

## Duncan Ferguson: 'I might try the vegan burger on Saturday if we win'

Interview

Will Unwin

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Duncan Ferguson pictured last weekend at his first match as manager of Forest Green

*Forest Green's new manager on why Everton should have stuck with him, hopes for a Real Madrid friendly and the environment*

Duncan Ferguson is synonymous with Everton and wherever he goes he takes a little bit of the club with him in the form of a tattoo on his arm. The ink is barely dry on his five-year Forest Green contract but he is already hoping to add the crest to his body. "Staying up could get a tattoo but if we get into the Championship, then definitely," Ferguson says.

After two decades at Goodison Park as a player and coach he is starting his managerial career at League One's bottom club aged 51. Ferguson came close to getting jobs at Blackburn and Middlesbrough but has had to drop to the third tier to find an owner willing to trust him. The former Scotland striker received

the call from Dale Vince in the middle of last week and drove down the next morning from Formby via “15 wrong turns” to sign the deal.

“When I first met the owner and saw his passion and enthusiasm for the club and what he was doing that certainly went a long way to making my mind up,” Ferguson says from a manager’s office equipped with many items hoarded from his time at Everton. “On top of that it was a start for me on my managerial journey. Feeling wanted was a big one for me. And I thought: ‘Why not take this challenge?’”



Duncan Ferguson with Forest Green’s owner, Dale Vince

Many believe Ferguson’s first manager’s job should have been at Everton, a club he says “will always be a part of me”. He had two caretaker spells but was overlooked before Frank Lampard’s appointment last January. “I think they should have considered me to take the team until the end of the season,” Ferguson says. “I said that from day one. I still believe that should have been the case. People in football have suggested that would have been the best move for them to do but at the end of the day they do their own thing and good luck to them.”

Instead, he has had to wait his turn. He was linked with Everton again after Lampard’s recent sacking but missed out. “I would suggest I have the most

experience in the country and my CV would be better than anybody's at this stage of my career going into my first job," Ferguson says. "I am confident in saying that. I have worked under two Champions League winning managers, the Belgium national manager, Dutch national manager, Barcelona, Real Madrid head coaches – it is endless. I did all my coaching badges 10 years ago. I've worked my way through the academy system and developed a lot of young players. I did it the hard way; I didn't cut any corners. As you can see now, I am still not cutting any corners."

One of those Champions League winners was Carlo Ancelotti, who respected Ferguson's opinion. The two remain close and Ferguson recently visited his former boss at Real Madrid. "I saw all my exercises on the training ground. Him and his son [assistant coach Davide] are like magpies – they've taken all my exercises," Ferguson jokes. "I've worked with Carlo a great deal. He is cool, he is calm, he is decisive, tactically he is very good. I've picked up things like that from him. He is the best manager in the world: he has won four Champions Leagues; nobody can touch him."



Duncan Ferguson with Carlo Ancelotti during Everton's FA Cup tie against Spurs in February 2021

Ferguson is not the only one at Forest Green with close links to Real. Vince has been advising the club on sustainability and use of pesticides. Could this lead to a friendly at The New Lawn? “I would love that – it would be absolutely fabulous,” Ferguson says. “Why not do it over in Stroud? If there is a gap in the calendar, I am sure Carlo would facilitate that.”

Forest Green are known for their environmental initiatives with an all-vegan menu and plans for a stadium made of wood. Ferguson is adapting to his surroundings and eager to learn about improvements he can make to help limit the impact of the climate crisis.

There is a relaxed nature to Ferguson, who is happy to mix between jokes, football and the environment. Forest Green is a club he can mould on the pitch in a design he has been plotting for more than a decade, even if he will need to adapt slightly off it.

“I didn’t do much research but I knew about the club and what they were all about because I’d seen bits on the television, the green issue, the environment, the vegan burgers and sausages. I saw the owner telling stories. When I met the man [Vince], he showed me the new training ground, the new plans he has for the stadium, so it was impressive.

“I think the vegan food is quite nice – I enjoy it. Chips are vegan, I didn’t know that. It is a worry with the planet. It is a shame what is happening: you can see it is happening and we are all starting to be aware of it. What is going to happen to our kids and grandkids? It’s real. The club has been great, it is fantastic what they are doing. Other clubs should be taking it up.” What’s his favourite on the menu? “I had a wee bit of vegan curry, a wee pie and mash today. I haven’t tried the burger yet. I might try one on Saturday if we get a victory.”

Ferguson has a fantastic rapport with the Everton fans thanks to his full-throttle nature as a player, passion for the club and commitment to the community. He took a young fan out for lunch as reward for improved school results after a promise from Ferguson in a video that went viral. “I’ve always been close to the fans and I will just be as close to the fans in Stroud,” Ferguson says. “Believe me, if there are any requests, I will fulfil that and if they get good exam results I probably will take them for a bit of lunch. I am a people’s guy, I respect the club,

I respect the fans. I will do a good job for them and as much as I can in the community. It would be a pleasure.”



Duncan Ferguson tries to find a way through Emmanuel Petit and Tony Adams during Everton's game at Arsenal in May 1998.

It looked as if Ferguson would win his first game when Forest Green led going into injury-time at Shrewsbury, only to concede in the 94th and 98th minute. It is a tough job Ferguson has taken on, managing a team who are four points from a safe position and have played more games than their relegation rivals. Only one player was brought in on deadline day when three would have been ideal.

Forest Green welcome Peterborough for Ferguson's first home match on Saturday as he looks to kickstart the charge for survival. "Staying in the division is massive for us," he says. "It is going to be a tough ask but one we can do. The owner's dream is to get into the Championship. I know it seems a long way off at the moment but we have got to dream."