

Sandy Strang



Success? It won't last long Dynasties always fall

COBH RAMBLERS don't spawn too many global legends, but Roy Keane, serial offender, malevolent retribution seeker, major driven talent, is a serious exception.

Filched for Nottingham Forest for a miserly £25,000 by Brian Clough on a 1991 Eire sortie, Keane is presently the key element in determining whether Man U's current stagger is a transient blip or the salient precursor of inexorable imperial decline and fall.

Rumours of the imminent death of the Reds may be greatly exaggerated, but Fergie unequivocally requires to undertake some judicious culling, allied to the unearthing of a new Cantona.

Errant Keane's continuing presence, though, remains crucial to resuscitate the hunger. Every sporting dynasty, however seemingly impregnable and inviolate, is bound by a temporary lifespan.

Sporting history is littered with the faded debris of once dazzling meteors. Witness Wigan rugby league, Welsh rugby, West Indian cricket. Witness even the present demise of those top-flight survivors of 34 years, Coventry City.

And ice hockey's Sheffield Steelers, lately grand slam winners, wound up on Friday.

"John, you're immortal", exclaimed Shanks to Jock Stein in the Lisbon dressing room on the evening of April 25, 1967. Not wrong. But by the mid-70s Stein's

Celts had gone the way of all sporting flesh. Their era of over-riding supremacy had died. No longer were they the undisputed masters.

Liverpool themselves also enjoyed an extended tenure in the dynastic sun – the renowned Boot Room years – but the sudden decline under Souness was as swift as it was unexpected, and only now under Houllier is there tangible evidence of a re-emergence.

It's often difficult to detect when football empires are about to collapse. Take Wolves, European standard-bearers of the 50s. In 1959-60 they missed out by a single point on becoming the first club to win the double in the 20th century and record a hat-trick of championships.

History

There was the consolation, though, in an FA Cup win in "The Dustbin Cup Final" against Blackburn Rovers, and the future appeared brightly golden.

However, stealthily, imperceptibly, the Molineux spark had extinguished, and five years after almost making history Wolves were relegated. The dynasty was dead. There has been no resurrection.

Who could have foretold that Third Lanark, founder member of the Scottish League, 100-goal championship challengers in that heady season 1960-1, hosts at Cathkin to an over-capacity 38,000 crowd for the first game the following year, would play their last game only six years later.

A mere three days after Lisbon. Extinct. As in war, every disin-



LEGEND: Roy Keane, Manchester United's ultimate Red Devil

tegrating football empire carries its affecting roll call of casualties.

The once successful, now departing manager invariably cuts a sorry figure.

One recalls Matt Busby's heart-rending letter of condolence to Stan Cullis, erstwhile Wolves demi-god, latterly crucified and sacked: "My dear Stan, how could people do such a thing after you have given your life's blood? What more success did they want after what you had given them? What loyalty have they shown you after the loyalty you gave them? My sincerest sympathies..."

Days of sporting glory are perilously short-lived for all: "My name

is Ozymandias, King of Kings", says Shelley's sonnet on the transience of human fame as he surveys the shattered visage of the Pharaoh's statue lying solitary in the desert sand. "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"

Never mind Egypt. Cue in Wolves and Third Lanark, and ponder on one-time greats in retreat or already gone, and others waning, like Morton, over whom the sickle is presently poised.

Some, of course, are on the rise, like Fulham and Livvy. But no proud dynasty has a divine right to abiding protected status. Even cash-rich Man U plc. Time will say nothing but 'I told you so'.