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THE TIMES

Revenge is sweet for happy Leeds

Leeds United 1 Liverpool 0

THERE was no danger of this first victory in 20 attempts over their arch-enemy going to the heads of the Leeds United players: not if Howard Wilkinson could help it. "Pathetic" and "jaded" were just two of the adjectives that their manager used to describe various aspects of his team's play, leading one to wonder whether Leeds's pulverising performance had not been a figment of the imagination.

At least Wilkinson did concede that it had been "a very significant result for us". He meant in an historic sense as opposed to a prognostic one, and he may have been right not to read too much in to the wider implications, if any, of Leeds's achievement.

It was enough that Leeds had beaten Liverpool for the first time in 17 years, and even the demanding Wilkinson was probably not too bothered how. Not that one ever takes a victory over Liverpool for granted, even in these more vulnerable times for the Merseysiders. But it is not always appreciated what goes in to it. Gordon Strachan, who puts more into a game than probably any other 34-year-old, provided a brief insight. "Physically you're tired, but when you play Liverpool, your concentration level has to be at a maximum, so you actually take more out of yourself in the mental part of the game," he said.

"The nervous tension got to our play in the second half the crowd was so desperate for us to beat Liverpool."

There was never much doubt of that from the moment Tanner, the young Liverpool defender, headed a looping shot from Chapman off his own goalline in the eleventh minute. If the Liverpool line-up was not already imbalanced enough it was made further so by the loss of Tanner through injury a short while later, to be replaced by Harkness, a player of even less experience.

It seemed only a matter of time before Leeds translated their superiority into a goal, which was eventually scored in the 25th minute, with typical opportunism, by Hodge, starting his first game for the club after six appearances as substitute. Leeds might just as well have been winning by three or four, so far behind did Liverpool seem in terms of performance.

Rarely can Liverpool have looked so ineffectual in attack, and on a day when the much-vaunted Welsh double act of Rush and Saunders made its first appearance in the League. Rush looked less than the 80 per cent fit he was alleged to be, and the Leeds back four was magnificent. None less so than McClelland, who, at 35, Wilkinson saw as another testimony to clean living.

Good health is a sore point with Liverpool at the moment, and the main reason why Leeds should not go overboard about this victory. Hodge likened the depth in strength of Leeds's squad to that of Liverpool's in explaining why he has had to bide his time since his Pounds 900,000 transfer from Nottingham Forest. But it is doubtful whether even Leeds, who were without Wallace and Fairclough, could withstand the absenteeism which Liverpool are enduring.

Not only are Liverpool missing key players in their first XI, but the back-up department has been wrecked, by injuries to Hysen, Molby, Venison, and now, probably, Tanner. Is it any wonder Liverpool are struggling?

LEEDS UNITED: J Lukic; M Sterland, A Dorigo, D Batty, J McClelland, C Whyte, G Strachan, S Hodge, L Chapman, G McAllister, G Speed (sub: C Shutt).

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Ablett, D Burrows, S Nicol, M Marsh, N Tanner (sub: S Harkness), D Saunders, R Houghton, I Rush, M Walters, S McManaman.

REFEREE: G Courtney.

the guardian

Old Masters give jaded Liverpool the brush-off

THERE are times when watching Leeds that you half expect a strident voice to rise above the crowd like a guide leading tourists around an ancient building. 'And this is McClelland, a remarkable example of preservation. And to your right Strachan, a restoration jewel. And above, Chapman, an extraordinary architectural oddity . . .'

One startling moment on Saturday saw McClelland, 35, give the terrier-sharp Saunders, 27, a yard start and beat the Welshman for pace. Faced with such improbable happenings, it is impossible not to marvel at the fabric of Howard Wilkinson's team. Yet the nagging question remains: very nice now, but will it eventually collapse?

Five of this team are thirtysomething, to be joined by Sterland next week.

Towards the end of last season, as the fixtures clustered ever closer, venerable and vulnerable legs began to creak and shriek. The pattern is in danger of being repeated.

Yet in the short term this was an important and perhaps significant win. What will have disconcerted Graeme Souness was that it was achieved without Leeds playing particularly well.

The loss of Barnes is obviously critical to Liverpool but on this occasion the absence of Whelan and McMahon was particularly pronounced - Marsh and Houghton could barely cope with their defensive duties and so had little time to spark any attacks. So Rush wandered hither and thither like a cockerel in a farmyard where a fox had killed all the chickens.

Tanner's first-half injury prompted an awkward reshuffle, Burrows switching from left to right-back, which further highlighted the lack of a steady hand. Had Hansen been a Leeds player he might, like McClelland, have been touched by eternal youth. Now, retired, he sits in the stands. His class is sorely missed.

It is rare to talk of Liverpool as being mundane, and last season's astonishing 54 victory was always going to make anything seem stale by comparison, but this was a display lacking inspiration. It was suggested to Souness that some of his players, notably Marsh, McManaman, Tanner and Harkness, might be struggling to raise their game. 'No,' came the emphatic reply.

Yet that was how it appeared, coupled on this occasion with the inability of those more experienced players to find a little extra. Leeds continually displayed a greater awareness, alertness and commitment, with Strachan setting a quite wonderful example.

On an afternoon of muted excitement, Strachan was involved in the one move of glorious invention and skill when an exquisite chip by McAllister sent the mighty little Scotsman ripping past two pairs of much younger legs before striking a shot that produced a save of gymnastic agility from Grobbelaar.

Some were quick to blame the Liverpool goalkeeper for Hodge's goal when he failed to reach Strachan's corner. Souness blamed Walters, whom he felt should have cleared before Dorigo turned the ball back in, allowing Hodge time to pivot and shoot.

Indeed, Walters had a far from happy match, shooting indecently wide on his one scoring opportunity, and turning in a stream of crosses that would only have been effective had Chapman suddenly changed sides.

'In football something often deserts you when it might best be exploited,' said Wilkinson. He might have been talking about Walters, but was, in fact, referring to what he called his side's 'crap set-pieces', even though they scored from one. Leeds fans must fervently hope that nothing deserts Strachan and Co. Age has not withered them, but too many matches may play havoc with the infinite variety bit.

SCORERS: Leeds: Hodge (25min).

Leeds: Lukic; Sterland, Dorigo, Batty, McClelland, Whyte, Strachan, Hodge, Chapman, McAllister, Speed (Shutt, 73).

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Ablett, Burrows, Nicol, Marsh, Tanner (Harkness, 35), Saunders, Houghton, McManaman, Rush, Walters (Rosenthal, 65).

Referee: G Courtney (Spennymoor).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Hodge ends years of waiting

LEEDS 1 LIVERPOOL 0

LEEDS 1(4-4-2): Lukic; Sterland, McClelland, Whyte, Dorigo; Strachan, McAllister, Batty, Hodge; Chapman, Speed.

LIVERPOOL 0(4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Nicol, Tanner (sub: Harkness, 35min), Ablett, Burrows; Houghton, Marsh, Walters (sub: Rosenthal 65min), Rush; Saunders, McManaman.

Goal: Hodge (25min).

Weather: bright. Ground: firm. Referee: G Courtney (Spennymoor).

LEEDS UNITED, so seldom victors over Liverpool, won far more substantially than the score suggested. They dominated the first half, when they scored their solitary goal, through Hodge. They would have doubled the margin in the second half had it not been for a remarkable save by Grobbelaar from a shot by Strachan, the shining star of the occasion. On a splendid, sunlit afternoon, Liverpool took to Elland Road their remarkable record of success against these opponents, and were hoping no doubt for a repeat of their victory of late last season, when they tore Leeds apart, ran four goals ahead, only to compromise their victory by relaxing and letting Leeds back into the game.

But where there is Grobbelaar, there is hope; at least for the opposition. And so it proved as early as the 14th minute, when the Liverpool goalkeeper, so athletic, so commanding, yet so unpredictable, nearly gave a goal away. It was a somewhat familiar story. Grobbelaar, who had missed the European tie last Wednesday, when the new rules limiting "foreign" players led Liverpool to play Hooper in goal, came out for Strachan's inswinging free kick from the left. He dropped the ball. Chapman lobbed it over him towards the deserted goal, but Tanner resourcefully materialised on the line to head the ball clear.

Rush was starting a championship game with Liverpool for the first time this season, though he did play last Wednesday, and came on as substitute the Saturday before. In the absence of Barnes, Liverpool switched McManaman, their tremendously promising and highly gifted young striker, to the left flank.

Rather a pity, really, that this should be necessary, since although McManaman can do tricky things down either flank, or anywhere else, for that matter, the lanky lad seems a natural centre-forward.

Walters, who is usually employed on the left, instead began deep out on the right.

As for Leeds, they relegated Shutt, the man who neatly headed their winning goal last weekend at Chelsea, to the bench, brought Hodge into midfield and pushed Speed up beside Chapman. Again, one was moved to reflect that Speed tends to do his most dangerous work elsewhere: that is to say, in a regular outside-left position. Grobbelaar was to some extent implicated in the goal with which Leeds went ahead after 25 minutes. It began with a glorious burst from the indestructible, 34-year-old Strachan on the right flank. He raced by two defenders as though he were 10 years younger and they 10 years older, finishing with a low cross shot which was deflected for a corner. Strachan took the dead-ball kick. Grobbelaar punched out. Dorigo, rushing in, turned his back but blocked the ball, then got it across to where Hodge, in an inside-right position, drove it home.

There might soon have been a second Leeds goal, when Ablett culpably let Speed through on the right. Speed unselfishly found Hodge, but the powerful shot which resulted was blocked by the resilient Tanner.

Unfortunately, Tanner was injured in making his second providential save, and off he went, forcing a Liverpool team already affected by injury to reshuffle even more. They brought on Harkness, their promising England youth international, at left-back. They moved Burrows to the right and Nicol to centre-back. It made no difference to Leeds's domination, which continued impressively. They had a firm grip on the midfield and, when they attacked, which was pretty steadily, they were surprisingly successful in tearing holes in the defence. A pass by Hodge to Chapman on the left exposed that rickety defence again, but once more Liverpool escaped. The sun went in, and you began to wonder whether, in a manner of speaking, it might have set for Liverpool; at least on this particular occasion.

But Leeds, who should really have taken an advantage of at least two goals into the dressing room at half-time, paid the penalty for not taking their various chances in the second half, when Liverpool gradually broke their grip.

McManaman and Walters switched flanks and, with 25 minutes left, that famous rescuer of lost causes, Rosenthal, came on in place of Walters.

This moved the former Liverpool captain, Alan Hansen, in the commentary position this time, to observe, as Rosenthal immediately bullocked his way down the left, that this was the first time a Liverpool player had run at the Leeds defence during the whole game. The trouble was that Liverpool's disposition still did not look quite right. Rosenthal, some 10 minutes from the end, was marooned out on the left, Rush seemed to be feeling the lack of match practice as well as the lack of a real service and although Saunders now and again went out to do dangerous things on the right wing, such interventions were sporadic.

Strachan remained the outstanding player on the field, still making nonsense of his years, wonderfully quick in mind and body, so very nearly a scorer when, 11 minutes from the end, McAllister sent him clean through that doubtful defence. His right-footed shot was powerfully struck, but this time Grobbelaar showed us what a superb goalkeeper he can be with a magnificent, flying, one-handed save. Grobbelaar being Grobbelaar, however, the sublime just had to be followed by the ridiculous. First he flapped hopelessly at a high cross, but McAllister shot over

the goal he had left. Then he tried to dribble outside his area, and nearly lost the ball to Shutt.

In the meantime, Saunders had forced Lukic to save his left-footed shot. But, with Houghton looking as uncomfortable as ever in the middle of the midfield, Liverpool were still reduced merely to mounting the occasional counter-attack.