

Date: 21 December 1991
 Opposition: Manchester City
 Competition: League

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THE TIMES

City put brakes on return to form by Liverpool

Liverpool 2 Manchester City 2

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Just as other clubs with designs on this season's championship were beginning to monitor their revival with mounting apprehension, Liverpool gave a performance on Saturday that while not as abysmal as Graeme Souness, the manager, suggested later was certainly disappointing.

Souness no longer invites questions after games: he simply says his piece and hurriedly departs. However, on this occasion, with brevity came eloquence and no little common sense.

"I am disappointed, both with the result and with the performance," he said.

"Some of my players were guilty of believing what had been written about them in the week. City worked harder and fully deserved their point."

Bearing in mind that a predictably frenetic game was played out in a ferocious gale and on a pitch made treacherous by surface water, Souness was, perhaps, being harsh about his side's considerable contribution to a splendid afternoon's entertainment.

Although Liverpool's attacks carried only the barest threat and their midfield was inclined to ignore rather than harness the elements, there were some encouraging signs, notably the assuredness of Tanner in defence and the dogged persistence of Saunders up front.

It was ironic that, during the course of an opening half of much incident but no great substance, City enjoyed a greater share of possession only to find themselves constantly indebted to their defence.

With Liverpool's belief in their own ability still not fully restored, they again needed a slice of luck to calm their nerves. Nine times out of ten, Coton, the City goalkeeper, would have comfortably saved Saunders's hopeful, drive in the eighth minute, but instead he allowed the ball to slip through his fingers. Quinn, City's most productive forward, had been so well shackled that Liverpool's slender advantage seemed likely to guarantee victory until White emerged to claim two memorable goals early in the second half. After delicately lofting a shot of deceptive power over Grobbelaar, he displayed remarkable positional awareness to score with a looping drive from the most acute of angles. Nicol salvaged a point for Liverpool seven minutes from the end with a firm, rising shot.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; R Jones, D Burrows, S Nicol, M Wright, N Tanner, D Saunders, R Houghton, S McManaman (sub: M Marsh), M Thomas, S McMahan (sub: M Walters).

MANCHESTER CITY: A Coton; I Brightwell, N Pointon, P Reid, K Curle, S Redmond, D White, A Heath, N Quinn, M Sheron, M Hughes.

Referee: D Phillips.

the guardian

Souness bemoans his paper tigers

LIKE a politician on the run, Graeme Souness, flanked by trailing pressmen, hustled in, said his piece and scarpered. The essence was that he was disappointed with the result and with the performance of a Liverpool team who had apparently 'believed what they had read about themselves in the papers last week', that they were once again the Super Reds. They are not. Not yet. Not quite.

Souness's brevity left no time, as was probably intended, for the awkward questions. Is he bidding for his former Rangers player Trevor Steven from Marseille? Is Steve McMahon set to sign for Manchester City?

The answer to the first appears to be no. As for the second, a deal for McMahon thought to be worth pounds 900,000 may go through before the end of the week. But would Liverpool's loss really be City's gain? Lined up alongside Reid, aged 35, McMahon, 30, would give City a cast-iron midfield but would not solve any long-term problems.

Neither of the two hard men was conspicuous in a match that called for the one quality - pace - that they must concede they are losing fast. Saunders and White at the cutting edge of opposing front lines left defenders for dead with quicksilver movement and deft touch.

Saunders drew first blood, turning as if on skates to strike a low shot which Coton, faced with a greasy ball and blustery wind, could not hold.

Liverpool had looked at the start as though their recent revival might hold, with the newcomer Thomas settling quickly into midfield. But nitty, gritty, hit-and-run City pegged them back for the rest of the first half and the start of the second. It was then that White, bursting through the defence to chase a flick-on from Quinn, lobbed Grobbelaar for City's first.

His second goal six minutes later was another lob. From a seemingly impossible angle on the right it hit the inside of the far post and bounced in. 'I didn't honestly believe I could score from where I was,' said White. 'I knew I could get it over Grobbelaar's head and just aimed in the general direction.'

The City element in the 36,743 crowd was ecstatic. But the pendulum then swung Liverpool's way. McManaman and McMahon were replaced by Marsh and Walters, who between them provided the wherewithal from the left for Nicol, running in, to drive home the equaliser eight minutes from time.

Most people thought it a just result, except Souness, who did not seem to think his side deserved the point. 'City worked harder and fought harder,' he said.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Saunders (9min), Nicol (82). Manchester City: White (48 and 54).

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Burrows, Nicol, Wright, Tanner, Saunders, Houghton, McManaman (Marsh, 79), Thomas, McMahon (Walters, 58).

Manchester City: Coton; Brightwell, Pointon, Reid, Curle, Redmond, White, Heath, Quinn, Sheron, Hughes.

Referee: D Phillips (Barnsley).

- Liverpool's injury woes continued when Mark Walters announced yesterday that he had aggravated a hamstring problem in Saturday's game and might miss Liverpool's holiday matches. 'It's four weeks since I injured it,' he said. 'That's normally enough time to recover from an injury like this. There is obviously something more to it.'

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

White goal steals a point for City

LIVERPOOL 2 MANCHESTER CITY 2

LIVERPOOL 2(4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Jones, Wright, Tanner, Burrows; Houghton, Thomas, McMahon (sub: Walters 58min), Nicol; Saunders, McManaman (sub: Marsh 79min).

MANCHESTER CITY 2(4-4-2): Coton; Brightwell, Redmond, Curle, Pointon; Shearon, Heath, Reid, Hughes; Quinn, White.

Goals: Saunders 1-0 (9min); White 1-1 (48min); White 1-2 (55min); Nicol 2-2 (82min).

Weather: mild, windy. Ground: firm. Referee: D Phillips (Barnsley).

LIVERPOOL'S return to form was disrupted by City's White, who is generally held to be one of the most potent young players in the game.

But this result may only be a hiccup. Liverpool were taking a corner as the match ended: another five minutes, you felt, and they would have won. A great deal that was wrong with Liverpool at the season's start is now right.

There was a period just after the half-hour when Quinn drifted out to City's right wing. That was a zone of movement without action if ever there was one. Quinn had got absolutely nowhere duelling for the ball with Wright in the centre, and over to the wing he went. But that made little difference, either. City put White on to Wright, in the vain hope that Wright's feet might not perform as adeptly as his head. But no, that too made no difference.

The heart of Liverpool's success has always lain in flexibility: block them here, and they surge out there. Wright played just like that, and his choice of when to lash the ball out and when to place it forward into the humming machine was crucial to Liverpool's performance.

So, too, was the flexibility of Liverpool's defence. Until a hash was made of marking White and then giving him the equaliser Quinn and White had only the briefest of half-chances between them. The covering and back-up that the four of them are giving each other got Liverpool through several crises, and will get them through worse ones when necessary.

But McMahon twice lost the ball on the edge of his own area. His colleagues were as astonished as White and Quinn, who did their best to seize on these unexpected moments. Early in the first half, McMahon was swept aside like some passing irrelevance by a typical burst of intricate passing between Heath and Reid. That, like the burst of pressure City managed just before half-time, died at the feet of Wright and Tanner.

Another passenger was McManaman, who missed a chance to sweep the ball in for a second goal before City turned the match. That did not seem to matter overmuch, as Saunders and Houghton were firing on all cylinders. Curle kept Saunders out of range well enough, but until White scored his second and spectacular goal, he was all that was preventing a rout. The first of White's goals came out of the blue. As much as anything, it could be put down to his positioning, which is unerringly good, coinciding with the first time Liverpool's marking slipped.

But White's second was certainly no fluke. He lobbed Grobbelaar from an angle that was more than acute, it was positively ridiculous. The ball took what seemed to be an eternity to waft over Grobbelaar's head before slinking in at the last possible moment at the far post.

City had been making a fight of it before then. But as much as Reid strove and pushed them on, it was unconvincing. When someone like Quinn drifts out of the centre to try to get a touch of the ball, any touch, things are not going well for City.

Saunders's opening goal had seemed to confirm that. He had had some flashes in the penalty area, but no more than that. But then he ran back out of the area and, for once, Curle and company gave him space to breathe. None the less, his shot needed the wind and something of a tumble by Coton to make it into a goal.

The degree to which McMahon had been part of the problem was clear when Walters, his substitute, repeatedly opened up City down the left. Marsh gave Nicol the opening for his equaliser, sending him the type of hard, accurate pass that McMahon usually serves.

BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

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