

# Thierry Henry

## MONSIEUR VA-VA-VOOM

By Justin Kavanagh

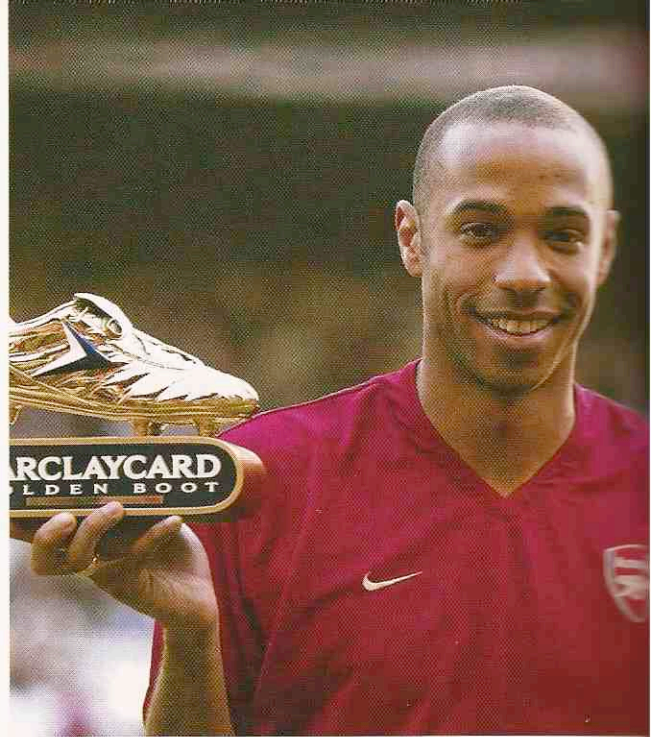
There has never been such a shoo-in for England's Players' Player of the Year award as the man they call Monsieur Va-Va-Voom.

Professional players know that careers are short and have always applied the logic of squad rotation to this elected honor. Never before have they chosen the same player two seasons running, yet realistically, there was never any viable alternative to Arsenal's Thierry Henry. Such have been the French striker's mesmeric displays of talent and his consistently decisive performances this year, that to give the honor to anyone else would simply have made the title meaningless.

To watch him perform this season is to be awe-struck by the visual appeal of the sport. Your mind goes to that special pantheon of those whose physical grace, speed, and complete mastery of their talents were aligned with the will and tenacity that define champions. And it's easy to see Thierry Henry taking his place alongside Muhammad Ali, Pelé, Sugar Ray Leonard, Martina Navratilova... and others whose imagination and talent for dramatic improvisation have redefined their sport.

Quite simply, Henry is playing soccer in a way that it has never been played before. He sees the same field we do; but in his head, he is imagining possibilities of time, space and movement on a completely different plane. And because he is now reaching his prime at a club that has raised physical preparation to an art form, the remarkably honed body is responding almost perfectly to the will and vision of a true maverick.

For Stateside aficionados, the rewind button has been overused this season; often two or three "takes" are needed to appreciate the range of calculations that must have gone through the Arsenal striker's head in a fraction of a second. Monsieur Va-Va-Voom's

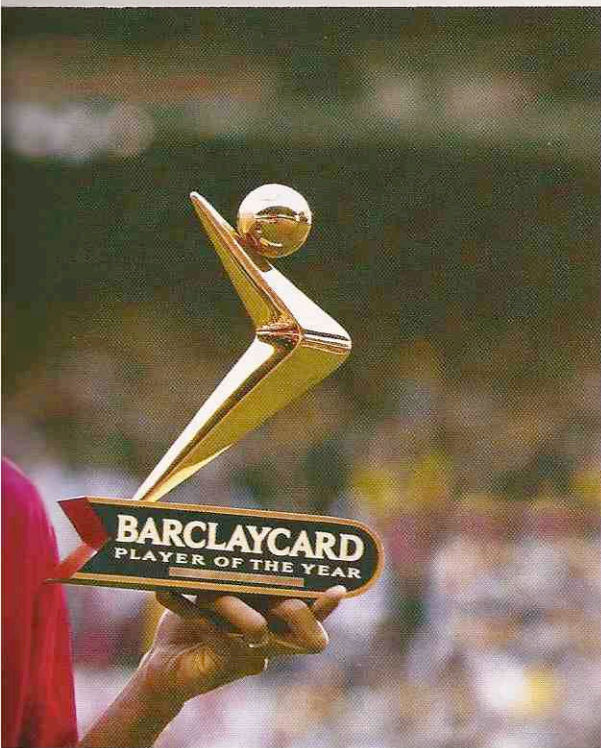


speed is a mental phenomenon too: The rest of us ordinary watching mortals are simply trailing in his wake, like so many weary Premiership defenders.

To the man variously known as Titi, Hooray, or Tel (in North London) it is all in a day's work. Witness his four-goal performance against Leeds. Here was the full repertoire of the complete footballer demonstrated in a devastating 40-minute spell. The first and third were trademark Thierry—Gilberto and Wiltord supplying balls in behind the helpless Leeds defense for Henry to turn on the afterburners and leave the ball nestling in the net before you could say Va-Va-Voom.

In between came a goal which only the totally self-assured could even contemplate. It is known in the trade as a "Panenka penalty," after the Czech midfield-general who audaciously introduced it to win the Final of the 1976 European Championships. Henry was true to the original, waiting for the keeper to make his move and then delicately chipping it straight down the middle into the space just vacated. It is a dangerous stunt to pull if there is even a shadow of self-doubt in your make-up. Thierry Henry had no such concerns.

The fourth goal was the best of the night. Robert Pires flicked a pass into his countryman's path just on half-way. Shadowed by two white shirts, Henry's change of pace made the Leeds professionals seem robotic in their reactions and movement. Within two seconds he was bearing down on the Leeds keeper, Paul Robinson, whose every nightmare was materializing in a red and white



shirt. In desperation, an airborne foul was launched by one of the chasing posse in a bid to stop the one-man rout. Henry started to fall, but keeping his head up, and aided by gravity-defying balance, he somehow arched a right foot shot between Robinson and the far post. It was reminiscent of Diego Maradona poking his shot past the Belgium goalkeeper in 1986, while being mugged by a series of exasperated defenders. As Blackburn manager Graeme Souness has observed, "the only way to stop Henry is with an AK-47."

Yet despite the illusion of gliding effortlessness created by his frightening pace and velcro control, Henry's game is driven by the attitude, work rate, and team values of a true professional. In the previous game against Liverpool, Arsenal were in serious trouble. Behind 1-2 at half-time, the Gunners were staring into the abyss: Having been knocked out of both F.A. Cup and Champions League that week, the Premiership seemed now to be slipping away too. Henry had described the cup exit as "the end of the world." But, he explained, "When you're a winner, you're never in doubt." Having been rested for the start of both cup ties because of a chronic back injury, the hastily recalled striker somehow found the tenacity and the will to drag one more season-saving performance out of an exhausted, injured body. He looked spent, but chased everything. He lost the ball too often, but tracked back to make amends. He cajoled and berated teammates and his selfless link play inspired tired legs and weary minds around him until, somehow, finally, the magic was conjured.

This time, the 35-yard slalom run on goal may have felt a lot longer, but three Liverpool defenders were left on the floor and the match was suddenly turned by Henry's second goal. To complete his hat-trick, he let fly a screamer from 30 yards; too tired, perhaps, to take on any more opponents.

Despite his charm and laid-back air, Henry's desire should never be doubted. His teammate, Lauren, learned this the hard way when the pair allegedly came to blows in the tunnel over the full-back's failure to square a simple pass to the unmarked striker in the last minute of the 1-1 tie with Manchester United in March. "Henry was like a wild man," according to a Highbury insider. But then, the most successful dressing rooms are never full of friends.

Despite such friction, Henry claims that, "I have my paradise at Highbury." The World Cup and European Championship winner is repeatedly wooed by Real Madrid and, more recently, Chelsea. But "Titi" remains loyal to the man who he calls his "spiritual father," Arsène Wenger. Henry first caught the coach's eye at Monaco, the club he joined in 1990 at the age of 13. "I knew Thierry could be special," says Wenger, "he had speed and technique, power and finesse. Unusual combinations."

Monaco sacked Wenger and sold their young winger (as he was then) to Juventus for \$14M. In Italy, he languished anonymously in a dull defensive line-up. Despite being France's top scorer in the World Cup triumph of 1998 (with just 3 goals), Henry did not play in the final. So when Wenger brought him to Arsenal in 1999, the player was deemed a brainless winger by many of the Highbury faithful, and hopes weren't high. Yet, such is the Arsenal coach's vision, that Henry was not only transformed into the world's best striker, but he has also been encouraged to reinvent the role itself. Incorporating the speed and invention of a winger with the style and flawless technique of a world-class striker, Thierry Henry is now a breed apart.

Little wonder then that French car manufacturer Renault saw in him the personification of their "Va-Va-Voom" slogan. Henry also met his English wife, the actress and model Nicole Merry, while making the ad. The couple's contentment in their "French enclave" of Hampstead, north London, close to his good mates Patrick Viera and Robert Pires, is another good reason to stay at Arsenal.

"When I came to Arsenal—no one believed in me anymore," says Henry, "Arsenal and ▶

Arsène Wenger held out their hands. Now that everything is going well, I can't turn around and say: "Thanks and goodbye."

It is fitting that his future should be promised to Arsenal as they look forward to their move to a new stadium in 2006. The London club served as the finishing school for Thierry Henry, the higher academy in a soccer education that has produced the world's most complete striker, and probably the prototype for the footballer of the future.

The son of immigrants from Guadeloupe, Henry grew up in the working-class Paris neighborhood of Les Ulis. Like Zinedine Zidane, Pelé, and Johan Cruyff, he learned his touch and technique on the streets. Later, when playing for the Palaiseau junior club, the young Titi would borrow his father's size-12 cleats on match day.

The professionalism and mental strength so evident this season came from his time in France's National Soccer Academy at Clairefontain, where Henry was groomed for greatness with a gifted generation that included David Trezeguet, Nicolas Anelka and Louis Saha.

But it was Arsène Wenger who nurtured his talent at Monaco, and then rescued his career from the misery of Turin. In London,

Wenger built his attacking new Arsenal team around the previously peripheral young player, who repaid his mentor's faith by becoming the perfect all-around forward, assisting in as many goals as he scores.

It is a mark of Wenger's coaching genius that he had likewise revived the career of Denis Bergkamp, who proved to be the perfect deep-lying foil for Henry. Bergkamp's replacement by Jose Antonio Reyes or David Bentley will be a vital part of Wenger's next jigsaw puzzle. It is also thanks to Wenger's methods that Henry has developed the remarkable fitness and athleticism to fully exploit his talents.

The writer and life-long Arsenal supporter, Nick Hornby, has summed up the joy of watching that talent in full bloom: "It's a privilege to have a season ticket, because he does something extraordinary every single game—a run, a trick, a burst of speed—and usually a goal."

Thierry Henry has it all; but the 26-year-old still strives to improve his game. "Perfection doesn't exist," he says, "but the quest for it makes you better."

This season, Thierry Henry has come closer to perfection than any other player on Earth. ⚽

Thierry Henry:  
Fueling his fire.

