

Pogba

shows importance to Man Utd

Midfielder shows just what Jose Mourinho's side have been missing with all-action return from injury

London

He does not yet share teammate Zlatan Ibrahimovic's cult status, but Paul Pogba's display on his comeback from injury showed his importance to Manchester United is second to none.

Having toiled in Pogba's absence, recently taking four points from a possible 12 in the Premier League, United rediscovered their swagger against Newcastle on Saturday when the Frenchman made his return.

With a goal and an assist in a 4-1

comeback win, Pogba was the man of the match and his overall display helped United find a level they have struggled to reach during his two-month absence.

"He affects our football," said United manager Jose Mourinho. "We all know, myself and the fellow players, that certain players influence the levels of the team. With him we have much more creation."

Though he has often dazzled with

his long-legged technical artistry, the recognition of Pogba's influence on United's play has been slow in coming.

His then world-record £89.3 million (US\$118 million) transfer from Juventus last year created huge expectations and although his first season was successful, there were few fireworks.

Pogba finished the season with nine goals in 51 appearances and winner's medals in the League Cup and Europa League, his goal in the final of the latter setting United en route to victory over Ajax.

But he could not compete with Ibrahimovic, whose goalscoring feats and larger-than-life persona immediately made him a favourite with the Old Trafford faithful.

United's fans had invented a song for Ibrahimovic – their "Swedish hero" – before he had even made his official debut.

Anthony Martial, too, is regularly serenaded, but Pogba is still waiting for an ode in his honour to take root.

With Ibrahimovic sidelined by an injury of his own, Pogba took centre-stage in the opening weeks of the current campaign as United made an impressive start to the season.

Yet it was only during the period of absence brought on by the hamstring injury Pogba sustained against Basel on September 12 that his importance began to be truly acknowledged.

"Pogba is a big miss because of his confidence and arrogance," said former United captain Gary Neville after Mourinho's men succumbed to a 1-0 defeat at Chelsea.

"He takes the ball into tight areas, holds the ball, beats a man."

Paul Scholes, meanwhile, said Pogba's unavailability explained why Romelu Lukaku had suddenly gone off the boil.

"He [Pogba] links the team together," said the former United midfielder.

"I don't think they have a good enough number 10 at the moment and that doesn't help Lukaku either. Lukaku is having to do a lot for himself, but Pogba will make the difference." With Pogba in the team,

United have scored 16 goals in five Premier League games this season, at an average of 3.2 per game.

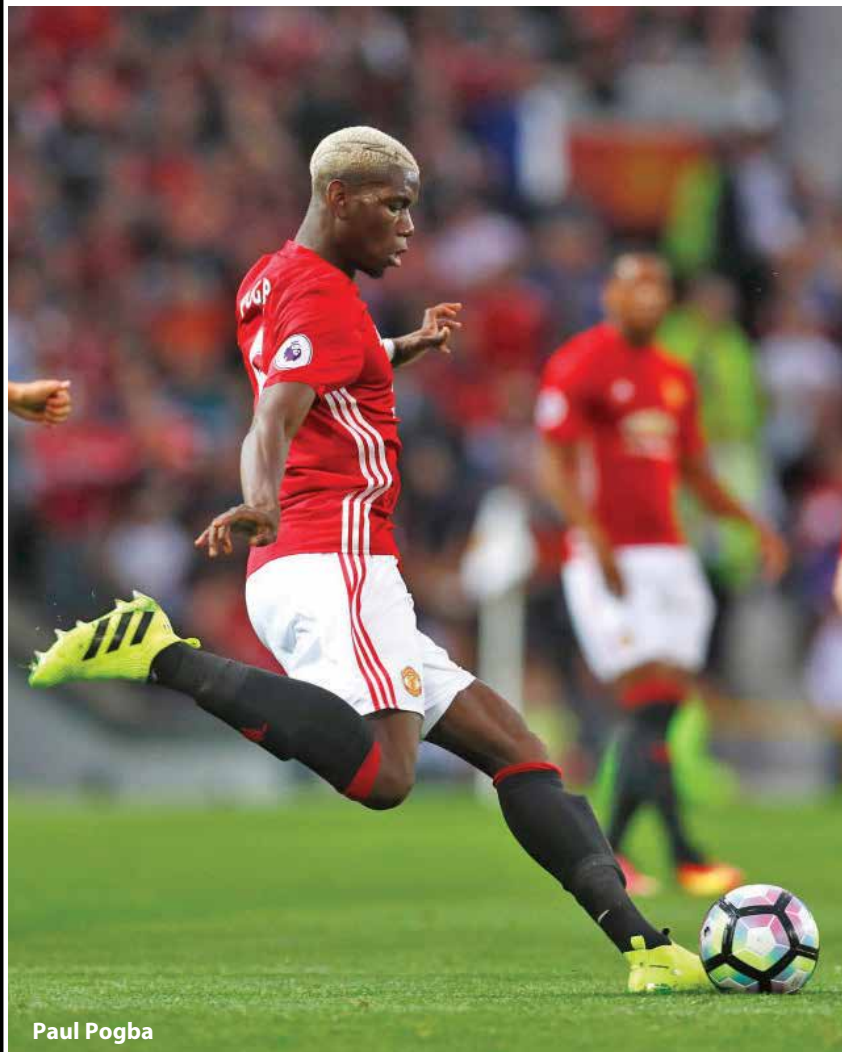
When Pogba is not playing, the average goals figure halves.

The 24-year-old has been directly responsible for eight goals in his last six league appearances – four goals, four assists – and with him and Ibrahimovic back on the scene, confidence is flooding back.

Manchester City opened up an eight-point lead over United while Pogba was convalescing, but both he and Ibrahimovic spoke optimistically about reeling in Pep Guardiola's side after Saturday's game.

While United have lost ground in the league, they have not missed a beat in the Champions League and visit Basel this week needing just a point to reach the knockout phase as group winners.

Mourinho has indicated Pogba could be rested, but whether he plays or not, his return to fitness has given United a major lift. (AFP)



Paul Pogba

