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THE TIMES

Earle earns Wimbledon deserved replay

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WIMBLEDON failed to maintain their 100 per cent record against Liverpool in cup competitions last night. They did the next best thing, humiliating the Merseyside giants in front of their own crowd.

Robbie Earle's goal six minutes from time takes the sides to Selhurst Park for a replay in a fortnight for a place in the Coca-Cola Cup quarter-finals. It was the least Wimbledon deserved after they had dominated the second half as Liverpool again plumbed the depths they had touched at Newcastle two weeks ago. Only a sterling performance by Mark Wright and some wayward Wimbledon finishing allowed them to escape the full consequences of a slipshod display. On this form they have only delayed the inevitable.

The Kop certainly thought so. Even the Anfield roar was muted, only 19,290 turning up, an attendance for an important cup-tie that gave its own telling verdict on Liverpool, in spite of their imposing recent home record of six successive victories. That record looked inexplicable on last night's inept display, possibly one of the worst for a Liverpool side since they came out of the second division 30 years ago.

"I am dumbfounded," Graeme Souness, the Liverpool manager, said. "I cannot understand how we can play so well against Villa and then play so badly three days later. I wish I could give a reason to our supporters, but I can't."

Wimbledon deserve a lot of credit, and for once they did it by playing football rather than the familiar tactics of crash and bash. Few sides can have come to Anfield and enjoyed such domination, and the Kop acknowledged it sportingly, their cheers for Wimbledon at the end mingled with boos for their own ineffectual team.

"It's not often you get a standing ovation from the Kop," Joe Kinnear, the Wimbledon manager, said. "But I thought we outplayed them. It would have been an injustice if we had lost."

Kinnear has now not lost to Liverpool in five matches as manager. For a time last night it looked as if that record might come to an end, but finally justice was done. It took a long time to arrive. Wimbledon had looked the sharper side from the start, but they fell behind after quarter of an hour as Rush fell under Scales's challenge in the penalty area for Molby to score from the spot as Segers went the wrong way.

That was to be Liverpool's only shot on target in the 90 minutes. Wimbledon's lingering sense of injustice at the penalty came to the fore again when they had what looked a valid equaliser disallowed as Fashanu bundled the ball past Grobbelaar only to be pulled back, presumably for a foul on the goalkeeper.

Fashanu then went down under Ruddock's challenge from behind, but this time Mr Dilkes refused the penalty appeals.

It was not to be Fashanu's night. Caught by Molby painfully in the ninth minute, he finally gave way to a dead leg two minutes after the interval and was a spectator as Wimbledon took over the game. The corner count tells its own story, 12-3 in all; in the second half, Wimbledon had eight corners, Liverpool none. Yet for all their pressure, with Wright resisting bravely, it took a long time for chances to appear. When they did so, Wimbledon failed to put them away, Wright recovering to deny Clarke an open goal after Grobbelaar had lost a low cross, and then Earle getting free to meet Jones's centre only to put the ball straight at the goalkeeper from five yards.

That miss seemed likely to leave Wimbledon with nothing to show for some telling football but, as the end neared, Earle was given a chance to redeem himself and he took it joyfully, heading home McAllister's centre to leave Grobbelaar helpless. It was no more than they deserved.

LIVERPOOL (4-4-2): B Grobbelaar R Jones, M Wright, N Ruddock, S Harkness J Redknapp, J Molby, D Matteo, J Barnes (sub: M Walters, 78min) I Rush, R Fowler.

WIMBLEDON (4-4-2): H Segers R Joseph, J Scales, S Fitzgerald, B McAllister W Barton, V Jones, R Earle, N Ardley D Holdsworth, J Fashanu (sub: A Clarke, 47).

Referee: R Dilkes.

the guardian

Earle's late honour

RARELY if ever can any Liverpool side have managed so little possession at Anfield or played with such scant authority and resolve as Graeme Souness's team did against Wimbledon last night.

They took the lead against the run of play through a 16th-minute penalty by Molby and thereafter played so thoroughly badly that it would have been a total injustice for Wimbledon if Earle had not managed to equalise and so force a replay.

The paucity of Liverpool's attacking play, stemming from an almost total lack of cohesion in midfield and continued frailty in defence, could not detract from a Wimbledon performance that was so controlled that they were in charge for something like 80 per cent of this tie. Liverpool's only direct shot was the penalty. Quite simply Wimbledon were by far the better team on the night - a fact acknowledged by the Kop, who applauded them off.

Wimbledon's domination of the second half was almost total even without Fashanu, who had limped off in the 48th minute feeling the effects of an earlier challenge by Molby. Yet when Earle and the substitute Clarke missed excellent chances it appeared that, for all their lack of invention, control and anything else you could mention, Liverpool might get away with it.

That they did not was a tribute to Wimbledon's unremitting perseverance and unbending resolve. Liverpool, like some bewildered tortoise, retreated inside their somewhat fragile carapace and hoped that everything would end all right. It did not.

Liverpool had taken the lead after Wimbledon had imposed themselves from the word go. Redknapp's ball inside to Barnes generated the move that led to the penalty, although it was Barnes's teasing ball towards the speeding Rush that was the crucial factor. Scales, faced with a vertical striker, converted Rush to the horizontal and the penalty was duly awarded.

Molby, who returned to the Liverpool side last Sunday, is finding it ever more difficult to contain his body within the narrow confines of shirt and shorts but his shooting remains lean and mean. Segers was comprehensively beaten.

At this point there seemed every prospect of a routine Liverpool victory. Instead their play simply fragmented, and Fashanu believed he had equalised when he bundled the ball past Grobbelaar. But the referee decided, without much difficulty, that foul play had been involved. Elbow-room, perhaps?

The longer the match went on, the more Liverpool's unease became apparent.

Rush and Fowler spent much time exchanging mortified looks and wandering into spaces that no other Liverpool player seemed inclined to recognise.

The two teams had met only once before in cup competition: the 1988 FA Cup final.

It could be argued that Wimbledon's extraordinary victory at Wembley signalled the impending decline of Liverpool. There was certainly evidence in plenty last night of their slide from excellence during the past five years.

Liverpool: Grobbelaar; Jones, Wright, Ruddock, Harkness, Redknapp, Molby, Barnes (Walters, 78min), Matteo, Fowler, Rush.

Wimbledon: Segers; Barton, McAllister, Jones, Fitzgerald, Earle, Fashanu (Clarke, 48), Holdsworth, Scales, Joseph, Allen.

Referee: R Dilkes (Mossley).

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BRITISH SOCCER WEEKLY

Dons dominate

Robbie Earle earned Wimbledon a replay at Selhurst Park with a goal six minutes from the end of this Coca-Cola Cup fourth round clash. And it was no more than the Londoners deserved - in fact, Joe Kinnear's side dominated Liverpool and created enough chances to have won comfortably.

Liverpool's only shot on target all night was Jan Molby's 15th minute penalty after John Scales had upended Ian Rush in the area following a quick one-two between the Welsh international striker and John Barnes. Molby sent Wimbledon goalkeeper Hans Segers the wrong way from the spot to put the home side ahead - but from then on it was one-way traffic.

Wimbledon should have been level within eight minutes but Mossley referee Roger Dilkes infuriated the Wimbledon players and travelling supporters by disallowing John Fashanu's header. Earle had headed down in the area and, although Fashanu mistimed his first header, he sent his second beyond Bruce Grobbelaar for what looked a perfectly good goal.

Warren Barton had a shot saved by Grobbelaar moments later and a slip by Neil Ruddock allowed Dean Holdsworth to pick out Fashanu eight yards out. This time, the tall striker got his legs in a tangle and only managed to prod a shot wide.

Then there were Wimbledon appeals for a penalty when Ruddock and Fashanu collided but again the visitors were disappointed.

Fashanu limped out of the action two minutes into the second half to be replaced by Andy Clarke and he quickly took up the gauntlet to continue the assault on rocky Liverpool.

Earle had a header saved in the 53rd minute and then a Grobbelaar mis-kick let in Clarke - only for Mark Wright to spare his goalkeeper's blushes with a last-ditch block. Dean Holdsworth shot straight at Grobbelaar before it was Ruddock's turn to save the day. Clarke burst into the area, prodded the ball under Grobbelaar's dive and looked certain to equalise when Ruddock suddenly intervened to protect his team's advantage.

When Earle headed a Vinny Jones cross straight at Grobbelaar from just six yards in the 75th minute it looked as if Liverpool were going to steal through to the quarter-finals.

A minute later Jones was the provider again but Holdsworth headed wide as Anfield began to vent its frustration against the home team.

And that increased after Earle equalised in the 84th minute. This time he made no mistake as Brian McAllister centred and the former Port Vale midfielder glanced the ball beyond Grobbelaar's dive.

Liverpool fans booed the side off the pitch at the end while Wimbledon's supporters taunted them with "what's it like to be outclassed?"

Joe Kinnear summed up Wimbledon's dominance when he said: "It would have been an injustice if we had been beaten."

Kinnear said: "I don't recall Liverpool having a shot on target apart from the penalty. We created plenty of chances and we were the better team and the Liverpool fans realised that. It's not often you get an ovation from the Kop like that but our football deserved it. We got three here last year and three the year before and we could have had three more tonight but the referee didn't give us too many favours."

Kinnear added: "Fashanu told me that Grobbelaar missed it completely and that the pair of them did not make contact."

It certainly looked a perfectly good goal but luck certainly favoured Liverpool on the night.

Anfield manager Graeme Souness was amazed by his team's dismal display, especially coming after the thrilling win over Aston Villa at Anfield.

He said: "I'm dumbfounded. I can't understand how we can play so well three days ago and then put on a performance like that. I wish I had an explanation for the fans. Wimbledon make it difficult but we were at home and it was up to us to make the running."

"We got a penalty early on and you would have expected us to go on from that but it was a very disappointing display."