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THE TIMES

Souness faces up to the vastness of his chosen task

Chelsea 4 Liverpool 2

ON THE assumption that lightning or even Lee Sharpe will not strike twice in the same place at Highbury tonight, it can be safely said that Liverpool's interest in this year's championship finally expired at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

The most traumatic season in their modern history is almost over. The question is, is it the beginning of a decline or just an isolated season of uncharacteristic misfortune with injuries?

Graeme Souness, the new Liverpool manager, came to the conclusion, one senses even before Kenny Dalglish threw in the towel that a "monstrous job" confronted him in restoring Liverpool to the position of eminence with which they have become accustomed for almost three decades.

Yet, it was only six months ago or less that people were predicting that Liverpool, admittedly with the help of a two-point penalty awarded against Arsenal for misconduct, were firmly on course for their nineteenth championship success.

It seems to have been overlooked that a big factor in the erosion of a one time eight-point advantage, as much as Arsenal's marvellous resilience and consistency, has been the damage and disruption done to Liverpool's mid-field, and the team as a whole, by long-term injuries to Steve McMahon and Ronnie Whelan. As it was, Liverpool had found it hard enough to maintain standards without the massively influential Alan Hansen in their defence all season.

Providing those players (with the exception of Hansen, who has retired) make full recoveries, there would not appear to be a great deal wrong with Liverpool that a top-class central defender, preferably a quick one like Mark Wright, of Derby, or Keith Curle, of Wimbledon, would not cure domestically. Abroad, however, Liverpool's requirements on their return to European competition are somewhat different. They must become considerably less British to abide by Uefa's rules which permit only five non-nationals per team.

"I don't think it is any secret that there are changes needed," Souness said. "If we can get the players we want, then we will make those changes. If we can't, we will work on with what we've got, maybe work a little harder at certain things in our game."

Given the tactics which they deployed, it was difficult to see how they could have done any better against Chelsea, who, by happy coincidence are the only team to have beaten Arsenal in the League this season. Boldness is one thing but Liverpool's line-up was positively suicidal: three centre backs Molby, Gillespie, and Staunton but no sweeper, with the full backs pushed up. Durie and Dixon, consequently, enjoyed their most impressive afternoon in tandem, according to Dixon, since they came together five years ago.

The game should have been up for Liverpool after half an hour, by which time Durie's unfettered freedom on the left flank had led to two goals, without reply: a header and a penalty from Dixon and Wise, respectively.

It was testimony to the quality that still exists in this Liverpool side, which Souness admitted was still the best in the country "if you talk about passing and moving, as I understand football to be" that they should have squared the game before Speedie and Rosenthal, a substitute for Carter, who was himself a substitute, eventually did so after 73 minutes. Had it ended there, the Israeli would have been hailed again as Liverpool saviour.

But Liverpool were undone by their old fallibility in the air when Grobbelaar came for a corner by Wise that he should not have needed to and was beaten by Dixon's header. A fourth goal by Durie was no more than the player, if not Liverpool, deserved.

CHELSEA: D Beasant; S Clarke, A Dorigo, A Townsend, J Cundy, K Monkou, G Stuart (sub: K Wilson), A Dickens, K Dixon, G Durie, D Wise.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Gillespie (sub: J Carter, sub: R Rosenthal), D Burrows, S Nicol, J Molby, S Staunton, P Beardsley, R Houghton, I Rush, J Barnes, D Speedie.
 Referee: S Lodge.

the guardian

Liverpool lose sight of their old goals

IF FOOTBALL, like cricket, went in for end-of-season festivals it would probably produce matches like this, hugely enjoyable but frivolous fare compared with the contest proper. Except that Liverpool came to Stamford Bridge with serious designs on the championship; they only seemed to be in festive mood.

Chelsea won because in Dixon and Durie they had the better means to capitalise on the manifold errors committed by both defences. Dixon's power in the air rolled back the years. No wonder Real Madrid wanted him on loan to brighten their moribund season.

Chelsea's season would have had more meaning had they maintained this level of performance. They remain the only team to have beaten Arsenal in the League. They are not a bad side but have good players who play badly too often.

This was not the case on Saturday, although there were moments when their defence, too, appeared built on quicksand. Liverpool's first cross had Beasant flapping like the corporal in Dad's Army who shouts, 'Don't panic' - and then panics. Yet he later made fine saves from Burrows and Barnes.

Liverpool, although they played attractively, often appeared to be performing more from vague memory than current inspiration, and near goal they became uncharacteristically over-elaborate.

Chelsea were much more direct, and three of their four goals followed incisive counter-attacks which exposed the thinness of Liverpool's defence.

The first, in the seventh minute, followed Stuart's quick pass to Durie, whose centre from the left was headed in by Dixon.

The second, just past the half-hour, was a consequence of Molby waddling forward and being dispossessed by Clarke, who then found Durie in much the same position as before. This time Durie cut into the box and was felled by Houghton, and Wise scored the penalty.

Two goals in the space of 10 minutes during the second half gave Liverpool a glimpse of salvation which proved illusory. Speedie scored against his old club after a studied build-up by Barnes and Beardsley. Then Rosenthal, a substitute for the substitute, Carter, brought the scores level having regained possession after losing the ball in the Chelsea goalmouth.

Three minutes later Grobbelaar failed to reach a corner from Wise and Dixon scored with a marvellous header. Three minutes from the end Dixon and Wilson caught Liverpool square with another quick break which saw Durie score from Wilson's cross.

If Graeme Souness had any doubts about the size of his task at Anfield these surely vanished with this Liverpool performance. This season they have conceded, on average, more goals per League match than at any time in the Eighties.

Writing in the programme about Chelsea's plans the club chairman, Ken Bates, said he was not prepared to have fans 'sitting in a first-class stadium watching second or third-rate performances'. On Saturday those words applied more to some of the visiting players than they did to Chelsea's; most of them in Liverpool's defence.

SCORERS: Chelsea: Dixon (7min, 75), Wise (pen 31), Durie (85). Liverpool: Speedie (62), Rosenthal (72).

Chelsea: Beasant; Clarke, Dorigo, Townsend, Cundy, Monkou, Stuart (Wilson, 82), Dickens, Dixon, Durie, Wise.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Gillespie (Carter, 34; Rosenthal, 67), Burrows, Nicol, Molby, Staunton, Beardsley, Houghton, Rush, Barnes, Speedie.

Referee: S Lodge (Barnsley).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Dixon and Durie pick holes in Liverpool case

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CHELSEA 4 (4-4-2): Beasant; Clarke, Cundy, Monkou, Dorigo; Wise, Townsend, Dickens, Stuart (sub: Wilson 82min); Dixon, Durie.

LIVERPOOL 2 (3-5-2): Grobbelaar; Gillespie (sub: Carter 35min; sub: Rosenthal 68min), Molby, Staunton; Nicol, Houghton, Speedie, Barnes, Burrows; Rush, Beardsley.

Goals: Dixon (8min) 1-0; Wise (pen 32min) 2-0; Speedie (63min) 2-1; Rosenthal (73min) 2-2; Dixon (77min) 3-2; Durie (87min) 4-2.

Weather: sunny. Ground: firm.

Referee: S Lodge (Barnsley).

DOWN by the King's Road, an afternoon of rare excitement and passion. At the end of it, the Chelsea thousands spilled on to the pitch to taunt the beaten foe. And Graeme Souness, after his first defeat back at Liverpool, was unsure how depressed to be. That late kick-off at Sunderland did little for anybody.

Chelsea, beaten 7-0 last time out in Nottingham, said a splendid farewell to Stamford Bridge for the season. They are the only side to beat Arsenal in the League, and now this. They fairly carved chunks out of Liverpool's three-man defence in a sweet opening, with Dixon and Wise (from a penalty) scoring, and it would have been 3-0 if Dixon, away and alone, had not bottled it.

Admittedly, Chelsea's season has been a let-down: after paying big money for Wise and Townsend, they had high hopes. In the match programme yesterday Ken Bates, four pages of him, was uttering a dire warning about "second and third-rate performances". But this match must have made him, and all true blues, happy.

Liverpool, once again, were a side in which inspired attackers were trying to compensate for a bad defence. This was Souness's third match in charge; he had won the other two 3-0. Just about his first act at Anfield was to drop Hysen and to play with three centre-backs, with Nicol and Burrows as attacking full-backs.

Up to three o'clock yesterday it seemed that Souness had found a panacea. Although Ablett was unfit, the manager stuck to the same formation. But in the event this left great holes which Chelsea's passing exposed, especially in the area where a Liverpool right-back would have been. With Nicol failing to cover back along his flank, Chelsea's first two goals came from that area.

For the first Durie centred and Dixon headed well, back across Grobbelaar. For the second Houghton tripped Durie and Wise converted the penalty. Wise, out of the Chelsea side not so long ago and in danger of being a Pounds 1.7m flop, can tell his grandchildren about this week. A scorer for country and club, and he buzzed well here.

Souness reverted to a flat back four at 2-0, with Gillespie going off. It made good tactical sense but, surprisingly, he said the switch was caused by Gillespie's troublesome hamstring.

Anyway, Liverpool's defence was definitely less suicidal from then on, and they could even have snatched the lead after Speedie, back on familiar pastures, and Rosenthal, who substituted the substitute Carter, made it 2-2. But Houghton missed just as badly as Dixon had done.

Dixon headed Wise's corner in off the bar for 3-2; Speedie hit a post. It was cracking stuff. And Liverpool were slightly hard done by when a sweeping Chelsea counter-attack made it 4-2 near time. A lovely move, this, with Dixon feeding the substitute Wilson, and Durie banging home his cross.

"Certain people weren't doing their jobs properly," Souness said of that period which probably ended Liverpool's hopes of the championship. "In the first half, we accepted second best."

Rush was certainly doing his job, and the other forward players all had their moments. But you could understand Kenny Dalglish's reluctance to play Molby, who was often ponderous in a defence where you could not see a five-star performer.

As for Rosenthal, whoever is king of the castle he seems fated to sit out much of the action. He had been on only four minutes when he swayed from side to side in the penalty area, mesmerising Dorigo and Stuart, and poking in a low drive that should never have been.

Today work starts on refurbishing Chelsea's main stand because Bates is sure that is where the club are going to stay. Tomorrow it is Liverpool's turn for the teatime kick-off, on television, at Nottingham Forest. They will probably score goals: and they will need to.

PRESS ASSOCIATION

Forget it now, Graeme!

Chelsea, the only team this season to have taken three points off champions-elect Arsenal, dashed the lingering title hopes of Liverpool, the reigning champions, in a thrilling match at Stamford Bridge.

Chelsea went into the game with a 7-0 defeat at Nottingham Forest fresh in their memory, while the Merseysiders had revived their title hopes with two wins in two games under new manager Graeme Souness.

Chelsea began brightly, forward Kerry Dixon heading over from eight yards.

Dixon had a second chance after six minutes and this time buried it, guiding a precise header past Liverpool goalkeeper Bruce Grobbelaar from Gordon Durie's pinpoint cross.

The goal came at the end of an exciting opening spell. There followed a lull in the drama before Chelsea went two-up after 31 minutes. Durie cut into the penalty area after a fine pass by Tony Dorigo and was tripped by Ray Houghton. Dennis Wise, England's goalscorer in the 1-0 European Championship win against Turkey in midweek, sent Grobbelaar the wrong way from the penalty.

The margin slightly flattered the home side, though it might have been three had Jan Molby not brought down Durie as he went clear just inside the Liverpool half. Molby was lucky to escape with only a booking.

Souness replaced defender Gary Gillespie with winger Jimmy Carter in a bid to fire Liverpool's attacking options. David Burrows then crashed a close range shot into Beasant's hands while Beardsley came close with a shot over the bar.

Cleared

Liverpool almost went three down with the second half only minutes old. Alan Dickens fed Dixon, but the Chelsea forward shot poorly after rounding Grobbelaar and his effort was cleared off the line.

Liverpool pressurised Chelsea at the back, but in doing so exposed themselves at the back and were often caught out by the hardworking Dixon and Durie.

Dixon, in the peak of his form at 29 and Durie, in inspirational mood, were the most influential players on the field.

Liverpool were not ready to relinquish their title however. Barnes sent in a dangerous curling free kick which Beasant saved with difficulty. Burrows, showing a little too much fight, was booked for fouling Stuart but, after 63 minutes, Liverpool scored the goal their pressure deserved.

Rush, his back to goal, turned and slipped a short pass to the incoming David Speedie, a former Chelsea forward, who scored from close range.

Souness made a bizarre second substitution, bringing off Carter, himself a substitute, for striker Ronnie Rosenthal.

The move brought immediate dividends. First, the Israeli striker's direct style helped create a chain for Rush, who just lost out in a 50-50 tussle with Beasant.

Then, after 73 minutes, Rosenthal scored a superb individual goal, twisting and turning past two Chelsea men on the edge of the area before sending a low shot past Beasant.

Chance

The noise was deafening when Dixon sent Chelsea back into the lead four minutes later with a firm header that went in off the underside of the crossbar from a Wise corner.

Before that, Houghton had missed Liverpool's easiest chance of the game, volleying over when the ball dropped to him only four yards out.

Liverpool were storming forward to gain a third equaliser. But for all Liverpool's sudden attacking vigour, they remained hesitant in defence and with three minutes left substitute Kevin Wilson broke down the right, held the ball up well and sent a simple pass to man of the match Durie who scored from close range. Liverpool, a team full of gifted internationals, had no one to match Durie on the day.