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THE TIMES

Liverpool put up a sound case for their title defence

West Ham United will again lead London's challenge in a championship that is destined once more to be claimed by Liverpool. The verdict was uttered by two men who were the closest of more than 60,000 witnesses to see the irrefutable evidence presented in two courtrooms on Saturday.

George Graham was the first to be called to the stand, at Highbury in the morning. After watching the goalless draw between the only representatives from the capital to lie in the top half of the table, the manager of Arsenal admitted that West Ham are 'much better than us.'

Jim Smith followed him, at Loftus Road in the afternoon. After his Queen's Park Rangers side had been beaten 3-1 and suffered their sixth defeat in nine games, he said that 'if you allow Liverpool to play, they are the best in the country. Everybody will tell you that.'

Take their words for it. Their views, offered on either side of the adjournment for lunch, were stated several miles and several hours apart but, so common was the theme that ran between them, they might as well have been speaking in the same place, at the same time and with the same voice.

In recognising similar striking differences in the respective matches, Graham and Smith touched on the reason that elevates West Ham above their London contemporaries and Liverpool above every club in the land. They are ahead in the arms race. They fire bullets. The rest shoot arrows.

The combination of Cottee and McAvennie, renewed after a gap of four games and after the sale of Goddard, threatened to blast an uncomfortably large hole in Lukic's record. Arsenal's goalkeeper had previously been beaten only twice in seven home appearances in the League.

'Their front two taught mine a lesson today,' Graham said. 'They make such good runs and have such great touch that their performance should serve as a great education for us. Combine that with quality service and you have a team that will be there or thereabouts, as they were last season.'

West Ham's pair could between them have scored seven. Two of their efforts were disallowed, four of their attempts were blocked by Lukic, and McAvennie, yet to regain peak sharpness, headed over from close range. No wonder Graham was 'pleased to keep our run going.'

Arsenal themselves contributed to 'an amazing number of golamouth incidents for a goalless draw' but their ideas, bounced usually off the forehead of Quinn, were dull by comparison. Williams occasionally matched the sunshine but West Ham's collective imagination was substantially the brighter.

In front of the biggest crowd of the day, Arsenal would have climbed to the top had they won. Instead they remained in the foothills where, momentarily at least, they belong. 'We are still in the process of learning,' Graham conceded 'West Ham are settled.'

But any claims that the south may hold on the title was suddenly and dramatically put into perspective. In spite of slipping and sliding on the dance floor that is known as the Rangers pitch, Liverpool strode elegantly to a place that has become as familiar as their own home.

Kenny Dalglish was justifiably full of admiration for the new first division leaders. Such is his dislike of the plastic surface that, unusually, he left himself out of his squad. His charges rarely perform well on it either. Beaten twice there last season, they went down 4-1 at Luton two weeks ago.

Yet Liverpool's opening was irresistible. Irreparable damage had been caused within 15 minutes, by Rush and Nicol, and the rest was an exhibition of defensive security linked to dangerous counter-attacks. Bannister's glorious header was cancelled out later by Johnston's equally firm nod.

The partnership of Walsh and Rush was even more threatening than that of Cottee and McAvennie. 'They were magnificent', Smith stated. 'Apart from his goal, Rush's work-rate was extraordinary. We gave them a two-goal start. It is bad enough at 0-0 but it is impossible to come back from there.'

ARSENAL: J Lukic; V Anderson, K Sansom, S Williams, D O'Leary, A Adams, D Rocastle, P Davis, N Quinn, P Groves, M Hayes.

WEST HAM UNITED: P Parkes, R Stewart, G Parris, A Gale, P Hilton, A Devonshire, M Ward, F McAvennie, A Dickens, A Cottee, S Walford,

Referee: C Downey.

QUEEN'S PARK RANGERS: D Seaman; W Fereday, I Dawes, M Allen (sub: L Rosenor), A McDonald, G Chivers, T Fenwick, R James, G Bannister, J Byrne, C Walker.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar, G Gillespie, J Beglin, M Lawrenson, C Johnston, A Hansen, P Walsh, S Nicol, I Rush, J Molby, S McMahon.

Referee: A Seville.



THE SUNDAY TIMES

Imperious grace

QPR 1 Liverpool ... 3

THE LAST TIME Liverpool played on plastic was a fortnight ago when they lost 4-1 at Luton. Things were quite different yesterday, Liverpool carrying on where they left off last week.

They commanded QPR like princes of the blood. On the alien Omniturf they strolled through the Rangers' defence as though they were playing on their own Anfield grass. After nine minutes of turning the screw they went ahead.

It was a delicious and delicate goal even by Rush's standards. QPR's Chivers latched on to a Johnston through ball and passed back towards his goal. With his famous speed off the mark, Rush darted in, lobbed, and Seaman fingered it back over his head into the net.

Liverpool's second arrived six minutes later. The goal will go down to Nicol but the real begetter of it was Jan Molby, who nutmegged Fenwick and then half-volleyed the resulting scrambled clearance. Seaman did very well to flick it over. Johnston took the corner, Nicol chested it down and booted in off the post.

The only QPR player to quicken the aristocratic languor of the Liverpool defence was Clive Walker, still the perky chappie of his Chelsea days. His headlong dashes down the left were too full of simple innocence for Lawrenson, who was still jockeying while Walker put over his crosses.

Somebody's head had to get on the end of one of them and it was Bannister's, after 28 minutes. The goal stemmed from Dawes who caught McMahon in possession. Johnston delivered the coup de grace from close in with 16 minutes left by converting Belgin's curling free kick.

Weather: Sunny, Ground: artificial, Queens Park Rangers: Seaman; Fereday, Dawes, Allan (sub Rosenor, 78min), McDonald, Chivers, Fenwick, James, Bannister, Byrne, Walker, Sub: Rosenor.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Gillespie, Beglin, Lawrenson, Johnston, Hansen, Walsh, Nicol, Rush, Molby, McMahon, Sub: Wark.

Referee: A Seville.