

Football's version of the Wacky Races for the contenders to succeed Sir Alex Ferguson



By Mark Ogden

Sir Alex Ferguson apparently laughed on Monday morning when told of the newspaper headlines suggesting he was to retire as Manchester United manager at the end of next season in order to be replaced by Jose Mourinho.

Was it the nervous laugh of a man whose secret plan had been rumbled or the mischievous chuckle of someone brushing off the latest punt at second-guessing his intentions?

In one sense, Ferguson's retirement date is football's most closely guarded secret. But on the other hand, there is a genuine possibility that Ferguson himself has not even circled a date in his diary as the day that he will walk away from Old Trafford.

The Scot, who will be 69 in December, has vowed never to repeat the mistake he made in 2001 by going public on his plans to quit at the end of the 2001-02 season.

That move fuelled uncertainty at Old Trafford and led to the team struggling badly on the pitch. By February 2002, Ferguson had realised his error and swiftly abandoned his retirement.

Eight years on, he is still the master of all he surveys at Old Trafford and, since performing his U-turn, has delivered four more Premier League titles, another European Cup and guided United to the Fifa Club World Cup. Imagine if he had missed out on all of that?

The only certainty about Ferguson's fu-

ture is that he will retire at some point, but predicting just when has become a futile exercise.

Every success appears to re-energise Ferguson, yet he gains the same motivation from setbacks and defeats.

And when he does choose to leave Old Trafford, he will surely want to go out on top, so why did he not call it a day after guiding United to a Premier League and Champions League double in 2008?

Is it realistic to expect him to call time on his reign if United end next season empty-handed? Will he really want to leave under a cloud of disappointment?

There are plenty of names in the frame to succeed Ferguson when he finally vacates the stage. There always have been. It is football's version of the Wacky Races.

Back in 1990, when he teetered on the brink of the sack, Howard Kendall, Terry Venables and Bobby Robson were the men touted as likely successors. In 2002, Sven-Goran Eriksson was the man who United courted.

In football terms, Ferguson has seen them all off, so maybe it is a risky business nailing your colours to the mast of one of the current front-runners.

Mourinho is clearly an obvious choice to succeed Ferguson at United. The Special One will not be fazed by replacing Ferguson, he has the arrogance and self-belief to rule over Old Trafford and, most impor-

tantly, he is a platinum-plated winner.

The Portuguese oozes success and, with Inter Milan on the brink of the Champions League final, he could become only the third man to win European Cups with two clubs.

Mourinho would appear to be the front-runner, but Ferguson and United chief executive David Gill have placed huge emphasis on building a staff of coaches at Old Trafford who will stay in place to ease the transition once Ferguson goes.

Would that suit Mourinho, a man who has taken his loyal backroom team from Porto to Chelsea to Inter? Where would they all fit in?

Away from Mourinho, take your pick from the likes of David Moyes, Martin O'Neill, Fabio Capello, Laurent Blanc and Pep Guardiola.

All of the above are best-priced at 20/1 or under by the bookies, with Everton manager Moyes currently an 11/2 second favourite behind Mourinho.

But here's the problem. Moyes, despite his success at Goodison Park, has never won a major trophy or signed players from the top end of the market in which United operate.

O'Neill did well at Celtic, but does he really have what it takes to succeed at Old Trafford? Capello would be a short-term fix, which isn't United's style.

Blanc is an interesting outsider. The

former United defender forged his reputation by guiding Bordeaux to the French title last season and the Champions League last eight this, but perhaps the job might come too early at United.

Guardiola? Great first season at Barcelona, where he won the Treble, but is he a great manager or the manager of a great team built by his predecessor, Frank Rijkaard? And don't forget, he is unlikely to have Lionel Messi at United.

Interestingly, one name that is rarely linked with United is Louis van Gaal, the Bayern Munich coach, yet his CV is as strong as any of his rivals.

The Dutchman, who guided Ajax to the Champions League title in 1995, is a 40/1 shot at the moment, but his transformation of Bayern this season has been remarkable.

He has big club experience having coached Ajax, Barcelona and now Bayern, he is a regular trophy winner and, like Ferguson, has a ruthless streak and little time for his critics.

If he wins the Champions League with Bayern this season, Van Gaal might just become flavour of the month.

But maybe that's the secret for all those aspiring to Ferguson's job. When he does go, just make sure your star is on the rise at the same time. -The Telegraph