

TT No.218: *Andy Gallon* - Mon 27th April 2009; **Newcastle United v Portsmouth**; Premier League; Res: 0-0; Att: 47,481; Admission: £31; Programme: £3 (76pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Seldom have I been to a game so hyped. When someone such as Alan Shearer, nominal president of the unofficial Geordie Nation, describes a match as one of the biggest of his career, you know, to use the nonsensical modern football vernacular, it's on the extra-large side of massive. Even by Newcastle United's soap opera standards, this campaign of bizarre plots and sub-plots, amid bewildering twists and turns on and off the field, has been traumatic. Shearer, whose results since taking charge suggest even so-called messiahs cannot work miracles, is the club's fourth manager (and a rookie at that) during a season which, after this result, seems certain to end in relegation. Four games left. Three points adrift. The biggest losers, of course, will be the fans. Many of Newcastle's squad, a clutch of typically overpaid, overrated Premier League mercenaries, will move on to pastures new rather than face the ignominy, and lower wages, of a sporting recession in the Championship wilderness. But the Toon Army, either unswervingly loyal or deaf, blind and daft, depending on your way of looking at things, cannot switch allegiance so easily. The passion and commitment shown on the 'terraces' at St James' Park has never (well, hardly ever) been in doubt. If the players, and those running the club, showed the same will to win, and dedication to the cause, the Magpies surely wouldn't be in such a mess.

Even to the casual observer, its clear football is rather more than just a game in the North East. Cliché-mongers will attempt to persuade you it's akin to a religion up there. If that's true, its followers need cathedrals - and St James' Park is Newcastle's version. I'd been just once before, in February 1988, when Mirandinha, Gazza and Peter Jackson were the stars of the team. Norwich City, 3-1 victors, were the opposition for a top-flight game. How times have changed for Delia's not-so-tasty Canaries. Then, much of the ground was a building site. Given the extensive revamp undertaken since to raise the capacity to a season ticket holder-busting 52,387, a return had been on my travelling agenda for some time.

The city centre location of the stadium, home to the Magpies since 1882, is astonishing. You can hop off the Tyne & Wear Metro, joining shoppers right in the heart of Newcastle, and be at St James' Park in five minutes of brisk walking. Though its vast, rearing stands are visible, temple fashion, for miles around, the stadium, up close and when approached on foot, is hidden until the last possible moment. Roof fascia-mounted floodlights and the local topography are responsible. Once located, having emerged from narrow streets, inside and out, it's an awesome place - made even more special on this emotional night of nights by a particularly memorable atmosphere. Hot, bothered and rain-soaked after a rush hour traffic pantomime in Gateshead had delayed my arrival, I finally stumbled across the stadium by the Gallowgate Stand, officially the South Stand under the

new arrangements. Ninety minutes before kick-off, the place was buzzing with anticipation. Past the two-floor club store (I've seen smaller branches of Tesco) and the cool, dark glazing of Shearer's Bar, I picked my way under the vast overhang of the extended Milburn (main) Stand to my turnstile in a corner of the Sir John Hall Stand. Beyond this point is the public Leazes Park, a community treasure, in which United, in 1995 when under the ownership of Sir John, wanted to build a new 55,000-seat stadium costing £65m. But there are limits, even in this city, to how far football can push its luck. The project on the coveted Town Moor was scuppered when park protectionists, who compiled a 36,000-signature petition, won the day. People 1 Self-proclaimed Man of the People 0.

Past the turnstiles, at least at the Leazes end of the ground, St James' Park is an odd mixture of alleys, corridors, gates, concourses and high ceilings. This feeling of an awkward conversion from ancient to modern is reinforced when you take your seat. Mine - K37, level two - took some finding. Sometimes, stewards can come in handy. The 1972 vintage East Stand, once the most impressive part of the stadium, and the Gallowgate Stand are dwarfed by the jaw-dropping height (said to be the largest cantilever structures in Europe) of the multi-tiered Milburn and Sir John Hall Stands, whose vaulted, translucent roofs tower above a pitch almost unnatural in its perfection. Owing to the presence to the rear of Leazes Terrace - magnificent grade one listed Georgian town houses - and its residents' legal right to natural light, the East Stand cannot become any taller, so the lop-sided appearance of the ground is here to stay. The club have done their best to unite the four sides of St James' Park, not least by using identical charcoal grey plastic tip-up seats throughout, but it is an impossible task.

Newcastle were desperate to drum up as much support as possible for this crucial fixture. So, I found myself handed a free black and white scarf (barred, in the traditional style, embroidered with present and retro logos, and a tenner in the store on any other day) as I entered the stadium, and there was a large black card draped over my seat. After Consett-born opera singer Graeme Danby had belted out a surprisingly clumsy rendition of Geordie anthem 'Blaydon Races', the teams emerged to a stadium comprising, thanks to the cards, walls of black and white stripes. This rapturous welcome almost brought a lump to my neutral throat. What the few hundred visiting Portsmouth fans, tucked away in a corner in the top tier of the Sir John Hall Stand having scaled 14 flights of stairs, made of it all, I can't imagine. Still, the view of Tyneside's lights would have been nice from up there.

Did the Magpies rise to the occasion? No, not really. The players' effort couldn't be faulted, but this team isn't good enough - and everyone around me knew it only too well. Newcastle seem to have a side made up of players nobody else in the Premier League would want. Michael Owen, terminally unfit these days and playing ridiculously deep, seems to have lost the few qualities he possessed in his prime, Alan Smith was an irrelevant headless chicken, musclebound Mark Viduka can't hack it at this level any more, and Irish imp Damien Duff's swagger has gone AWOL. Obafemi Martins was tireless, without getting much in the way of breaks, but fellow import Fabricio Coloccini, frighteningly short of confidence in the right-back

position, seemed incapable of finding a team-mate with any pass, short or long. No-one, certainly not striker-turned-dull-as-ditch-water-pundit Shearer, would be able to make a silk purse from this sow's ear. One of my work colleagues has a Newcastle United season ticket. How she justifies paying so much to watch this shower once a fortnight, I don't know.

No doubt most of you saw the highlights on TV. Newcastle began well, but no-one was prepared to take a risk. Duff forced David James to get down quickly to deal with a low drive. Neither Owen nor Viduka could beat the characteristically erratic Pompey keeper when through. A deflated Owen, on his knees having failed to end a goal drought now extending to nine games, made a fitting image for the morning papers. Martins somehow volleyed over wildly from eight yards with the net at his mercy. Anguish and resignation abounded. Heads were in hands. Fingernails suffered. As the game wore on, fellow strugglers Portsmouth, who played five across midfield in the hope of gaining a precious point, looked the likelier winners. Beanpole Peter Crouch, whose first touch was simply awful throughout, scuffed a great chance with only Steve Harper to beat, and Richard Hughes hit a post with a looping header. Coloccini was lucky to get away with a poor challenge on Crouch in the penalty area as referee Mike Riley rejected vigorous appeals.

The Toon Army began to lose homeward-bound troops (the "immoral minority", according to one supporter-run website) from the 75th minute, and the closing moments were played out in a wretched near-silence. The ride across the river on a packed Metro train was even quieter. Perhaps the fans were dwelling on next season, when the roll call of visitors has the potential to include the likes of Doncaster Rovers, Blackpool and Barnsley. Tentative plans to redevelop the Gallowgate Stand and push St James' Park's capacity to 60,000 could be put on hold. Indefinitely.

Not a great game, by any means, but a memorable experience. As for the Magpies, I will leave you with this joke: 'What's the difference between Alan Shearer and Newcastle United? Shearer will still be on Match of the Day next season'. We, the uninvolved, can chortle, but for the club's loyal hordes, it's no laughing matter.

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