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 Opposition: Aston Villa
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THE TIMES

Liverpool regain their touch at Villa's expense

Liverpool 1 Aston Villa 0

Liverpool last night delivered a notice of intent to those who would strip them of the League championship. In overcoming the defiance and resistance of Aston Villa and recording a first League win at Anfield in almost two months, the champions moved into fourth place in the first division, nine points behind the leaders, Arsenal.

Although Liverpool's performance was but a pale imitation of those produced during the course of last season, it was enough, just enough, to secure three points at home for only the third time in four months.

Kenny Dalglish, the Liverpool manager, had been expected to make changes after the defeat at Manchester United on Sunday, and he did not disappoint.

Molby, the Danish international, was recalled to start a senior game for the first time since mid-October and was asked to undertake the defensive duties he had been forced to relinquish upon his imprisonment for driving offences.

Although his natural inclination to drift forward does tend to lessen his effectiveness as a centre-back, his return did serve to strengthen a defence which had been exposed at Old Trafford. Rush, with whom Molby has worked so effectively in the past, was again absent through injury.

Graham Taylor, the manager of Aston Villa, had suggested beforehand that Liverpool are always dangerous, but never more so than when wounded by injuries to key players or cornered by their own inconsistency rather than the deeds of others.

Although the fluency which has marked their game for so many years was not fully restored last night, an urgency to prove wrong the critics was evident. Villa, despite being willing to counter-attack whenever possible, were forced to defend in numbers for lengthy periods.

Liverpool should have taken the lead after 18 minutes when Spink, the Villa goalkeeper, made the sort of basic error of judgement which had presented Arsenal with two goals in the game at Villa Park on Saturday.

In attempting to intercept Houghton's cross, he raced outside his penalty area, leaving Aldridge with a clear sight of goal but the Liverpool forward's shot passed two yards wide of the unguarded target.

Villa's response was immediate, Platt and McNally combining to release Gray, who was denied only by the outstretched leg of Hooper.

As if they began to sense that Liverpool's anxiety could be turned to their own advantage, Villa embarked on an enterprising spell which did not suffer through being interrupted by the half-time interval.

However, the breakthrough which Liverpool may have begun to fear would never come finally arrived after 67 minutes. It came in the shape of a goal which combined good fortune and improvisation and was greeted with near hysteria by a crowd which had been growing impatient.

Whelan released Houghton down the right flank and the Republic of Ireland international whipped over a low cross which evaded the lunges of several defenders. As Aldridge attempted to turn home from eight yards, Price, the former Blackburn Rovers full back, drove the ball away from his goalmouth. His clearance was inadvertently guided straight into the path of Whelan, who dived forward to head home his first goal of the season.

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

ASTON VILLA: N Spink; C Price, D Mountfield, K Gage, A Evans, M Keown, A Daley, D Platt, A McNally (sub: I Olney), G Cowans (sub: A Gray), S Gray.

Referee: R Dilkes.