

Manchester United's post-Alex Ferguson era has been a tumultuous journey of identity crises, managerial merry-go-rounds, and fluctuating fortunes on and off the pitch. Since Sir Alex's retirement in 2013, the club has seen a parade of managers — David Moyes, Louis van Gaal, Jose Mourinho, Ole Gunnar Solskjær, and now Erik ten Hag. Each brought distinct philosophies, ambitions, and vision to Old Trafford, but the underlying question remains: who genuinely improved the club the most?

Post-2013 Identity Crisis: Chasing Shadows of the Past

Ferguson's exit left a gargantuan void that's proven difficult to fill. The legendary Scot didn't just win trophies; he built a culture, an identity synonymous with resilience, attacking ambition, and expectation of excellence. Since then, United has struggled to define itself amid ever-changing managerial regimes and mismatched players trying to fit balls squarely into round holes.

This identity crisis stems largely from the disconnect between tactical philosophies and squad composition. Instead of a coherent, long-term vision, the club has often slapped patches over deeper structural problems — a classic 'rebuild slogan' symptom disguised as "project this" or "transition phase that."

Managerial Churn and Mismatched Squads

Let's be clear: the managerial churn at Old Trafford has been relentless. Since Moyes took over in 2013, United have had five full-time managers, not counting interim caretakers. With each new appointment, we've witnessed a reset of systems, recruitment priorities, and coaching staff. Unfortunately, this instability impacts players' development and morale — particularly when club recruitment doesn't align with the new manager's style.

Just to illustrate:

Manager	Key Tactical Style	Notable Transfers	Squad Fit	Trophies Won	League Position	High
David Moyes (2013-2014)	Direct, counter-attacking	Marouane Fellaini, Juan Mata	Poor (squad built for Ferguson's style)	0	7th	
Louis van Gaal (2014-2016)	Possession-based, structured	Angel Di Maria, Memphis Depay	Mixed	1 (FA Cup)	4th	
Jose Mourinho (2016-2018)	Defensive solidity, pragmatism	Paul Pogba, Zlatan Ibrahimovic	Mixed	3 (League Cup, Europa League, Community Shield)	2nd	
Ole Gunnar Solskjær (2018-2021)	Counter-attacking, high pressing	Bruno Fernandes, Harry Maguire	Improving	0	2nd	
Erik ten Hag (2022-Present)	Positional play, pressing	Casemiro, Antony	Improving rapidly	1 (EFL Cup)	2nd	

From the above, it's clear that each manager inherited a squad often mismatched with their philosophy, exacerbating instability. Van Gaal's patient positional football clashed with a squad still leaning on athleticism and pace. Mourinho's pragmatism called for defensive reinforcement but was burdened by a fragmented dressing room. Solskjær inherited a decayed midfield, forcing makeshift solutions. Ten Hag, while still early in his tenure, has started to mould a clearer, more consistent identity.

Carrick's Coaching Impact vs PR Hype

One of the overlooked but crucial factors in United's coaching saga is Michael Carrick's behind-the-scenes role. Stepping in as interim manager after Solskjær's sacking in 2021, Carrick is often overshadowed by the high-profile appointments. However, his intimate knowledge of the club's culture and players may have provided stabilising continuity amid chaos.

While media outlets herald managerial appointments with fanfare bordering on hyperbole, Carrick's impact was subtle but significant. His focus on restoring confidence, simplifying tactical demands, and fostering calm was critical in steadying a turbulent dressing room.

Unlike previous 'revolution'-branded hires, Carrick's approach was low-key but effective, demonstrating that improving United isn't always about flashy signings or radical tactical shifts. Sometimes, it's about restoring clarity and collective responsibility — although his interim role was never intended for long-term transformation.

Emotional Volatility and Media Pressure Cycles

Another under-discussed factor in post-Ferguson United's struggles is the emotional rollercoaster endured by managers, players, and fans alike. The club's massive global profile subjects it to relentless media scrutiny and unrealistic expectations. Every bad result fuels a tsunami of lazy narratives — from "lack of guts" to dreams of "revolutionary new managers" — feeding into cyclical pressure and instability.

This emotional volatility often distorts objective analysis. For example, a poor run is hastily labelled a "cultural collapse" ignoring that basic set-piece defending errors are not necessarily cultural but tactical training failures. Similarly, transfer talk commonly ignores system fit and player suitability, adding layers of confusion and pressure.

Managers must balance tactical evolution with man-management in an environment that demands success immediately. This atmosphere makes genuine long-term improvement difficult, especially when each manager's tenure is brief and fans expect instant silverware.

Manager Comparison: Trophies vs League Position

When evaluating improvement, many focus purely on trophies — an understandable metric given United's glorious history. However, trophies alone don't paint the full picture, especially in a transitional era. League [11v11.com](https://www.11v11.com) position, squad progress, and style evolution are equally telling.



- **David Moyes:** A tough start. No trophies, bottom half finish. Little improvement given time constraints and a squad in flux.
- **Louis van Gaal:** Brought an FA Cup but struggled in league consistency. Laid some tactical foundations but squad misfits limited success.

- **Jose Mourinho:** Won multiple trophies but league performances were inconsistent. Defensive style clashed with fans' expectations. His time left United with a fractured squad and off-field controversies.
- **Ole Gunnar Solskjær:** No trophies but notable improvement in league finishes and atmosphere. His management showed promise but lacked consistency and tactical depth.
- **Erik ten Hag:** Early days but a clear tactical identity developing alongside strong recruitment. Already won an EFL Cup and challenging for high league placement.

Verdict: Who Improved United the Most?

Based on the combination of trophies won, league improvement, tactical clarity, and long-term squad development, **Erik ten Hag** stands out as the manager who has most tangibly improved Manchester United since Ferguson's retirement.

He's brought a cohesive playing style reminiscent of his Ajax roots, better squad harmony, and most importantly, a sense of direction to a club desperate for identity. While it's early and no manager is immune to setbacks, his foundational work contrasts with previous churns marked by patchy recruitment and fluctuating philosophies.

Jose Mourinho delivered silverware but arguably did so at the cost of long-term squad health and morale. Solskjær injected optimism and steadied league position improvements, but trophies eluded him. Van Gaal and Moyes laid groundwork or stumbled amid transition but lacked the comprehensive impact Ten Hag shows on and off the pitch.

Conclusion

Manchester United's post-Ferguson era has been a cautionary tale in attempting to replace an iconic managerial presence without a clear succession plan or strategic continuity. The club has repeatedly fallen into the trap of 'instant revolution' clichés and short-term fixes that prioritise media narratives over system fit and squad cohesion.

In this context, Erik ten Hag's methodical, principle-driven approach finally appears to be a breath of fresh air — one with the potential to end United's identity crisis and restore sustained success. It underscores a key lesson for elite football: genuine improvement is rarely about quick fixes or hype. It demands patience, clarity, and alignment — from boardroom vision to coaching pitchside.

As we continue to witness Ten Hag's journey, it's worthwhile to keep a critical eye on results but also an appreciation for the subtle rebuilds beneath the surface. United may still be far from Ferguson's era dominance, but finally, genuine progress feels real rather than just PR fluff.

