

The Day 'Fergie' Almost Signed For Hibs



On Wednesday, Sir Alex Ferguson stunned the football world by announcing that he will retire as manager of Manchester United from the end of this season. Tributes continue to pour in from fellow managers, former and current players and supporters from throughout the globe to the man widely recognised as the greatest manager of all time.

Everyone knows of his outstanding managerial record during a career when he won an unprecedented 49 trophies in 40 years, beating giants of the world game such as Real Madrid, Barcelona, and Bayern Munich. However, a little known fact is that forty five years ago, he almost signed for Hibs.

The transfer fee was agreed between the teams, wages would not have been a problem, and Ferguson would have been playing with one of the top teams in Scotland, but the stubborn streak, which has served him well over the years, meant that instead of regular European football, he would soon be plying his trade with Falkirk, amongst the part-timers in the bottom league.

On the late sixties, Hibs had an exciting attack-minded team which included top quality players such as Pat Stanton, Pat Quinn, Colin Stein, Peter Cormack and Eric Stevenson. The manager Bob Shankly had previously managed Dundee to the League Title and the future looked bright in Leith, but, as so often happened with Hibs, the board decided to cash in on their top stars.

Twenty one year-old Colin Stein was a powerful centre forward with an eye for a goal, and sure enough big spending Rangers manager Dave White identified him as the ideal man to lead the

line in the fight for honours with Jock Stein's Lisbon Lions.

Alex Ferguson, a lifelong Rangers fan who was born and brought up next door to Ibrox, had signed for his boyhood heroes from Dunfermline for £60,000 two years earlier, and although his scoring record was decent, finding the net 25 times in 41 appearances, he fell out with one of the directors over non-football matters, and realised that his time in Govan was limited.

After pre-season training for the 1968/9 campaign, Dave White summoned Ferguson to his office and told him that he had been offered to Hibs as part of the deal for Colin Stein.

It was clear that White expected him to meekly agree to the move, but he was taken aback when Ferguson told him in no uncertain terms that he would be staying at Ibrox.

As 'punishment' Ferguson was banished to train with the reserves for a few weeks, but when White saw that this wasn't working, he became friendly and suggested that Ferguson at least talk to Hibs' manager Bob Shankly, and he agreed to do so, as a mark of respect for the man.

Whilst a move to Easter Road would have been to everyone's benefit, Ferguson was angry at the way he had been treated at Ibrox, and because of that he was determined to be as awkward as possible.

The pair met one Sunday at Shankly's house on the outskirts of the capital, and even though he was made very welcome by Bob and his wife, he stubbornly refused all offers of a contract. Instead, Hibs turned to Celtic and signed Joe McBride who proved to be a great success, scoring 58 goals in 91 games and becoming a big favourite with the supporters.

Stein's arrival at Ibrox meant that Ferguson dropped down the pecking order and although he did make the odd appearance that season, including a Fairs Cup Quarter Final against Bilbao

when he scored.

He also played in the Scottish Cup Final defeat to Celtic and was blamed for allowing Billy McNeil a free header for the opening goal, and soon after that he was on his way to the second division with Falkirk.

After hanging up his boots, Ferguson took over as manager of East Stirlingshire then St Mirren where he achieved success, building a team which eventually won the Scottish Cup, albeit after he had joined Aberdeen.

On arrival at Pittodrie, Ferguson turned to Hibs legend Pat Stanton as his assistant, and they both set out to take over from Celtic and Rangers at the top of Scottish football.

In 1979, the Dons reached the Scottish Cup semi-final where Ferguson pitted his wits against the more experienced Eddie Turnbull, and goals from Ally McLeod and Gordon Rae allowed the Edinburgh side to progress to the final.

To prove that he didn't hold any grudges, Ferguson brought his Manchester United superstars to Easter Road to play against Hibs in Gordon Rae's testimonial match, which is best remembered for Joe Tortollano's sending off in the first minute after a 'robust' challenge on Gordon Strachan, rather than United's 3-0 victory.



Ferguson maintains a soft spot for Easter Road, and all but won his first league title there; beating an already relegated Hibs side 5-0, sparking bedlam amongst the massive travelling support as he ran onto the pitch at the final whistle to embrace his players.

Ferguson's brother Martin also had a spell as a scout and coach under Alex Miller at Easter Road, and since that time, several players have arrived at the club having played at Old

Trafford, including Grant Brebner, Michael Stewart, John Rankin, Danny Galbraith and current goalkeeper and player of the year Ben Williams.

Williams in particular has a lot to thank Ferguson for. He said: "I had four years at United, including three as a full-time pro, but I left at 21 in search of regular football.

"United went through Fabien Barthez, Tim Howard, Roy Carroll and Mark Bosnich while I was there and I spent my last two years as third choice behind Howard and Carroll without getting the opportunity to play.

"When I spoke to the manager at the time it was decided the best thing for me to do was to start my playing career rather than sit around at United. Sir Alex Ferguson was fantastic with me. It was never a problem to knock on his door and ask for any advice or help.

"When it came to the crunch about my career, he was open and honest. Since then, I haven't looked back. It was a fantastic apprenticeship and a fast learning curve. I went from being in college doing my A levels at 17 to sitting on the bench for Champions League games when I was 19.

"The whole experience stood me in very good stead. There's probably no one better to learn from than Alex Ferguson."

Ferguson's replacement at Old Trafford, David Moyes, has less happy memories of Hibs, having captained Dunfermline in the 1991 Skol Cup Final defeat to Alex Miller's team.