

RSNJ 12/97

# Sunk in the 'Pool

AFTER arriving in Liverpool with an hour to spare before kick-off I was sure I would get the opportunity to take in some of the sights of Anfield.

Unfortunately, my opportunity was denied when our coach driver inexplicably got lost in the middle of Liverpool.

One U-turn and a left later and we were confronted by an annoying policeman who reminded us we couldn't use tickets if they were for the Kop.

This was seemingly trivial, but I look back on it as complete bias towards the home supporters as I saw two Reds fans in the Lower Centenary.

We then disembarked for the short walk to the ground.

Despite the efforts of the merchandise representatives I was not tempted to buy any of their wares.

Anfield itself is magnificent. A huge concourse area means there is a lot of room for fans and, despite there being nearly 7,000 Mariners supporters, found my way into the stadium itself relatively quickly.

Although I had 20 minutes to spare I spent most of this time searching for the programme vendors, which I eventually found, in the corner of the ground.

I took my seat just as 'You'll Never Walk Alone' blared over the PA system.

Liverpool's trademark song was soon drowned out by stirring renditions of 'Sing When We're Fishing' and 'We are Town'.

With a surprising non-response from the Kop, I was quietly confident for the match ahead. My confidence was rewarded as Town started brightly - and when a hopeful through ball from the Town defence was met by hesitancy from David James. This lapse from the giant 'keeper almost let in the super-quick Lee Nogan for what would have been the dream start.

Town did not seem to be overawed by the occasion and played neat passing football, but failed to make any real in-roads into the Liverpool half.

The Mariners' defence, in particular Tony Gallimore and Peter Handyside, were cool under pressure and stroked the ball between each other like a Liverpool side of old.

Gally especially looked composed, proving to me that he does indeed have a right foot and confidence to take on players. One moment that stands out was a 40-yard run, taking on both McManaman and Ince before being halted by the impressive Dominic Matteo.

It wasn't all Grimsby though. Liverpool had their moments in the opening third of the match. Their crosses and shots were wayward though and McManaman looked well below par.

Gallimore showed his awareness when he played a ball through the eye of a needle straight to the feet of Lee Nogan. Nogan tried too much flair and his backheel only found Steve McManaman. This is where Liverpool are at their very best, counter attacking. McManaman's speed showed as he ate up the ground and played a threatening ball to German international Karlheinz Riedle. As

defenders converged around the striker he was forced to check his movement. Jamie Redknapp moved into space and Riedle laid the ball off to him. Redknapp unleashed a typically fierce shot superbly saved by Aidan Davison. He could do nothing though about Michael Owen, who was quickest to react to the rebound and slotted home on 28 minutes.

This showed Owen's tremendous pace and awareness for such a young man, but even if he hadn't got there then Riedle surely would.

Despite losing the lead, the Town fans weren't discouraged and were still 100% behind the boys. Up until half-time Town were on top as they searched for an equaliser.

They came mightily close on three occasions. Liverpool unconvincedly cleared a Town corner and Kingsley Black unleashed a dipping volley, which James plucked from above his head. I am sure that had the ball been aimed to either side of the goalkeeper then Town would have been level as James was rooted to the spot. It was James who was involved in Grimsby's second glorious chance. After being complacent and chesting down a backpass, he gifted his clearance to Paul Groves. Groves took too much time and, when he finally shot, James was in a position so that he could get a foot to the ball.

Kevin Donovan had the last chance of note. He picked the ball deep inside the Liverpool half and embarked upon a mazy run, but his right-foot shot was blocked by Reds' captain Paul Ince.

As the game approached half-time I was relatively pleased with a 1-0 scoreline, knowing Town would have a good chance of getting an equaliser in the second half.

Liverpool would have one last attack though. The ball was slipped through to Owen but the well-organised Town defence had utilised the off-side trap well. The officials didn't seem to think so. Owen was allowed to continue and as Peter Handyside was about to catch him, the young star hit the deck. It was obvious that Handyside had not touched Owen, but the referee gave a penalty.

The Town fans were disgusted and even more so when Owen gave Davison no chance from the spot. 2-0 was definitely not a fair review of the first half.

It was nearly three just half a minute later. Riedle, standing at least three yards off-side, found himself one-on-one with Davison. Aidan pulled off the save of the match to give Town a glimmer of hope.

The teams exited to a chorus of boos which were, of course, aimed at the match officials.

The Grimsby fans still placed all the faith in the side and the players repaid them with a bright opening. If there was one clear penalty in the game, then it would be for Kvarme's tug on Lester. The truly abysmal referee waved play on as disbelief filled the faces of the Town supporters. Peter Handyside who was in unfamiliar territory, unleashed a 30 yard shot. All the

shot needed was an extra touch. This should have come from Tommy Widdrington, but the ball fizzed past his head.

Town gave Liverpool, a taste of their own passing game, but it was at the wrong time. Five minutes of possession, is not needed when you are 2-0 down, especially with the players reluctant to attack. Kevin Donovan was particularly frustrated on the right. Countless times, he lost his marker and found himself in an acre of space, but he was repeatedly ignored.

Town paid for their risk-free play. James hurled a Schmeichel-style throw, 60 yards to Steve McManaman on the left who played a ball inside to Owen. He perfectly curled a shot into the top right hand corner, beyond the despairing dive of Davison to complete his hat-trick. It was a superb goal. In truth though, it shouldn't have been a goal at all. If the referee had been paying attention to the game, then he would have noticed that David James had the ball in his hands, long after the designated 6 seconds before making his throw. This did nothing to take the class of young Owen's finish. Moments later, Mark Lever slipped allowing Riedle a chance to make it four. His volley, thankfully hit the bar. I felt that had this gone in then we would have been going home with a severe drubbing under our belts.

As it was, Alan Buckley decided it was time for changes, but it was possibly too late. Livingstone and Southall replaced Black and Lester respectively. It was Southall who came closest to scoring, with a thunderbolt free kick from 25 yards, which David James could only parry. Unfortunately there was no Town player on hand to tuck away the loose ball. Town pressed forward late in the match and in the move of the night came close to gaining a consolation. Widdrington swung a beautiful crossfield ball out to Kevin Donovan who finally got a chance to show his speed. Taking the ball in his stride, he outpaced Stig-Inge Bjernebye and sent in a peach of a cross from the by-line. Livvo looked certain to head home, but the ball was taken off his head at the last moment.

This would be Town's last hurrah and when the final whistle blew, they immediately went to the fans, who responded with a standing ovation. Also showing some class was Steve McManaman who clapped the Town fans for their efforts throughout the match. Indeed, the fans were real stars, from whistle to whistle. The Kop was repeatedly stunned into the silence by the enthusiastic Mariners fans. The match also showed me that Liverpool fans are not real football fans. They only sang when they scored and acted as if they were the away supporters. They also gave the Town fans a standing ovation, when the 'Mini-Toon army' gave a stirring rendition of 'You'll Never Walk Alone'. Despite losing, the fans were of high spirits, proving

that we are "The Mighty Town Army", if anything and safe in the fact that the players gave Liverpool a good game despite the 3-0 scoreline and anything the nationals might say. Truth be known, the real turning point in the match was the extremely dubious penalty. There was no realistic chance of Town getting a result from this point.

As we filed out of the ground, I got talking to a steward. He mentioned that the 'Pool fans have become less vocal since the ground became all-seater. This would explain, how 20,000 Liverpoolians could be silent for nearly two hours. I also marveled at the skill of Michael Owen. Although I bear grudges for two of the three goals, I could take nothing away from the 17 year-old's first senior level hat-trick. The thing that really stands out, is that the last time Town were at Anfield, Owen was barely a month old. It sends shivers up your spine! From England's point of view, it showed we have a bright future after the millennium, with Owen, Matteo, Redknapp, McManaman and Jones, not to mention Fowler and Carragher, possibly becoming the basis for England 2002.

If there was one complaint about the game, is what that Town weren't adventurous enough and I also felt that they should have gone with a 4-3-3 formation in the second half, as we did against Leicester. Really, I should feel happy after knocking out Sheffield Wednesday and Leicester City, we showed what a good footballing side we are, even when we gained little recognition. I went home happy, with my own Anfield souvenir, a piece of the turf, that one of the friendly stewards had acquired for me. Regretably, though I didn't get a chance to see The Shankly Gates or The Hillsborough Memorial. The last infuriating event of the night was finding that we were featured on Teletext as the major story, after we had lost 3-0, thanks a lot! I thoroughly enjoyed my trip to Liverpool, and will always remember it as our 1997 Cup Final. But as the old saying goes, all good things must come to an end.

Grimsby Town .....0 Liverpool.....3  
Owen 28, 45 pen, 57

Attendance: 28,515  
Town man of match: Kevin Donovan

## Teams and form guide

TOWN		LIVERPOOL	
Davison	6	James	6
McDermott	6	Jones	7
Gallimore	7	Bjernebye	5
Handyside	7	Kvarme	7
Lever	6	Matteo	7
Widdrington	6	Ince	5
Donovan	8	Redknapp	6
Black	5	McManaman	6
Nogan	6	Leonhardsen	6
Lester	7	Owen	8
Groves	5	Riedle	5

Subs: Livingstone 69 (Black), Southall 69 (Lester) Jobling 85 (Groves)  
Subs: Berger 65 (Redknapp) Not used: McAteer, Harkness

Key: 10 - out of this world; 9 - outstanding; 8 - very good; 7 - good; 6 - competent; 5 - average; 4 - poor.

