

Date: 23 August 2010  
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23 August  
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## the guardian

This was a victory whose resonance counted for more than the three points.

[Liverpool](#) are not what they were but a victory over them conducted with such thoroughness will encourage [Manchester City's](#) feeling that their project is far more developed than rivals prefer to think.

Aspiring clubs have to hit a rhythm that makes victories natural if not inevitable at their own ground. Roberto Mancini's team did that on this occasion and the studied football he favours took its toll on the visitors eventually. Adam Johnson's first start of the campaign increased the refinement that will be essential if there is to be a genuine bid for the title.

Liverpool were spirited, but that quality alone will not restore the club to its former standing. With an unsettled Javier Mascherano left out while he aches for a move to Barcelona, there is an element of further disruption at a club already riven by the fans' resentment of the owners George Gillett and Tom Hicks.

The proprietor of City can expect nothing other than acclaim and tearful gratitude. Sheikh Mansour relished it in person here and an opulent opening goal was presented to him after 13 minutes. Johnson slid a pass between Milan Jovanovic and Daniel Agger, with James Milner, on his debut, slipping into space on the right before pulling the cross back for Gareth Barry to side-foot the ball into the net.

It was a slick move that also reassured anyone in the home support still to be convinced that City have the punishing fluency to match established contenders Chelsea and Manchester United. Obstinacy, of course, is another indispensable trait and this match would have been too intriguing for Mancini's taste if Liverpool had cut the lead to 2-1, but Joe Hart pulled off saves from David Ngog and Fernando Torres after a Steven Gerrard attempt had cracked off the post in the 57th minute.

City therefore ensured that they have begun with three clean sheets across [Premier League](#) and Europa League. That will not be a source of awe away from Eastlands, but it does hint at a methodical approach being implemented despite all the public interest in the glossy expenditure. There is a heritage at this club of failure with darkly comic overtones and envious enemies probably wallow in imaginings of City floundering even with limitless sums at their disposal. Above all, Mancini looks determined to keep that fate at bay with his emphasis on order and control.

The early breakthrough appeared to augur well, but City showed little further interest in laying on an extravaganza. That was not so very great a surprise. Mancini has tried to look methodical and even downbeat in his management, as if he could personally offset the bemusement and disbelief that swirls around a club of unequalled means.

The prosaic streak was at its broadest when he opened the Premier League campaign cautiously at White Hart Lane. Even if he was wilfully refusing to play to the gallery, a goalless draw must have been entirely satisfactory against Tottenham Hotspur, who beat City to the Champions League qualifiers last season.

A first home fixture against Liverpool seemed to demand that Mancini reveal more of his intentions. Circumspection could not be the order of the day when Milner, signed from Aston Villa in a deal valued at £26m, was on the left wing.

Nonsensical as it sounds after all the outlay, City can be as rueful as any other club when a player is missing. Mario Balotelli, a £24m acquisition from Internazionale, might have been of use, but a striker who on his debut scored the only goal of the away match with Timisoara in the Europa League was ruled out with a knee problem. It took some time before efficiency in the penalty area was tapped to add to the opener against Liverpool.

Momentum and credibility for City can only have their origin in victories, yet they hardly reduced the visitors to panic in the first half. Liverpool were a good test then of City's resources. They were bound to be obstinate under that formidable strategist Roy Hodgson. The visitors had at least a yearning to be bold since Torres, making his first start since Spain's World Cup triumph, had the improving Ngog to assist him. Hodgson's conundrum lay in the inability of his team to advance with purpose until they were beyond recovery.

Each game is a significant experiment for Mancini at present. There was at least an indication in this outcome that he is a little nearer to identifying a line-up that is both trustworthy and explosive enough to make opponents dread their visits here. He may be fortunate in more than his budget. Disbelief still lingers over the transformation of City. The manager, for a little longer yet, can go about his work with greater funds than Manchester United or Chelsea while being spared the full weight of expectation that they endure.

## The Daily Telegraph

There are some Italians who can bring the best out of the English. Carlo Ancelotti manages it at Chelsea and now Roberto Mancini at [Manchester City](#) where six England players starred in this victory over lacklustre [Liverpool](#).

The Blue Moon rising last night cast an encouraging light on England. Gareth Barry, looking more svelte-like than usual, delivered a heavyweight performance in central midfield, powering forward to score City's first and also putting in some important tackles. He was named man of the match but the sponsors' bubbly could easily have gone to Adam Johnson, who had Daniel Agger and Martin Skrtel spinning like feathers in a wind tunnel.

Over on the left flank, James Milner constantly stretched Liverpool and was such a thorn in their side that Steven Gerrard grew increasingly frustrated and eventually began chipping away at City's new boy. Micah Richards, particularly, and Joleon Lescott also impressed while Joe Hart made saves from David Ngog and Fernando Torres that confirmed why he deserved the fans' salute of "England's No 1".

"It always takes time for a team to gel," said Mancini, "but what pleased me was that we had six English players in that side. This is important."

City's commitment to English players should accelerate team building and also ensure that complaints are fewer when Mancini rotates his expensively-assembled squad. Milner, Johnson and company are not the types to whinge if kept in reserve.

With Milner enjoying a dynamic debut, there was a hunger to City's movement, a zeal in the tackle that left Gerrard and company stunned. This was a damaging defeat for Liverpool, who badly missed the anchoring expertise of Javier Mascherano, seemingly destined for Barcelona after reportedly refusing to play at Eastlands. Liverpool's players are known to be furious at Mascherano's behaviour. Although Roy Hodgson reflected that the Argentine might be at Anfield "for a while" it is clear the midfielder is determined to force through a move to Barcelona, whose tactics in the transfer market will again come under scrutiny. They failed to land Cesc Fabregas but look destined to succeed with Mascherano. However admirably Mascherano has performed for Liverpool during his career the manner of his departure leaves a sour taste in the mouth. No wonder the Liverpool dressing room seethed with anger.

Mascherano's conduct clearly distracted Liverpool's players, who were quick to become fractious. As well as Gerrard's finger-pointing at Milner, Jamie Carragher remonstrated with Johnson when the winger sought to remind Phil Dowd that the man who brought him down in the box for City's penalty, Skrtel, had already been booked.

If Johnson must be careful not to acquire a reputation it was impossible not to warm to his performance. Used on the right, he will have reminded the watching Franco Baldini of how effective he can be whether going outside his full-back or cutting inside on to his stronger left foot.

This was a great night for City, for young Englishmen like Johnson and Milner and a youthful-looking Italian. Mancini's tactics had initially raised a few eyebrows with Yaya Touré, not the most lithe individual at work in the modern era, seeming an unlikely choice in the hole behind Carlos Tévez but City soon took the lead. After 13 minutes, Yaya showed surprising deftness to manoeuvre the ball wide to Johnson. The finish was made in England, Johnson cleverly teasing the ball between Agger and Milan Jovanovic for Milner, whose cut-back was turned in by Barry.

City then demonstrated their steely side, Mancini's players putting in a series of tackles as Liverpool sought vainly to build a head of steam.

Nigel De Jong dispossessed David Ngog. Vincent Kompany stole the ball off Jovanovic. Barry, once coveted by Liverpool, slid in on Ngog and Lucas in quick succession, earning deserved cheers with the timing of the tackle and intensity of his commitment.

Such an ethos was seen from back to front, from Richards clearing Glen Johnson's cross to Adam Johnson throwing himself in the way of a Skrtel clearance. Such work-rate disrupted Liverpool's hopes of building a rhythm.

Gerrard was not at the races, not really sure whether to hold alongside Lucas or push up towards Torres and Ngog. As the half closed, Gerrard tried to drag Liverpool back into contention but his shooting was poor, the first lifted over and his second skewed wide.

City extended their lead shortly into the second period. More good work from Johnson brought City a corner. Milner curled it in and Liverpool's man-marking system was caught out. Richards outmuscled Agger and headed powerfully down, Tévez claiming the faintest of touches as the ball journeyed past Pepe Reina.

Badly shaken, Liverpool finally stirred. Gerrard let fly from 25 yards, the ball clipping the post before bouncing back. Still the danger had not ebbed. Ngog tried his luck, ramming the shot goalwards but Hart saved superbly.

The applause doubled when England No 1 threw himself forward to block Torres' follow-up effort.

Liverpool's mood darkened further when Johnson dribbled into the box, eluding Agger and then being caught by Skrtel. Tévez sent Reina the wrong way from the spot. Their concentration damaged by the Mascherano mess, Liverpool certainly took a wrong turn last night. City appear on the right path under Mancini.

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# The Mail

## Sheik, rattle and roll - Tevez seals win as City owner turns up

For Roberto Mancini and his players there were major Brownie points as well as the three that come with every win in the Barclays Premier League. Because this was the night when they needed to impress the boss. The night when Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, to give him his full title, finally showed up to see what you get for £350million in transfer fees these days. That it took him the best part of two years to make it here from Abu Dhabi when he has his own fleet of private jets is something only Manchester City's owner can explain. But he picked a good night to take a first look at his football team, witnessing a thumping defeat of a club even he probably recognises as one of the giants of the global game.

It took roughly half the fortune he has so far spent to condemn a disappointing Liverpool to a crushing defeat, goals from Gareth Barry and Carlos Tevez proving enough to follow a decent draw at Tottenham with a win that will do much for the confidence of this hastily assembled team.

James Milner, selected alongside five other England internationals, enjoyed an excellent debut. He not only delivered the final ball for the first two goals but combined brilliantly with the excellent Adam Johnson in providing a real threat down the flanks.

For Fabio Capello's deputy, Franco Baldini, there was much that must have impressed him, including another outstanding display from Joe Hart as well as a composed, confident night's work from Barry.

City are shaping up much as Chelsea do and with Barry joined by Yaya Toure and Nigel De Jong, they dominated midfield in a manner familiar to those who regularly attend Stamford Bridge, although the late withdrawal of Javier Mascherano clearly weakened the opposition. The little Argentine was excellent against Arsenal nine days ago and his ball-winning ability was certainly missed. For Roy Hodgson it was most disappointing. He must have been encouraged by that opening encounter with Arsenal. But the abject failure of his side to put Hart under pressure until the first two goals were scored would have worried him, however positive he seemed in his post-match press conference, especially when there is meant to be a burning desire in the side to put right the wrongs of the last campaign and start challenging for the big prizes again.

Judging by the way they have started this season, those big prizes would now appear to be within City's reach. Last night the top four comprised Chelsea, Arsenal, Manchester United and City and, while it remains ridiculously early to make such predictions, it would not be a surprise to see those sides claiming the Champions League places come May.

When Mancini opted for the same slightly defensive approach he employed on opening day at Tottenham, there was a sense here at Eastlands that the Italian was being too cautious.

But those hoping to see a touch more adventure were not disappointed for long, a goal very much made in England lifting their spirits - and marking the arrival of Milner - after 13 minutes.

It was a fine example of fluent, passing football, sparked by a super pass from Johnson that was delivered between Daniel Agger and Milan Jovanovic and continued with an intelligent cut-back from Milner that was met by a well-executed first time shot from Barry. A smiling Sheikh Mansour looked most impressed.

By then Johnson had already sent a powerful drive whistling past Pepe Reina's right-hand post and the sight of Tevez smashing a shot into the side-netting would have only added to an animated Hodgson's anxiety.

His side were struggling in the absence of the combative Mascherano and he was not amused, almost losing his footing at one stage so angry was he with David Ngog.

Seven minutes after the break Hodgson's mood worsened, City increasing their lead thanks this time to an excellent Milner corner. If Liverpool's defending was poor for Barry's strike, Agger will wince at being beaten in the air by Michal Richards, whose header bounced past Reina.

In fairness to the goalkeeper, he did have the additional distraction of Tevez making a nuisance of himself in front of him, and the Argentina striker was awarded the goal even though it wasn't clear if he got the final touch.

### MATCH FACTS

**MANCHESTER CITY (4-3-2-1):** Hart 7;

Richards 7, K Toure 6, Kompany 7, Lescott 6; De Jong 7, Y Toure 7 (Zabaleta 85min), Barry 7; A Johnson 8, Milner 8; Tevez 7 (Jo 85). Subs not used: Given, Wright-Phillips, Adebayor, Silva, Vieira. Booked: Richards.

**LIVERPOOL (4-4-2):** Reina 6; Johnson 5, Carragher 6, Skrtel 4, Agger 4; Kuyt 6, Gerrard 6, Lucas 5, Jovanovic 5 (Pacheco 86); Ngog 5, Torres 6 (Babel 78). Subs not used: Jones, Aurelio, Kyrgiakos, Rodriguez, Poulsen.

Booked: Skrtel.

**Man of the match:** Adam Johnson.

**Referee:** Phil Dowd 7.

Only then did Liverpool muster any kind of response, but when a shot from Steven Gerrard rebounded off a post, Hart then produced a magnificent double save to deny first Neog and then a quiet Fernando Torres. Further vindication of



## CITY SHOW THEY CAN SHIN THE LEAGUE

SO this is what happens when the big boss comes to town.

It took him two years to make his first visit to Eastlands, but for Sheikh Mansour, the man who has bankrolled the lavish revolution at Manchester City, it was certainly worth the wait.

He watched with mounting satisfaction as Gareth Barry opened the scoring early in the first half before two goals from Carlos Tevez, one a penalty, buried Liverpool after the break.

Perhaps someone should point out to City's mega-rich owner that it is not always like this, that City do not always play with such ruthless conviction and put such illustrious opponents as Liverpool to the sword so comprehensively.

But after this demolition job, City look the real deal, capable - on this evidence at least - of mounting a successful title challenge and vindicating the Sheikh's decision to commit pounds 1billion of his fortune to his pet project.

And all this from a newly assembled City team that was, according to their boss Roberto Mancini, going to take at least two or three weeks to gel, with six new players having arrived this summer.

Mancini insists his City team remain a work in progress, but such an emphatic win will serve only to heighten the sense of expectation at City this season as the world's richest club aims to elbow its way on to football's top table.

For Liverpool, this demoralising defeat was a sobering reminder of just how far they have fallen behind the elite band of clubs capable of challenging for the Premier League crown, their campaign already looking like a bleak and torturous one on and off the field, with the issue of their ownership still to be resolved. For City, there are no such concerns. And what made their win all the more impressive, considering the numerous foreign imports who have arrived at Eastlands over the past two years, is that it was founded on England players - with no fewer than six featuring in Mancini's starting line-up.

None epitomised City's newfound ebullience more than latest signing James Milner, making his debut following his protracted pounds 26million move from Aston Villa. Milner drove City on with his relentless workrate and industry, his contribution earning him the instant respect of the Eastlands crowd.

City's new boy laid on the opening goal for Barry, one which was made in England, in the 13th minute.

Adam Johnson collected the ball on the right and funnelled it through to Milner, who was able to pull it back for Barry - a one-time Liverpool target - to apply an assured finish, steering the ball beyond the reach of Pepe Reina.

Operating with Barry and Nigel De Jong as the axis of the midfield, with Yaya Toure in a more advanced role, gave City the freedom to attack with devastating consequences down the flanks through Johnson and Milner, while lone striker Tevez played with customary Duracell bunny-like industry.

Without Javier Mascherano to anchor his midfield, Liverpool boss Roy Hodgson saw the Reds look impotent. City made it 2-0 in the 52nd minute, Michal Richards outjumping Daniel Agger to meet a Milner corner, Tevez helping the ball over the line, although his City teammate later claimed the goal was his.

Liverpool lacked the cutting edge required to breach City's defence, which has yet to concede a goal this season, an impressive feat considering they are without both new full-backs, Jerome Boateng and Aleksandar Kolarov.

When the visitors did find a way past City's back four, they were denied by cruel luck and the continued brilliance of Joe Hart, who once again justified his promotion to City's first-choice keeper ahead of Shay Given.

Hart was beaten by a fierce drive from Steven Gerrard (inset) in the 56th minute, the ball cannoning off a post. But Hart showed why he has the City jersey at the expense of Given, first denying David Ngog then flinging himself at a pointblank strike from Torres to make a crucial double save.

A miserable night for Liverpool got a whole lot worse in the 68th minute when Johnson was upended by Martin Skrtel, a decision which when replayed looked a shade harsh on the stand-in left-back.

Tevez converted the resulting spot-kick to add a touch of humiliation to the scoreline.

City must wish the Sheikh would come to watch them every week if this is the galvanising effect his appearance has on the team.

MAN CITY: Hart 8, Richards 7, K Toure 7, Kompany 7, Lescott 7, De Jong 8, Y Toure 7 (Zabaleta 84), Barry 7, A Johnson 7, Milner 9, Tevez 7 (Jo 84) **LIVERPOOL:** Reina 5, Johnson 5, Carragher 6, Skrtel 5, Agger 5; Kuyt 5, Gerrard 6, Lucas 5, Jovanovic 5 (Pacheco 85); Ngog 5, Torres 5 (Babel 77, 5) REF: Phil Dowd ATT: 47,087

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### Reds display shows the impossible task they face

IT had just turned to 7.50pm, when the pitch announcer cleared his throat and urged the City Of Manchester Stadium crowd to look up at the giant screen in the corner.

“Manchester City!” he screamed, building up the sense of theatre. “Please put your hands together and give a warm welcome for Sheikh Mansour!” Cue an image of the Abu Dhabi billionaire, waving graciously to the expectant, grateful home fans; alongside him was chairman Khaldoon Al-Mubarak with Garry Cook, City’s chief unctuous executive, joining in the applause.

While some will have thought it trite and over the top, City’s supporters revelled. Here were their owners showing they mean business; for Liverpool’s frustrated, bewildered followers, it was also a scene of huge symbolism – once again, their appalling landlords were nowhere to be seen.

Had that been the only disappointment of an important night, it could have been easily shrugged aside but it was anything but; the start was bad, the middle was poor and the least said about the end, the better.

Occasionally scorelines can be deceptive but not here; Liverpool were soundly beaten and many will fear this – struggling to keep pace with the Blues from the other end of the M62 – is a sign of things to come.

Alex Ferguson may have berated United’s neighbours for “kamikaze spending” this summer but they have invested fortunes in the hope of becoming, one day, the world’s biggest club; Liverpool, on the other hand, haven’t even been able to buy the left-back they desperately require.

In 90 depressing, rain-soaked minutes, the feel-good factor that has been often talked about in the last couple of months evaporated in dramatic fashion and those harbingers of doom seized upon the opportunity to tell anyone who would listen that a long, gloomy year beckons.

They may well be right; until the farcical ownership situation is sorted out, until Liverpool’s finances are in shape again and until the squad is laced with quality and possess depth, keeping pace with City will, in all likelihood, prove to be an impossible task.

To stand any chance of doing so, Roy Hodgson needs to be able to keep all the class players he has in his squad but, regrettably, it appears as if he is going to lose the man who is widely-regard as the best holding midfielder in the world.

Javier Mascherano’s absence probably signals the end of his Liverpool career and if he doesn’t want to be here, fine; in telling Hodgson he wouldn’t play, he let himself, his team-mates, his manager and his club down. It was totally, utterly unforgivable.

He was, remember, a West Ham United reserve when arriving on Merseyside, unable to oust Hayden Mullins; he will depart in shame, having enraged those who are desperate for Liverpool to succeed; you don’t turn your back on the Red shirt. Ever.

In a show of staggering selfishness, Mascherano plunged Hodgson’s plans into chaos; Christian Poulsen was not fit enough to slot into the position he would have occupied and it meant the manager was forced to play an unfamiliar system. Shame on him.

With this being City’s first home game of the season, this contest was always going to be played in a fervent atmosphere particularly as the home team’s benefactor was sat in the posh seats and there were a number of new faces on show.

What Liverpool needed to do during the opening exchanges was keep City at arms length and stop the home crowd getting excited but, with their scurrying, midfield gremlin absent, Mancini’s expensively assembled team were able to find gaps at will.

Would Mascherano have lost the tackle Lucas did to Yaya Toure in the build up to City’s opening goal? Unlikely. But, unfortunately, Lucas dithered and allowed the Ivorian to feed Adam Johnson and, once that happened, Liverpool were in grave trouble.

Slipping James Milner into a wide open space, the England international squared for Gareth Barry and he did the rest, turning his effort beyond Pepe Reina’s grasp; it was no more than City, for whom Johnson sparkled, deserved.

Rocked back on their heels, Liverpool’s passing lacked cohesion and, most surprisingly, there were several occasions when they lacked organisation – no wonder, then, that every time Hodgson was seen in his technical area he was glowering, scowling and gesticulating.

Given the way form has gone in the fledgling stages of this campaign, you might have anticipated an emphatic response from the Reds after the break but they couldn’t shake themselves from the lethargy which was gripping them.

Sure enough, they fell further behind within seven minutes of the re-start to another scruffy goal; on this occasion, Milner’s corner was met firmly by Micah Richards and his header squirmed past Reina to give City breathing space. Carlos Tevez’s penalty simply added insult to injury.

So, in many ways, it was a night to forget but at least the hurt that was etched on Liverpool’s players showed they cared – which is more than can be said for the man who downed tools.



### Failure to turn up is Liverpool’s undoing

IF Javier Mascherano wasn’t in the right frame of mind to play in Liverpool’s trip to Eastlands last night, then come full-time the travelling support were certainly not in the mood to watch it.

A chastening evening for Roy Hodgson and his players brutally exposed the challenge they face to regain their place among the Premier League’s elite as they were soundly beaten by Manchester City.

Goals from Gareth Barry, Micah Richards and a Carlos Tevez penalty ensured a deserved victory for Roberto Mancini’s side and inflicted Hodgson’s first competitive defeat since taking over at Anfield.

And Mascherano must take his share of the blame. The midfielder’s insistence on agitating for a move away from Anfield had reached such a crescendo that Hodgson felt he was left no option but to omit the Argentina international.

It’s precisely the kind of distraction the manager can do without as he attempts to stamp his mark on Liverpool and rebuild confidence after the unrelenting disappointments of last season.

But Hodgson must have feared such an outcome was inevitable the longer Inter Milan and Barcelona refused to meet Liverpool’s £25million valuation of the player.

Galling, then, that this was a game Mascherano would have relished, his midfield presence sorely missed against a City team that on this evidence will surely compete for the title.

So continues Liverpool’s poor away form in the Premier League, with only one victory – at doomed Burnley – this calendar year.

While no-one was getting carried away by the encouraging draw with Arsenal on the opening day, so there will be no panic in the wake of this defeat.

But this certainly did not augur well. A trip to Turkey beckons tomorrow for the second leg of their Europa League qualifier against Trabzonspor on Thursday, and with Hodgson insistent the Premier League takes priority, progress to the group stages is by no means a given.

There’s now a world of difference between the rich and famous – City the rich, Liverpool the famous – and this was shown on the teamsheet, with Manchester City’s bench costing only marginally less than Liverpool’s entire 18-man squad. The Anfield outfit, or indeed hardly any other club, simply cannot compete with that spending power. Requiring a striker, Hodgson is forced to shop around for the best deal while City can spend £25m on Mario Balotelli – and the Italian didn’t even play last night

No wonder City’s fans were so appreciative in their applause for Sheikh Mansour, the figurehead of the Abu Dhabi billionaires bankrolling their quest for glory, as he took his seat in the directors’ box before kick-off.

You couldn’t exactly imagine Liverpool’s owners being afforded such a reception at Anfield any time soon. Or indeed ever.

A much warmer reception greeted the news Fernando Torres was making his a first start since April having deemed sufficiently recovered from the adductor problem that hampered his pre-season.

The manner in which, shortly before half-time, Torres went past Joleon Lescott as if they City man wasn’t there allayed any fears the Spaniard has lost any of his explosive pace.

Of greater surprise was the fact Torres was partnered in attack by David Ngog, Hodgson placing faith in a 4-4-2 formation that has been the subject of such ridicule since England’s lamentable World Cup efforts in South Africa.

Was it the right move? Liverpool’s first-half performance would suggest not, with the visitors, outfought and outthought, happy to be only a goal adrift at the break. That strike came in the 13th minute and was a further reminder of the financial chasm between the clubs. Yaya Toure’s harrying gave possession to Adam Johnson on the City right, and the winger slipped in James Milner behind the Liverpool defence to cut the ball back for Barry to force home.

Barry, of course, was the man who inadvertently sparked the beginning of the end of Rafael Benitez’s reign and brought into sharp focus Liverpool’s financial limitations.

The visitors’ left flank proved fertile ground for City. Agger gave the impression of someone still struggling with the concussion that had threatened his involvement, and looked every inch the centre-back playing out of position at left-back after being constantly beaten by the rampaging Johnson.

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Agger, though, wasn't alone; few players in red did themselves justice, although to be fair, they weren't allowed to by an impressive City display. Liverpool's greatest moments of danger came when Steven Gerrard was on the ball, but with the skipper in a deeper central midfield role, that threat was greatly compromised. Ngog was the only player to test City goalkeeper Joe Hart with two comfortable efforts from range until, on the stroke of half-time, space opened up for Gerrard from a Torres lay-off but the eventual shot was sliced wide. City, though, only had to wait until seven minutes into the half to score their second, with a goal Liverpool's defence will not enjoy watching again. Richards was allowed to leap highest and head Milner's corner towards goal and Tevez, standing in front of Reina, did enough to distract the keeper and the ball bounced home. Liverpool perhaps knew it wasn't their day in the 57th minute when a combination of ill fortune and outstanding goalkeeping kept them at bay. Gerrard's shot from 20 yards beat Hart but struck the base of the post and flew back into play off the back of the keeper's head. Possession eventually fell to Ngog and, after repelling the Frenchman's shot, Hart did even better to deny Torres's follow-up attempt. Ten minutes later and the game was over. Johnson danced past Agger yet again before tumbling over Martin Skrtel's slight challenge inside the area, and Tevez did the rest from the penalty spot. Liverpool at least kept plugging away and, after Torres was inches away with an angled drive, his replacement, Ryan Babel, solicited another fine save from Hart at the keeper's near post. But it was all over by then. As, the suspicion grows, is Mascherano's Anfield career.



### Irresistible City give their benefactor a night to remember

Manchester City 3  
 Liverpool 0

A wet Monday night in Manchester might seem a risky choice to consummate a two-year long-distance love affair, but to Sheikh Mansour, the sugar daddy who has used his vast wealth to give this old tired club the ultimate facelift, this was a first date to remember.

For Liverpool, it was something else entirely, a nightmarish vision of the grim future that they face as the landscape of English football continues to shift menacingly in front of their eyes.

While these are early days in Roy Hodgson's tenure at Anfield, the way his team were so comprehensively outfought, outmuscled and outplayed by Manchester City did not augur well for the months ahead.

City have enjoyed some notable scalps on home soil in recent years - Manchester United, Arsenal, Chelsea - but this felt like the start of something.

A title challenge? It is too early to say, but Roberto Mancini has built a team with firm defensive foundations and, contrary to what some would have you believe, a core of talented English players.

Carlos Tevez made the victory safe with two second-half goals, the second a penalty, but the first goal came from Gareth Barry and, with Joe Hart, Micah Richards, James Milner and in particular Adam Johnson weighing in with impressive contributions.

It was a victory that certainly marked City as a team moving in the right direction while Liverpool, who are losing the battle to retain the services of Javier Mascherano, continue to pay the price for a ruinous ownership model that is the antithesis of Sheikh Mansour's largesse.

There was a stage last season, as Rafael Benitez's stock within the club plummeted, when a joke went around Anfield. Question: why does Rafa play with two holding midfielders? Punchline: Because he hasn't got three.

For Mancini, there are no such concerns. With Barry, Nigel de Jong and Yaya Toure on the pitch - and Patrick Vieira on the bench, just in case - it is not just belt and braces but elastic waistband as well.

The sight of Toure operating behind Tevez as the foremost of three central midfield players would cause astonishment in Barcelona, where he was always the man to do the spadework for Xavi, Iniesta, Messi et al, but, no matter that he looked at times like a square peg in that particular round hole, half-time arrived with City 1-0 up and in total control.

Liverpool were a sorry sight during the opening 45 minutes. They were a sorry sight last season, with a confidence crisis setting in after the sale of Xabi Alonso to Real Madrid, and it is hard to see where the improvement is going to come if, as it appears, Mascherano has played his last game for the club. Steven Gerrard puts on a brave face - a brave, anguished face - but there is no doubting the drop in quality around him as the club's financial problems, brought on by inadequate ownership, have taken hold.

A couple of years ago Benitez identified David Silva, the former Valencia playmaker, as the final piece in the Liverpool jigsaw, yet Hodgson could not have begun to compete with City for the [pounds sterling]25 million Spaniard's signature this summer.

Silva was not even in the starting line-up last night yet he cost more than Liverpool's seven substitutes combined - as did Emmanuel Adebayor and Jo, not to mention Robinho, who, having become surplus to Mancini's requirements, is expected to join Besiktas or Fenerbahce at a significant loss.

This is a more prosaic City team than the one Sheikh Mansour must have had in mind when he delivered Robinho as a [pounds sterling]34.2 million gift upon buying the club a little under two years ago, but last night they were full of purpose and endeavour. Both were supplied by Milner, making his debut on the left wing, with most of the creativity stemming from Johnson.

The first goal, on 13 minutes, had "made in England" written all over it. The patient build-up involved Toure and De Jong, but it was when Johnson played a clever pass to Milner, popping up on the right-hand side with an intelligent run to beat the offside trap, that things hotted up. Milner looked up and picked out Barry, whose side-foot shot beat Pepe Reina, no doubt causing howls of bitter regret among Aston Villa's supporters as well as Liverpool's.

Even Milner, making his debut after his move from Aston Villa, admitted he was not sure of a place in the present City team. "Luckily I was selected," the midfield player said. "It's always tough against Liverpool - but we got three goals and a clean sheet. They didn't cause us too many problems in the first half, then they came out in the second half.

"The club is moving forward, they've signed a lot of great players. There is great competition which is healthy for any team so hopefully we can build on this." City continued to dominate after half-time and scored a deserved second on 52 minutes. Richards rose high to get his head to a corner and Tevez's flailing foot may have only brushed the ball, but he did enough to distract Reina.

There followed a brief hint of a Liverpool revival, but Gerrard saw his shot rebound off the post and, when the ball bounced back into play, Hart made an outstanding double save to deny David Ngog and then Fernando Torres.

By the time a ring-rusty Torres took his leave with 12 minutes remaining, City were 3-0 up, Tevez having scored from the penalty spot after Skrtel brought down the irrepressible Johnson.

Hart might also have a claim to the man of the match award, after making another fine save from Ryan Babel in the closing minutes, but such statements would give a distorted impression of the evening. City were by far the better team and deserved to claim a treasured scalp in front of the man who made it all possible.

As for Liverpool, at the other end of the spectrum, the problems caused by irresponsible owners have been laid bare to Hodgson.

Manchester City (4-2-3-1): J Hart - M Richards, K Toure, V Kompany, J Lescott - N de Jong, G Barry - A Johnson, Y Toure (sub: P Zabaleta, 85min), J Milner - C Tevez (sub: Jo, 85). Substitutes not used: S Given, P Vieira, S Wright-Phillips, D Silva, E Adebayor. Booked: Richards.

Liverpool (4-4-2): J M Reina - G Johnson, J Carragher, M Skrtel, D Agger - D Kuyt, S Gerrard, Lucas Leiva, M Jovanovic (sub: D Pacheco, 85) - D Ngog, F Torres (sub: R Babel, 78). Substitutes not used: B Jones, S Kyrgiakos, F Aurelio, C Poulsen, M Rodriguez. Booked: Skrtel.

Referee: P Dowd.