

## IS VAN NISTELROOY THE HERO MANCHESTER UNITED FANS CRAVE?

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Any major new signing creates interest and raises expectations among a club's fans, but many Manchester United supporters are hoping that Ruud Van Nistelrooy will prove to be not only an effective performer but, more importantly, a new cult figure.

It may seem ironic but, despite all the silverware the club has won since 1993, a growing number of Manchester United fans feel they are missing out on the emotional intoxication they expect from supporting a successful team.

Of course, the capture of the Dutch international striker from PSV Eindhoven for a British record fee of £19 million clearly underlines the club's ambition to maintain its grip on the Premier League Championship while making a greater impact on the UEFA Champions League. But those United fans who have followed the club for many years – long before the advent of the Premier League and the unprecedented dominance of Sir Alex Ferguson's reign – are looking for more.

They hark back nostalgically to a time when maverick, flamboyant individuals strutted on the stage of Old Trafford's Theatre of Dreams. The current squad is a highly effective unit with an enviable work ethic and abundant talent, whose greatest strength is its consistency. Yet while football is a team game, and the sum of the team's performance should therefore be greater than its component parts, a lot of long-standing United fans feel largely indifferent towards, and untouched by, the present team's success. They yearn for the unpredictable individuality of the past.

This may seem astonishing to fans of other clubs who would give their right arms for just a little of the glory that Manchester United have garnered. But it reflects a deeper feeling that the club's quest for trophies on the pitch and global marketing muscle off it has come at a heavy price. Some fans would call that price United's soul.

One of them recently commented in a British football magazine that Old Trafford is now empty of gods and mavericks, that the exotic splendour of

the arena has been replaced by corporate functionalism, and that there is nothing exciting about supporting Manchester United any more.

Certainly controversy rages about the atmosphere at Old Trafford these days. As the stadium's capacity has increased, so the match-day passion among the crowd has receded. This is blamed on a number of factors, including:

- the removal of the standing terraces and their replacement by compulsory seating (a feature now demanded by law at all major British football stadia);
- the gentrification of football at Old Trafford and elsewhere, whereby clubs' traditional core support – relatively poor working-class males – has been diluted by the influx of more affluent, middle-class families;
- the pursuit by United and other clubs of corporate supporters, with companies paying lavish sums to entertain their business clients at football matches in luxuriously furnished boxes or special seating areas;
- the lack of sustained, in-depth competition to United from within the Premiership, which has made their League season too easy and predictable (only Arsenal have challenged United consistently during the last four years, and even they have fallen a long way behind);
- the growing distance, in terms of income and lifestyle, between United's fans and their spectacularly wealthy players;
- the demise of genuine characters on the pitch.

A large number of Manchester United fans have protested about the lack of atmosphere by insisting on standing during matches, much to the consternation of stewards, club officials and the local council, which has threatened to close sections of Old Trafford in response.

And Roy Keane, the abrasive club captain (who is perhaps the nearest thing the fans have got at present to a folk hero) recently fuelled the debate by complaining about the polite, passionless atmosphere on midweek European nights. Keane famously blamed the prawn sandwich brigade – the corporate spectators who, he implied, watch football as they might watch opera, with little understanding of or feeling for the game.

Yet if the atmosphere at Old Trafford is becoming soulless and sterile; if there is a desire to recreate the cacophonous, vibrant experiences of the past, it is perhaps because the team and its achievements are perceived as functionally efficient rather than beautifully inspired.

The acquisition of some larger-than-life characters, players gifted with abundant flair and improvisation, would certainly go some way towards

restoring the drama and capturing the imaginations of these disillusioned fans. That's why the way in which Van Nistelrooy acquits himself will be watched especially keenly. The hard-core United fans want another Eric Cantona, or Denis Law, or George Best to idolise. They want someone with the style, panache and glorious unpredictability of these latter-day United heroes. Someone whose breathtaking ability to produce the unexpected can re-ignite their passion.

Whether or not Van Nistelrooy can become such a figure, only time will tell. But as a striker he occupies the most promising position for an aspiring football hero. It is so often the prolific goalscorers at a club who attract the most adulation. And it is a curious fact that despite winning seven Premiership titles in nine years, United have consistently lacked a real gunslinger – a hot-shot in the mould of Law, Jimmy Greaves, Ian Rush or Ian Wright who can be relied upon to grab 30 goals a season.

There are many regulars at Old Trafford hoping that sharp-shooting Ruud will indeed prove to be Van the Man .

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