

The Debate: Is there any chance of a club outside the big four breaking into top four?

This weekend the big four occupied the top four for the first time this season.

Despite all the surprise results and the talk of a challenge to their hegemony, is this the end of competition for the Champions League places? Is there any chance another team could break it open? Or do we just have to accept that the top four is a league within a league, an impenetrable gathering of an elite that only gets stronger by the season?

In pre-season there was much made of Tottenham's chances of challenging for a Champions League place. Despite their incredible week, they're still bottom. Then the fact that Aston Villa hung on to Gareth Barry was encouraging, and their early consistency suggested they might present the strongest challenge. However, they were comprehensively put in their place by Chelsea last month and their small squad looked exhausted in defeat to Newcastle on Monday night.

That leaves Manchester City. Sheikh Mansour's takeover, the arrival of Robinho and the promise of further big stars in January promised much. Doubtless they will get stronger but back-to-back defeats at Middlesbrough and Bolton have left them close to the relegation zone than fourth spot. So is there any way the predictable four names will not be going into the Champions League draw next season?

YES

While the big four may well have aligned themselves in the first four berths, that doesn't mean it has to last. We are only just into November and all the big clubs have suffered set backs. Arsenal look the most vulnerable at the moment having lost to Fulham, Hull and Stoke. If they continue to wobble, who knows how many more slips might happen? They lack defensive confidence and seem to stutter in games that they should stroll. And they have to play Manchester United on Saturday. If their poor form continues there's every chance that Aston Villa could pip them - they're only behind on goal difference as it stands and have been terrific for most of this season.

And then there's City. They've had a couple of really poor performances but as long as they're not too far adrift by January it could get interesting - the arrival of a cluster of world class players could prompt a formidable second-half of the season for Mark Hughes' team. This league is still tight - only nine points separate fourth from the relegation zone and if one of the chasing pack can put on a seriously good run then there's every chance we could see a different name in the Champions League draw.

NO

The last time the big four was breached was in 2005, by Everton. David Moyes's team did brilliantly but the gap has widened since then. The big four have had consistent success in the Champions League and reinvested the resulting revenue.

Everton didn't even get into the group stage so barely benefited financially from their heroic efforts. Also it could be argued that they only had a shot at fourth because Liverpool were focused on the European games that would eventually result in that dramatic night in Istanbul. Either way, it would be extraordinarily difficult to repeat. Chelsea have been imperious, and are seemingly getting better. Manchester United have just started to hit their stride and bristle with menace. Liverpool were only beaten for the first time by Redknapp voodoo in a game they should have breezed. True, Arsenal have been unconvincing in some of their games but they have also outclassed the likes of Blackburn, Newcastle, Everton and West Ham. The squad will only get better when Eduardo and Tomas Rosicky return to fitness and Arsene Wenger will surely sign a centre half in January. With Cesc Fabregas, Emmanuel Adebayor, Robin van Persie and Theo Walcott Arsenal have talent that will tell over the season.

There is not another club outside the top four that can come close to matching that firepower. Look no further than the usual quartet.

