old Trafford, just as that initial hype was about to peak, there was a prodigious performance against Croatia as England beat them 4-2 at the European Championships. A few months before he put Fenerbahçe to the sword on his debut, sharpening that particular blade on the international stage put Rooney front and centre of a so-called golden generation. Except, unlike the doors he was able to unlock for Manchester United, things were never quite as simple when it came to playing for his country. It wasn't for a lack of trying; so many of his Premier League

peers never quite lived up to their billing when it came to the international stage. None of them quite suffered quite the same punch to their reputation, regardless of standing.

The World Cups that were to be in Rooney's prime both ended with a very specific infamy. In 2006 he was lucky to avoid being chased by a rabid English media that had shown previous for making scapegoats of Manchester United players, with their focus being all about Ronaldo's wink rather than a more than questionable red-card-earning stomp in the quarter-final. By 2010 a lot had changed, none of it in regard to disappointment. England's eventual defeat to Germany may have been marred by a lack of goal-line technology that may or may not have made a difference but it was a game earlier on, during the group stage that elicited widespread condemnation.

To say the mood in the camp was tense is to slightly undersell it. By all accounts no one was having a great time, such was the strictness with which head coach Fabio Capello regimentally marshalled the squad. Coming off the back of a draw with the USA in somewhat inexplicable terms put a certain amount of pressure on the next group fixture with Algeria. What proceeded to happen was one of the most non-eventful 90 minutes that has ever been played out. Not quite detrimental to the point of permanently damaging the chances of emerging through the group stage, still the England fans in attendance very clearly voiced their disapproval. As frustrated as they were, an equally exasperated response from Rooney was captured by the cameras, 'Nice to see your own fans booing you.'

One sentence – uttered in the immediate aftermath of a deeply unsatisfying performance – does not condemn Rooney to anything. Not least because he was right. The process of booing at full time has always remained a peculiar one, especially when it is so performative. Everyone has the right to express their emotions at any given time, fair and true. It doesn't achieve anything, however. Certainly not at this level.

England underachieved, given the talent they had during the 2000s, that much is reasonable. As part of this unfulfilled legacy, an unwarranted black mark grew into existence.

Despite a storied career that saw him tear up the record books, butting heads with an equally legendary manager over a period of years was part and parcel of an ever-changing landscape. Even during times of unprecedented success, there were those who crossed the boss only to find themselves close to the exit door. Transfer requests, protracted contract discussions and much more. Of all those who ever took on Sir Alex during his time, Rooney may very well be the only one to engage in such a battle and remain at the club.

The struggle that existed within the corridors of Old Trafford during the latter stages of Ferguson's reign only became more important once there was a vacuum. Mythical though Rooney had become, his role at this point had become akin to forever rolling a stone uphill only for it to fall down again. A team that had been rinsed clear of its ability to go again, the surgery that was required became terminal. For as bad as David Moyes and Louis van Gaal had it, things would have been a lot worse were it not for the ever diminishing returns of a player who found himself having to plug more gaps.

Time catches up with the best. Those who burst on to the scene in such a way are rarely those who disappear without a trace. Moving into midfield gave a spark of new life both in terms of Rooney's latter-stage Manchester United career as well as a final chapter for England that saw him wildly adrift in a 2-1 humiliation to Iceland during Euro 2016. Rejoining Everton might perhaps in another world have added the perfect epilogue for a player who the Goodison faithful once saw reveal a t-shirt saying 'Once a Blue, Always a Blue'. Ten goals in the 31 games that he did play – including a sensational hat-trick against West Ham – wasn't necessarily the ending that many had envisioned. Right to the very end, the potential of what might have been overshadowed what was.

Going to America felt like one move too many. Calling it a day after returning to Everton satisfied the biographers and completionists; still there was more football to play. Even with the less than impressive gaze through which MLS is viewed from European shores, there was still enough time to produce what might – after everything else – be the definitive piece of play of his career. A last-minute corner with a side trying to find a winner so much that they send the goalkeeper up. Once the ball breaks a certain way a goal is all but certain. When it comes to percentages however, Wayne Rooney never gave up on anything.

In the US they call it hustle, chasing down the one player who was about to hit an empty net before him. Clutch means something very different. To pick out a ball from the halfway line that would allow a forward at the other end to score and win the game, that's on another level entirely. Every aspect of that play highlighted a different part of one of the most gifted English footballers of all time. The desire to win it back, even when it wasn't his responsibility or the moment didn't really require it. Alone it would have been enough. To follow it up with the perfect technique, there are so very few who have that kind of all-round ability. That was Wayne Rooney.

Even after it's over, it's never really over. Coming back over the pond in the middle of the 2019/20 season and joining a Derby County side in desperate need of help in their quest to get back to the Premier League, it wouldn't take long before the task changed. Then the job changed, from player to manager. After that the job became impossible. It's astonishing that a player who saw it all and did it all can find themselves in an unprecedented situation. Even more so, there's an end point here that for once won't affect his reputation. Whatever happens to Rooney the manager, nothing can compare to the conviction that was put upon him after that first moment. Judgement comes after, not during.