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Times	Sunday Times	

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THE TIMES

Liverpool's gunslingers no longer quick on the draw

Sheffield Wednesday 2 Liverpool 2

Sheffield Wednesday's largest crowd of the season came to bury the embattled Peter Eustace, the manager, but inside 15 minutes his praises were being sung as the League champions conceded a 2-0 lead and looked a shadow of the side that won the title by nine points last spring.

Passes, once intuitive, now take time and Beardsley and Rush are two ageing gunslingers no longer quick on the draw. Worse problems are at the heart of the defence, where Hansen and Gillespie are sorely missed. Molby and Ablett, their inadequate replacements, were cruelly exposed by the two set-pieces which gave Wednesday the advantage they sadly surrendered.

A free kick by Sterland was headed back into the middle by West, across the goal by Varadi, and over the line by Proctor without a Liverpool defender offering a challenge and Rostron's corner from the left was flicked on by West at the near post for Varadi to head home comfortably, again without interference.

Wednesday's neat football, with Jonsson and Proctor controlling the midfield, threatened more and on the hour Rostron's fine run and cross gave Proctor a clear shot which he struck on the half-volley and over the bar. Wednesday thought they had done enough to register their first League win at home since October 1 and withdrew into defence, leaving no target for them to hit when they did win the ball.

The result was that every clearance came straight back and, under mounting pressure of their own making, mistakes followed. Cranson's poor header with 15 minutes left to the front of the penalty area was struck beyond Turner by Nicol and two minutes later Houghton pulled a cross back from the byline for the unmarked Aldridge, substitute for McMahon, to head the simplest of equalizers. Eustace denied that Wednesday chose defence, claiming that Liverpool forced his team back, but Rostron, surely the free transfer bargain of the season, said after his debut at full back: "We paid the price for working too hard at defence".

Wednesday's failure to win leaves them without a victory at Hillsborough over Liverpool for 25 years and with only one win in nine meetings since Sheffield returned to the first division five years ago.

SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY: C Turner, M Sterland, W Rostron, I Cranson, N Pearson, L Madden, M Proctor, D Reeves, C West, I Varadi (sub: A Galvin), S Jonsson.

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

Referee: R K Pawley.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Wednesday stunned as Liverpool claw back

Sheffield Wednesday 2 Liverpool 2 THIS match encapsulated all the uncertainty of the First Division this season; Liverpool went two behind, apparently giving up the ghost of their championship, then came back in the spirit of old to do all but win a breath-taking thriller.

The first half was one which showed the very foundations of Liverpool's champion pedigree to be in greater need of underpinning than at any time in the last decade.

Their defence was so utterly frail in the air that the goalkeeper, Turner, had only to kick the ball straight down the middle to induce all manner of panic.

Their midfield worked with customary vigour and knowledge but the opportunities they created were squandered. Liverpool had perhaps eight shots on Turner's goal, and not once did the goalkeeper have to make a save.

But Sheffield Wednesday returned to form, in exhilarating fashion, after the long, barren months since their last League victory on October 1.

They bombarded Liverpool's uncertainty with long, high balls for their twin blond strikers, West and Reeves, and after only four minutes the tactic opened up Liverpool.

Sterland struck a free-kick from the left and no less than three headers by Wednesday were allowed by a ball-watching Liverpool defence. West headed the free-kick on, Varadi nodded it back into the centre and Proctor was able to score with a downward header, despite Molby's frantic attempt to hook it from beneath the bar.

Wednesday had done their homework. They had driven into the soft underbelly of Liverpool's defence, where the loss of Gillespie and Hansen is so sorely felt.

Hooper showed himself to be no Grobbelaar in terms of aerial gymnastics; in fact he stood with as much disbelief as the rest of us while Wednesday played head tennis around his six-yard box.

And, 10 minutes later, the goalkeeper was hapless again when a Rostron corner was flicked on by West. Varadi claimed the goal, heading in at the far post.

By now the sort of sheer belief that few people can remember at Hillsborough was in full flood. It rose further when Varadi determined to prove that Wednesday are not merely aerial commandos.

In the 29th minute Varadi turned on his instinctive speed skills in a run which took him 50 yards, sidestepping Barnes, riding a tackle from Whelan and sending Ablett the wrong way. Alas, his cross to Reeves was along the floor and Hooper raced off his line to intercept.

But where were Liverpool? Barnes, in particular, was nearing the best of his form out on the wing. He created a constant supply of crosses but Liverpool were profligate, indeed inept, in taking them. Rush, back after three matches, was caught either yards short or yards offside, Houghton struck the ball wildly across goal and Beardsley made the miss of a lifetime.

Barnes created the opportunity, Rush divided the defence with a decoy run and Beardsley, the whole goal at his mercy, mishit the ball wide from 10 yards.

We may have difficulties understanding Kenny Dalglish, but the manager's half-time message to the Liverpool men must have been loud and clear. Liverpool came out resurgent.

Turner did supremely well to respond to a shot on the turn from Rush and when Barnes attempted to lob Turner, the goalkeeper jack-knifed to turn the ball over.

Then, twice inside three minutes, Liverpool found the scoring touch which has been eluding them. Nicol had to show them how; he advanced behind the forward line and when a heavily packed Wednesday defence headed the ball out, the full-back leaned back and curled a left-foot shot inside the far post.

The second goal was a classic. Barnes drifted past Sterland, Houghton took up the running and his deep cross found Aldridge, on as substitute, waiting to head home.

As both sides sought a winner, in near cup-tie atmosphere, Rush arrived, in his old style from the left, only to hit the ball, in his new fashion, into the side netting.

In the final moments Aldridge had his second opportunity with a point-blank header, but this time Turner was able to thrust it over his bar, and defend a deserved point.

Weather: fine. Ground: soft.

Goals: Proctor (4min) 1-0; Varadi (14min) 2-0; Nicol (73min) 2-1; Aldridge (76min) 2-2.

Sheffield Wednesday (3-4-3): Turner, Cranson, Pearson, Madden; Sterland, Proctor, Jonsson, Rostron; Reeves, West, Varadi (sub: Galvin 79min).

Liverpool (4-4-2): Hooper; Nicol, Molby, Ablett, Burrows; Houghton, Whelan, McMahon (sub: Aldridge 58min), Barnes; Rush, Beardsley.

Referee: R Pawley (Cambridge).