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Opposition: Tottenham Hotspur

Competition: League

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Goal by Waddle exerts influence on destiny of title

Tottenham 1 Liverpool 0

Tottenham Hotspur in general and Chris Waddle in particular yesterday opened the door to the Crown jewels of England. If Liverpool had extended their run of unbeaten games to 13 and especially if they had won to increase their total during that sequence to 35 points, the champions would surely have retained the big title.

David Pleat, the Tottenham manager, admitted as much before the last League fixture to be covered live on television. After his side had inflicted the first defeat on Liverpool since Boxing Day, he accepted that 'we are way short and it will be difficult to make up the ground on them.

'But you never know what will happen. If you don't buy a ticket, you won't win the raffle. The important point is that other teams are now in the running and the more clubs that are involved, the better. I'm sure that the Football League will be pleased with that.'

So, especially, will Everton. Although they lie six points behind, they have two games in hand, a superior goal difference and, most significant, they are to visit their neighbours at Anfield on April 25. The outcome of the domestic dispute may yet settle the national argument.

With his goal, Waddle more than potentially alters the destiny of the championship. He also changed the picture of the afternoon at White Hart Lane. For 39 minutes, it was neat and decorative but soft. Neither side convincingly penetrated the other. 'We were nervous, edgy and even in awe of them,' Pleat said.

There seems no apparent danger when Waddle took possession out on the right. Since Whelan was guarding the touchline, he cut inside. 'I thought about a back heel,' Waddle said, 'and I pretended to do one. That bought me a yard. With the wind behind me, I thought I might as well have a crack.'

His drive from fully 30 yards might not have beaten Liverpool's goalkeeper in the calm of a fine summer's day, but carried by a cold breeze that was laden with increasingly heavy drops of rain, it dipped in front of Grobbelaar, skidded off the sodden turf and bounced in.

Kenny Dalglish, the Liverpool manager, believed that Waddle's strike affected the course of the game. 'Up until then, we were containing them easily. It put the onus on us to look for an equalizer and I'm disappointed that we didn't get anything out of it. But we'll just plod on.'

His last comment may not have been meant to be taken seriously, but Liverpool were more pedestrian than has been their custom in the past. They lacked speed of thought and action in a midfield that was notably short of inspiration. Not a single opening was created for either Rush or Walsh.

Gough and the outstanding Mabbutt deserve lavish praise for imprisoning Liverpool's front line, which was later strengthened by the arrival of Aldridge. Tottenham were no less secure across their middle, where Paul Allen emerged as an influential force after the interval. On the hour he embarked on a mission of his own.

Within five minutes he twice brought Grobbelaar to his knees in the muddled goalmouth and then almost brushed a post. Liverpool countered Tottenham's increasing urgency by pushing Lawrenson into midfield in support of their enlarged attack. Even so, they never looked like avoiding defeat for the first time this year.

Yet they remain the favourites. Dalglish himself says that he would 'rather be in our position than in anybody else's'. Tottenham have protected their own aspirations, although they are heading for a fixture congestion as deep as an Arctic snowdrift. Nine of their remaining League games are away.

They start at Newcastle on Wednesday. 'It is a busy week,' Pleat said. 'We might have a day off tomorrow when the international squads are announced. I think Waddle, who opened the scoring against Wimbledon in the FA Cup last week, might just have done enough to retain his place.'

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR: R Clemence; G Stevens, M Thomas, S Hodge, R Gough, G Mabbutt, C Allen, P Allen, C Waddle, G Hoddle, O Ardiles.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar, G Gillespie, B Venison, M Lawrenson, R Whelan, A Hansen, P Walsh, C Johnston, I Rush, J Molby (sub: J Aldridge), N Spackman.

Referee: J Martin.