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Merson class lightens the gloom

ARSENAL 1 - (Merson 46) LIVERPOOL 0
(4-4-2): Seaman; Dixon, Linighan, Bould, Keown; Merson, Parlour, Jensen (Morrow 67min), Selley; Wright (Smith 80min), Campbell.
(4-4-2): James; Jones, Wright (Nicol 28min), Ruddock, Dicks; McManaman, Redknapp, Whelan, Barnes; Rush, Fowler (Thomas 71min).
1-0 Selley slid the ball to Merson in the box who slotted it home.
Weather: fine. Ground: good. Referee: R Hart (Darlington).
Give him the elbow: Arsenal's Parlour knows just how to keep Whelan at bay in their aerial duel at HighburyNigel Marple
THIS was a match easily forgotten. Arsenal's minds were on Paris and the Cup Winners' Cup. Graham even substituted Wright 10 minutes from the end. The minds of all at Liverpool, however, must now be on next season. Roy Evans has a lot of reconstruction to do and it will be a surprise if some of the present names reappear next season.
The most interesting pre-match sight was the presence of Terry Venables, not merely in the directors' box but in the press box, laughing and joking with journalists in a manner which clearly indicated that their agony over the Taylor regime had finally been banished.
Venables's choice of this match, immediately after watching Germany beat Italy in Stuttgart, was intriguing. For if he wanted to check on the form of Tony Adams, his possible captain in Berlin, then he could hardly have chosen a more inappropriate match.
Adams was present, but in his best Sunday suit distributing prizes to devoted fans. Graham's priority is for Arsenal to win a European trophy for the first time in 24 years, and with this in mind, four of the players who had entered battle that is the operative word against United last Tuesday were absent: Adams, Smith, Davis, Winterburn.
No doubt they will be back in Paris on Tuesday, for Graham's desire to be victorious in Europe is intense. He has won everything in domestic competition, nothing on the Continent.
The manager came to the after-match press conference accompanied by Merson, who scored the winner and was quite the best player on the field. Earlier in this season, Merson could not get into the side and there was talk of him leaving. Yesterday, manager and player were laughing and joking together. Graham denied they had ever been on different wavelengths. ``He just wasn't doing what I was telling him to do,'' Graham said before explaining that he was really just joking.
A cynic had suggested that the Arsenal midfield of Jensen, Parlour, and Selley was ``imaginative'', but it was the sort of remark that can give sarcasm a bad name. The result was that Arsenal's attacks started with Dixon deep on their right wing. The only surprise came from Merson's role, floating just behind Wright and Campbell.
It was from this wing, though not from Dixon, that the first goal attempt came. Wright found Campbell, who found Merson, and he put the ball in the net only to see it ruled offside. That was in the 11th minute. Four minutes later, Liverpool would have scored but for a stroke of Arsenal luck.
Rednapp found McManaman, who released Jones on the overlap. Fowler connected so well with the resultant cross that Seaman would have known nothing about it, but the ball smacked Linighan on the shoulder and went for a corner.
That escape seemed to shake Arsenal up, and in the next 10 minutes they came close to scoring with efforts from Merson and Parlour. At this stage, the game had little to offer. But there was always Merson, and soon after the start of the second half he scored. It began with a Parlour dribble that led to Selley providing the pass for Merson in the box to shoot strongly past James.
But was Merson offside? It looked suspiciously like it. Next minute, however, Merson turned provider and found Wright with a 30-yard pass. It caught Liverpool square and, with only James to beat, almost anybody would have put their money on Wright scoring, but somehow he managed to hit James's legs. Merson continued to be the only bright spark amid the dross.
And just as well he was having a good day, for nobody else caught the eye. It was sad to see Barnes reduced to the level where you could not trust him even to hold the ball. When great players decline so suddenly they should do it in private, not in front of 35,000 people. Redknapp should have scored in the 69th minute when McManaman's run set him up. Faced by Seaman, he could not conjure up the power of shot and allowed the goalkeeper to save with his legs. That did, however, mark the start of a spell that saw Liverpool create several chances. Their sudden dominance owed much to Thomas coming on for Fowler. Along with Redknapp, he was involved in the move in the 74th minute that saw Rush in the sort of position from where he has scored so many goals, but again Seaman was in the way. In the 82nd minute it was Nicol who was the provider for McManaman in the best opportunity Liverpool had.
The player, however, should have produced a more powerful strike. Ironically, the next minute he produced a powerful shot, but it sailed harmlessly into the crowd.

theguardian

Merson on his mettle

Arsenal 1
Liverpool 0
ARSENAL should be travelling to Paris with hopes sky-high for the European Cup Winners' Cup semi-final against St Germaine on Tuesday. The latest victims in a run of 13 games without defeat in the Premiership were England's most notable European fighters of all time. And yet the situation is clouded by too many factors to be totally optimistic.
For a start Arsenal, who have used 18 players in the past six games, made another four changes for this one, the most notable being the resting of
Adams, their skipper and defensive keystone. Possibly George Graham intends to produce his strongest side in Paris - if even he knows what that might be.
But the result of so much confusion was an Arsenal team playing at times like strangers, not just to themselves but to the game of football. Until the closing stages, Liverpool were no better. It does not count as that much of an achievement to beat them away from Anfield nowadays.
This was their successive fifth away defeat under new manager Roy Evans and there are only faint echoes nowadays of their great past, especially in attack. Barnes is a very large shadow of his old self. In bulk he looks half as big again and his speed has diminished in proportion while Rush seems disinclined to put himself about with his old deadly eagerness.
Liverpool, who once used fewer than 18 players to win a championship, seemed to make their defensive intentions plain when they pulled nine men back against Arsenal's opening onslaught, leaving Fowler the solitary attacking outpost.
Yet from that lonely situation Fowler hit the first authentic shot of the match, causing Seaman to back-pedal sharply to stop a 30-yard volley. Then, in the 15th minute, Linighan cleared off his line after another first-time attempt by Fowler.
One of the reasons Arsenal had been comparatively quiet in the opening minutes was the absence from the action of Wright but he suddenly forced his way through three tackles before Jones stopped him inside the area.
Four minutes later, Parlour went through the same number of Liverpool defenders. But finding himself in the clear, he was so astonished he missed. For a spell, the standard of passing became so atrocious in both teams that four passes strung together became a necklace of rare beauty.
It was a reward for all Merson's efforts when he scored Arsenal's winner just after half-time at the sharp end of a passing move between Parlour and Selley, though he looked perilously close to offside.
Still, Arsenal should have sewn it all up in the next five minutes when Wright hit a shot against the keeper's legs and Merson nodded a header wide when he had more time and room to aim. At the climax of this purple patch Campbell was even more culpable, giving James the time to save.
Liverpool did manage to roll back the years when McManaman put Redknapp through for a shot that was smothered, and the Rush of a few years ago would surely have beaten Seaman instead of allowing the keeper to win the race to the ball. The final flurry came too late to save the game.

Compiled by Graeme Riley