

Date: 15 December 1990
 Opposition: Sheffield United
 Competition: League

Times	Guardian	Sunday Times

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THE TIMES

United's sinking feeling as they hit the lowest depths

Liverpool 2 Sheffield United 0

AFTER an hour on Saturday, Sheffield United were still dreaming of the impossible. They had defied the red tide sweeping over them at Anfield and their heads could still be seen above the water.

But they were eventually submerged by an irresistible force. After John Barnes had drilled the first hole in the United dyke, only the continued resilience of Simon Tracey, their goalkeeper, and Paul Beesley, the centre half, prevented the floodgates from opening.

If Dave Bassett's team does sink back to the second division, it will not be without trace. United have equalled the achievement of Hull City, who 12 months ago went 16 games without a win from the start of a season, and as he donned another brave face Bassett admitted there was "a whole stack" of unwanted records still waiting to be collected, like the least number of first-division wins (three) and the fewest points (17).

The Liverpool manager, Kenny Dalglish, was typically unmagnanimous. He does not like discussing his opponents, he said, and he did not. Bassett, rightly, praised United's effort and enthusiasm. You sense he knows those qualities will not be enough to save them, even if they frustrated the champions for a long period.

Although Barnes, with a succession of searching crosses from the left, provided plenty of ammunition, Liverpool fired blanks throughout the first half. The one genuine chance they created from a wealth of possession was headed by Rush straight at Tracey, whose immaculate handling behind a composed, if overworked, defence kept United in with a chance.

As it was, only the thickness of Grobbelaar's crossbar prevented the unthinkable in the 27th minute when Bryson, robbing McMahon and exchanging passes with Deane, arrowed a shot on to the Liverpool woodwork.

If the supporters on the Kop had needed binoculars to feel close to the action in the first half, most of the second was played under their noses. You could understand why 34 points separated the teams before the kick-off.

Tracey's athletic save from Rush's header delayed, but could not prevent, the inevitable. Liverpool's opening goal was reward for Rush's willingness to chase lost causes. While his colleagues drew breath in readiness for another attack, he ran 30 yards to force a mistake out of Rostron: McMahon's diagonal pass, Beardsley's nimble footwork and Barnes's low drive past Tracey's left hand did the rest.

When, 14 minutes later, Tracey made his one mistake of the match, it was all over. Burrows, off balance near the corner flag, launched a hopeful, high punt towards the near post, Tracey distracted by Rush let the ball bounce, and when Houghton headed back across goal, Rush was on hand, virtually on the goalline, to head home.

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

SHEFFIELD UNITED: S Tracey; C Wilder (sub: J Hoyland), W Rostron, V Jones, P Beesley, C Hill, I Bryson, J Gannon, C Bradshaw (sub: P Duffield), B Deane, R Lucas. Referee: J Lloyd.

the guardian

Bassett top and tailed

AS Woody Allen said: 'Death doesn't worry me. I just don't want to be around when it happens.' Sheffield United must feel the same about football matches.

One Zenith Cup win does not make a winter. Next Saturday, at home to Nottingham Forest, the Bassett boys will get the chance to make the worst-League-start-of-the-season record their very own.

Those neutrals who hoped they might win were disappointed. Liverpool played rather badly, but not that badly. Dalglish's remark that he was 'pleased with everybody's performance' was pure Red lip gloss. Beardsley, Houghton and McMahon replaced Ablett, Venison and Molby from the team that lost to Arsenal, but the effect was less than startling.

Not that too much should be read into this. As the Radio 4 headline so succinctly phrased it: 'Liverpool win again'.

'You don't need to have such a long memory to recall how he (Bassett) steered his first club Wimbledon to victory over us in the 1988 FA Cup final,' Dalglish warned in Saturday's programme notes. No memory at all, of course, for Bobby Gould was in charge then. Could it be that our Ken's words of wisdom are ghosted or is he fallible after all? No doubt, as the Liverpool manager is fond of telling everyone, this is an internal matter and will be dealt with accordingly.

History, despite the Liverpool manager's best efforts, does not change, and neither do Bassett's game plans. However, whereas his Wimbledon side had an innate belief in themselves his Sheffield United do not. There was never much doubt that the best they hoped for on Saturday was a draw. Wimbledon would have been expecting to win.

United harried diligently, forcing a struggling Liverpool to struggle even harder, but always appeared to be expecting the worst. These days Vinnie Jones resembles a hardened criminal who has taken to flower arranging. Jolly pleasing, but not quite utilising his artistic strengths.

From the outset Barnes and Rush were Liverpool's sharpest, with the former's crosses thudding like flaming arrows into United's defensive timber. The water bucket was in frequent use, and by half-time Liverpool had become more than a little bedraggled.

Barnes donned his woollen gloves in the second half, and within 16 minutes had fingered United's defence. Hill, challenged by Rush, cleared carelessly and the ball was worked swiftly to Beardsley who gave it to Barnes on a warm plate.

Only then did United try to support Deane, but even with half an hour remaining it was too late. A huge up-and-under by Burrows saw Tracey singularly fail to jump and Rush, the man he believed had impeded him, scored.

So top remained top, and bottom remained bottom. And so Liverpool and Sheffield United may stay for many a month.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Barnes (61min), Rush (75).

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Hysen, Burrows, Nicol, Whelan, Gillespie, Beardsley (McManaman, 79), Houghton, Rush, Barnes, McMahon.

Sheffield United: Tracey; Wilder (Hoyland, 75), Rostron, Jones, Beesley, Hill, Bryson, Gannon, Bradshaw (Duffield, 79), Deane, Lucas.

Referee: J Lloyd (Wrexham).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Barnes breaks down Bassett's defensive trap

Liverpool 2 Sheffield Utd 0.

IN THE best tradition of lost causes, Sheffield United sold their lives dearly. They held out for an hour at Anfield, they were even within a whisker of leading when Bryson hit Grobbelaar's bar.

But all the while Barnes was menacing and it was appropriate that he should shoot the inevitable first goal. Near the end McManaman, an 18-year-old striker who had already played for England Under-21, came on for his Liverpool debut. Liverpool's earlier failings were forgotten and Anfield was satisfied.

The match threatened to be as much a test of Liverpool's Christmas charity as of their skills. At the start the difference between the sides was 34 points. Liverpool have lost only one League match this season; United have not won since their promotion. Liverpool still had the memory of their last match, that limp televised performance at Highbury, to erase.

Yesterday Liverpool were back to normal with Ablett, Venison and Molby dropped, and Beardsley, Houghton and McMahon back. Apart from Tracey no United player appeared as listed in the programme. The chief results of the juggling were that Marwood was not playing but that Lucas, aged 20 and Sheffield born, was having his second League match.

At Villa Park a fortnight earlier Lucas had man-marked Daley and done a fair job, and the word was that his manager now wanted him to turn his attention to Barnes. Barnes appeared in black tights, a sign of his disapproval of English winter afternoons. But he may be persuaded, when his contract expires next summer, to stay at Anfield for one more year.

Lucas was, in fact, marking Rush, Beesley was marking Beardsley, and Hill was sweeper. Dave Bassett, the manager, had obviously done some tactical thinking and, at least, his ideas survived the opening half-hour.

In that time, although Liverpool passed prettily, the main danger to Tracey came from a back pass from Hill and a cross from Barnes which Lucas sliced narrowly over his own bar. United did reply with one counter-attack, thanks to Jones's fine 25-yard ground pass. But he and United did not manage too many of those.

However, United clipped the top of Grobbelaar's bar just before the half-hour. Bryson did it. Indeed, it looked as though the ball was going in.

If the Kop had blown hard to deny Bryson, the Sheffield thousands behind Tracey had certainly used up all their lucky charms. Tracey is a good goalkeeper, the United defenders in front of him worked for all they knew, but they needed good fortune to hold out for the first half. They would not have done so had not Rush, with time to direct his close-range header, put it straight at Tracey.

Immediately after half-time the same two players staged a re-run. This time Tracey had to time his dive just right for a fine save. A little later Tracey was powerless as Whelan broke through to the penalty spot only to lose his impetus at the crucial moment.

And that was the pattern, nearly all Liverpool, with chances enough, and they finally put one of them away on the hour. McMahon found Beardsley with a long ball, Beardsley skilfully held up play and passed inside to Barnes, who scored with a low shot.

Liverpool's second goal was most unusual. Burrows hit a sky-high centre. Inexplicably Tracey watched it bounce a yard from his goal, Whelan nodded the ball across, and Rush scored with a simple header.

LIVERPOOL 2 Grobbelaar; Hysen, Burrows, Nicol, Whelan, Gillespie, Beardsley (sub: McManaman), Houghton, Rush, Barnes, McMahon.

SHEFFIELD UTD 0 Tracey; Wilder (sub: Hoyland 76min), Rostron, Jones, Beesley, Hill, Bryson, Gannon, Bradshaw (sub: Duffield 79min), Deane, Lucas.

Goals: Barnes (66min) 1-0; Rush (75 min) 2-0.

Weather: overcast. Ground: firm.

Referee: J W Lloyd (Wrexham).