

Date: 6 March 2011

Opposition: Manchester United

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6 March 2011

## THE TIMES

Ferguson applies silent treatment; The Premier League leaders were left speechless after a defeat that cast severe doubt on their claims to the title

If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all, goes the adage. Or as Sir Alex Ferguson tends to put it: "You've lot can all f\*\*\* off".

With nothing positive to be said of this Manchester United performance and preferring to eat glass rather than praise Liverpool, Ferguson led a media boycott yesterday that ensured the term "graceless" could be inserted ahead of losers. Justified anger at Jamie Carragher's horrible studs-up lunge at Nani -- backed up with photographic evidence of a gruesome gash -- could not excuse United's wider failings, so Ferguson and his entire staff took the option of saying nothing at all. No doubt they filled empty airtime on MUTV with reruns of great victories to a soundtrack of soothing violins.

Ferguson could have just accepted that United were beaten by the better side -- "no excuses", as Rio Ferdinand tweeted -- but measured reaction comes hard enough, particularly at this time of the season after an afternoon of raw intensity. So the only noise from the United camp was a backside emitting a tiny squeak. They remain top of the league -- "They are still the benchmark for everyone else," Kenny Dalglish said -- and they have to be regarded as favourites for the title, given their experience and knowhow, particularly in comparison with their closest challengers, Arsenal.

But the only surprise is that defeats such as this, and away to Chelsea in midweek, have taken so long. Who can dispute that one of United's greatest strengths remains everybody else's weakness? That is not a view shaped purely by two losses in a row -- and three in five league games after none in the previous 24. It has been said all season while United were getting away with some ordinary performances (admittedly a virtue in itself).

They are top and still chasing a treble. Knocking Arsenal out of the FA Cup on Saturday may stir obvious comparisons with 1999. But this campaign feels as different in tone to 12 years ago as Roy Keane is to Michael Carrick.

Then, United were being pushed to rare heights by a superb Arsenal team fighting to defend their own Double. They were required to go on a 33-match unbeaten run from Christmas through a series of epic challenges that built to a climax. They had a first XI with world-class quality from front to back, led by the peerless Keane, and reserves of the class and reliability of Phil Neville, Nicky Butt and Teddy Sheringham.

This side are capable of raising their game to a high pitch, and may well do so as soon as Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic are back (not that this defeat could simply be put down to the central defenders) but, all season, they have been vulnerable if they lost a senior player or two and if a good side came at them with real conviction.

It has taken one half from Chelsea and 90 minutes of sustained intensity from Liverpool to confirm as much, though there is also the oddity of Ferguson's team selection in both defeats.

For almost a decade he has faced the toughest challenges with a five-man midfield, almost without exception. Unable to find another Keane, and seeking to banish some of the naivety of the Nineties, he would reinforce the centre.

Such an approach would seem even more necessary with midfield resources underwhelming, so who was not surprised to see Carrick and Paul Scholes as a pair in a 4-4-2, not only for Chelsea but again at Anfield? Both times that duo worked, with some success early on, to take the sting out of the opposition, only to be overrun in the second period.

To watch Carrick this past week has been to be reminded, sadly, of what he has failed to become. He appears to have all the technical qualities of Xabi Alonso but lacks the personality to shape a game, particularly when the tide turns against United.

For the club to have given him a new contract at 29 is troubling to supporters who, understandably, interpret such a move as a sign that transfer funds are restricted under the Glazers, whatever the manager insists.

There was talk that Darren Fletcher was suffering from illness, though, if that were the case, why start him at Chelsea and then bring him on yesterday? His season has been fitful but his tenacity and drive are sorely needed.

This is the time of the year when people expect United to move up through the gears and so much still depends on Wayne Rooney finding inspiration. He worked hard enough yesterday but there was little creativity.

Missing the long-term absentee, Antonio Valencia, United will also need Nani to recover quickly from the cut that reduced him to tears.

United have bounced back too many times for us not to expect that they can draw on powers of recovery again, and consecutive victories at home against Arsenal, Marseilles and Bolton Wanderers can propel them in all three competitions.

The expectation, in fact, has to be that United remain favourites for a domestic Double, but yesterday was further evidence of why, all season, we have read that the 2010-11 Premier League is entertaining enough -- but certainly not a vintage one.

## the guardian

Barclays Premier League: Lethal Kuyt tears United to shreds

It felt like springtime at Anfield yesterday. The sun came out just before the kick-off to illuminate a wonderfully entertaining match, but it was outshone by the smile on Kenny Dalglish's face as, with his side 3-0 up on their fiercest rivals, he listened to the Kop celebrating his 60th birthday, which fell on Friday.

What Dalglish had seen, as he entered his seventh decade, was the unmistakable sight of the green shoots of recovery. A club so long mired in doubt and despondency is emerging into the light. After that 1-0 victory over Chelsea four weeks ago, this defeat of Manchester United confirmed the reality of the changes in mood and mentality since the Scot took over in the first week of January.

Dirk Kuyt scored his first Liverpool hat-trick yesterday - and the first goals of his career against Manchester United - but he would have been happy to ascribe the credit for his success to the prodigious efforts of Luis Suarez. The Uruguayan forward, who briefly made himself the most unpopular man in world football last summer by denying Ghana a place in the World Cup semi-finals, has now helped bring a long-lost sense of optimism back to Liverpool.

After Kuyt had struck for the third time, with 25 minutes left on the clock, there were smiles everywhere, but none bigger than on the face of Dalglish. He beamed when he sent on Andy Carroll, his pounds 35m striker, with a quarter of an hour left, when he shook Suarez's hand after withdrawing his goal-maker just before the end of normal time, and when he shared some sort of light-hearted exchange with his captain, Steven Gerrard, during added time.

Liverpool had begun this high-pressure fixture by producing football worthy of a side entirely comfortable with itself. As early as the second minute, interplay between Maxi Rodriguez, Suarez and Raul Meireles almost put Suarez in for an opening goal. While the visitors waited to take measure of the match, Dalglish's men were patiently producing a series of accurate first-time passing moves that dictated the overall shape and rhythm of the exchanges.

Suarez should have been booked by Phil Dowd, rather than merely warned, for the volley of invective loosed at one of the linesmen for failing, in the Uruguayan's view, to spot a foul by Patrice Evra just before the half-hour, but the first of his decisive contributions to the afternoon was not far away.

Anfield has been waiting a long time to see the sort of confidence he showed in broken play following the failure of the United defence to clear a corner from the right, when he set off on a twisting, jinking little dribble which took him past Rafael da Silva, Michael Carrick and Wes Brown before he prodded the ball across the goalmouth, seeing it take a slight deflection off Evra on the way to Kuyt, who tucked it away.

A handful of minutes later it was Suarez's chip from the right that induced Nani to produce the most bizarre of defensive headers, directing the ball back into his own goalmouth for the grateful Kuyt to nod home. The third goal, after 65 minutes, came from Suarez's 20-yard free-kick, which squirmed out of Van der Sar's arms and into the path of the voracious Dutchman, who completed a hat-trick that came from an aggregate range of no more than seven yards.

It would be no surprise were Dalglish to see a little of his younger self in Suarez. At 5ft 11in, the pounds 24m capture from Ajax is three inches taller than his manager, but he possesses a similar talent for using strength and a low centre of gravity to turn his marker and a familiar awareness of the movement of his teammates. United's spatchcocked defence will not be the only one to suffer.

Kuyt was a deserving beneficiary. No player has worked harder through Liverpool's barren time, in whatever role he has been asked to fill.

Yesterday's performance was also that of a natural predator, demonstrating the virtues of instinctive movement, lightning reflexes and economical finishing. "I scored more or these kinds of goals in Holland, when I played as a striker," he said afterwards.

The introduction of Carroll provided a further warning to their future opponents that Liverpool, who so recently looked impoverished, now have impressive resources. Cheered when he came on to warm up with his fellow substitutes half an hour before the kick-off, when he stripped off and replaced Meireles, and when his first touch turned out to be a 20-yard header from Jamie Carragher's free-kick, calmly plucked out of the air by Van der Sar, the Geordie appears to embody a new spirit of hope among the faithful.

In Liverpool's hour of triumph, however, a thought had to be spared for poor Ryan Giggs. The great man celebrated the 20th anniversary of his Premier League debut at Stamford Bridge on Tuesday, but left with the taste of defeat in his mouth. He arrived at Anfield to break Sir Bobby Charlton's club record of 606 league appearances, only for United to lose again, with the ground in carnival mood minutes before the final whistle.

Giggs provided the cross from which Javier Hernandez scored a consolation goal, but he and Paul Scholes, his fellow veteran, found events wrested from their control by a side whose rejuvenation is now a matter of fact.

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## The Mail

X-rated thriller is a nightmare for Ferguson; KUYT STRIKES SUPERB HAT-TRICK AS UNITED ARE BATTERED, BRUISED AND BEATEN BY DALGLISH'S MEN

Liverpool 3 Manchester Utd 1

Next: Braga v LIVERPOOL (Thursday), MANCHESTER UNITED v Arsenal (Saturday) AFTER managing to turn an entire continent against him in South Africa last summer, Luis Suarez knows a thing or two about acrimony. But the Uruguayan striker, whose goal-line handball against Ghana at the World Cup so enraged Africa, must have been struck by the volatile nature of a Barclays Premier League game that proved why Sir Alex Ferguson still considers Liverpool to be the ultimate grudge match for Manchester United. A match that was all the more significant because of the sense that United's season might have suddenly started to unravel. A sense heightened by the failure to take advantage of Arsenal's draw with Sunderland the previous day. This was explosive stuff. Ignited by a challenge on Nani that should have resulted in a red card for Jamie Carragher, trouble escalated. On the pitch, where players clashed and at least one more red card could have been awarded, and up in the directors' box, where David Gill, the United chief executive and a member of the FA board, had a few choice words for referees' chief Mike Riley.

In fairness to Gill, he had a point after what had also happened to Ferguson's side at Stamford Bridge in the week. Had Carragher been dismissed for a tackle that resulted in Nani leaving the field on a stretcher, Rafael Da Silva might well have resisted the temptation to pursue his own special blend of retribution with a lunge at Lucas. It sparked something of a brawl, Phil Dowd awarding four yellow cards in the final minutes of a dramatic first half. But Gill also needs to accept much the better team won, just as he needs to remember that Kenny Dalglish's side were two goals ahead when Carragher struck. Even if, in Graeme Souness's opinion, Carragher put Liverpool's advantage 'at risk' when he planted some studs on Nani's standing leg. Amid the chaos, Liverpool played some wonderful football and -- while Dirk Kuyt was able to reflect on his first hat-trick for Liverpool -- nobody was more impressive than Suarez. In creating Kuyt's first in the 33rd minute he did something very special, beating Rafael, Michael Carrick and Wes Brown before guiding the ball through the legs of Edwin van der Sar and inviting Kuyt to open the scoring from about six inches out.

Andy Carroll, on in the 74th minute to make his debut, is seen as the long-term partner for Suarez but the way the Uruguayan combined with Kuyt and Raul Meireles was a joy to watch. Not for the first time, Liverpool look like they did the better business in selling Fernando Torres to Chelsea and bringing in Carroll and Suarez. Dalglish was enjoying himself, celebrating wildly in response to every Kuyt goal and saluting the Kop when they sang 'happy birthday' to him. 'Dalglish, Dalglish,' they chanted, leaving Liverpool's owners in little doubt they would like him to remain their manager. For Ferguson, there was rather less cause for optimism. His side stay at the summit of the Premier League but a second defeat in a week amounts to the first wobble of a relatively trouble-free season. Presumably, and we have to presume because nobody from Old Trafford would speak to the media afterwards, Ferguson will deflect all attention on to the officials, and Dowd's failure to award a red card to Carragher might just strengthen his disciplinary case with the FA. But there were other concerns here, not least the form of his midfielders and another ordinary display from Wayne Rooney. This game was lost in midfield, where Liverpool were able to dominate with Steven Gerrard -- just back from injury -- only operating at around 60 per cent. Carrick was awful, Paul Scholes was not much better and before Nani's painful exit his only contribution of note was the header that enabled Kuyt to double Liverpool's advantage. The challenge facing Ferguson is how he revives his team. They have Arsenal next in the FA Cup and then Bolton at home in the league. But the first back-to-back league defeats in two years have exposed the fragility of a team that were probably flattered by that unbeaten run. Like their title rivals, they are by no means perfect and their position at the top may just owe more to the genius of their manager than the quality of the players. Had Darren Fletcher started, it might have been less one-sided yesterday. The absence of Nemanja Vidic and Rio Ferdinand also made them more vulnerable. Had Ferguson spoken, he might have pointed to the chances his side had. Dimitar Berbatov saw an early half-volley clip the outside of a post and a second-half header cleared off the line by Meireles. But no sooner had Kuyt scored his first than Nani provided the final ball for his second, his attempt to solve a problem created by a dangerous defensive header from Scholes amounting to something of a disaster. His header fell perfectly for Kuyt, who beat Van der Sar from close range. Chaos followed. First with Carragher's challenge on Nani, who then collapsed theatrically under a non-existent shove from Gerrard, and then the incident involving Rafael. Having been caught by Maxi Rodriguez, he then launched himself at Lucas and all hell broke loose. It was Liverpool, however, who maintained their composure, scoring again in the 65th minute when Kuyt seized on Van der Sar's failure to hold a testing free-kick from Suarez. Only then did United muster a response, and only in the 90th minute when Javier Hernandez met a Ryan Giggs cross with a glancing header. It reduced the deficit but not the sense of anger, disappointment and concern.

## The Daily Telegraph

United stunned into silence by Kuyt and Suarez show

Liverpool 3 Kuyt 34, 39, 65

Manchester United 1 Hernandez 90 Att: 44,753

Sir Alex Ferguson, the silent knight, refused to pass comment after this desperate display and no wonder he was speechless. Manchester United were so poor, an experienced midfielder exuding all the movement of Easter Island statues, while Wayne Rooney was alarmingly subdued. Rarely can a Ferguson team have performed with so little conviction or cohesion. As the chastened visitors sloped back down the East Lincs Road, the noise behind them was deafening. Anfield was rocking to a rendition of Happy Birthday to Kenny Dalglish, 60 on Friday. The sound system in the home dressing room was almost knocking the plaster off the ceiling with a song for the unstoppable Luis Suarez. It was Flo Rida's Club Can't Handle Me. Manchester United Football Club certainly couldn't.

This was another remarkable day in the title race, and another epic episode in the long-running drama between England's greatest clubs. It saw a hat-trick for Dirk Kuyt, a consolation for Javier Hernandez that could not halt the crowing of the Kop, who chanted, "Can we play you every week?" It also saw the dark arts at work. A horrendous tackle from Jamie Carragher left a deep gash in Nani's leg. It also saw a filthy lunge by Rafael on Lucas. Both offences deserved more than the cautions administered by Phil Dowd, who otherwise did well to keep the incipient mayhem in check. When the heat and dust was up, Suarez had died down, Dalglish rightly observed afterwards that Ferguson's side remain "the benchmark" for all those chasing excellence in the English game. United remain favourites, yet what this sulphurous occasion proved was that they need rejuvenating, need greater vibrancy. The contrast with Liverpool, whose afternoon was illuminated by Suarez and who brought on Andy Carroll, was clear. Ferguson needs to invest heavily in the summer. Getting Carrick to sign a three-year contract is not sound business if he continues to perform as ineffectually as this. Desire allied to technique is a formidable weapon, one that Suarez wielded brilliantly. The Uruguayan took some kicks, some that left him smeared across Anfield's greensward, and kept coming back for more. He created two goals for Kuyt before the break and kept scheming in the second half, kept dropping deep, turning and darting forward with the ball. When Suarez shimmied past Patrice Evra at one point, United almost needed a corkscrew to release their twisted back from the turf. Anfield loved it, revelling in this celebration of the strengths of Liverpool No7s, past and present. Similar chants are applied to "Dalglish" and "Suarez". The Kop deity Dalglish as if he has been sent down from on high in the directors' box to patrol the technical area, organising Liverpool's attempted sabotage mission of what could be a record-breaking campaign by United. Although mindful of history and fans' passion, Dalglish simply wants to revive Liverpool. If United's pursuit of a 19th title suffers collateral damage then all well and good. Yesterday simply showed why the feelgood factor has returned to Anfield, why Dalglish deserves to be awarded a permanent contract. The joy here will have been shared 200 miles to the south. Arsenal have stuttered at late, yet remain within three points (and three goals) of United with a game in hand. Ferguson's 50th league game against Liverpool was a brutal affair that had an impact on the record books as well as the league table. Kuyt recorded only the third Premier League hat-trick against United, after Egil Ostenstad and David Bentley. Kuyt's was the first Liverpool hat-trick against United in the league since Peter Beardsley in 1990. Yet United had caught the eye in the early stages. They lined up 4-4-2, with Carrick surprisingly preferred to the more industrious Darren Fletcher. Rooney dropped off Dimitar Berbatov, who gave momentary hope when eluding Carragher, beating Pepe Reina but not the post.

There was a strong belief and shape to Liverpool, Kuyt and Suarez alternating to good effect, utterly confusing Chris Smalling and Wes Brown. How United missed Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic. Smalling promises much but needs a far better organiser alongside him than Brown, who was almost as poor as Carrick. Liverpool were so pumped up for this, so well prepared tactically and mentally by Dalglish, Steve Clarke and Sammy Lee, that even a full-strength United would have struggled. Suarez was flying, his movement as constant as it was intelligent. And so it began, a game bequeathing many sweet memories for Liverpool fans. Sotirios Kyrgiakos, who had replaced the hamstringing Fabio Aurelio, found Suarez on the edge of the box at the Anfield Road End, affording United supporters a ringside seat on the punishment their defence endured. Suarez dribbled past Rafael, Carrick and Brown before sending the ball across past Edwin van der Sar for Kuyt to apply the coup de grace. And so it continued. Again Suarez played United's nemesis, this time raiding in from the right, like a skilled pugilist using every angle to weaken an opponent. The Uruguayan lifted over a cross that Nani, attempting to head clear, accidentally redirected back into the danger zone. What a gift. Kuyt, unmarked and dangerous, headed in. The game briefly turned nasty. Carragher had spoken eloquently earlier in the day about his respect for United's players, while understanding the loathing between supporters. Little respect could be detected as he tore into Nani, high and late. The Portuguese leapt up, remonstrated with Dowd, then collapsed and had to be carried away on a stretcher. Carragher did apologise afterwards.

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And still the lunges went in. Caught by Maxi Rodriguez, Rafael stormed into Lucas, who almost needed clearance from John Lennon International to take avoidance action. Ferguson introduced Hernandez and United briefly stirred. Ryan Giggs volleyed over. Berbatov's header was chested off the line by Raul Meireles. But back came Liverpool, Meireles going close and then Kuyt poaching his third, after Van der Sar failed to control Suarez's free-kick. When Suarez was withdrawn, the Liverpool fans stood in salute. Dalglish had a smile as wide as the Mersey in greeting him. The party was really in full swing on the Kop, which launched into Happy Birthday for Dalglish. The guests at least had a goinghome present, a good header from Hernandez, but it will have been tense, brooding journey back for Ferguson and his players.



#### Ferguson left speechless after Kuyt exposes flawed United

"Just because Fergie doesn't speak after games, I'm not going to spend twice as long talking to you." Kenny Dalglish was smiling when he said that in his press conference yesterday and with the music from the home dressing room drifting down the corridors of Anfield it felt a bit like there was a party on.

It had seemed the same during the game when, with Liverpool three goals ahead, the Kop serenaded Dalglish with Happy Birthday - he was 60 on Friday - and the Liverpool manager smiled and waved. Yes, it was a party all right, a party at which Sir Alex Ferguson was figuratively sitting in the corner with no drink and no one to talk to.

This was a Manchester United performance with few redeeming features save a brief rally in the first 15 minutes after half-time when they were already two goals behind. Other than that they looked as limp as they had done in the second half of their defeat to Chelsea five days earlier. For months United had looked like the one consistently average team in a below-average league season and consequently the title favourites. Suddenly they are struggling even to be average.

Their two consecutive Premier League defeats have rammed home some uncomfortable truths about this United team which, in spite of that run of 29 league games undefeated, is now starting to list badly. Dalglish's team are far from perfect but, in the likes of Luis Suarez and the hat-trick man Dirk Kuyt, his players had a much more profound effect on the game than Ferguson's leading men.

For Wayne Rooney it was another afternoon on which he toiled hard, and was forced out to the left following Nani's injury, for precious little reward. United were let down in defence where only Chris Smalling had a decent game and then in midfield where Michael Carrick failed to offer the leadership qualities that have so often eluded him.

As a result Ferguson and his staff and players left Anfield without speaking. What Ferguson made of it all we can only guess but it would be no leap of the imagination to say he was not happy. Even the unquestioning loyalty of MUTV went unrewarded in the ensuing Ferguson-initiated media black-out.

With the Football Association charge of improper conduct hanging over him, he will not have wanted to risk giving his opinion on Jamie Carragher's studs-up tackle on Nani before half-time. It was a red-card offence, no question, and Nani played no further part. Carragher escaped with a booking. The Manchester United chief executive, David Gill, had words with the referees' chief Mike Riley at half-time.

In mitigation, Liverpool would offer Rafael da Silva's wild lunge at Lucas Leiva shortly after Carragher's cruncher on Nani. Having been caught by Maxi Rodriguez, he leapt studs-up into a tackle with Lucas. There was provocation but Rafael's temperament remains a liability and he could easily have gone, too. The full-back was substituted before the end and it looked like it was done for his own protection.

It was not without the customary aggravation. There was a m\*|c]e after the Carragher tackle in which Nani threw himself to the turf when Steven Gerrard chastised him and much the same happened after Rafael's foul on Lucas. But for most of the game United were becalmed and alarmingly short of aggression. It even took Paul Scholes 83 minutes to get himself booked.

That meant for the most part Liverpool had control of the game but they still required a matchwinner in Suarez. There were excellent performances from the foot soldiers, Rodriguez and Lucas, but it was Suarez who provided the really telling moment.

Two of Kuyt's three goals were made by the Uruguayan and really this was Suarez's day. On the first occasion, on 34 minutes, Suarez cut in thrillingly along the left goal-line beating Rafael, Carrick and Wes Brown before slipping the ball under Edwin van der Sar for Kuyt to pinch the goal on the line.

Five minutes later, Nani gifted Kuyt the second by heading Suarez's cross from the right back across the goal straight onto the head of the Dutchman. United were in a wretched state even before Carragher went ploughing into Nani's shin a few minutes later.

Dimitar Berbatov had stroked a shot that clipped Pepe Reina's post in the 16th minute but even in their best period after half-time they scarcely carved out a really decent chance. Nani's departure meant that Rooney was moved out left while Javier Hernandez took his place alongside Berbatov.

There was a chance at the near post for Hernandez and Berbatov had a header cleared off the line by Raul Meireles. Then in the 65th minute the game was put to bed. Smalling's foul on Kuyt gave Liverpool a free-kick about 25 yards out. Suarez hit it, Van der Sar spilled it and Kuyt had the relatively simple task of lifting the ball over the United goalkeeper. Like all good goalscorers, he was in the right place at the right time.

The party atmosphere kicked in after that with the game in the bag and United offering very little until Hernandez's goal in time added on from Ryan Giggs' right-footed cross. To give the Mexican his due, he chases every lost cause and retrieves every ball kicked into touch near him. His even temperament is everything that Rafael's is not.

The three-goal margin allowed Dalglish to send on Andy Carroll for his long-awaited debut that was so enthusiastically received that the striker smiled to himself at his rapturous reception as he jogged down the touchline to come on. He looks like a player who has been out since 28 December although his first touch was, appropriately, a strong header from a cross.

United are still "the benchmark", as Dalglish said afterwards, because "they are top". But were it not for the sloppiness of the chasing pack, that would surely not be the case any longer.

Subs: Liverpool Kyriakos (Aurelio, 24), Carroll (Meireles, 74), Cole (Suarez, 89). Manchester United Hernandez (Nani, 45), O'Shea (Rafael, 76), Fletcher (Scholes, 84).

Booked: Liverpool Carragher, Skrtel. Man United Van der Sar, Rafael, Scholes.

Man of the match Suarez Match rating 7/10.

Possession Liverpool 54% Man United 46%.

Attempts on target Liverpool 11 Man United 7.

Referee P Dowd (Staffordshire) Att 44,753.



#### DUMB & DUMBER

IF he is still speaking to anyone at all, Sir Alex Ferguson could blame the referee again. If he can find anyone to listen now that even the club's own Pravda, MUTV, has been banned, he could say Phil Dowd wasn't fair.

He could claim Jamie Carragher should have been sent off for a shocking tackle on Nani. He could say that Carragher's yellow card and Nani's exit on a stretcher changed the complexion of the game. The Manchester United manager could say all that and it would not matter because he would be completely and utterly wrong. United were so poor at Anfield yesterday that no amount of mud-slinging at the officials could disguise their mediocrity. This was not just the kind of performance that raised doubts about their ability to cling on to their lead at the top of the Premier League.

It was a display so wretched that it asked questions about whether Ferguson will be able to halt a slide further and further away from the summit next season. Plenty of people predicted that this fall would come even when United were clinging on to the long unbeaten record they lost at Wolves.

They may not have had a defeat against their name this season until last month but that run did not fool anyone. This is not a vintage United team and everyone knows it. Now, finally, the evidence is incontrovertible. Beaten by Chelsea on Tuesday, United were overrun by the old enemy on Merseyside yesterday and even pursuers as inconsistent as Arsenal, Manchester City and Chelsea can smell blood. United looked tired and lethargic yesterday. Deprived of Nemanja Vidic and Rio Ferdinand at the back, they were alarmingly vulnerable almost from kick-off. The pick of their players were Paul Scholes and Ryan Giggs, which is a tribute to two outstanding professionals but a worrying comment on United's future.

Wayne Rooney was way short of his best as he has been for most of this season. His body language was negative and sullen, as it has been for most of this season. His contribution was minimal.

Dimitar Berbatov hit a post early on but after that he was peripheral. Nani was anonymous until he was chopped down by Carragher's appalling challenge. Patrice Evra was run ragged by Luis Suarez. Quite why the Frenchman was given the honour of being United's captain, by the way, was hard to fathom.

He is as much captaincy material as El-Hadji Diouf. A cursory glance back at the last World Cup would tell you that. He only became truly animated when he was trying to get Carragher sent off. Scholes and Giggs did all they could in midfield but they were no match for a half-fit Steven Gerrard and Lucas. Michael Carrick has just signed a new contract apparently. After yesterday, United might want to check the escape clauses. And at the back, well, where do you start. Wes Brown looked rusty and that is being very, very kind. Chris Smalling looked like he had too many late nights in London hotels. And that is being kind, too.

And as for Rafael. United's young right back is brimming with talent and energy but his temperament is suspect. He got United knocked out of the Champions League last season with a stupid sending-off and the red mist came down again yesterday. He only escaped a red card because Mr Dowd had been lenient with Carragher a couple of minutes earlier. United now face a grim battle to hold off Arsenal, City and Chelsea. Suddenly, the next home match against Bolton and the next away game against West Ham look rather more dangerous than they did seven days ago.

Ferguson's side will be strengthened by the returns of Vidic and Ferdinand but the idea that however badly they played, they would find a way to win has been stripped away

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They have been winning on instinct this season, drawing on all their years of superiority to fend off the rest. Now their defences are down. Most worryingly of all for the Old Trafford hierarchy, there was an unavoidable sense at Anfield yesterday that Liverpool were the side with the momentum and the energy. Suarez played like a magician, his mesmerising dribble to create Liverpool's first drawing comparisons with Robbie Fowler and Peter Beardsley. When Andy Carroll stepped off the bench to make his debut, he clasped Kenny Dalglish's hand in his and then ran on to a standing ovation. JAVIER Hernandez His first touch was a towering header, climbing above both United centre halves. How about that as a symbol of Liverpool's regeneration. It felt as if we were in on the beginning of something here, one team being reborn under the great icon that is Dalglish, another struggling for fresh life under the legend that is Ferguson. The United boss, of course, did not speak to the media afterwards. "Just because Fergie's not here," Dalglish said as he closed his press conference, "that doesn't mean I have to go on twice as long."



Neil Jones on how the Reds produced the perfect birthday present for Kenny Dalglish

"Everybody who supports Liverpool has had a great day, and it owes to the performance and attitude of the players." Reds boss KENNY DALGLISH savours a birthday to remember, and pays tribute to his players' spirit and commitment. Nothing. Alex Ferguson's assistant Mike Phelan did not carry out his usual post-match engagements. Radio rights holders talkSPORT were also left without any comment from the visitors. Should any of these organisations complain to the Premier League, the governing body will be forced to act. THERE are few sets of supporters that do spontaneity quite like Liverpool's. Thirteen minutes remained at Anfield, with the Reds three goals up, in total control and having welcomed record signing Andy Carroll for his long-awaited debut, when the Kop dug deep into its songbook, and found yet another perfectly-judged ditty. "Happy Birthday King Kenny" was the cry, and it reverberated around all four corners of the stadium. ] The Manchester United fans had lost the will to respond, whilst Kenny Dalglish, with a wave and a clenched fist, could not help but smile. Liverpool's manager may have turned 60 on Friday, but for him the weekend's real highlight would always be on Sunday afternoon. And, eager to play their part in the celebrations, Dalglish's players gave him the most perfect of belated presents. United, three points clear at the top of the Premier League table, were outplayed, outfought and, comprehensively, outscored. The last time Dalglish locked horns with Alex Ferguson at Anfield as Liverpool boss, it was a Peter Beardsley treble which did the damage, leaving the outclassed visitors to scuttle off back down the M62 with their tails between their legs. This time, it was Dirk Kuyt who assumed the role of hat-trick hero. The Dutchman's goals, each of them taken in predatory fashion, were just reward for Liverpool's endeavours, and cemented further – as if it were needed – his own reputation for producing the goods in the biggest of games. Not that this was a one-man show. Not by a long chalk. Kuyt's hat-trick will inevitably grab the headlines but, as the man himself admitted afterwards, this was a victory of teamwork, of control, of genuine, dazzling quality. Liverpool bossed Ferguson's league leaders – a side who have lost just twice in the league all season, don't forget – in just about every department, and fully deserved the victory – their third in a row against United at Anfield, and their most comprehensive against their fierce rivals in many a year. Indeed, not since that Beardsley-inspired success, in September 1990, have Reds fans been able to enjoy the closing minutes of a Liverpool-United clash so comfortably. They were already well on top by the time Kuyt opened the scoring, pouncing from close range after Luis Suarez had twisted beyond four United defenders in the 34th minute, and by the time he had grabbed his second just five minutes later, stooping to head home after a woeful defensive header from Nani, the stuffing had been all but knocked from the visitors. Kuyt completed his hat-trick - a bet worth 125/1 before the game - in the second half as he pounced after Edwin van der Sar had spilled Suarez's free-kick, and though Javier Hernandez's late header added a semblance of respectability to the scoreline for United, it did little to disguise the Reds' dominance. United fans have long taunted their Liverpool counterparts with their song about Diego Forlan and Scousers crying, but they might have to shelve that particular chant now, having been left reeling here by another Uruguyan. Suarez, put simply, was sensational. Involved heavily in all three goals, the former Ajax man was at the heart of everything good about Liverpool's performance. Combining work-rate with skill, one of the hardest things to do in top-level football, he tormented the United backline all afternoon.

He was not the only one; Kuyt provided the goals, Maxi Rodriguez and Raul Meireles provided bright and inventive support, whilst Lucas Leiva, alongside skipper Steven Gerrard, produced a midfield masterclass, leaving the vaunted duo of Michael Carrick and Paul Scholes very much in the shade. There were nervy moments – Meireles was twice asked to clear off the line, albeit comfortably, from Dimitar Berbatov, and the Bulgarian skimmed a volley off the outside of Pepe Reina's post, for example – but United rarely looked like breaching a defence marshalled superbly by Martin Skrtel and Sotirios Kyrgiakos – who replaced a limping Fabio Aurelio early on. The subdued performances, and sulky demeanours, of Berbatov and Wayne Rooney spoke volumes. Indeed, Liverpool might have had more. Gerrard was inches away with a couple of 25-yarders, Suarez gave Wes Brown and Chris Smalling nightmares – Lord only knows how long Nemanja Vidic would have lasted against him – and Kuyt threatened to grab himself a fourth with an ambitious volley. But as it was, three was enough. Liverpool fans are clever enough to know that one result does not a season make, and that there are still 18 points separating the sides in the table, but for now they care little. This weekend was all about giving Dalglish the birthday he craved, and a rampant Reds managed to do just that. It seems life begins at 60 for the King, after all. LIVERPOOL(4-3-2-1): Reina, Johnson, Carragher, Skrtel, Aurelio (Kyrgiakos 24), Lucas, Gerrard, Maxi Meireles (Carroll 74), Suarez (Cole 89), Kuyt Not used: Gulacsi, Spearing, Poulsen, Ngog. MANCHESTER UTD (4-4-2): Van der Sar, Rafael (O'Shea 76), Smalling, Brown, Evra, Nani (Hernandez 45), Carrick, Scholes (Fletcher 83), Giggs, Rooney, Berbatov Not used: Kuszczak, Fabio, Gibson, Obertan. GOALS: Kuyt (34, 39, 65) CARDS: Booked – Liverpool: Carragher (45), Skrtel (45). Manchester Utd: Van der Sar (45), Rafael (45), Scholes (82) REFEREE: Phil Dowd (Stoke) ATTENDANCE: (44,753)