

## **BOLTON WANDERERS, BLACKBURN ROVERS & FULHAM: Premiership Newcomers Making an Impression**

In nine seasons of the Premier League, promoted clubs have immediately been relegated on 13 occasions, underlining the difficulty in making the transition from the First Division to the highest level. At the start of this season, two of the three promoted clubs – Fulham and Blackburn Rovers appeared to have what it takes in terms of financial resources and playing strength in depth to survive beyond one season in the top flight. The third, Bolton Wanderers, were widely tipped to go straight back down.

Wanderers had been promoted on two earlier occasions (1995 and 1997) but struggled and were instantly relegated both times. Having qualified last May via the play-offs, and lacking obvious strength in depth, Bolton seemed a safe bet for another quick return to Division One. What a surprise, then, that they currently lead the Premiership by two points, unbeaten after four games and already with the notable scalp of Liverpool under their belts.

Geographically, Bolton is near Manchester. And living as they do in the shadow of Manchester United, it is particularly sweet for Wanderers to achieve something that their illustrious neighbours have not yet managed despite their dazzling success. United have never collected maximum points from their first three matches; Bolton have.

To win at Leicester on day one was good, but to win by five goals was exceptional. Beating Middlesbrough at home may not have been a total surprise, but hijacking Liverpool certainly was, and it was an endorsement of the belief manager Sam Allardyce has instilled in his squad. Wanderers followed this with a creditable draw at Leeds, another of the championship contenders, confirming their position at the top and further confounding the pundits.

Realistically, they are considered unlikely to be occupying so elevated a position by the end of season; but the confidence their start has given them may ensure that they at least avoid the dreaded drop. Helping them to do just that will be players like Michael Ricketts, an opportunist striker in his second season at Bolton after joining from Walsall in 2000. He scored 19 goals in 39 appearances (15 as substitute), and already has three Premiership goals to his name.

Other leading Bolton players include the three Danes – Per Frandsen (midfield), Bo Hansen (striker) and Henrik Pedersen (striker). The club's links with Scandinavia are also reflected by Finnish goalkeeper Jussi Jaaskelainen and Icelandic captain Gudni Bergsson.

Bergsson, 36, is a qualified lawyer who postponed his return to Reykjavik to pursue a legal career in order to have another crack at the Premiership. He came to Britain in 1988 and spent six seasons with Tottenham before joining Bolton, where he has become a firm favourite, voted player of the year in each of the last two seasons.

Ex-Blackburn, Manchester City, Rangers and Coventry centre-back Colin Hendry offers additional experience in defence, while Dean Holdsworth (once of Wimbledon) and young Kevin Nolan (two goals against Leicester) provide further attacking options.

Manager Allardyce made 198 League appearances as a defender for Bolton in a playing career that spanned 21 years in total between 1971 and 1992 (445 games; 28 goals). As a manager, a week ago he became the first man to be named Manager of the Month in each of England's four professional divisions (with Blackpool in the Third, Notts County in the Second, and Bolton in the First and the Premiership). He would dearly love to become the first man ever to lead Bolton to a top-flight championship. That may prove beyond him and the club's resources; but nobody can take away the excellent start his team has made this season.

Blackburn and Fulham have made more modest starts, but both look capable of holding their own in the Premiership. Fulham were last in the top division in 1968, and experienced a steady decline in fortunes, and a number of false starts, until wealthy Egyptian businessman Mohammed El Fayed bought the club in the mid 1990s. Fayed owns Britain's most prestigious department store, Harrods, situated in London's fashionable Knightsbridge. His football team occupies a picturesque ground (Craven Cottage) on the banks of the River Thames in an area of prime West London real estate.

Fayed has plans to transform the Cottage into a modern 30,000 all-seater stadium that will require Fulham to ground-share during the redevelopment, which starts next season. But his biggest impact has been on the pitch. Employing first Kevin Keegan and, more recently, Jean Tigana as team manager and making his extensive wealth available to them in the transfer market, Fayed has seen his team transformed into a stylish, smooth-passing outfit that certainly does not look out of place in the Premiership.

The jewel in Tigana's crown is French striker Louis Saha (27 goals last season; 3 already this), unrecognisable from the player who made 11 Premiership appearances for Newcastle in 1998-99 before returning to Metz then signing for Tigana.

Scotsman John Collins provides midfield subtlety and Dutch international Edwin Van Der Saar has added experience to the goalkeeping position. Steve Marlet, another French striker, has recently joined, while the Portuguese ex-Arsenal winger Luis Boa Morte has chipped in with many vital goals. Sean Davis is a highly rated English Under-21 midfielder who is expected to make a big impact in the Premiership.

Blackburn are managed by Graeme Souness, who won countless honours as a player with Liverpool and in Italy and then enjoyed a successful introduction to management with Rangers. Subsequent managerial appointments (Liverpool, Galatasaray, Southampton, Benfica) were less rewarding, but he has re-established his credentials with Rovers.

The club won the Premiership under Souness's ex-Anfield club-mate Kenny Dalglish in 1995. Souness has bought wisely in the transfer market, but some of his best playing assets were already at Ewood Park when he took over. They include striker Matt Jansen, expected to unsettle many top defences this season, Eire international Damien Duff and England Under-21 midfield star David Dunn, the club's most consistent performer last season. All three are coveted by so-called 'bigger' clubs but Souness sees them all as vital to Rovers' future and the club should have sufficient financial muscle to be able to hang on to them.

The squad includes a clutch of ex-Manchester United players: current Wales team manager Mark Hughes, who offers physical strength and experience in attack; burly full-back John Curtis; Norwegian centre-back Henning Berg; and Northern Irishman Keith Gillespie, full of guile on the wing.

In many ways, Rovers look the best-equipped of the three newcomers to make an impact at the top level, but will quickly need to add consistency and staying power to their undoubted team spirit. Fulham too will need to strengthen their silky skills with some steel, while Bolton will need to add some class and experience unless they are able to maintain their remarkable early-season form.

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