

Date: 24 October 1987
 Opposition: Luton Town
 Competition: League

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THE TIMES

Luton Town 0 Liverpool 1

Most of the Manchester United side were there to see the dawning light of their manager's prediction. Granted the afternoon off, they took their places in the stands at Kenilworth Road, a plastic graveyard where the spirit and apparent omnipotence of Liverpool traditionally dies and is buried in a year.

Alex Ferguson's claim that Liverpool will 'come back to the pack and be caught by three or four of us' was timed for the occasion that provokes most apprehension in the mind of Kenny Dalglish. Last season's FA Cup defeat in particular had exacerbated his already substantial dislike of the surface.

Liverpool's manager is not alone in his view. Aficionados of blow football might have enjoyed the first half of Saturday's fixture but others, watching an uncontrolled mess in which the lone consistent feature was the referee's whistle, might have considered it as no more than a crushing bore.

The followers of Luton Town and the witnesses from United, though they would justifiably have been disappointed by the profoundly poor quality, were not discouraged. For almost the first time this season Liverpool looked less than ordinary, less than comfortable and more than likely to be beaten.

But the grounds for Liverpool's fallibility were to be as artificial as the pitch itself. If anything, there is now a case superiority is potentially even more overwhelming. The arrival of the talented Houghton, bought last week and brought in immediately for Johnston, has reinforced their formidable power. Houghton, with only the experience of a testimonial match behind him, was as insignificant as everybody else before the interval. After it, as the game and Liverpool in particular improved out of all recognition, he was an inspiration. Dalglish, publicly as reserved as usual, was merely 'quite happy' with his new acquisition.

Sealey, the last line of Luton's defence, did divert the damage that might have been caused by McMahon, Beardley (twice) and especially Houghton before Gillespie, a higher flying object, arrived unnoticed to claim the winner from Barnes's corner. McMahon later beat him again and shook the foundations of a post.

Mick Harford's response was twofold (he opened by chipping against a post and closed by nodding against the bar) but his other contribution was more costly. In failing to accompany Gillespie, he confessed that he was 'guilty' of helping Liverpool to maintain their leadership of the first division.

Doubts that they will stay there have all but receded already. McMahon, for instance, states that 'they couldn't live with us once we started to play' and 'this is the best squad in my experience at Anfield.' Dalglish seemed initially to be offering an even more expensive comment. After agreeing that his representatives were indeed the 'strongest,' he paused before adding 'so far this season.'

----- LUTON TOWN: -----

L Sealey; T Breacker, A Grimes, D McDonough, S Foster, M Donaghy, D Wilson, B Stein, M Harford, I Allinson, M Weir. -----

LIVERPOOL: ----- B Grobbelaar; A Gillespie, B Venison, S Nicol, R Whelan, A Hansen, P Beardley, J Aldridge, R Houghton, J Barnes, S McMahon. ----- Referee: A Seville.



THE SUNDAY TIMES

Pacemakers QPR routed

Liverpool4 Queens Park Rangers0

NO TEAM has divine right to the League championship. But such hunger exists at Liverpool that when pretenders from the South come up to play more than 3,000 are locked outside. The determination which rolls from the stands containing close to 44,000 customers almost compels the destruction of the opposition.

So it proved, with Liverpool storming to a 4-0 victory which almost doubled the number of goals conceded by the ultra-defensive strategy on which Queens Park Rangers rely in their hope to lay a hand on the trophy.

Top-of-the-League Rangers may have been in the morning, but they came with a siege mentality, acknowledging from the kick-off that they were simply there to try to survive against the best in the land: they failed, and by the end of the game they had been discarded like pacemakers.

For long stretches there were 21 players camped in the Londoners' half.

Liverpool swarmed all over Rangers, sweeper and all. They were driven forward by McMahon, whose relish in the tackle no one from QPR could match and whose vision once despatched the ball with astonishing accuracy 50 yards from left to right to Johnston.

And yet Rangers were always capable of breaking with a telling sting. They created chances in the seventh and 11th minutes, first when Bannister, turning sharply away from Whelan 30 yards out, attempted to lob Grobbelaar. The goalkeeper was athleticism personified as he arched his back to palm the ball over.

Then Neill, QPR's rightback, raced to the corner flag and from his deep cross, the left-back Dawes connected with a flying header into the stomach of Grobbelaar. So much for the 'Continental' counter-attack. The rest was all Liverpool. Had Aldridge been his customary sharpness, it might have been all over by half-time. But Aldridge had the knowledge that Ian Rush was sitting in the stands in judgment and that weight of his mind seemed transmitted all the way down his body.

He missed two half-chances and it was Johnston who provided the cutting thrust, having one of those days when he resembled a grand prix motorcar, turbo-charged, of course. Johnston had what looked a perfectly legitimate goal ruled out after 13 minutes when he daringly ignored a foul by Dawes, but the referee saw no advantage in the advantage rule and pulled him back for a free kick outside the area.

Johnston was incensed and if anything moved even faster in the 41st minute when he rushed forward to kill off a chance created by Barnes, a sharp, stabbing, right-foot finish that gave Seaman, until then both a lucky and redoubtable goalkeeper, no chance.

After 65 minutes, from a Barnes free-kick, Fenwick handled the ball under pressure by Gillespie. Aldridge had been waiting for justice and he converted his seventh penalty and his 12th goal of the season, confirming, even on a bad day, that he scores whenever Liverpool play.

Barnes was now like some sleepy cat awakening. In the 78th minute he was the master of a one-two exchange with Aldridge after which Barnes hooked a right-foot shot against the stanchion inside Seaman's net.

Five minutes from the end Barnes did it all alone. Uplifted by the buzz from the Kop whenever he gets the ball, he won it 10 yards inside the Rangers' half, drifted away from one tackle, drew an utterly bewildered Fenwick and then bamboozled the goal-keeper with a low shot.

Weather: changeable. Ground: soft.

Goals: Johnston (41min) 1-0, Aldridge (pen 65min) 2-0; Barnes (78min) 3-0, Barnes (85min) 4-0.

Liverpool (4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Vension, Gillespie, Hansen, Nichol; Johnston (sub: Walsh 86min), Whelan, McMahon (sub: Lawrenson 86min), Barnes; Beardley, Aldridge.

Queens Park Rangers (5-3-2): Seaman; Neill (sub: Pizanti 77min), Parker, Fenwick, McDonald, Dawes; Allen, Byrne, Brock; Coney (sub: Maguire 77min), Bannister.

Referee: Mr R Bridges (North Wales).