

START DATES OF
DIFFERENT LEAGUES

Premier League	Aug-11
La Liga	Aug-11
Serie A	Aug-19
Bundesliga	Aug-18
Ligue 1	Aug-11
Saudi Pro League	Aug-11

City remain the team to beat

SHABAB CHOWDHURY



Defending champions Manchester City will be gunning for their eighth Premier League title as they fixate to build following their coveted treble-winning season.

Pep Guardiola's side became only the second English club to win a treble after city rivals Manchester United achieved the feat in the 1998-99 season.

United backed it up by clinching the league the following season, and all eyes this time would very naturally be on City to do the same. However, Guardiola's task has become stiffer as potential candidates who would look to challenge the reigning European champions have all brought in significant reinforcements to help their cause as the 2023-24 season has just got underway.

Arsenal, who pushed City to the limit last season in the league, won the curtain-raiser of the season, the Community Shield, on August 6 to bring Mikel Arteta only his second win against Guardiola's City in 10 meetings.

City have rarely had to rely on other sides for their destiny as they have consistently managed to churn out success with fluid football but they also have an interesting record to help them envision lifting another league title.

In the last decade, no side other than themselves have won the league after clinching the Community Shield! City were the ones to do



it in the 2018-19 season.

Guardiola, in an interview previously, credited a big part of his success to his mentality of upgrading or bringing in fresh players to the side after a successful season. "When did you see me with the same squad after winning the league?" Pep had asked.

With club captain Ilkay Gundogan and winger Riyad Mahrez having left, City have brought in Chelsea's Mateo Kovacic and defender Josko Gvardiol from RB Leipzig as reinforcements and upgrades, with potentially more coming in.

Despite Arsenal being the only real contender last time around, City turned around a five-point deficit and clinched the crown but they are set to have at least a few more teams, who look the part to pose a serious challenge to Pep Guardiola this time around.

Arsenal have made serious reinforcements to their side too, making their intentions clear with a statement signing when they roped in West Ham captain Declan Rice for 105 million pounds after getting the signature of Kai Havertz from London rivals Chelsea.

With the new-found belief of actually being able to compete against City for the Premier League title, Arteta's Arsenal have gained that attitude adjustment and would look to go for the title with a much more refined group, not just a young, talented bunch.

Rivals Chelsea were eagerly waiting for the transfer window to begin after a mishap of a season that saw them being managed by four different managers. The Blues cashed in big time on the window as they staged a squad overhaul where they let go of as many as 17 players, with 13 of those being permanent offloads as owner Todd Boehly takes a second chance to get their new beginning off to a less tumultuous start.

However, the one position that has haunted The Blues over the years -- the number nine curse -- is yet again at the forefront as French striker Christopher Nkunku was ruled out owing to a knee injury leaving Nicolas Jackson with the onus of leading the line. As shirt numbers were revealed last Tuesday, it was evident

that no one wanted to even try spurning the curse as all forwards snubbed the number nine shirt!

A young side, with a new manager in Mauricio Pochettino, Chelsea's primary objective this season has to be to get back to competing with Europe's best.

Another side that has been crying out for a striker has finally managed to land one ahead of the new season. Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag's demands were met when Danish striker Rasmus Hojlund was brought in as United's most expensive signing of the summer so far.

Ten Hag's struggles to instill his ideology and system have been evident throughout last season as the Red Devils try to work out the puzzle to get back to their former glories with the resources they have.

One of the biggest resurgences of the 2022-23 was Eddie Howe's Newcastle, who maintained remarkable consistency to cement a place in Europe after an absence of almost two decades.

With both feet on the ground, Newcastle have remained measured so far in the market, with an exception in the form of signing Italian midfielder Sandro Tonali for 55 million pounds followed by Leicester City's Harvey Barnes for 44 million pounds. These signings, however impressive, infer their desire to solidify a top-six finish in the Premier League.

Liverpool's fall from grace saw the Merseyside team make a shuffle in terms of recruitment. A handful of outgoings have made way for some new, exciting incomings -- World Cup winner Alexis Mac Allister and Dominik Szoboszlai. With the top four on the primary agenda, Liverpool also have the chance of getting back to the Champions League by winning the Europa League.

Eyes on the prize is the name of the game but another season of traditional top six teams aspiring to reach City standards might just be the case, while the Citizens look to push themselves and surpass their own standards as they eye their sixth title in seven years.

SAUDI PRO LEAGUE here to stay!

NABID YEASIN

Links of Kylian Mbappe to Real Madrid, rumours of Neymar returning to Barcelona have been the commonalities of the transfer market over the past few years. This summer, however, in addition to the aforementioned sagas, the emergence of one major entity -- the Saudi Pro League -- has taken the transfer market by storm.

The stage was set late last year, though, after an unprecedented deal worth \$200m per year saw one of the biggest names in football, Cristiano Ronaldo, move to Al Nassr from English giant Manchester United in the January 2023 transfer window.

Not only did that sensational move put Al Nassr on the map, it inevitably opened floodgates to the cash-rich Saudi Pro League. It is vividly evident this summer as a host of big names followed in the footsteps of arguably the most influential player of all time.

His former teammate in Real Madrid and the reigning Ballon d'Or winner, Karim Benzema, had tongues wagging with his move for free from the 14-time Champions League winners to Al Ittihad -- one of four clubs alongside Al Hilal, Al Ahli, and Al Nassr owned by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund.

German champions Bayern Munich saw Sadio Mane join Ronaldo at Al Nassr, Riyad Mahrez went to Al Ahli just after helping Manchester City to an era-defining continental treble. Meanwhile, N'Golo Kante, Ruben Neves, Edouard Mendy, and Kalidou Koulibaly all have been just a part of the major influx of players from Europe to Saudi Arabia.

Such big names being lured out of a continent that has ruled the sport for ages was bound to strike a nerve; and it did. Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp thought the fact that the Saudi transfer window closes on September 20, three weeks after it shuts in Europe, would have a "detrimental effect" on the sport. Meanwhile, according to City manager Pep Guardiola, the Saudi league has "completely changed the market" while Klopp admitted it is something that the European managers now "need to deal with".

With the Saudi league creating more adversaries than cohorts, the most scathing judgment on the league was probably passed by Barcelona president Joan Laporta, who saw one of his summer targets Marcelo Brozovic choose Al Nassr

over a move to the Spanish club. According to Laporta, the gold rush to the oil-rich Gulf state has "no sporting reasons", hinting at unmatchable, and at times outrageous, deals offered by the Saudi clubs being the sole motivator for players.

Even though the Saudi league has reportedly failed in their attempts to get seven-time Ballon d'Or winner Lionel Messi and 24-year-old Mbappe,



who has already let PSG know of his willingness to switch, a suggestion that the league offers no sporting reasons to players is arguably harsh.

While Ronaldo left for the Saudi league at 37 with the best parts of his glittering career in the rear-view mirror, it remains hard to consider someone as professional as the Portuguese would choose to jump ship only due to financial incentives -- especially since lack of a promising sporting plan and infrastructure had somewhat contributed to Ronaldo's decision in cutting ties with Manchester United despite having been their previous season's best player.

It is true that other than Ronaldo's countrymen Neves, 26, most players that moved to Saudi are in their thirties. But that still does not mean that the likes of Kante, Benzema, Mahrez, Mane, Roberto Firmino, Mendy, and Alex Telles are done making claims for their respective national teams. On the contrary, most are mainstays in their national sides -- a fact that only shows that the Saudi league is far from being a retirement destination

Major players acquired by Saudi Pro League 2023/24 season

Player	Club	Transfer fee
Sadio Mane	Al Nassr	£24m
Allan Saint-Maximin	Al Ahli	£23m
Riyad Mahrez	Al Ahli	£30m
Jordan Henderson	Al Ettifaq	£12m
Malcom	Al Hilal	£51.5m
Alex Telles	Al Nassr	Free
Seko Fofana	Al Nassr	£21.6m
Sergej Milinkovic-Savic	Al Hilal	£34.2m
Roberto Firmino	Al Ahli	Free
Marcelo Brozovic	Al Nassr	£15.4m
Edouard Mendy	Al Ahli	£16m
Karim Benzema	Al Ittihad	Free
N'Golo Kante	Al Ittihad	Free
Ruben Neves	Al Hilal	£47.1m
Kalidou Koulibaly	Al Hilal	£15.7m

** ALL FACTS AND FIGURES UPDATED TILL AUGUST 9, 2023

for players.

Also, Al Nassr refusing to go ahead with a deal for Chelsea star Hakim Ziyech following a reported knee injury implies that the Saudi project is not just about raking up the big names in football but one that prioritises a long-term vision -- unlike the case of the Chinese Super League, another Asian league that had injected serious cash to be a footballing force in the last decade but failed to see their vision through.

What the Saudi league is yet to do is convince more players in their mid-20s -- the period when footballers are primed to leave their marks on the global stage -- move to the Middle Eastern nation and still maintain their status quo as one of the top talents around the globe.

As things stand, the big spenders in Europe and the producers of footballing prospects around the globe are now well-aware of another major player in the market who could lure away their assets and targets. And it is probably going to stay for a while, relentlessly pushing to make Ronaldo's prophecy of the Saudi Pro League becoming "one of the top five leagues in the world".



EUROPE MOVES ON

As Lionel Messi continues to spread stardust, gracing his towering presence in the USA following Inter Miami move, fervent football fans enter an era they have long dreaded. With Cristiano Ronaldo having chosen to ply his trades in Saudi Arabia midway last season, European football is set to embark on a brand-new season without two of the all-time greats for the first time in 21 years. Despite the gaping void seemingly impossible to fill in the foreseeable future, brilliances from next-generation superstars and cutting-edge tactical innovations are primed to be served on a platter, especially in the Champions League.