How do teams with nothing to play for perform?

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Strategy Summary:

It is often reported that it is good to be playing teams with nothing left to play for at the end of the season, but how true is that? Here we investigate whether we should be looking to take these teams on or whether this supposed lack of motivation is overstated and they actually become value propositions in the run-in.

Published April 2018

🔲 DO TEAMS WITH NOTHING TO PLAY FOR MAKE EASY OPPONENTS?

Looking back at the final six games from 2010/11 to 2016/17 Premier League seasons we have identified 290 matches where at least one team had nothing to play for. We've taken this as approximately based on teams having a points gap to a meaningful position (top-four, top-six, relegation etc) of three plus the number of games remaining, i.e. a gap of four points going into their final game (although three plus an unrecoverable goal difference has also been taken), five points with two remaining, six with three etc.

Home Side with Nothing to Play For vs Motivated Away Team

If we start by looking at home teams with nothing to play for against an away team that does, then we have a sample of 97 matches. We can see that the home team had a poor record, going W29-D24-L44, showing an unusual bias towards the away side that would return +18.9% profit if you'd backed them every time.

Breaking that down, when these home teams were the favourites they've made for especially poor value. They've won only 16 of 45 matches while being beaten 15 times, including seven away wins at greater than 3/1. That's resulted in a profit of 40.4% backing the away team while backing the draw has also been a good strategy (+16.5%) as the golden rule has been to avoid the home side. Meanwhile, in the 52 matches where these teams were underdogs they produced a seemingly modest return of W13-D10-L29. However, that almost enough for parity between backing the home win (-4.4%) and the away win (+0.3%). Certainly, given the relatively small sample it doesn't conclusively suggest the home team should be discounted when they are underdogs with nothing to play for.

Motivated Home Side vs Away Team with Nothing to Play For

The reverse scenario, where the away side had nothing to play for but the home side did, is again in favour of the more motivated side. This time we have 90 of these matches, and the home side has won 66%, going W59-D19-L12. As a result, backing the away side would have left you out of pocket, with a -37.1% ROI, while the draw would have yielded another significant loss (-20.3%).

However, backing the home side who had something to play for, would have given a return of +7.8% and with all our profitability figures being based on average odds you'd most likely have made a 5% improvement on that by taking best prices, which would result in over 10% profit.

Furthermore, when the favourite in this situation is the home side, they won 73% of their 80 matches, only losing seven of these, as backing the home side gave a +17.4% profit, while both the draw or an away win gave big negatives. In the other 10 matches with the underdog at home in this scenario, the home side only managed one win but four did result in draws a large proportion of these games ended in draws. In fact, if we separate between home teams that were odds-on and all other home teams we see that the former category went W46-D4-L6 while the latter went W12-D11-L1, as there was a large increase in the number of draws.

Neither Side has Anything to Play For

Interestingly in the 103 matches where neither team had anything to play for it is the away side that has been the far more profitable side to back. This obviously goes against the general trend and assumption of a home advantage which is very intriguing. A record of W41-D23-L39 in these matches means that backing the away team every time would have given a +40.8% ROI. Moreover, home favourites were especially worth avoiding as despite an average price of 1.82 over 74 such matches, suggesting a 55% win rate, they won just 47% of the time and with defeat in 30% the away win would have yielded a +51.8% ROI. That includes such results as Man City losing to Norwich in

2013, Arsenal to Swansea in 2015, and Liverpool to Crystal Palace in 2015, while Man Utd's shock defeat to West Brom this season would also have fallen into this category.

In our 29 matches in this category where the home side was the underdog, it again pays to back the away team as they've won 17 times, resulting in a +12.8% profit.

Premier League Teams with Nothing to Play For in the Final 6 Games From 2010/11-2016/17

Anything To Play For?			Match Outcome			ROI (%)		
Home Team	Away Team	Matches	Win	Draw	Loss	Win	Draw	Loss
No	Yes	97	29	24	44	-16.79%	-6.38%	18.93%
Yes	No	90	59	19	12	7.77%	-20.31%	-37.12%
No	No	103	41	23	39	-20.65%	-18.24%	40.81%

Conclusions

It is clear it pays to oppose a side with nothing to play for, especially with the favourites in certain scenarios.

If the home team is the favourite but has nothing to play for then it made no difference whether their opponent had any motivation and they should be opposed – BACK AWAY TEAM

Home favourites with something to play for should be backed against teams with no motivation, while the longer the price on the home side the more the draw should be considered – BACK HOME TEAM

When neither team has anything to play for but the away side is the favourite then they tend to be good value – BACK AWAY TEAM

2017/18 Premier League teams with nothing to play for (as of 18/04/18):

Man City, Man Utd, Liverpool, Spurs, Chelsea, Leicester, Everton, Newcastle, Bournemouth, Watford, WBA