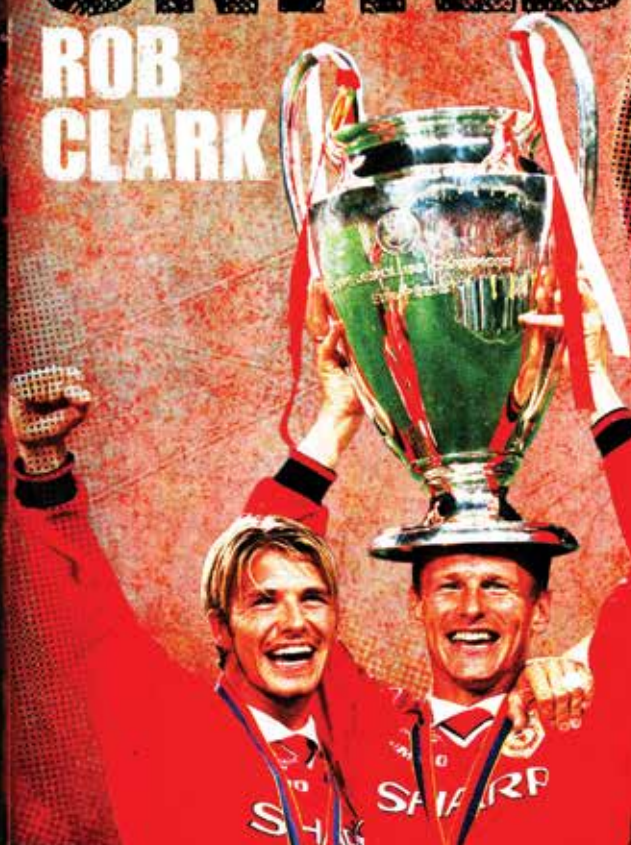




GREATEST GAMES MANCHESTER UNITED

ROB
CLARK



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INTRODUCTION

WITH some clubs, writing a book about their 50 greatest games is a case of picking out the odd league or cup win, perhaps a stoic battle against relegation or a triumphant promotion season, a game where a star player put in a top performance, or the team scored a hatful of goals.

Choosing Manchester United's 50 greatest games is a different task altogether.

Just writing a chapter each on the trophies we have won would take you to 42, and that's without the FA Charity Shield/Community Shield. There are the three European Cup/Champions League triumphs, the 20 Football League/Premier League titles – a record, of course – the 11 FA Cups (another record) and the four League Cups. Not to mention various sundry other one-off cups and trophies.

Then there are the great players: Arthur Albiston, David Beckham, George Best, Steve Bruce, Martin Buchan, Nicky Butt, Roger Byrne, Eric Cantona, Bobby Charlton, Andy Cole, Eddie Colman, Steve Coppel, Paddy Crerand, Duncan Edwards, Patrice Evra, Bill Foulkes, Ryan Giggs, Mark Hughes, Paul Ince, Denis Irwin, Roy Keane, Brian Kidd, Denis Law, Brian McClair, Paul McGrath, Gordon McQueen, Billy Meredith, Charlie Mitten, Kevin Moran, Gary Neville, Gary Pallister, Bryan Robson, Cristiano Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney, Jack Rowley, Peter Schmeichel, Paul Scholes, Teddy Sheringham, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, Jaap Stam, Alex Stepney, Nobby Stiles, Tommy Taylor, Ruud Van Nistelrooy, Robin Van Persie, Nemanja Vidic, Dennis Viollet, Norman Whiteside, Ray Wilkins, Dwight Yorke. Pick just one game from each of their stellar careers and there's your 50 – and there are some very good players missing from that list.

Arguing over who are United's greatest players is a discussion for another time and another book but some years ago I was working with a team of journalists on selecting United's 50 greatest players – it was a task which took many days and numerous meetings. Enjoyable days, but long ones nonetheless as good-natured argument flowed between us over the relative importance of players in different positions doing different jobs across different eras.

How good would Duncan Edwards and Eddie Colman have become? Should David Beckham have stayed at the club? Was Bryan Robson a more complete midfielder than Roy Keane? Was Eric Cantona's influence on the

younger players more important even than his impact as a player in his own right?

One eminent football writer, who I shall allow to remain anonymous, was of the opinion that Cristiano Ronaldo should not figure in the top 50 players who have played for the club – five years after he left he has just been voted the world's best player, and the Stretford End still sings his name at every home game.

Not just players then. OK, how about the matches when we scored six goals or more? Nope, we've done that on more than 50 occasions since the Second World War as well.

You can see it's an almost impossible task, so what I've tried to do here instead is combine the obvious with the less obvious. I make no apology for the fact that I have included two games from some seasons, such as the Treble of 1998/99 – frankly I could have written almost the entire book on that season as we notched up significant victory after significant victory.

As that momentous campaign drew to a climax, Peter Schmeichel and Dwight Yorke shared an ongoing joke which had begun when United beat Liverpool in the fourth round of the FA Cup, 'Hey Yorkie, 27 games left – 27 more wins and we've had an unbelievable season.' As the number got smaller and smaller, so the impossible dream became a reality.

Any list of our greatest games has to include, at the very minimum, both *that* goal by Ryan Giggs in the FA Cup semi-final replay and the Champions League Final itself. I know all United fans will already have every detail of these matches burned into their souls, but it never hurts to be reminded of exactly how they both unfolded, does it?

Elsewhere I have tried to include a number of 'firsts' – our first match as Manchester United after changing our name from Newton Heath; the first time the Busby Babes took the field; the first time Bobby Charlton, Denis Law and George Best played together; the Class of 92 winning the FA Youth Cup; the debut of one Wayne Rooney; and, of course, the first match with Alex Ferguson (as he then was) in charge.

I have had to include some of the wins over Liverpool – the 1977 FA Cup Final ranks highly for me as it prevented the Scousers winning the Treble that year. It was also the first trophy I saw United win live, having become a fan the previous year when we lost in the final to Southampton. Nor could I possibly omit the 4-0 drubbing in April 2003 during a run of nine wins and a draw from our final ten games of the season which saw us regain our title.

The last word on Liverpool was John O'Shea's stoppage-time header at Anfield on 3 March 2007 which all but confirmed another league title. Three wins over Liverpool, but frankly I could have written a whole book about that too except that Ivan Ponting got there first with his excellent history of games between the clubs entitled *Red And Raw*.

What about the rivalry with Manchester City, I hear you ask. To which I reply that those noisy neighbours haven't really *been* rivals for most of our

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history. I have chosen a couple of games against them, but for other reasons. There is the 1991 victory which marked Ryan Giggs's debut. Oh, and he scored the winner. And there's the early December 1992 win which marked the debut of a certain Monsieur Cantona.

Great European nights have also become, if not commonplace, hardly a rarity at Old Trafford. Even those of us who have been fans for decades still get a frisson, a thrill, when one of Europe's giants comes visiting. From Sir Bobby Charlton's cathartic hat-trick in Germany against Borussia Dortmund in 1964, via the European Cup Winners' Cup Final against Barcelona in 1991, to the Wayne Rooney hat-trick on debut against Fenerbahce in 2004. Ever since Sir Matt Busby rightly insisted that United enter the pan-European competition, the Red Devils have loved pitting their wits against the best and the brightest from all over the continent.

Of course the three European Cup triumphs are in here too, but if I had to pick a favourite moment it would be the one when all four corners of Old Trafford rose to applaud one of the most incredible solo performances our great ground has ever witnessed – that of Ronaldo for Real Madrid in 2003. That we are able to appreciate an opponent's brilliance even in the moment of being knocked out of the world's premier club competition tells you everything you need to know about United's fans.

So first and foremost this one is for fellow fans. I know you won't agree with every one of my selections, that's the nature of books like this. But one of the best things about a book on United's 50 greatest games is that we are spoilt for choice in a way no other club in England is.

Rob Clark



v Blackburn Rovers 3-4

3 September 1892

Football League First Division

Ewood Park

Attendance: 8,000

NEWTON HEATH

Jimmy Warner

John Clements

James Brown

George Perrins

Willie Stewart

Fred Erentz

Alf Farman

Jimmy Coupar

Bob Donaldson

Adam Carson

William Mathieson

Coach: Alfred Albut

BLACKBURN ROVERS

Rowland Pennington

John Murray

John Forbes

Willie Almond

Geordie Dewar

Jimmy Forrest

Harry Chippendale

Nat Walton

Jack Southworth

Coombe Hall

Charlie Bowdler

Coach: Thomas Mitchell

THIS was the first official league game for Newton Heath, and in keeping with the nature of a club style that was destined to be based around aiming to score one more goal than the opposition, it produced goals galore. Unfortunately for the nascent club it ended in defeat after a seven-goal thriller, but the outfit that was to become Manchester United some ten years later had been born, and so too had an enduring legend begun.

In truth, the club was founded 14 years earlier in 1878, but Newton Heath LYR (Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway) was initially established as no more than a means of allowing railway workers some light relief from a hard day's labour. They played numerous games against other railway companies but such matches were rarely reported in the newspapers and hence are not often a matter of record. However, it seems safe to say that the club nickname of 'The Heathens' owed something to the club's quick accumulation of local victories.

By 1892 formal ties with the railway company had ended, although the majority of the players at that time were still its employees, so the LYR appendage had been dropped. With the Football League being expanded to two divisions on account of growing interest in the sport, Newton Heath were duly elected to the First Division.

It was not a success. Of course the mighty Blackburn Rovers were scarcely likely to provide a gentle introduction to league life – already five times FA Cup winners and one of the most notable teams in the country, they raced into a 3-0 lead inside ten minutes with goals from the prolific Jack Southworth (who scored 97 goals in 108 games for Rovers, and represented England on three

occasions) and two from Coombe Hall. United fought back, however, with centre-forward Bob Donaldson pulling a goal back and James Coupar making it 3-2 to Blackburn at half-time.

In the second half honours were even as Alf Farman scored for Newton Heath and Harry Chippendale for Blackburn. It certainly wasn't a disgrace for the new boys against one of the country's top teams, and in front of 8,000 or so fans at Ewood Park.

The fact was, though, that Newton Heath were not quite ready for league football and they gained only a handful of victories in their first season. In fact they ended the season at the foot of the table, but with no prior arrangement having been made for relegation and promotion it was decided that the bottom three teams would play the top three teams from the Second Division and Newton Heath duly beat their near-namesakes Small Heath (later to become Birmingham City), winning a replay 5-2 after the first match had finished 1-1. That at least secured their place in the First Division for another season.

What the opening game of the season did do, though, was to display the fighting spirit and the never-say-die attitude which was to become synonymous with the club over the ensuing years. An interesting postscript to the season was that their first league victory was an almost unbelievable 10-1 win over a Wolverhampton Wanderers team which went on to lift the FA Cup at the end of the season. For all the goalscoring heroics of Tommy Taylor, Bobby Charlton and Wayne Rooney down the years – in much more successful teams – this remains United's biggest league victory.

Hat-tricks were scored by Bob Donaldson and Willie Stewart, and further goals were added by Adam Carson, Alf Farman, James Hendry and William 'Billy' Hood.

Hendry was making his debut that day and indeed made only one more appearance for the club. Hood was more successful, staying at the club for two years and featuring on 38 occasions; however, his record of just six goals did not warrant a longer tenure.

Donaldson, however, was to become the club's first great goalscorer, amassing 66 goals in 147 appearances. Although more than half his goals were scored when the club were in the Second Division, Donaldson nevertheless boasts a similar goals-to-games ratio in the higher division and his FA Cup record is even better, with ten goals in 16 games.

If on the pitch the 1892/93 season marked the arrival on the football scene of the club destined to become the greatest in the land, off it there were some major obstacles to be overcome. First of these was that the club were informed they had to vacate their home on North Road. It wasn't much of a home, admittedly, as it didn't even boast changing rooms – players, both Newton Heath and visitors, had to trudge to the Three Crowns pub, half a mile away instead.

Nevertheless, the football club had bought two stands which were able to hold 2,000 fans, and these had to be left behind; in fact, it has been suggested

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that the club's practice of charging fans for entry broke the terms of their lease and may have been the cause of their being asked to leave. Alternatively, it may just have been that the cricketers, with whom they shared the ground, got fed up playing on a mud patch.

The club officers did well to find a new ground, in Clayton, before the start of the 1893/94 season and although it was some three miles from Newton Heath, they managed to attract 7,000 spectators to their first match, a 3-2 win over Burnley. The location of the new ground was perilously close to chemical works, and some visiting fans went so far as to claim that it gave the Heathens an unfair advantage as they were used to the noxious fumes and the smells which assaulted the senses.

But if Newton Heath's first match was inauspicious, the advent of the club itself was anything but.