

GIGGSY

The Biography of Ryan Giggs



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JOHN BLAKE

This book is dedicated to Andy Bucklow, a true friend and a true Manchester United fan.

~~‘One day they might even say that I was another Ryan Giggs.’~~

George Best, 199

‘Giggs, Giggs will tear you apart, again.’

Terrace chant from his adoring fans

‘I’m more sad about what is going to happen to the team now he [Ronaldo] has gone... but he wasn’t my favourite player, and he wasn’t a United legend, so it’s nothing like it’s going to be for me when Ryan Giggs retires... then I will probably need some serious counselling to get over my loss.’

United fan Daisy, June 200

CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE

DEDICATION

EPIGRAPH

CHAPTER 1 LAND OF HIS FATHER

CHAPTER 2 RED ALERT

CHAPTER 3 MINE'S A DOUBLE

CHAPTER 4 KIDS DO WIN TITLES

CHAPTER 5 EURO STAR

CHAPTER 6 TREBLES ALL ROUND

CHAPTER 7 MILLENNIUM MAN

CHAPTER 8 THE GOING GETS TOUGH

CHAPTER 9 HAUL OF FAME

CHAPTER 10 DARKNESS BEFORE THE DAWN

CHAPTER 11 MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

CHAPTER 12 FROM RUSSIA (WITH LOVE)

CHAPTER 13 PLAYER OF THE YEAR

CHAPTER 14 WORLD CHAMPION

CHAPTER 15 LEAGUE OF HIS OWN

CHAPTER 16 PRINCE OF WALES

CHAPTER 17 THE GOAL-DEN BOY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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LAND OF HIS FATHER

He would become the most decorated, successful and, many would contend, the best player ever to pull on the proud red shirt of Manchester United. But the road to legend and riches was presented on the proverbial plate for Ryan Giggs. When he finally established himself in the first team at Old Trafford, he would talk about how important the history and the traditions of the club were to him – because he was a local lad. Yet while it is true that he was picked out from obscurity while living just a few miles from Old Trafford, he had been born and bred in an altogether different environment. In a different country, in fact; in a country in which he had known hardship and had had to contend with learning and developing within the confines of a fractured and fractious family.

Yes, he was a local lad (in Manchester) from the age of six, but before that Wales was his home, or more precisely, a tough district of Cardiff. He would never forget his Welsh upbringing, how it moulded and formed him and, in later life, would talk of his pride in being Welsh and how he never considered himself English, even when he captained the England schoolboys' team.

What we are trying to establish early on is this: Ryan Giggs is undoubtedly a phenomenon in world football, but he is not the stereotyped straightforward, straitlaced, somewhat boring 'Mr Manchester United' some pundits would have you believe. Of course, he is an honourable, respectable man – one of the nicest guys in football, for sure – but he is also an intense thinker and a complex character prone to deep introspection and self-analysis, and is at heart a very private being.

It is these very contradictions that help make Ryan the man – and the footballer – he is. Even some of his friends would tell you he can be stubborn, defensive in attitude and dismissive of fools. On the other hand, he is warm, generous, compassionate, and has time for anyone.

It is perhaps surprising that he could ever have been dismissed as one-dimensional, given the contradictions and vagaries of his upbringing. He had to battle his way to the very top of world football after being born into a poor, broken home, with no father by his side for his formative years. But he would overcome all the obstacles to reach the very top of his profession and always remain a truly nice guy. All in all, no mean achievement.

Ryan Giggs is a winner – always was, from the very first day he kicked a football – and a man who gets what he wants. He is driven by a desire for perfection and the goal of being the best. So where do all these complexities of character and ambition come from? It's easy to guess – it was down to his childhood in Wales, the love-hate relationship he 'enjoyed' with his rugby playing, womanising, boozing father over the years and the move to Manchester. It was also due to the bond he has always shared with his mother and subsequently Sir Alex Ferguson, manager of Manchester United and surrogate father figure during the early days of their relationship and of Giggs's footballing career.

Giggs weighed 7lb when he was born Ryan Joseph Wilson in Cardiff on 29 November 1973, to a labourer and rugby-playing father, Danny Wilson, and children's nurse and cook mother, Lynne Ceri Giggs. The couple met when they were still at school and by the time Ryan arrived on the scene, they were both still only seventeen.

Lynne was Welsh and hailed from the more tranquil Pentrebanne in west Cardiff; Danny was born to a Welsh mother and a father from Sierra Leone, and would become a promising halfback with Cardiff Rugby Union Club. His mother Winnie – a hospital cleaner – and Danny senior – a merchant seaman

hailed from the then rough dockland area known as Tiger Bay.

Ryan's first home would be with his mum and his dad on the Ely council estate. The surname on his birth certificate was registered as Giggs, and his mother gave her parents' address in Pentreban. The space where his father's name should have been entered was left blank.

The relationship between Lynne and Danny hardly augured well from the start. Inevitably, there were arguments as money was tight and they were very young to be coping with a baby. And they wanted different things. Lynne was a reserved girl who wanted stability; Danny was more rough and ready – he was handsome and would become known for his eye for the girls. She had no time for clubs and discos; he loved nothing more than a night on the town.

It was a potentially explosive mix – looking at it, even on paper you would say they were hardly suited from the start. And so it would prove. They would never marry and life was tough: at times Lynne worked two jobs, and had to rely on her parents to look after Ryan.

That was the one solid base the youngster had throughout his life – the love, care and reliability of his maternal grandparents, Dennis and Margaret. In reality, he would alternate his time as he grew up between staying with his parents in Cardiff and with Dennis and Margaret in Pentreban. He would become a regular sight in the district as he played with a football and a rugby ball for hours on end outside his grandparents' home.

Staying with them provided him with the stability he needed and which he was often denied when his dad was home. The rows between Danny and Lynne would worsen as the years rolled by and the relationship was in no way cemented when another son, Rhodri, was born three years after Ryan. Indeed, Ryan admitted that the arguments took on a more unpleasant aspect – not just shouting and crying – but 'physical'. Visits from the local constabulary weren't uncommon. In fact, after Rhodri was born, Danny would be arrested after 'one particularly bad fight' and told to get out by Lynne.

Ryan admitted that as he grew up and came to realise the way his father treated his mother, he found he liked him less and less. He was a self-confessed 'mummy's boy' and drifted apart from Danny, rarely talking to him as he grew from boy to man.

In his 2005 autobiography, Ryan described his relationship with his father in these terms: 'I have to admit that at one time I did look up to my dad... It wasn't until we moved to Manchester that I realised the full extent of the rotten life my dad gave her [Lynne]. He was a real rogue, and a ladies' man.' He also revealed that his father 'didn't exactly set the right sort of example.'

The growing rift would lead to Ryan eventually changing his name from Wilson to Giggs when he was sixteen. He would take the decision then, two years after his parents' separation, so 'the world would know he was his mother's son'. The rift would also, inevitably maybe, lead to him becoming more inward-looking, an insular boy. On the plus side, it also made him more determined not to be like his father (whom he considered a failure for wasting his talent) and set him on a path to financial perfection in his own career. Ryan would also admit, 'I didn't set out purposely to be different to my dad, but it influenced me subconsciously. He had a great talent and that was wasted. People tell me he was the greatest player they've seen.'

With his troubled early background, it was little wonder Ryan Giggs would suffer something of an identity crisis and strive to find himself in later years. Manchester United and Sir Alex Ferguson would play a vital role in helping him come to terms with his life and himself. Like a surrogate father and family, Sir Alex and the cosseted world of United provided him with the background he had in some ways been denied as a boy.

Ryan went to Hwyl Dda infant school in Ely and remembers his time there not for playing football – he never played for the school team – but for learning the Welsh national anthem 'Mae Hen Wlad I'

Nhadau' ('Land Of My Fathers').

One day in 1979 he came home from school and found his mother and father deep in conversation. Danny had been offered the chance to switch rugby codes – to swap from union to league – to Swinton, a team in Salford, a few miles north of Manchester. It would be the turning point of his life, a move for the better, although both Ryan and his mother Lynne were against it at the time. It would mean moving away from her mother and father, his beloved granddad Dennis and grandmother Margaret.

There were tears, but Danny insisted they had to go. He talked of it being a new start for them and the money was good and he could make it in the big time.

The family moved into a house owned by the club and Danny was welcomed as a conquering hero. He settled quickly at Swinton RL club, on the then princely salary of £10,000 a year and the red-brick semi thrown in. Even now, he is fondly remembered as a 'great' for his exploits on the field for Swinton by the club's fans. As one fan writing recently on the Swinton Lions website said: 'Surely Manchester United FC should contribute to our stadium fund! After all, if the club hadn't signed the great Danny Wilson way back in 1979 then in all likelihood Ryan Giggs would have been lost to football and Manchester United and would probably have pursued a career in Rugby Union.'

Ryan and brother Rhodri didn't settle as easily as their father. Growing up in multiracial Cardiff they had never thought about the colour of their skin. In north Manchester, they had to learn how to cope with being called 'nigger' and being laughed at and abused. Ryan would later admit it was a shock to hear the abuse when he attended Grosvenor Road School in Swinton, but that he dealt with it by dismissing it with contempt – unlike Rhodri, who would regularly get into fights with his abusers.

Giggys would elucidate more about his struggles in an interview with the *Daily Mirror* in 2007 saying: 'My dad was quite a famous rugby player where we were growing up. Everyone knew that, and I used to get quite a bit of stick at school because of the colour of his skin. It's obviously not nice, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone. My way of coping was to keep it to myself. I was a quiet, shy boy and what I should have done is tell the teachers.' But he didn't even tell his parents. 'It made me feel that I was different, because I felt that I should be fitting in with all these other kids at the school and I couldn't. It was especially difficult at my school. There just weren't that many pupils from different backgrounds. We didn't have many Chinese, Indian or black kids. If there had been six or seven kids in the class who were black or mixed race that would have helped.'

Ryan found another way of deflecting the abuse and getting his schoolmates to see him in a different light – through his sporting prowess. He excelled at rugby and football. His progress in rugby surprised everyone – apart from his father – as he was such a sprightly, wiry figure. Yet he stuck with the game all the way through comprehensive school from the age of ten to fourteen, and turned out for local side Langworthy and Salford Boys. He did well at stand-off and out on the wing – and was also good enough to represent Lancashire, playing one game for the county.

It was a busy time, but somehow he had enough energy in his tank to keep his hand in at football, playing up front for Sunday League outfit Deans FC and representing Salford Boys at football as well as rugby.

It was at Deans that he would make an impact – even though his first game for them ended in a crushing 9–0 loss – and at Deans that he would meet the man who would put him on the first rung of the professional ladder. The team was coached by milkman Dennis Schofield and he would certainly come to deliver on the promise he made to Giggs to help him make the big time.

Schofield knew a quality player and a star in the making when he saw one – and at the age of thirteen, he secured Ryan a trial at Manchester City. Even then our boy was a Red through and through.

– he used to watch Manchester United from the Stretford End when he wasn't playing rugby football – and he hardly endeared himself to the City youth team bosses by wearing a red United t-shirt for training!

Nevertheless, his talent shone through and did the talking for him, so he played one game for City youth when he was thirteen. But for Ryan, it was one game too many – his heart lay across the city, at Old Trafford, and he still dreamed of the chance of making it at United. His dream became reality thanks to another man who had his interests at heart – a newsagent by the name of Harry Wood.

Wood was a steward at Old Trafford and he persuaded Alex Ferguson to take a look at the boy. Ryan headed to Old Trafford for a week-long trial. But Ferguson caught a glimpse of his genius before the trial and is said to have made up his mind that he would sign him right there and then. Giggs was playing in a match for Salford Boys against a United under-15s side at The Cliff, United's then training ground, and he scored a hat trick. As he played, Ryan spotted the United boss watching with interest from his office window.

Ryan believed he had done enough already, but still attended the trial. And on his 14th birthday, his dream became reality. Returning home from school, he saw a gold Mercedes parked outside the house. He hurried anxiously inside and saw Sir Alex Ferguson sitting in an armchair, sipping a cup of tea out of some of the best china Lynne could find. Ferguson didn't beat about the bush, quickly offering his protégé a two-year deal as an associate schoolboy with Manchester United.

Ryan was fourteen, captain of England Schoolboys, and he had signed for Manchester United. The boy with the tough start in life now had the world at his feet... literally. He was about to embark on the most glittering career ever in British football: a legend was in the making.

RED ALERT

‘I shall always remember my first sight of him, floating over the pitch at The Cliff so effortlessly that you would have sworn his feet weren’t touching the ground.’

Sir Alex Ferguson, *Managing My Life*

‘When Ryan ran, he ran like the wind. You couldn’t hear him, he was that light on his feet. No disrespect to Beckham and Scholesy, but he’s the only one who was always going to be a superstar.’

Former United skipper, Steve Bruce

Ryan officially joined Manchester United FC on 9 July 1990, when he was sixteen – and he turned professional on 29 November 1990, his 17th birthday. Alex Ferguson knew he had special talent on his hands, but resisted the heavy temptation to throw the wonderboy into the first team at once. Instead, he decided on a softly-softly approach with the lad who would become a United legend – and in doing so, formulated a programme of development that he would employ with countless other young stars during the next 20 years of his reign.

He wrapped Ryan in cotton wool, using him sparingly and keeping him well away from the wolves of the media, whom he did not trust back then (and for the most part still doesn’t now). Ferguson would tell the pack to back off; that, no, Ryan was not available for a chat after a particularly inspiring showing, and, no, he would not be doing columns, adverts or promotions until Ferguson, the manager, decided the time was right for him to do so.

Fourteen years later Ferguson would sum up the methodology he used in his treatment of Ryan and other so-called ‘fledglings’ over the years when he spoke about how new boy Wayne Rooney would be handled. He said, ‘We won’t ask the lad to climb a mountain tomorrow. The important thing is that he is a major player in five years’ time. We have a job to do to make sure he fulfils his potential. We have a reputation for looking after young players here. He will get the same protection the others have had.’

Of course, United were more wary than other clubs may have been with Giggs – little wonder, given they’d had the original whiz kid, George Best, under their wings. After Best’s death, many fans believe that United, as a club, still felt some guilt that they had not done enough to help him, and get help for him. It hadn’t been the done thing in the Matt Busby era: you didn’t talk through problems, you just fronted it out.

Busby was hardly a therapist or a psychologist, and he never wanted to be. Ferguson was from the same down-to-earth Scottish upbringing – the idea that ‘we’re all big boys who don’t cry’ – but, to his credit, he was aware that Ryan Giggs would need his attention and his protection. He knew there would be comparisons with Best and that some pundits would sniff out Ryan’s background, find out that he was from a broken home and suggest he could easily go the way of the late, great Georgie Best, and so he determined, from day one, that it would not happen: that Ryan would not be George Best Mark 2. He would be Ryan Giggs, Mark 1.

Paul Parker, the former United full back who played in the United team of Ryan’s early career, summed up Ferguson’s influence: ‘The boss brought Ryan through from a troubled childhood and always saw him as one of his own. Ryan [also] got very close to Paul Ince, and Incey took him under

his wing. Ryan would also socialise quite a lot with Lee Sharpe. But he was always his own man and made his own decisions.

‘He didn’t go out looking for publicity. Apart from doing a few promotional things for his boot company, he was content to be known as Giggs the footballer.’

Fergie’s protectiveness helps explain why it was only in August 1993 – three years after he joined United and a good two years after his debut – that Ryan was allowed to have an agent to find him marketing deals. The lure of the boy was apparent when the agent quickly did a £500,000 deal for Ryan with a boot manufacturer. That same year the press got their bite of the cherry when he did his first major interview with the men’s magazine *FHM*.

Giggs made his league debut at the tender age of seventeen in the old Division One against Everton at Old Trafford on 2 March 1991, as a substitute for Denis Irwin. I was fortunate to be at the match along with *Sunday Times* sports editor Alex Butler. Alex had told me on the way up to Manchester that there had been talk among the men who covered United for the nationals of a young lad who was going to leave everyone stunned when he finally made it into United’s first team. Name of Giggs, he had been nurtured through the club’s academy and was expected to bypass the traditional route of years in the reserves. Butler had been given the nod that Ferguson might blood the kid against Everton, and so it was that we headed up north, hopefully to be a part of history in the making.

I recall it being a bitterly cold March day as we arrived at Old Trafford – and the match was particularly memorable. United were already trailing 2–0 when Denis Irwin fell awkwardly and was taken off. I half-expected Ferguson to bring on Lee Sharpe, or maybe even Russell Beardsmore. But then Butler nudged me and said, ‘This is it, he’ll bring on the lad Giggs.’ The big man of Fleet Street wasn’t wrong – a gawky, skinny boy with dark hair took off his tracksuit and headed towards the touchline.

At that moment a chill wind blew in from the nearby Ship Canal and I feared it might blow the boy over. Yes, he was that lightweight and featherlike; wafer thin and looking like he needed a good meal (or two).

Fergie patted him on the back and whispered in his ear: it was that sort of moment, history defining epoch making. ‘Good luck Ryan,’ I am told the boss said affectionately. ‘And give ‘em hell!’

It took the new boy a few minutes to get into the game but his first touch confirmed that everything I had been told about him was spot on. He had a deft control, a talent for beating a man with trickery and pace. And he roared off like a greyhound down that left wing for the first time; he would come to call the territory his own, but back then he was like a kid with a new toy. Then came the real surprise: we had been warned that he would be good, even brilliant, but we never expected him to have the strength and determination that he exuded when a desperate Toffees defender tried to upend him. He shoulder-charged him back and stood his ground. How had he managed that when he looked like a slight wind would blow him over?

It would later emerge that Fergie hadn’t just been wrapping Ryan in cotton wool and protecting him from the press; he had been encouraging him to build up his strength and physique and had told his backroom staff to work on that side of the boy’s development. The work had clearly paid off.

As Ryan trooped off, Fergie threw a protective arm around him and senior players, including Gary Pallister, Steve Bruce and Paul Parker, spoke words of encouragement to the boy wonder. The era of Ryan Giggs as a public face had begun in earnest. Parker would one day famously make the comment that while everyone likened Giggs to George Best, Ryan was, ‘so much quicker than Best.’

Welsh goalkeeping legend Neville Southall was between the sticks for the Toffees that day and he

told BBC Sport in 2009: 'I'd heard the hype beforehand and when he came on I thought what scrawny, thin kid with dodgy hair! But he had incredible blistering pace, dribbling ability, superb balance and great vision for a teenager – and you could immediately see the comparisons with George Best.'

Former Welsh skipper Kevin Ratcliffe was the man with the task of being the first to mark Ryan on his debut in 1991. He said he could see the massive potential in the boy, and that he was pleased he was Welsh born and bred – as it meant that he would not have to face him at international level!

He hadn't scored or been able to turn the game around for the Reds, but he had shown glimpses of just why Manchester United FC were so excited by one boy's emergence.

If his sub's role had whetted the appetite, Ryan's full debut would leave few doubting that here was a real talent, someone who could light up the Premier League for years to come. His first full start for the club would come at Old Trafford almost exactly two months later and would also never be forgotten, coming as it did against local archrivals Manchester City. He would mark the occasion by scoring his first goal – although even diehard United fans would concede that it did take a major deflection off Blues defender Colin Hendry and could have been credited to the big Scot. No matter, it was a goal, and it was the only goal as United chalked up a 1–0 win in the match that mattered most for local pride and bragging rights.

And it was Ryan who had pulled off the fairytale to send United fans out into the city streets celebrating that night. He became an overnight sensation, a hero in the making, because it was he who had won the derby match. Fergie then pulled the protective cloak over his wunderkind and shielded him from an inquisitive media and public. He took him back out of the limelight, knowing his time would come (and it would not be long) and that he also had the not inconsiderable talents of Lee Sharpe and Andrei Kanchelskis to keep the wings warm until Giggs was finally ready to step permanently into the first team.

Indeed, it would be Sharpe to whom the manager would turn just 11 days after the win in the Manchester derby. Fergie would not even include Giggs in the squad of 16 who defeated Barcelona in the European Cup Winners' Cup final in Rotterdam on 15 May 1991. Danny Wallace was on the bench as Sharpe's deputy – ironically, Lee had been Danny's stand-in until he took the older man's place at the start of that season.

Without Ryan, United would beat Barcelona 2–1 to celebrate the re-admission of English clubs to Europe after a 5-year absence in the wake of the Heysel disaster.

The next season, 1991/92, Ryan would become much more involved in the first team, turning on regularly and really starting to make a name for himself. To an extent, Fergie was still treating him with kid gloves and he left him out of the starting line-up for the first match of the season: the league encounter with Notts County at Old Trafford. But he was brought on in the second half to replace Fergie's son, Darren, and when Lee Sharpe suffered a series of injuries, young Ryan was retained in the first 11. The era of Giggs had definitely begun.

He scored his first 'proper' goal (one that did not need a deflection to take it into the net) for the club on 7 September 1991, in the league clash against Norwich City at Old Trafford, which United won 3–0. That season, he would go on to score another five league goals.

Two months later, Ryan savoured his first taste of senior glory as United beat Red Star Belgrade 1–0 in the European Super Cup final. The match took place at Old Trafford and Ryan, wearing the No. 1 shirt, came on for left-back Lee Martin after 71 minutes. Brian McClair grabbed the winner for the Red Devils, who were playing in the game because they had won the 1991 European Cup Winners' Cup (Red Star had lifted the European Cup). It was supposed to have been a two-legged affair but the

troubles in Belgrade led UEFA to play it over one leg, in Manchester.

It would not be long before Giggs was taking home more silverware. Just 5 months after the win over Red Star, he was again in the first team and helped United to a 1–0 win over Nottingham Forest in the League Cup final (then known as the Rumbelows Cup). He had played a major role in getting the Red Devils to Wembley, scoring the winner in the two-legged semi-final against Middlesbrough.

But it was Scottish ace McClair who grabbed the decisive goal in the final, as Ryan lapped up his first taste of success at Wembley on 12 April 1992. It was all the more special as it was United's first League Cup win – as well as Giggs's first major domestic honour in the pro game.

Giggs lined up on the left with his best mate Paul Ince playing alongside him in central midfield. Mike Phelan, now assistant manager at Old Trafford, was alongside Ince, with Kanchelskis on the right wing. Mark Hughes, who would of course go on to manage Manchester City, led the attack with McClair. Ryan was a constant threat down the left wing and he completed a fine performance by setting up McClair for his winner after just 14 minutes. He was still only eighteen years old.

His joy was complete when he went on to win the PFA Young Player of the Year award for 1992–93 and played in the final of the Youth Cup, skippering the side to a 6–3 triumph over Crystal Palace (he played in the second leg, which United won 3–2). It was the first time the club had won the trophy since 1964, when they beat Swindon 5–2. The triumphant team of '92 included some other youngsters who would go on to join Ryan in the United senior side at the very top of the game – namely David Beckham, Gary Neville, Paul Scholes and Nicky Butt.

Despite the accolades coming Ryan's way, some assessed the season as a failure – because United exited at an early stage from both the Cup Winners' Cup and FA Cup and, more crucially, did not win the league title when it had appeared to be theirs for the taking. The Red Devils lost out to Leeds United after leading the race for much of the season: the collapse that cost them so dearly began in Easter 1992, with three defeats in their final four games ending the dream. It led to major inquests in the Press and in the pubs around Old Trafford – and even Fergie conceded 'many in the media felt that [his] mistakes had contributed to the misery.'

He admitted his side needed an 'extra dimension' if they were to go one step further the following season and end 26 years of darkness by lifting the crown.

The boss had tried to sign Mick Harford from Luton Town to bring that spark, and said he believed United would have won the title with the big striker in tow. We'll never know whether Harford would have inspired United to greatness, but the man who would finally arrive at Old Trafford the following November certainly did: yes, Eric Cantona appeared with his collar turned up and nothing would ever be the same again at the Theatre of Dreams. Certainly, Ryan Giggs was entranced by his spell, admitting Cantona was his favourite player ever and that his own game improved as he tried to match 'The King's' rigorous standards in training and on the pitch.

If Paul Ince was his best mate, Eric Cantona was Ryan Giggs's role model. And the Frenchman took time out to help him reach his potential. He taught him that you can take nothing for granted – that you need to search all the time for perfection, find it and tap into your potential to become a great player, not just a damned good one. Cantona was world-class – and Ryan would join him, much to his satisfaction: he said he felt Giggs was the best young player that he had ever come across and that he had all the raw ingredients to become the finest footballer in the world.

Ryan would go some way to showing his potential – and the fact that he would work hard to exploit it – in the 1992/93 season, his third as a professional at United. He was still only eighteen, but rare to go and to help United hopefully break the title jinx that continued to cast a long, dark shadow over Old Trafford. Over the campaign, he would contribute with 11 goals in all.

But by the beginning of November, United were lagging behind in the newly-formed Premier League table. Ryan had scored in the 1–1 draw at Spurs in the middle of September and was playing his part with some fine performances down the left wing as United desperately tried to step up a gear to title-winning form. But a disappointing European exit – 4–3 on penalties to Torpedo Moscow in the UEFA Cup first round – and inconsistent form by his team in the league, with 1–0 losses at home to Wimbledon and away at Aston Villa, led Ferguson to plunge into the transfer market.

On 26 November 1992, he bought the catalyst, the man who would make the league title dream come true, finally ending that 26-year nightmare. The great Eric Cantona arrived from Leeds United for a fee of just over £1 million. It was like buying a Picasso for a fiver; Fergie had picked up a genuine masterpiece on the cheap. Cantona would prove the final missing piece of the jigsaw: he was to take United to a new level through his skill, genius and incomparable self-confidence.

During the first part of the campaign, Mark Hughes and Brian McClair had been struggling as a partnership – even with Ryan winging in inch-perfect crosses – but that would all change as the French talisman made his presence felt. Cantona quickly settled into the team, not only scoring goals but also creating chances for others. Ryan would later admit that he had looked on in some awe as the Frenchman strutted his stuff, but also said that he was grateful to have had him at his side as nerves threatened to overwhelm United's push for glory.

'The King', as United fans quickly came to call him, gave the whole team the belief that they could be champions. Cantona formed a strong partnership with Mark Hughes and fired the club to the top of the table.

He made his debut in the derby match against Manchester City on 6 December 1992, at Old Trafford, and his 9 goals in 22 league games helped bring the inaugural Premier League title to the club by the following May. His first United goal came in the 1–1 draw against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge on 19 December 1992. Controversy was, of course, his second name and on his return to Elland Road, on 8 February 1993, he was in trouble after spitting at one of the Leeds fans who tried to make his return visit to Yorkshire as inhospitable as possible: he was subsequently fined £1,000 by the FA.

Two months later, Cantona would have the last laugh by leading United to their first Premier League crown – a feat in itself as he became the first player to win the top-flight crown with different teams in successive seasons. And United had not taken the title with a whimper – no, they had done so with a roar, finishing a massive 10 points clear of runners-up Aston Villa.

A spin-off of the success was that Ferguson was voted Manager of the Year, while Giggs was rewarded for his excellent showings with another Young Player of the Year award. He would also claim a little bit of history as the first player to be given the accolade in successive seasons.

Ryan had certainly played his part in the run-in, setting up goals from that leftwing and grabbing the opener himself in the 3–1 win over Blackburn on 3 May 1993. He had played in a total of 40 matches with a decent return of 11 goals. But no way was the Welsh wing wizard happy to sit back and bask in complacency after that pivotal title win; like the team and manager he played for, he wanted more: much more – and quickly. The title albatross may have been removed from Old Trafford and Ryan was delighted to have been part of the history-making team that finally lifted the weight, but now he was aiming even higher – he wanted to win the double of the Premier League and FA Cup, and then steal glory in Europe.

And he wouldn't have to wait long to achieve the first part of his new target – less than 12 months in fact.

MINE'S A DOUBLE

'Ryan could play football in a phone box and find the door, no matter how many players were in there with him.'

Carlos Queiroz, former Manchester United assistant manager

Ryan Giggs knew he had a lot to live up to as the 1993/94 campaign dawned. During the summer he had enjoyed a good rest and a holiday with his mates in Crete, but realised everything had changed when he returned to Old Trafford for pre-season training in July 1993. No longer was he a minor character at Manchester United – already he was being compared to George Best and hailed as a matchwinner. His feats of the previous season had ensured things would never be the same again, but, typically of the boy whose feet were firmly on the ground, he did not let it bother him.

OK, there was much more attention, more autograph hunters and more press men pushing microphones in his face – as was exemplified during United's tour of South Africa a few weeks earlier when he was literally mobbed by fans and well-wishers – but for him, life went on much as usual. Even on that preseason tour he preferred to avoid the crowds and the adulation, often staying in the team's Johannesburg hotel listening to his favourite music on his personal CD player, or having a laugh with his room-mate. Typical of the boss, Ferguson even had a say in who roomed with the boy. Giggs on the tour – and who better to keep an eye on him than his son, Darren?

No, there was little chance that young Ryan would stray. His mother Lynne and manager Ferguson helped him stay on course by vetting his lifestyle and keeping him away from too much temptation. Giggs was still living at home with Lynne and his stepfather Richard Johnson, a chef whom she had married four years earlier. Their three-bedroom house was located on the main Worsley Road in Swinton (which led to Manchester and Old Trafford) and Ryan enjoyed their company and that of his eighteen-month-old half-sister, Bethany.

The only sign of ostentation was the sight of his red Golf GTI parked outside on double-yellow lines when he had to nip back for something he had forgotten on the way to training. Otherwise, he was living the life of a typical nineteen-year-old – going out with his friends for a game of snooker or a pint and seeing his girlfriend when time permitted. He may have been a shy lad, but he was a winner with the girls – including a model, Dawn Thomas, who he had briefly dated. And by the start of the new campaign in August 1993 he was going steady with Suzanne Rothwell, a nineteen-year-old building society worker, who lived nearby and had attended the same secondary school.

It was the kind of lifestyle that Fergie advocated. He didn't want Ryan going the same way as players like Lee Sharpe, who preferred to walk on the wild side. No, the boss knew Giggsey had huge potential and so he continued his policy of ensuring that he did not do too much, too young. He encouraged him to continue to live at home, to lark about with his long-time friends and to stay the course with one girl. Some would call Ferguson a control freak for pulling the strings with Giggs, but Ryan was privately grateful for the boss's time and concern.

He knew all about George Best and didn't want anything to derail him from his prime objective of becoming one of the finest footballers in the world at one of the best football clubs in the world. Anyway, he was never bedevilled by the same addictions and distractions that had cost the Northern Ireland genius so dearly.

So Ryan agreed when Ferguson suggested it might be a good idea if he stayed at home with Lynne

and Richard until he was at least twenty-one. And he was happy to fall in with the boss's suggestion that he learn how to cook, with the help of United's chef, in preparation for when he did leave home. After all, Ferguson told him, you can't live on cereal and toast for ever!

'Alex Ferguson has got permission from his mother to look after him,' the then United chief executive Martin Edwards told *Today* journalist David Jones in August 1993. 'He is extremely protective of Ryan. He has seen what has happened to other young boys with agents, and so on. Ryan has a particular talent and the last thing he wants is for the boy to go astray. It is for the boy's – and the club's – own good.'

Fergie was pleased with the way his young signing was developing and felt that he would step up to another level during the imminent campaign – and he would not be wrong on that score. Ryan was to turn twenty in the November of 1993 and his performances throughout the campaign would parallel his growing maturity. This would be his best season goals-wise at the club – he would score a total of 17.

To add to the team's strength, Ferguson had pulled off another masterstroke in the transfer market a month before the new season opened – bringing in Roy Keane from Nottingham Forest for a then British record fee of £3.75 million. The Irishman would go on to captain the club and be the boss's eyes and ears on the pitch, leading United to an unprecedented era of glory during the 1990s.

The Reds were beginning to look unbeatable – with a rock-solid defence containing the massive goalkeeping presence of Peter Schmeichel and centre-backs Steve Bruce and Gary Pallister, and a midfield that would revolve around Keane and Giggs on the wing. Plus, there was a whole host of other youngsters – the so-called 'Fergie Fledglings' – knocking on the first-team door.

With Giggs in splendid form, United would win the league again in May 1994 – notching a second consecutive title for the first time since 1957, before winning the FA Cup to complete the first 'Double' in the club's history.

Ryan got off to a flyer at the start of the campaign, grabbing United's first goal in the 2–0 win over Norwich on 15 August 1993. It was a goal that would highlight his poaching skills in the 6-yard box. Keeper Bryan Gunn could only deflect an effort from Mark Hughes and Giggs was on hand to tap the ball home in the 26th minute.

The match marked Keane's league debut for United, and the midfield maestro set up Ryan for his opener with a splendid cross that Giggs duly converted. If Keane was a rookie for United that day, and Giggs was still relatively wet behind the ears – there was another man learning his trade and heading for the big time in the press box.

Colin Forshaw would later go on to make his name on the *Mail on Sunday*, but on Roy Keane's debut he was honing his craft on the sports desk of the *Eastern Daily Press* in Norwich. Forshaw saw enough in Keane's performance to convince him that he had seen the heartbeat future of Manchester United but he was also bedazzled by the skills and ingenuity of the boy on the leftwing. He said: 'There was a bit of a buzz in the press box that day – what with Keane making his debut and being the most expensive player in British football. The United boys had told us he had been buzzing in training and that they reckoned he would take over from Bryan Robson as the key man in the side sooner rather than later. Sure enough, he wasn't in the least afraid of letting Robbo or Paul Ince know if he felt they had messed up, or not gone in hard enough.'

He remembered Keane as being the one who came out on top – the one who dictated the play rather than Ince: 'Keane set up the goal for Giggs and helped United keep their shape when Norwich occasionally threatened. There was no disgrace for City losing to United that day – in Keane they had found a gem of a player, but Giggs was also amazing. Keane stole the headline because it was he

debut and he was the most expensive player in Britain, but for me, Giggs was just as good, if not better. He ran Norwich ragged and had so much confidence and ability for a young lad. He was still wiry and skinny, but he was developing, you could see that. He was so fast, virtually unstoppable, and the Norwich defenders would be having nightmares about him for months after that showing.'

Forshaw was not at all surprised that Giggs went on to become one of United's best players: 'Ever back in 1993 it was clear that he was going to be a world-class footballer. It was just a shame that my hometown team had to be the ones who suffered as he started to really make his name!'

Just 6 days later Ryan was on the scoresheet again – this time in front of his own adoring fans at Old Trafford. Giggs delivered from a marvellous free kick that spun beyond the despairing reach of Newcastle keeper Pavel Srnicek in a 1–1 Premier League draw.

With Cantona at his side, there was no stopping the boy wonder that history-making season. His season's haul of 17 goals in the campaign would make him the team's third-highest scorer after Mark Hughes and Eric Cantona as United lost only 6 out of 62 games.

The only disappointment came at Wembley in March 1994, when Giggs and co. lost 3–1 to Aston Villa in the League Cup final. They had been so close to lifting an unprecedented domestic treble. There was also dismay as United's much-heralded return to the European Cup ended in tears in November as they crashed out on the away-goals rule to Galatasaray. The first leg in Manchester ended 3–3 and United could only draw 0–0 in Istanbul on the return.

But another plus for Ryan came in October 1993 – a month before his 20th birthday – when he signed a new 5-year deal that would tie him to Old Trafford until at least 1998. The fans and Ferguson breathed a collective sigh of relief – and Giggs started to work out exactly how he would spend the new readies as his salary increased to £350,000 a year (around £7,000 a week).

Shortly afterwards, United won 3–2 at neighbours Manchester City and the excellent league run continued for the next four months. From 30 October 1993 until 5 March 1994 Giggs and his teammates lost only once in 18 matches. Certainly, it was title-winning form, which included some fine highlights from Giggs.

He grabbed a brace in the 5–2 win at Oldham's Boundary Park just after Christmas 1993, and scored United's second in the cracker of a match that led to a 3–3 draw with Liverpool at Anfield on 22 January 1994. Ryan was also on target in the first leg of the League Cup semi-final against Sheffield Wednesday at Old Trafford on 13 February 1994. The goal sealed a 1–0 win for the Reds and put them in confident mood for the return at Hillsborough, which they duly won at a canter, 4–1.

Disappointment would come in the final against Villa, a month later. Goals from Dalian Atkinson and Dean Saunders (2) killed off United, who had only Mark Hughes's consolation strike to show for their trip to London. Ryan would feel low as he clutched his runners-up medal on the coach trip back to Manchester, but he knew greater glories were within reach.

United were roaring towards the retention of their league crown and reached the FA Cup final with a commendable win over neighbours Oldham Athletic. Again, Giggs was instrumental in the triumph. The first match ended in a 1–1 draw after extra time, but United made no mistake in the replay, winning 4–1. Giggs lashed home the first goal to send United on their way, with Denis Irwin (again from his old club), Andrei Kanchelskis and Bryan Robson putting the contest beyond doubt.

United wrapped up their second successive title win by winning 4 of their final 6 league matches after the FA Cup victory over Oldham. Surprisingly, they would lose 1–0 away at Wimbledon three days after beating the Latics, but went on to beat Manchester City, Leeds, Ipswich and Southampton before parading the trophy around Old Trafford after an anti-climatic 0–0 draw with Coventry in the final league encounter of the season.

Again, Ryan chipped in by scoring the opener in the 2–0 win at Leeds and the winner in the 2–0 victory at Ipswich. United were champions again – finishing 8 points clear of runners-up Blackburn.

Six days after wrapping up another title, Giggs and his team-mates headed back to Wembley on 1 May in an attempt to lift the FA Cup and their first double. Chelsea stood between them and the moment of history – but only for an hour.

While United were going all out to become only the fourth 20th-century team to complete the Double, Chelsea finally emerged from a period of gloom. This would be their first major final since 1971, but they were ranked underdogs, having finished 13 places behind the Reds in the league.

Bryan Robson, the man who had lifted the trophy three times as captain of United, was famously dropped from the squad for Brian McClair while Chelsea player-manager Glenn Hoddle left himself out of the starting line-up. Yet it would be the Blues who took charge of the match, proving to be the better side in a rain-soaked first half at the national stadium. But it was a different United after the interval and they crushed Chelsea with a demoralising 30-minute display of football from the hour onward.

Again, it was Giggs who was instrumental in setting United on their way. He and Kanchelskis were becoming more and more influential as Chelsea tired early and the damp surface made tackling a lottery. Giggs set up Irwin for a run into the box, where the Irishman was fouled by a desperate Frank Sinclair. Eric Cantona made no mistake from the penalty spot. Six minutes later ‘the King’ made it 2–0 with another penalty after Kanchelskis was upended in the box by Eddie Newton. Goals by Mark Hughes and Brian McClair – proving Fergie was right to choose him instead of Robbo on this occasion – killed off the match. Four-nil and Giggs and the boys had won the double.

Ryan celebrated into the night with his team-mates and United fans everywhere were convinced this was the start of an era in which the Reds would be invincible for many years at home – and hopefully they would begin to make inroads in the European Cup too. But the phrase ‘counting your chickens before they had hatched’ came to mind as Giggs joined United for pre-season training in the summer of 1994 after an enjoyable holiday with team-mate Paul Ince. Ferguson brought in David May from Blackburn to add strength to his squad and would sign goal-machine Andy Cole from Newcastle in the January of the campaign, but United were to falter dramatically and end the season empty-handed.

It was a situation Giggs described as ‘horrible’ and ‘a nightmare’, one that he was determined he would never have to suffer again. He did not want to go through the heartache of having the league and the FA Cup both within his grasp – another double – and seeing them snatched away at the last moment.

Of course, there were mitigating circumstances that season – none more so than Eric Cantona’s three-month ban after his ‘kung-fu’ attack on a fan at Crystal Palace at the end of January 1995. But United should still have had enough to complete the job with the available players. It’s often said that they simply cracked up after Cantona’s exit, but the statistics directly after the incident do not back this up. They won 8 of their next 10 matches – including the 9–0 rout over Ipswich, the 3–0 win at Manchester City in the league and the 3–1 win over Leeds in the FA Cup.

No, it is a tad too simple to say they collapsed just because Eric was absent – and the boss was to agree with that when it came to putting things right during the next summer break. A certain complacency had set in with some of the big players perhaps thinking they were the cream of the crop that they just had to turn up to win.

But Ryan Giggs was not among their number. If anything, one might argue that his absence during the season at key times due to injury – he was restricted to 29 Premier League games and one goal because of fitness problems – cost United as dearly as Eric Cantona’s absence.

His only goal in the league came in the 3–0 win over Wimbledon at Old Trafford in the opening month of the season, although he also scored another in the 5–2 home win over Wrexham in the FA Cup at the end of January, 1995, plus two more in the 4–2 European Cup first round first-leg victory over Gothenburg at Old Trafford in September 1994.

Yes, it was undoubtedly a poor return for a player at the top of his game and a player of such adjustment talent; but, as we have said, it was also down to a series of injury setbacks. That season Ryan suffered the first major injury of his career in the 3–2 loss at Ipswich in September 1994. He hobbled off with a calf problem and then suffered ankle, Achilles tendon and hamstring setbacks as the campaign progressed. At one stage, he would admit that he had played in some games when he was not fully fit, so keen was he to continue his glory run at United, but this obviously didn't help the injuries – indeed it explains why one setback seemed to merge into another. He never had the chance to get fit and fully recover.

By the end of the campaign Giggs was still only twenty-one and was part of what Ferguson saw as a new golden future. He would survive the ensuing summer cull and would be joined by fellow kids from the youth team as Fergie blew away the cobwebs of dismay that engulfed the club.

The new era was effectively launched when United collapsed in their final two games of the season. Their failure to win at West Ham on 14 May 1995 (they drew 1–1) allowed Blackburn to sneak in and claim their Premier League crown. Six days later there was another shock at Wembley as United were beaten down 1–0 to Everton in the FA Cup final. The win was totally unexpected – Everton had experienced a topsy-turvy season and the bookies were convinced Giggs and co. would wipe the floor with them.

But new boss Joe Royle inspired them to turn around their season and beat the drop – and to also win the Cup. Paul Rideout scored the goal that sent Everton fans into raptures and had United's army of supporters crying into their beer.

The goal meant the Toffees had won a trophy for the first time in 8 years – while United were left pointless for the first time since 1989. Giggs admitted he had only been half-fit and the boss kept him on the bench until half time, when he came on for Steve Bruce. Lee Sharpe started on the left, but found it difficult to break through the Toffees' famed 'Dogs of War' – defenders and midfielders who tackle as if their lives depended on it and would use any means, fair or foul, to stop someone breaking past them. Ryan had been suffering from the hamstring problem that had irritated him throughout the season and was unsure whether he should even take part. He had to be persuaded by the boss that he could play half the match.

Afterwards Ferguson would show how much he had come to rely on Giggs when he admitted the outcome of the lost double might have been different, had his boy wonder been playing. 'It is arguable that he could have won us the league at the death. He nearly turned the Cup Final around for us when we brought him on as a substitute,' he conceded.

Giggs admitted he did enjoy the after-match party – which had been organised to take place whether United won or lost. The boss told him and the rest of the lads to go out and enjoy themselves, that had been a long tough season, and to come back refreshed and more determined than ever. And so they did just that, drowning their sorrows at the swanky Royal Lancaster Hotel in London.

But Fergie himself didn't bother with the after-match party: already he was thinking up plans to put things right. And he gave a hint that, yes, he did think complacency may have set in among certain players when he observed, 'It's five years since we won nothing. Sometimes our players forget what defeat is like – they know now.'

The course of action that the boss eventually decided on would initially have the fans questioning his sanity, but it was to work beyond his wildest dreams – bringing the greatest haul of trophies and

glory that the club had ever known. Indeed, Ryan Giggs would often remark that he was thankful ~~to have been parachuted into Old Trafford at a time when Ferguson was boss.~~ The outcome of the following season would go a long way towards explaining just why he admired and respected his mentor so much.

KIDS DO WIN TITLES

‘You’ll never win anything with kids.’

Alan Hansen, *BBC Match of the Day*, 19 August 1995

‘Ryan Giggs was a hero to the younger lads, like me.’

David Beckham

It would turn out to be one of the biggest clangers dropped on national TV since Michael Fish’s infamous ‘there’s no hurricane on the way’ assertion the night before severe storms and gales battered Britain in 1987. And, in much the same way as the hapless Fish would be remembered for his wide-of-the-mark comment, so too would Alan Hansen’s words of wisdom come back to haunt him for the rest of his television career.

Hansen was a pundit on the BBC show *Match of the Day* and following Manchester United’s 3–0 defeat at Aston Villa on the opening day of the 1995/96 Premier League season, he uttered those famous words: ‘You’ll never win anything with kids.’ Alex Ferguson laughed it off but many of the United faithful found themselves nodding in agreement that night, even though Hansen was renowned as a Liverpool fanatic after starring for the Anfield club for the most part of a glittering playing career.

Some Reds felt they had no choice but to concur with the man so closely linked to their most hated rivals. After all, United had sold off major names from their squad during the summer of 1995 – and the boss had said that he was not planning to splash out to replace them. No, he was going to give gilded youth its big chance at Old Trafford.

Three big stars had paid the price for the barren campaign of 1994/95 when the club ended up trophy-less after falling at the last hurdles in both the league and the FA cups. Paul Ince, the self-styled ‘guv’nor’, was shown the door after Ferguson felt he had grown too big for his boots. Leger has it that the writing was firmly on the wall for Ince after one particular episode involving him and Ferguson in 1995.

The two men had jumped out of their cars – Incey’s boasting the registration GUV 8 – after parking up outside Old Trafford, and both were heading for the entrance to the ground at the same time. As they arrived, the guard at the door nodded his head in respect and said, ‘Afternoon, guv.’ Ferguson said ‘Hello’ back, but the doorman and Ince shared a sly wink as the player followed his boss through the door. No prizes for guessing the sting in the tail – the guard had been acknowledging Incey, not Fergie!

Giggs was upset at Paul Ince’s departure. He had become firm friends with the midfielder, who was to decamp to Italy and Inter Milan. They had gone away on holiday together and enjoyed nights and meals out. Ince had been somebody Ryan could talk to and confide in about any problems or dilemmas that he had. Plus, there was the not inconsiderable fact that Paul would look out for Ryan on the pitch and dive in with crunching tackles if anybody was giving him a hard time.

The other two stars shown the door were Mark Hughes, who would head to London and Chelsea, and Andrei Kanchelskis, who was to turn up just 35 miles up the East Lancs Road at Everton.

There were protests outside Old Trafford as United fans vented their feelings but Ferguson had

shown an iron grip in his disposal of the three big men and sent out a warning to any of his other players who might think they could sit on their laurels after the success they had enjoyed during the double season. That interim season of failure had forced the boss into the most drastic reshaping of his squad throughout his entire career and sent out a clear message: we only want players hungry for success in this team.

In their place, he would showcase the most exciting, talented batch of youngsters that the club had possessed since the glory and heartache of the 'Busby Babes'.

But it was not as if Ferguson had just come up with the idea from nowhere. In fact, he had been secretly planning the revolution for some time. Youth team coach Eric Harrison told him that he had unearthed the most exciting set of kids that he had ever known and the boss had witnessed the process with his own eyes.

Several players from that much-vaunted youth team – including Paul Scholes, David Beckham, Nicky Butt and Gary Neville – were now given their chance to emulate the progress Giggs had already made in the first team. Ferguson also believed that Roy Keane was a better player than Ince and that he could do well without Kanchelskis and Hughes. Plus, he knew that by October he would have the return of the inspirational Cantona once his 8-month ban came to an end. And he reckoned that the Frenchman would be fired up to lead the kids forward, that he would be their talisman.

And the boss was right in all his calls.

The new boys would let no one down – by the end of the season the kids who Hansen had infamously claimed would win nothing had won the double. Or, as United fans dubbed it, 'the double double' – as it was the second time they had now achieved the feat after the 1993/94 glory campaign.

Ryan Giggs played a vital role in the achievement. He put the injuries that had dogged his previous campaign behind him and enjoyed a brilliant season, emerging as one of United's best players alongside Cantona. At only twenty-one, he also played his part in helping the youngsters merge into the first team; he was there to help them and offer encouragement. Nicky Butt, in particular, would say how much he appreciated Giggs's contributions that season.

The United team for that opening-game defeat at Villa Park on 19 August read: Schmeichel, Parke, Irwin, Neville, Pallister (O'Kane, 59), Sharpe, Butt, Keane, McClair, Scholes, P. Neville (Beckham, 45). Sub not used: Davies.

The phrase 'Fergie's Fledglings' was born as the kids started to make their mark in the first team. It shows how far they would go in their first season when you compare the line-up at Villa with the one that ended the campaign at Wembley in the FA Cup final against Liverpool: Schmeichel, Irwin, Neville, May, Pallister, Keane, Cantona, Butt, Cole (Scholes, 65), Beckham (P. Neville, 89), Giggs. Sub not used: Sharpe.

Gary Neville had taken over from Paul Parker at right-back, Butt cemented his place as Ince's replacement in central midfield, Beckham was making good progress in his bid to become Kanchelskis's replacement, Phil Neville was proving what a top-class all-rounder he was, and of course, Ryan Giggs was back in the side, reclaiming his No. 11 shirt. Plus, of course, there was the little matter of the King's return – but more of Cantona later.

In the opening-day fixture against Villa, Beckham would come on at the interval for Phil Neville and mark his appearance by scoring 8 minutes from time. His reward was to be a starting slot in the next match – the Premier League home encounter against West Ham – which United won 2–1, thanks to a Scholes goal.

Giggs was still working his way back from his hamstring woes and his reintroduction to the team to the new boys was gentle. He came on as a 72nd-minute substitute for Andy Cole in the third match of the

campaign, a 3–1 win over Wimbledon, again at home and again in the league.

~~Giggs was sub once more in the next game: the 2–1 Premier League win at Blackburn, this time coming on after 75 minutes for Scholes. He was feeling his way back and starting to build up his strength again, but Ferguson resisted the temptation to throw him back in – keeping him on the bench for the big 3–2 win at Everton (again, in the league), in the first week of September.~~

Once again, he came on as a sub for Scholes, this time on 66 minutes, scoring a cracker of a goal. Word was around Old Trafford that Ryan had been getting slightly peeved at not being back in the thrust of the action, but the boss told him that he would have to be patient; that he knew best, and that he did not want to rush it and risk losing his player to injury again.

But after Giggs's winner in the match at Everton on 9 September, Fergie knew he could not hold that boy back much longer. Not after he had scored a goal that was already a contender for Goal of the Season (eventually only beaten at the end of the campaign by another wonder goal by Manchester City's Georgi Kinkladze).

The Goodison match was an early-season opportunity for United to gain revenge on the team who had pipped them to the FA Cup at Wembley just over three months previously. It was also a chance for Everton fans to finally witness the debut of Kanchelskis, who had signed for £5 million. But it was the boys who still had a future at Old Trafford who sealed the win for United. Everton went behind to a Lee Sharpe strike after only 3 minutes, and on 15 minutes Toffees fans would realise it was not going to be their day when Kanchelskis left the field in agony with a shoulder injury. Anders Limpar made it 1–1 on 27 minutes, but Sharpe put United back in front just after the interval. Everton equalised again with a Paul Rideout tap-in on 55 minutes, but Giggs killed off the contest with his acclaimed goal, just before Everton suffered a final misery when David Unsworth was sent off for a second bookable offence.

The Giggs goal had come after good work by David Beckham. The latter passed to Ryan and he waltzed to the edge of the penalty area before lashing the ball home past Neville Southall.

Pure genius and pure class.

United were now scrapping for top spot in the Premier League, separated from Newcastle only on goal difference. Giggs was hitting form and they still had the bonus of Eric Cantona's imminent return from his 8-month suspension.

A week earlier, Ryan started for the first time in the league that season – and was on target again. The Red Devils cruised to a 3–0 win over Bolton at home, with Scholes grabbing the other two goals. Ryan scored the second goal on 33 minutes; he was getting better and better as he started to put his injury woes behind him. United were starting to look awesome.

Now they had won five Premier League matches on the trot and the pundits were starting to talk about Giggs and the team in awed terms once again. Then, inexplicably, they lost form in three key matches. They exited the League Cup after a disastrous night saw them lose 3–0 at home to minnows York City and draw 0–0 at Hillsborough in a league match against Sheffield Wednesday. They followed the most disappointing result of their season – a 2–2 draw at home to the Russians of Rostov Volgograd in the UEFA Cup first round. United had drawn 0–0 in Russia – when Giggs had given a daring wing display – and were now out on the away-goals ruling.

True, there had been mitigating circumstances. United were in the middle of a defensive injury crisis that meant youngsters Phil Neville and John O'Kane had to fill in as full-backs, but Ryan would later say that for him, this was the most disappointing moment of the campaign.

United were two down inside 30 minutes and could not manage a winner despite goals from Scholes and Schmeichel (the big Danish keeper famously headed the Reds level with 1 minute to go but sadly

it was not enough). United had 18 shots on target, but the players were disconsolate. 'We lost the game in the first 20 minutes,' said Ferguson. 'You go 2-0 down and you have a mountain to climb in Europe. They were bad goals to lose because the last thing we said before the match was that a clean sheet would win it for us – we knew we would make enough chances.'

Despite the loss, Giggs had once again been United's star man, having a hand in both goals and sending the Russian defenders dizzy with his constant running and dribbling. He played a part in the opener by setting up Andy Cole for a shot. When that shot was half-cleared, Scholes had been on hand to score. And the second United goal of the night – from Big Peter's head – was a result of the incredibly perfect cross Ryan floated in for the keeper.

Heads were low as the players left Old Trafford that disappointing night at the end of September 1995. But the boss knew he didn't need to give any major morale-boosting exercises; he was convinced things would be OK and that the team would soon be back in business because the return of the King was nigh.

Yes, after a suspension lasting eight months – but seeming immeasurably longer to United fans – Eric Cantona was ready to make his comeback for the only club he ever truly cared about during his wonderful, controversial career.

Cantona returned in the red shirt on 1 October 1995, and the match couldn't have been any bigger or more heated – against their biggest, most-hated rivals, Liverpool, at home. Ryan had been one of the first to greet Cantona when he returned to first-team training a couple of weeks earlier and made it a point of talking with the great man as they warmed up on the Old Trafford pitch before kick-off.

He had already freely admitted Cantona was his footballing hero and that he had learned more from him than any other player. Eric's approach to training, practising free kicks and the general search for perfection greatly impressed the young Giggs, who had taken many of the lessons he'd learned to improve his own game. He would say this of Cantona in the book *Ryan Giggs: Chasing Perfection*: 'I used to watch the way Eric trained and rested, how he lived his life. He would give me advice and I would learn from it. I would be out with Eric and someone would offer him a drink and he would turn it down, because he never drank for four days or so before a game. I took that on board. I don't have role models, but Eric's as close to one as I've had.'

And in his first autobiography, *My Story*, published in 1994, he said: 'And we signed Eric Cantona from Leeds. That was the missing piece of the jigsaw. Eric is such an incredible character; his presence alone was enough to lift us, but he was a brilliant player, too, the best in Britain and pretty close to being the best in the world. With Eric on board we believed in ourselves completely.'

The King's return against the Kop idols ended in a 2-2 draw and, typically, he would score for United – a 71-minute equaliser from the penalty spot when the Red Devils looked to be heading for a 2-1 defeat after Robbie Fowler bagged a brace. Cantona set up Nicky Butt for the opener after just a couple of minutes, but Fowler seemed set to hog the headlines with two fine goals – the first a blast past Schmeichel, the second a lob that had the keeper reeling backward in agony as it landed in the net.

But it was Cantona who would have the last laugh, hugging a goalpost after his dramatic saving goal – a penalty brought about after Jamie Redknapp hauled Ryan to the ground in the box.

The Eric and Ryan show was back on the road and would soon wow audiences across the nation. The duo picked up the telepathic understanding they had developed before the Frenchman's ban. Ryan seemed to have an unerring ability to know where Eric was and when he should release the ball to him. Similarly, Eric would float balls to Ryan that left the opposing defenders perplexed. It was a two-man show with no equal at that time in British football.

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