

# Carry on, Fergie

There is little point in telling him to relax, says Houllier

By JOHN EDWARDS and NEIL MOXLEY

**G**ERARD Houllier believes Sir Alex Ferguson is right to carry on as normal following his heart scare and has revealed why retirement would not be an option for the Manchester United manager.

Houllier almost paid the ultimate price for his dedication to the Liverpool cause two years ago when he was taken ill midway through a home match against Leeds and rushed to hospital for 11 hours of life-saving surgery on a ruptured aorta.

Ferguson was one of the first to visit the Frenchman as he began a recovery that kept him out of football



## The treatment

SIR ALEX'S condition is supraventricular tachycardia — a heart rhythm disturbance caused by rapid electrical activity in the atria, or upper heart. It can be triggered by stress or even too much coffee. It is uncomfortable but not life-threatening and fairly common. He would have had an electrocardiogram to ensure there were no other previously undetected heart problems, then undergone a procedure, under anaesthetic, known as cardio version. A mild electrical charge is applied to the chest to switch the heartbeat back to normal.

## The tests

- FIRST, a manager's blood fats are measured, along with his body composition.
- They undergo a cardiogram and are asked about family history in a detailed questionnaire.
- They are pushed to the edge of physical exhaustion on gym equipment and their recovery times are then assessed.
- A lifestyle evaluation is made from the results.
- Medics then offer advice or take counter-active measures, such as nutritional changes.

## High-risk managers

**GRAEME SOUNESS:** Had triple heart bypass operation 24 hours after Liverpool's FA Cup semi-final against Portsmouth in 1992.

**JOE KINNEAR:** Suffered heart attack before Wimbledon's match at Sheffield Wednesday in 1999. Stepped down but later returned at Luton.

**GERARD HOULLIER:** Underwent a life-saving

six months and the bond between them was evident as Houllier explained why his great rival would carry on at Old Trafford and accept the offer of a new four-year contract.

'I was surprised by the news about Alex and I want to take the opportunity to send him my best wishes for a full and speedy recovery,' said the Liverpool manager.

'I will be contacting him in due course, but there is not much I can give him by way of advice. It would be no use trying to tell him to relax and

## You don't get any warning

take his foot off the pedal a bit, because in this job that is not possible. It is such a high-intensity, high-pressure occupation in so many ways and when you work so hard with that sort of pressure constantly at hand, you just don't know what it is doing to you.

'In my experience, you don't get any warning with something like this and I imagine that would be the case with Alex. There are health checks for managers these days, of course, but you don't always know what is going on inside your body and it can catch you out very suddenly.

'He was thinking of retirement before realising just how much he enjoyed the job and deciding he couldn't do without it. But the problem is, are you going to be any healthier if you retire? There is suddenly this huge void in your life and that can be even more detrimental. I'm not sure you would be better off at all.

'There is no easy answer, really, because it is very difficult trying to cut back on your duties. You can't suddenly say you are only going to work 50 per cent as hard as before. You just can't do it in this game.

'I was here at Melwood at 8.30am yesterday, the day after our night match with Bolton, and I didn't leave until 8.30pm.'

Ferguson and Houllier's heart problems are not isolated cases. One third of managers working at professional football clubs could be putting their



Happy days: Houllier and Ferguson relaxing at a recent function *Picture: DAVID LONG*

lives at serious risk, simply by doing their jobs. Research has shown that the modern-day manager is gambling with his future by failing to attend a specialist programme that flagged up the Manchester United chief's condition.

Backed jointly by the League Managers' Association and the Professional Footballers' Association, managers are put through a series of tests at the adidas Wellness Centre in Stockport.

These take the form of both physical examination — using some of the £500,000 equipment housed at the centre — and questions relating to lifestyle and family background.

But so far only just over half of the 92 League managers have enrolled. The results do not make encouraging reading.

'The *Fit to Manage* programme has been a tremendous success,' said Dr Dorian Dugmore, a leading cardiovascular specialist.

'After we have tested the managers, we make lifestyle evaluations. It could be as simple as cutting down alcohol intake or changing diet.

'But it could be slightly more problematical, like Sir Alex Ferguson, or even more serious than that.

'We have just tested our 50th manager and I would say that of those we have seen, one-third of them are fine. Another one-third need to make some modification to their lifestyle. The last third have issues — some of those are serious — and could well manifest themselves somewhere down the line.

'I am not a prophet. It could be that these people are fine tomorrow, or next month, or next year. But there are matters that need addressing.

'When we did a television experiment involving Dave Bassett and Sam Allardyce, we found that their stress levels were comparable with being

pushed past their levels of physical exhaustion. This is happening between 40 and 50 times a season. If you have a long career in management, there could be a cumulative effect on the heart.'

Bassett, now Leicester City's director of football, has adhered to the principles laid down by Dr Dugmore in the wake of the revelations about his stress levels.

He said: 'While I was on the treadmill they discovered I had an irregular heartbeat. That in itself is quite common, so I'm led to believe, but I would not have known about it had I not been to the centre. I've been back three times since it was first discovered and I am sticking to the changes that they recommended. If

## Apologised for his goading

someone decides to give you a warning like that, it's best you listen.'

Sentiment will play little part in Aston Villa manager David O'Leary's plans as he takes his struggling team to Old Trafford today.

O'Leary has apologised for repeatedly goading Ferguson during the days when the Irishman was in charge at Leeds United, but he maintains he still wants to pull off a shock result against his rival today.

He said: 'I'm disappointed with myself in how it turned out when I was at Leeds.

'I got influenced by things I should not have done — the whole thing between those two clubs which ended up being Alex Ferguson versus David O'Leary. But I'm much more mature now and I wouldn't allow it to happen again.'

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Underwent 11 hours of life-saving heart surgery in 2001 after being taken ill at half-time of a Liverpool match. Back in dug-out after six months' recuperation. DARIO GRADI: Crewe manager had heart valve replaced in September. Back at work in October.

# I want Sir Alex fit, says Wenger

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his allegations. Ferguson is due back at Cheadle's private Alexandra Hospital in a month for a check-up following treatment on Thursday to correct a 'minor' heartbeat irregularity that doctors discovered two months ago.

But after missing training yesterday, a rare event as his team prepared to face Aston Villa at home today, he said: 'I feel good, there's nothing wrong with me. I've had the treatment and now it's back to normal. There are no concerns.

'It's an irregular heartbeat. Half a million people in Britain have the problem. I've spoken to David Gill and he understands. There's no problem at all.

'I'm not re-thinking a thing. Why should I? I've always handled the pressure well. 'People don't realise it's a straightforward two-minute treatment.'

Among the many get-well

messages was one from arch-rival Arsene Wenger, the Arsenal manager, who said he would rather pit his wits against a fit Sir Alex than a retired one.

Wenger said: 'I want Alex Ferguson to be competitive, sharp and up for it. That's what makes it interesting for us.

'I was surprised when I heard about him. But from what I hear it is a minor problem. You want to win but that's not why you want people to be sick. I wish him very well and hope he is fully fit and ready to go for his game this weekend.'

Wenger, whose team are at Leicester today, says his tip for good health is to follow the same fitness regime as the players.

'You have to live like a football player,' he said. 'It's the only way to survive because you cannot be fully concentrated and up for every game if you go out and don't sleep and don't prepare.'