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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 reign.

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 Bjernebye'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 path by partner Ian 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 Bjernebye 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."