

Date: 12 September 1992
 Opposition: Sheffield United
 Competition: League

Times	Guardian	Sunday Times
British Soccer Wk		

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THE TIMES

Souness quiet as Liverpool falter

Sheffield United 1, Liverpool 0.

THESE are trying times at Anfield. Having beaten Manchester United on the opening day, Sheffield United are specialising in embarrassing their betters and Liverpool's tribulations continued at Bramall Lane on Saturday as Adrian Littlejohn's first goal in league football left them contemplating their worst start for 28 years.

Talk of a decline is, of course, premature. On Saturday, they could feel that all they needed, particularly after having the better of the first half, was the rub of the green as Rogers denied Rush on the line.

By the end, Sheffield probably just about deserved to add Liverpool's scalp to that of Manchester United, their defence finally tightening up to frustrate Rush and Rosenthal. Rogers patrolled midfield effectively while Deane and the pacy Littlejohn exposed the weakness at the heart of the Liverpool defence.

At the least, they need reinforcements there and the fee for Dean Saunders is unlikely to stay in the bank long enough to gain interest.

More worrying than individual weaknesses is the feeling of sourness developing at the club. On Saturday, they lost with little grace on or off the field.

They are beginning to play with a snarl too close to the surface, as Souness did in his playing days. The bookings Burrows for a bad tackle, Rush and Walters for dissent told their own story. There could have been others as the central defenders took no prisoners and, elsewhere, flying elbows and whingeing proliferated.

Off the field, the signs of an unhappy camp increase. "I've got nothing constructive to say," said the normally loquacious Paul Stewart afterwards, refusing a request for a radio interview. An hour after the game ended, Souness finally emerged to say: "Very disappointed."

"I wouldn't want to enlarge on that because it'll only give you headlines," he added with a loaded voice. When a local reporter approached him as he got into his Mercedes, rather than the team coach, a couple of lager louts harrassed the journalist.

After all the cynicism, the naive, smiling enthusiasm of Littlejohn, who had phoned Bassett for a trial after "a bit of a nightmare" at Walsall, was refreshing. The goal was pure Sheffield United Deane flicking on Tracey's kick for Littlejohn to break between two defenders and catch James off his line with a lob.

SHEFFIELD UNITED: S Tracey; K Gage, T Cowan, J Gannon (sub: A Cork), B Gayle, P Beesley, C Bradshaw, P Rogers, A Littlejohn, B Deane, D Whitehouse (sub: I Bryson).

LIVERPOOL: D James; S Harkness, D Burrows, S Nicol, R Whelan (sub: J Molby), M Wright, R Rosenthal, P Stewart, I Rush, J Redknapp (sub: M Marsh), M Walters.
 Referee: J Martin.

the guardian

Littlejohn hits the big time

ALAN CORK, Sheffield United's veteran striker, must have known a thing or two when he put a few bob on Adrian Littlejohn at 8-1 to score the first goal at Bramall Lane on Saturday.

Littlejohn's record suggested that he had about as much chance as Fergie has of becoming a nun. Since his arrival on a free transfer from Walsall in the summer of last year he had failed to score in 10 League outings. But Cork's confidence was justified; perhaps he was mindful of the seven goals his fellow striker scored on a pre-season tour of Sweden.

Littlejohn's big moment came after only four minutes when Tracey, having saved Cowan from the embarrassment of an own goal, punted the ball downfield for Deane to head on for the 21-year-old, gleefully, to whack it over James and into the net. 'I just had a crack and there it was,' he said modestly afterwards. 'I can't go any higher than the Premier League so I've just got to enjoy it.'

There was no enjoyment at all in watching a disjointed, mean-spirited Liverpool side. Their defenders were hustled and harried by Littlejohn and Deane and their forwards came off second-best against a quick-tackling midfield in which Rogers was superb.

Rogers, a pounds 50,000 buy from Sutton United, made the pounds 2.3 million Stewart and some of his expensive colleagues pale by comparison. Little wonder, perhaps, that the Liverpool players slunk away afterwards uttering only churlish grunts.

Whitehouse, who was injured in a training accident two days before the season started, made a surprise reappearance and impressed his manager Dave Bassett. 'But then they all did,' he stressed.

Liverpool had their chances, particularly Stewart. He showed that he can fire just as wide with either foot and forced Tracey to make the best save of the afternoon just after the break.

As Liverpool's frustrations finally boiled over near the end, Burrows was booked for a foul on Deane and Rush followed him for doubting the referee's judgment. Deane, Walters and Gage also paid for kicking the ball away, but several late tackles and a running feud between Walters and Cowan went unpunished.

Liverpool, deservedly, did not.

SCORER: Sheffield United: Littlejohn (4min).

Sheffield United: Tracey; Gage, Cowan, Gannon (Cork, 85), Gayle, Beesley, Bradshaw, Rogers, Littlejohn, Deane, Whitehouse (Bryson, 67).

Liverpool: James; Harkness, Burrows, Nicol, Whelan (Molby, 57), Wright, Rosenthal, Stewart, Rush, Redknapp (Marsh, 77), Walters.

Referee: J Martin (Alton).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Littlejohn exposes Liverpool cracks

Sheffield Utd 1 Liverpool 0

SHEFFIELD UTD 1 (4-4-2): Tracey; Gage, Cowan, Gayle, Beesley; Gannon (Cork 87min), Bradshaw, Rogers, Whitehouse (Bryson 73min); Littlejohn, Deane.
 LIVERPOOL 0 (4-4-2): James; Harkness, Burrows, Nicol, Wright; Whelan (Molby 58min), Stewart, Redknapp (Marsh 77min), Walters; Rosenthal, Rush.
 Goal: Littlejohn (5min).

Weather: cool. Ground: good.

Referee: J Martin (Hampshire).

SHEFFIELD UNITED were nothing special, but nowadays you do not have to be special to beat Liverpool. Liverpool, frantic, disjointed and always likely to concede goals, are the opposite to how they were under Shankly, Paisley, Fagan and Dalglish.

It is too early to talk of an Anfield crisis but the side is in a rut and there is much repair work to be done.

In gaining only their second victory of the season, United exposed the limitations of Liverpool, who were tetchy losers. Burrows, Rush and Walters were booked in a robust and niggly encounter. Sheffield were not blameless, but one has come to expect Liverpool to rise above the rough stuff.

There was a time when Liverpool players never seemed to get injured, but now they are going down like ninepins. Barnes and Jones are the most serious casualties, while McManaman, Thomas, Nicol and Stewart have all been on the treatment table at some stage this season.

What happened to Paul Mardon in midweek typified Liverpool's bad luck in this department. The Birmingham central defender, valued at Pounds 1m, damaged ankle ligaments while on trial at Anfield and has been ruled out for three weeks. Sheffield United's reputation for coming alive in the second half of the season may have lulled them into a false sense of security.

Results have been poor since they beat Manchester United on the opening day and their manager, Dave Bassett, has told the directors that he urgently needs reinforcements. Bassett's latest attempt to strengthen the side failed when Agana, a former Sheffield United forward, rejected a month's loan from Notts County. Agana, though, would have been pushed to improve on Littlejohn's early goal, his first for Sheffield in 11 League outings. Deane guided Tracey's long clearance into his path and the striker lifted the ball over a startled James.

Liverpool were slow to respond. Stewart, returning after injury, finished tamely after manoeuvring himself into a good position, but there was a better attempt from Walters, who had Tracey at full stretch with a fiercely driven free kick.

Tracey made a fine save low to his left to prevent Stewart from equalising as Liverpool tried to impose some authority. But Sheffield were yielding them nothing. With Rush stifled, Rosenthal was Liverpool's most enterprising forward, and it took both Gayle and Tracey to thwart him when the ball ran loose in the penalty area.

BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Littlejohn fires Blades to a shock victory

Adrian Littlejohn, plucked from obscurity by Dave Bassett, was the United hero as the Sheffield outfit picked up their first win in six games.

The little striker was shown the door by lowly Walsall last season before being given a trial by Bassett. And the 21-year-old, playing only his second game of the season, repaid the United boss with a coolly taken winner. He struck in the fourth minute after the ball was flicked on by England striker Brian Deane. Littlejohn spotted David James off his line and coolly lobbed the ball over his head from 20 yards.

United were denied a penalty in the 12th minute when Dave Burrows blatantly pushed Littlejohn off the ball but the player's appeals were turned down. United keeper Simon Tracey pulled off a spectacular save to foil Liverpool in the 26th minute after the Brammall Lane side had conceded a free-kick on the edge of the box. Ronnie Whelan tapped the ball to Mark Walters, whose fierce effort was pushed away by the United keeper.

Carl Bradshaw picked out Dane Whitehouse with a curling cross from the right and the United winger got his head to the ball only to be foiled by James.

Tracey pulled off another super stop in the 48th minute this time driving full length to tip Paul Stewart's 25-yard strike around the post.

Deane almost got on the scoresheet in the 63rd minute getting the better of England centre back Mark Wright only to see his glancing header graze the top of the bar.

Dave Bassett believes he has snapped up a bargain in Littlejohn. Bassett said: "When Walsall released him, he gave me a ring and we took him on a month's loan. Then we gave him another two months and he developed well. We signed him on a two-year contract in the summer and he's doing well. This was Aidy's first goal for the senior team and hopefully it will give him a lot of confidence. He caused Liverpool a lot of problems."