

Date: 25 September 2010
 Opposition: Sunderland
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25 September
 2010

THE TIMES

Even Bruce pities mess at Anfield

Liverpool 2 Kuyt 5, Gerrard 64 Sunderland 2 Bent 25 (pen), 48 Referee: S Attwell. Attendance: 43,626 TONY BARRETT A combination of disappointment and diplomacy may have prevented Steve Bruce from grabbing a banner and standing shoulder to shoulder with the 9,000 Liverpool supporters who protested against the club's owners, but even partisanship could not stop the Sunderland manager identifying with those attempting to rid Anfield of Tom Hicks and George Gillett Jr. "If it's unstable above you, with those who employ you, then it filters down,"

Bruce said after a pulsating 2-2 draw that featured the most bizarre goal of the season, Steven Gerrard's latest rescue act and further evidence of Darren Bent's status as a Barclays Premier League predator par excellence. "It doesn't matter if you're Liverpool or whoever. What's happening at this club is unbelievable.

"It's always been stable at the top and run properly. It's always been an institution. At the moment there's instability at the top and it filters down, so for Roy Hodgson and everyone concerned it's going to be a difficult time ahead until it gets resolved."

It says much about Liverpool's plight that even one of the Kop's most enduring and willing adversaries, a former Manchester United defender, can identify where their problems lie. Those who remained behind post-match to demonstrate against Hicks and Gillett have long since known it, of course, but their cause is being championed by friend and foe alike.

"I don't think anybody at the club wants anything but a solution to the ownership problem," Hodgson said. "The fans here are very passionate about this football club. You cannot criticise them for showing their displeasure about the situation, because like ourselves they want to see the club moving forward."

The feeling of an attempted coup at Anfield is inescapable. On Saturday the protests were not only given the backing of Hodgson, the Liverpool manager, they were also given visible support by Gerrard, the club captain, who applauded those assembled on the Kop. The post-match sit-in also appeared to be sanctioned by the club, with the stadium PA announcer asking those opposed to "the ownership situation" to "demonstrate peacefully".

Coming on the back of Christian Purslow, the club's managing director, taking control of the means of communication, in this case Liverpool's in-house TV channel, to inform Hicks that the board will attempt to thwart any attempts he might make to remain in situ and the revolutionary air at Anfield is as tangible as Liverpool's slump.

The latter was evident again as Sunderland were the latest to discover that Hodgson appears powerless to arrest a decline that is not of his making. For the most part, Liverpool were so poor that their manager's assertion that a home draw was not such a bad result given the failures of Chelsea, Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur on the same day smacked of a failure to grasp the severity of the situation he finds himself in.

On this and earlier evidence, Liverpool will not be competing with those London clubs for European places this season, they will be among the also-rans and had Sunderland made the most of their superiority for almost two thirds of the match, they would be facing up to their worst start to a campaign since 1954, the last time they were relegated.

Only Gerrard's headed intervention ensured this would not be the case after Bent's penalty and acrobatics had raised the spectre of a defeat that had seemed improbable when Dirk Kuyt took full advantage of the farcical outcome of Michael Turner's attempts with a free kick in his own half to give Liverpool an early lead. When gifts such as that are spurned, you know you are in trouble. But Liverpool do not need such occurrences to tell them that.

With a single win from their opening six league games and the natives growing increasingly restless, their problems are so entrenched that even their rivals are beginning to sympathise.

the guardian

Hodgson shows signs of susceptibility to mounting stress at Liverpool The Stoke City striker gets the nod, if only for his second-half performance. He was largely anonymous before the interval but whatever Tony Pulis said to him at half-time worked. He was a constant threat after that, hitting the post and crossbar with two impressive headers before nodding in the equaliser Best moment Unlucky to hit the bar from Dean Whitehead's free-kick One virtue that helped Roy Hodgson to become Liverpool's manager was a level of common sense which appeared to have eluded his two predecessors. Where Gerard Houllier seemed to exude paranoia towards the end of his reign and Rafael Benitez obsessed over feuds with the Anfield hierarchy, Hodgson was seen to be a wise figure who would spread calm through a club in distress.

In that regard, his demeanour after this match was concerning. Hodgson was prickly in response to the questions put to him and in one instance spoke in a manner that was almost alarmingly confusing.

"I'm sorry but I cannot see the drama you want to make of that," he replied, when asked if this draw had been particularly disappointing given Liverpool's desire for a morale-boosting win following their defeat by Northampton Town in the Carling Cup. "This group of players were not involved in the Carling Cup, I've explained that a dozen times, I don't know how many times I've got to go back to the Carling Cup." But then he added this: "But you're right, it was a disappointing night [against Northampton] and that disappointment could have carried over today." To suggest Hodgson is exhausted after a spell in charge of Liverpool that has seen them win one of seven domestic games, lose to a side who are 13th in League Two and continue to endure a draining saga over the ownership of the club is perhaps extreme, but as autumn takes its grip the beaming 62-year-old who walked into Anfield on a sun-drenched July day and spoke of his "honour" in taking over at the club seems to have vanished.

Maybe that was no surprise after a match in which he had seen his team start brightly but then lose rhythm and cohesion against opponents who would have won through goals from Darren Bent either side of half-time had it not been for an equalising header from Steven Gerrard on 64 minutes.

Hodgson claimed that the chances Liverpool created after that, most notably from Daniel Agger, meant they were "worth a point", but he was in a minority and more agreement could be found in his assessment that Liverpool remain well short of challenging for a top-four place.

"At the moment our major problem is dealing with expectations," he said. "There are a lot of new players [and] uncertainty over the ownership of the club and the minute you are not top of the table people are saying this is not good enough. That anxiety will play upon us but we cannot do more than we are doing."

A call for patience was also expressed by the forward Dirk Kuyt - "It's only a matter of time before we are playing at our level" - and with Fernando Torres gaining more match sharpness (if not more goals), Joe Cole able to bed into the team and Gerrard playing close to his best, Liverpool should improve. It is even possible that the boardroom dramas, which on Saturday prompted a sit-in protest by supporters, could be drawing to an end. The deadline for the American owners, Tom Hicks and George Gillett, to refinance their loans to the banks is approaching.

But even at this early stage, Liverpool need to find some momentum. This is now their worst start to a season since 1953-54 and Sunderland will feel that their plight should be worse, given their display and the manner in which they fell behind.

"A joke" is how Steve Bruce, the Sunderland manager, described Kuyt's fifth-minute opener, which came after Torres intercepted a backpass from Michael Turner to his goalkeeper, Simon Mignolet, which the referee, Stuart Attwell, deemed to be the free-kick that he had just awarded the visitors.

Sunderland broke out in a rage, claiming Turner was simply moving the ball into position so Mignolet could take the set piece himself. Attwell consulted with his assistant but still gave the goal.

"I watched the incident and it's crazy, the referee had his back to the play," said Bruce of the official. Attwell was defended by the Premier League but he already had a reputation soured by his awarding of an infamous Reading "ghost goal" against Watford in 2008.

Hodgson had his own grumblings against the 27-year-old but for him it was a day to be thankful for small mercies.

Man of the match Steed Malbranque (Sunderland)

Date: 25 September 2010

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Times

Guardian

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Echo

Sun Telegraph

Sunday Times



25 September 2010



DOOMED; Hodgson can't arrest decline of once-great Mersey giants
LIVERPOOL 2

SUNDERLAND 2

LIVERPOOL: Reina 6, Johnson 5, Carragher 7, Skrtel 6, Konchesky 5 (Agger 28, 6), Gerrard 8, Poulsen 6 (Ngog 61, 7), Meireles 7, Cole 6, Kuyt 6, Torres 7. Goals: Kuyt 5, Gerrard 64

SUNDERLAND: Mignolet 7, Onuoha 7, Bramble 8, Turner 7, Bardsley 6, Henderson 7, Cattermole 8, Elmohamady 7, Malbranque 8 (Riveros 88), Welbeck 7 (Gyan 81), Bent 7 (Zenden 90). Goals: Bent 25 pen, 48

REFEREE: Stuart Attwell ATTENDANCE: 43,626

GIVEN that watching Liverpool for much of the previous 90 minutes must have felt like a life sentence, the fans who stayed even longer at Anfield to stage a sit-in protest afterwards deserve a medal.

There were thousands of them, though, which emphasises the depth of feeling about the future among the supporters, who fear the club now stands on the edge of an abyss.

The latest rumours sweeping Merseyside on Saturday evening were that co-owner Tom Hicks is now in talks with banks from the Middle East to find the finance that will extend his tenure at the club, and with it extend the crippling debt that has brought Liverpool to its knees.

Even the thought of such a prospect is enough to send shivers down the spine of many thousands of decent and ordinary people who follow Liverpool not for money, but for love.

If that happens, and h to the current situation is extend for any longer, then the Reds are doomed.

It was certainly enough to keep the fans at Anfield for almost an hour after the game against Sunderland to air an unprintable protest about their American owners, who have of now abandoned all pretence of "stewardship".

It is a tragedy that such a fate can have befallen such an historic (or historicised, as co-owner George Gillett might say) club, and it is not just Liverpool fans who feel that way.

Steve Bruce, the Sunderland manager, admitted after the game that he is saddened by the mess at Anfield and the problems that have descended on Liverpool through no fault of their own.

Bruce is a rare thing in football, a man who is totally straight and honest, who can tell it like it is. You know what he says about Liverpool is genuine because he clearly feels the same way about his former club Manchester United who are experiencing similar, if less severe, problems.

What troubles the Black Cats manager is that his counterpart at Anfield, Roy Hodgson, has been subjected to some intense criticism just a handful of games into his reign, despite the massive problems he inherited.

Not only did Hodgson take over an expensively assembled squad that is simply not good enough - as witnessed by the midweek embarrassment of a highly-paid second string - he is also battling against a debilitating political situation.

Even in the midst of a celebration of his own side's best performance of the season so far (one that suggests Sunderland can perhaps challenge for a place in the top eight), Bruce was at pains to defend Hodgson and condemn the actions of Liverpool's owners.

"It's very difficult to judge anyone after five or six games, and it's unfair to criticise Roy," he said. "I think Liverpool have the right man in charge. If the situation is unstable above you then it filters down.

"It doesn't matter if you're a massive club like Liverpool, it still has a terrible effect. It's unbelievable what has been happening at this club because it's always been stable at the top and run properly, it's always been an institution.

"At the moment it's not got that, and it filters down so for Roy and everyone concerned at the club it's going to be a difficult time ahead until it gets resolved."

What is puzzling is that Hodgson isn't given the same leeway as his predecessor Rafa Benitez. Already, barely a handful of games into his new regime, there are dark mutterings against him.

Yet under a tense political situation and with clear financial restrictions, it is always going to take time to turn things around from the mess of last season. The defenders of the previous manager argued the deck was stacked against him. Yet the same people are quick to condemn the new boss.

The truth is that Liverpool will not be great again until their owners are forced out, and new custodians are found who will build a new stadium that doesn't place huge debt repayment pressure on the club's finances.

Under those circumstances the Reds could be one of the most profitable clubs in the Premier League, if not the world. But conversely, if Hicks clings on then they could go under. It is a nightmare for their new manager, and the pressures were clearly visible in a Liverpool performance that didn't really reach an acceptable level until the final 20 minutes.

Even a bizarre opening goal, controversially allowed to stand when referee Stuart Attwell - correctly - deemed that Michael Turner had restarted play at a free-kick, couldn't galvanise the Reds.

It was Sunderland who dominated large parts of the play either side of half-time. Darren Bent hauled them level from the penalty spot and the Sunderland striker headed his side into the lead three minutes into the second half from a fine Nedum Onuoha cross.

Only then did Liverpool respond, but Hodgson is right to suggest they actually responded rather well, with a rousing comeback led by skipper Steven Gerrard. He scored a fine goal when Fernando Torres showed his class out on the right flank to create the opening, and in truth, Liverpool had the chances at the end to have gone on and won the game. Daniel Agger missed a sitter in the dying seconds.

Liverpool sit just two points off the drop zone this morning, but Hodgson (above) believes it is not yet time to panic.

He says fans and critics alike must be realistic in allowing a new side time to gel to overcome the obvious problems he inherited from last season.

"I am not saying our start to the season is good enough, but I am saying it is something that could have been predicted when you consider everything that has gone on," he said.

"Under these circumstances you have to be patient. We are moving forward but it takes time when you have a new team that is still learning to play together. "I know I can't come in and just wave a magic wand and suddenly Liverpool will be winning trophies again.

"There is an awful lot of work to do, but there are signs that things are progressing.

"You could see that Fernando Torres is much different to the Fernando Torres in the opening games, and Steven Gerrard was a significant factor again.

"They are important players and they are leading by example. Fernando still needs time and patience and he will get there in terms of his level.

"The same goes for the new players. Raul Miereles showed flashes of what he is capable of, and I believe the way we responded to adversity shows what we are capable of.

"If we had capitulated at 2-1, it would be a very bleak picture now, but we didn't.

"We responded brilliantly, and that offers promise for the future for us all."



Dominic King sees LFC's poor start continue with a draw against Sunderland

SAME final score, different mood and appraisal.

If Roy Hodgson entered Anfield's Press room on Wednesday night sodden and angry, he left it on Saturday calm and cautiously optimistic.

While a 2-2 draw with Northampton Town was a precursor to one of the most wretched moments in Liverpool's modern history, another 2-2 - this time with Sunderland - has given Hodgson hope that all might not be lost.

Some supporters will be puzzled by Hodgson's optimism. Having had chance to reflect on what can only be described as a lively 90 minutes, they will be concerned about a number of issues surrounding their team and what this performance means for the future.

For starters: how could a side that burst out of the blocks with the impetus of a 100 metre sprinter lose its way so badly?

Why have all Liverpool's first half displays this season been so laboured?

Is this a signal of the level that Hodgson's men are really at?

It is hard to analyse Liverpool without worrying, particularly when you cast a glance at the Premier League table and see them stuck in the lower reaches with fewer points than all the promoted teams and just one win to their credit from their opening six matches.

When you consider on Saturday that Fernando Torres led the attack, Steven Gerrard, Raul Meireles, Joe Cole and Dirk Kuyt offered attacking options and the back four was perhaps as strong as it can be, it was alarming to see them so totally dominated by Sunderland at times.

Here's where it gets worrying; if talent of that level cannot brush aside a team that, in truth, can be expected to finisher no higher than between eighth and tenth, what does that signify for Liverpool's prospects?

Bleak, would be the obvious answer and listening to Steve Bruce talk afterwards, you were able to draw a clear impression of what the rest of the Premier League make of events going on inside Anfield's corridors of power right now.

"It's very difficult to judge anyone after six games - even 15 months," said Bruce.

"I think Liverpool have the right man in charge - he's got vast experience in a difficult time. Always in my experience if it's unstable above you, with those who employ you, then it filters down.

"It's unbelievable about this club because it's never had that. It's always been stable at the top and run properly. It's always been an institution. At the moment it's not got that and it filters down. So for Roy - and everyone concerned - it's going to be a difficult time ahead until it gets resolved."

You could easily dismiss those words as the mischievous offering of a former Manchester United player, eager to highlight the misery of one of his greatest rivals but it would be wrong to do so; Bruce is not someone who indulges in malevolence and his appraisal was offered with genuine sincerity.

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Everyone knows Liverpool will be in dire straits until, at the very least, Tom Hicks and George Gillett disappear and, amid the vitriol, there was an element of poignancy to the sit-in demonstration which followed the game.

Just before the near 3,000-strong throng headed home, a sombre rendition of "All we are saying, is sell up and go" was sung, the weary tone making it clear that the torment and suffering has gone on far too long.

Enough is enough.

So when you throw into the equation a struggling team to go along with absent owners, you have the recipe for a calamity – which is why Hodgson's post-match comments were all the more out of keeping with the scene.

"Some of the players we believe can lift the team are beginning to find their legs – like Torres and Gerrard as prime examples," Hodgson offered. "It was only (Raul) Meireles' second start, another start for Joe Cole. There are moments giving me satisfaction."

For those moments to become much more consistent, then, surely it is time for Hodgson to play this line-up regularly and allow them to build up a rapport. Chopping and changing does no good and, if anything, only makes things more difficult.

Take Torres. His every move is being scrutinised at the moment; every time he fails to smile it is seen as a signal that he is ready to hand in a transfer request, every time he misses a chance it is said that he is out of form and not the force of old.

Absolute nonsense. Two assists here – one for Dirk Kuyt, the other for Steven Gerrard – mean Torres is now responsible for five of the six goals Liverpool have scored this season and his work rate was impeccable; another 90 minutes in Utrecht on Thursday would do him no harm at all.

Bruce might have grumbled that Torres was "unsporting" in the build up to Liverpool's bizarre opening goal but he would do well to turn his ire on Sunderland defender Michael Turner, who was far too lackadaisical when taking a fifth minute free kick.

That should have been the springboard for Liverpool to push for a morale boosting win but, worryingly, Sunderland took a grip of the game and fully deserved the lead that Darren Bent's double either side of half-time gave them.

Only a late rally, which resulted in Gerrard's bullet header, enabled Liverpool to avoid the "black" day Hodgson had feared was about to unfold but that rally – which should, in all honesty, have achieved a win but for Daniel Agger's dreadful last minute miss – lifted the manager's spirits.

This might be Liverpool's worst start to a Premier League campaign since 1992 and Hodgson has collected fewer points from his first six games than Rafa Benitez, Gerard Houllier, Roy Evans, Graeme Souness and Kenny Dalglish, but none of that matters.

What is important is for Liverpool to find the form that will carry them into a position with which they are more accustomed – and the only way that will happen is if the 'A' team gets on the same wavelength.

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LIVERPOOL (4-4-1-1): Reina: Johnson, Carragher, Skrtel, Konchesky (Agger 28); Meireles, Gerrard, Poulsen (Ngog 61), Cole: Kuyt, Torres. Not used: Jones (GK), Jovanovic, Kyrgiakos, Rodriguez, Lucas.

SUNDERLAND (4-4-2): Mignolet: Onuoha, Turner, Bramble, Bardsley; Malbranque (Riveros 88), Cattermole, Henderson, Elmoahady: Bent (Zenden 90+7), Welbeck (Gyan 81). Not used: Gordon (GK), Colback, da Silva, Reid.

GOALS: Kuyt (5), Bent (25 pen, 48), Gerrard (64)

CARDS: Booked: Torres (59), Kuyt (60), Gerrard (75), Mignolet (90+5)

REFEREE: Stuart Attwell (Warwicks).

ATTENDANCE: 43,626.

The Sunday Telegraph

Bruce fumes as woeful Liverpool are let off the hook
 Liverpool 2

Kuyt 5, Gerrard 64

Sunderland 2

Bent 25 (pen), 48

Att: 43,626

Steven Gerrard has built his legacy on disguising Liverpool's flaws. It is to their captain that this team has turned for more than a decade in times of strife. Here, once more, he stepped into the breach to earn Roy Hodgson's team a point against Sunderland, but so deep are Liverpool's troubles that such a task is now beyond even him.

This is a team which, the first and final 15 minutes apart, was thoroughly outplayed by opponents the Kop is accustomed to seeing swatted aside for the second time in four days, and that despite being handed a goal lead by Michael Turner's inexplicable generosity.

And it is a club so mired in uncertainty and discontent that thousands of fans, organised by the Spirit of Shankly supporters' union, remained behind at Anfield to voice their displeasure at the continued ownership of Tom Hicks and George Gillett.

That sentiment has translated itself on to the pitch. Just as nobody knows where the club's future lies, so none of Hodgson's team seem to know where they are heading. There is a nervousness which permeates the entire club and, as much as Hodgson and his players must take responsibility for a week of poor results, that stems from the fact that the boardroom exists in a state of civil war.

Even being gifted a goal head start could not dissipate the sense that the Liverpool vintage – though there is nothing about this side that warrants such a tag – of 2010 remains as directionless, as listless as ever.

There was an element of poetic justice about the way Turner gifted Dirk Kuyt the opening goal, given the beach-ball incident which handed Sunderland a victory against these same opponents at the Stadium of Light almost 12 months ago. This fixture will soon earn a reputation for goals as comic as they are controversial. Referee Stuart Attwell, just a moment after ruling out a Fernando Torres strike for the most marginal of offsides, awarded Sunderland a free-kick just inside their own half for an apparent foul on Titus Bramble by Raul Meireles.

After Attwell demanded the kick be retaken, Turner seemed to play the ball back to his goalkeeper Simon Mignolet. The pass, though, was far too weak, and Torres pounced, streaking towards the Kop and presenting Kuyt with a simple finish. Sunderland protested, Attwell consulted his linesman, and the goal was allowed to stand.

"He has got it wrong," said Steve Bruce, the Sunderland manager. "Everyone in the ground knew Michael Turner had not taken the free-kick. Between the linesmen and the referee, they have got to get it right. It was a crazy goal." Fortunately for Attwell – and, as Bruce admitted, his wallet, regularly raided by the Football Association for his outspoken views on referees – Liverpool could not build on that start. Instead, Sunderland used the ball better, attacked with more purpose, played with more poise. They deserved Darren Bent's equaliser from the penalty spot, secured after Christian Poulsen handled Ahmed Elmohamady's cross, and, in truth, could consider going level at half-time as scant reward for their efforts. Little matter. The visitors scored immediately after the break, with Bent heading home Onuoha's deep cross.

Time for Gerrard. As his side threatened to crumble, as Sunderland began to appear comfortable, the Liverpool captain headed home Torres's cross, twice deflected on the way to the England international's brow.

There might have been a winner, too, David Ngog, Joe Cole and Daniel Agger all going close to completing Liverpool's comeback. It was not to be, though Hodgson insisted after the game that his team's performance was ample comfort. "There are a lot of new players and the more we play together, the better they will be become," he said. "Rome was not built in a day."

That such positivity could be found in a home draw, though, says much about the decline in Liverpool's empire. For three years, it has been allowed to crumble. The protesters inside Anfield know that, Hodgson knows that, and Gerrard knows that. It is to their enduring frustration that seemingly no one can stop the descent.

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Gift goal riles Bruce

LIVERPOOL 2

Kuyt 5, Gerrard 64

SUNDERLAND 2

Bent 25 pen, 48

THE AFTERNOON ended with Steve Bruce contemplating one more FA fine and Stuart Attwell at the centre of yet another refereeing debate.

The Premier League's youngest official has been surrounded by controversy before - the lowest point being the "ghost goal" awarded to Reading when the ball flew several yards the wrong side of the post. But Attwell's Anfield moment yesterday also was bizarre and left Sunderland manager Bruce fuming. It gave Liverpool a fifth-minute lead in a match they did their best to throw away; one that did little to reassure fans that a return to the Premier League's top four is a viable target.

Sunderland's Michael Turner stood over a dead ball some 15 yards from his own penalty area before backheeling it in the direction of goalkeeper Simon Mignolet. Whether Turner's kick was an undercooked pass back or an attempt to relocate the position of the set-piece, the defender's execution was odd. As a pass it was well short of its target. If he was handing responsibility over to his goalkeeper, why kick it at all? Rarely do defenders intentionally move the ball away from the opposition goal when preparing a free kick.

Either way, Turner was motionless as Fernando Torres chased the moving ball. Mignolet waved an arm at Attwell, demanding the play be stopped, then tried to block the pass to Dirk Kuyt. He achieved neither and Kuyt struck the ball into an empty net. Attwell, surrounded by a posse of Sunderland players, walked to his assistant for a second opinion, but the goal stood.

"The referee's got it wrong," said Steve Bruce. "If Michael Turner had taken the free kick it would have been 25 yards from where the incident was. I think everyone in the ground realised that, too.

"I've paid enough fines over the last six months. I'm accused of whinging and all the rest of it. If he's in doubt or whatever, which he was, otherwise why put the whistle to his mouth, why not give the free kick to be taken in the right position? Then we're not talking about this, we're talking about the performance of our team, which I thought was terrific."

Of that there was no argument.

Sunderland hadn't scored here in a decade of attempts, yet there were periods yesterday where they made Liverpool's position in the bottom third of the table seem realistic.

Hodgson has just one league victory as their manager, and while the fixture list has been unkind in handing out early meetings with Arsenal and the two Manchester clubs, losing a Carling Cup tie at home to Northampton has brought public questions about his "approach". "For me it's quite simple," said Hodgson. "It's the Rome wasn't built in a day adage and we have to keep working at it.

There's lots of things I think we have to work at but I've got a group of players who give it all.

"We have to start winning games. But if you've seen the results today - Tottenham losing, Chelsea losing, Arsenal losing - it's the games we all need to win because the League is very tight. Had we won today we'd probably be in fourth or fifth place. I don't think we're playing like a team in fourth place at the moment, but that's how close the League is."

In Hodgson's view, Liverpool should have been ahead before the game's great issue arose. While the decision to rule Torres offside when converting a Steven Gerrard free kick was marginal, the goal his team were allowed steadied no nerves.

Pepe Reina rescued Gerrard when his captain's errant header played Darren Bent in on goal, but the keeper could do nothing about Christian Poulsen throwing an arm at Ahmed Elmohamady's cross.

Bent gleefully converted his third penalty this season.

Liverpool started the second half in pallid style, sitting too deep and regularly turning over possession. When Nedum Onuoha sprinted past substitute left-back Daniel Agger and crossed, Bent headed a second, with Glen Johnson and Jamie Carragher embarrassingly distant spectators.

Liverpool levelled after Torres skipped past Titus Bramble and found Gerrard's forehead. Less edifying was the elbow with which the midfielder felled Danny Welbeck. "I think if it was Lee Cattermole he would have been sent off," deadpanned Bruce.

As the home side threw bodies and balls forward in an all-too-familiar attempt to rescue matters, Turner partly redeemed himself by denying Agger in the six-yard box. All that remained was the latest Kop protest - against owners rather than product on pitch.

Liverpool: Reina 7, Johnson 5, Carragher 5, Skrtel 6, Konchesky 6 (Agger 28min, 5), Meireles 6, Poulsen 5 (Ngog 61min), Gerrard 7, Cole 6, Kuyt 7, Torres 7
 Sunderland: Mignolet 5, Bardsley 5, Turner 5, Bramble 6, Onuoha 7, Cattermole 6, Malbranque 6 (Riveros 88min), Henderson 7, Elmohamady 7, Bent 8 (Zenden 90+7), Welbeck 5 (Gyan 81)

Storm clouds remain fixed over Liverpool: Roy Hodgson's side again struggle as Sunderland are unlucky not to win

A fixture with no notable previous history is developing a reputation for bizarre goals. After last season's one that bounced off a beach ball to help Sunderland to victory came a strike here that benefited Liverpool. Of greater note for them, however, will be another disappointing result and the lingering sense that this remains a troubled club.

This was meant to be the sunlight after the storm that was Wednesday's humiliating defeat to Northampton, when the regulars returned to the team and inspired the win that would restore pride and kick-start Liverpool's stuttering start to the season. Instead the hosts looked disjointed and at times clueless. They were lucky to draw.

Roy Hodgson did not see it that way, claiming his team were "worth a point" given the chances they created after recovering from going 2-1 down. The manager admitted, however, that his men are not playing in a manner that suggests they can reclaim a Champions League place and it will need "time" and "work" for them to gel into a cohesive unit.

What must become an instant priority for Hodgson is restoring Fernando Torres's goalscoring threat after he again looked like a lost soul. Torres was left stranded by his team-mates despite their lining up in a 4-2-2-1-1 formation in which Dirk Kuyt, on his return from a shoulder injury, was meant to play just off the striker with Joe Cole and Raul Meireles joining from a midfield anchored by Steven Gerrard and Christian Poulsen. The tactic worked initially but then disintegrated quickly, resulting in stray passes and empty spaces appearing everywhere.

"There are lots of new players coming together and we have not had much time.

The more we work together the better we will become," Hodgson said. "I'm sure the fans will join me in appreciating the determination and effort of the players."

That was hardly evident from the supporters who, as planned, used this match as a means to protest again against the club's American owners. Joy was instead

witnessed in the away section in appreciation of a performance by the visitors that combined pressure with eye-catching penetration. That was no more so

apparent than in the build-up to Sunderland's second goal, in which Jordan Henderson won a header from Poulsen and passed the ball quickly to Steed

Malbranque, who in turn found Nedum Onuoha on the right-wing from where the

full-back delivered a cross Darren Bent could not help but convert.

It was the striker's sixth goal of the season and his second of the game following

the penalty on 25 minutes which cancelled out the goal this game will be best

remembered for. The visitors were awarded a free-kick just outside their area on

five minutes. Michael Turner nudged the ball back towards his goalkeeper Simon

Mignolet but it was short enough for Torres to intercept before playing a pass for

Kuyt to score.

Sunderland complained that Turner had not taken the free-kick and was instead

moving the ball into position for Mignolet to take the set piece instead but the

referee, Stuart Attwell, ignored their protests.

"Everyone in the ground knew Michael Turner had not taken the free-kick," Steve

Bruce said. "It was a crazy goal and instead of talking about a fantastic

performance by my team I'm talking about the referee."

However, the Premier League's refereeing body later issued a statement backing

Attwell, saying it believes "the correct decisions were made". "The referee is

required to indicate the restart of the match' . . . These gestures can be minimal .

. . . There is no requirement by law to use the whistle . . . The referee [also]

correctly determined that the free-kick was played from the right place."

Having scored late to earn a draw against Arsenal last week, the visitors again

showed character, working aggressively in midfield and in Bent having a forward

who is excelling in leading the line.

The 26-year-old appeared to have condemned Liverpool to a third consecutive

defeat but they exerted enough pressure to equalise on 64 minutes, with Steven

Gerrard converting Torres's cross with a powerful header. David Ngog and Daniel

Agger had chances to win the game for Liverpool but Sunderland deservedly

survived.

Anfield 43,626

Referee Stuart Attwell