

Jonathan Agnew



When the Premier League season kicks off this weekend, we can be sure that all eyes will be on Manchester United. They entertain Swansea and their new manager Louis van Gaal faces a massive challenge to restore faith at Old Trafford.

Phil Neville, the former England and Manchester United defender joined me on *Test Match Special* last week to reflect on his passion for cricket (he was captain of England Under 15s) and also on the nightmare of last season. Neville was first team coach, working in partnership with his friend David Moyes who was sacked less than 10 months after taking over from Sir Alex Ferguson after what Neville described as a disaster and a complete failure.

With that brutal analysis came the acknowledgement that Moyes had an impossible task. United had won the League by the small matter of 12 points the previous season but change was needed and after 27

years of the same routines under one of the most successful managers of all time, this came at a heavy price which cost Moyes and Neville their jobs.

Neville believes that van Gaal will have an easier time this season because he is not Ferguson's direct replacement so will not be under the same scrutiny. Rather than being weighed down by the burden of expectation that buried Moyes, the Dutchman's is a lower starting point. With a striking similarity to the challenges

facing the England cricket team, this season at Old Trafford is all about careful rebuilding and although Manchester United's supporters will be hoping for immediate signs of improvement, they need to accept that this will probably take time. Also in van Gaal's favour is the fact that his team will not be involved in any European football. Ironically, United's failure to qualify for the Champions League for the first time since 1989

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was high on Moyes' charge sheet but it does not now afford his successor some breathing space in a typically crammed schedule.

As for Neville, he is looking forward to picking up his cricket bat again and replacing Alan

Hansen on the *Match of the Day* sofa alongside another cricket-loving footballer, Gary Lineker. Neville's early sorties at the microphone in the World Cup met with heavy criticism but I have little doubt that his candour and striking work ethic will make him an instant hit on football's favourite television programme, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year.

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