

# HURRICANE Wayne STRIKES

By Justin Kavanagh

A climate of change had been blowing through Old Trafford. A poor start to the league campaign had created a vacuum for a match winner. A heat wave of anticipation had burned around Manchester United all summer since Wayne Rooney, the precocious 18-year-old England forward, had signed for £27m (\$48.5m) from Everton. A fractured metatarsal, sustained against Portugal at Euro 2004, had delayed his debut, ratcheting up the sense of expectation and media hype.

Sir Alex Ferguson, one of soccer's master meteorologists, sensed the clouds gathering, and decided Rooney would start against Fenerbache of Turkey in United's Champions League home match. The hot air of hype was about to meet the chilly winds of reality on a wet September evening; the pressure systems swirling around Rooney as he stepped into the Theatre of Dreams were intense.

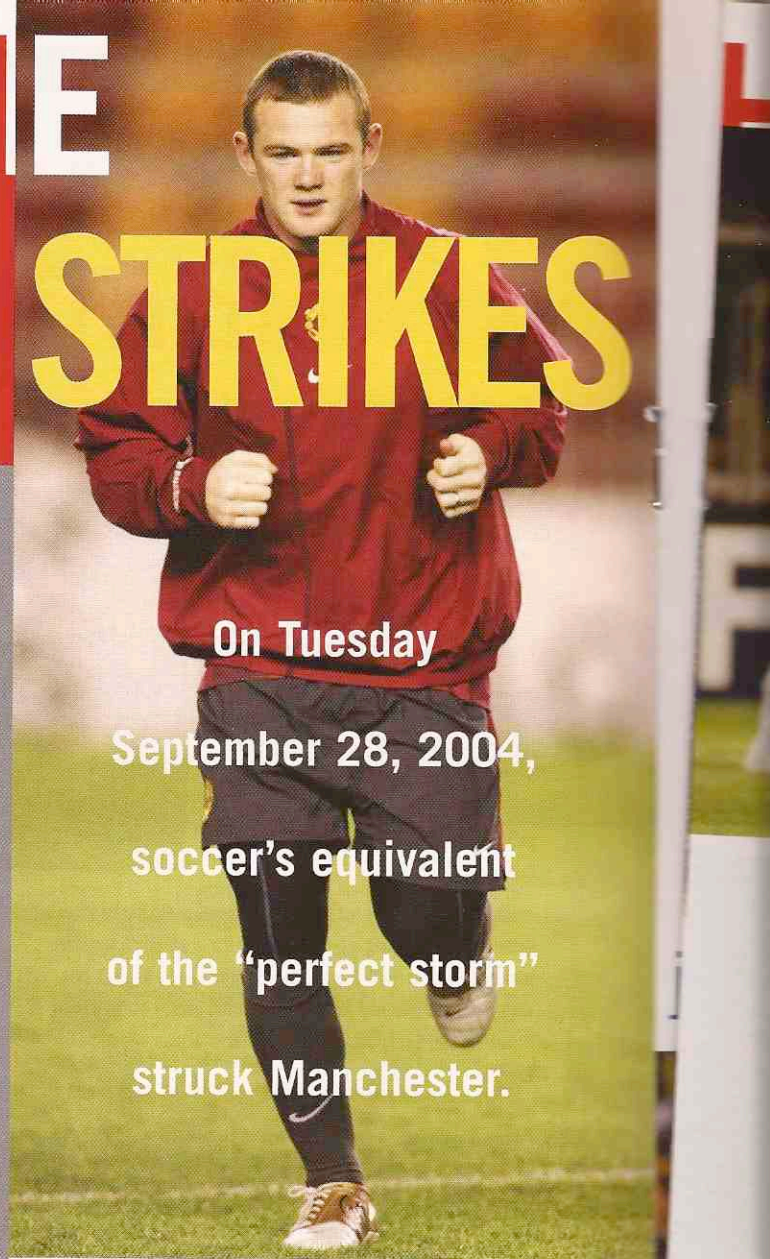
Ninety minutes later, Hurricane Wayne had swept aside all doubts, shattered the Turkish spirit, and spread a cold front of dread among the coaches of Europe: Rooney is coming, board up your defenses, but face it, resistance is futile.

A display of raw courage, exceptional intelligence and perfect control produced a hat trick of astounding quality. Rooney had made a debut unmatched in the history of English football's most storied club, and seasoned professionals were left awestruck. Manager Alex Ferguson beamed, "I think we have got the best young player this country has seen in the past 30 years." England Coach Sven Goran Eriksson, the personification of Swedish reserve, was seen leaping from his seat as the third goal went in.

Rooney, of course, had announced his arrival on football's biggest stages with four goals for Eriksson's England at Euro 2004, and had returned home injured, but with a reputation that spelt the end of his Everton days. But a dark shadow lies behind the fairytale arrival at the Theatre of Dreams.

Talk of Champions League nights in the English dressing room had convinced Rooney that his talents belonged on a bigger stage. It is likely that Manchester United players had used their influence—a common practice on international duty.

It would not be an easy decision. Rooney comes from a family of proud Everton supporters. His choice



**On Tuesday  
September 28, 2004,  
soccer's equivalent  
of the "perfect storm"  
struck Manchester.**

of Manchester United caused anger and resentment in his native Liverpool—graffiti appeared damning the player who "could have been a god but chose to be a Devil." He can expect a torrent of abuse when he goes back to Goodison Park with United on April 20, 2005. His agent, Paul Stretford, has received death threats.

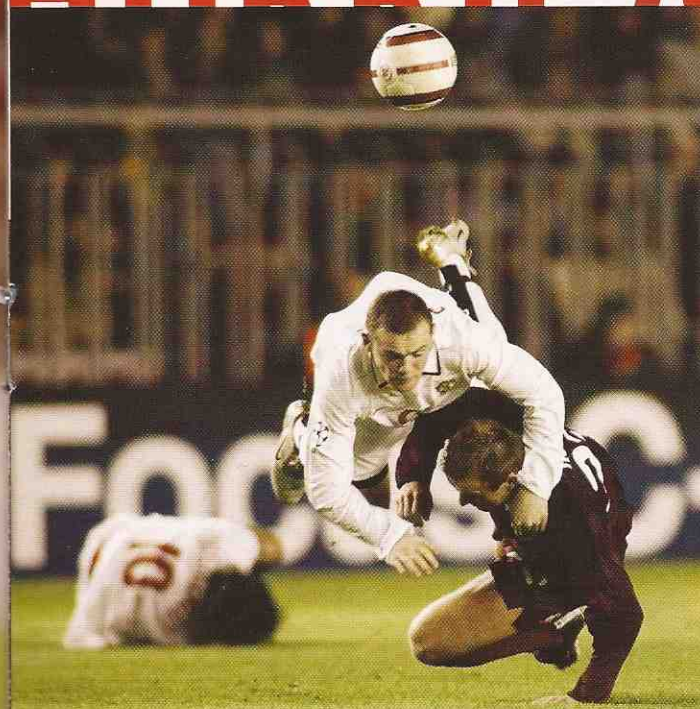
Stretford's handling of Rooney has raised many serious questions. His client's story was sold to *The Sun*, a tabloid universally loathed on Merseyside for their derogatory reporting of the Hillsborough disaster. The paper "repaid" the player's trust with a story alleging regular visits to a local brothel.

Stretford's part in the transfer to United also came under serious scrutiny when it emerged that his firm had represented both player and club in the deal. Manchester United will pay him £1.5M (\$2.7M). His Formation Group's contacts within Newcastle United also cast suspicion on that club's unlikely role in the bidding war for Rooney.

On the week of Rooney's sensational debut, Stretford himself was making headlines in a court case



# HURRICANE WAYNE



surrounding his original signing of Rooney in 2002, where details emerged of threats (on Stretford) by a former agent's "bodyguards," payoffs of £250,000 in a paper bag, image rights being sold for the nominal sum of £2, and allegations of offices being bugged.

Ominously, Alex Ferguson has little respect for Stretford. Andy Cole, a Stretford client, was one player caught in their crossfire. Rumor has it that Ferguson once refused to sign a player until Stretford left the room. Serious potential now exists for a battle between the pair for young Rooney's confidence.

Worryingly, the last time an agent got so much notoriety was back in the heyday of Mel Stein, the man who "handled" the ultimately wasted career of Paul Gascoigne. Equally worrying are the similarities between Rooney and Gazza. Both returned from international tournaments hailed as England's great hopes. Both come from working-class backgrounds, both have mothers who worked as dinner ladies and fathers who worked as laborers. Both left their hometown clubs for bigger things.

The difference in their fates could well be Alex Ferguson, the manager who famously rued Gascoigne being lured to London. Like with Beckham and co. before him, nothing will be left to chance, "Wayne will get the same advice and protection," said Ferguson. "In that dressing-room, there's a security. People like Roy Keane, Ryan Giggs, Paul Scholes and the Neville brothers are all mature, stable professionals. Wayne will see these players and how they have grown into how they are today. It's not by accident."

Keane and the others will quickly inform the new boy that Ferguson has eyes in every part of the city. "Manchester is a village" is the word in United's dressing room.

Ferguson knows he has signed that rarity in the modern game, the complete footballer. Rooney is a natural goal-scorer with the football brain of a play-maker, a European No. 10. Add to this the steely temperament he has shown on the big occasion and you have pure gold. "At his age, I don't see where coaching comes into it," said Ferguson. "He's blessed with natural instincts for the game and natural ability to play anywhere on the field. He's quick, skilful, aggressive, strong, good in the air, he's got vision and he can play it with both feet. There's not an 18-year-old anywhere else with that potential. The great thing will be developing that potential so in three or four years we will hopefully see the finished article, at which point we can say this boy has been a great investment."

Wayne Rooney as the "finished article" could now become one of Ferguson's magnificent obsessions. One of the great man-manager's in the game, the Scotsman seems to relish the challenge of a "difficult case." Eric Cantona may have been his greatest success. But the failure to stop Beckham's seduction by the fame game probably still rankles. And Ferguson knows that this diamond, properly polished, could shine a lot brighter than Beckham's limited luster. The question will be if Wayne Rooney can become one of United's greatest players, as many believe, and not sink in the mire like Gascoigne?

The first signs are encouraging. Rooney has shown a newfound maturity since the summer of 2003, when he reported back to Everton a stone overweight. "The spotlight will be on me more because I've just signed for one of the biggest clubs in the world," he said. "But I'm big and strong enough to handle it. The manager doesn't have to say anything to me. No one has to tell me how to behave on or off the pitch. I know myself." To which Ferguson muttered "Well done."

Rooney will be quickly whipped into shape by Carlos Queiroz, a training ground disciplinarian, and by Valter di Salvo, the Italian fitness guru that followed Queiroz to Manchester from Real Madrid, complete with personalized, computerized fitness regimes.

The Liverpoolian will not lack mental toughness. Rooney hails from a family of boxers, and his hat-trick against Fenerbache had all the hallmarks of a lethal combination followed by the knockout punch to a victim on the ropes: A left, a right, and then that curling, dipping free-kick over the wall like a sweet right hook that you see coming but can't avoid.

His sense of responsibility in demanding the free-kick was startling in one so young. And the reaction of his senior team-mates was equally telling: Three experienced dead-ball specialists, Giggs, Van Nistelrooy and Gabriel Heinze stood aside and trusted the task to the debutant. Three renowned internationals sensing which way the wind was blowing. Stepping out of the path of Hurricane Wayne. ⚽