

Date: 26 February 2012
 Opposition: Cardiff City
 Competition: Carling Cup

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26 February
2012

THE TIMES

Family affair is bittersweet for Gerrard

Cardiff City 2 Mason 19, Turner 118

Liverpool 2 Skrtel 60, Kuyt 108

(aet; 1-1 after 90min; Liverpool win 3-2 on pens)

Referee: M Clattenburg Attendance: 89,044

It was the moment Steven Gerrard had craved for the best part of six years, the golden sky at the end of the storm. Liverpool had finally won a trophy again, but the immediate taste of glory was bittersweet.

Gerrard's team-mates charged towards Jose Reina in celebration as once again Liverpool's nerve and luck held -- just about -- in a penalty shoot-out. But for their captain, that sense of release did not take over until he had consoled Anthony Gerrard, his cousin, who had just missed the decisive kick for Cardiff City in that cruellest of lotteries at the end of an enthralling game.

The Liverpool player talked of mixed emotions, which could also be discerned in the reaction of Craig Bellamy, who spent last season on loan to Cardiff, his hometown club. Their empathy came from the heart, but, from these two thirtysomethings, there must also have been a professional admiration for Malky Mackay's team, who had competed valiantly throughout, taking an early lead through Joe Mason, then forcing the penalty shoot-out when Ben Turner equalised with only two minutes left in extra time.

Even if the trophy-winning tradition had been lost since the Gerrard-inspired FA Cup triumph over West Ham United in 2006, old habits die hard for Liverpool.

That includes a frequent tendency to make life hard for themselves in cup finals, but ultimately they prevailed over their admirable npower Championship opponents and their hope now must be that, rather than serving as a landing platform, yesterday's success is a springboard to future successes.

Kenny Dalglish spoke in such terms afterwards. The era of Liverpool dominating English and European football, as they did in his playing days, is now a distant memory, but it has never felt more remote than when he answered the club's SOS call while on a cruise in the Arabian gulf in January last year.

Dalglish has not always got his judgment right over the past 13 months, whether PR-wise or in the transfer market, but, with the furor surrounding Luis Suarez finally dying down, there is no question that Liverpool's prospects have improved dramatically since he replaced Roy Hodgson and took over a team bereft of confidence and floundering in the lower reaches of the Barclays Premier League table. In victory yesterday, though, Liverpool did not so much show how far they have come but how far there is still to go. This team have qualities, but nothing like enough of the stellar match-winning quality that they need if they are to reclaim their place among Europe's elite. With Gerrard and Suarez some way below their best, it exposed mediocrity in some of those around them. On the balance of play and on the number of opportunities created, Liverpool looked like worthy winners. But there were long periods of this game when Cardiff's discipline, intelligence, spirit and resolve made at least as strong a case.

Not until Dirk Kuyt, a substitute, scored early in the second half of extra time did Liverpool establish a lead and even then they could not hold on as their retreat was punished by Turner's scrambled effort from a corner.

It had been a curious game, at times defying rhyme or reason. Glen Johnson curled a lovely shot against the crossbar as Dalglish's team looked to press home their greater experience and individual quality in the early stages, but Cardiff struck first on 19 minutes, Mason showing great composure to steer the ball between Reina's legs after Kenny Miller's clever pass from sent him clear.

Miller had missed an early chance after neat link-up play between Peter Whittingham and Don Cowie, but thereafter all the action until half-time was at the other end. Stewart Downing was Liverpool's most likely source of inspiration, for once imposing himself as others struggled, but Suarez and Andy Carroll were well marshalled by Turner and Mark Hudson.

Cardiff were defending deep -- intelligently, but too deep to suggest that they could hold out if Liverpool raised their game any farther. True enough, after a couple of near-misses early in the second half, the Premier League team equalised, Charlie Adam's corner was headed goalwards by Carroll and glanced on to a post by Suarez before Martin Skrtel struck home the loose ball.

If the expectation was that Liverpool would take control, it was short-lived. Crosses and shots rained in, but, even with Bellamy on for the plodding Jordan Henderson, there was never enough conviction. As the clock ticked down and extra time began to look inevitable, Cowie's quick free kick found Miller's darting run and, as the Cardiff forward missed the chance to make himself a hero, relief in the Liverpool ranks came second to anger as Adam was blamed for losing track of his fellow Scot. In extra time Suarez had a header cleared off the line by Andrew Taylor, but Liverpool were struggling to regain their momentum until the introduction of Kuyt in place of Carroll. True enough, three minutes into the second period of extra time, Kuyt carried the ball forward, saw a scuffed cross-shot cleared back into his path by Anthony Gerrard and reacted instinctively, losing his footing but still summoning the power to beat Tom Heaton at the near post. Finally it seemed that the cup was within Liverpool's grasp.

Cardiff, though, refused to lie down. As they won a corner in front of their supporters with two minutes left, Whittingham sent a menacing delivery to the near post, Reina panicked and Anthony Gerrard saw his effort cleared off the line by Kuyt. From the resulting corner Aron Gunnarsson's header was again met by Kuyt on the line, but this time Turner scrambled a dramatic equaliser.

The penalties? Steven Gerrard set the tone when his kick was saved by Heaton, then Miller and Adam both missed.

Successful kicks followed from Cowie, Kuyt, Downing, Whittingham and, with Rudy Gestede fluffing his lines, Johnson's conversion left Anthony Gerrard needing to score to keep Cardiff in the final. The defender sent his shot wide. Liverpool were back in trophy-winning business, but the climax was not what their captain would have wished.

the guardian

Liverpool's shootout kings turn Miller's miss into a nightmare

Liverpool have reacquainted themselves with the business of winning trophies at Wembley. For a club with their ambitions, it has been too long and they will cherish the moments of jubilation that followed this latest reminder that, when it comes to penalty shootouts, they are only just behind Germany in terms of efficiency.

This was the fifth time they have lifted a trophy because of their superiority from 12 yards and, in total, they have lost only two out of 13 shootouts. Some of the club's greatest moments have been shrouded in this form of high drama and it felt like they had been merely toying with everyone's emotions that they won despite missing their first two.

Steven Gerrard saw his effort turned on to the crossbar by Tom Heaton and when Charlie Adam shot over the opportunity was there for Cardiff City, representing the Championship with distinction, to win their first trophy since 1927.

When it really mattered, however, they could not hold their nerve. Don Cowie gave them the lead two rounds into the five but this was sandwiched by Kenny Miller and Rudy Gestede both hitting the post. Suddenly Liverpool found their composure, with Dirk Kuyt, Stewart Downing and Glen Johnson all scoring. Peter Whittingham beat Pepe Reina but the pressure was all too much for Anthony Gerrard as he walked up the end where Liverpool's fans were congregated.

In different circumstances, he might have been sat there himself. This was a cruel moment for a man whose first football memories are of playing in the street where his older cousin, Steven, lived in Huyton, both wearing their Liverpool replica kits. His attempt to beat Reina was dragged hopelessly wide and Liverpool had their first trophy for six years and their first at Wembley since 1995. On the balance of play, it was well deserved even if Cardiff emerge with great dignity in defeat. For a good part of the match the Welsh club were threatening to become the first second-tier team to beat top-level opposition in a Wembley final since Sheffield Wednesday won this competition at Manchester United's expense 21 years ago. They led through Joe Mason's 19th-minute goal and, demonstrating great competitive strength, refused to accept defeat after Martin Skrtel turned in the equaliser on the hour and Dirk Kuyt gave Liverpool the lead they merited 18 minutes into extra time.

There were only a couple of minutes left when Ben Turner poked in the goal from Whittingham's corner that took the game to penalties. Their effort could be accurately gauged by the sight of their captain, Mark Hudson, going down with cramp with almost 20 minutes of normal time still to play.

Hudson produced a monumental performance and he was not alone. Aron Gunnarsson could barely run towards the end but still rose the highest to flick on Whittingham's corner for Turner's goal. A few moments earlier, Kuyt had cleared Filip Kiss's shot off the goalline. Malky Mackay's side defended stoutly, were organised and strong in the tackle. They will also reflect on the moment, two minutes from the end of normal time, when Miller had the chance to win it. His first touch was exquisite, the shot was wild. That instance, with the goal begging, will stay with him for as long as his penalty miss.

Yet Cardiff had done well just to be in the match at that point. It was difficult to keep count of the chances Liverpool created without making it a more difficult afternoon for Heaton. In many ways it has been the story of Liverpool's season and why their goals-per-chances ratio recently dipped below 9%, the least distinguished figures in the Premier League. The were clearly the superior team and, if they had made their possession count, they could have won with something to spare.

Mason had beaten Reina with a low, diagonal shot after eluding Jose Enrique to run on to Miller's through ball and there were times in the first half when Kenny Dalglish's men looked frustrated. These moments quickly passed, though.

Downing chose a good day to have one of his best games for Liverpool. Gerrard was the key figure in midfield. Luis Suarez toiled away alongside Andy Carroll. Not everything they tried came off but they were a constant menace. Craig Bellamy was prominently involved after coming on as a 58th-minute substitute and the pressure was almost unremitting by the time, two minutes later, Carroll headed on Downing's corner, Suarez directed a twisting header against the post and Skrtel turned in the rebound.

How crucial Miller's 88th-minute miss became. Kuyt, replacing a tiring Carroll, had been on the pitch five minutes when he broke through the inside-right channel and fired in a shot that came back to him off Anthony Gerrard. Off balance, the Dutchman was still able to beat Heaton with a first-time shot inside the near post. Ultimately, Turner's late, dramatic equaliser just made the defeat more harrowing for Cardiff. Liverpool were defending an immaculate record in cup final shootouts and, as one Gerrard lifted the trophy, another was on his knees.

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The Mail

JOY AND SORROW; Gerrard's glee after Liverpool triumph but agony for his cousin

Cardiff 2 Liverpool 2

(Liverpool win 3-2 on pens aet; 1-1 @90mins)

STEVEN GERRARD lifted Liverpool's first trophy since 2006 and then issued an apology to his heartbroken cousin Anthony.

Liverpool overcame Cardiff City on penalties at Wembley following a dramatic Carling Cup Final that had ended with the sides having drawn 2-2 after extra time. The England midfielder saw his opening penalty of the shootout saved by Cardiff goalkeeper Tom Heaton but, after Liverpool poked their noses in front thanks to Dirk Kuyt, Stewart Downing and Glen Johnson, City defender Anthony dragged a must-score effort wide of the post.

'It is always cruel when it goes to penalties because there has to be a loser,' said Gerrard. 'It happens and I have mixed emotions. It was always going to be the case that one of us would be sad and one of us would be celebrating.'

'Obviously, I am delighted to have won the trophy but I feel for Anthony and Cardiff. It doesn't matter what I say to him. I know that he will be down.' This was football at its cruelest as well as its most dramatic. To the Liverpool star's considerable credit, he went to Anthony to offer a few words of consolation before joining his colleagues in wild celebration.

Never had a Gerrard's misfortune been greeted with such joy by Liverpool, but it was also with relief, given Cardiff's gallant performance.

What an extraordinary final. From the moment Joe Mason sent Malky Mackay's side into a 19thminute lead to the two chances Cardiff squandered in the dying minutes of normal time to render Martin Skrtel's equaliser an irrelevance, it was drama all the way.

From what appeared to be Kuyt's extra-time winner, and the goalline clearance the Dutchman then made to deny Filip Kiss an equaliser, to the leveller Ben Turner did then score from the resulting corner.

It meant that 120 minutes of already wonderful theatre would end with a mesmerising finale; the brutal lottery of spot-kicks.

Gerrard won the toss that enabled him to select Liverpool's end for the penalties only to then miss the opening effort, Heaton producing a brilliant save.

Then came 60 seconds of action that will be replayed again and again no doubt when the Scotland squad gather today to prepare for Wednesday's friendly with Slovenia.

Firstly, Kenny Miller hammered his spot-kick against the post, his day sinking from one frustration to another.

Then up stepped the normally reliable Charlie Adam only to fire his effort so high over the bar it is not absolutely clear that it has returned to Earth yet.

With all around him losing their nerve, credit the excellent Don Cowie for holding his as he coolly handed the advantage back to Cardiff.

With all three part of Craig Levein's squad this week, the conversation around the dinner table would be worth listening to.

Kuyt levelled, Rudy Gestege hit an upright again and Stewart Downing crowned one of his better displays in a Liverpool shirt by seizing an advantage for Kenny Dalglish's team.

When Peter Whittingham then converted successfully for a Welsh side notable for the absence of a single Welshman until Darcy Blake joined the action in the 106th minute, Johnson had to hold his nerve to put the pressure on young Gerrard.

He did so in some style, that pressure then proving too much for a centre-half who had only stepped off the bench after 99 minutes.

The significance of this victory cannot be underestimated for Liverpool, even if it did come against a Championship side that never should have been allowed to make such a contest of the game.

It was Liverpool's first trophy in six years, one that enabled Dalglish to join the pantheon of managers who have won a clean sweep of domestic trophies.

But it was also a victory that bought Liverpool's manager time with the American employers who were here to see the first real reward for their investment. Just as it was something that will help considerably in repairing the damage of what has been a difficult few months.

The Luis Suarez affair has been such a harmful episode for the club but this was a return to what Liverpool are supposed to be about and that moment when the two Gerrards embraced is the kind of image they should be focusing on now. An image far more worthy of a T-shirt.

For Dalglish, the sight of that final penalty drifting wide must have been met with enormous relief, particularly when he chose yesterday to pack his side with the six major signings that amount to [pounds sterling]108million he has spent on rebuilding this Liverpool side.

It meant there was no place for Kuyt, no place for Craig Bellamy and, the longer Jordan Henderson and Andy Carroll remained on the field, the more questionable a decision it seemed.

Henderson was dreadful, Carroll not much better. There were some better Liverpool performances, with Skrtel the outstanding performer in red and someone who just about pipped Turner for the best player on the pitch.

For Cardiff, Cowie, Mason, Mark Hudson, Andrew Taylor and Heaton were excellent.

While Liverpool had unleashed 42 shots by the time Kuyt scored, they lacked cohesion in a manner that has been all too vocal this season.

They still threatened first, Johnson sending a curling effort against the Cardiff crossbar after less than two minutes.

But when Scot Kevin McNaughton met a clearance from Skrtel with a ball into Miller, the Scottish striker split the Liverpool defence with a superb pass that Mason met with a finish that slipped under Pepe Reina.

For the [pounds sterling]250,000 summer signing, it was some goal.

Heaton excelled to deny Daniel Agger late in the first half and Suarez early in the second, Dalglish finally responding by replacing Henderson with Bellamy.

Within two minutes, Liverpool had levelled, Carroll rising to meet a Downing corner that Suarez diverted against a post before Skrtel seized on the rebound to score.

Heaton would impress again to thwart Downing but it was Cardiff who went closest to settling this in normal time, with Turner heading wide and Miller shooting over the crossbar with a golden opportunity.

In extra time, more drama.

Taylor's clearance off the line to deny Suarez, the cry from Cardiff's fans of 'only one Gerrard' when Anthony came on and then the sight of Kuyt's thumping right-foot finish that had Heaton beaten.

That arrived three minutes into the second half of extra time, but the lead survived just 10 minutes.

Kuyt had blocked the effort from Kiss but, from the next corner, Turner struck to ensure this final ended as it did.

For Liverpool it must have been terrifying, the burden of expectation outweighed only by the fear associated with knowing that, as a team, they had already missed five penalties this season.

MATCH FACTS CARDIFF (4-4-2): Heaton; McNaughton (Blake 106), Hudson (Gerrard 99), Turner, Taylor; Cowie, Whittingham, Gunnarsson, Mason (Kiss 91); Miller, Gestege. Subs (not used): Marshall, Earnshaw, Conway, Naylor. Booked: Kiss, Turner.

LIVERPOOL (4-4-2): Reina; Johnson, Skrtel, Agger (Carragher 86), Jose Enrique; Henderson (Bellamy 58), Gerrard, Adam, Downing; Suarez, Carroll (Kuyt 103). Subs (not used): Doni, Maxi, Spearing, Kelly. Booked: Henderson. Referee: Mark Clattenburg.

The Daily Telegraph

Brave Cardiff win everything but the silverware

Cardiff City 2 Mason 19, Turner 118 Liverpool 2 Skrtel 60, Kuyt 108 Att: 89,044 aet; 1-1 at 90 mins; Liverpool win 3-2 on pens What drama, what a finish, what a final, what contrasting family fortunes.

When Anthony Gerrard missed the decisive penalty, so giving the Carling Cup to Liverpool, the Cardiff City defender looked to the heavens, then to the ground, seeking solace, an explanation, an escape.

His cousin Steven, putting his joy briefly to one side, ran across, attempting to console him. They are flesh and blood. They played with and against each other while growing up on the Bluebell Estate in Huyton, Merseyside. "I love him, he's family," said Steven, who had missed the first kick of the shootout. Nothing he could say could console Anthony. Others tried.

Pepe Reina tried. Malky Mackay and his Cardiff players tried. No words of sympathy and support, no tender arms enveloping him could ease the pain. For all his anguish, Anthony Gerrard should reflect on this game with a collective pride. His side lost a shoot-out but won countless friends. Cardiff simply refused to be overawed. Even when Martin Skrtel and Dirk Kuyt overturned Joe Mason's opener, Cardiff never gave up. Even when their legs were filling up with cramp, they kept pushing for an equaliser that arrived from Ben Turner with three minutes of extra time remaining, sending the final into penalties and emotions into the wringer. The first three failed to make the mark, the final threatening to turn into a day-nighter. First Liverpool's Gerrard missed. Then Kenny Miller hit a post. Then Charlie Adam unleashed a shot that probably had Heathrow-bound planes taking evasive action. Composure eventually joined proceedings. Don Cowie coolly placed his kick past Reina. Advantage Cardiff. Mackay and his back-room staff stood on the touchline, arms draped around each other's shoulders, hope rising. Fortunes change so quickly in these most brutal of denouements.

Kuyt drilled his penalty low past Tom Heaton, Rudy Gestege struck a post, Stewart Downing converted and now it was Liverpool in the penalty-box seat. Up stepped Peter Whittingham, making it 2-2, but the nerves were biting into Cardiff when Glen Johnson swept home his penalty, putting Anthony Gerrard on the spot. His penalty missed, Anthony had to join his vanquished comrades on that long painful walk up the steps to the Royal Box to collect their losers' medals.

They shuffled along, their hearts broken, their legs drained of life, such a contrast to the buoyant Liverpool players who followed after a respectful pause. Steven Gerrard had waited six years for this moment. He was all smiles as he wove his way through the outstretched arms of supporters craving a handshake or offering him a red scarf. When Liverpool's captain then held aloft the Carling Cup, a roar of almost guttural intensity leapt from the throats of 40,000 fans. As one of their many banners declared: "New Wembley, same old story, Kenny's reds heading to glory." Liverpool were back in the old routine, winning trophies. But this was

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hardly the most stellar of displays. Some of the investment in underperforming players has yet to be repaid. Andy Carroll ([pounds sterling]35million) was poor, Jordan Henderson ([pounds sterling]20million) even poorer. Downing somehow won the man-of-the-match honours when Skrtel was vastly superior, holding the defence together at times. Yesterday was a reminder of Kenny Dalglish's impact, uniting the club, giving the team more confidence, but it also demonstrated how much work still remained. Sober reflections will have been few last night. Liverpool's players and supporters were in party mood. As the champagne sprayed through the air, the Wembley DJ ran through Liverpool's favoured songs from Ring of Fire to You'll Never Walk Alone. And so the day had concluded as it began with the singing of this Rodgers and Hammerstein classic before it was all aboard this crazy carousel of a Carling Cup final. Cardiff fans were in terrific voice. They threw beach-balls around, booed Luis Suarez when his name was announced, applauded Craig Bellamy and held up a banner stating "Don't Worry About A Thing". It was Liverpool doing the worrying in the first half. Carroll and Suarez were failing to link up. Gerrard and Adam were too deep. Henderson found a cul-de-sac and stayed there. Even though they could have taken an early lead when Johnson hit the bar, Liverpool were too disjointed. By contrast, Cardiff brimmed with energy. Miller kept taking up intelligent positions. Mackay's tactics were working, the presence of Gestede off Miller confusing Liverpool. Cardiff fans dared to dream after 18 minutes. Kevin McNaughton seized on a Skrtel clearance and calmly worked the ball to Miller. Cardiff's No9 had dropped off the front-line, controlling the ball and then sliding it through elegantly to Mason. He let the ball run across him before firing it past Reina. Liverpool were stunned. Their response was singularly poor. Carroll attempted a crazy shot. Cardiff kept frustrating Liverpool. Heaton judged his run from his line well to punch away a Gerrard corner. Then Mark Hudson, the captain leading by defi-ant example, snaked out a leg to whisk the ball away from Carroll. Still Liverpool enjoyed plenty of possession. Still they failed to show composure when it counted. From a Downing cross, Henderson excruciatingly failed to connect. As the second half unfolded, Heaton denied Suarez, and Turner threw himself in the way of an Adam shot. Finally Henderson was hooked, Bellamy arriving to applause from all. Within three minutes Suarez hit a post. The ball bounced out to Skrtel, who controlled it with his first touch and sent the ball flying past Heaton. Liverpool supporters really found their voice, singing The fields of Anfield Road with real gusto. Cardiff refused to fold. With two minutes remaining of normal time, it was almost Miller time. With only Reina to beat, Miller shot over. Liverpool breathed a sigh of relief, Cardiff fans launched into Men Of Harlech and extra time soon arrived. Liverpool really stepped up a gear. Kuyt mishit a shot which rebounded back to him and he made no mistake with his second attempt. Surely Cardiff's race was run? Their fuel gauge surely showed empty. They were running on fumes. But what fumes. Kuyt cleared a Filip Kiss header off the line but still Cardiff pressed, Turner pouncing. And so to penalties. And so to contrasting emotions in the Gerrard family.

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THE INDEPENDENT

Liverpool class finally tells to deny Mackay's battlers

It is not the European Cup, it is not the FA Cup, and it is a long way from the Premier League, but after almost six years without the kind of trophy-winning moment that used to be a regular event at their club, this will do for now for Liverpool. And who would have thought at the start of the day it would take this much effort for Steven Gerrard to finally get his hands on the Carling Cup? Winning the first trophy of Kenny Dalglish's second coming, against a team sixth in the Championship, was never supposed to be as complicated as this. One envisaged a couple of goals for Liverpool and a smooth, controlled performance as befitting the one leading Premier League team that has really taken this competition seriously this season. Instead, by 6.45pm yesterday, Liverpool still did not have their hands on the trophy. First, they gave the lead away to Cardiff on 20 minutes and spent the next 40 minutes chasing it. They scored the equaliser, then took the lead in extra time through substitute Dirk Kuyt and then, when the Football League were tying the red and white ribbons to the trophy, Ben Turner, a 23-year-old centre-half from Coventry, bundled an equaliser over the line and the lottery of penalties were upon Dalglish.

It was already a remarkable afternoon's football at Wembley by the time Steven Gerrard and then Charlie Adam missed the first two penalties and there were heads in hands all around the end bedecked in red. It was at that moment you wondered whether Dalglish's team had actually lost their nerve.

What decided it in the end? Probably the factor that one had previously expected to make the difference in the original 90 minutes: Liverpool's superior class finally told. Kuyt, Stewart Downing and Glen Johnson all scored their penalties while only two of Malky Mackay's players were successful from the spot, culminating in the decisive miss from substitute Anthony Gerrard.

What a dreadful moment for the cousin of Steven, the boy in his famous relative's shadow who was rejected by Everton and having fought his way back up the divisions did not make the Cardiff team yesterday. It is a cruel game sometimes.

As the Liverpool players sprinted towards Pepe Reina to celebrate, Steven stopped briefly to attempt a consolation with his cousin but, really, what could he say? It had been a monumental effort by Mackay's team who battled hard to make up for the deficit in talent. For Liverpool, the satisfaction was in the outcome, not the game. It is not the way they would have wanted to win it but neither was this a terrible performance. In many ways it was indicative of their season: patchy, but with the capacity for moments of surprising quality.

Liverpool made the job that much harder when they conceded on 19 minutes. It came from the right side where Kyle McNaughton played the ball across the face of the area to Kenny Miller. He was afforded the time to slip the ball through the Liverpool defence where Joe Mason could comfortably stroke the ball in.

From the moment of Mason's goal until the 83rd minute of the game, the Championship team scarcely had a sight of Liverpool's goal. The barrage was relentless, peaking either side of the break until at last they scored on the hour mark. In the end it felt like sheer force of will that saw the ball over the line. From Downing's corner Andy Carroll won a header which Luis Suarez turned on to the post. When it rebounded back to Martin Skrtel he afforded himself a touch before scoring. In the intervening period it had been frantic for Cardiff as they sought to protect their unexpected lead. At times it was a job to keep track of all the chances created by Liverpool. There was a notable tackle by the Cardiff captain Mark Hudson, who scooped the ball away from Carroll. Jordan Henderson failed to make contact with a Downing cross that Gerrard also miscued.

Andrew Taylor got in the way of Gerrard's shot just before half-time. Suarez jumped on a mistake by Hudson and had a shot pushed away by Tom Heaton. You get the picture. By the time Skrtel scored, Liverpool had two reasonable penalty appeals for handball rejected.

The pursuit of an equaliser appeared to take its toll physically and, having scored, Liverpool never quite recaptured the intensity until they raised their game in extra time. In fact, towards the end of normal time, Cardiff came back into the match. With seven minutes left, the Cardiff centre-half Turner came in at the back post and only narrowly headed the ball wide. With two minutes left, Cowie slipped in Miller in the right channel and with a clear sight of goal he missed the target. In extra time, Liverpool were better. Carroll, who had toiled hard in attack, came off for Kuyt. Kuyt struck a shot that looked to be going wide, the ball was returned straight to him by a poor clearance from Anthony Gerrard and Kuyt hit it first time inside the near post. That really should have been it but Cardiff proved to be determined. They raised themselves for one last assault on the Liverpool goal and may even have surprised themselves to claim an equaliser with two minutes of the 120 to play remaining. How did it happen? In the course of two successive corners, Kuyt first cleared off the line from substitute Filip Kiss and then, when the second corner came over, the Dutchman could not stay on his feet long enough to stop Turner from forcing the ball over the line from close range. Suddenly, Dalglish was choosing his penalty takers.

What drama followed. Heaton made a brilliant save from Gerrard, Charlie Adam missed and in between Miller missed for Cardiff. Not until Cowie hit the fourth penalty did anyone score. From then on Liverpool scored all three and only Peter Whittingham did so for Cardiff. Dalglish looked delighted but even he must have wondered why his team made it so hard for themselves.

DAILY MIRROR

EPIC LOSERS

OVER and over again, Anthony Gerrard must have dreamed of stealing the headlines from his cousin Steven.

He must have wished he could be the hero, that he could somehow create his own small version of the Miracle of Istanbul.

He must have yearned for the 2012 Carling Cup Final to be remembered as the Gerrard Final.

Named after him, not Steve.

Just once, he must have thought, it would be nice to overshadow the Liverpool skipper and England star.

It would have been nice to hear the media waxing lyrical about "Gerrard" and know that, for the first time, they were talking about him.

How sweet it would have been to have just one moment where he was celebrated for an achievement of his own rather than living in the reflected glory of Stevie G. Well, that moment presented itself yesterday evening when Gerrard stepped up to take Cardiff City's fifth penalty in the shoot-out at the end of the Carling Cup Final.

His cousin had already had his turn. He took Liverpool's first kick and saw it brilliantly saved by Tom Heaton.

It had been an epic final, a match that had turned one way then the other and which will be remembered most of all for Cardiff's absolute refusal to accept defeat.

Even when the Championship players could hardly walk in extra time, their legs gripped by agonising bouts of cramp, somehow they had found a way back into the match.

Even when they were 2-1 down with two minutes left, they would not capitulate.

Even when Dirk Kuyt headed a shot off the line from pointblank range, they would not admit it was their last chance.

From the next corner, Ben Turner forced the ball over the line after yet another clearance by Kuyt.

It was starting to seem as though destiny was on Cardiff's side, that against all the odds this would be the day of the underdog.

That feeling grew stronger when the Liverpool skipper and Charlie Adam missed their side's first two kicks.

Adam blasted his penalty so far over the bar that some reports suggested it had landed on the North Circular Road.

But by the time Gerrard took the long walk towards the penalty spot, he knew he had to score to keep Cardiff's hopes alive.

The shoot-out was still evenly balanced. Liverpool had missed two. So had Cardiff. This was Gerrard's moment to make the difference, to prove he had what it takes.

It would have been victory enough for most men to have the guts to step up and take the first penalty on such a momentous occasion anyway.

Maybe as he walked to the spot he thought about the interviews he had given to the media on Thursday.

Maybe he tried to draw on how he felt when, a couple of days after the heartbreak of being released by Everton in 2005, he found himself "crying into a beer" at a beach resort in Mexico as his cousin led Liverpool's astonishing Champions League final comeback against AC Milan in Turkey.

This was his chance to be part of something similar. His chance to play a critical role in a football epic. His opportunity to claim the glory for his branch of the family.

His day had not started well when he discovered he had not been selected in the starting line-up. He had been bitterly disappointed.

But he got his chance when Cardiff boss Malky Mackay brought him on in the ninth minute of extra time for the exhausted Mark Hudson.

Now he had the chance to put that disappointment behind him, the chance, at the age of 26, to build a happy landmark in his career.

He had to take the penalty in front of the Liverpool end where the red-and-white hordes yelled and jeered at him, pulled faces and gesticulated wildly.

The pressure was immense.

Gerrard struck the ball cleanly enough but he dragged it a foot further to the left than he had intended. It was enough. It went wide of Pepe Reina's right hand but wide of the post too.

As Reina leapt up and danced for joy, Gerrard sank to his knees and then, in slow-mo, lay flat out on the turf. His cousin sprinted from the centre circle towards Reina and then peeled off at the last moment to try to console him.

Gerrard pushed him away. Not aggressively but despairingly. There was no consolation to be had here.

Head down, he began to march away towards the far side of the pitch, away from the Liverpool celebrations, away from his teammates, away from everyone.

The headlines were his. He probably knew that. It had become the Gerrard Final after all.

Date: 26 February 2012
 Opposition: Cardiff City
 Competition: Carling Cup

Telegraph	Independent	Mirror
Echo	Western Mail	Times
Guardian	Mail	



26 February
2012



Reds lift League Cup for eighth time after dramatic penalty shoot-out win at Wembley

LIVERPOOL FC collected their eighth League Cup win with a penalty shoot-out victory over Cardiff City at Wembley.

The Reds were made to work every inch by the Championship opponents, but prevailed 3-2 on penalties after a 2-2 draw in front of more than 89,000 fans. Cardiff had led through Joe Mason early on, but Martin Skrtel levelled in the second-half, before substitute Dirk Kuyt looked to have won it in extra time. But Ben Turner's last gasp effort forced a shootout, and when Steven Gerrard and Charlie Adam both missed with their spot-kicks, Cardiff held the advantage, But Kenny Miller and Rudy Gestede both hit the post, before Anthony Gerrard dragged his kick wide to give Liverpool the win, a cruel blow for the defender, cousin of Reds skipper Steven.

Reds boss Kenny Dalglish sprung something of a surprise by naming Stewart Downing in his starting eleven, with Craig Bellamy left on the substitutes' bench against the club he supported as a boy.

It meant Andy Carroll and Luis Suarez were given the chance to continue their burgeoning partnership in attack, with Downing and Jordan Henderson in support.

Adam partnered Gerrard in the centre of midfield, with Daniel Agger, who had missed last weekend's FA Cup win over Brighton & Hove Albion, preferred to Jamie Carragher in central defence.

Liverpool started purposefully, and were almost ahead inside two minutes. Gerrard set off on a lung-busting 70-yard break through the centre and fed Downing on the left. Downing teed up Glen Johnson, who bent a sublime 20-yard effort against the underside of the crossbar, with Cardiff 'keeper Tom Heaton well beaten. Gerrard blazed the loose ball over the top.

It was a sign of things to come, with Dalglish's side on the front foot throughout the opening stages, though their Championship opponents showed plenty of belief in possession.

They fashioned their first opening on ten minutes after a neat move, with Don Cowie's flick presenting Miller with a sight of goal 16 yards out. The Scotland international sent his first-time effort over the bar with his weaker left foot. Carroll looped a header wide from Adam's diagonal cross soon after, before forcing Heaton into a save with another effort on 18 minutes.

It was Cardiff, though, who would strike first a minute later.

Miller was the provider, slipping a neat pass through for Mason to slot through the legs of Pepe Reina.

The goal rocked Liverpool. Carroll slashed wildly wide on 24 minutes as they sought a response, while Jose Enrique curled off target soon after.

There were muted appeals for a penalty when Jordan Henderson's cross struck Andrew Taylor, before Adam drilled a 30-yard strike a yard wide of Heaton's left-hand post as the pressure mounted.

Mark Hudson had to make a brilliant last-ditch tackle to deny Carroll on 37 minutes after the striker had played a neat one-two with Suarez, before neither Henderson nor Gerrard could take advantage of Downing's low cross, with the latter sidefooting awkwardly over the bar.

Taylor made a brave block to deny Gerrard in the final minute of the half, as the underdogs clung on until the interval.

It was Mackay's side who fashioned the first real chance of the second period, with Miller dragging a 20-yard shot wide from Cowie's backheel.

At the other end Heaton was called into action in the 50th minute, plunging to his left to keep out Suarez's effort, after the Uruguayan had got the better of Hudson to reach Carroll's flick. There were also suggestions of handball against Turner after he blocked Adam's 25-yard piledriver.

Henderson, booked for an ugly lunge at Mason, was replaced by Bellamy before the hour mark. The Welshman was given a rousing reception by both sets of supporters, having spent last season on loan at Cardiff.

And within two minutes of his arrival, Liverpool were level.

Downing floated in a corner from the left, Carroll beat Turner in the air to it, with the ball turned against the post by Suarez from right in front of Heaton. Skrtel was quickest to react, steering the ball through the goalkeeper's legs from 7 yards for the equaliser.

Reina fielded Mason's fizzing effort soon after, while Suarez flashed an inviting ball across goal after wriggling past Hudson in the box.

Skrtel nearly grabbed his second of the afternoon on 74 minutes, volleying into Heaton's arms after Cardiff failed to clear an Adam corner, while the goalkeeper made a smart save to push away Downing's low strike from 25 yards.

Cardiff had a great chance to pinch the game on 82 minutes when Cowie sent in an inviting cross from the left. Turner, climbing highest at the far post, sent his header a yard wide though.

Miller then had a golden chance with two minutes remaining, collecting Cowie's astute pass but volleying over the bar from close range, with Liverpool's defence nowhere.

It finished 1-1 after 90 minutes, and within seconds of the restart Suarez had tested Heaton with a skimming drive from distance.

The Uruguayan then met Bellamy's subsequent corner with a firm header inside the six-yard box, only for Taylor to block on the line with Heaton beaten. Carroll, whose influence had waned, flicked a header wide just before the interval in extra time, before being replaced by Kuyt. Bellamy then curled just off target after linking up well with the Dutchman, while Johnson scuffed a left-footed effort wide from the edge of the box.

Time was running out, but Kuyt is always the man for the big occasion, and in the 108th minute he struck after an incisive forward burst.

His initial effort was weak and half-cleared by Taylor, but Kuyt returned it with interest, slamming a fierce shot past Heaton from 16 yards for 2-1.

It looked like it would be enough. Even more so when Kuyt scrambled off the line from Filip Kiss three minutes from time. But from Whittingham's resultant corner, Aron Gunnarsson won the flick and the ball dropped loose to Turner two yards out. The big defender squeezed the ball past both Kuyt and Reina on the line to make it 2-2. It forced the lottery of a penalty shootout. Heaton denied Gerrard with Liverpool's first kick, but Miller struck the post with his.

Adam then blazed miles over, with Cowie keeping his nerve to give Cardiff the advantage. Kuyt netted for Liverpool, with Rudy Gestede dragging his kick onto the post to restore parity. Downing gave the Reds the lead coolly, but Whittingham followed suit. And after Johnson had scored for Liverpool, Anthony Gerrard's missed kick gave them the crown after an absorbing afternoo.



Cardiff City suffer shootout misery against Liverpool FC in Carling Cup final

CARDIFF CITY lost the Carling Cup final in the most heartbreaking fashion as Anthony Gerrard missed the decisive spot kick in a penalty shootout thriller at Wembley.

The 26-year-old, on as a substitute in extra time, missed the penalty in a shoot-out which gave the Merseysiders' a record eighth League Cup.

It was cruel not only on the defender – who was consoled by his cousin at the end – but the rest of his team who had seen their early lead overtaken but remained resilient and found the strength to snatch an equaliser with two minutes of an absorbing final remaining.

Joe Mason had given the Bluebirds a first-half lead but goals from Martin Skrtel and, in extra time, Dirk Kuyt had put Kenny Dalglish's side within touching distance of the trophy before Ben Turner pegged them back.

So it went to spot-kicks, where Liverpool had lost only two in 12 previously, and although the early efforts were poor, Glen Johnson scored the fifth and Gerrard missed.

Their first visit to Wembley in 16 years was eventually worth the wait and the hope at Anfield, and among fans, will be that this cup will be the start of another era filled with silverware.

Over the last 40 years the Reds have won a trophy early in the decade and gone on to add to it.

In Dalglish they certainly have someone who knows plenty about accumulating cups of every kind and this victory put him alongside Sir Alex Ferguson and Jose Mourinho as the only managers to win all three major domestic competitions. They also equalled Manchester United's record of 15 domestic cup wins.

Things looked like they would go to plan for Dalglish's side when the Cardiff crossbar was rattled inside two minutes.

Steven Gerrard raced 60 yards on a quick counter-attack but Johnson's shot which beat goalkeeper Tom Heaton and came back off the crossbar, with Gerrard blazing over the rebound, was the closest they came to threatening Cardiff's goal in the first half.

The Bluebirds created two better chances and, crucially, converted one.

Having snatched at a shot from Don Cowie's clever movement and backheel Kenny Miller did not make the same mistake twice.

The former Rangers front man was afforded all the time and space he required in the 19th minute when he picked up the ball just outside the area.

When Daniel Agger eventually closed him down Miller slid a pass into the space behind the centre-back where Mason collected and fired beyond Jose Reina.

The rest of the half saw Liverpool dominate but rarely trouble Cardiff.

Stewart Downing was their most creative outlet with a succession of crosses from the left but the Bluebirds dealt with them well enough, relying on Liverpool's over-complication and profligacy.

Charlie Adam flashed a low drive narrowly wide of Heaton's left-hand post while late in the half Andy Carroll was denied a clear close-range shooting opportunity when Cardiff captain Mark Hudson's outstretched leg hooked the ball away.

Liverpool fans tried to evoke memories of their second-half comeback in Istanbul in the 2005 Champions League final with a rendition of You'll Never Walk Alone at the break.

The situation was not quite as dire as that night but certainly Dalglish's side needed to find more composure and their clinical side.

Luis Suarez was starting to have more of an influence and drew the first real save from Heaton with an angled shot and was denied by Kevin McNaughton's perfectly-timed intervention just as he was about to unload from close range.