

SPORTING LEGENDS: GEORGE BEST

SPORT: FOOTBALL

COMPETITIVE ERA: 1963 - 1984

George Best (22 May 1946 - 25 November 2005) was a Northern Irish international footballer who is mainly remembered for his time with Manchester United F.C.

He played for United between 1963 and 1974, helping them to win the Football League Championship in 1965 and 1967, and the European Cup in 1968. The same year, he was named European Footballer of the Year and Football Writers' Association Player of the Year.



At the age of 15, George Best was discovered in Belfast by Manchester United scout Bob Bishop. He was subsequently given a trial and signed up by chief scout Joe Armstrong in 1961. He turned professional and made his debut for Manchester United in 1963 against West Bromwich Albion at Old Trafford.

He made 466 appearances for Manchester United in all competitions, scoring 178 goals (including six in one game against Northampton Town).

He was capped 37 times for Northern Ireland, scoring nine goals. He played mainly as a winger and was known for his dribbling skills and passing.

In 1974, the 27-year-old Best was sacked by United for excessive drinking and persistent failure to attend training sessions and matches.

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George Best in his prime; young, gifted and one of the Red Devils!

Best had a brief resurgence in form with Fulham in 1976-77, showing that, although he had lost some of his pace, he retained his skills. His time with the Cottagers is particularly remembered for an FA Cup game against second division outfit Hereford United in which he tackled his former teammate, and old drinking mate, Rodney Marsh. Best stated later in life that he enjoyed his time most while at Fulham, despite not winning any honours.

Best played for three clubs in the United States: Los Angeles Aztecs, Fort Lauderdale Strikers and later San Jose Earthquakes; he also played for the Detroit Express on a European tour. Best revelled in the anonymity America afforded him after England and was a success on the field, too, scoring 15 goals in 24 games in his first season with the Aztecs and named as the NASL's best midfielder in his second.

He opened "Bestie's Beach Club" (now called "The Underground" after the London subway system) in Hermosa Beach, California in the 1970s, and continued to operate it until the 1990s.

Best caused a stir in when he returned to the UK to play for Scottish club Hibernian. Hibs, who were suffering a decline in fortunes and were heading for relegation from the Premier Division. They signed Best on a "pay per play" basis after the club chairman, Tom Hart, received a tip-off from an *Edinburgh Evening News* reporter that he was available.

Even though Best failed to save Hibs from relegation, gates increased dramatically, as Hibs' attendance quadrupled for his first match at Easter Road. One infamous incident saw Best initially sacked by Hibs, only to be brought back a week later, after he went on a massive drinking session with the French rugby team, who were in Edinburgh to play Scotland.

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Best was extremely agile, with a devastating turn of pace in abundance.

Best returned to the USA to play for San Jose Earthquakes in what was officially described as a 'loan', though he only managed a handful of appearances for Hibs in the First Division in the following season.

He returned one last time to Easter Road in 1984, for Jackie McNamara's testimonial match against Newcastle. In his third season in the States, Best scored only once in 12 appearances. His moves to Fort Lauderdale and San Jose were also unhappy, as his off-field demons began to take control of his life again.

After failing to agree terms with Bolton Wanderers in 1981, he was invited as a guest player and played three matches for two Hong Kong First Division teams in 1982. In late 1982, Bournemouth manager Don Megson signed the 36-year-old Best for the Football League Third Division side, and he remained there until the end of the season, when he finally retired from football at the age of 37.

Diego Maradona has frequently named Best as his all-time favourite player and Pelé once stated that Best was the best player he ever saw play. He also named him as one of the 125 best living footballers in his 2004 FIFA 100 list.

In 2002, he had a liver transplant. In 2003 he was the focus of much criticism when, despite his transplant, he openly drank white wine spritzers and was accused of being selfish and having no regard for other people's feelings. He died in 2005 from liver infection complications.

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Scott Burton's Final Thought

George Best is a true sporting legend. Love or hate him, people will be talking about the ability of this guy for many, many years to come.

His time with Manchester United featured some of the finest footballing skill ever witnessed in the history of the game. He was part of an amazing team, and alongside Bobby Charlton and Denis Law, George Best thrived in an environment of creative teamwork.

His demons would always haunt him, but the people who still reminisce about Best do so about his sublime talent, not his alcohol-guzzling ability.

In many ways, he WAS the fifth Beatle. Guys wanted to be him, and girls wanted to have him. It's just a shame that he couldn't maintain the high standards of his early career for a longer period of time.

He was a genius, but in the final analysis, somewhat of a flawed one.



George Best - there was nothing he couldn't do with a ball at his feet!