Cox: Don't judge Solskjaer on Fergie's 'attacking' philosophy – it didn't really exist

Michael Cox Nov 15, 2021 333

If you've watched any Manchester United matches on television over the past three years, you'll doubtless have heard the argument regularly put forward by his former team-mates now acting as pundits that Ole Gunnar Solskjaer is a good fit for Manchester United because, as a former player, he understands the tradition of attacking football at the club.

It's worth stopping to momentarily consider quite what Solskjaer's reign has been all about. Solskjaer's United have generally appeared most comfortable changing their system to suit the demands of a game against strong opposition, retreating into a deep shape and then springing forward on the counter-attack to great effect.

They have been considerably less convincing against smaller sides, particularly at Old Trafford, when they've been forced to try to dominate the game.

This all seems entirely contradictory in light of the suggestions about Solskjaer and Manchester United's traditions, but the relevant pundits have happily ignored that to stick up for their old friend — which is understandable — while many supporters have happily gone along with it for the pure vibes. "I have been part of a United team and I wanted to go back to our traditions of attacking," said Solskjaer in his early days as manager. "Quick, attacking football with pace, power, and personalities."

It was particularly striking to see Rio Ferdinand celebrating United's dramatic win over Paris Saint-Germain in 2019 — an incredibly improbable result on the balance of play — with a celebratory shout on BT Sport of, "That's what it's about — the young lads coming into the side and playing! Sitting back and defending? It don't happen here!"

Sitting back and defending was precisely what United had done for the previous 90 minutes, recording just 28 per cent of possession in a situation when they were the side who needed to score, from kick-off until the 94th minute. But in this era when it sometimes feels like punditry is designed to sound punchy in short social media clips rather than contribute to any meaningful discussion about the game we've just watched, no one seemed to care.

United's win at PSG in March 2019 was the height of Ole-mania (Photo: Getty Images)

United had won with a performance fairly typical of Jose Mourinho, peculiarly now cast as the villain for his style of football rather than the more pertinent fact that his results towards the end were disastrous because he had completely lost the dressing room. That is something of which Solskjaer, for all his limitations, has rarely been accused.

The wider point, which has never truly been tackled or explained by the relevant pundits, is why this tradition of attacking football, apparently deeply ingrained in former Manchester United players, has not transferred in any obvious way to the various other Ferguson apostles that have dipped their toes into football management over the last couple of decades.

It is often suggested that few of Ferguson's ex-players have been any good as managers, which is a little unfair. English football has been host to several of the world's greatest managers over the last decade, and therefore not being on the level of Pep Guardiola or Jurgen Klopp, or even, for example, Europa League winner Quique Sanchez Flores or Ligue 1 winner Claude Puel is not evidence to prove you're not a good manager.

You don't reach 1,000 games as a manager, as Steve Bruce has done, without doing some impressive work along the way. Roy Keane wasn't successful in the Premier League but did a remarkable job in getting Sunderland promoted in the first place. Phil Neville was widely mocked after a peculiar, slow-motion resignation from the England women's national side, but they were a missed penalty and a VAR offside decision away from making the World Cup final in 2019. Mark Hughes performed solidly at Blackburn and Fulham, kept QPR afloat against the odds and improved Stoke's points tally while refining their style of play.

But that seems to be it, in terms of footballing style. Of all Ferguson's apostles — you can throw in Solskjaer at Manchester United, Gary Neville's brief stint at Valencia and perhaps Paul Scholes' forgettable spell at Oldham — and the only evidence of anyone having any discernible emphasis upon positive football has been Hughes at Stoke, where he was tasked with overhauling the most antiquated, direct style of football the Premier League has seen this century. With respect, any manager would have been more adventurous than Tony Pulis.

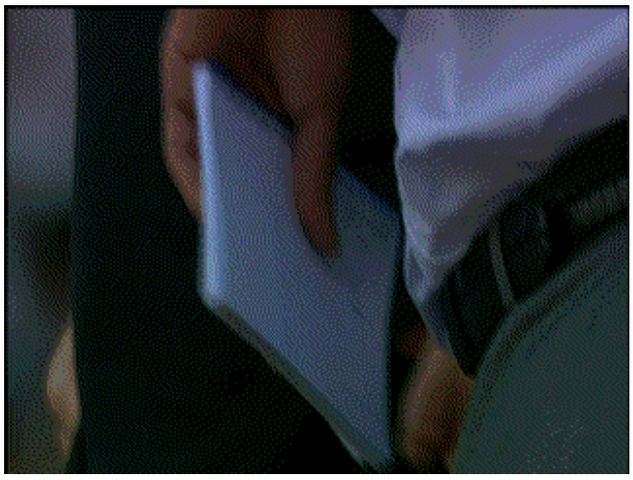
But where is the evidence of a non-negotiable attacking style of play? No one said that about Phil Neville's England, with various players hinting that the appointment of Sarina Wiegman would make England more technical. "Under previous England managers, there was more emphasis on being physical," said

Lucy Bronze. "But if you're going to be the best team in the world, you also have to focus on tactics and the technical side of the game. Sarina will do that, and go for total football, playing out from the back and through the thirds."

The Newcastle side coached by Bruce until very recently are averaging the least possession in the Premier League this season — not necessarily because they are dreadful at keeping the ball but because their pressing was almost non-existent. As *The Athletic*'s Chris Waugh wrote earlier this season, "A long-term style has been difficult to discern from Newcastle's play. Bruce has never sufficiently communicated what 'Bruce's Way' is, nor has it been identifiable out on the pitch. His tactics have ranged from ultra-defensive to direct to counter-attacking, all with mixed results." No obvious style of play there.

Keane's approach at Sunderland was generally an old-school 4-4-2 with battlers in the middle and more creative players out wide, with sometimes a third central midfielder brought into the side to help compete in the engine room. Keane put little emphasis upon stylish football as a manager, and in his guise as a pundit, speaks almost exclusively about character or desire rather than anything to do with how to actually play football.

If anyone can remember any particular emphasis upon stylish football from the management of Paul Ince, beyond the clip where a zoomed-in photo of his notebook on the touchline simply reveals the word "shoot", then the comments section below is very much open for business.



There are perhaps two genuine exceptions in Bryan Robson and Ryan Giggs.

Robson, by far the oldest of these ex-players, started his managerial career 27 years ago. His Middlesbrough side based their play around the wonderful Juninho and often played a then-futuristic 3-4-2-1 formation, albeit with mixed results.

Giggs' stint in charge of Wales, compared to the cautious — though highly successful — approach of Chris Coleman, has yielded positive results. Giggs created a more fluid, positive side and tried to accommodate extra attackers whenever possible, allowing them to express themselves. We are yet to see how that approach would translate to club football, however.

Otherwise, it's difficult to see anything to support the idea that Ferguson passed down an attacking style of play. The footballing philosophy of Solskjaer, Bruce, Ince, Keane, Hughes, Gary Neville, Phil Neville and Scholes is difficult to decipher, but it is certainly not attacking. British football has generally been more cautious than Dutch, Spanish or modern German coaching anyway, so maybe that's not surprising.

But even then, there's less of an emphasis upon attacking football than from other British managers who have managed in the Premier League in the last couple of years. Are the Manchester United alumni more positive, aggressive or attack-minded coaches than Brendan Rodgers, Dean Smith, Frank Lampard, Graham Potter, Eddie Howe or Chris Wilder?

The reality is that none of Ferguson's players appears to have a clue about the footballing philosophy of Ferguson. If they do, they haven't been able to outline it in any meaningful way, or with any specifics, as pundit or manager.

Ferguson's genius was his man-management skill rather than his tactical acumen. That's not to say he was poor tactically, but his footballing approach changed routinely over the years. Ferguson studied the European greats when other managers were solely concerned with English football. He constantly changed assistants — not always through choice — who brought ideas from elsewhere and were handed huge responsibility in terms of tactics and/or training sessions. (In contrast, Solskjaer's assistants are Mike Phelan, Michael

Carrick and Kieran McKenna, who bring little experience from outside Old Trafford in recent years.)

Here's a thought experiment: imagine Ferguson had been replaced by another manager midway through his 26-year-spell at Old Trafford, in 2000, but that manager had made the exact same decisions Ferguson did up until 2013. We would presumably have been bombarded with suggestions that the new manager was not understanding United's traditions by moving away from 4-4-2 (as Ferguson did in 2001), by playing defensive-minded, counter-attacking football in European knockout ties (as Ferguson did to great effect in the late 2000s), and by sometimes playing a converted winger up front (as Ferguson often did with Cristiano Ronaldo). Of course, that's not entirely true, because as long as Manchester United were winning trophies, as Ferguson continued to do, everyone would be fine with it. The man who most dramatically went against Ferguson's doctrine, perhaps, was Ferguson himself.

History is written by the winners, and Ferguson created a more formidable group of winners than any manager in British football history. But that history being framed around attacking football has been bizarre in the extreme, used for brand-building PR or by pundits defending their old mates.

Few outsiders thought that Ferguson's United concentrated on attacking football, no one can see any trace of it in Solskjaer's current side and none of Ferguson's apostles seemed to care about it as managers. The entire premise of Solskjaer's suitability for Manchester United was built upon a lie. It's now time to move on.

(Top photos: Getty Images; design: Tom Slator)

What did you think of this story?

MEH SOLID AWESOME

Michael Cox concentrates on tactical analysis. He is the author of two books - The Mixer, about the tactical evolution of the Premier League, and Zonal Marking, about footballing philosophies across Europe. Follow Michael on Twitter **@Zonal_Marking**.

334 COMMENTS

Add a comment...

N G. Nov 15 **349 likes**

Totally echo "the short punchy clips" statement. Punditry has become a mic drop affair, with focus on 'character, personality, willingness' and with zero output on the tactics or the systems used. I guess all these ex players played mostly under one system and are incapable to provide tactical analysis for the present crop of managers.

> **Mike P.** Nov 15 **82 likes**
>
> Rio is a div. He thinks he's brilliant at everything when in reality he was a great player who's pretty shit at everything else. This is the guy who wanted to be a boxer - I reccon we'll see him on Triller making a fool of himself!

> **Mark B.** Nov 15 **149 likes**
>
> Which is why we subscribe to The Athletic as they're actually professional journalists creating content rather than white noise to fill a hole

> **John M.** Nov 15 **27 likes**
>
> @Mike P. A fine player indeed. Even enjoyed the clips of his human interest stories.
>
> As a pundit? Shocking. A DOF? Don't make me laugh.

SI C. Nov 15 **10 likes**

Sadly, Rio's need for vibes (which is cringey most of the time) and his vast vast ego masks what actually is football intellect. Well, intellect in so much as being a player who's won stuff and a having a personality that achieves stuff. If he was a bit more modest then I think he might be regarded a lot differently. I'm thinking Ian Wright after he matured.

Curtis S. Nov 15 **41 likes**

The clip of Gary Neville with OGS postmatch after the PSG win was and is incredibly embarrassing. "Three questions: how long would you like you contract? What do you want your salary to be? And where would you like your statue?"

This is Manchester United!

SI C. Nov 15 **41 likes**

@Curtis S. I do feel that was a case of being a bit of a heat of the moment, forgetting where he was, loving his boyhood club, the club he played all his career for, one of his team mates leading the side. He was just being a human being.

Excusable? Yeah probably
Unfortunate? Definitely

Alvin C. Nov 15 **15 likes**

I thought it was good satire.

The statue comment was the giveaway

A Liverpool pundit with a proper sense of humour would have asked Origi which stand in anfield would he want his name on after that corner taken quickly goal

Ronan F. Nov 15 **7 likes**

@Alvin C. sad day for satire

Gerald G. Nov 15 **20 likes**

The quality of punditry is awful, but I can choose not to watch it. What I find dreadful is that the match commentary quality is fast deteriorating too. Ex-players turned commentators like Andy Townsend, Matt Holland, Don Hutchison (dear lord...) are horrendous with their condescending/high and mighty approach, they ruin the experience.

Give me Peter Drury any day.

As for pundits, I think sports journalists and ex-managers add much more insights.

SI C. Nov 15 **6 likes**

This is probably not a comment for the wider socials lol, but Micah Richards to my mind is one of the most out of kilter in regards to the balance between his talent as a pundit, and his standing. His moments of genuine insight are rare, and certainly not as common as the times he talks about got good he was or makes an anecdote about a good game he had....seems like a thoroughly fun guy fwiw. Probably quite infectious.

Peter F. Nov 15

Add Andy Hinchcliffe. He's like an arl woman.

Chris Z. Nov 15 **1 like**

Rio is one of the better pundits though that's not saying much. He's the only one I've heard who argues the modern game is a system game, Pep and Klopp put a system in place, and OGS relies on individuals which you just can't do anymore.

Ted P. Nov 15 **2 likes**

Ugh Peter Drury. Overwrought pap.

K D. Nov 15 **4 likes**

@SI C. Ian Wright knows the limits of his football knowledge and does not embarrass himself by going beyond the bounds of his knowledge.
Rio on the other hand, does not even research the basics and just thinks his stellar playing career means he is beyond preparing and just wants to vibe with sound bites. I actually feel embarrassed for him most of the time.

K D. Nov 15 **8 likes**

@Curtis S. OGS will be the end of Gary Neville's punditry career. Ever since Ole started unraveling, Gary has taken a mediocre turn and seems to think he is a pundit on MUTV.

K D. Nov 15 **2 likes**

@SI C. Not exactly. Even as a football fan who is biased towards United, not even at such pleasurable moments did I ever think Ole was worth a permanent role. I expect Gary to know better than me.

Arpit R. Nov 16

Fully agree

Daniel O. Nov 16

@SI C. He doesn't offer much insight but at least he's funny and pleasant. Him, Shearer and Lineker on the MOTD top 10s are always fun.

Keane is funny in a different way, I suppose. Plenty of total dreck out there, though – Murphy and Sutton spring to mind.

Brian M. Nov 15 **192 likes**

One thing Ferguson understood was when to urge his players to move the ball more directly or quickly vs slowing the game down. Or at least it seemed that way from the outside.

But no, his teams were solid front to back.

The idea they were always attack attack attack is pure media nonsense in the name of criticizing LVG and JM.

Michael Cox STAFF Nov 15 **57 likes**

I agree with that for the most part. Although towards the end when they often used Carrick-Scholes together I think they were also quite patient at times.

Catalin M. Nov 15 **38 likes**

@Brian M. I remember Scholes being unbearable on TV during LvG's tenure - it was like, mate, do you not understand how possession football works, tactically? Late-career Scholes would've been a decent shout for the pivot role in the 4-3-3, ironically.

To be fair to him, he's been the only former United player who's come out as specifically critical of Ole recently (alongside Michael Owen...let that sink in).

Dan A. Nov 15 **43 likes**

@Catalin M. Scholes can't formulate a tactical response because even he, the smartest of 90s players can't understand the game now, it's moved on so much. Him, Keane, Rio, Souness, Richards, all these guys played in one or two formations in an era where physically and bullying (both the opposition and your own players) were the norm. Blood and guts football.

To hear Keane go on about character and leadership every week, why isn't anyone shouting etc, is an embarrassment. The guys are dinosaurs that have no right being on TV.

Maxim T. Nov 15 **27 likes**

It's funny to hear Keane asking for United to kick a few players, or 'show fight' specifically in his comments after losing to city. In the game prior (vs Liverpool) United did exactly that, losing 5-0, receiving 7 yellows and 1 red.

Do they really think being 'up for it' is enough against football teams coached by elite coaches? More often than not it won't be.

Brian M. Nov 15 **37 likes**

Scholes strikes me as intuitive like a bad math teacher. He knows the midfield is wrong and could get in there himself and do the business no problem, but he can't articulate it for others.

If he were to learn terminology and techniques for teaching under an elite modern manager, he could probably be an awesome assistant. As was said above, ridiculously brilliant mind as a player. But i don't think he can transfer it.

Niall K. Nov 15 **23 likes**

@Brian M. I think it comes down to Fergie's instinct at big pressure moments - and how it compares to say, Mourinho.

Fergie would more often than not twist rather than stick. He didn't have an unshakeable attacking philosophy, he could be practical, but his instinct was to attack.

When Utd were chasing a game Ferguson never resorted to putting a big man up top - he just demanded more intensity, upping their natural game. He trusted attacking instincts would prevail.

I think it was Athletic man Daniel Taylor who said one of the great sights in football was watching Ferguson's Utd chasing a game, and he was right - it was exhilarating.

Also worth noting that most reputations in the game are forged by the initial big impact of that career. And Ferguson's first great Utd side were a wonderful attacking team (Aberdeen too)

Ferguson reputation as an attacking manager is merited.

Niall K. Nov 15 **1 like**

@Catalin M. Ah that's not true - Ince and Paul Parker have regularly criticised Ole, plenty of other ex-Utd players too if you care to look beyond Sky/BT echo chamber

Niall K. Nov 15 **19 likes**

@Dan A. Yeah what would Scholes know about football? Give me patience.

He'd know an awful lot more than you or I or any journalist will ever know that's for sure. Just because he may not have a very polished delivery in his 40 second time slot should not diminish his perceived knowledge of the game.

The notion that the "game has moved on" is such a load of utter nonsense imo. There's a growing craze from younger fans/journo's that the "modern game" is somehow hugely superior to what went before

Just because you weren't around 20 years ago doesn't mean tactics and innovation didn't exist. Of course they did. The game has always had deep thinkers and innovators.

But more importantly the basic truths of the game existed then and they still hold true now. The basic truths still exist. And pundits like Keane, Souness and Scholes are well versed in those truths.

And btw Scholes was around for a lot longer than just the 90's.

Ryan K. Nov 15 **3 likes**

@Brian M. This article doesn't address it, but even Keane and Scholes have spoken recently about how they often approached games under Ferguson with an eye toward a result than to attack. Also, Keane even advocated for adopting the sit back and counter attacking approach based on United's

Keane even advocated for adopting the sit back and counter attacking approach based on United's strengths and weaknesses.

I think these guys focus more on the players and their desire, decision-making, etc., because they see this squad as expensive, imbalanced, and not good enough to win the league no matter who is manager.

D H. Nov 15

Yeah, but it was Poul Schoa-less!

Maynard M. Nov 15

I remember the season we went unbeaten for a while. We won 1-0 or by single digit differences and drew a bunch of games. Even the RVP season was ruthless. Ferguson didn't go gungho. You can't do that and win. Even Pep say back to prevent Ole's counters a few years back and drew both games.

Brian M. Nov 15 **5 likes**

Agree that his teams chasing a game was a sight to behold (not one i liked as an opposing fan). I don't think it was just screaming for intensity. He could make a lot of clever tweaks here and there and also had a great eye for a sub. Knew whom on the opposition to attack and how to try it. Etc.

Never so daft as throwing Robert Huth up top out of desperation, haha. You're right there.

He was clever enough to get people to underestimate his tactical nous consistently, somehow...letting them think Wenger was the league's tactical genius when Fergie was much better in game (imo).

Great era, that. Sad it's gone. Maybe it's just my age, but the game's nowhere near as fun for me anymore.

Bård G. Nov 15 **1 like**

You've never seen Klopp or Guardiola shouting? How about Conte or Mancini? Managers who's won something lately.. Henderson, van Dijk? Not leaders who speak up when they have to? Sure the game evolves, but you'll never have a winnig team without leaders. But you'll never have a winning team without talent and a collective understanding of how to play either (which the manager has to provide). So it's that magic combo.
That beeing said, pundits get paid to talk shit, name of the game.

Charlie C. Nov 15 **4 likes**

@Niall K. Bang on Niall. There is a snobbery from a certain type of fan now towards football from the past. The way they talk is like it's a completely different game and totally ignores the fact that most managers in today's game base their tactics on those used by managers from a previous generation and build on these tactics (just like those managers did with managers around before them).
It also feels like if a pundit doesn't go into huge detail tactically and dissects it to the nth degree their views aren't relevant like tactics are the only things that matter in modern day football.

Pranay P. Nov 16

I think you did not understand what Keane meant. United did not show courage or fight or try hard enough. They had in previous seasons beaten top sides or at least not lost to them. The manager is definitely at fault for selecting the midfield that day, but players also don't have the right attitude. Most of united players in terms of attitude are not fit to wear the United shirt. They do not work anywhere as hard as Liverpool and Man City in winning back the ball or closing down players , that comes down to tactics, attitude and willingness. These players are too comfortable to lose and don't have the guts to question each other when things go wrong. The team lacks leaders and winners

Dan A. Nov 16 **6 likes**

@Niall K. Scholes know more about football than us? That's your bar is it? He hasn't had 40 seconds, he's had years. So has Keane. And Souness.

I'm not a 'younger fan, I've been watching football and going to Spurs since the 80s. If you think the game is the same now as 20 years ago we should stop this discussion now. Everything has changed, from speed. to fitness, to skill, to sports science, to tactics. Games are way harder, Keane only had one, maybe two teams to worry about, not most of the league. Keane et al couldn't make it through a half in any sense these days. 2 weeks ago Keane on Sky Sports told a story about just before a mid week game day and he was going out with the boys and Fergie told him 'not to have more than 5'. The joke was he had double that and if Fergie had found out he'd be in trouble.

That's the level of the 'glory years'. We all loved it at the time, but like my granddad going on about Best, Pele, Rod Laver etc, things move on, tactics move on, they are far more complex now and these guys have no idea as they are too old school. Who at Man City or Liverpool or Spurs when they were good are shouting and screaming like Keane whines about every week or Scholes spoke about? Keane was talking about 'getting stuck in and showing fight', ie: kicking, fouling, being a thug like he used to be (never mind they did that the week before and got what 7 yellows and red?). That's what he knows. Not data driven analytics.

Leadership comes in more ways than that, but these dinosaurs don't have the experience or intelligence (emotional or literal) to understand. They're there to get clicks and talk the language of the man in pub. It's easy, it's emotive and you don't need to understand tactics to do it.

No-one is saying there were no tactics or innovation before recently, but comparing football decades apart is ludicrous. At least Neville and a few other try, Keane, Souness, Scholes and most of the others they roll out aren't worth any attention.

Niall K. Nov 16 **4 likes**

@Dan A. My bar? And your bar is you think you know more than Scholes? And what's wrong with the language of the man in the pub Dan? Of the normal fan on the terrace? Not "literate" enough for you?

You call Souness, Scholes and Keane "dinosaurs" yet they are much smarter and aware than you think. Because the man in the pub - the kind you look down your nose at - is as worthy of attention as you are. And there are lots of them. And simple, sharp truths work well in broadcasting and social media.

As for the game has moved on - of course it has in certain ways. Sports science, facilities, quality of pitches, player protection, fitness etc. That's just the natural passage of time. Progression. And yes the drinking culture is nowhere near as strong - though you'd be mad to think it's gone altogether (and you'd be mad to take that Keane story too literally)

But the biggest change is coverage. There has been a transformational 'Americanisation' of football coverage in print and broadcasting. Analysis focused on stats and tactical "plays". On assists and transition. Whole magazines, books and pods dedicated to football tactics.

This has led some to believe that the game has developed enormously. That is is now unrecognisable from even twenty years ago. But it hasn't changed enormously. The coverage has.

Just because they weren't discussed on tv or in print does not mean that tactical innovation and serious analysis and deep thinking on the game wasn't happening in previous decades. Of course it was.

I heard Tony Pulis interviewed recently saying he heard Malcolm Allison discussing the false 9 position at Lilleshall in the 70's. Did you see Milan play in the late 80s? Magnificent. Only Guardiolas Barca could hold a candle to them. That's the Guardiola enormously influenced by Michels 60s and 70s Ajax team btw.

That the game is now faster and the players are fitter is undeniable. But it is not smarter. It's is not more tactically astute. It is not more entertaining. And the basic football truths exist now as much as they existed then.

And Keane, Souness and Scholes are well versed in these truths. It's still the same game they played.

Niall K. Nov 16 **9 likes**

@Dan A. Btw - "Keane et al couldn't make it through a half these days" Christ on a bike. You're right, we should stop this discussion now. Absolutely bonkers statement.

Yes I really couldn't see the likes of Keane or Souness surviving in a world where top clubs are playing such luminaries as James Milner, Fred, Oliver Skipp and Ross Barclay in midfield. They've been left behind, those useless old dinosaurs.

Give a 20 year old Keane or Souness today's facilities, sports science, pitches etc and they would be the two best midfielders in todays game. Ability wise they would dominate today just as they did in their day.

Nicholas Q. Nov 20

Owen is a total sausage, but I thought his criticism of Ole was so spot on. Harsh, but accurate. Constantly moving players around to cover for undroppable players that aren't good enough.

Brian M. 19h ago

@Dan A. now who is delusional ? a fit keane would take apart any midfielder in the league now. Jorginho/henderson/rodri compare with him . You are delusional

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Paul W. Nov 15 **55 likes**

Nothing like a Monday morning ManYoo bashing article to read, especially during this boring international break. Perfect, cheers me up no end. Although I would not have included Frank Jnr in the list of coaches that you mentioned, he's hardly worthy or experienced in the job to be mentioned as parallel to the others (Brendan Rodgers, Dean Smith, Lampard Jnr, Graham Potter, Eddie Howe or Chris Wilder?).

Jack B. Nov 15 **47 likes**

What's Man U bashing here??

[Hidden] Nov 15

[This comment has been flagged and is currently under moderator review]

Michael Cox STAFF Nov 15 **63 likes**

A bit harsh, Aadithya...but yeah, it's about style rather than achievements. Chelsea broadly played positively, but were very leaky defensively.

Aadithya S. Nov 15 **8 likes**

@Michael Cox Agreed. Chelsea played progressively under Frank but when they lost the ball in the final phase, there was no coordinated pressing structure or adequate counter pressing leading to a lot of goals being conceded in transition and leaving the defence exposed.

Oliver T. Nov 15 **27 likes**

@Aadithya S. Bit aggressive...? Not sure there's any need for that.

David F. Nov 15 **29 likes**

No need to act that way at all. You've let yourself down there, as your football argument itself is pretty coherent.

SI C. Nov 15 **24 likes**

@Aadithya S. Way to go calling a stranger an idiot.
What compels you to say that when you could just say that you disagree with the comment?
I truly don't get people sometimes.

Paul W. Nov 15 **12 likes**

I read the complete article several times and enjoyed it immensely. My point is that regardless of XG stats for a very short spell in management, I just don't agree that Lampard Jnr should be mentioned with the other respected, qualified coaches. That was my point so wind your neck in and thanks for your support to the other lads! Sorry if I p-ssed in your cornflakes.😂

Michael Q. Nov 15 **8 likes**

@Aadithya S. no need to call someone and idiot, deluded or that they don't have any brains. It would appear from your comment you dont have any decency. We're here to read and discuss football, not insult people. Think an apology would be the right thing to do.

Alex S. Nov 15 **1 like**

Nothing really. Hard to see where that comment comes from.

Thomas S. Nov 15

Yup, really no need for that sort of thing. Although given the subject of the article, it did ironically make me think of Fergie's "yous are all idiots" rant at the press room over Veron... 😂

Farhan N. Nov 15 **4 likes**

@Paul W. Yeah, there whole world is involved in a conspiracy against man utd.

Thomas S. Nov 15

Can someone remind me we've still got to dig that tunnel and sabotage their under soil heating next Tuesday pls?

Khoa L. Nov 16 **1 like**

Must be that West Ham fan who still think Frank Lampard was no good and only got to play because he's Redknapp's nephew.

Olamide O. Nov 15 **105 likes**

For me, club DNA is the most overrated thing I've seen get thrown around in club football.

Tottenham claiming free flowing attacking DNA that no one has heard them talk about before they came second in the league or United claiming attacking football and their first instinct was to appoint Moyes after Ferguson couldn't be more contradictory.

For me, it's just propaganda club legends turn pundits use to get a manager they don't like sacked as we saw it recently seen with Koeman and Barcelona. I could remember when he was appointed under this same DNA narration, few months of bad results he was then accused of not knowing the club's DNA again to get him sacked.

Keane is probably a pundit for the wrong generation. He is a living evidence that United had no clear DNA under Ferguson as it is being made to sound, his post match analysis will be more than just fighting and character if they ever had any football philosophy that they were adhering to.

Michael Cox STAFF Nov 15 **61 likes**

I agree with you. Although I do think Spurs fans often talked about a commitment to attacking football in the 60s/70s/80s. But yeah, you have to have incredibly faith in the DNA which hasn't proved successful for a while to be considering turning down managers who have won titles...

Olamide O. Nov 15 **10 likes**

I believe Tottenham just like every other team pre-Wenger and demolition of United by Guardiola had a level of commitment to attacking football, which is largely dependent on the quality of players you have.
The major change for me isn't how teams attack, it's how they defend which has drifted towards having most of the ball and pressing from the front to keep the opposition away from your goal.

"Attacking football" is maybe one of those terms that gets loosely used when clubs are trying to replicate past success, when emphasis should have been placed on how Mourinho sets up his team to defend because his team for me produced one of the most exciting attacking transitions last season.

Jack B. Nov 15 **17 likes**

@Olamide O. "Attacking DNA" I feel often gets used by clubs who have pretensions of success but can't quite convert them into actually winning anything (or at least winning at the rate they aspire to). See late Wenger era Arsenal, Spurs for about as long as I can remember, pre-Rogers Liverpool, current Utd. You can probably throw in half a dozen less high profile clubs too.

James F. Nov 15 **14 likes**

The 'West Ham Way' for starters 🤢

Philip F. Nov 15 **31 likes**

Perhaps, but the discussion of attacking DNA or philosophy at clubs like Spurs is a reflection of the stratification of football. Even Spurs aren't likely to win serious silverware against the spending power of Man City, United, Chelsea or even Liverpool. Realistically, teams from Tottenham down aren't playing to win the league etc. The fans are therefore beginning to ask what the point is. If we aren't going to win against club-states or multinational corporations then we might as well have fun and entertain. It's a serious point for the game generally-if you remove realistic competition from most teams then there have to be incentives for their fans to remain engaged. Otherwise the sport will effectively cut off the branch on which it sits. That's why the future in the long term is super league or salary caps or both. The present model won't be sustainable.

Philip F. Nov 15 **8 likes**

I should say I'm not generally in favour of a super league; I just see it as the logical end point of a world where there is a lack of meaningful competition in domestic leagues.

I'm also not unaware of Leicester's title win. However that was a black swan event whose shock value only illustrates the point that it is almost inconceivable that one of the big 6 (I would say 4) fails to win the league.

Alistair G. Nov 15 **3 likes**

@Olamide O. Remember when Derby were in the playoffs and sacked the manager because he didn't adhere to the "Derby way". Total nonsense.

Daniel W. Nov 15 **3 likes**

@Olamide O.
Liverpool do seem to have a European Cup "DNA", especially second legs at home.
The same 4 finals since switch to champions league as Utd (many more seasons qualified, better side over that 30 years) isn't a fluke. Well it is, but that is my point))

Phn A. Nov 15 **1 like**

@Philip F. this is a quality analysis and worthy of its own OP actually because you've summarised the entire problem facing professional football in Europe into one paragraph!

Phn A. Nov 15 **4 likes**

also worth adding that UEFA would be better served pondering the issues you raise than wondering how to increase prizemoney in their competitions.

Juhan L. Nov 15 **3 likes**

@Michael Cox I can't agree with you at all here. I think that understanding what the fans of the club expect is what is meant by this 'DNA'. I'd say that there are many ways to fail, but some of them are better than others. And it's quite inevitable that most managers do fail sooner or later. With one or two exceptions every generation.

I think that Ole has gotten this long exactly due to the fact that (until this season) he has played the way the United fans expect the team to play. The fans were happy with Jose as long as the results kept improving. When that stopped, everyone had a reason of why he should quit. You get a lot of goodwill if you 'fail the right way'. And I think that for most managers it takes time to get the team to play the way they want it. Along the way things can be quite bleak for some periods. I mean - Moyes was sacked by West Ham and look at him there now! His football probably doesn't align perfectly with the 'West Ham Way' either, but given time he has been able to get them to play well and get results. Now it seems like they're happy. But should he have a poor run of 2 wins in 10, then the old arguments of him not doing things the right way will come out again.

In the end I think all fans want to see fun football that is more attacking than defensive. They tolerate a defensive style if the results are there. And if the team is overachieving, then they tolerate the defensive style longer(look at Pulis at Stoke or Big Sam at Bolton or even Jose until he went to Real).

The situation where the expectations are high and the club has just overachieved and turns to a defensive manager has been a disaster in recent memory. I can't think of a team where such a defensive manager has kept his job for long.

Stephen P. Nov 15 **2 likes**

@Olamide O. As a Hammers fan who has no real idea what "the West Ham way" refers to (other than losing in high-scoring affairs), I tend to agree with you.

Edje N. Nov 15 **3 likes**

@Daniel W. Yeah, but 'European Cup DNA' is actually grounded in some form of actuality and psychology. It's a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy that makes Liverpool fans louder in those games and gives their teams a mental edge.
It's like Fergie time, that's most definitely real and tbf to him, something which Ole has copied somewhat successfully.

What fans mean with 'attacking DNA' is that they want to be entertained and experience some excitement when going to games. Mind, no one wants to say that because it will make you sound like a plastic, but that's what all these 'Attacking DNA' clubs share(d). It's why Fergies teams were 'attacking'. They mostly weren't, but with the added aura of Fergie time, the team's generally high levels of success, and the potent and quality attackers they possessed, they certainly were exciting despite being somewhat defensive.

Niall K. Nov 15 **1 like**

@Michael Cox Tbf it's been a long held refrain by Utd fans too. Utd fans of a certain age still revere the football played by Tommy Doc in the 2nd Div. Not many fans of big clubs would revere a stint in 2nd Div.

Atkinson's team also more popular than their achievements perhaps merited - because of their attacking style.

On the flip side, ask a Utd fan of a certain age and ask them about Dave Sexton and watch them yawn.

Ash G. Nov 15 **2 likes**

Spurs' motto is "To dare is to do" they are named for Sir Henry Percy who's audacity in battle earned him the nickname Hotspur. Tottenham's DNA has always been free flowing entertaining football, whether they've always managed to achieve it or not is a different story.

People get caught up in Spurs' recent history punching above their weight in recent years playing great football under Poch, then sliding into mid table mediocrity with JM and Nuno an echo of their 90's form.

Tottenham are a club that have existed since 1882 and in this time they were the 1st Non-league club to win the FA cup, 1st English club to win in Europe and they've won plenty of silver wear in between. The reason Spurs fans have been so angry recently is not because they're not winning silver wear, that'll come in time whether it's a league cup or conference league, what they can't stand is the turgid football that has been on display. It's not the Spurs way as their DNA is free flowing attacking football. This is also demonstrated by some of the great names that have passed through the club at certain points, just unfortunately they've never had the budget to keep multiple greats at the same time when other clubs with huge budgets have come knocking.

As a Spurs fan I can live without winning, football is incredibly competitive and just to be consistently mixing it up in the top half of the Prem and any European competition is in itself an achievement but what I can't stand if watching drudge every weekend as it's not in our DNA.

Joseph K. Nov 16

@Ash G. I thought Spurs has a 'bottling' DNA.

Christopher A. Nov 16

Couldn't agree more on this DNA rubbish. All that matters is that you're winning. Take the "West Ham way" for example. People probably associate Everton's DNA with being battling and energetic, fostered by Moyes' extended tenure in charge. Now he's in charge of West Ham, playing the same style of football, and they're doing really well. Everyone's happy and it's got no hallmarks of "West Ham way". It's a load of nonsense.

Daniel O. Nov 16

@Olamide O. Yeah, every team seeming to have a 'way' or 'dna' in how they play is just ridiculous.

Maybe Cruyff's legacy at Ajax and Barca is the only clear example of this that has lasted (mostly, and not unbroken) through several decades. Can't think of any club in England at the moment that has a 'way' embedded into them going back decades.

Ash G. Nov 16

@Joseph K. Gotta be in it to bottle it and most of the English football pyramid aren't even close but cool story bro

---

Keerthi Shivaraam R. Nov 15 **31 likes**

Wow. Thoroughly enjoyed reading this Micheal. Also, whenever you have the time, I'd love to see a few more entries into the 'Reconsidered' series!

Michael Cox STAFF Nov 15 **44 likes**

If there's another lockdown...

F A. Nov 15 **5 likes**

That's a No then - hopefully 😉

Paul B. Nov 15 **1 like**

Blaspheme! 😣

Jiajun L. Nov 15 **55 likes**

I think its our fixation with the "united way" that has inevitably caused our downfall. I constantly hear club legends and media personalities talking about "that's not how we play" or "attack down the wings, "play young players", "fast paced football". While that worked during its time football has changed and developed so much over the years. Look at liverpool and city. They lost for long periods, took stock of the club and made changes and eventually evolved. They hired a manager at the top of their game. they trusted him, gave him the money/support and built a team that embodied the style and system envisioned by him and his coaching staff. They brought in players that fit the system and ideology and ensure that if one player was removed from the system another would fit in seamlessly. We talk about giving a manager time to start again after fergie but every manager was short-lived because either they didn't play the "united way" or the players didn't buy into their ideas or they were just lambasted by fans and the media for not matching our "expectations" or "standards" of the "great Manchester united" (some deserved). Teams were built and assembled without a cohesive vision, managers brought in but were not supported fully, players lacking the basic professionalism of a footballer. Maybe its time to move on from this fixation with the "united way" and the past and look to build a club with a winning culture, players that are professional and take pride in their jobs and the badge and a manager that is experienced and tactically astute to instil good football fundamentals and to guide them along. Maybe it's time to talk about the "Winning way".

Kassra P. Nov 15 **15 likes**

Looking back, under Fergie "Winning" was the "United Way"!

Cameron W. Nov 15 **3 likes**

@Jiajun L. That was Jose Mourinho... win, whatever it takes. Play and buy 30yr old players at or just past their peak to maximise wins even at long term cost.

Jiajun L. Nov 15 **2 likes**

I mean if that was an identity that United would commit to I honestly wouldn't mind. Would it work? Maybe not. But the issue is that they didn't commit. They didn't commit to Lvgs "boring" football. They didn't commit to Moyes's "crossing" game. Each time their reason was: it's not the United way.

Jiajun L. Nov 15

Agree. But the United way has changed. It has become "attacking football" "believing In youth" "fast paced football". Is it really?

Ben R. Nov 15 **6 likes**

Surely you can't do something like this unless you cover every ex man u player Fergie managed? What's Mark Robins' style at Coventry like for example? Or what was Paul Ince's MK dons team like? You just seem to have picked a few ex players to compare

Michael Cox STAFF Nov 15 **130 likes**

I picked Bruce, Ince, Keane, Neville, Neville, Scholes, Giggs, Robson, Solskjaer and Hughes which seems quite a decent sample to me.

Ben R. Nov 15 **8 likes**

Giggs, Scoles and the Nevilles have about a seasons worth of games between them as a manager.

Andrew C. Nov 15 **19 likes**

Phil Neville has managed 70 games in his career. That's almost two seasons himself.

Oluyemi B. Nov 15 **45 likes**

It took Tuchel 3 games to establish a style of play at Chelsea.

Daniel H. Nov 15

Ince's MK Dons team played some lovely football at League 2 level. It helped that they were spending a lot of money but I was surprised how badly Ince failed when he stepped up to Blackburn. Robins' teams tend to be quite nice too but good lower league teams always have to have a level of steel and pragmatism about them that would get fans of the Champions League clubs tutting.

The article makes a good point, although I would argue that the gung-ho attacking stuff was largely true except in the biggest games against the best teams. Which I suppose is the point, it was conditional on what worked best to win.

Jamie R. Nov 15

Disappointing to see Gabriel Heinze not get a mention to be honest. His last job in the MLS was a disaster but he was the next big thing as a coach in Argentine football before then.

Daniel O. Nov 16 **2 likes**

@Jamie R. Heinze only played for 3 years at Man Utd and his coaching style is influenced by Bielsa so I wouldn't think of him as in the Ferguson 'tree' really..

Animesh S. Nov 15 **43 likes**

Bang on. I'm constantly hearing how Solskjaer "understands the United DNA" but what exactly does that mean?The only thing I can discern right now is that it means "no style of play but being repeatedly rescued by individual brilliance".

Reece C. Nov 15 **63 likes**

I actually think Carragher does a better job than most in identifying tactics and how certain managers expect certain tactical adaptations by players. His combined XI usually are geared towards one style of play rather than the best 11 players.

Jiajun L. Nov 15 **6 likes**

Way ahead of Gary neville.
Not as emotional, more objective.

Joshua R. Nov 15 **12 likes**

Neville once did a team of the year on MNF and had Eden Hazard as a left sided central midfielder. Really is no surprise he bombed at Valencia

Dj H. Nov 16 **1 like**

The MNF pair obviously have a SKY backroom team putting together the packages for them.
Very much doubt they're in the studio all day looking at film and picking out tactical patterns.
Still is a good watch regardless of the origin of the insights

Ian F. Nov 16 **1 like**

@Dj H. I mean, they probably do - it would be a bit unprofessional of the channel to just send them out there to say what they want without any oversight. To be fair, though, it's become clear since his retirement that Carragher really is an obsessive student of the details of football. Just read any interview or profile on him from the past few years. So I think it's safe to assume he does a decent amount of prep for the shows himself and has at least some input into what is discussed. How much, I obviously don't know, but I think he deserves a little credit at least.

> **Leonardo M.** Nov 16
>
> Carra is good. Neville is decent. Ferdinand... You might as well listen to your drunk uncle since he says absolutely nothing relevant

---

Ryan D. Nov 15 **15 likes**

Love the pundit shade the overwhelming majority are useless!

Chris F. Nov 15 **23 likes**

Thank you for the Robson & Juninho name check, I was getting worried he'd been forgotten. Robson was an attacking manager in that time but sadly it was to the detriment of the defence.

> **Michael Cox** STAFF Nov 15 **21 likes**
>
> Yeah, they were a very attractive side for the time.

> **Ian K.** Nov 15
>
> @Chris F. Whereas, Robson at West Brom...

Michael S. Nov 15 **16 likes**

"The entire premise of Solskjaer's suitability for Manchester United was built upon a lie. It's now time to move on."

Spot on, Michael. Let's indeed move on, leave Ole alone, and let him remain at the wheel. Vibes all the way up

---

SI C. Nov 15 **3 likes**

Tony Pulis at Palace was positively devil-may-care I'll have you know!

> **Michael Cox** STAFF Nov 15 **29 likes**
>
> I must admit I quite liked his Palace side...

> **SI C.** Nov 15 **2 likes**
>
> @Michael Cox It was a really good body of work he did there. A little bubble of almost perfection. Who knows what sort of platform that might have provided for the club and for him for the next season.

Winston Z. Nov 15 **6 likes**

This was a great read, thank you!

Aadithya S. Nov 15 **91 likes**

One of the best articles I've ever read over in this platform or anywhere else for that matter. Finally someone in the media busting the myth about the United DNA or about how attacking Ferguson's team was. Anyone who did not have blinders on could see that United's style under him was counter attacking especially in European games where they would sit back and use their speed on the break. Even the miracle of 99 only occurred after United were pummelled for ninety minutes by Bayern who hit the woodwork twice. The only English team in the 90's or 2000's who had a clear attacking style of play was Wenger's Arsenal who would set up on the front foot irrespective of the opponent but which ultimately led to his downfall.

> **Itai M.** Nov 15 **27 likes**
>
> I think I agree with most of this but This seriously can't be one of the best articles you've ever read (if so, maybe read more). Firstly, there's no cohesive definition of what actually constitutes attacking football - so the writer can just sorta come to whatever conclusions he wants.
> It's easy to "bust myths" when you frame the situation, don't define anything too tightly and pick a suitable dataset.
>
> It's also a little gross to read someone pushing to get someone fired. The things we do and say to each other don't exist in a vacuum.

> **Tim S.** Nov 15 **13 likes**
>
> @Aadithya S.
> The 1999 final saw a team score early and then focus on being hard to break down in defence and hit the opponent on the counter-attack. It's a familiar template, and because Bayern were good at that model, they can consider themselves unlucky not to have finished the game with their counter-attacks and/or held out for the win. However, since this isn't a debate about United being 'good or bad' but about whether their DNA is 'attacking', it's not the best example you could pick. Having gone behind in 1999, United were compelled to take the initiative. Indeed, in 1998-9 they were a more gung-ho attacking side in general than they were a decade later. United's serial wins against Arsenal when it was late-era Fergie vs late-era Wenger are a good example of Fergie's growing pragmatism.

> **Trevor A.** Nov 15 **3 likes**
>
> The article is brilliant until the last sentences urging for Ole to be sacked.

> **James K.** Nov 15 **7 likes**
>
> Another misremembering, Bayern did hit the cross bar twice, but they didn't pummel united for 90 mins.

> **Aadithya S.** Nov 15 **7 likes**
>
> @Itai M. It is pretty clear what constitutes attacking football in the modern era - playing a high line, the cb's splitting wide and the DM collecting the ball from the keeper, playing out from the back, numerical superiority between the lines, dominating possession, playing with a front 5 when in possession on the ball in a 2-3-5 or 3-2-5 shape, pressing or counter pressing when you lose the ball , etc. These are some of the principles that were orginated by Arrigo Sacchi and being followed currently by Pep, Klopp, Tuchel, Conte, Poch, etc. None of those above principles could be seen consistently in a Ferguson team.

> **Juhan L.** Nov 15 **1 like**
>
> @Aadithya S. Well, I would say that attacking football means creating a lot of scoring chances and scoring goals. Whether the teams tick all the boxes of your description is not relevant. Pep often plays with 3-6-1 or some other fluid formation in the bigger games(I think Michael or someone else here did a piece on his tactics in the CL games where it seems like he's overthought his tactics and lost). Tuchel's team had 40% possession in the CL final and they didn't really press all over the pitch etc.
>
> I get what you mean by these ideas, but it's not like all these managers have all their players do all those things all the time. It's also that Pep's teams can play a really defensive setup. They just do this defending by keeping the ball and not creating chances. Is it considered attacking football if you keep the ball for 75% of the time but only create 6-7 chances? I'm not sure.
>
> Ultimately all top managers/teams have a default setup that they tweak very little that they use against smaller teams. And when they play against top teams, they can change their setup and approach a lot more. I'd argue that Fergie also had a default setup against smaller teams, where his teams attacked a lot and were able to sustain longer attacks(that's what counterpressing is about ultimately) and he changed his tactics in bigger games.

> **James P.** Nov 15
>
> I agree mostly, however I think the dm collecting the ball is not universal and less common now that most center backs in top 5 leagues have to be able to play with the ball at their feet, so it's gk to cb to wb/dm then up the pitch if playing through or cb to wingers with a long sweeper.

Jon L. Nov 15 **1 like**

@Aadithya S. ahem. Kevin Keegan's Newcastle team, 'The Entertainers', famously 12 pts ahead of MUFC only to lose it at the death.....

"The only English team in the 90's or 2000's who had a clear attacking style of play was Wenger's Arsenal who would set up on the front foot irrespective of the opponent but which ultimately led to his downfall."
"

Peter M. Nov 15 **2 likes**

City create a ton of chances..just don't finish most of them.

Paul W. Nov 15 **3 likes**

Also to continue from you Jon L.. Aadithya S forgets to mention O'Learys Leeds - I know they crashed and burned shortly afterwards but in this short spell they never finished outside the top five in the Premier League, and secured qualification for both the UEFA Cup and the UEFA Champions League, enjoying cup runs to the semi-finals of both competitions. But Aadithya has already called me an idiot once today and he may again, but this deserves a mention.

Habeeb A. Nov 15 **1 like**

Lol, Paul

Jack B. Nov 15 **36 likes**

Yes!

It's baffling how little some of Ferguson's biggest strengths (adaptability, desire and willingness to bring in outside experts and grant them big mandates - see: leadership, ability to evolve a style of play ahead of the rest of the premier league) are actually mentioned in favour of this "club DNA" and "attack, attack, attack" stuff, whatever it actually means.

Michal G. Nov 15 **1 like**

@Jack B. Amen.

Craig A. Nov 15 **9 likes**

Yep Fergie's strength was to know when he needed help- bringing in Queroz, McClaren, Muelensteen, Walter Smith etc- and not let stubbornness and ego get in the way of progress. It's like in Game of Thrones " A wise king knows what he knows and what he doesn't"
-Solskjaer could remain in the job if he makes tough choices about his staff and go for best in class, experienced coaches who can cover his tactical deficiencies. Not sure if he will do that though

Ashley D. Nov 15 **3 likes**

His blind loyalty to his current substandard coaching staff will be the reason he is fired.

At £9m a year one would thing he might figure that out before it is too later for him.

Looking like the end is nigh for Ole and that Claudio R may apply the coup de grace at Watford on Sat.. Liverpool spanked 5 past Watford as a warm up for Old Trafford..

Daniel O. Nov 16

@Craig A. At that point you may as well just appoint a new coach and then keep Solskjaer as a dressing-room motivator, which is pretty much what he looks capable of at that level.

Yashan C. Nov 15 **23 likes**

Refreshing article. Pundits have started becoming a parody of themselves with lazy, poorly researched and often incorrect theories and assertions. When individuals are given so much air time, they repeat themselves half to death. Let's not forget how often they contradict themselves when it suits their agenda. Boring.

Ferguson's teams particularly toward the end of his time with United were highly functional but more tactically astute than from the more swashbuckling days and to good effect. The clashes with Madrid were always a dose of reality which caused Ferguson to consider how to evolve his team - and of course, they were the last team to eliminate a Ferguson led CL team.

United have probably hit a wall with Solskjaer. That doesn't mean his reign has been a failure - far from it. He steadied the ship and arguably overachieved, hence being given the gig full time. Both parties should do the right thing and agree to move on at the end of the season. And appoint someone for the medium to long term. A trophy within the next two years and a sustained title challenge within 5. A heavy dose of realism would be good, too.

SI C. Nov 15 **1 like**

@Yashan C. Some of them have become parodied, yeah.

But, and I know it's not hip to say, Neville does generally know whats he's talking about (perhaps he's a touch stubborn on the Ole thing, but then also thats because he understands that change at United is a seismic thing and not to be considered lightly). He does understand nuance. And Rio, for all his vibes, does nuance too. As does Scholes. They played at the club for years and won multiple things. We kind of do need to take what they say without too much salt. They understand the size of the job. They understand the tasks required to keep a club that size functioning.

Agree with your OGS analysis. He's done his stint. And yeah, a change mid season just feels too crude for United....buuuuuuut, and I've long suggested in on these pages, there does seem to be a ready made, short term solution out there ready to go right now, in the shape of Zizou. The ultimate winningy vibes-type manager who will get respect as soon as he walks in the door and will have willing, stardusty players at his disposal. It almost feels a case of squeezing out as much juice from the Ronaldo fruit as is possible while he's there, and who's got the most juice out of him in the past? And also has 2 of his most important players from the team he'll manage next (Pogba/Varane-France) and who could attract Tchouaméni to the club. Zidane in January has United in the headlines all over it, and the board will love that.

Jiajun L. Nov 15 **8 likes**

@Yashan C. Agree, except the point on ole. a manager's job is to win and not to steady a ship. We're not talking about a mid table club here, this is arguably one of the biggest clubs in the world. Ole has done well as a caretaker yes, but when he signed that contract full time he is became a manager of manchester united. wins and results are expected. Being tactically astute is expected. i don't get why he gets an out because he is a nice lad and injected positivity. The fact that we are talking about a manager overachieving at a club with a stature like united is pretty alarming.

Yashan C. Nov 15 **3 likes**

I like and respect Neville as well as Keane, Rio and Scholes. They all have their right to an opinion and speak with knowledge and substance. I feel that is less the case with other pundits with agendas like those on ESPN or the Liverpool contingent but then again we also took great pleasure in their travails.

Truth be told I don't know who id select as United manager! Personally not a fan of Zidane but then again it's just an opinion but one thing I'd like to see is us departing from appointments that benefit some players over others.

Either way agreed with what you said!

SI C. Nov 15 **2 likes**

Cheers Y :-)

Yeah the American vines are awful. Stevie Nicol is horrendous.

Carra is solid though. And whisper it, but Michael Owen might actually make it. It pains me to say cos he is most annoying!

Yashan C. Nov 15 **1 like**

Just to clarify, when he was first appointed he was caretaker. Agree that upon confirmation as full time then the parameters change! Truth be told he is up against the two best managers in English football who happen to be our biggest so I think we are in a lose-lose situation frankly. We missed the boat with Klopp and Guardiola.

Jiajun L. Nov 15 **3 likes**

@Yashan C. he did a good job to change the atmosphere after jose left.. but was undoubtedly out of his depth tactically.. no knock on him, the epl is punishing. i guess not everyone is like pep or Zidane where they had success almost instantly as club legends. Klopp and guardiola were trusted and backed 100% and the teams assembled are unmistakably theirs. I didnt mind conte but i understand the jose comparisons. but i felt he would have brought some professionalism and standards to the club and team. Players are way too sloppy, unprofessional and weak mentally. Needed some accountability and structure. Not saying tottenham is going places now but reports showing tougher training sessions and more discipline seems to be what the new generation of players need in this age!

Roel D. Nov 15 **4 likes**

@Michael Cox, could you make a follow-up article about the equally annoying" steadying the ship" defense of Ole?

In my eyes that is what he did in his first three months, since then all he has done is trying to keep the ship afloat.

Juhan L. Nov 15 **1 like**

@Yashan C. I think that one could construct a narrative of Ole having to manage a big change in style due to the Ronaldo signing. Such change doesn't always come successfully overnight. Maybe he won't be able to make it work at all. But if he does manage to make it work in the next few weeks or at least before Christmas, then I'd guess the narrative will change.

In the end it feels to me like this whole situation in the last month has been a clear sign that the recruitment in the summer was not planned well enough. Or I could just say it bluntly that signing Ronaldo makes on strategic sense. The team can carry one passenger in Pogba at best, but not two. That means one of them must be on the bench. Maybe it would have been a good idea to cash in on Pogba after Ronaldo signed? I'd guess there was the naivety of the idea that Pogba can play a DM role effectively. Well.. not really.

Not to mention that when Ronaldo signed, United should have decided that they need to clear out a few attackers. There are 11 for 3-4 places: Ronaldo, Cavani, Rashford, Greenwood, Sancho, Bruno, Lingard, Martial, Pogba, Donny and Mata.. At best you could argue that Pogba or (if you squint really hard) Donny could play in a deeper midfield role, but both of those options seem to require a designated elite DM to support them, so.. no. But even if we don't count those two, it's still 9 players for 3-4 positions. How on earth did we not sell Martial and/or Lingard? Or just not sign on Mata for another year?

I agree that he has hit a wall if he can't get this group of players to work. If the results start coming though... Whoever is responsible for the transfers though(both in and out)... oh man.

Remi W. Nov 15

@Juhan L. I agree with most of your views, I only want to add that playing with Martial was no better than with Ronaldo, when we are talking about playing with passengers.
He always reacts a couple of seconds to late and is always half hearted in his attempts to apply pressure up front or in his transitions when United loose possession. You can add his body language, with arms out and shaking his head while looking at the ground.
Totally unacceptable for me.
I would argue that Ronaldo has a better influence than Martial.

Bence H. Nov 15 **7 likes**

Finally someone has said it out!

Abhishek J. Nov 15 **4 likes**

Ferguson is OleIn, he wants to give some more time. Trust SAF. Trust Ole.

SI C. Nov 15 **9 likes**

I cant lie, nothing quite hits like that post-PSG Ferdinand clip!

.....But I think in the main it's worth listening at least to what his ex players turned pundits say because, you know, they've actually played at United and won stuff and played under Fergie.
Day in day out under his watch.....Sometimes I question all this chatter about the situation there, including from myself, when we're very much on the outside. We're talking like we know the ins and outs when we don't even a shade of awareness of what these guys went through in their playing careers.....

But that being said, to my (limited) eyes there seems to be parallels in terms of atmosphere at the club, and the whole club, not just the players (which possibly has been shaken a bit since Ronaldo arrived, but thats another story).

And perhaps the comparisons on the pitch are not so much in terms of attacking "style" (I refuse to use the b word!) as attacking independence. Passing over the responsibility to the players on the pitch to perform and to ping off of each other and to play to the Old Trafford atmosphere. Giving, or attempting to give, the players the confidence and the freedom, around a rough but not rigid tactical structure, to be their best selves in a game.....

And in that regard, it would perhaps seem like Graham Potter is the most Man United of the new breed of socially/culturally/tactically aware coaches out there. He's all about the vibes, getting players to enjoy their football, to get their creative synapses going with extra curricular stuff. But he gets them super fit and he gets them pressing. As the old saying goes, if he was called Graziano Potterelli he'd be in the Old Trafford hot seat already.

Ryan H. Nov 15 **24 likes**

The United DNA was the "win at all costs" mentality they had, rather than attacking play. Of course, attacking football is a by-product of winning because you have to score goals to win, but their style of play was nothing distinct like the fluid attacking football their rivals Arsenal had at their peak. Instead, Ferguson's United was a machine that could grind out wins no matter how tough the circumstances were.

Regardless, in an attacking-style or winning sense, or Solskjaer does not have the "United DNA" that the club supposedly needs.

> **Daniel H.** Nov 15 **14 likes**
>
> @Ryan H. You make them sound like Bolton!
>
> There were multiple Ferguson teams, and multiple Wenger teams for that matter. The Arsenal team that won the double in 1998 was very much built on the counter-attack and all those title winning teams had great physicality and speed on the counter, they weren't a pure tippy-tappy side like people seem to think though they could break down deep defences too obviously. Personally I'd rather watch a great counter-attacking team go from one end to the other in 8 seconds than anything else so that's not a knock at all.
>
> Meanwhile, Ferguson's best team, the 2008 Champions League winners, were very futuristic in generally not playing with a traditional fixed centre forward and interchanging the position of their forwards constantly that pre-dated Guardiola doing the same (I believe Ferguson got it from Spalletti's Roma). If a non-British manager had built a team like that they'd have been hailed as a tactical genius.
>
> Ferguson was absolutely a tactical chameleon like Michael has outlined on many occasions but the notion that their style of play at any given time was nothing distinct or didn't produce fluid attacking football is daft.

> **Juhan L.** Nov 15 **3 likes**
>
> @Daniel H. I agree - it feels like when people look back on Fergie and Wenger, they seem to try to fixate on one specific moment or season that should show the 'blueprint' that they used and then relate everything else to that. There's a lot of nuance there. The '99 and '08 teams were quite different.
>
> What I would say is that at least after '99 there was always an idea with the ball under Fergie. It felt like the players always found solutions of how to keep the ball or how to have enough urgency to create dangerous situations. How he achieved it was a bit different every season, but I feel like a working midfield was key. Currently it feels like there has been a bit of naivety about Pogba to play CM(or I read somewhere in the summer that they wanted to move Donny deeper) and that has badly backfired. Looking back at it - now it feels like getting a CM should have been at least as important as getting Sancho...

> **Marcelo F.** Nov 15 **2 likes**
>
> @Juhan L. Ferguson's teams just worked and were competitive, even when you thought there was a personnel mismatch vs opposition. Checking back on the line-ups for the team that were on their way to beating R. Madrid in 2013 before Nani's sending off, in the 1st leg Phil Jones line up with Carrick in midfield, and in the 2nd leg Cleverley started with Carrick. This against a team that featured Xabi Alonso, Khedira, prime Ozil and Modric off the bench.
>
> I think there were some strong overall ideas at any given time (although they changed over time) of how they intended to move the ball and how they intended to press the ball or organize the defense, which was a necessary base for there to be so much personnel rotation. I watched United teams be competitive and/or win big games with guys like John O'Shea, Ryan Giggs or Park Ji-Sung played out of position in central midfield. Just remembering now that with Keane and Scholes suspended for the '99 final, Ferguson sent out Butt and Beckham in the middle, Giggs on the right and Blomqvist on the left. Of course that wasn't a strong performance by that line-up, but I think is a good example of how relatively little emphasis was placed on natural positions by Ferguson.

> **Farhan N.** Nov 15 **1 like**
>
> @Daniel H. That 'tippy tappy' football Spain played won 3 tournaments in a row, including a world cup, which is something your beloved England have never done and will never do.

Paddy G. Nov 15 **5 likes**

Great content. I am of course referring to the use of the expression 'pure vibes' by Michael

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Mike P. Nov 15 **5 likes**

Very good. Not a ManU fan, but it's been clear for years that Fergie was brilliant at man management, but left the training ground and tactics largely to others - but that's what great managers do, surround themselves with the right people. Ole would shit at Cardiff and simply isn't qualified for an EPL job let alone this one.

Marc O. Nov 15 **7 likes**

Great article. Very true in terms of this nostalgic idea of All out attacking football under Ferguson. Would love an in depth article about his style of play over the years

Ashfaqul C. Nov 15 **6 likes**

Watching United from 2000, this is spot on. United was always a transitions team, dragging opponent towards them before hitting them at terrible speed. The reason why its often dubbed as attacking is because it is entertaining. As LvG once said "my United was boring attacking, while Ole's one is entertaining defensive."

However, OGS's appointment is not based on a lie. He wants to do exactly what United teams did in the past- play on transition, adapt ur tactics and nurture ur young talent. Can he do that is another question altogether.

> **Mr C.** Nov 15 **1 like**
>
> Nurturing young talent, ole hasn't even tried. Even mourinho placed more focus on this

> **Ashfaqul C.** Nov 15 **2 likes**
>
> @Mr C. Lol. Under Mourinho, Greenwood would be in a championship club on loan, never to come back. And dont forget, Mourinho talked about giving Rashford minutes as if he was doing a charity.

> **Mr C.** Nov 15
>
> Nah that's nonsense, greenwood is so good he would play under anyone. I don't think mourinho was any good with youngsters but ole is no better despite talking a good game. Mourinho brought mct through and ole has brought greenwood through, that's it

> **Juhan L.** Nov 15 **1 like**
>
> @Mr C. So we're ignoring the amount of time Ole has played Greenwood? Henderson? Williams? Tuanzebe? How in his first season he regularly played Pereira? How McTominay has been quite central to his best performances?
>
> He's also given a few chances to Elanga and Amad for example.

> **Charlie C.** Nov 15 **1 like**
>
> With all due respect United's youth system had been neglected when Ole took over so has there really been enough players of the right quality who are ready for the first team during his time in charge? The discounting of Greenwood is a ridiculous argument. No manager would have a good youth record if you ignore the players good enough to play for the first team!!

> **Ashfaqul C.** Nov 15
>
> Mr C. This is exactly what a typical Ole hater comment looks like. "Whatever OGS has done would have happened anyway." If he wins 3 UCL in a row you would still say nah it wud have happened anyway with the money United have.

> **Mr C.** Nov 15 **3 likes**
>
> It's not being a typical ole hater to point out there isn't much behind his rhetoric of promoting youth, as with his commitment to play attacking football. The list of other players he has given chances to is hilarious. How many minutes did tuanzebe get, Williams was poorly managed, pereira was barely a youngster and clearly not good enough.
>
> Elanga and amad certainly have had some minutes in meaningless games but no sign of proper development.
>
> The fact is the youngsters suffer from the same mismanagement as the wider squad. They will get no minutes until ole gets desperate and they will be thrown on in a situation which isn't conducive to them playing well. Several of them play in wide positions where its very difficult to see them getting past the many senior players in those positions

> **Richie R.** Nov 15 **3 likes**
>
> @Ashfaqul C. Did you just casually say "if he wins 3 UCL in a row" as if he is capable of that?

Justin S. Nov 15 **3 likes**

Good read, Michael. Always found the idea that attacking is the Man Utd way to be one of the weirdest talking points.

Fergie built from the back!

> **K D.** Nov 15 **1 like**
>
> @Justin S. I wish Ole would build. I don't care whether it is from the back, front or middle

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Matthew G. Nov 15 **6 likes**

Ferguson attacked against teams when Utd had superiority in terms of player talent I.e. the majority of PL matches. However, he was very pragmatic against superior opposition e.g. Wenger's best teams or Pep's Barca. The former Ferguson player examples you give have generally been managing largely inferior teams in the PL which would explain the generally pragmatic approach in the PL but less so when managing in the Championship e.g Keane and Bruce.

Andrew D. Nov 15 **6 likes**

The 1-0 loss to Man City at the end of 11/12 season when Kompany scored the only goal encapsulates the myth about Fergusons attacking mentality. Park was used as a defensive striker and Utd barely had a shot, which ended up costing the league.

Niall K. Nov 15 **3 likes**

@Andrew D. Yes one single match "encapsulates the myth". Pretty sure Ferguson won quite a lot of huge matches throughout his time at Utd - many of them with bold and decisive attacking decisions.

What that match encapsulated was Ferguson being practical with perhaps his worst ever Utd squad - a tired and old one too.

K D. Nov 15 **1 like**

@Niall K. Exactly! As if the 2005 FA Cup Final should be used 8n defining Wenger's style.

Scott S. Nov 15 **12 likes**

Michael, I have been actually enjoying the international break for once as I didn't have to think about United so I am not sure how I feel about being subjected to this on a miserable Monday morning 😂

One thing I will say is that all these pundits and ex players talk about how United always play attacking football and link it to Ferguson, but Sir Alex played winning football and adapted to the situation.

SI C. Nov 15 **38 likes**

You know who's playing some of the most Fergie-like football, under a man-manager of experience and class, with a load of native players playing above their perceived ceiling, with a sprinkling of International flair as the icing on the cake.....

West Ham

Mark J. Nov 15 **3 likes**

Lol, so true. There is a body of evidence that suggests that not only were United in decline at the end of Ferguson's reign but that Moyes didn't seem to grasp how they were able to bridge the gap, tactically. SAF's team we're leaning very heavily into what we would now call high expected-assists where there is a high risk/reward and Moyes didn't continue that. He seems to have developed his tactical nous over the past decade.

Mark B. Nov 15 **5 likes**

Great stuff as always Michael

It's something my brother an I talk about sometimes. He's a Man U fan, I'm a Liverpool fan. Fergie was far from attacking and attractive football all the time, at Liverpool Rafa was certainly not a total football god. People just make narratives to suit their agenda, much like most things like politics!

The other one I enjoy is the idea of "clutch" players. Things like "he never misses those" or "he delivers on the biggest stage." Generally they're a total load of rubbish, and some big moment has ingrained the idea in someone's head!

SI C. Nov 15

@Mark B. I know it can seem a bit far fetched, but I tend to find that enough big players have offered enough important clutch moments for it to actually be a thing. Ronaldo, Rooney, Iniesta, Messi, Lebron James, Damien Lillard, Steph Curry, Tom Brady, Tiger Woods, Serena Williams, Federer, Djokovic, Ben Stokes, Shane Warne, Steve Smith....

I definitely feel clutch is a thing.

Mark B. Nov 15 **1 like**

I carefully used "generally they're a load of rubbish".
I'm not sure they're clutch though anyway, and just great players who often do amazing things not many are capable of. Tom Brady wasn't only great when it was a final drive, he was usually great for most plays of his career for example

Mark B. Nov 15

I think there were Jordan states to go along with a quote from his for an advert years ago, his shot % with the game on the line was lower than his career average I'm confident. Be interesting to know stats for other top players in those situations

SI C. Nov 15

@Mark B. Yeah I know
I'm trying to turn your "generally" into something more concrete :-)

Buzzer beaters for example are literally a thing. And certain players are there making buzzer beaters more than others. Their team mates pass the ball to them as they have the mental and physical composure to execute at better odds than others.

And for sure, Im def not saying clutch players have to be one dimensional and are *only* clutch. The greatest sports ppl do great things at all stages of a game/match/tournament. Clutch is just one aspect.

Kassra P. Nov 15 **2 likes**

I'm less interested in the comments on clutch players and more interested in how you ended up supporting Man Utd and your brother Liverpool!?

Mark B. Nov 15

So are there buzzer beaters out there who shot a higher % than they usually do when it would be a game winning shot?
My theory is that in those situations you give the ball to your best shooter as they're more likely to get it.
I totally agree that some players thrive off though scenarios whereas others would wilt under the pressure.
An injury time penalty to win a match for example, I'd back Zlatan/ Ronaldo/ Ballotelli to score it more than their usual % as they'd absolutely love the fact millions are watching THEM and it's them in the limelight and they f'ing love it.
Golf would be an interesting case, as adrenaline is usually a negative thing, there must be some play-

> ers who when in contention on the back 9 on Sunday more frequently do better or worse than usual

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Marlon B. Nov 15

There's literally a new documentary out called The United Way. The new manager will talk about the same thing be it Brendon or Zizou whether they believe it or not. Remember Jose's weird no heritage rant? He tried to move away from that albeit cynically to protect his crumbling reputation.

> **Marlon B.** Nov 15
>
> Disagree. In this case it is used for effect to underline the ridiculousness of the overwrought language alluded to by the article author. Me writing 'there's a new a new documentary out called The United Way' would be factually correct but without the layered texture in line with the article. The whole point is the heightened, extraneous language used by OGS. Cox takes issue with it. OGS? Not so much. Ole is serious when he says such things. Literally serious.

William P. Nov 15 **3 likes**

The key is that 4th last paragraph mentioning how Ferguson studied other managers.
Sometimes people act like he was winning the league 21 years apart doing the exact same things which would reflect really badly on all the clubs trying to stop them.

Mark H. Nov 15 **2 likes**

This is a brilliant and astute piece. In truth, the 'United way' is more about bringing through youth - and the stats for Academy players in the match day squad are irrefutable. I never saw Ferguson as a great tactician - though, ironically, The Mixer made me revise that view somewhat. And when it comes to Solskjaer it's not that he is tactically naive - his successful tactics against major teams last year prove that he isn't. It's that he can't convert this squad into a dominant attacking force, as opposed to a counter attacking force. And in the trying the squad seem to have lost all rigour and discipline. Why that should happen is a mystery. But when Maguire - to name just one - plays like a not very talented 7 year old, it has the effect of making the team - and Solskjaer look tactically incompetent.

David M. Nov 15 **3 likes**

The main reason Ole was hailed was based on emotions. Ole spoke positively about the game and his team have at times played in style which surpassed the previous three managers. I think the ex player pundits fell into the same trap many fans have by wanting a clean break from Mou and LVG and just some more joy again, seeing a link to better times and a non-existent football philosophy. United need to start looking to the future in all its decisions (CEO, manager, players) rather than searching to recreate 25 yrs if SAF.

Anant M. Nov 15 **4 likes**

Let's be honest here - If we were winning games (deservedly or not), no one would bring the "style of play", like you rightly pointed out was the case in Sir Alex's later half.
And it was a similar case in Mou's tenure as well. We were winning games early in his 2nd season - a lot of them undeservingly due to DDG being in God mode- but no one was willing to question our approach in the 0-0 at Anfield or our approach in the 1-0 vs Spurs or the City/Chelsea game. We started going back on all this post Sevilla, and this may have gone for longer had Mou not gone "football heritage" and incited the fans.
Similarly, we look at Chelsea right now. They play a more defensive game. No one questions their style because they're winning. No one questions why despite having CHO, Mount, Lukaku, Werner, Pulisic, Ziyech, Havertz -attacking depth similar to Utd - only 2-3 players manage to get a start.
Look I'm not going into what-aboutism, but the point is narrative has always been built to suit the winners, and we don't want to build a narrative saying pragmatism/defensive football may well be the way to go if you're to win trophies. If Ole wins a few games on the bounce and we score 2-3 goals in each, suddenly the narrative will be flipped that Ole has found the balance and yada yada

---

Chris T. Nov 15 **3 likes**

For me the thing that helps Solskjaer is less the "attacking" philosophy and more the overall club philosophy - more recently has talked about it: things like "youth" and "courage". This sounds woolly, totally, and just like some aimless catchphrase punditry, but I actually think it's valuable in United's case for a couple reasons. One, that actually is what Ferguson was about. Few United fans think he just attacked all the time but we do think he was a people-managing master, as you mention in the piece, and that there are common traits to his sides psychologically, like "courage" - the late comebacks, the siege mentality, the late season momentum, the performances in the highest pressure games, etc.

The other is that Manchester United, more than most clubs, would suffer immensely from its ownership's values (or lack thereof) if there *weren't* someone like him acting as a buffer between board and footballing matters. I think since 2013, looking at the state of the club, you can say Solskjaer has improved essentially everything about the club apart from the performances on the pitch. If someone like him, a "values" manager, weren't there, the club just doesn't have the management structure in place to maintain a functioning footballing operation.

Maybe a good analogy is journalism. You'll occasionally, in an ideal setup, have something like an "editorial director" that sits between the top of the editorial team(s) and the bottom of the business/senior management level, and their job is to protect editorial integrity and from erosion as a result of business/financial pressures. Someone to say no to that extra in-line advert or sponsored content, etc.

United need that person, Solskjaer is doing it. Without a proper director of football with real knowledge and real power in the club, I'm just terrified of the long-term damage that'll come from losing him, in exchange for good performances for a couple years.

Robert M. Nov 15 **1 like**

Great article. The entire United DNA schtick from Solksjaer was always laughable. United under Ferguson was very defensive, especially in his last 2 seasons. A prime example is the Manchester derby in late April 2012 at the Ethihad when he set up in a 4-5-1 formation leaving Rooney isolated. After Kompany scored to put City in front they saw out the rest of the game with a cigar on. United may have lost the title in the last seconds to Aguero but that was the day they really knew the game was up.
United under Ferguson in his final season were very boring also. From Jan to May 2013 they rarely displayed a performance to get you out of your seats.
United with Solksjaer, Phelan, Carrick and McKenna have the worst coaching set up of any big side in Europe. The longer it continues the more harm it will cause the club in the long run.

Lee O. Nov 15 **6 likes**

Discussed this the other day. How Keane scoffs at the idea of a "football philosophy". Are the players who spent the majority of their careers under fergie a bit naive to the necessity of gaining an edge through tactical play? Could this be due to them consistently having better players and challenging, whereas someone like carra has seen how it can make a difference?

> **Justin S.** Nov 15
>
> @Lee O. lol what?

RICK S. Nov 15 **5 likes**

"his former team-mates now acting as pundits"

Another Fergie legacy: every single one of his former players turned out to be some of the biggest failures in football management, that's why they're infesting everywhere as pundits.

What else is there for them to do?

Dan C. Nov 15 **2 likes**

Totally agree with your point about Roy Keane's punditry. The fact that the featured video on the Sky Sports Football YouTube channel is "Best of 2020/21 Roy Keane" - none of the clips being longer than about 10 seconds - says a lot about how much he relies on sound bites rather than genuine footballing insight.

Alex M. Nov 15 **9 likes**

This is a brilliant article. A killer line is "The man who most dramatically went against Ferguson's doctrine, perhaps, was Ferguson himself". This is completely overlooked usually.

Another thing that I've not heard in analysis of the Ferguson era is what you allude to in terms of the history and responsibilities of assistants. His profound talent was in man management, but also in constructing a non-playing team and embedding his hyper-committed mentality in the club. The "great man" narrative from his outriders, and which he played up to after his retirement with Harvard lectures, books etc. actually fails to recognise the foundation of his success, making it about him as an atomised genius. As Roy Keane said "I think we (the United players) did alright for him", and Keane is the perfect example of SAF's extraordinary reign; an example of him knowing what the club needed, who had the potential to fulfil the role and how to maximise their impact.

Iain W. Nov 15 **4 likes**

Remember Klopp coming in at LFC and saying 'it's not not about the past' about 'having to make your own history'. The whole mindset at OT is retro. Ferguson should stop showing up for a bit and give them a chance to create something new.

Muminul I. Nov 15 **2 likes**

This article; is based upon a lie. The Lie that Michael Cox knows football. This guy, Miguel Delaney, Jonathon Wilson, Melissa Reddy, Jonathan Liew are all trash journalist that think they know football.

Oowww wheres the pattern of play, oww whats the philosophy. Get in the bin. Frank Lampard as an attacking coach. Get in the bin.

> **Gergő M.** Nov 15 **7 likes**
>
> Lol go touch grass pal

> **Frank Y.** Nov 15 **1 like**
>
> Maybe Jamie Jackson is more your style. But even he has been lamenting how shit Utd are recently.

> **Frank Y.** Nov 15
>
> And actually yes Lampard Is a very attacking coach just a poor one. So attacking that he has no clue how to organize his team defensively. Hence the absolute bucket load of goals Chelsea conceced throughout his time there

> **Thomas H.** 16h ago
>
> @Muminul I. lol Cox and Wilson have both forgotten more about football than you'll ever know. Liew is also a v good and v knowledgeable writer -- AND has the gumption to own up to it when he gets things wrong. not familiar w the other two but given the other targets of your weird attack, i'm gonna go look them up.

Donal S. Nov 15 **7 likes**

Great article!

I was only 16 when Fergie retired, so grew up watching his later United teams from mid 2000s. There's definitely a lot of nostalgia looking back at those years remembering attacking football and all the last minute goals on the way to winning titles.

I also remember some boring away games in the Champions League playing 4-5-1. Although there were often brilliant counter attacks with Rooney, Ronaldo and Tevez in the side (2007-09), looking at the knockout rounds of those 2 seasons, you can see that United's success was built on being defensively strong. Fergie had the back 5 of VDS, Brown/O'Shea, Ferdinand, Vidic and Evra. They were usually protected by Scholes, Carrick and Fletcher in midfield and 2 of Rooney, Tevez or Park working their arses off on the wings with Ronaldo lurking up front.
In 2007/08, there were 5 clean sheets, 6 goals scored and only 1 conceded in 6 games on route to the final.
In 2008/09, there were 4 clean sheets, 9 goals scored and 3 conceded in 6 games.

None of this is a criticism of Fergie as the defensive approach, particularly in away games, is what got United to 2 finals in a row. It just shows you how he adapted and changed United's approach in certain matches to win titles.

> **Donal S.** Nov 15 **1 like**
>
> Just realised I forgot to mention Hargreaves, he was great in 07/08

Stuart S. Nov 15 **5 likes**

Getting bogged down in formations and 'pressing' like all the journos and pundits. In terms of United's DNA, for attacking, here are some specifics 1) width and pace - a tradition of wingers and fast forwards 2) risk taking - looking for a killer pass early rather than playing it round the back four for minutes at a time, even it means conceding possession easily (United fans wouldn't have the patience for City tic-tac) 3) attacking midfielders - Robbo, Keane, Ince, Scholes - encouraged to break and support attack 4) win at all costs - if game is level at 70 mins, it's kitchen sink time 5) youth - fans enthused to see raw, keen, instinctive talent. 6) aggression - hard tackling and physical strength, imposing tackles not presses for the sake of it (Robbo, Keane, Big Norm, Vidic, Nev, Evra). Of course, Fergie played it safe/differently in big games so it never always this way. Keane did say on Sky after City "we were a counter attack team" - it's not secret and if we had to badge it that's fair...but when you have the mentality of the examples I mentioned, how can that be negative/not attacking. Maybe the issue that the ex players have had translating these traits at other clubs is because they are inherently United's dna!

> **James K.** Nov 15 **4 likes**
>
> The journos and pundits are bogged down in pressing because that's how the winning teams of recent years have become successful. Effective coordinated pressing forces mistakes and loss of possession in dangerous areas, preventing the need for flying tackles and chest thumping. The days of flying wingers and hard men in the "engine room" have passed. I'm not saying it's a necessarily a good thing, but that's where we are

---

Alvin C. Nov 15

Funnily I think Keane has an idea about attacking football but lacks those characters he played with for so long that it's hard for him to coach a decent group of players to greatness.

But his ideas around passing the ball forward, and using intensity and mental fortitude to win games assumes that every player has common sense and coached into playing with courage and being brave.

I think great players fail to understand that what made them great - those ingredients might not be present in some really good premier league players.

Attacking football is about creating chance and not having possession for the sake of having it. When you get the ball, you progress it to an area where you can hurt your opponents. If you don't create enough chances to win the game, you're not playing attacking football. Although you can also play attacking football in this definition by staying deep in your own half but getting more shots away at the other end.

I think there's genuine confusion about what's attacking football that is worth clarifying

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Anthony G. Nov 15

Very poor article. I'm disappointed!

Hari S. Nov 15 **13 likes**

I have been watching pl football since 2000 and can attest very much to Michael's view. There was never a DNA or attacking patterns or fixed playing style to Sir Alex. He is a great man manager, brilliant motivator, politician, incredible manipulator of situations, and most of all a very wily operator. His best trait is extracting the last ounce of all his available players. There's no Ajax' s total football or Germany's pressing or tiki taka. His style is a Winning football if they want to sit back they will sit back , they will play Diagonals and long balls , open teams with their wingers or an individual brilliance will win the match. This is also the part of the reason for manutd's struggles , sir Alex handled most of the manutd's footballing operations and he left a big void. Manutd's board has been looking for that all in one man which I don't think exists anymore. This article is a first of it's kind portraying the propaganda that's been pushed on young manutd fans.

Martin M. Nov 15 **5 likes**

The thing that set Fergie apart on the pitch was certainly not "attack attack attack" I would agree with that. he was the ultimate "horses for courses" specialist. To win the number of titles he did the swashbuckling performances will grab the headlines but behind them there are 3 or 4 , 1-0 or 2-1 tough away wins where you have to dig in, get the result and get the hell out of dodge. Thats what titles are built on and Fergie was was the master.

Man Utd could at times be absolutely outstanding, free flowing and fantastic to watch but they dispatched of team while playing badly or with two full backs playing central midfield or any number of other improbable scenarios.

Man Utd lack that today. You don't win prizes dropping points at home to Villa and Everton. Whatsmore and I will say it until Im blue in the face. United lack a pecking order in the squad. For all Fergie had his trusted generals titles are also won by Phil Neville, John O'Shea, Jonny Evans, Ji Sun Park and Darren Fletcher coming in for 20 games a season in various positions and specific scenarios and "doing a job" without complaint at being back on the bench next week. We as fans didn't appreciate them at the time but as each year goes by we realise the genius of the Fergie squad building.

> **Jack B.** Nov 15 **1 like**
>
> "For all Fergie had his trusted generals titles are also won by Phil Neville, John O'Shea, Jonny Evans, Ji Sun Park and Darren Fletcher"
>
> @Martin M. Yes, agree! Above all else the man was a winner, and knew how to identify and incorporate other winners alongside, or even ahead of, more obviously talented players.

Chetan L. Nov 15 **7 likes**

I always associated Ferguson's longevity with him being a manager rather than a coach, meaning he was not dogmatic about the footballing style.

The coaching was usually down to the assistant, which meant the footballing identity changed with that person.

The most extreme example (with perhaps a little bit of hyperbole) was late 90s / early 00s, where Man Utd went from using Teddy Sheringham in a similar role to his Millwall days (under George Graham), when Steve McClaren was assistant, to playing 4-6-0 before tiki-tika Barcelona, when Carlos Queiroz was assistant

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CM L. Nov 15 **4 likes**

Worth going back to Ferguson's Aberdeen players. Alex McLeish won the domestic treble with Rangers (two trophies more than Steven Gerrard) but was later sacked by Aston Villa, in part because of his playing style. Gordon Strachan played adventurous football on a relatively small budget at Coventry and Southampton. Mark McGhee won promotions (from lower divisions) with Reading, Millwall and Brighton but couldn't seem to work Fergie-style magic higher up the pyramid.

Paul S. Nov 15 **6 likes**

It would be an interesting article if someone would write about how the modern terms of 'DNA' and 'philosophy ' have been introduced into the football vocabulary. They seem, however, to be lazy attempts to describe something that is beyond the analytic ability of the speaker, often taking the terms of reference from a past style of play which is nothing more than a vague feeling. The historical development of football terminology would be a very interesting linguistic study.

> **A G.** Nov 15
>
> Football cliches pod needs to cover this if it hasn't already. Add “Project” and “identity” in there as well to see when they first cropped up.

Will G. Nov 15 **9 likes**

Another Cox hatchet job on United for the clicks. What point is he actually trying to make? Maybe Ferguson knows a bit more about managing a football team, not just than his protégés, but also than Cox himself? Fergie's teams played attacking football, but it was also widely recognised throughout his tenure that, when the team when through a down period, he would generally resort to securing the back end of the team and winning games 1-0 before reassessing what wasn't quite clicking up top. Because, y'know, management.

Is Cox saying that Fergie's teams or mentality was therefore not about quick, incisive attacking play? The fact he mentions Lampard as an example of progressive attacking football (really?) Also kind of undermines his own point given Frank's primary managerial influence was Mourinho.

For a tactical expert, it's ridiculous for him to say Solskjaer's style is no more attacking than Mourinho. Just look at the actual tactics. Case in point, look at the relative positions of wingers and fullbacks. Does anyone remember the constant narrative about Rashford being hamstrung by playing auxiliary left back? If that point has been made under Ole, I must have missed it...

And finally aren't proper journalists embarrassed writing "vibes" in their articles? I don't see this word used about any other PL managers, yet it's ok to say that's all a coach who's guided a team to overperforming 3rd and 2nd placed finishes is good for. I'm not saying Ole doesn't need replacing now, he does. But the fact seemingly respected (not least by themselves) journalists can get away with writing utter nonsense with barely any data or facts in their pieces, trading on reputation alone, is rather embarrassing. Why not do some actual analysis? I and many other fans can see what is actually happening with the team, past and present, so why don't you write about that with your superior insight/time on your hands?

> **Jack B.** Nov 15 **14 likes**
>
> @Will G. Somewhat ironically, this post uses a lot of words without really saying a lot.

> **Will G.** Nov 15 **2 likes**
>
> Ok how about this. Michael Cox has written an article to join his past library of pieces about United that is a) very cringe talking about "pure vibes", b) containing zero actual tactical insight and c) relies on a self-selected set of "data" - the undefined idea of managers' styles and philosophies - to compare to results and aesthetics, without actually analysing either.
>
> What is the point of this article? And why is the combined 20 or so games of club managerial experience of Neville, Giggs and Scholes at all relevant to anything? It's pure opinion

> **Frank Y.** Nov 15 **4 likes**
>
> Or in other words. You don't agree with Cox. Understood. Move on.

> **Will G.** Nov 15 **1 like**
>
> I do pay for content though and I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be agreeing with. There's no point in the article, yet the headline suggests it would be an interesting piece. I actually find his input usually quite enlightening except when he talks about United, when it's usually poorly researched garbage recycling a tired and provably incorrect narrative. I got to the end of the article and just thought "is that it? Finish the thought!"

> **Farhan N.** Nov 15
>
> @Will G. "poorly researched garbage" - Such a fragile response lol.
> You seem so defensive whenever there's an objective article about Man United. Perhaps you can't handle your ill-informed views being challenged.

> **Argha B.** Nov 15 **1 like**
>
> @Will G. It's fine. Leave it. This was an article for all the ABU fans to come together and enjoy. The amount of revisionism here is hilarious. Case in point is someone above saying Ferguson didn't contribute to the tactical side of the game. Haha. They should go and check out who played the 4-6-0 before it became what the hip managers play. You do have to understand that most of their ABU childhood/adulthood was scarred by United under Fergie winning all the time. So this is like a therapy session for them. Let them be.

Ollie W. Nov 15 **1 like**

Winning = fun!

Shrewsbury Town finished 3rd in L1 under Paul Hurst and a lot of our fans thinks we played attractive attacking football. We didn't! We played defensive counter attacking football but won a lot of games.

Jimmy D. Nov 15 **3 likes**

I remember when Man Utd reigned in Newcastle's big lead in 1996 they won 7 of their last 15 league games 1-0. And that was an era when they are remembered for being particuarly attacking and cavalier in their approach.

Andy S. Nov 15 **9 likes**

I don't think man utd played attacking football all the way. That would have being naive of Alex Ferguson. During the Invincibles era, Man Utd was never one to shy away from the 'if you can't get the ball, get the man' and parking 2 banks of 4 to disrupt Arsenal's play.

And that's why he won more trophies than Arsene Wenger despite Arsenal playing the more aesthetically pleasing football. He knew when the team in front of him got better players and tactics and is willing to resort to any way possible to win. Kudos to him for that. Not that I like it though. :(

From a Arsenal fan.

Philip F. Nov 15 **1 like**

You managed the whole article without mentioning the seismic Norwich v Utd game from the PL's first season. If I remember The Mixer, you argue that set the trend for deep, counter attacking football in the PL for the rest of the 90s.

Chris C. Nov 15 **2 likes**

There is so much nonsense talked in and about football it's simply unbelievable and goes way beyond simple outcome bias.

At the club I follow a significant number of fans believe our ex players make the best managers because 'they get what the club is about'. If you ask what that actually means you won't get a coherent answer because it's meaningless rhetoric.

Thank goodness the Athletic takes a more measured, analytical approach.

Elwyn D. Nov 15 **16 likes**

Thank you Michael, interesting read and totally agree with the 'disappointing' level of punditry we get to consume these days. I still fondly remember the Alan Hanson 'you can't win anything with kids' (can't believe that was 26 years ago!). What made that special was it was out of the blue, and seemed to surprise/shock viewers. From BT sport to MOTD, there is now a shameless scramble by pundits to get their quotable soundbite in before the next idiotic statement is blurted out by the person next to them. It's the fast food equivalent that is sadly so prominent now. I want insight and to learn something new about the game. I don't want WWE. That is what makes the Athletic a refreshing change.

For my two pennies worth, I think Fergie was a chameleon of the football world, albeit a territorial alpha of the species. He would build a team, adapt tactics and formations to get the most from the most talented of players. When they fail to win the league, that usually meant a ruthless trimming down and then rebuilding of the squad (take note Ole). He would then look at where footballing concepts/trends were heading and hire coaches to help him go again and gain an edge. It was an incredible system that was more in line with an empire than a football club, probably why it all went to pieces when he left.

Attacking football was a nice to have, they would often overwhelm weaker opponents, especially at OT. Some pundits seem to conveniently forget that he would then play Park, Ronny Johnson or Phil Neville at CM against rivals. That wasn't overly attacking, but it often got the job done. They might have even be called flat track bullies in this day and age.

I was fortunate to start supporting UTD in the late eighties, predominately due to Mark Hughes' return. As a sprightly Welsh boy in primary school, I recall an interview where he said he played in goal as a kid as he was the only one who was willing to dive with on the tarmac. With two left feet but a fiercely competitive edge, I could relate to that and you could argue the same for Sir Alex. From Hughes, to Keane, Neville, Scholes, Butt and Rooney. They were all scrappers in his image.

Fighting tooth and nail to win was UTD's DNA, with attacking football often a pleasant by product. That was and still is pretty clear to me as an amateur follower of the game, so why is it not clear to the professional pundits?

Aditya B. Nov 15 **3 likes**

So if I sum this right, Fergie wasn't an attacking manager on his own and solskjaer doesn't have credentials to be a united manager nor the coaching team for united to be a success let alone an attacking manager like united are known to be under fergie which they were definitely not.

Michael C. Nov 15 **6 likes**

What a bizarre and tendentious article.

It's completely irrelevant to compare ex-players' managerial careers with the tactics used by a manager they once played for. In the cases of Bruce, Hughes and Keane, for example, they had to base their approach around the standard of the players at their disposal.

Also, if "most outsiders" didn't think Ferguson's teams played attacking football then which other teams did? Blackburn Rovers? Mourinho's Chelsea?

The article contains grains of truth that could have been used to make less of a clickbait, controversy stirring article.

Ferguson had a noticeable inferiority complex in European games throughout his career and often hamstrung his sides with over-defensive tactics that were completely at odds with his domestic approach. Compared with his domestic domination he certainly underachieved in Europe because of this defensiveness. He also was a much better man manager than tactician throughout.

Yes, most TV commentary is self-serving drivel with the main motivation of not upsetting ex-team mates. That's why some of the women ex-players, like Karen Carey, are much better at analysing tactics in the men's game. Keane has his place - a lot of performance is character-related. Scholes is also one not to pull punches but you get the impression that Rio is used more due to his supposed positivity in comparison.

Divij R. Nov 15 **2 likes**

Ferguson's teams were solid in defence first and foremost. The Attack Attack Attack idea came about in the mid to late nineties when his teams would throw the 'kitchen sink' at the opponent to find a late winner. This carried on throughout his tenure and thus the media coined the term Fergie Time.

The fact that we see this in Solskjaer's team as well is probably the closest thing he's come to achieving stylistically to Ferguson. I don't think Solskjaer's teams are as defensively as solid in midfield compared to Ferguson. Also there is more of a focus on playing out from the back now which he has not been able to implement to the best standard. United are a mistake waiting to happen when playing out from the back.

Also the set pieces are dire. Ferguson liked more direct set piece plays as opposed to out-swinging corner deliveries which require technical skills to covert the resulting chance. As opposed to direct chances created for strong headers of the ball under Ferguson's set pieces.

In my opinion, Solskjaer has tried to make his United more European in some phases of their play which hasn't really worked as well as he would have liked. When it has worked, it's been to bail United out in the final minutes when he's thrown the kitchen sink ala Fergie.

Sola O. Nov 15 **6 likes**

Michael Cox, God bless you for this. You've excellently articulated my thoughts on this issue which I've in various forms shared with my mates.

I've even gone as far so say that for several years, SAF was NAIVE in Europe and it was in his later years he started employing more practical and astute tactics to compete in the top end of the competition. Man management was his forte and there's nothing wrong with that.

The myth of "Attack! Attack! Attack!" is an extremely false narrative and it's sad how that '99 generation in particular has been 'weaponized' to both hoodwink and placate fans to quite successful degrees. Nostalgia FC indeed...

Andrew F. Nov 15 **13 likes**

The whole thing with the Fergie era is a bit delusional. In only one of his title winning seasons did they score more goals than Conte's 16/17 Chelsea team - yet somehow appointing him would be a betrayal of Fergie's attacking principles. Makes absolutely no sense. Reminds me of how Scholes was reinvented after the fact as being the English Xavi.

Because United were winning in the 1990s, loads of kids started supporting them. These children, now adults, like to mythologise Fergie's teams in the same we all like to mythologise enjoyable aspects of our childhood. The media has an incentive to indulge this because there are so many United fans. And the rest of us have to sit there screaming silently because we remember what actually happened.

> **James B.** Nov 15 **8 likes**
>
> @Andrew F. This is definitely true in terms of the fan revisionism. So many people I know who started supporting Man united in the 90s have misty eyed nostalgia (understandably given the success), about every aspect of the club and so often it is just so far removed from reality its bordering on absurd

> **Gavin S.** Nov 15 **3 likes**
>
> @Andrew F.
>
> Great post. Also I would say a lot of those fans supported them because of the reflected glory attached to that success. Success and plaudits are more important to them than a kid who supported his local side through a sense of identity with his local club or along family lines. Hence the press, due to the number of clicks, churn out positive pieces and indulge this nonsense. The flip side is it pretty much undermines every new manager and you can see with recent appointments, such as Ole or bringing back Ronaldo its a nod to the past rather than a step forward in the evolution of the club

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Alistair G. Nov 15 **2 likes**

Great read. I have always felt that one of Fergie's key strengths was bringing in new ideas from outside in the likes of McClaren and Queiroz.

Matthew B. Nov 15 **4 likes**

I'm only here for the Cox. I loved The Mixer and Zonal Marking - is there a new book planned, Michael?

Gavin S. Nov 15 **2 likes**

Really enjoyable article.

It is a source of frustration reading and listening to the untruths written about Manchester United and Liverpool in the press on the daily basis and how even the slightest of successes are overblown so plaudits can be chucked in their direction. The United way is an example of this. Similarly the analysis of matches is equally poor. You can literally see the frustration in Guardiola's face when he again explains that its the ball that moves, rather the players when again asked about his rotation of the players. Its a key principle of how he approaches matches.

United played some wonderful under Fergie but also played some utter dross and were not scared to defend, sit in, play on the counter when the occasion demanded. Nothing wrong with that but Fergie I would not say has the same commitment to a style of play as Guardiola or Klopp have now and the genius of both those managers is they have adopted styles of play which fuses a style of play which is committed to attacking, while also providing a way to be defensively strong by adopting a high press and, closing down spaces by playing a high line.

Niall M. Nov 15 **2 likes**

Agree with the analysis. Ferguson was a pragmatist in the best possible sense. It was his adaptation that was essential and his ability to bring others along in buying into that. That maybe required some myth making that others have swallowed at face value.

I think Solskjaer understood that for the most part and that's why he has been at his best when adapting to the opposition. The 'United way' stuff in press conferences was to help get buy in. As mentioned above, Mourinho's counter attack tactics stopped working when he lost the dressing room, he stopped being able to get the commitment he had got from his earlier teams.

United fans have to be honest with themselves. In the 90s and 2000s, people talked about Newcastle as entertainers or Arsenal as playing better football - but United won!! We were masters of playing poorly and winning. And thats ok!! I love nothing more than old romantics lamenting that they play better football whilst we rack up silverware with dirty 1-nil wins. All the United way stuff is just good PR. The problem becomes when you start believing your own hype and getting 'high on your own supply'. That's why we should have hired Conte. This club needs to be about winning.

I love the Juve motto - 'winning isn't everything, it's the only thing that matters'.

Kjetil A. Nov 15 **4 likes**

The basic point is off, in my view. It is simply not true that United last season did relatively better against strong sides than against weaker ones, nor that they got the best results when sitting back and counterattacking. That is as antiquated and badly sourced as anything pointed to in this article. United dropped points against lower half sides more rarely than Chelsea did after Tuchel took over, and much more rarely than Liverpool did. "Counterattack United who beats big times but falter against small teams" has not been a fact since Bruno Fernandes arrived. While they have struggled at times against smaller sides, that's true of everyone and their record against such sides since February 2020 and through last season has eclipsed all except City. Conversely, United has done much less well than previously against bigger teams. The basic point made simply doesn't fit the facts. The wider point about Ferguson and attacking football is very interesting though, and definitely food for thought.

> **Will G.** Nov 15
>
> Exactly! The "pure vibes" line of argument is actually kind of ironic. Respected "tactical experts" like Wilson and Cox seem like they can't be bothered to actually watch what is going on at United but prefer to stick to lazy short-hand and outdated cliché.

Manveer M. Nov 15 **2 likes**

The article aside I'm quite glad you've stuck up for Phil Neville. A pretty decent guy who seems to get pilloried for no apparent reason.

As for Fergie, especially post Ronaldo, United didn't play this gung-ho attacking football. I know as I was there for all of those matches. It was all about winning football matches and getting the best of the players he had. For all the talk about him as a manager, no-one talks about how he got the most out of some pretty ordinary players. Hell I even remember LvG's Bayern Munich being bossed by Darron Gibson!

Cameron W. Nov 15 **3 likes**

Haven't seen a Cox article on Man Utd in awhile, only pops up when it fits his narrative I guess? SAF was pragmatic, he talked otherwise but his actions, his nature was always a pragmatic one. His players as managers have been the same, talk about attack while actually having a very pragmatic approach and not fixing on one style of play. Ole was at his best when he setup the team to play to its stengths - worked quite well in the big games where the big name managers have a fixed style of play.

SAF famously said he wouldn't play for a draw vs Man City when his team only needed a point to win the league but everything he did and the way the team was setup suggested he was perfectly happy with a point. What he said and what he did never had to match, it just had to get pundits, fans, the press and most importantly the opposition to believe that is what he would do.

Elisha A. Nov 15 **2 likes**

U

C M. Nov 15 **7 likes**

One of the best articles I've read on here.

First and foremost it should be said Ferguson was a serial winner and incredible man manager. He turned a shipwreck into a vessel at Aberdeen before reinstating and keeping Manchester United at the pinnacle of the game until he retired.

However, as the article states, there's been a lot of myth making by some of his former players over the last 8 years.

Ferguson was predominantly a 4-4-2 or 4-4-1-1 manager. Words like pressing didn't really enter the popular vocabulary of football fans in the UK until Guardiola and Klopp began to make a name for themselves and that was towards the end of Fergies career. Rio Ferdinand has repeatedly said he disagreed with Ferguson's approach to pressing, but if you watch any of the games from that time, what we've now come to know as Pressing is almost non existent. Certainly the now commonplace, co-ordinated tactical pressing just doesn't happen under Ferguson, or indeed many teams from that era. I also can't ever recall a Ferguson goalkeeper having a special requirement to be good with his feet? Distribution was to ensure the ball landed at the feet of one of the wide men or forwards.

Ferguson's importance to Manchester United is immeasurable and unlikely to ever be surpassed. His importance to tactical innovation and the game in a wider sense however just can't even be mentioned in the same sentence as coaches like Michels, Happel, Bielsa, Guardiola, Klopp (and many more). I think this is what many of his former employees either struggle with or just don't seem to realise.

Chris L. Nov 15 **3 likes**

"United had won with a performance fairly typical of Jose Mourinho, peculiarly now cast as the villain for his style of football rather than the more pertinent fact that his results towards the end were disastrous because he had completely lost the dressing room. "

I get that this is just meant to be a paragraph introducing a shift into the meat of the article. And we could all go into a lengthy discussion of statistics around number of times Solskjaer's Utd racked up 4 or 5 goals in a game compared to Mourinho and van Gaal.

Even just laying down the ground rules of what constitutes an 'attacking' playing style under Ferguson would be - the fact is that a lot of people would see the multiple rapid sweeping counterattacks Utd would launch under SAF as thrilling, positive, aggressive - others would fixate on the number of men behind the ball in the defensive phase, or the benching of more attack minded players to bring in Park/Butt/Fletcher/Ronnie Johnsen to shore up midfield in the process, and say that despite the number of times Utd fans would be up on their feet as Ronaldo/Giggs/Kanchelskis tore up the pitch with the ball, the playing style was defensive.

But the issue I have with this paragraph is that, no, Mourinho wasn't wrongly maligned for his playing style. Utd were not defensively secure under Mourinho even in his 2017/18 season, as De Gea's massive overperformances will attest. In attack his overreliance on bringing on Fellaini in the ~70th minute was abhorrent, and his purchase of Alexis for use as a LW when he had Martial and Rashford as productive as they were was the point at which the dressing room really started to go rancid. 2018/19 was merely the fruit borne from the seeds he'd sown in late 2017.

A lot of parallels can be drawn with the presumed end of Ole's tenure, but it would be untrue to pretend that Ole's version of counterattacking football in wasn't on a number of occasions closer to the idyll associated with the memory of Ferguson, than the dreary realities of Utd's Mourinho.

Harrison O. Nov 15

You are the best Cox. Absolute best article I read in a long time

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Jerome M. Nov 15 **9 likes**

With all due respect, this seems a very revisionist take.

I'd disagree with the notion that a team is either "defensive" or "attacking". Both Jurgen Klopp's and Pep Guardiola's sides are both defensive and attacking.

Klopp's defensiveness comes in hastily not allowing teams to leave their final third. Pep's defensiveness is a blend of that that, keeping the ball so noone else can play and fouling anyone who survives those two. They are both defensive and attacking cause they do both sides of the game at an elite level. Under SAF, so did United.

If there was no strategic attacking intent at United, how could Manchester United have won the most league trophies in England? Or at the start of this season, be the top overall goalscorers by more than 100 goals more, being the only team to have crossed 2000?

I agree that there are periods in SAF's history where iconic victories were built in the acknowledgement that another team was better and they had to defend to a victory, but the notion that they played direct counterattacking football and that means they didn't have an attacking intent is misleading.

Just listening to ex-players talk about the reverence they felt and about the battering the expected coming to Old Trafford under SAF implies they expected a defensive game and to be under pressure.

I can agree that SAF's various sides took various tactical iterations, as have various Barcelona sides over the years.

But the notion that direct play utilising width and counterattacking football cannot be described as an 'attacking philosophy' because it is not relentless pressing or endless possession football seems revisionist, a product of the last decade of football.

And using the protégé's of SAF is revisionist as well. Jose Mourinho trained under Bryan Robson and Louis van Gaal at Barcelona, does that mean neither of them had "attacking" philosophies?

Holding a coach accountable for how their players go on to coach is illogical.

> **Mahesh K.** Nov 15 **1 like**
>
> Nicely said Jerome. Perfect!

Dylan K. Nov 15 **5 likes**

It's telling that the tactical coaches that helped SAF implement that winning mentality are no longer working. Football moves on, so does tactics and team management. The minute u start referring to historic 'DNA' (what does that even mean?) then ur on a hiding to a loss.

> **Andrew M.** Nov 15 **4 likes**
>
> It's embarrassing to hear Ole continuosly using the Man Utd DNA argument. Its meaningless and unhelpful. When Klopp went to Liverpool he told the team and the media to forget the past because history doesn't mean anything going forward. "Man Utd DNA" is the only thing keeping Ole in the job, because apart from being an icon of Man Utd's past, he hasn't got anything of substance to offer.

Andy C. Nov 15 **2 likes**

It always seemed pretty obvious that Ferguson didn't have a specific style. So, why doesn't OGS see this? Or is it all about the vibes with him?

Kiret S. Nov 15

Wow. This is brilliant. No prisoners here.

Ranj B. Nov 15 **1 like**

Really interesting piece and one that does go straight in for one of the bigger myths we have around English football.

I do agree with the view around his side being all out attack was over exaggerated massively, and comparing him to his great rival wenger it's almost as if fergie was the one who played beautiful football all the time!
Reality is both knew when to attack and when to defend, but the most successful teams were built on truly great players who could adapt and manage games much better than anyone else.

I liken this to the myth of "fergie time", and it became such a big thing. Yes Utd would score late as they kept going, and that was probably because they wore out opponents over the 90 mins so got their chance, but some of the goals were scored even before the game started as the myth around late goals and fergie time meant that the opposition almost accepted some kind of late goal/s being conceaded.

It would be interesting to see how some of the great teams/managers we have seen over the last 10/15 years transition into management and their own footballing philosophy. Obvious everyone will be watching Xavi very closely but some of the other pl teams under Jose, the Liverpool team under Rafa or Houiller as a few examples to see what has been picked up and taken into management. I see Stevie G now as a prime example, taken the best elements of Rafa, Cappelo and houiller in being hard to break down and solid first before anything else

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Abdo H. Nov 15 **3 likes**

Hi Michael, can you please do an article on which manager's ex-players have been good as managers? I reckon Cruyff or Sacchi must've produced the most successful ex players turned managers?

James L. Nov 15 **3 likes**

Excellent article based on evidence rather than general impressions from watching match of the day. Ferguson routinely organised his side to nullify opponents especially Arsenal in their prime. They were also pretty tedious to watch in Europe once he modified the approach as you say. They also scored loads of goals on the counter which means they played deep a lot of the time. As Mourinho said he played winning rather than attacking football.

Malte G. Nov 15 **4 likes**

What does "attacking football" mean though? Often see it (maybe also here?) mixed up with "possession".

> **Simon H.** Nov 15 **4 likes**
>
> Agree, most people see attacking football as low risk possession football coupled with high risk defensive line.
>
> So I guess "attacking football" is how you defend rather than how you attack?
>
> Fergie played for the most part, low risk defensive line with high tempo counters which would be great to watch due to speed on flank and outlet possessed.
>
> Pundits nowadays try to make every team a clone rather than applauding variety in the game.

David J. Nov 15 **2 likes**

Great article. I watched a lot of Fergie-managed games where United went up against better teams and ground out a win without playing a free-flowing, attacking style of the game. They defended until they had a chance and nabbed it. There are a lot of rose coloured glasses out there.

Neil P. Nov 15 **6 likes**

The parallels between UTD 2010 - present and Liverpool 1991-16 are strikingly apparent. A commitment to a bygone (and somewhat mythical) philosophy, the desperation to reclaim former glory, the unwillingness to properly adapt to a much changed and rapidly evolving dynamic, the inability to accurately self-analyse, the problems in the boardroom, the mistakes in recruitment, the idea that they're "only a couple of players away", right down to the misguided belief that next year could be their year. It's almost a complete repetition of history with only the name of the club changing. They're now in the phase of believing that only a former club "great" could possibly get the best out of the players because he "understands the United way" like nobody else could. In reality, they're going round in circles which, by definition, lead nowhere.

I agree with the crux of this article, particularly on the point of style of play - let's not forget the year Cantona came back from the long ban and 1-0 to United became the natural order. History is rewritten regularly to suit narrative, and it can be because people have short memories which are easily manipulated and clouded by emotion.

Ultimately though, whilst Solskjaer is clearly unqualified, and lacking the acumen to manage a side with ambitions of becoming one of the top five in the world once again, the problems cut far deeper than him. Would bringing in a top manager help? Perhaps yes....however, van Gaal and Mourinho's efforts suggest otherwise. As a club, United has some serious soul searching to do, thy must move on from "the glory days" that were and assess themselves afresh. Rather then looking to recapture what once was, they must instead create it anew.

History is just that, the success of the past cannot help them solve the failures of today. It took Liverpool 30 years to get back to the top; if United keep following the same pattern, it could take them 20 more.

Craig A. Nov 15 **4 likes**

Agree about everything- as a Man United fan even I know that “attack, attack attack” was a myth. In Europe especially but also often top of the table clashes were tight affairs where Fergie was careful not to concede. He said he regretted when at 3-1 down against City with only ten men he didn’t shut up shop and we lost 6-1.

We were more adventurous and dominant over lower placed teams back then but that could also be due to the overall quality of the teams in the Premier League improving since the 2000s.

Also 100% on Keane- no insights on tactics or technique just “no heart” or “ no passion”. Whenever the presenters or other pundits mention to him about a tactical issue he just responds with “of course but the players should know what to do anyway” and then it’s back to “desire”.

A lot of pundits (I particularly remember Lineker) were dismissive of the suggestion that football journalists could be included on coverage. The old “how can you be a pundit/coach/ referee if you haven’t played the game?” chestnut! But I would like to see someone like a Michael Cox or a Tom Worville offering more outside tactical and statistical analysis on TV coverage (although Neville and Carragher can be insightful)

Dan M. Nov 15 **1 like**

I agree with this article but I have to say it's a little unfair on Mark Hughes (words I didn't think I'd be typing). That Blackburn side was, in the main, exactly what people think of as Ferguson football. Flying wingers, a technical midfielder next to a somewhat more energetic and bruising counterpart and a pressing attack (at home anyway). Maybe they played with more physicality but it was in my estimation very close to what is perceived to be 'the united way'

Mike B. Nov 15 **2 likes**

Can't we even get through an international break without someone calling for Solskjaer to be sacked? It's very tedious. Solskjaer was undoubtedly an emotional appointment, but emotions are important in football - some writers at the Athletic, including Cox, would do well to remember this.

Cox's main argument here is totally illogical - Solskjaer doesn't play attacking football, and neither did Ferguson, so Solskjaer hasn't inherited the club's DNA? Would you like to reconsider this?

Also, Quique Sanchez Flores is a revered manager because he won the Europa League, so Solskjaer himself was only a penalty shoot-out away from being a bulletproof second-tier Eurocoach? Nonsense.

Duncan T. Nov 15 **3 likes**

I find the distinction between "attacking" and "defensive" football to be rather tricky (here, if not in much else, I agree with Mourinho). I've always seen Tiki-Taki, for example, as being at least as defensive as it is attacking - it is wonderfully efficient at stopping other teams from scoring, because they simply don't have much of the ball. On the other hand, counter-attacking can be played with a lot of emphasis on the latter term, if it is based on a genuine analysis of an opponent's weaknesses and repeated attempts to exploit them.

Most of Ferguson's teams were counter-attacking, but they were not "defensive". The intent was always to win the game, be brave in possession, take risks in progressing the ball, and ultimately use your offensive firepower to take the day.

Bernard K. Nov 15 **1 like**

I’ve been asking the question for a while now, “What is this ‘United Way’ we keep hearing about?”

> **Baz N.** Nov 15 **1 like**
>
> Bullying refs, overly aggressive on and off the pitch and refusing to speak to the media in my memory.

Steve S. Nov 15 **4 likes**

The article highlights the nonsense that is the do called DNA of teams.
As a Wolves supporter I can tell you now Nuno dragged us into the 21st Century when he was appointed.We are another club that apparently likes to play fast aggressive football,well that served us well of the previous 35 years I don't think!
I still hear when I go to games from some of the older supporters "Get it forward,"Get it wide", " ,"This passing it around is no good"
They can't grasp that the game has moved on,same with so called pundits who still think you can kick people up in the air etc.

Suhail M. Nov 15 **1 like**

Why am I paying for this? Lol.

Chris C. Nov 15 **1 like**

Feels quite a xenophobic article.

Where are the comments on Jaap Stam, Laurent Blanc, Henning Berg, Gabriel Heinze, Henrik Larsson all which have had varying degrees of success playing styles of football

Weird the comment is restricted to just former British United players...

Henrik Nov 15

Is it possible for Ole to "move on" and still keep his job? Is there any way he can learn from whats happened and make the changes required?

If he has to go - who would you replace him with?

Jad M. Nov 15 **4 likes**

Michael's analysis has been more attacking than all of Fergie's former players' philosophies combined!

Savage, but brilliantly true.

Nemanja B. Nov 15 **4 likes**

"The entire premise of Solskjaer's suitability for Manchester United was built upon a lie. It's now time to move on."

This is very brave, open and direct, as it should be.

John C. Nov 15

As a club, United does have attacking football in its DNA but that's not connected to Ferguson. It rose from the Busby Babes and, importantly, was continued by the great fortune of having Best, Law and Charlton in the same side. Different times of course but those players only knew how to attack and, over the generations, this reputation has been retained. You could throw in Tommy Docherty as well. Ferguson, as great as he was, changing his methods halfway through his tenure was never going to alter the fans' belief that United need talented attack-minded individuals more than they need organisation. It will be tough for any manager/coach.

Bill I. Nov 15 **3 likes**

Excellent article. 2 comments. Al Davis of the Oakland/LA/Las Vegas Raiders had a slogan "Just Win. Baby". To me, that was always Ferguson's only goal and his openness to new ideas, filtered through his study and hiring new assistants is what makes him so impressive. There are many really outstanding managers who had good ideas and long periods of success, but only Ferguson seems to be able to change his approach so successfully to keep his teams fresh. From looking at other sports, its really remarkable. There are very few similar coaches who are that adaptable over their career. My other comment—thanks for noticing that punditry is so focused on playing hard while ignoring playing smart. It's particularly frustrating when watching on TV because we are limited in our ability to see the whole field and really need the pundits to supplement what we can see—not just bloviate about playing hard and how kicking the talent out of English football will bring back proper manly virtues.

Luke B. Nov 15 **2 likes**

I understand the point you're trying to make here but it's based on a false premise: that you can judge Ferguson's football philosophy by the managers who used to play for him. Better to judge it based on how his players actually played. Nobody who watched united through Fergie's reign could doubt that they were consistently electrifying in attack. Of course, they adapted themselves in Europe, but that was explicitly because they had been caught out previously by being so naively open.

Having said that - his teams were also solid all of the way through, and you could make a solid argument for the fact that the position his teams were consistently strongest in was centre back.

Regardless, this article is a classic "straw man" article; there are many better angles to attack Solskjaer from, if that's what you're trying to.

Chief amongst them would be the failure to develop players. Keane criticising the players last week made me really realise how glaring that failure has been. He picked on Shaw and Maguire - but does anyone doubt that they would both be world class if they'd played under Pep, Klopp, or indeed Fergie for the past three years?

> **Rob W.** Nov 15
>
> I agree with almost every word of this. Not sure about the Shaw comment, though. He was world class last season and thoughout the summer after struggling badly for a long time and for many reasons. That was under Ole's guidance. He's regressed this time, but it's too simplistic to blame the manager alone.
>
> Like you say, there are any number of angles to attack Solskjaer from, but I'm not sure Luke Shaw is one of them.

Jayant P. Nov 15 **1 like**

United were never a pure attacking team what we had was effective football. The players knew what they were doing on the field which is not the case now.

Nick B. Nov 15

Good read, tho I suspect you lost every single QPR fan when suggesting Mark Hughes "kept us afloat against the odds." In a club with a pretty good track records of calamitous managerial appointments, his arguably was the worst of the lot.

Uzair A. Nov 15

Love this article! So funny to see all this talk about Ole and all the return to tradition talk

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Ronnie S. Nov 15 **6 likes**

A club's DNA is such a nebulous concept and probably doesn't really exist. In human life DNA is inherited 50/50 from mother and father and is with a new human from the beginning. In the context of a football club, I doubt there's a football club in the world that can trace too much of what it does today back to its inception. In reality, 'DNA' is just describing a range of things that have happened at a club in a point in time, that are usually driven by individuals who were employed by the club.

Barcelona will talk about their DNA but I'm sure pre-Cruyff it looked very different, so it's more about Cruyff's influence than anything inherent at the club. Likewise Arsenal DNA - part 1 of Wenger was swashbuckling football, pre-Wenger it was solid defence and 1-0 to The Arsenal, and in the 30's it was Chapman's WM.

I'm probably being too literal but DNA can't be changed after something has been created. I doubt football clubs really have an on-pitch DNA because results and progress are deemed to important to worry about it, otherwise Man U wouldn't have had managers in the last 10 years with such different approaches, Arsenal wouldn't have gone from Graham to Wenger (with a left field choice in the middle of them) to Emery.

Phani K. Nov 15 **1 like**

Totally agree with this article. Probably the biggest threat to OGS's managerial career now, are the false expectations created by the 'pundits' themselves. In trying to protect the manager, they have created a wrong image of OGS as a manager. Utd are a club in the clutches of its past, unable to break through.

Francis M. Nov 15

I agree with much of what you say - but I think it's overstated - Ole did not only base his tactics on counter-attacking football - relative to the PL they had high numbers for touches in the opposition third, and for possession - at least up until this season. And I think I speak for many Utd fans in feeling that we saw more exciting attacking football under Ole - yes, in a variety of ways, which of course included fast counter-attacks - than we'd seen under the three previous managers. I do agree that Fergie often played very pragmatically - especially in Europe - that's true - on the other hand the team had some amazing attacking talent and you can't really say there wasn't also a lot of attacking football. So partly agree, but I think you've made it too black and white.

Richard A. Nov 15 **1 like**

I think often what fans feel their club "DNA"/ way of playing is, is really about looking back to when they were good! Successful, playing well and able to dominate (or go toe to toe with) other sides. For most (though not all) English clubs, that quality also allowed them to enjoy attacking play and the ability go and take the game to opponents and win. That's why that "attacking United DNA" is pretty similar to what you hear from fans from Everton, Spurs, West Ham, Liverpool, Newcastle, Villa, West Brom, Wolves etc - take your pick. When your team is strong, you can attack and dominate and that's what many fans hanker for - the good old days with a side of ability/quality. It then turns into a how things "should be" mythology. I love Fergie but there's a lot of myth-making - I remember years of Champs League borefests against, say, Deportivo or Valencia which were, if not defensive, certainly not "attacking DNA" performances. Fergie loved to attack and liked to play football when he could - but he was a clever pragmatist too.

Peter K. Nov 15 **8 likes**

I think Carl Anka said it best on a podcast about a year ago - all clubs think they're special for playing attacking football with a team of passionate, hungry players, many of whom came through their youth academy. Club DNA is a marketing myth

> **William C.** Nov 15
>
> Exactly, it's just a bunch of marketing gimmicks. The DNA or "Way" is agreed upon when the team is winning trophies after trophies, there's not such thing as a set way.
>
> Ever wonder why the fans still sing about "playing football the Matt Busby way" but not, say, the Ron Atkinson way... It's only because they were winning (more) under him.

Ulf L. Nov 15 **1 like**

Respectfully disagree here Michael. While Fergie took different approaches to the game in 2000's and early 2010's than he did in the 90's I do think that whatever the surface tactics were the underlying priority was attacking. Whether on the front foot pressing the play, as a counter attack when sitting in and defending, or as a quick transition counter when pressing opposition. I also believe many of the ex-United players tried to instill this same approach in their teams to varying success. The challenge with this approach is that it requires a mental commitment first to aggressive attacking when opportunities arise, regardless what the tactics of the day are. Fergie's United teams were always committed to scoring goals and winning games as the primary focus. He rarely played for a tie or not to lose.

Pooyan A. Nov 15 **4 likes**

Simply well said!

I love the fact you challenge the establishment of nonsense British football.

I had an earlier discussion that England would have won the EU championship if England had a more tactical astute coach in the final. I could not imagine that a team with players who had seen Pep, Conte, Sarri, Klopp, etc., scores at minutes 2, then sits back like England did and plays long balls.

The same goes for United. Both Van Gaal and Mourinho were tactically more successful than this idiot in charge now and won more trophies. But keep him on, why not. He serves the purpose for the United fans...lol

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Lee A. Nov 15 **1 like**

I would've liked more on Queiroz's no striker philosophy and how that influenced the '08 team. He was quite pragmatic as well.

Colin D. Nov 15 **1 like**

Interesting article which highlights the fact that some pundits are not accurately reflecting what is happening in games and are allowing their own bias to influence their criticism.

Thogdad Nov 15

Harsh but fair

Bh A. Nov 15

Hi Michael, even as a one time Solskjaer loyalist, I enjoyed this as I do your work generally.

A question, please. Given the current United squad, which manager and which tactics do you think would most suit us right now?

A month ago I wouldn't have countenanced Rogers. But I'm slowly warming to it...

James S. Nov 15

I'm a bitter blue, so incapable of being unbiased when it comes to Utd, but I have to say I have been thinking the same thing ever since Van Gaal was sacked and Giggs was given the job temporarily and there was all the talk of returning to their attacking principles.
I remember the treble winning side being good to watch, but since then I remember a LOT of backs-to-the-wall wins, triumphs of perspiration over inspiration. No doubt Ferguson was a great manager, but he was also a pragmatist, and certainly not a case of "however many you score, we'll score one more".

Prathik C. Nov 15

What a fantastic article, Michael! Thanks for putting this out there. I am so sick and tired of this Ole BS and the constant harking back to some non existent past visions.

Dave B. Nov 15 **1 like**

I agree that there has been very little managerial success from former United players. However as a season ticket holder from 1999 to around 2010 I can assure you that teams with Yorke, Cole, Sheringham & Solksjaer and Rooney Ronaldo, Tevez & Berbatov knew how to attack.

Дмитрий Nov 15 **1 like**

The entire premise of Solskjaer's suitability for Manchester United was built on his understanding what is Manchester United. Not attacking Man United, not defending. The whole Man United

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Steve C. Nov 15

Having seen how things have changed over time to put "the x way" on anything now would suggest a team method/culture that is embedded from academy to first team. Sorry to have to say it but like City now. Fergie had that, I presume when the class of '92 came through. How effective/sustained it was after that group I wouldn't claim to know, but clearly Eric Harrison developed players that fit the team model. My question though is when did this stop/slow down?

Thomas S. Nov 15 **2 likes**

Another negative article about United how boring. Where is the in-depth analysis on kanes poor league form for spurs? Or Messi struggling to settle in the French league or maybe de bruynes decline?...No another negative piece on man united, we know we aren't doing well atm, give us something else to read and stop the bias.

Ibrahim A. Nov 15 **2 likes**

On the point about punditry, couldn't agree more, it's absolute trash and 95% of ex footballers have nothing useful to say about a match.

Dan N. Nov 15

Sometimes it's more Ferguson's spoken word that gives this attacking Aurora associated with United. He regularly spoke about going for the win, taking risks in the last minute, wanting to justify fans hard earned money with entertainment. Contrast that with Mourinho who would celebrate a hard fought win or even a draw. Both fantastic managers with different ways of playing.

Betasphere Nov 15 **1 like**

The United Way is Winning and the United DNA is to never give up until the end. Getting blasted 5-0 at home and giving up vs City means you neither have the United Way nor the United DNA. My friends who are rival fans are asking me how is Ole still there, the only answer I could give is that we are becoming Arsenal that's why.

Lee C. Nov 15

What people seem to have forgotten entirely is that even while Fergie was winning trophies some of the football served up at Old Trafford was dross. There were plenty of dour 1-0 wins throughout his tenure. We weren't spanking teams 6-1 every week. But what he did instill in his players was a confidence to express themselves coupled with a fierce determination to win. We haven't seen either in any great capacity since he left.

Joe L. Nov 15 **1 like**

Ferguson was one of the greatest ever, for his time but the game has moved on more in 10 years than it had the previous 30 (I mean, look at the way Mourinho was brushed aside these last 6/7 years) and in my mind i think he knew that. the moment the likes of Pep came along and created the football his Barcelona side played, both with and without the ball, it was his time to leave it. You only have to watch sky sports classic games from 15 years ago, very little shape, patterns of play, desire to play from the back when pressed and then because of that.. players didn't have to press as well as a team. The change is absolutely incredible to what you see now with likes of Tuchel, Pep, Klopp, everything is so meticulous and well drilled.

And that's the biggest problem, the absolutely laughable thing about this whole Ole attacking, Fergie thing... the game has adapted, it's changed. Rio even alluded once that Fergie before a game said to them 'you're Man United, go and win the game' and that's all that was needed, but these days go out against top teams and without a real plan and idea, they will pick you apart. There belief that just a good bit of man management and lads with 'character' is enough in this modern day is mind boggling.

We will never know if Fergie would have been able to adapt to such a strong change in the way football is played and coached but there's no doubt to be successful he'd have adapted incredibly well to what was in front of him and yet his ex players still live and die by the old Fergie way.

Habeeb A. Nov 15

DNA Has nothing to do with football. I prefer it, if ppl just said "the Utd way".
It's a bit like when people insist on giving 110%, which is not a possibility....

There are some similarities in Ole's Utd, to the team of Old, and it's in counter- attacking. For most other things, the present team falls way short.

Roy Keane is right when he speaks of character, drive, confidence and personality. This and other traits had many teams beat before they step onto the pitch against the Fergie-era teams.
Nowadays, you cannot get-by with those traits alone.
Not only does the current side lack those traits, they do not have the technical and tactical accumen to overcome that, and follow the modern paths.

Good mention of that win Vs PSG in 2019. Utd rode their luck, and had VAR to thank for a quintessential modern penalty.
Finally, I also think Ole needs to hire top coaches and get ruthless with underperformers, instead of keeping the place "happy".

ACTG anyone?
Uracil?

Adam E. Nov 15 **2 likes**

The end of Fergie's reign was interesting. The team wasn't particularly good on the eye, but they squeaked out last minute winning goals the entire season en route to winning the league. It was one of the worst teams that have ever won the Premiership and that encapsulates Fergie's real genius!

When Moyes struggled, I wasn't surprised. The team weren't very good the year prior and they lost the famed Fergie effect.

Mahesh K. Nov 15 **1 like**

@Michael Cox, I normally enjoy your articles but that was a disappointment. It is clear that your definition of attacking football is different than that of the former players of Man United. No issues with that. But you haven't described your version of attacking football. Also, why should your version be the only one? Why not they be correct as well?

Ferguson played all sorts of football. He set them up defensively and purchased 1-0 wins when he needed to. But those are not the definition of 'Man United football'.

If you want to understand the attacking football under Ferguson, go watch the games they were chasing. It would be wave after wave after wave of relentless attacks. It was not tiki-taka, it was not gegenpressing, it was not counter attacking. Actually, there is no modern 'philosophical' term to explain it. That is the 'attacking football' of Man United.

For all of Solskjaer's shortcomings, I do think he has lived up to this. How many times have they chased a game and either won or drawn it? You can criticize Ole and his team for falling behind more than they should. But they definitely chase it like Fergie's teams used to do.

Us Man United fans may not be as tactically savvy as you or your Athletic colleagues! But we know 'our' version of football when we see one, especially when our team plays it!

> **Declan D.** Nov 15
>
> Yep, Ole and Fergies teams are characterised by doing it the hard way, falling behind, building pressure, throwing everything at it. It is swashbuckling football. I guess the difference is that the rest of the league has caught up and are.morelikely to hold out of hammer United on the counter, rather than roll over eventually. United don't ha e all the best players any more.

Ash G. Nov 15 **1 like**

Spurs' motto is "To dare is to do" they are named for Sir Henry Percy who's audacity in battle earned him the nickname Hotspur. Tottenham's DNA has always been free flowing entertaining football, whether they've always managed to achieve it or not is a different story.

People get caught up in Spurs' recent history punching above their weight in recent years playing great football under Poch, then sliding into mid table mediocrity with JM and Nuno an echo of their 90's form.

Tottenham are a club that have existed since 1882 and in this time they were the 1st Non-league club to win the FA cup, 1st English club to win in Europe and they've won plenty of silver wear in between. The reason Spurs fans have been so angry recently is not because they're not winning silver wear, that'll come in time whether it's a league cup or conference league, what they can't stand is the turgid football that has been on display. It's not the Spurs way as their DNA is free flowing attacking football. This is also demonstrated by some of the great names that have passed through the club at certain points, just unfortunately they've never had the budget to keep multiple greats at the same time when other clubs with huge budgets have come knocking.

As a Spurs fan I can live without winning, football is incredibly competitive and just to be consistently mixing it up in the top half of the Prem and any European competition is in itself an achievement but what I can't stand if watching drudge every weekend as it's not in our DNA.

Declan D. Nov 15 **4 likes**

I think Ferguson's era has been misinterpreted as time has gone on. The reference to his team's as attacking probably has gained prominence due to the turgid nature of Van Gaal and Mourinhos teams. So I don't think it is a Solskjaer thing per se.

I would call fergies teams swashbuckling, rather than attacking. There was always drama, they ofen went behind in games, the pressure on the opposition always mounted late in games, they tended to always do it the hard way.

Solskjaer teams are a bit like that, but without all the, you know, coaching and stuff!

So think Michael you have assumed this one incorrectly. Swashbuckling, high drama, but maybe not always attacking.

Paul G. Nov 15

Spot on Fergie played many a game with counter attack as a plan but the most damning indictment of OGS is his one dimensional back room staff Fergie had the foresight to bring in progressive thinkers from abroad OGS talks into an Echo Chamber

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Jan Inge H. Nov 15

When Ferguson came, he had never played for Unite. He brought his on philosophy. Way do we need ex United players as manager, trainers. Go out and find someone that has the right mentally and philosophy, and can be the next Ferguson with no relationship to United instead.

Tom S. Nov 15

The idea of clubs having 'styles' 'culture' of playing is daft. Name a club who don't think they should have an attacking, good to watch style?

Martin A. Nov 15 **1 like**

United could grind it out with the best of them. One of Fergusons underrated strengths was having an army of players who could play multiple positions. The likes of P.Neville, Brown, O'Shea, Alan Smith and Phelen were jack of all trades grafters who understood their limitations and worth in equal measure and the legend of exciting, front foot football (away from home anyway) was often a myth with the Keegans' Newcastle, the 90s Liverpool teams and Wengers' Arsenal far easier on the eye, if not troubling the trophy engravers to the same extent, and in Newcastles' case not at all.

Jacob F. Nov 15

Ferguson's teams did have a ferocity/determination to them and an instinct to always try to move the ball forward often quite directly (dare I say it they liked a good long ball) I do think it factors into a general insecurity about Man Utd's place in the game. While United are commercially the biggest team in the world other than the Ferguson years they've never really been a candidate for the title of biggest on the pitch. They're far behind the likes of Real Madrid and Bayern who they would consider their peers in terms of trophies or domestic and continental dominance. Club DNA/the X club way has more truth to it than some would care to admit but it's still very much a loose term, I think the echos back to the good old days of Ferguson had to be constructed into some far greater tradition quickly (seriously I don't really remember anybody using the words United way before Solskjaer's tenure) in order to suggest United were destined to return to winning ways even though it looks a long way off under the current ownership. If United hadn't lucked out in the 90s with SAF turning into the greatest manager of all time this would be a club with a few good years in the 60s, fewer league titles than Everton and fewer European cups or even final appearances than Nottingham forest.

Me Nov 15

Football philosophy? A giant contradiction in terms, a pretentious load of self justificatory bollocks. It's 11v11, the best 11 usually wins, that's it. Good fun though, sometimes

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Matthew R. Nov 16

Just because Ferguson didn't always play on the front foot doesn't change that United's style for the vast majority of his reign was entertaining attacking football, whether that was counter-attacking or playing on the front foot - it was still attacking.
You then said it best yourself Michael, about Ferguson going against his doctrine, he found other ways to win, realising that sometimes United had to sit in, just like Pep's City and Klopp's Liverpool have done, the end result was all that mattered. Lastly, didn't playing Ronaldo up front work an absolute treat? I'm not sure why you used that as an example of Ferguson breaking from tradition there.

Bhi N. Nov 16 **1 like**

I have followed United since 97. The real man utd way of playing was winning.

Zach Y. Nov 16 **7 likes**

I regret that I have but one "meh" to give. Perhaps do some analysis instead of just knocking down straw men. What were the stats in the Ferguson era(s) compared to opponents? Compared to now? What were the tactics his teams used? In what sense was a front three of Ronaldo, Tevez, and Rooney not attacking? How does that differ from the Project Restart front line of Rashford, Martial, and Greenwood? If large numbers of people see some continuity in the character of many distinct teams, of what does that continuity consist? Is it attitude? Standards? Approach to different games?

You mention Ferguson's strengths as man management and a non-dogmatic approach to tactics. Sounds a hell of a lot like Solskjaer, who is praised for his man management and (till recently) flexible tactical approach to big games, while being criticized for lack of tactical "identity." Ferguson had no consistent tactical identity, and it was brilliant. He was a grand strategist, not a tactician. That's why he outlasted so many. On the organizational level, he planned over years long timeframes. At the tactical level he gave his coaches principles from which to build game plans and develop players (e.g. "pace," "possession with purpose," "unpredictability" [quoted from an extended interview of Rene M]). Not "pressing" or "playing out from the back" or "4-4-2". There is real continuity of intent and purpose there. It reveals itself over time, but it doesn't pop out of individual matches, YouTube clips, or gifs.

Ole's issue is that he is too much like a caricature of Ferguson. He's Ferguson-esque. He's insistent on certain aspects of Fergie's approach without understanding how to cover his own weaknesses and adapt to the actual situation that he's in, rather than the one he wants to be in. That was one of Ferguson's greatest strengths: the ability to recognize and adapt to a new reality before it was obvious to everyone that it needed to be done. Sometimes he made mistakes, but he didn't really care.

Could Ferguson cope in the Klopp/Guardiola era? He'd probably take a beating or two and then start a multi-year process of retooling, from the coaching down to the analysis and recruiting and come back stronger. Those of us who have supported Ole did so not just out of romance or delusion, but out of hope that that was what he was trying to do. The signing of Ronaldo instead of a quality CM this year (and Haaland next) have dimmed that hope. The failure to bring in any top coaches who aren't friends of the current staff, who might be able to coach something like a modern possession structure, may have extinguished it entirely. Too much nostalgia. Not enough knowledge.

> **David M.** Nov 16 **1 like**
>
> You are on to something there Zach - Fergie would have "retooled" the football side of the club in response to City, Chelsea and Liverpool. I thought I saw glimpses of that adaptability and thinking in Ole and yet he's now consistently making the conservative and ultimately wrong decisions in every aspect of the club.

> **Vino T.** Nov 16
>
> 👉👌👏👍Brilliant ,a Fergie time winner

Matt Nov 16 **1 like**

Love this, Coxy! If I can call you Coxy.

Neil S. Nov 16 **2 likes**

I enjoyed this article. The only thing I would say in Solskjaer's defence is that his United team generally over his tenure haven't been boring, which definitely was the case under the United managers before him and United shouldn't be boring.
(I would emphasise "generally". I'm sure some people will point to the odd game but let's not be facetious)

David H. Nov 16

One of the biggest things I loved about Fergie was his ability to hide his teams weaknesses. No team is ever perfect but he would find a way to protect a player if they were going to struggle. That's one of the biggest problems now - every team knows that if they put pressure on Fred, he'll give the ball up a few times a game in a dangerous area. They know that AWB isn't as much of a threat so they don't need to focus on him. The weaknesses are known, they are exploited and nothing changes.
All those years where for 2 games a season (against Arsenal), there would be 5 in midfield and probably Park Ji-Sung comes in. Wenger did the exact same, he never adapted and the same thing kept happening.

GERARD M. Nov 16 **1 like**

The great thing Fergie realised was the death of a strict formation in early 2000s. Utd switched easily from 4-3-3 to a 4-5-1 when the game dictated it. He started Utd off as counter attacking 4-4-2 with two flying wingers and evolved constantly over the thirty years. Fergie's true genius was not being imprisoned by his own reputation or the teams reputation. He didn't surround himself with entrenched Utd ideas but new evolving younger ideas. But he did instill the Utd way of fighting to the end, courage on the ball and refusing to accept defeat, that has gone AWOL in too many of today's squad.

Debdut M. Nov 16

Incredible article!

Aungkon A. Nov 16

Such a nice article. Always found Fergie's teams to have disciplined pragmatism against big oppositions. Anyway, i think Ole is doing good. The core english base of Utd is bang average (sancho is unproven so far, rest I dont think anyone in the world rates very highly). international superstars are old and hardly press, Pogba is an enigma yet when he plays good alongside Fernandes Utd is a better team no doubt. Its just City like Chelsea has too much quality and Liverpool unlike Utd actually has a working philosophy under Klopp. United is expectedly in mid table and football wise they are a mid table team.

Andy C. Nov 16 **1 like**

Outstanding piece of truth telling !

Michael O. Nov 16 **6 likes**

Not quite sure what to make of this piece.

It's a myth that United have historically played attacking football as evidenced by the type of football played by ex-United footballers turned managers.

Is that really indicative of what United 'really' were?

The idea of United being synonymous with attacking football (rightly or wrongly) goes back long before SAF to Busby.

Perhaps it wasn't all-out attacking football of the 'you score 4 and we'll score 5' mould, but it was, nonetheless, attacking football and perhaps more importantly to the 'myth', played with great flair players - Best, Law, Charlton then Scholes, Giggs, Ronaldo, Rooney et al.

United, particularly under SAF could of course be pragmatic. You can't win what he did without the right amount of steel and grit running through the side but he always had pace, allowing for some memorable counter-attacks.

I would argue though, that for the most part, it was attacking football, but the determination of SAF and therefore his players, to actually win, perhaps drives the notion of United's attacking football as much as anything.

Fergie time is shorthand for that desire. United behind or level, deep into injury time; past injury time but they keep coming. Keep pressing forward until they score or at least until there is no more time.

Is it a myth about Manchester United playing attacking football?

No, it bloody isn't.

Luke S. Nov 16 **2 likes**

Fergie's United at their best were a cross and header team. Great if that's what you enjoy but I've never really found that an appealing style of football.

Mark F. Nov 16 **3 likes**

I've always believed that the guys that came out of Fergie's teams have been bang average managers , yes Michael listed some achievements but all are pretty shoulder shrugging . Most of them seemed to get by throwing United a few quid for all those academy players that Fergie would crow "Aye we got a good player coming through", looking at Fergie's style in the early PL days it was very fast with wingers and the like , when Jose and Rafa arrived on the scene it was much more restrained i feel . Particular attention goes to the games with Chelsea , Liverpool and Arsenal that were very cagey games most times with some individual moment of genius to win it. Take the games against Rafa's Liverpool in the early years it was O'Shea or Rio from a set piece for a 1-0 win, you could draw up a similar case for the Liverpool players that came into management from the 80's the likes of Souness, Neal , Evans , Dalglish you could argue the only manager with a committed style of play was Evans. I've always seen United as being build on two periods of play under Busby and Fergie , which is hardly enough to create a "Way" . Two managers some 30 years apart.

Gavriel J. Nov 16 **2 likes**

pretty blunt ending

Delany A. Nov 16

Well said

Paul R. Nov 16 **2 likes**

Not sure about this? Is this article suggesting that the evidence that Ferguson had no attacking philosophy points to players that played for him and have gone onto manage haven't embedded a style of offensive play themselves?

Gary R. Nov 17 **1 like**

Agree...ferguson was a superb motivator with a good eye for tactical coaches. He often said his teams were built from the back. He was condident enough in himself to bring in coaches who knew more than him. Unfortunately the current mgmt structure does not have that condidence and so bring in people who know less. A kind of race to the bottom.

Jason A. Nov 17

Weird end. I thought mapping out how Fergusons sides weren't devoted to ultra attack actually mirrors alot of how Solskaers teams try to play in transition. The important word is 'try'. Through different coaching styles or man management Fergie could get it right more often. Successful or not, Ole has probably come the closest of the post Fergie era to that quick transitional style whatever the results. But I feel the idea around United having to play and be a certain way hampers the team in a way their contempararies are not. Chelsea, Liverpool even West Ham can build teams and styles completely at odds with past teams and nick teams on the counter and its labelled a tactical masterclass. Ole has shown vulnerability in his management in the past month that he cant seem turn around like he has managed before, but in my opinion this media pile-on is a bit cheap and panders to hate clicks. Give him the season. What's the worst that could happen, they fail to get 4th? Don't win a trophy? Boo hoo. United aren't entitled to win and the manager is rightly critised if the team is losing, but the idea that the management team should be sacked every time supporters look over at any other teams success like kids unhappy at their Xmas presents is tiring. Maybe I just like supporting a team that has to fight, that's not expected to win every game, otherwise it just feels like hitting reset on Fifa video game. Or maybe like the article steals from twitter - 'vibes'. Isnt that what supporting football is all about? This team now. Today. Not a sanctimonious obligation to overly sentimental ideas of an obvious styles of play or in fact winning standards or previous era's.

Hean Loong O. Nov 17 **1 like**

Had to agree with the point that the current crop of coaches offers no outside experience other than academic ideas

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Mick B. Nov 17 **2 likes**

Ferguson was not defined by a discernible style of play a la pep or Klopp but the reason he's remembered for attacking football is that his teams over the course of 20 years or so would routinely score 3 or 4 goals a game, particularly against weaker sides. This was nearly routine. Yes the Chelsea, arsenal and Liverpool games where much tighter affairs but they usually contained goals at either end of the pitch. Undermining Ferguson's teams as non attacking purely because of an absence of a particular tactic no matter who we where playing is a massive disservice to what was actually being achieved on the pitch

---

Vitumbiku N. Nov 18 **1 like**

Manchester United under Fergie weren't wasteful or too methodical but their intention was always to attack and take risks especially when Carlos was no longer there. I'll give an example Wolfsburg with Rangnick as manager ... they played a very ruthless game plan and took so many risky passes but they won without a low or middleblock defensive system but didn't play the usual system they did that season. Today with so many philosophical managers with designer teams to suit their systems it's so easy to look at Fergie this way because you forget how much he adapted with the players he had at any particular point in time but it was always with him 'ATTACK, ATTACK, ATTACK'!

Alex A. Nov 19 **1 like**

The concept of having a defined style of play has been blown up because of the success of the top managers - specifically Pep and Klopp but also reflected in others like Gasperini, Tuchel (to an extent), etc. However, it isn't a prerequisite for success on the pitch, and Sir Alex demonstrated that better than anyone.

Wade P. Nov 20 **1 like**

That last line. Yowzers.

Maxwell O. Nov 20 **1 like**

I love how Michael was prepared for the showdown in the comments but most of us agree with him anyways 😆

Muktadir R. Nov 21 **1 like**

Michael, what is the definition of attacking football according to you? I remember Man Utd scored 104 goals in 2019/20 and 122 goals in 2020/21. Clearly the problem was in Solskjaer's defensive structure. May be Ole's team did not exactly match that of 2006-08 but I would not say he was not attacking minded. Also you seemed to praise Robson's 3-4-2-1 with Juninho in the focus. I see Ole's 4-2-3-1 with Bruno in the focus. Ole had a clear idea of having a no 10 in the center of all attack. That became obvious in the first six month of 2019/20 season where he had to play Pereira because Woodward could not deliver Bruno in the beginning. Anyway, always enjoy your tactical write up though. Cheers

---

Declan O. Nov 21 **3 likes**

Excellent article. Thank you Michael.

He was by no means a defensive coach, just more of a pragmatist.
I think the myth of Ferguson as a proponent of somesort of handbrake-off, free form attacking philosophy stems mainly from the fact that with 20 mins to go in matches where Utd were either drawing or behind, emboldened by the far superior attacking options he had on the bench, he would always gamble on winning a match and risking a defeat.

I think this adventurous mindset is what people mistake an attacking football philosophy with.

Ferguson was also a master at controlling the narrative, he bullied the British sports media, so they helped perpetuate the image.
It know seems the club and its fans have made the mistake of actually believing their own lies and are trapped trying to recreate a past that never really existed.

> **William C.** Nov 21 **1 like**
>
> I like how you worded your last sentence. It's true and very few realise it.

Sriram M. Nov 21

Outstanding piece

Thomas H. 21h ago

Ugh accidentally clicked “didn’t like” when I meant to click “awesome”. This was an excellent analysis.

Stuart G. 6h ago

Great article, but not entirely accurate. My memory is that in their pomp, Fergie's United went forward and dominated teams. After Ronaldo left and the Glazer's took over, with money tight, Fergie made the most of the resources available to him and United became a counter attacking team.

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