

WHERE

STARS

ARE

BORN



As United's Academy celebrates its 90th year, we take a look at the FC Zurich Blue Stars Youth Tournament, and how our club and that competition are inextricably entwined by success, prestige and tradition...

“You know what I can always remember,” says former Manchester United youth-team goalkeeper David Ryan, who appeared at the FC Zurich Blue Stars Youth Tournament on three occasions and won it once, in 1975. “They always used to give us that *Wienerschnitzel*. Veal in breadcrumbs, is it? I used to eat that for fun when we were over there.”

The tagline of Blue Stars is ‘Where Stars Are Born.’ It could just as easily be ‘Where Memories Are Made.’ When David first attended Blue Stars, in his mid-teens, United had been competing in the Zurich youth competition for two decades and had won it 10 times. He, like a great many others before and since, were aware of the tournament's importance internationally.

“When you look back, you think, ‘wow’. It's something to be proud of, really, travelling the world with Manchester United as a young boy – representing the club. It's a pretty special thing,” says David, who was later United Academy's head goalkeeping coach and also head of football and community development.

“It was something you looked forward to so much at the end of the season. It was regarded as the premier overseas tournament and we knew it was such a tradition for United to go there.

“We knew about the Babes, very much so, because the publicity around the tournament always spoke about them. We knew that tradition.”

Despite the intricate relationship that developed between Blue Stars and United in the second half of the 1950s, and the dominance the club established in the subsequent decade, Wolverhampton Wanderers were the first English team to enter. Under Stan Cullis's management, the Molineux club were approaching youth football with similar vigour and ambition to United and Matt Busby.

The Blue Stars tournament itself was formulated by Fritz Rey, the chairman of the Zurich-based team's youth committee. Rey received such significant pushback after suggesting a 12-team youth competition that he had to commit to covering any financial losses from his own pocket to convince the board. Only after this was the inaugural tournament held, mere months before the outbreak of the Second World War. Switzerland's neutral status permitted the tournament to progress mid-conflict and in 1941, it upgraded its home to Stadion Letzigrund, where it has since remained. Austria Vienna were the first foreign entrants in 1946 and finished as champions in the following two years.

United's initiation, meanwhile, came in the midst of an English football crisis. A 6-3 Wembley defeat to Hungary in 1953, in what is often deemed ‘The Match of the Century’ for its significance, challenged the



A United youth team, with Charlton, Pegg, Edwards and Whelan among the ranks, with the Blue Stars Youth Cup after winning the tournament on our first visit to Zurich in 1954

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– DAVID RYAN, YOUTH-TEAM GOALKEEPER

long-held sense of superiority felt by most involved in the English game. A major identity crisis followed, fused with debates about how to rescue the national sport and restore England to world pre-eminence. Five months later, Walter Winterbottom's team visited Budapest hoping to prove their home loss an anomaly but instead succumbed to an even greater masterclass and suffered a record 7-1 defeat. The world concluded as one that England must finally look towards the continent for tactical and technical inspiration.

Just three days on, a smartly-dressed Manchester United youth team gathered at Old Trafford, travelled by coach to Ringway Airport and flew to Zurich. The date, 26 May, had further significance. It was exactly one month since the young Reds had beaten Wolves to win the FA Youth Cup, just as they had in the inaugural 1953 tournament. Debates may have raged about England's national team, but anyone who had watched this new youth competition could hardly have been pessimistic, for United's young lads had confidence and skill sprinting through their veins.



Busby and his young Reds gather at Zurich Airport for our inaugural involvement in the tournament

BLUE STARS TOURNAMENT

After Youth Cup glory, their parents received a letter from assistant manager Jimmy Murphy. 'I am pleased to say that your son has been selected to travel on tour,' he wrote. 'It is essential that we should have his passport and birth certificate as soon as possible. Will you kindly forward these on...'

Forms completed, each boy received a booklet detailing the trip, while club secretary Walter Crickmer took some of the younger lads shoe-shopping to ensure they looked the part. For many, it was a thrilling first overseas excursion. Others had made first-team debuts already, like Eddie Lewis (20 appearances), Duncan Edwards (26 apps) and David Pegg (30), having impressed in the first Youth Cup campaign. Noel McFarlane had made his bow, too. Coaches Murphy, Bert Whalley and trainer Arthur Powell accompanied the squad with Busby, who told a reporter before departure: "I think we shall have a good chance of winning – we don't have to play any Hungarians!"

United settled into Zurich's Hotel Stoller, sampled new food, played cards, and slept. The next day, they drew with Young Fellows, defeated Berne Boys, the hosts Blue Stars – whose side included Werner Staub, who became a tournament organiser and friend of United (see p50) – then MTV Munchen in the semi-final. A stunning Edwards hat-trick – plus a goal from Albert Scanlon – then earned Busby's boys the Hermes Cup with a 4-0 thrashing of Red Stars of Zurich.

Silverware secured, they played two friendlies, the second of which was against Switzerland's national youth side. Pegg scored two and Edwards one, but it was Billy Whelan who shone, running from halfway, jinking through a full defence, side-stepping the goalkeeper and finishing. Watching on in admiration was the entire Brazil national team, preparing for that summer's World Cup in Switzerland. At full-time, the Brazilian FA's president entered the changing rooms to enquire about Whelan's value. Busby explained such a fee was inconceivable.



'THE GENERAL VERDICT HERE IS THAT THERE IS NOT MUCH WRONG WITH ENGLISH FOOTBALL IF THESE BUSBY BOYS ARE A SAMPLE OF OUR FUTURE'

– MANCHESTER EVENING NEWS REPORT

Top: a teenage Wilf McGuinness receives the runners-up prize as team skipper during the Reds' return to Zurich in 1955

Below: our 1982 side – complete with future first-team stars Mark Hughes, Clayton Blackmore and Graeme Hogg – land the cup for an unmatched 16th time



Although it was a wee Irishman who stood out, England's recent defeats were clearly on the mind when the *Manchester Evening News* reviewed: 'The general verdict here is that there is not much wrong with English football if these Busby boys are a sample of our future resources.'

United returned home with unparalleled confidence and a trophy, which they showed off in a civic reception held at Manchester Town Hall. Busby loved the trip, and seeing these youngsters develop into men. "Make sure you enjoy it," he reminded them often. He would never allow any player of his to lose the thrill of the game.

The team returned in 1955, their defeat in the final against Genoa coming a month after the foundation of the European Cup, to which the Football League denied entry to current English champions Chelsea. When United secured the title a year later, Busby would not be so easily restrained.

The Scot had been enthralled by the Blue Stars tournament and had witnessed the benefits his young players drew. In fact, the same could be said for Cullis of Wolves, who, having competed in Zurich, returned home and arranged a series of pioneering continental friendlies at Molineux. And so it was that perhaps inspired by Blue Stars, and in spite of the Football League's wishes, Busby took United into Europe.

A 12-0 aggregate victory over Anderlecht in the European Cup preliminary round in September 1956 asserted United's continental pedigree. Featured in the team were four members of the '54 Blue Stars team: Colman, Edwards, Pegg and Whelan, and the club continued to romp to Youth Cup success, lifting the first five titles. As well as cherry-picking Britain and

Ireland's finest talent, the secret lay in establishing connections within a group of maturing young men. Blue Stars was essential in that process. It gave them a feeling that they were a part of something special.

In 1991, United returned to Blue Stars for the first time in three years. The club had enacted total dominance of the competition since 1954, contesting 21 of 28 finals from then until 1982, and winning 16 times. In that period, no other club won it more than twice (AC Milan, Arsenal and Grasshopper Zurich).

The Reds were joined by English sides aplenty and lost to Arsenal in 1964, the same year that George Best inspired United to Youth Cup glory. They defeated West Ham in the Blue Star finals of 1966 and 1968, after which they returned home to watch – and then celebrate – the European Cup victory in London. In the '70s, when Youth Cup success dried up, there were narrow Blue Star final defeats to Dortmund and Atalanta, and triumphs over Tottenham – for Dave Ryan's group – and Middlesbrough. A 16th title came in 1982 with victory over Israeli side Hapoel Ramat Gan – a helpful antidote to Youth Cup final defeat to Watford for Norman Whiteside and Mark Hughes.

When United's involvement became intermittent in the 1980s – the club experimenting with other European tournaments – the opportunity to play at Blue Stars grew more special. Aged 19, midfielder



Several members of our famous Class of '92 take in the action during the 1995 tournament

“WE HAD A LOT OF DIGNITARIES WITH THE PARTY – SIR MATT, SIR BOBBY, ERIC HARRISON, BRIAN KIDD AND LES OLIVE. TO TRAVEL WITH PEOPLE OF THAT ESTEEM WAS REALLY EXCITING IN ITSELF”

– ALAN TONGE, YOUTH-TEAM MIDFIELDER



The Reds' last Blue Star success came in 2005, by which point FIFA had recognised its immense value, adding 'FIFA Youth Cup' to the international tournament's name

Alan Tonge experienced it for the first time in 1991. He knew United had been going there for a long time,” he remembers, “and what was quite exciting on our trip was we had quite a lot of dignitaries who travelled with the party. Sir Matt Busby came, and Sir Bobby Charlton, Eric Harrison, Brian Kidd and Les Olive. To travel with people of that esteem was really exciting in itself.”

That list of club legends illuminates the importance of Blue Stars for United. It had been similar in the '70s, when Bill Foulkes, Paddy Crerand and Jimmy Murphy accompanied the teams.

“One of the outstanding memories I have is on the first evening,” recalls Tonge. “We settled in and we were just sat around a table, chatting, playing cards, and stuff like that when over my shoulder, I noticed Sir Matt Busby was coming over, and so the hairs on your arm go up. He came over, and he spoke to the group. He was from Glasgow – Bellshill, he was born – and he had a sort of gravelly voice. He said, ‘are you all right, boys?’ We were a bit of scared of him, really, a little bit in awe of the great man. I think I replied a mumbled ‘yeah, all good, thank you, Sir Matt, all well.’ And he went, ‘as long as you’re enjoying yourself, that’s the main thing.’

“That line has always stuck with me, because that was kind of his philosophy, wasn’t it?”

Tonge's team reached the final and were beaten 2-1 by Spartak Moscow. On their way home, they faced Brazilian side Botafogo in a friendly. “An extra bonus for us was that they’d asked if Bobby Charlton would turn out because they’d clocked he was with the party,” explains Tonge. “It was just a surreal experience. We beat Botafogo 3-0 and Bobby was around 50 years old,

BLUE STARS TOURNAMENT

we were U19s, and he was just schooling everybody. He ran the show; long passes dropping it on to a team-mate's feet, flicking it on, dribbling with it, that little shimmy he used to have in his shoulders, and he scored a cracking goal as well. It's hard to explain what players like that are like. They are of a higher class. It's like they were born special. Another European Cup winner, Brian Kidd, came on, too. It was really exciting."

United returned the next year with what became known as the Class of '92 and faced the same fate: a final defeat to Spartak Moscow. The Reds finished third the next year and lost to Barcelona in 1994's final as FIFA patronised the tournament and renamed it Blue Stars/FIFA Youth Cup. United finished 11th in 2002 but made amends by securing back-to-back victories in 2004 – with Tom Heaton involved – and 2005, defeating Nani's Sporting Lisbon en route to an 18th triumph.

Compared to those of decades before, the squad had a distinctly global nature. German ex-Red Markus Neumayr told FIFA recently that he had played for United in Hong Kong and Dallas but upon arrival in Zurich, "quickly realised how important it was... it seemed particularly prestigious." It would do because, in his era, Sir Alex Ferguson maintained Busby's legacy by attending whenever schedules allowed. United's last involvement, a decade ago, concluded with a fourth-placed finish and Adnan Januzaj being named Player of the Tournament.



For former youth-team members like Alan Tonge (back row, second from left) – who was part of our 1991 tournament party – the Blue Stars Cup has provided plenty of fond memories and cemented the club's reputation for furthering youth development

Our 18 wins tell a story of dominance in youth football, but running through every one of those wins – and the defeats – are the memories forged for the young lads who represented the club abroad, from the Babes in '54 right through to those a decade ago, always expected to win, but with the philosophy of Matt Busby unerring. "I'll never forget that line as long as I live," Alan Tonge says. "As long as you're enjoying yourselves, that's the main thing." ●

WERNER STAUB: 1936-2023

Remembering a long-time friend of the club who sadly passed away recently

It was with great sadness that Manchester United learned that Werner Staub had died last month, a few days short of his 87th birthday.

It's a name that may not be immediately recognised by many of our supporters, but Werner – due to his involvement with the prestigious Zurich Blue Stars Youth Tournament, became a close and valued friend to Manchester United over countless years.

A native of the beautiful Swiss City of Zurich, his association with his local club began when he was a young man and his loyalty and dedication to FC Blue Stars never showed signs of waning. He progressed through the ranks from junior level to appear in the first team as an amateur. A serious injury, in his early twenties, curtailed his playing career and he decided to volunteer his services to the administrative section of the club, becoming secretary to the youth level of the club.

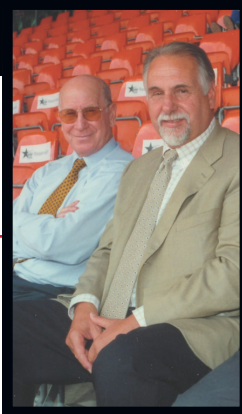
As a young player, he was in the Blue Stars team that participated in the 1954 competition, which included a game against a United

side which contained many of the legendary Busby Babes, including Bobby Charlton, Wilf McGuinness, Duncan Edwards, Albert Scanlon and Eddie Colman. Werner could speak sufficient English to communicate and, as a result, he developed a lifelong friendship with Sir Bobby Charlton and Wilf McGuinness.

His enthusiasm and devotion for his beloved Blue Stars saw him taking up a role in the youth tournament organising committee and in 1967 he was installed as their president. It was a position he held for many years and even after his retirement in 1991, he continued to play a hugely important part in the competition's running and development. His contacts with clubs in Europe and beyond were invaluable and he was always available to offer advice and opinions when approached.

The Zurich Blue Stars Youth Tournament played a huge part in his life and he was delighted when, in 1991, FIFA afforded its patronage and the competition was renamed 'Blue Stars/FIFA Youth Cup.

Long-term FC Blue Stars servant Staub established good relations with legends like Charlton



Werner's son, Marcel, has continued the family's involvement and remains an integral part of the tournament's set-up to this day.

Everyone at United extends their most sincere condolences to Werner's family and friends. He will always hold a very special place in the affections of all at Old Trafford and Carrington.

Many thanks to Hansruedi Ottiker (FC Blue Stars), as well as former United backroom boys Jimmy Curran and Paul McGuinness, for their assistance with this tribute