

Blood mud and glory – the forgotten miracle of the Busby babes

When Manchester United did the unthinkable and scored three goals within seven minutes against Lyon, they set up an epic battle against Spanish side Athletic Bilbao in the Europa League semi-final.

The two sides had met twice before. The most recent meeting being another Europa League encounter—a round of 16 tie in the 2011/12 season where Bilbao stunned United, winning 5–3 across two legs.

But the first time these two teams met was nearly 70 years ago, in a match that was commandeered by Matt Busby and his Babes—a night where youth, defiance, and beautiful football reigned.

“I think it is important to know our history when playing against teams like Athletic Bilbao. We will always share that quarter final,” said football writer John Ludden. “A game when you saw the very best of the Busby Babes. Many claim they were never better than on that long-gone night in Moss Side.”

6 February 1957, 4 a.m.

The Busby Babes lay in their beds, still and dreaming, a few hours from facing Athletic Bilbao in the European Cup.

A year to the minute, half of them would be gone.

Not to injury nor transfer, but to fire and snow on a Munich runway.

But that morning in Manchester, the young squad at the helm of the great Matt Busby, were untouched.

As the sun rose and the players left their beds, noise filled the Manchester streets as fans readied themselves for a match of a lifetime.

Laughter echoed through the hotel where the Busby Babes stayed, cutting the tension like sunlight through fog. Talk of tactics was punctuated with jokes that only teammates can share.

This Manchester squad was young in age, but men in confidence—and they were building something special.

Europe was the frontier, and this was to be a conquest that would go down in history.

No English side had come close to winning anything on the continent; in fact, this Busby Babe side was the first to try their hand at it.

And try they did.

Their first match?

Belgium champions Anderlecht

Prior to the first match in Belgium, the English FA had sent a letter to the offices of Manchester United, formally requesting that they not participate in the European Cup due to “clashing with league fixtures” and that “it is not in the best interests of the league as a whole.”

Walter Crickmer, Manchester United’s club secretary, responded in swift fashion, stating to withdraw would be “impossible” and that “[Manchester United] will, in any event will make the usual payment of 4% to the league, so long as our interest in the competition continues.”

So, off the Babes took flight to represent England in their first-ever European match.

To call the first leg a walk in the park would be unfair to Anderlecht, but they were never in the same class as Matt Busby’s side.

Denis Violett opened the scoring with a stunning strike from outside the area after 25 minutes. Anderlecht held firm until the 75th minute, when David Pegg crossed for Tommy Taylor—the Smiling Executioner—to head home powerfully past Felix Week.

The return leg, played at Maine Road due to ongoing floodlight work at Old Trafford, saw United explode into life.

Four goals from Violett, three from Taylor, two from Whelan, and one from Johnny Berry. Ten goals. No reply. United’s biggest-ever win: 10–0.

Bobby Charlton—completing national service at the time—called it “unbelievable” and “quite stunning.”

Next came Borussia Dortmund, who had edged past Spora Luxembourg after a shaky 5–5 draw and a 7–0 playoff win.

United, unbeaten since Anderlecht, started strong again. Within 35 minutes, they were 3–0 up through Violet and Pegg. But Dortmund hit back with two second-half goals, and suddenly the tie looked precarious.

In the return leg at the Rote Erde, United dug in. On a pitch that resembled an ice rink, Ray Wood made two crucial early saves to keep it 0–0 and send United through.

Dortmund forward Alfred Preissler said afterwards: “In England, Manchester swamped us with incredible football. In Germany, they fought like tigers.

“They will win the European Cup.”

Manchester United’s next step in the cup would be their hardest test yet. The current Spanish champions, who had trumped both Barcelona and Real Madrid to the league title.

A team that had lost just one game at home in the past three years.

Athletic Club.

But in 1957, they weren’t even allowed to use that name.

Back in 1941, under Francisco Franco’s regime, Spanish football was subjected to a policy known as Spanishisation.

As a result, Athletic Club were renamed Athletic Bilbao, a name that stuck until 1972.

‘Athletic’ was deemed too English—and even worse, too Basque.

United wouldn’t just be facing a formidable football team—they were walking into San Mames to face a side playing with regional pride and political defiance stitched into their shirts and souls.

The journey over to Bilbao was treacherous. Duncan Edwards had been battling with an illness, and the Dakota aircraft carrying the United squad to Spain had to deal with one of the worst snowstorms the Basque Country has ever seen.

The players’ only reference for Spanish weather was the sun-soaked tourist posters they’d seen back in England at train stations.

And when the United players stepped off the plane and onto a runway—that resembled more of a strip of road than any major international airport—they were greeted with snow, ice and black skies.

“Cambara!” Eddie Coleman said as he turned and grinned at his teammates. “Just like Salford.”

If the pitch resembled an ice rink when they faced Borussia Dortmund, the San Mames resembled more of a swamp.

When German referee Albert Dusch dropped the ball onto the playing field, the ball sank into the ground. Yet with Busby concerned about getting back to England to ensure they would be ready to play Sheffield Wednesday; the match would go ahead.

The conditions suited the home side.

Bilbao, backed by 55,000 fanatical Basques, all wearing traditional black berets and clutching matching umbrellas, created a surreal scene—the stands looking more like a mythical forest than a football crowd.

It seemed United had taken the lead with just a minute on the clock. Straight from kick off, Denis Violett exploded up the pitch, beating his Basque counterparts and letting a shot fly.

His strike had power and easily beat keeper Carmelo, yet as the ball looked destined to strike the net, it got stuck in the mire and landed harmlessly on the goal line.

Carmelo, stunned, scooped it up and launched it downfield, where it fell to Ignacio Uribe. Mark Jones tried to close him down, but his legs were tangled in the viscous terrain. Uribe skipped past him and rifled the ball past Ray Wood.

With less than three minutes played, the pitch had already faltered United twice.

Violett would later recall his missed opportunity. “I shot only for the ball to stick on the mud. They went down the other end and scored!

“At half time, Matt [Busby] blamed me!”

Those opening three minutes would be the start of a nightmare for Manchester United.

Watched on by a goal-hungry Basque crowd, their appetite was fulfilled as they saw Uribe and his striker partner Jose Artetxe combined to cause havoc with the Red Devils' defence as they tore through and scored two goals, leaving Bilbao 3-0 up at halftime.

Busby, along with his Babes, were shellshocked.

The pride of the English Isles had been destroyed, and it was only half-time.

With the players sitting in the dressing room with a sullen look on their faces, they already believed they had exited the European Cup.

The shattered, mud-caked United side that had resembled boys rather than men on the pitch were completely silent. Not a single word or half-hearted jest was made between them.

Busby and his assistant Jimmy Murphy entered the room, and instead of tearing into the players—Murphy had gained a reputation for being especially callous with the squad—they gave them words of affirmation and encouraged them to remember who they were representing.

Then in the second half, United came alive.

Blazing from the first whistle, United—commanded by the great Duncan Edwards—fought their way back into the tie.

It would then be United's striker partnership to team up on the Bilbao defence.

Just three minutes after the restart, Tommy Taylor finally got the better of Bilbao's legendary defender José Luis Garay, latching onto Viollet's pass and burying it. Moments later, a clever dummy by Taylor allowed the ball to run between his legs, giving Viollet space to fire home United's second.

Within 10 minutes of the restart, the Babes found themselves within touching distance of Bilbao.

But as the game went on, it became more stretched.

United struggled for a goal, and as they pushed more players up the pitch, Bilbao smelled blood.

In the 74th minute, Armando Merodio would score from a corner, and just four minutes later, Bilbao would reclaim their three-goal lead as Artetxe scored his first of the match.

United deflated once again. Just 12 minutes of the match remained, and they were in the same position they were in at halftime.

Then came a lifeline. Billy Whelan—the Irish prodigy once courted by Brazil after a dazzling youth tournament—produced a moment of magic, scoring a wonder goal in the 85th minute to make it 5–3.

It wasn't just a goal. It was a heartbeat.

The next morning offered up another challenge for Matt Busby and his squad.

The next morning brought a new challenge. With snow still hammering the Basque Country, United had to return to England to face their next league fixture. But there were no staff to de-ice the plane—so the job fell to the players and staff themselves.

“Operation Snow Shift,” radio officer Mr. Potter called it.

“They searched for brushes, broom heads, anything that would work on the ice and snow,” wrote Archie Ledbrooke of the Daily Mail, who travelled with the team.

Eventually, the Dakota lifted off the frozen runway—barely—into near-zero visibility. The players exhaled.

But the journey wasn't done.

The plane had to make an emergency landing in Jersey to refuel. When it finally touched down in England, it did so with an ominous bump—the pilot had missed the runway.

Manchester United had made it home, with the first-hand experience of dangerous air travel.

The reaper's scythe had swung, but for now, it missed its mark.

21 days later, the second match would kick off.

Bilbao had arrived a few days earlier. They did not face the same perils that United had to face when they headed overseas.

Ferdinand Daucik, the Hungarian manager of Bilbao, oozed with charm and confidence. “No team can beat the Basque nation by three goals,” he promised in a press conference.

They had no idea what was in store.

A miracle was needed from United. But could they provide it?

The roar of 70,000 United fans echoed around Maine Road, a sound more fitting for Old Trafford than a borrowed ground. The air buzzed with a belief as raw as it was desperate.

Duncan Edwards and Jose Luis Garay greeted each other in the tunnel as they prepared to lead their men into the lion's den.

The stadium strained under the pressure, creaking with the thunder of chants reportedly heard over 20 miles away. Cigarette smoke hung thick in the air, cloaking the pitch in a ghostly mist. A light drizzle fell from the heavens, mixing with the thin scattering of snow and turning the turf into a churn of grass, mud, and slush.

A nervous energy gripped the stands as supporters waited for the players to emerge. Then, at 8:20 pm, the teams stepped out to a deafening ovation—flashes bursting from all sides as photographers captured the moment, fans roaring them onto the pitch.

The crowd rose like a wave as the Babes took their places, the soft drizzle turning into a heavy rain, dampening hair and soaking through socks.

As the Babes did their final stretches before kick off—their red shirts clashing with the grey Manchester night—thousands of fans in the stadium offered a final prayer to help aid their heroes on the pitch to salvation.

Busby had invited tens of priests who adorned the rows of the stadium. Never afraid to call on the almighty, the players were hoping for a miracle.

As soon as Taylor nudged the ball to Whelan, all hell broke loose.

Bilbao had never seen anything like it.

Eleven rising stars in world football surged forward, ready to take this match to the wire. Tommy Taylor, the talisman, dragged his teammates with him—kicking and screaming to his level.

His duel with Jose Luis Garay, Bilbao's defensive colossus, was just getting started.

It would only take United 10 minutes to open the floodgates. As Taylor took command of a ball, he played the perfect pass to his strike partner Violet, who made no mistake in scoring.

Yet it would be dismay for United. As Violet wheeled off celebrating, referee Dusch had seen the linesman raise his flag for offside.

United were brought back down to Earth.

But the Babes would remain in control of the match.

As the first half progressed, Bilbao seemed to be buckling under the constant pressure, and an opening seemed imminent.

And that opening would not take long to come.

This time, it would be Johnny Berry who found Violett, who once again made no mistake in scoring.

But as Violett started to celebrate, the linesman would once again raise his flag to the dismay of the United players.

With 70,000 Mancunians screaming for blood, Busby had the goal of calming his players down to ensure they did not become irate and lose their heads. “Settle down boys” he screamed from the touchline, which was instantly drowned out by the wall of noise inside the stadium.

United carried on their relentless attack, and Garay would have felt like it was he alone against the battering ram that was the Babes. And as the half was drawing to an end, it seemed he had done the perfect job in keeping his counterparts from scoring.

Then Duncan Edwards, with four minutes left on the clock, let a shot fly from just outside the box. Canelo would originally make a great save, but the ball fell straight to Violett, and for the third time in the match, he made no mistake in scoring.

A glance at the linesman showed that he was unmoved. United had finally arrived.

This time, it would be the sunken heads of the Bilbao players that went into the dressing room shellshocked. Despite conceding just one goal, their defence had been reduced to tatters. Like an old sock, a rottweiler had gotten hold of.

There were gaping holes all over the pitch. The Babes were flooding in.

Bobby Charlton—who was present in the stadium but not on the pitch—remembers Busby telling the squad to “not panic” and “make your passes and do your running,” but above all, “keep your patience.”

However, it was Bilbao who came out of the blocks rampant. Artetxe dispossessed Eddie Coleman and advanced. He then magically rounded Ray Wood before shooting at an open goal.

Artetxe looked on at the near-certain equalizer, but from nowhere, captain fantastic Roger Byrne dived with an outstretched leg, denying a goal that seemed inevitable.

Sensing danger, Busby urged his players back up the pitch to level the game. The next 20 minutes were a flurry of action from the boys in red, and without Garay and Camelo, Bilbao would have certainly been three or four goals down.

And then came the equaliser.

In the 70th minute, David Pegg picked up the ball and surged down the left flank, delivering one of his trademark crosses into the box.

Taylor—closely shackled by Garay like glue to paper—finally broke free of his Basque chains, powering through like a bat out of hell to meet the ball and bury it past Carmelo.

As the net rippled, jubilation erupted. Fathers hugged sons, strangers embraced, and thousands of United fans exploded into pure, unfiltered celebration.

United had drawn level. Twenty minutes remained. Bilbao were wounded. Taylor could smell blood.

His flawless movement on the ball and his beautiful first touch allowed him to run rings around his adversaries.

Despite Garay's pedigree, Taylor was untouchable. His first touch was velvet, his movement unstoppable. Then Spanish centre-back had never been beaten this badly in a match, but the feet of the smiling executioner were about to finish him off.

In the 75th minute, Taylor danced past Canito and surged into the box. The crowd screamed for him to shoot—but Taylor waited, composed, and squared it to Berry, free in the area.

Silence.

The sound inside Maine Road dropped to that of a muted mouse.

A bead of sweat ran down Taylor's face. Berry focused.

Bang.

The strike was pure. A bullet.

The stadium detonated. United had completed the comeback. They had done what no team had ever done before in Europe—overcome a two-goal first-leg deficit.

Bilbao threw everything forward. It wasn't enough.

When the final whistle blew, players dropped to the pitch. Exhausted. Drained. Triumphant.

The adrenaline had gone, and it was replaced with pure emotion.

The newspapers that were published the next day were overjoyed with United's performance. "The greatest football match I have ever seen." George Follis of the Daily Herald described it. "The greatest crowd and the greatest centre-forward display, I have ever seen."

Archie Ledbrooke called it "the match of the century", and Henry Rose said it was "the greatest soccer match of all time."

At the post-match banquet, which both sides attended, Jose Garay pulled Taylor aside and had a short conversation before embracing him. Then, while people were eating, Garay made a toast where he stated, "Tommy Taylor is the greatest centre-forward I have ever played against."

Taylor had spearheaded his side to one of the most iconic nights in European history. Never had a side beaten the Basque Country. like that.

The dream of the Babes winning the cup would never come to fruition. They faced champions Real Madrid in a heated battle where Madrid came out on top.

And then a year on from their historic win against Bilbao, eight of the players who started would tragically die in the Munich air disaster.

But they live on.

Their legacy is not in silverware but in memory. In song. Their lives immortalised.

Every time Manchester United fans roar out one of their iconic chants, those eight players roar with them.

All quotes and story sourced through John Ludden. You can buy his new book here -

https://www.amazon.co.uk/BALLAD-BASQUE-Manchester-Athletico-European/dp/B0F6729MYT/ref=sr_1_1?dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.wl-0WNltRa2jkJPtQcFaSi53okcm8r5pSghonrKZnRqXgRBVgGvEiGYLZHzoK8oR9y7NkR4LAUu3hMAyC-UgzQRSeT6Rr_mf_0zxhifNR1QPNBomSruH8mWPTv9DVo-nJPi9IAmLnxCMJalocIFJUCGHG6-7W7rqLGtWJvBDACRU_ezKLJNy7buV1B8CsOZK3Zt_Y_P1YcrEB82xRGhXgwRE-FWmubNYUqhgJYRo7E.MSUWr_Rg0HaYHFHTxgkV0-MR_1CE2isiHaBrsiOl34Y&dib_tag=se&qid=1746709357&refinements=p_27%3AJohn+Ludden&s=books&sr=1-1