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Opposition: Arsenal

Competition: League

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THE TIMES

Liverpool move to challenge for League title

Liverpool 2 Arsenal 0

A TWO-HORSE race? Liverpool, though they were heavily handicapped throughout the first half of the season, have sprinted up the rails with a sequence of four successive League victories and now lie only eight points behind the leaders, Manchester United.

Liverpool's rapid progress is ominous, particularly as their season will end with a series of summit meetings. They are to visit Arsenal and Sheffield Wednesday in April and entertain both of the Uniteds, Manchester and Leeds, at Anfield. "It is building up to an interesting finish," Alex Ferguson, the Manchester United manager, said last night.

Yet, within a few minutes of his declaration, Liverpool's pretensions were dismissed. "They will play a role in the championship but I don't think there is going to be much change between the top two," George Graham, the Arsenal manager, said. His argument was given substance by his own Arsenal side.

The televised fixture hinged on the reckless intrusion of Ray Parlour, aged 18, who was making his debut, apparently through necessity. Graham, without the injured Davis and Hillier, felt he had no choice but to bring the highly promising youngster into midfield, where he opposed the Arsenal old boy, Thomas.

For 44 minutes, Parlour played his part, simply and effectively, in a performance that lacked only goals. That has become a startlingly familiar complaint.

Without a victory in six League games, their worst run under Graham, they have scored only once. "In a place like this, you have to convert your chances," Graham said.

Merson and Wright, both released by Rocaastle beyond a square defence caught unawares, did not. Their attempts were deflected and smothered respectively and Grobbelaar, equally crucially, leapt to the foot of a post to catch a menacing header from Wright.

Even though they lost O'Leary, whose 699th League appearance was halted abruptly when he tore a calf muscle "he thought somebody in the crowd had shot him," Graham said Arsenal suffered minimal discomfort until Parlour made his crucial error. With a lunge borne of inexperience, he effectively altered the whole complexion.

Rosenthal threaded his way past Winterburn and Bould, the substitute for O'Leary, and along the byline into the area. He was blatantly felled by Parlour, and Molby was able to provide Liverpool with the psychological lift they urgently required.

After the interval, Arsenal almost immediately collapsed under sustained pressure. The partnership between Adams and Bould, reunited for only the fourth time this season, was regularly pierced.

Rosenthal scorned two opportunities to increase the lead, and Saunders struck the outside of a post, yet Liverpool's second goal, when it arrived in the 69th minute, was worthy of deciding the occasion.

Saunders, with an astute dummy, rendered Nicol's through-ball even more incisive and Houghton, accelerating through another convenient gap, was clear and completed the move with a deft chip over the advancing Seaman.

The names of Thomas and Molby were taken, to add to that of Adams, before Arsenal finished at least with a flourish. A header from Smith bounced off the top of the bar and Carter, returning to his former home, brought Grobbelaar to his knees.

the guardian

Parlour opens door to Liverpool

ARSENAL played like champions at Anfield last night only to discover they had awoken sleeping giants. Liverpool could have lost the match in the first half but in the second they might have turned the evening into a rout. After Bruce Grobbelaar's saves had thwarted Arsenal, Ronny Rosenthal's misses spared them the heavy defeat that certainly the spirit of their performance did not deserve. Liverpool, unbeaten in 13 League matches, are now eight points behind Manchester United, the leaders, having played a game more, and six adrift of Leeds. Alex Ferguson, the United manager, has always been aware of Liverpool's powers of recovery and will hardly have been taken aback by last night's turn of events.

Nevertheless Ferguson will have noted a vibrant confidence in Arsenal's football which has not been there of late. Manchester United visit Highbury on Saturday and may be hard pressed to avoid their third League defeat of the season if George Graham's players reproduce the attacking pace and fluency they showed here.

Then again, Anfield has brought the best out of Arsenal teams for several years now. The way they approached last night's match bore echoes of the Friday evening three seasons ago when Michael Thomas's goal in stoppage time snatched the League title from under Liverpool's noses.

Thomas played last night, but now wore Liverpool colours. There was a moment early in the second half when he threatened to repeat his goal of 1989, accelerating through the middle before shooting from a slightly longer range. One of several fumbles by Seaman found Saunders only just unable to turn the ball in from the rebound. Eventually Thomas did manage to stamp his identity on the proceedings, but only by getting himself cautioned for a foul on Smith. Thomas criticised Graham, his former manager, in a newspaper article last month and as a result is now facing an FA charge of misconduct. Graham made a pertinent point last night by confronting Thomas with the 18-year-old Ray Parlour, whose composed introduction to League football was a reminder that nothing in the game ever stands still for long.

At one point Parlour and Rocaastle, supported by Merson, assumed such a strength of command in midfield that it seemed only a matter of time before Arsenal ended their barren run of five League matches without a win and only one goal scored. Liverpool's midfield melted away, their defence looked square and hesitant and only Grobbelaar stood firm.

Merson, sent clear and onside by the timing of Rocaastle's through-pass, was denied a goal by Grobbelaar's positioning and a diving save. Ian Wright's header was true but kept out at the foot of the left-hand post.

Liverpool, missing the freshly injured Barnes, were struggling in vain to get a shot on target. Although Arsenal lost a limping O'Leary this merely reunited Bould with Adams, and their defence remained untroubled.

Then one cheeky pass from Molby through Parlour's legs set off a sequence of events which found Arsenal back where they started. Once launched, Rosenthal is a hard man to stop. He cut inside past Winterburn and Bould and was brought down near the byline by Parlour's coltish lunge.

Molby's penalty was as true as usual and in the second half Liverpool were a team transformed. Suddenly their midfield players were no longer strangers to one another, their football brimmed with speed, accuracy and intelligent movement. Rosenthal, shooting high and wide when first Saunders and then Houghton set up simple chances, enabled Arsenal to hang on in hope, but in the 69th minute Saunders dummied over a long ball from Nicol, fooling the defence, and this time the recipient, Houghton, showed more gratitude as he scored Liverpool's second goal.

A header from Smith clipped the Liverpool bar as Arsenal fought to the finish. The champions are still without a win in 1992 but on this form they can do Liverpool an enormous favour on Saturday.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Rosenthal, Nicol, Wright, Tanner, Saunders, Houghton, Walters, Molby, Thomas (Marsh, 88min).

Arsenal: Seaman; Dixon, Winterburn, Parlour (Groves, 76), O'Leary (Bould, 22), Adams, Rocaastle, Wright, Smith, Merson, Carter.

Referee: M Reed (Birmingham).

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Kop sights title run

Manager Graeme Souness may be too cautious to discuss Liverpool's title prospects but the Kop faithful need no further convincing after the Anfield defeat of Arsenal.

"Now you have got to believe us we're going to win the league," they roared as Liverpool seized an opportunity to show a nationwide television audience their growing title pedigree.

Liverpool's victory over the current champions was their fifth in succession, extended an unbeaten run to 12 matches and cut the gap behind leaders Manchester United to eight points.

Few would bet against a revived Liverpool featuring in the title race to the end of the season now, least of all Arsenal who failed to press home their first half advantage and in the end were well beaten by a Jan Molby penalty and a Ray Houghton chip.

Arsenal manager George Graham gave 18-year-old Ray Parlour his debut but the Romford-born youngster, of whom so much is expected at Highbury, marred an outstanding performance with a momentary aberration a minute before half-time.

When Ronnie Rosenthal evaded challenges from Nigel Winterburn and substitute Steve Bould, Parlour panicked. His rash and illegal challenge was punished by Molby who sent the resulting spot-kick into the roof of the net.

It was rough justice for Arsenal who had created the better first-half chances but three magnificent saves by Bruce Grobbelaar kept them out. He knocked away a close-range Paul Merson effort with his left hand after a delicate David Rocastle pass split the Liverpool defence, then plunged to his right to gab an Ian Wright header on his goal-line.

Minutes later Grobbelaar came racing from his goal to deny Wright with a sliding tackle and watched with relief as Jimmy Carter's shot from the rebound sliced wide off his shin.

But Molby's penalty totally changed the flow of the game. The second half was all Liverpool, with Rosenthal twice going close and Dean Saunders hitting the outside of a post before Houghton scampered clear to chip a Steve Nicol pass over the diving Seaman.

It was an unhappy night for Liverpool's former Arsenal midfielder Michael Thomas who was booked for a foul on Alan Smith and later substituted.

Arsenal had only themselves to blame for leaving Anfield empty-handed but they were not helped by losing defender David O'Leary with a leg injury after only 20 minutes.

Arsenal manager George Graham dismissed Liverpool's title prospects.

Asked about the possibility of Liverpool capturing a 19th league championship with a late run, Graham insisted the title would be disputed between Manchester United and Leeds.

He said: "Liverpool are third in the table and they will have a role to play in what happens in the league. But I don't think there will be much change in the top two."

Liverpool manager Graeme Souness commented: "Football is all about opinions. I don't want to talk about us in connection to the championship. I am happy if people go on talking about Leeds and Manchester United. We were lucky to go in against Arsenal at half-time with a lead when we should have been a goal behind. But our second-half performance was good enough to win any game on its own," Souness added.

Graham admitted he could sense the frustration of his players as they failed to end a depressing sequence of results. He said: "We dominated the first half and had chances, but you must put them away at a place like Anfield. At half-time Liverpool must have felt they could only get better after the first-half drubbing they received. The penalty just before the break lifted them. I felt sorry for my players. I could see how frustrated they were at half-time when they didn't deserve to be behind."