

Make Us Dream

The Story of Liverpool's 2013/14 Season

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Neil Atkinson and John Gibbons



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FOREWORD

by Ben Smith

WHERE DO YOU START? How do you begin to sum up a season of a thousand dazzling images and a dozen 'I was there' moments with words and words alone?

This was no ordinary football season. This was the season when everything changed. The season when the status quo, at least to some degree, went out of the window and the pre-season predictions were being torn up by November. This was the season that blew through the English game like a breath of fresh air. The season when daring, adventurous football made an audacious comeback and the season when everyone associated with Liverpool Football Club found hope, and with it power and effectiveness and purpose and direction. And I am not talking about the incredible results or the records that tumbled relentlessly, nor am I talking about the statistics or the style and swagger with which the team played. I'm talking about something much more important than that, something that returned to Anfield this season, something that you won't see on a league table, or read in a newspaper. It was something I felt every time I went to Anfield to write or broadcast this incredible story, in fact, it was something I felt every time I was in the city. You could see it in people's faces, hear it in their laughter.

That same feeling came flooding back to me when I read the vivid and vibrant writing in this wonderful, passionate book. Because what leaps off the pages and what Neil Atkinson, John Gibbons and all their many esteemed contributors capture so brilliantly in what you are about to read is the feeling of reclamation, the feeling of a city and a football club finding harmony. The feeling that for the first time in a long time, Liverpool felt like a club at peace once again, a club buoyed by belief not burdened by fear or pressure. The defeats of Arsenal, Manchester City and Spurs were, of course, significant

moments. But what comes through in this book is that it was the defeat of the darkness and back-biting which has engulfed the club over the past decade that may ultimately prove the most important one of all. Liverpool burned away that darkness and let in the light with the way they played, with the enjoyment they brought back to Anfield.

Neil and John lived and breathed every moment of it. They talked about it, fought about it, they wrote about it and ranted about it (as listeners to *The Anfield Wrap* podcast will testify). They were there when it mattered and when it didn't. As a result, the story they have chronicled with such contagious passion is as compelling as it is instructive. It tells the story of a season that will stand the test of time, in such a way that ensures this book will stand with it. From a memorable pre-season which culminated at the mythical MCG in Melbourne to explosive and exhilarating victories at Anfield, the story of the season is told in a way that the mainstream media simply couldn't match. The depth, the insight, the love, the stories, the humour. This is a book that gives words to the memories, it is a bible of what really happened, how people really felt, what the fans said to each other in the pub, what it meant to go to the game, to enjoy and endure it. You'll know what I mean when you read Neil's review of Liverpool's trip to Craven Cottage. It touches on every key moment, on and off the pitch, in a way that is utterly comprehensive and forensic.

This book has been written with heart and head. There is insight, there are brilliant and witty observations, there are love letters, there are moments of despair and disappointment. There is wide-eyed awe at Luis Suárez's exhilarating blend of grace and devastation – the magician from Montevideo, with feet as sensitive as a pick-pocket's hands. And delight at the way Liverpool poured forward time after time, scattering opposition shirts like laundry torn from a washing line. There are tears too, tears of pain, tears that the dream was snatched away and tears of pride. History weighs heavy at Anfield, it always has and always will – the present cannot exist without the past. But this was the season that Brendan Rodgers took Liverpool back to the future and created a feeling that this is now a football club ready to create new history. It no longer feels that Liverpool's past is holding it back.

After the final match of the season against Newcastle at Anfield, Rodgers walked back to his office to be with his family. He was asked when he had

known the title had gone. Was it Steven Gerrard's slip against Chelsea? 'No, no,' he said. 'I knew when Jordan got sent off against Man City. I knew I couldn't replace him. But it's gone now. All that matters to me is that we made them dream.'

These pages carry those hopes and dreams. What a title race. What a season.

Ben Smith, June 2014

MELBOURNE VICTORY 0 LIVERPOOL 2

24 July 2013.

Goals: Gerrard 32', Aspas 90'

HITCH YOUR STAR TO THIS WAGON

THE SCORELINE ISN'T THE RELEVANT FIGURE. It never is in pre-season friendlies anyway. But on this day it is especially irrelevant. Ninety-five thousand people is relevant; 95,446 to be exact. That many went to the MCG to watch Liverpool play Melbourne Victory.

It's a lot of people.

It is a mind-boggling number of people.

Australia boggled the mind. Not because of anything particularly Australian. Indeed, I was struck by exactly how unstereotypically Australian they were in both Melbourne and Sydney, which is patently ridiculous and probably insulting. People have a habit of being people everywhere. I presented three shows there and each was so warmly received. In front of every crowd I was struck by how overwhelmingly happy people were to have us. How welcome they made us. How much they wanted to hear about football.

Australia boggled the mind because of the people getting involved. Involved in football. Involved in the culture around it. Ninety-five thousand people singing 'You'll Never Walk Alone'. What felt like the whole of Melbourne wearing red.

Nine hundred and fifty came to our show the night before 95,000 descended on the MCG. They threw themselves in. They'd thrown themselves in before we even got there. They were drenched in Liverpool football and Liverpool culture. They wanted more and more of it.

What's interesting about the intensity of Liverpool's popularity is that for four years we hadn't been very good. And for the time that came before that we had been very good only sporadically. I think the cultural aspect is part of what has helped sustain Liverpool in the collective imagination the world over. Liverpool means things that Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City and the rest just don't. Perhaps can't. Cities are strange things, the ones that grab people, even if they have never been there, and the ones that don't. New York City means more to the world than Los Angeles despite the latter controlling and producing the bulk of American culture consumed in the 21st century. Barcelona is more romantic than Madrid. Venice destroys Milan. St Petersburg overshadows Moscow.

We get to play at being that cultural aspect. We get to bring bands, tell jokes, talk about a city. Make football as large and inclusive and bold as it can be. We get to do all that because people, these unsterotypical and real Australians, have created the space for it in their own heads. We get there and they are teaching us their songs, the songs they have created about the football team and the city they love. They are so excited. So excitable. It's their football club. It's their city. Liverpool Football Club doesn't exist to win trophies. It doesn't even have to be very good. It exists to represent the city and those who wish to hitch their star to its wagon.

Ninety-five thousand people in Melbourne wanted to hitch their star to its wagon.

Craig Johnston helps. Being the first Australian to really make his name in football and to do so at Liverpool during the club's most golden era helps all the more. Craig Johnston, charisma and curls. And quality.

It helped us that Craig Johnston was involved in all three shows. And all Craig Johnston wanted to talk about was Luis Suárez. How much he loved Luis Suárez. The oceans he'd cross for Luis Suárez. What Luis Suárez represented. All the winning. Craig Johnston's wagon was well and truly hitched.

The following night at the MCG Steven Gerrard genuinely celebrated his opening goal. I wonder how much it mattered to him. It looked like it mattered. The biggest crowd he has ever played in front of and he scored. He

celebrated it. This is important. In my mind, very important. Correlation isn't causation.

I was in awe. I wanted to hitch my star to their wagon. I looked at the MCG, at the thousands, virtually one hundred thousand. I thought about Liverpool's friendly in Indonesia with its remarkable Iron Lady banner created in memory of Anne Williams. I thought about Liverpool's friendly in Thailand to come. A city come to claim its own half way around the world and I was in awe. What a thing to be part of.

We go and do those things, the talking aloud, and people don't come to see us. They come for something much bigger than that. They'd rather be in Anfield every week. They want to be close to the team, they want to be close to that shrine behind the Kop goal. They want that sense of belonging. Liverpool let anyone in. Liverpool should let anyone in. All we can ask is the love of team and city. It's a simple thing. There's a purity to it.

I think about the Indonesia leg of the tour just gone and I think about Thailand leg to come and I think about the 950 who came the night before, the 95,000 who were there on the night and my heart soars.

I recognise that this isn't the smooth opening article a book like this demands. I recognise that. But when the mind boggles it doesn't unboggle. It doesn't undo itself and then make coherent sense again. Everything started here in a sense. I thought about all these people with their 4 a.m. kick-off times and their supporters' clubs all season. All season I thought about the magic they were getting. All season I thought they'd played their part. Started something in some way. Correlation isn't causation, of course it isn't, but these people reminded Liverpool FC of something, I think. They reminded Liverpool FC of something it looked to have forgotten.

You are a big noise. You are the most romantic club in world football. You are the business.

You are serious. It is here and it is now and you are serious.

We came back. We spread the word. It's bananas in Australia, mate. Those lads and girls know what they are about. We get to go every week and they get up at 4 a.m. and think we're the business.

We'd best be it then.

No backward steps.

Neil Atkinson

CELTIC 1 LIVERPOOL 0

10 August 2013.

Goals: Baldé 12'

ANOTHER CRAZY WIN

WE'D BEEN TO IRELAND BEFORE. In the February just past we said we were doing a live *Anfield Wrap* show in Dublin and then announced it was in Bray. Every Liverpool fan in Ireland tweeted us saying Bray wasn't in Dublin. Like the cocky so-and-so's we are we did our first talking out loud in a 500-capacity venue (in a place no one wanted to go to). As someone who has played in bands most of my adult life I did try and explain how hard it was to sell out even a 100-capacity venue. No one seemed interested, although we did take Guillem Balague, Tony Evans and The Tea Street Band with us just in case. It sold out. It was a wonderful, improbable night. We made loads of new mates.

So I was less concerned when we decided we would go back to Ireland, to Dublin proper this time, to coincide with the Liverpool vs Celtic friendly at the Aviva Stadium. We went over on the Friday and got hammered. Saturday morning we got up and played the almost traditional (does twice count as a tradition?) game of football against the Irish Reds. We got beat again, although it was closer this time. We're better at the talking.

Then we went to the venue of the show. It quickly became apparent that this was a very different space to the last occasion. Bray was a conference room, all seated, which meant slightly organised chaos. This was a night club, all standing and loads of pillars, which meant potential bedlam. I was concerned again. I worry. Others told me not to worry. I started drinking. Most of the group went the game. Myself and Neil stayed behind to make sure everything was OK for the bands, although we did watch the game upstairs. I can't remember much of the match, to be honest. I remember we were rubbish, and

I remember we couldn't live with Baldé. Oh well, at least that was the last time that season we struggled to cope with a physical centre forward.

We then went to a bar round the corner to put the finishing touches to the show. I'm not going to tell you any more about the place, because, frankly, I don't want you all to ruin it. It's an improbably good bar so close to the nonsense that is Temple Bar on one of the busiest streets in Ireland. The music, the people, the beer were all perfect. It was so good we almost forgot what we were there for. I just hope it's still there in all its all glory when we go back.

The show itself was mad, a mixture of *Anfield Wrap* fans who wanted tactical analysis of the game and lads who had been drinking all day and just wanted to party. It was tough to work out who outnumbered who. I tried to bridge the gap by singing Philippe Coutinho songs. Everyone joined in. Tony Evans was great talking about 1983/84 for those who could hear with the struggling sound. Dion Fanning played the part of glass-half-empty pessimist with vigour. Kevin Sampson showed drunken disdain for the concept of a microphone. Neil managed to keep us all on the runaway mine train long enough to reach the end.

After certain things had been added (me acting out famous goal celebrations) and others had been abandoned (half the agenda) we finished and the bands came on. The Hummingbirds came on and loads of attractive girls appeared. Where were they for Rob Gutmann on Jordan Henderson? Ian Prowse came on and serenaded us with Celtic songs of love and war. The Tea Street Band came on and smashed everyone's head off. Then I played music until I was aggressively told to pack it in by the owner.

What I find interesting about looking back at these events is that they remind me of where we were at that time and the belief, or otherwise, of the fan base. The first trip came just after the January transfer window we were yet to know the full benefit of. The questions and conversations I remember that night were all, not unreasonably, of whether Brendan Rodgers had the experience to lead a side like Liverpool, and whether he was the right man to undertake the mammoth job in hand. By the summer I remember those I spoke to being more positive, but there was still debate over how much the team had genuinely progressed since Dalglish had been replaced, and whether the Champions League was a realistic target.

In the end I think we just about finished up that night. It wasn't a one-sided victory by any stretch of the imagination. By away-performance standards it was more Cardiff 3 Liverpool 6 than Tottenham Hotspur 0 Liverpool 5. But we're in the results business at the end of the day, and we left with more tales than hangovers. Another crazy win.

John Gibbons

LUIS SUÁREZ TELLS THE WORLD HE WANTS TO LEAVE LIVERPOOL...

... AND IT MAKES NO ODDS.

I understand why people think Suárez saying publicly he wants to leave matters. I understand the recourse to emotion. That's the aim.

When he ran on against Olympiakos in Gerrard's testimonial at Anfield, Suárez may have been surprised by the warmth of the response. I suspect his agent was. I suspect it made him think, we've got to do something about this. We need these people to barrack him. We need to do an interview which separates him from them. This is the next step. It is the only step. We need to do something to bring this move about.

Let's go all the way. He wants to go. The problem is ...

It makes no odds.

It's a manipulative move. By player, by agent. But it is merely saying publicly what has been said privately to the club. It is the explicit articulation of a number of implicit leaked nuggets to newspapermen. You knew Luis Suárez wanted to go. You know he really wants to go. He wants to play at the highest level and currently Liverpool cannot offer that.

It makes no odds.

The crux of it isn't unreasonable. This is where we are. We end this forthcoming season four years and six months on from our last Champions League fixture. Luis Suárez is, in my view, the best attacking footballer in the world who doesn't currently play for Barcelona or Real Madrid. He ought to have the opportunity to play at that level. His talent isn't wasted at Liverpool – it's appreciated like nothing on earth. It's a glorious, marvellous, rambunctious

thing which we have loved for two and a half seasons now. It should be showcased in European Cup finals as Zidane's and Messi's, Dalglish's and Di Stéfano's has been.

It makes no odds.

The player is under contract at Liverpool. Now presuming that the clause doesn't oblige Liverpool to accept anything (and this had better be the case or Liverpool's competence question is only going to go nuclear), the reality is that Liverpool choose whether he stays or goes. Liverpool choose what to do with an offer of £40m plus one pound. Liverpool choose.

Liverpool have chosen.

The situation is that Liverpool's challenge for a finish fourth or higher is easier if Luis Suárez doesn't play for anyone this season than if he plays for Arsenal and Liverpool have £50m to spend. This is the reality. This is where we are as well. What stuns me is that Arsenal haven't offered 60 or 70 million for the player. Because any amount he is worth to Liverpool he is worth that plus 10 million to Arsenal. He is the player who would cement them in the top four barring catastrophe. He is the player who would make them genuine contenders.

But it would make no odds.

A sale to Arsenal is suicide for a Liverpool that has spent four years dangerously close to coma, though finally showing serious signs of fight. This is a serious sign of fight, the second half of last season, a serious sign of fight. Selling Suárez would be switching the life-support machine off. A sale to Madrid slightly less so, but still gives Liverpool a huge question as to how they effectively spend any money. How effectively they can spend the money. Without being able to offer ...

... and on we go.

I love the expression 'it makes no odds'. What exactly does it mean? It doesn't make that much sense in theory but your mouth has a symmetry as it says it. It's what not being impressed sounds like. It's your mouth shrugging.

It's the response. The only response to this tantrum.

Garments shouldn't be rent, hair should remain in the scalp, tears shouldn't be shed and shirts should remain uncharred.

Let's not give anyone what they want. No heat. No light. No shouting.
Just a collective 'It makes no odds, lad'.

Neil Atkinson

LIVERPOOL 1 STOKE CITY 0

17 August 2013.

Goals: Daniel Sturridge 37'

CHAMPIONS ELECT

OPENING DAY IS THE BEST. Anything could happen from here. I always get ridiculously optimistic, but why not? In theory every team has an equal chance before a ball is kicked, no one has lost yet, everyone has the same points. Of course, in practice, some are more equal than others, but for now it's all to play for. Maybe Hull will win the first five. Maybe Chelsea will get relegated. Maybe we will win EVERY game. It's unlikely, but it's still possible. That's the beauty of opening day.

Of course, in recent years Liverpool have had a habit of quickly crushing this pre-season positivity. We had only won one of our previous ten opening-day fixtures. You'd go into the ground dreaming of league titles and walk out wondering if you could hibernate until next August and start again with loads of new lads you could pin your hopes on. We're already behind them lot, and we'll never catch them now.

Two of those last ten opening games particularly stick in my mind for providing a journey from optimism to depression in 90 minutes flat. The first is Sheffield United away in 2006/07. The season before, we had finished the league campaign with 82 points and won the FA Cup. It was logical to expect that the next step for Benítez's gang of achievers was a genuine title charge. But when the team came through at Bramall Lane, we suddenly didn't look particularly strong, and we needed a disputed penalty to draw the game.

The second is Sunderland at home in 2011/12. Liverpool had been brilliant in the second half of the season before under Dalglish, showing genuine top-four form and scoring a tonne of goals in the process. We'd spent

heavily in the summer and it felt to everyone that we were set for a new adventure, under new owners and with the most popular man in the club's history at the helm. Sunderland at home seemed a perfect game to get the season off to a flier, but after starting well Liverpool could only draw again. Same old Liverpool.

You might argue that the opening fixture shouldn't be the be-all and end-all. There are 37 games left to turn it round, and plenty of teams have won things after shaky starts, or started brightly and gone down. But not really Liverpool, in the Premier League era at least. Both of the opening games I have discussed were ominous signs of the season to come. The 2006/07 team struggled all season away from home, losing the next away fixture 3–0 to Everton and only winning once in the league away from Anfield before the beginning of December. In contrast the Sunderland result at the start of 2011/12 was the first of nine league draws at Anfield that season, as the team became specialists in dominating for long periods of play, missing chances, and allowing the opposition back in the game once heads had gone down and Charlie Adam couldn't run.

But the last time we won an opening fixture, this time away at Sunderland in 2008/09, was the last time we mounted a significant title challenge, so maybe the omens are with us this time. Yes, we only won 1–0, and we weren't particularly great, but we won 1–0 without playing that well at Sunderland too. That time Torres, this time Sturridge. New heroes, new hope.

You don't need to be that great opening week. It's about the win. It's about not being behind the leaders already. It's about keeping that daft pre-season optimism going for another week. No one has beaten us yet. Maybe no one will. Maybe we'll win the lot. You can't tell me it definitely won't happen. We're gonna win the league.

John Gibbons

A PENALTY SAVE

ONE OF THE KEY THEMES in David Peace's brilliant, bewildering novel *Red or Dead* is monotony.

Through Bill Shankly, Peace explores the essential sameness of football, the relentless, inevitable, intense orderliness enshrined in the game's very structure.

You do the same things, in the same ways, at roughly the same cities and towns. You could be doing them for the rest of your life. This is your life.

At least managers and players are getting paid.

The means by which football takes over their lives, our lives, and much of our national life is the league. Until the Football League, it was Old Etonians and Royal Engineers and Everton messing about in the FA Cup or playing in loosely-structured local competitions.

We didn't even bother forming till the league was four years old, having given it a decent chance to bed in. In their first season in the first Division, Liverpool played Aston Villa, Sunderland and West Brom. They also played Stoke.

Stoke have become the living embodiment of the league and what it does to you. You accept Stoke. You get Stoked. You bow your head, write it off as a bad job, explain away dropped points because it's Stoke. Since they came back up it's always been Stoke.

In July, when the pattern of your life until the following May is roughly laid out for you, you see Stoke and you dread Stoke. You worry for your new signings, you panic about what forwards who score roughly once every six games will do against the fragile hothouse flowers who suddenly seem to make up your central defence.

And this season, it's Stoke first. Not buried somewhere in November when we've already drifted out of contention, but straight away, in the daytime, at lunchtime, before anyone else kicks a ball.

Stoke have a new manager, are aiming to be different, sick of the sight even of themselves. But we know they'll still be Stoke, and they are. They compete. They go long. They understand refereeing better than any official yet born, better than the chip in the ball, better than a team of Hawkeyes. They get in our heads.

We worry for Iago Aspas, his slight frame seemingly at odds with the challenge we face. But he plays his part in the number 10 role, drifting between the liniest lines in the league.

The other concern is Simon Mignolet. Our new goalkeeper looks nervy. His kicking in the first half is poor, an anxious Kop at his back feeding off his discomfort.

Nobody feels secure. Nobody expected to - we're playing Stoke. Daniel Sturridge settles an argument from 20 yards with a beautifully pure strike, but we're still unmistakably playing Stoke.

Peter Crouch is a worry. Kolo Toure looks imperious against a side with little pace to hurt him. Mignolet makes a fine diving save. Liverpool pass away the minutes, retaining possession and appearing composed. Then Daniel Agger handles in the box. This will be a draw. The house always wins.

And yet this time, this year, it doesn't. The house doesn't win, the league doesn't win, monotony does not win. Mignolet saves the penalty, and saves the follow-up. He immediately gets on with organising his defence for the resulting corner.

We have three points. Stoke have none. It took a Sturridge shot and a Mignolet save. In however many moments you get in 90 minutes, we had the best two, the two that mattered.

Walking back to town, the routine rhythm of the season interrupted already, tables are checked and pictures are tweeted. As everybody else kicks off, Liverpool are top of the league. Isn't it funny? By a quirk of scheduling, we're top of the league. Hahaha. Enjoy it while you can, lads. Enjoy it while you can.

We can.

Gareth Roberts

THE BUZZ

PAUL COPE SAID TO ME: 'Listened to your Melbourne podcast. And I just thought, yeah. We should enjoy it. It should be great. It used to be. We get to go and do this and all we do is act like it ruins our day whereas people around the world would kill to do this every week. Well, let's start fucking enjoying it. I'm going to have a great season.'

Rob Gutmann said to me: 'I'll take the scrappiest 1-0 from Stoke. The scrappiest.'

I said to him: 'I think we need a statement-of-intent display. A performance. Houllier or Benítez seasons can start scrappy but this Liverpool side did its best stuff in style last season.'

Against Stoke, we got scrappy. We got a statement of intent. We got both.

Liverpool were terrific at times. Fluid and intelligent. Lucas and Gerrard held court in centre mid. Coutinho shining like a national guitar. Aspas lithe. Sturridge splendid then brave. Kolo Touré became a man we'd follow to the very jaws of hell. Then they tired without the second they deserved. They had to fight. The side was painfully let down by the vice-captain before Mignolet got us all out of jail.

Mirror football journalist John Cross was channelling Emmylou Harris on Twitter. He described the Liverpool collective as 'The city of forgiveness where everyone bar the unfaithful lover is to blame'. John, you need to get up here. We aren't anywhere near as romantic as that these days. We spend our time fighting the darkness that hacks at our heels every year and being tainted by that fight. But at our best these days there's a noisy, gnarled defiance that I love. Nothing says Liverpool like a communal 'fuck off, you'. Loud, while through gritted teeth. Watch the last 20 minutes of Chelsea at home in 2005 again. Spurs home 2010. City in the 2012 League Cup semi. Just fuck off, you.

The sheer fuckoffed-ness in the aftermath of Mignolet's penalty save was glorious. Liverpool's day was saved. Our day was saved. It was the sound of 40,000 days saved. The sound of 40,000 days saved times 19. Times 38. How many days can one save save? The darkness of Martin Skrtel against City, combined with the Dempsey cock-up and the Arsenal debacle, all that darkness let in last season wasn't being let through the door against Stoke.

The darkness that was Hodgson, Hodgson endless Hodgson, that was Skrtel and Carragher breaking each other's face, that was Charlie Adam running round in centre mid shattered and apologetic after 60, wasn't darkening these parts. Just fuck off. Fuck off with that. We don't want that taint. Not this year. We won't have it again. It's taken too much of a toll. We won't stand for it. We were roaring because it was kept at bay and because we

need to keep it at bay. Liv-er-pool belted out by all quarters because that is who we are, for better or worse. Liv-er-pool, fuck-off, you.

And so we were all out. We all had a great day. A great Saturday with laughs and shrugs and songs and drinks and jokes. We were buzzing. So let's keep buzzing. Let's all come together to build some massive defences against the darkness that dogs us. We aren't good enough to assume it won't grab at us. But we all have to work at it. We are good enough to keep shaking it off. We owe it to each other around the world not to acquiesce to it any more. We need to keep buzzing. While we are buzzing we can see the darkness off. We can block it out with laughs and shrugs and songs and drinks and jokes.

Saw Cope. He said someone started moaning near him after three minutes. He felt a bit sorry for him. That bloke needs to get with it. Look at them. They suddenly could be a red gang again. Not yet a squad but a gang. I want to be one of Kolo's Heroes. I want Steven's lime green boots. I want Lucas to stick up for me against a million grocks.

Saturday sits on my shoulder. I want it today and tomorrow and a week on Wednesday. I want it 37 more times. People'd kill to do this every week.

Neil Atkinson

ASTON VILLA 0 LIVERPOOL 1

*24 August 2013.
Goals: Sturridge 21'*

DANIEL STURRIDGE

DANIEL STURRIDGE FINISHED THE 2012/13 SEASON with 11 goals in 16 games, or 10 in 14 league games, a start to his Liverpool career which compared favourably with any of the renowned strikers to have played for the club. There were some complaints at the time that such an explosive start didn't get the recognition it deserved, but I think it was reasonably understandable. Nationally the press aren't going to pay much attention to a Sturridge-led surge from tenth (when he signed) to seventh – even when some of the football was so easy on the eye – when there are far more noteworthy things happening at either end of the table.

Even for Liverpool supporters there wasn't much of a clamour to laud the achievement, for the simple reason that even relatively young fans have experienced seasons with success, seasons with trophies, seasons that ultimately mattered. In football all goals are equal, but some are more equal than others. Stan Collymore scored 35 goals for Liverpool and I can remember about three of them (and one of those was a freak bobble). Luis Garcia scored 30 and I reckon I can have a good go at naming the lot.

Through no fault of his own, Sturridge came to us at a time that was more Collymore's era than Garcia's, and it's the goals in big seasons that really mean something to fans. For all the nonsense reasons given for why Sturridge wasn't as instantly loved by the Kop as he might have been, it was rarely acknowledged that we've seen tonnes of great players during far better times. Most Liverpool fans were largely willing to accept 2012/13 as a transition season, but it was hard to get particularly excited about anything going on within it when it ends in finishing seventh. It's all a bit 'and what?'

Saying all that, I do wonder what Daniel Sturridge must have been thinking in the summer of 2013 when the Suárez circus was in full steam. When Liverpool's season seemed to hinge on Suárez staying or leaving he must have felt like saying, 'Don't worry, lads, I'm really good at the scoring.' Even when Suárez decided to stay, all the talk was of how they would cope in the first six games without him, everyone seemingly ignoring again the lad who was really good at the scoring.

But if Sturridge was annoyed, he let his feet do the talking. Any frustration he might have had was leathered into the winner at Stoke. If his first of the season was a sledgehammer, his second was a sculpture. After a lovely dummy from Coutinho, the type that never usually come off but lead to a lot of thumbs up afterwards, it was all Sturridge's magic feet. Later in the season he spoke to *The Anfield Wrap* about how, when he plays at his instinctive best, he has to watch his goals back to see what he actually did. He would have enjoyed seeing what he did against Villa, dancing round defenders and firing into the roof of the net with Guzan helpless.

I think it was that game when Sturridge went from top player to match winner in many eyes. Or maybe it was just in mine. The season was two games old and, notwithstanding other good performances, he had won both on his own and it wouldn't be long before he was doing it again. Maybe we wouldn't miss Suárez as much as we thought we would those first six games. Although I reckon Danny would have told you that all along.

John Gibbons

BENTEKE EVERYWHERE

Liverpool 1 Aston Villa 3 – 15 December 2012. Liverpool crumbled to a defeat under an aerial bombardment. Christian Benteke bossed Liverpool into submission. He wasn't the first to do this. Far from it.

Benteke, and the Bentekes, are terrifying. Physical centre forwards change football matches. It isn't as simple as winning a few headers. It's the pace, the disruption, the aggression. But also the touch. Everyone used to laugh about Crouch being described as having a good touch for a big man. The reality is

that footballers playing centre forward at this level tend to have an excellent touch. You don't get this far without it.

Benteke, and the Bentekes, have always been kryptonite to Liverpool defences I've watched with the exception of those helmed by Sami Hyypia. Hyypia wasn't impervious to good footballers putting themselves about – no one can be. But he improved Liverpool markedly overnight, and progressively for years.

Aston Villa 1 Liverpool 2 – 31 March 2013. Liverpool got battered first half. Benteke was everywhere. Second half they came out and played. They played and played and Villa couldn't cope. They got themselves ahead and Villa came with a late bombardment against us but we held out.

Aston Villa 0 Liverpool 1 – 24 August 2013. And nothing. Liverpool dominated the first half against Villa, Sturridge did marvellous things. And at the other end – one chance for Benteke. One half-shout for a penalty. No panic. No battering. No disturbance. Yes, Liverpool sat deep second half but they never felt anywhere near as stressed and stretched.

Kolo Touré.

Kolo had turned up, told the world and the dressing room they could win the league. Told everyone how magnificent they were. Told them they were leaders and men and footballers. They seemed to have more fun. Gerrard in brightly coloured boots and with a beard. He gave the club the boost a two-time league-winning player can give. He wasn't jaded, he was genuinely pleased to be here. Liverpool was a privilege, not a chore. These players weren't limited, they were limitless. Kolo was the first to say in one sense, 'We are Liverpool. Tra-la-la-la-la.'

And then he played against Stoke.

Kolo against Stoke was magnificent. Crouch couldn't get near the football match, Liverpool were well marshalled and tight. And then Kolo attacked. A red streak charging forward in a straight line. The move broke down. Kolo charged back. A red streak charging backwards in a straight line. Stoke punted the ball upfield. Kolo headed it clear. The Kop cheered, sang his name, and Kolo clapped back.