

FULHAM PLAYERS OF THE SEASON 2020-21

NA 2021-05-25; updated 2021-05-25

When Fulham were promoted a year ago, some fans' mild ambivalence about returning to the Premier League was mocked by the pundits. Perhaps there will be greater understanding now. Supporting a team that loses most of its matches is a pretty miserable experience, and that has become what Fulham fans now associate with the Premier League.

For the third consecutive season in the English top flight, and compressed into just eight years, Fulham have been relegated – the third-fastest such hattrick in English football history.* In fact, they ended up nowhere near safety. Again.

This was always going to be a very challenging season. A year ago, I [acknowledged](#) that staying up was "probably against the odds". After a season that finished so unusually late, there was little time for rest and recruitment. And yet, surely, given Fulham's resources, a better fist could have been made of it. *Again.*

You don't know what you're doing

Once more, it's impossible to look past the way in which the club is run. Unlike fans of those "[Super League](#)" [clubs](#), I can't feel *too* much resentment at the American owner. His generous funding has, let's face it, maintained a position in the English leagues that is higher than Fulham would otherwise be able to reach. At the same time, he has entrusted the running of the club to his son, who means well but clearly has no idea what he is doing.

I did fear the worst even in the days after promotion last year. The owner's son, Tony Khan, was [interviewed](#) in *The Times*. His tone could be described as bullish. Fulham didn't need to spend much to improve the team sufficiently for the Premier League, he claimed, thanks to the investment made in the preceding transfer windows. "I expect the squad to look very similar to the one that got promoted," he declared.

So how did that prognosis work out?

Of all the players signed during the period that Khan alluded to, only three made any sort of significant contribution during this latest failure in the top flight. None would today warrant the transfer fee that Fulham paid for him. Khan's spectacular misjudgement was plain for all to see in the first four matches of this season, all lost. Indeed, the writing was on the wall – in large, luminous letters – after the very first game, in which Arsenal must have had their easiest victory in years.

The odd thing was that Fulham did actually improve after their disastrous start. This was made possible by a last-minute recruitment spree in which some genuinely talented players were brought in. The trouble was, most of them were only borrowed for the season. In February, in perhaps the performance of the season and the first time in 23 attempts that Fulham had taken anything from Goodison Park, no fewer than seven players in the starting

XI were on loan (two from England, three from France, one from Germany, one from Italy). Two of the other four had also been bought recently, in the summer. So much for the idea that the promotion-winning team would be kept intact!

It's obviously very difficult to build a team of loan players. They mostly didn't participate in pre-season preparation. Perhaps even more debilitatingly, they know at the back of their minds that they probably won't be around beyond the current season.

Meanwhile, all the newcomers blocked the progress of the club's younger players. Not one product of Fulham's much-praised youth system got the slightest chance in the first team until relegation had been confirmed. It must cost a fortune to run the Fulham academy, which, remarkably, won its league for a second consecutive season. That is a truly fantastic achievement. Yet the youth system's contribution to the first team in recent seasons has comprised, in essence, a single player, who scored goals and was sold for a big fee. Otherwise, it can only be regarded as a total waste of money, because its graduates' progress into senior football has never been prioritised. It just makes no sense.

A coaching conundrum

Given these difficult circumstances, it's hard to evaluate the performance of the coach, Scott Parker.

His promotion team never really convinced, but ultimately did the job. This season was the reverse. Fulham played really well in a lot of mid-season matches and often didn't get the luck they deserved. (The most egregious example came in the home game against Tottenham. A disallowed Fulham equaliser exposed a revolutionary and utterly harebrained permutation of the handball law. Unbelievably, the authorities then amended the law the very next day.) The switch to three at the back tightened things up. Players adapted quite impressively to new positions. Wins remained all too scarce, but draws brought points and Fulham stayed in touch.

When we won, gloriously, at Liverpool, we were still in the bottom three, but there were ten games left and other teams were within reach. A Swedish TV pundit asserted that, barring some unforeseeable disaster, such as an outbreak of illness or injuries, Fulham would comfortably stay up. Parker's reputation was at its zenith.

And then, by God, *what* a collapse. Without any particular disaster striking, Fulham proceeded to take just two points from those remaining matches and lost six in a row at home [for the first time in nearly 60 years](#).

It's hard to know exactly what went wrong. The players' confidence, which had been so painstakingly built up over months, seemed to deflate spectacularly in the very next match after the victory at Anfield, as Manchester City simply took us apart. Maybe the following game, at home to Leeds, was even worse, as a tired-looking Fulham struggled against the visitors' pace and intensity and were beaten much more easily than the one-goal margin would suggest. Even in the next game, there were 17 minutes of hope, as Fulham were gifted

an opening goal. But when, with 12 minutes left, Villa equalised, we were done for and everyone knew it.

It's hard to pin much blame on the coach for the points chucked away so recklessly in the early season. Three penalties were missed in the first nine games. (The indescribable one that cost us a point at West Ham was one of the most excruciating moments of my entire Fulham-supporting career, which is saying something.) Every team should have a trusted penalty taker. Fulham didn't. Indeed, every team should have someone who can take set pieces with a modicum of competence. Fulham didn't. The quality of attacking corners, for instance, was consistently awful. In fairness, though, it is a deficiency that any manager would struggle to resolve when he's rebuilding the ship at sea. The players you have available are either good at kicking a dead ball or they're not.

Yet there was also something crucial missing in Fulham's general play. What it was is no secret. We just struggled terribly all season to create goalscoring chances.

The stats are eye-watering. The tally of just nine goals at home, an atrocious average of less than half a goal per game, was *the worst of any club ever in English professional football*. Incredibly, just three were scored in the last 13 home games.* We managed to score only once after the 77th minute of any league match – and even that was an injury-time consolation that meant nothing. The final game, against Newcastle, was, as Parker pointed out, a microcosm of what had gone before: two-thirds of the possession, often high up; yet not a single shot, *not one*, on target.

Why? What held us back? Apart from the set pieces, I felt that Fulham were too slow to attack in transitions, those key moments when the ball is won and the opposition is briefly open and vulnerable. Too often, Fulham would play the ball sideways or backwards, allowing opponents time to regroup. That may have been partly due to the lack of an experienced, mobile centre forward to create space for forward passes. Our wider players, who worked prodigiously, were also consistently bad in their decisions about final balls, whether crosses, passes or shots. But you could argue that something, anything, should have been tried to get the ball into dangerous positions with a bit more frequency.

Throughout Fulham's season, Parker conducted himself exemplarily, with engagement and composure nicely balanced.

Who gets what?

On to the awards.

MOST IMPROVED. The pool of potential winners of this coveted award is pretty small, as it can usually only include players who were at the club before this season – and there weren't many of those who featured very often.

Anguissa looked to be in with a good shout early on, but he faded and will surely now leave. Cavaleiro's athleticism got him a lot of playing time, but he struggles to make a decisive difference.

The only possible winner, then, is **Decordova-Reid**. He showed an ability to pop up in the right place and ended up top scorer, although he hardly managed any goals in the second half of the season. He looked like a capable right wing back.

If you stretched the category to players who improved over the season, Lemina would be a contender, so he deserves a mention. The tough on-loan midfielder found some fine form in the latter part of Fulham's good spell.

MOST SURPRISING. This category is a pretty open one. I suppose it's reasonable to include players of whom I was previously unfamiliar, but who turned out well. I didn't know that PSG had such an excellent goalkeeper as Areola, who went straight into the team and, without being entirely flawless, did enough to become the fans' player of the season.

However, the award goes to Abdul-Nasir Oluwatosin Oluwadoyinsolami Adarabioyo – in other words, "**Tosin**". After he switched from Man City's reserves at the end of the summer window, his form was sensational. It declined more than anyone's else as Fulham's bubble burst. At his age and price, however, he looks like an absolute bargain, and may well captain the team next season.

WEAKEST LINK. It was a shame to see decent players look suddenly so out of their depth at the start of this season. Hector was the prime example, but not the only one. They barely had a look-in subsequently so can't really qualify for this unwanted accolade.

Of the last-minute recruits, the only real flop was Loftus-Cheek. There is a fine player in there somewhere, which we glimpsed every so often. But I think he needs to drop down a level for a couple of years before he will really remember how good he can be. He might also need a slight change of position. His final passes were woeful, his shooting unmentionable.

I'm afraid that the clear-cut winner is one of my all-time favourite players, **Mitrović**. In a season in which goals were such a problem, it seems incredible that someone with his goalscoring record started matches so rarely. In truth, though, he was often unpickable. He's never exactly been fleet-footed, but has he always been so extremely immobile as during this season? In certain matches, he barely got above walking pace. And, in fact, even in [last season's review](#), I remarked that "in some ways, the team seemed to play better without him". Unless he has some fundamental physical or attitudinal problem, he needs another playing system, one that brings him more chances near goal. Or he needs another club, even if the fee he attracts is a modest one.

PLAYER OF THE SEASON. As usual, I refer to the [record of performances](#) that I saw on telly or the internet. Each player in each starting XI got a mark out of 5. In my ranking, I thus follow the averages generated by this record.

A couple of players didn't make the top three, but deserve a mention. Robinson is a lively if slightly ragged left back, whose pace is an asset. I'd like to see him combine with Bryan rather than replace him. Lookman is even faster and more technical, although his decision-making lets him down. In a better team (although probably one that isn't as good as Leipzig, where he has a contract), he could well prosper.

Anyway, here are bronze, silver and gold.

3rd. **Tosin** (average 3.40). An untypically sound investment.

2nd. **Reed** (3.48). There was a question mark about whether this snappy defensive midfielder, who has a clever short pass up his sleeve, could sustain last season's form. After all, if he wasn't good enough for the top flight at Southampton, why would he be at Fulham? But he was good enough – almost, perhaps, good enough for an England call-up. I'm just slightly concerned about his propensity for injury, which curtailed this season. On the other hand, that might put off potential buyers.

1st. **Andersen** (3.68). His form, too, tailed off a bit at the end of the campaign, understandably. But not before he'd shown himself to be a really top-class centre half, one of the best I've seen in a Fulham shirt. He's strong, aggressive, capable of fantastic cross-field passes and an obvious leader. The only mystery is why Lyon were prepared to loan him out.

Interestingly, average team performance over the season, at 2.95, was only a bit lower than last season's 3.03. That maybe reflects the often underwhelming displays during the promotion campaign, and that there were some fine efforts in this doomed season.

Back to the Championship

Lessons had been learned from the previous fiasco in the Premier League, Parker [said](#) after promotion had been secured. Well, they obviously hadn't.

That might not have been his fault. I remain unconvinced by his coaching skills. But he's been in charge now for two difficult seasons, and he's made a decent stab at both. There is plenty of scope for me to become convinced.

A year ago, I [wrote](#): "if a second promotion in three seasons is followed by a second relegation, there's always the Championship to look forward to!" That is what we now face – and there are many worse scenarios for a Fulham fan. Is it too much to ask that the club gives a real run to the likes of Carvalho, the teenager who played so promisingly in the late-season dead rubbers? Might the club have other goals next season, other than just promotion at all costs? Might the club look to the even slightly longer term? Probably not.

* Thanks to Tim for the stats.