

Date: 7 April 2003

Opposition: Aston Villa

Competition: League

Echo	Times	Sunday Times	Independent	Sunday Mail
	Guardian	Sun Telegraph	Sunday Mirror	Birmingham Echo
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7 April 2003

## THE TIMES

Penalty decisions fuel Dalglish ire

Liverpool 1 Suarez 82

Aston Villa 1 Herd 10

Referee: M Oliver Attendance: 44,321

The woodwork struck in triplicate, a visiting goalkeeper in outstanding form and a hat-trick of penalty appeals turned down. If the Premier League table was ordered according to hard-luck stories, Liverpool would be flying high, their sense of injustice now so acute that Aston Villa's escape with an ill-deserved point prompted dark mutterings of conspiracies at Anfield.

Others might be tempted to believe that Liverpool are the victims of an underhand plot, Kenny Dalglish suggested after Michael Oliver, the referee, had rejected two decent shouts for handball by Chris Herd and Eric Lichaj, the Villa defenders, and another, more obvious claim for a penalty after Luis Suarez was tripped by Alan Hutton. The Liverpool manager stopped short of subscribing to such a theory but only just and for reasons of diplomacy and probable FA opprobrium rather than anything else.

"Someone needs to get assassinated for us to get a penalty kick," Dalglish complained, his ire having been further stoked by Suarez's booking for simulation when replays clearly showed that the Uruguayan had stumbled only after having his right foot trodden on by Stephen Ireland, the Villa midfielder. Almost five months have passed since Dalglish first voiced his concerns that Suarez was being judged by referees according to his reputation rather than the standards applied to other players and on Saturday, if not always on other occasions, he clearly had a case.

The problem for match officials, though, is that their levels of trust in modern players has plummeted to such an extent that it is increasingly difficult to differentiate a trip from a dive. That is not the fault of referees, whose "crime" is only to call situations as they see them, it is the responsibility of those who have taken gamesmanship to such extreme levels that those charged with policing football are having to make quick-fire decisions in the knowledge that they could be the victim of a con.

As well as unjustly proffering a yellow card in Suarez's direction, Oliver also booked Samir Carruthers for diving, even though it appeared that the Villa substitute had been clipped by Daniel Agger just inside the penalty area. Rather than being held up for ridicule or subjected to the one-eyed anger of managers, though, referees surely deserve at least a degree of sympathy. They are, after all, not the ones responsible for the moral decline that has made their job even harder than it already was.

Had the big decisions gone Liverpool's way then it is likely -- albeit far from certain given their propensity for missing penalties -- that they would have won a league match at Anfield for only the second time this year. As it was, they had to settle for a draw as a much-improved performance by recent standards failed to yield maximum reward. The point they earned when Suarez's late equaliser cancelled out Herd's first Villa goal produced almost as much relief as it did frustration as it ensured they averted a fourth successive league defeat.

Alex McLeish knew that his team, in inverse proportion to Liverpool, had garnered more than their performance truly deserved. "We were under the cosh," was the Villa manager's colourful, but accurate, description of the majority of the game. But a team deprived of nine players through injury that had to plunder the club's crop of academy graduates to make up the full complement of substitutes would have expected little else. That they showed such collective resilience, with 20-year-old Nathan Baker excelling in central defence, was a definite achievement and one which gave McLeish further cause for hope as he attempts to plot a course away from the lower reaches of the table.

"What I have seen this season has been very heartening from the point of view of whether these young guys can handle this," the Villa manager said. "Baker was fantastic today alongside James Collins and they are all playing the positions really well. It is great credit to Aston Villa's academy that we had so many players in the team today and six of them on the bench and they come and get a point against Liverpool. The young boys will be walking tall after this."

Liverpool (4-4-1-1): M Doni 6 -- J Flanagan 6, J Carragher 6, M Skrtel 8, J Enrique 5 (sub: D Agger, 76) -- D Kuyt 7, J Henderson 6, J Shelvey 6 (sub: C Bellamy, 65 6), S Downing 4 (sub: A Carroll, 65 6) -- S Gerrard 8 -- L Suarez 7. Substitutes not used: B Jones, M Rodriguez, S Coates, J Spearing. Booked: Suarez. Next: Blackburn Rovers (a).

Aston Villa (4-4-2): S Given 8 -- A Hutton 6, J Collins 8, N Baker 7, E Lichaj 6 -- B Bannan 6 (sub: S Carruthers, 86), C Herd 7 (sub: A Weimann, 73), S Ireland 6, S Warnock 7 -- E Heskey 5 (sub: G Gardner, 58 5), G Agbonlahor 5. Substitutes not used: B Guzan, E Stevens, D Johnson, D Williams. Booked: Carruthers. Next: Stoke City (h).

## theguardian

Liverpool's relegation form gives McLeish a lift

Liverpool (0) 1

Suarez 82

Aston Villa (1) 1

Herd 10

Referee Michael Oliver

Attendance 44,321

Even in this season of Gary Speed's suicide, Fabrice Muamba's collapse and Stilian Petrov's announcement that he is suffering from leukaemia, there is nothing quite as emotive as the minute when Anfield falls silent for Hillsborough.

As he stood amid the stillness, Alex McLeish had every reason to imagine he would be beaten. There was a part of the Aston Villa manager who imagined his makeshift team of academy products might be overwhelmed. The last time he had come to Anfield, with Birmingham City, they lost 5-0.

"Liverpool's players are only human, they have two legs like us," he said. "But they took a bit of stick during the week and, with the Hillsborough anniversary, I thought to myself: 'What a week to get Liverpool!'"

By any logical method of accounting, the kind that sent Kenny Dalglish over the edge on the final whistle, Aston Villa ought to have been swept away. Liverpool had 21 shots to Villa's five, 11 corners to three and struck the frame of the goal a further four times to take this season's tally to 28. Dalglish looked as if he could stand it no more. Liverpool were eighth, not far from where he found them, 15 months and pounds 110m ago, and tomorrow they travel to Blackburn, where Roy Hodgson's Anfield regime was ended by a 3-1 defeat.

It was while Hodgson was still clinging to power that Damien Comolli, the Liverpool director of football, began the negotiations that would lead to Luis Suarez's arrival at Anfield, with Dalglish describing him as a "wee, smiley guy".

There have been fewer smiles lately and for Dalglish, who has made an enormous and sometimes wrongly directed emotional investment in the Uruguayan, it has been paid back by bans and bookings, even if the latest - for diving - left him incandescent.

"When Luis goes down, it's because Stephen Ireland has trodden on him," he said.

"You just need to keep going and make sure the club retains the integrity it has.

We know we have got it and maybe we are going about it the wrong way. Maybe we should shout our mouths off."

That Aston Villa left Anfield with a point that McLeish did not expect was due to something he understands instinctively - the art of central-defending. James Collins and the rest of the Villa back four were at least as responsible for Liverpool's draw as any decision made by the referee.

McLeish said Suarez is a clever striker and, asked if he meant "clever" in the way Diego Maradona was "clever", he smiled and said he would like him in his team. El Diego described some of his more dubious methods as "pickpocketing". Suarez, too, has something of what in South America is called viveza - the ability to win with a bit of cunning. "He is world class," said McLeish. "I am so proud of the way my two centre-halves handled him because he is so creative.

"We talked about having to watch him when we had the ball so there were no quick breaks from Liverpool. He is such a good player that you will never pin him down for 90 minutes." Villa managed 80.

McLeish knows what can happen to a club after they win the Carling Cup. Birmingham were 14th when they snatched the trophy from Arsenal at Wembley in 2011. They finished up being relegated after picking up nine points from 12 games. Liverpool have taken four in seven which, as the Scot knows, is relegation form.

Daniel Agger, who had not played since Liverpool lifted the trophy in February, and who made Suarez's equaliser, said: "Nobody is even thinking of the FA Cup semi-final with Everton [on Saturday]." It had better start crossing their minds soon because for Liverpool it is all that the season has left.

Man of the match James Collins (Aston Villa)

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## The Mail

**KENNY FACES KOP SUMMIT;** Owners looking for answers  
 LIVERPOOL'S owners will fly in to meet Kenny Dalglish this week ahead of the club's seasondefining FA Cup semi-final against Everton.  
 It will be the first time Dalglish has seen John W Henry and Tom Werner since it emerged he will have to submit a written report at the end of the season to explain why Liverpool have faltered so badly in the Premier League. The last time they were in town was to see Liverpool win the Carling Cup against Cardiff in February.  
 Dalglish insisted last week that his relationship with Henry and Werner was 'exactly the same now as it was at the start of the season' but given that Liverpool have won only two games in the Premier League during 2012, there will inevitably be a degree of initial awkwardness.  
 Henry and Werner will meet Dalglish after the latest frustrating Anfield afternoon of the campaign. Aston Villabecame the 10th side to hold Liverpool to a draw in front of their own fans and the pattern of the 1-1 result was all too familiar.  
 But despite the recent slump, Dalglish's position is not under threat and it was always the plan of the Americanbased Henry and Werner to come over for Saturday's match.  
 'We aren't playing well,' admitted Daniel Agger, who returned from injury as a late substitute. 'We just aren't working in the right way. It's a bit of everything. Hopefully it will turn soon. When you play for a club like this, it doesn't matter if there is a trophy at stake or not.  
 'You have to try and win every game, especially at Anfield. That's not happened in the last couple of weeks,' added Agger.  
 For Villa, this was a performance to settle nerves and suggested they will preserve their top-flight status. Manager Alex McLeish is already looking to next year and he provided a cryptic answer when asked if Andy Carroll could be a potential target.  
 'I cannot talk about another team's players,' said McLeish. 'But Andy Carroll is a great player and I tried to get him to play for Scotland once but the mug decided to play for England!' If McLeish was coy on the subject of Carroll, he was candid about how difficult his year since crossing Birmingham has been.  
 The performances of Barry Bannan, goalscorer Chris Herd and Nathan Baker, however, augurs well for the future. 'We have had to go through a little bit of pain this season,' he said. 'When I took the job, I thought that would be the case. We had a squad short on experience but it was heartening to see so many [academy graduates] giving everything for the club. They will be walking tall after this.'

## The Daily Telegraph

**Dalglish points to hidden 'agenda'**  
 Liverpool 1  
 Suarez 82  
 Aston Villa 1  
 Herd 10 Att: 44,321  
 The end&#x2013;of&#x2013;season report filed by Kenny Dalglish will need to be bigger than War and Peace to chronicle Liverpool's problems. It may yet be Dalglish's best chance of surviving an internal investigation.  
 By continuing to swell the contents of the club review, it would take owners John Henry and Tom Werner all summer to read. By the time they have digested the conclusions, it may be too late to consider a change.  
 The Americans are flying in to watch Saturday's FA Cup semi&#x2013;final against Everton, and will meet Dalglish before the game at Wembley. He will need to be at his most charming, and for the owners to be at their most gullible, to earn sympathy for Liverpool's league position following another grim draw at home. A familiar post&#x2013;match dissection was little more than a rerun of their season's failings. Dalglish gave a hint of what his explanation will be for the awful sequence of results and, worryingly, appears to be inviting all those of an Anfield persuasion to consider the possibility of a grand conspiracy, or factors "beyond their jurisdiction".  
 Dalglish said that he would not be surprised if others thought referees had an agenda against his side. He was referring to a rejected penalty appeal for Chris Herd's handball and a contentious booking for Luis Suarez.  
 So off we toddle, left to contemplate whether Liverpool's latest setback was a consequence of lack of quality or the dual effects of bad luck and incompetent officiating. It needs all of two seconds for a reasoned conclusion, unless you are a fully paid&#x2013;up member of the 'flat earth' society.  
 Officials, goalposts, fixture planners, the Football Association, Patrice Evra and the 'anti&#x2013;Liverpool' media; all have been held responsible for the club's difficulties this season.  
 Yet this performance, studded by cameos from certain players who would struggle to feature in a Cham&#x2013;pianship team, shows that Liverpool's toils are of their own making. Jordan Henderson and Jonjo Shelvey are the closest Liverpool have come to pairing Tweedledum and Tweedledee in central midfield. Their presence meant Steven Gerrard was shifted first to the position of a second striker and later a makeshift right&#x2013;midfielder. As usual, he came to the fore by creating Liverpool's late equaliser but his role should not be compromised for the sake of two players who you imagine queuing to get the captain to sign their shirt after a game. Their inclusion is symptomatic of why Liverpool are where they are.  
 Senior figures in the side are not doing enough, either. Suarez has been poor since the new year, favouring individualism above the team ethic. Jose Enrique's disintegration has been rapid, while Stewart Downing usually makes only one decent contribution in every match.  
 Daniel Agger's fine display from left&#x2013;back showed how much he has been missed. His header against the bar allowed Suarez to nudge home the equaliser, setting up a late bombardment. Too late, though. Villa, for their part, had one shot. These days, that is all you need to score at Anfield, although Herd's strike was sweet. The Premier League campaign cannot end soon enough for Liverpool.

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## THE INDEPENDENT

When it comes to paranoia, Kenny's the undisputed king

When it comes to conspiracy theories, Kenny Dalglish lags a long way behind Sir Alex Ferguson, whose obsession with the Kennedy assassination led him to obtain a copy of the autopsy report.

In one of their first meetings, in days of Liverpool's unbroken dominance, Dalglish once passed Ferguson raging into a radio microphone about the impossibility of getting a decision at Anfield. He was holding his daughter, Lauren, and told the interviewer the baby would make more sense.

In the past, managers who came to Anfield used to suffer from paranoia; now it is the man in the home dugout who talks of refereeing decisions gone wrong and vendettas against his players. If referees tend to give big decisions to big clubs on their own pitches - a theory that seemed proven at Stamford Bridge on Saturday and Old Trafford yesterday - then Liverpool are no longer a big club.

Luis Suarez had been booked for diving when, in Dalglish's words, he was lucky not have had his foot broken by Stephen Ireland. The referee, Michael Oliver, had told Dirk Kuyt that Eric Lichaj had been "unlucky" to have handled in the area.

Dalglish argued that he wanted to retain Liverpool's integrity while adding: "Maybe we should shoot our mouths off."

Liverpool have been unlucky a lot this season. They had struck the frame of the goal 23 times before Saturday's encounter with Aston Villa at Anfield and did so another four times during a tormented afternoon. They have been awarded fewer penalties than Wigan and half as many as Manchester United. And they have missed most of those they have been given.

Of the last 10 shots aimed at Liverpool's goal, eight have gone in. Nearly half the goalscoring opportunities Liverpool have given their opponents have finished with the ball in their net. You could call it unlucky or you might think Liverpool have a back four that requires a serious overhaul - it is the one area of the squad Dalglish has barely touched.

Liverpool, in contrast, have not converted even a third of their chances. According to websites that study these things, the average chance conversion rate is 38 per cent.

You can tell a lot from the banners on the Kop and amid the homages to "Sir" Roger Hunt and Billy Liddell there was one that read: "Support and Believe."

There is still plenty of support for Dalglish, although belief is a commodity seriously on the wane.

The greatest source of belief at Liverpool is that whatever Dalglish does, it has to be an improvement on his predecessor.

There are not many things that were better in Roy Hodgson's short tortured time on Merseyside but under him Liverpool did win six of their 10 matches at Anfield. This season, Dalglish, a man who is idolised rather than treated with indifferent contempt by the Kop - which was Hodgson's lot - has overseen just five home victories in 16 attempts. That is not unlucky, that is awful.

Before the game, Dalglish defended his habitual policy of never criticising his players in public, which sometimes makes his utterances sound like a press officer from the North Korean FA. When he does, it is in private and it is calculating and effective.

After Liverpool lost the 1990 FA Cup semi-final to Crystal Palace 4-3, Dalglish gave his press interviews, showered and changed and waited 15 minutes before turning on his players and accusing them of delivering "the most unprofessional performance I have ever seen". Steve McMahon was the chief target but nobody was exempt.

He did the same after the 3-1 defeat at Bolton in January. In 1990, his players responded by cementing the championship; now they knocked both Manchester clubs out of the Carling and FA Cups.

When he returned in January last year, some said that Liverpool had to get Dalglish out of their system just as Kevin Keegan's abortive comeback at St James' Park had meant he was no longer seen as a great lost leader.

Dalglish has not failed but he has not transformed Liverpool. The worst possible outcome for those plotting the long-term future of the club is that Dalglish would prove moderately successful.

Everything now pivots around Saturday's FA Cup semi-final against Everton.

Should Liverpool win, it would give Dalglish a loincloth rather than a fig leaf for the season. Two major finals, by any reckoning is a good season, two trophies a triumphant one.

Marcelo Bielsa's lionised boys from Athletic Bilbao are on course for two cups and they are even more bogged down in La Liga's mid-table mire than Liverpool are in theirs.

Silverware matters and given the fact that "Europe" is no longer the exotic destination it appeared a few years ago, but an exhausting money-making merry-go-round, it matters more than ever. Ask Robin van Persie. Ask Cesc Fabregas.

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Hitting the bar

Liverpool had struck the frame of the goal 23 times this season before the Aston Villa game - they then managed to hit the post and crossbar four more times on Saturday.

## DAILY Mirror

CLOAK AND AGGER; No-nonsense defender cuts through boss Dalglish conspiracy theories and admits: We're just not good enough  
 PREMIER LEAGUE: LIVERPOOL 1 ASTON VILLA 1

IF you are looking for a bit of straight talking, then perhaps it's a good idea to start with a massive geezer sporting a mohican and full-body tattoos.

There is a real suspicion Liverpool have been deluding themselves in recent months, complacently hiding behind a collective belief in both their quality and their misfortune, when the evidence suggests a deeper-rooted malaise.

So it was refreshing to hear Daniel Agger's take on his side's problems, given that he's been able to assess the situation dispassionately, from a detached position on the sidelines, because of his rib injury.

In his absence, the Reds have struggled not only to address their failings, but to admit to them, with a succession of players ducking the post-match inquest after every devastating defeat since the turn of the year (and there have been plenty of them).

Agger (left) doesn't duck much on the pitch or off it. His presence as a late substitute transformed Liverpool and at least gave them a point against a spirited Villa side. Afterwards, though, he didn't hold back on his team-mates, despite their impressive late revival.

"We didn't score a winner. Maybe that's because we aren't good enough," claimed Agger.

"We had a lot of good chances, especially at the end. But we couldn't score the winner and that's the fact.

"You can see for yourself the problem is a bit of everything. We aren't playing well. We just aren't working in the right way."

And he wasn't exactly brimming with confidence about transforming the current situation quickly.

When asked what Liverpool can do to go about changing things his blunt response was: "What can you do? You just train every day," he added.

Liverpool have now failed to win 10 of their 15 home games in the league, and actually have a better win ratio away from Anfield.

Maybe they need to face up to the reality of their situation.

Afterwards, manager Kenny Dalglish (below) spoke of a growing sense of "conspiracy" around the place, because of the decisions he believes have gone against his side.

Yet as close as the two penalty calls were, you can't fault referee Mike Oliver's logic. When Luis Suarez went down in the first half, under Alan Hutton's tackle, it was a triple salko with pike moment, and such theatrics rarely win penalties.

In the second half, there was a better shout when Dirk Kuyt's attempted cross hit Eric Lichaj's arm, but the defender simply wasn't looking at the ball, and it would have been a harsh decision.

The Reds also hit the woodwork for the 28th time in the league this season when a Suarez header from Steven Gerrard's cross cannoned off the post.

Yet for all the claims of home misfortune, a desperately young Villa side deserved their point for an impressive first-half display, and desperate rearguard in the second, where James Collins was magnificent.

Rather less than magnificent was Liverpool's first-half performance. They were woeful and the visitors deserved their lead when stand-in keeper Alexander Doni flapped at a cross allowing Chris Herd to turn in Barry Bannan's cutback.

Only in the last five minutes before the break did they begin to play, though to their credit Gerrard and Suarez were irrepresible after the break, with the skipper sending in a series of crosses Villa boss Alex McLeish described as "almost undefendable".

Eventually, Gerrard's cross was met by Agger's brilliant header which again found the woodwork, but this time Suarez reacted swiftly enough to turn it in.

As for Villa, their young players were simply magnificent. For McLeish, his team's battling, positive attitude should be enough to steer them clear of relegation.

"What I have seen this season has been very heartening," he said.

"It is great credit to the AV academy that we had so many players in the team today and six on the bench, and they come and get a point against Liverpool.

"Any team you inherit, you want to enhance the quality. Young players have the quality but they don't just have the experience. That is the difference.

"We have a squad short on experience but it is so heartening to see those boys giving everything for the club. The young boys will be walking tall tonight."

LIVERPOOL: Doni 5, Flanagan 6, Carragher 7, Skrtel 6, Enrique 4 (Agger 76, 7), Kuyt 7, Henderson 6, Shelvey 6 (Bellamy 65, 6), Downing 5 (Carroll 65, 6), Gerrard 7, Suarez 7. Goal: Suarez 82

ASTON VILLA: Given 7, Hutton 6, Collins 9, Baker 7, Lichaj 6, Bannan 7 (Carruthers 85), Herd 7 (Weimann 73, 6), Ireland 7, Warnock 6, Heskey 6 (Gardner 65, 6), Agbonlahor 7. Goal: Herd 10 REF: Michael Oliver ATT: 44,321

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LFC's season summed up in one game

THIS was an afternoon which encapsulated an entire season. One which threatened to deliver the victory Liverpool FC so desperately required but ended with that familiar sinking feeling. Another tale of chances being spurned, woodwork being struck and dominance going unrewarded.

Another inquest where the absence of Lady Luck was rued and controversial decisions bemoaned. It was Groundhog Day at Anfield as Aston Villa joined the alarmingly long list of visiting teams to cash in on Liverpool's glaring failings. Kenny Dalglish poked an accusing finger in the direction of referee Michael Oliver, who rejected a hat-trick of penalty appeals.

The young official from Northumberland got so much wrong. Handballs by Chris Herd and Eric Lichaj went unpunished, while Alan Hutton somehow got away with tripping Luis Suarez in the box. To add insult to injury, Oliver then booked Suarez for diving when Stephen Ireland had clearly stepped on his foot. It smacked of someone making decisions based on reputation rather than reality.

Considering that a week earlier the game at Newcastle had turned on Martin Atkinson's failure to award the Reds a clear spot-kick, Dalglish's fury was understandable. "Someone might need to be assassinated for us to get a penalty kick," he claimed. The manager picked his words carefully with talk of "people's paranoia might set in, they'll think there is an agenda against the club" qualified by "we don't see it that way".

Yet injustice from officials isn't the reason why Liverpool are enduring their worst run in the top flight for 59 years. A chronic lack of confidence, character and quality are much bigger problems. There is too much within the manager's control which needs improving without worrying about what he can't change.

As supporters quietly filed out after the final whistle on Saturday, the mood wasn't one of anger at Liverpool being cruelly denied their just deserts by the man in black. Instead there was a weary acceptance that once again their team had been found wanting. Once again frustrated fans had been left short-changed.

Why had it taken until the final half hour for Liverpool to play with the kind of energy, purpose and desire which should have been on show from the opening minute? Suarez's late header at least stopped the rot after three straight defeats but there was precious little to celebrate.

Villa became the 11th visiting team to leave with something to show for their efforts with the Reds' 16 home games having yielded a pitiful return of just 20 goals and 24 points. Of course the cups have provided solace and this rollercoaster season could yet end in glory as Dalglish's men bid to add the FA Cup to the Carling Cup. But Liverpool are limping towards their date with destiny against Everton at Wembley on Saturday. History is on the Reds' side but it's the blue half of the city which has the momentum. Saturday was the perfect opportunity for Liverpool to get out of their current rut. Even if Alex McLeish had been handed the whistle, the hosts should have been far too strong for a severely depleted Villa side. A weak squad had been stretched to its limits by injuries to the likes of Charles N'Zogbia, Darren Bent, Fabian Delph, Richard Dunne and Carlos Cuellar, coupled with the loss of skipper Stiliyan Petrov after he was diagnosed with leukaemia. Just one win in eight games had seen Villa slip into the relegation battle and McLeish was forced to field a host of Academy graduates.

Yet somehow they led for most of the afternoon and were on the brink of inflicting Liverpool's seventh defeat in eight league games before Suarez's intervention. It wasn't the start to his Anfield career debutant Alexander Doni had hoped for as he played his part in Villa making the breakthrough in the 10th minute. The Brazilian keeper flapped at Stephen Warnock's cross and Barry Bannan teed up Aussie Chris Herd who curled home his first Premier League goal. However, Doni had good reason to question some woeful defending as Villa were gifted both time and space. That error aside, Pepe Reina's deputy was solid enough but was rarely called into action.

Prior to Herd's strike, Dirk Kuyt had seen his effort palmed on to the post by Shay Given and the Dutchman's pleas that it had crossed the line were ignored. Stung by falling behind, the Reds struggled to summon a response. Jose Enrique spent most of the first half apologising for tossing away possession but he wasn't the only one. The Kop used to sing about having the best midfield in the world.

But where Xabi Alonso and Javier Mascherano once stood, there was Jordan Henderson and Jonjo Shelvey on Saturday. Pushing skipper Steven Gerrard into a more advanced role made sense but the axis which the Reds were relying on to kick-start attacks simply wasn't strong enough. There was no supply line to the skipper. Too often Henderson takes the wrong option, seemingly gripped by fear, with the groans from the stands which accompany his errors hardly helping his self belief. Suarez was the bright spark, always pressing and probing for an opening. Just before the break he picked out Gerrard whose cross-shot was inexplicably turned over the bar by Kuyt from two yards. As Stewart Downing toiled, Gerrard gave the winger a lesson in how to cross a ball and early in the second half Suarez almost profited from the captain's delivery. The Uruguayan sent a glancing header past Given but it bounced off the inside of the post and the keeper somehow clawed it away. It was only following the introduction of Andy Carroll, Craig Bellamy and Daniel Agger for the ineffective Downing, Shelvey and Enrique that the pressure was cranked up.

Bellamy rattled the woodwork before the equaliser finally arrived eight minutes from time. Agger met Gerrard's cross with a thumping header which struck the bar and Suarez nodded in the rebound. The Reds lay siege to Villa's box late on but Carroll headed straight at Given before the Irishman parried away Gerrard's pldriver. You can point to 67% possession, 21 attempts on goal and 11 corners as signs of superiority. But the failure to make that count merely highlights serious weaknesses. It's happened too often this season to blame it on ill fortune. Fans want solutions rather than excuses.

*"I have never heard of a penalty not being given by a referee who said the boy was unlucky. What chance have we got? I think if we keep trying it will turn – but sometimes people's paranoia will set in."* **KENNY DALGLISH** on the referee's performance.

*"We went toe to toe with Liverpool in the first half and we took a deserved lead. I thought we had a lot of pressure at that time before, in the second half, we had to withstand a battering ram. We stood firm and I am so proud of the guys."* **ALEX MCLEISH**

**LIVERPOOL (4-2-3-1):** Doni, Flanagan, Carragher, Skrtel, Enrique (Agger 76), Shelvey (Bellamy 65), Henderson, Downing (Carroll 65), Gerrard, Kuyt, Suarez. Not used: Jones, Rodriguez, Coates, Spearing.

**ASTON VILLA (4-4-2):** Given, Hutton, Collins, Baker, Lichaj, Bannan (Carruthers 86), Herd (Weimann 73), Ireland, Warnock, Heskey (Gardner, 58), Agbonlahor. Not used: Guzan, Stevens, Johnson, Williams.

**GOALS:** Suarez 82; Herd 10

**CARDS:** Booked – Suarez; Carruthers

**REFEREE:** Michael Oliver

**ATTENDANCE:** 44,321



Luis Suarez's late header prevented a fourth successive league defeat but it only served to paper over the cracks of another faltering Liverpool performance.

The Reds went into the game on the back of six losses in seven matches, their worst sequence for almost 60 years, and with criticism mounting on both the players and manager Kenny Dalglish.

Fragile confidence was eroded further when Chris Herd put the visitors ahead early on but a much-needed win for the midlanders, for whom relegation worries have been growing, proved beyond them.

While a month ago Dalglish argued, with some justification, that results were not reflecting performances that has not been the case in the last few weeks.

Since the turn of the year they have won just twice in the league, taking nine points from 13 games as their bid for a top-four place evaporated in the euphoria of February's Carling Cup triumph. Defeats to the likes of Wigan at home and a late capitulation at QPR destroyed any confidence the squad had and undoubtedly impacted on their form. Their anxiety and uncertainty was not helped by goalkeeper Doni, who had previously played only 57 minutes of an October friendly against Rangers, having to make his debut in place of the suspended Jose Reina – ending a run of 183 successive league appearances.

The Brazilian failed his first test and it proved expensive as he flapped at former Liverpool defender Stephen Warnock's left-wing cross in the 10th minute, allowing Barry Bannan to cut the ball back for the unmarked Herd to bend in a shot. However, Liverpool would have been ahead by then had it not been for the reactions of the experienced Shay Given who clawed Dirk Kuyt's shot off the line after Stewart Downing's low cross picked out the Holland international at the far post. The home side's response to going behind was slow as despite a succession of corners Martin Skrtel's header wide of the post was the closest they came. Suarez had a valid claim for a penalty turned down when he was caught by Alan Hutton but it was not until the final minute of the half the Reds really posed a threat. The best chance fell to Kuyt from Steven Gerrard's cross-shot but the Dutchman ballooned over from five yards before Suarez fired straight at Given. Dalglish switched to 4-4-2 for the second half with Gerrard playing wide right and the captain almost helped deliver the equaliser.

His 53rd-minute cross picked out Suarez whose header beat Given but bounced off the far post, although it still needed the goalkeeper's quick reactions to flick the ball away from an almost impossible position behind him to prevent it crossing the line.

Villa, content to hang on to their lead, were starting to come under more sustained pressure and the Liverpool manager attempted to turn the screw by sending on Andy Carroll and Craig Bellamy, effectively playing with four forwards. But still they struggled to test Given with Bellamy, given time to bring the ball down on the left of the penalty area, driving against the outside of the post.

The woodwork was struck again in the 82nd minute but this time it actually benefited Liverpool. Gerrard's cross from the right saw substitute Daniel Agger, on for Jose Enrique, plant a header against the underside of the bar but when the ball bounced down Suarez was on hand to nod in from close range. Carroll headed straight at Given from another Gerrard cross before the captain's swerving shot was kept out by the goalkeeper's legs in added time.

A victory would have flattered the home side who, despite making all the running after going behind, were far from impressive and made hard work of getting a point against a side who had won just twice in 11 games.

Date: 7 April 2003  
 Opposition: Aston Villa  
 Competition: League

Echo	Times	Sunday Times	Independent	Sunday Mail
	Guardian	Sun Telegraph	Sunday Mirror	Birmingham Echo
Mirror	Observer	Sun Independent	Mail	Telegraph



7 April 2003

**Ranting Dalglish sees red over referee's 'joke' decisions**

For the 11th time this season, Liverpool failed to win at Anfield and for the 11th time Kenny Dalglish sat in what was once the boot room and is now a press centre and talked of luck, frustration and refereeing decisions.

Aston Villa were pummelled relentlessly by a side that finished with four specialist strikers. If you count the move that led to Luis Suarez's late equaliser, Liverpool struck the frame of the goal four times, taking their tally for the season to 27.

When the referee, Michael Oliver, signalled the end, James Collins's muscles and those of the rest of his back four would have ached like those of a boxer who had spent too many rounds on the ropes.

Dalglish was in no mood to claim a moral victory. After six defeats in seven matches, Liverpool needed real wins. The frustration was unbearable; he denounced Oliver for failing to award a penalty when a ball appeared to strike the arm of Villa's American defender, Eric Lichaj, and for booking Suarez for diving.

If it was pointed out to Dalglish that Lichaj had his back to goal when the ball hit him and that Suarez possesses a serial offender's form for falling to the ground, he was in no mood to listen. A month's worth of defeats does that to a manager.

He claimed that Oliver had told Dirk Kuyt that Lichaj had been "unlucky". "I have never seen a penalty given by a referee when he said a boy was unlucky," Dalglish said. "What chance have we got?"

"Suarez was booked for diving and their guy [Stephen Ireland] trod on him. That is a joke because you can imagine the headlines tomorrow. He has been booked for diving and he is lucky he has not broken his foot.

"There have been an awful lot of coincidences if you go over the last three games and the number of decisions that have not gone our way.

"The danger is that paranoia will set in and you think there is an agenda against our football club. When you are refused a penalty because the referee thinks your opponent was unlucky, then what can you do? We have integrity but maybe we are going about it the wrong way. Perhaps we should shout our mouths off and complain about things."

Since a fortnight ago Dalglish had sat in the same room and claimed that Suarez's punching of the ball into the net should have been allowed, maybe paranoia is stalking the corridors of Anfield. Liverpool were unlucky, not in the non-award of a penalty but because they battered their opponents and emerged with a point. However, once more they failed to make superior resources tell.

That they were facing one of the few Premier League sides that could claim to be in worse form than themselves could only have made the bruise more livid. This was a contest between two animals baring their gums at one another and it was Aston Villa who bit first.

Pepe Reina's dismissal at Newcastle meant that this was Alexander Doni's first game of the season and when he flapped at a cross from Stephen Warnock it seemed it would not be worth the wait. Barry Bannan played it incisively to Chris Herd, who swept his shot into the net beneath the Kop. The game was 10 minutes old and the young Australian had scored his first goal for Villa.

Thereafter, Doni was barely troubled, although the same could not be said for Shay Given. The Irishman made any number of remarkable interventions, deflecting Kuyt's sliding shot on to the post in the first half and later trying to deal with Steven Gerrard's crosses which, in the words of the Aston Villa manager, Alex McLeish, were "undefendable".

One was met by Suarez who possesses an astonishing leap for a small man. The ball struck the post and scooted across the face of the goal before Given pushed it away. In between all this, Kuyt had somehow contrived to miss from two yards.

The breakthrough came with eight minutes remaining. Craig Bellamy had just skimmed the post and then another superlative cross from Gerrard was headed against the crossbar by Daniel Agger and nodded in by Suarez. It seemed justice of sorts had been done, although Dalglish begged to differ.

Liverpool (4-4-2): Doni; Flanagan, Carragher, Skrtel, Enrique (Agger, 76); Henderson, Gerrard, Shelvey (Bellamy, 65), Downing (Carroll, 65); Kuyt, Suarez.  
 Aston Villa (4-4-2): Given; Hutton, Collins, Baker, Lichaj; Bannan (Carruthers, 86), Herd, Ireland, Warnock; Heskey (Gardner, 58), Agbonlahor.

Referee: Michael Oliver  
 Man of the match: Collins (Aston Villa)  
 Match rating: 7/10.

## The Sunday Telegraph

Dalglish makes excuses as sorry run continues

Liverpool 1

Suarez 81

Aston Villa 1

Herd 10

Att: 44,321

For all the mitigating factors, the overriding feeling after yet another day of frustration at Anfield was that this is just how it is, and how it will be, for Liverpool.

Once again there was an impressive performance from the visiting goalkeeper, there could have been a couple of penalties, among so many controversies that Kenny Dalglish was forced to clarify which incidents he was talking about at length, and the number of times they have hit the woodwork this season was increased to 35 occasions in all competitions.

But a team of Liverpool's pretensions should have enough about them to overcome such ill-fortune and the recurring theme of bad luck and missed opportunities can only go on for so long.

A Villa team that contained six defensively-minded players got a little more negative after Chris Herd gave them the lead after nine minutes and the hosts had to wait until there were just nine minutes remaining to grab a draw through Luis Suarez's close-range header.

Liverpool felt they should have been awarded a penalty when Suarez went down under Alan Hutton's challenge early on and Dalglish felt Stephen Ireland could have broken Suarez's foot in a challenge that resulted in the Uruguayan booked for diving.

But the main talking point was a second-half handball call, when the ball appeared to strike Eric Lichaj's hand under pressure from Dirk Kuyt, with Dalglish claiming referee Mike Oliver had said the Villa defender was "unlucky" for the ball to have hit his hand, presumably because he did not believe the Villa defender had handled on purpose.

The first two points were particularly hard to argue with but, just like the draws against Norwich, Swansea, Blackburn, Stoke and the defeat against Wigan, they should be minor footnotes after a home victory rather than excuses.

As it is Liverpool have only won five of their 16 home matches, scoring just 20 goals, and their exile from the Champions League will be extended to three seasons.

While Dalglish, with a Carling Cup win and an FA Cup semi-final against Everton to look forward to next weekend, need have no real concerns over his job, it is hard to make a case for a guaranteed topfour place for next season.

The Scot, who defended Suarez before the Uruguayan was banned for eight matches for racially abusing Patrice Evra, insists he does not feel there is an agenda against the Anfield club.

"I've never heard a penalty not be given by a referee who said 'The boy was unlucky'. What chance have we got?" Dalglish asked. "Even Suarez's booking, the guy's trod on him. It's a joke because you can imagine the headlines when he's been booked for diving and he's lucky he hasn't broken his foot.

"Even in the last three games, there have been a number of decisions that haven't gone our way. We just need to keep going. Maybe we're too polite.

"I think if we keep trying it will turn but sometimes for some people paranoia will set in and you think there's an agenda against the football club from people of importance. We don't see it that way but I suppose other people will do and when you see the effort and commitment they put into it for them to refuse a penalty and say the opponent is unlucky doesn't add up."

What is easier to calculate is that this is the club's worst run of form in 59 years and that Dalglish's side are now 15 points behind fourth place and only above the relegation zone by the same figure.

They looked to have got off to a fast start against Villa, with Kuyt's effort from a narrow angle being pushed on to the post by Shay Given after a couple of minutes.

But 10 minutes in, Villa took the lead when Alexander Doni failed to clear Stephen Warnock's cross and Barry Bannan pulled back for Herd, whose only previous goals had come during loan spells at Port Vale and Lincoln City, to guide a shot into the top corner.

The hosts were limited to hopeful pot-shots until the first Suarez penalty appeal and Kuyt managed to lift over from two yards in his attempts to turn in a mishit shot from Steven Gerrard.

After the break, a cross from Gerrard, who was shunted to the right flank after failing to make a difference playing behind Suarez, was headed onto the post by Suarez before Given clawed the ball away.

The pressure told when Craig Bellamy's corner was headed away by James Collins, only for Gerrard to whip in a fine cross that was headed on to the bar by Daniel Agger before Suarez headed in.

Villa withstood the onslaught to keep their point and manager Alex McLeish said: "It was a tough, tough second half but for the bad luck we've had in recent weeks we deserved something." It was a familiar refrain.

Date: 7 April 2003  
 Opposition: Aston Villa  
 Competition: League

Echo	Times	Sunday Times	Independent	Sunday Mail
	Guardian	Sun Telegraph	Sunday Mirror	Birmingham Echo
Mirror	Observer	Sun Independent	Mail	Telegraph



7 April 2003

## THE SUNDAY TIMES

### Suarez saves point

STEVEN GERRARD once dovetailed with Didi Hamann and Gary McAllister, then Xabi Alonso and Javier Mascherano; yesterday Gerrard was playing out of position so that Jordan Henderson and Jonjo Shelvey could anchor his midfield.

The decline in Liverpool's talent levels is undeniable. Happily for a succession of managers, Kenny Dalglish being the latest, the quality of the captain's attitude and the level of his ability don't waver.

Staring at an eighth defeat in nine league games, late in a 90 minutes that repeated many of the themes of their taxing season -- missed chances, hitting of woodwork, controversy involving Luis Suarez -- Liverpool pulled back from the brink. Collective willpower from players rocked by Chris Herd's early goal was behind it. Suarez poached the equaliser nicely and Daniel Agger, back from injury to make a key substitute's impact, played a role. The difference-making moment, the one when superb desire and technical quality were applied in Liverpool's favour, came from Gerrard. Villa, tired after 82 minutes of monumental effort, could not clear Craig Bellamy's corner decisively and Gerrard took possession near the right touchline.

"We were under the cosh and then you've got Gerrard firing in those almost undefendable balls he produces," said Alex McLeish, Villa's manager. Gerrard lashed a cross on to Agger's forehead and the defender powered an effort against the bar. It was the 35th time this season Liverpool had hit the woodwork but the Kop had no time to reflect on outrageous misfortune. Suarez headed in before Shay Given could add to his canon of remarkable saves.

Liverpool should have won the game in stoppage time (Given denied Gerrard brilliantly and Andy Carroll headed straight at the keeper) but a point gave them some momentum to take into Tuesday's game at Blackburn.

Dalglish will hope the Liverpool of the last 30 minutes here -- not the opening 60 -- turn up. Beyond Ewood Park lies a momentous FA Cup semi-final against Everton.

Dalglish said: "We deserved more. The players showed great character and commitment to come back." He discussed what he felt were injustices. Suarez, refused a penalty when going down after Alan Hutton trod lightly on his foot, was booked for diving when he tumbled in a similar incident involving Stephen Ireland.

The strongest of Liverpool's penalty claims saw Eric Lichaj, with back turned and body spread, blocking Dirk Kuyt's ball with his arm. "The referee said to Dirk their boy was unlucky. What chance have we got?" said Dalglish. "Suarez's booking -- the guy's trod on him. It's a joke.

"If we keep trying [luck] will turn -- but sometimes people's paranoia will set in. They'll think there's an agenda against the club. We don't see it that way but to be refused a pen because the ref says the opponent is unlucky just doesn't add up."

McLeish was proud of Villa's "young lions" -- nine injuries to senior players saw him fielding rookies. Nathan Baker rewarded him with a nerveless display at centre-back. Herd and Barry Bannan outplayed Henderson and Shelvey in midfield. Herd swept home Bannan's lovely cut-back after Doni, pressured by Emile Heskey, flapped at Stephen Warnock's cross. Given had already pushed Kuyt's backpost effort against a post. Television replays were inconclusive but the ball may have crossed the line.

James Collins was close with a header, Henderson and Kuyt skied chances. Suarez diverted Gerrard's astonishing delivery against the post and Given clawed to safety. Suarez's goal saved Liverpool from their worst league run since 1909; this is merely their worst in 59 years.

Liverpool: Doni 4, Flanagan 6, Carragher 6, Skrtel 7, Enrique 5 (Agger 76min), Henderson 5, Gerrard 7, Shelvey 5 (Bellamy 65min), Downing 4 (Carroll 65min), Suarez 7, Kuyt 6

Aston Villa: Given 8, Hutton 6, Collins 7, Baker 6, Warnock 6, Lichaj 6, Ireland 5, Herd 7 (Weimann 73min), Bannan 6 (Carruthers 86min), Heskey 6 (Gardner 58min, 6), Agbonlahor 6

### REDS HEADING FOR WORST POINTS TALLY

Liverpool's Premier League misery continues. Kenny Dalglish's side need 12 points from their final six matches if they are to avoid their worst Premier League points tally, which was 54 in 1998-99.

The draw against Aston Villa was only their ninth point from 13 matches in 2012. They have won just once in nine league games.

That was at Anfield, where they have gained six points from their past six games. The last time they had such a poor run was in their relegation season of 1953-54 when they gained just four points -- all from draws -- in 13 matches

Liverpool are 15 points off a Champions League place, and also 15 points clear of the relegation zone.

## The Observer

### Fortress Anfield lets its defences down again

LIVERPOOL 1 Suarez 82 ASTON VILLA 1 Herd 10

Liverpool needed to stop the rot after losing five of their last six league matches, and a late comeback just about did that. Anfield never used to be grateful for points shared with opponents from the bottom half of the table, but both these clubs have fallen a long way from grace. Liverpool have hit their worst patch since they were last relegated; Alex McLeish is haunted by fear of back-to-back relegations. The glum reality for a Liverpool crowd raised on better fare is that most weeks there are two undistinguished mid-table teams to watch.

"We showed character and commitment to come back from a goal down," Kenny Dalglish said. "The longer the game went on the stronger we got. I have to be happy with a point but I think we deserved more."

McLeish was much happier. "We were under the cosh in the second half. It's not easy when Steven Gerrard is firing in crosses that are almost undefendable," the Villa manager said. "Some of the lads are disappointed that we capitulated but I'm proud of the way our young boys played. It was a tough, tough second half, but we deserved something from the game."

The idea that Anfield used to be a fortress is quickly becoming laughable.

The Villa fans were certainly laughing after 11 minutes when their side followed Wigan a fortnight ago in discovering that even relegation candidates can boost their chances at Liverpool. "We're winning away," they chorused when Villa took the lead. "How crap must you be, we're winning away."

For well over an hour there was little the home side could offer by way of argument. Before Liverpool knew it, they were behind. Playing instead of the suspended Pepe Reina, Alexander Doni only half dealt with Steven Warnock's cross, and after retrieving possession Barry Bannan had all the time he needed to look up and place the ball exactly where Chris Herd was indicating he wanted it, so that the Australian could open his Villascoring account with a confident first-time shot. It would have been worse for Liverpool before half-time had James Collins managed to hit the target with a free header from a corner, though at least the home side exerted some pressure and created a few chances as the interval approached. Martin Skrtel headed narrowly wide and Luis Suarez had an appeal for a penalty turned down when tackled by Hutton, before Kuyt somehow turned the ball over the bar from two yards out having done the hard bit by getting on the end of Gerrard's shot across goal.

Suarez thought he had scored with a glancing header from one of Gerrard's deep crosses at the start of the second half. Everybody in the ground thought he had scored, probably including Given, yet at the last moment the ball bounced on to a post and back across goal, to be pawed away to safety by a surprised but relieved goalkeeper.

By the time Emile Heskey departed after an hour, Villa were holding their own comfortably but beginning to defend too deep. Only a comedy mix-up between Skrtel and Doni threatened another away goal, and though Collins was outstanding at the heart of Villa's defence they were now fighting a rearguard action with most of the game in their own half.

Liverpool could have had a penalty when the ball hit the back of Eric Lichaj's arm in the box, but much to their manager's annoyance, the referee gave the defender the benefit of the doubt. "He actually told Dirk Kuyt he [Lichaj] had been unlucky," an incredulous Dalglish said. "Can you believe that? I've never heard a referee give that as a reason for not giving a penalty before. It was like the booking Luis Suarez received for diving. The guy [Stephen Ireland] has trod on his foot. It's a joke. Imagine the headlines tomorrow - Suarez booked for diving - it's lucky he's not broken his foot."

Bellamy hit a post as the game entered the last 10 minutes, adding to the list Liverpool are keeping of close encounters with the goal frame this season, but it was the third substitute, Daniel Agger, who finally made a difference. Meeting another Gerrard cross at the far post, Agger brought a reaction save from Given, who ended up in the back of the net and was thus unable to prevent Suarez diverting the loose ball across the line.

After his harsh caution for diving a few minutes earlier Suarez was able to claim some positive headlines, though whether that represents a satisfactory outcome for Liverpool at home these days is another matter. Only in the final, frantic few seconds did Anfield sound anything like its old self. The new sound of Anfield is mostly silence, unless you count Dalglish muttering about agendas against the club and the number of decisions that haven't gone their way, all the while insisting he is not paranoid.

"Aye, well," McLeish said, closing the debate with some Glaswegian good sense. "We've been aggrieved by penalties we haven't had this season too. We can take great confidence from that display."

### LIVERPOOL

Doni: Flanagan, Carragher, Skrtel, Jose Enrique (Agger 76); Kuyt, Henderson, Gerrard, Shelvey (Bellamy 65), Downing (Carroll 65); Suarez (Booked)

Subs not used Jones, Maxi, Coates, Spearing

### ASTON VILLA

Given; Hutton, Collins, Baker, Lichaj; Bannan (Carruthers (Booked) 86), Herd (Weimann 73), Ireland, Warnock; Agbonlahor, Heskey (Gardner 58) Subs not used Guzan, Stevens, Johnson, Williams

Anfield 44,321 Game rating 7/10 Referee Michael Oliver

Date: 7 April 2003  
 Opposition: Aston Villa  
 Competition: League

Echo	Times	Sunday Times	Independent	Sunday Mail
	Guardian	Sun Telegraph	Sunday Mirror	Birmingham Echo
Mirror	Observer	Sun Independent	Mail	Telegraph



7 April 2003

## The Mail

ON SUNDAY

Suarez can't paper over Anfield cracks; Dalglish faces more quizzing on Liverpool crisis despite Uruguayan's late leveller

1 LIVERPOOL Suarez (82) 1 ASTON VILLA Herd (10)

LUIS SUAREZ'S face-saving, 82nd-minute equaliser merely delayed another inquest into the reign of Kenny Dalglish at Anfield. As the minutes ticked away, and the tension mounted, Liverpool were in growing danger of slumping to a seventh defeat in eight league matches, which would have matched their worst run since 1909. With the Kop doing its best to suck in a goal, skipper Steven Gerrard swung over yet another ball into the Villagoalmouth. When substitute Daniel Agger, on for the disappointing Jose Enrique, headed against the bar it looked like yet another attack was doomed to failure. Then the Uruguayan striker popped up to head the rebound past a startled Shay Given and bring a massive roar of relief from the majority of the 44,321 crowd, who have now witnessed nine home league draws this season.

It was hard to decide which of the two managers, Dalglish or his fellow Scot Alex McLeish, was the more agitated as Liverpool swept forward in the five added minutes. Suarez's eighth league goal - he tops Liverpool's scoring list, which tells a story in itself - had robbed Villa, and midfielder Chris Herd in particular, of a famous and desperately needed win. Aussie midfielder Herd, who spent time on loan at Port Vale, Wycombe and Lincoln before making his debut for Villa in November 2010, scored the goal of his career in the ninth minute to set the tone for another afternoon of frustration and anticlimax at the stadium that was once a fortress but now appears to be a place that holds no fear.

Fellow midfielder Barry Bannan laid the ball off and Herd struck his shot beautifully, the ball flying into the far top corner beyond the reach of Alexander Doni. The debut-making keeper's last appearance in England was for Roma, when they were slaughtered 7-1 at Manchester United in a Champions League quarter-final tie five years ago. The Brazilian, playing because of Pepe Reina's three-match suspension, might have suffered flashbacks as Herd's shot hit the net.

But Doni need not have worried. Having got their unexpected breakthrough, Villa, who have slipped towards the relegation mire of late, set out to dig in and protect their slender lead and Doni was largely a spectator from then on.

Liverpool went in at half-time looking sheepish, but also feeling aggrieved after a string of bad breaks had counted against them.

It is arguable whether the ball crossed the line when Dirk Kuyt met Stewart Downing's cross, the winger having skinned Alan Hutton, in the sixth minute. Kuyt's far-post, close-range shot was parried by Given, the ball spinning away to the foot of the post, leaving Kuyt appealing in vain for a goal.

Herd shot Villa into the lead three minutes later and, within 60 seconds, Suarez was appealing for, and being refused, the first of two penalty requests. Suarez's attempted cross hit Villa's star of the moment, but referee Michael Oliver waved away the penalty claims. Suarez appeared to have a stronger case seven minutes before the break when he burst into the box and went tumbling as Hutton put his foot in on the striker. Again, Mr Oliver was having none of it, his reluctance to point to the spot adding to the growing tension on the pitch and in the stands. Seconds before that incident, Jordan Henderson had been presented with a chance similar to the one from which Herd had stunned the Kop into silence. The young midfielder ballooned his shot into the crowd.

But the biggest gaffe was Kuyt's. Gerrard's misdirected shot flew straight to the Dutchman, who was unmarked and two yards from goal. Somehow, he lifted his shot yards over the bar. When Suarez then seized on a defensive mistake to break clear in the box, his subsequent shot was straight at Given.

It was the last act of a desperately frustrating first 45 minutes for Dalglish, his players and the home crowd. Another penalty claim was refused after the break, Kuyt claiming handball against Eric Lichaj, before Liverpool mounted their final assault, Dalglish bringing on Andy Carroll and Craig Bellamy in an attempt to inject some bite into his misfiring forward line. Carroll, with six goals in 37 appearances, made his most significant contribution when he flattened two defenders in the hope of getting on the end of a Gerrard cross and the [pounds sterling]35m striker then headed straight into Given's arms, his captain again the provider. Villa, somehow, clung on for a draw which manager Alex McLeish described as 'a terrific point, especially when you look at the other results'.

LIVERPOOL (4-3-3): Doni; Flanagan, Carragher, Skrtel, Enrique (Agger 76); Henderson, Gerrard, Shelvey (Bellamy 65); Kuyt, Suarez, Downing (Carroll 65). Subs (not used): Jones, Maxi, Coates, Spearing. Booked: Suarez.

ASTON VILLA (4-4-2): Given; Hutton, Collins, Baker, Lichaj; Warnock, Ireland, Herd (Weimann 73), Bannan (Carruthers 86); Heskey (Gardner 58), Agbonlahor. Subs (not used): Guzan, Stevens, Johnson, Williams. Booked: Carruthers.

REFEREE: M Oliver.

Liverpool are second bottom of table since New Year's Day  
 IF the Premier League had started on New Year's Day, Liverpool, with eight points from 12 games, would be 19th in the table (left), with only Wolves below them.  
 MANAGER Kenny Dalglish (right) prefers the regular table, in which they are eighth, but their points tally of 43 is only 15 more than third-bottom Blackburn's.

Worst for 58 years

LIVERPOOL'S goal difference is three with six games to go and Liverpool have not had such a low differential at the end of a season since 1964-65, when it stood at minus six.

Worst for 60 years

THEIR home form has been particularly poor, winning only five of their 16 games at Anfield, or 31%. The last time they won so few, six of 21 (33%), was in way back in '51-52.

Worst for 88 years

LIVERPOOL'S goals per game ratio is 1.16 and they have never had such a low level. The closest was in 1923-24, when they recorded 49 goals in 42 games (1.17).



LUIS TO REDS' RESCUE; Suarez spares Dalglish's blushes with late leveller

LIVERPOOL 1 Suarez 82 ASTON VILLA 1 Herd 10 IT was a reprieve of sorts, but few in these parts will be deluded the torment is over. Liverpool averted a seventh defeat in eight Premier League matches - and with it their worst run since 1909 - courtesy of Luis Suarez's late equaliser. Yet their desperate scramble to salvage something from yet another frustrating afternoon here merely summed up their season. Aston Villa had become a soft touch for almost any side they played, but they discovered, as a succession of modest outfits before them, that Anfield holds fear for no-one these days.

Kenny Dalglish's team saw plenty of the ball, yet as on so many occasions at Anfield this season they lacked the imagination to use it. Suarez offered flashes of his talent and Steven Gerrard strained every sinew to the end, but Liverpool have won only five of their home matches this campaign and that spells mediocrity.

"Villa, given a first-half lead by Chris Herd and with a little help from stand-in goalkeeper Alexander Doni, dug deep for a precious point that eases their survival concerns. Dalglish was aggrieved that his players had two penalty appeals turned down and Suarez was booked for diving by referee Michael Oliver.

Dalglish said: "There will be some people for whom paranoia will set in and there is an agenda against the football club from people of importance.

"We don't see it that way, but I suppose that other people will do."

Suarez was denied a penalty after tumbling under Alan Hutton's challenge and Dirk Kuyt was furious his pleas for handball against Eric Lichaj were rejected.

Uruguay striker Suarez was shown a yellow card for going to ground after a tackle by Stephen Ireland.

Dalglish said: "The referee told Dirk their player was unlucky to handle it and I think Hutton was fortunate as well. "And their guy stood on Suarez's foot. He's lucky he hasn't broken his foot, but the headlines will be about Suarez diving. It's a joke." Villa manager Alex McLeish was content with a point that eases their relegation fears. He said: "I haven't seen the penalty incidents, but we are aggrieved at penalties we've not had this season. It's such a grey area.

"We were under the cosh in the second half and some of Steven Gerrard's crosses were undefendable. But it's a terrific point when you look at the other results around us."

The gloom around Anfield surfaced quickly, in the 10th minute, as Doni flapped at a cross and Barry Bannan picked up the loose ball to feed Herd, who curled his shot beyond the keeper's reach. James Collins spurned the opportunity to extend Villa's lead, heading off target from a corner with the Liverpool defence standing and watching. Liverpool enjoyed long periods of possession without seriously threatening the Villa goal until they, too, raised hopes with a corner. Gerrard delivered and Martin Skrtel headed just wide.

Suarez finally unleashed his talent, darting into the area to take a return pass and tumble under Hutton's challenge. Dalglish led the appeals for a penalty and again the verdict went against Liverpool. The Uruguayan played his brilliant part, along with Gerrard, in setting up Kuyt, who somehow missed from two yards.

Suarez - and most of Anfield - thought he had headed the equaliser from Gerrard's centre early in the second half, but the ball hit the inside of a post before Given scooped it away. Gerrard gave Kuyt another glimpse of goal and another chance came to nothing. Dalglish sent on Andy Carroll and Craig Bellamy and the substitutions helped Liverpool to eventually find a way through.

Substitute Daniel Agger headed against the bar from Gerrard's superb cross and Suarez nodded in from the rebound.

Suddenly optimism coursed through the team and supporters in red - but Carroll headed just over and then straight at Given.

ALLSOP'S VERDICT ANOTHER frustrating and unsatisfactory day for Liverpool, who lack the creativity and cutting edge to handle even the weaker Premier League teams. THE BIG ISSUE Should Liverpool's US owners keep faith with Kenny Dalglish or think about a replacement to come in this summer? IT is the question that has doubtless been going through their minds these past few weeks and will surely have to be addressed unless Dalglish can finish the season with a flourish.

The Scot has already delivered the Carling Cup and could add the FA Cup to the Anfield trophy cabinet.

But then if Dalglish's side are beaten in Saturday's semi-final by Everton and they are subjected to further league humiliation that success against Cardiff may carry little weight. In those circumstances, any other Reds boss would be on the brink. Dalglish, however, is a special case.

The one person who can spare the fans the ultimate test of their loyalty is Dalglish himself. He must know - and perhaps ultimately decide - whether he's up to the job in 2012.