

## **PREMIERSHIP CHALLENGERS MUST PROVE THEIR CREDENTIALS**

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The 2000/01 Premiership season offered plenty of thrilling moments and no shortage of sublime skills or great goals; but it will not be remembered as a classic. The competition at the top of the League was too lightweight for that.

The fact that Manchester United had clinched the title more than a month before the end of the season underlined the problem. They had been allowed to turn the championship into a stroll not a struggle, so that most interest focused on who would join United in next year's Champions League, or on the battle to avoid relegation.

There was none of the drama and tension of some campaigns that were decided only on the final day, such as when Blackburn Rovers edged out Manchester United in 1995, or when United themselves pipped Arsenal by a solitary point on the last day of the 1999 season.

This time, United's dominance meant their last five matches – three of which they uncharacteristically lost – became largely meaningless. Such an anti-climactic finish took some of the gloss off their remarkable achievement of three consecutive championships – a feat previously performed only by Huddersfield Town (1924-26), Arsenal (1933-35) and Liverpool (1982-84).

Indeed, the apparent inevitability of United's seventh title in nine seasons meant that Liverpool's Cup treble captured people's imaginations far more. If this was a little unfair on Manchester United and their admirably consistent players, it proved that the football public is looking for the status quo to be broken, for other clubs to seize the initiative.

In 1998, when Arsenal won the Premiership/FA Cup double, they looked capable of challenging United's supremacy over the next few seasons. But they have since finished second rather than first in five competitions, and by their own standards have under-achieved. In players like the magnificent Patrick Vieira and Tony Adams, the Gunners have natural-born winners in the squad; the problem is that too many others have so far failed to demonstrate the fighting spirit and consistency to match their undoubted

skills. The task for Arsene Wenger is to mould a more cohesive, single-minded unit. And he could do a lot worse than give first team opportunities to some of the members of his exciting and highly successful youth team.

While Arsenal tended to let themselves down when it mattered (not only in the recent FA Cup Final but also at Old Trafford in February, when they crashed 6-1), two other clubs served notice last season that will be serious contenders for United's crown.

But for a spate of long-term injuries throughout the squad (and an ongoing legal case involving three of their key players), Leeds United would almost certainly have finished in the top three. Yet they finished the season firmly believing that they are on the verge of greatness. David O'Leary has fashioned a squad high on team spirit, commitment and no little skill. Significantly, too, most are relatively young and British-born. Their failure to qualify for another crack at the Champions League (in which they acquitted themselves so well during 2000/01) means they will be fully focused on winning the Premiership next season.

That will also be Liverpool's priority, notwithstanding their recent success in Cup competitions. Few doubt that Gerard Houllier's squad have the potential to emulate their Anfield predecessors and become championship winners. Now that they also have the self-belief that comes from winning trophies, they will be formidable challengers to arch-rivals Manchester United.

The club that will probably reflect on 2000/01 with most satisfaction is Ipswich Town. George Burley rightly received the Manager of the Year award for the way he guided his newly-promoted squad not simply to Premiership survival but also into Europe. Their particular brand of passing football brought a breath of fresh air to the top division, and confounded the majority who predicted immediate relegation for the Suffolk club. Burley knows, however, that next season will be a lot harder – if only because expectations have been raised.

Of the other promoted clubs, Charlton Athletic also acquitted themselves well on a modest resource base, but Manchester City, the biggest of the three, failed miserably and were relegated on the back of a disastrous home record. Their response was to sack manager Joe Royle. Other managers for whom time ran out included George Graham at Tottenham Hotspur, Harry Redknapp at West Ham, Gianluca Vialli at Chelsea, Chris Hutchings at Bradford City and probably Bryan Robson at Middlesbrough.

Graham did his best to resurrect Tottenham's fortunes but too many people at the club were against him. They now have their favourite, Glenn Hoddle, at the helm, but the reluctance of key players like Sol Campbell to stay at White Hart Lane will make Hoddle's task all the more difficult. Chelsea's decision to sack the successful and popular Vialli seemed bizarre at the time and the team's subsequent performance during 2000/01 fell a long way short of expectations. They are likely to be very active in the transfer market this summer – buying and selling.

For Middlesbrough, success was merely in avoiding relegation; they must now sort out their managerial position and hope for a more purposeful campaign that makes full use of Alan Boksic's sheer class. Both the other North-East clubs, the season was disappointing. Sunderland looked good mid-way through the season, but a slow start and a post-Christmas slump undermined their efforts. Newcastle United simply never got into the stride, though they suffered their share of injuries. Both clubs – and their fans – will be looking for an improvement next season.

So too will Aston Villa and Everton, neither of whom came close to doing themselves justice last season. Time is probably running out for both managers – John Gregory and Walter Smith, respectively – so early form could be decisive. Southampton survived being abandoned by Hoddle and finished the campaign on a positive note by beating Manchester United and Arsenal on consecutive Saturdays. Their move to a new stadium will give them an added incentive to improve.

Peter Taylor has a similar incentive. He found his managerial credentials under the spotlight after a promising start at Leicester City degenerated into an alarming late-season slump, and will want to prove himself all over again.

Looking ahead to 2001/02, it is difficult to envisage the champions being any club outside last season's top four of Manchester United, Arsenal, Liverpool and Leeds. But for the sake of the Premiership, let's hope that the competition between these four is intense from start to finish.

**Personal nominations for 2000/01: Team of the season:** Liverpool; **Manager:** George Burley; **Player:** Patrick Vieira; **Young Player:** Steven Gerrard; **Goal:** Thierry Henry, Arsenal v Man Utd, 1<sup>st</sup> October; **Best buys of the season:** Fabien Barthez, Rio Ferdinand; **Worst buys:** Juan Pablo Angel, Paulo Wanchope; **Best decision of the season:** Middlesbrough's to bring in Terry Venables; **Worst decision:** Chelsea's to sack Vialli after five games.

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