

## Our Bench, the Punch Line of a Bad Joke

Manchester United have had their best season opener in a long time, maybe ever. We have played some beautiful football and many fans are starting to dare to hope that the Premiership will be coming home to Old Trafford. We have an amazing first eleven consisting of just the right combination of experience and youthful ambition. The problem however that United are facing is that if something happens to that first eleven, that's when we will struggle.

The rumours of Owen Hargreaves joining United are all well and good; I'm not going to go into that as it's not our defensive roles that are concerning me, at least not at the moment. Manchester United's form this season has been good, superb in some cases, despite that at times we have been lucky to get all three points. People blame the referee, they blame the cheating opposition, a bad pitch or the fact that the sun is shining two degrees too far from the west. When it comes down to it, the blame can only be placed in one area when we struggle, when we cannot score and when we lack that extra *je ne sais quoi* that you need to be a great winning side.

I've heard a lot of people claim that we don't need attacking options, that we have Rooney, Saha, Solskjaer, Smith and Rossi. I say anyone who could say that have not been paying much attention, as they would be very wrong. Rooney is young, energetic, ambitious and he loves United, but he isn't going to score in every match, far from it. He is one of our greatest assets, but he is not enough. Saha is 28, he doesn't have many years left in him on top form and he is injury prone. Solskjaer is too old, he might be loved by the fans, including me, but he will be out injured and unfit for bigger periods of the season than he will be out there scoring. Smith isn't a striker anymore, and I'm not convinced that he can be again, but we should know by January. This next month is going to make or break his career at United. As for Rossi, he is a wonderful prospect, he can have the making of a great striker, but he won't be for at least another couple of seasons. We need another striker, and we need it badly, it won't harm us to get two. With Huntelaar and Torres being the front runners amongst the favourites the fans would like to sign, no one knows who Sir Alex has in mind, and he **will** have someone in mind.

When I am waiting for the matches and they announce our bench I cringe. Fletcher, O'Shea, Richardson... Match changing players they are not. Fletcher is never going to fill the expectations that some have of him, he is a squad player and even that he is only good for when we are playing well and winning. Has he improved this season? Of course he has, he is one year older, he makes fewer mistakes, or others make them before him and he doesn't get noticed. Neither he nor the likes of O'Shea are the answers to our prayers. Chelsea have another first eleven waiting on their bench, Arsenal have young players so talented that if and when they learn to play together as a team they will be a big threat. Even Liverpool have options that although aren't great, they are still ten times better than ours. Squad players don't win you matches, squad players are what you use when your first and second choices are unavailable, they're not players who are unexpectedly made first choice because the manager has an unhealthy amount of faith in them.

The problems with transfers are that when people expect replacements, they don't expect players to fill the previous player's shoes, they expect clones. We are not going to find clones of Solskjaer the super sub, there is no second Giggs or Scholes, and Roy Keane was one of a kind. When Carrick was brought in, he was brought in to be Scholes replacement. He was not brought in because he is just like Scholes, because he is not, but because Sir Alex knows he has talent and he wants him to learn from Scholes. He doesn't expect Scholes and Carrick to be playing together, because Scholes is heading towards the end of his career, he is expecting Carrick to be the possession holder, the creative counterpart to a defensive minded midfielder. When we bring in a new striker, he is not there to replace Ruud or set up a tent in the box, he is there to score goals and win us matches. Football evolves, every season it gets more difficult, more athletic players, stronger defenders, stricter rules; you're not going to keep winning unless you evolve with it.

Sometimes you have to rely on your bench to win matches. When the likes of Chelsea look at our bench they are not going to feel threatened, they're going to laugh. A couple of injuries and we are going to struggle and the chance we have of winning the league will soon demolish. I have an incredible amount of faith in our boys, and I am proud when I watch them play, but that pride and faith doesn't blind me towards the problems that we do have. I don't care about the Champions League, we're out of one cup, if we go out of the other I'm not going to cry, but I do WANT OUR TROPHY BACK. For that to happen, come January, there will have to be some changes.

*This article was written prior to the January Transfer Window*

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