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The greatest history by «Manchester United»

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Manchester United are an English club in name and a global club in nature. They were the first English side to play in the European Cup and the first side to win it, and they are the only English side to have become world club champions. In addition, the Munich Air Disaster of 1958, which wiped out one of football's great young sides, changed the club indelibly.

The club was founded in 1878 as Newton Heath LYR Football Club by workers at the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Depot¹. They played in the Football League for the first time in 1892, but were relegated two years later. The club became Manchester United in 1902, when a group of local businessmen took over. It was then that they adopted the red shirt for which United would become known.

The new club won their first league championships under Ernest Mangnall in 1908 and 1911, adding their first FA Cup in 1909. Mangnall left to join Manchester City in 1911, however, and there would be no more major honours until after the Second World War.

In that time United had three different spells in Division Two, before promotion in 1938 led to an extended spell in the top flight. The key to that was the appointment of the visionary Matt Busby in 1945. Busby reshaped the club, placing complete faith in a youth policy that would prove astonishingly successful. United won the FA Cup in 1948 and were runners up in the league in three consecutive seasons from 1947 to 1949; then, in 1952, Busby won United's first title for 41 years.

The team that won the league in 1956 became known as the "Busby Babes", due to a remarkable average age of 22. They regained the title the following season, having already become the first English side to play in the European Cup, with Busby standing firm despite pressure to withdraw from the Football League. United thrashed Anderlecht 10-0 in their first home match, and reached the semi-finals before losing to Real Madrid².

A year later, the team were on the way home after victory against Red Star Belgrade in the quarter-finals when a plane crash in Munich claimed 23 lives, eight of them players: Roger Byrne, Eddie Colman, Duncan Edwards, Mark Jones, Billy Whelan, Tommy Taylor, David Pegg and Geoff Bent.

Busby survived the crash and, after a makeshift side lost the FA Cup final to Bolton later in 1958, he built a second great side in the early Sixties, based around the Holy Trinity of Bobby Charlton, George Best and Denis Law. United won the FA Cup in 1963 and the championship in both 1965 and 1967; Busby's journey was complete with a poignant victory in the European Cup final of 1968. United beat Benfica 4-1 in extra-time with Wembley, with two of the goals scored by Charlton, who had survived the crash 10 years earlier.

When Busby resigned in 1969, United went into freefall. After just avoiding relegation in 1974 they went down a year later; although they were doomed anyway, the fact that Law - now playing for Manchester City - scored the winning goal against them at Old Trafford on the day they were relegated carried the cruelest symbolism.

United won Division Two at the first attempt, but at the highest level the swaggering brand of football they played under Tommy Docherty was more conducive to cup success. They lost unexpectedly to Division Two Southampton in the 1976 FA Cup final, and denied Liverpool a Treble by beating them 2-1 at Wembley a year later. Docherty was sacked shortly

after that FA Cup triumph, following an affair with the physiotherapist's wife; his replacement, Dave Sexton, was more cautious, and many fans felt his style of play betrayed the club's traditions.

Sexton's four years included runners-up places in the league and FA Cup, but he was sacked in 1981 despite winning his last seven matches. His replacement, Ron Atkinson, took United back to the Seventies and the Docherty era. With an emphasis on attacking football and width, and a British record purchase of the remarkable Bryan Robson, United enjoyed five memorable years under Atkinson. They won the FA Cup in 1983 and 1985 - the latter after Kevin Moran was the first man to be sent off in the FA Cup final - but Atkinson was unable to end the long wait for a league title, and was replaced by Alex Ferguson in November 1986.

It is hard to imagine now, but Ferguson's first few years at Old Trafford were difficult in the extreme. United finished 11th, 2nd, 11th and 13th in his first four seasons, and only an FA Cup victory in 1990 provided some respite. Ferguson never looked back from that success: it was the first of 25 major trophies that he would win over the next 20 years, including 11 league titles.

United beat Barcelona to win the Cup Winners' Cup in 1991, yet there was only one prize they really wanted: a first championship since 1967. It finally arrived in 1993, the first season of the Premier League, and was catalyzed by the mid-season signing of the majestic Eric Cantona from then-champions Leeds.

The club's first Double was secured in 1994, with Cantona and another outstanding crop of young players winning another in 1996. By now, Ferguson and United had a new Everest: the European Cup. They reached the promised land on May 26, 1999 - what would have been Sir Matt Busby's 90th birthday - when they beat Bayern Munich 2-1 in

an astonishing finish, with United scoring twice in injury time. With another Double already in the bag, United thus became the first English side to win the Treble. Later in the year they beat Palmira's to become world champions.

United went on to win three consecutive league titles in a row from 1999 to 2001 and, despite the considerable turmoil caused by the controversial takeover of the Glazer family in 2005, that feat was repeated by a new generation between 2007 and 2009. They also added United's third European Cup, beating Chelsea on penalties in an impossibly dramatic final in Moscow, while the 2009 title took United to 18 league titles; level with their great rivals Liverpool. A 19th title eluded them in 2009-10 but, the feat was overcome in 2010-11 as they finished the season nine points clear of Chelsea.

For the first time in a long while, though, they did not win a trophy the following season; losing out on goal difference to rivals City on the last day of the campaign as Roberto Mancini's men scored twice in stoppage time to deny them.

References:

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