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Opposition: Wimbledon
Competition: League

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Barton tips Liverpool off their perch

Liverpool 1 - Wimbledon 1.

LIVERPOOL removed themselves from the top of the First Division by squandering chances throughout the match and refusing to bring Rosenthal off the bench until all opportunity was lost. Liverpool had led from the first half but once Wimbledon realised that their goal was charmed, once the impish Gibson in particular led the fightback, they deserved their late equaliser.

These are strange times in which the national game struggles for our full concentration. Yet the changing times of Liverpool are such that yesterday we had Jimmy Carter on the right side of midfield, Staunton on the left, Barnes down the middle and on the bench Rosenthal and Jamie Redknapp, who at 17 is hoping to be the youngest player ever to wear the famous red.

Youngest? A far, far younger figure in red took the field before the kick-off, a three-year-old, proving that the dark days of high fencing are behind us. The toddler wandered over to Barnes, perhaps to tell him what his father thought of the Jamaican's red thigh warmers, was invited by Nicol to take a kick at the ball, and rather reluctantly agreed to let a steward take him or her by the hand back to the seating. A change too in Wimbledon. They elected to alter a winning side, the captain, Curle, returning after suspension in place of Sanchez, but it is their complete lack of commando menace that is the most welcome sign of the times under the management of Ray Harford.

Thus, in a subdued theatre, we had a game that could have yielded a score of 5-2 by half-time had either side shown the quickness of finishing that Careca and Van Basten displayed against the Football League on Wednesday.

The chances came as early as the second minute. Staunton glided down the left, his long, raking stride too powerful for Joseph. Staunton's cross over the head of Segers looked also to be too high and handsome for Rush but somehow the centre-forward stopped in mid-stride and rose in the same instant to flick the ball with his head inches wide of the undefended far post.

Within seconds, Gillespie, with another diving header just wide, was demonstrating how vulnerable this Wimbledon side are in the air now that Beasant, Young and Thorn have been sold.

However, ours is also a League of foreigners. Two of them came together in the seventh minute when Molby dithered and Kruszynski nudged the ball through his legs to Gibson. From two yards outside the penalty box, Gibson unleashed a rising, curling shot to which Grobbelaar, by design or deception, reacted late but with enough spring to make a spectacular clutching save to his left.

Twice Liverpool invited their newcomer, Carter, to show his paces down the right, but twice Phelan's own speed was more decisive, and Carter then crossed over to the other flank to try his luck with the slower Joseph.

When the Wimbledon ranks were finally breached, however, it came straight down the middle. Staunton once more was the instigator, and when his long centre pounced over the defence there was Barnes.

He had looked uncomfortable in the role but now had the speed to burn off Joseph and the presence to get goalside of Blackwell; more importantly, he has that extra special left foot with which he was able to flick the ball gently into the air and then, before it could fall to knee height, use the same foot to guide the ball precisely around the advancing Segers.

Not many minutes later, Gibson had a similar opportunity when a looping free-kick from his goalkeeper dropped unattended into the Liverpool box. But Gibson lashed at the ball and his lack of direction sent it over the crossbar.

And just before half-time, Liverpool should have doubled their lead when Nicol put Barnes clear of the offside trap, Barnes crossed low from the right, but Rush looked as if he was trying to swallow a live snake and was completely unable to get hold of the shot. The opportunities, and the squandering of them, continued apace. Staunton fired the ball across the face of goal but Carter stumbled over it at the far post. Then Gibson took the ball off McMahon and put Cork through with only Grobbelaar to beat; Cork demanded far too much time and Burrows ran back five yards to slide the ball clear.

By now it had the appearance of knock-out competition. Gibson, at 5ft 5in and 10st a dwarf alongside Gillespie, tormented the big man, but like Liverpool was wasteful of his chances. Barnes, for the second time in the match, had a header against the crossbar, and just as it seemed as if his exquisite touch and calm in the first half had settled the match, Wimbledon came back.

It was in the 81st minute when Phelan began a terrier-like run straight at the Liverpool defence. He cut inside Gillespie, who instinctively nudged the Wimbledon defender to the ground. A professional foul? Certainly borderline, but the Welsh referee merely gave a free kick two yards outside the penalty area.

No matter. Up strode Barton and fired the ball through the packed penalty area and inside the netting of Grobbelaar's left-hand post before the acrobatic goalkeeper had moved a muscle.

LIVERPOOL 1(4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Nicol, Ablett, Gillespie, Burrows; Carter, McMahon, Molby (sub: Rosenthal 84min), Staunton; Rush, Barnes.

WIMBLEDON 1(4-4-2): Segers; Joseph, Blackwell, Curle, Phelan; Barton, Scales, Kruszynski, McGee; Gibson, Fashanu (sub: Cork 28min).

Goals: Barnes (32min) 1-0; Barton (81min) 1-1.

Weather: clear. Ground: soft.

Referee: H King (Merthyr Tydfil).

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