

# United are a work in progress, and Wayne Rooney in midfield is wrong

MANCHESTER, England -- Three thoughts on Manchester United's 3-1 win over Leicester to move up to third in the Premier League.

## 1. Odd and unconventional, but United winning again

They rarely look comfortable, they are certainly not orthodox, but Manchester United have a habit of winning games regardless. With a formation that defied numerical description and with several players out of position, Louis van Gaal's team comfortably defeated Leicester City at Old Trafford.

Demons were exorcised here. A 3-1 win against Leicester was supposed to be the result that galvanised their season back in September. But on that extraordinary day, the Foxes came back and won 5-3. There was no dramatic comeback this time. Three first-half goals provided a cushion and even Marcin Wasilewski's late consolation goal failed to precipitate any late drama.

This has been such an odd season that the Foxes, bottom of the table, were actually the form side in the build-up. With four wins from their last six games in all competitions, there was a feeling that they had ridden out their awful winter form and were well on their way to recovery. United, by contrast, had won just two of their past six games, their last fixture being a grim 0-0 draw with lowly Cambridge. Leicester manager Nigel Pearson fancied his chances and didn't deviate from his standard plan: an old fashioned 4-4-2. In retrospect, this was a mistake.

United's supporters have begged Van Gaal to be equally devoted to 4-4-2. But while he dumped his unpopular back three for this encounter, this was by no means a conventional formation. Daley Blind sat in front of a back four, Adnan Januzaj, Wayne Rooney and Angel Di Maria roamed around in front of him, trying not to get in the way of Robin van Persie. The Dutchman was tasked to roam behind Radamel Falcao, who had the freedom to drift wide, usually into the path of the roaming full-backs. Roaming, you see, was very much the order of the day. But if there were times when United's players didn't seem to know where they should be, the Leicester players had even less of an idea. A slow start, dominated by United possession, soon gave way to an avalanche of goals.

Van Persie, one of the most profound disappointments of the season, opened the scoring on 27 minutes, volleying home a splendid lofted pass from Blind. He then turned provider, teeing up Di Maria's shot four minutes later, which was fumbled by Mark Schwarzer and bundled home by Falcao. On the stroke of halftime, poor Wes Morgan headed past his own goalkeeper after Blind knocked down a Rooney corner.

Leicester had little option after that, save for removing the wretched Jamie Vardy and throwing on Esteban Cambiasso to try to regain control of the central areas. The gate was now firmly bolted. The horse, sadly, was galloping into the horizon and whinnying happily. United's challenge for Champions League football continues.

## 2. Leicester are better than this

After such an encouraging result away at Tottenham Hotspur in the FA Cup, this was a pronounced step backwards for Leicester. Pearson made only a single change to the team that won at White Hart Lane, but they could not have looked more different.

If former United scholars Ritchie de Laet, Danny Simpson and Danny Drinkwater had hoped to prove a point to their erstwhile employers, they will have to do it on another occasion. None of them gave United cause for regret. Jeffrey Schlupp, so effervescent in north London, was subdued and diminished. Neither Leonardo Ulloa nor Andrej Kramaric could provide the benefits usually associated with twin target men. After a resolute start, this was a very meek capitulation, undeserving of the excellent vocal support from their travelling fans.

Pearson's ploy to shut the game down in the second to prevent further humiliation worked well and might have been better used from the first minute instead of the 46th. Leicester even scored, Wasilewski heading home substitute Marc Albrighton's cross with 11 minutes to go. But there was no repeat of the dramatic comeback of four months ago.

## 3. Rooney in midfield? It's just not right

There have been periods in Rooney's life when it would be fair to say that he has played rather below his natural level. There was a spell after the 2010 World Cup when his touch and demeanour suggested that he was playing in Wellington boots and had just been told that his dog had died. This is not one of those periods. Rooney is more composed and diligent than he has been for some time. Yet you still feel that central midfield is not the best place for his talents.

It would be easy to be swayed by a pair of Rooney passes that were so wretched they brought laughter from some rueful United supporters in Old Trafford. But while his general distribution could hardly be called flawless, there was focus and concentration in his movement. He worked for the team far more than he worked for himself. In this role, he was competent and nothing more.

But is it Rooney's purpose to be competent? Players like the departing Darren Fletcher do competence. Rooney is supposed to be spontaneous, driven, aggressive and wild. He should play like a box of fireworks tossed onto a bonfire.

Van Gaal may see a tamed and obedient squad man, diligently following orders. All I see is a broken Jack Nicholson at the end of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," lobotomised and drooling, waiting for a well-meaning friend to put him out of his misery. Take my advice, Rooney: If you see Phil Jones approaching with a pillow, run like the wind.