

Date: 16 August 1992
 Opposition: Nottingham Forest
 Competition: League

Times	Guardian	

16 August 1992

THE TIMES

Liverpool pay for flawed defence system

Nottingham Forest 1 Liverpool 0

LIVERPOOL yesterday completed a pointless start by the three clubs most favoured to contest the inaugural Premier League championship.

Featured in the first game to be televised live this season by BSkyB, Liverpool began their campaign later than Arsenal and Manchester United but the outcome was equally fruitless.

Moreover, the defeat could have been as embarrassing as that inflicted by Norwich City on Arsenal, a result which will form one of the surprises not only of the opening weekend but also of the whole season. Yet Liverpool are not, and perhaps will not be, the formidable side of old.

Outplayed and almost overwhelmed by Nottingham Forest throughout the first half, they looked more vulnerable at the back than they have been for three decades. If Graeme Souness persists with an obviously unsuitable formation, they are unlikely even to be among the principal contenders.

As was illustrated during the Charity Shield when they conceded four goals to Leeds United, their system of employing only three defenders is flawed. Tanner is not secure enough to operate with only two colleagues and Walters cannot offer the assistance required by a midfield player guarding a flank.

Whelan, stationed in front of the central trio, attempted to block the gaps which appeared around him and Wright tried to minimise the damage. Yet the understudy for Grobbelaar, who opted to represent Zimbabwe, was left to ponder the credibility of Liverpool's reputation.

James, who was acquired from Watford in the summer, was under siege for the first ten minutes and not until after the interval was he allowed even a temporary respite. By then Forest, tired by their own attacking exertions, were showing signs of fatigue.

They scored only once but the goal will have enhanced the interest which has recently centred on Sheringham. The tall centre forward, showing a significantly improved first touch and overall comfort on the ball, put them ahead with a spectacular strike on the half-hour.

Liverpool were convinced that he was offside when Gemmill threaded one of several incisive passes through their rearguard. Sheringham ignored their appeals, cut in from the left and unleashed a powerful drive diagonally beyond the reach of James.

Liverpool, unable to suppress the ideas of Clough, the runs of Keane and the movement of Sheringham, were regularly pierced. James had to block attempts from Keane and Clough in rapid succession and he closed the half by saving athletically again from Keane.

Rush subsequently withdrew with a groin strain and, although McManaman brought on with him a sense of positive urgency, Liverpool only once threatened to take a point away from a ground where they have not won for eight seasons. Thomas spoiled the opportunity by directing his effort at Crossley's legs.

In the closing stages, Forest were denied a penalty which appeared to be as legitimate as Manchester United's claims at Sheffield United on Saturday. Keane fell under the impetus of James's spreadeagled frame but the referee who was otherwise consistently correct in all of his decisions visibly interpreted the stumble as a deliberate dive.

"I thought we could have scored a few more," Brian Clough, Forest's manager, claimed justifiably. He had insisted that his club would not miss the contribution of Walker, whose move to Sampdoria was completed during the summer. On this occasion, the opposition was not sufficiently inventive to expose the potential weakness.

Only half a dozen members of the Liverpool team which won last season's FA Cup were on view. Until they are restored to full strength and until their manager revises the personnel he requires to fit his system, their season is initially likely to prove uncomfortably unconvincing.

NOTTINGHAM FOREST: M Crossley; B Laws, S Pearce, T Wilson, S Chettle, R Keane, G Crosby (sub: K Black), S Gemmill, N Clough, E Sheringham, I Woan.

LIVERPOOL: D James; N Tanner, D Burrows, S Nicol, R Whelan, M Wright, D Saunders, P Stewart, I Rush (sub: S McManaman), M Walters (sub: R Rosenthal), M Thomas.

Referee: M Reed.

the guardian

Sheringham dishes up a tasty starter

AFTER the initial bangers and mash the Premier League's first Sky TV dish of the day turned out to be more of a passing fancy. The quality of Nottingham Forest's football in the first half of yesterday's game at the City Ground proved enough to defeat a Liverpool side still searching for the right mix.

If the match did not manage to sustain its early excellence, becoming scrappy and disjointed after half-time, there was still enough to remind the watching England manager that accurate, imaginative football allied to incisive finishing is possible amid the helter-skelter of the domestic game.

Graham Taylor returned from his European Championship failures making worrying noises about playing more direct football in the World Cup qualifiers. He is entitled to quote the style of Nottingham Forest, who are hardly long-ball specialists but still move the ball forward quickly, as examples of what he was getting at. But that would beg the question of why Nigel Clough did not get a game, or even part of a game, in Sweden.

Clough's vision, the speed of his footballing brain and his ability to find a team-mate in a scoring position with a firm pass or careful lob, could have opened Liverpool's Premier League career with a rare rout. But for the form of James, in the Liverpool goal, the contest would have been over long before half-time.

James, signed from Watford for pounds 1 million during the summer, played because Grobbelaar was on World Cup duty for Zimbabwe in Harare. A good three inches taller than Grobbelaar, he is less fun to watch but, for a Liverpool defender, probably more fun to be with.

In the third minute James saved feet first from Keane, whose runs from midfield terrorised Graeme Souness's three-man defence from the start, then repeated the process twice in quick succession as Clough made two attempts to score from rebounds.

James could do little about the goal, which arrived after 28 minutes and followed one of those patient Forest build-ups that probe for weaknesses like men tapping an oak-panelled room, expecting to hear a hollow ring. Wilson, Pearce and Woan were all involved before Sheringham collected a ball from Gemmill on the left and with the defence half-expecting him to pass to Clough, cut inside to unleash an unstoppable shot into the top far corner of the net.

'We don't work on scoring goals like that,' said Brian Clough later. 'They come out of the blue from pure ability. Edward Sheringham stuck it in. . . bang! That's what strikers are paid for.' The Lineker-less Tottenham, still hoping to sign the former Millwall player, would certainly have been impressed by yesterday's performance.

At the end of the first half Nigel Clough set up Gemmill for a centre from the right which Keane nodded down hard, only to see James save at the second attempt. Liverpool appeared to take fresh heart after this. Rush, who had a slight groin strain, was replaced by McManaman and his willingness to take on defenders with the ball caused Forest problems.

For a time Liverpool, with Wright coming up from the back, looked capable of forcing a draw, although their passing never reached the standards Forest had set earlier.

When Forest reasserted themselves late in the game the referee decided that Keane had dived over James's lunge and refused to award them a penalty.

Sheringham's shot found the side-netting after Wright and Thomas had failed to clear the ball, and Liverpool came off still looking second best.

Nottingham Forest: Crossley; Laws, Pearce, Wilson, Chettle, Keane, Crosby (Black, 85min), Gemmill, Clough, Sheringham, Woan.

Liverpool: James; Tanner, Burrows, Nicol, Whelan, Wright, Saunders, Stewart, Rush (McManaman, h-t), Walters (Rosenthal, 75), Thomas.

Referee: M Reed (Birmingham).