

Date: 16 October 1993
 Opposition: Oldham Athletic
 Competition: League

Times	Guardian	Sunday Times
British Sport Wk		

16 October
1993

THE TIMES

Upbeat finale cloaks disharmony

Liverpool 2, Oldham Athletic 1

SEVEN minutes from time, the home supporters started drifting away. An Anfield occurrence as rare as a red card in Rotterdam. Liverpool trailed 1-0 to Oldham Athletic, had not scored an FA Carling Premiership goal in approaching ten hours and were heading for a sixth successive league match without victory. The fickle had had enough; they were off.

Four minutes later, the faithful were rewarded with an equaliser from Fowler; into injury time, Barlow turned Ruddock's wayward shot into his own net. Liverpool had somehow won, Oldham had somehow lost and those who departed prematurely were left cursing their impatience.

For many of the Oldham players, having tasted league success just once this season, it was too much. Like the shattered England team after their 2-0 World Cup defeat in Holland on Wednesday, they sank to their knees, held heads in hands and looked to the heavens for explanation.

It was a travesty. Oldham had arrived without a prayer, sure-fire fodder for a Liverpool side itching to regain their early-season impetus. Yet they absorbed sporadic pressure, broke incisively and took a deserved lead from Beckford's header after 73 minutes. It should have been enough.

"I'm utterly devastated," Joe Royle, the Oldham manager, said. "I'd have been disappointed to get just a point but to get nothing is ridiculous. At least we showed we have the ability to compete at this level."

Oldham retained senior status last season by winning their last three matches and, despite a refreshingly adventurous outlook on life, can expect to be involved in similar feats of escapology this time around. Whatever the outcome, Royle, the longest-serving manager in the Premiership, is likely to remain in charge.

Boundary Park is content with the occasional glory day second division championship, Littlewoods Cup final. It is happy to embrace fine football, to scrap for and scrape survival by Royle appointment.

Merseyside, though, demands much more. A term without European competition is bad enough but another term without sight of domestic silverware is not far short of heresy. Graeme Souness, the Liverpool manager, has spent millions rebuilding his squad but the Kop will tolerate the phrase "transitional period" only so much longer.

Liverpool still have style. Barnes, yet to play this season, was resplendent in steel-tipped cowboy boots, mini-waistcoat, white shirt outside trousers and long jacket as he mingled with the crowd before the game. Grobbelaar, pig-tailed and pouting, looked positively sinister in black cap, black top and black bottoms, a cat burglar prowling between the sticks.

Yet when the team cannot string together even short passes, finds opponents more regularly than team-mates and has to rely on pushing the bulldozing Ruddock up front to make an impact, something is radically wrong, even if Redknapp, through his industry and Fowler, 18, with his eye for goal, at least offer glimmers of hope.

"I don't know why we played so poorly," Souness, twitching with embarrassment, said. Shifting part of the blame on midweek international call-ups was unconvincing. "Please, don't ask me any more questions. Can I go and get drunk now?" he joked. It will take more than a stiff drink to solve Liverpool's problems.

LIVERPOOL (4-1-2-1-2): B Grobbelaar R Jones, M Wright, N Ruddock, J Dicks (sub: M Walters, 61min) P Stewart J Redknapp, D Hutchison (sub: S Nicol, 45) N Clough I Rush, R Fowler.

OLDHAM ATHLETIC (3-4-1-2): P Gerrard C Fleming, S Redmond, A Barlow G Halle, M Milligan, N Henry, R Holden P Bernard G Sharp, D Beckford.

Referee: A Wilkie.

the guardian

Red faces and hot flushes at Anfield

RED shirts and shorts, white flashes: these are the Liverpool colours. Red faces and mists, hot flushes: these are the complexions and state of many Liverpool fans.

This was a thoroughly awful display by Liverpool and two late goals could not disguise it. They were inept, guileless, occasionally crude and almost totally disjointed. Grobbelaar, Nicol and Rush, the faded remnants of a once great and rudely dismantled team, added an occasional touch of lustre; the young and talented, such as Jones, Redknapp and Fowler, were frequently dragged down into mediocrity. The rest, a motley millionaire gang of muscle men and misfits, mocked the shirts they wore.

Oldham, understandably, counted themselves fearfully unlucky to lose, Joe Royle blaming the referee for succumbing to physical pressure. In fact it was Oldham who succumbed. Without Jobson in the centre of defence they were always vulnerable in the air and when Ruddock rumbled forward in the closing 15 minutes, route one unstitched them.

Graeme Souness offered no excuses, except for international calls in midweek, which was no excuse at all. For much of the first half their best outfield player, the one with the surest touch and quality of pass, was Grobbelaar.

Long gone are the days when Liverpool played carefully out of defence, initiating attacks with precision and intelligence. Grobbelaar now rarely throws or rolls the ball back into play. Instead, either under instructions or in despair of locating a defender who can pass, he hoofs it with height and not much hope into a midfield of despoil and despond.

Many hundreds of fans only heard Liverpool win, having started on their way home with 10 minutes remaining. The quality of Liverpool's play was bad enough, but perhaps of more concern to the board was the sharp decline in support, Anfield being less than three-quarters full.

Oldham, who threw away points at Maine Road in their previous Premiership match, took the lead with a Beckford near-post header. Just before that a Halle cross had bounced off Jones into Beckford's path and he had failed to make proper contact. About 10 minutes after his goal the striker lobbed inaccurately with Grobbelaar stranded.

A second goal would have killed Liverpool. Instead Fowler equalised crisply and an own-goal by Barlow added the salt. So it was that virtually all those leaving the directors' box appeared to have gloomy faces, one Liverpool guest or friend remarking to another that he hoped those two goals would not unduly prolong Souness's stay.

Royle appears convinced that his side are good enough to turn the corner. They have done it before and may do it again, but they remain chronically short of clout in front of goal, which harshly burdens the hard-working defence and midfield.

As for Liverpool, it is perhaps best, like Souness, to say nothing more for the moment.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Fowler (88min), Barlow (og 90). Oldham Athletic: Beckford (73).

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Dicks (Walters, 61), Wright, Hutchison (Nicol, h-t), Clough, Stewart, Rush, Redknapp, Fowler, Ruddock.

Oldham Athletic: Gerrard; Fleming, Henry, Redmond, Halle, Milligan, Bernard, Sharp, Barlow, Beckford, Holden.

Referee: A Wilkie (Chester le Street).

Date: 16 October 1993 Opposition: Oldham Athletic Competition: League	Times	Guardian	Sunday Times	16 October 1993
	British Sport Wk			



Fowler finally fires a fumbling Liverpool

Liverpool 2, Oldham Athletic 1

(4-4-2): Grobbelaar; Jones, Wright, Ruddock, Dicks (Walters 60min); Hutchison (Nicol 45min), Clough, Stewart, Redknapp; Rush, Fowler.

(4-4-2): Gerrard; Halle, Redmond, Fleming, Barlow; Bernard, Milligan, Henry, Holden; Sharp, Beckford.

0-1 Beckford headed in left-wing corner at near post.

1-1 Fowler had final touch in goalmouth scramble.

2-1 Barlow turned the ball into own net under pressure from Rush.

Booked: Fleming (2min); Hutchison (24min); Halle (28min).

Weather: sunny. Ground: superb. Referee: A Wilkie (Gloucester).

YOU could not help but feel sorry for poor old Oldham as the victory cup was dashed from their lips by two goals in the last three minutes, scored by a side which had been firing blanks for the previous 588 minutes of League football. Oldham have not been to Anfield very often in their history and when they have there has usually been a good hiding awaiting them, but against an unsure Liverpool side which was technically weak, they went in front when Beckford rose high at the near post to flick home a header and were looking forward to only their second Premier League win of the season when Liverpool staged their comeback.

Liverpool are four points better off this season than they were at the same stage last, but fumbling football built on bad passing and poor control made an Oldham defence which has kept only one clean sheet in 11 games look impregnable.

The cause was Milligan's close marking of Clough, who hardly had a kick, while his excellent marker found the time to make useful contributions going forward.

Fowler, scorer of all five against Fulham in the League Cup, had a couple of efforts, a header and a shot, straight at Gerrard. But Oldham looked better balanced and should have led in the first half when Bernard and then Beckford rounded Grobbelaar as he raced from his goal. Beckford's first effort was blocked by Wright and the second hit the post with Sharp waiting in the middle.

There was bags of space down the Oldham right, where Halle, the full-back, was more of a midfielder, but Liverpool failed to exploit the room until Nicol came on as substitute, and even then it was spasmodic.

But Liverpool were level when Fowler scored his first League goal by poking the ball home in a scramble and Barlow, who had enjoyed an otherwise outstanding game, was mortified when Ruddock's close-range jab after Clough's cross from the left went in off his boot.

Joe Royle, the Oldham manager was, not surprisingly, "devastated" by the result, and his club are now four points worse off than they were at a similar stage last season when they escaped relegation only on goal difference. "I would have been disappointed even if we'd got just one point," he said. "But I've seen referees intimidated here before and I think this one just lost it."

Referee Alan Wilkie booked Fleming and Halle for fouls and Hutchison for not retreating at a free kick, taking his total of cautions to 20 in nine games along with a sending-off, but he allowed too many desperate tackles.

Graeme Souness had the grace to admit: "We didn't play any football, and one of the reasons is we had seven players away this week. I think all Premier League managers would agree that internationals should be played at weekends. That's not the only reason for our poor performance, but it is a big factor."

BRITISH SOCCER WEEKLY

Liverpool on the ugly side of Route One

The winning ways of Liverpool, Saturday October 16, 1993 were far removed from the engaging ones that made Anfield a centre of football excellence.

Once reality had settled on the relief at the late goals that brought an undeserved 2-1 victory over Oldham there were more expressions of shock and outrage from the home supporters than from the devastated losers.

The cries of anguish were for a lost art. What has become of that fine, skilful team known as Liverpool? "What has he done to us?" some bemoaned, pointing the finger at manager Souness.

The fear is that the beautiful passing game has gone forever. Little more than two months into a campaign that began with affirmation that the Liverpool way would never be compromised we have witnessed the betrayal.

Liverpool - yes Liverpool - taking to Route One as crudely as much-criticised Wimbledon and Sheffield United have done. It proved effective but I heard the greatest condemnation from one disbelieving, disillusioned fan: "I'd rather we lost."

Liverpool, as Neil Ruddock, the high riser in that bombardment, admitted, "hardly strung three passes together."

They were fortunate that Oldham did not punish them with more than one goal, credited to Darren Beckford after 73 minutes but open to debate with some players saying it went straight in from Nick Henry's corner and others that Bruce Grobbelaar got the last touch.

Beckford shot against a post after 29 minutes and lobbed over when he should have made it 2-0 after 85.

With records in sight - Oldham's first win at the stadium since December, 1914 and the longest run without a league goal in Liverpool's history - the desperation showed and finally told.

Ruddock, the big, powerful 2.5 million pound defender, was pushed forward and the rockets were launched. After 88 minutes he headed over the defending line and Robbie Fowler nipped in to equalise.

"It hit me on the knee and then went through the goalkeeper's legs but they all count," said the 18-year-old of his first strike in the Premiership - Liverpool's first league goal since Jan Molby's penalty against Leeds on August 28.

Another raid a minute into the time added to the 90 by referee Alan Wilkie ended with the unfortunate Andy Barlow turning Ruddock's low cross-shot into his own net.

Striker Graeme Sharp, a respected rival from 11 years with Everton, said: "This is the worst Liverpool team I have seen. They shoved Ruddock up front and just bombarded us with high balls. It's not the Liverpool way of football."

Sharp, Milligan and all connected with Oldham were, as manager Joe Royle said: "Totally devastated." They appear to be developing the Oldham way of losing. They are conceding too many goals in the last few minutes. "It's absolutely ridiculous. We just have to learn," Sharp said.