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Competition: League

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THE TIMES

Liverpool's first defeat in 25 years closes a chapter

Sheffield Wednesday 2 Liverpool 0. Liverpool returned to Hillsborough last night and lost there for the first time since 1964 but, although they failed to extend their lead at the top of the first division, the result was of secondary importance. The club has at last been able to close the chapter on the darkest events in their history.

Seven months after 95 people lost their lives on a bright and sunny April afternoon, they were remembered once again on a dark and freezing November evening. The brief ceremony was conducted with all the dignity shown by Liverpool, the city and the club, during their grief.

Alan Hansen, the captain who was unavailable through injury, and Chris Turner, a goalkeeper chosen to represent Sheffield Wednesday, led the teams in a procession towards the end where the disaster took place. While their colleagues stood dutifully to attention, they entered the Leppings Lane terraces and each laid a wreath.

The stone steps, on which so many spectators had been asphyxiated in the crush, were now empty. Hansen and Turner were surrounded only by bouquets of flowers, scarves and banners. They had been either placed or thrown from the stands above where Liverpool's 4,500 followers were accommodated.

Some, unable to bear the prospect of returning to the scene of British sport's worst tragedy, preferred to remain at home. Those who did travel found their journey as troublesome and as elongated as on the fateful day and it was poignant that the crowd, waiting to gain entry, should be told that the kick-off would be delayed by a quarter of an hour.

It has been argued that, had the same decision been taken before the FA Cup semi-final against Nottingham Forest, there would have been no need for late-comers to panic and stampede. Inevitably, the occasion, the atmosphere and the game itself last night were by comparison subdued and respectful.

The minute's silence which preceded the belated start was long and reverential. There were no jeers from the home supporters, as is usually the tedious custom, when the opposition's line-up was announced. Because of injuries, it was extensively rearranged.

Apart from Molby's nonchalant assurance at the back, Liverpool as a whole were not convincing. Inhibited perhaps by the dreadful memories, the best side in the first division was initially held and then, in front of, Hillsborough's largest crowd of the season, well beaten by apparently the worst.

Once Beardsley and Rush had confirmed Liverpool's present weakness in front of goal, Wednesday rose to unforseen heights. Inspired by the erratic but enterprising Atkinson, they could in the end have won by an extravangant margin. Hirst, sweeping Palmer's cross, gave them the lead in the 55th minute.

But for two astonishing point blank saves from Grobbelaar, the scorer and creator of the first goal would have added a couple more. The second belonged solely to Atkinson, who set off on a typically mesmerising run in the closing seconds and, for once, kept his head and his control.

Wednesday's followers warmed by the glorious strikes which had lifted their club off the bottom for the first time, filtered out leaving behind a message stretched across the terraces. ``Hillsborough will always share your sorrow.'' The huge banner read. ``For all you Reds a new tomorrow.'' May Liverpool's recuperation now be complete.

SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY: K Pressman, N Worthington, P King, C Palmer, P Shirtliff, N Pearson, D Bennett, J Sheridan, D Hirst, D Atkinson, C Shakespeare.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar, G Gillespie, S Staunton, G Ablett, R Whelan, J Molby, P Beardsley, R Houghton, I Rush, J Barnes, S McMahon.

Referee: V Callow.

Compiled by Graeme Riley