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Smith's 100th goal is a timely one for Arsenal

Arsenal 1 Liverpool 1

The two championship heavyweights climbed out of the Highbury ring yesterday afternoon, each carrying a bag full of regrets. Each had seen more than enough openings to deliver a clean knockout punch but they both left the verdict open to the judges in the stadium and to the television public.

Liverpool won marginally on points, even if they did not collect the three on offer from the first League fixture between the two clubs this season. Yet the feature of their fifth contest so far was the number of blows which might have floored the opponent but did not.

Arsenal entered as the holders of the most powerful attack in the first division. Yet they lapsed into an uncharacteristic stupor and awoke only after being stung by the words of their manager, George Graham, during the interval and by the brilliance of Barnes at the start of the second half.

Liverpool came in with the strongest defensive record but they were never convincingly secure, even before Smith reached the same individual milestone as had Cottee on Saturday and claimed his 100th League goal of his career in the seventieth minute.

The significance of the occasion, therefore, was as subdued as the atmosphere on the periphery. Although the audience of 31,863 was the highest of the weekend, it was some 22,000 lower than the crowd which gathered in the same arena for the Littlewoods Cup third round replay last month.

Since all of the other leading candidates had obligingly cleared the stage by losing the previous day, the initial challenge of Arsenal in particular was surprisingly meek. Two successive defeats, their worst run of their campaign, had shaken their belief as much as their dismissal by Liverpool from the Littlewoods Cup.

The League champions had subsequently suffered an even more embarrassing fate in the competition. Heavily beaten by West Ham United in midweek, they had as much reason to wear a cloak of caution during the early sparring.

They were unhinged first by Marwood's free kick and then by Merson's inadvertent miscue. On both occasions Smith illustrated his aim has momentarily left him. The scorer of 13 goals in his first 13 games, he had since added only one in eight.

He was not alone in disregarding the possibilities for Arsenal, though he may have been the most obvious. Winterburn and Adams contributed to the list of missed chances, although Rocastle was denied only by Hooper's extraordinary reaction to a ricochet.

Liverpool, substantially the more inventive in their groundwork, were equally profligate. Aldridge skipped away alarmingly easily from Adams, for instance, only to end his break by striking the angle of post and bar. Barnes, with his weaker right foot, sliced wide.

Yet Barnes compensated for his and every other error with a goal as dazzling as his strike in the first of the club's meetings in the Littlewoods Cup. Drifting deceptively comfortably past three defenders, he found a path between Dixon and Bould and a gap between Lukic and the far post.

"If only he did that six times a game," George Graham said later, "he would really be scintillating." Even without his goal, Barnes remained the sparkling individual who studded the cold and dark afternoon. Returning after an absence of four games, he seemed likely to be the matchwinner to boot.

But Arsenal, responding belatedly, equalized with a goal which typified their preference for the aerial route. Rocastle's chip curled behind a retreating defence and Whelan, in attempting to clear, touched it instead onto one post. Smith chased it across towards the other before tapping in his first goal against Liverpool.

He might still have finished on the losing side. Barnes, with a free kick, clipped the bar and Aldridge finished with a wild header which encapsulated the theme of the display.

Norwich City, who have led the first division for all but one week, thus remain on top. Yet the indications are that the table is assuming recognizable shape. Arsenal and Liverpool may have held each other back for the moment but by the time the return fixture is staged, on April 22, they are likely to be competing for more than second place.

ARSENAL: J Lukic, L Dixon, N Winterburn, M Thomas, S Bould, A Adams, D Rocastle, K Richardson, A Smith, P Merson, B Marwood (sub: M Hayes).

LIVERPOOL: M Hooper; G Ablett, S Nicol, R Whelan, N Spackman, P Beardsley, S Staunton (sub: D Burrows), J Aldridge, R Houghton, S McMahon, J Barnes.