

THE REPUBLIC OF MANCUNIA

MADE IN MANCHESTER

A SELECTION OF PLAYERS WHO CAME THROUGH
THE MANCHESTER UNITED ACADEMY



BABES



FLEDGLINGS

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Foreword

Saturday mornings are a buzz of activity at most professional training grounds. Young boys, maybe only seven or eight years old, are fully kitted out in their clubs colours, boots shining from the latest polish, and a club bag swung over the shoulder of the latest sponsored tracksuit.

At Manchester United, over 150 young hopefuls representing ten or so teams, will pass through the gates at Carrington over the course of a weekend and either participate in matches or receive expert tutelage under the watchful eyes of a multitude of coaches.

They seem to take it all in their stride.

I think back to what a different world it must have been in 1932 when there were only three teams in existence. The first team, the reserves, and a third team made up of trialists and amateurs who turned out in the mid-week league.

There were no kids around and the term 'Academy' only applied to the London ballet. The norm of the day was to buy established professionals or scout less experienced players from non-league clubs. A costly strategy if a manager got things wrong.

The Manchester United chairman at that time, James Gibson, had a broader vision and revealed that he would like to '*have a first team made entirely of home grown youngsters all from the Manchester area*'. Walter Crickmer, United's secretary, soon organised the entry of an 'A' team into the Manchester League and lads in their late teens were brought in to compete and gain experience.

Thus the likes of Tommy Manley, Jackie Wassall, Johnny Hanlon, Stan Pearson and Johnny Carey became the first crop of 'home produced' players to reach the first team. Not all household names but important none-the-less.

Six years later and Crickmer took the idea one step further. He liaised with local schools and teachers and started the Manchester United Junior Athletic Club. Young boys, with schoolbooks over their shoulders rather than shiny new training kit, were now being given the chance to train and play for Manchester United. It doesn't sound a big thing today but it was a revolutionary concept at the time. It had never tried before and the 'Juniors'

wiped all before them to validate the club's innovation.

The MUJACs had arrived!

In that 1938/39 season, the first team had consolidated their place in the First Division after a yo-yo existence, the Reserves had won the Central League, the 'A' team had walked away with the Manchester League in addition to the MUJAC's success.

So when Matt Busby officially took over Manchester United as manager in October 1945, he arrived to find a bombed out football ground, no training facilities and no money. However, he did have a very good football team with a host of young players who had shown excellent promise before WW2.

I think there was a real 'connection' between Busby and Gibson. Their philosophies matched and both were willing to change the whole infrastructure and culture at United to make it happen. I also believe that the appointments of Jimmy Murphy and Bert Whalley were instrumental to the whole venture.

It's amazing to think of all the records achieved, all the players to rise through the ranks and reach the first team, all the international honours. I also reflect on the small things, like Busby breaking new ground when he fielded ten youth players in a league match versus Spurs for the first time in 1957. No manager or team had ever played so many youngsters in a top-flight match before. As far as Busby was concerned if you were good enough, you were old enough!

Those early pioneers created a youth culture, philosophy and success for all others to follow. Most failed to achieve the same success as Busby and it took two decades and five other regimes before Alex Ferguson's faith in youth helped us scale even greater heights. The record books clearly show how our Academy was the foundation of that success.

Over the last eighty years over 200 players have passed through the system to reach the first team, many of their stories are in this book and the names just roll off the tongue. Gary Neville, Roger Byrne, Bill Foulkes, Nobby Stiles, George Best, Paul Scholes, Duncan Edwards, Ryan Giggs, Dennis Viollet and Bobby Charlton.

What a team that would be...never mind a keeper!

Walking around Carrington you see photos all over the walls reminding

everyone of the club's vision and ground-breaking work over seventy years ago. Although times have changed and football is such a big business in the modern era, the game is still about eleven lads playing together to achieve success. There is no better feeling than seeing one of our own 'make it' and be part of that success.

We will continue to produce players of the highest quality...it's in our culture. We will continue to give those players a chance...it's in our DNA. We will continue our success with youth at the core...we are Manchester United, it's what we do.

Tony Park, @mrmujac

Sir Bobby Charlton - The ambassador who has become a symbol of the club

Perhaps the best place to start is in the esteemed pages of “The Football Man”, written by one of my predecessors at the Guardian, Arthur Hopcraft, and regarded as one of the timeless masterpieces of football writing.

Hopcraft recounts how everyone who loves this sport has a favourite player. It may not necessarily be the best player. Yet there is always one particular man who appeals more than anyone else. “He is the player we bring to mind first when we ask ourselves what football looks like when we enjoy it the most,” he writes. “The man I name for this role is Bobby Charlton.”

The eulogies are so rich they make it a permanent irritation for those of us who never saw him grace a football pitch. But we have all seen the old footage, those driving runs from midfield, Charlton's elegance on the ball, straight-backed, head up, and the aesthetic quality of his goals. A great player's goals. Kieran Toal, another youth-team graduate, once played with him on a tour match. “He was in his early-50s and nobody could get near him,” he remembers.

What we have now is a man whose achievements are as solid as the statue that honours him on Sir Matt Busby Way. Charlton has enough awards to fill an aircraft hangar and his own collection of club records – among them, the highest number of league starts (604) and the most goals (249).

For the generations who never saw him play he is the ambassador whose courage and dignity has become a symbol of the club, still clocking up thousands of air miles in the business of promoting the club, despite all the horrors of the Munich tragedy.

Yet Charlton was first and foremost a footballer who had an acute impression on the people who saw him with the ball at his feet. “The flowing line of Charlton's football has no disfiguring barbs in it, but there is a heavy and razor-sharp arrowhead at its end,” Hopcraft writes. “It is the combination of the graceful and the dramatic which makes him so special. There are few players who affect a crowd's responses as much as he does. Something extraordinary is expected of him the moment he receives the ball. He can silence a crowd instantly, make it hold its breath in expectation. A shot from Charlton, especially if hit on the run from outside the penalty area, is one of the great events of the sport, not because it is rare, which it is not, but because

the power of it is massive and it erupts out of elegance.”

Daniel Taylor, @DTguardian

All-time United academy XI: Bosnich; G Neville, Edwards, Brown, P Neville; Beckham, Charlton, Whiteside, Giggs; Best; Hughes.

Ryan Giggs - The early years

"When you're 11 or 12, it's the little things that you remember," recalled Ryan Giggs earlier this season when asked about Eric Mollander, the City scout who picked him up and took him training to Platt Lane for four years.

"Eric made sure that I got lifts, that I was there on time," said Giggs. "I wasn't really poor, but we didn't have a lot of money. Eric made sure that I had boots, a kit. He wanted to help me."

Mollander, 62 and a retired school teacher who grew up in Gorton and has spent most of his life in Flixton, adored Giggs.

A friend of his ran the Deans junior team in Salford and suggested that Eric went to "look at this little left winger." It was, of course, the ten year old Ryan Wilson, better known as Giggs.

"Every time I saw him for 30 years after he reminded me of when I first saw him," says Eric. "Ryan was a younger, smaller version. He was very, very quiet off the field but on it Ryan showed us that wonderful left peg. He could swerve, weave and dribble. And boy did he have good pace."

Eric was so impressed that he approached Ryan's dad and then informed City's chief scout Ken Barnes, who immediately told him to bring Ryan down. Unlike today when boys as young as nine can be recruited, clubs could not sign players until they were 14.

"Ryan came to us for almost four years," adds Eric. "He wore the blue of City but I never once asked him who he supported. Ken Barnes would see to it that Ryan was invited to games and often the four of them would go: mum, dad and both boys."

Ryan's mum Lynn also handed Eric a letter inviting her son for a trial with England schoolboys. As the family had no car, she asked if Eric could take Ryan to what would be a successful trial on the Astroturf of Preston's Deepdale. He also generously bought him some trainers as Ryan didn't have any suitable ones.

"I didn't enjoy going to City," said Giggs. "I'm not sure why, but I wanted to go because of him. He made a big effort to make sure that I was looked after. He was a football man and similar to Denis Schofield, who was also a City scout. They wanted to make everything right for me. They don't need to. Maybe it was because I was a good player, but I seemed like a favourite to

them. Kiddo was the same. I once said: 'Kiddo, I've got no boots' and he gave me his Adidas World Cups. He was a nine and I was an 8. They were a little bit big, but I wore two pairs of socks."

"Even then, Ryan was very patriotic, very passionate about being Welsh," recalls Eric. "Ryan said to me: 'If I was good enough, could I get a trial with Wales?'"

City offered Ryan a signing-on form on his 14th birthday, but United had stepped in with a personal visit from Alex Ferguson.

"I was disappointed," says Eric. "I think that's natural because I'd really grown to like Ryan and his family. But if a boy prefers to go to United rather than City, I never call United. And even though I'm a true Blue, United are a wonderful club who had an extremely successful manager."

"Ryan is a great credit to himself, his family, to football and to Manchester United, his only professional club. His determination, modesty, and desire are a credit to himself and all those who have guided him throughout his career."

"People use the word 'great' all too readily. But Ryan was a great player and a wonderful person who never gave me one bit of trouble in all those years."

The City of today might have been more sophisticated in keeping the young winger. They weren't then, nor did they have Sir Alex Ferguson on hand to sign the player who'd end up being 'feared by the blues and loved by the reds'.

Andy Mitten, @AndyMitten

Bill Foulkes - His loyalty to the club was unequivocal

“Loyalty cannot be blueprinted. It cannot be produced on an assembly line. In fact, it cannot be manufactured at all, for its origin is the human heart-the center of self-respect and human dignity. It is a force which leaps into being only when conditions are exactly right for it-and it is a force very sensitive to betrayal.” – Maurice Franks.

Such a powerful statement when you analyse what Franks is saying, and without doubt, it epitomises everything that Bill Foulkes was.

Sadly, Foulkes passed away on the morning of 25 November 2013. For the last four years of his life he had been suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease.

Foulkes is certainly the most unsung hero in Manchester United’s great history. Despite the litany of great, great players who have graced Old Trafford since 1910, only three of them have ever played for the club more times than big Bill, and they are Ryan Giggs, Paul Scholes, and Sir Bobby Charlton.

To play 688 games for any club is an outstanding achievement, but to do it at Manchester United and play every game in the First Division, is not only a testament to his skill, but also to his dogged determination, his courage, and his great character.

Bill’s career spanned three entirely different eras at Old Trafford. Never one for flamboyancy, he quietly, but effectively got the job done. He never pretended to be a pretty ball player with delicate ball control, but throughout his longevity at United, he was the model of consistency and his record is almost unbelievable.

By the middle 1950s he had become one of the hardest and toughest full-backs in the game. In all the games that he played in that position, only two players ever caused him real problems. One was Preston North End’s Tom Finney, and the other was Real Madrid’s flying left winger who was commonly known as ‘the bicycle man’ – Francisco Gento. But how many full-backs in the football world could ever claim to have kept those two wonderful players quiet?

Of course then came the trauma of the tragedy at Munich. Bill had strapped himself in tight and had then taken his shoes off during the fatal third run down the runaway. The initial impact made him lose consciousness

momentarily, but then he was able to unbuckle himself from his seat and escape through a hole in the aircraft's fuselage. In the thick snow he ran almost two hundred yards away from the burning wreckage before he stopped, turned around, and then realised the enormity of what had happened. He raced back across the snow covered field to the burning stricken airliner to give Harry Gregg, who had performed heroics in rescuing people, help with further rescue attempts. It was only when he got to the Rechts der Isar Hospital in Munich that he realised that he still had no shoes on.

How both he and Gregg were able to play first class football again just thirteen days after the accident is beyond comprehension. There was no trauma counseling back in those days, and when both he and Harry returned to Manchester, it was a case of 'just getting on with it.' Bill was handed the club captaincy, and again, it was an enormous burden for him to carry, but he did the job unflinchingly. His loyalty to the club was unequivocal. It was no surprise that within a year, due to the pressure that he had carried with him, he had to stand down from the captaincy which he handed over to another Munich survivor, Dennis Viollet. His form suffered and he was left out of the team for a while.

Foulkes was a tough, resilient character and when United were having trouble with the centre-half position in the early 1960s, he answered the call. Quietly and competently he took over the job and for almost ten years, performed so consistently that it was a travesty that he was never rewarded by being called up for further international appearances. Again he faced some of the best centre-forwards in both Britain and Europe and also chipped in with a couple of very important goals in the European Cup; one against Benfica in 1966, and of course the goal that took United through to their first European Cup Final in 1968 when, against Real Madrid, he appeared from nowhere into the centre-forward position and sidefooted the ball home.

It was fitting that at the age of 37 he appeared in the European Cup Final against Benfica and snuffed out the threat of Benfica's giant centre-forward Jose Torres. Once the final whistle went, the emotion was there for all to see. As he walked off the Wembley pitch with Bobby Charlton just aside of him, words were not necessary. Immediately after the game ended, Busby had given him a huge hug. He'd been there at the start of United's European journey in 1956, and had finally seen the job through and his thoughts and

deep emotions were with the young team mates who had been lost just ten years before.

Just over a year later, Bill's football career came to an end when on August 16, 1969, after a home defeat by Southampton, he had to accept the fact that Old Father Time had finally caught up with him. He'd given 19 years of loyal, solid playing service to the club. He'd played with the 'Babes' as they had emerged in the mid 50s, and had played a huge part in that team's successes, but ultimately, also shared in their tragedy. After Munich he'd been a pivotal figure during the club's rebuilding process, and then after that, had played a major part in the successes which culminated in the winning of the European Cup. After he hung up his boots he was installed as the reserve team coach and worked through the Wilf McGuinness era, and then through the Frank O'Farrell debacle.

Sadly in 1975, after having given over 25 years of loyal service to the club as both a player and a coach, he was forced to leave. United were never going to pay him a decent wage. Initially, he'd been working on his player's contract which was £70 per week, but when that contract finished, the club would only agree to a junior coaching contract which paid just £38 week. He approached Busby and the club about the financial problem, but as many players/coaches had found before, it was like trying to get blood out of a stone. Old Trafford was not the same place for him and he had become so disenchanted with all the internal politics that had been going on.

By then, he was a fully qualified FA Coach. Out of the blue came an offer to join Chicago Sting in the North American Soccer League as their Chief Coach and he immediately took the job. He then coached the Tulsa Roughnecks, and San Jose Earthquakes. In 1980 he returned to Europe and to Norway where he coached Steinkjer FK, Il Brin, and Lillestrom. He then moved on and to the Far East and Japan where he spent three years coaching the Mazda club in Hisoshima.

Bill never lost the love of his club and still carried them in his heart. He finally succumbed to his illness on that November morning in 2013 and Manchester United lost one of its true heroes. For the fans who saw him play, he will never be forgotten, and alongside the legends who perished at Munich, will always be revered and remembered.

Tom Clare, @TomClare2

Nicky Butt – A scrapper not a fighter

Watching football, and United in particular, is a visceral experience, a sharp, intense mess of bodies, noise and smells. So it's not surprising that the majority of fan favourites are linked by a single trait: they are men with whom it is deeply unwise to fuck. In my own lifetime, that includes Remi Moses, Bryan Robson, Norman Whiteside, Mark Hughes, Paul Ince, Eric Cantona, Roy Keane, Jaap Stam, Wes Brown, Ruud van Nistelrooy – sadly, in theory only - Nemanja Vidic, and though, Rojo shows promise, none of the current ponces.

It's probably fair to say that Nicky Butt was never quite a favourite, but he nonetheless contributed plenty of fearless hardness, and in a manner that reeked of both Manchester and United. If his mates were in a ruck, he was there, if he was in a ruck, his mates were there, if someone needed telling or doing, he was there, and he just fancied it for his own entertainment, he was there. He never took a backwards step, physically outmatched or not, nor was there any demonstration or ostentation; he was a scrapper not a fighter, asserting himself with economy and tenacity.

He was also a pretty handy footballer. The second Class of 92 member to establish himself, he was instrumental in facilitating Hughes' volley against Oldham in 1994, and he fought with distinction through the second half of the following season, scoring his first United goal in a New Year's Eve gale at The Dell.

By 1995-96, he was more or less a regular, most notably supplying an excellent take and finish to ensure that Eric's comeback game began correctly. His contributions, though, are better measured, not in moments, but momentousness; the teams he played for achieved unprecedented glory and success, in the United style. And within them, he competed as we all say we would, but most probably wouldn't.

As a kid, he and Paul Scholes had bullied the brothers Neville when Boundary Park Juniors met Bury Juniors, but at Old Trafford, when Scholes relocated to midfield, the two were, more often than not, competing for a place. And, though Scholes was the superior footballer, Butt was often preferred on the biggest occasions. In United's greatest ever season, he started both games with Leeds and Chelsea and all four with Arsenal, as well as away at Juventus - United's greatest ever performance.

His display in the first of those Leeds games, capped but not defined by a brilliant winning goal, suggested he was ready to ascend a level. That never quite happened, but he remained reliable and likeable, playing a key role in the doomed but thrilling revival of 2001-02, the ballast that facilitated the artistry; or, put another way, he'd swagger into the current team, after tenderising the various shins and ankles on the training ground.

Though he was the first of his cohort to leave United, he harbours not a single regret. However hard he's pressed, and however that pressing is formulated, he feels only pride and pleasure in his six league titles, three FA Cups and one European Cup. He also hated Dennis Wise, was respected by Roy Keane, and scalded Schmeichel's scrotum with a burning teaspoon, and there can be few more auspicious recommendations than that.

Daniel Harris, @DanielHarris

All-time United academy XI: O'Shea; G Neville, Edwards, Foulkes, Byrne; Whiteside, Scholes, Charlton; Giggs, Hughes, Best

Norman Whiteside – A colossus

In the Eighties Norman Whiteside was my boyhood hero; a player to be proud of and cherish during a largely bleak time for United.

To a kid, he seemed like a colossus; powerfully built, no one messed with him on the pitch, but he was an intelligent, skilful and graceful player too, and always seemed to deliver in big games.

Even as a teenager he had the presence of a veteran. It was his Northern Ireland team-mate Sammy McIlroy who said, “He was a man well before his time. We used to joke he was nine before he was born.”

Discovered in Belfast by Bob Bishop, the same scout who had unearthed George Best a generation earlier, Whiteside made his debut for United aged only 16-years-old in April 1982, and that summer replaced Pele as the youngest player to ever appear in the World Cup finals in Spain, aged 17 years and 41 days old.

In his first full season at Old Trafford Whiteside became the youngest player to score in both the 1983 League Cup final, which United lost 2-1 to Liverpool, and the FA Cup final as they overcame Brighton 4-0 in a replay at Wembley.

But his greatest moment would come in the 1985 FA Cup final against Everton beneath the twin towers of Wembley.

This was my first FA Cup final, when it was still the most important game in English football. Sitting high up in the Wembley stands opposite the Royal Box, it was even then a faded and crumbling old stadium, a full fifteen years before it was finally knocked down, but for a wide-eyed 12-year-old, it was full of grandeur and romance.

Everton were the overwhelming favourites, having just emerged from Liverpool’s shadow by winning the First Division title. They were also the FA Cup holders, who four days before this final against United had added the European Cup Winners Cup as well.

The final proved to be a cagey and nervous affair, with neither side creating many real chances, and as Paul McGrath recalls it was looking like it would be remembered as, “one of the dulllest goalless draws in Wembley history.”

But this was all to change after 78 minutes when Peter Reid intercepted an

under hit pass from McGrath and slipped the ball past Kevin Moran only to be spectacularly upended by a reckless and late challenge from the United defender.

Although just inside the United half, Reid would have had a clear run at the United goal, so Moran, as the last man, was sent off by the referee Peter Willis to become the first player in the 113-year history of the FA Cup final to be shown a red card.

But a tired Everton side were unable to take advantage of United being reduced to ten men and the final staggered in to extra-time.

Step forward Norman Whiteside. Ten minutes from the end of extra time Mark Hughes put him through on the right side of midfield, but as he approached the area, Everton didn't seem to be too troubled, Whiteside was too wide, and the angle appeared impossibly narrow.

But entering the area Whiteside performed a step over to buy time before curling an incredible shot around Pat van den Hauwe and beyond the stretched arm of Neville Southall to dramatically win the Cup for United.

Thirteen years later, I had the pleasure of sitting across a restaurant table from Whiteside as he explained the goal in great detail using a bottle of tomato ketchup bottle and mineral water.

"I was getting back from a previous attack and was absolutely exhausted, so I was thinking, 'Please, don't pass it to me,' but Mark Hughes found me with a great pass."

"I made my way in to the penalty area and could see Neville Southall hanging on to his near post. Pat van den Hauwe came right into line with the ball and at that moment I hit it. I used the defender as a screen, so Southall couldn't reach the ball."

In the following years, as United went in to decline and even flirted with relegation I would watch and rewatch that goal on an old VHS tape, and it never failed to give me goose bumps.

The commentary on the tape was particularly poignant, with the BBC's John Motson yelping, 'When they write the Norman Whiteside story, I wonder where they will start? And for that matter, where they will finish.' It was sooner than anyone could have imagined, as that goal would prove to be the peak of Whiteside's career.

Whiteside was never the same player again. A series of debilitating injuries saw to that, and as Sir Alex Ferguson, who replaced Ron Atkinson as United manager in November 1986, observed, it was his “depression at his continual injury [that] lead him to seek refuge in a lifestyle that created conflict with my concept of a United player,” which essentially meant he started drinking too much with his friends Paul McGrath and Bryan Robson.

Whiteside eventually left Old Trafford in the summer of 1989, but after briefly flourishing at Everton, he was sadly forced to retire from football aged only 26-years-old.

Sam Pilger, @SamPilger

All-time United academy XI: Crompton; G.Neville, Edwards, Byrne; Beckham, Scholes, Whiteside, Giggs, Best, Hughes, Charlton.

David Beckham – Always ‘one of us’

The rise of David Beckham through the Manchester United youth system was, in some ways, a curiosity.

He was not one of the fiercely humble local lads that have come to symbolise the famous Class of 92 of which he was a member.

He was a Londoner, a little bit flash even then with his sculpted hair, among the no-nonsense crew dominated by Nicky Butt and the Neville brothers.

In other environments, Beckham might have been considered an outsider but United's youth set-up has always been cosmopolitan and inclusive.

Beckham was there with the Ulsterman Keith Gillespie and the young Welsh midfielder Robbie Savage.

Being uprooted from his home in east London at the age of 14 and living in digs near the old training ground at The Cliff helped to forge Beckham.

His dad, Ted, was a hard taskmaster who was sparing with his praise and ready with his criticism.

And living away from his parents at such an early age only seemed to harden Beckham's resolve and steel.

Even at that age, it was obvious that the kid had style and that he had substance, too.

He had a ferocious work ethic, a quality that never left him even when fame and fortune assailed him.

He may not have been the most talented player that United's academy has ever produced but he became one of its most illustrious.

He was certainly its most well-travelled. Some of the Class of 92 felt no need to spread their wings but Beckham was not like that.

After winning everything at United, he spent time at Real Madrid, LA Galaxy, AC Milan and PSG.

But everywhere he went, he was keen to stress that he remained, and always would remain, a United fan.

That is one of the reasons why he has become part of the Class of 92 brand, a brand almost unique in its genesis.

It is a brand that plays on the mystique of the United academy and the importance to the club of its youth set-up.

It is the same kind of mystique that surrounds the fact that the Lisbon Lions, the great Celtic side that won the 1967 European Cup, were all born within 30 miles of Glasgow.

Beckham is part of something similar at United. He will always be part of a group of kids who grew together into the men who brought Manchester United their greatest glories.

He was part of the second incarnation of the Babes, he was a symbol of United's embrace of youth.

That is why, wherever he has travelled, he has always been welcomed back like a favourite son when he has returned to Old Trafford.

He kept his promise never to join another English club, never to play against United in the Premier League, and the fans loved him for that.

However exotic he had become, however rarefied the circles in which he moved, his history as one of the greatest products of United's youth system means that, for the fans, he will always be 'one of us'.

Oliver Holt, @ollieholt22

All-time United academy XI: Jimmy Rimmer; Gary Neville, Bill Foulkes, Duncan Edwards, Phil Neville; David Beckham, Paul Scholes, Bobby Charlton, Ryan Giggs; Dennis Viollet, George Best.

George Best – The man who exemplified everything Busby believed in

Famously, the telegram simply read: “I think I’ve found you a genius.”

And with those seven words – sent from chief scout Bob Bishop to boss Matt Busby – the life of George Best and the history of Manchester United changed forever.

Best was just a skinny 15-year-old when Bishop first saw him play, but the experienced scout was in no doubt as to the sublime talent the Belfast teenager possessed.

The club enticed Best over to Manchester, but the homesick youngster lasted only two days in the city before returning to his family home. Undeterred, Busby talked Best into giving Manchester another try and the legend of the Belfast Boy began in earnest.

Between 1961 and 1963, Best was part of the United A and B teams, but it was his starring role in the 1964 Youth Cup winning team that brought him to the attention of supporters.

A slight and shy young man, he amazed the crowds with his ability to endure from the toughest of tackles and was always demanding the ball, always ready to take on – and usually skip past – his opponents.

The club was quick to reward his progress, and Best signed professional terms on 22 May 1963 – the day of his 17th birthday. He made his first team debut just four months later, playing in 1-0 win against West Bromwich Albion following an unexpected call up from the Reserves.

Despite an impressive performance, he would have to wait another three months for another first team opportunity. A starring performance in the youth team’s 14-1 win over Barrow when Best scored a hat-trick meant a promotion to the first team in late December. The teenager played an important part in a 5-1 victory over Burnley, and was a mainstay in the first team from then on.

Busby cherished his Best’s raw talent and even stressed to his coaching team they should not to try to change the way Best played. “Don’t tinker with the boy’s style,” he demanded. “Let him develop his own way, naturally. He’s something special.”

What he went on to achieve on the pitch was remarkable, but his impact off

the pitch also contributed to his legacy.

Best was a man who revelled in the social life and fame that football afforded, but ultimately it was to prove his downfall as he struggled with the intensity of life in the spotlight and there followed a sad descent into alcoholism.

But on the pitch, he exemplified everything that Matt Busby believed in as he rebuilt his team – and the club – following the Munich air disaster of 1958.

He combined relentless courage with a daring sense of adventure and a desire to entertain the crowds. He glided gracefully past defenders, with balance and pace that thrilled everyone who watched him play.

In a career that frequently shocked the world, what is perhaps most shocking is the fact the Best left United at the age of just 27 – burnt out by the pressure of the game he once loved.

In his short time at the club, the team won two league titles and the European Cup in 1968, the same year he won the personal accolade of European Footballer of Year. In the modern, trophy-laden era, that might not seem like a lot of reward for someone who is held in such high regard in the club's formidable history.

But Best transcended football. He was the embodiment of Matt Busby's dream, the personification of his football philosophy. Adventurous, audacious, exciting and inspirational.

Thanks to his on-pitch quality and his off-pitch character, he created a legend that still echoes around Old Trafford today. He came to symbolise everything that we hope a Manchester United youth team player will become: a world-beater who played football the United way.

Laurie Hanna, @LaurieHanna

All-time United academy XI: Mark Bosnich; Gary Neville, Wes Brown, John O'Shea, Phil Neville; Ryan Giggs, Paul Scholes, Darren Fletcher, David Beckham; Ben Thornley*; Mark Hughes.

*This may seem a strange choice, but Ben Thornley scored one of the best goals I've ever seen live against Hearts in the 1991 Milk Cup. If he hadn't suffered a terrible injury aged just 19, he could have gone on to great things.

Phil Neville – Like having a Stretford Ender racing all over the pitch

When Phil Neville made his monotone punditry debut at the World Cup last year it was almost symbolic of his playing career.

Dismissed as not having the talent for the job the Bury lad took the flak, corrected the faults and came back stronger

For those close to him it came as no surprise - he had spent years at United proving people wrong.

Fans love one of their own in the team. They also love someone who might not be the most-talented but goes above and beyond for the cause.

Why? Because he reminds them of themselves. Having Neville out there busting a gut was like seeing a Stretford Ender racing all over the pitch.

Not that he was without talent - and not only in football.

At the other Old Trafford, they still talk about him as the one that got away. In a blossoming period for the Red Rose, to become the youngest player to represent the second XI, at just 15, speaks volumes about what may have been down the other end of Warwick Road.

Neville also prompted humour from the faithful and was sometimes aided by his brother. Who can forget the Nevilles' dance? Along with Gary, nobody put more into warming up from the bench. Off they would set, in front often in front of a giggling south stand, arms flailing as like touchline crabs they shifted from side to side.

And who could forget 'Phil will tear you apart'?

This effort, combined with a determination to succeed, became a trademark of both brothers. It is, no doubt, what prompted Jaap Stam to label them 'a pair of busy c***s'.

It is also what prompted Sir Alex Ferguson to write the following in his autobiography: 'He was one of those players to whom you could say: 'Phil, I want you to run up that hill, then come back and cut down that tree.' And he would say: 'Right, boss, where's the chainsaw?'

At Everton, where he arrived in 2005, there was suspicion. While the path from Old Trafford to Goodison Park is considerably more travelled than the one to the other side of Stanley Park, Neville was still seen as a Manc.

On October 26, 2008 that all changed. With United 1-0 up and Cristiano Ronaldo rampant came the moment that showed the Gwladys Street what he was about.

The Portugese, on the break, was stumbling after being nudged by Steven Pienaar. It was enough for Alan Wiley to blow for a foul. It was not enough to stop Neville - who came steaming in like an East Lancashire railway to almost cut his former teammate in half.

Old pals quickly became enemies. Over marched an incensed Rio Ferdinand. Then came a furious Ryan Giggs. To complete the old boys network it was Tim Howard who dragged Neville away.

That was all they needed at Everton to learn what United fans already knew and what reinforced that chainsaw point Fergie made.

When it comes to commitment you cannot question Phil Neville.

Mike Keegan, @MikeKeegan_DM

All-time United academy XI: Gary Walsh; Roger Byrne, Wes Brown, Bill Foulkes, Gary Neville; Ryan Giggs, Duncan Edwards, Paul Scholes, David Beckham, Bobby Charlton, Dennis Viollet.

Russell Beardsmore – Embodied the spirit of the new United

If anything symbolised the rebirth of Manchester United under Sir Alex Ferguson, or plain old Alex as he was in the late-1980s, it was the sight of skinny youngsters with bad hair-cuts doing their utmost to carve out a career with English football's great under-achievers.

But while many regard the Class of 92 as the acorn from which the United monster grew in the 1990s, the reality is that Ryan Giggs, David Beckham, Paul Scholes, Nicky Butt and Gary and Phil Neville may not have developed in the icons they became but for their youthful predecessors collectively bracketed as Fergie's Fledglings.

The bridge between the Busby Babes and the Class of 92 had been neglected to the point of dereliction prior to Ferguson's arrival as manager in November 1986.

Mark Hughes and Norman Whiteside were the home-grown poster boys of the 1980s, United products whose achievements in the game rightly earned them a place in the club's Hall of Fame, but they were isolated cases, with no great tide of youngsters emerging to provide the backbone of the team for the next decade.

Ultimately, the Class of 92 provided that backbone, not for ten years but almost twenty, yet Fergie's Fledglings cleared the path and none embodied the spirit of the new United better than Russell Beardsmore.

Born and raised in Wigan, Beardsmore was the archetypal kid plucked from within twenty miles of Old Trafford who would go on to live the dream of so many of his contemporaries.

He also looked like the kid who had been dragged off the local playing field and given a red shirt and told to go and play.

Just 5ft 6ins tall and appearing to weigh about eight stone, Beardsmore's ability as a winger was first identified by Ferguson at the start of the 1988-89 season, when the then-19-year-old was handed a senior debut as a substitute in a 2-0 Old Trafford victory against West Ham.

That same day, a seventeen-year-old summer signing from Torquay United by the name of Lee Sharpe made his debut.

Few would know it at the time, but the presence of Beardsmore and Sharpe in the squad was the first sign of things to come.

An injury crisis during December and January of that season forced Ferguson to accelerate his youthful revolution, however, with the likes of Beardsmore, Tony Gill, Mark Robins, Deiniol Graham and David Wilson all promoted to the first-team, with an FA Cup replay victory against Queens Park Rangers proving the highpoint of the Fledglings' all-too-brief spell in the spotlight.

Beardsmore's personal high came during a famous 3-1 victory against Liverpool in New Year's Day in 1989, when he made a goal for Hughes and scored himself.

When your high as a Manchester United player is a match-winning performance against Liverpool, it is always going to earn a place in the hearts of the club's supporters.

Injuries, loss of form and the emergence of the likes of Beckham ultimately restricted Beardsmore to 73 senior appearances for United, in which he scored four goals before being sold to Bournemouth following his final outing, against Atletico Madrid in 1991.

But while his statistics may appear unremarkable, Beardsmore's place in United's recent history is much more important.

His skinny frame barely filled his shirt, his centre-parting hair-cut and youthful courage and audacity sat perfectly with the mood in the city at the time, with football, music and fashion conspiring to make Manchester the place to be.

United would soon find themselves at the heart of the football universe and Russell Beardsmore played his part in that.

Mark Ogden, @MOgdenTelegraph

All-time United academy XI: Bosnich; G Neville, Brown, O'Shea, P

Neville; Beckham, Scholes, Butt, Giggs; Hughes, Whiteside.

Gary Neville – The greatest English right-back of his generation

It is peculiar looking back at the tributes to Gary Neville following his retirement in 2011. Platitudes were rolled out and lazy clichés abounded. “Over-achiever” made an unwelcome appearance more times than you would expect, the simple idea being that he made the most of his limited football talent to succeed through just dedication and persistence.

Such functional, even dour nouns are an affront to Manchester United’s best and most talented right back in their 137-year history - edging out Bill Foulkes in the process.

Neville of course had the basic requirements to be a strong footballer but he possessed more than that. His combination with David Beckham remains the most threatening right back, right wing partnership the Premier League has ever seen; an axis that terrified defences at home and abroad, helping United achieve the greatest feat in their history, the 1999 Treble.

Before that, he also provided an outlet for Andrei Kanchelskis and throughout a career that spanned 19 years and took in 602 senior appearances for the club he loved, Neville new how to adapt as the game changed. While the aforementioned Foulkes possessed similar defensive characteristics as Neville, he lacked the attacking instincts that Neville used to fortify United. It is easy to envisage Neville thriving in sepia-tinged highlight reels from the 50s and 60s just as you can recall how he played in the modern day.

Lung-busting, overlapping sprints as defence morphed into attack were the norm under “Red Nev” as was distaste for authority and pathological dislike of all things Liverpool. No wonder he is so revered. No wonder the Stretford End still sings his name even in retirement.

A United fan since he was four, Neville would rail against his Elton High School classmates in Bury for supporting those down the East Lincs Road. As a kid and a professional, he was the toughest United cheerleader you’d ever see.

As is the case with many of United’s best ever players, Neville grew up in the club’s famed academy, captaining the 1992 FA Youth Cup winners from centre-back. “Passion” has grown into an ugly word in the football lexicon but it sums up the player and the man perfectly, whether a 16-year-old coming off the bench against Leicester at Gigg Lane for the youth team or a

seasoned campaigner, running the length of the pitch to celebrate in front of Liverpool fans following a late winner against the old enemy.

In copping a £5,000 fine for celebrating a goal like the fan he was, Neville said, quite brilliantly: “It’s a poor decision, not just for me but for all footballers. I ask the authorities: ‘where is football being taken?’ Being a robot, devoid of passion and spirit, is obviously the way forward for the modern-day footballer.”

He married guile with graft, brain with brawn, pragmatism with panache. A superb crosser and strong in the tackle, Sir Alex Ferguson called him the greatest English right back of his generation. When the game’s greatest ever manager hands out such high praise, merely labelling Neville a trier who made the most of limited ability can be shown up for the short-sightedness that it is.

Alex Shaw, @AlexShawESPN

All-time United academy XI: Jack Crompton; Gary Neville, Bill Foulkes, Wes Brown, Roger Byrne; David Beckham, Paul Scholes, Ryan Giggs; Duncan Edwards, Bobby Charlton, Dennis Viollet

Dennis Viollet – The man who touched the lives of everyone he met

Seven Manchester United players lost their lives that sad day in Munich, and another one, the colossus that was Duncan Edwards, was to lose his young life just fifteen days later. Because of the severity of their injuries, two others were never to play again. Of the seven surviving players, four of them would leave the club within four years, and of that four, three would disappear into relative anonymity. The other player is the subject of this tribute, and he is of course, Dennis Viollet.

Mention of that wonderful team always throws up the names of Byrne, Colman, Edwards, Taylor, and of course a young teenager who had just broken into the team, a certain Bobby Charlton. Yet one of the side's key performers was widely and peculiarly underrated, though not, it should be emphasised, by Matt Busby himself. In terms of appearance, Dennis Viollet did not correspond with the popular image of a goal-scoring hero. Wan of countenance and slim to the point of scrawniness, he seemed pathetically equipped physically to mix it with strapping defenders. Yet the prolific Mancunian was a gem, both as a foil for the magnificent Tommy Taylor and as a marksman in his own right. Indeed, the fact that no one - not Law, not Best, not Cantona, not Ronaldo, not even Rooney - has netted more league goals than Dennis did in a single season, offers telling evidence of his rare calibre.

After captaining Manchester schoolboys - and also playing regularly for his country at that level - he joined Manchester United as an amateur in 1949, turning professional a year later and making his first-team debut at St. James' Park, Newcastle in 1952-53. Dennis held his own against white-hot competition as Busby's youthful revolution gathered exhilarating momentum and he won a regular place during 1953-54. He was blessed with instinctive ball control, searing acceleration, and the vision to use these attributes to full advantage. Arguably he was at his most effective when working in tandem with Taylor, the big bold Yorkshireman who lost his life on that slushy German runway. Big Tommy was majestic in the air while his less conspicuous but formidably lethal partner was a steel dart at ground level. During the mid-1950s when the Babes were sweeping all before them, the duo struck up a seemingly telepathic understanding, creating space for each other by their imaginative movement and registering a river of goals that showed no signs of drying up. It is incredible when you look at the fact that

they played in 134 games together and scored 182 goals between them, Dennis netting 84 and Taylor 98!

From the inside-left position, Dennis contributed at least 20 senior goals per season, and he went on to share in a succession of heady triumphs, notably the League Championships of 1955-56 and 1956-57. As United blazed a trail into Europe, his pedigree shone through ever more vividly and his evident relish for continental opposition made his sojourn in the international wilderness increasingly perplexing. Maybe this was because at that time the England team was chosen by a selection committee made up of chairmen/directors of other First Division clubs.

Dennis survived the tragedy at Munich but did suffer head injuries and was hospitalised for a month after the accident. However, he did return home to Manchester and began the journey that would see him playing again. By mid-April of 1958 he was deemed fit enough to play again at first team level and after a couple of League outings he was selected to play at Wembley against Bolton Wanderers in the FA Cup Final. Dennis had missed the emotional passage of United's patched up young team winning their way to that Final, and sadly, on that May day in the London sunshine, the emotions of the previous few months caught up with them, and their energies seemed to have been sapped. They didn't function too well and Bolton were deserved 2-0 winners.

Any fears that Dennis would never be the player that he was quickly disappeared over the following two seasons. In season 1958-59 Manchester United confounded everybody by finishing as runners-up to Wolves in the First Division. Dennis contributed 21 goals. The following season he was on fire and set a club League goal scoring record by notching a further 32 goals. By this time he had also taken over the responsibility of Club Captain from Bill Foulkes. It was an enormous responsibility considering that the club was in the early stages of trying to rebuild the team after the accident. It was also during this same period that Dennis finally and deservedly won full international recognition. That he was only capped twice for England was, and still is, a travesty of justice.

In the 1960-61 season Dennis's form dipped and he lost his place in the team. Perhaps his phenomenal contributions from the previous season did take its toll. However, he battled back towards the end of the season and he began the 1961-62 season as first choice striker. Again his form dipped and once more

he was left out only making sporadic appearances and playing in the number seven shirt. By this time United had signed centre forward David Herd from Arsenal, and plans were well afoot to bring Denis Law back to Manchester from Torino in Italy. Dennis was still only 29 years old, and despite his herculean efforts for the club since the tragedy, Busby sold him to Stoke City who were then in the Second Division, for the sum of £25,000 in January of 1962. Just four years after the tragedy, only Gregg, Foulkes, and Charlton, remained at Old Trafford from the 17 players who had left for Belgrade in 1958, and Gregg was to leave the club in 1966.

It was a big shock for the United fans when he was allowed to leave the club in 1962 – he'd been at Old Trafford since leaving school in 1948. But Denis being Denis, he hid his disappointment and went off to Stoke City and enjoyed five memorable years at the Victoria Grounds. Stoke City were then in the Second Division, but in his second season with the 'Potters, he helped them gain promotion back to the top flight. .

There was a human side to Dennis and there are so many tales to tell about him. He touched the lives of everybody he met and they were better for the experience. Once, when he found himself at Manchester Airport late on a Saturday evening, as he was about to leave he spotted a young lad bedding down on the seating there. There was nobody about and all flights had departed for that day. Dennis went across and spoke to the young man and found out that he was a United fan making his way back to Ireland, but had missed his flight and had to wait until the Sunday morning until he could continue his journey. Dennis did no more, took the lad home, billeted and fed him, and got him back to the airport the following morning.

In 1967, when his time was up at Stoke City they gave him a testimonial game which was played against England's World Cup team. Dennis had an old school friend named Alan Wallace. They had played together in the same school team back in the late '40's, and Dennis told him;

"You were there at the start of my soccer career, and I would like you to be there at the end of it."

The late Sir Stanley Mathews was to say;

"There were moments in games when the ball came to Dennis and it was if a spotlight had fallen on him and every other player was in his shadow. Your eyes were drawn to him as he engineered, first space to work in, then

proceeded to conjure up his own special brand of magic. Only when the ball had left Dennis's feet did you see the opening as the ball glided across the turf just in front of one of our galloping forwards for the course of the game to be altered. Short pass, long pass, low pass, high pass, it mattered not one jot. Whatever it was, it was always the right pass when it came from Dennis."

Sadly at precisely 3 o'clock on the afternoon of Saturday 6 March 1999 the final whistle was blown on Dennis Viollet's life. The effects of the head injuries which he had received on that awful day in Munich 41 years before had manifested themselves just a few years earlier. There were two tumours which had appeared under the scars inflicted all those years beforehand. The boy from Moss Side in Manchester had played football in 40 different countries and graced the beautiful game for almost five decades. Wherever or however you met Dennis Viollet, you never forgot him. He was one of those very special people whose contact made a deep impression on your life, an impression which time will never diminish.

I'll leave you with Dennis's own words spoken just as he was about to retire from the game

"No player has gained more pleasure from the great game of football than I have. But as I bow out, there is a little sadness for me. I see that the game is changing. The pattern is less colourful, and the individuals grow fewer and fewer. Football is now regimentation. Yet I have been privileged to spend the major part of my career with a club I have always considered the finest in the world – Manchester United. During those years, and after, I played with the greats like Duncan Edwards, Roger Byrne, Tommy Taylor, and the rest. I have also been thrilled to play with the illustrious Stanley Mathews, and against mighty footballers like Puskas and di Stefano. To me these were the football kings, ruling the game with their brilliance and overwhelming authority."

Tom Clare, @TomClare2

John O'Shea – There's only one thing to talk about

There's a lot you can say about John O'Shea but only one bit especially matters.

You can talk about his introduction early in the second half of the 2-1 victory against Juventus in 2003, in a move which contributed to United taking a first leg advantage to the Stadio delle Alpi.

You can talk about how, when he was only 21, he decided the best course of action in the famous 4-3 defeat (you might remember it as a victory, but it was a defeat) to Real Madrid, he decided that with the game goalless, the best course of action was to nutmeg Luis Figo. It wasn't a fluke, either, but in the middle of a run of form where, Alex Ferguson believed "He would do well in central midfield. He has great passing awareness, two good feet, he is quick, and he is balanced." While that can now be seen as building expectations slightly too high, other players have proven that to be a reliable utility player at Manchester United is a rare talent of its own.

You can discuss his goal against Arsenal in the 4-2 victory in 2005. A game that kicked off with United's premier Irishman, Roy Keane, belittling the opponent's captain, Patrick Vieira. Few fans will have been as nervous before a match as they were before they took on Arsenal at Highbury, a claustrophobia-inducing ground when you never felt more than 0.33 seconds from conceding on the counterattack. This was, thankfully, Before Twitter, and the tunnel stramash was only news to the crowd as phones started pinging with the texts of friends watching on Sky.

It still all appeared a finely balanced match, even if in retrospect Keane had won the match before the first whistle. At 3-2, Mikael Silvestre was sent off for a desperately soft headbutt on Freddie Ljungberg. It was on the edge of disaster, and Silvestre said after the match, "I wasn't prepared for the game mentally. I was prepared to win the game, to win battles, to win challenges, but not to face that attitude."

And while it was clear Keane had the right mentality, so did O'Shea. In the last minute of the 90, United had held on. Gabriel Heinze had the ball on the left wing. He could have run for the corner, but instead found Louis Saha inside him. Sensibly keeping the ball, he passed back for Paul Scholes. Scholes, then, had a dilemma. With a few minutes remaining he could do the conservative and pragmatic thing, and find a defender.

But there were two things to keep in mind. The first is this, an attitude summed up in February 2015, when Scholes said. “In the periods of my career when I stopped passing the ball forward, or when I stopped looking for the risky pass that might open up a defence, the consequences were the same. The manager stopped picking me.”

The second was that twenty yards ahead of him, standing unmarked on the edge of the box, left to run free as every Arsenal player inexplicably sat and waiting for Scholes to make his mind up, was O’Shea. Scholes’ single, decisive touch was to flick the ball into O’Shea’s path. He took a slightly heavy touch, and Jens Lehmann ran out to spread his frame as wide as possible. A lesser man would have panicked and whacked a shot anywhere, hoping for the best. But that day, O’Shea was a hero, and possessed by the spirit of Eric Cantona, lifted a measured, artful chip over the ‘keeper.

Instead of losing his mind at such a moment, O’Shea casually sauntered away, expressionless for once because of a sense of cool-as-fuck, rather than oh-fuck.

You can talk about all of these things. The five Premier League titles, three League Cups, the FA Cup and the Premier League, but all it all fades into nothingness. That’s because when you talk about John O’Shea, all you really need to talk about his goal in the 2006-7 title run-in. In injury time. With a side down to 10 men. Against Liverpool. At Anfield.

Alexander Netherton

All-time United academy XI: O’Shea; Wes Brown, Gary Neville, Phil Neville; Butt, Fletcher, Beckham, Scholes, Giggs; Welbeck, Hughes.

Duncan Edwards – Born in Dudley but one of ours

Ask any Manchester United supporter of a certain vintage about Duncan Edwards, and almost inevitably the eyes will moisten and there will be a lump in the throat. Of all the great players whom have worn the red shirt with distinction over past decades, none have inspired more debate or devotion than the boy from Dudley, who became not just an adopted citizen of the rainy city, but became one of Manchester's most beloved sons.

Though every soul lost in the Munich disaster was a spear through the heart, the loss of Edwards at the time was perhaps felt most profusely. More so because his injuries, it was claimed, would have felled lesser mortals. Not so Duncan, who battled on against all earthly odds to amaze and astonish the German doctors and nurses at the Rechts de Isar hospital in Munich, who fought with equal grim determination to save him. When ultimately Edwards lost his fight for life fifteen days after the initial crash, their tears fell equally as long and hard as those that were shed in the houses, shops and factories across Manchester.

That even today Edwards possesses the power to reduce grown men to emotional wrecks can only be due to the effect of what they witnessed him performing on a field. A powerhouse of a footballer and who today would be considered a midfield player. Utterly priceless. Blessed with a thunderous shot, two great feet, strong and fast, great balance, a devil in the tackle and the ability to hit teammates with thirty yards passes. And as Jimmy Murphy once so famously quoted: 'When we knock the rough edges off Duncan he will be quite a player.'

For Edwards was only 21 years old when the heavens fell on Manchester United football club and the airplane bringing them home from Belgrade erupted into fire and flames in the Munich snow.

Just 12 months earlier, United's Busby Babes had run the imperious Real Madrid close in the European cup semi-final. In the second leg at Old Trafford a 2-2 draw was sufficient to see Real go through 5-3 on aggregate, but the visitors, none more than the great Alfredo di Stefano were hugely impressed by the ferocity and skill of Edwards. On hearing news of the dreadful events in southern Germany, Di Stefano, as were all at Madrid, left devastated at such a tragic loss of life.

'No one deserved more than Duncan, a fullness of a great career.'

As this Munich anniversary arrives once more and the truly heartfelt accolades are spoken. As flowers are laid and songs sung. Older supporters will close their eyes and remember what must surely now feel like a different lifetime ago, that bunch of bouncing Busby Babes. And if you really want to know about the magic of those times. And these special young players. Duncan Edwards especially. Well ask them. Then look into their eyes. For then few words will be required and you will have your answer.

Duncan was extraordinary. A certain vintage. Born in Dudley but ultimately one of ours.

John Ludden, @JohnLudds

All-time United academy XI: Gary Walsh; Gary Neville, Duncan Edwards, Nobby Stiles, Roger Byrne; David Beckham, Paul Scholes, Bobby Charlton, Ryan Giggs; George Best, Norman Whiteside.

Danny Welbeck – Could things have been different?

When he came off the field suffering from cramp on the night of Wednesday 13th February 2013 Danny Welbeck had entered the hearts of Manchester United fans. Seemingly forever. He had scored a tidy, looped header against Real Madrid in the first leg of Manchester United's Champions League clash with the Spanish giants and had worked his socks off. His supporters had been waiting for a moment like this for years and now he was finally vindicating their faith in him.

A few of the Real fans I was sitting with inside the Bernabeu also applauded as United's number 19 was substituted. They appreciated the young man had turned in a terrific performance. He kept rattling the Real defence as his pace and trickery got him behind their lines. As one commentator said at the time, "the centre-forward who never scores has scored!" On a night that Robin van Persie had been a little wasteful, Welbz had done what he so often didn't – he had finished. He had not only scored the crucial United goal, he also constantly frustrated Xabi Alonso. Yes, XABI ALONSO! Perhaps that explained his manager's effervescence. Sir Alex Ferguson told the media that Real's defence had simply found him too hot to handle.

Welbeck became a bit of a cult hero at United over the years, aided by the remarks made on Twitter by another former academy player, Ravel Morrison. After Welbeck scored against Manchester City in United's 3-2 win in the FA Cup at the Etihad in 2012, Morrison tweeted "My boy Welbz, zup zup, say nada", leading to its repetition on social media every time the Longsight lad found the back of the net. When scoring at the Bernabeu, it was "Welbz is dat guy".

"Dat guy" was a red through a through, who went "mental" as an 8 year old in his front room with his family watching United win the European Cup in 1999, and who looked like a player who could see out the best years of his career at his boyhood club.

In 2012, he signed a new four-year deal, saying: "Playing for United is all I've ever wanted to do – it's the club I've supported all my life."

However, Welbeck didn't achieve the Hollywood ending that every United fan would have wanted for him, leaving the club for Arsenal two years after signing that extension.

He was the very opposite of one of today's Galacticos. Born in Longsight and spotted by United's scouts at the age of just six. This player already has 32 senior England caps and it would have been dreamy if he had become one of Old Trafford's greats. And there have been times this season when his pace might have been a good complement to Radamel Falcao or Van Persie. But a better complement than James Wilson? Might Welbeck's retention have suffocated Wilson's advance into the first team? Taking off the red-tinted spectacles it's hard to argue with Louis Van Gaal's decision to sell Daniel Nii Tackie Mensah Welbeck last summer for £16 million.

Many Arsenal supporters are becoming frustrated at the former United player – especially at his lack of movement off the ball, as well as his on-off finishing. There's no doubting his technique, however, and that technique may mean he's more suited to Arsenal's less direct style of play. He may well evolve into a better Wenger player than he would ever have been a United player. For England's sake the more patriotic United fans can only hope so.

But could things have been different? Sir Alex was brilliant at bringing on young talent throughout his imperious reign but something seemed to go a bit wrong towards the end. Lots of players who promised so much have struggled to graduate to the next level. Phil Jones, Chris Smalling, even Tom Cleverley. None were given a fixed position or place in the team at critical stages in their career. Fergie tried Welbeck on the left, as a traditional striker, and also just behind the striker. Might things have been different if he had enjoyed more trust more quickly or am I thinking with my heart rather than my head? United fans will wonder and wonder for many years to come.

To finish, I'll leave you with Welbeck's thoughts on the club, given back in 2009.

"I think Manchester United is the best club to be at. It has helped me a lot. If I wasn't at United playing a few games, I don't know where I would be or at what stage I'd be at or what level. But just getting a few games here and there for the best club in the world has helped me get to this level. It's what every Manchester boy dreams of. Growing up, you just want to play for United but to score for them was out of this world. It's the Man United way of winning things. There's no better club than United."

Tim Montgomerie, @montie

Mark Hughes – A genuine legend

Modern football. It is easy for those a certain age to become cynical with a passion that has become marketed as a product. The game is now obsessed with money, celebrity and brand; overhyped drama engineered to lionise and vilify in the same narrative. That is to mention nothing of the cost and ever-moveable fixture list. It is a game, for some, out of touch with its roots.

It is not so long ago that football was, well, just football, not ‘a whole new ball game’. There was a time when not even the global population summed to “five point one billion,” let alone a television contract. The purity of competition in the 1980s, played out in what now seems a simpler era, was a time that many fans remember fondly. Football was less complicated and the players were loved for it. That is, at least, the romantic recollection.

There were few players less complex than Mark Hughes – an academy graduate who made his United debut aged 20 in 1983. Nor was the Welshman’s talent any real secret, even in an era before blanket coverage of the youth game. Over the next dozen years Hughes etched his name in United’s history – a genuine legend from a time before the phrase became widely abused. Forget, for a moment, the subsequent spats with Sir Alex Ferguson, or Hughes’ spiky managerial persona, the player was as adored as any in the modern era.

On the pitch Hughes was a beast, but one with the grace to stand out even as United’s side became more cosmopolitan in the 1990s. Even now the player’s rise through the youth ranks, indomitable competitive spirit and penchant for the spectacular embodies everything supporters expect United to stand for as a club.

It took very little time for fans to bond with Hughes. Five goals in 10 starts in the 1983-84 season offered real promise, with the Welshman partnering Frank Stapleton to some effect. He scored 24 the following campaign in what would be the most prolific of a career built on far more than goals alone. Few will forget the winner Hughes scored against Liverpool in the FA Cup semi-final that season, blasting past Bruce Grobbelaar from Gordon Strachan’s through ball. It wasn’t the last crucial FA Cup goal Hughes would score, nor indeed against the Merseysiders.

Yet, inside three years Hughes was gone, with United selling to Barcelona for a book-balancing £2 million – a huge sum for the day. It is easy to forget that

Hughes' sale in 1986 was every bit as controversial on the terraces as the Welshman's second departure some nine years later.

If anything, however, Hughes' second spell was more successful than the first. Player of the Year in his first season back, Hughes went on to score some of the most critical goals in United's recent history; in the FA Cup semi-final and then final of 1990 and then twice in the European Cup Winners' Cup final a year later. It marked United's first glory in Europe for 23 long years.

In total Hughes scored 163 United goals in 468 games. Yet, that tells only part of the story of a youth player turn terrace hero. In time he may even be forgiven for managing City!

Ed Barker, @unitedrant

All-time United academy XI: Jimmy Rimmer; Gary Neville, Bill Foulkes, Jackie Blanchflower; Duncan Edwards; George Best, Paul Scholes, Bobby Charlton, Ryan Giggs; Mark Hughes, Brian Kidd

Darren Fletcher: From an unwanted presence to the last hope

It's pleasing that Darren Fletcher managed to redeem himself so thoroughly at Manchester United, given that he helped to end the United career of one of the club's greatest ever players and captains. Not through any fault of his own of course, but his generally inept early displays helped to provoke Roy Keane into his ill-fated MUTV outburst of fury at his colleagues. Soon enough, shunted from his position on the wing, Fletcher would be asked to fill Keane's boots.

An ominous task. And certainly not one he had shown any inkling of being capable of, either. Keane's displeasure was another voice added to many in the stands at the bewildering lack of talent from "the Scottish player", sparking suggestions Fergie might have a secret love-child or was picking a pal. Which is ridiculous, of course - Ferguson is unlikely ever to overpromote someone for a massively important role at Manchester United just because he's Scottish and a pal.

It was more than Fletcher's own ineptitude, however, it was what he summed up - a bewildering lack of determination in Ferguson to fix a serious problem, and the decline of a snarling, intimidating presence in midfield that could strike genuine fear into teams. Then as now, United no longer scared teams and suffered for it. Keane's voice was the loudest because he was raging impotently against his own decline, as the team seemed to wither with his legs.

While others bemoaned the situation of course, others got on with it. Fletcher never did replace Keane at United, but he tried many times harder than any other player, manager, chairman or supporter to do something about it. And do something he did. An excellent run of form lasting up until the 2009 Champions League semi-final. Then, Fletcher was more replacing Owen Hargreaves, a far less intimidating task and one he did exceptionally. United blew their opponents, Arsenal, off the park, overrunning them and outmatching them in every department. The game was won. And then, Cesc Fabregas got through on goal.

It was a foul. We might as well admit that now. A gentle breeze would've moved the ball further than Fletcher's contact on it, regardless of whether or not he'd clattered Fabregas and wrapped his leg around his body before

getting there. But you all know how the rest goes - red card, Robin van Persie scores a pointless penalty, United get to the final and get rings run around them by Barcelona.

It wasn't too ridiculous a view at the time that United missed Fletcher, and with Michael Carrick doing his traditional big-game routine of utter anonymity, he could certainly have made a difference. Now, of course, we know the ludicrous dominance that Barcelona team went on to have, and the idea seems quaint. But Fletcher's importance, redemption and hard work were all evidence. From an unwanted presence in a poor side to the last hope of a team of world-class players. It's just a shame that his legacy will be somewhat marred by Tom Cleverley and presumably more to come persisting due to the "look at Fletch" excuse. But you can't have it all. Fletcher didn't, but he couldn't have been much happier with what he got.

Callum Hamilton, @Callum_TH

All-time United academy XI: Mark Bosnich; Gary Neville, Brian Greenhoff, Wesley Brown, Clayton Blackmore; David Beckham, Norman Whiteside, Paul Scholes Ryan Giggs; George Best; Mark Hughes.

Is it the best team? Not exactly. Would they give you the best night out? Yes.

Brian Kidd – Twisting blood long before Giggs

As far as birthday celebrations go, Brian Kidd's jubilant jumps at Wembley on the 19th anniversary of his birth probably rank as his most memorable.

The date was 29 May, 1968, and Kidd had all but sealed United's first European Cup glory, pouncing on his own fumbled header to make it 3-1 against Benfica, when he reeled away and leapt into the air.

It had been less than a year since Kidd made his debut for Manchester United in a 3-3 draw with Tottenham Hotspur in the 1967 Charity Shield and despite missing out on the league title that year to Sunderland, the striker played a pivotal role in United's European Cup victory - scoring the third and assisting George Best. In total, Kidd scored an impressive 17 goals in his first season, playing 50 of United's 54 games.

Born to a family of devoted United fans just four miles from Old Trafford, in Collyhurst, Manchester, Kidd signed as a schoolboy for United in December 1963, moving up the ranks to become an apprentice one year later.

While England were plotting World Cup success in 1966, Kidd achieved his boyhood dream: signing a professional contract with the Reds.

Best later recalled how Kidd, the 18, ran rings around imposing centre-half Mike England during his debut against Spurs. "Kiddo turned Mike inside out and you knew he was something special," Best reminisced.

Gifted with height and a strength that belied his diminutive frame, Sir Matt Busby deployed Kidd as a striker but he also proved devastating operating from wide positions, his combination of quick feet and turn of pace turning defenders inside-out decades before Ryan Giggs "twisted" their blood.

Both Kidd and United failed to build upon their success of the 1967-68 season and slumped to 11th the next year with the striker netting just four times. Slowly, Sir Matt's United, build up over more than a decade after the Munich disaster, was tearing at the seams.

Wulf McGuinness lead United to eighth the next season, with Kidd chipping in with 12 league goals, and a return of 13 goals the following season saw United rooted to a consecutive eighth spot.

It was not until 1970, two years after Kidd burst onto the scene at the summit of European football, that he made a belated England debut in a 3-1 win over

Northern Ireland in the 1970. He failed to impress England manager Sir Alf Ramsey and missed out on England's 1970 World Cup squad.

His fortunes at United didn't improve much either as the club continued to toil until, without the departed trinity of Dennis Law, Bobby Charlton and Best, it was relegated in 1974.

So when Arsenal came in with an offer of £110, 000 for Kidd, he left for North London with a total of 70 goals in 264 appearances for United.

Unlike most United players, Kidd was able to forge a second, and arguably more successful, career at Old Trafford when he was brought in by Sir Alex Ferguson - then just plain old Alex - as a junior coach and director of school of excellence.

It was there that his "arm around the shoulder" man-management style saw Kidd earmarked a youth development role and in 1990 he began overseeing the blossoming of the Paul Scholes and David Beckham. History says the pair ended up doing quite well.

Fergie had higher aspirations for Kidd and in 1991 made him his assistant - famously giving us another memorable leaping celebration when Steve Bruce's winner against Sheffield Wednesday turned the tide in the 1992-93 title race.

If Fergie was the more tea spilling, plate smashing of the pair, Kidd was about inspiring morale amongst the United ranks and perhaps explains why the Boss said of his assistant in the first instalment of his autobiography: "I would have had serious reservations about Brian ever taking charge of United. I suspect that the constant demand for hard, often unpopular, decisions would have put an intolerable strain on his temperament."

Kidd's impact at Old Trafford may have been overlooked by the club's success after he left - United went on to win an unprecedented Treble the season he departed for Blackburn Rovers - but he was undoubtedly a great number two and a haul of four championships and two FA Cups is testament to the Fergie/Kidd partnership as well as the on-pitch alchemy.

From fan to player and then coach to within reach of the highest office of all, Kidd's United career touched all corners of the club and is unlikely to be match by anyone apart from Giggs.

Lewis Dean, @lewisdeanuk

All-time United academy XI: Jimmy Rimmer; Gary Neville, Bill Foukes, Roger Byrne; Duncan Edwards, Paul Scholes, Ryan Giggs, David Beckham, Bobby Charlton, Dennis Viollet, George Best.

Wes Brown – The hardest man in all the town

Most chants by football fans aren't entirely accurate if we're being completely honest. Anderson never did defecate on Cesc Fabregas – while was hardly better than Kleberson if we're going down the candid route. Nemanja Vidic probably wouldn't commit any form of homicide, regardless of the fact he was perfectly capable of it and as far as I'm aware Roy Keane's clothing had absolutely no magical powers.

One chant that isn't only true but also sung regularly at away games and even the odd home one is the song regarding a certain Wesley Brown being the hardest man in all the town. Brown may have left Old Trafford some years ago but he remains as popular as ever as a home grown player who came good, gave his all, won the lot and only left when he was deemed surplus to requirements- even though we've arguably needed him ever since.

My first memory of Brown was during the summer of 1998 when, at a testimonial match at Old Trafford, the then-academy defender faced up against the likes of Eric Cantona, Jean Pierre Papin and Martin Dahlin. Papin may have given him the slip to nick one from a corner but Brown more than redeemed himself by taking the ball off Paul Gascoigne as though he was removing a pack of tampons from a mischievous child at the supermarket. This was the same 'Gazza' who'd hit the headlines for not making the England World Cup squad that summer and Brown was more than equal to the task of disarming him.

The treble-winning season saw Wes - for some reason he seems one of the few players we all feel comfortable using their first name - used sporadically in the first team, with the Champions League really showcasing his talents. Brown was thrown in against the likes of Barcelona and Bayern Munich and you almost felt sorry for the likes of Rivaldo and Stefan Effenberg as this teenager from Longsight flew into them with the sort of challenges normally reserved for Ardwick Pits.

While playing for the first team during those teenage years - mainly as a right back - Brown showed his talents at centre back for the academy and the reserves, twice picking up the Jimmy Murphy young player of the year award.

The 1999-2000 season should've seen Brown stake a claim at the heart of United's defence alongside Jaap Stam, but unfortunately injury saw him miss

the entire campaign. It's with a twinge of sadness we often look back at Brown's United career as, despite the fact he won seven titles and two Champions Leagues and made over 350 appearances for the Reds, it should have been a lot more. Brown suffered from a string of injuries which prevented him from reaching the consistent heights his talents deserved. Sir Alex once labelled him the country's most naturally gifted defender, few would dare to disagree with him.

Brown's finest moment in a Red shirt came at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow when at the end of a campaign that had seen him play over 50 times, more than any other United player that season, his left footed cross found the head of Cristiano Ronaldo for United's Champions League Final opener.

Brown's Old Trafford career wound down after Moscow as injuries again hampered his career. He managed just 13 appearances in 2008-09 and 15 in his final season at the club.

At a time when plastic tough guys make cynical challenges before hiding behind the referee or taking to social media to show their bravado, one man stands alone as a true hard man who was the perfect exponent of the crunching tackle. An academy graduate who made the fans proud and more than a few wingers wince in pain. Altogether now "he's big he's bad..."

Justin Mottershead, @JayMotty

All-time United academy XI: Gary Bailey; Gary Neville, Wes Brown, Bill Foulkes, Arthur Albiston; David Beckham, Duncan Edwards, Ryan Giggs, George Best; Bobby Charlton, Dennis Viollet.

Roger Byrne – He is peerless

When my dad was alive I would sit in awe and listen to stories of players I'd not seen. As a pre-war MUJAC himself, and season ticket holder until his death in 2006, he'd seen everyone. He was fair though. Cantona made his best ever team, as did Bryan Robson. 'As captain' I once asked? I remember he laughed, shook his head, and said 'no, my captain is Roger Byrne.'

Roger William Byrne, the right footed lad from Gorton, was not blessed in heading prowess, tackling proficiency, or left foot dexterity. Indeed a scout when watching him for United reserves is said to have written: 'heading – poor, tackling – ordinary, right foot – fair, left foot – non-existent, overall – disillusioned', when asked to report on the future United captain and England mainstay. So how did it happen? Roger Byrne was special.

At Ryder Brown Boys Club Byrne played as left wing back despite being right footed as the contrary position was taken by future Lancs and England fast bowler Brian Statham. After moving to United as a junior, his career was interrupted by National Service, where for two years he played rugby not football with the RAF.

He returned to United and made his debut versus Liverpool at Anfield on the 24th November 1951 in a 0-0 draw. Towards the end of that season, Byrne made six more appearances, all on the left wing, scoring six times in the process; and at the end of that season Manchester United were Champions of England for just the second time in their history, a gap of 41 years that had seen two world wars since the first. But this, far from being the beginning of his illustrious United career, was nearly the end.

When the then un-knighted Matt Busby asked Roger to play on the left wing for United in the following season, Byrne refused. He wanted to play left back. This could have been seen as arrogance but it was far from that. Roger knew his limitations as a player and also his strengths. Byrne was fleet of foot, and even swifter of mind. He could read a situation and react to any danger. He could nick the ball away from a player and had the skill to distribute the ball wisely. And despite being a shade under five foot nine inches tall he was also as tough as the heavy leather boots players wore in those days. At first an impasse occurred, and when Roger put in a transfer request Busby did not consider him for selection, and it seemed his days as a Busby Babe were over. But team captain Johnny Carey and his vice-captain

Allenby Chilton could see in Byrne United's future leader and they took him to one side, gently reminding him of their age, and a re-think saw him withdraw his request and his re-instatement in the side. As left back. A United career was born.

Carey and Chilton were right. When firstly Carey retired Byrne stepped up to Chilton as his vice-captain and when he retired Byrne was made team captain. He was the man the players trusted implicitly, he protected them on the pitch and he was their mouthpiece when dealing with Matt Busby off it. He was also unreservedly trusted by his boss and as captain he led the young Busby Babes to consecutive League Championships in 1956 and 1957 and the FA Cup Final of 1957. Byrne was also an England regular, and had completed 33 Internationals on the trot following his debut against Scotland at Hampden in 1954. With Billy Wright about to retire from the national game, Byrne was the man to become the next England captain. The future for Manchester United and England, with Roger Byrne as their leader was exceptionally bright.

On February the 6th 1958 in the freezing cold of a Munich winter Byrne lost his life alongside many of his teammates and colleagues. On his return he would have found out his wife Joy was expecting their first child. She didn't tell him beforehand so as not to distract him from the game in Belgrade. That baby lost a father, Manchester United lost a captain, and England lost a legend. But for those who saw him play, his memory shines as brightly as any who have pulled on the beloved red shirt; and for those same who watched Roger William Byrne, they'll tell you, as Manchester United captain you need look no further. Roger Byrne is peerless.

Steve Black, @black_steve1905

All-time United academy XI: Rimmer; Carey, Edwards, Foulkes, Byrne; Stiles, Scholes; Best, Charlton, Mitten, Giggs.

Paul Scholes – One of the finest midfielders of all time

Ask any Manchester United fan about Paul Scholes and they will likely look far into the distance, a glint of nostalgia in their eye. For players of Scholes' ability come along rarely.

United have produced many wonderful players from their academy over the years. Sir Matt Busby set the wheels in motion many moons ago with the 'Busby Babes.' Decades later, Sir Alex Ferguson continued this proud tradition when he promoted a crop of youngsters, who would go on to achieve unparalleled greatness, to the first-team.

Ferguson took what seemed, at the time, a punt on this group. Back then, they were referred to as 'Fergie's Fledglings.' Now they are known as the 'Class of '92.' Ferguson's punt turned out to be a masterstroke and the likes of Alan Hansen, who famously claimed that 'You can't win anything with kids,' was made to eat his words when this crop of kids swept all before them, culminating in the treble of 1999.

That night in the Nou Camp, when United came back from 1-0 down to beat Bayern Munich at the death and write themselves into the history books, will forever remain the most memorable in many United fans' lives. The fact that one of the finest products of the club's hallowed youth-system was unable to take part, due to suspension, remains a sad footnote in that incredible story.

Scholes paid the price that night for a part of his game that has often been ridiculed. His tackling left a lot to be desired and he regularly picked up yellow and red cards. Still, he was not picked for his defensive ability but for his incredible influence going forward.

Scholes was the kind of diminutive midfielder that became the hallmark of the great Barcelona team of a few years ago, with the trilogy of Xavi, Iniesta and Messi at its heart. Such players used to be frowned upon in England but Scholes oozed so much class that he was impossible to ignore. His vision and ability to spot a run, pick out a pass, thread the ball through the eye of a needle, made him an invaluable part of some of Ferguson's greatest teams. He also had an eye for goal, from the spectacular to the tap-in, and many of them were crucial. To see him lining up alongside Roy Keane in United's midfield must have struck fear into the hearts of opponents.

Scholes had an uncanny ability to find space where there appeared to be

none. He was always available to receive the ball and you could probably count the number of times he misplaced a pass throughout his career on two hands - he was that good. He, alongside Keane, made United tick and was their creative spark. With him in the team, you always felt that a moment of magic was never far away.

Quiet off the pitch but ferocious on it, Scholes had it all. He was the kind of player that truly makes football the 'beautiful game.' He left spectators awestruck. Like Keane, he has never really been replaced, because he was simply irreplaceable. He lived and breathed the club over the course of his 718 appearances and was the kind of player you wish could go on forever. His name will be sung from the stands of Old Trafford for years to come, for he was not just one of the finest midfielders of his generation, but of all time.

Paul Gunning, @PaulGunning1

All-time United academy XI: Jack Crompton, Gary Neville, Bill Foulkes, Wes Brown, Roger Byrne, George Best, Paul Scholes, Duncan Edwards, Ryan Giggs, Sir Bobby Charlton, Mark Hughes

Eddie Colman – Salford Snakehips

I would imagine all Manchester United supporters not old enough to have seen the famous Busby Babes play wish that they could have seen that legendary team in action.

I also imagine that most would pick out the sight of the great Duncan Edwards as the player they would most like to have seen.

Not me! As much as I would have loved to watch big Dunc, the player who caught my imagination, as a young lad growing up in 1960s Manchester, was little Eddie Colman. I couldn't say for certain why he was the one I loved to read about or be told about, but it was probably because of my Dad, who would wax lyrical about those who perished at Munich. I can certainly remember when I was put to bed and when most kids would be read a story, I would ask my Dad to tell me about old United players and the Babes in particular.

I spent a few weeks in hospital when I was about seven and I was given football annuals to read whilst there. When I read about how Colman, who was nicknamed "Snakehips", I was hooked.

Colman was a Salford lad, born in 1936, joined United on amateur terms in 1952 and as a professional the year after.

He made his FA Youth Cup debut in the 1952-53 season against Everton in his usual right half position and he stayed in that team until he became too old to play.

During that time, United's Youth team conquered all before them and won the FA Youth Cup trophy within the first five years of its existence. Colman is one of only a handful of players to have won the trophy three times, the last season as captain.

It was inevitable that Colman's talents would take him to the first team and so it proved, when just after his 19th birthday, he made his First Division debut at Bolton in November 1955.

Colman soon became established in the team and was a popular member of the squad with the other players. He has been described as a cheeky chappy type of young man, of quick wit, ready with a joke or playing tricks on teammates.

He quickly picked up his famous nickname, “Snakehips”, given to him for his body swerve that would bamboozle opposition players. Even though Colman was a small and lightweight man, he could easily mix it with bigger players and he never let his slight frame be a hindrance to his career.

Like George Best and Cristiano Ronaldo who followed him, he was often seen as a ballhog, but his teammates understood that he needed that freedom to inspire the team as well as he did. Surrounded by great, young players, Colman was one of the more creative.

In the 1955-56 season, Colman played in 25 league games and one FA Cup game, a year when United won the league by a huge margin of 11 points, in an era when only two points were given for a win.

The following season United were favourites to win the title again and the bookies got it right, this time winning it by a mere eight points! Colman played in 36 of the 42 league games in 56-57 and also scored the solitary league goal of his career in a 2-2 draw away at Spurs. I have seen footage of this goal and it was close range effort from just a few yards out. He also played in all six FA Cup games that season in the run to the final where United were denied winning the double when goalkeeper, Ray Wood, broke his jaw six minutes in to the match. This was in the days before substitutes, so United had to play an outfield player in goal for the majority of the final and lost 2-1.

Colman also played in all eight of the European Cup games that season too, playing in total of 51 games.

The fateful 1957-58 season saw United named as favourites for the title yet again but as we all know, the Munich Air Disaster meant that would never happen. At the time of the crash, United were near the top in the chasing pack and Colman was as influential as ever, with his teammates regularly being on the end of his pinpoint passes.

Colman picked up his second Charity Shield plaque when Aston Villa were dismissed 4-0 at Old Trafford at the beginning of that season. He also scored only his second goal for United in the 2-1 home win over Red Star Belgrade in the European Cup.

On the way home from the return leg, after United booked their place in the second successive European Cup semi-final, Colman was one of the eight

players to lose their life, dying instantly.

Having just turned 21, Colman was the youngest player to die in Munich, and he is buried in Salford. A building at Salford University is named after him.

In total Colman played in 107 games in all competitions and scored two goals.

I am proud to say I get a daily reminder of Colman, and the others who died at Munich, as I have their names tattooed on my arm and hardly a day passes when I don't wish I could have seen Snakehips play.

@ManUtdReserves

All-time United academy XI: Gary Bailey, Gary Neville, Nobby Stiles, Bill Foulkes, Roger Byrne, George Best, Duncan Edwards, Bobby Charlton, Ryan Giggs, Mark Hughes, Dennis Viollet.

Substitutes: Gary Walsh, Paul Scholes, David Beckham, Norman Whiteside, Wes Brown.

John O'Shea – A career defined by a series of iconic moments

John O'Shea wasn't Gary Neville or Denis Irwin, defined by their consistency and reliability. No, Sheasy made plenty of mistakes along the way and, in truth, Fergie's squad was not especially weakened when he headed off to Sunderland.

And yet, with a generous enough definition, O'Shea probably genuinely qualifies for that most overused sobriquet—he is a United Legend.

He played 393 times for the club, in almost every position on the pitch. His versatility was his greatest blessing, after all, it seems unlikely he would have excelled enough in any one position to play there almost 400 times for United. However, of course, his versatility also meant that he never got a chance to find out. He offered too much utility to discover whether he could have been a truly outstanding, say, right back.

He only topped 30 league appearances in two seasons, 2003-4 and 2005-6. Neither of those were vintage Ferguson sides. However, he did play in important supporting part in some classic sides, and more than that in 2008-09 when he was involved in 54 games in all competitions, 42 of which were starts.

All these hard facts are presented just to set context for discussion of what really matters with O'Shea, though.

The young man who won the reserve team player of the year award in 2001-02, went on to win five league titles, an FA Cup, a Champions League and the Club World Cup. He is an extraordinarily decorated player. He did not have a spot in too many "best XI when everyone is fit" selections, but Fergie trusted him all over the pitch, and there were not too many players he did.

After the "Class of '92", not all that many youth team players made the grade in Fergie's teams, but O'Shea most certainly did, and whatever his limitations it was a remarkable achievement.

And whilst his limitations were frustrating at the time, they seem to fade in retrospect. The things you remember about Sheasy are a lot more fun than that.

He went in goal that time. That was ace. He nutmegged Figo.

Sheasy nutmegged Figo. Figo and John O'Shea felt like they were from

different ends of the galaxy when that happened. Figo had moved from Barcelona to Real Madrid to be part of the Galactico project, which was essentially the parallel opposite of John O'Shea. Figo, so skilful, so glamorous, so exotic, got a massive taste of his own medicine from our own homegrown lad, with his feet seemingly on the ground, and it was beautiful.

He scored 15 goals in his nearly 400 games, making our certainty that—when he went marching down the wing—we all knew that he would score a goal, slightly on the generous side. But who cares? He played his heart out for United, did whatever the boss asked him too, and scored a last minute winner in front of the Kop and looked absolutely stunned.

He can't hang, in terms of raw talent, with some of the illustrious names with whom he shares this book, but for sheer endeavour, United legend status well befits him. We'll be singing his mathematically inaccurate song for decades to come.

Paul Ansorge, @UtdRantcast

All-time United academy XI: John O'Shea in goal, Rafael, Wesley Brown, Gary Neville, Phil Neville, David Beckham, Paul Scholes, Darren Fletcher, Ryan Giggs, Adnan Januzaj (Don't let me down, bro), Danny Welbeck (Don't @ me bro)

Norman Whiteside – Perfect mix of brawn and brain

Norman Whiteside once told us in an interview: "I'm just a working class guy with a bit of a talent from the back streets of Belfast." Whilst it was that understated approach and self-depreciation that endeared him to United fans, his understatement belittles a supremely gifted footballer whose injuries curtailed one of the great Manchester United careers. He was even better than they tell you.

Those who watch Academy and youth football at United - old farts as they sometimes call themselves - still talk affectionately of that game in the FA Youth Cup against Watford in which Norman and Mark Hughes featured in one of the great games, when they knew both had it. And both became great themselves.

Whilst we often talk about Norm's United style approach, that is his tenacity and bite, (like at Anfield in the 3-3 with Strachan lobbing imaginary cigars, and Norm his actual elbows and boots), in a way it does him a bit of a disservice. Not only could he mix the spice up, but his football too; a cultured foot and ability. Brian McClair was not joking in a later interview with our fanzine when asked to recall the most talented player he'd played with at United. We waited for Eric to come back our way. "Norman" was what we got. Striker or in midfield. He managed to create and find time and execute what his brain saw coming; think Everton and that Cup Final gem, an angle which I still watch in repeats and remain in awe that it came off.

I can remember one goal against Nottingham Forest at Old Trafford, when in one quick move he accepted the ball, swivelled and blasted a 25 yarder towards the Stretford End on the bouncing volley in aerodynamic mint towards the goal and crowd which had taken him as one of their own.

Or as he told us: "I went out to play the game as most of the supporters would like to play it or seen it played." The boy who had the world at his feet got more than half way up the mountain and it was a delight to watch him mix brawn with brain. Not what ifs but what seen.

Barney Chilton, @barneyrednews

All-time United academy XI: Gary Walsh, Mike Duxbury, Wes Brown, Gary Neville, Arthur Albiston, David Beckham, Nicky Butt, Ryan Giggs, Paul Scholes, Danny Welbeck, Norman Whiteside, Mark Hughes.

Substitutes: John O'Shea, as he could cover everywhere!

Jonny Evans – A highly accomplished footballer with a rich array of abilities

Central defenders rarely become “dat guy”. Their route into first team football, from out of the academy and up through the youth ranks, is a stoic climb dependant on a determination to prevent goals rather than scoring them, and plug gaps instead of sprinting into them.

Yet in Sir Alex Ferguson’s final two seasons at Old Trafford, it seemed as though Jonny Evans had finally made the step up to show he had the minerals and the calibre to become “the man” at the back for Manchester United for some years to come.

Rio Ferdinand may have won most of the plaudits during the club’s last title-winning campaign, but it was his regular Northern Irish partner who enabled the veteran to showcase his cultured qualities rather than his weaknesses, covering for his aged legs and diminished aerial leap.

Some 18 months or so later however and Evans’ progress towards the senior leadership role he had been long groomed for has been checked. He lost ground through injury and ill-fitting tactics under David Moyes, and has so far struggled to adapt to the new demands of a back three, after the departures of Ferguson, Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic, under Louis van Gaal.

There remains a wealth of goodwill and hope that he can turn things around under the Dutchman — like so many of his unconvincing teammates — especially given how well his talents fit with the ball-playing philosophy espoused by his new manager when in-form.

Evans is a highly accomplished footballer with a rich array of abilities, and stands as a testament to the patience, good work and high-sighted ideals of United’s academy. Such is his level of comfort on the ball, more than a few fans have argued over which side he is naturally strongest on over the years, and although he may be right-footed, his left peg isn’t just for standing on.

Though long balls have been demonised as inherently negative and inelegant for some time now, there is a growing consensus that they can be used as signifiers for low standards at Old Trafford under Van Gaal, but they shouldn’t be seen as bleak by default. In fact, Evans is one player who can make big, accurate diagonal balls out from the back look like an artform at times. His arcing, cross-field ball from the left of defence to the right wing to

set Nani off on his goal-scoring run in the 3-1 win over Chelsea in September 2011 is just one notable example of the defender's craftsmanship as a long-range passer.

A capacity to unleash United's wingers and helping to continue the club's fine traditions of producing wide, fast, attacking football caught the eye of Ferguson. So confident was he of the Northern Irishman's potential that when Gerard Pique left for Barcelona in 2008, Evans was the player earmarked to make up for the loss of the Spaniard's class in his long-term plans for United's back-line.

Having finished a period out on loan at Sunderland he returned to Old Trafford to undertake an on-the-job apprenticeship under Ferdinand and Vidic that wasn't without incident, but it eventually helped to round off some of the kinks in his potential to become a first-team starter.

Since the aforementioned loss of the senior support structure — and key sources of attention-checking bollockings — both in the dugout and in the dressing room that he previously took for granted and relied upon, he has look shorn of confidence and composure: a lethal mix for a player who needs both to properly bring his uncommon mix of skills to bear.

If he does leave Old Tafford in the near future then he will become one of the other many graduates of United's academy bringing a touch of quality to the other squads of the Premier League, as so many other cult heroes and homegrown products have in the past.

However, watching Evans depart — with another expensive signing brought in to take his place in the summer in central defence — would feel like a mini-tragedy to those that appreciate not only his talent but his presence as an academy player in the starting XI. For many, it still hurts to see “dat guy” Danny Welbeck playing in another shade of red for Arsenal, and the Northern Irishman, after having come so close to realising his potential in 2012, would be another blow to a dreamy future manned by Fergie's final clutch academy players.

That's not to say Van Gaal has turned away from youth, and in fact the emergence of Tyler Blackett — another similarly silky-touched yet error-prone defensive prospect for the future — could yet see Evans' niche taken up by a new, home-brewed ball-player centre-back, alongside Paddy McNair.

Constant injuries, a downturn in form and an apparent mental frailness when it comes to being a senior defender suggests time is fast running out for the 27-year-old, but how much sweeter would it be if he can recover to help lead a new generation, just as his seniors developed him?

Greg Johnson, @gregianjohnson

All-time United academy XI: Ron-Robert Zieler; G. Neville, W. Brown, O'Shea, P. Neville; Beckham, Fletcher, Butt, Giggs; Scholes; M. Hughes

Stan Pearson – The striker from Salford

Stanley Clare Pearson was born in Salford, Lancashire on 11 January 1919. He attended Frederick Road Council School, and like all boys, he loved to take part in games, and especially football and cricket. The young Stanley was to excel at both sports as a schoolboy, and it was under the watchful eye of school sports master Jack Stuart that he was to hone his skills. Indeed, during his time at school, the football and cricket teams won every competition for which they were eligible to enter. He was also selected to play for Salford Boys at both sports, and captained the football team for two consecutive seasons.

The recruiting of the youngsters for MUJAC was a job given to Louis Rocca under the title of Chief Scout, and one of his first signings was Stanley Pearson who as a United fan, dreamed of playing for the club.

Aged just 16 years, Pearson signed amateur forms for the club in December 1935 and joined the ground staff doing a myriad of jobs quite unrelated to that of a footballer. He cleaned the dressing rooms and the baths, swept the terraces, and also assisted the chief Groundsman in keeping the Old Trafford playing pitch in as good a condition as was possible. On the football side, he played in the 'A' team, and he was developing into a graceful young inside-forward who had a knack for being in the right place at the right time and scoring goals. His progression into the Reserve team was swift as the club trainers could see just what a special talent this young Salfordian was becoming.

Pearson signed as a full-time professional in May 1937 just a few months after his 18th birthday. At the time Manchester United were languishing in the Second Division. The day that he had been waiting for came later that year on 13 November when he was selected to make his first team debut against Chesterfield at their Saletrgate Stadium. Don Davies, a local reporter for the *Manchester Guardian* and who wrote under the pen-name of *Old International*, reported;

'Pearson played the chief part in United's 7-1 win at Chesterfield. For the last few years United have nursed him along, and the result is a young footballer with the self-possession of a veteran. He was the key man, for he dribbled and combined in such a delightful way that not only did he provide the passes for four goals, but he knitted the usually ragged United attack into

a smooth working machine.'

The following Saturday he made his home debut against Aston Villa with United winning 3-1 and he scored the third goal. United finished runners-up to the Second Division champions Aston Villa that season, thus securing promotion to the First Division. It had been a fantastic year for the young man as he started the season in the A team and had finished it as a member of a promotion winning team.

The following season, 1938-39, saw Pearson vying with a young Johnny Carey for the inside left berth, but it was Carey who played for most of the season. Pearson played just seven games and scored one goal during that campaign. The 1939-40 season opened on a brighter note as far as football was concerned as he played in the opening three games. However, the onset of WW2 meant that for Pearson and the rest of football in Britain, careers were going to put on hold.

Pearson enlisted into the 2nd/4th battalion of the Lancashires and was initially stationed in Ireland before being sent to India. After a long journey by sea to Bombay, he was scheduled to be sent to a holding camp in Deolali. He was in the holding area in Deolali for ten days initially, and while there he heard about a football team being sent to play in two competitions which were being held in Bombay. His Commanding Officer told him that he would be going along to play for the team and that as long as the team were winning, they would stay in Bombay – but if they were knocked out, then they would return to Deolali. The team won both competitions and when the team returned to Deolali, Pearson was given a 'soft-job' in the camp stores.

A few months later a team was formed from the various professional players serving with different regiments in India. Stan ended up in a team that was captained by Dennis Compton, the Arsenal player who was also to find fame as a world renowned cricketer, and who played for England at both sports.

When the war ended, Stan Pearson, like many other players of his generation had lost six and half years of his full-time professional career. When he returned to Old Trafford he found that Matt Busby had taken over the club as the new manager. Busby was quick to see what an asset Pearson was and quickly got him to sign a contract. It was not long before he was back in first team colours again. Carey had been moved from inside-forward to full back, and the position was now Stan's to cement for himself – which he did.

After five games of the 1946-47 season, Manchester United found themselves top of Division One. Busby had begun to knit his team together and they were playing bright, inventive football. Don Davies wrote an article in the Manchester Guardian spotlighting the emerging brilliance of Busby's United team.

'The ever popular Liverpool side (which on this occasion certainly took the palm for sartorial elegance) met Manchester United at Maine Road, and as a result of their meeting, received a lesson in football craft which they are not likely to forget for many a long day. The first twenty minutes was almost ceaseless bombardment of the Liverpool goal. Wave after wave of red shirts rolled over and around the Liverpool defenders at will; in the 12th minute Pearson converted a lob by Warner and soon afterwards Pearson slammed a shot-cum-centre from Mitten high into the Liverpool net. This was progress indeed and soon a feast of football entertainment, which the 41,657 operatives who called in on the way home to tea seemed to find ample compensation for meals deferred.

One cannot recall an occasion when Liverpool's play was so undistinguished. Until the closing minutes that is when Paisley drove in a ball which forced Crompton, the Manchester goalkeeper, to reveal his whereabouts and prove that he had not gone home from sheer boredom.

United's response to Paisley's impudence was to walk the ball up field and invite Pearson to score the fifth, which Pearson most willingly did. Taken all in all, this was a masterful performance and one even Manchester United will not easily repeat.'

Sadly for Pearson and United, they could not keep up that level of performance even though they finished strongly winning 11 out of the last 12 games and eventually finished runners-up.

The 1947-48 season started well but then form dipped. When the FA Cup draw was made for the third round proper in December 1947, it paired United with Aston Villa. It turned out to be an absolute classic. The first United player to touch the ball after only 13.5 seconds was goalkeeper Jack Crompton and he was picking the ball out of the net after Villa had scored! Far from putting United on the backfoot, it had the opposite effect and with Pearson spraying passes immaculately, after 30 minutes United were leading 3-1 and when the half-time whistle blew had stretched that lead to 5-1.

It looked as though the game was over, but Villa came back strongly in the second-half and with just ten minutes left had pulled the score back to 5-4. However, with just two minutes of the game left, a Charlie Mitten corner found Pearson some 12 yards out and he volleyed it through a crowd of players into the Villa net to make the game safe. Immediately after the game Pearson was to say;

“In my opinion, and I don’t care who hears it, that game was when we played the best football from anybody, anywhere, anytime. That’s saying a lot, but we pinged the ball around quickly first time – I’ve never seen anything like it, before or since. It was magic.... Everything just seemed to click into place.”

United marched on to the FA Cup Final that season, their first since they first won the famous old trophy back in 1909. It turned out to be an all-Lancashire affair as their opponents were from the seaside resort town of Blackpool. Blackpool were a very good team who boasted the likes of Stanley Mathews, Stanley Mortensen and Harry Johnstone. It turned out to be one of the most memorable finals ever. From being down by 2-1 at half-time, United were to prevail by 4-2, with Pearson scoring United’s third goal.

When the team brought the FA Cup home to Manchester the following evening, there was nobody aboard the top of that coach who had a bigger smile and grin than Stan Pearson. The local boy who had fulfilled the dream of playing for the club he had supported as a boy and had now score for them in an FA Cup Final. It seemed as though the whole population of Salford had turned out to see him bring that trophy home with him.

The first half of the 1951-52 campaign was nothing outstanding, but by the turn of the year, Manchester United once again clicked into gear, and on the final day of the season at Old Trafford, after thrashing the mighty Arsenal by 6-1 with Pearson scoring twice, they were at last crowned First Division Champions.

By 1953 Old Trafford was beginning to change. Busby and Jimmy Murphy’s work with the youngsters on the staff was starting to become very evident. One by one, the youngsters started to appear at first team level. Bill Foulkes, Mark Jones, David Pegg, Duncan Edwards, Jackie Blanchflower, and Dennis Viollet all started to replace the familiar names of Busby’s post-war team.

At the commencement of the 1953-54 season, Pearson was appointed club

captain at Manchester United – it was a very popular choice. However it was a season that was to see the end of his career at Old Trafford.

He lost his place in the team to a young boy who admired him so much and who had quietly learned from his mentor... Dennis Viollet. Stan realized that at 34 years old his prospects of regaining his first team place were limited to say the least, but he still wanted to play first team football. He played in the Reserve team until February 1954 when after talks with manager Busby, he decided to join local club Bury and a fee of just £4,500 changed hands.

This quiet, loveable Salfordian had served Manchester United so well. Although never the quickest player, what he lacked in speed, he more than made up for in speed of thought. His intelligence in reading a game was outstanding and he had the knack of being in the right place at the right time. A prolific goal scorer, he did however make more goals for other people than he ever scored himself. He seemed to glide through games gracefully scoring goals with both feet and many with his head.

Stanley Clare Pearson played 345 games for Manchester United scoring 149 goals along the way. After retiring from the game he became a sub-Postmaster at Prestbury Post Office in Cheshire. He continued to follow his beloved United until the very end when he passed away in Alderley Edge in February 1997 aged just 78 years.

Tom Clare, @TomClare2

The importance of youth

Sir Matt Busby's 'Babes' and Sir Alex Ferguson's 'Fledglings' don't just feature in Manchester United's history books, but in stories of football on a worldwide scale.

In 1968, Busby's team became the first English side to win the European Cup, with a line-up of players that consisted mainly of those who had come up through the ranks. In 1999, Ferguson's team became the first, and still only, English club to win the Treble, with a similar makeup.

Both sides were following in the footsteps of Busby's side of local, young players who lost their lives in the Munich Air Disaster in 1958. For all the talk of Louis van Gaal's "philosophy" this season, the club's primary goal, going back to Busby's appointment in February 1945, is giving youngsters a chance to be successful.

People enjoy being cynical though and would like to simply dismiss all the success United's teams have enjoyed as a fluke. United got lucky. This, of course, is completely untrue. When you look at the work Busby put in, under the guidance of chairman of James Gibson, which was again repeated by Ferguson when he took charge, it's clear to see that we haven't been flukey when it comes to our triumph with youth, but we have been fortunate.

How grateful we should be as fans to have seen players who have grown up supporting the team, dreaming of one day wearing our jersey at Old Trafford, lifting trophies for our club.

Fans of most clubs have witnessed a player come up through the ranks and become a success in the first team, but none have seen so many of them do so much.

Of course, our youth products don't do it alone. They have always been complimented by world-class additions. Whether that was Tommy Taylor in the 1950s, Denis Law in the 1960s, Robsons in the 1980s, or Keane and Cantona in the 1990s.

United needed the goals from Andy Cole and Dwight Yorke to win the league in 1999, they needed the goals from Teddy Sheringham and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer to win the Champions League, but what would that side have achieved if not for the spine of former academy boys?

Roy Keane, in his first autobiography, talked about the group of players we

now more often refer to as ‘The Class of 92’.

“They form the core of the team, on and off the field and are bonded in a way that excludes the rest of us. At the heart of our club there is something solid, something real, something identifiably Mancunian, an attitude created by the Six Amigos, that is fundamental to the team and its success. When players join United, however much they cost, wherever they come from, it is this attitude they must plug into.”

Nobody in the history of English football has won the league as many times as Giggs, who has 13 Premier League winners’ medals. He is followed by Scholes with 11, then Gary Neville with eight, making them amongst the three most successful players in the history of the English game. It’s fairly fitting that they at least matched Alan Hansen’s eight titles, given he said they wouldn’t win anything.

David Beckham, Nicky Butt and Phil Neville have won the league six times, despite leaving the club in their 20s.

One by one, the Six Amigos left United, either for the promise of first team football that they could no longer be given at Old Trafford, for a new experience, or to retire, or to retire again, but one still remains. When you reflect on all the incredible moments you’ve enjoyed as a United fan, Giggs walking out of the tunnel in his suit, as manager of Manchester United, with his mates Paul Scholes, Nicky Butt and Phil Neville as his coaches, has to be up there.

Butt still coaches the youngsters at United, Scholes has been promised a position by Van Gaal when he wants it, and Giggs, as the Dutchman’s number two, still is very much a part of the day to day running of the team.

However, to talk of these two teams, the Babes and the Fledglings, is to do a disservice to what Manchester United have created over the years. Our glory isn’t just in creating two teams of our own players.

At the time of writing, Manchester United have fielded at least one former academy player in their matchday squad for the past 3,730 games on the trot, taking us back to October 1937.

This shows it’s not just about the teams that had homegrown players at the core, but about United’s philosophy when it comes to prioritising the development of their own players.

The chances of bringing through so many talented players all at once is slim, but that doesn't mean there haven't been plenty of youth products who have established themselves since the Class of 92 and done their bit to add to our success.

Wes Brown, John O'Shea and Darren Fletcher have five Premier League winners medals, and Jonny Evans has three. When you consider that John Terry has three and Tony Adams has two, this says a lot.

A further 10 former academy products have won the Premier League at least once, including the likes of Danny Welbeck, Darron Gibson, Kieran Richardson and Tom Cleverley.

In the Premier League era, more than ever before, football has become a squad game, where all the cogs are vital, even if some get more recognition than others. So to have squad players who love the club certainly works in your favour, and certainly has helped United to dominate English football for the past few decades.

When looking at the likes of Brown, O'Shea, Fletcher, to name a few, you didn't often see a player who would set the game alight, even if all, individually, had their own massive moments in the team. Brown assisted Cristiano Ronaldo's goal in the 2008 Champions League final and O'Shea scored that injury time winner at Anfield. Our title rivals had players of equal ability in their squads, but theirs didn't have anything like the same affinity with their club. For some, as children, they hadn't even heard of the club they were pulling a jersey on for, whereas at United, they had grown up supporting them.

Harry Redknapp, when managing Tottenham Hotspur in 2009, explained how United were set apart from the other clubs in the league.

"When we played United at White Hart Lane, my coaches, Tim Sherwood and Les Ferdinand, were in the stands along with the United boys who weren't subs. They were jumping up and down at every decision and again when they scored their goals. That winning mentality goes right through the club. Gibson and all the other boys wanted to play but they also have those feelings that they showed. There are not many clubs where you get that. It's something you'd like to develop. It's hard to change some people but that's what makes winning teams."

How many players who didn't even make the bench for our title rivals would be jumping up and down in the stands? All footballers, you imagine, are desperate to do well, but not all of them have the added incentive of being desperate to do well for their club.

When Michael Owen scored that late goal against City in our 4-3 derby win, Gary Neville, who was an unused sub, sprinted down the touchline towards the away fans.

"That's why United are where they are," Redknapp continued. "They are a team and they are all together. Gary Neville has won everything there is to win but you look at the excitement he showed at his team winning, when he wasn't even in the team. He wasn't sitting on the bench with his arms folded. He was jumping higher than Fergie. I thought it was amazing to see Neville's feelings show and the joy he had at winning."

People talk about the great youth programmes going on at clubs like Southampton and West Ham, and there is certainly value in that. But without the pressure to win trophies year on year, it is certainly a cost effective and less risky approach than it would be for other clubs.

The fact that United have spent the majority of the glory days as the richest club in the country, yet still looked to promote youth, speaks volumes about its importance.

For example, when looking at the most recent Premier League title wins of every other club, you can gauge just how much value the champions of England give to players they have developed themselves.

When Manchester City won the title in 2013-14, just two former academy players featured for them in the league, and they made a combined total of just three appearances. That works out, for the sake of comparison, as an average of 0.08 former academy players per game.

When Blackburn were champions in 1994-95, just one former academy player featured for them in the league, giving them an average of 0.71 former academy players featuring per game.

When Chelsea won the title in 2009-10, they had a total of 57 appearances made by former academy players in the league (granted, 37 of them were by just one player, John Terry), working out at an average of 1.5 former

academy players used per game.

That leaves us with Arsenal who had 76 appearances from six different former academy players when they won the league in 2003-04, averaging out at 2 former academy players per game.

How do United compare? Over the past 15 years, the worst title winning season United have had, in terms of how many of our own developed players have featured, was in 2012-13, with an average of 2.97 per game, which still blows the likes of Chelsea and City out of the water, and also better than Arsenal's record.

In 2010-11 it was an average of 3.37 former academy players used per game, 2007-08 it was 4, 2008-09 it was 4.11, 2006-07 it was 4.75, 1999-00 it was 5, 2002-03 it was 5.18, and in 1998-99 it was 5.26. Statistics can help you argue any point, but it's possible that it's more than a coincidence that the most successful season enjoyed by any club in English history also coincides with the year that United played more homegrown players than any other in the Premier League era.

The dedication the club has to developing youth is special, but particularly special when you consider how little other successful clubs value developing their own players.

However, the players who don't make the grade at United often go on to have good careers elsewhere. In fact, according to a report by CIES Football Observatory in 2014, only Barcelona has developed more players who are currently playing in Europe's top five leagues. Barcelona has 43, followed by United in second place on 36, ahead of the likes of Real Madrid (34), Lyon (33), PSG (27) and Bilbao (24). Arsenal have the ninth best record in Europe, with 22, while Chelsea, City, Spurs and Southampton are ranked 45th in Europe, with 12 players.

So, with this history in mind, United would have struggled to find a manager who has given quality youngsters a better chance than him. Xavi, Patrick Kluivert, Andres Iniesta, Edgar Davids, Thomas Mueller, Victor Valdes and Clarence Seedorf were amongst the players who were given their debut in professional football by our manager.

At United, he gave seven youngsters their first opportunity to play for the first team in his first seven weeks in charge. It took Ferguson almost two

years to do the same.

With Van Gaal, United are continuing in the traditions put in place by Busby and advanced by Ferguson, with players made in Manchester set to feature in the first team for ever more.

Scott Patterson, @R_o_M

All-time United academy XI: Gary Walsh; Gary Neville, Wes Brown, John O'Shea, Phil Neville; David Beckham, Darren Fletcher, Nicky Butt, Ryan Giggs; Paul Scholes; Mark Hughes

Academy players on United

Gary Neville: The club is, after my family, the most important thing in my life, in terms of what it's done for me and how I feel about it. I've only ever been at United. I joined at the age of 11 at the Centre of Excellence and left at the age of 36. For 25 years of my life, Manchester United has almost consumed every waking moment, and that is a great thing. I've been so privileged. I would never say that I don't want to go back to Manchester United because it is my heart and soul.

Jonny Evans: My first recollections of Manchester United would be going way back, probably in my granny's house having these little figures of United players. Even before that, I got a United poster for Christmas when I was five years old. My bedroom was all done out in Manchester United stuff: bed covers, posters... so it goes back to when I was just a kid. It's hard to put into words exactly what Manchester United means to me. From a young age, I was fanatical about United and I used to cry when the team lost. That's how much it meant as a kid. Now I feel really privileged to pull on the shirt and go out there and try to make a difference and represent the fans on the pitch.

Paul Scholes: My preference was to play for Manchester United or no one else. I never wanted to play for any other club, whether that was in the United States or elsewhere

Danny Welbeck: I used to love Giggsy so much – and still do. Just seeing him in training you can learn so much from him. He's always there to give advice, too, which is great. I could say he's my idol. I think Manchester United is the best club to be at. It has helped me a lot. If I wasn't at United playing a few games, I don't know where I would be or at what stage I'd be at or what level. But just getting a few games here and there for the best club in the world has helped me get to this level. It's what every Manchester boy dreams of. Growing up, you just want to play for United but to score for them was out of this world. It's the Man United way of winning things. There's no better club than United. The way the club is run and the way the players are. Nobody is too good, everyone helps each other at the right times.

David Beckham: When you are a Manchester United player and a Manchester United fan you never want to play for any other club.

Ryan Giggs: I am immensely proud, honoured and fortunate to have represented the biggest club in the world 963 times. My dream was always to play for Manchester United, and although it saddens me to know I won't be pulling on a United jersey again as a player, I have been lucky enough to have fulfilled that dream playing with some of the best players in the world, working under an incredible manager in Sir Alex Ferguson, and most of all, playing for the greatest fans in world football. I have always felt and appreciated your support. To the greatest fans in world football, thank you, I have loved every minute of playing for you and representing the biggest and best club in the world.

Darren Fletcher: Ever since I was a kid, I've wanted to play football. I've been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to play for Manchester United and wasn't going to give that up lightly.

Tyler Blackett: It means everything to me. I was brought up here in Manchester and playing now for United is like a dream come true. Hopefully, I'll continue to do my best for the club. Being a local lad, there's no extra pressure but it's something I thrive on. As one of the more local lads, I know what this club means. Don't get me wrong, the foreign players know Manchester United as well but being a local lad gives you extra incentive to do well. You know the history and which players have come through with my being here all through the ranks. I know what it means to me and my family as well. Everyone in my family is a United fan and have always watched United over the years. With fans from both sides of Manchester being in the stadium, it provides an extra atmosphere to the ground. The derby is a great game to play in.

Wes Brown: I love being a Manchester United player and I have never thought about going anywhere else. Throughout my career I've always been a squad player. The manager knows he can pick me and I can do a good job, so I'm very happy here. Leaving United is a conversation I would dread to have with the gaffer. I love playing for United. It's my home town, so I'm just glad to still be here after all the injuries I've had. Leaving would be a step down.

Paddy McNair: I'm very happy. It's a boyhood dream to be in the first team. I never would have expected this 12 months ago but it just shows how fast football can change. It's great to be playing in the first team most weeks, playing at Old Trafford.

Contributors

Tony Park is a Manchester United Youth historian, statistician and co-author of 'Sons of United'.

Daniel Taylor is the Chief Football Writer at The Guardian/Observer. He is also the author of 'This is the One: Sir Alex Ferguson: The Uncut Story of a Football Genius'.

Andy Mitten is the editor of the popular fanzine 'United We Stand'.

Tom Clare is from Chorlton and grew up watching the Busby Babes play. He has written several books on United, including 'The men who were the Busby Babes' and 'Forever a Babe'.

Daniel Harris writes for The Guardian. He has also written two books on United, 'The Promised Land' and 'On the road: a journey through a season'.

Sam Pilger is an experienced sports writer who writes for The Times Magazine, FourFourTwo, Bleacher Report, Esquire and the Mail on Sunday. He has written several books, including 'Manchester United's Best XI' and 'The Treasures of Manchester United'.

Ollie Holt is the Chief Sports Writer at The Mail on Sunday.

Laurie Hanna is a lifelong Manchester United supporter and freelance journalist.

Mike Keegan is the North West Football Reporter at Mail Online. Formerly BBC and M.E.N.

Mark Ogden is the *Daily Telegraph Northern Football Correspondent*. *Have covered Manchester United for the Telegraph and various titles for over 15 years.*

Alex Shaw is the general editor at ESPN FC and previously worked as sports news editor at the Sunday People. Before that he worked as a sports journalist for Hayters Sports Agency, covering football for national newspapers in England, Ireland and Abu Dhabi.

John Ludden is the author of two Manchester United books, 'A Tale of Two Cities' and 'From the Stars'.

Tim Montgomerie writes for The Times.

Ed Barker has edited United Rant for over a decade – perfecting the art of

misanthropic commentary on everything United, in print, online and on the weekly podcast *Rant Cast*.

Callum Hamilton is a Scottish freelance writer and Moyes loyalist based in Paris. He writes a twice weekly column for VICE, runs Manchester United blog The Busby Babe and occasionally writes for SBNation and The Mirror.

Lewis Dean is an online reporter for the International Business Times.

Justin Mottershead's dad took him to Old Trafford in the 80s, life's never been the same since. He is a freelance radio reporter and editor/contributor to several United sites.

Steve Black is a United We Stand contributor, season ticket holder, angry young man growing old ungratiously; red in all things life.

Paul Gunning writes for Squawka and Republik of Mancunia about Manchester United.

ManUtdReserves has watched United regularly since the early 1970s. He takes a very keen interest in United Reserve and Youth teams.

Paul Anson is the co-host of the United Rant podcast "Rant Cast". He also writes about United for Bleacher Report and Republik of Mancunia. He remains entirely convinced that Louis van Gaal's side will end up being brilliant.

Barney Chilton has been watching United since 1976, and has edited Red News, the first United fanzine since 1987.

Greg Johnson is Features Editor at Squawka.com and a contributor to The Blizzard, FourFourTwo, Vice and others.

Stan Chow (@stan_chow) designed the images of Sir Matt Busby and Sir Alex Ferguson.

David Foy (daftfish.co.uk) designed the PDF format of this e-book which is available at TheRepublikOfMancunia.com

Scott Patterson is the founder of TheRepublikOfMancunia.com and writes for ESPN, The Metro and Red News.

Trafford Macmillan Wellbeing Centre

Dealing with a diagnosis of cancer, and all that follows, can be an overwhelming, frightening, exhausting, and sometimes lonely experience - for the person who is ill and also for those who care about them. The future becomes uncertain, there are difficult treatments to deal with, and even as time goes by it can be hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Less than 5 miles from Old Trafford, The Macmillan Wellbeing Centre is a small, friendly and welcoming, safe place. It offers information and support to help patients, and/or their carers, deal with the changes that illness brings, at any stage. The Centre has a wide range of activities, including counselling, aromatherapy, therapeutic support, and relaxation skills, in 1-1 and group settings.

Everyone at The Centre works hard to provide individual plans of support to improve people's sense of control and wellbeing, and to help them move confidently on to live as well as possible.

Many of the centre's activities rely totally on fund raising. All donations will be gratefully received and used for: complementary therapies, volunteer training, information resources, provision of therapeutic groups and improvements to facilities.

The Centre can support any adult in Trafford who has been diagnosed with cancer, and also those close to them. We are aware that men are particularly reluctant to ask for help - this can make dealing with their cancer even tougher. It's really easy to find out how we can help you - just drop in to see us for an informal chat (we're in the grounds of Trafford General Hospital on Moorside Road) or telephone **0161 746 2080** or visit **macmillancentretrafford.org**

All profits made from the sale of this document will be donated to The Trafford Macmillan Wellbeing Centre.

Thank you for your support.