

John Barnes

For most people, Munich 1958 is not of any major significance. But for one type of Liverpool fan it is commemorated in paint on multiple city walls. Drearily accompanied by the NF logo, it witnesses the night that Manchester United's multi-fatality plane crash took place. For the inmates of the mad macho world of terrace tribalism, this type of venom is not reserved for the Manes along the A580. Now a new slogan has made its debut on the walls of the town's toilets: 'Niggerpool'.

It would be bad enough if neanderthal attitudes to race were solely the province of the beery banana-throwing thugs who represent away clubs. Liverpool Football Club (LFC) has been accused of its own institutional racism with a strong *prima facie* case to answer: the city has the nation's most developed amateur league network which is well representative of its 8% black population. Yet it has taken John Barnes to come from Watford before a black player can become established in the first team.

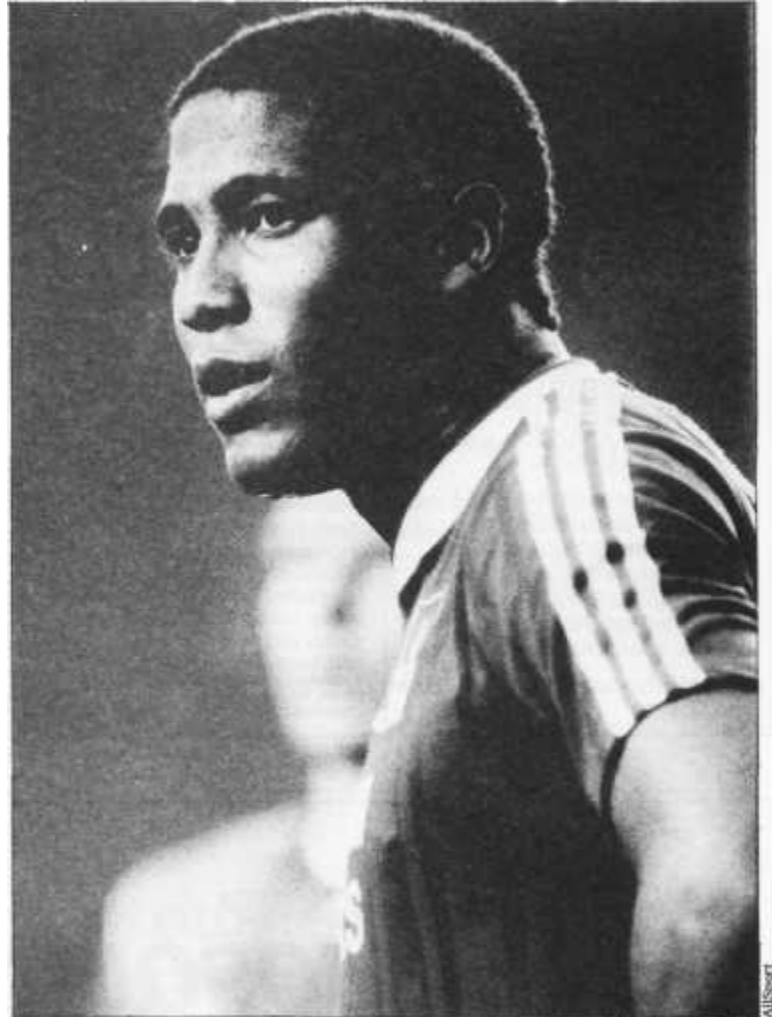
Established is perhaps the wrong word. From a patchy performer in the South to an unrivalled Kop crowd-appeal, Liverpool has brought out the genius that has made Barnes a local hero and one of England's most exciting internationals. Maybe his mind has been concentrated by the fact that a £900,000 transfer fee alone guarantees nothing at Liverpool, but the competition for a first-team place has turned Barnes into the heart and soul of 'The Machine'. Barnes lapel badges sell out the day they arrive at the LFC souvenir shop.

Barnes was perhaps the ideal transfer for Liverpool's management. When Ian Rush left for Italy, the *Liverpool Echo's* 'Arriverderci Rushy' campaign concealed genuine doubts about his replaceability among the fans and club officialdom. This is the gap that Barnes stepped into. On

the field as well as off, he has presented few problems to the club. An initial backwoods unease among the fans about a black player on the team has given way to unbridled admiration. The Jamaican-born son of an ex-military diplomat, Barnes is the embodiment of modern professional soccer's corporate identity. He is quiet and studious. To relax, he goes to sleep. There are no court appearances for George Best-style outbursts in night-clubs, no overturned cars, none of the bag and baggage of the womanising braggadocio that accompanies football heroism.

Yet his very quiescence is not without its problems. He is emphatically silent on the issue of racial taunting from the crowds. Anti-racists may seethe on the terraces, but Barnes' own silence is almost as annoying. To some it conveys a lack of principle. Observers say this characterises other aspects of his life, including his playing career. He is well removed from the play-for-Liverpool or-die tradition of LFC stars. He made no secret of his disappointment at not going to play for Juventus and still locates Italy as the source of his ambition. He has been called the 'filofax footballer'. He goes to work, he retires to his suite at the Moat House Hotel (nee Holiday Inn), where he nightly crosses the official T&G picket line. In a city where class can outweigh race in the loyalty league, this has produced mutters of disaffection far from the jeering yahoos of Saturday afternoon.

But for Barnes, the policy is to turn the other cheek. He may not respond to the crowd's taunts, he does not respond to the kicks and trips on the field either. His background might be military but he is not aggressive. Perhaps his silence is the most eloquent response to the monkey-chanting mob who take up a large but increasingly isolated section of Anfield's



Barnes: Defying the racists

ground. A recent visit by Newcastle fans produced the now Pavlovian 'oo-oo-oo' when Barnes took a corner. Kemlyn Road erupted in protest. There is evidence that the police take a strong, not to say bruising, line with observed banana-shiers. How far this conveys a change from life-long ingrained racist attitudes is hard to say but cynics put these responses down to the 'he may be a black bastard but he's our black bastard' mentality.

This is not to say that any of the fans would wish Barnes away. Comparisons are made with the best of world football, and Pele's name crops up in casual conversations with supporters. His presence undoubtedly produces coldness in the heart of the opposition, yet his wholesomeness on and off the field

makes him a slippery figure to hate.

For all his silence on the race issue, his impact at LFC has challenged the appointments policy of neighbouring Everton's lily-white lineup. Perhaps under the influence of left-leaning millionaire philanthropist John 'Mr Littlewoods' Moores, Everton have made overtures to black players - the most notable, Mark Walters, going to Glasgow Rangers. This is not without its own irony, given the sorry history of Rangers' own 'Protestants only' appointments. It is not clear whether Walters is a Protestant but it is good to see the absurdities of soccer tribalism being broken down, if only in patches and by degrees. Sometimes a point is all that you can score.

Chris Jones