

The 2019/20 season and collapse of the takeover bid have left Newcastle in a sorry state of affairs

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ABSTRACT

Following an uninspiring league campaign and the collapse of the club's proposed takeover, Newcastle have been left in a difficult position going into next season.

Where does this leave the club now? What prospects do we have left for the future?

Those are the kind of questions this past week has thrown up for Newcastle supporters as the club undergoes a tough, unexpected reckoning. First fans were forced to watch as the club struggled its way over the line to conclude a 2019/20 Premier League season which on paper might have achieved its goal of league safety but throughout the season offered little to inspire the supporters nor distract from the glaring inadequacies throughout the squad. Then, as if the fanbase needed a further hammer blow to its dreams of a different life, the club's lifeline Saudi-backed takeover up and imploded almost without warning.

Few could truthfully blame the prospective new owners of finally growing tired with the Premier League, who had all but confirmed they were indefinitely stalling out the patience of the Saudi elements of the deal. For their own reasons, be that morally or commercially, neither the league nor its chief Richard Masters wanted to approve the deal but had quite clearly, during the incredible seventeen weeks of checks, processes and deliberation, discovered there was little in their own processes which could justifiably and legally halt the takeover going through. The proposed board member to

represent the Saudi interests in the club, Yasir Al-Rumayyan, was always going to pass the relevant requirements of the tests.

It's quite telling that the Premier League was keen to try and interject and force a link to be present in the takeover between Newcastle and the government of Saudi Arabia itself - which likely could fail the Owners and Directors Test - rather than just Al-Rumayyan, Governor of the Public Investment Fund (PIF) and a board member of a number of major multinational companies in various industries.

When they couldn't achieve that outcome, they instead forced the deal into a state of permanent limbo which inevitably was too much for the new owners.

The entire takeover process has been a long, dramatic and complex series of events, ever-changing and which understandably have prompted fury among the North East for the eventual outcome; one which has not just robbed a club of prospective new owners with huge financial wealth, but also wider investment into the entire region by the PIF - a commitment the new owners had already made. There's little surprise, perhaps, that it has sparked vocal calls and petitions for an independent review - an outcome which, in the interest of full disclosure, I too would be in favour of seeing occur.

But, regardless of what occurs off the field regarding the now seemingly dead in the water takeover, Newcastle has other very serious problems to address. On the pitch, they simply weren't good enough during the 2019/20 Premier League season.

Responsibility for that inadequacy falls equally on the players, staff and boardroom - not just on Steve Bruce's tactics as some of the more vitriolic sections of the fanbase seem to be keen to suggest. Most of the points earned last season were done so through scrappy results and uphill struggles. As much as that talks to the spirit and strength of character which Bruce has instilled in his players, it is also inherent of a serious problem of underinvestment and a lack of quality or depth in the squad.

Jonjo Shelvey finished the season as Newcastle's top goalscorer: with just six goals. That's six goals in a total season of 38 league games. Up front, Dwight Gayle led the scoring charts with four goals - all of which came during a late flurry of form in the post-coronavirus restart period. Big money striker Joelinton, who has suffered a total crisis of confidence in front of goal and represents an entirely different problem in and of itself, had just two goals for the season. As for Japanese striker Yoshinori Muto, he's increasingly starting to seem like just a figment of our collective imaginations.

In football, we talk about a 30-goal a season striker as being a mark of a top athlete in that position. Right now, Newcastle can't even manage a five goal a season striker. If that isn't the greatest damnation of the

Magpies, then truly I don't know what is. On paper, Bruce guided the side to a similar finishing position to Rafa Benitez the season before; no progress lost, as much as not gained either. Yet, there is as seen a tangible decline we are seeing, and its in that forward position.

Newcastle supporters understood the struggles the club faced under Benitez's final season in charge, when we had a front three of Miguel Almiron, Ayoze Perez and Salomon Rondon. It was a passable Premier League up front, but it was far from a shining example. It did provide enough goals for the club to get on by and ensure league survival though.

Fast forward one season and with only Almiron left, Bruce has been handed a squad with almost nothing to offer in the final third. The one shining light up there this season has been French winger Allan Saint-Maximin, whose pace and trickery on the ball make him a livewire and a good Premier League quality creative player. Give him the ball and he will drive forward; he creates chances. But he's not perfect, he's a very good player but he isn't the complete package. Yet, among this Newcastle side, he's become Pele. Everything positive for the Magpies this season, especially in the latter half, has come through him. That's simply unsustainable for any club.

And make no mistake, as much as I bemoan the lack of quality in the Newcastle squad, that isn't as much a criticism of the players themselves but rather the overall investment in the squad. Nobody can question the drive and spirit of Matt Ritchie nor the utility belt qualities of Javier Manquillo but

these are players who arguably are at best squad players for a typical Premier League side; more aptly top Championship players. As soon as they begin to represent the spine and core of your top flight team there are clear problems. Much of Newcastle's ability to survive this season and avoid the relegation scrap at the bottom came from luck and other teams in the division performing worse.

Newcastle simply can't go into the 2020/21 season relying on others' shortcomings to survive. That is a certain recipe for relegation, and yet without a serious overall of the squad it is the outcome the club is going to have. As the article title says, Newcastle indeed find themselves in a sorry state of affairs.

Ask Newcastle fans from two years ago and I doubt anyone in black and white would have begged for the return of Spanish striker Joselu. Now, even setting aside the impressive form he has found with new side Alaves in La Liga, the defensive forward would walk into the Newcastle team and would probably be welcomed just to provide those five or ten goals a season the club so desperately needs right now. That's not a position any viable Premier League side should be finding itself in.

Add in further difficulties of a very sparse academy setup which offers the club neither any truly capable youth prospects for depth or to be sold on for a significant profit and the avenues to generate the necessary funds for the required investment fall squarely at the door of Mike Ashley - somewhere they have been for the past 13 years to little avail. The few promising

prospects the club has had which it could cash in on, such as the Longstaff brothers, have had to be fast-tracked into the first team, often before the club could move to do sensible business practices such as locking them down on longer professional contracts with smaller wage demands - instead, they've been drafted in, impressed and then been able to price out the club, leading to situations such as Newcastle's loss this summer of Matty Longstaff.

Quite simply, this summer should have been one of excitement and revolution on Tyneside. Now, for reasons either outside of their own control or seemingly subject to questionable outside influence, that is not the case. Attention must shift to taking stock of the assets, resources and budgets the club currently has available to it and how they can be best pumped back into the team to ensure that, if Ashley is as genuinely open to selling the club as he claims to be, then in a year's time it remains a Premier League side in the shop window and not a Championship one.

Priority one has to be in the forward department therefore. Defensively, Newcastle are far from stellar but with Martin Dubravka in goal and a well-drilled and spirited collective of defenders they can at least get a job done. Moving into midfield, there is an abject lack of depth or diversity of approaches to playing but with Shelvey and then likely someone like Isaac Hayden alongside, Bruce has a recipe he's likely to stick to anyway - further additions would be to bolster not redesign. Instead, money has to be put down to secure a reliable source of goals or relegation awaits.