

THE REVOLUTION STARTS HERE



First on the transfer list when Alex Ferguson arrived in Manchester was a sunbed: second-hand, one burly owner. It had sat in the manager's office at The Cliff. Ron Atkinson once conducted a press conference while reclining on it. Sometimes, training wouldn't start until Big Ron had topped up his tan. Atkinson was addicted to bronzing. Ferguson was interested only in silverware.

Alex Ferguson joined Manchester United on 6 November, 1986, but Manchester United had been eyeing him since 11 May, 1983, when he won the European Cup Winners' Cup with Aberdeen, beating Real Madrid in the final. One newspaper listed 21 reasons why United had chosen the right man, but elsewhere there were doubts. No top manager brought to England from Scotland had ever quite 'done it' down south – not even Ferguson's mentor, Jock Stein. "It has to be asked whether [Ferguson] can transfer all those [successful] qualities from the tight, parochial, united and socially compact environment of Aberdeen," cautioned *The Times*.

Incredible as it now seems, Ferguson's new salary was less than three quarters of the £120,000 he had earned the previous year at Aberdeen. And there were other figures that might have put a meeker man off the job. For instance, the First Division table was a grisly read. United, with just three wins from 13 games, sat joint 21st. It all ended for Atkinson on a forlorn and wintry night at Southampton, where United were dumped out of the League Cup 4-1.

The beginning for Ferguson was a 2-0 defeat against Oxford United at the ramshackle Manor Ground. Although he spent most of the 90 minutes trying to peer beyond the photographers crowding his dugout, he saw enough. At Aberdeen he'd been able to send footballers into the fray who were as fearless and focused as he was; where was his new team's stomach for the fight?

"He looked round the dressing room, and I don't think he could get his head round the fact that all that talent, all these international players, had just lost to Oxford," says Arthur Albiston. "He was quite easy-going when I worked under him with Scotland, but now it was obvious he was going to shake things up."

Indeed, things would change at United, and the fixing and demolishing would be incessant. Ferguson quickly decided that the club needed a course of forceful action. If one word characterises his first years, it is revolution.



A three-step plan

Ferguson is fond of saying that the most important thing a manager can do is make decisions. Clayton Blackmore recalls how it took him just 45 minutes to resolve on a policy he wanted to impose. When the half-time whistle blew in the Oxford game, he had been annoyed to see his players amble from the field, and gave them a dressing down. "He liked us to run to the changing rooms, because it demonstrated to the crowd and our opponents that we were full of energy," says Blackmore. "Despite the champagne image he cultivated for the media, Ron Atkinson could be quite hard," adds Albiston, "but there was a certain easiness about how things had gone under Ron and a few players, especially the younger ones, were in a comfort zone. Under Alex they got a shock.

He didn't make big speeches, but he'd look in our eyes and challenge us. 'Do you want to win things or not?'"

Revolution, step one: home rule. Gordon Strachan unnerved the United dressing room with stories about Ferguson's many eruptions at Aberdeen, such as the tale of Doug Rougvie. Rougvie was a giant full-back, a fearsome figure who looked as likely to douse wingers with ketchup and try to eat them as to tackle them. Yet he was a kitten in the face of Ferguson and became the target when the manager wanted to crack down. For instance, he was once lambasted in front of the squad for buying a motorbike, and forced to sell the vehicle.

At Old Trafford, an old-fashioned blazer-and-flannels dress code was imposed and United players were no longer allowed free phone calls from their hotel rooms on away trips. Everyone had to report to training earlier, too. "Making it 9.30am was clever. It gave us the sense that we were going to a proper job. We had to get up early and crawl through the traffic like everyone else," Frank Stapleton recalls.

The Cliff itself changed. The security gates and seclusion of the modern Carrington complex attest to Ferguson's idea of a training retreat but The Cliff, when he arrived, was a free-for-all. "The media had the run of the place," remembers Stapleton. He relates how its layout meant that visitors, including journalists, congregated at the bottom of a staircase – below, and therefore within earshot of, the manager's office and in sight of the dressing rooms. Now reporters were excluded unless they had an appointment.



Top: Alex Ferguson in the dugout during his first game as United manager, a 2-0 defeat at Oxford. Above: the programme for the Oxford game.