

“At Man United, I was angry not getting the chance to complete the three years they had asked of me. I wasn’t given that time”

LOUIS VAN GAAL

Louis van Gaal lifted 14 major trophies in four of Europe’s biggest leagues – but it’s another feat which arguably distinguishes him.

From Ajax to Old Trafford, Van Gaal handed chances to a string of young stars who repaid his faith with stellar careers. He started in Amsterdam, where players including Edgar Davids, Clarence Seedorf, Patrick Kluivert and Nwankwo Kanu stunned Europe to win the 1994-95 Champions League.

In two spells at Barcelona, the Dutchman waded through Carles Puyol, Xavi, Andres Iniesta and Victor Valdes; then came Thomas Muller, Holger Badstuber and David Alaba at Bayern Munich. In Manchester, Marcus Rashford’s unforgettable introduction came with chances for Jesse Lingard, Tim Fosu-Mensah and Andreas Pereira.

Van Gaal has always been proud of team building – growing up with eight siblings, he learned its importance very early on. “I was the youngest and everyone in the family had a task to do – it made for good communication and discipline,” he tells *FourFourTwo*.

Those were the conditions for Van Gaal’s teams to flourish. But before he could apply them, the 69-year-old was a player – and a different twist could have taken him to England far earlier...

What was the highlight of your playing career?

Lewis Thomson, Reading

We were usually in the Eredivisie’s top six at Sparta Rotterdam and played in Europe a few times. We beat Hamburg in 1985-86, where I came up against Felix Magath. Before that, I also played in Europe with Royal Antwerp – there was one UEFA Cup match where I did really well against Aston Villa and they even showed interest in me after it. I decided to stay in Belgium, though, as I had just come back into the first team and wanted to build on that. I started my career as a striker but

gradually evolved into a midfielder; at AZ, I even played as a sweeper. I had very good spatial awareness, but just wasn’t explosive enough. When I was 19 years old, I already realised that I wouldn’t reach the top. I made it to Ajax’s second team, but saw players who were better physically. Still, I had a good career and played until I was 35, so I wasn’t that bad!

What inspired you to eventually become a coach?

Olly Burke, Aberdeen

When I was young, I watched Rinus Michels’ training sessions at Ajax and

his career path was an inspiration to me. Like him, I also went to the academy of physical education and eventually taught at a school for children with social and behavioural issues. In the meantime, I obtained my coaching badges, so in that way I followed exactly in his footsteps. I combined playing football with my work as a PE teacher, and also chaired the Dutch Footballers’ Union [VVCS]. I was so tired with all of the activities that I drove my car into the crash barrier a few times. *[Laughs]* As a PE teacher, I learned how to motivate people, but also how to change their behaviour – which is a long process. It’s about hitting the right tone at the right moment, knowing when to comfort someone or when to leave them alone. Like with children, your approach towards players has to be individually tailored because everyone requires a different approach.

How did you take a young Ajax to Champions League glory in 1995?

Nathan Macdonald, Halesowen

When I took over, Ajax came from a situation where they had almost gone bankrupt, so I was forced to take academy players. We also got a few cheap players from Scandinavia, like Jari Litmanen, plus Finidi George and Kanu from Nigeria. Together with the academy prospects such as Seedorf, Davids and Kluivert, we built a strong team that was consistent. That started to pay off – eventually, we won the Champions League unbeaten playing some very attacking football. We beat holders Milan twice in the group stage, then again in the final. We actually didn’t play very well in that match, though: Milan were more dominant and I made some changes pretty early in the second half, which was rare for me – but they paid off and changed the game. The way that we won the tournament was incredible, with so many goals scored (18) and only a few conceded (four). That was the highest we could achieve.

Was joining Real Madrid instead of Barcelona in 1997 ever an option?

@Ras_Dam, via Twitter

No, not then – but they did approach me when I was already at Barcelona. I think it was in my second or third year, after I had won the league, cup and European Super Cup. But if you’re ▶



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CLUBS (PLAYER)

- 1972-73 Ajax
- 1973-77 Royal Antwerp
- 1977-78 Telstar
- 1978-86 Sparta Rotterdam
- 1986-87 AZ

TEAMS (MANAGER)

- 1991-97 Ajax
- 1997-2000 Barcelona
- 2000-02 Netherlands
- 2002-03 Barcelona
- 2005-09 AZ
- 2009-11 Bayern Munich
- 2012-14 Netherlands
- 2014-16 Manchester United

at Barcelona, you just can't make that move. I could have joined Milan before going to Spain, as well – they met me in Holland and I could have gone with them on the plane back to Italy! I had won everything at Ajax and was ready for a new challenge, but decided to stay for another year – my youngest daughter still had to finish secondary school. I've often based career choices on the people close to me – I went to AZ [in 2005], for example, because my wife wanted to be closer to her dad.

Was it awkward to replace Bobby Robson as Barcelona manager, while he stayed on as director of football?

edwardsaunders26, via Instagram
He actually became head of scouting. Initially I was joining to become their academy head, which would have allowed me to learn the language and then perhaps become manager later on. But by June, the president [Josep Lluís Nunez] had changed his mind and asked me to succeed Robson straight away, despite the fact he had won three trophies. I found it strange and asked for a meeting with Nunez, Robson and his assistant, who was Jose Mourinho. That's why Robson and Mourinho eventually stayed, because I expressed my confusion after we had initially made other plans. It's not easy to succeed someone who has just claimed silverware, so at first I wasn't looking forward to it too much.

You worked with both Mourinho and Pep Guardiola at the Camp Nou. Did you ever expect either to become a Champions League winner like you?

Thomas Sorensen, via Facebook
You can't predict that, although both showed managerial potential. After I met Mourinho in that first meeting, I offered him a role as our opposition analyst. He fulfilled that really well, so I rewarded him with the opportunity to coach the first team in the Copa Catalunya. I couldn't really judge him as a coach, though, because he was often away analysing opponents. I didn't expect Luis Enrique to become a coach, but with Guardiola it was a certainty. After I arrived, I made him captain straight away. He wasn't the most logical choice, because players like Guillermo Amor and Miguel Angel Nadal were older, but I chose him because he saw football the way that I think it should be seen. That is very important, because I think a captain represents his coach on the pitch. From the start, I spoke to Guardiola and the rest of the team in Spanish. I was still learning the language, but I did this on purpose to show them that I was able to show a vulnerable

Right to left Held high after 2009 glory with AZ; milking Ajax's big 1995 Champions League win; Jose was rewarded by LVG, while Pep's dugout future "was a certainty"; replacing Sir Bobby was not in the original script **Below** Van Gaal won a pair of major honours in his first year at Barça



side as well – so they could see the difference between the self-assured coach and the person who had to learn. When I spoke Spanish, the players would adjust and correct me.

How do you look back at your first period as Barça boss? Just how good was the team which won the league in your first two seasons?

Frankie Hudson, Islington
I think the third year was even better – we played the best football since I had

arrived – but then we didn't win any trophies. Rivaldo started to show different behaviour after he won the Ballon d'Or [in 1999]. Suddenly, he wanted to play as a No.10, but that position requires different awareness. Rivaldo had always played as a left forward – at Deportivo before, too – so his brain was adapted to that position. To change behaviour requires a lot of time. And why change, when you are so good and scoring so many goals? He probably associated the No.10

position with being the best player. I tried him there, but it disrupted the team balance. I sent him away to the reserves, but then reintegrated him at the request of other first-team players – something I shouldn't have done. In the end, we didn't win the league and were knocked out in the semi-finals of both the Spanish Cup and Champions League. President Nunez resigned and I showed my loyalty towards him by resigning as well, which meant I gave up two years of wages! [Laughs]



Although you succeeded David Moyes at Manchester United in 2014, there were rumours you had been lined up to replace Sir Alex Ferguson in 2002. How true is that?

@ChrisSergeant4, via Twitter

Yes that's true! Ferguson asked me to succeed him when he was planning to retire at that time. We knew each other from the UEFA Elite Coaches Forum, where we were always the last people to leave at night. He chose me as his successor, but then never left! [Laughs] He changed his mind and decided to continue. Later, I was also approached by Peter Kenyon about a potential move to Chelsea. I knew him from before when he worked at Umbro, but it was never followed up.

You gave debuts to Xavi and Iniesta at Barcelona. What do you remember about them as young players?

Isaac Webb, Wandsworth

Xavi was already in the reserves when I first saw him play, but I remember watching Iniesta at a Nike tournament when he was about 15. Both players had fantastic spatial awareness – Xavi a bit more, and that's why I played him in the middle. Iniesta was a more explosive player, so I put him on the left of midfield where he could offer something extra attacking-wise.

Some managers are scared of taking risks with young players – why were you always willing to do it at all the clubs you coached?

Jeremy Taylor, Budapest

Because, in my opinion, the dressing room needs to be refreshed every year – otherwise, players go into autopilot mode and the hierarchy will remain

“FERGUSON ASKED ME TO SUCCEED HIM AT MAN UNITED IN 2002, BUT THEN HE NEVER LEFT! HE CHANGED HIS MIND AND CONTINUED”

the same. That's not good. With youth you can shake it up, because they're ambitious and want to go for it. At the same time, they can inspire older pros.

Any regrets about going back to Barça for a second spell in 2002?

Owen Watts, East Grinstead

Yes, because they had bought some players who didn't actually fit into my philosophy. I had to adapt as I couldn't really play 4-3-3 once they had signed Javier Saviola and Juan Roman Riquelme. I had to play with two strikers, but Saviola and Riquelme needed space in front of them and were less effective when opponents were playing really defensively. After we won the league twice [in 1998 and 1999], teams parked the bus against us. It became harder to score, but at the same time we were vulnerable at the back because we were high upfield with a lot of space behind us. I didn't have the players to unlock those defences.

The same happened at Manchester United, where I didn't get the players that I wanted to dismantle the bus.

How big an achievement was it to win the Eredivisie with AZ in 2009?

Hubert Boek, Rotterdam

That was fantastic, especially if you remember that we almost won it twice – in 2007, we squandered the title on the final day of the season. If you are managing Ajax, Barcelona or Bayern, the chances are pretty big that you win the league, but not with AZ. You have to beat clubs who have a budget four times bigger than yours. My greatest achievement is winning the Champions League with Ajax, because you are playing at the very highest level against teams from everywhere. Winning the FA Cup with United was also a big achievement, but more in a psychological sense as I had to cope with a lot of resistance in different ways.

Bayern Munich weren't in amazing shape when you took over in 2009. What did you change to make them double winners and Champions League finalists in your first season?

@ElsaadiJ, via Twitter

First of all, I tried to operate from within the club's system, changing things a little by switching their 5-3-2

formation to a 4-4-2 with a diamond. I also tried a flat midfield, but neither worked. That was when I told the board that I wanted Arjen Robben, because with him I could change the system to play with three forwards. I knew he was for sale, because he wasn't playing regularly for Real Madrid. The fact he could play on the right was good for us, because I had Franck Ribery who liked the left. I also repositioned Philipp Lahm from left to right-back. I always focus on the positional preference of a player, even if he is not fully aware of it himself – it is my Total Human Being principle. I don't only look at the technical qualities of a player, but also the person behind them. I think this approach gave me an advantage early in my career. I recently published my second book about this principle and my career in general, which is not a typical autobiography as it also includes many contributions from people who I've worked closely with – Guardiola, Robben, Robin van Persie and Wayne Rooney.

Before you took over for the second time as Netherlands boss in 2012, is it true that Liverpool approached you to become sporting director?

Steff Fraser, Northampton

Yes, their managing director [Ian Ayre] came over to Portugal where I have a house, and we held lengthy talks – he even stayed on to have dinner. After he left, though, I never actually heard anything again. I don't imagine he would have come out to Portugal if they weren't serious about it, but later I heard I was apparently too arrogant or something. I don't know. ▶



Why did Robin van Persie run over to give you a high five after he scored that amazing header against Spain at the 2014 World Cup?

ben_marsden6, via Instagram

He was injured before the World Cup, but had recovered with the help of our physios. I even asked Alex Ferguson for permission that Robin could do it with us, which was OK. He managed to be ready just in time, and although I'm not a fan of players who aren't totally fit, I took the gamble to play him because he offered us so much extra quality. Alongside Robben and Wesley Sneijder, he was the creative brain of that team and the other players had to accommodate those three. I changed things in the build-up to that tournament – switching to a more defensive system, for example, based on all the quality I had at my disposal. I started to play with five defenders, changing to three if we were attacking. That happened often against Spain, and our system helped us have a very successful tournament.

Why did you replace Jasper Cillessen with Tim Krul for the quarter-final shootout against Costa Rica?

matthewyoung_2005, via Instagram

Because Cillessen didn't stop penalties during that period. For that reason, I'd already said in a meeting months before the World Cup that we should have a penalty killer as our third-choice keeper. That was Krul. I even talked about this scenario with other players – except Cillessen, because otherwise he might have lost his focus during the match. I wanted to make it easier for him, although he didn't appreciate it much. [Laughs] But the team always has to come first.

You joined Manchester United after the tournament. What can you tell us about your first meeting?

Joseph Graham, Oldham

I met with them in Brussels – clubs often organise talks in foreign cities so the media can't track them down easily. The Glazers and Ed Woodward were there – they asked me about everything, including my vision and how I would want to organise things, and said they would meet my needs for new players. I inherited an old team that hadn't been refreshed for some time, and wanted to rejuvenate the squad with players who would bring the same kind of quality. But to get the ones I wanted proved very difficult. It surprised me, even though I understand that clubs hold out for the highest fee because they know United are the richest in the world. At the same time, though, if you are the



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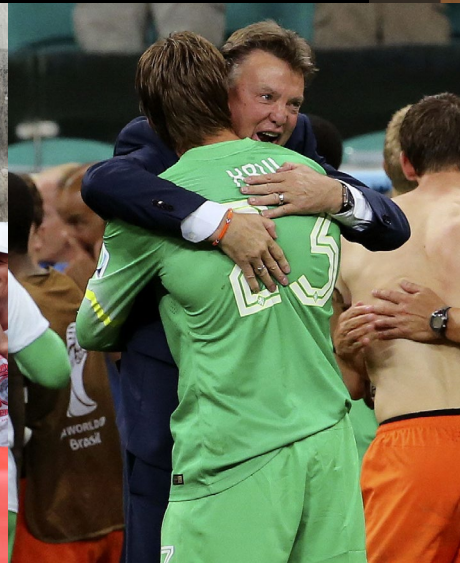
Bayern fans love a man in lederhosen; the Dutch had similar affections for their chief "penalty killer" Krul; Fergie picked Van Gaal for United... but didn't vacate the throne
Right Louis 'gambled' on RVP in 2014. Fooled us...

richest, you'd expect to get what you want. But it didn't happen: we only got third-, fourth- or fifth-choice players.

Was going to Tottenham ever a serious option before United?

Sasha Reynolds, St Albans

It definitely was. Daniel Levy flew into Holland with a private jet and came to my house, where we spoke for several hours. He even stayed on to watch the Southampton-Spurs match later that afternoon [which Spurs won 3-2]. He asked for my thoughts about that game, so that was a kind of test as well. When Levy wanted to leave in the evening, I noticed there were TV cameras outside my house. A Dutch broadcaster had heard that he was in Holland, and guessed he would be here for me. As we wanted to keep it quiet, I called my neighbour to ask whether he could take him away in his car. As they did, with Levy hiding in the back seat, I opened my front door and approached the reporters to ask what they were doing. It worked out very well – they were taken by surprise. As a coach, timing is everything! [Laughs] But it took Spurs a long time to make a firm offer, and United approached me in the meantime. They acted far quicker. I also liked the idea of going there, to coach the number one club in England – just like I had done before in Holland, Spain and Germany. If Spurs



HIGHS & LOWS

HIGH: 1995

Leads Ajax – with an average age of 25 – to Champions League glory

LOW: 2000

Quits in frustration as Barça boss, after a trophyless campaign

HIGH: 2009

Breaks PSV's four-year run by leading AZ to Eredivisie title

LOW: 2010

Suffers Champions League final loss to Inter, ending treble hopes

HIGH: 2016

Wins Manchester United's first FA Cup for 12 years in his final season

had come with a concrete offer earlier on, I'd have signed for them. Spurs were actually a club I liked when I was younger, as I was a big fan of Jimmy Greaves. I told Levy that as well, but he blew the chance by waiting so long.

Which players did you try to sign but couldn't get for United?

Dipak Patel, Goa

I wanted Robert Lewandowski, but when this proved difficult I tried to get Gonzalo Higuain instead. Before I had arrived, I also spoke with the board about Neymar. If you are at United, you have to think big. He was also interesting for the club in terms of selling shirts, and I wanted to have quick wingers. For that reason, I also tried to get Sadio Mané and Riyad Mahrez. Thomas Muller was on my wish list, too, and in central midfield

I wanted N'Golo Kanté. I even tried to sign James Milner, who was already quite old but very multifunctional and possessed leadership skills. For the defence, I wanted Sergio Ramos and Mats Hummels, because ours wasn't the strongest in building from the back. Those were my top targets, but we couldn't get any of them. I don't know why, because as the manager I wasn't involved in any negotiations. After I left, players like Mahrez and Kanté ended up at Manchester City and Chelsea, while United couldn't get them. I found that very odd.

What were you thinking when the fax machine broke down on deadline night in 2015, wrecking the deal to swap David de Gea for Keylor Navas?

Andre Ward, Leeds

I didn't want to sell David de Gea. I had a veto right as manager and told the club that I didn't want him to leave, as he was the best keeper in England. I think all those tales about that fax machine are more like media stories.



I don't know what exactly happened because I wasn't there, but I don't believe it. Why would a fax machine not work when you really need it?

How do you reflect on your time at Old Trafford overall now?

jamiestein98, via Instagram
For the first 18 months there, I really enjoyed it and the fans greeted me enthusiastically on the streets. In the first season we achieved our target by qualifying for the Champions League and rebuilding the team. I was still working on that. If you don't get the players you want to sign, you have to integrate young players, so that's what I did. In the second season, we went out of the Champions League after losing to Wolfsburg in the final minutes, and missed out on fourth in the Premier League on goal difference. We still won the FA Cup, though, so it wasn't that bad – especially if you take the challenging circumstances into consideration. What made me angry was that I wasn't given the chance to

“MY WIFE THOUGHT SOMETHING CHANGED WITH WOODWARD – I DIDN'T BELIEVE IT”

complete the three years they had asked of me. It was me who had suggested a two-year contract, so I could retire at 65 – as I had once promised my mother. They insisted on a three-year contract, as they wanted to give me time to build. In the end, I wasn't given that time.

Did you know you'd been sacked before the 2016 FA Cup Final?

Rohit Aswani, via Facebook
No, and not even directly afterwards. Later that evening we had a party to celebrate the cup victory, although none of the directors were present, which was obviously very odd. The

next day, when I had arrived home, they asked if we could meet at my house. Only then did Woodward tell me I had to leave. My wife already had a hunch in December – she felt that something had changed in the relationship with Woodward, but I couldn't believe it because we kept having the same kind of conversations as before. I even told him back then that I'd understand it if they wanted to sack me, because in December we lost four games in a row. Although we played with something of a B team, those results weren't up to United's standards. But he told me not to worry, despite the many stories that I would be sacked and that Mourinho was on his way to replace me. In that final six months, my head was on a chopping block. Those things affect the authority of a coach, and it meant that I had to give privileges to some players who might otherwise not have stood behind me. I have a structure of discipline to create a team process, which includes having breakfast and

lunch together. I loosened those rules a bit, as the squad had already asked me to do that in the first season. To keep them behind me, I felt I had to give them something, so they had the feeling I was listening to them. But it wasn't my preferred choice – it's important that players communicate with each other. Growing up, I learned that you interact most at the dinner table, and I introduced that at every club I worked.

Wayne Rooney said you are the best coach he worked with, because of your football knowledge and style of play. How did you feel about that?

gargentinomarco, via Instagram
Those things were really great to read. I've also been a very demanding coach, so if players still say those things about me, it's particularly nice. I gave Wayne the captaincy to keep him within the team's discipline and code of conduct, which he struggled with on occasions. A new period was dawning and he was one of the older players, so I thought that it could have a positive influence on him. And he was an outstanding player, of course.

How good was Marcus Rashford in the youth team for you to call him up against Midtjylland in 2016?

@BarkerGray2, via Twitter
I saw that he was a handy dribbler. He didn't always oversee the whole pitch, but that's a process – and he is still developing. Robben was the same when he was young, and 10 years later he was quite a different player. Rashford already sees more on the pitch than before; the same applies to Anthony Martial, who I signed when he was 19 – he's also grown as a player. Those are the guys who are currently doing it for United. The biggest change has been the arrival of Bruno Fernandes, though – he shows how one player can make a difference to the whole team process.

Is there any team you would have liked to manage, but didn't?

Donal J O'Driscoll, via Facebook
I have never coached a foreign nation. Two years ago, Mexico approached me – I was keen, but my wife wasn't and that was the end of it. [Laughs] I discuss everything with her, because she sacrificed her career for me 25 years ago, and now it's my turn to do so. I would be open to managing a top footballing country like Germany, Spain or England; Brazil or Argentina. With clubs, though, there is nowhere else I would have wished to be. The list of teams I have coached is just fantastic. ☺