

If the summer break from European football has left you feeling empty then don't despair. Brazil's top flight, which kicks off this Saturday, is an exciting league which has seen six different teams finishing in the top three positions over the past two campaigns, both of which have been decided on the last day of the season. From a [betting](#) perspective there is plenty of value available in a league where home advantage is fundamental. So who are the main contenders in the race for being crowned champions of the 2011 Campeonato? Who are the teams to watch and who are the key players who may prove the difference when the Serie A title is decided in December? Here are six teams, in no particular order, which in my opinion will be in the mix and challenging for honours at the business end of the season.

CORINTHIANS

Having led the competition for the majority of last season, Corinthians were disappointed to end up in third place at the finish line. However, for a team that was promoted from the Serie B in 2008 and finished tenth in the Serie A in 2009, last year's third place finish was a magnificent result. Interesting to note is the fact that of the 19 games they played at home last season, Corinthians won 15.



Player to Watch: Bruno Cesar

The 22 year old midfielder was the third top scorer in the Serie A last season, weighing in with an impressive 14 goals which any striker would be proud of. It will be interesting to see how he

links up with centre forward Adriano, who has returned to Brazil after a short but shambolic spell with Italian side Roma.

CRUZEIRO

Hailing from Belo Horizonte in Minas Gerais, Cruzeiro have been one of the most consistent teams over the past four seasons, finishing in fifth, third, fourth and second places respectively (in 2010 they finished only two points behind champions Fluminense). Having last won the Campeonato in 2003, the same year they became the only Brazilian side to win a domestic treble, expectations will be high amongst home supporters that this season could be their year.



Player to Watch: Thiago Ribeiro

Top scorer in the 2010 Copa Libertadores with 8 goals, the 25 year old striker will be a vital cog in Cruzeiro's assault on the title. A recent run of 10 goals in 9 games in the Copa and Campeonato Mineiro in April/May suggests this could be a huge year for the Brazilian born attacker.

FLAMENGO

Having finished in third and fifth places in 2007 and 2008, Flamengo of Rio de Janeiro finally won the title after a barren period of seventeen years in 2009. This was followed by a terrible

fourteenth place finish last season. Whether or not they can improve drastically enough to reclaim the title this season is debatable, but one player could have a huge say in this.



Player to Watch: Ronaldinho

The 31 year old world cup winner and twice FIFA World Player of the Year has returned home after five seasons with Barcelona and three with AC Milan. He was an integral part of current Italian champions AC Milan's side before leaving for Brazil in January and will be the focal point of this Flamengo side in the 2011 Campeonato.

FLUMINENSE

After finishing in fourteenth place in 2008 and sixteenth place in 2009, Fluminense surprised everyone by being crowned champions in the 2010 season. They have retained their most inspirational players for the upcoming season and are very much title contenders in 2011.



Player to Watch: Dario Conca

While striker Fred will be the main provider of goals, arguably the player most important to Fluminense's cause is Argentinean midfielder Dario Conca. The 28 year old is at the peak of his career and was named the Campeonato's player of the season last year. As well as creating goals he scored an impressive nine times from midfield in the 2010 season and his input could again prove the difference this year.

GREMIO

With top four finishes in three of the past five seasons, Gremio are seeking their first title since 1996. Fourth last year, but only eight points behind the victors, they have scored more goals at home over the past two seasons than any other side, winning 25 of their 38 home games in 2009 and 2010. If they can improve marginally on their away from they could well be contenders this year.



Player to Watch: Andre Lima

With the departure of Jonas, the Campeonato's top scorer with 23 goals in 2010, it's time for Andre Lima to shine. Eleven goals last year was a respectable tally for the 26 year old striker, but with the gaping void left by Jonas, he now has the opportunity to become a cult hero with home fans by helping Gremio to go all the way.

SAO PAULO

Winners in 2006, 2007 and 2008, Sao Paulo finished the last two seasons in third and ninth places respectively. Last year looks to be a blip more than a loss of form and this club harbours high expectations of reclaiming the Serie A title this season.



Player to Watch: Luis Fabiano

Returning to the club he left in 2004, 30 year old striker Luis Fabiano has signed from Sevilla in time for the 2011 Campeonato. He scored 66 goals in his last four seasons in the Spanish Primera and a similar strike rate with his old club could be the difference between a top six finish and contending for the title.

It really does appear that a number of teams can finish top of the pile in 2011. From a punting perspective keep in mind that, similar to the MLS in the United States, the large distances travelled by teams to play away games has a dramatic effect on the home and away records of each club in Brazil's Serie A. The result of this is a higher than usual home win percentage record (and therefore a higher away loss percentage record) over the duration of the season. Added to this is the excellent value on offer in the betting markets. I can only speculate that a lack of popularity in the Campeonato betting markets is a major factor in this, but from experience over the past three seasons I've found excellent value time and again, even when top three sides host a bottom third side. When such a fixture arises in England (think Chelsea v Birmingham), odds quoted will approximate 1.25 to 1.30 for a home win, while a similar game in Brazil tends to return 1.45 to 1.50. This becomes significant over the course of a 38 game season so don't miss out! To register and receive winning Brazilian selections, as well as other **expert soccer tips**

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