

Date: 5 September 1992

Opposition: Chelsea

Competition: League

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THE TIMES

Saunders remains an enigma

Liverpool 2, Chelsea 1

IF, AS expected, Dean Saunders does sever his ties with Liverpool this week and joins Aston Villa, he will ask himself several questions in the months ahead. The most pertinent of those is did he fail or was he failed by those around him?

It was fitting that what was almost certainly his final appearance for Liverpool on Saturday offered, if no conclusions, then several clues. Saunders need look no further than his fitful contribution to a compelling match for the more salient reasons behind his plight for here, in microcosm, was his 14-month career at Anfield.

A marvellous first-half performance of bristling aggression and frenetic activity yielded a smartly-taken headed goal from Molby's free kick and made one wonder why a player of such application should find himself surplus to requirements at a club that has struggled to score goals in recent seasons.

Sadly, his display after half-time made one wonder why Graeme Souness had delayed his decision to sanction the sale of a willing but erratic individual.

Had Liverpool's desperation for victory not brought a fortuitous winning goal in injury time, it is unlikely that Saunders would have been afforded a standing ovation. For he missed two glorious chances.

"Dean was through on the goalkeeper twice and if he had put just one of them away he would have made life a lot easier for us," Souness said. Saunders retorted: "I think Liverpool are making a mistake in selling me. One club wants me, the other club wants the money. I want this sorted out so I can concentrate on playing."

Although Ian Porterfield claimed with some justification that his side had looked the more likely victors after Harford had equalised from close range in the 72nd minute, Chelsea's chances had already shrunk dramatically when Elliott, the mainstay of their defence, was carried off on a stretcher after 11 minutes after a brutal, if accidental, collision with Saunders.

"Paul has damaged his knee ligaments," Porterfield said. "It is a big blow; a bigger blow than losing the game, in truth."

The defeat was sealed when Beasant let Walters's weak cross slip through his fingers, allowing the impressive Redknapp to decide the issue with almost the last kick.

LIVERPOOL: D James; R Jones, D Burrows, S Harkness, R Whelan, M Wright, D Saunders, J Redknapp, I Rush, J Molby, S McManaman (sub: M Walters).

CHELSEA: D Beasant; D Lee, G Hall, V Jones, P Elliott (sub: I Pearce), M Donaghy, E Newton, R Fleck, M Harford, A Townsend, D Wise.

Referee: J Key.

the guardian

Redknapp spares the red faces

ONE OF Sir Henry Thornhill's famous illustrated cards of the Twenties, entitled Commencement of Football Season, shows an elephant in red shorts passing to a rabbit. Clearly it is Molby before his time. The rabbit, too, is prophetic. Liverpool are jumpy now, apart from Molby, Rush and the admirable James.

At some stage they are going to want this season to commence again, but not yet, notwithstanding Saturday's win. They are still in disarray. The victory should have been clear-cut, once Chelsea were dislocated by Elliott's early departure with knee-ligament damage. In the end it was fortunate, achieved in the last minute when Beasant unaccountably missed Walters's cross for Redknapp to score easily. The Kop exulted with him and for him. They had booed his substitution on Tuesday against Southampton. Once managers at Anfield could do no wrong by the Kop. In 18 months of Graeme Souness that bond has been broken.

Souness trod on toes from the outset. This spring he was lucky to survive the selling of his heart's tale to the Sun. Sadly, suddenly, the old privilege of wearing the red seems to be offset by the disaffection of doing it for him. The air in the corridors is no longer comfortable. There is probably only one solution but the board missed its chance in May.

On Saturday Souness was without Nicol and Stewart (hamstrings), Thomas (ankle) and Barnes (chronic), with Rob Jones about to enter hospital for a shin-splints operation. Even so, while using 18 players in seven matches, he has included no one who would not walk into any Premier team in the league. The manager moans but injuries are not new and were never an excuse here or anywhere. Everyone just rolled the sleeves higher to sustain the calm authority.

Souness said afterwards: 'When you're going through a sticky spell the experienced players will get you out of it.' But he sold Beardsley and Houghton, Whelan is showing sign of frustration and Saunders will probably go to Villa this week, and be glad to. His energy and first-half headed goal surely bridged the pounds 150,000 gap between the clubs.

When, rarely, Chelsea ran at Liverpool's defence, it collapsed like a house of cards, mostly jokers, and Grobbelaar was only on the bench. James at least wears the No. 1 like an ace, though he had no chance with Harford's equaliser.

In February Chelsea won 2-1 at Anfield, ending Liverpool's run to get back in the promotion race. That was when the rot set in. One by one the dynasties totter - the boot room, the monarchy - each, in its way, down to Chelsea. Only civilisation remains - and Molby.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Saunders (27min), Redknapp (90). Chelsea: Harford (72).

Liverpool: James; R Jones, Burrows, Harkness, Whelan, Wright, Saunders, Redknapp, Rush, Molby, McManaman (Walters, 75).

Chelsea: Beasant, Lee, Hall, V Jones, Elliott (Pearce, 10), Donaghy, Newton, Fleck, Harford, Townsend, Wise.

Referee: J Key (Sheffield).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Elliott feels the full force of attacking Liverpool

Liverpool 2 Chelsea 1.

LIVERPOOL 2 (4-4-2): James; Jones, Wright, Burrows, Harkness; McManaman (Walters 75min), Molby, Redknapp, Whelan; Rush, Saunders.

CHELSEA 1 (4-4-2): Beasant; Hall, Elliott (Pearce 10min), Donaghy, Lee; Newton, Jones, Wise, Townsend; Harford, Fleck.

Goals: Saunders (27min) 1-0; Harford (72min) 1-1; Redknapp (88min) 2-1.

Weather: mild. Ground: firm.

Referee: R Key (Sheffield).

THE crucial moment in this game came after just 10 minutes. And it may become a time that Paul Elliott remembers for years.

Elliott was clearing a ball that was slamming around at a height and speed that typified the opening minutes when Saunders tackled him at an angle and pace which could only mean that neither player had clearly seen the other.

Down went Elliott, writhing in pain. The injury was to his knee ligaments and he was out of the match. When the full impact is assessed, there is a good chance that Elliott's injury is similar to that which Paul Gascoigne suffered 16 months ago. Saunders was contrite and it was noticeable that no Chelsea player remonstrated with him during the six or seven minutes while Elliott was treated before being carried off. The die had been cast none the less. The Chelsea fans booed Saunders every time he touched the ball and it did not seem coincidental that it was directly in front of the Chelsea contingent that Lee felled him after 27 minutes.

In what turned out to be an important decision, Mr Key spoke to Lee, but did not book him. The early slapdash was settling into a monumental battle and a booking at that stage could have sparked off a chain reaction between terraces and pitch and overwhelmed the game.

In the short term, the price of Lee's silly foul his only failing of the game was a Saunders goal. Molby took the free kick and Saunders got his head to it in a way that could be described as either lucky or supremely skilful. But for a man who has been through a purgatory of uncertainty for four days, the difference is academic.

As he celebrated, something clicked inside Saunders and for the rest of the game he latched on to the ball and, whenever possible, crashed it towards Beasant with the passion of a man who has suffered so much that only passion is left.

But this was not quite enough; Saunders missed a virtually open goal when his best chance came. Every harsh tackle that succeeded Lee's and there were many only inspired Saunders further. One save that he forced out of Beasant came from a turn and shot that showed what might have been for Saunders at Anfield.

Meanwhile, Chelsea gave as good as they got. They are on the brink of being one hell of a force. Harford got their goal after Jones, not for the first time, missed the ball. Newton carried, passed, jinked and ran like a man whose time had come. In the period late in the game when visiting sides normally surrender, every Chelsea man battled.

It was out of character with the rest of his game that Beasant should let the ball reach Redknapp at the very death, and typical of Harford's luck that he miscued seconds before, when James's goal was open for the taking.

In the rush and fury of all this, however, Mr Key had let what was a shrewd decision become an ideology, oblivious to the worst of tackles. The tackles that both sides dished out, and for a period Saunders became a particular target, were just short of outrageous. It is some tribute to the players' common sense that none of these inspired a bloodbath.

A draw would have been a fairer result, and a Chelsea victory by no means an iniquity. But Jones giving away the ball and Elliott's injury stretched Chelsea's bridge too far this time.

BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Redknapp's strike grabs Reds' points

A dramatic last minute strike by young midfielder Jamie Redknapp gave Liverpool victory against stunned Chelsea.

Welsh international striker Dean Saunders had marked his possible Liverpool swansong with a fine opening goal only to see Chelsea's Mick Harford snatch a second half equaliser.

Saunders was also involved in an early clash which left Chelsea central defender Paul Elliott in hospital.

Liverpool and Aston Villa are haggling over a fee for the 28-year-old Welshman who could have added to his first league goal of the season in an impressive performance. Saunders was fouled wide on the left by defender David Lee and when Jan Molby floated in the resulting free-kick Saunders rose to deflect the ball into the far top corner with a deft header after 27 minutes.

Chelsea equalised after 72 minutes, Eddie Newton releasing Robert Fleck down the left. When Fleck beat Rob Jones and crossed, Vinnie Jones failed to connect but the ball ran on to Harford who drilled it home at the far post.

But with a minute left Liverpool substitute Mark Walters jinked his way past three defenders down the right flank before turning the ball across the face of the Chelsea goal for Redknapp to turn it home.

Chelsea had lost Elliott when he challenged Saunders on the halfway line. The Welshman appeared to catch Elliott's knee with his boot though Liverpool won the eventual free-kick. Elliott was carried off after a four minute hold up and taken to hospital with expected knee ligament damage.

Said Chelsea manager Ian Porterfield: "We don't know how serious it is but obviously it is a big blow to us. He is a very important player. He's been a tower of strength to us ever since he joined us from Glasgow Celtic, and I don't think there's anyone better than him in central defence anywhere in the country. I think Saunders came down on top of him and there was a scratch on his leg. I was a bit surprised the referee gave the free kick against us."

But he did not blame the Welshman for the incident and added: "These things happen in football and it's a man's game."