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## *The Manchester United Disaster*

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Late on a cold February afternoon of this year I was driving home from London when I suddenly saw, under the first lighted street lamps, one of those blue and yellow news placards that are designed so often to shock you into buying a newspaper you don't particularly want and that, nine times out of ten, you would be just as well off without.

"Manchester United In Air Crash", it said. My immediate reaction was, I confess, a mildly cynical one. The announcement seemed to me to belong to precisely the same category as "Winston Churchill in Car Crash" - the car crash almost invariably turning out to be nothing more than a tender argument between the starting handle of an ancient Austin Seven and the great man's Rolls-Royce somewhere in the region of Parliament Square. I am getting too old, I thought, to be caught by newspaper screamers.

At six o'clock, out of pure curiosity, I turned on my television set. As the news came on, the screen seemed to go black. The normally urbane voice of the announcer seemed to turn into a sledge-hammer. My eyes went deathly cold and I sat listening with a frozen brain to that cruel and shocking list of casualties that was now to give to the despised word Munich an even sadder meaning than it had acquired on a day before the war when a British Prime Minister had come home to London, waving a pitiful piece of paper, and most of us knew that new calamities of war were inevitable.

Roger Byrne, Bill Whelan, Duncan Edwards, Tommy Taylor, David Pegg, Geoff Bent, Mark Jones, Eddie Colman - of Manchester United's flashing young giants hardly one had been out of the cradle at the time of the first Munich disaster. Probably not one of them had kicked a football in that year on the eve of the war when England had sent to Berlin eleven other giants

to thrash the team representing Hitler's master-race by six goals to three.

By the time war was over it was inevitable that the heroes of that resounding Berlin victory – men like Tommy Lawton, Raich Carter, Wilf Copping, and Stan Cullis – were on the verge of slipping from the international football scene. A new race of giants had to be found to represent the country that had taught the rest of the world all that was best in the skill and beauty of soccer. And soon, as men like Carter, Drake, Lawton, and Cullis turned their talents to the tutorship of new teams, we began to hear more and more of a man, up in Manchester, who appeared to be dedicated to the apparently revolutionary notion that you can make mature footballers out of boys in their teens.

To me that idea of Matt Busby's never seemed in the least bit extraordinary. There is nothing more true about football than that it is a young man's game. In youth the eyes have a fantastic swiftness, limbs are marvellously supple, with powers of resilience, and recovery unknown later. The clay of young flesh is a beautifully plastic thing that can be trained and shaped under skilled teaching in endless and remarkable ways. Not only in football has the principle of shaping extreme youth proved to be an excellent one. Who, twenty years ago, would have dreamed of swimmers of thirteen and fourteen representing their native countries and breaking world records? Today these things are commonplaces.

Gradually, as the Busby principle of teaching was translated into reality, the names of the top students began to emerge. We began to hear of players representing Manchester United in the First Division at the age of seventeen. Presently we were to see the greatest of all the Busby prodigies, Duncan Edwards, an appealing giant of a boy, representing England at the age of eighteen, striding the Wembley pitch like a mature colossus, gaining the first of his eighteen international caps, under each of which he increased in stature so much that at twenty-one he was not only a veteran but clearly England's future captain.

If I select Duncan Edwards as the most compelling of all the



young Manchester men who will now never play football again it is because he always seemed to me the epitome of all that was best in skill and character in the team that became popularly known – and very foolishly I think – as the “Busby Babes”. I have always intensely disliked that cheap journalistic label and I have a fancy that most of the players may have done so too. There was certainly nothing of a babe about Edwards. A more mature young man, both in physical strength and artistry, never walked on to that treacherous and difficult turf at Wembley to play for his country.

You could say almost the same of that excellent and cultured back Roger Byrne, who gained thirty-three England caps; of the energetic and enthusiastic Tommy Taylor; and of Pegg, Colman, and Jones, all of whom, like Duncan Edwards, had been schoolboy stars; of Whelan, who also appeared for his native Ireland, and Bent who travelled to Belgrade as a reserve. Footballers, George Bernard Shaw once said, have their brains in their feet, but I have always had a sneaking notion that Matt Busby liked to be sure that his young men had a few brains in their heads too.

But what these young prodigies possessed above all, I think, was class. It is an attribute not easy to define, but when Manchester United were beaten in the 1957 Cup Final by an Aston Villa playing very robust but not very good football, it was also pure class that made them, I think, as admirable in defeat as they had so often been in victory. And when they were again and deservedly beaten in the 1958 Cup Final it was not merely because they were lacking in the necessary arts and skills. The class was not there.

And how could it possibly have been? Its ashes lay irreparably scattered across a German airfield after the cruellest day in English sporting history. Whether the same degree of class will ever be seen again in the United colours it is too early to tell; but one thing is certain. If it never returns it will not be the fault of Matt Busby, the tutor, happily still with us; or of the young men to whom, so very early in life, he taught the beauties of our national game, and who, having acquired fame

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in youth, set such an adult example before they were so prematurely and tragically taken from the field.

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