

Date: 11 January 2012  
 Opposition: Manchester City  
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11 January 2012

## THE TIMES

City suffer rare shutout as Dalglish nears return to Wembley

Manchester City 0 Liverpool 1

To judge by the resolve with which they defended their first-leg lead last night, Liverpool will not be moved in their pursuit of a first trophy since 2006. A dogged, determined, intelligent performance put them in control of this semi-final tie and, in doing so, heightened Roberto Mancini's concerns that Manchester City are flagging. Top of the Barclays Premier League they may be, but this, courtesy of Steven Gerrard's thirteenth-minute penalty, was City's third defeat in their past five matches in all competitions. Unquestionably they paid a price for their exertions in chasing an FA Cup comeback against Manchester United on Sunday, but since November 19 they have won just six out of 13 matches and, with Vincent Kompany suspended, the Toure brothers on Africa Cup of Nations duty and Mario Balotelli joining David Silva on the injured list, they looked tired last night. No matter what they tried in a much-improved second-half performance City could not find a way through Liverpool's defence, which grew in defiance and in numbers as the night went on. By the end Kenny Dalglish had a five-man back line protected by Jamie Carragher in a midfield holding role, with Gerrard looking exhausted as he continued a comeback that he hopes will include lifting the Carling Cup at Wembley on February 26.

Gerrard did his bit in the first half, driving Liverpool forward to vindicate Dalglish's belief that they could punish any tiredness in the City ranks. They took the game to Mancini's team, forcing Joe Hart into a succession of fine saves before the goalkeeper was beaten by Gerrard's penalty, awarded after Daniel Agger was brought down by the initially hapless Stefan Savic. With no Kompany to hold the defence together and no Yaya Toure to impose himself against Gerrard in central midfield, City found themselves under pressure from an early stage last night.

As early as the fifth minute, Liverpool manufactured what looked like a clear opportunity as Andy Carroll was sent clear by Stewart Downing, but the forward, his confidence low, shot straight at the advancing Hart as he came under pressure from Savic. Dalglish must have been feeling a sense of déjà vu, given that Hart denied Downing in similar fashion in the league fixture, but Liverpool would soon find themselves 1-0 up. Taking the game to City, they were dominating, with Hart forced into another save from Gerrard's longdistance shot, which he pushed around the post, and then called into action again as, from the resulting corner, Gerrard picked out Downing, whose volley was flicked goalwards by Agger and saved superbly by the England goalkeeper. Joleon Lescott scrambled the ball behind for a second corner. City were creaking, with Hart imploring his teammates to raise their game. But they did not. From the next corner, Savic caught Agger late as they contested a ball at chest height. Lee Mason, the referee, immediately pointed to the penalty spot, from which Gerrard broke Hart's resistance with one of the most emphatic spot kicks you will ever see.

Liverpool were looking comfortable, but their mission was complicated by an injury to Jay Spearing midway through the first half. An understated stand-in for Lucas Leiva, Spearing has the discipline -- tactically, if not always in the tackle -- to give them a solid foundation in midfield, but his departure required Gerrard and Charlie Adam to curb their attacking instincts while Jordan Henderson operated behind Carroll. The visiting team became more cautious, particularly as Michah Richards started to give City some much-needed attacking impetus from right back. As half-time approached Richards, wearing the captain's armband, burst down the right to cross from the touchline, only for James Milner to miss the target. By then, Balotelli had made an uncharacteristically low-key exit, making way for Samir Nasri. The Italy forward had not looked fit or focused all night, his evening summed up by the incident when he was fouled by Adam, squared up to the Liverpool midfielder and, still raging, struck the resulting free kick so fiercely that he seemed to aggravate the ankle injury that had kept him out of the FA Cup derby on Sunday. Beyond a Carroll header that went narrowly wide, after Martin Kelly ventured down the right, Liverpool seemed far more interested in preserving than extending their lead. The second half was certain to bring a stiffer test of their resolve and indeed within 15 minutes of the restart City had threatened on three occasions. There was a suspicion that Sergio Aguero was lacking his usual sharpness after exerting so much energy while playing as a lone striker on Sunday, but he was quick to race on to an Adam Johnson through-ball ten minutes into the second half, only to be denied by the alertness of Martin Skrtel. Then he seized on a poor backpass from Kelly but was forced wide by Jose Reina and sent his shot over the crossbar. Apart from a speculative Nasri effort in the first half, Reina had not had a serious save to make, but he was required to be in the right place at the right time on the hour when Nasri took a corner and Richards, who possesses one of the most prodigious leaps in English football, tested him with a fierce header. That was about as good as it got for City. No visiting team had kept a clean sheet at the Etihad Stadium previously this season, but Dalglish and his players seemed to be insistent that this must change. First came the move to a five-man back line, with no team-mate by now getting to within shouting distance of Carroll, and then the sight of Carragher sent on in midfield.

City kept trying, but they were running low on ideas as well as energy. Should they fail to overturn their deficit at Anfield on January 25, they might content themselves with the idea that they have higher goals to achieve. They do, but you only had to look at Mancini's selection to know that he wants this trophy. Just maybe not quite as much as Liverpool do.

Manchester City (4-4-2): J Hart - M Richards, S Savic, J Lescott, G Clichy - A

Johnson (sub: E Dzeko, 66min), N de Jong (sub: A Kolarov, 72), G Barry, J Milner - M Balotelli (sub: S Nasri, 39), S Aguero. Substitutes not used: C Pantilimon, N Onuoha, P Zabaleta, O Hargreaves. Booked: Nasri.

Liverpool (4-2-3-1): J M Reina - M Kelly, M Skrtel, D Agger, G Johnson - J Spearing (sub: C Adam, 23), S Gerrard - C Bellamy (sub: J Carragher, 79), J Henderson, S Downing (sub: J Enrique, 59) - A Carroll. Substitutes not used: A Doni, S Coates, J Shelvey, D Kuyt. Booked: Carragher.

Referee: L Mason.

## the guardian

Gerrard draws first blood for Liverpool

Captain's penalty gives Reds semi-final advantage: City lose at home for second time in four days

After going through the whole of 2011 without losing on their own ground, Manchester City have now been beaten twice in the space of four days and are beginning to look conspicuously thin around the edges. Steven Gerrard's 13th-minute penalty puts Liverpool in a position of strength going into the second leg of this Carling Cup semi-final when it will need a significant improvement from the Premier League leaders if they are to prevent Kenny Dalglish's team from confirming a trip to Wembley. Rarely have City looked so devoid of imagination this season. Liverpool took an early lead, threatened more goals and then eventually settled for a backs-to-the-wall operation during a second half in which the home side's possession was not accompanied by the wit or gumption to break down a team displaying great defensive qualities of industry and organisation. The two sides renew acquaintances at Anfield in a fortnight's time and Liverpool, the seven-time winners, should be greatly encouraged about the way they matched and, at times, outdid a side that have managed 56 league goals compared to their own tally of 24. City looked weary at times. They had used up a lot of energy and emotion in Sunday's FA Cup defeat to Manchester United and they were missing their captain, Vincent Kompany, as well as two of Roberto Mancini's other mandatory first-team picks, David Silva and Yaya Toure. The Etihad has been a formidable stadium for opposition teams on Mancini's watch but for long spells they looked laboured and a good notch or two below what is usually seen of them on their own ground. As for Mario Balotelli, he lasted only 39 minutes before being withdrawn. Shortly before, he had allowed a simple pass to run over his boot and go out for a throw-in. The striker, sent off in the league at Liverpool in November, took exception to one challenge from Charlie Adam and had to be restrained from taking the argument further.

It was difficult to be clear whether he was still struggling with the ankle injury that had kept him out for the previous two games, but there was something very deliberate about the way he and Mancini ignored each other on the touchline. Balotelli went straight down the tunnel and it added to the sense of a night that was not going to plan. Liverpool, in contrast, had begun the game as if affronted by the memories of their 3-0 league defeat here last week. They were quick to the ball, strong in the challenge and, even before Gerrard's penalty, there were three separate moments when it was only Joe Hart's goalkeeping that had kept them out. The third of those saves, diving full length to his left to turn away a deflected Stewart Downing volley, was a truly exceptional piece of goalkeeping. Yet it was rare to see City so open and it was in this flurry of attacking that Liverpool's pressure eventually led to Gerrard driving his spot kick emphatically into the bottom corner. Perhaps in hindsight Mancini might regret not moving Michah Richards across from the right side of defence to partner Joleon Lescott in the centre and bring in Pablo Zabaleta at full-back. Instead, Stefan Savic was given the responsibility to stand in for the suspended Vincent Kompany and it was a gamble that backfired. Savic's challenge on Daniel Agger was raw and mistimed, catching him just above the knee, and it was not his only mistake of a difficult evening. One misplaced pass inside his own penalty area led to voluble dissent from the crowd and, without Kompany, there was a vulnerability that does not normally exist.

Liverpool had the advantage of having two days' extra rest and in the opening 45 minutes they seemed to be getting to every loose ball first. Their momentum was not disrupted too badly by Jay Spearing leaving the pitch with a hamstring injury and it was not until the final minute of the first half, when James Milner turned Richards's low cutback over the crossbar, that Pepe Reina's goal was threatened seriously. Liverpool were obdurate opponents. Their strength this season has been in defence and they were more guarded after the interval. A misplaced backpass from Martin Kelly almost had costly repercussions, only for Reina to do enough to put off Sergio Aguero. Reina then saved a leaping header from Richards inside the six-yard area and, with Mancini switching to a three-man defence, the pressure on the visitors' goal was increasing. Yet the late onslaught that might have been expected never materialised until stoppage-time. Liverpool held out fairly comfortably and are now the marginal favourites to reach the final.

Manchester City 4-2-3-1 Hart; Richards, Savic, Lescott, Clichy; De Jong (Kolarov, 72), Barry; Johnson (Dzeko, 66), Aguero, Milner; Balotelli (Nasri \*, 39). Subs not used Pantilimon, Zabaleta, Onuoha, Hargreaves.

Liverpool 4-1-4-1 Reina; Kelly, Skrtel, Agger, Johnson; Spearing (Adam, 23); Bellamy (Carragher \*, 79), Henderson, Gerrard, Downing (Enrique, 60); Carroll.

Subs not used Doni, Coates, Kuyt, Shelvey.

Referee L Mason.

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## The Mail

STEVE SHIFTS BALANCE; Gerrard penalty is boost for Reds as City stumble again

Man City 0 Liverpool Liverpool 1

A SURGE of optimism on Merseyside, a slight twinge of anxiety in Manchester. Last night's result at the Etihad Stadium may well be significant in terms of the destiny of the Carling Cup this season. It may also transpire to be influential in terms of these two clubs' seasons. When Manchester City and Liverpool met on this ground in the Barclays Premier League last week, it was the team in red that seemed beset by problems on and off the field. They lost 3-0.

Just eight days on and Liverpool have their first away win of the year to reflect on, have a re-energised captain back in harness and the smell of a Wembley final in their nostrils. City, meanwhile, have lost twice at home in the space of three days and are losing players faster than they were scoring goals back in the glorious days of late summer. Last night, City were as poor as they have perhaps ever been under Roberto Mancini. Lifeless and listless, they deserved nothing from a game that saw Mario Balotelli depart injured once again and Stefan Savic look anything but a capable deputy for the suspended Vincent Kompany.

Liverpool, meanwhile, won thanks to an early penalty from the terrific Steven Gerrard and rightly head in to the return at Anfield on January 25 as favourites. The last time City played a semi-final in this competition -- two years ago here against neighbours United -- they produced a commemorative programme. Last night there was no such excess, nor was the Etihad Stadium full to capacity. Both serve as indications that City and their supporters are beginning to get used to life as a big club. As much as City would like to exorcise their FA Cup disappointment of the weekend by reaching the lesser of the season's two Wembley finals next month, Liverpool's need is perhaps even greater.

It's remarkable to think that Liverpool have not played at Wembley since the mid-1990s. More recent finals involving one of England's biggest clubs have taken place in Cardiff and a return to Wembley is overdue. Perhaps sensing some weakness at the heart of the City defence -- Kompany's suspension has hit the league leaders hard -- Liverpool manager Kenny Dalglish fielded an attacking team. Andy Carroll -- the subject of links to a return to Newcastle this week -- started the game through the middle while Gerrard and Craig Bellamy also featured. It was some surprise to see that one of the visitors' most creative midfielders, Charlie Adam, was on the substitutes' bench.

Carroll, so short on confidence recently, could actually have scored in the fourth minute. Liverpool had begun the game brightly and when a Stewart Downing pass split the City defence, Carroll was denied by the legs of Joe Hart as he ran clear of blue shirts through the middle.

That Liverpool created such a good chance so early spoke volumes for their intent and for City's problems at the back. With Kompany out and the Toure brothers, YaYa and Kolo, away at the Africa Cup of Nations, City manager Mancini paired Joleon Lescott with the young Montenegrin international Savic at the heart of his back four. The City defence was asked questions early on and, sadly for them, could not come up with the answers. Soon after Carroll's early chance, Gerrard brought a fine save from Hart with a curling shot from distance and this set in motion the sequence of events that led to the opening goal in the 13th minute. From the resulting corner, Hart produced an even better save as a Downing volley was deflected towards the England international's left-hand corner.

From the next one, however, the ball fell to Liverpool defender Daniel Agger and after seeing Savic rake his studs down the Dane's knee, referee Lee Mason rightly awarded a penalty. There were no complaints from City. In fact, Savic seemed to raise his hand in apology. Gerrard stepped up to convert a super penalty low to Hart's right. With less than quarter of an hour gone, City looked as though they were yet to shake the effects of Sunday's defeat to United from their minds and indeed rid their legs of the tiredness such a huge second-half effort must have induced. Sergio Aguero did sweep one first-time shot into the crowd as City briefly pushed Liverpool back. In the early stages, though, it was very much an isolated threat. As the half wore on, City looked no more potent. Liverpool were largely in control of the game, even if a hamstring injury for Jay Spearing prompted a slight reshuffle and the introduction of Adam in the 23rd minute.

One of the Scot's first contributions was to bring down Balotelli, Adams' subsequent attempt to apologise bringing a rather angry reaction from the Italian. Balotelli's free-kick then struck Adam in the wall. Only he will know if it was deliberate. As half-time neared, Liverpool continued to look comfortable and Carroll caused some alarm in the 36th minute with a decent header that flashed wide. Minutes later Balotelli, seemingly injured, was replaced by Samir Nasri. Just before the break City finally found something of their true selves. Nasri brought a save from Pepe Reina with a low shot and then James Milner fired a presentable chance into the away end support. Liverpool defender Martin Kelly did play in Aguero just before the hour with an awful back pass but Reina narrowed the angle well enough to ensure the South American squeezed his shot off target. Moments later, City seemed set to equalise as Micah Richards -- their best player -- met a corner with a header. Reina, though, dropped to his right to parry well. Then Aguero found himself at the apex of a flowing break and curled a shot towards the corner that the Liverpool keeper once again proved equal to.

### MATCH FACTS

MANCHESTER CITY (4-3-3): Hart 7; Richards 8, Savic 5, Lescott 6, Clichy 6; Milner 6. De Jong 6 (Kolarov 72min. 6) Barrv 6; Aguero 6. Balotelli 5 (Nasri 42. 5). Johnson

5 (Dzeko 66, 6). Subs not used: Pantilimon, Zabaleta, Onuoha, Hargreaves. Booked: Nasri. LIVERPOOL (4-2-3-1): Reina 7; Kelly 7, Agger 7, Skrtel 8, Johnson 7; Spearing 7 (Adam 23, 6), Henderson 6; Bellamy 6 (Carragher 79), Gerrard 8, Downing 6 (Enrique 59, 6); Carroll 6. Subs not used: Doni, Coates, Shelvey, Kuyt. Booked: Carragher. Scorer: Gerrard 13 (pen). Man of the match: Martin Skrtel. Referee: Lee Mason 7.

## The Daily Telegraph

Savic's slip sees Gerrard give Liverpool a lead

Manchester City 0 Liverpool 1 Gerrard pen 13 Att: 36,017

This was an ugly game, a scrap of a cup tie, a celebration of containment over entertainment, but Liverpool will not care a jot. Determinedly protecting Steven Gerrard's early penalty, Liverpool had six defenders on the pitch by the end of this Carling Cup semi-final first leg, doggedly refusing to yield an inch as they edged closer to a first visit to Wembley in 16 years. Liverpool had started with a real hunger, scoring early through that Gerrard penalty, pushing down the left through Stewart Downing while Craig Bellamy sought to stretch City down the right. The hosts were patently missing the suspended Vincent Kompany in defence and the powerhouse that is Yaya Toure in midfield. David Silva's ankle problem had removed him from contention, although City said they were hopeful he would be available to face Wigan Athletic on Monday. With their spine weakened, City were heavily indebted to Joe Hart as a red storm tore their way. The England international quickly made three good saves, diving out to deny Andy Carroll, pushing away a Gerrard shot and then a deflected Downing volley. But the pressure told. Stefan Savic, too limited an understudy for Kompany, was already struggling, soon erring badly in challenging Daniel Agger, clearly fouling him. Lee Mason hardly needed to be Perry Mason to solve this. The referee pointed to the spot, and Gerrard did the rest, ignoring the green laser pen shining on his face to slide the penalty low to Hart's right. So resolute until then, Hart had no chance. Liverpool kept pouring forward, moving fluidly forward with Gerrard setting the tempo. They even took the loss of Jay Spearing in their stride, the midfielder injuring his hamstring and being replaced by Charlie Adam. The Scot's first involvement was a delight, a beautiful 40-yard pass driven from the centre to Bellamy on the right. It was still unfortunate for Spearing, who had just returned from suspension and had been looking promising in the Lucas role. City broke briefly into life, Gael Clichy gliding down the left and lifting in a cross that Glen Johnson headed out but the force was mainly with the sharper visitors. Carroll was still labouring, still unsure in his first touch as when under-hitting a ball that the excellent Richards seized on. At least Richards was having a go, joining Hart as one of the few City players performing with the requisite application levels, although they improved after the break.

Balotelli was going through the enigma variations, mainly off key, though. Fouled by Adam, the Italian reacted angrily, particularly when the midfielder tapped him on the head. James Milner stepped in smartly to steer Balotelli away. The striker demanded the ball for the free-kick which he then drove angrily into the Liverpool wall. He did not last much longer, damaging his ankle, and heading straight down the tunnel, although he hardly seemed to be limping. Samir Nasri came on, needing to convince City fans of his worth, and only really coming to creative life in the second half. Before then, Liverpool continued to close City down quickly, occasionally with excessive vigour as Gerrard did in challenging Milner, who did not milk the Liverpool captain's foul. Gerrard then flew into a more legitimate challenge on Aguero, ending a promising dart by the Argentine. Nasri reminded people he was on the pitch with a shot that Pepe Reina pushed away. Trying to inject some energy into his players, Roberto Mancini changed his formation, going three at the back with Clichy pushed far down the left, the Frenchman whipping in some good crosses. City were far better after the break, moving the ball quicker. When Martin Kelly played the ball back blind to Reina, Aguero pounced, nicking the ball and moving to go round the keeper. Reina, judging his interception perfectly, dived in to remove the danger.

Liverpool were sitting deeper, leaving Carroll further isolated in attack. City chased harder and harder for the equaliser. When Nasri curled over a corner, Richards outjumped Agger in the air, headed downwards but was thwarted by Reina. Still City pushed and probed. Aguero kept running at Liverpool's defence. Liverpool switched to a back-five with first Johnson, and then Kelly as the right-sided of the three centrehalves. Johnson made a superb challenge on Aguero just as the striker was about to let fly. City kept hunting. Milner slotted the ball wide to Nasri, who curled in a terrific cross that Reina reached just before Gareth Barry. With 11 minutes remaining, Dalglish again stiffened his defence. Bellamy was taken off, accorded warm applause by City fans, and replaced by Jamie Carragher. Liverpool now had a back five of Johnson, Kelly, Martin Skrtel, Agger and Jose Enrique shielded by Carragher. Jordan Henderson, Gerrard and Adam patrolled just in front of them and they almost needed binoculars to spot the distant Carroll. Dalglish had declared, wanting to take that narrow lead, and precious away goal back to Anfield. City hammered at Liverpool's backdoor. Nasri was more involved. Edin Dzeko tried to impose himself. Barry drove a low cross in from the right which Agger thumped out for a corner. City fans sighed in frustration when Aleksandar Kolarov's corner desperately over-hits it. Controversy then ensued. Nasri and Carragher were both cautioned for a coming together of heads. Henderson was particularly angered by Nasri's conduct and the Frenchman told him to shush.

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## THE INDEPENDENT

### Gerrard gives City mountain to climb

Before Sunday, Manchester City had not lost at home in a year. By last night, they had lost twice in the space of four days and, already out of the FA Cup, they now face the prospect of this Carling Cup semi-final slipping away from them.

The absence of Vincent Kompany, dismissed with City one goal down to Manchester United on Sunday afternoon, was felt again last night as the television cameras picked him out through the rain, looking down balefully from his executive box at his team without him. With Kompany, would City have conceded the penalty that Steven Gerrard scored from in the 11th minute to decide this match? It is debatable, given how shaky Stefan Savic was in the first 30 minutes but what is not in doubt is that City are missing their captain, who will be absent for the next three games including the return leg of this tie in 13 days' time. It should be noted that Liverpool are also without Luis Suarez although they spent much of last night defending. This was an impressive performance in many ways from Kenny Dalglish's team who had to cope with playing Glen Johnson out of position at left-back. The England international was very fortunate not to be dismissed - or even booked - for a two-footed challenge on Joleon Lescott, which was similar to that committed by Kompany against Nani for his red card on Sunday. In the latter stages, Liverpool brought on Jamie Carragher on the 15th anniversary of his debut for the club, as a defensive midfielder. They were clinging on grimly at the end but that goal could be precious at Anfield.

The stand-out player in Liverpool's team was Pepe Reina who, after errors this season at Fulham and against City in the Premier League, looked back to his old confident, commanding self. Dalglish is 90 minutes away from taking his club to their first final since the Champions League in Athens in 2007 and that will do much to dispel the misgivings about their progress in the league.

Without David Silva as well as Kompany, this is certainly not the same kind of City team that has progressed so smoothly in the league this season. They are still a long way from anything approaching a crisis of confidence although Sunday's trip to Newcastle United in the league now takes on a greater significance if they are to change a run of three defeats in their last four games.

Joe Hart began the game in magnificent form and he had already stopped three Liverpool chances that a lesser goalkeeper would not have been equal to when Gerrard slotted in his penalty.

Within five minutes, Hart had to go down low to stop Andy Carroll when the Liverpool striker, alone in a 4-2-3-1 formation, went through on goal but could not get his shot beyond the City goalkeeper. Within the next five minutes, Gerrard had a shot pushed away by Hart and the best of all was a low save to the goalkeeper's left from a deflected shot from Stewart Downing.

Given his form, there was a nagging feeling he might save Gerrard's penalty too. It was conceded by Savic who raked his studs down Daniel Agger's leg when he misjudged the ball in the area. Gerrard struck his penalty into the inside of the side-netting to Hart's right and it was too well-placed even though the goalkeeper dived the right way. It had been a strong, decisive start from Dalglish's team who were backed by an away support singing "We're not racist, we only hate Mancs".

Without Silva and Kompany, City lacked a little of that stability and creativity, and with the added concern that Mario Balotelli was right there on the edge it made for an intriguing first half. The Italian had reacted to being patted on the head by Charlie Adam as he lay prone following a foul from the Liverpool midfielder. On that occasion, James Milner sprang to his feet to intervene. But with two minutes of the first half to play, Mancini replaced Balotelli with Samir Nasri and the former, who has been carrying an ankle injury, went straight down the tunnel. Before then, Adam had replaced Jay Spearing when the latter pulled up. Adam came in as a direct replacement alongside Gerrard as one of the two holding midfielders. This was only Gerrard's second start, after the FA Cup third-round tie against Oldham on Friday, since his long injury absence and he was fortunate not to be booked for fouls on Milner and Adam Johnson.

City rallied towards the end of the first half. Reina saved Nasri's shot from the left. Then Micah Richards went past Johnson and cut the ball back for Milner who should have done better than scoop his shot over the bar.

By half-time it had been established it was Balotelli's ankle, rather than his temper, that had been troubling the forward. Having failed to get into the game, City were better without him. Reina did extremely well to shepherd Sergio Aguero away from danger when Martin Kelly's panicky pass back to his goalkeeper was intercepted by the Argentine. Aguero never had the time and space to run directly at Reina and, in taking the long route around, only managed a half-sight of goal and struck it over. City were coming back at Liverpool in the second half as strongly as they had done against United on Sunday. Richards met a corner first time and forced a good save from Reina at close range. Aguero ran on to Nasri's pass on 66 minutes and switched direction to get a shot away.

Carragher came on as Liverpool parked the bus once and for all. It worked. Dalglish turned to applaud the away support at the final whistle. At the very least this was a vast improvement on the 3-0 defeat his team suffered in the league eight days earlier. At Anfield, they will be hard to beat.

Substitutes: Manchester City Nasri (Balotelli, 39), Dzeko (Johnson, 66), Kolarov (De Jong, 72). Liverpool Adam (Spearing, 23), Jose Enrique (Downing, 59), Carragher (Bellamy, 79).

Booked: Manchester City Nasri. Liverpool Carragher.

Man of the match Reina.

Match rating 5/10.

Possession: Manchester City 56% Liverpool 44%.

Attempts on target: Manchester City 6 Liverpool 4.

Referee L Mason (Lancashire). Att 36,017.



### THE ETIBAD STADIUM

It's gloom for Blue Moon as City are humbled at home THREE defeats in four games and the crisis scenario Roberto Mancini feared has now become a reality for Manchester City.

Mancini predicted January would be a huge test for City, with international commitments and injuries taking their toll on the Italian's expensively-assembled squad. So far, it is a test they are failing.

Without key players, Mancini's cosmopolitan squad suddenly looks decidedly ordinary.

This defeat, in a competition Mancini admitted was last on his priority list, will not cause him undue concern.

But it is the knock-on effect of such demoralising defeats that could wreck their ultimate aim of landing the Premier League title. This was the first time since November 2010 that City have failed to score at home and, despite a spirited second-half display, Mancini knows his side now find themselves at the defining moment of their season.

With Yaya and Kolo Toure away on Africa Cup of Nations duty, playmaker David Silva sidelined with an ankle injury and skipper Vincent Kompany suspended, Mancini's options were limited, though he still managed to field a side that cost in the region of pounds 150million and a bench worth around pounds 70m.

Liverpool dominated the early exchanges and City were thankful to goalkeeper Joe Hart, restored to the starting line-up after Mancini's bizarre decision to play on-loan keeper Costel Pantilimon against Manchester United on Sunday, for making three world-class saves inside the opening 10 minutes.

Andy Carroll was the first of Liverpool's players to be denied by Hart, the lurching pounds 35m striker having wrestled free of Stefan Savic only for Hart to come charging off his line and block the forward's effort which, in keeping with his miserable season, lacked any conviction.

Hart came to City's rescue again six minutes later, diving at full stretch down low to his left to keep out a dipping, goal-bound strike from Liverpool skipper Steven Gerrard.

From the resulting corner, Gerrard picked out Stewart Downing on the edge of the area, his superbly-struck volley taking a deflection off Daniel Agger. Hart showed remarkable reactions to adjust to the change in flight of the ball and turn it behind.

But City's luck ran out in the 11th minute when a clumsy high challenge from Savic caught Agger, sending the Liverpool defender sprawling to the ground, referee Lee Mason pointing straight to the spot.

Gerrard stepped up to dispatch the penalty with calm authority.

Without the assurance of Kompany at the back, the presence and penetrative edge of Yaya Toure in midfield and the artistry of Silva in the final third, City looked a shadow of the side that has set the standard this season, allowing Liverpool to dictate play.

Mario Balotelli was at his sullen worst, the controversial striker a peripheral figure deployed out wide on the left, the familiar red mist descending on the half-hour when Charlie Adam, having fouled him, cuffed the City striker around the head as he lay on the ground.

Balotelli leapt to his feet to remonstrate with Adam, but Milner stepped in to placate him and defuse a potential flashpoint.

Balotelli took the resulting freekick, which thudded against the wall, before clutching his right ankle - but it was difficult to tell whether it was injury or his own combustible nature that was behind Mancini's decision to replace him with Samir Nasri in the 39th minute.

Nasri made an immediate impact, forcing a save from Pepe Reina with a curling effort, while Milner was guilty of a glaring miss seconds before half-time, scooping the ball high over the target after Micah Richards had done superbly to muscle past Glen Johnson to get a cross in.

City reasserted themselves after the break, changing to three centrebacks, with Gael Clichy and Milner operating as wing-backs, the move giving the home side more of an attacking intent.

Mancini's men dominated possession and put Liverpool under sustained pressure in the second half, but Dalglish's men held firm to take the advantage into the second leg at Anfield on January 25.

MAN CITY: Hart 8, Richards 7, Savic 4, Lescott 6, Clichy 7, De Jong 6 (Kolarov 72, 5), Barry 6, A Johnson 6 (Dzeko 66, 6), Balotelli 5 (Nasri 39, 7), Milner 7, Aguero 7. LIVERPOOL: Reina 7, Kelly 5, Agger 7, Skrtel 7, Johnson 5, Spearing 5 (Adam 23, 6), Gerrard 8, Downing 6 (Enrique 60, 6), Henderson 6, Bellamy 6 (Carragher 80), Carroll 4. REF: Lee Mason ATT: 36,017

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NO-ONE will be getting measured up for a suit just yet but Liverpool FC fans had best keep Sunday, February 26 free in the diary. LFC took a huge step towards ending their 16-year exile from Wembley with a gutsy victory at the Etihad Stadium last night. It wasn't pretty as Kenny Dalglish's men desperately clung on to a lead given to them by Steven Gerrard's early penalty. But it was a performance bubbling with character as a heroic defensive effort snuffed out the threat of the Premier League leaders. This is Liverpool FC's 14th League Cup semi-final and they have never lost at home at this stage of the competition. If that record is maintained at Anfield on January 25 then a final showdown against either Cardiff City or Crystal Palace awaits. There was a time when Wembley was like a second home for the Reds but since the twin towers were demolished they haven't been back. That frustration coupled with a painful six-year trophy drought explains the Reds' burning desire to lift the Carling Cup this season. With no European football on the agenda, this competition matters more than ever. That was evident at Exeter, Brighton, Stoke and Chelsea. And it was evident once again last night. Liverpool simply wanted it more. A first trophy to mark Dalglish's first full season back at the helm would be hugely symbolic. Success breeds success and silverware would represent a major statement of intent that Liverpool are once again a force to be reckoned with. Dalglish has won every domestic honour as a manager except for the League Cup and he's now in the perfect position to complete the set. The Reds boss had urged his players to learn the lessons of their 3-0 league defeat at the hands of City eight days earlier and the warning was heeded. Quality may have been thin on the ground at times but as a tactical battle it was intriguing. The inclusion of Gerrard and Craig Bellamy in place of Charlie Adam and Dirk Kuyt ensured there was more menace to the Reds than on their previous visit. The duo provided a welcome injection of pace, power and energy. Interestingly, there was no place for Jose Enrique with Martin Kelly starting at right-back and Glen Johnson switched to the left to combat Adam Johnson. Liverpool tore into City from the start and the only surprise was that they had to wait 13 minutes to break the deadlock. Andy Carroll should have put them in front early on when he latched on to Stewart Downing's pass and outmuscled Stefan Savic but his scuffed shot was well kept out by Joe Hart. The England goalkeeper's heroics denied the Reds maximum points in the league clash at Anfield back in November and once again he showcased his talents. Gerrard's curling 25-yarder was tipped past the post and then he reacted smartly after Downing's volley was deflected goalwards by Daniel Agger. But from the resulting corner, Liverpool were handed the gift their incessant pressure deserved. Agger was carelessly chopped down by Savic and Gerrard emphatically drilled the spot-kick past Hart. It was the skipper's third goal in five appearances following his return to action after two months out with an ankle injury. With Downing and Bellamy impressing down the flanks and Jordan Henderson working tirelessly behind Carroll, the Reds maintained a firm stranglehold on proceedings. Gerrard and Jay Spearing had stamped their authority in midfield to help ensure City strike duo Mario Balotelli and Sergio Aguero were starved of service. Frustratingly, that axis was broken up midway through the half when Spearing pulled up lame. Having started the game so brightly, Spearing cut a sorry sight as he limped off and was replaced by Adam. City sorely missed the creativity of David Silva, the presence of Yaya Toure and the leadership of skipper Vincent Kompany at the back. With Kolo Toure away with his brother on African Cup of Nations duty, Roberto Mancini had been forced to turn to Savic. The young Montenegrin centre-back was a bag of nerves and a glaring chink in City's armour. Carroll could have doubled the Reds' account when he climbed to meet Kelly's cross but powered his header narrowly wide. As the game wore on Liverpool sat back, happy to merely contain City and then hit them on the counter-attack. The plan worked a treat and a frustrated Mancini took action as he hauled off the ineffective Balotelli and brought on Samir Nasri. Pepe Reina had been largely a spectator but he was belatedly called into action just before the break as he parried away Nasri's low strike. City had a golden opportunity to equalise when Micah Richards powered his way past Johnson and picked out James Milner in the box but he ballooned his shot over the bar. The thousands of empty seats meant this was hardly an intimidating cauldron but spurred on by Mancini the hosts did improve in the second half. Kelly's sloppy back pass presented Aguero with a clear run on goal but Reina raced off his line to close him down and City's 17-goal top scorer failed to hit the target. Reina's blunder may have helped City on their way to three points at the Etihad last week but this time the Spaniard was back to his imperious best. When Richards rose to nod Nasri's corner goalwards, the City fans were already off their seats celebrating but Reina reacted smartly to keep the Reds' lead intact. Fearful of the ever increasing amount of space Nasri was enjoying, Dalglish took action as he brought on Enrique for Downing and went to five at the back. Glen Johnson briefly found himself playing as a third centre-back before Kelly moved across. Mancini went for broke by throwing on Edin Dzeko, Dalglish responded by introducing Jamie Carragher for Bellamy. With six defenders on the pitch, Liverpool struggled to get out of their own half. It was a dangerous game plan but the philosophy was clear 'thou shall not pass'. Bodies were put on the line and the commitment was total. Johnson and Martin

Skrテル both produced perfectly timed challenges to deny Aguero before the striker nodded a late chance over. It's only half-time but Liverpool have taken a giant leap towards a final flourish.

Manchester City: Hart, Richards, Savic, Lescott, Clichy, Johnson, Spearing (Adam 23), Gerrard, De Jong (Kolarov 72), Milner, Balotelli (Nasri 39), Aguero.

Not used: Pantilimon, Zabaleta, Onouha, Hargreaves.

Liverpool: Reina, Kelly, Skrtel, Agger, Johnson, Spearing (Adam 23), Gerrard, Downing (Enrique 60), Henderson, Bellamy (Carragher 80), Carroll.

Not used: Coates, Kuyt, Doni, Shelvey. Referee: Lee Mason Attendance: 36,017

Goals: Gerrard 13 pen. Bookings: Carragher, Nasri.



Manchester City will go into their Carling Cup semi-final second leg trailing after a lacklustre performance at the Etihad Stadium against Liverpool. Stefan Savic - in for the suspended Vincent Kompany - conceded a penalty in the 11th minute and Liverpool skipper Steven Gerrard beat Joe Hart with a precision finish.

The Blues - also missing David Silva and Yaya Toure - livened up after the break but could not break through a resolute Liverpool defence. City must now hope to turn the tie around in the second leg on January 25.

#### Disappointing

This was a disappointing display from a severely weakened City team, yet they still hauled themselves off the canvas, just days after going toe-to-toe with United, to almost level in the second half. But few teams in the world could swallow losing three of their four truly world-class players and keep up their performance level. It made the second half showing against United, without those three, and down to ten men, all the more remarkable. But here, it never looked to be enough. Liverpool were fired up and City were given a torrid examination right from the off. In fact, had it not been for Hart's brilliance, the Blues might have been out of this tie within the opening 15 minutes. The full effect of the red card for Kompany became evident in that spell, as the Blues looked defenceless, leaderless and, at times, clueless. It was a big ask to throw Savic into such a big game, three days after his 21st birthday and when he hasn't started a match for five weeks.

Carroll exposed him early on, outmuscling the defender only to find Hart in defiant mood to block his shot. Hart then saved superbly from Gerrard and Daniel Agger to keep City on level terms. But there is only so much one man can do and following a corner calamity struck. The ball pinged around the box and when Agger tried to burst through, Savic caught him with his studs, the faintest of touches. Agger made sure of the penalty with an outrageous attempt at a forward somersault. Whether referee Lee Mason would have pointed to the spot had he stayed on his feet is a moot point. Perhaps the right decision might have been to award the penalty and then book the man who won it! It would have been a novelty, at least. Not even Hart could stop the deadly Gerrard from scoring from 12 yards out. Now City needed rhythm. This was the moment when it became crystal-clear why Nigel de Jong has fallen from grace at City, going from key man last season to fringe player this. De Jong remains a very good player when you are defending - although he didn't cover himself in glory last night or in Sunday's derby - but when you are chasing a game his passing lacks the bite and pace which Yaya Toure has.

#### Midfielders

Gareth Barry returned to the side, and he has been one of the Blues' most important midfielders this season. But he has been so successful because he is a perfect fit for Yaya's attacking bent and David Silva's dancing genius. He is not the man to take a grip on a situation like this. With Adam Johnson a spare figure on one flank and James Milner looking like a man who has just run a marathon - which he very nearly did on Sunday - on the other, the Blues were thrashing around in a desperate search for inspiration. Mario Balotelli has been the go-to man this season when they needed a goal from nothing, and on the rare occasions he got the ball, there were glimmers of hope. But then he appeared to rick his knee when attempting a blockbusting shot from a free kick, limped around for a while, and then departed, to be replaced by Samir Nasri. City made a brave attempt to rally, but it looked a bit flat, a bit uninspired - in need of a Yaya barnstormer or a Silva jig. And the danger was that Liverpool would go down the other end and finish it as a contest. Nasri drew a nervous save from Pepe Reina as he jinked and then curled one for the far post and then, in first half added time, they squandered the best chance of all. Micah Richards, again wearing the armband, was doing his best to lift his team and when he powered past England rival Glen Johnson and cut back his shot for Milner, the goal seemed sure. But the youngster, normally so assured in those situations, swept his shot high over the bar. It needed a better effort after the break, and City provided it. Sergio Aguero missed a great chance when he latched on to Martin Kelly's poor back-pass but chipped his shot over the bar. And then Richards, who appeared to be everywhere, rose highest at a corner, his header somehow sticking in Reina's glove as half of the ground rose to acclaim a goal. The final misery for City was to see Glen Johnson slide in two-footed, studs showing, on Joleon Lescott late in the game, and not even have a foul awarded against him. Kompany, watching from the stands, must have had a rueful shake of the head at that one, as he got a red card for the same offence, and a four-match ban. But in the end the Blues did not quite have enough to avoid a second successive home defeat - the first time that has happened to them for three years.