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THE TIMES

Mind over muscle buries record

Liverpool 1
 Manchester United 0

Manchester United have been deprived of even their annual consolation prize. Although they have consistently lost the war against Liverpool, they have at least persistently avoided defeat in the battle at Anfield. Yet they were neither prepared nor equipped to protect a record which stretches back to 1979. The fixture, from which United usually take away optimism as well as comfort, offered them dispiriting confirmation of their own inadequacies. In direct comparison to the champions, they resembled not so much genuine contenders as a parade of muscle-bound bodybuilders. Their physique was disproportionate to their fitness.

Hughes took the regrettable and unattractive posture almost to the extreme limit. By the end of an explosive first half, when the air was thick with the acrid stench of cordite, he had expended his energy on physically intimidating Liverpool's back four in general, and Molby in particular. Casualties were inevitable. Strachan limped off almost immediately and McMahon hobbled away shortly afterwards. Molby, tempted eventually into retaliation, was cautioned and Robson and Spackman might have suffered a heavier punishment for indulging in a personal dual of their own. Anderson and Grobbelaar were also booked for blatant fouls. McClair was the eye of United's storm, but they had no one else capable of stepping out of the predictably fiery heat. Significantly, when the flames died down temporarily after the interval, their challenge was at its strongest. Nevertheless, Grobbelaar's contribution was restricted to a lone save from an Anderson header.

Liverpool had several individuals who could coolly evade the flailing limbs and invade their opponents' territory. Especially after Strachan had departed, for example, Barnes and Nicol regularly penetrated the right flank. Leighton was solely responsible for disguising the extent of United's deficiencies which include a lack of fitness as well as subtlety.

The Scotland goalkeeper was so enraged by the prospect of being beaten that he, too, was booked for disputing the referee's decision to award a penalty. His manager later also questioned it. But Anderson appeared to be as guilty of felling the elusive Barnes inside the area as did Bruce in the next minute. Molby scored. "The first incident looked more like a penalty than the second," Alex Ferguson commented. "But two wrongs don't make a right." He did concede that Liverpool deserved their victory. The evidence was irrefutable. As he himself said: "We yielded possession too easily in the first half, our final ball was not good enough and we petered out on the edge of the box."

Ferguson, whose side is already five points behind the leaders, described the gap as "daunting". So it is. If United, with their power and their supposed quality, cannot maintain their successful sequence against Liverpool, then who else can realistically expect to prevent the champions from retaining the title?

Kenny Dalglish has yet to choose from a full complement. Once Rush's instincts have been sharpened (the replacement for Aldridge, he missed an opportunity to claim the first goal of his career against United) and Hansen has completed his recuperation, their squad will be even more formidable.

Few would agree with the generous opinion of Barnes. He believes that "the race will be tighter this year". Yet he helped to remove his club's one mental obstacle.

"We've beaten our bogey side at last," he said. "But Liverpool never regarded them as a jinx. We just kept on winning the League."

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Gillespie, B Venison, S Nicol, R Whelan, J Molby, P Beardsley, R Houghton, J Aldridge (sub: I Rush), J Barnes, S McMahon (sub: N Spackman).

MANCHESTER UNITED: J Leighton; V Anderson, C Blackmore, S Bruce, P McGrath (sub: W Garton), M Duxbury, B Robson, G Strachan (sub: P Davenport), B McClair, M Hughes, J Olsen.

Referee: K Hackett.



THE SUNDAY TIMES

Reds' class wins brawl

Liverpool 1 Manchester United 0

A PENALTY goal, which did not begin to reflect Liverpool's superiority, ended the thread of consolation Manchester United have clung to in the long decade of playing second fiddle in the championship. Before yesterday United had put the Indian sign on Anfield, remaining unbeaten there since 1979.

Yesterday, United scarred the match with an awful lack of creative endeavour and injected into it a sinister degree of scuffling and violence. There was nothing dubious about the penalty decision. Indeed, it saved the day on which United, supposedly themselves super class, came only to spoil.

They had only two areas of equality: a fighting spirit, which more often than not went over the top, and a goalkeeper who single-handedly prevented a drubbing and put to the sword the myth that Scottish goalkeepers are all amateurs. Yet as willing as Liverpool occasionally were to meet fire with fire, they did overcome the rough stuff with some awesome flourishes. Barnes and Nicol, down the left, were notable in this regard, and Houghton in the second half released his sublime touch.

So, not surprisingly, it was Barnes who won the penalty. In the 38th minute, he evaded Robson, he rounded Anderson, he turned Bruce, and then, after a 90-degree change of direction that bordered on sorcery, he was tripped from behind by Anderson. No penalty, decided referee Hackett. Seconds later, however, Barnes ran diagonally across the penalty area, this time completely direct in his intentions. And this time he was felled by a tackle by Bruce which resembled that defender's only apparent weapon, the scything kick into the heels of whomever went by him.

Goalkeeper Leighton, far too violent in his protests, was booked, and then beaten comprehensively by Molby's penalty.

Thus the "top of the table" clash was won and lost.

I saw nobody touch Strachan who, from the fifth minute, was unable to walk, never mind provide the inspiration United lacked. But nobody could have missed the ugly intent of the raised foot from Duxbury which caught McMahon just below the right knee and finished his match after 25 minutes.

Barring a disallowed goal for offside from Duxbury, United did nothing to ruffle Liverpool until the 45th minute when Anderson, diving to head a corner, brought a neat reaction save from Grobbelaar which his manager Dalglish said afterwards was "his full contribution to beating Manchester".

United's stimulus from Robson blew up, almost literally, in the 55th minute when, not for the first time in the afternoon, he followed through a tackle on Spackman by throwing a punch. Mr Hackett, acting as if he was caught in a Tyson street brawl, grabbed the England skipper, calmed him and then amazingly declined even to book him.

One great moment came with the Kop's reception for the substitute Ian Rush.

Instantly, the Welshman showed sharper goal sense than Aldridge, turning on a pass from Nicol but having his shot hooked off the line.

Poor Aldridge. All afternoon Bruce had been blackening his calves and ankles, and now he was replaced in the crowd's affection by the returning goalscorer.

Weather: showery. Ground: soft.

Goal: Molby (pen. 38min) 1-0.

Liverpool (4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Venison, Molby, Gillespie, Nicol; Houghton, McMahon (sub: Spackman 25min), Whelan, Barnes; Aldridge (sub: Rush 79min), Beardsley.

Manchester United (4-4-2): Leighton; Anderson, Bruce, McGrath (sub: Garton 84min), Blackmore; Strachan (sub: Davenport 10min), Robson, Duxbury, Olsen; McClair, Hughes.

Referee: K Hackett (Sheffield).