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Oldham still battling hard but running out of time and players
 THEY think it's all over. It isn't yet. If Oldham, third from bottom, do go down they will go kicking and screaming.

Joe Royle said he was disappointed with this performance. 'Until the last quarter of an hour we never showed what was required,' he said.

That seemed a trifle harsh. It was difficult to see what more they could have done, given their stretched resources. But it was never going to be enough, and with only five games left - the most important tomorrow against Sheffield United, who are two places and two points ahead of them - they are running out of time and players.

Olney, recovering from flu and replaced at half-time, and Milligan were added to a long list of sick and lame. Milligan, who aggravated a twisted knee, had worked hard to hold the middle ground against a wily Liverpool midfield.

In the opening stages Barnes and Whelan threaded passes that knitted the Oldham defence in knots, but Barnes could not sustain this guile whereas Oldham stuck grimly to their task. Pointon at right-back and Oldham's England Under-21 goalkeeper Gerrard were outstanding in keeping the game within reach and, if hard work won points, Oldham would top the league. But they are short of a Flash Harry superstar up front, and with their goalscorers Sharp and Marshall long-term casualties and Ritchie again injured, they looked desperately short of power in attack; Nicol and Wright - who played well despite a knee injury - easily contained Olney and Beckford, Oldham's recent signing from Norwich.

Royle thought some of his players were overawed. Certainly there were times when they stood off as Liverpool surged forward. Such an accusation could not be thrown at Pointon, who was little short of magnificent, dealing efficiently with Walters's runs down the right and clearing off the line after Rush's header threatened a second goal.

Rush was looking for four goals to take his total with Liverpool to 300, which would be a club record. In truth the goal he scored was worth five of many others seen this season. Oldham lost the ball in midfield and Hutchison tapped it out to Rush, who drifted wide on the right, dragging the defence with him, before sharply cutting in along the 18-yard line and into the space they left. He finished with an exquisite left-foot drive into the far top corner.

SCORER: Liverpool: Rush (60min).

Liverpool: James; Jones, Burrows, Nicol, Wright, Whelan, McManaman (Rosenthal, 63), Hutchison, Rush, Barnes, Walters.

Oldham Athletic: Gerrard; Halle, Pointon, Barlow, Jobson, Fleming, Adams, Beckford, Olney (Keizerweerd, ht), Milligan (McDonald, 40), Bernard.

Referee: J Worrall (Warrington).

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Rush sinks defenceless Oldham

LIVERPOOL 1 OLDHAM 0

THIS WAS a match that mirrored the seasons of both teams. Oldham, we know, cannot defend. They proved this so undeniably that, had Liverpool even a half-decent striker in support of Rush, they might have scored half a dozen. Liverpool, for all their possession, never converted their half-chances or even full-blown ones, and look in need of repair almost as much as Oldham. It was perhaps appropriate that the match should have been decided by a goal that was vintage Rush. But if this warmed the Kop, they must know that a lot needs to be done if the Liverpool of old are to return.

As for Oldham, while the results at the bottom have gone for them, they meet Sheffield United at home tomorrow still aware that a near miracle is required to keep them in the Premier League.

Time was when teams came to Liverpool and, before they took the field, looked at the sign that Bill Shankly put up in the tunnel This Is Anfield and shivered. Now they travel to the ground having read the tabloid press and giggled a bit about the latest doings of Graeme Souness, the latest manager in the Shankly line.

This week's episode, which is proving to be a more compelling saga than either EastEnders or Coronation Street, concerns Bruce Grobbelaar. It says much for Souness's management style that he could have converted a man normally regarded as deserving guffaws for his clowning, or gasps of astonishment for his eccentric goalkeeping, into an object of almost universal sympathy.

Last week, when Grobbelaar was recalled from his loan at Stoke which was meant to be until the end of the season Souness justified it on the grounds that Mike Hooper was not likely to play again this season owing to an arm injury. To say Grobbelaar was inconvenienced would be putting it mildly. He is committed to play for Zimbabwe, and has arranged things quite neatly with Stoke to fit in with their plans. But, recalled to sit on the bench against Blackburn last week, he flew on Tuesday to Harare, and will now return via Lusaka and Lyons, presumably to be on the Liverpool bench before flying to South Africa for more action with Zimbabwe.

Meanwhile, Hooper has made such a marvellous recovery that yesterday he was on the bench, and Stoke have had to go to Wrexham to find a goalkeeper. It is clear that Souness and Grobbelaar are less than the best of friends. If Souness laughs at Grobbelaar's antics, he laughs at him, not with him, but Shankly's successors are not meant to behave like this. Tradition has been that Liverpool do everything differently and much better than anybody else. This is cheap melodrama served up as high comedy.

Souness could argue that all this has been necessary because of the makeshift season Liverpool have had plagued by injuries and unable to call on several key players. It is the mark of a good manager to obscure rather than highlight that, and this match provided further proof of how makeshift Liverpool can look these days. So Hutchison, who a few weeks back was being touted as a considerable forward, started back in midfield while McManaman, who had thrilled us in the Cup final as Liverpool's answer to Ryan Giggs, partnered Rush. The result: Rush often did not get the support he needs up front, and many a promising move broke down because there was nobody with him.

This was exemplified in the 32nd minute when a nice move between Barnes and Rush saw Rush get to the goal-line and cross. But there was nobody in the box to finish it.

Despite this, Liverpool had the chances to go two up in the first 10 minutes. In the seventh minute, McManaman got to the goal line and, via Barnes and Rush, found Jones. His first shot was beaten back, his second hit the outside of the far post and trickled away.

The next minute, McManaman fed a ball over the Oldham defence and saw Gerrard parry his shot, but the rebound fell invitingly for Walters. Barely eight yards out, much of the goal lay open before him, but, evidently overwhelmed by it all, he got tangled with his own legs and shot wide.

In the 34th minute, McManaman had another splendid chance when, in acres of space, he had virtually a free header, but with only Gerrard to beat he made the faintest and tamest of connections. It was not surprising that in the 64th minute he should have been substituted by Rosenthal. By then, Rush had scored with the sort of individual goal in which he specialises. McManaman fed him the ball well, and Rush, utilising the space, cut in and cut out a gaggle of Oldham defenders before scoring at the far post.

Rosenthal's arrival certainly pepped up Liverpool's attack. He rarely starts a game because, say Anfield insiders, he is not really a Liverpool player: he can run but he cannot pass. But his running meant greater weight in the attack and at last some support for Rush.

Rush should have scored in the 77th minute when he headed a Burrows cross: Gerrard was beaten, but Pointon headed it off the line. The very next minute Hutchison produced a magnificent shot from 20 yards, but it was matched by an equally great save from Gerrard.

At this stage, Oldham, despite their reputation for flamboyant attacking, had shown little or nothing to trouble Liverpool. James had lost a corner before seeing it scrambled away and, just before Rush's header was saved on the line, Keizersweerd had produced a save from James. But in the last few minutes, as Liverpool were unable to reproduce their old knack of holding the ball, Oldham

threw everyone forward and created nervous moments in the Liverpool box. High balls rained in from both wings and every time James came out, the Kop held its breath. But he held out and so did Liverpool.

LIVERPOOL

(4-4-2): James; Burrows, Nicol, Wright, Jones; Barnes, Hutchison, Whelan, Walters; McManaman (Rosenthal 64min), Rush.

OLDHAM

(4-4-2): Gerrard; Halle, Fleming, Jobson, Pointon; Adams, Milligan (McDonald 39min), Bernard, Barlow; Olney (Keizersweerd 46min), Beckford.

Goal: Rush (60min).

Weather: sunny. Ground: good.

Referee: J Worrall (Warrington).

BRITISH SOCCER WEEK

It's Rush yet again

Ian Rush's sixth goal in seven matches gave Liverpool a well-deserved three points against relegation-haunted Oldham.

It needed a spectacular effort to enliven a largely drab match in which Oldham were rarely able to threaten but Liverpool looked strangely incapable of turning their dominance into goals.

There seemed little danger as Rush took Steve McManaman's 60th minute pass in his stride and broke down the right, swaying inside while Mark Walters made room for him with an intelligent overlapping run.

But, with everyone expecting a pass, the Welsh marksman glanced up and unleashed a rising left-footed shot from the edge of the box that sailed into the top corner past started 'keeper Paul Gerrard.

Liverpool full-back Rob Jones had almost scored after seven minutes, his first shot bouncing back to him off Neil Pointon and his second rebounding to safety off the post.

Three minutes later, McManaman's angled drive was well parried by Gerrard but ran invitingly to Walters, who stumbled over the ball with the goal at his mercy.

In the second half, McManaman fired another great chance straight at Gerrard after good work by Rush who himself had a low shot from a tight angle well saved by the busy Oldham 'keeper.

When Gerrard missed a cross in the 76th minute, Rush headed powerfully towards goal but Pointon denied the Welshman his second goal with a headed clearance off the line. Gerrard made up for his blunder moments later with a magnificent save to palm Don Hutchison's shot over the bar.

Oldham, perhaps recalling their retrieval of a two-goal deficit in the last five minutes against Everton at Goodison Park a few weeks ago, staged a desperate late rally, but despite a couple of goalmouth scrambles and two telling one-handed interceptions by 'keeper David James, there was to be no reprieve this time for Joe Royle's side.

Royle paid tribute to the fine Ian Rush goal: "It was a terrific strike that probably didn't belong in that game. It should have been the winner in a 4-3 thriller," said the Oldham boss, a former centre-forward.

"Rush is always a threat - he's a terrific player. If they give him a free transfer, we are interested!"

Royle said skipper Mike Milligan went off in the first half because of the twisted knee he had suffered against Sheffield Wednesday, and Ian Olney, who lasted until half-time, was suffering from a heavy bout of flu.

But he admitted: "Until the last quarter of an hour we never showed anything like what was required to win a game like this. I am disappointed really because we had shown the right stuff of late."

Liverpool boss Graeme Souness said: "Rush's goal was worth waiting for. His header later deserved a goal as well. Neil Pointon deserves a mention for managing to clear that one."