

Moyes' swift Man Utd departure a stark reminder of how football has changed

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The signs did not augur well for David Moyes. He began his career as the Chosen One, anointed by no less a person than Sir Alex Ferguson, the most successful manager in Manchester United's history. Very quickly, however, his transfer targets did not materialise. In September his side lost to both of United's arch rivals – Liverpool and Manchester City. It seemed the star was on the wane.

After that less-than-confident start to the season, Manchester United under Moyes struggled to build any momentum. Chelsea and Manchester City continued their success fuelled by petrochemical money from foreign owners. Elsewhere in the north west, Liverpool enjoyed a renaissance under their [young, innovative manager Brendan Rodgers](#). Even Moyes' old club Everton have seen a boost under [Roberto Martinez](#).

Manchester United, meanwhile, languished in the league and in the Champions League. In January, some fans displayed a banner declaring: "Wish he wasn't the chosen one". By March, a plane had been chartered to fly over Old Trafford sporting a banner declaring "Wrong one – Moyes Out". The fans were getting restless. [Defeat to Everton on Easter Sunday](#) led to the sack.

Twenty-seven years previously, Moyes' predecessor, Ferguson, took the reigns. Like Moyes, Ferguson was Scottish and moved from a club (Aberdeen) with a different pedigree to Manchester United. They finished eleventh in Ferguson's first season, worse than Moyes' seventh spot at the time of his sacking. However, Manchester United were 21st when Ferguson took over.

The following season they finished second, but then hit trouble in 1988-9 when they finished 11th again. It was not until 1990, four years after Ferguson took over, that United won their first trophy under his management – the FA Cup. Ferguson then went on to win the league, European Cup and helped transform the club into the global brand that they now are.

How can we explain the contrast between Moyes and Ferguson? Why was one given time and the other given nine months?

All change

Ferguson's tenure as United manager coincided with a period of dramatic transformation of European football. The business of football turned the sport into a global industry. In his book, [The European Ritual](#), Anthony King has highlighted how political deregulation transformed European football. Media deregulation permitted new television channels like Sky to enter the market and pay more for television rights, as well as giving a global audience to matches. Players' contracts were deregulated under the Bosman ruling, meaning that clubs could sign players from anywhere across Europe, and with fewer restrictions, at the end of their contract.

The clubs that could command the biggest audiences could afford the best players. Star players were accumulated by the most successful European clubs like Real Madrid, Juventus and Manchester United. The reorganisation of the European Cup into the Champions League further increased the power of the larger clubs and provided another global stage for their brands. In short, much of Ferguson's success was due to being in the right place at the right time.

Yet global success brings conflict. [Alessandro Portelli wrote in 1993](#) about the paradoxical relationship Italian fans have with their owners. The fans adore the owners for the success that their money brings their club. Yet they also resent the fact that they are reliant on the owners. This has occurred within the English game.

Fanning the flames

The stakes are so high in terms of commercial and on-the-pitch success that fans are keener for the good times to remain. They are no longer competing with local rivals for bragging rights but have global competitive advantage to worry about. As Peter Millward has shown in his book [The Global Football League](#), fans of Liverpool and Manchester City were happy to have foreign owners if it enabled them to compete with the success of Manchester United. It was not important for a club to be run sensibly and within a budget – as has been the case at Arsenal – foreign investment was the only way to have on-the-pitch success.

Managers have evolved to be a form of protection for the owners. Yet managers are just part of an overall team. As clubs have become more professional, there are ever-growing squads of players, as well as teams of coaches, physiotherapists, masseurs and psychologists. There is also a hierarchy of owners and directors who are running the clubs in various ways. Plus there are wider political, economic and social changes that impact on success.

But the manager has become the de facto symbol for the success and failure of the team. It is they who fans call on to be sacked. Rarely do fans call for the resignation of the commercial director or the chief executive. Calling for the manager to be sacked is one of the rare examples where fan power appears to have an effect. Fans are buying into the global media image of football and demanding increased success on the pitch. Who owns football and how it is run does not attract the same attention or the same fervour from supporters, and when it does, the fans rarely claim a scalp.