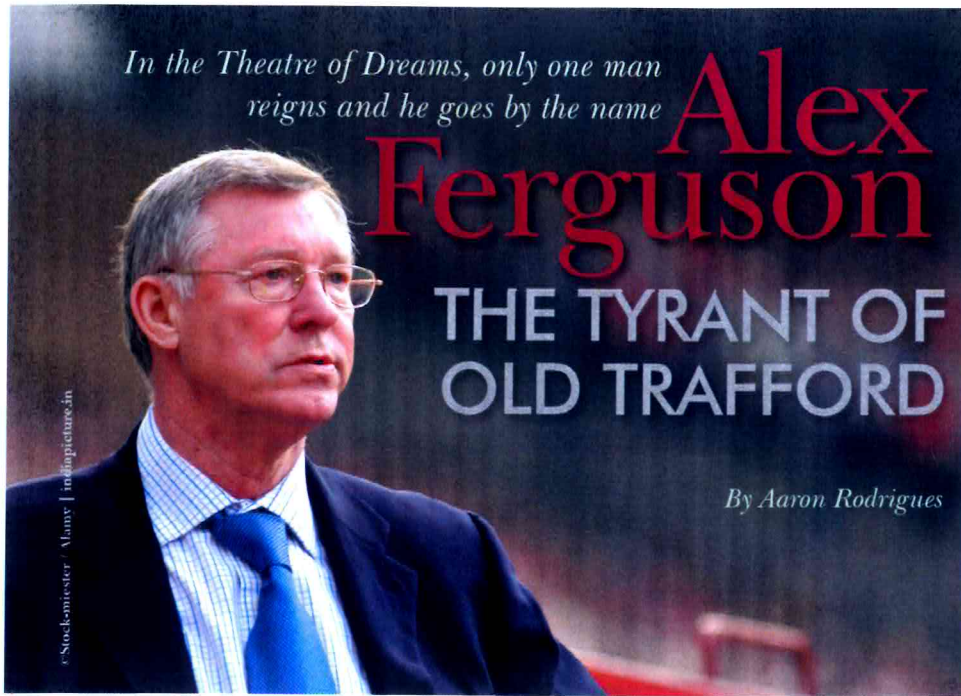


In the Theatre of Dreams, only one man reigns and he goes by the name

Alex Ferguson

THE TYRANT OF OLD TRAFFORD

By Aaron Rodrigues



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The poker table is set. The 69-year-old, grey-haired man, with the half-rimmed glasses knows that the cards are against him, and so do the guys sitting around him. Loosening his tie, he chews his gum slowly, and smirks. On his right is a Portuguese, who has proclaimed himself as 'The Special One', while to his left sits his arch-rival, a Frenchman by the name of 'Le Professeur'. Facing him is a blond man, his only friend at the table. The Portuguese, forever being sensible, walks out of the game. The blond, not wanting to risk his good fortune, quits too. So, that just leaves the grey-haired man and 'Le Professeur'. The 69-year-old drops his cards, contending with the Frenchman to draw his. 'Le Professeur' draws it with a grin on his face. The grey-haired man doesn't have to see the cards; he just knows that leer, and yet, Sir Alex Ferguson looks at the man and challenges him to another game.

It's this habit to always win and never let defeat be an option, even if it be a friendly poker match, which has made Sir Alex Ferguson one of the finest

coaches to walk Old Trafford, or for that matter the English Premier League, or even the European stage. Players revere him for his sharp edge; some are even terrified of his disciplinarian ways. Coaches envy him for his longevity at Manchester United. He's been in charge of the club for nearly 25 years, which is astonishing; as coaches in the EPL and throughout Europe are routinely sacked within a month or so. Recently, Ferguson extended his reign at United, surpassing fellow Scotsman Matt Busby's record, set during his two spells at Old Trafford.

The 'Special One' aka Jose Mourinho once said: "To stay at one club for so long is incredible in itself. To win as much as he has won will never be repeated." Speaking about Ferguson on his 20th anniversary as Manchester United's manager, Le Professeur, better known as Arsene Wenger, said, "That has to be the target for every other manager in the league, to do better than he has done." The blond, Harry Rednapp, Tottenham Hotspurs' coach was quoted saying, "He lives for the game, knows the game inside

out, every player at every club, what everyone is doing. It is his life."

YOUNGER DAYS

Born on 31st December, 1941, in Govan, Glasgow, to parents from the shipping industry, Alex Ferguson, played his first amateur game as a striker for Queens Park. He had a small stint at St. Johnstone, before transferring to Dunfermline, where he started getting recognised. In the 1965-66 season, Ferguson put in 45 goals in 51 games for The Pars, making him the top scorer, along with Joe McBride of Celtic. But by 1967, Ferguson left for his boyhood club — Rangers — for a record fee, of £650,000. Nonetheless, even with some prolific goal scoring — 44 goals in 57 appearances — during his two-year stint for The Gers, Ferguson didn't get a chance in the first place. Mistreatment and disagreements with the management, the issue of his wife being a Catholic in a Protestant-dominated club (though Fergie denies this as an issue) and being blamed in some quarters for the goal that led to the club losing the 1969 Scottish Cup final, eventually saw Fergie leave Rangers and move to Falkirk.

EARLY COACHING STINTS

Being a workaholic, Ferguson, at the age of 32, joined East Stirlingshire as a part-time coach, leading them to a reasonable spot in the league. However, in the next season, he headed to St. Mirren and created a remarkable team that managed to move on from the lower half of the old Second Division to First Division champions in 1977.

SUCCESS AT ABERDEEN

After a bittersweet ending at St. Mirren, Ferguson joined Aberdeen. But joining Aberdeen needed crossing some hurdles. Earning respect was going to be tough, as Ferguson at the time was 36, the same age as some of the players at the club. Winning the Scottish League was even tougher as the two Glasgow sides — Rangers and

“ He continuously strives to look for more ways to make the game more entertaining and seek new ways to unsettle the opponents.

Celtic – had divided the league between themselves. However, in time, he had The Dons in a position to physically and mentally challenge the established order. He did this by deliberately creating a siege mentality and accusing the Scottish media of being prejudiced towards the Glasgow clubs. Furious Fergie, as he was nicknamed, thereafter, won three Scottish Premier Division now the Scottish Premier League, four Scottish Cups, the European Cup Winners Cup against Real Madrid, the European Super Cup and a League Cup – all in the space of seven years.

THE ROUTE TO MANCHESTER UNITED

By now, he was known to everyone. In 1985, English clubs like Tottenham Hotspurs, Arsenal and Wolverhampton Wanderers came calling. But in 1986, he ultimately joined Manchester United. Who knows what would have been the fate of these clubs, had Fergie decided to join them. But we do know United's fortune.

The journey wasn't easy. In fact, no silverware came United's way until 1990. In 1989-90, when it looked like Ferguson was going to be sacked – the second time in his career after St. Mirren –

Mark Robins scored a goal against Nottingham Forest in the third round that led them to proceed to the finals of the FA Cup and ultimately win the title. In the following years, after some close slip-ups, Ferguson won his first league title, with the brilliant signing of the highly volatile Eric Cantona in the 1992-93 season. And, the sensational signing of Roy Keane in the 1993-94 season also led United to its winning streak in the years to come.

FERGIE'S FLEDGLINGS

Football pundit Alan Hansen should be remembered for many great predictions, however, he will forever be remembered for his infamous phrase - "You'll never win anything with kids", after watching United lose to Aston Villa 3-1 on the opening day of the 1995-96 season that fielded many young unknowns. However, these unknowns went on to win the league title later on. Known as Fergie's Fledglings, these 'kids' included David Beckham, Ole Gunnar Solskjær, Paul Scholes, Ryan Giggs, Phil and Gary Neville, and Nicky Butt. All of them won the treble, the EPL, FA Cup and Champions League in the 1998-99 season.

Ferguson's singular aim is to spot, acquire, cultivate, educate and ultimately unleash young talent who can recreate his philosophy on the pitch, which is to attack, and attack beautifully whenever they can. No wonder his United side won the European title again in 2005-06, with the likes of Darren Fletcher, Wayne Rooney, Cristiano Ronaldo, Carlos Tevez and John O'Shea.

Fergie's best quotes

"At the end of this game, the European Cup will be only six feet away from you and you'll not even be able to touch it if we lose. And for many of you that will be the closest you will ever get. Don't you dare come back in here without giving your all".

Half time team talk during the 1999 European Cup Final

"When an Italian tells me its pasta on the plate, I check under the sauce to make sure. They are the inventors of the smokescreen."

Before Manchester United played Inter Milan in the Champions League Quarter Final, 1999

"They say he's an intelligent man, right? Speaks five languages! I've got a 15-year-old boy from the Ivory Coast who speaks five languages!"

On Arsene Wenger

THE FUTURE

The English game is changing, but he keeps on reinventing himself and the team. He continuously strives to look for more ways to make the game more entertaining and seek new ways to unsettle opponents.

Sir Alex Ferguson ranks as the most successful manager in British football history, showcasing proudly more than 30 trophies and still counting.

This year again, Manchester United were finalists in the Champions League, but were defeated by FC Barcelona, 3-1. However, everyone knows that he will find the right cards to beat Pep Guardiola's side next time around.

Speaking of cards, let's head back to the poker table. The cards have been dealt, and this time you know Ferguson has a game plan; and he is going to beat his arch-rival. ♠



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