

Date: 1 January 1992
 Opposition: Sheffield United
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THE TIMES

Saunders makes amends for missing early chances

Liverpool 2 Sheffield United 1

LIVERPOOL claimed their first win of the holiday period, but it was a long time coming and far from convincing. Sheffield United were only 11 minutes from earning their own third draw in succession.

In the end, Saundersound the accuracy to match his eye for an opening, so Sheffield had to be content with scoring their first goal at Anfield since 1968. But if the result was familiar, the style, for a long time, was not. In a high wind the hurry-scurry football would not have been out of place on the local park pitch. Things improved later with Houghton and Molby giving much-needed direction and McManaman coming off the bench to add impetus to the attack. But the hard work Liverpool made of disposing of one of the League's strugglers spoke for itself.

Rush, Barnes and Walters will undoubtedly make a difference, but the club which dominated for the past two decades is now no more than a good-to-average side. For the first half they did not even look that as Saunders spurned two good chances to give them an early lead and they instead found themselves behind as Sheffield's direct approach unsettled the defence.

The breakthrough came on the half-hour as Wright made one of those errors to which he remains prone, giving the ball away in the first place.

Molby's attempt to tidy up ended badly he diverted Hodges's cross to Deane to leave him free in front of goal. Deane summoned up the composure which has escaped Saunders to beat Grobbelaar from ten yards.

That was no more than Liverpool deserved, and there was little immediate improvement, although Molby's attempt brought Tracey full length to clutch his drive.

Help, in the form of McManaman, was at hand. The young forward's early season freshness has faded in recent weeks, but he came off the bench with appetite apparently renewed to spark Liverpool's revival. It took only seven minutes for him to fashion the equaliser, speeding past Cowan for a hard drive low cross which was turned in by Houghton at the far post. From that moment the only question was whether Sheffield could hold on. Liverpool began to look like Liverpool, passing with purpose and running off the ball to stretch the Sheffield defence in all directions. "We stepped up a gear in the second half," Graeme Souness, the manager, said. "Maybe before that we were guilty of allowing the game to flow instead of us changing it."

Saunders, however, had not changed his ways, three times speeding through the defence only to fail to finish, and when Houghton showed more accuracy, Tracey responded with a reflex save.

Hill came on to strengthen the Sheffield defence for the last 20 minutes, but the red tide was now flowing in a more familiar fashion. Finally the goal arrived. Thomas's drive was deflected to fall for Saunders and a left-foot shot succeeded where his trusty right foot had failed.

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

SHEFFIELD UNITED: S Tracey; K Gage, T Cowan, J Gannon, B Gayle, P Beesley, I Bryson, J Hoyland, A Littlejohn (sub: C Hill), B Deane, G Hodges (sub: D Whitehouse).

Referee: P Wright.

the guardian

Saunders finishes it

DEAN SAUNDERS, whose succession of near-misses were enough for at least 19 nervous breakdowns, scored the winner 11 minutes from time to encourage Liverpool's optimism that a new year championship challenge is still not beyond them.

Whatever inaccuracies may afflict Saunders' finishing - five League goals in 19 appearances suggests there remain a few - his appetite for the task remains undiminished. Persistence alone made Saunders the deserved recipient of the fortunate chance which fell his way after Thomas's wayward shot had struck McManaman. Allowed no time to reflect on his missed opportunities, he scored off a post.

For Liverpool's title challenge to be realistic, victories against struggling sides ought to be automatic. They were foolish enough to begin at a trot against a Sheffield United side in full cry, and though they quickened the tempo in the second period, for all of an undistinguished first half Liverpool found the going tough.

By then Sheffield were a goal to the good, and though they had created little of substance for themselves they were spirited enough to accept any gifts which came their way. Liverpool's offering duly arrived after 32 minutes as Molby's attempted back-pass at full stretch diverted the ball into the path of Deane, who finished calmly from 10 yards.

Credit for Liverpool's blank first half should rest with Tracey, United's London-born goalkeeper, who on this form may soon be receiving overtures to join Jack Charlton's band of honorary Irishmen. One twisting stop from Houghton was exceptional.

Tracey seemed almost able to read Saunders' mind, first springing swiftly to his left and later saving with his legs after Saunders outsmarted Gage as they competed for Houghton's through ball.

McManaman's introduction at half-time led directly to Liverpool's equaliser after 52 minutes when he sprinted coltishly inside Cowan like a two-year-old on the gallops and Houghton turned in his firm cross at the far post.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Ablett, Nicol, Wright, Tanner, Saunders, Houghton, Marsh (McManaman, h-t), Molby, Thomas.

Sheffield United: Tracey; Gage, Cowan, Gannon, Gayle, Beesley, Bryson, Hoyland, Littlejohn (Hill, 68min), Deane, Hodges (Whitehouse, 59).

Referee: P Wright (Northwick).

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Saunders' strike decisive

A Dean Saunders goal 11 minutes from time capped below-par Liverpool's recovery after they trailed at half-time to lowly Sheffield United.

Liverpool had enough chances to have won with comfort but were repeatedly frustrated by the brilliance of goalkeeper Simon Tracey.

There seemed little danger to Liverpool as Glyn Hodges drove in a low cross from the left after 32 minutes.

But Jan Molby was at full stretch as he tried to intercept and succeeded only in pushing the ball through for Brian Deane to score with ease from 10 yards.

Liverpool equalised after 52 minutes when Steve McManaman, an interval substitute for Mike Marsh, cut into the box past two defenders and though his cross eluded Saunders, Ray Houghton raced in to turn the ball home at the far post.

Houghton looked certain to score his second in the 64th minute, powering a shot from a Saunders cross back towards the far corner only to be denied by a superb save by Tracey. But the keeper, who foiled Saunders three times in the first half, had no chance when Michael Thomas' shot rebounded off a ruck of players for Saunders to drive in the winner off a post.

Disappointed Sheffield United goalkeeper Simon Tracey spoke about the point that got away.

The 24-year-old keeper produced a series of fine saves. "It is disappointing to lose after leading 1-0 and we should have at least got a point out of the game," said Tracey. "We put in a lot of hard work in the first half but in the end it was all for nothing."

But he claimed Saunders mis-hit the winning goal. "If he had hit it straight on I might have got to it but he mis-hit it and it was typical of our luck that it went in off the post."

Liverpool boss Graeme Souness said: "We gave them a goal start but we had opportunities to make life easier for ourselves."

Souness revealed that Scottish international Steve Nicol had signed a new three-year contract. He said: "I've played with him and managed him and he's a wonderful player for any team. He's got so much talent."