

Ex-Premier League Players Who Made Unexpected Switches To The SPFL

Victor Wanyama's recent return to the SPFL with Dunfermline Athletic under Neil Lennon wasn't on fans' bingo cards for 2025, but it acts as a timely reminder of the unexpected paths football careers can take. Over the years, several ex-Premier League players have made surprising moves north of England's border – some chasing a fresh start, others seeking a final flourish.

While the SPFL has long been a stepping stone for talent heading to England and the wider footballing sphere, there have been several instances of high-profile names going the opposite way. Ultimately, football is full of unpredictability, both on and off the pitch. In turn, this alters practices such as online gaming and [matched betting](#), where knowledge and strategy can play a key role in navigating the ever-changing landscape of the game.

Here, we take a look at some of the most surprising cases.



Chris Eagles

Chris Eagles was once one of the most exciting young prospects at Manchester United, tipped for a bright future after emerging from their prestigious youth academy. With a technical style suited for top-flight football, he showed flashes of brilliance at clubs like Burnley and Bolton Wanderers. However, he fell short of establishing himself as a consistent Premier League performer as he tallied up just 15 goal contributions in 74 appearances across different spells in the division.

As his career faded from England's top tiers, few would have predicted his next destination – Ross County. In 2017, the Highland club took a gamble on the former United winger, but his time in Scotland was fleeting. He made only nine appearances for the Stags before picking up a groin issue,

which forced him out of action, and while he did register four assists in 484 minutes of football, he wouldn't have made as much impact as he would've liked to in Dingwall. It was a career move that promised a fresh start but ultimately became a footnote in his footballing journey before ending his playing time at Oldham Athletic.

Jermain Defoe

Some moves defy expectations in the best possible way. Jermain Defoe's switch to Rangers in January 2019 was one such case. While Rangers have a rich history of attracting high-profile players, Defoe's initial arrival from Bournemouth on loan – when he was still a recognised goal scorer – was a statement of intent.

Unlike some, Defoe wasn't just in Scotland to wind down his career. The veteran forward, who bagged over 150 Premier League goals, became a key figure in Steven Gerrard's side after signing permanently in the following summer on a free transfer. He played a pivotal role in the club's resurgence. His experience and predatory instincts helped Rangers claim their first league title in a decade in 2020/21, as he notched 32 goals and 10 assists in 74 games for the Gers and even transitioned into a player-coach role. His time in Glasgow cemented his legacy as a player whose class transcended leagues and expectations.

Roy Keane

Roy Keane was never one for the easy route. After a dramatic and controversial departure from Manchester United in 2005, speculation was rife over his next move. A return to English football seemed likely, but instead, the fiery Irishman shocked many by signing for Celtic.

Given Keane's status as one of the most fearsome midfielders

in English top-flight history, having featured in the heart of midfield for 440 games, his move to Scotland was met with intrigue. While he added a Scottish Premiership and League Cup to his glittering trophy cabinet, injuries prevented him from making the lasting impact many had hoped for. He played just 12 games before hanging up his boots, marking a low-key end to a truly iconic career.

Freddie Ljungberg

Freddie Ljungberg's name is synonymous with Arsenal's golden era, particularly their 'Invincibles' season, where he played 30 league games and supplied nine goal contributions. The stylish Swede was a fan favourite in the Premier League, but by 2011, his career had taken an unexpected turn.

After stints in Major League Soccer and a short spell at West Ham, Ljungberg made the decision to join Celtic. The move, though high-profile, never truly worked out. He made just eight league appearances, failed to score, and left for Shimizu S-Pulse in Japan after six months. What should have been an exciting late-career chapter instead became a forgettable cameo in Scotland.

Ian Wright

Ian Wright's infectious personality and goal-scoring exploits made him a Premier League icon. Having spent the peak of his career banging in goals for Arsenal, it was hard to imagine him ever playing outside English football. Yet, in 1999, he surprised many by signing for Celtic.

At 35, Wright still possessed his poacher's instinct, but injuries and age had taken their toll. His time at Parkhead was brief – just nine appearances and three goals to his name before moving on – but it remains an intriguing postscript to an otherwise dazzling career. While his spell in Scotland was

short-lived, it only added to the rich tapestry of his footballing story.

Conclusion

The SPFL has long been a proving ground for emerging talent, but these cases prove that even seasoned Premier League stars can make the unexpected switch to Scottish football. Whether they sought a final challenge, a fresh start, or simply the opportunity to fulfil a personal ambition, these players found themselves in Scotland at an unanticipated stage to many onlookers.