

Date: 13 September 2014

Opposition: Aston Villa

Competition: League

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

13 September
2014

THE TIMES

Lambert hails the new maturity of Villa's rising stars

Liverpool 0

Aston Villa 1

Agbonlahor 9

Referee LMASON Attendance 44,689

It was supposed to be the precursor to a season of struggle; a summer featuring an increasingly reluctant owner unable to find a buyer, a manager seemingly on borrowed time with the club's supporters, turmoil in the boardroom and signings that hinted at stagnation rather than ambition. But after watching his unbeaten Aston Villa side secure a hard earned but richly deserved away win over Liverpool on Saturday, Paul Lambert came to a conclusion about his players - adversity has brought maturity.

"They've become men this season," the Villa manager said. "The football club is a better place for it. If they can continue to grow together and we get one or two back from injury, we'll be really strong."

Neither performing well at Anfield nor winning there is a novelty for Villa under Lambert, who is yet to suffer defeat there since replacing Alex McLeish as manager, but the early-season form that has been bettered only by Chelsea is certainly a pleasant surprise. In the past three years, they have finished 16th, 15th and 15th in the Premier League, rarely averaging more than one point per game. After four matches of the campaign, Villa are second in the table with ten points to their name.

At the heart of their improvement is a defensive solidity that has seen them concede only one league goal. Aside from a late shot by Philippe Coutinho that struck a post, Liverpool hardly threatened to add to that tally. With Nathan Baker and Philippe Senderos resolute at the heart of Villa's defence and protection afforded to the duo by a three-man midfield screen featuring Fabian Delph, Ashley Westwood and Tom Cleverley, Liverpool's attack was blunted, much to Brendan Rodgers's obvious frustration.

Lambert singled out Baker and Westwood for particular praise but he could just have easily have hailed Gabriel Agbonlahor, who struck the decisive goal from Westwood's expert set-piece delivery, Delph, Kieran Richardson or the much-criticised Cleverley, with all four contributing to an impressive team effort.

"If you look at our midfield today, we had four Englishmen," Lambert said. "Then there was Gabby. So we've got English lads outside the national team performing really well. Westy's a very clever player. He goes unnoticed. I think the arrival of Carlos Sanchez has made him step up a level again."

On Saturday, Westwood excelled in the holding role, a position in which England have no natural practitioner, but is rarely mentioned as a potential candidate for international honours. "It's because of the way the lad plays," Lambert said. "He makes everything look so simple. He does the easy things brilliantly. He can pass a two-yard ball and never give it away. Some people don't want to do that. It's up to the England manager. It was the same with Fabian. He got a chance and didn't let anyone down."

Neither, at Anfield at least, did anyone in Villa's all-white strip. The problems on this occasion belonged only to Liverpool as they were undone by slack defending at a set-piece after starting the game lethargically. Rodgers will hope that this was merely a bad day at the office but, like Lambert, he is astute enough to recognise that a number of problems, most notably in the defensive and attacking thirds, must be overcome if his team are to mount a repeat of last season's title challenge.

ratings Liverpool (4-2-3-1): S Mignolet 5 - J Manquillo 5, D Lovren 5, M Sakho 5, A Moreno 5 - S Gerrard 5, J Henderson 6 - L Markovic 5 (sub: F Borini, 71min), P Coutinho 5, A Lallana 5 (sub: R Sterling, 61 5) - M Balotelli 5 (sub: R Lambert, 71). Substitutes not used: B Jones, J Enrique, K Toure, Lucas Leiva. Booked: Lallana, Hutton, Moreno. Aston Villa (4-5-1): B Guzan 6 - A Hutton 6, P Senderos 8, N Baker 8, A Cissokho 6 - A Weimann 7, T Cleverley 7 (sub: C Sanchez, 86), A Westwood 8 (sub: C N'Zogbia, 71), F Delph 7, K Richardson 6 - G Agbonlahor 7 (sub: D Bent, 90). Substitutes not used: J Okore, L Bacuna, S Given, J Grealish

the guardian

Lambert urges Villa to 'grow together' as Senderos becomes an unlikely hero

Their fans sang of winning the league but Gabriel Agbonlahor refused to make predictions for Aston Villa. His reticence was understandable having witnessed several false dawns at Anfield but something more impressive than the dishevelled beards of Paul Lambert and Roy Keane is evidently growing at Villa. As the victorious manager put it: "They have become men."

Lambert has not tasted defeat in four visits to Liverpool as a Premier League manager but his latest rewarding trip felt different, with more substance, guile and experience to Villa's performance than the previous two encounters that proved no more than brief highlights in seasons of gloom. More incisive than Liverpool when on the front foot in the opening 25 minutes and more resilient under pressure throughout the second half, this was further evidence that Villa have come of age. With 10 points from the 12 available they have made an emphatic start to silencing the pre-season doubters.

Philippe Senderos excelled against a varied but limited Liverpool attack, a sentence that cannot have been written before, while alongside him the 23-year-old Nathan Baker deputised for the injured Ron Vlaar with an imperious display.

"Everything about his game was great," his manager purred. Sitting in front of Villa's immovable central defenders was a 24-year-old Englishman, Ashley Westwood, whose calm authority suggested Roy Hodgson's options for a holding midfielder do not have to be limited to Jack Wilshere. "Westy's a very clever player, he goes unnoticed," Lambert said. "He doesn't get talked about because he makes the game look so easy at times. He does the easy things brilliantly."

Westwood, with the new England international Fabian Delph to his left and Villa's new signing Tom Cleverley to his right, led a midfield trio that cut off Liverpool's supply route and stretched the home side's vulnerable defence when in possession. Brendan Rodgers' team had no answer. True, they had 18 attempts on Brad Guzan's goal and were unfortunate when Philippe Coutinho's 82nd-minute drive struck the inside of a post, but only one effort was on target. Guzan did not have a save to make beyond punching clear a Steven Gerrard free-kick and dropping on to Coutinho's header with the final act of a merited away win.

"I think they've grown up now and they've become men this season," Lambert said. "You can only be a young boy for so long. Jack Grealish is young at 19 but the other players are in their early 20s. They're not classified as young now. Every one of them have been performing great. Delph's just come back from England and has been exceptional. He looks as though he's grown in stature."

"The football club is a better place for it. If they can grow together and we get one or two back from injury we'll be really strong. It's early days but the chairman saying what he's said [about wanting to sell the club] has helped."

"It has galvanised the supporters, who've been brilliant anyway since I've been here. Everybody, as a group, has been excellent. My staff have been outstanding and we've had a new chief executive come in and that's helped too. The feelgood factor is there at the minute. We're doing really well."

Villa took the lead for the third season in succession at Anfield when Mamadou Sakho was harried into conceding a needless corner by the tireless Agbonlahor. The striker bundled Westwood's resulting corner over the line after Senderos lost Dejan Lovren to head goalwards and his team caused Liverpool problems at set pieces throughout. Senderos, twice, and Andreas Weimann should have extended the visitors' advantage but with Rodgers' side lacking the menace of last season, the slender advantage sufficed.

Agbonlahor, fresh from signing a new four-year contract with Villa, said: "I think there is more togetherness now, that's the main thing, and a bit more experience to a good group of young players. We're not getting carried away. It's four games. We've got 34 to go."

Rodgers cut a dejected figure after Liverpool's second league defeat of the new season, a tally they did not reach until November last term. Their performance owed as much to a squad adapting to the demands of a Champions League campaign for the first time as the absence of last season's prolific strike-force, with Daniel Sturridge looking frustrated in the stands after injury on international duty with England. Mario Balotelli was subdued and bruised by Senderos and Alan Hutton on his home bow but Rodgers, to his credit, was not interested in excuses. "It is a man's game," he said, and Villa have them.

Man of the match Philippe Senderos (Aston Villa)

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The Mail

Lambert's boys man up to stun Liverpool

LIVERPOOL 0

AVILLA 1

PAUL LAMBERT had just finished holding court when he spun on his heels and made his way out of Anfield's press auditorium. Aston Villa's manager grabbed at the handle of the first door he saw and immediately marched through it before he had to abruptly halt. The door in question led into a pantry and, with a wry smile, he was forced to double back. It was the only wrong move he made all day.

In the moments beforehand, Lambert had conducted himself with class and dignity. There was no boasting or revelling in a triumph over Liverpool but it was clear from spending time in his company that this was a man bursting with pride at a job well done.

No wonder. Lambert enjoys visiting Anfield -- in five trips with Celtic (as a player), Norwich and Villa, he has yet to be beaten -- but there was more to this than merely savouring Gabby Agbonlahor's solitary strike. Here, he felt, was a performance to show his side are coming of age.

'These young players have become men this season,' said Lambert, extolling the displays in particular of Nathan Baker and Ashley Westwood. 'If they can grow together and we get one or two back from injury we'll be really strong.' The last few years have been fallow at Villa Park and Lambert has had to ride some punches but, suddenly, things appear to be falling into place.

Liverpool might have dominated possession but Lambert had Villa immaculately drilled. Baker, for one, marshalled his defence, Westwood held the midfield together with exemplary passing and, around him, Tom Cleverley, Kieran Richardson and Andreas Weimann buzzed with intent.

'It is early days but the chairman's come out and said what he's said (about selling),' Lambert continued. 'Everybody knows the situation and that's helped. It's galvanised the supporters who've been brilliant since I've been here. 'Since the start of the season we have been fantastic. This is another clean sheet. But it's a long road.'

Retaining perspective won't be an issue. Lambert deals in pragmatism, while his assistant, Roy Keane, emerged from the dugout at key moments, growling at Villa's midfielders to retain their focus.

If all was right in the world for Lambert, the same could not be said for Brendan Rodgers. Liverpool's defending continues to alarm and questions persist over the suitability of Simon Mignolet and Mamadou Sakho to this project.

The goal Liverpool conceded was wretched, a sequence of errors -- first from Sakho conceding a corner, then from Dejan Lovren -- allowed Philippe Senderos to cause havoc before Agbonlahor pounced. If they are to progress domestically and in Europe, they must be more robust. 'We have to defend better,' said Rodgers.

'Just defend -- don't try and be clever. The worst-case scenario when we have days when we are not creative we get a point and move on. It's disappointing we didn't.'

SUPER STAT: This was a rare victory for Villa's defence in front of the Kop -- the first time in 14 visits that they have kept a clean sheet.

LIVERPOOL (4-2-3-1): Mignolet 5.5; Manquillo 6, Lovren 5.5, Sakho 5, Moreno 5.5; Henderson 7.5, Gerrard 6.5; Markovic 7 (Lambert 71mins, 5.5), Coutinho 6, Lallana 6 (Sterling 62, 6); Balotelli 5.5 (Borini 71, 5).

Subs not used: Jones, Enrique, Toure, Lucas. Booked: Lallana, Moreno.

ASTON VILLA (4-5-1): Guzan 7; Hutton 6, Baker 8, Senderos 7.5, Cissokho 7; Weimann 7 (N'Zogbia 72, 6), Westwood 7, Delph 7.5, Cleverley 7 (Sanchez 86), Richardson 6.5; Agbonlahor 7. Subs not used: Given, Bacuna, Bent, Okore, Grealish. Booked: Hutton. Scorer: Agbonlahor 9. Referee: Lee Mason 6. Man of the match: Nathan Baker.

The Daily Telegraph

Liverpool lament lack of plan B without Sterling

Liverpool 0

Aston Villa 1

Agbonlahor 9

Att: 44,689

This was one of those Saturdays when Liverpool were held as prisoners of their past. While luminaries such as Kenny Dalglish, John Barnes and Jan Molby signed autographs in the Main Stand's narrow car park, George Sephton, Anfield's stadium announcer, evoked the spirit of the late 1980s by playing Erasure's *Sometimes during the warm-up*.

Yet soon minds would return to the mid-1990s; a period when opponents recognised that if they managed to stop Steve McManaman they stopped Liverpool, whose defence was not defiant enough to grind a low-scoring victory on the basis of a clean sheet.

Raheem Sterling's importance to the present Liverpool team may have been underestimated. Here, he was rested. In his absence, with four players making their home debuts, Liverpool were lacking in exuberance, thrust and, indeed, cohesion.

Aston Villa scored a merited goal through Gabriel Agbonlahor via a corner, sat back and played on the counter-attack.

Sterling was given half an hour to rescue a result after being introduced as Liverpool's first substitute. But even with a reasonable amount of time, it felt like the outcome was already settled.

The disheartening performance was delivered at the end of a week when it was revealed that *Mighty Red*, a mascot imagined by Linda Pizzuti, wife of John W Henry, the Liverpool owner, was going to become a regular part of the match-day spectacle; causing the same kind of fume fans deem the idea as unnecessary at serious football club; as the development of McDonald's inside the Kop, just as it was when the fast food store was installed in the summer of 1995.

Liverpool started the season that followed with their most expensive defender ever at the time in Phil Babb wearing the No6 shirt, a goalkeeper with a dubious reputation in dealing with crosses in David James, and a newly recruited but unpredictable centre-forward in Stan Collymore.

Cast in those roles this year are Dejan Lovren, Simon Mignolet and Mario Balotelli. Neither Lovren nor Mignolet imposed themselves on Ashley Westwood's brilliantly awkward delivery for Villa's winner, while Balotelli was regularly distracted by Philippe Senderos, with the pair pushing each other like two middle-aged men accusing one another of cheating in a pub quiz. Afterwards the questions towards Brendan Rodgers, the manager, were focused on the shortcomings of his goalkeeper and back four, which may have had a total of 30 Liverpool appearances between them but seemingly remain without leadership.

Rodgers was more disappointed with the lack of an attacking threat from wide positions, but spoke positively about Lovren: "a wonderful defender, strong and aggressive".

Without naming him, Rodgers indicated that he was less satisfied with Mamadou Sakho, whose hesitation led to the corner kick from which Villa scored. "We have to defend better, that's where it starts," the Liverpool manager said. "Don't let them have the set piece."

It is not just at Liverpool where history is repeating itself. This win gave Villa 10 points from their opening four league games, a tally last achieved in 1998 under John Gregory when they topped the table on Christmas Day only to finish sixth. Presently second, Paul Lambert revelled at the emergence of Fabian Delph, Nathan Baker and Westwood, those aged 23 or 24, who have become "men" since the beginning of the campaign. It was in midfield where Villa were most impressive, with Delph, Westwood and debutant Tom Cleverley, on loan from Manchester United, strangulating the space where Liverpool can overwhelm if allowed.

Perhaps it should be expected, considering the backgrounds of both Lambert and his assistant, Roy Keane. As players, they drove Celtic and Manchester United towards conquests of Anfield following inspiring displays from the centre of the pitch.

"I think youngsters in the side see Roy and they are going to listen," the match-winner Agbonlahor said. "He's perfect for the club and I think we needed someone like that."

Champions League Liverpool v Ludogorets Tomorrow, 7.45pm Form guide
Ludogorets are just two points off the top of the table with a win and a draw after two matches in the Bulgarian league Verdict Comfortable win for Liverpool

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Lambert's boys become men to stifle Liverpool

Alan Pardew was always the even-money favourite to become the first Premier League manager to lose his job but, when the season opened, Paul Lambert was among the runners and riders.

When Graham Taylor resigned as manager of Aston Villa in 2003, he said it was because the biggest sporting institution in the Midlands was "more than about finishing 16th". Lambert's first two seasons at Villa Park saw them finish 15th each time and when the club's owner, Randy Lerner, put it up for sale, there were many who thought his manager was in a cul-de-sac with only one way out.

It will not last but after Saturday's 1-0 victory at Anfield, Villa are second, having conceded one goal in four games. Lambert claimed that Lerner's decision to sell had gelled a young squad rather than sent them scurrying for their agents.

"Everyone knows the situation and I think that has helped," he said. "It has galvanised the supporters. Since the start of the season we have been fantastic but it's a long, long road the Premier League."

The next four junctions see them turn off to face Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City and Everton. But while Villa's performances in their last two seasons have been generally underwhelming, they have tended to over-perform against the big players. Saturday's 1-0 win at Liverpool was the third time Villa have come to Anfield under Lambert, and their tally is seven points.

Lerner may be ready to leave but the appointment of Tom Fox as chief executive has speeded up tying players down to long-term contracts. Gabby Agbonlahor has signed and the club is hopeful Fabian Delph will do the same.

The England manager, Roy Hodgson might have had a profitable afternoon here; one in which Lambert said some of his boys became men. "If you look at our midfield, we had four Englishmen out of five," he said. "And there is Gabby Agbonlahor, so we have English lads outside the national team performing really well."

Delph, Tom Cleverley - who showed those who had baited him on social media what he is capable of - and Ashley Westwood formed a formidable midfield.

"Delph's come back from England and looks like he's grown in stature," said Lambert. "Westwood's a very clever player who goes unnoticed. He doesn't get talked about because he makes the game look so easy."



TRICKY LAMBERT

IT is perhaps appropriate, when you have Mario Balotelli as the inevitable centre of attention, to talk of the tricks of the magician's trade.

After this depressing defeat, the focus for Liverpool was on the rough stuff dished out to their striking sorcerer, and the surprisingly effective influence it had in limiting the Reds' attacking ebullience.

Yet the fundamental technique used by conjurers is the art of distraction, drawing the focus away from the real issue with a misdirection, and that is what happened as Villa's defence so stoutly restricted the home team's creativity.

Afterwards, Anfield boss Brendan Rodgers focused on the lack of quality in the final third, and that was an issue with only one shot on target.

Yet more fundamental is the fact that Liverpool cannot challenge for the title defending like this.

Going into a game against unbeaten, organised opponents with a completely new three-man frontline - all of whom have lacked game-time recently - was always going to risk a reduction in potency, due to rustiness and unfamiliarity.

You get those days, and you get through... but not if you defend like this. Just about every time the visitors delivered a set-piece into the Reds' box, they created an opportunity. And in the first half in particular, they came with an alarming frequency.

Not only did it produce the match-winning goal for the impressive Gabby Agbonlahor, as he capitalised on woeful marking at a corner, and some even more disastrous defending in the build-up to it, but further chances for Philippe Senderos could have wrapped it up by the interval.

Liverpool only had a shot from Philippe Coutinho (right with Villa boss Paul Lambert) that hit the post and chances for Lazar Markovic, Adam Lallana, Balotelli and full-back Alberto Moreno to show for their efforts.

But later the manager admitted: "We have to defend better. The worst-case scenario should be that when we have those days when we're not creative with the ball, we get a point.

"That's the disappointing thing because we didn't. You saw from the goal we need that consistency.

They lost their marker too easily in the box.

"When you let the opponent get the first contact that's what can happen. Dejan Lovren is a wonderful defender, but we have to do better in that situation. Clean sheets are still a problem." Liverpool's set-piece set-up in defensive positions still needs work, and Rodgers' biggest concern is the berth alongside Lovren at the heart of the defence, with Mamadou Sakho again looking unconvincing, as was evidenced by his shocking mistake in allowing Agbonlahor to rob him and force the corner that led to the goal.

"The goal we conceded is disappointing. We have to do better down the side of the pitch before the corner. It's a problem," he added.

Villa exposed another problem as they set up perfectly to maintain their unbeaten record, and steal a victory they deserved for their defensive steel and organisation.

Lambert identified the weakness at the set-piece, but also Balotelli's vulnerability when defenders give him stick, and he spent much of the contest getting involved in distracting off-the-ball tussles, rather than producing the moment of magic his team required.

Yes, Villa were heavy-handed at times, and Senderos could have been dismissed had the referee seen an off-the-ball hack at the Italian, as could Alan Hutton for the wild challenge on substitute Raheem Sterling.

But the physical challenge is part of the game, and the suspicion lingers that this new-look Liverpool, for all the promise shown by Lallana's skilful flourish, doesn't have the resilience or steel epitomised by Luis Suarez last season.

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Reds are left frustrated

They came to hail a new attacking hero. They left bemoaning the same old defensive frailties. Anfield played host to a depressingly familiar story as Brendan Rodgers' side continue to suffer a stuttering start to their Premier League campaign. On the day new £16million signing Mario Balotelli made his home debut, Aston Villa underlined why it will take time for Rodgers' expensively-assembled squad rebuild to take shape. Gabriel Agbonlahor netted the only goal after just nine minutes as the Reds huffed and puffed to no avail against Paul Lambert's well-organised, well-disciplined visitors.

Having struggled to overcome Southampton on the opening day and then lost at Manchester City, it seemed Liverpool had hit their stride with victory at Tottenham Hotspur. But this was a huge step backwards, a second defeat just four games into the Premier League season.

And there was little sign the Reds had addressed the back pains that proved so costly during the closing stages of last season's championship challenge. The names change, but the problem remains. Balotelli, with six goals against Villa during his time at Manchester City, was a marked man from the start, kicked from pillar to post by Philippe Senderos whose team-mates weren't averse to a strong challenge in an attempt to provoke the Italian. And if this was an evening for Anfield to say hello to the next generation, like many first meetings it was somewhat awkward. Balotelli, Alberto Moreno and Lazar Markovic all made their home debuts – Markovic also handed a first start – while Adam Lallana made a belated first appearance for the Reds having suffered a knee injury early in pre-season following his £25million arrival from Southampton.

Injuries, of course, had forced Rodgers' hand. But it will not go unnoticed that for the first time since December 2012, the Reds had gone into a game without the injured Daniel Sturridge and the now departed Luis Suarez. And with the other leading attacking light, Raheem Sterling, rested on the bench after his England heroics, this was very much a step into the unknown for Rodgers' side.

It told as the Reds struggled to form a cohesive attacking unit, allowing Villa to seize the early initiative. Liverpool had been undone by the Midlanders during the first half of last season's corresponding fixture, and they were caught out once again by conceding after just nine minutes.

It was a goal that owed much to poor defending. After Agbonlahor harassed Mamadou Sakho into conceding a corner, Dejan Lovren was beaten to Ashley Westwood's right-wing corner by Senderos, the Villa defender's header then striking Agbonlahor who reacted quickest to prod home from six yards.

Brendan Rodgers manager of Liverpool reacts during the Barclays Premier League match between Liverpool and Aston Villa at Anfield Villa should have been further ahead moments later. Westwood swung in a free-kick from the right and Senderos lost his marker far too easily but directed his header wastefully over. Liverpool were unconvincing and unsure at the back, Sakho and Lovren demonstrating little faith in the shaky goalkeeping of Simon Mignolet who demonstrating a similar lack of confidence in the defending in front of him. Poor control from Manquillo gave Agbonlahor a chance of a run on goal but the Spanish right-back atoned with a timely sliding challenge.

Villa, unbeaten through the opening three games of the Premier League campaign, were encouraged by a decent recent record at Anfield, having won twice and lost only once on their last five visits. Liverpool had fashioned a few early half-chances, Markovic sending an ambitious volley over from a deep Alberto Moreno cross and then heading wide a Javier Manquillo delivery from the opposite flank. But with their forward efforts slow and laboured, they struggled to make inroads as the new-look team inevitably took time to mesh against a well-drilled Villa side that included former Liverpool loanee Aly Cissokho.

Isolated up front, Balotelli was anonymous. In fact, the only kick he had was from the boot of Senderos, whose off-field swipe sent the Italian flying and surely would have resulted in a red card if spotted by the officials.

From a Jordan Henderson nod down, Lallana saw his effort from inside the area blocked and later flashed a drive narrowly wide from 20 yards after a Balotelli lay-off. The Reds finally gained some momentum towards half-time, Balotelli's thump from range deflected over off Andreas Weimann before Sakho set Alberto Moreno free down the left but Nathan Baker raced over to block the Spaniard's shot. The second half began in the same manner, Liverpool probing against a packed Villa defence but lacking the creativity and cutting edge to find a way through. So began the calls for Sterling, with the youngster duly introduced shortly past the hour.

Within a minute, Alan Hutton had gone straight through Sterling and was fortunate to escape with only a booking. But a hint of desperation began to creep into Liverpool's play, too many hopeful punts from range and too many overhit crosses. Rodgers looked to the bench and Rickie Lambert and Fabio Borini were introduced for the frustrated Balotelli and fading Markovic.

Coutinho was within inches of equalising with nine minutes remaining but his effort from just inside the area struck the inside of the post, with Sterling then hammering the rebound at the unwitting Henderson.

But the Reds could have played all night and not scored. Not the ideal preparation with a return to the Champions League just around the corner.

BIRMINGHAM MAIL

Paul Lambert accepted the plaudits for his tactical masterclass at Anfield but stressed it would not have been possible with another group of players. He explained that while he may have found the right formula to see off Liverpool in their own backyard, his well-worked system would have fallen face down had it not been for the energy of his in-form performers.

Inbetween his post-match celebrations Lambert also thanked owner Randy Lerner for his help in the recent transfer market where he was able to bring in six new recruits.

There were kind words for the fans, a mention for his trusted assistant Roy Keane, and brief discussions about the optimism of working alongside new CEO Tom Fox. Correct me if I'm wrong, but this sounds like a club all pulling in the same direction.

A Mario Balotelli scarf for sale prior to the Barclays Premier League Match between Liverpool and Aston Villa

Healthy investment from the chairman, detailed and accurate planning from the management team, a never-say-die attitude from the players and smiles of satisfaction from the stands.

It all sounds so simple and at times on Saturday Villa made it look that way. Gabby Agbonlahor got the early goal and Villa dug deep to record a third win in four and secure yet another shut-out.

It's in games like these where the manager really earns his crust.

Lambert chanced it with two men up front but had to quickly adapt so Villa could stifle their opponents.

They soon changed their formation with Andreas Weimann and Kieran Richardson adopting the wide positions in a five-man midfield. That prevented Liverpool from playing in the gaps and picking out holes in Villa's defence. There simply weren't any.

While Nathan Baker deserves credit for his gallant efforts after replacing Ron Vlaar, the man many feared that Villa could not do without, it's Philippe Senderos who appears to be holding everything together.

Once again he was dominant throughout, and as Carlos Sanchez is already known as The Rock, maybe it's time to find a suitable nickname for the ever-reliable Swiss ace.

Senderos has played a pivotal role in guiding Villa to the lofty heights of second place.

His leadership skills help others flourish alongside him, as was seen with Baker on Saturday.

Had he doubled Villa's lead on 13 minutes to make the contest a lot more comfortable, he would have capped off another outstanding display.

For all of Liverpool's possession they failed to test Brad Guzan.

In fact Philippe Coutinho's effort, which crashed off the post in the 81st minute, was their only meaningful chance.

That they struggled to create so few openings was credit to Villa's energetic midfield.

Unsung hero Ashley Westwood was superb as was Fabian Delph as they put up the brick wall

Tom Cleverley also fitted in perfectly and did most of the dirty work – he tracked runners superbly and won more duels than any other Villa player.

Cleverley also had the best pass completion rate as he met Lambert's brief with the minimum of fuss.

Smiles all around for a side that show no sign of letting up.

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Villa stun poor Liverpool

Aston Villa like playing at Anfield. They last lost there in 2010 and manager Paul Lambert had never seen any of his teams walk away pointless. They won again there yesterday when Gabriel Agbonlahor's early goal put them ahead and a heroic defensive display was so effective that goalkeeper Brad Guzan barely had a shot to save.

With Mario Balotelli's home debut turning into the most water-sodden of squibs, they sorely missed Daniel Sturridge and looked potent only when Raheem Sterling came off the bench an hour in.

So, as a thousand punners have already asked, how do you solve a problem like Mario? On his home debut Liverpool had not expected to attempt to integrate what is either an outstanding bargain or a destabilising folly without the aid of Sturridge, arguably one of two men capable of operating on the same level as Balotelli.

The thigh injury sustained in England training, which will probably rule out Sturridge until the end of the month, forced Brendan Rodgers to rely on the Italian as a solo striker, theoretically serviced by Adam Lallana and Lazar Markovic making their first Liverpool starts and Philippe Coutinho. Rodgers elected to leave Sterling, the other man whom Balotelli may have bonded and blended with, on the bench. Struggling to craft a silk purse from a motley collection of sows' ears, they looked unbalanced and disjointed. With a surfeit of defenders facing Liverpool's one-man forward line, Lambert deployed the much-maligned Philippe Senderos on limpet duty, leaving Nathan Baker, on his first league start of the season, or Alan Hutton to mop up when Balotelli broke cover.

For all his frailty when defenders run at him and his often curious positional sense, Senderos was a model of concentration and ruggedness, even if like some irredeemable hitman he could not resist the temptation to stray into illegality after 22 minutes when Balotelli ran across him. Senderos simply hacked down the Italian. Lee Mason's eyes were following the ball so Senderos escaped censure, but Balotelli was forewarned that a lonely, difficult evening beckoned.

For all the hullabaloo generated by Liverpool, they kicked off a place and a point behind their guests. The visitors started brightly and were a goal ahead after nine minutes when Mamadou Sakho gave away an avoidable corner.

Ashley Westwood slung it over and Dejan Lovren allowed Senderos to get goal side of him and rise unchallenged. His downward header cannoned off Javier Manquillo for Gabriel Agbonlahor who signed a four-year contract extension in midweek to score.

Villa might have had a second shortly afterwards. Once more Liverpool failed to deal with an expertly lofted Westwood ball. Once more they failed to cover Senderos, who headed over. The lesson of the goal had not been heeded.

Without Sterling's natural will o'the wisp width and with Lallana and Markovic utilising the inside channels, Balotelli was soon drifting wide in search of the ball. There he met Hutton, as maligned and as shaven-headed as Senderos, but equally unwilling to take prisoners.

The Villa fans sang "We're gonna win the league". The Liverpool fans watched Lallana go close with a fierce drive and have another effort blocked by who else? Senderos, and they purred loudly when Balotelli finally managed some outdoor fireworks with a glorious curling shot in the 45th minute, only for Andi Weimann to deflect it wide.

Outmuscled by Senderos all evening, Balotelli was soon swapped for the more prosaic, but less bullyable Rickie Lambert. The Liverpool surge continued, but so did Villa's stoic defending.

When Guzan was finally beaten after 82 minutes, Coutinho's angled 20-yard drive cannoned off the inside of a post to safety.

Liverpool: Mignolet 6, Manquillo 6, Lovren 6, Sakho 5, Moreno 5, Gerrard 6, Henderson 6, Lallana 6 (Sterling 61min), Markovic 5 (Borini 71min), Coutinho 6, Balotelli 6 (Lambert 71min) Aston Villa: Guzan 6, Hutton 8, Senderos 8, Baker 8, Cissokho 7, Westwood 8, Delph 7, Cleverley 6 (Sanchez 86min), Richardson 7, Agbonlahor 7, (Bent 90min), Weimann 6 (N'Zogbia 72min)

The Sunday Telegraph

Villa run out worthy winners

Brendan Rodgers was right in warning it would not be the Mario Balotelli show at Anfield every week, but this was not quite what he had in mind.

As Aston Villa left Merseyside with a deserved victory - Paul Lambert has taken seven points from nine on his last three trips to Anfield - Liverpool were left to ponder whether in adding the much-lauded depth to the squad over the summer they may have created a new set of problems.

This was the kind of result and performance many predicted once Liverpool returned to Europe, as meddling with systems and personnel leads to the kind of inconsistency they avoided with fewer games and fewer players.

It can be both a luxury and inconvenience to have more options, and the decision to rest Raheem Sterling - albeit understandable given how much is now expected from him in a Liverpool and England shirt - looked like it would backfire from the minute Gabriel Agbonlahor scored what proved the scruffiest of winners on nine minutes. Allied to the loss of the injured Daniel Sturridge, Liverpool were unrecognisable from that which defeated Spurs a fortnight ago.

"I have to trust all the players we have," said Rodgers. "If Raheem did not have international football he would have played." Rodgers is in new territory having to determine how to manage his players through a greater workload, but the Kop has been here before and seen how it can go wrong.

Gerard Houllier introduced the word 'rotation' into the Anfield dictionary and had ceaseless political battles proving he was right, and lest we forget there was a boardroom discussion about sacking Rafa Benitez in 2007 because he dared to preserve the muscles of Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher in a Premier League defeat to Reading because a pivotal Champions League game was on the horizon. 'Resting' is a perilous business, and this proved a calamitous evening for Liverpool because there were too many changes to deal with at once, allied to the fact four of Rodgers' selection were making their home debut.

As well as Balotelli - who showed glimpses of both his skill and temper but was a largely peripheral presence - Adam Lallana, Alberto Moreno and Lazar Markovic were also making their bow on home soil.

No wonder they performed like they had only just met. Balotelli's main involvement was a scuffle during which Philippe Senderos appeared to kick him off the ball and the Italian returned the compliment to Nathan Baker.

Villa were primed well, Lambert accepting plaudits for a tactical masterclass which for most of the evening included a six-man midfield and no centre forward. It seemed the Anfield pitch had shrunk as Tom Cleverley - excellent on his debut - Fabian Delph and Ashley Westwood scurried like possessed bloodhounds and Philippe Coutinho, Lallana and Markovic were left looking as if they attempting to create elaborate designs on a postage stamp.

Delph looked like a seasoned international, while every time Agbonlahor performs like this one wonders why he has never been called up more often for his country. He has been a scourge for Liverpool at Anfield throughout his career.

Lambert also believes Westwood should be monitored more closely by England manager Roy Hodgson. "I can't see why he is constantly ignored," said Lambert. Villa scored from a set-piece.

Not for the first time, the Liverpool defence will be looking at itself. Mamadou Sakho's indecision led to a corner and Westwood's delivery was perfect. Philippe Senderos glanced goalwards, panic ensued and Agbonlahor was able to guide the ball home.

The Kop's ire rose as successive Westwood set-pieces found a Villa attacker in space, patience appearing to wear thinner with Simon Mignolet's indecision. By the time Liverpool found any rhythm they were faced with roadblocks at every turn. Only when Sterling was summoned on the hour was there a brief surge of belief, but it was short-lived.

The sense of desperation was palpable by the time Rodgers sent on Fabio Borini - a player he warned would get any game time two weeks ago - in a doomed salvage act. Coutinho struck the post, but there was no sustained pressure on Guzan.

"Tactically it was fantastic," said Lambert. "The lads grasped what we asked them to do." For Rodgers, the consolation is an instant opportunity to make amends in the Champions League on Tuesday night.

As so many foresaw, his challenge now is to ensure entry into Europe's premier competition is not an impediment to Premier League ambition. For all the protests, it is difficult not to conclude the additional exertions of Europe have contributed to the loss of three Liverpool points before the first Champions League whistle has blown.

Liverpool (4-3-3) Mignolet 6; Manquillo 6, Lovren 6, Sakho 6, Moreno 6; Gerrard 6, Henderson 7, Coutinho 6; Markovic 5 (Borini 71, 6), Lallana 6 (Sterling 61, 7), Balotelli 6 (Lambert 71, 6). Subs Jones, Enrique, K Toure, Lucas. Booked Moreno, Lallana Aston Villa (4-5-1) Guzan 7; Hutton 7, Baker 7, Senderos 7, Cissokho 7; Westwood 8, Delph 8, Cleverley 8 (Sanchez 86), Richardson 7, Weimann 7 (N'Zogbia 72, 6); Agbonlahor 8 (Bent 91). Subs Given, Okore, Bacuna, Grealish Booked Hutton Referee Lee Mason (Lancashire)

Date: 13 September 2014
 Opposition: Aston Villa
 Competition: League

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

13 September
2014



Gabriel Agbonlahor's early goal gave Aston Villa a battling victory at Anfield that moves them up to second place in the Premier League table.

Agbonlahor struck from a corner after nine minutes and, despite dominating possession, Liverpool were unable to break down the visitors' well-organised defence.

Villa remain unbeaten, with 10 points from their first four games giving them their best start to the season since the 1998-99 campaign, when they went on to finish sixth.

Paul Lambert's side worked hard, were well organised and were good value for their win but, worryingly for Liverpool boss Brendan Rodgers, his first attempt at rotating his newly-strengthened squad ended in a frustrating defeat.

At the start of a spell of seven games in 21 days, Rodgers' selection was partly enforced by Daniel Sturridge's injury while training with England, but the Reds manager now knows how much his side rely on the striker and fellow England man Raheem Sterling, who started the game on the bench.

Some of Liverpool's summer signings were meant to provide the initiative in their absence - with six making the starting XI.

But, although Adam Lallana enjoyed an encouraging debut and Lazar Markovic again looked lively, Mario Balotelli was anonymous on his first home start.

Brad Guzan and Dejan Lovren

Villa goalkeeper Guzan faced just one shot on target during the 90 minutes

The home side also had problems at the back and their failure to deal with Villa's threat from set-pieces was punished after nine minutes.

Philippe Senderos saw his header blocked from Ashley Westwood's corner but Javier Manquillo could not stop Agbonlahor from scrambling home the loose ball.

The Reds did not learn their lesson, and Senderos should have done better when he was left unmarked from a Westwood free-kick, sending his header over.

Villa were also looking dangerous on the break but their cause was being helped by Liverpool's lack of cohesion and cutting edge going forward.

To their credit, Villa chased and harried whenever the Reds had the ball but, with Balotelli being well-marshalled by Senderos, the home side barely threatened despite dominating possession.

Visiting keeper Brad Guzan did not have a serious save to make in the first half and things did not improve for Liverpool when Sterling was finally introduced on the hour mark either.

With Villa still defending resolutely, Rodgers went for a different approach when he sent on two strikers, Rickie Lambert and Fabio Borini, after 70 minutes, bringing Balotelli's unsuccessful evening to an early end.

The home side increased the pressure but a finishing touch continued to elude them, with Dejan Lovren heading over and Philippe Coutinho firing against the post.

That was the nearest Liverpool came to an equaliser, and Rodgers will need his new-look side to show a vast improvement in the final third when they face Bulgarian side Ludogorets Razgrad in the Champions League on Tuesday.

Liverpool manger Brendan Rodgers: "We were slow in our pressing and passing early on and gave away a bad goal, but then we upped it.

"It was a frustrating day but I think it was a combination of Aston Villa defending well and us failing to find that wee bit of quality. We had enough of the ball but could not find the penetration in the final third."

Aston Villa manager Paul Lambert: "It is one of toughest places to come in Europe, let alone Britain, but I think we deserved the win.

"There is a lot of momentum on and off the pitch at this club, the players have been excellent as a group and the supporters have stuck with it and now our young guys are turning into young men."

Date: 13 September 2014

Opposition: Aston Villa

Competition: League

Echo

Sunday Times

Guardian

Mirror

BBC

Sun Telegraph

Independent

Mail

Times

Telegraph

Birmingham Mail

13 September
2014



90:00+4:13 Full time Second Half ends, Liverpool 0, Aston Villa 1.
90:00+3:05 Foul by Rickie Lambert (Liverpool).
90:00+3:05 Alan Hutton (Aston Villa wins a free kick in the defensive half.
90:00+1:43 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Alan Hutton.
90:00+1:23 Attempt blocked. Dejan Lovren (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Steven Gerrard.
90:00+0:04 Substitution Substitution, Aston Villa. Darren Bent replaces Gabriel Agbonlahor.
88:47 Attempt missed. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is too high.
87:57 Offside, Aston Villa. Brad Guzan tries a through ball, but Charles N'Zogbia is caught offside.
87:03 Attempt blocked. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked.
85:35 Substitution Substitution, Aston Villa. Carlos Sánchez replaces Tom Cleverley.
85:03 Offside, Liverpool. Jordan Henderson tries a through ball, but Javier Manquillo is caught offside.
81:01 Attempt missed. Raheem Sterling (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box misses to the right.
80:58 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool hits the right post with a right footed shot from the left side of the box. Assisted by Alberto Moreno.
78:28 Attempt missed. Dejan Lovren (Liverpool header from the centre of the box misses to the right. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho with a cross following a corner.
78:04 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Nathan Baker.
77:46 Alberto Moreno (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.
77:46 Foul by Kieran Richardson (Aston Villa).
75:45 Booking Alberto Moreno (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
75:26 Foul by Alberto Moreno (Liverpool).
75:26 Kieran Richardson (Aston Villa wins a free kick on the right wing.
74:33 Foul by Dejan Lovren (Liverpool).
74:33 Brad Guzan (Aston Villa wins a free kick in the defensive half.
73:54 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick on the right wing.
73:54 Foul by Charles N'Zogbia (Aston Villa).
72:49 Foul by Alberto Moreno (Liverpool).
72:49 Kieran Richardson (Aston Villa wins a free kick in the defensive half.
71:13 Substitution Substitution, Aston Villa. Charles N'Zogbia replaces Andreas Weimann.
70:43 Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Fabio Borini replaces Lazar Markovic.
70:34 Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Rickie Lambert replaces Mario Balotelli.
67:45 Attempt blocked. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from the left side of the box is blocked.
67:04 Attempt blocked. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Raheem Sterling.
65:19 Attempt missed. Raheem Sterling (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is high and wide to the right. Assisted by Alberto Moreno.
64:08 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
64:08 Foul by Andreas Weimann (Aston Villa).
62:02 Booking Alan Hutton (Aston Villa is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
61:25 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.
61:25 Foul by Alan Hutton (Aston Villa).
60:19 Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Raheem Sterling replaces Adam Lallana.
58:34 Alberto Moreno (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.
58:34 Foul by Tom Cleverley (Aston Villa).
55:14 Offside, Liverpool. Steven Gerrard tries a through ball, but Mario Balotelli is caught offside.
54:45 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Alan Hutton.
54:22 Lazar Markovic (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
54:22 Foul by Aly Cissokho (Aston Villa).
50:33 Attempt missed. Jordan Henderson (Liverpool header from the centre of the box is too high. Assisted by Steven Gerrard with a cross following a corner.
50:12 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Philippe Senderos.
47:25 Attempt missed. Mario Balotelli (Liverpool header from the centre of the box misses to the right. Assisted by Adam Lallana with a cross following a corner.
46:49 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Tom Cleverley.
46:47 Attempt blocked. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Lazar Markovic.
45:00 Second Half begins Liverpool 0, Aston Villa 1.
45:00+1:32 Half time First Half ends, Liverpool 0, Aston Villa 1.
44:24 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Andreas Weimann.
44:20 Attempt blocked. Mario Balotelli (Liverpool right footed shot from long range on the left is blocked. Assisted by Steven Gerrard.
43:22 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
43:22 Foul by Kieran Richardson (Aston Villa).
42:14 Attempt missed. Adam Lallana (Liverpool left footed shot from outside the box is close, but misses to the right. Assisted by Mario Balotelli.
37:26 Attempt missed. Philippe Senderos (Aston Villa right footed shot from very close range misses to the right. Assisted by Alan Hutton with a headed pass following a corner.
36:51 Corner, Aston Villa. Conceded by Jordan Henderson.
36:09 Corner, Aston Villa. Conceded by Javier Manquillo.
32:01 Foul by Dejan Lovren (Liverpool).

32:01 Gabriel Agbonlahor (Aston Villa wins a free kick in the defensive half.
31:52 Attempt blocked. Adam Lallana (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by Jordan Henderson with a headed pass.
30:43 Offside, Liverpool. Mario Balotelli tries a through ball, but Alberto Moreno is caught offside.
27:20 Mario Balotelli (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
27:20 Foul by Philippe Senderos (Aston Villa).
18:12 Mario Balotelli (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.
18:12 Foul by Andreas Weimann (Aston Villa).
17:30 Hand ball by Jordan Henderson (Liverpool).
15:56 Corner, Aston Villa. Conceded by Steven Gerrard.
15:53 Attempt missed. Andreas Weimann (Aston Villa right footed shot from the right side of the box misses to the left.
15:18 Corner, Aston Villa. Conceded by Jordan Henderson.
12:46 Attempt missed. Philippe Senderos (Aston Villa header from the centre of the box is high and wide to the right. Assisted by Ashley Westwood with a cross following a set piece situation.
11:52 Booking Adam Lallana (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
11:43 Foul by Adam Lallana (Liverpool).
11:43 Tom Cleverley (Aston Villa wins a free kick in the attacking half.
11:20 Foul by Jordan Henderson (Liverpool).
11:20 Tom Cleverley (Aston Villa wins a free kick in the defensive half.
10:50 Attempt saved. Mamadou Sakho (Liverpool header from the centre of the box is saved in the bottom left corner. Assisted by Steven Gerrard with a cross.
10:21 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Aly Cissokho.
9:45 Steven Gerrard (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
9:45 Foul by Gabriel Agbonlahor (Aston Villa).
8:45 Goal scored Goal! Goal! Liverpool 0, Aston Villa 1. Gabriel Agbonlahor (Aston Villa right footed shot from very close range to the bottom right corner following a corner.
8:43 Attempt missed. Philippe Senderos (Aston Villa header from the centre of the box misses to the left. Assisted by Ashley Westwood with a cross following a corner.
8:08 Corner, Aston Villa. Conceded by Mamadou Sakho.
5:51 Attempt missed. Lazar Markovic (Liverpool header from the centre of the box misses to the left. Assisted by Javier Manquillo with a cross.
4:21 Corner, Aston Villa. Conceded by Dejan Lovren.
3:39 Alan Hutton (Aston Villa wins a free kick on the right wing.
3:39 Foul by Adam Lallana (Liverpool).
2:40 Attempt missed. Lazar Markovic (Liverpool right footed shot from the right side of the box is too high. Assisted by Alberto Moreno with a cross.
0:00 First Half begins.
0:00 Lineups are announced and players are warming up.