form labs

2020/21 Premier League

Key Stats

- Only six teams have won the Premier League (PL) since it was reduced to 20 teams in 1995/96: Man Utd (11), Chelsea (5), Arsenal (3), Man City (3), Leicester City and Liverpool
- 25 of 27 PL champions had finished in the top three the previous season – eight were defending champions, 11 had been runners-up and six had been third
- 21 of the last 23 runners-up had finished in the top four the previous season with 11 being defending champions
- Since 1995/96 six teams (Chelsea in 2013 and 2017, Liverpool in 2014, Leicester in 2016, and Man Utd in 2018 and 2020) have finished in the top three having been lower than fifth the previous season.
- 17 of the last 23 defending champions have finished in the top two
- Since 1998/99 all nine PL teams that have reached a Champions League final the previous season have finished in the top four

Dominant Duo (Liverpool & Man City)

Liverpool and Man City will of course be the teams to beat this year. Much emphasis will be placed on whether the former can demonstrate the same levels of relentless consistency and whether the latter can overcome defensive slip-ups, particularly following the signing of Dutch international Nathan Ake.

Man City only actually conceded two goals more than Jurgen Klopp's champions last term, while they also had to cope with best centre-back Aymeric Laporte on the sidelines for just over half the season. However, it's worth noting that 18 of the 33 goals Liverpool conceded came in their final 12 games, with the title virtually in the bag by that point. Meanwhile, taking the best possible back four and goalkeeper from around the league, there's a highly plausible argument to be made for four Liverpool inclusions (Alisson, Trent Alexander-Arnold, Virgil van Dijk and Andrew Robertson).

City haven't done much business besides and Ferran Torres is essentially a direct replacement for Leroy Sane, but **Liverpool** are much the same and haven't required any major surgery this summer, spurning the opportunity to pay big money for Timo Werner and so far, Bayern and Spain midfielder Thiago. A lack of such a playmaker is the only thing really missing from the Reds after they brought in cover at left-back (Kostas Tsimikas), but they don't struggle for goals in any case owing to their star front three.

Mo Salah, Sadio Mane and Roberto Firmino are all 28 years old and ready in the here and now to deliver Klopp's brand of football, but better back-up options wouldn't go amiss and Liverpool do appear more susceptible to injuries in the final third. Indeed, Virgil van Dijk was their top scorer beyond the front three in the league last term, so it's understandable that City are favourites to reclaim their domestic crown. Man City's recent triumphs in 2017/18 and 18/19 were the first back-to-back league titles anyone has managed since Man Utd's hat-trick in 06/07, 07/08 and 08/09, so history appears to be against the current champions.

The Pretenders (Chelsea & Man Utd)

Chelsea have shown ambition in the market and targeted the forward department, leaving their attack in fine shape. Timo Werner, Hakim Ziyech, Kai Havertz and Christian Pulisic all have the potential to wreak havoc on defences, though the Blues' backline was by far the worst amongst the top half of the table last term and it's hard to see them challenging the dominant duo without addressing that concern.

Frank Lampard has been handed further funds to sign left-back Ben Chilwell, fixing one of the biggest weaknesses in defence. 35-year-old Thiago Silva arrived on a free transfer, as has promising centre-back Malang Sarr, while new additions could still arrive, most notably the heavily-linked Rennes goalkeeper Edouard Mendy, so the Blues look a shoe-in for a top-four finish.

Whereas Chelsea shipped 54 goals, **Man Utd** only let in 36 – just three more than Liverpool's much vaunted rearguard. Despite the clear need for a top-level centre back to partner Harry Maguire, the Red Devils have solid foundations to build upon as they aim to re-establish themselves as a serious European force.

The signing of Bruno Fernandes worked wonders for the second half of United's campaign, with Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men taking just 1.42 points per game before his arrival, and 2.29 since his first game in February. In fact, the Portuguese international bagged eight goals and seven assists from 14 league games, as well as eight goals and seven assists in 17 matches for previous club Sporting CP as he consistently influenced games.

Add into the mix the arrival of Donny van de Beek and the continued presence of World Cup winner Paul Pogba, and United's midfield has an array of options with solid back-ups in Nemanja Matic, Scott McTominay and Fred. Meanwhile, further forwards, young attacking trio Anthony Martial, Marcus Rashford and Mason Greenwood bagged 64 goals between them across all competitions last season, which was seven more than the combined total of Liverpool's front three.

United's first choice options are beginning to take shape, but it's clear that Solskjaer doesn't fancy his back-up options so much, particularly in defence and up front, often playing the same XI time and again after the covid break. The midfield is in good shape and although Jadon Sancho may yet slip through the net, Man Utd will surely spend money at some stage this window to keep a step ahead of those that would threaten their recaptured Champions League status.

Title Race – Man City (1.82), Liverpool (3.3), Chelsea (12), Man Utd (21)

Liverpool held a an 18-point gap over Man City in the final standings and we'd expect things to be much closer between them this time around. However, Liverpool's 33-point lead over both Man Utd

and Chelsea left them with 50% more than those two sides, and that's simply too big a gap to bridge in one season.

Man Utd and especially Chelsea might only be two or three signings away from a real title challenge, but Liverpool and City have been a class apart from the rest of the league for some time now. With the dominant duo possessing two of the best managers in the world, rookies Frank Lampard and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer will simply be seeking to reduce the points deficit rather than overhauling them.

City and Liverpool are hard to split but Chelsea have done some excellent, if expensive business, and they look like being the best of the rest.

Chelsea w/o Liverpool & Man City @ 2.75

North London Revival (Arsenal & Tottenham)

The budding optimism that followed Mikel Arteta's appointment has grown following success in both the FA Cup and the Community Shield. Attack has been bolstered by the signing of the versatile Willian, while they're reportedly trying to add Lyon midfielder Houssem Aouar, but it's further back where they've really struggled.

The centre-backs at Mikel Arteta's disposal simply haven't been up to the job, but with William Saliba finally arriving and the left-footed Gabriel Magalhaes added, Arsenal could be much better in this department – provided Hector Bellerin remains at right-back. Granit Xhaka excelled under Arteta in midfield alongside Dani Ceballos, who has returned on loan, and should the Gunners add Atletico Madrid's Thomas Partey to the ranks, they could suddenly become much more competitive.

Arsenal are no longer rudderless and are heading in a defined direction, but their eighth-place finish last term was both their lowest standing and points total in a quarter of a century. Rivals have also strengthened, meaning that closing the gap to a Champions League place looks beyond the Gunners reach at present, but they look worthy of their billing to get back into the top six.

Jose Mourinho is yet to truly shake off the feeling that he is ill-suited to following Mauricio Pochettino at **Tottenham**. However, Spurs would have finished fourth based on a table since his appointment, wile his team looked more tactically coherent and were adapting to his methods post-lockdown with 14 points from their final six league games. His first choice attacking options appear in good shape – speedsters Heung-min Son and Lucas Moura can flank goalscorer Harry Kane – which is well suited to Mourinho's quick transitions from back to front.

The arrival of Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg is welcome but another central midfielder is needed. Matt Doherty is an excellent signing at right-back and will presumably start over the defensively erratic Serge Aurier, but Jan Vertonghen's departure leaves them short at centre-back. Overall, Spurs need more depth at centre-back, possibly left-back, central midfield and a substitute for when Kane is unavailable, and look the most vulnerable of the traditional 'Big Six' heading into the new campaign.

Upstarts (Leicester, Wolves & Everton)

Leicester occupied the vast majority of last season in a top-four position and no doubt they'll be a threat again this time around. However, they ran out of steam and squandered Champions League football, as they're lack of depth proved fatal in the final stretch. That was particularly exposed when full-backs Ben Chillwell and Ricardo Pereira suffered injuries, but while they've added Atalanta full-

back Timothy Castagne, Chillwell has departed for Chelsea. Having qualified for the Europa League, the Foxes will endure a testing schedule, so we wouldn't be at all surprised to see them fizzle out in the final stretch again.

Wolves did manage to cope with the workload of playing in Europe, despite Nuno Espirito Santo calling upon a small squad. They're not in the Europa League this time around though and look a better bet than the Foxes to challenge the traditional 'Big Six'. They've shown consistency under Nuno Espirito Santo and although the loss of Matt Doherty at right-back will hurt, there's good reason to think they can maintain their standards.

They're well equipped in attack with the emergence of Daniel Podence and the progress of Adama Traore, along with the presence of Diogo Jota and star striker Raul Jimenez. Meanwhile, they've also spent £35m on wonderkid Fabio Silva and possess Ruben Neves in midfield, so we'd expect them to have the firepower to turn some of their draws into victories. Indeed, they had a joint-high 14 stalemates along with Arsenal and Brighton, as they went just W1-D6-L3 in the Premier League following Europa League qualifiers or group stage games during the first half of the campaign.

Of those challenging the established order Wolves look best equipped, provided new signing Marcal slots in well at left-back with Jonny Otto injured for the long term, and as long as a quality replacement can be found for Doherty.

Everton have spent a lot of money in recent years under a conveyor belt of managers with different philosophies, the end result being a squad that's bloated and suffering from a high wage bill. Despite this, they've backed Carlo Ancelotti with big name signings Allan and James Rodriguez – both of whom have enjoyed success under the Italian previously – and now is the time to deliver.

Midfield was a particular area of concern for the Toffees last term and although expensive, those two signings are just what the doctor ordered. Allan brings control to proceedings and James should provide the creativity that Gylfi Sigurdsson was originally signed to inject. Abdoulaye Doucoure has also been purchased from relegated Watford, so there should be a big improvement in central areas.

Our big concern with the Toffees is the lack of a truly class forward. Arsenal (Aubameyang), Spurs (Kane), Leicester (Vardy) and Wolves (Jimenez) are all covered, but it's hard to place Dominick Calvert-Lewin in the same bracket, Moise Kean has so far failed to ignite, while Richarlison isn't quite in the same mould as those players.

Ancelotti's thoughts must also turn to defence. A centre-back and cover at full-back is required with Leighton Baines retiring and Djibril Sidibe returning to Monaco, and so while Everton should be a far more competitive outfit this term, a top six finish would appear beyond their reach at present.

Top 4 – Chelsea (1.5), Man Utd (1.53), Arsenal (3.75), Tottenham (4.5), Wolves (7.5), Leicester (11)

Top 6 – Arsenal (1.57), Tottenham (1.73), Wolves (3.5), Leicester (3.75), Everton (6)

Arsenal are heading in the right direction and look a step ahead of their North London neighbours to land a top-six finish, but at the prices we'd leave them alone. Tottenham's lack of depth concerns us and should anything happen to star duo Heung-min Son and Harry Kane, you would have to fear for them. Everton have spent big and will expect a top-half finish, but they're playing catch up with Leicester and Wolves, as the latter look the best option to upset the cart a little.

0.5pts: Wolves Top 6 @ 3.5

Top Half/Relegation

There's not much room for smaller clubs to compete in the top half this season. Liverpool and City are out in front on their own, Chelsea and United are clearly European material, there's potential for a North London revival, Leicester and Wolves will remain dangerous, while big spenders Everton will expect Carlo Ancelotti to make progress. That's nine teams all shorter than 1.7 for a top-half finish, who will expect nothing less than that, with all but the Toffees shorter than 1.5.

Solid and Steady (Southampton & Sheffield Utd)

Of the 11 teams that look like plausible candidates for relegation, **Southampton** are the favourites to survive. They finished the 19/20 campaign with a seven-game unbeaten run, including a win over Man City and a draw with Man Utd, lifting them to 11th in the final standings. They're certainly heading in the right direction under Ralph Hasenhuttl, but there must be concern in midfield with key man Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg departing this summer, while it remains to be seen whether Danny Ings can replicate last season's form.

The Saints have strengthened at the back with Kyle Walker-Peters joining permanently from Spurs, while they've signed centre-back Mohammed Salisu from Real Valladolid. They should find themselves relatively comfortable from the drop, but for a team that has lost a key player this summer they look too short to go on and bring about a top-half finish.

Sheffield Utd excelled on their return to the top flight last summer and Chris Wilder isn't expected to deliver another top-half finish. However, they are pretty much the same squad as last year, with Dean Henderson replaced in goal by Aaron Ramsdale, However, there has been strengthening at the back with Derby full-backs Max Lowe and Jayden Bogle arriving for small fees and Ethan Ampadu joining on loan, while winger Oli Burke has joined from West Brom. The Blades held the fourth-best defence in the division last term and we'd expect that to ease them comfortably to safety.

Fallen Giants (Leeds, Newcastle, West Ham & Aston Villa)

Only promoted duo Fulham and West Brom are odds-on to go down with any of the bookies, though Marcelo Bielsa's Leeds appear better equipped for the top flight and could surprise some people this term. 1997/98 remains the only Premier League season where all three promoted clubs went down immediately, so we'd expect at least one of them to survive.

There are similarities between **Leeds** and Rafa Benitez's Newcastle in 2017/18, where a combination of sleeping giant and world class manager landed a top-half finish. Newcastle had only spent one season out of the top flight, but whether Bielsa's brand of football could be carried out in the Championship was questioned when he arrived in Yorkshire, and there's conclusive proof at this stage that his approach can handle the rigours of English football.

We would however be wary of backing them for a top-half finish. Patrick Bamford has fine movement but lacks a clinical edge up front, and we're not sure £27m signing Rodrigo is going to be the answer. Since a 16-goal haul for Valencia in 2017/18, he's since netted just eight times in 18/19 and just four last term. Further, at 35-years-old key creative force Pablo Hernandez can't be expected to deliver week in week out, while it remains to be seen whether signing Robin Koch can fill the gaping void at centre-back after Ben White returned to Brighton.

There's a heavy disappointment among the **Newcastle** fanbase over the failed Saudi deal, while a poor end to last season where they failed to win any of their final six games sours the mood ahead of the new campaign. Steve Bruce has done a fine job considering the negativity that surrounded his appointment, uncertainty in the boardroom, the quality at his disposal, not to mention the hard task of following fan-favourite Rafa Benítez as a former Sunderland manager himself.

The Magpies have hardly set the transfer window ablaze, but they have brought in Callum Wilson, Ryan Fraser, Jamal Lewis and Jeff Hendrick this summer. They'll hope Wilson helps reduce a dependence on wide men Allan Saint-Maximin and Miguel Almiron for goals, and that Ryan Fraser can rekindle his habit of providing assists for his former Bournemouth colleague. They could do with some more creativity beyond Jonjo Shelvey, but while Newcastle fans can expect another acrimonious season with the board and little true excitement on the pitch, they should retain their top-flight status.

The **West Ham** board have further irked the fans by allowing Grady Diangana to join relegation rivals West Brom on a permanent deal, which combined with an unpopular manager and lack of new arrivals, leaves a toxic atmosphere to start the campaign with. Although David Moyes' conservative tactics grate with the crowd, he hasn't even been able to shore up a porous backline that has had particular problems dealing with set-pieces.

Further, attacking options Felipe Anderson, Manuel Lanzini and Pablo Fornals have each experienced a significant dip in form. Jarred Bowen, Andriy Yarmolenko, Michial Antonio and Sebastian Haller look set to lead the Hammers' charge in the final third, and that combination won't scare a lot of teams in this division. Beyond Declan Rice and Tomas Soucek, there's a lack of real quality in midfield and West Ham could pay the price.

Aston Villa survived by the skin of their teeth last term, with talisman, local boy and captain Jack Grealish scoring on the final day to keep them afloat. They can't just rely upon the newly capped England midfielder to pull all the strings though, and they need to sort out a backline that conceded 67 times last seasons – second only to rock-bottom Norwich.

The end of the experienced Pepe Reina's loan spell doesn't help matters. Wesley is still injured, but Villa have spent big to bring in Brentford's Ollie Watkins, who scored 25 times in the Championship last season. They've lacked a forward that can run in behind since Tammy Abraham's loan spell at Villa Park, but there's a need for greater quality throughout the team. The signing of Matty Cash at right-back is also useful, with Dean Smith relying up centre-backs to play there at the end of last term.

Dull Trio (Burnley, Palace & Brighton)

Sean Dyche has done a fantastic job at **Burnley** but aside from in goal and up front, his squad is threadbare, with Jeff Hendrick also departing for Newcastle. The frustration is evident, but Burnley lack the financial resources to make any major moves in the market.

Ashley Barnes, Chris Woods and Jay Rodriguez represent three good choices in attack, but should anything happen to key men James Tarkowski, Nick Pope or Dwight McNeil (all of whom have been linked with a move away this summer), Dyche's job will get even harder. Still, we can expect resolute defensive displays and Burnley will likely retain their top-flight status.

After a seventh-place finish in 2017/18, Burnley struggled as they dropped to 15th the next time around. They had a hectic early Europa League schedule that season though, which they won't this time around, and while they won't be the most interesting team to watch they should have enough about them to battle to survival.

Crystal Palace were certainly a dull team for the neutral last term. Only Norwich scored fewer goals than them last term, while they became the first side never to score more than twice in a game and avoid relegation. With easily the best defensive record amongst the bottom-half finishers, it's clear where Roy Hodgson's men need to improve this season.

The signing of Eberechi Eze is exciting and should help in that regard, while talisman Wilfried Zaha looks set to stay with no club willing to pay the kind of money the Eagles are after. Pre-season has seen Palace create plenty of chances and that offers encouragement, but there's still no clinical finisher to tuck them away.

Without further additions, Palace look set for an uncomfortable season. They have an ageing squad and while the signing of right-back Nathan Ferguson ticks one box, there's further refreshment needed. Centre-backs James Tomkins, Gary Cahill and Mamadou Sakho are not getting any younger, but Hodgson's deep-lying tactics should eke out one more year from that trio, while Martin Kelly can shift inside to help out. A new striker could change the picture completely, but at the moment the Eagles are tired and predictable.

Roy Hodgson came close to leaving this summer and Palace are certainly in the mix for relegation. However, their demise is more likely to be a slow one. Put simply, the Eagles have a reliable a solid manager, provided he stays the course of the season, but need to recruit well over the next 12 months to avoid being prime candidates for the drop next time around.

Palace's rivals **Brighton** enjoyed a solid first season under Graham Potter, adapting to a more possession-based brand of football, even if they were still involved in a number of low-scoring affairs. Centre-back Shane Duffy has been loaned out to Celtic, but while a sturdy defender, a lack of ability in possession makes Ben White (who spent last season with Leeds) a much better fit for the current regime. Indeed, they turned down a £25m bid from the Whites to retain his services.

Adam Lallana has the potential to add a bit of class to the team and replace the departed Aaron Mooy, and he's another good fit for Potter's style, especially with the Seagulls low on creativity. They'll need Neal Maupay and Aaron Conolly to be at their best with limited options up front, but an encouraging end to last season suggests they ought to hang around in the top flight.

Promoted Favourites

Fulham have bounced straight back under Scott Parker and have made a couple of smart signings in Antonee Robinson (LB) and Mario Lemina (DM), while Harrison Reed (DM) has made his loan from Southampton permanent. They have a proven goalscorer in Mitrovic, but still need more quality at the back to be competitive. Fulham conceded a whopping 81 goals in their last top-flight campaign and shipped more than the three sides to finish above them in the Championship last season. Even Steven Sessegnon and Alfie Mawson have been loaned out to Bristol City and so there's a lack of both quality and depth. Without addressing this area, Fulham could be toast.

West Brom endured a sustained decline in form either side of the coronavirus break, winning just three of their final 12 matches, seeing them scrape back into the top flight as Brentford failed to

capitalize. Loan stars Matheus Pereira and Grady Diangana have returned on permanent deals, but Filip Krovinovic has returned to Benfica and full-back Nathan Ferguson has been snapped up by Palace. They've also lost Premier League experience from the dressing room with veterans Gareth Barry, Chris Brunt and Ali Al Habsi departing this summer, so Slaven Bilic's men look in serious trouble.

Top Half – Southampton (2.63), Leeds (3), West Ham (4), Sheffield Utd (4.2), Brighton (4.5), Burnley (6), Newcastle (6.5), Aston Villa (8), Crystal Palace (8), West Brom (13), Fulham (15)

Relegation – Fulham (2.0), West Brom (2.1), Aston Villa (3), Crystal Palace (3.25), Newcastle (3.5), Burnley (4.5), West Ham (5), Sheffield Utd (5), Brighton (5), Leeds (5), Southampton (11)

Promoted duo West Brom and Fulham are understandably the favourites to go down. However, our pick would be the former, given the lack of new signings and the departure of experienced veterans around the dressing room. Fulham have a little bit more about them, particularly with a goal machine in Serbian international Mitrovic up to, so we'd back the Baggies to finish bottom.

Palace are certainly in the mix for relegation, but it might be one year too early and its next season that we'd fear for them if they can't make further inroads in the market, and especially in their attempts to sign a striker. Aston Villa and West Ham would be the other two sides we're most concerned about, though the latter are a much bigger price and look better value for the drop. Moyes was never going to turn the Hammers into an exciting outfit, but he hasn't even been able to secure the defence and unless something changes it's going to be a long hard slog for them this term.

[West Brom To Finish Bottom @ 4.5](#)

[0.5pts: West Ham Relegated @ 5](#)

Top Goalscorer – Salah (6.5), Aubameyang (6.5), Kane (7), Werner (10), Aguero (10), Sterling (15), Mane (17), Vardy (19), Jesus (21), Rashford (23), Martial (23), Ings (23)

Six players have made the top seven in the past two seasons for goals (Vardy, Aubameyang, Sterling, Salah, Mane and Kane). It would be a surprise to see Danny Ings come so close again, but we would expect Chelsea new boy Timo Werner too add himself to the list of contenders, especially with other attacking talents like Pulisic, Ziyech and Havertz to feed him. The former Leipzig man bagged 28 goals in last year's Bundesliga, leaving him second only to the irresistible Robert Lewandowski, and well ahead of third-placed Jadon Sancho on 17.

We'd certainly disregard Sergio Aguero this term. He'll maintain consistency when he's on the pitch, but he misses a few games and teammate Raheem Sterling looks more attractive at a much bigger price. However, the England international isn't the most natural of finishers and can still miss easy chances, as he demonstrated against Lyon in the Champions League, and we'd rather leave Man City's players alone.

Kane is another we'd steer clear of given we expect his club side to struggle a bit. He's third favourite and has missed chucks of recent seasons with injuries, most notably in the ankle. Having reached the 20-goal mark four seasons running, he's dipped under that mark in the last two, while a lack of back-up means no doubt at some point fatigue or injury will play its part.

We're not quite so sure Mo Salah deserves to start as the favourite and will have to share goals with Sadio Mane at Liverpool. Those two have played an extraordinary number of games over the past couple of years for club and country, and burnout could become an issue. Mane looks far better value that his teammate, but we'd expect the Senegalese international to hover close without claiming the prize.

Aubameyang may be 31-years-old now, but he doesn't appear to have lost any of his pace yet and should expect a better supply line to feed of this term. He came joint-first with Salah and Mane in 2018/19 and finished just one behind golden boot winner Vardy last term, so with more chances to feed off, he looks worthy of being backed.

Vardy's price is huge considering he finished as top scorer last season. Age may be a factor, as well as Leicester's late season collapse, but the likes of Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Ciro Immobile and Robert Lewandowski are all the wrong side of 30 and still banging them in. The first two might be superhuman, but age doesn't have to be a barrier for either Vardy or Aubameyang – both of whom are still rapid.

The Leicester City man has bagged 18 from the penalty spot in the last five seasons and can be expected to add another four of five to his tally that way, while Leicester play some attractive football that should see chances continue to drop his way. We'd have a little on the former England international, but Aubameyang steals the show and Werner is one to watch out for.

Aubameyang Top Scorer @ 6.5

Vardy Top Scorer EW (4 places, 1/4) @ 19