

OLD TRAFFORD V THE BERNABÉU

By Peter Jack

WHAT'S the match day experience like at two of the world's most famous football stadia, Old Trafford in Manchester and the Bernabéu in Madrid?

By a strange quirk of fate, I attended both recently on two separate weekends – am I a lucky boy or what?!

The first trip was a Christmas present from my boys, Patrick and Mark and the second was a birthday treat from me to me.

So I thought I would compare and contrast the whole experience and grade it along the following 10 criteria:-

01. Cost of ticket and size of the crowd.
02. Quality of stadium experience.
03. Quality of the football.
04. Match day atmosphere.
05. Transport to and from the ground.
06. Cost of travel to each city.
07. Tourist things to do in the city other than attend the match.
08. Cost of basic drink and food at the ground.
09. Safety in the ground.
10. Speed of exit.
11. Cost of Ticket and size of the crowd.

(a) Manchester

My ticket cost £37.00. That got me into the Alex Ferguson Stand and in the very back row. I had to climb 200 steps from the entrance to get there. Who says you don't have to be fit to be a soccer fan? The attendance at Old Trafford was 74,742 out of 74,994. Arsenal charge £60.00 however for a home game and their capacity is less than 60,000 so the score for Old Trafford for me in this category was a very good 8/10.

(b) Real Madrid – the attendance was 63,811. And the capacity is 81,044.

I bought my ticket from Viagogo months ago and paid over the odds as I couldn't get through on the Real Madrid website. My best mate, Mark Kinkaid, who accompanied me to Madrid, was able to get his ticket three days before hand for £37.00! i.e. exactly the same as the Old Trafford price. As there was meant to be a billion dollars worth of talent on the pitch, I will give that a 9/10.

2. Quality of Stadium Experience

(a) Old Trafford

I used to be a season ticket holder so I have been on quite a few occasions. The ground is in the Trafford area of Manchester near the river. We happened to be there on the 60th anniversary of the Munich air disaster and we attended a memorial



Santiago Bernabeu the home of Real Madrid.

service outside the ground at 1.30 p.m. as did several thousand others. The minute's silence at 3.00 p.m. was also impeccably observed by both sets of fans. Part of the reason why Manchester United are so well supported and loved all over the world was that particular tragedy on the 6th February 1958 when the plane crashed while trying to take off for the third time from the Munich runway, killing twenty three club staff, including eight top class players with the likes of Tommy Taylor, Duncan Edwards and Liam Wheelan, all fatally injured, on Flight 609. The Phoenix like rise from the Ashes of the "Busby Babes" ten years later to finally land the Holy grail i.e. the European cup, is part of the fabric of the club and helps form its mystic, magic and mythology. Our very own Harry Gregg from Portstewart, who saved the lives of his own team mates that fateful day in Munich, was in the crowd on the 3rd February along with Sir Bobby Charlton, who lifted the cup in 1968. The stadium as a whole is functional, if not a thing of beauty – Score; 6 out of 10.

(b) Madrid

All I can say is: Wow!! We emerged from the Metro Station to be confronted by the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium straight in front of us. It was a genuine 'hairs on the back of your neck' experience. We got there about 45 minutes before the match started and had a chance to look at the trader's stalls. Strangely enough, there wasn't a Mega Store as it was just the stall holders who were selling the scarves, hats, match shirts etc. This seemed to be a wasted commercial opportunity. Neither

were there any match day programmes (normally on sale at Old Trafford for a fiver a pop). Is that why Manchester United are the most commercially successful of the big clubs in the Deloitte World Money List?

My seat was meant to be in the back row of the stand behind the goal and although it was way up in the lap of the Gods, the view was excellent. There was approximately one thousand white shirted (team colours) fans behind the far goal and their job was to sing the team songs accompanied by the beat of a drummer. It was obviously co-ordinated (as they were sectioned off from the rest of the crowd) and it could have been a bit gimmicky but it worked. They kept going, as Lionel Ritchie once famously sang, "All night long". One other nice touch was the presence of – and the activation of – big electric heaters above us to keep us warm. In Old Trafford if you wanted to keep warm, you sang and clapped! I was very impressed by the Bernabéu, a huge bowl which in 1957 held 135,000 people (all standing) when Real Madrid played..... Manchester United. Score - 9/10.

3. Quality of the Football

(a) Manchester

We were playing the far from mighty Huddersfield Town, not known as one of the world's leading clubs who were spending their first year in the Premiership – and probably their last – as they are cannon fodder for relegation. However, they did beat us in the corresponding fixture back in November. Our goal keeper, the

wonderful David De Gea was superfluous, he wasn't needed to save a single shot. Huddersfield spent most of their time with 10 or 11 players behind the ball. Even when they were 2 nil down, they dallied over goal kicks i.e. they were quite happy to lose by a respectable margin.

We on the other hand weren't much better. We had the worst defeat of the season, 2 nil to Spurs, four days previously and our talismanic midfielder Paul Pogba had been dropped as our manager, the eternally cool Mr. Jose, wished to vent his spleen and show his displeasure. The red shirts of United strolled about the park without putting too much effort in. "This is Huddersfield Town we are playing, not Real Madrid, why should I have to bother to run?" seemed to be the attitude. The only exception to this culture of entitlement was our new signing, Alexis Sanchez, who was running around probably because he hadn't picked up his first weekly pay packet with us. Having said that, he would probably get a hernia if he did try to literally pick it up as it would be 17,500 £20.00 notes at the end of 7 days labour.... Sanchez was however lively, full of hard work and aggression and intent with lots of flicks and tricks as opposed to his colleagues who seemed to have an air of detachment about them. Anyway, we scored twice. First, through a Belgian called Lukaku, (he cost us a mere 75 million quid) and then from a penalty follow up from Sanchez (his signing on fee, wages, agent's fee and incentives over the next four and half years will cost an eye watering £180 million). So we won but there wasn't much on display to scare our noisy neighbours, City. The biggest cheer of the day incidentally, was not when we scored but when Burnley equalised against our much despised neighbours in the earlier match which we saw on the screen in the nearby hotel owned by Gary Neville and the Class of 92 - Scores on the doors; 4/10

(b) Madrid

Real Madrid "were on it" from the start. Inside thirty seconds, Ronaldo (number 7, ex Man. United, world footballer of the year 5 times etc.) sprinkled some magic dust down the left wing, left his marker for dead with twisted blood and put in an exquisite cross which was headed in by one of his team mates, 1-0, what a start! Real Madrid tore into Real Sociedad as if there was no tomorrow and they were four up by half time. This is exhilarating stuff. In the second half, Real (known to the locals as the Meringues, as they play in all white) took their foot off the gas and allowed their plucky opponents to score twice but the goal that everybody wanted to see finally came in the 80th minute when the one and only Ronaldo scored a tap in after the



Patrick Jack in front of Sir Matt Busby's statue.

keeper fumbled a shot from Gareth Bale, for his hat trick. Mark and I were so lucky to be present when Cristiano Ronaldo secured the match ball with this effort. The crowd obviously love Ronaldo but they certainly do not love their centre forward, Benzema. He missed a sitter in the last minute and he got the bird from about 50,000 irate spectators, they are not a forgiving crowd! None of his team mates give the unfortunate French centre forward a consoling hug, so maybe he is on his way out of the world's second most famous club?

All in all the football was of the highest quality with intricate passing and great individual skill. I am not just sure if Real are a great team or just a collection of great individuals. Score: 9/10.

4. Match Day Atmosphere.

(a) Manchester.

I am not saying Old Trafford was quiet, but I have been at noisier wakes. The Stratford End as usual did their fair share of singing but it's always the away fans who have travelled further who show more commitment and make more noise. Next year the Huddersfield fans will be travelling to the likes of Rochdale and Millwall so they were determined to enjoy their day out with "football royalty". Even Mr. Cool himself, Jose Mourinho, gave off later about how quiet the crowd was but mostly I think that the average fan is more passionate about whether a team wins or loses, than the average player. If we don't win, I don't watch Match of the Day – childish, moi? We don't quit supporting our club – you would change your religion quicker – but the players and manager are just passing through on their way to their next big pay day. There were various songs about the Busby Babes which were very apt on this memorial occasion and we belted those out with gusto. The biggest noise of the day was when one of the opposition players fell to the ground as if shot and stayed there vainly trying to beseech the referee either for sympathy or more importantly a free kick. Thirty seconds later, with him still rolling around on the turf, one of his team mates passed the ball in his general direction and he sprang off the turf into action, Lazarus like, oh did we give that faker dog's abuse or what!

p.s. Every punter in the crowd got a free match day programme and a book on the Munich Disaster and a special 1958 pin. This was a nice

touch from the club – Score; 5.

(b) Madrid

This was great. An 8.45 p.m. Saturday night kick off maybe helped, the crowd were up for it and it was obvious that the twelve time winners of the Champions League/European cup were also up for it. Four days later Real were due to play PSG (with Neymar, the World's most expensive footballer) in a Champions League last 16 match – match tickets were €75.00 or a VIP ticket for €550! Zinedine Zidane, the Real Manager and former player for the club made three substitutions including bringing on the ex-Spurs player, Gareth Bale, this maybe disoriented the team but helped keep three more "galaticos" happy. It can't be easy trying to manage and soothe the egos of twenty multimillionaires in your squad! We as a crowd really enjoyed when the names of the players come up on the screen beforehand and the MC shouted out the first name and then we shouted out the surname and when Ronaldo scored his third goal, he received three shouts of acclamation in return. Score 8/10.

5. Transport to and from the ground.

(a) Manchester.

This was fairly slick and quick and a well-honed operation. Patrick and I (as Mark joined us at the ground after travelling down from Newcastle) took a tram from his flat in Chorlton (where Georgie Best used to reside in digs!) and we had time to amble about. A tram for the entire weekend in Manchester costs £7.00 and its very good value. The tram/Metro Link even stretches out to the airport. After the match we had to wait while Mark picked up his bag from security and then we had a 10 minute walk to a different tram which then whisked us back to Patrick's flat. All in all the transport scored very highly – 8/10.

(b) Madrid

We were in an airbnb whose front door was literally two metres from the metro stop. We had only one change to make on the underground so transport was incredibly easy. There was no doubt that all big clubs rely on top quality infrastructure and public transport to get you into the ground quickly. We had earlier bought a ten trip metro ticket for €15.00 i.e. very good value. Score 9/10.

To be continued next week...



Peter and Mark outside the famous Old Trafford, Manchester.