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Opposition: Wimbledon

Competition: League

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THE TIMES

Wimbledon ride luck at Anfield

Liverpool 1 - Wimbledon 1.

LIVERPOOL'S recent inability to conquer Wimbledon has become a symbol of their slide away from the heights of footballing success and yesterday their status as one of the Premiership's inconsistent also-rans was confirmed when the south London club extended its unbeaten run against the Merseysiders to eight games. Ever since Liverpool's loss to Wimbledon in the 1988 FA Cup final, meetings between the two have assumed almost talismanic proportions and the wild cheers from the Kop that greeted every successful tackle on Fashanu, every mistake from Jones, was evidence of the importance the home supporters attached to the game.

But their fervour turned to despair in the second half when, despite all their pressure, Liverpool could not retake their first-half lead which had been wiped out by a fortuitous Fashanu equaliser.

"It will take faith in ourselves to win today" Graeme Souness, the Liverpool manager, said before the kick-off. His team appeared to have the faith, but not the penetration or the luck.

In the first 30 minutes though, Liverpool's domination was such that it seemed they were bound to erase the memories of their Coca-Cola Cup defeat at Selhurst Park on penalties a fortnight ago.

Redknapp and Clough looked composed in midfield, Ruddock determined in defence, Fowler vibrant in attack. Fashanu, and Wimbledon by contrast, looked lacklustre, drained rather than liberated by their captain's exoneration in the Mabbutt affair. The home side nearly went ahead in the fifth minute when Clough's clever through-ball found McManaman and his shot was tipped over by Segers.

McManaman was to blame two minutes later when he wasted Fowler's intelligent pull back by screwing his shot well wide from 15 yards out.

This at least was not the Liverpool of the scoreless draw with Sheffield United at Bramall Lane on Sunday, when their defence was torn apart by a ponderous but profligate attack. Nicol's inclusion in place of Dicks seemed to reassure Wright and Ruddock and Matteo's pace in midfield gave their forward movements more urgency.

Rush, fighting for his place in the team after being substituted on Sunday, created the opening goal. Acting as provider rather than predator these days, he took Redknapp's pass on the edge of the area in the 27th minute and drove in a low cross which Scales hammered into the roof of his own net as he tried to hack it away.

When Segers was forced to block from Nicol, two minutes later, and then save a Rush drive with his outstretched boot in the 33rd minute, it seemed the jinx was about to be broken.

Five minutes before half-time, however, Fashanu lurched past a static defence, advanced on Grobbelaar and after his first shot had been blocked by the goalkeeper, he nonchalantly side-footed home.

Try as they might, Liverpool could not score in the second half, and will have to wait until April for revenge.

Joe Kinnear, the Wimbledon manager, was delighted with the result. "We rode our luck a little bit but we had our share of chances ourselves. Segers was magnificent today.

"They are definitely my luckiest team. But we are only three points behind them now and we have a game in hand. That shows you how much we have improved." Either that, or an indication of the depth of Liverpool's decline.

LIVERPOOL (4-4-2): B Grobbelaar R Jones, M Wright, N Ruddock, S Nicol (sub: M Walters, 78min) N Clough, J Redknapp, S McManaman, D Matteo I Rush, R Fowler.

WIMBLEDON (4-4-2): H Segers W Barton, S Fitzgerald, J Scales, B McAllister (sub: A Clarke, 67) V Jones, R Earle, P Fear, N Ardley J Fashanu, D Holdsworth.

Referee: K Cooper (Pontypridd).

the guardian

Lively Liverpool reined in

LIVERPOOL threw themselves into action as if they had already made a New Year resolution to shake out past nightmares, including their failure to beat Wimbledon in the last seven meetings.

With the youngsters in the side looking hungry for goals, their hard-running enthusiasm put the older players in the shade. 'I'm proud of them. They stood up to everything and played football in the way we ask them to play in training. I thought we played well but didn't get the result we deserved,' said Graeme Souness.

Fowler, Redknapp, Jones and Matteo launched attacks at blistering pace. From the start Fowler, only 18 and with 14 goals in 18 games, was clearly enjoying himself. In the opening minutes he laid back a perfect pass only to see McManaman's shot across goal spin wide. Then he passed square across the face of goal, such an inviting ball that Sam Hammam beat his fists in anguish on the directors' box before McAllister cleared.

The Wimbledon owner's relief was short-lived. After 29 minutes Rush shot from an acute angle and Scales, trying to clear off the line, could only help the ball into the net via the underside of the bar.

The force and frequency of the raids had Wimbledon pinned back but Liverpool's vulnerability to the break was demonstrated by Fashanu. The big striker had been left up front alone, and not only by his own side. There were no defenders on his shoulder as he strode on to one long clearance and took on Grobbelaar.

The goalkeeper came out and Fashanu chipped over him but, in front of an open goal, the striker lost his footing and the chance escaped.

But Liverpool were locked into an attacking frame of mind and they failed to heed the warning. After 40 minutes Fashanu again ran on to a through-ball from Ardley and left the defence behind. Grobbelaar stood up to him and appeared to smother the shot but somehow it ran loose and Fashanu potted the equaliser - his first goal since his much publicised collision with Tottenham's Gary Mabbutt.

The pattern stayed the same in the second half despite late changes of personnel, with Walters replacing Nicol and Clarke on for McAllister: Liverpool had more possession and play but Wimbledon always looked dangerous on the break.

Joe Kinnear was delighted. 'Won five, drawn three against Liverpool isn't a bad record,' the Wimbledon manager said. 'It shows how well we are doing when we are only three points behind them.'

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Nicol (Walters, 78), Wright, Ruddock, McManaman, Clough, Redknapp, Matteo, Rush, Fowler.

Wimbledon: Segers; Barton, McAllister (Clarke, 67), Scales, Fitzgerald, Fear, Jones, Earle, Ardley, Fashanu, Holdsworth.

Referee: K Cooper (Pontypridd).