

Date: 10 March 2012
 Opposition: Sunderland
 Competition: League

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10 March 2012

THE  **TIMES**

the guardian

Tricky questions for Dalglish after Champions League flame fades
 Sunderland (0) 1

Bendtner 56
 Liverpool (0) 0
 Referee Anthony Taylor
 Attendance 41,661

An afternoon which surely extinguished Liverpool's hopes of Champions League qualification raised far more questions than answers. Where might Kenny Dalglish's team be without Craig Bellamy? Why do Andy Carroll and Stewart Downing not feature in more Anfield starting XIs? Is Luis Suarez losing interest? Should Sunderland's Jack Colback be regarded as mildly or seriously underrated? Is Nicklas Bendtner's knee injury really that serious? How bad a signing has Charlie Adam been for Liverpool?

Ponderous in possession, horribly prone to losing the ball and constantly fouling, Adam disappointed in a midfield department in which Colback, the academy graduate deputising for Lee Cattermole, quietly shone alongside the much improved Craig Gardner. There was a time when Colback was kept out of Sunderland's team by Jordan Henderson but here the Liverpool midfielder's industry failed to disguise an ordinary performance.

"I've told Jack I've got more belief in him than he does at the moment," Martin O'Neill said. "Jack's a very fine player, all he lacks is self-belief. But he's shown he can mix it with the Premier League's best including Steven Gerrard. Perhaps Jack should listen to Nicklas Bendtner . . . Or perhaps not."

Bendtner, borrowed from Arsenal, has infuriated those Wearsiders who fret about the inordinate amount of time he spends drifting around outside the box. Here, though, he provided the inexperienced Liverpool centre-half Sebastian Coates with a tough workout before hooking Sunderland's second-half winner home from close range after Fraizer Campbell's 20-yard shot had rebounded off a post, Pepe Reina's head and the post again.

When Bendtner was carried off after an abrasive late challenge from Martin Skrtel, suspicion grew that the Dane had perhaps deliberately halted visiting momentum when, with Gerrard, Carroll and Downing finally on the pitch, Liverpool threatened.

Even so, he departed wearing a knee brace and O'Neill reported the "twisted" joint to be "sore and swollen", leaving him a doubt for Saturday's FA Cup sixth-round tie at Everton. "I'm desperately hoping Bendtner pulls through," said O'Neill, who will wait on a scan today. "He's strong and gives us presence." Tearing down Sunderland's left, James McClean worried Liverpool but, in the first half at least, O'Neill's players looked equally nervous of Bellamy. The only shame was that too many team-mates proved unequal to his promptings.

Suarez was repeatedly second-guessed by John O'Shea and Michael Turner when that increasingly formidable pair may have been more fazed by Downing's crosses and Carroll's penalty area physicality.

By the time the latter two were united in combat the game was lost but Dalglish refused to accept Liverpool's Champions League dream is over. "If we get fourth spot it would be fantastic," he said. But he is in danger of seeing his side overtaken by a team like Sunderland or, much worse, Roy Hodgson's West Bromwich Albion.

Forget the idea of finishing fourth - Dalglish's real challenge is keeping Liverpool in the top seven.

Man of the match John O'Shea (Sunderland)

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The Mail

The Daily Telegraph

Suarez hints at move to PSG as Liverpool's problems mount

Sunderland 1

Bendtner 56

Liverpool 0

Att: 41,661

As if a defeat that all but ended Liverpool's hopes of reaching the Champions League was not bad enough, their striker Luis Suarez was last night reported to have said he "could" join French league leaders Paris St Germain.

Suarez was reported by French sports website 10 Sport to have told the Canal Football Club television programme on Canal Plus that he could join up with fellow Uruguayan Diego Lugano, who plays for PSG.

"I would love to play at the same club as him," he reportedly said. "Yes, I could come to Paris, like lots of other clubs. There are lots of big clubs with such a reputation who want to build a strong team and Paris are one of these teams who buy to strengthen their side."

The news is certain to be greeted with concern at Anfield where Suarez has become something of a talisman since joining from Ajax in January last year. But if he wants to play in Europe's elite competition next season, he looks almost certain to have to ply his trade elsewhere as Liverpool are now 10 points off fourth following three league defeats in a row.

A Merseyside derby with Everton tomorrow night is not the ideal game to try to end a losing streak and the mid-table pack, led by Sunderland, are only two points behind them.

It is a good thing that Liverpool have pocketed the Carling Cup - and a route into the Europa League - and have an FA Cup quarter-final to look forward to, otherwise manager Kenny Dalglish would have to answer awkward questions from the club's American owners.

Dalglish felt a draw would have been a fairer result at the end of an uninspiring encounter here, but his side were poor, slow on the break, starved of width and unimaginative in midfield.

It was Nicklas Bendtner, a striker who does not need to score goals to retain faith in his ability, who condemned Liverpool to another defeat. Bendtner has not scored as many goals, just five in 20 appearances, as he should on loan from Arsenal, yet there has been no sign of any dip in morale. Even a visit to Newcastle Magistrates' court to answer a criminal damage charge this morning as a result of a night out with captain Lee Cattermole before Christmas has failed to knock the stuffing out of him.

Maybe it should. His form at Sunderland is unlikely to have Champions League clubs dashing to sign him as he hoped - although he was linked over the weekend with a [pounds sterling]4 million move to Hannover - and there is no guarantee Martin O'Neill will look to turn his temporary stay into a permanent one either. Bendtner does have talent and Sunderland will hope the knee injury that forced him off on Saturday does not rule him out of the FA Cup quarter-final against Everton.

O'Neill is amused, rather than dismayed, by Bendtner's high opinion of himself, but does want to see more goals like the one that decided this game.

While Liverpool's defenders stood and watched Fraizer Campbell's shot hit the post twice via the back of goalkeeper Pepe Reina, Bendtner followed up and was rewarded with a tap in.

"That will have given him a boost in confidence, although I've chided myself because that's the last thing he needs," O'Neill said. "He did very well. We have a few jokes at his expense, but when he's strong and fully fit he is a handful.

"Confidence is a wonderful thing to have, if it's properly placed. You can have all the self-belief in the world, but you need the ability to go with it. Fortunately he has the ability."

By Luke Edwards at the Stadium of Light

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10 March 2012

THE INDEPENDENT

Bendtner grows in self-belief as Carroll's confidence ebbs

This was the story of two six feet four inch centre-forwards and their respective backsides; one, Nicklas Bendtner, carried from the field on a stretcher after a match-winning goal, sitting up and waving to Sunderland fans as if he was royalty. The other, Andy Carroll, sat on a substitutes' bench like a caged animal for 70 minutes, before he was once more introduced too late to effect any change to a dismal game.

Perhaps it is only in the North-east now that there remains the memory of a rampaging young English striker who looked like he had the world at his feet, the player Liverpool paid [pounds sterling]35m of their Fernando Torres money for. By the time he was given another cameo, there was so little momentum in Kenny Dalglish's side it would have been a footballing miracle if there had been a dramatic conclusion.

Bendtner, the frustrating and supremely confident on-loan Arsenal forward had scored for the second successive game by then, tucking away a Fraizer Campbell shot that struck a post, struck Pepe Reina's head, struck the same post before the Danish forward won the match and took the gap between Sunderland and their opponents to just two points. He was felled late on, damaging a knee that will be scanned once the swelling has gone down, and then carried from the field. If his body (he is wearing a mask because of a broken nose) is taking a battering then his robust ego, as Martin O'Neill alluded too, is unbreakable.

"That will have given him a boost in confidence, although I've chided myself because that's the last thing he needs," he said. "He's done well. We have a few jokes at his expense but when he's strong and fully fit he is a handful. I know that the crowd get a wee bit irked at times, but he is fine and strong and gives us a presence and fans might like that."

Confidence. Carroll at times does not even look like he remembers what that was and there is so much more to him than he is currently showing. A return to his home area where he was jeered relentlessly, as he warmed up, as he entered the field and as he struggled in this ordinary Liverpool side, seemed a good opportunity for a statement to be made. Another chance had been missed, and that has happened too often in the past 14 months with Liverpool.

* Liverpool striker Luis Suarez is keen to link up with fellow Uruguayan Diego Lugano, who plays for French league leaders Paris St-Germain. "Yes, I could come to Paris, like lots of other clubs," Suarez told Canal Plus TV.

SUND'LAND 1-0 LIVERPOOL

Scorer: Sunderland Bendtner 56.

Substitutes: Sunderland Vaughan 6 (Campbell, 75), Wickham (Bendtner, 84). Liverpool Gerrard 6 (Bellamy, 69), Carroll 5 (Adam, 69), Downing (Henderson, 80).

Booked: Sunderland McClean. Liverpool Skrtel.

Man of the match Gardner. Match rating 5/10.

Possession: Sunderland 45% Liverpool 55%.

Attempts on target: Sunderland 1 Liverpool 5.

Referee A Taylor (Cheshire). Attendance 41,661.

DAILY Mirror

MONEY FOR NOTHING & YOUR CUPS FOR FREE; Liverpool are getting no return on investment in Premier League

SUNDERLAND 1

LIVERPOOL 0

SUNDERLAND: Mignolet 7, Bardsley 7, O'Shea 8, Turner 7, Bridge 7, Larsson 6, Colback 7, Gardner 7, McClean 7?, Bendtner 7 (Wickham 83), Campbell 7 (Vaughan 75).

Goal: Bendtner 56

LIVERPOOL: Reina 6, Kelly 6, Skrtel 6?, Coates 6, Jose Enrique 6, Kuyt 6, Henderson 6 (Downing 79), Adam 6 (Carroll 69, 5), Spearing 5, Bellamy 6 (Gerrard 69, 5), Suarez 5.

REF: Anthony Taylor

ATT: 41,661

KENNY DALGLISH is going to have a job explaining why such lavish spending has produced such a meagre Premier League points haul recently.

This lumbering defeat at Sunderland was their third in a row, for the first time in nine years. It means the likes of Andy Carroll, Jordan Henderson, Stewart Downing and Charlie Adam, combined cost pounds 75million, have won just twice in their last 11 league games.

Five Cup wins may have come in that lean league period stretching back to December 21, but top-four contenders is certainly not what Liverpool are at the moment. Even their Carling Cup glory came after a 2-2 draw and a chaotic penalty shoot-out against Championship Cardiff.

The next week is huge for Dalglish and Liverpool. Lose in the Merseyside derby on Tuesday and Everton will leapfrog their great rivals. Then there is the FA Cup quarter-final against Stoke.

Lacking the guile, the creativity, the zip, to carve opponents apart is the obvious failing. The last 11 league games have yielded only 10 goals and five blanks. Sunderland's solid, well-organised defence, backed up by a battling midfield, discovered they were comfortably the match for all that Luis Suarez, Craig Bellamy, Dirk Kuyt and then sub Carroll could muster.

If you are going to pay pounds 35m for Carroll (right), surely there is a plan somewhere along the line to play to his strengths. Pump the odd high ball into the mixer and let him leap. Whip the odd cross in and allow him to cause havoc?

Martin O'Neill's men deserve credit and they have their own crunch game against Everton, next Saturday, in the FA Cup.

And they will be hoping for the sort of luck that helped Fraizer Campbell's shot hit the post, bounce off Pepe Reina's head, hit the post again and emerge at the feet of Nicklas Bendtner to smash home for the winner.

Bendtner, who has notched two goals in two games, is finally coming into form, and Sunderland will pray the twisted knee he picked up here is not too serious. Discussing the masked Dane's contribution, boss O'Neill said: "According to Steve Bruce, when Nicklas went to Birmingham as an 18-year-old, he was trying to pick the team after a week! He has enormous self-belief, it never seems to flinch no matter what he's done in the game. Fortunately he has the ability to back it up.

"I think he realises it's a big season for him. He's been sent out on loan to us from Arsenal. Perhaps that would have dented his confidence, although perhaps not."

Which is not something that can be said of Liverpool. A revival in the league is needed, as is more FA Cup success.

Nothing can mask the run they are on.

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Stadium of plight for LFC in drab defeat to Sunderland
 SO much for silverware driving this Liverpool FC side on to greater heights. Just 13 days separated LFC's Carling Cup triumph with Saturday's wretched defeat at Sunderland but on the long journey home that Wembley triumph felt like a distant memory. Any lingering hopes of Champions League qualification were extinguished at the Stadium of Light. For a third successive campaign the five-time European Cup winners will be on the outside looking in on the continent's elite. The home reverse inflicted by Arsenal a week earlier may have been cruel but this was no hard luck story. Of course the Black Cats' winner was laced with good fortune as Pepe Reina inadvertently played head tennis with the post before Nicklas Bendtner pounced.

But Liverpool got exactly what they deserved from a dour contest as they produced a lifeless performance devoid of any attacking spark. There have been many occasions this season when a lack of potency in front of goal has seen their dominance go unrewarded. Kenny Dalglish had talked about just needing to find a "finishing touch" but there was a lot more wrong on Saturday than merely the absence of a ruthless streak. It wasn't quite as bad as the tame capitulation at Bolton back in January but it deserves to sit just beneath that game, alongside September's hammering at Tottenham, in the admittedly short list of unacceptable displays this term. From the glory of ending Liverpool's six-year wait for silverware, Dalglish and this group of players now find themselves responsible for the club's worst league run for nearly nine years. Not since October 2003, when under Gerard Houllier they lost to Charlton, Arsenal and Portsmouth, have the Reds suffered three league defeats on the bounce. It's not a freak sequence of results as they have taken just 10 points out of the last 33 on offer going back to mid-December. That's an alarming statistic. Having spent recent months looking up at the top four, there's now the real threat of dropping lower than seventh. Stoke in 13th place are only three points worse off.

An in-form Everton will be licking their lips at the prospect of piling on the misery at Anfield tomorrow night. Liverpool FC need a show of character to halt the slide and lift the mood prior to Sunday's FA Cup quarter-final.

The airwaves on Saturday night were predictably polluted with talk of the need for change. The fickle minority, who specialise in knee-jerk reactions, have short memories about the mess Dalglish inherited. Liverpool have made progress. The style of play, the depth of the squad, the newest addition to the Anfield trophy cabinet and their continued interest in the FA Cup are proof of that.

But the league table lays bare the fact that there is still an awful long way to go. This remains a new team with nine members of Saturday's 18-man squad having been at the club less than 14 months. Dalglish's initial impact on his return may have suggested otherwise but he's not a miracle worker. He's overseen a lot of change in a short period of time but problems remain.

This summer will be crucial to address the shortcomings and the manager will need the financial backing of Fenway Sports Group. Those who argue that £114million of investment should have guaranteed a top four finish this season conveniently forget that around £78million of that outlay was recouped in sales. What is undeniable is that too many of Dalglish's signings have so far failed to live up to their billing. Only Reina has made more appearances this season than either Charlie Adam or Jordan Henderson. But what have that midfield duo contributed to warrant such pivotal roles? Both struggled badly on Saturday.

They offered so little creativity and frequently tossed away possession. At 21, Henderson may be one for the future and is still learning his trade but Adam has no such excuses. The Scot looks desperately short of confidence. A manager down the East Lincs Road once claimed his deliveries into the box were worth £10million alone but you wouldn't have offered £10 for them on Saturday. The groans from the away end were audible in the second half when Adam slammed another free-kick in a promising position into the first defender. Adam, Henderson and Stewart Downing have made 101 appearances between them this season and boast a combined tally of four goals.

Just when Andy Carroll appeared to be showing signs of being a Liverpool FC No 9 he has been consigned to bench duty. Surely, the time has now come to give him an extended run alongside Luis Suarez to see if their £58million double act really can work. Dalglish's cautious approach with Steven Gerrard on Saturday was understandable considering the week ahead.

But with the skipper left watching the first three quarters of the match from the bench Liverpool not only lacked energy and invention but also leadership. A swirling wind and an awful playing surface were never going to make for a game which was pleasing on the eye. It was a day to roll up your sleeves and grind out a result but only when Gerrard and Carroll were introduced with 20 minutes to go was there any show of fight. Sunderland may be resurgent under Martin O'Neill but they were hammered 4-0 by West Brom a fortnight ago and looked vulnerable without skipper Lee Cattermole and top scorer Stephane Sessegnon. Yet the Black Cats were the better side during a first half when they played on the nerves of Sebastian Coates. The Uruguayan centre-back was a surprise choice ahead of Jamie Carragher and after two months on the sidelines looked rusty. Coates improved as the afternoon went on, helped by the fact Martin Skrtel was

once again outstanding alongside him. The big problems were further forward with Suarez isolated and left to embark on those solo slaloming runs which promise so much but ultimately deliver nothing. The support for him was non-existent. A desperate game briefly flickered into life 11 minutes into the second half. Frazier Campbell's shot beat Reina's despairing dive and struck the post. However, it then bounced off the back of the keeper's head and against the upright again before dropping kindly for Bendtner to fire home. Dalglish rung the changes and the improvement was instant but there was no way back. The last time Liverpool FC performed this poorly within seven days they had knocked both Manchester clubs out of the Cups. Supporters will be hoping the lengthy inquest into Saturday's setback provokes a similar response. The Reds' season depends on it.

SUNDERLAND: Mignolet, Bardsley, O'Shea, Turner, Bridge, Larsson, Gardner, Colback, McClean, Campbell (Vaughan 75), Bendtner (Wickham 84). Not used: Gordon, Elmohamady, Kilgallon, Meyler, Kyrgiakos.

LIVERPOOL: Reina, Kelly, Skrtel, Coates, Enrique, Spearing, Kuyt, Henderson (Downing 80), Adam (Carroll 69), Bellamy (Gerrard 69), Suarez. Not used: Doni, Rodriguez, Carragher, Flanagan.

GOALS: Bendtner (56). CARDS: McClean, Skrtel. REFEREE: Anthony Taylor. ATTENDANCE: 41,661.

The Northern Echo

Cats are clawing way up the table

FORGET a footballer's common claim that they have not had a glance at the standings after a result – the Sunderland squad enjoy looking at the Premier League table right now. It may not have been particularly pretty, but in overcoming Liverpool with a narrow victory, courtesy of Nicklas Bendtner's potent second half strike, Martin O'Neill has now won 11 of the 18 matches he has been in charge of. Such a record, even after a run of three league matches without a win before the visit of Jordan Henderson and Co, has transformed the fortunes at the Stadium of Light – a venue which, not too long ago, seemed to strike fear into those playing in red and white shirts. Ahead of the visit of Carling Cup winners Liverpool, who admittedly are going through a difficult time in the league, the inevitable doubts were raised because Sunderland were without the suspended pair of Lee Cattermole and Stephane Sessegnon. Yet the visitors' profligacy combined with a dogged display from a Sunderland team shorn of two of their key players after the tempestuous Tyne-Wear derby led to the latest success story of O'Neill's reign. After seeing out the game following Bendtner's decisive winner ten minutes after halftime, there was an immediate admission from within the Black Cats camp that their new top ten position had already been noted.

"It's not like we have been looking (at the table) or anything!"

said striker Fraizer Campbell, sporting a smile almost as wide as the day he learned he had been called up for the England squad last month.

"I think we might have gone eighth! You are under pressure when you don't win games all the time. But we knew we had been playing good football. We have been showing the right mentality, we stuck to our guns, and we worked hard for each other. "We are two points behind Liverpool, they are a great side. They are up there year in year out, so to be so close to them at this stage of the season is credit to all of us." The situation Sunderland find themselves in looks all the more impressive when it is remembered that under Steve Bruce this same group of players were battling to stay out of the relegation zone as recently as December. Going forward, Sunderland might not have been up to much against the Reds, but defensively they never looked like conceding as John O'Shea marshalled a back four competently in keeping Luis Suarez, Craig Bellamy and Dirk Kuyt quiet. Even when Steven Gerrard, Andy Carroll and Stewart Downing were introduced in the latter stages of the second half by Kenny Dalglish, goalkeeper Simon Mignolet was well protected by those in front of him. If they can head in to the FA Cup quarter-final with Everton on Saturday with a similar belief that the job can be done without the tenacity of Cattermole and the flair of Sessegnon then Sunderland could edge another step towards Europa League qualification.

Campbell said: "We are just taking each game as it comes.

We have a tough game next week. But we are just enjoying ourselves at the minute. We just want to keep on winning. If we do that we can move further up the table. "We are also two games away from Europe in the FA Cup. That is exactly the way we have to look at it. One win and you are at Wembley, two and you are in the final." Conditions at the Stadium of Light hardly helped on Saturday. Sunderland did cope with the gusty wind and the poor surface better than their Liverpool counterparts. Opportunities were few and far between at both ends. In the first half O'Shea glanced a header over, while Mignolet denied Kuyt and Suarez from reasonable positions. It was always going to be a moment of magic or slice of good fortune that broke the deadlock and it was the latter.

Two-and-a-half years after Darren Bent's winner defeated Liverpool with the help of a beach-ball, Bendtner had the assistance of the woodwork and Pepe Reina's head. After the Denmark striker rolled the ball back to Jack Colback he continued his run in to the Liverpool box. By the time he arrived, Campbell had chested down a pass, turned Martin Skrtel outside the box and unleashed a shot from 18 yards. Campbell's strike hit the foot of the post, bounced off the head of Reina and on to the woodwork again before Bendtner reacted first to arch a volley in to the Liverpool net. It was a nice way to begin a new attacking partnership for the

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Sunderland forwards. "I like to hit the post twice before I get an assist," said Campbell. "I think it must be that super hero mask he was wearing." The introduction of Gerrard did increase Liverpool's impetus. But Sunderland stayed strong to leave Liverpool ten points behind Arsenal and Chelsea in the race for fourth. Dalglish is a man of few words at the best of times, but even more so after Liverpool had lost their third league game in a row for the first time since Gerard Houllier's days in charge in 2003. "It's up to us to keep going, and keep our mouths shut," said Dalglish. "As I've said all season, we see how many points we have collected by the end of the campaign, and see where that takes us. "There wasn't much in the game, it was decided by a bit of luck, that was the difference between a draw and a defeat. I thought we matched them." Matched Sunderland in many ways? Perhaps. Crucially, the scoreline suggested otherwise.



Bendtner opportunism finds Liverpool flat-footed

Much will be made of the nature of the goal that did for Liverpool yesterday; a strange affair, that saw a shot hit a post, hit Pepe Reina, hit the same post before Nicklas Bendtner scored. Similarities will be drawn to the beach ball goal from 2009, of which far too much was made at the time, certainly by Rafa Benitez. Then, he found a hiding place for failure as a stray inflatable thrown from his own fans helped Darren Bent puncture Liverpool's season. It was a nice excuse for a woeful display. Three years and more than [pounds sterling]100 million later, the same club still require such places to hide from their inadequacies. On this showing, progress is not taking place. By the close, Liverpool's top four aspirations looked slightly ridiculous, losing a third successive Premier League tie for the first time since the 2002-2003 season; their only comfort in recent months has come from the Carling Cup and the penalty shootout victory over Cardiff City. Kenny Dalglish referred to that win as soon as he was asked about the difficulty he faces in getting Liverpool into a top four finish. The gap when the final whistle blew yesterday was 10 points. With 11 games to go that seems an almost insurmountable target to reach. Thus much has to be made of the Wembley success and the FA Cup quarter-final that looms, not the fact his side lacked direction with Steven Gerrard on the bench for much of the game in anticipation of the derby with Everton on Tuesday. "Obviously if we could get fourth spot it would be fantastic for the football club," said Dalglish. "But winning the Carling Cup was fantastic for the football club, getting to the sixth round of the FA Cup was fantastic for the football club. I don't think the performances we've had, especially at home, have merited the points we have. I don't think it was much of a game. It was always going to be a bit of fortune and not a bit of brilliance to win the game. We matched all the attributes Sunderland have. A bit of luck was the difference between a draw and a victory." There was a slight oversimplification there, although this was certainly no thriller. Sunderland's industry and momentum, however, has been such in recent weeks that it was not overly derailed by the absence of key figures such as St[c]phane Sessgnon and Lee Cattermole. They just about deserved their victory, scoring in the 56th minute when Fraizer Campbell's shot set in motion the elements for Bendtner to score, before he was carried off after damaging his knee. Phil Bardsley had cleared a Dirk Kuyt header off his line, but both teams fed from scraps. Only the industry of Craig Gardner and Jack Colback and the resolution of John O'Shea and Michael Turner made Sunderland more purposeful. "I'm delighted with the effort," said their manager, Martin O'Neill. "Again, with the changes we had to make, I couldn't ask for much more it was a great effort from the team." Sunderland (4-4-2): Mignolet; Bardsley, O'Shea, Turner, Bridge; Larsson, Gardner, Colback, McClean; Campbell (Vaughan, 75), Bendtner (Wickham, 84). Liverpool (4-1-4-1): Reina; Kelly, Skrtel, Coates, Enrique; Spearing; Kuyt, Henderson (Downing, 80), Adam (Carroll, 70), Bellamy (Gerrard, 69); Suarez. Referee: Anthony Taylor Man of the match: Gardner (Sunderland) Match rating: 5/10

The Sunday Telegraph

Liverpool's bad run extended by Bendtner strike

Sunderland 1
 Bendtner 52
 Liverpool 0
 Att: 41,661

There was excitable talk following Liverpool's Carling Cup final victory of it being a springboard to Premier League success. It is starting to look like a weight around their necks after this defeat at Sunderland.

Although Liverpool can feel a little aggrieved at the manner in which Nicklas Bendtner scored Sunderland's winner, this was a lacklustre performance from Kenny Dalglish's side.

The defeat is Liverpool's third in a row in the league - the first time that has happened since October 2003 - and they remain five points adrift of Newcastle in sixth. Worse still, Sunderland's win means they are now just two points behind the Reds in eighth.

For all of the money spent, for all of the talk of a Champions League challenge, Dalglish might be grabbing hold of that Carling Cup triumph like a comfort blanket come May if his team do not buck their ideas up.

"I don't think it was much of a game and the only difference between a draw and a win was a bit of good fortune for them," said Dalglish. "It wasn't going to be a moment of brilliance that won it.

"There's no point feeling sorry for ourselves. We've won the Carling Cup, we're in the last 16 of the FA Cup and we'll count up the number of points at the end of the season and see where we are."

He was right about the goal. Sunderland got lucky when Fraizer Campbell's shot hit the post, rebounded off goalkeeper Pepe Reina's back and hit the post again before falling kindly to Bendtner.

But if that left the Dane a simple finish, Dalglish must also question why none of his defenders had followed him into the six-yard box.

The first-half was relatively even. Sunderland were the best side for the first half an hour and Liverpool finishing strongly, almost taking the lead when a run by Luis Suarez ended with a fine save from Simon Mignolet.

The second-half was only 11 minutes old when Sunderland took the lead, but despite dominating possession, Liverpool struggled to make inroads up front, even after the introduction of Andy Carroll and Steven Gerrard from the bench. Sunderland held on far too comfortably in the end.

"It was a game of very few chances so it was great to get the goal," said O'Neill.

"It's a great result for us - beating Liverpool always is - but especially with the players we had missing today."

Sunderland (4-4-2): Mignolet; Bardsley, O'Shea, Turner, Bridge; Larsson, Gardner, Colback, McClean; Campbell (Vaughan 75), Bendtner (Wickham 84). Subs: Gordon, Elmohamady, Kilgallon, Meyler, Kyrgiakos.

Liverpool (4-4-1-1): Reina; Kerry, Skrtel, Coates, Enrique; Henderson (Downing 80), Adam (Carroll 69), Spearing, Bellamy (Gerrard 70); Kuyt; Suarez. Subs: Doni, Maxi, Carragher, Flanagan. Booked: Skrtel Referee: Anthony Taylor

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

The Observer

Bendtner left feeling the pain after landing a blow to Liverpool's
 Champions League

SUNDERLAND 1

Bendtner 56

LIVERPOOL 0

Mathematical possibility may suggest otherwise, but this was surely the day Liverpool's already slender hopes of Champions League qualification finally turned to dust. Up against a Sunderland side weakened by the suspension of two key players, Stephane Sessegnon and Lee Cattermole, Kenny Dalglish's team tested the home goalkeeper, Simon Mignolet, with one shot on target. Considering the array of expensive talent on view for the visitors, indictments do not come much more damning.

"I don't think it was much of a game," said a downbeat Dalglish. "I don't think there was much in it." Asked if his side's position, 10 points behind fourth-placed Arsenal, meant the top four was no longer a realistic target, Liverpool's manager demurred. "I'll say what I said in August," he said. "At the end of the season we'll count our points and see where we are."

They will not accrue as many as expected if too many more 90 minutes contain as many missed connections and concession of possession as this one. When it came to the latter, Charlie Adam was the biggest culprit. Not content with showing his ponderous side, the Liverpool midfielder also gave away a series of needless fouls, eight before the interval.

If Adam represented one weak link in Dalglish's armoury, Sebastian Coates looked like another, the centre-half displaying his inexperience against Nicklas Bendtner. But while the Dane - who scored Sunderland's winner before later being taken off on a stretcher with a knee injury that threatens his participation in Saturday's FA Cup sixth round tie at Everton - delighted in stealing in behind Coates on the blindside, such manoeuvres invariably ended with no one around to latch on to the resultant cross or lay off.

If Bendtner, like his Sunderland team-mate James McClean, were two of the few to impress on a badly cutting up pitch, Craig Bellamy was arguably the best individual - albeit one betrayed by less inventive colleagues. Time after time Bellamy got beyond Phil Bardsley only to find Luis Suarez and company unequal to his deliveries. With Suarez struggling in the face of the highly efficient defensive barrier provided by John O'Shea and Michael Turner, the puzzle was why Dalglish did not swiftly introduce Andy Carroll in a bid to ruffle O'Shea, especially.

With Sessegnon sidelined, Bendtner and Fraizer Campbell formed Martin O'Neill's new-look attacking partnership and, in the 57th minute, they answered lingering questions about their compatibility. First Campbell did well to resist the attentions of Martin Skrtel before unleashing a shot from 20 yards out that rebounded up off both the base of a post and Pepe Reina. Before Reina could rally, Bendtner had half-volleyed the ball beyond him from close range. Adam subsequently shot wide after a cross by Jordan Henderson, who, despite much typically energetic endeavour, would surely have hoped to have made more of an impact against his old club.

It was Adam, though, who rightly made way when Dalglish finally liberated Carroll, along with fit-again Steven Gerrard, from the bench. That Bellamy - who looked far from happy at seeing his number flash up on the electronic board - was the other Liverpool player withdrawn presumably had more to do with his troublesome knees than the threat he posed Sunderland.

O'Neill responded to Dalglish's little reshuffle by replacing Campbell with David Vaughan and switching to a five-man midfield. By succeeding in starving Carroll of service, this switch highlighted Liverpool's lack of a proper cross-supplying winger. When Henderson eventually made way for precisely such a player, Stewart Downing, it was too late. Indeed, an enduring Merseyside mystery is why Carroll and Downing are so rarely on the pitch together.

The sole blemish on Sunderland's afternoon was Bendtner's injury, sustained after a challenge that resulted in Skrtel being booked. With the break in play suiting O'Neill's team, it initially seemed the Arsenal loanee might be indulging in a little time-wasting, but he was carried off with his leg in a brace and, afterwards, Sunderland's manager expressed concern.

"Nicklas is a worry for next weekend," said O'Neill. "He's twisted his knee and we're not certain about it. It's pretty sore and there's a bit of swelling. We won't know anything for 48 hours." With Bendtner having hit decent form over the past couple of weeks, Everton will be hoping the prognosis is disappointing.

SUNDERLAND

Mignolet; Bardsley, O'Shea, Turner, Bridge; Larsson, Gardner, Colback, McClean (Booked); Bendtner (Wickham 83), Campbell (Vaughan 75) Subs not used Gordon, Kilgallon, Elmohamady, Meyler, Kyrgiakos

LIVERPOOL

Reina; Kelly, Skrtel (Booked), Coates, Jose Enrique; Henderson (Downing 79), Spearing, Adam (Carroll 69), Bellamy (Gerrard 68); Kuyt, Suarez Subs not used Doni, Rodriguez, Carragher, Flanagan

Stadium of Light 41,661

Game rating 6/10

Referee Anthony Taylor

Date: 10 March 2012
 Opposition: Sunderland
 Competition: League

Echo	Sun Telegraph	Sunday Mirror	Independent
Guardian	Sun Independent	Northern Echo	Mirror
	Sunday Mail	Observer	Telegraph



10 March 2012

The Mail

WUNDERLAND; O'Neill is working the oracle yet again

SUNDERLAND 1

Bendtner (56)

LIVERPOOL 0

IT WAS not quite the beachball farce of 2009 that earned Sunderland a rare victory against Liverpool - but in the glossary of comical goals, Nicklas Bendtner's winner was not a bad second.

Three seasons ago Darren Bent's shot was deflected into the Liverpool net off a beachball thrown by a spectator. This time it was more of a pinball machine effort that produced in turn cheers, groans, and finally cheers as the ball eventually found the net.

Fraizer Campbell beat Martin Skrtel outside the area; his shot evaded Pepe Reina's dive; the ball came back off a post and hit the prostrate keeper on the head; it then hit the same post a second time before Bendtner raced in to score.

Apart from the Dane's strike, the match was devoid of goalmouth action but victory maintains Martin O'Neill's astonishing renaissance.

Defeat is potentially disastrous for Kenny Dalglish's hopes of rescuing a season of some success but much bitterness by qualifying for the Champions League.

'We just need to keep going and try to get as many points on the board as we can,' Dalglish said. 'If we get the fourth spot it will be fantastic for the club - just like winning the Carling Cup was fantastic and reaching the sixth round of the FA Cup.'

Liverpool are only two points ahead of the Wearsiders, who were relegation fodder when O'Neill took charge in December, and they now lie 10 points behind a top-four slot. It is the first time since 2003 that Liverpool have lost three successive Premier League games. And they got what they deserved after starting with Andy Carroll and Stewart Downing on the bench alongside Steven Gerrard. All three came on before the end as Dalglish attempted to pull a rabbit out of the hat.

But the only magic came from Sunderland, without Lee Cattermole and Stephane Sessegnon through suspension, and Kieran Richardson with a calf injury.

They will miss the FA Cup quarter-final at Everton next week and Sunderland could also be without Bendtner, stretchered off near the end after a tackle by Skrtel.

'I thought it was a tremendous effort, especially being without three influential players,' said O'Neill. 'I couldn't really ask for much more.'

SUNDERLAND (4-4-2): Mignolet; Bardsley, Turner, O'Shea, Bridge; Larsson, Colback, Gardner, McClean; Campbell (Vaughan 75), Bendtner (Wickham 83). Subs (not used): Gordon, Elmohamady, Kilgallon, Meyler, Kyrgiakos. Booked: McClean.

LIVERPOOL (4-3-3): Reina; Kelly, Skrtel, Coates, Enrique; Henderson (Downing 79), Spearing, Adam (Carroll 69); Kuyt, Suarez, Bellamy (Gerrard 69). Subs (not used): Doni, Maxi, Carragher, Flanagan. Booked: Skrtel.

Referee: A Taylor.

SUNDAY Mirror

The perfect Bend; NICK CAUSES A STIR AS THE CARLING CUP

HANGOVER CONTINUES FOR KENN NY & CO

SUNDERLAND 1 Bendtner 56

LIVERPOOL 0

IN TERMS of comedy value the goal that gave Sunderland victory in their 5,000th competitive game wasn't quite up there with the hilarious beach-ball winner of 2009.

It was 1-0 again, but this time the scorer was Bendtner rather than Bent. But Nicklas Bendtner's fifth goal of his Sunderland stay was in its own way pantomimic - the Dane's shot twice ricocheted off an upright as well as striking Liverpool keeper Pepe Reina before nestling in the back of the visiting net. Sunderland fans went home after seeing their wellorganised side deservedly win a

dour game, and boss Martin O'Neill described his side's victory as "a great effort" after it had been hit by suspensions.

"It was a great effort by the team with the likes of Sessegnon and Cattermole out," he said. "But it was a game of few chances and we were relieved to get the Bendtner goal which turned out to be the winner."

"I thought the keeper had saved it at first. I thought we just edged it. Bendtner has twisted his knee but it will be 48 hours before we know the extent of the injury."

Liverpool's supporters will not be happy with a third successive league defeat that effectively kills off any hopes of Champions League football next season, but Kenny Dalglish declined to write off his side's hopes, despite being 10 points off fourth

place - a gap that could grow to 13 if Arsenal beat Newcastle tomorrow. Dalglish said: "It was a little bit of luck that decided what was a poor game."

"Sunderland got that luck and that was the difference between a draw and a defeat."

"It is up to us to keep going and keep our mouths shut. Then we will see where we are at the end of the season."

It is the first time Liverpool have lost three successive Premier League games since October 2003 and the reality was that they were mediocre for much of this

contest. The Black Cats went into the game paying a heavy price for the volatile derby draw at Newcastle, losing both Stephane Sessegnon and skipper Lee Cattermole to suspensions.

Liverpool preferred Uruguayan central defender Sebastian Coates to veteran Jamie Carragher, with Daniel Agger out with a rib injury.

And Dalglish decided not to risk Steven Gerrard, who has been troubled by hamstring trouble. Gerrard began on the bench with two of Dalglish's big signings - Andy Carroll and Stewart Downing.

The first half was a mediocre, featureless affair with neither side carving out a really memorable chance.

A swirling wind led to a succession of wayward passes, but it was no excuse for some dreadful football.

Sunderland went closest early on when John O'Shea flicked a header from Seb Larsson free-kick wide of Reina's left-hand post.

It took Liverpool half an hour to record the first ontarget effort and even then Dirk Kuyt's tame header was comfortably saved by Simon Mignolet.

The closest an unimpressive Liverpool side went in that drab opening period was a hard-driven free-kick from Charlie Adam that almost caught Mignolet napping.

The Belgian keeper was clearly expecting a cross but the power of Adam's effort and the wind deceived him and he had to readjust to the tip the ball over the bar.

The second half began in much the same way as the scrappy first had ended. But at least Jack Colback tried to liven things up with a 25-yard effort.

Dalglish tried to stop the rot that seemed to be spreading in his under-performing side and told Gerrard and Carroll to warm up.

But before he could get them into the action Sunderland had gone ahead through Bendtner.

The architect was Fraizer Campbell, who struck a 22-yard drive that cannoned off Reina's right-hand post.

The ball struck the back of the Spanish keeper's head before hitting the upright for the second time and Bendtner, following in, was able to joyously ram it into an empty net.

McNALLY'S VERDICT
 A spirited, fighting display from Sunderland, aided by a bizarre Bendtner goal, gave Martin O'Neill his 11th win in 18 games. His side are real Europa League challengers.