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Barnes shrugs off spiteful jeers

Liverpool 1 Manchester United 1

THE jeers that spitefully accompanied John Barnes almost throughout the Tennent's FA Charity Shield at Wembley on Saturday might have made more sense, if been no more acceptable, had they been in protest at his sudden return to form rather than because of his human weakness during the World Cup finals. Barnes remains the outstanding enigma of English football. An abject disappointment for England in the World Cup finals where he failed to reproduce even shades of his stunning club form of last season, he pulls on a Liverpool strip the grey one at that in his first serious match since then and is immediately transformed into the figure we know him to be the most skilfully exciting forward that Britain has produced since George Best. Rather than jeering Barnes, the Wembley crowd (one assumes just the Manchester section of it) should have been cheering him. Lack of interest in Barnes abroad because of his ineptness in Italy is the Continent's loss but English domestic football's gain. There was less bravado in a remark from Kenny Dalglish afterwards than perhaps even the Liverpool manager realised when he said: "It doesn't concern us what he does for England, it only concerns us what he does for our club and he's been magnificent since he came here."

The success or otherwise of Liverpool's season may again depend upon Barnes, whose rare creativity, never mind the 22 goals he scored, was crucial to Liverpool regaining the championship last season. For Liverpool he seldom suffers from the fickleness of form that has bedevilled his England career and his performance against United, which ran him a close second to Gary Pallister for the man-of-the-match award, will have come as no surprise to Dalglish.

It was entirely through Barnes's own efforts that Liverpool retained Merseyside's record of being unbeaten in the last six of these pre-season appetisers, earning the penalty when Pallister was dubiously adjudged to have tripped him before tackling him and then scoring from the spot himself. For all Liverpool's typically tidy possession play they produced precious few goal-scoring chances against United's new but hardly original defensive tactic of three centre backs. Indeed, only a half-chance header that fell to Rush and then into Sealey's waiting arms springs notably to mind among Liverpool's goal attempts.

United can take heart from the fact that they produced rather more but certainly no encouragement from the way in which they dealt with them. After six minutes, Hughes, with uncharacteristic moderation, volleyed gently into Grobbelaar's arms. Even when United took the lead in injury time of the first half Hughes completely missed Phelan's cross and what should have been a clean conversion by the much-improved Blackmore ended up as a right-footed shot that went in off the left leg.

Ferguson, looking pleased enough with a share of the Shield afterwards despite the fortuitous nature of Liverpool's equaliser ("Another season, nothing changes"), found solace in the solidity of his new defence just two goals conceded in eight pre-season matches. "Three at the back should take us a good distance in terms of consistency. We just need to get the passing ranges and passing options better," he said, adding the quip "and then I'll probably start worrying about the front line." One wondered whether he had got his order of priorities right.

Any talk of United's championship potential is, as it has been at the start of most of the past 24 seasons, entirely premature. United usually raise their game against Liverpool, in itself an indication that they still have some way to go before conquering the mountain. But if the secret is to emulate Liverpool then Ferguson may never have made a more sane decision than when he was adjudged by many to be mad to pay Pounds 2.3 million for Pallister.

Like a developing three-year-old colt, Pallister has lost much of that legginess that made him look awkward and gangling. He now looks even more the archetypal Liverpool defender; tall, elegant, composed and, last but not least, constructive. That latter quality was notable by its absence in the Liverpool team for whom Ablett again proved no substitute for Hansen, suffering once more with his knees. Irrefutably, Ferguson made the right decision. It is up to him to prove to Pallister that he also did.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Hysen, D Burrows, B Venison, R Whelan, G Ablett, P Beardsley (sub: R Rosenthal), R Houghton, I Rush, J Barnes, S McMahon.

MANCHESTER UNITED: L Sealey; D Irwin, M Donaghy, S Bruce, M Phelan, G Pallister, C Blackmore, P Ince, B McClair, M Hughes, D Wallace (sub: M Robins).

Referee: G Courtney.

the guardian

United yet to bridge credibility gap

AFTER the FA Charity Shield had performed its annual function of giving the new season an easy act to follow, the players of Liverpool and Manchester United, having drawn 1-1 over 90 minutes, stood around uncertainly on the pitch wearing expressions reminiscent of the cartoon character created by Chad which symbolised post-war shortages. Wot, no shoot-out?

Given a summer of phoney climaxes it seemed a little odd that a game of football could be played for its own sake, its result having only fleeting significance. Surely Tennent's, the sponsors, could have rustled up a dartboard and let the captains play nearest the bull. As it is, each team will hold the unwieldy shield for six months. The afternoon was not entirely without point, since charities benefited from a crowd of just over 66,500, which is 20,000 more than the largest League attendance this season is likely to be. But as a guide to League form the match did little more than remind everybody that even in second gear Liverpool still pass the ball better than their contemporaries.

They should have been beaten on Saturday because United, revving up with more enthusiasm because they had more to prove, created more scoring opportunities and gave Grobbelaar the chance to show that in his 33rd year and his 11th season at Anfield his reflexes remain sharp. He not only saved Liverpool from defeat but also spared United the false optimism of victory.

Encouraging though some aspects of United's performance were Pallister gave a thoroughly efficient defensive display it was difficult to believe they were a championship team in the making. Even when Robson and Webb are fit Robson is unlikely to return before September 1 gaps in ability will surely remain.

Alex Ferguson, United's manager, intends making Robson sweeper, partly to prolong his playing career but as much to give the team quicker and more perceptive delivery of the ball from the back. The theory is admirable and Robson's suitability for the role, when he is fit, ought to be unquestioned.

If only one did not have nagging memories of some uncharacteristic errors committed by Robson when playing as sweeper which he has rarely perpetrated in midfield. Quite a few wing-halves have become successful liberos, or quasiliberos, but Robson is not a Moore or a Beckenbauer.

Still, the idea of him bringing the ball out of defence and linking with Webb to set attacks in motion is something for Old Trafford to cling to. But sooner or later the ball will end up with Hughes, that maverick among mavericks, whose immense strength in possession continues to be let down by his being oblivious to the movements of those around him. Hughes's value to United was never better demonstrated than in last season's FA Cup final, when his single-mindedness enabled them to force a replay against Crystal Palace. On Saturday, moreover, his was the pass which sent Phelan to the right-hand byline on the stroke of half-time, catching Liverpool off guard. Hughes missed Phelan's low cross but Blackmore, unmarked to his left, gave United a deserved lead after a brisk start dimmed by the loss of Wallace with a thigh strain which has put him out of next Saturday's game. What they did not deserve was the penalty decision by George Courtney which enabled Liverpool to level in the 50th minute.

A ricochet in the United area gave Barnes a glimpse of goal but Pallister's reactions were equal to the danger as, flinging out a foot, he just managed to touch the ball away. Down went Barnes, and Courtney, who was one of the better World Cup referees, awarded Liverpool a penalty straight out of the Italia '90 theatre of the absurd.

"Thank God it wasn't a cup final," said Ferguson later. An unabashed Barnes scored, not fairly perhaps but fittingly because he was easily the pick of the Liverpool players and the one man on either side capable of rousing the afternoon from its torpor. He spent much of the match drifting from left wing to inside-right, taking the attention of the defenders with him and leaving the left flank free for Burrows to exploit. Barnes made things happen, whereas in Italy he had tended to wait on events. When the contrast between his performances for club and country was put to Kenny Dalglish he retorted: "It doesn't concern me what he does for England, it only concerns me what he does for our club, and he's been magnificent." Did Dalglish impart this sentiment to Barnes before the World Cup? If so, it would explain a lot.

Had Burrows been a Brehme, or even a Beglin, United's defence would have undergone a more searching test and Ferguson would have approached the League programme more certain of who his first choice in goal should be, Sealey or Leighton. At the moment the advantage lies with Sealey, the man in possession.

During their better spells Liverpool did enough to suggest that with Hansen and Nicol back in the side little will have changed. Certainly the manager remains much the same.

On Saturday someone asked Dalglish if Ronnie Rosenthal, a busy substitute, would start the season. "Come to Sheffield Wednesday and find out," said Dalglish. This could be a long investigation. Liverpool are playing at Sheffield United.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Barnes (pen, 50 min). Manchester United: Blackmore (45).

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Hysen, Burrows, Venison, Whelan, Ablett, Beardsley (Rosenthal, 77), Houghton, Rush, Barnes, McMahon.

Manchester United: Sealey; Irwin, Donaghy, Bruce, Phelan, Pallister, Blackmore, Ince, McClair, Hughes, Wallace (Robins, 24).

Referee: G Courtney (Spennymoor).