

Date: 19 September 2010
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19 September
 2010

THE TIMES

Berbatov seizes his time to shine

Man United 3 Berbatov 42, 59, 84 Liverpool 2 Gerrard 64 (pen), 70 Referee: H Webb. Attendance: 75,213 OLIVER KAY Football Correspondent In two years since joining Manchester United, Dimitar Berbatov had done little to dispel the doubts that some at Old Trafford had expressed beforehand about his big-match temperament, but, if any such concerns remained after a glorious hat-trick yesterday, they could be based only on Liverpool's present predicament. With an hour gone yesterday afternoon, a sumptuous overhead kick by Berbatov had put United 2-0 in front and one of the most resonant fixtures in English football was looking like a mismatch. A cricket score was in prospect, according to Sir Alex Ferguson, but a sudden Liverpool riposte brought two goals in six minutes for Steven Gerrard before Berbatov rose to the occasion for a third time, securing a dramatic 3-2 victory with six minutes remaining. Never before has Old Trafford risen to acclaim Berbatov as it did when he took his leave four minutes later. Never before has the Bulgaria forward looked so at ease on a stage on which he has occasionally found the spotlight dazzling. Even when he left the stadium an hour or so later, he did so hiding under the rim of an oversized baseball cap, but this time he emerged with a spring in his step, no longer burdened by his [pounds sterling]30.75 million price tag or by the expectation that came with it.

It was not just that he scored three times, becoming the first United player to score a hat-trick against Liverpool since Stan Pearson in 1946. It was the quality of his goals: two towering headers and that irresistible overhead kick that bounced in off the crossbar at the Stretford End.

Much like his adroit flick past Tim Howard with the outside of a foot at Goodison Park eight days earlier, they were the kind of finishes that a player would attempt only when flushed with confidence. Having been outshone by Cristiano Ronaldo in his first season with United and Wayne Rooney last term, Berbatov is emerging as his team's key player. All too often last season he was left out of their biggest matches, as Ferguson used Rooney as a lone striker, but now, after scoring six times in his first five league matches this season, he looks as if others, including Rooney, will have to fit around him. Comparisons will be made with Fernando Torres, his opposite No 9, whose fortunes have dipped just as things have clicked into place for Berbatov, but they would be unfair on the Liverpool forward. For one thing, Torres has yet to recover his mobility, sharpness or confidence since his injuries. For another, he is playing in a Liverpool team who appear resigned to another season of mediocrity, having taken only five points from their first five Barclays Premier League games under Roy Hodgson. Liverpool have been there before, of course, having endured plenty of rocky periods over the two decades since their last league title, but rarely can the summit of English football have felt as distant as it does now. Hodgson is correct in pointing out that his side have had "a very hard start", having faced Arsenal, Manchester City and Manchester United in their first five matches, but while an upturn will be expected, they are a pale imitation of the team who won 4-1 at Old Trafford only 18 months ago. For the first 45 minutes yesterday, this looked like any other United home game against organised but limited opposition as Liverpool defended deep and showed little inclination to counter-attack. Jamie Carragher and Martin Skrtel were dealing well with just about everything that came their way - even if Berbatov and Rooney would be entitled to complain about being tugged almost every time the ball came into the penalty area - but three minutes before half-time Torres failed to attack the ball from a corner by Ryan Giggs, leaving Berbatov to steer a header past Pepe Reina.

United's best spell came early in the second half as Berbatov threatened for a second time and Nani rattled the frame of the goal with a rasping shot. Those two, plus Paul Scholes, have been United's most influential players this season, although rarely have they linked up so spectacularly as in the 59th minute when, after Paul Konchesky misjudged a cross-field pass, Nani crossed from the right and Berbatov controlled the ball on his thigh before his overhead kick sailed past Reina, hit the underside of the crossbar and landed in the net. At that stage, Liverpool's supporters must have feared the worst, but the introduction of David Ngog brought a renewed sense of vigour. Joe Cole strode forward and picked out Torres, who cut inside the challenge of Jonny Evans before having his legs taken from under him. United's players protested, but it was a clear foul, punished by Gerrard as he beat the hitherto untested Edwin van der Sar from the penalty spot. Six minutes later, incredibly, it was 2-2, Gerrard stroking a perfect free kick through the hole that appeared between Darren Fletcher and John O'Shea in the United wall. Carragher had urged Howard Webb, the referee, to send off O'Shea for the foul - which led Ferguson to suggest, harshly, that Torres "made an absolute meal of it to try to get the player sent off" - but it was unlikely that the Liverpool forward would have reached the pass from Raul Meireles.

Meireles sent a header a yard wide in the immediate aftermath, but Liverpool retreated as United rediscovered a sense of purpose in the final 20 minutes. Scholes sprayed the ball to the right wing, where O'Shea crossed and Berbatov rose above Carragher to send another header past Reina. Old Trafford erupted again. Ferguson said that a draw would have been a "travesty" and that a "cricket score" would have been more appropriate. Hodgson reacted as he always does, which is to say politely, respectfully, even a little deferentially. For Ferguson, it must make a change from exchanging barbs with Rafael Benitez. But a year or two ago, at least for a while, United and Liverpool were equals. Right now they are on different levels, with United lifted to a higher plain by Berbatov.

the guardian

Magnificence of Berbatov makes the difference

A victory of this sort ridicules the idea that football is a team game. Everything rested with the vision and touch of Dimitar Berbatov. Liverpool had the tenacity to pull level from 2-0 down, but those attributes were not sufficient when Manchester United had the majesty of the Bulgarian. The sheer range of his work was beyond the scope of the opposition's defence and he headed the winner from John O'Shea's cross with six minutes remaining.

His hat-trick had also begun with a header, but the centrepiece was a moment of unforgettable imagination and technique. In essence, it is to Liverpool's credit that they competed so effectively and scored with each of their two efforts on target. If the heritage and passion that attach themselves could be stripped away, this would be seen as a creditable display by visitors much diminished in terms of budget and, therefore, in the distinction of the squad.

Roy Hodgson's men had plenty of character, yet too much rests with the contributions of Fernando Torres and Steven Gerrard. Even so, United are still to impose their authority on this campaign. The blessing for Sir Alex Ferguson lies in the fact he continues to have a few men who can sway a game as their striker did here.

Berbatov's efforts dispelled talk of all other issues, but concerns do exist. Wayne Rooney, for instance, operated in a deeper position and although that ensured involvement it took him no closer to the rediscovery of his habitual impact. The topic was a minor matter because United had no need to count on him when another striker teemed with a virtuosity that was encapsulated in his second goal. There had been a presumption that the creativity of the Old Trafford side would swamp the visitors, and that goal was exquisite. Nani's low cross in the 59th minute went behind Berbatov, but he flicked it up and, on the turn, put a lob high into the net while Jose Reina scarcely moved. To Liverpool's great credit they did not let themselves be discouraged, but perseverance was not quite sufficient. Manchester United do suffer from some hindrances of their own. Rio Ferdinand reappeared from injury last week to face Rangers and so had his first outing since May, but illness ruled him out of this encounter. Stability will presumably be regained in due course, but the condition of United overall is intriguing.

A crowd that was elated at full-time can scarcely be expected to brood, but United did falter here against opponents who, broadly speaking, are not of the calibre of their predecessors in the Liverpool shirt. Despite that, Liverpool might conceivably have got themselves into a position to win. Momentum was with them once Torres, taking a Joe Cole pass, was fouled by Jonny Evans and the referee's assistant rightly signalled for a penalty that Gerrard converted after 64 minutes.

The Liverpool captain had been fielded in an orthodox midfield position, presumably because Hodgson believed it essential to have him at the core of the play. With that decision taken, it was left for Raul Meireles to fill the post just behind Torres. Regardless of the logic, it was essential for Gerrard to advance and cause alarm.

Liverpool will suppose that the crux of the matter was a decision taken by the referee Howard Webb. Evans fouled Torres once more and avoided a red card because the official seemed to judge, correctly, that a goalscoring opportunity had not been denied since the ball was running into the hands of the goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar. Gerrard exacted as much punishment as he could by fighting home the set-piece in the 70th minute.

The thrills and fluctuations ought not to distract anyone from the inherent truth about the clash. Ferguson had promoted the match beautifully when he deemed it the greatest of all fixtures in the Premier League but the recent meetings do not suggest that the occasion retains the grandeur of days gone by.

Liverpool's 4-1 victory here in March 2009 was certainly memorable, but no one should forget that United have now won six of the last seven engagements with these opponents on this pitch. While the visitors were on the verge of a memorable draw, the Liverpool regulars appreciate that encouragement must be restricted while the finances and ownership of their club are so problematic. The visitors suffered lapses in concentration and organisation. From Ryan Giggs's corner in the 42nd minute Berbatov got in front of Torres and no one could stop his header from reaching the net.

Liverpool can hardly afford that sort of lapse. There was still a partial recovery and that testifies to morale within the squad, but it will be hard for Hodgson to get his men into the upper reaches of the table. United will be among the elite, but they are still to suggest that the Premier League trophy can be recaptured.

Man of the match Dimitar Berbatov

His talent has never been in dispute, but he is now bringing it to bear throughout matches

Best Moment The Bulgarian's second goal was a beautiful blend of technique and imagination as he lofted the ball into the corner of the net

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The Mail

TOLD YOU HE WAS A GENIUS; Berbatov lives up to Fergie's prophecy with world-class treble
 Manchester United 3 Liverpool 2
 Next: Scunthorpe v MANCHESTER UNITED (Wednesday), LIVERPOOL v Sunderland (Saturday)

THIS was not just a victory against those Sir Alex Ferguson considers his team's fiercest rivals. This was a victory that made Manchester United's manager look even smarter than usual. Because Ferguson chose yesterday to focus on Dimitar Berbatov -- and in particular on why he has stood by his [pounds sterling]30million striker -- and my, how the Bulgarian responded. A first United hat-trick against Liverpool in 64 years was quite a repayment, especially after his defensive colleagues contrived to throw away the two-goal advantage he had initially secured. Ferguson wrote of Berbatov's 'touch of genius' in the match programme, prompting a front-page headline that some players might have considered rather unhelpful before a match of this significance. 'Off to a flier, Dimitar Berbatov has been unstoppable,' it said. 'More of the same is required today.' As well as two brilliant headers, Berbatov managed to deliver that touch of genius (or touches, if truth be told) with his second. First came the touch that controlled Nani's chipped cross, then the stunning over-head kick that beat Pepe Reina via the underside of the crossbar. 'You must persevere and trust your judgment, you must have faith, and I think we are being rewarded this season for our confidence in him,' said Ferguson.

Six goals in five matches -- seven in six if we include the Community Shield -- would certainly suggest Berbatov is starting to feel comfortable as a United player. Far more so than some of those in red at Old Trafford, judging by the way they allowed Liverpool to battle their way back after such an unambitious first half. Ferguson complained his players had been 'careless and wasteful' in surrendering the advantage at Fulham and Everton and defensive indiscipline would have proved costly again had it not been for their in-form front man. Two up after 59 minutes, they somehow allowed the irrepressible Steven Gerrard to level by the 70th with a penalty and a superb free-kick. Although Berbatov scored again to secure the three points, it will worry Ferguson that his team keep doing this. Liverpool had no right to a share of the points, given how disappointing they were. Gerrard continues to impress -- he was terrific yesterday in central midfield in front of Fabio Capello -- but Roy Hodgson now has a very ordinary side, despite the quality in players like Reina, Jamie Carragher, Joe Cole and Glen Johnson. Too many of the others just aren't good enough to be in a club of Liverpool's stature, and the team is suffering. Yesterday's game largely passed Raul Meireles by in his role behind Fernando Torres, while Maxi Rodriguez and Christian Poulsen offered nothing.

Torres won both the penalty and the free-kick, but he also struggled. He was at fault for Berbatov's opening goal and he and United's hero-of-the-hour now seem to be performing a sporting equivalent of Trading Places. Having made nine changes to the side that stuttered to a goalless draw against Rangers, Ferguson must have been happy enough with the opening 45 minutes. United looked in control, aside from the shocking histrionics Nani used to try to gain an advantage. Ferguson, one hopes, will have a word. The goal United deserved finally arrived three minutes before the break, Torres finding himself on the wrong side of Berbatov and so allowing his opposite number to meet a corner from Ryan Giggs with a super header, albeit one helped by Paul Konchesky's decision to drift off the near post. Nani almost extended the lead when he drove a shot against Reina's left-hand post, but had to settle for role of provider with the ball that invited Berbatov to perform his piece of magic.

But then came what looked like a collapse. It was evidence that will ensure Rio Ferdinand returns to United the moment he regains full fitness. He left the stadium before the game because of flu-like symptoms, but there is a plan to play him in the Carling Cup against Scunthorpe on Wednesday as he continues his rehabilitation after a knee injury that ruled him out of the World Cup. After Torres accelerated on to a brilliant pass from Cole, it was Jonny Evans who gave the penalty away -- and it was a penalty, whatever Ferguson might think -- with a reckless challenge on the Spaniard. Howard Webb pointed immediately to the spot, and Gerrard converted his 15th spot-kick in 16 attempts. That John O'Shea then brought down Torres again -- this time outside the box with a challenge Webb rightly punished with a yellow rather than red card -- must have infuriated Ferguson. But not as much as the sight of Darren Fletcher breaking away from the wall, presenting Gerrard with the space to slot his shot through.

Fortunately for Fletcher and his fellow defenders, Berbatov was not finished. A cross from O'Shea was met with another wonderful header, with Carragher this time beaten by the Bulgarian in the air. In those same programme notes, Ferguson spoke of what a 'big season' this is for Berbatov.

'It could determine the rest of his career. But he has accepted the challenge and responded in a way that has made him one of our major successes so far. And there's plenty more to come from him this season.'

Rarely has he been more prophetic.

The dangers of being caught out of position The curse of zonal marking may have left Liverpool with Benitez's exit, but poor defending hasn't. Paul Konchesky should be standing on the post, not four feet along the goal-line Why go around when you can go through? Darren Fletcher left a gaping hole in the wall when he leapt to his left when Gerrard scored from a free-kick One Liverpool player who didn't deserve to be on the losing side... STEVEN GERRARD'S touch map illustrates the extraordinary work rate of the Liverpool skipper. He was all over the pitch, finding space and making more touches (101) than any other player this weekend. He is relishing his freedom under Roy Hodgson.

One Liverpool player who didn't deserve to be on the losing side...

STEVEN GERRARD'S touch map illustrates the extraordinary work rate of the Liverpool skipper. He was all over the pitch, finding space and making more touches (101) than any other player this weekend. He is relishing his freedom under Roy Hodgson.

The last hat-trick hero

STAN PEARSON was the last United player to score a hat-trick against Liverpool -- in 1946. Overall, he scored 148 goals in 343 games, putting him ninth on the club's all-time top scorers' list. He helped United lift the 1948 FA Cup, scoring in the final, and won the league in 1952. Pearson hit his treble at Maine Road, where United played from 1946-49 after Old Trafford was damaged by Second World War bombs. Joe Spence was the last United hat-trick hero against Liverpool at Old Trafford, during a 6-1 win in 1928.

MATCH FACTS

MANCHESTER UNITED (4-4-2): Van der Sar 6; O'Shea 6, Vidic 6, Evans 5, Evra 6; Nani 5 (Gibson 88min), Fletcher 6, Scholes 7, Giggs 6 (Macheda 82); Rooney 6, Berbatov 9 (Anderson 88). Subs not used: Kuszczak, Brown, Owen, Smalling.

Booked: Rooney, Scholes, O'Shea, Evans.

LIVERPOOL (4-4-1-1): Reina 6; Johnson 6, Carragher 5, Skrtel 5, Konchesky 5 (Agger 81); Rodriguez 5 (N'Gog 62, 6), Gerrard 8, Poulsen 5, Cole 6; Meireles 4 (Jovanovic 79); Torres 6. Subs not used: Jones, Kyrgiakos, Babel, Lucas.

Booked: N'Gog.

Man of the match: Dimitar Berbatov.

Referee: Howard Webb 8. Attendance: 75,213.

The Daily Telegraph

Majestic Berbatov rises to the rescue

Manchester United 3

Berbatov 42, 59, 84

Liverpool 2

Gerrard 64 pen, 70 Att: 75,213

Ooh aah, Dimitar. Echoes of Eric Cantona imbued Dimitar Berbatov's majestic display here and it was not simply the touches of magic conjuring up a glorious overhead strike as the centrepiece of a fine hat-trick. What should particularly thrill Manchester United fans is that the Bulgarian clearly now feels he belongs in the famous red shirt. He will be turning his collar up next.

As with Cantona, there are some instants when all the heat and dust of this mad sport, all the controversy and speculation, are stripped away and a moment of pure sporting genius shines through. Some great goals have spiced this season, from Gareth Bale's volley to Hatem Ben Arfa's drive, but what happened a shade before the hour mark here was truly exceptional.

United were leading through Berbatov's header, the forward having effortlessly eluded Fernando Torres to connect with Ryan Giggs's corner. They were in control, exploiting the initial lack of ambition in the Liverpool ranks. Nani had taken a welcome break from play-acting, the one stain on his otherwise excellent game, and was troubling Paul Konchesky, soon lifting in a cross.

Berbatov's response, standing with his back to Pepe Reina's goal, was sublime. Cushioning the ball on his right thigh, he flicked it up and then hooked it over his head and in off the crossbar. A split-second silence seemed to seize the Stretford End as fans shook the disbelief from their eyes, before an almighty roar erupted.

"Lots of questions were asked about him last season and he was made something of a whipping boy, to the point where he must have wondered whether he had a future at Old Trafford," Sir Alex Ferguson had mused about Berbatov in his programme notes.

United's manager added that the club could have avoided "the aggravation" if critics had simply asked whether Berbatov possessed the technical ability and strength of personality to be a United player. The technique has never been in doubt, simply the self-belief. Both qualities now etch his every move.

As United's No9 has waxed this season, Liverpool's has waned. Wellmarshalled by Nemanja Vidic in a scrappy first half, Fernando Torres only showed signs of life when Roy Hodgson rejigged his team after Berbatov's gem.

David Ngog came on for the anonymous Maxi Rodriguez, Raul Meireles dropped back from his role in the hole and finally Torres enjoyed more sustained support. Ngog's mere presence distracted Vidic and company.

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Old Trafford hit fever pitch. Wayne Rooney's nocturnal escapades drew caustic comment from the visiting Kopite choirs. The Stretford End responded with a reminder of Liverpool's diary engagements for Thursday evenings. The atmosphere had already been stoked pre-match by the DJ mischievously spinning a succession of hits from 1990, the last time Liverpool won the title.

This "daddy of all derbies", as Ferguson called it, certainly lacked nothing in edge, although little venom discoloured the tackling.

Trailing 2-0, Liverpool were certainly not diminished in spirit. Torres began making those old runs into the box, particularly attacking areas not protected by the outstanding Vidic.

Within four minutes of Berbatov's beauty, Joe Cole slid the ball towards Torres, who was brought down by Jonny Evans. For all Ferguson's frequent declarations of admiration for his young centre-half, Evans can get caught out. Ask Bobby Zamora and Tim Cahill. Rio Ferdinand, stricken with flu, was undoubtedly missed. Steven Gerrard placed the ball on the spot and stepped back, waiting calmly while Howard Webb delivered a lecture to everyone else about encroachment, the referee resembling an experienced doorman dealing with an impatient queue of bargain-hunters outside a department store sale. When Webb was ready, Gerrard ran in and stroked the penalty unerringly past Edwin van der Sar.

With Fabio Capello watching, Liverpool's captain provided another example of his composure under pressure and his dead-ball prowess, equalising within six minutes. When Christian Poulsen swept a low ball through the middle, Torres was off and running until brought down by John O'Shea on the edge of the area.

Liverpool fans bayed for red and a few Liverpool players whispered such thoughts in Webb's earshot. The world's leading referee deemed yellow to be sufficient.

Liverpool's response should have been stamped "Made in Melwood". When Meireles deliberately bumped into Darren Fletcher on the end of United's wall, the Scot overcompensated, shifting the other way and leaving a gap between him and O'Shea. Gerrard promptly swept the ball through the hole and in.

United had let another lead go, repeating events at Craven Cottage and Goodison Park, but this time they fought back, Berbatov rising to the rescue to head in O'Shea's cross. It brought United's first hat-trick against Liverpool in 64 years as well as a deserved victory.

For Liverpool, troubles persist on and off the field. Reflecting the scoreline, the boardroom is split 3-2 and Tom Hicks' new refinancing plans, effectively seeking to buy out George Gillett, are sure to run into a three-vote roadblock of Martin Broughton, Christian Purslow and Ian Ayre.

Hodgson talked of Liverpool being a "team in transition", and he clearly needs time, but four of these players were his recruits. Cole looks more effective centrally, Poulsen must be more consistently positive in his passing, Konchesky can be exposed by pace, while Meireles requires a few weeks to pick up the pace. Hodgson will also be aware that this is Liverpool, not Fulham, and a spirit of boldness is expected by fans. Some of the individuals he has inherited, notably Rodriguez, are simply not good enough. Liverpool's new manager could do worse than consider pushing Glen Johnson up the right and looking at Martin Kelly at full-back.

For United, victory could fully launch their season. Berbatov certainly has lit the fuse in style.

Dimitar's masterclass 1-0 Escapes his marker Fernando Torres to head an out-swinging corner beyond Pepe Reina from eight yards.

2-0 Uses his thigh to control a cross from the right and directs an overhead kick in off the bar from 12 yards.

3-2 Outjumps Jamie Carragher to meet a cross and direct a powerful header low into the net from six yards. **BERBATOV'S LEAGUE SCORING STATS** Season 2008-09 2009-10 2010-11 Apps 31 33 5 Goals 9 12 6 Chance conv % 21 15 30 History boy United's last hat-trick hero against Liverpool was Stan Pearson (left), who netted three times in a 5-0 win in 1946. Pearson, born in Salford and a war veteran, scored in United's 1948 FA Cup final victory and helped win the league title in 1952.



Berbatov treble gets blundering United defence out of trouble

For most of the time he spends on the pitch, Dimitar Berbatov wears the expression of a man who has just been told some very bad news. Occasionally the black cloud above him lifts briefly. Yesterday it disappeared altogether.

That is the effect that a hat-trick against Manchester United's biggest rivals can have on a man but this performance represented more than three goals from Berbatov. Rather it was a significant step along the road to proving that he is capable of fulfilling the expectations on any player who signs for Manchester United for [pounds sterling]30m and wears the No 9 shirt.

It took a while but this was Berbatov's standout performance in just over two seasons at Old Trafford, a period that could hardly be described as smooth sailing. Along the way, Berbatov has been left out of the team to play in the 2009 Champions League final, lost his place in the team last season and could conceivably have been sold last summer.

There is no reluctant genius quite like Berbatov, a man who at times just finds it impossible to bring his prodigious ability to bear on games. The manner in which he did so yesterday - and has this season - demonstrated just what an effect he can have even on a team as big as United. Nowhere more so than in his extraordinary second goal, brought down on his thigh and volleyed in over his head before Liverpool's defence could react.

No one has really explained how Berbatov came to be such an erratic performer over the last two years, least of all Ferguson, who yesterday seemed to be shifting most of the blame on to "the media". "That [criticism] happens when we buy a player for a lot of money and he is not starting every game," Ferguson said. Of course, there is a good reason why Berbatov has not always started every game for United in the past.

This season, however, is shaping up to be his year and yesterday he was responsible for rescuing a game for United that somehow they contrived to throw away, having taken a 2-0 lead just before the hour. Old Trafford was in raptures at a Berbatov hat-trick to beat their oldest, most loathed rival but none of them could deny that their team had done its best to throw it away at times.

In the first half United faced a Liverpool team with virtually no ambition and no attacking threat which, for Berbatov's first goal, gave the striker a free header direct from a corner. Then, having gone two goals ahead, two separate incidents in defence demonstrated the fragility of United's back four - one that was again without Rio Ferdinand, who was sent home with what Ferguson described as a virus.

Even by his notoriously one-eyed standards, Ferguson made the ludicrous claim that the two respective fouls by Jonny Evans and John O'Shea that gifted Liverpool a crucial penalty and a free-kick were mistaken. Steven Gerrard scored from both and, as they did against Fulham and Everton earlier this season, Ferguson's defenders conspired to undo all the good work done by their strikers.

For much of the first half it was a desperate game, reminiscent at times of the drudgery of Rangers' visit last week. As for the aggression between the two clubs, it surfaced only briefly when Paul Scholes kicked out at Gerrard as the Liverpool captain went past him. Something seems to have persuaded United's veteran that he is entitled to do pretty much whatever he likes in the sunset years of his career.

There was a decent battle between Paul Konchesky and Luis Nani down Liverpool's left side and, having done a good job of containing United, the away side then tossed it all away at a corner. Fernando Torres was given the task of marking Berbatov and did it very badly. He failed to put in a challenge of any note on the United striker, who nodded in his first direct from Ryan Giggs' corner.

Nani hit the post before the hour and then Berbatov's second seemed to have closed the deal. He struck the ball so sweetly that Pepe Reina hardly moved. The build-up to the goal was not bad either, a long pass from Darren Fletcher out to Nani on the wing and a good cross. It was United's reward for being the only side with any ambition but that changed within a few minutes.

Roy Hodgson's chummy act with Ferguson might get him in trouble with Liverpool supporters if it goes much further. Rafael Benitez spent his last couple of seasons in perpetual animosity with his opposite number and, generally speaking, Liverpool fans liked it that way. Unfortunately, until the 62nd minute when Joe Cole played in Torres, who won the penalty, Liverpool were just as accommodating as their manager.

Later Ferguson said that it was a "farce" that United were pegged back to 2-2 and argued that his side should have won by a "cricket score". Hodgson, who seems to regard Ferguson as a friend, chose not to respond. It might take a while but eventually Hodgson will learn that Ferguson will always be impolite or intemperate towards a Liverpool manager if it suits him, whoever that Liverpool manager happens to be.

Gerrard scored from the spot and Liverpool were transformed. On 71 minutes, O'Shea fouled Torres when it looked like he was running clear on goal and picked up only a booking. Gerrard's low free-kick found a gap in the wall between Fletcher and O'Shea and the game was level.

As United came to terms with this, Raul Meireles had a header that was only just wide and it looked like we might be witnessing one of the most monumental collapses of all time in this fixture. Giggs was substituted and headed straight down the tunnel. Ferguson said that the player had the same illness as Ferdinand and was going for treatment. Berbatov's winner was a giant leap and a delicate header that guided O'Shea's cross into the corner of Reina's goal. Jamie Carragher, who had done his best in difficult circumstances until then, might not want to watch that one again. Having taken a point from their games against Arsenal, Manchester City and United it hardly needs saying that Liverpool will have to win their next two against Sunderland and Blackpool. As for Ferguson, he now at last seems to be getting the best from Berbatov. Whether he can say the same for the rest of his players is rather less than certain.

MATCH FACTS
 Manchester United (4-4-2): Van der Sar; O'Shea, Vidic, J Evans, Evra; Nani (Gibson, 88), Fletcher, Scholes, Giggs (Macheda, 82); Berbatov (Anderson, 87), Rooney. Substitutes not used: Kuszczak (gk), Brown, Owen, Smalling.

Booked Rooney, J Evans, Scholes, O'Shea.
 Liverpool (4-2-3-1): Reina; Johnson, Carragher, Skrtel, Konchesky (Agger, 82); Gerrard, Poulsen; Rodriguez (Ngog, 62), Meireles (Jovanovic, 79), Cole; Torres. Substitutes not used: Jones (gk), Kyrgiakos, Babel, Lucas.

Booked Ngog.
 Man of the match Berbatov.
 Possession Manchester United 53% Liverpool 47%.

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IT has taken two years, but Dimitar Berbatov is finally starting to justify his status as the most expensive player in Manchester United history. Just when it seemed United's carelessness at the back had cost them victory for a third time this season, Berbatov came to their rescue to clinch a stunning hat-trick and a dramatic win at Old Trafford.

Even Sir Alex Ferguson admitted Berbatov had become a "whipping boy" after failing to live up to his pounds 30.75million transfer fee, but hailed the striker's "touch of genius" following his match-winning display over United's arch-rivals.

The biggest game in the Premier League calendar, according to Fergie, lived up to its billing with a second half of unremitting drama. Liverpool clawed their way back on to level terms against the odds before Berbatov struck the killer blow with six minutes left.

Berbatov looks like a player reborn, the 29-year-old brimming with confidence and attacking intent, a far cry from the forlorn figure who ended last season mired in self-recrimination after failing to step up to the mark when Wayne Rooney was injured.

Berbatov put United on their way to a victory, one which should have been far more comfortable than it ultimately was, three minutes before half-time, stooping to score with a low header while holding off Fernando Torres..

Quite why Torres, whose forte is clearly not defending, was designated to mark Berbatov for the corner only Liverpool know, but the Bulgarian showed impressive strength and agility in scoring from such an unlikely position.

United could have had a second in the 56th minute when Nani, whose brilliance on the ball was marred only by his theatrics in going to ground too easily, beat Pepe Reina with a thunderous shot, only to see it hit the framework of the goal and bounce to safety.

But United doubled their lead three minutes later. Berbatov's second goal was the pick of the three and the perfect illustration of his newfound confidence, an audacious overhead kick from a Nani cross which was majestic in its creation and breathtaking in its execution.

After squandering winning positions against Fulham and Everton, blowing a two-goal lead in added time at Goodison Park the previous weekend, Fergie warned his players they could not afford a repeat.

But four minutes after Berbatov's strike, Jonny Evans conceded a needless penalty to hand Liverpool a lifeline they barely deserved. Joe Cole funnelled the ball through to Torres, whose clever drag-back caught out Evans, who clumsily chopped him down.

Steven Gerrard stepped up to dispatch the spot-kick past Edwin van der Sar. Within six minutes the visitors were level, Raul Meireles threading the ball through to Torres, who was hauled down by John O'Shea just outside the United area. Liverpool were incensed O'Shea was not shown a red card, but ref Howard Webb clearly felt Torres was not going to get to the ball, which served only to compound the United defender's stupidity in conceding a free-kick from which there were to be damaging consequences.

Gerrard clipped the ball through a gap in the wall between O'Shea and Darren Fletcher to complete the unlikeliest of comebacks.

United looked to have thrown away victory for the third time in four games until O'Shea sent a looping cross into the Liverpool penalty area in the 84th minute and Berbatov rose above Jamie Carragher to head past Pepe Reina.

Old Trafford became a sea of delirium and Fergie danced his familiar grandfather-at-a-wedding jig in the dugout as Berbatov was mobbed by his team-mates.

Victory kept United within touching distance of leaders Chelsea, while for Liverpool their season of soul-searching goes on.

MAN UTD: Van der Sar 5, O'Shea 6, Vidic 7, Evans 6, O'Shea 6, Nani 7 (Gibson 88), Scholes 7, Fletcher 6, Giggs 7 (Macheda 82), Rooney 7, Berbatov 9 (Anderson 88).

LIVERPOOL: Reina 5, Johnson 6, Carragher 5, Skrtel 6, Konchesky 5 (Agger 81), Rodriguez 5 (Ngog 62, 6), Gerrard 7, Poulsen 7, Cole 6, Miereles 7 (Jovanovic 79, 5), Torres 6.

REF: Howard Webb ATT: 75,213

Did you know..

...the last time a United player scored a hat-trick against Liverpool? It was 64 years ago, on September 11, 1946, when Stan Pearson took the headlines in a 5-0 win.



Dominic King on another self-inflicted bloody nose for the Reds

TO borrow the phrase he muttered last week: what a bloody nightmare.

While Alex Ferguson was trying to explain what lay in store for Manchester United ahead of their trip to Goodison Park, every Liverpool fan left Old Trafford yesterday grumbling those same four words but for wildly different reasons.

Having tenaciously climbed from the depths of despair to a platform from which they could have shot for the stars, Liverpool today find themselves consumed by the emptiness that follows a last-gasp defeat at the hands of their oldest enemy. So, so galling. Though the visiting section defiantly belted a rousing rendition of 'You'll Never Walk Alone' at the final whistle, refusing to show how much hurt had been caused by Dimitar Berbatov's hat-trick, they knew it could easily have been an anthem to mark a victory.

Ferguson, as is his way, suggested afterwards that it would have been a "travesty" had Liverpool taken anything from this contest, pointing to the fact United goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar "never had a save to make".

Strange, then, how a side that seemingly had no sense of adventure managed to score twice and might have grabbed a third after launching an impressive comeback when many would have expected them to capitulate.

Yet "the bloody nightmare" to which every Red awoke this morning stemmed from some slapdash defending; as he starts to sift through the wreckage of a defeat that leaves Liverpool stuck in 15th position, Roy Hodgson will know his players were masters of their own downfall. Watch the final goal.

John O'Shea was allowed too much time to swing in a cross and Jamie Carragher failed to deal with the leaping Berbatov as he normally would; on such small details are games of this magnitude decided.

But what about Berbatov's opener? Fernando Torres found himself on the wrong side of the Bulgarian (many will wonder why he was marking him in the first place), Paul Konchesky moved off the post he was protecting and suddenly Liverpool had a mountain to climb. What galls most of all, however, is that United were there for the taking; it may be in vogue to hurl brickbats at Liverpool but, judging on recent evidence, it is not going to be long before Ferguson finds his squad under the microscope.

Had Liverpool displayed from the start the sense of adventure which came after Steven Gerrard confidently dispatched a 64th minute penalty, they would probably have gone on to secure the victory to kick-start a campaign that is trying to splutter into life. Did they pay United too much respect? Possibly.

It was hard to envisage either side scoring in an opening period that resembled a chess game, so for Liverpool to hand their rivals the initiative was both careless and inexplicable. The Reds, after all, used possession well but it was only after Hodgson took Maxi Rodriguez off, partnered David Ngog with Fernando Torres and switched Raul Meireles to the right flank that Liverpool really started to make an impression. Meireles, in particular, showed up prominently and that was not down to his savage new haircut; putting great weight behind his passes and always trying to keep Liverpool on the front foot, he has the potential to become a crowd favourite. Everything he does, he does with grace and class; he moves elegantly, has a good range of passing and is not afraid to put his foot in to a tackle; it is not hard to envisage him and Gerrard striking up a potent rapport, one that might just keep Torres in clover.

Inevitably, Torres' performance came in for heavy scrutiny but his effort and application were first class; if he was frustrated – he did not touch the ball until controlling a throw on the 19th minute in his own half – it certainly did not show. Most significantly of all, his continued presence led to anxiety in United's defence even when they appeared to be cruising; he makes those who are marking him do stupid things, which is precisely how you would describe the actions of Johnny Evans and John O'Shea. Unsurprisingly, Ferguson moaned about the award of both the free-kick and the penalty but it was difficult to see what his gripe why – he should have applauded Howard Webb for failing to show O'Shea a red card as other referees may have done. Gerrard relished the opportunity to drag his side off the canvas and the goals were reward for his perseverance and persistence; had you been asked to name the winner as Gerrard ran over to plant a kiss on the same television camera as he did in March 2009, you would have said Liverpool. Which is why it is so frustrating that this has ended up being a tale of woe; instead of continuing to drive forward, putting a defence that appeared ready to cave in under pressure, Liverpool started to retreat deeper and deeper.

The withdrawal of Meireles and Konchesky, who had what can be kindly described as an uncomfortable afternoon, meant Liverpool lost some of their shape and the knock-on effect was Berbatov being able to complete his hat-trick in the most simple, avoidable fashion. Hence the bloody nightmare. No defeat hurts more than this, especially when you consider the circumstances.

To avoid suffering any more, they must discover the brand of football that enables them to dare to dream. "The first was a wonderful corner and header and the second was a little bit of genius but the third was far too routine," ROY HODGSON laments Dimitar Berbatov's crucial strike "I have watched the incident and Fernando Torres made a meal of it. There is no doubt he tried to get the player sent off," ALEX FERGUSON defends John O'Shea's rugby tackle

MANCHESTER UNITED (4-4-2): Van der Sar: O'Shea, Vidic, Evans, Evra: Nani (Anderson 88), Scholes, Fletcher, Giggs (Macheda 82): Rooney, Berbatov (Gibson 88). Not used: Kuszczak (GK), Brown, Owen, Smalling.

LIVERPOOL (4-2-3-1): Reina: Johnson, Carragher, Skrtel, Konchesky (Agger 81): Gerrard, Poulsen: Maxi (Ngog 62), Meireles (Jovanovic 79), Cole: Torres. Not used: Jones (GK) Babel, Lucas, Kyrgiakos.

GOALS: Berbatov (42, 59, 84), Gerrard (64 pen, 70)

CARDS: Booked – Rooney (57), Evans (63), Ngog (66), Scholes (68), O'Shea (69).

REFEREE: Howard Webb (Rotherham).

ATTENDANCE: 75,213