

Date: 5 May 1993

Opposition: Oldham Athletic

Competition: League

Times	British Soccer Wk	Guardian		5 May 1993

THE TIMES

Oldham offer no respite to Souness

Oldham Athletic 3 - Liverpool 2.

AT THE conclusion of a match that embraced high drama, sheer desperation and the most full-blooded football, Oldham Athletic's improbable dream of staying in the Premier League was still alive. If the unfashionable east Lancashire club can beat Southampton in its final fixture at Boundary Park on Saturday, and if Crystal Palace are defeated by Arsenal at Highbury, salvation will be guaranteed. It is a slender lifeline, but a lifeline nonetheless.

In many respects, the evening was as much about the future of Graeme Souness, the manager of Liverpool, as it was about the painful search for victory being organised by his opposite number at Oldham, Joe Royle. However, Souness's own equally desperate fight for survival will end in disappointment within the next few days.

Here, in microcosm, were the twin problems of inconsistency and errors of judgement that have so blighted Souness's attempts to build a new Liverpool dynasty. Once again, there was passion aplenty, but, once again, the efforts of senior professionals like Rush and Nicol were undermined by the indiscretions of some and the naivety of others.

As if to emphasise the decline in Liverpool's disciplinary standards since Souness assumed control two years ago, Hutchison became the club's sixth senior player to be dismissed this season, sent off 14 minutes before the final whistle for a disgraceful assault on Bernard.

Although so much of Oldham's football bore the hallmarks of a team sustained more by fear than by inspiration, they did cause Liverpool numerous problems. In contrast, Liverpool's football lacked urgency.

They appeared to have ridden out the initial storm when Oldham deservedly moved in front in the twentieth minute, Beckford heading in Pointon's corner at the near post. Although Rush restored the status quo with a magnificent lob from 25 yards on the half-hour, Oldham were swiftly back in control.

After 36 minutes, James, a goalkeeper who seems to lose his bearings every time the ball is raised above turf level, inexplicably punched a Henry corner into his own net. Less than 60 seconds later, Henry's splendid long pass released Olney down the centre and he scored with a fine, rising drive.

Oldham seemed uncertain about whether or not they should try to extend their lead and their hesitancy was punished in the 59th minute when Rush rose to head in his 299th senior goal for Liverpool.

It was hardly a night Souness will care to remember as he contemplates an uncertain future. He will take charge of a Liverpool team for the final time on Saturday before his traumatic association with the club comes to an untidy end.

Despite announcing yesterday that he wished to see out the remaining three years of his contract, Souness, who celebrates his fortieth birthday today, is already planning a life away from the club, having accepted earlier in the week that his departure was inevitable. An official announcement confirming that club and manager are to follow separate paths will be made as soon as the two parties have reached agreement on the question of compensation.

If that particular problem can be overcome swiftly, it is conceivable Souness may announce his departure shortly before or immediately after the weekend fixture against Tottenham Hotspur at Anfield. With both sides anxious to avoid an acrimonious climax to an uneasy relationship, it is unlikely that Souness will be dismissed from his post. An announcement indicating an amicable parting is expected instead.

OLDHAM ATHLETIC: P Gerrard; G Halle, N Pointon, N Henry, R Jobson, C Fleming, S Redmond, I Olney, D Beckford, M Milligan, P Bernard.

LIVERPOOL: D James; R Jones, D Burrows, S Nicol, M Wright (sub: T Piechnik), J Redknapp, P Stewart (sub: R Rosenthal), D Hutchison, I Rush, J Barnes, M Walters. Referee: P Durkin

the guardian

Olney keeps Oldham alive

ON A night when the end could surely not come quickly enough for either Graeme Souness or Joe Royle, Oldham hung on to a first-half lead and to the possibility of staying in the Premier League.

'I've said all along,' said Royle, 'that no side in the country has given us more problems than we have given ourselves.'

They must now win their last match on Saturday, at home to Southampton, and hope that Crystal Palace lose theirs, at Arsenal. Oldham's goal difference is minus 12, Palace's is minus 10. Victory by the odd goal for Oldham and defeat by the odd goal for Palace would see the Selhurst Park side relegated because they have scored fewer goals. A point would save Palace.

'It's a one-game season now,' said Royle. 'It might be exciting for the impartial fan but it's very frustrating for me.'

On another terrible night in a miserable season for Liverpool, James was found wanting more than once and Hutchison was dismissed in the final 15 minutes - the sixth Liverpool player to be shown the red card this season.

Souness missed the post-match press conference and the team bus. He slipped away afterwards into a waiting car.

With Liverpool's attention focused on the imminent departure of the manager and the team likely to finish in its lowest league position for 30 years, this was possibly the softest Anfield target Oldham had faced in 71 years of trying to beat Liverpool.

Royle stuck with the line-up that ended Aston Villa's hopes of the championship on Sunday, but in one of his tactical surprises he played the right-back Halle up with the strikers Beckford and Olney.

Halle narrowly failed to tuck away a cross dropped by James as early as the third minute, but Oldham's determination paid off halfway through the first half when Beckford at the near post met Pointon's corner from the right and James could only help it into his own net.

Liverpool found it difficult to subdue Oldham on a rock-hard and balding pitch and tempers frayed, with Burrows, Redknapp and Walters booked, as Liverpool tried to come to terms with difficult conditions and opponents.

They did it initially with a peach of a goal from Rush on the half-hour. He collected a long cross from Stewart just outside the area and, with superb control, brought the ball down to lob Gerrard as he came out to the very edge of his area. It was Rush's 298th goal for Liverpool and his 19th this season.

Though Liverpool were lucky to escape from one corner when James missed Pointon's cross altogether and Wright headed out, they succumbed to the next, after 35 minutes. James juggled Henry's cross before palming it into his own net. Seconds later Oldham were further ahead, when Olney hit a shot into the roof of the net after Henry's pass split a disorganised Liverpool defence.

But on the hour Barnes provided the perfect chip into the box for Rush to direct his header through the narrowest of gaps between a diving Gerrard and his left-hand post - leaving the striker one goal short of his 300, and Oldham's nerves on edge.

The goal lifted Liverpool for one last effort, until they were reduced to 10 men. Hutchison was dismissed apparently for elbowing Bernard in an off-the-ball incident.

With 10 minutes left of a bad-tempered match Beckford was carried off with a damaged hamstring. He and Pointon, who twisted a knee, may miss the Southampton game.

Oldham: Gerrard; Halle, Pointon, Henry, Jobson, Fleming, Redmond, Olney, Beckford (Ritchie, 80min), Milligan, Bernard.

Liverpool: James; Jones, Burrows, Nicol, Wright (Piechnik, h-t), Redknapp, Stewart (Rosenthal, 52), Hutchison, Rush, Barnes, Walters. Referee: P Durkin (Dorset).

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Oldham refuse to surrender

An Ian Olney double kept Oldham's slim Premier League survival hopes alive with a victory over lack-lustre Liverpool.

Joe Royle's side must now beat Southampton at Boundary Park on Saturday and hope that fellow relegation strugglers Crystal Palace and Ipswich lose badly in their final fixtures.

Even then it would be down to goal difference but Oldham have the worst of them all.

While Oldham can continue to live in hope, the result puts even more pressure on under-fire Anfield manager Graeme Souness amid speculation that he is about to lose his job.

And Liverpool goalkeeper David James hardly helped his manager's cause with two blunders to give Oldham vital goals.

James, sent-off on the previous Saturday after giving away the penalty that sent Liverpool to defeat at Norwich, blundered badly again.

His first error came after 20 minutes when he failed to collect a Neil Pointon corner and striker Darren Beckford glanced home a header.

Liverpool levelled on the half-hour when Oldham 'keeper Paul Gerrard raced off his line to try to beat Ian Rush to a through ball but he was never in the running and watched in dismay as the lethal striker lobbed the ball over him and into the empty net.

Oldham were in front within five minutes and again James was at fault.

He fumbled another Pointon corner behind to concede a second flag-kick which Nick Henry swept in and James, going up with Ian Olney, again failed to claim the ball.

Whether Olney managed the final touch, or even got a touch at all, was unclear with James' flap at the ball only seeing it end up in the back of the net.

But just 42 seconds later, Olney left the 15,381 crowd in no doubt about the scorer as he burst into the area and steered a fine finish past James for a 3-1 defeat.

Liverpool threw everything forward in the second half and a bad slip by Paul Bernard allowed John Barnes to race clear and his lofted cross saw Ian Rush produce the perfect downward header to find the bottom corner.

Liverpool's hopes of salvaging a point were hit when midfielder Don Hutchison was sent-off by Dorset referee Paul Durkin in the 76th minute for elbowing Bernard in an off-the-ball incident.