

Date: 21 October 2010
 Opposition: SSC Napoli
 Competition: Europa League

Times	Guardian	Mail
Telegraph	Independent	Mirror
Echo		



21 October
2010

THE TIMES

Liverpool draw on their reserves and give Hodgson some respite

Perhaps Roy Hodgson has been misjudged. Maybe the **Liverpool** manager is just ahead of his time. Five days after he erroneously claimed that his team had produced their best performance of his reign, they delivered a display worthy of such a description.

In the face of mounting adversity, Hodgson coaxed **Liverpool** into a semblance of their former selves and a draw in Naples was a deserved reward for his perseverance. Sunday's defeat by Everton may have prompted Hodgson's specious claims that **Liverpool** were on the up, but, on the evidence of their latest European excursion, it may also have belatedly stirred his players into collective action.

"We showed that the club's not dead." Hodgson said, adding, without fear of contradiction on this occasion, that "there were a lot of positives to take from the game.

"It was a good point, one that many people did not think we would be capable of getting. The team proved a few people wrong and we should not be anything other than delighted."

As was so often the case during the reign of Rafael Benitez, Hodgson's predecessor, continental combat is providing the antidote to domestic strife for **Liverpool**. Nineteenth in the Barclays Premier League, they occupy top spot in Europa League group K despite having contested tricky assignments in the Netherlands and Italy.

However, it is at home, rather than abroad, that Hodgson will be judged. The outcome of Sunday's game at home to Blackburn Rovers will play a far more significant role in determining his future than a creditable draw away to **Napoli**, a factor that led to his pre-match admission that he was prepared to risk sacrificing potential success in Italy to protect the cluster of star players he left behind.

Having presided over the worst start to a season by any **Liverpool** manager since 1928, Hodgson finds himself in mid-crisis little more than three months after accepting his "dream job". The wild rumours suggesting that **Napoli** would be his last game in charge were dismissed, but the doubts surrounding his position will only be removed if he can convince **Liverpool's** new owner, New England Sports Ventures (NESV), that he can mastermind the kind of revival that its initial [pounds sterling]300 million investment demands.

"I have heard the ridiculous rumours and I can assure you that there is not an iota of truth in them," Hodgson said. "I can assure you that I have never considered resigning and I never will."

Those comments ensure that any decisions about the manager's future, if they are to be made, will have to be taken by NESV, an onerous situation for the Americans to be in given their limited experience of English football in general and **Liverpool**, in particular.

Despite the rumours regarding his situation, Hodgson's thoughts had focused largely on the safety of the **Liverpool** fans who had been attacked on the streets of Naples. He was taken aback by the hostility with which the local Ultras greeted his club's fans.

As if the atmosphere of intimidation needed exacerbating, a lone helicopter repeatedly circled the Stadio San Paolo before kick-off. The noise of its rotors stirred memories of the opening scene of Apocalypse Now but the away supporters may have been reminded more of The Warriors, having spent the day running the gauntlet of gangs of knife-wielding thugs.

On entering the stadium, groups of **Liverpool** fans were targeted by Ultras. The previous night, six others, including a family of three, were injured in attacks involving knives, bats and bottles.

The head of the city's anti-terror unit tried to play down the hooliganism by insisting that those responsible were "not murderers", adding that their intention was "only to hurt". That will have been of little consolation to those on the receiving end.

At least those who made it inside the ground were able to enjoy the most spirited **Liverpool** performance since Hodgson's arrival. For those who argue that the passage of time is all that is required for his methods to take effect, this display will preserve their faith.

Even with Steven Gerrard, Fernando Torres and Raul Meireles left on Merseyside, and despite the withdrawal of Jamie Carragher at half-time, **Liverpool** managed to play with a level of tactical organisation and defensive fortitude that has been missing of late. Their failure to find the back of the net will, of course, be cited by Hodgson's army of critics, but no English side have scored at the Sao Paolo in European competition and a draw was a commendable result for a weakened team. Had Paul Konchesky not thwarted Marek Hamsik with a goalline clearance or Pepe Reina not denied Edinson Cavani with a smart save, **Liverpool's** efforts might have been in vain.

That was pretty much the sum total of **Napoli's** attacking efforts, however, and **Liverpool** could lay claim to the best chance of the night when Ryan Babel was put clean through on goal only for Morgan Di Sanctis, the **Napoli** goalkeeper, to make a spectacular save with his left foot.

Hodgson had every right to be pleased with his team, with Jonjo Shelvey, 18, making a particularly impressive on his full debut.

"The players stepped up to the plate and dealt with it," the **Liverpool** manager said. Now Hodgson must deal with the incessant pressure that continues to come his way in a similar fashion if the judgment of him is to become more favourable.

the guardian

Mayhem in Naples but not on the pitch as Hodgson's young stand-ins stay cool

Pandemonium reigned here last night as Ultras fought Carabinieri and attacked Liverpool supporters. Inside the stadium, and unusually for Roy Hodgson's brief tenure as Liverpool manager, there was order and calm. The great "sacrifice" Hodgson took with his team did not extend to his job prospects after all.

Liverpool remain top of Group K after a scrappy draw with Napoli but, more importantly, a determined display by the fringe players Hodgson gambled upon at a delicate moment in his reign. Victory over Blackburn on Sunday would complete the vindication for the 63-year-old, who shook hands with every member of the Liverpool bench after a point gained and made. He must be tempted to resist wholesale changes against Rovers after a night when the only reputation stained in Naples was that of Italian football. On the eve of the game the newspaper Napoli carried an unsubstantiated article warning of "one thousand hooligans" heading over from England. As in many parts of Italy, of course, the problem is much closer to home. Five English people and one Italian, the owner of the pizzeria where supporters had come under attack, were hospitalised on Wednesday night and trouble continued throughout today. Gangs of Ultras "went out seeking English fans", according to local police, and fought with officers outside the stadium before kick-off. There were unconfirmed reports of at least 10 Liverpool supporters being injured on the approach to the ground.

To endure all this at great expense is an extreme test of loyalty. To endure all this to watch a makeshift team bordered on insult but that at least was removed by the reaction of their team. Most managers in Hodgson's predicament would do the same but, aware of the potential repercussions among a disenchanting fan-base and squad alike, would not say so ahead of the game. The argument for keeping Steven Gerrard, Fernando Torres, Raul Meireles and Lucas fresh for Blackburn Rovers on Sunday is not watertight anyhow, given that the Liverpool manager rested his captain in Utrecht with Blackpool in mind and lost the Premier League game 2-1. Liverpool's reshuffled pack did not perform as cautiously or ineptly as their more established colleagues had done against Ian Holloway's team or in the derby defeat at Everton. Individual errors and an initial reluctance to commit to attack, both features of Hodgson's team recently, were shown by Napoli before they eventually discovered the form that has taken Walter Mazzarri's side to fourth in Serie A.

Hodgson gave Jonjo Shelvey a first start for Liverpool since his pounds 1.7m arrival from Charlton Athletic and was repaid with a debut of rich promise from the midfielder. The occasional loose touch did not detract from Shelvey's willingness to support the lone striker, David Ngog, with intelligent runs forward, while his strength on the ball and influence on the Liverpool performance belied his age. Jay Spearing, Martin Kelly, Milan Jovanovic and Ryan Babel were also brought out of hibernation and, with the exception of the Holland international, all contributed to a composed European away performance. Babel's display was encapsulated in two first-half moments. Released into space on the left of the Napoli area by a fine diagonal pass from Jovanovic, the pounds 11.5m forward turned away from goal and eventually ran the ball out of play. He was then dispossessed by the industrious Ezequiel Lavezzi deep in the Napoli half and gave up the chase to retrieve possession before Martin Skrtel intervened at the expense of a booking. With 20 minutes remaining the 23-year-old was presented with a glorious chance to make amends. Jovanovic sliced across the Italian defence and picked out Babel's unmarked run into the Napoli area on the left. Babel fired low, but the goalkeeper, Morgan De Sanctis, stuck out his left leg and deprived the Dutchman, Hodgson and Liverpool of a much-needed release. Ngog was also thwarted with a shot on the turn, although chances for Liverpool were scarce. Napoli carried the greater threat but were unable to apply a finish. The striker Edinson Cavani failed to convert two inviting deliveries from Lavezzi and, when Cavani returned Hugo Campagnaro's corner across the face of Jose Reina's goal, Marek Hamsik scuffed a close-range effort past the Liverpool goalkeeper but not beyond Paul Konchesky on the line. Jamie Carragher was withdrawn at half-time yet, with Skrtel commanding in defence, Liverpool held firm.

Napoli 3-4-1-2

De Sanctis; Campagnaro, Cannavaro, Aronica; Maggio (Zuniga, 75), Piazienza *, Gargano (Yebda, 83), Dossena; Hamsik (Sosa, 85), Lavezzi; Cavani.
 Subs not used Izzo, Grava, Dumitru, Cribari.

Referee T Kinhofer (Ger).

Liverpool 4-2-3-1

Reina; Kelly, Carragher (Kyrgiakos, 46), Skrtel, Konchesky (Aurelio, 65); Spearing, Poulsen; Jovanovic, Shelvey, Babel (Cole, 65); Ngog.

Subs not used Jones, Rodriguez, Wilson, Eccleston.

Group K:

P W D L F A GD Pts

Liverpool 3 1 2 0 4 1 3 5

Napoli 3 0 3 0 3 3 0 3

FC Utrecht 3 0 3 0 1 1 0 3

St Bucharest 3 0 2 1 5 8 -3 2

Next fixtures 4 Nov Liverpool v Napoli, Steaua Bucharest v FC Utrecht

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The Mail

HODGSON MAKES A BIG POINT; Result for Kop boss after he rests stars
 Napoli 0 Liverpool 0

HE STOOD with his hands in his pockets for most of the 90 minutes, and Roy Hodgson was able to keep them there after seeing Liverpool extend their unbeaten start to this season's Europa League here last night.

The Liverpool manager had admitted he would 'hold my hands up and take the blame' if his bold gamble of resting skipper Steven Gerrard and [pounds sterling]21million record signing Fernando Torres had backfired and led to their first defeat, after five wins and a draw. Fourth in Serie A, Napoli were expected to present a formidable challenge, particularly given the hostility generated by a capacity Stadio San Paolo crowd, yet it never materialised. With Christian Poulsen and Jay Spearing establishing a stranglehold in midfield, and Jonjo Shelvey growing in confidence on his first Liverpool start, Hodgson's side were good value for a point and could easily have made it three after finishing strongly.

Hodgson said: 'There were plenty of positives and, if it was a gamble with the team I selected, the players made it pay off. Not many people expected a performance like that, but the team I sent out proved a lot of people wrong. 'When you make use of your squad, the players who come in have to step up to the plate, and they did. Young Jonjo Shelvey was making his first start in a tough atmosphere, yet he handed it superbly.'

The pressure had been building relentlessly on Hodgson, and it showed no sign of easing, following a clear indication that former Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard was ready to step into his shoes at a moment's notice. After the game, Hodgson responded to rumours that he was ready to quit his post at Anfield in the wake of the recent uncertainty surrounding the club. 'I have heard the ridiculous rumours and I can tell you there is not an iota of truth in any of them,' he said. 'The simple answer is I have never considered resigning and I never will.'

Rijkaard had only left Galatasaray 24 hours earlier, yet the signals were the Dutchman was already making his way towards Anfield. There had not been any direct contact from John Henry, or anyone else from New England Sports Ventures, according to his agent Perry Overeem, but they knew where he was.

'Frank will return into football, that is for sure,' said Overeem. 'The question is when and where, and that will not be answered now. It was only on Wednesday that the situation changed at Galatasaray, and we are working on making sure that everything is sorted out there. 'We haven't been approached by anybody official (at Liverpool) yet, and, to me, the current coach is still working with the support of Liverpool. Let us all wait and see what happens.'

Rijkaard may not have to wait much longer, if Liverpool fail to launch an overdue revival against Blackburn at Anfield on Sunday, despite the temporary respite provided by another encouraging venture to the continent.

While the noise from a partisan home support was constant and loud, Napoli's players looked tentative and strangely subdued. A marked lack of creativity limited their attacking threat to long-range efforts, Ezequiel Lavezzi firing harmlessly over from 25 yards in the 20th minute and striker Edinson Cavani clearing the bar from roughly twice as far after spotting Pepe Reina off his line eight minutes later. It was all looking comfortable for Liverpool, particularly with Spearing making the most of a rare start alongside Poulsen, but the mood threatened to change in first-half injury-time, when they failed to deal with a cross from Lavezzi, following a short corner on the right.

The ball was knocked down to Marek Hamsik, and his flick was on the point of crossing the line, when Paul Konchesky hacked it to safety.

Little had been seen of Liverpool as an attacking force, though Ryan Babel should have done better after being picked out on the left of the area by Milan Jovanovic's crossfield pass. Babel's first touch let him down, and his second was scarcely any better, as he retrieved the ball from the goalline and succeeded only in running it out for a throw-in.

Jamie Carragher was withdrawn at half-time to save his legs for Sunday, though it hardly seemed necessary.

There was a brief scare on the hour, when Cavani planted a header narrowly wide with Reina rooted to the spot, but, increasingly, the game looked Liverpool's for the taking, if only they could muster a little more attacking intent.

Jovanovic had looked as likely as anyone to oblige, and he duly created an opportunity Babel should have despatched in the 70th minute. But Babel could only fire a shot against keeper Morgan De Sanctis.

A breakthrough beckoned again in the 82nd minute, when David Ngog turned past his marker, after chesting down a Jovanovic cross with his back to goal, and drilled a goalbound shot that was blocked.

It was a positive finish by Liverpool, but if only they had started in the same vein.

MATCH FACTS

NAPOLI (3-4-2-1): De Sanctis 5; Campagnaro 6, Cannavaro 6, Aronica 6; Maggio 6 (Zuniga 75min, 6), Paziienza 5, Gargano 5 (Yebda 83), Dossena 5; Hamsik 6 (Sosa 85), Lavezzi 7; Cavani 6. Booked: Paziienza.

LIVERPOOL (4-2-3-1): Reina 6; Kelly 6, Carragher 7 (Kyrgiakos 46, 6), Skrtel 6, Konchesky 6 (Aurelio 65, 6); Poulsen 8, Spearing 7; Jovanovic 7, Shelvey 7, Babel 6 (Cole 76); Ngog 6. Booked: Skrtel.

Man of the match: Christian Poulsen. Referee: Thorsten Kinshofer (Germany) 7.

The Daily Telegraph

Liverpool thrive in crucible of intimidation

Napoli 0 Liverpool 0 Att: 55,489

Some things never change. Italy's hooligan problem continues undimmed, pockets of ultras remain committed to ensuring the country is not a safe place for travelling fans to watch football and, on the pitch, Liverpool do not succumb to intimidation. Whoever occupies the Boot Room and the boardroom, whatever the names on the back of the shirt, the club contains a streak of defiance.

Given the circumstances, it was the least Roy Hodgson's side could do. Around 1,000 fans made the trip from Merseyside and after what a number went through at the hands of a section of Napoli's support, the players had a duty to live up to expectations.

They did more than that. Hodgson named a scratch side, devoid of Steven Gerrard and Fernando Torres, and had admitted beforehand that he would sacrifice a win here if it led to a victory on Sunday against Blackburn. But what a side consisting mainly of wannabes and never-will-bes lacked in finesse, they made up for in fire. Breathless, ceaseless running, an unstinting work ethic, an insatiable appetite to stifle and, as confidence grew, a smattering of ambition.

Liverpool left the pitch to the whistles of 60,000 disappointed Neapolitans. They should have heard a round of applause and they should wear Napoli's frustration like a badge of honour.

"This was a point a lot of people did not think we would be capable of getting," Hodgson said. "But the team proved people wrong. I do not think we should be anything other than delighted. This was a tough game, in a very tough atmosphere.

"We were aware of what had happened to some fans and we were concerned. It is not something we want, where fans do not go and support their team because they are frightened of being hurt. All I can do is say how sad we were to learn some were attacked and some of them seriously. These supporters have done a fantastic job, coming to a potentially dangerous place, and we are grateful for their support.

"I would like to say, too, that I was asked yesterday whether I was worried about drunken English fans coming here. That seems almost amusing now, when peaceable fans have come here to watch a game and some of them have been stabbed." The most statesmanlike speech of Hodgson's somewhat unpredictable reign followed the first statesmanlike display. No wonder he dismissed rumours he had resigned as "ridiculous", insisting the thought had never so much as entered his mind. Perhaps he is settling into a role he has seemed ill at ease with in recent weeks. If so, his timing is impeccable.

Hodgson started this game with his position looking its most vulnerable. Christian Purslow, his closest ally in the Anfield boardroom, left the club on Wednesday. Manuel Pellegrini and Frank Rijkaard are believed to be casting covetous glances. The Dutchman's agent said yesterday: "He will return to football, that is for sure. The question is when and where. Let's wait and see."

Defeat here might have expedited that return. That Liverpool, and Hodgson, returned to Merseyside late last night with their reputations enhanced may delay it. If this is the beginning of a recovery, it may postpone it indefinitely.

In truth, Liverpool were helped by their opponents' determination to face the 2005 and 2007 editions of the club who stormed so many of Europe's great cathedrals. Walter Mazzarri, Napoli's manager, had described this as the most important game of his club's season. They wanted a showpiece, a sense of occasion. Liverpool had no desire to offer them either.

Instead, they did what Liverpool have always done. They sat back, inviting pressure, challenging Napoli to prove their worth. They maintained their shape, devotedly, doggedly sticking to their task. They refused to buckle to the hostility washing down from the stands, to the flares and the fireworks.

The hosts threatened only fleetingly in the first half, and consumed with doubt, faded in the second. Liverpool might even have won it, as Ryan Babel found himself denied by Morgan De Sanctis's legs and David Ngog saw a shot blocked. It did not matter. Hodgson's - and Liverpool's - point was made.

Four fans stabbed in attacks by Napoli ultras * At least six Liverpool fans were injured and three Italians charged with attempted murder after groups of hooligans armed with knives, bricks and bats attacked travelling supporters before the Europa League tie in Naples last night.

Italian police said that five supporters were taken to hospital on Wednesday night, while a local restaurant owner was hurt as he tried to prevent ultras pelting tourists with stones and bottles. Gary Brown, 60, from Bedfordshire, suffered knife wounds to the thigh and head, while his son Adam, 17, suffered bruising in an attack near the city's Piazza Garibaldi.

Ross Hazeldene, 23, was also stabbed. All have been released from hospital.

Three men have been charged with attempted murder in connection with the attack. A variety of weapons - including cudgels, knives and a baseball bat - were recovered. Alexander Phillips, 53, from Liverpool, and a 27 year-old who did not wish to be named, were also stabbed in separate incidents. As reports filtered in of attacks on fans near Napoli's stadium, Dr Filippo Bonfiglio, head of the city's antiterror unit, said: "There was no provocation from the Liverpool supporters."

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THE INDEPENDENT

Hodgson's youth gamble pays off

A FEW miles from Vesuvius, Roy Hodgson was metaphorically staring into the volcano. Defeat in the Merseyside derby that topped a bad start to the season had pushed the Liverpool manager seemingly very close to the edge. According to that most baseless of currency - internet rumours - after he had presumably overseen a humiliating rout in Naples, Hodgson would fly home, call a press conference at Anfield for this morning and announce his resignation. Frank Rijkaard, who left Galatasaray this week, had already been singled out as his replacement. As with so much of this stuff, nothing of the sort actually happened - as a rough guide to internet rumours the News of the World do not tell teenagers blogging from their bedrooms that they are about to break an exclusive. "I have heard the ridiculous rumours and there is not an iota of truth in any of it," Hodgson said. "I have never considered resigning and I never will." Instead, Hodgson oversaw what was probably the best performance under his management. After leaving Steven Gerrard, Fernando Torres and Raul Meireles on Merseyside to prepare for Sunday's encounter with Blackburn, the manager gambled that this was a game he could probably afford to lose.

However, in one of European football's most intense cauldrons, a young, makeshift team not only endured, they held their own. Here, each side had one exceptional chance to break the deadlock. Paul Konchesky cleared a shot off the line before the interval and, in the second half, Ryan Babel squandered an opportunity to give Liverpool an improbable victory after being put through by a beautifully judged pass from Milan Jovanovic. His shot clattered into Morgan De Sanctis's legs and the chance for something extraordinary passed. Nevertheless, in the wake of Utrecht's draw with Steaua Bucharest, Liverpool still top their group and this was the kind of backs-to-the wall display away from home that had seen Fulham through to the Europa League final last season.

"It was a point that many people thought we would not get," Hodgson reflected. "We stepped up to the plate in a very tough atmosphere. It doesn't matter if you are Inter, Milan or Juventus, this is a hard, hard place to come. We are still marooned in the League," he said. "But we have shown tonight that we are far from dead." Hodgson, however, was angered by the violence that had surrounded this fixture that had left several of the club's fans injured. "In my pre-match press conference, I was asked in Italian whether I was concerned about the damage drunken Liverpool fans would do in Naples," he said. "Given what has happened, I find that faintly amusing. They were peaceful people who came here to watch football and ended up in hospital. I hope they don't come home with too many bad memories."

It was not in truth much of a spectacle but the setting, at least, was panoramic. Beyond the concrete, graffiti-strewn walls of the San Paolo the sun set into the Gulf of Naples, framing Vesuvius in a sheath of gold. Away from the volcano, the stadium seethed. Inside there were images of love - a vast banner saying "Ti Amo" and a portrait of Diego Maradona, who in 1987 drove this proud, chaotic, impoverished city to an Italian championship they have never forgotten. And there were expressions of menace; flares burning in the stands, police helicopters clattering overhead. And yet a Liverpool team with plenty of academy products - Jonjo Shelvey had never before started a competitive game for the club - were not intimidated. Shelvey even provided Liverpool with their first shot on target after half an hour, while another young midfielder, Jay Spearing, received Michele Pazienza's boot in his face. Napoli had billed this match as a show of strength; an opportunity to demonstrate that they were back mixing it with the big boys. In fact, they caused Liverpool fewer problems than Blackpool. Possession was surrendered, moves broke down and the collective howl uttered by the San Paolo when a horribly misplaced cross from Ezequiel Lavezzi landed on the stadium's running track, demonstrated they were quite capable of turning on their own. In first-half stoppage time, Napoli looked for a second as if they had broken through as Marek Hamsik turned Edison Cavani's shot past Pepe Reina for what would have been the opening goal of the night had Konchesky not reacted instinctively. Given what had happened to Frank Lampard at Bloemfontein during the World Cup, it was a neat irony that is should have been a German referee who had to judge if the ball had crossed the line. Thorsten Kinhofer ruled it had not. Traditionally, you are supposed to see Naples and Die. Liverpool survived.

GROUP K

P W D L F A Pts

Liverpool 3 1 2 0 4 1 5

Napoli 3 0 3 0 3 3 3

Utrecht 3 0 3 0 1 1 3

Steaua Bucharest 3 0 2 1 5 8 2

* Results so far: Liverpool 4 Steaua Bucharest 1, Napoli 0 Utrecht 0; Steaua Bucharest 3 Napoli 3, Utrecht 0 Liverpool 0; Napoli 0 Liverpool 0, Utrecht 1 Steaua Bucharest 1.

* Liverpool's remaining fixtures: 4 Nov

Napoli (h); 2 Dec Steaua Bucharest (a); 15 Dec Utrecht (h).

MATCH FACTS

Napoli (3-2-4-1): De Sanctis; Campagnaro, Cannavaro, Aronica; Piacenza, Gargano (Yebda, 83); Maggio (Zuniga, 76), Hamsik (Sosa, 84), Lavezzi, Dossena; Cavani. Substitutes not used Iezzo (gk), Grava, Dumitru, Cribari.

Liverpool (4-2-3-1): Reina; Kelly, Carragher (Kyrgiakos, h-t), Skrtel, Konchesky (Aurelio, 65); Poulsen, Spearing; Jovanovic, Shelvey, Babel (Cole, 77); Ngog. Substitutes not used Jones (gk), Rodriguez, Wilson, Ecclestone.

Booked: Napoli Pazienza; Liverpool Skrtel

Possession Napoli 51%, Liverpool 49%.

Shots on target Napoli 3, Liverpool 5.

Referee T Kinhofer (Germany). Attendance 55,489.

Man of the match Konchesky. Match rating 6/10.



RED ROY CAN LIV NAPOLI EVER AFTER

ROY HODGSON must be wishing he could bottle Liverpool's European success, as his spectacular gamble paid off here in Italy.

The Anfield side stretched their unbeaten run in the Europa League to seven matches with an assured display against Napoli that belied their woeful domestic form.

Beforehand Hodgson admitted that he would be forced to take yet more criticism - and with it perhaps unbearable pressure - should his team have lost with Steven Gerrard and Fernando Torres rested.

Instead the Reds emerged with a valuable point that makes qualifying for the knock-out stage look a formality. Indeed, they were so comfortable the only complaint is that they didn't win easily.

For Hodgson, it offers the merest glimmer of relief as he now looks forward to the home Premier League game on Sunday against Blackburn with renewed confidence.

With Frank Rijkaard lurking in the background, cheerily proclaiming he would take the Liverpool job at the drop of a hat, Hodgson knew defeat here was unthinkable.

While he cannot yet claim to have turned the corner given that his side are now seven games without a win, he will take comfort from the fact his side are starting to look like a unit, and starting to respond to his tactics.

His only mystery is why it has taken so long.

Liverpool looked nothing like a bottom three team either, even without their top stars.

Certainly, Liverpool were more measured, the brave decision by Hodgson (left) to rest Gerrard and Torres looking less of a gamble as the night wore on.

The Reds retained possession, and young players including Martin Kelly, Jay Spearing and Jonjo Shelvey, on his first start for the club, seemed to grow in confidence as the game wore on.

Indeed, Liverpool came so close to snatching victory when Ryan Babel was presented with a glorious chance on 69 minutes.

A fine run from Milan Jovanovic, who had previously fired over, culminated in a clever pass which put Babel in space, but from a fine position Babel smashed his shot against the keeper.

David Ngog found himself with a similar chance 10 minutes later, only to see his shot cannon off the lunge of defender Paolo Cannavaro.

Napoli's only real effort came on the stroke of half time, and it was great work from Paul Konchesky that denied them when he turned a goalbound shot from Marek Hamsik off the line.

Hodgson's gambling instinct even allowed him the luxury of playing Joe Cole for a 15-minute cameo, and for giving both Jamie Carragher and Konchesky a second half breather, but it did little to affect the Liverpool performance.

On another day, his side would have won comfortably, but as it is, they are in a strong position to qualify from this group with two homes games left.

Even more important, perhaps, is that Hodgson's side visibly lifted in confidence, and with Gerrard and Torres rested for Sunday, he will be hoping that it can provide the watershed to his team's season.

NAPOLI: De Sanctis 5, Campagnaro 5, Cannavaro 6, Aronica 6, Maggio 6, Pazienza 7, Gargano 6, Dossena 5, Hamsik 7, Lavezzi 6, Cavani 5.

LIVERPOOL: Reina 6, Kelly 7, Carragher 7 (Kyrgiakos 46, 6), Skrtel 7, Konchesky 7 (Aurelio 65, 6), Poulsen 7, Spearing 8; Jovanovic 7, Shelvey 7, Babel 6 (Cole 74, 6), Ngog 7.

REFEREE: Thorsten Kinhofer

ATTENDANCE: 55,489

EURO HEROES..

HODGSON'S Reds have enjoyed an impressive unbeaten run in the UEFA Cup. Shame about their domestic form..

29/7 Rabotnicki

0-2 Liverpool

5/8 Liverpool 2-0 Rabotnicki

19/8 Liverpool 1-0 Trabzonspor

26/8 Trabzonspor 1-2 Liverpool

16/9 Liverpool 4-1 St.Bucharest

30/9 Utrecht 0-0 Liverpool

21/10 Napoli 0-0 Liverpool

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Dominic King sees the Reds make their point in Naples
 JUST three weeks ago a European stalemate was the precursor for Liverpool's lowest ebb in 57 years; now, perhaps, a similar result might just provide the launchpad for recovery.
 Roy Hodgson may have admitted to taking a gamble with Liverpool's present to safeguard the club's future by leaving a number of star names at home but, happily, that gamble, to some extent, paid off last night in Naples – never before has a 0-0 draw been so welcome.
 Determined, dogged, disciplined and doughty throughout, the Reds rewarded those supporters who ran a gauntlet of hate to roar their team to a result that keeps them in control of Europa League Group K but, more importantly, has given everyone at Anfield a lift.
 Coming on the back of possibly the most stomach-churning defeat to Everton in two decades, it was widely assumed Liverpool – without Steven Gerrard, Fernando Torres and Raul Meireles – would collapse like a deck of cards in Stadio San Paolo.
 A capacity crowd, a young, enthusiastic team and Hodgson's admission that this was effectively a contest Liverpool could do without led to predictions that Napoli would comfortably add their name to the list of those who have toppled the Reds so far.
 Yet, once again, we received a reminder that it is dangerous to make assumptions in football; silencing Napoli's fans and, shushing the doubters, Hodgson, for the moment at least, can feel a sense of satisfaction and relief.
 There is nothing clever about the design of this stadium – it is just one cavernous bowl – but it is incredibly atmospheric and, to confirm how a big deal this game was for the locals, it was just over half full 90 minutes before kick-off.
 Predictably, Hodgson's makeshift side emerged to a wall of sound when the time came for proceedings to get under way and, for some of the younger members of the travelling party this was clearly going to provide a big test of their credentials and capabilities.
 One novice who found himself thrust into centre stage following Hodgson's decision to leave his big guns at home was Jonjo Shelvey; who was one of seven changes to the team that had suffered the ignominy of being brushed to one side at Goodison Park.
 Many, if we are honest, expected things to continue in the same vein as against Everton but the opening half hour was relatively stress free for Hodgson, as his players had the best of the possession and frustrated opponents who seemed in awe of their reputation.
 With a better touch, Ryan Babel would have galloped clear onto Milan Jovanovic's early through ball while only a desperate sliding tackle from Paolo Cannavaro prevented Shelvey – who was outstanding throughout – from skipping on to another pass from the Serbian international.
 So puzzling. Here were Hodgson's men dealing with the biggest test they have faced in the past month with the minimum of fuss, keeping their shape and holding a solid line and not batting an eyelid as the volume in the stands was ratcheted up.
 Christian Poulsen – a figure of derision since his arrival from Juventus – controlled the tempo, taking possession, giving it simply, while flying into tackles and interceptions; Jovanovic and Babel, meanwhile, constantly looked to cause menace from the flanks.
 The longer the game went on, the more you got the impression that Napoli's reputation did not have great substance and Pepe Reina had arguably his quietest 45 minutes of the season in the opening period, as the home side struggled to deal with the occasion.
 Then again, he had Paul Konchesky to thank for the fact Liverpool went into the break all square, the left-back kicking Marek Hamsik's shot off the line after Edinson Cavani's cross-cum-shot had squirmed through a penalty area melee.
 It would have been exceptionally harsh on Liverpool had the fallen behind at that juncture and, as he strode back to the sanctuary of the away dressing room, Hodgson's thoughts would surely have been taken with the fact the contest was there for the winning.
 His players, evidently, felt the same way. Poulsen's first act on re-emerging was to clap his hands repeatedly together, imploring those around him to believe in themselves and to be brave in their pursuit of a result to change the atmosphere surrounding the club.
 Perhaps it was due to the fact he was playing against familiar opponents at a familiar ground but it was impossible to dispute that this was Poulsen's most effective match to date in a Red shirt, a performance which showed why Hodgson was so keen to sign him.
 While the rat-a-tat-tat pace of the domestic game might leave the Denmark international's head in a spin at the moment, this run out will have gone some way to restoring confidence levels that must surely have plummeted of late.
 But couldn't you say the same about the team? Watching Liverpool for much of this campaign has been torturous, a harrowing experience seeing the team in Red stumble from one catastrophic result to another.

Here, however, was them battling gamely to restore a sense of pride and had Babel a ounce more conviction when Jovanovic – another who could say he finally showed a glimpse of his real form – put him through, Liverpool should have taken the lead on 70 minutes.
 Those sentiments were repeated shortly after when the ball fell to David Ngog but, frustratingly, he could not get his shot away quick enough to pass Salvatore Aronica, who made a block to keep Napoli in the game.
 No matter. A late goal would have been the icing on this cake but at least Liverpool travelled back home in the early hours content that they had rediscovered their fighting spirit – now it would be helpful if they followed up by dismantling Blackburn. Time to push on.
MAN-OF-THE-MATCH: CHRISTIAN POULSEN – Looked a different player to the one that has struggled so badly in the Premier League, never missed a tackle or wasted a pass all evening. Deserves the award ahead of the industrious Milan Jovanovic.
NAPOLI (3-4-2-1): De Sanctis: Campagnaro, Cannavaro, Aronica: Maggio (Zuniga 75), Paziienza, Gargano (Yebda 83), Dossena: Hamsik (Sosa 85), Lavezzi; Cavani.
SUBS: Iezzo (GK), Grava, Dumitru, Cribari.
LIVERPOOL (4-2-3-1): Reina: Kelly, Carragher (Kyrgiakos 46), Skrtel, Konchesky (Aurelio 65): Spearing, Poulsen: Babel (Cole 80), Shelvey, Jovanovic: Ngog. **SUBS:** Jones (GK), Wilson, Maxi, Ecclestone.
Bookings – Skrtel (28), Paziienza (57)
Referee – Thorsten Kinhofer (Germany)
 He said: "We were more than worthy of the point – there are players outside the marquee players who can play well for this club," Roy Hodgson lauds the efforts of his much changed team
Flashpoint: A swift counterattack on 70 minutes saw Milan Jovanovic role a perfectly weighted pass into the feet of Ryan Babel; with the visiting supporters ready to scream 'goal', he pulled his foot back only to have no conviction with his shot. Such a waste.
Next up – Blackburn Rovers, Premier League, Anfield, Sunday, (3pm); Bolton Wanderers, Premier League, Reebok Stadium, October 31 (4pm)