

Ferguson has learnt many things in his long reign at Manchester. The most interesting thing is how United have changed over years since they first played in the Champions League proper in the 1990's. Gone are the typical English 4-4-2's that used to cost United time and time again in Europe. Indeed when United won Fergie's first Champions League in 1999 it was with a very English approach but it was the tactics that he would employ in the era between 2006-09 that would cement him as a truly world class manager.

In the 2006-07 season United mainly used a direct 4-3-3 with quick wingers Giggs and Ronaldo destroying teams week after week. Confident that his wingers would have the beating of opposition full backs, Fergie didn't have a worry in the world. This particular period reached its zenith in the 7-1 annihilation of Roma in the Champions League Quarter Final of 2006-07. So, United were cruising in the league and faced an AC Milan struggling post Calciopoli. United beat Milan at Old Trafford in the first leg 3-2. Although Milan scored two goals, most pundits believed United had the game to beat Milan easily. Surely, they were quicker and younger and they had Ronaldo – and anyway the Italians play too narrow, United's wing speed will be too much for the Italians.

What happened in the second league was a piece of tactical mastery by Ancelotti's Milan. Milan played a Christmas tree 4-3-2-1 (I'll review this game in the Classic Tactics section in the off-season), but don't be fooled by its apparent narrowness. Gattuso the right sided central midfielder was given license to shuttle to the right and double team Ronaldo with Oddo. All off a sudden United looked horrible going forward, space didn't open up elsewhere. Seedorf attacked through the middle but defended the left and Kaka sat high on the right so if Evra dared support Ronaldo, Kaka would do what he did in Manchester.

So forward the clock 6 years and what does Fergie do against Ronaldo? He plays Phil Jones as a right sided defensive midfielder "the Gattuso role". Admittedly, Fergie didn't apply it as well as Ancelotti as space was left for Di Maria and Ozil, but clearly Ferguson's adaptability should be commended. <http://www.zonalmarking.net/2013/02/14/real-madrid-1-1-manchester-united-real-dominate-but-united-withstand-the-pressure/>

As an interesting aside, Mourinho's response was to direct Ronaldo to play through the middle. This was exactly how Fergie began using Ronaldo on most occasions from 2007-08 – 2008-09 in order to avoid what happened at Milan. Ronaldo battled part-time in a centre forward role and scored a great header against Chelsea when they won the Champions League in 2008. Fergie also took inspiration from how Spalletti's Roma used Totti as a false 9 where Ronaldo would also sit deeper and run straight at central defenders. Zonal Marking captures this era perfectly <http://www.zonalmarking.net/2010/03/20/teams-of-the-decade-3-manchester-united-2006-09/>

So whilst other Managers after many years in the game can look somewhat redundant over time it seems as though Sir Alex is going from strength to strength, always ready to keep up with the times.