



QUE SERA, SERA

Wayne Barton

**Manchester United
Under Dave Sexton
and Ron Atkinson**

Foreword by Ron Atkinson

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Style

OVER THE years which have followed Dave Sexton's reign as manager of Manchester United, the quicker, more succinct assessments of his tenure include the descriptions of 'dull' or 'boring' when referring to the style of football. A closer inspection, however, suggests that the issue was more to do with a certain incompatibility, for a number of reasons, than it was a matter of philosophy.

It is fair to say that from the off there were certain elements of the philosophy that caused a conflict. Sexton believed in the virtue of the counter-attack as the most profitable form of attack, and, while some could say with a degree of certainty that 'counter-attacking' was a fair description of one of United's most potent, and most attractive, strengths, it was also accurate to say that under Tommy Docherty the prevailing emphasis had always been on United imposing their own style. Docherty was proactive and Sexton, whilst not necessarily reactive, was always guarded and mindful of the negative consequence of leaving his team open, and so his primary approach was to establish a solid defence from which his team could attack. Which, in fairness, makes a lot of sense.

'I believe the counter-attack to be the most effective way of penetrating the opposition's defence,' Sexton said in his book *Tackle Soccer*. He likened this to a golfer pulling back his arm to make the swing on the ball, or a boxer pulling back his arm to unleash more power in his punch, emphasising the power of kinetic energy: 'The action of recovering your original position is the source of energy

I'm talking about. You must make the effort to get into position and regain the ball before you can do damage to the opposition.'

Sexton's explanation of the boxer, however, demonstrates his cautious nature: 'The boxer who throws a punch but fails to get his gloves back to cover will get whacked.' Sexton quoted New Zealand rugby coach Freddie Allen, who said, 'A good attack is a thrust to which there is no parry,' and translated into football parlance as a 'thrust by a team which does not allow the opposition time to get back, cover or defend.'

It certainly seemed fair to describe Sexton as much more thoughtful and considered in his approach than his predecessor. The more obvious and pronounced example of the difference would best be personified by one player: Gordon Hill. The winger's job was to go at the opponent and, when they had the ball, his instruction was to 'tuck-in'; his former manager and team-mates were well aware that his defensive deficiencies meant he was not suited to a more pragmatic role and made allowances for that.

For Sexton, however, there were no concessions. It was about balance and responsibility, as far as the new man was concerned. 'An interesting problem arises when the opposition play a 4-4-2 formation with four players in midfield,' he explained. 'Don't sit back with four defenders marking two forwards while the opposition take control in midfield. Push a defender into midfield to even the contest. You still have the three defenders needed to mark two forwards, so that is in your favour. It's all a matter of what to do with your spare man at the back. He can move into midfield or he can push further forward if you discover the opposition are struggling at the back.'

'When we think in terms of human nature and natural instincts, it is natural for a forward to want to run at the opposition. But it is an unnatural action to put the same amount of effort and enthusiasm into getting back, recovering. Midfield players are faced with the same problem. Here the coach holds the key. He must educate these responses until they become natural responses. Midfield players play a big part in good lines of defence. The left-side midfield player should help the left-back, the right-side midfield player should help the right-back and the central-midfield player should work with the central defenders ... your winger may rarely get a defensive touch. But just by being there, he makes the opposition think twice before

giving the ball to that player: their pass has to be accurate and their winger has double the problems to overcome.'

It did seem as if there was some room for understanding the personal differences of each player. 'Keep discipline in perspective. Know your players as individuals,' Sexton said. 'This will make the application of discipline easier. Aim to be positive when correcting a player. Don't just lay into him. Treat your players as adults and they will respond as adults.'

The same principle could apply to knowing your team. And, despite having such a heavy emphasis on pragmatic responsibility (that would perhaps become *too* heavy), there were indications within Sexton's approach that adventure could be accommodated; although the addendum of the mathematical equation hinted at the inherent incompatibility with United's explorative style under Docherty. 'Football is not an academic exercise,' Sexton explained. 'There is a point to the game. That point is that when you have possession of the ball, aim to produce a move that ends either with a goal or with an attempt at scoring a goal. The gift of being able to score goals is not something coaching can manufacture. Certainly, good coaching can improve a striker's technique by giving him confidence and a good, basic education around his talent. But before you can do anything, the gift must be there from the beginning. No amount of teaching, practising or brainwashing can substitute for nature in this instance ... Finishers are born, not made ... but they can be helped, encouraged and improved. A simple way of ensuring that you get a finishing response is to demand a certain number of attempts at scoring in each half. It does not matter whether those attempts comprise shots or headers. Perhaps your players will fail to achieve your target on occasions. But as long as you maintain your standards, they will maintain theirs. Always remember you are working with human beings. Gentle reminders and good, positive and well-planned coaching stimulate – and excite – players.'

The way he explained his belief in the value of quality wingers almost seemed like it could be music to the ears of a player like Hill: 'The forwards are the spearhead – the cutting edge on the knife. Their game should comprise five essential qualities:

- 1 goal flair;
- 2 aerial strength;

- 3 directness;
- 4 control;
- 5 speed.

‘Therefore, the coach who can field three forwards, each possessing all five qualities, has the ideal forward line ... There are many attacking advantages to be gained by playing as wide as possible. For example, if the ball is on the opposite wing, let’s say the right wing, the left-winger can either come inside or stay out by the line. Let us assume he stays wide. Now the right-back begins to worry. He has to keep one eye on the left-winger and also watch what is happening on the other wing. There are few more exciting sights in football than a winger in full flight, ball at his feet and the full-back backing off, waiting for the opportunity to dive in and make a winning tackle. When taking on a full-back, the winger’s angle of approach is extremely important. The best way is to attack the defender on his inside foot.

So how you divide up your midfield is what matters. A good midfield player in the wrong role can look a mediocre player – the coach must see and know his players. The Germans exercised their systematic brain to analyse the jobs that need to be done by a midfield unit. What they evolved is what we now use as our midfield blueprint:

- 1 The attacking midfield player who pushes up behind the forwards in support, looking for goals and backing up in all attacking situations.
- 2 The midfield general who positions himself in as many central areas as possible to take and give passes to all sides of the pitch. He is the link within the link.
- 3 The all-purpose midfield player who is good at winning the ball and who tends to get back into defensive positions more than the other two.

‘Having set the pattern, it is extremely important to understand that all three midfield players should be looking to do their jobs plus a share of their colleague’s responsibilities ... By dividing up your midfield, you ensure that all vital jobs are seen to. But you do not restrict your midfield players to rigid roles. Flexibility, once the number-one jobs are done, is a great strength in any team.’

Sexton had typically thoughtful and extensive views about goalkeeping; that the difference between a 'liner' and a goalkeeper more comfortable with coming out and collecting the ball could have a profound difference on the defensive line and also require different attributes from defenders. 'The ideal goalkeeper has a safe pair of hands, capable of holding the ball under pressure and when it comes at him from different angles,' the coach said. 'He must have good agility, sharp reflexes, quick anticipation, positional sense and also be a good kicker of the ball. Properly coached, the goalkeeper can become the most versatile footballer in the team. I emphasise the words "properly coached". The coach who spells out the importance of creative thinking throughout the team – beginning with the goalkeeper – will produce a positive response.'

Again, it did seem as if his approach veered more towards the cautious end of the spectrum, although his words suggested otherwise. The idea of a goalkeeper as a member of the outfield team and not the last line of defence was nothing new at Old Trafford. Harry Gregg famously hated 'liners' and one of Alex Stepney's most desired qualities was his distribution. Sexton had inherited Stepney, of course, but stress as he might about taking personal attributes into consideration, even a goalkeeper in Sexton's team would have to be prepared for all eventualities. Which, again, in theory, was no bad thing, but it was a contrast to the emphasis being on the damage United could do to the opposition.

Stepney, the veteran 35-year-old that he was, might have thought himself to be an old dog who could not be taught any new tricks. He was in for a shock in pre-season training. United travelled to Germany and Norway to play four games.

'My first introduction to Dave in his role as United manager came in our pre-season tour of Norway,' Stepney recalled. 'He took Paddy Roche and myself for specialised goalkeeper training. As we walked out to a pitch that was hard and bumpy and flecked with gravel, I thought about something Phil Parkes, the QPR goalkeeper, had told me. He had worked with Dave for a long time and had nothing but praise for his knowledge of training and preparation. Phil had also warned me that the demands of the early, specialised goalkeeper training had been killing. The warm-up routine on this warm Norwegian morning was fierce enough. Then he made Paddy

take a turn in goal. He had two footballs on the go. One ball would be driven to the bottom right-hand corner and then, as soon as you were across for it, the other would be sent to the opposite side of goal, and you had to spring over to save that one. The balls were fired with rapid, relentless timing. I watched Paddy lurching from one side to the other. He is rather pale at the best of times; I could see what little colour there was beginning to drain from him. The sweat stood out on him. Suddenly he reeled away, slumped to the ground and threw up. Then it was my turn. I was determined not to give in. From side to side I went. The pain was searing through the muscles in my legs. My breath was tight and I could feel a band tightening around my head. But I would not give in. My legs were starting to seize up and I felt as though I was falling from one side of goal to the other like a helpless drunk. I could hear Dave beginning to make cracks about my fitness, or the lack of it. Suddenly my senses cleared as a hidden, reserve supply of adrenaline burst into my brain igniting my dormant temper. I kept up the training, moving from one side to the other; I did not even pause as I shouted to him: 'Don't take the piss out of me when I am working.' From that moment on we had an understanding. We had a relationship going. He knew I was tough, and I knew he was prepared to drive people until they cracked. The training was marvellous, and I returned for the start of Dave Sexton's first season as manager of Manchester United feeling like a new man.'

Stepney had actually spent some time with Sexton, coincidentally. 'I had long been an admirer of Dave Sexton,' he admitted in his 1978 autobiography. 'I once spent a week's holiday with him in Sardinia. We did not go together but found ourselves in the same hotel, and, even though we had both taken the break with the idea of forgetting about football for a while, we still got the ball out, both on the beach and in our conversations ... His arrival in Manchester was something of a challenge to the press. Those journalists who fed daily upon the deeds of Manchester United had only to finger the pen in their top pockets for Tommy Docherty to launch into a string of quotes that were often sensational, usually unconventional, and rarely failed to make the back pages. Dave is a different animal. He cares little for publicity or personal glory. He would probably admit that he is not a very good communicator,

and those journalists who spent the first few days close to him, as close as they are ever likely to get, said that drawing words from him required the same precision and strength as chipping away at a rock. They quickly dubbed him “Whispering Dave”. The players enjoyed the contrast after The Doc’s abrasiveness. Dave was polite. He treated us like gentlemen and we were all aware of the magnitude of the job he had taken on.’

Sexton had that rarest of opportunities afforded to any football manager – the chance to take over a club in the ascendancy. The usual scenario is for a manager to be sacked when things have gone horribly wrong and so there would be issues to address for the new man. There are for any manager, good or bad. But the usual immediately critical concerns of turning around form or confidence were not problems for Dave Sexton at United. Instead, he was effectively tasked with the further education of this young group. In the early days, that meant getting to know them better, through their application to the new training schedule. Under Docherty, Blunstone and Tommy Cavanagh, training had been a relaxed affair. Now there were routines that were being practised until perfected. Sexton was closely observing how the players adapted.

‘We rarely finished with five-a-side, it would usually be some routine where the clipboard came out,’ Brian Greenhoff remembered. ‘He would mark things down, scoring things and tell you what you’d done – I always felt under pressure, which for me isn’t what training should be about ... Dave’s monitoring may well have been intended to motivate but it certainly didn’t do that for me.’

However, at that point nor had Sexton’s different approach to Docherty pushed anyone’s nose out of joint just yet. In late July *The Guardian* reported that Steve Coppell had signed a new contract, with Greenhoff and Lou Macari set to follow suit. It was clear that the new manager was more focussed on continuity than making big changes.

Pre-season went well; a defeat against Werder Bremen was followed by three huge scorelines against admittedly weak Norwegian opposition – 8-0 over Rosenberg, 4-0 over Hamarkameratene and 9-2 against Strømsgodset.

During the last part of the tour, Sexton granted a feature interview to Bob Russell of *The Mirror* regarding the forthcoming Charity Shield against Liverpool. ‘This is an important game for

the boys, though it's not really my occasion because I had nothing to do with them qualifying for Wembley,' he said. 'But for me the really important one is still over a week away – the kick-off in the league at Birmingham ... Starting with the Charity Shield, we'll be going for the lot – league, European Cup Winners' Cup, League Cup and FA Cup again. I don't believe in listing priorities, because if you miss out on a particular one you can be left in limbo with nothing to go for. By going for everything, even if you finally finish with nothing, you maintain the momentum right through.' It was pointed out that the only previous manager whose first game had come at Wembley was Brian Clough at Leeds. 'I hope to last a little longer here,' Sexton grinned.

On the eve of his first official game in charge, the new United boss told reporters: 'If you can repeat a win over Liverpool you let the whole football world know you are a force to be reckoned with.' The Charity Shield, however, was a non-event; on an energy-sapping hot day where Kenny Dalglish made his debut for Liverpool, United were untroubled but were unable to make any attacking inroads of their own thanks in part to an early injury to Jimmy Greenhoff. He came off in the 20th minute to be replaced by utility man Dave McCreery. Though still fairly competitive as far as Charity Shields go, both teams went through the paces in the final moments, and Gordon Hill recalls signalling to the referee to blow for full time with three minutes still to play. The official obliged and the shield was shared after a goalless draw.

Jimmy Greenhoff was ruled out for weeks and so young striker Ashley Grimes was called into the squad; but Sexton decided that he would move Macari up front, with McCreery in midfield and Grimes as the substitute, for the opening game.

The Express's James Lawton ran a feature on both Manchester clubs on the first Saturday of the First Division season. The United side was headlined: 'Sexton: We have to win a certain way' and the new boss was asked how he would cope with the relentless attention of the media. 'I could always hide,' he joked. 'It's no secret that I love the coaching side of the game and of course it is hard to imagine a club with more outside pressures. And it is not just simply that of winning things. That is always around in football. But you have to win things in a certain way here. We are talking about sport, a

thing that ebbs and flows. What you can do is work as well as you know how and you can give everything you have to keeping the club healthy. That way you can get to sleep at night.'

City manager Tony Book believed that he was in charge of the more prosperous club in the area. 'We are in a take-off situation,' he boasted. 'The other day we opened our 40th fan club – in York – and the crowds are going to threaten United's old supremacy. They are under pressure all right. I don't want to sound arrogant about this, but the truth is we have the scope to go further. The pressure on Dave Sexton is that United have done everything – their problem is one of keeping to a level.'

While City were drawing 0-0 at Maine Road against Leicester, United were putting another Midlands club to the sword; two goals from Lou Macari, first in the fifth minute and then again in the 22nd, put Dave Sexton in dreamland. Birmingham pulled a goal back early in the second half, but in the 75th minute Gordon Hill scored one of the most astonishing goals of an impressive catalogue. Arthur Albiston clipped a pass into the box, the ball dropped over Hill's left shoulder around 12 yards from goal and the winger connected with a first-time volley that flew into the far corner. Eight minutes later, Macari put a perfect footnote on the afternoon with another goal to complete his hat-trick and a 4-1 win. The only disappointment from the game was the withdrawal of Stuart Pearson, who came off with a trapped nerve in his neck.

Sexton was thrilled with his team's capability of scoring despite the main strikers not being there. 'It was smashing,' he said. 'Everything came off for us even though Jimmy Greenhoff was out and Stuart Pearson had to go off. I'm very pleased about the way things have gone, particularly as I've always found Birmingham a very difficult side to beat.'

Hat-trick hero Macari was keen to praise the new manager: 'It's so easy to work for Dave,' said the Scot. 'He has changed our style very little, just making sure that every member of the side plays to his strength. He's a quiet man, but after the first day's training with us it somehow seemed he knew so much about us that he had been with us five years.'

Pearson was cleared to play the next game – the first home game, against Coventry, four days later. In his programme notes, Sexton

addressed the supporters formally for the first time, insisting he was the right man for the job. 'Manchester United are my kind of team,' he wrote. 'I suppose there is nothing particularly special about that because they appeal to people all over the country, indeed all over the world. They are the best supported club in the business and have been for some years. Their name is an international byword in football circles. So it is with particular pride that I have become manager at Old Trafford and an honour that I shall do my best to justify. I was on the point of joining Arsenal, after leaving Queens Park Rangers, and there is magic in working for the Gunners as well. But when the vacancy suddenly materialised at Old Trafford it was an opportunity that I felt I could not miss. It was a chance that fired my imagination and I was delighted to be appointed. I will not be making changes simply for the sake of change. I don't think I am one of those support ego people who must turn everything upside down just to let everyone know who is boss. I hope I won't be afraid to change things if I feel it is right and necessary because after all I have a job to do and I would be letting the club down if I shirked it. But United are a successful team with consistency in both cup and league for the past couple of years. They have achieved this by producing an extremely attractive type of football. I neither want to spoil the attractive nature of their game nor obviously do I want to do anything that will interrupt the run of success ... United have evolved a pattern of play that has proved successful and entertaining. I don't want to alter it because it's good. I simply hope to add to it ... I shall do my best to uphold the proud traditions of this famous club.'

It wasn't a classic introduction to life at Old Trafford. Hill scored an early penalty and David McCreery scored a late winner in a 2-1 victory; McCreery for Jimmy Greenhoff the only change from the FA Cup Final team as Sexton kept as close as he could to the winning formula Docherty had.

Already, though, the idea of United's capability to challenge moving forward was being called into question. Playing Pearson backfired and he was ruled out of the next game at home to Ipswich Town.

It wasn't so much that United weren't good enough. Their first team had proven that they were. But whenever that side are questioned on how they would have done, they are generally split

into two camps; they can usually be determined by those who come under the description of Docherty loyalists, and those who don't; those who did would insist the first team was easily strong enough to challenge, and those who didn't would stress that more quality was needed in certain areas. One thing both sides agreed upon was that strength in depth was needed in the event of an injury crisis. It wasn't a crisis for Sexton – yet – but he was discovering quickly that the drop in quality from first team to reserve was significant.

For United, the first consequence of the change of manager was coming home to bite them, although it was too early to categorise it as an error (if calling it an error at all was fair). The decision taken to sack Docherty meant sacrificing the loss of momentum when considering the manager's plans. Docherty might, or should, have been able to attempt to sign two or three players to build on what he had achieved. It was difficult for Sexton to do that without the risk of upsetting one or two players in the first team, and so one would consider his approach was the most reasonable one.

Without their first-choice strikers, McCreery and rookie Chris McGrath were selected in midfield to play against Ipswich, with Macari remaining up front to be joined by Steve Coppell. Just before the hour mark, Sammy McIlroy had to come off with a knock, and Ashley Grimes, a player more defensive, was brought on. Ipswich held on for a 0-0 draw.

McIlroy was out, but Pearson was back for the League Cup visit to Arsenal. Proving the theory that United at their best were a match for anyone but anything less would make it difficult for them to compete with the top teams, the Gunners controlled the tie and were already safely 3-1 in front before a late consolation from Pearson helped the scoreline look more respectable at the end. That setback was followed by an impressive 1-0 win at Derby County which just about spelled the end for their manager, Colin Murphy.

The Rams had struggled since Dave Mackay left in November 1976 and there had been rumours that they were interested in appointing Tommy Docherty in the build-up to the 1977 FA Cup Final. That speculation had forced United's hand when it came to renegotiating a contract with Docherty, and a new deal had been agreed but was left unsigned, with The Doc set to formally agree to it once he returned for pre-season. Murphy was sacked two weeks

after the defeat to United, and Derby were finally successful in hiring Docherty. Within days, he returned to his former club to attempt to bring Tommy Cavanagh and Frank Blunstone to the Baseball Ground.

By that time, however, Docherty was merely adding to Sexton's growing list of headaches. The win at Derby meant, after four games and heading into the first international break of the campaign, United were level at the top but third behind Manchester City and Liverpool on goal difference. It was a strong start and a solid foundation. The first game following international duty was at Maine Road.

Tony Book played up the intensity of the occasion by saying: 'There is nothing I detest more than losing to United.'

For Dave Sexton, this was a new experience. 'The only experience I have that can remotely compare with this sort of game is that I have twice been concerned in Arsenal-Spurs matches. Somehow, although the adrenalin runs on those occasions, I don't think it will be quite the same,' he said. 'The picture is clear. Everyone believes in the reputation that Manchester United have built as an attacking side and it is clear to me that we shall have to keep things that way. People look to us to entertain and I think we have the players that can do that and win. It won't be just another game, will it? The fact that a win could put either of us on the top makes it important enough without the rivalry. I don't really know what to expect, except I am looking forward to it. And I am expecting us to play well.'

But they didn't. Jimmy Greenhoff was joined on the sidelines by his brother Brian, and Sexton replaced the younger brother, with Jimmy Nicholl replacing him; a full-back who would have to moonlight as centre-half. It was only Nicholl who ironically would emerge with any credit, scoring a blockbuster 30-yard shot in the 87th minute. By that time, though, United were 3-0 down, with former Old Trafford forward Brian Kidd getting a couple of goals against a team who were as unfamiliar with each other in defence as they were in attack.

Brian Greenhoff was back for the next game, the first leg of the Cup Winners' Cup tie against St Etienne in France. There, United actually played well, scoring through a fine Gordon Hill goal (Hill

also had two goals disallowed). The hosts equalised and the game ended 1-1.

The occasion was marred by controversy in the stands. There was a comedic undertone as both sets of supporters threw sticks of French bread at each other; but the bread was followed by bottles, and because the stadium had no segregation there were lots of fights between fans even before kick-off.

‘A barrier collapsed and more than 100 St Etienne fans climbed the 10ft wire fence which surrounds the pitch to escape,’ reported David Lacey of *The Guardian*. ‘United supporters fought for several minutes and were then routed by French police who drove them to the terraces and in some cases out of the ground altogether.’

‘About 100 Britons started a fight behind one of the goals,’ read the report in *The Times*. ‘Armed with bottles, sticks and knives, they went for the supporters of the French team. Panic-stricken supporters rushed down towards the wire netting around the pitch where they were piled up. People following jumped over the bodies to the safety of the pitch. The rest of the crowd shouted, “Les flics, les flics (Cops, Cops!)” because the riot police on hand were slow to intervene. It took three charges by truncheon-swinging police to clear the battlefield, expelling most of the Manchester supporters.’

United were immediately defensive about their role in the events; Sexton and club secretary Les Olive were singing from the same hymn sheet by claiming United fans had been provoked. In truth, the trouble had started much earlier: ‘The night before the game, a small group of Manchester supporters, some with knives, broke shop windows, ransacked the hall of a hotel and looted a shop in the city,’ *The Times* reported. ‘Five were arrested and will appear in court.’

St Etienne chairman Roger Roche was furious. ‘They were the worst hooligans I have ever seen,’ he said. ‘This ground had been without a blemish until these gangsters came here and started drinking.’

The initial leak from UEFA was that they were strongly considering expelling United from the competition, though Robby Herbin, the St Etienne manager, insisted he did not want his team to win ‘in a boardroom’. The English team were supported by the minister for sport, Denis Howell, who was preparing a report which would lay blame at the poor organisation of the game by the host

team. Before he had chance to submit it to UEFA, the governing body had acted on that threat to kick United out. A statement read: 'The commission were of the opinion that the violent behaviour of the Manchester United supporters seriously endangered public security and the physical wellbeing of the spectators.'

Howell responded immediately via the press to complain the decision had been taken far too hastily. 'My preliminary report from the Foreign Office suggests that the official Manchester United club did everything they were asked to do in the way they were asked to,' he said. 'I would have wished that UEFA had read this report before they took official action.'

United goalkeeper Alex Stepney made an extraordinary blast at the fans of the club, telling the BBC, 'It's too ridiculous for words. As far as I'm concerned as a player for United, United fans have nothing at all to do with me. We went over there and gave an advert for football, both teams. I mean, we're getting condemned for something we haven't done.'

On 21 September a United contingent including Sir Matt Busby appealed to a three-man UEFA committee for the club to be reinstated. They were buoyed by a statement from St Etienne who now said the ban was 'unjust' – UEFA relented and allowed United to play the second leg, on the condition that it would be played at least 200km from Old Trafford, and the club were also ordered to pay a fine.

Busby was pleased, declaring 'Justice has been done.' But the news was not greeted with encouragement or co-operation by the FA or the Football League. The most obvious choice for a venue that would meet the conditions was one of the big stadiums in London. Arsenal offered Highbury, but, bizarrely, Alan Hardaker intervened to veto the plan. 'United have a lot of fans in London and they are worse than anyone,' Hardaker said, a comment only likely to infuriate those with long memories at Old Trafford.

Plans to hold the game in Aberdeen were ruined as the Dons had a League Cup game against Rangers. An invitation to play at Glentoran's ground in Belfast was politely declined as United finally settled on Plymouth's Home Park, a compromise Hardaker agreed with.

United manager Dave Sexton was relieved his team could continue to play in the competition. 'It is a fantastic situation,' he

said, surely meaning the literal rather than positive sense of the word. 'The club is absolutely correct in everything they do and the players could not do more. They have won the fair play award for two years on the trot.'

The form of the team continued to be bumpy amidst the controversy. Chelsea scored within 90 seconds of their visit to Old Trafford and United were unable to recover; their issues compounded when captain Martin Buchan was forced off the pitch with an injury.

'United played into our hands by knocking so many high balls into our defence,' said Chelsea captain Ray Wilkins. Sexton complained that the Blues were 'masters in the air and we couldn't break them down our way.'

That defeat was followed by a draw at Leeds. On the eve of the game at Elland Road, Tommy Docherty revealed he had approached United to take their staff. 'I spoke to Dave Sexton today and was given permission to speak to Tommy Cavanagh,' he said. 'I hope he decides to join us. I will be meeting him later tonight.'

Cavanagh and Docherty, the two Tommys, were a double act. Some of the players remarked on the difference in Cavanagh's demeanour now Sexton was at the club, as opposed to how he was under Docherty. Brian Greenhoff claimed Cavanagh had tried to stress that the players at United were more productive with a more relaxed approach rather than the methodical instruction laid out by Sexton. To some of the United players, and to Cavanagh, Sexton's well-intentioned style of coaching was redundant. They already felt equipped to do the things he was instructing them to perfectly. Cavanagh's knowledge of the players meant he tried where possible to encourage them to play in the way he knew came naturally, but he was unsuccessful in trying to convince Sexton this was the right way to go about things.

'Ultimately, he had no choice but to coach us using Dave's methods,' said Gordon Hill. 'It was get on the bandwagon or find yourself another club ... Cav would still encourage us where possible to express ourselves but training was a world apart from how it had been under the boss.'

It seems – to give Sexton some benefit of the doubt – that there had been a miscommunication. Both the squad and the manager

had their tried and tested, and successful, manner of doing things. As the manager, Sexton felt it was natural that his method should prevail. That was why he was hired, after all, and it stands to reason that he should want to do this. He wasn't familiar with the players and their ability in the same way Cavanagh was.

Under the previous regime, there was a strong element of trust and faith in a sport comprised hugely of chance; the players were good enough to get it right on the Saturday. Sexton was different; he wanted *proof* that the players were good enough on the Monday-Friday. It meant relentlessly working on particular drills until they were successful. Corner-kick routines would be repeated time and time again to the frustration of players who would eventually take it upon themselves to agree to contrive to make the routine successful just so they could get off the training pitch. United's star men couldn't understand why Sexton was so intent on the repetition. Was this meant to improve them? Was this supposed to be constructive in bridging the gap of quality between United and Liverpool?

Sexton was almost obsessed with the idea of planning the game so well so that as little as possible could be left to chance. Hence the repetition of these routines; an outsider can most certainly see the value in working until perfect, because even in a game of chance where crosses can largely depend on the technique of an individual, the purpose is to improve that technique through that repetition so that the chances of a successful delivery are higher. Perhaps, then, some blame can go to the players who were uninterested and uninvested.

Whenever there is such a crossover where one manager replaces a successful one, as rare as it can be, the natural resistance to the new man's methods can sometimes translate into performances. Certainly, United's players would complain about what they felt was an over-complicated approach which had too much emphasis on protection and defence.

Yet even when that does translate into performances, as well it might as players struggle – but struggle honestly, with their own best intentions – to put into practice the training through the week into a game at the weekend, there come the odd occasions where the buttons of pride are pushed and they evoke a different reaction. If

players are at all concerned about their capability to get a result, you might often find them naturally reverting to the methods which had served them so well. Buchan and Jimmy Greenhoff were back for the visit of Liverpool on 1 October. It was more like the old United as their second-half performance was thrilling, and rewarded with goals from Lou Macari and Sammy McIlroy.

If the players had seen, noticed and felt the change on the training pitch, then the idea of a 'new' and 'old' United was at least not evident from the stands yet. Supporters were patient and willing to give the new manager plenty of time and they were sympathetic with the injuries and the controversy which had faced him in the early weeks. The victory over Liverpool was a very welcome boost.

It was a shot in the arm for the players who had a renewed confidence ahead of their second leg against St Etienne. In footballing matters, United had been the superior side, and bizarrely it did seem as if their hopes of progression depended as much on what happened off the pitch at Home Park as what happened on it. Plymouth Argyle were playing in the Third Division and their average attendance effectively halved after their relegation earlier that year. Home Park saw an average of 6,752 at the gate, which was the lowest since the turn of the century. Yet despite the regulations which were intended to make it difficult for United supporters to get there, 31,634 were present at Plymouth to watch the game. (To put this in some sort of context, United's lowest crowd in their relegation season was 33,336 for the game against Burnley – this was a mightily impressive turnout.)

'Home Park was packed to the rafters,' Arthur Albiston told *The Mail*. 'I don't think their players were used to having fans so close to the pitch like we were in England. The United fans made it a little bit unsettling for them and that helped us.'

Stuart Pearson scored after 32 minutes and midway through the second half Steve Coppell secured the result.

It was the first time since the Charity Shield Dave Sexton had been able to name the same 11 that had won the FA Cup, though the luxury didn't last too long as Pearson had to come off. In better news, the fanatical support which had travelled to Devon largely behaved themselves. The authorities in England would have breathed a huge sigh of relief, and not just the footballing ones;

the British government were counting on United to play a friendly game in Tehran in late October as part of the British Trade Week export drive and so the game passing without incident would have been welcome indeed.

United lost against Middlesbrough at Ayresome Park three days after winning in Europe; the arduous journey that saw them travel the entire length of the country probably had something to do with their below-par performance. With a week's rest they were preparing to take on Newcastle at Old Trafford but were unwittingly hit by an illness epidemic when, the day before the game, the players had to have vaccination injections before their travels to the Middle East.

United were able to get through a tough game against Newcastle at home but were paying the price; Brian Greenhoff, already feeling the pain of a knee injury, became ill, as did his brother. Gordon Hill picked up a cold, as did Arthur Albiston. 'Tommy Cavanagh said it's like somebody had taken a syringe and taken everything out of us,' Hill said. 'We couldn't run.'

'The injections made the lads' arms swell up a little bit,' Sammy McIlroy remembered. 'That knocked a few of the lads for six.'

Not ideal preparation then for the Cup Winners' Cup game in Porto, which meant a flight to Portugal as well. With players desperately struggling with illness, the hosts took clinical advantage and registered an emphatic 4-0 victory. Despite the size of the scoreline, there was more than a smidge of sympathy for the beleaguered United side who weren't in any shape to give their best.

Martin Buchan did not give any excuses. 'There was only one team in it,' the skipper said. 'And only one team gave the impression that they were going to win.'

However, when Sexton saw his team defeated by the same scoreline at West Brom a few days later – their sixth loss in 11 games – there were more people beginning to agree with *Express* reporter Alan Thompson, who had written in the wake of that defeat in Europe: 'Now United must buy – and quickly.'

'They were shattered and dejected from a lesson in the arts and crafts handed to them by a Portuguese side not all that highly regarded in their own country,' Thompson said. 'So where do they go from here? They will live in hope that they will pull back the goals in the second leg. And Dave Sexton must buy if he wants to

put United truly back on the map. Not just one player, but more ... simply because they do not have sufficient playing strength to make a dent on the domestic scene, let alone compete against the sort of class we saw Porto produce.'

One name linked with United was Gordon McQueen of Leeds. The Scot had the height that United's defence had been lacking since the departure of McQueen's compatriot Jim Holton a year earlier. Sexton decided to wait until Brian Greenhoff was ready to return, but there was already enough evidence from the opening weeks and months of this season to prove that the suggestion of United being equipped to challenge for the biggest honours as they were was way off. The defeat at The Hawthorns had seen Nicholl at centre-half again and young Martyn Rogers given his one and only game.

Tommy Docherty made an enquiry for Stuart Pearson. *The Mirror* reported that he was not 'completely turned down' and there was talk of a £250,000 offer, though Docherty was told he would have to wait until United's injury crisis eased up. The openness to selling Pearson and the link to McQueen were the first indications that Sexton felt United would need to change their style. More signs were to follow very soon.

After the ill-advised trip to Tehran (United won 2-0 against an Iran 'B' side), United travelled to Villa Park and were 2-0 down at half-time. After failing to start the second half in the manner he would have liked, Dave Sexton made a symbolic move, bringing off Gordon Hill for Ashley Grimes. The away fans couldn't believe it. The substitution didn't pay off, although perhaps in Sexton's mind it did – United did not concede again, and were able to get a late consolation through Nicholl.

Sexton was finding Hill to be the biggest obstacle in terms of players who were resisting his style of coaching. After training, he asked Hill to join him in his office where the pair watched videos of the hardworking Hungarian wingers in their great 50s teams. Sexton was keen for Hill to contribute more defensively and felt that part of the reason they had been so porous of late was because they were so open further up the field. Hill had not shirked his duties as he understood them from the Docherty days, but that was not enough for the new manager, who wanted Hill to drop further back and help Arthur Albiston. It had only been in January of that year

when Old Trafford was witness to one of the most peculiar sights in history – Martin Buchan running up to Hill and scuffing him around the ear after losing the ball and putting the team in trouble. If you think that supports Sexton's theory, it was actually quite the opposite; Buchan was scolding his team-mate for taking a liberty in an unfamiliar area. Hill's strength was not defending and his captain was making him aware of that and sending him back to where he was of use to the team. It is said that some members of the team may have been growing frustrated with Hill for not working harder defensively; if Sexton was reading it this way, then perhaps he was taking their complaints too seriously, for by all accounts it seems that for most of the players it was light-hearted. They were more than happy to accommodate Hill's talent. Sexton, however, was not willing to accommodate anyone who would not work to his plan, and Villa Park was the first public sign of things going wrong.

The United boss could not afford to take such a gamble when playing against Porto in the return leg. To his credit, he sent his team out to overturn an unassailable advantage, and when Steve Coppell scored an early goal Old Trafford responded loudly. What followed was frantic, breathless and relentless as United hunted in packs. The visitors dealt a body blow by hitting the home side on a counter-attack on the half-hour to equalise; it meant Sexton's team now needed to score six to go through. But they got two before half-time for a 3-1 lead and renewed hope. Coppell netted again in the 65th minute to set up a grandstand finish, but a Porto goal in the 85th minute finally ended the hopes of the hosts. A fifth United goal followed in injury time to round off a memorable night, even if it was in vain.

The next few weeks were also memorable for the wrong reasons. Four defeats in seven games followed the Porto game as injuries to Brian Greenhoff, Buchan and Albiston continued to undermine the defensive solidity (and the elder Greenhoff also missed games, putting the goalscoring responsibility on Hill and Pearson). Sexton did not do much to help matters, however. After the defeat against Arsenal on 5 November – the first game after the Porto elimination – the United boss decided to make a big change.

'On the following Thursday I received the summons to report to his office,' Alex Stepney said. 'He told me that he was leaving me out of the team for the next match. He said he did not think that

the goals were my fault, or that I was playing badly. But there were so many goals going in that he thought I was in danger of becoming punch-drunk, like a boxer who had taken too much stick.'

The legendary stopper had shipped 18 goals in seven games. Sexton told Stepney he would be calling Paddy Roche into the team. Stepney had been in this position before. Previously, Roche had made mistakes and Stepney had soon been recalled by Docherty. 'I asked Dave what he would do about the goalkeeping situation if Paddy failed to change the team's luck and performed no better than I had,' Stepney recalled. 'He did not answer for a while, and I suggested that he would probably go out and buy a new goalkeeper altogether. I had Phil Parkes at the back of my mind. There had always been some speculation, and it seemed logical to me that Dave would go back to his old club for a goalkeeper who was on the fringe of the England team. Dave looked at me and said that if Paddy failed to do his job I would be given another chance. Although I had no reason to doubt Dave's word, I felt that probably I had finally come to the end of the road as United's goalkeeper.'

Stepney was already beginning to have concerns about the compatibility of Manchester United and the manager he had high expectations for. 'Something was wrong,' he said. 'The team was not fully responding to Dave. It seemed that he had not taken the dressing room by the scruff of the neck.'

Roche's introduction to the first team did not help matters, though, to be fair to the understudy, it was not conducive to good form that the defence in front of him kept changing. Buchan and Brian Greenhoff did come back for his first game but the captain was only back for three games before missing the next two. He was back again for the visit of Nottingham Forest but United's campaign sunk to a new low when they were absolutely destroyed 4-0. Brian Greenhoff said it was, 'the worst performance I ever had at Old Trafford. Martin and I had just come back from injury and I just could not put a foot right and we got run ragged.'

Forest were now top of the division. They had been with United in the Second Division and so their progress and the sheer magnitude of their victory put the decline of Sexton's side in a very harsh light. *Express* reporter Alan Thompson, who had urged United to buy after the defeat to Porto, gave a damning report on the afternoon: 'When

fans leave Old Trafford in their thousands long before the end, the situation with Manchester United must be critical,' Thompson wrote. 'Twelve months ago, this same United side was being hailed leaders of the movement to bring back attacking skill and enthusiastic running. Where has it all gone? The finger of suspicion can't but be pointed towards manager Dave Sexton. The aggressive style that won them the cup only seven short months ago has disappeared. In its place is something which this Sherlock Holmes cannot detect. But whatever it is supposed to be, the number of empty seats 20 minutes from the end should be enough to convince Sexton that it is not within a million miles of being the "Manchester United brand". A commanding centre-half, a courageous centre-forward and a dominant goalkeeper – the backbone of any side – are initial requirements. Don't tell me they have not been available. In the past 18 months Nottingham Forest have signed Peter Withe, Kenny Burns, Peter Shilton, Archie Gemmill and David Needham. Brian Clough has transformed an average Second Division side into First Division leaders. Those players were available to any bidders ... and any one of them would be an asset to Manchester United. If lack of available talent cannot be accepted as an excuse, neither can poverty be accepted as a plea. It was not the fact that Manchester United lost 4-0 to Forest on Saturday which disturbed me – it was the manner of it. They were outclassed in all departments – and in the second half they dropped chins and accepted slaughter like chickens. Forest should have won by eight clear goals. Now there are two courses open to them. Either they will have to settle down to at least a five-year wait for young players of certain styles to emerge or they will have to spend heavily. About £1m should do it.'

Sexton was a patient man and he had a patient board, but the former option was not one that was available, considering the quality of the squad he had inherited. Some may have been willing to concede that United were not quite as ready to challenge Liverpool as some had heralded, but they were most certainly much better than their form over the first half of the season had suggested. Going into Christmas 14th place in the table was a dismal start, and Sexton felt that even despite the injuries he had a greater conviction over his belief in the weaknesses of the squad. He appeared to concur with Thompson's assessment; having already dropped Stepney, he also

viewed the Forest defeat as more of an indication that Buchan and Greenhoff shouldn't be first choice as a pair, instead of it being a blip. Stuart Pearson did not seem best suited to Sexton's preferred style of delivery for centre-forwards, and Gordon Hill did not seem best suited to the manager's preferred attitude and work rate.

Over Christmas in 1977 there was plenty of speculation. Manchester City's Dennis Tueart reportedly turned down an advance from Sexton, while Aston Villa refused an offer of £200,000 for their striker John Deehan. Birmingham said no to an approach for Trevor Francis. There was a strong link to QPR's talented midfielder Gerry Francis, but the London club had put a stunning £500,000 price tag on his head.

Stung by the public criticism and the very real possibility that any number of them could be at risk, United's stars responded in style, trouncing Everton by a 6-2 scoreline at Goodison Park on Boxing Day, and then putting another three past Leicester the following day at Old Trafford. But the manager had already made up his mind, and the reality was that those two victories were the last hurrahs of the Docherty side in the guise that supporters were familiar with. They were projected for further success and, in the eyes of some, might have even taken the place of Forest or Villa on one of their European Cup-winning nights; yet, the team with a young average age and a bright future did not even make it to the end of the calendar year before it was torn apart.

On one hand you can't help but feel sympathy for Sexton when it comes to the criticism he received for 'tearing the team' apart. He had not had a proper opportunity to play the 11 who had won the FA Cup. That team had played together just twice and both times the manager had to make a change because of injury. And because of those injuries, which were mounting up, Sexton was already finding that Old Trafford was no place he could hide; no place where these mitigating circumstances would mask failure, even if most observers *did* feel sympathy. Importantly, the players could not complain now that Sexton was looking to make high-profile changes. Individually, they might, and indeed would, but it was plain to see the squad needed reinforcements. From championship hopefuls to being in a 'critical' condition; Manchester United were experiencing the familiar, unsettling feeling of a bumpy transition once more.