

THIERRY HENRY: Premiership Player of the Week

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A goal against Fulham in the Premiership and two more in the Champions League against Schalke 04 made it another excellent week's work for Arsenal striker Thierry Henry. However, the fact that the Gunners won both games 3-1 and 3-2, respectively, was the most important aspect for Henry, who is a real team player.

The Frenchman was quick to point out after the Schalke victory that while he might get the headlines as a striker, every member of the team makes an important contribution and he is often the beneficiary of others' approach play. 'We win as a team and we lose as a team,' says Henry. That may be true, but his team ethic and modesty should not detract from Henry's impact as one of the Premiership's top strikers.

His latest three goals took his total for the season so far to six in seven matches (including one appearance as a substitute). Remarkably, he has now totalled 54 goals for the Gunners in 108 appearances in all competitions since joining them from Juventus in August 1999 for a then club record fee of £10 million.

That is an average of a goal every second game – not a bad return for a player whom Juventus used largely as a winger. Henry's strike rate is all the more impressive when you consider that 20 of those 108 appearances were as a substitute coming off the bench.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger is in no doubt about Henry's ability. 'He's simply world class', says the thoughtful Gunners boss of his 24-year-old compatriot. Henry was not widely regarded as a natural goalscorer when Wenger brought him to Highbury to replace Nicolas Anelka. He had begun his career under Wenger at Monaco (20 goals in 105 League games) and was keen to link up with his former mentor in London after an unhappy spell in Turin (3 goals in 16 League games for Juventus).

Wenger knew exactly what he was buying for his money. And although Henry took a while to acclimatise to the English game, but after exploding into form towards the end of November 1999, he terrorised defences both in the Premiership and UEFA Cup, finishing his first season as a Gunner

with 26 goals. That included a record-equalling sequence when he scored in seven consecutive Premiership matches.

Under Wenger's skilled coaching and confidence-building, Arsenal had found a striker as quick as Anelka and even more effective in front of goal.

However, the challenge now for the World Cup and European Championship winner is to produce his best form on a consistent basis on other grounds as well as the superbly manicured Highbury surface. That will help him fulfil his ambition of winning major club honours with Arsenal.

So far, he has finished second on four occasions as a runner-up to Manchester United in both completed Premiership seasons, and as a loser in two cup finals against Galatasaray in the 2000 UEFA final, and against Liverpool last May in the FA Cup final.

The Liverpool game was one that Arsenal dominated for 80 minutes yet lost and Henry could have put the Gunners two or even three goals ahead before Michael Owen struck twice to snatch the Cup from the London club's grasp.

That prompted many commentators to criticise Henry. They said he was not clinical enough in his finishing. The player himself said afterwards that Arsenal needed a fox in the box to snap up half-chances from close-range. Someone like Ian Wright, perhaps the greatest ever Arsenal goalscorer. Henry's game is different from Wright's. It combines blistering pace, vision and superb ball control with deadly shooting. But Henry hasn't scored many scruffy goals. Most have been athletic works of art.

That is something he'd like to change in the interests of the team. His form so far this season suggests that Thierry Henry is on the way to becoming the complete striker.