

# DELIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Former Manchester United manager **Sir Alex Ferguson** tells *Ben Jacobs* he is relieved to quit football

**T**here was a point when the end of the world seemed more imminent than Sir Alex Ferguson's retirement. Yet just when we half-expected the 71-year-old to rival former Team Bath boss Ivor Powell and continue into his naughty nineties, Fergie called it quits before 12 May's

2-1 Premier League victory over Swansea at Old Trafford.

Although a carefully calculated decision – influenced in part by Ferguson's pending hip operation this summer – it was also one of football's best-kept secrets, making the announcement feel like a raging tsunami had desecrated an age-old institution overnight.

Ferguson's departure, after almost 27 years at Old Trafford, made the front pages around the world. The news even triggered a 4.5 percent drop in Manchester United's share price. This wasn't just because Ferguson is Britain's longest-serving post-war manager, presiding over 2,154 games (1,500 of them at United). Nor was it solely down to the Scot's 38 trophies at Old Trafford (including 13 top-flight titles) – one more than Arsenal have managed in their 126-year history.

It is because there will never be another boss like Sir Alex, who was knighted in June 1999. He somehow turned footballers into Arthurian knights. A shrewd yet stern, inimitable yet irritable character, Fergie just had a knack of making players fall on their swords for him. They were, almost inexplicably at times, hypnotised by his rousing dressing-room war cry... or in David Beckham's case stunned into obedience by an errant flying boot!

Whether Ferguson is the greatest gaffer of all time is up for furious debate, but he is comfortably the most influential in recent times. The former East Stirlingshire (1974), St Mirren (1974-1978), Aberdeen (1978-1986), Scotland (1985-1986) and United (1986-2013) boss has presided over a period when football has been violently reformed, yet he's remained chief of the managerial mafia during an era when – based on last season's Premier League clubs – 255 of his peers have been axed, including 14 at Manchester City.

Perhaps Liverpool's Bob Paisley – the only manager to have won three European Cups – or Brian Clough, who transformed Derby and Nottingham Forest from unfashionable flops to (unfashionable) forces, still rank above Ferguson in the all-time managerial pecking order. You could also make compelling cases for Herbert Chapman (football's earliest tactical pioneer), Don Revie, Bill Shankly or Sir Matt Busby. Ferguson will inevitably be mentioned in the same breath as the latter – who twice built United from wartime rubble and was in charge through the 1958 Munich Air Disaster – yet the comparison isn't one the humble Scot is comfortable with.

"For me, Sir Matt is the greatest manager ever – not just at Manchester United, but full stop," reasoned Sir Alex. "He started at the end of the war and went right through to winning the European Cup in 1968. Those were difficult times, full of tragedy and heightened emotions. Just ask Sir Bobby Charlton, who played under Matt and worked with me. He'll tell you what a towering

figure he was at Old Trafford. It is flattering to be mentioned in the same breath, but I think Matt was in a different league. For a start, he was a lot calmer than me!"

Ferguson does himself a disservice. To remain at Manchester United for almost 30 years, during a period when English football has changed seismically, is an astonishing feat – one that will surely never be repeated. Since Ferguson lost his debut game at Oxford United (2-0) on 8 November 1986, grounds have become luxury theatres and players have metamorphosed into global brands. Meanwhile, impatient, quasi-oligarchical owners, itching for success, are prepared to cull managers on a whim, as Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini discovered in May. The harshities of the modern game are one key reason why Sir Alex chose to call it quits.

"Football is a way of life, and a stressful one at that," said Ferguson, who made 41 appearances for Rangers as a player. "I have had a fantastic career, and been fortunate enough to work with some wonderful footballers and staff. I will stay on in an ambassadorial capacity, so I am not totally cutting my ties with the club or game. It is just time to step back, relax and enjoy my retirement.

"I always wanted to exit on a high, rather than be pushed, so to leave on my own terms, having won a 13th top-flight title at Manchester United, and a 20th for the club – two more than Liverpool – is the perfect send-off.

"Football has become a cut-throat game. If you look at the behaviour of some clubs sacking managers left, right and centre, it's a disgrace. I am not naming any one club – it's the whole bloody lot of them! In light of this, I have to thank United for staying

unwaveringly loyal to me. I hope I have been able to repay them for that over the past 27 years.

"There are some who argue I can't live without football, but that's nonsense. Of course, I will miss being in the dugout on a weekly basis, but the game has become so frantic and demanding since the Premier League began in 1992, so it's time to step away and spend some time with my family. When I look at the stats, I am ecstatic with what I have achieved, but also relieved, and delighted, to move on. Of course, I am a bit sad that the most incredible journey of my life has come to an end, but I am also really excited about the future."

Ferguson will remain at the club in order to help his replacement David Moyes bed in. The 50-year-old Scot joins from Everton on a refreshingly long six-year deal,

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With 47 seasons in charge (1902-1948), former West Brom boss Fred Everiss is the longest-serving British manager, but Ferguson's 27 seasons at United mean he ranks 11th on the all-time list

and in many senses is Fergie's doppelganger. United did fleetingly consider Paris Saint-Germain boss Carlo Ancelotti instead, but they never approached the then Real Madrid manager Jose Mourinho, despite the fact Sir Alex personally endorsed him.

"Of course, we valued Sir Alex's input, and I can tell you Mourinho was one of the names he put forward," United director and 1966 World Cup winner Sir Bobby Charlton told *Sports Talk*. "However, the decision to appoint David was unanimous. On balance, even Alex saw the worth in picking someone a little like himself, who might stay at the club for the foreseeable future. Mourinho was never interviewed. The reason for that was down to the strength of David, but also a fear Jose wouldn't embrace the culture of the club. He is an exceptional manager, but in our eyes Moyes was just a better fit."

Moyes, who failed to land any silverware in 11 seasons with Everton, is going to struggle to live up to Fergie's reputation, but he shouldn't try to emulate his prodigious predecessor. After all, he arrives at Old Trafford with a pedigree of his own. On a shoestring budget, and with a squad ravaged by injuries, he guided the Toffees to sixth last season, while they even finished fourth back in 2005. He has a win percentage of 42, and a meagre net spend of £28.3 million – that's just £2.57 million per year, less than most Championship clubs. His transfer kitty will be comparatively colossal at Old Trafford, but so will the expectations.

"There's no denying there's pressure on David," conceded Ferguson. "Managing United is not always a golden path of riches. Yet he has a great work ethic and tremendous perseverance. Look at what he's done at Everton – 11 years without any substantial financial backing but he's stuck at it and created some decent teams. He will need these qualities to succeed at our club.

"What I would say is, the board and fans must be patient. Hopefully the silverware will continue, but if it doesn't David needs to be given time and support. I will be very disappointed, if things don't click straight away, to see a knee-jerk reaction. It took me four years to get my first trophy, and that was during a period when Liverpool were our only real rivals. Now, there's four or five big-spending clubs who all expect to win major trophies."





After spells with Queens Park, St Johnstone and Dunfermline, Sir Alex moved to Rangers in 1967 for £65k, scoring 25 goals in 41 appearances – yet during his time at Ibrox was also demoted to the youth team for a mistake which handed Celtic the 1969 Scottish Cup

“Moyes has massive shoes to fill,” added Rio Ferdinand, who Ferguson signed for £30 million from Leeds in 2002. “Yet he couldn’t be walking into a healthier dressing room. The young players here are all very hungry and want to win stuff. The senior guys, like myself and Ryan Giggs, will do our utmost to help him settle quickly and try and keep Sir Alex’s legacy going.”

The legacy to which Ferdinand refers certainly didn’t happen overnight. It took Ferguson seven turbulent years to land his first title (1993), and long before it came he was on the brink of the sack.

Govan-born Sir Alex replaced two-time FA Cup winner Ron Atkinson in November 1986, having attracted interest from south of Hadrian’s Wall courtesy of his three Scottish top-flight titles, four Scottish Cups and the 1983 Cup Winners’ Cup with Aberdeen. He had previously turned down Aston Villa because he didn’t fancy working with Doug Ellis, and also snubbed Wolves since the vibe from the directors overwhelmed him. Ferguson rebuffed Arsenal and Spurs, too, after pledging to lead Scotland to Mexico ‘86 following the unexpected death of national manager Jock Stein. As Gordon Strachan later revealed, Sir Alex said in Mexico that he would only leave Aberdeen for two clubs – Barcelona or Manchester United.

Ferguson’s first task was to take a side second-bottom in Division One and stave off relegation, as well as addressing the booze culture prevalent among the likes of Bryan Robson, Norman Whiteside and Paul McGrath. In light of current successes, an 11th place finish in his first season might smack of mediocrity, but it convinced the board he was the right man for the job.

In the summer of 1987, Sir Alex brought in, Brian McClair, Steve Bruce and Viv Anderson, but even this trio couldn’t stop United ending nine points adrift of Liverpool in second place. In the off-season, Sir Alex’s response was to re-sign Mark Hughes, who had left Old Trafford for Barcelona in 1986. However, to his frustration, Fergie missed out on Newcastle maestro Paul Gascoigne, who he had enviously watched run rings round his midfield. In one noteworthy incident, Gazza nutmegged Remi

Moses, then patted him on the head as he skipped past him to retrieve the ball. Fergie bolted out of his seat and yelled, “Get that f\*\*king so and so!”

“At the time, I genuinely thought Gazza would be the difference between us knocking Liverpool off their pedestal or staying in their shadow,” said Ferguson, who could only guide United to 11th that season. “I sometimes wonder what kind of person he’d be today had he been a part of the Old Trafford culture. I would have done my utmost to add some discipline to his life, that’s for sure.”

Instead of Gascoigne, Ferguson procured Paul Ince from West Ham for £1 million, but by then the Stretford End were already questioning his acumen. The discontent was amplified by an eviscerating 5-1 loss to Manchester City on 23 September 1989. In a rare moment of lyricism, Sir Alex dubbed his side’s humbling at the hands of their city neighbours as “like climbing a glass mountain”.

“Every time somebody looks at me I can’t help thinking I have betrayed them,” he later moped. “After such a result, you feel as if



From the start, Ferguson put a big emphasis on youth and was rewarded in 1992 when Ryan Giggs, Nicky Butt, David Beckham, Gary and Phil Neville and Paul Scholes all came through United’s academy

## FERGIE’S MANCHESTER UNITED TIMELINE



6 November 1986

Replaces Ron Atkinson at Manchester United

29 August 1989

Breaks the British transfer record (£2.3m) for Gary Pallister from Middlesbrough

12 November 1989

Almost sacked after a 5-1 defeat to Manchester City

17 May 1990

Claims first trophy after an FA Cup replay win over Crystal Palace

15 May 1991

Beats Barcelona 2-1 in Rotterdam to win the now-defunct European Cup Winners’ Cup



12 April 1992

Wins United’s first ever League Cup thanks to a Brian McClair goal against Nottingham Forest

26 November 1992

Signs Eric Cantona from Leeds for £1.2m

2 May 1993

Wins the inaugural Premier League – United’s first title in 26 years

1 May 1994

Wins second title, with Cantona contributing 25 goals

14 May 1994

Completes a Premier League and FA Cup double

14 May 1995

Fails to beat West Ham as Blackburn pip United to the title

5 May 1996

Wins third title after Kevin Keegan’s Newcastle blow a 12-point lead

11 May 1996

Beats Liverpool 1-0 to win the FA Cup and secure a second double



11 May 1997

Beats West Ham 2-0 to bring the title to Old Trafford for the fourth time in five seasons

26 May 1999

Completes a Premier League, FA Cup and European Cup treble after Teddy Sheringham and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer score in injury time to see off Bayern Munich 2-1 in the latter

22 April 2000

Beats Southampton 3-1 to win the Premier League at a canter

14 April 2001

Beats Coventry 4-2 to make it three consecutive Premier League titles

18 May 2001

Announces his retirement

27 February 2002

U-turns on his retirement and instead signs a three-year deal

22 July 2002

Breaks British transfer record (£30m) to sign Rio Ferdinand from Leeds

4 May 2003

Beats Liverpool 4-0 to secure his eighth title

22 May 2004

Beats Millwall 3-0 to win the FA Cup

31 August 2004

Signs 18-year-old Wayne Rooney from Everton for £25.6m

26 February 2006

Beats Wigan 4-0 to win the League Cup

6 May 2007

Wins first title since 2003

11 May 2008

Wins 10th Premier League title, 25 years to the day after he led Aberdeen to European Cup Winners’ Cup glory

21 May 2008

Beats Chelsea 6-5 on penalties in Moscow to win the Champions League

1 March 2009

Beats Spurs on penalties to win the League Cup

16 May 2009

Wins United’s 18th top-flight title, equalling Liverpool’s record

27 May 2009

Loses 2-0 to Barcelona in the Champions League final

28 February 2010

Beats Aston Villa 2-1 to win the League Cup

14 May 2011

Wins United’s 19th league title after a 1-1 draw with Blackburn

28 May 2011

Loses 3-1 to Barcelona in the Champions League final

13 May 2012

Denied the title after a dramatic Sergio Aguero winner for Manchester City against Queens Park Rangers

2 September 2012

Takes charge of United in the league for the 1,000th time in a 3-2 win over Southampton, with new signing Robin van Persie scoring a hat-trick

22 April 2013

Wins United’s 20th league title, and his 13th since joining, thanks to a 3-0 victory over Aston Villa

8 May 2013

Announces his retirement aged 71





United's injury time heroics against Bayern Munich will go down as one of football's greatest ever comebacks, but their 4-3 aggregate win over Juventus to reach that final was equally as unlikely and sensational

you have to sneak round corners, like you are some kind of criminal. The fans have been waiting 22 years for a league championship. I've been waiting less than three, but in terms of frustration it already feels like 22."

The defeat reportedly left Ferguson on the cusp of unemployment after three trophyless seasons at the helm. Both Manchester clubs finished the season level on points in the lower echelons of Division One and were it not for an FA Cup triumph against Crystal Palace in 1990, Fergie could well have found himself on the managerial scrapheap. His first trophy undoubtedly bought him time, and by 1993 he had added a maiden title to it – Manchester United's first since 1967.

"Had I joined United in 1996, not 1986, I would have been sacked before the millennium was out," predicted Ferguson. "There's no way, since the start of the Premier League, a new manager at a top club would last four years without a trophy and six without a title. That's why people are calling for Arsene Wenger's head at Arsenal, since he hasn't won a trophy since the 2005 FA Cup."

The season Ferguson won his first title at Old Trafford was significant for two other reasons: it saw the £1.2 million signing of Eric Cantona from Leeds United, plus the so-called 'Class of '92' emerged. The likes of David Beckham – who called Sir Alex a "second father" – Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes all came through the ranks, with the latter two still around when Ferguson retired. This tremendous trio became the spine of a squad that would help Sir Alex claim 13 league titles, and complete a league, FA Cup and Champions League treble in 1999.

The night of the latter will live long in footy folklore, as Teddy Sheringham and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer struck in injury time to give United the most improbable 2-1 victory over shell-shocked Bayern Munich at Barcelona's Nou Camp. It was the kind of ridiculous drama usually confined to football computer games, and for the first time in his life left Ferguson speechless.

"I was lost for words, and that doesn't happen very often," he laughed. "I always sensed we might equalise, but to score twice in stoppage time was beyond belief. It is dramatic moments like that make football such a brilliant, unpredictable game, although a cruel one too... especially if you're a Bayern fan!

"I got a lot of credit for that win, but a manager can't really influence that kind of finish. Both goalscorers were substitutes, though, and the decision to bring them on was obviously mine.

"Even though we left it extremely late, I have always felt my half-time talk was vital that night. We had fallen behind to an early Mario Basler goal and I wasn't happy with the energy levels at the break. I said to the players, 'At the end of this game, the European Cup will be only six feet away from you, and you won't even be able to touch it if we lose. For many of you, that will be the closest you will ever get. Don't you dare come back in here without giving your all!' We had a real go in the second half, and thankfully our efforts paid off."

Ferguson is notorious for his half-time pep talks (or, perhaps more accurately, rollickings). His ferocious temper led Hughes to coin the phrase

## TOP 20 FERGIE QUOTES

### On his mission at Manchester United...

My greatest challenge is not what's happening at the moment, my greatest challenge was knocking Liverpool right off their f\*\*\*ing perch – and you can print that!

### On Paul Ince...

I used to have a saying that when a player is at his peak, he feels as though he can climb Everest in his slippers. That's what he was like.

### On Gary Neville's defensive skills...

If he was an inch taller he'd be the best centre-half in Britain. His father is 6ft 2in... I'd check the milkman!

### On winning the 1999 Champions League...

I can't believe it. I can't believe it. Football. Bloody hell!

### On AC Milan striker Filippo Inzaghi...

That lad must have been born offside.

### On kicking a boot into David Beckham's face in 2003...

It was a freakish incident. If I tried it 100 or a million times I couldn't repeat it again. If I could I would have carried on playing!

### On the 2003 title race...

It's getting tickly now – squeaky-bum time, I like to call it.

### On Jose Mourinho...

He was certainly full of it, calling me boss and big man when we had our post-match drink after the first leg. But it would help if his greetings were accompanied by a decent glass of wine. What he gave me was paint-stripper.

### On rumours of selling Cristiano Ronaldo to Real Madrid...

Do you think I would enter into a contract with that mob? Absolutely no chance. I wouldn't sell them a virus.

### On Arsene Wenger...

They say he's an intelligent man, right? Speaks five languages. I've got a 15-year-old boy from the Ivory Coast who speaks five languages!

### On Italians...

When an Italian tells me it's pasta on the plate I check under the sauce to make sure. They are the inventors of the smokescreen.

### On Ryan Giggs as a youngster...

I remember the first time I saw him. He was 13 and just floated over the ground like a Cocker Spaniel chasing a piece of silver paper in the wind.

### On whether he felt Liverpool would win the 2007 Premier League...

You must be joking! Do I look as if I'm a masochist ready to cut myself? How does relegation sound instead?

### On Wayne Rooney's 2010 transfer request...

Sometimes you look in a field and you see a cow and you think it's a better cow than the one you've got in your own field. It's a fact, right? Yet it never really works out that way.

### On Manchester City (part 1)...

Sometimes you have a noisy neighbour. You can't do anything about that. They will always be noisy. You just have to get on with your life, put your television on and turn it up a bit louder.

### On Manchester City (part 2)...

It's City, isn't it? They are a small club, with a small mentality. All they can talk about is Manchester United, that's all they've ever done and they can't get away from it.

### On former players becoming managers...

It is difficult to pinpoint who will make it as a manager. For instance, nobody here thought Mark Hughes would become a manager, never in a million years, and we all thought Bryan Robson was a certainty to be a top manager.

### On his showdown with Newcastle manager Alan Pardew...

The press have had a field day. The only person they have not spoken to is Barack Obama because he is busy.

### On winning a 19th league title...

It's not so much passing Liverpool. It's more important that United are the best team in the country in terms of winning titles.

### On winning a 20th...

Look at me – it's taken 10 years off me today. It's these tablets, they're great!

## HAD I JOINED UNITED IN 1996, NOT 1986, I WOULD HAVE BEEN SACKED BEFORE THE MILLENNIUM WAS OUT.

"hairdryer treatment" to describe the locker-room rages. Sir Alex claims he has mellowed with age, but Wayne Rooney (himself capable of chucking his toys out of the pram) isn't so sure.

"There's nothing worse than getting the 'hairdryer' from Sir Alex," said Rooney, who Ferguson dropped for his final two games after the England striker handed in a transfer request. "When it happens, the manager stands in the middle of the dressing room and just loses it. He gets right up in your face and shouts. It feels like you have put your head in front of a BaByliss Turbo Power 2200 – it's horrible!

"I don't like getting shouted at by anyone. It's hard for me to take, so sometimes I'd yell back and tell Sir Alex he was wrong. The problem with his approach is, although it spurred some of the lads on, it crushed others. I saw the manager scream at people and when they went back on the field their heads just dropped. Not every footballer performs well under fear."

Rooney recalls a particularly heated exchange after United were beaten 1-0 at Celtic in a 2006 Champions League group game. Louis Saha, now at Sunderland, missed a last-gasp penalty and got the full Fergie treatment afterwards.

"It was the worst 'hairdryer' I have ever seen," revealed Rooney. "The gaffer was right up there in Louis' face, shouting and screaming. I got an earful too. Sir Alex knew I was negotiating a new deal and thus saved some for me. He came right up to me and said, 'Players wanting more money from the club and new deals – you don't deserve anything after that performance!' Fergie was fearless. He would stand up to anyone, and it was hard to argue with him when he was in full flow... mostly because you couldn't get a word in edgeways!"

There was one player, though, that even Ferguson truly feared – Eric Cantona. The Frenchman's arrival, for a



Sir Alex comfortably won last season's Premier League, seeing off "noisy neighbours" Manchester City by 11 points after losing out to them in the dying seconds of the final day 12 months earlier

bargain £1.2 million from Leeds in 1992, catalysed a period where United won four titles in five years. Cantona scored 82 goals in 185 appearances, and was the centrepiece of the 1994 side that completed a league and FA Cup double.

By most accounts, Ferguson had one rule for Cantona and another for the rest of his squad. He was allowed to eat as he pleased, train when he wanted and wasn't even reprimanded by the Scot after his notorious kung fu kick on Crystal Palace fan Matthew Simmons in April 1995, which resulted in a nine-month ban. Midfielder Lee Sharpe, who played alongside Cantona, claims Ferguson found most of his antics amusing, and was so in awe of his talent that he didn't dare question his methods.

"I think Eric was the only United footballer capable of standing up to Sir Alex," said Sharpe, who made 263 appearances for United. "Fergie was scared of upsetting him, so just let him get on with it.



"I remember, after we won the double in 1994, we went on a victory parade, and there was even some royalty present to greet us. We had been out on the town the night before and I turned up hungover, in a creased shirt, feeling pretty worse for wear. Sir Alex was looking fresh as a daisy, in a well-pressed suit, and as soon as he saw me get out of my car he grabbed me by the ear and told me, very forcefully, to go home and change immediately.

"I trudged off gingerly, wondering whether I even had a clean suit in my cupboard. Then, just before I left, Eric rocked up wearing Hawaiian beach shorts and a T-shirt! I took prime position to watch Fergie tear him a new one – after all he was far less appropriately dressed than me. The gaffer came hurtling towards him, but to my disbelief just patted him on the shoulder and walked off with a massive grin on his face. A few moments later, he turned to me and said, 'That Eric, what a card!' I couldn't believe it! I got a right b\*llocking for my slightly crumpled clothes, yet in Fergie's eyes Eric could get away with murder."

It is a touch reassuring to know there was someone who genuinely unnerved Ferguson. It adds a human element to an essentially private (and somewhat intimidating) man, who may choose to show his softer side now that he's retired.

Sir Alex's teams have been enchanting to watch over the years, and thus his parting was rightly akin to a memorial. As Frank Sinatra blared out at Old Trafford, and thousands of fans grappled to get their mitts on a souvenir programme, an emotional Ferguson took to the microphone with aplomb. The PA announcer went through the long list of trophies accumulated (which was so lengthy he had to read them from a script). Then the tears started, because Fergie knew the 'end was near'. However, it wasn't quite over. There was still just a little more 'Fergie time', in the form of an away trip to West Bromwich Albion on the final match of the season. It was a formality, with the title already wrapped up, although the game offered Ferguson the chance to bow out with victory in his 1,500th game at United. Sadly, he couldn't end with a win, but he'll settle for the 895 others he clocked at Old Trafford. Plus, the 5-5 draw he ended with is certainly something to tell his 'team' of 11 grandkids about, who he'll now spend his retirement 'managing!' [ST](#)

# What was Fergie's best XI?



**DENNIS IRWIN** **LB**  
Appearances: 529  
Goals: 33

Irwin, who won seven titles, two FA Cups and a Champions League at Old Trafford, was equally adept at left- or right-back and a free-kick specialist to boot. He also made Sir Bobby Charlton's lifetime United XI.



**PAUL SCHOLES** **CM**  
Appearances: 717  
Goals: 155

The so-called 'Ginger Pele' is cited by the likes of Zinedine Zidane and Xavi as one of the best midfielders of his generation, making over 700 appearances for United, winning ten titles, three FA Cups, two League Cups and two Champions Leagues in the process.



**RYAN GIGGS** **LM**  
Appearances: 941  
Goals: 168

The Welsh wizard has been a regular at United since 1992. Giggs, who has made almost 1,000 appearances for United, currently boasts 12 league, four FA Cup, three League Cup and two Champions League winner's medals. He has scored in 23 consecutive seasons in the top flight.



**CRISTIANO RONALDO** **CF**  
Appearances: 292  
Goals: 118

Ronaldo was signed from Sporting Lisbon in 2003 for £12.24 million and soon showed his game was not just about fancy stepovers as he developed into one of the world's most potent footballers. He scored an incredible 42 goals in the 2007-08 season as United won the Champions League. Although his exit to Real Madrid a year later was a blow, the world record £80 million fee he commanded softened it slightly.



**PETER SCHMEICHEL**  
Appearances: 398  
Goals: 1

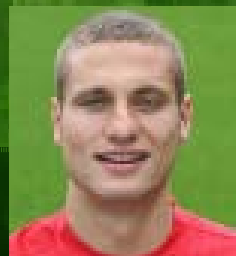
Signed for just £500k from Brøndby, Ferguson dubbed Schmeichel the "bargain of the century". The Dane won five Premier League titles, three FA Cups, the League Cup and the Champions League during his time at Old Trafford.

**GK**



**RIO FERDINAND** **CB**  
Appearances: 431  
Goals: 8

Ferdinand has more than justified the £30 million United paid Leeds for his services. He reads the game well, defends intelligently and even scored the winner in Fergie's last game at Old Trafford (2-1 v Swansea). His international retirement will be Roy Hodgson's loss.



**NEMANJA VIDIC** **CB**  
Appearances: 266  
Goals: 19

Vidic has the same ruthlessness and uncompromising style that Dutch defender Jaap Stam possessed, but is also a goal-scoring threat from set pieces. The Serbian international is without doubt one of the top defenders to have ever played under Ferguson at United.



**ROY KEANE** **CM**  
Appearances: 480  
Goals: 51

The £3.75 million Ferguson paid Forest for Keane was a British transfer record at the time, but there's little doubt he got value for money. In 12 years of service, the Irish midfielder was United's engine room as they dominated English football throughout the nineties. Fergie called him "the best player I have had in all of my time at United".



**DAVID BECKHAM** **RM**  
Appearances: 394  
Goals: 85

Beckham began his professional career at United, making his first-team debut in 1992 against Brighton in the League Cup. He won the Premier League title six times, the FA Cup twice and the Champions League once, before leaving for Real Madrid in 2003.



**ERIC CANTONA** **CF**  
Appearances: 185  
Goals: 82

Cantona signed from Leeds in 1992 and his five-year spell at United will never be forgotten - if only for kung fu-kicking a fan against Crystal Palace in 1995! The Frenchman, who cost Ferguson just over £1 million, gave the United faithful countless moments to savour with his dazzling skills, which helped the club to a haul of four titles and two FA Cups during his time there.



**GARY NEVILLE** **RB**  
Appearances: 602  
Goals: 7

Ferguson called Neville "the best right-back of his generation". The Bury-born defender made his debut in 1992, claiming eight titles, two League Cups and the Champions League. Neville also won 85 England caps - a record for a right-back.

## WHAT THE sports TALK

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