

Date: 25 August 1990
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THE TIMES

Pemberton plagued by Liverpool nightmare

Sheffield United 1 Liverpool 3

JUST when John Pemberton must have thought his luck against Liverpool had changed, he walked back into a nightmare on Saturday. Taking over in goal on his debut for Sheffield United from the injured Simon Tracey, the right back remained defiant for 44 minutes before making two wretched mistakes to give Liverpool an easy start to the defence of the championship.

As a Crystal Palace player, Pemberton had been able to share the torment last September when he was just one of the unfortunates on the end of a 9-0 roasting at Anfield. This time he stood alone, waiting for the ground to swallow him up, as first he spilled a catch from Houghton into the path of Barnes and then, with the game already won, he misjudged a Rosenthal up-and-under, allowing Rush a simple headed goal.

Yet one could have excused him for feeling a tinge of optimism when he pulled on the green jersey in the fourteenth minute after Tracey had fractured a cheekbone in a collision with Rush. Had he not been the inspiration behind the famous Palace FA Cup semi-final victory over Liverpool in April with a right wing run from which Bright equalised?

The difference was that on this occasion he became a source of inspiration to Liverpool or at least he should have done. "Playing against a team without a goalkeeper is like playing against ten men," Kenny Dalglish, the Liverpool manager, conceded with rare candour, only to add: "People say you should beat them, but how many teams do?"

Liverpool, who chose to omit Beardsley from their 13, made it difficult for themselves by declining to subject Pemberton to shots of any description. When you are as good as Liverpool, it is hard to be ordinary, but the champions were not at their best. Given more fortunate circumstances, it was not stretching the imagination too far to say that United might have reopened their first division account, after 14 years, with an unlikely victory.

Even with Pemberton sitting invitingly between their posts, United produced the more clear-cut scoring chances, although the quality of their football seldom rivalled that of their opponents. Whatever misfortune befalls United in defence this season, Deane and Agana not dissimilar in style to Bright and Wright of Palace are going to cause a lot of first division defences problems. Deane was a particular menace, in spite of the firm aerial challenge offered him by Hysen.

It was Deane who dragged United back into the game within two minutes of Barnes's goal, pouncing on an errant header by Whelan before powering his way between the Liverpool centre backs to beat Grobbelaar. And only a fortuitously positioned Liverpool body may have prevented him from reducing the deficit two minutes from time.

Agana ought to have given United the lead in the 22nd minute when the harassed Liverpool defence was forced into error, but after seizing on an untimely Hysen header, Agana slipped his shot wide of the goal. Rush, too, was without excuse, other than the crowd's persistent and unfair abuse following his collision with Tracey, when he swivelled onto a neatly chipped pass from Molby and shot wide. If Sheffield United only knew it, it was not a bad day to catch Liverpool on. But try telling that to Tracey, who will be out for six weeks, or Pemberton. The full back, not to mention the United supporters, will be relieved to know that among the four pre-season signings of Dave Bassett is a goalkeeper: Kite, from Bournemouth. Another consoling thought for Pemberton is that he is unlikely to be dropped from the team for his poor performance.

SHEFFIELD UNITED: S Tracey (sub: M Morris); J Pemberton, D Barnes, R Booker (sub: P Wood), P Stancliffe, C Hill, J Hoyland, W Rostron, A Agana, B Deane, I Bryson.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Hysen, D Burrows, S Nicol, R Whelan, J Molby (sub: R Rosenthal), G Gillespie, R Houghton, I Rush, J Barnes, S McMahon.
 Referee: V Callow.

the guardian

Unkind first cut for blades

LIVERPOOL, champions six times in the past decade, could hardly have resumed their familiar ways in less taxing circumstances. Sheffield United, limited enough in their promotion year, were poorly equipped to offer a lasting contest on their First Division return even before losing their goalkeeper with a fractured cheekbone after 15 minutes.

The injury befell Simon Tracey an accidental collision with Ian Rush, who stumbled into him as he rolled in a shot which was disallowed for offside. It will rule the goalkeeper out for six weeks and did obvious damage, as his replacement, John Pemberton, was sorely at fault for the first and last Liverpool goals.

But equally unsettling for United was the disheartening experience awaiting Paul Stancliffe. At 32, after a sterling career in the League's lower reaches, he had long yearned for a brief flirtation with First Division life. He had suspected he would not play, but Dave Bassett (surely not bowing to sentiment?) preferred him to Beesley, a Pounds 375,000 record signing from Leyton Orient, and he took up his position in central defence.

Only Liverpool do things differently. For one thing, there was no target man to which Stancliffe could attach his bulky presence. Only 35 seconds had elapsed when Rush set the theme by exposing his lumbering lack of pace. By the end, Stancliffe deserved every ounce of sympathy.

Liverpool, with Beardsley left out, should feel a certain dissatisfaction. Despite having so much in their favour, they occupied the first hour by asserting their control of midfield when greater ambition would surely not have harmed them.

Rostron's surly clashes with McMahon and Burrows were the most notable aspects of an unappealing match.

It was symptomatic that it took Pemberton's desperado dash from his line to grant them the lead. As a full-back for Crystal Palace, such advances made him a potent force. Here, he failed to gather, Barnes rolled the stray ball into the net and ruffled his hair. 'I own up, it's down to me,' volunteered Pemberton, but emergency goalkeepers should be spared soccer's litany of blame.

Molby, from left midfield, produced Liverpool's calmest forward passes, but it was easy to see why Liverpool had toyed with playing him as sweeper. Deane, whose unceremonious ways unsettled Hysen throughout, equalised a minute later, only for Houghton to touch in a brave goal after Rush had headed back Barnes' cross. Liverpool, at long last, began to stroll. Finally, Pemberton was simply outjumped by Rush for the champions' third goal.

SCORERS: Sheffield United: Deane (60min). Liverpool: Barnes (58), Houghton (65), Rush (87).

Sheffield United: Tracey; (Morris 15), Pemberton, Barnes, Booker (Wood, 77), Stancliffe, Hill, Rostron, Hoyland, Agana, Deane, Bryson.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Hysen, Burrows, Nicol, Whelan, Molby (Rosenthal, 81), Gillespie, Houghton, Rush, Barnes, McMahon.

Referee: V Callow (Solihull).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Liverpool steal the show

SHEFFIELD UNITED 1 LIVERPOOL 3

SHEFFIELD UNITED 1

(4-4-2): Tracey (sub: Morris 15min); Pemberton, Stancliffe, Hill, D Barnes; Hoyland, Booker (sub: Wood 77min), Rostron, Bryson; Deane, Agana.

LIVERPOOL 3

(4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Nicol, Hysen, Gillespie, Burrows; Houghton, McMahon, Whelan, Molby (sub: Rosenthal 84min); J Barnes, Rush.

Goals: Barnes (58min) 0-1; Deane (60min) 1-0; Houghton (66min) 1-2; Rush (88min) 1-3.

Weather: humid. Ground: excellent.

Referee: V G Callow (Solihull).

LIVERPOOL do not really need bounteous good fortune. Sheffield United, however, might. After United's triumphant progress in two seasons from the Third Division to the First without benefit of play-offs, they were rewarded by the blase computer with the best possible opener.

They produced a newly laid pitch broadly striped in pale and dark green, then disaster struck: they lost Tracey, their goalkeeper, after 15 minutes. Seventy-five minutes' exposure to Liverpool was too long a time for his deputy, Pemberton, a new signing from Crystal Palace trying to settle in at right-back.

He was applauded off at half-time, but at the final whistle he received commiserations from John Barnes and Grobbelaar. Two misjudgments had brought two goals for Liverpool, and but for these a spirited Sheffield side would have achieved a draw. What was also hard for Sheffield to take was that Tracey's injury was unnecessary.

Rush, put through by Barnes, was given offside but Tracey was already in a dive to his feet and Rush's boot caught him. He was taken to hospital with a cheekbone injury while play continued.

Liverpool were as powerful as ever and had the chances to win clearly without the aid of an inexperienced keeper. Their passing and the dribbling by Barnes gave the defenders an uneasy time at first. Only Tracey's speed denied Rush a goal in the opening minute.

United's best period came as they and their fans showed spirit in adversity. Agana narrowly missed scoring and near the interval Bryson was close with a left-foot volley. Early in the second half, Booker volleyed inches over with Grobbelaar beaten.

Rush wasted a chance before the sad first goal, which came when Pemberton dashed out too hastily, missed the ball and left Barnes facing an empty net.

Two minutes later, Deane crushed in the equaliser. Houghton's easy goal, giving Liverpool the lead again, soon followed, and two minutes from the end Pemberton misjudged a cross and Rush headed in Liverpool's third.