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THE TIMES

Liverpool untied by enigmatic United

Manchester United, who opened the season by humiliating the champions, reached the halfway stage on Saturday by humbling the probable successors. They have unwittingly illustrated that the title they have not claimed themselves for 22 years is now more accessible than it has been for many years.

Neither Arsenal, beaten 4-1 at Old Trafford on August 19, nor Liverpool, morally defeated just as convincingly at Anfield, despite the 0-0 scoreline, are the irresistible forces they were last season. They may lie first and second respectively, but only because the standard in the first division has, if anything, continued to spiral downwards. Whenever it has been lifted, Liverpool have invariably been involved. They have either touched the heights of excellence themselves, notably in crushing Crystal Palace 9-0, or their opponents have been inspired. Aston Villa, Norwich City and Southampton, all of whom are in the top six, have been the most memorable examples.

United, beaten only twice by Liverpool in their last 20 League meetings, raised their games against them annually anyway. They did so again on Saturday but there is no compelling reason to believe that they will necessarily reproduce their form in their next game, at Villa Park this afternoon. The most enigmatic side in the first division, they have lurched like a drunken fell walker from high peaks to low points. When they perform as a unit, as against Arsenal and Liverpool, they resemble genuine contenders. When United play as isolated individuals, as has been more often the case, they look like relegation candidates.

The most common feature of their erratic journey so far has been inefficiency in front of goal. United, who had not scored in nine of their previous 20 games, scorned at least half a dozen opportunities at Anfield to improve their record. Alex Ferguson, their manager, prefers to disguise the deficiency. "We are still in the agony period," he said, not for the first time. "We are just not getting the breaks". Yet, in persisting with Hughes and McClair as his front line, he is not arming himself with a reliable goalscorer who could end the sequence of apparent misfortune. Significantly, Arsenal and Liverpool are similarly ill-equipped. No one was more prolific in the first division last season than Smith, for example, but Arsenal's centre forward has lost the art, temporarily at least, and he is no longer considered a regular member of the England squad.

The decline of Rush is even more marked. His principle asset, his explosive acceleration, has never been evident since his return from Italy. Without it, the once fearsome predator no longer carries a menacing threat. During his seventeenth appearance against United without scoring, he was a bystander lingering without intent in the shadows. Since Rush's powers were so clearly diminished and unlikely to be restored, it seemed curious at the time that Liverpool should have agreed to release their most dependable weapon, Aldridge. The decision to sell him, even for the princely sum of Pounds 1 million, could yet prove to be an expensive error. Like Rush, coincidentally, Lineker seems to have gone through the same debilitating process during his stay abroad. He also relies on speed rather than subtlety to carry him through the opposition but, whether he is representing Tottenham Hotspur or England, he no longer penetrates defences with his usual ease and regularity. Although Terry Venables denied it at the time, the departure of Waddle to Marseille not only prevented Lineker from doing as well as he might have done, but reduced Tottenham's hope of deposing their North London rivals, Arsenal. Yet, having faltered at the beginning, Spurs are now sitting on the edge of contention with Villa, Norwich and Southampton.

Traditionally, the championship is earned by the club which concedes the fewest goals. On that premise alone, Tottenham and especially Southampton can be discounted. So can Chelsea. Their defence, the strongest in the country a month ago, fell apart so rapidly it seemed they had been blown up with dynamite. Their sweeper system was so embarrassingly disorganized 10 days ago that the idea might now be rejected. Bobby Campbell, the Chelsea manager, chose to deflect criticism of his own team at Stamford Bridge that day by claiming that Liverpool, who could have won by an appreciably wider margin than 5-2, would be realistic contenders for the World Cup.

A week later, Kenny Dalglish reflected on his side's next performance and declared: "If that is the best we can do, then we are in trouble." The two statements indicate that even Liverpool, unrivalled for their consistency during the last decade, are unable now to maintain their own constant level.

They are still the best side in England but, apart from Arsenal, who are still trotting rather than sprinting at the head of the field, Villa appear to be the most dangerous outsiders. At the end of last season they were clinging to the other end of the table. Their subsequent recovery, conducted in a stylis fashion, has enhanced the reputation of Graham Taylor, a manager who was thought to be committed to nothing more adventurous than the dreary and limited long-ball game. The careers of Cowans and McGrath have been resurrected and that of Platt in particular has flourished. So have the team, a blend of fresh young legs and experienced old heads. The manager of their visitors today, Ferguson, has yet to create a similarly successful mixture. To protect his own position, he needs to produce the right formula, especially for the third round tie of the FA Cup, against Nottingham Forest on January 7. Otherwise, he may not be allowed to complete a championship race which, ironically, his side has helped to make more open.

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

MANCHESTER UNITED: J Leighton; P Ince, G Pallister, S Bruce, L Martin, C Blackmore, M Phelan, B Robson, M Hughes, B McClair, D Wallace (sub: L Sharpe). Referee: J Worrall.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Liverpool let off as McClair spurns gifts

LIVERPOOL 0 (4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Venison, Hysen, Hansen (sub: Nicol 46min), Ablett; Houghton, Whelan, Molby, McMahon; Rush, Beardsley. MANCHESTER UNITED 0 (4-4-2): Leighton; Ince, Pallister, Bruce, Martin; Blackmore, Phelan, Robson, Wallace (sub: Sharpe 73min); McClair, Hughes. Weather: moist but sunny. Ground: soft. Referee: J B Worrall (Wirral). FORM plays no part in these matches at Anfield between Liverpool and Manchester United. Let me state this in other terms. Form does play a part, but it is the form of tradition and history, rather than the form shown by either team at the actual time.

So it was that United, who should have gone into the game as underdogs and lost by a street, once again displayed their liking for this stadium, and their ability to do well there. They should, in fact, have won, and at no time evinced the shadow of an inferiority complex.

Although, towards the very end, Liverpool were pulling the previously solid and decisive Pallister out to the flanks, and giving him a living, by and large United were the crisper, quicker, more incisive team. It was a Liverpool player, Gary Gillespie, sitting in the press box, who remarked of United: "They seem to want to walk the ball into the back of the net. Nobody wants to hit it."

This may well have been the salvation of Liverpool, who yesterday, despite their overwhelming victory a week earlier at Chelsea, looked a team with a number of problems.

Some of these can certainly be resolved. For instance, the lack of Barnes seriously unbalanced this side. With the heavy, intelligent Molby and the lanky Ablett on the left, there was no one to challenge United down that flank with the necessary pace. McMahon, apart from one splendid shot in the first half, never established mastery in midfield, where Whelan, tirelessly diligent and shrewd, was the best of the Liverpool players.

In defence we saw, by no means for the first time, that Hysen and Hansen tend to be a vulnerable couple. Each of these two senatorial figures needs to be abetted by someone quicker. Hughes, combative, quick and muscular from first to last, was generally too much for Hysen, and only the courage of Grobbelaar prevented him from scoring 12 minutes from the interval.

After an excellent United move involving Ince, Wallace and McClair, Hughes was clear, but as he tore in from the right, Grobbelaar hurled himself at his feet and the shot spun off his body, to curl over the bar.

Thirteen minutes earlier, Hughes, from the left, had left Liverpool's defence for dead, to send in a low cross, from which McClair was scarcely a step away. There were a couple of other occasions in the first half when the Scottish striker, with foot and head, might well have scored.

United have been criticised, with some justification, for using their gifted, expensive new acquisition, Ince, at right-back, while the more pedestrian Blackmore operates in midfield. Yesterday, especially in the second half, they solved this particular problem by frequent switches between the two men, Ince moving confidently up into attack while Blackmore unselfishly dropped back to fill his position in defence.

A couple of minutes from half-time, Wallace threw away a substantial chance to give United the lead they deserved. Hughes, now in the less familiar role of provider rather than exploiter, released the winger on the right with a magnificent crossfield ball. Wallace came away with it, but as Hansen, clearly not fully mobile by then, moved across to challenge him, he seemed somehow bemused. Instead of carrying on for a crack, he feebly allowed the centre-half to take the ball away from him.

So it was, in the very next minute, that Beardsley, who was dangerous in spasms, got away on the Liverpool right, and was blocked only at the last stride by Pallister. United continued after the interval to give as good as they got, though Beardsley did once get through on a long ball from Venison, only to allow Leighton to anticipate him when a goal seemed probable.

In the United midfield, Phelan was having one of his best and most productive games of the season. He will, as we know, seldom give a forward pass when a square one will do, but he worked endlessly, and his use of the ball was unfailingly productive.

United, indeed, continued to make most of the chances. When, in the 15th minute of the second half, Hughes superbly held off Hysen and Blackmore crossed from the right, Grobbelaar turned McClair's header over the bar.

Liverpool, who had Nicol, with his superior speed, on in the centre of defence for Hansen, could never be at rest, though now Houghton was coming into the game a good deal more.

Yet their opportunities were few; this wasn't Chelsea. Beardsley danced in along the goal-line from the left, went past Pallister and was frustrated only by the defender's desperate tackle. There was some speculation as what would have happened had Beardsley decided to go down rather than go on.

In the last minute of all, Beardsley and McMahon contrived a chance for Molby who, with time to spare, shot high over the top. "They get paid for that!" cried a disgusted Liverpool fan.