

The FA CUP FINAL, 2005 Arsenal 0

MESSIAH... OR

Fergie must prove he's still the right man

Oliver Holt



CHIEF SPORTS WRITER

MANCHESTER United held their end-of-season party on Saturday night at a hotel in Cardiff that boasts panoramic views of the dark, brooding expanse of the Bristol Channel on one side and the green hills of South Glamorgan on the other.

When their players awoke yesterday morning, an army of uneasy feelings must have made bad company for the headache they had from being mugged by Arsenal in the Millennium Stadium the day before.

Because as they stared blearily out of their picture windows, they must have known this United team more than any other of the last decade is perched precariously on a ridge running between two different worlds.

Rebirth and decline are jostling for position at Old Trafford and beckoning them as they turn their back on a rare season without a trophy and stare towards a future crowded with uncertainties.

Raced

Their supporters were black to the FA Cup Final on Saturday to register a dignified protest against the Malcolm Glazer takeover and by the time the rain began to fall late in the afternoon, it had become a dark day indeed for them.

In the middle of all their agonising about what is happening to their club, one Arsenal player after another smashed penalties past Roy Carroll at the United end and gestured triumphantly at them.

And when Patrick Vieira converted the winning kick, those United fans who have suffered so much this season were forced to watch the Arsenal celebrations at point-blank range and look on as Robin van Persie danced a jig of delight in their faces.

Those supporters were left with some reasons to be cheerful. Not least the memory of a fine performance that was true to United's attacking, creative ideals



NOTHING TO CELEBRATE: Roy Keane and Co try to put on a united front, but disappointment is etched on their faces

and that rendered Arsenal's eventual triumph decidedly hollow.

Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo were the best forwards on the pitch by a distance, too. Both were a joy to watch.

Ronaldo's jinking first-half runs down the left were a thing of beauty, a riposte to all

those who laugh when we tell them football can be art. The Portuguese winger mixes the power of a sprinter with the grace of a dancer. He was mesmerising.

And Rooney just gets better and better. His vision is breathtaking, his power irresistible. He came closest to breaking the deadlock when Jens Lehmann expected him to cross but he shot instead. It deserved a goal but it hit a post.

But Rooney and Ronaldo are not the whole picture. They are far from that. They are just the brightest lights in the gathering darkness.

The reality is that Glazer's takeover has come at a time when United were already wrestling the kind of troubling

issues usually associated with the end of a wonderful era of football dominance.

Sir Alex Ferguson is coming to the end of his greatness but showing no signs of recognising his own mortality and moving aside to let a successor breathe new life and impetus into his team.

Cracks

Far from backing the stance of the fans, it appears as though he is about to become one of the biggest beneficiaries of the takeover and allow it to paper over some of the cracks in his regime.

If the new owners can keep him onside - and there is every indication that they have already achieved that - they know they will be able to

dilute the opposition to them among many United fans who are still fiercely loyal to Ferguson.

To the horror of some United fans, Ferguson seems to be seizing the opportunity of the chaos of the takeover to salvage three more years at the club when many believe it desperately needs a freshness of direction from the top.

When he talked for the first time about the Glazers in the aftermath of defeat in Cardiff, Ferguson's attitude was very much that he would carry on as if nothing had happened and that these were men he could do business with.

"I've not met them yet. We've only spoken on the phone but it's early days as far as that is concerned. But

when we need a player who we think can improve us, we'll try to get them.

"I don't know when I'm going to meet them. I'm going on holiday on June 1 and I'm not changing at my age."

Ferguson is often at his best in defeat and Saturday was no exception. But Chelsea under Roman Abramovich have changed the landscape of English football and there are too many problems at United to be sure that they can mount a more realistic challenge to John Terry, Frank Lampard and the rest next season.

Ferguson's own authority has been compromised by the influence granted to his deputy, Carlos Queiroz, who has an increasingly powerful

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? Fergie was left scratching his head after defeat in Cardiff

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Manchester United 0

AFTER EXTRA TIME: ARSENAL WIN 5-4 ON PENALTIES



SPENT FORCE?

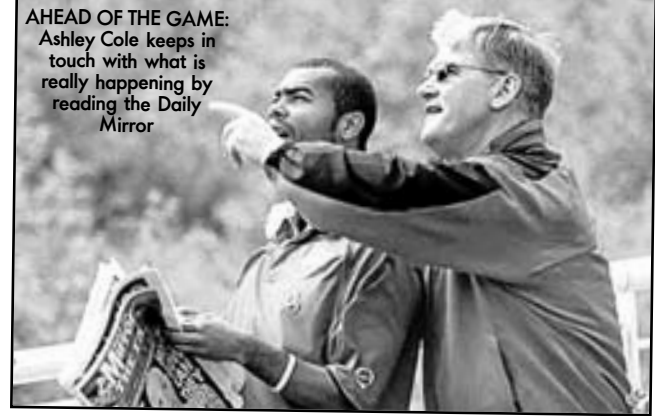
to lead United out of the gathering gloom



as Paul Scholes walks forlornly back to the centre circle after missing the penalty that cost his team-mates a chance of silverware

AHEAD OF THE GAME:

Ashley Cole keeps in touch with what is really happening by reading the Daily Mirror



By JOHN CROSS

PATRICK VIEIRA last night sent a clear warning to the Arsenal board that they must keep Ashley Cole if they want to regain the Premiership title.

French hard-man Vieira admits he sympathises with Cole, having himself been caught in a controversial transfer tussle which nearly saw him join Real Madrid last summer. But the Arsenal captain insists the club must do everything they can to hang on to Cole in the face of his tapping-up row with Chelsea as he awaits the outcome of the Premier League's inquiry into the scandal.

Cole has indicated he wants to stay if he can get the right deal and Vieira believes keeping the current squad together is more important than new signings as they try to chase Chelsea next season.

Vieira said: "Of course if one or two new players can come that will make us stronger."

"But what is more important is to keep our players. It's important that Dennis Bergkamp is staying because we are losing Edu, who in the last five years has been quite important for the club."

"It's really good news that Dennis is staying because of the experience he's got. It's good for the young players like Jose Antonio Reyes and Robin van Persie and they will learn from him."

Cole, who has two years left on his contract, may be sold this summer because he is angry that the club offered him a £45,000-a-week new deal and then reduced it by £5,000.

It has left an ugly stand-off and Arsenal may be forced to cash in because Cole is now refusing to sign a new deal.

Arsenal vice-chairman David Dein insists Cole's Highbury future is secure irrespective of the findings of the Premier League inquiry into the affair.

Dein told BBC Radio Five Live's Sportsweek: "Ashley Cole

is and will be remaining an Arsenal player."

"We really have no problem with Ashley - we may have a problem with others - and now we await the outcome of the hearing on June 1."

"We have always had a very warm and happy relationship with Ashley and I believe he has too with the club."

"He has come on leaps and bounds and the fact that he is now one of the finest left-backs in the world speaks for itself. We do not intend to lose our best players."

Vieira insisted Cole has had to show real strength of character throughout the bitter row and said he showed his passion and commitment after scoring one of Arsenal's penalties in the Cardiff shoot-out. Vieira added: "I had some chats with Ashley about it because I've been in that position myself."

"But in the last few months he's shown through the way he plays that he loves the club and how he wants to stay."

"Our players never had any questions about him. We know how determined he is."

Cole is key to Gunners' title hopes says Vieira

BARCA WANT RIO

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massive wage demands. Ferdinand - who has two years left on his current deal - and his agent Pini Zahavi are demanding £125,000 a week, which would make him the highest-paid defender in the world.

The plc board have made it clear that there is no way they will give him that sort of money,

which would put him on a much higher level than every other player in the United squad.

They would have to consult American tycoon Malcolm Glazer (left) following his takeover before proceeding with any big transfer deals.

The board is strongly recommending that they sell if the price is right because they do not want Ferdinand to run his contract down any further.

United paid £30m for Ferdinand from Leeds three years ago but his

contract stand-off, a nine-month ban for missing a drugs test and being photographed dining with Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon have meant that he has never become a favourite with the fans. United boss Sir Alex Ferguson made it clear he wanted a decision from Ferdinand on his future before Saturday's FA Cup final, but that never came.

Now Barcelona have made an approach directly to United to try to take advantage of the uncertainty at Old Trafford.

say in team selection and who is resented and distrusted by many of the players. Where once Ferguson's rule was absolute, now there is a degree of confusion about who calls the shots.

How will this great working class hero feel if Glazer raises seat prices next season so watching Manchester United is out of reach of even more fans?

How will he feel if Glazer does what he did in Tampa and builds even more corporate boxes?

How will he feel about trying to chase Chelsea and rebuild his side in the face of open revolt from the supporters against the owner?

Ferguson has dealt with upheavals in the past.

Some might say he has thrived on them.

But he was so much younger then.

