

Magpies, Boro relegated

AFP, London



Newcastle became the biggest Premier League casualties since Leeds dropped out of the top flight five years ago after a final-day defeat at Aston Villa condemned Alan Shearer's side to relegation.

The Magpies will be joined in the Championship next season by local rivals Middlesbrough, whose last chance of beating the drop disappeared with a 2-1 defeat at West Ham.

Newcastle and Boro's misery ensured huge relief for both Sunderland and Hull. They also lost their final matches but managed to cling on to their top-flight status thanks to the failure of their rivals to snatch the lifeline on

Shearer said he would decide whether to continue as Newcastle boss following talks with club owner Mike Ashley next week before voicing his frustration over everything that has happened at St James' Park this season.

"We haven't been relegated because of what happened today. We have gone down because of what happened over 38 games," the former England striker said. "Big changes need to be made at the club."

Darron Gibson demonstrated the rich resources Sir Alex Ferguson has at his disposal with a stunning strike to give Manchester United their win at Hull and ensure the champions finished the campaign with a four-point advantage over second-placed Liverpool. Another youngster, Junior Stanislas, sealed West Ham's win over

ent on results elsewhere for their safety after Salomon Kalou and Ashley Cole extended the visitors' lead.

Kenwyne Jones claimed a late consolation effort for Sunderland, who learned after the match that manager Ricky Sbragia had decided to step down following talks with chairman Niall Quinn.

"I've had a chat with Niall this week and I think we need a bigger name to carry the club further," said Sbragia, who stepped up from a coaching role following the departure of Roy Keane in November.

Everton secured 5th place with a 2-0 win at Fulham that was secured by a Leon Osman double.

The defeat could have cost Fulham a place in Europe but Tottenham's 3-1 loss at Liverpool meant that Roy Hodgson's side remained in seventh place -- the club's highest Premier League finish -- and will play in the Europa League next season.

Fernando Torres's 50th goal for Liverpool and an Alan Hutton own goal put the Reds in control and although former Reds striker Robbie Keane marked his return to Anfield with a goal, Yossi Benayoun made sure of the points.

Arsenal finished a frustrating season on a high with a 4-1 win over Stoke, exacting revenge for a bruising defeat at the Britannia Stadium in December.

The Gunners were 3-0 up inside 20 minutes thanks to a James Beattie own goal Robin van Persie penalty and an Abou Diaby header. Ricardo Fuller pulled one back from the spot but van Persie claimed his second before half-time and the rest of the match was reduced to a training exercise.

West Brom, who had already been relegated, finished bottom of the table after a goalless draw at Blackburn while Manchester City rounded off their campaign with a 1-0 win over Bolton that was sealed by Felipe Caicedo's early strike.

City finished the season in 10th place, one position above Wigan, for whom Colombian striker Hugo Rodallega delivered a 1-0 win over Portsmouth.

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Liverpool striker Fernando Torres (C) scores the opening goal against Tottenham Hotspur during their Premiership encounter at Anfield on Sunday. Liverpool won 3-1.

STANDINGS

English Premier League table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Team	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Man Utd	38	28	6	4	68	24	90
Liverpool	38	25	11	2	77	27	86
Chelsea	38	25	8	5	68	24	83
Arsenal	38	20	12	6	68	37	72
Everton	38	17	12	9	55	37	63
Aston Villa	38	17	11	10	54	48	62
Fulham	38	14	11	13	39	34	53
Tottenham	38	14	9	15	45	45	51
West Ham	38	14	9	15	42	45	51
Man City	38	15	5	18	58	50	50
Wigan	38	12	9	17	34	45	45
Stoke	38	12	9	17	38	55	45
Bolton	38	11	8	19	41	53	41
Portsmouth	38	10	11	17	38	57	41
Blackburn	38	10	11	17	40	60	41
Sunderland	38	9	9	20	34	54	36
Hull	38	8	11	19	39	64	35
Newcastle	38	7	13	18	40	59	34 - relegated
Middlesbrough	38	7	11	20	28	57	32 - relegated
West Brom	38	8	8	22	36	67	32 - relegated

offer to them. Hull's 1-0 defeat by a Manchester United side missing all their big names ahead of this week's Champions League final meant that a draw would have been enough for Newcastle to stay up.

But that never looked on the cards and Villa, who finish the season in sixth place, fully deserved the three points, although they were sealed in fortunate fashion by a Gareth Barry shot that was deflected past Steve Harper by Damien Duff.

SHARPSHOOTERS

Goals

19	Nicolas Anelka (Chelsea)
18	Cristiano Ronaldo (Man Utd)
16	Steven Gerrard (Liverpool)
14	Robinho (Manchester City), Fernando Torres (Liverpool)

Middlesbrough after Gary O'Neill had cancelled out Carlton Cole's first-half strike.

Boro boss Gareth Southgate has been assured his job is safe and he vowed to implement the lessons of this season in the fight to bounce straight back up.

"This last six months has been very hard but you have to go through these painful things to come out stronger and better," he said. "Tonight we'll grieve for what has happened but tomorrow we'll come out fighting."

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ASSISTS

Assists

11	Robin van Persie (Arsenal)
10	Dimitar Berbatov (Man Utd), Cesc Fabregas (Arsenal), Steven Gerrard (Liverpool), Frank Lampard (Chelsea)

Gourcuff best in France

AFP, Paris

Bordeaux midfielder Yoann Gourcuff was named by his fellow professionals on Sunday as France's Player of the Year.

The 22-year-old, whose play has drawn comparisons with the great Zinedine Zidane, has been instrumental in the Girondins' excellent season which currently sees them top of the French first division and needing just one point from next weekend's final round of games to lift the title.

He has contributed 12 goals and laid on seven others in 26 matches played and also taken on an increasingly key role in the French national side who are in a period of transition under coach Raymond Domenech.

Gourcuff started his career at Rennes, but moved to Italy to play for AC Milan in 2006.

He failed to make his mark there though and joined Bordeaux on loan at the start of this season. He has yet to decide where he will play next season.

Cannavaro bids farewell

AFP, Madrid

Fabio Cannavaro took his leave of Real Madrid's fans on a losing note on Sunday but insisted he had enjoyed his time in Spain.

The Italian World Cup winning skipper was substituted 10 minutes into the second half of the 1-3 loss to Mallorca, the club's final home game of the season.

The fans gave him a solid round of applause which drew thanks afterwards from the player.

"I have had three fantastic seasons, it has been an incredible experience winning two leagues and being in the Real Madrid dressing room," Cannavaro said.

"I have always tried to be professional and give everything. I think the fans appreciate that and it was amazing to hear them chanting my name at the end."

"It was sad to finish my time at the club losing but after the defeat by Barcelona it has been very difficult for us to bounce back."

"The loss to Barcelona has definitely been the lowest point of my time here."

The 35-year-old world player of the year in 2006 following Italy's World Cup triumph in Germany has resigned for Juventus for next season.

Real began with plenty of possession but they lacked movement from Raul Gonzalez and Kasper Hjulsten in attack.

They did get the breakthrough though when Gonzalo Higuain headed home after 20 minutes but Juan Arango equalised minutes later against the run of play.

Cleber Santana scored a superb goal, beating four players before clipping the ball into the top corner and then the victory was confirmed with another fine strike by Alassane Keita.

Neville eyes milestone

Football

AFP, London

Gary Neville is on the verge of becoming England's most-capped full-back after being handed a surprise call-up by Fabio Capello for next month's World Cup qualifiers against Kazakhstan and Andorra.

Manchester United star Neville will compete with Portsmouth's Glen Johnson for the right-back slot in Capello's team despite spending most of the season on the sidelines at Old Trafford.

Sir Alex Ferguson's decision to play Neville in Sunday's win at Hull, where the United boss fielded a mostly reserve team, showed the veteran is no longer regarded as a first choice.

And the 34-year-old, who made his last appearance for England against Spain in 2007, must have feared his international career was over after an injury-ravaged last two years.

But, just like his long-time friend David Beckham, Neville has been deemed worthy of a recall.

And, if he is picked for either match in next month's World Cup double-header against Kazakhstan and Andorra, he will equal Kenny Sansom's record for a full-back of 86 caps and would take sole possession of the

record with appearances in both matches.

Indeed, as Capello would not have picked Neville if he did not believe he could make a meaningful contribution beyond two matches England should win to take maximum points from their first seven matches in Group Six, the 34-year-old could well end up getting somewhere close to the century mark before he does eventually call a halt to his international career.

That Capello chose to draft in someone with so much experience suggests the time for untested rookies to be utilised before the World Cup finals themselves in South

Africa next summer is drawing to a close.

Manchester City are represented in the form of Wayne Bridge and Shaun Wright-Phillips, who was supposed to have been ruled out with a knee injury, only for Blues boss Mark Hughes to discover the problem was not so bad after all.

Jermain Defoe returns after a three-match absence, while Theo Walcott is fit for international duty after dislocating his shoulder in training prior to the friendly win over Germany in Berlin last November.

It is the goalkeeping department where Capello has most to worry about, although even here he has gone for the tried and tested as first and second choices David James and Ben Foster have been ruled out with shoulder and thumb injuries respectively.

West Ham's Robert Green has emerged as first-choice despite winning just two caps, both as a second-half substitute in friendly matches.

And with Joe Hart ruled out on form grounds after losing his place at Manchester City to Shay Given, Paul Robinson, who won the last of his 41 caps in the catastrophic European Championship defeat in Russia in October 2005, is recalled along with Scott Carson, who has just been relegated with West Brom.

Newcastle look to the future

AFP, London

Newcastle owner Mike Ashley is to have meetings with Alan Shearer this week to work out the way forward for the club following their relegation from the Premier League.

The northeast giants were sent crashing down into the Championship after losing 1-0 at Aston Villa on Sunday on the final day of the season.

It was an end to 16 straight years in the top flight and it left the beleaguered Ashley with big decisions to make.

Relegation could cost the club anywhere between 30million and 60million pounds with the sportswear tycoon's total investment of around 250million pounds over the last two years counting for little.

Shearer, who took over as temporary manager late into the season in a final bid to avoid the drop, admitted that huge mistakes had been made and that massive changes were required very quickly.

Managing director Derek Llambias told the club's official website, www.nfc.co.uk: "Being relegated from the Premier League is a huge disappointment for everyone involved with Newcastle United."

"We are all hurting and I feel desperately sorry for everyone associated with Newcastle United; for Mike, who has invested heavily in the club, and for all the supporters who have given the team magnificent backing up and down the country all season long. "Mike and I will sit down with Alan this week to discuss how the club moves forward again, and I hope to be able to say more to our supporters later this week."

One of the first issues to be resolved will be Shearer's continued presence or otherwise at St James' Park after his eight-game reign drew to a close on a dismal note.

Iran mulling US friendly

AFP, Tehran

Iran on Monday said that it had received a request from the US football federation for a friendly match and it was studying the proposal, the ISNA news agency reported.

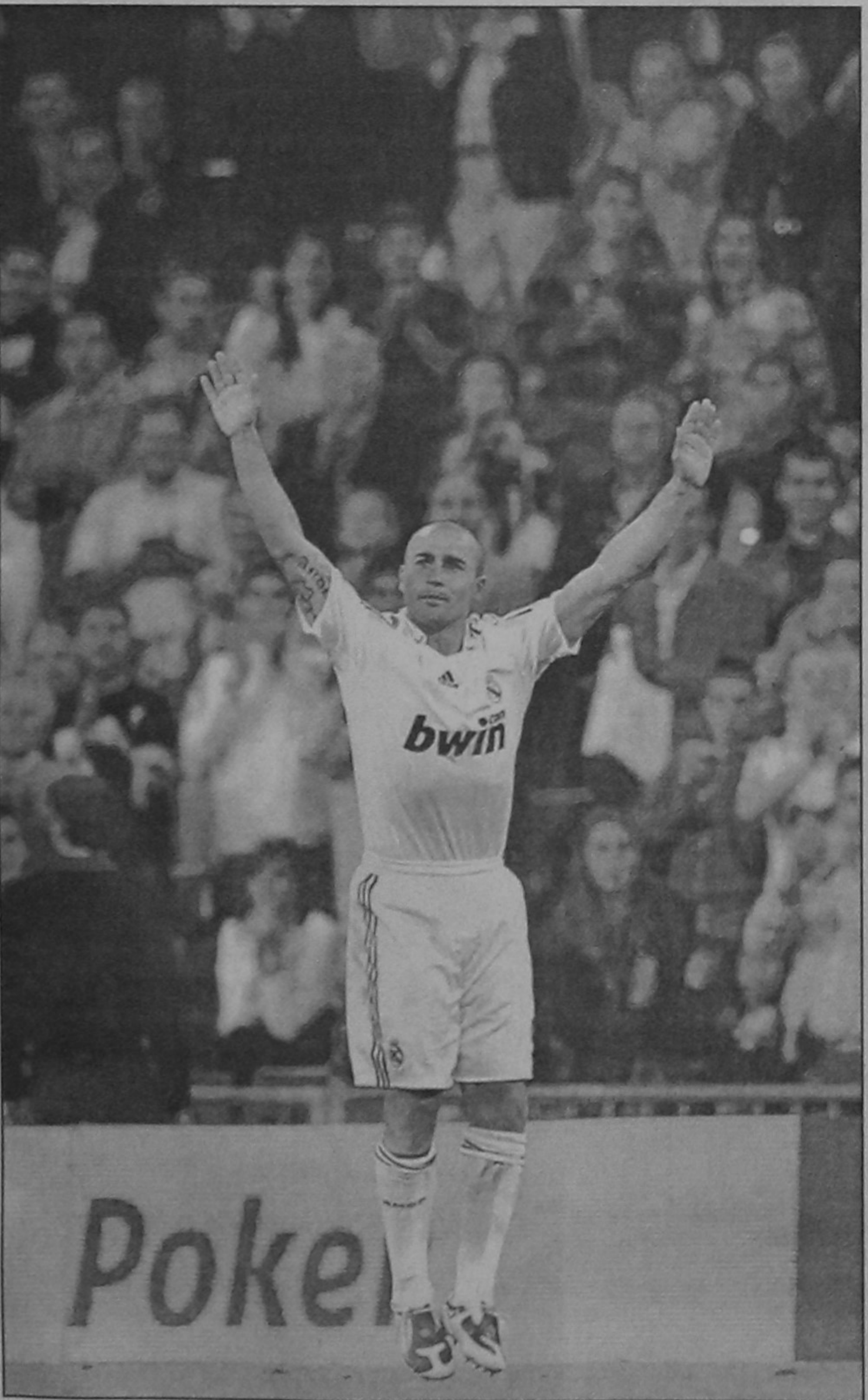
Iran's Team Melli's most celebrated exploit of recent years was when it defeated the United States 2-1 in a thrilling encounter at the 1998 World Cup in France.

Iran later played a friendly match in the United States which ended in a 1-1 draw.

Washington broke diplomatic ties with the young Islamic republic in 1980 in the aftermath of the Iranian Islamist students taking over US diplomatic mission in Tehran holding diplomats hostage for 444 days.

"The US football federation has forwarded a request for a match. We are studying it and after a legal process we will notify them about our decision," the head of Iranian football federation Ali Kafashin was quoted as saying.

"The match has not been finalised, but if so we will tell you," he added.



Real Madrid defender Fabio Cannavaro waves goodbye to fans after his last match at Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday.