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Saunders scorns chance to level with late penalty

Manchester City 2 Liverpool 1

THE belief that several clubs have a genuine claim to the game's top honours was lent more credence at Maine Road last night when Liverpool succumbed to Manchester City.

After McManaman had reduced the host club's advantage with a diving header in the 75th minute, Saunders squandered the opportunity to rescue a point when he struck the crossbar with a penalty kick seven minutes from time.

City's pursuit of a first victory over Liverpool since 1985 began with refreshing zest and the stalemate would not have extended beyond the tenth minute, had White not driven the home side's first real chance into the arms of Grobbelaar.

Reveling in a contest which became more robust, City subjected Liverpool to some considerable pressure, but with Brennan so often failing to provide Quinn with the service upon which he thrives, there was no tangible reward.

Megson would possibly have underlined City's growing superiority in the 24th minute, had Nicol not intervened with the most sublime of late tackles to distract him. His shot was not only under-hit but woefully misdirected.

As Liverpool appeared to be contemplating a more adventurous policy, City succeeded in unhinging a defence which seems some way from finding a familiar rhythm following the introduction of Wright, the England centre back. In the 28th minute, Quinn's incisive pass from just inside his own half released White, who covered 40 yards down the right flank before driving sartly beneath the body of Grobbelaar.

Liverpool's approach work was more productive and their football more inventive immediately after the resumption. In the 56th minute a glorious three-man move nearly brought an equalising goal. McMahan's well-weighted pass sent Saunders away down the right and although Houghton met the ensuing cross perfectly he was denied by Coton, the City goalkeeper, who leapt spectacularly to turn the shot over the crossbar.

In the 64th minute White, again released by Quinn, drove in a firm shot which hit the underside of the crossbar before bouncing down behind Grobbelaar.

MANCHESTER CITY: A Coton; A Hill, N Pointon, P Reid (sub: Heath), K Curle, S Redmond, D White, I Brightwell, N Quinn, G Megson, M Brennan.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Ablett, D Burrows, S Nicol, R Whelan, M Wright (sub: M Marsh), D Saunders, R Houghton, S McManaman, J Barnes (sub: M Waters), S McMahan.

Referee: P Vanes.

the guardian

City all White on the night

THERE is nothing Manchester likes more than putting one over on Merseyside.

Manchester City had not beaten Liverpool at home since Boxing Day 1985, so last night's victory, with two goals by David White, was savoured to the full.

It was a marvellously exciting evening with Liverpool, 2-0 down, almost snatching an improbable point when they finally found a semblance of rhythm in the last quarter of an hour.

McManaman pulled a goal back in the 75th minute and then Saunders, awarded a penalty after being bundled down by Hill, saw his shot strike the underside of the bar before being cleared.

Liverpool, hustled and bustled out of their collective stride by a City side that competed for every ball in every area of the park, barely deserved to equalise, although they clearly believed that White's second goal, which also struck the underside of the bar, had not crossed the line. The linesman, however, had no doubt.

The opening of the season is a time for perfect green grass, perfect sunbans and frequently less than perfect understanding among team-mates, but Liverpool had more new names to assimilate than Manchester City and it showed.

The organisation that Kendall imposed at Maine Road has not been allowed to fragment under Reid, and the signing of Curle from Wimbledon for a surrealistic pounds 2.5 million further underlined City's intention to build success on firm defence, never one of their great strengths.

Quinn's height and White's speed immediately tested the sinew of Liverpool's defence and it was that combination that undid Liverpool.

In the 28th minute Curle found Quinn and, although challenged by Wright, the Irishman managed to turn the ball into the path of White, who scorched past Burrows, gaining five yards before the Liverpool full-back had time to turn. Only Grobbelaar blocked his path and, as he advanced to narrow the angle, White beat him comfortably.

It was thoroughly enterprising football by City in the first half, sharp attacking play backed up by solid midfield and defence, but City supporters needed a second goal to calm their nerves, particularly after Saunders broke clear and found Houghton with a perfect ball.

Coton, back after suspension, somehow managed to push the close-range shot over the bar. Houghton simply could not believe it.

Liverpool replaced Barnes for Walters and almost immediately White scored again, seizing on a flick by Quinn to lash in a left-foot shot. City appeared to be home and dry, particularly when the limping Wright was eventually replaced by Marsh. It was Marsh, however, who produced the cross for McManaman to head home in the 75th minute.

Suddenly everything went red in front of City's eyes and, when Saunders was fouled, their supporters raised their eyebrows and prepared for the worst. But the luck was with City, and they had earned it.

Manchester City: Coton; Hill, Pointon, Reid (Heath, 86min), Curle, Redmond, Wright, Brightwell, Quinn, Megson, Brennan.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Ablett, Burrows, Nicol, Whelan, Wright (Marsh, 70), Saunders, Houghton, McManaman, Barnes (Walters, 61), McMahan.

Referee: P Vanes (Warley).