Date: 28 September 1991
Opposition: Sheffield Wednesday
Competition: League

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THE TIMES

Liverpool's problems pile up for Souness

Liverpool 1 Sheffield Wednesday 1

GRAEME Souness may be reluctant to admit as much but it is increasingly clear that Liverpool's season is fast approaching if not the point of no return, then a critical phase.

Unlike his immediate predecessor, Kenny Dalglish, Souness is a man who often feels the need to publicly discuss the shortcomings of his team and the shrug of the shoulders said a good deal more about Liverpool's lamentable second-half performance.

``I am deeply disappointed because I think that in the first half you saw our best performance of the season and in the second, our worst performance of the season,'' he said. ``After the interval, we just did not get started. I wish I knew why there was such a difference.''

The cure may well lie in the club's treatment room where quality players like Barnes, Whelan, Molby and Wright still linger. By the time those influential figures are restored to full fitness, it could be too late for Liverpool to reduce the 11-point gap which separates them from Manchester United, the first division leaders.

The form of Saunders will possibly prompt Souness to reflect on the old adage which suggests that throwing money at a problem in no way guarantees a satisfactory solution. The Welshman's contribution since becoming British football's most expensive footballer at Pounds 2.9 million has been negligible so far.

On Saturday, when faced by a Sheffield Wednesday defence which was a model of consistency, Saunders was a sad and desolate figure as he scampered around the perimeter of the penalty area in the forlorn hope that his persistence would eventually be met with some tangible reward.

Houghton's splendid strike in the 17th minute gave the home side a lead whic they only occasionally threatened to extend. It was remarkable that the scoreline remained unchanged until the 68th minute when Harkes headed in Worthington's accurate cross from the left for the equaliser.

It was similarly remarkable that Wednesday failed to score a second, decisive goal in the game's remaining 22 minutes as Liverpool's already threadbare play began to further deteriorate. The record books prove that it would be foolish to suggest the alarm bells are sounding at Anfield but, even at this early stage, it could just be that the manager's finger is beginning to reach for the button.

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

SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY: C Woods; R Nilsson, P King, C Palmer, P Warhurst, N Pearson, D Wilson, J Harkes, N Jemson (sub: T Francis), P Williams, N Worthington.

Referee: P Danson.

theguardian

Winter promise cuts no ice with Souness

IT IS often said that Liverpool never really get going until the last few straggling swallows have fled our southern shores and the first frosts have withered the autumn leaves.

The chill winter wind that whipped around Anfield on Saturday signified neither a return to championship form nor the sharp, expectant tingle of better things to come. There was ice in Graeme Souness's words but fire in the manager's eyes.

In common with the old grey mare, Liverpool ain't what they used to be.

McMahon's return after suspension galvanised them in the first half but the men from the knackers yard were edging on to the pitch long before the final whistle.

'Deeply disappointing,' said Souness. 'Maybe we thought we had won it.' The 'we' was not royal.

On such occasions Souness's predecessor Kenny Dalglish would stare into some small corner of infinity and chunter his pre-recorded message about 'matters being dealt with internally'. This would be followed by a long silence.

Souness is not a man to linger. Having briefly but courteously dispensed with the post-match formalities he departed with the thinly disguised demeanour of someone about to kick somebody's spine up through their hat.

The sharp turnaround in this match is perhaps best indicated by two incidents involving McManaman and Harkes. After Houghton had expertly seized on a loose ball to put Liverpool ahead, Woods having parried McMahon's free-kick, McManaman produced a delicious cross that left the head of Rush with goal written in capitals. The save by Woods was of true international pedigree.

At this point Ritchie Barker, Wednesday's assistant manager, made frantic signals for Harkes to move out from central midfield into a wide position in order to stifle McManaman at source. Wednesday were clinging on for dear life and the Koppites were happy.

It all changed. McMahon's influence faded; Houghton and Marsh failed to respond. The next time McManaman and Harkes met significantly it was the former trying to mark the latter, a complete role reversal. 'I told my midfield players to be more positive in the second half,' said Wednesday's manager Trevor Francis.

Worthington, a slightly anachronistic remnant of Wednesday's Wilkinson era, finally found time to measure a cross that the New Jersey-born Harkes, dispensing of McManaman's fragile challenge, headed beyond Grobbelaar.

If Hirst had been fit or Jemson match sharp, there is no knowing the amount of damage Wednesday might have inflicted in a second half which almost entirely belonged to them. Less than a fortnight ago the Kop were gleefully singing, 'Are you watching, Manchester?' as Saunders put four goals past Kuusysi Lahti. What chance the same refrain at Old Trafford next Sunday?

If Liverpool lose this one the gap between them and United will be an unthinkable (for Merseyside at least) 14 points. A decidedly frosty thought.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Houghton (16min). Sheffield Wednesday: Harkes (68).

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Harkness, Burrows, Nicol, Marsh (Walters, 83), Tanner (Ablett, 67), Saunders, Houghton, Rush, McManaman, McMahon.

Sheffield Wednesday: Woods; Nilsson, King, Palmer, Warhurst, Pearson, Wilson, Harkes, Jemson (Francis, 87), Williams, Worthington.

Referee: P Danson (Leicester).

Compiled by Graeme Riley

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Wednesday pounce on Liverpool's vulnerability

LIVERPOOL 1 SHEFFIELD WED 1

LIVERPOOL 1 (4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Harkness, Nicol, Tanner (sub: Ablett 65min), Burrows; Houghton, McMahon, Marsh (sub: Walters 81min), McManaman; Saunders, Rush.

SHEFFIELD WED 1

(4-4-2): Woods; Nilsson, Pearson, Warhurst, Palmer; King, Wilson, Harkes, Worthington; Jemson (sub: Francis 87min), Williams.

Goals: Houghton (16min) 1-0; Harkes (67min) 1-1.

Weather: overcast. Ground: firm.

Referee: P Danson (Leicester).

STILL Liverpool do not wear hat invincible look that was theirs for so long, not even at Anfield. Although they took an early lead through Houghton, and then fashioned some neat football, they allowed their determined opponents to catch them over the distance.

At the end it was Wednesday who came closer to winning it, when a shot from the beanpole Palmer flashed just wide of Grobbelaar's post and flew into the Kop. A win would have flattered Wednesday but they have arrived as a force, little doubt about it.

At three o'clock it would have been a gross exaggeration to cast Liverpool among the sick men of the First Division; on the other hand, they were certainly not in the rudest of health.

The previous Saturday they had lost to Leeds for the first time in 18 seasons, and only time will tell whether that signalled a switch in the balance of power. Much worse, in the week Liverpool could manage only a draw against Stoke City in the League Cup. At Anfield, too.

Ablett, the defender who blundered for Stoke's second goal, was dropped, but this was a half-hearted act of liquidation by Graeme Souness. Ablett was banished only as far as the bench, and he emerged later on when Tanner, Liverpool's best defender, hobbled off after a kick on the shin. Tanner is fifty-fifty for Liverpool's match in Finland this week where, against Kuusysi Lahti, they have a 6-1 lead. Whelan is hoping to play in that one.

Liverpool miss Whelan, with his no-nonsense sidefooted passes and his harrying, and they would like Wright back soon as well. But most of all they would like Barnes back, and that is not going to happen for weeks.

When you see Liverpool struggle for inspiration as they did throughout the second half here, you realise why they were prepared to pay so much to keep Barnes. They did not even have Rosenthal to bring on to run at Wednesday: he was not chosen among the 13.

At first, Barnes's absence mattered little because the lanky young McManaman, on the left wing, lit up the grey afternoon. But after about half an hour McManaman vanished from the match. McMahon, most forceful early on, followed him, but not until he had instigated the goal.

That came when Saunders again troubled Pearson and won an indirect free kick centre-field. McMahon collected a touch at the set-piece and shot low and powerfully. Woods did what an international goalkeeper should: he managed to knock the ball away at an angle. Houghton, however, scored well.

Soon after came Liverpool's high tide. Saunders fed McManaman, who centred. Rush headed well and Woods saved athletically.

Trevor Francis said some hard words to his men at half-time. And it worked. Liverpool were seen much less often. Francis failed at QPR, but is succeeding at Wednesday. He has a side which tries to close-pass in the best Liverpool tradition. The nippy little Williams embarrassed Nicol early on, just as Pearson was caught once or twice by Liverpool's front two, but Jemson was a disappointment: he had one particular first-half opening which he wasted.

Wednesday, without Sheridan and Hirst, wore their splendid blue and white stripes, not modern rubbish, and owed their second-half surge to the midfield four, not least to Wilson.

Their goal, however, was a surprise. But a fine strike it was. Worthington, who had done good work down the flank in his solid way, put over a high cross and Harkes, the American World Cup midfielder, put a powerful header back across the leaping Grobbelaar into a top corner.

No blame to Grobbelaar, nor to McManaman who, curiously, was Harkes's marker. It was a goal that would have beaten anybody.

There was ample time for a winner, but Liverpool seldom looked like getting it. Walters replaced Marsh who, like Houghton, had a mixed afternoon. Walters did manage Liverpool's best shot late on, but Woods was equal to it.

Francis was ticked off by the referee for touchline noise, but as Francis is always a Wednesday substitute, referees will find it hard to suppress him. Francis, indeed, has come on in all of Wednesday's 10 League matches. Here it was for three minutes. He could end up in the Guinness Book of Records.

Souness spoke with a quiet menace afterwards. He wished he knew why Liverpool have lost their way so emphatically. Nobody chose to mention to him that a player called Beardsley had scored for Everton for the sixth match on the trot. Nor that Aberdeen had won 2-0 at Ibrox.

Compiled by Graeme Riley