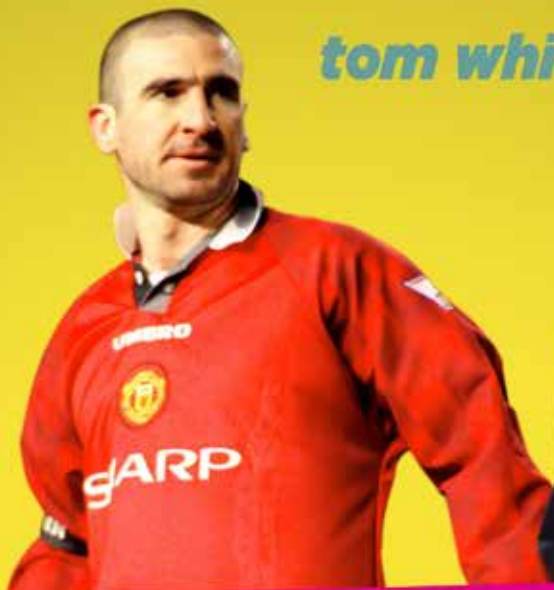


tom whitworth



when the seagulls follow the trawler

football in the 90s



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In Manchester – Part I

Off Their Perch

By the time Alex Ferguson's Manchester United visited Carrow Road to face Norwich City in early April 1993, they sat third in the Premier League table, two points behind their hosts and four behind Aston Villa who were leading them all. That evening, the performance United gave in front of the Sky cameras for *Monday Night Football* was breathtakingly devastating, clinical and winning – all that was good about the side that Ferguson had built.

In their green-and-yellow change strip, a nod to the club's Newton Heath origins, they destroyed Norwich in the first 21 minutes of the game, blowing them away with three superb, counter-attacking goals. Ryan Giggs opened the scoring, Andrei Kanchelskis made it 2-0, and then, after Paul Ince had intercepted the ball inside his own half, the midfielder charged forward and played it across the box to their French maestro forward Eric Cantona for 3-0. 'United were fantastic that night,' says fan Andy Walsh from the comfort of his living room in his neat semi-detached Stretford house. 'Really blistering. There

was a swagger about them that night. They were just on another planet.’

United were searching for their first title since 1967 – too long for a club of their size and stature – and the iconic moment of the run-in came the following Saturday at home to Sheffield Wednesday. Trailing by a goal with only minutes left in the game, defender Steve Bruce rose to head in the equaliser before, deep into injury time, doing the same for the winner. On the sidelines Ferguson celebrated joyfully, his arms in the air, and his assistant Brian Kidd leapt around on the pitch. The win put United top of the table.

‘I don’t actually remember much about the match apart from just completely losing it when Bruce’s second goal went in,’ recalls Walsh. ‘It was a very emotional moment, like an out-of-body experience. Being in the ground with my dad and the lads that I’d gone to school with, and experienced so much with over the past 20-odd years made it even more special. I was so emotional that day; I can feel it now just talking about it.’

After that win United picked up maximum points on the run-in, striding on to take the title and become the first Premier League champions. ‘After we won it, we went into town and stayed out on the piss for two days,’ says Walsh. ‘I don’t remember much more than that really.’

* * * *

The winding Snake Pass road that links over to Glossop then Manchester starts somewhere at the top of Sheffield. It takes you all the way up into the peaks before the eventual descent on the other side. Today it is clear and bright and

the scenery is beautiful as I make my way over the hills to Stretford, Manchester.

Andy Walsh is a passionate and thoughtful guy who speaks with the strong Manchester twang. I used to live over here and listening to him talk is a familiar and comforting sound. Now with grey hair and glasses, Walsh first saw United in person when he was five, standing with his father on the cigarette-smoky terraces of Old Trafford at the end of the 1960s. He became a regular, a season ticket holder, watching the Reds every other week. For me, he is the everyman football supporter: passionate and devoted.

‘Going to United was just something our family did,’ he says. ‘My dad used to go with his brother and his mates and I can remember pestering him on a Saturday for me to go with him. When he did take me it was special – the atmosphere and the banter and the game – it was great. The sense of being part of a big crowd had a huge impact on me.’

When he was older, Walsh went to the games with his school-mates, ‘From probably about the age of ten or 11, we were going on our own. We’d queue up outside the ground for ages, get through the turnstiles, then leg it up the different stairways to try and get our spot in the ground early.

‘We all had paper rounds and jobs on milk floats, working in local shops and things like that, just to get the money together for the game. I lost a couple of jobs because, you know, there might be a game on that day and you wanted to go to that instead of working. I remember having a difficult conversation with a local greengrocer once when I just didn’t understand why he couldn’t let me off on a Saturday when United were at home. That job lasted about two weeks.’

As the years went by a routine developed. 'We'd be under the stand drinking and singing, dancing and bouncing around,' remembers Walsh. 'It was just brilliant, absolutely mental.' The lads were growing up together, got 'proper' jobs on building sites, as office clerks, a couple were musicians. 'I was in a bank,' says Walsh. As money allowed, they'd follow United to away games up and down the country, having a laugh and drinking beer all day, some of them jibbing into the grounds.

Walsh's journey around Old Trafford would take him from the Stretford Paddock and the Scoreboard Paddock, round to the United Road Stand opposite the dugouts, then K Stand behind the goal. The areas were cheap – milk- and paper-round fare – and were filled with lively younger lads (around the time Walsh started going to the games the average age of fans on the 'Stretty' was 18). Notable from the videos of United's early-1990s seasons are those kind of lads in the crowd, jumping up and down wildly when goals were scored – all joyous and uninhibited.

Walsh lives in Stretford partly because it is where he grew up but partly because he wanted to be nearer to United. 'It's the second house we've had here. The one before was 500 yards closer to Old Trafford,' he says. The drive here from the ground takes five minutes.

In the 90s he became involved in IMUSA (Independent Manchester United Supporters' Association), a group that became active in club matters affecting the fans such as ticket pricing. I had known about Walsh for some of the activities he had been involved in over the years, particularly his activism for United. Later on in the 90s, he and others fought back against a major takeover of United that in his eyes threatened the fabric of the club he loved – he wrote

a book about it. Back in 1991, he was jailed for 14 days for refusing to pay the unpopular and riot-provoking new poll tax. ‘I was adamantly against it and was eventually jailed for non-payment,’ he says. ‘A warrant had been issued for my arrest and United were actually playing in Rotterdam in the Cup Winners’ Cup Final [1991], so I decided that leaving the country wasn’t the right thing to do. But I still disappeared for a couple of days, so I could watch the game. I just didn’t go home and slept at a mate’s house, then handed myself in at Stretford nick.’

As United got closer to the title in 1992/93, Walsh had in the back of his mind events from the previous season. With five games to go, United had sat two points clear at the top of the First Division table. In the team they’d had the excellent Peter Schmeichel in goal, the solid Steve Bruce and Gary Pallister at the back, Bryan Robson and Ince bossing the centre of midfield, Andrei Kanchelskis and the skilful youngster Ryan Giggs on the wings, with Mark Hughes getting the goals up front. That season the title was at last within United’s reach. Stay the course and win it – that was all that was needed. But then they blew it, lost three times in the final stages and handed the crown to Leeds United.

‘A lot of us got swept up in thinking it was going to happen that year,’ remembers Walsh of United’s late collapse that season. ‘We *were* going to win the title. I was convinced. Then I went on holiday, which I never used to do before the end of the season. Then naturally when we lost it I blamed myself. I remember thinking that we’d lost it because I’d gone away. As a football fan all rationality goes out of the window with that kind of thing. But I really had thought we were going to do it that year. I still

think I'm partly to blame for going away and not seeing the season out.'

A year later, as 1992/93 drew to a close, Walsh didn't go on holiday and this time he was around to catch the run-in and enjoy the celebrations. He and his friends and family, the people with whom he'd shared so many memories and experiences of watching United, celebrated in style, savouring every moment. United's 26-year wait for the league was over.

* * * *

If there is one football club that best represents the journey of English football in the 1990s, it is Manchester United. Throughout this era of great change for the game that saw the formation of the breakaway Premier League and its emergence, United were at the centre of both English football's commercial rise and the development of its clubs as globalised mega-brands, along with their gradual revival in European competition.

In the dark Thatcher 80s Liverpool had been the dominant force in English football, but in the 90s it was Ferguson's dynamic team that would be all-conquering, lifting five of the first seven Premier League titles. Old Trafford would grow to become the largest club ground in the country. Shares in the plc company which owned the football club and paid the ballooning player wages and transfer fees of the time could be freely bought and sold. And the United brand would become one of the most popular and coveted in world sport. In Manchester, England, it truly was 'a whole new ball game'.

In Manchester. Beside the Pennine hills where the city's Industrial Revolution mills had turned 'Cottonopolis'

into one of the wealthiest cities in the world. Where in 1894 they had built a vast inland port and ship canal because they wanted one. Where in 1917 they had split the atom. Where by the 1980s the bands Joy Division then New Order emerged from the renowned Factory Records label. And where by the 1990s gang-related gun crime was a blight for the city's reputation, earning it the nickname 'Gunchester'.

Alex Ferguson moved here from Aberdeen in November 1986 after he had won three league titles, four Scottish cups and the European Cup Winners' Cup for the Dons. His ability to compete with the bigger and wealthier Old Firm clubs of Glasgow, coupled with his reputation as an ambitious and strong-willed workaholic manager, had earned him many admirers in England. Some 19 years after United's previous league title success, the club's hierarchy believed he could be the man to return them to the top – or in his own words, to knock dominant Liverpool 'right off their fucking perch'.

Andy Walsh had been impressed with Ferguson when he had arrived at the club, particularly when it came to what he stood for and how he came across. He says, 'I liked him straight away. He knew what United were about and what was important. He had this willingness to learn about the club from all angles, too. He had this desire to get under the skin of the club and understand its history. Talking authoritatively about its history and its players, his respect for Matt Busby and the players from the past. All of that was very different from what had gone before.'

'One of the things that struck me as well was his personal politics: [he was] a trade unionist and self-declared socialist. I thought this guy has a set of values that you don't usually come across in football.'

‘He also had this great ability to connect with the fans from day one. The efforts that he made to speak to supporters; the stories you heard of people bumping into him outside bars and restaurants in town, where he stopped and had time for them. He would stand and talk to people and made himself available. To me that was really quite important.

‘He created that sense of club and he was insistent on the players understanding United and its history. He made sure that his dressing room, whether that be players, coaching staff or support staff – people in the kit room, the people who did the tea – interacted with the supporters properly. That was positive, I thought.’

The transformation under Ferguson would not come quickly. He had inherited a squad with problems, specifically a drinking culture. Individuals that were said to be at the core of this, such as Paul McGrath and Norman Whiteside, would be moved on. Organisation and investment were needed for the youth set-up, too, along generally with greater discipline throughout the club. Several troubled seasons would have to be steered through as performances often failed to meet expectations – while second place in the First Division in 1987/88 was encouraging, 11th the following year was not. Average crowds at Old Trafford had dipped below 40,000.

There was some success. The FA Cup was lifted in 1990 and the European Cup Winners’ Cup a year later. They came close to that title in 1991/92, before Andy Walsh went on holiday and United lost their nerve and blew it to make it 25 years and counting since their last top-flight championship.

A stuttering start to 1992/93 had given little encouragement: two defeats and one draw from their

opening three games. By early November they sat tenth in the table and in the seven games leading up to that point had scored just four times without winning. Ferguson's United needed something different, something better. A big bang.

Forty miles away in Leeds they had it – something different, something better. An influential forward who in 1991/92 had helped spur Howard Wilkinson's side to the First Division title at United's expense. A maverick and a transformer. A Frenchman.

* * * *

Up until that point Eric Cantona had lived out a nomadic existence in French football, regularly falling out with people and getting banned, and briefly retiring from the game in exasperation at his treatment. He could be broody and difficult but, as English football would come to learn, he was also a supreme player and a unique and entertaining character.

Powerful and confident on the pitch, with an elegance and intelligence as both a goal-maker and goal-scorer Cantona played with his head up and back straight, his chest puffed out. One of his managers astutely observed how he mainly looked for the simplest and most effective pass, only playing the extravagant ball when necessary. Off the pitch, he liked art and on team nights out drank champagne while others downed beers.

Statistically, his impact on Leeds's championship side had been modest – three goals in 15 games since joining from French side Nimes. Leeds won only one of the five matches he had started before the 1991/92 title was won.

What he did bring to the table, though, was something different, a vital coolness and an unmistakable charisma. As one of his team-mates at Leeds, Gary McAllister would explain, ‘When it came to winning the championship, Eric played a pivotal part ... [he] would come on when we struggled to find a way through ... get the crowd going with a little bit of magic ... the crowd would lift us ... [then] we’d score an important goal.’

How Cantona came to be at Old Trafford is a pivotal 1990s football story. In short, after Leeds had first enquired about signing United’s full-back Denis Irwin only to be told they had no chance, their rivals from Manchester then enquired about Cantona. Leeds were open to a sale and for just £1m United were able to get their man. Howard Wilkinson thought the Yorkshire club were better off with the cash rather than their continental verve and the Leeds fans had to cry into their beers. Alex Ferguson would describe the deal as ‘an absolute steal’.

‘At first I wasn’t that excited about him coming to us to be honest,’ remembers Walsh of United’s new signing. ‘In my circle of mates it was like, “He’s never done anything special against us, so what?” I guess the fact that the Leeds fans were pissed off was a plus.

‘But then you started to see him play and it was like, “Fuckin’ ’ell! OK, I’m going with this. This is exciting. This guy’s cut from a different cloth.”’

The impact that Cantona was to have on his new team would be completely transformational. Deployed off Mark Hughes in the United attack, his imagination and ability to find space and time brought a brilliant new creative dimension to United. Club legend George Best would note how Cantona had ‘given this team a brain’. They opened up

and the quality of the rest of the group shone through even more as their confidence grew. In the nine league games that followed his debut in late 1992, they won six times, drew twice, lost once and scored 22 goals as they worked their way to the top of the table.

‘As time went by the admiration for Eric grew,’ explains Walsh. ‘It wasn’t instant but it grew. That wasn’t just because of what he was doing on the pitch. One thing I liked about him, something that we learnt when we heard his interviews, was how there was that sense of the supporter in him. You felt like he was doing it for you. You felt like he cared and from pretty early on you could see that.’

As Cantona would say of his role as a footballer, ‘So much the better if my goals give you something to sing about. Nothing else is important.’

As Walsh says, ‘He cared about his performance. He cared about his team-mates’ performance, the team’s performance and the result. He cared about the *way* they won. All the things that you cared about as a supporter were embodied in this bloke and that was absolutely intoxicating. It made you proud to be a United fan.’

The new man appeared to be United’s final piece in the jigsaw. Old Trafford was buzzing – buzzing for Cantona – and after those key victories over Norwich and Sheffield Wednesday in 1993 they ran on to pick up the title by ten points.

* * * *

When his United players reported for pre-season training before the 1993/94 season, Ferguson asked them whether they were hungry for more success. As they went on to win

13 of their opening 15 games, playing fast and thrilling football a notch up even from the impressiveness of the previous campaign, there was no doubt that they still were. By the end of the season the Premier League would be comfortably retained and the FA Cup was lifted too, completing the domestic Double.

This was the season that Cantona really emerged as the main star at Old Trafford, scoring 25 goals in all competitions and creating 15 for others. Among them was a match-winning free kick against Arsenal at Old Trafford, plus the two strikes that orchestrated a comeback victory at Manchester City. During an FA Cup tie at Wimbledon, despite being kicked around by their basic midfielder Vinnie Jones for much of the afternoon, Cantona repeatedly got up, carried on and went on to score another wonderful goal – a volley teed up and blasted into the corner of the net. By now, the United supporters were in true unwavering awe of the man who wore the collar of his shirt up and for whom at Christmas they sang their chant ‘The 12 Days of Cantona’. The man they called ‘King Eric’.

Cantona was similarly impressive off the pitch, never acting the Big Time Charlie or playing up to the role of the celebrity that he undoubtedly was. In the city he could be seen playing table football in pubs like the cosy Peveril of the Peak or visiting the Cornerhouse arthouse cinema.

‘I think he was genuine and realised that he had a role with people,’ says Walsh. ‘That he was important in other peoples’ lives. He understood that position and he always had time for them. There are stories about him not leaving the car park at the training ground until everyone who wanted a photo had got one, or everyone who wanted something signing got it signed. That kind of thing was

important. It wasn't PR or spin. It wasn't plastic or kissing the badge bollocks. It was all genuine.'

In the end United took the 1993/94 title with 92 points, eight clear of their nearest rivals Blackburn Rovers, the provincial Lancashire club who were funded by the steel millionaire Jack Walker, managed by Kenny Dalglish and saw most of their goals scored by their £3.6m striker Alan Shearer. Ferguson's men had led the table since August and never shifted from there all season. After the league was secured, they went on to beat Chelsea 4-0 in the FA Cup Final at Wembley. Cantona, of course, calmly slotted away two penalties.

Man Utd Plc

Coinciding with the rise of the United team though the 1990s was their surge into footballing financial superdominance. By 1991 Manchester United was valued at £47m, its emergence as a commercial vehicle and international brand that sold millions of pounds of merchandising to its fans around the globe in full swing. This was set to continue right through the decade and beyond. By 1998, a buyer would need over £500m to buy the club, which at the time of writing is now worth just under £3bn.

Back in 1980, the 35-year old Martin Edwards had taken over as United chairman after inheriting a controlling stake from his father Louis, a wealthy local butcher. It was under Edwards junior that the commercial transformation of the club would gather pace. In 1986, he had appointed Alex Ferguson as manager before later hiring a man named Edward Freedman as head of merchandising. While the former would take care of the football, the latter looked after the United brand – the main manifestation of

Freeman's work coming in December 1994 when the club's megastore opened at the ground. On matchdays, supporters could now be seen clutching carrier bags of logo-featuring merchandise, while thousands would be seen wearing the latest team strip (United changed theirs regularly around this period, having at times three different strips each season – one home and two changes). Old Trafford also had a museum that welcomed over 100,000 visitors a year. With fans visiting even on non-matchdays, the ground was a seven-days-a-week cash register. 'If you like money, Old Trafford is a great place to be,' the United fan and journalist Jim White wrote in 1994.

Before meeting Andy Walsh, I had parked up near Old Trafford and walked around the gigantic stands. Inside, the 74,000 seats are accessed by the nod-to-the-past red wooden turnstile doors. The Sir Alex Ferguson Stand (his knighthood would come in 1999) is almost guarded by his bronze statue that stands outside with arms folded. There's the shop, where branded golf balls, bottle-openers and replica kits are for sale. And there are more statues: Sir Matt Busby, Georgie Best, Denis Law and Bobby Charlton. It wasn't a matchday when I was there but a good number of fans were milling around, taking photos and buying stuff.

In 1991, Edwards took the major step of moving the club to a stock-market listing. This now meant that the plc that owned the club had as its primary objective to grow profits, increasing its market value and paying out dividends to its shareholders. Shares could be freely bought and sold by investors and with enough of these, any single party – such as a global media organisation or a wealthy overseas investor (which might not support the club but might like the idea of its profits) – could feasibly make a full takeover

bid. At the time of the flotation Alex Ferguson was not in favour of the idea and supposedly refused to take up his entitlement of shares. ‘My own feeling is that the club is too important as a sporting institution, too much of a rarity, to be put up for sale,’ he would say.

‘Personally, at the time, I saw a share issue itself for what it was,’ explains Walsh. ‘It was a way of raising funds for the club, the company. The bigger shareholders would still have influence but there was a large number of United fans who saw it as a method to get a platform at the club, having been ignored before on a number of issues that had previously been pushed to one side and dismissed. So people saw this as an opportunity to get a stake in the club, to go to meetings and hold the club to account. A couple of people in my circle saw it as an opportunity to ask questions at shareholders’ meetings.’

When the flotation went ahead, £6.7m was initially raised towards the construction of the new Stretford End stand.

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Traditionally, the cheap terraces on Old Trafford’s Stretford End had been where the more youthful element of United’s support stood for games, helping to create the lively atmosphere of a matchday in the packed and vibrant stand. At the end of the 1991/92 season, it was flattened to make way for its 10,164-seated £10.3m replacement which was completed the following summer. This marked the first stage of the ground’s redevelopment and would be followed by the conversion of the Scoreboard End to all-seater (Lord Justice Taylor’s post-Hillsborough report into the 1989

disaster had determined that at the top levels of the game in England and Scotland the standing terraces had to make way for seats). Later, the construction of the three-tier, £20m, 25,000-capacity North Stand would take Old Trafford's total capacity to 55,000. Following the transition from standing to seating, many would point to a shift in the atmosphere at Old Trafford. It was a safer and a nicer experience, but for many the atmosphere was diminished, with less singing and much less raucousness. It was a similar story across the country as clubs converted or reconstructed their grounds.

Developments also brought in new corporate areas that included glassed-off executive boxes and large hospitality suites. When Old Trafford's capacity reached 55,000 seats, 2,000 would be reserved for corporate guests or sponsors. For many, this was a further detriment to atmosphere. Paul Parker, a player in Ferguson's early 1990s teams, would later note a drop off in atmosphere during his time playing for the club. 'I noticed it in my second season when the Stretford End wasn't there and it got worse over the years ... too many corporate fans who are more concerned about being in Old Trafford than supporting the team.'

'That was the culture around the game at the time,' says Walsh. 'You definitely got a sense that the suits in the boardroom saw everything as a marketing exercise. United was a bit of a hothouse for all of the commercial things that were happening because of their size and their pursuit of the corporate dollar. It really was becoming a corporate juggernaut and the plc was very much seen as being something that was outside of the club. An atmosphere developed amongst many of the fans of "Love the club, hate the 'business'". It wasn't just the corporate hospitality and things like that which some of the fans had a problem

with, it was the commercialisation of what was ours – our football club.

‘Another big thing that was happening at this time was the increase in the number of games picked for television. Kick-off times and dates were moved and for me that was part of a slow destruction of the matchday experience. Shifting fixtures for television meant you then had to shift your life around. You didn’t know what time you were kicking off at: 12.30pm, 3pm, 5.30pm? Or what day: Saturday, Sunday, Monday? It was a nightmare and it started to affect your matchday routine. Even if you could make it to a game, the people that you went with might not have been able to.’

To many match-going supporters at the time, most concerning was the rising cost of tickets. While buying a replica kit or sitting in the corporate hospitality seats at Old Trafford were matters of choice, less so was paying over your money to pass through the turnstile to watch the team you loved. In 1991/92, a season ticket at Old Trafford for standing on K Stand cost £110.50. By 1994/95, a season ticket there (now for a seat) had risen to £266. Nationally, the average price of a ticket for a top-flight match was around £11.50 that year.

‘In reality loads of our fans couldn’t care less about how many shirts the club brought out or what the latest tacky merchandise was being pushed through the megastore,’ explains Walsh, ‘Ryan Giggs duvets or whatever. But what was important were the ticket prices. Please keep the ticket prices down because if you’re a football fan, you’ve not really got a choice about going to a game. I accept that they could have filled Old Trafford three or four times over for every match, but it was about accessibility for fans. I think they

just saw it a supply and demand equation rather than a cultural issue. The team was really flying, winning trophies and playing brilliant football. But at the same time this commercialisation was happening and for me that was becoming a problem.

‘During that time the football was brilliant; going to games was fantastic. You could still go without having to plan for three months ahead because you could pay to get in on the day; you didn’t always have to worry about getting time off work or about getting tickets. But in the 90s that change had begun to take place.’

Selhurst Park

Along with his personable and king-like status, Eric Cantona’s character certainly had its fiery side. During the 1993/94 Double season, he was red-carded twice in two consecutive league games, first at Swindon where he stamped on the unfortunate John Moncur, then at Arsenal, after receiving two yellow cards. Earlier that season, he had been sent off on a hostile night at Galatasaray, after which his head had been on the receiving end of a Turkish police baton. Before that there had been controversies in France, including punching a team-mate, calling his coach Henri Michel ‘a bag of shit’, and throwing the ball at a referee. On one fateful evening in January 1995 at Selhurst Park he was sent off again. The aftermath of the incident would become the most infamous moment of his career and one of the most iconic moments of 1990s football.

That evening, when they visited Crystal Palace, United sat second in the Premier League. In the starting line-up they had their new £7m striker Andy Cole and were well placed to make a strong run for their third title in three years.

It was just after half-time that the chaos came.

Wearing United's all-black change kit, Cantona first kicked out at defender Richard Shaw, then was given his marching orders by the referee, Alan Wilkie. He walked off the pitch towards the dressing room and, as he did so, a Palace fan named Matthew Simmons rushed down the stand to direct some vile abuse his way. 'You fucking cheating French c***,' one witness claimed that Simmons had said. 'Fuck off back to France ... French bastard. Wanker.' In response Cantona lashed out, quickly and infamously delivering a flying-kick to the thug before following up with a few punches for good measure. 'Bruce Lee would have been proud of Eric's kung-fu kick,' one team-mate would say of the incident. The shit had truly hit the fan.

'To be honest, we didn't really know what had gone on,' says Walsh, who was at the game that evening. 'I saw Shaw going down and Eric getting sent off, then something happening. But you couldn't really see it. Afterwards, I remember meeting my friend who lived in Croydon and walking back to his house. We put the news on and saw Eric drop-kicking this fella. I thought, "Oh my god." I was just standing there watching the TV because it was repeated over and over again and thinking, "Shit, what's going to happen now?" It just looked like that was the end really.'

United acted firmly, fining Cantona two weeks' wages (£10,800 in total) and banning him from playing until the end of the season. Initially, there had been talk of cancelling his contract. The FA took it further, banning him until the end of September 1995, meaning he would miss the start of the following season. He would also face criminal charges for the incident.

For that court hearing, a bunch of United fans decided to make the journey down to Croydon Magistrates Court. 'We were going there to support Eric and I drove the minibus,' remembers Walsh. 'At the court a load of Palace fans had turned up to give Eric some stick but nobody expected United fans to be there as well. Some of our lot managed to blag themselves inside the courtroom. Eric said later that he was made up to see some friendly faces in there because he had been quite worried about what was going to happen.'

Cantona received a 14-day prison sentence for his actions, which was later reduced to 120 hours of community service coaching football to local youngsters. In the press conference that followed his court case, he would say only this, 'When the seagulls follow the trawler, it's because they think sardines will be thrown into the sea.' Years later, when recalling that night at Selhurst Park, he would say, 'I did not punch him [Simmons] strong enough. I should have punched him harder.'

It would be eight months until Cantona next appeared in a United shirt. Without their talisman his team-mates stuttered, losing in the league away at Everton and Liverpool and drawing at home to Tottenham, Leeds and Chelsea, failing to score in each of those five games. Once again, that season it had been Kenny Dalglish and Alan Shearer's Blackburn Rovers that were United's main challengers, and it was they that took the title on the last day of the season. United would then go on to lose to Everton in a poor FA Cup Final. Their chance of a winning another Double had been blown and Alex Ferguson was not happy. For the following season he would reassess, with big changes to come.

The Return of the King

During the summer of 1995 three big-name players would leave Old Trafford. Paul Ince moved to Italy and Inter Milan for £7.5m. The battling midfielder and his manager had had an increasingly fractious relationship and Ferguson would describe the deal as ‘good business’. Andrei Kanchelskis fell out with Ferguson and joined Everton for £5m. Mark Hughes went to Chelsea for £1.5m. Ferguson had wanted to keep his Welsh striker, but with Andy Cole now at the club Hughes saw more opportunities for first-team football away from Old Trafford. There to fill some of the space in the squad was a group of highly rated yet unproven younger players that were emerging from the club’s academy.

‘The Class of ’92’, as the group would be known thanks to their success in the FA Youth Cup of that year, included the hard-working defenders Gary and Phil Neville, the diminutive midfielder Paul Scholes and the boy-band-looks wide man David Beckham. Along with Nicky Butt and Ryan Giggs – both similarly youthful but already established in the first team set-up – they would each bring an added vibrancy and dynamism to Ferguson’s United, albeit along with significantly less experience.

The youngsters had been nurtured by the club’s youth coach Eric Harrison who, according to Gary Neville, ‘took boys and turned them into men ... made us better footballers and, just as importantly, he made sure we would compete’. Neville would note how he and his fellow graduates possessed ‘a relentless will to succeed ... an unbelievable work ethic ... [and] were desperate to improve ... desperate to play for United.’

On the opening day of 1995/96, the new-look and youthful United did not get off to a great start as they lost

3-1 at Aston Villa. Lining up that afternoon had been both Nevilles, Scholes, Butt and Giggs, with Beckham coming off the bench to score. It was a shock result which led to the former Liverpool defender turned pundit Alan Hansen famously remarking on that evening's *Match of the Day*, 'You can't win anything with kids.' The kids recovered well, though, winning each of their next five league games. But nevertheless, after the loss of Ince, Kanchelskis and Hughes, there remained significant work to be done to mount a successful challenge to that season's early pacesetters, Newcastle United. United needed their Cantona.

* * * *

It had been eight months since Selhurst Park, eight months since Cantona had last played in a United shirt. Eight months of him trying to learn the trumpet. But now the King was back.

It was on Sunday, 1 October 1995, at Old Trafford, on Sky Sports against United's great rivals Liverpool.

The fans turned up early. Many wore berets and carried French tricolour flags with Cantona's face on them and the words 'Eric The King'. When he strode out at Old Trafford – last out behind his team-mates, head up, chest puffed out, the collar of his red shirt lifted up – the sense of anticipation and noise were immense.

'The routine for that game was the same as it always was,' remembers Andy Walsh of the day. 'We met up with friends outside the chippy on Chester Road. But there obviously was increased anticipation about him coming back, this returning hero. The atmosphere outside the ground when Liverpool were in town was always good but that day it was a little more

special. The anticipation had been building up through all of those months he'd been away.'

That day, the capacity at Old Trafford was restricted to below 35,000 due to the ongoing construction of the new North Stand (officially there were no Liverpool fans in the ground). But inside it was loud and the atmosphere was charged.

In the first two minutes, Cantona set up a goal with a cross to Butt who lifted it past the Liverpool keeper David James for 1-0. The visitors' young striker Robbie Fowler brought them back into it with a fantastic equaliser, then grabbed a brilliant second to put them 2-1 up. But when United earned a penalty on 71 minutes, there was only one man to take it. Back to business and walking up confidently, Cantona struck it calmly past James to equalise. Old Trafford roared and Cantona leaped on to the netting pole behind the goal where he let out a scream of joy at scoring the equaliser on his return.

'Straight away you could see the impact he had on the rest of the players,' says Walsh. 'He had done his puffing out his chest thing, stood there imperiously and you could actually see it in the rest of the players how they were looking up to him. Here was this champion, the leader of the team, and I think you could see the improvement in the way they played now he was back. Even though it was only a 2-2 draw, it was so good. It felt as though we were back together as a club. Everyone was lifted that day and it was the kick the team needed. After that they sort of picked up momentum.'

United next travelled to York City for a League Cup tie. They trailed 3-0 from the first leg (Ferguson had fielded a weakened team at Old Trafford against the Second Division

side), but Cantona started at Bootham Crescent and United won 3-1, though they still exited the competition 4-3 on aggregate. An international break followed York, meaning no Premier League fixtures. Instead, United's reserves hosted Leeds's reserves at Old Trafford and Cantona played again – 21,502 turned up, the largest gate in the country that day. There were 30 games of the season left. 'King Eric' was back.

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By Christmas, Kevin Keegan's Newcastle United led the Premier League table, ahead of United by ten points. It was a significant gap to close, yet for Ferguson's bunch of exciting youngsters and their reliable performers Schmeichel, Irwin, Pallister and Irishman Roy Keane (now in his third season at the club, having emerged as one of United's star men following his move from Brian Clough's Nottingham Forest in 1993), they now had their returning maestro to lift them.

Throughout the run-in, Cantona's impact was simply colossal as he made and scored numerous vital goals for the team, grabbing 13 winners or equalisers himself. From 22 January 1996, United won seven league games 1-0 and he scored the winner in five of them. Out of their last 15 league games, United took 40 points out of 45 as they applied the pressure and closed the gap on Newcastle.

United's comeback was impressive, but the title race that season would be as much about Newcastle's collapse as it would be about the counter from the Old Trafford juggernaut. The Newcastle side that Keegan had built attacked flowingly and won many admirers for their entertaining style of play, but as the season drew on their

players became nervous as confidence dipped and points were dropped. By the time the two contenders met at St James' Park on a Monday night in March 1996, the pressure was immense for both sides. Newcastle still had 11 games to go (compared to only ten for Ferguson's men), but their lead over United had been cut to just four points.

That evening St James' was deafening. In the opening exchanges,, striker Les Ferdinand had his chances to put away the game but twice was denied by Schmeichel. Later, Newcastle hit the bar from a free kick. Ferguson's men held on.

On 51 minutes Phil Neville's cross to the far post was met by Cantona who volleyed into the ground and past Pavel Srnicek for what would prove to be the only goal. As he ran off to celebrate, the Frenchman cocked his head back slightly and let out a roar appropriate for such a pivotal moment of the game, and the title race – a visceral release of pent-up passion rooted perhaps in the events of Selhurst and his subsequent banishment.

Andy Walsh hadn't been able to make it up to Newcastle, settling on watching the game on the telly in Manchester. He recalls, 'It was just the logistics of getting there. Working and kick off being on Monday night and what have you. Obviously, I watched it. The performance of the players that day, it made the hairs on the back of your neck stand up.'

With that win – their sixth in a row in the league – United had closed the gap to a single point. As Jim White would note, Cantona's winner 'wasn't just a goal that won a game, it was a goal that assassinated his rivals' hopes'. From then on, Newcastle faltered further as United surged on relentlessly. Through the closing weeks of the season

Ferguson and Keegan would engage in various mind games – or more accurately, Ferguson played mind games with Keegan, the latter famously snapping during one post-match interview. ‘I will love it if we beat them. Love it!’ he ranted. After Newcastle, Cantona went on to notch winners against Arsenal, Tottenham and Coventry. In the end, United took the Premier League by four points. It was a turnaround totally driven by Cantona, his galvanising impact and goals in those 1-0 games so vital.

There would be one more Cantona winner that season, this time against Liverpool at Wembley in the FA Cup Final.

The contest had brought big expectations from two great rivals: United, Premier League champions; Liverpool, third in the league and with their star striker Robbie Fowler who had scored 36 goals. It was the day when the Liverpool players wore cream Armani suits for their pre-match walk on the pitch. ‘We thought they looked like fucking knobs,’ the United defender David May would comment of their outfits. The game itself would turn out quite unmemorable with few chances created and entertainment kept to a minimum.

The deadlock was broken on 86 minutes. A corner from Beckham was punched out by David James and the ball fell to Cantona. Having moved back intelligently to the edge of the area, he shaped his body superbly and struck his volley through the Liverpool players and home. In his biography of Cantona, Philippe Auclair would describe the goal as ‘a study in poise and elegance’. It won United another Double.

* * * *

The following month, an IRA bomb exploded on Corporation Street in the centre of Manchester. Thanks to a warning call made 90 minutes beforehand, a massive evacuation of the area was made and thankfully no lives were lost, although over 200 people were injured. Earlier in the year, an explosion at Canary Wharf in London had killed two people, ending an IRA ceasefire that was critical to the Northern Ireland peace process.

In the Manchester blast, over 1,000 buildings were damaged, among them the brutalist Arndale Centre. Out of the destruction would come change, as the bomb's devastation cleared the way for the development and rejuvenation of the city centre. In place of the unloved 70s buildings came shiny shops and retail areas, new public spaces and good design: places to visit and live. As the Manchester music man Tony Wilson explained, 'The bomb was a catalyst to the regeneration and gave us a chance to rebuild.'

The King is Dead

In 1996/97, United won the Premier League, again. On the opening day of the season, David Beckham lobbed the Wimbledon keeper Neil Sullivan from the halfway line and that year he and his fellow youngsters from 'The Class of '92' became even more established and influential in the United team. Cantona scored 11 times in the league. Newcastle again had been their rivals, along with Liverpool and Arsenal. Four of the first five Premier League crowns had now gone to Old Trafford and things in the Premier League were getting a bit like *Groundhog Day*, the 1993 Bill Murray movie in which his grumpy weatherman character relives the same day over and over again.

Beyond their dominance in England, that season United made a true push for European glory in the Champions League. They had last won the European Cup in 1968 and in recent years UEFA's three-foreigner rule had hindered them on the European stage – most notably in Barcelona in 1994 as they went down 4-0 in the Camp Nou with Ferguson choosing to play Gary Walsh in goal instead of Peter Schmeichel after being limited by the regulation. With these restrictions now gone, however, an unlimited number of players from European Union countries could be selected in European competition, meaning that United and other clubs had far greater options as to who they could select for their teams.

In 1996/97, having knocked out Porto in the quarter-final, United faced Borussia Dortmund in the last four. Many had fancied United to progress but over two legs they missed a succession of chances and could not break the Germans down, succumbing 1-0 both away and at home and 2-0 on aggregate. Ferguson would describe the Dortmund tie as a 'devastating' exit. '[W]e missed 15 one-v-ones that night,' he would say. The search for that top European prize would continue. Added to that, Eric Cantona was leaving the club.

* * * *

The announcement of the King's retirement from football came on Sunday, 18 May 1997. Cantona had had another strong season with those 11 league goals, plus 12 assists (the most in the Premier League that year). He was still only 30, yet quite suddenly had decided to call it a day. 'I didn't want to play anymore,' he would later say. 'I'd lost the passion.'

‘We knew that he had appeared to be getting frustrated with the growing commoditisation of him,’ recalls Andy Walsh. [‘Manchester,’ Cantona would say, ‘it’s a lot of merchandising. You’re sometimes needed for a video, a book, photographs, interviews.’] But I didn’t exactly see his retirement coming.

‘When it did there was this sense of loss for someone that has been very important to you. Here was someone who you not only had admiration for as a player but who philosophically you felt a kinship with as well. That might seem a bit over-sentimental but that’s how it felt as a football fan. It’s not just about the football. There just weren’t any other players around at the time that were as interesting as him. He was one of the few players you would pay to just go and watch him. Fans that go to Old Trafford now who probably never saw him play will still sing his name. Here was somebody who cared.’

The fans were shocked. The man who had been so influential for their team, who had kicked them on to the title in 1992/93 and contributed so magnificently to their 1995/96 Double while giving them so much joy was leaving. It was the end of an era.

Throughout the 1996/97 season there had been suggestions of how Cantona’s bright light had been dimming. Writing in *The Guardian*, David Lacey noted, ‘His contribution to the team’s fourth championship in five years has been valuable but not invaluable.’ Ferguson would later observe how his star man had seemed ‘subdued and did not seem to be enjoying his football’, adding, ‘Somehow the spark had gone.’ Nevertheless his manager had tried to persuade him to stay, though his attempts ultimately were in vain.

WHEN THE SEAGULLS FOLLOW THE TRAWLER

On the day of the announcement hundreds came to Old Trafford to pay tribute – perhaps for some it was to grieve for the man who had given them so much. It was an abrupt end, leaving like that. But the King – the first real superstar of the Premier League era – was gone.

The dust would eventually settle and Ferguson's United would enter a different phase. Cantona later reflected, 'My best moment? I have a lot of good moments but the one I prefer is when I kicked the hooligan.' Meanwhile for Andy Walsh, the everyman United fan, there would be eventful and changing times ahead.