

# When Arsenal beat Liverpool at Anfield and never looked back

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Arsène Wenger's team were a mixed bag at the start of the 2001-02 season, but their 10-man win at Anfield kickstarted a new era.

There's no bad way to win a league title. It's a uniquely rewarding achievement, nine months in the making, so anytime, anyplace, anywhere will do. But as any [Arsenal](#) fan will be generous enough to explain, that doesn't mean all coronations are equal.

In the modern era, Arsenal have won the league six times. By delirious coincidence, four of those titles were clinched away to one of their greatest rivals: twice at White Hart Lane, once at Old Trafford and once at Anfield, a game that also produced the most dramatic finish to a season in English football history.

The other two, involving idyllic bank-holiday-weekend parties at Highbury, were pretty special too.

But winning the league behind enemy lines is a fantasy that brings infinite glory, unimaginable euphoria and a healthy kick of schadenfreude.

Most supporters don't experience it once, never mind four times in 31 years. A handful of blessed souls were in the away end for all four games.

The story doesn't end there. Spurs are their most hated rivals, [Liverpool](#) and Manchester United the other members of English football's aristocracy. As well as winning the league,

Arsenal have enjoyed coming-of-age victories away to all three. On each occasion, wins that felt giddily symbolic at the time were later confirmed as rites of passage for an emerging team.

David Rocastle's orgiastic injury-time winner at White Hart Lane in the Littlewoods Cup semi-final replay of 1987 was the symbolic start of George Graham's reign at Arsenal; Marc Overmars' winner at Old Trafford in 1998 is a similar landmark in the [Arsène Wenger](#) years. And on 23 December 2001, 10-man Arsenal ignored xenophobia, injustice, history and Europe's deadliest snake to outclass their title rivals Liverpool at Anfield. It was the start of the Invincible era.

It's not only history that is written by the victors. Winning brings another privilege – it allows you to rewrite the preceding defeats, make them part of the prologue. When Arsenal were mugged by Liverpool in the 2001 FA Cup final, with [Michael Owen](#) scoring two clinical late goals to turn a 1-0 deficit into a 2-1 victory, it was presented as definitive evidence of their lack of a killer instinct. Since winning the Double in 1998 they had finished as runners-up five times: three in the league and once apiece in the FA Cup and Uefa Cup.

Arsenal's subsequent success gave them the right to reframe that FA Cup final defeat as a line in the sand. They were mad as hell and they weren't gonna take finishing second anymore. What happened next makes their version hard to dispute, though it took a while for them to take effective action. The first half of the 2001-02 season was a melodrama in which Arsenal sent mixed messages to their own subconscious, never mind the rest of the football world. There were rousing victories, exquisite football – but also a number of humbling, ignominious or exasperating defeats, most notably a minor fiasco at home to Charlton in which they created umpteen chances and lost 4-2. On the day of the Liverpool game, writing in the Sunday Telegraph, Patrick Barclay described

them as “a team that can make Jekyll and Hyde look like Tweedledum and Tweedledee”.

The task of understanding them became even more difficult when they started to contradict their own recent history. In December 2001 Arsenal were unbeaten away in the [Premier League](#) and a bit of a mess at home, the polar opposite of the previous two seasons. In Europe, they were irresistible at home and useless away. They played the purest football in England yet had the worst disciplinary record.

In November and early December they had three huge victories, which in hindsight were forerunners of the game at Anfield. They thrashed the champions Manchester United, who were flattered by a 3-1 defeat, came from 2-0 down at home to a decent Aston Villa to win 3-2 and then outclassed Juventus in the Champions League. And then they went and spoiled it all with a desperate 3-1 defeat at home to Newcastle. Ray Parlour was sent off and Thierry Henry had to be repeatedly restrained after the match as he attempted to drill down into the laws of the game with the referee Graham Poll.

Wenger's biographer Xavier Rivoire later wrote that he privately conceded the title that night. It's an intriguing but jarring comment. In an unusually open title race, Wenger was just about the only manager to say that his team could win the league. Even Sir Alex Ferguson wrote off Manchester United, at least in public, after an unthinkable run of five defeats in seven games.

United's desperate start to what was going to be Ferguson's last season gave the rest an unexpected chance. They were aiming for a record fourth consecutive championship, and most thought it would be a formality when they signed two of the world's better players in Ruud van Nistelrooy and Juan Sebastián Verón. United had won the last two titles at a canter – by 18 points in 1999-2000 and by 10 in 2000-01. It would have been a lot more had they not lost the last three

games after checking out early for their summer holidays. Not even the most optimistic United-phobe saw what was coming in the autumn of 2001. Those signings, the sale of Jaap Stam and purchase of Laurent Blanc, Ferguson's obsession with Europe and his apparently imminent retirement sent United into freefall.

It made for the most open title race since the inaugural Premier League season, certainly in the first half of the season, and a compelling tale of the unpredictable. Chelsea beat Liverpool who beat Newcastle who beat Leeds who beat Arsenal who beat Chelsea three days after the Liverpool game. And, apart from Leeds, all of them beat – and in most cases hammered – Manchester United.

Before Christmas, Liverpool, Leeds, Bolton, Everton and Newcastle all spent time at the top of the table. Newcastle went there with that 3-1 win at Arsenal, who themselves missed the chance to go top that night. Arsenal, who started the game brilliantly before unravelling in the second half, were slaughtered in the press for their indiscipline. Henry displayed a surfeit of va-va-voom when he put his fist through a window after the game. "You cannot ask your players to be 100% committed for 90 minutes," said Wenger, "and then walk off with a smile on their faces after a 3-1 home defeat when you are pressing for the title."

Parlour's red card in the same game was the 39th in since Wenger took over at Arsenal in October 1996. Patrick Vieira and Lauren also had upcoming suspensions because of an accumulation of yellow cards, Vieira for the game at Anfield. In the early 2000s Arsenal had a contradictory status: they were the sanctimonious villains of the Premier League, a team who would only pose for their mugshot atop the moral high ground.

"If you judge any manager over four or five years and add up his red cards you will always get an impressive amount," said

Wenger, though that part of his argument didn't stand up to scrutiny. In the same period, by way of comparison, their biggest rivals Liverpool (22) and Manchester United (21) had barely half as many.

The rest of his assessment had a bit more merit. "People try to stop us in ways that are not always regulation, and sometimes we over-react. But I don't think anybody would disagree that we try to play football. We try to play a physical game, because I think that's all part of an exciting spectacle. Our football is based on pace, movement and commitment, and sometimes we go a bit overboard on the third quality, but we never go into any game intending to kick somebody."

The criticism of Arsenal was part of a broader moral panic about the behaviour of footballers in England, with the media finding the whiff of testosterone increasingly pungent. External testosterone, anyway. It's long forgotten now but at the time it felt like a never-ending story. "[Football's] decadence is the subject of a thousand talk shows," wrote Oliver Holt in the Times. "Never since the Fever Pitch boom of the 1990s took hold has football's renaissance seemed so perilously close to falling back into a dark age."

It was panto season, but there wasn't much family-friendly entertainment in the stories emerging from various Christmas parties. West Ham defender Hayden Foxe changed the mood in the VIP lounge at the Soho nightclub Sugar Reef by unfurling his penis and draining it across the bar, a relief for which he was relieved of two weeks' wages. Afterwards, he was a model of contrition. "I wouldn't go so far as saying I was pissing at the bar in front of a thousand people," he said. "It was a discreet quiet little one." Another West Ham player puked over tables and seats, and the group were encouraged to leave the nightclub via the back door.

Ipswich's Titus Bramble had so many pints of Nytol Substitute

that he passed out in a taxi. The driver was unable to wake him so dropped him at the police station instead. There were also allegations of sexual assault (Blackburn), punch-ups (Leicester), criminal damage (Leeds), assault (Oldham) and – will *anyone* think of the children – an afternoon drinking session (Manchester City).

In the same week, Leeds' Jonathan Woodgate was found guilty of affray after an infamous street brawl in January 2000; and earlier in the 2001-02 season, the Chelsea quartet of John Terry, Frank Lampard, Eidur Gudjohnsen and Jody Morris were fined for drunkenly living life to the max, the day after 9/11, at a Heathrow hotel full of horrified American tourists.

The Premiership's sponsors, Barclaycard, accepted a PR open goal – they announced that Liverpool v Arsenal would be the first game in which the Man of the Match received a trophy rather than a bottle of champagne.

Henry's behaviour after the Newcastle game, described as a "bizarre war dance" in the Sunday Times, gave the media another reason to stroke their chin. It was his second post-match meltdown in a couple of months: after a Champions League defeat away to Panathinaikos he went looking for the referee and had to be pushed away by Wenger and a local policeman.