

The TOP TEN PREMIERSHIP CENTRE-BACKS

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The centre-back is the heart of the defence, the pivot around whom a team's defensive capabilities revolve. Once called a centre-half, the position's role began to change from the mid-1960s with the advent of the flat back four in formations such as 4-2-4, 4-3-3 and the now widespread 4-4-2. This change also the introduction of twin centre-backs, so that stoppers now come in pairs – like Stam and Brown, Adams and Keown, and Hyppia and Henchoz.

The Premiership is full of centre-backs who present formidable obstacles to even the cleverest strikers. They have to combine excellent heading ability with tough tackling, a turn of speed, clever positional play and effective distribution. Increasingly, too, as English clubs seek to progress in the Champions League, centre-backs are expected to be able to bring the ball out of defence with confidence and control before finding an opponent with a shrewd pass.

This more creative aspect of the role is not typically British but reflects the influence of continental coaching and tactics. As a result of this and other changes, such as the outlawing of the tackle from behind, the days of the slide-tackling, clear-it-anywhere centre-back have gone. The best players in this position now possess a high level of technical skill. They initiate attacks as well as breaking up the oppositions.

The quality in the Premiership is such that some excellent candidates must regrettably be omitted from my top ten. They include high-class performers like Stephane Henchoz of Liverpool; the Leeds trio of Jonathan Woodgate, Lucas Radebe and Dominic Matteo; Ugo Ehiogu of Middlesbrough; Derby County's highly promising Chris Riggott; Everton's David Unsworth; Nikolas Dabizas of Newcastle United and Southampton's Dean Richards.

Who then are the top ten?

- 10 **Titus Bramble (Ipswich Town):** Tough yet skilful, Bramble was a revelation last season as Ipswich took the Premiership by surprise to prove that they were nobody's relegation fodder. Hailed as a genuine star in the making, Bramble turned 20 last Saturday and is already an England Under-21 international. The strongly-built, bustling centre-

back overcame a succession of injuries in the 1999-2000 season to force his way into the heart of the Ipswich defence with a succession of commanding displays. Envied by many bigger clubs, he recently signed a new four-year contract with the Suffolk club and looks set for a marvellous future in top-flight football.

- 9 **Wes Brown (Manchester United and England):** Still only 22, England international Brown recently signed a new contract that will keep him at Old Trafford for several more seasons, during which time his partnership with Jaap Stam in the middle of United's back-four can be expected to flourish further. After making a substantial impact on the Premiership during United's treble-winning campaign of 1998-99 (when he was often deployed as a full-back), Brown suffered a serious knee injury which forced him to miss the whole of 1999-2000. But he came back in style last season and, despite conceding the odd own-goal, played with class and composure under pressure.
- 8 **Gareth Southgate (Middlesbrough and England):** After finally getting his wish of a move away from Aston Villa, Southgate is hoping to be part of a successful team at the Riverside under the ambitious new manager, Steve McClaren. Reliably consistent and characteristically whole-hearted throughout his spell at Villa – even when clearly unhappy with the club – Southgate overcame the trauma of missing the crucial spot-kick for England in the semi-final shoot-out with Germany at Euro '96, and remains a regular member of the England squad. His £36.5 million transfer to Boro underlined his value, and should provide the motivation to re-launch his career.
- 7 **Tony Adams (Arsenal and England):** For many years Adams was the undisputed king of Premiership centre-backs. Only the ravages of injury and age have allowed others to overtake him, but he remains a formidable presence – not simply because of his great experience and ability, but also because of his inspirational qualities. Captain of the Gunners since 1987, and of England on many occasions before retiring last year from international football, Adams leads by example and exhortation. Arsenal's results are consistently better when he is in the team. No other Arsenal captain has lifted more trophies for the club, and his ability to overcome adversity – including a brief prison sentence in 1990-91 for drink-driving and his public admission in 1996 of alcoholism – have added to his stature and influence within the game. The new season will be his last before retiring, and he will be sorely missed.

- 6 **Marcel Desailly (Chelsea and France):** At the age of 32 Desailly continues to prove that he is one of the classiest defenders in the world. Chelsea bought him from AC Milan just before the 1998 World Cup, where he was undoubtedly one of the players of the tournament, collecting a winners' medal to which he added a European Championship winners' medal at Euro 2000. He also won the French and Italian league championships with Marseille and Milan, respectively, as well as the European Cup with both clubs and the FA Cup with Chelsea. Approaching the end of an illustrious career which saw him perform as a central midfielder before smoothly making the transition into central defence, Desailly at his best is peerless.
- 5 **Martin Keown (Arsenal and England):** Tenacity and remarkable consistency have kept Keown among the elite of centre-backs despite his lacking some of the technique and finesse of a Desailly. A highly effective man-marker and a ferocious tackler, Keown remains one of the fastest defenders in the Premiership even though he celebrates his 35th birthday this week. He first teamed up with Adams in the Arsenal youth team in 1982, but left Highbury in 1986 for Aston Villa and then Everton before the Gunners paid £2 million to bring him back in 1993.
- 4 **Sol Campbell (Arsenal and England):** Yet to appear in an Arsenal shirt in the Premiership, Campbell joined the Gunners in the summer's most controversial transfer – walking out on Tottenham Hotspur at the end of his contract to join their bitterest rivals without a fee changing hands. At Spurs, where he was captain, Campbell established himself as one of the most admired defenders in the country. Physically imposing at just under 1.9 metres tall and weighing 89 kilos, the 26-year-old is commanding on the ground and dominant in the air, with the ability to carry the ball out of defence on marauding dribbles and runs. His combination of pace, power and attacking flair have made him a stalwart of the England squad, and Sven Goran Eriksson has made him vice-captain of the country.
- 3 **Rio Ferdinand (Leeds United and England):** When Ferdinand left West Ham United for Leeds United last November the £18 million fee not only set a British record but made him the world's costliest defender. Any doubts about his value were swiftly dispelled, however, as Ferdinand stamped his class and authority on the Leeds defence and also revealed previously unexposed leadership qualities. Manager David O'Leary was impressed enough to give the 22-year-old the captain's armband, and the player's consistency was

recognised by regular England selection. Recognised as probably the best ball-playing centre-back in the country, Ferdinand seems certain to become even better as he matures in the years ahead.

- 2 **Sami Hyppia (Liverpool and Finland):** Probably Gerard Houllier's best buy since taking over as Liverpool's manager, the giant Finnish centre-back has performed with such determination, skill and consistency that he was voted the club's Player of the year in 2000 and has unquestionably been among the very best players in any position in the Premiership during the last two seasons. Hyppia, who has proved an excellent captain in the absence of Jamie Redknapp and Robbie Fowler, has established a formidable partnership with Swiss star Stephane Henchoz. Brilliant in the air and highly effective when the ball is on the ground, he is the rock around whom the Reds will launch their bid to win the championship in 2001-02.
- 1 **Jaap Stam (Manchester United and Holland):** The imperious Dutchman was Ferdinand's predecessor as the world's most expensive defender when he joined United from PSV Eindhoven for £10 million in 1998. He has since proved himself an all-round central defender of strength and stature, combining a powerful physique with exceptional speed and a quick footballing brain. Stam is also very comfortable with the ball at his feet, proudly maintaining the Dutch tradition of Total Football. A regular Dutch international, Stam was ever-present during the 1998 World Cup Finals and also played in most of Holland's games at Euro 2000. He is a natural born winner who has collected Premiership winners' medals in each of his three seasons in England, as well as FA Cup and European Cup winners medals.