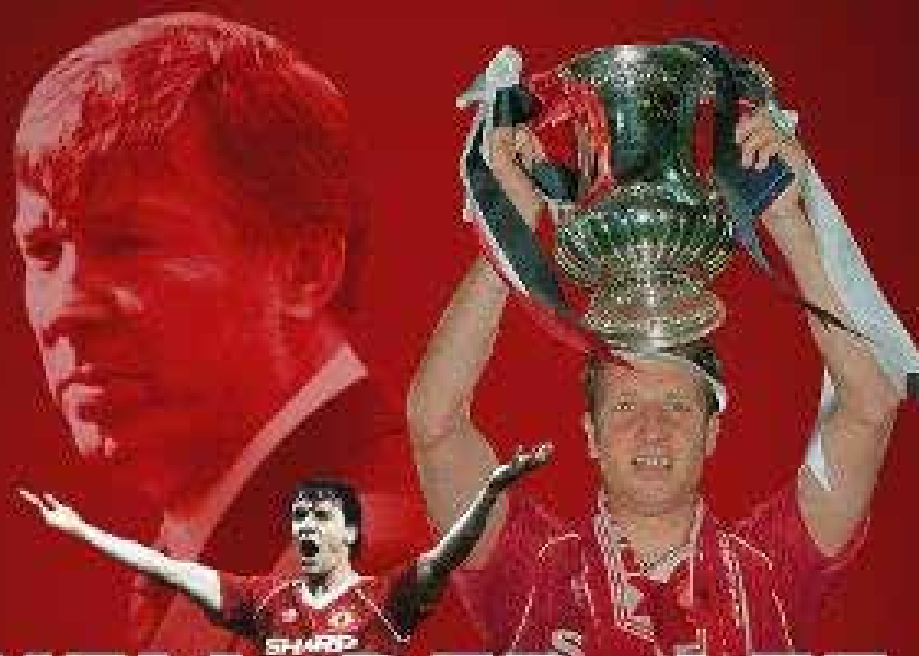


J O H N M C N I C O L L



# WEM-BER-LEE

The Goal That Kickstarted Sir Alex Ferguson's  
Manchester United Dynasty



Foreword by Wayne Barton

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## Genesis of a Football Club

MANCHESTER UNITED had become a national icon, with their fame beginning to spread further across the globe. It wasn't just a football team on an industrial estate in Trafford Park anymore. We were now beginning to see the start of a boom period, although the creation of the Premier League and all its riches were still a few years away. For a club of this size, with its fantastic support and infrastructure, the thought of another blank in the title wins column was a massive concern from everyone associated with the Red Devils. It was a long and eventful process to get to this stage, with several bumps along the road, but many had felt that the club were somewhat stuttering and fluffing their lines at present.

The very beginning saw the club's formation in 1878 as Newton Heath LYR Football Club but it was nearly a decade later that the club would play in its first ever competitive match, an FA Cup tie in 1886. Fast forward another two seasons and, in what you would call the

club's first meaningful campaign, they finished eighth in the Football Alliance league. It wouldn't take long for the club to start to build and in 1892, it applied for entry to the Football League. However, they found it tough going and were relegated to Division Two in 1894.

It was a tough pill to swallow and Newton Heath were barely treading water in the division as they looked for a return to the top flight. In doing so, the club was starting to struggle behind the scenes. In 1902, the club faced financial turmoil and was on the brink of extinction. A local brewer named John Henry Davies stepped in and rescued the team, renaming it Manchester United. Under Davies's ownership, the club began to stabilise, eventually gaining promotion back to the top division in 1906 and two years later, they won their first major trophy by lifting the First Division title.

Legend has it that John Henry Davies stumbled into becoming a club owner with his takeover of Newton Heath. According to the story, the club captain Harry Stafford's dog (a St Bernard named Major) wandered away from the player at the club fundraising bazaar at St James's Hall, Manchester, in February 1901. Major was found by Davies, who returned him to Stafford. Davies asked if he could buy the dog but instead ended up donating to the club. As a gesture of thanks, Stafford allowed him to keep the dog. In March 1902, at a meeting at the New Islington Hall, Stafford announced to Newton Heath supporters that he, Davies and three

other local businessmen had agreed to invest £200 each in the club in order to save it after a winding-up order had been issued two months earlier.

One of Davies's earliest moves was to change the colours of the team to red and white, as well as installing Ernest Mangnall as the manager. He not only oversaw the championship triumph in 1908 but also claimed the inaugural Charity Shield, held between United and Queens Park Rangers. It took a replay for the two sides to be separated but overcome Rangers they did. The following season saw the team's league form dip drastically but the club claimed its first-ever FA Cup win, defeating Bristol City 1-0 in the final.

Two years later, in 1911, and United and Mangnall were top of the pops again. This time, however, the club were competing in new surroundings, with Davies securing a deal to play at Old Trafford, with United leaving their old Bank Street stadium in 1910. It was a bold move but one that the owner gambled on at a time when attendances were rapidly increasing, as was the popularity of the sport in general. For Mangnall, though, this was the end of the road as far as he was concerned – he was hotfooting it across town to take up the manager's position at Manchester City.

Following his departure, the team began to falter in the league and neither T.J. Wallworth nor John Bentley could change the fortunes of the club in the period leading up to the outbreak of World War One. Jack

Robson took the reins between 1914 and 1921 but his tenure was blighted by the outbreak of war and his team was decimated by players not returning from serving for their country. John Chapman replaced Robson but was unable to stop the club tumbling into Division Two in 1922 and it would only be at the third time of asking that Chapman would eventually lead United back into the top tier.

His first attempt at the First Division in 1925/26 brought a ninth-place finish but a poor start to the following campaign saw Chapman relieved of his duties in October 1926. His replacement was Clarence Hilditch. Chapman had, in fact, received a telegram from the Football Association suspending him from all football activities. ‘Lal’ Hilditch was one of the Manchester United players at the time, so this was arguably one of the earliest instances of a player-manager at a top club. Hilditch managed to steady the ship but was replaced at the end of the season by Herbert Bamlett. Bamlett’s stint was less than spectacular and after three seasons, including a relegation back to Division Two, he parted ways with the club.

John Henry Davies passed away in 1927, leaving the club in a better place than when he founded it but the finances were looking precarious following the war and with the country affected by the Great Depression. James W. Gibson acquired the club in 1931 and immediately injected around £40,000 to help with the running costs

and pay off the surplus debt. The club were in Division Two and looked to the services of club secretary Walter Crickmer, who took on the manager's role in 1931. After a single season under Crickmer, Scott Duncan was charged with lifting the club back into Division One. It was a challenge that Duncan accepted and then excelled at, as he not only gained promotion in 1935/36 but won the Second Division title in the process. Unfortunately for Duncan, what goes up must come down and in this case it was United as the Red Devils crashed straight back through the relegation trapdoor.

Despite fleeting success, Duncan's time at Old Trafford was up and Crickmer was again called upon to lead the team. What Crickmer or anyone else didn't know at the time was that we were less than two years away from World War Two. Crickmer stayed at the helm until the war had ended in 1945, albeit that there had been little to no football played during that period, with players serving their countries both home and away. In 1941, tragedy struck at Old Trafford when the club's stadium was severely damaged during a German air raid. Crickmer was believed to be one of the first on the scene, as he was working as a special police constable during the war, but could only stand and watch his beloved stadium burn and crumble.

The rebuilding process was arduous but the spirit of the club remained unbroken. Manchester United had been on the brink of financial ruin, as well as having



their home flattened to debris, but they kept on going. It felt like United had hit rock bottom but little did anyone know at the time that the club was still to face its darkest hour. Games would have to be played across town at Maine Road for the foreseeable while construction began to bring the stadium back to a state of good health.

In early 1945, arguably one of the most important pieces of business that the club ever did was to hire a fella by the name of Matt Busby. Busby had plied his trade as a footballer, representing both Manchester City and Liverpool, but his career at Anfield was cut short when World War Two began. Busby was called up for National Service and it was during this time that he served as a football coach in the Army Physical Training Corps, gaining experience and forming opinions on how the beautiful game should be played.

Liverpool offered Busby the chance to join their manager, George Kay, on his coaching staff but, after a meeting with the board, Busby decided that his future lay elsewhere. It was reported that Busby's ideologies were not aligned with those of the men who were courting his services. News in football travels fast and, learning that Busby had rejected Liverpool's approach, Manchester United made their move.

Louis Rocca, an ice cream seller from Newton Heath, had been around the football club for the best part of 30 years. He had been a friend of John Henry

Davies, carrying out various roles at the club and was even assistant to Walter Crickmer at one point. But most important was his ability to convince James W. Gibson to inject some much-needed investment into the club and then the cherry on the cake for United's 'fixer' was a letter that he wrote to his friend, Busby. It was addressed to his army regiment and outlined a position as the manager of Manchester United. As a result, a meeting with Gibson was arranged and, in February 1945, Busby signed on the dotted line and a new dawn at United had begun.

Busby's first task was to hire a man called Jimmy Murphy. Murphy had impressed Busby in a coaching session held between a team of non-commissioned officers and it was at this point that Busby had seen the way in which Murphy had handled not only himself but also the lads he was leading in the session. 'He had us all transfixed,' said Busby. 'It was as if he had put everybody in a footballing trance. I visualised how good he could be for Manchester United.' With a firm handshake cementing the pair's agreement, Murphy joined Busby as his chief coach.

The duo hit it off immediately, mixing a blend of youth and experience amongst the squad. Busby later admitted: 'Jimmy was my first signing and my most important.' Crickmer had spent years previously building the foundations of what would now be classed as a youth set-up by scouting for young, local talent and harvesting

them for the first team. This was music to the ears of both Busby and Murphy, whose philosophy was ‘if you are good enough, you are old enough’. Murphy picked up the baton from Crickmer and, with the help of coach Bert Whalley, took it to a whole new level. He brought in youth friendlies, reserve friendlies and even tours to Ireland to aid with the search for fresh new talent.

Murphy and Busby were similar in how they perceived the game should be played and it was the pair’s footballing knowledge that led to the team’s DNA that you see right up to the modern day. Murphy had a set of footballing principles that he looked for when scouting and signing players. A goalkeeper must be confident in his ability and excel at handling. His full-backs (a new trend at the time) would possess both speed and balance, with a key responsibility of overlapping their winger to join in with attacks. He noted that, whilst tackling was still important for a full-back, it wasn’t the most important skill required for the role. Murphy’s thinking was that, with his full backs marauding down the wings, the opposition team’s wingers would spend more time marking them than attacking themselves.

Murphy wanted his central defenders to be tall, athletic, and good readers of the game. They needed to be strong, so as not to be bullied by the opposition frontmen. His midfield was the engine room, with Murphy liking his two central midfielders to operate in different ways. One player would be the ‘sweeper’,

screening the defence and making interceptions to break up the opposition's attacks, while the other would play further forward, linking the play to the forwards. Think Roy Keane and Paul Scholes between 1999 and 2001 when the pair were at their peak playing together. Despite the roles differing slightly, the principles stayed the same, with the players having to be mobile, possess great stamina and a passion for looking after the football. He was a real stickler for passing stats, boasting that a player in that role should give away no more than one pass every five or six attempts.

Then you have your frontmen. Murphy liked to set his teams up with two centre-forwards, with one being at least 6ft tall so that he could pose a dominant aerial threat. They would need to have great stamina, as there was no such thing as a lost cause, with both players having to chase balls in the channels, as well as putting pressure on the opposition defence when they had possession of the ball. And, finally, you had your wingers. These were what Murphy would describe as your game changers. They would need to be lightning quick, show courage on the ball and have unnerving accuracy when delivering crosses into the box. His wingers were also tasked with being able to run back towards their own goal when the team didn't have the ball, so stamina and workrate were a must.

In his first two seasons, Busby – aided by Murphy – guided the team to two consecutive runner-up spots,

as well as an FA Cup trophy in 1948. In fact, United finished second in four of the first five seasons Busby was at the helm. It was a marked improvement for a club that had been yo-yoing between the divisions over the previous decade but still they were not quite at the top of the pile. That was until the 1951/52 season when, finally, Busby and Murphy were able to enjoy the fruits of their labours. It was the first top division title win for just over 40 years, although this did include the war years. The club were, once again, the champions of England.