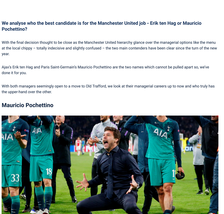
FEATURE

Erik ten Hag vs Mauricio Pochettino: Who will be Manchester United's next manager?

JOE TUDOR 04 APRIL 2022 7:00AM



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We analyse who the best candidate is for the Manchester United job – Erik ten Hag or Mauricio Pochettino?

With the final decision thought to be close as the Manchester United hierarchy glance over the managerial options like the menu at the local chippy – totally indecisive and slightly confused – the Red Devils have now been clear since the turn of the new year.

Ajax's Erik ten Hag and Paris Saint-Germain's Mauricio Pochettino are the two names which cannot be pulled apart so, we've done it for you.

With both managers seemingly open to a move to Old Trafford, we look at their managerial careers up to now and who truly has the upper-hand over the other.

Mauricio Pochettino

The Argentine has been linked with Manchester United ever since his departure from Tottenham in 2019 after finding his side in 14th position – just months after guiding Spurs to their first ever Champions League final.

Pochettino is seen as the direct competitor to Erik ten Hag to be the next Manchester United manager. The Argentine's philosophy as a manager is overseeing the rise of young talent such as Harry Kane, Dele Alli and Son Heung-min while playing an attractive, expansive style through high pressing – particularly with Tottenham – to a key element in United's interest.

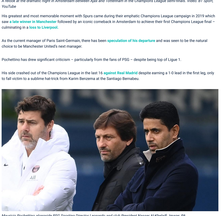
After replacing Tim Sherwood in 2014, Pochettino transformed the recruitment and mentality to one which was admired by many

> **YOU NEVER SEE HIM DISTRAUGHT AND THE WAY HE TEAM PLAY IS A TESTIMONY TO THE WORK HE IS DOING. HE UNDERSTANDS THE ADVANTAGE OF PLAYING YOUNG PEOPLE**
>
> *Dr Alex Ferguson on Mauricio Pochettino in 2018 on Manchester Evening News*

Within five years, Pochettino took Spurs from also-ears to contenders.

Despite leaving Spurs trophyless, he brought the club from the wilderness of the Premier League to genuine title challengers, with the closest coming in the 2016/17 season where Spurs achieved their highest ever Premier League points tall – achieving 86 – alongside scoring the most goals in the league and conceding the least.

Though it was not enough to overcome the new Tottenham manager Antonio Conte and his former Chelsea side who won the title by seven points, it demonstrated a shift in mentality and finally placed Tottenham in the conversation amongst the teams at the top – which was a far cry prior to his arrival.



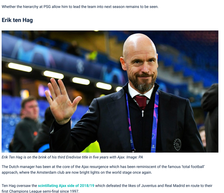
A redcat at the dramatic night in Amsterdam between Ajax and Tottenham in the Champions League semi-finals. Video: BT Sport, YouTube

His greatest and most memorable moment with Spurs came during their emphatic Champions League campaign in 2019 which saw a late winner in Manchester followed by an iconic comeback in Amsterdam to achieve their first Champions League final – culminating in a loss to Liverpool.

As the current manager of Paris Saint-Germain, there has been speculation of his departure and was seen to be the natural choice to be Manchester United's next manager.

Pochettino has done significant criticism – particularly from the fans of PSG – despite being top of Ligue 1.

His side crashed out of the Champions League in the last 16 against Real Madrid despite earning a 1-0 lead in the first leg, only to fall victim to a sublime hat-trick from Karim Benzema at the Santiago Bernabeu.



Mauricio Pochettino alongside PSG Sporting Director Leonardo and club President Nasser Al-Khelaifi. Image: PA

The subsequent week, both Neymar and Lionel Messi were subject to whistles and boos from the Paris Saint-Germain home fans, who have called for mass changes at the top which include President Nasser Al-Khelaifi and Sporting Director Leonardo.

> **HOW CAN A COACH (MAURICIO POCHETTINO) BE THE RESPECTED BOSS OF THE CHANGING ROOM WHEN HE IS MANIFESTLY NOT THE TRUE DECISION MAKER?**
>
> *Statement from PSG ultras group 'Collectif Ultras Paris' following their exit from the Champions League. Source: GFFN*

With Pochettino's contract running until June 2023, he is thought be attainable given the current unrest at PSG, though he may opt against becoming the next Manchester United manager should he feel that he is the man to secure European glory for the Parisians.

Whether the hierarchy at PSG allow him to lead the team into next season remains to be seen.

Erik ten Hag

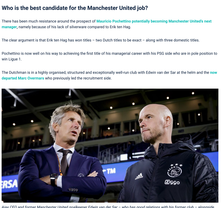
Erik Ten Hag is on the brink of his third Eredivisie title in five years with Ajax. Image: PA

The Dutch manager has been at the core of the Ajax resurgence which has been reminiscent of the famous 'total football' approach, where the Amsterdam club are now bright lights on the world stage once again.

Ten Hag oversaw the scintillating Ajax side of 2018/19 which defeated the likes of Juventus and Real Madrid en route to their first Champions League semi-final since 1997.

After a five year wait for the Eredivisie title, it was ten Hag who guided Ajax to back-to-back titles in 2019 and 2021 (2020 campaign cancelled due to COVID-19).

The crop of young talent making their name on the world stage was overwhelming. The likes of Frenkie de Jong, Matthijs de Ligt and Donny van de Beek – all of whom earned big money moves to the largest clubs in Europe – were synbiotic of what ten Hag had birthed at Ajax.



Former club captain Matthijs de Ligt celebrates his sides incredible victory in Turin following their match against Juventus. Image: PA

Ten Hag has rebuilt two Ajax sides, namely the Champions League semi-finalists which got ripped apart and rebuilt with the likes of Antony, Sebastien Haller and Ryan Gravenbeck – who looks set to join Bayern Munich in the summer.

The growth in young talent under the Dutchman has been nothing short of exceptional, though the high-level recruitment and development of Ajax's youth as well as the time allowed to progress these players into the first team, may be met with more difficulty at Manchester United.

As the longest-serving Ajax manager since Louis van Gaal, the Dutchman is building a lasting legacy in Amsterdam having won two Eredivisie titles and signed a contract extension until the summer of 2023 last year.

Ajax are currently enjoying an impressive campaign so far, scoring 60 goals and conceding just 13 in their 27 league games, though were disappointingly knocked out of the Champions League in the last 16 against Benfica.

> **WITH THE TEAMS MY TEAM IS PLAYING IN... AT A CERTAIN STAGE DURING THE GAME THE OPPONENT WILL FEEL FORCHED. EVEN WITH A 5-0 BEHIND, THEY GOT AWAY WITH IT.**
>
> *Erik ten Hag following Ajax's 5-0 victory over FC Twente. Source: Fcdaily*

Impressively, ten Hag has only lost one away game out of 17 in the Champions League as Ajax manager with the only defeat coming against Liverpool in 2020.

With the departure of the Ajax Sporting Director Marc Overmars, who worked closely with ten Hag, all indications suggest he has ran his course in Amsterdam.

If Manchester United came knocking however, the Ajax boss is thought to be "100% interested" in becoming the next Manchester United manager according to Sky Sports – although may be seen as the biggest gamble of the two.

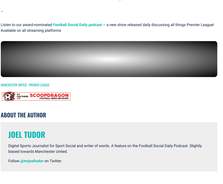
Who is the best candidate for the Manchester United job?

There has been much resistance around the prospect of Mauricio Pochettino potentially becoming Manchester United's next manager, namely because of his lack of silverware compared to Erik ten Hag.

The clear argument is that Erik ten Hag has won titles – two Dutch titles to be exact – along with three domestic titles.

Pochettino is now well on his way to achieving the first title of his managerial career with his PSG side who are in pole position to win Ligue 1.

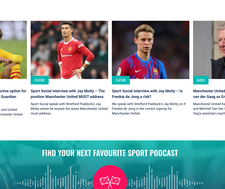
The Dutchman is in a highly organised, structured and exceptionally well-run club with Edwin van der Sar at the helm and the now departed Marc Overmars who previously led the recruitment side.



Ajax CEO and former Manchester United goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar – who has good relations with his former club – alongside Erik ten Hag. Image: PA

As well as Ajax having the largest budget in the Netherlands, would it be wrong to suggest that Mauricio Pochettino couldn't have done a similar job and wore titles had he been in the Ajax hot seat?

For Pochettino to take Tottenham Hotspur to a Champions League final – despite not spending a single penny in the summer price – and defeat Ten Hag's Ajax side in the semi-finals, is an achievement which shouldn't be taken lightly.



The total amount spent by Mauricio Pochettino during his five years at the club. Image: Sky Sports

Despite the Argentine's inability to bring silverware to Spurs, he paved the way for the club to be contenders and be in the conversation amongst the bigger clubs which is as much of a feat as Ten Hag's ability to develop and build exciting sides who are competitive, and still win trophies.

The Ajax manager's distinct ability to develop young players, rebuild teams who remain competitive and play a strikingly attractive style of football are all indicators that he could be a favourite to be the next Manchester United manager.

Whether the next Manchester United manager is Erik ten Hag or Mauricio Pochettino, both would be a step in the right direction for a club which has been without it since the retirement of Sir Alex Ferguson.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOEL TUDOR

Digital Sports Journalist for Sport Social and writer of words. A feature on the Football Social Daily Podcast. Slightly biased towards Manchester United.

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