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THE TIMES

Liverpool stumble over Arsenal's lack of ambition

Rob Hughes survives boredom at Anfield, as Liverpool sink into a morass of Arsenal negativity

NO WONDER the pretenders to Manchester United's crown are already falling away. The 42,750 spectators at Anfield on Saturday, an act of faith if ever there was one, might have been more aroused had they attended a trappist monastery. Liverpool tried but could not score in their fifth consecutive League match.

Arsenal came, yet again, simply to nullify. It was gentlemanly of them not to do as everyone else does, hit Liverpool while they are down.

United's 3-2 win at Sheffield Wednesday on Saturday is the sum goal total of Arsenal's five performances away from home: they have conceded two goals and confined themselves to scoring three. Swindon have scored more on their travels. "We are tired," the Arsenal manager, George Graham, pleaded, referring to the fact that his team have played five games in 15 days. Tired? It is we, Mr Graham, who are fatigued.

In away games this season, Arsenal have contained the opposition with three different negative styles: at Tottenham, they matched the midfield diamond with an aggressive diamond of their own; at Old Trafford, they played five across the back; and, at Anfield, they deployed Jensen to smother Clough, withdrew everyone bar Ian Wright behind the ball and, at one stage, Graham was bellowing on the touchline for even Wright to get back behind a Liverpool free kick.

That Liverpool could do nothing about it speaks volumes for what is happening to them. They drew the biggest crowd of the day and bored them with the only goalless display in the FA Carling Premiership.

Jan Molby, one injured Liverpool absentee who might have made a greater fist of things in midfield, unwittingly gave the game away with his comment to Liverpool's radio listeners. After 20 minutes, he observed: "I don't know whether Arsenal haven't started playing, or Liverpool's playing reasonably well today. Our passing is not as crisp as it was earlier in the season, but it's not going to be when you have lost five of your last six League games."

Oh dear. Graeme Souness is trying to tell us that there is no crisis of confidence at Liverpool. Over, once again, to the broadcaster, Molby: "Arsenal look very predictable to me, they don't seem to have much movement when they are in possession, but this is not a game about performance, it's all about three points."

Liverpool's latest tactical approach is to replicate the diamond formation, a curious compliment to Tottenham since Souness, after the London club had won at Anfield, raged: "I can't believe we've lost to a five-a-side team."

The pity is that, against Arsenal, Liverpool looked the better team without proving it so. Hutchison and Redknapp, playing on the sides of their midfield, are the youth and vigour that was missing while Souness clung to older players. Alas, Hutchison's late, perceptive runs into scoring positions were betrayed by anxious attempts at finishing.

Rush, meanwhile, was hobbled by wretched service and Wright had no genuine chances. It was left to the inexperienced to try to win the points. Robbie Fowler, at 18 a proven striker who has scored freely for the England youth team, is a Liverpoolian who is going to excite.

This was his first home appearance and he created three chances. In the 66th minute, when the subdued Clough provided a rapier pass, Fowler was through one-on-one against Seaman. The England goalkeeper stood his ground, intimidating the teenager and when Fowler hastily attempted his shot, Seaman got down to block it. Seaman repeated the exercise twice more.

However, late on, as usual, Arsenal contrived opportunities to steal a win: after a miscued header by Linighan, Merson, literally on his knees, slipped at the moment he might have connected with McGoldrick's cross. The chance went begging.

LIVERPOOL (4-1-2-1-2): B Grobbelaar R Jones, M Wright, N Ruddock, J Dicks P Stewart J Redknapp, D Hutchison N Clough I Rush, R Fowler.

ARSENAL (4-3-2-1): D Seaman L Dixon, A Adams, A Linighan, N Winterburn E McGoldrick, J Jensen, P Davis K Campbell, P Merson I Wright.

Referee: G Ashby.

the guardian

Kop sings a sad song as Souness switches off style

IT IS almost as if from some Jungian collective unconscious that the Liverpool Kop now sporadically sings 'Come on you mighty Reds'. In a few brief years Liverpool have been marginalised as a championship force.

In terms of this year's title race this result was more about Arsenal losing two points than Liverpool showing any genuine signs of becoming involved. Arsenal have twice demonstrated under George Graham that it is possible to be champions by exciting nobody but the blind faithful. But with Manchester United in such joyous form, mere pragmatism may not be enough.

And yet with United and Arsenal involved in an alluring but tiring chase across Europe, this may be a season when fresher legs pick up the title run-in. In theory, then, it should be the moment for Liverpool to stride up, as Leeds are currently doing.

Instead Liverpool had to be thankful they had avoided their fifth successive Premiership defeat, even if the only defence they have cracked since August 28 has been Fulham's - which even by the hair that Jimmy Hill used to have on his chinny chin chin is not impressive.

Souness insists that all his players are buoyant. He praised the potential of Fowler and proclaimed delight with his quartet of defenders. 'You would be pushed to find a more talented back four.' Nobody twitched.

When goals are scarce the last team one would wish to meet at home is Arsenal. With Barnes and Walters injured and McManaman benched, Liverpool had few options but to play the ball through the middle, for the support from Jones and Dicks was minimal.

Thus eyes fixed on Clough who in such circumstances might be thought of as just the ticket. Indeed his instant flicks set up chances for Hutchison (twice) and Fowler, but for long periods he was isolated in the midfield commotion.

Merson's considerable talents were similarly by-passed although, if he had kept his feet in the 82nd minute, he would surely have stolen the three points. A sudden burst of pace by Campbell completely did for Dicks, and McGoldrick's low cross scudded into Merson's path. He executed a perfect pratfall.

It was one of the few chances Arsenal created. Liverpool, without ever achieving midfield or attacking fusion, tested Seaman at least twice, the England goalkeeper standing his ground to save from Hutchison and the 18-year-old Fowler.

'He will prove himself every bit as clinical as Rush,' said Souness, who must have wished, however, that just one of Fowler's opportunities had fallen Rush's way. Anfield applauded Fowler loudly but for much of the game appeared traumatised. Souness, for good reasons or not, has destroyed the familiar and imposed the sort of rapid team changes to which the club is totally unaccustomed. Many seem unsure what to make of it all, numbed by the shock of the new. Some just think it shocking.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Dicks, Wright, Ruddock, Redknapp, Hutchison, Clough, Stewart, Rush, Fowler.

Arsenal: Seaman; Dixon, Winterburn, Linighan, Adams, McGoldrick, Davis, Jensen, Merson, Wright, Campbell.

Referee: G Ashby (Worcester).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Liverpool find nought for their comfort

LIVERPOOL 0, ARSENAL 0

LIVERPOOL 0 (4-3-1-2); Grobbelaar; Jones, M Wright, Ruddock, Dicks; Redknapp, Stewart, Hutchison; Clough; Fowler, Rush.

ARSENAL 0 (4-3-3); Seaman; Dixon, Adams, Linighan, Winterburn; McGoldrick, Jensen, Davis; Campbell, I Wright, Merson.

Highlight Clough's through ball in the 66th minute put Fowler clean away, but he shot straight against Seaman's body.

Booked: M Wright (39min); Stewart (40min).

Weather: fine. Ground: firm. Referee: G Ashby (Worcester).

Playing for kicks: Redknapp, one of Liverpool's few successes, sends Davis, of Arsenal, into orbit Hugh Routledge

FOR Liverpool, still little joy, still no goals. At least they avoided losing their fifth Premier League match on the trot. But then it would have been hard to lose to an Arsenal side who offered this contest precious little.

George Graham had obviously omitted to show his men the video of Arsenal's visit here in May 1989. Of Thomas's last-minute goal, of Arsenal's last-gasp championship. Arsenal should have trotted on to this pitch humming tunes of glory. Alas, they did not. None more so than Ian Wright, substituted against Odense in the week, and rightly so. This was Wright's last real test before England play Holland, with all due respect to Huddersfield, who go to Highbury on Tuesday bearing a 5-0 deficit in the League Cup.

Wright needed to show the Match of the Day cameras a thing or two, but he was curiously low on zip and confidence. A move near time summed it up. Wright collected a pass on the flank which put him half-clear. Instead of homing in on Grobbelaar and the Kop, he cut inside into a string of red shirts and was lost. Only in the last 10 minutes did Arsenal move like a side who were second in the League and were playing in an arena where the fates have often been kind to them. Then, Linighan was a foot wide when he headed on Merson's cross, and Merson fell over when McGoldrick's low centre reached him just beyond the far post. Had any of those late chances gone in, it would have been a typical Arsenal exercise. Grind down the opposition, and sucker-punch them late on. But this was not typical Arsenal. True, it was their fifth match in 15 days and after Odense, Graham was making gentle noises about tired players. Was this the same George Graham who took his team to South Africa before playing in the Charity Shield on August 7? It was. But now there is no answer to the tiredness factor. Arsenal can hardly let in six against dear old Huddersfield and exit from the League Cup.

Liverpool would dearly love to be back in Europe. First, though, they have to score a goal. Their last in the League came at 3.39pm on Saturday, August 28, some 501 playing minutes ago. And even that was an Anfield penalty.

Molby converted that kick. Yesterday he was still injured and in the press box commentating. Liverpool can ill-afford to lose their best midfielder, even though Redknapp was a strong candidate for man of the match, and even though Hutchison, alongside him, ran into some good shooting positions.

Stewart was fitful, though, as was Clough, who may have been worrying about dad. Too many of Clough's passes were mis-hit. This is partly a compliment to Jensen, who often marked Clough, and who is now in tune to the pace of the English game after a poor start.

Clough did at least produce the pass of the day and it should have led to a Liverpool goal. That pass came in the 66th minute and it sent Fowler, the 18-year-old, haring down the middle towards Seaman, using his considerable speed.

Fowler, starting only his third senior match, has scored goals for England Youth, and Graeme Souness believes he is a born goalscorer. Seaman, however, is England's best goalkeeper. He stood up until the last second and contrived to block Fowler's shot. It had taken almost 66 minutes for the match to come alive.

The catalyst was a long shot from Ruddock, which was more accurate than some of Ruddock's passes out of defence. It flew just over Seaman's raised fingertips, and the Liverpool supporters thought they were going to get a corner.

They did not; they were angry. At last, a bit of passion. At last, this tentative, misfiring Liverpool were pushed forward by noise.

Liverpool did not field wide men because Barnes is still injured and Souness is unconvinced by the current form of McManaman and Walters. Therefore, Liverpool often tried to trick their way down the middle, as when Fowler beat Linighan only to be deprived by an unlucky rebound.

Breaking down Arsenal is hard. Indeed, both defences played well, not least Dicks, who at 25 is talented enough to replace Pearce as England's left-back if only he can control his temper. At right-back, Dixon is full of joy at being back from injury. His performance probably shaded that of his opposite number, Jones.

Stewart could not control his temper, being cautioned for a needless moment of dissent. He followed Mark Wright, who had rugby-tackled Campbell, into the book. But there was seldom the bite you expect from two rivals such as these.

Souness repeated what he had said after the defeat at Chelsea seven days earlier: that he was not disappointed with Liverpool's play, only with the blank they drew. "Sooner or later the goals will start going in," he said. "And young Fowler will prove that he's every bit as clinical as Rush."

In League terms, the soonest Liverpool can score is on Saturday week, when Oldham Athletic visit Anfield. If they do not do so then, we will have to start thumbing through the record books again.