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THE TIMES

No better time to bid Anfield adieu

IF LIVERPOOL had not performed so abysmally on the plastic before, it would have been convenient to attribute their 3-1 defeat by Luton at Kenilworth Road on Saturday and the loss of the first-division leadership to the sudden departure of Kenny Dalglish, their manager, 24 hours earlier. Damage, if any, done to Liverpool's morale by Dalglish's going could be the least of their problems. Without wishing to sound unkind, this is not a bad time to be dissociated with Liverpool, despite their prominent League position and their involvement in the FA Cup. The pressure to remain successful is intense at Britain's leading club and it is going to get a lot worse before it gets better.

It is probably the most inopportune moment for anyone to take over the management of Liverpool since Bill Shankly picked up the reins 32 years ago. The job is fraught with difficulty, both in the short term and the long. Not since Shankly retired has the choice of manager been so critical.

The Liverpool board this morning will doubtless ask Ronnie Moran, the coach, to lead the club into the most crucial seven days of its season still in the capacity of acting manager. On Wednesday, Liverpool play Everton in an FA Cup fifth-round second replay at Goodison Park and on Sunday they play Arsenal, the new League leaders, in a championship game at Anfield.

Apparently the board is split over whether to continue the Liverpool tradition of appointing from within or to look elsewhere for a successor to Dalglish, who, it was reported in one newspaper yesterday, cannot work for another League club during the remainder of his three-year contract without Liverpool's permission. Whoever takes over, the word is that the back-room staff remains.

The main problems facing the next Liverpool manager are mainly those of tomorrow. Such as how they will cope next season should they qualify and be accepted back into Europe with the new Uefa rule limiting teams to four non-nationals only. All that Moran can do this week is to pick them up after their latest setback (Liverpool have won only three of their last 13 League and cup games).

The long-term injuries to Ronnie Whelan and Steve McMahon have left the midfield short on mobility and aggression. Iain Dowie, Luton's two-goal hero and surely everyone's man of the match, was of the opinion that Liverpool "could miss McMahon just as much as, if not more than, Dalglish".

Much of the Liverpool malaise would have been as evident on grass as it was on plastic. The late withdrawal of Bruce Grobbelaar with a stomach virus may have marginally undermined Liverpool's aerial power in their own penalty box but that in itself is an indication of their weakness in that area of their game. The absence of Gary Gillespie, who is still injured, compounded the failing. The extent of Dowie's supremacy in that department was embarrassing.

None of this explained the lethargic and sloppy performance from the champions. Luton, fourth from bottom of the table on Saturday morning, did not even have to be at their best to beat them, though their own game improved considerably after half-time. It was then that their short, sharp passing game pulled Liverpool to pieces in a way in which Liverpool are more used to doing to other teams.

Perhaps the most inexplicable individual performance of all belonged to John Barnes. Here he was on the kind of surface which favours anyone with his close ball skills up against a player Marvin Johnson who is seriously at odds with his game and never once did Barnes threaten. Indeed, Barnes has not turned in any of his customary magic since early in the season and one wonders what effect his contractual limbo which is self-imposed is having on his game.

The tide was turning against Liverpool even before they took the lead, courtesy of the kind of penalty award more commonly on offer to them at home than away. Julian James, the Luton left back, had little chance of withdrawing his hand in time to avoid contact with Steve Nicol's cross and, conversely, Jan Molby gave Alec Chamberlain little chance of getting his hand to the penalty kick.

Liverpool's luck Luton had a seemingly valid goal disallowed for offside could not hold forever, with their defence finishing second best on far too many occasions for comfort and a beautifully fluent move by Luton, rounded off by a free header from Kingsley Black, deservedly brought them level.

Seven minutes later, Barnes conceded possession to Mark Pembridge in his own half and the ball was whisked quickly upfield to Dowie in open space on the right wing, and he even had time to finish at the second attempt. Luton rubbed it in with a third goal when Dowie beat Glenn Hysen to a cross from Lars Elstrup with the kind of ease which makes managers want to resign.

LUTON TOWN: A Chamberlain; M Johnson, J James (sub: J Rees), D Beaumont, G Rodger, J Dreyer, L Elstrup, D Preece, I Dowie, M Pembridge, K Black.

LIVERPOOL: M Hooper; G Hysen, B Venison, S Nicol, J Molby, G Ablett, P Beardsley, R Houghton, I Rush, J Barnes, S Staunton (sub: D Speedie).

Referee: J Ashworth.

the guardian

Losing their grip on plastic

WHATEVER the pressures that forced Kenny Dalglish to resign it is safe to assume that fear of relegation was not among them. The last manager at Anfield to experience sinking feelings was Don Welsh, who in the early Fifties, having failed to take Brighton into the Second Division from the Third (South), finally made it with Liverpool, albeit in the opposite direction. Welsh, who as a player had held the FA Cup aloft for Charlton Athletic in 1947, was a cheerful man who believed that all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds. The story goes that after Liverpool had lost their struggle to stay up and faced Second Division football for the first time in 50 years, he offered solace to his players with the immortal words: 'Well, never mind, lads, the reserves lost as well.' Liverpool reserves lost on Saturday but it is safe to assume that Ronnie Moran, caretaker-manager after Dalglish's abrupt departure, did not try to dispel the first team's gloom at Kenilworth Road in like manner. Luton's 3-1 victory did not send Liverpool down but it helped remove them from the top of the First Division and, given the present state of play at Anfield, the sense of frustration and disappointment was barely less acute. The next week should give a clear indication of Liverpool's ability to pull through the present crisis. On Wednesday they return to Goodison Park in an effort to settle a fifth-round FA Cup tie with Everton which has already spanned the loss of the team's driving force, Steve McMahon, as well as Dalglish. Four days later Arsenal, having regained the leadership by beating Crystal Palace 4-0, visit Anfield. Arsenal are now 10 goals ahead of Liverpool and are only kept level on points by the FA's deduction of two after the brawl at Old Trafford in October. This time they will not have to win by two goals to snatch the title; all George Graham's players have to do is avoid defeat and hope that Liverpool continue to self-destruct, a process which began some time before Dalglish left. Losing at Luton was the first normal thing that happened to Liverpool in an otherwise abnormal week. It was their fourth defeat in six matches on an artificial pitch Dalglish detested. Luton, who previously had not won a First Division fixture this year, beat the champions almost routinely. Iain Dowie, who scored two of their goals, was outstanding.

Far from being galvanised by the manager's resignation, Liverpool merely compounded the confused state of affairs which had brought it about and for which Dalglish, even in his absence, still bore prime responsibility.

It was only Liverpool's third League defeat of the season but if FA Cup games against Brighton and Everton are included it was the seventh time they had failed to win a match after taking the lead. The only unusual aspect of the Kenilworth Road performance was the absence of Dalglish's inscrutable countenance on the touchline. Otherwise it was the familiar contest between the attacking qualities which had given Liverpool their early-season impetus and the defensive frailties which are dragging them down. In the absence of the injured Whelan and McMahon, Liverpool are like a door which has lost its bolts. They can open games up but can no longer keep out the draughts around the back. A strong midfield might even now be able to ease the pressure on a suspect back four. On Saturday, in the second half, Luton flowed past Molby and Houghton and practically picked off the defenders one by one. Even though Liverpool took a slightly fortuitous early lead, Molby scoring with a penalty after Nicol's low cross had struck James on an arm, Dowie's dominance of Ablett, and Hysen's slow responses, suggested that they would be even more fortunate to hold it. So it proved. Two minutes into the second half good passing by Beaumont and Elstrup gave Dowie the chance to cross from the right and Black headed in at the far post. Six minutes later the highly promising Pembridge dispossessed Barnes, Elstrup took the ball on and Dowie scored at the second attempt after the Dane had inadvertently blocked the first shot. The final straw for Liverpool came 10 minutes from the end when Hysen was so ponderous in dealing with a low centre from Elstrup that Dowie was able to step in front of the Swedish defender and flick Luton's third goal past Hooper, deputising for Grobbelaar, who had a stomach bug. Rush, Beardsley and Nicol were tireless in their efforts to salvage something from the wreckage. But Barnes, to whom Anfield will be looking for inspiration this week, spent much of the time motionless on the left wing, wearing red leggings under his Liverpool strip and performing a passable imitation of a pillar-box. Afterwards Moran, who has been a fixture in the Liverpool boot room longer than most of the boots, admitted that he would not mind being manager 'I've never turned my back on a job in my life' but still spoke like a No. 2. He made all the right pick-ourselves-up-and-bounce-back noises but you could not, in all honesty, imagine him rebuilding the team from the transfer market. And in the matter of making chief coaches manager, Liverpool have Everton's experience with Colin Harvey to guide them. What they need immediately is better results, and during the coming week the matter rests almost exclusively with the players. As for Dalglish, well, Hillsborough tested the man and the man came through with dignity and distinction. But his management did not survive its first serious examination, and now Liverpool will have to draw on an older inner strength to win something this season.

SCORERS: Luton Town: Dowie (54, 80min), Black (47). Liverpool: Molby (pen 16). Luton Town: Chamberlain; Johnson, James (Rees, 79), Beaumont, Rodger, Dreyer, Elstrup, Preece, Dowie, Pembridge, Black.

Liverpool: Hooper; Hysen, Venison, Nicol, Molby, Ablett, Beardsley, Houghton, Rush, Barnes, Staunton (Speedie, 68).

Referee: J Ashworth (Rutland).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Liverpool plunged into further crisis

Luton 3 Liverpool 1.

LUTON 3

(4-3-3): Chamberlain; Johnson, Rodger, Dreyer, James (sub: Rees 76min); Pembridge, Beaumont, Preece; Elstrup, Dowie, Black.

LIVERPOOL 1

(4-4-2): Hooper; Venison, Hysen, Ablett, Staunton (sub: Speedie 68min); Nicol, Houghton, Molby, Barnes; Beardsley, Rush.

Goals: Molby (pen 16min) 0-1; Black (47min) 1-1; Dowie (54min) 2-1; Dowie (80min) 3-1.

Weather: balmy. Ground: plastic.

Referee: J Ashworth (Rutland).

IF THIS be Liverpool's new era, Arsenal are going to love it. Twenty-four hours after the retirement of Kenny Dalglish, it will not surprise him to hear his team squandered a lead and the soft centre of their defence collapsed to the vigorous attentions of a relatively unsung young man.

Iain Dowie, who three years ago worked as a development engineer for British Aerospace, scored twice. The goals were due reward for his constant vigilance and for harrying the Swedish defender Hysen to apoplexy.

We were not merely attending another Liverpool match, not even questioning whether they could come to terms with the dreaded plastic on which Dalglish had lamented: "On an artificial surface, you get artificial football."

We were keen to see whether the elevation of Ronnie Moran could provide the boot-room link to propel Liverpool into a third winning decade.

Moran says he will give 100 per cent. Of course he will; he has ever since he came to Anfield recommended by the postman in 1949. But commitment from the bench is one thing; his predecessor has challenged that of the team.

They came to the plastic with two enforced changes, Hooper taking over from Grobbelaar, who had a stomach upset, for his first senior match for Liverpool since January 1988. The suspension of Burrows brought about the return of Houghton.

So Moran made no voluntary switch. And the uncertainties that had been evident in Liverpool's rearguard since long before Goodison were welcome prey to at least two Luton attackers. We wondered how soon it would be before Black exposed Venison, and how Hysen would cope with Dowie in the air. The answers came in the first 10 minutes.

First Venison produced a groping, mistimed tackle against Black, and the free kick was won in the air by Dowie, albeit with a header woefully wide. And when Dowie once again hustled past Hysen, he had two chances with his left foot, fluffing the first one, and misdirecting the second wide of the far post.

Though Liverpool find this pitch so abhorrent, they led on it from the 16th minute.

The move stemmed from Beardsley, so quick and positive with his first touch.

Houghton swept the pass on to the right and Nicol aimed a centre which struck the hand of James at waist height. It was an instinctive touch, spotted by a linesman, but despite the screaming protestations of the sole home-only crowd in football, Molby nervelessly stroked home the penalty.

Preece and the young Welshman Pembridge were giving Luton a grip on midfield.

The visitors, as tentative and as unsure of their footing as Arsenal had been on this travesty of a pitch, showed their unease when Rush received the ball to feet, and was unable to make contact.

This immobility spread to Barnes, indeed to most Liverpool players with the exception of Beardsley. He, low on centre of gravity, high on desire, was prepared to risk skin burns to try to force some rhythm. However, the booing and stomping was heard once more in the 27th minute when another high ball caused confusion in the Liverpool box, and Elstrup bounced the ball over Hooper into the net, only to be ruled offside.

But pressure, that much-used word at Liverpool, finally turned the match two minutes into the second half. Luton's aggression forced a corner on the right, Hysen missed the ball, Staunton sliced his clearance, and Elstrup showed the pace and class that was the decisive factor in the game. He rushed towards Liverpool, his pass reached Dowie and the centre-forward's measured chip to the far post was met by a consummate header for the equalising goal from Black.

In the 54th minute the screw was turned. Barnes dwelt on the ball and was harried off it by Pembridge. The Welshman drove urgently into the Liverpool half, Elstrup took over and surprised the square defence. From his pass Dowie attempted a shot which was going wide before it hit Elstrup, rebounded to Dowie's left foot, and this time the shot was curled with telling accuracy inside the far post. The victory was confirmed in the 80th minute when Elstrup once more was too fleet of foot for Liverpool, and his cross was met firmly and sharply along the ground by, who else, Dowie.

Soon afterwards Moran was staring into the glare of television lights. "I don't know if I'll be doing this again, the chairman asked me to pick the team and told me we'll talk again on Monday," he said.

He was smiling, more than Dalglish could ever have done in defeat. Did he feel the pressure? "Oh no, no! I can't lose any more hair, can I? We didn't perform in the second half and Luton deserved the win. But I gave no rollickings to anybody after what's happened in the last 48 hours, it's my job to try to lift them up for Wednesday."