

Date: 18 March 2012
 Opposition: Stoke City
 Competition: FA Cup

Mirror	Guardian	Sentinel
Independent	Telegraph	
Mail	Echo	



18 March 2012



Downing finally finds target and Liverpool get neighbours Everton in their sights

Some FA Cup traditions can be tiresome. This match lived up to the expectation that a quarter-final will be hard-fought, but there is only so much enjoyment to be extracted from a prolonged struggle. Even so, Liverpool undoubtedly deserved a win that leads them to a semi-final with the victors of the replay between Sunderland and Everton.

That encounter, according to the manager, Kenny Dalglish, will go ahead at Wembley on Saturday 14 April, since a match the following day would fall on the anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster of 1989 when Liverpool faced Nottingham Forest in an FA Cup tie. "We have never played on the 15th," he said. "The FA and Uefa have always been exemplary."

There was a tone of happy anticipation when Dalglish's thoughts turned instead to the possibility of a derby match at Wembley, should Everton prosper in that replay at the Stadium of Light. "Merseyside will be hoping Everton get through and we can all have a day out," said the Liverpool manager.

There was a need for doggedness to ensure that Dalglish's men would be at the national stadium again, following their success in winning the Carling Cup there this season. "If you don't put in a decent performance against Stoke," the manager said, "you don't get a decent result."

The losers were far from devastated by the outcome. Tony Pulis, the manager, recognised a "ground-breaking" season in which they had appeared in the Europa League and appeared in the FA Cup sixth round for the third consecutive campaign.

The opener from Liverpool had a refinement that was seldom on view in the contest as a whole. Luis Suarez worked a one-two with Maxi Rodriguez and sent a low, bending drive beyond the left hand of Thomas Sorensen in the 23rd minute. It would have heartened the home support that the Uruguayan is now minded to stay in this country despite the eight-match ban that he served for racial abuse of Manchester United's Patrice Evra.

Despite being a newcomer Suarez has even spoken of hoping to sign a new contract even though the current one runs to 2016. "I want to stay, despite everything that happened," he told a Uruguayan website. All the same, the concise move for his opener was in contrast with much of the action and the Anfield stage was not the scene of a wholly commanding performance.

The former Liverpool striker Peter Crouch levelled in the 26th minute by heading in from a Matthew Etherington corner while Pepe Reina complained that his path had been blocked by Ryan Shotton. "The goalkeeper is fouled," Dalglish said flatly and, by contemporary standards, accurately. Perhaps the rough and tumble sanctioned by the referee, Kevin Friend, was a nod to the heritage of what has sometimes been a rough old tournament.

The hosts had much of the play until the move that re-established the lead. With 57 minutes gone, Stewart Downing came off the right wing and cut across the edge of the penalty area to exchange passes with Gerrard and shoot low past the left hand of Sorensen. There were more flourishes to follow, with Suarez again testing Sorensen, yet this had been an untidy win in which Liverpool spent part of stoppage time defending Stokecorners.

Dalglish rightly preferred to think of the contribution of Downing, who has still to acclimatise fully to the Anfield environment after his pounds 20m move from Aston Villa last summer. He notched only his second goal for the club and it was the first to carry true significance.

This tournament and the Carling Cup have been important to Liverpool. A sustained bid for, say, the Premier League title does not look probable in the near future, but status of a sort is being regained. While the side did not impress greatly, they took another step towards the prestige of yesteryear as they set course for Wembley.

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The Mail

Goal and a new deal for Suarez

Liverpool 2

Stoke 1

IF THEY could perform with the consistency they have shown in cup competitions in the Barclays Premier League, this would be some season for Liverpool. But a second visit to Wembley in six weeks, after a 16-year absence from the national stadium, will ease the sense of frustration and disappointment as well as any pressure that might have been building on Kenny Dalglish. It would be interesting to know if Dalglish would trade both, and with them the Carling Cup itself, for a place among the Premier League's top four and the opportunity to play Champions League football next season. The league table is a concern, Newcastle's win against Norwich leaving Liverpool five points adrift of Alan Pardew's fifth-placed side last night -- albeit with a game in hand.

But it is also a situation that increases the significance of the super goals Luis Suarez and Stewart Downing scored against Stoke because a domestic cup double, allied with a crack at the Europa League, would go some way to appeasing the American owners who have allowed Dalglish to spend more than [pounds sterling]100million. They must have enjoyed what has been an excellent week for their club, this victory following that impressive 3-0 defeat of an Everton side they might now meet in the last four of the FA Cup if David Moyes can navigate his men past Sunderland. It would suggest Liverpool are at least moving in the right direction.

The ease with which Peter Crouch levelled the scores after 26 minutes yesterday would not have amused Dalglish and his coaching staff. Defensively they were naive. But, beyond that, Liverpool played well and not just because of the quality of the finishes. They had to play with real composure to deny last season's beaten finalists the return to Wembley they craved.

'It was a difficult game,' said Dalglish. 'But the way my players competed, put their bodies on the line, was pleasing.' Suarez, who yesterday revealed in Montevideo's daily El Pais that Liverpool want to extend his contract despite having four years remaining on his current deal, was terrific.

Downing and Steven Gerrard too. But credit should also go to the work-rate of players like Jay Spearing, who gets the defensive duties done and allows the likes of Gerrard to get further forward. It was from a Gerrard free-kick that Liverpool threatened first, Maxi Rodriguez sending a header just over the bar. But, when Gerrard then found Suarez with a neat ball in the 23rd minute, a quite brilliant goal followed. It owed much to the return ball Suarez received from Rodriguez as he surged forward, but it was some finish; a stunning 20-yard right-foot effort. That Stoke levelled within three minutes incensed Liverpool, not least because the corner from which Crouch (below) struck should never have been given as Ryan Shawcross got the final touch. But the idea that Pepe Reina had in some way been obstructed by Ryan Shotton was a pretty thin excuse. While Reina should have freed himself, Crouch should not have been able to arrive in the box unmarked to meet Matthew Etherington's corner. Reina was booked for complaining to the referee when he should have been more annoyed with himself and his team-mates.

Before the break a further opportunity fell to Stoke and, as Tony Pulis said, Jonathan Walters should have at least been on target, but sliced wide. Liverpool always looked in control, though, and when Downing played a fortuitous one-two with Gerrard in the 57th minute -- the Liverpool captain's back-heel seemed more by accident than design -- the England winger scored superbly. Suarez also threatened in the second half to underline Liverpool's dominance, first with a header and then with a shot Thomas Sorensen did well to save. 'I thought we played really well but that second was a poor one to concede,' said Pulis afterwards. The FA have told Liverpool their semi will be played on Saturday, April 14 rather than the Sunday, the anniversary of Hillsborough.

LIVERPOOL (4-4-2): Reina 6; Kelly 7 (Coates 89mins), Carragher 7, Skrtel 7, Enrique 6; Downing 7, Spearing 7, Gerrard 7, Rodriguez 7 (Kuyt 62, 6); Suarez 8 (Henderson 89), Carroll 5. Scorers: Suarez 23, Downing 57. Booked: Kelly, Reina. STOKE CITY (4-4-2): Sorensen 6; Wilkinson 5, Shawcross 6, Huth 7, Wilson 6; Shotton 6 (Pennant 61, 6), Whitehead 6 (Delap 74, 6), Whelan 6, Etherington 6 (Jerome 72, 6); Walters 6, Crouch 7. Scorer: Crouch 26. Booked: Whelan, Wilkinson, Shawcross, Wilson. Man of the match: Luis Suarez.

Referee: Kevin Friend 5. Attendance: 43,962.

The Daily Telegraph

Suarez vows to stay at Airfield as Wembley beckons a second time

Liverpool 2 Suarez 23, Downing 57

Stoke City 1 Crouch 26 Att: 43,962

Liverpool have endured a host of ups and downs during the course of this season and, if cup success comes in waves, the club are now riding on a crest as they prepare for a second Wembley trip in two months.

After waiting 16 years for a visit to the stadium, a chiselled-out victory over Stoke means predictable jokes about long delays and London buses can be made. The gag about Wembley being Anfield south may start to resonate again, too, especially if Liverpool return for the final in May.

With Luis Suarez suggesting he has received a new contract offer; and is prepared to sign it; the stars are aligning at the perfect time for Kenny Dalglish.

He did not feel he had unfinished business when he returned to the manager's chair last season. After all, he was the John D Rockefeller of honours during his first spell. It was more a case of trying to continue where he had left off, collecting silver and restoring the old ways.

Yet even in his distinguished career, nostalgia does not always conjure up happy memories. Dalglish's last FA Cup semi-final as Liverpool's manager was a defeat to Crystal Palace in 1990, eight months before his resignation.

It was perceived by many as the beginning of the end of that first reign. Reaching the last four this time may be a defining moment of his second coming.

Dalglish is fooling no one when he doubts the credibility of Liverpool's place in the Premier League table, but at least no such kidology is necessary in the cups.

Should he win another major trophy this season, he will be entitled to tell everyone to ignore the league table as he guides visitors around the new arrivals in the trophy room.

In many respects the performance yesterday was as patchy as Liverpool's season. There were enough moments of individual brilliance to offer encouragement, but they were punctuated by periods of carelessness. Ultimately, Liverpool won because they were prepared to accept the bruises which are inevitable when facing such a belligerent unit as Stoke.

Suarez scored a fine opener after 23 minutes, providing a moment of beauty in a contest which was not always so pleasing on the eye.

The Uruguayan exchanged passes with Maxi Rodriguez 25 yards from goal and, with minimal backlift, found the bottom corner past Thomas Sorensen.

He followed this with an even more encouraging off-the-ball strike. "I would like to stay," he said, the lengthy ban after the infamous Patrice Evra affair seemingly not upsetting his contentment as much as feared. "Despite everything that happened, I'm happy here, on and off the pitch, and at the club they're happy with me and want me to stay.

"I have a contract until 2016 and they already want to renew it for me. The coach still believes in me and that's very important, especially after having been out for eight matches."

Suarez's solo effort was cancelled out when Andy Carroll lost concentration and Peter Crouch was left unaccompanied to meet Matthew Etherington's cross. Pepe Reina complained he was impeded by Ryan Shotton, but he was in suspiciously David de Gea territory in his impotence from the set-play.

Jonathan Walters should have given Stoke the lead before half-time when he shot wastefully into the side netting and with that the momentum shifted.

Stewart Downing re-established Liverpool's lead after 57 minutes. The left winger has regularly been used on the right to cut inside and take advantage of a powerful left boot.

Finally, nine months into his Liverpool career, the ploy worked.

Downing's emphatic finish belied his impoverished scoring record at Anfield. This was his second goal in 35 games, both in the FA Cup.

Despite the kind of aerial and physical onslaught which Stuart Lancaster would have admired as much as Pulis, Liverpool held firm.

Amid the towering presence of Stoke stood the diminutive, underrated Liverpool midfielder Jay Spearing. When Spearing kept leaping for headers with Crouch, the obvious height difference was of no consequence.

The 24-year-old rarely gets noticed beyond Liverpool, but he has excelled in the past two games. Dalglish knew he needed giants to resist a late Stoke bombardment, and in Spearing he found it in heart and application if not in stature.

"It was as difficult as you would expect against Stoke," Dalglish said. "They are very good at throw-ins and set-plays and we had to throw our bodies in the way."

There have been times when Dalglish has talked a better game than Liverpool have played. Not this week.

With a trophy already won, another semi-final secure, and a possible Merseyside affair at Wembley on the horizon, only the rise of New Romanticism, return of large shoulder pads and the recommissioning of Brookside will complete Dalglish's Eighties revival.

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THE INDEPENDENT

Downing blooms with Stanley Park's daffodils

There is a field of daffodils on Stanley Park and, during the walk past it toward the stadium, a Scouse voice called out: "Bloody hell, it's Mother's Day; they should all have gone by now." The old wit remains and so does another Liverpool tradition that Kenny Dalglish would recognise from his first stint as manager: the pursuit of silverware.

Dalglish may never succeed completely in dragging Liverpool back to where they were when he left them but, should he deliver two trophies, his first full season back can only count as a triumph, whatever Liverpool's final league position. Should Everton overcome Sunderland, there will be another throwback, the two halves of Merseyside meeting at Wembley as they did in 1989, a month after the agonies of Hillsborough. Whoever they face, Liverpool will ask to play their semi-final on Saturday, 14 April, since they have never played on the anniversary of the disaster. "We will not be playing on the 15th," Dalglish said. "The FA and Uefa have always been very supportive and we have never played on the 15 April before."

Liverpool were drawn as the 'home' team for the semi-final, as they have been in every round of this competition and they dealt with Manchester United and Stoke as efficiently as they pushed aside Oldham and Brighton. Once Stewart Downing seized on an accidental lay-back from Steven Gerrard, ran at the centre of the Stokedefence and lashed his shot past Thomas Sorensen, the outcome was seldom in question.

As with all of Dalglish's British signings, many have wondered whether Liverpool will ever see value for money from a player for whom they paid [pounds sterling]19m. Gareth Southgate, Downing's manager at Middlesbrough, pointed out that, like many flair players, the winger's self-confidence is fragile. "Your first year at Liverpool is sometimes a difficult one to get yourself through," Dalglish said. "But Stewart is a really good player with a good turn of pace and a good left foot as you saw out there. He was man of the match in the Carling Cup final and has done us proud here."

This was Stoke's third successive FA Cup quarter-final and the club had subsidised the coaches that thundered up from the Potteries but their last league win at Anfield came in 1959 and only fleetingly did they mount any threat to that hoodoo.

They were a goal down when their goal came, predictably perhaps, from a corner, albeit one that should not have been given since the final touch before the ball went out of play came from a flick of Ryan Shawcross's head.

A blow became a shining bruise when Peter Crouch headed home the corner, Dalglish arguing vehemently that his goalkeeper, Pepe Reina, had been impeded by Ryan Shotton. Nevertheless, Andy Carroll, who now that Fernando Torres has found a way to goal will be under more scrutiny than usual, made an especially feeble attempt to mark the Stoke centre-forward, who scored with ease.

The same might have been said when Jon Walters burst through late in the first half without requiring Reina to make a save. His manager, Tony Pulis, thought this was the least he might have done and Stoke were to be given nothing like the same opportunity again.

The number of chances Luis Suarez requires to score is held up as perhaps the forward's one great technical weakness, although he found the net on his debut against Stoke with virtually his first shot and did the same again here.

It capped a beautifully liquid move, struck first time on the edge of the box after Suarez played a one-two with Maxi Rodriguez. There were three Stoke defenders who might have closed him down but they each moved fractionally late and the shot rocketed into the corner of Sorensen's net beneath the Kop.

Liverpool's great fear has been that Suarez would leave at the end of the season in search of Champions League football. It probably contributed to their disastrously one-eyed defence of him during the Patrice Evra affair, although he has indicated in an interview for a Uruguayan website that he will now be more than happy to stay.

DAILY MIRROR

Dalglish heading to Wembley again.. for possible derby clash with Everton

STOKE CITY 1 FA CUP QTR-FINAL: LIVERPOOL 2

WHATEVER it is with Kenny Dalglish and Wembley, Liverpool should find a way to bottle it.

The Reds manager is going back to the home of English football for the 23rd time after his side overcame a gritty but distinctly limited Stoke side to reach the FA Cup semi-final - where they could meet neighbours Everton.

It is also the 23rd occasion the Anfield club have reached the last four of this competition, and there can be no doubting the magic of Dalglish when you consider the identity of their match-winner.

Before yesterday, Stewart Downing had found the net just once in his Liverpool career, against Oldham. Yet if there was any crisis of confidence after finding himself the target of fans' ire at times this season, his finish hardly betrayed it. The winger produced a stunning strike to add the perfect flourish to what was a dominant performance against disappointing opponents.

Dalglish has found himself criticised at times for supporting his summer signings even when they have under-performed, as Downing has done. But he was vindicated with the England international's fine strike.

The winner came on 57 minutes, when Downing cut in from the right flank to take a clever return from skipper Steven Gerrard and lash a left-foot shot into the corner with all the instinct of a born goalscorer - not someone who has found the net once in 34 games.

It could be a huge goal, not just for Downing's Anfield career, but for Liverpool and their manager too, because their season was in danger of crawling to an unedifying halt with their poor league form.

While the top four remains his ultimate target, FA Cup glory will certainly give him breathing space in that aim. And to Liverpool's credit, there was little doubt they would progress here, despite the tight scoreline.

They were always in control, thanks in part to Stoke's lack of quality in their passing going forward. Even at the end when the home side decided to defend their lead, the inability of Tony Pulis's side to produce even a basic level of skill in their delivery meant there was little danger.

Stoke had their heroes, with the likes of Ryan Shawcross and Robert Huth defiant, and the impressive Jonathan Walters, Dean Whitehead and Glenn Whelan industrious, but they can play so much better than this.

Liverpool didn't reach the heights of their midweek romp against Everton, but they did more than enough to win, thanks to the quality of Gerrard in the middle and Luis Suarez up front.

The South American has many critics, but he also has something almost unique around the penalty area. His goal to open the scoring on 23 minutes was a case in point.

There seemed little on as he progressed towards goal, but a swift exchange with Maxi Rodriguez and a shimmy to his right, and the Uruguayan was curling the ball quite magnificently into the far corner past the bemused Thomas Sorensen.

Stoke did rally impressively in the first half, and they capitalised on another mistake from the unfortunate Pepe Reina to draw level before the break. The Reds' Spanish keeper allowed a Matthew Etherington corner to be met by Peter Crouch just three yards from his goal, which doesn't exactly qualify as commanding your six-yard box.

It was Crouch's first goal in 10 appearances against Liverpool since he left the club, and also Stoke's first-ever FA Cup goal against the Reds in seven attempts, but the visitors couldn't hang on to that lifeline.

When Downing restored Liverpool's lead, you expected Pulis's team to throw the kitchen sink at it, but they could never build any momentum because of their woeful passing.

In the end, perhaps the biggest worry Dalglish faced about another visit to Wembley as the game drifted into stoppage time was what suit to wear. But then he has quite a choice, because he must have some collection by now.

LIVERPOOL: Reina 5? Kelly 7? (Coates 89), Carragher 7, Skrtel 6, Enrique 6 Downing 7, Spearing 7, Gerrard 7, Maxi 6 (Kuyt 62, 6); Suarez 8 (Henderson 89) Carroll 6 Goals: Suarez 23, Downing 57 STOKE: Sorensen 6; Wilkinson 6?, Shawcross 7?, Huth 7, Wilson 6?, Shotton 6 (Pennant 61, 5), Whitehead 7 (Delap 74, 5), Whelan 7?, Etherington 6 (Jerome 72) Walters 7, Crouch 7 Goal: Crouch 26 REF: Kevin Friend ATT: 43,962

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Sweet smell of success lingers again for double-chasing LFC

THIS is becoming a habit.

Just seven weeks after savouring their first trip to Wembley for 16 years,

Liverpool FC will return to Anfield South next month.

Success breeds success and Kenny Dalglish's side have the scent of a Cup double in their nostrils.

Having already ended the club's six-year drought by placing the Carling Cup in the trophy cabinet, they now have a greater prize firmly in their sights.

Not long after the stragglers finally made it back home and the hangovers cleared following the celebrations triggered by that dramatic triumph over Cardiff City, Kopites can start plotting another day out in the capital.

This time there won't be any silverware up for grabs but the stakes on Saturday, April 14 will be high nevertheless.

It promises to be a hugely emotional occasion on the weekend of the Hillsborough anniversary. And the opposition could be the neighbours from across Stanley Park.

The semi-final draw has thrown up the mouthwatering prospect of a first all-Merseyside Wembley clash since the FA Cup final of 1989.

However, for that to happen Everton must beat Sunderland in their own back yard.

Dalglish's men can sit back and watch, safe in the knowledge that whoever they end up facing under that giant arch they will have a golden opportunity to reach the club's first FA Cup final for six years.

If the semi goes to plan the Kop will have to change their tune because with the champagne on ice, they could be off to Wembley 'thrice'.

Liverpool's Premier League campaign may have been dogged by inconsistency but in the domestic cups they have developed a useful knack of rising to the occasion.

This was no classic by any means but then it was never going to be against Tony Pulis' Stoke City. If the Potters were playing in your back garden, not only would you pull the curtains but you would board up your bedroom windows.

The Reds had to dig deep and produce a real show of character to deal with an aerial bombardment.

Stewart Downing scores against Stoke to send LFC in the FA Cup semis

One costly moment aside they defended expertly with Martin Skrtel and Jamie Carragher putting their bodies on the line.

Ultimately, the hosts were indebted to two special finishes from Luis Suarez and Stewart Downing as their superior class in the final third saw them through.

It was Suarez's double which dumped Stoke out of the Carling Cup earlier in the season and he tormented them again yesterday. His 11th goal of the campaign was reward for another mesmerising display.

Sick of being made to look stupid, the likes of Andy Wilkinson and Ryan Shawcross resorted to kicking lumps out of Suarez. Each time the striker came back for more before departing to a standing ovation.

News of an interview he has given in South America during which he reaffirmed his commitment to the Reds amid speculation linking him with a summer move to Paris St Germain, will be music to the fans' ears.

Liverpool paid a heavy price for sticking by Suarez during the race row earlier in the season and that loyalty needs to be repaid over an extended period.

Talking of repayments, Downing picked the perfect moment to produce his most telling contribution in a Liverpool shirt as he slammed the winner past Thomas Sorensen. After a poor start to his Reds career, the £20million winger is finally starting to look the part.

Over the past month there have been flashes of the ability everyone knows he boasts.

Once he found the net yesterday, Downing looked a different player – displaying a belief and a swagger which was so sadly lacking in the first half of the campaign.

The first quarter of this tie was instantly forgettable. Last season's beaten finalists were never going to allow Liverpool the kind of time and space they enjoyed in the midweek rout of Everton.

After a period of applause for Bolton midfielder Fabrice Muamba, the opening stages were error-strewn.

Maxi Rodriguez, making his first start for nearly two months in place of Jordan Henderson, headed wide from Steven Gerrard's free-kick, while at the other end Pepe Reina comfortably claimed Peter Crouch's header. It was desperately scrappy but then out of nothing Liverpool fashioned a 23rd minute opener. Suarez burst forward and neatly exchanged passes with Rodriguez before brilliantly curling a shot into the bottom corner from 20 yards.

However, within three minutes Stoke were level. The Reds protested furiously as referee Kevin Friend had awarded a corner despite Shawcross clearly directing the ball wide.

But there was no excusing the woeful marking which gifted Crouch a free header he simply couldn't miss from Matthew Etherington's corner.

Reina also felt he had been unfairly blocked off by Ryan Shotton but all he got for his protests was a yellow card. It was the first time in 10 appearances against the Reds since leaving Anfield that Crouch had returned to haunt them.

Stewart Downing scores against Stoke to send LFC in the FA Cup semis

Well organised and combative, Stoke were good value for their equaliser.

A string of erratic decisions from Friend as the first half progressed only served to heighten the sense of frustration around Anfield. Suarez did well to bite his lip and continued to pose a threat, only for Sorensen to deny him a second.

After the break, Liverpool raised the bar. Jay Spearing was once again outstanding in midfield with the Kop's chanting of his name a telling sign of the growing admiration for his talents.

Steven Gerrard and Suarez went close before the breakthrough arrived in the 57th minute.

Downing cut in off the right and attempted to find Gerrard, only for the ball to strike the skipper's heel. Alert, the winger latched on to the loose ball, worked his way into space and hammered a fine left-footer past Sorensen for his second goal of the season.

Liverpool controlled the rest of the contest expertly with Stoke never looking like restoring parity.

Kenny's Army are preparing to march on the capital once again.

"Stewart's a really good player - a good turn of pace and a great left foot. He's done us proud. He's got us in the semi-final with his winning goal so that won't do anybody any harm." Liverpool manager KENNY DALGLISH welcomespraises his match winner.

"In the second half we gave them a leg up with the goal, which was a poor one to concede, but when you are playing against one of the top four or five teams in the country they punish you and that is what they did. But you can't fault their effort and honesty. Good luck to Liverpool, I hope they do well in the next round." Stoke boss TONY PULIS

LIVERPOOL: Reina, Kelly (Coates 89), Skrtel, Carragher, Jose Enrique, Downing, Spearing, Gerrard, Maxi (Kuyt 61), Suarez (Henderson 89), Carroll Not used: Doni, Flanagan, Shelvey, Adam.

STOKE: Sorensen, Wilkinson, Huth, Shawcross, Wilson, Shotton (Pennant 61), Whelan, Whitehead (Delap 74), Etherington (Jerome 72), Walters, Crouch. Not used: Nash, Upson, Palacios, Jones.

GOALS: Suarez 23, Downing 57; Crouch 26.

BOOKED: Whelan, Wilkinson, Shawcross, Wilson.

REFEREE: Kevin Friend.

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18 March 2012

The Sentinel

FA CUP QUARTER FINALS

LIVERPOOL 2 (Suarez, 23, Downing 57)

STOKE CITY 1 (Crouch, 27)

STOKE City's hopes of getting to the FA Cup final for the second year running were dashed as they were beaten 2-1 at Liverpool in the quarter finals this afternoon. City did themselves and their 6,000 travelling supporters proud with a battling performance, but could find no way back once Stewart Downing fired Liverpool into a 2-1 lead on 57 minutes.

Luis Suarez had scored the opener with a 25-yard strike on 23 minutes, but City roared back to level when Peter Crouch headed home Matthew Etherington's corner four minutes later.

Tony Pulis made four changes to the side which lost at Chelsea last week as Thomas Sorensen, Glenn Whelan, Etherington and Peter Crouch all returned to the starting eleven.

Stoke hearts were in mouths in the third minute when Maxi met Steven Gerrard's free kick, but sent his header looping wide.

And Stoke were soon on the front foot, only for Martin Kelly to bring down Matthew Etherington and earn a fifth-minute booking.

Ryan Shotton's cross from the right found Crouch, but he planted his back post header straight at

Pepe Reina.

Glenn Whelan went into the book for a late challenge on Jay Spearing as Liverpool tried to break, but Stoke were largely looking comfortable in possession.

However, they fell behind after superb play from Suarez who played the ball up to Maxi and surged forward to get the return pass 25 yards from goal. He had time to steady himself before firing a precise strike past Sorensen and into the bottom corner.

Stoke surged back to win two successive corners, before equalising from the third.

Etherington sent over an inswinger and Crouch rose unchallenged to thump a header past Reina to send the 6,000 travelling fans behind the goal into ecstasy.

Andy Wilkinson was booked for a 30th-minute challenge on Suarez before Carroll volleyed over from Spearing's cross.

Stoke threatened a second when Dean Whitehead broke up play on the edge of his own area before surging forward and sliding a pass between two defenders for Walters. The forward took the ball into the right side of the area, but sent his shot wide of the near post.

Gerrard sent a free kick just over from the edge of the area as Stoke deservedly went into the break on level terms.

Half Time

Liverpool 1 Stoke 1

Gerrard's 20-yard strike was well held by Sorensen, but the home side threatened again on 53 minutes when Stewart Downing's free kick was glanced wide by Suarez.

And the pressure told on 57 minutes when Liverpool regained the lead. Downing played the ball into Gerrard on the edge of the area before running on to the return pass. The former Aston Villa winger took one touch to glide into the area before belting a shot left-footed past Sorensen.

Tony Pulis brought on Jermaine Pennant for Ryan Shotton on the right of midfield while Liverpool boss Kenny Dalglish replaced Maxi with Dirk Kuyt.

Kuyt's long-range effort was comfortably held by Sorensen. The keeper had more problems on 66 minutes when he threw the ball out, but it hit the back of Etherington. However, City managed to scramble the ball away.

Stoke were struggling to get back into the game so it was no surprise that Pulis made a second change, on 72 minutes, as Cameron Jerome replaced Etherington.

Rory Delap replaced Whitehead on 74 minutes before Ryan Shawcross went into the book for a foul on Suarez on 77 minutes.

Jerome's shot was blocked in the area on 80 minutes, but Shawcross's sliding challenge denied Kelly at the other end just as Liverpool were threatening a third.

Five minutes of injury time gave Stoke some hope, but Liverpool repelled two corners and two Delap long throws to book their place in the semi finals.

LIVERPOOL: Reina, Enrique, Carragher, Skrtel, Kelly (Coates, 89), Maxi (Kuyt, 63), Gerrard, Spearing, Downing, Suarez (Henderson, 89), Carroll.

Subs: Doni, Adam, Flanagan, Shelvey.

STOKE: Sorensen, Wilkinson, Shawcross, Huth, Wilson, Shotton (Pennant, 63), Whelan, Whitehead (Delap, 74), Etherington (Jerome, 72), Walters, Crouch.

Subs: Nash, Jones, Upson, Palacios.

Referee: Kevin Friend

Attendance: 43,962