

Date: 15 September 2012
 Opposition: Sunderland
 Competition: League

BBC	Mail	Sunday Times	Sun Telegraph	Independent
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15 September
2012

THE TIMES

Rodgers learns that respect does not bring respite

Sunderland Fletcher 29 Liverpool Suarez 71 Referee M Atkinson Attendance 41,997 1-1
 Brendan Rodgers is a canny and diligent man, but if he did not fully grasp the scale and depth of the implications before, he now has a true sense of what it means to manage Liverpool. After a week of memories, of horror and endurance, a return to the pitch felt like a necessary statement of getting on with things, but, in his position, normality is a questionable concept. Welcome to Anfield, like the old sign says.

Within moments of the 1-1 draw away to Sunderland, Rodgers was being asked about the Hillsborough report, about the strain of guiding his team through all that sapping emotion, about the tracksuits that commemorated the lost 96. And then came the other questions: the failure to win any of their opening four league matches, a sequence last mustered in 1911.

Liverpool cannot - and should not - outrun their history, but this was a reminder of just how deeply despair and triumph infiltrate the fabric of the club, where respect does not necessarily equate to respite, but where only a fraction of Rodgers's role revolves around time on the grass. In the context of death, football is meaningless, yet it also everything; football has been Liverpool's expression of solidarity, grief and anger.

"It is a way of life," Rodgers put it. "It is a wonderful responsibility. I have worked all my life to arrive at a big club, at the age of 39. I've learnt very quickly that it is more than just football at Liverpool. It is a wonderful challenge and a club of real class and integrity, and I am very honoured and privileged to be the manager here."

They were noble words expressed on a day of poignance, when Sunderland flew their flag at half-mast and a message of sympathy was beamed on the screens at the Stadium of Light before kick-off. It laid bare just what an onerous task it will be for Rodgers to harness all that, to remain true to the past while achieving in the present and building for the future.

In the dressing room, both he and Steven Gerrard, the Liverpool captain, had spoken about the tragedy, about the team's status as a beacon for the city and explained why their first game back was so pivotal - about how the team should take something from the patience and defiance of fans and then offer it back. It was about grasping a moment that could, in some small way, give promise.

"Stevie G always has words of inspiration for us, but the boss was like that today, too," Jonjo Shelvey, the midfielder player, said. "His message was 'Do it for the Hillsborough fans, do it for the 96 who died.' What happened this week was an inspiration for us. The Liverpool fans fought for years to get that verdict. There was no way we would allow ourselves to lose on a day like this."

Nor did they, although they struggled.

The blueprint that Rodgers has drafted is clear, with Liverpool hogging possession and hoping to drive their opponents towards error, but for all their neat passing and chances - Gerrard and Glen Johnson hit the woodwork - their lack of clarity in front of goal was startling. Sunderland defended stoutly.

Martin O'Neill's side countered with purpose and grasped the advantage against the run of play in the 29th minute, Craig Gardner surging forward from the right-back position, pushing through weak challenges from Luis Suarez and Johnson, and shaping a cross that allowed Steven Fletcher to slide in ahead of Martin Skrtel.

Relief was not Liverpool's until midway through the second half, when Raheem Sterling, who was excellent on the right wing - "He is an exceptional talent, we want to make sure he is around for many years," Rodgers said - deceived a struggling Danny Rose and crossed to the near post, where Suarez found Titus Bramble, the Sunderland centre half who was on as a half-time substitute, with his first shot and the net with his second. By the end, Liverpool could have won it. It was not a day for delivering verdicts because there had been another, more meaningful one off the pitch, but you could not escape the contrast of that long, scandalous wait for justice and the fierce yearning for success.

"It has been a big, emotional ride this week," Rodgers said. "We used that as a lever, and both the verdict and that game gives us great hope going forward. There was no deflection. The families and people involved in the city are an integral part of the club, there is no running away from that. It is something we embrace. It my job to help them deal with it. The way we can do that is by putting on performances."

ratings Sunderland (4-4-1-1): S Mignolet 8 - C Gardner 7, J O'Shea 6, C Cuellar 5 (sub: T Bramble, 46 5), D Rose 7 (sub: F Campbell, 71) - S Larsson 5, J Colback 6, L Cattermole 6, J McClean 6 - S Sessegnon 4 - S Fletcher 7 (sub: L Saha, 86).

Substitutes not used: M Kilgallon, Ji Dong Won, D Meyler, K Westwood. Booked: Larsson.

Liverpool (4-2-3-1): J M Reina 5 - M Kelly 5, D Agger 5, M Skrtel 5, G Johnson 5 - S Gerrard 7, J Allen 6 - R Sterling 7, J Shelvey 7, L Suarez 7 - F Borini 5 (sub: S Downing, 64 6).

Substitutes not used: B Jones, J Enrique, N Sahin, O Assaidi, J Henderson, J Carragher. Booked: Suarez, Skrtel.

the guardian

Suarez equaliser cannot mask Liverpool's striking deficiencies

Sunderland 1

Fletcher 29

Liverpool 1

Suarez 71

Compromise is a vital part of football management. The surprising number of long balls studding Liverpool's game suggested that Brendan Rodgers, mere weeks into his first season at Anfield, has already accepted the need to modify a few short-passing principles.

With Steven Gerrard in Liverpool's team it is virtually impossible to replicate precisely the controlled, possession-based game Rodgers instilled at Swansea and the Northern Irishman has responded with a sensible dash of pragmatism.

The only shame is that this slight relaxation of philosophy arrived too late to keep Andy Carroll at Anfield. Had Carroll - or another senior outright striker of the type Liverpool, unforgivably, lack - been on the pitch, Rodgers' team would surely have won comfortably.

With Raheem Sterling excelling on the right of the front three and Jonjo Shelvey dangerous in an attacking midfield role in front of Gerrard and Joe Allen, Liverpool were frequently a fluid blur of exhilaratingly high-tempo passing and movement. When they played it long they usually did so with intelligence and accuracy but they lacked an attacking focal point.

Fortunately for Martin O'Neill a Sunderland side well below their best possessed a pounds 12m centre-forward in Steven Fletcher who, courtesy of dreadful defending on Glen Johnson's part, scored his third goal in two games.

Sunderland had started badly and vaguely got going only when the impressive Jack Colback began exploiting the gaps left by Gerrard's occasional positional indiscipline. With the normally assured Allen hassled into uncharacteristic concessions of possession, they might have done better on the counter-attack had Adam Johnson not been absent injured or the alarmingly lacklustre Stephane Sessegnon looked as if he cared.

An evocative evening when thoughts rested with the 96 who lost their lives at Hillsborough 23 years ago really should have concluded with Liverpool's first league victory of the season but they had to settle for a point achieved by way of Sterling's cross, Titus Bramble's misjudgment and Luis Suarez's volley.

"We dominated and should have won," said Shelvey. "Stevie G always has words of inspiration for us before kick-off and he was like that again but the boss was like that too. His message was 'do it for the 96'.

"What happened this week was an inspiration for us. The Liverpool fans fought for years to get that verdict and we wanted to do it for them. Everyone is gutted we didn't get the three points we deserved.

"The way Brendan Rodgers plays his football suits me. His system is working, we're dominating possession but we have to start taking our chances. When we do that we'll rise up the table. We were disappointed no striker was brought in at the end of the transfer window but it's down to the midfielders to start racking up goals."

Although Suarez is clearly a forward, his clever approach play - sometimes too subtle for team-mates - against a Sunderland team that last won a Premier League game in March emphasised that he is much more a creator than a finisher. Yet the moment, late on, which really highlighted the folly of loaning Carroll to West Ham came when the Uruguayan - whose booking for a first-half dive was his third in four league games - took a corner. The problem? At that point Suarez was the only visiting player who could properly be described as a striker and he needed to be in the area. "Luis plays on emotion, all the top players do," said Rodgers.

Much the same could be said about Kenny Dalglish's successor; what a shame Rodgers lacks the centre-forward required to make the most of his very real managerial qualities.

Man of the match Raheem Sterling (Liverpool)

Att 41,997

Ref Martin Atkinson

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The Mail

WE DID IT FOR THE 96, SAYS SHELVEY

THERE was no doubt about the inspiration for Liverpool making sure their disappointing start to the season did not take a turn for the worse at Sunderland. Jonjo Shelvey revealed that in their team-talks, manager Brendan Rodgers and captain Steven Gerrard had emphasised the need to get Liverpool's season on track at the end of the week in which the Hillsborough report had exposed the truth about the tragedy.

'Stevie G always has words of inspiration for us before kick-off,' said Shelvey after the 1-1 draw at the Stadium of Light. 'His message was "Do it for the Hillsborough Fans. The 96 who died." What happened this week was an inspiration for us.

The Liverpool fans fought for years to get that verdict and we wanted to come to a stadium like this in our first match since, and do it for them.'

But Liverpool's first half was not up to the standard that will be needed against Manchester United on Sunday. Sunderland may have been lucky to lead through [pounds sterling]12million signing Steven Fletcher's third goal in two games, but Rodgers' Liverpool line-up was all over the place. Luis Suarez flirted with the left-wing -- and was as culpable, if less qualified, as Glen Johnson in the dreadful defending that allowed Craig Gardner to create the goal. Steven Gerrard was forced to meander in front of a fragile back four to cover for Joe Allen's nervousness.

The second half was a marked improvement, particularly when Fabio Borini was replaced by Stewart Downing and Suarez was left to roam closer to the goal posts that Johnson and Gerrard struck earlier, and where he buried a rebound off Titus Bramble's legs.

Rodgers said: 'It was a big emotional week, as you can imagine. We used that as a lever and platform to bring into this game -- that performance gives us great hope. The verdict in the week helps the city and the club move forward.'

Today is the start of a first full week for Sunderland's signings, although Adam Johnson's thigh injury may delay his training. The winger has played only two games but he was missed in a side pinned back for most of their third draw in three games.

MATCH FACTS

SUNDERLAND (4-4-1-1): Mignolet 8; Gardner 7, O'Shea 6, Cuellar 5 (Bramble 46min, 5), Rose 6 (Campbell 72, 5); Larsson 6, Colback 6, Cattermole 7, McClean 5; Sessegnon 5; Fletcher 6 (Saha 86). Subs not used: Kilgallon, Ji, Meyler, Westwood. Booked: Larsson. Scorer: Fletcher 29. LIVERPOOL (4-2-3-1): Reina 5; Kelly 6, Skrtel 5, Agger 5, Johnson 6; Allen 6, Gerrard 6; Sterling 7, Shelvey 7, Suarez 6; Borini 4 (Downing 64, 7). Subs not used: Enrique, Sahin, Assaidi, Henderson, Carragher, Jones. Booked: Suarez, Skrtel. Scorer: Suarez 71. Referee: Martin Atkinson 6. Man of the match: Simon Mignolet.

Attendance: 41,997.

NEXT: West Ham v SUNDERLAND (PL, Saturday), Young Boys v LIVERPOOL (EL, Thursday).

The Daily Telegraph

Rodgers calls on players to help ease fans' pain

Sunderland 1

Fletcher 29

Liverpool 1 Suarez 71

Att:41,997

Liverpool Football Club will never forget the Hillsborough tragedy and the 96 people who died 23 years ago, but the game must go on and for Liverpool's manager, Brendan Rodgers, that process began with a draw at Sunderland.

Rodgers handled himself well during last week's revelations about the extent of the Hillsborough cover-up, but it is how he handles himself in the dugout that matters now.

Through all the drama and emotion, it was easy to forget Liverpool's start under their new manager has been a poor one and still they wait for a Premier League win this season.

Against Sunderland, though, there was more reason to be optimistic. Not only did Liverpool pick up a useful point on the road, they did it with a performance that indicated they are getting to grips with the style Rodgers wants them to adopt.

"It has been a big emotional ride, there was a lot of sadness and a lot of emotion in the build-up," said Rodgers. "There was no deflection. The families and people involved in the city are an integral part of the club, there is no running away from that, it is something we very much embrace, it is a big part of the history of the club.

"It is my job as the leader of the club to organise and help the families and supporters deal with it and the way we can is by putting on performances like we did against Sunderland."

Certainly, Sunderland struggled to get the ball off his side, even after they had taken the lead through Steven Fletcher, who pounced on a cross from Craig Gardner after the fullback had broken through tame challenges from Luis Suarez and Glen Johnson after half an hour.

Liverpool were mobile, passed well, and in the second half in particular, they imposed their will on the contest.

There is a bluntness to Liverpool's play in the final third and their equaliser, scored by Suarez, was their only reward for 19 attempts on goal, the majority of them from outside the area.

Indeed, it was only when Liverpool's midfield, with or without instruction from the manager, began to be more direct with their forward passes that Sunderland began to wobble.

Liverpool were the better team, but they would not have been able to exert so much pressure had Sunderland's playmaker, Stephane Sessegnon, not forgotten how to control the ball and allow his defenders respite.

"They had a lot of possession without putting us under real pressure," said Sunderland midfielder Seb Larsson. "They keep the ball a lot more now and they're very good at that."

Having seen Johnson and Steven Gerrard hit the woodwork, Liverpool finally broke the home side's resistance when Raheem Sterling, taking advantage of a tiring Danny Rose, weaved his magic on the wing.

It was the 17-year-old's cross which enabled Suarez to score the equaliser and it needed an excellent save by Simon Mignolet to prevent Jonjo Shelvey from grabbing a winner.

"I am sure it is difficult for him to take it all in as you get a lot of adulation for playing well," said Rodgers when asked about Sterling's impact on the game. "Part of me is trying to keep him level-headed and make sure the whole situation does not distort his reality. We want to nurture him and make sure he is around for many years, not just a few months."

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THE INDEPENDENT

Liverpool make point at end of momentous week

"It is more than just football at Liverpool," he said. "It is a way of life."

They were the words of the manager of Liverpool Football Club, and at half past seven in a corridor at the Stadium of Light, Brendan Rodgers sounded like one.

"It is my job as the leader of the football club to organise and help the families and supporters deal with it [the fallout from the Hillsborough Independent Panel's findings] and the way we can is by putting on performances like we did tonight," he added.

"There was no deflection. The families and people involved in the city are an integral part of the club. There is no running away from that, it is something we very much embrace ourselves into, because it is a big part of the history of the football club and it is a way of life. It is a wonderful responsibility.

"I have worked all my life to arrive at a big club at the age of 39 and I learned very quickly that it is more than just football at Liverpool. It is a wonderful challenge and a real club of class and integrity, and I am very honoured and privileged to be the manager here and having the extra duties as manager is certainly no hardship."

These past few days have been momentous for Liverpool. A club moulded on the iron will of Bill Shankly needed its manager, its leader, to speak from the heart but to speak with the authority and stature of a man ready to march at the front as well. Rodgers in that moment found the correct tone to reflect the gravity of what happened last week, and what has festered like a bad wound for the 23 years since so many in supposed power sent 96 unsuspecting football supporters to their deaths.

"It has been a big emotional ride and week, as you can imagine," he said. "In the week and the build-up to the decision it was just the matter of all the evidence coming out and there was a lot of sadness and a lot of emotion. We used that as a lever and platform to bring into tonight's game and that performance against Sunderland gives us great hope and the verdict in the week going forward for the city and the club."

It did not overly deflate a renewed sense of optimism that Liverpool had not won. They were the better team, but more than that it felt like a club ready to move again without the weight of such injustice hanging over it.

Rodgers used the events of the last five days in his team talk. They have not hidden from the message of the Hillsborough panel. It was a tool to unify, and Liverpool have needed that as a club for a long time now.

"Stevie G always has words of inspiration for us before kick-off and he was like that again today, but the boss was like that today today as well," said Jonjo Shelvey.

"His message was 'Do it for the Hillsborough fans, the 96 who died', and that message was spelt out to us before the game in his team talk. What happened this week was an inspiration for us.

"The Liverpool fans fought for years to get that verdict and we wanted to come to a stadium like this in our first match since, and do it for them. There was no way we would allow ourselves to lose on a day like this.

"The way Brendan Rodgers plays his football suits me and I hope the fans can see that. I want to keep it going. I have played in a few roles so far, both in the deep and attacking, but to pull a shirt on for Liverpool, I would play anywhere because it is an honour."

High in the stands with the away fans were the flags, fighting now for justice, not just vindication. They delighted in Luis Suarez's equaliser after superb footwork from Raheem Sterling had opened up the Sunderland defence. A goal seemed the least they deserved after the week in which they learnt that 41 of their own had been alive at 3.15pm on 15 April 1989, and that the dead had had criminal checks done on them to besmirch their characters.

It cancelled out Steven Fletcher's 38th-minute opener, his third goal in two league starts since moving from Wolves for [pounds sterling]12m. His goals are badly needed by Scotland and last night the striker opened up the possibility of a return to international football. The 25-year-old has not played for his country since angering Levein by withdrawing from a squad to face Northern Ireland last year. Levein has dug his heels in over the former Wolves man ever since, insisting he has to make the first move if he wants to start a reconciliation process.

When asked by a fan on Twitter "would you pull on your Scotland jersey next month if Craig Levein asked you to come back?" Fletcher replied by saying "yes".

S'LAND 1-1 LIVERPOOL

Goals: Sunderland Fletcher 29. Liverpool Suarez 71. Subs: Sunderland Bramble 6 (Cuellar, h-t), Campbell (Rose, 72), Saha (Fletcher, 86). Liverpool Downing 5 (Borini, 64).

Booked: S'land Larsson. L'pool Suarez, Skrtel. Man of the match Shelvey. Match rating 6/10. Possession: S'land 48%. L'pool 52%. Attempts on target: S'land 4. L'pool 9. Ref M Atkinson (West Yorks). Att 41,997.

DAILY MIRROR

Saviour Suarez makes a late point

Uruguayan showed both sides to his game - getting booked for diving before scoring the leveller that earned the Reds only their second point of the season

In a week when justice was the watchword on Merseyside, Luis Suarez's equaliser gave Liverpool what they deserved on the football field.

Boyhood Liverpool fan Steven Fletcher shot Sunderland ahead on his home Premier League debut on 29 minutes to heap further pressure on visiting boss Brendan Rodgers, whose side had made their worst start to a season in 50 years. It was £12million Fletcher's third goal in two games.

And his tally is all the more remarkable given he had only three on-target shots in those games.

But Liverpool, after an emotional week off the field when their fans were - vindicated over the Hillsborough tragedy, roared back with a compelling second-half performance.

And but for a series of great saves from home goalkeeper Simon Mignolet and some bad luck, they would have had more to show for their efforts than Suarez's 71st-minute leveller.

Liverpool captain Gerrard said: "We were very disappointed in our performance against Arsenal last week.

"I felt we were in control today for the entire 90 minutes and deserved to win.

"It does take time to settle into a new manager's style of play but our performance shows it won't be long before we get it right."

But it is the first time since 1911 that the Reds have not won one of their opening four games.

And while Sunderland have begun with three draws, they have now gone 11 games without a win.

But Rodgers' men gave notice that they are on the way back and at least raised morale at the end of a historic week.

They started more brightly and Mignolet had to make two early saves to deny Fabio Borini.

Sunderland went ahead in the 29th minute with a well-worked goal expertly finished by Fletcher.

The architect was Craig Gardner with a surging charge down the right flank that saw him elude Luis Suarez and Glen Johnson before firing a

hard-driven, low cross into the visitors' six-yard box that eluded Pepe Reina.

Fletcher read it perfectly to steal a march on Martin Skrtel and bang the ball home for a goal on his home debut.

Suarez, who was constantly booed by the home fans, was booked for diving in the 37th minute and that only intensified the ill-feeling towards the controversial Uruguay striker.

Television replays, however, showed that there may have been the faintest of contacts.

But Suarez's reputation for diving may well have influenced referee Martin Atkinson's decision.

The home side made a change at half-time with Titus Bramble replacing Carlos Cuellar.

But Liverpool completely dominated after the break with Mignolet having to save from Jonjo Shelvey.

And then on 51 minutes Johnson was desperately unlucky to see a wonderful, curling effort smack against the bar.

The overworked Mignolet pushed away a teasing Raheem Sterling cross from the right.

Shelvey teed it up for skipper Gerrard and his raking, low drive clipped the base of Mignolet's left-hand post.

Liverpool's pressure was intense but once again they were denied by Mignolet, who got down smartly to save Skrtel's header from a Gerrard cross.

But Liverpool got the equaliser they deserved on 71 minutes through that man Suarez.

Sterling beat Danny Rose down the right to find Suarez lurking on the six-yard line.

His first shot cannoned off substitute Bramble but the Uruguayan followed up to find the net for his third goal of the season.

It was no more than Liverpool deserved for a compelling second-half display.

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LUIS SUAREZ'S second goal of the league season helped secure deserved a point for Liverpool at Sunderland.

The Uruguayan striker pounced from close range midway through the second half to level the game after Stephen Fletcher had given the home side the lead just before the half hour mark.

Liverpool dominated possession at the Stadium of Light for long periods this evening and manager Brendan Rodgers will feel a point was the very least his side warranted from their fourth Premier League fixture of the campaign.

They still search for their first win of the league season however and until Suarez capitalised on Titus Bramble's failed clearance on 71 minutes, it was an increasingly frustrating game for the Reds who were struggling to convert their control on the game into goals.

Glen Johnson had crashed an effort against the bar and Sunderland goalkeeper Simon Mignolet had denied the visitors on a number of occasions.

But when Raheem Sterling – who produced another promising performance – worked his way to the by-line and fired in a low cross, Liverpool eventually found their reward.

The Reds now have two points from matches following their draw at home to Manchester City and the point won here tonight.

Liverpool were forced to wait 13 days to try and put right the disappointment of defeat to Arsenal and from that game out went the injured Enrique and new loan recruit Sahin.

Martin Kelly, who played in the corresponding fixture last season, won a start with Jonjo Shelvey also earning a place in the 11.

And the Reds started the game positively at the Stadium of Light.

Shelvey and Suarez found space on the edge of the area but dragged their shots wide as Sterling used his pace to try and cause problems for the Black Cats' defence.

Fabio Borini almost capitalised on Carlos Cuellar's weak headed back pass, but the Liverpool striker saw his close range effort smothered by Simon Mignolet.

Other than Sebastian Larsson's in-swinging free-kick which narrowly missed the goal, Liverpool had been the side to offer nearly all of the attacking intent.

But, tellingly, it was Sunderland who struck first.

Craig Gardener's determined run down the right wing saw him slalom between Glen Johnson and Suarez before driving the ball into the area.

Pepe Reina dived but the ball evaded his full stretch and Stephen Fletcher reacted quickest to knock the ball in.

Liverpool continued to plug away and Mignolet denied Borini's low side foot effort after neat build-up between Shelvey and Suarez created the chance on the edge of the area.

Steven Gerrard would fire over the bar before Suarez was booked for diving in the Sunderland area.

Rodgers' half-time team talk appeared to give the Reds impetus after the break and Johnson came mighty close to equalising when his powerful drive smacked off the crossbar.

Gerrard struck the outside of the post not long after as Liverpool played with a greater tempo.

Martin Skrtel's header forced Mignolet to smartly adjust his feet before the Reds' persistence found reward.

Sterling again tormented Danny Rose on Liverpool's right and when his cross was not cleared by Titus Bramble, Suarez pounced to fire past Mignolet to make it 1-1. Shelvey nearly put Liverpool ahead when he tested the Sunderland keeper after some excellent build-up play. Suarez was unable to properly connect with the rebound.

Sunderland summoned a late rally to try and snatch a winner but Reina remained untroubled throughout the second half.

SUNDERLAND (4-4-2) Mignolet, Gardener, O'Shea, Cuellar (Bramble 46), Rose (Campbell 72), Larsson, Colback, Cattermole, McClean, Sessegnon, Fletcher (Saha 85). Subs: Campbell, Kilgallon, Ji, Meyler, Bramble, Westwood, Saha.

Goals: Fletcher (29)

Cautions: Larsson

Red Cards: None

LIVERPOOL (4-3-3) Reina, Kelly, Skrtel, Agger, Johnson, Gerrard ©, Allen, Shelvey, Suarez, Borini (Downing 64), Sterling. Subs: Jones, Enrique, Sahin, Assaidi, Henderson, Downing, Carragher.

Goals: Suarez (71)

Cautions: Suarez, Skrtel

Red Cards: None

Referee: Martin Atkinson

Attendance: 41, 997



Persistence pays off for LFC

SINCE meeting with Hillsborough families in the wake of Wednesday's historic revelations, a simple fact has resonated strongest in the mind of Brendan Rodgers. "One thing I have taken from the last few days is that perseverance and persistence are the biggest things you can have in life," said the Liverpool manager. "These are a group of people who fought for 23 years. Can you imagine their journey, the good and bad days? But they kept fighting."

It would be wholly insensitive to compare the continued efforts to find justice for the 96 with anything that transpires within the confines of a football field.

But, at the end of a traumatic and emotional week for the club, Liverpool's players demonstrated at the Stadium of Light the core values that have embodied the fight to uncover the truth. They weren't enough to ensure Rodgers avoided attaining another unenviable statistic of the Anfield outfit having not won any of their opening four league games of a season for the first time since 1911.

This, though, was at least a step in the right direction following the dismal, dire effort in their last outing against Arsenal a fortnight earlier.

There has been much subsequent navel-gazing following that defeat, the introspection heightened by the enforced international break.

Rodgers' philosophy, of which so much was spoken before a ball had even been kicked this season, has come under intense scrutiny, not least with Liverpool's deadline-day disappointment leaving the manager

short on strikers for a team that, until the weekend, had yet to score a goal from open play in the Premier League. And while no doubt concerned by some

worryingly familiar shortcomings, those away supporters that travelled to Wearside at least saw evidence of what the Northern Irishman is striving to

achieve. For the fans, of course, Saturday wasn't just about the match. This was their first opportunity as a collective to give their response to the findings of the Hillsborough Independent Panel that revealed the

cover-up and smear campaign that followed that fateful day on 15 April 1989.

The banners said it all. "South Yorkshire Mass Murderers Guilty" and "Duckenfield Mass Murderer – Justice Is Coming RIP 96" were just two of many, while defiant

chants included those concerning their delight come the imminent demise of Maggie Thatcher. Liverpool's players paid their own tribute by walking out

wearing black tracksuit tops with the number 96 emblazoned on the back, while

Sunderland flew flags at half-mast and posted a message of support on the in-stadium television screens during the opening moments of the match.

The visitors gave the travelling army reason to cheer when, having fallen behind to Steven Fletcher's first-half tap-in, they finally managed to turn their territorial

dominance into tangible reward with Luis Suarez's equaliser 19 minutes from time. This was a conflicting evening for Suarez. Posted on the left flank for the

opening hour, the Uruguayan was at fault in the build-up to Sunderland's opener, Craig Gardner barging his way through his weak challenge and that of Glen

Johnson before delivering a low cross that was bundled home by boyhood Liverpool fan Fletcher. Suarez also picked up a yellow card for simulation after

tumbling needlessly inside the area, already his third caution in four games this season. So short on striking options, Rodgers can ill afford to be without Suarez

due to any self-inflicted wounds.

But, as the Liverpool manager later accepted, to douse the Uruguayan's fire would be to remove a large part of his game. Suarez will continue to be indulged,

if once again reminded of his responsibilities.

Indeed, the striker had now netted three times in six games this season with his latest owing much to the once more impressive wing play of Raheem Sterling.

The youngster, unfazed by his first Premier League away start, tormented Danny Rose throughout, and it was after yet again bamboozling the Sunderland left-back

that Sterling crossed towards Suarez who, having seen his first effort diverted back to him by the perennially hapless Titus Bramble, made no mistake at the

second attempt. Rodgers had initially shifted Suarez to the left flank to accommodate Fabio Borini in his more accustomed central role.

Playing out wide, the Italian has struggled at this exalted level since his summer arrival from Roma, but through the middle he proved far more encouraging, twice

soliciting good first-half saves from Sunderland goalkeeper Simon Mignolet.

With Steven Gerrard impressing in a disciplined withdrawn role alongside Joe Allen to help comprehensively win the battle for midfield supremacy, Jonjo

Shelvey was given licence to attack and came closest to a winner in the 80th minute when, having ran crossfield beyond three defenders, released a venomous

beaten out by the busy Mignolet.

The curse of the woodwork returned with Glen Johnson striking the crossbar from 16 yards and Gerrard sidefooting against the outside of the post, but Liverpool

refused to be disheartened, their relentless attacking not exactly indicative of a team at the wrong end of the table.

That the visitors were again playing catch-up was as much a frustration as the inability to turn possession into more than one goal; Sunderland scoring with their only genuine effort on target will be a concern given free-scoring Manchester

United are next up at Anfield on Sunday.
 Liverpool may still be looking to break their Premier League duck this season. But the real victory had come earlier in the week.

Date: 15 September 2012
 Opposition: Sunderland
 Competition: League

BBC	Mail	Sunday Times	Sun Telegraph	Independent
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THE INDEPENDENT

ON SUNDAY

Rodgers' side start to put the pride back in Liverpool

After the myriad of emotion, the heartache of new revelations and the triumph of vindication that has come to the people of Liverpool during this truly historic week, 11 men with the Liver bird crest on their chests stepped out to represent an exhausted city.

Quite how, given the backdrop of this week, was to their credit, as was their point. As with much of what has happened over the past four days, it was the least they deserved. "Justice for the 96" rang around the streets of Sunderland before a ball had been kicked. They were here for football, but they will never forget. How not to rage at the failure of so much alleged authority? The police, the ambulance service, the Football Association, Sheffield Wednesday, the Government. Whether to point the bile of resentment at them or to marvel at the stoicism of the families who showed strength beyond the realms of human comprehension has been the spectrum of emotions that the people of Merseyside have flickered through.

Numbers can get lost in the vastness of a football crowd, so perspective is vital. Twenty-two players marched on to the Stadium of Light turf at 5.25pm yesterday, the 11 from Liverpool in black tracksuit tops with two numbers on the back. Nine and six. Twenty-two players covered the turf from where Liverpool can perhaps begin to look to a different future.

Those 22 plus another 19 was the number of those people who, we now unequivocally know, were left to die on the Hillsborough playing field while supporters made stretchers of advertising hoardings and became the emergency services. No wonder there was anger on Thursday to follow the joy, if that is what the emotion actually was, of vindication. It bubbled yesterday; "You'll Never Walk Alone" tumbled down from the stand in which their supporters were housed one minute, the vilification of Margaret Thatcher the next.

From this Brendan Rodgers has to make sense of a struggling team, a football club on the slide, and walk through with dignity. He will, but this game was not the time for a fair assessment to begin, not in the aftermath of Wednesday.

It is Liverpool's worst start for over 100 years, he was told, but there were signs of progress as that bit of unwanted history was made. The togetherness was noticeable. As was their dominance. Bar one mistake, which led to Steven Fletcher's goal six minutes before half-time, Liverpool were in control.

"I thought it was an outstanding performance and the players deserve a big credit," said Rodgers. "The players have been terrific. It has been a difficult week, as you would imagine. Some of the players have been involved in the tragedy in terms of relatives. It's been really emotional. When you sign for Liverpool that's part of the contract. You sign an agreement with the supporters, an emotional one. The support we got was exceptional. They kept driving a young team on."

"The tracksuits that we wore were about being respectful. We felt it was something we wanted to do in support of the families, the survivors and the people of the city. It was a club decision. "The performance really bodes well as we move forward. Our creativity and movement were good and we had a really good tempo. Their goal was soft and against the run of the play and we upped the tempo and the penetration in the second half. By the end Sunderland were probably happy with the point." His players deserved the mention. They were the forgotten men this week, but there were good showings from Steven Gerrard, Jonjo Shelvey, Raheem Sterling and Luis Suarez, who showed his good and bad side, drawing a yellow card for his theatrical dive in the first half, then giving Liverpool the equaliser they richly deserved in the 72nd minute after a fine run from Sterling. Sunderland's goal was littered with errors from Liverpool's players. Suarez and Glen Johnson were guilty of woeful defending to let Craig Gardner skip down the Sunderland right, his cross should have been cut out by Pepe Reina but it slid past him and Fletcher struck what was, to all intents and purposes his side's only on-target shot of the afternoon on the visiting goal.

Shelvey, Suarez and Fabio Borini had missed chances before the goal. Shelvey and Borini did the same after the interval, but once Johnson curled a shot off the crossbar with Simon Mignolet beaten and Gerrard clipped the outside of the post, an equaliser felt inevitable.

It came when Sterling produced skill to go past Danny Rose. He crossed to Suarez, whose shot hit Titus Bramble. From the rebound Suarez gave his side a point. "Overall Liverpool probably deserved the equalising goal," said Martin O'Neill. "They had the better of the second half. We played well in the first half but a point was a fair result. I'm delighted for Steven Fletcher. He's got three goals now and he will get better. I'm just very pleased with how the crowd have taken to him. He can link the play up." O'Neill's was the language of football, and there was some form of reassurance in that.

Sunderland (4-4-1-1): Mignolet; Gardner, Cuellar (Bramble, 46), O'Shea, Rose (Campbell, 72); Colback, Larsson, Cattermole, McClean; Sessgnon; Fletcher (Saha, 86).
 Liverpool (4-2-3-1): Reina; Kelly, G Johnson, Skrtel, Agger; Gerrard, Allen; Sterling, Shelvey, Suarez; Borini (Downing, 64).
 Referee: Martin Atkinson. Man of the match: Shelvey (Liverpool)
 Match rating: 6/10

The Sunday Telegraph

Suarez brings order to a day of emotion

Sunderland 1

Fletcher 29

Liverpool 1

Suarez 71

Att: 41,997

After the week of all weeks for Liverpool Football Club, for their supporters, and for football, it was hard to know how this match would play out; hard to find the right pitch, the right sentiment, the right tone. The result certainly wasn't immaterial but then it was in the context of the findings of the Hillsborough Independent Panel and what they meant, of what really happened on that day 23 years ago.

But Liverpool, in their first game since the momentous, vindicating report was published, were desperate for a victory because win is what football players have to try and do; what their fans crave. And Liverpool were desperate to launch their campaign; to gain that first triumph under their new manager Brendan Rodgers who has also spoken to eloquently, so responsibly over the last few days. He also spoke of how it has brought home the magnitude of his job.

They gained a draw, with a late Luis Suarez goal, but deserved all three points.

This morning Liverpool, after four matches and no victories, are uncomfortably close to foot of the Premier League but they will climb, they will improve. They also avoided the ignominy of making their worst start to a season for more than a century.

Sunderland knew that whatever happened, however well they played, whatever the result, the occasion would be a Liverpool story. But they were fortunate to avoid defeat while teenager Raheem Sterling produced a display of precocious brilliance as he drove Liverpool back into the match.

The Liverpool players took to the pitch wearing black tracksuit tops with, in large white writing, the number 96 on the back. They included several players - 17-year-old Raheem Sterling, 20-year-old Jonjo Shelvey and Martin Kelly, 22 -- who were not even born when the disaster happened such has been the tragic injustice, the passage of time.

Kelly, most poignant of all, born in Whiston, Merseyside, and with Liverpool since he was seven, has grown up immersed in the horrific events and how they affected his club, his community, his city and beyond. The line-up also, of course, included Steven Gerrard who lost his cousin that day.

As they strode out there were banners, also, high up to their left draped in front of the visiting supporters. "Justice for the 96" read the most visible, a reminder that justice is still achingly far away despite the relief of the panel's findings.

There was little other ceremony, little other acknowledgement, beyond a heartfelt message of support on the large screens hanging from the top of the stands behind the goals, which was wholly understandable. Here was, now, a Premier League match, with points at stake, and a fierce competition to unfold.

Sunderland were not in the mood to stand off; not with Lee Cattermole, who snapper into tackles on Joe Allen and Gerrard as the contest rattled at a relentless pace. Space was at a premium, especially in midfield, although with their greater fluidity Liverpool began to exert a modicum of control with Fabio Borini released close to goal only for Simon Mignolet to save his driven shot with his legs.

It was a good opportunity for the Italian to score his first goal and he went even closer, making a sharp connection with Suarez's lay-off inside the area. Mignolet, again, produced an instinctive block.

That concern rose dramatically.

Just as Liverpool appeared in control it was inevitable, then, that Sunderland would score. They broke away with Craig Gardner superbly tricking his way down the right and sending in a dangerous low cross. Steven Fletcher showed the predatory instinct of an in-form striker to steal in ahead of Daniel Agger and turn the ball into the net for a third goal since his big-money arrival from Wolves. Liverpool's frustration grew with Suarez cautioned for diving in pursuit of a penalty. There was no protest from him this time.

Liverpool were hugely unfortunate not to draw level, however, when Glen Johnson cut in from left-back, onto his right foot, only for his curling shot from the area's edge to beat Mignolet but cannon back off the crossbar.

By now Sunderland were in danger of sitting off but Martin O'Neill urged them forward and Stephane Sessegnon twisted and turned into the area before Seb Larsson was denied with a goalbound drive because it struck Kelly's head.

Still the better chances fell to Liverpool with Mignolet saving again from Borini before Shelvey ferried the rebound to Gerrard who, of all people, somehow sidefooted wide. Finally the goal came and it owed much to the hugely impressive Sterling, creating space down the right and centring. Substitute Titus Bramble was caught out, lacking alertness, and Suarez pounced to sweep home the ball from the near post.

If anything, Liverpool's dominance grew as they sensed victory. Sunderland struggled to gain a foothold and Larsson was fortunate only to be cautioned for launching himself at Sterling. Earlier, Mignolet had beaten out Shelvey's fierce shot. Liverpool continued to push, continued to seek the victory their efforts deserved but Sunderland held on.

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Suarez earns draw for Liverpool

SUNDERLAND 1

Fletcher 29

LIVERPOOL 1

Suarez 71

AFTER a week of high emotion, Liverpool went to the northeast looking and needing to get on with their season. In the end, they took one point when, for all Sunderland's eager endeavour, it should have been three.

More slowly than some might like, the Brendan Rodgers revolution is taking shape, even if he may not yet have found the personnel to match his vision.

Raheem Sterling is already beginning to answer those who questioned his place in the England squad; Stewart Downing offered evidence that he may yet be the player he used to be; and this will not be the only game this season pivoting on the mercurial, frustrating, brilliant Luis Suarez.

In recognition of a draining but historic week for the club and the city they represent, Liverpool's players emerged with the number 96 on their training tops in memory of the Hillsborough dead. "Wearing those tracksuits was a mark of respect," noted Rodgers. "The players have been terrific during a difficult week but when you sign for Liverpool the club, you sign with the supporters too. This was an outstanding performance which bodes very well for us."

Sunderland, in the throes of their own revolution, are without victory or defeat this season and must play catch-up after their opening home game against Reading was postponed. Sorely missing Adam Johnson, injured with England, they lost impetus after a fine first half.

"Without being too magnanimous, Suarez: credit to Liverpool -- they're a fine team and deserved their equaliser," said Sunderland manager Martin O'Neill. "We gave away possession far too easily for my liking."

For all that Rodgers could draw comfort from the point and some of his team's performance, none of his defenders looked comfortable with the rigours of the passing game. Sunderland started the quicker and Jonjo Shelvey floated inconsequentially behind the three-man strike force like an agoraphobic marooned in a desert.

Shelvey scuffed a chance wide on 17 minutes and the miss soon proved costly. Just before the half-hour mark, Craig Gardner danced around flimsy challenges from the struggling Glen Johnson and Daniel Agger before crossing low for Steven Fletcher to tuck the ball home.

for diving Liverpool had been in the ascendancy but their unsatisfactory half reached its nadir when Suarez tumbled theatrically over John O'Shea and was booked for his trouble.

Soon Liverpool's front three were dropping back in search of the possession their under-manned midfield struggled to provide. When Johnson rattled Simon Mignolet's bar with a delicious 50th-minute curler, it underlined of the paucity of chances Liverpool had created.

Cometh the hour, cometh the Uruguayan. Sterling got the better of Danny Rose ("he will get better," said O'Neill) and crossed viciously, Suarez's first-time shot bounced off Titus Bramble and Suarez pounced like a panther to blast the rebound past Mignolet.

With Downing providing vim and vigour, Liverpool added a fist to their velvet glove. The winner would not come but things might just be starting to right themselves on the field as well as off it.

Star man: Raheem Sterling (Liverpool) Yellow cards: Sunderland:

Larsson Liverpool: Suarez, Skrtel Referee: M Atkinson Attendance: 41,997

Sunderland: Mignolet 7, Gardner 7, Cuellar 5 (Bramble h-t, 5), O'Shea 6, Rose (Campbell 72min), Larsson 7, Colback 6, Cattermole 6, McClean 5, Sessegnon 6, Fletcher 6 (Saha 86min) Liverpool: Reina 6, Kelly 5, Skrtel 5, Agger 6, G Johnson 5, Gerrard 6, Allen 5, Shelvey 5, Borini 5 (Downing 64min), Suarez 7, Sterling 8

Suarez makes point on tough day for Reds

SUNDERLAND 1

Fletcher 29

LIVERPOOL 1

Suarez 71

Liverpool moved the ball around fluently enough, created several chances, possessed a fabulous young winger in Raheem Sterling and even scored a rare goal but something was missing.

If Andy Carroll had been on the pitch rather than nursing an injury at West Ham, Brendan Rodgers's team would surely have secured a much craved victory on one of the more poignant evenings of their long history. Instead they had to make do with a point and the looming prospect of some uncomfortably forensic analysis of the new regime's perceived shortcomings.

"It was an emotional occasion but I thought the performance, our movement, was outstanding," said Rodgers, accentuating the positives. "We looked a threat, players are growing into the team, we're improving all the time. We were terrific." The only problem is that Liverpool have loaned their only senior outright striker to Upton Park and watching them increasingly mix Rodgers's preferred short passes with some accurate long balls, the folly of Carroll's exit was emphasised.

In many ways it had been a day which belonged to the memory of absent friends. The flags outside the Stadium of Light were at half mast, banners demanded "Justice for the 96" and Liverpool emerged wearing black tracksuit tops emblazoned with that most haunting number.

Rodgers knew that the end of a week in which the prime minister had apologised unequivocally for the events at Hillsborough 23 years ago was the perfect time for his side to record a first League win of the season.

Appearing suitably psyched up, Liverpool started well, their momentum boosted by Sunderland's initial inability to string two passes together. A fluid, essentially 4-2-1-3 visiting formation featuring Jonjo Shelvey as the link between midfield and attack certainly seemed to confuse Martin O'Neill's players.

Gradually though, Steven Gerrard began losing a little positional discipline and, spotting the gaps as England's captain rampaged forward from his supposedly deep role alongside Joe Allen, Sunderland's Jack Colback began initiating the odd home attack.

Even so, Simon Mignolet made some decent saves as his defence were repeatedly mesmerised by Liverpool's movement and positional interchanging. How O'Neill must have wished that a thigh injury had not sidelined Adam Johnson.

At least he had Steven Fletcher on the pitch. Very much against the run of play, the pounds 12m striker scored his third goal in two games. It came at the end of a move started by Colback, continued by Craig Gardner and featuring lax marking from Luis Suarez and, most negligently Glen Johnson. When Gardner, overlapping from right-back, danced around Johnson with embarrassing ease, Pepe Reina could not quite reach his cross and Fletcher pounced to shoot Sunderland ahead. As Rodgers, unusually, lost his cool and berated Johnson, Liverpool's game went a little flat. It took Sterling and his exciting talents to get them going again and Sunderland's Danny Rose was given a tough time at left-back. How many goals, you wondered, might Carroll have scored in tandem with the 17-year-old?

When Suarez collapsed under John O'Shea's challenge visiting fans appealed for a penalty. Sunderland supporters simply saw a dive and Martin Atkinson, the referee, agreed, booking Suarez. It was the Uruguayan's third yellow card in four League games.

Cutting in on his right foot, Johnson very nearly atoned for the opener with a curving, Mignolet-deceiving, shot but the crossbar came between the full-back and redemption. With Colback making things sporadically tough for Liverpool, Rodgers's body language became palpable. Off came Fabio Borini and on went Stewart Downing, the substitute assuming his preferred left side attacking role as Suarez shifted to a more central position - although that did not prevent the latter, bizarrely, taking the odd corner.

Courtesy of a little help from Titus Bramble, Suarez celebrated his relocation by equalising. Sterling crossed, the ball bounced off Bramble's shin and, as the South American's fine volley hit the back of the net, Rodgers relaxed a little.

"Liverpool probably deserved the equaliser," said O'Neill, presumably relieved to see Sebastian Larsson merely booked for a bad tackle on Sterling. "They had a number of chances but didn't take them."

SUNDERLAND

Mignolet; Gardner, O'Shea, Cuellar (Bramble ht), Rose (Campbell 72); Larsson (Booked), Cattermole, Colback, McClean; Fletcher (Saha 86), Sessegnon Subs not used Westwood, Kilgallon, Meyler, Ji

LIVERPOOL

Reina; Kelly, Skrtel (Booked), Johnson; Gerrard, Allen; Shelvey; Sterling, Borini (Downing 64), Suarez (Booked) Subs not used Jones, Enrique, Sahin, Assaidi, Henderson, Carragher

Stadium of Light 41,997

Game rating 6/10

Referee Martin Atkinson

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Sunderland Echo

THIS game could have been a landmark one for Sunderland, an early-season statement of intent – had the Black Cats' best player not been his side's least impressive performer on the day.

For the third game in a row, Stephane Sessegnon was strangely out of sorts, more perhaps than the previous two games combined – a man off, despite his manful efforts to get into the game.

And without the Player of the Season's special brand of genius, Sunderland failed to fully test a Liverpool side stretched by the emotional fall-out of the Hillsborough verdict and a rocky start to Brendan Rodgers' managerial reign.

Martin O'Neill has worked hard to improve the quality of Sunderland's squad this summer, but, with Adam Johnson sidelined, the Wearsiders had the look of the side which won only one of its final 12 games last season.

Steven Fletcher, Carlos Cuellar and on-loan left-back Danny Rose all made their home league debuts, but with Fletcher and Rose not 100 per cent fit and Cuellar making an error which could have cost the Black Cats early on, this was not quite the improved side we can expect later this season.

Recent years have seen Sunderland improve their record against the once all-conquering Reds and many in Saturday's 40,000-plus crowd at the Stadium of Light arrived hoping for an upset.

It was a hope enhanced when the Wearsiders took the lead through a classily constructed and impressively despatched goal, albeit one against the run of play. The last time this fixture was played, it was Arsenal loanee Nicklas Bendtner who scored the only goal of the game. On Saturday it was his replacement – £12million man Fletcher – who fired in the opener.

The Scot struck after outstanding work from stand-in right-back Craig Gardner, the Brummie getting forward well and slaloming past two challenges on the wing before driving a low, diagonal ball into the danger area.

Fletcher had spoken before the game about relishing the service from the flanks that Johnson, James McClean and Seb Larsson can provide, but they couldn't have bettered Gardner's delivery, which was turned home from six yards out by the striker's left leg.

Goalkeeper Pepe Reina might have done better than to be beaten at his near post by the centre, but the goal was another example of Fletcher's ability to sniff out an opportunity; that priceless gift of knowing where and when to be to maximise the chance of scoring.

Less than three hours into his Premier League career on Wearside and he already has more than a third of the number of goals top scorer Bendtner notched in the whole of last season.

His third goal in his second league appearance came just before the half-hour, up to which point Sunderland had been solid rather than spectacular.

They had been strong at the back but careless on occasions going forward – and the best openings had all gone Liverpool's way.

Midfielder Jonjo Shelvey produced the first attempt on goal in the fourth minute after a slick move involving Luis Suarez, but the long-range shot was always going wide, as was Suarez's 11th-minute effort which the striker created with a lovely first touch.

The first shot on target did not arrive until the 13th minute when Liverpool summer signing Fabio Borini shot from the right, with the ball deflecting on the way through, but Simon Mignolet was alert to the change of direction and smothered the ball.

Sunderland started to show signs of getting their act together after the quarter-hour, largely through their full-backs – good interceptions by Gardner, some impressive touches from Rose.

But that could all have been undone in the 18th minute when a header back to Mignolet from Cuellar lacked strength and Borini nipped in.

The Italian did little wrong, driving in a fierce shot from the right, but Mignolet had narrowed the angles and the shot was straight at him.

It was a rare scare at the back for Sunderland; it was further upfield where their problems lay with Sessegnon simply unable to get anything to stick to his usual glue-like boot.

The African, though, won a free-kick in the 20th minute which offered Sunderland their best chance of scoring before Fletcher notched – Seb Larsson curling in a deep free-kick from the left which everyone missed but dropping just a yard the wrong side of Reina's left-hand post.

Raheem Sterling, on Liverpool's right, and Rose at left-back were enjoying a good duel, with the Sunderland man holding his own well.

And that meant Liverpool's only other chance before falling behind came from the centre of the pitch, when the ball dropped to Borini in front of goal and he hit a fine, first-time shot 15 yards out, from which Mignolet made an even finer save.

After Sunderland went ahead, Liverpool sagged and it was at this point that the hosts could have done with a second goal, with the visitors looking unsure.

Sunderland pressed for it – the tenacity of Fletcher and McClean in the 34th minute resulting in a cross from the left flashing through the area, but there was no-one to get a final touch to an inviting ball.

Sunderland did at least take their lead into the break – thanks in part to

experienced referee Martin Atkinson spotting Suarez, far from being fouled, had dived over John O'Shea's leg in the Sunderland penalty area in the 37th minute. A yellow card, rather than a penalty, followed.

But, from the moment the second half started, it was clear Liverpool were determined to recapture and extend their former momentum.

Sunderland had to cope with the loss of hamstring victim Cuellar at the interval, and replacement Titus Bramble endured a torrid second half.

Shelvey set his side's stall out early, hitting a 47th-minute shot from range before Liverpool won a corner a minute later.

A minute after that, attacking full-back Glenn Johnson flashed a ball across the area which whizzed through the six-yard box, but there was no-one there to attack it.

Johnson then cut inside from the left and curled a disguised shot against Mignolet's crossbar as Liverpool's goal threat continued.

Sunderland needed to get into the game and to do that they needed to keep hold of possession, but time and again they failed to do so.

It wasn't until the 55th minute that they were able to gain respite when they won a corner and Colback's centre from the right ended with Gardner firing in a snapshot which felled Martin Kelly.

Liverpool continued to hold the whip hand and should have levelled on the hour when goalmouth pressure saw the ball come back out to Steven Gerrard on the edge of the area.

It was the sort of chance the Liverpool skipper has made a career of sidefooting home, but, on this occasion, he steered it just wide, the ball brushing the outside of Mignolet's left-hand post.

Five minutes later, the Belgian keeper produced a brilliant stop to prevent what would have been a lucky goal from the visitors – Gerrard's shot deflecting to the head of Martin Skrtel, whose goal-bound effort from six yards out was successfully saved on the line.

Having ridden out all this pressure, Sunderland might have hoped to prosper and, gradually, they showed signs of getting their act together, but, just as their passing game was improving, they conceded the equaliser.

A tiring Rose was finally skipped past by Sterling's trickery and the winger's centre struck a stranded Bramble's legs before bouncing back to Suarez, who smacked the ball home at the near post from six yards.

The nature of the goal was unfortunate – Rose had been signalling his tiredness for minutes beforehand and was due to be replaced; Bramble's inability to react was compounded by the ball going straight back to Suarez – but the goal had been coming for some time.

Changes were made – Rose removed in favour of Fraizer Campbell, who went to the right wing, with Larsson moving inside and Colback dropping to left-back. But Sunderland remained on the back foot and Mignolet had to make a great 80th-minute save to deny Shelvey as he waltzed through the penalty area. Sunderland barely featured at all in front of goal, apart from a narrow-angled shot from McClean which cleared the bar in the dying stages.

Once again Lee Cattermole got through a Trojan amount of work against opposition which often had greater strength in numbers in midfield.

But for Sunderland to gain the upper hand, their front two needed to be involved more and the more the game went on, the more they faded.

Louis Saha should perhaps have come on five, 10 minutes earlier than he did, on the evidence of the injury-time snapshot he produced from distance which was not far away.

So, despite taking the lead for the second game in succession, it was Sunderland who were grateful to end with a point.

The Black Cats have now had three Premier League games and three draws so far and been the best side in none of those matches.

It's no bad knack to have – to grind out points against sides who have the upper hand on you on the day – and it does no harm at all that Sunderland remain unbeaten.

But O'Neill will want performances in the weeks ahead in which it is his own side which looks too hot to handle.

To do that, he will need Johnson's successful return and Sessegnon to be back to his best – something which was occupying his mind after Saturday's game.

"Stephane? It's not happening for him at the moment," the manager mused, an observation which suggested getting the Benin international back to his best is one of his top priorities.

Sessegnon was not the sole reason for Sunderland's failure to sparkle on Saturday.

But when the striker is at his irrepensible best, so is his team.

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90:00+3:47 Full time The final whistle is blown by the referee.
 90:00+3:09 Corner taken by Stewart Downing from the left by-line, Headed effort from inside the area by Glen Johnson misses to the right of the target.
 90:00+2:21 Foul by Stephane Sessegnon on Glen Johnson, free kick awarded. Free kick taken by Jose Reina.
 90:00+1:13 Luis Saha has a shot on goal from outside the box which misses left.
 90:00+0:31 Raheem Sterling gives away a free kick for an unfair challenge on Fraizer Campbell. Simon Mignolet takes the direct free kick.
 86:22 Raheem Sterling fouled by Stephane Sessegnon, the ref awards a free kick. Free kick crossed right-footed by Steven Gerrard from left wing, clearance made by Fraizer Campbell.
 85:16 Glen Johnson takes the direct free kick.
 85:16 Substitution Substitution Steven Fletcher leaves the field to be replaced by Luis Saha.
 85:16 Raheem Sterling fouled by Craig Gardner, the ref awards a free kick.
 83:56 Unfair challenge on Steven Gerrard by Sebastian Larsson results in a free kick. Free kick taken by Steven Gerrard.
 80:50 Steven Gerrard takes the free kick.
 80:50 Booking Sebastian Larsson goes into the book for unsporting behaviour.
 80:35 Sebastian Larsson concedes a free kick for a foul on Raheem Sterling.
 79:48 Luis Suarez takes a shot. Save made by Simon Mignolet. Header from deep inside the penalty area by Luis Suarez goes harmlessly over the crossbar.
 77:34 Corner taken right-footed by Luis Suarez.
 77:07 Stewart Downing decides to take a short corner.
 75:58 Outswinging corner taken by Stewart Downing from the left by-line played to the near post, clearance by Craig Gardner.
 72:02 James McClean concedes a free kick for a foul on Martin Kelly. Direct free kick taken by Steven Gerrard.
 71:35 Substitution Substitution Danny Rose leaves the field to be replaced by Fraizer Campbell.
 70:25 The assist for the goal came from Raheem Sterling.
 70:25 Goal scored Goal - Luis Suarez - Sunderland 1 - 1 Liverpool A goal is scored by Luis Suarez from close in low into the middle of the goal. Sunderland 1-1 Liverpool.
 69:02 Effort on goal by Glen Johnson from just outside the penalty area goes harmlessly over the target.
 59:18 Craig Gardner takes a shot. Blocked by Daniel Agger.
 66:22 Stephane Sessegnon takes a shot. Raheem Sterling has an effort at goal from outside the penalty box missing to the wide left of the goal. Martin Skrtel gets a block in.
 64:52 Steven Gerrard takes a shot. Martin Skrtel takes a shot. Comfortable save by Simon Mignolet. Blocked by Martin Skrtel.
 64:26 Outswinging corner taken left-footed by Stewart Downing from the left by-line.
 63:22 Substitution Substitution Stewart Downing replaces Fabio Borini.
 62:22 Titus Bramble takes the direct free kick.
 62:22 Booking Martin Skrtel goes into the referee's book.
 62:13 Unfair challenge on Stephane Sessegnon by Martin Skrtel results in a free kick.
 60:46 Foul by Danny Rose on Raheem Sterling, free kick awarded. Indirect free kick taken by Jose Reina.
 60:07 Steven Gerrard produces a right-footed shot from just outside the box that hits the post.
 59:18 Effort from outside the penalty area by Craig Gardner goes wide left of the target.
 58:50 Shot from just outside the box by Jack Colback goes over the bar.
 57:38 The referee blows for offside against Steven Fletcher. Jose Reina takes the free kick.
 55:39 Corner from the left by-line taken by Jack Colback, clearance made by Martin Skrtel. Craig Gardner takes a shot. Blocked by Martin Kelly.
 52:52 Foul by John O'Shea on Luis Suarez, free kick awarded. Free kick crossed by Steven Gerrard, John O'Shea manages to make a clearance.
 52:03 Header by Fabio Borini from deep inside the penalty area misses to the left of the target.
 50:20 Glen Johnson produces a curled right-footed shot from 20 yards.
 49:57 Free kick awarded for a foul by Stephane Sessegnon on Joe Allen. Joe Allen takes the direct free kick.
 48:45 The ball is swung over by Glen Johnson.
 48:30 Luis Suarez fouled by Sebastian Larsson, the ref awards a free kick. Direct free kick taken by Joe Allen.
 47:15 Corner taken right-footed by Steven Gerrard, clearance made by Steven Fletcher.
 46:41 Jonjo Shelvey takes a shot. Save by Simon Mignolet.
 45:01 The second half has started.
 45:01 Substitution Sunderland makes a substitution, with Titus Bramble coming on for Carlos Cuellar.
 45:00+1:07 Half time The half-time whistle blows.
 45:00+0:41 Martin Skrtel concedes a free kick for a foul on Steven Fletcher. Simon Mignolet takes the free kick.

44:24 Free kick awarded for a foul by Jack Colback on Glen Johnson. Free kick taken by Glen Johnson.
 43:06 Jonjo Shelvey challenges Lee Cattermole unfairly and gives away a free kick. Free kick taken by John O'Shea.
 41:13 Craig Gardner challenges Luis Suarez unfairly and gives away a free kick. Direct free kick taken by Glen Johnson.
 40:36 Danny Rose fouled by Jonjo Shelvey, the ref awards a free kick. Indirect free kick taken by Simon Mignolet.
 38:15 The offside flag is raised against Raheem Sterling. Danny Rose takes the direct free kick.
 36:38 Booking for Luis Suarez for unsporting behaviour.
 35:54 Free kick awarded for an unfair challenge on Raheem Sterling by Danny Rose. Free kick taken by Jose Reina.
 35:03 Corner from right by-line taken by Steven Gerrard.
 33:35 Danny Rose challenges Raheem Sterling unfairly and gives away a free kick. Shot comes in from Luis Suarez from the free kick.
 31:27 Free kick awarded for an unfair challenge on Fabio Borini by Jack Colback. Jose Reina takes the direct free kick.
 30:48 Inswinging corner taken by Jack Colback.
 28:50 Craig Gardner provided the assist for the goal.
 28:50 Goal scored Goal - Steven Fletcher - Sunderland 1 - 0 Liverpool Goal scored by Steven Fletcher from close range low into the middle of the goal. Sunderland 1-0 Liverpool.
 27:13 Shot from just outside the area by Steven Gerrard goes over the bar.
 26:29 Raheem Sterling takes a shot. Craig Gardner gets a block in.
 24:37 Fabio Borini takes a shot. Save by Simon Mignolet.
 21:50 Danny Rose gives away a free kick for an unfair challenge on Raheem Sterling. The free kick is delivered right-footed by Steven Gerrard from right wing, clearance made by Steven Fletcher.
 20:36 Foul by Jack Colback on Steven Gerrard, free kick awarded. Martin Skrtel takes the free kick.
 18:38 Jonjo Shelvey has an effort at goal from the edge of the box that misses to the right of the target. Daniel Agger concedes a free kick for a foul on Stephane Sessegnon. Free kick crossed right-footed by Sebastian Larsson.
 18:01 Fabio Borini takes a shot. Simon Mignolet makes a save.
 13:04 The ball is swung over by Fabio Borini, save by Simon Mignolet.
 10:58 Shot from just outside the box by Luis Suarez misses to the left of the goal.
 10:04 Foul by Lee Cattermole on Fabio Borini, free kick awarded. Steven Gerrard restarts play with the free kick.
 7:05 Danny Rose fouled by Martin Kelly, the ref awards a free kick. Free kick taken by Danny Rose.
 6:31 Martin Kelly gives away a free kick for an unfair challenge on James McClean. Free kick taken by Danny Rose.
 5:32 Craig Gardner fouled by Martin Kelly, the ref awards a free kick. Simon Mignolet takes the free kick.
 3:21 Long distance shot from Jonjo Shelvey misses to the left of the goal.
 1:58 Free kick awarded for an unfair challenge on Danny Rose by Martin Kelly. Free kick taken by Danny Rose.
 0:00 The ref blows the whistle to start the match.