

Date: 29 July 2010
 Opposition: FK Rabotnicki Skopje
 Competition: Europa League

Times	Guardian	Mail
Telegraph	Mirror	Echo



29 July 2010

THE TIMES

Hodgson opens account with routine win

Rabotnicki 0
 Liverpool 2

Far from being the most difficult start that Roy Hodgson could have expected to his Anfield career, the **Liverpool** manager began his reign with a victory so routine it bordered on being easy. Rarely will he be so happy - and so relieved - to be proven so badly wrong.

Hodgson's fears that **Liverpool** were unprepared for the Europa League third qualifying round first-leg tie proved unfounded as he marked his first competitive game as the club's manager with a win as comfortable as any he can have experienced throughout his nomadic career.

So much for the well worn cliché that there are no straightforward assignments left in European football. A 2-0 scoreline - with goal in either half from David Ngog - may not suggest that this was a walk in the park, but the raw statistics do little justice to the yawning chasm between the clubs: one that retains pretensions of continental conquest, the other whose ambitions extend no farther than being able to mix it with the European big boys.

Probably more telling than the goal count is that Diego Cavalieri, **Liverpool's** stand-in goalkeeper, did not have a save to make throughout a one-sided affair that left Zoran Stratev, the Rabotnicki coach, complaining that his players had been "scared of the name of **Liverpool**".

In contrast with his pre-match musings, in which he had protested that a competitive fixture had come so early that **Liverpool** were at risk of becoming victims of one of the biggest upsets in their history, Hodgson had no complaints. "I am very satisfied," he said. "It could have been very difficult for us, so I am pleased that we can go back to Anfield with a margin of victory that makes it more comfortable.

"I'm really pleased that we got through this test because they are an experienced European team, who can play some good football. I am encouraged by that." Indeed, Hodgson's mood had been lifted so much by the victory that he even allowed himself to indulge in the benefit of hindsight by conceding that a competitive game in late July may not have been as much of an inhibition to his planning as he had originally feared.

"The players came into the game under pressure, and I am delighted it is a positive outcome and they can go back to **Liverpool** feeling good about themselves," Hodgson said. "You learn a lot about your team every time they play, and there were a lot of players out there who I need to learn about. Some of them I've hardly worked with, so it was a very good exercise for me in that respect."

Even with the likes of Steven Gerrard, Joe Cole and Jamie Carragher left on Merseyside to continue their training and Pepe Reina and Fernando Torres still to return to the fold after their World Cup-winning exploits with Spain, it was evident from the outset that **Liverpool** were from a class far above their opponents. Hodgson's well-drilled banks of four in midfield and defence established a stranglehold on Rabotnicki and Ngog's goals brought their reward.

"Ngog has worked very hard in training and done very well in the pre-season games, and he crowned his hard work with an impressive performance and the goals that will be a big weight off his mind," Hodgson said. "Front players need goals, and he has got them, which means he can relax. He has shown us that he has the movement and touch, and quality."

Ngog's suitability to the role of understudy to Torres may still be in question but each of his goals was well taken, the first a cool finish after being released by Lucas Leiva and the second a sweet volley from Martin Kelly's cross. He did his cause little harm, particularly at a time when Hodgson looks to separate the wheat from the chaff in **Liverpool's** squad.

"I came to the job knowing the situation, and the important thing is to put together a team that can match the expectation that surrounds this club," Hodgson said. "I don't think I've ever said the squad is in need of a major overhaul.

What I want to do is add one or two players to the team, which is what Rafael Benitez would have wanted to do.

"If we are going to have a good season in the Premier League, we will need the stars back in our midst, but I can also say that we've got players who are maybe not as well known who have done a good job, who have stepped in and got a great result in conditions that were not easy."

If the rest of his **Liverpool** career turns out to be as straightforward as his opening night, Hodgson will be on Easy Street, but he will know better than anyone that the difficult days are still to come.

Rabotnicki (4-3-3): M Bogatinov - G Dimovski, Fernando Lopes, E Belica, V Sekulovski (sub: E Adem, 43min) - V Tunevski (sub: F Petkovski, 77), N Gligorov, G Todorovski - Ze Carlos (sub: G Mojsov, 57), Wandeir, Fabio Silva. Substitutes not used: T Kandikijan, Marcio, Roberto Carlos, K Sinkovic. **Liverpool** (4-4-1-1): D Cavalieri - M Kelly, M Skrtel, S Kyrgiakos, D Agger (sub: S Darby, 72) - D Amoo (sub: N Eccleston, 83), Lucas Leiva, J Spearing, M Jovanovic - A Aquilani (sub: L Dalla Valle, 83) - D Ngog. Substitutes not used: P Gulacsi, J Shelvey, D Ayala, T Ince.

Referee: A Damato (Italy).

the guardian

Ngog's bright start suggests Hodgson's Liverpool story could be a thriller

Rabotnicki 0
 Liverpool 2

Ngog 17, 58

As an avid reader of some pretty heavyweight fiction, Roy Hodgson knows opening chapters are extremely important. Just like novelists, football managers benefit from good starts and he will consequently be suitably satisfied with last night's assured competitive beginning to his **Liverpool** reign.

Two polished finishes from David Ngog - one dinked, one volleyed - on a balmy Balkan evening ensured the first leg of this Europa League third-round qualifier was anything but the ordeal Hodgson had privately feared.

He asked a young, makeshift side to "swim" and, perhaps to his surprise, they generally did - none more strongly than Ngog and David Amoo, an exhilarating winger **Liverpool** fans are unlikely to have heard the last of.

Granted Rabotnicki were unexpectedly obliging hosts but with his, able at times understandably ring rusty, visitors playing with real width and disciplined intelligence - tellingly, no one was booked - the early signs are Hodgson's unfolding Anfield story could be well worth sticking with.

"Front players need goals. Tonight David Ngog got them and that will be a big weight off his mind," Hodgson said. "I'm just delighted so many players who were under pressure coming into the game can go back to **Liverpool** tomorrow feeling good about themselves. I'm very satisfied as it could have been very difficult for us in front of a big crowd who really supported their team."

On Tuesday locals here marked the anniversary of the devastating earthquake which flattened large areas of Skopje in 1963, killing 1,066 people.

Forty seven years on, the clock at the city's former train station still has its hands frozen at 5.17am, the moment the quake struck in one of Europe's seismically most unstable regions.

Last night residents were ready for Rabotnicki to rumble Hodgson's youthful ensemble. The need for post-World Cup holidays dictated **Liverpool's** new manager was without 10 senior players for his first formal game in charge of the club he took over only a month ago but it soon appeared the Macedonian threat had been greatly exaggerated. Lucas Leiva, Hodgson's captain for the night, is not every **Liverpool** fan's favourite but the Brazilian was soon cutting an assured figure in the heart of an essentially five-man midfield, winning some key interceptions.

He also took the 17th-minute free-kick which was completely misread by two defenders, thereby permitting the unattended Ngog to lift the ball over the advancing goalkeeper Martin Bogatinov. Goals rarely come softer.

Although Jay Spearing was sometimes too easily dispossessed and novice right-back Martin Kelly found himself turned by Rabotnicki's Brazilian forward Wandeir, the Macedonians largely found Martin Skrtel and Sotirios Kyrgiakos an obdurate defensive barrier.

Much as the 20,000 who had crammed into a half-built stadium for the biggest game in Rabotnicki's history delighted in booing the latter's every touch - Macedonians are not generally over-fond of their Greek neighbours - Diego Cavalieri, **Liverpool's** goalkeeper, could have been forgiven for dozing off. Toothless throughout, the Macedonians were as weak as the ground's new floodlights, which dimmed alarmingly during the second half.

Not that Bogatinov was exactly overworked. Despite the odd adroit touch from Milan Jovanovic, the Serbia winger newly signed from Standard Liege, and Alberto Aquilani along with Amoo's raw energy down the flanks, it is unlikely Steven Gerrard, Joe Cole and Fernando Torres will be sweating on their places.

Yet if Jovanovic and Aquilani - who began in a withdrawn attacking role floating behind Ngog - were big on economy of effort, Amoo's high-intensity exertions suggested he saw this as an important audition. The former Millwall flyer is all scorching pace and fierce crossing and there could be some exciting cameos to come from him.

Ngog, too, is clearly anxious to please his new manager and the young French striker duly arrived in the right place at the right time to claim his second goal. Kelly, overlapping down the right, drove in a splendid cross weighted perfectly for Ngog to connect with. All that remained was for the forward to volley it right-footed into the top corner from around six yards.

It was the sort of instinctive, first-time, natural poacher's finish which indicated he may yet confound his many doubters. A new, exciting, chapter might just have begun at Anfield.

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The Mail

Ngog makes it a double as Hodgson gets off to a flier

FK Rabotnicki 0 Liverpool 2 DAVID NGOG was the unlikely hero last night, scoring the first two goals of Roy Hodgson's reign to silence the hostile fanatics in Macedonia.

And assuming they paid their [pounds sterling]4.99 for the privilege to watch the game on Primetime, Steven Gerrard, Jamie Carragher and Joe Cole will have watched a very satisfactory performance from Liverpool's young second string. More than 20,000 turned out for the biggest game in FK Rabotnicki's 73-year history, double their normal attendance for even the biggest league games.

Although the Macedonian side, including four Brazilians, could not match their supporters' passion with football to test Liverpool, Hodgson knew they were tricky opponents for his first game.

Yet, Liverpool breezed through the first half and Diego Cavalieri, making a rare appearance in the visitors' goal, had nothing to trouble him from the side who finished second in the Macedonian league last season.

The only effort Cavalieri had to save was an ambitious strike from 30 yards from the Rabotnicki playmaker Ze Carlos which bounced about 10 times in front of the standin keeper before he made a routine stop. His warm-up was harder.

Liverpool, cheered on by about 300 fans who had made the journey from England and various part of Eastern Europe, went close before Ngog broke the deadlock with a simple move in the 17th minute.

Captain for the night Lucas Leiva forced goalkeeper Martin Bogatinov to race from his area and clear after 12 minutes, following Alberto Aquilani's neat through ball, and teenage winger David Amoo caused havoc on both flanks, slipping one cross beyond Ngog and Bogatinov.

Defender Sotirios Kyrgiakos, who was jeered relentlessly for being Greek, also went close with a header from a Lucas corner.

But Lucas made no mistake when he turned provider with a quick free-kick which caught the home defence napping. Bogatinov and Fernando Lopes made a mess of a simple clearance at the edge of the area, allowing Ngog to walk the ball into the empty net with ease.

It was his eighth Liverpool goal since his [pounds sterling]1.5million move from Paris St Germain two years ago and a crucial one for Hodgson.

It was a game the 62-year-old could afford to lose but certainly did not want to. He had asked the Liverpool board to prioritise the Europa League as the last of their concerns, and certainly way behind Champions League qualification, and appeared to get his wish.

Daniel Agger, Martin Skrtel and Kyrgiakos were back earlier than he and they would like, but at least he managed to preserve the longterm fitness of his big stars.

It took him 18 games to reach the Europa League final with Fulham last season and the London side suffered in the Premier League as a result, finishing 12th and failing to build on the impressive seventh place finish the previous season which had got Fulham into Europe in the first place.

Different club, different expectations.

Twelve months ago Hodgson's Fulham players were back in training in the first week of July. Several of the players he has inherited at Liverpool are still waiting to return for their first day of preseason training.

His England contingent have been back for more than a week but, taking the advice and pleas from his sports science staff, Hodgson resisted the temptation to play them.

They are more likely to play some part in a friendly against Borussia Monchengladbach on Sunday and could even play in the second leg at Anfield next Thursday. His pre-season campaign with most of the same young and fringe players, plus Alberto Aquilani, Ngog, Milan Jovanovic and Lucas Leiva had hardly gone to plan.

The drew 0-0 in Zug against a strong FC Grasshopper side and then lost 1-0 to Kaiserslautern in Germany at the weekend, failing to create a chance of any real note against a side promoted back to the Bundesliga last season.

As a team whose season had started with the first qualifying round in Andorra in early July, and won the two legs 11-0, and then just managed to overcome similar opponents from Armenia by a single goal, FK Rabotnicki would ordinarily represent good opponents for a pre-season run-out.

But this was serious competitive action and although he was forced to put out an experimental team, Hodgson wanted a positive result.

He was assured of it when Ngog made it two in the 59th minute. Young full back Stephen Kelly combined with Amoo down the right and from a tight angle crossed for Ngog to tap in his second.

Rabotnicki did go close after the break but Kyrgiakos cleared the danger from Wandeur and Goce Todorovski skied an effort over.

Such was the ease and margin of victory, Hodgson may be tempted to rest the stars next week, too.

The Daily Telegraph

Callow Liverpool emerge unscathed

Rabotnicki 0 **Liverpool** 2 Ngog 17, 59 ROY Hodgson may still have mountains to climb in his first summer and first season at **Liverpool**, but at least he has cleared the molehill. A comfortable victory against FK Rabotnicki hardly warrants a place in **Liverpool** legend, but all that matters is that the club's new manager did not begin his reign by entering the annals of shame.

Perhaps it was that prospect, that knowledge that this was a game in which a win was no sort of triumph but a defeat would be the end of the world, that made Hodgson so downbeat on the eve of his debut as Anfield manager.

He had little reason to worry. Two strikes from David Ngog were more than enough to see off their willing, but limited, opponents in a confident, assured manner.

Hodgson can now turn his attentions to rather more taxing matters, on and off the field. He must secure the faith of Fernando Torres, if he has not already, attract new signings and begin to impose his vision on his new club. All are likely to require rather more effort than this.

This was never likely to be a particularly educational evening as to the shape Hodgson's **Liverpool** will take. Some 11 players were missing, thanks to the extended leave of absence granted to the club's World Cup contingent, while the 62-year-old will be hopeful of adding several new faces to his squad between now and the start of the season proper with the visit of Arsenal on Aug 15.

In their stead came three youth team graduates - Martin Kelly, Jay Spearing and David Amoo. Although they acquitted themselves well enough, they are unlikely to feature in his plans regularly this season. Also starting were a new signing, Milan Jovanovic, still attempting to gel with his team-mates and two players, and Sotirios Kyrgiakos and Diego Cavalieri, who Hodgson will hope to move on in the coming days.

Hardly the sort of line-up on which it would be fair to base an assessment of the former Fulham manager's plan, especially against opponents who posed so few problems. Rabotnicki, as is expected of Balkan sides, were dogged and technically accomplished, but all that could be achieved here was avoiding embarrassment. There was no scope for a statement of intent.

Not that the game was entirely devoid of meaning for the new **Liverpool** manager. He will never again underestimate the hatred Macedonians reserve for Greeks, for one, such was the cacophony of vitriol poured upon Kyrgiakos's every touch. He will know he has to practise corners, too, so many did Jovanovic and Alberto Aquilani waste.

More importantly, he will have been heartened by the display of Lucas Leiva, handed the captaincy for the evening, who offered further evidence that he is maturing into a composed central midfielder, and by the coltish enthusiasm of Ngog.

Hodgson had been keen to dismiss the idea that this game was a training exercise, but it is fair to suggest it was a scouting one, an occasion on which he could gauge the depth of the resources available to him. Both Lucas and Ngog, seen by some as evidence of his predecessor's folly, made a fine first impression.

It was the Frenchman who opened the scoring, settling **Liverpool's** nerves, helping a scratch side discover a degree of familiarity. Lucas quickly took a free-kick just inside the visitors' half, catching Rabotnicki's defence cold. Egzon Belica misjudged the bounce of the ball, Martin Bogatinov mistimed his run, and Ngog lifted the ball over the goalkeeper and tapped into an empty net.

It was a goal which summed up **Liverpool's** night. They did not excel - though they should not be chastised for that - and it would be premature to suggest there was any great proof of Hodgson's influence. This was simply one team seeing off inferior opponents in as efficient a manner as possible.

Any lingering fears of an improbable comeback from Zoran Stratev's side were assuaged after less than an hour. Kelly, the brightest of the three prospects handed a chance to impress, charged down the right, picking out Ngog. The 21-year-old, darting to the near post, caught his first-time volley sweetly, guiding the ball past Bogatinov. That was all that was needed. **Liverpool**, and Hodgson, could afford to relax, saving their energies for greater battles to come.

Rabotnicki (4-3-3): Bogatinov; Dimovski, Fernando, Belica, Sekulovski (Adem 43); Tuneski (Petrovski 77), Gligorov, Todorovski; Jose Carlos (Mojsov 57), Valdeir, Fabio Silva. Subs: Sandakan (g), Francisco, Da Silva, Sinkovic. : **Liverpool** (4-4-1-1): Cavalieri; Kelly, Kyrgiakos, Skrtel, Agger (Darby 72); Amoo (Ecclestone 83), Spearing, Lucas, Jovanovic; Aquilani (Dalla Valle 83); Ngog. Subs: Gulacsi (g), Shelvey, Ayala, Ince.

Referee: A D'Amato (Italy).

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Hodgson off to a winning start as Ngog double puts Kop in charge

LIVERPOOL made light work of their new boss Roy Hodgson's dire warnings with a convincing Europa League victory.

Hodgson (below) feared his young side, missing 11 of last season's firstteam squad, would find Rabotnicki too much of a challenge so early in his preseason preparations. But two goals from David Ngog, pressed his claims to remain at Anfield after being linked with a move away, gave them an easy win and made the second leg a formality.

Hodgson will even be allowed the luxury of leaving out big-hitters like Steven Gerrard, Jamie Carragher and Joe Cole for next Thursday's return, such was the confidence of this shadow team.

And with the likes of Ngog, defender Martin Kelly and flying winger David Amoo all shining, it offers the new boss hopes of a bright future.

Liverpool were quickly into their stride at the Philip II Stadium in sweltering Macedonia.

Sotirios Kyrgiakos had already headed wide before **Liverpool** took the lead in the 17th minute when Ngog raced through a static home defence to clip home a Lucas free-kick.

Brazilian-born Ze Carlos found space as Rabotnicki tried to respond but shot tamely from distance.

Amoo, a 19-year-old Londoner, showed plenty of potential and created an opening for Lucas, whose touch let him down.

The second goal came on the hour as Kelly found space on the right and his cross was turned in by Ngog.

The referee played on when half of the floodlights went out with 10 minutes left and any fears the game might be abandoned were dispelled as some power was restored.

But many home fans knew the game was over and left long before the final whistle.

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29 July 2010



David Ngog double seals Liverpool FC victory over Rabotnicki in Roy Hodgson's first competitive match

DAVID NGOG struck twice as Roy Hodgson began his reign as Liverpool manager with a comfortable victory from a potentially tricky Europa League test tonight. The Frenchman found the net in each half as an under-strength Liverpool side overcame FK Rabotnicki with little alarm in the first leg of their third qualifying round tie in Macedonia.

With 17 days still to go before their Premier League opener, Liverpool were without 10 of their World Cup players but their blend of youth and experience coped well in a game of little drama. Hodgson's decision to leave behind the likes of Steven Gerrard and Joe Cole was fully vindicated.

Daniel Agger, Martin Skrtel, Sotirios Kyrgiakos, Alberto Aquilani, Lucas and Ngog were the established players to start, while new signing Milan Jovanovic was handed his debut alongside David Amoo, making his first senior appearance. Diego Cavalieri, Martin Kelly and Jay Spearing made up the team but it was a sign of the times that the side on show at the Philip II Stadium - an old arena halfway through an impressive rebuild - was still worth £41million. Liverpool, playing in black, began with Aquilani operating in an advanced role behind Ngog on a balmy evening in sweltering Skopje.

Rabotnicki had the first opportunity but Ze Carlos' optimistic shot from a 40-yard free-kick was blocked by Lucas.

Wandair dos Santos attempted to beat Kelly on the left but the young right-back stood up well.

Liverpool's first serious chance came when Kyrgiakos headed wide from an Aquilani corner.

The visitors took the lead in the 17th minute when Ngog raced through a static Rabotnicki defence to reach a Lucas free-kick.

The Frenchman ran into the box unchallenged and clipped the ball past a half-hearted attempt at a save from Martin Bogatinov.

Brazil-born Ze Carlos found space as Rabotnicki tried to respond but shot tamely at Cavalieri from distance. Vladimir Tuneski also tried his luck from the edge of the box but fired wide.

Amoo made his first dangerous run after switching from the right to the left wing as half-time approached. He reached the byline and pulled the ball back across goal but Jovanovic was unable to get around a defender to reach it.

Amoo showed a glimpse of his potential early in the second half as he set off on a run down the right after a neat turn on halfway.

The 19-year-old Londoner cut inside to beat one man and then went outside another but his cross was too long.

Another good run by Amoo created an opening for Lucas but the Brazilian's touch let him down. Liverpool were almost caught out as Dos Santos ran onto a long ball into the box but he lost balance and Cavalieri gathered.

Liverpool countered through Jovanovic but Aquilani could not control and Lucas shot over. Dos Santos had another chance for the hosts but missed the target from the edge of the box.

Liverpool doubled their advantage just before the hour as Ngog volleyed in a fine second.

Kelly found space on the right and whipped in a ball which the striker nimbly turned in.

Kelly worried Rabotnicki with another good run but his cross was deflected and Bogatinov claimed.

The referee played on when half of the floodlights went out with 10 minutes remaining and any fears the game might be abandoned were quickly dispelled as some of the failed power was quickly restored.

Many Rabotnicki fans knew the game was over, however, and had left long before the final whistle.

And a lot of those that remained seemed to have had enough as they tried to fool the players by blowing for time with their own whistles.

Liverpool eased to walking pace and the real final whistle eventually came to signal a winning start to the Hodgson era.



FK Rabotnicki 0 Liverpool FC 2 - easy first win for Roy Hodgson

IN the end, it was difficult to see why there was such a kerfuffle.

Roy Hodgson may have feared his first major game as Liverpool manager would turn into a calamity, but the reality was anything but.

Having voiced concerns that a lack of preparation and the absence of key personnel would make Liverpool's trip into the unknown a journey to hell, the Reds' new manager was able to breathe a welcome sigh of relief last night in Skopje.

The first European assignment of the new campaign turned into a glorified training session, FK Rabotnicki's enthusiasm and endeavour not being anywhere near enough to check the progress of what, admittedly, was a makeshift Liverpool team.

Confident, organised and assured, Hodgson eventually cut a content figure as Liverpool effectively guaranteed their progress to the Europa League's play-off stage next month.

Hodgson had appeared somewhat agitated as he faced the media here on Wednesday, answering several questions brusquely; others were more cryptic and his declaration that "all we ever do at this club is have discussions" evoked memories of a certain press conference in Athens three years ago.

Back then, remember, Rafa Benitez famously proclaimed after losing the Champions League final to AC Milan that "all we ever do is talk, talk, talk."

It would be exceptionally worrying if Hodgson's attempts to make headway in the transfer market are being stymied by chatter.

Liverpool have known since the end of May that they would be a left full-back short after Fabio Aurelio's release and have been aware for a similar time that their first competitive game would be on July 29, so it is not rocket science to realise the Brazilian has needed replacing.

In fairness to Hodgson, he has been exploring options and Wigan Athletic's Maynor Figueroa is one of three names he has been pursuing and he will have been loathe to play Daniel Agger out of position in his first game back after a break.

It's all very well signing Joe Cole and securing the services of Steven Gerrard and Fernando Torres, but there are plenty of other areas in Liverpool's squad that need improving quickly; the feel good factor must be maintained for as long as possible.

Fortunately, there was nothing to burst it here and within 17 minutes, Liverpool - wearing that distinctive new black and gold kit - had a goal to settle any nerves that may have been lingering with the help of some quite abysmal defending by the home team.

Skipper for the night Lucas should be applauded for the speed of thought he showed to take a quick free-kick, but his ball only became an assist as Rabotnicki's central defenders Fernando Lopes and Egzon Belica dithered, leaving David Ngog to skip clear. Showing great poise, Ngog nonchalantly lifted the ball over the sprawling Martin Bogatinov to create a little piece of trivia in becoming the first goalscorer of the Hodgson reign.

You might have anticipated that Rabotnicki would have conjured up an impressive response.

Not so. Rabotnicki's reluctance to commit men forward or throw caution to the wind utterly baffled, the point proven by the fact their attackers wanted to shoot from 45 yards and they only put one man into the penalty area at free-kicks.

Not that Liverpool were complaining, of course. Boasting a line-up that included six internationals - Agger, Alberto Aquilani, Sotirios Kyrgiakos, Martin Skrtel, Lucas and Milan Jovanovic - the gulf in class between the two sides was glaring. With sharper passing or better control, the game might have been over before half-time.

Managers can rarely relax when their teams have such a slender advantage and the way Hodgson gave Martin Kelly a dressing down before going to give his half-time team talk merely served to remind everyone that there was work to be done.

Whatever Hodgson said to Kelly, it clearly worked a treat as 14 minutes after the re-start his pinpoint cross from the right was smashed impressively past Bogatinov by Ngog on the volley. It will have done wonders for his confidence; should the rough edges on his game be polished sufficiently, he could end up fulfilling a key role within the squad.

Looking at Ngog now compared to the way he was physically six months ago, it is clear to see he has bulked up; his shoulders and neck are more muscular and he has not been getting buffeted off the ball so much - the next thing to work on is that occasionally erratic first touch.

He will get another chance to work on it against Rabotnicki in six days when they come over to Anfield for the return leg and, on this evidence, it is very likely Liverpool will be able to indulge in some shooting practice on home soil.

Not surprisingly, the Hodgson who held court shortly after the final whistle was juxtaposed to the one of 24 hours earlier and behind him an advertising banner behind him pre-empted the journey home; "fly with a smile," it read - and that's just what he did.

FK RABOTNICKI (4-3-3): Bogatinov; Dimovski, Lopes, Belica, Sekulovski (Adem 44); Tuneski (Petrovski 77), Grigorov, Todorovski; Ze Carlos (Mojsov 57), Vanidair, Fabio.

LIVERPOOL (4-5-1): Cavalieri; Kelly, Skrtel, Kyrgiakos, Agger (Darby 72); Amoo (Ecclestone 83), Spearing, Lucas, Aquilani (Dalla Valle 83), Jovanovic; Ngog.

Goals - Ngog (17, 59)

Referee: Antonio Damato (Italy)

Attendance - 20,000