

Date: 9 October 1991
 Opposition: Stoke City
 Competition: League Cup

Times	Guardian	

9 October 1991

THE TIMES

Stoke's slow start sets Liverpool on right path

Stoke City 2 - Liverpool 3

(Liverpool win 5-4 on aggregate)

LIVERPOOL are through to the third round of the Rumbelows Cup but their winning margin over opponents who lie midway in the third division was close. A pale imitation of the side which won the trophy four times a decade ago, they progressed principally because of Stoke City's generosity.

Tony Kelly, ironically, was the culprit. A fortnight ago he claimed the equaliser at Anfield which offered his club genuine optimism about the outcome at the Victoria Ground last night. Yet, with an ill considered and needless back pass, the forward was ultimately responsible for conceding defeat.

He knew as much himself when, in the 56th minute, he found himself in an unfamiliar defensive role. Before checking to see whether the long path to his own goalkeeper was occupied, he inadvertently rolled the ball directly to the seat of Rush and recognised instantly the damage that he had caused.

Turning away with his head in his hands, he could not bear to watch as Rush predictably evaded Fox and cut the ball back for Saunders to walk it into the unguarded net. Two goals ahead on the night and on aggregate, Liverpool's place in the last 32 was apparently secure.

So it should have been but their defensive vulnerability in the air was illustrated yet again and in the end, struggling for survival, their most convincing method of protecting their lead was to waste time. The Liverpool of old would have merely retained possession.

Their opening was assured enough. McManaman, dropped from the fixture against Manchester United last Sunday, reestablished his claim with a goal, only his second for the club, after eight minutes. Standing on his own in the shadow of a post, he tapped in a low cross from Walters.

Stoke were initially surprisingly diffident. Apart from a display of petulance from Biggins, their leading scorer, who was first sternly warned by the referee and then booked for thrusting an elbow into the face of Harkness, they were prepared to be subservient throughout a largely lifeless first half.

Even Kennedy stood off from McMahan and allowed him to dictate the pace and direction of the tie. Not until after the interval did their attitude change.

A fierce drive from Scott swerved towards the near post and almost surprised Hooper, who is in the process of deposing Grobbelaar as Liverpool's prime goalkeeper. Then Kelly intervened at the wrong end of the pitch and Stoke's impetus was lost, albeit temporarily but at a vital stage.

They regained it by withdrawing their sweeper, Cranson. Rush and Houghton both cleared off the line before Tanner, attempting the same feat in the 77th minute, handled Overson's header and was fortunate not to pay any personal price for his offence. Liverpool did, though, as Biggins converted the penalty.

With half a dozen minutes to go, Stoke were caught on a break by McManaman's incisive pass to Houghton whose cross was turned in by Walters. But Liverpool's aerial weakness was exposed almost immediately as Butler's free kick was nodded in by Biggins.

STOKE CITY: P Fox; J Butler, L Sandford, I Scott, V Overson, M Kennedy, I Cranson (sub: D Kevan), C Beeston, A Kelly (sub: I Wright), W Biggins, L Fowler.

LIVERPOOL: M Hooper; S Harkness, D Burrows, S Nicol, S McManaman, N Tanner, D Saunders, R Houghton, I Rush, M Walters, S McMahan.

Referee: A Smith.

the guardian

Biggins near to upset

THE suspicion of an upset remained a suspicion and no more at Stoke's Victoria Ground last night. City's hopes were well founded after a spendid 2-2 draw in the first leg, but Liverpool were generally in control except in a frenetic last 10 minutes.

An early goal by Steve McManaman doused Stoke's initial fire and, just when it seemed they might ignite in the second half, Dean Saunders made it 2-0. The goal was a gift. Kelly, attempting a too ambitious back pass, succeeded only in putting it directly to Rush's feet. He might easily have scored himself but instead squared to Saunders, who had merely to guide the ball home from close range into an unguarded goal.

Then came the penalty in the 77th minute for handball against Tanner, which Biggins converted. The noise was intense but Liverpool rapidly responded, Walters nipping on to Houghton's cross to beat Fox from close in. Back again came Stoke, Biggins heading in Overson's deep cross for his 12th goal of the season.

Fox denied Rush with his legs and Saunders had his follow-up shot also blocked. The warnings were crystal clear, however, and McManaman quickly put Liverpool into the lead with the simplest of goals. Walters produced a low cross to the near post that saw virtually the whole of the Stoke defence trying to deny Rush. In fact the Liverpool striker could not quite reach the ball but as he missed it so did the chasing posse, leaving McManaman with a strictly routine side-foot.

Biggins, already seething after being booked for a sequence of challenges against Nicol and Harkness, had his misery compounded when he missed badly from a good position.

Stoke, twice behind at Anfield, aroused themselves considerably after McManaman's goal and a mis-punch by Hooper, retaining his place in goal ahead of Grobbelaar, presented Beeston with a three-quarter chance which was squandered.

There was no doubting the eagerness of the Third Division club to press forward; Liverpool frequently caught Kelly and Biggins offside. Stoke badly needed to ruffle a few feathers but generally Liverpool kept themselves well preened.

Stoke City: Fox; Butler, Stamford, Scott, Overson, Kennedy, Cranson (Kevan, 65min), Beeston, Kelly (Wright, 80), Biggins, Fowler.

Liverpool: Hooper; Harkness, Burrows, Nicol, McManaman, Tanner, Saunders, Houghton, Rush, Walters, McMahan.

Referee: A Smith (Birmingham).