

Date: 12 September 2010
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12 September
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THE TIMES

Honeymoon now over for Hodgson

Birmingham City 0 **Liverpool** 0 Referee: M Halsey. Attendance: 27,333 OLIVER KAY Football Correspondent For the happy couple who got engaged on the pitch at half-time, only to be greeted with mocking chants of "You don't know what you're doing," there is at least the big day to come. For Roy Hodgson and **Liverpool**, however, the immediate joy of marital bliss and ensuing honeymoon period were only ever going to be short-lived. A draw away to a redoubtable Birmingham City side is by no means a poor result - it was as much as Arsenal, Chelsea and Manchester United managed last season - but if this goes down as a point gained for **Liverpool**, already seven points off the top of the Barclays Premier League, it reflects a lowering of expectations at a time when a change of ownership has become the club's overwhelming priority.

Expectations were a recurring theme at St Andrew's yesterday. Hodgson said afterwards that his "weren't that high" for this game, not least because his preparations had been interrupted by the international break, and called for patience as Fernando Torres looks to rediscover his form, but the manager was quick to dispel the idea that he had ruled out a title challenge, saying: "I'm not prepared to make a mistake by saying this club can or can't win the league."

It is, as Hodgson put it, "faintly amusing" that a team can be ruled in or out of the title race when the season is barely a month old, but **Liverpool's** first four matches have strengthened the belief that they lack the flair, imagination, spirit and belief to make more than a moderate improvement on their wretched final season under Rafael Benitez. If **Liverpool** had the best player on the pitch yesterday, it was Pepe Reina, the goalkeeper, who, having endured a difficult start to the campaign, made two wonderful saves in the first half to keep out headers from Cameron Jerome and Craig Gardner. Jamie Carragher was another who acquitted himself well, but otherwise the outstanding players on view wore the blue shirts of Birmingham: Roger Johnson, Scott Dann, Barry Ferguson, James McFadden and Jerome. Johnson and Dann were so dominant and so assured in the centre of the home defence that Steven Gerrard and Torres barely saw a chink of daylight all afternoon.

As Alex McLeish, the Birmingham manager, said: "They never let those two guys [Gerrard and Torres] out of their sight and restricted **Liverpool** to very few chances." The performance of Torres was a talking point. At half-time Jamie Redknapp, the former **Liverpool** captain, described the forward's first-half display as "terrible" and "diabolical" from the Sky television studio, saying that the club's supporters "won't suffer a lack of effort". It seemed like a wild accusation; it will take time for Torres to rediscover his predatory sharpness and, by extension, his confidence, while he appeared to make enough runs off the ball, the majority of them in vain, to preclude him from charges of laziness.

Hodgson defended Torres and said, correctly, that Birmingham's defenders deserved credit for reducing his player to a single ambitious effort that was well saved by Ben Foster late in the game.

"I don't share that opinion," the **Liverpool** manager said when informed of the criticism from Redknapp. "We know Fernando lacks match-training, but he is working hard for the team.

"You should give Dann and Johnson credit. I'm not at all concerned about Fernando Torres."

The biggest problem - and it is a familiar one - was a lack of finesse in midfield, where Christian Poulsen and Lucas Leiva toiled with little success and found themselves outplayed in the first half by Ferguson and Gardner.

Birmingham also produced the better quality in wide areas, with McFadden picking out Jerome for a downward header that was repelled superbly by Reina, diving low to his right.

The process was repeated ten minutes later when the goalkeeper made a similarly spectacular save from a header by Gardner, this time from Stephen Carr's cross.

It was not until the final half-hour that **Liverpool** began to attack in numbers. The introduction of Raul Meireles in place of Lucas gave them more dynamism, with Gerrard dropping back into central midfield alongside Poulsen, but even then there was a lack of incision in their forward play.

Hodgson will hope that the return of Joe Cole from suspension gives his team the extra dimension they need, but there is a danger that, as with England during the World Cup, the midfield player's creative powers have grown to mythical proportions in his absence.

The integration of Meireles and Cole should help **Liverpool**, but the same should be said of a Birmingham side who have yet to draw fully on the qualities of Martin Jiraneek, Alexander Hleb, Jean Beausejour and Nikola Zigic.

Under McLeish, they have acquired the look of a top-half team, one who are capable of winning plaudits for showing more than the gutsy performances for which they were renowned last season.

Come the season's end, Birmingham will surely be looking up to **Liverpool**, but perhaps again without having to crane their neck.

Hodgson's task is to try to keep the club vibrant and positive while they await the necessary change of ownership.

There could be nothing better than a trip to Old Trafford on Sunday to raise spirits - or dampen them further.

the guardian

Barclays Premier League: Lifeless Liverpool in search of inspiration

A featureless display by Liverpool will still have been etched deep in the minds of supporters as they headed back to Merseyside. They had no right to expect victory at St Andrew's, where they have not won in the Premier League since 2004, but the tepid nature of the team continued to offend those hot-blooded fans. The outcome would have been worse had it not been for the superlative goalkeeping of Jose Reina.

Birmingham City were admirable and, if this fixture was the only evidence submitted, most people would conclude that Alex McLeish is the manager with the happier future before him. Roy Hodgson, his opposite number, will have understood completely the stress to come when he accepted the Anfield post during the summer.

Reina is one of the few connections to the excellence of years gone by and Liverpool depend on such men to sustain them. To Hodgson's misfortune in Fernando Torres he has a remarkable striker who has been shorn of true impact since a knee injury in the spring. For all the manager's know-how, there is no other way to address that topic except through trust and patience.

It was Birmingham's centre-forward, Cameron Jerome, who was in the thick of the action. While he contributed vigorously it is still symptomatic of clubs outside the elite who seek or already hold Champions League places that the extra dimension in technique or imagination is lacking. Even so Birmingham had faith and did not waver when Liverpool came closer to hitting a rhythm in the second half.

McLeish's line-up was full of a purpose that daunted Hodgson's men for a time. Torres, trying to revert to his old self, must have cursed the obdurate work of the centre-backs Roger Johnson and Scott Dann. It could, of course, be a help that Birmingham do not have the weight of grand history to carry on their backs as they travel through this Premier League programme.

These are heady times for them. It is natural, given the costs, that the most refined technique is not present. Even so, their methods came close to downing Liverpool. Birmingham may not glitter but Reina had to tip over a header from Jerome in the 22nd minute when he got between Martin Skrtel and the debutant Paul Konchesky to connect with a Lee Bowyer cross.

Eight minutes before half-time Steven Carr's delivery found Craig Gardner but that header, too, was kept out by Reina. The outcome of the game appeared to depend solely on the outcome of Birmingham's struggle to achieve precision in the goalmouth. Their own goalkeeper, Ben Foster, might have gone unnoticed until he saved routinely from a Steven Gerrard 20-yarder.

That attempt by the captain illustrated Hodgson's dilemma. The manager needs Gerrard near the fringes of the penalty area but by having him in so advanced a post he depletes a midfield whose core here of Lucas and the recently arrived Denmark international Christian Poulsen was no more than workmanlike. While Liverpool did enjoy more possession at the start of the second half they were still at Birmingham's mercy.

In the 57th minute Dann met a Sebastian Larsson free-kick but connected with such force that his header bounced steeply over the crossbar. Liverpool did show more intent thereafter and Hodgson's desire to reshape his line-up was clear when the substitute Raul Meireles made his debut. But a greater transformation is essential.

Joe Cole's imminent return from suspension should be of help and the nuances of his style will increase the range of the build-up. Liverpool are far from the top of the table, though, and do not appear to have the means to rise all that high. Essentially everything that the club does sparks yet more discussion about the debts, the ownership and the bank's intentions over Anfield affairs.

Liverpool, unlike Birmingham, will never be allowed to go about their work quietly. McLeish, of course, may not necessarily feel blessed to be in his post. Apart from some awkwardness over the sealing of a new contract, the Scot has to consider how much higher he can hoist the club. It will be tough to pull off more coups such as the signing of Barry Ferguson, who shaped this match from midfield.

Still McLeish could be content. James McFadden's form picked up and there was a more technical approach than might have been anticipated.

It was not creativity so much as precise finishing that eluded Birmingham. The line-up is well-integrated, though, and the record on this ground - where all of last season's top four were held to draws - must now be making rivals wince when the fixture at St Andrew's rolls around.

Given that context, Liverpool can hardly have been in despair at the share of the points. All the same, it is difficult, without a sustained revival from Torres, to tell how Hodgson's men can reel off wins and transform their position.

The Spaniard never faltered for Liverpool on a day when Birmingham were intimidating. His side could easily have been on the end of a heavy defeat had it not been for Reina's brilliance in goal.

Man of the match Jose Reina

Best moment The first of his two saves from Jerome, diving to his right to deny the City striker at full stretch from close range.

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The Mail

Reina to the rescue for Roy's rabble

Birmingham 0 Liverpool 0

Next: West Bromwich Albion v BIRMINGHAM CITY (Sat); Manchester Utd v LIVERPOOL (Sun) IT HAS been 13 months since Roy Hodgson last tasted victory away from home in the Barclays Premier League and, judging by this, it could be a good while longer yet. Especially when Manchester United come next.

His Liverpool team appear to be travelling as badly as a Fulham side who won away only once in the league last season -- the failure even to begin to trouble Birmingham yesterday a real concern for the new Anfield manager.

Hodgson remained relatively calm afterwards, citing the fact that these are still early days; that such things can happen at the end of an international week; that Birmingham deserved credit for playing as well as they did, not least in defence where Alex McLeish has organised them magnificently. But it already seems Hodgson has his work cut out if he is to improve on the seventh place Liverpool achieved under Rafa Benitez in May. They might continue to possess real quality in the likes of Steven Gerrard, Fernando Torres, Pepe Reina and Jamie Carragher but too many of the players who stand alongside them simply don't appear good enough to be representing a team with serious designs on the Champions League. Yesterday Lucas Leiva and Christian Poulsen looked inferior to their more immediate predecessors. The central midfield pairing of Xabi Alonso and Javier Mascherano was as good as any in the Premier League. The same cannot be said of these two, who were not even a match for Craig Gardner and Barry Ferguson. For Gerrard and Torres, the apparent inability of their colleagues to pass the ball with any kind of fluency caused real frustration. In the end, Gerrard decided to drop deeper, if only to get more involved and inject a bit of urgency into Liverpool's football. He may have also lost a bit of patience with Torres, who for all the faults of his less gifted teammates also had something of a horror show. When fit and in form, he is among the finest strikers in the world, as he proved during his first season at Anfield. On yesterday's evidence he is still short of both, the sight of him shooting wildly from the tightest of angles when Gerrard was accelerating towards the edge of the six-yard box pretty much summing up his afternoon. Gerrard threw his hands into the air in exasperation, and one wonders if both of them might now regret not moving on when they had the chance.

Torres seems far from happy, judging by his body language. Right now there are no such concerns at Birmingham. They were much the better side going forward, too, and had it not been for Reina they would have won this comfortably.

Benitez never beat Birmingham in the league and Hodgson may now appreciate why, because McLeish and his men certainly had the measure of Liverpool this time. After an opening 20 minutes memorable only for the sight of Torres shooting weakly and Gerrard sustaining a nasty cut to his ear in a collision with Ferguson, Birmingham started to apply some pressure. A super cross from Lee Bowyer was met by Cameron Jerome with an excellent header, but Reina somehow conjured a save as good as any he will make this year.

Gardner then met a ball from Sebastian Larsson with a shot that looped over the crossbar and Reina excelled again in denying Jerome for a second time, intercepting a cross from Larsson just as Birmingham's striker prepared to unleash another header. What followed was just as impressive, Reina producing the third such save to stop a Gardner header that owed much to the quality of the cross from Stephen Carr. There was further disappointment for Birmingham when Roger Johnson failed to convert a fine delivery from the excellent Ferguson. In fairness to Johnson, he did all that was asked of him in defence alongside Scott Dann. The uncertainty in Liverpool's defensive ranks continued after the break, the arrival of Paul Konchesky doing little to raise standards at the back. A teasing free-kick from Larsson was allowed to bounce behind the back four, only just clearing an exposed Reina's bar. Only when Gerrard dropped into a more central role did Liverpool begin to gain some momentum but even then the better chances fell to Birmingham. While Reina remained on alert, Ben Foster enjoyed one of his easier days at the opposite end. He denied Gerrard and Torres but his goal was not often threatened. Jerome cursed his luck after directing a header wide when he really should have scored, leaving Birmingham to reflect not so much on a point gained but a major opportunity lost. They continue to grow under the management of McLeish, and had they secured the three points they deserved they would have been among the Champions League places this morning - the kind of territory Liverpool used to occupy but not at the moment and not any time soon, given the way they have started this campaign. They were awful at Manchester City, and hugely disappointing here too. Next stop Old Trafford.

BIRMINGHAM CITY (4-4-2): Foster 6; Carr 6, Johnson 7, Dann 7, Ridgewell 6; Larsson 7, Gardner 7, Ferguson 7, Bowyer 6; Jerome 7, McFadden 6 (Zigic 90min). Subs not used: Taylor, Murphy, Derbyshire, Michel, Fahey, Jiranek. Booked: Gardner.

LIVERPOOL (4-4-1-1): Reina 8; Johnson 6, Carragher 6, Skrtel 6, Konchesky 6 (Agger 78); Maxi 6, Lucas 5 (Meireles 76), Poulsen 5, Jovanovic 5; Gerrard 6; Torres 5. Subs not used: Jones, Pacheco, Kyrgiakos, Babel, Ngog.

Man of the match: Pepe Reina. Referee: Mark Halsey 7. Attendance: 27,333.

The Daily Telegraph

Torres toils as Liverpool struggle to find any spark

Birmingham City 0 Liverpool 0 Att 27,333

LIVERPOOL were as disappointing as Birmingham City were impressive here yesterday. Alex McLeish's tight unit of a team are up and running brightly, rising to fifth in the Premier League, while Roy Hodgson clearly has much work still to do to shift 13th-placed Liverpool into top gear. Liverpool's 4-2-3-1 shape had been familiar enough but Javier Mascherano's departure cannot be covered easily. Christian Poulsen and Lucas lack the mobility and passing range of the Mascherano-Xabi Alonso axis. One clunky first touch from Lucas almost brought him serious injury as Craig Gardner leapt in for the over-run ball. Raul Meireles, wearing the No4 shirt vacated by the hapless Alberto Aquilani, arrived late on and looked every inch the experienced Champions League campaigner that he is. For all the critical hubbub around Liverpool yesterday they will boast more substantial attacking options when Meireles, Joe Cole and Dirk Kuyt replace Lucas, Maxi Rodriguez and Milan Jovanovic.

For all the talk of Hodgson's honeymoon being over, he rightly stresses that Liverpool are a "work in progress", that he needs time to bed players in and a few more games for Fernando Torres to regain his famous sharpness. Jamie Redknapp's half-time critique on Sky of Torres' performance as "diabolical" was excessive. The Spaniard was not at the races yesterday, fluffing a good chance created by Glenn Johnson, but he remains a thoroughbred and will come good. Amid the inquest into Liverpool's continued sluggish start to the season it needs remembering that it takes two to tangle, that the Premier League abounds with opponents as well organised and spirited as McLeish's. Birmingham were excellent, full of organisation and spirit, pushing confidently forward through their 4-4-1-1 formation with James McFadden earning particular praise from his manager. "James McFadden answered a few critics," said McLeish, elaborating that his fellow Scot's application and fitness had been questioned north of the border. "He's one of the best trainers at the club, if not the best." It helps that McLeish uses McFadden so shrewdly, playing him in the hole where his close control causes opponents most trouble.

Only Pepe Reina's reflexes kept McLeish's men at bay, the Liverpool keeper pulling off his first stunning save by pushing away a Cameron Jerome header. Still Birmingham pressed, delighting the St Andrew's public.

Sebastian Larsson dribbled in from the right, eluding the sluggish Poulsen before cutting the ball back to Gardner, whose effort looped over.

Then Gardner, McFadden and Larsson combined to work the ball to Jerome but there was Reina again, cutting out the danger. The Spanish keeper then somehow denied Gardner.

Much of Birmingham's threat emanated from Barry Ferguson, who was hailed as "fantastic" by McLeish for running operations from deep midfield. "We don't get enough credit for the way we try to play," said Ferguson. "We play good football. We're always confident and you could see the work ethic of the team. It's outstanding." After Reina, Ferguson was man of the match. He constantly pinged balls forward, often angling them over the head of Martin Skrtel to Jerome. The sooner Daniel Agger replaces Skrtel in the heart of Liverpool's defence the better. Agger had been filling in at left-back, a situation that was far from ideal and one Hodgson hopes to have rectified by Paul Konchesky's recruitment. Hardly Alan Kennedy or Joey Jones, Konchesky is at least more defensively sound than Emiliano Insua, although his passing lacked accuracy, certainly in an impoverished first half for Liverpool. For long periods, Hodgson's side seemed trapped in a state of ennui, the lacklustre Torres following Konchesky in surrendering the ball cheaply. Such was his seemingly frustrated nature that Torres followed through on Roger Johnson.

Torres was isolated at times despite Steven Gerrard's attempts to join him. Gerrard himself revealed only glimpses of the form that has vivified England in recent days. Liverpool's captain had one shot saved as the second half opened but Ben Foster was in good form, providing another reminder of the excellence of Birmingham's goalkeeping department that so improved Joe Hart. When Gerrard took a painful whack in the right ear from Ferguson it at least provided evidence that if you cut him open he bleeds Liverpool red. Birmingham looked the likelier to draw first blood, Scott Dann heading down and over then Jerome nodding the ball wide after Konchesky had gifted possession to Stephen Carr. Liverpool's inertia was captured in the 73rd minute when Glenn Johnson dribbled around in the final third, searching vainly for a teammate to show.

Liverpool's lack of a cutting edge was highlighted when Torres displayed little interest in contesting a loose ball with Dann, who was thundering in, drawing lengthy applause from McLeish. "The players put in a phenomenal shift," said McLeish as the Blues stretched their unbeaten League record at St Andrew's to 17. As well as the quality of Birmingham's performance, the match was also memorable for some touches of humanity. At half-time, a Birmingham fan proposed to his girlfriend as St Andrew's bayed with a chant of "you don't know what you're doing". At the final whistle, Ferguson walked across and hugged Mark Halsey, the referee who is returning to football after overcoming cancer. Class.

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THE INDEPENDENT

Hodgson stands up for 'terrible' Torres in wake of TV attack

ROY HODGSON must hope that sooner or later the black cloud hanging over the head of Fernando Torres will disappear but against Birmingham City yesterday Liverpool's famous centre-forward looked distinctly like a man who wished he was elsewhere. With a nod in the direction of Alex McLeish's side, who were the better team, if this afternoon was memorable for anything then it was a turgid Liverpool performance. Torres was not the only man in a red shirt who looked off the pace but at times it was painful how far he looked from the player who scored 33 goals in his first season at the club and has become one of the best strikers of his generation. It was one of those days for Liverpool, one of those days when Steven Gerrard spends much of his time throwing his hands in the air and looking skywards in despair. Afterwards Hodgson put a brave face on it. But there was no more trenchant criticism of Torres than from Jamie Redknapp, the Sky Sports pundit, who described the Liverpool striker's first half performance as "diabolical". Redknapp, a former Liverpool captain, said: "Out there for 45 minutes he [Torres] has been terrible. He hasn't got hold of the ball, he hasn't chased, he's got frustrated, he could have been booked. He's been diabolical. I'm his biggest fan and I love seeing him. Of course you have to give [Roger] Johnson and [Scott] Dann credit but he's shown no appetite for the game. He's looked frustrated, sloppy, lethargic."

Torres cannot take all the responsibility for Liverpool's start to the season, but in a team that is struggling desperately for form, they need something from their famous No 9 to spark them into life. He scored against West Bromwich Albion last month and twice for Spain against Liechtenstein in Euro 2012 qualifiers but there is still the glumness about him that accompanied his demotion to substitute for Spain at the World Cup finals. These are early days for Hodgson and the team he is trying to build but at Liverpool the expectations are such that the early days do not last long. They have one win from their first four games and the manner of their draw yesterday was the greatest cause for concern. They were flat and, for long periods, they were outplayed. The Liverpool manager came to the defence of Torres, rejecting the criticisms of Redknapp and pleading the case that his striker was still not completely fit. Knee and groin problems slowed Torres all last season and, with the other strikers at his disposal, Hodgson has little chance but to persist with the player. Hodgson said: "I don't share that opinion [of Redknapp]. He [Torres] is working hard for the team. As we saw towards the end of the game, he's a constant thorn in the sides of defenders and I think you should give the defenders Dann and Johnson a lot of credit for making life difficult for him."

"We know that he lacks match training. He missed matches at the end of last year and he missed matches during the World Cup. But I'm not at all concerned about Fernando Torres. He will get better and better as the season goes on and I believe that, whether or not we will be discussing this is a good season or a bad season, we will be doing that in May, we won't be doing it at the beginning of September." McLeish's team have not been beaten at St Andrews for 17 games and they have a robustness that makes them hard to break down. It was not pretty but Birmingham's central defenders Dann and Johnson stuck close to Torres. Craig Gardner and Barry Ferguson did the same to Gerrard and their reward is a draw that takes them to fifth in the Premier League. It was Pepe Reina who kept Liverpool in the game in the first half making three crucial saves, the third of which from Gardner's close-range shot was extraordinary. In a heartbeat, Reina got down low to his right to keep the ball out. Twice he stopped Cameron Jerome when the Liverpool defence melted away in front of him. The chances for McLeish's side far out-numbered those for Liverpool. Dann should have done better when he headed the ball downwards from Seb Larsson's free-kick from the right on 57 minutes and it bounced up and over the bar. Jerome had another header at the back post on 70 minutes.

The Birmingham manager could justifiably say that his team were disappointed with not having won the game but that was not his overriding emotion. "We never took our chances so that is why we did not win but I have to be thrilled with the performance and the chances we created," he said. "You have to say that Pepe Reina was outstanding for them. They were certainly great saves."

"As for our defenders I would like to believe that they were the reason [Torres was kept so quiet]. Our two are difficult to play against. They keep their concentration. Liverpool had that wee bit of ascendancy in the second half, Gerrard got influential, and we kept our concentration." For Liverpool, there were debuts for Paul Konchesky and Raul Meireles which reflects the changes that the team are adapting to under a new manager. Both of them looked reasonably solid: it is the likes of Torres, not to mention Gerrard's increasing frustration, that are a greater cause for concern for Hodgson. Only once did Torres really work Ben Foster with an explosive near post shot on 63 minutes that he might have cut back to Gerrard. It was hard to remember another decent effort from Hodgson's team who now have five points in four games and sit one place behind Bolton Wanderers in the unfamiliar position of 13th in the table for a club of such reputation.

Not since 15 August has Hodgson won a game away from home as a Premier League manager and the signs are that it will be on their travels this season that Liverpool will struggle. He talked up the return of Joe Cole yesterday after the game and, of course, they are missing Dirk Kuyt for the long term. But what they really need is a spark of inspiration from Torres.

MATCH FACTS

Birmingham 4-4-2: Foster; Carr, Johnson, Dann, Ridgeway; Larsson, Gardner, Ferguson, Bowyer; Jerome, McFadden (Zigic, 89). Substitutes not used: Taylor (gk), Murphy, Derbyshire, Michel, Fahey, Jiranek.

Liverpool 4-4-1-1: Reina, Johnson, Carragher, Skrtel, Konchesky (Agger, 78); Maxi, Lucas (Meireles, 76), Poulsen, Jovanovic; Gerrard; Torres. Substitutes not used: Jones (gk), Pacheco, Kyrgiakos, Babel, Ngog.

Booked: Birmingham Gardner.

Man of the match Roger Johnson

Possession Birmingham 42% Liverpool 58%.

Shots on target Birmingham 2, Liverpool 3.

Referee M Halsey (Lancashire). Attendance 27,333

Match rating 5/10.



DIABOLICAL, TERRIBLE, SLOPPY.. AND FED UP; Redknapp* blasts tepid Torres as fears mount

Birmingham 0 Liverpool 0

FERNANDO TORRES was branded "diabolical" in an amazing blast from TV pundit Jamie Redknapp.

As Liverpool's talisman struggled to regain his scoring touch in a dismal stalemate at St Andrews, former Anfield favourite Redknapp accused the Spanish striker of lacking interest.

Torres scored twice for World Cup holders Spain against Liechtenstein last week. But he boarded the team coach last night escorted by three security guards and with a face like thunder after drawing another blank for Liverpool. Sky Sports analyst Redknapp panned Torres, saying: "Fans will suffer to a certain extent when you give the ball away, but they won't suffer a lack of effort."

"Out there for 45 minutes today he (Torres) has been terrible. He hasn't got hold of the ball, he hasn't chased, he's got frustrated, he could have been booked, he's been diabolical."

"I'm his biggest fan, and of course you have to give (Roger) Johnson and (Scott) Dann credit, but he's shown no appetite for the game."

"He's looked frustrated, sloppy, lethargic. I know people talk about his rustiness, but he looked fed-up."

Redknapp went on to write off Liverpool's title chances, adding: "It's completely unrealistic to think Liverpool can win the title. They need a couple of stars" But Kop boss Roy Hodgson hit back: "I don't share that opinion - Fernando is working hard for the team and is a constant thorn in the side of defenders."

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Dominic King on how an instant fix is not a reality for the Reds

PATIENCE is a quality lacking in the modern world but patience is needed more than ever in the modern world of Liverpool FC. While goals rained in at grounds all across the country on Saturday, that happy trend did not continue at St Andrew's yesterday as the Reds laboured against a hard-working, determined Birmingham City side to secure a point. Judging by some of the post-match chatter among certain anxious fans, this was evidence that the season – four games old, remember – is already moribund; here, after all, were Liverpool playing as if they had forgotten the Anfield mantra of pass and move.

It would be easy, then, to sit and pick holes in a lifeless performance and make proclamations that the end of the world is nigh; a side with a modicum of attacking verve would have put Birmingham to the sword in the final 15 minutes here but Liverpool never threatened to do so. Of course, it wasn't good enough on many levels. That Ben Foster never made a save of note was a damning indictment of what they did in the final third and brows were furrowed that Fernando Torres and Steven Gerrard did not get the service needed for them to make a significant impact. But, hard though it might be, the display needs putting into context with the whole situation. Liverpool are in a state of flux right now and huge changes have been made on and off the pitch – it would, therefore, be naïve to expect them to start playing fantasy football straight away.

Waiting for them to get to that point, however, is proving to be torturous. All Liverpoolians want to see is the side they idolise slip effortlessly into a groove that will bring an avalanche of goals and enable them to carry on old traditions. Unfortunately, it is not going to happen any time soon. Roy Hodgson, for starters, is still getting to know his players and working on a system that will marry silk and steel; it's all very well being organised but Reds expect a sense of adventure, too. That will never change.

If the mood in the visiting section was relatively buoyant before kick-off – the team was given a rousing reception when first emerging from the tunnel – it didn't take long for the bonhomie to evaporate during an opening 45 minutes that was, at best, attritional. Lacking any verve or wit in their play, Liverpool's best sight of goal came when Glen Johnson bombed forward and cut inside a couple of challenges but Torres uncharacteristically scuffed his effort from 12 yards wide. It was the start of a long afternoon for the number nine. After that, it was all about the home side. Birmingham had little difficulty bypassing Lucas and Christian Poulsen in the middle and the direct approach caused Martin Skrtel some uncomfortable moments, leading to Jamie Carragher offering some words of wisdom at the break.

Fortunately, while others struggled, Pepe Reina was in the kind of form which has earned him a cavalcade of superlatives, coming to Liverpool's aid with spectacular interventions that took the breath away and kept his team in the game. First, Reina plunged to his right to keep out Cameron Jerome's thumping header but he surpassed that when Stephen Carr picked out James McFadden; the former Everton man's header was firm and well placed but Reina's athleticism and strength ensured it came to nothing. This was much more like it. Having inexplicably put through his own net on the opening day, left some wondering about his part in the second goal Manchester City scored at Eastlands last month and then suffered another rick on international duty, this is what we expect from Reina.

"Somewhere down the line, we will be winning 1-0 or drawing and he will make a world class save – that's what he does," Steven Gerrard pointed out after the 1-1 draw with Arsenal. "He will certainly make up for that during the course of the season." Precisely. Reina would walk into any side in the Premier League, not to mention the majority of others on the continent – while keeping Gerrard and Torres at Anfield is crucial to a successful future the same, absolutely, goes for the man from Madrid. Everything he did here was impeccable. Exuding authority when coming for crosses, nullifying any aerial threat with assured handling, using possession with the poise of midfielder and throwing with the accuracy of a quarterback, Reina held the Reds together at times.

He wasn't so busy in the second period but neither was his opposite number Foster, despite Liverpool dominating possession – only when new signing Raul Meireles came on did Hodgson see his side have more creation and invention.

His was an interesting little cameo and the way he glided across the pitch, putting fizz into his precise passes, suggests he will make an impact; so, too, will Joe Cole, now that he has served his three-match ban and is ready to launch his career for real. Yet, again, both men will need time to become fully attuned to their new surrounds and that, inevitably, means it is time to show a little patience – even if it is the hardest thing to do. "I don't share that opinion. I think he was working hard for the team," - Roy Hodgson disagrees with Sky pundit Jamie Redknapp's assertion that Fernando Torres had been "terrible"

"We restricted Liverpool to very few chances; if they had our chances, I would have sat here in a very bad mood," Birmingham boss Alex McLeish credits his side's endeavour rather than pointing to Liverpool's attacking failings

BIRMINGHAM (4-2-3-1): Foster, Carr, Johnson, Dann, Ridgwell: Bowyer, Ferguson: Larsson, Gardner, M Murphy, Derbyshire, Michel, Fahey, Jiraneck. BOOKED: Gardner.

LIVERPOOL (4-2-3-1): Reina: Johnson, Carragher, Skrtel, Konchesky (Agger 78): Lucas (Meireles 76), Poulsen: Rodriguez, Gerrard, Jovanovic: Torres. SUBS: Jones (GK), Pacheco, Kyrgiakos, Babel, Ngog.

cFadden (Zigic 90): Jerome. SUBS: Taylor (GK), REFEREE: Mark Halsey (Bolton) ATTENDANCE: 27,333