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Garth Crooks' Team of the Week: Vicario, Romero, Stones, Rice, Garnacho

🕒 11 March 2024 | [Premier League](#)

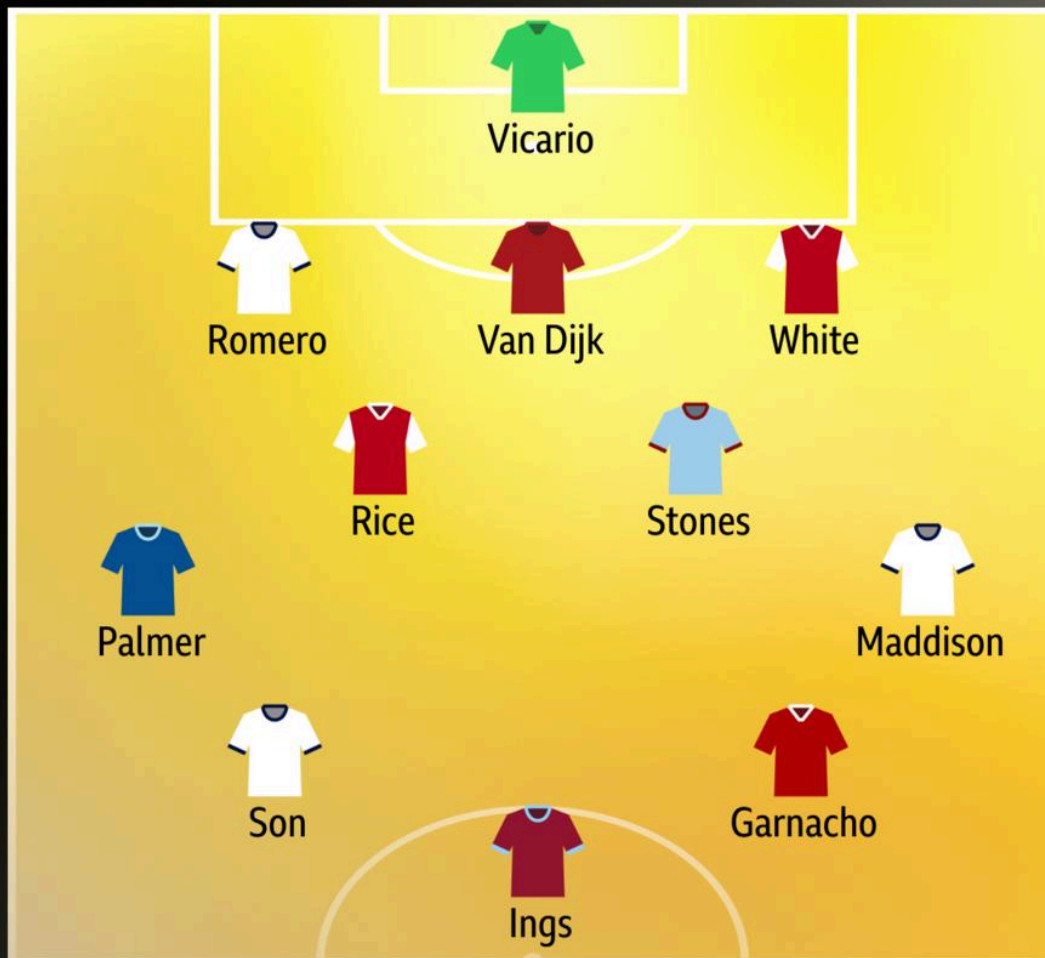


Team of the Week **Garth Crooks**

After every Premier League weekend, BBC football pundit Garth Crooks gathers his thoughts and gives you his Team of the Week.

Here are this week's choices and, as ever, Garth also discusses the game's big talking points in the Crooks of the Matter.

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BBC SPORT

Garth Crooks'

TEAM OF THE WEEK

Goalkeeper

Guglielmo Vicario (Tottenham Hotspur): What a save. Anything other than a point-blank stop by Vicario from Nicolo Zaniolo's attempt on goal at a crucial stage of **Tottenham's 4-0 win over Aston Villa** would have been a game-changer. The Italian keeper put his body on the line to make the save and it paid off.

This was another very important clean sheet by Spurs as goal difference may have a bearing on matters at the end of the season. I've said on a numerous occasions the best thing they did was to get rid of keeper Hugo Lloris - and it should have happened years ago.

Since Vicario's arrival, the Spurs keeper has saved the team several points, which is precisely what a top-class keeper should be doing. This is now all about who will finish fourth - and with a game in hand and a better goal difference Spurs have stolen the initiative.

Defenders

Cristian Romero (Tottenham Hotspur): Last week it was Micky van de Ven who made my team selection, but this week it is Romero and for very good reason. The Argentina international was the coolest defender on the pitch and needed to be as it got a little heated at Villa Park. Romero became more prominent in the second half due to the departure of the impressive Van de Ven, who suffered an injury but was performing brilliantly at the time.

Once Van de Ven left the pitch Romero took control and looked immense. Regular readers will know how furious I was with Romero because the defender was repeatedly getting sent off quite needlessly. However, he seems to have re-evaluated his game and realised that really good defenders don't have to kick their opponents - just defend.

Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool): What a performance by Van Dijk in the **1-1 draw against Manchester City**. It started with a superb interception by the Liverpool skipper when Phil Foden was about to receive the ball in the game's opening exchanges. Then a cross from Bernardo Silva was destined for the head of Erling Haaland and looked as though it had beaten Van Dijk, but the Netherlands defender coolly headed the ball out of play.

His general passing and distribution of the ball was [Bobby] Charlton-esque, while Van Dijk never gave Haaland a kick throughout the match. However, the sliding tackle on Foden in the second half, as the City forward was about to instigate a counter-attack, was telling. Firstly, because you seldom see Van Dijk on his backside, but the occasion demanded it and the quality of the tackle brought a respectful pat on the back from Foden.

This was a Van Dijk masterclass.

Ben White (Arsenal): Brentford boss Thomas Frank was absolutely right. Kai Havertz had no right to be on the pitch when he scored the winner in **Arsenal's 2-1 win over Brentford**. The Germany international, having received a caution for throwing his elbow, elected to dive in the Brentford penalty area in order to

try to seek a clear advantage. However, what was more troubling was that referee Robert Jones refused to do anything about it, even though the Brentford defenders were waving an imaginary card in the air in an attempt to bring the incident to his attention.

For Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta to then glorify the "manner of the win" in his post-match interview, having seen him gloating with Havertz at the end of the game, was a poor advert and only served to rub salt in Brentford's wounds.

Fortunately for Arsenal, White was on hand to play a pivotal role in Arsenal's victory over the Bees. Two beautifully floated crosses provided excellent assists in what was otherwise a rather grubby affair by the Gunners. If Arsenal are going to win the title please don't win it like this.

Midfielders

Cole Palmer (Chelsea): This kid has been a revelation since his arrival at Stamford Bridge. It was clear that Manchester City weren't prepared to give him the game time he thought he needed and how could they with Kevin de Bruyne, Silva, Rodri and Foden occupying the space with Jack Grealish getting the occasional game. The smart move was to leave and get the playing time his talent deserved elsewhere.

Well he did just that and in his first season in top-flight football has scored 11 Premier League goals. It was Palmer's strike that was cleverly diverted in to the Newcastle goal by Nicolas Jackson but there was no mistake with his superb finish that put Chelsea 2-1 up against the visitors.

Palmer is an exceptional talent and it will be interesting to see if Gareth Southgate - who was watching the youngster perform against the Magpies - selects him in the England squad for the forthcoming internationals. I think he's earned it.

Declan Rice (Arsenal): If Arsenal were to lift the Premier League title then Rice will have had an awful lot to do with it. It won't merely be down to his beautifully timed run into the box and headed goal against Brentford, but the support he has given to their midfield and especially to Martin Odegaard.

Having dispensed with the services of Granit Xhaka, who was a good player but a loose cannon, and replaced him with Rice, who is a safe pair of hands, it could ultimately be the turning point in Arsenal's fortunes.

The Gunners splashed out on Rice to the tune of £105m, which appeared at the time a ridiculous sum of money but a statement of intent to their fans and more importantly to their competitors. Meanwhile, they currently sit on top of the

Premier League table and insist they be taken seriously as title contenders. However, should Arsenal win the title, Rice will have been worth every penny.

John Stones (Manchester City): What a fabulous game of football, but if you had told me that by the end of the game De Bruyne would have been substituted, Haaland practically non-existent, and Stones City's best player, I would never have believed you.

Stones was outstanding and getting more confident in his new central midfield role with every game. Pep Guardiola exchanging words with De Bruyne, having brought the Belgium international off the pitch in a tactical change, did not go down well and clearly the player was far from happy with the manager's decision. Guardiola needs to be careful - De Bruyne can walk into almost any team in the world, but John Stones can't.

James Maddison (Tottenham Hotspur): Nothing could stop Maddison from dominating the midfield. Spurs controlled this fixture against Aston Villa from start to finish and Maddison was at the heart of it. His goal was a peach only surpassed by the most glorious cross supplied by [Pape] Sarr. Maddison had to cover a great deal of ground to get into the six-yard box to get on the end of the cross.

Tottenham's performances have got gradually better since Maddison's return from injury. However, there can be no doubt that if Spurs are going to pip Aston Villa and take the final Champions League spot, they have to keep Maddison fit.

Forwards

Son Heung-min (Tottenham Hotspur): One goal and two assists says it all. From the moment the game started there was only one winner. Son's one-touch finish against Aston Villa demonstrated the versatility of the striker. He's not just about scoring on the break or creating his own goals, he can be a fox in the box too. I also get the feeling that his appointment as team captain has made the South Korea international more of a team player.

His assists for Brennan Johnson and Timo Werner didn't just prove the point, they destroyed Villa. As for John McGinn's red card, the Villa captain should have known better. A three-match ban may just have cost his team a Champions League spot - and if it's not three matches it should be for a tackle like that.

Danny Ings (West Ham United): He had a goal disallowed, scored a beauty on the turn and another strike crashed against the Burnley's crossbar with the goalkeeper well and truly beaten - and Ings had only been on the pitch a matter of minutes.

The 31-year-old hasn't started a game in a West Ham shirt for some considerable time but managed to salvage a point for the Hammers in a game that looked lost at one point. In fact some might have considered his time in top-flight football to be coming to an end. Well, based on his performance against a rejuvenated Burnley, it couldn't have been further from the truth. Ings looks like a player with a point to prove and I think it might be in David Moyes and West Ham's interests to let him prove it.

Alejandro Garnacho (Manchester United): Two very badly timed tackles cost Everton this game. Does James Tarkowski or Ben Godfrey understand the perilous situation Everton find themselves and why they can't afford to be reckless in their own box? You would have thought they'd have learnt their lessons by now.

Meanwhile, Manchester United, having failed miserably against Fulham and not even laying a glove on Manchester City, continue to slalom their way through the season with glaring inconsistency but managed to beat Everton having been gifted two totally avoidable penalties. The only United player that showed any real endeavour was Garnacho. The Argentine looked sharp and interested. He was the player brought down for both infringements that cost Everton the game due to his willingness to take defenders on. Still one of the most exciting elements of the game.

The Crooks of the Matter

I have tipped Liverpool to win the title, but Manchester City are refusing to give it up and Arsenal are convinced they are going to win it too. Meanwhile, the score draw between Liverpool and City at the weekend lived up to its billing and proved once again why the Premier League is still the envy of the world.

Who would have thought that City winning the title in the late 1960s under Joe Mercer would have served as a lightning rod to the club's modern day obsession with the trophy?

Arsenal winning it in the '70s under the leadership of Bertie Mee followed by Terry Neil only to see their successes taken to yet another level by the sophistication of Arsene Wenger.

And who can forget the Bill Shankly and Bob Paisley era at Liverpool? These clubs are synonymous with league titles. It's literally carved into their history and a reason why winning it again is so important to them.

This title race is proving to be one of the best we've seen for some time and will not be settled until the last kick, in the last minute, on the last day of the

season. Football doesn't get better than this.

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