

40

Rafa had more outings last season than ever before, racking up 40 in all. Only four players featured more in 2012/13

DEFENDERS

2. Rafael

Born Rio de Janeiro, Brazil **Age** 23
Appearances 116(15) **Goals** 5

Much like David De Gea, Rafael had a season to remember in 2012/13 as he crossed over from promising youngster to essential first-teamer. The Brazilian is the epitome of the modern full-back: roving forward as an extra attacker to overload opposition defences, yet mindful of his role in protecting the flanks and his centre-halves. Rafa's pace and boundless energy allow him to control the right wing from back to front and after two belting strikes against Liverpool and QPR, you can be on him eyeing up the top corner as soon as he overcomes a hamstring injury.

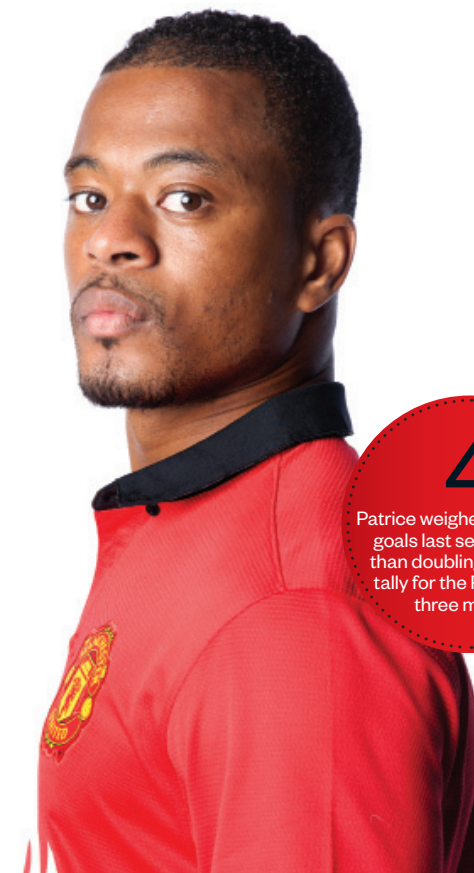


MEN ON A MISSION

3. Patrice Evra

Born Dakar, Senegal **Age** 32
Appearances 314(21) **Goals** 7

There's been little debate over United's left-back position in recent years. For six seasons running, Patrice Evra has notched up more than 40 appearances in all competitions, and last term he even added goals to his game, often appearing unnoticed at set-pieces as defenders marked the more obvious towering targets. Now 32, he has a bucketload of top-level experience, remains hugely popular in the dressing room and the Old Trafford stands and will doubtless be happy to take the captain's armband again if required in 2013/14.



4

Patrice weighed in with four goals last season, more than doubling his overall tally for the Reds inside three months

4. Phil Jones

Born Preston, England **Age** 21
Appearances 55(11) **Goals** 2

No-one thrives in the heat of battle quite like Phil Jones. He runs at the opposition as if with bayonet fixed and hurls himself into defensive manoeuvres with little thought for his own safety. That's not to say, though, that he isn't blessed with considerable footballing skills – he can go past players with real dynamism, while his deceptive turn of pace and good reading of the game are the prime assets for a centre-half. Under new management, it'll be fascinating to see where his role evolves at United. Full-back, centre-back, midfielder: he can play them all, but Jones is no mere utility player. He has the potential – as noted by such sage commentators as Sir Bobby Charlton – to be as good as any English player of any era.

16

Injuries limited Phil to 16 starts in the Premier League and Champions League last term, but his run-in form was very impressive



5. Rio Ferdinand

Born London, England **Age** 34
Appearances 423(9) **Goals** 8

His testimonial has been marked, but it's certainly not time yet to wave farewell to the longest-serving defender in the United squad. His quality and consistency in 2012/13 moved Sir Alex to call it "his best season at the club" – at the age of 34. He retains the unflappable, ball-playing composure that has long been his hallmark (and which rubs off on his defensive cohorts), and always seems to be in the right place, snuffing out threats and putting out fires. A contract extension keeps him at the club at least until next summer, but who knows? He's got five years on Ryan Giggs...



33

Rio chose his 33rd outing of last season to score his first goal of the campaign – a match-winning belter against Swansea

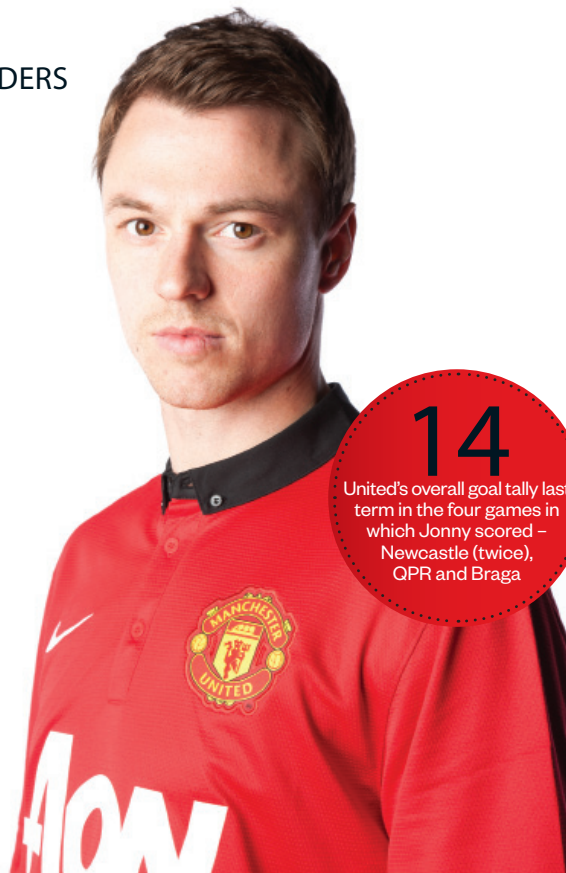
DEFENDERS

MEN
ON A
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6. Jonny Evans

Born Belfast, Northern Ireland **Age** 25
Appearances 140(16) **Goals** 5

No longer the apprentice, Jonny Evans is now one of the senior pros in the defensive group and his displays in last season's title win underline that fact. In essence he has developed his game to bear similar characteristics to both his senior peers: seriously powerful in the air and the tackle in the manner of Vida, yet with the anticipation, ball control and eye for a pass of Rio. All in all it gives the new manager a welcome headache in deploying his forces in the centre of defence – with Jonny at his disposal, David Moyes has a centre-half equipped at the very highest level.



14

United's overall goal tally last term in the four games in which Jonny scored – Newcastle (twice), QPR and Braga

DEFENDERS

15. Nemanja Vidic

Born Uzice, Serbia **Age** 31
Appearances 259(8) **Goals** 19

The club captain's importance to United's defensive ramparts is evident from a before-and-after comparison of last season's goals against column. After his September injury, United conceded 22 goals in the 14 league games to Boxing Day from which Vidic was absent. In Vida's next 13 league games to the end of the season we conceded a mere seven. His knee worries of recent campaigns have hopefully now passed, and we can anticipate a season of granite durability from the Reds' Serbian rock. Vida's presence will be vital as the first shots of the title race are fired.



72

Vida's 267 outings for United take him to 72nd in the Reds' all-time list – an injury-free campaign may push him into the top 60.

12. Chris Smalling

Born Greenwich, London
Age 23 **Appearances** 63(23) **Goals** 3

Chris had a rotten time with injuries last season and will be hoping for a long spell off the treatment table as the 2013/14 campaign kicks off. When fit and firing he's shown himself as a classy defensive asset, principally at centre-half or alternatively at full-back (for club and country), giving his manager a viable option against the teams in which there is a clear aerial threat.



15

A broken metatarsal kept Chris out until November, after which he clocked up 15 Premier League outings for the Reds

22. Fabio

Born Rio de Janeiro, Brazil **Age** 23
Appearances 36(17) **Goals** 2

After a season-long loan at QPR, Fabio need look no further for inspiration than his twin brother Rafael, who has emerged as first-choice right-back in United's strongest defence. Fabio has the skills to prosper likewise – he started the 2011 Champions League final and will be determined to hit those heights again.



23

Fabio made up a total of 23 appearances for QPR while at Loftus Road on loan, scoring once in the FA Cup

28. Alexander Büttner

Born Doetinchem, Netherlands **Age** 24
Appearances 12(1) **Goals** 2

Büttner was an under-the-radar signing from Dutch club Vitesse Arnhem last summer but has provided energetic left-back cover with some eye-catching performances, notably with a mazy run and goal on his debut against Wigan at Old Trafford. The Reds' young Dutch defender loves to attack, so look out for his surging runs on the left flank.



14

Seems it's goals galore when Alex scores – his two strikes for the Reds came in a 4-0 win over Wigan and a 5-5 draw with West Brom