

20Legend

Most modern footballers don't play for passion. They play for money. They don't play for the fans love and adoration. They play for status and admiration. At Manchester United we have been lucky, so very lucky, to still have players who value playing for the shirt you wear more than the money. Who celebrate with their friends, in the colours they love, for the fans that they are DESPERATE to please. Ole Gunnar Solskjær was such a player. Growing up a Liverpool fan, he moved to United from Norwegian club Molde on the 29th of July of 1996. Making his debut less than a month later in a 2-2 draw against Blackburn Rovers, Solskjær also scored his first goal for United on that day, going on to becoming our top scorer that season with 19 goals.

Players are bought and sold in football. Every season, most teams will lose at least one player, and sign new players and with most players you will wish them luck, shrug your shoulders and go back to concentrating on the season ahead. With some players... it's a different story. I shrugged and wished Richardson good luck. I fumed and wished Heinze good riddance. I heard about Solskjær. I didn't shrug. I didn't wish him good luck, I just sat there, staring, the tears falling from my eyes when I realized that I would never see him scoring another goal. I don't want him to leave the club, and as it has been said that he will stay on as an ambassador for the club, and might be offered a coaching job in the future, I hope this means I won't have to see him leave just yet.

Although all United fans are going to remember one thing more than anything about Ole, that glorious goal in 99, there were so many layers to him, not only as a player, but as a person. Ole worked continually for charity, UNICEF being an organization that he devoted a lot of time to. Not only did he work for UNICEF through United, but was one of the Norwegian ambassadors for them. He has been giving money, raising money and coming up with ideas for them for years, never ONCE asking for recognition. When he spent a season on the sidelines after his knee surgery Ole made the decision to give all his sponsorship money to UNICEF, alone paying for one school out of nine that were to be built in Eritrea. Of the total sum that was close to £100 000, 70% came from his sponsorship deal with Nike, and Ole simply justified it to his friends by saying it was the right thing to do. "He didn't need money or equipment that he wouldn't be using." Not once did he try to get attention or credit for what he did, instead Ole refused to comment on it, despite confirmation from Nike and UNICEF themselves. The Secretary-General of the Norwegian Committee for UNICEF, Kjersti Gjestvang commented;

"He's our golden boy. And it's amazing that he has done this all on his own initiative, something he of course would never admit to. He came to us and said he wanted to collect money for our schools. Of course we were wondering how he was going to do it, then he brought us the Nike deal."

Solskjær had rung Nike less than a week after he had his knee operation and told them what he wanted to be done, and as most of us would be, they were surprised by such an unselfish gesture by a major footballer.

“I just thought, yes! This is great. But at the same time I was quite surprised. I’ve seen a lot as far as athletes are concerned, often complete opposites of the actions demonstrated by Solskjær” Reidar Skorpen, a representative for Nike Norway commented, before going on to say that. “It’s not just in Norway, but it’s special for athletes all over Europe. We’re incredibly impressed with his involvement. He is a great athlete, and what he has, done does not make him any less great. The fact that he does get so involved with UNICEF, says a lot about what kind of a person Ole Gunnar Solskjær is.”

He summed it up in that final sentence. Gestures like that does say a lot about what kind of a person Ole is. He is never rude to a fan. He is the most modest of players you will find. And he wants to help. He knows how fortunate he is, and he knows what a difference his efforts can make to someone else’s life. He doesn’t do it for media attention, he is rarely in the media for anything that’s not football related, and he just does it because he cares. I’m not going to go on and on about the humanitarian Ole Gunnar Solskjær, but it is worth a mention, because as a football fan it’s easy to get caught up in the attitudes of the Lampards and Rio Ferdinands of the world, and those who still only play for passion, deserve their recognition.

Going back to Ole as a player, there’s not much that can be said that most United fans won’t already know. He was a Super Sub, our baby faced assassin, and saving our backsides so many times it’s left every single one of us eternally grateful. After having an incredibly debut season for us, Ole had more of a disappointing season in 97/98, only making 15 league appearances for the club. He came back with a vengeance in the following year though, as Solskjær and Teddy Sheringham were a back up pair of strikers that were envied by every club in the Premiership, showing that if the dynamic duo of Yorke and Cole couldn’t perform, we had someone we could always rely on. One night of that season will stand out in a United fans’ memory. The date is the 26th of May, the stadium is The Camp Nou in Barcelona, and all across the world United fans are sitting in relief as moments earlier Teddy Sheringham has equaled an early lead taken by Bayern Munich. Expecting to go into extra time and still have a chance at the trophy, the fans are relaxing slightly more than they were before the goal, and not a single one of us had seen it coming. “And Solskjær has won the European Cup for Manchester United.” Till this day that line, gives me chills. The tears that night were of happiness, I couldn’t sleep and I was so proud of Ole. The player from the tiny country of Norway, who had gone on to win Manchester United their first European Cup since Sir Matt Busby’s team in 1968.

After United's treble winning season Solskjær spent a lot of time on the bench, but once again he returned with a vengeance. In the year that saw Ruud Van Nistelrooy completing a move to Manchester United, Ole once again found his place in the team, scoring a total of 26 goals during the 2001/2002, his most successful season for the club. This was followed by a frustrating season for Solskjær, which although brought him the most appearances for him at the club, saw him playing in different positions of the field, not all flattering him as a player. He did what some players don't though, he kept his head down and he got on with it.

Injuries started to really haunt Ole Gunnar from then on, spending months on the sidelines in the 2003/04 season with a knee injury that would plague his career till the day of his retirement. Throughout his injuries he showed commitment to the club, not only working for the club itself but embracing the supporters association of Shareholders United. All of which earned him the banner of 20legend.

In his final season for United he scored 11 goals for the club, despite not always being fit playing a part in the club retaining their title. And on a day when a lot of United fans are sad and feeling down, it should bring at least some comfort that our 20legend got to retire whilst once again being the champion.

We will miss you Ole, and you will never fully know just how much we love you and appreciate your love for the club. If in the future you decide that your coaching career lies away from Old Trafford, it will hurt to see you go, and it would be a massive blow, as if there ever was the perfect role model for a young player trying to find his way. You're that person. Thanks again, 20Legend.