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Liverpool touch clouds of dreamy perfection

Liverpool 2 Chelsea 1

Liverpool, standing proud at the peak of the first division, climbed to almost unreasonable heights yesterday. After a thrilling demonstrating of all of their lavish qualities, even their taciturn player-manager was persuaded to hail a performance the enchanted 31,211 spectators at Anfield and millions more on television.

'We haven't found ourselves behind too often this season,' Kenny Dalglish said. 'We handled it superbly. We played really well with a lot of good football, although we didn't convert all of our possession into goals.'

His comments amount to praise indeed - even he cannot disguise Liverpool's remarkable record. After 17 unbeaten fixtures, they are five points clear of Arsenal, and 11 ahead of the third-placed club, Queen's Park Rangers, plus a home game in hand. Chelsea's main credit was keeping the scoreline so close. Dixon and Durie were often isolated. When Chelsea's defence was besieged by prolonged the ferocious storm, they might have been ploughing a different meadow. Liverpool's only shadow was in defence.

In the twentieth minute, Dixon challenged for Durie's cross the Grobbelaar mishandled only to recover and parry Nevin's volley. But he was to be beaten almost immediately: Dixon's headed flick caused indecision and Nevin was brought down by Lawrenson. Durie corrected his sights from the penalty miss at the Baseball Ground a fortnight ago and by putting Chelsea ahead, not only lifted their belief but also raised the game to a breathtaking plane.

Liverpool's response was astonishing. For controlled power, for speed of thought, for swiftness of exchange, for options provided to the player in possession and energy expended, they touched perfection.

Opportunity piled on top of chance, but Chelsea, reinforced by the renewal of the Pates and McLaughlin central partnership, resisted with collective courage that suggested armour-plating.

Pulled to the left, tugged to the right and stretched in the middle, they survived somehow. Once Wilson cleared Gillespie's header off the line Freestone parried Beardsley's attempt with his legs and Barnes drove against a post, a most unlikely victory became feasible.

But Liverpool, never resorting to wild or indiscriminate assaults, would not let Chelsea clear their heads. First Beardsley prodded in one of Nicol's numerous crosses and although Houghton was adjudged guilty of a push, Chelsea's relief was adjudged guilty of a push, Chelsea's relief was temporary. As Aldridge chased Whelan's delicate chip inside the area, McLaughlin fouled him and Aldridge's penalty retained his position as the first division's leading goalscorer - 14 in the League and 18 overall.

Liverpool, deservedly, relaxed. But moments after Johnston arrived and Barnes assumed a central role, a goal of glorious and irresistible simplicity brought the lead. Once Barnes's back heel released Houghton, McMahon's decisive finish brooked no answer.

So Liverpool's challenge for the championship, their seventh in the last decade, looks unstoppable. Their displays this season have deserved the highest plaudits. Yesterday granted another graphic illustration of a side that is not only the best, but also the most exciting.

----- LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar: G Gillespie, M Lawrenson, S Nicol, R Whelan, S Hansen, P Beardsley, J Aldridge (sub: C Johnston), J Barnes, R Houghton, S McMahon. -----

----- CHELSEA: R Freestone; S Clarke, A Dorigo, C Pates, J McLaughlin, D Wood, P Nevin, J Murphy, K Dixon, G Durie, C Wilson. -----

----- Referee: G Courtney -----