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THE TIMES

Liverpool fail to find hope in the heart of defence

LIVERPOOL have learnt to cope with triumph, having lived with it on the grandest scale for more than two decades. They demonstrated, in the aftermath of Heysel and especially Hillsborough, that they can also handle tragedy. Now they face a new experience, a crisis of confidence.

England's flagship in Europe for so long is visibly sinking and, as the skipper, Graeme Souness must accept responsibility. His managerial position is expected to be reviewed this week and the board will surely conclude that, apart from winning last season's FA Cup, his 21 months have been less than distinguished. Souness is thought to be supported by the chairman, David Moores. Besides, the club, in its unprecedented state of confusion, hardly requires further disruption. The officials, the coaching staff and the players need instead to hold their nerve. Otherwise, Liverpool might even founder on the rocks of relegation. Inconceivable? They are only five points away from danger now and are plainly unable to protect themselves from drifting closer still. Souness cannot be certain that his side's position will not worsen, as has been the case during the last few weeks, before eventually it improves.

The doubt is based on the defence. The traditional strength of Liverpool has become its weakness. With a variety of goalkeepers, they have conceded more goals than all but Oldham Athletic, Leeds United and, after yesterday, Middlesbrough. They have lost more games than all but Everton and Nottingham Forest.

They have been kept afloat by the fourth most productive attack in the Premier League but there is always the nagging suspicion among the forwards that all of their work might be in vain. The 2-0 loss to Wimbledon at Selhurst Park on Saturday provided a graphic example of the imbalance.

"We never saw the ball for the first 25 minutes," Joe Kinnear, the Wimbledon manager, said. "Liverpool were exceptional. They passed us to death." Once Piechnik had clumsily conceded a penalty by baulking Cotterill, the Merseyside club capitulated so swiftly, and so completely, that all of their early promise soon became a distant memory.

Souness's reaction was more considered than after the 2-0 FA Cup defeat by Bolton Wanderers at Anfield in midweek. Then, he pointed an accusatory finger at some of his avaricious players, a public criticism scarcely designed to promote harmony within the camp. On Saturday evening, he chose wisely not to utter a single word.

The manager cannot be blamed for the injuries which have continually disturbed his plans. Not once this season, for example, has he been able to pick an unchanged line-up. His moves in the transfer market, though, are open to question. Of his acquisitions, Jones alone has been a positive success.

Since Kenny Dalglish's senior representatives were growing old together, a thorough transformation was inevitable and a decline likely, particularly as one of the principles on which the Anfield legend was built has been altered. Whereas new players once spent a year or two in the reserves, they are nowadays habitually introduced into the first team without hesitation.

Youngsters such as Marsh, McManaman, Hutchison and Redknapp, all of whom were bought by Dalglish, have had to graduate ahead of schedule. They are blossoming and Redknapp, who is still only 19, was their most prominent figure against Wimbledon. He initiated the moves which finished with Hutchison and Barnes missing clear openings.

The more experienced arrivals have struggled, none more so than the two Scandinavians. Piechnik is unrecognisable from the assured marker who helped Denmark to win last summer's European championship and Bjernebye has yet to finish on a winning side since he was signed from Rosenborg two months ago. Their discomfort is predictable since, in spite of their ability, they are accustomed to a different defensive system. Bjernebye, forced to move over from his natural left-back role to replace the injured Piechnik, who limped off before the interval, had never before partnered Wright. It showed. The back four was subsequently totally inefficient.

The pair were not wholly responsible for the collective disorganisation. There was nobody patrolling in front of them. Hansen and Lawrenson, for instance, were invariably protected by the likes of Souness himself and, later in their careers, by McMahon. Without a fit Whelan, they have nobody capable of fulfilling the duty. "Once we got our noses in front, we put them to the test," Kinnear said. "You could question them when they went behind, particularly their central defenders. They are not the same as of old. There are a lot of new faces but Graeme will get it right."

The vote of confidence was echoed by Fashanu, who converted the penalty. Playing with a heavily bandaged hand to protect two bones broken by Keown's boot in midweek, he regularly dismantled a defence with a partner who might no longer be employed by Wimbledon.

Cotterill, the scorer of the second goal, would recently have been sold if the second division club, Brighton, where he was on loan, could have afforded the fee of Pounds 300,000. Their strikes were almost matched by Sanchez, who headed against the bar.

"Maybe an era has ended," Fashanu said after Wimbledon's fifth victory of the season, "maybe, for a moment, their time has past but it will come back. There hasn't been stability. They have been experimenting, swapping, moving, changing and hustling and things aren't going the way Souness would like.

"You could see one or two players weren't as happy as they usually are. You would expect that from a team which has lost a few matches but they all worked hard. It was just that things weren't coming off for them.

"Everybody is looking to jump on them because they represent the establishment in football. They have been the yardstick, they have set precedents and they have been the governors."

Such words, though justified, will be of little comfort to Souness as he reflects on a season which is sure to be empty.

WIMBLEDON: H Segers; R Joseph, G Elkins, S Cotterill, J Scales, D Blackwell, N Ardley, R Earle, J Fashanu (sub: D Holdsworth), L Sanchez, A Clarke (sub: S Talboys).

LIVERPOOL: D James; M Marsh, R Jones, P Stewart, T Piechnik (sub: S Harkness), M Wright, M Walters (sub: R Rosenthal), J Redknapp, D Hutchison, J Barnes, S Bjernebye.

Referee: R Dilkes.

the guardian

Unthinkable in the wake of the unpalatable

LIVERPOOL'S directors this week have to consider the unthinkable. Should they, despite the club's past habits, dismiss Graeme Souness?

Whether the Anfield board chooses to remove the manager - and the tide of Mersey popular opinion is turning that way - remains to be seen. But it is not the just the spectre of the sack but also relegation that confronts Souness.

Wimbledon, the latest conquerors, offered conciliatory noises afterwards, their manager Joe Kinnear's continuing admiration of the ailing giants extending to the thought - no doubt shared by all traditionalists - that he could not 'possibly imagine the Premier League without them'.

Yet, confronted by a table that shows Liverpool only five points ahead of his own team, Kinnear conceded: 'They could get sucked into the relegation battle and will have to live with the pressure like we've done for the last two years.'

Wimbledon would not have been flattered by four goals, so low is Liverpool's confidence and so brittle their defence, whatever permutations Souness tries. Yet London's own great survivors do not see Liverpool as fellow strugglers.

However, many neutrals do not share that view. William Hill, offering only 64 against Souness starting next season as Liverpool's manager, has now cut his team's relegation odds from 101 to 81 in the wake of this latest defeat.

It is a reasonable cut, given Liverpool's collapse at Selhurst Park. As Wimbledon's Lawrie Sanchez put it: 'Once we scored and their centre-half (Piechnik) went off, their heads seemed to go down. After that, there wasn't much doubt who was going to win. When that first goal went in, you could almost hear them saying, 'Here we go again!'

Souness's post-FA Cup diatribe against some of his men - 'gutless mercenaries' in short - has left certain senior players privately seething. It is too early to say whether the manager's message will bring the desired response, but guts was not the problem here. 'It's not lack of spirit,' said Sanchez, 'but their confidence has been a bit rocked.'

This time, Souness said nothing. In fairness, after the post-Bolton outpourings there was little he could have added. But the abuse rained on him by a section of Liverpool fans as he left the pitch spoke volumes about the manager's personal predicament.

Kinnear, delighted to have secured Wimbledon's first home win over Liverpool in seven years, gave Souness a heartfelt pat on the back at the final whistle and then declared, 'He'll get it right' - although that genuine vote of confidence appeared to be conditional on Souness being given time to develop 'young players that he will keep faith in'.

Fashanu, who could be said to have overcome Liverpool's central defenders with one arm tied behind his back - his left hand was strapped to protect two broken bones - could have added insult to the injury inflicted by his 36th-minute penalty, which was cruel counterpoint to Liverpool's pressure. Instead the Wimbledon striker defended Souness: 'People should get off his back, give him some space.'

Space was the commodity enjoyed progressively by Wimbledon after Piechnik hauled down Cotterill for that penalty award. Piechnik departed two minutes later and the recalled Wright was now joined by Bjernebye in central defence. The latest Liverpool realignment made no difference, James's growing nervousness hardly helped by his unsuccessful challenge on Earle which saw the ball squirt free for Cotterill to seal Liverpool's seventh away league defeat of the season.

SCORERS: Wimbledon: Fashanu (pen 36min), Cotterill (62).

Wimbledon: Segers; Joseph, Elkins, Cotterill, Scales, Blackwell, Ardley, Earle, Fashanu (Holdsworth, 90), Sanchez, Clarke (Talboys, 73).

Liverpool: James; Marsh, Jones, Stewart, Piechnik (Harkness, 37), Wright, Walters (Rosenthal, 74), Redknapp, Hutchison, Barnes, Bjernebye.

Referee: R Dilkes (Mossley).

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No defence for feeble Liverpool

Wimbledon 2 Liverpool 0

WIMBLEDON 2

(4-4-2): Segers; Joseph, Cotterill, Scales, Elkins; Ardley, Blackwell, Sanchez, Clarke; Earle, Fashanu (Holdsworth 89min).

LIVERPOOL 0

(4-4-2): James; Jones, Piechnik (Harkness 38min), Wright, Bjornebye; Redknapp, Marsh, Hutchison, Walters (Rosenthal 74min); Stewart, Barnes.

Goals: Fashanu (pen, 36min) 1-0; Cotterill (62min) 2-0.

Weather: windy. Ground: soft.

Referee: R Dilkes (Mossley).

AFTER 20 minutes, it would not have been unreasonable to have predicted a victory for Liverpool by five clear goals. They had already had that number of chances, were running Wimbledon ragged and we were all assuming that Graeme Souness's tough talking after the midweek defeat by Bolton had had a most beneficial effect.

But so much did the game swing after a stupid penalty was given away with 10 minutes to run before the interval, that Liverpool could have lost by five and deserved to. By then, the primary cause of their present plight had been cruelly exposed. Their defence is terrible. Wimbledon, who have found scoring difficult of late, should have helped themselves to more than they did.

Souness has complained that his players are more committed to their bank balances than the cause. If he is right, he surely condemns himself as well, for commitment cannot just be expected. It has to be nurtured and led. In any case, Liverpool's problems at Selhurst Park were technical. Organisation at the back was so poor that Wimbledon players in forward positions were often left entirely to their own devices. That is not lack of commitment. It is bad marking.

But if the second half was all Wimbledon, the first was a very strange affair, in three quite distinct phases.

Phase one was the Wimbledon welcome: a heavy foul by Blackwell on Stewart in the first minute, soon followed by two bad fouls by Elkins on Hutchison and Walters. Elkins should have been booked immediately. Later, he was.

Phase two was the reminder of Liverpool past. With Barnes and Redknapp outstanding, the moves were sweet, the support always available, the opposition gradually stretched to breaking point.

Barnes missed an early opportunity. Then he dummied cleverly in midfield, allowing the ball to run to Redknapp who released Walters on the right. His low cross to the far post was met by Hutchison who put the ball over at full stretch. Walters followed up with a good long-range effort and Hutchison beat two men to give himself an excellent chance which he spoiled with a bad shot. Piechnik headed over from a free-kick. It was all Liverpool, with Wimbledon chasing shadows.

Phase three followed the turning point the penalty. Cotterill received a ball from Clarke and advanced inside the Liverpool area. He might have scored, but the angle was against him. Nothing extreme, therefore, was called for. But Piechnik not only bodychecked Cotterill, but then, almost as if to spare the referee uncertainty, wrestled him to the ground.

A plainer penalty one could not imagine. Fashanu dispatched it with ease, sending James the wrong way. At the time the goal seemed a terrible injustice. But Liverpool might have conceded two more, from Ardley and Sanchez, before the interval, and therein lay the signs of what was to come.

James, brought back in to replace Hooper, himself a replacement for Grobbelaar in the Liverpool goal, opened the second half with a sharp save from Clarke who had beaten Jones on the left with ease.

From there on, James had his work cut out as Liverpool's defence vanished. Fashanu found Sanchez unmarked inside the area and James managed to block his shot. Elkins took a free-kick and Sanchez, again unattended, headed it against the bar. Fashanu was set free, cut inside and shot left-footed. James saved smartly.

It was as much all Wimbledon as it had been all Liverpool earlier. A long lob by Cotterill looped over James and was almost turned into an own-goal by Bjornebye and Harkness, who seemed to collide with one another on their own line. They managed to clear it in the end.

At last, and inevitably, came Wimbledon's second. A long free-kick from the left was flicked on by Fashanu's head. Earle had a shot blocked by James. This time the rebound went to Cotterill, who shot firmly inside the far post.

Liverpool struggled to get back, bringing on Rosenthal to run around and throwing men forward. But it was more desperate than scientific, and produced only one effort, by Jones, which Segers did well to save.

Well done Wimbledon. They weathered a heavy storm in which they had been all but humiliated and believed in themselves enough to turn the game around. As for Liverpool, what was lacking was not commitment but continuity and consistency, their old hallmarks. When a side can move from the sublime to the ridiculous in one easy movement, something is badly wrong.

Souness declined to share his thoughts with the press, but it is clear he has an awful lot to do, as the Wimbledon manager, Joe Kinnear, made clear. "They are not the team of old," he said. "Only time will tell if they can go on to better things. But we are delighted. In the end we would not have been flattered by four

BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Dons add to agony

Wimbledon piled on the misery for Liverpool at Selhurst Park as the storm clouds continued to gather over Graeme Souness.

Just three days after their FA Cup humiliation by Bolton, Souness' ramshackle Liverpool side were hit by goals from John Fashanu and Steve Cotterill to continue a run of seven games without a win - and Wimbledon could have done more.

Souness dropped goalkeeper Mike Hooper and striker Ronnie Rosenthal after the Bolton debacle, bringing back David James and Mark Wright.

But with four other key men injured, Liverpool were struggling before the game even kicked off.

Liverpool had the better of the first half-hour as Don Hutchison, Mark Walters and John Barnes all missed chances.

At that stage Liverpool looked good - but Wimbledon punished them mercilessly for their inaccuracy.

In the 36th minute Liverpool's Danish defender Torben Piechnik pulled down Dons forward Cotterill and Fashanu, playing with a cast on a broken wrist, slotted home the penalty.

It was the beginning of the end for Liverpool, who never seriously threatened to come back into the game.

James made brave saves from Neal Ardley and Lawrie Sanchez and at the start of the second half was in action again, denying Andy Clarke, Sanchez again, and then diving at the feet of Fashanu to save after Sanchez's header hit the bar.

Steve Harkness cleared Cotterill's lob off the line but the inevitable second came in the 62nd minute.

This time Gary Elkins' free-kick was flicked on by Fashanu, Robbie Earle's shot was blocked by the brave James but Cotterill - who last week asked for a transfer - cracked home the loose ball from 10 yards.

Liverpool never recovered and Wimbledon had registered their third home win of the season, completing the double over the troubled men from Anfield.

Wimbledon boss Joe Kinnear had words of sympathy for Souness: "They are not the team of old," admitted Kinnear. "They have got a lot of young lads in there. But Graeme has got enough points to make sure there is no danger of relegation. They have got enough class to stay in the Premier League. Only time will tell if they go on to better things. But in the first 20 minutes they played extremely well. They played us off the park. But we dug in there - our two centre backs were magnificent, and we survived and gradually got going."

"Once we got our noses in front we created a few chances. We put them to the test really. In the end we would not have been flattered by four goals. We are just delighted to get three points. We have had a good week after beating Everton in the Cup - now we've done the double over Liverpool. We've lost one of our last eight games now, hopefully that will continue."

Souness declined to comment after the match, boarding the Liverpool team coach straight afterwards with his players and racing away.