

Date: 19 December 1998
 Opposition: Sheffield Wednesday
 Competition: League

Sunday Times	Times	Mirror	
Observer	Guardian		
Sun Independent	Independent		

THE TIMES

Worrying lack of passion leaves Liverpool in limbo

LIVERPOOL 2 SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY 0

THE most accurate encapsulation of a rare Liverpool triumph came from the one man whose attempts to haul the match from its mediocrity went unaided. "It was efficient," Jamie Redknapp said. "That's what we need right now."

Limited ambition underpins work at Anfield these days and, therefore, although they succeeded in ending the club's worst sequence for 44 years, there was still no evidence to disprove the theory that this is the worst Liverpool team for decades. Even the source of much satisfaction, their second clean sheet in 12 games, cannot be relied upon as some sort of barometer for a brighter future. The diligent efforts of Benito Carbone apart, Sheffield Wednesday belied the kind of endeavour and threat that had recently injected some hope into their FA Carling Premiership season.

What could be construed as more worrying for Liverpool is that events surrounding the actual football provided more of a focus for what remains a loyal crowd. Supporters' groups dedicated the moments before kick-off to the memory of the 96 people who lost their lives in the tragedy at Hillsborough, the home of Wednesday. The Kop rose in unison, reminding officials of the visiting club of their desire to see a permanent memorial erected at the ground.

If that was an emotional and necessary interlude, another kind of emotional outpouring from the fans after the final whistle showed how low the club has sunk. The biggest cheers were reserved for announcements of defeats elsewhere for Manchester United and Everton. One fan said: "I know we can't catch Man U, but as long as we finish above Everton, that's all that matters."

It will be a disaster if they do not manage that. Indeed, if they finish below their Merseyside rivals, they could well be playing in the Nationwide League first division next season. Of course, Liverpool have too many talented individuals to suffer such a fate, but, before a 15-minute period of pressure proved enough to break their opponents' resistance on Saturday, they were alarmingly close to the relegation area.

The unease was evident in the body language of Gerard Houllier, the manager, midway through the second period. Liverpool, ahead through goals from Berger after 18 minutes and Owen 15 minutes later, had relaxed a little and Houllier, sensing the danger of a Wednesday revival, was off the bench, clenching his fist at the players.

Redknapp, whose passing and awareness was delightful all afternoon, took the hint and, a couple of attacks later, the home side had reassured themselves. "The more we show signs of strength and stability, the better we feel," Houllier said. "We are not there yet, though. I know what went wrong in the second half, and now we must find a way of playing for the whole match."

There does not, though, appear to be much love left in South Yorkshire for Paolo Di Canio, the Wednesday striker who has not returned for training with his club. Suspended until their Premiership encounter with Leicester City on Boxing Day, for pushing over Paul Alcock, the referee, in September, Di Canio spent the weekend in his home town near Rome. Danny Wilson, the Wednesday manager, said: "The chances of him playing next week are slim and, apart from physically dragging him back, what can I do? The sooner he tells us whether he wants to play for Sheffield Wednesday, the better."

Moreover, Carbone, Di Canio's fellow countryman, is missing his absent friend's ability on the field. On Saturday, you had to sympathise with Carbone, for he was let down by his team-mates. Moments after Owen had struck for Liverpool's second, he looked like a broken man, and Wednesday will have to work hard to prevent him from falling into Di Canio's trap of disillusionment.

LIVERPOOL (3-5-2): D James - J Carragher, S Staunton, P Babb - V Heggem (sub: BT Kvarme, 83min), J Redknapp, P Ince, P Berger, SI Bjernebye - M Owen (sub: K Riedle, 89), R Fowler.

SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY (4-4-2): P Srnicek - P Atherton, D Walker, E Thome, A Hinchcliffe - N Alexandersson (sub: L Briscoe, 60), D Sonner, W Jonk, P Rudi (sub: R Humphreys, 86) - A Booth, B Carbone.

Referee: A Wilkie.

the guardian

Liverpool labour the point despite best efforts of Berger and Owen WHEN a team are one defeat away from alienating their most blinkered loyalists all they can ask for is a level playing field, a fair wind and, most crucially, accommodating opponents.

While it would be stretching a point to suggest that Sheffield Wednesday had begun to unfurl the white flag before their arrival at Anfield, only fleetingly did they toy with the idea of deepening Liverpool's mid-season crisis. It was an opportunity callously missed. With their hosts marooned in their worst patch of form for more than four decades the assumption was that Wednesday would give it a real go at the very least, if only because the events of the last few months have conspired to prove that Liverpool are vulnerable when standing toe-to-toe with players of enthusiasm.

Sadly, too much was expected of the South Yorkshire club for it was only after they had shipped the two goals which always seemed likely to decide the outcome that they shaped as if to confirm their own emergence from the Premiership's trauma ward.

'They got their goals at a point when I thought we had weathered the storm,' said Wednesday's manager Danny Wilson. 'We really needed to score a goal during the period when we had most of the possession, but it just wouldn't come.'

Actually it would not have come had the game been extended until Boxing Day for despite the tireless running and sublime touches of Benito Carbone, Wednesday's attempts to rip a hole in Liverpool's tissue-paper defence fell only fractionally short of being embarrassing.

'I am particularly happy with the second half because we managed to keep a clean sheet and that doesn't happen very often these days,' said Liverpool's manager Gerard Houllier with the look of a man who had just taken the first faltering step on a journey that threatens to be an extremely long one.

The accusation that Houllier's players neither care nor try is palpably false for their work-rate was again beyond reproach. But this Liverpool team are ordinary, decidedly so, and it will take a combination of firm leadership and huge bundles of cash if the slackers and mercenaries are to be flushed out and replaced not simply by better players, but by better players who can boast much more laudable ideals.

'We are not perfect; we know that,' said Houllier. Houllier's main problem is the transparently imperfect form of Robbie Fowler whose recovery from a career-threatening knee injury has now slowed to a crawl.

The only way to restore the young England forward to full match fitness is to play him, of course, but he is so lacking in every department right now that it really is proving to be a painful exercise.

The solution to the problem is likely to come in the form of the aforementioned firm leadership for if Fowler should display McManaman-esque reluctance to accept the offer of a new contract, Houllier will probably seek to sell him before the season is over.

While he never looked like scoring Fowler did actually have a foot in both of Liverpool's goals, steering into the path of Patrik Berger after 19 minutes and then beginning the move which ended with Michael Owen's close-range drive 15 minutes later.

It was not until after the interval that Liverpool came to appreciate that the game was still theirs to throw away.

By way of laborious midfield movement and a series of reckless clearances they applied themselves diligently to the task of dismantling what it was they had built in the first half.

True to form they tried to toss it all away, but this time it was beyond them.

Date: 19 December 1998
Opposition: Sheffield Wednesday
Competition: League

Sunday Times	Times	Mirror		
Observer	Guardian			
Sun Independent	Independent			

The  Mail

The Daily Telegraph

Date: 19 December 1998
 Opposition: Sheffield Wednesday
 Competition: League

Sunday Times	Times	Mirror	
Observer	Guardian		
Sun Independent	Independent		



Reds still a ghost of Christmas past
 Liverpool 2 Sheffield Wednesday 0

PALPITATIONS ON the bench and periods of anxious silence in the stands provided testimony that the Liverpool renaissance remains a fantasy for a Christmas yet to come.

But, for management and supporters alike, this humble offering will suffice as a Christmas present, warding off as it does the humiliation of the club's worse sequence in 44 years.

Gerard Houllier's repeated claims of grounds for optimism meet with growing scepticism on Merseyside, and the patience of the natives would surely have snapped after a ninth defeat in 12 games.

Instead they were served with a deserved if unspectacular victory, Liverpool summoning enough quality from the archives in 15 vibrant and destructive first-half minutes to expose the frailty of Sheffield Wednesday's much vaunted resurgence.

That Liverpool then reverted to the sterile football which has characterised more recent times was confirmation that no seasonal miracle had been worked. A kind of balancing act had been accomplished. This latest evidence suggests that Liverpool are a slightly better than ordinary side, and Wednesday an ordinary one.

It all depends on your aspirations, of course. For Wednesday, "ordinary" represents no small achievement in the Premiership. At the start of the season, and only a few weeks ago, they were considered relegation fodder. Now they look likely to hold their own in the upper league.

Benito Carbone, all impish skills and elusive spins, brings the propensity for the unexpected, the rest supply dependable, functional stability. On another day Andy Booth might have headed them back into contention: on this day he looked like another willing but ordinary player.

The one man who might dance to Carbone's tune, of course, is his countryman Paolo Di Canio, who is eligible for a return to active duty on Boxing Day but chose to make his way on to the missing persons file rather than Wednesday's training ground.

By common consent, Liverpool have been missing a dominant central defender for some considerable time, but on Saturday the back three coped relatively comfortably with Booth and generally managed to keep even Carbone at a safe distance.

They will meet distinctly more menacing attacking forces, and Steve Staunton in particular will not always be as fortunate as he was on this occasion. Wednesday were simply incapable of exploiting his now familiar lapses.

Although Paul Ince is a player of limited means, the midfield is a resourceful and potent department when Jamie Redknapp steers its course, while Patrik Berger is an important source of goals. His right-foot blast which produced the opening for Liverpool was something of a collector's item.

Michael Owen effectively put the match beyond Wednesday with Liverpool's second, but this was a strangely fleeting performance by the 19-year-old, and the attack is still a tantalising conundrum for Houllier. Robbie Fowler, his other striker, had one of those afternoons that challenge your recollection of the swaggering youngster who scored goals and destroyed defences for fun.

He scuffed a first half chance and squandered two more in the second when he could have spared Houllier and Phil Thompson all that touch-line torture.

The restoration of a fully fit, committed and focused Steve McManaman - or a direct replacement if he is to leave - would give Liverpool another dimension that would also help to lift them above that sad, "slightly better than ordinary" category.

Their overall problem is their inability to sustain the intensity of their football through a full match - or even half a match.

Fifteen minute spells of explosive football are insufficient to see off better teams than Wednesday and bring back some much missed fame and glory to Anfield. Had Wednesday managed a goal in the second half the entire stadium would have been a bag of nerves. But as it is Houllier has a welcome breather. There will be more tests and perhaps more palpitations to endure in the weeks and months ahead.

Goals: Berger (18) 1-0; Owen (34) 2-0.

Liverpool (3-5-2): James; Carragher, Staunton, Babb; Heggem (Kvarme, 82), Redknapp; Ince, Berger, Bjerneby; Fowler, Owen (Riedle, 87). Substitutes not used: Friedel (gk), McAteer, Thompson.

Sheffield Wednesday (4-4-2): Srnicek; Atherton, Thome, Walker, Hinchcliffe; Alexandersson (Briscoe, 58), Sonner, Jonk, Rudi (Humphreys, 85); Carbone, Booth. Substitutes not used: Clarke (gk), Stefanovic, Magilton.

Referee: A Wilkie (Chester-le-Street). Bookings: Liverpool: Bjerneby, Berger.

Sheffield Wednesday: Hinchcliffe.

Man of the match: Redknapp.

Attendance: 40,003.



Red roar is replaced by a chorus of disapproval

THE famous old roar of the Kop has been replaced. Not by jeers, but by mocking laughter.

It's the new brand of that famous Scouse wit. Such is the decline in standards at Anfield that the fans now snigger at some of the fare served up to them by their fallen idols.

Poor Stig Inge Bjerneby and Phil Babb are the butt of the merciless mirth. It was one of those days when they actually saw too much of the ball. The Norwegian struggles badly for control but, to his credit, never hides. The crowd wish he did at times, and there was a wave of ironic cheers when he got it right.

Babb was the other victim of soccer sarcasm. He clocked up every wayward pass in the manual - Alan Hansen he isn't - and then found his man. Cue more laughter.

Finding the funny side of Liverpool's plight is quite an achievement. But you can't fool knowledgeable supporters, although boss Gerard Houllier does try his own form of kidology.

Once upon a time the only double talk you heard at Liverpool was about winning the title and the FA Cup.

Plain speaking, no psycho-babble. Same team as last season, as Shankly used to say. If they didn't rate you then the Boot Room soon got the message across.

Now it's about massaging egos, keeping people onside when you would rather they were off, and maintaining confidence just to be sure you don't get relegated.

No-one is a bigger confidence trickster, if you know what I mean, than new boss Houllier. He has inherited a right old mess but has to be a French smoothie.

So when Robbie Fowler is kept on for the whole 90 minutes when he is labouring badly and the public are baying for a change, it is to keep his spirits up.

Fowler is not firing as he would like, but rather than substitute him as he did so dramatically at Wimbledon, Houllier is using his powers of psychology to get the best from him.

Houllier said: "Robbie was unlucky. He worked hard. The problem is that in the last four weeks he has not been able to train with us fully because of an ankle injury."

"I hope he is all right now. He needs to have top sharpness. I wanted to keep him on to the very end to show him that I believe in him."

In other words, Fowler was unhappy last week and Houllier could do without falling out with players he might want to keep when his French revolution is over. Houllier also claimed the fans were right behind the team, but that was not how it sounded when Fowler in particular showed faltering touch in the second half as Liverpool staggered.

You cannot spin-doctor the Kop. They know that this side needs a massive overhaul - and is about to get it.

Houllier admits the side played well for 20 minutes, when the reality is that they were ordinary for 70 against a team even worse than themselves.

Wednesday were so weak that they did not manage a shot on target, and beating them only adds to Liverpool's sorriest statistic. Just one win against a top-half team all season tells its own story.

Houllier must know that in his heart but has to say the team is taking shape. He can't say that many must go without being sure he has the replacements coming. After the farcical manoeuvres of late traillists from Cameroon, Monaco reserves and Ukraine, not to mention a failed move for a German veteran, that may not be so easy.

So Houllier will continue to shrug his shoulders Gallic-style and ramble around the real issue - that he needs five or six players pronto, or Liverpool will be stuck in mediocrity.

The shining lights were the usual ones, Jamie Redknapp in midfield, Jamie Carragher at the back and Michael Owen, the 13-goal top scorer who just keeps on going.

Redknapp was quite magnificent, spraying passes around in an area he dominated with some ease. A goal would have made his day even more memorable.

At least Redknapp was close to the point when he said: "It wasn't a great performance, just efficient. But that is what we needed."

"We've got Steve McManaman coming back from injury next week and that is a massive boost. It's an old cliché, but it will be like signing a new player."

Now McManaman, there is another great area of double-talk. He says he wants to stay, the club want to keep him, but he is now just 11 days away from talking to anyone he fancies.

The truth, as they say, is out there. McManaman will surely go, and hopefully there will be an outbreak of honesty and he will admit it's for the cash and maybe a better chance of medals.

Then Fowler's contract will become the big issue and if we can cut the cackle we will find out if he too sees Liverpool as the place to be or longs for a move.

And of course skipper Paul Ince's future has also to be resolved. He is a major player in the political intrigue at Anfield and there are rumours of unrest with number two Phil Thompson.

That struggle for power can have only one eventual winner, with Thompson installed from above and Ince growing older and less influential on and off the pitch. With all these dimensions at Liverpool it is perhaps no wonder Houllier prefers to dwell on coaching-speak and trying hard to be the statesman.

Poor old Wednesday's problems are more mundane, unless you include Paolo Di

Date: 19 December 1998 Opposition: Sheffield Wednesday Competition: League	Sunday Times	Times	Mirror		
	Observer	Guardian			
	Sun Independent	Independent			

Canio, which sadly they can't.
The Italian enigma has not even called to say why he is staying away.
Danny Wilson would gladly accept the charges if he rang to tell him he intends to come home when his ban runs out on Boxing Day.
Wilson groaned: "We are completely in his hands, the decision is his.
"He either wants to play or he doesn't. I don't know what's on his mind.
"The fans want to know what's going on and they're entitled to an answer.
"I think they are losing patience, which is understandable."
There's plain speaking for you. Wilson one day deserves a bigger club than Wednesday. He has kept them above the danger zone with shrewd handling. But their shortcomings were there for all to see at Anfield.
They are a lightweight team whose best chance of beating the drop is that there are so many others around like them.
LIVERPOOL: James 6, Heggem 7 (Kvarme 82, 6), Carragher 7, Staunton 6, Babb 5, Bjernebye 6, Ince 7, Redknapp 9, Berger 7, Owen 7 (Riedle 88, 6), Fowler 6.
SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY: Srnicek 6, Atherton 6, Thome 7, Walker 6, Hinchcliffe 7, Alexandersson 5 (Briscoe 57, 7), Sonner 5, Jonk 6, Rudi 5 (Humphries 87, 6), Carbone 8, Booth 6.
MAN OF THE MATCH: Jamie Redknapp



Date: 19 December 1998
 Opposition: Sheffield Wednesday
 Competition: League

Sunday Times	Times	Mirror
Observer	Guardian	
Sun Independent	Independent	



Owen aids the recovery

COMPLETE recovery may take quite a while, but it's not unreasonable to assume that Liverpool's convalescence has begun. Drawing on Anfield's restorative powers and surviving a queasy first quarter-hour, Gerard Houllier's much derided side rediscovered some missing vitality yesterday and recorded their first win of December.

Having lost each of the last three games, the club reacted to apparent ill-health by surrounding themselves with supportive friends and family, creating an ideal ambience for recuperation. The supporters - rarely in decades gone by offered the chance to be anything more than "fair weather" - sang long before they were winning. The players knew they were still loved and reacted accordingly.

Even so, like any groggy patient, Liverpool were slow risers. Benito Carbone, in twinkle-toes mode, and Danny Sonner, with a rising volley, might have given them nightmares before they were brought to full cold- light-of-day consciousness by Andy Hinchcliffe's zippy free-kick.

Once awake though, Liverpool produced 20 minutes of football held up by Houllier as an example of how he wants his team to play. During that spell, the game was won.

With a suddenness that seemed to take their opponents aback, Liverpool came upliftingly to life. Their midfield metamorphosis was led by Jamie Redknapp - a man who has risen above much of the recent criticism. His passing, combined with Paul Ince's constructively harnessed desire, changed the mood and the goals followed.

First, Robbie Fowler, controlling Stig Inge Bjernebye's left wing corner, teed-up Patrik Berger. Then, just beyond the half-hour Bjernebye scampered on to Jamie Carragher's pass and cut inside before locating Michael Owen in prime predatory position to dispatch his 13th goal of the season.

Owen's lifting of the pace was the constant catalyst for the Kop's lifting of the noise. He - the nippy hurrier on to so many hopeful midfield passes - has represented hope through recent grim times. So, when he was withdrawn late in the second half, the crowd's valedictory applause was heartfelt.

In one week, Owen has missed a penalty, collected the BBC Sports Personality Of The Year award and turned 19. His fans will be relieved to hear that age has not withered him.

Liverpool's visible improvement brought a measured response from Houllier, who had bemoaned his team's unlucky empty-handedness at Wimbledon last week. "We're not perfect - we know that," he said. "We've got to improve in several areas. But these points will give us confidence."

Suddenly, Houllier's problems seem relatively small alongside those of Wednesday's Danny Wilson. Last season Anfield offered his Barnsley team probably the most joyous away day of their brief but beautiful Premiership life. This time, Wilson, in defeat, was met by questions about his errant Italian Paolo Di Canio, still exiled in Rome.

Had he heard any more from Paolo? "More?" replied Wilson, "I haven't heard anything from him."

Di Canio's return from long- term suspension was scheduled, not inappropriately, for Boxing Day. But he has not trained since going home to Italy and the likelihood is that his grand re-entry will be considerably delayed yet.

The Sunday Telegraph

Date: 19 December 1998
 Opposition: Sheffield Wednesday
 Competition: League

Sunday Times	Times	Mirror	
Observer	Guardian		
Sun Independent	Independent		



THE SUNDAY TIMES

Berger brings joy to Anfield

Liverpool 2 (Berger 19, Owen 34) Sheffield Wednesday 0.

THAT IS Liverpool's dire sequence of results over, then. Counterpointed throughout by the ill-placed and at times inexplicable optimism of Gerard Houllier, it finally ended on the day Liverpool's manager chose to temper his over-rosy view of Liverpool's future, noting: "We need to do more." Quite.

During the cataclysmic run of only three victories in their 13 League games before yesterday, it was tempting, but perhaps premature, to think that Liverpool had reached their end.

And although slightly scurried, Liverpool's infamous defence did not panic in the initial to and fro, and Sheffield Wednesday had Des Walker to thank for clearing up some untidy passing at the back.

When trouble did come for Liverpool it was split level. Andy Booth is big enough to exploit Liverpool's weakness in the air and Benito Carbone was in the mood for an advanced lesson in dynamics. Luckily for Jamie Carragher and Phil Babb, the Italian got his equations wrong and was prone to giving away the ball.

In turn, Liverpool, especially if Stig Bjernebye or Patrik Berger were in possession, gave it straight back, which ensured Wednesday's early confidence stayed in place.

With attacks breaking down, Liverpool's best hope appeared to be from a dead ball. Several corners and a Berger free kick caused Pavel Srnicek to flap before Carbone's increasing activity took some of the attention away from him.

But Liverpool kept at it, and when Robbie Fowler, a relative stranger to the net these days, brought down the ball in Wednesday's penalty area, he wisely chose to push it back to Berger. The Czech, at least, was able to find the goal with his feet - his shot lifted through the crowd to beat Srnicek.

We do not expect such altruism from Liverpool's No 9, but it showed good reading of his own game. Every shot he had was scuffed or bungled. Open goals, undefended goals, goals with sage bush blowing past them - none could Fowler master. But his involvement added a lift to Liverpool's previously wayward progress.

Paul Ince, on day release from his self-destruct mechanism, carved up a midfield that Wim Jonk had shown pretensions to controlling. He supplied Jamie Redknapp for a dipping drive that was one of the more masterful efforts in Liverpool's extended re-entry into the game.

However, this unlikely domination appeared to be under threat every time Liverpool's left had the ball.

Babb and Bjernebye laid on clangers, howlers and a startling array of mistakes.

But, after a fine build-up that once again featured Fowler's creative side,

Bjernebye crossed from the left and Michael Owen shot in off a post.

For Bjernebye this represented a sea change of sorts. From then on he looked for his own men, putting Owen through alone against Srnicek before laying on a display of intermittent ability that suggested someone else had played the first half an hour in his place.

It was enough, along with Redknapp's movement from midfield, to maintain Liverpool's momentum. But even at 2-0 Liverpool looked fragile and able to succumb at any moment.

Whether it would be Wednesday's doing or their own depended mainly on Carbone. He caused trouble whenever he had the ball, but was not given it nearly enough. Yet there was every reason for Wednesday to be upbeat as the second half started, though they had still to work out a way of countering Redknapp.

Finding the sort of form that occasionally justifies some of the more hyped-up attention he receives, Redknapp twice played excellent passes into the path of Owen, but Owen was usually off target.

Surprisingly the formations stayed as they were. Petter Rudi, sharp and skilful against Liverpool's right, was especially dangerous when he was actually given the ball - finding Carbone in a move that showed Liverpool at their most static.

Some Liverpool players were evidently not fit enough. Before an hour had passed Fowler was dishevelled and gasping and Ince had slowed to a rumbling trot. Booth, Carbone and Rudi all maintained their pace, although the first glimpses of resigned frustration were visible early in Andy Hinchcliffe's countenance.

Too early, for Liverpool's old faults were still apparent. When Booth jumped to head wide he was watched by all the Anfield back three, with all six feet firmly on the ground. How Paolo Di Canio would have loved a run at such fragile stock.

Danny Wilson, the Wednesday manager, was without the option - "We can't drag him back if he doesn't want to come" he pointed out at the end - but Wilson seemed unwilling to employ his other options in a game that Wednesday could always have got back into.

A clumsy ennui overcame proceedings as the match tripped towards its end.

Shots were snatched from distance, the midfield passages were clunking, a passing movement seldom got beyond two or three players.

Danny Sonner made a typical effort, blasting away at the Liverpool defence when we all know you need only pass straight through it to achieve maximum distress.

Berger did as much to Wednesday's defence, but never into an area that was likely to contain one of his teammates.

It took Redknapp to show how that was done, again Owen picked up on it, but he lost out in the bundle. The ball broke to Fowler and for a flash it seemed he would put into the goal, but his shot deflected and dropped to the right of a post.

More of this followed, Liverpool defending from the middle and breaking via Owen whenever Wednesday extended themselves.

Owen went off after a semi-cocked game and Wednesday presumably wondered why they had not tried that bit harder. Fowler, of course, missed a sitter at the end.

Substitutes: Liverpool: Heggem (Kvarme 83min), Owen (Riedle 88min).

Sheffield Wednesday: Alexandersson (Briscoe 58min), Rudi (Humphreys 86min).

Booked: Hinchcliffe (14min), Bjernebye (15min), Berger (42min).

Referee: A Wilkie (Chester-le-Street).

Attendance: 40,003.

The Observer

End of Reds alert

Liverpool 2

Berger 19, Owen 33 Sheffield Wednesday 0 Att: 40,003

AS GERARD HOULLIER conceded, this was far from a vintage Liverpool performance. However, on the back of the club's worst sequence of results in 44 years, the mere fact that his beleaguered defence had remained unbreached was a cause for celebration in itself.

This was only the second occasion in 14 matches that Liverpool had managed a clean sheet and, despite his side's obvious deficiencies, Houllier was clearly delighted that they had stopped the rot after three successive defeats.

'This was a game we knew we were not allowed to lose,' he said. 'The more our defence continue to show signs of solidarity, the better I feel. I know we are still not perfect, but the fact we have not conceded a goal will bring confidence to all the players.'

'I am very pleased with our strength at the back because, to me, it means a lot. Sometimes we were a bit shaky, but there were other times when we produced outstanding football.'

With eight defeats in their previous 11 matches, the statistics made grim reading for Liverpool's followers, and it was Wednesday, buoyed by an impressive run of nine matches with only one defeat, who were the more attacking force in the opening stages.

Petter Rudi and Danny Sonner both threatened the home goal inside the first 10 minutes, while the ubiquitous Benito Carbone was always ready to run at the Liverpool defence, with the army of dissenters inside Anfield beginning to find their voices.

However, it was the hosts who drew first blood, against the run of play in the 18th minute, courtesy of Patrik Berger's seventh goal of the campaign. Stig Bjernebye's corner fell to Robbie Fowler at the far post and the striker cut the ball back for Berger to lash a fierce drive through a crowded penalty area past the visiting goalkeeper Pavel Srnicek and ease the growing disquiet in the stands.

For the remainder of the half, Liverpool were in the ascendancy. Jamie Redknapp, the catalyst behind most of their attacking forays, sent a trademark drive fizzing just inches over the upright, as well as testing Srnicek with another rasping 20-yard effort, while Vegard Heggem's probing runs along the right flank were a constant problem for Danny Wilson's side.

An air of vulnerability had descended over the visitors and Owen capitalised in the 33rd minute. Bjernebye picked out the England striker on the penalty spot and Owen swivelled and fired a low drive past the advancing Srnicek.

'It was going according to plan for the first 15 minutes, but once they got their noses ahead they played really well for the rest of the first half and I was glad to hear the half-time whistle,' said Wilson. 'Their defence get a lot of stick, but they did well on this occasion and should be commended for that.'

Late in the match the home supporters were subjected to heart-stopping moments as the visitors sought to take advantage of their opponents' fragile confidence. But Liverpool held on for a victory which will have served as a morale-boosting exercise, even if work still needs to be done before there can be any talk of a revival.

Liverpool: James, Heggem (Kvarme 83), Babb, Staunton, Bjernebye, Carragher, Redknapp, Ince, Berger, Fowler, Owen (Riedle 88).

Sheffield Wednesday: Srnicek, Atherton, Jonk, Walker, Carbone, Booth, Hinchcliffe, Thome, Rudi (Humphreys 86), Alexandersson (Briscoe 59), Sonner.

Referee: A Wilkie (Chester-le-Street).

Date: 19 December 1998
Opposition: Sheffield Wednesday
Competition: League

Sunday Times	Times	Mirror		
Observer	Guardian			
Sun Independent	Independent			

