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Opposition: Crystal Palace
Competition: FA Cup

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THE TIMES

Perfect revenge as Palace dream becomes reality

Crystal Palace 4 Liverpool 3 (aet; score after 90 min, 3-3)

AGAINST all the odds, Crystal Palace successfully completed the restoration of their self-respect in the most dramatic FA Cup semi-final in living memory at Villa Park yesterday. Thrashed to the point of humiliation seven months ago by Liverpool, when beaten 9-0 at Anfield, Palace gained the perfect revenge to reach their first major final in their 85-year history.

Not even the most imaginative fiction writer could have dreamed up such a storyline and ending. The balance of power shifted back and forth, with both sides leading twice. Palace, a goal down after 14 minutes, recovered to lead with just eight minutes of normal time remaining. But within two minutes Palace were trailing again, only to force extra time with an 87th minute equalizer. The tie was eventually settled in the 109th minute with a header by Pardew.

Liverpool, seemingly, had the game by the scruff of the neck and were dragging it towards its inevitable conclusion. But an equalizer after just 16 seconds of the second half had an extraordinary galvanizing effect upon Palace.

Where before Palace's football had lacked ambition and accuracy, it now repeatedly threatened Liverpool, notably at set pieces. The loss of Gillespie, with a recurrence of groin trouble, at half-time, was, perhaps, a significant one.

Liverpool also lost Rush, with bruised ribs, shortly after he had put them ahead with a classic piece of finishing. Palace's attempt to play him offside were lamentable as McMahon, winning back possession from Pardew, bisected their defence. Rush, at the end of a diagonal run, made finishing look easy.

Even though it was the only attack of note from Liverpool in the first half, one sensed that their control was total. Within seconds of the start of the second half the crowd of 38,389 discovered differently.

Pemberton made a penetrating run down the right and crossed to the far post, where Salako's shot was blocked by Staunton. Bright, however, volleyed the rebound straight past Grobbelaar.

Only Grobbelaar's rapid reactions to a close shot from Thomas prevented Liverpool from falling behind sooner than they did. Thomas and his midfield partner and look-a-like Pardew, who was playing for Yeovil Town, just three years ago, began exercising even greater control over Liverpool's renowned mid-field and it came as no great surprise when Palace went ahead in the 69th minute.

The free kick ordered against Hanson for a push on Bright seemed harsh. And Liverpool's vulnerability at set pieces was again underlined, as Bright won the header from Gray's free kick, leaving O'Reilly with a simple goal from close range. Meanwhile Palace's defence remained as porous as it has been all season and when Liverpool won a free kick on the right, Staunton's ball was deflected perfectly into the path of McMahon, who volleyed it crisply home from 20 yards.

Within a minute Palace seemed to have surrendered their place at Wembley, when Pemberton unnecessarily tripped Staunton and Barnes fired Liverpool back in front from the penalty spot and surely towards another Merseyside double. But Palace and this tie refused to die and Gray headed the London club level again as Staunton failed to repel an effort from Thomas on the goalline.

Even then Palace might have won it outright in normal time, but the crossbar refused Thorn's header.

It would have been too much to expect extra time to lift us on to an even higher platter of excitement, but Palace, proving stronger than Liverpool, came pretty close. Liverpool had to face up to their first defeat in a semi-final for five years when with 11 minutes of extra time remaining, Thorn headed on a corner from Gray at the near post and Pardew rose above the Liverpool defence to head home the decider.

CRYSTAL PALACE: N Martyn; J Pemberton, R Shaw, A Gray, G O'Reilly; A Thorn; P Barber; G Thomas; M Bright; J Salako; A Pardew.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Hysen; D Burrows; G Gillespie (Sub, B Venison); R Whelan; A Hansen; P Beardsley; R Houghton; I Rush; (Sub, S Staunton); J Barnes; S McMahon.

Referee: G Courtney.

The seven goals which Crystal Palace and Liverpool scored at Villa Park yesterday is the highest aggregate in an FA Cup semi-final for 32 years since Manchester United beat Fulham 5-3 in a replay at Highbury in 1958. Palace are first-time FA Cup finalists but Steve Coppell, their manager, has been involved three times as a player with Manchester United. He collected a winners medal in 1977 (v Liverpool) and losers medals in 1976 (v Southampton) and 1979 (v Arsenal).

Yesterday's defeat was Liverpool's first in the Cup since the final against Wimbledon two years ago. Palace are 6-5 favourites with William Hill, the bookmakers, to win the Cup. Hill's quote Manchester United at 5-4 with Oldham Athletic 4-1.

theguardian

Extra-special Eagles fly into first final

THE Eagles dared, the Liver birds drooped, and after one of the most amazing turn-arounds seen in an FA Cup semi-final, Crystal Palace are at Wembley legends in their own Sunday lunchtime. This is clearly not the year to be favourites, especially holders and favourites, of anything sporting. Liverpool, seeking their

fourth FA Cup final appearance in five seasons, went the way of Mike Tyson et al and could not even plead a long count in mitigation. Essentially they lost through poor defending at free-kicks. Palace, a goal down at half-time and with apparently no more interest in the match than damage limitation, stunned Liverpool by drawing level within 16 seconds of the resumption and from then on the season's most foregone conclusion became a classic cup tie. Amid mounting excitement, the teams shared four goals between the 70th and 90th minutes to take the match into extra time at 3-3. Then Alan Pardew's header in the 109th took Palace to their first FA Cup final by denying Liverpool their 10th. So far as the Cup is concerned, Liverpool proved to be the real victims of the 9-0 thrashing they inflicted on Palace in September. Yesterday they never seemed to believe the doormats of autumn could outscore them in the spring. Conceding 14 goals two more in the second League game to Liverpool yet reaching Wembley at their expense is, after all, a little unusual. Even at the final whistle, with the marvellous Palace fans roaring 'Eagles, Eagles . . . ' and the Kop giving the winning team the usual warm applause, the Liverpool players looked like men who thought they were dreaming and would wake up to find themselves omnipotent again.

The fact is that for two years now Liverpool have fallen into the habit of losing important matches despite form. They lost the 1988 FA Cup final to Wimbledon and last season saw the championship go to Arsenal after conceding a goal in injury time at Anfield. Palace, especially their manager Steve Coppell, take much credit for refusing to acknowledge the logic of Liverpool's superior pedigree and sticking to a tight-marking sweeper system even after Ian Rush had scored just before the quarter-hour. 'When Liverpool went ahead, the players were looking to the bench and wondering if I wanted to change to 4-4-2,' Coppell explained afterwards, 'but I wanted us to stick to a specific plan, and it worked. 'The truth is, the team with the best players doesn't always win a semi-final. It's a one-off. Sometimes character, determination, guts and passion are more important than skill. This may sound a horrible thing to say, but it's true. 'I was not too worried about being a goal down at half-time. I told the players not to panic and that there was no problem. To be honest, I thought that when they went ahead at 3-2 we'd blown it and that in extra-time both sides had settled for a replay. I was panicking then because we hadn't re-booked our hotel for midweek. I was convinced the game would be won or lost today.'

After spending the whole season playing with a flat back four and compressing the game in midfield, Palace yesterday used Thorn as a sweeper and had O'Reilly, Shaw and Pemberton tight-marking Rush, Beardsley and Barnes. When McMahon regained the ball from Pardew before sending Rush in for Liverpool's first goal, it seemed that Palace might have done better to stick to their offside trap.

Then Liverpool lost Rush, who had damaged his ribs in a collision with O'Reilly, after half an hour and, although Barnes immediately switched to the middle, their attack never regained its assured pattern. Even so, they appeared to have the semi-final well under control at half-time. Nobody could have been prepared for the speed of Palace's response. Liverpool kicked off for the second half but in the next instant saw the left-hand side of their defence swept aside by a run from Pemberton, the Palace right-back. From his centre Salako's shot was stopped on the line by Grobbelaar, but the ball came out to Bright who scored with an exultant half-volley. Now the Eagles soared. Just past the hour Grobbelaar saved superbly from Thomas after an exchange of passes with Bright and well-timed run had taken the midfielder through the middle of Liverpool's defence.

With 20 minutes remaining Liverpool, who had lost the height of Gillespie from their defence for the second half because of a groin strain, failed to deal adequately with a free-kick from Gray and O'Reilly gave Palace an undreamt-of lead. That was to be the story of Liverpool's decline and fall.

'I don't think Liverpool are weak at set-pieces,' Coppell mused later, 'but teams know that these are the only occasions when they can be sure of getting in crosses with five or six men in the box.' Kenny Dalglish, Liverpool's manager, thought his team had just defended badly at free-kicks; either way the dramatic effect was superb. Liverpool must have thought they had survived when McMahon walloped them level in the 81st minute, after Venison had crossed low, and Barnes restored their lead with a penalty a minute later following Pemberton's trip on Staunton. But with three minutes of normal time remaining another free-kick found them wanting and, although Thomas had two headers blocked, Gray scored with a third. In the 90th minute Thorn headed Gray's free-kick against the bar and for a moment or two in extra-time it looked as if Palace would be so near yet so far, Barnes sending Staunton clear to shoot into the crowd. The decisive goal arrived 11 minutes from the end of this extraordinary affair. Palace forced a corner on the left, Thorn nodded on Gray's cross from the near post and Pardew headed past Grobbelaar. Martyn just managed to scramble away Barnes's well-directed header, and that was that. It was Pardew's first goal in the Cup for Palace. He remembered scoring once in the competition before, for Corinthian Casuals five years ago. 'He's been an unlikely hero all season,' said Coppell of the 28-year-old player he acquired for Pounds 7,000 from Yeovil Town. Ron Noades, the Palace chairman, dived into the team bath afterwards. At least it made a change from Fiona Richmond.

SCORERS: Crystal Palace: Bright (46min), O'Reilly (70), Gray (87), Pardew (109).

Liverpool: Rush (14), McMahon (81), Barnes, pen (82).

Crystal Palace: Martyn; Pemberton, Shaw, Gray, O'Reilly, Thorn, Barber, Thomas, Bright, Salako, Pardew.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Hysen, Burrows, Gillespie (Venison, h-t), Whelan, Hansen,