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THE TIMES

Powerhouse end to season too late for Arsenal

Arsenal 4 Liverpool 0

DEPOSED as champions Arsenal may be, but nobody can say that they have not finished the season like champions. Ask Liverpool. In taking their unbeaten run to 15 games, Arsenal yesterday inflicted on the Merseysiders their worst defeat in nine years and their heaviest at the hands of Arsenal in 39 years.

Such an achievement, such a performance, including not least an astonishing 50-yard opportunist goal by Anders Limpar, deserved some tangible reward other than just three points. Sadly for English football, as well as Arsenal, their powerhouse finish to the season seems likely to leave them just short of a European reward. Sheffield Wednesday have only to take two points from their remaining two games to make sure of securing the second Uefa Cup qualifying place.

How galling it must be for George Graham's manager, particularly in this sub-standard season, to see his team recover their poise just a few games too late to offer a more formidable defence of their trophy.

While it is Arsenal's scoring power which has monopolised the headlines in recent weeks, with 35 goals in those 15 games, the fact that Arsenal have conceded more than one goal on only one occasion will not have escaped Graham's critical attention to detail. His defence yesterday, however, could afford to bathe for most of the afternoon in the Highbury sunshine while the opposition's back four received the roasting.

It has to be said that Liverpool invited punishment. Without the pace and quality of Mark Wright, it was asking for trouble against the speedy Ian Wright and Campbell for their defence to push up quite so far. It did not require hindsight to see that they would have been better off playing Molby as a sweeper.

Yet whatever their tactics, it was obvious from the fourth minute, when Campbell turned Nicol and drew a fine save from Hooper, that Liverpool had their work cut out.

Even for a squad of their strength it was spreading their resources a bit thin to try to cope without Grobbelaar, McManaman, Thomas, Burrows, and Whelan as well as Wright. Graham was honest enough to admit as much.

Nevertheless, it cannot have done anything for Liverpool's confidence to be trounced so conclusively less than three weeks away from their FA Cup final date with Sunderland. Indeed, it could quite easily have been worse. Arsenal, four goals up after 47 minutes, were worth at least a couple more.

Arsenal must have known that this was to be a special day when Hillier opened the scoring in the sixth minute with his first senior goal, though the manner in which he buried his shot, following a poor clearance to an equally poor corner, belied his inexperience in such matters. The game was far too open to remain at 1-0 for long and there were no prizes for guessing who might concede the second. A superb diagonal pass from Limpar in the sixteenth minute picked out Wright in full flight and his finish was measured and assured. Yet even that goal was surpassed in terms of quality in the fortieth minute. Limpar, receiving the ball just inside the Liverpool half courtesy of some sloppy play by the visitors, noticed Hooper several yards out of his goal and, with what Graham aptly described as "vision, power and skill", he deliberately aimed a shot from some 50 yards perfectly over the goalkeeper's head. It was hard for anyone to top that, including George Best, watching from the stands. But Merson and Wright did their best when they combined to catch Liverpool's defence square once more and the latter scampered through for his 28th goal of the season.

ARSENAL: D Seaman; P Lydersen (sub: D O'Leary), N Winterburn, D Hillier, S Bould, T Adams, D Rocastle, I Wright, K Campbell, P Merson, A Limpar.

LIVERPOOL: M Hooper; R Jones (sub: M Walters), N Tanner, S Nicol, J Molby, B Venison, D Saunders (sub: D Hutchison), R Houghton, I Rush, J Barnes, M Marsh.

Referee: K Hackett.

the guardian

Liverpool provides the icing for an Arsenal cakewalk

ANDERS LIMPAR struck one of the most audacious goals of this or any other season yesterday as Arsenal so exposed Liverpool's defensive frailties that the visitors were given their worst First Division defeat since 1983.

Arsenal's fans will remember this Easter extravaganza with relish; they will certainly have mentally freeze-framed the moment in the 40th minute when Limpar, his immediate path blocked by two Liverpool players, lofted the ball more than 50 yards over the desperately back-peddalling Mike Hooper.

George Graham acclaimed it as a goal combining 'vision, power and skill' but rightly placed the first of Ian Wright's pair almost in the same class.

Arsenal frequently penetrated the FA Cup finalists' horribly square defence, which was missing Grobbelaar, Wright and Burrows. They are unbeaten in 15 games - since losing to Liverpool, in fact, on January 29 - and look the most accomplished team in the land. Yet they are likely to miss out on a Uefa Cup place.

Arsenal's supremacy was imposed long before Limpar's inspired strike. Liverpool's tendency to err was demonstrated after just six minutes when Marsh failed to control a corner and Hillier drove emphatically past Hooper's left hand for his first senior Arsenal goal.

Limpar prefaced his goal with another superb chip, in the 16th minute, this time delivering an angled pass over 30 yards into Wright's path. Arsenal's top scorer positively devalued this opportunity, clipping the ball into the far corner from just inside the area.

The Swede's goal effectively ended the contest, but the appetite of the First Division's leading scorers remained as voracious as ever. Another finely judged through-ball, this time from Merson, sent Wright on a confident path past the advancing Hooper to his 28th goal of the season.

There could have been more in the remaining 43 minutes as Arsenal threatened their biggest win over Liverpool since an 8-1 rout in 1934-35. Wright was denied a hat-trick by Hooper, Limpar struck the underside of the bar and Tanner, epitomising his team's defensive uncertainties, almost headed into his own net. Liverpool should have retrieved at least one goal from this humiliation. Rush and Barnes narrowly failed twice each and Marsh once shot tamely wide. So their caretaker manager Ronnie Moran was forced to focus on defensive deficiencies. 'I'm embarrassed by the goals,' he said. 'It was Sunday League stuff.'

Arsenal: Seaman; Lydersen (O'Leary, 87min), Winterburn, Hillier, Bould, Adams, Rocastle, Wright, Campbell, Merson, Limpar.

Liverpool: Hooper; Jones (Walters, 57), Tanner, Nicol, Molby, Venison, Saunders (Hutchison, 76), Houghton, Rush, Barnes, Marsh.

Referee: K Hackett (Sheffield).

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Liverpool humbled

Anders Limpar scored from almost 50 yards to sharpen the humiliation of Liverpool's heaviest defeat of the season at Arsenal.

Ian Wright twice contributed to an Easter parade of glorious goals as George Graham's abdicating champions preserved their slim mathematical hope of a UEFA Cup place.

Not since they crashed 8-1 57 years ago have Liverpool been so badly mauled at Highbury. But as well as a pre-occupation with the FA Cup final against Sunderland next month, they were undermined by injuries to Mark Wright, Bruce Grobbelaar, Ronnie Whelan, Michael Thomas and David Burrows.

That left Arsenal to unwrap and gobble up their soft-centred defence at leisure and stretch their unbeaten run to 15 games since they lost 2-0 at Anfield in January.

They made the perfect start when Limpar's sixth minute corner from the right spun off Mike Marsh's attempted interception to David Hillier from the edge of the area and his low drive through a crowded area gave him a first senior goal for the club.

Ten minutes later Limpar angled a lob over the top of the Liverpool defence to send Wright clear. The 2.5 million pound striker cracked his 25th league goal of the season past Mike Hooper from the edge of the box.

Hooper dashed out of his area to deny Kevin Campbell after 32 minutes but his presence on the edge of the box cost Liverpool dearly in the 40th minute.

Limpar picked up a loosely-struck Liverpool pass and appeared to be dithering just a couple of yards inside the Liverpool half until he spotted Hooper off his line. The Swedish international's lob showed not only breathtaking audacity as it sailed over the embarrassed goalkeeper.

Two minutes into the second half, Paul Merson sent Wright through and again Hooper dashed out. This time the England striker hooked the ball round him and calmly steered it into the empty net from 25 yards.

Arsenal should have added to their haul but Hillier volleyed over, Hooper denied Wright his hat-trick with an excellent save and in the 78th minute Limpar crashed a shot against the underside of the bar.

No wonder the Liverpool fans behind Hooper's goal refused to return the ball at one point to try to save their side from further damage.

Liverpool caretaker manager Ronnie Moran admitted after the defeat: "I'm sick inside, but you can't show that - life must go on".

But the FA Cup finalist's heaviest league defeat for nine years will have done nothing to aid Graeme Souness's recuperation from heart surgery and Moran said: "It was embarrassing the way we lost the goals. That was Sunday league defending, but it is not just only the men at the back who were at fault. It's the first time in all my years I've been at Liverpool that I've seen two goals go in from that far out."

Pick of the bunch was Limpar's chip and Moran added: "I'll give the lad top marks for vision. I've only ever seen Pele try that before. But the goalkeeper was not in the wrong position, he should have been prevented from doing that, it was bad play on our side."

Arsenal manager George Graham said: "It was a great goal, great vision. It was so far out, it had power as well as skill". But he admitted that Liverpool's problems detracted from the impact of the victory, saying: "They were playing a bit suicidal with their offsides, and with better finishing we could have had more. But they looked a bit tired. They have had a lot of injuries, and that was probably not a normal Liverpool performance."