

Date: 1 October 1994
 Opposition: Sheffield Wednesday
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Times	Guardian	Sunday Times
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1 October 1994

THE TIMES

McManaman exposes the error of Wednesday's wastefulness

Peter Ball argues that the margin of Liverpool's 4-1 victory did less than true justice to their opponents

THE scoreline at Anfield on Saturday suggests the irresistible Liverpool of old. The truth was somewhat different, the renewal of Steve McManaman's fine talent separating the teams to lift Liverpool to their victory.

Sheffield Wednesday could hardly believe it. They had an equal share of the play and, if anything, more and better chances as Liverpool's new alignment of three centre-halves at the back proved less than watertight.

"It's a new system and all new systems need fine tuning or major tuning in some cases," Roy Evans, the Liverpool manager, said. "I was delighted with the effort, but I couldn't be totally happy with the performance."

But from the early minutes when Watson found himself in the wide open spaces between Ruddock and Babb only to shoot hastily, Wednesday spurned their chances. The exception was Ian Nolan, who put his team ahead from close range on his first appearance at Anfield.

"I remember the days when you used to come to Anfield and do well to get a corner," Trevor Francis, the Sheffield Wednesday manager, reflected ruefully.

"We actually had 11 shots at goal first half, but only two were on target, which tells you something. In the second half we had five clear-cut chances, and if you don't take those you're going to get problems."

Bright alone spurned a hat-trick of second half chances, Sheridan missed a sitter and Sinton had a shot blocked on the line. But by then the problems had already arrived.

Liverpool, too, had had their chances as their football at times recalled their days of pomp, flowing across and down the pitch in movements of ten or 12 passes. For 50 minutes Pressman had defied them, one double save from Bjornebye and Molby taking the breath away.

Then ironically his first mistake presented Liverpool with their equaliser. "I'm loath to criticise the keeper, but you don't drop them when Ian Rush is around," Francis said.

The rest was all Steve McManaman. "He was magnificent," Phil Babb said, "I'm glad I don't have to play against him. He is on a par with Ryan Giggs."

What a difference a year, and a change of manager, can make. McManaman is again playing with a smile on his face. "He has been outstanding this year," Evans said. "He was very positive today."

Hardly to be voiced a year ago, at the moment, if anything, the comparison with Giggs tells in the Liverpoolian's favour. Nominally playing on the right wing, he has a free wandering role, and is revelling in the freedom to run at defenders with all the pace, control and eagerness of a man brimming with confidence. He has a body swerve to rank with Cliff Morgan, a slight dip of a shoulder sending a perplexed defender the wrong way, and he is again shooting with venom.

In the end when the panel which nowadays decides these things meets, he may not be credited with a "hat-trick", for his second goal took a huge deflection off Des Walker's boot up and over poor Pressman. The first demanded comparison with George Best, let alone Giggs.

He received Molby's perfect 40-yard crossfield pass, drifted down the left before suddenly cutting inside Petrescu and running on to take on two more defenders as he ran along the front of the penalty area. He appeared to have gone too far but instead swivelled suddenly to fire the ball beyond Pressman's groping fingers into the corner of the net.

The third was more straightforward, Babb breaking forward to set him up, and Wednesday were left empty-handed for all their good football. They are now just outside the bottom four. Too good to go down? Of course, but then they were in 1991.

LIVERPOOL (3-4-3): D James S Nicol, N Ruddock, P Babb R Jones, J Molby, J Barnes, S Bjornebye S MacManaman, I Rush, R Fowler (sub: J Redknapp, 76 min).

SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY (4-4-2): K Pressman D Petrescu, P Atherton, D Walker, I Nolan C Bart-Williams, J Sheridan, G Hyde, A Sinton M Bright, G Watson (sub: D Hirst, 58).

Referee: G Willard.

the guardian

Fate frowns on Francis

LIVERPOOL were due a break. Dominating performances at Manchester United and Newcastle won glowing tributes but only one point. Now, matched for pace, passion and skill, they took all three from another game of fine angles and flowing movement, when, on chances created, they could have taken none.

'It looks like a hammering,' said Trevor Francis, the Wednesday manager, 'but we played well. I can remember the days when you came to Anfield and were glad to get a corner.' This was a man beleaguered perhaps but not bewildered, frustrated as a farmer who knows he has done everything right and said his prayers and has only a plum and three lemons (six points) to show at Harvest Festival.

In the first half Wednesday had 11 shots but only two on target; one was Nolan's goal. In the second Bright missed a hat-trick of sitters, Sheridan, Sinton and Hirst one each. The parable of prodigality does not belong to this weekend.

Liverpool will be aware of their let-off. Injury to Scales left only two costly centre-backs to fit in but, including Nicol, they persisted with three at the back and were uneasy with it when, after the interval, Bart-Williams and Sinton pushed into the gaps behind Bjornebye and Jones. This was a strategic victory for Francis that the strikers failed to reap.

In possession Liverpool bore the appearance of the days when visiting sides were glad to get a corner: comfortable, solid power, smooth lines - what Jaguar choose regrettably to call retrolutionary. In effect, though, the performance owed a bit to the trickery of fortune.

Pressman was shaping for headlines as he beat out four shots in a pair of stunning double saves. Then he let a simpler one slip, Rush equalised and the headlines were up for grabs. McManaman, whose running often seems piloted by the brain of a leveret, seized them with a hat-trick of brilliance and fluke.

Are Liverpool the only Premiership club sufficiently sure of their entertainment not to interrupt it with scoreboard flashes? This was a treat to all but Wednesday. For the third season running under Francis they have stalled on the grid. In 1992 they won two of their first 15 games, in 1993 four of 19, now one of eight. There has been talk of a whispering spanner in the works but Francis said 'morale is not a problem'. It was impossible after this to imagine otherwise. Simply, Wednesday are due a break.

SCORERS: Liverpool: Rush (51min), McManaman (54, 66, 86). Sheffield Wednesday: Nolan (31).

Liverpool: James; Jones, Nicol, Ruddock, Babb, Bjornebye, McManaman, Molby, Barnes, Fowler (Redknapp, 76), Rush.

Sheffield Wednesday: Pressman; Petrescu, Atherton, Walker, Nolan, Bart-Williams, Sheridan, Hyde, Sinton, Bright, Watson (Hirst, 58).

Referee: G Willard (Worthing).

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

Mac's the man

Steve McManaman ended a two-year goal drought at Anfield with a hat-trick as Liverpool fought back from a half-time deficit to beat Sheffield Wednesday.

McManaman started his romp in exhilarating fashion after 54 minutes, swaying in to the centre from the left flank on a superb, teasing run before unleashing a magnificent that left 'keeper Kevin Pressman helpless.

Twelve minutes later McManaman's luck was in, when his shot took a cruel deflection off defender Des Walker to loop high over the unfortunate 'keeper and into the net. [originally it was given to Macca but later changed into an own goal by Des Walker].

And after 86 minutes, Ian Rush slipped the ball out to Phil Babb on the left and he pulled the ball back low for the advancing McManaman to sweep home.

Sheffield Wednesday's Ian Nolan had rifled his side into the lead after 33 minutes when he cropped up unmarked on the left to smash in an angled drive after Mark Bright's header fell invitingly to him.

Neil Ruddock tried desperately to clear off the line but could only help the ball home.

But Rush slotted home Liverpool's equaliser after 51 minutes after Pressman could only parry Stig Inge Bjornebye's shot into his path.

Rush had almost given Liverpool the lead after 26 minutes, exchanging passes with McManaman before seeing his fierce shot well parried by Pressman. The Welsh striker collected the rebound but this time the agile 'keeper dived to hold on to his accurate low drive.

Pressman performed more heroics at the start of the second half, after McManaman's cross found Rob Jones whose chip was headed off the line. The 'keeper blocked Bjornebye's shot and recovered to save McManaman's follow-up effort before Molby's shot was finally deflected for a corner.

Liverpool goalkeeper David James did well to tip a dipping long range effort over his bar from Graham Hyde in the first half, but should have been given no chance as Bright squandered three fine scoring opportunities.

John Sheridan was the other culprit, as the visitors wasted opportunities that could have made the scoreline much more respectable for them.

McManaman cheerfully confirmed that he was claiming his hat-trick.

There was some controversy about the second of the midfielder's three goals, which took a cruel deflection off Des Walker. Wednesday boss Trevor Francis expressed the view that it was an own goal.

But McManaman said: "I'm claiming the hat trick without a doubt - you've got to! It's not often that I get the goals."

Of his spectacular first effort he said: "I just kept on running, saw the gap and hit it. At the end I offered the ball to the linesman but the referee came up to me and gave me the ball."

Liverpool boss Roy Evans said: "McManaman has been outstanding in many ways this season. He is creating that amount of chances in each game and it was nice to see him putting them away. He was very positive today, in the second half especially. I'll credit him with all three goals."

But despite the scoreline Evans had some reservations about the performance and the amount of chances Wednesday were able to create. "I've got to praise my own players for their effort but to be fair to Sheffield Wednesday I don't think the 4-1 scoreline did them any favours. It was closer than that."

It was a view endorsed by Francis who said: "Today we had as much possession as them. We had 11 shots at goal in the first half and only two were on target. That tells us our approach work is good but our finishing isn't good enough. Goals determine the outcome of games. We were 1-0 at half-time and in the second half we had five excellent chances - Mark Bright had a hat-trick of chances. If you don't take those you are going to get problems - 4-1 looks like a hammering but I have to say I thought we played well. The players know we've got to score a far greater ratio of goals than we are doing."

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

McManaman wrecks Wednesday

Liverpool 4, Sheffield Wed 1

Liverpool 4, (Rush 51, McManaman 55, 66, 86)

James; Jones, Nicol, Ruddock, Babb, Bjernebye; McManaman, Molby, Barnes; Rush, Fowler.

Sheffield Wed 1, (Nolan 33)

Pressman; Petrescu, Atherton, Walker, Nolan; Bart-Williams, Sheridan, Hyde, Sinton; Bright, Watson (Hirst 53).

Booked: Sheridan (6min);

Weather: drizzle. Ground: soft. Referee: G Willard (Worthing).

FRUSTRATED for 45 minutes, Liverpool turned the Anfield agonising into echoing applause with an irresistible second-half performance. Better teams than Wednesday would have been swept aside as McManaman claimed a hat-trick even if his second looked suspiciously like a Walker own goal.

None the less, this was a deceiving result. Although ultimately overrun, Trevor Francis's team showed the strength of character that has sometimes been lacking, to dominate the first period. And Wednesday missed five inviting second-half chances. Bright could conceivably have collected a treble himself and Francis said: "Everyone will see this score and think we were hammered but anyone actually here knows different."

Defiant talk, but the truth. Five days earlier, Francis had looked hugely reassured after a 10-man Wednesday drew with Leeds, his side appearing models of committed professionalism. Yesterday represented another test of their sometimes diffident attitude. Wednesday began, however, by reaffirming Francis's faith. Belief undermined by leaks claiming that the manager is unpopular and on his way out at Hillsborough was restored as Sheridan and Hyde increasingly controlled the midfield.

At this stage, Liverpool supporters must have questioned Roy Evans's decision to persevere with his recently introduced five-man defence, even though Scales was out injured. Evans's adherence to the formation meant a recall for Nicol. He was positioned to Ruddock's right, with Babb to the left. This gave the back line an excessively left-footed look, exposed by Wednesday's initial superiority.

All was not well in midfield either. Sheridan's booking for tackling Barnes from behind added weight to the feeling that there were few faint hearts among the visiting ranks. At that stage, Liverpool were being outpassed their cause not being helped by an injury to Molby, which left him limping. It was Wednesday's full-backs doing the overlapping as the visitors forced a succession of free-kicks and corners. James performed wonders to tip Hyde's curler over the bar.

The goalkeeper was beaten, though, after 34 minutes. Appropriately, the move began with an excellent midfield interchange involving Hyde and Sheridan. The latter's cross was intended for Bright but, although he missed his header, the striker proved an unwitting decoy. No Liverpool marker picked up Nolan as he retrieved the ball and threaded it, low and left-footed, across the line from the tightest of angles. That type of subtlety summed up Wednesday's play.

At half-time, Evans must have treated his players to a scathing summary of their shortcomings. Just seven minutes after the interval, Pressman was picking the ball out of his net, having parried Bjernebye's speculative 20-yard strike into Rush's path. Pressman was left with no hope of redemption this time, however. Rush, the predator, relished slotting home the ball.

Liverpool's second, four minutes later, was a goal no keeper could be blamed for conceding. Credit must go solely to the scorer, McManaman. Perhaps fancying a change of scenery, he wandered over to the left flank. Collecting Molby's ball, McManaman evaded four challengers while snaking his way up the wing before swerving the ball right-footed past Pressman from a difficult angle just inside the area.

Evans admitted he had "been going on at McManaman" to score more goals. The manager will, however, have been equally delighted by the control the player displayed as he swayed past challenge after challenge. Reverting to the right shortly afterwards, McManaman repeated his snake dance before apparently attempting a cross in the 67th minute. It resulted in Liverpool's next goal.

Intending to intercept, Walker stuck out a leg and the horror-stricken central defender saw the ball diverted off his shin to loop over the advancing Pressman and sail just under the bar. As Francis said, it was really an own goal but, cheekily, McManaman claimed it and the referee agreed.

There was no question, however, about McManaman's third, four minutes from time. It began with the defender, Babb. Advancing from what had effectively become the left-back position, he centred unselfishly for the winger again to extend his right foot and punish the unfortunate Pressman once more. Hats off to Babb, though. Many in his position would have gone for glory. But then, such teamwork proved the cornerstone of Liverpool's triumph on a day when application was assiduously harnessed to ability and not just by Evans's side.

The Observer

Big Mac hits hungry Owls

Liverpool 4

Rush 51, McManaman 54 66 86

Sheffield Wednesday 1

Nolan 33

Att: 31,493

THE ONLY place you can get the traditional Kop experience these days is in one of the pubs around Anfield before a match. There, in the heaving saloons, you're squeezed in shoulder to shoulder with fellow fans; you can hardly get a drink; a trip to the toilet takes 20 minutes and, by the time you get back, your place has been nicked.

Just like the old days.

The word in the Flatiron pub before this particular encounter was that at last Liverpool seem to have tightened up in defence and returned to their traditional footballing ways. But on the strength of yesterday's performance there's still much to be done, despite a McManaman hat-trick which gave the home team a 4-1 victory.

Liverpool fielded three centre-backs in a five-man defence, even though Scales was injured. The denuded midfield of Barnes and Molby is pretty to watch in possession of the ball, and in the opening spell Molby, in particular, demonstrated the art of looking not for players, but for space to play in.

Liverpool soon looked like scoring, with both Fowler and Rush coming close, but somehow they failed to grip the game. They looked vulnerable in front of the defence, where neither Barnes nor Molby was quick enough to break up the tricky one-tuos of Sheridan and Sinton. It was Ian Nolan, though, looking settled in after his move from Tranmere in the summer, who scored the opening goal - the first Liverpool have conceded at Anfield this season.

Petrescu - another recently arrived full-back at Sheffield - crossed, and Bright's interference allowed the ball to travel through for Nolan to score from close range.

They say confidence is something you gain in inches but lose in yards. It seemed to drain from Liverpool even before Wednesday scored, and it took two early goals after the break to restore it.

Rush tapped in the first after Pressman failed to hold Bjernebye's drive. The second was a bit special: a sparkling dribble and shot by McManaman to give him his first goal at home in two years. His run on the right made Liverpool's third in the 66th minute, when his shot struck Walker and looped impossibly over the hapless Pressman's head.

To their credit, Wednesday continued to attack, exposing Liverpool's defensive frailties. Bright spurned a hat-trick of easy chances; Sheridan and Sinton followed suit. But McManaman added a flattering fourth goal just before full-time, whacking in Babb's cross from 12 yards.