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## THE TIMES

Liverpool move into top gear

Manchester United 1 Liverpool 2

Liverpool seem to have timed to perfection the unleashing of their true form. By convincingly defeating a side which they may meet in the FA Cup Final, they extended an unbeaten sequence to 20 matches yesterday, reducing Aston Villa's advantage at the top of the first division to two points. They also have a game in hand.

Although United have lost only two of their previous 20 League games against Liverpool, they were outplayed at Old Trafford and, with one League win in the last three months, they will dismiss at their peril the threat of relegation.

The scoreline flattered the home side. After Liverpool had established a two-goal advantage early in the second half, they played with such enterprise that a rout seemed inevitable.

Kenny Dalglish, the Liverpool manager, said he was fully satisfied with the outcome. But he must have felt a measure of disappointment at the failure of his forwards to convert an endless string of chances which had been created by an inventive midfield.

On a better day, when the run of the ball went for rather than against him, Rush would have ended his barren spell against United.

It was somewhat ironic that in the last few minutes of a game in which they had produced some quite magnificent football, Liverpool should be forced to resort to a succession of back-passes and time-consuming moves of little consequence to guarantee a victory which was richly deserved.

Surprisingly, United were able to field Hughes, the Welsh international forward, who had damaged a calf muscle four days earlier. His swift return to fitness, or perhaps refusal to miss a fixture he relishes, was the second encouraging note in less than 24 hours for Alex Ferguson, the United manager, who on Saturday had watched Webb, the England international, playing for the first time in seven months in a reserve game at Anfield.

Dalglish had not been so fortunate in terms of injuries. Nicol, a defender, was ruled out shortly before the kick-off because of a leg injury. His replacement, Staunton, may be relatively inexperienced but had he not displayed, in the third minute, the composure which has hallmarked Liverpool defenders down the years, his side might have fallen behind.

Phelan's deftly delivered pass down the centre released McClair and, but for Staunton's awareness and deceptive pace, United's pleasing, if largely unproductive, early play would have been rewarded.

Staunton proved to be similarly alert in the 43rd minute when he intercepted a pass by Wallace which would have left Hughes with an unencumbered route to goal; but by that stage Liverpool had not only smothered their opponents' attacking ambitions by establishing control in midfield, they had also taken the lead.

It was what people tend to refer to as a typical Liverpool goal a blase manner in which to describe the successful blending of simplicity and perfection.

Venison, having dispossessed Martin, fed Houghton, who instinctively drilled the ball forward to Beardsley. He, with equal speed of thought, found Barnes, who ran some 40 yards before sliding his shot beneath the body of Leighton, whose charge away from his goalline was undertaken fractionally too late to be effective. United did enjoy their moments in the first half but, on the one occasion when Hansen and Hysen were found wanting in the 22nd minute, Grobbelaar dealt comfortably with Wallace's close-range shot.

Liverpool's concentration was not disturbed by the half-time interval and, by continuing to kill in their infancy any United moves of promise, they seemed the more likely of the two sides to score.

They obliged in the 55th minute when Barnes stroked home an uncontested penalty after Rush's assault on goal was halted by Anderson's ungainly tackle. In his attempt to retrieve a lost cause, Ferguson immediately introduced Duxbury and Beardsmore in place of Anderson and Wallace, but the subsequent advantage of having more attacking options was nullified by the space which a weakened defence afforded Liverpool.

Although Liverpool should have added further goals, the game had an unexpectedly intense finish after United regained a semblance of self-respect in peculiar circumstances. In the 82nd minute, Whelan contrived to score a ridiculous own goal when he clipped the ball over his goalkeeper from 25 yards.

MANCHESTER UNITED: J Leighton; V Anderson (sub: M Duxbury), L Martin, S Bruce, M Phelan, G Pallister, C Blackmore, P Ince, B McClair, M Hughes, D Wallace (sub: R Beardsmore).

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Hysen, B Venison, S Staunton, R Whelan, A Hansen, P Beardsley, R Houghton, I Rush, J Barnes, S McMahan.

Referee: G Courtney.

## the guardian

Liverpool made to feel at home

AFTER failing to win at Old Trafford for eight years, Liverpool made the place a home from home yesterday to keep pace with Aston Villa at the top of the First Division. Liverpool's victory over a Manchester United side hiding none of their limitations has closed the gap to two points and Kenny Dalglish's team still have a game in hand.

So now the pressure is on Villa to win tomorrow night's match at Queen's Park Rangers, who have already beaten them 3-1 on their own ground. Should Villa slip, Liverpool would be able to resume the leadership by winning at Tottenham on Wednesday.

Alex Ferguson's players may have found a fresh impetus in the FA Cup and could still foil Liverpool's ambitions of another Double should the teams meet at Wembley, but in the League United continue to lurch from one disappointment to another.

Until Grobbelaar made one of the saves of the season nine minutes from the end, only to be beaten in the next minute by a spectacular own goal from Whelan, the match had struggled to retain the trappings of a contest, so marked was Liverpool's superiority and so inept was United's response.

Certainly Liverpool were more like their old selves. Barnes and Beardsley were outstanding and in the matter of accurate, imaginative passing normal service was, by and large, restored. Barnes scored both of the goals Liverpool managed to put into the correct net, one from a penalty.

Barnes himself was given so much freedom that one felt he was entitled to march through the United defence with a fixed bayonet or hop on a corporation bus without having to pay the fare.

Apart from those two mad minutes late in the game, Liverpool stayed in control once Barnes had put them in front on the quarter-hour. The goal was typical of the game, because it began with the breakdown of a vague Manchester United movement which Liverpool used as a springboard for a brilliant and incisive piece of improvisation of their own.

Martin advanced into space on the United left and had Wallace available near the touchline. But instead of passing the young full-back trundled on into a cul-de-sac where he was dispossessed by Venison, who used the space Martin had created to send Beardsley clear.

Beardsley drew Anderson towards him then released Barnes in a broad avenue of unpopulated territory. Barnes coolly slipped the ball past the advancing Leighton and anyone who thought that this would rouse the beast in United was to be disappointed.

From time to time Hughes, playing in spite of a calf injury, became engaged in a spot of unarmed combat with Hysen but the rest was tame indeed. Nine minutes into the second half a studied piece of passing by Houghton, Beardsley and McMahan ended with Anderson upending Rush and Barnes increased Liverpool's lead with the penalty.

Manchester United fans had begun to drift home when suddenly McClair met Beardsmore's centre from the right with a perfectly struck horizontal volley which Grobbelaar somehow managed to push over the top. But the Liverpool goalkeeper was powerless to stop Whelan's illogical if beautifully struck 25-yard chip which floated in under his bar.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Barnes 2 (15 pen, and 54 mins). Manchester United: Whelan, og (82).

Manchester United: Leighton; Anderson (Duxbury, 56), Martin, Bruce, Phelan, Pallister, Blackmore, Ince, McClair, Hughes, Wallace (Beardsmore, 56).

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Hysen, Venison, Staunton, Whelan, Hansen, Beardsley, Houghton, Rush, Barnes, McMahan.

Referee: G Courtney (Spennymoor).