

Date: 29 March 1989
 Opposition: Derby County
 Competition: League

Times		

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THE TIMES

Liverpool's hopes kept alive by goal from Barnes

Liverpool 1 Derby County 0

Liverpool's march continues but they were not at their irrepressible best at Anfield last night. They did not need to be. Derby never directly threatened to break a sequence which now embraces eight successive victories, six of them in the first division, and 14 unbeaten matches.

The win, by a deceptively slim margin, has set the stage for Saturday. Then Liverpool, five points behind Arsenal with a game in hand, could overtake Norwich City but their timely run is sure to be under more substantial strain at Carrow Road than it was in front of their biggest crowd of the season 42,518.

Even though Derby's defence has kept them in the top eight since November, they reinforced their protective shield. The replacement for the injured Goddard was Cross, who raised their numerical strength in midfield to five. Their lone attacking ploy was to use the speed of Saunders on the break.

The plan, based on undisguised self-preservation, contained one damaging flaw. Liverpool's back four, the base from which so many of their ideas are constructed, were allowed the freedom of their own half. Whenever Saunders approached the man in possession, he merely rolled it to an unguarded colleague.

A dramatic opening suggested that the third strongest defence in the first division might be dismantled with embarrassing regularity. In the first minute McMahon, with a rasping volley, gave Derby's goalkeeper a startling introduction. Within 60 seconds Shilton had been beaten by another of his England colleagues.

Whelan's delightful back-heel released Beardsley on the left and his low cross was side-footed home from close range by Barnes. The goal was beautifully simple and simply beautiful, although not in the eyes of Derby's supporters. With the gates closed on the usual full house some did not see it.

By the time all the spectators had been squeezed in, Liverpool might have been further ahead. Houghton's burst was halted only by the flag of a linesman who had ludicrously adjudged him offside. Aldridge's advance was blocked only by the legs of Shilton and Beardsley's thunderous drive was stopped only at the second attempt by the goalkeeper.

But Derby's security remained intact and Liverpool, weary perhaps after their victory over Tottenham Hotspur at White Hart Lane on Sunday, began to run out of inspiration. Each misplaced pass, however marginal, was greeted with murmurs of frustration on the terraces. The inhabitants are nowadays accustomed to perfection.

Liverpool were no more than a touch away from it after the interval. Aldridge almost tucked in one of Barnes's crosses, could only softly nod a deliberate chip from Houghton and, with an appreciably firmer header, prompted Shilton to make a typically agile save at the foot of a post.

He could do nothing but watch two other strikes, one from McMahon and the other from Beardsley, which flew narrowly wide.

Derby's response was negligible. "They came to lose nothing and they've gone away with nothing," Kenny Dalglish said. His side are now considered the championship favourites.

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

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

Referee: R Gifford.