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Three Promising Youngsters, Three Cultural Conundrums

Wayne Rooney, in a transfer completely lacking in suspense, has joined global marketing force and über-club Manchester United. One of at least three teenagers carrying the "next Pelé" label—along with **Robinho** of Santos and **Freddy Adu** of D.C. United—Rooney's sale capped an extraordinary summer for the 18-year-old. The former Evertonian generated "Rooneymania" in the European Championships (see our "[Euro blog](#)") and, in the same tournament, suffered a broken foot, an injury that still keeps him sidelined. But Rooney offers a far more interesting study for some of his decisions off the pitch and for the way these decisions are filtered through the English press. Both Robinho and Adu face their own challenges within vastly different football cultures—to which we will come shortly—but Rooney's combination of youth, captivating skill and salvific potential (that is, the potential he has to save **Sven-Göran Eriksson's** bacon) creates special pressures.

Rooney's unique place within the English imagination perhaps most clearly emerged during the summer, following Euro 2004 and as all things Wayne became public commodities. In selling his "world exclusive" story to the **Rupert Murdoch**-owned *Sun* tabloid for some £250,000, Rooney set off a swirl of events that recalled the darkness of [Hillsborough](#) 15 years earlier. As a Merseysider, although only 3 years old when the tragedy occurred, Rooney and certainly his advisers should have known better than to deal with the *Sun*, infamous for its egregiously careless journalism following the 1989 disaster—as if its misogynistic style of reportage and inflammatory headlines would not be enough to scare anyone away. But the *Sun* headlines post-Hillsborough, within days of the 96 deaths—"Some fans picked pockets of victims"; "Some fans urinated on the brave cops"; "Some fans beat up PCs giving the kiss of life"—assured an almost total loss of its Liverpool circulation (**Owen Gibson**, "[What the Sun Said 15 Years Ago](#)," *The Guardian*, 7 July). Incredibly, 15 years on, the *Sun* still has not regained the 200,000 local readers it reportedly lost that week. It sells 3.3 million copies nationwide but only 12,000 in Liverpool (**Ian Burrell**, "[An Own Goal? Rooney Caught in Crossfire between 'The Sun' and an Unforgiving City](#)," *The Independent* [U.K.], 8 July).

More substantively, some feel that the *Sun* in its carelessness helped perpetuate a negative stereotype of Liverpool. **Jon Brown**, deputy editor of the *Liverpool Echo*, says:

The *Sun's* coverage of Hillsborough still has ramifications today in the vilification of Scousers, of an entire culture and community. It blackened the reputation of the city and it has still not recovered. If you go anywhere in the world Liverpool has a great reputation. If you go anywhere in England, it's different. (**David Smith**, "[The City That Eclipsed the Sun](#)," *The Observer* [U.K.], 11 July)

After its Rooney "exposé," the *Sun* made matters worse by printing a front-page "apology" that, while saying "we gladly say sorry again . . . fully, openly, honestly and without reservation," also managed to plug itself in the same article: "For goodness sake, give the lad [Rooney] a chance. . . . [N]early all Liverpool-born celebrities regularly talk to Britain's favourite daily newspaper" ("Don't Blame Rooney," 13 July; article only available through paid archive). The *Sun* also alleged that its rivals—the Trinity Mirror-owned *Liverpool Echo* and *Post* (Trinity Mirror owns the *Sun's* tabloid rival, the *Daily Mirror*)—were the ones exploiting Rooney, to which the *Echo* responded:

Today's *Sun* article is not a real apology. It is a shameless and cynical attempt to win readers. And most people on Merseyside will realise that. The *Sun* has missed the point and lost the plot. The majority of the people of Merseyside have nothing personal against Wayne Rooney. They feel he has been badly advised. . . . Today's *Sun* exaggerates, over-reacts and depicts a lurid picture of hate which is about as far from the truth as its London offices are from [Goodison Park](#). ("[The Sun Has Lost the Plot \[Again\]](#)," 7 July)

So Rooney now leaves Merseyside, perhaps with some relief. He moves to the Northeast and to a city seeking to reinvent itself, as revealed in **June Thomas's** recent weeklong *Slate* diary ("[Manchester, So Much to Answer For](#)," 30 August; see also subsequent entries). Will Rooney become part of the "bourgeoisification of the working class" of which **George Orwell** wrote in the 1930s in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (see Thomas's [day 2](#))? With the [Imperial War Museum North](#) and the [Lowry](#) as evidence, perhaps the once-gritty Lancashire city has room for another urban hulk looking to retool.

And what of Robinho and Adu? **Robson do Sousa**—Robinho's given name—is also 18 and plays for Pelé's old club [Santos](#); his skills have helped lead Santos back into the limelight of South American football. The possible burden seems clear to Santos management, who have barred Robinho from wearing Pelé's No. 10 jersey. "[T]he simple sight of a young black boy of such promise wearing that number would trigger a collective recollection in Brazil too profound for anyone to bear," writes **Guy Lawson** in his recent *Observer* profile ("[The Boy Wonder](#)," 5 September). Lawson continues:

The likeness between the two was first suggested by Pelé himself. He had been estranged from his old team for years, feuding with the directors over the allegations of fraud and corruption that have long blighted Brazilian football. But the very first day he returned to Santos to work with the junior players, as if drawn by a karmic force, he spotted Robinho. The boy was only 13, his shirt dangling from the narrow, underfed shoulders, but Pelé instantly saw himself in the boy. Not in size, strength or style of play. As a child Pelé was bigger, stronger, direct, the product of an age before the poverty and hunger of Brazil today; Robinho was small, skinny, sly. Pelé meant in the mastery of *ela* [the ball], in familiarity and control of her; in his ways with her.

The encounter as depicted may be apocryphal; indeed, it smacks of hagiography. But the sense of precedent in Brazil seems strong, a nation able to field a roster of "next Pelés" (featuring **Romario, Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, Kaka, Diego** . . .). **Alex Bellos** even dissects the phrase in [his own Robinho profile](#). The reality has arrived that it is not enough for Robinho to remain a *malabarista*—a magician, trickster, illusionist—and master of the *pedalada* (pedaling-like feint). Agent **Wagner Ribeiro** has advised his client to shun the *pedalada*, realizing that "every Brazilian hopes to go to Europe. I am very sad about this." Robinho, according to Lawson, seeks to become a *craque*, a "player of substance": "The *craque* doesn't pass to a man. He passes to *ponto futuro*: a point in the future."

Another drama in self-creation involves Adu, 15, who suffers somewhat in his quest from the naïveté of the U.S. press and public. The age dilemma for Adu is dual-edged. After the questions as to whether the Ghanaian-born Adu were truly 15—an insinuation, whether intended or not, of assumed Third World incompetence—now he must play a joyful game with serious men (see **Steven Goff's** extended profile, "[The Emergence of a Prodigy](#)," *Washington Post*, 31 August). He is both young and, in a sense, old: we see above,

with Rooney and Robinho, how, in the minds of dreamers and nostalgists, 18 represents the height of athletic potential. But, for realists, 17 or 18, too, might be the age of emergence: when a mark must be made, the monster transfer arranged. Already at Highbury, the Arsenal supporters sing of midfield wizard **Francesc Fábregas** ("[Fábregas the Fabulous: A Star on the Rise](#)," FIFA.com, 7 September):

Fábregas
Fábregas
He's only seventeen
And he's better than **Roy Keane**.

Hurry up, Freddy. Time is wasting.