Ferguson talks about United . . . and ex-pupil Joe Hanrahan

Manchester United boss **Alex Ferguson** was in Limerick this week and he spoke to Leader reporter, **Alan English,** on the trials and tribulations of being manager of such a famous club, his hatred of the Tabloid Press and his admiration of Joe Hanrahan. Mr. Ferguson was guest of the Limerick Branch of the Manchester United Supporters Club.

HE'S NOT REALLY what you'd expect, Alex Ferguson. The manager of Manchester United, portrayed in the tabloid press he detests as tough, gruff, uncompromising (FURIOUS FERGIE IN FASHANU FLARE-UP etc), came to a function in Limerick this week and charmed all who met him. He was friendly, patient, a gentleman.

His visit to the city, along with three of his United players, Bruce, Gill and Robins, was an unqualified success. And he was prepared to speak at length on Limerick City darling boy Joe Hanrahan, who had a face-to-face confrontation with the Scot prior to leaving the glamour and trappings of United. Lou Macari, former United midfielder and present supremo at Swindon Town, also came along. Macari is pretty much an annual fixture here.

Ferguson and his boys mingled with the punters, signed their programmes, posters and cigarette packets, posed for their instamatics and provided a smiling and interested audience for the words of wisdom, recollections of great days and team advice they imparted. It was the boss's first time in Limerick and he declared himself very impressed with the local hospitality.

Alex Ferguson was born in working class Glasgow, a city that cares more about its football than any other in Britain. His father was a shipyard worker, his mother worked at various jobs, while he and his brothers kicked a football around, skilfully.

At 16 he became a senior player with Queen's Park, the famous Glasgow amateur side. He went from there to St Johnstone, Dunfermline ("where I had my best spell as a player"), Rangers, Falkirk and Ayr United, where he quit at 32.

"I could have played on, but I had it in my mind to be a manager. I had an opportunity at 32 to manage a small club in Scotland, East Stirling. Don't ask me why I took it, but I took it. I did quite well and after three months I was offered a better job at St Mirren."

Offered

In 1978 he was offered a better job still at Aberbeen, who he led to three Championships, four Scottish Cups and a European Cup Winners Cup. Then, in November 1986, Old Trafford beckoned him, and he followed.

His ambition then was the same as it is now — to win United's first League since 1967. The title has become an obsession with the Old Trafford faithful, laughed at for too long by Liverpudlians enjoying outrageous good fortune while United flounder.

Dave Sexton and Ron Atkinson, his immediate predecessors at United, were fired for this unacceptable state of affairs, amid screaming headlines and endless accusations that their million pound misfits were not fit to lace the boots of Charlton, Edwards, Law or Best. (Rumour has it that the first words uttered by the American hostages released in Iran in 1980 were "Has Birtles scored for United yet?")

Alex Ferguson too has had his share of the headlines in the British tabloids. He is contemptuous of their tactics and, as "a good socialist", sad that they are so widely read.

"The tabloid press, unfortunately, has brought a degradation to life in Britain. Their way of doing their job shouldn't be acceptable to the British public. If Manchester United have a bad spell, they have hitmen that come out of the woodwork and do a nasty piece, and talk about the manager being under pressure. What they're really trying to do is get the manager sacked for the speculation of getting him sacked, the speculation of a new manager, and then the whole game starts all over again. It's a terrible thing, you know," he says, seeming more sad than resentful, though he is both.

He doesn't read the tabloids anymore; they're too upsetting. "I know one lad who works for the tabloids and he can't take his work home, his wife won't allow him to take the paper in the house."

Exposed

But, unlike Bobby Robson, he has yet to be exposed to the tabloid hate machine at full throttle. Of the England manager's vilification he says: "I believe they want England to lose. I really believe that."

Much of the recent coverage of events at Old Trafford has been positive. The tabloids have gleefully coined the phrase "Fergie's Fledglings" to describe the latter-day Busby Babes. Youngsters like Sharpe, Beardsmore, Gill and Robins were dramatically called into action by Ferguson this season and impressed a great deal.

A smiling Alex Ferguson pictured this week in Limerick.

"There's been a lot of big changes in the club. What I had to do was take a long-term view because I had a lot of players like Frank Stapleton and Arthur Albiston and Kevin Moran all in their thirties, so I had to build a younger team.

"We said at the start of the season that the work that had been done at youth level would not be recognised for three or four years but by fate, by chance, by luck, maybe even a brave decision, we're getting recognised for our young players and they've done very well."

One player who never did get recognised by the Stretford End was Limerick's Joe Hanrahan, who, after graduating from UCD, spent a couple of years knocking on the first team dressing room door. He didn't get in. Ferguson was frank and forthcoming about his experience of Limerick City's number 11.

Restless

"He wasn't a bad player Joe. He was restless, he wanted to be in the first team. When I first came, he came to see me. He was unsure of his future. He'd been there a year with Ron Atkinson and I said "I really haven't seen enough of you Joe to give you a decision". And after a year with me I didn't think he was first team level.

"I think one of the problems that Joe had was that he was always in a hurry. I think he felt he'd made a big decision leaving because he was academically very bright. So that maybe always weighed against him, whereas a player with less academic ability would have had no option but to give it a go with football. I always thought that Joe was never sure he'd made the right decision coming to United."

And if he had stuck around? "I think he would have definitely had a career in England, there's no doubt about that. Also, I don't know what he felt his best position was. We bought him as as striker but he seemed to prefer dropping into the middle of the park too many times. He may have felt that with playing up front, it was going to be hard to get into the first team, I don't know.

"Sometimes the best person to tell you is the person himself. He can provide some information that maybe we didn't think about. There's a lot of cases where the manager could, maybe, have handled the thing differently, or better. Joe, being intelligent and having strong opinions, it was difficult to have an argument with him. He had strong opinions about what he felt was right for himself.

"I tried to say to him that there were two things — he had to persevere strongly to be a front player, or definitely he was to move, get another club, which he didn't want to do. In fairness, he said to me "I've made up my mind that if I didn't make it with United I don't want to play in England." I still think that he could have made a good career for himself but he said "No, I've had my go...I'm going back."

Hardest

For Alex Ferguson, being manager of Manchester United is "the best job in the world. It's the hardest, but it's the best. It's the pinnacle of my life."

One thing that has made a lasting impression on him in his two years in charge is the response he has had from the fans. He listens to what they tell him.

"The supporters have told us the kind of club they want. They've been absolutely magnificicent with the young ones. I'll tell you the kind of club we are... If we were to sign the best player in the world they (the directors) would welcome it with open arms. But if we signed a player who in their opinion wasn't the best, the reception would be lukewarm, and maybe even cold, whereas if we bring young players in, it's what they want."

And apart from the daily diet of tabloid lies and wild speculation, what are the frustrations of being manager of Manchester United? An easy question.

"The frustrations of not winning the League. What you feel is: Right, if we just could win that League, the place would explode. The Reds would just lock their doors and know that life had ended for them."

The Reds of Liverpool that is. But Kenny's Kop Army, who can't quite claim as many Limerick followers as the mighty Man U, have got some life left in them yet. Maybe next year...

GARRYOWEN, SHANNON CAN BOTH SUCCEED

By CORMAC LIDDY

There could scarcely be a more attractive start to the Carling Munster senior cup than the meeting of holders Shannon and UCC at Thomond Park this Saturday.

[illegible] clash of sides who ably produced strong running backs and the present side is no exception.

But the Shannon forwards should dominate and if they do they can create sufficient chances for Oliver Kiely and John Pearse to pave the way for a winning start which will for a victory and while it may be a tight affair I would be confident that garryowen will make it a Limerick double.

Garryowen (from) P. Danaher, P. Murphy, K. Smith, D. Duggan, M. Boland, P. Feddis, I. Barry, G. Griffin, N. Barry, J. Moloney, [illegible] p.m. (extra time), G. Norton.

Webb Cup — Galbally v. Thurles, Galbally, 3.30 p.m., P. Ahern.

Clanwilliam v. Cashel, Tipperary, 3 p.m., S. Lynch.

Mansergh Cup — Cashel v. Clonmel, Cashel, 3 p.m., P. Barriscale.

[illegible] Thurles

Charlie Quaid, vice-president, Munster Branch, presenting a cheque for £10,000 to Tim and Helen O'Shea, Bruree, winners in the third monthly Thomond Park draw. Also included is Michael Wallace, hon. treasurer (left).

THOMOND FAVOURED TO MASTER

Crescent-Munchin's meet in Junior Cup

THE final of any Munster Schools Cup is always a most sporting and colourful occasion, especially when two local schools are involved.

Thomond Park will house a huge attendance on Wednesday next when St. Munchin's and Crescent Comprehensive meet in the final of the Munster Junior Cup for the second time in three seasons.

The respective supporters will be suitable attired, while the cheer leaders, with their megaphones, will ensure continuous vocal support throughout.

Pity that the space in the stand will be very limited as many of the younger supporters will be forced to watch the match from the terracing.

For Crescent, who are on target for a senior and junior cup double, it will be a very important occasion, as a win would surely be a great spur to the senior side, who play C.B.C. in Cork two days later.

Indeed schools rugby has caught the imagination of the rugby public in a big way and Thomond Park. It was a match full of excitement and good football. It was to be St. Munchin's day, despite being behind to a Stephen Tuohy penalty at the interval.

In the second half with the advantage of the wind tries from Brian Clancy and James O'Riordan, which Patrick Kane converted, saw the cup on its way to Corbally.

The teams that contested that final were:

St. Munchin's: L. Rice, P. Horan, B. Clancy, B. Walsh, T. Moran, T. Neville, D. Hartery, J. Maher, B. O'Shea, J. Coleman, J. O'Riordan, G. Healy, P. Kane (captain), S. Liston, D. Place.

Replacement: J. Franklin for Neville.

Crescent: C. Tobin, G. McGuire, B. Collins, A. Reddan, R. Hanrahan, S. Tuohy, F. Downes (captain), P. Madigan, S. McMahon, J. Legear, S. Leahy, M. Ward, S. Eliott, G. Dineen, M. O'Mara.

Replacement: N. Kirby for Tuohy.

Last season Crescent lost their third successive final on a 12-nil scoreline to P.B.C., degree of certainty.

St. Munchin's should hold a slight edge in the forwards, while the Crescent backs are more dangerous when in possession.

Hopefully, the weather will improve and both teams will display the football ability they are capable of. The result could hinge on big match nerves, the taking of the half chance but, more likely, it could be all down to the form of the place kickers.

O'Halloran Irish champ

Limerick boxer Pat O'Halloran wings his way to Atlantic City this week-end with the International team, fresh from his outstanding victory in the national championships in Dublin last week-end.

Saturday's Dog Card

Tuthill 30/40 Sweep, heat 1: Here It Is, Mary, I'm Depressed, Kilderry Flyer, Sandy Air, Bettyville Duke, Swift Lancer (res.), Canine Cola (res.).

Tuthill 30/40 Sweet, heat 2: Daisys Wish, Cahara Feaver, Anns Special, Fast Dame, Oyster Nancy, Ardroe Stranger, Paddys Bogey (res.).

Tuthill Consulation 550 yds.: Longview Santa, Dreams of Kerry, Humble Opinion, Learacro Sail, Portrine Sally, Erins Peace, Miss