

It's time for May – that month of the year where all the sport gets wrapped up. I'm at risk of sounding like a broken record for the umpteenth year, but I can't believe we're here already. The main attraction is the run-in for the domestic football season – which team is winning the league, the teams that are getting top four, who's going down ... and if you keep going, who's coming up, down, up, down, up, down, etc. If there's a team flying the flag for the southwest this season, it's Plymouth Argyle – at the time of writing top of League One and on the brink of returning to the second tier for the first time since 2010.

The Champions League is reaching a pulsation conclusion, as are its little siblings the Europa League and the Europa Conference League – and there's an English stake in all of the above competitions, with Manchester City, Manchester United and West Ham respectively the bookies' favourites for each European crown.

Speaking of European competitions, our local rugby giants Exeter Chiefs have reached the Champions Cup semi-finals – taking on defending champions La Rochelle. The Chiefs have done remarkably well to reach this high this season, amidst what many are describing a rebuild era following years of competing right at the top end of the sport. However it does look unlikely that they'll be fighting for domestic rugby glory, currently 6th in the table and slipping away from the play-off spots.

But as it's May, it's only fitting to focus on the Premier League first. The big question, after 19 years of this never really cropping up, is whether Arsenal are on the cusp of winning the title. It's been 19 years since that memorable undefeated 'Invincibles' season, which is yet to be repeated - and even though they've lost thrice this time around, I still think they'll have just about enough to get their hands on the trophy again. Their main rivals? Of course, it's Manchester City – and they look rampant

right now. However good Arsenal's players are, led by the 21-year-old English starboy Bukayo Saka, Manchester City have two who don't even seem human – namely midfield maestro Kevin De Bruyne and the robotic goalscoring freak Erling Haaland (I say that in as positive a way as that phrase can be interpreted).

Do Arsenal have the nerve though? Not playing in Europe will help, following a surprise Europa League loss to Sporting Lisbon. Manchester City on the other hand, however much they'd love to win a fifth league title in six years (an underappreciated dominance of English football), their zero Champions League hoodoo still haunts them.

This season presents a great opportunity to banish said demons. Between me writing this and you reading, they'll have battled against Bayern Munich in the quarter-finals – arguably the best time to play the German heavyweights who've recently changed managers. Get through this and City will then need to beat Real Madrid or Chelsea – I think City are better than both, but would certainly prefer to face the latter. Then comes the final – and the way this year's knockout draw has fallen, this on paper represents their easiest fixture. The other side of the draw is stacked with the underdogs – three Italian clubs in Napoli, AC Milan and Inter Milan, as well as Benfica.

Napoli are the favourites to reach the final from this side, as they find themselves on the brink of winning the Italian league at a canter – 22 points ahead of AC Milan, 23 points ahead of Inter. I'm rooting for them for overall glory, not just because I love the underdog but also because one of the few bets I ever put on will come through if Napoli do lift the Champions League, netting me £200. Although I would've been in line for £500 had I had the balls to put the bet on way back in August when the thought first crossed my mind. The Neapolitans

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are great to watch, led by the talismanic attacking duo Victor Osimhen and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (go on, try pronouncing that) who are both surely in the Ballon D'Or conversation at this rate. With domestic honours all but secured for Napoli, and as already noted a comparatively straightforward route to the final, they're approaching the climax of this season with much less strain on them. Napoli might be underdogs on paper, and certainly weren't expected to be this close to glory when the season kicked off, but their performance levels this season perhaps stick them right up there with Manchester City as favourites to become continental champions.

But let's go back to England and the Premier League – and the race for those Champions League qualification spots is hotting up. Newcastle United are on fire right now and looking to secure an unexpectedly quick return to Europe's top table. Sure they've got the wealthiest owners in world football right now, but the cash hasn't been splashed in the ways we all anticipated – they've gone about building a competitive team in a hugely admirable way. I think 3rd is in the bag for the Toon Army. As for Manchester United, the Red Devils have surely got enough quality and consistency to edge past a shambolic Tottenham, who are somehow still in the hunt for the top four despite the chaos that has ensued since former manager Antonio Conte's now infamous press conference condemning the club culture at Spurs.

Aston Villa are now the surprise package – in top form under new boss Unai Emery, they're picking up win after win and have snuck from the bottom half into the top six largely unnoticed. It's great to see ex-Brentford strike Ollie Watkins scoring in almost every game – as one of the hardest working footballers I've ever had the pleasure of watching, he thoroughly deserves every success he gets. Villa are possibly too far back for a late charge at

the top four, but I think top six and with it Europa League qualification feels very realistic for them. Their main rivals for that are Brighton, who have punched above their weight all season long and still have games in hand on Villa. Liverpool, on their day, are one of the best teams in the league – as evidenced in their recent draw against league leaders Arsenal. But those days have been too far and few between this year, so I can't see them coming any higher than 8th. Then we come to the mighty Brentford; our form's dropped off a little and I can't see us catching any of the top eight, but looking the other way I feel like there's enough room beneath us to secure 9th – buzzing to a top-half finish was something I certainly didn't expect back in August. To finish above Fulham and Chelsea as the best team in west London would be extra sweet – although now I've committed this to writing, I'm sure the prediction will come back to haunt me. Fulham have recently slumped – perhaps their players' heads are already 'on the beach' – and I think they'll struggle to pick up the points from here on out after their mafia-henchman disguised-as-a-striker Aleksandar Mitrovic got a deserved eight-match ban for pushing a referee.

Chelsea meanwhile find themselves in the bottom half of the league, which is nothing short of hilarious in my eyes. The Blues have now re-hired Frank Lampard, albeit on a caretaker basis this time around. The ex Chelsea legend is obviously loved at Stamford Bridge for his playing career in west London, which buys him an element of immortality with the fanbase. However, he had an indifferent first spell as manager – a fairly solid first campaign remembered for bleeding in the club's criminally underused youth prospects, before a disappointing start to the second season. Despite his exceptionally high IQ of 150, Frank's never really shown any managerial smarts. Perhaps this caretaker role is perfect for him – no expectation seeing as the club are miles

adrift of both ends of the table in a mid-table chasm. He's also got a fresh crop of young talent to work with, and could kickstart their careers at the highest level. Ukrainian wonderkid Mykhailo Mudryk for example, who Chelsea spent an eye-watering £80m on despite him only having scored nine career goals before coming to England – he's unsurprisingly struggled to adjust to the Premier League and has looked short on quality, but working alongside Lampard for a few months could help unlock the potential that many see in him.

Lampard replacing former manager Graham Potter feels like an appropriate reflection of Chelsea's season. It's a huge shame how the last six months unfolded for Potter, as one of the brightest minds in the game. Perhaps what we've learnt is that during his time in charge of Brighton last year, Potter was the beneficiary of low expectations combined with a supremely well-run football club. I do think Potter

would be a great replacement (long-term) for Gareth Southgate at England, inheriting the carefully-nurtured environment that Southgate has fostered in the national team set-up whilst offering a higher command of advanced tactics that Gareth appears to be lacking. Although Southgate has merited staying in charge until the conclusion of Euro 2024 at least – where I think we have to expect silverware as a nation.

Going back to Potter and his time at Chelsea though, this is in a strange way perfect news for myself as a Brentford fan. Our very own prodigious manager Thomas Frank has been allegedly eyed up by Chelsea and Tottenham – but like Potter, Frank too is benefitting from the low expectations and well-run setup at Brentford. Maybe the big fish won't want to repeat the same managerial mistake.