

Date: 23 March 1991
 Opposition: Derby County
 Competition: League

Times	Guardian	Sunday Times
Press Assoc.		

23 March 1991

THE TIMES

Champions flattered by defenceless Derby

A SPECTACULAR illusion was conjured in front of 20,531 witnesses at the Baseball Ground with scarcely any effort. Derby County transported **Liverpool** back in time and made them appear to be the same irresistible side which opened the season by dropping a mere two points out of a possible 39.

Their most emphatic away win for almost a century may yet inspire **Liverpool** to finish as they started and so retain the title. Alan Hansen, for one, believes that they will, albeit by a narrow margin, "because this will have done wonders for their confidence".

But Hansen, aged 35, persuaded because of the fragility of his knees to retire last month, admitted that, even in his enfeebled state, he would have been able to cope.

With the outstanding exception of Saunders, who would not have been out of place in **Liverpool's** line-up, Derby were wretchedly feeble. Defenceless and hopeless, they capitulated in a manner which suggested that they are already resigned to relegation.

Their back four operated as individuals isolated from each other. Nor was there any visible cohesion amid a midfield which, apart from readily yielding possession, made scant attempt to regain it. Harford, on his return from suspension, was muscular but ineffective. They were united only by their own chaos.

Shilton, twice beaten at his near post, fell below his usual standards and so, alarmingly, did Wright. The central defender, who is expected to retain his place in the England side against the Republic of Ireland on Wednesday, started badly and, like his colleagues, went downhill from there. The organiser of Derby's defence conceded a penalty by man-handling his personal tormentor, Rush. Molby converted the penalty and so did Saunders after McMinn had been brought down by Hooper, an infringement which was curiously interpreted as worthy of a caution. Once Barnes had restored **Liverpool's** lead midway through the first half, the afternoon developed into an unhindered exhibition of their attacking qualities. At times it was mesmeric. The third goal by Rush and especially the seventh by Houghton were glorious examples of excellence. Where, though, was the opposition?

"We disintegrated," Shilton said. "And, let's face it, it could have been a lot worse." He recalled letting in seven against Everton while at Leicester City and against Luton Town during his stay at Southampton, yet, but for his own athleticism, Saturday would have been statistically the most humiliating experience of his 26-year career.

The extensive gap between top (**Liverpool**, as well as overtaking Arsenal, significantly reduced the deficit in goal difference from ten to four) and bottom was put in perspective by Derby's profoundly disenchanted followers.

"We're so bad, it's unbelievable," they sang. A cruel jibe but true and Barnes was not deceived by the size of the historic scoreline.

Although **Liverpool** equalled the club's record away win set at Burton Swift's in 1896, "We didn't sustain the pressure as we can," he said. "We can play 20 per cent better than that." Barnes revealed that he expects to have signed a new contract before Saturday's fixture at Anfield against Queen's Park Rangers.

It is never **Liverpool's** custom to boast or gloat, but Ronnie Moran also dismissed the marginal victory and even expressed dissatisfaction. "I wouldn't say we had arguments in the dressing room, but we pointed out one or two things we'll have to work on when the internationals return on Thursday," he said.

"This was the worst day to play like that," Shilton said, "because **Liverpool** keep on punishing you. They were looking for eight and nine." They restricted themselves, mercifully, in the end to two goals from Barnes and Nicol and one each from Rush and Houghton as well as Molby's penalty.

Nor can Derby expect to escape lightly next Saturday. Their visitors happen to be Arsenal.

the guardian

Seventh heaven is hell for Derby

THE front-page headline in Saturday's Derby Evening Telegraph read: 'A Message From Above.' Divine intervention now appears the only way to save Derby County from tumbling like fallen angels out of the First Division, although whether Robert Maxwell has vouchsafed his ex-directory telephone number to God is doubtful. Arthur Cox and his team have 30 points to play for, but application has already been made to football's equivalent of the Chiltern Hundreds. The Shilton Seven, perhaps. The great man, with the bluster of a veteran actor stumbling over his lines, shook his head mournfully and waved his right arm in irritation as the ball scudded past him time and again. It was sad to see him twice beaten comprehensively at the near post.

Not that Shilton attempted to hide afterwards. 'That's football,' he said, with a seventh of a smile. 'Good times and bad.' But the telling moment came as he made his way to the exit and was asked if he wanted to pop into the players' lounge for a drink. 'I think,' he responded, 'I'd better go home.'

Liverpool's previous performance against Sunderland had clearly led to much frank talking. As against Manchester City two weeks ago, they attacked with a pace and cohesion that was often too often, for Derby quite overwhelming. Watching Derby's defence was like watching a club tail-ender facing a West Indies Test bowler. Mark Wright did his best to be supportive in the initial stages but by the end seemed to have decided it was best to stay out of the firing line and watch from the non-striker's end.

The psychological impact of this Liverpool win on the championship is, as yet, incalculable. The ease with which Saunders cut through their defences, particularly during the first 30 minutes when Wilson, supported by the aggression of Williams, used the ball with considerable intelligence, was reminder enough that Liverpool's back four, even with the addition of Gillespie, is sub-championship standard.

However, Ronnie Moran's restoration of Nicol to the right side of midfield, with Houghton moving inside to replace the dropped Speedie, ensured that the velocity of Liverpool's attacks was the best form of defence. Barnes, whose one-year contract should be signed and sealed this week, had his most effectively forceful and positive game for weeks.

Barnes, however, did acknowledge that, despite the size of the win, Liverpool did not sustain the level of play they would have wished. He suggested they could play '20 per cent better'.

It will be interesting to see how they fare against the tighter marking of Queen's Park Rangers next Saturday when Derby, as chance would have it, are at home to Arsenal. Can Arsenal, keen to improve their goal difference, score more nine or ten, perhaps? Certainly some of their players have shown themselves in the past to be capable of one over the eight.

SCORERS: Derby County: Saunders (pen 20min). Liverpool: Molby (pen 7), Barnes (23, 47), Rush (36), Nicol (56, 63), Houghton (90).

Derby County: Shilton; Sage, Cross, Williams, Wright, Forsyth, Micklewhite, Saunders, Harford, Wilson (Hebberd, 54), McMinn.

Liverpool: Hooper; Hysen, Burrows, Nicol, Molby (Staunton, 54), Ablett, Beardsley, Houghton, Rush, Barnes, Gillespie.

Referee: P Don (Hanworth Park).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Liverpool hit seven to go top

Derby 1 Liverpool 7

Derby

(4-4-2): Shilton; Sage, Forsyth, Wright, Cross; Micklewhite, Williams, Wilson (sub: Hebberd 57min), McMinn; Harford, Saunders.

Liverpool 7

(4-4-2): Hooper; Gillespie, Hysen, Ablett, Burrows; Nicol, Houghton, Molby (sub: Staunton 53min), Barnes; Rush, Beardsley.

Goals: Molby (pen 6min) 0-1; Saunders (pen 19min) 1-1; Barnes (23min) 1-2; Rush (40min) 1-3; Barnes (48min) 1-4; Nicol (56min) 1-5; Nicol (63min) 1-6; Houghton (89min) 1-7;

Weather: sunny. Ground: firm. Referee: P Don (Middlesex).

THE smile, the menace, and above all the belief is back at the top of the First Division with Liverpool. While they were enjoying this romp and Arsenal were goalless at Carrow Road, only the cruel inequality of the struggle could make anyone refrain from saying how foolish the country had been to presume that Liverpool had gone. Alas, poor Derby. Their record now stretches to 13 games without tasting the nectar of victory: one more and they equal 1945, a season in which they also surrendered First Division status.

A visitor's heart can only go out to them. No other First Division club are so embedded in their own industrial heartland, and to add to the woes of the absentee landlord, Robert Maxwell, denuding his club of support and resources, Rolls-Royce, the local works, has added dramatically to the town's unemployed. Yet the crowd remains so understanding. Even in yesterday's clear embarrassment, they made no scapegoats; how could they blame either Cox or his team when, self-evidently, Mr Maxwell has overdrawn the credit he took for rescuing County in 1984. In contrast, of course, the life-blood is ebbing back into Liverpool. How quick were some critics to write the obituary when Dalglish quit a month ago, how full of life the team are this weekend.

It stemmed from two players who at last have committed their near futures to Anfield Barnes and Molby. One would not suggest of these two characters that they have deliberately withheld either energy or enterprise. But gone yesterday were the cobwebs: Barnes danced, twisted and turned at his will, Molby strolled the midfield with an invention that has always been his. In consequence Molby turned the game with nonchalance in the sixth minute. Liverpool had betrayed some tension when Burrows tripped Micklewhite on the edge of the area, and when Hooper had tentatively punched a cross from McMinn. Then Molby exposed Derby: he lobbed the ball from 30 yards over the top of the Derby defence, Rush was alert and moving, and Wright impetuously twice wrestled at him from behind.

You might as well try swallowing a snake alive. The penalty was crassly disputed by Shilton and Wright, but converted with the minimum of fuss by Molby. Surprisingly, the next goal came to Saunders. Not that he does not deserve to score; his energetic pace was at times too much for Hysen and Ablett. Yet the goal was a gift. McMinn, labouring with a knee that was strapped up from the start, was recklessly fouled on the edge of the area by Hooper. A silly foul, but surely not deserving of the yellow card as well as a penalty. Saunders put the ball past the unmoving Hooper to register his 14th out of a total 28 League goals for Derby this season. It was the prelude to the ensuing embarrassment. Within four minutes Rush and Barnes worked themselves into a situation that put both of them through to challenge Shilton. The goalkeeper used the last ounce of his anticipation to parry the side-footed shot from Rush, but of course Barnes was lurking to score at the far post.

Shilton then made athletic saves, first from Gillespie, then from Nicol and Beardsley. But he was overworked, he is over age, and one soon began to fear he might get arthritis bending to pick the ball out of his net. Five minutes before half-time, Burrows, Barnes and Beardsley played one touch down the left. Derby were bemused, and from Beardsley's centre Rush was stealing in, like one of Fagin's pickpockets, to score the third. It was so very clear that Rush in particular relished having not only Beardsley in the flesh, but also the free-flowing mind of Barnes to serve him. And though a minute after half-time Beardsley squandered another gift, it took only a couple of minutes for atonement.

In the 48th minute, Burrows beat Sage in the tackle and Beardsley was away on the left. The little man stroked the ball into the stride of Barnes, and the winger needed no prompting to beat Shilton at the near post with a flickering shot from 15 yards.

Come the 56th minute, Beardsley's delicate chip found Barnes again and when the ball was pulled back Nicol took a mighty swing from outside the area. He even had a little help from Cross, who unwittingly made the deflection past Shilton. That element of a cloud for Nicol was erased in the 63rd minute when, again facing poor Shilton, he did exactly as Barnes had done, a low instant finish inside the near post.

It was by now practice-ground stuff, and indeed one could level at Liverpool the criticism that they were not extracting every opportunity offered to repair in one afternoon the goal difference that has favoured Arsenal since the start of the year.

In the event, the final goal was accepted with ease: a corner on the left, a back-heel through his own legs by Barnes, and Houghton this time was put through with only Shilton to beat. That goal claimed Liverpool's biggest away win since 1896, when, in the space of three weeks, they beat Burton Swifts and Crewe by 7-0.

The final cameo came at the whistle, with Shilton standing, shoulders slumped waiting for retirement; and Burrows, the youngest of the Liverpool team, dancing for joy at having been here on this day.

PRESS ASSOCIATION

Magnificent seven

Liverpool returned to the top of the First Division with an emphatic win over a poor Derby County side, and gave the perfect response to those who have talked about a crisis at the Anfield club.

Derby were so comprehensively beaten that seven goals seemed to be poor reward for Liverpool's overwhelming superiority.

However, a large victory is just what Liverpool needed to eat away Arsenal's superior goal difference - a factor that could be crucial in deciding the outcome of the League championship.

Liverpool were in complete control and John Barnes, who has pledged himself to Liverpool for at least one more year - he signed a new one-year deal for a reputed 8,000 pounds a week only hours before this game - was Derby's greatest tormentor with his mesmerising runs and superb close control.

He was involved in all but the first of Liverpool's goals, which came from a Jan Molby penalty after England international Mark Wright had fouled Ian Rush.

Derby equalised after 20 minutes from a penalty of their own, after Liverpool goalkeeper Mike Hooper had brought down Ted McMinn. Welsh international Dean Saunders scored the penalty. Clinical

Barnes restored Liverpool's lead three minutes later, and Rush gave them an unassailable half-time lead with a clinical finish from Beardsley's through-ball. Barnes got his second only two minutes after half-time, and Derby's former England international goalkeeper Peter Shilton was left exposed time and again to Liverpool's ruthless attack.

The versatile Steve Nicol weighed-in with two goals and Ray Houghton completed the rout with the seventh in injury time.

With Arsenal held to a goalless draw at Norwich, Liverpool are now a point clear at the top. Derby could not be in a worse position, firmly rooted to the bottom of Division One, and heading for the Second Division, 12 points adrift of the safety zone.