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THE TIMES

Liverpool quick to profit from Barnes's return

Queens Park Rangers 0 Liverpool 1

SIX months after rupturing an Achilles tendon, John Barnes made an unexpectedly early and enterprising debut in the Premier League last night. Not only did he appear for 70 minutes as a substitute at Loftus Road, but he also helped Liverpool to their first away victory since January.

The combination of events was highly improbable, but England's prodigal sons are in the happy habit of announcing their comeback with a characteristically stylish flourish. Last Wednesday it was Paul Gascoigne's turn to confirm at Wembley that he had completed his recovery from an even more horrendous wound.

Barnes has been the victim of a catalogue of injuries. He has been able to take part in only 17 of Liverpool's last 88 fixtures, and his hapless club must continue to work on the premise that, as soon as they welcome back one of their internationals, they lose another.

Their latest casualty is their leading scorer, Rush. When he pulled a hamstring, Barnes was pressed back into action ahead of schedule on two counts.

When he underwent the operation before the European championship finals, it was feared that he would not resume until at least the new year. Ideally, Liverpool would have preferred for him to ease himself into his first game of the season during the closing stages. Instead, he was forced to take his usual role on the left flank of a side which was already being stretched.

Ferdinand, included for the first time in an England squad for the World Cup qualifying tie against Turkey, was so consistent and forceful a menace that Liverpool's disorganised defence seemed bound to be first fractured and then dismantled. Piechnik, in particular, was regularly left spinning helplessly like a top. Neither the usually cultured Danish international nor his colleagues were able either to restrain Ferdinand or restrict the supply from midfield, designed largely by Wilkins. Yet Rangers were thwarted either by their own inaccuracy or by the agility of Hooper. In rapid succession, Hooper tipped over a couple of drives from Sinton, but he required the assistance of a defender on the line to keep out a close-range volley from McDonald. Liverpool withstood the siege, which lasted for most of the first half, before reshaping their own formation.

Only when McManaman was withdrawn from the front line into a beleaguered midfield were they able to smother Rangers. The second half of a game notable for the high and unremitting quality of the distribution was consequently more evenly matched.

Ferdinand, though a less conspicuous threat, might still have won it for Rangers, but he narrowly misdirected a powerful header from Holloway's cross. With four minutes left, their initial overwhelming superiority became irrelevant and their profligacy was punished as Barnes measured a through-ball for the willing Rosenthal.

The Israeli international unleashed a typically ferocious drive to lift Liverpool into tenth place, their highest position so far this season, and inflicted on Rangers their first home defeat. Apart from the prolonged contribution of Barnes, though, the most surprising aspect of the evening was another statistic claimed by Graeme Souness's side. It was only their second clean sheet in 16 League games.

QUEENS PARK RANGERS: A Roberts; D Bardsley, C Wilson, R Wilkins, D Peacock, A McDonald, A Impey, I Holloway, L Ferdinand, B Allen, A Sinton.

LIVERPOOL: M Hooper; M Marsh, D Burrows, S Nicol, T Piechnik, D Hutchison, S McManaman, J Redknapp, I Rush (sub: J Barnes), R Jones, R Rosenthal.

Referee: R Milford.

the guardian

Rosenthal rocket wrecks Rangers

JOHN BARNES returned to the Liverpool side at Loftus Road last night to inspire their first away victory in the Premier League and bring about Queens Park Rangers' first home defeat since early April. Barnes's pass set up Ronnie Rosenthal for the winning goal three minutes from the end of a match that QPR should have put beyond Liverpool's reach by half-time.

A win would have taken Rangers to second place in the table behind Norwich. The lesson they learned last night was one of the oldest in the business: never give suckers an even break.

At one point Liverpool's defence was not merely on the ropes but holding on to them with eyes glazed and gumshield adrift. Graeme Souness's players simply had no answer to the wisdom of Wilkins, whose penetrating passes found the perfect complement in the assured first-time touches of Ferdinand.

Then Rush tweaked a hamstring and this, far from completing Liverpool's discomfort, proved their salvation. With Thomas already added to Anfield's list of casualties, Souness could have been forgiven for emulating the man who before the kick-off had hammered a nail into a plank with his fist then drawn it out again with his teeth (this, remember, is Football a la Murdoch). But Barnes eased much of Liverpool's pain.

He had not played first-team football since rupturing an Achilles tendon playing for England in June. Last season he had made only a dozen league appearances. He looked a fraction heavy but there was nothing wrong with the weight of his passes and Liverpool's inexperienced midfield drew strength from his soothing presence.

Paradoxically, no sooner had Barnes come on for Rush in the 18th minute than he found himself getting caught up in a scuffle between Burrows and Impey. By the half-hour Liverpool might well have been four down.

Early in the game Piechnik had twice come to their rescue, intercepting a telling centre from Wilson before it could reach the head of Ferdinand and then heading a rebound out from under the bar after Hooper had blocked a shot from the QPR striker with his legs. Thereafter the Danish defender had trouble telling a hawk from a handsaw as Rangers' movements flowed past him.

With Ferdinand omnipotent, a goal for QPR seemed only a matter of time. But McDonald put a header wide and saw a shot blocked on the line by Jones, and Hooper twice tipped rising drives from Sinton over the bar.

Towards half-time Barnes worried QPR with a couple of low crosses and as McManaman began to appear in scoring positions one had the feeling that Rangers might pay for their profligacy. Indeed, the McManaman goal disallowed for offside after Barnes had put him through in the 49th minute proved a chilling portent for QPR.

Ferdinand sent a firm header just wide and Sinton's shot drifted past the far post, but Liverpool's passing began to dominate the game. In the 87th minute Barnes's long pass sent Rosenthal clear with Peacock in pursuit. The QPR defender tried to pull his man back but Rosenthal shook him off before beating Roberts with a strong shot from a narrow angle.

Queens Park Rangers: Roberts; Bardsley, Wilson, Wilkins, Peacock, McDonald, Impey, Holloway, Ferdinand, Allen, Sinton.

Liverpool: Hooper; Marsh, Burrows, Nicol, Piechnik, Hutchison, McManaman, Redknapp, Rush (Barnes, 18min), Jones, Rosenthal.

Referee: R Milford (Bristol).

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Barnes is back!

John Barnes announced his return to League football by setting up an 87th minute winner for Ronnie Rosenthal at Loftus Road.

The England star, out of action since the summer with a ruptured achilles tendon, secured a battling victory for Liverpool with one superb pass which sent the Israeli clear to shoot sweetly past Tony Roberts from an angle.

Barnes, injured in England's European Championship warm-up in Finland last June, came on for hamstring victim Ian Rush after 17 minutes, but that was the last thing Liverpool fans had to cheer for some time.

Without the injured Paul Stewart and Michael Thomas, they were rescued by two goal-line clearances, while Mike Hooper made tremendous saves from Les Ferdinand and Andy Sinton (twice) as Ferdinand threatened to tear them apart.

Barnes showed a flash of the old magic with a low cross that Mike Marsh just missed, then curled in a free-kick which Roberts saved comfortably. But those were isolated breaks.

But Graeme Souness had strong words with his team at the interval, and they came out determined not to be overrun again.

The warning signals were there for Rangers as McManaman had a goal disallowed for offside.

Ferdinand and Ian Holloway both had chances at the other end, but Jamie Redknapp should have given Liverpool the lead with a close-range volley which flew over.

In the 75th minute, Sinton saw his curling effort whizz a fraction wide of the far post.

But Barnes' influence had been steadily growing - and three minutes from time his superb angled pass set Rosenthal galloping for his fifth goal of the season.