

LUKE WILLIAMS

1999 WATCH THE  
**THRONE**

THE TACTICS  
BEHIND THE  
PREMIER  
LEAGUE'S  
EUROPEAN  
CHAMPIONS

2019



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# Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	7
Introduction. . . . .	9
<b>Part 1: Manchester United 1998/99</b>	
1. Quarter-final – Manchester United 3 Inter Milan 1 (aggregate) . . . . .	13
2. Semi-final – Manchester United 4 Juventus 3 (aggregate) . . . . .	40
3. Final – Manchester United 2 Bayern Munich 1, 26 May 1999 . . . . .	64
<b>Part 2: Liverpool 2004/05</b>	
4. Quarter-final – Liverpool 2 Juventus 1 (aggregate) .	83
5. Semi-final – Liverpool 1 Chelsea 0 (aggregate) . . .	102
6. Final – Liverpool 3 AC Milan 3; Liverpool win 3-2 on penalties, 25 May 2005 . . . . .	119
<b>Part 3: Manchester United 2007/08</b>	
7. Quarter-final – Manchester United 3 Roma 0 (aggregate) . . . . .	139
8. Semi-final – Manchester United 1 Barcelona 0 (aggregate) . . . . .	155
9. Manchester United 1 Chelsea 1; Manchester United win 6-5 on penalties, 21 May 2008 . . . . .	174
<b>Part 4: Chelsea 2011/12</b>	
10. Round of 16 – Chelsea 5 Napoli 4 (aggregate) . . .	193
11. Semi-final – Chelsea 3 Barcelona 2 (aggregate) . . .	211
12. Final – Bayern Munich 1 Chelsea 1; Chelsea win 4-3 on penalties, 19 May 2012 . . . . .	233

**Part 5: Liverpool 2018/19**

13. Round of 16 – Liverpool 3 Bayern Munich 1  
(aggregate) . . . . . .255

14. Semi-final – Liverpool 4 Barcelona 3 (aggregate) . .273

15. Final – Liverpool 2 Tottenham Hotspur 0,  
1 June 2019 . . . . . .302

## *Chapter 1*

# Quarter-final – Manchester United 3 Inter Milan 1 (aggregate)

### **First leg: Manchester United 2 Inter Milan 0, 3 March 1999**

To progress beyond the quarter-final stage, Manchester United would have to do what so many teams across the continent struggled to do throughout the 1990s – defeat Italian opposition. Serie A was indisputably Europe's best league for the duration of this decade, emphasised by the fact that it had provided a finalist for every single European Cup/Champions League Final between 1992 and 1998. Furthermore, every UEFA Cup Final between 1990 and 1998 featured at least one Italian side. United's 1999 quarter-final opponents, Inter Milan, had won the UEFA Cup in 1998 with a brilliant 3-0 victory over compatriots Lazio. Although 1998/99 was proving to be a tough season for them domestically, their European form had not faltered and they attained the joint-highest points total in the group stage despite facing holders Real Madrid (who finished second and qualified as the best runner-up). For United, this was a huge test.

Not only was this quarter-final a meeting between two giant clubs aiming for European glory, it was also the first

meeting between David Beckham and Diego Simeone since the latter feigned injury to get the former sent off during a round-of-16 clash between England and Argentina at the 1998 FIFA World Cup. Beckham had spent the season receiving abuse at away grounds across England and United were keen to avoid discussing the issue before their encounter with Inter, but Simeone revelled in the controversy and spent the day before the first leg speaking freely about how he had cheated to get Beckham red-carded. In response, Ferguson calmly stated that United would do their talking on the pitch because ‘the referee is there to sort out Simeone on the field’. This was good management from Ferguson, whose words put pressure on the game’s chief official (Hellmut Krug of Germany) to be wary of Simeone and not get sucked into making a rash decision that could harm the Mancunian outfit.

The team selections, shown by *Figure 1*, were as follows:

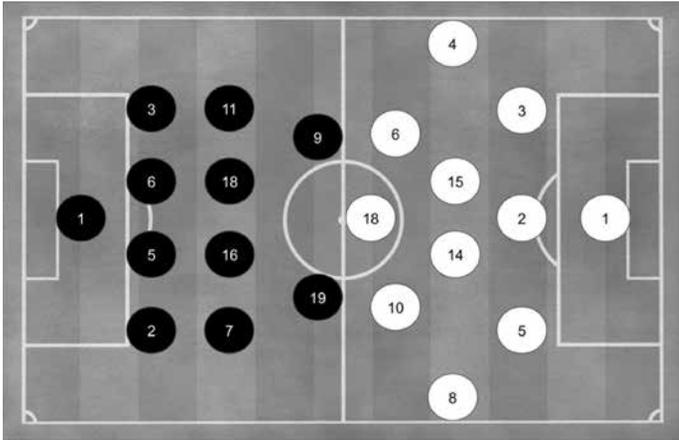


FIGURE 1

Manchester United (1-4-4-2): 1. Schmeichel; 2. G. Neville, 5. Johnsen, 6. Stam, 3. Irwin; 7. Beckham, 16. Keane (captain), 18. Scholes, 11. Giggs; 19. Yorke, 9. Cole.

Substitutes: 17. van der Gouw, 8. Butt, 12. P. Neville, 15. Blomqvist, 20. Solskjær, 21. Berg, 30. Brown.

Head coach: Alex Ferguson CBE.

Inter Milan (1-3-4-2-1): 1. Pagliuca; 3. Colonnese, 2. Bergomi (captain), 5. Galante; 4. Zanetti, 15. Cauet, 14. Simeone, 8. Winter; 6. Djorkaeff, 10. Baggio; 18. Zamorano.

Substitutes: 22. Frey, 11. Ventola, 13. Zé Elias, 16. West, 21. Pirlo, 20. Gilberto, 25. Milanese.

Head coach: Mircea Lucescu.

United lined up in their usual style – a well-balanced 1-4-4-2 with solidity at the back, energy in midfield, quality on the wings and an excellent strike partnership leading the line.

Goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel, in his last season for the club, was an excellent shot-stopper thanks to techniques that he had developed by playing handball in his youth. Right-back Gary Neville – one of several homegrown graduates from the United academy's famed Class of '92 – was a mature, reliable player who combined his defensive ability with simple ball-playing decisions that helped his side retain possession. Jaap Stam was a magnificent centre-back who would step out of the back line to intercept passes and engage with opponents while his partner, Ronny Johnsen at the start of this match, would cover behind to protect the space that Stam vacated. Left-back Denis Irwin was a versatile and hard-working defender who earned plaudits for his understated levels of consistency. In central midfield, Roy Keane and Paul Scholes complemented each other wonderfully to supply both industry and quality in equal measure. On the right wing, David Beckham possessed an immense crossing and passing ability, and on the left Ryan Giggs was the side's key dribbler. Last but by no means least, the forward line of Dwight Yorke and Andy Cole had everything – power, intelligence, technique and, most importantly, goals.

Despite being managed by a Romanian, Inter Milan's setup was quintessentially Italian. In goal, Gianluca Pagliuca was a fantastic shot-stopper, although he was sometimes susceptible to crosses and operated best behind centre-backs who could dominate in the air. The right and left centre-backs were strict man-markers tasked with sticking tight to opposition strikers, with the third central defender sweeping up behind them. This would change if a striker moved deep and central though – if this happened then the central defender, Bergomi, would follow the relevant striker so that the side centre-backs could retain a solid shape in anticipation of through balls. In this match, Francesco Colonnese was Andy Cole's primary man-marker and Fabio Galante was Dwight Yorke's.

The wing-backs Javier Zanetti and Aaron Winter were technically gifted, but only encouraged to venture high up the pitch if Inter needed goals (Winter was a midfielder playing out wide here in the absence of injured defenders). The central midfielders, Benoît Cauet and Diego Simeone, were hard-working players in functional roles, prioritising discipline over individual expression. In the absence of superstar forward Ronaldo, Inter employed two *trequartisti* – the extremely talented pairing of Youri Djorkaeff and Roberto Baggio – with ex-Real Madrid star Iván Zamorano leading the line. A key feature of Italian football in the 1990s, a *trequartista* operated between the lines of midfield and attack with the freedom to explore and exploit space across the pitch as their side's primary creative force. There was little onus on them to contribute defensively; hence it was important for the defensive and midfield lines to play with vitality and discipline.

The Old Trafford pitch was in poor condition after several days of persistent rain in Manchester, although the

atmosphere inside the ground remained fiery and expectant. There was a real hope that this United team was finally capable of going a step further on the continent than it had done in recent years.

United had developed an unhealthy habit of conceding early goals in European matches and Inter tried to start the game with a high tempo, hoping to seek out and then capitalise on any early Mancunian nerves. There were extremely loud boos for Simeone every time he touched the ball – they would persist all night.

Inter took a calculated risk by looking to start quickly away from home and it backfired. It was a struggle for them to keep hold of the ball in the opening stages. They took two long goal kicks in the first few minutes that only reached the midfield area, where United won the initial aerial challenge, with either Yorke and Cole in the centre or Beckham and Giggs on the wings able to aggressively challenge for the second balls and ensure the easy regaining of possession. By battling for first and second balls at a high intensity, United were being asked to do nothing different to what was expected of them in the opening exchanges of a typical domestic match.

It was from a goal kick that United punished Inter's risk and opened the scoring in the sixth minute. Pagliuca booted his clearance into midfield, where United won the first challenge and Giggs dribbled the loose ball away and into space down the left, before being closed down and winning a throw-in. Irwin threw short to Scholes, who passed short to his midfielder partner Keane. As this was happening, Yorke moved deeper to create a passing option between Inter's midfield and defensive lines and Bergomi stepped out to follow him through the middle. Keane tried a through pass to Yorke but Bergomi got a toe on it,

looping the ball up into the air, which encouraged Winter to inexplicably charge inwards to try and make a clearance. Despite Winter's challenge, Yorke won the ball in the air and headed it onwards for Beckham to meet it on the right-hand side of the Inter penalty area. Galante moved out to try and press Beckham in Winter's absence but had too much ground to cover. The English winger produced a chipped cross to the centre of the six-yard box for Yorke to run on to and head United in front.

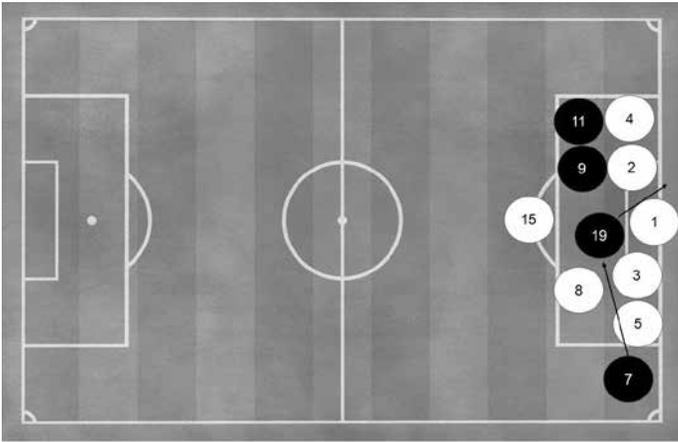


FIGURE 2

Colonnese, who had been marking Andy Cole, had left him alone to cover Galante and zonally mark the ball-side area of the box ready for Beckham's cross, so Bergomi rushed back to try and mark Cole instead. Showing his intelligence, Cole then drifted to the back post and took the recovering Bergomi with him, leaving Yorke free to attack the ball in the centre. *Figure 2* shows Beckham's cross and Yorke's header, with the arrows illustrating the path of the ball. Notice how outnumbered United were in the penalty area, Beckham's superb cross took maths out of the equation by landing right on Yorke's head.

Despite the poor defending from the visitors that aided the goal, it was an example of several factors that made United such an effective team. Ryan Giggs used his dribbling ability to force the opposing team backwards after the initial battle for the ball in midfield. Scholes and Keane showed their ability to attract opposition midfielders closer (done here via Scholes's short pass) before looking to accelerate proceedings and progress the ball forward (via Keane's through ball). Yorke used his power to pull defenders around and beat them in the air before bursting forward to meet a perfect Beckham delivery in space created by Cole's clever movement.

This was a dream start for Ferguson's men, who instead of conceding an early goal in a European tie had scored one themselves. There was ecstasy in the stands, and even the stewards behind the goal in the East Stand celebrated Yorke's header wildly.

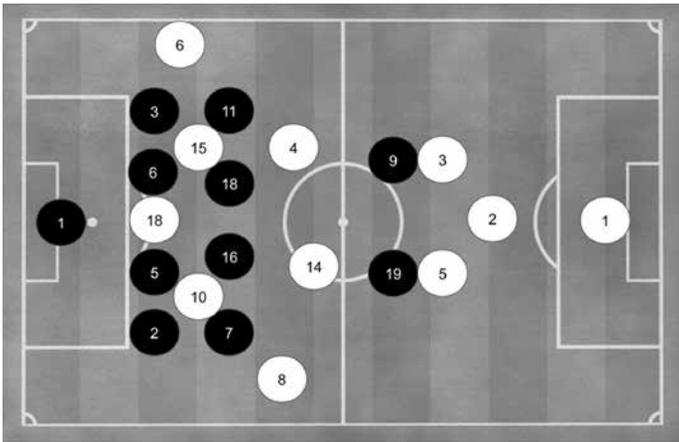


FIGURE 3

As Inter found their feet in the aftermath of conceding, their system became clearer. *Figure 3* illustrates their standard formation when establishing possession in United's half. Zanetti looked to move inside from the right and assumed

a more central position in front of United's midfield line alongside Simeone, with Cauet looking for space either between or behind United's midfielders. In response to this, Djorkaeff would move to the right and look for space in wide areas. If he received the ball out wide, he would try to dribble inside towards United's defence, looking to take men on or find clever through passes. If Inter moved the ball across to the left side, Baggio would occasionally move wider to assist Winter who, as previously mentioned, would refrain from venturing too far forward unless Baggio needed someone to make a run in front of him.

The main purpose of the movements shown in *Figure 3* was to try and create a central overload – simply, when Inter had the ball they wanted more players in central areas than United had. Inter sought to overload Keane and Scholes with a central four v two (Zanetti and Simeone in front of them, Cauet and Baggio behind them).

To defend against this attempted overload, United were happy to sit deep and retain two solid lines of four in front of Schmeichel. Wingers Beckham and Giggs made sure to track back and form a narrow midfield line either side of Keane and Scholes, so the hypothetical four v two became a four v four. Staying horizontally compact meant that the midfield could limit the space for passes into Cauet and Baggio from Zanetti and Simeone. This meant that the home side conceded space in wide areas, but they were able to cope with this too.

If Djorkaeff dribbled inwards from the right, he dribbled towards left-back Irwin, who was naturally right-footed and was therefore content to see his opponent attack his stronger side rather than go outside him and make him defend with his left foot. If Baggio dribbled inwards from the left, he did so towards United's compact shape, with the home side

knowing that Baggio lacked the pace to run wide and try to isolate Gary Neville.

The problem for United came on transition when they won possession because the gap between their midfield and their strikers was too large, a risk teams run when defending deep. This made it difficult to adequately perform quick forward passes to Yorke and Cole once United won the ball back because Zanetti and Simeone were able to sweep up in front of them. If the ball did reach its intended target, it often took too long for the home midfield to advance forward and support their strikers, who were outnumbered themselves by Inter's three centre-backs.

Theoretically, Inter's system was far more sophisticated than the tactics that Ferguson was used to facing at domestic level. Unwavering defensive discipline was needed from his players, something that he did not always get with his 1998/99 side despite the success that was to come. With regards to United's tactics when in possession of the ball, simplicity was key. The full-backs would play simple balls either inside to Keane and Scholes or wide to Beckham and Giggs, who would use their creative abilities to accelerate and progress play. Irwin was capable of supporting attacks but would rarely overlap, leaving the wide left area to the left-footed Giggs and giving him room to isolate and dribble against opponents. Alternatively, he could play long channel balls down the left for a striker to chase with Giggs in support. On the right, Neville would often stay deep but was capable of overlapping Beckham if necessary. When a match was in the balance, one central midfielder would push forward and the other would sit back behind the ball to provide cover. The strikers were tasked with both holding the ball up with their back to goal and running to chase long passes into wider areas, depending on specific match situations.

Inter began to establish more periods of possession than United and had largely been in control of the tempo and direction of the game since going behind, as the hosts continued to struggle to create anything meaningful from transitions. The crowd kept on encouraging the home team, but there was a growing sense of tension, illustrated on the pitch by Schmeichel kicking two passes out of play when only under a small amount of pressure. For all their possession, Inter were still struggling to create clear-cut chances and the United back four was defending well. Stam was having a very good half, reading play and timing tackles expertly. So much of a team's success in elite European football rests on its ability to survive the opponent's periods of positive momentum, and the solidity of United's defence gave them an ability to safely negotiate these periods of Inter possession in a way that lesser teams would have found difficult to do. No team, however great they are, dominates the entirety of a Champions League knockout tie. Ferguson now had a team capable of sufficiently limiting an opponent's strengths at this level, giving the attacking players a platform to build from once chances arose. It was not in United's nature to defend first and attack second – they had conceded 11 goals in the group stage – but it was a necessary approach for long spells in this match.

As the tension increased, so did the levels of aggression being shown on the pitch. Keane and Zamorano both received yellow cards after a confrontation with each other – cheap bookings to receive in such an enormous fixture.

Beckham began to drop deeper when his team had possession and instead of looking central for Yorke, he tried to play long crosses to Cole – one of which resulted in a significant chance. Despite finding it difficult to dominate the game, Beckham's extensive passing and crossing range

made him dangerous from anywhere and, by coming deeper, he gave himself more space to showcase his talent. These deeper movements also brought Winter further forward from his slot as Inter's left wing-back so that he could try and close Beckham down, which opened space down this side of Inter's three centre-backs. Beckham could then play wide passes for Yorke, who could engage in a wide one v one battle, which proved more effective for United than simply knocking the ball into central areas where Inter enjoyed their overload.

This led to United's second goal, as they transitioned with a direct channel ball to Yorke, who received it and switched play to Irwin, successfully establishing possession in Inter's half. Irwin played the ball back inside with a short pass to Scholes, who received on the back foot, opened out and fed the now inward-moving Yorke centrally with his back to goal. Yorke laid the ball back to Keane and the Irishman passed square to Neville. Neville shifted the ball on to Beckham, wide on the touchline, who crossed brilliantly to the centre of the six-yard box again for Yorke to double the Red Devils' lead. As the cross came over towards Yorke, he checked his run slightly so that he created some space between himself and Galante and earned the freedom to jump up unopposed and meet the ball. Pagliuca showed his vulnerability to crosses with what was a rather half-hearted attempt in trying to deal with Beckham's delivery. Beckham, under so much media scrutiny, let his football do the talking via two superb assists.

After struggling to impose themselves on large periods of the half, United took ownership of the key moments and scored two quality goals to give themselves firm control of the tie. Old Trafford was in dreamland and suddenly it was difficult to envision Inter getting back into the quarter-final, but not improbable. United had raced into a 2-0 first-half lead against Barcelona in September 1998 only to concede

three times and draw 3-3. Protecting the existing lead and keeping a clean sheet against Inter would signify that progress had been made at this level, even in comparison to just a few months beforehand.

### **Half-time – Manchester United 2 Inter Milan 0**

United made a substitution at the interval, replacing Ronny Johnsen with Henning Berg in a like-for-like swap. They started the second half positively, buoyed by their second goal. This momentum was halted briefly when Scholes received a yellow card for an accumulation of fouls. Both central midfielders were now on a booking and were unable to defend with the same bite and tenacity shown in the first half. Inter then offered a reminder of their danger when Schmeichel was forced into making a brilliant save to deny a close-range header from Zamorano, who was free at the back post after Djorkaeff had made an inward run to drag Irwin inside. This was an example of how the Dane used handball as inspiration for his goalkeeping techniques, as he made a starfish shape to become as imposing as possible and block the goal-bound header.

In addition to his two first-half assists, Beckham was contributing well defensively – tasked with both tracking left wing-back Winter and moving inside to press Simeone, who was looking to receive the ball with space between himself and United's midfield line in the hope that he could pull Keane or Scholes out of position to engage with him. While Beckham and Giggs are rightfully remembered as being very gifted on the ball, their willingness to work hard off it was also an important factor in their team's success. They worked hard to track back and retain a compact defensive shape to block off passes into wide areas, while also being able to move inside and defend against central overloads like Beckham was

doing here. There was some added tenacity in Beckham's tackling on this occasion, with Simeone feeling the force of one or two feisty challenges that were met with delight from the Old Trafford crowd.

Zanetti continued to be more effective than Winter when Inter had possession, but the Argentine's involvement was leaving space for United to attack behind him with a combination of Giggs's dribbling and leftward movement from Cole and Yorke – one striker would drift wide to receive a pass while the other remained central to make a run into the box and Giggs would burst forward on the underlap. While United got some joy breaking into the space, they lacked end product and failed to create many meaningful opportunities to further increase their lead. By understanding Inter's use of Zanetti and how they could exploit it, United showed how they could tactically adapt in-game in a manner that they were rarely given credit for.

Baggio played more centrally in the second half, looking to receive in front of United's yellow-carded central midfield pairing and dribble at them in the hope of enticing them into committing more fouls. He was now more involved in proceedings and Inter improved. They thought they had scored a crucial away goal when Simeone, of all people, headed in from a corner, but the referee blew his whistle, citing a foul in the centre of the box. In truth, it was a very soft disallowance – but as you will discover in this book, there is little point in pretending that luck is not a factor in European success.

The visitors made their first substitution in the 68th minute, replacing the ineffective Zamorano with Nicola Ventola. Ventola was an exciting young striker, fast and energetic and always willing to make threatening runs into the space behind the opposition defence. He was tasked

with doing exactly that, threatening the space behind United's centre-backs so that Inter could force them deeper and unsettle what had so far proven to be a compact and disciplined defensive shape. Without space between United's defence and midfield lines for them to operate in, it was difficult for the *trequartisti* to impact the match in dangerous areas.

A minute later, United introduced Nicky Butt in place of Scholes, so that they now had a central midfielder on the pitch who could defend without the restrictions of a yellow card hanging over his head. This was especially important considering that United were sitting deep against persistent Inter pressure, with the back four often in line with the semi-circle on the edge of the penalty area. When a team defends this deep, they must ensure that it is difficult to penetrate their lines centrally and Butt's introduction as a ball-winning midfielder helped in this regard.

Baggio had begun to lose effectiveness and was replaced by the young Andrea Pirlo in the 79th minute. Pirlo was deployed centrally, with Djorkaeff moving to both the left and the right to try and find space in which to operate. The Frenchman appeared to focus more on moving to his left, from where he could look to receive the ball and dribble inwards.

United restricted the visitors to precious few open opportunities, yet they almost lost their clean sheet when Ventola got down the side of Stam and used his pace to beat the Dutchman to a through pass. Schmeichel rushed out of his goal to meet Ventola but could only palm his shot into the path of the onrushing Colonnese, who had gambled and run forward to support the attack. Colonnese looked certain to score, but Henning Berg made a fantastic goal-line clearance to retain United's two-goal advantage. Whereas United had

scored at both ends of the first half, Inter should have scored at both ends of the second period but were denied by two moments of individual defensive heroism. United won the big moments and, combined with better defending than they had previously produced in Europe, it won them the match.

After surviving this late scare, Ferguson's charges were content to keep possession until full time and see the game out, using Giggs to protect the ball by the corner flag. A lead of 2-0 was a perfectly acceptable one to take to Italy. Shutting out Inter was a milestone night in United's defensive development – it was their first clean sheet in a Champions League knockout match at home since March 1997. It should be noted that Ferguson had given the exhausted Schmeichel some time off in January to get some winter sun in Barbados, a masterstroke that saw the Dane come back fresh and ready for the challenges ahead. Schmeichel's starfish save against Zamorano was not just a brilliant stop, it was one of the most important of his career. Giving tired players winter holidays does not guarantee a return to form, but Ferguson showed his ability to manage big players to help them return to playing at the required level, even within such busy schedules. He had an awareness of the needs of his players – an important quality for any manager. In return, they delivered for him when it mattered most.

### **Full time – Manchester United 2 Inter Milan 0**

United absorbed pressure brilliantly against an Inter Milan side that saw plenty of the ball but was rather blunt in attack. The scoreline could be explained easily; United managed to score with their two best chances, Inter failed to with theirs. Inter hoped to have Ronaldo fit for the return leg in a fortnight's time, a man who was capable of single-handedly turning the tie on its head. However, if the Red Devils could

reproduce the good level of defending from the first leg then they were perfectly suited to playing on the counter-attack. Preventing an Inter away goal had put them in firm control of the tie and they fancied their chances of progression.

## **Second leg: Inter Milan 1 Manchester United 1 17 March 1999**

Dreaming of a treble, United followed up their first-leg victory with a 2-0 FA Cup quarter-final replay triumph against Chelsea after the original match was drawn 0-0. Remarkably, they had kept three clean sheets in three knockout matches in the space of seven days. As has been previously mentioned, it was not always in their nature to defend first and attack second, but in a make-or-break week for their pursuit of a treble they had kept clean sheets when the pressure was on. Newcastle United were then beaten 2-1 in the league to keep the Red Devils at the top of the table. In stark contrast, Inter dropped league points against Bari and AC Milan in addition to being knocked out of the Coppa Italia by Parma. Struggling in the league and out of the cup, Inter only had Europe to focus on and the pressure was on for them to salvage something from an otherwise disappointing campaign.

Both sides made changes for the second leg, as shown by *Figure 4*.

Manchester United (1-4-4-2): 1. Schmeichel; 2. G. Neville, 21. Berg, 6. Stam, 3. Irwin; 7. Beckham, 16. Keane (captain), 5. Johnsen, 11. Giggs; 19. Yorke, 9. Cole.

Substitutes: 17. van der Gouw, 10. Sheringham, 12. P. Neville, 15. Blomqvist, 18. Scholes, 20. Solskjær, 30. Brown.

Head coach: Alex Ferguson CBE.

Inter Milan (1-3-4-1-2): 1. Pagliuca; 3. Colonnese, 2. Bergomi (captain), 16. West; 4. Zanetti, 15. Cauet, 14. Simeone,

24. Silvestre; 10. Baggio; 18. Zamorano, 9. Ronaldo.

Substitutes: 22. Frey, 5. Galante, 6. Djorkaeff, 8. Winter, 11. Ventola, 13. Zé Elias, 17. Moriero.

Head coach: Mircea Lucescu.

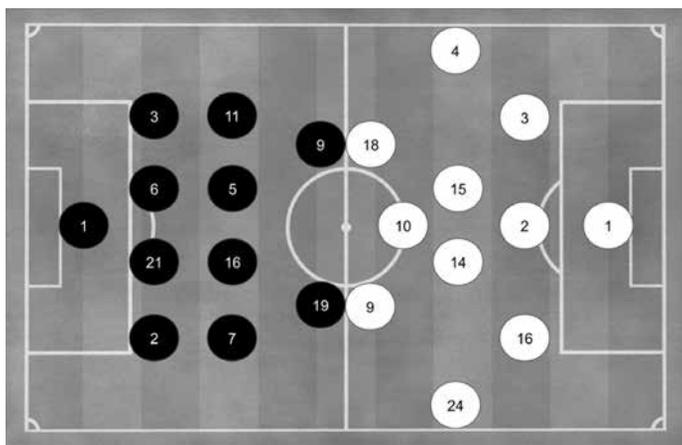


FIGURE 4

Mircea Lucescu's contract at Inter was a short-term deal that expired at the end of the season. This was his one chance to win the Champions League with the club and, with that in mind, he brought Brazilian superstar Ronaldo back for the second leg. Ronaldo, the FIFA World Player of the Year in 1996 and 1997, was being plagued by injuries and there were serious doubts over his fitness levels going into this match. Even with a lack of sharpness, he still carried a threat that United needed to be very wary of. At left wing-back, Mikaël Silvestre replaced Winter. Silvestre was fast and energetic, but most importantly he was naturally left-footed and would provide more balance than Winter had done at Old Trafford. Nigerian international Taribo West came into the side at centre-back in place of Galante.

Anticipating the return of Ronaldo, Ferguson opted for a more defensive-minded central midfield partnership. Johnsen

took Scholes's place and Berg came in from the start as the right-sided centre-back. Scholes and Keane were both one yellow card away from a suspension, so bringing in somebody without that jeopardy hanging over them made sense for a game that would undoubtedly require a lot of defending in central areas.

The visitors were met with an intense atmosphere inside the Giuseppe Meazza Stadium, beginning in the warm-up when oranges were thrown down from the stands in the direction of the bemused players. Not in the mood for niceties, Roy Keane conducted the pre-match handshakes like a man possessed, storming straight past Ronaldo and Simeone without acknowledging them as the pair bent down to adjust their socks.

As had been the case at Old Trafford, Inter Milan wasted some early goal kicks by kicking into midfield, where United easily won possession. This time, the Inter players were more compact in anticipation for the kicks, but they just did not challenge for them with the same desire as their opponents. Ryan Giggs won two headers in the opening minutes of the match while Zanetti stood and watched him unchallenged. It was quite absurd viewing, but it showed that tactics can always be undone by a lack of application if players do not win their necessary individual battles.

The personnel changes saw Inter change their in-possession approach from the first match. Ronaldo and Baggio rotated the responsibility of partnering Zamorano, with the other moving wide to the left. Silvestre had the energy to overlap on occasion, but he often stayed deep to leave space ahead of him for the Ronaldo/Baggio rotation to take place. Zanetti still tucked inside, but was not quite as central as he had been in the first leg. This allowed space for both Cauet and Simeone to operate in front of United's

midfield line, rather than having Cauet push forward. Keeping Cauet deeper left room, in theory, between United's defence and midfield for Baggio and Ronaldo to try and exploit, with Zamorano looking to attack Stam's side to occupy the big Dutchman.

The Milanese used the 'third man' concept to try and get Ronaldo or Baggio on the ball in threatening positions. In football, the third player is simply an unmarked player who is free and able to receive a ball. They are the third player because the original ball-carrier passes to another team-mate for them to give the ball to the third player, instead of just playing one direct pass. A basic example of this is available in *Figure 5*, which shows the following:

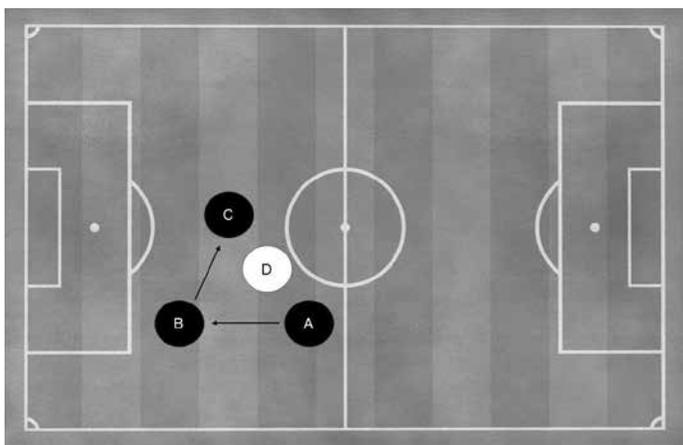


FIGURE 5

Player A has the ball and wants to pass to Player C, but a defender – Player D – is blocking the pass. Therefore, Player A passes to Player B, who in turn then passes to Player C. It is a simple concept, but it can be extremely effective if performed well.

*Figure 6* is an example of Inter implementing the 'third man' idea, with Ronaldo acting as the third player in this

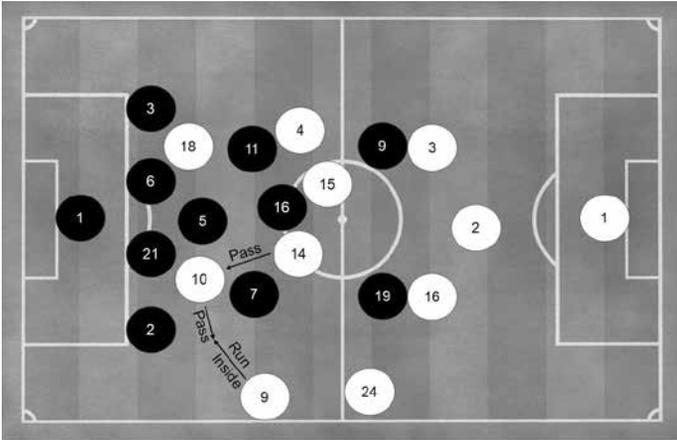


FIGURE 6

instance. As Simeone begins to perform the action of passing forward to Baggio, Ronaldo bursts infield. Baggio, with his back to goal, lays the ball off into the path of Ronaldo, who is now moving inwards at speed against the United defensive line. Third-man combinations rely on good timing, something that quality players are of course capable of producing. If Ronaldo was to come inside too early, he would have less space in which to run at United's defence. If he arrived too late, Baggio would have to hold on to the ball until it was an appropriate time to pass, which would slow the move down. The passes performed by Simeone and Baggio needed to be timed so that Ronaldo received the ball at the right moment in relation to his run. When the combination was performed well, as it was done here, it could threaten a United defence that could not afford any lapses in concentration.

Of course, it was important for United to once again be compact when defending. They remained vertically compact by reducing the space between their defence and midfield lines, and horizontally compact by limiting the space between

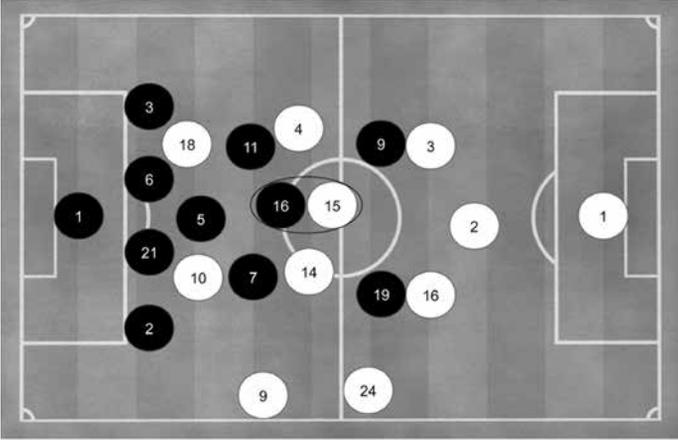


FIGURE 7

individual members of those lines. *Figure 7* shows both their vertical and horizontal compactness in action. Not only is the gap between their defence and midfield lines minimal, but the members of those two lines are close together, often no more than ten yards apart. *Figure 7* also shows how United tended to adopt a diamond shape in midfield when they initially conceded possession to Inter in central areas. The nearest central midfielder to the ball would close down the Inter ball-carrier (circled), with the other central midfielder staying behind to cover. Beckham and Giggs would tuck inside to ensure that the pressing central midfielder left no space behind them that could be exploited – retaining the midfield’s horizontal compactness. This made it extremely difficult for Inter to attack centrally. If United’s midfield line was broken, they would retreat deeper into a standard line of four. They were clearly disciplined and well-drilled.

The hosts had a strong penalty appeal turned down in the 16th minute when Schmeichel took down Zamorano when the pair were one v one in the penalty area. The referee waved the claims away, perhaps because of Ferguson’s pre-

match comments regarding Inter's reputation for diving and looking for fouls. Regardless, it was a stroke of good fortune for United, who had another scare when Henning Berg produced a superb hook off the line to clear a dangerous cross from Zanetti. The Argentine wing-back then crashed a shot from the edge of the area against the post after the away team had failed to sufficiently clear a corner kick. These three incidences were Inter's standout moments of the half as they struggled to play through United.

Finding it difficult to trouble their opponents, Ronaldo and Baggio changed their attacking movements. Ronaldo began to drop deeper and more central, which United reacted to by bringing Beckham in even narrower when out of possession. This created a central three v three. Ronaldo would then look to receive and then lay the ball off to a central midfielder before moving out to his left, and taking Beckham wider with him to try and create space for Baggio to move into. Berg would move out of the back line to follow Baggio and vacate space that Ronaldo could look to attack. However, Ferguson's men remained diligent and disciplined and retained their vertical and horizontal compactness. When Berg stepped out with Baggio, Neville made sure to move narrower to cover the space and Beckham kept pace with an admittedly half-fit Ronaldo. Keane and Johnsen did not get overly attracted to the ball and prioritised blocking central passes rather than pressing too high.

Giggs was looking threatening, but in a different way to in the first leg. When Zanetti was defending against him, he was reluctant to get too tight in one v one situations in case he was dribbled past. This often prevented Giggs from dribbling beyond his rival, but it gave him room to get his head up and play early crosses that Zanetti could do nothing about. Inter

were able to address this situation, though – Taribo West was doing a better of job of marking Yorke than Galante managed in Manchester and United's front pair was nullified well in the first half.

Much to the delight of the away end, Diego Simeone was substituted off in the 32nd minute after failing to recover from an ankle injury that he picked up early in the game. His replacement, Zé Elias, was an energetic left-sided central midfielder. There was still time for Inter to turn the tie around, but in contrast to the previous summer it was Beckham's turn to see Simeone exit proceedings prematurely.

Both Bergomi and Johnsen picked up yellow cards as United comfortably navigated their way to half-time. They were lucky not to concede a penalty, but they had successfully limited Inter to only two shots on target and that deserved credit. Ronaldo had offered little more than the occasional quality touch and it remained to be seen how long he would stay on the pitch.

### **Half-time – Inter Milan 0 Manchester United 0**

With only 45 minutes left to save the tie, Inter started the second half with a high tempo and committed both wing-backs higher than they had done in the first period. This left space for United to play long channel balls on transition, where Beckham and Giggs would look to receive and play a cross into Yorke and Cole. Whereas one central midfielder often broke forward and supported attacks in the first half, Keane and Johnsen were now more cautious and stayed behind the ball. These counter-attacks were not amounting to anything due to an uncharacteristic lack of quality on the crosses, but as long as United counter-attacks were happening it meant that Inter were not scoring and that was what mattered now.

Baggio was now Inter's sole *trequartista*, with Ronaldo up front alongside Zamorano, focussing on being an option for through balls rather than dropping deep to receive himself. He latched on to one brilliant through ball from Baggio, breaking free of Berg after making a run across the box while Zamorano sprinted in the opposite direction to confuse the United defence, but he shot straight at Schmeichel. It was a chance that should have been converted and it was becoming increasingly apparent that this was not going to be Ronaldo's night.

Just before the hour mark Lucescu replaced Ronaldo with Ventola, who had looked promising in his cameo two weeks before. He was much more suited to the task of running down the sides of centre-backs on to through passes than a half-fit Ronaldo was.

To his manager's delight, Ventola scored just four minutes after his introduction when United failed to properly defend the second phase of an Inter corner. As his team pushed out following the initial clearance, Keane was unaware of Ventola's presence on his outside and was caught flat-footed as Cauet lobbed a pass over his head for Ventola to volley over Schmeichel. Suddenly, Inter were back in the tie and had plenty of time to go searching for an equaliser.

Inter made their third and final substitution in the 69th minute, replacing centre-back Bergomi with right-winger Francesco Moriero. They were now going all out for that equalising goal, changing to a 1-4-2-4, shown by *Figure 8*. Baggio was now deployed as a left-winger, but regularly moved inwards. Zanetti moved further infield when Inter had the ball, like in the first leg, which allowed Cauet or Zé Elias to push forward centrally or move wide and support Moriero wide on the right-hand side.

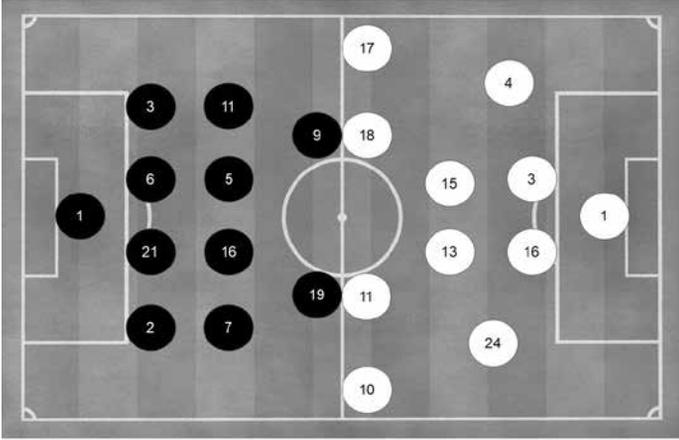


FIGURE 8

Inter began to attack more down their right, so United were forced to defend strongly on their left before looking to counter on their right, where there was more space.

Ferguson made his first substitution of the night in the 76th minute, taking off the yellow-carded Johnsen for Scholes. As he had done in the home leg, Ferguson made a change so that his team could defend deep without the precariousness of having both central midfielders on a booking. Six minutes later, Phil Neville, the versatile younger brother of Gary, came on for Giggs on the left side of midfield. This gave United an extra defensive-minded player on the side that Inter were attacking down the most. He could support Irwin in wide areas if necessary, but most importantly he could follow Zanetti inside and prevent him from finding space in central areas. This further reinforced United's idea of stemming the flow of attacks down their left side and countering down their right.

The atmosphere remained raucous, but frustration was growing among the *Nerazzurri* players. With little more than a couple of minutes of normal time left, Colonnese received a

booking for throwing the ball at Beckham to try and force the winger into taking a quick throw-in, which he of course had no interest in doing, given the circumstances. Yorke moved out towards the corner flag on the right-hand side to receive the throw-in and Colonnese, still visibly wound up, rushed out to try and slide-tackle him. Yorke passed back to Gary Neville, who crossed deep to Andy Cole on the far side of the Inter penalty area. Aware that Colonnese was stranded out wide, Scholes made a run into the centre of the box and was not followed by an Inter midfielder. Cole produced a fantastic knock-down to lay the ball into Scholes's path for a simple finish. *Figure 9* shows how the goal transpired, with the arrows showing the path of the ball, beginning with Neville's cross.

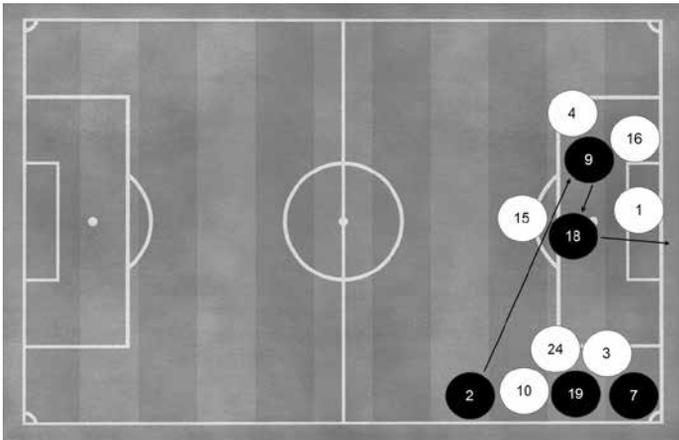


FIGURE 9

Scholes's goal took all hope and energy out of the hosts, both on the pitch and in the stands. United saw out the final few minutes with ease as their fans lit flares and sung songs of joy and admiration.

**Full time – Inter Milan 1 Manchester United 1;  
Manchester United win 3-1 on aggregate**

United had been victorious in the quarter-final two seasons earlier against an inferior Porto side, but defeating a star-studded Inter Milan team that had won three UEFA Cups in eight years was a big statement. By starting Johnsen over Scholes and then swapping the pair to such great effect, Ferguson proved beyond reasonable doubt that he was a tactician capable of operating at this level – he was more than just a strong figurehead in charge of great players. Beginning with two ball-winning midfielders helped United restrict Inter's star players to limited opportunities. Introducing Scholes for the final quarter of an hour then gave United a player intelligent enough to exploit space centrally as Inter became more desperate for an equaliser. Ferguson gave his players a platform on which they could perform to their strengths, and that they did.

Elsewhere in the quarter-final stage, holders Real Madrid were knocked out by Dynamo Kyiv thanks to three goals from rising star Andriy Shevchenko. The competition had been blown wide open.