

Date: 18 December 2011
 Opposition: Aston Villa
 Competition: League

Echo	Bham Post	Telegraph
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18 December
2011

THE TIMES

Dalglish keen on raising the bar

Aston Villa 0

Liverpool 2

Bellamy 11, Skrtel 15

Referee: P Walton Attendance: 37,460

ALYSON RUDD

For the home side, the hate figure was always going to be Stewart Downing, over whom there had been a tug of war in the summer, with Liverpool finally signing him for [pounds sterling]18 million. But Liverpool have a hate figure of their own; the woodwork.

Twice it denied them goals of outstanding quality, bringing to 17 the number of times it has intervened against them this season.

Richard Dunne was sometimes solid in the face of the jinks of Luis Suarez, and sometimes bedazzled, but he was never going to be able to compete with the frame of Brad Guzan's goal, which denied the Uruguayan what would have been one of the goals of the season. In the end, two set-pieces early in the game were all it took to undo an Aston Villa side who should have taken heart from their first-half efforts but instead wilted as the visiting side improved.

Kenny Dalglish praised his team's workrate but added that "we don't practise hitting the bar". They did not, he said, keep statistics on strikes against the woodwork when he played, but "if we could shave a couple of inches off [the woodwork] we'd be OK".

This was Liverpool's sixth clean sheet of the season but their margin of victory should have been far greater. And as the fight for fourth place seems certain to be tight, goal difference could be crucial and Dalglish's side are simply not translating their dominance into goals.

"The harder we try, the luckier we become and maybe one will go in off the bar," Dalglish said.

While Liverpool were somewhat fortunate to take a 2-0 lead into the interval, they dominated the second half and the woodwork rather than astute defending maintained a modest scoreline.

Loud -- and surprisingly aggressive -- jeers greeted Downing whenever he was on the ball. "They'd have been better off giving support to their own players,"

Dalglish said -- and Downing got his last laugh in early when his corner led to the opening goal.

Two back-heels greeted his corner; the first was from Jonjo Shelvey and the second, from Suarez, left Guzan prostrate, enabling Craig Bellamy to force the ball over the line.

Five minutes later another corner, this time from Bellamy, was met by Martin Skrtel, who flicked the ball into the far corner of Guzan's net.

Villa responded by applying pressure that culminated in a strike by Charles N'Zogbia that was a tad too high, then a second effort by the France midfielder player that struck the side netting.

Without the suspended Gabriel Agbonlahor and the injured Darren Bent, Villa were always going to find it tricky to dominate. "We obviously lacked that cutting edge, losing two of our top players," Alex McLeish, the Villa manager, said. "I'm sure Liverpool would be the same if they lost Suarez. Sometimes determination and will can overcome the skill which Liverpool had in abundance and in the end they had too much nous and experience for us."

Liverpool will indeed be without Suarez should the FA's independent regulatory commission find against him in the racism case brought against the striker by Patrice Evra, the Manchester United defender.

Dalglish said that he could not comment on the case but one small hint of support came when he substituted Suarez in the 74th minute. There would be no need to rest a player likely to be suspended for several matches and Suarez had been integral to the air of menace that Liverpool produced in the second period.

Bellamy tried to set up Daniel Agger and the visiting side went closer still when Suarez outwitted Dunne but saw his shot hit the underside of the crossbar.

In the 53rd minute the booing from the home fans began as Liverpool behaved like the side two goals behind and possessed the vitality Villa so badly needed. From the edge of the area, Suarez chipped the keeper beautifully, only to see the woodwork intervene once again.

A trademark powerful run from Charlie Adam resulted in a shot that was deflected to safety by James Collins.

By the end Villa had shifted from being unlucky to be 2-0 down to be fortunate to be only two goals behind.

the guardian

Suarez thwarted but Liverpool raise bar against listless Villa

The woodwork continues to frustrate **Liverpool** and Luis Suarez in particular but this was never going to be one of those days when Kenny Dalglish was left cursing the dropped points that the upright and crossbar have cost his team this season. **Liverpool** were already two goals to the good by the time that Suarez was shaking his head after twice striking the goal frame' something Dalglish's side have done on 17 occasions this season' and the brutal truth is that a listless Aston Villa side never looked like recovering.

Liverpool were in control from the early stages and cruised to a fifth Premier League away win on a day when they could afford to play with something in reserve. Craig Bellamy and Martin Skrtel struck early following corners to expose Villa's frailties at set pieces and but for Suarez's misfortune and a couple of fine saves from Brad Guzan, the scoreline would have been much more convincing. With Gabriel Agbonlahor suspended and Darren Bent injured, Villa could have been forgiven for lacking a cutting edge but excuses were not so readily available for shortcomings in other departments. There was little pattern to their play and the ball was given away too easily on too many occasions, gifting **Liverpool** several chances to add to their lead. Christmas came early for a **Liverpool** side who are up to sixth, level on points with Arsenal.

"I think we got most things right: we've had a shutout, we scored two goals, we increased our goal tally, we increased our points tally . . . and we've increased the number of times we've hit the woodwork," Dalglish said. "Luis's chip for the second shot [that hit the bar] was fantastic. But we'll keep trying because the harder you try the luckier you become; maybe one day they'll go in. You can only practise what you do in training every day - and they don't practise hitting the bar."

Dalglish singled out Suarez for praise because of the way the forward performed after a week when he was required to attend the disciplinary hearing into allegations that he racially abused Patrice Evra. "Suarez has been sat in a hotel room for three days. He's only trained Tuesday and Friday and he puts in a performance like that. I think it speaks volumes for the man," he said.

This was an awkward game for Stewart Downing for other reasons. The England international left Villa under a cloud in the summer after submitting a transfer request, despite saying he wanted to stay. That Downing could have handled his departure better is indisputable, yet it can also be said that, on the evidence so far, the winger is entitled to feel vindicated that he made the right decision.

He left Villa Park still searching for his first **Liverpool** goal but momentarily silenced the boos that greeted his every touch when he provided the corner-kick that led to the first goal, which Bellamy tapped in after Guzan had saved from Suarez. "I think it's sad," Dalglish said of the criticism Downing received. "They'd have been better giving the support to their own players because it wasn't going to upset Stewart. He was excellent."

Bellamy created the second with a corner that Skrtel headed beyond Guzan, after outjumping Alan Hutton at the near post. It was the eighth time Villa have conceded from a corner this season. "I am very disappointed we allowed the players free runs. It causes havoc and it's something we have to address," said Alex McLeish, who believes Bent has a decent chance of being fit to face Arsenal on Wednesday, after being ruled out of this game with a thigh strain picked up in training.

The Villa manager, who admitted **Liverpool** had "too much nous and experience for us", felt his side were "sloppy" in the second half, when Guzan made flying saves to repel efforts from Glen Johnson and Jonjo Shelvey and Suarez hit the woodwork twice. His first cannoned off the crossbar, after he got away from Richard Dunne and James Collins, and the second was a sublime chip that came back off the post with Guzan stranded. "If we can shave a couple of inches off the [goal frame], we'll be OK," Dalglish said.

Man of the match Craig Bellamy (**Liverpool**)

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The Mail

KENNY'S WALK IN THE PARK

Aston Villa 0 Liverpool 2 DON'T be fooled by the scoreline. This wasn't a truly vintage Liverpool performance.

Proficient? Yes.

Professional? Yes. Deserved? Without a doubt.

If Kenny Dalglish was hoping for a morale-boosting pre-Christmas work-out, then he couldn't have organised a better one had he grabbed his fringe players for a kickabout at Melwood.

As he said afterwards, it was pretty much the perfect afternoon.

'We increased the points tally, earned a shut-out and scored two goals,' he said, before adding with his usual dry wit, 'and we also added to the number of times we have hit the woodwork.' All true. But as a litmus test as to Liverpool's progress this didn't provide Dalglish with much more than he knew already.

Two goals from corners in the first 15 minutes laid the platform for a victory that was far more routine than the above statistic would suggest.

The goal frame has now been tested 17 times so far this season by Liverpool, and the latest efforts from Luis Suarez afforded everyone at Villa Park an insight into his wonderful talent.

There were other opportunities aplenty as Villa, hit by a pre-match injury to Darren Bent in addition to Gabriel Agbonlahor's ban, played like a team lacking any confidence in their replacements.

All of which contributed to a ridiculously comfortable afternoon for Dalglish, who must have been expecting a far more thorough examination.

And that, really, is a damning indictment of the current state of Aston Villa as much as a comment on Villa, as much on the proficiency of a Liverpool team that remains very much a work-in-progress.

The highlights were all contained within Dalglish's summing-up.

Jonjo Shelvey, brought in for his first start in the Premier League, showed flashes of the talent that caught the attention of Anfield's scouts in the first place.

Daniel Agger and Martin Skrtel were unflappable, Suarez was a menace and Craig Bellamy a pacy pest. Stewart Downing, who was booed by the home crowd as a result of voicing his determination to stay at Villa Park in June before being enticed to Merseyside two months later, also did well.

But while there was plenty to admire -- and certainly the two efforts from Liverpool's South American Suarez were worth the admission money alone -- Dalglish won't be hoodwinked into thinking there isn't room for improvement.

The Scot's afternoon started well. Downing's corner from the right was met at the near post by Shelvey, who back-heeled the ball goalwards. Suarez repeated the feat inside the six-yard box, only to see Villa keeper Brad Guzan block it. The ball then fell to the feet of Bellamy, who tapped home his third goal of the campaign. Four minutes later, it was two.

Bellamy's corner from the opposite flank to the near post was well directed, as was Skrtel's header into the Villa goal.

The hosts staged something of a revival before the break, Charles N'Zogbia finding his shooting boots to finally show Villa Park why Alex McLeish had spent half the money raised by Downing's sale on the France winger.

But after the restart, Liverpool went at it for 15 minutes and then realised they had a heavy festive programme ahead of them.

In that quarter-hour, Agger gave Guzan sight of a header that the American really shouldn't have sniffed. Then Suarez robbed Richard Dunne in the area, stepped inside Alan Hutton's lunge and cracked a shot from seven yards out that thumped the crossbar.

It wasn't as horrible a miss as Ronnie Rosenthal's in 1992 in front of the Holte End, but the reaction from those Villa fans in the North Stand was the same.

Moments later, the Uruguayan rekindled memories of Eric Cantona's outrageous chip against Sunderland. But, unlike the attempt by Manchester United's Frenchman, this time the ball did not end up nestling in the net -- it bounced off the upright and to safety. Next, Shelvey blazed wide and Charlie Adam bludgeoned his way through the middle only to see Guzan save again.

For the last half-hour Villa pressed. But few were convinced, judging by the swathes of blue seats, empty long before the end. Boos rang around the stadium. Afterwards, it was left to McLeish to refute rumours that Bent was left out due to a pre-match bustup.

'Darren has a thigh-cum-groin kicking strain,' said the Scot. 'He came off the training ground on Tuesday and I knew then that it could be serious. The doctor seems to think that he should be close to being ready for Wednesday against Arsenal.' Pressed further about conspiracy theories, McLeish added: 'I don't know why that deserves an answer. He had a scan during the week and it was confirmed he had a small grade one injury. He wasn't playing because he was injured.'

'Do you think I would leave Darren Bent out of this game? Unfortunately, he didn't make it.' Worrying times for Villa. Arsenal visit on Wednesday, and it goes without saying that McLeish needs an improvement.

Otherwise worse, far worse, could be just around the corner.

The Daily Telegraph

Bellamy inflicts more misery on unloved McLeish

Aston Villa 0

Liverpool 2

Bellamy 11, Skrtel 15 Att: 37,460

It is the season of ill-will at Villa Park. Worryingly for the club's owner, Randy Lerner, it appears to last 10 months, between August and May.

An assertive Liverpool performance, winning by two but deserving of a far greater margin of victory, exposed why these are confusing times to be an Aston Villa supporter.

Kenny Dalglish has come to expect abuse whenever he takes his Liverpool side on the road. He had not anticipated the worst the Holte End could muster would be directed at their own players and manager.

The 40-yard walk along the touchline which separates the dugout from the tunnel at Villa Park is already resembling the green mile for Alex McLeish.

The Villa fans' default position seems to be disenchantment, no matter how mitigating the circumstances for their troubles or how impressive the opposition.

Glad to see the back of Martin O'Neill and unwilling to tolerate Gerard Houllier's pleas for patience, those that do keep turning up are now already aiming their discontent at McLeish. Some never wanted him to begin with. It is excruciating to watch a good manager who has barely started his job being forced to endure such torment. There is no identifiable home advantage for him here.

With Darren Bent a late absentee with a hip injury, and Gabriel Agbonlahor suspended, Villa could offer no resistance and little response once Liverpool rushed into a two-goal lead within 15 minutes.

McLeish tried to offer several explanations for the limpness of his side's display - injuries and defensive failings among them - but there is no appetite for tolerance. Every misplaced pass, wasteful shot or shoddy cross is met with a crescendo of kindergarten-style wailing.

The Villa fans had predictably started the afternoon targeting their former winger, Stewart Downing, but it did not last long as the jeering soon switched to the home jerseys and manager.

At least it took their minds off jumping on the anti-Luis Suarez bandwagon, and had one of his exquisite second-half efforts not become the 15th and 16th Liverpool attempts this season to hit woodwork, the stadium would have applauded his genius.

There was plenty of stick for Craig Bellamy too, his sheer presence seemingly enough to antagonise opposing fans and to provoke referees to brandish a yellow card. He, like Downing, shrugged off the insults to give the Villa defence a torrid afternoon.

Bellamy must feel something of an oddity at Liverpool. Usually, if recrimination is shadowing a star striker it is Bellamy's silhouette trying to scurry from the accusations.

He has played a supporting role to Suarez this season, but the Welsh forward delivered a timely reminder that there is more than one forward at Anfield opposition fans love to hate. The Liverpool supporters have come to adore the little Welshman. He and Martin Skrtel hit McLeish's side with a blitz early in the first half from which they never recovered, courtesy of poor Villa defending from set pieces.

Downing was inevitably involved in the first when his right-wing corner was flicked on by Jonjo Shelvey, a surprise inclusion after being recalled from a loan spell at Blackpool, and Bellamy was on hand to tap in after Suarez's back-heel was only partially saved by Brad Guzan.

Guzan, who was deputising for Shay Given, was beaten again five minutes later when Bellamy's corner, this time on the left, was met with a majestic header from Skrtel.

Villa rallied before half-time when Charles N'Zogbia peppered Pepe Reina's goal with long-range efforts, but they looked impotent up front while Liverpool looked capable of stepping up several gears.

The visitors should have been out of sight at the start of the second half when Suarez was denied two stunning goals.

First he rattled the crossbar after bewitching Richard Dunne and James Collins, and he was cursing his luck on the hour after a wonderful chip over Guzan rebounded off the post.

If there was any concern for Dalglish it was a familiar one. Such was his side's dominance, two goals was scant reward for their overall play at the start of each half.

These are starting to sound like moot criticisms, however. After a two-year spell in which an away goal was elusive, and an away win rare, it is a major progression to see Liverpool shaking their heads only at the failure to annihilate an opponent. After Chelsea's dropped points at Wigan, this was the ideal start to a hectic festive schedule for Dalglish. He will regain one world-class player when Steven Gerrard returns to training today, and fret as to whether he will lose another if the disciplinary ruling goes against Suarez, but the progress is now tangible at Anfield. Villa, in contrast, look unsure where they are heading. Giving Liverpool a two-goal start is one of many unwinnable battles McLeish has taken on by crossing the Birmingham divide.

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THE INDEPENDENT

Suarez the hero picks pockets of bad Villans

Just before kick-off, those two Scottish warriors, Kenny Dalglish and Alex McLeish, embraced and the Liverpool manager flashed his counterpart an assassin's smile. By the time a quarter of an hour had passed, Aston Villa's throat had been cut. The only question thereafter was how many Liverpool would score and the surprise was that the answer was two. In everything bar the scoreline, this was a massacre.

This was Liverpool's fifth away win and most have come in English football's grand stadia; the Emirates, Stamford Bridge and Goodison Park. Villa Park fits comfortably in that list, although the fact that the Holte End had emptied long before the final whistle demonstrated the grim fact that Aston Villa's personnel do not match their surroundings.

A year ago, Liverpool had lost at home to a side from the West Midlands, Wolverhampton Wanderers, and become convulsed by the spasms that ended in Dalglish's return and the rebirth of a club. Had they not dropped points at Anfield against Sunderland, Norwich and Swansea - and had they not struck the frame of the goal 16 times already this season - Liverpool might be doing rather more than merely window shopping on the fringes of the Champions League places.

It was hit twice more by Luis Suarez, who had spent three days in a hotel answering charges of racism laid by Manchester United's Patrice Evra. That he was able to play at all says something; that the Uruguayan was able to play so beautifully was exceptional.

There were two supreme moments of skill that ought, with any natural justice, to have been rewarded with something better than what used to be called the sound of leather on woodwork.

First he was fed by Craig Bellamy and accelerated away only to be intercepted by Richard Dunne who then lost the ball in his own area. Suarez turned James Collins, picked his spot and curled his shot against the underside of the crossbar. By now he would have known instinctively it would not be going in. Moments later, Suarez deceived Brad Guzan with a fabulous chip that struck the inside of the post. "He is perpetual motion," said McLeish when asked to sum up Liverpool's striker. "He is a player who makes a big, big difference."

A training-ground injury ensured that Darren Bent, the one Aston Villa player who might have made a big, big difference, was absent and - with Gabriel Agbonlahor suspended - McLeish had no option but to turn to his old warhorse, Emile Heskey, whose cavalry charges are long behind him. Charles N'Zogbia tried manfully to fill the gap but, after the interval, Villa's passing became sloppier and Liverpool ever more dominant. "Sometimes determination and will can overcome skill, which Liverpool had in abundance, but they had too much nous for us," said McLeish. "We should not be making these mistakes and sometimes you have to believe in yourself."

The only thing anyone involved at Villa did with any conviction was to howl down Stewart Downing, although the winger's decision to abandon the Midlands for Merseyside has been entirely justified by events. "You must have led a sheltered life if you thought that was bad," Dalglish smiled. "But I think the Villa fans would have been better off giving support to their own side."

Frankly, after 15 minutes, it would have been of precious little use. McLeish's sides do not as a rule over-indulge in goals and they do not recover from two-goal deficits. After a 4-1 defeat at Manchester City in October, McLeish reflected that their weakness at defending set-pieces was one that could be overcome relatively easily on the training ground. The fact that both Liverpool goals came from corners suggests there is plenty of work left to do at Bodymoor Heath.

The first was delivered by Downing into a mass of bodies. Jonjo Shelvey, who but for the injuries to Lucas Leiva and Steven Gerrard would have still been learning his trade on loan at Blackpool, back-heeled it towards goal; Suarez did the same with the rebound and Bellamy finished it off.

Four minutes later and Villa themselves were finished. This time their downfall was even more straightforward; a routine corner that Martin Skrtel met before Alan Hutton and headed in off the post. Seventy-five minutes stretched ahead in which the home side somehow avoided further punishment while the advertising boards promoted Wednesday night's chance to "see Arsenal under the floodlights". If that is the only electricity on the pitch, Villa will be taken apart.

MATCH FACTS

Substitutes: Aston Villa Bannan 5 (Heskey, 56), Weimann Delph, 80). Liverpool Carroll 5 (Suarez, 73), Carragher (Shelvey, 83), Kuyt (Bellamy, 88).
 Booked: Aston Villa N'Zogbia. Liverpool Adam, Bellamy.
 Man of the match Suarez. Match rating 7/10.
 Possession: Aston Villa 44% Liverpool 56%.
 Attempts on target: Aston Villa 8 Liverpool 12.
 Referee P Walton (Northamptonshire).
 Attendance 37,460.

DAILY MIRROR

SEASON TO BE JOLLY? Dalglish's Liverpool look full of festive cheer but McLeish's side are ripe for a stuffing

PREMIER LEAGUE: ASTON VILLA 0 LIVERPOOL 2

STEWART DOWNING'S decision to quit Villa for Liverpool was totally vindicated as the Reds strolled to victory.

The England winger tormented Liverpool in the final game of last season (below) as Villa won 1-0 to finish ninth - just three places behind Liverpool.

But Kenny Dalglish's side emphatically outclassed Villa yesterday as Alex McLeish's team produced their latest powder-puff display. And it showed exactly why England winger Downing was so keen to leave for Anfield this summer when he slapped in a transfer request to clinch his pounds 20million switch.

For upwardly mobile Liverpool are reaping the benefits of their heavy investment in promising players like Downing, Charlie Adam, Jordan Henderson and Luis Suarez.

But Villa owner Randy Lerner's decision to cut costs and sell stars like Downing and Ashley Young could leave them in a relegation battle.

Many fans are unconvinced McLeish is the right man to lead the club after his defection from bitter rivals Birmingham.

And this latest display has only heightened criticism as Villa continue to toil in front of goal and concede from setpieces with alarming regularity.

Craig Bellamy and Martin Skrtel scored from first-half corners to underline Villa's defensive frailties.

Villa now must face a tough Christmas fixture list with Arsenal due on Wednesday before trips to resurgent Stoke and Chelsea.

But while McLeish cut a tense figure after the reverse, his compatriot Dalglish was all smiles as he laughed off Liverpool's tendency to hit the woodwork.

The Reds have rattled the frame of the goal on 17 occasions this season after Suarez was twice frustrated.

It would have been a more accurate reflection of the game had Liverpool netted more to vividly illustrate their top-four ambitions.

But there should be no doubting their clear superiority. The visitors er rs quickly assumed control as Downing saw plenty of the ball despite being barracked by home fans.

Many are still angry Downing quit after believing he would show more loyalty having joined from Middlesbrough in July 2009 on crutches with a broken foot. But he blocked out the taunts to deliver a dangerous near-post corner which led to Bellamy's scrambled opener.

Villa failed to clear after full debutant Jonjo Shelvey helped on Downing's corner and the Welshman notched his third goal of the season in the 11th minute.

The sloppy goal infuriated boss McLeish, and the Scot was quickly up off his seat as his side went 2-0 behind four minutes later.

Bellamy delivered the ball and Skrtel headed into the top corner.

Villa had a couple of efforts as Charles N'Zogbia screwed two efforts just off target, while Nathan Delfouneso headed over.

But Liverpool remained dominant after the break as Shelvey twice forced keeper Brad Guzan into action.

Daniel Agger headed wide, then Suarez hit the underside of the bar after dispossessing Richard Dunne.

Guzan had to make a good flying save to tip over a longrange effort from Glen Johnson.

range Johnso Villa drow Pe Villa responded as N'Zogbia drove in a low effort and Pepe Reina saved.

But Liverpool remained on top as Suarez hit the o woodwork again as his sublime chip came back off the post.

Guzan had to make another save from Shelvey as Liverpool cruised to victory.

VILLANS' WORST FIVE DISPLAYS THIS SEASON

1. Tottenham 2 Villa 0, November 21 Boss McLeish admits Villa's display arguably the worst-ever by a side he has managed. Fan fury rating: ****
2. Villa 0 Bolton 2, September 20 Villa fail to trouble Bolton's second string side in the Carling Cup until the final few minutes. Fan fury rating: **
3. Villa 0 Liverpool 2, yesterday Two early goals from corners. Villa booed off and fans start leaving in 75th minute. Fan fury rating: *****
4. Villa 0 Man Utd 1, December 3 Villa jeered off at break and final whistle as hosts' lame televised performance is slammed by studio pundits. Fan fury rating: ****

5. Man City 4 Villa 1, October 15 McLeish blames schoolboy defending as visitors are routed away at City. Fan fury rating: **

Key: Fan fury rating..... * lethargic, ** angry, *** furious, **** hopping mad, ***** Fans planning McLeish-out protest

ASTON VILLA: Guzan 8, Hutton 6, Collins 5, Dunne 5, Warnock 5, N'Zogbia 7?, Petrov 6, Delph 6 (Weimann 80), Albrighton 6, Delfouneso 5, Heskey 5 (Bannan 56, 5). LIVERPOOL: Reina 7, Johnson 8, Skrtel 8, Agger 7, Enrique 7, Downing 7, Henderson 7, Adam 8?, Bellamy 8? (Kuyt 88), Shelvey 7 (Carragher 83), Suarez 8 (Carroll 73, 6). Goals: Bellamy 11, Skrtel 15 REF: Phillip Walton ATT: 37,460

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Ambition burns bright as LFC stroll past Villa

THE answer was staring the Holte End in the face.

Those Villa fans who unleashed a torrent of abuse in the direction of Stewart

Downing should watch these 90 minutes again.

If they look closely they will see exactly why the winger was so desperate to make the move to Anfield last summer.

The taunts of greed towards Downing made little sense. The only thing the England international is guilty of is ambition.

The fact is Liverpool FC have it in abundance, while Villa are going nowhere fast.

This was a game which laid bare the gulf between the sides.

One club has invested heavily in a bid to recapture past glory, the other has merely sold off the family silver with Downing joining the likes of Gareth Barry, James Milner and Ashley Young out of the exit door.

Liverpool FC have a manager in Kenny Dalglish who has brought unity and inspiration in equal measure. As a beaming Dalglish embraced his players after the final whistle and saluted the 3,000 packed into the away end, his opposite number Alex McLeish scuttled away down the tunnel with boos ringing in his ears.

The fellow Glaswegians played alongside each other for Scotland at the 1982 World Cup finals but the contrast between them yesterday couldn't have been greater.

Liverpool will enjoy more emphatic victories this season but it's hard to believe any will be as easy as this one in the Midlands. McLeish made a habit of thwarting the Reds during his time in charge at Birmingham City but there was no chance of a repeat.

Goals from the outstanding Craig Bellamy and Martin Skrtel inside the opening 15 minutes ensured Liverpool closed the gap on fourth placed Chelsea to just three points.

It was the perfect start to a hectic festive period which sees the Reds play five league games in 16 days before turning their attention to the FA Cup tie with Oldham. Standards must be maintained at Wigan on Wednesday night.

After a flying start Dalglish's men threatened to run riot but it was a familiar tale with a glut of chances spurned. The curse of the woodwork continues with the Reds' tally for the season now standing at 18.

A ruthless streak is still missing but it mattered little yesterday as Liverpool were so vastly superior in all departments.

Dalglish sprung a surprise with his team selection as he handed a first Premier League start to Jonjo Shelvey. It was a major show of faith in the 19-year-old, who was preferred to Dirk Kuyt, Maxi Rodriguez and Andy Carroll to play just behind Luis Suarez.

The boss was rewarded with an industrious display from Shelvey, who has vowed to use his successful loan spell with Blackpool to launch his Liverpool career.

Unsurprisingly, the teenager tired late on but his contribution will ensure he has a part to play over Christmas.

Shelvey was instrumental in the Reds' 11th minute opener. Downing ignored the jeers to whip a decent corner into the box and Shelvey flicked it goalwards.

Suarez's shot was blocked by Brad Guzan but Bellamy reacted smartly to tuck away his third goal since returning to Anfield from Manchester City.

Liverpool's lack of potency from corners has been a hot topic of debate over the years but it seems all that set-piece work at Melwood is finally paid dividends.

A second corner four minutes after going in front brought a second goal.

The delivery from Bellamy was exceptional and Skrtel ensured it got the finish it deserved. The centre-back darted towards the near post and arched a header into the far corner.

In truth a subdued Villa Park crowd appeared resigned to their fate even when it was goalless and the early goals ensured the mood worsened.

Aside from baiting Downing, the only time the groans subsided was to greet a remarkable shimmy from Emile Heskey with ironic cheers.

The Reds' task was undoubtedly made easier by the absence of Darren Bent and Gabriel Agbonlahor. Without them the hosts were toothless with Heskey and Nathan Delfouneso comfortably shackled by Skrtel and Daniel Agger. Their centre-back partnership is flourishing with just three goals conceded in the last seven games together.

Skrtel is enjoying a rich vein of form and the Slovakian is arguably Liverpool's most improved player of 2011.

Charles N'Zogbia went close from distance on a couple of occasions but Pepe Reina was never seriously troubled as the top flight's most miserly defence collected a sixth league clean sheet of the campaign.

With Bellamy terrorising Villa down the left on his return to the side and Downing impressing on the right, Liverpool had too much pace, energy and invention for the hosts to handle.

The stick from the same supporters who voted him their Player of the Year last season appeared to inspire Downing who served up one of his best displays for the Reds.

Bellamy ensured there was no let-up for an overworked Villa backline. The Welshman was a constant menace but for the third successive match he picked up a mystery booking.

This time he was carded after Alan Hutton ran into him. Bellamy laughed it off but there's no question he's suffering from referees making decisions based on reputations.

After a lull before the break there was more urgency from the Reds in the second half. The passing and movement was slicker with Villa cut open almost at will.

Suarez will still be trying to work out how he didn't get his name on the

scoresheet. Some of his touches were sublime but there was no end product.

After dancing past Richard Dunne and James Collins, he struck the underside of the bar with the net gaping.

Suarez was soon cursing his luck once again. Downing's vision sent him scampering through and he coolly weighed up his options before executing a delightful chip.

Guzan, who kept the score down with fine saves from Glen Johnson and Shelvey, could only stand and watch as it looped over him and bounced back off the post.

The Uruguayan's frustration was clear but it was another dazzling display, especially considering what's hanging over him.

Suarez had been forced to miss training during the week to attend the FA disciplinary hearing into allegations of racist abuse. A verdict is likely to be known tomorrow.

As for Downing, this was an afternoon to savour. These are two clubs going in opposite directions and this hopelessly one-sided contest merely emphasised that he made the right decision to head north.

ASTON VILLA (4-4-2): Guzan, Hutton, Dunne, Collins, Warnock, Albrighton, Petrov, Delph (Weimann 80), N'Zogbia, Delfouneso, Heskey (Bannan 57). Not used: Marshall, Clark, Cuellar, Johnson, Burke.

LIVERPOOL (4-4-1-1): Reina, Johnson, Skrtel, Agger, Enrique, Bellamy (Kuyt 88), Adam, Henderson, Downing, Shelvey (Carragher 83), Suarez (Carroll 74). Not used: Doni, Rodriguez, Coates, Kelly.

GOALS: Bellamy 11, Skrtel 15.

CARDS: N'Zogbia (Aston Villa); Adam, Bellamy (Liverpool).

REFEREE: Peter Walton.

ATTENDANCE: 37,460

Date: 18 December 2011

Opposition: Aston Villa

Competition: League

Echo	Bham Post	Telegraph
Independent	Mirror	Daily Mail
Times	Guardian	



18 December
2011

BIRMINGHAM POST

Liverpool boss Kenny Dalglish celebrated his first league win as a manager at Villa Park as first-half goals from Craig Bellamy and Martin Skrtel ensured a comfortable victory over Alex McLeish's side.

Bellamy and Skrtel struck inside the first 15 minutes to seal the Reds' fifth away win in the Barclays Premier League this season.

But the star of the show was striker Luis Suarez who tormented the Villa defence and hit the bar and the post.

Former Villa winger Stewart Downing was booed by the home fans after his £20million summer move but he and Craig Bellamy caused problems down both flanks.

Villa missed the forward duo of suspended Gabriel Agbonlahor and injured Darren Bent and seldom looked like breaching what is the tightest defence in the Premier League with just 13 goals conceded.

But they were also guilty of frequently giving the ball away and only skipper Stiliyan Petrov had composure in midfield.

Villa started promisingly and Petrov curled a free-kick past the defensive wall and forced Pepe Reina to save away to his right.

Downing managed Liverpool's first effort on goal following a cross-field ball from Bellamy when he forced Brad Guzan to save at the foot of the post.

Then after 11 minutes Downing played a part in Bellamy giving Liverpool the lead.

His corner found Suarez inside the box and a back heel forced a fine instinctive save out of Guzan but Bellamy reacted first to the rebound for a simple tap-in.

Villa winger Charles N'Zogbia was yellow-carded for bringing down Glen Johnson two minutes later.

After 15 minutes Liverpool doubled their lead through Skrtel - and from another corner.

Villa failed to pick up the central defender as he attacked a Bellamy cross and his glancing header flew past Guzan.

Villa tried to counter-attack and Nathan Delfouneso had a 20-yard shot deflected wide and a long-range attempt from N'Zogbia was just off-target.

Delfouneso teed up the over-lapping N'Zogbia whose shot contained plenty of power but flew into the side-netting.

Charlie Adam was booked after 28 minutes for bringing down Emile Heskey.

Two minutes later Bellamy was yellow-carded for fouling Alan Hutton to the right of the Liverpool box.

But Delfouneso could not keep his header down from Albrighton's free-kick.

Villa were trying to get a foothold in the [game](#) but Liverpool continued to look more dangerous and Richard Dunne blocked a first-time attempt from Shelvey after he ran on to Suarez's pass.

Liverpool began the second half on the offensive and twice went close to adding to their lead.

Bellamy's pace took him clear of the Villa defence down the left flank and his cross was headed wide by Daniel Agger.

Then Suarez showed sublime skill in evading the challenges of Dunne and James Collins and from 10 yards out he crashed his shot against the bar.

Villa were giving the ball away too easily and a mistake by Stephen Warnock allowed Johnson time to line up a shot which was turned aside by Guzan.

Reina was forced into a rare save in getting his body behind a low effort from N'Zogbia.

But Suarez was denied by the woodwork again after chipping Guzan following a pinpoint 40 yard ball from Downing.

Guzan turned aside Shelvey's cross-shot and Adam had shot deflected wide when Shelvey was unmarked 10 yards out to his left.

Dalglish brought on Andy Carroll after 74 minutes for Suarez who was given a standing ovation by the Liverpool fans.

Villa substitute Barry Bannan appealed in vain for handball when his shot struck Agger and flew out for a corner.