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Opposition: Arsenal

Competition: League

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THE TIMES

Liverpool pull the crowds and set season's yardstick - Merseyside giants campaign to become champions in the league's centenary year in dominant and attractive style

----- Arsenal 1 Liverpool 2 -----

The marketing men of the Football League, Barclays Bank and Arsenal could not have dared to stage such an opening day at Highbury.

If the standards set by the clubs that are expected to finish among the first division leaders, as well as their followers, are maintained throughout the season, the centenary will indeed be worth celebrating.

The size and behaviour of the audience, the first half and the unlikely last few minutes were all as warming as the dazzling sunshine. 'I thought that even the referee had an excellent game,' George Graham said before remembering that managerial comments about officials are not permitted.

One of the biggest arenas in the country could not accommodate all those who wanted to witness the debuts of Liverpool's England internationals. Some scaled the roof on the North Bank, others clung to the perimeter fence or perched on window sills behind the southern terrace.

The attendance was, therefore, even higher than the official gate of 54,703.

Compare that with last season's figures: it represents a rise of 7,000 above the corresponding fixture (in March, when both sides were in contention for the title), 14,000 above that for Arsenal's initial 1986-87 appearance (against Manchester United), and 26,000 above their overall average.

Not for some five years has Highbury been anything like as packed. In view of the widely-publicized nonsense that took place at the other end of the League at Scarborough, it is worth recording that scarcely a scuffle disturbed the peace of by far the largest crowd of the day.

Barnes and Beardsley were inevitably the main attractions. Williams threatened immediately to spoil the party, as is his distasteful custom, by assaulting Beardsley. Then McMahon, without even bothering to disguise his evil intentions behind a cloak of subtlety, sought and gained instant retribution. Both miscreants could justifiably have been booked.

The foundations may have been ugly but the rest of the afternoon's construction work, until concentration and energy was dismantled by the heat and exhaustion, was unreasonably appealing. 'I thought that it was just going to peter out,' Graham said. Instead, Liverpool finished with a typical burst and claimed a significant psychological advantage.

Since their own damaged home at Anfield is out of bounds for a month, their championship challenge might initially have been delayed. 'That wouldn't have worried us,' Kenny Dalglish stated, 'but it's a disappointment for our fans. They want to see Barnes and Beardsley, who are desperate to play there.'

By September 12, the new boys should be fully schooled. On Saturday both were slightly withdrawn. Barnes, who became increasingly positive and consequently more and more dangerous, did create both goals but Beardsley, seemingly inhibited by 'a dead leg' caused by several illegitimate tackles in addition to William's was eventually replaced.

Aldridge, the other comparatively fresh face, might have been impersonating Rush as he drifted between Arsenal's taller central defenders to head Liverpool into the lead.

Smith marked his first appearance for Arsenal by inviting Davis to nod in the equalizer, but his touch on the ground was notably untidy. He has already been summoned by Bobby Robson but the attention of England's manager, who was among the spectators, will have been caught particularly by Adams. Graham considered him 'outstanding'.

Yet the youngster, expected to be Butcher's partner when England play in West Germany next month, was inadvertently involved in the winner. Barnes' free kick bounced off Adams' head and onto that of Nichol, who responded spontaneously from almost the edge of the area. Even then, Nicholas scorned an opportunity once more to redress the balance.

The sale of Anderson has weakened Arsenal's rearguard but Liverpool's achievement should not be underestimated. Only two visitors scored more than once at Highbury last season (Watford, only in the closing minutes of a sixth round FA Cup tie; and Norwich City, in the final, and meaningless, League fixture). To think that Dalglish has another Pounds 3 million worth of talent at his disposal - no wonder Graham still regards them as 'the yardstick'.

ARSENAL: J Lukic, M Thomas, K Sansom, S Williams, D O'Leary, A Adams, D Rocastle (Sub: P Groves), P Davis, A Smith, C Nicholas, M Hayes.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; S Nichol, B Venison, G Gillespie, R Whelan, A Hansen, P Beardsley (sub: P Walsh), C Johnston, J Aldridge, S McMahon, J Barnes.

Referee: R Milford.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Give-away by Arsenal

Arsenal 1 Liverpool 2

It all turned out well in the end for Liverpool's rebuilt side, though Arsenal, their defence and their bumper 54,700 crowd will be pretty displeased with the way both Liverpool's goals were given away.

Nicol's very late winner had a slight element of the comic about it. Arsenal can console themselves that Nicholas all but equalised at the end; and that Smith, the newcomer, should do well when he gets the support his ability in the air and skill on the ground deserves.

For Liverpool and their enormously costly new recruits, the game could scarcely have had, in every sense, a more sunlit beginning. One must qualify that a little. In the first minute, there was a nasty foul by Williams on the expensive Beardsley, followed a minute later by what looked like an example of vendetta when McMahon ruthlessly brought Williams down. Mr Milford, the referee, surprisingly contented himself with giving McMahon a short homily.

Seven minutes later, the ball was in the Arsenal net, giving a provisional answer to some of the questions this match, even this season provoked.

Out near the left touchline, Beardsley, after a free kick, found Barnes, whose perfect long cross was headed splendidly and strongly into the right-hand corner by another attacker who has still really to win his Anfield spurs, Aldridge.

Ten minutes more, and Arsenal themselves had a pleasant if, again, provisional answer to questions about their own expensive new striker, Alan Smith. He had already twice impressively won long balls in the air. Now, his heading ability set up his team's equalising goal.

O'Leary began the attack with a fine, sweeping ball to the left. There, Nicholas collected it and crossed, Smith headed back from the far post and Davis, in turn, headed past Grobbelaar.

Soon afterwards, that big, eccentric goalkeeper was forced to scramble back to push over a difficult, wind-assisted lob from Sansom. The fans, who had packed the Tube to soffocation point, could not complain they were not getting action for their trouble and money.

Given the warmth of the day and the time of season, it was probably inevitable that things should grow less lively well before half-time. On the half-hour, we saw an authentic moment of Beardsley's great class, when, out on the left, he evaded Thomas, to give Nicol a superb pass.

The cross was excellent; Johnston should have headed it in, rather than over. But being the kind of player he is, he surprised us, and Arsenal, in the very next minute with a magnificent long run and a pass to Aldridge which could well have been put away, rather than past the post.

There were, of course notable absences. Lawrenson is still not fit enough to bring his speed and swift anticipation to the Liverpool defence. Arsenal have lost their England right-back, Anderson, and replaced him with the promising and mobile young Thomas.

Above all, of course, Liverpool and English football have lost the majestic figure of Rush. He is irreplaceable and his going obliges Liverpool to adopt very different tactics: a further burden for their player-manager Kenny Dalglish whose policy of doing things his way and seldom suffering fools gladly demands continuous success.

But the departure of Rush may allow Aldridge to emerge from under his giant shadow. Beardsley, unselfish to a degree, more interested, perhaps, in creating goals rather than scoring them, should be a perfect partner.

On such a hot and early day of the season, definitive judgement was hardly practicable. There were some careless moments. Barnes will doubtless be told that at Liverpool, deep wingers are not encouraged to hang on to the ball and lose it well inside their own half.

Arsenal's defence was terribly slow to approach Beardsley's incursion from the right, enabling Whelan to sidestep O'Leary, and shoot over the bar, off Adams. Come to think of it, that famed central defence should surely have done more about Aldridge's header.

Beardsley, fouled by O'Leary, hobbled off the field with a look of disgust. That seemed to be that. But it wasn't. In the 88th minute, Groves, the Arsenal substitute, fouled Barnes on the left of the box. Barnes took the kick himself and, when it was headed out, Nicol got his head to it in turn, the ball floating away from a surprised and stranded Lukic, into the corner of the net.

Weather: warm and sunny. Ground: firm and grassy.

Goals: Aldridge (9min) 0-1; Davis (19min) 1-1; Nicol (88min) 1-2.

Arsenal (4-4-2): Lukic; Thomas, O'Leary, Adams; Sansom; Williams. Davis, Hayes, Rocastle (sub; Groves 75min); Nicholas, Smith

Liverpool (4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Venison, Hansen; Gillespie, Nicol; Whelan, Johnston, McMahon, Barnes; Beardsley (sub: Walsh 84min). Aldridge.

Referee: R G Milford (Bristol).