

Date: 22 March 2015  
Opposition: Manchester United  
Competition: League

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22 March 2015

# THE TIMES

Gerrard's stamp of disapproval

Liverpool 1 Sturridge 69 Manchester United 2 Mata 14, 59  
Referee M Atkinson Attendance 44,405

By the end of this extraordinary tussle, Steven Gerrard was already suited, booted and ready to express contrition in front of the television cameras. A familiar feeling of self-admonishment overcame the Liverpool captain, struggling to explain the red mist that had accompanied him on to the Anfield stage in his disastrous final appearance against Manchester United.

Sent on as a substitute at the start of the second half, with Liverpool 1-0 down, Gerrard lasted just 39 seconds before being sent off for stamping on Ander Herrera. He spent even less time on the pitch than the great Pele, who hurried on and off in a half-time appearance on behalf of one of Liverpool's sponsors. The Brazilian had not even got back to his seat in the directors' box by the time Gerrard trudged off the pitch in disgrace. This was a truly wretched afternoon for Gerrard and Liverpool and one of great satisfaction to a United team who are now five points clear of their rivals, with a better goal difference, in the race for Champions League qualification. For much of this season United have struggled to look like a top-four team, but this was a mature, resilient, assured performance, embellished by Juan Mata's two goals, the second a beauty. Gerrard suggested that he should take full responsibility for the result -- and given the timing and entirely irresponsible nature of his offence, that is only right -- but the curious thing was that United looked at their most comfortable during a dominant first half-hour, when playing against 11 men. Mata, who had given them a 14th-minute lead, scored a spectacular second goal just before the hour-mark and then came a strange ending to the game as United lost their way and Liverpool, having pulled a goal back through Daniel Sturridge, briefly threatened an equaliser. For perhaps the first time under Louis van Gaal, United have begun to look like a team who mean business. Their best victories in the first half of the season -- over Arsenal, Southampton and Liverpool -- tended to look more impressive on paper than in real time, such was their debt to the brilliance of David De Gea, but their past two games, wins over Tottenham Hotspur and now Liverpool, have seen them exert control from an early stage.

Control is a buzzword in football these days. United had it in the first half, much of it based on the calming influence of Michael Carrick in midfield, and it was in the hope of challenging that imbalance that Brendan Rodgers, the Liverpool manager, sent on Gerrard in place of Adam Lallana. Gerrard immediately looked to dictate the game, receiving and recycling the ball five times during his very brief involvement, and then, having produced a thunderous tackle on Mata, he reacted aggressively to a sliding challenge from Herrera, stamping on the United player's calf. Was this the Los Angeles-bound Liverpool captain raging against the dying of the light or was it, as seems more likely, a highly emotional player pumped up a little too far as he looked to take out his frustration -- both at his recent inactivity and at his team-mates' inert first-half performance -- on United? The tackle on Mata was hard but fair, but his reaction to Herrera's challenge, for which the Spaniard was booked, was the act of a player who was trying to establish control of the game before he had control of himself. Rodgers was right to suggest that Gerrard appeared desperate to change the tone of Liverpool's performance. United had controlled the first half in what was arguably their most impressive 45 minutes' football of Van Gaal's tenure to date. Certainly it has been rare to see them looking so comfortable with their game plan, winning the physical battles, imposing their skill and personality on the game.

Carrick brought composure, helping to release Herrera, for whom this was, like Mata, perhaps his most enjoyable day in a United shirt. On 14 minutes, from Marouane Fellaini's pass, Herrera looked up and spotted Mata attacking the space behind Alberto Moreno, Liverpool's left wing-back. Herrera's pass was perfect and so was Mata's finish, clipped inside the far post to put United 1-0 up. For 20 minutes Liverpool looked lost, simultaneously unable to find their rhythm, thanks to the presence of Fellaini and others, and unable to break United's. Then they flickered into life, Jordan Henderson picking out Sturridge, whose layoff was met by Lallana with a crisp first-time shot that flew just wide of a post. Lallana made way for Gerrard for the second half and we all know what happened next. United quickly took advantage of the extra man, with Angel Di Maria coming off the bench to set up Mata for that exquisite second goal, an acrobatic scissor volley like one from Mark Hughes' back catalogue. United sat back after that and, with Carrick perhaps tiring, that was risky. Chris Smalling, for the second consecutive game, was looking at last like the defender he could be, but he was powerless in the 69th minute, when Philippe Coutinho, always Liverpool's best hope, released Sturridge, who, on his right foot, took De Gea by surprise at the near post. Liverpool mounted plenty of pressure after that, but, with United scrapping well in defence, they were always outnumbered. In the third minute of stoppage time, Daley Blind fell under Emre Can's clumsy challenge. Wayne Rooney, anonymous to that point, had the chance to put the gloss on United's victory, but his penalty was saved by Simon Mignolet, diving to his right. That was the cue for one final Liverpool push, but the game ended with Martin Skrtel, an emergency centre forward, chasing an overhit pass and risking a retrospective FA ban by appearing to stamp on De Gea as the goalkeeper smothered the ball. The animosity continued after the final whistle and, in the bowels of Anfield, a 34-year-old man, in a suit, cleared his throat and prepared to take the blame.

# the guardian

Manchester United's Juan Mata sinks Liverpool after Steven Gerrard red card

It was a performance from Manchester United that has been a long time in the making and for Steven Gerrard another personal ordeal in an expanding file. Not as harrowing, perhaps, as the one that means Anfield is now subjected to chants of "you nearly won the league" but still to be placed among the more incongruous moments of all those fine years in Liverpool's colours. Gerrard badly let down his team-mates and for a player of his distinction that will be the hardest thing to take. Perhaps it was the taunting from the away end that got under his skin. Or more likely it was the knowledge that his team were being outplayed and this would be the last time he could influence one of these occasions. Gerrard had barely worked up a bead of sweat by the time he was on his way back down the tunnel. There wasn't a scuff of dirt on his kit. But the occasion -- his last Liverpool-United fixture, starting on the bench, with his team desperately needing him to sprinkle the game with some of his old magic -- undoubtedly got to him.

A half-time substitute, he had been on the pitch 38 seconds when Ander Herrera slid in and clipped his ankles. Gerrard dealt out his own retribution, bringing down his studs on Herrera's shin while the Spaniard was on the ground. The referee, Martin Atkinson, sent the Liverpool captain off and Anfield blinked, rubbed its eyes and tried to take in a red card that, to put it into context, was crazier and more self-defeating than anything Mario Balotelli has done this season.

Balotelli, another substitute, had to be restrained later by some quick-thinking supporters as he tussled with Chris Smalling by the touchline. The Italian had been booked within 90 seconds of coming on and those supporters probably spared their team from going down to nine men. We expect this kind of brainstorm from Balotelli. But Gerrard? He did at least apologise after the match but it was a gross dereliction of duty and that lack of control seemed contagious. Martin Skrtel could conceivably face retrospective action for the stamp on David de Gea that engulfed the match in more controversy at the end.

A man down, Liverpool actually played with great togetherness in an attempt to pull off an improbable feat of escapology. Juan Mata's brilliant second goal arrived just before the hour and at that stage Liverpool might have been excused for thinking the game had become an exercise in damage limitation. Instead they came back in a way that threatened to spike United's most rounded performance of the season. Daniel Sturridge halved the lead after 69 minutes and United had to withstand some awkward moments before Simon Mignolet saved Wayne Rooney's stoppage-time penalty and the chaotic, bad-tempered finish.

There is no doubt, however, that on the balance of play the better team won. Mata was superb, with Herrera not far behind, whereas Liverpool's lack of discipline was accompanied by some of the flaws that undermined them earlier in the season. De Gea might be aggrieved about being beaten at his near post by Sturridge's shot but it was a slick and controlled performance that leaves United firmly established in fourth position, only a point behind Arsenal and two short of Manchester City. In the first half in particular, Louis Van Gaal's team played in a way that has rarely been seen since he took the job. "We played Liverpool off the pitch," was the Dutchman's assessment and Brendan Rodgers did not argue. "He [Gerrard] was probably frustrated; we didn't make a tackle." In better times Gerrard would have found another way. There would have been a crunching tackle, a long-range shot or a driving run, something choreographed to bring the crowd to its feet and lift his team-mates. The difference is he would have relied on pure ability and competitive courage rather than resorting to studs on flesh. There was no real mitigation. It was, however, easy to understand if Gerrard was burning with frustration. Just before the half-hour, one statistic flashed up that Mignolet had touched the ball more times (10) than Jordan Henderson (eight). Henderson was overwhelmed in a way that, ironically, must have made the home crowd crave Gerrard's presence. Raheem Sterling was out of position and out of sorts. Joe Allen was another who let the game pass him by and defensively there were some startling moments of carelessness, all the way until Emre Can brought down Daley Blind for United's late penalty. Marouane Fellaini's opponents found him a difficult man to tangle with. Blind and Antonio Valencia pushed up from the full-back positions. Herrera played in a way that made it seem absurd he has found it so difficult to get a place in the team and Mata looked absolutely determined to shape the match from his new position, in Van Gaal's words, as a "false right-winger". His first goal was clinical in its execution and classy in its creation but the second was a thing of beauty, a scything volley after he exchanged passes with the substitute Ángel Di María, launching himself into the air and making the perfect connection to volley the ball into the far corner. It was a Mark Hughes-type special, albeit left-footed.

Liverpool's supporters were incensed shortly beforehand that Phil Jones was not sent off for a late challenge on Henderson but it was probably a shade between a yellow and a red -- a shade of orange, perhaps -- and the home side's real problem stemmed from not passing the ball well enough or defending with cohesion. Alberto Moreno's positioning for Mata's first goal was a case in point. Skrtel was not in line with the other centre-backs and Herrera's pass was beautifully weighted for Mata to finish with an equally precise shot in off the post. Liverpool, as Rodgers said, needed Gerrard. The old Gerrard, that is, not the one who lasted 38 seconds.

Man of the match Juan Mata (Manchester United)

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# The Mail

38 SECONDS TO HUMILIATION; Red-card stamp turns Gerrard's last hurrah into dismal little cameo

LIVERPOOL 1 Sturridge 69 MAN UTD 2 Mata 14, 59

SOMETIMES, a man can rage just a little too hard against the dying of the light. That was the pitiful reality of Steven Gerrard's final match for Liverpool against Manchester United. He wanted it too much. The heroic last hurrah, the script from the heavens, the breathless drama, the epic final scene.

Gerrard's codas are rarely short of spectacular. Last-minute goals, revivals, miracles even. This was a screen grab -- blink and you'd miss it -- a dismal little cameo that, knowing the man, will probably haunt him into his twilight years. And not just as a footballer either. Gerrard hoped for so much from his final Anfield appearance against Manchester United. These are the games he knows he will miss and he wanted so badly to make it count. It was over before it had begun. Thirty-eight seconds. That was Gerrard's contribution to this game. Introduced at half-time by Brendan Rodgers, with Liverpool already trailing, Gerrard no doubt hoped to make a big impact on the 45 minutes. He failed even to make it to 45 seconds -- seven short when a stamp on Ander Herrera ended his involvement. It is possible to have sympathy for Gerrard's misguided desire while also believing referee Martin Atkinson's straight red card was entirely merited. Gerrard put one in on Juan Mata -- very hard but fair -- Herrera then gave him one back, and Gerrard stamped on him in fury as retaliation. Atkinson saw it and flashed a red card instantly. He also booked Herrera, although that may have been as a sop to the home crowd, watching their talisman disappearing forlornly down the tunnel. Gerrard didn't even protest greatly. He knew he was wrong, he knew he had lost it in his desperation to leave the pitch a winner on 90 minutes. He knew he had let his team-mates down, too -- and admitted it in a heartfelt apology, made immediately after the match. Last year, the slip against Chelsea -- that was misfortune. This he recognised was little short of madness. Did it cost Liverpool the game, or at least a point? Possibly. Considering how close the scoreline was with 10, who knows if United would have held out against 11?

Certainly, Gerrard's exit left Liverpool with a hill to climb, doubly so when Mata scored his second of the game -- one of the goals of the season to stretch United's lead to 2-0. The defeat leaves Liverpool five points adrift of the top four and still to visit Arsenal and Chelsea. The first of those games must be played without Gerrard, who will also miss next month's FA Cup quarter-final replay against Blackburn Rovers.

After this, how much he will start of the remainder of the season is unknown. A player so overwhelmed by need as his final weeks slip away is hardly reliable. Gerrard had not been sent off in the Premier League for nine years, so this was entirely out of character. That will worry Rodgers as he prepares to regroup for one last assault on Champions League qualification.

Manchester United are in the box seat now. Having ridden their luck so often this season, with a daunting run of fixtures one of two things had to happen. They would either improve, as promised by Louis van Gaal, who claimed his teams always got stronger in the second half of his first season; or United would experience a fearful reckoning, savaged by tougher opponents. Following an impressive display against Tottenham Hotspur last week, United appear to have taken option one. The first half here, certainly, was as good as they have played all season. They reduced Liverpool to less than 40 per cent possession, the midfield was exceptional and they scored a vital goal through Mata. He is one of the three most improved players under Van Gaal and all were in effect yesterday. Michael Carrick has had a huge influence as a defensive screen since returning from injury, while Marouane Fellaini has tremendous nuisance value as a deep-lying targetman, a unique position Van Gaal appears to have created for him. Mata is in much better nick than this time last season under David Moyes, too, particularly as a goalscorer. His two yesterday were exceptionally taken -- and constructed. It was a beautifully worked move for the 14th-minute opener. Daley Blind won the ball on the left, feeding Fellaini who picked out Herrera in the middle. It was his pass that clinched it, splitting the Liverpool defence and leaving Mata with only Simon Mignolet to beat. The finish was equally impressive, shooting across the goalkeeper inside the far post. Liverpool's usual fluency was missing but after 35 minutes they should have levelled. Jordan Henderson crossed from the right, the ball falling to Daniel Sturridge, who generously laid it back to Adam Lallana. Maybe he regretted his decision after Lallana powered his shot low against the perimeter advertising. It wasn't terribly wide, but Lallana had to do better from there. He made way for Gerrard at half-time.

Liverpool improved, strangely, despite being reduced to 10 but United were worth their victory and -- Gerrard's sad exit aside -- were responsible for the most memorable moment of the afternoon.

It came after 59 minutes. Carrick broke up play and fed the ball to Herrera. His blocked shot fell to Mata who then found substitute Angel di Maria. He paused, waited for the opening, and chipped it back to Mata. What happened next was simply delightful. Mata took two steps back, sized up the dropping ball and hit a sideways scissor kick on the volley which utterly defeated Mignolet.

BY far the best team for an hour, United could have won by more had Wayne Rooney not had an injurytime penalty saved after Emre Can had clumsily felled Blind. It was a fine diving stop by Mignolet and of particular frustration for Rooney, being only his fourth shot on target at Anfield in his career.

That Liverpool had earlier got a goal back and had Van Gaal's men sweating for a

while is tribute to a spirit that is increasingly independent of Gerrard's presence -- and will need to be in the coming weeks. The goal came from Sturridge in the 69th minute, beating David de Gea at his near post from a lovely pass by Philippe Coutinho, to remind Roy Hodgson there is not just the one prolific English striker in the Premier League right now. At the end, Atkinson was booed by the locals, although it is hard to see what he got so drastically wrong. If anything Liverpool were lucky -- Martin Skrtel appearing to stamp on De Gea in the last move of the match, provoking a mild scuffle. Atkinson looked to have missed it, the television cameras didn't, and considering what happened to Diego Costa earlier in the season, it is unlikely the FA will either.

## The Daily Telegraph

Gerrard left with stamp of disapproval

Liverpool 1 Sturridge 69 Manchester United 2 Mata 14, 59 Att: 44,405

Steven Gerrard was determined to leave a final mark on English football prior to his summer farewell, but the bruise on Ander Herrera's ankle was not what he envisaged. If the enduring image of last season was the Liverpool captain's slip against Chelsea, a salvage act is required to ensure his stamp on the Manchester United midfielder does not prove equally as significant in the pursuit of Champions League places. Whether it was a mental aberration or the reflection of an adrenalin overdose as he sat on the bench for 45 minutes, the swiftness of his apology underlined his fear Manchester United may not be caught after what looks a defining Anfield win. Here was the manifestation of Gerrard's complex relationship with the most meaningful fixtures. His career is littered with glory and calamity on the biggest occasions; stunning winners and own goals; inspirational comebacks and ruinous backpasses; 30 yard equalisers in the last minute and perplexing dismissals in his first minute; every trophy won except the one he craves most. No Liverpool player has shaken the hand of triumph and felt the kick of catastrophe in such equal measure. Of Gerrard's seven red cards for Liverpool, four have come against Manchester United or Everton. It is no coincidence. These fixtures can stir the blood but equally pure the brain, and Gerrard is not used to being unleashed at the halfway point of a gladiatorial battle. In the efforts to rationalise the 38 seconds between his half-time introduction and red card, you could imagine Gerrard stewing on the Liverpool bench, simmering as the away fans worked through their repertoire about lost titles, boiling point reached as he witnessed every 50-50 challenge go United's way. He introduced himself with a ferocious tackle on Juan Mata, and as The Kop rose to applaud the aggression, he followed up with what replays and the subsequent apology confirmed was a stamp on Herrera.

Despite the ire from the home fans, referee Martin Atkinson deserved credit for spotting it and issuing the red card. Providing he does not return on loan next season, this could be an ignominious end to Gerrard's association with what is ironically described as the Premier League's 'glamour' fixture. It was not the only ugly scene, the video assessors no doubt pencilling in several hours for reviewing duty on Monday morning. The glee of United's fans was all too apparent. They already have an extensive discography of tunes dedicated to Liverpool and their captain, and swiftly penned another to add to their playlist. There were a couple of occasions they lauded the excellence of their own team, too. For all the inevitable focus on Gerrard's selfdestruction, United were already in control and their most accomplished performance to date under Louis van Gaal was a contributory factor in the home indiscipline. This was the United we have not seen since Sir Alex Ferguson's retirement - fluent in possession, overpowering in midfield and menacing in attack. Liverpool could barely get hold of the ball in the first half, the 3-4-3 that has caused such a transformation since their last Premier League defeat suddenly looking flawed.

Liverpool have spent the last three months trying to repair the damage of their previous setback against United, taking the plaudits for their style and tactical nous while Van Gaal was said to be stumbling to victories. The contrast between a side in control of their emotions and another playing in a state of frenzy was apparent before Gerrard's ugly cameo. It was the team in red that was bereft of composure. "We played them off the pitch in the first half," Van Gaal said. "We beat them with their own weapons - pressing." The Dutchman's assessment was fair. United looked stronger, quicker and hungrier as they grasped their half-time lead, prompting Rodgers's swift substitution. Marouane Fellaini was possessed in the kind of role David Moyes saw the best of him at Everton but mystifyingly never used him at United, an advanced midfield bully bruising the air, the turf and anyone within distance. United's first diagonal ball to the Belgian was within ten seconds, Fellaini shrugging off Emre Can - the plan to play on the edge of Liverpool's penalty area all too apparent. This was no mere direct action, however. Herrera and Michael Carrick offered the midfield elegance, and Liverpool's creative energy was subdued to the point of anonymity. At times Carrick looked like an alien presence, a picture of serenity in the midst of havoc. The visitors' opening goal, courtesy of Mata on 14 minutes was fully deserved, pieced together with the kind of high tempo move Van Gaal and United's followers have been yearning for. Herrera crafted it, picking out Mata who was enjoying himself against the labouring Alberto Moreno. He finished with aplomb after being sent scurrying into a faceoff with Simon Mignolet.

Just as at the Liberty Stadium last Monday, Brendan Rodgers was forced to alter his strategy, switching to a diamond midfield in the hope Philippe Coutinho would find space. The 3-4-3 worked better with Sterling up front than Daniel Sturridge,

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who is either still hunting for fitness or is not as capable of linking the play for midfield runners. "It was not just the sending-off, we gave them control far too easy," Rodgers said. With 10 men, another tactical reshuffle assisted Liverpool until Mata doubled the advantage with a brilliant volley after linking with substitute Angel di Maria. It seemed to be a case of damage limitation for the hosts, but Sturridge reduced the deficit on 70 minutes and a missed penalty from Wayne Rooney in injury time made United sweat until the end. They left Merseyside with a fivepoint lead, Liverpool's ambition of stealing fourth now looking suspiciously in need of result against Arsenal in their next fixture. Van Gaal showed Rodgers he is not the only one who can find a winning formula at the right time, and the head start United were given by Liverpool at the beginning the season may now be decisive. In the directors box, there were two notable observers. A few seats from Pele sat former United manager Ferguson, who must have been thrilled by the sense of recognition. "This was the moment," Van Gaal said in the press conference, suggesting the last two wins represent a turning point of his reign. United are looking menacingly better, ensuring the Liverpool captain's long goodbye must now include one final shot at redemption.

THE

INDEPENDENT

Juan Mata inspires United after shock Steven Gerrard red card

The great Pele had not returned to his seat in the Anfield directors' box and, tellingly, the digital clock by the corner of the Kop had not been restarted for the second half, so in some ways you could say that time really did stand still for Steven Gerrard's moment of madness. Why did he do it? His last game against Manchester United at Anfield and the only explanation for his stamp on the leg on the inoffensive Ander Herrera, and the subsequent red card, was that the occasion had shot his composure to bits. Maybe not just the occasion, but this long goodbye to the only club of his life, his most recent injury and the dawning that Liverpool do not need him like they used to. Gerrard started the game as a substitute and one required to warm-up near the United fans but although they were relentless, he has surely heard their songs about him dozens of times before. This was just his second appearance after that hamstring injury and while the clock inside his head must be ticking, this was not the actions one expects of Gerrard, 34 years old, a man with a century of England caps and every medal bar the league title. This was the Gerrard as he was occasionally in his early years, the combustible young man sent off for kicking Kevin Campbell in the Merseyside derby in 1999. He was on the pitch today for 38 seconds. As Pele would no doubt testify, it takes some people longer to order their favourite version of the brand of sandwich that the Brazilian is paid so handsomely to endorse. Gerrard built his career on being the man who could turn a game at Anfield in the last few seconds, but rarely has he had quite such an impact in the first minute. Wit Liverpool one goal down, playing badly and then facing the prospect of a half with just ten men, Gerrard will take little consolation from the fact that his team-mates did better without him. It was testament to the will of this Liverpool team that, despite falling two goals behind, they were still in this game right to the end after Daniel Sturridge's goal narrowed the deficit. But it was United who won the game, largely thanks to two superb goals from Juan Mata – the second an airborne volley straight out of the Mark Hughes playbook. That Wayne Rooney missed from the penalty spot in time added on at the end of the game at Anfield and for it not to be the most memorable event of the afternoon told you something about the drama of the occasion. While Mata's technical brilliance was undeniable there were many times throughout an often low-quality game when United relied on the muscle and the heading ability of Marouane Fellaini. Whatever his faults, he is not a bad man to have on your side when the locals are hostile and the stakes are high. United had a much better first half, and after Gerrard's red card they should have had an even better second half. But they struggled to make that dominance tell in the late stages with Mario Balotelli on as a substitute and the excellent Philippe Coutinho pulling the strings in midfield. For Louis Van Gaal, however, this represented the double over Liverpool in his first season and opens the gap to their rivals in fifth to five points. Afterwards Rodgers had no stomach to condemn Gerrard who now misses three games including the FA Cup quarter-replay against Blackburn Rovers. More of a concern for Rodgers was the potential for retrospective action against Martin Skrtel for a late studs-up challenge on David De Gea that looked provocative. Rodgers' team were barely in it from the start while United settled quickly. Fellaini was crucial in those early stages in asserting United's supremacy in the midfield. He won every heading duel that fell within his orbit, and some that did not. United did not create many chances, but the one in which they scored from was easily the best move of a hard-fought, inelegant first half. It was Alberto Moreno who lost possession for Liverpool and from there it went forward until Fellaini found Herrera and he played his pass into the right channel. Coming in from the right side, Mata sprung the offside trap and beat Mignolet brilliantly with a shot inside the goalkeeper's right post. By that stage Liverpool had got behind United just once, when Raheem Sterling had run out of ideas down the right side and that was much the way it was for the rest of the first half. Despite the best efforts of Coutinho to get his team moving on the counter-attack, there was nothing about Liverpool that was as sharp as United's move for the goal. Sturridge had just one sight of goal which he cut back for Adam Lallana, a most un-Sturridge like option to take. Lallana shot wide.

United were fortunate at times with the referee Martin Atkinson booked Joe Allen early. Fellaini managed to escape a similar fate for a tangle with the same player. Phil Jones' heavy collision with Lallana was classic Jones, the driverless train ploughing onwards. He was finally booked later in the second half for a tackle so late on Jordan Henderson it was better suited to the 4pm kick-off. On came Gerrard at the start of the second half. His introduction had lifted the stadium. His tackle on Herrera was hard but admissible and then came the boot plunged down on the leg of the United player. He went off amid anger in the stands and then, as realisation spread that it was the right decision, disbelief. All first half the Liverpool captain had to listen to the away fans sing that "Gerrard f\*\*\*\*\* it up". And now he really had. Before the hour, United had their second, a superb volley from Mata from a cross by the substitute Angel Di Maria. Liverpool fought back and within ten minutes Sturridge had scored, running onto Coutinho's ball down the right. United never took advantage of the extra man. Only in the later stages, with Liverpool truly stretched did they win a penalty when Emre Can pushed Daley Blind. Simon Mignolet saved from Rooney and Liverpool were alive to the very end, when Skrtel clashed with De Gea. By then Gerrard was readying himself for an apology at a time in his life when he should know better.

DAILY

Mirror

Juan Mata bags a brace as Steven Gerrard sees red after 48 seconds

Pele was here at Anfield for 45 minutes, in his latest role as a salesman for an American sandwich shop. He no longer advertises little blue pills. Just as well on Sunday, because no one in the Premier League needs extra stimulation. There could hardly have been a more appropriate match to decide which club will represent the maddest competition in world football in the Champions League next season. Liverpool's club captain Steven Gerrard was sent off just 38 seconds after arriving as a substitute, for a crazed stamp on Ander Herrera. His team, outplayed with 11 men, threatened a remarkable comeback with 10. But the decisive contribution came from Juan Mata – a sublime talent, who looked as though he might be on his way to being bombed out of a second major club in the Crash, Bang, Wallop League. After weeks of humiliation for English clubs in Europe, this red-letter fixture between the nation's two greatest trophy-winning institutions laid bare the essence of Premier League football – the frenzied tempo, unfettered passion, mindless violence and terrace hatred. But United have clicked since Mata was restored to the starting line-up against Spurs last week with Angel Di Maria suspended. The Spaniard netted a clinical first and a spectacular second to send Louis van Gaal's men five points clear of their bitter rivals and looking nailed-on to replace them again in the Champions League. Mata, sold by Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho for a lack of defensive qualities, was even seen winning a tackle at right-back as Liverpool pressed for a late equaliser. This was a personal triumph for Mata but was also hugely significant for Van Gaal's reign. There were plaudits for Brendan Rodgers in the build-up, just as for Tottenham's Mauricio Pochettino before he crossed swords with Van Gaal last week. But the Dutchman put both young pretenders in their place and looks certain to achieve his main objective of restoring United to the European elite – to keep those commercial deals rolling in, if not to seriously compete for the trophy. It was Liverpool's first defeat in 14 league matches since a 3-0 defeat at Old Trafford in December – and Gerrard accepted blame after a challenge which looked the mark of a severely frustrated man. Since the slip against Chelsea which chucked away the title last term, he has looked broken. His farewell tour is threatening to fall flat now. With a three-match ban looming, it is not inconceivable Sunday's red card could be his last significant contribution as a Liverpool player. Rodgers pointed to a more short-term frustration, suggesting Gerrard was angered by Liverpool's lack of intensity before he arrived as a half-time sub for Adam Lallana. The Liverpool boss claimed it was "probably our first challenge of the game". He was not far wrong. United had been outstanding. On 13 minutes, Marouane Fellaini squared to Herrera, who played a sweeping pass to free Mata, the Spaniard slotting in off the far post. A goal manufactured by David Moyes's two marquee signings and Herrera, the one who got away. Lallana squandered Liverpool's one great first-half chance, then came Gerrard's stamp on Herrera after a 50-50 challenge. On the hour, some genius among the mayhem. Mata exchanged passes with Di Maria and scored by combining a bicycle kick with a stuntman's tumble. Yet the 10 men got a grip and Daniel Sturridge beat David De Gea at his near post. Wayne Rooney had a penalty saved by Simon Mignolet after Emre Can shoved Danny Blind. Martin Skrtel appeared to stamp on De Gea, ensuring the match ended on a fitting note – white noise and unconcealed rage. Pele had long gone. In search of the beautiful game, perhaps.

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LIVERPOOL

ECHO

You can talk tactics. Wing-backs. Stupid stamps. All of that. But there's one question that will have been nagging at the back of supporters' minds long after they began trudging home following a dire Anfield afternoon.

Does this Liverpool side have the bottle to succeed?

That might seem a little harsh given there were a plethora of reasons why Brendan Rodgers' men managed the notable achievement of, for 45 minutes at least, making a bang average Manchester United appear borderline world beaters.

Yet when the Reds boss sifts through the wreckage, there will be a recurring theme.

This was Liverpool's biggest game of the season. A pivotal moment in the chase for Champions League qualification against their nearest rivals.

And they blew it.

Just like almost 12 months earlier when, with a first title in 24 years beckoning, Liverpool welcomed Chelsea.

And they blew it.

Steven Gerrard, of course, was integral to both failures, although in vastly different circumstances.

But while his swift red card against United didn't help, in truth the game was being lost long before the veteran was thrown into the fray at half-time.

In attempting to inject passion and purpose into Liverpool's performance, Gerrard went over the top – literally.

But who else was there to do so? Who else in the Reds line-up was ready to take the game by the scruff of the neck and fire up the troops?

This is a problem for Rodgers. He has spoken in the past about possessing on-field leaders, but the reality appears somewhat different.

And when Gerrard departs in the summer, it's going to become an even greater concern.

The ability to handle pressure is crucial to any successful side, cool heads required to negotiate a crunch one-off fixture.

Liverpool, still a relatively young side, don't really have that right now, further evidence of which can be seen in their indifferent cup record under Rodgers, too often a case of nearly but not quite.

It doesn't matter how you get over the line in the end as long as you do so: look back at Liverpool's past cup finals wins and many tested their mental fortitude to the limit.

Sure, Rodgers will point to the fine form of the Reds since the New Year, both this season and last.

But on each occasion they were regarded underdogs with little to lose and barely any realistic expectation. They could crack on and build momentum until, eventually, hitting the brick wall.

Thankfully, it's not over yet.

Liverpool still have eight games remaining to make up the five points to the top four, but that is going to most likely demand victories at Arsenal and Chelsea.

Perhaps being unfancied will work in the Reds' favour. That, though, isn't enough in the long term.

Certainly, Dr Steve Peters should become a busier man over the next few months.

MANCHESTER EVENING NEWS

Full steam ahead to the Champions League.

Get those UEFA Handel's Zadok the Priest tapes out of the Old Trafford vault because the stirring tones of Europe's elite tournament anthem is set to be played again next autumn. This had the feel of a make-or-break day in the top four rat race. To the winners the probable ticket to Champions League qualification. To the losers a damaging huge dent in the ambitions to ensure feasting at the top Euro table next season.

United's potentially fraught finale to the season is turning into a triumphal march back to the big stage. In the warm up Brendan Rodgers, a student of Van Gaal, had his backroom staff put his squad through a virtually identical practise passing session. It was an impressive display of quick one-touch football.

Glance across the pitch to United's squad and their possession warm up was equally as awesome. Nobody was putting a foot wrong in either camp.

Something had to give when the real business started surely otherwise we were probably in for a stalemate. But it was the previously buoyant Liverpool who cracked. The question mark hovering over United all week in the build up to this showdown was whether or not putting Spurs to the sword at Old Trafford was one thing and dominating Liverpool in front of the Kop was another.

There have been a few false dawns during the course of the last eight months when the Reds threatened to get into top gear only to fall flat on their faces leaving Van Gaal's philosophy up to be savaged.

But the test doesn't come harder than this and at half time when the time came to turn the examination paper over to page two it had to be a supremely confident United who approached the next set of questions in a more positive mood. True the questions had become harder in the latter stages of the first 45 minutes but Van Gaal's XI had still managed to answer them.

It was a first half that was almost perfection for United and their best opening 45 of the campaign surely. In the art of quelling a partisan crowd and an in-form swaggering opponent the Reds produced a masterpiece opening.

As the Kop grew anxious United grew in stature and gave themselves the steady platform with Juan Mata's 13th minute goal.

When the debate over whether Angel di Maria should be brought back immediately after his one-match ban for his sending off some thought the £59.7m buy's speed and counter-attacking qualities should win the vote.

They argued that despite Mata's goal record he didn't possess the explosive 10 yards to damage Liverpool. But the Spaniard didn't need to be Usain Bolt to take advantage of a superb Ander Herrera through ball instead he just glided into the space behind Liverpool's defence and kept his cool at the Kop End to put United ahead and join an illustrious elite band of Reds who've scored in the enemy's territory. Anfield had been so raucous before the match but United's dominance saw them turn quickly on their heroes as they struggled to disrupt Van Gaal's imperious team. Liverpool did finally respond but it took then until the 35th minute to show their true colours. It knocked United out of their stride but they survived superbly the fightback.

Only downside was the form of skipper Wayne Rooney who was well off it while his colleagues papered over his unusual incompetency. Maybe the thought of the watching great Pele studying those in his famous number 10 shirt had unnerved the skipper. If his leadership was muted on the day Rodgers put his eggs in the Steven Gerrard basket after the interval. It was just 38 seconds before they were completely scrambled. Leading by example and urging your colleagues on is one thing but the adrenaline must have been in overdrive as it coursed through Gerrard's veins. Stamping on Herrera less than a minute after coming on was utter stupidity. It added just another verse in the many United chorister's anti-Gerrard catalogue of songs and this was as good as over as a contest.

Van Gaal had baked the cake, his side had iced it and then Mata plonked the ceremonial cherry on the top in the 59th minute.

Di Maria had made onto the pitch for Ashley Young and five minutes later caressed a superb chip to Mata in the box.

The midfielder executed a world class finish as he volleyed in a bicycle shot over his right shoulder. Even the watching great Pele must have bolted out of his VIP seat when that beauty flew in.

A man down, a rudderless side in disarray United had their opponents where they wanted them.

But Liverpool somehow crafted a reaction from their adversity to inflame Anfield again as Daniel Sturridge beat de Gea at his near post in the 69th minute.

Now the questions on the paper had become graduate standard.

With Mario Balotelli and Sturridge asking the posers Smalling and Jones responses were sure and defiant.

The only one who flunked the test was Rooney. After an off key first half, a slightly improved second, he was then offered the best redemption with a chance to score his first Anfield goal for 10 years from the penalty spot.

Liverpool 1 Manchester United 2: Player ratings

Liverpool 1-2 Manchester United: 30-second verdict

Blind was bundled over by Can and the skipper strode to the 12-yard shoot-out. Keeper Mignolet smothered his effort easily.

Perhaps this was one of those occasion when protocol should have been ignored and Mata should have been handed a hat trick opportunity.

Nonetheless when the 90-minute examination paper was complete United had passed with flying colours.

Date: 22 March 2015 Opposition: Manchester United Competition: League	Times	Telegraph	Echo		22 March 2015
	Guardian	Mirror	MEN		
	Independent	Mail	BBC		

BBC

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard was sent off 38 seconds after coming on as a half-time substitute as Manchester United retained their grip on a top-four place with a vital win at Anfield.  
Gerrard was introduced for Adam Lallana at the start of the second half with United deservedly leading through Juan Mata's early goal - but was gone almost as quickly after following up a thunderous tackle on the goalscorer with a reckless reaction to a challenge with a clear stamp on Ander Herrera.  
It was inexcusable behaviour from a player of Gerrard's experience, having just been handed the responsibility by manager Brendan Rodgers of getting an underperforming Liverpool side back into the game.  
Mata emphasised the folly of Gerrard's red card when he added a second with a sensational volley just before the hour to confirm United's superiority in a game that confirmed the impression that manager Louis van Gaal is now getting the sort of performances and results he demands.  
Daniel Sturridge pulled a goal back to give Liverpool hope of an unlikely comeback but the visitors were never seriously threatened again and could even afford the luxury of Wayne Rooney seeing an injury-time penalty saved by Liverpool keeper Simon Mignolet.  
United built on last Sunday's impressive 3-0 win against Tottenham to extend their lead to five points over Liverpool, who are a place behind in fifth.  
And the magnitude of the win was emphasised by the sight of manager Van Gaal joining his players as they celebrated with their fans in the Anfield Road end at the final whistle.  
The game ended in more acrimony after a challenge by Reds defender Martin Skrtel on United keeper David De Gea - but nothing could diminish United's joy at a fully deserved win against a home side who paid the price for a poor first-half performance and a moment of sheer recklessness from Gerrard.  
The 34-year-old, who announced in January that he was leaving Anfield after joining the Reds aged nine, will now serve a three-game ban.  
The hosts have made a fast start their trademark at Anfield under Rodgers - but United turned the tables comprehensively and fully merited the lead given to then when Herrera slipped in Mata superbly for a composed finish in front of the Kop.  
The visitors' tempo meant Liverpool were getting no joy in midfield or attack, where Sturridge cut an isolated figure and Raheem Sterling was pushed to the periphery on the right flank.  
Sturridge did, however, set up Liverpool's best chance of the half when he played in Lallana with a clear sight of goal. The former Southampton man took aim before sending a side-footed finish wastefully wide.  
Lallana was the player sacrificed for the brief introduction of Gerrard, who hinted at his approach with a thunderous challenge on Mata, followed seconds later with another tangle involving Herrera.  
For a player of such vast experience, Gerrard's reaction - appearing to stamp on his opponent on the ground - was only going to end one way, with a deserved red card.  
Liverpool's fans were furious, especially when Phil Jones escaped with a yellow card for a wild lunge on Jordan Henderson - and their mood darkened further when United added a brilliant second after 58 minutes.  
Angel Di Maria, on as a substitute for the limping Ashley Young, lifted the ball into the area for Mata to deposit a brilliant low finish past keeper Simon Mignolet with an acrobatic scissor kick.  
Liverpool had actually responded well to Gerrard's dismissal and kept the game alive with more than 20 minutes left when Sturridge beat De Gea with a shot at his near post that the normally impeccable United keeper should have dealt with much better.  
The final drama came with that missed Rooney penalty after Emre Can fouled Danny Blind, but fortunately for Rooney it was not to prove expensive.

Date: 22 March 2015

Opposition: Manchester United

Competition: League

Times	Telegraph	Echo
Guardian	Mirror	MEN
Independent	Mail	BBC

BBC

90:00 +4:58 Full time Second Half ends, Liverpool 1, Manchester United 2.

90:00 +3:50 Substitution Substitution Substitution, Manchester United. Marcos Rojo replaces Daley Blind.

90:00 +3:13 Penalty saved! Wayne Rooney (Manchester United fails to capitalise on this great opportunity, right footed shot saved in the bottom left corner.

90:00 +2:24 Penalty Manchester United. Daley Blind draws a foul in the penalty area.

90:00 +2:24 Penalty conceded by Emre Can (Liverpool after a foul in the penalty area.

87:24 Foul by Wayne Rooney (Manchester United.

87:24 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.

85:30 Falcao (Manchester United wins a free kick in the defensive half.

85:30 Foul by Joe Allen (Liverpool.

84:35 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Antonio Valencia.

82:20 Substitution Substitution Substitution, Manchester United. Falcao replaces Ander Herrera.

81:06 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Marouane Fellaini.

78:48 Foul by Antonio Valencia (Manchester United.

78:48 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

78:10 Foul by Chris Smalling (Manchester United.

78:10 Mario Balotelli (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.

76:46 Antonio Valencia (Manchester United wins a free kick on the right wing.

76:46 Foul by Raheem Sterling (Liverpool.

75:36 Foul by Marouane Fellaini (Manchester United.

75:36 Martin Skrtel (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

74:55 Attempt blocked. Mario Balotelli (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked.

74:06 Foul by Chris Smalling (Manchester United.

74:06 Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.

72:48 Juan Mata (Manchester United wins a free kick in the defensive half.

72:48 Foul by Raheem Sterling (Liverpool.

71:54 Delay over. They are ready to continue.

71:27 Delay in match Simon Mignolet (Liverpool because of an injury.

70:58 Foul by Wayne Rooney (Manchester United.

70:58 Simon Mignolet (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

69:56 Marouane Fellaini (Manchester United wins a free kick on the left wing.

69:56 Foul by Joe Allen (Liverpool.

68:48 Goal scored Goal! Goal! Liverpool 1, Manchester United 2. Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool right footed shot from a difficult angle on the right to the bottom right corner.

68:14 Ander Herrera (Manchester United wins a free kick on the right wing.

68:14 Foul by Mamadou Sakho (Liverpool.

66:55 Booking Mario Balotelli (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.

66:44 Phil Jones (Manchester United wins a free kick in the defensive half.

66:44 Foul by Mario Balotelli (Liverpool.

65:05 Substitution Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Mario Balotelli replaces Alberto Moreno.

64:36 Marouane Fellaini (Manchester United wins a free kick in the defensive half.

64:36 Foul by Emre Can (Liverpool.

59:35 Foul by Michael Carrick (Manchester United.

59:35 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

58:18 Goal scored Goal! Goal! Liverpool 0, Manchester United 2. Juan Mata (Manchester United left footed shot from the right side of the box to the bottom left corner. Assisted by Ángel Di María.

58:11 Attempt blocked. Ander Herrera (Manchester United right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Michael Carrick.

56:22 Hand ball by Ángel Di María (Manchester United.

55:19 Booking Phil Jones (Manchester United is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.

55:15 Foul by Phil Jones (Manchester United.

55:15 Jordan Henderson (Liverpool wins a free kick on the right wing.

54:18 Substitution Substitution Substitution, Manchester United. Ángel Di María replaces Ashley Young.

53:49 Attempt missed. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is just a bit too high. Assisted by Mamadou Sakho.

49:54 Foul by Wayne Rooney (Manchester United.

49:54 Martin Skrtel (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

47:00 Delay over. They are ready to continue.

46:40 Booking Ander Herrera (Manchester United is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.

46:34 Delay in match Ander Herrera (Manchester United because of an injury.

45:38 Dismissal Dismissal Steven Gerrard (Liverpool is shown the red card for fighting.

45:33 Foul by Ander Herrera (Manchester United.

45:33 Steven Gerrard (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

45:00 Second Half begins Liverpool 0, Manchester United 1.

45:00 Substitution Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Steven Gerrard replaces Adam Lallana.

45:00 +2:15 Half time First Half ends, Liverpool 0, Manchester United 1.

45:00 +1:12 Attempt saved. Michael Carrick (Manchester United right footed shot from outside the box is saved in the top right corner. Assisted by Marouane Fellaini.

44:20 Phil Jones (Manchester United wins a free kick in the defensive half.

44:20 Foul by Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool.

42:43 Offside, Manchester United. Ander Herrera tries a through ball, but Juan Mata is caught offside.

37:45 Corner, Manchester United. Conceded by Raheem Sterling.

37:12 Michael Carrick (Manchester United wins a free kick in the defensive half.

37:12 Foul by Jordan Henderson (Liverpool.

36:45 Attempt blocked. Joe Allen (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is

blocked. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho.

36:39 Attempt blocked. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Alberto Moreno.

35:39 Foul by Marouane Fellaini (Manchester United.

35:39 Joe Allen (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

34:35 Attempt missed. Adam Lallana (Liverpool left footed shot from the centre of the box is close, but misses to the left. Assisted by Daniel Sturridge.

33:37 Foul by Marouane Fellaini (Manchester United.

33:37 Emre Can (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

31:02 Juan Mata (Manchester United wins a free kick on the right wing.

31:02 Foul by Adam Lallana (Liverpool.

29:55 Attempt blocked. Wayne Rooney (Manchester United right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Ander Herrera.

26:04 Corner, Manchester United. Conceded by Joe Allen.

24:46 Chris Smalling (Manchester United wins a free kick in the defensive half.

24:46 Foul by Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool.

22:35 Delay over. They are ready to continue.

21:30 Delay in match Adam Lallana (Liverpool because of an injury.

20:53 Foul by Phil Jones (Manchester United.

20:53 Adam Lallana (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.

20:28 Foul by Marouane Fellaini (Manchester United.

20:28 Emre Can (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

18:36 Booking Joe Allen (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.

18:33 Ander Herrera (Manchester United wins a free kick in the attacking half.

18:33 Foul by Joe Allen (Liverpool.

16:51 Attempt missed. Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool left footed shot from the left side of the box is just a bit too high. Assisted by Jordan Henderson.

15:30 Offside, Manchester United. Michael Carrick tries a through ball, but Wayne Rooney is caught offside.

14:27 Foul by Antonio Valencia (Manchester United.

14:27 Alberto Moreno (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

13:02 Goal scored Goal! Goal! Liverpool 0, Manchester United 1. Juan Mata (Manchester United right footed shot from the right side of the box to the bottom left corner. Assisted by Ander Herrera with a through ball.

11:54 Offside, Manchester United. Ander Herrera tries a through ball, but Wayne Rooney is caught offside.

11:27 Foul by Phil Jones (Manchester United.

11:27 Adam Lallana (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

7:32 Juan Mata (Manchester United wins a free kick on the right wing.

7:32 Foul by Alberto Moreno (Liverpool.

1:27 Corner, Manchester United. Conceded by Martin Skrtel.

0:00 First Half begins.

0:00 Lineups are announced and players are warming up.