

## **Headline Makers:**

# **PREMIERSHIP PLAYERS OF THE SEASON**

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As the Premiership campaign approaches its conclusion, the annual ritual of picking teams and players of the season is well underway. In a domestic season again dominated by Manchester United, it is hardly surprising to find several United players on the short lists of the official polls.

Indeed, the Football Writers Association, which has elected its Footballer of the Year since 1948, announced on Friday that its choice for 2001 is Teddy Sheringham. The striker narrowly beat team-mate David Beckham to become, at 35, the first English-born player to scoop this particular award since Alan Shearer won it in 1994. Arsenal's Patrick Vieira finished third. By way of celebration, Sheringham scored United's goal from the penalty spot in the 1-1 derby draw with Manchester City to take his goals tally for the season to 21.

Meanwhile the players themselves, through the Professional Footballers Association, have issued a list of six nominations for their Player of the Year. It includes Sheringham, his captain Roy Keane (who won both the Writers and Players' awards last year) and fellow club-mate Ryan Giggs, as well as Marcus Stewart of Ipswich, Liverpool's Emile Heskey and Arsenal's Thierry Henry.

The omission of both Beckham and Vieira from the PFA short-list was a major surprise, because both would feature highly in most fans' polls. In fact if it was up to the fans, Keane would probably be United's player of the season for his leadership and drive. Even the dark side of his game evident again in Saturday's Manchester derby when his horrendous tackle on Alfie Haaland earned him a red card is admired by United's fans as a badge of commitment to the club's cause.

Vieira enjoys similar status among Gunners' fans, and has undoubtedly been Arsenal's most consistent and valuable performer throughout the season. Skipper Tony Adams has again been an inspiration when fit, while Henry's pace and goals have caught the eye. But Vieira would get the vote by a distance at Highbury.

At Anfield, a season of great Cup runs has thrown up several heroes, of whom the powerful Heskey is certainly one. But among Reds supporters, choosing the player of the season would probably be a two-horse race between centre-half Sami Hyppia from Finland and the impressive young midfielder Steven Gerrard. Personally I would give the honour to Hyppia for his composure, strength in the air and speed of thought; he has galvanised the Liverpool defence into a cohesive unit. But on Merseyside, where they love to see local lads break into the first team, midfield powerhouse Gerrard is seen as the future - the embodiment of an exciting and long awaited return to the glory years.

Leeds United's season has got better and better since Christmas, but the turning-point for many was the arrival of Rio Ferdinand in a world record transfer from West Ham United. Ferdinand has improved dramatically since moving to Yorkshire, where the fans love his style and the ball skills that are exceptional in an English defender. But most of all Leeds fans love Rio for choosing their club when leaving London and giving them credibility as a big, ambitious club.

It is difficult to identify worthy contenders from many other clubs, although Stewart's prolific goalscoring has certainly been a revelation in Ipswich Town's marvellous first season back in the Premiership. Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink has done a similar job for Chelsea, although in contrast to Ipswich, who have far exceeded expectations, the Blues have failed to live up to theirs.

Elsewhere, the fans' choices would probably be Paul Merson at Aston Villa, Stuart McCall at Bradford City, Jonatan Johansson at Charlton Athletic, and John Hartson at Coventry City (whose goals have given the Sky Blues a lift despite his arrival only late in the season). Craig Burley and Chris Riggott have done most for struggling Derby County, while at Everton Michael Ball has been consistently impressive in a generally mediocre squad. Muzzy Izzet would get the vote at Leicester City, Danny Tiatto at Manchester City and Alen Boksic at Middlesbrough.

Newcastle United's fans would go for Nolberto Solano or Gary Speed, and at Southampton the choice would probably be between James Beattie and goalkeeper Paul Jones. Kevin Phillips remains a hero at Sunderland, but for his all-round contribution their player of the season would surely be Don Hutchison. Neil Sullivan has been Tottenham's best performer, with Stuart Pearce getting the vote at West Ham United ahead of Paolo Di Canio, Joe Cole and Frederic Kanoute.

For me the overall winner would be Arsenal's Patrick Vieira – a world class ball-winner and playmaker through whom all the Gunners' best moves are channelled.

While all these players have earned applause and recognition for their exploits during the season, neither they nor their colleagues throughout the Premiership should lose sight of one important fact. As their astronomical wages take them further and further away from the world inhabited by their fans, those same fans demand certain qualities in return for all the riches. Apart from a certain level of skill, these qualities are effort, commitment and loyalty. They are the qualities that make great players and great teams.

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