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Opposition: Manchester United

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THE TIMES

No hiding place from harsh realities in Liverpool

They held a minute's silence for the last person to die as a result of the Hillsborough stadium disaster at Anfield on Saturday, before Liverpool played Manchester United. Tony Bland, victim and cause celebre, lived in what doctors described as a "persistent vegetative state" for the past four years. Artificial feeding was stopped on February 22; Bland died of kidney failure. He was 22. I have not been to Anfield since the strange, haunted Sunday that followed the Hillsborough disaster. Anfield will always feel strange to me, and to the many thousands of others who filed into the place that day in a state of bewildered mourning.

A minute's silence a form of godless prayer invented for the needs of the late twentieth century is always a dangerous experiment at football matches. Its main advantage is that it allows one to hear individual obscenities with greater clarity than usual. The United supporters filled the silence with naughty words, ensuring that this match began in bitter mood.

It was, in truth, a deeply bitter occasion. How could it be else? This oddly un-English, doom-prone city has always clung to the comfort of its footballing excellence, but the excellence was being taken apart before their eyes. Sport is trivial, but triviality is its great strength. In Liverpool, football footballing excellence has been a source of both comfort and strength in the hardest of times. And times have been unendingly hard. Liverpool has known rioting, the stadium disasters of Heysel and Hillsborough, and the relentless grinding of poverty and unemployment: this is a city that has been marginalised. But always there was football.

The latest, the saddest and the most bewildering event to take place in this city is the horrifying tale of James Bulger. There have been banners of sympathy for the Bulgers at Liverpool matches, just as there was a banner in memory of Bland yesterday. This sort of thing has always been Liverpool's way. Such links between community and football club are alien to Londoners, as they are to most outsiders. But alas, the additional comfort of footballing success was gone.

Liverpool have two local rivals. With Everton, their city neighbours, they have always shared a joshing, brotherly amiability in battle. But the rivalry with Manchester United is as bitter as any in football: hence the United fans' delighted sacrilege during the minute's silence.

Has the rivalry ever been as bitter as it was on Saturday? United won 2-1, and now stand high on top of the Premier League, championship favourites. Liverpool are now sixteenth, and unthinkably remain relegation candidates.

Relegation? Liverpool? A short while ago, it seemed that the stars would start from their courses and the sun refuse to rise before such a thing could occur, so smoothly did Liverpool pass from one triumph to another, from one manager to the next.

Then came the collapse of Kenny Dalglish, and the arrival of a man with a moustache. I had never felt that moustaches were really Liverpool, and I think I have been proved right.

Graeme Souness arrived at the club where he had performed so ably as player, and he was eager desperate to make his mark. Had he asked me for a word of advice before starting to work, I would have said: "Graeme old chap, if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

But Souness did his best to improve on the Liverpool system of excellence, with the results we now see. Saturday revealed the despair within the side. After a breezy opening spell, Liverpool suffered a sudden attack of corporate fatalism: a shared failure of belief.

And after that, it became United's day. Not even a truly pretty goal from Rush hit waist-high on the turn, a goal straight from the great days could re-ignite Liverpool. Simple goals from Hughes and McClair were ample for United's comfortable victory.

United had the impermeability that was once Liverpool's; United had the bite that was once Liverpool's. Above all, United had the sense of destiny that Liverpool no longer possess.

The Anfield crowd, one used to purring, was lost not so much in anger as pain and bewilderment. Surely this cannot be happening? Surely there is a fault in reality. They sang "You'll never walk alone" at the start, Anfield's great godless hymn, but before the end, the crowd was filing out looking at the floor.

I have often wondered what this song means, and why it is so important to Liverpool Football Club and to Liverpool, the city.

The burden of the song seems to be that life is really pretty terrible, and that the only thing that makes things bearable is companionship/ community/family.

Liverpool, afflicted, it seems, with the greatest horrors and miseries that this country can offer, from the relentless difficulties of everyday life to the worst of nightmares, has always enjoyed the trivial, but far from negligible comfort of its footballing excellence. Such things have made the storms more tolerable.

In a troubled and changing world, the simple joys and complex excellence of Liverpool Football Club have given comfort and good cheer to those who have turned to it.

But sport is too fragile, too trivial a thing to bear such a weight. What is amazing is not Liverpool's fall, but the way the club has managed to carry such a burden for so long. But now the spell has been broken by the man with the moustache: one wonders if it will ever be recast.

the guardian

Mature United confirm championship credentials

TEN months after Liverpool frolicked amid the flotsam of Manchester United's torpedoed championship hopes, Alex Ferguson's team left Anfield on Saturday with their Premier League aspirations looking decidedly more watertight. The style of United's first win at Liverpool in six seasons offered the most convincing argument yet for the title going to Old Trafford.

A crucial seven days lie ahead. United have taken a one-point lead over Aston Villa which they can stretch to four at struggling Oldham tomorrow night. Villa could find themselves facing Tottenham at home on Wednesday needing a victory simply to keep in touch before they have to visit Old Trafford next Sunday.

Saturday's win at Anfield emphasised the new depth and maturity of qualities in United's make-up, which last season flattered to deceive. After a fragile start the underlying strengths of the team, from Schmeichel's inspired goalkeeping through the resilience of Bruce, the industry of Ince and vision of McClair to Giggs's sorcery up front, gained Ferguson his most satisfying victory of the season so far. After the match there was much talk about United having weathered a storm in the opening 20 minutes, but it was more of a brief squall. Certainly they came under pressure as Anfield breathed passion, jealousy and hate, and Schmeichel appeared distracted by the Kop's hot breath on his neck. Several times the Dane pawed nervously at the ball, and when he failed to come for one centre a desperate clearance from Parker rebounded from the underside of the United bar.

An exhilarating game contained any number of exciting incidents, but if one turned the course of the match then it had to be the moment in the 21st minute when Hutchison spun off a defender and produced a cleanly struck shot that any goalkeeper could have been forgiven for missing. Schmeichel, however, is not just any goalkeeper, and somehow he got his 6ft 4in frame down and across to push the ball wide.

From then on United had the extra speed, power and confidence to reach the ball first and make their passes tell. Victory was achieved without the suspended Cantona but, with Giggs in irreplaceable form and McClair the tactical master of Liverpool's midfield, he was scarcely missed.

United's most breathtaking movements produced close calls, the last when Kanchelskis hit a post after being sent clear by a glorious pass from Giggs. Their goals were, as Graeme Souness put it, 'avoidable'.

A poor clearance from Stewart, caught in the act of pulling a hamstring, enabled Irwin to send in Giggs for the cross from which Hughes headed past James two minutes before half-time. In the 56th minute the errant Liverpool goalkeeper wandered out to meet Sharpe's corner and was left stranded as Pallister nodded the ball on for McClair to head into an unguarded net.

In between times Rush, the replacement for Stewart, had brought the scores level with a beautifully struck goal. But the optimism this produced on the Kop was illusory. Liverpool scarcely achieved another shot, or even a final pass, on target. They remain a team of fading yesterdays and promising tomorrows, but with little for today. Despite the excellence of Rush's goal the attack looked less mobile when he joined Barnes in the middle than it had done at the start when Hutchison and McManaman were giving the United centre-backs problems.

Even now talk of Liverpool going down sounds fanciful. But they require at least nine points from 11 matches to be sure of survival, and their last 11 have yielded eight. 'This is a new experience for me,' Souness said on Saturday. Anfield is wondering when, and if, the novelty will wear off.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Rush (50min). Manchester United: Hughes (42), McClair (56). Liverpool: James; Redknapp, Jones, Nicol, Wright, Bjornebye, McManaman, Hutchison, Walters (Burrows, 78), Barnes, Stewart (Rush, 43).

Manchester United: Schmeichel; Parker, Irwin, Bruce, Sharpe, Pallister, Kanchelskis, Ince, McClair, Hughes, Giggs.

Referee: R Milford (Bristol).

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McClair puts United back on top

LIVERPOOL 1 MANCHESTER UTD 2

LIVERPOOL (4-4-2): James; Jones, Wright, Bjernebye, Nicol; Redknapp, Hutchison, Stewart (Rush 44min), Walters (Burrows 79min); Barnes, McManaman.

MANCHESTER UTD (4-4-2): Schmeichel; Parker, Bruce, Pallister, Irwin; Sharpe, McClair, Ince, Kanchelskis; Hughes, Giggs.

Goals: Hughes (42min) 0-1; Rush (50min) 1-1; McClair (56min) 1-2.

Weather: mild. Ground: soft. Referee: R Milford (Bristol).

High jinks at Anfield: Manchester United's Hughes celebrates McClair's winning header and the leadership of the Premier Division Nigel Marple
 MANCHESTER UNITED are on top of the Premier League, that first elusive title for 25 years seemingly within their grasp, after a magnificent piece of football theatre on one of the game's great stages and in front of 44,000 the biggest gate anywhere in England this season. Their first win at Anfield in six years confirmed Liverpool as yesterday's men, now only three points away from an unthinkable relegation. The question, however, remains for United: will their nerve hold this time? It was here last May that the Kop sang Always Look on the Bright Side of Life, as United's last flickering hopes were extinguished by goals from Rush and Walters. Rush, with a stunning goal five minutes into the second half, looked as though he would spoil their party again, and of all the 308 he has scored in this country there can have been few better. But this is a different United side, with more mettle, which battled through Liverpool's early surge, took the lead and eventually asserted an authority which should have been turned into an even more substantial victory. They meet Aston Villa next Sunday at Old Trafford and, of the leading contenders' remaining 11 fixtures, seven are against the same opponents, including Norwich, Sheffield Wednesday, Coventry and Blackburn, four of the five clubs immediately below them. Liverpool, 11 times champions while United have anguished over missed opportunities, gave little indication that they are in their worst position for 30 years. Hutchison and McManaman, playing as strikers, gave Bruce and Pallister plenty to think about with deft touches and superb pace. The two best chances near the start fell to Liverpool, one by accident, one by design, but possibly even at such an early stage United decided it was going to be their day. Walters, playing wide on the right and somewhat out of his depth, put in one of his rare crosses and Ince, racing back, hammered the ball against his own bar. If that was good fortune, it was brilliant goalkeeping which foiled Hutchison when he struck a volley from 14 yards. Schmeichel flung himself to his left to push the ball aside, a save described by Alex Ferguson, the Manchester United manager, as "one of the best I've ever seen". But even when under pressure, United were able to bang the ball into open spaces down the flanks, with Liverpool using Jones, Wright and Nicol as three centre-backs. That was surely folly with the magical talents of the teenaged wonder, Giggs, roaming around the halfway line ready to pounce. Three times he purred clear of defenders to make chances. Ince failed to reach his cross with a diving header, then Giggs ran clear from the centre circle and squirmed inside Wright to shoot across the goal. Another run and cross left Kanchelskis with a chance he carelessly squandered. The Ukrainian had already finished weakly after a 40-yard diagonal run and briefly United faltered. Liverpool, in an earlier incarnation, would have murdered them but their passing is no longer as accurate and the pace pedestrian. They could not match Sharpe, Ince, McClair and Kanchelskis, fortified by Parker and Irwin, and gradually it was that which told. Graeme Souness clearly has to rebuild from the ruins abandoned by Dalglish and it therefore seems extraordinary that he could turn down an offer from Aston Villa, reputed to be worth Pounds 3m, for John Barnes, now in his 30th year. He has played only 27 League games out of the last 54 and scored three times, form that is a pale reflection of the man whose 80 goals in his first five years with Liverpool inspired them to be runners-up three times, champions and FA Cup winners twice. Barnes has been so ravaged by injuries that to believe he will recapture the poise, speed and subtlety that made him such a joy to behold flies in the face of reality. In the context of a game of total commitment, he was largely a spectator, overrun by events around him. As every manager says, these days the game is all about pace, and if it needed reinforcing, United did it with their first goal. Sharpe burst clear from halfway pursued by Stewart, who appeared to have won the race. But in doing so he pulled his hamstring and, left alone at the byline with the ball at his feet, made a complete hash of his attempt to clear. He hit the ball straight to Irwin, who immediately fed Giggs, and when his lovely, curling cross came in, Hughes finished with a classic header, United's first goal at Anfield in four seasons. Fortunately for Liverpool, Stewart was replaced by Rush, who took very little time to make his presence felt. Souness said: "I told him, 'Go on then, prove me wrong for leaving you out' and he went out to score a fabulous goal." There seemed little chance when Rush jostled with Wright beyond the corner of the penalty area, but from nowhere he produced a right-foot volley which dipped over Schmeichel to level the score. "Brilliant," Ferguson said. "The goalkeeper was perfectly positioned yet had no chance. You can't do anything about things like that." This was the time for United to show their steel and they did it with a vengeance. Giggs, inevitably, chased down Wright, won a corner, and when Sharpe took it Pallister flicked on and McClair nodded in over James. "It was a bad goal," Souness said. "The goalkeeper made up his mind to come for it before the ball had been kicked." Liverpool, with their flank men absent without leave,

were almost finished and another fine effort from Rush proved the only shot in their locker. But as they pushed forward the gaps started to appear at the back and Hughes should have snatched a hat-trick. It was United's turn to tell Liverpool to look on the bright side of life.

BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

United march on to title glory

Manchester United climbed back on top of the Premier League with a significant victory which ended an Anfield jinx and launched them confidently towards title glory.

United demonstrated championship credentials before sceptical Merseyside fans more accustomed to watching their own team chasing football's major prize.

Mark Hughes and Brian McClair claimed United's first Anfield goals in five visits to give Alex Ferguson's outfit a one-point advantage over Aston Villa with 11 matches left.

If United eventually claim the championship, they will owe goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel a huge debt. The outcome of this frenzied clash - and possibly the title race - hinged on a 22nd minute incident. With Liverpool laying siege to the United goal, Don Hutchison controlled the ball and turned to shoot from 12 yards in one movement. It looked a goal all the way but Schmeichel flung himself sideways and knocked the ball aside with his left hand.

In those nervy early stages United were fortunate not to concede an own goal when full-back Paul Parker sliced a Mark Walters cross against the underside of his bar.

But United deserved the good fortune that came their way with Paul Ince and Brian McClair working feverishly in midfield to gain some measure of control.

The breakthrough came after 42 minutes when a moment of carelessness from Paul Stewart presented the ball to Dennis Irwin who found Ryan Giggs. The young Welshman's cross was perfect for Hughes to head in his 13th goal of the season.

Stewart was immediately replaced by substitute Ian Rush who put Liverpool back in the game after 50 minutes when Steve Bruce and Irwin hesitated over a clearance. The Welsh international pounced to arrow his shot over the stranded Schmeichel.

Hughes came close to restoring United's lead in the 53rd minute when David James knocked away his close range effort but three minutes later McClair headed in after a Lee Sharpe corner had been flicked on by Gary Pallister.

Schmeichel came to United's rescue once more by denying Rush in the closing stages while Hughes twice missed from close range in breakaways and Andrei Kanchelskis rifled a right-foot shot against a post.

Manager Alex Ferguson was jubilant after United had survived an early roasting to extend their magnificent run to only one defeat in the last 16 games and Ferguson said: "I can't hide my pleasure at this result. Given the history of both clubs and their rivalry we realised that this was Liverpool's cup final and if we won it we would strike a real blow for ourselves."

Ferguson praised Danish goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel who produced an incredible left-handed save to foil Don Hutchison when a hectic match was still scoreless. He said: "That was an unbelievable save and I don't think I've seen a better one. We didn't start well when we were defending too deeply but we began to create chances for ourselves in the second-half. We showed determination and our confidence is sky-high,"

"The pace of the game was incredible and there are plenty of exhausted players in both dressing rooms. We are certainly playing well at the right time but we mustn't get carried away."

Liverpool boss Graeme Souness blamed Paul Stewart for the first goal and David James for the second.

He said: "Paul damaged a hamstring and trying a clearance in that position was a mistake, but he has held up his hands. For the second, David decided to come for the ball before the corner had been taken and he ended up in No Man's Land. We played very well for the first 35 minutes but United are playing with lots of confidence and in Giggs they have a very special player. We are not scoring enough goals. United weathered the early storm, took their opportunities and must have a good chance of winning the title. But so do Villa."