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Opposition: Real Madrid
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THE TIMES

Liverpool reflect on spurned chance to make gain in Spain

Real Madrid 1 Benzema 27 Liverpool 0

In 50 years of playing European football, Liverpool have featured in some extraordinary nights. This one was just weird. Defeat by Real Madrid ultimately proved inevitable, as had been imagined beforehand, but this was an evening when we went from consulting the record books and Uefa statutes to wondering, however briefly, whether they might succeed in turning logic on its head.

It cannot quite be called vindication, because they were beaten and are now three points adrift of Basle and at great risk of elimination from the Champions League, but this scoreline and, in some respects, the performance were more positive than those predicted by many Liverpool supporters as they headed out to Spain in pessimistic mood on Monday. Brendan Rodgers's team selection -- with Glen Johnson, Dejan Lovren, Steven Gerrard, Jordan Henderson, Raheem Sterling and Mario Balotelli all either rested or dropped, depending on your view -- was one that risked not only defeat but an angry fall-out if things went as badly. As it was, this seemingly depleted Liverpool side competed more intelligently and more creditably than the so-called first team has in recent weeks. Kolo Toure, one of the infamous transfer committee's more curious signings, was magnificent -- food for thought ahead of Chelsea's arrival at Anfield on Saturday lunchtime, perhaps. For a time in the second half, as Real's levels dropped after their failure to add to Karim Benzema's goal, it was even tempting to wonder whether Liverpool might snatch an equaliser. It had taken them 56 minutes to manage a shot on target, but they were the more dangerous team for ten minutes or so. In fact, momentum seemed to be lost, rather than gained, when Rodgers sent on Gerrard, Sterling and Philippe Coutinho as urgency increased in the closing stages.

For all of 26 minutes in the first half, Liverpool kept their heads above water, applying themselves -- the odd scare notwithstanding -- in a manner that suggested that this might not be such a bad idea after all. Simon Mignolet had been forced into fine saves to deny James Rodriguez and Cristiano Ronaldo, but Liverpool were defending with more discipline and passing the ball with more precision than they have managed lately.

That was never likely to be enough to keep them level at 0-0, though. The move that brought the opening goal was knife-through-butter stuff, from Isco to Ronaldo to Isco to an overlapping Marcelo, whose perfect cross was steered past Mignolet by Benzema from six yards. At that point, thoughts reverted to just how many might Real might score.

Statistics that they flashed up on the scoreboard at half-time looked damning of Liverpool's performance -- not a single shot, whereas Real had mustered 13, six of them on target -- but then again by the same stage at Anfield a fortnight ago, they had been trailing 3-0, rather than 1-0.

The suspicion, though, was that Real could step up a gear at any time. That was certainly how it felt in the opening minutes, even as they allowed Liverpool plenty of possession, with Emre Can and Lucas Leiva initially appearing far more at home than they have done on their more brief outings at Anfield.

Liverpool were keeping a decent shape, too, but the reality was that they had no penetration on the few occasions they broke forward and very little answer to the speed and guile that Real possess in abundance.

The first two mistakes Liverpool made were very nearly punished. A stray pass from Lucas in the fourth minute led to a chance for Rodriguez, whose shot was saved by Mignolet to his left. Six minutes later Martin Skrtel dwelt too long on the ball and saw his clearance charged down by Benzema, Basle moved into second place in group B with a 4-0 victory over Ludogorets at St Jakob Park last night. The home side took the lead in the 34th minute when Fabian Frei chipped a pass forward to Bree Embolo, who chested the ball down before slotting it into the net. Derlis Gonzalez got the second seven minutes later after another deft through ball from Frei. Shkelzen Gashi added a third just before the hour mark after an Embolo cross and Marek Suchy scored the fourth from a corner after 65 minutes. who teed up Ronaldo for a shot that Mignolet stopped, again to his left. Liverpool were settling into the game to an extent: Lazar Markovic dribbled the ball 40 yards before being dispossessed by the marvellously assured Raphael Varane, while Toure won a few unlikely "Oles" for waltzing around Benzema near the touchline. A rude awakening was not far away, though. In the 27th minute, a clever one-two between Isco and Ronaldo allowed Marcelo to get away from Javier Manquillo down the left-hand side. So potent when running onto the ball in wide positions, Marcelo played a menacing cross towards the far post, where Benzema, in space behind Skrtel and Toure, scored with ease. Real threatened a second goal before half-time -- Ronaldo with a free kick that caused Mignolet some discomfort, Luka Modric with a chip that Ronaldo could not convert. Liverpool finally had a shot, even if Iker Casillas could scarcely have been tested by Fabio Borini's daisy-cutter. It was the start of a much better spell for Rodgers' team, in which Adam Lallana shot wide and Borini had a free kick deflected narrowly off target.

That was the cue for Rodgers to send on Gerrard and Sterling for the final quarter, soon followed by Coutinho, in what looked like that long-awaited injection of urgency and quality. As it was, Real had a fairly decent substitute of their own, Gareth Bale, who within minutes of his return to action had hit the crossbar. Bale went close with a free kick soon afterwards and, after one or two vaguely promising Liverpool attacks broke down, it was clear that the equaliser was not

going to happen. Rodgers will take solace not from the scoreline but from more a positive performance than he has seen from his team of late. The problem, of course, is that their Champions League prospects are left hanging by a thread, but that was the case before last night

the guardian

Benzema makes Liverpool pay after Rodgers puts out his White Flag XI

By the end, at least, Brendan Rodgers could make the basis of an argument that even if he had started with his best men there was no guarantee they would have done a great deal better. His selection resembled a White Flag XI but Real Madrid restricted themselves to Karim Benzema's first-half goal and the Liverpool supporters peering down from the Bernabeu's most vertiginous stands would probably have been forgiven for thinking it could have been a lot worse when they saw the side that the manager had put out.

There was some sense, perhaps, in Rodgers keeping back a couple of players for Saturday's game against Chelsea. Yet this strayed dangerously close to looking like premeditated surrender and Liverpool were undoubtedly fortunate that Madrid were not in the mood to punish them more heavily for their impertinence. It is certainly a strange set of events that Liverpool make it back into the Champions League then remove their best players from the showpiece fixture of Group B because they are already thinking ahead to next season's competition. It was also a strange match to comprehend.

On the one hand this was the first time in 13 Champions League games at the Bernabeu that Madrid have managed only one goal. On the other, what Rodgers did will always leave that sense that Liverpool arrived at the home of the competition's champions and effectively forfeited their chance to add this to their list of memorable European nights.

Rodgers was certainly pushing it as far as he possibly could when he talked of his team being "very, very unfortunate not to get something out of the match", lavishing praise on them in a way that made it seem as though he wanted to change the direction of the headlines.

The truth is Liverpool did not have a single shot until 10 minutes into the second half and all the time there was the clear sense Madrid were holding something back. Liverpool can count it as a victory of sorts that they avoided the thrashing that might have been anticipated bearing in mind what happened when the two sides encountered one another at Anfield two weeks ago. But it is a strange kind of success. In total Rodgers had made seven changes to the starting XI that lost to Newcastle, with Steven Gerrard, Raheem Sterling, Jordan Henderson, Glen Johnson, Mario Balotelli and Philippe Coutinho on the bench. Dejan Lovren was given the night off and Kolo Toure was brought in for only his second Champions League start in five and a half years.

Rodgers will be accused of lacking courage and not having enough trust in his strongest XI. In another way what he did was exceedingly brave when Madrid were at full strength and Cristiano Ronaldo was gunning for Raul's record as the Champions League's all-time record scorer.

It could very easily have blown up in the Liverpool manager's face. Carlo Ancelotti's men pinned them back for long spells and Liverpool might have been in for a messy evening if Simon Mignolet had let in one of the early attempts from James Rodriguez and Ronaldo. Mignolet had a busy and sometimes outstanding night and was the main reason why Ronaldo will have to wait before he takes over from Raul.

Ronaldo looked desperate for the record and he might also have been placing too much importance on it judging by the number of times he took aim from the kind of positions that seemed implausible even for him.

Liverpool's selection made it clear that Rodgers was not only prioritising Saturday's game but also their last two Champions League ties, against Ludogorets and Basel. They did, however, show at times they were not here merely to spend the night in their own penalty area.

Emre Can certainly gave the impression that he wanted to show he could flourish at this level. Alberto Moreno also stood out and Liverpool were visibly growing in confidence when they reached the midway point of the opening half without any score.

Fabio Borini will have enjoyed his nutmeg on Luka Modric. Lazar Markovic went on one run that acted as a warning to Madrid - a false alarm, it turned out - and there was another period midway through the second half when Liverpool, for a few minutes at least, had some real momentum.

Toure's appearances rarely spread confidence but in fairness he was excellent in the heart of defence.

There was, however, something devastating about the way, 27 minutes in, Madrid decided it was time to put them in their place.

It was a clever exchange of passes between Ronaldo and Isco that opened up the visiting defence. Marcelo was free, overlapping on the left, and the full-back's cross was measured perfectly for Benzema to turn the ball in at the far post.

When Gerrard did come on, after 69 minutes, there was a wonderful show of appreciation from the Bernabeu crowd. Sterling was brought on, too, but it was Gareth Bale, replacing Rodriguez to make his comeback from injury, who was closest to adding another goal with a shot that came back off the crossbar. Ultimately it was not an occasion a club with Liverpool's ambitions should cherish, for a variety of reasons.

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RODGERS THROWS IN TOWEL! Leaving stars on the bench for this game was stupid

REAL MADRID 1 Benzema 27 LIVERPOOL 0

MARTIN SAMUEL reports from Madrid IT could have been an embarrassment. It wasn't. So all's well that ends well. Had Gareth Bale not hit the bar, had Cristiano Ronaldo not taken an extra touch, had Simon Mignolet not had one of the best games of his career, the fall-out could have been very different.

But Liverpool's reserves only lost 1-0 in the Bernabeu Stadium last night. All things considered it was probably as good as could be expected. They didn't hope to win with a team like that. Did they? By the end the cavalry were on, and what reinforcements they were. Steven Gerrard, Raheem Sterling, Philippe Coutinho -- the players who, when the draw was made, would have been anticipating this night as a potential career highlight. In the end, they were the supporting cast. Brendan Rodgers sent out his understudies -- still not a poor team, and boy did they graft for him -- but not an XI that could hope to do any more than contain the European champions. It felt wrong, though, tossing away such a meeting, focusing on the two remaining group games and, more obviously, the next league game with Chelsea. Rodgers will say big decisions like this are what elite management is all about -- it could be argued games like this are about something more than damage limitation. The resilience, the commitment notwithstanding, it was still a pity to see them like this. Sterling was given a knowingly warm reception by the home crowd -- it was almost as if they were tempting him, showing what life could be like at a club with the biggest ambition. The club that has 10 and demands more. The debate around Rodgers' team selection will rage until the final whistle at Anfield on Saturday, when it will be known whether his ploy to rest the majority of Liverpool's starting line-up to keep them fresh for Chelsea has paid off. This is a results business. Win and everything you do is right; lose and, well, you know. So without knowing the effect, all that can be assessed is last night's result and the message it sent. Did it win Liverpool the game and blow Champions League Group B wide open? No. Did Liverpool do better than expected? Yes. Were Real Madrid demotivated by the sight of Liverpool's Capital One Cup team? Probably. Was it the occasion we had hoped for? No. And that really is the bottom line, until part two of the great experiment unfolds on Saturday. For this was meant to be the marquee fixture of Liverpool's season. It was the game that signalled their return to elite football -- a repeat of a European Cup final from the days when this tournament truly was for champions. The day the draw was made, this was the pairing that leapt out to Koppites, fans and romantics. Liverpool back in the Bernabeu. Back where they belong, some would say. Any Anfield regular who says his imagination did not run a little wild at the sight of it is surely lying. The champions of Europe? Cristiano Ronaldo, James Rodriguez, Gareth Bale? What if we could beat them, as Rafael Benitez once did? LIVERPOOL yearn to add to their storied European history. Might this be another night that will live in the memory, that might be commemorated in flags and songs? What will not have been contemplated is that Liverpool might arrive in Madrid already having abandoned thoughts of victory. Rodgers will say he did nothing of the sort -- yet if Liverpool's first team had been dismantled with three first-half goals at Anfield two weeks ago, what chance did the second string have? Ultimately, it was one of those achievements that required a sub-clause. You know -- quite likeable, for a politician. Good touch, for a big man. Liverpool did well, for the reserves. They did not have a genuine scoring chance in 45 minutes and could have been 6-0 down at half-time but, in the circumstances, it felt like a decent performance. Certainly, before kick-off, most of the travelling party would have settled for losing only 1-0 at the interval. That it took 27 minutes to happen was seen as something of a triumph, too. It was a simple goal, considering the intricacies of much of Real Madrid's work. Marcelo ran down the left crossed and Karim down the left, crossed, and Karim Benzema ran off Kolo Toure to stick out a foot on the slide and turn the ball into the roof of the net. It was classic Benzema really, a tricky finish that he made look rather easy. He is in magnificent form this season and this was his fifth goal in four Champions League matches so far. One of the few first-team players Rodgers did risk was goalkeeper Mignolet and he will no doubt be relieved he did. By the time the 10th minute was up he had made two world-class saves and his workload did not diminish throughout the game. Only four minutes had gone when a shot from Rodriguez forced Mignolet into a superb one-handed save, tipping the ball around Liverpool's left post. From Madrid's next attack, Martin Skrtel took a horribly heavy touch attempting to clear and Benzema cut the ball back for Ronaldo, who forced another good stop from Mignolet. A lot of the time, Madrid were happy to practise training-ground keep ball, and with Liverpool barely involving Iker Casillas in the game, it hardly mattered. A short spell before half-time, however, signalled a more positive intent and they could have had three goals inside four minutes. First, there was a free-kick from Ronaldo struck with such venom that Mignolet's save cannoned out for a throw-in some 20 yards up the pitch. In the 36th minute, a lovely chip by Raphael Varane was chased down by Benzema, Toure just getting a toe in take the ball away, but almost lobbing Mignolet in the process. A lucky escape. Finally, Benzema set up Marcelo for a low shot that Mignolet saved. He will certainly be well-practiced for Chelsea, the others well-rested. Without the three points, though, it is merely an opportunity wasted. This was not a team, or a performance that said Liverpool are back. Who knows when the Bernabeu will see them again?

The Daily Telegraph

Liverpool reserves hit by Benzema

Real Madrid 1 Benzema 27 Liverpool 0 Att: 75,000

Damage limitation in Europe is unbecoming of a club with Liverpool's history.

Brendan Rodgers picked a weakened team with the weekend's Premier League game against Chelsea in mind, sending out a side that managed one shot on target in 90 minutes and who were duly defeated.

Liverpool could take some pride from losing only narrowly to the European champions, conceding only to Karim Benzema, and managed to stop the prolific spree of Cristiano Ronaldo, who had scored in his previous 11 games in La Liga and the Champions League. They avoided humiliation. They even saw fine displays from Kolo Toure, barring a lapse of concentration when Benzema scored, and from Alberto Moreno, who is maturing into a very good leftback, although not yet in the league of Marcelo, who was brilliant for Real.

But to see Liverpool, a team who have won the competition five times, with so little ambition was so disappointing. Rodgers effectively surrendered any chance of any points with his team-sheet. Liverpool's best performer was their goalkeeper, Simon Mignolet, who made a series of good saves and must have bruised knuckles from all his punching. Liverpool fans sang Rodgers' name at the end, but this will only have been vindicated if a refreshed Steven Gerrard and Raheem Sterling orchestrate a defeat of Chelsea. Rodgers' team-sheet had confirmed many suspicions, that he was focusing more on challenging for Premier League points, yet it seemed an insult to players like Gerrard, who had to wait 68 minutes to feature. When he finally arrived, Real fans demonstrated their respect with warm applause. It had seemed strange to start Sterling against Middlesbrough in the Capital One Cup but not against Real Madrid in the Champions League, although the teenager eventually came on with Gerrard. It had been a huge gamble by Rodgers but he could point to still being in the game at only 1-0 down when his main men began arriving.

It did, though, seem wounding to the 4,500 Liverpool fans who flocked to Madrid, including a young girl from Syria with her home-made 'You'll Never Walk Alone' banner. They love the European Cup with a passion, had waited impatient five years to return to the top table of European football, got into the ground early to hang up all their flags, proclaiming themselves 'European Royalty' and then found Gerrard, Sterling, Jordan Henderson, Philippe Coutinho, Glen Johnson and Mario Balotelli on the bench. Joe Allen and Fabio Borini kicked off, the Italian taking up the lone striker's role with the Welshman in support through the middle flanked by Lazar Markovic and the left-sided Adam Lallana. Emre Can and Lucas anchored midfield. They were mainly on the back foot in a first half that saw Real have 13 attempts on goal, six of them on target. Liverpool's resistance was broken after 27 minutes. There was an air of inevitability about it. Real had been so imperious in their previous 11 games, all wins, amassing 46 goals, that the momentum continued, a tide of white washing over the men in red. Yet Liverpool were never embarrassed. They fought hard. Until Benzema exploited lax marking by Toure, Liverpool had been doing well, composed and compact, intercepting the ball, surviving occasional scares. They were still hugely indebted to Mignolet, who had to be alert after three minutes when James Rodriguez let fly.

Six minutes later, Martin Skrtel miscontrolled the ball, gifting Benzema a chance to run down the inside-left channel. The Frenchman played the ball back to Ronaldo, who let the ball run across him before connecting very deliberately with his right foot. Mignolet again excelled, stretching out his right hand and tipping the ball over. On it came, these waves of hurt. Javi Manquillo was nutmegged by the magnificent Marcelo, who was rampaging down the left as usual. On it went, Toure stopping a James run, Skrtel blocking a Toni Kroos shot and Lallana dispossessing Luka Modric, who was dictating the flow of the game.

Mignolet continued to keep the European champions at bay for 27 minutes, pushing away Ronaldo's left-footed shot, after the Portuguese dribbled past Markovic and Manquillo. Liverpool did have moments of promise before the unlikely dream began to fade. Raphael Varane was too strong for Markovic, simply stepping across and taking the ball almost arrogantly. Alberto Moreno, the former Sevilla full-back who enhanced his reputation here, embarked on a great, weaving run through the middle but ran out of space and options. Toure beat Benzema to the ball and then drew cheers from the Liverpool fans by dribbling around Rodriguez. From a rare Liverpool attack after 24 minutes, Lallana played in Allen, whose cross was blocked by Sergio Ramos.

These did not even scratch Real's armour. The European champions stayed patient in the utter belief that they would score. After 26 minutes, Gerrard and Henderson came out to warm up, and were so unused to the practice that they had to return for bibs. As they began to stretch their legs down the touchline, running towards the applauding Liverpool supporters, Real were cutting their defence apart. Isco found the overlapping Marcelo, who delivered his cross too quickly for Manquillo to react. Liverpool were badly caught out. Believing Benzema was offside, Liverpool's defence switched off, allowing Real's No9 to slide in and score at the far post. Toure was particularly culpable, simply paying insufficient attention to Benzema. Nobody knows whether Dejan Lovren might have been sharper but he represents Liverpool's future more than Toure, although overall this was one of the Ivorian's better displays for the club. As Benzema was engulfed by teammates, Gerrard and Henderson looked on from close-by. Real would have made it more by the break but for Mignolet, who dealt

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well with a fizzing Ronaldo free-kick that moved right late. Mignolet punched it out. Ronaldo stood there, hands on his hips, looking disgusted that he had been denied the goal that would have equalled Raul's Champions League scoring record of 71. Dogged before the break, Liverpool played with more fluency after. After 55 minutes, they even registered their first shot on target but Iker Casillas dealt comfortably with Moreno's shot. Lallana then shot wide.

Carlo Ancelotti sought to pep up his attack, sending on Gareth Bale for Rodriguez. After 68 minutes, Rodgers unleashed Sterling for Markovic and Gerrard for Lucas. Real fans recognise class and they saluted Gerrard as he sprinted on. Yet it was the Real substitute who came closest to scoring, Bale hitting the bar from Marcelo's cross.



Benzema proves the difference but Rodgers' B-team get an 'A' for effort
 It takes a certain kind of nerve to send your Capital One Cup team out to face one of the most glittering collections of footballers ever assembled, but then Brendan Rodgers will have reasoned that if he was going to take a risk then it might as well be a big one. It was no exaggeration to say that humiliation beckoned. In fact it was one of those team-sheets, without six of Liverpool's starters, that could easily have been mistaken for the proverbial managerial suicide note had Madrid taken a sledgehammer to Liverpool. The likes of Athletic Bilbao, Elche, even the mighty Barcelona have been dispatched in this stadium this season, all, it should be said, by greater margins than Liverpool lost by last night.

In the event, it was not the drubbing that so many of their supporters lodged in the upper reaches of the Bernabeu would have feared when they saw a team without Steven Gerrard, Dejan Lovren, Raheem Sterling, Jordan Henderson, Glen Johnson, Philippe Coutinho and even poor old Mario Balotelli. In fact, it was a very creditable performance indeed. A strange night, because it was ultimately a defeat for Liverpool - just not the kind of defeat that could have been so damaging for Rodgers. There is a case for saying that a side of Liverpool's tradition should never play a weakened team against a side of Real Madrid's magnitude, yet at Anfield last month they played their best available XI and lost 3-0. Football can be funny like that. Either way, Rodgers needed to catch a break and this time he did. His team gave a good account of themselves and his big hitters got the benefit of a rest before the visit of Chelsea on Saturday. It begged the question, could a stronger Liverpool team have taken something from the game? That would be to imply that Madrid were there for the taking, which they most certainly were not. There were some unlikely heroes on the night, not least Kolo Tour[c] who prevented Cristiano Ronaldo from scoring the goal that would have taken him level with Raul at the top of the all-time Champions League scorers' list. No mean task when you consider that Madrid had 28 attempts on goal to Liverpool's four. The likes of Adam Lallana and Joe Allen shone as well.

They departed the pitch at half-time a goal behind to Karim Benzema's strike in the 27th minute, but at Anfield two weeks earlier they had left for the break three behind, beaten and outclassed. In many respects they were outclassed again before the break. But then lots of good teams are outclassed by Madrid, it is the default setting for so many of the domestic opposition sent into the Bernabeu to try to avoid humiliation. Liverpool defended a lot, but there is nothing wrong with defending when you play at Madrid. What mattered more is that they defended well. The first-half Madrid goal was one of those moments that was a cause for regret, but it happens against a team this good when the walls start closing in and the chance for any sustained period of possession recedes. Isco and Ronaldo worked the ball left and Marcelo crossed deep to where Benzema had drifted off Tour[c]. He lunged at it and poked the ball into the roof of Simon Mignolet's net. That aside, Rodgers' irregulars did rather well in the first half. Tour[c] had a few of those heart-in-mouth moments, like when he stuck out a boot to take the ball away from Benzema and ended up depositing it onto the roof of his own net. But there was also one marvellous moment when, running towards his own goal, he turned Benzema and dribbled past James Rodriguez. Marvellous to watch, probably less comfortable for Rodgers.

As is often the case when an inexperienced side steps into the lions' den, the first few exchanges are crucial, and although Mignolet had to save a Rodriguez shot in the third minute, Liverpool settled quickly. Ronaldo had another shot from a Benzema cutback but Liverpool's goal was not flooded with chances. Their problem was that, as the half progressed, the ball was coming back at them ever quicker. Fabio Borini worked himself into the ground to chase lost causes and offer his team options. The thought did occur that Balotelli would have been entirely unsuited to the task. The disappointment was Lazar Markovic who, although still very young, seems unwilling to take risks or really turn on the kind of pace and directness that made him such an effective player at Benfica. Otherwise there was some serious ground covered in that Liverpool side, with Allen, Emre Can and Lallana working their proverbial socks off to keep the waves of white shirts at bay. They were not always successful but they did not allow themselves to be disheartened. The disappointment for Rodgers will have been that his side did not really create a chance of note in the few incursions into Madrid territory that they were permitted.

It was much the same story in the opening stages of the second half, when Liverpool's midfield grew in confidence and Tour[c] looked ever more assured in the centre of their defence. The problem was getting within range of Madrid's

goal. Just before the hour-mark, Alberto Moreno played a good ball into Lallana who turned well but struck his shot wide. Lallana was another who grew into the game. His tackle on Ronaldo at the start of the second half was a beauty, nicking the ball away with the minimum of fuss. There was always the running of Lucas Leiva to mop up danger, but Lallana offered that little extra finesse on the ball when his team were under pressure. Meanwhile, Tour[c] was having arguably the game of his Liverpool career. Carlo Ancelotti had seen enough and brought on Gareth Bale for Rodriguez. He was to hit the bar later. Rodgers responded by finally rolling out some of the A-team: Sterling and then Gerrard, the latter came on to a warm round of applause from the home fans. It turned out to be a better night than Liverpool could have dared expect.



Rodgers puts out his B team in the Bernabeu... but his special reserves make Real look ordinary

If they were supposed to hang their heads in shame, then Liverpool did not read the script at the Bernabeu.

Instead, they left this football cathedral proud and defiant after disproving the critics who predicted a rout when Brendan Rodgers dared to select a team he would normally reserve for the Capital One Cup.

The Liverpool manager knows a defeat - even one such as this where his side displayed such character - cannot silence the chatter completely.

But as he said afterwards, the performance showed nothing but passion and commitment. If there was not quite the miracle many thought was required, then there definitely was not a slaughter of the lambs in this lion's den of a stadium.

It went some way to justifying Rodgers' selection or at least quietened the outcry that greeted his team sheet. Yes, he picked a shadow side, and yes, that maybe was courting unnecessary controversy, but it was not giving up on the game.

In fact, Rodgers can point to the fact the energy of this line-up was significantly better than that of the team which suffered a record European defeat at Anfield two weeks ago. And for that reason alone, he can stare down his critics.

Real were restricted to fewer chances than usual and Cristiano Ronaldo was silenced, even though he had scored in all his last 12 matches. Liverpool matched Real for long periods, showed spirit in the second half and dared to go in search of an equaliser after Karim Benzema - who else? - had opened the scoring after 27 minutes. They almost got it too, the lively Adam Lallana shooting narrowly wide and the impressive Fabio Borini seeing a free-kick deflected wide when it could easily have gone in.

Lazar Markovic showed more in the opening quarter than he has all season back at Anfield.

The faces of the Liverpool players as they lined up before kick-off showed this was uncharted territory for many of them.

There was tension, if no visible signs of fear and a wide-eyed wonder at the sheer size of this place. You could hardly blame them, because the Bernabeu wears its history proudly, a monument not just to Spanish football history, but the beautiful game. Daunting, yes, but inspiring too.

An early move saw Simon Mignolet save brilliantly from James Rodriguez's fine strike.

Ronaldo was denied by Mignolet on 10 minutes, but more often he was ushered into cul-de-sacs by a committed defence marshalled by the canny Kolo Toure. It could not last, of course, against a side who had scored 18 goals in their last four home matches and managed 17 in six Champions League appearances at the Bernabeu last season.

No one seriously thought Liverpool would win, no matter who played, so what was required was energy and perhaps the brashness of youth to believe they could match the best team in the world. At times, they did just that.

They were undone at a moment when it seemed they had becalmed Real, just as in the first game. When Isco combined with Ronaldo to send Marcelo free on the left, a goal seemed inevitable.

It was inevitable too that Benzema would be on the end of it and he finished coolly with a first-time touch into the roof of the net.

But there was no capitulation this time, which was of great credit to a young side who had been examined so seriously.

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If the Liverpool team sheet was greeted with shock, what followed in the ensuing 90 minutes in the Bernabeu was equally as surprising. Brendan Rodgers' big gamble didn't halt the Real Madrid juggernaut but neither was it punished with the kind of crushing setback many had predicted. The manager's controversial decision to rest Steven Gerrard, Raheem Sterling, Jordan Henderson, Mario Balotelli, Glen Johnson and Philippe Coutinho ahead of Saturday's Premier League clash with Chelsea had been viewed by many as effectively raising the white flag before a ball had been kicked in the Spanish capital.

The record books had been checked and Liverpool's 5-1 hiding at the hands of Ajax nearly half a century ago looked likely to be under severe threat. A clash between two European heavyweights appeared to be a mismatch with one of them going into battle with only a peashooter. But the lambs to the slaughter simply refused to accept their fate. A much-changed line up dug deep and departed with their heads held high after a gutsy display against Real Madrid.

The European champions triumphed courtesy of Karim Benzema's first-half strike but the pride belonged to Liverpool. It was a night when those on the fringe players grasped their chance to perform on the big stage. Kolo Toure, Lucas Leiva, Emre Can, Lazar Markovic and Fabio Borini have started just seven league games between them all season. But, remarkably, they rose to the challenge against the finest club side on the planet and contributed to a performance packed full of desire and character to frustrate Carlo Ancelotti's men. In doing so they became the first team to stop Cristiano Ronaldo from finding the net since August.

Rodgers won't escape criticism for his team selection. Having worked so hard to get back among Europe's elite, it felt wrong that Liverpool were going into such a prestigious fixture without so many star names. By so obviously prioritising the visit of Chelsea, considerably more pressure has been heaped on the outcome of Saturday's game with the leaders. On a night when Real failed to hit their usual heights, some will rightly question what the Reds could have achieved if their big guns had been out there from the start. But then again after such a stuttering start to the campaign trying to decipher what exactly is Liverpool's best line up isn't straightforward. Certainly, the 4,000-strong travelling Kop had no complaints as they repeatedly chanted Rodgers' name and inspired those in red with their vociferous backing. Rather than endure the kind of footballing lesson Real dished out to Liverpool at Anfield last month, a shadow side brushed aside the sense of impending doom. For nearly half an hour the Reds defied all expectations as they denied the hosts. Rodgers, prowling the touchline, clapped in appreciation as his players worked tirelessly to close down space and restricted Real to few opportunities. Simon Mignolet expertly clawed away James Rodriguez's strike early on and then brilliantly turned over Ronaldo's drive after Benzema had pounced on Martin Skrtel's poor touch.

There was much to admire about the Reds' energy and intensity as the central trio of Lucas, Joe Allen and Can hassled and harried Carlo Ancelotti's men. When full-back Alberto Moreno embarked on a surging run down the left, the packed away end roared its approval. Liverpool had their moments as an attacking force but weren't able to take advantage. It opened up perfectly for Markovic but with acres of space to burst into the £20million Serbian winger lacked conviction and allowed Raphael Varane to get back and dispossess him. The inclusion of Toure at the expense of Lovren wasn't as controversial as some of the other changes Rodgers made considering the Croatian's dismal form. This was a return to the big time for Toure, who had only started in the League Cup since his own goal nightmare at Fulham back in February, and he loved every minute of it. The veteran defender helped repel Real's advances as he threw himself into the path of Ronaldo's piledriver. When Toure then held off the attentions of Benzema before skipping past £60million Colombian Rodriguez it was a sign of the Reds' growing confidence. But just as at Anfield a fortnight earlier Real Madrid broke the deadlock out of nowhere with a goal of true quality. Mignolet had given away possession cheaply by punting the ball aimlessly downfield when Rodgers was demanding he played it short to one of the full-backs. And Real made the most of it as a slick passing move saw Marcelo released down the left flank. His cross was inch perfect as Benzema got away from Toure and fired high into the roof of the net. At Anfield going behind was the trigger for Liverpool to crumble. Heads dropped and 1-0 quickly became 3-0 before half-time. Not here. To their credit they stood firm and reached the interval without

suffering any further damage. Ronaldo's swerving 30-yard free-kick was beaten away by Mignolet, while Toure was relieved to see the ball drop on to the roof of the net after he poked it away from Benzema. Marcelo was then thwarted by the keeper after Lucas had played the Reds into trouble. It was a similar story in the second half with Rodgers' men pinned back and fighting bravely to stay in the contest. Luke Modric and Benzema combined to tee up Ronaldo 18 yards out but he failed to beat Mignolet, who gathered at the second attempt. Joe Allen is caught between Toni Kroos and Raphael Varane. At times it was a world away from the slick, passing game Rodgers preaches as first Toure and then Can hammered it 80 yards upfield. But it helped to relieve the pressure and allowed the Reds to regroup. Moreno forced the first save of the night from Iker Casillas and then Lallana turned brilliantly on the edge of the box but unleashed a left-footer beyond the far post. On the hour the tireless Borini was chopped down by Sergio Ramos and the Italian's 25-yard free-kick struck Modric before looping wide. Ancelotti responded by introducing the world's most expensive player in Gareth Bale at the expense of Rodriguez. There was danger when Ronaldo exchanged passes with Benzema but the outstanding Toure again made the vital block. Benzema blazed wide at the back post before Rodgers called for his big guns as Gerrard and Sterling replaced Lucas and Markovic. Liverpool got lucky when Bale's strike from Marcelo's cross thudded against the bar with Mignolet beaten. Coutinho came on for Can as Rodgers played his final card in search of an equaliser. It didn't arrive as the Reds suffered a third successive European defeat for the first time since 1968. However, this was a night for praise rather than recriminations. If they can beat Basel and Ludogorets in their final two group matches then this European adventure could yet continue into the new year. Real Madrid (4-2-3-1): Casillas, Arbeloa (Nacho 83), Varane, Ramos, Marcelo, Modric, Kroos, Rodriguez (Bale 62), Isco, Ronaldo, Benzema (Hernandez 87). Not used: Navas, Pepe, Medran, Torro. Liverpool (4-2-3-1): Mignolet, Manquillo, Toure, Skrtel, Moreno, Lucas (Gerrard 69), Can (Coutinho 75), Allen, Lallana, Markovic (Sterling 69), Borini. Not used: Jones, Johnson, Henderson, Balotelli. Referee: Viktor Kassai (Hungary) Goal: Benzema 27. Bookings: Skrtel, Rodriguez, Ramos, Marcelo, Moreno. Man of the match: Kolo Toure. The veteran defender grabbed his big chance as he repeatedly repelled Real's advances.

Date: 4 November 2014
Opposition: Real Madrid
Competition: Champions League

Times	Telegraph	Echo
Guardian	Mirror	BBC
Independent	Mail	

4 November
2014



A much-changed Liverpool fought hard but came up short against Real Madrid as Karim Benzema scored the only goal in their Champions League match. The Frenchman turned in Marcelo's low cross after Simon Mignolet had done well to keep out efforts from Cristiano Ronaldo and James Rodriguez. Liverpool threatened briefly after the break as Adam Lallana fired just wide. But Real remained in control and Steven Gerrard and Raheem Sterling's arrival off the bench could not turn the tide. Despite the slimmer margin of victory, the game petered out in a similarly low-key style to when Real enjoyed a 3-0 win in the reverse fixture at Anfield a fortnight ago. In possibly the biggest gamble of his managerial career, Brendan Rodgers made seven changes to the starting XI that lost to Newcastle at the weekend, with Mario Balotelli and Jordan Henderson joining Gerrard and Sterling on the bench. Instead, Kolo Toure, who has seen less than a minute of Premier League action this season, started in defence, behind a midfield trio of Emre Can, Lucas and Joe Allen, with the willing Fabio Borini in attack. Liverpool's line-up seemed to suggest damage limitation, rather than a revenge mission, at the Bernabeu. If minimising their losses was Rodgers's aim, he succeeded, but some will struggle to understand his approach to such a big game. The result, and team selection, will be thrown into even starker light should Liverpool fail to get a result at home to Chelsea on Saturday, when some of their rested first-choice players are likely to return. And promising performances from several of Rodgers's second string will not alter the maths of Group B, in which Liverpool find themselves three points behind second-placed Basel with two games to play. Their line-up may have seemed more in keeping with the Capital One Cup than the Champions League, but the changes initially appeared to unsettle in-form Real. Liverpool made a similarly promising start at Anfield, though, and Mignolet was still required to make sharp stops from Rodriguez and Ronaldo. The Merseysiders held out only four minutes longer than they managed on home turf before Marcelo stole a march on Lazar Markovic on the left to set up Real's opener. The full-back's measured cross was met by Benzema as he darted in front of Toure and the visitors appealed in vain for an offside flag. Liverpool reached half-time without registering a shot on goal but, more importantly, despite being penned back on the edge of their own box, survived without conceding a second. The Reds emerged for the second half to a rousing chorus of You'll Never Walk Alone from the travelling fans, and they responded with more attacking endeavour. Alberto Moreno and Lallana both caused moments of alarm with snap-shots, before Borini saw a free-kick deflected wide. But it was the hosts who created more openings, with Benzema side-footing over on the stretch and Gareth Bale hitting the bar after being introduced on the hour. Gerrard, Sterling and Philippe Coutinho came on soon after, but a late sucker punch never arrived. Instead it took a timely foul from Moreno to stop Bale as he shaped to let fly with his left foot and Real probed at the growing defensive gaps.

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Full time Match ends, Real Madrid 1, Liverpool 0.
 90:00+3:09 Full time Second Half ends, Real Madrid 1, Liverpool 0.
 90:00+2:44 Offside, Liverpool. Raheem Sterling tries a through ball, but Javier Manquillo is caught offside.
 90:00+1:29 Marcelo (Real Madrid wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 90:00+1:29 Foul by Javier Manquillo (Liverpool).
 90:00+1:03 Offside, Real Madrid. Javier Hernández tries a through ball, but Gareth Bale is caught offside.
 87:27 Foul by Toni Kroos (Real Madrid).
 87:27 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 86:50 Substitution Substitution, Real Madrid. Javier Hernández replaces Karim Benzema.
 86:17 Offside, Liverpool. Raheem Sterling tries a through ball, but Fabio Borini is caught offside.
 84:54 Attempt saved. Gareth Bale (Real Madrid left footed shot from outside the box is saved in the top right corner.
 84:02 Booking Alberto Moreno (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 83:54 Gareth Bale (Real Madrid wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 83:54 Foul by Alberto Moreno (Liverpool).
 82:58 Substitution Substitution, Real Madrid. Nacho replaces Álvaro Arbeloa.
 77:39 Attempt missed. Marcelo (Real Madrid left footed shot from outside the box misses to the right.
 77:34 Attempt blocked. Isco (Real Madrid right footed shot from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by Cristiano Ronaldo with a cross.
 75:28 Booking Marcelo (Real Madrid is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 75:26 Foul by Marcelo (Real Madrid).
 75:26 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 74:33 Sergio Ramos (Real Madrid wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 74:33 Foul by Fabio Borini (Liverpool).
 74:16 Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Philippe Coutinho replaces Emre Can.
 73:44 Attempt missed. Toni Kroos (Real Madrid right footed shot from outside the box is high and wide to the left. Assisted by Isco following a corner.
 73:23 Corner, Real Madrid. Conceded by Martin Skrtel.
 73:20 Attempt blocked. Marcelo (Real Madrid left footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Álvaro Arbeloa.
 72:40 Corner, Real Madrid. Conceded by Kolo Touré.
 72:37 Attempt blocked. Gareth Bale (Real Madrid left footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Marcelo.
 71:15 Attempt saved. Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid right footed shot from outside the box is saved in the centre of the goal.
 70:19 Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 70:19 Foul by Emre Can (Liverpool).
 70:13 Gareth Bale (Real Madrid hits the bar with a left footed shot from the centre of the box. Assisted by Marcelo.
 68:53 Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Steven Gerrard replaces Lucas Leiva.
 68:39 Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Raheem Sterling replaces Lazar Markovic.
 68:04 Attempt missed. Karim Benzema (Real Madrid right footed shot from the right side of the six yard box is close, but misses to the right. Assisted by Marcelo with a cross.
 67:03 Corner, Real Madrid. Conceded by Kolo Touré.
 67:02 Attempt blocked. Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid right footed shot from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by Karim Benzema.
 65:15 Attempt missed. Alberto Moreno (Liverpool left footed shot from outside the box is close, but misses to the right. Assisted by Lucas Leiva.
 62:53 Offside, Liverpool. Emre Can tries a through ball, but Fabio Borini is caught offside.
 61:58 Substitution Substitution, Real Madrid. Gareth Bale replaces James Rodríguez.
 60:46 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Luka Modric.
 60:43 Attempt blocked. Fabio Borini (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked.
 59:15 Booking Sergio Ramos (Real Madrid is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 59:13 Foul by Sergio Ramos (Real Madrid).
 59:13 Fabio Borini (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 58:44 Attempt missed. Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid header from the centre of the box is just a bit too high. Assisted by James Rodríguez with a cross following a set piece situation.
 58:19 Álvaro Arbeloa (Real Madrid wins a free kick on the right wing.
 58:19 Dangerous play by Adam Lallana (Liverpool).
 57:57 James Rodríguez (Real Madrid wins a free kick on the right wing.
 57:57 Foul by Adam Lallana (Liverpool).
 57:16 Attempt missed. Adam Lallana (Liverpool left footed shot from the left side of the box is close, but misses to the right. Assisted by Alberto Moreno.
 55:40 Attempt saved. Alberto Moreno (Liverpool left footed shot from outside the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Joe Allen.
 55:05 Foul by Luka Modric (Real Madrid).
 55:05 Lucas Leiva (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 53:43 Hand ball by Alberto Moreno (Liverpool).
 53:14 Offside, Liverpool. Kolo Touré tries a through ball, but Lazar Markovic is caught offside.
 52:26 Booking James Rodríguez (Real Madrid is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 52:23 Foul by James Rodríguez (Real Madrid).
 52:23 Lazar Markovic (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 51:22 Attempt blocked. Karim Benzema (Real Madrid right footed shot from outside the

box is blocked. Assisted by James Rodríguez.
 50:49 Álvaro Arbeloa (Real Madrid wins a free kick on the right wing.
 50:49 Foul by Alberto Moreno (Liverpool).
 48:18 Attempt saved. Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid right footed shot from outside the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Karim Benzema.
 47:43 Attempt blocked. Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid right footed shot from a difficult angle and long range on the left is blocked.
 46:45 Booking Martin Skrtel (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 46:40 Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid wins a free kick on the left wing.
 46:40 Foul by Martin Skrtel (Liverpool).
 45:00 Second Half begins Real Madrid 1, Liverpool 0.
 45:00+0:12 Half time First Half ends, Real Madrid 1, Liverpool 0.
 43:09 Attempt missed. Isco (Real Madrid right footed shot from outside the box is too high. Assisted by Cristiano Ronaldo.
 39:16 Attempt blocked. Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid right footed shot from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by Karim Benzema.
 39:09 Attempt blocked. Luka Modric (Real Madrid right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by James Rodríguez.
 38:59 Attempt saved. Marcelo (Real Madrid left footed shot from the left side of the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Karim Benzema.
 37:17 Marcelo (Real Madrid wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 37:17 Foul by Lazar Markovic (Liverpool).
 35:41 Corner, Real Madrid. Conceded by Kolo Touré.
 33:59 Attempt saved. Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid right footed shot from outside the box is saved in the top centre of the goal.
 33:04 Isco (Real Madrid wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 33:04 Foul by Lucas Leiva (Liverpool).
 31:55 Attempt blocked. Álvaro Arbeloa (Real Madrid right footed shot from the right side of the box is blocked. Assisted by James Rodríguez.
 30:11 Foul by Álvaro Arbeloa (Real Madrid).
 30:11 Fabio Borini (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.
 26:21 Goal scored Goal! Goal! Real Madrid 1, Liverpool 0. Karim Benzema (Real Madrid right footed shot from the right side of the six yard box to the top right corner. Assisted by Marcelo with a cross.
 22:55 Attempt blocked. Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid left footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Isco.
 19:07 Foul by Isco (Real Madrid).
 19:07 Lazar Markovic (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 17:34 Attempt saved. Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid left footed shot from a difficult angle on the left is saved in the bottom left corner. Assisted by Karim Benzema.
 15:33 Attempt blocked. Isco (Real Madrid right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by James Rodríguez.
 14:24 Corner, Real Madrid. Conceded by Javier Manquillo.
 12:54 Attempt blocked. Toni Kroos (Real Madrid left footed shot from the left side of the box is blocked. Assisted by Karim Benzema.
 9:41 Corner, Real Madrid. Conceded by Simon Mignolet.
 9:38 Attempt saved. Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid right footed shot from the left side of the box is saved in the top centre of the goal. Assisted by Karim Benzema.
 9:09 Foul by Lucas Leiva (Liverpool).
 9:09 Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 6:40 Adam Lallana (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 6:40 Foul by Álvaro Arbeloa (Real Madrid).
 3:13 Corner, Real Madrid. Conceded by Simon Mignolet.
 3:11 Attempt saved. James Rodríguez (Real Madrid left footed shot from the centre of the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Karim Benzema.
 0:00 First Half begins.
 0:00 Lineups are announced and players are warming up.