

Date: 26 May 1989
 Opposition: Arsenal
 Competition: League

Times		

26 May 1989

THE TIMES

Arsenal champions at last; Thomas has final word

Liverpool 0 Arsenal 2

Arsenal's youngsters last night came of age and were crowned as champions in the most astonishingly dramatic fashion. In the closing seconds of a season which had lasted for nine months, and amid almost unbearable tension, Michael Thomas changed the destiny of the title with a deceptively simple prod. His majestic goal, worthy of the occasion, defied belief, logic and all expectation. So did Arsenal's performance as a whole. The result leaves both teams on 76 points with the same goal difference, but Arsenal become champions because they have scored more goals.

Liverpool were heavily favoured to extend to 25 their prolonged unbeaten sequence stretching back to New Year's Day and to create a notable piece of history. No other club had won the double twice.

At the close, the Liverpool players sank to their knees, unable to comprehend the defeat and its dispiriting consequences. But they and their followers, though equally stunned, picked themselves up and magnanimously offered their congratulations before leaving the stage to the side which had earned its unforeseen glory.

A silken red banner proclaimed: "You name it, we've won it." Liverpool have indeed won the FA Cup, the Professional Footballers' Association fair play award and Nicol was voted the player of the year, but the principal honour belongs to George Graham, the strongest candidate for the manager of the year, and his side.

Graham controversially disrupted an apparently successful formation at the beginning of last month and introduced a sweeper system. With hindsight, the move might have been designed to complete the script which unfolded in front of the television cameras last night. The ploy worked to perfection.

In confirming that the tactic should not be regarded necessarily as negative, Arsenal turned predictions upside down. Their most experienced individual, O'Leary, had admitted that Anfield is "the hardest place in the world to win by one goal, let alone by two". The possibility became genuine in the 53rd minute. Before the kick-off, delayed by 10 minutes to allow the capacity crowd to take their places, Arsenal threw bouquets of red roses to the spectators. Their charming gesture of generosity ended abruptly and they subjected their hosts to undisguised ferocity.

No one was more committed than Adams nor more influential than Thomas, two comparative youths, whose England international careers have been suspended. The contribution of Winterburn suggested again that his should soon begin.

Arsenal restricted Liverpool to two long-range attempts in the first half (Rush struck the first with such force that he pulled a groin muscle and had to be withdrawn) and had threatened twice themselves. Nicol cleared Bould's header off the line and Smith glanced a free kick, curled in by Winterburn, narrowly wide. The two combined more precisely after the interval. After Smith had stooped to nod in his 23rd League goal, the outcome of the game and potentially of the championship hung in the balance. The referee, surrounded by Liverpoolian complaints, asked for a second opinion and a linesman supported his original verdict.

Thereafter, the legs and the concentration of Liverpool began to buckle. Sensing that they were losing control of their own fate, their touches became uncharacteristically edgy and their followers grew increasingly anxious. Never more so, seemingly, than a quarter of an hour from the end.

Then Thomas, released by Richardson, had Liverpool at his mercy, but he snatched at the possibility and Grobbelaar, who had never finished on the losing side in 28 previous appearances this season, collected the half-hit shot.

After Houghton and Aldridge had scorned opportunities, the ball was swept from one end of the pitch to the other, where Thomas brought the season to a thrilling climax.

After the unseemly behaviour of the spectators at Wembley last Saturday it was heartening to witness the conduct of the crowd of 41,718 inside the arena which shuddered with noise throughout the extraordinary evening. In elation and in despair, everybody restrained themselves.

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

ARSENAL: J Lukic; L Dixon, N Winterburn, M Thomas, D O'Leary, A Adams, D Rocastle, K Richardson, A Smith, S Bould, P Merson.

Referee: D Hutchinson.