Date: 2 April 1994

Opposition: Sheffield United

Competition: League

Guardian	Times	Sunday Times
Observer		

THE TIMES

Bassett's hunters on the prowl

Liverpool 1, Sheffield United 2

WHEN winter turns to spring, Sheffield United become the hunters and not the quarry. They reeled another one in at Anfield on Saturday to move to the edge of the relegation zone. Manchester City, Oldham Athletic and the rest are casting nervous glances behind them.

Dave Bassett's team is in a groove now. Seven games without defeat, two victories in succession: this was their first away win of the season. While others freeze in the spotlight, United seem emancipated by the pressure, habitual veterans of this annual struggle.

They know their subject inside out, and refuse to panic. They have mastered the knack of pouncing on teams like Liverpool, floundering in the remains of a fruitless season, unaccustomed to fighting for points when there are no trophies at stake.

Liverpool too make a fascinating study a team crippled by the inability to cast off the playing remnants of the sides that brought them so many honours. Nicol is too slow at centre back, Whelan fades after half-time, and Barnes's contributions are increasingly insubstantial.

Only Rush of the old brigade still deserves his place, full as ever of intelligent running. He should never have been allowed to collect Redknapp's volleyed cross in the third minute, but when the ball eluded Gayle, he let it run on to his left foot and dispatched it past Tracey from ten yards.

Thereafter, though, Liverpool wasted chance after chance and in the second half their superiority faded with the freshness of their legs. Rogers and Gannon worked prodigiously in midfield and exposed Whelan and Barnes for the pedestrians they have become. Littlejohn then embarrassed Nicol in a sprint to a through ball a minute after half-time, and when his shot squirmed from James's grasp, Flo scored.

Flo then confirmed his status as United's top scorer when he rose unmarked to loop Carr's cross over James with a combination of head and shoulder for the winner and his eighth goal of the season.

Carr should have made the margin of victory more comfortable two minutes from time, but blasted his shot straight at James.

"We showed Liverpool too much respect in the first half," Bassett said. "It was the worst possible start and we allowed them to dictate the game. We were a bit like lemmings jumping over the cliff, but we began thinking along the right lines in the second half."

LIVERPOOL (4-4-2): D James R Jones, S Nicol, N Ruddock, J Dicks S McManaman, J Redknapp, R Whelan (sub: M Thomas 73min), J Barnes (sub: D Hutchison 76) I

SHEFFIELD UNITED (4-4-2): S Tracey C Bradshaw, B Gayle, D Tuttle, R Nilsen F Carr, P Rogers, J Gannon, D Whitehouse J Flo, A Littlejohn.

Referee: T Holbrook.

theguardian

Too soon to toll the bell for Bassett

AFTER today's match against Arsenal at Bramall Lane Sheffield United have almost two weeks before their next one.

The manager Dave Bassett is off for a sunshine break to Key West in Florida, noted for its spectacular sunsets from Mallory Dock, Sloppy Joe's bar where Hemingway drank (a lot) and the palm-shaded house on Whitehead Street where he wrote.

Whether the Premiership bell tolls for United remains to be seen but, after their strong, spirited and skilful performance at Anfield, talk of sunsets seems inappropriate.

With all the relegation sides winning except Southampton and Swindon, who were below them anyway, this win did not move United out of the relegation zone. But they are now undefeated in seven games and have won their last two. 'If we had played like this at the start of the season we would have been up there with Manchester United and Blackpool - er, Blackburn,' said happy Harry. A similar run last season hoisted his side from the drop zone to 13th.

Roy Evans was less than impressed with Liverpool. 'I sometimes think I'm

managing two different teams,' said the exasperated manager. Liverpool's inconsistency over 90 minutes is an enigma. More than once in recent weeks Evans has had occasion to rue the half-time interval, his side seemingly well in control in the first 45 minutes, only to lose their way in the second.

And so it proved here. Liverpool steamed ahead with a splendid move that found United still rubbing the sleep out of their eyes as Whelan lobbed the defence. Redknapp ran through the dozing sentries and crossed for Rush to stab Liverpool into the lead with less than four minutes gone.

This, of course, was simply par for the course for United, who would hardly know how to tackle a game if they did not start with a disadvantage.

However, Whitehouse came close to equalising three minutes after Liverpool scored, releasing a left-foot shot which swerved and dipped as if to go under the bar, only to be tipped away at the last second by James, preferred in goal again to Grobbelaar.

That said, United hardly had another look-in during the first half as Liverpool raced forward, playing an extremely fast, passing, attacking game which left the spectator with the feeling that at any moment this big red train ride could be detailed.

Sure enough, a minute into the second half Littlejohn ran through the buffers of Jones and Nicol and laid the ball back to a rather startled Flo, who nevertheless managed to squeeze the equaliser past an equally surprised goalkeeper. Liverpool's young striker Fowler, who saw much of the game pass him by, did get the ball in the net during the second half but was ruled offside. That apart, the story belonged to United, whose pace and commitment never slackened and who produced the winner with 18 minutes left. Again Nicol was beaten as Carr raced down the flank for the 6ft 4in Flo to head past James.

Carr might have made Liverpool look even worse. Completely unmarked and given plenty of time on the edge of the box to decide what to do, he drew breath, heaved every ounce of energy into his strike and aimed straight at James's chest. A well-placed chip might have done the trick.

Still, United were well satisfied with their day's work and left Anfield feeling a good deal more confident that their planned pre-season tour to Australia might be the only down under they will be seeing this summer.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Rush (3min). Sheffield United: Flo (46 and 72).

Liverpool: James; Jones, Ruddock, Nicol, Dicks, McManaman, Redknapp, Whelan (Thomas, 73), Barnes (Hutchison, 76), Fowler, Rush.

Sheffield United: Tracey; Bradshaw, Gayle, Tuttle, Nilsen, Carr, Rogers, Gannon, Whitehouse, Flo, Littlejohn.

Referee: T Holbrook (Walsall).

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Flo and Carr reverse Sheffield's downward course LIVERPOOL 1, SHEFFIELD UTD 2 LIVERPOOL 1 (Rush 4)

SHEFFIELD UTD 2 (Flo 46, 72)

(4-4-2): James; Jones, Nicol, Ruddock, Dicks; McManaman, Redknapp, Whelan (Thomas 73min), Barnes (Hutchison 80min); Rush, Fowler.

(4-4-2): Tracey; Bradshaw, Gayle, Tuttle, Nilsen; Carr, Rogers, Gannon, Whitehouse: Flo. Littleighn.

1-0 Redknapp played the ball in to Rush, who chested it down and shot home. 1-1 Littlejohn beat Nicol, collided with James, and Flo knocked home the loose hall

1-2 Carr beat Nicol and crossed for the unmarked Flo to head home from eight yards

Booked: Bradshaw (41min).

Weather: sunny. Ground: excellent. Referee: T Holbrook (Walsall). IF, and it remains a big if, Sheffield United stay up, Franz Carr's contribution should not be forgotten. It is no coincidence that Dave Bassett's side have perked up appreciably since Carr's comeback from six months in the stiffs.

No matter that he was a fairly peripheral figure for much of this match, the rightwinger created Sheffield's winner. By dodging Nicol before depositing the afternoon's best cross on to Flo's forehead, Carr helped to earn three potentially salvation-securing points. Privately, Bassett must be regretting leaving him languishing in the reserves for so long. Liverpool dominated this game for a long first-half stretch. Roy Evans's side should never have let it slip from their control and had they needed victory as badly as Bassett's boys, Liverpool surely would not have surrendered in such a laissez-faire fashion. As Evans said: "I feel like I'm the manager of two different teams they changed at half-time." It is called an attitude problem. The signs seemed very different when Rush ghosted into space after four minutes. He made the most of his hard-won freedom, subduing Redknapp's ball with his chest before finishing in a single seamless movement.

Whitehouse must have wished for similarly instinctive control when Sheffield's only realistic first-half opening fell to his left foot. James did well to tip that swerving volley to safety. Whitehouse is one of Bassett's more skilful charges. But the first half's recurring theme involved Gayle and Tuttle twisting and turning in an effort to keep tabs on Rush and Fowler and their blindside runs. The otherwise impressive Tuttle was fortunate not to be booked for letting his frustration show in a clumsy challenge on Rush.

All this made anxious viewing for Tracey making his first appearance in Sheffield's goal since November in place of the injured Kelly. By the final whistle Tracey had fully vindicated his vocal claims to permanent tenure of the first-team jersey. One save from Barnes especially was worth a win bonus on its own.

Tracey did, however, have a close call when, unimpeded, Jones advanced deep into his penalty area from right-back, only to scoop a left-foot shot over the bar. That chance came about courtesy of the growing right-wing rapport between Jones and McManaman. Theirs is Liverpool's strongest flank and if McManaman could only use his left foot to better effect they might soon be England colleagues. This excessive reliance on his right peg let McManaman down when Fowler's pass left him one on one against Tracey. As he switched feet, the goalkeeper spread himself, using the precious seconds to blot out the danger. Even so, the degree to which McManaman stretched Sheffield's back line was reflected by Bradshaw's assassin's tackle and subsequent booking. Little had been seen of Carr until that point but, as Sheffield finally rallied, his glorious cross-field ball to Whitehouse hinted of greater things to come. Shown the door by Brian Clough at Nottingham Forest and Kevin Keegan at Newcastle, and still far from Bassett's favourite, Carr knows that impressing between now and May is imperative. If not, it will probably be curtains for his Premier League career.

Carr's commitment, physically in particular, has been queried by Bassett. He expects Sheffield's players to risk limb, if not life, for the cause and the equaliser was a case in point. Having badly exposed Nicol's waning powers of acceleration, the slight, deceptively frail-looking Littlejohn gamely ran at the 6ft-plus and bulky poundage of James

Not surprisingly, Littlejohn needed treatment after their inevitable collision but he had forced Liverpool's goalkeeper to lose his grip on the ball, freeing Flo. The Norwegian, too, required the physio's services after forcing the ball home. A beaming Bassett explained: "We were showing more personality." For that, read subjecting Liverpool to non-stop assault and battery.

It paid off. The chants of "Going down" no longer rang round Anfield. They were replaced by groans when Nicol was again caught in possession by Littlejohn. No wonder a central defender is high on Evans's shopping list. Bolton's Alan Stubbs has been mentioned.

With Littlejohn now repeatedly licking Nicol for pace, events had turned full circle and Ruddock resorted to illegalities in an attempt to restrain Flo. To little avail. A centre from Carr, for once on the left, soon precipitated Flo's winner. Sheffield had won away in the Premier League for the first time this season and it was also their first victory at Anfield in 26 years. Just to add to Bassett's joy, his daughter Carly obtained a signed photograph of her hero, Jamie Redknapp. "That made our day," the winning manager declared.

TheObserver

Flo charts Liverpool

Liverpool 1

Rush 3

Sheffield United 2

Flo 46 72

Att: 36.642

IT IS 26 years since United last won at Anfield. And they will talk about the value of this victory for another 26.

1994

When you consider the garbage they served up earlier in the season, this was an outstandingly brave performance. After giving away an early goal, they spent most of the first half looking as if they would be overrun by Rush and Fowler. But, kept in the game by courageous goalkeeping from Tracey and outstanding defence by skipper Gayle, they came back in the second period to win with a brace of goals from their Norwegian World Cup striker Flo.

Now, with just one defeat in their last dozen games, the Blades may feel they can pull off their Houdini trick.

Liverpool, playing towards the Kop, were in front after only three minutes. Redknapp crossed from the right and the ball found its way to Rush. Standing on the penalty spot, he had no trouble sweeping the ball into the corner of the net. Then the giant Flo - six feet four and built like a Viking longboat - began to make his presence felt. Nicol was unable to stop him heading down to Carr and the little winger missed a good chance from five yards.

The Blades were back in the game within a minute of the restart. Littlejohn surged down the left wing, taking the ball past Jones and Nicol before laying it back to Flo who, although he looked surprised, hit the ball past James from the corner of the penalty box.

Sheffield were unlucky when Littlejohn had the ball in the net only to see his side pulled back to take a free-kick for an earlier foul on Flo.

Littlejohn's pace caused Liverpool untold problems. Flo hit one cross way off target. Rogers had James at full stretch from another.

A goal had to come, and in the 73rd minute Carr was allowed to turn Nicol twice before crossing to the unmarked Flo, who headed home from a couple of yards. Ruddock, it has to be said, was absent without leave.

Just time for Tracey to prove his mettle with two more excellent saves as Liverpool threw the kitchen sink at him. He simply wasn't in the mood for handing out Easter eggs.