

J O H N S I L K



# Even the **DEFEATS**

How Sir Alex Ferguson  
Used Setbacks to Inspire  
Manchester United's  
Greatest Triumphs

Foreword by René Meulensteen

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## The final piece of the jigsaw

FOOTBALL FANS, even those of some of the most successful clubs, rue defeats almost as much as they enjoy the victories, sometimes more. Supporters of the big teams can be a greedy bunch, and probably lack the gallows humour of those further down the food chain.

Many will have an almost morbid curiosity with how the defeat came about. Others, and this applies to followers of all clubs, will take great pleasure in venting their anger at the manager, the board, the club mascot, the players (in that order), as they seek to apportion blame for the crumbling team they see before them. Manchester United fans, despite all the success through the Sir Alex Ferguson era, are no different.<sup>1</sup>

On Christmas Day 2009, my friends and I sat around the table asking each other questions as the year was coming to an end. If you could change one thing – what would it be? As some people jostled for position to express their thoughts, others seemed tongue-tied, not remembering the day before never mind the previous 360. ‘Anything?’ I asked. ‘Anything,’ they confirmed.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferguson’s first three and a half years at the club included many dissenting fans. The grumbling returned during a fallow period between 2003 and 2006.

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My mind was clear – ‘I would change the result of the Champions League Final against Barcelona,’ I blurted out. No one else at the table was a football fan. None of them could empathise. The fact that I had no control over the result didn’t matter. I still wanted the power to change it.

In fact, if I could only alter one result as a United fan, that one would be it.<sup>2</sup> That match was a chance to establish a European dynasty as the first team to win back-to-back Champions Leagues.

We also lost the 2011 final at Wembley, but that one was far less painful. By then United’s star was waning, largely due to the loss of Cristiano Ronaldo, and Barcelona were in a different stratosphere in footballing terms. But in the Eternal City there was a real opportunity. Ferguson knew it too, as will be detailed later in this book. United were at their peak, the Catalans had yet to reach theirs. The English champions and European Cup holders were favourites going into that final, and the opening passages of play reflected that, making the eventual defeat all the more difficult to take.<sup>3</sup>

Under Ferguson, United had a history of just falling short in Europe’s premier competition. The knockout blows in the latter stages at the hands of Borussia Dortmund, Monaco, Real Madrid, Bayer Leverkusen and AC Milan all hurt to this day.

But those defeats were still a step or two short of the final, where heartache could still have arisen. The loss to AC Milan in 2007 at least meant we didn’t have to face Liverpool in the final, a prospect many United fans were dreading. Some may think you could flip the scenario and imagine the bragging rights if you win. That *some* are not Manchester United or Liverpool fans. Supporters of neither club wanted that final,

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2 There are numerous other teams with United in their title, but given the Old Trafford faithful’s affinity for using it, and the fact that this book is principally about Manchester United, it is this club I am referring to when using this name.

3 All bookmakers gave shorter odds on a United victory. Barcelona had squeezed past Chelsea in the semi-finals. The London club were not at United’s level.

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and probably never will. The high from winning such a game is nowhere near as dramatic as the sense of despair should we lose.

Domestically, there are quite a few ‘what if’ moments too, as United followers desperately seek that one more trophy that would make their dreams complete. The final piece of the jigsaw, if you will. For me there are a couple. I would love to have just one more league title. Take your pick from 1995, 1998, 2010 or 2012.<sup>4</sup> The first three would have created an unprecedented series of championships, the last one because of the very nature of the defeat – in the last minute to our cross-city rivals.

But what if we did alter history, domestically at least, and manipulate it so that United win one of those league titles that slipped through their grasp? Be careful what you wish for. Take 1995, for instance. United win that title. Paul Ince, Mark Hughes and Andrei Kanchelskis stay, the Class of ’92’s emergence is stunted, and United do not win the treble in 1999. Or the arrivals of Arsène Wenger, José Mourinho and Roman Abramovich’s cash do not provide the fly in the ointment that puts a stop to domestic dominance, and United stroll to a few more titles in the 2000s. But then Ferguson does not have a problem to solve; does not appoint Carlos Queiroz as his assistant; does not buy Ronaldo; and does not win the Champions League of 2008. A lot of ifs, buts and maybes, but you catch the point. Perhaps the defeats were necessary to inspire the club and Ferguson to greater things, the Barcelona 2009 defeat aside.<sup>5</sup>

With the exception of the latter years in the Champions League, where even so-called Fergie Time caught up with

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4 There were other near misses, but they sit a little easier with me. Though the title loss of 1992 was my worst moment as a United fan, I do not yearn to change it in the way I do some other setbacks, as I think it helped inspire the club to greater things.

5 Spoiler alert: there is one chapter in this book that does not have a happy ending.

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the great man, I noticed a distinct pattern.<sup>6</sup> The recurring theme involved some of the lowest points of the Ferguson era and yet on each occasion they led to eventual triumph. Some of the answers to how the success was achieved lie in the defeats that preceded them. From the thrashing at Maine Road and the ‘Ta ra Fergie’ banner in 1989 to winning the FA Cup the same season; from the haunting defeat at Anfield in 1992 to achieving the Holy Grail a year later; from ‘you can’t win anything with kids’ to a youth-inspired double; from the crushing European defeats at the hands of Galatasaray and Barcelona to that glorious night at the Camp Nou; from appearing to be out of his depth after the arrivals of Wenger and Mourinho to overcoming the pair in style; from further European disappointments to winning the Champions League again in 2008; from last-minute title despair to going out on a high – every low was the beginning of a journey towards an eventual peak.

The more I looked into the subject, the more I discovered a clear relationship between the two – failure and success. This book goes some way to filling in the gaps en route from defeat to victory.

There have been many excruciating defeats but one stands out above all others – the loss to Liverpool at Anfield in 1992 that confirmed Leeds United as champions. I’m not old enough to remember the club’s relegation in 1974 so that Sunday on Merseyside will always be the worst day I have ever endured as a fan of the club. And no matter what happens in the future, it always will be.

The clouds eventually lifted and United ended a 26-year wait for title glory a year later. The images of Ferguson and his assistant Brian Kidd celebrating on the pitch after a remarkable

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6 Fergie Time was a phrase used to describe late goals. Ferguson had a tendency to look at his watch as his team piled forward, in desperate search of a goal. Steve McClaren once said, ‘Manchester United never lose, they just run out of time.’

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turnaround against Sheffield Wednesday, taking the team a step closer to the championship, will never be forgotten. But nor will Anfield '92.

Further success followed in the 1993/94 season, but a year later Ferguson had to deal with a series of issues that are difficult to ignore when analysing future glory. In the space of six days, the title was relinquished to Blackburn Rovers, followed by an FA Cup Final defeat to Everton. Both setbacks precipitated the sales of three key players – Mark Hughes, Andrei Kanchelskis and Paul Ince.

Within four years, though, United would go on to have arguably the greatest night of the Ferguson era, but just five of the 14 players in the matchday squad against Everton would be involved in that unforgettable night at the Camp Nou.<sup>7</sup>

When conducting research for this book, watching the team toil against Hereford United and Oldham Athletic en route to winning the FA Cup in 1990, it's almost impossible to comprehend that just nine years later United won the European Cup. Of course, the team changed entirely in that time, but as a fan it remains one entity.

During the journey from Wembley 1990 to Camp Nou 1999 there were numerous bumps in the road. The season after winning the FA Cup, United entered Europe for the first time in my life as a fan, having started supporting the club in 1985. Like Fergie, I became obsessed with conquering the continent.

### **Life goes on**

Wednesday, 30 October 1996. Maybe not the most significant date in Manchester United's history, but for me, it was a memorable one.

There had been defeats before, many of which were more painful and had far-reaching ramifications. Several of these

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Schmeichel, Gary Neville, Denis Irwin, Nicky Butt and Ryan Giggs were the five. Roy Keane and Paul Scholes were involved at Wembley in 1995 but suspended at the Camp Nou.



will be highlighted in this book. But this one to Fenerbahçe in the Champions League group stage was different. United had more than just lost to a deflected shot from Elvir Bolić. It was the night they forfeited their undefeated home record in Europe.

This achievement had come under threat a few times during Sir Alex Ferguson's reign, most notably when a late equaliser from goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel preserved the record, salvaging a draw against Rotor Volgograd in the UEFA Cup a year before. But now, it was gone. Forever.

I went out that autumn night with friends, but was distracted the whole evening. How could I enjoy myself? And how could my pals expect me to have fun? All the time, I was wondering how Ferguson must be feeling. If it was bad for me, what on earth must he be going through? No manager had ever led United to defeat at Old Trafford in a European tie and now Ferguson had that unwanted record. Despite all his success at the club, he recognised in his first autobiography, *Managing My Life*, that it 'put a blot' on his copybook that he 'had always dreaded'.

For Ferguson, the burden of defeat was something he had to carry throughout his managerial career.

Meanwhile, as a fan, I was keen to discover what the reaction of the manager would be. From the initial post-match team-talk, to speaking to the media; from the changes he would implement to remedy the setback, to the long-term ramifications – his response was always fascinating.

I recognised how I was becoming obsessive about how Ferguson must be feeling and what he would do to fix the issue, if indeed an alteration was needed. Sometimes remaining calm and not overreacting was the crucial medicine required to cure the ills.

My curiosity with the manager's thoughts, both in the immediate aftermath of a defeat, and how he would rouse both himself and the club afterwards, was something that returned

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time and time again. The more painful the defeat, the more keen I was to hear what the manager had to say. I was often shocked, never disappointed. From the ‘they got him sent off, typical Germans’ raw comments after a Champions League exit at the hands of Bayern Munich, to tirades at journalists questioning his side’s struggles – Ferguson’s reactions were priceless. These remarks only endeared him to the United support even more. But the comments would also reverberate around the dressing room, often garnering the response the manager yearned for.

Ferguson acknowledged during one particularly sticky spell in the autumn of 1996, in the wake of three successive league defeats, to Newcastle, Southampton and Chelsea, that he was ‘always a better manager in adversity’.<sup>8</sup>

Journalist Henry Winter explained his admiration for Ferguson’s reaction to hard times, ‘One of the things about Ferguson is that he used emotion very intelligently. He went through the gears. I ended up going to Ferguson’s press conferences when Manchester United lost, that was Ferguson at his best. He would come out, he would blame the referee, he would blame the media, he would blame the temperature of the tea at half-time – anything to defend his players.’

In Ferguson’s first few years at Old Trafford, a bad defeat appeared to be followed by thrown teacups rather than a tactical tweak; the hair dryer as opposed to a wily streak. However, the more you listened to him, and those close to him, you began to realise it was more than just a rousing speech that would help his team respond. Don’t get me wrong, Ferguson was a great motivator and frequently reminded us that there is nothing wrong in losing your temper. And there was nothing more likely to push him to breaking point than a defeat. But it was his ability to pinpoint what was wrong and rectify it that was crucial to the success that followed.

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<sup>8</sup> The run included the aforementioned home defeat to Galatasaray, but was punctuated by a less meaningful win in the League Cup.

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As the years went by, the Old Trafford faithful trusted the manager more and more. So much so that when he would use his go-to phrase ‘no question about that’ the supporters shared the Scot’s conviction. They did not question. They knew he would get a reaction.

After one painful defeat – a 6-1 thrashing at home to Manchester City in October 2011 – I was desperate to know what Ferguson was thinking. It was troubling me all the way home after leaving the ground. His post-match interview explained a lot and it eased my worries. In the weeks that followed, my amazement and fascination grew further still. He reasoned the team were careless, that Jonny Evans’s sending off had skewed the match terribly in City’s favour. As fans we believed him. After 25 years he had earned our trust. Ferguson was angry at how his side had shipped so many goals with a gung-ho attitude. A succession of clean sheets was what Ferguson wanted, and the doctor got what he ordered. Unbelievable. In the wake of such a galling defeat, how could he just dictate the results of the following fixtures like that?

When he failed to appear for the mandatory press briefing after going out of the Champions League in 2013, as fans, we knew how he felt – because we felt the same. Crestfallen. Little did we know that it was his final match in the competition and therefore his last shot at lifting a third European Cup.

When news began to emerge of his impending retirement on social media one Tuesday night in May 2013, it was difficult to believe. There was plenty of evidence to suggest the rumours were untrue, such as his programme notes from the match against Chelsea just two days previously. Ferguson spoke of his excitement about leading the club for many more years to come with the current crop of players. His passion for the club and the sport remained undimmed, just like it had throughout that season. One such example was when he remonstrated with referee Mike Dean at half-time against Newcastle United. He was as demonstrative that day as any of the previous 9,548.

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Ferguson himself, no doubt, would be dismissing any suggestions of retirement the next day, in his usual inimitable style:

‘Yous lot are full of ... ’ he would surely say.

‘Retirement is for young people. I’m too old to retire. I would have nothing to do.’

‘As long as my health is good I will carry on. My family will make this decision.’

‘Making up stories again.’

‘Your job is to tell the truth.’

The club’s future was in safe hands – Ferguson’s hands. It made the rumours all the less credible. Early the next morning, Paddy Crerand was on the radio, dismissing the suggestion that Ferguson was about to retire. ‘Rubbish,’ he told Irish radio station News Talk. ‘I don’t think there’s a word of truth in this. When the club say something, that’s when I’ll believe it.’

Within half an hour of Crerand’s interview, Sir Alex Ferguson’s retirement was confirmed in an official club statement. Ferguson, who likes a gamble and built a close friendship with Crerand over the years, has almost certainly never taken his compatriot’s advice on which horse to back.

There was no dismissal of the rumours, no turnaround, no remonstrations. He was going, bringing down the curtain on 26 and a half remarkable years as manager of Manchester United.

People often say they remember where they were when John F. Kennedy was shot. I was not born at the time of his assassination in 1963 but I remember the scene on 6 November 1986, sat at the breakfast table as news broke of Alex Ferguson’s arrival. Little did I know then the effect that news would have on the rest of my life.

The ‘remember where you were’ moment was repeated more than a quarter of a century later when the news of Ferguson’s retirement was confirmed on BBC Radio Five Live. I slumped down on the couch, and tears rolled down my cheeks. I had

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not cried over football since the aforementioned loss at Anfield in 1992.

Ferguson would often ask for just one more player in order to reach the Promised Land, much to the exasperation of the United board. ‘The favourite line when I want to buy a player is to tell them it’s the last piece of the jigsaw,’ Ferguson wrote in *Six Years at United*, published in 1992. And board member ‘Mike Edelson is fond of reminding me,’ Ferguson continued, ‘it’s the biggest jigsaw in the world.’

For me, that final piece came on Sunday, 12 May 2013, shortly after a late winner from Rio Ferdinand had secured victory over Swansea in Ferguson’s last home game as manager. As Fergie took the microphone to address the crowd, I looked around the stadium. I saw many in tears. I started to weigh up the age of the people around me. 20? 25? Some in their early 30s? Most had never known another manager of their club. In the 26 and a half years that Ferguson was at the helm, Manchester City had 21 managers. Real Madrid had changed their head coach 25 times. When he took over, Manchester United had won seven league titles. Almost four years into the Ferguson era, Liverpool led the title-count 18-7.

Fast forward almost a quarter of a century and Ferguson had reversed that trend, winning 13 titles without reply, knocking Liverpool off their perch. By the time the Scot left the Old Trafford building, United led 20-18.

Back in 1994, shortly after Ferguson claimed his first title as United boss, a banner was unfurled at Anfield by the home fans, reminding the team from just an hour up the M62 that Liverpool were still Kings of England. ‘Come back when you’ve won 18,’ it said. United supporters responded after their club’s 18th and 19th titles, unfurling flags at Anfield, pointing out to Liverpool fans that it was the Old Trafford club who were now on top of the perch from which they once reigned supreme. Ferguson loved it, declaring after the second flag had been

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on display at the home of their rivals, 'I wish I had taken that banner to Liverpool.'

The United manager searched hard to find answers. He once said he viewed the game like chess, often waiting for the opposing manager to make the first move. Now he had made his last move. Checkmate.

All that was left was for him to make a speech, to give fans one last opportunity to experience what it must have felt like to be in the changing room with the boss.

'I've absolutely no script in my mind, I'm just going to ramble on and hope I get to the core of what this football club has meant to me.' Ferguson never needed a script.

'First of all, it's a thank you to Manchester United; not just the directors, not just the medical staff, the coaching staff, the players, the supporters, it's all of you. You have been the most fantastic experience of my life. Thank you,' Ferguson said, and the crowd erupted as loudly as it did for any of the late winners he would soon reference. By now the welling up of the tears had reached breaking point, where volume and then gravity took over.

'I have been very fortunate. I have been able to manage some of the greatest players in the country, let alone Manchester United. All these players here today have represented our club in the proper way. They have won a championship in a fantastic fashion. Well done to the players,' Ferguson continued to more applause.

'My retirement doesn't mean the end of my life with the club. I will now be able to enjoy watching them rather than suffer with them,' he joked.

'If you think about it, those last-minute goals, the comebacks – even the defeats – are all part of this great football club of ours.'

Now I had the final piece of the jigsaw. 'Even the defeats,' I thought. Yes – even the defeats are what made United, and Ferguson in particular, so successful.