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Liverpool's big gun neutralizes Arsenal advance

Arsenal 1 Liverpool 1

Ronnie Rosenthal, who has made such an explosive impact since being introduced into the Liverpool side, last night propelled them towards the first division title.

Although Barnes scored the equalizer, the Israeli international was responsible for transforming the televised fixture at Highbury which was as dramatic, though not as conclusive, as the historic events of last May.

Liverpool, two points clear of Aston Villa and with a game in hand, remain favourites to extend their record of championships to 18, 10 of them in the last 14 years. Effectively, though not technically, the field of potential winners has been reduced to two.

Arsenal could still retain the trophy but they would have to win and Liverpool would have to lose each of their remaining four games by a lavish margin.

Realistically, therefore, they were eliminated by Barnes in the 87th minute of this fluctuating match.

For an hour, Arsenal were appreciably more vibrant, more cohesive and more dangerous than Liverpool. However, once Rosenthal came on to inject breathtaking speed into a challenge that previously had scarcely been evident, Liverpool became by far the more menacing force and might even have collected all three points.

The destiny of the English crown is, in the opinion of George Graham, already decided. "Without question," the Arsenal manager said, "Liverpool will win it."

Kenny Dalglish, was more restrained. The Liverpool manager, said: "We have a better chance than Arsenal, but even if we had lost tonight, we would still have been in the best position. The fewer games there are to play, the harder it is for us to be caught."

It was clear which posture his side would take initially. Ablett was brought in as an additional central defender in a back line of five, which included Nicol after an absence of a month, and Staunton, a regular full back, who was selected in midfield. The line-up was laced with caution.

Inevitably it reduced Liverpool's contribution before the interval. Instead of exchanging in midfield, as is their custom, they were instead playing predominantly where, numerically, they were at their strongest. For lengthy periods, they pinned themselves to the unfamiliar territory on the borders of their own area.

They were neither secure nor comfortable there. Arsenal, in a manner reminiscent of their extraordinary, championship-winning, victory at Anfield 11 months ago, stepped immediately into the more positive role and relinquished it only when they were overcome by fatigue.

Liverpool's vulnerability at set-pieces, which had been illustrated in their defeat by Crystal Palace in the FA Cup semi-final, had by then been reconfirmed. Bould's nodded flick from Dixon's long throw, which embarrassed Grobbelaar and was cleared hastily by Hysen from under his own bar, was ominous.

In the 40th minute they were undone first by Hysen's clumsy push on Smith and then by their own lack of concentration. Davis, prominent in only his sixth match of the season, caught Liverpool off guard with a quick free kick and Merson, alert to the possibilities, put Arsenal ahead with an uncomplicated, accurate drive. Until Barnes's shot was fumbled by Lukic on the hour, Liverpool had posed scarcely a genuine threat. But once Rosenthal was summoned, they spread unease and discomfort throughout Arsenal's rearguard. Staunton, Rosenthal and Barnes all missed chances to equalize before Nicol created the closing glory for the England winger.

Rosenthal, in weaving a path to the byline, was indirectly responsible for it. In his abbreviated appearances during the last four matches, the Israeli who was rejected by Luton Town's directors has now scored four goals and created another four for his colleagues. His belated contribution to Liverpool's season promises to be decisive.

ARSENAL: J Lukic; L Dixon, N Winterburn, M Thomas, S Bould (sub: C Pate), A Adams, P Davis, D O'Leary, A Smith, P Merson, P Groves (sub: K Campbell).

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

Referee: A Seville.

the guardian

Late Barnes goal makes a title point

LIVERPOOL are a point closer to an 18th League title, which now will surely be theirs barring a complete collapse accompanied by the sort of revival which is beginning to look beyond Aston Villa, their only serious challengers. Last night's draw at Highbury has taken Kenny Dalglish's team two points ahead of Villa with a match in hand and four games to play, three of them at home.

It promises to be one of **Liverpool's** more nervous triumphs. By their own standards they have had a less than outstanding season, producing their best form only in patches, not losing often but looking vulnerable in places where previously they have been omnipotent.

Knowledge of these frailties, and the barely healed wound of **Liverpool's** FA Cup defeat by Crystal Palace, conditioned Dalglish's approach. Of Beardsley there was no sign. The **Liverpool** manager packed his team with defenders and spent the bulk of the first 45 minutes attempting to sit out the game behind an eight-man barricade, only to concede a goal to a sucker punch shortly before half-time.

The tedium of the first half was redeemed by **Liverpool's** abrupt change of tack in the second, but until they replaced Staunton with Ronny Rosenthal, the Israeli international signed on loan from Standard Liege via Luton reserves, they did not have sufficient attacking inspiration to save the game. Then they might have won it even before Barnes brought the scores level with under four minutes remaining.

Arsenal, who had inadvertently kept the championship open a week earlier by losing at home to Villa, really needed to beat **Liverpool** to preserve an air of mystique about the last lap of the contest. For an hour last night they were worth a win. In the end, however, the result was about right.

Liverpool employed three centre-backs in a five-man defence and had McMahon, Staunton and Whelan falling back behind the ball to present Arsenal with a seemingly impenetrable wall of grey shirts. After 20 minutes Arsenal lost Groves with a damaged Achilles tendon and, unfortunate though his departure was, it did at least provide an opportunity for Campbell to bring his superior vision to bear on the problem of finding a way through.

Not that **Liverpool** were seriously in trouble until Arsenal stole ahead in the 41st minute by taking a free-kick before the grey blanket was properly in place. Davis stabbed the ball forward to Merson, who was unmarked and scored off the inside of the right-hand post.

With more players committed to attack in the second half, **Liverpool** looked suspect defensively; Grobbelaar dropped a centre from Dixon and the ball was scrambled away; Davis tried his luck from 30 yards and was only just wide. However, when they started to exert serious pressure on the Arsenal defence an equaliser was imminent.

Barnes was often subdued by Arsenal's tight marking but Staunton gave way to Rosenthal and it was as if someone had found the right plug for the **Liverpool** attack. The Israeli immediately outpaced Adams, who was cautioned for bringing him down, and, although Rosenthal squandered a free header with 15 minutes to go, his was the decisive influence in saving the match.

With eight minutes to go he neatly intercepted a back pass from Merson, which would have led to a goal had Barnes not lifted his cross over the bar.

Four minutes later Rosenthal chased the ball to the left-hand byline and avoided Bould's challenge before driving it to the opposite side of the penalty area, where the grey shirts were queuing up to receive it. It reached Nicol, whose cross beat the offside trap Bould had been unable to move up in time and Barnes did the rest.

While it was not one of **Liverpool's** most memorable performances, the way they switched from defence to attack said much for their inner strength, and after that frightful first half Rosenthal made the night worthwhile.

Arsenal: Lukic; Dixon, Winterburn, Thomas, Bould (Pates, 89min), Adams, Davis, O'Leary, Smith, Merson, Groves (Campbell, 21).

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Hysen, Burrows, Nicol, Whelan (Molby, 47), Hansen, Ablett, Staunton (Rosenthal, 64), Rush, Barnes, McMahon.

Referee: A Seville (Birmingham).