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THE TIMES

Liverpool ready to mark the centenary in unbeaten style

Oxford United 0 **Liverpool** 3

Ten games ago it would have been foolhardy to suggest that **Liverpool** could go a further 10 games without defeat, and in so doing break a 38-year-old club record. Well, here they are at the half-way stage still unbeaten after their best ever start to a season and the prospect of remaining unbeaten throughout the next 10 games is suddenly a lot more conceivable.

The idea of **Liverpool** emulating the feat of Preston North End in the League's inaugural season 100 years ago and going throughout the entire programme unbeaten - and what an appropriate way of marking the centenary that would be - is not as fanciful as some might imagine. While it would be a considerably taller order than that managed by Preston, who played only 22 games, it is not as onerous a task as it would have been had **Liverpool** stood in this position only two or three years ago.

The polarization of the league, caused by the unbalanced distribution of wealth, has given **Liverpool** a real chance of achieving the impossible. **Liverpool's** game with Oxford United on Saturday was a perfect example of this new imbalance.

There was a time when the sloping Manor Ground was a minefield for any unwitting visitor, and not a few reputations were blown apart. And nowadays it is little more than a pleasant walk through the Oxfordshire countryside, its atmosphere more inviting than intimidating, so much so that Oxford have been outscored in five of their 11 home League games this season.

The explosives have been dug up and sold off, principally in the direction of **Liverpool** who have reaped their most lethal pieces, Aldridge and Houghton. It was hardly surprising when these transfers backfired on Oxford in the first half, Houghton starting a move which Aldridge finished inevitably with a characteristic close range effort after Whelan's header had been blocked on the line.

If that opening goal in the 41st minute took its time coming, one should add that it following **Liverpool's** fourteenth corner. In terms of quality **Liverpool** already held an embarrassing advantage. With the possible exception of Hucker, who was largely responsible for delaying the inevitable, there was not a single Oxford player that would have qualified for selection even for the **Liverpool** substitutes' bench.

Hucker staked his claim when he advanced into a one-on-one situation in which he invariably excels to thwart Nicol superbly with his legs after two other Oxford defenders had failed miserably.

Weaknesses, in **Liverpool** stand out probably more than they do in most other teams and Beardsley's shooting is one, as he demonstrated when he dribbled round Dreyer and then disrespectfully to beat Hucker with a tame side-footed shot. But the rest of Beardsley's game was so powerful that it seems churlish to talk about goal scoring weaknesses, particularly in a team with an abundance of good finishers.

Barnes showed Beadsley how it was done with a side-footed goal of great accuracy, though it was significant that he took his pass from Breadsley.

McMahon surpassed even that effort with a formidable strike from 30 yards which swerved violently past the helpless. Hucker. Beardsley, did, however, manage to readjust his sights and struck a post before the finish.

It is no longer a question of who can catch **Liverpool** but of who can beat them if only once. With three more matches to come over the holiday period against teams from the lower half of the table **Liverpool** should have an unassailable lead going into the New Year. We may have to wait some while yet before **Liverpool** face a demanding test and that appropriately will be at the home of Everton, the champions, on March 19.

----- OXFORD UNITED: -----

---- P Hucker; D Bardsley, J Dreyer, G Shelton, R Hill (sub: R Mustoe), T Caton, T Hebbard, W Whitehurst, D Saunders, L Phillips, P Rhoades-Brown. -----

----- **LIVERPOOL**: ----- B Grobbelaar; G

Gillespie, B Venison, S Nicol, R Whelan, A Hansen, P Beardsley, J Aldridge, R Houghton, J Barnes(sub, C Johnston), S McMahon (sub: N Spackman). -----

----- Referee: G Ashby.