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Liverpool ride their luck to regain the lead

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Liverpool returned to the top of the first division at Anfield yesterday but it is improbable they will ever record a luckier victory. That Sheffield Wednesday, a team threatened with relegation, left Merseyside with nothing to show for a magnificent display was a travesty.

Wednesday's players left the pitch shaking their heads in disbelief, unable to take solace from the ovation provided by those Liverpool supporters who are becoming aware of their own side's frailty and mortality.

Buoyed by the news that Arsenal had succumbed to a late Southampton goal at The Dell, Liverpool instilled into their numerous early attacks much of the gusto which had been missing against Manchester United three days earlier.

The injured Barnes may have been missing from an attack which has proved somewhat impotent of late, but the sense of urgency personified by the workrate of Rush and Beardsley initially left Wednesday breathless.

Yet despite the all-round excellence which continues to set Liverpool apart from all but a handful of their rivals, the days when an early goal served as the prelude to an emphatic victory appears to be at an end.

Not for the first time this season, Liverpool looked to be at their most vulnerable when in front; it said much for Wednesday's confidence that they were capable of not only maintaining their discipline after falling behind but that they grew stronger as the first half progressed.

In halting the drives of Atkinson and Carr in the 25th and thirtieth minutes respectively, Grobbelaar denied the visitors an equalizer they richly deserved. Both those opportunities were created by Sheridan, who contested the position as the game's most influential individual with Molby before giving rein to an immense talent first nurtured at Leeds United, then ignored at Nottingham Forest.

Molby's passing game may have suffered in comparison to that of Sheridan's but he did claim the game's opening goal, after three minutes, when he headed a Venison cross over Pressman from 20 yards.

McMahon, Houghton and Rush could have added further goals in the minutes which followed and their failure to do so was the signal for an erosion of Liverpool's self-belief.

Wednesday had performed well in the first half but their display after the interval was remarkable. They took the game to their opponents in a way which few sides can and only Hysen of the Liverpool back four emerged with his reputation intact. The equalizer, inevitably, came after 50 minutes, when Atkinson headed home a Worthington corner which had drifted over the heads of a static defence to an unprotected far post. Only a glaring miss by Hirst, in the 74th minute, and the luckiest of saves by Grobbelaar from Carr's long-range shot two minutes later, prevented Wednesday from moving in front.

Just six minutes remained when Liverpool conjured up the cruellest of tricks. Staunton, the substitute, who had been on the field for less than a minute, drove in a low free kick from the left and, amid a cluster of bodies, Rush stuck out a boot to steer the ball into the net.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Hysen, B Venison (sub: D Burrows), S Nicol, R Whelan, G Ablett, P Beardsley, R Houghton, I Rush, J Molby, S McMahon (sub: S Staunton).

SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY: K Pressman; R Nilsson, P King, C Palmer, P Shirtliff, N Pearson, F Carr, J Sheridan, D Hirst, D Atkinson, N Worthington.

Referee: P Kyldesley.