

# MANCHESTER



Fans, before the start of the match, within the stadium premises

# UNITED FANS AT OLD TRAFFORD

AN EXHILARATING ACCOUNT OF FAN MANIA DURING MANCHESTER UNITED'S OPENING MATCH OF THE ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE AT OLD TRAFFORD, AGAINST WEST HAM IN AUGUST 2017

BY SRAVASTI GHOSH DASTIDAR





An aerial view of **Old Trafford cricket ground** in Manchester

**A desperate fan with** his pants falling off is running away from the tickets and membership services building, with the Manchester United Yearbook in hand. The stadium police and stewards unite to chase the man.

The scene unfurls in front of a teenage girl and a young lady engineer, who wait for their tickets to be exchanged for better seats at the Mecca of English Football, the Old Trafford Stadium, before Manchester United's opening match of the English Premier League against West Ham on 13 August 2017. Season ticketholders can resell unwanted tickets for sold-out games. Other members can purchase or exchange these online and collect them from the ticketing counters on match day. Charisma, an automotive engineer with the Mercedes Formula One team, has been going for Man U matches since she was eight. Her father, Sumit, a consultant anaesthetist at Warrington & Halton Hospitals (NHS Trust), has been supporting the haloed club while growing up in England. Accompanying them is Indian schoolgirl Abhipsha, who has travelled all the way from Brunei to experience the atmosphere

of a home match at the theatre of her dreams, and to see her idols in the flesh.

The excitement has been building for days. Abhipsha could not sleep the night before. She is nervous about the outcome of her first big match. Charisma does not sit with her best friend during matches because the team loses whenever she does. Abhipsha is hopeful they will win. Then, Charisma will happily sit with her the next time. This is just one of the many superstitions that ardent fans of all games have worldwide. There is a fingers-crossed confidence among seasoned fans, like Sumit and Charisma, that their players will not let them down. There is expectation around Pogba, Mata, Rashford, and the newly signed Lukaku and Matic.

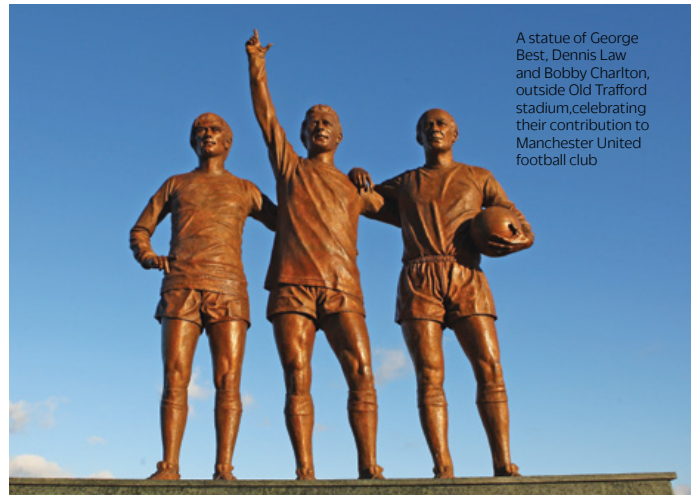
The excitement is not as much as it would be if Manchester United were playing their arch-rivals Liverpool or rivals Arsenal, Chelsea or Manchester City. However, the match is important as it is a league opener. If they win, they will top the league standings. United last won the league in 2013. They have, however, dominated the Premier League from 1992 by winning 13 out of 25

Photos courtesy: shutterstock/ivort

24 November 2016:  
Manchester United  
celebrating Wayne  
Rooney, Daley Blind,  
Juan Mata, Zlatan  
Ibrahimovic, Michael  
Carrick and Paul  
Pogba



titles. Excited fans in club colours make their way to the 107-year-old stadium after downing pints at local pubs like The Trafford and Toll Gate. Some wish there were cheaper bars beneath the stands, unlike the flagship Red Café, so they can reach the venue early to build the atmosphere. Home fans travel from near and far in cars, trains, trams or buses. Away fans come in coaches organised by the away club. There are parking lots in and around the stadium, which charge £3-10 depending on the distance from the ground. The stadium has its own train station just outside the away end. The quickest is the tram or the metrolink to the nearest tram station that is a 10-minute walk from the stadium's Sir Matt Busby Way. Once the epitome of fan culture, the violence and hooliganism associated with English Football in the past has seen a big change by steps taken by the FA over time. The Red Devils nevertheless march on, waving their 'non-of-



A statue of George Best, Dennis Law and Bobby Charlton, outside Old Trafford stadium, celebrating their contribution to Manchester United football club



Entrance to the Sir Alex Ferguson Stand



A vendor, selling match scarves, poses happily

fensive' flags 'without sticks or poles' and banners. MU fans transcending age, gender, religion and nationality sing their club chants, like *Ole Ole Ander Herrea*. They snack at the fish and chips or burger and hotdog kiosks in and around Old Trafford. The foot-long hotdogs with onion and English mustard are to-die-for. Kiosks and vendors selling club souvenirs and match scarves colour the way.

Spectators are searched before entering the Old Trafford premises. Some of them carrying bags bigger than 8 x 6 x 2 inches, large-bodied DSLRs or video cameras, and plastic water bottles more than 500ml are stopped at the gates. According to a steward, fans may throw these at others during heated moments. Throw an expensive camera! Well, that's definitely for copyright issues. This information, though available on the Internet, does not always reach the members. Sumit, after depositing his guests' rucksacks and DSLR at the bag drop counter, wishes that communication were better between members and the club. Inside the premises,

the atmosphere is sufficient to dazzle and deafen new spectators like Abhipsha. Looming large against a rare blue summer sky is the dominating structure of Old Trafford. Statues of legendary footballers stand tall above the entrances.

At the North Stand, outside the Club Museum, is Sir Alex Ferguson's statue. The green-glassed East Stand has Sir Matt Busby's statue. Opposite it is the United Trinity Statue of George Best, Denis Law and Bobby Charlton, who instrumented the 1968 European Cup win. The South Stand, or Bobby Charlton Stand, houses the executive boxes and television gantry.

A clock that strikes at 15:04 pm and a plaque that reads 6th February 1958 remind you of the time and date of the Munich Air Disaster. The old tunnel here is the only structure from the original 1910 stadium that survived the bombing during World War II. This tunnel, renamed the Munich Tunnel, commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Munich Disaster involving Matt Busby's Babes. There are stadium and

Photography: Sruvasti Ghosh Dasgupta

tunnel tours conducted on non-match days. A fan-sponsored mural is inaugurated on this match day by former skipper Bryan Robson, in the concourse beneath the old 'J Stand'. This is where the most vociferous fans are found. The mural etches the most memorable chapter in Robson's football career – of him being spontaneously carried off the field by jubilant supporters after United's 3-0 win against Barcelona in 1984. Most fans feel that the atmosphere of that particular night has remained unique.

Singing spectators queue up to enter the stands. Security officials search them again. At one gate, an uncapped water bottle is not allowed, and at another, the same is permitted!

The first sight of the magnificent all-seater stands is overwhelming. Old Trafford is totally enclosed and is the largest club ground in Great Britain with a capacity of 75,643. The three-tiered Alex Ferguson Stand that seats 25,500 spectators dwarfs the main, two-tiered Bobby Charlton stand.

Sumit, being an official member, feels lucky to have a seat in the main stand, as this and the away section have the best views. Alongside the away section is the segment for wheelchairs of disabled supporters. The Club has taken positive steps towards accessibility by reducing capacity and re-locating season ticketholders. After all, as Virgin Media says – Every Fan Deserves Every Match. So, the differently-abled supporters now get to cheer their football heroes at the stadium, too. Waiting for the heroes to enter the field from the corner of the Bobby Charlton Stand, the chants of both teams permeate the air. The raised pitch and decorated stands raise expectations.

Not all fans are happy with the all-seater arrangement, especially those from the Stretford End and J Stand. They prefer to have safe standing facilities on the good old terraces to egg their team to victory. They like their chants to be louder than the public address system. Charisma feels that song sheets on the back of the seats can help group fans around the stadium to create a Mexican wave of chants, and that the stadium can do with more spacious seating. Nonetheless, as the game kicks off, MU looks slightly sluggish initially. They quickly manage to mount and maintain pressure on the Hammers. West Ham clears a few attempts. Lukaku nets the first goal, assisted by Rashford. The stadium erupts.

At half time, West Ham trails by 1 goal. During the interval, Charisma is pleased to see the scoreboard flashing her name with other members whose birthdays are in August.

Within a few minutes of the second half, Lukaku scores again. The Red Devils' united chants of 'O when the Reds, Go marching in' exhilarate Abhipsha. Excitement peaks as Matic's accurate passes and touches to set up openings are systematically converted. Mata shines. Martial and Pogba score two more. The scoreboard looks delightful. As the goals are hammered in, the PA system tells the away fans to leave after the stadium is empty of home fans. The noisy Hammer fans are subdued. A match usually dies if no goals are scored till the last minute. Fans feel disheartened and the stadium



The most photographed statue at Old Trafford

sounds dead. But the speed, power and a steady stream of goals at this match pave the way for Jose Mourinho's team to have a good season ahead. Mourinho has never lost a match on home turf on a Sunday! MU wins the next match, too, with the same score, against Swansea City.

The final score is enough to keep music and football united at Manchester's Old Trafford. The fans are exuberant. Abhipsha is happy to be lucky for Charisma. Sumit wishes the young football enthusiast could have watched a match against arch-rivals Liverpool. For him, a quintessential fan supports Manchester United over the national team; hates all their rivals, especially Liverpool; and one of their favourite chants is 'We hate Scousers'. The team presents the fans a dream score line that reads Manchester United 4–West Ham 0. Lukaku and Matic, in rhythm with their new team, make a dream debut with MU; and, Old Trafford lives up to its name—the Theatre of Dreams.●