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Opposition: Wimbledon

Competition: League

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THE TIMES

Souness rendered almost speechless

Wimbledon 0 Liverpool 0

GRAEME Souness is usually not afraid to voice his opinion but, on Saturday, after being warned by the referee during the game, he was rendered virtually speechless after it, wary perhaps of uttering comments that might be open to misinterpretation on an event which merited minimal description.

"It was vastly different to last Sunday." That was all the Liverpool manager cared to say. He was referring to the televised fixture which was lifted to rare heights by Liverpool and West Ham United. At Selhurst Park, his side was pulled down to a level below mediocrity.

Being diminished by Wimbledon is a familiar experience for Liverpool, most notably in the 1988 FA Cup final when they were beaten by Sanchez's lone goal. Both clubs were in their prime three years ago and the contrast in styles at Wembley provided spectators with at least a modicum of entertainment.

Both teams are now considerably weakened. Wimbledon have sold so many of their players that their chairman, in a bizarre attempt to reverse the trend, has offered Fashanu, one of the few remaining survivors, not only the presidency of the club but also a valuation in the transfer market of Pounds 12 million.

Fashanu was unavailable, a groin strain having been kept secret all week. Without the scorer of their only goal in the last five matches, it was predictable that Wimbledon should maintain their other unproductive sequence. They have yet to win under the managership of Peter Withe.

Liverpool, so depleted that they resembled more or less a second team, had neither the experience nor the wit to create space for themselves and impose their own immeasurably more appealing passing game.

Molby, more rotund than in the past, w an incongruously regal figure. He introduced some class into an otherwise sterile midfield and one of his touches, a chip beyond Phelan into the path of McManaman, would have been admirable even if it had been executed six days earlier.

Souness, who was already without eight senior members of his squad, lost another midway through the first half. Rosenthal, whose pace was posing a threat, was felled by Fitzgerald, an offence which might have earned instant dismissal rather than a caution. Unjustly, it was the Israeli who had to depart. In falling awkwardly, Rosenthal dislocated his collarbone and will be out for at least a month. It is unlikely that he would have been in the line-up for the Uefa Cup tie against Swarovski Tiro, but Liverpool scarcely needed yet another stroke of misfortune. Barnesush, Whelan and Venison, as well as Rosenthal, are out of contention.

Liverpool, two days before leaving for Austria, could scarcely have competed in a less relevant practice game. As Souness implicitly suggested, it was almost too awful for words.

WIMBLEDON: H Segers; R Joseph, T Phelan, W Barton, J Scales, S Fitzgerald, N Ardley, R Earle, A Cork (sub: A Clarke), T Gibson, S Anthrobus.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; R Jones, D Burrows, S Nicol J Molby, N Tanner, D Saunders, M Marsh, R Rosenthal (sub: G Hysen), G Ablett, S McManaman.

Referee: R Pawley.

the guardian

Mediocrity rules where cash is king

IT SEEMS that the more football talks about money, the more tedious much of the action becomes. No sensible critic would write off the season on the evidence of one bad match, but Saturday's goalless draw between Wimbledon and Liverpool at Selhurst Park was, sadly, more typical of the way the English game is going than the previous weekend's scoreless encounter between West Ham and Liverpool. The rapturous reception last week's game received was in itself a measure of the way First Division standards have been falling. When the sight of players merely passing the ball accurately and with a modicum of imagination is regarded as unusual, then our football must be sliding towards a new nadir.

And when Liverpool, even allowing for their lengthening casualty-list, are able to make no more impact on an afternoon's entertainment than they did on Saturday, the trough of mediocrity is deep and wide.

During the five days which separated near-event and non-event on the parks of Upton and Selhurst, the sports pages were full of yet more news of the millions awaiting happy footballers. The itinerant Mo Johnston is bought by Everton for pounds 1.5 million, and when a Japanese club - not actually playing - signs Gary Lineker for pounds 3 million the item is reported in trumpeting tones as if to suggest that somehow English football, rather than the Lineker bank balance, is the beneficiary of this sudden Nipponese desire to become involved in something bigger than a golf ball.

Perhaps we should be grateful to Sam Hammam, the owner of Wimbledon, for completing a week's worship of Mammon with a proposition so absurd that it almost made sense of the previous tomfoolery. So keen is Hammam to keep his centre-forward John Fashanu that he is prepared to make him player-president. Furthermore, any club wishing to buy him will have to find pounds 12 million. For Fashanu, according to Hammam, is 'priceless'. Quite a few of us had come to that conclusion already. Yet anyone who turned up at Selhurst on Saturday hoping for a glimpse of the president-elect was disappointed. Pressures of imminent office being what they are, the great man had to cry off at the last minute with a groin strain.

What is it about the family Fashanu that makes men of apparently sound mind flip their financial lids? Ten years ago Brian Clough paid Norwich pounds 1 million for the older brother, Justin, largely on the strength of one outstanding goal against Liverpool. The Fashanus are useful and articulate footballers who talk a good game when they are not talking a good deal. But their first touch on the ball has usually been indifferent.

Saturday's grey game could have done with a flash of 'Fash', but even John Fashanu, modest man that he is, reckons he is worth only pounds 2 million. This would make him roughly pounds 1 million cheaper than Dean Saunders, Liverpool's major summer buy from Derby County. However, the way Saunders is playing at present Hammam would surely not take him in part-exchange. Saunders looked good in a poor Derby team but is little more than a slightly improved version of Alan Whittle, the sort of player Ron Greenwood used to describe as a 'flitter' - flitting here and there and scoring a few goals but with no real concept of his role. Against Wimbledon he not only wasted a handful of chances through being off-target but missed others because he had failed to react correctly to the movements of others.

Not that Liverpool can be criticised with any severity while they are missing Barnes, Houghton, McMahan, Rush, Walters, Whelan, Wright, Venison and now Rosenthal, who went off after 20 minutes with a dislocated shoulder and may be out for up to a month.

The reorganisation this necessitated gave some idea of Graham Souness's difficulties as he approaches Wednesday's Uefa Cup match against Swarovski Tiro in Innsbruck. Hysen, the substitute, went to centre-back, Nicol to right-back, Jones to right-wing and McManaman to centre-forward.

Liverpool functioned fitfully thereafter. What passing Souness's team did achieve was usually channelled through the ever-expanding Molby, who now screens the ball in Cinemascope. The Dane's clever lob to McManaman in the second half was the best pass of the afternoon, and McManaman's gauchely ambitious shot into the side netting typical of the finishing of both teams.

Wimbledon achieved the odd neat movement when they were not simply thumping the ball high towards goal, and Scales, excellent at centre-back, was the best player on the field. But they have not won in seven matches since Peter Withe became manager and, if there is much more of this, Fashanu may feel he is being offered soccer's equivalent of the presidency of Albania. Better footballers have refused that country's crown.

Wimbledon: Segers; Joseph, Phelan, Barton, Scales, Fitzgerald, Ardley, Earle, Cork (Elkins, 78min), Gibson, Anthrobus.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Burrows, Nicol, Molby, Tanner, Saunders, Marsh, Rosenthal (Hysen, 24), Ablett, McManaman.

Referee: R Pawley (Cambridge).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Workhorse hold the whip hand in woeful affair

WIMBLEDON 0 LIVERPOOL 0

WIMBLEDON 0 (4-2-4): Segers; Joseph, Scales, Fitzgerald, Phelan; Earle, Barton; Ardley, Cork (sub: Clarke 78min), Gibson, Anthrobus.

LIVERPOOL 0 (4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Jones, Nicol, Tanner, Burrows; McManaman, Molby, Marsh, Ablett; Saunders, Rosenthal (sub: Hysen 22min).

Weather: dull. Ground: soft.

Referee: R Pawley (Cambridge).

A FAIR result was never possible, because both sides thoroughly deserved to lose. Wimbledon's juniors were bad, but Liverpool's reserves were worse. Saunders, unrecognisable from his rampaging days at Derby, missed an open goal in the last minute and Wimbledon nearly scored in injury time, but it would have been a travesty if either side had won.

Grobbelaar provided the only entertainment, catching one of Wimbledon's relentless high balls on his chest and dancing across the penalty box with the ball on his head. The crowd were grateful, but must surely have felt their money had been wasted.

Wimbledon, now without a win in seven matches under manager Peter Withe, may finally be heading out of the First Division, where they have resided too long for true football supporters. Liverpool's demise, however, can only be bad for the game.

With their injury list nearing double figures, Graeme Souness was finally forced to play the most expensive player in Britain, but the early signs were not good.

Saunders was effectively shadowed by Fitzgerald, signed on a free transfer, as he twisted and turned in no man's land to no avail. Amid cries of "What a waste of money," he enjoyed just one shot. The corner flag was not amused.

There was no such taunting of the Wimbledon players. In total they cost less than Saunders' Pounds 2.9 million fee and it showed. This latest bunch of home-grown wannabees looked far inferior to Wimbledon's finds of the mid-Eighties. Apart from Phelan, who is rumoured to be departing any day, these youngsters were not only bad, but boring.

At Goodison last week, Fashanu led his young charges into bruising battle with lunging tackles, but without Captain Bash, allegedly injured, the boys were lifeless. Even the foul which saw Rosenthal retire clutching his wrist looked accidental.

Yet Wimbledon enjoyed the least worst of the grim opening period, Gibson pushing aside the fragile Liverpool defence for two surshots well held by Grobbelaar.

Liverpool's counter-attack? There wasn't one. Their only first-half shot came from Ablett, who has been barracked into the reserves by an increasingly desperate Kop this season, and that was easily held by Segers.

In the second half Molby and McManaman, the only potential inspiration available, were both hustled out of it by Wimbledon workhorses who then looked in vain for some thoroughbreds to take things on.

There was one fine duel between the full-backs, Phelan and Jones, both pushing forward to provide the attacking impetus their team-mates woefully lacked, but nothing doing. This was no way to spend a Saturday afternoon.

BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Saunders' woes continue

Dean Saunders squandered the sort of chance that made him a 2.9 million pound transfer target as Liverpool could only draw at Wimbledon.

With 90 minutes on the Selhurst Park clock, Saunders beat Wimbledon defender John Scales for once and with only goalkeeper Hans Segers to beat, he curled his left-foot shot wide of the far post.

Saunders, who has only managed two league goals since his arrival at Anfield, seems to be wearing the massive price tag like a millstone. He had a poor match, putting two close range headers over when well placed, was twice blocked out by Scales and generally looked out of sorts.

But he was not the only one guilty of glaring misses, with 19-year-old Steve McManaman only finding the side netting when put clean through in the 73rd minute by a precision pass from Jan Molby.

Mike Marsh saw one 20-yard shot saved by Segers and another whistle off the angle while defender Gary Ablett had a fierce left-foot shot gathered by the home keeper.

Wimbledon, without a win in seven games under Peter Withe and who have never beaten Liverpool at home, also squandered their opportunities. Terry Gibson, Neal Ardey and Steve Anthrobus wasted a chance apiece in the first ten minutes of the second half.

In the first half Warren Barton had seen a goalbound shot blocked and then gathered by Goalkeeper Bruce Grobbelaar.

With so many chances going begging it was inevitable the match would end goalless and Liverpool's disappointment will be all the keener with the loss after only 22 minutes of striker Ronnie Rosenthal with a suspected dislocated collarbone - another injury worry for manager Graeme Souness.