

End of Chelsea's run deserved a bang but got only a whimper



Chelsea could not solve the puzzle they were set so Luiz Felipe Scolari has work to do on a side that is good but not superior

One of the great records in the history of English football came to an end yesterday, but you would never have known it when the final whistle sounded at Stamford Bridge. The look of utter desolation on the face of John Terry required a fitting response from Chelsea's fans, who should have consoled their captain and the other stalwarts of the 86-match unbeaten home record in the Premier League - notably Petr Cech, Frank Lampard and Ricardo Carvalho - with resounding acclaim for their superlative achievement.

What did the players get? A smattering of applause from the north stand but otherwise virtual silence, with row upon row of seats that had emptied in the closing minutes, and a lone fan who ran on to the pitch and was still aiming kicks at Liverpool players even as he was being manhandled away by security guards. They deserved something far better.

Those 86 matches will stand among

the great monuments of the English game, alongside Herbert Chapman's four league titles with Huddersfield and Arsenal between the world wars, Tottenham Hotspur's Cup-and-League double season of 1960-61, Bob Paisley's three European Cups (and 18 other trophies) at Liverpool between 1974 and 1983, Nottingham Forest's unbeaten 42 league matches under Brian Clough between November 1977 and December of the following year, Manchester United's treble of 1998-99, Arsenal's "invincible" season of 2003-04, and Sir Alex Ferguson's 10 league titles in 22 seasons at Old Trafford.

For that record Chelsea should salute Claudio Ranieri, who was in charge for the first half-dozen matches; Jose Mourinho, who supervised the next 57 over three complete seasons; Avram Grant, unbeaten at home in 19; and Luiz Felipe Scolari, with two wins and two draws before the walls came tumbling down yesterday. The team that began the run with a 2-1 win over Fulham on March 20 2004 went like this: Ambrosio, Gallas, Desailly, Terry, Bridge, Gronkjaer, Gerni, Lampard, Duff, Crespo and Gud-

johnsen, with subs Joe Cole and Scott Parker. Terry and Lampard were on duty yesterday, but Joe Cole was badly missed as the team searched for weaknesses in the triple-locked centre of Liverpool's defence.

For all the praise showered on Scolari in recent weeks, and for all Chelsea's missing stars (principally Didier Drogba and Michael Essien, as well as Joe Cole), it has to be said that the club's new Brazilian manager showed little inventiveness in his attempts to claw back the lead established by Liverpool while the match was still in its formative stages. And for this Lampard and Deco should shoulder some of the blame, since - as Scolari admitted afterwards - in the absence of Drogba the team are ill equipped for a game based on crossing from wide positions.

All credit, however, to Rafael Benítez, whose seasons of tinkering are finally bearing genuine fruit. This morning Liverpool sit on top of the Premier League at a meaningful stage of the season for the first time since the Spaniard took charge in 2004, and there is nothing deceptive about their position. He may

have done little to encourage local talent but everything Liverpool accomplished yesterday was firmly in the mould established by Bob Paisley and his great predecessor, Bill Shankly. Resolute in every tackle, pressing from the front with remorseless persistence, fast and direct on the counterattack and constantly stretching Chelsea's defence with the sort of raking passes that summoned the ghosts of Ian Callaghan and Ronnie Whelan, the players were true to their heritage in every respect.

Throughout the first half their astonishing intensity left Chelsea gasping for air, and for answers. Whenever the blue shirts tried to move the ball from one side of the pitch to the other, each receiver came under harrowing pressure and none had the time or space in which to select a penetrating pass. If Dirk Kuyt's unselfish chasing and harrying embodied Liverpool's effort in the first half, Javier Mascherano's magisterial shepherding in the second period made him the game's outstanding individual.

Chelsea were set a puzzle, and could not begin to solve it. Pepe Reina

remained untested in the Liverpool goal, the home side's best chance coming when Ashley Cole's wild slice flew wide from Franco Di Santo's header in the 73rd minute. But this was by no means merely a study in negating the creativity of others. Liverpool might easily have had two and perhaps three more goals in the second half.

The end of an era, then. No longer the richest club in the world, no longer defending an extraordinary record, now - after last week's narrow victory over AS Roma - on a run of two generally undistinguished performances, Chelsea are currently just a very good Premier League team who must fight it out among the leading pack, with no presumption of superiority.

As Lampard reminded us during the build-up to yesterday's match, in Mourinho's first season they really were something to see, scoring four goals in a match on no fewer than nine occasions, including the Champions League ties against Barcelona and Bayern Munich. The great record had to end some time, but Scolari now has serious work to do.



Scolari



Tony Adams gets tough with Portsmouth players who are missing Harry Redknapp

Tony Adams began life as Portsmouth manager insisting any of the club's players pining for former boss Harry Redknapp are free to leave.

Adams was appointed just over 48 hours after Redknapp's shock defection to Tottenham. Redknapp has already suggested he will try to cherry-pick the likes of Lassana Diarra, Peter Crouch and Sylvain Distin when the transfer window reopens in January.

With finances at Fratton Park tight, departures in the New Year are inevitable but after holding his first official training session, former Arsenal and England defender Adams reiterated he will only keep players who genuinely want to remain at the football club.

"None of them have come to me and said they want to leave but if they do and want to go I will

let them," Adams said.

"I want players who want to play for Portsmouth, if I was the manager at Arsenal one day and somebody comes to me and says, 'I do not want to play for Arsenal I would still say I would let them go.'

"That is 100 per cent, that is crystal clear because if they do not want to play for Portsmouth it does no good in the long run.

"We have some very good players at this football club and it is my job to keep them here and at the moment they are responding.

"I am very pleased other managers want some of the players we have here but I am sure Harry

is not the only one, if he does I will fight him all the way." At least the new Portsmouth manager will not have to contend with the prospect of leading scorer Jermain Defoe making a rapid return to White Hart Lane after the Premier League confirmed players are unable to re-register with a former club within 12 months.

Defoe moved to Pompey initially on a loan deal from Spurs ate on transfer deadline day before the deal was made permanent several weeks later in February.

A Premier League spokesman said: "It is written in section L19 of the Premier League rules that a club which transfers or cancels the regis-

tration of a player may not apply to register that player within a year.

"The only exception to that is if it has been made with the prior written consent of the Premier League board." Adams, in landing his first Premier League managerial job, has been given a two-and-a-half year contract at Fratton Park after first being brought to club as Redknapp's assistant in June 2006.

His elevation from number two follows a four-year journey from a disappointing 12 months in charge of Wycombe between November 2003 and 2004 where the club plummeted into League Two with Adams having to frantically cut

the spiralling wage bill.

After leaving Adams Park citing personal reasons he undertook a fact-finding tour of various French and Dutch academies before working as a youth coach under Wim Jansen at Feyenoord. Adams, who is yet to appoint his own assistant, added: "I am one of those annoying people who keep getting back up. It feels the right time and I have been looking around for the past few months.

"I have grafted for the last two-and-a-half years and always wanted the chance to be a number one again. I would have hated to be sat at home and seen the guys give the job to

someone else.

"I am ready to get some experience as a number one. In an ideal world I would have taken over towards the end of the season but that has not happened and this is now." Adams' first assignment is to take his side to Anfield to try and derail Liverpool's title ambitions but a quick phone-call on Monday night to former boss Arsene Wenger indicates he is ready to mix it with the big boys.

"I spoke to Arsene and he said, 'Welcome to hell'. I said, 'Are you scared?' he said 'Why?', I replied, 'Because I am coming for you.'"