Newcastle sings the Blues

Chelsea reaches FA Cup final for third time in seven years

BY MIKE COLLETT
in London

Gianluca Vialli admitted Chelsea rode its luck to beat Newcastle United, 2-1, in a pulsating FA Cup semifinal at Wembley and set up a date with Aston Villa on May 20.

"They played better than us for long periods of the game," said the Chelsea manager, "and the only difference at the end was that we took our chances and they did not. Newcastle made it very hard for us, and we have to be thankful that Gustavo Poyet scored two great goals and that Ed De Goey was so outstanding in goal."

The Chelsea-Aston Villa match will be the last Cup final at Wembley before the stadium is demolished later this year for rebuilding.

Newcastle captain Alan Shearer, after losing the last two FA Cup finals, was devastated by the latest loss and said the sooner the Twin Towers came down the better.

"I cannot believe we played as well as that and lost," he said. "We have been sitting there absolutely stunned in the dressing room. I thought we were the better side, but we have had no luck here for years and as far as Newcastle United are concerned, the sooner they knock this place down the better."

Shearer praised Poyet, the Uruguayan international who arrived from Spanish club Real Zaragoza two years ago.

"I thought we were the better side," Shearer said, "but you cannot give Poyet chances like that. He is one of the best attacking midfielders in the world and if you give him half a chance, he'll bury you. I have to admit it, we feel hard done by today."

Chelsea somehow survived almost endless Newcastle pressure in the second half and won a superb match with a brilliantly taken header by Poyet just five minutes after Newcastle had finally equalized.

Poyet opened the scoring against the run of play in the 17th minute when he lobbed the ball over Newcastle goalkeeper Shay Given.

Newcastle had to wait until the 67th minute before Robert Lee powerfully headed home a Shearer cross for the equalizer.

Vialli gambled on making six changes to the team that played so superbly to beat Barcelona, 3-1, in the first leg of their Champions League quarterfinal series.

He even omitted from the starting lineup goal scorers Tore Andre Flo and Gianfranco Zola. Instead, he paired George Weah and Chris Sutton in attack, and although they were both replaced later by Flo and Zola, Vialli's gamble paid off and Chelsea reached its third FA Cup final in seven seasons.

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Two great goals by Uruguayan Gustavo Poyet saved Chelsea against Newcastle at Wembley.

The end of the line

Bradford City and Watford, both promoted to the Premier League a year ago, look like they'll be going straight back down to the First Division after failing to win vital home matches on April 8.

Last-place Watford was held to a 0-0 tie by Derby County at Vicarage Road, while Bradford lost, 2-1, at Valley Parade to Southampton to remain in 18th place.

The results boosted Derby's chances of staying up and all but guaranteed Southampton Premier League soccer for another season.

With six matches to go Watford has 20 points, one less than Sheffield Wednesday (21) but six behind Bradford (26), which is six points behind Derby. The bottom three go down.

"We might be heading back to the First Division," said Watford manager Graham Taylor, "but at least we are in good spirits and I don't think there is any chance of us nosediving through the divisions as happened before. The club is in good shape, I have been able to take advantage of the situation by bleeding some young players. Although I do not like to be in this situation you have to be realistic."

Bradford City crashed to its fifth straight loss at home.

"We will keep fighting, we are not down yet," said City manager Paul Jewell. "We've clearly got a tough fight on our hands, but we will keep going right until the end. You have to remain optimistic, but you have to be realistic, too. This is a very tough league to survive in."