

Date: 6 May 1991
 Opposition: Nottingham Forest
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THE TIMES

Forest's machine leaves Liverpool waving white flag

Nottingham Forest 2 Liverpool 1

A HAPPY 38th birthday it was not for Graeme Souness, the Liverpool manager, yesterday, as he watched his team surrender their championship without much of a fight at the City Ground. For the second time in three days they were comprehensively outplayed; the margin of Nottingham Forest's victory, secured by goals from Nigel Clough and Ian Woan, was less than the FA Cup finalists deserved.

Two controversial penalty decisions one for each team thankfully did not affect the outcome of a match which Liverpool never looked like winning, despite a 56th-minute penalty by Jan Molby to square the game. The outgoing champions threatened the Forest defence on only one other occasion, when Rush rounded Crossley, the Forest goalkeeper, with 14 minutes remaining only for Pearce to clear off his line.

Beardsley was made scapegoat for the 4-2 defeat against Chelsea and was replaced by Rosenthal, while Gillespie was out with a hamstring injury. Souness discarded the tactic of three central defenders in favour of a flat back four.

No overhaul of any kind is necessary in the case of Forest, more a matter of just keeping a finely tuned engine ticking over until their appointment with Tottenham Hotspur at Wembley on May 18.

In the absence of the injured Keane, Hodge was given the opportunity to prove, after a two-month absence, that he was good enough for club as well as country. Whether he did enough to keep his place for the final remains to be seen. Laws, the player of the match, did his own claim, in the absence of Charles, a power of good.

A perfect illustration of Forest's mastery of the passing game was supplied in the thirteenth minute by Clough when he played the ball accurately into the path of Crosby. Despite Staunton's deliberate attempt to impede, Crosby still managed to put the ball into the net only for Forest to be awarded a penalty. Clough duly claimed his eighteenth goal of the season from the spot.

After Liverpool's fortunate reply, from a foul on Rosenthal, it took Forest just eight minutes to rectify matters. A free kick by Crosby was headed on by Molby only as far as Woan, who scored with a fine left-footed volley.

An end to the Liverpool era? Perhaps, but Souness's comments afterwards should be heeded. "I want to know how badly they feel. I would like to think that any team of mine in future would hurt badly on occasions like this."

NOTTINGHAM FOREST: M Crossley; B Laws, S Pearce, D Walker, S Chettle, S Hodge, G Crosby, G Parker, N Clough, L Glover, I Woan.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Ablett, D Burrows, S Nicol, J Molby, S Staunton, R Rosenthal (sub: M Marsh), R Houghton, I Rush, J Barnes, D Speedie.

Referee: J Martin.

the guardian

Forest sever Liverpool's last link with title

THE last remaining threads connecting Liverpool to the League title were ripped away yesterday by a Nottingham Forest side playing the precise, penetrative football which would have been the envy of any champions.

The dethroned champions, exposed defensively at Chelsea two days before, were revealed before the television cameras to be a shadow of their former all-conquering selves. Forest, in formidable form before the FA Cup final, could have won by a greater margin.

Thus Graeme Souness's 38th birthday was marked by the end of Liverpool's 19th title pursuit and the manager left the City Ground to contemplate the rebuilding required quickly to equip the Anfield club for the twin challenge of domestic honours and the Uefa Cup next season. Forest, of course, could be joining them in Europe and, once again, they looked marvellously built for that task.

After the puzzling selection at Chelsea which virtually invited punishment, Souness reshuffled his defensive cards and reverted to an orthodox back four. Molby, palpably uncomfortable at the back on Saturday, was moved into midfield while Ablett returned to central defence as a replacement for the injured Gillespie. Beardsley made way for Rosenthal, while once again Hysen was not even on the bench.

The revised plan was under threat for most of the first half from a Forest side playing with the confidence born of 17 goals in their previous four games.

Hodge's re-introduction, after an absence of more than two months, in place of the injured Keane made no difference to their midfield machinery, which serviced Clough and Glover at the earliest opportunity. Woan's interchange with Glover, ending with the midfielder's angled shot, soon demonstrated Forest's precision. Liverpool's first error, after 13 minutes, was severely punished - though not before a palpitating wait for Forest fans. When Houghton gave the ball away to Clough, the striker supplied Crosby who, despite Staunton's challenge, fired low past Grobbelaar's left hand. But Mr Martin had already whistled for a shove by Staunton on the winger. Clough appeased the enraged fans by blasting the penalty above Grobbelaar.

Liverpool, fortunate seven minutes later when Ablett appeared to push Clough just inside the area, were slow to express their gratitude. Houghton chipped lazily over from 25 yards and 33 minutes passed before Barnes produced his side's first effort on target, heading a corner straight into Crossley's arms as Rush menaced. Liverpool's final act of the half saw Speedie take Barnes's inviting pass from the left only to shoot high and wide.

Liverpool re-emerged with far greater purpose. A fine retrieving tackle by Laws, the Man of the Match, baulked Rush and a Houghton shot from 12 yards quickly followed as the search for an equaliser intensified.

When it arrived after 56 minutes Liverpool could scarcely have been more pleased - or embarrassed. When Rosenthal fell under Chettle's outstretched but clean challenge, everyone braced themselves for a corner. Instead the referee pointed to the spot, from where Barnes beat Crossley inside the goalkeeper's right-hand post.

Forest had to counter from the deep - not a position Clough's men dislike - and a break continued by Crosby again brought illegal intervention by Staunton. This time it was outside the area and the winger himself curled a free-kick into the area where Molby diverted the ball at full stretch into Woan's path. The midfielder breastst it down before striking a shot on the rise that beat Grobbelaar for sheer pace.

Ablett retaliated with a low drive and Rush, after rounding Crossley, saw his shot cleared off the line by the lunging Pearce. But then Parker's shot was touched on to the top of the bar by Grobbelaar and Glover's deliberate low effort hit the base of a post.

Afterwards Souness said: 'I would say that without a doubt over the whole season Liverpool have lost the championship rather than Arsenal have won it. Anyone who plays for me takes defeat badly. Second may be a healthy place for some clubs, but not us. That's the burden I have to carry.'

Nottingham Forest: Crossley; Laws, Pearce, Walker, Chettle, Hodge, Crosby, Parker, Clough, Glover, Woan.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Ablett, Burrows, Nicol, Molby, Staunton, Rosenthal (Marsh, 72min), Houghton, Rush, Barnes, Speedie.

Referee: J Martin (Alton).

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PRESS ASSOCIATION

Woan ends any Reds' hopes of anothe title

Liverpool's reign as champions was formally brought to a close by the left foot of a man from the Wirral - but in truth Ian Woan's 64th-minute goal merely put the Anfield outfit out of their misery.

From a position in November when the deduction of two points from Arsenal stretched Liverpool's advantage to eight, the Reds had slid to a situation where only an enormous stuff-up by Arsenal could have handed them the title.

But Liverpool were for once the side to succumb to pressure and though some will point to the bizzare departure of Kenny Dalglish and the equally strange delay in bringing in Graeme Souness, only the most ardent Koppite could argue that such goings-on were not balanced out by equally strange occurrences at Highbury over the course of the campaign.

Manager Graeme Souness admitted as much: "Liverpool have lost the championship rather than Arsenal winning it. We all take defeat in different ways but anybody who plays for me should be bad losers. Finishing second in the table may be a healthy position for anyone else but certainly not for Liverpool. That's the burden I must carry."

On the field Nigel Clough made the most salient points. With an awareness which must surely soon earn him a regular England spot, he mercilessly exposed a new-look back four.

Major surgery

In response to the mauling at Stamford Bridge, Souness had employed David Burrows, Steve Nicol, Gary Ablett and Steve Staunton as the back four.

It looked very much like a hastily applied field dressing rather than the major surgery a defence which has been most un-Liverpool-like this season needs.

Clough's pass in the 14th minute put Gary Crosby through and the panic that ensued saw Burrows put the ball in his own net and Crosby on the deck. The ref had seen the foul first and it made no difference as Clough stepped up to convert from the spot.

Perhaps reminded during the break of the responsibilities which come with a Liverpool shirt, the abdicating champions showed some touches of class in the second half.

They drew level when Steve Chettle's challenge on Ronnie Rosenthal was seen as a foul and Jan Molby dispatched the penalty with ease. The Liverpool of old would surely have gone on to win, but this time they gave ground in midfield and Forest were back in front within eight minutes.

Crosby's free-kick found Woan and the 80,000 pound signing from Runcorn sent the title to Highbury with a sweet volley.