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Ferguson ponders ironies of 10 years at Man Utd

By Gideon Long

MANCHESTER, England, Nov 5 (Reuter) - Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson must be wondering whether his 10th anniversary at the club is an occasion for laughter or tears.

Three weeks ago his side were one win away from a place in the quarter-finals of the European Cup and two points away from the top of the English premier league.

Memories of their 4-0 victory over title-rivals Newcastle in the Charity Shield in August were still fresh and the defending English champions had just beaten arch-rivals Liverpool.

But since mid-October, the 53-year-old Glaswegian has seen his side humiliated at Newcastle and Southampton, beaten at home in the league for the first time since 1994 and robbed of a much-cherished record by Fenerbahce in the Champions' League.

Prior to last Wednesday's 1-0 reverse against the Turkish champions, United had played 56 consecutive European matches in Manchester without defeat. Records like that do not go quietly, and a sense of unease hangs over Old Trafford.

"It's an ironic life," he reflected morbidly after the Fenerbahce match. "You prepare to celebrate 10 years at a club and instead find yourself suffering the first home defeat in Europe. I had hoped it wouldn't happen during my time here."

Happen it has, but if Ferguson needs cheering up on his anniversary, if he needs reminding how far United have come in his term of office, a glance

back to 1986, when he took the most demanding job in British club football, should do the trick.

In November that year, the once-mighty United sat 19th in the old 22-side first division and had just been dumped out of the League Cup -- ironically enough by Southampton.

The Reds' 1968 European Cup triumph seemed more myth than reality with each passing season and they had not lifted the English league trophy for 19 years.

In Ferguson's first match in charge, a demoralised United lost 2-0 to lowly Oxford. Things had to change.

Ferguson, a strict disciplinarian during his management days at Aberdeen and a master of psychological warfare, had noticed some of his players walking off the Oxford pitch at halftime.

He reminded them they were representing one of the world's great club sides. From that moment on, United players ran rather than ambled to the dressing rooms at the interval.

Short haircuts, pulled-up socks and tough training sessions became the order of the day at Old Trafford as Ferguson, following in a tradition of no-nonsense Scots who have succeeded in management south of the border, went about his task.

"It is the point of their job to reach a certain standard of fitness and keep it," he asserted. "They know I'm right. They know you can't achieve anything by being lax in your life."

But for a long time the Ferguson revolution failed to gain momentum.

From November 1986, when he took over, to May 1990, when United lifted the F.A. Cup, Ferguson failed to bring a single piece of silverware to Old Trafford.

"People had been calling for his head," recalled United legend Bobby Charlton in a recent newspaper interview. "But as a board of directors we decided that when we appointed Alex we were going to give him the time he needed -- no matter what.

"Alex excited us all with his dreams and hopes for the club. And he convinced us they would all soon come to pass."

The club's patience was to be well rewarded.

The 1990 F.A. Cup led to the Cup Winners' Cup the following season. United beat Barcelona in the final to claim their first continental trophy since their solitary European Cup in 1968.

Next up was the League Cup in 1992 and, finally in 1993, the one the Stretford End fans had yearned for -- the English league championship.

United's final home game of the season against Blackburn was a carnival. Ferguson, by nature a terse, short-tempered man, smiled in the May evening sunshine as United's ecstatic fans turned Old Trafford into a sea of red and white celebration.

In 1994 United won the league and cup double and, after a frustrating 1995 in which Ferguson's men relinquished their league title on the final day of the season and their F.A. Cup title in the final, they reclaimed both trophies in 1996.

Ferguson, a Scot to the core of his soul, a former Glasgow Rangers player and Scotland manager, had become the first coach in history to win the English domestic double twice.

It has been an astonishing 10 years for "Fergie", who has won admiration for the way he has offered paternal protection to young talents such as Ryan Giggs and for gently guiding his wayward captain Eric Cantona back to the straight and narrow.

The man born within sight of the giant shipyard cranes on the River Clyde has remained faithful to his working-class origins. His politics are as red as United's famous shirts.

It will be a while before Ferguson qualifies for the legend status accorded to the late Sir Matt Busby, architect of post-war United and the club's manager for 24 years from 1945.

But despite the 5-0 rout at Newcastle last month, despite the 6-3 defeat at Southampton, the 2-1 upset against Chelsea and the historic home loss against Fenerbahce, Ferguson is still king of Old Trafford.

The second decade starts here.

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