

### Burnley 1 Newcastle 4

The last time I reported for the BFCLSC magazine on Clarets vs Newcastle was the fateful last day shoot out in May 2022 when Burnley dropped down to the Championship amid a profusion of great uncertainty with respect to the management and direction of the club. Back then, Burnley were playing a Newcastle side that finished mid-table after not just flirting with relegation but after looking nailed on certainties until their second league win in late January and a run of subsequent victories fuelled by a massive spending spree, which included the purchase of our top scorer Chris Wood. A run of 10 wins from 14 games lifted them out of any danger and in to eleventh place with 49 points, 14 more than Burnley.

The following season they went into overdrive, finishing in fourth place playing an exciting brand of cavalier football underpinned by a solid defence, the fulcrum supplied by another astute piece of business by Eddie Howe, picking up Nick Pope for a mere £10 million to add to the vastly-experienced Kieron Trippier. Newcastle's new found solidity must have come as a surprise to most Burnley and Bournemouth supporters, as one thing Eddie was not noted for was his ability to put together a resilient defence. However, it also underlines the importance of having a top class goalkeeper, and there is no doubt that Pope is in that bracket. Unfortunately for him, he was injured in early December but popped up on the bench for this fixture. Since that point, the number of clean sheets kept by the Mags has halved – the number of goals conceded (55) is way beyond the 33 of last season's campaign, hence they are lingering in seventh place and looking at the Europa League rather than the Champions League.

In the latter competition, they landed in a very tough group with two of this season's semi-finalists, Dortmund and PSG. The other team was Milan, who are about to finish runners-up in Serie A. To the Mags' credit, they squeezed a draw out in Milan where Popey was the hero of the night, and, to great delight on Tyneside, they went on to banjax PSG 4–1 at St. James' Park. That was the zenith of their campaign. They came undone against Dortmund with home and away defeats, and also lost to Milan on home turf, consequently finishing bottom of the group and thereafter able to 'concentrate on the league'.

At present, their position of seventh place is, I think, the Europa League Conference slot, so they will want to upgrade that by climbing above Man United into sixth. Their form since Popey's demise has been patchy. They contrived to lose at home to Forest on Boxing Day, but on the whole at St James' they have been consistent and solid.

On the road is another matter. Although they won at Villa, they managed to lose at Luton, one of 10 league defeats away from home. That's as many as Burnley, and they have let in 34 goals which is actually one more than the Clarets. Their most recent outing was at Crystal Palace where they managed only five shots and lost 2–0, although Palace have undergone a bit of a renaissance under their new manager Oliver Glasner, including a win at Anfield. So beforehand, it is quite difficult to predict what type of showing Newcastle would put on.

Since we last played them at home in 2022, the Mags have picked up Swedish centre-forward Isak, a snip at £63 million from Real Sociedad, Livramento from Southampton for £23 million, plus Gordon for £43 million, not a bad shopping list. On the other hand, he has a couple of home grown talents in the shape of Longstaff and Anderson, the latter being a local lad from Whitley Bay.

As for the Clarets, hopes were raised with points deductions for Forest and Everton, which at one point put both teams within range. However, thanks to Muric's howler at Everton, we contributed enormously to the momentum that has seen them disappear over the hills and far away. Before the game, finishing above Forest was still within our hands, but finishing above Luton was not.

Much has been made of our recent run of eight games with only one defeat, but this relative uptick had allowed some people to get a bit carried away methinks. Another more telling statistic is that Burnley have won only two of their last 17 games, moreover those wins came against a team that played with 10 men for ninety minutes and vs. one of the all-time worst sides ever to grace the Premier League. All that has happened recently is that the team have found a way to draw games instead of losing them. Furthermore, they have not been able to shed the habit of shooting themselves in the foot at the worst possible moments, hence Berge's clanger at Old Trafford and Muric's recent pair, with the most calamitous moment being the 1–1 draw with Brighton, which saw Muric win their Goal of the Month competition as he was their only scorer in April. Brighton even gave us a present to enable us to collect three points, instead we came up with one of the most ridiculous own goals of all time just three minutes later.

It was dull, cloudy day pre-kick off and beforehand were able to watch Ipswich Town clinch their place in the Premier League, very probably at our expense. The team had just one change from the previous week at Old Trafford, with skipper Brownhill coming in for Fofana who was on the bench. Burnley started off with a front three of Odobert, Foster and Bruun Larsen, three players who had never played EPL football before this season. In fact, they have not even played much senior football, amassing only 100 starts at their various clubs prior to this season, scoring a total of 21 goals. Contrastingly, Newcastle fielded a considerably more experienced and very powerful forward line, with Gordon, Isak and Callum Wilson leading their attack, and Burnley are one of the latter's bunnies as he had scored six goals previously against the Clarets. Wilson's career total is 132, emphasising the gulf in quality and achievement.

Nevertheless, it was Burnley who flew out of the blocks once the tonsured Anthony Taylor blew the whistle to start the game. As early as the first minute attacking down the right, Burnley gained a corner. Following this, Assignon flashed a cross into the box but nobody made contact. In the third minute Muric, almost in the centre circle, lofted a ball over the top of the Newcastle back line to Bruun Larsen, who had timed his run to perfection. Finding himself five yards clear, he brought the ball down with a deft touch and created a shooting chance but Dúbravka was alert to the danger and spread himself to smother his attempt. A couple of minutes later Foster teed up the same player for another effort which went wide and Berge played in Foster but a last ditch tackle blocked his shot.

After eight minutes Assignon, who was at the centre of a lot of the early attacking play, burst into the box and went down under a challenge from Brazilian Guimaraes. Initially it looked like a foul but Assignon has a track record of going down easily under minimal contact, but replays showed that although he was stumbling a bit, he was given a helping hand in the back by his opponent to ensure that he hit the turf. The game seemed to go on and it was not clear at the time if there was a VAR check or not. The MOTD pundits later claimed that there is a new ruling that contact is now allowed if it does not materially affect the player's fall or balance, however, plainly that rule did not apply to Assignon when he conceded a penalty and was sent off at Chelsea. Moreover, as Guimaraes had made no attempt to play the ball, the red card should have been brandished as Assignon was just about to shoot. I am not normally a referee basher and understand the difficult

job they have when players are blatantly cheating all the time, but there is no doubt that Burnley have previously been victim of big club bias and were on this occasion.



**Assignon – key to Burnley’s early attacking play**

Nonetheless, Burnley continued to press forward and cause Newcastle problems. Assignon popped up again but hit a tame shot straight at the keeper. However, the tide was beginning to turn a bit with Newcastle coming more into the game and gaining some possession in the Burnley half. From one sortie, Newcastle forward Wilson made a dramatic dive in the area and the referee rightly yellow-carded the Newcastle forward. However, it was not long before Wilson was able to extract his own form of retribution by firing the Mags in front from point blank range.

After 20 minutes, the opposition created a move that was the kind of goal ideally you imagine Kompany would like his team to score. The move began with a roll out to the full back, and a ball down the line to Murphy left Brownhill and Cullen stranded up the field. Right full back Livramento carried the ball at pace into the Burnley half and a swift interchange of passes saw the ball played into Murphy who took advantage of Vitorino and Berge hesitating as to who should pick him up. Consequently Murphy had the space and time to deliver a cross into Isak who turned the ball towards goal from about six yards. Muric made a

fine reflex save but the ball dropped conveniently to the lurking Wilson, enabling him to rattle his tally up to seven vs Burnley. Out of nowhere, the Clarets found themselves a goal down with the Mags barely in the contest as an attacking force up to that point.

Burnley did respond almost immediately when Assignon smashed in a fierce shot, but it was straight at Dúbravka. However, Newcastle were now beginning to go up through the gears and they fashioned another chance after robbing Assignon. Muric was forced to make a good save from Livramento at fairly close range, and Newcastle rather worryingly were beginning to find room not just in the Burnley half but also in their penalty box. Burnley tried to respond. Foster sent a pea-roller wide of the post, and a neat trick by Assignon, again in a very advanced position, gained the Clarets a corner, from which Newcastle were able to break when Bruun Larsen coughed up the ball and the move ended with Gordon just flashing the ball wide of Muric’s far post. Gordon then forced another corner from which Burn headed just over. The power, speed, precision and

cohesion of Newcastle's forward play was now forcing Burnley into errors, and it seemed only matter of time before Newcastle would add to their lead.

After 35 minutes, a poor ball from Cullen was intercepted by left full back Hall and the Clarets were forced to turn round and run back to their goal. Hall advanced and played in an accurate cross to Wilson who brought the ball down and took Estève on a run to the bye line. After outmuscling Estève, Wilson then found winger Murphy once more in oceans of space as Burnley had four defenders in the box but they were all in no man's land, watching the ball and marking thin air. Murphy ran forward and then pulled the ball back to Longstaff unmarked on the edge of the box with Brownhill ambling up behind him. Longstaff rifled the ball low and hard past Muric's right hand into the bottom corner, and at 2-0 the game was virtually up.

Newcastle were now in complete ascendancy and Estève was forced into pulling back Gordon and was booked for his pains. Gordon forced a save from Muric from the resulting free kick. It was one way traffic now and it was only another five minutes after the second goal that the match was put beyond Burnley's reach. Again it was a calamitous goal from Burnley's perspective. They tried to play out with the ball from near the corner flag in their own half on the right hand side. All was going well until Assignon decided to needlessly take on Dan Burn with the ball at his feet. As a contest it was like watching Charles Atlas take on Charles Haughtrey and there was only going to be one outcome. When Burn fed Gordon in abundant space, about half a dozen Burnley players retreated to the six yard box, however Gordon simply pulled the ball back to Guimaraes, totally unmarked on the edge of the box, and he fired it through the ruck of assembled players past Muric into the net. This last one really was schoolboy defending at its finest.

Six minutes of time were added on, enabling the Mags to fashion three more chances, one of them a sitter, and it could have easily been a lot worse at half time. To their credit, Burnley did try to hit back when Odoberst forced a corner, only for O'Shea to head over the resulting cross. Just before the whistle Estève went down and subsequently went off, perhaps he simply did not fancy being battered for another 45 minutes by Callum Wilson, who knows? Ekdal was his replacement.

At half time it felt like I had stepped into a time machine and had gone backwards to August 2023, when City, Spurs, Villa and Chelsea all took turns at pulverising the Clarets defence, except that unlike in the matches versus Chelsea and Spurs, Burnley had not converted their early positive start into a goal. Nevertheless, as with both those games, one sensed that an early goal would have merely stung the opposition into action much sooner than after 20 minutes when the Mags began to take control. Frankly there looked to be absolutely no way back and if anything the fear was that Newcastle could score with further abundance if they felt so inclined.

Once play resumed, there were quite a few empty seats near me as some folk had obviously had enough. The Clarets started on a bright enough note when a run by Odoberst now operating on the left, resulted in a chance for Foster which he skied into the Jimmy Mac. After that flurry, Newcastle resumed their position on the front foot and Gordon found himself confronting Brownhill near the Clarets right hand corner flag. Gordon forced Brownhill back and then burst past him on the bye line. Brownhill grabbed a piece of Gordon's shirt and possibly clipped his heel which was enough for the well-positioned Taylor to give a spot kick. Isak has never missed a penalty for the Mags but he did this time as Muric saved well, diving to his right. Nonetheless VAR felt obliged to see if there was any way they could help Newcastle as they ran a check for encroachment, the first time I have ever seen or heard of that.

Instead of building some momentum from this reprieve, the Clarets conceded another goal only a few minutes later. They surrendered possession in their own half, this time Brownhill and Berge both gave the ball away in quick succession, and Wilson sped away, feeding Murphy on the right who squared it across the six-yard box, finding Isak with time to take a touch and plant the ball in the net. Shortly after, O'Shea came close to scoring, unfortunately at the wrong end as he put a header just wide of his own goal for a corner.

So far, Murphy had been given the freedom of Turf Moor, with Vitorino and Bruun Larsen treating the Newcastle player as if he was carrying a highly contagious disease and were consequently keeping well clear. On the hour mark, the Burnley management sprang into action and the bid to score the five goals needed to rescue the Claret's EPL sojourn was under way when Bruun Larsen made way for Guðmundsson. After this point, the game petered out to some extent although Muric made a fine flying save from Guimaraes once more lurking on the edge of the box completely unattended by a Claret shirt.

Whatever the plan was to save the game was at half time, it hadn't worked as Dúbravka spent the second half of the contest untroubled by anything such as a direct shot on goal until five minutes from the end, when he was fishing the ball out of the net following O'Shea's well-taken header from a corner, conceded by a slightly uncharacteristic and comical gaffe by late sub Matt Ritchie. There was time for Muric to make two more decent saves when at last Anthony Taylor put the few remaining home fans and players out of their misery.

The team piled up yet another depressing statistic as they have lost at home to every team in the top ten. Furthermore, they can now only equal the record for the lowest number of wins at home (three) set in 1889/90, and bear in mind there were only 11 home games played in that season.

By the end of the game, many of the home sections were less than half-full. A steady stream of departures took place during the second half as beating the post-match traffic was deemed preferable to watching their team outclassed and at times humiliated on Turf Moor. To be fair to the players they kept going until the end, but in this division the virtues of hard work and effort that our manager keeps trumpeting, are not enough.

The side lacks experience, physical strength, expertise, skill, guile, and most of all co-ordination and organisation. For teams like Newcastle, we are sitting ducks, especially at home where the points tally is the same as Sheffield United's. My real concern is that the defending at times was a complete shambles and the players were continually coughing up the ball in dangerous positions. It's ironic that one of the game's best defenders doesn't seem to be able to set the team up defensively, yet going forward at times we don't look too bad. The problem in this department has been that at EPL level we lack quality, as highlighted by the shot conversion rate, which is one of the lowest in the Division. Our front three, Bruun Larsen, Foster and Odobert look lightweight, and back-ups Fofana, Amdouni and Benson look even lighter.

Sadly, it was difficult to see any improvement from those early days in the season and with two games to go we are back at square one, except we now know who our best goalkeeper is. It is interesting to note that the team won three games in the first half of the season and so far have won only two in the second half. So by any means of measurement there appears to be no progress. Don't get me started on recruitment, circa 35 players on the books and £100 million spent last summer and we take the field with two loanee defenders.

That's enough "analysis". Only one more home game to go and then I can unwind over the summer.

**Burnley:** Muric, Assignon, O'Shea, Estève (Ekdal 45), Vitorino, Berge, Cullen, Odobert, Brownhill (Amdouni 85), Bruun Larsen (Guðmundsson 62), Foster (Fofana 85). Subs not used: Trafford, Taylor, Trésor, Benson, Rodriguez.

**Newcastle:** Dúbravka, Livramento, Krafth, Burn, Hall, Murphy (Anderson 69), Longstaff (Joelinton 77), Guimarães, Gordon (Ritchie 85), Wilson (Barnes 69), Isak (Almirón 77). Subs not used: Pope, Dummett, White, Murphy.

**Attendance:** 21,781.