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Liverpool's challenge gains extra momentum

Tottenham Hotspur 1 Liverpool 2

The giant shadow of Liverpool is being thrown ever larger across the peak of the first division. In extending their unbeaten sequence to 13 games and their run of successive victories to seven yesterday, they have climbed into a familiarly threatening position from which to launch their final assault.

They now lie two points behind Norwich City, their opponents at Carrow Road next Saturday, and eight points behind Arsenal, a gap which is deceptively wide.

Liverpool, with a couple of games in hand, are scheduled to entertain the leaders at Anfield on April 23, a date which could be hugely significant.

Mabbutt, the Tottenham Hotspur captain and voted the man of the match, would prefer to be in Arsenal's position. Terry Venables, their manager, feels that "if Liverpool get on a level footing, then you've got to fancy them. They are an outstanding team but that comment is hardly a revelation".

Liverpool had to subdue the enterprise of one of the strongest sides in the country on present form. Tottenham had collected 14 out of a possible 18 points, a run which started with a victory over Norwich and ended with one that effectively pushed Nottingham Forest out of contention last Wednesday.

The champions needed a touch of fortune along the way as well. Tottenham's appeals for two penalties in the first half one for an apparently late tackle by Ablett on Nayim and the other, less justifiably, for hand ball against McMahon were both denied by an unmoved referee.

"The television guys told me the first was a definite penalty," Venables said. "And the lads thought that the second was as well." Yet he was more concerned about the manner in which his team, having recovered from an unproductive opening and taken the lead soon after the interval, immediately conceded their advantage.

If the first half was bright, inventive, and interesting, the second blew up into an explosion of incidents. Stewart, the victim of derisive comments from the terraces, was responsible for the initial spark. As he bulldozed a pass past Staunton, Ablett caught a trailing leg and brought him down.

Fenwick converted the penalty but Liverpool's championship challenge was disrupted for no more than a minute. "We lacked professionalism in not holding on to the lead," Venables admitted. "If we had protected it for a little longer, it might have been different. But we panicked when we had the ball."

Specifically, Allen did. Dispossessed in his own areas, he felled Houghton and Aldridge equalized from the spot. Although McMahon cleared Stewart's header off the line and Mabbutt lofted a loose ball on to the roof of the net, Liverpool were in control of the rest of the sunlit afternoon.

"If anybody had walked in to watch the last 25 minutes, you would have thought there was only one team in it," Venables said. "That was not a fair reflection of the game as a whole." Perhaps not but Liverpool suggested throughout that, if necessary, they were capable of raising themselves.

After their equalizer, they threatened consistently and principally through Aldridge. One of his attempts was cleared off the line by Mabbutt and another, after he had drifted around Thorstvedt, was deflected past a post. Houghton, released through the middle, also prompted the Tottenham goalkeeper to illustrate his agility.

Tottenham, by now almost permanently on the retreat, were eventually undone by one of their own men. Waddle, whose long passes had been so incisive, hesitated over further possibilities in the centre circle. McMahon pounced and, within an instant, Houghton had freed Beardsley on the left.

With his sixth goal in six games, Beardsley finished with stunning precision and allowed Liverpool to stage a prolonged exhibition of their relaxed composure.

"Most of the players have been in this challenging position before," Kenny Dalglish said. "Unless you've been in it, it is hard to describe and even harder to experience."

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR: E Thorstvedt; G Butters, C Hughton, T Fenwick, Nayim (sub: V Samways), G Mabbutt, P Walsh (sub: J Polston), D Howells, C Waddle, P Stewart, P Allen.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Ablett, S Staunton, S Nicol, R Whelan, G Gillespie, P Beardsley, J Aldridge, R Houghton, J Barnes, S McMahon.

Referee: R Milford.