

Date: 24 August 1991  
 Opposition: Luton Town  
 Competition: League

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24 August 1991

## THE TIMES

### McMahon paces recall at risk

Luton Town 0 Liverpool 0

WHEN normal service was resumed at Kenilworth Road, the picture was far from pretty. The game may again be staged on grass and in front of visiting supporters there, but, on the opening day of Luton's programme at home, the product was shabby and tinged with disgrace.

The quality was already wretched before Steve McMahon lowered the standard of behaviour as well and was sent off. In raising his arm towards the face of Philip Gray, he has, for the second time this year, damaged his chance of resurrecting his England career. The effect could be terminal.

Graeme Souness, Liverpool's manager, offered McMahon neither support nor sympathy and, although he will not pay an additional penalty, the price for his irresponsible indiscretion promises to be severe. Guilty of violent conduct, he will automatically be suspended for two games and will therefore be unavailable for the international against Germany in three weeks. Lawrie McMenemy, the England manager's assistant, saw for himself the incident in the 52nd minute which, though not overtly malicious, confirms that McMahon's discipline is flawed. Consequently, he remains a liability. Nine months ago, for instance, he was seen by television viewers to thrust his elbow in the mouth of Gascoigne.

He avoided becoming the first player to be dismissed during a game covered live, a fate which was to befall Gascoigne himself on New Year's Day, but a week later, McMahon was ordered off for committing a second bookable offence during the FA Cup third-round replay against Blackburn Rovers. That cost him a potential place in the England party against Cameroon, a rehearsal for the European championship qualifying ties towards the end of last season.

Since the visit of the Germans will be used by Graham Taylor to refine his side for the remaining competitive games against Turkey and Poland, history seems to have repeated itself.

The timing displeased Souness too. With no fewer than eight casualties in this squad, he scarcely needed to lose another of his senior representatives. Refreshingly, he agreed with the referee's interpretation.

"A hand was raised," he said. "My player was in the wrong and he deserved to go, which disappoints me."

Gray, an Irishman, resembled a Latin American in theatrically over-reacting to the glancing blow struck as Luton were attempting to take a quick free kick. Yet McMahon, who had worked his way back from a serious knee injury suffered in the FA Cup against Everton in February, can have no complaints.

Whelan did not last for even as long as his central defensive midfield partner. The captain, another to miss the closing months of last season, was struggling with the knee he hurt in midweek and was substituted, apparently only as a precautionary measure, midway through the first half.

Thereafter, Liverpool, virtually unrecognisable from the team beaten 3-1 at Luton six months ago on the day after Kenny Dalglish resigned as manager, amounted almost to a second team. Saunders, who could do nothing right, and the equally ineffective Walters would not, on present form, merit a place in a full-strength line-up. Since Barnes and Rush will be out for another month, Liverpool could stay temporarily in the middle of the table. Nevertheless, though physically and numerically depleted, they were still stronger than Luton. Burrows shook the angle of bar and post and later Rosenthal saw his effort hooked off the line by Rodger.

Luton may have acquired Peake, a defender who is expected to captain them at Arsenal tomorrow night, but their principal deficiency is in attack. They have yet to score this season and, unlike Liverpool, there is no reason to think that they will substantially improve.

LUTON TOWN: A Chamberlain; D Beaumont, R Harvey, D McDonough, G Rodger, J Dreyer, P Gray, D Preece, B Stein, M Pembridge, K Black.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Ablett, D Burrows, S Nicol, R Whelan (sub: M Marsh), N Tanner, D Saunders, R Houghton, S McManaman, M Walters (sub: R Rosenthal), S McMahon.

Referee: J Moules.

## the guardian

### Macca canned

MANCUNIANS may be chortling, but Liverpool's early-season bulletins are no laughing matter for Graeme Souness and Graham Taylor. First John Barnes goes for surgery, then Steve McMahon is sent off - a case, you might say, of elbowing himself out of the England scene.

With his backward swing in the 51st minute McMahon may well have ended his international career. The victim, Philip Gray, may have over-reacted but John Moules had no choice after hearing a linesman's account.

When the referee's report confirms violent conduct the midfielder will be banned for three games, starting September 7. Under FA policy governing friendlies, he will be debarred from England's selection for the Germans' visit to Wembley four days later. Taylor, already shorn of Barnes and Gascoigne, now has another midfield option cut off.

Surely Souness, who had already seen Whelan join Liverpool's nine-strong list of injured with a recurrence of his knee trouble, would see red over the dismissal? No, Liverpool's manager was a model of dignity and verbal precision. 'The sending off was justified . . . if you raise your hands you deserve to go . . . the referee had to be guided by the linesman because he didn't see it . . . I don't think the Luton man over-reacted; you don't expect an elbow in the chin.'

Plastic has turned to grass at Luton, but this Kenilworth Road occasion still smacked of unreality. Liverpool finished the game with three forwards in midfield, among them Saunders. If the pounds 2.9-million man's miss from six yards was astonishing, Rodger's bicycle kick off the line to deny Rosenthal's chip was surreal. But there is scoring potential, and much besides, in the leggy McManaman and compact Marsh. The 19-year-old McManaman - 'outstanding,' purred Souness - is ready for the full 90 minutes but the 22-year-old Marsh is still being moulded.

'You'll see more of him as the season goes on,' said Souness.

With David Pleat returned, Brian Stein in tow and the grass restored, Luton look to be going back to the future - though it does not hold much promise of a Premier League place. Pleat is working on extremely limited resources, but has spent pounds 100,000 on Trevor Peake. The 34-year-old central defender - fitness permitting - will captain the team at Arsenal tomorrow.

Luton created few chances despite Pembridge's deft and quick promptings. That was largely because of the excellence of Ablett and Nicol. Pleat offered an additional reason: 'The pitch destroyed the game . . . the grass is too long. It should have helped us when we were playing 10 men. But the ball doesn't run.'

Luton Town: Chamberlain; Beaumont, Harvey, McDonough, Rodger, Dreyer, Gray, Preece, Stein, Pembridge, Black.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Ablett, Burrows, Nicol, Whelan (Marsh, 24min), Tanner, Saunders, Houghton, McManaman, Walters (Rosenthal, 80), McMahon.

Referee: J Moules (Erith).

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## THE SUNDAY TIMES

McMahon's red card adds to Liverpool woes

LUTON TOWN 0(4-4-2): Chamberlain; Beaumont, Rodger, Dreyer, Harvey; McDonough, Pembridge, Preece, Black; Gray, Stein.

LIVERPOOL 0(4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Tanner, Nicol, Ablett, Burrows; Houghton, McMahon, Whelan (sub: Marsh 24min), Walters (sub: Rosenthal 80min); Saunders, McManaman.

Weather: overcast. Ground: lush grass.

Referee: J Moules (Erith).

KENILWORTH ROAD still won't be Liverpool's favourite ground. Obligated to play almost half of the game with 10 men, they held on for a 0-0 draw, Luton simply not being good enough to exploit their advantage. But Liverpool, though they almost won at the death, have an abundance of problems.

History of a sort was made at the ground. Luton have torn up, at the behest of the Football League, their horrible plastic pitch; and what more suitable opponents could they have for the baptism of their new, green sward than Liverpool, whose reaction to the plastic had been that of a vampire to a wreath of garlic. How Liverpool, and especially Kenny Dalglish, used to hate having to play on it. Whatever expedient they tried, whether it be a sweeper or a flat back four, they always appeared to find themselves in the deepest difficulty.

Yesterday, moreover, they were officially able to bring their own fans. Luton's controversial ban on away supporters, which so delighted Mrs Thatcher, and perhaps got their former chairman into the House of Commons, has gone.

Liverpool, already without the injured Rush, also found themselves without the injured Barnes, whose Achilles tendon injury may keep him out for a month. Also missing was their new centre-back, Mark Wright, whose place was taken by Nicol, Tanner coming in at right-back.

With McManaman, a lanky, local centre-forward, leading the attack, and the quick, gifted little Marsh sat on the substitutes' bench, it was indeed an unusual afternoon for Liverpool, whose attitude in recent years to local players, such as the two last named, has been little short of ostracism. When they lost at Manchester City last Wednesday, Marsh delightfully made a goal for McManaman. Who knows what changes the new UFA dispositions, making Scots, Irish and Welsh "foreigners" in English club teams, may make at Anfield?

Yet watching Liverpool work their way, with some hardship, into the game, it was impossible not to wonder why they had decided to rid themselves of an English international in Beardsley, so much the finest player on the field when Everton lost to Nottingham Forest last week.

As it transpired, Marsh would again get his chance to come off that bench, Whelan, recently back after very long absence being obliged to go off after 24 minutes.

Four minutes after that, Liverpool very nearly scored, although it would almost literally have been a bolt from the blue. From far out, Burrows swung his left foot at the ball, which ripped past Chamberlain, and rebounded from the top of the far post.

At least Luton had been given time to play themselves in, not only on the unaccustomed grass, but after the trauma of their 5-0 thrashing at Coventry. As their returning manager, David Pleat, complains, Luton have little or no money to buy players; indeed, they have to sell them. Sooner, rather than later, one of the big battalions is sure to come in for the little Welsh midfielder, Pembridge, as deft as he is quick and versatile.

Saunders has been bought for Pounds 2.9m, presumably to score goals. He did nothing of any significance throughout the first half, and in the opening minute of the second, when Tanner crossed, McMahon shot point blank, Chamberlain blocked full length, and the ball ran loose, Saunders booted over from a few yards out. It made him look still more expensive.

Worse still, McMahon was sent off after 51 minutes, when the swing of an arm left Gray on the ground. Lively little Marsh almost immediately forced Chamberlain to tip over, but Liverpool's burden was now heavy.

Rosenthal came on for the flaccid Walters, brushed past an inept challenge, and almost won the match for Liverpool. His shot, touched by Chamberlain, was going in, when Rodger hooked it gallantly off the line.