

Date: 16 March 1991  
 Opposition: Sunderland  
 Competition: League

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| Times        | Guardian | Sunday Times |
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16 March 1991

## THE TIMES

Owers presents Liverpool with undeserved points

Liverpool 2 Sunderland 1

IN THE past, Liverpool's response to the almost perennial suggestion that their domination of English football is about to come to an end has been delivered where it matters the most out on the field of play.

Questions about their ability to overcome a myriad of problems this season were first asked around the turn of the year when a loss of confidence was reflected in performances that were often barely adequate and occasionally exceedingly poor.

This crisis, for want of a better word, was accelerated by the departure of Kenny Dalglish, the team manager, and while talk of an irreversible decline may yet prove to be premature, the argument is more tenable now.

It is becoming increasingly clear that Liverpool's effectiveness has been so dramatically reduced that opponents now relish, rather than fear, games against them.

On Saturday, Liverpool played badly yet still collected maximum points. Their football, particularly in the first half, was as barren as at any time during the last 18 months.

Sunderland's goal, in the eighteenth minute, was a classic example of the malaise that has afflicted the Liverpool defence since Christmas. After David Rush's header had bounced back off a post, Armstrong was not only allowed time in which to drive a shot into the legs of his fallen colleague, but to readjust before heading in to the net.

In contrast, both of Liverpool's goals were fortuitous in the extreme. Barnes's thirtieth-minute cross, his sole contribution of the afternoon, was sliced by Bennett, the Sunderland captain, and it is debatable whether or not his mishit clearance would have found its way past Norman had it not clipped the foot of Ian Rush.

Owers inadvertently presented Liverpool with what proved to be the winning goal just two minutes before half-time, when he slid in at the far post to knock a Beardsley shot into his own goal.

Ronnie Moran, the Liverpool manager, later conceded that his side was once again below par, but his disappointment was tempered by the news that Jan Molby, the Danish international midfielder player, had agreed to sign a new, four-year contract, 12 months after it was first drawn up.

LIVERPOOL: M Hooper; G Hysen, D Burrows, S Nicol, J Molby, G Ablett, P Beardsley (sub: S Staunton), R Houghton, I Rush, J Barnes, D Speedie.

SUNDERLAND: A Norman; G Owers, P Hardyman, G Bennett, K Ball, J Kay (sub: J Cornforth), P Bracewell, G Armstrong, D Rush, M Gabbiadini (sub: K Brady), C Pascoe.

Referee: K Hackett.

## the guardian

Justice seen but not done

A COUPLE of medical workers, dressed in green gowns and surgical masks, stood just inside the entrance to the main stand on Saturday. They were collecting for charity. But as the match progressed, images of amputations, transfusions and assorted transplants stubbornly refused to clear the mind. This is Anfield.

And when Peter Robinson, Liverpool's chief executive, flitted through the press room at half-time, the thought occurred that he was about to announce he had sold off the team's corporate body for medical research.

The players certainly wore red shirts and went by the names of Barnes, Beardsley, Nicol et al, but there the resemblance to Liverpool ended. The cohesion between defence, midfield and attack was minimal, the passing frequently abject, and possession was flung airily away at the feet of Sunderland as if, after 25 years, Liverpool were finally satiated with success.

In a week when justice came in for a protracted bout of close scrutiny, Sunderland returned to the North-east not wishing for one second to weigh up the legitimacy of this result lest they did themselves a nasty injury or burst into uncontrollable tears of self-pity.

'I'm sick of people saying how well we played and there are no points to show for it,' said the manager, Denis Smith, his eyebrows knitted like twin wreaths. He knows time and matches are running out and, if Sunderland were ever going to beat Liverpool at Anfield, Saturday was the day.

The early loss of Gabbiadini, with a pulled muscle in what is best described as the 'Gascoigne area', was always likely to be crucial. Initially, with the substitute Brady playing a blinder in midfield and Armstrong heading Sunderland ahead, their leading scorer's departure was barely noticed. But such was Sunderland's dominance, and so pathetic Liverpool's defences, that the spotlight fell suddenly and harshly on a 19-year-old rookie with a famous name and number.

Long after Rush, Ian, has hung up his working boots, Rush, David may be wowing them at Roker. But in the meantime he has a lot to learn. First Brady put him clean through and, with only Hooper to beat, he froze. Then a lovely, sinuous run by the defender Bennett again set him free, but the young Rush shot hastily when he had both time and space to move into a better position. Sheer inexperience.

So Liverpool might have been 3-0 down. Instead, without ever playing anything like the Liverpool of old, they won. Barnes, shifting gear just once in the entire match, crossed low for Bennett to lunge in the equaliser via the back of Rush senior's leg. It looked an own-goal, but Bennett was not having it under any circumstances.

The winner quite definitely belonged to Owers, for Beardsley's shot would at best have hit the post before the Sunderland player diverted it with something approaching certainty. Lucky Liverpool.

So remember, you read it here. Sunderland are good enough to save themselves and most certainly will. Liverpool are now nowhere near good enough to retain the championship and will fade away fast in the Easter run-in. And being wrong is a natural gift.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Rush (29min), Owers (og 44); Sunderland: Armstrong (19).

Liverpool: Hooper; Hysen, Burrows, Nicol, Molby, Ablett, Beardsley (Staunton, 78), Houghton, Rush, Barnes, Speedie.

Sunderland: Norman; Owers, Hardyman, Bennett, Ball, Kay (Cornforth, 68), Bracewell, Armstrong, Rush, Gabbiadini (Brady, 10), Pascoe.

Referee: K Hackett (Sheffield).

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Liverpool pounce on east pickings  
 Liverpool 2 Sunderland 1.

LIVERPOOL 2(4-4-2): Hooper; Nicol, Hysen, Ablett, Burrows; Houghton, Molby, Speedie, Barnes; Beardsley (sub: Staunton 82min), I Rush.

SUNDERLAND 1(4-4-2): Norman; Kay (sub: Cornforth 68min), Ball, Bennett, Hardyman; Bracewell, Armstrong, Owers, Pascoe; D Rush, Gabbiadini (sub: Brady 10min).

Goals: Armstrong (19min) 0-1; I Rush (29min) 1-1; Owers (og 44min) 2-1.

Weather: rainy. Ground: soft. Referee: K Hackett (Sheffield).

THE MOST significant sound of this topsy-turvy afternoon was that of the Kop whistling desperately to encourage the referee's final whistle. Sunderland, although they lost Gabbiadini so early, were ridiculously unlucky to lose. Although the win put Liverpool back on top of the First Division, there is still something very wrong with them; with Barnes, with Beardsley, with the central defence, with Speedie. The departure of Dalglish seems to have cast a long and persisting shadow.

It was likely to be difficult enough for Sunderland at this windswept Anfield even without losing the swift Gabbiadini, their star striker, after only 10 minutes. Hurt earlier in a tackle with Speedie, used yesterday in midfield, Gabbiadini subsequently gave way to Brady.

That Brady should come on was in itself by no means to be deplored. The young midfielder, born in Glasgow but committed to Ireland, has shown great promise on the comparatively few occasions when Sunderland have given him his chance. At last, and at least, he has recently been put on the substitutes' bench, and here he was actually on the field with most of the game to go. The trouble was, he is scarcely a striker.

As for Liverpool, who gave the often-neglected Rosenthal a seat on the bench, they were obliged once more to replace the injured Grobbelaar, in goal, with Hooper.

Showing just how wonderfully perverse a game football is, Sunderland, despite their troubles, were the first to score, and that barely a minute after they had nearly conceded a goal themselves. What is more, having scored, Sunderland, only a few minutes later, threw away a chance so easy that David Rush must still be wondering how on earth he so ludicrously missed it.

Liverpool might have gone ahead when Nicol, overlapping down the right, easily went round Hardyman and crossed from the goal line. Speedie headed back from the far post and Ian Rush nodded the ball over the bar.

Sunderland came away immediately. Pascoe lost Ablett, then a curious scene resulted. David Rush hit the post, then, on the ground, inadvertently blocked the subsequent drive by Armstrong. But the ball spun into the air, and Armstrong nodded it in.

It became quite clear that Liverpool's defence is still subject to the jitters. Twenty-two minutes gone and clever little Brady threaded a ball through to David Rush. Perhaps he was simply so surprised by the inadequacy of the Liverpool defence that he could not believe his good fortune. Instead of beating Hooper from such close range, he snatched at the ball with his left foot, and Hooper, no doubt amazed in his own turn, had only to pick the ball up.

A little later, Rush had yet another chance, all on his own, though not as close, but he snatched at that one too, sending it high and wide. What must Ronnie Moran, once such a solid left-back for Liverpool himself, think of the defence he has inherited?

Having stared their gift horses in the mouth, beneath the gaze of their own, exuberant supporters, perhaps Sunderland had but themselves to blame when Liverpool equalised with a somewhat fluky goal. The build-up was fluent enough. Nicol to Houghton, then on to Beardsley, who sent Barnes flying down the left. His low centre looked as if it might reach Ian Rush, but Bennett, the Sunderland stopper, lunged in desperation. Sunderland's manager, Denis Smith, said the ball hit Bennett, then went in off the back of Ian Rush's leg. I suppose you could say Rush scored. Rather better, perhaps, than Liverpool deserved at that point. "I've heard of deflections," Groucho might have said, "but this is ridiculous." Another such occurred when Bracewell shot, and the ball spun up off Brady. Hooper dealt with it well.

Just before half-time, Liverpool, most unexpectedly, went into the lead; and can you beat it? it was an own goal. Again, the build-up was impressive. Ian Rush was the original architect, on the right, moving the ball to Molby. Speedie in turn found Beardsley, whose low cross-shot was heading towards the far post, when Owers came streaking back, and banged it into his own net.

So Liverpool went in at half-time a goal in the lead, while Gillespie, that gifted centre-half, sat among the rest of us in the press box, perfectly fit, and mysteriously omitted from a defence which so badly and clearly needed him. Some of the stuffing was inevitably knocked out of Sunderland by that goal, although they continued vigorously to compete after the break. Yet it was Liverpool who, for all their deficiencies at the back, made the better chances up front. Speedie, having a largely ineffectual and unhappy afternoon, missed two of them. Nicol put him in excellent possession after a fine break, but he shot wide. Then Molby now apparently interesting mediocre Seville, after an earlier transfer to mighty Barcelona fell through gave Speedie one of his exquisite through passes. Speedie had only Norman to beat; but that is no simple matter.

The Welsh international keeper threw himself at the shot, and gallantly kept it out.

Again, Sunderland breached the fragile Liverpool defence, and again Liverpool escaped. Pascoe neatly sent Owers clear from what was now a right-back position. The shot was hard and true, but the admirable Hooper managed to turn it over the top in spectacular style.

Liverpool, to the Kop's displeasure, took off a wan Beardsley, but it was Speedie, not Rosenthal, who took his place in attack, Staunton moving into midfield. With a couple of minutes left, Liverpool's defence faltered again, allowing Pascoe to strike a loose ball in the box. Hooper kicked it out; with his knees.

## PRESS ASSOCIATION

Marco goes off injured as Rokerites lose

Liverpool came from behind to beat Sunderland and go three points clear at the top of Division One, but there are still signs that all is not well at Anfield. Sunderland have won only once away from home in the League this season, and their already slim chances of victory got worse when top striker Marco Gabbiadini limped off after just ten minutes.

With the experienced Peter Davenport left out, Sunderland were left with 19-year-old strikers David Rush and Kieron Brady. But Sunderland took a surprising lead after 19 minutes when Gordon Armstrong headed home after his initial shot had been blocked. Sunderland continued to bombard Liverpool but were unable to increase their lead, with young David Rush failing to score when sent clear.

Sunderland were soon to learn the hard way that chances created against Liverpool at Anfield should be converted. Liverpool inevitably equalised, although there was a hint of luck about the goal. John Barnes swept in a centre after 29 minutes and the ball deflected off defender Gary Bennett onto Ian Rush, who claimed the goal. And Liverpool's winning goal, just before half-time, was even luckier.

Peter Beardsley found space to shoot but the ball appeared to be going wide when Sunderland's Gary Owers sliced it into the net as he tried to clear.

Liverpool's Speedie and Sunderland's Pascoe and Owers all missed chances to score in the second half, and Liverpool held on to move three points ahead of Arsenal at the top of the League.

But Arsenal look to be in a stronger position than the champions, despite having been docked two points for their part in a brawl at Old Trafford earlier in the season.

It has been announced that Liverpool's caretaker-manager Ronnie Moran is to stay in charge at least until the end of the season. He will be glad of small mercies, and will be more than pleased with his team's second successive League victory despite their poor performance.