

Date: 26 April 1992
 Opposition: Manchester United
 Competition: League

Times	Guardian		26 April 1992
British Soccer Wk			

THE TIMES

Anfield gloats as United crumble

Liverpool 2, Manchester United 0

THE dying embers of Manchester United's challenge for the championship were finally extinguished yesterday, in front of an Anfield crowd that rose at the final whistle to bask in their dejection. It was cruel, but such is the bitter rivalry between Merseyside and Manchester. Nine days earlier, before Leeds United's arrival at the same stadium, Manchester United were such overwhelming favourites to take their first title in 25 years that bookmakers had stopped taking bets on them. A fixture that was always destined to be problematical became all the more testing after Leeds's victory earlier in the day. United had to win. In the event, they slipped to a third defeat in seven days, but their fate had been sealed several weeks ago, when impotence befell the forwards and self-doubt began to gnaw at the midfield. On an afternoon impaired by a blustery wind, United initially applied themselves well. But the surprising inclusion of Robson and Ince, who were not expected to play again this season, was a gamble that brought only limited success. Although Robson's belligerence occasionally threatened to ruffle lethargic opponents, his inability to eclipse Molby was the decisive factor amid the fierce aggression and unrelenting incident. Molby was a towering presence who defended with assurance and who inspired the attacks which precipitated United's downfall.

Liverpool's first serious assault yielded a twelfth-minute goal. Barnes deftly flicked the ball into the path of Rush who, typically, had timed his run to perfection. As Schmeichel came off his line, Rush slotted the ball inside a post for his first goal against United in 24 appearances. In reply, Ince struck the foot of a post, Hughes twice drove over and United were denied again when Bruce and Kanchelskis both struck the bar in one attack.

They finally bowed after Houghton had driven a cross from Thomas against the bar. Walters stabbed home the rebound to end the arguments.

LIVERPOOL: M Hooper; R Jones, D Burrows, N Tanner (sub: B Venison), J Molby, M Wright, D Saunders, R Houghton, I Rush (sub: M Walters), J Barnes, M Thomas.

MANCHESTER UNITED: P Schmeichel; M Donaghy, D Irwin, S Bruce, A Kanchelskis, G Pallister (sub: M Phelan), B Robson, P Ince, B McClair, M Hughes, R Giggs.

Referee: R Gifford.

the guardian

Glory days return for battling Leeds as Rush bedevils United

THE League title which nobody appeared to want has gone to the team that did not expect to win it for at least another week - if indeed they won it at all. Leeds United took the Championship yesterday for the first time in 18 seasons, leaving Manchester United to regret passing up their best chance of winning it in 25 years.

In the end the climax to an often mundane contest provided a nice mix of drama and eccentricity. By the time Alex Ferguson's players arrived at Anfield they knew that Brian Gayle's own goal at Bramall Lane had virtually anointed Leeds as champions. A third defeat for Manchester United in seven days and it would be all over.

So it proved. With a masterly sense of timing, Ian Rush chose yesterday of all days to score his first goal against United in 24 attempts. Ferguson's players, showing the zest which had deserted them over Easter, hit posts and bar as they strove to prolong the agony until the final weekend of the season, but when Mark Walters increased Liverpool's lead three minutes from the end they knew at last that the task was beyond them.

Leeds United's success is a triumph of hope over experience and no praise can be too high for their manager, Howard Wilkinson, who in the space of four seasons has taken football at Elland Road from the lower reaches of the Second Division into the European Cup. With fewer resources than Ferguson, Wilkinson has remained true to his team selections and his tactical instincts and his players have rewarded him with their refusal to accept that the Championship was inevitably bound for Old Trafford.

Certainly that was the way it had looked before Easter, before Manchester United's collapse of form and confidence had seen them take just one point from three games.

Yet by yesterday lunchtime Liverpool supporters, their interminable feud with Old Trafford stimulated by the result from Bramall Lane, were celebrating in anticipation as their car radios told them that for an afternoon at least they could become Leeds fans by proxy and gloat over the discomfort of the old foe.

The Liverpool players needed no second bidding to complete Manchester United's bloodiest Sunday of the season. Their movements achieved the speed and fluency which had previously been seen only in glimpses. Barnes, Molby, Jones and Wright were outstanding, Houghton, Thomas and Saunders fully committed.

After 11 minutes Barnes collected a pass from Molby and the superb weight and angle of his through ball, allied to the perception of Rush's run, spreadeagled the Manchester United defence. Rush beat Schmeichel with a shot in off the far post and the eruption on the Kop could not have been greater had Liverpool been going for the League themselves.

In reality, they are hoping to win the FA Cup a week on Saturday, which was why Rush, who had taken a knock on a knee, was taken off as a precaution just before the half-hour, giving way to Walters. Manchester United, by contrast, had to risk the fitness of Robson and Ince in order to give their midfield the aggression which had been missing against Nottingham Forest and West Ham.

The gamble looked justified midway through the first half when Robson dispossessed Molby with a fierce lunge and Ince met the loose ball with a 25-yard drive which beat Hooper and hit the inside of the near post before rebounding to safety across the face of the net. How United could have done with such scoring potential over Easter.

At the start of the second half, after a free-kick from Irwin had been half-cleared, McClair headed against the Liverpool bar and Kanchelskis's attempt to equalise from the rebound clipped the bar on its way into the crowd.

The loss of Pallister, who severed an artery in a foot after half-an-hour, forced a reorganisation in the Manchester United defence. The voracity with which Liverpool exploited the opposition's weakness might have brought them several more goals before half-time.

Agile to the last, Schmeichel saved feet first from Saunders who then saw a goalbound shot blocked on the line by Walters. In the closing minutes he achieved an even better save to deny Molby a goal but after he had turned a shot from Houghton on to the underside of the bar, Walters completed the scoring from the rebound.

Ferguson, sounding not unlike a Scottish Neil Kinnock, gracious but numbed by failure, praised Leeds for staying the distance and making fewer mistakes than anybody else. Those who spoke of a mediocre First Division, he said, did poor service to the new champions and their manager.

Eighteen years ago the Kop had saluted a rather more distinguished Leeds side as worthy champions but that team had taken more than 10 years to evolve under Don Revie. Wilkinson insists that the present side is at least two years away from completion. Which makes his achievement all the more creditable.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Rush (11min), Walters (87).

Liverpool: Hooper; Jones, Burrows, Tanner (Venison, 21), Molby, Wright, Saunders, Houghton, Rush (Walters, 27min), Barnes, Thomas.

Manchester United: Schmeichel; Donaghy, Irwin, Bruce, Kanchelskis, Pallister (Phelan, 30min), Robson, Ince, McClair, Hughes, Giggs.

Referee: R Gifford (Llanbradach).

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Despair

Manchester United's faltering championship dreams lay in ruins today as the title went to Leeds.

Defeat at Anfield, where Ian Rush finally broke his duck against United, finally killed the Old Trafford club's bid.

A 3-2 win at Sheffield United had already set up Leeds for their first championship triumph since 1974 and Rush rubbed Manchester United's noses in it with a glorious 12th minute strike.

Substitute Mark Walters added a second in a frantic finish but it was the Rush goal that eclipsed United as he strode onto a perfect John Barnes pass to clip the ball beyond goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel.

It was the first time in the Welsh international striker's goal-laden career that he had breached United's defence and it was to prove crucial.

Despite all their passion and commitment United's third consecutive defeat was always on the cards after that and they were unable to revive their dream of a first title success in 25 years.

Alex Ferguson's team never let go of the slightest hope and they took the game boldly to the FA Cup finalists right from the start.

Paul Ince, Brian McClair and Andrei Kanchelskis all hit the woodwork but Liverpool confronted their fierce rivals with a determination which suggested they were chasing glory themselves rather than just wrapping up a season which, by their lofty standards, has been desperately ordinary.

United boss Ferguson took one last roll of the dice and plunged his inspiring captain Bryan Robson into the Anfield cauldron despite six games out with a damaged calf muscle. The former England leader drove United on with his customary generalship among an avalanche of flying boots but it was an awesome task in a battle of blood and guts that produced three injury substitutions, including the exit of Rush, in the first 31 minutes.

United, with Ince also making a surprise return in midfield, never stopped battling for the trophy their vast army of fans have long craved. But it was never going to be their day as Liverpool won their first League match since Coach Ronnie Moran took over as caretaker manager from the stricken Graeme Souness nearly a month ago.

United must have known their fate when Ince saw his flashing 20-yard drive cannon across the face of goal from the inside of a post 11 minutes after Rush's opener.

United lost Gary Pallister when he limped off after a block tackle by Barry Venison and it was the Liverpool sub who shot into the side netting when confronted with an open goal after a delightful Barnes back-heel. Walters, who had come on as Rush's replacement, inadvertently blocked a goal-bound Dean Saunders shot right on half time and Saunders later missed another inviting chance to put United out of their misery. And it was just that for Ferguson's team when McClair and Kanchelskis both put efforts against the bar following a Dennis Irwin free-kick two minutes into the second half.

United never let the pace slip right to the end but as they poured forward in increasing desperation they were vulnerable to the inevitable counter attack. Molby looked certain to grab Liverpool's second until Schmeichel brilliantly kept out his drive but even the giant Danish keeper back to his best in this memorable struggle, was helpless when Walters jabbed the ball into an empty net three minutes from time after Ray Houghton hit the bar.

Ferguson choked back his disappointment to congratulate Leeds on their league title triumph and it should not be devalued by any talk of United throwing it away. "We have been punished for our mistakes, particularly this week, but Leeds have won it because they made less mistakes than anybody else all along the way," said Ferguson.

"Anybody who talks about it being an ordinary league is talking rubbish. It is still as difficult to win as ever. Losing it has had a numbing effect on us and I don't know how we will get over it but we will find a way. I'm still proud of my team. People like Bryan Robson and Brian McClair show what we are all about. You can't leave your character behind in the dressing room and what you see on the pitch is a true reflection of them as human beings. Of course, this is a big disappointment but looking back it's not been that bad a season."