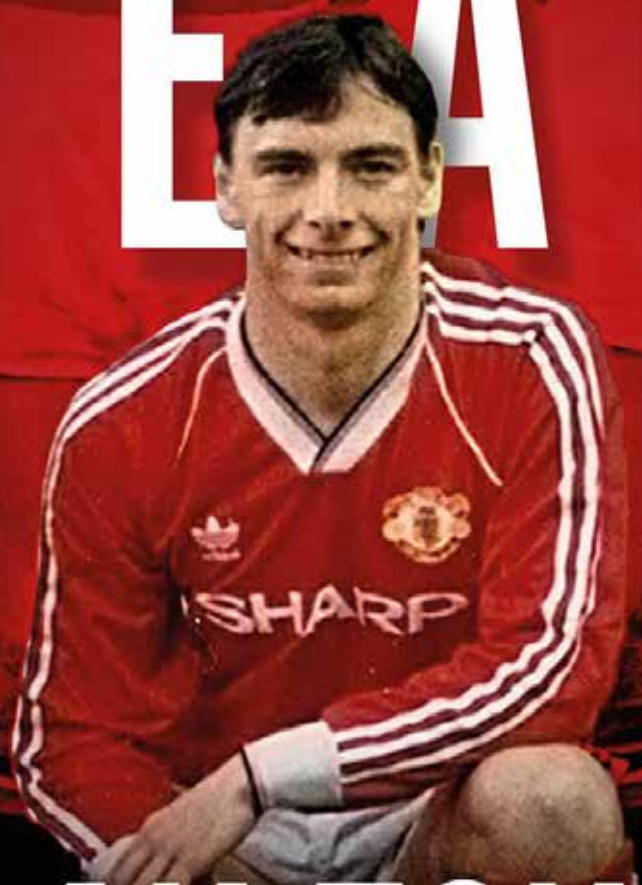


# FROM RED TO READ



# ALAN TONGE

With Michael Garvey

Foreword by Norman Whiteside

**The Story of Fergie's First Fledgling**

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## Chapter 1

# Everything Starts Somewhere

‘WE’D LIKE to sign you, son. We think you’ve got a chance but it’s not going to be easy for you.’

The words that most football-obsessed teenagers dream of hearing.

It’s January 1987 and the new manager of Manchester United is sat in his office having tea and toast, about to clinch his first signing. But it’s not a decorated player with international experience or even someone who’s going to make an instant impact, which was probably needed at that time. It’s me. A 14-year-old boy from Bolton ...

Football had been a big part of my life for as long as I could remember. My dad was a decent player and had been on the books at Oldham and Bury as a youngster. He often jokes that his football career went downhill when he met my mum!

He’s a big United supporter and I was brought up on stories of the Busby Babes and George Best, and even now he’ll recall matches he went to in the 1950s and 60s. He was at Old Trafford for Bestie’s debut against West Brom and remembers the surprise when the team was read out and he was a late replacement for Ian Moir.

The club has always had a certain mystique and magic about it to me. My earliest conscious memory is us winning the 1977 FA Cup Final against Liverpool at Wembley on a red-hot day back when cup finals were cup finals. As a kid I loved all the build-up, which would start in the morning in the team hotels as they ate breakfast, then there might be snooker matches between legends from both clubs and finally the TV crews would be on the coaches with both teams as they made their way to the stadium.

It was a big thing in our household and was even more special if United were involved. We were a decent cup team in those days and the victory over the Scousers was followed by further wins over Brighton in 1983 and Everton in 1985. It wasn't all plain sailing, though, and I can still clearly recall the heartbreak of 1979, when a late goal from Alan Sunderland sealed a crushing 3-2 defeat to Arsenal after we'd battled back from two goals down, which was also one of the only times I've cried at a football match.

There weren't a lot of live televised matches in those days, usually just the big ones or World Cups, and I can remember rushing home from school to see my hero Bryan Robson score that early goal for England against France in 1982. I avidly collected the Panini stickers like most lads my age and would sit mesmerised in front of the TV watching the top continental players play on the biggest stage – the likes of Michel Platini, Karl-Heinz Rummenigge and even Kenny Dalglish. I'd often pretend to be them, playing in the park or playground at school the next day.

For the most part though, my usual routine would be to listen to the United match on the radio in the kitchen every Saturday afternoon before watching the highlights on *Match of the Day* that evening if my parents let me stay up. I didn't go to my first match until my dad took me to Old Trafford as a present

for my ninth birthday in the spring of 1981, for a match against Leeds United.

Garry Birtles had recently signed and was still on his quest to score a goal, something that, unfortunately, only Leeds managed that day with Brian Flynn getting a late winner. It was a surreal feeling watching their fans celebrating in the section below us – what’s now the South Stand. I remember the excitement of going and the aura around the place but obviously there wasn’t much to cheer about after losing to a big rival, so I came away that day feeling that things could only get better.

As a fan you form an identity or special connection to a club usually at a young age. Mine was United and like most kids I dreamed of playing for them. As a young kid I idolised Gary Bailey and actually remember wanting to be a goalkeeper initially. I used to wear a green V-neck top with a white T-shirt underneath to look like him and loved diving around to make saves. You could say that all the diving helped shape my approach to tackling later on when I moved to play outfield!

My dad built some goals in the garden at home for me, and what was particularly enjoyable about that was there always seemed to be scenarios set up like being 1-0 down to Liverpool in extra time. I’d spend hours pretending to be Stuart ‘Pancho’ Pearson or recreating Jimmy Greenhoff’s diving header in the 1979 FA Cup semi-final.

I’d do the same at Mytham Road playing fields, which were very conveniently located at the top of our street and is a place that holds many fond childhood memories. It had a bowling green on one side, a main road on the other and two full-size pitches at the top. I’d usually get home from school, quickly get changed into my playing-out clothes and rush up to the field, where I’d be until it went dark, with a short break for tea.

We'd often join up with whoever was there, playing five-a-side if there were enough of us and making up all the rules ourselves. It was just about having fun and enjoying yourself. I think most of my technique and identity as a player was derived from free play rather than organised coaching. Sadly, I think that's something a lot of youngsters miss out on these days when they get picked up by academies from a young age, being able to develop that early love for the game with no coaches telling you what to do.

On a Saturday afternoon they used to put the proper nets up about an hour prior to kick-off for the local men's team, which presented a dream opportunity to take penalties and bend balls into the top corner while the blokes who were playing were turning up and getting changed. I'd often stay to watch the match too.

My dad worked long hours for British Gas as a courier delivering post but he'd always have time to take me and my twin brother Kev for a kickabout or to play cricket when he got home, no matter what kind of day he'd had. He was and still is a remarkable man who was an absolute bedrock of support and encouragement for us growing up. He'd meander up the road and the magnetism he had meant that as soon as he set foot on that field kids from the neighbourhood would appear from all angles almost like they were drawn by some hypnotic trance. What would start as me, Kev and my dad would often end up in games of seven-a-side, sometimes more!

Crumpled coats or tracksuit tops would be cast to the floor and it would only finish when we could no longer see, well into the cool serene dusk of the evening. Dad made time for everyone and would never judge or criticise, while allowing anyone to join in regardless of their ability or how the game was flowing. As far back as I can remember, he always invested quality authentic time

into me and our family. We always seemed to have a football at a park or somewhere with goalposts, and it was a glorious time in my life. Strong foundations were laid at the top of Mytham Road, with morals, values and character put in place.

It was the same at home, where I, along with Kev and our younger sister Janine, benefitted from a strong family environment. My mum is a really top person and a good foil for my dad in a lot of ways. They got married all the way back in 1969 and they're still going strong. She worked quite a few jobs in places such as Hampsons, Thorntons the chocolate shop, on the tills in a supermarket and was a doctor's receptionist for a while, all to bring in some extra income. She always made sure we were sent to school in nice, ironed uniforms, which a lot of kids don't get unfortunately. I wouldn't say she was a lover of football but she'd come and watch to support me or my dad, depending on who was playing.

It was a stable environment and I have a lot to be thankful to my parents for. My nana came to live with us too after my grandad died. She was a beautiful person who lived until she was 97 and would often make me something to eat when I popped home from school for my dinner. There was no materialism, just a lot of love and support that didn't cost anything, with our lives revolving around spending time together. They were all good people and I was very lucky because it gave me the best start in life.

I could sense that I was quite a decent footballer and maybe stood out a bit in my peer group at school. I started playing at grassroots level when I was nine or ten for Farnworth Boys and was there for a couple of years before moving to a club called Moss Bank, which was affiliated to the Bolton town team.

At the age of about 14 a few of us progressed to Bolton Lads Club, which was my first real introduction to a proper coaching



set-up. Tony Moulden and Billy Howarth were our coaches. Billy's son Lee was at Blackpool and Tony's lad Paul was absolutely prolific at youth level, famously scoring 340 goals in a single season before being snapped up by Manchester City. I remember us going on a trip to Maine Road to watch him play for City's first team and he'd sometimes come down to training with Lee to help coach us.

I loved playing for Tony and Billy, who were both great coaches, arguably the best I had on my football journey, and I learned a lot from them, which I took forward into later life. They put a lot of faith in me and understood that if you treat someone well, delivering praise at the right times, you can get more out of them. They knew what it took to make it because they both had sons in the game. The training was intense and I remember a lot of cross-country runs around Queens Park in Bolton or fierce two vs twos in the small gym. We had a great team and quite a big rivalry with Horwich RMI, who had also managed to attract some of the best talent in the area. It would be between us and them for who would win the league every year and the results in those fixtures would usually define our season.

Seven of us from the Lads Club went on to serve apprenticeships with Football League clubs with me, Mike Pollitt, Jason Lydiate and Paul Sixsmith all ending up at United together. Neil Hart went to Bolton, our centre-forward Sean Whorlow ended up at Burnley, as did Neil Howarth, who made a few hundred career appearances for the likes of Macclesfield and Cheltenham Town, while Lee Mason became a Premier League referee.

I played for the Bolton Boys Federation Inter League team too where my team-mates included future England cricketer Ronnie Irani, and Garry Flitcroft, who of course went on to play for

Manchester City and Blackburn Rovers. I also made the Greater Manchester County team, so it worked out at one point that I was playing football six days a week! Maybe that was detrimental to me in the long run but I loved it and just wanted to play as much as I could.

A few clubs began to show an interest and I was actually on the radar of my local club Bolton Wanderers from the age of ten or eleven. I remember catching two buses a couple of times a week to go and train in the indoor gym behind their old ground at Burnden Park. There were goals painted on the walls and an outdoor shale surface with a couple of five-a-side nets at each end. Most of the lads from Bolton Boys were training there and the club physio Peter Nightingale used to take us.

I remember playing in a couple of junior tournaments for them and they wanted me to sign schoolboy forms. The Liverpool legend Phil Neal was the manager and I remember him phoning my mum and dad but I didn't want to rush into anything. I just wanted to play football for anyone and everyone and not be tied down.

Despite being from a red household I did briefly flirt with the blue side of Manchester. My maths teacher at school, Mr Mullender, also served as City's scout for the Bolton area and was always sure to let me know of their interest. I remember going to their old training ground at Platt Lane on a couple of occasions and had a very good trial there, scoring in one match we played from a cross that was fizzed in and I just connected with it really well before watching it fly into the top corner.

They also wanted to sign me and I remember being in manager Billy McNeill's office at Maine Road. They had a decent youth set-up with quite a few lads progressing into the first team, such as Paul Lake, Andy Hinchcliffe, Steve Redmond, Ian Brightwell

and David White, who all came through in the same crop, but I sort of knew it wasn't for me because I just didn't have any affinity with the club.

I knew I was a reasonable player so decided to hang fire. The advice I was getting from my coaches was not to commit and to keep my options open, because if you signed schoolboy forms with a club you were tied to them until the age of 16. Perhaps it was a subconscious thing too on my part, in the hope that my dreams would come true if United came calling.

Sure enough they did. I was spotted by a scout called George Knight, who covered the Bolton area for United and had been a player for Burnley just after the Second World War. They invited me down to the school of excellence where we trained at The Cliff on a Monday and Thursday night. I used to get the number 94 bus from the top of our road all the way into Manchester and it would drop me round the corner, which was handy.

You'd go into the main building and there would be a couple of physio beds in the middle of the changing room, but I only ever saw them used for dumping loads of kit on. Yellow shirts, dark blue shorts with numbers on and the traditional United socks that were red, white and black. You'd take your pick of what was there and wander over to the indoor AstroTurf feeling ten foot tall because you were kitted out ready for training with Manchester United. You could sense the history and what it meant; it was quite a big thing really. We'd train for about an hour on the AstroTurf. It was always freezing in there and usually felt colder than it was outside. You could see your breath in front of your face.

It was on one of my first trips down there that I met Eric Harrison for the first time. He was wearing his big United coat

with his initials on and didn't waste time with any small talk. 'Who's sent you down?' he asked in a gruff manner.

I remember replying quite meekly, 'Erm, George Knight from Bolton.'

It was quite a cold exchange. A few seconds into the circle work we were doing as part of the session he was on to me, telling me to get my touch sorted and my head up when looking for a pass. It was a level above what I'd been used to.

We'd be put through passing drills and it was so demanding. Brian Kidd would take us out for a long-distance run near the old Cussons soap factory and then, when we got back, Eric would pair you up to take part in a 'one-v-one'. This involved playing an eight-a-side match but you'd be directly responsible for one of the opposition. If they broke away from you and scored or your team lost, you'd have to do a forfeit. They were testing our courage and will even then at 14, because you might be absolutely shattered after the run but then you've got to chase someone man for man and beat them. It was brutal; we were like football gladiators and it was very unforgiving.

Things were about to turn up another notch too. On 6 November 1986 I was there for training. We'd just started the session when the new manager Alex Ferguson came in and introduced himself to all the parents and lads who were there. He didn't give a massive speech or anything like that. He just told us to enjoy ourselves but, when you look back at it, it's quite interesting because it was his first day and he'd have been holding the scarf on the Old Trafford pitch earlier on. Now he'd come to The Cliff in the evening to look at all the youngsters who were just schoolboys, eager to get a grip on every aspect of the club from top to bottom. I didn't really know who he was or what he'd achieved

up at Aberdeen but it said a lot that the new first-team manager was taking an interest in us.

Not long after I was invited to an extended trial over Christmas and New Year. I'd played in a Greater Manchester County match at Macclesfield's Moss Rose ground against Cheshire, and Joe Brown, who was United's youth development officer, spoke to my parents afterwards and invited me down for a week. I remember he said to them that I could cross a ball really well, which in his opinion not many lads my age could do.

The extended trial started on 28 December so I was staying in the halls of residence at Salford University over the New Year. We trained, played in a couple of practice matches, went to watch a first-team match and the club took us to the cinema on Salford Quays to see Clint Eastwood's latest film *Heartbreak Ridge*.

I think it was the first big trial Fergie held since taking over and there were a lot of lads there from all over the UK. There were quite a few scouts and coaches there too, casting their eyes over the young prospects. Being a United fan from a young age, I remember seeing Sir Matt Busby and Jimmy Murphy observing, so we were also in the presence of absolute footballing royalty.

I had a cracking trial and everything went really well. I was just focused on doing my best, knowing I had nothing to lose. Obviously there was scrutiny but I wasn't really conscious of it. At one point I remember flicking a ball out wide in the match I was playing in and hearing Eric Harrison's approval from the sidelines, which gave me a boost because I knew from training with the club that he didn't praise you often. 'Brilliant, son!'

One morning I was asked to train with the reserves, which was a big deal because I was still only 14 but quite strong for my age,

especially in my legs, and had a pretty solid build. I found myself training alongside lads who were a few years older. I hadn't even signed for the club and recall the likes of Mark Robins, Deiniol Graham, Tony Gill, Lee Martin, David Wilson and Russell Beardsmore being in that group.

At the end of the trial it was initially Joe Brown who told me that they were going to offer me something. By that stage I'd spent time training at a few clubs, but once United showed an interest there was only one place I was going to end up. I remember being given a lift back and running down the drive at a hundred miles an hour when I got home to announce to my proud parents that Manchester United wanted to sign me.

I was back at The Cliff on the indoor AstroTurf a few days later when I got the call to go up to see Fergie in the manager's office there. I excitedly walked up the stairs and knocked on the door. My mum and dad were already sat there, and Fergie was behind his desk eating toast. He was deep in conversation with my mum, who's from Dundee, so they already had something in common with the Scottish connection. He was commenting on the lack of playing fields being in use up there and how things had changed since he was young. This was still in the height of Scotland producing a lot of top players but maybe he could see the decline that followed coming.

'Turn round Alan, yeah you've got good lines on your legs. Aye, you've got good lines, son.'

I didn't even know what that meant but it sounded positive and he must have just been weighing me up. He told me this was the first step on the ladder and that it was going to be tough but it would be down to me because they thought I had a chance of making it. He offered me schoolboy terms and a two-year YTS

deal when I left school and that was it. There was no fanfare; I just went down the stairs and back into training.

It's more impressive from a personal perspective now looking back at it than when you're going through it as a youngster. I was probably more focused on sorting my PE kit for school the next day and doing my homework when I got home that night. My mum and dad probably saw it as a fantastic opportunity and I was happy about it but it didn't really mean too much at that moment. I was probably quite matter-of-fact about it with my schoolmates the next morning.

But on 13 January 1987 I was confirmed as Alex Ferguson's first-ever acquisition at Manchester United. It's a claim to fame, even if Viv Anderson is more commonly remembered as Fergie's first signing but his transfer from Arsenal didn't happen until the summer. If we're going to split hairs then he can have the accolade of being the first signing the gaffer bought, but technically I was his first-ever non-fee signing!

A few other lads from the Bolton or Greater Manchester area were all signed around the same time – Mike Pollitt, Paul Sixsmith, Jason Lydiate, Chris Taylor and Kieran Toal – the first bits of mortar in the mansion the manager was going to construct.

I've still got the newspaper clipping where it was announced that United were taking us on. My name is spelled as 'Tongue' though, something that was to dog me throughout my life. There was also a quote from the manager which read: 'The youth players bring a special ingredient to the club.'

Fergie was just beginning the process of overhauling the youth system. I remember at the end of his first season there were a lot of shocked and disgruntled parents when none of the under-16s group from the year above us were taken on as apprentices. Ashley Ward was in that group and went on to play for Manchester City

and Norwich, and there were a few other decent players in there. Maybe it was a clean sweep because he associated them with the previous regime or he wanted a higher standard of young player.

When he arrived at the club they only had two scouts for the whole of Greater Manchester and he makes reference in one of his books to the fact they signed several young players from the local area after he took over, knowing they weren't good enough but the club needed to make a statement. He doesn't name us specifically but I think it's my group he's referring to as the sacrificial lambs; what a way to be remembered!

My life didn't really change for the next 18 months until leaving school and joining United full-time. I carried on going down to The Cliff for training a couple of nights a week but could still play on Sunday mornings for Bolton Lads Club, which probably helped keep my feet on the ground. It was different back then and sadly youngsters these days are often prevented from playing grassroots football as soon as they get snapped up by academies.

When you're that age football becomes a strong part of your identity but, unlike a lot of lads in the same position, I didn't take my foot off the pedal with my education. Maybe part of me knew that I might need something to fall back on one day, and I was a bright lad. I did well in my exams and came away with a handful of GCSEs. I was reasonably intelligent, even if I didn't know it at the time.

Maybe I wasn't 100 per cent obsessed with football, not in a rebellious way through drinking or anything like that, but because I engaged with other things too. I liked reading and enjoyed other sports such as cricket, golf and tennis, and I loved playing badminton but United put a stop to that when the physio Jim McGregor observed that my calves were rock solid from being on



my toes all the time. They told me I'd have problems as I got older and advised that I stopped and concentrated on trying to make a career in football.

On a Saturday morning I'd play for United's 'B' team, which was effectively the fourth team. The 'B' team would usually be the junior players or lads under the age of 18 but you'd occasionally find yourself up against older pros who were maybe coming back from injury and I loved it.

It was a great opportunity and the first step on the path to fulfilling my dream. Sadly my school didn't quite share my enthusiasm and were a bit of a pain when it came to releasing me to play for United on a Saturday morning. They had the rather old-fashioned attitude that playing for the school team took priority. All the other local lads at United were released straightaway by their schools and sometimes in life you have barriers put in front of you that you shouldn't have to face. It's crazy when you look back at it and that could have been my football career finished straight away.

My mum and dad ended up going in to have it out with the headmaster and my PE teacher and eventually a compromise was reached. I'd continue to play for my school team but play for United on alternate Saturdays. Not ideal, but better than nothing.

It wasn't a great start and looking back they should have been more supportive, even if times have changed, because it probably wouldn't happen now. What I took from that is that as a teacher you should nurture and encourage students' ability or opportunity when it becomes apparent, because you have no right to try to stand in someone's way and suppress it. It was a valuable lesson considering the direction my life ended up taking to endeavour to have a positive impact on the lives of young people.

The same can't be said for the impact my PE teacher had on mine, as he wasn't the most supportive and was a bit like the guy from *Kes*. I remember him standing on the touchline during our school matches making comments like: 'Are you going to get into the game today?' 'Should I bring a chair on for you?' It can have quite an effect at a young age mentally when you don't feel that somebody is fully behind you or bothering to try to forge a connection. It sticks with you.

I do have him to thank for switching me to the position where I ended up playing a lot of professional football, although it probably wasn't intentional. I was a central midfielder when I was younger, one who could play a bit but he put me at right-back for a couple of matches with Bolton Schoolboys and that's where I was playing when I was scouted by United.

I was beginning to progress as a player with United but was learning that was a tough school too. At the age of 15 I was picked to play in the second leg of the 'prestigious' Lancashire League Supplementary Cup Final against Crewe at Gresty Road, which was an eye-opening experience and still sticks strongly in my memory, maybe more for the bollocking I got afterwards from Eric Harrison.

It was an under-18s competition but there must have been some injuries ahead of the match and I remember thinking beforehand, *I'm not sure if I'm ready for this.*

The match was played on a Thursday night. It wasn't the best of pitches and everything felt like it was happening at a hundred miles an hour. You'd take a touch and their lads would be on you, and it was a level up from the standard I was used to. I was playing with and against lads that were two or three years older, which is a big thing at that age. I've got a team picture somewhere and the

size difference between me and the other lads who had all filled out and developed a bit more is very noticeable.

We won the match and the cup 6-3 on aggregate but for some reason Eric gave me the full-blown hairdryer treatment in the dressing room afterwards. It was unbelievable and not a nice thing at all to experience. I hadn't even started at the club full-time but was on the receiving end of a verbal assault that basically ended with: 'YOU'VE BEEN ABSOLUTELY FUCKING USELESS TONIGHT!!!'

It was a nasty vitriolic tirade that I totally wasn't expecting and a real shock to the system because I hadn't a clue what I'd done so wrong. I'd had cross words and sly jibes off other coaches previously but this was on another level entirely. I was only 15 years old and was still a child really so hadn't the means in me to say anything or fight back. I had no choice but to sit there and take it. I honestly didn't know what to say to my mum and dad afterwards and just sat in relative silence during the car journey home. It was a really strange feeling.

I reflect on this experience now in my later years and having been in education for a long time as my second career. It was tantamount to the great racehorse trainers Aidan O'Brien, Henry Cecil or John Gosden telling the jockey to whip the life out of a two-year-old on its first run. You simply don't do that. Nurture it, show it and educate it. I was a young footballer doing my best playing three years up in an under-18s team. I respected Eric but he got it totally wrong on that occasion.

I think one of the worst things in football (and life) is being belittled in front of other players (or people), especially in a tight dressing room. It can cause a lot of shit in your head because it's hard to deal with and you don't know how to react, especially at that tender age.

I remember I was playing in the 'B' team on the following Saturday morning. Heading into The Cliff to get some stuff, Eric pulled me on the stairs and apologised: 'I'm sorry, son. I was out of order on Thursday night. I shouldn't have spoken to you like that. It's for your own good though.'

I appreciated the apology but it still left a mark on me, a deep scar that created doubts in my own confidence and ability, leading to overthinking and anxiety issues. It definitely closed me up a bit.

Welcome to the world of professional football!