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 Opposition: Coventry City
 Competition: League

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2 May 1987

THE TIMES

Coventry gear up for Cup in win over fading Liverpool

Coventry 1 Liverpool 0

With belief sloshing around in their tanks, Coventry City are accelerating towards the prize that lies at the end of their season. Far from easing up before the club's first appearance in the FA Cup final, they actively relish warming up for the occasion against Tottenham Hotspur in two weeks' time.

In mentally cooling down their own engines, Liverpool have all but run out of hope of retaining the title. Their fuel is so thin that, when belatedly they depressed the appropriate pedal at Highfield Road, there was no response. They merely continued to coast towards the runners-up position.

No Liverpoolian, least of all Kenny Dalglish, would publicly concede that the race is over. It would be unseemly to wave one white and one chequered flag to their neighbours across Stanley Park. But one of the manager's comments illustrated the lack of collective urgency running through the side.

Asked if he had seen a positive sign during the afternoon, he could offer nothing more than 'the goalkeeper played well'. If he had not the margin might have been as wide as it was four years ago. Coventry will remember the date, December 10, and the score, 4-0.

They had not beaten Liverpool in any competition since Moreover, they had lost all three previous fixtures against them this season. In Coventry's minds, therefore, there were two psychological blockages. Before removing one, their inferiority complex, they had first to remove the other, the debilitating fear of injury.

George Curtis told them that: 'They would probably be hurt if they took the soft approach'. Any advice given by the managing director, who could moonlight as a heavyweight wrestler, tends to be treated respectfully, as though it is a command rather than a comment Coventry obeyed instructions admirably.

They will go on carrying out the order three times in the next five days as well. 'Our players are work-horses,' Curtis stated. 'They need to play and so we will resist the temptation to rest anybody.' Houchen may today become an exception to the hard rule.

The scorer of precious cup goals 'took a knock' and was replaced. So was Ablett, whose ailment is thought to be more serious. If X-ray examination confirms that he has fractured a fibula, as Dalglish suspects, he will be the fourth Liverpool full back to require crutches.

The casualty list at Anfield is appreciably longer than usual but they have no reason to complain. Everton's, for instance has been no less extensive. That the Merseyside clubs should, in spite of the heavy damage, still be a lap ahead, underlines the relative weakness of the rest of the field.

Coventry were the stronger, if only for a day. With a deliberate stroke shortly after the interval, Pickering won the match itself and his own duel with Hooper. Grobbelaar's replacement defied him on three other occasions, plus Regis twice, Houchen and Kilcline.

Apart from Molby's free-kick which sent a shiver up a post in the first half and Aldridge's disallowed effort in the second, Liverpool's response was surprisingly and uncharacteristically undistinguished. So, by their standards, has been their season. In the last nine years, only in 1985 have they failed to collect a trophy.

COVENTRY CITY: S Ogrizovic; B Borrows, G Downs, L McGrath, B Kilcline, T Peake, D Bennett, D Phillips, C Regis, K Houchen (sub: S Gynn), N Pickering.

LIVERPOOL: M Hooper; G Gillespie, B Venison, N Spackman, R Whelan, A Hansen, G Ablett (sub: J Aldridge), C Johnston, I Rush, J Molby, S McMahon.

Referee: A Buskh.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Coventry douse Liverpool flame

Coventry1 Liverpool0

LIVERPOOL well and truly lost their title at Highfield Road, in an adventurous, open game in which the third of Pickering's notable attempts at goal was successful.

Coventry played, commendably, like a team which had a chance of the championship itself. Ogrizovic, their tall goalkeeper, saved them time and again, as did the woodwork on a couple of occasions. But Coventry gave as good as they got, and deserved their win. They will be substantial opposition at Wembley.

Liverpool decided again to use the methods which had served them so well a week previously against Everton: Rush as the solitary spearhead, backed up by five men in midfield. This, as we know both from the last World Cup and from Tottenham's performances this season, in no way entails a negative strategy.

Indeed, Liverpool were the first to strike at all dangerously after only seven minutes when Johnston took a corner from the right, which was headed out to Whelan. The Irish international worked the ball on to his powerful right foot, and pivoted for a shot which was deflected. Ogrizovic managed to clutch it at the second attempt.

On the quarter hour, Coventry, also playing with plenty of enterprise, and showing no sign that their first cup final is not far off, came even closer. A free-kick by Kilcline was headed on by Houchen.

The ball, in this case too taking a deflection, enabled Pickering to race alone through the Liverpool lines, for a point-blank header which the young reserve goalkeeper, Hooper, managed resourcefully to block with his chest. Some five minutes later, he threw himself down to seize a long, accurate ground shot from the same Coventry player.

With Liverpool needing nothing less than a win, and Coventry in a state of tranquil relaxation, at least so far as the result was concerned, the game continued to be open and eventful. Wheeler saved another header, this time from Kilcline, and then Liverpool trained their big guns.

A ferocious free-kick by Molby beat the wall and the goalkeeper, only to rebound from the righthand post. The ball then came to McMahon, whose close-range hook shot was caught by Ogrizovic. Then it was Whelan's turn, again, with a clever bicycle kick when Peake's header was inadvertently directed to him. The ball went just wide of the post.

Pickering had certainly found the range. Another fierce shot, after the ball had fallen to him out of defence, again was resisted only by Wheeler's body.

There was no hope of his holding it. How appropriate that Pickering, five minutes after halftime, should eventually open the scoring. But that was still to come.

Meanwhile, we had a free-kick from the right by Molby, a clever header by Gillespie, a thundering drive by Spackman which Ogrizovic did wonderfully well to hold in full flight.

Just before the break, Ablett had to retire, and Liverpool, bringing Aldridge into attack, had to change their pattern. They fell behind when Houchen's shot, rebounding, dropped into the path of Pickering, and his fulminating strike gave Wheeler not the phantom of a hope.

Coventry brought on their lively substitute Gynn, for Houchen, and nearly scored again when Regis got his famous head to a corner by Gynn himself, Hooper tipping over with great difficulty.

Liverpool fought desperately for an equaliser. When McMahon flicked on Johnston's corner, Aldridge struck the bar, then managed to head in, only for the goal to be given offside.

A remarkable, feet-first save by Ogrizovic from Rush, just outside the box, when Aldridge sent him through, preserved Coventry's goal again. So Coventry held out, and Liverpool's title disappeared across Stanley Park.

Weather: sunny; Ground: firm.

Goal: Pickering (50min).

Coventry City (4-3-3): Ogrizovic; Borrows, Kilcline, Peake, Downs; McGrath, Phillips. Pickering; Bennett, Regis, Houchen (sub; Gynn, 60min).

Liverpool (4-5-1): Hooper; Venison, Gillespie, Hansen, Ablett (sub; Aldridge, 44 min); Johnston, Spakman, McMahon Whelan, Molby; Rush.

Referee: A Buksh.