

We're deep into the summer of sport, and there's so much I'd love to write about. But unfortunately quite a lot of the things I could discuss at this moment may look ridiculous when you pick this up, so I've got to resist. Like the Tour de France for example; at the time of writing we're two weeks through the world's best bike race, with a gripping battle for the yellow jersey between the two pre-race favourites Jonas Vingegaard and Tadej Pogacar. But there's still one week to go for me – I could praise Vingegaard and his team for keeping the irrepressible attacking force that is Pogacar at arm's reach. But knowing Pogacar, he could very easily blow Vingegaard away in one of the final stages and cruise to victory. So all I can really talk about is how much I've enjoyed the high-stakes racing, catching a snippet of a couple of different stages in the flesh when I visited northern Spain a few weeks ago, watching this year's in-form sprinter Jasper Philipsen win four out of the five sprinters' stages (so far), and so much more.

There's also the Ashes, which has been a thrilling ride too. The women's tournament, played out in an unorthodox points-based format (which I won't bore you with the details of), reached a gripping finale with Australia winning the penultimate match by a mere three runs to retain the urn. On the men's side, at the time of writing England are currently 2-1 down after the first three tests – perhaps on the balance of play that's a fair score line, but each test has been remarkably close and characterised by near constant shifting of momentum. Without using a commentary cliché, the momentum has been swinging back and to between England and Australia 'like a pendulum'. England could count themselves unfortunate to lose the second test in particular, a match whose outcome perhaps hinged on the controversial stumping of England's Jonny Bairstow – the batsman left his crease

after ducking under a ball, believing the ball to be dead... but the ball hadn't gone dead, so Aussie wicket keeper Alex Carey stumped him out. The controversy ensued because, despite Carey's actions being legal, it was widely seen as a very cheap way of winning a wicket and ultimately the match. If England can overcome the Aussies over the five test series then this might go down alongside the 2005 series as one of the best of all time; if we don't, then there's a good chance we'll be pointing fingers at that one moment at Lord's.

One sporting event that has wrapped up that I can write about is Wimbledon – and what a spectacle it was once again. In my opinion, the two weeks of Wimbledon are the two weeks that make our summers quintessentially British. Whether that's something to be celebrated, I'll leave up to you, but the drama alone deserved to be celebrated at the very least. I always have reluctance in picking favourites for the women's singles ahead of any Grand Slam because there's always surprises. And this year my reservations stood me in good stead, because Marketa Vondrousova became the first unseeded woman to win the title at SW19. She was in stellar form throughout her run to the final; perhaps we could've seen it coming, given her pedigree as a former French Open finalist. But then again, in women's tennis it feels like everyone's been a French Open finalist at some point in the last decade. Vondrousova took down crowd favourite Ons Jabeur in the final; the Tunisian has now lost back-to-back Wimbledon finals despite entering both as the favourite, and she still waits to become Africa's first ever tennis Grand Slam champion.

I was pretty close to calling the men's side of the draw accurately. Novak Djokovic came into the tournament as many

continued on p57

people's favourite – having not lost on Centre Court since 2013, he'd won the previous four Wimbledons and was, as always, in great shape and in great form. And he breezed through to the final, barely breaking a sweat and only dropping two sets across his first six matches. But despite all of these credentials in his favour, there is a reason why he finds himself ranked second in the world ... there's a new kid on the block. 20-year-old Spanish sensation Carlos Alcaraz took his first Grand Slam at last year's US Open when he was just 19, and had been in stellar form since then to secure the top spot in the rankings. His style of play is pretty much faultless in all departments, but backed up by relentless youthful energy, a rocket of a forehand and a dizzying array of different types of shot. Fans of Alcaraz were obviously spooked by the prospect of playing the imperious Djokovic in the final, but to be the best you have to beat the best. And despite losing the first set 6-1, Alcaraz roared back to win the second in a tense tiebreak, before dishing out his own 6-1 in the third set to edge into the lead. Djokovic, as he always does, remained calm and composed to level the match and take another classic Wimbledon final into a deciding fifth set. And in these moments, Novak's experience on the big stage tends to pull him through. But Alcaraz, like a future star in the making, rose to the occasion and took the fifth and final set 6-4 to claim his first Wimbledon title... and I suspect it won't be anywhere close to his last.

Last month I said July is my favourite month of the year for sport, and I stand by that. But August is pretty good too – and whilst there might not be quite as big a range of headline-grabbing events taking place, our sporting bedrock will return... of course, I'm talking about the domestic football season. Let's rattle off a few things to keep your eyes on, and a

few predictions of my own.

Manchester City, fresh off the back of winning the treble, will be looking to win their sixth Premier League title in seven years (and fourth in a row). They're still expected to make one or two signings to bolster their already stacked squad, but as per usual Pep Guardiola won't be rocking the boat too much. Arsenal will push them once again for the league, buoyed by the arrival of England star Declan Rice from West Ham for an eye-watering £105m. His calming presence in midfield will help the Gunners in the pressure-cooker moments of the season that ultimately saw the title slip away from their grasp - so whilst that £105m might seem a little extreme, he could very realistically be the key difference maker to bringing the Premier League trophy back to north London for the first time since 2004.

Having said that though, I don't believe it'll quite be enough – and I will bore you all by predicting City to win, again.

The race for the top four could be very spicy this year. Liverpool will look to bounce back from a disappointing campaign, and with a few fresh faces in midfield I expect them to have a real crack at the title as well. Newcastle have obviously got a lot of cash to spend under their Saudi ownership, but with the added pressures of playing in the Champions League, there's a high chance that they can't secure back-to-back finishes in the top four. Manchester United will be fairly strong again, but they still need to do some work in the transfer market. Tottenham are in a rebuilding phase under new manager Ange Postecoglou, so don't expect them to challenge for Europe. And Chelsea fans, don't hold out too much hope either – sure, you've got a world-class manager now in Mauricio Pochettino and have totally refreshed the squad with exciting young players. But on

continued on p58

paper I don't see the makings of a top four side if I'm being honest – you'll do well to finish in the Europa League places.

Money's being spent across the league, at a level that's perhaps only being outstripped by the new global force that is the Saudi Arabian Pro League (something that I'll talk about in more detail next month). Brighton will be challenging for European football again, Aston Villa have the squad to do so again too. I genuinely believe Brentford can continue to punch above their weight as well, and I think the likes of Crystal Palace and West Ham should be targeting a top half finish too. But despite the apparent quality throughout the league, I also feel that there's a few teams who will definitely struggle. Luton Town have done remarkably well to get here, but they were punching above their

weight in the Championship – the Premier League will surely be a step too far for them, and they could be looking at a bleak season. One of the other newly promoted sides are Sheffield United, who I similarly think would do remarkably well to even get close to staying up. And then there's one of Everton - in dire straits on and off the pitch; Bournemouth – who bafflingly sacked Gary O'Neil, the manager who almost single-handedly kept them up last year; and Fulham - who I've got a hunch (and a hope) that they'll suffer a nasty bout of second-season syndrome. If any of those three get relegated in just under a year's time, I think I'll claim this as great foresight. So, expect me to be wildly off the mark.

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