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THE TIMES

Liverpool lift their morale

Full Text :

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Liverpool 2 - Nottingham Forest 0

GRAEME Souness may not yet be in a position to use merit as the sole criterion for his team selection, but he will be encouraged by the level of consistency which Liverpool have achieved in recent weeks.

A deserved win over opponents who displayed a lack of character after failing to capitalise on some splendid early football maintains Liverpool's interest in the League championship.

Having tired of the criticism which his players have been forced to endure this season, Souness now uses every victory speech as a platform from which to boost morale.

"This was our best performance since I have been manager at the club," he said.

"Our balance was better than for some time and we succeeded in matching Forest in every department."

While Liverpool's midfield imposed its will on the game after being embarrassed for both speed of thought and limb during the early exchanges, the home side's defence still lacks cohesion, despite the return of Wright.

Liverpool often looked uncomfortable when confronted by forwards who displayed great enterprise but who, too often, spurned the opportunity to test Grobbelaar's suspect concentration.

Forest were guilty of over-elaboration. Despite an ability to transform defence into attack with breathtaking simplicity, their desire to entertain rather than merely succeed ultimately proved their undoing: possession is a worthless commodity when taken in isolation.

But for good fortune in the sixteenth minute it is, however, conceivable that Liverpool's ceaseless efforts would have gone unrewarded. Walker was a commanding figure at the heart of the Forest defence.

But then Liverpool benefited from some good luck. Chettle's attempt to clear Molby's hopeful punt forward, at the precise moment that his sense of balance betrayed him, was ill-advised. He could do no more than deflect the ball into the path of McMahon, who scored with a crisp drive.

Forest threatened to restore the status quo in the early stages of the second half by attempting to utilise the aerial prowess of Sheringham.

But a feeling of misplaced optimism, bearing in mind Liverpool's largely unchallenged domination in midfield, was finally punctured with 11 minutes remaining, when Crossley failed to prevent Molby's powerful free kick from crossing the line.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; R Jones, D Burrows, S Nicol, M Wright, N Tanner, D Saunders, R Houghton, S McManaman, J Molby, S McMahon.

NOTTINGHAM FOREST: M Crossley; G Charles, S Pearce, D Walker, S Chettle, R Keane, G Crosby, S Gemmill, N Clough, E Sheringham (sub: C Tiler), I Woan.

Referee: K Hackett.

the guardian

Music to their ears

IF SOMETHING as dismal as McCartney's Liverpool Oratorio can receive critical acclaim, then it should come as no surprise that as soon as Liverpool FC put together a few good movements the Kop immediately bursts into an optimistic refrain of 'We're Going To Win The League'.

No other club could possibly make a position of 15 points behind the leaders, with a game in hand, sound so threatening.

Appropriately Liverpool's second goal, a free-kick scored 11 minutes from time by Molby, was decorated by the first snowflakes of winter. Such an apt reminder of the arduous slog which lies ahead could have been enough to cause shivers down the back of the neck in Manchester and Leeds.

Excluding Liverpool's aberration in the Rumbelows Cup at Peterborough, they have been undefeated for nine matches. Graeme Souness regarded this dismissal of Forest as 'the best performance since I became manager', although he would not quibble with the view that the standards of yore remain some distance away. Central to Liverpool's recent improvement has been the influence of the former Derby pair Wright and Saunders. Wright is rapidly restoring order to central defence. Saunders, whose limited attacking support has not always been appreciated, carried a confidence born of the Uefa Cup into the domestic programme and with more luck might have scored four. Here is one advantage of Europe that not even Mrs T could deny.

Forest's first-half performance promised misleading riches. As always, they were a cultural experience, passing fluently to feet. Woan revealed pleasing finesse on the left, Charles foraged on the right but gradually a young midfield was out-thought by old heads.

Nigel Clough almost gave Forest an early lead as Grobbelaar transformed an inventive 35-yard chip into a full-blooded pantomime. But he can also cut a maddeningly downcast figure at times.

Liverpool matched Forest for movement, repeatedly firing passes low into Forest's centre, where Saunders went unchecked. But the opener fell to McMahon as Molby's delicate up-and-under forced an error from Chettle. It was McMahon's first goal of the season and probably his last for Liverpool.

SCORERS: Liverpool: McMahon (16min), Molby (80).

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Burrows, Nicol, Wright, Tanner, Saunders, Houghton, McManaman, Molby, McMahon.

Nottingham Forest: Crossley; Charles, Pearce, Walker, Chettle, Keane, Crosby, Gemmill, Clough, Sheringham (Tiler, 83), Woan.

Referee: K Hackett (Sheffield).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Reborn Liverpool win classic test of skill

LIVERPOOL 2 NOTTINGHAM FOR 0

LIVERPOOL 2(4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Jones, Wright, Tanner, Burrows; Houghton, Molby, McMahon, Nicol; Saunders, McManaman.

NOTTINGHAM FOR 0(4-4-2): Crossley; Charles, Walker, Chettle, Pearce; Crosby, Gemmill, Keane, Woan; Sheringham (sub: Tiler 81min), Clough.

Goals: McMahon (16min) 1-0; Molby (80min) 2-0.

Weather: clear. Ground: good.

Referee: K Hackett (Sheffield).

LIVERPOOL are back, a magnificent, flowing performance outplaying and outwitting the country's finest exponents of passing football at their own game. If Ian Rush had been available to finish things off, this rousing show could have been a rout. But this was no day for quibbles.

Amid the increasing cynicism in high places, Anfield witnessed an open and honest encounter of skill, strength and subtlety in which the better side won.

The Liverpool manager, Graeme Souness, who has offered some short, sharp post-match comments since his uneasy return, exclaimed: "This was our best performance since I've been back at the club."

Both Souness and Brian Clough provided glowing pre-match tributes to each other's continuing commitment to the passing game in the face of growing long-ball brutalism. And how the passes flowed!

Molby was inspirational, measuring the first of a flourish of telling balls inside 60 seconds. He split the defence twice with Nicol and Saunders narrowly missing out before the killer opener, chipped high and over the flat back four. Chettle and Walker turned into each other, making it even easier for McMahon to run through and fire home.

If this was the old warrior's final appearance for Liverpool before his mooted move to Manchester City, then he can be proud of a performance to remember.

He applied guts, determination and a typical 30-yard pile-driver which beat the keeper by miles, but the post by only inches.

Saunders, too, was unrecognisable from his recent League form, one magnificent dummy letting Nicol through for his third shot on goal in the first half. But the all-rounder had forgotten his finishing.

Forest enjoyed just one real chance early on, but what a chance it was. Amid constant Liverpool pressure, the ball came out to Nigel Clough, whose instinctive dummy set Woan free. Back to Clough, who released a 35-yard lob dropping unerringly under the bar. Grobbelaar, back-peddalling madly, got fingers into the flight path and half-parried, but had to fall back and palm clear as the trajectory carried it on.

Did it cross the line? Do not ask players or officials no one else was within half a pitch of the controversy.

Crosby wove through with some dangerous crosses, but Grobbelaar was now well and truly awake. As the frantic pace continued, chances fell to McManaman and Saunders, but luck was passing Liverpool by.

The second half saw Forest forced back, unable to handle the speed or abundance of the attacks; McManaman and Saunders zipping into the angles, switching wide and deep.

Nicol, his first-half failures behind him, fed the front men and ran at will. Three interchanges with Saunders surely deserved at least one goal. First he bent a pass to the in-form striker, who unleashed a fine volley, just tipped over. Then he threaded through for Saunders to drive into the corner, brilliantly reached by the keeper. And finally the striker set up the best chance of all for Nicol, who drew the keeper only to find his shot spin inches wide.

By now the Forest manager's judgment on the opposition was looking good, but he had little else to savour. Wright was contemptuous of Forest, winning every aerial challenge and moving forward to join the fray. Chance after chance ensued. Then came the second and decisive goal.

Molby, who never flagged, slid a ball into McManaman, with back to goal, ready to turn. He was bundled over instantly, and Forest looked beaten as Molby strode ominously across to take the free kick. Controlled power, bent round the wall... Crossley stooped, but could not conquer. He got both hands to the ball, but was beaten by power.

Keane, Forest's only effective influence, had one late shot. But this was Liverpool's day and, most of all, football's day.

BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

That's the best yet, says boss

A Steve McMahon goal on what was probably his final appearance for Liverpool set them on the road to victory against Nottingham Forest at Anfield.

McMahon, who is expected to move to Manchester City this week with his Liverpool replacement Michael Thomas, who signed from Arsenal for 1.5 million pounds, watching from the stands.

McMahon's goal came after 16 minutes, when Jan Molby lobbed a hopeful central high ball forward and Steve Chettle failed to cut it out. The England midfielder ran in unmarked to drive the ball low past the advancing Mark Crossley.

Molby scored the second himself 10 minutes from time, curling in a low free kick from just outside the area after Chettle had fouled Steve McManaman. Crossley got down to block the shot, but it somehow squirmed out of his grasp and rolled over the line.

Dean Saunders had missed a fine chance to put Liverpool ahead inside the first two minutes, lobbing over Crossley but just clearing the bar.

After the break Saunders turned and fired in a rising shot which Crossley finger-tipped brilliantly over his bar and Steve Nicol saw an angled effort fly across the face of goal and wide.

Forest's Roy Keane could have equalised moments after McMahon's opener, Bruce Grobbelaar denying him with a fine save.

The Liverpool keeper had earlier almost gifted Forest a goal, letting Nigel Clough's shot bounce off his palms and over his head. The keeper recovered to turn and catch the ball just before it crossed the line.

Grobbelaar had little to do after the interval, his most difficult moment coming as he got down sharply to save an ill-judged Nicol back-pass late in the game.

Liverpool manager Graeme Souness hailed his side's win as their best performance since he returned to Anfield. Hard-to-please Souness said: "I enjoyed the game and even neutrals must have done because it was a good game overall. Forest came here to play football but our balance was better than it has been for a long, long time. It's the best performance since I came to the club."

Jan Molby, creator of one goal and scorer of the second, added: "It was a very good game between two good footballing teams. We seem to be playing better every week."

Molby had a special word of praise for central midfield colleague Steve McMahon, who scored from his 16th minute pass on what could be his final Liverpool appearance before his transfer to Manchester City. "If that was to be his last game for us, it was nice for him to score a goal," said Molby. McMahon himself refused to comment.

Thomas described the performance as "very impressive".

Souness said Thomas would play against Tottenham on Wednesday, but after this performance Thomas was taking nothing for granted. "I'm looking forward to playing in the side if selected," he said.

The entire Forest side had left the stadium within half an hour of the final whistle, without commenting on the performance.

Ian Woan said as he hurried away: "I'm not allowed to say anything. We've been read the riot act."