



PETER PRICKET &
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**MOMENTS
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CONTENTS

Peter Prickett Introduction	7
Peter Thornton Introduction	11
What If Eric Cantona Hadn't Retired?	13
What If There Was No Offside Law?	19
What If Celtic and Rangers Had Joined the Premier League?	28
What If Ronaldo and Messi Had Played Together?	34
What If Tom Finney Had Been Born in a Different Era?	46
What If Pelé Had Played in Europe?	53
What If Brazil 1970 Played Spain 2008-12?	66
What If Pep Guardiola Managed in League Two?	79
What If England Had Built Their Team Around Glenn Hoddle?	89
What If These Crazy Transfers Had Actually Happened?	107
What If The Champions League Was Still For Champions Only?	115
What If English Clubs Had Not Been Banned From Europe in 1985?	126
What If Steven Gerrard Had Signed for Chelsea?	135
What If Brian Clough Had Managed England?	141
What If Ajax Never Sold?	159
What If Football Had a Linear Champion Like Boxing?	171
What If the Munich Air Crash Never Happened?	180
What If an African Team Win the World Cup?	191
What If Hungary 1954 Played Holland 1974?	204
What If the Ref Had Called It Right?	219
What If Paul Gascoigne Had Scored in the Euro 96 Semi-final?	233
What If We Restructured English Football?	240
What If Michael Owen Had Stayed Fit?	249
What If Soccer Had Become the National Sport of the USA?	256
What If Roman Abramovich Buys Spurs Instead of Chelsea?	268
What If Jimmy Greaves Had Stayed Fit During the 1966 World Cup Finals?	284
What If Real Madrid Galacticos 1960 Played Real Madrid Galacticos 2002?	294
What If Technology Took Over From the Referee?	311

WHAT IF ERIC CANTONA HADN'T RETIRED?

King Eric. The catalyst for Manchester United's reign of dominance. Signed from Leeds for just over £1 million in 1992, he was the final piece in Sir Alex Ferguson's Manchester United puzzle. After rumoured attempts to sign David Hirst, Matthew Le Tissier, Brian Deane and Alan Shearer, Manchester United signed Dion Dublin, but a broken leg early in the 1992/93 season stopped Dublin's career at Old Trafford before it could even start. United were once again on the lookout for a striker. In November of 1992, they landed Eric Cantona.

Cantona's impact went beyond goalscoring. Describing Cantona as a striker is to suggest his role was as the primary goalscorer. While he scored regularly his creativity elevated Manchester United to the next level. Cantona brought with him flair, swagger and attitude. His confidence filled the team, the training ground and Old Trafford itself. With Eric around nothing was impossible. Cantona propelled Manchester United to the Premier League trophy in 1992/93, following this up with wins in 93/94, 95/96 and 96/97. Two FA Cup wins would also

arrive, in 93/94 and 95/96. Cantona scored three goals in the two finals, including a famous step-back volley winner against fierce rivals Liverpool in 1996. This was just one of many iconic moments provided by the man with the upturned collar. From a perfectly spun outside of the foot assist to Denis Irwin, a thunderous free kick beyond the grasp of David Seaman (with an exuberant, plaster cast-wielding celebration) to the impudent, exquisite chip versus Sunderland at Old Trafford. As well as iconic moments he had a penchant for vital goals, match-winning goals. During the first of Manchester United's title wins Cantona seemed to specialise in scoring the only goal in a 1-0 win. In 1995/96 Manchester United came back from 12 points behind to overtake Newcastle United. In the crucial away game at St James' Park Cantona scored the only goal.

Cantona retired from football at the end of the 1996/97 season. He was 30 years old when he played his final game for Manchester United and showing little indication that his powers were on the wane. He was an icon, perhaps *the* modern-day icon, and a legend in his own playing career. For many players it is only once they have retired that their place in history is assured, but for Cantona that position was abundantly clear. The player who was instrumental in winning United's first league title for 26 years, then delivering three more. Inspiring and guiding a generation of young players who would become known as the class of '92. At times as much credit seemed to be given to Cantona as to Sir Alex Ferguson.

How long could Cantona have continued? Even if he had retired at 33 (still relatively early) he would certainly have been playing in 2000. Had he retired at 35 that would have taken him to 2002. This covers the famous treble of Premier League, Champions League and FA Cup in 1998/99, and two more Premier League wins in 1999/2000 and 2000/01. Cantona might have added more titles to his already legendary haul.

Or would he?

The replacement for Cantona was Teddy Sheringham. The Tottenham Hotspur and England striker was a vastly experienced player with the ability to both score and create. His playing style seemed to be a perfect like-for-like replacement for King Eric.

It didn't quite work out that way.

Sheringham's personality was not as large as Cantona's. Although the class remained, the swagger and confidence had dropped away. Infamously, Sheringham's relationship with his strike partner Andy (Andrew) Cole was also frosty. Once Cole arrived Cantona went from the player United looked to for goals, to a creator and scorer of important goals. Cole scored 15 league goals during Sheringham's first season, while Teddy himself netted nine times, a relatively low combined total. Manchester United finished the 1997/98 season without a trophy, Sheringham judged to have been a flop.

Manchester United were never a club to wait on a problem to resolve itself, especially when it came to the

vital business of scoring goals. Dwight Yorke had been a consistent scorer for Aston Villa. Manchester United moved for him, spending just over £12.5 million, a huge fee for the time. The Cole and Yorke partnership became legendary, with the pair of them combining for 35 league goals in the 1998/99 league season. They followed this with 39 goals in the 99/00 season. Sheringham was reduced to a rotational role, which he shared with Ole Gunnar Solskjaer.

It was this quartet of forwards that became famous for firing Manchester United to their legendary treble. Solskjaer weighed in with a dozen league goals plus a further half dozen in other competitions. Sheringham only contributed five in all competitions, one in the FA Cup Final, another of vital importance.

On 26 May 1999 Bayern Munich have dominated Manchester United for 90 minutes. Bayern have rattled the frame of the goal twice but only lead 1-0. United haven't looked like winning the game but they have a corner.

Most football followers know exactly what comes next. A Beckham corner is half-cleared, Ryan Giggs scuffs a right-footed shot into the penalty area, the ball reaches Sheringham who pivots on his standing leg, sweeping the ball into the net with his right foot to equalise.

Minutes later another Beckham corner from the left side is headed towards goal by Sheringham. Solskjaer is lurking at the far post. He reacts to poke a volley into the

roof of the Bayern net. United have gone from beaten to winners in mere minutes and it is the substitutes who break Bayern hearts.

When Cantona retired he was the first name on the team sheet and captain of the side. Had he remained until he was 33 or 35 years old, in all likelihood Teddy Sheringham would not have been signed; United would not have had any need for him. As Sheringham was not the success United had hoped for, they signed Yorke. The retirement of Cantona was the catalyst for the formation of the front four who clinched the treble but if Cantona had not retired when he did, Sheringham would not have been in the team to contribute in the vital moments of the final. United might have performed differently on the day with Cantona in the team, who is to say? Then again, they may not have even made it to the final.

Cantona's retirement also left a vacancy as captain. Roy Keane filled the role magnificently. Keane's leadership played a huge role in United's post-Cantona dominance, with the game-by-game impact almost impossible to measure. However, in United's journey to Champions League triumph Keane left a highly measurable mark with one of the great captain's performances.

In the semi-final Manchester United faced a Juventus side laced with Zidane, Davids, Deschamps and co, managed by Carlo Ancelotti. At Old Trafford the game had finished 1-1, leaving United a tough task to get through to the final. The task became even tougher when

Filipo Inzaghi scored twice within 11 minutes. Keane powered in a header to drag United back into the game before picking up a yellow card that would mean he missed the final. This personal blow did not stop him from grabbing control of the game from central midfield and inspiring United to a 3-2 win in the Stadio Delle Alpi.

Does Roy Keane lead the team in this way without the armband? Leadership does not have to be about captaincy but Keane clearly relished the role. Cantona was a great inspiration, Keane was a great general.

If Cantona doesn't retire he certainly adds to his collection of trophies, but do United win a treble and the likes of Beckham, Scholes, Keane, Neville and Solskjaer command quite so significant a place in United history?

There is a strong case to be made that if Cantona does not retire Manchester United do not win the treble in 1998/99 and the course of football history is quite different.