

Date: 4 April 1988
 Opposition: Manchester United
 Competition: League

Times		

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THE TIMES

Liverpool stretched to the limit

Liverpool 3 Manchester United 3

It would be difficult to conceive of a game more filled with passion, pace, skill and commitment than that provided by the two sides at the top of the first division at Anfield yesterday. Both conceded three goals for the first time this season and Manchester United have now not lost on the ground for nine years.

For 38 minutes they looked as though they would become the third team in the last four matches to master Liverpool, but three goals in 10 minutes either side of half-time altered the picture and when Gibson was sent off on the hour, for a foul on McMahon, the task was even less viable. But against all the odds they nearly managed it.

United had the ideal start with a goal inside two minutes, the result of a mistake by Gillespie, who gave the ball to Davenport on the half-way line. He outpaced Hansen before crossing for the unmarked Robson to score his first goal since before Christmas. The United plan then became clear - defend in depth, with four men strung across the middle of the field. But as so many teams have learned before them, giving Liverpool the initiative is a game of diminishing returns.

After 37 minutes they drew level when Aldridge headed on to Houghton and Robson missed his tackle. When the cross came over Beardsley held off an attempted tackle by Robson and got in his cross with inches to spare. When Barnes hooked it back from beyond the far post, Gillespie headed home.

Two minutes into the second half there seemed little danger when McMahon turned inside Bruce 20 yards out but he unleashed a tremendous left-foot shot which went well beyond Turner.

United now were forced to abandon all pretensions at defence and attack in numbers, Davenport giving them some hope when his shot bounced back off the uneasy Grobbelaar. After 55 minutes they sent on Olsen and Whiteside in place of Blackmore and Duxbury, both of whom had given everything in the cause.

Gibson, who had earlier been booked for kicking the ball away, was then sent off by the referee, Key, after a challenge on McMahon which sent the England midfield player sprawling. Some may have thought he had got his just desserts, having put about some fearsome stick himself earlier in the afternoon. Gibson could count himself unlucky, as indeed could Liverpool, as Whiteside made his presence physically felt with a foul on McMahon and a crack in the face for Barnes.

United, however, next produced a goal with a great slice of luck when Robson, just outside the penalty area, struck a tentative shot which hit a defender on the heel and sent Grobbelaar the wrong way.

The game hotted up, with Liverpool striving to score the goal that would make them safe only to find the United central defenders, McGarth, playing only his second full game since his recovery from injury, and Bruce, in magnificent form. Against the odds United were level when Davenport's neat ball found Liverpool square and Strachan just onside and the little Scotsman took his time before slotting the ball past the goalkeeper with 12 minutes left for play.

This thrilling encounter still had plenty of life in it, with Gillespie soaring to meet a Barnes free kick only for Turner to save superbly.

Both sides were drained, as they had every right to be, after such a stirring encounter. Liverpool's lead remains at 11 points and it seems impossible that they will have to play a more demanding game in what remains of the season - even an FA Cup Final.

----- LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; Gillespie, G Ablett, S Nicol, N Spackman, A Hansen, P Beardsley, J Aldridge (sub: C Johnston), R Houghton, J Barnes, S McMahon. -----

MANCHESTER UNITED: C Turner; V Anderson, Blackmore (sub: J Olsen), S Bruce, P McGarth, M Duxbury (sub: N Whiteside), B Robson, G Strachan, B McClair, P Davenport, C Gibson. ----- Referee: J M Key.