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THE TIMES

Liverpool's empire sees decline and fall of Portsmouth

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Kenny Dalglish's recent assertion that a man who is happy in his work will produce good results was again emphatically borne out on Saturday.

Liverpool are clearly enjoying not only their football but also the accompanying praise from the critics who just six months ago cited the club's failure to win a trophy and the departure of the irreplaceable Ian Rush to Italy as indications of the imminent fall of an empire.

The empire, however, is striking back. Not only has Dalglish restored confidence and made ridiculously light work of disguising Rush's absence he has made Liverpool a better and more enterprising team.

After the sadistic mauplings of Newcastle United and Derby County, the stage was set for the anti-climactic Liverpool performance which will inevitably materialize at some stage and, during an opening period when passes went astray and set pieces failed to gel, there did seem a semblance of hope for Alan Ball's patchwork side.

But it takes just one flicker of brilliance or one stroke of luck to change the course of a football match and a curious alliance of both these factors on the half hour was to prove decisive. As they have done on numerous occasions Liverpool effortlessly swept the length of the pitch with Johnston and Whelan combining with neat efficiency to deliver the ball to the feet of Beardsley.

The England forward gracefully out-manoeuvred his market with a subtle feint to his right before firing deep into the bottom corner. The fact that his shot was slightly mis-hit and subsequently of a far less venomous nature than was intended possibly deceived Knight in the Portsmouth goal.

Portsmouth's self-belief drained away in agonizing fashion in the ensuing 60 minutes and had Liverpool taken it upon themselves to dig a little deeper into their arsenal of weapons their margin of victory would have been considerably greater. As it was they were content to plunder just three more goals, two of which came within the space of 90 seconds around the fiftieth minute.

First McMahon despatched a quite stunning 40-yard pass from Hansen with immense style. The Aldridge converted an uncontested penalty after Sanford had tripped Whelan as the Liverpool player drew back his boot in readiness for a shot. Whelan himself completed a low-key rout 19 minutes from the end with a sweetly struck drive from 20 yards after Barnes had unselfishly parted with the ball.

----- LIVERPOOL: -----

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

----- PORTSMOUTH: -----

----- A Knight; K Swain, L Sandford, M Fillery (sub: K Dillon), M Shotton, W Gilbert (sub: K Ball), B Horne, C Whitehead, P Mariner, M Quinn, V Hilaire. ----- Referee: G Courtney.