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Opposition:
Competition: League

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THE TIMES

## Houllier building on weak foundations

Chelsea 2 Liverpool 1

NEXT to Gerard Houllier, Gianluca Vialli, with his penchant for school-uniform colours and jumpers, looks every inch the keen student. But Houllier, while appearing professorial, needs to peek over Vialli's shoulder to discover the formula they are working to at Stamford Bridge.

Chelsea's victory came too easily, Liverpool only applying pressure in the final 20 minutes, and had the visitors secured a draw, no one would have been fooled. Chelsea should have doubled their goal tally while so evidently on top, but that has been their bugbear all season and still they keep on winning. Liverpool cannot keep on doing anything except bow to the gods of inconsistency. It is not difficult to picture Houllier buried in the bootroom, chalk in one hand, board duster in the other, trying to unearth the formation that will solve the puzzle and unleash on to the FA Carling Premiership a Liverpool side that lives up to its billing.

That is perhaps at the root of the problem. All this fiddling, tweaking and cajoling has to stop. Liverpoolshould have been rebuilt years ago, possibly twice over since they last won the league title in 1990. Arguably Bill Shankly's greatest talent was in seeing decline in the midst of victory, of planning beyond the next cup final, the next trophy.

Now the opposite is true. Houllier is clinging on and building around foundations that are just are not strong enough. Both Liverpool and England are suffering because the partnership of Ince and Redknapp in midfield is considered a perfect combination of guile and guts. Well, it ought to be, and on occasion it has been, but their fine performances do not outweigh their disappointing ones.

Against Chelsea, Liverpool gave away possession in midfield and put the defence under constant pressure. Babb and Matteo coped reasonably well and while Kvarme and Bjornebye blundered, struggling to adapt to the 4-4-2 formation forced on them when Heggem had to be replaced in the ninth minute, the entire back line could argue they had been let down.

Houllier has been protective of the team when, on their travels, they have lost ground - this was their eighth away defeat of the season - but on Saturday he was less inclined to find excuses. Even so, he restricted his criticism to the niceties rather than the fundamentals. "We build up too slow. What gives fluidity to a game is movement," he said.

Some disillusioned supporters might want to see movement of a different sort. With only a decent placing in the Premiership to strive for, Liverpool are in danger of becoming insular and obsessed.

Chelsea's concentration ebbed a touch too early, but you could almost forgive them for believing they had done enough in the first half to win the game.

They rotate much more than just their strike-force at Stamford Bridge. They take it turns to be heroes, too. Right now Goldbaek is the toast of the Fulham Road. He and Petrescu enjoyed themselves, pinging the ball from wing to wing, leaving the visitors dizzy and disorientated, and from a deep cross by the Rumanian, Goldbaek snatched Chelsea's second goal. "I was unmarked," he admitted. That happens sometimes but why had no one on the Liverpool bench noticed that Goldbaek had been continuously unmarked and ordered Kvarme to stalk him?

Liverpool could have played the misfortune card early on, Babb giving away an early penalty, converted by Leboeuf, after it appeared he was not intentionally handling the ball but claiming a foul against him by Flo.

Liverpool created chances other than the one that led to Owen's goal in the 77th minute, but it is not just Chelsea who have brushed them aside this season.

CHELSEA (4-4-2): E De Goey - A Ferrer, M Desailly, F Leboeuf (sub: B Lambourde, 33min), G Le Saux (sub: E Newton, 82) - D Petrescu, R Di Matteo, J Morris, B Goldbaek - T A Flo (sub: M Forssell, 86), G Zola.

LIVERPOOL (3-5-2): D James - B T Kvarme, D Matteo, P Babb - V Heggem (sub: S McManaman, 9), J Redknapp, P Ince (sub: J M Ferri, 48), P Berger (sub: K Riedle 80), S I Bjornebye - M Owen, R Fowler.

Referee: P Durkin.

theguardian

## Turf at the top as Liverpool wilt in a pitch battle: Martin Thorpe sees Chelsea turn the pressure cooker up another degree

CHELSEA successfully unveiled their relaid playing surface on Saturday, and then answered the recurring question: can their performances stay at Championship pitch?

Another three points pocketed against a wretched Liverpool ensured that Gianluca Vialli's second-placed side continue to keep up with the Fergies and, with a game in hand, remain perfectly placed to pounce on any domestic slip-up by Manchester United now that that club's main gaze has returned to Europe.However, Aston Villa's implosion offers a chilling example of what can happen to early shoots in the harsh climate of a long season. And Chelsea's reputation is hardly that of a hardy perennial.

So it was interesting to hear Vialli explain why his team should no longer be regarded as a collection of highly paid peacocks but instead be seen as a side with the strength and persistence required to win the title race.

'I try to sign players with a winning mentality,' said the Italian. 'To be consistent the team needs a big desire as well as being mentally and physically strong. My players have shown that in winning everything around the world.'

Indeed, although the unique pressures of championship-chasing are relatively new to Chelsea as a club, the team are old hands. Saturday's XI between them boast an astonishing 17 league championship medals, with Vialli adding another two with Sampdoria and Juventus.

The goalkeeper Ed de Goey won one title with Feyenoord, Albert Ferrer five with Barcelona, Marcel Desailly one with Marseille and two with Milan, Graeme Le Saux one with Blackburn, Dan Petrescu four with Steaua Bucharest, Roberto Di Matteo one with the Swiss club Aarau, Bjarne Goldbaek one with Kaiserslauten and Gianfranco Zola one with Napoli.

Such bountiful backgrounds also help in a variety of other ways. 'To be consistent as a team you need to know what you have to do tactically,' says Vialli, 'and then experience is often more important than being skilful because these players know what to do, when and how.'

Vialli's defensive homework has been equally thorough, not only drafting in the right-back Ferrer and capturing one of the world's finest centre-backs in Desailly last summer but making sure that defensive-mindedness starts with the strikers and works its way back. 'We try to be tight, narrow and aggressive.'

The Chelsea manager, in acknowledging that the old cliche of winning games while playing badly 'is the key to the title', will also be encouraged by his team's mastery of that art on quite a few occasions this season.

Chelsea's striking concerns remain. Though they were eased slightly on Saturday by Tore Andre Flo's return to the starting line-up after a long injury lay-off, transfer cash is in short supply until the summer, and only an on-loan reinforcement is likely before then.

Gerard Houllier wishes Liverpool's problems were so simple. Whereas Chelsea unveiled their new pitch, the visitors' manager was left merely to consider which players to put out to grass.

A largely spiritless performance gave Chelsea the encouragement to turn on their party tricks, go 2-0 up after 38 minutes and, despite a belated Liverpool flurry, pocket another morale-boosting win before Thursday's Cup Winners' Cup quarter-final.

At one time a visit from the Merseyside club represented a yardstick of a team's Championship credentials. Now the only measuring going on at Anfield is how far the end-of-season axe will reach into a low-quality squad as Houllier attempts to rebuild the Liverpool legend squandered by so many years of inconsistency.

He is likely to start at the back. On seven minutes Le Saux was allowed to cut in unmarked from the left to set up Zola for a cross which Phil Babb clearly handled in the area. Leboeuf converted the penalty. For Chelsea's second the impressive Goldbaek was left free at the far post to volley home Petrescu's cross.

In between Robbie Fowler and Michael Owen missed inviting chances, but then Chelsea went close three times before Liverpool, emerging with more urgency after the interval, pulled a goal back through Owen.

As tensions mounted Le Saux then appeared to hit Fowler off the ball, for which he could face further action, but despite a late slice of pressure Liverpool ended a miserable day by failing to force one save from De Goey.

*Compiled by Graeme Riley*

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The Mail

The Daily Telegraph

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THE INDEPENDENT

## Chelsea have the Desailly to win

TWO VASTLY experienced centre-backs, veterans of combat at a rarified level, spent the entire 90 minutes at Stamford Bridge organising, coaxing and clearing virtually every threat to the respective rearguards. Marcel Desailly influenced a vital Chelsea victory from the heart of the action. Phil Thompson, symbolising Liverpool's role in the title race, was outside looking in.

Now working as coach under Gerard Houllier, Thompson cut an animated figure on the touchline. Once he had stopped making phantom headers, the former Liverpool captain must have wondered how the club of Hansen, Lawrenson and Nicol could have ended up without a single defender remotely in Desailly's class.

Franck Leboeuf may have been wearing the armband for Chelsea, but his exit with an ankle injury merely highlighted the leadership provided by his fellow Frenchman. On the day when Aston Villa's collapse confirmed the Premiership stakes as a three-horse race, John Gregory's belief that "strikers win matches but defenders win championships" found a new standard-bearer in Desailly.

The Villa manager's words, uttered when his own back line was looking impregnable, neatly articulated a philosophy to which George Graham, like Brian Clough before him, has long been a subscriber. As an attacker of considerable flair, Gianluca Vialli may seem an unlikely adherent. As an Italian, he is also steeped in a football culture which has elevated defensive efficiency to an art form.

It should not, therefore, come as a great surprise that, in his first full season since replacing Ruud Gullit, Vialli has placed a high priority on making Chelsea harder to score against. They have conceded just 22 goals - second only to Arsenal, 12 less than Liverpool and eight fewer than at the same stage last February.

Tellingly, Chelsea's 27 League fixtures have produced a mere 63 goals for themselves and their opponents, compared with 84 - some 33 per cent more - in Liverpool's games. Such a record is due in large measure to what Vialli called the "winning mentality" of Desailly, yet the player- manager argued that it was simplistic to explain it solely in terms of an individual or even a unit.

"When we talk about defending I don't just talk about the back four, because it all starts with the two strikers," he said. "I'd say we're playing better when the other team have the ball. We try to be tight and aggressive."

The textbook example of forwards working to prevent opponents building from the back is that of Alan Shearer and Chris Sutton during Blackburn's championship season. To see a performer of Gianfranco Zola's skills doing a similar job is impressive proof of Vialli's powers of persuasion.

The Sardinian still found the energy for his creative duties, supplying the cross which led to Phil Babb handling under pressure from Tore Andre Flo and Leboeuf scoring from the spot. A combination of fluid attacking and feeble defending enabled Bjarne Goldbaek to double the advantage.

Chelsea, having survived two scares at 1-0, became so superior that they eased up. Perhaps they were conserving power for their quarter-finals, in the Cup-Winners' Cup against Valerenga on Thursday and the FA Cup at Manchester United on Sunday. Michael Owen punished their wavering concentration, but as purposeful as Liverpool became they did not trouble De Goey again.

In mitigation, Houllier cited the absence of Rigobert Song and Jamie Carragher as well as the loss of Vegard Heggem which forced an early switch to 4-4-2. But he did not beat about the Bridge. "They were better than us. We watched more than we moved. Because of that, the passing was too slow and we gave the ball away. "We're responding rather than acting, and I don't like that. At half- time I said: `At least take the initiative, show for the ball and play'. We have to build on the attitude of the last 25 minutes. The rest wasn't good enough, but Chelsea played some quality football. Let's admit it."

The Liverpool manager traced his team's poor form to the week of internationals in which England lost to France, saying his players returned short of confidence and sharpness. Maybe so, but if he does not see the need for a radical overhaul of every department bar the strikers, he is deluding himself.

"Pass and move" was once the Anfield mantra; it was even the title of their Wembley song one year. Today's version has to be called "Stand and watch". By contrast, Chelsea were so mobile they often appeared to have more players on their new patchwork quilt of a pitch.

The extent to which the surface adjusts to facilitate their one-touch style will be critical during the run-in; likewise the availability or otherwise of Graham Rix, their coach and tactical controller, who could well be in prison by the time the silverware is handed out.

Manchester United - whose next League game, intriguingly, is at Liverpool - look "unstoppable" according to Vialli. However, having been over the European Cup course with Juventus, he must be hopeful that two games with Internazionale will take more out of the leaders than the Norwegian diversion will out of his own side.

Vialli kept stressing the importance of maintaining Chelsea's "desire". On reflection, he may well have been saying "Desailly".

Goals: Leboeuf pen (8)1-0; Goldbaek (38) 2-0; Owen(78) 2-1.

Chelsea (4-4-2): De Goey; Ferrer, Desailly, Leboeuf (Lambourde, 34), Le Saux (Newton, 83); Petrescu, Di Matteo, Morris, Goldbaek; Zola, Flo (Forssell, 86).

DAILY Mirror

## Le Saux blow on Fowler sparks ugly Battle of The Bridge

CHELSEA manager Gianluca Vialli last night condemned the 20 minutes of madness which almost cost his side victory over Liverpool.

The Blues clung on to the three points, but Vialli was in despair that the title-chasers so hopelessly lost control after becoming sidetracked by two running battles during the game.

Vialli said: "Something was wrong on the pitch that affected the whole game. "For 70 minutes we were out of this world and then it all went wrong. It is bad for us because we want to play football, not get involved in arguments."

The main on-field battle involved Chelsea's Graeme Le Saux and Liverpool striker Robbie Fowler, although a simmering feud between David James and French World Cup star Marcel Desailly boiled over after the whistle as both teams clashed on their return to the changing rooms.

Le Saux was lucky not to be red-carded after he felled Fowler with a blow to the back of the head. World Cup referee Paul Durkin was unsighted and took no action.

The feud began after Fowler was booked for fouling Le Saux and took an ugly twist when the Chelsea left-back was yellow carded for protesting that Fowler was mocking him.

In a childish display, the Liverpool striker repeatedly bent over and pointed to his backside as Le Saux prepared to take a free-kick.

Durkin brandished the card and Le Saux saw red - and yellow.

Moments later, in an off-the-ball incident, Fowler went down clutching his head, the victim of what appeared to be a Le Saux forearm smash.

The referee, his assistant and most of the Stamford Bridge crowd, missed the incident and Le Saux scampered away scot-free.

A disappointed Vialli said: "I don't know if Graeme Le Saux was provoked or something like that. It's not easy when supporters give you stick all the time.

"The two players were angry with each other but it went on too long. You have to forget about that and get on with your game.

"Players are under pressure. Sometimes you do something you shouldn't do - not that I am saying Graeme Le Saux did something wrong."

Le Saux eventually limped out of the action.

Vialli added: "Graeme got kicked, he was limping and couldn't carry on playing."

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier was very guarded with his comments on the Le Saux-Fowler flare up, insisting: "I know what happened. Robbie told me. I just regret it."

Kop goalkeeper James and Chelsea's Desailly were also involved in a skirmish which overshadowed the game. It was suggested that James was less than respectful as the teams came out of the tunnel before the kick-off.

Desailly maintained concentration to turn in a superb display, but when he lef the field he confronted James and the two had a heated argument.

A steward stepped between the players as they disappeared down the tunnel still engaged in a furious debate.

Desailly refused to be drawn about the dispute, saying: "Nothing happened. I was just concentrating on the game."

He certainly did that. He was awesome.

Liverpool would almost certainly not be in their current dispiriting state had Desailly chosen Anfield when they tried to sign him, but the Frenchman was already bound for Chelsea.

Desailly was in imperious form, restricting Michael Owen with almost as much ease as he did when the world champions mastered England at Wembley.

He said: "This was a really important result because it was a very difficult game. They're a good team with many strong players. We're making progress even if were not playing well."

The relentless schedule of games might take its toll on lesser mortals, but not Desailly.

He said: "At AC Milan, there was a time when we played really badly, but we came through with determination. That's what wins a lot of championships, and being strong physically and mentally."

Houllier touched on the "leaders" of his side not fulfilling their role of inspiring the side. Houllier gave Desailly his international debut and their mutual respect is such that the Liverpool coach did not need to expand on the virtues of a player he was desperate to capture last summer.

He said simply: "He's a good defender."

Well, that's something Houllier urgently needs. Albert Ferrer's crossfield pass to Le Saux and a deft ball inside to Gianfranco Zola opened up Liverpool in the seventh minute.

Flo challenged for Zola's cross at the near post, and Phil Babb claimed he was pushed in the back as he raised his hand to punch the ball away.

Referee Durkin ordered the penalty, rebuked Babb but didn't book him, and also gave Owen the benefit of the doubt for a robust clash with Leboeuf in the opening minute.

Leboeuf, who missed his first penalty in the last home game, resumed normal service, sending James the wrong way.

Chelsea went two up after Dan Petrescu crossed for the unmarked Bjarne Goldbaek, who volleyed through James' legs to continue his scoring streak. A rare lapse by Desailly and a failed Le Saux tackle on Owen brought Liverpool back for a

*Compiled by Graeme Riley*

Date:
Opposition:
Competition: League

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| Sunday Times | Times | Mirror | | |
| Observer | Guardian | | | |
| Sun Independent | Independent | | | |

late surge and a nervous end for Chelsea.
But they continue their relentless pursuit of Manchester United on the day that Aston Villa's challenge collapsed with a 4-1 home defeat by Coventry.
Although Chelsea last won the title back in 1955, the club is packed with champions from other countries.
Vialli is one, and he said: "Manchester United seem to be unstoppable, so all you can do is to do your best. If somebody does better than that, fair enough."
CHELSEA: De Goey 6, Petrescu 7, Leboeuf 7 (Lambourde 34, 7), Desailly 9, Goldbaek 7, Le Saux 7 (Newton 84), Di Matteo 6, Ferrer 7, Flo 6 (Forssell 85), Zola 7, Morris 6.
LIVERPOOL: James 6, Kvarme 6, Babb 5, Fowler 5, Owen 7, Redknapp 6, Heggem 5 (McManaman 7, 6), Berger 5, Ince 6 (Ferri 48, 6), Bjornebye 5, Matteo 7.
MAN OF THE MATCH: Marcel Desailly
CHELSEA v LIVERPOOL
4
6
1
1
0
SHOTS ON TARGET
SHOTS OFF TARGET
CORNERS
YELLOW CARDS
RED CARDS
4
5
3
1
0

LIVERPOOL ECHO

*Compiled by Graeme Riley*

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Competition: League

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THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

## Chelsea make their title pitch; Leboeuf and Goldbaek capitalise on new surface as Liverpool's Stamford Bridge blues deepen

NO GREEN CARPET treatment for Liverpool at Stamford Bridge yesterday. Just an exhibition of compelling, fluid football on their new lawn, laid at the behest of Gianfranco Zola and ordered by the chairman, Ken Bates, to aid their passing game, as Chelsea maintained a sustained championship challenge that is looking increasingly plausible. Only that defeat at Arsenal spoils an undefeated league run since the first day of the season, when Coventry were their conquerors.

So much for those who predicted the Londoners would falter with the absence of Pierluigi Casiraghi, Gustavo Poyet (who should be fit in a fortnight) and Brian Laudrup. Where Gianluca Vialli is concerned, no matter. They have discovered a Dane, Bjarne Goldbaek, at a touch over pounds 300,000, who has fitted neatly into his compatriot Laudrup's No 7 shirt and yesterday scored his third goal in two games, supplementing an early penalty opener from Franck Leboeuf - his fifth successful spot-kick of the season - as well as displaying an industry and vision that was a major contribution to his team's success. "He's playing really well," said Vialli. "He now knows what we expect from him when we haven't got the ball. I just hope he keeps doing the job."

Complacency is not in Vialli's character and, rather than dwell on the excellence of Goldbaek together with the merits of Marcel Desailly in defence and Dan Petrescu, the Italian is seeking further improvements. "We should have killed them off before the start," he said. "We had a lot of chances, but to do well we must be more clinical. We must improve our scoring percentage. Now the pitch is in such good condition, there are no excuses. It allows us to pass the ball around."

For Liverpool, yet to savour victory here in the Premiership, the spectacle of their players trooping off disconsolately at the final whistle is one that has been all too prevalent during a season in which they have lost eight away games.

Thirteen years ago Kenny Dalglish scored the winner here to secure yet another Liverpool championship. Maybe those days will never be recaptured, but this was simply not good enough for a club of their great stature and manager Gerard Houllier knows it. An early injury to the increasingly influential Vegard Heggem may not have helped the Liverpool cause, but that fact should be used in mitigation, not as evidence against prosecution.

"You were second best to everything," somebody suggested afterwards. "I think so," Houllier gave that little Gallic shrug, maybe wishing Roy Evans was present to divide the responsibility. "You've got to be realistic. They were better than us. We are not playing good football and when your leaders are not at their best, you suffer."

If those "leaders" he referred to included Robbie Fowler, the manager was right. The England striker muffed one first half chance and there was little evidence of a potent partnership with Michael Owen, who at least acquired some decent scoring positions, even if he only converted one 76th minute opportunity, presented by the Real Madrid-bound Steve McManaman.

The only amusement the travelling Liverpool fans derived was some ribald chants at the expense of Vialli's No 2, Graham Rix, who recently pleaded guilty to unlawful sexual intercourse with a 15-year-old girl and is awaiting sentence. However, Chelsea and Vialli are evidently standing by their assistant coach, and Bates even raised the issue in the matchday programme, writing that the club will not act or comment until the final outcome.

It all began very much as form suggested it would, with Chelsea establishing a lead after seven minutes. Zola cut into the area and his attempted cross was handled by Phil Babb. There were few protests from Liverpoolwhen the referee Paul Durkin pointed to the spot, which provided Leboeuf with the chance to scored with aplomb. The visitors might have equalised during a period when Jamie Redknapp began to make incursions into the home rearguard but, somewhat against the run of play, Goldbaek reasserted the Blues' authority, converting a facile chance at the far post from a fine cross by Petrescu.

Houllier, though, was no doubt contemplating the fact that he was so unattended by any defenders he might have been suffering from an infectious disease.

After the interval, with Paul Ince by now replaced by Jean Michel Ferri, Owen cleverly fashioned an opening but nobody in red picked up his invitation in front of an open goal, but that was a rare foray for the visitors. Before the young England striker finally prised open the home defence 14 minutes from time, Goldbaek, Petrescu and Zola had all gone close to causing Liverpool further embarrassment.

There had also been time for Graeme Le Saux to display some of that typical petulance that can so mar his performances. He was cautioned for refusing to take a free-kick because he believed Robbie Fowler was encroaching. A few minutes later, Fowler was mystifyingly found lying clutching his head with Le Saux suspiciously close. After consulting a linesman at length, and then speaking to both players Mr Durkin took no further action.

Owen's goal regalvanised Liverpool, but they exhibited few signs of restoring the score to two apiece. Indeed, Chelsea might have profited further on the counter-attack. You can only admire Vialli's poise and ability to adapt his team to given circumstances. But he recognises that the toughest part is yet to come.

"You have to be physically and mentally very strong," he stressed. "You must have

The Sunday Telegraph

*Compiled by Graeme Riley*

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| Sunday Times | Times | Mirror | | |
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| Observer | Guardian | | | |
| Sun Independent | Independent | | | |

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Blues cruise

Chelsea 2 (Leboeuf 7 pen, Goldbaek 38), Liverpool 1 (Owen 77). Classy Chelsea saunter to 2-1 victory

LIVERPOOL have not won at Stamford Bridge for 10 years and have an awful record in London, where they are without a win in their last 10 visits. Neither sequence was ever going to improve yesterday, when Chelsea produced a performance of championship quality to maintain the pressure on Manchester United at the top of the table.

Gianluca Vialli's team of all talents should really have won by a much more convincing margin, but after Frank Leboeuf's penalty and a close-range goal from Bjarne Goldbaek had given them a commanding lead, they eased up, and momentary carelessness let in Michael Owen for Liverpool's consolation reply.

For three-quarters of the match, however, Chelsea looked the part as title contenders. Unlike Aston Villa, they show no signs of slipping, and can surely be expected to last the course. Liverpool, down to seventh, were poor, particularly in defence, and their mini-revival under Gerard Houllier is petering out.

Second versus sixth at start of play is roughly where you expect to find these two sides, but the other way around. Liverpool have declined while Chelsea improved, and now it is London's leading lights who contest the major prizes while the most successful English club of them all endure another transitional season.

Chelsea recalled Graeme Le Saux and Roberto Di Matteo and had Tore Andre Flo back in their starting line-up for the first time since December 29. Hugely influential, in every sense, it was as if he had never been away. As is his wont, Dennis Wise was suspended, but again he was hardly missed. Liverpool's Jamie Carragher was also banned and Rigobert Song was away on international duty with Cameroon. How they needed them. Bjorn Tore Kvarme filled the defensive vacancy, while Paul Ince returned after suspension to the midfield anchor role in which Carragher had been deputising. The new deployment was not to last long.

Liverpool were unsettled when the first attack of the match saw David James spill Dan Petrescu's low centre from the right, and their discomfort was magnified enormously after seven minutes, when they conceded a goal of the self-inflicted variety.

Le Saux's perceptive through pass enabled Zola to get in a short cross from the left, aimed at Flo, who had made a run to the near post. Babb moved to meet the danger, but seemed to get a nudge in the back and, off balance, reached out and handled the ball. Leboeuf had missed his last penalty, against Blackburn 10 days earlier, but made short work of this one, driving low past James's right hand.

There was more trouble for Liverpool after 10 minutes when Vegard Heggem was helped off injured, and replaced by Steve McManaman. The introduction of an attacking maverick for a wing-back necessitated a tactical change to 4-4-2.

Zola, with his back to goal, almost doubled Chelsea's advantage with a marvellously deft flick which carried just over the bar. Gradually, through hard work and application, Liverpool improved, grafting their way into the game. They were still wide open at the back, however, and that recurring weakness when the ball is in the air was again their undoing after 38 minutes, when Chelsea made it 2-0. Flo won an aerial tussle to free Zola, whose dexterity on the ball allowed Petrescu to deliver a cross which found Goldbaek in acres of space at the far post. The sidefoot finish, from the edge of the six-yard box, bordered on the perfunctory.

Given the cushion of a two-goal lead, Chelsea started to run through their party pieces, stringing long sequences of passes together to the delight of their supporters, who cheered each one to the echo. It would have been 3-0 just before half-time but for the stunning reaction save with which James repelled Petrescu's point-blank shot at the far post. The provider, as usual, was the litte bundle of elusive energy that is Zola.

Two minutes into the second half, Ince limped out of the fray. For Liverpool, a bad day was getting worse. They plugged away, but at 2-0 the game was effectively over, the visiting fans reduced to singing silly slanderous songs about Le Saux's sexuality. Another pleasing passing move from Chelsea culminated in Flo setting up a shooting chance for Di Matteo, whose 25-yarder was too close for James's comfort. Goldbaek then caught the Liverpool defence hopelessly square with a pass which sent Petrescu through. It seemed a certain goal until Matteo materialised from nowhere to make a last-ditch tackle. Top-notch defending.

Zola, who deserved a goal, might have had one when Di Matteo set him up, but his shot, from left to right, ran wide. Instead, Liverpool silenced taunting choruses of "You're not very good" by pulling one back after 77 minutes, when McManaman threaded the ball through to Owen, who finished like the predator he is.

Carelessness had condemned Chelsea to an anxious finale to a match they should have had wrapped up by half-time. The scoreline would have been a fairer reflection of the play had Di Matteo's late piledriver gone in, rather than over.

"We should have killed them off earlier," Vialli said. "We lost a bit of concentration in the second half, but we played well again." Amen to that.

* TV cameras caught Le Saux as he appeared to punch Fowler from behind shortly after the pair had been booked following a running battle. Fowler fell to the ground but the referee did not see the incident.

The Observer

Goldbaek's golden goal: Owen's late strike can't save Reds as sad Houllier finds it a Bridge too far

Chelsea 2

Leboeuf 7 (pen), Goldbaek 38Liverpool 1

Owen 77 Att: 34,822

IT'S THE STAGE of the season when the real deals stretch away from the nearly men, the silverware comes into focus, the pressures intensify. In the midst of it all Chelsea continue to show they have what it takes.

At times in this thrilling, three-pronged campaign they have delighted, at others dominated, and sometimes just dug in. They needed a bit of everything to collect three more precious points.

For 75 minutes Chelsea were, to Gianluca Vialli's eyes, 'out of this world'. Then Michael Owen reduced the deficit and tension gripped Stamford Bridge until the sweet release of the final whistle. Still in reach of the Premiership summit, the week ahead brings a European Cup Winners' Cup tie against Valerenga on Thursday followed by that mouth-watering FA Cup meeting with Manchester United. 'There's a lot to play for,' said Vialli, 'and if we keep getting results we've got a great opportunity.'

Skill alone is not enough when the prizes are in sight, and Vialli has instilled in Chelsea the stomach for a challenge. 'Inner strength is vital,' he mused. 'The team is in good condition physically and you must have the desire for success.' From the kick-off they had ruthlessness to go with their refined flair. A mere two minutes had passed when Dan Petrescu drove the ball across the face of goal to the onrushing Tore-Andre Flo, making his first start of the year after that untimely knee injury. David James spilled the ball and to his relief, Bjorn Kvarme was on hand to help it away.

It was fairly obvious Flo's presence would cause discomfort to Liverpool's rearguard, seldom at their most convincing against a totem pole. The visitors' palpitations when the ball arrived at head height were tangible. 'We knew before the game it would be difficult because we didn't have Jamie Carragher and Rigobert Song,' rued Gerard Houllier. Five minutes later Gianfranco Zola aimed for the giant Norwegian.

There were three red shirts in attendance, and up went Phil Babb's hand at the near post, although he claimed he had been pushed. Referee Paul Durkin, without a second's hesitation, pointed to the spot, and Frank Leboeuf, showing admirable nerve - he had missed his previous penalty - swept the ball past James.

The French defender was later withdrawn with a twisted ankle but should be fit for Valerenga. Word that Gustavo Poyet is close to full recovery is an added bonus for the Blues.

A goal down and with Heggem limping, Houllier had to bring on Steve McManaman and switch to 4-4-2.Liverpool rallied briefly and crafted three half-chances, the best falling to Owen. Fed by a perceptive Jamie Redknapp pass, he raced away but De Goey pushed his shot away.

Just as Liverpool were stitching some attacking play together, they were brutally unpicked by a devastating Chelsea break after 37 minutes. Bjarne Goldbaek gets the plaudits, Dan Petrescu the assist, but the architect of the goal was Zola, whose silky mastery of the ball dazzled and distracted Liverpool. On the run the Italian killed the ball dead, soft-shoe shuffled, and touched the ball to Petrescu on the right. The Romanian's pinpoint cross was tucked away by the industrious Goldbaek with a neat volley. Were it not for James's splendid reflex save from Petrescu's fierce drive, it would have been game over by the break.

There seemed little left for Liverpool but damage limitation. Goldbaek whipped a 30-yard missile fractionally wide, and when the Dane later sent Petrescu through on goal, a superb last-gasp interception from Dominic Matteo prevented more Mersey pain. Then Zola steered an angled drive past the far post.

Afterwards Vialli remarked his team needed to be more clinical to avoid the bitten-
fingernails finish endured after Owen had clipped his 21st goal of the season past De Goey. Houllier's satisfaction that his team at least managed a 'reaction' didn't cloud his overall distress. 'We are not doing well at the moment, we are not playing good football, and we are always making silly mistakes,' the Frenchman frowned.

'If you give a goal away against a top team it is difficult to come back.' They didn't. Chelsea march on.

Chelsea: De Goey; Ferrer, Desailly, Leboeuf (Lambourde 33), Le Saux (Newton 82), Petrescu, Morris, Di Matteo, Goldbaek, Flo (Forssell 86), Zola.

Liverpool: James; Heggem (McManaman 9), Kvarme, Matteo, Babb, Bjornebye, Berger (Riedle 80), Redknapp, Ince (Ferri 48), Owen, Fowler.

Referee: P Durkin (Portland)

*Compiled by Graeme Riley*

Date:
Opposition:
Competition: League

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| Sunday Times | Times | Mirror | | |
| Observer | Guardian | | | |
| Sun Independent | Independent | | | |

The Mail ON SUNDAY

SUNDAY Mirror

*Compiled by Graeme Riley*