

Date: 10 March 2011

Opposition: Sporting Clube de Braga

Competition: Europa League

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10 March 2011

THE TIMES

Alan hits the spot as tame Liverpool dig a hole for themselves

Braga 1
Liverpool 0

In the hype-fuelled world of modern football, it is a given that games often fail to live up to expectations. But rarely can a pre-match proclamation promising an encounter high on quality between opponents rich in talent have been as misplaced as the one preceding Braga's utterly uninspiring victory over Liverpool. "The Europa League gives us the opportunity to see some of the best teams in Europe," Braga's master of ceremonies informed a sparse crowd at the Estadio Municipal before kick-off. Suffice to say, his positivity was incongruous with what followed as the sixth-placed teams in England and Portugal provided the latest exhibit in an increasingly compelling body of evidence that suggests that the Champions League's little brother is anything but high-class.

Pace, dynamism, creative flair, flashes of outrageous skill and a collective spirit of adventure - this game had none of them. Liverpool were particularly disappointing. Braga may imitate Arsenal to the point that they are known as "Os Arsenalistas" after their red-and-white kit, but it was the visiting team who took on the worst tendencies of the North London club.

They failed to trouble the opposition goalkeeper to any meaningful extent on a night when a tame header from Raul Meireles on the stroke of halftime and a speculative strike by Dirk Kuyt that Artur tipped over were the best that they could muster.

It is an open secret that Liverpool do not view the Europa League as their top priority, even though it remains their only chance of adding silverware to a disappointing season. The competition has come to represent little more than an opportunity for the club's lesser lights to get match practice.

How it showed against Braga - and in their previous fixtures away to Steaua Bucharest, Napoli, Utrecht and Sparta Prague, when all they could muster was one goal - as Liverpool again went through the motions and their squad players illustrated why they do not feature more regularly in Kenny Dalglish's team. Only when Andy Carroll came off the substitutes' bench near the hour mark to give the attack a much-needed focal point did Liverpool even begin to look threatening. By then, they were behind as Alan's well-taken penalty after 18 minutes provided a suitable punishment for Sotirios Kyrgiakos's ill-advised lunge on Mossoro. The indiscretion by the Greece defender clearly riled Dalglish, who was seen shaking his head on the touchline, but it was far from being the only reason for the Liverpool manager's disquiet about a dire display from his team that cost them a share of a club-record 14 European games without defeat.

"The way we started the first 35 minutes was terrible," Dalglish said. "At that stage they never put us under any real pressure but they scored with a penalty with the player going nowhere.

"The boys deserve credit for the second half. They picked themselves up and increased the tempo, but the first half was poor. At 1-0 we're still in with a chance, but if we play like that at Anfield, we have no chance.

"To come away only one goal behind was very fortunate. When you play as bad as that, you can only be happy that you have lost 1-0. Nobody can be pleased with their performance."

In a stadium built in a quarry, the hole that Liverpool dug for themselves could have been made even deeper had Silvio's half-volley from 35 yards dipped under the crossbar instead of striking it flush with Pepe Reina stranded by its brilliance. Perhaps it was best that the full back's shot did not find the net because if ever there was a game that did not deserve to be illuminated by an iconic goal it was this one.

Dalglish claimed that Liverpool were denied "a stonewall penalty" when Joe Cole tumbled in the box under a challenge from Kaka, but television replays suggested that the Braga defender had taken the ball. He had more reason to be angered by the elbow that was crashed into Carroll's face by the same player only to claim not to have seen the incident.

"I'm going to do my impersonation of Arsene Wenger," Dalglish joked. "I honestly never saw it."

How those Liverpool supporters who made the trip to one of Europe's most jaw-dropping venues must wish they could say the same about the 90 minutes that they witnessed. The Europa League may have the hype, but it is a long way from living up to it.

Braga (4-2-3-1): Artur -- M Garcia, Kaka, A Rodriguez, Silvio -- L Salino, H Viana -- Alan, Mossoro (sub: Paulao, 69min), P Cesar (sub: H Barbosa, 90) -- Lima (sub: A Meyong, 78). Substitutes not used: Cristiano, Dani, J Peterson, A Capela. Booked: Kaka. Liverpool (4-4-1-1): J M Reina -- J Carragher, M Skrtel, S Kyrgiakos, G Johnson -- J Spearing, Lucas Leiva, C Poulsen (sub: A Carroll, 57) -- R Meireles -- D Kuyt. Substitutes not used: P Gulacsi, D Pacheco, M Rodriguez, D Wilson, D Ngog, J Flanagan. Booked: Poulsen. Referee: S Gumienny (Belgium).

the guardian

Carroll roughed up while Dalglish says Liverpool were lucky to lose one-nil

Only the surreal experience of playing in a disused quarry can explain Liverpool's decision to dig themselves into a hole. From the heights of Manchester United on Sunday came the depths of a self-inflicted defeat and the first public criticism of his players from Kenny Dalglish. There is a threshold to his positivity and it was demolished in Portugal.

Braga, who have now defeated three British sides this season, celebrated a little too exuberantly on the final whistle for such a slender first-leg lead. They should have departed with the regret that Liverpool remain alive in the Europa League when, as the visiting manager noted, a revival for which Anfield is famed should have been beyond his men. "To come away just one goal behind after the first-half performance is very fortunate," said Dalglish. "We created most of our own problems and when you play as badly as that you are fortunate to lose only 1-0." Adventure has struggled to make it past security at John Lennon Airport when Liverpool have travelled this season and this was another soul-sapping away display for their followers to endure, especially a first half that ranked down there with Utrecht and Sparta Prague - or Arsenal in Barcelona - as nights when a shot on goal appeared to constitute a bonus.

Dalglish's priorities were stated before his team took to the field of the oddly impressive Estadio Municipal, consisting of two sides stadium, one side grass verge and one side quarry face. The decision to wait 57 minutes before unnerving Braga with the presence of Andy Carroll made sense in light of recent injury but with both Christian Poulsen and Jay Spearing drafted into midfield it was clear that containment was the order. Given Liverpool were relieved to reach half-time only one goal in arrears, yet finished still in the contest, the policy was a qualified success.

The Liverpool manager said: "You don't know if it's a good or bad result until the second leg is over. There's nobody in the dressing room pleased with their performance or pleased with the result."

Liverpool had identified Braga's Brazilian pairing of Mossoro and Lima as the greatest threat to their designs on a quarter-final place and Anfield's scouting department proved prescient. Seventeen uneventful minutes had elapsed when Mossoro, the fulcrum of Braga's attacking play, swept past Sotirios Kyrgiakos on the left of the Liverpool penalty area and was sent tumbling by a clumsy challenge from the Greek international.

Mossoro applauded the moment he landed back on solid ground, so blatant was the penalty decision that followed, while Dalglish simply shook his head in the dug-out in despair at a needless tackle. Though Jose Reina read which way Alan's spot-kick was heading, the power and accuracy of the Braga midfielder's drive towards his bottom right-hand corner gave the Liverpool goalkeeper no chance. Buoyed by the breakthrough, the quarry finally rocked while a Braga team infused with Brazilian influence sensed a second against compliant opponents. Lucas Leiva and Spearing both made important interceptions to prevent Lima breaking through and a Hugo Viana free-kick troubling Reina respectively.

Moments later another Braga free-kick almost produced a sublime goal from the left-back Silvio. Mossoro miskicked in front of goal and, when the ball was cleared to Silvio 30 yards from goal, he unleashed an exquisite volley that Reina was nowhere near but which smacked the face of his crossbar. In first-half stoppage time Liverpool had their first effort on goal, a tame header from Raul Meireles that failed to trouble the keeper Artur.

Dalglish sought to rectify Liverpool's carelessness in midfield and ineffective attack at a stroke early in the second half when he introduced Carroll for Poulsen who, along with Joe Cole, again failed to seize a rare opportunity to impress. Immediately Braga were unsettled by the presence of the towering, if not fully fit, centre-forward and set pieces became a valuable outlet for the visitors.

Carroll flicked Dirk Kuyt through on goal with his first header but Artur was alert to the danger and smothered. He was then penalised for climbing at a Meireles corner, not that he needs to at six foot four, and had a left-foot shot deflected over Artur but wide and was finally assaulted by a flailing elbow into the face from Kaka. The offence went unpunished.

"I'm going to do my interpretation of Arsene Wenger, I honestly never saw it," said Dalglish.

Braga 4-4-2

Artur Moraes; Miguel Garcia, Kaka*, Rodriguez, Silvio; Leandro Salino, Hugo Viana, Alan, Mossoro (Paulao, 68); Paulo Cesar (Helder Barbosa, 90), Lima (Meyong, 75)

Subs not used Cristiano, Dani, Peterson, Anibal

Liverpool 4-4-2

Reina; Carragher, Skrtel, Kyrgiakos, Johnson; Poulsen* (Carroll, 57), Lucas, Spearing, Meireles; Cole, Kuyt

Subs not used Gulacsi, Pacheco, Maxi, Wilson, Ngog, Flanagan
Referee S Gumienny (Belgium)

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The Mail

SLEEPY REDS HIT BUMP; But Carroll cameo is fine omen for Kenny
SC Braga 1

Liverpool 0

LIVERPOOL'S Europa League campaign has been one long, bumpy ride, and so it proved again last night. Starting in Macedonia seven months ago, they somehow managed to go unbeaten through 12 games despite a series of patchy displays. But that came to a halt in Portugal as they were beaten by a well-organised Braga side.

Had Liverpool managed to avoid defeat, they would have equalled a club record of 14 unbeaten matches in Europe -- they won the last game of their previous campaign -- but that proved a step too far. Sluggish and subdued throughout, they only perked up when Andy Carroll was introduced.

The [pounds sterling]35million striker received a nasty elbow to his nose from Braga defender Kaka late in the game when Liverpool were trying to snatch an equaliser, but snatching is exactly what it would have been. The visitors, once again, failed to live up to their illustrious pedigree.

With no stands behind either goal, this is one of the more unusual stadiums in Europe. Despite the frenzied attempts of a garrulous pitchside announcer to whip up some atmosphere, it felt as if it was hosting a pre-season friendly.

The pedestrian pace of the opening exchanges added to that feeling. Both sides seemed happy to keep hold of the ball, showing no ambition to seize the initiative, but that changed in the 17th minute when Sotirios Kyrgiakos made an ill-advised lunge. There was no question he fouled Marcio Mossoro, clumsily sticking out his right leg to crudely halt the Brazilian midfielder. Alan -- another Brazilian -- confidently drove the resulting spot kick past Pepe Reina. It was a stupid challenge and the sight of his central defensive partner Martin Skrtel clapping his hands to his head in wide-eyed disbelief told its own story.

For Braga to stand any chance of reaching the last eight winning the home leg was imperative, as they have a lamentable record in England -- five games, four defeats, 17 goals conceded -- and their erratic form in the Portuguese league throws into doubt their ability to flourish on Merseyside. Liverpool, however, seemed intent on making things difficult for themselves.

Their play during a quite dire first 45 minutes was strewn with errors, they never created a chance and it was scarcely believable that some of those on duty had helped flatten Manchester United five days earlier.

Kenny Dalglish could easily have seen his side trail by two at the break but the bar came to Reina's rescue after Silvio's thumping leftfooted volley from 25 yards had whizzed past him. How Liverpool missed the guile, pace and devilment of Luis Suarez -- in the stands, ineligible to play -- and the drive of Steven Gerrard. The elegant simplicity of Maxi Rodriguez was also sorely lacking.

Then again, it was not hard to predict that the game would be so dull. Liverpool's travels throughout Europe this year have failed dismally to capture the imagination. Milan Jovanovic is the only Liverpool player to have scored away from Anfield in the Europa League proper and draws in Utrecht, Naples, Bucharest and Prague were all games for which the phrase 'instantly forgettable' was conjured up. What's more, with three midfielders whose natural game is to be destructive, it was no surprise Liverpool were toothless. Joe Cole tried hard to add some wit to proceedings but, not for the first in his Anfield career, could not find the actions to back up his enthusiasm.

It came as no surprise, then, when Dalglish decided to freshen things up by introducing Carroll on 56 minutes and, almost immediately, there was a difference in Liverpool's play; his hulking frame instantly caused problems for Braga's central defenders Kaka and Alberto Rodriguez.

He might still be some way short of peak condition but his presence is enough to unsettle opponents and when Liverpool started hurling balls into Braga's penalty area, Carroll kept getting his pony-tailed head on the end and opening up avenues which had hitherto been closed.

Cole and Dirk Kuyt so nearly profited in his first few minutes on the pitch, while the 22-year-old himself went close with a spin and leftfooted shot that looped off Rodriguez but went away for a corner. Much to Dalglish's relief Braga were being tested at long last.

Ultimately, however, the belated huff and puff failed to yield an away goal as Braga stood firm, their obduracy eventually causing Liverpool to slip back to the sluggish standards they had initially set. Glen Johnson's abysmal, 86th-minute free-kick proved that point.

Yet, as Dalglish will know, this is not a disastrous result. Liverpool are adept at retrieving European deficits and they will be hot favourites to repeat the trick. It is just going to require a significantly better performance than this.

MATCH FACTS

SC BRAGA (4-2-3-1): Artur 6; Garcia 6, Kaka 6, Rodriguez 6, Silvio 7; Salino 6, Hugo Viana 8; Alan 7, Mossoro 7 (Paulao 69min 6), Paulo Caesar 6 (Barbosa 90); Lima 5 (Meyong 77). Subs not used: Cristiano, Dani, Peterson, Capela. Booked: Kaka.

LIVERPOOL (4-3-3): Reina 6; Carragher 6, Skrtel 6, Kyrgiakos 5, Johnson 6; Lucas 5, Poulsen 5 (Carroll 56 7), Spearing 6; Meireles 6, Kuyt 6, Cole 6. Subs not used: Gulacsi, Pacheco, Rodriguez, Wilson, Ngog, Flanagan.

Booked: Poulsen. Man of the match: Hugo Viana. Referee: Serge Gumienny (Bel) 6.

The Daily Telegraph

Liverpool face rocky road after Alan's strike gives Braga the edge
Braga 1

Alan 17 (pen)

Liverpool 0

Att: 15,000

There was always a risk that Kenny Dalglish's attempts to garland his return with silverware would be undermined by the weaknesses he was brought in to disguise.

After a chastening defeat in Braga's wondrous stadium, hewn into the walls of a granite quarry, Liverpool's manager can only hope that his cast of extras and afterthoughts can forge victory from another Anfield cliffhanger next week. Dalglish will still not be able to call upon Uruguay striker Luis Suarez, ineligible for this competition, or midfield inspiration Steven Gerrard, anxiously awaiting a decision on whether he requires surgery for the groin injury which has blighted his last month, when Braga travel to Merseyside on Thursday.

Instead, Dalglish must hope that his supporting cast can discover a source of inspiration which eluded them here. He must demand of his reservists that they transcend the abject mediocrity which afflicted them in this most spectacular of settings.

He must spend his next seven days plotting a way to help his team dig themselves out of a hole he freely admits is entirely of their own making.

"We created most of our own problems," said the Scot. "When you play as badly as we did, you have to consider yourselves lucky only to lose by one goal. If we play like we did, especially in the first half, at Anfield, we will not go through."

"It was a very poor first half performance from ourselves and I have no complaints about the penalty. We picked it up in the second half."

It is not in Dalglish's nature to panic, of course, and he will have seen in the second half the route to his and his side's salvation.

The 400 or so hardy souls who travelled to northern Portugal to keep the red flag flying will remember little of this game in years to come; all that will survive is the impression created by [pounds sterling]35million record signing Andy Carroll in the first 10 minutes of his Europa League debut.

"We looked more threatening when Andy came on," said his manager. "We have to give him as many minutes as we can to make sure we are making a contribution to his fitness."

"That is a bit longer than he got on Sunday [against Manchester United] and we will continue to make a contribution towards his fitness. He worried them."

That may be an understatement. The striker, returning to continental combat for the first time in four years, created more chances, wreaked more havoc and raised more pulses in the first flush of his introduction than his team's mates managed in the 57 minutes which preceded it. Carroll causes problems for defenders simply by existing. His presence seems to spread fear and, fray nerves. He created two chances for Dirk Kuyt; one smothered by goalkeeper Artur Moraes, a second tipped over; simply by standing, menacingly, in the penalty area.

He is dangerous with the ball, too; still clearly not at the peak of fitness after two months on the sidelines, Carroll had one shot deflected over and probably should have scored with a header from the subsequent corner.

His presence forced his opponents to resort to the darker arts to try to negate his threat. Liverpool's challenge had long since sputtered out when Kaka, the Brazilian defender, caught Carroll with a flailing elbow. To Serge Gumienny, the Belgian referee, the incident did not even warrant a caution. Dalglish, however, claimed he had not seen the incident clearly.

"I saw the two of them collide but I didn't see where he connected with Andy," added the Liverpool manager.

Carroll shook the blow off; Dalglish requires the rest of his players to take the same approach to defeat. Deserved defeat, too, secured thanks to a coolly executed penalty from another of Braga's Brazilians, the improbably named Alan.

Indeed, Liverpool can seek solace that they are not further behind in the tie; 13 minutes after Sotirios Kyrgiakos had tripped Marcio Mossoro to grant Alan the chance to put Braga ahead, the left-back Silvio struck Pepe Reina's crossbar with a 30-yard volley.

Had his shot been but an inch lower, and Liverpool might have been down and out. Their ambitions remain in the balance, regardless. They have just about survived the rock. Now they have to emerge from the hard place.

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THE INDEPENDENT

Dalglish admits sloppy Liverpool were fortunate to escape lightly SHOULD LIVERPOOL reach the Europa League final, the club's commercial department may be tempted to release a DVD of the full campaign. The away legs will, however, need to be fast-forwarded or cut out. Thus far, they have travelled through the Netherlands, Italy, Romania, the Czech Republic and now Portugal, amassing thousands of air miles and a single goal.

It was difficult to imagine that this was practically the same team that had taken Manchester United apart at Anfield. It was like coming across an old friend who has had Botox; they looked familiar but various bits were not moving as they should.

On Sunday, Andy Carroll had made his Liverpool debut as the United game turned into a triumphal procession. Here, football's most expensive Englishman caused Braga rather more problems than anyone else before receiving an elbow in the face from Kaka - not the one everybody has heard of but a Brazilian defender signed on loan from Hertha Berlin. "I'll do my impression of Arsne Wenger and say I didn't see it," his manager, Kenny Dalglish, commented afterwards. There was much, much more he would have wanted to avoid viewing again.

Braga's stunningly designed stadium is known as "The Quarry" and it would be tempting to say that Liverpool need digging out. True, they were beaten and the electronic scoreboard in front of the Monte Castro rock face was showing 67 minutes when home goalkeeper Artur was required to make his first real save, tipping over a drive from Dirk Kuyt. However, they were not buried alive, as perhaps they might have been.

Dalglish thought Liverpool fortunate to have only been beaten by a single goal. Celtic and Arsenal lost rather more comprehensively here this season, although significantly Braga were beaten at Celtic Park and humiliated at the Emirates Stadium. As he takes his side to a training camp in the Algarve, Dalglish might fancy Liverpool's chances of overturning this result on their return to Merseyside next week.

"Not if we start the way we did here," he interrupted. "Nobody can be pleased with the performance or the result. We won't be able to assess if we have contributed to our downfall until Thursday night."

Braga has a reputation for being the most conservative city in a conservative country, the Tunbridge Wells of Portugal, although their football team plays in a stadium that is positively radical - two vast stands each holding 15,000, with one goal framed by the side of a quarry, the other by a grassy bank.

It looked as if Liverpool were playing a spectacularly wealthy Sunday League side, an impression reinforced when the goalscorer was announced as Alan.

Perhaps appropriately given the setting, Sotirios Kyrgiakos demonstrated a caveman's touch when attempting to challenge Mossoro, conceding a penalty that Alan Osorio da Costa Silva, known simply as Alan, put away in the goal in front of the grassy knoll. The Alan known as Shearer could not have buried the spot-kick any more emphatically.

Braga deserved and should have scored a second when, after Liverpool failed to clear an inventively taken free-kick, Silvio unleashed a superlative volley from outside the box that clattered against Pepe Reina's crossbar. A few inches lower and Silvio would have scored one of the goals of this European season.

Much of Braga's best midfield work was carried out by Hugo Viana, which may have caused a quizzical eyebrow to be raised at Newcastle United. At roughly the same time, English football's two managerial knights, Sir Bobby Robson and Sir Alex Ferguson, bought Sporting Lisbon's two most glittering talents. One is on half the billboards in Portugal, the other is not, but there were times yesterday evening when Viana's game did not seem so very different from Cristiano Ronaldo's.

Only if Braga show more resistance than they mustered at Arsenal, the club that inspired their foundation, will this result be seen in its full context. "We are optimistic," said their manager, Domingos Paciencia. "But we have to be very careful when we go to Anfield because Liverpool are one of the sides that can win this competition." Not on this evidence.

Braga (4-2-3-1) Artur; Garcia, Kaka, Alberto Rodriguez, Silvio; Salino, Viana; Alan, Mossoro (Paulao 69), Paulo Cesar (Helder Barbosa, 89); Lima (Meyong, 77).

Substitutes not used Cristiano (g), Dani, Paterson, Capela.

Liverpool (4-2-3-1) Reina; Carragher, Skrtel, Kyrgiakos, Johnson; Poulsen (Carroll, 56), Lucas; Spearing, Meireles, Cole; Kuyt. Substitutes not used Gulacsi (gk), Pacheco, Rodriguez, Wilson, Ngog, Flanagan.

Referee S Gumienny (Belgium).

DAILY MIRROR

KOP RED FACE DAY!

HOW fitting that UEFA have decided to put the Europa League in the dead space of early-evening television.

It's Thursday, it's six o'clock, so it must be time for another teatime tedium session from such a flawed competition.

Not even the introduction of Andy Carroll as a second-half substitute could lift Liverpool - or this last-16 tie - above the mundane.

Even Lewis Carroll couldn't give this game a happy ending. Braga in spring is no football wonderland and one wonders when this competition will ever get going. But that is unlikely to worry Liverpool boss Kenny Dalglish much, even if he will be disappointed his side again failed to score on their European travels.

For all their lethargy, Liverpool still controlled long periods of play and will have seen nothing in their Portuguese opponents to suggest the second leg at Anfield next week will be anything but uncomplicated.

The appearance of Carroll for more than half an hour was a further bonus and the home team looked ill-equipped to deal with his aerial threat - offering a clear plan for the return.

Braga even resorted to violence to stop him, when he was clearly elbowed by defender Kaka.

That was little comfort to the small crowd who visited the Estadio Municipal hoping for entertainment.

Braga's stadium is an impressive monument, hewn out of the side of an imposing granite mountain.

So it was no surprise that Liverpool found themselves between a rock and a hard place in a shocking first half. Just as in Sparta in the previous round - and in fact in all their matches in the competition proper so far - before the break they found attacking a near-impossible proposition.

In their four away matches before this, they had managed one measly goal, which should have offered the watching television audience back home notice. It is fast becoming a no contest between the Europa League and BBC2's Eggheads.

Liverpool did not have a single attempt on goal before the interval, which probably had even the remaining diehards switching to Masterchef.

At least Braga cooked up some digestible fare, which raised this game slightly above the tripe that has typified much of the Europa League this season.

Braga are lively at home and their early efforts coaxed the game briefly into life, even if it took a moment of defensive weakness by Liverpool to gift them the lead in the 18th minute.

Braga's danger came almost exclusively down their right, with the exotically-named Brazilian Alan (I kid you not), providing the main threat.

Sotirios Kyrgiakos had twice been troubled by crosses from that flank and when Mossoro raced into the penalty area, the big Greek's ridiculous lunge felled another of Braga's Brazilians.

Alan converted from the spot and the home side almost scored a second when Liverpool failed to deal with a free kick from the right.

Mossoro found himself unmarked in front of goal but criminally missed his kick. Even then, the ball found its way to Silvio, whose thunderous drive cannoned off the bar.

Under such depressing circumstances, Dalglish had but one option, to call Carroll from the bench and his presence injected an immediate urgency that had previously been lacking.

He managed four attempts on goal within five minutes - three more than his teammates had managed in the previous 55 minutes.

Such endeavour roused those around him though, and Dirk Kuyt spluttered briefly into life with a fierce shot that was tipped over the bar by the agile home keeper Artur.

But that was the end of Liverpool's flourish, as they settled for a one-goal deficit and the chance to progress next week.

BRAGA: Artur 6, Miguel Garcia 6, Kaka 5, Alberto Rodriguez 6, Silvio 6, Hugo Viana 7, Leandro Salino 6, Paulo Cesar 6, Mossoro 6 (Paulao 69, 5), Alan 7, Lima 6 (Meyong 78).

LIVERPOOL: Reina 6, Carragher 6, Kyrgiakos 5, Skrtel 6, Johnson 6, Lucas 5, Poulsen 5 (Carroll 57, 7), Spearing 6, Meireles 6, Cole 6, Kuyt 6.

REF: Serge Gumienny

ATT: 12,991

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Reds run into spot of trouble at the rock face

KENNY DALGLISH probably felt like banging his head against the quarry wall in Braga.

At the unique beauty of the Estadio Municipal de Braga last night, Liverpool offered up a frustratingly drab performance.

Second-half improvements, brought about with the introduction of Andy Carroll, were certainly encouraging but insufficient to prevent a first defeat in the Europa League this season.

Liverpool are by no means left with a task beyond them at Anfield next week but will certainly require the unrivaled tonic of a night of European competition on their home soil to ensure progression into the last eight.

The Reds' demise was brought about not by the design of a decent SC Braga side but by their own fault; first in the gifting of Alan's decisive penalty and then by the blunt nature of the opening period's forward play.

Dalglish will, of course, hope for more comforting news from the Melwood treatment table this week because with Steven Gerrard patched up and able to offer his services, the captain's ability to invigorate those around him could prove priceless.

Carroll's impact from the bench will be the basis for much hope carried home on the flights back home, and though Dalglish does not want to rush him, the direction he offers to the attack could help drag Liverpool out of this hole.

On a night when the pressure created by an Anfield surge holds the key, the former Newcastle United man already appears to have unnerved Braga and surely comes into the reckoning to start in a much more attacking formation.

Liverpool made four changes from the team which swept Manchester United aside on Sunday, choosing personnel and a formation more familiar with away games, particularly in Europe this season

Injury to Gerrard saw Christian Poulsen recalled while the ineligibility in Europa League football of new Kop favourite Luis Suarez meant Joe Cole was handed a chance to support central frontman Dirk Kuyt.

Maxi Rodriguez was replaced by Jay Spearing, while the hamstring injury Fabio Aurelio sustained against United, meant Sotirios Kyrgiakos started his third successive match in the competition, pushing Jamie Carragher out to right-back.

After Dalglish made a personal milestone in managing the club for the first time on the continent in the last round against Sparta Prague, he took Liverpool into a first-ever meeting in European competition with the Portuguese side – it would prove an achievement marked with disappointment.

Attempting to protect an unbeaten run in this season's Europa League, stretching to 12 matches, the Reds had consistently shown pragmatism rather than being pleasing on the eye when on their travels.

Indeed, the foundations of Liverpool's progression in this season's competition – started under Roy Hodgson and continued with Dalglish – has been stubborn work away from Anfield.

With that in mind, Liverpool were committed to keeping shape in front of Pepe Reina's goal, attempting to stifle and squeeze the game early on.

However, just before the midway point of the half was reached, the Reds went behind to a momentary lapse in that discipline as Kyrgiakos put in a daft challenge on Brazilian midfielder Mossoro, conceding a penalty.

The tried and tested approach away from home was quickly becoming a hindrance.

Reina guessed correctly, but Alan's spot-kick was struck with too much power and accuracy for even the Spanish keeper to prevent the opening goal.

The strike forced Liverpool – behind in a European match for the first time since November – to look forward with greater purpose, but with Lucas and Christian Poulsen not the most effective ball carriers, passes were hit towards the front with too much haste placing greater pressure on the workload of an already-burdened Kuyt.

Defined in the early exchanges as measured, Liverpool's approach going forward was now lacking urgency and with attacks starting from ever deeper areas, Dalglish required a rethink at half-time to help his side make an impression.

It was so nearly a team talk about overturning a 2-0 deficit when full-back Silvio hammered a volley from the edge of the box, only to watch it cannon back of Reina's crossbar on 38 minutes.

After giving the formation a chance in the early minutes of the second period, Dalglish made a first change just before the hour mark bringing on Carroll for Poulsen.

Curiously, the striker entered the fray in the number 29 shirt due to a UEFA rule meaning he could not wear the number nine previously worn by the departed Fernando Torres in European competitions this season.

Carroll's introduction almost brought immediate rewards as he won an aerial challenge to bundle the ball in the direction of Kuyt whose progression in the box was smothered by Braga keeper Artur.

The presence of the £35m man gave Liverpool direction and far greater purpose up front; Carroll was something Braga's Kaka and Alberto Rodriguez were straining to contain.

Importantly it helped bring Joe Cole and Meireles into the game and though the former had appeals for a penalty waved away, a rare foray into the area was encouraging.

Kuyt's half-volley on the turn brought a smart stop from Artur before Kyrgiakos headed the corner marginally over the bar.

It would be the sum of their collective efforts attacking Braga's goal all evening as the game petered out.

Liverpool, so often rock solid away from home in Europe, have left themselves a challenge, but the outcome of this tie is in no way set in stone.