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THE TIMES

Clinical Cantona makes most of Liverpool's charity

Leeds United 4 Liverpool 3

THE picture painted by two of England's leading clubs at Wembley, which contrasted so vividly with the nation's miserably negative contribution to the European championship, was seen by some as a bright portent for the inaugural Premier League season. If only it was indicative of a new beginning. The Charity Shield on Saturday was, indisputably, the most spectacular that anyone could remember, but the occasion, as the respective managers conceded, represented a public practice match. Once the genuine competition starts, Liverpool's defence, in particular, is unlikely to act like a collection of independent free spirits.

Only once last season did they concede as many as four goals and that, their heaviest defeat for nine years, was at Highbury in April when they had already drifted far out of contention for the League title. "We were extremely charitable today," Graeme Souness, their manager, said.

He insisted he will persist with the 3-5-2 formation he has used in each pre-season game apparently, it suits his players but unless he changes the personnel, Liverpool promise to be more vulnerable at the back than they have been for several decades. Walters and Saunders may enhance and broaden a powerful attack, but neither can adequately fill the role of a "wing back" and protect the defence on the flank. Houghton, the club's most consistent individual last season, could have done, but he was surprisingly sold during the summer.

Howard Wilkinson, aware of the possibilities, selected three forwards. In omitting Strachan and Rocastle, he ran the risk of his numerically weakened midfield being overrun. At times, it was, but his own front line, especially the diminutive Wallace, was able to run into unusually wide, open spaces.

Nobody benefited more than the tall and elegant Cantona. The French "enfant terrible", who spent an anonymous evening in the shadow of Keown when he represented his country against England in the same stadium six months ago, scored three goals for the first time in his career.

A member of France's equally undistinguished European championship side, he will doubtless continue to be unpredictable and rely on inspiration rather than industry. Although Wilkinson said Cantona has trained diligently, he admitted: "Language is still a barrier when I suggest that he should work harder. He understands when I say anything complimentary."

The first player since Tommy Taylor in 1957 to claim three goals in the Charity Shield, Cantona completed his haul courtesy of a typically aberrant Grobbelaar waving at Wallace's cross. Nevertheless, Souness stated that his goalkeeper, who has been picked by Zimbabwe for a World Cup qualifying tie next weekend, will not be released.

James, the Pounds 1 million reserve, must wait for his chance, but presumably Jones, McManaman, Nicol and Thomas, if not Molby, will come in as soon as they recover from injury. As last season, Liverpool will be fit to be judged when the strongest lineup, which will include Stewart, is available.

Goals from Rush and Saunders, almost immediately after switching positions with Rosenthal, kept them deservedly in contention until a dozen minutes from the end. Wright, with significant assistance from Strachan on the line, added a third in the closing stages, but, by then, Cantona had lifted Leeds out of reach.

Dorigo, with a deflected free kick, was credited with their other goal and his display contrasted with that of his fellow full back. Newsome, Sterland's understudy, was so tormented by Walters that Liverpool, who gained a dozen corners to Leeds's two, might, with more accurate finishing, have collected the trophy themselves.

In Wilkinson's view, it would be "churlish, small-minded and mean" to criticise the nature of a game that was so thrillingly open. It could be again when the sides meet at Elland Road tomorrow night for the benefit of Jim Beglin, a former player with both, but the fixture on August 29 is surely bound to be a different matter altogether.

LEEDS UNITED: J Lukic, J Newsome (sub: G Strachan), A Dorigo, D Batty, C Fairclough, C Whyte, E Cantona, R Wallace, L Chapman (sub: S Hodge), G McAllister, G Speed.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar, N Tanner, D Burrows, M Marsh, (sub: D Hutchinson), R Whelan, M Wright, D Saunders, P Stewart, I Rush, R Rosenthal (sub: I Kozma), M Walters.

Referee: D Elleray.

the guardian

Cantona puts crown on curtain-raiser

SHOULD the Premier League take its cue from this rip-roaring roller-coaster of a game at Wembley then the demand for Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB dishes will be in danger of exceeding the capacity of Alan Sugar's Amstrad company to make them. As a trailer for its exclusive live coverage of Premier League matches this season Sky Sports could not have asked for anything more.

After Leeds United, the League champions, had defeated Liverpool, the FA Cup holders, 4-3 with the assistance of a hat-trick from their French striker Eric Cantona, both managers trusted that normal service would be resumed as soon as possible. Since the defences had entered into the charitable spirit of the afternoon by giving away goals with the generosity of Little Sisters of the Poor one could understand their scepticism.

Yet the reservations of Howard Wilkinson and Graeme Souness could not obscure the fact that for once the players appreciated the occasion for the aperitif it was. So did the referee, David Elleray, who retained a schoolmasterly sense of when the new term actually begins and managed to resist flourishing a yellow card until Batty took Walters's legs away 12 minutes from the end. Batty would probably get himself booked playing Handel's Largo.

Not since 1968, when Manchester City routed West Bromwich Albion 6-1, had the FA Charity Shield produced so many goals. Not since 1967, when one of the six shared by Manchester United and Tottenham was scored by Pat Jennings, the Spurs goalkeeper, with a prodigious clearance, was the ball so likely to enter the net in bizarre circumstances.

In the closing minutes on Saturday Cantona had just scored his third goal to give Leeds a 4-2 lead when Liverpool forced a corner. The ball found its way to Wright, who drove a shot towards the inside of the left-hand post. Strachan, who had just come off the bench, stopped the ball on the line but then found he could not get it out from under his feet and backheeled it into his own net.

Credulity was also tested when the Leeds defence stood around Rosenthal in a deferential circle and allowed him the cross from the byline which enabled Rush to head Liverpool's first equaliser, Wallace having set up Cantona's opening goal. Dorigo scored Leeds's second with unwitting assistance from Rosenthal's rear end, after Liverpool had failed to pursue the industrious Wallace as he retrieved a stray ball back off the left-hand corner flag, Grobbelaar's failure to intercept the cross enabled Cantona to head the champions' fourth.

If it was a cheap day for goals, there was no doubting the alacrity with which some of them were taken. Cantona's second, which restored Leeds's lead at 3-2, was his best. Having outjumped the defenders to reach McAllister's free-kick, the Frenchman reacted quickly when the ball came back to him off Fairclough and drove the ball unerringly past Grobbelaar.

Saunders had brought Liverpool back into the match at 22 with an equally stunning goal. Having spent much of the game occupying the injured McManaman's role on the right, the Welsh striker moved to the left and slipped the ball to Walters, who had momentarily switched to the middle. Walters's shot ricocheted off two defenders, by which time Saunders had raced into the centre to gain possession and beat Lukic with a superb half-volley.

With six first-team players missing, Liverpool took some comfort from the sharpness of Rosenthal, Saunders and Rush, the latter scoring his usual goal at Wembley having taken his total in FA Cup finals to five, a record, when he completed the 2-0 victory over Sunderland in May. Stewart, for whom Liverpool have paid Tottenham pounds 2.3 million, will add resilience rather than subtlety to Souness's midfield.

Souness said: "I thought we played well and dominated the second half but we gave away some goals that I would hate us to do in the League."

Wilkinson allowed himself some cautious pleasure at Cantona's performance: "He's got exceptional potential but he's got to keep hard at it." For Cantona, keeping hard at it probably does not translate too well.

Wilkinson expanded: "He's a better player now in my view than six months ago and I'm not just talking about in terms of English football. He has exceptional potential and his attitude in training since he came back from the European Championships has been just right."

At times Newsome, a gauche cover for Sterland at right-back, struggled against Walters's wiles. Nevertheless Wilkinson's team looked in reasonable fettle and the result should swell tomorrow's attendance at Elland Road for Jim Beglin's testimonial, when the same teams go through their paces.

SCORERS: Leeds United: Cantona (26min, 77, 87), Dorigo (43). Liverpool: Rush (34), Saunders (65), Strachan (og, 88).

Leeds United: Lukic; Newsome (Strachan, 84), Dorigo, Batty, Fairclough, Whyte, Cantona, Wallace, Chapman (Hodge, 79), McAllister, Speed.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Tanner, Burrows, Marsh (Hutchinson, 72), Whelan, Wright, Saunders, Stewart, Rush, Rosenthal (Kozma, 83), Walters.

Referee: D R Elleray (Harrow).

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Ooh-Aah-Cantona

A brilliant hat-trick from French ace Eric Cantona lit up Wembley in the highest scoring FA Charity Shield game for 24 years. Cantona's treble gave League Champions Leeds a dramatic 4-3 win over FA Cup holders Liverpool but the Merseysiders made them fight all the way.

Twice in the last 13 minutes Cantona struck with opportunist efforts that looked to have finished off gallant Liverpool. But in the dying seconds Mark Wright forced an own goal from Gordon Strachan to keep the 61,291 Wembley crowd enthralled to the end. It was the most exciting curtain-raiser to the season for years and the highest scoring since Manchester City beat West Brom 6-1 in 1968. Liverpool began the game with their usual collection of players ruled out through injury: John Barnes, Jan Molby, Steve McManaman and Rob Jones but new 2.3 million pound midfielder Paul Stewart, their summer signing from Tottenham, fitted in well as Liverpool ran the game for long periods.

Leeds, who left 2 million pound David Rocastle on the bench, first breached Liverpool's fragile defence in the 25th minute. David Batty put Rod Wallace away on the left and he coolly cut the ball back for Cantona to strike his first goal from eight yards, with the help of a deflection from David Burrows.

Liverpool went straight back on to the attack, Ian Rush nodding wide and then Stewart seeing his low shot deflected a fraction wide. The goal they deserved eventually came in the 34th minute when Rosenthal was allowed to turn and Rush rifled home the equaliser with a header from the Israeli's accurate cross. Liverpool were making most of the running but Leeds looked dangerous on the break and two minutes before half-time the Anfield rearguard was breached again, after they had conceded a free-kick on the edge of the box. Tony Dorigo lashed in a shot and the ball deflected off Rosenthal on the end of the wall to leave Bruce Grobbelaar helpless.

It was a cruel blow for Graeme Souness' men but they shrugged it off and dominated again at the start of the second half, Lukic having to make a good save from Mark Walters' low drive. The second equaliser came in the 65th minute. Walters' shot was blocked but Saunders picked up the rebound and lashed it home.

Grobbelaar kept out a Wallace shot with his legs while Saunders and Burrows both missed the target at the other end as Cantona struck again. This time he nodded down McAllister's long free-kick, Chris Fairclough chested the ball back to him and the Frenchman lashed a low shot past Grobbelaar from 15 yards. Ten minutes later Cantona grabbed his hat-trick with a simple header after Grobbelaar completely missed Wallace's cross.

In the final minute Leeds failed to clear a corner, allowing Wright to drive the ball into the net of the heels of substitute Strachan, but Leeds clung on for a famous win.

Cantona later handed the credit to his team-mates: "I'm very happy to score three goals but me, I'm not very important. It's more important for the whole team." But the French ace's striking partner Lee Chapman put Cantona's superb performance into perspective, saying: "He fully deserved to score three goals and he's going to have a great season."

"He took a while to adapt because English football is so different, but he can only get better and better." And, looking ahead to Leeds' bid to retain their championship, Chapman added: "It's going to be a great season. It's looking good but there's a long way to go."

Leeds manager Howard Wilkinson said: "I enjoyed the result and the game. It was just the sort of match the English game needs at the moment but it was not surprising with so much skill out there today. It would be nice if we see that level of skill in the Premier League in the new season. But there were some defenders out there today who won't be too happy with their performances. Perhaps there will be a lesson in that for them and we might see defenders getting on top in the League."

Wilkinson, although reluctant to nominate a man of the match, praised Cantona's performance. He said: "He's scored three goals in the Charity Shield at Wembley. I believe nobody has done that before, so it's an historic performance. He's a better player now in my view than six months ago and I'm not just talking in terms of English football. He's got exceptional potential and his attitude in training since he came back from the European Championships has been just right. Perhaps he was a bit disillusioned by what happened in Sweden but he hasn't shown it with us."

Wilkinson predicted the match would "not mean a thing" as far as his team's opening Premier League game against Wimbledon next Saturday is concerned. "The main thing I'm pleased about is that we have no serious injuries and we have shown ourselves we are pretty fit. I think Graeme Souness would have a similar view."

Souness said: "I thought we played well and dominated the second half but we gave away some goals that I would hate us to do in the League. It was very un-Liverpool."