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Opposition: Millwall

Competition: League

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THE TIMES

Millwall in danger of becoming popular

Liverpool 1 Millwall 1

The small army of Millwall supporters who had the vocal capacity, not to mention the audacity, to dominate the Kop on Saturday would have had no wish to enlighten the young Liverpool supporter who asked before kick off: "Are they dirty, Millwall, or is it just their supporters?"

That is not to say that Millwall supporters are necessarily happy for themselves, or their team, to be thought of in such derogatory terms, just that they have grown rather attached to their role in life as an underdog, the runt in the litter. As Millwall supporters rejoice in telling us: "No one likes us, but we don't care." When Hurlock took Beardsley's legs away from behind in the first minute, the young Liverpool enquirer must have thought that she had been given her answer. But that small misdemeanour proved to be as misleading as many of the rumours that circulates about Millwall FC, whether it be the behaviour of their supporters or the style of their team.

The truth is something quite different, as Liverpool discovered. Many more performances like this one and Millwall's team, at least, is in danger of becoming liked.

They certainly gained the respect of the Liverpool crowd with the quality of their football, notably in the first half. Jack Charlton, the Republic of Ireland manager, who had come to run the rule over his five representatives, described it as one of the best performances he had seen by a visiting team at Anfield.

That was partly because Millwall looked more like Liverpool than Liverpool, accurate in their passing, supportive in their running. Seldom has an opening goal from the visitors at Anfield seemed more inevitable than Millwall's did. After just eight minutes Cascarino sounded a warning when, unchallenged at a corner, he sent a thudding header against the Liverpool crossbar.

One minute later Liverpool were again exposed when Briley and Sheringham moved the ball across the face of goal to give Stephenson an expansive view of Hooper's net and the debutant duly buried his shot in spite of rather than because of a deflection. Millwall will expect such a contribution from Stephenson, a balanced, skilful player, to become the norm rather than the exception. It was his second goal in 65 games.

Any appreciation of Millwall's performance, though, must be tempered by the knowledge that Liverpool were not themselves. That presence and supreme confidence which exudes from Liverpool the moment they set foot on the field was missing. They looked ordinary, like the Central League side with Beardsley and Nicol making guest appearances. But most crucially it was their passing game which deserted them.

Ablett is a very poor man's Hansen or Gillespie in central defence while Burrows, who bears a striking resemblance to Nicol, at least looks the part but is too inexperienced. With Barnes reluctant to accept responsibility and punish Millwall's one weak link Stevens at right back it was overall a display which must have provided Howard Kendall, seated in the stands, with the most persuasive argument yet for leaving Spain and renewing his rivalry with Liverpool.

Liverpool's equaliser, coming five minutes after Millwall's goal, was ill-deserved and fortuitous. McLeary's hurried clearance went straight to the feet of McMahon who promptly side footed a volley back past Horne.

Injuries in the 37th and 55th minutes to Dawes (twisted ankle) and O'Callaghan (who had to have 11 stitches inserted in a gashed leg), respectively, disrupted Millwall's rhythm though they could be thankful for substitutes since neither player was in any state to continue. There was so much fur flying in midfield that you could have opened a furriers.

McMahon, pretty good at dishing it out, took objection when Briley and Hurlock gave him a taste of his own medicine and he wreaked his vengeance on little Morgan instead. Kenny Dalglish, concerned that his player was about to see red again in the shape of a little square card, was poised to bring him off when an injury to Whelan took precedence.

LIVERPOOL: M Hooper; G Ablett, D Burrows, S Nicol, R Whelan (sub: S Staunton), N Spackman, P Beardsley, J Aldridge, R Houghton, J Barnes, S McMahon.

MILLWALL: B Horne; K Stevens, I Dawes, (sub: D Salman), T Hurlock, S Wood, A McLeary, P Stephenson, L Briley, E Sheringham, A Cascarino, K O'Callaghan (sub: D Morgan).

Referee: J A Kirkby.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Football's heart goes on vivid display

Liverpool 1 Millwall 1

On their great day, Millwall could not quite win but they did the next best thing. They trotted out at Anfield with a rare will, they quickly hit the Liverpool bar, and then they led, albeit briefly, before emerging with an honourable draw.

The reaction of the rival supporters at the end told the tale: Millwall's were applauding, the Kop whistled in frustration.

It was Millwall's first visit to Anfield, that is if you discount an FA Cup tie back in the dark Victorian past of 1896. And it was, perhaps, the last stage of their coming-of-age in the First Division. Beating Everton had been an event, topping the table likewise; but there is nothing quite like Anfield.

The players did it in style, 19 of them flying north. Their supporters did them proud, all 4,000 of them, with the overspill watching the action on closed-circuit television back at the Den.

Millwall included Stephenson, a 20-year-old winger signed from Newcastle for Pounds 300,000 the day before. He arrived in a team that was a neat mixture: four had come up through the ranks, five if you include O'Callaghan, who left and came back again, and the others had been bought, although not extravagantly. Briley, the captain, somehow typified Millwall's spirit. Aged 32 and a busy midfielder, he has trod the boards at Hereford and Aldershot, and must have thought that moments like this had passed him by.

It was Briley, indeed, who did most to fashion Millwall's goal, although not before they had smacked Hooper's bar, right under the Kop's noses, too. In the eighth minute Millwall won a corner, already their third. O'Callaghan took it and Cascarino, all 6ft 2in of him, jumped and headed, only to find the woodwork. A minute later Millwall scored with a neat crossfield move. Briley wrong-footed two Liverpool men, Sheringham helped the ball on and it fell to Stephenson, whose rising shot clipped Nicol on its way in.

"I didn't run around," said the debut boy afterwards. "I wanted to keep my energy and my feet on the ground."

The Millwall thousands were not so inhibited. "Can you hear us at the Den?" they roared. But they quietened a little as, up to half-time, Liverpool played their surest football, with Barnes tormenting poor Stevens, and Beardsley always threatening.

When Liverpool equalised on the quarter-hour, however, the goal was down to an old-fashioned Millwall error. Burrows put in a square ball for Liverpool, centre-back McLeary only knocked it to Nicol and his sure shot from 20 yards went in off a post.

The second half was tetchy, with three bookings, and Liverpool committing the cardinal sin of giving the ball away repeatedly. Houghton, it seems, has lost his sparkle, McMahon and Spackman lacked invention.

Before the kick-off, Kenny Dalglish was generous to Millwall's "heart-warming example to other clubs." Afterwards, he was terse.

Nicol, however, was more complimentary. "They are not just a battling team," he said. "They can play a bit."

They did, too, not looking at all like long-ball hoofers. And, of course, just to have been there was a victory for them.

Weather: fine. Ground: firm.

Goals: Stephenson (9min) 0-1; Nicol (15min) 1-1.

Liverpool (4-4-2): Hooper; Whelan (sub: Staunton 76min), Nicol, Ablett, Burrows; Houghton, Spackman, McMahon, Barnes; Beardsley, Aldridge.

Millwall (4-4-2): Horne; Stevens, McLeary, Wood, Dawes (sub: Salman 37min);

Stephenson, Hurlock, Briley, O'Callaghan (sub: Morgan 55min); Sheringham, Cascarino.

Referee: J A Kirkby (Sheffield).