

Date: 4 November 1989
 Opposition: Coventry City
 Competition: League

Times	Sunday Times	

4 November
1989

THE TIMES

Sillett refuses to reveal the secret of Anfield success

Liverpool 0 Coventry City 1

Whether it was a brilliantly disguised scheme or bluff we may never know, but John Sillett, the Coventry manager, left Anfield with three points and a posse of Press still searching the trail for clues. Sillett had forewarned of a "secret plan", one that would give Coventry their first win at Liverpool at their 25th attempt; but he left the ground with the ace still up his sleeve or was it a joker?

Even the sages of Coventry who report their matches week in, week out could not identify the play. In fact, it seemed a victory made of simplicity: a headed goal from a free kick, lashings of hard work from a 4-4-2 formation and one of those strapping goalkeepers who remind Liverpool of their most infamous 1-0 defeat. Ogrizovic, a 6ft 4in Beasant-like figure, was such a nuisance that it looked like Wimbledon at Wembley all over again.

Half a dozen saves, keeping out Barnes, Beardsley, Whelan and Houghton, ensured that Coventry inflicted upon Liverpool their first home defeat and their third loss in four matches since Arsenal's unforgettable celebration there in May. The goal, and a splendid drive from Speedie apart, Grobbelaar was relatively untroubled.

Regis's first goal of the season, running unmarked from deep to head a cross from Downs, after a free kick, two minutes after the interval, thus went down as the winner. Liverpool are sponsored by Candy and Coventry's goal was like taking it from a baby. With McGrath and Speedie stifling the supply from Whelan and McMahon in central midfield, it probably no more needed Sherlock Holmes to solve this one than Cagney and Lacey; it was that simple.

Sillett, however, maintained a cloak of secrecy. Usually prompt for his press conferences, he now went absent. He was caught trying to escape. To questions about his plan, the Artful Dodger replied, as he backed out of the door: "Do you want me to tell the world? Do you want me to end up a pauper?"

Kevin MacDonald, like Ogrizovic an ex-Red, confirmed suspicions of bluff. "They didn't play up to their best and we rode our luck" was MacDonald's explanation. Kenny Dalglish, the Liverpool manager, knew why they had not been at their best. "If the attitude is not right, we cannot play," he said. For the second time in a fortnight he made the observation after the defeat at Southampton he said: "We won't accept that as a standard of performance for this club."

Houghton and Beardsley may be excused criticism; they gave glimpses of their joyful skills. Where, but at Anfield, can you cut through three defenders, as Beardsley did, but suffer a collective groan because your pass is too strong? Hansen, returning from injury, was unconvincing, Ablett worse than that, Barnes peripheral and, most worrying of all, Rush back in his early-season rut. He has scored in only two of his 13 games this season and on Saturday was on the end of only one chance, which he put wide. All this and Arsenal the next visitors to Anfield. Dalglish, one assumes, can at least rest easy that attitude will not be wanting for that one.

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

COVENTRY CITY: S Ogrizovic; B Borrowes, G Downs, K MacDonald, P Billing, T Peake, L McGrath, D Speedie, C Regis, K Drinkell, D Smith.

Referee: T Simpson.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Liverpool's home record shattered

LIVERPOOL 0 (4-3-3): Grobbelaar; D Burrows, Hysen, Hansen, Ablett; Houghton, Whelan, McMahon (sub: McMahon 76min); Beardsley, Rush, Barnes. COVENTRY 1 (4-4-2): Ogrizovic; B Burrows, Billing, Peake, Downs; MacDonald, McGrath, Speedie, Smith; Regis, Drinkell. Goal: Regis (47min). Weather: blustery. Ground: soft. Referee: T Simpson.

JOHN SILLETT's claim that this is the best side Coventry have ever fielded was given credence with their first win at Anfield since they were promoted to the First Division 23 seasons ago; a skilful, doughty show that took advantage of a Liverpool performance that was curiously out of kilter, their passing and control so poor that Kenny Dalglish, the manager, said: "I won't accept that as an acceptable standard for this club."

On paper Coventry faced a daunting task, their last goal on the ground was nine years ago with two cup defeats to go with the losses in the league. Liverpool, after setbacks against Southampton and Arsenal, appeared to be back on the rails with victory over Spurs, but Dalglish admitted he "hadn't a clue" about what had gone.

Initially Coventry were pushed back, but with McGrath pinning McMahon down and Speedie getting a grip of Whelan they eventually took the initiative which was fluently exploited by Regis in the middle and Smith and MacDonald on the flanks. If there was danger it was that Ablett and Burrows would get in behind the wide midfield men and Barnes, at least, should have profited in the first half. But two left-footed full-backs was not a good idea against such useful players and when Burrows fouled Smith, not for the first time, at the start of the second half, the floated free kick allowed Regis a free run and header at the far post, his first goal of the season and his first at Anfield.

Liverpool struck back vehemently, the passion at times boiling over into some chilling tackles, but Ogrizovic, behind Billing and Peake, stood firm. In the face of a greasy ball as the rain and the attacks poured down. On the break, Brinkell had a wonderful opportunity to improve on his three goals in four games since joining from Rangers, but struck his volley over the bar.

"We had a plan and it worked," Sillett said. "I told them all week we could win, whatever the history books say. They stuck to their jobs and I'm proud of them."

The salt in Liverpool's wounds will come if Everton win at Villa Park today and replace them as league leaders.