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THE TIMES

Clough inspires Liverpool recovery

Liverpool 3 Manchester United 3

THE passion of English football comes no greater than this. On a raw night, the will to run, tackle, to show aggression and the desire to score were to the fore as Manchester United were hauled back from a three-goal lead by a team that used to call itself champions. It was exhausting trying to keep pace with the action.

"That's the first time I've ever lost a three-goal lead," Alex Ferguson, the Manchester United manager, said. "But it was incredible, a marvellous game. I was raging at losing that lead, but the third goal made us a bit sloppy and Liverpool deserved it. However, I think 84 points will win the championship. That leaves us with 26 points to get from 17 games and I think we can do it, especially because there's going to be some throat-cutting among the teams below us fighting for a place in the Uefa Cup."

After the uninspiring football of Saturday, when Leeds had wrung the flair out of United, this was an intense opening. The need for Liverpool to win a battle, knowing that their campaign for the FA Carling Premiership title is long over, was made clear beforehand by Graeme Souness, whose position as manager after so much spending to so little effect, may soon be in jeopardy.

And so Liverpool tore into United. They should have scored after barely 45 seconds when Bruce attempted to block the ball, it slithered beneath his foot and Fowler, the prodigiously talented teenager, was quickly behind him. Inexperience betrayed the striker, however, and he lifted his head and shot high and wide into the disbelieving Kop from 12 yards.

Fowler was to miss again, or rather to offer an easy save to Schmeichel from only eight yards, in the eighteenth minute.

And by that second lost opportunity, United had already begun to plunder the disarray of Wright and Ruddock at the heart of such a costly defence. A goal was bound to come.

Cantona is too much of a sorcerer, Giggs far too quick not to play on such inviting ineptitude. They worked a corner in the eighth minute, it was repelled with some panic, but then Cantona flighted the ball in from the left towards the far post. There Barnes could hardly get off the ground in his attempt to head the ball and lurking behind him, ready to capitalise on the freedom, was Bruce, who opened the scoring with a mighty header.

After 20 minutes United added a second. This time Redknapp attempted to play the ball back towards Wright. The former England defender ponderously tried to control it, whereupon Giggs pounced, Wright lumbering behind in pursuit. When Grobbelaar impetuously came forward off his line, Giggs took one glance and with his left foot curled the ball easily and delightfully over the stranded goalkeeper's head and dropping it a foot below the bar.

Liverpool were further embarrassed three minutes later. Ruddock had hacked at the shins of Keane and Ince dared to push the intimidating defender threateningly in the chest. When tempers cooled, Irwin dispatched the free kick into the far corner of the net from 25 yards.

Yet suddenly the match changed, and changed because Clough, confined to a flimsy attempt to consolidate in front of Liverpool's central defence, produced two shots and two opportunist goals.

The first came half a minute after United considered the match was over. They were admiring their third goal when Keane's attempted clearance fell to Clough nearly 30 yards out and he threaded the ball instantly through the black shirts of United; Schmeichel got fingertips to the ball, but could not prevent the goal. After Clough had been booked for tripping Giggs, it fell to the Liverpool No7 to give his team a flattering second goal.

This followed Bruce's effort to clear a free kick, a clearance that struck Keane, bounced down to Clough 30 yards out, and again the shot was perfect, this time well out of the reach of the Dane.

The action hardly abated in the second half, which was littered both with fouls and with stirring goalmouth activity. Justice was done when Liverpool equalised in the 78th minute. Within seconds of coming on in place of McManaman, the ability of Bjornebye to deliver a telling cross brought dividends. Astonishingly, it was Ruddock, advancing with hunger and tenacity, who equalised with a header from eight yards.

Looking a man reprieved, Souness said: ``That was an outstanding advert for football, though I can't say I enjoyed our naive defending in the first 20 minutes. Yet once Nigel scored the first goal, I felt there was something in it for us because the history of this club shows that we are capable of coming back from anything." LIVERPOOL (4-4-2): B Grobbelaar R Jones, M Wright, N Ruddock, J Dicks S McManaman (sub: S Bjornebye, 77min), J Redknapp, N Clough, J Barnes I Rush, R Fowler.

MANCHESTER UNITED (4-4-2): P Schmeichel P Parker, S Bruce, G Pallister, D Irwin A Kanchelskis, R Keane, P Ince, B McClair E Cantona, R Giggs.
Referee: P Don.

theguardian

Clough leads comeback classic

the first five coming in 28 first-half minutes - were stunning. Both sides had promised this would be a 'one off' and every minute lived up to expectation. United's 21-point Premiership lead over Liverpool counted for nothing as the Anfield club fought back from 30 down.

'Can you recover?' Graeme Souness was asked as Liverpool ran out for the second half 32 down. The Liverpool manager simply pointed to the sign over the tunnel: 'This is Anfield'. It said everything, as a first half of frantic passion and commitment was replaced by a second half of polished entertainment in which Ruddock's 79th-minute header secured the equaliser to produce the only just result from such an extraordinary contest.

Alex Ferguson was not happy, though - for the the first time in the United manager's career one of his side's had surrendered a 3-0 lead. At the end of the night it was two points dropped. But he conceded: 'That was incredible stuff. The excitement, the pace of it. They ran a yard further and a yard faster. The crowd had them at fever pitch.'

From the first whistle no one dared blink - on or off the pitch. Liverpool tore into United and, with the second hand on the referee's watch hardly underway, Fowler ran on to Clough's deflected strike to shoot. But it was too early an opportunity and, in his surprise and haste, the prolific 18-year-old striker put the chance over the bar.

Clough was to emerge from the first 45 minutes as the key figure in midfield. So anonymous at times since his move to Liverpool, on this night he seemed transformed. 'You have seen the best of me but not enough of me,' he told Liverpool supporters recently. They had not. Clough has rarely played better and was to crown his performance with Liverpool's first two goals.

The United centre-half Bruce's early challenge to halt Liverpool's raid proved that he, too, was going to have an exceptional night. In the midst of the hurly-burly at the start of this inter-city rivalry he remained ice cool. It was also his cool head which capitalised for United almost as soon as they took the game to Liverpool in front of a roaring crowd of 42,795.

Bruce had a shot blocked but, as it was cleared to Cantona about 20 yards out, the Frenchman lobbed the ball back in. Barnes leapt to head clear but could not make contact and Bruce, who had run in between Barnes and Dicks, headed United into the lead with nine minutes gone.

In the following 10 minutes Liverpool were swamped and, when Redknapp attempted to play a pass back, it failed to run to Wright. Giggs nipped in and chipped a stupendous goal with his right foot from 25 yards which soared over the stranded Grobbelaar into the top right-hand corner.

Two minutes later, with only 23 minutes gone, United went further ahead with another marvellous strike. This time it was Irwin, after Ruddock conceded a free-kick with a challenge on Keane. The full-back's strike from 20 yards roared into the roof of the net.

While United were still celebrating, Liverpool struck back. In a half in which both sides were guilty of errors in their anxiety to excel, a clearance by the United defence found Clough in space 35 yards out. His drive, straight and true, had Schmeichel beaten.

It was the lift Liverpool needed and, as they poured forward, spurred by an inspirational Barnes, Clough scored again, this time running on to the ball after Wright's pass bounced off Keane. Clough's 14-yard shot sent Liverpool in at half-time with every chance.

'Liverpool team's have a history of always being capable of coming from behind. I thought as soon as Nigel scored the first that there was something in it for us,' said Souness.

Bjornebye replaced McManaman with just over 10 minutes remaining and, with virtually his first touch, he returned Ruddock's pass with a fine cross from the right, and the big defender jumped to head in the equaliser.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Wright, Ruddock, Dicks, McManaman (Bjornebye, 78min), Redknapp, Clough, Barnes, Rush, Fowler.

Manchester United: Schmeichel; Parker, Bruce, Pallister, Irwin, Kanchelskis, Keane, Ince, Giggs, McClair, Cantona.

Referee: P Don (Hanworth Park)

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEKLY

Liverpool back from the dead

Ruddock crowned the most astonishing fightback of the season with a 79th minute Anfield equaliser against a Manchester United side that had led 3-0. The champions' stunned surrender from their peak of the 24th minute has not diminished their domination of the Premiership - instead they stretched their lead to 13 points.

But the combined efforts of Liverpool's 4.7 million pound newcomers, 'Razor' Ruddock and two-goal Nigel Clough, underlined United's faltering defence of their title, with six points dropped out of 12 over the holiday programme. And it could also serve to be a benchmark in Graeme Souness' troubled Anfield

When United raced into their commanding advantage, it looked the most damning chapter yet in the decline and fall of the Merseyside empire under the Scot. But a near-43,000 crowd was thrilled by the most audacious and courageous comeback, sparked by Clough and completed when Ruddock stormed onto substitute Stig Bjornebye's right wing cross.

There seems nothing wrong with Souness' powers of motivation or his players' self-belief on this evidence. These battles between the north-west's super heavyweights have developed a greater passion and enmity than a local derby, but this game was possibly the greatest in the last 40 years.

It will certainly be unlikely to be matched anywhere else for sheer devil-may-care attacking exuberance.

The goal rush should have started after just 47 seconds when Robbie Fowler had a gilt-edged chance to notch his first goal in four games. But the 18-year-old fired over the bar from 15 yards when Nigel Clough's low drive was deflected into his nath by partner lan Rush

Instead, United looked to have sewn up their second consecutive Anfield win, and stretched their unbeaten run to 18 Premiership games, with a three-goal blitzkrieg. Jamie Redknapp's miscued header, attempting to avoid a third successive corner, put Liverpool under intolerable pressure in the eighth minute and when John Barnes' clearance came out to Eric Cantona on the left, he spotted Steve Bruce's far post run. His cross was perfectly delivered for the big defender to get behind Barnes and in front of Steve Nicol to head in his seventh goal of the season.

Both Fowler and Ryan Giggs missed good chances before Redknapp was involved in another defensive blunder, his 20th minute underhit back-pass allowing Giggs to whip the ball round Mark Wright and lob over Bruce Grobbelaar from 20 yards. Four minutes later, Denis Irwin curled in an unreachable free kick from the 'D' of the Liverpool penalty area into Grobbelaar's top right hand corner after Ruddock's foul on Roy Keane.

Most teams would have run up the white flag, but not Liverpool, unbeaten for 11 games at home since their early season troubles - and Clough sparked the revival within a minute.

The 2.2 million pound former Forest favourite's first goal since November 6 came from nowhere as the recalled Julian Dicks' attack petered out. But when the ball broke into his path 30 yards out, his low right foot drive whistled into the bottom left hand corner of Peter Schmeichel's goal.

Clough, booked for a trip on Giggs but the victim of a Keane tackle which also earned the Irishman a yellow card, then conjured a second goal, his eighth for Liverpool, seven minutes from the break.

United, who had failed to keep a clean sheet in 20 of this season's previous games, showed why when Bruce and Keane got in a mix-up as Wright strolled out of defence. The ball again broke into Clough's path, this time just inside the area, and another swing of his right foot unmanned Schmeichel.

It echoed United's European Cup collapse against Galatasaray earlier this season when a 2-0 lead became 2-3.

But still Grobbelaar had to make a superb save from Giggs on the break, matched by Schmeichel from Redknapp's curling right foot effort after 64 minutes. Liverpool fans will argue that referee Philip Don, a headmaster, was derelict in his duty in not sending off Ince after 69 minutes. Already booked for a trip on Fowler, he then fouled Jones on the edge of the area. But the red card stayed in the Middlesex headmaster's pocket.

Souness then sent on Norwegian World Cup star Bjornebye for McManaman and within two minutes he put Ruddock's pass back onto the big former Tottenham defender's head for the dramatic equaliser.

Alex Ferguson said: "One of those games you get once in a lifetime."
But the Old Trafford boss admitted that the Anfielders' magnificent fightback
from 3-0 down left him "bloody raging" at his own team. "Even though Liverpool
deserved a draw, they can't believe their luck," he said. "The chances we created
to finish it off were unbelievable."

But even in his anger, his admiration for Liverpool's achievement, his excitement at the sheer entertainment value of the game and his satisfaction at emerging from a tough programme still 13 points clear of the pack more than compensated. "It's the first time I've ever lost a 3-0 lead but Liverpool deserved it. They went kamikaze out there - they ran a yard faster, they tackled harder, the crowd had them up to a fever pitch. The worst thing that could have happened was us getting a third goal. At 2-0 I would have been happy, they would have kept their discipline but at 3-0 a wee edge came off, they got carried away. "Liverpool

getting their second goal just before half-time set them up to have a go at us. And they really did put an incredible effort in. I thought our game against Aston Villa earlier in the season was an incredible advert for the game. But tonight took some beating."

Ferguson has now set his side a target of 26 points from their remaining 17 games to reach what he believes will be an unassailable 84 points to win their second consecutive title. "If you look at it broadly, they have done magnificently since the start of December - some tough games and we're still up there at the top." Liverpool manager Graeme Souness admitted he could see little way back into the game after United punished their "naive" defensive mistakes.

But he added: "Teams over recent history here have always been capable of coming back from behind."

"Liverpool teams have done that over a long period. At 3-0 I was wondering 'Christ - what will we get out of this?" But when Nigel (Clough) scored the first I thought we would get something. It was a great game of football and it would have been unjust for anybody to lose."

Hero Neil Ruddock said: "It shows what potential and team spirit we've got. When we got back to 3-2 we thought we could come out and win it, but to get the draw we're still over the moon."