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Liverpool's red machine shudders to a halt

Liverpool .....0 Norwich City .....0

ALL THAT talk of the League championship becoming a procession this season must now surely be discounted. This draw, on a grey Merseyside day, was Liverpool's third on the trot, and although they battered away at a spunky Norwich they bore no air of invincibility.

Aldridge, well though he moved over the distance, missed two very takeable early chances for Liverpool; later, as the Kop became increasingly frustrated, Norwich goalkeeper Gunn made three athletic saves under their noses.

And, it was within the bounds of possibility that poor, beleaguered managerless Norwich might even have won. In the first half Crook headed the ball down from close in and nudged it over the line, and, scouts honour, he said afterwards that it had been a fair goal.

Much nearer time, the lanky Rosario broke down the wing and crossed low for Drinkell to confront Grobbelaar. The Liverpool goalkeeper was splendidly alert despite long periods of inaction and he just got to Drinkell's feet in time.

The climax was exciting with Bruce hooking Aldridge's header from, almost, under the bar, but one man who missed it was Beardsley. Alas, the Beardsley who played for Liverpool yesterday looked far short of the Beardsley who plays so well for England, and with 25 minutes remaining, he had been pulled off to make way for Johnston.

Some 12 minutes earlier Beardsley's lack of confidence had been underlined when Aldridge had headed down smartly, and Bruce had been able to nip in and block Beardsley's shot. 'I was just tryign to win the match,' said Kenny Dalglish, the Liverpool manager, when asked about the substitution.

After the match Dalglish was quiet; beforehand he had been untypically provocative with his accusations that others in the game were manipulating the media. 'Things have been written about Liverpool in the past month which have reacted adversely on the club,' he said. People are using the press to influence other people's decisions, he said.

Presumably, we are talking about penalties, and yesterday there was no vain Liverpool claims for those, but there was the continuing case of Houghton and Johnston. One senses that while buying Beardsley, Aldridge and Barnes with Ian Rush's millions was generally applauded as good business, the further purchase of Houghton smacked of greed, and won Liverpool no friends.

Yesterday Houghton started a home match for the first time in place of Johnston, that other dark, bouncy, little right-sided player. Houghton began as brightly as anybody as Liverpool produced some scything moves which slit open Norwich's belly. But when they did not score, of course, anxiety set in.

It showed in Lawrenson, whose old, high-stepping assurance seems to have gone: he hit too many loose passes. McMahon, too, did not have the driving midfield match that has made him Liverpool's most praised player of late, and Nicol had one of those afternoons when the touchline kept spoiling things for him.

Gillespie, Whelan and Barnes were the pick of this Liverpool, with Barnes summing up their first half by beating three, or possibly four men, and chipping into a wasteland. Having weathered the worst, Norwich showed that they are nobody's mugs. Not that, having watched them three times previously of late, one suspected they were. They were quite idiotic to sack Ken Brown.

Drinkell won applause for one sortie down the wing, before Gunn was called on to win his three house points. The first save was from Gillespie's header, the second from Gillespie's 30-yard shot, and the last and best was for a clawing effort after Barnes had slipped through and put a ball, pinpoint this time, on Aldridge's ever-willing forehead.

Now Liverpool are home to Watford, on Tuesday bought anfield or not by then, will be a real test for them. It will be interesting to see, for example, whether the stern-faced Mr Dalglish starts with Beardsley

Weather: overcast. Ground: yielding.

----- Liverpool (4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Lawrenson, Gillespie, Hensen, Nicol; Barnes, McMahon, Whelan, Houghton; Beardsley, (sub: Johnston 65 min) Aldridge. -----

----- Norwich City: (4-4-2): Gunn; Brown, Bruce, Butterworth, Elliott; Gordon, Crook, Phelan, Putney; Rosario, Drinkell. -----

----- Referee: J Deakin (S Glamorgan).