

Date: 26 December 1991  
 Opposition: Queens Park Rangers  
 Competition: League

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## THE TIMES

### Stejskal keeps out Liverpool

Queen's Park Rangers 0 - Liverpool 0

LIVERPOOL discovered again yesterday that the most inventive approach-play can count for nothing if it is not accompanied by goals. To Loftus Road's biggest crowd of the season it hardly mattered, but the suspicion was that Graeme Souness would gladly have exchanged the ovation for both teams at the end for a single Liverpoolian strike.

The visiting manager was a little closer to the mark than his forwards when he said after a marvellous match: "I would not say it was poor finishing, but it was less than impressive finishing. Otherwise, we could have gone home at half-time."

It would have been churlish, nevertheless, to attribute Liverpool's failure to score and their consequent fifth draw in eight games entirely to Saunders and company.

But for the fact that they were facing a highly-competent goalkeeper in Stejskal, Liverpool would have had no trouble maintaining the momentum of their surge up the first division. When they threatened to carve open the Queen's Park Rangers defence in the first half, Liverpool were denied by the big Czechoslovak on at least four occasions.

The subsequent tightening of the Rangers rearguard after the interval kept Liverpool at longer range, but Stejskal proceeded to pluck their shots out of the air almost with the disdain of Grobbelaar.

Almost, but not quite. Not even Stejskal could match Grobbelaar's dainty footwork when he advanced from his area to prevent Wilkins finding Bailey with a long through-pass. Grobbelaar chested the ball down, controlled it and found Wright with a lay-off, typical of the touch-play displayed in more orthodox fashion by Liverpool's outfield players.

Grobbelaar had begun the match by staggering back almost over his goaline under the weight of Barker's deflected header. He ended by flinging himself sideways to turn aside Wegerle's rasping drive.

In between, he was a spectator for long periods, watching as Liverpool pushed Rangers back with a whole range of sweeping moves, characterised by the telepathy of their one-touch passing. Molby, back after injury, was at the core of things, but the smooth adjustment of Thomas into midfield suggested that Liverpool will be no worse for McMahon's departure. Significantly, Liverpool's endless creativity was only stemmed when Holloway was deployed to follow Thomas.

After diving to his left to save Molby's sidefooter and to touch on to the bar a fierce free kick from the Dane, Stejskal produced his best save yet to tip aside a low shot from Thomas. When the goalkeeper parried a similar effort from Nicol, Marsh had the formality, it seemed, of putting Liverpool ahead. The telescopic reach of Stejskal decided otherwise. Not that it was all Liverpool.

Rangers have improved too much to be rolled over and much of their football was straight out of Liverpool's copybook. Their best moment came when Bailey bamboozled Wright on the halfway line with dexterity that was not matched when it came to the kill against Grobbelaar. He had muffed an earlier one too, but most of the rest from both sides was admirable.

QUEEN'S PARK RANGERS: J Stejskal; D Bardsley, C Wilson, R Wilkins, D Peacock, A McDonald, I Holloway, S Barker, D Bailey, R Wegerle, A Sinton.

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

Referee: I J Borrett.

## the guardian

### Passing with fading colours

LIVERPOOL have not lost in the League since early November but if their recovery is to become a revival they will need to start winning the sort of match they drew at Shepherd's Bush yesterday, a game full of imaginative football but one where goals were in the mind rather than the net.

It was Liverpool's fifth draw in an unbeaten sequence of eight First Division matches, three of which have ended scoreless.

Much of their football yesterday flowed in the old assured manner, and the superior passing of Jan Molby, who played the ball to feet with weight, measure and more than a little wisdom, was often at the heart of their better movements. But when their authority was at its peak Stejskal, Queen's Park Rangers' Czechoslovak goalkeeper, produced a series of excellent saves to keep his team in the game, and in the end Liverpool were grateful to Grobbelaar that they themselves did not lose.

Liverpool have now played half their League fixtures and are 13 points behind the leaders. Although they have closed bigger gaps in the past to win the championship, the present target continues to recede.

'The time to judge us,' said Graeme Souness, their manager, 'will be when we have got everyone back. Any club in any league anywhere in the world would find it difficult trying to win games without the likes of Barnes, Rush and Walters.' Presumably Souness had something like this in mind when he paid Derby County pounds 2.9 million for Dean Saunders last summer.

Although the Wales striker produced an accurate 30-yard shot early in the second half which Stejskal just managed to push wide, the rhythm of Liverpool's football still tends to miss a beat when the ball reaches him.

Saunders can be a voracious penalty-area predator but if a shot is not on he often loses possession either through being over-ambitious or simply not knowing what to do next. He has to learn the Anfield way of doing things if his undoubted talents are to bear fruit.

Much the same applies to Michael Thomas, recently arrived from Arsenal, although in yesterday's game he made several of the late runs into scoring positions which are his stock-in-trade and one of these appeared certain to give Liverpool the lead just past the half-hour until Stejskal stuck out a hand to push the ball wide.

Twice Stejskal denied Molby a goal, the second time pushing the Dane's free-kick on to the bar. Not that QPR were outplayed; this was their fifth game without defeat and their new confidence showed.

Grobbelaar did not have to make as many saves as Stejskal but those he did achieve were equally important. In the opening minute he held a header from Barker which had taken a deflection and in the last he tipped a shot from Wegerle over the bar.

Early in the second half his positioning spared Wright some embarrassment, Bailey slipping past the England centre-half but failing to beat the goalkeeper. And when Sinton's centre found Barker just before the hour, Grobbelaar dropped smartly on the header.

Had McManaman not been absent with flu Liverpool's attack might have had a decisive extra option. They badly needed someone able to go past defenders with the ball. Sometimes you need more than a passing fancy to win matches.

Queen's Park Rangers: Stejskal; Bardsley, Wilson, Wilkins, Peacock, McDonald, Holloway, Barker, Bailey, Wegerle, Sinton.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Burrows (Venison, 80min), Nicol, Wright, Tanner, Saunders, Houghton, Marsh, Molby, Thomas.

Referee: I J Borrett (Harleston).

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## BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

### Jan keeps the Reds in check

Rangers' Czech goalkeeper Jan Stejskal denied impressive Liverpool the chance to close the gap further on the first division leaders.

Stejskal three times saved his side in a thrill-packed Boxing Day encounter as Liverpool, inspired by the imperious Jan Molby, strolled through a game they largely controlled.

Stejskal started off by brilliantly turning Molby's fierce free-kick onto the bar and then plunged to deny Michael Thomas his first goal for Liverpool since his 1.5 million pound move from Arsenal.

But he excelled himself with a double 25th minute save, first getting a hand to Thomas's low shot, and then somehow stopping Mike Marsh's follow-up.

At the other end Liverpool goalkeeper Bruce Grobbelaar was also in unbeatable form, making two fine stops from Simon Barker headers and then dashing out to foil Dennis Bailey after a superb turn had fooled the defence.

But Mark Wright marshalled Liverpool's back four so surely that the Rangers strikers rarely got a look-in in a game that featured plenty of fine football.

Right at the end Roy Wegerle for once wriggled clear of two tackles to fire in a rising shot, but again Grobbelaar was equal to it, twisting in mid-air to turn the ball round the post.

Liverpool manager Graeme Souness accused his team of showing a bit too much festive generosity.

"I'm a bit disappointed because we are not taking three points back with us," said Souness. "I felt that we played very well, especially in the first half. But that's football, and they say Christmas is a time of giving."

Souness was full of praise for QPR's Czech goalkeeper Jan Stejskal, who pulled off some fine saves to prevent Liverpool scoring. "Had it not been for some good saves by their goalkeeper and less than positive finishing from us we could have gone home at half time. He made some excellent saves and kept them in the game".

Rangers manager Gerry Francis, whose side stretched their unbeaten run to five games with this result, said: "It was a tremendous game. If you wanted shots and saves and good football you had it all, the only thing missing was a goal. Although Liverpool have had an indifferent start, they are the leading side of the last couple of decades in terms of winning things, and this was a good measure for us to play them and see how we performed".