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THE TIMES

Villa workaholics find inspiration in talent of Hodge

Liverpool 3 Aston Villa 3

Billy McNeill's first League match in charge of Aston Villa was notable not merely because the club at the bottom of the table thoroughly tested the champions.

Two penalties, five bookings and six goals brought almost an excess of excitement.

From the fourth minute this was a game which was always trying, and pretty well succeeded, in getting a quart into a pint pot. Hodge set the tempo, gliding forward to volley in Dorigo's cross so neatly and carefully he might have been putting away his best shirt. The unsettled England international stood out for his prodigious industry even though all the outfield players - bar the languid Stainrod - were workaholics.

In the case of an unusually awkward and unbalanced Liverpool defence, however, the overdose of adrenalin was nearly fatal and it was left to Wark's coolness to revive the home side. In the 26th minute he drove precisely inside a post. Then, Thompson having regained the lead for Villa when Grobbelaar chose to demonstrate that he is approaching mastery at the art of dropping hopeful punts into the penalty area. Wark equalized again from the penalty spot just before the interval.

Elliott, who had marked Rush with great effectiveness until that point, was adjudged to have handled the ball as he lunged in front of the Liverpool forward. But if that decision seemed harsh it was balanced by the award of a penalty to Villa 12 minutes into the second half.

This time, Hansen was considered to have offended as he and Hodge became so entwined they could have been performing some kind of expressionistic ballet. Evans banged the ball to the right of the goal and Grobbelaar, poor chap, expertly dived the other way.

Not many teams in recent years have taken the lead three times in a match at Anfield, but Liverpool were not overcome by the novelty. Ten minutes from the end, Beglin broke down the left, Rush weaved inside and rolled the ball invitingly sideways. McMahan, a former Villa player, ran forward eagerly and let fly from 20 yards with one of those shots that dreams are made of: it went right in the top corner.

Afterwards, the creases in McNeill's face all seemed to have turned into smiles. But Kenny Dalglish, the Liverpool player-manager, was even more morose than usual, muttering about 'defensive mistakes.' Perhaps, after the extraordinary midweek victory over Fulham, he had been expecting to win 10-0 again.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Gillespie, J Beglin, M Lawrenson, R Whelan, A Hansen, K Dalglish, S Nicol (sub: B Venison), I Rush, J Wark, S McMahan.

ASTON VILLA: N Spink; D Norton, A Dorigo, A Evans, P Elliott, M Keown, P Birch, S Stainrod, G Thompson, S Hodge, S Hunt. Referee: D Shaw.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

McMahon's rocket ends Villa dream

Liverpool3 Aston Villa3

HAD IT been any other team than Liverpool, Aston Villa would be celebrating an astonishing victory in their first league match under manager Billy McNeill.

Surely only Liverpool could have come back from behind three times against Villa's fierce determination to respond to McNeill's arrival from Manchester City. Just to turn the fairy tale really sour, it was the former Villa favourite, Steve McMahon, who hit an unstoppable 20-yard shot nine minutes from time to save Liverpool's blushes, and their unbeaten home record.

It was hard on Villa, but if he was disappointed McNeill was not showing it. 'I am delighted with their response,' he said. 'We are far from perfect but we have the ingredients to make ourselves into a good side and start marching forward.'

He singled out transfer-seeking Steve Hodge for special praise. 'Whatever his differences, he has acted so professionally and played so well for us.'

Liverpool manager Kenny Dalglish, unhappy about a penalty decision against his side, admitted: 'There should be a few dented prides. We can't afford to throw away goals like that.'

Villa began as they meant to continue, Hodge dashing in to score from a flick by fullback Tony Dorigo in the third minute. Their keenness showed in the four bookings they earned in the first half.

But they were optimistic in hoping then to stonewall a Liverpool attack that put 10 past Fulham in midweek. After 25 minutes centre half Paul Elliott conceded a penalty, blocking a Lawrenson cross with his arm.

No sooner had John Wark scored from the spot than an error by Bruce Grobbelaar, in his first League appearance this season, helped Villa to go ahead again after 34 minutes. He dropped a high cross and Gary Thompson headed the rebound into the net.

This time Villa's joy lasted until a minute before the interval, when Wark beat Spink for his second goal.

Liverpool piled on the pressure in the second half and were furious to find themselves behind again after 59 minutes. Referee Shaw penalised Alan Hansen for pulling Hodge as they fought for the ball. Allan Evans converted the penalty, and Liverpool were in trouble again - until McMahon secured one of the hardest points they will get this season.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar: Gillespie, Beglin, Lawrenson, Whelan, Hansen, Dalglish, Nicol, Rush, Wark, McMahan.

Aston Villa: Spink; Norton, Dorigo, Evans, Elliott, Keown, Birch, Stainrod, Thompson, Hodge, Hunt. Referee: D Shaw.