

## **PREMIERSHIP PROSPECTS FOR 2001-02**

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The addition of Ruud van Nistelrooy and Juan Sebastian Veron to Manchester United's already glittering array of stars has made the Red Devils favourites to lift the Premier League championship for what would be a record fourth consecutive season as the 2001-02 campaign kicks off.

The two newcomers are world class and their arrival has sharpened the appetites of the rest of the squad. United are determined to win both the Premiership and the European Cup as a fitting finale to the Ferguson era. Sir Alex retires from management at the end of the season would love to lift the European Cup at Hampden Park in his home city of Glasgow next May. But retaining the Premiership is no less a priority.

Along with most other managers and commentators, Ferguson has said he hopes the title race is more closely contested this year. The squads of each of United's main challengers look stronger than last season, but the feeling persists that anyone finishing above United will win the League.

Realistically, the only genuine candidates are again Arsenal, Liverpool, Leeds United and Chelsea.

Arsenal have strengthened every department of their squad and look a much more viable outfit with the addition of Richard Wright, Sol Campbell, Giovanni van Bronckhorst, Junichi Inamoto and Francis Jeffers. Most significantly, Patrick Vieira is still a Gunner. He feels Arsenal could overhaul United this season after finishing as runners-up in each of the previous three. To do so, their away form and ability to convert chances

David O'Leary's Leeds United have been improving dramatically during the last two seasons and should now be ready to mount a sustained challenge for the title. The tag of inexperience will no longer apply, and with no Champions League distractions this time around O'Leary's squad can be expected to maintain a sharp focus on the Premiership prize. The major signings – Mark Viduka, Dominic Matteo, Rio Ferdinand and Robbie Keane – were made last season: now is the time to turn their promise into trophies.

Chelsea remain the Premiership's biggest enigma – loaded with top international stars, their squad have the ability to beat anyone on their day, but are too often inconsistent, especially away from Stamford Bridge. Frank Leboeuf, Dennis Wise and Gustavo Poyet have departed, but Claudio Ranieri has made some astute signings in Emmanuel Petit, Boudewijn Zenden, Frank Lampard and William Gallas. His task now is to demonstrate tactical and team-building abilities that were not always apparent last season.

It is difficult to see who might successfully challenge the 'big five', though at least one club will probably spring a surprise, like Ipswich Town did last season. Ipswich may find it harder to sustain the superb form they showed last winter, but Tottenham Hotspur could break into the European places. Despite the loss of Campbell, manager Glenn Hoddle has now instilled his thinking into the squad, which looks stronger with the arrivals of Teddy Sheringham, Poyet, Goran Bunjuccevic and Kasey Keller.

Middlesbrough will probably be unrecognisable from last season's strugglers. New boss Steve McClaren has already transformed expectations at the club and instead of a relegation battle, a European challenge could materialise. Gareth Southgate and Ugo Ehiogu have given Boro a more solid look defensively, while the signings of Manchester United pair Jonathan Greening and Mark Wilson should broaden their creative options.

Boro's north-east neighbours Sunderland have become a solid force at the

Promoted clubs have fared notoriously badly since the Premiership was founded, but two of this year's trio – Fulham and Blackburn Rovers threaten to ruffle a few established feathers and be more concerned with upward mobility than mere survival. Both benefit from substantial financial resources and in Jean Tigana and Graeme Souness, respectively, both have astute managers who should navigate the unfamiliar Premiership waters with confidence. Both have made good signings during the summer and could surprise a few people.

West Ham United may be less affected by the departures of ex-manager Harry Redknapp and star midfielder Frank Lampard than many seem to think; but the Hammers will do well to improve significantly on last season's finish – especially if they do not quickly sign a solid central defender.

That leaves Bolton Wanderers, Charlton Athletic, Leicester City, Derby County, Southampton, Everton and Newcastle United – all of whom could find life a little difficult this season. With the exception of newly-promoted Bolton, who will probably again find the step-up in class too great to bridge, these clubs are capable of mid-table security or better – but also prone to the sort of confidence-sapping runs of poor form which, without squad strength in depth, can lead to relegation.

One thing is for certain – the managers, players and especially the fans of all 20 Premiership clubs start the season full of hope and ambition. For most, that optimism will quickly fade as the harsh reality of results begins to bite. But over the next ten months, the prospect of breath-taking moments of skill, courageous goalkeeping, heroic defending and spectacular goalscoring exploits will again captivate followers of one of the most entertaining and exciting Leagues in the world.

*My predictions of who will finish where next May:*

- 13 West Ham United
- 14 Everton
- 15 Leicester City
- 16 Charlton Athletic
- 17 Southampton
- 18 Newcastle United
- 19 Derby County
- 20 Bolton Wanderers

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