

## The TOP TEN PREMIERSHIP MIDFIELDERS

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Midfield is arguably the most demanding part of any team. It is the link between defence and attack, providing vital cover for the back-four while manufacturing the bullets that the strikers fire. Midfield is both a team's engine-room and its creative heart. Usually consisting of four men from wide right through centre right and centre left to wide left, it encompasses old-style wingers and scheming inside-forwards; hard-tacking ball-winners and shrewd play-makers.

Versatility and stamina are minimum requirements for the best midfield players, who ideally possess strong legs, powerful lungs and quick-thinking footballing brains with the vision to recognise creative possibilities and the skill to exploit them.

Competition for places is often more intense in midfield than in any other part of the team, because it is a tactical battleground offering coaches and managers a wide range of options. This congestion on the pitch is reflected in any list of the Premiership's best midfield players because there are so many worthy candidates. In fact to do the position justice it is necessary to consider the top twenty rather than just the top ten.

And even then some outstanding players cannot be included in the list, which is based on performances last season. That means that Manchester United's new signing Juan Sebastian Veron, who has yet to appear in the Premiership and may well prove to be one of the very best, is excluded. So too is Emmanuel Petit, who made a massive impact in Arsenal's midfield between 1997 and 2000, and is likely to prove influential again, this time with Chelsea. Arsenal's newcomers Giovanni van Bronckhorst and Junichi Inamoto cannot yet be considered, either. And among the newly promoted clubs, Fulham's Sean Davis and Blackburn's David Dunn are expected to make their mark at the top level.

Unlucky not to make the top 20 are players of the calibre of Liverpool's Patrick Berger, Jamie Redknapp, Vladimir Smicer and Danny Murphy; Matt Holland (Ipswich); Freddie Ljungberg and Ray Parlour (Arsenal); Mark Kinsella (Charlton); Trevor Sinclair and Michael Carrick (West Ham); Seth Johnson, Craig Burley and Georgi Kinkladze (Derby); Muzzy Izzet (Leicester), David Batty and Eirik Bakke (Leeds), Mustapha Hadji (Aston

Villa); Paul Gascoigne (Everton) – who a decade ago might have been number one – and Newcastle's Nolberto Solano.

So who are ahead of them?

- 20 **Robert Pires (Arsenal and France):** Last season, his first in the Premiership, saw Pires get stronger as he came to terms with the physical demands of the English game. Initially tended to flit in and out of matches but later added consistency and determination to his undoubted passing and shooting ability.
- 19 **Don Hutchison (Sunderland and Scotland):** Versatile, combative and with a good eye for goal, Hutchison has had a chequered career with Hartlepool, Liverpool, West Ham, Sheffield United, Everton and now Sunderland, often interrupted by injury and suspension. But at the Stadium of Light he has become increasingly influential and at £2.5 million is providing excellent value for money.
- 18 **Dietmar Hamann (Liverpool and Germany):** The last player to score a goal at the old Wembley Stadium, Hamann is a multi-purpose midfielder able to stamp his authority on a game when at the top of his form. An accurate passer with a formidable long-range shot which he uses effectively at free-kicks.
- 17 **Nick Barmby (Liverpool and England):** Having burst on the scene with Tottenham in the early 1990s, Barmby's mobility and creativity marked him out as one for the future, and international honours duly followed. But his career seemed to lose its way at Middlesbrough and, initially, at Everton. However, a resurgence of form carried back into the England squad and a move to Anfield maintained the momentum.
- 16 **Kieron Dyer (Newcastle United and England):** After making his name at Ipswich, Dyer joined Newcastle and was arguably their most influential player until a debilitating shin injury disrupted his season. A dynamic performer combining boundless energy with versatility, quick footwork and explosive speed.
- 15 **Joe Cole (West Ham United and England):** Rated by many as the most naturally gifted English footballer to have emerged since Gascoigne, Cole is expected to become one of the very best but needs to add greater consistency and end-product to his dazzling ball skills and ability to beat opponents.

- 14 **Gustavo Poyet (Tottenham Hotspur and Uruguay):** At Chelsea Poyet was invariably one of the team's most potent attacking threats when he was free of injury. Strong, resilient and tremendously powerful in the air, Poyet shoots well with both feet and also has the vision to create space for colleagues and find them with penetrating passes. Spurs fans will be hoping he makes the same impact at White Hart Lane.
- 13 **Olivier Dacourt (Leeds United):** A talented, hard-working central midfielder, Frenchman Dacourt made a significant contribution to the Leeds team last year, added to a reputation gained during one season at Everton and subsequently with Lens. A hard tackling, strong running player able to keep confident possession before releasing opponents with intelligent passing, Dacourt is also a threat at free-kicks and has shown signs of improving a previously suspect disciplinary record.
- 12 **Gary McAllister (Liverpool and Scotland):** McAllister enjoyed a fairy-tale debut season with Liverpool at the age of 36, collecting three Cup winners' medals and proving hugely influential in the Reds' midfield, either from the start or, especially, when introduced from the bench. With a wealth of experience, he brings composure and creativity to any side – qualities that his younger Liverpool teammates thrive on.
- 11 **Nicky Butt (Manchester United and England):** Only the excellence of United's other midfield stars restricts Butt's appearances for club and country. He would be an automatic choice for most other clubs in the Premiership, being an industrious, highly competitive all-rounder who is strong in the tackle and links up well with the rest of the team.
- 10 **Frank Lampard (Chelsea and England):** One of the best young players in the Premiership, Lampard will form a strong new midfield partnership at Chelsea with Emmanuel Petit. A string of consistently impressive performances for West Ham propelled him into the England squad where he is expected to stay for a long time. Lampard is an all-purpose midfielder who attacks and defends with equal effectiveness. He is clever on the ball with good vision and a strong shot, plenty of energy and determination in the tackle.
- 9 **Harry Kewell (Leeds United and Australia):** A graduate of the Leeds youth and reserve teams, 22-year-old Kewell has emerged during the last few seasons into one of the most exciting and

watchable young talents in the Premiership. Long-term injuries seriously disrupted his career last year, but on his return he reminded Leeds fans what they had been missing with his impudence on the ball, great balance and brilliant left foot. Always a threat to slow or retreating defences, Kewell is a world-class superstar in the making.

- 8 **Paul Merson (Aston Villa and England):** Having overcome difficult personal problems, Merson is, at 33, enjoying probably the best form of his career, which included a decade of success with Arsenal and an inspirational spell with Middlesbrough. long and successful career. He has added consistency and fitness to superb technique and a rare creative vision, and the responsibility of captaincy has added a new dimension to his game.
- 7 **Ryan Giggs (Manchester United and Wales):** There are few more exciting sights in football than Giggs in full flow. The Welsh international is a footballer of immense grace and skill, and can be almost unstoppable when he attacks down his favourite left flank. He combines the natural attributes of an old-style winger with the work ethic of a modern midfielder. Still only 27, Giggs has been central to all of United's achievements since 1993, and is only now reaching the peak years of his career.
- 6 **Paul Scholes (Manchester United and England):** Highly rated by a succession of England managers and coveted at Old Trafford as a jewel in their dazzling midfield, the quiet, unassuming Scholes is one of the most effective central midfielders in the business. His great assets are an ability to lay the ball off quickly and precisely to a teammate, an uncanny knack of timing forward runs to perfection, and a killer instinct in front of goal.
- 5 **Lee Bowyer (Leeds United):** Bowyer's consistently dynamic performances in the Leeds midfield last season – domestically and especially in the Champions League – would undoubtedly have brought him guaranteed England recognition but for the ban imposed on him for as long as his court case remains unresolved. Despite that distraction, his consistency was remarkable, and his influence on Leeds has been immense. Apart from his willingness to run and run, based on impressive reserves of stamina, Bowyer is the epitome of the goalscoring midfielder. Last season he contributed a further 14 goals – a tally many strikers would be proud of.
- 4 **Steven Gerrard (Liverpool and England):** Susceptibility to injury is the only threat to the dazzling progress made by Liverpool's brilliant

all-rounder. Gerrard seems to improve each time he pulls on an England shirt. He is a tough tackler with great vision who plays a commanding role in Liverpool's engine-room, displaying skill with both feet and his head. A ferocious shot, boundless energy and enthusiasm and a natural assurance on the ball make Gerrard a formidable opponent and a major asset to club and country.

- 3 **Roy Keane (Manchester United and Republic of Ireland):** The United captain is the complete midfielder – strong, energetic, aggressive and shrewd, with the ability to score goals regularly. Discipline has been the only flaw in his armoury – suspension robbed him of an appearance in the 1999 European Cup final against Bayern Munich – but as an all-round midfielder and leader in tune with the demands of the modern game, Keane has few equals.
- 2 **Patrick Vieira (Arsenal and France):** Another player whose career has been punctuated by disciplinary problems, Vieira added to his immense stature last season by getting into trouble less often while dominating almost every match he played in. There are few better tacklers or stronger runners with the ball anywhere in the world than Vieira, whose influence was underlined by man-of-the-match performances in both the semi-final and final of the FA Cup. His drive and commitment are allied to a deft touch and excellent technique. Frustration with Arsenal's failure to land a trophy since 1998 have made Vieira the centre of transfer speculation all summer, but the tall, commanding figure from Senegal looks set to remain at Highbury next season.
- 1 **David Beckham (Manchester United and England):** The most gifted English footballer of his generation, Beckham is a world class star, the biggest attraction in the Premiership and the envy of top coaches everywhere. Despite having to contend with an unrelenting media spotlight and all sorts of criticism from the press and public mostly based on jealousy – Beckham has added leadership and maturity to his all-round game since becoming England captain. No-one is better than Beckham from dead-ball situations, whether corner-kicks or free-kicks, and his crossing ability means Sir Alex Ferguson consistently plays him on the right wing. His skill and vision suggest, however, that he will be even more influential in central midfield – an option that Sven Goran Eriksson seems willing to experiment with. Runner-up to Rivaldo in both the European and World Footballer of the Year polls in 1999, Beckham is both a model professional and an immensely talented superstar.

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