

Date: 11 January 1992
Opposition: Luton Town
Competition: League

Times	Guardian	Sunday Times
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THE TIMES

Luton's bad habit proves expensive

Liverpool 2 Luton Town 1

FOR one who has an enviable ability to illuminate even the darkest corner with his self-deprecating humour, David Pleat, the Luton manager, cut a sad and despondent figure after a prospective victory had been transformed into a cruel defeat in the dying minutes of the game against Liverpool at Anfield on Saturday. After rebuffing a succession of incisive assaults to move within five minutes of the final whistle with their one-goal advantage intact, Luton lost both their poise and concentration.

Although the present Liverpool side may lack the ruthless streak of old, it is still capable of accepting an invitation to punish hesitancy.

"That must be the tenth time this season that we have conceded late goals," Pleat said. "The problem was that we had young boys out there who did not know how to kill a game. In the end the pressure of playing at Anfield overtook them."

It was the withdrawal of the injured Preece, shortly after the interval, that reduced Luton's effectiveness as they sought to defend the advantage which had been gifted to them in the 31st minute when Tanner inexplicably turned Nogan's harmless cross into his own net. Even so, Liverpool's finishing had been so lacklustre that Tanner's misfortune seemed destined to divide the teams until the Luton defence, to a man, lost concentration. Four minutes remained when McManaman tapped in from close range after Wright had headed on Houghton's hopeful cross. The game had entered its third minute of injury time when Saunders arrived at the near post to convert one of Barnes's better passes.

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

LUTON TOWN: S Sutton; J James, R Harvey, C Kamara, J Dreyer, T Peake, P Telfer, B Stein, K Nogan, M Pembridge, D Preece (sub: S Oakes).

Referee: W Burns.

the guardian

The nervous art of living dangerously

ANFIELD's new stand begins to tower over the Kemlyn Road end, and already the first billboard is aloft, set like a topgallant to test the trade wind. It advertises electric razors. But Liverpool will not want a closer shave than they had on Saturday.

There were only five minutes left when they finally shook off Luton who had clung to their first-half lead with all the determination of a Jack Russell with its teeth embedded in the postman's ankle. Just as it seemed they would secure their first away win since March, McManaman equalised and in the dying seconds of injury-time the Kop, as Shankly used to say, sucked in the winning goal from Saunders. It was a grand-slam finish from a Liverpool side who, if not yet hitting their stride, are finding their feet at a time that is ominous for the two Uniteds ahead of them in the League. Luton were heartbroken. 'I don't know how many times recently we have lost in injury-time. It must be at least ten,' said their bitterly disappointed manager David Pleat.

Indeed Luton, without their regular strikers Harford (suspended) and Gray (injured) might have gone ahead after only five minutes when Telfer's strike, deflected off Nicol, hit the bar.

But it was an own-goal from Liverpool's Tanner that gave them the lead on the half-hour. The centre-half attempted to turn a harmless shot from wide on his right back to his goalkeeper but instead helped it into the net, leaving a furious Grobbelaar diving into thin air.

'Bruce said he shouted but Nicky said he didn't hear him,' said the manager Graeme Souness. 'It's not much of a way for the youngster to celebrate the new three-and-a-half-year contract he signed today. But it is the only thing he has done wrong for weeks. But there should not be that lack of communication between the back four and the goalkeeper.'

Barnes, making his second appearance after five months' absence, has yet to establish a rapport with Saunders. The Welsh striker's constant running seems to make him as elusive to his own men as to the opposition. But in the second half, in spite of losing Molby with a tweaked hamstring, Liverpool twisted the tourniquet and at least stopped the bleeding.

Houghton hit an upright and Thomas had more than one shot blocked, one brilliantly by Luton's on-loan goalkeeper Sutton, whose bravery also kept Saunders at bay. Luton's centre-backs Peake and Dreyer were magnificent but they could not hold out and, when Wright headed down Houghton's high cross, McManaman potted the equaliser.

That was blow enough for Luton. But in a heart-stopping finish, with just seconds left, Barnes at last found Saunders who turned in the winner.

SCORERS: Liverpool: McManaman (85min), Saunders (90). Luton: Tanner (og, 31).

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

Luton Town: Sutton; James, Harvey, Kamara, Dreyer, Peake, Telfer, Stein, Nogan, Pembridge, Preece (Oakes, 58).

Referee: W Burns (Scarborough).

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Luton fail to derail the Liverpool revival

LIVERPOOL 2 LUTON 1

LIVERPOOL 2

(4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Jones, Wright, Tanner, Nicol; Barnes, Molby (sub: Rosenthal 45min), Thomas; Houghton, Saunders, McManaman.

LUTON 1

(4-4-2): Sutton; James, Peake, Dreyer, Harvey; Telfer, Pembridge, Kamara, Preece (sub: Oakes 57min); Stein, Nogan.

Goals: Tanner (og 31n) 0-1; McManaman (85min) 1-1; Saunders (90min) 2-1.

Weather: overcast. Ground: firm.

Referee: W Burns (Scarborough).

“WHO won, mate?” shouted a tribe of Manchester United supporters on the platform at Wigan station last night. The Liverpool fans, thus addressed, replied: “Two-one to us, and we scored all of them.” That was one way of looking at it. Nicky Tanner, overcome perhaps by a new 31/2-year contract he had received yesterday morning, scored a freakish own goal that threatened to give Luton their first League away win since last March. But ancient rites decree that Liverpool must finish with a blinding five minutes. They did and goals from McManaman (his fifth) and Saunders (his 17th) restored a proper order.

It seems a long time ago since League managers voted Liverpool the most entertaining team in football. They have been, but only if you're an Everton supporter.

The ritual disembowelment of the hard core midfield, with the departure of Steve McMahon and long-term injury to Ronnie Whelan, has caused great happiness across the park at Goodison. Not to mention the trading of Beardsley, the catalogue of injuies and the grim set of the manager's moustache after each defeat since his takeover. Nothing is more consoling to non-Liverpool supporters than the sight of Souness bristling with unexploded expletives.

Now, however, Liverpool are on the mend. Like millions of rail passengers before them, Liverpool changed at Crewe. Their FA Cup victory last Monday and the hat-trick accomplished by John Barnes on his return from a long stretch of injury-time has signalled that Liverpool's personal recession is over.

But Luton, strong candidates for the Sheffield United award for valour in the face of relegation, began the match in sharper mood.

They quickly stifled any smug superiority felt by Liverpool when they invaded Nichol's territory down the right-hand side, stirred Grobbelaar with shots from Telfer, Dreyer and Pembridge and valiantly flung defensive bodies into the path of Saunders and McManaman, who was playing in a more advanced position than usual to accommodate Barnes. Liverpool, naturally, were enjoying most of the possession. Luton, unnaturally, were enjoying the feeling of holding a lead. A slightly ill-gotten lead, it has to be said, since all the hard work had been performed by Tanner.

“It was a communications breakdown," Souness said afterwards, the break in question occurring between Tanner's brain and his boots. So intense was the back's concentration on Nogan a striker who has not scored a League goal for two years he failed to notice that Grobbelaar was not in a position to receive his back pass. Transfixed by disbelief, Anfield was silent as the ball rolled ever so slowly and sedately into the net.

It seemed improbable that this state of affairs could continue, but Luton were undeniably tigerish and Liverpool demonstrably sluggish in the first half. Souness applied Rosenthal to this problem. The perennial substitute saw more of the game than usual, coming on for a hamstrung Molby at half-time and displacing McManaman as a striker.

The difference was tangible, although Dreyer, the human skittle, blocked three shots in succession as Liverpool drove forward relentlessly. With only five minutes remaining, it seemed that victory at Crewe had not been enough to ignite a passionate Anfield revival. But in the end specialities would out. Liverpool's is scoring late goals, Luton's is conceding them and so McManaman equalised and a short-range prod from Saunders spelt Luton's last-minute defeat.

Whether Liverpool will surge on to greater success or Luton avoid relegation is unclear. The only certain conclusion to be drawn from this match is that the great British flirtation with long shorts, Italian-style, is a sartorial disaster.

BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Late goals lay Luton low

An injury-time goal by Welsh international striker Dean Saunders broke the hearts of gallant Luton and saw Liverpool snatch victory from the jaws of defeat in an astonishing last five minutes.

The Merseysiders staged a ferocious second-half onslaught but it had begun to look as if lowly Luton were on course for their first away victory since March last year, courtesy of Liverpool defender Nicky Tanner's first half own goal.

But after 85 minutes Steve Nicol crossed from the left, Mark Wright headed the ball into the danger area and Steve McManaman forced home the equaliser as on-loan Luton keeper Steve Sutton tried to clear.

Liverpool surged forward again and with the second half over 46 minutes old, substitute Ronnie Rosenthal found John Barnes. He crossed for Saunders to stretch out a leg and turn the ball past the despairing Sutton from close range.

Tanner had cut out Kurt Nogan's pass intended for Mark Pembridge after 31 minutes, but then he pushed the ball wide of keeper Bruce Grobbelaar and into his own net in a disastrous attempt at a back-pass.

Liverpool had survived an early scare, Paul Telfer's drive deflecting off Nicol onto the bar after six minutes.

Sutton saved well in the first half from Barnes and McManaman while Saunders sliced a close-range volley just wide.

After the break it was virtually one-way traffic for Liverpool, Michael Thomas was twice denied by Luton centre-half John Dreyer and a low 25-yard Ray Houghton drive rebounded off the foot of the post.

Sutton and Saunders both needed attention after 74 minutes when they collided painfully after the keeper just beat the striker in a race for the ball.