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THE TIMES

Liverpool find their rhythm as winter thrust is launched

Liverpool 6 Norwich City 2

Poor Norwich. Sandbagged at Wimbledon the previous week, they were cut to ribbons by Liverpool's rapier thrusts on Saturday, their autumnal dalliance at the top of the table ended as Liverpool announced that with the onset of winter, the serious business is beginning.

'I wouldn't have thought anybody could have stopped them the way they played today. Even I enjoyed watching them,' a rueful Ken Brown conceded afterwards. With Dalglish proclaiming it Liverpool's best performance in his time at the club, a staggering testimony in itself, there will be few to argue. Only Everton, with their full complement, and then only possibly, could have lived with Liverpool in that mood.

Norwich certainly could not. The crowd only watch admiringly with the rest of us as the red shirts brought a carnival atmosphere to a bright winter afternoon with the pace, power and inventiveness of their flowing movements.

There is a lot of nonsense talked about English football valuing hard work to the detriment of flair. Liverpool prove that the pair co-exist, as Brown pointed out. 'They have a lot of stars,' he reflected. 'But they work so hard for one another, and they give you nothing.'

Norwich certainly were never allowed to settle for a moment, but the memory that will linger will be of Liverpool's attacks. From Lawrenson at right-back, revelling in the opportunity offered to launch a series of searing raids, through the controlling genius of Molby in midfield, ably assisted by the searching runs of McMahon, Whelan, and Nicol, to the lethal finishing of Walsh and Rush, Liverpool's football glistened.

Rush's two goals took his total to an incredible 19 in as many games this season, but for once, he was surpassed by his partner Walsh, emerging as the hero of the hour with three to mark his first home League appearance since February, and only his fifth in all since then.

From his first goal and Liverpool's second, as he received Molby's long ball, turned inside the bemused Culverhouse, and placed his shot beyond Benstead, he was irresistible. His touch, speed, and incisiveness gave Bruce and Elliott miserable afternoons as he claimed two more himself and set up Rush for his brace.

'It is like having a new player,' said Dalglish, whose preference for Walsh meant that he had had to wait until Nicol limped off to make a belated 500th appearance for the club. By then, even Gillespie and Hansen were coming up to join in the fun, and the die was cast, as indeed it had been from the moment Nicol beat Norwich's naive off-side trap to collect Molby's pass and beat the defenceless Benstead.

Then and later, Norwich did not help themselves. Their two goals in the closing stages, scored by Phelan and Hodgson after Drinkell had made decisive contributions, at least enabled them to leave Anfield with a modicum of self-respect, however, and few teams will be able to do more when Liverpool are in full stride.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Gillespie, J Beglin, M Lawrenson, R Whelan, A Hansen, P Walsh, S Nicol (sub K Dalglish), I Rush, J Molby, S McMahon.

NORWICH: G Benstead; I Culverhouse, A Spearing, S Bruce, M Phelan, S Elliott, I Crook (sub T Putney), K Drinkell, D Hodgson, P Mendham, D Gordon.

Referee: J E Bray

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Crushed by Liverpool's magicians

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EVEN BY Liverpool's standards, this was mightily impressive. They took an obviously capable First Division side and crushed them with the weight of their passing, running and invention.

They were 5-0 up and the top were chanting 'champions' before Norwich had their first meaningful kick.

Walsh will probably get many of the headlines because he scored a hat-trick, his first goals since a long, worrying injury. And, indeed, with his impish twisting and turning he was reminiscent, not so much of Dalglish, the man the Anfield backroom want him to replace, but of that long-departed hero, Kevin Keegan. Dalglish, the governor, had sat and watched as Liverpool were humbled 4-1 on Luton's plastic a week ago, then had played when they beat Leicester by the same score.

Yesterday he chose compromise, made himself substitute, and came on for his 500th Liverpool appearance at 5-1. Even he admitted that this performance was 'one of the best since I've been here'.

There was talk overnight of Dalglish, for the first time, dropping Molby, who had played in three different positions for club and country in three matches. False rumour.

Instead, Molby, that remarkable bulk, functioned where he is probably best: in central midfield. His passing and positioning was often quite delightful. Norwich trotted out confidently in that loud yellow and green strip which somehow sums up their refreshing, out-of-town approach. They have always tried to play attractive football, and their early-season success, despite selling Woods and Watson for a fortune, has been welcome.

In their attack they had Hodgson, an ex-Liverpudlian, who had moved on to Sunderland, then to Norwich, on a free transfer. He had a hat-trick to his name in midweek and soon had one promising run on goal, fed by Mendham. But he needed too long, and the score was 6-1 by the time he managed to head in a stray ball for the last goal, in front of the Kop.

'They showed us what football is all about,' said Hodgson later.

It was a clear autumn day, and the early play took place in that unreal, clinical atmosphere, when the players' shouts carry loud and clear. (Yes, even at Anfield). Walsh produced the first roar with a fine ball down the wing to Beglin. McMahon, an expert at forward runs these days, was denied in the six-yard box.

But Liverpool, scarcely putting a ball or a foot wrong, scored after 15 minutes when Molby passed to Nicol, who ran clear to shoot past Benstead. A suspicion of offside, but no matter.

Before half time, Molby had hit an even better ball, from well in his own half, and Walsh had turned Bruce to score splendidly: 2-0 at the break. Sometime, soon after, Norwich became punch-drunk.

It wasn't evident at the third goal, for which Rush, at the near post, turned in Walsh's hard, low cross; but it was for goal four, when Hansen chipped the ball back in after a corner.

Walsh simply had no marker as he scored.

Rush made it 5-0 with a persistent run, and by now there was even laughter: laughter as Molby tricked a yellow shirt and slipped daintily past him; laughter as Grobbelaar, until now untroubled, made a typical excursion out of goal.

Norwich, really, had had very little joy since that early Hodgson run. They had not come to Anfield to lie down, but they had, unquestionably, been buried.

However, Drinkell did contrive to feed Phelan for one goal, at which point Dalglish - scarcely sensing a crisis, one suspects - made his entrance. He saw Molby pass well to Gillespie, who hit a post, for Walsh to sink the rebound for his hat-trick.

Then, finally, Hodgson made it 6-2.

Afterwards, Walsh surprised us by saying that he thought he was moving poorly before that first goal, which made all the difference.

Dalglish, who always manages to look like a man who has lost sixpence on these occasions, was pleased. But he wouldn't concede that Liverpool's next match is again on the dreaded plastic, at QPR.

Their next opponents are Motherwell, in a testimonial. So there.

Weather: clear. Ground: firm.

Goals: Nicol (15min) 1-0; Walsh (31min) 2-0; Rush (49min) 3-0; Walsh (58min) 4-0; Rush (70min) 5-0; Phelan (72min) 5-1; Walsh (76min) 6-1; Hodgson (85min) 6-2.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Gillespie, Beglin, Lawrenson, Whelan, Hansen, Walsh, Nicol (sub: Dalglish 72min), Rush, Molby, McMahon.

Norwich City: Benstead; Culverhouse, Spearing, Bruce, Phelan, Elliott, Crook (sub: Putney 72min), Drinkell, Hodgson, Mendham, Gordon.

Referee: Mr J E Bray (Hinckley).