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THETIMES

Liverpool take command

Arsenal 1 Liverpool 2

Night has fallen on the dawn of a new era. In subduing the young pretenders so convincingly in the second replay of the Littlewoods Cup third round tie at Villa Park, Liverpool repressed all thought that they should prepare to leave the throne of England.

The champions may be weakened and they may have been fortunate to survive the first meeting in their own home but there was an ominous inevitability about the eventual outcome. Even given an early advantage Arsenal, as George Graham later admitted, were no match for them.

Having won a battle which was stretched over five hours, who is to say that they will not now go on again to win the war, the championship? The League fixture, to be televised live at Highbury on Sunday week, will provide another clue but last night's evidence was compellingly in Liverpool's favour.

Mark Lawrenson, reflecting on his former colleagues, wondered who might be omitted when all of their players are fit. Even Aldridge, responsible for the dramatic winner three minutes from the end, cannot be certain of his place on Saturday or in the fourth round tie at West Ham United next Wednesday.

Liverpool were much the more convincing from the start. Within a mere four minutes they had seemingly unhinged a defence that had protected Arsenal throughout their unbeaten sequence of a dozen matches. But Spackman, the understudy for the injured Barnes, was adjudged to be offside before nodding in Beardsley's cross.

Rush, if only temporarily beginning to resemble the fearsome predator of old, subsequently opened the way for his partner, albeit inadvertently. As his shot was blocked, Beardsley collected the rebound but hesitated over the possibilities, allowed Arsenal to recover and struck no more than the side netting.

Arsenal, initially as pale as their yellow shirts, had scarcely crawled out of their own territory. But, roared on by their vociferous supporters whenever they did so, they broke away midway through the first half and took a lead that had not been foreseen except perhaps by Merson.

The Arsenal forward claimed two of the three goals against Middlesbrough on Saturday and, so powerful is his belief, that he needed only to be ushered through by Thomas. Accelerating onto his pass, he held off Ablett's challenge and, from an oblique angle, slid the ball past Hooper.

Nor was that the only setback to be suffered by the winners of the trophy four times at the beginning of the decade. Rush, in advancing towards Houghton's cross, collided with Lukic and damaged his hip. Although he carried on for a few minutes, he was eventually withdrawn and Aldridge took his place.

Without Barnes, whose memorable run at Anfield in the initial meeting had led to the only incision in Arsenal's rearguard, Liverpool were relying on another individual piece of brilliance. On several occasions Beardsley, willing to set off on innumerable runs, was on the point of providing the necessary wizardry.

But, on an evening when the balance was as fine and the contest as fiercely competitive as had been predicted, a boot or a leg invariably blocked his path. So, on the hour, McMahon accepted the responsibility instead and claimed an equalizer as dazzling as Rocastle's a fortnight ago.

An idea shared by almost every member of Liverpool's line-up was interrupted by Thomas. McMahon felt he had done so illegitimately but he immediately regained possession, took the ball on a pace or two and struck a ferocious drive from the edge of the area beyond the reach of Lukic.

ARSENAL: J Lukic; L Dixon, N Winterburn, M Thomas, S Bould, A Adams, D Rocastle, K Richardson, A Smith, P Merson, B Marwood.

LIVERPOOL: M Hooper; G Ablett, B Venison, S Nicol, R Whelan, N Spackman, P Beardsley, S Staunton, I Rush (sub: J Aldridge), R Houghton, S McMahon.

Referee: K Hackett.