

Luton exploit Anfield chaos over Dalglish

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THE gloom that had descended so quickly on Anfield with the news of Kenny Dalglish's departure on Friday morning spread with rapid destructiveness south to Kenilworth Road.

Liverpool, locked in a state of shock, surrendered the First Division leadership just 24 hours after losing their manager.

Defeat at struggling Luton coupled with Arsenal's comprehensive victory over Crystal Palace completed the most miserable of weekends for the Anfield club.

Although Liverpool's plastic pitch has never been Liverpool's most popular venue—it was Dalglish's most despised ground—the home side had not won in the League since Dec 29.

If there was a team capable of allowing a gentle rehabilitation after such a savage loss, it appeared to be Luton. Instead, Liverpool, with an inept performance, crumbled embarrassingly. It was a sad performance by Liverpool and, at this rate, Arsenal are championship certainties.

Without their mentor, Liverpool lacked a focal figure. They meandered aimlessly, even though they were handed the most perfect and fortunate of starts.

Ronnie Moran, who is in charge for the "foreseeable future", mustered a smile as he stepped out to face a posse of photographers.

That smile broadened into a grin when referee Jim Ashworth, after consultation with his linesman, awarded Liverpool a 16th-minute penalty when James was adjudged to have handled Nicol's cross.

It seemed a harsh decision, but Molby, instrumental in orchestrating Wednesday's excellent display against Everton, rolled the penalty to Chamberlain's right. The goalkeeper had made his exit to the left.

It was just the start that Moran had wanted. A faction of the Liverpool board feel that if their caretaker is a success,

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there would be a strong case to promote from within.

There are those in the Anfield boardroom who hold that tradition particularly dear. They would not want to see it broken though, at 56, there are some reservations about Moran's long-term future.

There is no doubt that Moran, who has been with Liverpool for 42 years, would leap at the chance to guide the club, but the evidence from yesterday's meek surrender was not the most inspiring reference.

Moran, at his first press conference, said he will meet Noel White, the Liverpool chairman, tomorrow to discuss whether he will be in charge for the second replay of the FA Cup epic against Everton at Goodison Park on Wednesday.

If they are to maintain their interest in the Cup, they will have to perform with more determination than they displayed yesterday. They were a sad side who found it impossible to match the beaming smile of their caretaker-manager.

It is hard to remember such an indifferent sequence in Liverpool's history. They have won only three of their last 13 games and, understandably, they were reported to be downhearted after yesterday's effort.

They were in total disarray in the second half, conceding a much-merited equaliser to Luton only two minutes after the restart. Dowie, who went on to add two goals, was the creator of what is becoming increasingly familiar mayhem at the heart of the once solid Liverpool defence.

He broke down the right past the ineffective Staunton, later to be replaced by David Speedie, Dalglish's last signing, before crossing to the far post.

Black had been guilty of wasting an outstanding chance in the first half when he found himself in front of goal and

unmarked with only Hooper, a late substitute for the unwell Grobbelaar, to beat.

But when Dowie's 47th-minute cross arrived, Black made amends with a firm header past Hooper, who showed none of the rustiness that one might expect of a goalkeeper who has spent the last two years in the reserves.

Hooper had been called south after Grobbelaar had reported a stomach upset at 4am. By 7.30, Roy Evans, a Liverpool coach, had confirmed that Grobbelaar would not be able to take his place at Kenilworth Road.

Dowie gave Luton their second after 53 minutes when Pembroke, an outstanding contributor to the Luton effort, robbed Barnes, not for the first time, before releasing Elstrup to run at the retreating Liverpool defence.

He pulled the ball across towards Dowie, but the striker's shot hit Elstrup and, for a second, it appeared the chance had gone. But the Liverpool defence had frozen, giving Dowie time to recover and sweep the ball beyond Hooper's right hand.

Luton's third goal, which completed Liverpool's afternoon of embarrassment, was a carbon copy of the second. Elstrup again went down the right before crossing to Dowie who nipped in ahead of Heysen to flick the ball beyond Hooper's dive.

Moran tried to play down the effects of Dalglish's departure. "It could have happened anywhere, at anytime," he said. "I have seen performances like that before. I just have to make sure that the team bounce back on Wednesday."

Luton's Jim Ryan, who is beginning to learn about the pressures on managers at the bottom of the First Division, had been anxious to urge his team to ignore the Dalglish factor.

He said: "When I heard about his retirement, I couldn't believe it." Liverpool, clearly, are still struggling to come to terms with it as well.