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## THE TIMES

Southampton sail into elite waters

Southampton 4 Liverpool 1

Once in a while the invincibility of Liverpool appears to be as substantial as a mirage. Once in a while the side which regularly maintains standards that others can touch only occasionally is reduced to the ordinary. Saturday at The Dell was one of those rare days.

For only the third time in four years since Kenny Dalglish has been in charge, Liverpool were utterly outplayed. They were knocked out of the FA Cup 3-0 by Luton Town in 1987 but, as Dalglish justifiably claims, the artificial surface at Kenilworth Road "produces artificial games" and, therefore, artificial results. Their other heavy defeats have been inflicted in genuine circumstances by opponents who were not only inspired but also beat Liverpool at their own game. West Ham United did so, by 4-1, in the Littlewoods Cup at the end of 1988 on their way down to the second division.

Arsenal did so, by 2-0 but memorably at Anfield in May on their way to last season's title. Now Southampton have joined an elite trio who triumphed not through physical brutality or through the tedium of the long-ball game or even through luck.

They were superior in every aspect. They were tighter in their marking, quicker to the ball, stronger in the tackle, more purposeful in their passing; they gave themselves more options and their finishing was of the highest quality. For almost an hour, until they conceded a penalty, they embraced perfection.

Osman and Ruddock, the central defenders, could not have been more attentive guards. Case and Cockerill could not have been a more convincing combination of the combative and the creative in midfield. Even their full backs, both of whom are considered third choices, could not have been more supportive. Each played his part in the flawless play.

Rodney Wallace, strengthening his position as the club's leading scorer with two goals, Rideout, who also struck the bar and a post, and Le Tissier, the most cultured individual on view, finished the moves in appropriately spectacular fashion. The praise is worthy, though neither manager, not even Chris Nicholl, chose to offer any themselves.

Dalglish instead lashed his own team with uncharacteristically stinging criticism. Seldom, if ever, has he been heard to throw such verbal vitriol as "those who turned up to watch did better than those on the pitch". He was equally curt when asked to comment on Houghton's notable effect after the interval.

"It wouldn't have taken much to improve on our first half," he retorted. "Our performance was totally unacceptable." In preparation for Wednesday's Littlewoods Cup tie against Arsenal at Highbury, he intends this morning to right wrongs "which may not have been obvious to yourselves". One or two deficiencies were unmistakable.

Venison, until he was withdrawn during the interval, was less effective in restraining Rodney Wallace than was Dodd, a comparative novice at 18 years of age, in containing Barnes. The aerial weakness in defence, illustrated by three of Southampton's goals, was scarcely a revelation. Nor was the continuing diminishment of Rush's ability.

Dalglish was not being surly but, at the end of the biggest League defeat of his managerial career, he could stand accused of belittling Southampton's contribution. So, in a sense, could Nicholl. Amid the euphoria, he appreciates perhaps that his youngsters cannot realistically be expected to fly so high consistently.

Last season they climbed to third place, for instance, and then fell in the new year straight to the edge of relegation. He had regarded Saturday's fixture merely as a guide to their recent progress. They surpassed all expectations, extended their unbeaten record to nine fixtures since they lost at Goodison Park at the end of August and rose to genuine contention.

To put their achievement into perspective, Liverpool had been beaten only once in any competition since New Year's Day. Indeed, the lone mistake throughout the afternoon was committed by Nicholl's oldest representative. The 35-year-old Case, in clumsily baulking Burrows, conceded the penalty which was converted by Beardsley. The goal, as Dalglish confirmed, was not even considered as consolation.

SOUTHAMPTON: T Flowers; J Dodd, F Benali, J Case, N Ruddock, R Osman, M Le Tissier, G Cockerill, A Shearer (sub: G Baker), P Rideout, R Wallace.

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

Referee: R Lewis.

## THE SUNDAY TIMES

Wallace strikes twice as defence is torn to pieces

SOUTHAMPTON 4 (4-4-2): Flowers; Dodd, Ruddock, Osman, Benali; Rodney Wallace, Cockerill, Case, Le Tissier; Shearer (sub: Baker 72min), Rideout.

LIVERPOOL 1 (4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Venison (sub: Houghton 46min), Hansen, Hysen, Burrows; Nicol, Whelan, McMahon, Barnes; Rush, Beardsley.

Goals: Rideout (25min) 1-0; Wallace (37 min) 2-0; Wallace (55min) 3-0; Beardsley (pen 58min) 3-1; Le Tissier (84min) 4-1.

Weather: windy. Ground: yielding.

Referee: R S Lewis (Great Bookham).

FOR THE FIRST time this season, Liverpool have lost in the League, and what a crash! A 4-1 defeat which might have been 5-1 had Beardsley, in the last minute, not cleared off the line a header by Ruddock, the big Southampton stopper. Southampton, deploying their young lions so incisively and effectively in attack, took the game from the very beginning to a Liverpool defence which just did not know how to cope. The lack of pace in the two Liverpool centre-backs was only too apparent; to such a degree that Southampton dictated most of the game and were able to make light of their own deficiencies at full-back. Liverpool should certainly have had Houghton on the field far earlier, and Barnes was a far more effective leader of the attack last week at Wimbledon than was the Rush of yesterday. It is doubtful if Liverpool would have got back into the game at all if Case, their former player, had not so rashly and unnecessarily given away a penalty just after Southampton had scored their third. Southampton came out in an exuberant mood, as befitted a team unbeaten in its last eight matches; a team, moreover, which had just scored four goals in west London against Queens Park Rangers. Though no fewer than three Southampton full-backs were unavailable, there was plenty of firepower in the side, with the double centre-forward combination of Rideout, not long ago centre-forward in Italy for Bari, and Shearer. Behind them, revelling no doubt in the chance to play once more against the club which discarded him, was Jimmy Case. When they let him go, Liverpool could hardly have believed he would be so useful for so very long. Liverpool, winners last week at Wimbledon despite the eccentricities of Grobbelaar, restored Rush to centre-forward and pushed Barnes, who had done so well there, out to the left wing. It was Southampton who could so well have gone into the lead after 16 minutes. Indeed, they had threatened to do so on the quarter-hour, an excellent ball to the left from Wallace enabling Benali to cross. The ball flew just over Shearer's head. Immediately, advancing from midfield, Rideout let rip a right-footed drive from some 30 yards out. Grobbelaar, too far off his line, was utterly surprised by it. Over his head the ball went, only to rebound off the bar. This gave Southampton all the confidence they needed. It was not long before Ruddock hooked a long ball from his fellow centre-back, Osman, high over the bar and then, in the 25th minute, Rideout did real damage. Dodd, the 18-year-old right-back, playing only his second League game, crossed from the right. Rideout got in ahead of the Liverpool defenders to meet the ball perfectly on the near post. Into the opposite corner of the net it flew. The sheer inspired disrespect shown by Southampton obviously unsettled Liverpool. They did have, and threw away, an important chance to equalise, when a pass by Whelan appeared to find Beardsley in an offside position. The referee saw nothing wrong and Beardsley was allowed to proceed, but his shot was a poor one. Southampton resumed the running. They nearly scored again after a mistake by Liverpool's Swedish centre-back, Hysen. As Shearer homed in on the ball in the penalty box, Hysen almost whimsically performed a delicate dummy. The trouble was that it deceived no one but himself. On went Shearer, but this time Grobbelaar came to the rescue of his beleaguered team. Eight minutes from the break, however, he was beaten again. Once more the fallibility of the Liverpool defence was embarrassingly shown. Wallace got the ball on the left and found Le Tissier. The winger ran at Liverpool's defence, before giving the ball back in the area to Wallace. Wallace, cool and impertinent as you please, picked his way neatly round a desperate Venison, then beat Grobbelaar for Southampton's well-merited second goal. How were the mighty falling! For the second half, Liverpool at last brought on Houghton, who has mysteriously been confined to the bench for weeks. Venison dropped out, Nicol dropped back. It made little immediate difference. Indeed, after just 10 minutes, Southampton had another goal. The wingers took all the credit. First Le Tissier, on the right touchline, flicked the ball elegantly over the head of Burrows, and left him stranded. His long cross again found Liverpool's defenders wanting. Wallace ran in from the left and drove the ball through Grobbelaar's legs. That should logically have been that, but when Case had an apparent rush of blood to the head, needlessly fouling Burrows just inside the box, Beardsley put the penalty away. It was, predictably, a very different Liverpool now. Burrows crossed from the left, Nicol came thundering in through a scattered defence, and a goal seemed inevitable. The header was strong, but Flowers flailed it away. Liverpool, such was their desperation, pushed Hysen into attack and left consequent gaps. Rideout, beating Whelan, the emergency stopper, came in from the left for a low shot which Grobbelaar held, off the post. But, with six minutes left, in another breakaway, Rodney Wallace crowned his exuberant afternoon with a centre from the left which Le Tissier, again exploiting the deficiencies of Liverpool's reorganised defence, headed powerfully past Grobbelaar. Southampton's cup was full.