

The TOP TEN PREMIERSHIP STRIKERS

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Football is all about goals, and the men who can score them on a regular basis are priceless. They are the predators, the gunslingers and hitmen who provide the team with its cutting edge.

They usually hunt in pairs, but modern Premiership football is a squad game, with most leading clubs having at least four top class strikers and rotating selection between them match by match. Manchester United, for example, can call upon Andy Cole, Dwight Yorke, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and new signing Ruud van Nistelrooy. At Arsenal the candidates are Thierry Henry, Sylvain Wiltord, Dennis Bergkamp, Kanu and now Francis Jeffers. Liverpool have Michael Owen, Robbie Fowler, Emile Heskey and Jari Litmanen, while Leeds United boast Alan Smith, Mark Viduka, Robbie Keane and Michael Bridges.

Inevitably the squad system and rotation policy have significantly intensified competition among the best goalscorers, making selection of the Premiership's top ten strikers harder than ever.

Some, like van Nistelrooy whose pre-season form suggests he may become the most prolific marksman of them all are ineligible because they did not play in the Premiership season. In the same category, also with excellent credentials, are Fabrizio Ravanelli (Derby), Louis Saha (Fulham) and Matt Jansen (Blackburn Rovers).

And in narrowing the list down to the best ten, many high class strikers must inevitably be excluded. Kanu, Bergkamp, Wiltord, Jeffers, Cole, Yorke, Smith, Keane, Litmanen, Heskey, Gianfranco Zola, Les Ferdinand, Sergei Rebrov, Paolo Di Canio, Fredric Kanoute, Dion Dublin and Kevin Campbell all boast impressive scoring records and have strong claims to be considered among the top ten.

Sadly, however, none of these make it into the final ten. Nor does Alan Shearer who would have topped the list a few years ago but whose injury problems increasingly restrict his appearance. Duncan Ferguson probably the most effective header of the ball in the League has been similarly plagued by injury. Who then are the ten best?

- 10 **Marcus Stewart (Ipswich Town):** Ipswich's record signing when he joined for £2.5 million in February 2000, Stewart has proved to be one of the great bargains of recent years. Although he had been a prolific goalscorer in the lower divisions with Bristol Rovers and then Huddersfield, many doubted whether he would be as effective at the top level. Stewart answered the doubters emphatically by netting 21 goals in League and Cup goals during Ipswich's successful first season back among the Premiership elite. Tipped to win a place in Sven Goran Eriksson's England squad, Stewart quietly went about his business and underlined his ability to put the ball in the net in any company.
- 9 **Alen Boksic (Middlesbrough and Croatia):** Only a series of untimely injury set-backs – one of which ruled him out of Croatia's successful 1998 World Cup campaign – denied Boksic recognition as one of Europe's greatest strikers of the 1990s. Fast, with a sharp footballing brain and great technique, Boksic, now 31, was a European Cup winner with Marseille at the age of 22. He later joined Italian giants Lazio, with whom he had two spells separated by a successful season with Juventus where he won an Italian League championship medal. Injuries again affected him last season, but he showed the highest class when fit, able to unsettle any defence.
- 8 **Mark Viduka (Leeds United and Australia):** Viduka enjoyed a tremendous first season in the Premiership following his transfer from Celtic for what now looks a bargain £6 million fee. While in Glasgow he finished top scorer in the Scottish Premier League, and maintained that form last season with Leeds, for whom he scored 22 times – including all four in the 4-3 defeat of Liverpool in November. Australian-born with Croatian parents, Viduka has a deft touch for someone so powerfully built. He combines strength in the air with skill on the ground and is an expert at holding the ball up and bringing others into play.
- 7 **Kevin Phillips (Sunderland and England):** A classic penalty-box predator, the diminutive Phillips made a phenomenal impact on the Premiership in 1999-2000 following Sunderland's promotion, netting 30 times to become the league's runaway leading goalscorer and also winning Europe's Golden Boot award. Last season was a lot tougher for him, partly because his striking partner, the giant Irishman Niall Quinn, was frequently sidelined with a recurring neck injury. Phillips missed the service provided by Quinn's towering strength in the air, but nevertheless claimed a further 18 goals, taking his total to 108 since joining Sunderland from Watford in 1997. Also capable of

rifling in goals from long-range, Phillips adopts a shoot-on-sight policy and has become a local hero on Wearside.

- 6 **Ole Gunnar Solskjaer (Manchester United and Norway):** Nicknamed 'The Baby-Faced Assassin', Solskjaer has consistently lived up to that description with a marvellously consistent goals-to-games ratio. He will always be remembered for his last-gasp winner against Bayern Munich in the 1999 European Cup final, but that crucial strike was typical of his contribution, often when introduced to the action as a substitute. That priceless ability to come on and affect matches with deadly finishing has been one of United's major assets in recent years. He would walk into the first team of almost any other Premiership side, but has had to be content with a restricted role at Old Trafford. Solskjaer has nevertheless remained fiercely loyal to United, invariably delivering the goods in front of goal when called upon.

- 5 **Thierry Henry (Arsenal and France):** For blistering pace and brilliant ball skills, Henry has few peers in the modern game. A potent weapon when played in behind a defence or forcing a defender to turn, Henry in full flow is an exciting blend of speed, control and composure. The one weakness in his game is that he sometimes seems to lack the killer instinct – as was evident in the FA Cup final when he had the chance to bury Liverpool. Nevertheless, the striker who has won World Cup and European Championship winners medals with France has netted 48 times for Arsenal in 101 matches since joining the Gunners from Juventus for £11 million exactly two years ago. That's a strike-rate of almost a goal every other game. Henry netted the goal of the season against Manchester United at Highbury last October, beating international team-mate Fabien Barthez with a turn and stunning volley from the edge of the penalty area.

- 4 **Teddy Sheringham (Tottenham Hotspur and England):** Signed by Manchester United in 1997 to fill the gap left by Eric Cantona's retirement, Sheringham proved to be one of Alex Ferguson's shrewdest investments. He rejoined his former club Tottenham Hotspur this summer, after proving with United last season that at the age of 35 he is still among the cleverest footballers in the Premiership. His haul of 21 goals was his best ever at Old Trafford, and he could do even better at White Hart Lane, where the competition for first-team places will be less acute. Lack of pace has never been too much of a problem for one of the most intelligent forwards in football. Sheringham adds stealth and subtlety to any

attack, possessing the vision to create chances out of nothing and the ability to convert those chances into goals.

- 3 **Robbie Fowler (Liverpool and England):** Often described as the most natural goalscorer in English football, Fowler is the proud inheritor of the legendary Ian Rush's mantle at Anfield. A prodigious talent ever since his arrival on the scene back in 1993, he has endured a frustrating time with injuries in each of the last two seasons and has also had to contend with Gerard Houllier's rotation of his strikers. While these factors have limited his appearances, he still managed to finish the 2000-01 campaign with 17 goals to his credit – including strikes in both the Worthington (League) Cup and UEFA Cup finals. He has now scored well over 100 Premiership goals for his home-town club, and is currently negotiating an extension to his present contract with Liverpool. Hungry, clinical and with plenty of skill, Fowler also has the ability to play telling passes to his colleagues, attributes which help make him both a deadly finisher and a valuable team player.
- 2 **Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink (Chelsea and Holland):** Hasselbaink is a consummate finisher: ruthless, single-minded and with a ferocious shot. His 26 goals for Chelsea last season confirmed the power and potency of he brings to the attack – qualities first seen in England during two highly productive seasons with Leeds United. A perfectionist whose goals are rarely ordinary, Hasselbaink was the Premiership's leading goalscorer last season and produced a number of stunning strikes to underline why Chelsea paid a then British record fee of £15 million to bring him back to England after one season with Atletico Madrid.
- 1 **Michael Owen (Liverpool and Chelsea):** The Boy Wonder of English football, Owen became a global star during the 1998 World Cup in France when his brilliant goal against Argentina captivated audiences around the world. His two match-winning strikes for Liverpool against Arsenal in last May's FA Cup final enhanced his reputation and confirmed that Owen is back on top form after being plagued by niggling hamstring injuries that repeatedly disrupted his post-World Cup progress. At his best he is a class apart – breathtakingly quick, skilful and a superbly cool finisher. Despite absences through injury he scored 24 goals for Liverpool last season, as well as some crucial goals for England. Still only 21, Owen is undoubtedly one of the brightest talents to emerge for a long, long time and is seen as one of England's greatest assets in their World Cup 2002 campaign.

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