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THE TIMES

Liverpool issue timely warning

Derby County 0 Liverpool 1

With timing worthy of a world class, middle-distance runner, Liverpool accelerated past three opponents to move menacingly into third place in the championship yesterday. Equally ominous for the rest of the field was the fact that Rush, scoring his first goal since November 5, was the man responsible for putting them there.

Doubtless, Liverpool would prefer that they could have repeated last season's devastating display of front-running; on Boxing Day last year they were 13 points clear at the top. But it is where they finish next May that matters and to that end, Liverpool look nicely on course.

That was not quite how it appeared before yesterday's game, which provided a severe test of the champions' character as much as anything. They arrived at the Baseball Ground, the scene of their record-equalling 29th game without defeat last season, without a win in four League games, to face a team two places higher up the table with a defence second to none.

But an injury to the dependable Sage recently has meant that Derby have had to reshuffle their back four and Liverpool's attack, though less prolific than normal, were ever eager to expose them for pace through the middle.

After taking the lead in the 16th minute, Liverpool always looked more in charge than the one-goal margin indicated. This was Liverpool at their cunning and economical best. Derby's challenge looked almost naive as they were comfortably held at an arm's length throughout the game.

The goal was a classic Liverpool one from start to finish. McMahon, spotting Beardsley free on the right, played a ball that was marginally beyond the reach of Forsyth. Beardsley galloped on to cross the ball to the near post where Rush, in splendid isolation, side-footed instinctively past Shilton.

Derby, beaten once in the last nine games, must have been an enormous disappointment to their biggest crowd of the season 25,213. Their only goal-scoring effort of note in the first half was a header by Saunders with which he ought to have done better.

Typically, it took the angular McMinn to rouse Derby out of their lethargy. In the opening minute of the second half, he cut inside his full back to hammer a ferocious shot which Hooper just managed to tip over the crossbar.

The only blemish on an otherwise faultless display from the Liverpool defence followed Callaghan's free kick early in the second half, when Hooper came for the ball and missed it comprehensively in much the same way that his predecessor, Grobbelaar, was given to do on occasion. Fortunately for Liverpool, Goddard headed wide of the empty goal.

DERBY COUNTY: P Shilton; P Blades, M Forsyth, G Williams, M Wright, R Hindmarch, E McMinn, D Saunders, P Goddard (sub: S Cross), T Hebbard, N Callaghan (sub: P Gee).

LIVERPOOL: M Hooper; G Ablett, S Staunton, S Nicol, R Whelan, D Burrows, P Beardsley, R Houghton, I Rush, J Barnes, S McMahon.

Referee: J Lloyd.