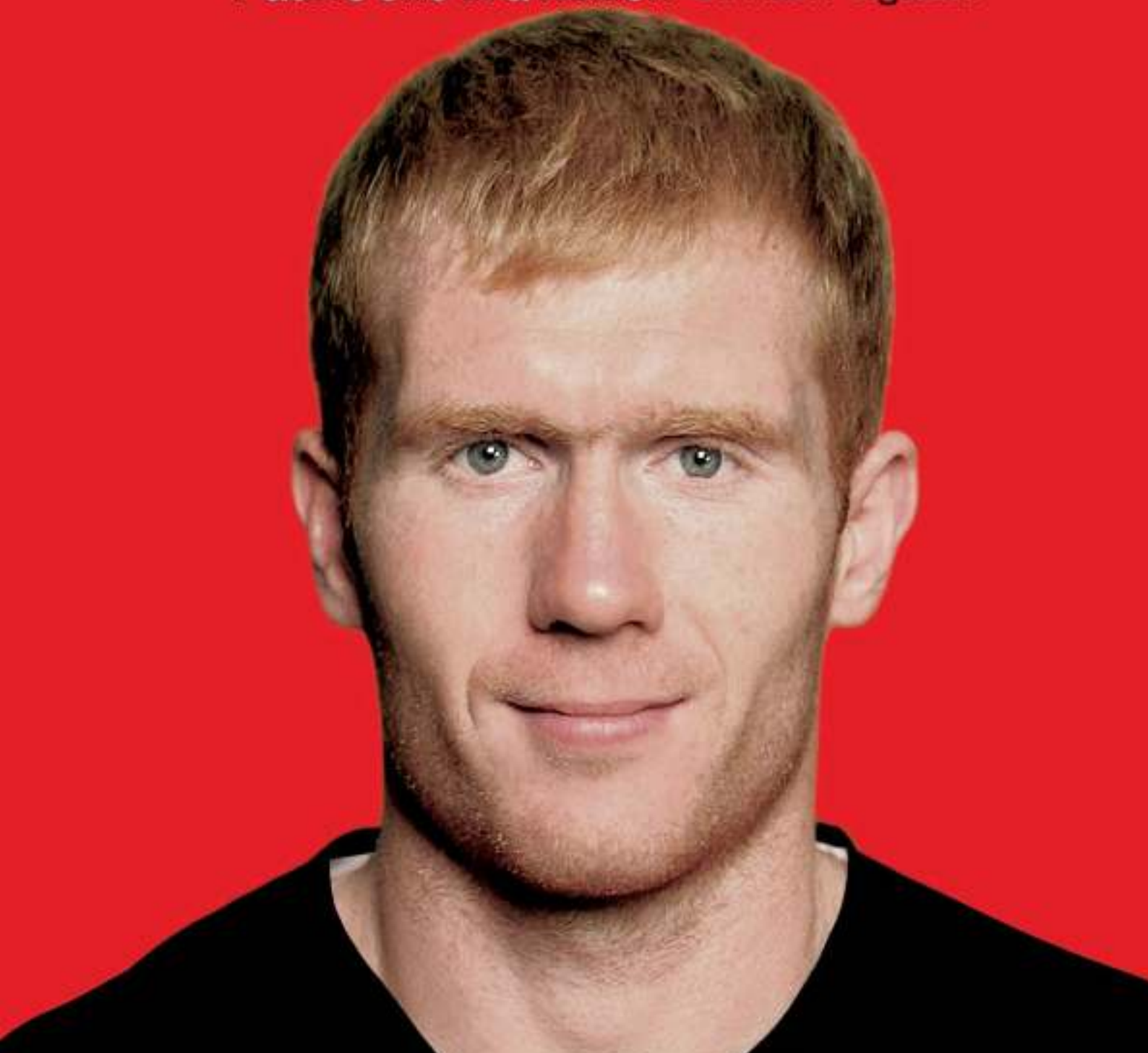


'Paul is one in a million' Sir Alex Ferguson



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To Claire, Arron, Alicia and Aiden

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FOREWORD

BY SIR ALEX FERGUSON

Manchester United have been blessed down the decades with a galaxy of fantastic footballers, some of the finest ever to walk the earth, and although these words will embarrass a dour, uncomplicated Lancashire man who has no time at all for the frivolities of life, it cannot be doubted that Paul Scholes has earned his own honoured place among the most exalted company.

As the baseline you can take Duncan Edwards, whom Bobby Charlton tells me is the best he ever played with – and that's good enough for me. Then you move forward to the unsurpassable Bobby himself; to Denis Law, who was my own hero when I was starting out in the game; and to the irresistible genius that was George Best. More recently, my own time at Old Trafford has been graced by the likes of Bryan Robson, Eric Cantona, Roy Keane, Ryan Giggs and Cristiano Ronaldo, every one of them an all-time great lauded the world over – and unquestionably Scholesy is right up there beside them.

That's why he has attracted glowing tributes from such global luminaries as Zinedine Zidane, Patrick Vieira, Thierry Henry and Edgar Davids, all unsolicited by Paul, of course – he is one of the most genuinely modest, unassuming individuals I've ever met – but palpably sincere for all that.

The first time I laid eyes on Paul was when Brian Kidd, who was our youth development officer at the time, brought him to a first-team match along with another lad and they arrived at the door of the dressing room. Kiddo told me they'd be coming so I poked my head out but didn't notice any boys. 'Where are they?' I asked. It turned out they were there all along, but both standing behind Kiddo and so small that I couldn't see them.

When Paul started to play you could see exceptional ability, but he was so tiny! One day I turned to my assistant, Jim Ryan, and said, 'He's got no chance, he's a midget.' That's become a standing joke. These days, considering all Scholesy's achieved, Jim never lets me forget that early assessment, and I have to hold my

hands up. Mind, he was only about twelve at the time and he took a wee growth spurt in his early teens.

Paul went on to be 5ft 7in or so, which is fine for a central midfielder player. Look at Xavi, Iniesta, Fabregas – they're not big guys – and when we saw Spain dancing the ball about in the World Cup, wasn't it fabulous?

Of course, there was no getting away from the fact that Paul was small for a centre forward, his position when he came to us, and also it was clear that he didn't have the requisite pace for that role. But it wasn't too long before we realised exactly what he was, a midfielder. His extraordinary ability to play the game was never in question. His passing was always exceptional, he could play his way around any opponents in the world and other managers knew that. Once we brought him on as a substitute against Tottenham and immediately Harry Redknapp put on Wilson Palacios to man-mark him. Naturally, that didn't stop Paul.

Some people criticise his tackling but, honestly, he has never been a bad tackler. He isn't a serial offender, never anything criminal and never really hurts anyone. He never misses a lot of games, just one here and there, nothing to worry about over such a marathon career. I know he has this wee competitive spark about him that carries him into rash challenges occasionally, and unfortunately that earns him a reputation. Do I get worried about him sometimes? Absolutely! But funnily enough, if he picks up a booking it is usually okay because he knows the possible consequences of another yellow card.

In fact, he has missed far more time through injuries than suspensions, probably the equivalent of almost two seasons when you add it all up, which puts the 700 or so games he has played for United into vivid perspective.

As a person, Scholesy has an image of being quiet and so he is, but let me tell you that doesn't mean he's dull. Anything but. For instance, he's a ruthless assessor of people. He can sense a fake in a couple of seconds, seeing through all the bull every time. He won't necessarily volunteer his opinion, but if I ask him for a judgement it's instant and, where appropriate, absolutely merciless. There's no messing about, he's a completely black-and-white man, and I really love that about him.

We've had all different types of people playing for Manchester United, and not all of them have been as level-headed as Paul. He's such a wholesome character. You don't have to worry about where he's going in the afternoon after training, he's off back to the hills where he lives with that family of his. Most likely he'll be spending his time battering a ball about with his son, Arron. It's a fantastic way to live and it suits him. He's got a lovely family and he cherishes it. He guards

his privacy strenuously and he's not changed a bit down all the years, despite the remarkable success he's enjoyed.

There's a wicked humour about Scholesy. For instance, it's never wise to go for a pee anywhere near the side of the training pitch when he's about. I can remember Gary Neville doing just that, trotting a good forty yards away from us and facing a fence. There he was, doing his business, when suddenly – whack – Scholesy's hit him on the back of the head with a sweet right-footer. He really is that accurate. John O'Shea was another victim, and he was maybe even further away. Whenever I'm on the training ground I'm always wary, because Scholesy's been trying to catch me for years. If the players are behind me, the question is always in my mind: 'Where are you, Scholesy?'

Then there was the fun he had with big Schmeichel. At shooting practice Schmeichel would always be right off his line, maybe seven or eight yards, to make it difficult for the boys and Scholesy used to chip him, which absolutely infuriated the big feller. One day he had steam coming out of his ears and he told Scholesy, 'You do that one more time and I'll kill you.' On Scholesy's next turn, naturally, he chips him again, beats him all ends up. Schmeichel's away like a rocket, chasing Scholesy across the pitch, lumbering along with those giant strides while the wee



man's legs are pumping so hard you could hardly see them. It was hilarious, we were all falling about. That said, it was a good job Peter didn't catch him or we'd have lost a great midfielder!

Of course, Paul isn't just a wind-up merchant, there's something of the wise old head about him now. Quite a few players have taken counsel from him over the years, and he's very good with the kids. He's always got a straightforward opinion and he understands everything about being a professional footballer. Quiet ones like Scholesy have got a big advantage over more demonstrative personalities because they tend to take a step back, and so they see everything. With that quality, I see a bright future for him as a coach eventually, and there'll always be a place for him with Manchester United. One day I think he'll be excellent; he won't be the bouncy, demanding kind like Archie Knox or Steve McClaren, more a thinking man's coach like Carlos Queiroz, maybe doing things with individual players.

When he let me know his intention of retiring in May 2011, I understood his reasons and respected them absolutely. I told him he could go on another year, maybe playing twenty-five or thirty games, but at the time his professional pride wouldn't allow him to do that. He wanted to be remembered for playing fifty games a season, not half that number. That was his own analysis and he was being true to himself, which he has always been.

But halfway through 2011/12 he came in to see me and said, 'I think I've made a mistake. I'd like to come back playing.' There were no negatives from me, and I knew there wouldn't be from the players or the fans. He had trained like a beast and was still very fit. He played in most of our games for the rest of the season and did fantastically well, bringing back that calmness to our side, that controlling of the tempo of a match, a natural awareness and vision that you just can't coach. It is hard for any club to lose such a great player as Paul and we were no exception.

Now he's back and he's playing again in 2012/13, when he'll be exactly the same. If he shows signs of tiring in one or two games, we can monitor it and control it. Paul Scholes isn't over the finishing line yet – and that's great news for Manchester United.

Sir Alex Ferguson

Old Trafford,
September 2012

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A BOY AND HIS BALL

I was always football daft. When I went to junior school, I would leave home half an hour early in the mornings and spend the time before the bell went for the first lesson by kicking the ball around the schoolyard. Occasionally some mates would be involved, but often I was on my own and that didn't bother me in the slightest. I was happy as long as I had that ball.

But what really fired my imagination was the prospect of getting a game. As a little lad, I was always hanging around the edge of the action when older lads were playing, just hoping they'd invite me to join in. Once I started, and they saw I was all right, then they let me play regularly, even though I was maybe two or three years younger than them. On Sunday afternoons we'd go down to the local field and play for three or four hours, then I'd go home and annoy the neighbours by kicking the ball against their fence. Football was a way of life for me from the start.

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