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THE TIMES

Plough Lane produces easier pickings

Wimbledon 1 Liverpool 2

There was something missing at Plough Lane on Saturday which, try as they might, neither Kenny Dalglish, the Liverpool manager, nor Bobby Gould, the Wimbledon manager, could disguise. It was fear, a fundamental ingredient in Wimbledon's recipe for success as concocted by Dave Bassett more than 10 years ago.

There was a time when its smell pervaded every corner of the visitors' dressing room and manifested itself in the hearts of the opposition, even before a ball had been kicked a very long way in anger. Suddenly, the one-time ogres of the English game have forgotten how to be beastly.

Those close to the club believe that it is due to a lack of hunger, caused by the distracting influence of players' agents. Gould's explanation for their present malaise, which has dumped them third from bottom of the table, is that there has been an influx of new players who are still learning the Wimbledon way.

Certainly, one would not have thought that the loss of three particular players Beasant, Gayle and Jones could have caused such disruption. Wimbledon have handled changes in personnel before.

The team that horrified the purists by beating Liverpool at Wembley two seasons ago showed seven changes in its starting line-up from the one which first rocked the establishment by beating Liverpool at Anfield 14 months earlier in a League game.

In turn, the team on Saturday showed a further six changes from the FA Cup winning side. One is tempted to suggest that the contribution of the notorious Jones to notorious Wimbledon was underestimated.

Contrary to opinion in some quarters, as Dalglish pointed out, Liverpool have never been easy meat for Wimbledon, least of all at Plough Lane.

The facts are that Wimbledon have won twice and lost four times in eight League and cup meetings and have never beaten Liverpool at their delightfully ramshackled, claustrophobic stadium. Nevertheless, it is a record of which many clubs three times the size of Wimbledon would be proud.

Despite Dalglish's protestations to the contrary, I do not believe that any of his teams have ever before enjoyed an afternoon in the company of Wimbledon. Yet, dare one say it, one felt that they did so on Saturday. That is not to say that Wimbledon never worried Liverpool, because they did. But they lacked the desire to make life as typically uncomfortable as usual for their illustrious guests.

Give Liverpool an inch and they will take you to the cleaners, which is what they threatened to do after just three minutes. Barnes, displaying not a hint of the hamstring injury which prevented him playing for England in midweek, put Beardsley through for an easy goal.

Even with Grobbelaar in one of his classic Jekyll and Hyde moods, there never seemed any danger of Liverpool losing the initiative, not so long as Wimbledon continued to allow them to show just how dazzlingly attractive and effective the short game can be.

Then Grobbelaar needlessly dropped a cross from Gibson on to the head of Wise and Wimbledon, if only as far as the scoreline was concerned, were on level terms. But it took only three minutes for Liverpool's sense of injustice to wreak its retribution, the excellent Whelan following up on Staunton's adventurous work. Barnes, standing in for the injured Rush in the central role, twice had the opportunity to leave nothing to chance but finished disappointingly. Not that it mattered. The sight of a dispirited Fashanu trundling towards the line to be substituted 14 minutes from time was tantamount to a white flag from Wimbledon.

WIMBLEDON: H Segers; K Curle, T Phelan, D Kruszyński (sub: L Sanchez), E Young, J Scales, C Fairweather, V Ryan, J Fashanu (sub: A Cork), T Gibson, D Wise.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Hysen, D Burrows, S Nicol, R Whelan, A Hansen, P Beardsley, B Venison, S Staunton, J Barnes, S McMahon.

Referee: L Shapter.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Liverpool march on despite Grobbelaar

"WHERE there's Grobbelaar there's hope" might be the motto of Liverpool's opponents this season.

Liverpool have looked a class or more ahead of the rest of the League, as indeed they did at Wimbledon. But if Grobbelaar, their erratic keeper, continues to make the kind of mistake which gave Wise a goal just after half-time and nearly gave Fairweather another, no team need abandon itself to despair.

Such is the depth of Liverpool's reserve strength that they can even leave out a right-winger as versatile and effective as Houghton, who dived down the flank to good effect for Ireland in Dublin last Wednesday. Putting Venison, a full-back, in his place was one of Dalglish's more whimsical decisions.

Barnes created a beautiful early goal and might have had one for himself. He was well supported by a Beardsley who looked transformed from the pallid figure we saw in Poland three days earlier.

Wimbledon plugged away, got their farcical equaliser, and could have scored again. But it would not have been a true reflection of play.

Barnes, it should be said, was not yet fully fit after his injury and, dangerous though he always potentially was, he could have done more damage in ideal circumstances.

Yesterday it was, you might say, a case of the bludgeon against the rapier. Even Bobby Gould, Wimbledon's manager, was virtually admitting as much before the game.

Without Rush and with Aldridge now an honorary Basque, Liverpool reshuffled their team.

It was expected that Staunton, the promising young Irish international left-back, who had substituted for Rush the other day against Wigan and scored a second-half hat-trick, would partner Beardsley up front. Instead, the task went to Barnes, with Staunton playing adventurously on the left of the midfield.

What you need at Plough Lane against the inevitable Wimbledon bombardment is an early goal. And Liverpool got it in impressive style.

Barnes, whose pulled hamstring had caused him to miss last Wednesday's England game in Katowice, displayed pure skill, killing a high ball, turning away from Scales virtually in the same movement, and sending Beardsley through to score with a cool, low shot.

Barnes might well have had a second goal. In the 20th minute, Nicol and Beardsley set him up and, with delightful footwork, he made a chance from nothing, sending the ball over Segers' head, only for it to come back off the bar.

Whatever Wimbledon lack, however, it is not morale. They gradually forced their way into the game and might have scored three times before the interval. If Fashanu was getting no change from Hysen in the air, he was regularly beating Hansen. A free kick by Phelan sailed into Liverpool's goalmouth where, under pressure from Fashanu, the unpredictable Grobbelaar dropped the ball, only to retrieve it with a desperate plunge.

Eight minutes later and five from half-time, he had to leap to turn over a ferocious shot by Kruszyński, served by Fashanu. And just before half-time, Burrows kneed an awkward, in-swinging corner from Wise out of the goalmouth.

These were the warning signs and, a couple of minutes after the break, a still more extraordinary blunder by Grobbelaar, presented Wimbledon with their equaliser.

Scales found Gibson on the left. His centre was nothing special and the only challenger to the massive goalkeeper was Wise. Somehow Grobbelaar dropped the ball and Wise, at point-blank range, nodded in.

Fairweather sent a shot whistling over Grobbelaar's bar, but the keeper's agony lasted only eight minutes before Liverpool scored again.

Barnes found Staunton, whose left-footed shot brought Segers full stretch to save. All Whelan had to do was follow up and score.

Grobbelaar continued to live dangerously. He dropped Wise's free kick, but his fellow defenders blocked Fairweather's drive.

Then, when Fairweather flicked on Wise's corner, he produced an acrobatic save.