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written on the subject of soccer.*

Manchester United - Ramblings of a Nostalgic Old Red

by Thomas Clare

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Manchester United

Ramblings of a nostalgic old Red



Tom Clare



**Manchester United - Ramblings of a
Nostalgic Old Red**

Thomas Clare

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Sir Matt and Sir Alex - The Wonder of Two

(This article first appeared in the November 2011 edition of Red News, Manchester United's first fanzine)

In 1878, the workers of the Carriage and Wagon Works at the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway were granted permission by their bosses to form a football team. From those first embryonic days when those workers played on a bare patch of land just to the north of Manchester's City Centre, a lot of water has run under the bridge. Little could they have ever imagined what was eventually going to evolve from such an austere, and humble beginning. Today, the legacy of those workers and those far distant days is the juggernaut of a club that is called Manchester United.

Apart from a brief period of success during the first decade of the 20th Century, Newton Heath, and Manchester United's first 50 years of history, could only be described as nothing less than mediocre. It would be true to say that the club was known more for happenings off the field of play, than those initial small successes achieved on it. It was almost always a club shrouded in poverty and had twice come close to becoming bankrupt and extinct. The club was saved on both occasions by local benefactors who saw some kind of masochistic benefit in investing their hard-earned cash and time, into what could only be described on both occasions as lost causes. That they did, gave credence to their foresight and vision.

These persons have become revered in Manchester United's history. Because of their faith in what they were doing in keeping the club from going under, it has been able to build a history which is now littered with personalities, accomplishments, and achievements, that could never have been envisaged all those years ago. J.H. Davies, J. Taylor, W.

Deakin, and J. Brown were the first men to rescue the club in 1902. Later, years saw the arrival of James Gibson in 1932. There were also many other unsung heroes outside of the Boardroom who helped keep the club functioning. People like Fred Attock, 'Father' Bird, Harry Stafford, George Lawton, Ernest Mangnall, George Bedford, Harold Hardman, Louis Rocca, and Walter Crikmer. Apart from the years between 1906 and 1911, there were no real tangible successes apart from a few promotions out of the Second Division. These were almost all followed very quickly by relegation back to the place from whence they came, so for the most part the club wallowed in the doldrums.

When James Gibson took over as Chairman of the club in 1932, not only did he inject much needed monies into the club, he took a huge interest in the development of it as well. It was Gibson who persuaded the Midland Railway Company which operated a service from Manchester Central to Liverpool, to put in a passenger halt at Old Trafford on the line which passed directly behind the main stand of the stadium. He also had a revolutionary idea which would take the best part of 20 years to come to fruition. It was simplistic in that Gibson thought that football clubs generated their own financial problems in that they spent large amounts of money buying players, many of whom were found to be bad investments. His vision was one where his club would find the best young local, and schoolboy talent, and develop them through from the junior teams, and up into the first team at Football League level. It was quite visionary, and in the years from 1937 – 1939, his plans began to take shape.

In 1936, United gained promotion back to the First Division. Then, in 1937, with Louis Rocca and Walter Crikmer overseeing it, the Manchester United Junior Athletic Club (MUJAC) was established. They played in the Chorlton Amateur League and in their first season scored an incredible

223 goals. At that time, Scott Duncan was the manager, but in 1938 he left to take over the reins at Ipswich Town who had just been elected to the Football League. Crikmer took over as manager at Old Trafford and immediately started to bring much younger players into the first team. Chairman Gibson was overjoyed and stated; *"We have no intention of buying any more mediocrities. From now on we will have Manchester United composed of Manchester players."* There was a fresh energy all around Old Trafford and the future looked bright. Sadly, on September 3rd 1939, World War II broke out, and football as the fan knew it, was put on hold for almost seven years.

When football finally did resume its normality in 1946, few United fans at that time could have ever imagined the enormous strides that the club would make over the next 50 years, or that just two men would be responsible for making Manchester United arguably the biggest football club in the world.

Today, when one looks back over the club's 133 years of existence, it is surprising to find that out of a total of 17 Managers employed during that period, only three of them have ever managed teams that have won the coveted First Division/Premiership title – Ernest Mangnall, in those halcyon years between 1906 -11, then Sir Matt Busby, and after him, Sir Alex Ferguson. Many others failed along the way and it is no coincidence that the three who could do so enjoyed longevity in their tenure, and so were given the time to build those championship winning teams. In Mangnall's case however Manchester City were able to coerce him into leaving Old Trafford in 1912 to join them. Although he stayed with City until 1924, he was never able to emulate the feats which he achieved during his tenure at Manchester United.

In May 2011, I traveled to Manchester for my Annual Dinner, and also to take in the last home game of the season against Blackpool. For the previous 12 months, I had been involved with the students at Stretford High School in a project about the Busby Babes. Chris Hirst, the Director of Learning at the school, invited me to go over and speak to the year 7 students. It was a refreshing experience. What I will always recall is the Q and A session with the kids after I had spoken. They had obviously done their homework, but one question floored me when it was asked – *“Who is the best manager – Sir Alex Ferguson or Sir Matt Busby.”* Wow! How do you come up with an answer to that? Do you let your heart rule your head? Do you allow sentiment to cloud your judgment? It really is a difficult question to answer, but fortunately, I was able to give those students some kind of answer. However, since that day, that question has turned over in my head many, many times, and I have thought about it a lot, especially with the 25th anniversary of Sir Alex’s appointment on November 6th 1986, becoming imminent.

Sir Matt’s tenure as manager finally came to an end in 1971 after a period of some 25 years and 15 years before Ferguson first entered Old Trafford. Those in between years saw a mixture of mediocrity, a glimmer of hope, a period of boredom, and of being the *‘nearly men.’* It also saw the arrival and departure of four managers, O’Farrell, Docherty, Sexton, and Atkinson. Two came close to winning the First Division Championship – Docherty and Atkinson. One fell on the sword of his infidelity with a colleague’s wife, and the other because he became too blasé and too close to the players. The other two, O’Farrell and Sexton, found the pressures of managing a club the size, and with the status of Manchester United, just too daunting. So why is it then that Sir Matt and Sir Alex succeeded where so many others floundered?

The simple answer to that question can be described in one word – character. Sir Matt had it in abundance, as does Sir Alex today. Both men were blessed with the inner strength, single mindedness, and ever burning desire to make Manchester United into the finest football club in the world. That they did succeed is beyond doubt. There is not a country in the world today where the name Manchester United is not known. Love them or hate them, they are still the most talked about club in world football today.

Both men imposed their vastly differing personalities upon the club from the very first day that they commenced work. It is their DNA. Busby, the pipe smoking, soft spoken Scot, who was never heard to raise his voice in anger, but who still ruled with a firm hand, and was the most astute of men when it came to both club, and football politics. Ferguson, who can be said to be loud, volatile, arrogant, and to rule by fear, but like Busby, knows how to play the political side of the game. However, when it gets down to the real nitty-gritty of decision making, and running the football side of the club, the only thing they would ever consider to a situation was if the outcome was to the good and benefit of Manchester United.

Both men arrived at the club when it was at low ebb. In Busby's case, it could be said to have been virtually non-existent, and it is a wonder that Chairman Gibson, Rocca and Crikmer, could persuade him to take on the job. No ground (Old Trafford was suffering from bomb damage incurred in WWII), and no money to buy players, the prospects did not look too bright. But when Busby met James Gibson at the Cornbrook Cold Storage facility in February 1945, they both outlined their ideas as to how each thought that Manchester United should be run. There was a mutual liking for the items discussed in their conversation, and at the end of it, Busby walked out with a five-year contract and a salary of £750 per year. It was to turn out to be the moment when the foundations

of Manchester United really began to be cemented, and the following 25 years brought the most significant successes to the club, and saw the most terrible tragedy ever to impact British sport.

Busby was a radical thinker where football was concerned. It was through him that the term '*track suit manager*' was advocated. Prior to WWII, football managers were '*suits*' and never ever seen out on the training pitch. Busby changed all that. He trained with the players, talked to them throughout practice games, and illustrated exactly how he wanted the game to be played. He also knew that he could not do everything himself and enlisted the services of the genial Welshman, Jimmy Murphy, as his assistant. Murphy's work and contribution to Manchester United should never ever be forgotten, and he is without doubt the best assistant manager that the game of football has ever seen. Busby built his own team of trusted servants around him and trusted them implicitly to carry out the plans laid down for his, and James Gibson's visions.

When he arrived, the club's directors were responsible for team selection, but within a year of his appointment, he had wrested that responsibility from them, and he was also solely responsible for negotiating transfers, and for selling on players. In his own words;

"Call it confidence, conceit, arrogance, or ignorance, but I was unequivocal about it. At the advanced age of 35, I accepted the position only if they would let me have all my own way. As the manager, I wanted to manage – I would be the Boss."

In those early years, he had to stand his ground with those directors, particularly with Harold Hardman who was later to become Chairman, and there were more than a few occasions

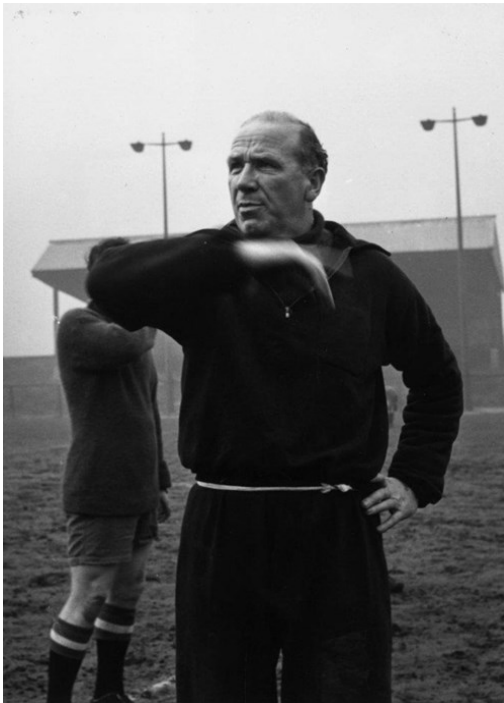
when he threatened to quit. Fortunately, he was always able to get his way as those directors acquiesced to what he wanted.

Busby's reputation and that of Manchester United grew. He moulded his teams to his, and to Jimmy's way of wanting the game to be played. His first team was mainly made up of players who had come back from serving their country in WWII and had lost six years of their careers. However, they became the most exciting team to watch during those post war years and in 1948, ended the club's 37 years wait for a major trophy when they were victorious in what is often described as one of the best Wembley FA Cup Finals ever. They were also runners-up in Division 1 on four separate occasions before finally becoming League Champions in 1952 for the first time since 1911. That great team gave Busby the precious time which he needed to see the club's innovative youth policy come to fruition.

What followed was revolutionary, and his team of "*Babes*" would dominate English football for the next few years winning two First Division championships, and they came so close to winning what was then a glorious treble. Busby was far sighted and had fought the Football League about United entering the new European Cup competition. He could see the benefits of his teams pitting their skills against the best football clubs in Europe. He could also see the financial benefits that would be brought to the club, but not only that, he coveted the prestige in Europe that Manchester United's name would bring. Where others had feared to tread, Busby had foraged forward, and with his calm, but firm political nous and manipulation, once again he won the day. If he had not, who is to say how long it would have taken for English clubs to be allowed to compete in European competition?

Of course, following the European dream, Busby, and the club, were to endure the horrific tragedy of Munich. It was a

disaster which once again, threatened to destroy the future of the club. Fortunately, Jimmy Murphy was able to take over the mantle as manager and he did more than a remarkable job in keeping the club afloat. It is incredible that upon his recovery Busby could put together another great team and that just five years after the disaster happened, they won another major trophy by lifting the FA Cup, and then went on to win two more First Division championships. In 1968, the Holy Grail was at last achieved when United became the first English team to win the coveted European Cup.



Sir Matt Busby oversees a training session at The Cliff - United's original training centre.

It was great testament to his character, will, and determination to keep Manchester United at the forefront of both English and European football. There had been battles along the way with both the FA, and the Football League, and

there were several Chairmen at other First Division clubs who would have relished in the demise of Manchester United. He could be as hard as bell metal in his dealings with other clubs, or the legislators of the game, as well as with his own staff. However, never once did Busby lose his grip and he fought those battles in his quiet, dogged, but determined way. He was no push over as the authorities found out. His standing in the British game made him the patriarch of his time. As Hugh McIlvanney wrote at the time of Sir Matt's passing:

'Greatness does not gad about, reaching for people in handfuls. It settles deliberately on a blessed few, and Matt Busby was one of them. If Busby had stood dressed for the pit, and somebody alongside him in the room had worn ermine, there would have been no difficulty about deciding who was special. Granting him knighthood did not elevate him. It raised however briefly, the whole dubious phenomenon of the honours system. 'Busby emanated presence, substance, the quality of strength without arrogance. No man in my experience ever exemplified better the ability to treat you as an equal while leaving you with the sure knowledge that you were less than he was. Such men do not have to be appointed leaders. Some democracy of the instincts of the blood elects them to be in charge.

That innate distinction was the source of his effect on footballers. He never had to bully. One glance from under those eloquent eyebrows was worth 10 bellows from more limited natures. Players did not fear his wrath. They dreaded his disapproval. His judgment of the priorities of football was so sound, his authority so effortless, that a shake of his head inflicted an embarrassment from which the only rescue was recovery of his respect. Using Shakespeare's words to praise somebody we knew is bound to be a rather wild risk but invoking Mark Anthony's lines about Brutus: "His life was

gentle, and the elements so mixed in him that nature might stand up and say to all the world "This was a man."

Like Busby before him, Alex Ferguson's arrival at Old Trafford came when the club was in complete disarray. Ron Atkinson's early years had promised so much, but delivered just two FA Cup winning teams in five years. It is true to say that towards the end of his tenure, there was problems with the structure of the club, especially at the grass roots level. In the 1985/86 season, United had got off to an electrifying start winning their first 10 League games. They were still unbeaten after fifteen games after they had beaten Coventry City 2-0 at Old Trafford on November 2nd, and they had increased their lead over Liverpool to a 10 points margin. As they went into 1986 they were still topping the table by 5 points although both Liverpool and Everton had played a game more. After beating Birmingham City on New Year's Day 1986, the following 18 games brought a paltry return of 6 wins, 6 draws and 6 losses. It was the losses and draws at Old Trafford that cost them dearly and at the end of the season, United finished in 4th place some 12 points behind the champions, arch enemies, Liverpool. A season that had promised so much became an agony for the faithful fans.

The following season, 1985/86 got off to a disastrous start and on November 1st, after drawing 1-1 at Old Trafford against Coventry City, United languished in 19th place in the league and had managed just 3 wins from their 13 fixtures. The wheels had come off, and worse was to follow. On the following Wednesday evening, in a replayed League Cup tie against Southampton at the Dell, United were heavily defeated by 4-1. The Saints fans sang vociferously;

"He's round, he's fat, he's going to get the sack – Atkinson, Atkinson." They were not wrong – 24 hours later he was gone. Atkinson had got too close to his players, and there was a

definite drink culture with the senior players that he could not curtail. On the club's pre-season tour to Holland he fined seven senior players for an after-hours drinking soiree. Together with some bad investments in the transfer market, and his own personal life problems, he had certainly lost his credibility to manage Manchester United, and although he could not see it, he was the master of his own demise.

There is some conflict regarding when Ferguson was approached by United regarding the manager's job at Old Trafford. There was a lot of suspicion that he had been approached before the sacking of Atkinson. Certainly, Atkinson's sacking and the search for a new man had been discussed vehemently during the earlier weeks by the United Board. Sir Bobby Charlton confirms this in his autobiography *'My Manchester United Years'*. Charlton championed Ferguson's appointment when the remainder of the board wanted Terry Venables. He'd spoken to Ferguson in Mexico during the summer's World Cup finals. There is a story that there had been a clandestine meeting some days before Ferguson's appointment, and that this had taken place at a motorway service area in Scotland between Ferguson, Martin Edwards, Bobby Charlton, and United's legal man, Maurice Watkins. Whenever questioned about the story, none of the persons concerned have ever confirmed, nor denied the occasion.

Ferguson's very first meeting with his players took place on Friday, November 7th, 1986. What he saw certainly did not please him and made him realize the enormity of the task that was at hand. The previous evening, and after his sacking, *'Big Ron'* had thrown a party at his house and several of the senior players had been in attendance. When Ferguson addressed the assembled group at The Cliff that morning, it is more than fair to say that several of them were suffering from a distinct lack of concentration. It was a far cry back to Sir Matt's first

experience when he had first addressed his new players back in 1946. Under Atkinson the training regime had been allowed to become slack. Training had supposed to begin at 10.30 a.m. – that is only if Atkinson turned up on time. Under Ferguson it became a much different matter – it began at 9.30a.m., and, seeing as he was in his office every morning at 7.30a.m., he was there when the players began arriving. Anybody turning up late soon discovered what the penalty would be and woe betide them if they transgressed again.

There was no doubt that Ferguson was appalled at the state that the club was in. Just like Sir Matt had done all those years ago, he had to restructure the club from top to bottom. He got rid of the deadwood in the scouting area and completely reorganized it. If there was a youngster who was thought to be of United caliber, then he wanted to know about it, and woe betides the scouts if any of those youngsters slipped through the net. He knew that the rebuilding process was going to take time, and that there would be some painful decisions to be taken along the way. One by one he got rid of the bad apples on the playing side, and others that were not up to his standards were also shown the door. These were players on high wages who were also a barrier to the younger players breaking through. As Sir Matt had done, those tough decisions were never shirked. The early years were as tough a ride as a manager could get and he had to fight his corner in the boardroom just as Sir Matt had done.

Within a year of his appointment, his relationship with United's Chairman, Martin Edwards was not as good as it could have been and it was all down to the financial constraints placed upon him. He was getting frustrated and stated at a board meeting;

'I came here thinking that I would have the luxury of buying players. I have done a lot of hard work at youth levels, but to

win the league we need to buy. I'm very disappointed that I haven't had that kind of money. Liverpool have bought the best but what sticks in my gullet is the difference between them and us. I respect them – but I don't like being second. Mr. Chairman, you now face two very tough choices between having a very good team or balancing the books. It is impossible to have both at present.'

Eventually, he started to get his way and along with a certain amount of financing, players were also shipped out to supplement the cost of bringing better players in. Ferguson was building blocks, and one by one they were starting to cement the foundations that he needed. However, it was taking time. He was never afraid to embrace Sir Matt and talk to him, and also to Jimmy Murphy, before he died. It was something that previous managers before him, apart from Docherty, had been unable to bring themselves to do. Ferguson's outlook was that with that amount of experience and expertise there for his asking; it would be silly not to tap into it.

By the start of the 1989/90 season, from outside Old Trafford, things looked as bad as they had done on the day that Atkinson had been dismissed. The fans were restless, the board was restless, and there is no doubt that the hatchets were out for the manager. On January 1st 1990, after drawing at home to QPR, United languished down in 15th position in the league. Millions had been spent on players – Leighton, Anderson, Bruce, Phelan, Pallister, Ince, Webb, McClair, Hughes, Wallace, and Sharpe. On the terraces at home matches, there had even been heard a concerted chorus of “*Fergie Out*” reverberating around the stadium. Even Red News was to lash out and was typical of the feeling at the time;

*'What really hurts Alex, is that under you, we've had **** football, **** atmosphere, **** boardroom shenanigans, and our support is drifting away.'*

Even ex-players and current players were having a go. Willie Morgan was keen to state in the local paper that he didn't want to go and watch United again for a very long time. Jim Leighton and Clayton Blackmore even went as far as to say that Ferguson had lost the dressing room and that the players thought that he would be on his way, sooner rather than later. In a home game, just before Christmas 1989, a fan unfurled a homemade banner on a thinly populated Stretford End which stated – *"3 years of excuses and it's still crap ... tara Fergie."*

These were pressures that Sir Matt had never ever had to face. Boardroom politics and hostility, yes, but there was never any backlash from United fans. There was never a time when United's fan base was ever less than 100% behind him. Times had changed though, and though Busby had seen the advent of the greater freedoms of the 60's and the more vociferous and younger type of fan, he was never subjected to the outside hostilities that Ferguson was. Matt was shrewd and managed and massaged journalist's egos. He was a master at PR, but McIlvanney said that was wrong. He said that Human Relations (HR) was Matt's specialty. To quote him;

'He conquered millions of hearts one at a time, moving out from his club, and the adopted city that he loved, into the world of football and the wider world beyond that. The way that the huge power of his personality worked was the benign equivalent of house-to-house fighting.'

Those words could never have been written about Ferguson in his early years at United. One could say that it was his personality which changed people's view of United

outside of the Old Trafford faithful. Unlike Sir Matt, he didn't take defeat gracefully, and would launch tirades at referees, linesmen, and even rival clubs, particularly Liverpool. Opposing fans saw United as bad losers, whiners, and still do to this day. But it was all part of Ferguson's make-up, he wears his heart on his sleeve where Manchester United are concerned. The pressures upon the man were enormous and not only did he have to deal with the unrest on the terraces, he had to deal with criticisms from 'phone-ins on local and BBC radio stations, as well as from the many fanzines that had started to appear from the mid-1980's.

Only the Board members who were serving at the time will ever know the truth as to whether Ferguson would have lost his job had United lost to Forest in that FA Cup tie on the first Saturday in January, 1990. There was immense media pressure upon him in the week preceding the tie, and 99% of the media pundits believed he would be out of a job by the following Sunday morning. Over the years, the press had become more and more intrusive, and sports editors and journalists were not of the mould that Busby had found during his tenure. This was now a beast of a considerable different nature, and could be scathing in both professional and personal aspects. Nothing was judged to be sacred. Looking back, it's difficult to envisage how Sir Matt would have handled the intrusiveness and downright vindictiveness that opined towards Manchester United at the start of the 1990's, and has continued since.

That United won that cup tie by 1-0 is consigned to the history books which show that after four hard years, Ferguson's team was finally able to lift its first major trophy. The platform was now there and his dynasty began to take shape. The following season they finished 6th in the League, reached the League Cup Final (losing 1-0 to Sheff Wed), but it culminated in them winning the European Cup Winners Cup in

Rotterdam against the mighty Barcelona. It was the first year that English clubs had been allowed back into European competition after the 5-year ban imposed after the Heysel tragedy of 1985. In 1991/92, despite the club winning the League Cup by defeating Forest 1-0 at Wembley, it was to prove to be a season of bitter disappointment with United capitulating from being league leaders with five games to go in the run-in. The title seemed certain to come back to Old Trafford after 25 years, but of those last 5 games, United were to draw one and lose three – the ultimate pain being the loss by 2-0 to Liverpool at Anfield which confirmed Leeds United as First Division champions. Nobody felt that defeat more than Alex Ferguson.

Behind the scenes at Old Trafford his building bricks were being cemented into solid blocks and the youth team won the FA Youth Cup for the first time since 1964. For the club, it was a significant achievement and one that was looked upon with great pride. Amongst those youngsters who lifted that trophy were Gary Neville, David Beckham, Nicky Butt, and Robbie Savage. Two of the substitutes were a certain Ryan Giggs, and Keith Gillespie. The following season the youth team was beaten finalists losing 4-1 on aggregate to Leeds United. Additions to the United youth team included Paul Scholes and Phil Neville. All eight players were later to excel at international level. Not one of the Leeds United players made it to that level and for a few of them, they only saw careers played out in the lower divisions of the Football League. Nobody was prouder of United's youth team than was Sir Matt as he watched them from the stands. In later years Ferguson was to say; *'Sir Matt lost and rebuilt a team, rebuilding it the right way, in the fashion of what he thought Manchester United should be. My job really was to regain that.'*

Season 1992/93 saw the inception of the Premier League and the increased levels of television money being brought

into the game. It also saw the beginning of the destruction of a way of life that had gone on for well over 100 years – normal Saturday afternoon football. It was the start of the tail wagging the dog. The piper had to be paid and the FA had sold its soul to the Premier League. However, for Manchester United and for Ferguson, things were about to change. By the first week in December, United were in 5th position in the League some 9 points behind the surprise leaders, Norwich City. During that week, a chance ‘phone call from the Leeds United chairman Bill Fotherby to his counterpart at United, Martin Edwards, was an enquiry asking if United would be interested in letting Dennis Irwin go. Ferguson, who was with Edwards at the time didn’t want to know, but he did pass Edwards a small piece of paper which had written upon it; *‘ask him about Cantona’*. The United chairman’s eyebrows lifted in surprise but ask he did, and he was surprised when Fotherby did not rebuff him but said he would call back. Less than half an hour later the return call came and Fotherby said Leeds would accept just one million pounds for the Frenchman. Ferguson was delighted and the deal was concluded. The final brick in the block was about to arrive and little could anybody both inside or outside of the club ever have imagined just what an impact this piece would have over the next four years.



Sir Alex Ferguson waves to the fans as he takes his seat on match-day.

When Eric Cantona was unveiled at a press conference as United's latest signing, the press and media thought that Ferguson had lost his marbles. There was widespread disbelief that United had signed a player with such a flawed temperament, and one who had a more than colourful past. Despite this, Ferguson played his hunch and it turned out to be the master stroke that saw the catalyst for the next five years of unbridled success. On April 21st 1993, after beating Crystal Palace 2-0 at Selhurst Park, United were four points clear of Aston Villa their nearest challengers with just two games to play and they had played the same number of games. On May 2nd, Villa was at home to Oldham Athletic, a team languishing in the bottom three of the league. It was a game everybody expected Villa to win easily, but surprisingly they lost 0-1, and United were champions for the first time since 1967. The celebration party at Steve Bruce, the United captain's home in Hale, went on well into the daylight hours with all the first team squad in attendance.

That evening United had a home game to play against Blackburn Rovers. When the players strode onto the pitch, many of them were suffering from king sized hangovers. They went behind very early to a Kevin Gallagher goal, and it could have been even worse had the referee denied the Rovers a perfectly legitimate penalty claim just shortly afterwards. But as the United player's heads cleared, Ryan Giggs equalized with a wonderful free kick, Paul Ince added a second, and then minutes before the final whistle, Gary Pallister blasted a free kick into the bottom corner of the Blackburn goal to ensure that every outfield player in the team had contributed with at least a goal that season.

Cantona had made an outstanding contribution with his prompting, passing, and goals, and had been a revelation to the younger players with his professionalism, especially at training. As both Bruce and Bryan Robson jointly received the very first Premiership trophy, the music blasted out throughout the stadium – *'We Are the Champions'*, *'Simply the Best'*; and up in the stands, a venerable old white haired Scotsman, stood with his daughter, and joined in with the chorus to *'Always look on the Bright Side of Life'* as the players cavorted with the trophy down below them on the pitch. Later, within the confines of the dressing room, the Master Builder and his younger Apprentice, stood together and posed for a photograph together with the Premiership trophy. From that day on, the Apprentice became the Master Builder.

The following season the double of Premiership and FA Cup was won, but not before Sir Matt had passed away on January 20th, 1994. Thousands turned out for his funeral at St John's Catholic Church in Chorlton cum Hardy, and along the route after the requiem mass was over. The cortege made one final journey for Sir Matt, down past the stadium at Old Trafford, before going on for a private family interment at Southern Cemetery where he was laid to rest with his beloved

wife, Lady Jean who had passed away in 1988. His presence had blessed British and European football for some 66 years. Never, or since, has anybody been more revered in the game than Sir Matt Busby.

In the 17 years, which have followed Sir Matt's death, Ferguson has gone on to surpass everything that Busby had ever achieved in terms of winning trophies. He knocked Liverpool off their ****ing perch, as he so succinctly put it in his early days. He saw off the threats of Kenny Dalglish when at Blackburn, Arsene Wenger at Arsenal, Jose Mourinho, Avram Grant, Carlo Ancelotti at Chelsea, and will now meet the challenge of their new manager Andre Villa-Boas head on. He has never shirked a challenge or walked away from a battle in all his time at Old Trafford.

Nobody who follows Manchester United will ever forget that most wonderful of nights in Barcelona's Nou Camp stadium when to all intents United were just about to lose to Bayern Munich in the Champions League Final. That final, although never one of United's finest displays of free-flowing football, displayed all of Ferguson's qualities. His character was stamped all over that team; courage, indefatigable spirit, determination, and the never-say-die attitude that saw the final three minutes of that game turn it into one of, if not the most remarkable finish to a European Cup Final, that has ever seen.

When referee Collina blew his whistle to end the game, United were European Champions, Premier League Champions, and holders of the FA Cup. What most football pundits thought was an impossible task to achieve, had been achieved, and ironically, it was done on the very day that Sir Matt Busby would have celebrated his 90th birthday. As Ferguson was to say just after the game in the Nou Camp finished;

'It would have been Sir Matt Busby's 90th birthday today, but I think he was up there doing a lot of kicking. I'm privileged to have followed Sir Matt because all you have to do is to try and maintain the standards and traditions that he set so many years ago. If only it was that simple!'

It's so hard to make comparisons between these two great men because they have reigned in two distinctly different eras. When Ferguson first took over at Old Trafford although the game was changing, it was little different to the football world that Busby had experienced. However, over the last 20 years a juggernaut has propelled British, European, and even World football into a completely different stratosphere. Today's football world is nothing like the one that Sir Matt knew and loved. I have the suspicion that had he been alive today, he would not like what he would see. Some eight years before he passed he was to say;

'You can see the changes. Business people come in, not many with experience of football. It has become a business organization.'

He vehemently fought the Edwards family over the initial share rights issue in 1979. He was bitterly opposed to any one person owning Manchester United. Before the public flotation of the Club in 1990, he also said;

'Recent events have only demonstrated only too clearly, the problems that can arise from private ownership when the time comes for the club to be sold. I agree with the people who believe we would get more stability, and a better guarantee for the future well-being of United, if it were now to pass into the control of a few representative shareholders.'

Those words eventually went unheeded by Martin Edwards, but they were so far sighted. No, the great man

would not like what he sees in the corridors of Old Trafford today.

To have stayed at Old Trafford for 25 years as manager is a remarkable achievement. At other clubs, managers come and go on a regular basis and become long forgotten. Like Sir Matt, Ferguson is fiercely protective of everything United and of those who work for him. Notwithstanding that, he has had to fight his battles with the board, although as of this moment, we do not know if there have been any battles with the club's American owners. Only time will tell on that matter. He has made mistakes, some which he readily admits to. His dalliance with the racing fraternity, especially J.P. MacManus and John Mangier, left him with a bloody nose and certainly had some serious long term effects on Manchester United. His benefit match in 1999 does not stand up to too much scrutiny, and his conduct with his son Jason who was then acting as a football agent, left a sour taste in the mouth. Telling a United fan of many years standing to *'**** off and go and watch Chelsea'* was also not the brightest thing that he has ever done.

However, for all his warts, there is not a shadow of a doubt that he is a football man through and through. He's made his enemies within the game, particularly among the journalistic and media corps, and although a lot of today's fans may find it hard to believe, Sir Matt also had his. But just like Sir Matt, when the tough decisions have had to be made, and especially where players are concerned, he has never shirked that responsibility. There is also a very compassionate side to Ferguson's nature, one which the public very rarely sees. His work with charities is done well away from the glare of the media, and many, many United fans will also tell of his kind and generous deeds.

When will he be loved? By the most resentful and embittered followers of Liverpool, Chelsea, and Arsenal, the

answer is, of course, never. When it comes to the wider football community beyond the gates of Old Trafford, Ferguson - like Busby, Shankly and Stein - will be suitably acclaimed only when he's safely removed from the combat zone and is no longer a threat. That his genius will be universally recognised is beyond doubt: it's a matter not of if, but when. And that, for the man who will be forever caricatured as gesticulating at a stopwatch in the dying moments of a contest, ensures an end game in which time, just for once, is unquestionably on his side.

So, back to the school child's question; '*Who is the best manager – Busby or Ferguson?*' All I will say is that as Manchester United supporters, we have been so blessed to have been managed by two Scotsmen with totally differing personalities who have placed Manchester United on the pinnacle upon which they stand today. I loved Sir Matt Busby dearly, and cherish his memory, and the great things and foundation which he gave to his beloved club. Love him or hate him, Ferguson has a huge standing within world football, earned through his hard work, grit, and determination, and his will to never be second best. The saddest day for Manchester United and its legion of fans will be when the day comes and he retires. Without doubt both Sir Alex and Sir Matt, in my opinion, stand as the two greatest managers of their time. Oh! Boy, would I like to have had them both at my table as dinner guests, and joined by Bill Shankly, Jimmy Murphy, and Jock Stein. Now that would have been one incredible long night!

I'll leave you with a little piece by Hugh McIlvanney:

'Some people argue that Ferguson isn't particularly good tactically, but is it likely that a manager weak in that area would have had such success at the highest levels of the modern game? Would his teams have so consistently combined marvelously entertaining football with the effectiveness that

wins trophies by the barrow load? Ferguson is the kind of true football man whose understanding of, and feel for how the game works, goes beyond any orthodox technical analysis. Once, when interviewing Juan Manuel Fangio, I asked him to identify the most important of the assets that made him a great driver. He said instantly: 'I drove with my ear to the heartbeat of the car.' I think Ferguson does something like that with football teams, with football clubs, in fact, because he is concerned about everything and everybody at Manchester United, as he was at Aberdeen, St Mirren and East Stirlingshire. He has a commitment to the fundamentals of team spirit that is almost religious. Ideally, he has said, when each player is sitting in the dressing room before a big match he should be able to look at the men on either side of him and know there's nobody in the world he'd rather have at his shoulder in the action ahead. 'That's when you know you have a team,' Ferguson says. And he can talk that way to footballers and make them believe absolutely. Assessments of his work emphasise his monstrous, inexhaustible energy, and it is freakish even by the standards of obsessive, driven personalities. But all that energy is the vehicle for something you could just about risk calling a spiritual conviction, and you have to think about that when defining Ferguson's optimism.'

If it Had Not Been for Sir Matt's Vision

(This article was first published in the Red News Fanzine No 126 in the summer of 2006)

But for the vision of Sir Matt Busby, English football would have been on the outside looking in for many years – while other clubs from other countries competed for the glittering prize of the European Cup. For back in the dark days of the early to middle fifties, English football's governing bodies wanted nothing to do with this 'half baked' new European competition; and they did not want their clubs to have anything to do with it either.

The first invitation given to an English club asking them to partake in the new European Cup competition went to Chelsea after they had won the First Division Championship in season 1954-55. The competition had been the brainwave of the Editors of the French sports magazine L'Equipe, Jaques Ferran, and Gabriel Hanot.

The summer of 1953 saw Wolverhampton Wanderers play a friendly game against a South African XI to begin a remarkable run of victories over the next months. Wolves played a series of friendlies against foreign opposition such as Racing Club of Argentina, Spartak Moscow, of the Soviet Union, among others, before meeting Honved, of Hungary in a game televised live on the BBC. The Honved team included many of the Hungarian national team. Wolves won the game 3-2 which led their manager Stan Cullis and the British press to proclaim them as "*Champions of the World*". This was the final spur for Hanot who had long campaigned for a European-wide club tournament to determine who was the best of the continent.

“Before we declare that Wolverhampton are invincible, let them go to Moscow and Budapest. And there are other internationally renowned clubs: Milan and Real Madrid to name but two. A club world championship, or at least a European one – larger, more meaningful and more prestigious than the Mitropa Cup and more original than a competition for national teams – should be launched.”

The UEFA congress of March 1955 saw the proposal raised, with approval given in April of that year, and the kick-off, of the first European Cup the following season.

The idea was to bring together 32 European Champion teams to contest for the trophy on a knock-out basis, with home and away legs in each round except for the Final. The ties would be played in mid-week and would not affect the club's local domestic league commitments.

Chelsea declined that first invitation, not that they had any objections to entering this new, exciting competition. They were simply forbidden to do so on fear of reprisals by the insulated and isolated mandarins of the Football League who quite clearly believed that there was nothing those 'foreigners' could teach the nation which had given the game of football to the world.

Undaunted by that snub, the organisers of the European Cup competition sent out a second invitation to the English Champions of the 1955-56 season who just happened to be Manchester United. Fortunately for the organisers, they had addressed the invitation to Matt Busby personally. It was read by a manager who was the most forward thinking man in the British game, and a man who had the courage to accept that not only English football, but that British football HAD to become more of a part of a European and Global game.

I can recall many years later, after Sir Matt had been knighted, explaining why he had taken the decision to defy the Football League and blaze a trail for English football in Europe.

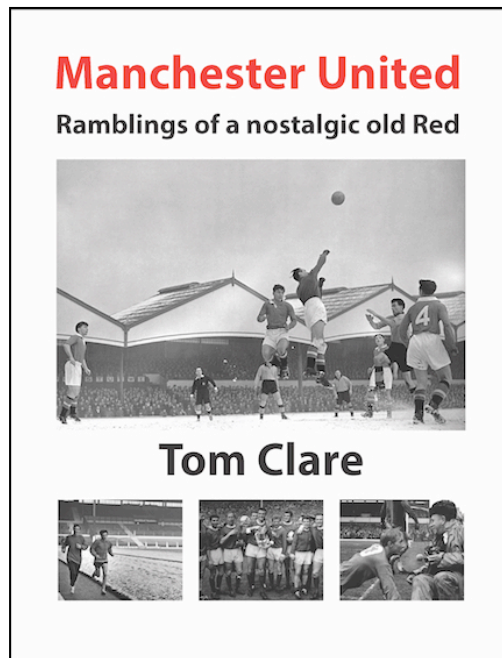
“I was very keen on the idea of pitching my team against the best in Europe” he recalled. “At one of our Board meetings early in May 1956, my Chairman, Mr. Harold Hardman, asked me if I thought it wise to enter the club in this European competition. My reply was, ‘Well Mr. Chairman, football has now become a more expansive game, both in Europe and world-wide. It no longer belongs exclusively to the British Isles.’ It was around this time that we had received a letter from the Football League forbidding us to enter this glamorous new competition.

At our next Board meeting in June 1956, I again repeated to the Board my keenness for this new European challenge, and once more proposed that if the Football Association were willing to back us, then we should go ahead and enter. There was always a difference between the two governing bodies of English Football, and I had a hunch that if I approached the Football Association, then they would back us against the League. I went down to London and spoke to the powers that be at the Football Association, and came away with their blessing to enter the competition. So, at a further Board meeting on 22 June 1956, we decided to go ahead and step into new waters and enter the challenge of the European Cup.”

What a momentous decision that proved to be – not just for Manchester United, but for every other English football club who subsequently followed in the path that United had trodden to the doors of the great football stadia of Europe. For Manchester United and Sir Matt, it was to be a European adventure sprinkled with equal measure of both triumph, and great tragedy.

We all know what happened on that dark, dark day in February 1958, and it will be forever remembered as the blackest day in the long and illustrious history of Manchester United Football Club. But like the Phoenix, United somehow managed to rise from the ashes of that sad inferno, and go on to build a new team which would help Sir Matt achieve his greatest ambition in holding aloft the European Champions trophy on that never to be forgotten balmy night at Wembley in May 1968, when not even the mighty Benfica from Portugal, could deny the lovable United manager his greatest goal, which many believe had helped him survive the aftermath of the Munich Disaster.

However, the tears of Munich and the ecstasy of Wembley were events still waiting to unfold when Matt Busby and his Directors sat around that boardroom table in June 1956 to decide which would affect the whole destiny of Manchester United, and English football. It was Europe here we come!



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