

Date: 2 December 2010
 Opposition: FC Steaua
 Competition: Europa League

Times	Guardian	Mail
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2 December
 2010

THE TIMES

Lesser lights guide Liverpool home

Steaua Bucharest 1 Liverpool 1

Tony Barrett Bucharest It says everything about Liverpool's struggle to live up to former glories that it is the competition in which they are least determined to flourish that they are finding progress easiest.

The Europa League probably needs Liverpool, and in particular the lustre their reputation brings, more than the Merseyside club need it but even though Roy Hodgson's priorities lie elsewhere and his team selections have consistently reflected this, they have managed to finish top of group K with a game to spare. The weakened team Hodgson fielded in the third round of the Carling Cup resulted in a humbling defeat at home to Northampton Town. As with Napoli and Utrecht, though, Steaua Bucharest could not achieve the same feat as the npower League Two club, which probably says more about the standards of the Europa League than Liverpool's squad strength.

A largely second-string side earned the point needed to guarantee progression into the knockout stages and even though an uncharacteristic aberration by Pepe Reina, the one first-team regular in Hodgson's starting line-up, gifted Steaua an equaliser and resulted in a nervy finale, the goalkeeper's mistake did not ultimately cost Liverpool.

"We are very happy to have qualified," Hodgson said. "But most of all I'm happy that the team that we had confidence in to take on this tough task were able to get the result we needed. I was a little bit concerned with the selection because I was asking a lot of the players, some of whom hadn't played for some time, but I think the players served the club well."

Hodgson's game plan away from home in Europe is a conservative one built around two banks of four in defence and midfield sitting deep and denying the opposition space. Adventurous it may not be but that does not mean it is ineffective and it was anything but during a first half in which Liverpool took the lead in the nineteenth minute through Milan Jovanovic, a player who, like so many on display, had been challenged by his manager to stake a claim for more regular first-team football.

The Serb, who was otherwise quiet, was at least able to serve notice of his intent, being involved in the opening goal's inception and finish. The neat pirouette that allowed Jovanovic to evade his marker was impressive, as was his decision to pick out Ryan Babel with an astute pass when others may have opted to shoot, before showing determination in attacking the six-yard box to meet the Dutchman's cross with a glancing header that easily defeated Ciprian Tatarusanu, the Steaua goalkeeper.

Hodgson has quickly discovered that the value of the tournament lies in the opportunity to offer game time to fringe players. Jovanovic's goal meant he had made his mark but Hodgson saved the bulk of his praise for those younger members of his squad who acquitted themselves well in testing conditions, even if the opposition were not.

"We've seen the emergence of people like David Ngog and Martin Kelly and that's come really through the Europa League games," he said. "Today you'd have to add the name of Dani Pacheco, whose not had many chances but certainly didn't let the side down. In particular I was delighted for Ryan Babel. He's not had many chances, but tonight he took it with both hands. It's good to know the work we're doing on the training field is having some effect, even with those who don't get the chance to play every week." How Joe Cole must have looked on with envy as others made the impression that he is so desperate to make. Yet again his performance was hampered by a lack of confidence and prompted Hodgson to put an arm around his shoulder. There are some things, however, that not even the most understanding of managers can help with, as proved by Cole's inability to take a through-ball from Babel in his stride.

The failure to take that opportunity gave Steaua hope and after Bogdan Stancu had shot wide, Eder Bonfim struck the equalising goal with a header in the 61st minute that slipped through Reina's fingertips and over the line.

The goalkeeper complained that he had been impeded by Romeo Surdu but the goal was awarded, a decision that Reina conceded was right. "I've watched replays and it's my fault," Reina said. "It's my mistake and I have to handle that and get through. He was definitely obstructing me, but I definitely should have reacted much better than I did."

Even that setback could not deflect Liverpool from their course and while they continue to struggle to live up to their reputation in the Barclays Premier League, the Europa League is another matter entirely.

Steaua Bucharest (4-2-3-1): C Tatarusanu - E Bonfim, G Alves, F Gardos, I Latovlevici - E Bicalvali (sub: S Angelov, 46min), R Gomes - B Nicolita, R Surdu (sub: I Szekely, 80), C Tanase - B Stancu.

Substitutes not used: C Lungu, I Emeghara, O Abrudan, N Martinovic, C Matei.

Booked: Bonfim, Nicolita, Eder.

Liverpool (4-4-1-1): J M Reina - M Kelly, S Kyrgiakos, D Wilson, F Aurelio - D Pacheco (sub: Lucas Leiva, 90), C Poulsen, J Shelvey, M Jovanovic (sub: N Eccleston, 79) - J Cole (sub: D Ngog, 75) - R Babel. Substitutes not used: B Jones, M Skrtel, J Flanagan, J Robinson.

Referee: Bulent Yildirim (Turkey).

Group K P W D L F A Pts Liverpool (Q) 5 2 3 0 8 3 9 Steaua Bucharest 5 1 3 1 9 10 6 Napoli 5 0 4 1 7 9 4 Utrecht 5 0 4 1 5 7 4

the guardian

Reina blunders but Liverpool still march on in Europe

Liverpool qualified as group winners despite themselves. From Roy Hodgson gambling with team selections when under the fiercest pressure to Jose Reina gifting Steaua Bucharest a point here last night, the Europa League has witnessed Liverpool at their most casual and yet their most comfortable this season. How Hodgson must wish he could take a similar approach to the Premier League.

A draw in Romania, coupled with Napoli's recovery to take a point from Utrecht, was sufficient for Liverpool to win Group K with a game to spare and to overcompensate for the disappointment felt by Reina when he spilled Eder Bonfim's second-half header over the line. Given the relative inexperience and rustiness of those he selected, Hodgson's satisfaction was well founded. "I was a little bit concerned with my selection," the Liverpool manager said. "But I think the players I picked served the club well and if Joe Cole had taken his chance in the first half maybe we'd have had it easier."

Liverpool took the lead with their first attack, courtesy of two forwards on trial for Hodgson in Bucharest, Milan Jovanovic and Ryan Babel, although the manager may have already reached a verdict on the pair. The Serbia international, a bit-part figure since his free transfer from Standard Liege in the summer, instigated the attack with a sharp turn in midfield before releasing Babel down the right. Cole made an inviting run to the near post but the Dutchman cut back inside and floated an inch-perfect cross into the centre, where Jovanovic glanced a header into the bottom corner.

It should have been two moments later when Babel broke down the left and squared for Cole, unmarked and with only the goalkeeper to beat. A player Hodgson had admitted was desperately low on confidence trod on the ball, however, and the opportunity was carelessly lost.

Steaua's greatest threat came in the air but it took a calamity for Marius Lacatus's side to equalise. There appeared little danger when Stanislav Angelov crossed from the right and, even when Bonfim headed goalwards, the weakness of the effort should have posed no threat. Reina, however, was distracted by Romeo Surdu who, to his eye, was in an offside position and who then ducked out of the way as the ball sailed over the forward and through Reina's grasp. Surdu was, in fact, played onside by Danny Wilson and Reina, targeted by a green laser throughout the game, belatedly held up his hands. "It was a real pain," he said. Steaua Bucharest 4-4-2

Tatarusanu; Bonfim *, Alves, Gardos, Latovlevici; Nicolita *, Gomes, Bicalvali (Angelov, 46), Tanase; Stancu, Surdu * (Szekely, 80).

Subs not used

Lungu, Emeghara, Abrudan, Martinovic, Matei.

Liverpool 4-4-1-1

Reina; Kelly, Kyrgiakos, Wilson, Aurelio; Pacheco (Lucas, 89), Shelvey, Poulsen, Jovanovic (Eccleston, 79); Cole (Ngog, 75); Babel.

Subs not used

Jones, Skrtel, Flanagan, Robinson.

Referee E Yildirim (Turkey)

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The Mail

ROY RIDING THE ROLLERCOASTER; Europa League; Reina and Cole take shine off Reds' night

S Bucharest 1 Liverpool 1

ROY HODGSON'S eventful season continued here last night as his Liverpool side secured the point they needed to progress to the Europa League's first knockout stage. The 1-1 draw means Liverpool finished top of Group K, but Hodgson had to suffer a furious tantrum from Joe Cole, substituted on his return from injury, and a goalkeeping howler from Pepe Reina for Steaua Bucharest's equaliser. But not even Reina's uncharacteristic error -- and he had a laser shone at him on several occasions -- could dampen Hodgson's mood, as Liverpool wrapped up matters with a game to spare.

'I'm very happy my team had confidence to take on this tough task and I'm delighted we have made it through,' said Hodgson. 'I was a bit concerned with team selection and we stuck it out very well. All credit to Steaua, they made us work very hard.' The Europa League has not been high on Hodgson's list of priorities since he took charge of Liverpool in July but now they have qualified with a game to play -- Milan Jovanovic's first-half header being cancelled out by Eder Bonfim -- that may change. When Liverpool last visited Stadionul Steaua in February, former manager Rafa Benitez selected a side that included Steven Gerrard, Javier Mascherano, Martin Skrtel and Yossi Benayoun to ensure there was no slip-up against Unirea Urziceni and was duly rewarded with a comfortable 3-1 win. Circumstances meant the makeup of Hodgson's squad was completely different last night but even though this was a makeshift travelling party -- a fact illustrated by the sight of the 17-year-olds Jack Robinson and John Flanagan on the bench -- eight internationals started.

Chief among them was Cole, who was returning to action after missing six games with, first, a hamstring problem then a jarred ankle. Hodgson had made it clear the midfielder had something to prove here and his body language before kick-off was positive. If only the same could have been said when his night ended. Hauled off after 75 ineffective minutes, Cole shook his head and spat out invective in frustration, slapping his hands down hard as he crossed paths with his replacement David Ngog. He arrived on Merseyside with such high expectations and has been desperate to show he can recapture the form that helped him win three Barclays Premier League titles with Chelsea, but at present he remains horribly out of sorts. Cole, however, was not the only Liverpool player who started this contest with the intention of impressing. Jovanovic, not sighted since Napoli were beaten 3-1 at Anfield a month ago, relished being out in the middle again and performed with great assurance.

Frustrated by his lack of opportunities, the Serb was clearly bristling from the start and his release came on 17 minutes when he leapt highest to dispatch Ryan Babel's cross past Ciprian Tatarusanu with a glancing header.

His celebration -- rushing to the away section and kissing his badge -- was pure theatre but more significant were the glare at Hodgson and the point at the pitch which followed -- was this a message to say, 'Look what I can do'?

There was, though, a certain irony attached to Jovanovic's goal as it was the only time in the first period that Liverpool remotely threatened and had Eric Bicalvi and Bonfim shown greater conviction, Hodgson's side would have trailed at the interval. Steaua's supporters even tried to assist their players with the laser. Reina was on the receiving end of a similar incident when Liverpool played Trabzonspor in Turkey in August. 'It was a real pain,' said Reina. 'It wasn't anything to do with the goal but the laser was even stronger than it was in Trabzonspor.'

Captain in the absence of the hamstrung Gerrard and Jamie Carragher, who is having shoulder surgery today, Reina had not put a glove out of place and dealt with everything that came his way impeccably, providing assurance to young defenders Martin Kelly and Danny Wilson.

So it came as a huge surprise when he allowed a tame header from Bonfim to squirm from his grasp on the hour, the ball trickling agonisingly across the line to enable Steaua to restore parity. The offside decision Reina hoped would save his blushes never arrived. 'I've watched replays and it's my fault. It's my mistake and I have to handle that,' said Reina. 'I definitely should have reacted much better than I did. I will handle the mistake and improve.'

Fortunately for Reina, it did not prove costly. Steaua huffed and puffed but never threatened to fashion a winner, and Liverpool's players worked tirelessly to maintain Hodgson's eight-match unbeaten record in Europe. Sotirios Kyrgiakos almost pinched it with a header that hit the bar.

When Liverpool arrived here on Wednesday Hodgson was, rather curiously, asked to explain what memories he had of the country. 'Only happy ones,' he replied in a flash. 'When I was manager of Switzerland we beat Romania at the 1994 World Cup in Detroit and it was a very important victory.'

So while domestic life may be a struggle for Hodgson at the moment, Europe is becoming a happy distraction and he wants the adventure to continue. He will know, though, that performances will have to improve if, like he did with Fulham last year, he is going to reach the final.

MATCH FACTS

STEAUA BUCHAREST (4-4-2): Tatarusanu 6; Bonfim 6, Gardos 6, Geraldo 7, Latovlevici 7; Nicolita 6, Ricardo 6, Bicalvi 5 (Angelov 46min, 6), Tanase 7; Surdu 7 (Szekely 80), Stancu 6. Subs not used: Lungu, Emeghara, Abrudan, Martinovic, Matei. Booked: Nicolita, Bonfim.

LIVERPOOL (4-2-3-1): Reina 7; Kelly 6, Kyrgiakos 7, Wilson 6, Aurelio 6; Shelvey 6, Poulsen 7; Pacheco 5 (Lucas 90), Cole 5 (Ngog 75, 5), Jovanovic 8 (Eccleston 79); Babel 6. Subs not used: Jones, Skrtel, Flanagan, Robinson.

Man of the match: Milan Jovanovic.

Referee: Bulent Yildirim (Turkey).

The Daily Telegraph

Jovanovic makes point to gambling Hodgson

Steaua Bucharest 1

Eder 61

Liverpool 1

Jovanovic 19 Att: 20,000

Any gambler will confirm that everything can fall apart on the turn of an ace. Roy Hodgson will simply be relieved that even when the ace he would have put his mortgage on let him down, everything still came up red.

The Liverpool manager's selection for the visit to Steaua Bucharest was consistent with his policy towards this competition: his stars rested. Only Pepe Reina remained constant.

How typical, then, that it was the Spaniard's uncharacteristic error which almost left Hodgson ruing his risk.

And how fortunate that Liverpool still held out for the draw which guaranteed top spot in Group K and ensured the prospect of European football come spring. In the city where they recorded one of their most famous European triumphs - the 1984 victory over Steaua's fierce rivals, Dinamo - this was hardly vintage Liverpool; for much of the opening period they were second-best to their hosts, grateful only that Steaua's menace rather lacked an edge.

For all their possession, Marius Lacatus's side produced just two genuine chances, both wasted by the burly Eric Bicalvi. The first, a header placed over from six yards, was the more cutting. But barely a minute later, Liverpool led.

Jovanovic, a technically excellent player who has a habit of appearing to perform an impromptu Charleston when he receives possession, received the ball 30 yards from goal. In the absence of a challenge, he laid the ball to Ryan Babel and waited for the cross. From eight yards, his header found the corner.

That the goal meant rather more to him than this competition does to either of these teams - the Steaua Stadium was far from full - was clear from his celebration. The man who marked his winner for Serbia against Germany by racing into a ditch obviously does not lack passion.

The chest-thumping theatrics were in full view here, though without the subsequent pratfall. The Liver Bird was kissed, the fans saluted, and his manager left in no doubt that Jovanovic, given the choice, will remain in red beyond January. With a move for Rennes's left-winger Sylvain Marveaux mooted in France yesterday, that decision may be out of his hands.

Had Joe Cole, returning from a hamstring injury, converted when presented with just the goalkeeper to beat, Liverpool's evening would have passed comparatively pleasantly; his profligacy, though, encouraged the hosts. Steaua should have equalised when Bogdan Stancu fired wide.

They might have done so when Bicalvi skewed a shot past the post just before the interval, or when Reina, occasionally disturbed by a green laser at his eyes, reacted to field Florin Gardos's header.

Such close shaves suggested they warranted the substantial slice of luck which accompanied Eder Bonfim's equaliser, the right-back's speculative header disguised by Romeo Surdu, standing directly in front of the Liverpool goalkeeper, allowing a tame ball to slither from Reina's grasp and between his legs.

Liverpool reacted, Sotirios Kyrgiakos hitting the bar from a Fabio Aurelio corner, as their hosts scented blood, Banel Nicolita driving wide and Stancu skimming the roof of the net. But neither could force a winner.

Steaua (4-2-3-1): Tatarusanu; Bonfim, Geraldo, Gardos, Latovlevici; Ricardo, Bicalvi (Angelov 45); Nicolita, Surdu (Szekely 80), Tanase; Stancu. Subs: Lungu, Emeghara, Abrudan, Martinovic, Matei.

Liverpool (4-2-3-1): Reina; Kelly, Kyrgiakos, Wilson, Aurelio; Shelvey, Poulsen; Pacheco (Lucas 90), Cole (Ngog 75), Jovanovic (Eccleston 78); Babel. Subs: Jones, Skrtel, Flanagan, Robinson.

Referee: B Yildirim (Turkey).

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THE INDEPENDENT

Reina fluffs his lines but Liverpool take lead role

THE RESULT will suggest that Liverpool qualified very comfortably for the latter stages of the Europa League but they will mislead as much as any Fifa delegate when asked for his vote.

Roy Hodgson's young side were outplayed in Utrecht; in Naples they were heroic; and here in the frozen air of eastern Europe they survived, qualifying in first place and learning the kind of lessons they cannot teach at Melwood. "I was concerned for them," said Hodgson. "I asked a lot, bringing a side containing footballers who had hardly played at all in the first team to go to Bucharest and get a result.

Danny Wilson, for example, has played one game - and that at left-back. It was a big ask for some of those players to stand up to the pressure and the quality football Steaua produced and end up winning the group."

Liverpool were denied victory when Pepe Reina allowed a header from Eder Bonfim to slither between his legs and over the line. "I thought one of their players was offside for the goal but I've watched replays and it's my fault," said Reina, who complained about having a laser pen directed at him during the game. "He was obstructing me but I should have reacted much better than I did."

Steaua created a chain of chances but Milan Jovanovic was more accurate in steering Ryan Babel's cross surgically into the corner of Ciprian Tatarsanu's net after 19 minutes. It was only the Serb's second goal this season. His first had been in the humbling by Northampton in the Carling Cup. This came in what is proving a more successful cup competition. Steaua Bucharest (4-2-3-1): Tatarusanu; Bonfim, Alves, Gardos, Latovlevici; Gomes, Bicfalvi (Angelov, h-t); Nicolita, Surdu (Szekely 80), Tanase; Stancu. Substitutes not used Lungu, Emeghara, Abrudan, Martinovic, Angelov, Matei.

Liverpool (4-1-3-1-1): Reina; Kelly, Kyrgiakos, Wilson, Fabio Aurelio; Poulsen; Pacheco (Lucas Leiva 90), Shelvey, Jovanovich (Eccleston 79); Cole (Ngog 76); Babel. Substitutes not used Jones, Skrtel, Flanagan, Robinson.

Referee B Yildirim (Turkey).

GROUP K

P W D L F A Pts

Liverpool (Q) 5 2 3 0 8 3 9 Steaua Bucharest 5 1 3 1 9 10 6

Napoli 5 0 4 1 7 9 4

Utrecht 5 0 4 1 5 7 4

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

Utrecht 1, Liverpool 3 Napoli 1. Steaua 1 Liverpool 1; Utrecht 3 Napoli 3.

Remaining fixtures: 15 Dec Napoli v Steaua; Liverpool v Utrecht.

DAILY MIRROR

MILAN'S MAGIC POINTS WAY FOR ROY'S KIDS

A DRAW in Romania these days hardly merits a mention in the Liverpool history book, but for Roy Hodgson there was still some quiet satisfaction as he left Bucharest last night.

The point garnered from a hard-fought contest with Steaua means the Reds qualified for the knockout stages of the Europa League with a game to spare and as group winners.

Sure, this was hardly 1984's battle of Bucharest, when Graeme Souness endured a torrent of hate after breaking a Dynamo player's jaw in the first leg.

That was a famous night on the way to another European Cup triumph. Yet Hodgson may feel this too could be a stepping stone to better times in Europe, because again his young team showed some resilience in a game that was testing, if not terrorising.

Milan Jovanovic put Liverpool ahead and they should have won, but for a bad mistake by keeper Pepe Reina. Even then Soto Kyrgiakos could have secured victory for them, but hit the bar with a header.

It was a decent performance, enhancing a Hodgson record in Europe since arriving at Anfield that has been remarkable, given Liverpool's form in the league over the same period has been so indifferent, to say the least.

He is unbeaten in nine Europa League games, and the way his side controlled the early stages and took the lead indicated why.

The reward is a final game that will allow him to field an even younger side, because there is nothing resting on it.

Under Hodgson, Liverpool are organised in Europe and difficult to break down.

Similar to how they were under his predecessor Rafa Benitez. It should come as no surprise though, as Hodgson was hired partly on the back of Fulham's performances in this competition last season.

They too, fielded understrength sides and still beat some serious opposition.

While Liverpool have yet to face any team who have offered a stiff challenge, they have looked good with the mixture of reserves and kids.

Hodgson made 10 changes from the team beaten at Spurs on Sunday, giving the likes of Danny Wilson and Dani Pacheco their first outings since September's debacle against Northampton.

Centre-back Wilson has enjoyed his Scotland debut since then, and here looked far more assured alongside Kyrgiakos than he did three months ago, to suggest he has some real promise, given he is still just 18.

Liverpool even managed two 17 year olds on the bench in Jonathon Flanagan and Jack Robinson, robust defenders who have caught the eye in the reserves.

It was the rather more experienced members of the Liverpool party who caused a lethargic looking Steaua most problems though, especially in a first half where the home team simply failed to come to terms with their visitors' incisiveness on the break.

Joe Cole made his return from a six-game injury absence, and even though his passing was a little rusty, his movement was impressive.

Cole has struggled since arriving at Anfield, according to Hodgson not least under the burden of so wanting to do well for his new team, but he did enough last night to suggest he is finding form and fitness again.

Likewise Ryan Babel. He was responsible for the lead which Liverpool enjoyed at the break, and almost created another as the visitors defended with poise and then broke with precision.

The goal came on 19 minutes when Jovanovic broke well from the midfield, passed out to Babel on the right, and then continued his run to cleverly head home an excellent cross from the Dutchman.

Babel has looked less than convincing as a possible stand-in for Fernando Torres, but this was much better, and his fine run would have brought a second goal had not Cole stood on the ball when in a good position.

Steaua had chances, even if they were rare, but in the second-half came to terms more with the pattern of the game. Bogdan Stancu and Geraldo Alves should have scored when presented with a shot and a header within 10 yards of goal.

Perhaps they had been given a rocket from new boss, Romania legend Marius Lacatus, but they were markedly different after the interval, and created a sustained pressure that led to their equaliser on 62 minutes.

It arrived only with some outrageous luck. When substitute Stanislav Angelov's crossed, Eder Bonfim's header was a feeble effort, but Reina in the Liverpool goal was distracted by Romeo Surdu's failed attempt to deflect the ball in front of him, and inexplicably allowed the ball to roll slowly through his legs and creep over the line.

STEAUUA: Tatarusanu 6; Eder Bonfim 6, Alves 7, Gardos 6, Latovlevici 5; Nicolita 6, Ricardo Gomes 6, Bicfalvi 5 (Angelov, 46, 6); Tanase 5, Surdu 6 (Szekely 81, 5); Stancu 5.

LIVERPOOL: Reina 5; Kelly 7, Kyrgiakos 6, Wilson 7, Aurelio 7; Pacheco 5, Poulsen 7, Shelvey 7, Jovanovic 6 (Eccleston 79, 5); Cole 6 (Ngog 75, 6); Babel 7.

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Reds Europa League mission accomplished

IN THE city where legend has it Dracula resided, Liverpool's understudies finally showed their teeth.

It wasn't pretty and it won't live long in the memory but Roy Hodgson left Bucharest with what he came for. This was mission accomplished. Job Done.

A point ensured the Reds will progress from Group K as winners and passports can be safely stored away until the Europa League knockout stage gets underway in mid-February.

The final group game at home to Utrecht in a fortnight can be treated as little more than a training exercise.

This was a test of character and a shadow Liverpool side passed it. One high profile English team may have embarrassed itself yesterday but this one refused to be beaten by Eastern European opposition.

Of course it could have been even better. Having gone ahead courtesy of Milan Jovanovic's first half header and soaked up plenty of Steaua pressure, Pepe Reina's blunder gifted the hosts an equaliser.

How ironic that on the night Liverpool's fringe players were in the spotlight, one of their most experienced and talented players should flounder.

But Reina, so often the hero, will be quickly forgiven for his late contribution to the festive DVD of goalkeeping bloopers.

The closing stages were safely negotiated to ensure the journey made by the 200 committed souls in the away end wasn't in vain.

There was certainly no doubt where Hodgson's priorities lie as he made no fewer than 10 changes from Sunday's defeat at Spurs.

Premier League points come before European success and with Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher both sidelined the boss was loath to risk his star names ahead of Monday's Anfield meeting with Aston Villa.

Only stand-in skipper Reina retained his place from that heartbreaking setback in the capital

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Only stand-in skipper Reina retained his place from that heartbreaking setback in the capital

Jovanovic has struggled to prove why Liverpool were so keen to land him from Standard Liege last summer.

But the Serbian finally displayed a glimpse of the talent he's been hiding. After a mazy run he picked out Ryan Babel and then arrived in the box to expertly nod the cross into the far corner.

It was Liverpool's first on the road in Group K having fired blanks away to Utrecht and Napoli.

Despite their attacking threat, Steaua looked vulnerable defensively and Liverpool should have swiftly added to their tally.

More good work from the lively Ryan Babel put it on a plate for Joe Cole but his first touch let him down and the chance went begging.

Hodgson hoped this game would kick-start Cole's Anfield career after the red card against Arsenal and subsequent injuries had damaged his confidence.

However, too often Cole picked the wrong pass and he remained firmly on the periphery. After a long absence he clearly needs games to get back up to speed.

Steaua finished the first half with a flourish and should have levelled the contest.

The ball dropped kindly for 15-goal top scorer Bogdan Stancu but he inexplicably blazed wide with the goal at his mercy.

Lacatus' men had only lost once in six games at home to English opposition and that was at the hands of Arsenal in the Champions League three seasons ago.

It had taken a Djimi Traore goal to earn the Reds a 1-1 draw here in the UEFA Cup in 2003 and after the break Steaua poured forward in search of an equaliser.

Geraldo Alves was gifted a free header six yards out but his weak header allowed Reina to save.

Lone frontman Babel helped to relieve the pressure with some slick touches and put in the kind of shift rarely seen during his time at Anfield.

But Steaua continued to press and got their reward in farcical fashion just past the hour mark.

Eder Bonfim's tame header looked to pose little danger but Reina was distracted by Romeo Surdu ducking in front of him and somehow allowed the ball to squirm between his legs and over the line.

The impressive Sotirios Kyrgiakos rattled the bar with a header from Fabio Aurelio's corner but Steaua always looked the more likely to find a winner with Nicolita and Stancu going close. But Liverpool survived to take a significant step on a road they hope will lead all the way to Dublin in May.