

Best: Football's Van Gogh

REUTERS, London

top division when he was 17 and within a year playing his first international for Northern Ireland.

Best's artistry was undeniable. His ball control and balance was bewitching and his frail appearance belied an ability to produce a strong tackle and a powerful shot.

While primarily a creator of chances, his goal tally of 136 in 361 league games for United demonstrated a deadly touch. He once scored six goals in an FA Cup tie against Northampton Town and was United's top scorer five seasons in succession.

Best, England's Bobby Charlton and Scotland's Denis Law -- perhaps the most talented combination in the history of English soccer -- took United to the top of the European game. Best's greatest moments came in European Cup campaigns.

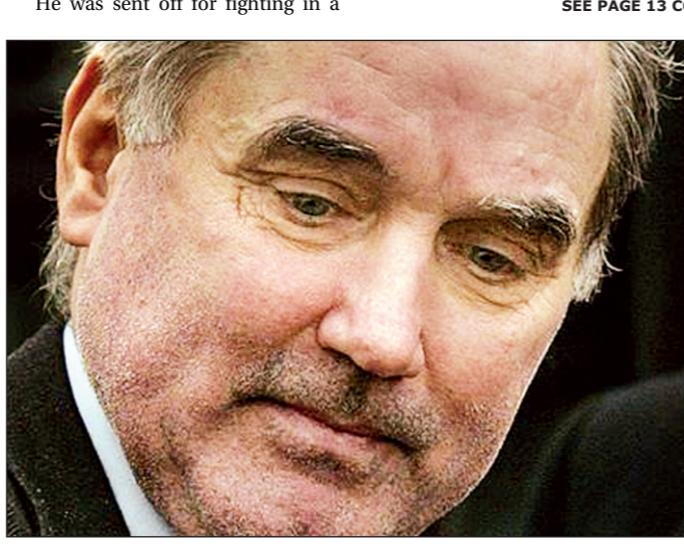
He scored twice in a 5-1 quarter-final defeat of Benfica at Lisbon's Stadium of Light in March 1966.

Two years later he scored a brilliant solo goal in United's 4-1 victory over Benfica in the final at Wembley which brought Europe's top club prize to

England for the first time.

At that moment Best ruled the soccer world -- he was receiving 10,000 fan letters a week and employed three fulltime staff to answer them. But things quickly began to unravel.

He was sent off for fighting in a



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