

Date: 19 September 1992

Opposition: Aston Villa

Competition: League

Times	Guardian	Sunday Times	19 September 1992
British Soccer Wk			

## THE TIMES

### Saunders turns screws on Souness

Aston Villa 4, Liverpool 2

FOOTBALL managers talk about "the immutable law of the ex". Judging by his expression, Graeme Souness had an earthier word for it as he stalked out of a press conference at Villa Park on Saturday after being asked whether it was inevitable that Dean Saunders would score against Liverpool.

With two goals against the club he had left only ten days earlier, in an electric atmosphere generated by the Premier League's largest crowd to date, Saunders, inevitably, was the focus of attention, even though he was not the only Liverpool old boy to enjoy the afternoon. In quieter fashion, Houghton and Staunton made their own points to Souness.

The Liverpool manager would have been even more discomfited if he had stayed long enough to hear Saunders's description of his first two goals for Villa, and his bubbling recognition that his luck had suddenly changed for the better.

"Both went through the keeper's legs," Saunders confessed. "I've been in those situations all season and they've been hitting the keeper's legs or hitting the post and bouncing away. It's a change of luck. Today, every time I got near the posts, I thought I was going to score."

As important as his goals, first impressions suggested that Villa's more headlong style, with the ball played into space for him to run on to, is much more likely to exploit his assets than Liverpool's more measured passes to feet.

His two goals made the point, Saunders turning in the promising Froggatt's excellent early cross and getting free to drive home his second and Villa's third off James's legs from Houghton's pass.

It was made even more strongly by an exhilarating 30-yard burst, culminating in a fierce shot just over the angle, and an explosive surge past Wright for a shot that flew away off the post.

By then, his marker, Liverpool's new signing, Torben Piechnik, must have wondered what he had let himself in for.

Villa were running away with the game, taking complete control once Houghton's pass and Parker's miscued shot allowed Dalian Atkinson to put them ahead, nine minutes into the second half.

Saunders and Atkinson combined for Parker to put them 4-1 up as Wright erred.

"The first and third goals came from mistakes by our young boys," Souness said, "the fourth came from a mistake by an English international."

"We want five," the Villa fans chanted. Instead, Rosenthal had the last word, enabling Liverpool to end with a respectable margin of defeat.

They deserved no less. Had Rosenthal shown more accuracy earlier instead of staking a claim for the miss of the season by hitting the bar from in front of goal after rounding Spink, it might have been a different story as Liverpool controlled a poor first half.

Ron Atkinson, the Villa manager, was delighted with Saunders "If he scores as many goals for me as he did for Liverpool, then I will be well pleased," he said but he also had some sympathy for Liverpool.

"They gave us more problems than anybody else this season, but it wasn't really Liverpool anyway," he said. "I'd hate to see what state we'd be in without five of our best players." Some consolation for Souness at last.

ASTON VILLA: N Spink; E Barrett, S Staunton, S Teale, P McGrath, K Richardson, R Houghton, G Parker, D Saunders, D Atkinson, S Froggatt.

LIVERPOOL: D James; T Piechnik, D Burrows, S Nicol, J Redknapp, M Wright, R Rosenthal, M Marsh, D Hutchison, J Molby, M Walters.

Referee: P Don.

## the guardian

### Saunders double silences Souness

BEFORE the M6 was completed Liverpool set out for Aston Villa and were guided off the southern end of the motorway by one of their directors, who said that he knew the quickest route to the ground. After the team coach had pulled up outside a deserted St Andrew's, the players made it to Villa Park just in time. Bill Shankly was not amused then and would hardly be convulsed now, but at least this shows that where Aston Villa are concerned Liverpool have lost their way before. The point about Saturday's defeat at Villa Park, where Liverpool have not won since 1984, was not so much the result as its context.

Graeme Souness's team have won only two of their nine Premier League fixtures and have lost four; hardly a catastrophe, but hardly Liverpool either. Unlike the 51 rout Bob Paisley's side suffered in 1976, after which they retained the championship and won the European Cup, this was not so much an aberration as part of an ongoing pattern of decline. Naturally Dean Saunders, whom Souness had just sold to Villa, scored twice and narrowly missed a hat-trick. Hell has no fury like a striker scorned.

Afterwards Souness summed up his feelings in a brief statement, then turned on his heel before questions could be asked. But before he reached the door someone inquired whether it was inevitable that Saunders would score. Souness responded with a sniff worthy of Will Hay, upon whom his style of management, cynics would say, is loosely based.

Such a criticism would be manifestly unjust, but the familiar Liverpool litany of injuries - seven players who would have appeared if fit - now has to be set against the lengthening queue of those Souness has sold but who can still return to haunt his judgment. The performance of Ray Houghton, sold to Villa in the summer for pounds 900,000, was as pertinent to the argument as Saunders's goals.

The departure of Houghton, Beardsley, McMahon, Venison and others represented Souness's desire to turn the team around, a process delayed under Kenny Dalglish. What he had not bargained for was a crop of injuries that has forced him to draft in youngsters such as McManaman, Marsh, Harkness, Redknapp and, on Saturday, Hutchison.

In the case of Saunders, however, Souness has only himself to blame. He bought the striker from Derby for pounds 2.9 million and sold him for pounds 2.3 million.

While at Anfield Saunders scored 10 goals in 36 League appearances, a modest return enhanced by some rabbit-skinning activities in cup games.

Not that Saunders should be denied credit for Saturday's performance. The Welshman was alert and busy and restored Villa's interest in a contest that appeared to be slipping away when he nipped in front of Piechnik, Anfield's latest Dane, on the stroke of half-time to meet Froggatt's low centre and level the scores.

He also scored Villa's third, after Houghton had taken the ball off Hutchison to make the chance, and hit the angle of post and bar before setting up the movement with Atkinson that led to Parker netting their fourth. Atkinson it was who originally put Villa in front, getting a touch on Parker's mishit drive after Houghton had created the opportunity.

Ron Atkinson's teams habitually rely on midfield players such as Parker and Houghton who can run with the ball to create space, quick wingers such as Froggatt, who will be more influential once his crosses improve, and strikers in the Regis or Saunders mould who want the ball played in front of them so that their speed can do the rest.

"This is what he likes," said Mark Lawrenson, the former Liverpool defender and Saunders's manager at Oxford United. "He's not going to come off people and get behind the ball, that's not his style." On Match of the Day another former Liverpool player, Alan Hansen, demonstrated the player's limitations with action replays. You were left wondering not so much why Souness sold Saunders as why he bought him in the first place.

Souness was entitled to be satisfied with Liverpool's first-half performance, when the ball was passed sweetly from the back. Yet even if Rosenthal had not hit the bar when facing an open goal five minutes before half-time, the outcome might well have been the same.

Walters put Liverpool ahead three minutes later with a first-time shot but Saunders's equaliser precipitated a familiar collapse before Rosenthal's header completed the scoring.

Had Rush, Barnes and McManaman been available, Liverpool would have posed more of a threat. But as disgruntled supporters left early, they might have been asking themselves if Stewart or Thomas would have provided an answer to Houghton. Even a fit squad does not promise to solve Anfield's problems.

SCORERS: Aston Villa: Saunders (44 and 66min), Atkinson (54), Parker (79). Liverpool: Walters (43), Rosenthal (84).

Aston Villa: Spink; Barrett, Staunton, Teale, McGrath, Richardson, Houghton, Parker, Saunders, Atkinson, Froggatt.

Liverpool: James; Piechnik, Burrows, Nicol, Redknapp, Wright, Rosenthal, Marsh, Hutchison, Molby, Walters.

Referee: P Don (Hanworth Park).

Date: 19 September 1992

Opposition: Aston Villa

Competition: League

Times	Guardian	Sunday Times	19 September 1992
British Soccer Wk			



## THE SUNDAY TIMES

Saunders savours sweet revenge

Aston Villa 4, Liverpool 2.

ASTON VILLA 4(4-4-2): Spink; Barrett, McGrath, Teale, Staunton; Houghton, Parker, Richardson, Froggatt; Atkinson, Saunders.

LIVERPOOL 2(4-5-1): James; Nicol, Wright, Piechnik, Burrows; Marsh, Redknapp, Molby, Hutchison, Walters; Rosenthal.

Goals: Walters (43min) 0-1; Saunders (44min) 1-1; Atkinson (54min) 2-1; Saunders (56min) 3-1; Parker (80min) 4-1; Rosenthal (83min) 4-2.

Weather: mild. Ground: firm. Referee: P Don (Middlesex).

THIS WAS the coronation of Dean Saunders, but not the dethronement of Liverpool. Saunders scored twice and participated in a third goal in the manner of a long-term prisoner set free. But things are not as simple as the scoreline suggests. This is not the passing of the flame from Liverpool to Villa. In spite of Saunders's rampaging, nobody on his side played as if this was the moment to seize the stage and kill Liverpool as they flounder at their most vulnerable.

But first, Saunders. Ron Atkinson, the Villa manager, said that his new acquisition and the rest of the side "did not turn up until a minute before half-time", and that was so. Before then, the sort of thing Saunders experienced was Nicol lashing away the ball as soon as it came anywhere near his old Anfield teammate.

Nicol was not alone in dreading anything that could conceivably let Saunders have so much as a whiff of goal. In fact, after Liverpool calmed down, Saunders spent most of the first half going nowhere. For 44 minutes, he ran where passes rarely came and offered himself for chances that never came. Villa played what Atkinson later called "amusement football"; along the back, around and about midfield almost anywhere, except up to Saunders. But even this said something about Saunders as the force he could yet become in English football. Many strikers deprived of the ball like this would have gone hunting for it in midfield, potentially to the detriment of what they are paid to do. But Saunders hung on, sometimes running, sometimes peeling off right and occasionally almost getting on the end of Froggatt's crosses. He always kept his cool. Saunders is an emotional man who bubbles in joy and sometimes broods in withdrawn silence. To keep the faith through the team's lean period on his home debut is an indication of a considerable maturity. Liverpool, meanwhile, minus no fewer than seven senior players, including Rush, refused to surrender the flame. Certainly, they were brittle in the first 10 minutes or so and, around Saunders, positively nervous. But once they realised that no Villa pressure was coming, they fought like demons.

There was a pass from Molby that almost tore Villa apart, another from Burrows that almost brought Walters within shooting distance of Spink's goal. Calm down, calm down, was the unspoken message from Wright and Piechnik at the centre of their defence. After the initial minutes, the message was spread down the field and there were moments when, missing seven players or not, you almost wondered what the Liverpool crisis has been. Liverpool, like Saunders, have fallen back on the core of their spirit when everything else has gone wrong. Rosenthal should have put them ahead. To everybody's amazement, he hit the underside of the bar when Spink's goal lay open. The game was scoreless at the time, and minutes later Walters put Liverpool ahead. So, incredible as it may seem, Liverpool could have gone in at the interval 2-0 ahead. Atkinson thought Rosenthal's miss was the turning point. "They gave us more problems in the first half than any team we have played this season. When he missed that one, I had my first thought that things might go our way." What happened before half-time was a portent of things to come. All was forgotten the moment Saunders erupted. First, Liverpool scored. Walters notched the goal from an angle so acute and a distance so great, that it was almost certainly intended as a cross, not a shot. Still, no matter. Liverpool deserved the lead but it seemed to loosen the final tie of the many that have kept Dean Saunders earthbound for the past year.

The way Saunders turned the game was this: Froggatt started running down Villa's left flank, fast and determinedly, as he has done all season. Even as he took off, Saunders was peeling off his marker in midfield. He then brushed aside a Liverpool midfielder until, by the time Froggatt cracked in a low, fast cross, Saunders had got into Liverpool's penalty area. He lashed the ball home as if he and Froggatt had been practising such things for a lifetime. Piechnik, on his debut, looked distraught, and this was one of two goals that Graeme Souness said were down to defensive mistakes. But that was not the point. From that moment on, Saunders played like a man who would be denied no longer. His drive was ferocious, his goals inevitable. Saunders's second was utterly different. Villa clicked in the second half because Houghton got more into the game and because Parker was patient enough to wait for the rest of the side to catch up with the vision he had shown in the first half. Saunders simply latched on to the end of these efforts. Houghton crafted a pass into Saunders's path as he ran between Wright and Piechnik. He slipped the ball under James and into goal with complete equanimity. There was a moment when Saunders brought the ball from the centre circle to within spitting distance of James's six-yard area while Parker, who had run an even greater distance, got into a position where just a pass from Saunders would have given him a tap-in goal. But Saunders wanted his hat-trick.

That was the only loss from any greed of Saunders that Villa suffered. As Rosenthal grabbed consolation and Atkinson notched something of a fluke, the goal that says the most about what Saunders may become was Villa's last one. Saunders linked up with Atkinson and Parker in a manner that was never going to

give him a chance, but did benefit his team. Parker was adept enough to turn it into a goal.

But Villa did not strut this stage until a depleted Liverpool could no longer dominate it. This was the coming of Saunders, not the going of Liverpool.

Villa are a passing side, not too far behind Liverpool at their best. That, and the frequent bursts of speed they unleash, suit Saunders's game perfectly. In other words, this could happen again and again. All Saunders needed at Liverpool was to play in a style and an atmosphere that suited him. He had neither.

## BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

It had to be you ...

Dean Saunders came back to haunt Graeme Souness with two goals as Aston Villa overran Liverpool at Villa Park.

Saunders, sold to Villa 10 days ago for 2.3 million pounds, had the last word with a fine display on his home debut.

The Welsh international wiped out Villa old boy Mark Walters' 43rd minute opener for Liverpool, equalising on the stroke of half-time with only his second shot on goal. He burst into the box to meet Stephen Froggatt's low cross first time, leaving Anfield goalkeeper David James the job of retrieving the ball from the back of the net.

Saunders could have made it 2-1 right after the break with a fierce left foot shot that flew just past the angle but new striking partner Dalian Atkinson did give Villa the lead in the 54th minute with a straight-forward tap-in from Garry Parker's sliced shot.

The Villa newcomer was back on target, though, in the 66th minute when he ran onto a ball from another Liverpool old boy, Ray Houghton, to steer the ball between the legs of the exposed James. And he showed his delight by leaping over advertising hoardings to celebrate in front of Villa fans in a 37,863 crowd, their best of the season.

Saunders could have grabbed a hat-trick in the 77th minute when he beat Wright but shaved a post with a right foot shot.

But Parker made no mistake a minute later as he romped through the midfield of Liverpool's disintegrating defence to set the home fans chanting "We want five." That rare insult to Liverpool's ears sparked the Anfield side forward and Ronnie Rosenthal, guilty of an astonishing first-half miss when he struck the crossbar when in front of an empty net, pulled a goal back.

Saunders is determined to savour his double strike in Aston Villa's colours. And Saunders said afterwards he would be settling down in his armchair to watch the goals again on BBC Television's Match Of The Day programme. Saunders said: "I haven't been watching lately because I have been having a bit of a nightmare but I'll be tuning in again tonight. Obviously I had a big incentive to do well today and I'm thrilled to have scored. Both my goals went through the goalkeeper's legs. Two months ago I was hitting shots like that and they were coming back of the goalkeeper's legs. It just shows how things can change. I actually thought Liverpool were the better side in the first half but we really did well in the second half."

Villa manager Atkinson, who persuaded Souness to part with Saunders and swallow a 600,000 pound loss on the 2.9 million pound British record fee he set 14 months ago, said: "If we had gone in behind at the break it could have made all the difference. Dean's first goal was a very good striker's goal inside the six yard box. He was the first to get in there, the first to get to the ball and he put it away just like the best strikers do."

Souness' press conference lasted barely a minute with the Anfield boss saying: "I though we played very well in the first half, maybe the best we have played all season but the second half saw things tell on the younger boys in the team as Villa put us under pressure. The first and third goals were from mistakes by younger players while the fourth was a mistake from an England international. Remember, though, we had seven players who would have been in my line-up out injured." Asked if it was inevitable that Saunders would score, Souness just stared back and snorted on his way to the door.