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THE TIMES

Villa employ Anfield Textbook

Liverpool 1 Aston Villa 1

Injury, that weakness of the flesh which over the past 20 years or more seems to have afflicted all clubs bar Liverpool, has finally caught up with the Merseysiders. With up to eight players injured at any one time during the past seven weeks, Liverpool's efforts to bring the championship back to Anfield are being seriously frustrated.

Kenny Dalglish, their manager, understandably proud of the squad which he has assembled, has been honest enough to protest that the injuries had not left them with a depleted squad but still a quality one. The disruption to Liverpool's form, however, has not been caused by the scale of the injury problem, but by the damage done to continuity.

In the first 10 games of the season none of which Liverpool lost the team was virtually unchanged. In the last 10, not a game has gone by without the team being tinkered with in some department as 19 players have been called upon. Anyone, including Dalglish, would be hard pressed to name their first-choice back four.

The statistics make interesting reading. In the first 10 games, seven were won, three drawn, 29 goals were scored and six conceded; in the next 10, four games were won, one drawn, five lost, 13 goals were scored and 15 conceded.

The month of December, though, could be Liverpool's salvation, with four of their six games at home. Even in their present state of comparative disarray, Liverpool would prove too much for most teams.

It is, therefore, an indication of Aston Villa's worth that they not only resisted Liverpool without undue cause for alarm, but threatened, at times, to win the game. It was a performance by Villa straight out of the Anfield textbook of the sixties and seventies on how to steal an early advantage and hold on to it away from home.

What a difference confidence makes to a side. Eight wins in nine League games had left Villa looking polished and fluent.

Unfussy and direct in the Graham Taylor idiom, Villa have at last found how to capitalize upon Ormondroyd's extraordinary physical advantages. The 6ft 5in forward, now positioned on the left wing, where he has the time and space to unfurl those long legs to greater effect, was like a lighthouse on the fringe of the Red Sea, beckoning forth the Villa armada.

Drifting into the middle only to receive Spink's clearances, he headed on to telling effect in the 24th minute for Daley to supply the impressive Olney with a chance to rap the ball past Grobbelaar.

As long as Barnes, returning from his hamstring injury, was there on the Liverpool left flank to tease and stretch the five-man Villa defence, enthusiastically supported by its midfield, Liverpool could be optimistic of regaining the initiative. But that all evaporated when Barnes's hamstring gave way in the 37th minute and he was carried off the field and out of England's international at Wembley on Wednesday to what sounded ominously like the cynical approval of some Villa supporters.

Dalglish confirmed that it was the same injury. "We will know more on Monday once they have had a look at him," he said.

Taylor suggested that when Barnes went off the more unpredictable problems posed by Steve McMahon, Jan Molby and Ronnie Whelan made it more difficult for his side.

"We never got to terms with the inter-movement of those three players and when that happens you cannot get out of your half and when you do get the ball you have been pushed so deep you can't get things to happen for you anyway. "But we defended very well. I wouldn't say we came here to defend, but you have got to be realistic when you come here."

Whatever state the flesh was in, there was nothing much wrong with Liverpool's spirit. They continued to pound away at the Villa defence, if more in hope than expectation. The enterprise of young Tanner, coming on to good effect at right back as he did on his League debut the previous week, occasionally threatened to pick out a path for Rush, but generally every avenue of attack ended up in a cul-de-sac.

It was only after some particularly intense pressure in the 64th minute that Liverpool forced a breach in the Villa defence. Beardsley, with fine opportunism, steered a half-volley through it.

Even then Villa might have regained the initiative with three minutes remaining had Olney's shooting skill matched his footwork.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Hysen, S Staunton, G Ablett, R Whelan, J Molby, P Beardsley, R Houghton, I Rush, J Barnes (sub: N Tanner), S McMahon.

ASTON VILLA: N Spink; C Price, S Gray, P McGrath, P Mountfield, K Nielsen, A Daley, D Platt, I Olney, G Cowans, I Ormondroyd.

Referee: K A Redfern.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Liverpool drive back pretenders

LIVERPOOL 1 (4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Molby, Hysen, Ablett, Staunton; Houghton, Whelan, McMahon, Barnes (sub: Tanner 37min); Rush, Beardsley. ASTON VILLA 1 (3-4-3): Spink; McGrath, Mountfield, Nielsen; Price, Cowans, Platt, Gray; Daley, Olney, Ormondroyd.

Goals: Olney (21min) 0-1; Beardsley (64min) 1-1.

Weather: clear. Ground: firm.

Referee: K A Redfern (Whitley Bay).

ASTON VILLA'S bright challenge to the First Division establishment lives on. They could not win at Anfield, but they did the next best thing.

They led for a long while through a goal from their young centreforward Olney and then, in the second half, they were not beaten by a relentless Liverpool roll. They deserved the ovation their thousands gave them.

Whether they would have escaped had Barnes lasted the afternoon is open to question. Barnes was back after hamstring trouble, operating wide on the left, and he did not take long to weave some magic. There was one delicious moment when he trod water in the penalty area with no Villa man daring to touch him. Alas, a minute later he was gone. He turned in almost the self same spot, fell, and had to be helped off, and out of England's match against Yugoslavia.

But plenty of good things remained. This was always an absorbing match with Villa surprising the masters in the first half, not least the 6ft 4in Ormondroyd on the left flank. It was not so long ago that he was the butt of the Aston Villa fans. Now his heading and running embarrassed a hesitant Liverpool defence. As one of Ormondroyd's opponents said recently: "It's disconcerting, facing a floodlight pylon at outside-left."

Olney, a teenager for just one more week, also began well, confirming his promise. Indeed, Olney almost scored inside 90 seconds, and under the Kop's noses at that. Ormondroyd headed down, Olney shot hard, and the ball sped across the unguarded goal off Grobbelaar's hand.

Olney did score 20 minutes later, taking advantage of bad marking by Ablett and Hysen, Liverpool's centre-backs. Spink knocked the ball down and Ormondroyd and Daley allowed the youngster the room to shoot hard in-off Grobbelaar's arm. Near half-time, the Villa end was shouting for Mr Redfern to blow his whistle. But their three centre-backs, a system which manager Graham Taylor favours these days, did not look all that flustered. There had been a roar when Rush had gone down against McGrath, but nobody really thought it was a penalty.

Any Villa fan reading his programme at halftime would have noticed that 30 years ago almost to the day Liverpool had appointed a Scot from Huddersfield Town as their manager, one Bill Shankly.

Liverpool were in the Second Division then. Shankly said he was proud to join a club "of such great potential." His first match was a disaster, losing 4-0 at home to Cardiff. So that was how the Anfield dynasty, the one everybody wants to emulate, had started.

After the interval, however, the folk from Birmingham found a different ball game. Liverpool's defence, admittedly hit by many injuries, had been suspect. We had seen little of Houghton; McMahon had not launched any dangerous runs, while Whelan had made several neat passes, but his teammates had failed to capitalise.

Manager Taylor thought that the presence of Molby in midfield (he had begun at right-back) made a difference. At least with Barnes they knew where the flak was coming from. Now they didn't.

But Villa's self-belief had diminished, and it cost them dear. Mistakenly, they decided to hold what they had.

So we saw a familiar Anfield sight, a team under siege as those red shirts knocked the ball here, there and everywhere. The equaliser could have arrived many times.

It did so just past the hour when Rush and a defender leapt for a forward ball which fell to Beardsley, and he scored with a low shot from 20 yards.

The expression on Kenny Dalglish's face afterwards suggested that the joy of Christmas has not yet reached the banks of the Mersey. "I think we deserved more," he said.