



THE NEXT GENERATION

Nineteenth of November, 2005: a date that marked the end of an era as captain Roy Keane left Manchester United. Keane, the player who Sir Alex Ferguson considers "the best player I have managed in my time here", finally had to accede to the wear and tear on his body from 12 years of service to the Red cause. While his natural competitiveness and experience were still driving him on to high-level performances, Keane's struggles with injury since his 2002 hip operation were taking their toll and limiting his appearances. An inspirational leader, Keane had been the heartbeat of the team, but even the great players have to move on and both manager and player realised that the time was right for Keane to seek a new challenge.

If there was one specific incident which hastened Keane's departure, it may have been an appearance on MUTV's *Plays the Pundit* show. The format called for him to review a video of United's most recent performance. History might have been different if the date on which he was scheduled to participate had coincided with a victory, rather than a dreadful 4-1 defeat at Middlesbrough. United had performed poorly at the Riverside and, characteristically, Keane didn't hold back and the programme could not be broadcast.

Yet Keane's comments, or rather a decontextualised, exaggerated version of them, were leaked to the press. The controversy ramped up the considerable pressures already weighing upon Ferguson's side, who had started the season inconsistently, and in United's next game – in Paris against Lille – travelling fans jeered their own players and chanted "Keano". United succumbed 1-0. Their supporters' mood hadn't helped their players.

Ferguson had always encouraged Keane to state his mind when colleagues needed upbraiding, but only on the football pitch or in the dressing room. Any public rants should be confined to general terms – a rule Ferguson always applied to himself.

For some time Ferguson had been making his team more youthful, and there was already a suggestion that Keane's ever-demanding presence as captain was inhibiting certain emergent players. Keane would argue that a Manchester United footballer of any age should have sufficient character to cope with a little flak, but plainly, in the public forum into which he'd dragged their failings, there was no comeback.



Injured Roy Keane's comments on the 4-1 defeat at Middlesbrough on 29 October, 2005 hastened his departure from the club after 12 fantastic years.



United's first post-Keane game seemed to confirm the judgment that he'd ultimately become a negative influence. A galvanised performance saw the team beat the supposedly unstoppable Chelsea 1-0.

Of course, Keane would be missed in many ways. Mid-season, United had lost their focal footballer, their symbol and icon. Their team was a new one, still under construction, and the manager had hoped to count on his captain's experience to help teach and develop key talents like Wayne Rooney. Keane's wise head and unrelenting willpower might well have prevented the collapse in Lisbon against Benfica that was responsible for United's shock early exit from the Champions League in December 2005.

The road less travelled

Ferguson might not love poetry like Eric Cantona, but he does appreciate verse. On his old desk at The Cliff, this man of parts displayed a ditty:

*'Where is the Govan I once called home
The grimy old Govan that I used to roam
Where are the streets I roamed on my bike
That all to me looked so alike'*

His taste for wistful yet self-affirming rhyme might also be satisfied by *The Road Not Taken*, a work by the New Englander Robert Frost. It ends:

*'I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference'*

The road less travelled by... The departure of Keane brought to its conclusion a process begun four years previously. Who would dare break up the most successful team in the club's history but Ferguson? It is summer 2001. United have just landed a third consecutive league title without breaking sweat. The heroes who won the Treble are all there (apart from Peter Schmeichel) and Ferguson has set his retirement date for May 2002. Surely changing things would be the last thing on his mind. Why not enjoy one more golden season, collect a history-making fourth consecutive title with a squad that's proved itself capable of doing so? The future? Let the successor sort that one out.

But Ferguson has never thought in such limited terms. He likens being part of a successful football club to riding on a bus. There are only two choices: stay on or get off. If you're not moving forward, in other words, you'll be left behind on the side of the road.

When United won the Champions League in Barcelona, 18 players were involved (the starting XI plus seven substitutes), while Keane and Scholes watched from the stand. When the 2000/01 season ended, 19 of these 20 men were still in United's squad. But by the time Keane departed only five of the 23 players Ferguson used over the course of 1998/99 remained: Scholes, Giggs, Gary Neville, Ole Gunnar Solskjær and Wes Brown. Of the players who left during the intervening years only Schmeichel went entirely of his own accord, while David May, Raymond Van der Gouw, Denis Irwin and Jesper Blomqvist left for reasons of age or injury. The other 13 players were released by the club as it once more set its sights on

Left: Ryan Giggs and Wayne Rooney, teenage prodigies past and present, celebrate Giggs's goal against Charlton in a 2-0 win in November 2004.