

The TOP TEN PREMIERSHIP FULL-BACKS

By **Graham Lister**, Chief Football Correspondent,
China Monitor (UK) Sports Division

There was a time when the full-back's job was simply to mark the opposing winger, prevent him from getting in a cross and, after winning possession, clear the ball as far up-field as possible. Straying over the halfway line was not part of the full-back's job description. The game has advanced significantly since then, and the attacking full-back now plays a key role in his team's offensive options as well as its defensive capabilities.

The position now calls for speed, boundless energy to get up and down the length of the pitch repeatedly, and an old-fashioned winger's ability to dribble, pass and cross the ball – as well as the defensive skills of marking, blocking and tackling.

Consequently, the modern full-back is often and more accurately called a wing-back, and the best – like Roberto Carlos of Real Madrid and Brazil – are highly-valued specialists. But who are the best in the Premiership?

Inevitably some excellent full-backs don't quite make it into my top ten simply because the competition is so hot. They include the pairing from Arsenal's classic back-four of a few seasons ago – Lee Dixon and Nigel Winterburn – even though both are still performing with great consistency and enthusiasm in the Premiership, for Arsenal and West Ham, respectively. Others just out of the top ten include Gary Kelly of Leeds, Chelsea's promising Jon Harley, the Aston Villa pair of Mark Delaney and Alan Wright, and Southampton's Wayne Bridge, of whom good things are expected.

- 10 **Graeme Le Saux (Chelsea and England):** Last season was a forgettable one for the Channel Islander, who was injured for most of it as Chelsea struggled for consistency, particularly away from home. He will be hoping for better luck and an extended run in the team next season, when he will also be seeking to re-establish his claim on the left-back shirt for England ahead of the 2002 World Cup Finals. A Premier League championship winner with Blackburn Rovers in 1995, Le Saux began his career with Chelsea and returned to Stamford Bridge in 1997. Passing and crossing are his greatest strengths, and although a certain abrasiveness has caused him

disciplinary problems in the past, Chelsea look more balanced and potent when Le Saux is in the team and on form.

- 9 **Danny Mills (Leeds United):** The England Under-21 international was snapped up by David O Leary for £4.4 million two summers ago, after making a big impact on the Premiership with Charlton Athletic in the 1998/99 season. A marauding right-back with plenty of pace and a strong shot, Mills is also good in the air and has been used in the centre of defence and as a wing-back. Last season he displaced the experienced Gary Kelly at right-back in the Leeds first-team and played an important role in the club's impressive European campaign. He has received a call-up to the England squad but is yet to win a first full international cap.
- 8 **Michael Ball (Everton and England):** Ball's current contract renegotiations with Everton appear to have broken down, a situation likely to alert a number of other clubs who have previously cast admiring glances at the left-back. Ball is still only 21 but already an England international, having been given his debut in Sven Goran Eriksson's first game in charge – the victory over Spain at Villa Park. One of relatively few genuinely left-footed full-backs in the Premiership at the moment, he has often been used by Everton as a left-sided central defender, but his build and mobility make him better-suited to the left-back berth. An accurate passer of the ball from the back, Ball's cultured left foot is often used to good effect at set-pieces.
- 7 **Michael Gray (Sunderland and England):** The only player currently on Sunderland's books to have played in manager Peter Reid's first game in charge of the Black Cats back in 1995, Gray enjoys hero status at his home-town club. He overcame the trauma of missing the decisive penalty in the 1998 First Division play-off final against Charlton Athletic but bounced back strongly the following season as Sunderland swept to the championship and automatic promotion. His progress was such that he earned a call-up to Kevin Keegan's England team, but last season was probably his most consistent yet. Having begun his career as an orthodox winger, Gray retains the ball-playing skills that make him a potent attacking threat going forward.
- 6 **Gary Neville (Manchester United and England):** Neville may attract less adulation and headlines than some of his United teammates (especially best-friend David Beckham), but he has earned more England caps than any other of Fergie's fledglings. He has

become a highly-accomplished right-sided defender, equally at home in a three or four-man defence. A fierce competitor, Neville keeps cool under pressure and invariably distributes the ball intelligently and accurately when in possession. He has been an integral part of United's domination of the Premiership in recent years and has the appetite to stay at the top for some time to come.

- 5 **Silvinho (Arsenal and Brazil):** Arsene Wenger suddenly acquired an abundance of riches at left-back when Ashley Cole burst onto the scene last season as cover for Silvinho. The Brazilian was unable to reclaim his place on a regular basis and, unless Wenger can accommodate him in midfield, Silvinho could be heading out of Highbury. His departure (possibly to Spain) would be a loss to the Premiership, because he has made a big impression with his committed attitude, dancing dribbling skills characterised by excellent close control, and dangerous crossing ability. Like many Brazilians, Silvinho also has a powerful shot in his armoury. He contributed four important goals to Arsenal's season – his second in London although his enthusiasm for getting forward means his defensive duties are occasionally neglected.
- 4 **Jamie Carragher (Liverpool and England):** Liverpool-born Carragher was already one of English football's hottest properties before cementing his reputation last season with a string of solid, consistent performances as Liverpool swept to a unique Cup treble. Originally a hard-working midfield ball-winner, he has settled down in defence and has made the right-back slot his own. Comfortable on the ball, he has shown strength and tenacity, good marking skills and sound positional sense as Gerard Houllier's defence has established itself as a tight, effective unit. The 23-year-old Carragher won a record number of Under-21 caps for England and has followed that up with a senior international debut, with more appearances in the full England squad a certainty.
- 3 **Stephen Carr (Tottenham Hotspur and Republic of Ireland):** Dubliner Carr has made the right-back position his own both for Tottenham and Ireland, and is a model of consistency, having missed just five League games in three and a half years until an injury forced him out of action temporarily last season. First and foremost a solid, dependable defender, tough in the tackle and blessed with unquenchable stamina, Carr is also confident bringing the ball out of defence. His trademark style is to storm up the wing on the overlap and deliver penetrating crosses into the opposition's box. When Carr appeared at the Nou Camp to watch a match earlier this summer,

rumours began to fly linking the Irishman who will be 25 next month with a possible move to Barcelona. That has not materialised, and Spurs will be desperate to keep one of their brightest stars after losing Sol Campbell to rivals Arsenal.

- 2 **Ashley Cole (Arsenal and England):** No newcomer made of an impact on the Premiership or the international scene last season than 20-year-old Cole, who took his chance when Silvinho was unavailable and was a full England international before he'd made 20 League appearances. Displaying great composure, confidence and maturity despite his lack of experience, Cole proved yet again that if you are good enough you are old enough. Supporting the attack down the left for both club and country with dynamic running, crossing and the occasional vital goal, Cole also discharges his defensive responsibilities intelligently and seems set for a glittering future at the top level.
- 1 **Ian Harte (Leeds United and the Republic of Ireland):** Dead-ball specialist Harte is as effective as an extra striker for Leeds and Ireland. He combines effective tackling skills with marauding runs down the left wing to whip in crosses that are a nightmare to defend against. But if this is an integral part of David O'Leary's attacking strategy, so too is Harte's skill at set-pieces. His lethal left foot is one of Leeds United's most potent weapons at free-kicks from almost any distance. Harte is also United's principal penalty taker and combines with ferociously accurate long-range shooting from open play. Last season Harte contributed 11 goals in all competitions for Leeds, a phenomenal return for a full-back. Harte is actually the nephew of club and international team-mate Gary Kelly; but if his uncle's career has passed its peak, Harte's is still very much in the ascendant as O'Leary's exciting young side prepare to challenge for the Premiership without the distraction of another Champions League campaign.

www.chinamonitor.com