

Sport The big interview

From boy to man
The Walcott years

Words by Bill Edgar

August 2005 Makes Southampton debut against Wolves aged 16 years and five months

January 2006 Joins Arsenal for fee ultimately agreed at £9 million

May 2006 Becomes England's youngest player when he faces Hungary aged 17 years and two months

June 2006 He is a member of England's World Cup finals squad but does not play

August 2006 Finally makes his Arsenal debut against Aston Villa

February 2007 Scores in League Cup final but Arsenal lose 2-1 to Chelsea

September 2008 Strikes a hat-trick in England's World Cup qualifying win away to Croatia

June 2012 Scores three minutes after being introduced as a substitute in Euro 2012 win over Sweden

October 2012 Hits a hat-trick as Arsenal recover from 4-0 down to win 7-5 away to Reading in the Capital One Cup

'I got a lot of abuse from the fans that wasn't fair'

After last year's saga over his new contract, Theo Walcott says he is stronger and wiser, writes **Matt Dickinson**

Smart black shirt, grey strides, expensive-looking shoes and Zorro-beard neatly trimmed, Theo Walcott looks sharper than a carving knife when he walks into the Arsenal training complex. But, football dressing rooms being what they are, he has taken grief that morning for the crime of dressing up for photographs.

"I'm normally a jeans man, but actually I like looking smart," he says. "There's talk of compulsory suits next season on match days, which I think is great. More grown up."

Ah, growing up. It is a theme that comes up lots in conversation with Walcott, who, you almost have to remind yourself, is 24. He is no longer the kid so impossibly young that he looks like a mascot in Arsenal team photographs.

He speaks now as a Barclays Premier League and England player of eight years, 31 international caps and more than 250 games for Arsenal. More pertinently, he talks as the hardened veteran of one of the most baffling contract renegotiations of modern years; months of angst concluding with Arsenal re-signing their own forward for a lot more money than he would have accepted in the first place.

If there was an upside to all the palaver, Walcott talks of the toughening-up process that came from having to stand up for himself in the face of accusations of greed and disloyalty, with his employers pressuring him to sign a new contract and the manager leaving him out of the starting XI for nine Premier League matches.

Those around Walcott, friends and

family, worried how he might be affected. He is such a nice, polite lad. Too soft, some have thought. They worry about that a lot less now after Walcott proved that he could enjoy the most productive season of his career, despite all the distractions.

"There's always pressure in football, but there was a lot more than I've had to deal with," he says. "More than going to the World Cup as a teenager or missing out on the World Cup when I thought I should go in 2010."

"This was bigger than all of that, especially because I could affect it. The World Cups, I didn't play. It's out of my hands. This was different, and tough. With this, if I'd hit bad form I could guess what people would say. I had to perform to my best." Or else.

Walcott has endured bouts of criticism from Arsenal fans for the sin

Theo on . . .

. . . Contract row

'There's always pressure in football, but with the contract there was a lot more than I've had to deal with. More than going to the World Cup as a teenager'

of inconsistency in a frustratingly inconsistent team, the worst of it against Tottenham Hotspur last season. While his family suffered in the stands, he came out for the second half and scored twice in an astonishing 5-2 win. That took steel, and there is a flash of it now.

"Last year, against Tottenham in the first half, I got a lot of abuse from the fans, which wasn't fair," he says. "I'm sure they would be nice to my face. People always are nice when they meet you. They would come up to me and say, 'We hope you stay, but respect your decision.'"

"It's only on messageboards or Twitter and stuff — or when it's in a crowd — that it turns nasty, and that's why I avoid all that stuff."

Tougher than any criticism was not playing. Walcott was banished from the starting XI as Arsène Wenger demanded a quick answer over the pay negotiations. "Last season I played for 52 games and then I was left out for nine — it was very difficult," Walcott says. "Being left out made me angry."

It was then, Walcott says, that he found a new inner resolve as he went to see Wenger to ask why he was being exiled. "Going to see the manager used to be like sitting outside the headmaster's office, biting my nails, thinking, 'Oh s***, what am I going to do now?' Feeling like I was sweating," he says.

"But I think the whole business showed me that I had to decide what I wanted and go for it. I think that did change me. I would like to think I'm still a nice guy, well brought up, but maybe more determined now to get



JULIAN FINNEY / GETTY IMAGES

what I want. If I want to talk to the manager, I'll go do it. Maybe in the past I would fret — 'Should I, shouldn't I?' That's a different side of me. I came out of the meeting with bit more understanding of what the manager wanted and that's fine. As long as I did what he asked I was back in the team."

Walcott was recalled and, in January, a new 3½-year contract worth more than £100,000 a week was agreed. Walcott insists that he never wanted to leave Arsenal and never asked his agent about other offers, even though they could have made him rich beyond anything on offer at the Emirates Stadium. Chelsea or Manchester City would have been getting a £20 million-plus footballer for nothing. "I was hoping you would say £60 million," he says, laughing.

"People now can surely see it didn't

. . . Discipline

'I got booked in the Champions League for kicking the ball away — I was actually having a shot. Trouble was it went towards the corner flag'

. . . Ambition

'I would like to think I'm still a nice guy, well brought up, but maybe more determined now to get what I want'

revolve entirely around money. I could have hung on and walked out for nothing and who knows what I could have made then? My agent might know, but he never told me and I never asked. I just wanted to be in the team, playing well.

"I always said I wanted to stay. I knew what I owed to Arsenal and to the manager, getting me when I was 16. I did want to repay the club. Others might say that and not believe it, but I do."

"When a club and a manager have shown interest in you at such a young age, when you've done next to nothing in the game, and they've helped you reach the top level, helped you develop and work around top players, you don't lightly walk away from that. I wanted to stay because I still think this club can go on to achieve something. It's 'when' and not 'if' we win something."

"If anything came out of it all, I think

Seat of learning: Walcott's career began with Southampton, aged 16, above, and he claims to have gained a great deal from last year, when he was in dispute with Arsenal and dropped. He is now the club's top scorer and a regular provider of assists



TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, MARC ASPLAND

. . . Spurs

'We've got the experience of coping with the pressure. When you've expected them to win they don't and that has to make you wonder about how much they want it'

it's a bit more respect between me and the manager. We've shown faith in each other and I feel there is a bit more responsibility on me to create something out of nothing."

Despite that period of exile, Walcott remains Arsenal's top scorer with 18 goals this season — although he is more pleased to find himself in second place in the Premier League list of assists, his ten putting him one behind Juan Mata, of Chelsea.

He has not scored since the end of January, which, just to prove that you can never please all the people, resulted in Wenger being forced to deny that Walcott is too comfortable with his fat new contract.

"Robin [van Persie] went through a tough goalscoring period — it happens to the best and no one questions if he is still giving everything," Walcott says. "I'm not in some comfort zone. How can I be when we've got five games to go and a fight for a place in the Champions League?"

Walcott is confident that Arsenal will stay ahead of Spurs. "I think because we've had the experience of doing it at the death and Tottenham have a history of phasing out, we have the upper hand, definitely, the

experience of coping with the pressure of it," he says. "Losing at their place was obviously a blow, but we've bounced back from that and when you've expected them to win they don't and that has to make you wonder about how much they want it."

That question has been asked a few times of Arsenal, and Walcott himself, but he insists that the statistics, the stability of the new contract, his age and experience point to his peak years coming up.

There are other signs. He turned to a sports psychologist 18 months ago, but dropped it because he feels much more self-reliant. With England, one of the coaches pulled him aside recently and explained how they were looking to him to step up as a senior member of the squad.

There is his overt eagerness to play as striker. "I haven't done it much. I

. . . Self-belief

'At times, with myself maybe I haven't believed how good I am. People around me, my agent, my dad, say that to me sometimes. I think that might be the case'

might have to ask for another word with the manager," he says.

Then there is his marriage in the summer to Mel, his girlfriend from childhood. All part of the growing-up process: beard, suit, wedding bells and, he insists, a new assertiveness. We really must stop talking about him as a kid. Now over to Walcott to prove that we are seeing a man in his prime.

Wenger foresees remedy for Hodgson's suffering

Rory Smith

Arsène Wenger, the Arsenal manager, sympathises with Roy Hodgson's complaint that England are suffering because of the lack of home-grown players in the Barclays Premier League, but believes the long-term outlook is rather less bleak.

Arsenal's opponents this afternoon, Fulham, became the latest team to field an entirely foreign side during their 3-0 defeat by Chelsea on Wednesday evening, just hours after Hodgson had claimed the overwhelming number of imports in the Premier League put England at a "major disadvantage" on the international stage.

Just 35 per cent of players in the top flight are home-grown, a statistic for which Wenger, right, has for a long time shouldered a considerable proportion of the blame. The Frenchman, though, believes that is an unavoidable consequence of England being home to the most attractive, most lucrative domestic competition in the world, but is adamant there are young English players starting to come through.

"I can understand Roy Hodgson, of

course, because when you go to games and there are no English players you complain," Wenger said. "But you cannot want the best league in the world and also close the borders, so you have to find a good mixture. I think that would be to produce players from your own academies, and buy the very top-class players [from abroad]."

"The trend always follows economic strength. When I was at Monaco, all of the players went to Italy. That was the league you wanted to be in, and all the best English players like Paul Gascoigne went there too. Now it is England. The price you pay is that you have fewer English players. Maybe Roy is right — a few more would be a good thing."

"But the trend is changing. I have good young English players, who are playing regularly: Kieran Gibbs, Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, Carl Jenkinson, Jack Wilshere, Theo Walcott, as well as someone like Aaron Ramsey. It is not my fault he is Welsh."

"I was surprised by Ross Barkley [during Everton's 0-0 draw at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday]. He has all the attributes of a good midfield player. Is he English? You see, that's another one."



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