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THE TIMES

Dalglish's dilemma is whether or not to use his own two legs

West Ham United 2 Liverpool 5

To play or not to play? That is the question that continues to run around the conscience of the manager of Liverpool, Kenny Dalglish. He appreciates that his 35-year-old legs can no longer transport him as far or as fast as he would wish but, modest though he is, he cannot deny the influence that they carry around the first division arenas.

Last season, during which he happened to divide his contribution on and off the pitch into two equal halves, the evidence was overwhelming. In his absence Liverpool lost seven of their 21 fixtures and dropped 26 points. In his presence they won 16, including the last seven in a row, and picked up 51 points as well as the championship.

This season the pattern has continued. Take last week as an example. On Wednesday he persuaded himself to come on for the closing minutes at Filbert Street and almost immediately scored a spectacular goal to reduce Leicester City's lead. On Saturday he had no choice but to make an earlier entrance at Upton Park and his impact was even more dramatic.

Before Hansen pulled a hamstring, an injury that forced him to withdraw from the Scottish squad, Liverpool were in trouble. Dalglish had decided to build a fortress around his three recognized central defenders but, as he sat on the sideline, he watched it crumble alarmingly within the opening quarter of an hour. The sweeper system was itself being swept aside.

West Ham United are by now accustomed to the tactic. Four of their five opponents so far have employed it to combat the considerable threat posed by Cottee and McAvennie. Although Devonshire was not there to spread their ideas on the left flank, Ward and Stewart combined to offer them a dangerous route on the right. They followed it to take the lead.

Nor was Stewart's penalty, awarded after Gillespie had been bemused by the control and speed of Cottee, their lone early strike. But then Hansen departed and Liverpool's formation became more conventional. Whelan retreated into midfield and Dalglish stepped on to partner Rush. John Lyall, West Ham's manager, admitted that 'it was the worst thing that could have happened'.

At once the balance shifted, not substantially but enough to lift Liverpool into contention. After Whelan, who is more effective when he strikes from the deep, equalized from a position that surprised even himself, the gap became gradually wider. In the end it represented a huge chasm into which West Ham had uncharacteristically pushed themselves.

'We had the second best defence in the first division last season,' Lyall pointed out. 'Yet we have conceded six goals at home this week. The attacking part of our game is reasonable but we are giving the ball away. Against some sides you might not be punished. Against Liverpool you don't escape. We may be providing entertaining games but our resilience must improve.'

Johnston took advantage of their first error soon after the interval. Hooper's wild flap, reminiscent of Grobbelaar, allowed Cottee to mark his England call-up but the trickle of West Ham mistakes became a waterfall. Dalglish scored twice with the aid of deflections and Rush added the other with the cleanest drive of the afternoon.

'The margin flatters us,' Dalglish conceded. 'We played better at Leicester without getting any reward. But considering that we won the double last season, I'm pleased with the attitude of the players. They are still hungry and ambitious'. He added ominously that he expects Nicol and Grobbelaar to be available again before long.

So, more significantly, will Walsh. He began training last week. Dalglish preferred not to set a date for the return of the comparative youngster: 'I don't want to put pressure on him or disappoint him if he doesn't make it'. Yet Liverpool's manager is aware of the implication, even if he does not admit readily to it.

Until Walsh is available for selection Dalglish will remain in a dilemma. He must be prepared either to go on running around on his ageing legs twice a week or to face the prospect of seeing Liverpool perform less convincingly. For the moment, the decision belongs to someone else. Should Andy Roxburgh invite him to play for Scotland on Wednesday? Dalglish has saved himself 'just in case'.

WEST HAM UNITED: P Parkes; R Stewart, G Parris, A Gale, A Martin, G Pike (sub: K Keen), M Ward, F McAvennie, A Dickens, A Cottee, N Orr.

LIVERPOOL: M Hooper; B Venison, J Beglin, G Gillespie, R Whelan, A Hansen (sub: K Dalglish), K MacDonald, C Johnston, I Rush, M Lawrenson, S McMahon. Referee: J Martin.



THE SUNDAY TIMES

East End hammering

West Ham 2 Liverpool 5

AN ABYSMAL collapse in defence and morale in the second half saw West Ham surrender four goals and the game.

What soft goals they were, too. There was a 67th minute shot by Dalglish, which Parkes somehow allowed to spin over his diving body, a one-two between Rush, who had till then done nothing, and Macdonald, three minutes later; an error in the final minute by Dickens, which allowed Dalglish to score again with a deflected drive.

Johnston missed a chance still easier than most of these. It was a depressing plunge by West Ham into abject despair and to think of them after this as serious contenders for the championship is difficult indeed.

Liverpool put out a somewhat strange team. Dalglish, who at 35 is clearly reluctant to play three full games in eight days, but remains utterly irreplaceable, relegated himself to substitute again, as he had a few days earlier at Leicester.

Added to that, Liverpool were without the massive Molby, who was unfit, not to mention Walsh, who has so far been unable to play a single game this season. Somewhat whimsically, Dalglish decided to put Whelan, a left-sided mid-fielder, rather than Johnston, whom he used in midfield, beside Rush up the front. A fluid five-man defence was employed with Lawrenson as an extra centre-back; but when your defenders do the kind of silly thing that Gillespie did after only nine minutes, it really doesn't matter how many you have at the back.

Two minutes earlier, Hansen, yet another of Liverpool's accident-prone centre backs, had slipped, to let in West Ham. There was a sustained scramble, at the end of which Hooper had to dive boldly at the feet of McAvennie. Then, controlling a long ball from Stewart, celebrating his return to the Scottish squad, the little man was foolishly felled by Gillespie. Stewart trotted up to drive the penalty high into the top left-hand corner with his formidable left foot.

But rather like Bobby Robson in Mexico last June, Liverpool stumbled on a more logical formation. Suddenly, after 17 minutes, Hansen departed, to give way to Dalglish. The player-manager used himself up front, there were now two instead of three centre backs, and above all, Whelan dropped back into the midfield.

Within a few minutes, his magnificent right-footed shot from the right-hand side forced Parkes to turn the ball over the bar. Not bad for a naturally left-footed player you thought; but better still was to come five minutes later. This time, from the opposite side, Whelan drove a still more remarkable right foot shot into the right hand corner, and Liverpool, most unexpectedly, were level.

Just before the interval, a delightful pass by the always intelligent Dickens let Cottee clear through Liverpool's defence, but the angle was difficult, Hooper was shrewd, and Cottee wasted his chance at least to make a goal. An expensive indulgence. Soon after half-time, Liverpool were ahead, and again, there was a kind of dress rehearsal for the goal.

An error by Gale let in the exuberant Johnston from the right; Parkes made quite a meal of his left-footed shot. There was nothing the keeper could do in the very next minute about his right-footed shot, after Pike's ill-judged back pass to Parris. West Ham's equaliser was freakish. An indirect free kick inside the box clutched to and thunderously struck by Stewart. The ball rebounded high into the air, Hooper rushed out but couldn't reach it. Cottee put it in.

Weather: mild. Ground: soft.

Goals: Stewart (pen, 9min) 1-0; Whelan (25min) 1-1; Johnston (52min) 1-2; Cottee (61min) 2-2; Dalglish (67min) 2-3; Rush (77min) 2-4; Dalglish (89min) 2-5.

West Ham United (4-4-2); Parkes; Stewart, Martin, Gale, Parris; Ward, Dickens, Orr, Pike (sub; Keen 75min); Cottee, McAvennie.

Liverpool (5-3-2); Hooper; Venison, Gillespie, Hansen (sub: Dalglish 75min),

Lawrenson, Beglin; Johnston, McMahon, MacDonald; Whelan, Rush,

Referee: J Martin (Hants).