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THE TIMES

Wimbledon maul the champions

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Liverpool are, after all, human. The manner in which England's most complete footballing side sank to a quite comprehensive defeat without so much as a whimper of defiance must throw into doubt their ability to win a championship so many had prematurely awarded.

Preposterous though the notion may be, Anfield's perennial winners were given a genuine, and quite effortless, mauling by a Wimbledon side whose education is very nearly complete. In fact the first division novices' margin of victory should have been far greater.

Liverpool have not been performing particularly well for several weeks now, which either says a great deal about their inbred ability to ride what luck comes their way or about the frailty of the challenges being proffered by the pretenders to their throne.

But if Liverpool were awful Wimbledon were magnificent. No respecters of reputation, they fought tenaciously for a foothold early on, building their more inventive moments around their forward, Fashanu, a man who is unorthodox only in the sense that, unlike most footballers, he is often reluctant to comply with the game's rules.

Having successfully ensnared Liverpool in a cunningly constructed defensive web Dave Bassett's unfashionable yet always entertaining side stole forward to justifiably take the lead eight minutes before the interval.

Hansen, having been penalised for a push on Fashanu, was, like the rest of his defensive colleagues, little more than a spectator as Winterburn swept home Hodges's short free kick.

Liverpool were level within three minutes of the restart, Dalglish picking up a loose ball before striding forward to bend a quite stunning drive inside the far post from fully 25 yards. Wimbledon had defended with an admirable degree of efficiency but no side could possibly legislate for a goal of such quality.

Despite the failure of Fairweather and Sayer to convert inviting chances Wimbledon were, however, to have the final say when their substitute, Cork, headed in a Hodges corner, which had been flicked on by Morris with just 10 minutes remaining.

Liverpool's misery was complete when it was revealed that their key defender Lawrenson, who had limped off midway through the first half, had been taken to hospital for an operation on a ruptured Achilles tendon, which will rule him out for the remainder of a season which is now tinged with self-doubt.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Gillespie, B Venison, M Lawrenson (sub: J Aldridge), R Whelan, A Hansen, K Dalglish, C Johnston, I Rush, N Spackman, S McMahon.

WIMBLEDON: D Beasant; K Gage, N Winterburn, V Jones, B Gayle, A Thorn, C Fairweather, A Sayer (sub: A Cork), J Fashanu, M Morris, G Hodges.

Referee: G Courteney.