

THE MIRROR ED: ISSUE DATE: PAGE: BCM Y



EUROPEAN KOP FINAL



UNBELIEVE



LIVERPOOL sealed the greatest comeback in Champions League history last night to turn the Istanbul night red with Scousers' delight.

Rafa Benitez's men had stood on the brink of humiliation as they were three goals down before the break and being run ragged by the brilliance of Brazilian Kaka and the predatory instincts of Chelsea cast-off Hernan Crespo.

But the legends of the past could only look on in wonder as the Reds turned a lost cause into a night of sheer bedlam in the space of six stunning minutes that defied belief and all footballing logic.

And then just as against Roma 21 years ago, the Reds triumphed from the spot again, as Jerzy Dudek proved the hero in a penalty shoot-out as Liverpool won it 3-2.

Benitez, horribly let down by Harry Kewell who repaid his decision to back the Aussie over Didi Hamann by limping away after 23 minutes, looked to have made a mistake that might haunt him for years.

A first minute goal from Paolo Maldini seemed to have knocked the stuffing out of the Reds, while the absence of Hamann allowed the inspirational Kaka to rip huge holes in the Liverpool rearguard.

When Crespo, on loan from Chelsea

MILAN		LIVERPOOL FOOTBALL CLUB
53%	POSSESSION	47%
10	SHOTS ON TARGET	7
11	SHOTS OFF TARGET	6
7	OFFSIDES	6
11	CORNERS	4
16	FOULS	23
0	YELLOW	2
0	RED CARDS	0
ATTENDANCE: 65,000		
MAN OF THE MATCH: Gerrard		

and still having half his £90,000-per-week wages paid by the Blues, capitalised twice on Kaka's approach work, the Special One's cast-off appeared to be gaining Stamford Bridge revenge for the semi-final defeat.

Yet out of nowhere, Liverpool found the courage and guts to change everything as Steven Gerrard's header sparked a comeback that would have been dismissed as fanciful in a Boy's Own comic.

Kewell's replacement, Vladimir Smicer, grabbed a second and as the Liverpool fans began to urge their men onwards, Gerrard's run into the box was ended by a foul from Rino Gattuso and Xabi Alonso converted the rebound after Dida saved his spot kick.

The Merseyside fans who filled

ATA BOYS: Xabi Alonso fires home after seeing his penalty saved and Liverpool miraculously pull it back to 3-3
Pictures: BRADLEY ORMESHER

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AC Milan **3** Liverpool **3**

**AET: LIVERPOOL WIN
3-2 ON PENALTIES**

WABUUL

**Liverpool the
kings of Europe
after greatest
fightback in
Cup history**

Martin Lipton

CHIEF FOOTBALL WRITER, IN ISTANBUL



AL RIGHT NOW:
Milan Baros
celebrates with
scorer Alonso



SMICER celebrates Liverpool's second

Gerrard Kops a classic

FROM BACK PAGE

comebacks in Istanbul's Ataturk Stadium against AC Milan.

Dudek revealed that before the shoot-out Jamie Carragher told him to remember Bruce Grobelaar's rubber leg antics in the 1984 final shoot-out.

He said: "Jamie told me to remember what happened and put them off all the time - just do it the same."

Liverpool scored three times in six minutes after trailing 3-0 at half-time with Steven Gerrard, Vladimir Smicer and Xabi Alonso bagging the goals - the equaliser coming on the rebound from a saved spot-kick.

And after a goalless period of extra time, including a wonder-save by Dudek, it went down to the nail-biting drama of a penalty shoot-out.

Dead and buried at half-time as they trailed to three unanswered AC Milan goals, the English club showed a spirit and determination that defied belief.

No team has ever come back from three goals down in a European final before.

But Liverpool under Rafael Benitez have proved that nothing is beyond them in Europe this season, not even trailing by three goals to Milan, the Italian masters of defending.

A six-minute spell just after the break, as Liverpool offered a rousing attempt to come back into the final, stunned their opponents and somehow achieved the impossible.

Goals from the inspirational Gerrard, substitute Smicer and then Alonso dragged them level in the 59th minute, and took this to extra time.

Surely not even one Liverpool fan who took over almost the entire stadium thought after the first half that it was possible to even see extra time.

The game had started so disastrously for the English club, when they conceded a goal to Paolo Maldini after just 51 seconds, and things went from bad to worse as the half progressed.

First Harry Kewell limped off with a groin injury, and then two goals in the space of five minutes just before the break from Chelsea reject Hernan Crespo destroyed Liverpool.

Somehow though, they kept their nerve, and manager Rafa Benitez rearranged things to give his side a trickle of hope that swelled into a torrent in the second half.

three-quarters of the ground had believed in glorious victory.

But those dreams were looking shattered as Milan struck a devastating blow inside 53 seconds.

Djimi Traore had no need to jump in on Kaka as the Brazilian was wandering rather aimlessly on the right flank. When he did so, the consequences were brutal.

Andrea Pirlo sized up his options before delivering to the penalty spot and, despite a host of red shirts, it was the right boot of Maldini that connected, his downward volley bouncing past the unprepared Dudek.

Gerrard and Alonso were struggling to get any sort of grip on proceedings, with the cowardly Kewell letting down Liverpool and Benitez as he seemed to be looking for a way out even before the groin knock that saw him make way for

Smicer. The boos and jeers from the Liverpool fans told their own story.

Milan were looking to get in behind Liverpool at every opportunity, sharper to the ball and far more controlled and dangerous, and when the sublime Kaka slipped Shevchenko through on goal on 28 minutes, the Ukrainian did not expect the flag to be raised as he reeled away in triumph after slotting home.

Killed

Liverpool, by contrast, were hitting with hope rather than expectation, although neat work between Riise and Baros gave Garcia a rare sight of goal, his volley slicing wide.

But it was what happened in the space of 15 seconds in the 38th minute that seemed to have killed off Liverpool. Alonso sent Garcia

scurrying away in to the box, his shift inside sending Alessandro Nesta on to his back as the ball clearly struck the defender's arm inside the box.

Yet neither referee Manuel Mejuto Gonzalez nor his assistant spotted the blatant handball and Milan struck with devastating efficiency as Kaka's ball to Shevchenko found that gap behind Traore.

Jamie Carragher's momentary loss of balance made the task easy for the Argentine.

And two minutes before the break, Kaka unhinged the Reds with a sublime turn away from Gerrard, matched by a peerless pass that sent Crespo romping away.

The finish was deadly and instant, Dudek helpless as the ball was scooped over him to nestle in the bottom corner. Yet the introduction

of Hamann sparked the most astonishing turnaround in the 50-year history of the cup.

When Gerrard rose unattended to meet Riise's cross with a looping header that billowed into the net, it looked like a consolation act.

Sneaked

But it galvanised Liverpool and breathed life into their fans. Within two minutes, Smicer's drilled effort from 20 yards sneaked past Dida to finish in the bottom corner.

Then Garcia's touch sent Gerrard in on goal, with Rino Gattuso clearly bundling him over.

This time the referee pointed to the spot and, although Dida saved Alonso's initial spot kick, the midfielder rammed the rebound into the roof of the net.

But there was more spot-kick drama to come as Liverpool triumphed.

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