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15 December  
 2010

## THE TIMES

Liverpool's inability to break free adds to frustration for Hodgson

Liverpool 0  
 Utrecht 0

Tony Barrett Two days after the Liverpool hierarchy declared that his tenure thus far had been "unacceptable", Roy Hodgson's team selection policy was influenced by the club's medical department.

However, any significant undermining of his position as manager was done by his own team, as Liverpool allowed themselves to become consumed by caution on a night when they had nothing to lose.

With qualification for the last 32 of the Europa League already secured, Liverpool had nothing at stake against Utrecht, other than cementing their status as group winners. Their only other remit was to provide entertainment for a near full house as fans took advantage of a generous offer from the club's new owner, John W. Henry, to allow children free admission for the visit of the Dutch side.

In the event, the Anfield crowd departed disillusioned by a combination of the negativity displayed by their team and Hodgson's belated decision to omit Fernando Torres from his team, having insisted only a day before that the Spain forward would play.

According to Hodgson, a consensus had been reached, resulting in a late U-turn on his original decision to field Torres and Pepe Reina. Torres was named as a substitute while the goalkeeper was left out altogether. "I'm glad I was persuaded to change my mind on the subject," the manager said, only to qualify his relief by adding that he still considered that Torres might have benefited from a run-out to shake off the ring rust that has dogged him of late.

It may have been a logical decision to leave out Torres - and one that was made to look even more sound when Ricky van Wolfswinkel, Utrecht's own star striker, was carried off with a serious shoulder injury - but the confusing series of events that led up to it will inevitably raise further questions about Hodgson's relationship with the club's medical department, even though he attempted to stop any conspiracy theories in their tracks immediately after the match.

"A change of heart," was how Hodgson explained his decision, confessing that the club's medical staff had made him "see sense".

If only someone of influence at the club had done the same when Hodgson accepted the acquisition of Joe Cole in the summer, Liverpool may not now be saddled with a player whose performances have done little other than increase the number of critics who believe that his best days are behind him. In the absence of Torres, the stage was set for Cole to take the limelight but he failed miserably and when Hodgson pointed out that Liverpool's inability to break down such limited opponents had been caused by a lack of "technical quality in the final third", it will not have gone unnoticed that this was the area of the pitch in which the former Chelsea player was supposed to make a difference.

On Cole's present form, the [pounds sterling]100,000-a-week contract that had some senior Anfield officials proclaiming his signing as one of the bargains of the summer appears to meet all the criteria - overpriced, overrated and overripe - of the bad business deals that Henry believes Liverpool have been guilty of in the past two years.

It was another of Liverpool's free summer signings who came closest to scoring. Milan Jovanovic, acquired on a Bosman transfer from Standard Liege, struck the crossbar with a shot from distance. That opportunity came in the eighth minute and it was as good as it got for Liverpool on a night when their struggle to create chances - with or without Torres and regardless of the quality of the opposition - was laid bare once again.

"I was really hoping that with so many in the crowd and so many new fans in the crowd we would produce a more sparkling performance but we were not capable of doing that I'm afraid," Hodgson said. "But it was a useful exercise.

"This was a team short on match practice and there were definitely some positives, in particular with one or two of the young players, but it wasn't a classic."

In many ways, the uninspiring draw summed up Liverpool's Europa League campaign as they stumbled through another game without ever looking particularly effective or incisive but with several of their stars afforded the opportunity to enjoy a rest.

"The happiest thing for me is we've achieved the results without bashing our most senior players," Hodgson said. He will know, though, that Liverpool's owners and fans, even those who are allowed free entry, are entitled to expect much better than this.

Liverpool (4-4-2): B Jones -- M Kelly, M Skrtel (sub: S Kyrgiakos, 46min), D Wilson, F Aurelio -- M Jovanovic, C Poulsen, J Shelvey, M Jovanovic (sub: D Kuyt, 73), J Cole -- R Babel, N Eccleston (sub: D Pacheco, 56). Substitutes not used: M Hansen, G Johnson, R Meireles, F Torres. Booked: Eccleston. Utrecht (4-2-3-1): M Vorm -- T Cornelisse, S Keller, J Wuytens, M Nesu -- M Silberbauer, G Nijholt -- E Duplan (sub: T Oar, 71), B Maguire (sub: A Sarota, 84), D Mertens -- R van Wolfswinkel (sub: L de Kogel, 45). Substitutes not used: E Cummins, M van der Maarel, I Vorstermans. Referee: K Jakobsson (Iceland).

## the guardian

Liverpool stutter after Hodgson tears up his plans

To all intents and purposes this was as meaningless a match as Liverpool will play in Europe yet, such is the lot of Roy Hodgson, it merely raised fresh questions over his authority after he confirmed his team was altered on medical advice. Coming just 48 hours after Liverpool's owners had described the season so far as unacceptable, it was not the admission of an emboldened manager.

John W Henry and Tom Werner, Liverpool's new chairman, missed a sterile display against Utrecht after returning to the United States to attend a funeral. They missed a game on which nothing rested, with Liverpool having already qualified as group winners, but also one that did nothing for the manager's attempts to restore the confidence of key individuals. Liverpool started with seven internationals on the pitch and threatened twice all night.

Only at Liverpool could a dead rubber be brought to life by controversy and conspiracy. Hodgson was unequivocal on the team selection on the eve of the game as he revealed he had torn up his Europa League policy in order to play Fernando Torres and Jose Reina from the start, the former due to form and a minor injury to David Ngog, the latter for unspecified reasons. Both Spaniards were keen to play and to get the misery of the defeat by Newcastle out of their system yet were absent from the team sheets, with Torres on the bench and Reina excluded altogether.

Hodgson's explanation contained a first - an apology to the press - and made absolute sense in many respects. But it did nothing to dispel the suspicion that Liverpool's manager must cede authority to Dr Peter Brukner, the club's head of sports science and sports medicine, even on a night when he wanted to put on a show for his employers ahead of Saturday evening's reunion with Fulham.

"I had a change of heart," Hodgson said. "I must apologise to the reporters. I was certainly considering giving Fernando a start. But I also had a talk to our fitness people and they made me see sense that it wasn't the wisest thing to do. And of course it would be very bad for us if he picked up an injury. The same applied to Pepe Reina. They made me see sense, I listened to the reason around me and I changed my mind. I am a bit sad that, unintentionally, I tricked some supporters and a few journalists."

Liverpool's new owners had increased the gate, and produced a fine PR move in the process, by allowing under-16s in free, hence Hodgson's contrition on the absence of the biggest draw. His argument that it was needless to risk Torres to injury was merely strengthened when Utrecht lost their leading forward, Ricky van Wolfswinkel, to a serious shoulder injury on the stroke of half-time. It was hard not to feel bewilderment, however, and indeed some sympathy for the Liverpool manager, at the sudden turn of events.

Brukner's influence over when players can and cannot play has been a recurring theme of Hodgson's debut season at Anfield. The manager angrily denied being dictated to by the Australian when it was first put to him in the autumn.

Increasingly, as Joe Cole, Torres and Steven Gerrard have all returned later than originally anticipated from injury, even while Hodgson has been struggling for acceptance, that conclusion appears inescapable.

Torres' frequent injuries over the past two years precipitated a review of Liverpool's medical department in the summer and no-one is disputing Brukner's opinion. But it is difficult to imagine, for example, Sir Alex Ferguson or David Moyes changing their stated team at the last on doctor's orders. And supporters never shout for a medicine man's head if it all goes wrong.

The game itself was not the most pressing in Liverpool's European history even before it fell a distant second to the team selection. Nevertheless, it did not augur well for Hodgson when Anfield began chanting "attack, attack, attack" with the contest in its embryonic stage and Liverpool's rigid formation failing to excite.

Nathan Eccleston was handed a first Liverpool start in place of Torres and made his presence felt after only six minutes. Unfortunately it was for a dangerous challenge through Mihai Nesu that warranted the booking he received. Milan Jovanovic looked to have accepted the need to impress when he drifted inside and unleashed a fine 25-yard drive that goalkeeper Michel Vorm tipped onto his crossbar shortly afterwards. That was a rare highlight in the first half as Liverpool tested even the patience of the fans.

Hodgson's resolve was also stretched. He sent Torres out for a warm-up, and a warning to those on the pitch, after half an hour and words were exchanged at half-time on the evidence of a more purposeful second half. Ryan Babel twice went close to giving Liverpool the lead while the disappointing Cole had a goalbound effort blocked late on.

Liverpool 4-4-2

Jones; Kelly, Wilson, Skrtel (Kyrgiakos, h-t), Aurelio; Jovanovic (Kuyt, 73), Poulsen, Shelvey, Cole; Babel, Eccleston\* (Pacheco, 56).

Subs not used

Hansen, Johnson, Meireles, Torres.

Utrecht 4-4-1-1

Vorm; Cornelisse, Keller, Wuytens, Nesu; Duplan (Oar, 71), Silberbauer, Nijholt, Mertens; Maguire (Sarota, 84); Van Wolfswinkel (De Kogel, 45).

Subs not used

Cummings, Van der Maarel, Vorstermans.

Referee K Jakobsson (Ice)

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## The Mail

Reds draw to a halt as Roy rests Torres

Liverpool 0

FC Utrecht 0

FERNANDO Torres spent a wasted night on the bench as Liverpool failed to land a blow in their bid to equal a club record nine consecutive European home wins. Roy Hodgson had intended to play Torres from the start against FC Utrecht but was talked out of the move by Liverpool's medical staff. How the manager must wish he had stuck to his own devices.

Liverpool were poor and only looked like scoring once -- when Milan Jovanovic struck the crossbar after eight minutes -- to the obvious frustration of the Anfield crowd.

The last time Liverpool won nine European games in a row was between 1984 and 1991 but they never threatened to equal that here.

The first half was not one which will live long in the memory of those young fans who benefited from the club's generous offer of free tickets.

Aside from Jovanovic's effort, the home side never established a rhythm, which was partly down to the fact Hodgson made 10 changes to the team which lost to Newcastle at the weekend with only Martin Skrtel, captaining the team on his 26th birthday, surviving.

The team still contained the likes of Joe Cole, Ryan Babel, Jovanovic, Christian Poulsen and Fabio Aurelio but also included 19-year-old Nathan Eccleston, making his first start, and 18-year-old Danny Wilson on only his second appearance. It contributed to a disjointed performance which very rarely rose above mediocre. Utrecht, for their part, arrived at Anfield knowing they could not qualify for the last 32 but even with that freedom they too could not muster a display to excite their 4,000-strong travelling contingent.

And they suffered a blow just before half-time when top scorer Ricky van Wolfswinkel left the pitch on a stretcher and was taken to hospital with a suspected broken collarbone after falling awkwardly.

Hodgson made a change at the interval but it was not the one the crowd were wanting, with Sotirios Kyrgiakos replacing Skrtel.

Babel was first to threaten 10 minutes after the restart when his run to the edge of the penalty area saw him fire wide of Michel Vorm's right-hand post.

Eccleston then departed to allow another promising youngster, Dani Pacheco, to enter the fray.

But Babel was looking Liverpool's most likely goalscorer and he came within inches of connecting with Kelly's low cross into the six-yard box.

Hodgson's final substitution had more than a touch of sentimentality about it, giving Dirk Kuyt a run-out for the final 18 minutes against his former club when he replaced Jovanovic.

It posed the question quite why Torres was included in the match squad at all. Late on Cole looked certain to score but had his low shot charged down by Sander Keller after Vorm had spilled Aurelio's cross.

That summed up the England midfielder -- and Liverpool's -- night.

Despite the poor showing, Kuyt believes Liverpool have a great chance of winning the Europa League.

He said: 'We have a couple of targets and obviously we like to win trophies.

'I think we have a very good chance to win this trophy.

'It's good to be top of the group, and we'll wait and see who our next opponent is.'

While Liverpool await that news from Friday's draw, Utrecht's European campaign is over.

Kuyt, though, was delighted to hear the travelling contingent from Holland cheering him as he appeared off the bench in the 73rd minute.

'That's great,' he said. 'The supporters from Utrecht were unbelievable, just like the Liverpool supporters.

'After seven years, to play against them and get a crowd like this it's unbelievable and showed a lot of respect, and I'm very thankful for that.' Kuyt stressed he understood Hodgson's decision to start the match with him on the bench.

'We play a lot of important games this month so he has to make his choices,' Kuyt explained. 'Obviously Saturday is another very important game for us so he decided to rest me.'

**MATCH FACTS** LIVERPOOL(4-4-2): Jones 6; Kelly 6, Skrtel 6 (Kyrgiakos 46min, 6), Wilson 6, Aurelio 7; Jovanovic 7 (Kuyt 73, 6), Poulsen 6, Shelvey 6, Cole 5; Babel 5, Eccleston 5 (Pacheco 56, 6). Subs not used: Hansen, Torres, Meireles, Johnson. Booked: Eccleston.

**FC UTRECHT** (4-5-1): Vorm 7; Cornelisse 6, Keller 7, Wuytens 8, Nesu 7; Duplan 6 (Oar 71, 6), Silberbauer 7, Nijholt 6, Maguire 6 (Sarota 83), Mertens 7; Van Wolfswinkel 6 (De Kogel 45, 6). Subs not used: Cummins, Van der Maarel, Vorstermans.

Man of the match: Jan Wuytens. Referee: Kristinn Jakobsson (Iceland) 6.

Attendance: 37,800

## The Daily Telegraph

Liverpool go through motions to test the fans' patience

Liverpool 0

FC Utrecht 0

Att: 37,800

A substantial, admirably stoic crowd of 37,800 somehow survived a truly dreadful Europa League tie last night. Even those who got in for nothing could have questioned the value for money. One supporter, dressed as Santa Claus, walked out early and you know it's serious when Father Christmas turns his back. The final whistle was greeted with a brief flurry of boos.

On the positive side, Liverpool remain unbeaten in 10 European games, no one got injured and stars like Fernando Torres and Pepe Reina were rested before the weekend's game with Fulham. Jonjo Shelvey hinted at his promise in the centre while there was also confirmation of how the left flank does not suit Joe Cole.

If Liverpool supporters were largely quiet, their Utrecht counterparts made a real racket, singing in Dutch and English, but this was a largely dispiriting night, particularly for the visitors' young striker, Ricky van Wolfswinkel, who departed to hospital with a suspected broken collarbone.

Already safely through to tomorrow's draw, Liverpool had given out free tickets to children in an attempt to engender a lively atmosphere for a dead rubber (although the visitors had a chance of qualifying). The home fans were largely subdued in the first half, barring one chant of "attack, attack, attack". Groans tumbled from the Kop when Christian Poulsen kept losing the ball.

Far noisier were the Dutch fans, 3,800 of them had paid [euro]90 each for the trip, keen to support their team, to see one of the great arenas of European football and salute one of their old boys, Dirk Kuyt.

Liverpool's No18 started on the bench, sitting just behind Fernando Torres, rested in anticipation for the Fulham game. A few of the Utrecht players had talked of their desire to get Kuyt's shirt. Their talented 21-year-old striker, Van Wolfswinkel, also had another aim: to show his "favourite club" that he was worth considering as a potential transfer target.

Having scored 19 goals this season, Van Wolfswinkel has been making a name for himself in Dutch football and was determined to make his mark. When Martin Kelly was short with a back-pass, Van Wolfswinkel darted into the box but Martin Skrtel intervened.

The Utrecht No9's dream of a starring role at Anfield ended shortly before the break when he sustained a suspected broken collarbone.

Barring poor Van Wolfswinkel's injury, the first half was largely devoid of note.

Skrtel was captain for the night, partnering Danny Wilson, in a 4-4-2 formation headed by Nathan Eccleston and Ryan Babel. Eccleston's eagerness to impress went too far in the early stages, the young forward thudding into a late challenge on Mihai Nesu. After consultation with his countless officials, Kristinn Jakobsson waved a yellow card. It could have been red.

The theme of profligacy in possession was highlighted by Poulsen, who gave away the ball three times midway through a stultifying opening period. Here was a chance for the Dane to show that he could deliver but his first-half contribution was hardly inspiring.

More influential was Liverpool's other central-midfielder, Shelvey, short of hair but long on ambition, who kept charging through the midfield, occasionally over-running the ball or running into cul de sacs but still drawing applause for his effort.

Liverpool's best attempt of the half, pretty much their only one, came from Milan Jovanovic, who cut inside from the right, dragging the ball away from Utrecht's captain, Michael Silberbauer, before letting fly with a 25-yarder that clipped the bar and carried on into the Kop.

Fabio Aurelio also tried his luck with a free-kick but this time Liverpool were denied by the Utrecht wall.

Hodgson made a switch at the break, giving Skrtel a break and sending on Sotirios Kyrgiakos, the armband changing hands. A new Babel emerged as well, the former Ajax player continuing to earn jeers from the Utrecht supporters but now really troubling their defence.

Hodgson twisted again, sending the promising Daniel Pacheco on to the left, removing Eccleston, and inserting Cole in the hole. Pacheco was quickly involved, drilling in a low right-footer that thudded into Michel Vorm's ribs.

Pacheco's first few touches had been promising but he was soon dragged down by the general poverty of the occasion. Kuyt finally arrived, greeted warmly by both sets of supporters, but still the fare on offer remained of the grim variety. Liverpool almost snatched victory. Cole's goalbound volley was instinctively blocked by the Utrecht centre-half, Sander Keller.

Liverpool: Jones; Kelly, Skrtel (Kyrgiakos 46), Wilson, Aurelio; Jovanovic (Kuyt 73), Poulsen; Shelvey, Cole, Eccleston (Pacheco 56), Babel. Subs: Hansen (g), Johnson, Meireles, Torres.

Booked: Eccleston.

FC Utrecht: Vorm, Cornelisse, Keller, Wuytens, Nesu, Duplan Oar (71), Silberbauer, Nijholt, Mertens, Maguire (Sarota 84), Van Wolfswinkel (De Kogel 45). Subs: Cummings (g), Van der Maarel, Vorstermans.

Referee: K Jakobsson (Iceland).

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## THE INDEPENDENT

### Hodgson apologises for late omission of Torres

LIKE A reality show in which you no longer care about the characters, Liverpool's Europa League group campaign creaked to its conclusion last night. It had provided the club with much of what manager Roy Hodgson would have wanted. Qualification was utterly straightforward; there were no defeats and in the Steven Gerrard-inspired overturning of Napoli last month it provided an authentic great Anfield night.

That was the first match the club's new co-owner, John W Henry, chose to attend. Had the owner of Boston Red Sox made his Anfield debut last night, he might have concluded he should have invested in a more exciting English sport; shove ha'penny perhaps. Dead matches are either carefree, shot-a-minute affairs or a tedious playing out of time. This fell into the latter category.

Even Hodgson broke into a smile when reminded that "the game wasn't a classic." The club, employing more imagination than some of the passing on display, had ensured a near full house by giving free tickets to children who came with an adult. "I was hoping that with so many in from the first time, we could provide a sparkling performance," he added.

If this was an opportunity for a young Liverpool side to impress their manager, it was one that was largely not taken; perhaps because this was a group of footballers that had so rarely performed together. Joe Cole, the one senior player who would have wanted a command performance on a minor stage, could sum up his evening by winning a free-kick on the edge of the area and the smashing it low into the wall.

It was not just the men in red. Utrecht, the team who had to win, managed their first shot on target with exactly an hour gone and it was not an experience the side ninth in the Dutch Eredivisie felt inclined to repeat. They had, however, brought almost 4,000 fans to Merseyside, who were loud and seasonal in their choice of songs and who ensured the game had its quota of atmosphere. They were even given the sight of Dirk Kuyt, who made his name in the Dutch university town. There was however, no sign of the promised Fernando Torres. Before kick-off, Hodgson took the unusual step of issuing an apology to journalists for suggesting that Torres would start the game. Instead, the young audience had to make do with Ryan Babel rather than a glimpse of Europe's most elegant striker.

Hodgson had intended to begin with the striker but, the club's medical staff persuaded him otherwise. "I thought it would be a chance for Fernando to get his confidence back," he said. "But I also had to talk to our fitness people and they made me see sense that it wasn't the wisest thing to do. Had he played a wonderful 45 minutes, it would have been worth it but as it panned out, it would have been a total waste of time."

Unlike most of his team-mates, Milan Jovanovic is no longer young - he will turn 30 in April - but he is running out of patience about his lack of first-team opportunities. Last night he provided the one true moment of excellence in a dismal game that both managers might have issued an apology for. With defenders backing off, the tall Serb sent a shot thundering against the bar via the fingertips of Michel Vorm's gloves.

Ricky van Wolfswinkel, Utrecht's most dangerous forward, spent the night in hospital having fractured his collarbone; giving the young striker a painful memory of the evening that will linger longer than most.

Liverpool: (4-4-2) Jones; Kelly, Skrtel (Kyrgiakos, h-t), Wilson, Aurelio; Jovanovic (Kuyt, 73), Poulsen, Shelvey, Cole; Ecclestone (Pacheco, 56), Babel. Substitutes not used: Hansen (gk), Johnson, Meireles, Torres.

Utrecht: (4-4-1-1) Vorm; Cornelisse, Keller, Wuytens, Nesu; Duplan (Oar, 71), Silberbauer, Nijholt, Mertens; Maguire (Sarota, 84); Van Wolfswinkel (De Kogel, 45). Substitutes not used: Cummins (gk), Van der Maarel, Vostermans.

Referee: K Jakobsson (Iceland).

## DAILY MIRROR

### I'M SO SORROY

ROY HODGSON was forced to issue an embarrassing apology to Liverpool fans over his failed promise to start with star striker Fernando Torres.

Hodgson conceded he changed his team selection on the orders of the Anfield medical staff, having insisted on the eve of the game Torres would start.

Although a dead rubber for Liverpool, with them already confirmed as group winners, Hodgson wanted to start with Torres to help his out-of-sorts striker gain some much-needed confidence. Liverpool's commendable policy of allowing children into the meaningless game for free lost some of its lustre in light of the absence of Torres, a decision Hodgson felt duty-bound to explain.

"I had a change of heart," said Hodgson. "I must apologise to the reporters. I was certainly considering giving Fernando a start, I thought it would be a nice game for him and a chance for him to regain confidence.

"But I also had a talk to our fitness people and they made me see sense it wasn't the wisest thing to do.

"We have already qualified and, if he'd played, he would have been taking the place of a young player who needs the chance.

"And, of course, it would be very bad for us if he'd picked up an injury. They [the fitness people] made me see the error of my ways, and I changed my mind.

"By renegeing on my first idea of playing Fernando, I've got a totally fresh team to play against Fulham on Saturday. I'm sorry if I misled people, but I didn't do so intentionally.

"With so many fans here, I had hoped we would produce a sparkling performance, but it wasn't to be."

If, as Hodgson claimed, Liverpool's medical team had vetoed Torres playing, claiming it was a risk not worth taking, why was the Spaniard even on the bench? That decision made less sense than the U-turn.

Some fans even felt the move may have been a cynical ploy to ensure Anfield was as full as possible, the promise of Torres starting an attractive inducement to entice them into the ground. But Hodgson said: "It wasn't a question of needing a big name to sell the game as almost 40,000 tickets were sold before."

Hodgson also claimed Pepe Reina would start, but revealed he decided to with Brad Jones in goal when he learned Australia coach Holger Osieck was in the Anfield crowd, giving the keeper a rare chance to impress his national coach.

And the 3,000-odd Utrecht fans who had made the 13-hour coach journey to Anfield were dismayed to see their former player and cult hero Dirk Kuyt had only made the bench.

Yet the absence of Torres saw 19-year-old striker Nathan Ecclestone handed a first start, one of three teenagers in Hodgson's line-up, along with midfielder Jonjo Shelvey and centre-half Danny Wilson. Ecclestone made an instant impact, with a shocking sixthminute challenge on Mihai Nesu which could have seen him issued with a straight red card, rather than the caution he received.

Liverpool's play lacked fluency, not surprising with Martin Skrtel and Joe Cole the only regular first-team players in the starting line-up.

Milan Jovanovic provided the only moment of excitement for Liverpool fans in the first half, his sumptuous, dipping 25-yard strike beating keeper Michel Vorm but hitting the bar.

Liverpool upped the tempo after the break, Ryan Babel flashing an angled shot across the Utrecht goal.

The Dutchman, taunted by the away fans because of his Ajax past, should have done better when Martin Kelly drove the ball into the six-yard box but was unable to finish.

The introduction of Kuyt for Jovanovic, with 17 minutes to go, prompted the biggest cheer of the night, from both sets of fans.

Cole saw a goalbound shot blocked at pointblank range with eight minutes to go. It summed up a night Anfield will want to forget in a hurry.

LIVERPOOL: Jones 5; Kelly 4, Skrtel 5 (Kyriagos 46, 5), Wilson 5, Aurelio 5; Jovanovic 5 (Kuyt 73, 5), Poulsen 5, Shelvey 5, Cole 4; Babel 4, Ecclestone 4 (Pacheco 56, 5)

UTRECHT: Vorm 5; Cornelisse 5, Keller 5, Wuytens 5, Nesu 5; Duplan 5 (Oar 71, 4), Silberbauer 6, Nijholt 5, Mertens 6; Maguire 5 (Sarota 84); van Wolfswinkel 5 (de Kogel 45).

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Reds' Europa League hopes still alive, despite boring dead rubber  
 THE Europa League has been good to Roy Hodgson. His run with Fulham to last season's final greatly enhanced his reputation and went a long way to securing him the job as Rafa Benitez's successor. Since arriving at Anfield this summer the continent's second club competition has provided welcome relief for the manager during a turbulent five months. Domestically, optimism fuelled by commanding home triumphs has been swiftly snuffed out by insipid displays on their travels. The result is a home record in the Premier League better than Arsenal and Manchester City but an away points tally worse than Wigan and Blackburn – and mid-table mediocrity. That inconsistency has been galling for supporters but in Europe the Reds have made serene progress. Hodgson has gambled by fielding largely a combination of fringe senior stars and hungry youngsters – he has used no fewer than 31 players so far – but it has paid dividends. An adventure which began in Macedonia in July has seen Liverpool cruise past Rabotnicki and Trabzonspor before securing top spot in their group with something to spare. Of course they have hardly been mixing it with European heavyweights. Steaua Bucharest and Utrecht are only also-rans in their respective leagues, but taking four points off a Napoli side flying high in Serie A isn't to be sniffed at. Last night's final chapter in Group K will hardly live long in the memory. It was dire and desperate. Despite the manager's vow there would never be a 'dead game' under his tenure it certainly had the feel of a pre-season friendly. Entertainment was in such short supply that if the kids hadn't been let in free they would surely have been asking for their money back. The chance to equal a club record of nine successive home wins in Europe went begging but the dour stalemate still edged Hodgson closer to a place in the history books. He's now unbeaten run in 10 European games with Liverpool and closing in on Joe Fagan's best of 12. The Europa League undoubtedly represents the Reds' best chance of ending a trophy drought which stretches back to Cardiff in May 2006. Seeded for tomorrow's draw in Nyon, there is little for them to fear. However, the bad news for Hodgson is that it will be mid-February before his side play in the competition again. For the next two months he won't be able to rely on Europe to point to progress being made. The only way he can ease the pressure on his shoulders is by improving the Reds' Premier League fortunes. And fast. The fact they are closer to the relegation zone than the top four is an alarming statistic that needs to be put right. Last night's game may have been a dead rubber but the manager's demeanour as he barked orders from the technical area made a mockery of the idea that the result didn't matter. Just 48 hours earlier Hodgson had heard the owners brand the Reds' start to the campaign as "unacceptable" and warn that better was required. The phone-in on the club's TV channel had highlighted the depths of fans' frustration and that was reinforced once again by the boos that rung around the ground at the final whistle. Given that depth of feeling and his pre-match declaration that he would field a strong team it was something of a surprise that stand-in skipper Martin Skrtel was the only survivor from Saturday's defeat at Newcastle. Hodgson had vowed to start Pepe Reina and Fernando Torres after admitting the striker needed a game to boost his flagging confidence after his recent struggles. Strangely, the manager completed a swift U-turn after consulting with his sports science team and despite naming him among the substitutes Torres spent the night warming the bench. "I had a change of heart," he said. "I had a talk to our fitness people and they made me see sense that it wasn't the wisest thing to do. "We have already qualified and, if he played, he would be taking the place of a young player who needs the chance to stake his place in the team. And of course it would be very bad for us if he picked up an injury. "But I am a bit sad that, unintentionally, I tricked some supporters and a few journalists as well." In Torres' place there was a full debut for 19-year-old Nathan Eccleston who after being booked for an over-zealous lunge settled well alongside Ryan Babel before making way for Daniel Pacheco after the break. Liverpool were unfortunate not to lead inside eight minutes when Milan Jovanovic embarked on a mazy run before unleashing a blistering 25-yarder which Michel Vorm tipped on to the bar. However, that was as good as it got.

They were careless in possession with Joe Cole once again failing to stake a claim for a regular starting spot, while Martin Kelly was hampered by having the erratic Jovanovic in front of him. The only shining light was Jonjo Shelvey who demonstrated his growing confidence with a mature display in midfield. Comparisons with Steven Gerrard at such an early stage of his career are ridiculously premature, but the master will have been proud of the way the apprentice threw himself into tackles and used the ball intelligently. This was Utrecht's first ever visit to Anfield and despite having already been knocked out they were clearly determined to do their vocal 3,500-strong travelling support proud. Four of their five group games had finished deadlocked – including the goalless draw with the Reds in September – and it's easy to see how as they sat deep and showed little attacking intent. Their chances of seriously testing Brad Jones, making his first appearance for the Reds since the Carling Cup debacle against Northampton, were diminished when 19-goal top scorer Ricky van Wolfswinkel was forced off after falling awkwardly. The bumper crowd – swelled by the owners' decision to give out free tickets to youngsters – grew increasingly irritated by the hosts' lack of cutting edge in the final third. The game did open up in the second half with Babel dragging one attempt just wide before narrowly failed to provide the finishing touch to a great cross from Kelly. The introduction of Pacheco and Dirk Kuyt – against the club where he began his professional career – finally increased the Reds' attacking threat. Cole was thwarted by Sander Keller's goal-saving block late on but it truth victory would have greatly flattered the Reds. The natives are restless and when the big guns return against Fulham on Saturday Anfield will demand a drastic improvement.