

Manchester City 2025-26 Preview: Looking to Bounce Back After Subpar Season and Big Summer Signings

“Pep Roulette” has been a term commonly used among Manchester City fans and Fantasy Premier League users as an indication of the manager’s lack of consistency and use of rotation in his starting lineup. With a deep squad and not many departures as of yet, there are many questions about who Pep Guardiola will field for the team’s opening Premier League fixture this Saturday versus Wolves at the Molineux Stadium.

Due to the introduction of the 32-team Club World Cup expansion, City’s season was prolonged to the 30th of June, where the team was defeated by Saudi side Al-Hilal in the Round of 16. Manchester City played just two preseason matches (one behind closed doors) before their trip to Wolverhampton, and this lack of football will leave many unaware of what Pep’s vision for the new season is. At the Club World Cup, fans were introduced to new signings throughout the tournament, but not enough to get a true idea of what City’s strongest team is moving forward.

Competition In Goal

With the signing of **James Trafford**, Pep now has a serious decision to make. While Stefan Ortega has provided great performances during his City tenure, he never truly challenged **Ederson** for the starting role. Now, with a young, promising goalkeeper with a more advanced shot-stopping ability than Ederson, Trafford has serious contention to be the starting goalkeeper versus Wolves. Ederson’s future at Manchester City has become a question mark, with a potential move to Galatasaray in the works. If the Brazilian keeper leaves Manchester, the name being linked with the club is Champions League winner, **Gianluigi Donnarumma**. The Italian keeper is linked with a move away from Paris and could become City’s number one keeper if he joins.

Attempting to Revamp the Defense

When comparing Manchester City’s defense from their treble-winning season to what was seen on the pitch last season, there was a dramatic drop in quality. The backline consistently struggled defending the counterattack and seemed in danger when pressed. The only new addition to the back four this summer is left-back **Rayan Ait-Nouri**, who many will expect to see in the starting lineup from day one. **Nico O’Reilly**, who was recently handed a new contract and squad number, will be unlucky to lose his starting position in the squad following a stellar season breaking into the first team.

Despite a plethora of options at center-back, it will be surprising to see Pep go with a pairing other than **Ruben Dias** and **Josko Gvardiol**. However, due to not being fully fit, Gvardiol did not feature vs. Palermo. Pep has reliable squad players with **John Stones**, **Nathan Ake**, **Manuel Akanji**, and **Abdukodir Khusanov** all providing coverage in that position. Guardiola has

utilized all of his center-backs, besides Dias, as options in the full-back position, so it will be expected to see that throughout the season once again. This is especially notable for the right-back spot, where there is no natural full-back for that position. **Matheus Nunes** spent a lot of time at right-back last season, impressing from an attacking perspective but sometimes struggling on the defensive side of the ball. **Rico Lewis** has been a catalyst under Pep, inverting into midfield from the right-back spot, but it has become clear as time has progressed that his ability on the ball and strongest qualities are on the attacking side of the ball. Despite seeing minimal time after joining in January, Khusanov impressed in his stints at full-back, notoriously having one of the only positive performances of the team in the away leg at the Bernabeu last season. However, it would be expected that Pep starts with Matheus Nunes against his former club on the opening day of the season.

The Return of Rodri and Future Partnership with Reijnders

Many will attribute last season's struggles to the exclusion of Ballon d'Or winner Rodri. His health heading into the beginning of the season is still deemed a question mark, with the Spanish midfielder missing parts of preseason training with a groin injury and expecting to not be fully fit until after the international break. After missing almost the entirety of the season with an ACL injury, Rodri returned for some limited action in the Club World Cup. It was difficult to get a true reading of his play as he seemed stiff in his movement – something to be expected following a nine-month absence. With his return to full health around the corner, there is potential that his partnership with new signing **Tijani Reijnders** can become one of the best in the world. Reijnders was spectacular in his play for AC Milan last season, with a profile capable of providing goals and assists. Reijnders impressed in the second half vs. Palermo, scoring two goals and being inches away from a third.

In what some may have deemed a panic buy in January, Manchester City signed Spanish midfielder **Nico Gonzalez** from FC Porto. The unfortunate circumstance with Nico was the lack of trust he was given by Pep. He impressed in limited minutes but was still behind the pecking order of veteran players such as **Mateo Kovacic**, **Ilkay Gundogan**, and **Bernardo Silva**. Nico deserves a chance heading into the season, and could see a heightened role with the injuries of Rodri and Kovacic in midfield. Bernardo, who was personally named captain by Pep, is still expected to play a big role heading into the season.

Claudio Echeverri impressed in his only appearance at the Club World Cup, scoring a wonderful free-kick. However, the young Argentinian got injured in the match and was not fully fit to feature against Palermo. Another youngster got an opportunity against Palermo, with 17-year-old **Divine Mukasa** making his debut appearance with the first team and providing an assist for the team's third goal. Echeverri is expected to be loaned out, and Mukasa may see limited action throughout the season.

A Plethora of Attacking Options

Pep is expected to play an attacking three behind **Erling Haaland**, with many options to choose from. It will be interesting to see if there is a clear answer for the attack going forward, but it has been years since there was a set lineup under Pep.

The coveted number 10 position, and what has been considered the “Kevin De Bruyne role” for Man City, is the biggest question mark at the moment for Pep. **Phil Foden** was remarkable in the 2023-24 season, shifting centrally and carrying City to big victories throughout the season. However, his form saw a big dip last season and now faces competition centrally from new signing, **Rayan Cherki**. We have seen versatility from Foden, with the ability to play left, right, or centrally. Now, with other wing options and the departure of De Bruyne, it is the perfect opportunity for Foden to find his form and take the role as the main creator for the team.

Cherki has emerged as one of the hottest prospects in world football with a phenomenal touch on the ball and the ability to create at an elite level with both his right and left foot. While he may seem like a candidate to start off the right, it seems like there might be a bigger need for him centrally to start the season as Foden gets to full fitness.

On the wings, the team has three traditional wingers: **Oscar Bobb**, **Jeremy Doku**, and the potentially departing **Savinho**. Oscar Bobb seemed more than set to have his breakthrough season last year before breaking his leg and missing most of the campaign. Now, returning to the team with full fitness, many can expect to see a big role for Bobb this season. On the left flank is Jeremy Doku, a player who many will hope can improve his goals and assist tally. Doku is an explosive winger, who might be the best one-on-one attacker in the world, but has struggled to find the quality needed in the final product. This was a similar story with Savinho last season, who is now being linked to a move away from Manchester. Tottenham seems keen on his signature, and his departure may be imminent. If he were to stay, Pep would expect a higher production rate on the score sheet.

Omar Marmoush joined in January and has impressed during his short stint with the club. While he is traditionally a striker, it is expected that Marmoush will spend most of his time this season on the left wing. With a striker like Haaland on the team, it will be rare to see Marmoush play as the main number 9 in the squad. He has the potential to be an elite goalscorer in this team, and it will be critical to see him be a part of the starting XI this season. We have not seen much of Haaland and Marmoush on the field together, with both having the capability of bouncing off each other to create goals.

Predicted XI vs. Wolves + Game Prediction

My predicted starting lineup vs. Wolves: Trafford, Nunes, Dias, Stones, Ait-Nouri, Nico, Reijnders, Doku, Cherki, Marmoush, Haaland

It took a 95th-minute winner from John Stones last season for City to secure a win at the Molineux, and it is expected to be a tough opener for the team. However, Wolves will not have enough firepower to contain Man City and I expect a 3-1 win for the Citizens.