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The penalty of no return

Manchester City 0 Liverpool 4

Manchester City's vision of Wembley, which dimmed as soon as the draw for the sixth round of the FA Cup was announced, was irreparably damaged in the fifty second minute at Maine Road yesterday. Until then, their resistance was creditable. Afterwards, Liverpool turned the tie into an exhibition.

Some of City's followers will claim that their team was wronged during the decisive moment. One of them chose to vent his feelings in front of more than 44,000 spectators and millions of viewers at home.

Yet the immediate impression and the evidence on television suggested that the referee had been right to award a penalty. Johnston was the central figure in the brief and controversial play. The replacement for the injured Aldridge, he suddenly found himself running on to a headed flick and into City's empty half. Stowell, a goalkeeper on loan (from Everton, of all clubs), was the only opponent in front of him.

Johnston, in swerving round him, was slightly impeded, and was then caught by Redmond. Although the tackle was clean enough, the preceding push was justifiably adjudged to be an offence. City pleaded in vain for mercy, but Beardsley, ruthlessly efficient throughout the rain-swept afternoon, converted the penalty.

An uninvited intruder entered the stage after the restart, and, pointing menacingly, demonstrated the anger being voiced on the terraces. After punching a steward intent on restraining him, he was marched away by a posse of policemen. Disputes, both verbal and physical, subsequently broke out in a corner of the arena.

The unsavoury incidents, though prominent, were utterly out of character with the rest of the tie. City offered no small contribution to a first half that was brightly illuminated by Houghton's astonishing goal, which bore a close resemblance to the winner that he claimed in the previous round at Goodison Park.

Beardsley and, principally, Barnes, the creators then, acted as his assistants again, and Houghton scored with a volley from a seemingly impossible angle. City's flame was doused, though it did burn after the penalty when Stewart (watched past Graeme Souness, the player-manager of Glasgow Rangers, almost nodded past Grobbelaar.

The closing half-hour was transformed into a stunning display of Liverpool's attacking qualities. If Beardsley was not piercing City's defensive barrier, then it was Barnes or Houghton or Johnston or McMahan. They added another two. It could have been four and, indeed, City were fortunate not to concede another penalty.

Lake, in attempting to block the advance of Beardsley to the by-line, handled the ball, but the referee treated them leniently. Liverpool were not so generous.

Johnston, released by a combination of Houghton's power and Lake's error, repeated his earlier break, evaded Stowell's challenge, and swept in the third a dozen minutes from the end.

Liverpool saved their best until last. Barnes, who had gradually emerged from comparative anonymity, took possession inside his own half, exchanged with Beardsley, and strolled deceptively on, and rolled in the fourth. His fourteenth goal of the season sealed another dazzling show.

For 22 games Liverpool have remained unbeaten. In their last 15, they have conceded only one goal. The statistics they are compiling are as awesome as the style in which they play. In today's semi-final draw, neither Luton Town, nor Nottingham Forest nor Wimbledon will relish the prospect of suffering the fate that was inflicted on City.

----- MANCHESTER CITY: -----
 ----- M Stowell; J Gidman, A Hinchcliffe, I Brightwell, P Lake, S Redmond, D White, P Stewart, I Varadi, N McNab, P Simpson. -----

--- LIVERPOOL: ----- B Grobbelaar; G Gillespie, G Ablett, S Nicol, N Spackman, A Hansen, P Beardsley, C Johnston, R Houghton, J Barnes, S McMahan. ----- Referee: A Gunn.