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Liverpool return to the top

Liverpool 2 Arsenal 1

At the end of yesterday's clash between the nation's two heavyweights, Anfield had been transformed into "Emergency Ward 10." The description was uttered by George Graham, Arsenal's manager, after he had left his casualties which included O'Leary and the bloodied Quinn. His defeated side finished in comparatively healthy condition.

Liverpool, in regaining the leadership of the first division on goal difference and with a game in hand, suffered various head injuries. Hysen and Hansen were both cut and Venison, dazed with concussion, was lying in hospital. Though of lower quality than the memorably decisive event six months ago to the day, the fixture had been equally dramatic.

Liverpool had the perfect foundations laid for them. Within the opening minute O'Leary, in losing his footing, offered Rush not only possession but also an open path. He followed it before inviting Houghton to provide the finishing touch. Instead, he hit the inside of a post.

The failure to take advantage of such opportunities had, among other unusual deficiencies, prompted talk of a crisis at the club. The whispers, fuelled by a sequence of four defeats in six games, almost grew audibly midway through the first half when they could not even convert a penalty.

By then their defence had been rearranged. Venison, after colliding with Hysen and falling heavily, picked himself up and staggered around as though in a drunken haze. Although the full back was visibly and horribly distressed, the linesman did not immediately alert the referee to the stricken victim.

The delay was potentially dangerous. For two terrifying minutes, and with Liverpool's officials pleading for the game to be stopped, he was allowed to stumble on. The club doctor, summoned to assist in the treatment, decided instantly that Venison should be withdrawn first to the dressing-room and then to hospital.

"Everybody could see that he was out on his feet and didn't have a clue about where he was, except for the linesman," Kenny Dalglish, Liverpool's manager, said. "You can't blame the referee because he was unaware of what had happened but that sort of thing, an injury to the head, is always very worrying." Beardsley, who is considering asking for a transfer, alone profited from the sickening incident. Aggrieved again to be left out, he was brought into the attack. Staunton and Barnes dropped back conveniently on the left flank where Arsenal's defence was next to be unhinged.

Dixon, as he slid towards the byline, was harshly adjudged to have deliberately handled Barnes' cross and the decision would doubtless have stirred many an argument had it been decisive. It became almost an irrelevancy after Lukic had spread his elongated frame to parry Barnes' kick.

Graham conceded that Liverpool "dominated the first half" but their award was meagre. Although Rush confirmed again that he has yet convincingly to restore his reputation as a fearsome scorer, he did set up the opening goal by cushioning the ball for McMahon to unleash a precise drive on the half-hour.

Although Smith's volley was hooked off the line by Houghton shortly after the interval, Liverpool's supremacy was emphasized in the 65th minute. Adams, who had earlier been booked with McMahon and Richardson, brought down Rush, provoking cries that he should be sent off. The foul was clumsy rather than malicious.

Liverpool sought their own retribution, anyway. Barnes, the most talented individual on view, ignored Arsenal's substantial wall and the imposing height of their 6ft 4inch goalkeeper. He curled his free kick around the obstacle and over Lukic. Graham suggested that the second goal was "against the run of play."

But until then his side had been the more limited and the less forceful. Only after losing O'Leary, who had been hobbling around on a twisted ankle before he was knocked unconscious by the stunning impact of Houghton's ferocious volley, did they even begin genuinely to refresh the memories of last May.

Smith, assisted by the confusion which spread among Grobbelaar, Staunton and Whelan, cleared up the muddle by reducing the margin. But for the intervention of Hansen, Thomas might even have claimed a belated equaliser in a manner similar to his extraordinary winner in the dying seconds of last season.

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

ARSENAL: J Lukic; L Dixon, N Winterburn, M Thomas, D O'Leary (sub: S Jonsson), A Adams, D Rocastle, K Richardson, A Smith, N Quinn, P Groves.

Referee: M Peck.