

Sports

Solskjaer pays price for failing to rekindle Man Utd's golden years

United's fifth defeat in seven league games was the final straw

LONDON: As Ole Gunnar Solskjaer trudged forlornly towards Manchester United's fans at Vicarage Road, the merciless booing that greeted the ashen-faced Norwegian served as a bitter coda to his failed reign.

United had just suffered a 4-1 thrashing against lowly Watford, the latest in a long list of calamitous defeats during Solskjaer's three years in charge. The axe was about to fall on the United manager and the club's supporters had finally turned on a man they regarded as a legend for his heroics during his Old Trafford playing days.

stormed off the Old Trafford pitch in disgust after Solskjaer only brought him on in the second half of a draw with Everton. Even Alex Ferguson, the great United manager who brought Solskjaer to the club in 1996, added to the mounting pressure when he reacted to the Ronaldo incident by saying you should "always start with your best players".

United in decline

In truth, Solskjaer often looked out of his depth at Old Trafford. The 48-year-old's previous experience in management had come with Norway's Molde — where he was working when United called to hire him in late 2018 — and a brief stint with Cardiff that featured Premier League relegation and concluded with the sack after less than a year.

Even Jose Mourinho and Louis van Gaal, both boasting far more in terms of success and service time than Solskjaer, had been unable to solve the problems that have bedeviled United since Ferguson retired in 2013. After replacing Mourinho on an interim basis, Solskjaer earned a permanent contract by winning 14 of his first 19 matches. Supposedly reconnecting United to their soul with his commitment to an attack-

ing style that contrasted with the pragmatic Mourinho, Solskjaer was feted by fans who chanted "Ole's at the wheel".

As a player, Solskjaer won six Premier League titles in 11 years with United, shining as a selfless super-sub with an eye for goal. But the man idolized at Old Trafford for his dramatic Champions League final winner against Bayern Munich in 1999 failed to fulfil hopes of a return to the glory days. United finished third in the 2019/20 season, losing in the semi-finals of the FA Cup, League Cup and Europa League. And while they came second last term, they remained underachievers on the big occasion, crashing out of the Champions League group stage and losing to Villarreal on penalties in the Europa League final.

Solskjaer was given a new contract in July, but his failure to get a grip on a squad packed with big personalities proved fatal. It must have been galling for Solskjaer that his last moments as United manager featured Bruno Fernandes arguing with the fans who jeered after the final whistle at Watford. If only Solskjaer's players had shown such defiance during matches, they might have avoided another depressing chapter in United's post-Ferguson decline. — AFP



Another depressing chapter in post Ferguson decline

Solskjaer was sacked yesterday with seventh-placed United languishing 12 points behind Premier League leaders Chelsea and six adrift of the top four. It was a dismissal that felt years in the making after Solskjaer repeatedly dodged the bullet during previous troubled periods.

Coming hot on the heels of a humiliating 5-0 home defeat against arch-rivals Liverpool and a 2-0 loss to Manchester City, United's fifth defeat in seven league games was the final straw. There was an alarming lack of cohesion, direction and fight in a star-studded team that flopped despite the close-season signings of Cristiano Ronaldo, Jadon Sancho and Raphael Varane.

Those deals, especially re-signing Ronaldo from Juventus, were expected to prove the catalyst for United to push hard for their first English title since 2013. Instead, they appeared increasingly rudderless as Solskjaer struggled to gel his new recruits into a team packed with attacking talent but painfully short of midfield steel and prone to embarrassing blunders at the back. When Liverpool ran riot at Old Trafford on October 24, the malaise at the heart of United's brittle squad was brutally exposed. Solskjaer's decision to opt for a high-pressing game-plan was picked apart by Liverpool, with United's players reportedly complaining that the manager did not give them enough preparation time.

That hint of dissent came just weeks after Ronaldo



MANCHESTER: In this file photo taken on September 11, 2021 Manchester United's manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer embraces striker Cristiano Ronaldo after the English Premier League football match against Newcastle at Old Trafford in Manchester, north west England. — AFP

Five candidates to replace Solskjaer

MANCHESTER: Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's time as Manchester United manager finally ran out on Sunday as the Norwegian was sacked following a humiliating 4-1 defeat at Watford. Solskjaer failed to win a trophy in nearly three years in charge at Old Trafford and tangible signs of progress after finishing second in the Premier League last season have been blown away amid a run of five defeats in their last seven league games. United are already 12 points off the pace at the top of the table and the club have announced their intention to appoint an interim manager until the end of the season before making a permanent appointment. Here, AFP Sport looks at five of the leading candidates to be Solskjaer's successor:

Zinedine Zidane

Expectations were high for United to challenge for major trophies this season after the signings of serial winners Cristiano Ronaldo and Raphael Varane, along with £73 million (\$100 million) winger Jadon Sancho. Three of Ronaldo and Varane's Champions League titles came under Zidane at Real Madrid and the Frenchman is also a free agent having ended his second spell with the Spanish giants in May.

Zidane proved himself a master of molding a star-studded squad into a team at Madrid, where he also won two La Liga titles. That is exactly what United

need and his global profile fits the brand-building exercise the English giants have gone down in recent years, at times to the detriment of a well-functioning team on the field. According to reports, he is the favored candidate of the club's American owners, the Glazer family.

Brendan Rodgers

The outstanding option on the domestic market for United is Leicester boss Brendan Rodgers. The Northern Irishman's past as a Liverpool manager may rule him out for many United fans, but he has rebuilt his reputation since a rollercoaster three years at Anfield between 2012 and 2015. Rodgers proved himself capable of handling the demands of winning every week in three years at Celtic, where he won a clean sweep of seven domestic trophies before returning to the Premier League with Leicester.

The Foxes have narrowly missed out on the Champions League for the past two seasons to Chelsea despite far inferior resources and beat the European champions to win the FA Cup for the first time in the club's history last season. However, Leicester have also struggled of late with just two wins in their last nine league games.

Erik ten Hag

The Dutchman is responsible for one of the form teams in Europe right now with Ajax already into the Champions League last 16. Ten Hag was linked with a number of top jobs after leading the four-time European champions to the semi-finals of the Champions League for the first time since 1997 two

years ago. But unlike many of his players from that run, he is yet to be poached by one of Europe's top clubs. The former Bayern Munich youth team coach would fit the attacking style demanded of a United manager.

Luis Enrique

The Spain coach is another with plenty of experience in getting the best out of a collection of talented individuals. He won the treble in his first season at Barcelona and added another La Liga title with a front three of Lionel Messi, Luis Suarez and Neymar.

Fluent in English, Luis Enrique has never hidden his desire to one day coach in the Premier League. His success with Spain this year at Euro 2020 and the Nations League finals shows he is also capable of producing an exciting side without the same quality of stars he had on offer at the Camp Nou.

Mauricio Pochettino

The Argentine is the one that got away for many United fans as the Red Devils kept faith with Solskjaer while Pochettino was a free agent for over a year following his sacking by Tottenham in 2019. Now in charge of Paris Saint-Germain, Pochettino is unlikely to jump ship mid-season with a 12-point lead at the top of Ligue 1 and another chance to win the club's first ever Champions League.

However, Pochettino's time in the French capital has not been plain sailing, particularly in his dealings with PSG's sporting director Leonardo. By waiting until the end of the season to make a permanent appointment, United are opening the door to another shot at luring Pochettino to Old Trafford. — AFP

What's next for Man Utd?

LONDON: Manchester United once again have to press the reset button after Ole Gunnar Solskjaer became the fourth manager to be shown the door since Alex Ferguson stepped down in 2013. United have fallen a long way in those eight years, watching from the sidelines as their fiercest rivals, Manchester City and Liverpool, have become the new dominant forces in the Premier League.

David Moyes, Louis van Gaal and Jose Mourinho all came and went before beloved former United striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer was appointed as caretaker boss in December 2018 with a brief to restore the club to former glories by tapping into its DNA. United rediscovered their spark in a honeymoon period under the Norwegian, summed up in a breathless Champions League comeback against Paris Saint-Germain — a result that helped persuade club bosses to hand him a permanent deal. Despite persistent concerns over his lack of experience and technical nous, Solskjaer has come agonizingly close to delivering the club's first silverware since 2017, losing on penalties in last season's Europa League final and finishing second in the Premier League. Club bosses were confident enough in the direction of travel to hand him a new three-year contract in July.

Former United goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel said in his recent autobiography that his former team-mate had brought the "heart and soul back" to the club after the divisive Mourinho reign but in the end that did not prove enough. Solskjaer, 48, said after his side's chastening 4-1 defeat to lowly Watford on Saturday that he felt for the fans and understood their pain after they vented their fury at Vicarage Road.

"We've had a hard time since Sir Alex (Ferguson) left the club and fans who have been with us the last few years since I came in, they've been unbelievable, they've understood the situation," he said. "The signings this summer with Rafa (Raphael Varane), Jadon (Sancho) and Cristiano (Ronaldo) of course raised everyone's expectations, rightly so, because we brought some top players."

Zidane link

The question is, who do United turn to now to take the club forward? A club statement on Sunday stated the intention to hire an interim manager till the end of the season with former midfielder Michael Carrick in the hotseat for the forthcoming games. By delaying Solskjaer's departure, one prominent candidate is now off the market as Tottenham snatched up a former Premier League winner in Antonio Conte. United have been consistently linked with Paris Saint-Germain boss Mauricio Pochettino and the Argentine may well be the motivation for waiting till the summer. Former Real Madrid boss Zinedine Zidane, Leicester manager Brendan Rodgers and Ajax coach Erik ten Hag have also been linked with the role.

United, for so long a byword for stability under Ferguson, have been reluctant to sack their managers until they feel their hand is forced. That tipping point has now been reached, with the club seventh in the Premier League, already six points off the top four and out of the title race after just 12 games. Whoever does take over at Old Trafford will have a richly talented but bloated and unbalanced squad to work with. United can boast abundant riches in attack, with Ronaldo, Edinson Cavani, Marcus Rashford, Sancho, Marcus Greenwood and Anthony Martial all vying for starting spots. — AFP

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I, Siji Jobin, holder of Indian Passport No. M290484 and Civil ID No. 287062207323 has changed by Surname from Jobin to Rajan. Name: Siji, Surname: Rajan hereinafter in all my dealings and documents I will be known by the name of Siji Rajan. **(C 0979)**

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