

The great thing about working for *United Magazine* is that you get to meet the players. As a supporter, putting questions to the people who you cheer on from the stands every week is a great privilege, one that I'm fully aware of and try not to take for granted. Sometimes though, you get days when you'd rather just forget about football altogether. Do something else for the day, something that doesn't involve talking, writing or hearing about it.

The Monday after United have been beaten in the Manchester Derby is one such day. Carrington seems subdued. Kath Phipps on reception is her usual friendly self but others around the Trafford Training Centre seem depressed. MUTV are describing the 'Munich' abuse they took from City fans after the game. Others are undertaking a post-mortem of the team's display. Cheerful is not a word you'd use to describe the atmosphere. And I can understand why; I feel exactly the same way and have done since Saturday. The manner of the defeat at Maine Road was painful. The fallout of the result will be on evidence elsewhere in the magazine, suffice to say the United team failed to do themselves justice.

The player I'm interviewing today is Ruud van Nistelrooy. I'm fully aware that he



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won't really be relishing the prospect of speaking to a journalist, United fan or anyone else on a day like this, and his body language says as much as he walks over to where I'm sitting. Neither of us are in a particularly good mood. He's friendly of course, I've never known Ruud be anything but, it's just that our timing could be better.

"The whole game Saturday was very disappointing," he says, answering my first question, which inevitably is about the Derby. "I was especially disappointed with my performance," he continues. "I didn't play well on Saturday, I lost too many balls and that didn't help the team."

"What was the atmosphere like in the dressing room afterwards?" I ask.

"You can imagine how it was. I mean, still now... [shrugs his shoulders] it was very bad... [sighs and shakes his head]. But we have to move on. Everybody has to look in himself to see what he can do better or not. Everybody knows in himself what they did well or badly. I think if everybody goes and does that then it could be a big step forward. It's important that we ask questions of ourselves and not blame each other."

"Was the manager critical?" I continue, already knowing the answer.

"Yes, of course he was, and he was right to be."

"But can we pick ourselves up from this?"

"It's hard after such a defeat to say that this season is going to be fine. It's just a matter of games now, every one we play is so important because of the ones we've lost already. The pressure is on so much and we have to take each game at a time and see what we can get from them."

"We've missed Roy but the Premiership table doesn't lie. I think that's the reality of the way we've been playing, it hasn't been good. So we have to be realistic. You can talk for hours about it and the injuries we've had but it just has to happen on the pitch."

Ruud's season has been a strange one so far and an unfair amount of criticism was aimed in his direction from the very start of the campaign. When he failed to score from open play in his first seven Premiership matches he was accused of being greedy, not decisive enough in front of goal and

lacking in confidence. Ignoring the fact he'd scored four goals from open play in Europe, plus two penalties in the league, he was pinpointed as the main culprit of missed chances, getting headlines like 'Ruud van Misselrooy' and 'Ruudly Hell'.

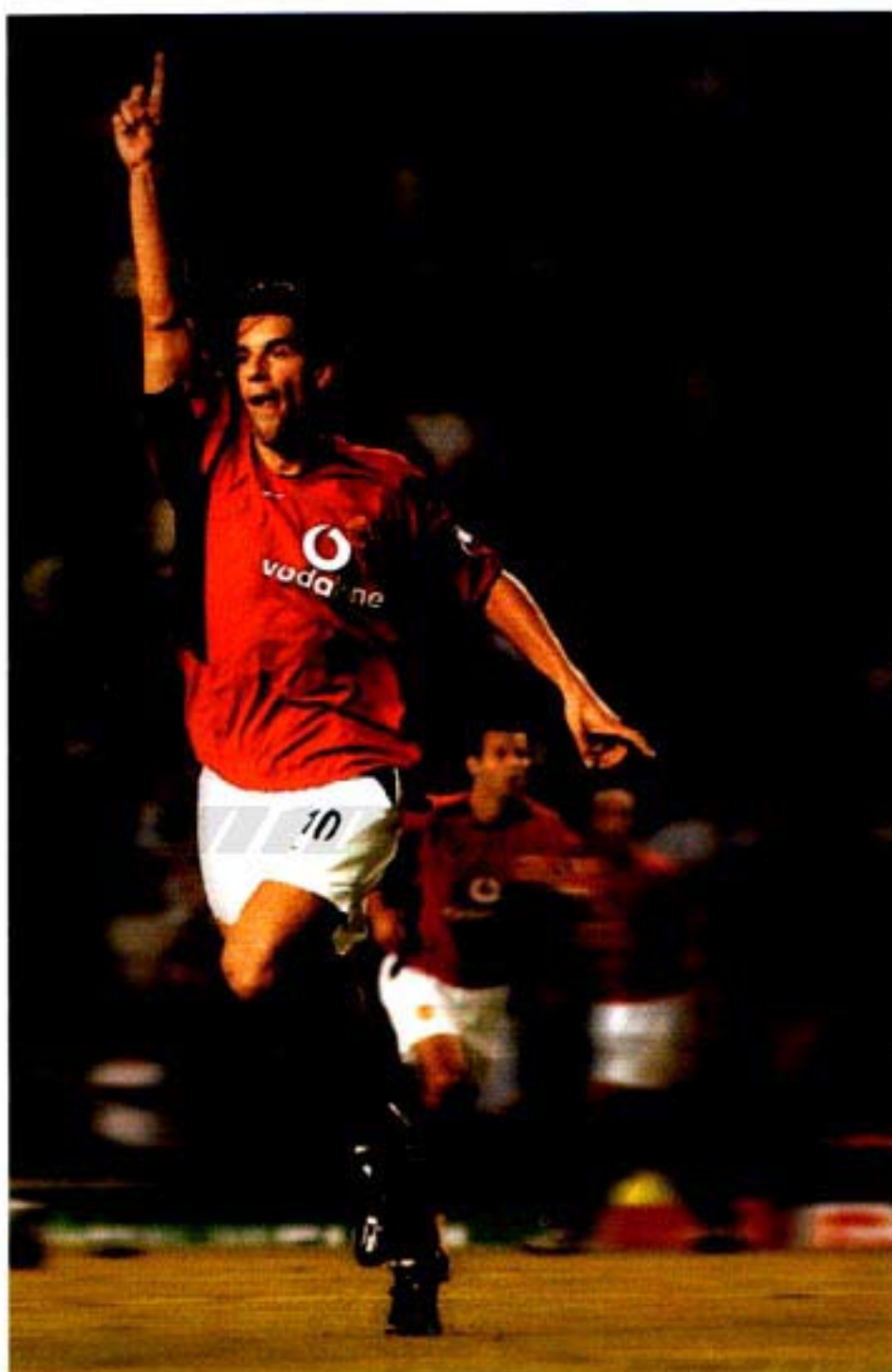
"Criticism is an opinion and for me that is part of football," says Ruud when I remind him of some of the harsh headlines. "There were some papers saying that I played well but didn't score and there were other papers saying I was playing poorly with no confidence. People, everybody, has a different vision on football, that's part of the game."

"But it's just an outside opinion. I know myself what I do, how I train, how I want to improve. If I play bad I know. Nobody has to tell me, well, of course, some do, like the manager and coaches, but I know myself how I've performed and how things are going. That's me. I'm not going to change myself for an article in the paper. I've gone from starting at a second division club in Holland to United. That's what I did and this is what I do, what I am. I just do what comes naturally."

There seems to be confusion over just how well Ruud has performed this season. On the radio the day before the Derby I'd heard one station say that Ruud was 'looking to get back on the goal trail' and that he was 'hoping to put his disappointing season behind him'. Yet a few hours later I heard another radio station state that a key to the game would be whether Ruud could 'continue his excellent scoring run'. Clearly, Ruud is suffering from the fact that his season was temporarily halted with a hamstring injury just as we were beginning to see him back at his best. Injury came against Bayer Leverkusen on the very day he was being labelled 'Van Misselrooy'. Having scored two goals in a brilliant first half display he failed to appear for the second half suffering from a tight hamstring.

"I was happy with how I played in Leverkusen: it was a great half, but I was unlucky that I got injured then because I was on a great run. I'd scored six out of seven games. I felt that my form was getting better and better with every game, then unfortunately the hamstring injury came. I played against Charlton and Everton but I wasn't totally fit. Then I had to sit out for three or four weeks but now I'm back again. Now I'm starting to fight back from the injury."

So does he feel he's had a good season so far? "Well, I think the start was OK and so far for me it hasn't either been a very fantastic or special year, but I'm quite



→ satisfied. Not totally satisfied but happy enough. Except for Saturday, of course."

"So is this a new start for you?" I ask.

"In a way, yes, but it wasn't that long I was out. This is a little new start. Yeah, it was frustrating but at that time I couldn't play through the injury and I didn't want it to carry on. So I think it was the right decision."

Recently Sir Alex Ferguson said that he believes Ruud could better the 36 goals he scored in all competitions last season (including the Charity Shield). At the time of writing he's on course to fulfil the manager's prediction, with nine goals already - one better than he'd scored at the same time last season. But does he think he can meet his manager's target?

"Well it would be nice but it's not about beating the goals of last year. I'd like to score as many goals as possible but I'm not making targets. My goal for this year is to become the complete striker."

"Last year I was happy with the amount of goals I scored but I wasn't particularly happy with the way I played with my back to the goal, with defenders at my back. Hopefully, people will see that I've tried to improve that area of my game and that it's something I've worked on in training."

And is the hard work paying off?

"I'm always looking to be a better player and that's why I try to do more in training and in games as well. That's what it's all about. I'm 26 and I didn't come to Manchester United to say, 'that's it, I've made it now. I don't need to work hard, I can't improve any more'. You're going to be a worse player if you say that. So it's all about trying to improve and working hard in training on the things you want to do in a game. Having shown people what I could do last season, I now have to work even harder this year. I'm very confident that things will work out for me."

**B**ut will things work out for the club? In the coming weeks there are some huge games for Manchester United and we could well get the answer to that question. These games could make or break our season. By the time you read this we could be more or less out of the Championship race or relying on an incredible run of victories to give us any hope of being 'in the mix' in the final stages. However, with so much doom and gloom around Carrington on the morning of the interview, and the defeat at Maine Road never far away from the conversation, maybe a bit of positive thinking is required. Should we manage to pick up points from forthcoming games then going into Christmas we could be in a similar situation to last year - on the up with lots of points on offer.

The Reds won all four of their matches over the festive period last season, scoring 14 goals in the process. Six of those goals came from Ruud, as he embarked on a run that would see him go on to break club and Premiership scoring records. Not bad for someone getting used to playing over Christmas for the first time.

"In Holland we have a winter break. It's not more difficult to enjoy Christmas in this country because we are playing matches but it is different. In Holland you have a winter break of about two weeks. Here you are training and preparing for the games, so you don't really get the same feeling. It's different but it's okay."

"I can't go to see my family because I'm playing but maybe my family will come here. This year we play Middlesbrough on Boxing Day so I'll be away from my family on Christmas Day night. That's the way it is, this is how football is in England. I hear rumours we may get a winter break, that one may be introduced maybe next year or the one after. It would be good. Maybe not over Christmas but over New Year or just after would be a good idea. I think maybe a two-week break would be really good for everybody, a nice chance to rest. Ideally, I think it would be ten days off then ten days in training before going again for the rest of the season. I think that's going to improve the quality of the league."

And what a quality there is in the league this season. The Premiership has arguably never been stronger. Every team seems to have improved (at least against us) and the overall standard is on the rise, which will make achieving success in the Premiership harder than ever - particularly given our results this season.

As the interview comes to an end, I ask Ruud for his honest assessment of our prospects for the remainder of the season. Again he is realistic and only too aware of the task ahead of the team but tries to remain positive nonetheless. "It's hard now. You can't say we're still going to win the league. I'm not saying we're not going to either but we just have to see how the games are going to go. Maybe if we have an incredible run... if, if, if... here we go again. It's all talk right now."

"Only our results can say what is going to happen. After the next few games you will have a better picture of how things might go. We'll see after that if we still have a chance. I think with the form we've had, we've not been great but we've still managed to win six or seven games. That should give us some confidence and I think if it's going to happen it has to be soon. We can't wait for it to come good, we have to make it happen." **RU**