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THETIMES

Moran despairs as Rangers roam free at Anfield

Liverpool 1 Queen's Park Rangers 3

SO THE dissatisfaction expressed by Ronnie Moran, Liverpool's acting manager, at the previous week's 7-1 win at Derby was not a case of false modesty after all. If he was disappointed then, he was devastated on Saturday when Liverpool fell woefully short of the standards expected of them.

``I'm smiling, but I'm choked inside," Moran said after watching the club spinelessly concede their first defeat at Anfield to Queen's Park Rangers, and restore the first division leadership to Arsenal. On this form, they will not regain it again this season.

One cannot think when a visiting manager to Anfield ever had the temerity to say, as Don Howe did without any hint of bravado, ``we didn't want half-time to come". The ghost of Bill Shankly could not have believed his ears or his eyes. But I dare say Kenny Dalglish would have done.

Liverpool just did not play like Liverpool, even allowing for the absence of Barnes with flu. They conceded possession, notably in the first half, with startling regularity, while their build-up from the back, at one time their great strength, was vague and often downright mindless. Moran gave the impression that he thought that the players merely lacked commitment and half suggested that the midweek internationals were responsible. But one senses that the reasons ran deeper than that.

The guts, for the remainder of this season at least, have been ripped out of the midfield with the loss through injury of Ronnie Whelan and, perhaps most crucially, the combative Steve McMahon. It has left the defence at the mercy of teams with the ability to exploit its lack of speed and Rangers were suitably equipped to take advantage and solid enough not to concede it.

Wegerle may not be the quickest of players but he is one of the cleverest and a brave, mazy 60-yard run in the opening minutes helped rid Rangers of any unhealthy and, on this occasion, misplaced respect for the champions. A goalscorer as prolific seven goals in seven games and as fast (once out of his blocks) as Ferdinand needed no invitation.

Yet before they had enabled Rangers to accelerate into a two-goal lead by half-time they had Stejskal, their Czechoslovak goalkeeper, to thank for stalling Liverpool with as good a save as any made by the likes of Seaman, or more pertinently, Miklosko, that other Czechoslovak, this season. Rush, having just missed with a free header, connected perfectly with a cross from Burrows, but somehow Stejskal got a hand to the volley.

If Ferdinand's first goal at Anfield was not quite as memorable, the player, whose team colleagues call him ``our black pearl, our Eusebio", said that he would never forget it. It was a case of gamely accepting a second chance after his first effort had come back off a post, even if he still needed the other post to head in off. Liverpool contributed to their own demise, when, on the stroke of half-time, Staunton played a hopeful back pass intended for his goalkeeper, which Burrows allowed to run past him but Wegerle did not. Moran shuffled the numbers at half-time and Liverpool improved, winning a penalty which Howe described as ``not unusual".

Brevett was adjudged to have handled after receiving a helping nudge from Houghton and Molby converted. A full and unrewarding recovery was denied Liverpool when Nicol dithered over a Ferdinand cross, affording Wilson an easy goal.

``I've never been able to understand why players can run around in the second half but not in the first half," Moran said with the same unsophisticated charm as his old contemporaries from the Boot Room. Doubtless they would have been sympathetic too, when he said: ``Injuries? I hope some players have injuries in their hearts. I know I have."

LIVERPOOL: M Hooper; G Hysen, D Burrows, S Nicol, J Molby, G Ablett, P Beardsley, R Houghton, I Rush, S Staunton (sub: R Rosenthal), G Gillespie.

QUEEN'S PARK RANGERS: J Stejskal; D Bardsley, R Brevett, A Tillson, D Peacock, D Maddix, R Wilkins, S Barker, L Ferdinand, R Wegerle (sub: B Allen), A Sinton (sub: C Wilson).

Referee: M Reed.

theguardian

Enough to turn Anfield to boos

NOBODY takes much notice of alarms nowadays. House alarms, car alarms: a cursory glance then just a curse. These horrible bits of modern technology cry wolf too often; and, when somebody really is breaking in, they never seem to go off anyway.

It is not known, as so much is not known, whether Kenny Dalglish suffered unduly from rogue bells and beepers troubling his stressful life. If so, it is perfectly understandable that he chose to ignore the deafening tocsins when the Liverpool defence crumbled against Crystal Palace in the FA Cup semi-final last season. Dalglish made no move from then until the moment of his extraordinary, ill-timed departure to strengthen the team significantly in this area. On Saturday his mistakes again caught up with Ronnie Moran.

It is rare to see Liverpool fans leaving before the final whistle but when Wilson scored, abruptly ending all hopes of any points, the exodus began in the main stand. Then came the booing. That huge win at Derby had temporarily expunged the memories of the previous dreadful home display against Sunderland. QPR did what Sunderland should have done and with brass knobs on. Liverpool beat the west London club 2-1 last April to clinch the championship. It was Alan Hansen's last first-team game and with him went the Liverpool defence. Such was the power of the midfield, at least when Whelan and McMahon were fit, that Hysen and crew were not rumbled in this campaign until Manchester United bundled them out of the Rumbelows Cup at Old Trafford last October.

Now any half-decent attacking move looks likely to unhinge them. With Wales in midweek Derby's Dean Saunders was eager to tell anybody how easy he had found it to ferret his way up Liverpool's trouser-leg. Alas for him, his own side's defensive pants fell down with startling alacrity against the Reds' superb counter-attacks.

QPR, carefully ensuring that their own rearguard was prepared and organised to the last zip and button, so outplayed Liverpool for the majority of this match that by the end it was almost impossible to conceive of the title remaining at Anfield. Silly, of course. 'Don't write us off yet, sunshine,' chorused Scouse voices. No, sir. Yet it was not as if the only thing wrong with Liverpool was the defence. The passing was poor and the challenging almost non-existent. True, Barnes pulled out at the last minute with a virus, but a far more virulent infection did for his colleagues. And it was fear.

Not a fear of QPR, well as they played, but a fear of failure. Groans and cries of derision greeted misplaced passes and missed tackles. And suddenly there was nobody in the Liverpool side with the stature or the self-confidence to rise above it all. The midfield was bereft.

Only a dubious penalty when Brevett was adjudged to have handled injected any sort of concerted energy into Liverpool's play after Ferdinand, with his seventh goal in seven matches, and Wegerle had virtually won the match by half-time. Ferdinand, who has a disconcerting habit of almost ignoring the ball when it first arrives at his feet, demonstrated astonishing skills and, after Barker's hard work, set up the third and killer goal.

Liverpool, who will regain first place if they beat Southampton in this teatime's televised match at The Dell, will no doubt have reflected on the first-half moment when, with the scores level, Rush's violently struck volley from a cross by Burrows was countered by a truly startling save from Stejskal.

A goal then and who knows what might have happened. Now, when things go wrong upfront, there is always the possibility of collapse, so frail is their defence. So it happened. 'They're still a good side. We just dented their armour a bit,' said Ray Wilkins. But these Liverpool knights looked well and truly errant.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Molby, pen (64min), Queen's Park Rangers: Ferdinand (32), Wegerle (44), Wilson (84).

Liverpool: Hooper; Hysen, Burrows, Nicol, Molby, Ablett, Beardsley, Houghton, Rush, Staunton (Rosenthal, 78), Gillespie.

QPR: Stejskal; Bardsley, Brevett, Tillson, Peacock, Maddix, Wilkins, Barker, Ferdinand, Wegerle (Allen, 75), Sinton (Wilson, 82).

Referee: M Reed (Birmingham).

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Feeble Liverpool flop from the top

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LIVERPOOL 1 (4-4-2): Hooper; Gillespie, Hysen, Ablett, Burrows; Nicol, Molby, Houghton, Staunton (sub: Rosenthal 79min); Rush, Beardsley.

QPR 3 (5-3-2): Stejskal; Bardsley, Peacock, Tillson, Maddix, Brevett; Barker, Wilkins, Sinton (sub: Wilson 82min); Ferdinand, Wegerle (sub: Allen 75min).

Goals: Ferdinand (10min) 0-1; Wegerle (45min) 0-2; Molby (pen 64min) 1-2; Wilson (83min) 1-3.

Weather: overcast. Ground: firm. Referee: M Reed (Birmingham).

RONNIE MORAN'S short, fraught tenure as Liverpool manager took a sudden downward plunge yesterday. Just when he thought he detected a silvery light at the end of the Anfield tunnel after those seven goals last week, his team lost emphatically at home for the second time this season.

That first defeat, against championship-chasing Arsenal, had been respectable. This one, against relegation flirts, was not. Make that: ex-relegation flirts.

QPR, under Don Howe's tender tutelage, looked positively suave compared to the souls stuttering in the guise of Liverpool. The visitors may linger nearer the bottom of the table than the top, but they arrived at Anfield nurturing a run of seven games without defeat. Even so, the robust manner in which they made it eight, could scarcely have been anticipated.

Wegerle was a handful from the start, leaving Molby and Ablett in twisted confusion, with an early stretch of his legs. Ferdinand, whose opening goal made it seven in seven games for the converted midfielder, demonstrated sophistry (a back-flick to Sinton which opened an attack down the left), strength (a 25-yard drive fingered over the bar by Hooper) and even smooth defending. When Gillespie side-footed a shot not more than four yards from the QPR goalline, it was a ricochet off Ferdinand which averted the danger.

Wilkins, of course, was a pillar of verbal strength in midfield. Beardsley, incidentally, admitted that he is a tremendous fan of the man once called Butch, possibly for his shining example of legs that still work at the age of 34. P. Beardsley is 30, as Private Eye would say.

The Eye might also point out that the combined aged of Liverpool players at the moment is 1,341 (adding up has never been the magazine's hottest point). But there were times when the home side's defence looked every bit the frail victim of senility, while the attack drove forward in ripples rather than waves.

QPR's parsimonious sweeper system did show signs of occasional strain. Swift passes between Gillespie and Beardsley, for instance, tended to open the box down the right, and, in one adrenalin-rushing moment in the first half, a ball hoisted by Burrows fell on Rush's boot, only for Stejskal to perform a sensational, flying, one-handed save. Houghton collared the rebound, but his shot was saved. But this was Liverpool in full whimper rather than full cry. They allowed too many balls to go unchallenged and too many passes to go astray. The back four were exposed, the midfield often harried, and Barnes was missing, due to illness. Or shock perhaps, since he has just signed a contract which insists he pocket Pounds 8,000 a week for his work.

Still, that was nothing to the shock that jolted Liverpool fans as their team succumbed to Ferdinand the Irresistible. He converted his ever-ready threat into a goal 13 minutes before half-time, arriving on the end of a cross from Barker. Liverpool should have been warned. Only seconds earlier, a Ferdinand header was cleared by Ablett off the line. Liverpool fans summoned jeers to their throats and the poor, pale side that trooped off at the interval were pelted with hearty boos. Not least because a terribly misconceived back-pass by Staunton had just been serenely tucked into the net by Wegerle.

To be two goals down at half-time is a paranormal experience at Anfield. Moran undoubtedly bathed his team in pertinent unpleasanties in the dressing room and they emerged with a reconstructed defence, Nicol moving from midfield, and more thrust about the strike force.

Fuelled by exhortations from the crowd and the scoreline at the Baseball Ground, they tried hard to increase the pace of the game. But when their goal came, no Liverpool player had a hand in it. The hand in question belonged to Brevett, the QPR full-back, who was adjudged to have touched the ball illegally in the area while he was in the process of falling over. Molby converted the penalty and so Liverpool were provided with a trapdoor through which they might yet clamber to safety.

But they didn't. In the final frantic stages, Rosenthal replaced Staunton, Beardsley hit a post, a Hysen header was punched clear by Stejskal and then Wilson, on the field as a substitute for only a minute, applied the putty that sealed QPR's victory.

``We want four," sang the QPR fans.

## PRESS ASSOCIATION

Reds get the Ferd degree

Rangers' striker Les Ferdinand continued his run of scoring form to lead his team to a rare win at Anfield.

The striker's seventh goal in as many games opened the scoring to stun the champions, who were hoping for a comfortable win to retain their top spot.

And as they slid to defeat Arsenal were overhauling them with a win at Derby, scene of a 7-1 Liverpool victory last week.

The other hero was Czech goalkeeper Jan Stejskal, who made vital saves every time Liverpool threatened to come back into the match.

Stejskal saved from Ian Rush, two goals away from 200 in the League, after 25 minutes to start the afternoon of frustration. Eight minutes later Ferdinand headed Rangers in front.

Seconds before half-time Republic of Ireland international Steve Staunton experienced his second slice of bad luck in four days.

Recovered

On Wednesday he had the misfortune to deflect England right-back Lee Dixon's shot into the Wembley net. The Republic recovered but after Staunton's back-pass was mistakenly left by Burrows and Roy Wegerle pounced, Liverpool would not. Wegerle danced past Mike Hooper and ended a lean spell to score his 16th goal of the season.

Liverpool, despite the absence of their inspiration John Barnes, a flu victim, improved after the break. Stejskal kept out Staunton's 25 yard drive and Glenn Hysen had a header cleared off the line.

A regular feature of recent Liverpool matches has been the Jan Molby penalty, and it made its appearance in the 64th minute after Rufus Brevett handled.

The game's crucial moment, with the score at 2-1, involved Peter Beardsley, the ball and a post, the post having the final say.

Hysen had one more go at levelling the scores with his head, but Stejskal pawed the ball to safety to ensure Rangers move further from the relegation zone.

Substitute Clive Wilson capped a magnificent effort from a Rangers team growing in confidence in recent weeks by scoring with his first touch for the third goal.

In November of last season Rangers beat Liverpool during the Reds' worst run of the year.

Liverpool recovered to take the championship, but this time the surprise victory may have left them without enough time.