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THE TIMES

Late strikes by Hughes give United a point

Manchester United 2, Liverpool 2.

MARK Hughes and Ian Rush, united in the cause of Wales in midweek, together ended prolonged barren spells against each other's clubs at Old Trafford yesterday.

Demonstrating contrasting finishing touches, the Welshmen claimed three of the four goals in a Premier League fixture with an improbable sting in its tail.

For 79 minutes, Hughes and Manchester United fumbled through an afternoon during which they were demonstrably second best. Then Hughes, who specialises in the spectacular, lifted not only his side out of their torpor but also himself out of his personal misery, with two goals of rare quality. United, in protecting an unbeaten sequence which has lasted since the second game of the season, climbed up to fifth place. Liverpool, for so long yesterday the more convincing unit, failed to collect the reward they had earned.

Still without half a dozen senior representatives, their inexperience cost them a couple of points and a huge psychological boost. They remain sixteenth, but their League position, after their worst start to a season for 39 years, is palpably false.

Under unfavourable circumstances, Graeme Souness, their manager, is moulding a team worthy of the club's reputation. Piechnik, the Dane he bought for Pounds 500,000 from Copenhagen, proved his value with the most assured display alongside Nicol in the heart of the defence. Hutchison, stationed on the left side of a young but dominant midfield, gave them a deserved, albeit fortunate, lead.

Midway through the first half, he typified Liverpool's increasing optimism by taking aim from well outside the penalty area.

His shot would not have beaten Schmeichel, but it took a deflection off Bruce and veered into the corner of the net.

A few seconds before the interval, Liverpool's superiority was underlined by the most familiar source. Rosenthal, immediately after scorning one opportunity, burst towards the byeline to fashion another for Rush, who had never scored a League goal at Old Trafford.

A dozen years after first moving from Chester, Rush claimed his 287th for Liverpool to surpass the club record set by Roger Hunt two decades ago. His strike, like that of a snake from close range, was as characteristic as those of his Welsh colleague, Hughes.

Before Molby had been carried off on a stretcher, probably with damaged ankle ligaments (he will have x-ray examinations today), Hughes made his mark as well. In hooking in Blackmore's chip, he claimed his first goal against Liverpool for almost four years.

Hughes, who was credited with his country's winner in the World Cup qualifying tie in Cyprus on Wednesday, brought the fixture to a breathtaking finale.

Liverpool, unable to protect themselves against pressure which was purposeful for the first time, were undone deep into injury time.

Giggs, the talented Welsh youth whose final pass is invariably inaccurate, for once corrected his sights and Hughes, stooping low, headed powerfully home. "We didn't play particularly well," Alex Ferguson, United's manager, admitted, "and perhaps we didn't deserve a point."

MANCHESTER UNITED: P Schmeichel; P Parker, D Irwin, S Bruce, D Ferguson, G Pallister, A Kanchelskis (sub: C Blackmore), P Ince, B McClair, M Hughes, R Giggs.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; M Marsh, D Burrows, S Nicol, T Piechnik, D Hutchison, S McManaman, J Redknapp (sub: M Thomas), I Rush, J Molby (sub: N Tanner), R Rosenthal.

Referee: K Hackett.

the guardian

Hughes steals Rush's thunder

LIVERPOOL'S football rediscovered its soul at Old Trafford yesterday only for Mark Hughes to sabotage their salvation. Hughes scored twice in the last 12 minutes to deny Graeme Souness his most heartening win of the season and bring Manchester United a point from a match which appeared to have drifted beyond their reach.

When Ian Rush broke Roger Hunt's 23-year-old scoring record for Liverpool by giving them a 20 lead on the stroke of half-time it was hard to see how a United side passing badly and bereft of ideas would save the game. In the event they did so only after Liverpool's atrocious run of injuries had continued with the loss of Jan Molby.

Hughes's first goal had just given Old Trafford a glimmer of hope when Molby went into a tackle with Ferguson and was carried off with damaged ankle ligaments. Not for the first time the rotund Dane's vision and accurate long passes had given Liverpool an important extra dimension, and they missed his ability to slow things down when United hurled themselves into a series of mass attacks which eventually produced their equaliser.

Certainly United, on yesterday's indifferent form, were never going to break down Liverpool through skill or stealth. For this was hardly the defence which had quailed before the might of Chesterfield in the Coca-Cola Cup.

The success of the centre-back partnership of Nicol and Piechnik bodes ill for the chances of Mark Wright making an early return. After seeing his fellow Dane leave on a stretcher, Piechnik completed an excellent match with some inspired defending. Had Liverpool managed to hold on to their lead he would have taken much of the credit.

Afterwards Souness put the loss of his team's lead down to inexperience at crucial moments. "With a bit more ringcraft and fieldcraft we would probably have won," he said. Yet the composure of his younger players - Marsh, McManaman, Redknapp and Hutchison - had easily withstood the traditional Old Trafford passion and pressure.

In fact there were times when one would only have swapped Rosenthal for Barnes to complete Liverpool's restoration. With Rush holding the ball up consistently throughout, the timing and accuracy of their movements had United chasing shadows for long periods.

A win would have taken Manchester United to third place in the Premier League but on yesterday's evidence it is a little early to start discussing Alex Ferguson's team in championship terms. Until Hughes came to their rescue it looked as if the problems they have had finding the net would again be their downfall.

For a while after Darren Ferguson had missed a couple of chances in the third minute a lot of the creative life drained out of United's football. For some of the second half Alex Ferguson switched Kanchelskis to the left flank and moved Giggs inside to support Hughes. But it was the United manager's decision to replace his Ukrainian winger with the utilitarian Blackmore, amid routine boos from the fans, which was to prove the more decisive move. Passes from Blackmore led to both Hughes's goals.

Liverpool took the lead midway through the first half. Molby found Hutchison in space and his half-hit shot took a deflection off Bruce.

Giggs, controlling a prodigious clearance from Schmeichel beautifully before shooting over the bar, offered United some comfort. But in the last minute of the first half Rosenthal, having squandered an obvious chance himself, played the ball back from the left-hand byline to Rush, who scored an historic goal.

His tally for Liverpool is now 287, one more than Hunt's total completed in 1969. Another goal and Rush will have 200 in English league matches alone. Yesterday's was his first at Old Trafford.

In the second half Grobbelaar began leaving his goal at regular intervals and in the 68th minute did so once too often. Blackmore's through-pass found Hughes onside and the Welshman chipped the ball past the stranded goalkeeper.

A little earlier Hughes had seen a goalbound header inadvertently blocked by McClair. But when Giggs met a crossfield pass from Blackmore in the last minute with a firm centre to the near post Hughes flung himself to meet it and this time there was nobody, friend or foe, barring the way.

Manchester United: Schmeichel; Parker, Irwin, Bruce, Ferguson, Pallister, Kanchelskis (Blackmore, 66min), Ince, McClair, Hughes, Giggs.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Marsh, Burrows, Nicol, Piechnik, Hutchison, McManaman, Redknapp (Thomas, 71), Rush, Molby (Tanner, 82), Rosenthal.

Referee: K Hackett (Sheffield).

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Sparky's spree saves United

Mark Hughes was Manchester United's hero with two goals in the final 11 minutes as the Old Trafford side clawed back from a two-goal deficit with fierce rivals Liverpool.

Hughes struck in the 79th and 89th minutes to stun Graeme Souness' Merseysiders, who looked to be cruising to a comfortable victory.

But the combative Welshman had other ideas and led a one-man fightback before a 33,243 crowd.

As the minutes ticked away, United had become increasingly frantic, but it was a piece of calm, cool and calculated brilliance from the Welsh international that set them on their way.

Substitute Clayton Blackmore centred and Hughes met it on the volley to lob the ball brilliantly over Bruce Grobbelaar. It still seemed a task too far for Alex Ferguson's side as Liverpool defended determinedly and often desperately, but in the dying moments Hughes sent Old Trafford into uproar with a superb diving header to convert Giggs' cross.

The Old Trafford fans had been strangely quiet in a first half where Liverpool bossed the play, despite their lowly league position and a catalogue of injuries. Playing some exquisite, flowing football there was, however, more than a touch of fortune behind their opening goal.

The impressive 21-year-old Don Hutchison let fly in the 23rd minute and saw his shot take a marked deflection off United skipper Steve Bruce and end up in the bottom corner of the net.

Hutchison had another chance in the 38th minute, but saw his shot blocked and turned behind for a corner, and Ronnie Rosenthal could also have added to their lead after being put through by Jan Molby.

Rosenthal, though, made amends on the stroke of half-time when he burst clear into the left of the penalty area before squaring the ball to Ian Rush, unmarked and just seven yards out for his first goal at Old Trafford.

That looked to have put the seal on a Liverpool triumph. Rush had scored his first ever goal against United at Anfield last April in a 2-0 victory, which finally killed off United's championship dream and it now looked as if his score would inflict another painful blow.

But United, who have lost only twice in their last 13 meetings with Liverpool, refused to throw in the towel. Ryan Giggs, who received the Barclays Young Eagle of the Month award for October before the match, was a constant threat, but there did not seem to be a way through until Hughes finally found the key.

It was a terrible final 11 minutes for Liverpool, who also saw Molby stretchered off with what appeared to be a serious knee injury following a Darren Ferguson tackle.

Afterwards the United boss said: "We looked like a side in need of inspiration and Mark certainly provided it. I don't know whether he knew if Bruce Grobbelaar was off his line for the first goal but it was a terrific finish. And the second goal was every bit as good and in those closing minutes we looked the sort of team that I expect from a Manchester United side."

Hughes, who scored the winner at Brighton in the Coca-Cola Cup, the winner for Wales and now two more vital strikes to make it four goals in three games was delighted. He said: "The first goal came completely out of the blue but it gave the impetus to get going and put them under pressure. We hadn't been playing particularly well up until then. I have been criticised in the past for not scoring enough goals and I accept that criticism to a certain extent because I haven't been getting into the box as much as I would like to. But that's four goals in my last three games and I don't think anyone can complain about that."

And Hughes paid tribute to his international team-mate saying: "For the past decade Ian Rush has been the top scorer in the country and for any player to score the amount of goals he has is phenomenal."

Rush said: "Obviously I am proud and privileged to have beaten the record of a great player like Roger Hunt. He was my father's hero. My dad used to call him Sir Roger. But while it's nice to have got the record I would rather the side had got the win we deserved."

Liverpool manager Graeme Souness said: "We are sick because we had three points in our grasp, but our inexperience and lack of ring-craft cost two of them, but we played really well - the youngsters especially."

And about the injury that saw Danish international Jan Molby stretchered off Souness explained: "At first we thought he had a broken leg, but now we think it is ankle ligaments. He's going for X-Rays and we should know tomorrow the extent of the injury."