

The lead up to World War Two will be remembered as a disastrous period by all associated with Newcastle United Football Club. The Magpies were now in a period of rapid decline after a bright start to the 1930s, which consisted of title challenges and a 2-1 victory in the 1932 FA Cup final against one of the great Arsenal sides.



As the 1933-34 season got underway, manager Andy Cunningham seemed to have put together a decent side with respected international players at its heart. Despite this, United went through their worst season since entering the Football League forty years earlier. One win from the last 14 league games saw United slump into the relegation zone and finish two points below Birmingham City. After 36 years in the top flight, United was demoted to Division 2. Our first ever relegation.

Relegation sparked boardroom unrest that would last almost until war broke out in 1939. With finances in free fall and all the country's football clubs hit by the

worsening economy, the Magpies went through their worst season in the club's history in 1937-38, missing by a whisker the drop into Division Three North.

In the last full season before WW2 brought regular football to a halt, The Magpies took decisive action to arrest the decline of recent seasons. United's directorate invited former player Stan Seymour to the top table, which would prove to be a master-stroke.

As the clouds of war gathered over Europe once more, Seymour's influence saw an upturn in the team's performances. Almost £40,000 was spent on transfers as Seymour stamped his authority on the club; United finished the

season in ninth position, despite plunging into debt. Furthermore, young players such as inside forward Albert Stubbins were starting to make their mark on the first team. Stubbins would go onto be one of United's finest wartime goalscorers, notching 230 goals in just 187 wartime appearances.

United was well on course to becoming one of the country's top sides once again. However, the revival was put on hold for six long years as Hitler brought senior football to an abrupt end.

Long before the 1939-40 season began there had been murmurs of discontent regarding the mounting problems on the continent. Three games into the new season, Prime



Minister Chamberlain declared war on Germany and football was suspended as a world-wide conflict erupted. Less than 24 hours before, United recorded their first win of the season with an 8-1 home victory over Swansea Town, with Ray Bowden grabbing a hat-trick.

Football's authorities wiped the record books clean, disregarding all matches played and scrapping all competitive football until peace was restored. Players also had their contracts cancelled.

The government wanted the game to continue in some form despite restrictions put on crowd numbers attending sporting events. A season of development saw a wartime league structure put in place with 10 regional leagues and a national knock-out cup. In the meantime, clubs organised friendly matches to sustain fitness levels.

Clubs were permitted to field guest players stationed in the area or on home leave. Several celebrated names pulled on the Black & White shirt, including 1950s icons Sir Tom Finney, Bill Nicholson, and Stanley Mortensen.

Unlike World War One, United stayed in

business throughout the conflict and performed admirably in the 1939-40 wartime Football League North East. United was top of the league at the turn of the year but eventually fell away, finishing some way off eventual winners Huddersfield Town.

United almost went all the way in the War Cup, reaching the semi-final after negotiating their way through four two-legged rounds. Blackburn Rovers won a one-off game 1-0.

The Magpies also played a number of friendlies during the season and two Tyne-Wear derby games in aid of the war fund. United won both encounters, prevailing 2-0 at St. James' Park and 3-2 at Roker Park with Stubbins netting one of his 29 wartime hat-tricks.

Wartime football was extended for the 1940-41 season with a wider league format and results acting as a qualifying competition for the War

Cup. The regional leagues were thrown together to make one collective table and a complicated goal-average system was introduced. United finished 10th in the league and once again went close in the War Cup, this time losing 2-0 on aggregate in a two-legged semi-final against one of the pre-war elite and league champions, Preston North End.

On top of the league and cup campaigns, three friendlies were played during the season. Once again two Tyne-Wear derbies were played, with the spoils shared as The Toon beat Sunderland 3-1 at home before losing 4-3 away. A special fixture against an Army and RAF XI was staged at St James' Park with the servicemen trouncing the Magpies 4-0 in front of a crowd of nearly 5000.

The complications in league structure continued the

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UNITED IN THE WARS - PART 2

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Fulham v NUFC 1939





following season with all of England's clubs being rolled together and the league championship split into "First" and "Second" competitions before and after Christmas.

With Newcastle United's peacetime squad almost completely decimated as players entered active service or returned home to complete essential wartime work, the club relied heavily upon local talent from around Tyneside. The high-scoring matches continued, with Middlesbrough suffering two seven-goal defeats on consecutive weekends at the hands of the Magpies, with Stubbins scoring five in each game.

Wartime football saw competitive football contested between Newcastle United and their closest neighbours Gateshead for the first time. The Heed were a Football League side at the time and met the Black & Whites on 24 occasions during conflict, a local Tyneside derby which has not been repeated since, except from the odd friendly game.

United finished 15th in the First Championship before Christmas and fared little better in the Second Championship. Such form saw them fail to qualify for the knockout stages of the 22-team War Cup.

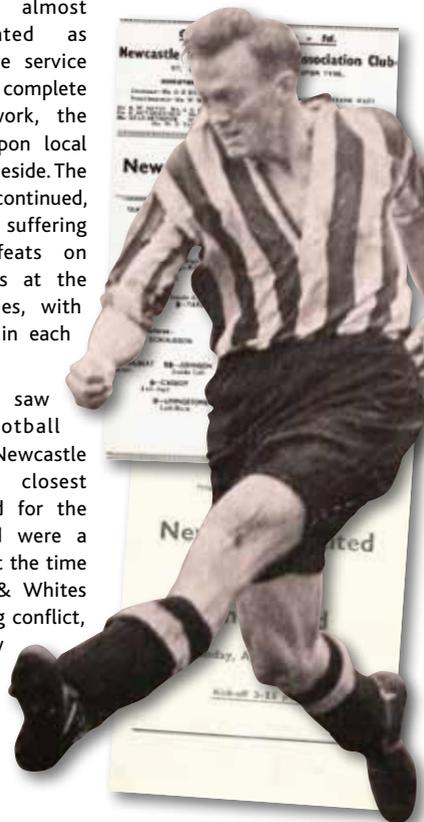
1941-42 friendly fixtures:

Newcastle United 2-0 Heart of Midlothian

Newcastle United 6-2 Gateshead

Newcastle United 1-1 Aberdeen

United improved in the 1942-43 season, netting 113 goals during the campaign and Stubbins once again leading the line with 42. He was joined by a number of guest players such as pre-war stars Alex Herd and Ray Westwood and North East-raised guests Eddie Carr and John Short, while



Finney and Mortensen played their part too.

After the split in the championships The Magpies qualified for the War Cup and went into a preliminary regional league, another test to see which clubs could get to the knock-out stages of the competition. The Magpies finished 12th and just made it to the knock-out stages, losing 4-3 on aggregate to York at the first serious hurdle.

1942-43 friendlies:

Newcastle United 2-4 Sunderland

Newcastle United 0-2 Northumberland Army

Aberdeen 0-0 Newcastle United

The men from Gallowgate finished in 11th position in the 1943-44 season with Albert Stubbins leading the line with 43 goals. Stubbins was often accompanied by a fresh-faced youngster by the name of John Edward Thompson Milburn from Ashington, who found solace from pit work by turning out for the Magpies of a weekend.

United reached the knockout stages of the War Cup yet again, losing out to Sheffield United 5-3 on aggregate in front of 53,000 at St James'.

The inaugural Tyne-Wear-Tees Cup then took place. This was a second rate competition that ran along with the league programme to see who was the top dog in the North East. United won the competition in novel circumstances. After a two-legged final against Darlington the sides were tied at 3-3 after extra time of the second leg. The two teams decided to settle the competition by playing until the first team scored – a golden goal of sorts – and after 32 minutes



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NUFC 11 - 0 Boro, V.E. Day Celebration match

of "over extra time" Wor Jackie netted the winner.

1943-44 friendlies:

Newcastle United 2-2 Preston North End

Newcastle United 3-3 North East Select XI (In aid of the Widow of Wilf Gallow)

1944 saw a U.S. Navy side take on a U.S. Army team in a wartime baseball exhibition on the St James' Park pitch. Also, recognised AAA (Amateur Athletic Association) track, field, and cycling events took place at the ground before and after conflict ceased.

Immediately after the war, the board attempted to erect a stand on the Leazes Terrace side of the ground which would have increased the capacity to 80,000, but an agreement could not be reached.

As the Second World War drew to a close Newcastle United was one of the finest sides in the country in front of goal. The Geordie public was treated to 122 goals in the 1944-45 season with that man Stubbins netting 40+ goals and guest star Eddie Carr notching 29.

Bradford City was handed an 11-0 drubbing and Hull were given

back-to-back 7-0 and 6-3 hidings.

Football was getting back to normal as the crowd restrictions were lifted proper and 43,000 descended upon St James' to see United overturn a 3-0 first leg deficit and triumph 4-2 against Bolton Wanderers in the War Cup.

As the midpoint of the season was reached and the end of the war in sight, pre-war players returned to St James' Park and made themselves available for selection. Thankfully, there are no records of any of Newcastle players dying during the conflicts. The crowds flocked back along with the players as an average gate of 40,000 was recorded.

1944-45 no friendlies were staged

With the war all but over, the national game returned to normal in the 1945-46 season. Regional leagues continued but with only two divisions – North and South – and a familiar 42-game home and away programme. The FA Cup also returned as the country as a whole was focussed on getting back to normal.

Stubbins notched another 40 of United's 106 goals in the league as a number of notable results were recorded. Stoke City were

dispatched 9-1 and Blackburn Rovers 8-1 as Newcastle scored four or more times on 12 occasions.

Barnsley knocked the Magpies out the FA Cup in an enthralling 5-4 encounter. Chilean George Robledo made such an impression that Stan Seymour soon signed him up. Seymour had seemingly taken up the reigns from Tom Mather, who had long since returned to Stoke.

The Barrack Road club also played in a series of friendlies in the Counties Cup and in a number of overseas fixtures, the highlight of which came in a 7-0 demolition of SK Brann.

Newcastle United Football Club spent the Second World War years wisely. Stan Seymour led a revolution that culminated in the assembly of a squad brimming with young, local talent in readiness for peace-time football.

United was almost rebuilt from scratch, with the determination to get back to the top just as they had after World War One. Newcastle United had created a side that would triumph with attacking flair, compromising a mixture of home-grown talent and shrewd – yet expensive in some cases – talent. ☐