

Follow, follow, follow.....



Once before the tour departed Johannesburg on a night when United were playing a Champions League fixture. That was in '99, so I took it as a good omen that we were flying out as United took on Barcelona at Old Trafford.

I would discover another good reason to be flying out on the same night. It meant I had to travel in my match-day clothing, and that turned out to be a good thing because Virgin managed to leave all my clothes in Johannesburg. Had the match against Barcelona taken place on the Wednesday we'd surely have lost – because I'd be wearing the wrong clothes – and, as it took them a week to get my clothes to me, we'd have lost to West Ham too!

Mobile phones don't work from 35,000 feet up, and the on-board phones weren't working either. We got news via a Sky News text service on-screen that United were 1-0 up at half-time, but then Nothing. Michael asked the stewardess to see if she could get any information and it was shortly after midnight that a message appeared on the screens: "For all you football followers, here is the score from tonight's match..."

Wait...

Wait...

Wait...

FINALLY, another screen gave us the news: Manchester United 1 – Barcelona 0. Cheers could be heard from all over the aircraft. Sorry to those passengers who'd gone to sleep early!!

England was cold at 6.30am, but the coach was there to meet us and it was nice to see Alex Stretford as our driver. Alex is a scouser, but a nice one – is that an oxymoron? – and we know he doesn't fret about drinking and smoking in the back of the coach. It's a long drive to Manchester from Heathrow and despite our own onboard refreshments, it was nevertheless a relief to see Alex pull into the motorway services mid-morning so that we could all stretch our legs and get a bite to eat.

Fergie has always been happy to accommodate the branches and to allow us to visit Carrington to watch the squad prepare for the match. But, that visit is never guaranteed. It can't be, but, having said that, only once before have we been disappointed. The minute the final whistle went against Chelsea I knew that Carrington was not going to be on our itinerary. Something some supporters tend to forget is that – in this case – football is a job, and it is the employer's (or his manager) prerogative to deny outsiders visits to the office, especially when there's a deadline to meet. United's deadline was the Premiership title.

So it was my sorry duty to inform the group that this time Carrington was not on the menu. I'd also been told when I rang up to book the stadium tour that they weren't taking any bookings for May, "because of renovations". I rang back right away in the hope that we could still get a booking for the day we arrived in Manchester, but was told "stadium tours have already stopped". Double disappointment, and I could feel the mumblings of discontent when I passed this information on to the group. I felt awful, but what could I do?

Still, we had a day at the Theatre of Dreams to look forward to and everyone was up bright and early the next day. After a substantial breakfast we boarded the coach and set off for Old Trafford. We had a quick photographic session on the forecourt and the group made their way to the Megastore, while Jim and I planned to walk up to the Membership office to collect the match tickets.

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Imagine our surprise to see a sandwich board outside the Megastore advertising 'STADIUM TOURS .. THIS WAY ..' We rushed around the back of the stadium to the museum entrance where I was very pleased to learn that we could, after all, have a tour. The man at the desk was puzzled to hear I'd been told – not once, but on two separate calls – that the tours had been suspended. No more argument, we paid our money, got the tickets, and went off to see who we could find to pass on the good news.

The group had dispersed, some going to the Megastore, some to Red Star Sports, and some to Bishops Blaize. Trust me, getting them all back together quickly was not going to happen, so I booked the stadium tour to take place after lunch in the Red Café.

The backs of the chairs in the Red Café are painted with players names and numbers, and so many people move chairs around until they've got their favourites'. Tv monitors play round the clock footage of highlights, but management would benefit from employing enough staff. The poor lad put in charge of us worked entirely on his own, and how he managed to get through the afternoon without a nervous breakdown is beyond me. Sorting out the bill at the end was a nightmare and by the time Jim and I arrived at the meeting point in the Museum for the stadium tour, there was no one in sight. If you do miss the appointment Someone will come and escort you to your tour group. I recognised the man who arrived to take us and told him I'd seen him a few nights ago on MUTV. "I'm hoping for my own series," he quipped.

They've changed the route of the tour, and it seems one is no longer taken down the original tunnel – but that may have happened before we got there! Standing inside Old Trafford, gazing on the empty seats, one can't help feeling the sense of history. How many truly great players have graced this stadium? These days the media bandies the word "great" about and applies it to footballers who, quite frankly, couldn't spell it! But it most certainly applied to Duncan Edwards, Roger Byrne, Bobby Charlton, George Best, Denis Law, Bryan Robson, Mark Hughes, Eric Cantona, Peter Schmeichel, Ole Gunnar Solksjaer, Roy Keane.... In my opinion, only two of those currently wearing United's red deserve the description: Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes. The others haven't quite earned it yet.

In the dressing room, players have one spot which they keep for as long as they are with United. Who sits where is identified for visiting groups with a shirt bearing the players' name hanging on a peg over the seat. Nowadays everyone wants to have their photo taken with Ronaldo's shirt. There's a door to a small room opposite the bathroom which our guide pointed out as having been built for Eric Cantona. I find it amusing that the story has evolved over the years to accommodate what people want to hear. On my very first visit to Old Trafford – a long, long time ago! – we were told it was a room where Sparky psyched himself up for a match. We were told then that after he'd broken several strip light fittings, a steel grill was fitted over the tubes. It's still there.

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the crash at Munich, the tunnel under the Stretford end has been renamed the Munich Tunnel. Several glass cases contain pictures of the players and staff who died, and the placement of this tribute means that anyone who visits the stadium can learn about the Club's history without having to go through the museum. One photograph in particular is quite astonishing. It shows a smiling bunch of lads, knowing they are on the brink of something special. The pictures in all the cabinets are printed in sepia tone, which, given the history connected to their display, is tasteful. In this particular photograph, the shirts of eight players on the right of the image are in colour. The players in red are Roger Byrne, Tommy Taylor, Eddie Coleman, Duncan Edwards, grouped together in a photograph, they died together at Munich.

Changing times, and changing priorities. The tour now ends in the Megastore, but as we'd already been there, done that, got ALL the t-shirts, we bid farewell to our guide there in the tunnel, and as the rest of the group made their way to the museum, Jim and I headed for the city centre. The hotel management wanted paying and we'd been unable to cash travellers cheques thusfar.

The following day we would normally have been watching the squad at Carrington, but instead the coach picked us up from the hotel and we went down the motorway to Preston and the National Football Museum. That a museum dedicated to the National Sport should be housed at Preston came as a surprise to me, but it's a fascinating collection of objects, and we spent an interesting morning there.

And so to Match Day, and the reason why we were in Manchester. With an early kick-off – as always to accommodate television – we were up and ready with the birds. Too early for the hotel, in fact. I'd forgotten that breakfast is served an hour later at the weekend, and Jim and I came down to find most of the group sitting around the reception area waiting for the dining room to open. But we were still able to get to Old Trafford and spend a good deal of time wandering around the stalls, taking in the match-day atmosphere.

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The fanzone was set up a few years ago, and has proved a great success. It's placed at the back of the stadium, close to the Museum, and can accommodate – they tell us – a thousand fans. I'm happy to pay £2 to have somewhere to sit and wait for kick-off, where it's just a minutes walk to the gate, and have a meal while I'm waiting. It's also ideal to arrange to meet friends there. Sky Sports News is relayed on big tv screens and there's always a visit from a couple of ex-players who will chat for a few minutes.

As usual the group was split up around the stadium. With so much of the ground given over to season ticket holders it's impossible for us to get 30-odd seats together. Everyone had been given their match-tickets at breakfast and independently made their way to their seats shortly before 12.45pm.

Stadium administrators here have much to learn about crowd control. With 15 minutes to go before kick-off Old Trafford is only about half-full. Yet by the time the referee blows his whistle all of the 76,000 seats are occupied. And you can bet that within 15 minutes of the final whistle, the stadium is empty. Tickets are clearly marked with seat, row, block and gate numbers. One

can't gain access through any but the correct gate and there are hundreds of yellow-jacketed stewards to direct fans to their seats. Each gate is designed to accommodate the number of fans in that particular block and the flow both in and out of the stadium is comfortable.

I've been to many, many games at Old Trafford over the years. I've seen some wonderful results, and some bad ones. I've seen United win the Premiership, and I saw them lose it to Arsenal. I've seen Champions League fixtures, but never an FA Cup tie. It has been some time though since I've seen the crowd so up for it as they were for this match against West Ham. There was a wonderful party atmosphere, with flags and scarves everywhere. There's definitely a 60's flavour nowadays, with red, black and white scarves being twirled furiously – and I even saw some with scarves tied to their wrists! The team was welcomed onto the pitch with a roar of approval, and they proceeded to give us their best effort as they whipped West Ham into submission.

The Stretford End has a special love affair with Sir Alex, and he always responds to their appeal, "Fergie, Fergie, give us a wave". Sometime during the 2nd half, when the match was long-since won, seeing Carlos Tevez standing alone in the centre of the pitch the Stretford End begged him for a wave. He responded, much to the annoyance of the Sunday Express journalist who complained about a lack of respect in his column the following day.

Being the current crowd favourite, Ronaldo gets special attention, but every player on the pitch knows that he is loved. Some have songs dedicated to them, and some don't, but the crowd always finds a way of acknowledging a player who's done something special. Paul Scholes holds a special place in the hearts of United supporters and on this particular Saturday his contribution at the last match was well remembered. So, when he received the ball on the halfway line, facing the goal, it was a natural reaction for the entire stadium to howl, "Shoooooooooot". He did, but it was cleared. Later in the match, when Michael Carrick was urged to Shoooooot, he obeyed, and scored!

This was one of those occasions when the Theatre of Dream didn't empty 15 minutes after the final whistle. It being the last home match of the season, Fergie addressed the crowd. Don't believe what you read about him retiring in 3 years, even if he says so himself. He loves Manchester United, and he loves the rapport he has with the supporters. His wife Cathy may want him to be at home to fix the washing machine, but Fergie needs the inter-action he gets when he picks up a microphone and addresses a captive audience of 76,000.

The players did a walkabout round the perimeter to thank the fans for their support over the season, and we finally trooped out of the stadium, content in the knowledge that they would give their all against Wigan to keep the trophy at Old Trafford.

And so on Sunday morning another SAReds tour came to an end as the coach whizzed down the M6/M1 to London. Once again a group of people with a common interest had come together for a few days and I know, from the many requests to exchange e-mail details, that they will keep in touch with each other. No one cares about education, age, gender, religion, nationality. What matters is that we all support the greatest football team on the planet. We are United.

I wonder who will be our opponents for the last home game in 2009.....