

Erik ten Hag faces biggest rebuilding job in Manchester United's recent history



- More than 10 players likely to depart Old Trafford this summer as new coach seeks to revive the club's fortunes

With every passing day, Erik ten Hag's job gets harder and harder.

On Thursday night, Manchester United sleepwalked their way to an uninspiring 1-1 draw against Chelsea at Old Trafford, all but extinguishing any lingering hopes of a top four finish.

Coming on the back of defeats to Liverpool and Arsenal, it was yet another indication that Ralf Rangnick's interim appointment has done little to close the gap on United's traditional rivals.

Few will argue that this dysfunctional squad needs a major overhaul this summer, with ten Hag building almost from scratch.

There has been talk of United needing to get rid of over 10 players, permanently or on loan, but this surely will not happen in one transfer window.

Ten Hag has signed a three-year contract, with an option of a fourth, and as things stand it may take most of this period to restore luster to the Old Trafford club, which will end a fifth consecutive season without a trophy.

The new coach has set out his plans for the future, with nearly \$250 million promised for new signings, a budget on potential sales.

At his current club Ajax, ten Hag has not been known for splashing millions on players, instead preferring to refine young talent from the club's academy or bring in untapped signings.

This is not something that will be afforded at Old Trafford. The Dutchman takes over a broken team that needs immediate fixing. Manchester United currently have the highest average age among the traditional Big Six clubs in Premier League (27.6 years), slightly above Manchester City's 27.5 and Liverpool's 27.1.

It is perhaps the only comparison in which United are close to arguably Europe's best two teams. Elsewhere, there are none at all.

In order to implement his plans, the 52-year-old must ditch around 12 players, according to incumbent Rangnick.

First in line are those whose contracts are expiring, including Paul Pogba, while Edinson Cavani, Jesse Lingard, Nemanja Matic and Juan Mata are also heading for the exit door.

The club is ready to listen to offers for others, such as Eric Bailly, Phil Jones, Andreas Pereira, Lee Grant and Anthony Martial, currently on loan at Sevilla.

Other cases are not as clear cut.

For a start, there is the question of how to handle Harry Maguire, who is struggling for form and confidence, and facing pressure from critics and fans. It remains to be seen whether ten Hag sticks with the England center-half.

Marcus Rashford has long been seen as central to any bright United future, but in recent month has spiralled into a vortex of poor form and apathy.

Then there is the curious case of Cristiano Ronaldo, who is somehow a few experts' reason for United's problems, while arguably remaining the club's player of the season.

It has been reported that ten Hag does not see him as part of United's future, and the Portuguese superstar will likely jump before he is pushed.

One of the few beneficiaries of ten Hag's appointment could be Donny van de Beek, the Everton loanee reuniting with the coach that oversaw his best form at Ajax.

A complication for ten Hag is that he is expected not only to turn the team's fortunes around in the short term, but also do it playing the exciting attacking football that the club's fans demand.

Bringing in the right players will be key, and already he has been linked with Wolves midfielder Ruben Neves, Benfica striker Darwin Nunez and Leeds United's Calvin Phillips.

Other reported targets, such as West Ham's Declan Rice and Tottenham's Harry Kane may prove out of reach financially.

Ten Hag will likely seek players that he has worked with before and trusts. Ajax winger Antony Matheus dos Santos and defender Lisandro Martinez are expected to be targets, while Juventus center-half Matthijs de Ligt, who played under ten Hag at the Dutch club, could also be open to a reunion.

The Dutchman will have a select group of young players at the club who he will relish developing as he did with so many at Ajax.

Jadon Sancho is already an established talent at Old Trafford and is sure to be pivotal to the new coach's planning. Meanwhile Tunisian Hannibal Mejbri, Argentina's Alejandro Garnacho and England U21 international Tim Garner, on loan at Nottingham Forest, could all have bright future under ten Hag's guidance.

For now it seems that a core group, mainly Bruno Fernandes, Raphael Varane, David de Gea and Sancho, are the cornerstone of the club's new project, with Scott McTominay, Luke Shaw, Fred and Anthony Elanga also expected to escape the cull.

There does not seem to be much of solid foundation as Manchester United embark on the biggest rebuilding job in their recent history.

For ten Hag, the clock is already ticking. The hard work starts in the summer.
