

Why this season could provide the perfect ending to Fergie's incredible Old Trafford reign



Predicting the moment when Sir Alex Ferguson will finally call time on his illustrious Manchester United reign has become the journalistic equivalent of pin the tail on the donkey.

Logic is turned on its head, all reasonable arguments go out of the window and the process is reduced to second-guessing what the great man is thinking.

Fergie has already postponed his retirement once before, when he reneged on his intended decision to step down at the end of the 2001-02 season after learning Sven Goran Eriksson had been lined up as his successor.

And United's success since then - four Premier League titles, one Champions League, one FA Cup and three League Cups - vindicated Fergie's spectacular U-turn.

But the context of this enthralling season provides a compelling case for Fergie to bow out on the ultimate high, should he steer United to Premier League and Champions League glory.

If United win their remaining seven Premier League games this season they will create history by becoming the first English club to win four successive top-flight titles.

More importantly, though, it would be a 19th title in all, seeing them overtake arch rivals Liverpool to officially become the country's most successful footballing force.

It would be an extraordinary achievement, put into remarkable context by a Liverpool banner held aloft at Anfield the season after the first of Fergie's 11 titles in 1993.

The banner read: 'Come back and sing Ooh-

Aah Cantona when you've won 18', the creator never imagining the remorseless way in which United would devour titles over the next two decades.

Well, United have and, in the crude words of Fergie when he arrived at Old Trafford in 1986, Liverpool have been well and truly knocked off their f***** perch.

Another Liverpool record is also within Fergie's sights this season, as he seeks to match their former boss Bob Paisley by becoming the only other man to win three European Cups.

Plenty of distinguished names have won two, including Brian Clough, but claiming a third European Cup would put Fergie in an elite bracket alongside Paisley, setting the pair apart.

Again, it would be the perfect way to bring the curtain down on Fergie's United tenure, with this year's final at the Bernabeu, home of Real Madrid, the most successful side in European history.

All these historical milestones would provide Fergie with the perfect stage on which to bow out on a high and make way for his successor, entrusted with the unenviable job of continuing the Scot's incredible success.

But Fergie has said that he will continue at United as long as his health allows him to, which, given his current vigour, suggests he will remain at the Old Trafford helm for some time yet.

And despite his irascible and belligerent nature, when he does eventually decide to step down, Fergie will leave a cavernous hole in English football that will never be filled.

Mancini may have lost his cool by squaring up to Moyes, but he might just lose his job if City don't finish fourth

Roberto Mancini's loss of control in squaring up to David Moyes in their extraordinary touchline bust-up illustrated perfectly the pressures of Premier League management.

Only three days earlier, Sir Alex Ferguson and Rafa Benitez clashed on the Old Trafford touchline during Manchester United's 2-1 win over Liverpool, their simmering long-running animosity bubbling to the surface.

But Mancini's outburst was remarkable, particularly as it was so at odds with the urbane, sophisticated image the Italian has cultivated since arriving at City to replace Mark Hughes.

City's meek capitulation against Everton, after impressive wins at Chelsea and Fulham and a hard-earned point at Sunderland, proved they are still plagued by their familiar tendency to self-destruct.

Still two points behind fourth-placed Tottenham with their advantage of a game in hand now wiped out, the next eight games will make or break Mancini's future as City boss.

The pre-match jibe from Moyes, that City's group of expensively-assembled stars had no empathy with or passion for their club, had the desired effect.

No amount of money and big-name signings can foster the kind of unity that has seen Everton go on the kind of run in the second half of the campaign that would have seen City sew up fourth place long ago.

It remains to be seen whether Mancini and his players can handle the pressure of going for fourth spot, which has become a unique title race all of its own.

On the evidence of Wednesday night at Eastlands, the answer would appear to be not.



Rafa may be having a rough time at Anfield but he is still on Real Madrid's radar

Most people believe continuity in the dug-out goes hand-in-hand with success in football. And popular wisdom claims chopping and changing managers is a sure-fire guarantee of failure.

Anyone looking for an example of how it should be done look to Sir Alex Ferguson's 24-year dynasty at Manchester United. Their 11

league titles and two Champions League trophies accumulated over that period are frequently attributed to such stability.

So you'd expect any club that has changed managers 24 times in 24 years would never win anything.

Yet that is exactly how many managerial changes Real Madrid have had since Ferguson took over at Old Trafford. And their 10 League

titles and three Champions League trophies might make you wonder if continuity is not the only solution.

It certainly suggests we should all be in less of a rush to rubbish the Galactico model.

Real's Champions League elimination at the hands of Lyon was a calamity but they are still domestically on a par with the best Barcelona side in history.

More money will be spent in the summer on the likes of Franck Ribery and maybe David Silva (but not on Cesc Fabregas). And unless Barcelona are humiliated at the Bernabeu next month, Madrid's 25th managerial change in 25 years will be ushered in.

Yet there may be a change to their coaching structure - where the man in the dug-out has little

say in anything other than tactics - in favour of a proper manager. Carlo Ancelotti and Fabio Capello are being considered, but Jose Mourinho and Rafa Benitez are the front runners.

Benitez's critics claim Madrid's reported interest is a ploy to reinforce his position at Anfield - yet cynics forget Rafa's stock remains very high in Europe.