Sir Alexander Chapman "Alex" Ferguson, CBE (born 31 December 1941), manager of Manchester United, where he has been in charge since 1986. His tenure has seen the club go through an era of success and dominance both in England and in Europe, giving Ferguson a reputation as one of the most admired and respected managers in the history of the game.

Ferguson previously managed East Stirlingshire and St. Mirren, before a highly successful period as manager of Aberdeen. Briefly manager of the Scotland national team — in a temporary capacity owing to the death of Jock Stein — he was appointed manager of Manchester United in November 1986.

With 25 years as manager of Manchester United, he is the longest serving manager in their history after overtaking Sir Matt Busby's record on 19 December 2010. His tenure is also the longest of all the current League managers. During this time, Ferguson has won many awards and holds many records including winning Manager of the Year most times in British football history. In 2008, he became the third British manager to win the European Cup on more than one occasion.

He was knighted in 1999 for his services to the game and also holds the Freedom of the City of Aberdeen.

Manchester United

Ferguson was appointed manager at Old Trafford on 6 November 1986. He was initially worried that many of the players, such as Norman Whiteside, Paul McGrath and Bryan Robson were drinking too much and was "depressed" by their level of fitness, but he managed to increase the players' discipline and United climbed up the table to finish the season in 11th place, having been 21st (second from bottom) when he took over.

His first game in charge was a 2–0 defeat at underdogs Oxford United on 8 November, followed seven days later by a goalless draw at newly promoted Norwich City, and then his first win (1–0 at home to QPR) on 22 November. Results steadily improved as the season went on, and by the time they recorded what would be their only away win of the league campaign at title challengers and deadly rivals Liverpool on Boxing Day, it was clear that United were on the road to recovery. 1987 began on a high note with a 4–1 victory over Newcastle United and United

gradually pulled together in the second half of the season, with relatively occasional defeats on the way, and finished 11th in the final table. Ferguson's mother, Elizabeth died of lung cancer, aged 64, three weeks after his appointment. Ferguson appointed[when?] Archie Knox, his assistant at Aberdeen, as his assistant at Manchester United.

In the 1987–88 season, Ferguson made several major signings, including Steve Bruce, Viv Anderson, Brian McClair and Jim Leighton. The new players made a great contribution to a United team who finished in second place, nine points behind Liverpool. However, Liverpool's points lead had been in double digits for most of the season and while United had lost only five league games all season, they drew 12 games and there was clearly still some way to go before United could be a match for their north western rivals.

United were expected to do well when Mark Hughes returned to the club two years after leaving for Barcelona, but the 1988–89 season was a disappointment for them, finishing eleventh in the league and losing 1–0 at home to Nottingham Forest in the FA Cup Sixth Round. They had begun the season slowly, going on a nine-match winless run throughout October and November (with one defeat and eight draws) before a run of generally good results took them to third place and the fringes of the title challenge by mid February. However, another run of disappointing results in the final quarter of the season saw them fall down to mid table.

During the season, United played in friendly matches against the Bermudan national team and Somerset County Cricket Club as part of the Bermudan team's tour of England. In the match against Somerset, both Ferguson himself and his assistant, Archie Knox, took to the field, with Knox even getting on the scoresheet. The match remains Ferguson's only appearance for the Manchester United first team.

For the 1989–90 season, Ferguson further boosted his squad by paying large sums of money for midfielders Neil Webb, Mike Phelan and Paul Ince, as well as defender Gary Pallister and winger Danny Wallace. The season began well with a 4–1 win over defending champions Arsenal on the opening day, but United's league form quickly turned sour. In September, United suffered a humiliating 5–1 away defeat against fierce rivals Manchester City. Following this and an early season run of six defeats and two draws in eight games, a banner declaring "Three years of excuses and it's still crap...ta-ra Fergie." was displayed at Old Trafford, and many journalists and supporters called for Ferguson to be sacked.[44][45] Ferguson later described December 1989 as "the darkest period [he had] ever suffered in the game", as United ended the decade just outside the relegation zone.

However, Ferguson later revealed that the board of directors had assured him that they were not considering dismissing him. Although naturally disappointed with the lack of success in the league, they understood the reasons for the sub-standard results (namely the absence of several key players due to injury) and were pleased with the way that Ferguson had reorganised the club's coaching and scouting system.

Following a run of seven games without a win, Manchester United were drawn away to Nottingham Forest in the third round of the FA Cup. Forest were performing well that season and were in the process of winning the League Cup for the second season running,[48] and it was expected that United would lose the match and Ferguson would consequently be sacked, but United won the game 1–0 thanks to a Mark Robins goal and eventually reached the final. This cup win is often cited as the match that saved Ferguson's Old Trafford career, even though it has since been stated that his job was never at risk.[48][49][50] United went on to win the FA Cup, beating Crystal Palace 1–0 in the final replay after a 3–3 draw in the first match, giving Ferguson his first major trophy as Manchester United manager. United's defensive frailties in the first match were unilaterally blamed on goalkeeper Jim Leighton, forcing Ferguson to drop his former Aberdeen player and bring in Les Sealey.

The first league title

Although United's league form improved greatly in 1990–91, they were still inconsistent and finished sixth. There were some excellent performances that season, including a 6–2 demolition of Arsenal at Highbury, but results like an early 2–1 loss at newly promoted Sunderland, a 4–0 September hammering by Liverpool at Anfield, and a 2–0 home defeat by Everton in early March (the game where 17-year-old hot prospect Ryan Giggs made his senior debut) showed that United still had some way to go.

Even after the FA Cup Final victory in the previous season, some still had doubts about Ferguson's ability to succeed where all the other managers since Busby had failed — to win the league title.[50] They were runners-up in the League Cup, losing 1–0 to Sheffield Wednesday. They also reached the final of the European Cup Winners' Cup, beating that season's Spanish champions Barcelona 2–1. After the match, Ferguson vowed that United would win the league the following season, and at long last he seemed to have won over the last of his sceptics after nearly five years in the job.

During the 1991 close season, Ferguson's assistant Archie Knox departed to Glasgow Rangers to become assistant to Walter Smith, and Ferguson promoted youth team coach Brian Kidd to the role of assistant manager in Knox's place. He also made two major signings – goalkeeper

Peter Schmeichel and defender Paul Parker – to bolster his side. There was much anticipation about the breakthrough of the young Ryan Giggs, who had played twice and scored once in the 1990–91 campaign, and the earlier emergence of another impressive young winger in the shape of Lee Sharpe, who despite their youth had made Ferguson feel able to resist plunging into the transfer market and buying a new player to take over from the disappointing Danny Wallace on the left wing. He had also added the Ukrainian Andrei Kanchelskis to the right wing, giving him a more attacking alternative to older right footed midfielders Mike Phelan and Bryan Robson.

The 1991–92 season did not live up to Ferguson's expectations and, in Ferguson's words, "many in the media felt that [his] mistakes had contributed to the misery".United won the League Cup and Super Cup for the first time, but lost out on the league title to rivals Leeds United after leading the table for much of the season. A shortage of goals and being held to draws by teams they had been expected to beat in the second half of the campaign had proved to be the undoing of a United side who had performed so well in the first half of the season. Ferguson felt that his failure to secure the signing of Mick Harford from Luton Town had cost United the league, and that he needed "an extra dimension" to the team if they were to win the league the following season.

During the 1992 close season, Ferguson went on the hunt for a new striker. He first attempted to sign Alan Shearer from Southampton, but lost out to Blackburn Rovers. He also made at least one approach for the Sheffield Wednesday striker David Hirst, but manager Trevor Francis rejected all offers and the player stayed put. In the end, he paid £1 million for 23-year-old Cambridge United striker Dion Dublin – his only major signing of the summer.

After a slow start to the 1992–93 season (they were 10th of 22 at the beginning of November) it looked as though United would miss out on the league title (now the Premier League) yet again. However, after the purchase of French striker Eric Cantona from Leeds United for £1.2 million, the future of Manchester United, and Ferguson's position as manager, began to look bright. Cantona formed a strong partnership with Mark Hughes and fired the club to the top of the table, ending United's 26-year wait for a League Championship, and also making them the first ever Premier League Champions. United had finished champions with a 10-point margin over runners-up Aston Villa, whose 1–0 defeat at Oldham on 2 May 1993 had given United the title. Ferguson was voted Manager of the Year by the League Managers' Association.

Two doubles

The 1993–94 season brought more success. Ferguson added Nottingham Forest's 22-year-old

midfielder Roy Keane to the ranks for a British record fee of £3.75million as a long term replacement for Bryan Robson, who was nearing the end of his career.
United led the 1993–94 Premier League table virtually from start to finish.

Ferguson was the very first winner of the Premier League Manager of the Month award, introduced for the start of the 1993–94 season, when he collected the accolade for August 1993.

Cantona was top scorer with 25 goals in all competitions despite being sent off twice in the space of five days in March 1994. United also reached the League Cup final but lost 3–1 to Aston Villa, managed by Ferguson's predecessor, Ron Atkinson. In the FA Cup final, Manchester United achieved an impressive 4–0 scoreline against Chelsea, winning Ferguson his second League and Cup Double, following his Scottish Premier Division and Scottish Cup titles with Aberdeen in 1984–85, though the League Cup final defeat meant that he had not yet achieved a repeat of the treble that he had achieved with Aberdeen in 1983.

Ferguson made only one close-season signing, paying Blackburn Rovers £1.2million for David May. There were newspaper reports that Ferguson was also going to sign highly rated 21-year-old striker Chris Sutton from Norwich City, but the player headed for Blackburn Rovers instead.

1994–95 was a harder season for Ferguson. Cantona assaulted a Crystal Palace supporter in a game at Selhurst Park, and it seemed likely he would leave English football. An eight month ban saw Cantona miss the final four months of the season. He also received a 14-day prison sentence for the offence but the sentence was quashed on appeal and replaced by a 120-hour community service order. On the brighter side, United paid a British record fee of £7million for Newcastle's prolific striker Andy Cole, with young winger Keith Gillespie heading to the north-east in exchange. The season also saw the breakthrough of young players Gary Neville, Nicky Butt and Paul Scholes, who provided excellent cover for the long periods that United were left without some of their more experienced stars.

However, the championship slipped out of Manchester United's grasp as they drew 1–1 with West Ham United on the final day of the season, when a win would have given them the a third successive league title. United also lost the FA Cup final in a 1–0 defeat to Everton.

Ferguson was heavily criticised in the summer of 1995 when three of United's star players were allowed to leave and replacements were not bought. First Paul Ince moved to Internazionale of Italy for £7.5 million, long serving striker Mark Hughes was suddenly sold to Chelsea in a £1.5 million deal, and Andrei Kanchelskis was sold to Everton.

Ferguson made an approach for Tottenham Hotspur winger Darren Anderton, but the player signed a new contract with the North London club. He then made a bid to sign Dutchman Marc Overmars from Ajax Amsterdam (the European Cup winners), but the player suffered a serious knee injury and was ruled out for months. Media reports suggested that United were going to make an approach for Juventus and Italy forward Roberto Baggio, who was generally regarded as the best player in the world at this time, but the player remained in his homeland and signed for AC Milan instead.

It was widely known that Ferguson felt that United had a number of young players who were ready to play in the first team. The youngsters, who would be known as "Fergie's Fledglings", included Gary Neville, Phil Neville, David Beckham, Paul Scholes and Nicky Butt, who would all go on to be important members of the team. And so the 1995–96 season began without a major signing, at a time when the likes of Arsenal, Liverpool and Newcastle United were making the headlines with big money signings.

When United lost the first league match of the 1995–96 season 3–1 to Aston Villa, the media swooped upon Ferguson with undisguised glee.[citation needed] They wrote United off because Ferguson's squad contained so many young and inexperienced players. Match of the Day pundit, Alan Hansen proclaimed that "you can't win anything with kids".

However, the young players performed well and United won their next five matches, exacting their revenge over Everton for the FA Cup defeat with a 3–2 win at Goodison Park and achieving a 2–1 away win over defending champions Blackburn Rovers who were now looking rather like relegation battlers than title contenders.

Cantona's return from suspension was a boost, but they found themselves 10 points behind Newcastle United by Christmas 1995. A 2–0 home win over the Tynesiders on 27 December narrowed the gap to seven points and a subsequent win over struggling QPR narrowed it to four points, but a 4–1 defeat for United at Tottenham on New Year's Day 1996 and a 0–0 home draw with Aston Villa saw the Magpies re-establish their wide lead and it looked certain that the league title was Newcastle's.

However a series of good results starting in mid January 1996 saw the gap close, and when United travelled to Newcastle and won 1–0 on 4 March, the gap was down to a single point.

United went top of the league soon after the win at Newcastle, who continued to drop points in crucial games.

Early April saw Newcastle manager Kevin Keegan's famous outburst on live television ("I'd love it if we beat them! Love it!"), and is generally regarded as the moment that Ferguson gained the upper hand against his opponent. United's Premier League title success was confirmed on the final day of the season, when they defeated a Middlesbrough side managed by former United captain Bryan Robson in a game which ended in a 3–0 win despite strong displays by Boro confounding pre-match reports that Robson would give his old team an easy ride.

They played Liverpool in that year's FA Cup final, winning 1–0 with a late goal by Cantona. This made them the first team in English football to repeat the double of the league title and FA Cup, and more impressive was the fact that it had been achieved with a similar set of players to the ones who achieved the first double.

1996–97 saw Ferguson guide Manchester United to their fourth Premier League title in five seasons. In late autumn, they suffered three league defeats in a row and conceded 13 goals in the process. They also lost their 40 year unbeaten home record in Europe to unfancied Turkish side Fenerbahçe. But they still reached the Champions League semi final, where they lost to Borussia Dortmund of Germany. At the end of the season, Cantona surprisingly retired from football.

Other success stories of the 1996–97 season were two Norwegian signings, striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer (the club's top scorer that season) and defender Ronny Johnsen, who were bargain buys as they were little known outside the Premier League on their arrival the previous summer but went on to be key factors in United's fourth Premier League title.