Mid-tier Premier League clubs and the awkward art of reinvention

Wolverhampton Wanderers will be relegated at the end of this season, ending an eight-year stay in the Premier League.

In 2018, Stoke City and West Bromwich Albion both dropped into the Championship after 10 and eight years respectively of top-flight football. In 2023, Southampton's 11-year stint came to an end, while Leicester City went down after eight seasons that included the most remarkable title triumph in Premier League history.

Charlton's seven-year spell in the top division ended in 2007, and they have not been back since. West Bromwich Albion, Leicester and Southampton have all returned for a single season in the top division in subsequent years, but their previous stories are typical of a host of clubs that have tried to narrow the gap to the division's elite.

A pattern is clear.

Clubs who win promotion and survive their first season often solidify their Premier League status for a while. Sometimes they exceed expectations for a season or two, or even more. But, eventually, they succumb to the pressures of the division and slip back from whence they came.

"Sometimes clubs that come up can actually be a victim of their own success early on," says Danny Higginbotham, a player who battled against the Premier League's gravitational pull with Southampton, Stoke City and Sunderland.

"The first couple of years of going to these great stadiums and having great players coming to your stadium are amazing for the fans, and it's even better if you can give a good account of yourselves.

"For every team that comes up, first and foremost, your aim is to stay in the league and then you hope you can start to build on that. But then, as time goes on, your expectations get a little bit higher, and I think that's when it gets harder."

Danny Higginbotham (centre) celebrates scoring a rare goal for Stoke City against Newcastle United in 2011Bryn Lennon/Getty Images

The problems do not afflict everyone.

Arsenal, Chelsea, Everton, Liverpool, Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur have been in the Premier League every season since its inception more than 30 years ago. Manchester City were relegated in its early days and Aston Villa and Newcastle United more recently, but with their current, wealthy owners, all three look secure — notwithstanding the multiple Premier League charges hanging over City that could, in theory, bring points deductions.

For everyone else, the challenge is different. Of the current 20 Premier League clubs outside that group, only West Ham United (14 years) and Crystal Palace (13) have been there for more than a decade.

Seven clubs have been there for five years or fewer. Outside the ‘big six’ and Everton, there have been just 14 stints of 10 years or more in the Premier League among all of the other clubs.

On one hand, it adds interest to the league that the teams below the top echelons are changed on a regular basis. On the other, it creates a genuine question for clubs striving for promotion: *What exactly is the point?*

If Leicester’s 2015-16 title triumph is viewed as an astonishing aberration for the established elite, then most of the other clubs spend their time in the Premier League simply trying to avoid dropping out of it. But there are ways to make the journey from promotion to seemingly inevitable relegation more meaningful.

The then Leicester City manager Claudio Ranieri lifts the Premier League trophy in 2016Laurence Griffiths/Getty Images

“You have to communicate clearly what you’re trying to achieve,” Les Reed tells *The Athletic*. Reed worked at clubs including Fulham and Charlton, spent time with the Football Association and was a director and vice-chairman at Southampton between 2010 and 2018 when they climbed from League One to the Premier League. They stayed in the top division for 11 seasons.

“You’ve got to understand that fans are stakeholders and they deserve the right to know how you’re going to go about this. What is it you’re bringing to the table that’s going to give them great days out?

“We had that structure and strategy in place, and everybody believed in what was called ‘the Southampton way’, but we also delivered moments. In 2010, we had the Johnstone’s Paint Trophy final at Wembley and it’s got to be part of your strategy to say ‘we want to repeat that’.

“So we repeated it with two back-to-back promotions into the Premier League. We had a consolidation year when we finished 14th, then Mauricio Pochettino came in and we finished eighth. Then, under Ronald Koeman, it was seventh and sixth. In that time, we played Inter in San Siro in the Europa League, we had Europa League group stage games where the fans were travelling around Europe and we played at Wembley in an FA Cup semi-final.

“You’re continually delivering for the fans, but you have to keep on top of it. You can’t sit back and stop doing it.”

Virgil van Dijk and Oriol Romeu after Southampton's 1-0 defeat by Inter in October 2016Matthew Ashton – AMA/Getty Images

Swansea City are another of the 51 clubs to have played in the Premier League since its launch in 1992.

They climbed from the bottom tier of English league football to spend seven years in the top flight, achieving one top-half finish, a season in the Europa League and a League Cup win at Wembley 2013. In that time, they also basked in the unlikely presence of Denmark legend Michael Laudrup as manager and the crowning of heroes, including Spanish forward Michu.

But they have not returned since sliding out of the division in 2018 — a fate that former chairman Huw Jenkins believes was down as much to a shift in mentality as to any business or tactical decisions.

"We had come through every league with a similar sort of thought," Jenkins tells *The Athletic*. "So going into the Premier League with that type of thinking was no different.

"For us, it was about sticking to our principles. We wanted to go out and be positive, trying to win games, and they didn't change just because we were playing the supposed bigger teams.

"But the better we did, the more it became a mindset that we didn't want to struggle and we needed to maintain what we had, and once that happens it becomes much much harder to get wins on the board and things change from that point."

Michael Laudrup spent almost two years in charge of Swansea City in the Premier LeagueRichard Heathcote/Getty Images

The formula for success in the Premier League for mid-sized clubs is complicated.

In commercial terms, growing revenue can help clubs invest in better players within the Premier League's financial guidelines. But increasing matchday income can be difficult given that most clubs have a natural ceiling when it comes to the size of their fanbase — and it will be lower than that of Manchester United, Liverpool and the traditional heavyweights of the English game.

The Athletic has analysed the finances of Brentford, Brighton & Hove Albion, Bournemouth, Crystal Palace, Leicester, Southampton, West Brom and Wolves during their current or recent Premier League stints to compare their financial growth.

Several clubs have achieved huge increases in commercial income — which includes a wide range of revenue streams — including Southampton's 129 per cent rise since being promoted in 2013, Crystal Palace's 350 per cent increase since 2014, Bournemouth's 155 per cent improvement since 2016 and Brighton's 308 per cent uplift since 2018.

Clubs who are unable to increase their capacity or significantly grow their fanbase can increase ticket prices as they become established in the league, a tactic which has allowed Wolves to increase their matchday income by 40 per cent. But the Premier League's current bottom side are the only club from our sample for whom matchday increases have outstripped commercial rises.

Their commercial increase is a paltry four per cent, albeit they started from a higher base than most of our cohort.

Wolves will slip out of the Premier League this season after an eight-season stayStuart Leggett/MI News/NurPhoto via Getty Images

Leicester's 57 per cent increase in matchday income is the biggest from our sample clubs, but West Brom's seven per cent reduction in matchday income between 2011 and 2018, due in part to multiple price freezes as their on-field fortunes faded, underlines the challenge of increasing ticket revenue.

Broadcast revenue, though, remains the biggest single source of income for Premier League clubs — a fact that explains the general fear of relegation and the loss of the hugely lucrative broadcast deals from which funds are split between the 20 top-flight clubs.

For most clubs, broadcast revenue equates to between 70 and 90 per cent of their overall turnover, with those with a lesser reliance on TV money regarded as more solid, sustainable businesses.

Most of the clubs in our sample have reduced their reliance on broadcast revenue over their time in the Premier League, with Brighton the most successful by reducing from 79.1 per cent of their income coming from TV cash in 2018 to 68 per cent in their most recent set of published accounts as their other income streams rose.

But in all cases, broadcast revenue remains the cash cow that comes with Premier League status. The fear of losing it goes a long way to explaining the mindset that Jenkins described.

Swansea City’s Malick Yalcouye scores his side’s fourth goal against Sheffield Wednesday in the Championship on SundayNick Potts/PA Images via Getty Images

Remaining sustainable in the top division is a multifactorial challenge, but almost everyone who spoke to *The Athletic* identified player recruitment as the single most important element to achieve success.

Brighton, who have sold numerous star players, including Marc Cucurella, Alexis Mac Allister, Moises Caicedo and Joao Pedro to the Premier League’s big six and replaced them successfully, are in their ninth successive season in the division.

Bournemouth have managed four straight seasons in the top flight while selling Dominic Solanke, Milos Kerkez, Dean Huijsen, Antoine Semenyo, while Brentford are in their fifth successive campaign despite sanctioning the departures of David Raya, Ivan Toney, Bryan Mbeumo and Yoane Wissa.

In each case, success hinges on clubs replacing their best players *before* agreeing to sell.

The Brentford story has been built on principles of stability and forward planning. Chairman Matthew Benham and director of football Phil Giles have been in place for more than a decade, while technical director Lee Dykes joined in 2019.

They plan three transfer windows ahead, try to add fresh voices to the senior management team regularly, attempt to raise player wages gradually and drive hard bargains when selling players.

Brentford sold Yoane Wissa and Bryan Mbeumo over the summerAndrew Kearns – CameraSport via Getty Images

The blueprint has echoes of that put in place at West Brom in the late 2000s and early 2010s by chairman Jeremy Peace and sporting and technical director Dan Ashworth, whose success at The Hawthorns began a journey that led to jobs at the Football Association, Brighton, Newcastle and Manchester United.

For several years, Ashworth's model, involving rooms full of DVD recorders and television feeds from around the world — in the days before scouting tools such as Wyscout became commonplace — made West Brom a model club.

But his departure for the FA removed the lynchpin from the machine and led to relegation in 2018. After Ashworth and manager Roy Hodgson left and Peace sold up, structure and planning gave way to firefighting. In spite of manager Tony Pulis holding back the flames for three seasons, West Brom were ultimately overcome.

"When I first joined the club, it was stable," former defender Gareth McAuley tells *The Athletic*.

"There was not much drama off the field. Dan was running the place with Jeremy, who ran a shrewd business in terms of football, and there was a core of players who were there for a long time.

"The mistake (after Ashworth left) was not replenishing underneath that core group. They probably squeezed more out of that core than they should have. Footballers want a simple message and I think the supporters do, too. That was there in the early days.

"Before I joined, I met with Roy Hodgson and Dan. The vision they talked about was exactly how the club was when I walked through the door, and then it kind of stopped being that when the ownership changed."

Roy Hodgson and West Brom chairman Jeremy PeaceAMA/Corbis via Getty Images

Reed reported a similar change at Southampton in 2017, when new Chinese owners acquired the club from the Liebherr family. The previous ownership's success had been underpinned by investment in recruitment, with players including Virgil van Dijk and Sadio Mane signed and sold for profit, in tandem with youth development. Their academy helped produce the likes of Luke Shaw and James Ward-Prowse.

"Their theory was: 'Southampton's done really well, but now we've taken over, we need to go the extra step'," says Reed. "It was more about commercial and branding than it was about stability and sustainability in the Premier League.

"It was all clever stuff, but it was all taking your eye off the ball and what had made this club attractive for them to buy it in the first place."

Palace have become the latest club whose previous stability is threatened by recent changes.

The club claimed their first FA Cup last May and are competing in UEFA competition for the first time in their history this term. But manager Oliver Glasner has announced his intention to leave at the end of the season. Sporting director Dougie Freedman left last May after eight years at the helm, placing ever more scrutiny on their recruitment.

The consequences of such changes will become clear in the months ahead.

Oliver Glasner claimed the FA Cup with Palace last season but will depart in the summerTom Jenkins/Getty Images

While Palace, Bournemouth, Brentford and Brighton remain in the league, it is possible any one of them — or a new contender, like Sunderland, Coventry City or Middlesbrough — could buck the trend and become the Premier League's newest 'regular' member.

Yet history suggests that everyone, eventually, will be guilty of missteps that condemn them to relegation, as Wolves are now discovering.

The Midlands club enjoyed seventh-place finishes, reached a Europa League quarter-final and played at Wembley in the semi-final of the FA Cup, but a lack of clear direction from owners Fosun brought multiple unsuccessful transfer windows, which provoked their current struggles.

Striker Jorgen Strand Larsen has already been sold to Palace. Most of their other star players are expected to leave in the summer, with a swift return to the Premier League far from guaranteed.

So as sobering and limiting as it might feel, perhaps the key for clubs and fans is to ride the wave, work hard to ensure it lasts as long as possible, be prepared for it to crash — and enjoy it while it lasts.

"There can be an unbelievable freak season, like Leicester City winning the Premier League, but they are few and far between," adds Higginbotham. "So as a club, and as a set of fans, you need to understand what you are.

"That's easy for me to say because I've been a Manchester United fan all my life, but I have played for these clubs and there is a danger that you can get carried away with some success and think: 'Right, what's next'. If you finish seventh or eighth, which is a great achievement in itself, you can start to think that you're maybe £100million ($136.7m) away from the teams in the top six.

“That might be the case, but what you don’t factor in is that those clubs can go and spend £200m and pull away from you anyway.

“So maybe you have to look at it differently. Can you finish in the European places? Can you challenge for the League Cup? Can you sign a player that excites the fans even if he does eventually go on to a bigger club?

“Ultimately, it’s about understanding who you are and what your club stands for.”