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Liverpool a class above Oldham

OLDHAM 2 LIVERPOOL 3

OLDHAM 2(4-4-2): Hallworth; Fleming (sub: Ritchie 70min), Marshall, Jobson, Barrett; Adams, Henry, Milligan, Holden; Sharp, Bernard.

LIVERPOOL 3(4-3-3): Grobbelaar; Jones, Wright, Tanner, Nicol; McManaman, Houghton, Thomas; Rosenthal, Saunders, Barnes (sub: Marsh 57min).

Goals: Adams (4min) 1-0; McManaman (20min) 1-1; Saunders (43min) 1-2; Thomas (73min) 1-3; Bernard (86min) 2-3.

Weather: dry. Ground: firm.

Referee: K Redfern (Whitley Bay).

LIVERPOOL extended their unbeaten run to 12 matches with three goals on the break, the last scored by Thomas, the Pounds 1.5m acquisition from Arsenal, with a clever turn and shot.

With Jones outstanding in defence, Liverpool were content to soak up Oldham's attacks and then counterpunch. Whenever they broke forward, Oldham's defensive heart was in its collective mouth and, despite a second mistake by Grobbelaar which gave Bernard a late goal, the biggest crowd of the season at Boundary Park could only reflect that class always tells and that Oldham's breathless commitment was not enough.

Liverpool have become one of the League's draw specialists this season, but their intention to attack was clear, with three out-and-out strikers, Barnes, Saunders and Rosenthal, in the starting line-up.

Souness allegedly warned his players about the backlash from Oldham's defeat at Leyton Orient in the Cup, but the loss of Molby with hamstring trouble had a greater effect. Despite putting up a few pounds overweight, he has dominated the midfield with the penetration of his passing, once a Liverpool skill taken for granted.

Oldham were quickly in trouble at the back, with Marshall beaten by the pace of Saunders and Rosenthal and needing desperate cover to cut out the danger.

Then, quite extraordinarily, they had the lead. Tanner conceded a corner on the Oldham right, and when Holden swung it in Grobbelaar completely missed the straightforward ball and Adams had the simplest job of nodding over the line.

Liverpool's mobility and speed had Oldham constantly stretched, but the final ball took fractionally too long to deliver and consequently they were caught offside too often. That Oldham were not over-run was entirely due to the midwinter madness in the Liverpool defence.

First Grobbelaar allowed a ball being shepherded back to him by Tanner to bounce out of his arms, only recovering at the last moment, and then a dreadful back-pass by Wright led to a fine chance for Adams, which he squandered.

As they had threatened, Liverpool drew level. Thomas found Saunders, who released McManaman, who ran 20 yards to beat Hallworth with an excellent cross shot.

The lead came with a break down the left by Rosenthal, who delivered what would have been a perfect ball for Nicol. Even when he missed his kick, the pass remained a choice offering for Saunders, who hammered his 18th of the season past the horribly exposed Hallworth.

the guardian

Red survive a late flap

LIVERPOOL creep ever closer to the leaders. 'Re-emerging?' queried Joe Royle scornfully. 'Have they ever been away?' But in the end this was a close-run thing. Oldham, characteristically, had their supporters on the edges of their seats, and not just because the seats at Boundary Park are so uncomfortable and the view so restricted.

That morning as Liverpool fans travelled east across the pewter-skied west Lancashire plain, a shooting party disturbed hundreds of visiting Canadian geese, so that instead of their organised V-formations, they flew about in circles crashing into each other squawking complaint. Such were Liverpool in the dying minutes as Oldham attempted to fight back from a two-goal deficit.

It was not so at the start. Oldham's defence, open to question after the events of midweek, was still open to marauders. Indeed, they now have the worst defensive record in the First Division.

Liverpool were quickly through them but then succumbed to an early corner, which Adams, at the far post, converted with a header leaving the last man Rosenthal rooted to the goal-line.

The Israeli, wearing the No. 3 shirt of the much-missed Molby who has a hamstring injury, was rather nimbler partnering Saunders in attack and laid on crosses for two of the goals while Saunders supplied the ammunition for McManaman in prairie space to score an easy first for Liverpool.

Their second, a pounds 2.2 million striker's shot from Saunders scoring his seventh league goal and 18th for Liverpool, was all style.

A calf strain forced Barnes off after the interval, in only his third match following his five-month lay-off before Thomas put Liverpool further ahead with quarter of an hour left.

But four minutes from time, Grobbelaar let Oldham back in by failing with a one-handed attempt at a cross. Bernard cashed in, sparking a characteristic and spirited revival which might have produced the equaliser.

At any rate, that is what the Liverpool supporters anxiously whistling for time seemed to think. They have lost the belief that the Reds are invincible. Yet Liverpool are now unbeaten in their last 12 League games. They might not be that pretty but they are still pretty effective, and now only nine points behind the leaders.

SCORERS: Oldham: Adams (4min), Bernard (86). Liverpool: McManaman (17), Saunders (42), Thomas (73).

Oldham: Hallworth; Fleming (Ritchie, 69), Barrett, Henry, Jobson, Marshall, Adams, Bernard, Sharp, Milligan, Holden.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Rosenthal, Nicol, Wright, Tanner, Saunders, Houghton, McManaman, Barnes (Marsh, 56), Thomas.

Referee: K Redfern (Whitley Bay).