

Date: 12 January 1991
 Opposition: Aston Villa
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THE TIMES

Alert Spink tosses spanner in creaky Liverpool works

Aston Villa 0 - Liverpool 0

THE excellent Nigel Spink may have been working overtime in the Aston Villa goal, but one could not help thinking that the Liverpool machine was still not operating to full capacity at Villa Park on Saturday. It seems only a matter of time before they are overhauled in the championship race by Arsenal.

Mechanical analogies, of course, are more pertinent in relation to Arsenal than they are to Liverpool, and could be one reason why England's undisputed champions may find themselves relinquishing their title for the second time in three seasons to the London club. Liverpool lack the adaptability and fluency in their football of recent seasons and as such are prey to the relentless automatons of Arsenal.

The return of that easy eloquence to the Liverpool side depends upon them restoring stability and mobility to a midfield which has been chopped and changed by injury and loss of form, and unbalanced in its temporary repair.

Though he would never say it, Kenny Dalglish, the Liverpool manager, might concur privately with Jack Charlton, who says that the first name he writes down on any Republic of Ireland team sheet is that of Ronnie Whelan. This season Dalglish has had to do so too often in pencil, only later to rub it out due to a recurring ankle injury which has kept Whelan out of exactly half of Liverpool's games.

Also missing on Saturday because of injury was Ray Houghton, though loss of form has been a more restricting problem this season. It is unlikely that Charlton would do the same as Dalglish and use Steve Staunton wide on the right as a replacement for Houghton on the Republic's team. But Dalglish has been left with few options in a team that is coming apart at the seams.

An injury to Peter Beardsley, no longer a definite starter, fit or otherwise, has caused further complications. John Barnes may enjoy his free role up front, but it is debatable whether it affords Liverpool as many attacking options as it does when he is played wide on the left.

He was still the player to cause Villa the most problems by his sheer individual brilliance. One bewitching run from the halfway line by him in the first half left the Villa defence totally bamboozled and primed for the kill, but he drove his shot just wide of the target. Paradoxically, it is Barnes's ability to finish which Liverpool will find hard to replace if, as seems inevitable, he leaves them for the Continent at the end of the season.

Jimmy Carter, bought at great expense from Millwall in midweek as either his successor or one to make up the English numbers when and if Liverpool return to Europe, made an encouraging debut. A tricky winger, who showed the versatility expected of him by performing on both flanks, too often ambitiously went for goal, without either sufficient venom or cunning.

Still, Liverpool just about deserved to inflict upon Villa their first home defeat of the season in any competition. They were frustrated chiefly by Spink, whose alertness to every danger was never more evident than when he made a vital, smothering save at the feet of Ian Rush four minutes from time.

Villa, who a year ago were extending Liverpool over the course of a season, should at least take heart from the fact that Bruce Grobbelaar was forced to break sweat, which for once was not entirely due to exhaustive efforts of David Platt. Tony Cascarino's modest success suggested that Peter Withe's arrival at Villa Park as coach has already begun to bear fruit.

ASTON VILLA: N Spink; C Price, K Gage, P McGrath, A Comyn, K Nielsen, D Yorke, D Platt, A Cascarino, G Cowans, I Callaghan.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Hysen, D Burrows, S Nicol, S Staunton, G Gillespie, J Carter (sub: R Rosenthal), J Molby, I Rush, J Barnes, S McMahon.

Referee: I Borrett.

the guardian

Much is lost in translation

SOCBERSPEAK was much in the air at Villa Park on Saturday. 'Dr Jo Venglos has a world-wide reputation as a coach and his achievements over the years have been superb' in other words, the Villa players can't understand him.

And again, 'Peter Withe's arrival as first-team coach was a big surprise' in fact, the deal was set up more than three months ago.

It was an odds-on certainty, after Aston Villa finished runners-up to Liverpool last season, that they would struggle this time. A poor season always follows a good one. It is the story of Villa's life, and Saturday's bumper crowd of more than 40,000 was another reminder of the club's under-achievement. In that, at least, they are consistent.

Withe's arrival, at the instigation of the chairman Doug Ellis, is aimed at motivating Villa. Withe will wind up the mechanism, while Venglos adjusts the hands.

To some extent the Czechoslovak manager is the victim of Graham Taylor's peculiar decision to pay a lot of money for Cascarino. Most of Villa's better moves against Liverpool broke down at the feet of the former Millwall player. His confidence is clearly at a low ebb, while the kind of service and support he needs is almost totally lacking.

Venglos, without a doubt, would feel happier without Cascarino, while the player would not be entirely disappointed to leave Villa Park. The size of the fee will be the deciding factor, unless Withe's views on the matter lead to a re-think.

Carter, who once used to plonk the ball on Cascarino's head, more than once sent over crosses of the sort the latter now probably dreams of. They were not, however, of the type Liverpool demand. Rush, taking the words out of Uncle Mort's mouth, might have been inclined to remark on a couple of occasions: 'You're a pillock, Carter.'

It was, however, a reasonably impressive debut. Carter has not scored many goals for Millwall but twice against Villa he switched the ball confidently from right to left foot and found the target. It is a talent which Liverpool will want to encourage.

Villa's overriding problem is a lack of goals. Their second-leg Uefa Cup match against Inter could be seen as a watershed. Prior to that they had failed to score in only three out of 17 games. Of their next 14 they have not scored in seven. Defensively Villa remain sound. Liverpool, as one would expect, discovered openings where other teams cannot breach, but Spink was solidity personified. His best save came in the second half at the feet of Rush, after Molby and Barnes had combined brilliantly.

Villa's thoughts will now turn sharply to Wednesday and Elland Road, where if they lose their Rumbelows Cup quarter-final their season will be as good as over. Tony Daley, who pulled a hamstring at Old Trafford two weeks ago, might have been the man to worry Leeds but the injury is long-term.

Just as Platt resurrected England's World Cup with a goal against Belgium, Villa fans will pray he can do it for them this week.

Ageing Liverpool, meanwhile, lurch from one 'crisis' to the next. For 'crisis', of course, read championship.

Aston Villa: Spink; Price, Gage, McGrath, Comyn, Nielsen, Yorke, Platt, Cascarino, Cowans, Callaghan.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Hysen, Burrows, Nicol, Staunton, Gillespie, Carter (Rosenthal, 74min), Molby, Rush, Barnes, McMahon.

Referee: I Borrett (Norfolk).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Spink frustrates Liverpool right to the end

Aston Villa 0 Liverpool 0

ASTON VILLA 0(5-3-2): Spink; Price, McGrath, Comyn, Nielsen, Gage; Callaghan, Cowans, Platt; Yorke, Cascarino.

LIVERPOOL 0(4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Nicol, Hysen, Gillespie, Burrows; Carter (sub: Rosenthal 73min), Molby, McMahon, Staunton; Barnes, Rush.

Weather: cold. Ground: firm.

Referee: I J Borrett (Norfolk).

NO GOALS, but any amount of passion, excitement and diverting football.

Liverpool made enough chances to have beaten most opposition, but they came up against a remarkable goalkeeper in Spink, whom they must by the end have despaired of beating. Moments of inspiration by the likes of Platt and Cowans kept Villa in with a chance; but they could have done with Daley.

Conditions could scarcely have been in sharper contrast with those at Wimbledon last Wednesday, when Villa lost an FA Cup replay in a howling wind and in a deluge. The pitch at Villa Park had held up astonishingly well despite the rain, which suited the style of both teams and must have been a particular relief to Yorke, the young winger from Trinidad still standing in for the injured Daley. Bigots in professional football used to say of black players, "Just wait and see what they do at Middlesbrough on a wet winter night." Well, you could scarcely have had a wetter winter night than we did at Wimbledon, yet Yorke, brought up not in Britain but in the West Indies, kept going gallantly till the end, one of the salient players on the sodden field.

Liverpool themselves deployed a winger of particular interest in their new acquisition from Millwall, the slight, speedy Carter, who did many a clever thing down at The Den. No prizes for guessing who was left out of the Liverpool attack. Yes, it was Rosenthal, warming the bench once again, for all the goals he has scored and brought about.

As for Yorke, played on the right, with the right-footed Callaghan in front of the right-footed Gage on the left, he twice in the opening minutes obliged Hysen to intervene with desperate efficiency in the box, first with his head, then, at full stretch, with his foot.

Lonely as ever in the middle was Cascarino, whom some had expected to give way to the recovered Olney, especially after the dreadful miss, alone in front of goal, which enabled Wimbledon to pinch the game last week. Cascarino, however, is too easy a scapegoat. As one has remarked before, he needs a shoulder like Sheringham, who used to play with him and Carter for the Lions. As it was, an early header put the Liverpool defence in trouble, a shot on the spin, from Price's cross after 16 minutes, had Grobbelaar diving on the ball.

Grobbelaar had other saves to make; a spectacular flyer from Platt's lethal free kick, another, towards the end of the first half, when Nielsen suddenly popped up to unleash a ferocious drive from some 30 yards. This came in the very next minute after Barnes had left him for dead, negotiated McGrath into the bargain, and shot just wide of the far, right-hand post.

In Liverpool's midfield, the massive Molby strolled about, deep in space, occasionally making exquisite passes, but of course he has never had the explosive change of pace to join in at will with his strikers. Such as Rush, who once, characteristically, got his head to a ball which seemed destined for a defender, only for Spink to save.

Carter, who had beaten Comyn comfortably only to waste his opportunity with a poor shot straight at Spink, switched to the left wing, where Barnes was also wont to drift. This gave Nicol, if he wished, the chance to motor down the right.

Early in the second half, only the resilient goalkeeping of Spink denied Liverpool a goal. Three saves he made in five minutes, the first two of them outstanding.

Rush, with one of those electric turns peculiar to him, spun on a ball from Burrows before the kind of shot which brought him a Cup goal in midweek. Not this time, Spink saved it, as he would save from Staunton when the Irishman picked his way by Gage and Comyn.

The third save, from Carter, was altogether easier. And, 17 minutes from the end, Carter finally made way for Rosenthal.

Two more stupendous saves by Spink, in the closing minutes, again frustrated Liverpool. He turned over a tremendous drive by Staunton. Then, when Molby, with a beautifully judged through-ball, sent Rush in alone, Spink launched himself at the centre-forward's feet.

Villa were by no means out of the game, played before a crowd of over 40,000. But they kept in it largely through moments of improvisation and sudden eruptions of individual skill, rather than with the measured pressure Liverpool had been exerting. Thus, had Villa scored, it would have been a reward for high morale and persistence, yet something of an injustice. They did well, in the event, to hold on to a point.