

FC United proudly boast that they're a club run 'by fans, for fans'. But, five years after breaking ranks from Malcolm Glazer's Manchester United 'nightmare', how is the club faring in the lower reaches of non-league, and are the fans hankering after a return to the glory nights at the Theatre of Dreams?

Words: RICHARD LENTON
Photography: TONY WOOLISCROFT

UNITED

We Stand



The FC United supporters' coach is struggling to scale the steep hill that leads from Stocksbridge high street to the town's quaint football stadium that sits at the very top of the valley. Witnessing its final push to the finish line is like watching muscle-bound contestants at the World's Strongest Man contest trying to yank an artie lorry across a desert. At one point it appears certain that the driver will have to shed passengers and its contents - which include several crates of cold and fizzy liquid - in order to negotiate the steep incline to the chequered flag. However, in the end he scrambles the spluttering vehicle into the club car park.

It's a bitterly cold Saturday afternoon in South Yorkshire, where hordes of FC United followers have once again swapped the glamour of Old Trafford for Unibond Premier League football. This time we're in Stocksbridge, a former steel-making heartland in an otherwise unremarkable suburb of Sheffield.

As the diehards clamber off the crowded bus, one fan who's honourably embracing the standard Mancunian get-up of floppy haircut, flared denims and parka, bursts into song. 'You can stick your fucking steel up your arse' he whines, in an effort to goad God knows who. His attempt is half-hearted at best, and, if truth were told, it's pretty difficult to locate any steel to insert in one's rectal area around here these days. No, the days of Stocksbridge being somewhere near the epicentre of Britain's once world famous steel industry are long gone. The factories which occupied virtually the entire valley of Stocksbridge for over a century-and-a-half are shut, and swathes of land that was once teeming with young men grafting to earn an honest crust are now barren wastelands. The area wreaks of desolation, and optimism is thin on the ground. Maybe a couple of local likely lads will set up South Yorkshire's answer to the Chippendales in an effort to keep the repo-men from the door and galvanise their lives. Oh, hang on a minute...

EVEN SIR ALEX - A VETERAN OF MANY A SHIPYARD DISPUTE IN HIS NATIVE GLASGOW - BRANDED THE BREAKAWAY GROUP AS PUBLICITY SEEKERS

Optimism is, however, one thing that fans of FC United are certainly not short of. When 4,000 dissident Manchester United supporters formed the club in 2005 as an act of rebellion against the controversial takeover by American businessman Malcolm Glazer - which saw the giants of English football inherit an eye-watering debt of £540 million in the process - most interested observers saw it as a publicity stunt. Some of the ringleaders were described as fly-by-night traitors, and even Sir Alex Ferguson - a veteran of many a shipyard dispute in his native Glasgow - described them as mere publicity seekers. But, five years on, FC United are still going strong; in fact, the club that is run 'by fans, for fans', is thriving.

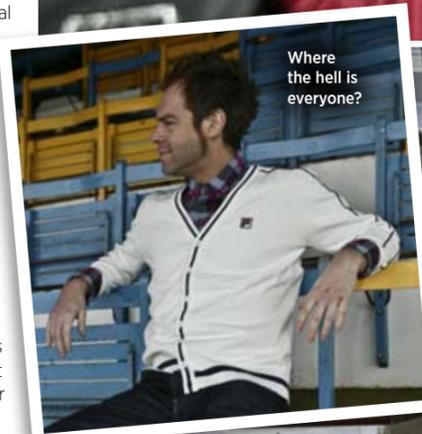
After being elected to the North West Counties League Second Division in 2005, the club enjoyed that promotion feeling in each of its first three seasons. In 2008-09, the club just missed out on the play-offs for a place in the Conference North, but the current campaign began with high hopes for another promotion tilt. However, in a season heavily affected by the weather, FC find themselves struggling in the relegation zone, although admittedly they haven't kicked a ball for seven weeks and boast games in hand on every other team in the division.

Despite their lowly league position, FC's ultimate ambition is to clamber up the next three tiers of the pyramid and into the Football League, and, with a fanbase that has seen the club pull in more punters than their League Two landlords, Bury FC, it's no longer such a fanciful proposition. The founder members of the club who made the heartbreakingly difficult decision to rescind their Old Trafford season tickets in favour of trips to some of non-league football's bleakest outposts, could soon be rewarded with journeys to some of the Football League's, er, bleakest outposts.

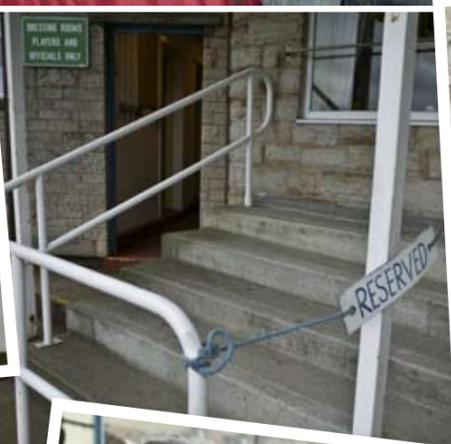
If they do achieve their dream of clinching Football League status, then the stadia that the travelling fans rock up to every other Saturday should look a little different to what the masses have discovered in Stocksbridge. The front of the stadium is pieced together by the greying stone used to build mining homes a century ago, and the ground houses just one small-seated stand. It really is like stepping



And again, 'We all live in an FP wonderland, an FP wonderland...'



Where the hell is everyone?



Come in number 43...



'Bit parky outside, Barry... Shall we stay here?'



'What was the vegetarian option?'

THE CLASSIC SMITHS SONG MORPHS INTO GLAZER IN A COMA. THE VITRIOL THEY FEEL TO THE 'AMERICAN GNOME' TAKES ME BY SURPRISE



back in time. Fans are squeezed through a tight corridor between the brickwork in order to reach the away terrace; these fans, reared on derby matches with City and Liverpool and huge European nights against the Barcelonas of this world, haven't seen anything quite like this. 'Fucking 'ell, we'll be in someone's front room in a minute!' shouts one. Old Trafford it ain't.

The Stocksbridge directors who invite me into their cosy lounge for tea and biscuits couldn't be more welcoming. If anyone deserves a decent payday from the visit of the behemoth of the Unibond League then it's these chaps. With average gates of around 200, the 500 or so FC fans expected today can pay plenty of gas bills.

Jack Newton, the president of the club, which was formed in 1986 following the merger of Stocksbridge Works FC and Oxley Park FC, grabs my hand and takes me over to a wall adorned with black

and white photos. "Best club in Yorkshire this," he tells me, while aiming his crooked finger at a photo of himself playing in goal for Stocksbridge back in 1949. He was a strapping lad back then, but he's diminished in size now. "I lost my wife a fortnight ago, I still can't believe she's gone," he tells me, with tears in his eyes. I've no idea what to say, apart from to clumsily ask for another piece of shortbread.

I head upstairs to join the FC fans who're now here en masse, and grab a beer and a pie. The place is heaving and the atmosphere vibrant, in





For any readers under the age of 30, this is a reference to a Stone Roses lyric - the best band in the world... Ever.p

MAN UNITED HAVE FORKED OUT A STAGGERING £325 MILLION IN INTEREST PAYMENTS ALONE SINCE 2005

stark contrast to the home supporters bar next door which houses just four fans sat silently on stools watching Chelsea pummel Preston in the FA Cup on a TV in the corner.

The FC United movement has enjoyed a real resurgence in attention following the publication of Manchester United's 2008-09 accounts, which showed that despite enjoying the most successful spell in their history (including three successive Premier League titles and a Champions League), the club only avoided a potentially catastrophic financial loss when Cristiano Ronaldo was shipped out to Madrid in the summer. The level of debt has seen United fork out a staggering £325 million in interest payments alone since 2005, but is FC United really a viable, long-term alternative to the Lehman Brothers of football?

"This is the start of something big in football because regular people can't afford to go to Premier League games any more," says Bob Westerdale, a regular at FC since the beginning.

"In time all fans will want to see football back at this level where it's real and not PLC-driven. Football is becoming a corporate plaything. Glazer's there to make money out of United - our club. He's got a £700 million debt, £200 million on the credit card with 14% interest and the reason he can sustain it is because Man United make money year on year by raping fans with ticket prices and all the other merchandising."

"The football at FC isn't brilliant, but the time you have here is fantastic and it's only £8 to get in. You can take your kids, have a good time and meet nice people," says another burly fan whose body is adorned with more ink than a fountain pen factory.

"If we lose today in a sense it doesn't really matter because we'll be here next week come what may. I don't want to be a franchise, I don't want to be a customer, I don't want to be a client, I just want to go and watch a football match. Here it's one member, one vote. We decide the future of this club, and that's a template for other clubs to follow in the future. The identity of Man United has gone



A really offal prize...

The boys go for some synchronised dance steps...



KEN HAWORTH

"I'm 67 now and I've been going to Old Trafford since 1948 - my dad took me to my first match which was Derby at home; it was when we'd just moved back to Old Trafford because of course we had to play at Maine Road for a few years because of the War (bomb damage at Old Trafford). We won the FA Cup that year. I used to live in

Salford and one of my first memories is when the team paraded the trophy around the streets. Great times. What's happened at the club is a disgrace. But this (FC United) is marvellous."

forever, but FC United will never be sold."

As if on cue the packed bar bursts into anti-Glazer song. 'This is how it feels to be FC, this is how it feels to be home, this is how it feels when you don't sell your arse to a gnome.' Like most FC chants, the tune is pillaged from one of Manchester's biggest bands of the 80s and 90s. As FC lyrics go, the Inspiral Carpets influenced number is among the most polite on offer today. Soon the Smiths' anthem 'Girlfriend In A Coma' morphs into 'Glazer In A Coma'. The vitriol that these men, women and children feel towards the 'fucking American gnome' takes me by surprise. The fans snarl the words out of their red-faced cheeks like rabid Pitbull Terriers who've just been injected with HGH. The next track off the hit parade is the delightful: 'We're having a party when Glazer dies, jelly and ice-cream when Glazer dies, pass the parcel when Glazer dies...'

But the big question is, what would happen if Glazer left United and the club got its house in order financially? Would these fans return in their droves, or is the intimacy that can be enjoyed at places like Stocksbridge too much of an attraction?

As the bar heaves under the swathes of bodies draped in red and white, I spot Tony, the FP photographer, dripping in sweat like a hippo in a powershower. 'Why don't you take your jacket off?' I ask him. 'Cos of what's underneath... I just put my Liverpool shirt on without thinking this morning.' Not the best move, big fella. Let's head outside.

Despite it being a cross-Pennines clash, this is as big a supporter mismatch as you're ever likely to see. Stocksbridge's 50 or so hardy souls in the Main

Stand are comfortably outnumbered by the refreshed colossus that is the FC travelling contingent, who make their way down to the tiny away enclosure in plenty of time for kick-off. Supporters drape banners on every vantage point they can, and the fans are keen to talk about anything Glazer-related.

"The biggest thing for me was in '99 when they trademarked the badge worldwide and took the words 'football club' off it," says Mark Sheldon, who's here with three of his kids. "I started to fall out with modern day football then, and when FC United came along I was straight here. I've had four and a half brilliant years. I've been a United fan all my life, a season-ticket holder, and my oldest lad is at Old Trafford today, but I'm not interested. I'm interested in the result but not in being there. We're not anti-Man United, we're anti-commercialism in football. Manchester United, our club, is in a terrible, terrible state because of it."

So terrible in fact, that during the previous week's clash at home to Premier League minnows Burnley, the visiting contingent taunted the hosts with chants of, 'We've got more money than you'. In response, a group of fans unfurled a banner saying, 'Love United, Hate Glazers'. Within minutes fluorescent-jacketed stewards surged to the scene to confiscate the offending piece of thought crime and frogmarched the

"THE IDENTITY OF MANCHESTER UNITED HAS GONE FOREVER, BUT FC UNITED WILL NEVER BE SOLD"



dissidents out of the ground.

It's doubtful whether the stewards at Stocksbridge, many of whom have been shipped in from Sheffield Wednesday especially for today's game, would fancy their chances of confiscating FC's anti-Glazer messages from the terrace even if they wanted to. No, at this level of football, the disaffected mob can preach their gospel without fear of draconian reprisals.

As the two teams stream onto the pitch - Stocksbridge in a yellow and blue outfit that most pub sides would turn their noses up at, and United resplendent in their 70s-esque red, black and white number - I still can't help feeling that the match is simply a sideshow to the bigger picture. It's like engaging in small talk with a lapdancer, only not as expensive.

On the pitch United are a class apart. Down the left the Guadeloupe international Ludovic Quistin and Jerome Wright maraud freely, displaying pace and trickery aplenty. Up front Carlos Roca has, as the song goes, 'lightning feet'. However, he is up against a defender who appears to have released the dietary shackles at Christmas and continued with the same abandon throughout January.

A brief chant in deference to keeper Sam Ashton is soon replaced by 'Ooh Aah Cantona', followed by the anti-City 'You've Won Fuck All Since Elvis Died'. The club's heart is still clearly at Old Trafford.

Stocksbridge somehow negotiate the first 45 minutes without conceding, and, as the players troop off the pitch, a queue of thirsty punters stretching from the tiny entrance to the bar all the way to the away stand has formed. For some there'll barely be the chance to lick the froth off their pint before the second half kicks off.

As the referee's whistle for the second period draws near, a delighted FC fan struts back into the away enclosure with a lager in one hand and a carrier bag in the other. It contains the contents of the Stocksbridge FC meat raffle. This fella, who has stood on the Stretford End watching Robson, Cantona, Giggs and Beckham in their primes, is positively beaming as he clutches his prize. Football doesn't get any rawer than this.

In the 59th minute United's pressure finally tells when Roca feints to shoot from inside the right channel, selling his marker beautifully, then fires a low left foot shot through the legs of the Steels keeper. The air in the away enclosure is filled with noise and makeshift confetti. It's no more than United deserve; it's been so one-sided it's akin to watching an American warship take pot-shots at a P&O ferry.

The question now is how many FC will score, and, after the rotund figure of Steels' defender Brett Lovell is dismissed for another agricultural tackle, the answer would appear to be 'quite a lot'.

However, chances come and go, and, in the dying moments, the Steels launch a rare counter attack. A ball is played in from the right and Andy Ring scrambles home the most undeserved of equalisers.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, the visiting contingent urge their troops on for one last effort. However, despite giving it their all, Roca and co can't come up with a deserved winner and FC remain entrenched in the bottom three.

At the final whistle, as the visiting supporters troop out of the stadium and back onto the fun bus, the palpable sense of disappointment that 99 per cent of fans would feel had they dominated a game then conceded a last minute goal is missing. This club seems far more concerned with what's happening off the pitch than on it, and whether that is sustainable in the long term is very much open to debate. And if FC continue to tread water in the lower reaches of non-league, then will fans start drifting back to Old Trafford?

It also begs the question: What would these hardy souls do if a fella from Manchester bought the Glazers out then pumped Manchester money into the club to clear the debts and buy new players?

"Manchester United is a corporate entity, we've built a real football club. Come what may, we'll still be here," insists FC supporters' spokesman, Tom Stott.

I'll happily take his word for it, but the doubts linger...