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THE TIMES

Sunderland clipped by wings

Liverpool 2, Sunderland 0

ONE tactical rearrangement by Liverpool altered the course of the FA Cup final. Switching Steve McManaman from left to right flank a few minutes before the interval at Wembley on Saturday was as conclusive as a checkmate on a chessboard.

Sunderland were no longer able to protect themselves. His first intrusion provoked panic and justifiable appeals for a penalty; his second created the opening goal for Michael Thomas. After that, the second division team capitulated.

McManaman's contribution was so influential that it refreshed memories of the 1953 final. That year, a winger claimed the Cup for Blackpool and stirred the nation's emotions because, at the age of 38, Stanley Matthews was unlikely to have another chance of collecting a winner's medal.

By contrast, McManaman, aged 20, is at the dawn of his career, but he could develop into an England international of renown. Such a verdict is reinforced, poignantly, by John Barnes. Had Barnes not withdrawn with a pulled thigh muscle on Friday, the youngster would have been left on the sidelines.

"He played very well today," Barnes said, "but I had no qualms about that because he is the fittest player at the club. Despite being out for a month, I didn't think he'd have problems.

"I was surprised how well he lasted because he took a few knocks towards the end. For me, he was the man of the match.

"Even if he stood still now, he'd still be a hell of a player. I think he will improve and he has the potential to play for England, sooner rather than later. He's become more aware this season. He's always been a good dribbler and now he's conscious of people around him and how to bring them into the game.

"Once he's fit next season, I'm sure he'll be even better. Crossing may not be his strongest point, but too many people try to find the perfect player. He appears to be frail, but that is deceptive. There are a lot of good players around but no one is more exciting than him."

The talent of McManaman, which had been evident in the semi-final against Portsmouth before he was carried off, was hidden for almost all the first half. He was smothered by both David Rush and Gary Owers amid a defensive system so effective that Liverpool were rendered largely impotent. Apart from a lone thrust from Michael Thomas, astutely released by Ray Houghton early on, the favourites were in danger of being undone. Yet, when the prospect was most apparent, the finishing touch of Sunderland's most reliable scorer deserted him.

In snatching hastily at a loose ball, John Byrne miscued and lost the chance to become only the tenth individual in the history of the competition to score in every round. Nevertheless, Paul Bracewell, whose effort was inadvertently deflected wide by Mark Wright, and Peter Davenport almost succeeded where he failed.

Davenport seemed to be baulked inside the area by Rob Jones, but the foul was not as obvious as that perpetrated by Bracewell on McManaman seconds before the interval.

He escaped then, but it was not long before his side was punished. Sunderland were penetrated on the left, a flank guarded by Anton Rogan, a defender more suited to patrolling the central area. Liverpool recognised the flaw, McManaman exposed it.

Though surrounded, he scooped the ball into the path of Thomas, who specialises in deep and unexpected runs. Nobody was accompanying him as he swivelled and volleyed in a goal to compensate his new club for his dramatically belated intervention at Anfield three years ago, when he clinched the championship for Arsenal.

On Saturday, he protected Liverpool from completing successive seasons without a trophy, an indignity they had not endured for two decades. Once he had struck, Sunderland submitted. They were metaphorically chasing shadows long before the sun broke through the clearing clouds.

Whereas Byrne and Davenport became utterly isolated, Jan Molby was allowed to bring every one of his colleagues into the occasion.

Dean Saunders nodded against the bar before his partner, Ian Rush, set a record with his fifth goal in a final.

the guardian

Liverpool overpower and overawe in a final of repute

LIVERPOOL won the FA Cup for the fifth time on Saturday because, at the last, they remembered who they were while Sunderland realised that they themselves were no better than they ought to be. It was not so much a question of the trophy returning to Anfield on the back of Liverpool's reputation as of the Second Division team's inability to put out of their minds the repute in which the name of Liverpool FC still stands. Effortless continuity, a refusal to dwell on past achievements and a seemingly endless supply of talent once laid the foundations of Liverpool's greatness. For those now in charge the most satisfying aspect of this latest success was that it stemmed from the natural skills and self-assurance of a

gangling 20-year-old, Steve McManaman, who debagged the Sunderland defence at the start of the second half. Sunderland were left holding their trousers up with one hand while struggling to save the game with the other, an exercise which always looked beyond them. True, they were given winners' medals at the end but this was merely a faux pas on the part of the Football Association, which if it had been in charge of investitures at Buckingham Palace would by now be functioning under the chairmanship of Dame Bert Millichip.

The only other slip-ups on a thoroughly orthodox afternoon were suffered by some of the players as they tried to turn quickly on a pitch saturated by the wettest prologue to a Cup final since 1950, when Liverpool were beaten by two goals from Arsenal's Reg Lewis. There was a touch of old Arsenal in Saturday's victory; Michael Thomas missed one, scored one and, more by luck than judgment, created another. In its way this pleasant, watchable and largely uncomplicated final offered a perfect counterpoint to 1991 and the bizarre melodramatics of Paul Gascoigne. The ultimate ease of Liverpool's victory rendered academic any controversy over the penalty which every neutral except the referee, his nearest linesman, Jimmy Hill and other flat-earthers thought they should have been awarded shortly before half-time. Thomas's beautifully struck half-volley locked the match on to an unalterable course and Ian Rush's fifth goal in FA Cup finals, beating Stan Mortensen's record with Blackpool, ended what was left of the contest. No doctor could have ordered a Cup final better suited to minimise the strain on the newly mended heart of Graeme Souness, the Liverpool manager. The Duchess of Kent briefly sat down beside him at the start, presumably to offer her assurance that he was quite right to play Grobbelaar rather than Hooper; Grobbelaar then stuck religiously to the script, offering only one tiny reminder that among goalkeepers he was never a postmaster-general but safely handling everything else. Having achieved a 20 lead, Liverpool then allowed the match gently to unwind. They had enough chances to surpass their 30 defeat of Newcastle United in the 1974 final and Houghton saw an outrageous Limpar-like lob from 40 yards bounce over the Sunderland bar. In the end, however, Liverpool were content merely to keep the ball out of harm's way.

McManaman and Jones apart, Liverpool's performance did not offer any fresh insight into the way the team might develop next season. Souness, if he played pontoon, would always buy rather than twist or stick, and for the moment he is stuck with the knowledge that the best passer in the club weighs 15 stone and will soon be challenging Anfield's long-held belief that no one man will ever be bigger than the team. Captain Ahab being unavailable Sunderland detailed no one to harpoon the great white Dane, although in the first half, when Bracewell and his fellow midfielders were pressing forward, Molby was forced deep and became a hazard to his own defence's navigation. But in the second he swept the ball from one side of the field to the other while Sunderland, like the victims of Poe's pit and the pendulum, watched helplessly as they were opened up through the middle. The profound influence of Molby and his consistent liaison with Houghton was in evidence from the second minute, when the pair combined to release Thomas on a late run past Sunderland's square defence. The speed with which Norman left his line contributed to Thomas shooting over the bar but it should have been a goal all the same.

That was Sunderland's one life. Just before the quarter-hour Ball headed a cross down to an unmarked Byrne but the man who had scored in every previous round snatched at his shot and miscued. That was Sunderland's one real chance.

A series of clinches followed but when Liverpool began switching McManaman from the left wing, where he had replaced the injured Barnes, to the right it put you in mind of the time Georges Carpentier knocked out Joe Beckett after changing to a southpaw stance. Liverpool were denied a penalty after Bracewell's panicky lunge had caught the weaving McManaman's trailing leg but a goal was not far away. In the second minute of the second half McManaman, apparently hemmed in by four opponents, feinted past one, swerved away from two more and flicked the ball forward as Armstrong made a tackle. Thomas, subdued after his miss, pounced gratefully and although Norman managed to get a touch on the ball he barely altered its course into the far corner of the net.

Liverpool relaxed visibly, Molby saw a 25-yard dipper tipped over the top, and Saunders stopped being a poor man's Kevin Keegan to send a header against the bar. Then the Molby-Houghton combination sent Saunders dashing at a retreating defence and Thomas gathered the Welshman's pass with the intention of getting the ball on to his left foot for a shot; as he did so a late challenge caused him to lose control but the ball simply ran into the path of Rush, who dispatched it with the aplomb of someone who had scored 40 goals this season rather than a mere four.

Souness kissed the FA Cup, which was preferable to kissing the other manager, but in the broader scheme of things at Anfield Saturday's success can only be ephemeral. Liverpool are back in Europe but in a tournament they had previously regarded as small beer. It is, however, better than nothing, about which there would have been much ado.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Thomas (47min), Rush (68).

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Burrows, Nicol, Molby, Wright, Saunders, Houghton, I Rush, McManaman, Thomas.

Sunderland: Norman; Owers, Ball, Bennett, Rogan, D Rush (Hardyman, 68), Bracewell, Davenport, Armstrong (Hawke, 77), Byrne, Atkinson.

Referee: P Don (Hanworth Park).

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Liverpool pass with distinction

Liverpool 2 Sunderland 0

LIVERPOOL 2(4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Jones, Wright, Burrows, Nicol; Houghton, Molby, Thomas, McManaman; Rush, Saunders.

SUNDERLAND 0(4-4-2): Norman; Owers, Bennett, Ball, Rogan; Rush (Hardyman 68min), Atkinson, Bracewell, Armstrong (Hawke 78min); Byrne, Davenport.

Goals: Thomas (47min) 1-0; Rush (67min) 2-0. Weather: blustery. Ground: sodden. Referee: P Don (Middlesex).

ONCE the master class of Liverpool's passing began to roll, all of the nostalgic waves of 1973 passed away. Until half-time the vigour of Sunderland's running had, if anything, given the north-east every hope. But, cleverly switching McManaman from the left to the right flank and using Thomas to make penetrating runs through the middle, Liverpool outclassed them from the moment Thomas scored. Inevitably, Ian Rush added a second, and the pretence at equality was over. For once we had two humble men, far removed from the gold-chain managerial cult, leading their sides out at Wembley. A pity that Graeme Souness, dressed in sombre black, had defied not only his surgeon in coming at all, but rubbed convention into the sodden turf by timing his entrance just as the teams were preparing to be introduced. Naturally enough, the old stadium was an absolute sea of red waves, though Sunderland were obliged to wear unfamiliar white. Their spectators, 17,800 of them on the official allocation, were drowning Liverpool with their raucous expectations. But in the opening minutes it was Liverpool who settled, and with such a superior air. After only three minutes Houghton cleverly worked the ball through for Thomas. The former Arsenal midfielder has yet to convince Liverpool of his conversion, but now his run was exquisitely timed, putting him through one on one against Norman. Wretchedly, Thomas's finishing betrayed him. He lifted his head too early and lofted his shot a yard over the bar. Yet still, for the moment Liverpool seemed more assured of touch, more confident on the ball. Thus, in the fifth minute Nicol had the beating of a Sunderland defence standing like rabbits caught mesmerised in the headlamps. Nicol's cross was hastily headed away for a corner by Armstrong, and from the resulting confusion, Wright nodded the ball down for Ian Rush, whose half-volley was pounced upon by Norman.

But the spirit of the north-east communicated itself from the crowd to the Sunderland players. They hustled Liverpool with their tremendous pace. They resembled a colony of ants, working here, there and everywhere, and in the 12th minute they exposed the Liverpool defence. Rogan came through from left-back, and his long, low shot hurried Grobbelaar into such a frantic dive at his right-hand post that he mildly concussed himself when his scalp clattered against the woodwork. From the corner, with the Zimbabwean goalkeeper still groggy, Byrne should have completed his mission of becoming the first player since Peter Osgood, for Chelsea in 1970, of scoring in every round. The goal was at his mercy, but Byrne completely mis-kicked from 12 yards. But now we knew both defences were wide open. And Sunderland's tail was up again in the 15th minute when Molby made a lazy lay-off in his own area, and Bracewell was swift on to the ball, swift into his shot, and unfortunate when it deflected wide off the heel of Wright. In the opening exchanges, Molby had looked imperious. He stroked the ball with elegant timing, his range was 40 yards or 10 depending on his whim, and it was only the fact that Rush and Saunders still make an unlikely pairing that made some of his through-balls a wasted effort. In the 24th minute Byrne again came battling through from the left, but saw only the whites of the goalposts, and, ignoring Davenport, again he shot wide. On the stroke of half-time McManaman should without doubt have won a penalty. He wriggled through on the right, such a skinny and upright figure but so sinewy of movement. He rounded Armstrong, he out-paced Bracewell, and Bracewell then took his trailing leg from the ankle. Surely a penalty? Referee Philip Don was 10 yards away, but he waved the appeals aside. At that moment one recalled his words before the match that he was there to set an example to 29,000 referees in this country. Liverpool left the field arguing bitterly with Mr Don's interpretation. But within 90 seconds of the restart they were fulfilled by a marvellous goal. McManaman, once more irresistible, eluded Atkinson and then Armstrong on the right touchline. How wonderful even to see a winger hugging that white line in this day and age, and though Armstrong caught McManaman in the small of the back, it did not prevent him looping the ball into the area, where Thomas allowed it to bounce and, with stunning virtuosity, drove the ball right-footed over Norman. That strike from Thomas had been as assured as his earlier miss was wretched. The shot was made almost from shoulder height, and without a second's hesitation. Moments later Molby offloaded one of his special 30-yard shots, and Norman needed all his acrobatic ability in tipping it over his bar. Now the rout was on. Burrow was harshly booked for a late tackle on Byrne, but when Nicol floated the ball from the left Saunders rose without a marker to head against the crossbar. Seconds later, Saunders invited Thomas on another infiltrating run, Thomas turned and fed Rush, and from the sort of angle he loves Rush's low finish was as sharp and as true as a surgeon's blade. It was now a frolic, counting the Liverpool passes as they played keep-ball. Houghton tried to lob Norman from 40 yards, and was only a foot wide. Saunders brought an athletic save from Norman, but these were acts of a defiant goalkeeper whose side had withered in front of him. Liverpool are back, Europe beckons, and there was no equality at the end of our Cup final.

BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Reds crush Roker dream

Graeme Souness barely batted an eyelid as Liverpool celebrated their third FA Cup triumph in seven seasons. But beneath his promised, unruffled exterior, the Anfield boss went through the mill only 48 hours after his discharge from hospital, before Sunderland were ultimately denied a second Wembley fairytale.

No-one inside the windy, storm-swept stadium was more relieved than his personal physician when Michael Thomas put the second division club on the slide in the 47th minute. Up until then not only Souness, who underwent a massive heart by-pass operation just 33 days ago, but every Liverpool fan was suffering palpitations as the Wearsiders threatened a repeat of their 1973 sensation against Leeds.

But, like Bristol Rovers, Ipswich and Portsmouth before them, they could not break the lucky streak the Merseysiders have ridden in this competition all season. And when Ian Rush scored for the fifth time in three finals after 68 minutes, to eclipse the long standing record of Stan Mortensen, Liverpool were home and dry and more importantly, from their point of view, back in Europe. It could have all been so different, though. Sunderland, one of seven outsiders to win in the previous 110 finals, were passionate, committed and inspired by the ghosts of Porterfield and Stokoe.

The omens were in their favour too. Liverpool were in the dressing room they used before their shock defeat by Wimbledon, Sunderland in the same one as 19 years ago and the Duchess of Kent was waiting to present the trophy as she had to Bobby Kerr. And on a saturated pitch, a greasy defender's nightmare, they had their chances. First they survived a third minute chance when Ray Houghton sent Thomas racing through to blaze over. And Rush tested Welsh international Tony Norman with a sharp half volley.

But far from being cowed, Sunderland turned the tide with Bruce Grobbelaar risking his neck to get down and touch round Anton Rogan's fierce 25-yard drive. From the corner Kevin Ball's header presented John Byrne with a chance to maintain his record of scoring in every round but the Irishman mis-hit his shot badly.

A misjudged Jan Molby pass, one of many, was pounced on by Gordon Armstrong and to Liverpool's relief his shot flew wide off Mark Wright. After penalty appeals for a Rob Jones challenge on Peter Davenport, Byrne cut through but shot wide and Liverpool looked a little punch drunk.

While they persevered with their patient passing, it was the direct approach which brought them back into the game. Twice Jones was involved, first with a long ball from which Dean Saunders extended Norman and then with a run down the right and a cross from which young Steve McManaman headed over. The England Under-21 striker, who had been tipped to be the match winner in the absence of John Barnes, was robbed of the breakthrough by a cock-eyed decision a minute before the break.

Middlesex referee Philip Don ignored a clear trip by Paul Bracewell after the former Everton player had been left wallowing in McManaman's wake. It took McManaman less than two minutes of the second half to put the record straight, beating Brian Atkinson and then being fouled by Armstrong in the delivery of a magnificent chip into the path of Thomas. McManaman was already rolling in pain as the 1.5 million pound England midfielder belted his right-foot half-volley into the far corner.

Having won the title and Littlewoods Cup with Arsenal, his fifth goal since his move was a significant contribution to the completion of his domestic collection. Norman had to be at his best to keep Sunderland afloat, touching over a deceptive volley by Molby while Saunders headed against the bar in the 66th minute. Within two minutes the Welsh striker set up the decisive second, Thomas turning a pass on for Ian Rush's deadly right foot to stroke the ball into the far corner and provide a massive compensation for a season disrupted by injuries. After that it became a familiar story, Liverpool arrogantly keeping possession and taunting Sunderland, who deserved better for the magnificent way they had stretched both the Merseysiders and Graeme Souness' nerve.

Rush breaks record

Ian Rush celebrated his record-breaking Wembley day and then insisted:

"Whoever said the Liverpool era was over got it wrong."

After netting his fifth Wembley final goal which sent the Cup back to Anfield, the Welshman beamed: "I didn't know it was a record but someone told me about it and I am delighted. But it doesn't mean anywhere near as much as picking up another winners medal."

Rush said that the presence of Graeme Souness on the bench had been a real boost for the players. "We won it for him and we won it for ourselves."

Maybe, by our standards, we have had a bad year but we have still won the cup. Next year, I believe we will be challenging in the League and in Europe when we have got a full side. It's not been the best of years for me on the goalscoring front and I've had lots of injury niggles. I just wish that the season wasn't over because I feel I am back in my sharpest form."

Michael Thomas, who lit the Liverpool torch with one of Wembley's great goals, joked: "Never mind that volley - what about the one I missed after two minutes?" "But I've scored goals which have won the league and the FA Cup. Now all I need is one to win the European Cup. Having Graeme back today helped a hell of a lot and it was a great lift for the team."

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Souness defies medical opinion

Graeme Souness almost upstaged the royal party at Wembley as he emerged for the FA Cup Final against Sunderland. With the two teams lined-up in the centre of the pitch about to be presented to the Duke and Duchess of Kent, Souness emerged from the tunnel flanked by Liverpool doctor Mark Reid and club physiotherapist Phil Boersma.

Souness just made it onto the pitch as the band struck-up the National Anthem. He stood to attention on the line at the tunnel end, and as he completed his walk to the Liverpool bench the Anfield fans chanted "Souness" to welcome him back, after his triple heart by-pass operation.

And as the Royal Party made their way to the Royal Box, the Duchess of Kent went to the Liverpool bench and sat alongside Souness, obviously wishing him all the best in his recovery.

But Souness was keen to deflect attention away from himself to the final itself. He said: "It's not about me. It's about Liverpool and Sunderland playing for the FA Cup final."

Souness' decision to sit on the bench was a surprise with many expecting him to watch from the VIP box and Souness, well known for his excitability on the touchline, confessed he has been forced to calm down his act.

"Because of my love for the game I have been too excited on the odd occasion but now I understand the situation," he said. "It's not a case of wanting to be different. It's a case of having to be different. Maybe I have been guilty of taking football too seriously." "In a perfect world the doctor said he would rather I stay at home, but he understood how much I wanted to be at Wembley." "This is the first time I have been to a FA Cup final. I never made it as a player and I wasn't going to miss it as a manager."

Red faces

A medals mix-up left Football Association officials sporting faces as red as the shirts of Cup winners Liverpool at Wembley on Saturday.

Dejected Sunderland players stared in disbelief at their medals after the 2-0 defeat for each one received from the Duke of Kent was labelled "FA Cup winner 1992".

When they suggested an exchange of medals afterwards Liverpool players responded: "You must be joking - we've won the Cup". Then they took a closer look after being told of the gong gaffe and the swap was arranged on the pitch before the laps of honour.

The medals were handed to the Duke for presentation by Football Association Chief executive Graham Kelly. More than an hour after the match he said: "I know nothing about this. I handed the medals to the Duke so perhaps they were in the wrong box or the boxes were labelled incorrectly."

Sunderland manager Malcolm Crosby joked: "I think we should have kept the medals. If they want to hand them out like that it's up to them."

Liverpool caretaker boss Ronnie Moran said: "The Sunderland lads came over to our players at the end and told them about the problem. Most of them swapped on the pitch and there were just one or two missing, but that's all sorted out now."

One player who could not wait to get back to the dressing room with his winners' medal was Sunderland's Irish striker John Byrne. He declined to join his colleagues on the lap of honour and so missed the medal exchange. As he returned to the dressing room he said: "I've got a winners medal here and I'm going home now before anyone finds out."

Team-mate Gordon Armstrong said: "At least I had a winner's medal to hold for about 30 seconds."

Liverpool goalscorer Ian Rush added: "I couldn't understand it, but they soon put it right. It was good of the Sunderland lads to come up and tell us so soon."

Football Association spokesman David Bloomfield said: "It was a simple mistake. The players resolved it among themselves."

Moran pays tribute to match-winner McManaman

Liverpool stand-in manager Ronnie Moran hailed whizz-kid winger Steve McManaman as the comeback hero at Wembley after the Anfield giants lifted the FA Cup with a 2-0 win over Sunderland.

McManaman, 20, destroyed the dream of the Division Two side in a one-sided second half after being switched from left to right and making the vital opening goal for Michael Thomas.

"We don't usually individualise at Liverpool," said Moran, the veteran coach who has been in charge since Graeme Souness underwent open heart surgery a month ago. "But Steve's switch in the second half changed the game for us."

McManaman, local hero on Merseyside, was playing only his second game since a knee operation on April 9 and would have been only a substitute had England star John Barnes not failed a fitness test on a thigh injury yesterday.

Moran said: "Steve has come back and has done no real training since the operation. He only played in a reserve game at Nottingham Forest on Tuesday, but I never considered it a gamble playing him today because nothing ever bothers him. He can come straight back into it without any problems at all."

McManaman's run down the right and a superb through ball with the outside of his right foot opened the way for Michael Thomas to strike home a vicious volley. "I never saw much of Michael's goal," said McManaman. "There were two players on me and I knew I just had to flick the ball through before they could get in a

tackle. I just aimed for the space and Michael did the rest."

Moran explained: "He had the surgery on the knee to remove a piece of bone. He has always been a lad of tremendous potential and today he proved how good he is. He's come through to make the best of the situation with all the injuries we have had this season and now he has got a great chance to go on from here. We are back in Europe and apart from the result and winning the Cup, that's the biggest thing to a club like this."

Moran admitted: "Our passing wasn't sharp enough in the first half and give credit to Sunderland, they had a couple of chances to score. I even thought they might have had a penalty but then right on half-time we could have had one too so it evens itself out. Once we got the break in the second half we were on our game. But we never eased up because you need a third goal before you can get the cigars out."

Sunderland manager Malcolm Crosby admitted: "I thought we did very well in the first half, but sadly we didn't put our chances away when we had them."

Republic of Ireland striker John Byrne, who had scored in every previous round, miskicked with the goal at his mercy in the 13th minute and admitted: "I should have done better but to be fair Liverpool gave us a lesson in football in the end." Crosby said: "Byrne knows he had a chance and it was one that we usually expect him to take. But this was the FA Cup final and I can't be too critical because it's been a magnificent job just to get here."

And Crosby, who earned a one-year contract in the last few weeks after taking on a caretaker role following the dismissal of Denis Smith four months ago, added: "I can't complain. The players are all disappointed but I've been round to remind them that they have the best job in the world, playing football, getting paid for it and coming to Wembley once in a blue moon."