

EDITORIAL

When you consider that during Liverpool's impressive 15th League Championship season they prised just one point in two attempts from Wolverhampton Wanderers, the bottom club, FA Cup semi-finalists Plymouth Argyle only just escaped relegation to Division Four and Tottenham Hotspur won the UEFA Cup despite an indifferent domestic season, the depth of strength in the League is undeniable - at least up to a point.

But it could be argued that as Liverpool under Joe Fagan's guidance for the first time have achieved their seventh title in nine seasons and overhauled Arsenal's previous record of eight championships during this period, the need for consistent challengers to ignite the competition is obvious. Not content with this admirable achievement, Liverpool added the Milk Cup and the European Cup in a season which in the domestic sphere saw the League itself sponsored for the first time by Canon (UK) Ltd.

Their involvement coincided with the arrival of live televised League football and despite its advent on the small screen, overall attendances were down by less than half a million on the previous term. Indeed, with a 6 per cent increase in Milk Cup gates it might be said that the decline showed some sign of being halted, though FA Cup attendances themselves slumped in a season of many upsets.

Live Friday night matches menaced Saturday afternoon attendances in a disturbing manner which was not true of the Sunday afternoon coverage. The continued unceasing outbreaks of violence among so-called followers of the game was tempered by the growing if belated realisation that the attendant hooliganism is socially oriented; a fact brought home by examples of industrial brawling which was often indistinguishable from mayhem on the terraces and outside grounds.

Club successes have frequently overshadowed disappointing performances by the national team in recent years, so European Championship failure was no great surprise. But it was ironic that both Wales and Northern Ireland came much closer to reaching the finals than either Scotland or England, even though the latter two decided in their wisdom to end the 100-year-old British International Championship. The last series ended pointedly with Ireland and Wales - both of whom desperately need the revenue from these games - finishing first and second. The double irony of the situation comes from the value League clubs place on not only Scots but Irish and Welsh players. Liverpool used only 15 players in their championship season - only four of them English born and one of these restricted to a handful of appearances. Footballer of the Year Ian Rush, with a personal tally of 49 goals in all senior matches for club and Wales, headed a cosmopolitan clique of Liverpool elite. This was completed by five Scots, three Eire internationals, a Zimbabwe international goalkeeper and another player born in South Africa and brought up in Australia.

Despite Liverpool's overwhelming domination of the game, Everton, who have lived under the red shadow on Merseyside for more years than they care to recall, emerged creditably with a plucky Milk Cup runners-up berth against their Anfield rivals and victory in the FA Cup over Watford, who only six years earlier were still in the Fourth Division. Everton also won the FA Youth Cup.

If the modern game has taken its fair share of knocks about a lack of spectacle, the UEFA Cup Final was a good example of finely-balanced thrills, the outcome only decided on penalty kicks with Spurs succeeding at Anderlecht's expense. There was a similar end to the more chess-like European Cup Final, with Liverpool triumphing as Roma sagged in front of their own fans.

Penalty kicks are a lottery and with referees clearly intent on getting the business over with as little hassle as possible the enforcement of the rule forbidding goalkeepers to move before the kick is taken is largely ignored. This certainly applied to the Tottenham game, although in Liverpool's case the kickers who failed all managed to put the ball wide. Yet in a bygone age, corner kicks were used to decide matches, possibly a fairer method of determining a winner after 90 minutes plus extra time if carrying on until a sudden death winner is considered unacceptable. But perhaps the most important factor of sudden death would be in the attitude over the 90 minutes of play which would encourage players to adopt a more positive approach rather than the fearful negation which is all too obvious for nearly half the match.

The implementation by the FA of a School for Excellence and the adoption of the Youth Opportunity Scheme for youngsters attached to League clubs reflected the intention to encourage embryo talent, but oddly enough the greater impact came at the other end of the age scale with the announced retirement of players like Trevor Brooking, Kevin Keegan, John Hollins and Eddie Gray, seasoned and accomplished professionals who have graced the game and will not easily be replaced if at all.

PETER DUNK

Rothmans Football Awards 1984

ALEX FERGUSON With a towering trio of trophies in 1983-84 comprising the Scottish League Championship, the Scottish FA Cup and European Super Cup, Aberdeen strengthened their claim to be the leading club in Scotland and one shrewdly guided by Manager Alex Ferguson, whose reign at Pittodrie has been of tremendous benefit to Scottish football as a whole. Not only has this manifested itself on the domestic front but with equal impact abroad, where there has been increasing respect and admiration for the Scottish game. The steely Ferguson took over the reins in 1977-78 and in 1982-83 led Aberdeen to Cup-Winners' Cup success in Sweden against Real Madrid, an honour which capped previously won approbation for League and Cup successes.

JOHN HOLLINS To play effectively in more than 700 League matches and be scarcely a source of concern to officialdom on the field or off it is a feat in itself at any level. In the highly competitive atmosphere of League football it is even more praiseworthy and in his service with Chelsea (twice), Queen's Park Rangers and Arsenal, John Hollins succeeded in maintaining not only the best traditions of his adopted profession but retained that schoolboy enthusiasm which spanned his entire career from Stamford Bridge and back again via Highbury and Loftus Road. At the end of last season he was assistant manager at Chelsea but still capable of playing in more than half his side's League games to help the club back to the First Division.

KEN JONES Northwich Victoria's annexation of the FA Trophy after a replay against Bangor was a fitting climax at the end of the term for club captain Ken Jones. At Wembley at the age of 37 he played his 900th match, having originally started on the staff of West Bromwich Albion and later graduated to Northwich via Ellesmere Port Town. It was in his 15th season with the Vics and few players can claim to have earned three testimonials in yeoman service with one club and moreover richly deserving of such a trio of accolades culminating in that Wembley milestone. It epitomised the loyalty and dedication of countless players in similar company up and down the country but was no less of a personal accomplishment for Ken Jones himself.

KEVIN KEEGAN In two years on Tyneside, Kevin Keegan added another significant chapter to his already illustrious life story in the game which saw him emerge with Scunthorpe United, develop with Liverpool, expand with Hamburg and continue with Southampton while at the same time gracing the England scene with the national team in the four corners of the world. But with Newcastle United he achieved something more: a personal contribution to the return of First Division football to St James's Park which ensured him of undying affection from the hearts of the Geordies as the giants of the north-east stirred from their Second Division slumbers. Kevin Keegan has been one of the most influential players to have figured in the last decade and at his peak was a world class performer.

HOWARD KENDALL In 1983-84 Everton came out from the Merseyside darkness which had shrouded Goodison Park since their last major honour in 1970 when they won the League Championship, a trophy which has since appeared to have become the property of their great rivals at Anfield. It was not an easy transition and often painful in the execution, but Manager Howard Kendall kept faith with his ideals and persevered to a point where the second half of the season produced a respectable League position and a place in the two major cup finals. On top of this the club's youngsters won the FA Youth Cup. In finishing as runners-up in the Milk Cup, Everton more than matched Liverpool over two absorbing games. In the FA Cup they deservedly won the trophy for the first time in 18 years marking a tribute to Kendall's honest and endearing approach to the rigours of management.

TREVOR SENIOR Apart from a deviation last year, it has been the practice to recognise the top League goalscorer of the season, simply because there is the equal opportunity over a programme of matches common to all clubs that is unfair when some teams' considerations are extended by lengthy cup runs. So Trevor Senior in his first full season at Reading finished as the top marksman in the four divisions. Originally discovered as a prolific scorer with Dorchester Town he was signed by Portsmouth but found opportunities restricted with them. He was lent to Aldershot and in a late season burst in 1982-83 revealed his scoring ability there and Reading snapped up this tall, athletic striker to replace Kerry Dixon, who had transferred to Chelsea. It was a sound move for club and player as Reading won promotion to Division Three.