

Date: 21 April 1990
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THE TIMES

Liverpool look beyond the title

Liverpool 4 Chelsea 1

LENNART Johansson, the new president of UEFA, has inadvertently chosen an inopportune moment to usher Liverpool back towards Europe. The prospect may be hypothetical anyway, but instead of returning next year, the earliest date which logically could have been predicted, they could return, before they are ideally ready, in September.

Although neither the club nor the Football Association would consider rejecting the invitation which has so generously been offered, the nation, as well as Liverpool themselves, would prefer them to be at their most powerful when they are accepted again on the Continent. The journey is sure to be glaringly public and emotional.

But, as they head towards their eighteenth title and reconfirmation that they are appreciably the strongest side in England, there are signs that they have fallen away from the peak they reached two years ago. After one particularly memorable performance against Nottingham Forest, Tom Finney described them as the best team he had ever seen.

They have not, this season, been consistently as convincing as they were in 1988. Then, they finished out on their own, nine points clear of the runners-up, Manchester United, and 17 points above Forest in third place. Now, they are still in Aston Villa's sights.

Liverpool dismissed Chelsea, eventually, with ease on Saturday, but, in a curiously passionless fixture, there were ominous deficiencies. Most notably their passing, the traditional foundation of their game, was uncharacteristically wayward. The accuracy of even Molby, their most prominent and imaginative creative influence, was far from flawless.

There were contributory reasons, as Kenny Dalglish, their manager, revealed later. Three members of his squad Houghton, Staunton and Whelan were injured. His gamble on the fitness of others succeeded on the day, but cost three more internationals a cap in midweek: Barnes, Nicol and Rush were also all withdrawn. Absenteeism has been another unusual feature of their season. Rosenthal, the prolific goalscorer who put them ahead against Chelsea and might have added at least four more, is the twentieth representative to be selected in League matches and Grobbelaar alone has appeared in each of their 46 fixtures.

Most significant of all, Liverpool have defensively been less secure than in the past. Hysen, who appears to be so serene and comfortable when filling the sweeper's role for Sweden, continues to look awkward and rushed in the fiery heat and the increased pace of the domestic game.

Hansen always plays as though he is dressed in a dinner suit, but even he, at the advanced age of 34, is occasionally vulnerable. It was his momentary lack of concentration which allowed Dixon to complete Chelsea's otherwise unproductive afternoon with an irrelevant goal in the closing minute.

It was the 35th that Grobbelaar has conceded at an average of precisely one in each first division game. The statistic is only marginally superior to that of Wimbledon, who are lying in the middle of the table, and even Derby County, who have dropped to the edge of the relegation zone.

Nor is Rush the predator who spread fear throughout Europe when he was leading the front line. No longer armed with an explosive burst of acceleration, his decline is made all the more unmistakable when he is accompanied by Rosenthal, who resembles the fleet-footed Welshman of old when chasing a through-ball.

Barnes, again the principal illumination in their attack, may yet carry out his threat to take his exciting talent to foreign fields. Should he do so, Liverpool will lose the character who, with the help of Beardsley over the last three seasons, has lifted them far above the ordinary.

In the middle of December, after they had humiliated Chelsea 5-2 at Stamford Bridge, Bobby Campbell suggested that they could win the World Cup. After the equally emphatic defeat at Anfield, his opinion was equally outrageous. "I thought 4-1 was a little bit over-the-top," Chelsea's manager said.

Yet, once Nicol had headed home Barnes's cross to increase the lead before the interval, Liverpool could have scored another five before Rush, who had struck the bar, allowed Nicol to claim the third in the eightieth minute. Almost immediately, the erratic Rosenthal laid on the fourth for Rush.

Liverpool, requiring another four points from their three remaining fixtures, will probably be crowned at home against Derby on Tuesday night. Their return may frighten other entrants in the European Cup, but, even if England's supporters behave themselves in Italy this summer, they should be considered among the favourites name only.

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

CHELSEA: D Beasant; G Hall, A Dorigo, J Bumstead (sub: D Lee), E Johnsen, K Monkou, K McAllister, P Nicholas, K Dixon, G Durie, K Wilson (sub: C Wilson).

Referee: R Milford.

the guardian

Gillespie fit as others fall

MORE than one quizzical eyebrow was raised as Kenny Dalglish reeled off the list of his injured players unavailable for international duty this week. Had it really been such a hard match?

Barnes (calf) is unfit for England and Beardsley (callouses from sitting on the substitutes' bench?) also a non-starter. Rush's bruised ribs will keep him out of the Wales side, and Nicol (groin) will be out for Scotland. Whelan and Houghton, injured before yesterday, will miss the Republic of Ireland's game.

Only Gillespie, the subject of an earlier tug-of-war between Dalglish and Scotland's coach Andy Roxburgh over international availability, did not finish the game. He had cramp but will join the Scotland squad.

This long list of injuries was surprising. Even an out-of-synch Liverpool, still on course for their 18th League championship, two points ahead with three games to play, had found Chelsea a soft touch. Perhaps it was the offside trap that did the damage, although Rosenthal, most often its victim, survived.

It is a wonder HM Customs did not seize Rosenthal. The Israeli international on loan from Standard Liege until the end of the season, when Liverpool will surely buy him at Pounds 500,000, is their latest big gun.

He has scored five times in as many appearances. He started this game on Rush's right but was thereafter difficult to pinpoint, as Chelsea's Johnsen discovered. His stunning 24th-minute goal, for which somehow he managed to slither out of the arms of Monkou, then swivel and strike, gave Chelsea a shock from which they had difficulty recovering. Indeed the defence was invisible as Nicol, free as air, rose to head in a cross from Barnes for Liverpool's second.

Nicol, supplied by Rush, also scored their third, beating Beasant with a low shot.

And Rush made it four with a simple header seven minutes from time as Rosenthal, profiting from an electric run by Barnes, crossed from the left.

Teams no longer come to Anfield with legs and minds of jelly, but Chelsea brought only one elaborately acrobatic save of note from Grobbelaar when Bumstead tried a long-range strike. And it was injury time before Dixon evaded the normally impassable Hansen to lob a shot over the goalkeeper.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Rosenthal (24min), Nicol (37, 79), Rush (83). Chelsea: Dixon (90).

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Hysen, Burrows, Nicol, Gillespie (Ablett, 79), Hansen, Molby, Rosenthal, Rush, Barnes, McMahon.

Chelsea: Beasant; Hall, Dorigo, Bumstead (Lee, 75), Johnsen, Monkou, McAllister, Nicholas, Dixon, Durie, K Wilson (C Wilson, 67).

Referee: R Milford (Bristol).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Nicol eases an agonising wait for Liverpool

LIVERPOOL 4 CHELSEA 1.

LIVERPOOL 4 (4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Gillespie, Hysen, Hansen, Burrows; Nicol, McMahon, Molby, Barnes; Rush, Rosenthal.

CHELSEA 1 (4-4-2): Beasant; Hall, Johnsen, Monkou, Dorigo; McAllister, Nicholas, Bumstead (sub: Lee, 74min), K Wilson (sub: C Wilson, 66min); Dixon, Durie.

Goals: Rosenthal (25min) 1-0; Nicol (36min) 2-0; Nicol (79min) 3-0; Rush (82min) 4-0; Dixon (89min) 4-1.

Weather: fine. Ground: firm.

Referee: R G Milford (Bristol).

AFTER that dull televised affair at Highbury, Liverpool owed us something. And they provided. The real Liverpool stood up and turned on the style in agreeable April sunshine, with Nicol scoring two goals, Rosenthal one, and Rush one. Dixon's reply, in the last minute, was a fair award for him as Chelsea's best forward, but otherwise irrelevant.

Therefore Liverpool's 18th league championship should not be long delayed. At times there was almost a festive, exhibition air yesterday as Liverpool went about their business, with three men trying to close-pass all the way to Beasant in one attack, with Rosenthal adding one or two cavalier misses to his goal, and with Barnes sometimes adding a delicious trick.

After his recent goals and his rejuvenation act against Arsenal, Rosenthal was the man of the moment. Indeed, there are signs that Standard Liege, who are lending him to Liverpool, are now wanting more than Pounds 500,000, the original price, to make the transfer permanent.

This time Rosenthal began the match while Beardsley sat, and stayed, on the substitutes bench. Beardsley's fate is a reminder that being a Liverpool player can be like being a king's favourite in days of old: you can never be sure that the axe is not being sharpened.

Whelan's ankle had not recovered from a knock at Arsenal, and he, the injured Houghton and Venison were given cushions and sat on the press box floor for 90 minutes.

Before the start Staunton, in civvies, his services not being required, received a young player of the month award on the pitch. Kenny Dalglish, the manager of the month, preferred to receive his goodies in the privacy of the dressing room.

Whelan and Houghton's incapacity is probably no bad thing. Whelan has not been himself in recent weeks, and if his passes go astray, the whole Liverpool ship flounders. Houghton, too, has tended to be energetic rather than effective. And, of course, somebody had to step down to make way for Rosenthal.

The Whelan role, that of the central midfield provider, fell to Molby, as composed and chunky of thigh as ever. Molby has a longer range than Whelan: yesterday he was good but sometimes over-ambitious. It is not the Liverpool way to give the ball away with 30 yard passes.

But back to Rosenthal, who had been important in each of his four Liverpool appearances to date, and who now made it five. At the end of the season he will have done much to bring the title to Anfield but will they be allowed to give him a medal?

"When you get to the last game, you can ask me the same question," said Dalglish. But it would appear from previous league rulings that Rosenthal will be unlucky.

It took him only four minutes to set up Liverpool's first chance, with a neat pass to Rush, who shot across goal, two feet away. After 26 minutes Liverpool scored, and none other than Rosenthal bagged it.

Monkou, the lanky Chelsea centre back, was forced to concede a throw-in near the corner flag. When the ball came across it was Monkou who was up Rosenthal's back. But he defended badly and Rosenthal was able to turn and beat Beasant with a strong shot from 10 yards.

Chelsea might have come back from there because they began positively, with two wide men, and never played badly. But Dixon did not get the help he might have from Durie and, moreover, Liverpool all but killed them off with a second goal after 36 minutes.

This was a curious affair, as Burrows crossed high from way out. Chelsea saw the ball coming but could not stop Nicol's header.

Burrows, incidentally, had an impressive match, good enough to suggest he should be a first choice. Nicol also scored Liverpool's third, with a strong run down the flank from Rush's pass.

But Liverpool's fourth was the best. Barnes did his version of the three-card trick and fed Rosenthal wide. Rosenthal's cross was so accurate that Rush was left with a standing header, a few yards out.

Chelsea had almost scored from Bumstead's fine shot but Grobbelaar fairly flew to catch it. Grobbelaar was safe: surely it was his centre backs Hansen and Hysen, who were to blame for that semi-final disaster, not the goalkeeper.

On that theme, Dixon had troubled Liverpool not so much in the air, as you might expect, but on the ground. At the last, and Chelsea were not four goals worse, Dixon left Hansen on his seat and chipped Grobbelaar.

Afterwards, Dalglish said that Barnes, Nicol and Rush would not be joining their international squads this week in addition to Whelan and Houghton.