

CHAMPIONS ALL!

Arsenal 1931

Manager: Herbert Chapman
Leading scorer: Jack Lambert, 38 (7 hat-tricks)
Ever-present: Cliff Bastin
First at top: At start
Latest at top: Feb 5
Date won: Apr 18
Players used: 22

It took Herbert Chapman six years at Arsenal to mould his first championship team, with only one top-six finish before 1931. One wonders if today's managers would be granted as much time! Five straight wins at the start of the season took Arsenal to the head of the table. Aston Villa and Sheffield Wednesday (bidding for a third consecutive title) both had spells at the top, but just one defeat in their last 19 games saw Arsenal home. They scored a new club record of 127 goals and their 66 points was also a record until Leeds United's 67, 38 years later.

127 remains the highest number of goals scored by a championship-winning club. It is second in the all-clubs list, only being bettered by Aston Villa, who scored 128, also in 1930/31. There was just one game in which Arsenal did not score – against Huddersfield Town, Chapman's former club.

Jack Lambert scored 98 League goals in 143 games for Arsenal, having joined them from Doncaster Rovers in 1926. He was a strong player with a powerful shot but won no England caps. David Jack (with 31) and Cliff Bastin (28) also made major contributions to the goal total.

This was the first time a southern club had won the championship. Of the 108 titles to date, only 20 have been won by clubs south of the Midlands and East Anglia.

Arsenal 1933

Manager: Herbert Chapman
Leading scorer: Cliff Bastin, 33
Ever-present: Cliff Bastin
First at top: Oct 29
Latest at top: Nov 19
Date won: Apr 22
Players used: 22

After finishing second in both League and Cup in 1931/32, Arsenal returned to the top this season. Their two wingers, Hulme and Bastin, scored 53 of Arsenal's 118 goals. Lambert was not so productive this season, but scored five in one game in a 9-2 win over Sheffield United. Arsenal set the pace all season, winning the title with a comfortable four point margin over Aston Villa.

Cliff Bastin enjoyed a long career at Arsenal, from 1929 to 1947, having joined them from Exeter, aged just 17. He was just 21 years of age in this championship season. 5ft 8in tall, Bastin had a powerful left foot shot and won 21 England caps. His overall career figures for Arsenal were 151 goals in 353 League appearances.

The season was notable for Arsenal's FA Cup defeat at Third Division Walsall, although admittedly they were without five first-team regulars.

Arsenal 1934

Managers: Herbert Chapman, Joe Shaw
Leading scorers: Cliff Bastin, Ray Bowden, 13
Ever-present: No-one
First at top: Nov 25
Latest at top: Apr 2
Date won: Apr 28
Players used: 24

Tragedy struck on January 6, 1934 when manager Herbert Chapman died of pneumonia, aged 55. Trainer Joe Shaw took over team management for the remainder of the season, with George Allison as general manager.

Perhaps as a consequence, a run of three defeats in January followed, dropping Arsenal to second place. However, just two defeats in their last 15 games ensured Arsenal of their second successive championship.

Inside-right Ray Bowden joined from Plymouth Argyle in March 1933. He won six England caps whilst with Arsenal and moved to Newcastle United in 1937 after scoring 42 goals in 123 League games.

Ted Drake made his debut in March and made an immediate impact, scoring seven goals in the 10 games he played.

Arsenal 1935

Manager: George Allison
Leading scorers: Ted Drake, 42 (7 hat-tricks)
Ever-present: No-one
First at top: Oct 13
Latest at top: Jan 19
Date won: Apr 22
Players used: 25

Arsenal won their third consecutive championship by a four point margin over a Sunderland team that went on to win the 1936 championship. At halfway, Arsenal were two points behind Sunderland and Manchester City, but as these clubs lost form in January Arsenal won four on the trot and retained their lead to the end of the season.

This was Ted Drake's season. He had joined from Southampton in March 1934 and was 23 years-old in 1935. He was a brave and powerful centre-forward who won five England caps, despite the competition from Dean and Lawton. His seven hat-tricks in 1934/35 included four 4-goal hauls. Later, he managed the Chelsea championship team of 1955. He also played first-class cricket for Hampshire. His career totals for Arsenal were 128 goals in 169 League games.

Allison's important signings this season were Jack Crayston, a 6ft centre-half from Bradford Park Avenue, and Leeds United's English international Wilf Copping, an examiner and one of the real 'hard men' of the game.

The England team that played Italy at Highbury in November 1934 included seven Arsenal players.

Arsenal 1938

Manager: George Allison
Leading scorer: Ted Drake, 17
Ever-present: No-one
First at top: Feb 19
Latest at top: Mar 5
Date won: May 7 (last day)
Players used: 29

Many of the triple-championship players had retired or left the club, so there were new faces in the Arsenal teams of 1937/38. They included cricketer Denis Compton, who joined brother Les in the team. Alex James had retired in 1937 and finding a successor proved difficult. The team featured George Swindin in goal, amateur Bernard Joy at centre-half and centre-forward Eddie Carr, who scored important goals as the season reached its climax.

Brentford were the surprise club of the season. They built up a three-point lead over their rivals by the end of December, but fell away in the second half of the season to finish 6th. With three games to play, Preston North End had the same points total as Arsenal, and their first championship since 1890/91 looked possible. However, Arsenal beat them 3-1 in Preston, leaving the Gunners in a straight fight with Wolves for the title. Wolves had a difficult last game at Sunderland and lost 0-1, so Arsenal's 5-0 win at home to Bolton gave them the championship by a single point. Arsenal equalled Sheffield Wednesday's record championship low total (for a 42-game season) of 52 points.

Arsenal used 29 players in League games this season, a total not exceeded until Chelsea's 30 in 2004/05.

Arsenal 1948

Manager: Tom Whittaker
Leading scorer: Ronnie Rooke, 33
Ever-present: Ronnie Rooke
First at top: At start
Latest at top: Never headed
Date won: Apr 10
Players used: 19

Unbeaten in their first 17 games, Arsenal never looked like being caught. They were three points ahead of Burnley at the turn of the year, and finished a comfortable seven points clear of Manchester United. A 1-1 draw with Huddersfield Town in April gave them the title with four games still to play. Five of the 1938 championship team made regular appearances this season and wing-half Joe Mercer had played for the 1939 Everton team.

5ft 9in Ronnie Rooke joined from Fulham in December 1946. He was a 37-year-old veteran in this championship season. Never capped, but he was blessed with a thunderball shot that brought him 68 goals in his 88 career appearances for Arsenal.

Arsenal 1953

Manager: Tom Whittaker
Leading scorer: Doug Lishman, 22
Ever-present: No-one
First at top: Apr 15
Latest at top: Same
Date won: May 1 (last game)
Players used: 21

Five consecutive wins in April took the Gunners' supporters minds off climbers on Everest and invitations to the coronation of HM QE2. A defeat at challengers Preston in the penultimate game meant that the title race boiled down to a last game 'must win' against Burnley. Preston had finished their programme with a two-point lead, so Arsenal knew a win was good enough for them to take the title on goal average. Late goals from Burnley made for an exciting finish, but Arsenal held out to win 3-2. This was only the third time that goal average was needed to settle the title.

Doug Lishman was a 5ft 11in inside-left with a knack of scoring goals, 125 in 226 League games for Arsenal. He joined from Walsall in May 1948. He was not capped by England, but is well thought of by your author, thanks to his hat-trick for Forest in a vital end-of-season promotion decider at Bramall Lane in 1957!

Arsenal 1971

Manager: Bertie Mee
Leading scorer: Ray Kennedy, 19
Ever-present: George Armstrong, Frank McLintock, Bob Wilson
First at top: Apr 17
Latest at top: May 3
Date won: May 3 (last game)
Players used: 16

Leeds United and Arsenal were well clear of the pack at the halfway point of the season, with Leeds three points clear. However, an excellent second half saw Arsenal to the championship; all their last nine home games were won. Leeds finished their programme with 64 points; good enough to win the title in most seasons. Arsenal had a game in hand, played two days later at White Hart Lane. A goal from Ray Kennedy gave Arsenal a 1-0 win and the championship.

With the title won, attention switched to the FA Cup final. An unforgettable Charlie George goal in extra time won Arsenal the Cup and the League and Cup double.

Ray Kennedy, just 19 at the time, had an outstanding season. He was a tall powerful inside forward who was later to win more championship honours after his move to Liverpool.

In addition to the three ever-presents, Kennedy, McNab, Radford, Rice and Storey also made 40 or more appearances this season. George Graham, later to manage the club to two championships, played in 38 games and scored 11 goals.

Arsenal 1989

Manager: George Graham
Leading scorer: Alan Smith, 23
Ever-present: John Lukic, Nigel Winterburn,
David Rocastle
First at top: Dec 26
Latest at top: The same
Date won: May 26 (last game)
Players used: 17

This season saw the closest-ever finish. The last day of the season found Liverpool top after winning games in hand, needing only a draw from their home game with Arsenal. Even a 0-1 defeat would have left them top. In a moment that is etched into folk memory, Michael Thomas skipped away in the last minute of the game to score Arsenal's second in their 2-0 win. It left the clubs level on points and level on goal difference; Arsenal took the title because they had scored more goals. If goal average was still the rule, it would have been Liverpool's championship.

Alan Smith was a tall (6ft 3in) striker who joined Arsenal from Leicester City. He was Arsenal Player of the Year in 1989. His career totals for the club were 87 goals in 242+22 League games.

Only Paul Merson also scored ten goals or more this season.

Arsenal 1991

Manager: George Graham
Leading scorer: Alan Smith, 22
Ever-present: David Seaman, Lee Dixon, Nigel Winterburn, Steve Bould
First at top: Dec 8
Latest at top: Dec 31
Date won: May 6
Players used: 19

This is the only occasion that a championship winning team has had points deducted during the season. Arsenal were docked two points (on November 12) and Manchester United one point after being found guilty of bringing the game into disrepute following a 21-man brawl during the game at Old Trafford in October. Arsenal still finished 7 points clear of second placed Liverpool, losing only one League game. Just 8 goals were conceded in the 19 away games, equalling Preston's record from 1889 (when only 11 away games were played).

The line-up was remarkably similar to that of 1989, except that Anders Limpar had replaced Brian Marwood on the wing. Tony Adams was the kingpin of a defence that only conceded 18 goals.

Arsenal 1998

Manager: Arsène Wenger
Leading scorer: Dennis Bergkamp, 16
Ever-present: No-one
First at top: Sep 24
Latest at top: Apr 7
Date won: May 3
Players used: 26

Arsène Wenger's championship-winning career started on a high note as Arsenal produced a League and Cup double. There were little signs of this at the end of December, with Arsenal in sixth place, 12 points behind Manchester United. A run of 10 consecutive victories (five of them "1-0 to the Arsenal") in March and April gave them the title with two games to spare – both of which they lost. However, the FA Cup was won 2-0 against Newcastle United.

Dennis Bergkamp was one of the first 'stellar' players to join the Premier League. He was a £7.5m signing from Internazionale in July 1995. This was his greatest season for Arsenal, culminating in two Player of the Year awards. He went on to make 245+46 League appearances for the Gunners, scoring 85 goals.

Seaman, Adams, Bould and Winterburn were still most effective in defence. Ian Wright and Marc Overmars followed Bergkamp in the scorers' list this season.

Arsenal 2002

Manager: Arsène Wenger
Leading scorer: Thierry Henry, 24
Ever-present: No-one
First at top: Sep 15
Latest at top: Apr 1
Date won: May 8
Players used: 25

Another double season, and the first occasion since the very first season when a championship club was unbeaten away from home. Arsenal scored in every game, the only time in all 108 seasons that the champions have done this.

At the end of March, Arsenal were in third place behind Liverpool and Manchester United but with games in hand. They were in the middle of a run of 13 consecutive wins to the end of the season. The title was won with a vital 1-0 win over Manchester United at Old Trafford in the penultimate game, thanks to a goal from Wiltord. This game came four days after the FA Cup was won at the Millennium Stadium, by 2-0 against Chelsea.

Thierry Henry signed for Arsenal from Juventus in July 1999 and made an immediate impact with his lightning pace and excellent ball skills. His goals to games ratio stands comparison with some of the great strikers of old. To watch him in full flight as he cut in towards the goal must have had Arsenal supporters counting on another goal before he even shot.

The 2001/02 Arsenal team was much changed from the previous championship year. Sol Campbell was now at the heart of the defence, with Ljungberg and Wiltord contributing goals.

Arsenal 2004

Manager: Arsène Wenger
Leading scorer: Thierry Henry, 30
Ever-present: Jans Lehmann
First at top: Aug 31
Latest at top: Jan 18
Date won: Apr 25
Players used: 22

When I was a lad, they used to say the double of League and Cup would never be done again. Well, since 1961, several clubs proved the experts wrong. There was one record that seemed on safer ground; repeating Preston's achievement in the first season of being unbeaten in the League. In what I think is Arsenal's greatest-ever season, 2003/04 is when they remained unbeaten to equal Preston's record. I doubt if I will see it happen again in my lifetime.

Manchester United seemed to be the main threat, and headed the table at the end of December. However, United fell away badly in the second half as Chelsea put in a challenge. A 2-2 draw at White Hart Lane in April gave Arsenal the title, with four games left to play.

Henry's 30 goals came in 20 separate games. You would have done nicely at the bookmakers if you had bet on him to score in each game Arsenal played!

Although Arsenal won none of the cups this season, they had good runs in all of them, losing in the semi-finals of the FA Cup and the League Cup.

Aston Villa 1894

Manager: George Ramsey (sec)
Leading scorer: Jack Devey, 20
Ever-present: Jimmy Cowan
First at top: Sep 16
Latest at top: Oct 28
Date won: Apr 7
Players used: 23

Villa were very much the club of the decade, with five championships and two FA Cup wins from 1894 to 1900. For the first two of these championship seasons, they were based at Wellington Road. Though reporters claimed gates of 20,000, it is not clear how many of these would have been able to see the game!

Villa built up a six-point lead by the end of December and maintained that margin to the end of the season, with only Sunderland providing a serious challenge.

Jack Devey was an all-round sportsman who enjoyed a long cricket career with Warwickshire. He played football for local clubs in Birmingham before joining Villa in 1891. He was capped twice by England.

Jimmy Cowan was an attacking centre-half in the days when this was a common tactic. He was well-known as a sprinter and won the famous Powderhall Handicap in 1896. He was just 5ft 6½in tall, but his quoted weight of 12st 3lbs indicates a sprinter's powerful build.

For the first time in the League's history, the 'Scots Count' fell below five. Maybe the lessons learned from the Scottish players had finally permeated the English game. The preponderance of Scots in championship teams was henceforth not so great – with the odd exception of course.

Aston Villa 1896

Manager: George Ramsey (sec)
Leading scorer: John Campbell, 26
Ever-present: Jack Devey
First at top: Sep 30
Latest at top: Jan 11
Date won: Apr 4
Players used: 18

Derby County won all 10 home games and led the table at the end of December, with Villa in third. Six consecutive wins took Villa to the top in January and they finished with a four-point margin over Derby, taking the title when Derby dropped a point on April 4.

Villa paid Burnley £250 for international back James Crabtree in the summer of 1895. Crabtree, Reynolds and Jimmy Cowan formed an outstanding line of half-backs.

John Campbell was a Scot from Celtic where he had won the Scottish championship twice, and later returned to the club. He had developed an outstanding reputation in Scotland, and emphasized his skill by scoring his 26 goals in just 26 games. 5ft 9in tall but nearly 12st in weight, he was said to be difficult to stop when running at the opposition's defence.

This was the season Villa lost the FA Cup – literally. Following their FA Cup win in 1894/95, it was on display in a shop window in Birmingham. Sometime during the night of September 11-12 1895 it was stolen and never seen again. A replica had to be made to the same design. Villa were fined £25.

Aston Villa 1897

Manager: George Ramsey (sec)
Leading scorer: Fred Wheldon, 18
Ever-present: Charlie Athersmith, Jimmy Cowan, Fred Wheldon
First at top: Nov 28
Latest at top: The same
Date won: Apr 10
Players used: 17

If 1895/96 was good, this season was outstanding. It got off to a slow start, with Villa recording only two wins in the first six games. An unbeaten run of 12 games took them to the top, where they finished with a lead of 11 points. The title was won when Derby County failed to win on April 10; Villa had three games left to play, all of which were won. For good measure, the FA Cup was also won, to make Villa the second team to complete "the double".

John Campbell was not quite as productive as in the previous season, and the leading scorer honours went to Fred Wheldon. Fred had been signed in 1896 from local rivals Small Heath (today's Birmingham City). He was a good dribbler with the ball and won four caps for England. He played first class cricket for Worcestershire.

Aston Villa 1899

Manager: George Ramsey (sec)
Leading scorer: Jack Devey, 21
Ever-present: Tom Bowman
First at top: Oct 29
Latest at top: Apr 24
Date won: Apr 29 (last game)
Players used: 23

Three of Villa's 1897 championship team joined Celtic in the summer of 1897, so 1897/98 proved to be a rebuilding period for the club. By the mid-point of 1898/99, Villa had a narrow lead over Everton and Burnley but a late season run by Liverpool dropped them to second place. It came down to 'last-game decider', with Villa at home to Liverpool. 41,000 spectators shoe-horned themselves into Villa Park to see an emphatic win by the home team, 5-0.

The season was notable for one of those one-off, never repeated events that enliven League history. The referee was late arriving for the match at Sheffield Wednesday. After some deliberation, it was decided to start without him. Though he took over at half-time, the delay meant that darkness fell with 10 minutes left to play. Wednesday were the better team on the day and led 3-1 at the time. The League, in their infinite wisdom, consulted the rule-book and decided that the last 10 minutes would have to be played at a later date. The first suggestion was that perhaps the 10 minutes could be played before the return game at Villa Park. In the end, Villa agreed to play Wednesday in a benefit match for one of their players, and the missing minutes were duly played out before the friendly game. Villa made one change for the second game, Garraty replacing Bedingfield. I've chosen to give Garraty a 'substitute' appearance in the records, even though he wasn't.

At the time, the League instructed that the game should count as a loss for Villa when calculating the League table. I've chosen not to do this when calculating Villa's position throughout the season; you never know, they might have knocked in three goals in those closing minutes!

Aston Villa 1900

Manager: George Ramsey (sec)
Leading scorer: Billy Garraty, 27
Ever-present: Billy George, Fred Wheldon
First at top: Feb 17
Latest at top: The same
Date won: Apr 23
Players used: 21

Sheffield United set the pace this season and built up a six point lead by the end of December. Villa grew stronger towards the end of the season, losing just one game in their last 13, to leave United in second place by two points. Villa finished their programme first, leaving a mathematical chance for the Blades if they scored plenty of goals in the last two games. Their last game at Burnley was lost, leaving Villa champions by two points.

Billy Garraty was a local man, signed from Aston Shakespeare, and just 21 years of age this season. He was an industrious player able to play in almost any position – one of the first great "utility" players. He was capped once by England. He scored 96 goals in 224 League games during his career at Villa.

Aston Villa 1910

Manager: George Ramsey (sec)
Leading scorer: Harry Hampton, 26
Ever-present: Charlie Wallace
First at top: Jan 29
Latest at top: The same
Date won: Apr 16
Players used: 18

This season saw a straight fight between Villa and Liverpool and they finished well clear of the rest. Villa's record included a 15-match run without defeat. They built on this to finish five points ahead of Liverpool.

The Villa team included centre-forward Harry Hampton and inside-forward Joe Bache. In their Villa careers, Hampton scored 213 goals in 338 appearances and Bache 167 in 431. Hampton was just 5ft 8in tall and was a fearless, fast moving player on the field.

The ever-present outside-right Charlie Wallace also enjoyed a long career at the club, scoring 54 goals in 314 League games.

Aston Villa 1981

Manager: Ron Saunders
Leading scorer: Peter Withe, 20
Ever-present: Des Bremner, Gordon Cowans, Ken McNaught, Tony Morley, Dennis Mortimer, Jimmy Rimmer, Kenny Swain
First at top: Oct 22
Latest at top: Apr 4
Date won: May 2
Players used: 14

This season was something of a throwback to the 19th Century. Not only were Villa champions again, but they did it with just 14 players, of whom no less than seven were ever-present.

Liverpool and Villa were top at the end of December, but Ipswich were just a point behind with games in hand. Villa finally edged in front of Ipswich on April 4 and remained in top spot to the end of the season. Ipswich were still in with a shout, but both clubs lost their games on May 2, leaving Villa as champions.

Peter Withe won 11 caps for England and championship honours with Nottingham Forest in 1978. He had also played for Southport, Barrow, Wolves, Birmingham and Newcastle before joining Villa and later played for Sheffield United and Huddersfield Town. His longest time at one club was at Villa, where he scored 74 goals in 182 League games.