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Opposition: Arsenal

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THE TIMES

Parlour makes both goals in Arsenal's win

Liverpool 0 Arsenal 2.

ARSENAL were bound to climb up to a more realistic position of respectability sooner or later. Yesterday, guided principally by their youngest player, they did so and left the Premier League credentials of one of their supposed challengers in tatters.

Indeed, it is pertinent to question whether the sun is setting on Liverpool's golden era. On the evidence displayed this season and particularly at Anfield yesterday, where they failed to direct a single shot at Seaman, it might not be premature to suggest that it has already dipped over the horizon.

The absence of Barnes, Rush, Nicol and Stewart cannot disguise the uncharacteristic nature of their performance. Their attack was weak, their midfield was limited and their defence, which was eventually torn to shreds, was more insecure than any wizened observer could remember.

Although Graeme Souness has abandoned the system featuring three central defenders and was able to restore Rob Jones to a conventional back four, his outstanding player was his young goalkeeper. James, already establishing himself as Grobbelaar's superior rather than understudy, kept the defeat below embarrassing proportions.

Whereas Liverpool continue to lack conviction and cohesion, Arsenal raised themselves above their inauspicious start to the season. Yet their first victory, which was founded on the inspired contribution of Parlour, should be viewed against the unusually poor state of their opponents.

The general standard of the first half was lamentable. George Graham had requested Arsenal to strengthen their physical approach and his instructions were followed to the letter, initially by Dixon, who, within a few seconds of being lectured sternly for using illegitimate tactics to stop Walters, was booked for the same offence.

As the occasion spiralled downwards into a series of ugly collisions and misplaced passes, Jensen was also cautioned and so was Parlour for an assault which provoked a member of Liverpool's staff to throw a bag from the dugout onto the pitch. For one of the 46 fouls, Whelan had his name booked as well.

Midfield, the main area of combat, was eventually illuminated by Parlour, who had been brought in by his manager to stiffen his side's resolve. He did more than that and, in creating both goals, he erased the memory of his debut in the same arena eight months ago.

Last January, with a rash challenge borne of inexperience, he conceded a penalty in the 3-0 defeat. From almost exactly the same spot where he committed that indiscretion, he fashioned the opening which lifted Arsenal and the fixture itself. His first cross was blocked and from the rebound he allowed Limpar to squeeze the ball between James and the near post. The Swede, struck accidentally by the point of McManaman's elbow, was later helped away, suffering from concussion and a broken cheekbone.

The damage inflicted on Liverpool might subsequently have been appreciably more severe. Once Merson had taken Limpar's place on the left flank, the attacks became more regularly and more varied. Tanner, in particular, was incapable of maintaining the resistance and James was left to cope more or less on his own. He parried one shot from Merson, caught another from Parlour, blocked another from Merson and deflected yet another from Parlour before being beaten again. Liverpool believed that the incision should have been disallowed but a television replay confirmed that Ian Wright was on side.

Parlour's through-ball was timed to coincide with his burst from the halfway line and, although James touched his lob, the ball spun in. Campbell almost completed Arsenal's heartening afternoon by evading the whole of Liverpool's spread-eagled defence only to roll his attempt narrowly wide.

LIVERPOOL: D James; R Jones (sub: R Rosenthal), D Burrows, J Molby, R Whelan, M Wright, D Saunders, N Tanner, S McManaman, M Walters, M Thomas (sub: M Marsh).

ARSENAL: D Seaman; L Dixon, N Winterburn, D Hillier, C Pates, A Adams, J Jensen, I Wright, K Campbell, R Parlour, A Limpar (sub: P Merson).

Referee: K Redfern.

the guardian

Ray of hope evens up Arsenal odds

THE MONEY bet on Arsenal to win the championship for the third time in five seasons looked less of an idle flutter at Anfield yesterday. After a grim gridlock of a first half they dominated the rest of the match to such an extent that only superb goalkeeping by David James maintained Liverpool's interest in the contest. Arsenal's Premier League aspirations needed this victory. What is more to the point, they needed the strength of the performance which achieved it. Liverpool, again beset by fitness problems, matched neither the opposition's power nor, in the second half, the quality of their movements.

After throwing away a two-goal lead in their opening game before losing 4-2 at home to Norwich and then going down 1-0 at Blackburn, Arsenal took much heart from yesterday's success. Particularly encouraging for their manager George Graham was the part played in it by a mop-haired 19-year-old midfielder from Romford who was starting only his third senior game.

Last season Graham introduced Ray Parlour to League football at Anfield, a decision which said much for the confidence he had in the player and, despite giving away a penalty, Parlour immediately looked the part. Yesterday his horizons broadened with a strong, positive performance which did much to turn the match in Arsenal's favour after 45 minutes of midfield stalemate.

Already lacking Rush, Liverpool had lost Nicol with a leg injury and Stewart with a ricked neck. As a result they lacked flexibility in defence, power in midfield and for half the game were forced to leave little Saunders alone up front to challenge Adams and the Arsenal defence.

Liverpool enjoyed a lot of possession before half-time without putting Arsenal under serious pressure. With Parlour making dangerous runs coming in behind Campbell and Ian Wright, Arsenal suggested that they would quickly take command of the match once they had managed to find the net.

After producing the only shot on target from either team before half-time, Arsenal soon justified this feeling. Seven minutes into the second half Pates and Campbell combined to make space for Parlour near the byline. Parlour's first attempt at a centre ricocheted off Mark Wright and Marsh, who had come on for Thomas, and the ball bounced back to the young Arsenal player.

Now Parlour showed his quality, reacting quickly to the situation and squeezing in a much more damaging centre which saw the ball swing away from James and fall to Limpar, who had time to steady himself before driving a low shot into the net.

For a few minutes the match went slightly mad as high tackles came in from all sides. The one that saw Parlour cautioned for a foul on Jones brought a protest from the Liverpool bench in the form of a trainer's bag. Limpar retired with concussion after receiving an accidental elbow in the face from McManaman and will have an X-ray today.

The Kop raged and the benches raved - but the teams rather enjoyed it. Certainly Arsenal retained a cool sense of attacking purpose that saw James make saves from Merson, Wright and Parlour, and Wright and Campbell both shoot wide after taking on the shaky Liverpool defence.

Then with 11 minutes to go a burst of skill and speed took Parlour into the centre circle and his quick pass released Wright, who had stayed onside and now had a clear run at goal virtually from the halfway line. James managed to get a foot to Wright's shot but could not keep the ball out of the Liverpool net.

Ian Wright considered that moment to be 'quite fulfillin' - a view doubtless shared by Michael Thomas after scoring at the same end of the ground three years earlier to bring the championship to Highbury when Liverpool thought they had the title won. Arsenal will be entertaining no such thoughts yet but at least they lived up to their billing.

Liverpool: James; Jones (Rosenthal, 75min), Burrows, Molby, Whelan, M Wright, Saunders, Tanner, McManaman, Walters, Thomas (Marsh, 47).

Arsenal: Seaman; Dixon, Winterburn, Hillier, Pates, Adams, Jensen, I Wright, Campbell, Parlour, Limpar (Merson, 63).

Referee: K Redfern (Whitley Bay).

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Back with a brace!

Anders Limpar and Ian Wright scored second half goals as battling Arsenal chalked up their first win of the season and stunned Liverpool with a powerhouse performance at Anfield.

Manager George Graham demanded more physical aggression from his deposed premier League title favourites after dismal defeats in their opening two games. He received it in full measure as the gritty Gunners shot down their championship rivals with an unflinching display of muscle, method and skill.

Arsenal's renewed vigour earned them four bookings, with Lee Dixon, John Jensen, Ray Parlour and Tony Adams all shown the yellow card for fouls. The Londoners also had goal hero Limpar led away in the 62nd minute with a nasty looking eye injury.

Their thundering commitment was altogether too much for Liverpool and in the end Graham's team should have won far more comfortably than by the two goals that the impressive parlour set up for Limpar and Wright in the 53rd and 80th minutes.

Limpar struck at the far post when Parlour, who gave away a penalty on his league debut at Anfield last February, sent a cross from the right beyond the dive of goalkeeper David James for the Swede to strike home.

By the time that Wright, making his first full appearance of the season, added the second goal ten minutes from time to clinch the points, it had needed a combination of James' superb saves and Arsenal's wasteful finishing to keep the scoreline in check.

The clincher finally came when Parlour, still only 19, unhinged Liverpool's off-side trap to send Wright, last season's top league goalscorer, sprinting clear to force his shot over the 1 million pound former Watford goalkeeper.

By then, James had made splendid saves from Parlour, Wright, David Hillier and substitute Paul Merson, while opposite number David Seaman enjoyed a quiet afternoon against an impotent Liverpool attack badly missing the injured Ian Rush and Paul Stewart.

Arsenal skipper Adams and reserve centre-half Colin Pates erected a virtually impenetrable barrier in the centre of the Gunners' defence, but it was the Londoners' combative midfield energy which finally won the day after an undistinguished first half.

England's Dixon and Denmark's Jensen had already been booked by the time the slimline Parlour clashed with Liverpool's Rob Jones to produce yet another yellow card, and also the macabre sight of a kitbag thrown onto the pitch in anger from the Liverpool dug-out.

Arsenal lost Limpar 28 minutes from the end but his substitute, Merson, provided just as many problems for Liverpool as he battled to prove his fitness to manager Graham, who left him out of the side for being overweight.

James brought off yet another impressive save to stop Merson at the far post from a cross by Hillier, who was then also denied by the goalkeeper.

Kevin Campbell wasted a wonderful opportunity two minutes from time to make Arsenal's win even more emphatic when after slipping through the middle of Liverpool's defence he shot wide with the goal gaping.

Graham saluted his side's convincing victory and said: "We are back among the big boys now. I love it when we get stick. The boys respond to it and it does my job for me. We showed today we should never be written off. In the end I thought Liverpool's goalkeeper David James was the man of the match. The Premier League is all topsy-turvy at the moment and none of the fancied teams are charging away with it. We are back among the big boys but we have got to maintain it or we will be criticised again."

Ian Wright shrugged off Liverpool's suggestions that he was offside. He said: "Ray Parlour held the ball up beautifully for me and I knew I was onside. It's a long season and we have started with two bad results but now we have something really good to build on."

Mark Wright refused to condemn Arsenal, saying: "You expect plenty of tackles to be flying about but it was no worse than our game against Sheffield United in midweek. The disappointing thing is that we just did not play our football and get anything on target. We've got to get back to that as soon as possible. We've never expected anything other than a tough test against Arsenal because no matter what the critics might say they are still a very strong force and will be up there again at the end of the season."