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THE TIMES

McMahon joins list of shame

Liverpool 3 Blackburn Rovers 0

STEVE McMahon last night added himself to the disturbingly dishonourable list of England internationals who have recently been guilty of misconduct. During Liverpool's predictable victory over Blackburn Rovers at Anfield, he became the third player to be dismissed in a shamefully ill-tempered FA Cup third-round tie. He is also the third member of the national squad to be sent off in the last 29 days. The sequence was opened by Neil Webb during the England B international in Algeria and continued by Paul Gascoigne during Tottenham Hotspur's televised fixture against Manchester United.

The Football Association has yet to determine whether they and Tony Adams, who was imprisoned for a drink-driving offence, will be penalised for their crimes. McMahon, though included in the Football League squad to play against the Italians in Naples next Wednesday, can expect to be omitted from the international against Cameroon next month.

When he was booked in the first half, it gave him more than 20 disciplinary points which leads to an automatic two-match suspension. The FA may extend the ban in view of his second cautionable offence, for which he suffered the same fate as Kevin Moran and Glenn Hysen on Saturday.

McMahon's misdemeanours overshadowed a typically convincing performance. Though cautious and inhibited outside Anfield, Liverpool remain awesome at home.

Of all their opponents there this season, Manchester City alone have avoided defeat. Several others, such as Manchester United and Luton Town, have been systematically taken apart by the irresistible force.

Rovers were in danger of a similarly dispiriting fate once the battle lines had been drawn. Steve Staunton, cautioned for a deliberate foul in the first tie, might have received another yellow card for felling Howard Gayle. McMahon and John Millar were immediately officially warned to cease their individual hostilities.

Liverpool lifted themselves and the game clear of the niggling unpleasantnesses for a decisive period during the first half. They established a convincing lead, through Ray Houghton and Ian Rush, and were threatening to toy with their second division opponents with football which, momentarily at least, bordered on the mesmeric. Ceaseless movement offered the player in possession any number of alternative options and the precision of the passing was acute.

Houghton completed one of several dazzling moves with appropriate finesse. After exchanging passes with Gary Gillespie on the edge of the area, he put Liverpool ahead with a crisp drive.

The second goal was, if anything, even finer. Jan Molby swept a long ball out to John Barnes, who used Staunton to create space for himself. His low cross was controlled neatly by Rush, who turned with characteristic swiftness and scored with a shot which grazed the crossbar on its way in.

In allowing McMahon and Molby the freedom to dictate the shape and pace of Liverpool's attacks, Rovers crucially conceded the initiative. By the time they attempted to regain it, too much damage had been inflicted. Any realistic hopes of entertaining Brighton in the next round had already gone.

But the appeal of the game was reduced first by the weather and then by overt animosity. The only cup-tie to survive last night was staged in a fierce blustery wind and, when it increased in velocity, hurling sleet across the arena, the conditions became arctic.

The temperature on the pitch rose to an unacceptably high level ten minutes into the second half. McMahon was adjudged to have caught Gayle, a Liverpool old boy, with an illegitimately late and harsh tackle, leaving the referee with no choice but to order him off. Gayle received treatment as the England international midfielder pleaded for clemency before walking off.

The bad blood, which had been simmering throughout, almost boiled over again when Staunton was involved in a hefty collision with Nicky Reid and collapsed theatrically near a touch line. No punishment was thought necessary but the atmosphere had subsided to a shameful depth.

Millar was booked for deliberately baulking Nicol and football had become almost an irrelevancy when Liverpool, now 7-2 favourites to win the Cup, completed their victory. Staunton broke on the left and was at hand to take advantage after Ronnie Rosenthal's effort had been blocked.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Hysen, J Molby, S Nicol, S Staunton, G Gillespie, R Rosenthal (sub: S McManaman), R Houghton (sub: G Ablett), I Rush, J Barnes, S McMahon.

BLACKBURN ROVERS: R Mimms; M Atkins, M Duxbury (sub: L Johnrose), N Reid, D May, K Moran, H Gayle, J Millar, F Stapleton, S Garner, S Sellars.

Referee: M Peck.

the guardian

McMahon's off night fails to jolt Liverpool

ANFIELD obviously reaches parts of the Liverpool team other grounds cannot. The champions, who scraped a replay only by the misfortune of Blackburn's injury-time own-goal at Ewood Park on Saturday, were back to brilliant form last night and had a comfortable two-goal lead by half-time.

They were reduced to 10 men and a scrap in the second half, but saw off their Second Division opponents with a third goal eight minutes from time.

McMahon, who was booked in the first half for a foul, was sent off early in the second after a challenge on the Blackburn winger Gayle, a former Liverpool player. The referee, Michael Peck, had also dismissed Liverpool's Hysen and Blackburn's Moran in the 1-1 draw on Saturday; McMahon and Hysen will miss Liverpool's League game against Manchester United and the fourth-round FA Cup tie against Brighton.

The Blackburn manager Don Mackay said a different referee, a penalty and a goal might have made a difference. It seemed to be asking a lot.

Blackburn wear their sponsor's name, Perspex, on their shirts, and Liverpool's defence was see-through for the first few minutes. But Houghton shattered Blackburn's hopes of an early advantage, racing on to a pass from Gillespie and driving a low shot into the far corner of the net with 15 minutes gone.

The speed of the interchanges between Barnes and Staunton, reverting to full-back in the absence of Burrows, who had influenza, was remarkable, and it was a classic cross from Barnes in the 24th minute that found Rush in front of goal.

Given ample time by his marker Moran, one of five Blackburn players who have experience of FA Cup finals, he turned and shot into the top of the net.

Thereafter Blackburn survived various close encounters but came out after the break concluding that their best defence was at least to get into the Liverpool half, which is no mean feat for a Second Division side at Anfield.

The speedy Sellars represented the best hope for Rovers on the break but an immaculate challenge by Hysen halted one run and their hopes from a free-kick just outside the area were equally easily snuffed out by the Liverpool wall.

Liverpool lost Houghton just after the interval with a thigh injury and the substitute Ablett came on at full-back, allowing Staunton to revert to the midfield role he seems to covet. He had been trying to get his name on the scoresheet, sending a thunderous drive just wide in the first half, and he succeeded eight minutes from time. After making a solo run he passed to Rosenthal, who ran into a tangle of defenders. But when the ball emerged from the ruck Staunton strode on to it and struck Liverpool's third.

In all six players were booked Blackburn's Millar was also cautioned last night and three were sent off in the two ties.

Mackay suggested afterwards that after Saturday's 'emotional' game a different official might have been a sensible idea.

His opposite number Kenny Dalglish was disinclined to enter the argument, but pointed out that more Liverpool players had been dismissed in these two games than in the previous three years.

'It is not as if we are telling the players to do anything different, and it is not as if their attitude is different,' he said. 'But the crime-count keeps mounting, and while they keep sending people off they are inciting the crowd. Let us sit down and sort this out sensibly.'

'The players who will get their names in the headlines are the ones sent off and not the ones who score the goals. The fact is that, in racing terms, we won with hands and heels.'

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Hysen, Molby, Nicol, Staunton, Gillespie, Rosenthal, Houghton (Ablett, 48min), Rush, Barnes, McMahon.

Blackburn Rovers: Mimms; Atkins, Duxbury (Johnrose, 70), Reid, May, Moran, Gayle, Millar, Stapleton, Garner, Sellars.

Referee: M Peck (Kendal).