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 Competition: League

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THE TIMES

Liverpool swagger to victory

Liverpool 2 Queen's Park Rangers 0

Liverpool returned last night to the top of the first division, the place they promised to hold at the end of the protracted season. They stood on the peak for only four days a month ago, and their stay now may be temporary, but at Anfield last night they resembled genuine champions.

They beat Queen's Park Rangers, a side which had been beaten only once in its previous 14 fixtures, with such extravagant ease that they turned the second half into another exhibition of their lavish gifts. The closing 30 minutes, in particular, became little more than a gentle exercise.

Since they were competing in their fifth fixture in 13 days, the relaxation period was welcome. Their dominance was eventually so comprehensive, the margin of superiority so wide, that they could afford to indulge in practising retaining possession in preparation for the FA Cup final against Everton on Saturday.

No one can accuse Rangers of yielding. Under the guidance of Trevor Francis, they have climbed away from the dangers of relegation beyond a position of mere respectability. He has reinforced his squad since the turn of the year and refined the sweeper system, which he encountered so often in Italy.

His defence was designed specifically to restrict the individual talents among the opposition. Parker, in compensating for his lack of height with his speed, has developed into arguably the most accomplished marker in the country. He was assigned to guard Aldridge, the principal weapon in Liverpool's extensive armoury.

His colleagues fulfilled similar duties, albeit less efficiently. Barker followed Barnes from one flank to the other, for instance, Allen shadowed Houghton wherever he went, and Maddix shepherded the elusive Beardsley. Behind them, Kerslake acted as a cover and his job was as active as any throughout the evening.

The play of Liverpool, whose own territory was initially an empty green expanse, was for the opening 20 minutes almost flawless. It was a purple patch which would have been enriched in colour only if the final pass had been consistently as precise as the rest of the measured build-up.

Rangers were pulled, stretched, teased and confused, but they did not break.

After being compressed into their own crowded area, they recovered to develop their own attacks and their goalkeeper was able to take a more distant view of events which, for the most part, were to unfold directly in front of him.

Athletically, Seaman launched himself to tip over a shot floated in by Barnes, he watched McMahon spoil a promising run with a wayward finish, and corrected his footing to stop a deflection. But he was beaten a few seconds before the interval by the touches of inspiration which Liverpool required.

Barnes's control, as Staunton's cross dropped over his shoulder, was as deft as Aldridge's lob. It looped over Seaman for his 27th goal of the season, and gave Liverpool a psychological lift as well as the lead. They returned from the dressing room carefree and composed.

Although there was no longer an urgent need to pierce Rangers, Liverpool almost did so on a number of occasions. McMahon, one of their outstanding contributors during their prolonged unbeaten run of 22 games since New Year's Day, created the second goal by rolling an open invitation into the path of his captain. Whelan arrogantly stroked it home in the 55th minute.

Arsenal, Wimbledon's hosts at Highbury tonight, may resume the leadership, but the qualities of Liverpool were confirmed by the comments of Francis. "After the first goal we were always struggling," the Rangers manager said. "We had enough players at the back to control their forwards, but the trouble is they have 11, make that 13, men who can cause you trouble."

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Ablett, S Staunton (sub: I Burrows), S Nicol, R Whelan, A Hansen, P Beardsley, J Aldridge (sub: I Rush), R Houghton, J Barnes, S McMahon.

QUEEN'S PARK RANGERS: D Seaman; S Barker, M Allen, P Parker, D Maddix, N Spackman, A Gray (sub: M Falco), D Kerslake, C Clarke, P Reid (sub: A McDonald), A Sinton.

Referee: K Redfern.

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