



Right: Mark Hughes celebrates scoring United's second goal in the 1990 FA Cup final.

## “The difference between winning and disaster that season was nothing at all”

Clayton Blackmore on 1989/90

Robins, born in Ashton-under-Lyne but brought up in Oldham, was an Old Trafford trainee who signed his first professional contract six weeks after Ferguson arrived in 1986, and was therefore one of the manager's first recruits to the United playing staff. Despite playing for England Under-21s and making a total of 69 appearances in six years at Old Trafford, his career never quite matured. But it wasn't a case of someone wasting their potential. "When it came to practising, Mark was as committed as David Beckham, Gary Neville or anyone I've ever had," says Eric Harrison, United's youth-team manager for nearly 20 years from 1981. "He'd stay out on the field all day long – always in front of a goal, mind, smacking the ball into the net.

"He was a mini Ruud Van Nistelrooy when it came to finishing. He scored more than 100 goals for us at youth level and I don't think anyone, in my time, scored more. He had two fantastic feet and could shoot with tremendous power using either one. He hit the ball almost without any backlift, like Wayne Rooney. He'd get his shot away before a defender or goalkeeper even knew it had been struck.

"He was also like Rooney and Van Nistelrooy in that he'd follow the path of a ball so well. When a cross was in flight, whether it was going to the near or far post, he'd be moving to where it arrived. It was like he possessed on-board radar. He was a fantastic lad, and the only thing that stopped him being top-class was a lack of pace. He had everything else – the temperament too. He was always as cool as ice. I wasn't at all surprised when he scored against Forest. It was like Beckham's first goal from a free kick for United. Everyone gasped, but I didn't because I'd seen it all before, hundreds of times, on the youth-team pitch."

Robins was a policeman's son and, yes, his goal arrested United's slide – at least for an afternoon. Further league defeats followed, against Derby and Norwich, and then came the

next round of the FA Cup and a visit to Hereford. Some have revised history to suggest that the path ahead of Ferguson miraculously cleared after the Forest win. Not so. The FA Cup did lead the manager to safety, but every tie United played in the competition was as fraught and precarious as the win at the City Ground. Indeed, the journey that ended with Bryan Robson climbing the Wembley steps to lift the trophy was less a procession than a tightrope walk over a shark-infested lagoon.

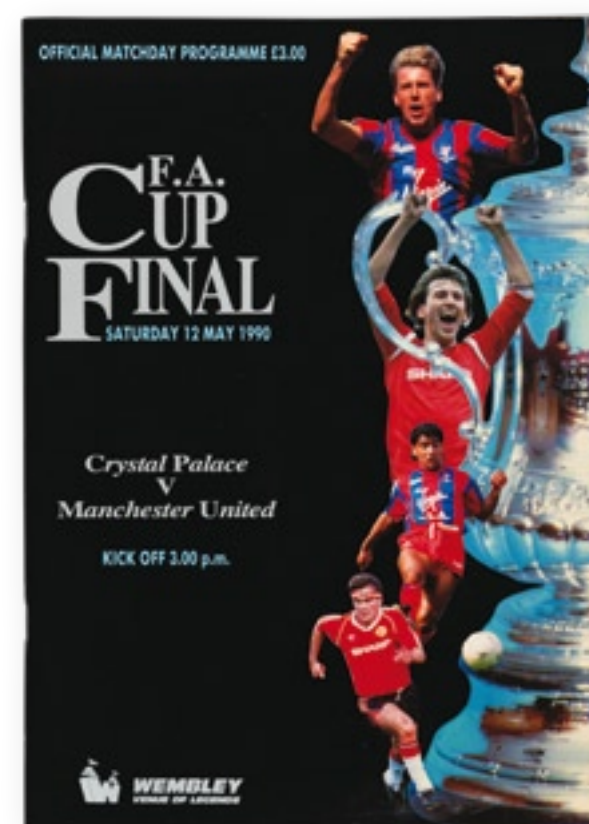
The fourth round tie at Hereford was a horrible match where Jim Leighton was under as much pressure as the home goalkeeper, Tony Elliot, and only a rare Clayton Blackmore strike, six minutes from time, saw United through. Newcastle in the fifth round provided a controversial, seesawing game where it took a late goal from McClair (his first in four months) to squeeze United through 3-2. The quarter-final against Sheffield United was a narrow, nervy 1-0 win.

Then came Oldham in the semis. United's Second Division neighbours had already reached the League Cup final and knocked Arsenal, Everton and Aston Villa out of cup competitions that season. Against United they refused to

be subdued. Fighting back from 2-1 and then 3-2 down, they drew 3-3 to earn a replay – an occasion about which Ferguson later said: "I've never felt so much pressure, so much strain in a game." United led through McClair, but Andy Ritchie forced extra time. Then, in the 110th minute, Robins chirped again. He'd only been on the field for 10 minutes as a substitute when he stroked in a lovely goal to send United into their first Cup final since 1985. One headline the next morning said it all: "Ferguson Safe – For Now."

The levels of drama were maintained in the final. Crystal Palace, conquerors of Liverpool in the other semi, pulled off another shock when they took the lead, but Bryan Robson, just back from another lay-off, equalised via a deflection and Mark Hughes made it 2-1. However, a brash young Palace substitute called Ian Wright took the match into extra time – and then scored again. United were eight minutes from defeat when they were rescued by Hughes. Ferguson had much to ponder.

Making decisions is the most important thing a manager can do. When Ferguson handed in his team sheet for the replay, one notable name was missing: that of Jim Leighton. The goalkeeper had failed to come for a cross when Palace scored their opening goal in the 3-3 draw and, to Ferguson's eyes, had the body language of a beaten man as he sat slumped in the dressing room after the match. He had been culpable in a 4-0 defeat against Nottingham Forest the week before the final and had struggled for form all season. Because of their shared past at Aberdeen, the goalkeeper was perceived by supporters as more of a "Ferguson player" than any other, and he bore the brunt of terrace discontent. Earlier in the campaign a United fanzine had printed a spoof advertisement for the Leighton condom – "clean sheets not guaranteed".



United keeper Jim Leighton had a miserable time in the 1990 FA Cup final against Crystal Palace, letting in three goals, and was dropped for the replay.

