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THE TIMES

Liverpool reach Wembley after penalty shoot-out

Liverpool 0, Portsmouth 0
 (aet; Liverpool win 3-1 on penalties)

SIX days after undergoing a triple heart bypass operation, Graeme Souness last night had to endure the agonies of watching one of the FA Cup's most dramatic semi-finals. For the first time, the tie was decided on the cruel and ludicrous lottery of penalties.

Lying in his hospital bed, Souness at least had the consolation of seeing his side reach the final, an experience he never savoured as a player. Yet even he would concede that the victory was empty and unsatisfactory.

A hundred years after the penalty was first introduced into the game, the shoot-out was brought in to avoid the repetition of replays. The unnecessary and illogical decision has spoiled two occasions this season first when Manchester United were eliminated by Southampton and last night in front of a crowd of over 40,000.

After two hours filled with Liverpool's attacking quality and Portsmouth's valiant resistance, they and Souness witnessed a finish which made a sad and bitter mockery of all the preceding finery. Surely, another method must urgently be found to complete a game of such importance and high emotion.

Portsmouth, to their credit, accepted the most sickening of defeats in a gracious manner. Having held the favourites for four hours, they were denied their greatest moment since the war because, ultimately, their nerve broke.

They had been on the verge of creating a more honourable piece of history. Had they qualified to meet Sunderland at Wembley on May 9, they would have taken part in the first final to exclusively feature representatives from the second division. Three minutes from the end of normal time, they almost made it.

McLoughlin, standing amid Liverpool's disarray deep inside their area, swept a low Beresford cross against the bar. Had his aim been marginally lower, he would have spared three of his colleagues from a memory that is sure to haunt them well beyond the end of their careers.

Kuhl, the Portsmouth captain, typically accepted the responsibility for taking the first of the series of penalties, yet he rolled his attempt wide and loaded even more pressure on those who were to follow him especially after Barnes had scored to put Liverpool ahead.

Although Symons completed his flawless evening by beating Grobbelaar, Neill, the only Portsmouth player to have appeared in a final, struck his penalty into the goalkeeper's midriff and then Beresford pulled his kick past a post. Rush and Saunders, experienced internationals, kept their heads to put Liverpool through. Yet Portsmouth soon recovered their composure and celebrated a performance which indicated that the future, even if they do not enter the Premier League next season, is bright.

Liverpool, for all their possession, penetrated their opponents only once in the first half. Thomas's deft reverse ball for once released Saunders, but his path was blocked in the advancing Knight and, from the rebound, by Symons's smothering tackle. Portsmouth were no less efficient until the early stages of extra time.

Then Barnes might have been awarded a penalty when he was apparently pushed inside the area but Portsmouth, whose contribution had initially been limited to defensive work, had mounted a significant challenge towards the end of normal time. Burrows, for instance, twice had to recover to block Whittingham, the replacement for the injured Clarke, and Anderton.

His interceptions proved to be crucial. Three hours after the scheduled kick-off, which had to be delayed for 15 minutes to allow the spectators to enter the stadium, Liverpool eventually claimed their place in the final for the fourth time in seven years. They thus avoided a couple of embarrassing statistics. Not for two decades has the club failed in successive seasons to gain a single trophy.

Souness, who watched the tie from his private ward in the Alexandra Hospital in Cheadle, said: "I am delighted for the team. We deserved to win and were the better side overall, but having said that, Portsmouth did defend exceptionally. I enjoyed watching the match and it presented no problems at all for me."

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; R Jones (sub: M Walters), D Burrows, S Nicol, R Whelan (sub: B Venison), M Wright, D Saunders, J Molby, I Rush, J Barnes, M Thomas.

PORTSMOUTH: A Knight; A Awford, J Beresford, A McLoughlin (sub: W Aspinall), K Symons, C Burns, W Neill, M Kuhl, C Clarke (sub: G Whittingham), R Daniel, D Anderton.

Referee: M Bodenham.

the guardian

Liverpool stretched but bounce back from tight spot

and their first through the back door of administrative convenience. After four hours of absorbing but deadlocked football they eventually made it to Wembley last night when they beat Portsmouth 3-1 in a penalty shoot-out at the end of a goalless semi-final replay at Villa Park, the fifth tie of the season to be settled in this manner.

To say that the Second Division side deserved a better denouement would be putting it mildly. At Highbury they had led Liverpool until three minutes from the end of extra-time. Last night Alan McLoughlin hit the Liverpool bar with only five minutes of normal time left.

Yet from the moment Bruce Grobbelaar prepared to face the opening penalty with the full-throated support of the Kop at his back you sensed that Portsmouth were on a hiding to nothing. Sure enough Martin Kuhl, who had been so composed in midfield, rushed the first kick and sent the ball wide.

That was more or less that. Barnes, Rush and Saunders dispatched their penalties with almost Germanic precision and while Symons did manage to find the net for Portsmouth the contest was decided with Grobbelaar not even having to move to make a save.

All England must have known how Portsmouth's players felt, having suffered a similar anti-climax in the 1990 World Cup semi-finals in Turin. In whatever context you care to place it, the penalty lottery will always be a wretched way to settle cup ties. Last night, moreover, the device was especially inappropriate because Portsmouth's defence had worked so hard to deny Liverpool close glimpses of goal. Only when the referee had ordered the penalty area to be cleared did Liverpool show some composure in their finishing.

Neither the match nor its conclusion could have provided an ideal convalescence for Graeme Souness, the Liverpool manager, who had undergone open-heart surgery two days after thanking the Almighty for his team's deliverance from defeat in the original match at Highbury. Grobbelaar alone did enough to test the wonders of modern medicine, several times leaving his goal for one of those blind dates with the ball he does not always manage to keep.

So the FA Cup has been denied its first all-Second Division final. Instead Sunderland will be meeting Liverpool at Wembley on May 9.

Liverpool did not play badly last night. Their performance at Villa Park in the League two days earlier had been vague and vapid. Against Portsmouth they certainly did not lack a sense of purpose - just a penetrating final pass, an accurate centre or a telling shot.

Nicol was detailed to watch Anderton, whose speed caused Liverpool concern rather earlier than it had done in the first match. After 12 minutes Grobbelaar rushed off his line as Anderton moved on to a long pass and became trapped in no-man's land. Anderton's lob floated towards an inviting goal, but into the side netting.

Then Thomas's well-timed through pass sent Saunders clear in the Portsmouth penalty area, but his shot cannoned away off Knight's body.

With Kuhl and Burns solid in midfield, Portsmouth remained confident on the break, especially when the ball was played early to Anderton.

Paradoxically, the loss of Clarke in the 73rd minute after the centre-forward had dislocated an elbow in an awkward fall, created even better circumstances for Portsmouth to win the match. The speed and aggression of his replacement, Whittingham, several times found Liverpool's defenders tumbling back to cover. In the 85th minute Whittingham worked the ball to Neill near the right-hand by-line. Following his centre Beresford gained possession on the left-hand by-line and the defence relaxed, thinking the ball was about to run into touch. Instead Beresford's cross reached the unmarked McLoughlin and it was a bad moment for more than one Liverpool heart. McLoughlin struck the ball well - but struck the bar.

Two tiring teams slugged out extra-time before the world's oldest competition bowed to the dictates of the FA, the police and television. With the possible exception of a hospital patient in Cheadle nobody could have cavilled at a third meeting. 'I hope the boss is still alive,' said Ian Rush. But something precious in the FA Cup had died.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Burrows, Nicol, Whelan, Wright, Saunders, Molby, Rush, Barnes, Thomas.

Portsmouth: Knight; Awford, Beresford, McLoughlin, Symons, Burns, Neill, Kuhl, Clarke, Daniel, Anderton.

Referee: M Bodenham (Looe).

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Penalty clause

Portsmouth hearts and FA Cup dreams were cruelly shattered by the injustice of a penalty shoot-out that gave Liverpool a place in the final that four hours of open play could not deliver.

The Second Division side, triumphantly defiant throughout the semi-final replay at Villa Park, incredibly surrendered so tamely in the first spot-kick competition to decide a Wembley place.

Liverpool were on their way to their fourth appearance in the last six years from the moment Pompey captain Martin Kuhl drove their first effort wide of goalkeeper Bruce Grobbelaar's left hand post.

Though young defender kit Symons was coolly accurate when he was next up, the strength of resistance had been sapped too from the legs of Warren Neill and John Beresford to kill off any hope of an all Second Division final against Sunderland on May 9.

John Barnes, Ian Rush and Dean Saunders showed the devastating accuracy which makes them three of the most expensive players in the domestic game and recuperating manager Graeme Souness the prize which should serve as the perfect tonic.

Watching on satellite television from his Manchester hospital after his heart bypass operation, he must have had a few flutters in the 12th minute when the eccentric Bruce Grobbelaar nearly presented Portsmouth with the lead. He raced out of his area but completely misjudged Andy Awford's long ball and the pursuing Darren Anderton reached it first but lobbed wide of the exposed goal.

With Jan Molby restored to midfield, Liverpool assumed control but struggled to carve out clear openings and the better chances fell to Portsmouth, as they had done in the 1-1 draw at Highbury ten days ago.

And far from ruining their prospects the loss of Northern Ireland striker Colin Clarke after 73 minutes with a suspected broken arm after an awkward fall, produced instead a much-needed injection of pace with the arrival of Guy Whittingham.

Beresford set up the best chance five minutes from the end of normal time when he pulled the ball back for Alan McLoughlin. With Liverpool protesting the ball was out of play, the Irishman scooped the close range chance against the bar and Liverpool survived.

They might have snatched it themselves before extra time when Portsmouth goalkeeper Alan Knight was penalised for handling just inches outside his area. It was a better position than that from which John Barnes set up the dramatic Highbury equaliser but this time his free kick was blocked.

Extra time produced little prospect of an end to the deadlock, bar several more excursions out of his area by Grobbelaar, the worst of which in the 115th minute almost settled the issue. Again Whittingham beat him to it but his cross was taken away from Beresford by Jones' timely tackle.

So Portsmouth, never behind over four hours and two matches, found their hopes of a first final for 53 years taken to penalties and destroyed.