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THE TIMES

Souness's strolling players assume lead role in style

Swindon Town 0 Liverpool 5

LIVERPOOL'S ascent to the top of the league for the first time under the volatile management of Graeme Souness was achieved with a tinge of sadness as heavy as the dark clouds which hovered over the County Ground.

The FA Carling Premiership has changed names twice since Souness took over the management of the club in the spring of 1991, there have been 23 changes of playing personnel and a deficit in the transfer market of some Pounds 9 million but, at last, with the two significant additions of Neil Ruddock, for Pounds 2.5 million, and Nigel Clough, for Pounds 2.75 million, he has bought aggression and subtlety and restored the old conviction.

The score could have been anything Liverpool desired. Their team may contain five players over the age of 30, but what pedigree and experience they bring. Poor Swindon, abandoned first by Ardiles and then Hoddle, the creators of their brave attempt at fluid football, simply could not cope with the tide that came their way in Liverpool's unfamiliar change strip of green with a penguin-white front.

At the level at which John Gorman is attempting to build a team for a club that seems suspiciously to have risen above its station, the main ingredient has to be hope and character. The hope came in the first 15 minutes, when Liverpool took a long, gentle look at what was on offer. In the third minute, Summerbee chipped the ball perceptively over Liverpool's square defence to where Mutch had made an excellent run. He hesitated a fraction and Grobbelaar, the goalkeeper in black, came two yards beyond his area to block him.

There were two more chances while Liverpool waited. The first fell to Fjortoft, his attempted overhead shot going wide, and then, after Moncur drifted a delightful ball 25 yards from left to right, Mutch hit his shot along the ground a foot wide of the far post.

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth minutes, the game turned. Fjortoft tried to grapple with Ruddock, received a sharp elbow to the face and no mercy from a referee who ignored Ruddock's misdemeanour.

Moments later, when Summerbee grounded McManaman with a less-obvious elbow, out came the yellow card. Worse, from Bjornebye's free kick, Ruddock took the ball on his chest and, with his second touch, prodded it over the goalline. Now Liverpool took command. More precisely, Whelan and Molby took languid command. They may be the strollers of the Premiership, but they prove that the first yards of pace in true football come from the brain and, after 35 minutes, that quality was found to be lacking in the Swindon defence. Jones made a 25-yard run at the retreating red shirts, he slipped the ball out to Nicol on the right, and the Scot's measured cross was then volleyed in for goal No2 by McManaman.

Summerbee, was inert when he should have been marking the winger.

After Mutch had squandered two more opportunities, Nijholt was caught out and Swindon fell further behind. The Dutchman had possession, took his eye off the ball, and Whelan pounced. Having won the ball, the Irishman, whose return to fitness this season has much to do with Liverpool's greater composure, released McManaman, who swayed away from a naive MacLaren tackle and calmly lofted the ball wide of the on-rushing goalkeeper, Digby.

That was in the 61st minute. Nine minutes later, the score was 4-0 after a cross from Bjornebye had been headed out straight to Whelan, who accepted the invitation to

score with an instant shot

from the edge of the penalty area.

By now, the embarrassment of it all was too much for Swindon. The character they will need in abundance this season seemed to desert them, their third consecutive defeat was huge and Liverpool were trying their best to lay on the 200th League goal of Ian Rush's career in a Liverpool shirt. Three times in one minute he could have scored, but when the scoreline was finally rounded up to five, it was through the substitute, Marsh, who curled in an immaculate shot with his right foot.

It was all over bar the talking and even that came from Liverpool. "It was generally known when I took over I had to make changes," Souness said. "I'm absolutely delighted to have some of the best players in English football and, if they desire it and want it, we have a chance in every competition. We can only get better and, if we do, then we can start frightening a few teams."

SWINDON TOWN (5-3-2): F Digby N Summerbee, A Whitbread, R MacLaren, S Taylor, K Horlock M Ling (sub: C Maskell, 78min), L Nijholt, J Moncur (sub: M Hazard, 50) J A Fjortoft, A Mutch.

LIVERPOOL (4-4-2): B Grobbelaar R Jones, M Wright, N Ruddock (sub: M Marsh, 76), S Bjornebye (sub: S Burrows, 73) S Nicol, R Whelan, J Molby, S McManaman I Rush, N Clough.

Referee: P Don.

the guardian

A leisurely excursion for the new Liverpool express

IN THE days of steam, GWR locomotives used to puff their way out of Swindon bearing the names of famous football teams. Yesterday the modern equivalent returned to the County Ground to leave the Premiership's rawest newcomers stranded in a siding after what was rarely more than a spot of gentle shunting. For the second time in five days Liverpool gave an exhibition of passing to support their argument for being regarded as the side most likely to wrest the championship from Manchester United. Having stated their case with a 31 victory at QPR, they completed a leisurely 50 win over a Swindon team whose attacking enterprise was not matched by their finishing and whose sluggish defence had been demolished long before the end.

Liverpool are now top of the table, displacing Everton. It is the first time they have led the league during Graeme Souness's 29 months as manager.

'I have some of the best players in English football,' said a jubilant Souness after the match. 'If they have the desire and we don't suffer too many injuries we will have a chance in every competition.'

Late last season Souness's management appeared to be living on borrowed time. Now he seems to have recovered his old truculence. 'Why are we talking about a Liverpool revival?' he retorted. 'Revivals happen after Christmas. If we're making headway, then that will be the time to judge us.'

The essential strength of this performance lay in the depth of footballing knowledge possessed by the likes of Whelan, Molby and Rush which, given the additional thought processes of Clough, enabled Liverpool to mark time, mark space and stroll forward when Swindon lost the ball - which was increasingly often.

To their credit Swindon tried to recreate the patterns of progress which had distinguished last season's promotion. But, with Hoddle's guiding light now searching for a break in the clouds at Stamford Bridge, while Calderwood's defensive authority has gone to Tottenham, they are not well equipped to survive these awkward early days in the Premiership.

On Wednesday Swindon will face a different though equally demanding task at Southampton, who are also awaiting their season's first point. Few of Swindon's opponents will be prepared to allow their attack the space they enjoyed throughout this game and had Mutch, the new arrival from Wolves, or Fjortoft accepted one of several early chances Liverpool might not have been able to spend so much time in leisurely pursuits.

The point was not lost on Swindon's manager John Gorman. 'If one of those had gone in it could have been an entirely different story,' he said. 'Liverpool could not believe they were 20 up at half-time because at that stage we were the better team.'

'It was Liverpool's sheer quality that finished us off but I saw a lot of good things in our play. It's my job to lift the team now but we will stick to our passing game because it will bring us joy against lesser sides than Liverpool.'

In fact the contest had remained evenly poised until the 18th minute. Then Ruddock elbowed Fjortoft and was lectured but, when Summerbee did the same to McManaman, he was cautioned. Swindon were still smouldering as Ruddock chested down Bjornebye's free-kick and put Liverpool ahead.

Ten minutes before half-time Jones set up Nicol for the centre which caught Summerbee slumbering as McManaman nipped in to slot their second. The third goal arrived on the hour after Whelan had caught Nijholt in possession before sending McManaman swaying past a defender to score again.

Nine minutes later Whelan himself drove a 25-yard shot low past Digby and Marsh, who had replaced Ruddock because of the defender's slight groin strain, reminded one of Liverpool's depth of strength with an elegant fifth goal 11 minutes from the end.

Rush appeared to have distinguished another selfless, industrious game with his 200th league goal for Liverpool, only to discover that play had been halted for a foul on Molby committed after the Dane's pass had sent the Welshman through. It was the only illogical moment of Liverpool's performance.

Swindon Town: Digby; Summerbee, Nijholt, Taylor, Moncur (Hazard, 48),

MacLaren, Fjortoft, Ling (Maskell, 76), Whitbread, Horlock, Mutch.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Bjornebye (Burrows, 72), Nicol, Wright, Ruddock

(Marsh, 75), Clough, Rush, Whelan, Molby, McManaman.

Referee: P Don (Hanworth Park).

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEKLY

Reds go nap

Liverpool made it a Merseyside monopoly as they strode back to the summit of English football for the first time in more than two years. These are early days for manager Graeme Souness' red revolution but the signs of a bristling return to former glories were ominous as his team leapt over local rivals Everton at the top and cruelly underlined newly promoted Swindon's struggle to adjust to life in the fast lane.

Barnstorming centre-half Neil Ruddock, Souness' 2.5 million pound buy from Tottenham, scored his first league goal for Liverpool to end Swindon's early promise of an upset. But it was Steve McManaman, the leggy, local discovery on the left wing, who sealed the result with a pair of smartly-taken goals either side of half-time.

Swindon, brave and combative and still full of the good intentions implanted by former manager Glenn Hoddle, found themselves on the end of a comprehensive defeat - their third in a row - after Ronnie Whelan and substitute Mike Marsh drilled home emphatic shots from the edge of the box in the final 20 minutes. And new boss John Gorman is left looking up from the foot of the table under no illusions already about the size of his task to keep the Wiltshire team afloat in their first Premiership season. It could have been so different had his 250,000 pound former Wolves striker Andy Mutch accepted the early chances he was given to make a glorious debut. In only four minutes, Mutch hesitated over a through ball from Nicky Summerbee which sent him clear to the edge of the Liverpool box and allowed goalkeeper Bruce Grobbelaar to race out and dispossess him.

Then Norwegian striker Jan Aage Fjortoft put a spectacular overhead shot just wide when Mutch nodded down John Moncur's cross and Mutch rammed another opportunity beyond the far post after swooping in on another opening provided by Moncur.

Swindon were left regretting their wastefulness when in the 18th minute, the powerful Ruddock muscled his way into the six yard box, knocked down a free-kick from Stig Inge Bjernebye and forced the ball home. McManaman, jeered relentlessly by the home crowd who felt he made a meal of the foul by Summerbee that led to the free-kick, popped up unmarked on the end of Steve Nicol's low cross to slot in Liverpool's second goal in the 36th minute.

There was no way back for Swindon after that, especially losing the influential Moncur through injury early in the second half. McManaman skipped past two challenges to register a third goal with a measured shot over 'keeper Fraser Digby just after the hour.

Even after Whelan and Marsh added further punishment in the 70th and 80th minutes there were ample opportunities for Liverpool to grab more goals in what had already become a rout. Delighted Souness said: "We can only get better." The Anfield boss added: "I have some of the best players in the country and if they have the desire we have a chance in all three domestic competitions this season." But Souness said: "Why is everybody talking about a revival? The time for that usually comes after Christmas."