

UNITED RANT

Issue 5 – December 2011

Monthly

One nil

UNITED'S CASE FOR THE DEFENCE

Great Irish hope

ROBBIE BRADY MAKES HIS MARK

Modern fandom

WILL BEING A UNITED FAN CHANGE IF SUCCESS DRIES UP?

United, nil points

REDS ON THE BRINK IN THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Youth renaissance

WILL FERGIE TAKE A CHANCE ON HIS KIDS?

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ONE



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Editor

Ed Barker

Contributors

Paul Ansoorge
Ajay Smith
Dan Bowman
Sean Geraghty

With Thanks

Rob Diablo
Sam Taylor
Jade Adams
David Smales
Phil Gatt

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Contact

editor@unitedrant.co.uk
www.unitedrant.co.uk

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Leader

BELOW PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON

When Bill Clinton successfully beat George H. W. Bush senior to the White House in 1992, the former Governor of Arkansas did so seemingly against the odds. The end of the Cold War, and conflict in Iraq, ensured foreign policy dominated the headlines at a time of intense national pride. But in assessing the contest, Clinton's chief strategist James Carville correctly determined that it was not the collapse of the Soviet Union, nor Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, that would determine the November 1992 election, but the dollar in ordinary Americans' pocket.

It was, to paraphrase the sign hanging on Clinton's Little Rock campaign office, the economy, stupid, that would send the Arkansan to office. Clinton's win, barely a year after Bush received 90 per cent approval ratings in the polls, was gained on a more nuanced understanding of Americans' needs than his predecessor could ever muster.

Six weeks after Manchester United's humiliation in the derby, one wonders whether the club, like Bush, is on the precipice of acceding to a superior force. In the period since City scored six at Old Trafford, Sir Alex Ferguson's side has seemingly become ever more recalcitrant, stubbornly grinding out single goal victories. In the face of an ever-growing injury list, with the side's rhythm broken by recurring absentees, United's ability to win 'when playing poorly' is – as the old cliché goes – the stuff of champions. Indeed, points gained now could well have a significant impact come May.

Yet, United's performances since 23 October have been mired in the kind of sparkle-less midfield performance that – aside from a short period at the current campaign's start – has become increasingly the norm. A new emphasis on midfield structure, built around the admirable Michael Carrick, and not the injured Tom Cleverley's pass-and-move

creativity, has replaced the free-flowing football played in August and early September. In truth those are memories now long gone; August an exception that proves the rule. This observation is not new – supporters and pundits alike have complained of a glaring weakness in Ferguson's squad for years. Paul Scholes, ageing and increasingly pushed to the margins, always needed replacing. Roy Keane and Owen Hargreaves are long gone. Ferguson's midfield is, even for the most optimistic Reds, at least two high-class players short. Increasingly, Ferguson has taken to experimentation in search of a solution. Wayne Rooney, Phil Jones, Ryan Giggs and Park Ji-Sung have each been deployed in central midfield in recent games. The position is unnatural to all of them.

It is worrying, then, that the Glazer family is unwilling to release funds this winter for midfield reinforcements, if the word on the street currently doing the rounds is to be believed. It is a truism that United was interested in Internazionale's midfielder Wesley Sneijder in the past summer, only for the deal to flounder on the Dutchman's substantial wages. Any move for Luka Modric was ended at the conceptual stage once the Croatian's fee was established at more than £30 million on the open market.

Meanwhile, City acquired Samir Nasri at great expense from Arsenal, adding to the exceptional talents already at Eastlands, including this season's best player, David Silva. That City's vast array of midfield talents contrasts so starkly with Ferguson's meagre resources is all the more disappointing for Reds keen to stave off the rising Blue Moon. Nasri, also a target for Ferguson, has spent much of the campaign held in reserve by Roberto Mancini.

City's midfield quartet of Yaya Touré, James Milner, Gareth



Barry, and Silva, ran rings round United at Old Trafford. Just as, one might add, Barcelona had at Wembley in May. Anderson and Darren Fletcher failed against City, just as Carrick and Giggs succumbed to the Catalans six months earlier. One wonders how many lessons it is going to take?

How much criticism is reserved for Ferguson, who dragged his limited squad to a glorious 19th domestic title last May, depends on how far you believe he is culpable for the marked decline in his midfield resources. One version paints Ferguson as the visionary, transforming his squad through vibrant youth, and investing in Cleverley as United's next great playmaker. An alternate casts the Scot as the Glazer family's lickspittle; a carpetbagger's lackey, beholden to owners that are unwilling to invest in the club's playing resources unless costs are cut elsewhere.

In '92 the American people, who should have been emboldened by the Cold War's end, and impassioned with militaristic pride at the successful conflict in the Persian Gulf, instead threw out the old regime and invested in the promise of a bright young southern lawyer. Ferguson is unlikely to cast aside the dead wood in his midfield, but it is, to borrow a phrase, the midfield, stupid, that will ultimately end United's quest for 20 unless something changes. And fast.

. Sincerely, Ed Barker, Editor

“Ferguson is unlikely to cast aside the dead wood in his midfield, but it is, to borrow a phrase, the midfield, stupid, that will ultimately end United's quest for 20 ”

A matter of black & white

Race, it seems, is top of the editorial agenda in the football after (insert obligatory 'alleged' here) incidents involving Luis Suarez and John Terry in the past few months. Each is seemingly a sad indictment of the English game, where racism it appears, still thrives. Luis Suarez, claims Patrice Evra, called the defender a "n*gger" – or something approximating the 'N' word – at "least ten times" during Manchester United's visit to Anfield in September. Meanwhile even the English national captain has been involved in a claim of racism, with John Terry was caught on camera calling Queens Park Rangers' Anton Ferdinand a "black c*nt". The only debate is whether Terry's excuse of context ("No I didn't call you a...") is genuine or not. Ferdinand, and his big brother Rio, have been deafening with their silence on the matter.

That neither case has been resolve speaks much for the complexity of arguments, of course, but also the Football Association's dithering. It also says much for the English game's lack of progress in combating racism that the clubs and supporters involved have divided largely along partisan lines. To Liverpool's management, Suarez' innocence was never in doubt. So much so, that manager Kenny Dalglish has called for "the accuser" Evra to face sanction. Meanwhile, Liverpool supporters have engaged in an orchestrated smear campaign against Evra with erroneous 'evidence' of the Frenchman repeatedly 'playing the race card' distributed liberally by more vocal Scousers. Sir Alex Ferguson's dignified silence has spoken volumes.

Despite the trial defence by media, the FA has charged charged Suarez with using "abusive and/or insulting words and/or behaviour towards Manchester United's Patrice Evra contrary to FA rules" and a specially convened panel will hear the case in December. Similarly, Chelsea and the club's supporters have unilaterally backed Terry's claim of



misunderstanding. Indeed, Chelsea fans were audibly chanting anti-Ferdinand slogans as the Londoners met Genk in the Champions League last month. Would United supporters behave differently if, hypothetically speaking, Wayne Rooney faced a similar charge? It is a question that supporters should honestly ask and answer.

Sepp Blatter

In fact the controversies of recent weeks have unveiled the shroud of denial about racism in the game. One need only peruse popular social media sites to discover a tsunami of bigotry among match-going fans. Ferdinand was subjected to the worse kind of racist abuse on his own account, from the very supporters defending Terry. No wonder, with denial coming from the very top – Sepp Blatter – who claims that racism does not exist in football, and if it occurs can be resolved with a handshake. The comments brought a wave of condemnation.

"I would deny it. There is no racism," Blatter told CNN in November.

"There is maybe one of the players towards another, he has a word or a gesture which is not the correct one, but also the one who is affected by that. He should say that 'this is a game. We are in a game, and at the end of the game, we shake hands, and this can happen', because we have worked so hard against racism and discrimination.

"I think the whole world is aware of the efforts we are making against racism and discrimination. And on the field of play sometimes you say something that is not very correct, but then at the end of the game, the game is over and you have the next game where you can behave better."



ABOVE SEPP LOVES BLACK PEOPLE



Blatter apes the views of more than one prominent pundit, with racist language justified on the basis of ‘banter’ or ‘high emotions’. It says much for the neanderthal element still present in our game. Indeed, the Daily Mail ran a bigoted ‘opinion’ editorial urging black players to “just ignore it” when subjected to racism and be “thankful” for the apparent progress made. There was more than a little irony when the paper launched a tirade against FIFA’s President last month.

1980s

True, gone are the universal ‘monkey chants’ and banana-throwing of 1980s crowds. Racism has gone underground. Yet, surely, race should not be a matter for partisan support. Offence, if the accusations against Suarez and Terry are true, should be universal. That it is not says something for the road football has travelled, but more for the distance yet to go.

There is also a devastating charge of complacency to be levelled against the football community and, perhaps, the Football Association too. Certainly, the governing body’s dithering over both cases does not reflect well on the FA. That a number of prominent black players genuinely considered boycotting the Kick It Out campaign because of the perceived FA governance of the body (it is

part financed but not governed by the FA) says much for the frustration felt within the game.

After all, racism is institutionalised in football, with so few administrators and coaches coming from the ethnic minorities, despite black players making up around 25 per cent of professionals in England. Fans of all colours should be ashamed of this.

Apology

Perhaps some progress was made then when Blatter, inundated with criticism, apologised to BBC editor David Bond, even if the Swiss national refused to resign, and latter blamed the English media for the controversy. Laughably FIFA.com pictured Blatter hugging Tokyo Sexwale, a black FIFA official and South African government minister, in an attempt to polish the President’s anti-racism credentials.

“I am sorry and I regret that my statements earlier this week have resulted in an unfortunate situation,” said the 75-year-old FIFA President. “I am committed to the fight against racism, have no doubt about that. And I want to make it very clear: I will not stop until we have stamped racism out of football. When you have done something which was not totally correct, I can only say I am sorry for all those people affected by my declarations. It

hurts and I am still hurting because I couldn’t envisage such a reaction.”

The community’s reaction to the latest turn of events suggests that while race is high on the agenda there is some way to go when it comes to stamping out racism in all forms. While a presumption of innocence is enshrined in our legal system, there is little reason to believe that Evra is lying. Indeed, the FA charge suggests Suarez has a case to answer and it is likely to come down to context and the nuances of language if leaks from the Uruguayan’s camp are to be believed. The FA’s scrutiny will be further heightened after Suarez’ single-fingered salute to Fulham fans in Liverpool’s recent fixture in the capital.

The FA is likely to set a very high bar for proof, but having been so critical of Blatter in the past, it cannot be seen to sweep the issue under the carpet. It takes genuine strength of will an authority to sit in judgement; something the governing body has long since lost. Now, more than ever, is the time for the body to truly govern our game. **EB**

ABOVE SUAREZ AND EVRA CLASH AT ANFIELD

One nil to United

Reds winning but where's the style?

There have been times in Sir Alex Ferguson's management of Manchester United over the past 25 years that the Scot's side has been forced 'back to basics'; when the necessity to grind out results overcomes the need to entertain. Think back to United's campaign in 1996, for example, when Ferguson's side chased down Newcastle United with seven single-goal victories in the league post New Year. That the Scot's outfit had lost 4-1 to Tottenham Hotspur on New Year's Day underlined the gritty nature of the club's campaign during the run-in.

Few of those times have come so early in the new season though, with United's 1-0 victory at Aston Villa in early December the fourth such result since Manchester City's heavy victory at Old Trafford in October. In the Premier League at least United has scored no more than a single goal since derby defeat. Indeed, five clean sheets in a row following the derby demonstrated a renewed determination to grind out results through defensive security. In truth, Ferguson's side has rarely, in that period, played the brand of attractive attacking football that is expected by Old Trafford regulars.

Clean sheets

Not that any criticism of United's style will bother Ferguson while his team is maintaining clean sheets and winning games. Keeping in touch with rivals City at the top of the Premier League is the priority, and United are doing that. Just about.

"Keeping clean sheets has been an integral part of our success and we have been careless with our defending," admitted Ferguson recently. "A few weeks ago there was genuine criticism about the defending and the chances

opponents were getting. When you win these games 1-0 it brings the concentration back to a good level which has been lacking. The concentration we have showed is exactly the concentration we need back in the team. We've tightened things up and there were some good performances by our defenders."

Whether fans will accept the change in approach is another matter. At the other end of the pitch United have rarely sparkled in recent games, with Wayne Rooney seemingly unable to find his scoring boots. The Scouse striker has now gone eight games without a goal. It is a record all the more concerning given injuries to Javier Hernández, Michael Owen and Dimitar Berbatov. The Mexican, who has scored four goals in the post-derby period, is unlikely to play again before the New Year.

In midfield the pass-and-move attacking philosophy of Tom Cleverley and Anderson

has been replaced with a far greater emphasis on structure. With Rooney at times augmenting midfield, Ferguson



has sought to ensure United is no longer out-fought in central midfield. Michael Carrick's renaissance has done much, but when Ferguson needs discipline he turns to Ryan Giggs, Darren Fletcher and Park Ji-Sung. And while the Korean ostensibly started wide-left in the match against Swansea, for example, with Giggs partnering Carrick in the middle, United was never going to be out-fought in the centre of the pitch. 'They shall not pass' has become a mantra these past six weeks.

It is this reemphasis on defence that could still win United the major trophies come May, says goalkeeper Anders Lindegaard.

"When you look back over history, all the great teams have been known for having a fantastic defence and that is very important," says the 28-year-old Dane.

"In truth, Ferguson's side has rarely, in the past six weeks, played the brand of attractive attacking football that is expected by Old Trafford regulars"



“The quality we have been showing in defence since the Man City game has been scary as well. I thought the defence was absolute world class [against Villa] and also think we did pretty well on the offensive part of the game. So we can be pretty satisfied, the only thing is we need to score another goal or two more. Vidic and Ferdinand are world-class players. The competition for those two spots on the team is amazing, it’s scary. [The four of them] are players that could play in most teams in the world.”

Hernández

With Hernández in the side, even a far-from-fluid United retains a threat if Ferguson’s outfit can create enough chances. Goals against Everton, Swansea, and Newcastle secured United seven points that may be crucial in the Premier League title race. The Mexican’s injury comes at a hugely inopportune time given the side’s current form.

The challenge for United now is to turn results into performances, with City winning not only frequently, but with genuine style this season. Roberto Mancini’s men have dropped just four

points in the Premier League, scoring 48 goals in the process. That’s 17 more than United in the same number of fixtures.

Yet, it has certainly been an easier task for United to tighten up at the back post-derby, with Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidić both fit and restored to the centre of Ferguson’s defence, than achieving a more fluid style could be. After all, while United has the attacking talent to match almost any in Europe, experience has shown that sacrificing central midfield solidity for attacking fluidity results in the opposition creating more chances.

“You always want to score more goals, of course, but I don’t think it’s a concern,” adds Carrick.

“It’s about winning games and it’s a good sign that we can win games like that. We haven’t been at our best but there’ll be a point in the season when everything will come easily. We’ll score some more goals because of the talent in our team. We believe we can do that, but at this time it is about grafting, sticking together and showing a lot of character.

“We are happy, we weren’t at our best but three points is nice. The football wasn’t as fluent or easy on the eye as it could have been but 1-0 is a win and we’ll take that. At this stage of the season it is about picking up points and wins – judge where we are by Christmas and we’ll kick on from there.”

It’s a message that supporters want to believe: that United can combine both the attacking football of the late summer, with the defensive nous of the past six weeks. Yet, with Fergie still reliant on numbers to compete in midfield, it is a goal to be achieved in hope, rather than expectation. For the time being United fans must accept winning football that is not necessarily achieved the ‘United way’. **EB**

LEFT NEMANJA VIDIC
ABOVE PHIL JONES

HAYTON'S

FOCUS ON YOUTH

In the second focus on youth of the season, Rant Monthly looks at the key issues concerning young players at Manchester United today. **Dan Bowman** asks whether, with the first team struggling for rhythm and club short of money, Sir Alex Ferguson should gamble on young stars Ravel Morrison and Paul Pogba. Continuing the theme **Ed Barker** asks why the great Scot has failed to give young players a chance in this season's Carling Cup. Sean Geraghty looks at a hot prospect for the future: Irish U21 international Robbie Brady. And we say hello to new signing Andrea Pereira.





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Time fo



DAN BOWMAN In the past few weeks, despite Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson's assertions to the contrary, it has become obvious that the club simply does not possess a central midfield pairing worth talking about positively. Despite the early pace set by youngsters Tom Cleverley and Anderson, United has few central midfield options that can challenge domestic rivals such as Manchester City and Arsenal, let alone those of Barcelona and Bayern Munich. This is especially true since the pair's lengthy injury absence took hold.

In contrast to Cleverley's performances during the late summer, the growing dissatisfaction with Michael Carrick continues around Old Trafford. Although the Geordie's performance

against Swansea City 10 days ago was an improvement, it was a 'needle in a haystack' full of dismal showings. Carrick's lack of pace and dynamism, as well as his predictability and defensive frailties, remains a source of frustration for many followers of the club.

Indeed, even the once revered 'Scottish player', Darren Fletcher, has begun to bear the brunt of some criticism for his lack of guile and, at times, poor passing. Despite the Scot's enduring endeavour, Fletcher has never been the most proficient player technically. Too often this has been apparent over the last two years. One can attribute Fletcher's muted displays to

a prolonged period on the sidelines due to illness, but what is now clear is that there is little more to come from the player that fans have not already seen. Fletcher's game is no longer improving rapidly, and worse, his form has begun to stagnate.

Cleverley

Anderson and Cleverley started brightly this season; the pair was simply magnificent during August and early September. Cleverley was a breath of fresh air, while Anderson had seemingly found a partner who could bring out the best in the Brazilian. Since then both players have picked up long-term injuries combined with the loss of form of Anderson. To many, Cleverley's absence until Christmas

could be the downfall of United's trophy ambitions this season.

It is rare that a player is missed so much at United. Rarer still that this is true of Cleverley while he remains a rookie. After all, when Cristiano Ronaldo left the club, United survived. Ditto Cantona and a host of other stars. Yet, without the young Englishman's presence, the Reds have seemingly very few options of quality in the creative midfield role. Some say that Ryan Giggs' return from injury could be the team's saviour, but for many that sentiment is a sad reality for a club of United's stature. Reliance on a 37-year-old veteran, who can barely manage two games in a week, to be the creative driving force says much.

Youth

Then there is youth, perhaps the only stone left unturned by Ferguson in the search for the right midfield balance. The Scot has forever championed the use of youngsters, yet Paul Pogba and Ravel Morrison remain reserve team players at best. To many supporters the situation is increasingly frustrating, with Morrison displaying more creativity against Aldershot Town in the Carling Cup last month than many of United's regular central midfielders have done in years.

The much-troubled player has been hailed by observers as potentially the best in a generation, and despite this is still waiting in the wings. Granted, it is very early in Morrison's career for the 18-year-old to be playing against the very best, but his services need to be better utilised in the games against so-called lesser sides.

It was positive, then, that the pair appeared against Crystal Palace in the Carling Cup, even if neither started the match. After all, Ferguson has tended to use this season's tournament to offer fringe players some game time, rather than exploit youth. Many predicted that Morrison and Pogba would start against both Leeds United and Aldershot in the earlier rounds. They did not.

r youth

"I think the League Cup has turned into quite a good tournament," adds Ferguson.

"Clubs like United are able to introduce young players and ones who have not been playing regularly in the first team and it's been good to us over the years. We've won two finals at Wembley with young players, which is good going, and I think it's become an important tournament for us in terms of getting the youngsters an introduction into winning and having an understanding of the progress they're making."

Morrison

Indeed, Morrison's performance against Palace was marred only by particularly insufficient outing as a team. The midfielder was bright in parts, but as Ferguson highlighted post-match, it was a hard game to join as a substitute when few others were contributing. The young Englishman found himself in good positions, but lacked support from his teammates to revive United's fortunes on the night.

It was a similar story with the highly rated Frenchman Pogba. The player is reportedly

"Given United's tough FA cup draw there may be few opportunities for Pogba and Morrison in the months to come"

considering his options due to a lack of first team football (and the inevitable requirement for a large pay rise). And where he might see the stadium lights at the Emirates, for example, his chances remain few and far between at Old Trafford. Pogba was also given a chance against the south London side and acquitted



himself reasonably well in a tough situation. The 18-year-old nearly crashed in a long range shot almost shortly after Darren Ambrose had given Palace the lead, but was to be denied by a deflection. The Palace game was, in parts, an unfair test for the youngster in his pursuit of further first team action due to his lack of time in the game, as well as the lack of quality around him.

Neither of the pair is genuinely ready to push United to a new level, but each warrants Christmas outings against weaker opposition such as Wigan Athletic and Blackburn Rovers.

The issue is hot topic for many critics. The failure to sign Wesley Sneijder, or another leading midfield name, during the course of the previous summer was always going to be Ferguson's shortcoming this season. And while this may be true, if there are none of the right midfield players are currently available at a price the

club is willing to spend, then somebody else must be offered the chance. Yet, for many fans the sight, for example, of Ji-sung Park chasing shadows in the centre of midfield, or Wayne Rooney's immense talent wasted as a defensive midfielder, is beyond frustrating.

It is clear that Cleverley has the potential to be one of the world's best players in the years to come. The player's handful of games for the club has already demonstrated all the qualities that Ferguson needs, even if the youngster has too often been injured in his short career. But as Cleverley's rise illustrates, sometimes Ferguson gains much from taking a chance on the players at his disposal.

In the meantime a conundrum lies ahead of Ferguson in January's transfer window: will the Scot be able to tie both players down on long-term deals, and if so will they then go out on loan? Sir Alex has previously ruled out a move for Pogba and Morrison, but given United's tough FA cup draw and no more Carling Cup ties then there may be limited opportunities for the pair in the months to come. **DB**

ABOVE RAVEL MORRISON

The great Irish hope: Robbie Brady



the 16-year-old Brady's signature at the time.

Brady, a left sided midfielder, was inevitably hailed as the "new Ryan Giggs" when United signed him. At this club, there is no higher praise for a young player. And it didn't take long for the youngster to make his mark in the youth set-up, impressing in the 2009 Milk Cup in Northern Ireland as United won the Premier section. Brady has also shone for United's academy side with bursting runs down the flank, high quality crossing, and a deft finish or two, which even earned the player a stint as Academy captain.

Following many younger players learning their trade at Old Trafford, Brady was sent out on loan for seasoning in the current campaign.

SEAN GERAGHTY Two of Ireland's favourites, especially for Reds growing up in Dublin in the 1990's, were Denis Irwin and Roy Keane. Unsurprising, of course. Not only was the pair two of the best in the Republic of Ireland team, they were two of the finest for one of Ireland's favourite clubs, Manchester United. For many, Irwin was the best left-back ever seen in a United shirt, and that is some praise indeed. Irwin's sharp tackling, marauding runs, and cannon of a right-foot made the Cork-born player a complete defender. Meanwhile, Keane's sheer bloody-mindedness, leadership, and talent made the player one of the best midfielders of his generation.

Indeed, United's history with Ireland is strong, with the club enjoying healthy support in the Republic. More than 30 players from the Republic of Ireland have turned out for the Reds over the years.

Yet, since Keane and Irwin left Old Trafford earlier this decade there hasn't been a great Irish player in the United team. True, John

O'Shea, a very competent player for whom many were sad to see go, spent a decade in Manchester. But O'Shea never reached the level of his predecessors; a great player for Ireland, but not for United. There were other Irishmen who have passed through, but never quite made it, such as Paul McShane, Liam Miller, and Darron Gibson. The latter is likely to move on during the winter transfer window.

Brady

But now there's a player tipped for huge things at Old Trafford – a new Irish hope – 19-year-old Dubliner Robbie Brady. Described by Kevin Keegan as a player who "has everything," and currently turning heads on loan at Hull City in the Championship, Brady joined the United Academy in 2008, having already representing Ireland at U-17 level. Around 15 Premier League clubs were after

Like Danny Welbeck and Tom Cleverley before him, Brady has joined the conveyor belt from youth team, to Championship loan and then potentially Ferguson's first team. Moreover, in the Championship, Brady has been seen by a wider audience, and has stepped his game up accordingly, impressing fans and pundits alike. ESPN's Keegan and Robbie Savage are two commentators who have been lauding the young Irishman's efforts, tipping him as one of the brightest players at Championship level.

Brady made a strong start to his Hull career, scoring a fine goal against Liverpool in the Tigers' 3-0 pre-season friendly win. The Dubliner has continued to impress in his early Championship games for Hull, even

"Brady has the raw talent to make it as a United player: a swift, attack-minded, confident, skilful winger, with clever feet and a footballing brain that fits into the United mould"

ABOVE AND RIGHT

ROBBIE BRADY

netting a winning goal against Reading in his fifth competitive game. He has made 18 appearances to date, starting 16 of them.

Form

However, Brady suffered a slight dip in form during November, with former Hull manager Nigel Pearson citing fatigue as the cause, reminding fans that the player is still only 19, and this is his first full season of football. Brady's stamina and fitness will need to improve, and each has been a concern going back to the reserves under Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, who noted that: "we've just got to work on his fitness and, if we can get him super fit, then he'll be a very, very good player." Encouraging words, and at a club such as United, there are the facilities to fix the problem.

The rigors of top flight football are much more demanding than the reserves of course, but these are standard growing pains for a young 'up-and-comer'. Fitness is likely to hamstring Brady less as he acclimates to the Championship. Indeed, after a short rest the player's performance for the Irish under-21s recently showed that he's still just as talented as hoped.

Worse was to come for the Dubliner, with Brady shown a straight red card for a challenge on Dan Harding during Hull's recent 2-1 defeat to Southampton at St Mary's, although caretaker manager Nick Barmby defended the player: "I don't think it was a sending-off. I've had a look at it again and I do not agree with the decision." It seems unlikely to hold the player back.

Should Brady continue his progress there is no limit to where the youngster could go – a place in Sir Alex Ferguson's first team squad is not out of the question next season. If not, a loan to a Premier League club is inevitable as the player looks to step up a level.

Irish youth

Brady has also climbed through the Irish youth ranks, scoring plenty of goals along the way. Now at under-21 level, Brady has hit five in as many games, two of which came in the recent 2-1 friendly win over Lichtenstein. As a stand-out player at age-group level, Brady is being widely tipped to become one of the finest Irish players of his generation. He'll soon get a chance to shine with the full national side too,

although he is unlikely to make Ireland's Euro 2012 squad.

Brady has the raw talent to make it as a United player: a swift, attack-minded, confident, skilful winger, with clever feet and a footballing brain fits into the United mould. And while many United supporters are justifiably excited about Ravel Morrison, Paul Pogba and Ryan Tunnicliffe, many over the Irish sea will be keeping a special eye on Brady's progress.

For Dublin-based Reds, he is the great Irish hope. **SG**

Robbie Brady factfile

Born 14 January 1992, Dublin, Republic of Ireland

- 1998-8 St Kevin's Boys
- 2008-11 United (academy)
- 2011- Hull City, 18 apps, 1 goal
- 2005-8 Ireland U17, 5 apps
- 2008-10 Ireland U19, 5 apps, 2 goals
- 2010- Ireland U21, 5 apps, 5 goals



Reds welcome Andreas Pereira, but say goodbye local talent?



Manchester United supporters might be forgiven for welcoming yet another highly rated youth prospect to Old Trafford with a grudging nod. After all, while United's policy of hoovering up the very finest youth talent, especially creative midfielders, is a prudent one, the here-and-now also matters such is the shambles of the Reds' central midfield at times in the past two seasons. Yet, another 'prospect' it is, with confirmation that Brazilian-born Belgian teenager Andreas Hoelgebaum Pereira will join the club 1 January 2012, the day he turns 16.

Pereira, an attacking playmaker who can be deployed in midfield or as a shadow striker, will join from PSV Jugend, Eindhoven's academy side, for nominal compensation. The player has agreed a three-and-a-half year deal with United.

Starting out at KVSK Lommel in Belgium before moving to PSV aged nine, Pereira has developed a reputation as one of Europe's finest youth talents. He has been reportedly contacted by most of Europe's leading clubs

and played in the Nike Manchester Premier Cup this past summer.

"I am an offensive midfielder, a real 10," Pereira told *De Telegraaf*. "Setting up my team mates, scoring and a good shot are my qualities. PSV knew that I was talking with some clubs and they respected my choice. I had some doubts but at the end Manchester United is my dream team to play for. I have been a few times to Manchester United to have a look. I got a tour and spoke to Sir Alex Ferguson. Being a 15-year-old, to talk with such a man was great."

Son of Pereira

The 15-year-old is the son of Marcos Pereira, a retired Brazilian striker who played in Europe for BSC Young Boys, Mechelen, Sint-Truidense and Royal Antwerp. Indeed, Pereira senior appeared alongside Phil Bardsley, Eddie Johnson, Souleymane Mamam and Dong Fangzhuo for Antwerp in the 2003-4 season. Junior's team-mate Zakaria Bakkali was recent linked with move to Manchester City, although his signature is equally sought-after. Bakkali won this year's Manchester United Premier Cup 'Most Valuable Player' award. It was a tournament whose final was played at Old Trafford of all places, and one which

has previously featured the da Silva brothers, Andreas Iniesta, Cesc Fabregas, Robinho, Theo Walcott, Lionel Messi and a host of household names.

Belgian youth

Pereira will join a growing Belgian youth international contingent in Manchester, including Marnick Vermijl, Charni Ekangamene and Adnan Januzaj - as well as Richie De Laet who is currently on loan at Norwich City. Meanwhile, United has previously raided Holland for Dutch youth winger Gyliano van Velzen, who starred in the Academy's run to FA Youth Cup victory last season, along with Ravel Morrison, Paul Pogba and Will Keane. United have previously signed Ruud van Nistelrooy, Jaap Stam and Park Ji-sung from PSV Eindhoven.

The midfielder is the latest in a long line of imports into United's academy, which although boasts a good percentage of local players, is increasingly internationalised. There are now 16 players from outside the British Isles in the club's reserve and academy teams. Pereira may well compete for the attacking midfielder's role with another recent acquisition, the Norwegian Mats Møller Dæhli. This contrasts starkly with the class on '92 - an all British Isles affair.

Indeed, United's search for value has taken the club's youth scouts to all corners of the globe, including Pereira's fraternal homeland Brazil. In recent seasons Anderson, Rodrigo Possebon, and the da Silva twins have all appeared in Sir Alex Ferguson's first team - to varying degrees of success. While Anderson arrived via Porto at astonishing expense the latter trio joined directly from their homeland for little more than loose change in compensation. It's a policy that legendary coach Carlos Alberto called the "rape of Brazilian football." The

1970 World Cup winning right-back has demanded that FIFA outlaw youngsters moving abroad before the age of 21 but to United it is a simple financial equation; the club spent €30 million on Anderson and less than 10 per cent of that on the da Silvas.

Brazilian connection

Far from heeding the 67-year-old's words, United expanded the policy in 2009, inking deals with sports management firm Traffic and the agency's Porto Feliz-based 'academy' Deportivo Brasil. Squaring the circle through a partnership with Dutch club FC Twente Enschede, United now intends to bring young Brazilians to Europe and enable them to qualify for either a European passport or a UK work permit if selected for the national team.

Five Traffic players attended United's 1-0 victory over Bolton Wanderers towards the end of April 2011. Alongside coach Osmar Loss, midfielders Gladstony, Rafael Leão, Agnaldo and Lucas Evangelista, and striker Aguilar watched the match. Gladstony is officially a United player, although on loan to Twente until June 2012. He is likely to extend his stay while awaiting a European passport. Leão is currently 'on loan' with United, with a view to a permanent deal. The quintet has pedigree too, with Aguilar breaking into the same Brazilian under-17 side from which both Rafael and Fabio graduated three years ago.

There is no hiding United's attempt to bypass the UK work permit system either. Much as many Premier League sides have similar relationship - Chelsea has a deal with PSV Eindhoven, and Arsenal previously with Beveren, for example. Non-EU nationals are

required to have played in 75 per cent of their country's internationals over the past two years or pass a special "exceptional talent" exemption that is widely abused. It's a road United has not required for the da Silva twins, who have Portuguese passports, while Possebon obtained Italian citizenship before returning to his homeland summer 2010. Anderson and Mexican Javier Hernández each qualified under the exceptional talent provision though. It's a wonder why the work permit rules exist at all when leading clubs so openly flout them.

Neither is the quintet the first group from Deportivo Brasil to attend training at United over the past two years. The Brazilian 'club' has more than 120 youngsters aged between 13 and 20 on the books, with Traffic maintaining 100 per cent ownership of the boys' economic rights. It's the kind of third-party ownership that is now banned in the Premier League, but seen previously in the transfers of Carlos Tevez and Javier Mascherano.

While the financial terms of the club's involvement is unclear, United will have to pay Traffic a transfer fee should any of the boys sign at Old Trafford. It is also not unreasonable to assume that the club is already paying Twente or Traffic, or both, in lieu of the boys' wages.

Twente

Yet the Dutch club claims there is no agreement to fast track the players into the first team, where the standard is presumably higher than at Royal Antwerp, where United have previously sent more than a dozen



United players over the past decade. It is a relationship that has, at times, aided United's younger players, but has not served the Reds well in terms of circumventing UK work-permit laws. Hence, United's agreement with Twente is seemingly different. Ferguson is not expected to send fringe players out on loan, but a stream of young Brazilians could well work their way through Twente and on either to United or other European clubs.

Many, if not most will fail though, thousands of miles from home and without a local support network. United's response will dictate history's judgement, not solely how many players make it into Ferguson's team. Football's ability to discard the unwanted player without a moment's hesitation suggests the club will behave with financial considerations first. The results can be tragic. Pereira can only hope he is one of the successes. **EB**



ABOVE ANDREAS PEREIRA

LEFT TRAFFIC'S YOUTH 'CLUB' DEPORTIVO BRASIL

Is Fergie holding back the kids?



When Sir Alex Ferguson transplanted the 'class of '92', from the youth cup winners, to a third round League Cup tie away to Port Vale in September 1994, the Scot pioneered the concept of bleeding youngsters in the competition. Ferguson, deploying a team aged just 22 years on average, sent Paul Scholes, Gary Neville, Keith Gillespie, David Beckham, Simon Davies, and John O'Kane to Vale Park, securing a 2-1 victory.

In the face of intense scrutiny for the decision that night, Ferguson was effectively accused of devaluing the 51-year-old tournament.

ABOVE THE CLASS OF '92

Today, few leading clubs roll out the first team in the league cup's early rounds, paying homage to Ferguson's vision, while the media no longer questions the policy. In that there is a compliment to the Scot's pioneering vision of what is now universally recognised as a squad game.

"If you go back to that season when Scholes made his debut, the gaffer got slaughtered for it," says former United defender David May, who at 24 was one of the elder statesmen of Ferguson's side at Vale park.

"But you look now and everybody does it. They use the competition to blend in their youngsters. Yet the manager got slaughtered

for it years ago. As soon as you sign professional forms you've got the right to play for anybody. The Carling Cup has been a great breeding ground for United. The manager gets that blend of youth and experience right. It is fantastic for a 20-year-old playing at United and winning. And it's all down to the manager trusting young players. He only plays them because he trusts them. He always has. He's done it since I was there."

Yet, for all the credit Ferguson has gained by integrating young players into many United sides over the past 25 years it is a perverse quirk that the Scot has offered last season's winning FA Youth Cup team few chances in the current Carling Cup campaign. Much



Frenchman’s stubborn refusal to sign a new contract with the club. Even if the motivation for the currently stalled round of talks is primarily financial, progress is also important to younger pros impatient to make a mark. Indeed, when Ferguson claimed, earlier this summer, that he had not dipped into the market for fear of stalling Pogba’s development the Scot’s thoughts may have been more prescient than many first understood.

Yet did Ferguson gain more by ensuring Park Ji-Sung, Diouf and Gibson were 90 minutes match sharper than he may have by handing Pogba his first start for the club? Or Morrison, Will Keane, Larnell Cole or several others now chomping at the bit.

Morrison’s bright half against Palace was one of the very few positives to emerge from a disastrous result at Old Trafford. Historically the Scot gets very

little of this balancing act wrong, but Ferguson will have learned little about Diouf, who will never make it at United, or Dimitar Berbatov, whose future is still the subject of speculation. Either of whom could have made way for Morrison’s first start in the first team, yet did not. It is atypical of Ferguson’s history with the league cup.

Youth system

Ferguson, though, rejects this assertion, believing that the conveyor belt running from youth team, through reserves, to the Scot’s premier group, is looping at the optimal speed.

“The monitoring system here is good and there’s a lot of consistency with our Academy staff,” claimed Sir Alex in the December edition of Inside United.

“These are guys that have been here a long time and know what to look for. When somebody like Paul McGuinness comes to me and says: ‘He’s a first-team player’, then I know to keep a special eye on the player. From there, we’ll bring the boy into first-team training for a couple of sessions. That’s what we’re doing at the moment with Paul Pogba, Ravel Morrison, Jesse Lingard, Zeki Fryers, Larnell Cole and Michael Keane.

“That allows me to see how they cope playing against seasoned professionals, it lets me judge their temperament. It allows me to get a far better picture of how they’re progressing.

ABOVE VILLAREAL’S GIUSEPPE ROSSI

against the perceived norm the boss has, instead, preferred to deployed senior fringe players. The most talented group of United’s youngsters for a generation is seemingly out in the cold when it comes to the first team, with fringe pros requiring minutes given priority.

This season’s policy must genuinely be a frustrating one for the youngster’s involved, with Paul Pogba and Ravel Morrison much talked about, but rarely seen in a first team shirt despite the manager, unusually, singling the pair out for praise this season. Such is the wealth of Ferguson’s squad resources perhaps. But while the Scot’s policy is pragmatic, balancing the need to keep senior players happy and match fit, it has restricted opportunities for those whose star is on the rise, while seemingly entrenching an age-based squad hierarchy.

Pragmatism

Indeed, Ferguson’s Carling Cup policy this season, while pragmatic, could have negative consequences for half-a-dozen youth teamers, while offering little upside to the squad’s fringe.

Manchester United’s 2-1 defeat to Crystal Palace in this season’s competition is a case in point, with Mame Biram Diouf and Darron Gibson starting for the home side. United tried to offload both in the past summer, while neither is likely to last at Old Trafford beyond the winter transfer window, let alone expect deployment in the important games to come during the run-in. In the pair’s selection on Wednesday Ferguson opted to cover his bases should a short-term injury crisis hit, rather than blood youngsters who may become United’s future.

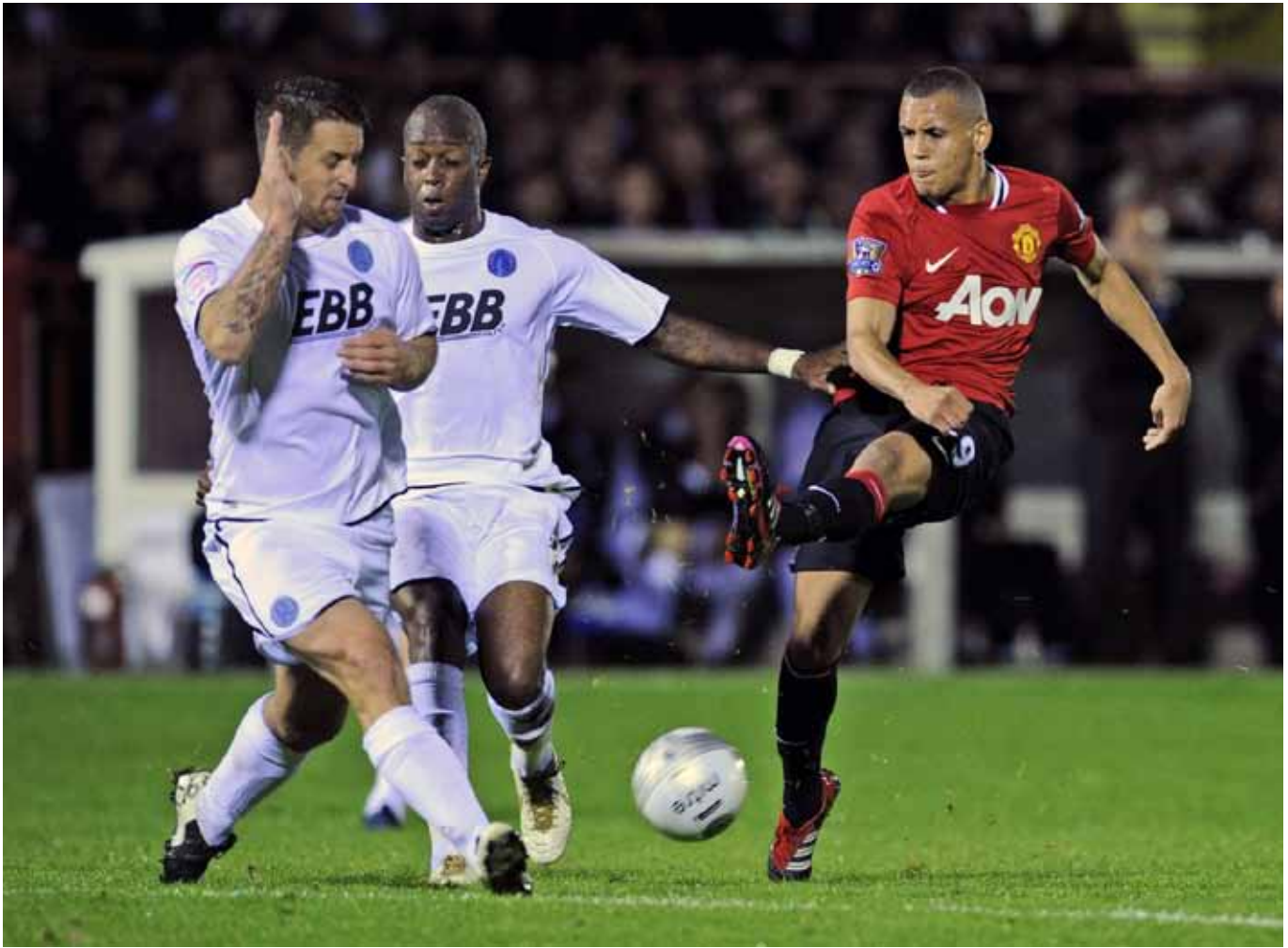
More dangerous still failure to offer younger players time in the first team may well lead to a talent drain. Much as Giuseppe Rossi and Gerard Piqué left for greener pastures in previous years, so too could others if a path to the first team does not materialise. While Rossi and Piqué have developed into stars of genuine class away from Old Trafford, Ferguson’s inability to find space in his team for the pair made the decision for both player and club seemingly straightforward. This backfired on club, not the players, with around £50 million worth of talent leaving for

less than a quarter of that amount.

Pogba

Fast forward to the present day and French midfielder Pogba’s frustration at a lack of progress in the past three years may yet play a part in the

“Much as Giuseppe Rossi and Gerard Piqué left for greener pastures in previous years, so too could others if a path to the first team does not materialise”



And, while this is going on, you hope they're playing well for the Reserves and displaying the right attitude and enthusiasm. Players are never simply thrown into first-team action."

In posing the question of whether it is more valuable to play youngsters, or maintain squad morale and fitness, there should be no assumption that younger players are ready for the first team in Premier or Champions League action. Morrison and Pogba, for example, are probably not. But, with the pair retained at Old Trafford this season, there is little more either is going to learn from reserve team football either.

There is, of course, much to learn for the star pair. Morrison's off-the-field temperament has frequently come under question, with the 18-year-old having seen the inside of a court on three occasions over the past 18 months. He was handed a referral order for witness intimidation in 2010.

Pogba, meanwhile, has been singled out for a more limited range of passing than is acceptable for a first team player at United. It is something new reserve coach Paul Scholes is determined to correct in a player many at Old Trafford believe is a future world star.

"He is a big, strong player. His skill is brilliant, as are his physique and speed," adds Scholes.

"The one thing that he probably needs to tidy up a little bit is his passing, but once that comes right, he's potentially a top-class player. He came on against Leeds [in the Carling Cup] and did really well."

Meanwhile, Ferguson described Morrison as a "very talented boy" recently. High praise and insight into the club's continuing patience with the Wythensaw-born midfielder

Yet, neither is likely to see the first team again this side of Christmas. In the meantime Ferguson has bigger fish to fry in the Premier and Champions Leagues, with a run of six winnable games coming up domestically, and a crucial tie with FC Basel in Europe. But come January, and the FA Cup third round tie against Manchester City, Ferguson may well again need to choose between his squad's fringe, and his talented youngsters. Supporters will, of course, want Ferguson to deploy his strongest side. Pogba, Morrison and the rest will hope that a return to 1994 is on the cards. **EB**

Factfile

Paul Pogba:
Born Lagny-sur-Marne, France, 15 March 1993

1999-06	Roissy-en-Brie			
2006-07	Torcy			
2007-09	Le Havre			
2009-11	United	3 apps	0 goals	
2008-09	France U16	17	(1)	
2010	France U17	10	(2)	
2010-11	France U18	6	(1)	
2011-	France U19	5	(0)	

Ravel Morrison:
Born Wythenshawe, Manchester, 2 February 1993

2009-10	United	3	0	
2008	England U16	1	(1)	
2009	England U17	3	(0)	
2010-	England U18	0	(0)	

ABOVE RAVEL MORRISON

RIGHT ONE THAT GOT AWAY, GERARD PIQUE



Reds face up to Euro disaster

(but this is nothing like 2005)

The last time Sir Alex Ferguson's side failed to make it out of the Champions League group stages all hell broke loose at Old Trafford. Defeated by Benfica at Estádio da Luz on 7 December 2005, Manchester United finished bottom of Group D, avoiding ignominious relegation to the UEFA Cup. Then, as now, the Reds faced, on paper at least, an eminently winnable qualification group. Yet, Ferguson's outfit dropped points against Lille, Villarreal and the Portuguese side, leaving Ferguson red faced, and United out of Europe's premier competition in 2005.



The dark clouds of defeat not only hung over United's European campaign but the domestic one as well. The defeat to Benfica in Lisbon had followed an equally tedious display against Lille in Paris, after which Ferguson had sought – unfairly – to blame the Stade de France pitch for the Reds' 1-0 loss. Four days earlier, Middlesbrough had hammered United 4-1 at the Riverside in what many still regard as one of the most humiliating losses in Ferguson's reign. The manager appeared, on the surface at least, to hold no answers to United's struggles.



In between Euro defeats, the tension between captain Roy Keane and the boss had reached its zenith, with the Irishman effectively sacked on 18 November. Keane - whose contract due to expire the following summer, having already voiced his willingness to play elsewhere, went on to name and shame his failing United teammates in a now infamous (and unaired) MUTV interview. Keane and Ferguson had already clashed in pre-season over preparations at a Portuguese training camp. This later escapade simply ensured the midfielder's expedited departure to Celtic.



The media fallout was equally certain. Doom-laden headlines appeared in most papers, and very public questions were aired regarding

Ferguson's ability, energy and willingness to turn United's apparent decline around. After all, failure in Europe during the 2005/6 season capped a relatively barren period for the club. Chelsea captured that season's League title by eight points, having finished the previous title race some twelve points ahead of the Reds. Moreover, Arsenal had taken the Premier League title in 2003/4, finishing a staggering fifteen points ahead of Ferguson's limited side. Supporter anger, brewing since the Glazer takeover the previous summer, was only exacerbated by United's football in the winter of 2005, which was all too often turgid in nature, with Ruud van Nistelrooy ploughing a lone furrow up front and Wayne Rooney frequently consigned to a wide role. It is no wonder some fans began to express their anger in writing.

Criticism

"It is an increasingly inescapable conclusion that, unwittingly or otherwise, Ferguson is winding down, a prizefighter who no longer has the stomach or the wit for an admittedly enormous challenge which, once upon a time, he would have fervently inhaled," wrote United supporting journalist Rob Smyth in the *Guardian*.

"Like he did with Liverpool. Ferguson's almost maniacal yearning to "knock Liverpool off their f***ing perch" was arguably the single most important factor in United's 1990s renaissance. It makes it all the more vicious an irony that, 10 years later, he should knock United off the perch he had made for them through increasingly rank mismanagement."

Six years on, four Premier League titles and a European trophy later, this expression of frustration has proven embarrassingly wrong. Yet, in the gloom of Euro exit and loss of domestic dominance, it was not obvious that

ABOVE REDS IN 2005 AND 2011

RIGHT SIR ALEX FERGUSON

the groundwork was being laid for future success. Smyth's was not the only voice of concern: a similar sentiment had been expressed by your writer months earlier in the same outlet.

Spending

The inevitable question now is whether United, being heavily outspent by Chelsea and Manchester City domestically, and on the verge of European failure, will repeat the twin disappointments of the 2005/6 domestic and European campaigns? Qualification from Group C is certainly not guaranteed. After all, FC Basel gave the Reds a genuine game at Old Trafford, scoring three times in a well-earned draw. In the hot-house atmosphere of St. Jakob-Park on 7 December[,] the Reds could conceivably fail. While United's defensive nous on the road ought to earn at least the draw needed to go through to the knockout rounds, few will bet heavily on it.

More to the point, the chances of United securing a second round tie against a European heavyweight is high, with Internazionale, Bayern Munich, Real Madrid and Barcelona all likely to top Champions League groups. Unless whipping boys Otelul Galati secure at least a draw at Benfica[,] United cannot top Group C, and the nation's bookies will weigh the odds in favour of a Euro exit in the New Year.

Yet, if this is to be a season of transition, with the Class of '92 – except for Ryan Giggs – now departed, the groundwork for future success is surely more advanced than in Winter 2005. True, United then had a young Cristiano Ronaldo, whose partnership with Rooney would blossom into a Premiership and Champions League winning force, but the squad also contained plenty of dead wood, including Mikael Silvestre, Kieran Richardson, Alan Smith, and Liam Miller.

Wages

The retirements and player sales in the summer have removed much of the dead wood from last year's side. So today, Ferguson's chief concerns (in ascending order of difficulty) are: 1) to mould Phil Jones, Chris Smalling, the da Silva brothers and David de Gea into a consistent, long-term, defensive unit; 2) find the right blend from the variety



of attacking options he has among the strikers and on the wing; and 3) to assemble a central midfield that can compete at the highest level - a task that may require buying a player or two. As it is, the mediocrity in the centre of United's formation is forcing Ferguson to compromise either United's attacking or defensive cohesion. Too often both.

This concern is not new, of course. Ferguson's failure to adequately replace first Keane and then Owen Hargreaves is utterly dumbfounding. Believing that injury-prone rookie Tom Cleverley would carry United's central midfield load alone this season, and not preparing a 'Plan B', was a glaring strategic error. As was the misplaced trust in players who haven't developed as Ferguson hoped, such as Darron Gibson and Anderson.

In the short-term, the Scot will hope, beyond hope, that captain Nemanja Vidić's return in Switzerland will be accompanied by a fit and in-form Rooney. The pair, arguably United's only 'world class players, should help to postpone Euro humiliation. Until the New Year at least. **EB**

Ferguson's Champions League record

- 1994 - 2nd Rnd - Galatasaray (3-3, away goals)
- 1995 - Group - 3rd place
- 1997 - SF - Borussia Dortmund (0-2)
- 1998 - QF - Monaco (1-1, away goals)
- 1999 - **Winners** - Bayern Munich (2-1)
- 2000 - QF - Real Madrid (2-3)
- 2001 - QF - Bayern Munich (1-3)
- 2002 - SF - Bayer Leverkusen (3-3, away goals)
- 2003 - QF - Real Madrid (5-6)
- 2004 - 2nd Rnd - Porto (2-3)
- 2005 - 2nd Rnd - AC Milan (0-2)
- 2006 - Group - 4th place
- 2007 - SF - AC Milan (3-5)
- 2008 - **Winners** - Chelsea (penalties)
- 2009 - Final - Barcelona (0-2)
- 2010 - QF - Bayern Munich (4-4, away goals)
- 2011 - Final - Barcelona (1-3)
- 2012 - ?

Winners	99, 08
Final	09, 11
SF	97, 02, 07
QF	98, 00, 01, 03, 10
2nd Round	94, 04, 05
Group	95, 05

Glazernomics

Q1 results fuel financial debate



“There is only one Manchester United,” said Richard Arnold, the Reds’ Commercial Director last month. Indeed, the club’s first quarter (Q1) financial results, published in November, once again demonstrated the cash generating monster United has become, with yet another quarter of increased turnover posted. Thanks in part to an aggressive regionalised commercial strategy, the club is generating more income than ever before. Yet amid the Old Trafford back-slapping the truly eye-watering waste enforced on United by the Glazer regime is once again revealed.

United’s Q1 results showed a 17 per cent year-on-year (YoY) increase in revenues to £73.8 million in the quarter, with matchday income up nine per cent, largely thanks to the expanded US tour conducted this past summer. Meanwhile, higher Champions League pool payments led to a 17 per cent YoY increase in media income, with a 22 per cent increase

in commercial income over the same period. The latter is largely thanks to the continued aggressive commercialisation of the United brand, including a £40 million four-year deal struck with DHL to sponsor the Reds’ training kit.

Loss

Amid the positive news, there are also plenty of negatives for the Glazers’ bean counters to ponder. Staff costs grew by 12.2 per cent YoY, with player remuneration increasing despite several senior squad members leaving in the summer. New contracts awarded to Park Ji-Sung, Javier Hernández, Antonio Valencia, Chris Smalling and Tom Cleverley demonstrate that wage inflation is continuing unabated in football no matter what the financial chaos in the wider economy.

All this adds up to a strong EBITDA (earnings before interest, tax, deductions and amortisation) of £19.2 million for the quarter, increasing 30 per cent on the previous year, with a margin of over 26 per cent. Although given that the club has moved to an internationally recognised accounting system, we can discount any charge for amortisation. Meanwhile, United’s cash position, which is typically very cyclical, was down significantly from £151 million at the end of the last financial year in June, to £65 million in Q1.

This comes with no surprise as United’s cash balance is always highest during the summer, while heavy spending on transfers and debt has reduced the pile. The club spent £47.1 million on player transfers during the last window; £21 million on interest and £8.2 million buying properties around Old Trafford. The latter increases the amount of land the club now owns around the stadium,

with no genuine explanation of the strategy forthcoming. They're certainly very expensive car parks.

Although bond debt is almost £100 million less than at its peak, net debt is actually £3 million higher YoY – something not widely reported. In fact in the three months to 30 September, the club posted a £6.9 million accounting loss, in part due to increased financing costs and forex changes – a fact that the Press Association (PA) completely omitted from its widely syndicated report. The cash cow continues to be profitable until debt is factored into the equation.

Balance sheet

Leaving all the dry accounting speak aside, United remains a very strong business, with a balance sheet ruined by debt. Although the Glazer family continues to spend United's cash buying back bonds, and paying themselves 'management fees' (more than £16 million in the final quarter of the last financial year), the hyper-commercialisation of the club continues unabated. United's appeal is global in scope, with brands keen to leverage United's reach to the claimed 330 million fans worldwide. That DHL is spending so much to sponsor the club's training kit underlines the transformation of the club's commercial strategy under the Glazer regime.

Yet, the cost to the club of having the Glazers as owners continues to rise. Including interest spent, management fees paid, and debt repayments made, the family has now cost

the club around £580 million in aggregate over six years, according to blogger Andersred. It's a story of staggering waste – paid for, in large part, by the fans through higher ticket prices. And it is a picture unlikely to change in the near future, with the mooted Asian IPO on hold while global financial markets remain in turmoil.

Criticism

And while the Glazer family draws praise for the aggressive and largely successful commercial strategy, criticism is certainly due elsewhere. The logic of swapping bank debt, at great cost, for bond debt that earns a higher yield has never been explained. Unless, of course, the plan was always to take a very large dividend, before the Glazers were spooked by the 'Green & Gold' movement. Securing seven-year bonds, and buying large chunks back within two years, is equally inexplicable as a coherent financial strategy. It will come as no surprise then that the Manchester United Supporters Trust (MUST) reacted with anger to the latest set of results.

"Revenue continues to grow building on the platform laid down by Sir Alex Ferguson over 25 years of unparalleled success," said MUST CEO Duncan Drasdo.

"However a key concern for supporters is that on top of the hundreds of millions lost in interest and fees resulting from the Glazers' ownership we are now seeing huge amounts of additional money being paid out of the club's cash reserves being spent on buying the

bond debt incurred by the Glazers. That is the Glazers' debt, that they dumped on our debt-free club and they are now using club funds to pay for it. A sum exceeding 'the Ronaldo money' they claimed would remain available for transfers has now been spent and this is on top of the £100s of millions in interest and fees already wasted."

Effect of debt

Even taking into account the approximate £100 million in Corporation Tax saved during the Glazer era, the damaging effect of debt is clear. That United is financially strong enough to survive more than half-a-billion pounds wasted is one thing. The moral, financial and strategic legitimacy of the waste is quite another. Moreover, in the post-Sir Alex Ferguson era, when United will no longer be able to draw on the Scot's brilliance, the club will face a plethora of challenges on and off the pitch. Rival clubs will mirror the Glazers' commercial strategy, potentially eating into United's market share, while the Reds cannot compete with the external wealth brought to Manchester City and Chelsea, let alone the TV revenue secured by European rivals Real Madrid and Barcelona.

This is a truism that many supporters will have to face in the years ahead. **EB**

LEFT GLAZER OUT BANNER
BELOW GLAZER FAMILY



Finding Fergie's replacement



The new “Sir Alex Ferguson Stand” rises high above the Old Trafford pitch; a fitting and imposing memorial to the Scottish coach who transformed Manchester United. Ferguson’s 25 years in charge of the club was celebrated with some emotion last month, with plaudits from fans, the media and the club both genuine and heartfelt. Ferguson deserves it all, of course, having changed the club from the ground up and brought unparalleled success. Ferguson’s quarter century was a feat celebrated in-depth throughout November’s Rant Monthly.

Yet, in celebrating Ferguson’s longevity thoughts turn, inevitably, to the great Scot’s successor. Turning 70 at the month’s end, even Fergie cannot last forever. The succession is a task likely to be led by chief executive David Gill, but with significant input from the great man. Indeed, the manager’s shadow – literal, in some sense given the new stand’s name,

and metaphorical – will loom large over any successor, but especially those for whom success has not always come so regularly. While the new man will work under intense scrutiny – the first defeat will be a crisis; the next potentially job-threatening – he will also work under a completely different executive management regime. Ferguson’s ability to work the transfer market has been hampered by United’s huge corporate debt, but the manager’s pull is still strong. The new man will both be held back by United’s finances, with bond debt due to mature in 2017, and by his own limitations.

The pressure facing the new man was underlined by Gill last month. The man who follows Sir Alex into the Old Trafford hotseat must adhere to a club policy of investing in youth. The chief executive didn’t state that Fergie’s successor must understand the

phrase “there’s no value in the market,” but he wasn’t far short. Like England’s prestigious, but ultimately pointless friendly with Spain in November, it’s all about heritage and tradition. Honest.

“We are a great club whose values go back in history to our heritage to the ’50s and ’60s and the last 25 years with Alex,” Gill told *MUTV*, conveniently forgetting the 70 years of history before Sir Matt Busby took charge of the club in 1948.

“To continue with that, the new manager needs to understand those values and the vision for the club and must buy into that. The important point to make is the new manager, whenever that may be and whomever that

RIGHT CANTONA
ABOVE SIR ALEX FERGUSON STAND

may be, will be taking over a great, great club, in a great, great sport and Alex, in particular, will want to make sure he inherits a great squad. That's our goal – to make sure when the new manager comes in he does have a great squad to work with in terms of age and profile.

“Alex's legacy to United is to my mind very clear – delivering an unprecedented period of success in the Manchester United way. By that, I mean attractive football using young players – both homegrown and buying players when necessary like Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney, but actually developing our own players. That record is there for everyone to see and that legacy is very clear also.”

Transfer policy

In that Gill presumably means a commitment to the current policy of acquiring only younger, cheaper, players in the transfer market, while eschewing fees spent on those over 26. It is a policy that, guided by Ferguson's genius, has allowed the Glazer family to taste success despite largely starving the club of transfer funds. The 'Ronaldo money is available' you see, but the market is 'so over-heated that only young players will do.' In any case, 'United's tradition is to focus on youth, not the transfer market,' forgetting the six occasions on which the club broke the British transfer record during Ferguson's early reign.

Whitewashing of history aside, Ferguson's successor will bring no similar guarantee of success with the same policy. After all, the Scot has squeezed more out of his relatively limited squad over the past five years than any mere mortal could expect to. It is a period in which Ferguson's true worth has genuinely shone through. Without the deluge of talent the class of 1992 brought, or the relative wealth of the early 2000s, Ferguson has still delivered a succession of major trophies. At a time when that club, supporters and manager have all been celebrating Ferguson's 25 years in charge at Old Trafford, this is worth noting.

“I believe in young people,” Ferguson told his favourite media outlet *Sirius XM* in November. “You need a foundation at a football club and that is vital. You can build a first team, but you

“Cantona: a wonderful player, but so much more than that: an inspiration to a generation of youngsters and supporters”

really do need the back-up and the foundation to make it a football club.

“With all the young players that come to us in their formative years, you have got a job to make them good footballers but also to show them how to grow up the right way. Cristiano came to us at 18, just a young lad from Portugal who didn't know the country. But he learned the language, adapted very well and he has turned out fantastically as a human being, just as was the case with the Nevilles, Scholes, Beckhams, Giggs and all those lads.”

Building a legacy

Ferguson's selflessness in building a squad for the future is highly relevant, although there is, of course, strong evidence that the Scot has little choice. With money released this summer largely down to retiring stars removing themselves from the wage bill, Ferguson's successor may well begin life with a serious financial handicap. Rumours that the Glazer family has denied the Scot funds to buy a much needed midfielder this January simply will not go away.

Indeed, of the leading candidates to replace Ferguson, none – save perhaps for Pep Guardiola – has a history of building teams based on home-grown talent, in that the Spaniard has benefited hugely from Barcelona's very long-term policy of investing in La Masia, together with some very deep

pockets for expensive acquisitions. Meanwhile, José Mourinho has largely built a youthful-looking Real Madrid team in the transfer market, while Laurent Blanc, David Moyes, and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer have no such heritage at all.



It all adds up, says Gill, to a “difficult” choice in replacing Ferguson when the Scot retires at some point over the next three years. It probably doesn't require a FIFA-sized committee to work that one out. **EB**

Ferguson's successor?

Front-runners:

Jose Mourinho, Real Madrid
Laurent Blanc, France
David Moyes, Everton

Dark horses:

Pep Guardiola, Barcelona
Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, Molde
Carlos Quieroz, unemployed

Outside bets:

Martin O'Neil, Sunderland
Steve Bruce, unemployed
Mark Hughes, unemployed
Roy Keane, unemployed

Long shots:

Darren Ferguson, Peterborough United
Eric Cantona, New York Cosmos
Bryan Robson, unemployed
Mike Phelan, Manchester United



Fans' Forum: growing up with United

AJAY SMITH As a 20-year old Manchester United fan, I am fortunate to have been introduced to the world of football during the most accomplished period in the club's history. I have enjoyed an era of success that most football fans will not be privileged to experience in their lifetime. The first season I remember vividly is the 1997-8 campaign, culminating in the pain of Arsenal's title win. The second campaign requires no colour, and there are not enough superlatives to describe how the Treble season felt for supporters. And while, in terms of pure, unadulterated euphoria, the dying minutes at Camp Nou may never be surpassed, '99 proved not to be a torturous window to the big time, waiting to slam shut before we could finish indulging in the view, but a preview of things to come.

The subsequent years of success, achieved through the application of exciting, attacking, and often daring football was enough to spoil any young football fan. To have watched a midfield comprising of Ryan Giggs, David Beckham, Paul Scholes and Keane at the height of their abilities is something I will never take for granted. Nor, I would imagine, will any similarly lucky United fan who has since witnessed the exploits of Eric

Djemba-Djemba, Kleberson and Alan Smith, occupying those same roles.

Even the list of acquisitions as 'failures' in the post-millennium United contains players I feel truly privileged to have watched;. Juan Sebastian Verón may never have really settled in Sir Alex Ferguson's side, but he still produced some truly encapsulating moments while wearing the United shirt. In fact, the sombre, 'dark days' between Premier League triumphs in 2003 and 2007 felt so unbearable because of the unimaginative

4-5-1 formations, and uninspiring performances which accompanied them, as much as they did for the absence of silverware, such as the quality of football United fans had become accustomed to. And anyway, as far as the worst spell of your football supporting life goes, four years of European football and top-four finishes, with a Carling Cup thrown in to boot, is hardly enough to irreparably traumatise. That I can call this period a bad patch at all is symbolic of a privileged, United-supporting upbringing, and goes some way to explaining why, as a football supporter, I've always felt something of a superiority complex.

“Ultimately, the coming years will be as enjoyable as we make them ”

regardless of location, allocation, or kick-off times (the latter constantly manipulated to accommodate the whims of Sky).

Even opposing fans who sneered that Old Trafford crowds were dispassionate or uninterested did so with little evidence. While football was becoming more corporate, match-goers in either of the Stretford or Scoreboard ends at Old Trafford knew that accusations of poor vocal support were regularly exaggerated, or even untrue. It was a myth, just like the

one about all real Mancunians supporting Manchester City. United will always be the subject of such myths as long as other teams, fans and pundits continue to resent the success the club enjoys. Continuing superiority bred discontent.

I also loved the fact that I could idolise players. Yes, all football fans can, and often do, idolise the players that grace their team's colours. But I could idolise them as more than just footballers, safe in the knowledge that, in a United squad possessing many local academy graduates, they weren't simply paid mercenaries

or flashy, insubstantial imports, who would leave as soon as Real Madrid came knocking. No, they were 'our' lads. Gary Neville may have been a millionaire, but he was also 'one of us'.

To contrast circumstances then and now though, it is clear the overwhelming sentiment among United supporters has shifted from one of unbridled optimism to uncertainty. It



Growing up, I believed that every intricate detail about being a United fan was unequivocally better than it would have been had I followed another team. Not just because of the domestic dominance or the oft-pretty football that enthralled me as an impressionable child, but as an even more impressionable teenager the quality of our diehard support provided me with similar exuberance. Ignoring the usual stigma attached to such a word when describing football supporters, it was hard not to feel proud of a fan-base that sold out every single away trip,

ABOVE THAT GOAL IN 1999

RIGHT GARY NEVILLE IS A RED

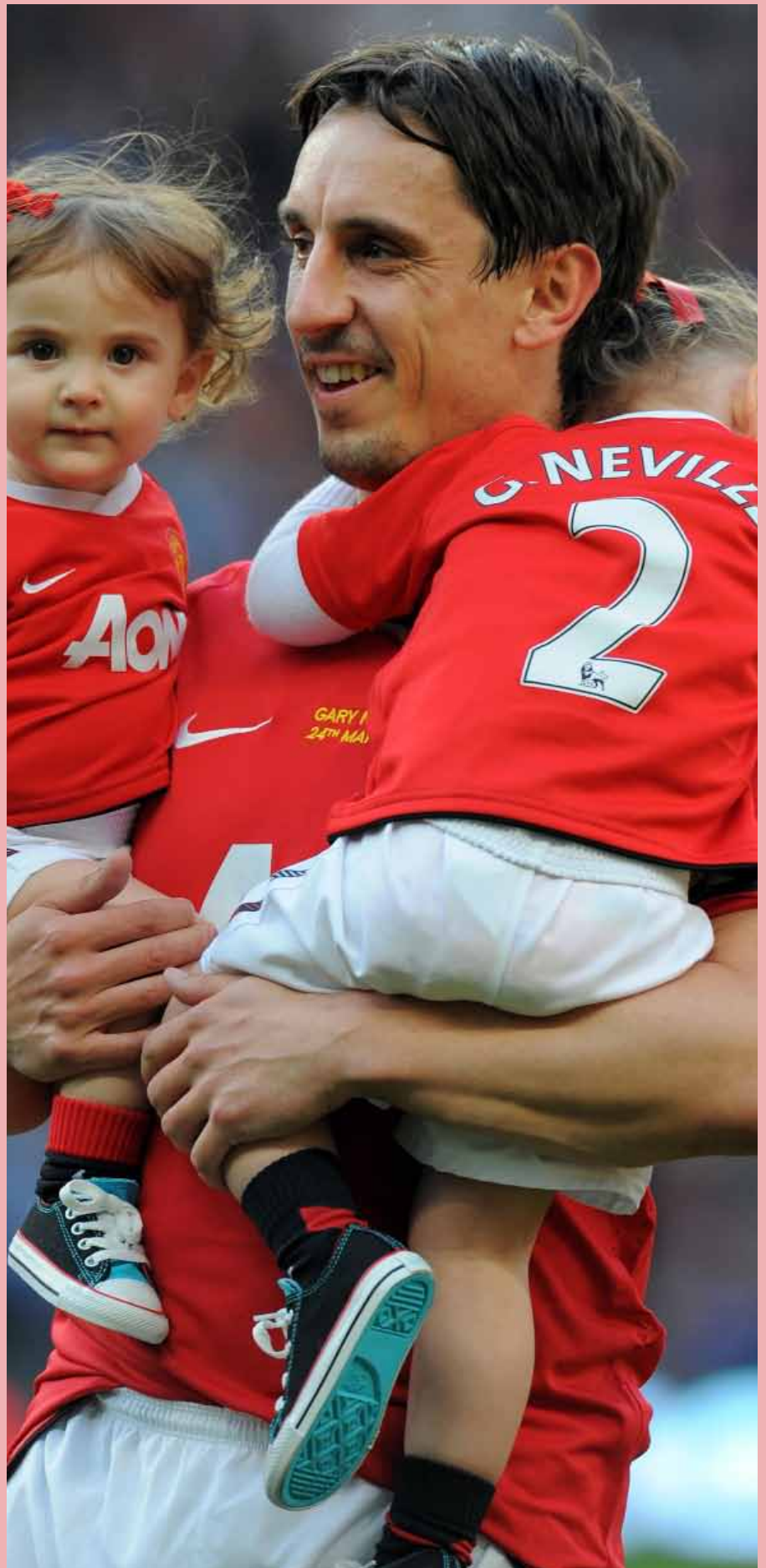
appears increasingly likely that the Sheikhs are in it for the long haul and that City's insurgence will not dissipate. Meanwhile, the nagging doubt remains that United will begin to simultaneously capitulate, due to the club's inability to compete financially, as the Glazers pillage our club unabated. But in such potentially turbulent times it is important to maintain a sense of perspective, and just perhaps, adjust our expectations.

We should appreciate the good football while we still can. Admittedly the quality of football played this season has varied significantly, and there remain those who believe the days of signing world-class players are not yet behind us. But recent disjointed performances, coupled with a failure to invest in a desperately depleted midfield, enforce worries that the future may not be so bright. If this is to be the case, rather than despair that standards are slipping, truly savour the remaining moments of magic which the team produces. After all, the next time you see Dimitar Berbatov masterfully pluck a football out of the air, with nothing more than a flick of his big-toe, it may well be the last.

Should this bleak prophecy be true, and the good football disappears into the ether, fans should not turn on the players. It is not the United way. After all, fans backed David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo in tough times; why should Jonny Evans, for example, be any different?

It is also important to remember that winning isn't everything. City fans have always been the bitter ones – not Reds – and we should not let the roles become reversed in the event that the bookies are correct, and the future dominance of English football is Blue. It is imperative to maintain magnanimity regardless of what the future brings – title number 19 was made all the sweeter by the Scousers' previous jibes. The manner in which Ferguson took United to 19 is ample enough reminder that a club's prestige can change in the time.

In growing up I've come to realise that the days of idolising footballers, or even valuing them for anything more than their ability on the pitch, are long gone. As supporters we cannot impact the quality of football played or quantity of silverware won. But we can control the way we support 'our' team. United fans who have experienced harder times will concur that it is the manner in which we display this support that derives much of the superiority complex we collectively possess. And if preserving our egos is not sufficient enough motivation to banish negativity, preserving our sanity should be; ultimately, the coming years will be as enjoyable as we make them. **AS**





Data point: United's player performance in November

In partnership with the EA Sports Player Performance Index, Rant Monthly uncovers the data behind Manchester United's strong start to the 2011/12 campaign. The EA Sports PPI covers Premier League performance based on a mathematical model developed Dr Ian McHale (a Liverpool fan) and Professor Phil Scarf (a United fan). The index provides objective ratings for players' performances in a match, and over a season, enabling comparisons across positions, and over time, by identifying how much a player genuinely contributes to a team's success. Players are allocated points based on set criteria, including matches won by the team, specific actions during a match, time on the pitch, goals, assists and clean sheets. McHale and Scart have analysed hundreds of matches since the Premier League's inception in order to quantify the relationships between player actions and the match result.

Goalkeepers:

Both David de Gea and Anders Lindegaard have enjoyed a run out in November, with de Gea taking the role between the sticks twice and Lindegaard once in the game against Sunderland at Old Trafford;

Lindegaard had just one save to make in that game, while de Gea has made eight in his games against Newcastle United and Swansea City. Those nine saves across three games show a more stable defence than the one that forced the two goalkeepers into 25 saves across four games in October;

Between them the goalkeepers conceded just one goal in November.

Defence:

After a difficult start to the season dogged by injuries United had something like their first choice back four available throughout

November, with Rio Ferdinand, Nemanja Vidić and Patrice Evra starting every game, while Fabio da Silva and Phil Jones rotated right-back duties;

As a squad United made 17 clearances and 11 blocks in protecting the goal, with nine clearances and seven blocks coming from centre back pairing Ferdinand and Vidić;

United won 54.55 per cent of all tackles in November, winning 18 and losing 15.

Midfield:

United has also been buoyed with the return to form of central midfielders Darren Fletcher and Michael Carrick;

Fletcher has averaged a pass completed in his opponent's half every three minutes 25 seconds in his two appearances in November, while Carrick did so every three minutes six seconds in his three appearances;

Ashley Young also returned against Newcastle and made an instant impact with four efforts at goal (two on target) and delivering eight crosses, almost a quarter of United's total crosses for the month;

Young also put in the highest individual distance covered for a single game in November, clocking up exactly seven miles against Newcastle, although it was the game against Sunderland that saw United put in the most miles overall this month. The team covered a total of 66.51 miles in that game;



Ryan Giggs, meanwhile, continues to roll back the years and put in an incredible 71 passes completed in his opponent's half over two performances, averaging one every two minutes 24 seconds

Strikers:

Of most concern to United fans will be that after a high-scoring start to the season, November has seen United players net just twice in three games (the winner against Sunderland was an own goal by former United defender Wes Brown);

Javier Hernández scored both of those;

Hernández' goals came from ten efforts on goal with six on target, making an accuracy rating of 60 per cent and a chance conversion rating of 20 per cent;

Rooney drew a blank again in November, despite having 13 attempts on goal with nine on target (69 per cent accuracy), though the United striker worked hard for his team mates contributing 109 passes in his opponents area, one every two minutes 37 seconds. **EB**

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PLAYER PERFORMANCE INDEX

How to lose fans, and alienate your manager



Poor Tomasz Kuszczak. Not only is his name nigh on unspellable, at least without Wikipedia's aid, but the Polish goalkeeper has become a last bastion of modern-day slavery. Trafficked from his place of birth in Krosno Odrzańskie, Poland, to Old Trafford, Kuszczak has been asked, no, compelled to play for the world's most supported football club, Manchester United, on no less than 61 occasions. It is a brutal thought.

That Kuszczak has endured this horror five seasons long, comforted only – for what little comfort money can bring – with compensation of £25,000 per week only adds to the indignity of it all. No wonder that it proved all too much for the Pole, who finally cracked after being denied a loan move to Leeds United last month

"I've become a slave to Manchester. I'm frustrated but I don't want to slander or criticise Ferguson," said the 29-year-old stopper, before criticising and then slandering Sir Alex Ferguson.

"It's not my style. I've talked to Ferguson recently. I asked him to let me leave the club now, before the January transfer window. I told him I want to play and get back into the national team, because Euro 2012 is just around the corner – but it seems he doesn't care. The possibility of a two-month loan to Leeds United came up two weeks later. The club blocked it. It was a glimmer of hope for me. It would have reminded the Poland manager about me – but I didn't get the club's approval. I have respect for Ferguson because, for me, he's a great manager, but I hope he will let me go in January."

Fortunately for Kuszczak, whose contract ends in June 2012, there is almost nobody at Old Trafford – fans, players, coaching staff, manager or tea lady – that wants any different for the big-mouthed Pole. It is in this knowledge that the former Hertha Berlin player has become increasingly vocal in his failure to land a more permanent role at United. Five years after joining the Reds from West Bromwich Albion, Kuszczak's inability to land the number on spot in Ferguson's side has surprised few. Save for a brief spell two years ago, when Edwin van der Sar took time off to spend with his sick wife, Kuszczak has rarely looked a man with United-calibre talents.

Moreover, now relegated to fourth choice behind David de Gea, Anders Lindegaard and Ben Amos, Kuszczak's bizarre decision to self-publicise a desired move to Leeds is unlikely

to ingratiate the 'keeper with anybody at the club. Least of all his manager, who has never reacted well to being embarrassed in the media. It is a fact Jaap Stam will recall well. It is a sad end for a stopper, whose talent was bright enough to take him to Old Trafford, but not to propel the player ahead of van der Sar in the pecking order. Ferguson's decision to recruit first Lindegaard, and then De Gea, was the final nail in the coffin of Kuszczak's United career. And in that there is some sympathy. After all, United reportedly asked for £4 million in the past summer – a fee that would have represented a profit on a player, who has never been more than a reserve, and has less than a year to run on his contract.

However, with three Premier League winners' medals – each via special dispensation – two League Cups, three FA Community Shields, the UEFA Champions League and the FIFA Club World Cup, Kuszczak will carry away more silverware than a man of his limited talents would normally. It is a good haul, especially for a player who has completed just one full season in an entire career, and that was just 28 games.

At international level Kuszczak was selected by coach Franciszek Smuda for friendly matches against Romania and Canada last year, but is considered far from first choice. Indeed, the player's 10 caps have been spread over eight years. With Arsenal duo Wojciech Szczesny and Łukasz Fabiański available, it is unlikely Kuszczak was ever going to start Poland's attempt to win Euro 2012 when it kicks off in Warsaw on 8 June 2012, even had a move to Leeds materialised.

Having insulted club and manager, Kuszczak's fate is now out of his own hands. At least until his contract runs down and the 29-year-old can negotiate a free transfer away from his personal hell. **EB**

Tomasz Kuszczak Facts

Hertha BSC, 2001–2004

0 appearances

West Bromwich Albion, 2004–2006

35 appearances

Manchester United, 2007–

61 appearances

Poland, 2003 –

10 appearances

DFB-Ligapokal: 2001, 2002

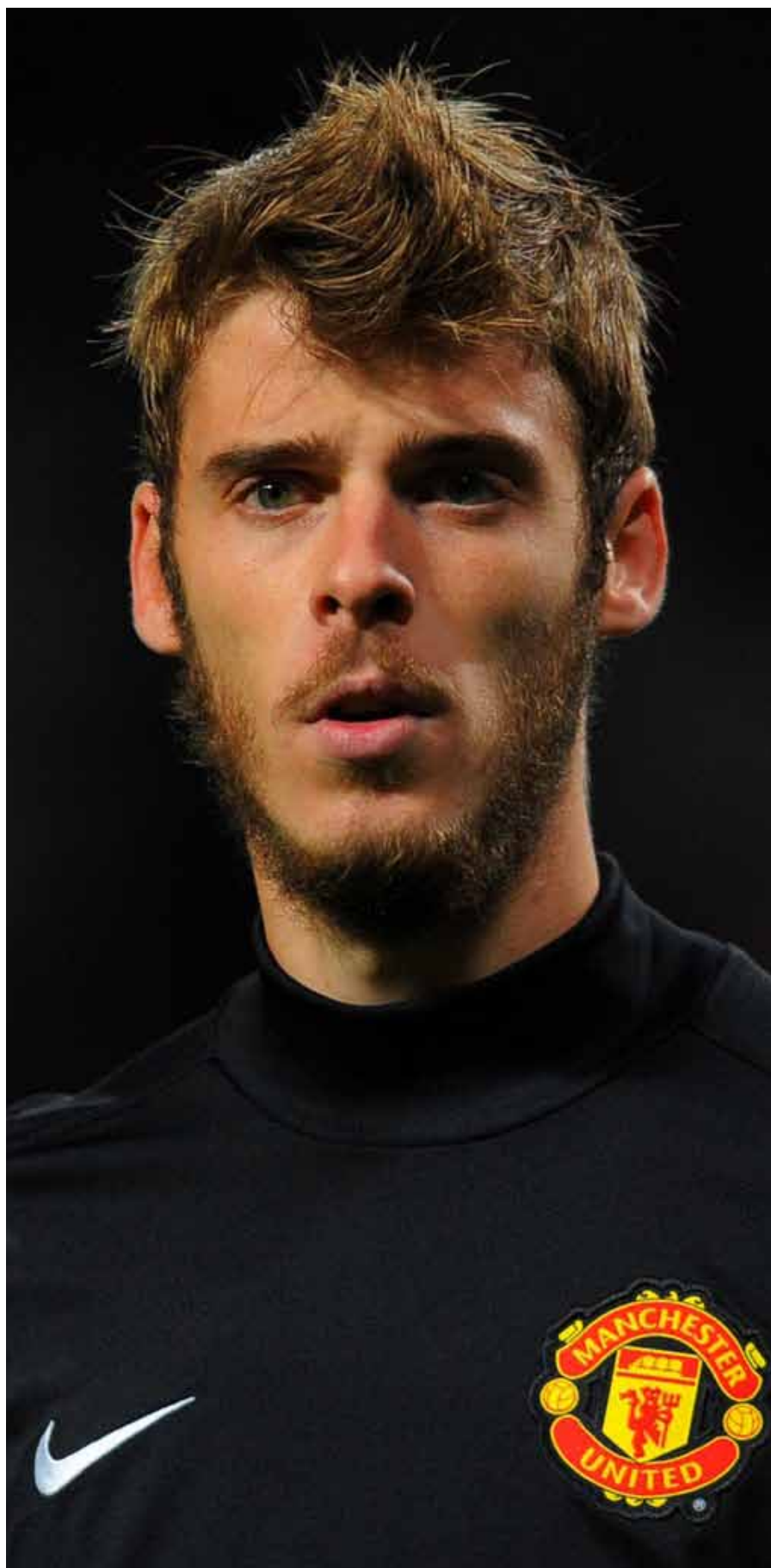
Premier League: 2007, 2008, 2011

League Cup: 2009, 2010

FA Community Shield: 2007, 2008, 2010

UEFA Champions League: 2008

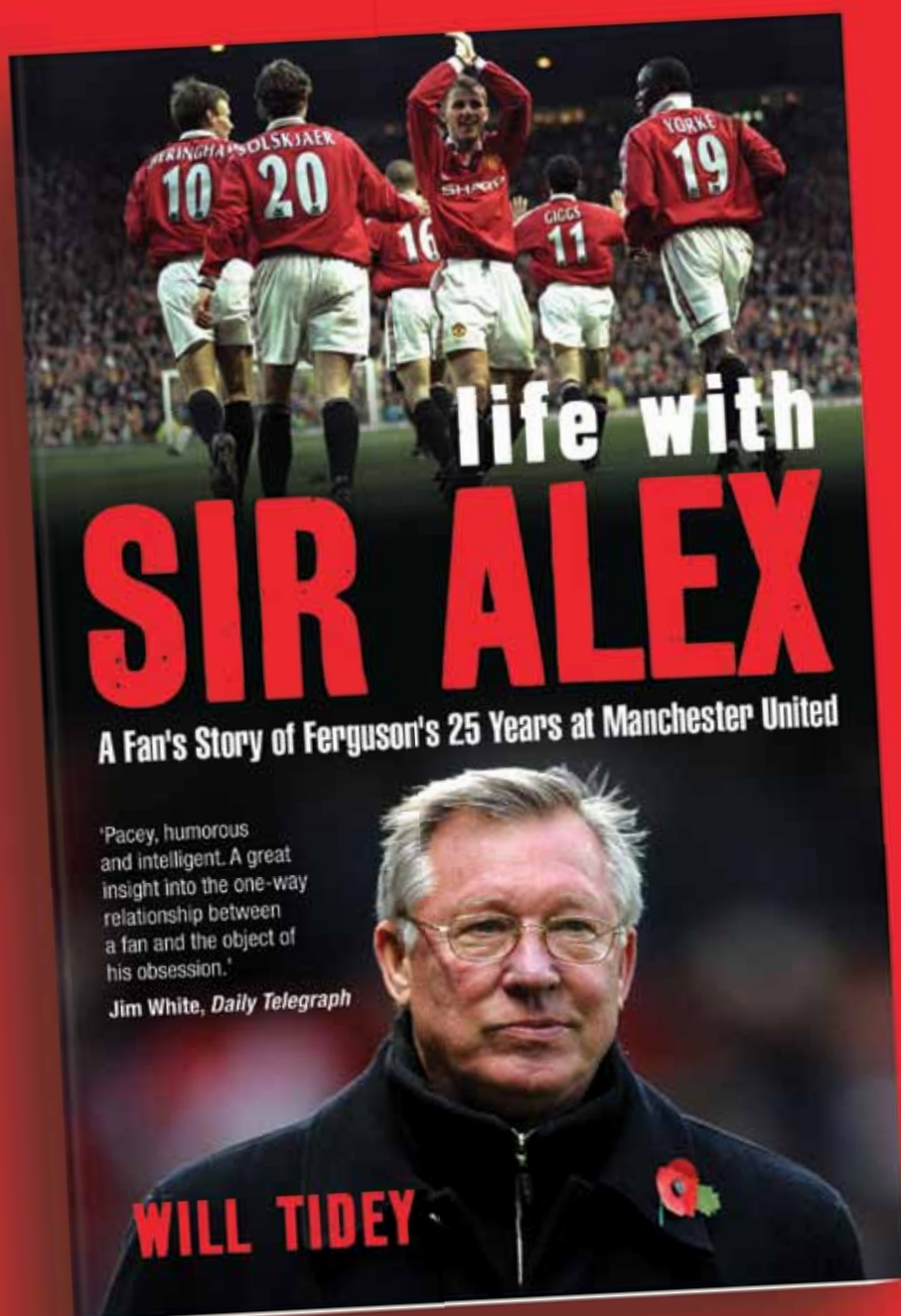
FIFA Club World Cup: 2008



LEFT Tomasz Kuszczak

ABOVE MAN IN POSSESSION, DAVID DE GEA

THE STORY OF ONE OF THE GREATEST FOOTBALL MANAGERS OF OUR TIME



Passionate, witty and smart, Tidey neatly sums up the fans-eye view of Ferguson's time at Old Trafford. For that, it is well worth the read

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