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Opposition: Manchester City

Competition: League

Guardian	Mirror	BBC
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26 August 2012

THE TIMES

Rodgers defends Skrtel as flawed City fight back

Liverpool Skrtel 34, Suarez 66 2 Manchester City Y Toure 63, Tevez 80 2 Referee A Marriner Attendance 44,942 On an enthralling afternoon at

Anfield, Liverpool were undone - and Manchester City saved - by the type of error that usually sends a manager's blood pressure soaring through the roof. With ten minutes remaining and his team leading 2-1, Martin Skrtel played a careless back pass that was ruthlessly punished by Carlos Tevez to the sounds of groans from a hitherto exuberant Kop.

It was the kind of mistake that often sees a player blanked, subjected to a blast of invective or dragged back to the scene of the crime to have the figurative "Row Z" pointed out to him to ensure that it never happens again. But that is not Brendan Rodgers's style. From Liverpool's manager, denied an uplifting victory in his first Barclays Premier League match at Anfield, there was an arm around the shoulder for Skrtel, whom he indulged and encouraged to be brave enough to take approximately the same risk again in future.

"It's not frustrating," Rodgers said. "It's all part of the journey. I commend the player's courage. The easy thing is to get a player to smash the ball upfield and then the opposition have the ball and they're on the attack again. The angle of the ball is what we will work on. There's no blame on Martin. For us to dominate games we need to have players who have courage on the ball."

It is the classic Rodgers pronouncement, often heard during his days at Swansea City; wherever that journey ends up taking his team, short cuts will not be allowed. And while that might sound questionable with Liverpool sixteenth in the Premier League after taking a solitary point from their first two games, conceding five goals, this was an afternoon that brought encouragement, not least in the contributions of Joe Allen and Raheem Sterling, the precocious 17-year-old winger.

All that encouragement, though, will be tempered by an unexpected sense of disappointment for Liverpool. They caught Manchester City on an off-day and, having played well to lead deservedly at 1-0 and 2-1, they let them off the hook. As for whether Roberto Mancini might regard it as two points dropped or one point gained, his immediate focus might be on a point proven to his board about the need to add more than Scott Sinclair, the Swansea winger, to his squad before the transfer deadline on Friday.

The champions have begun their title defence in curious fashion. Yesterday saw a reversion to the 3-4-1-2 formation seen in the Community Shield and on this occasion, with a rusty Kolo Toure bewilderingly preferred to Joleon Lescott, it did not convince. Tevez was a rare source of positivity, along with the character they showed after falling 2-1 down, but they looked dysfunctional in falling behind to Skrtel's 34th-minute header and then, after Yaya Toure's equaliser, a Luis Suarez free kick. Rodgers's Liverpool is perhaps epitomised by Allen, diminutive but highly economical in midfield, but the eye was constantly drawn to Sterling. He showed a wonderful confidence on his first Premier League start.

From one Sterling cross, Fabio Borini volleyed just wide in the eighteenth minute and it was at that point that the belief from the home players and supporters seemed to rise. Liverpool grew in confidence and, after Martin Kelly's cross was deflected over the crossbar by a stretching Vincent Kompany, Steven Gerrard's corner was met with a thumping header from Skrtel.

Despite the early loss of Lucas Leiva to a thigh injury, Liverpool were looking assured in midfield, their only scare in the first half coming when Samir Nasri's pass allowed Tevez to dribble around Pepe Reina, who deflected the ensuing shot on to a post. By half-time City were looking sloppy and, as Nigel de Jong's pass was intercepted by Borini and then wasted by Suarez early in the second half, the feeling grew that something would have to change.

Rather than send on David Silva, Mancini replaced Nasri with Jack Rodwell, but that allowed him to move Yaya Toure farther forward - and within four minutes the midfielder had equalised. The goal could be traced back to a stray pass from Gerrard, but there were mistakes from Liverpool all along the line after that, as Sterling was left isolated against Tevez, who beat him easily and then sent a cross that Reina, Skrtel and Kelly all failed to deal with, allowing Yaya Toure to convert. Parity lasted only three minutes.

Rodwell was harshly punished for handball, after a Gerrard shot bounced off his knee and on to his arm, and his sense of injustice increased when Suarez curled the free kick around the outside of the wall and past a scrambling Joe Hart. "It was not a free kick - the same as it was not a penalty against us here last year [when Micah Richards was punished over a similar incident in the Carling Cup semi-final at Anfield]," Mancini said. Mancini was entitled to complain, but a lucky escape followed when Kolarov seemed to trip Glen Johnson in the penalty area. A third Liverpool goal at that point might have put the match even beyond Manchester City's recent powers of escapology, but, as it was, Mancini's team responded well. That pressure was seen in Tevez's persistence, which turned what might otherwise have been a routine back pass by Skrtel into a suicidal one. Tevez pounced, waltzed around Reina and prodded the ball in for the 100th goal of his eventful career in English football.

Even then there was time for two out-of-favour centre forwards to threaten a winning goal, Edin Dzeko shooting over from Kolarov's cross and Andy Carroll seeing his header cleared off the line by Rodwell. Skrtel looked distraught at the end. His manager will tell him to keep calm and carry on.

ratings Liverpool (4-2-3-1): J M Reina 5 - M Kelly 5 (sub: J Enrique, 65min 6), S

Coates 6, M Skrtel 6, G Johnson 7 - Lucas Leiva (sub: J Shelvey, 56 7), J Allen 8 - F Borini 7 (sub: A Carroll, 84), S Gerrard 6, R Sterling 7 - L Suarez 6. Substitutes not used: B Jones, J Carragher, J Henderson, S Downing. Booked: Suarez. Manchester City (3-4-1-2): J Hart 5 - K Toure 4, V Kompany 5, P Zabaleta 5 - J Milner 5 (sub: D Silva, 75), N de Jong 5, Y Toure 7, A Kolarov 6 - S Nasri 5 (sub: J Rodwell, 60 6) - M Balotelli 5 (sub: E Dzeko, 62 7), C Tevez 8. Substitutes not used: C Pantilimon, S Savic, J Lescott, A Razak.

the guardian

Martin Skrtel's gift gives Manchester City a draw against Liverpool

Brendan Rodgers will be tormented by the manner in which Liverpool surrendered their first Premier League win under his stewardship. His team had played with great vibrancy but they were undone by the kind of defensive mistake that will fill their manager with intense frustration, just as he might have been tempted to think everything was starting to click into place.

Martin Skrtel was the man waving an apologetic hand and wearing the expression of someone who could scarcely believe his own carelessness. Liverpool were winning 2-1 when the centre-half tried to play the ball back to his goalkeeper, Pepe Reina, and succeeded only in teeing up Carlos Tevez for an equaliser Manchester City had barely deserved. Skrtel had committed the defender's sin of passing the ball from a blind position and Tevez, loitering with intent, nipped in to score in front of the Kop and leave Liverpool with only a solitary point from the first two league games of the Rodgers era.

With Arsenal and Manchester United sandwiching a trip to Sunderland in their next three matches, it is not the start Rodgers would have wanted but this was far from a Liverpool performance to inspire any sense of unease, certainly not in the manner of their 3-0 defeat at West Bromwich. They were the better side for long periods and, though they must feel great exasperation, they can still take encouragement from they way they tackled the champions. If nothing else, it should soothe any lingering nerves from what happened at The Hawthorns. Liverpool not only played with great industry and togetherness but demonstrated a sense of belief that must have invigorated their crowd. The home side could easily have lost direction after Yaya Touré's equaliser had threatened to turn the game in City's favour after 63 minutes. Instead, the players in red rolled up their sleeves and set about the business of reasserting their authority.

Luis Suárez's wonderfully taken free-kick put them back into the lead within three minutes and, at that point, City looked vulnerable and short of ideas. Roberto Mancini argued that his team had more than matched their opponents, going on to say that not many other sides would create so many chances at Anfield. It was a generous appraisal. City started the game well and might even have snatched a winner during an entertaining second half but the champions looked flat and unusually subdued in other periods. Mancini was experimenting with the 3-4-1-2 formation he tried out in the Community Shield and the conclusion is they are a more potent outfit in their usual 4-2-3-1 system.

There was also the latest sign of possible discord behind the scenes when, losing 1-0, Mancini gave some instructions to James Milner and his player responded with a steam of invective. Too much can be read into these moments sometimes and it is too simplistic to say it represents a lack of team spirit. City have shown on plenty of occasions this is far from the truth. Equally, however, these little outbursts happen too often with this group of players.

Mancini's anger was more focused on his team's marking for the opening goal when Steven Gerrard's corner was delivered with speed and curl and Skrtel attacked the ball in the manner of someone whose only intention was to score. Aleksandar Kolarov, the nearest opponent, was nothing like as decisive and Skrtel's header powered its way beyond Joe Hart. The defender's afternoon would form a wild graph of different emotions. Liverpool had been threatening City's goal for the previous quarter of an hour and finished the first half on top by some distance. Joe Allen was prominently involved, linking up promisingly with Gerrard. Suárez was joined in attack by Fabio Borini on the right and Raheem Sterling on the left, offering plenty of movement and penetration against the new-look City defence, most surprisingly featuring Kolo Touré ahead of Joleon Lescott.

Sterling justified his selection with some lovely flashes of old-fashioned wing play, although the Premier League can be an unforgiving place for a 17-year-old and the teenager lost Tevez in the buildup to City's first equaliser. Tevez's cross flicked off Skrtel to take the ball away from Reina and, when it came back off Martin Kelly's thigh, Yaya Touré swivelled to score from six yards.

Yaya Touré had just been moved further forward in a tactical switch from Mancini that saw Jack Rodwell come on for the largely ineffective Samir Nasri. Rodwell, as a former Everton player, was baited by the Kop, but it will not have hurt as much as conceding the free-kick that allowed Suárez to score. Rodwell was penalised for a handball when the first connection to block Gerrard's shot was actually with his knee. What cannot be disputed is that Suárez bent the ball around the wall and Hart with great expertise.

Anfield, once again, felt like a happy place but Skrtel's mistake had significant consequences. Tevez missed the injured Sergio Agüero - the same understanding is not there with Mario Balotelli - but he had already turned one effort against the post and was ruthless when given the chance to equalise.

It was his 100th goal in English football and, to Liverpool's anguish, it came wrapped in red and white ribbons.

Man of the match: Joe Allen (Liverpool)

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The Mail

Mancini has a real fight on his hands to lift champions

One of Roberto Mancini's favourite current mantras is that champions need to improve if they are to stay ahead of the rest.

At the moment, though, the opposite is true of Manchester City. Two games into the defence of their Barclays Premier League title and the Italian's team look a shadow of their true selves.

City more than played their part in a lively game at Anfield on Sunday afternoon. One thing last season's championship has given them is belief. For the third league game running, City came from 2-1 down to earn something from the match. This, however, cannot go on. If City are to successfully defend their title then rollercoaster days like this one and the one they endured at home to Southampton will not get the job done. Mancini will take heart from another comeback. His team remain hard to beat. Nevertheless they were given two goals here by Liverpool's defence and created precious little of note apart from that. Some may argue that Mancini's tinkering with his formation isn't helping and there may be something in that. On Sunday he reverted to a three-man central defensive line that featured a reserve, Kolo Toure, and Pablo Zabaleta, who is a full back. With Liverpool operating with just one central forward, Luis Suarez, this was puzzling, especially given that Joleon Lescott was among the substitutes and is not injured. Frankly, City looked laboured for long periods. Dreadful in the first half, they did get better as the game wore on and perhaps even finished the game the stronger team. A point, though, was the very most they deserved.

One would imagine they will improve. Players such as David Silva and Mario Balotelli look as though they are still finding their sharpness after post-Euro 2012 lay-offs. The same can be said of England midfielder James Milner. Mancini, though, will hope that improvement arrives soon. Games against Stoke City and Arsenal are on the horizon, as is the Champions League, and City need to find a better stride.

On Sunday, they found themselves facing a Liverpool team still settling down under the guidance of a new manager, Brendan Rodgers. After last week's defeat at West Bromwich Albion, Liverpool's anxious supporters came hoping for an afternoon of reassurance — and, for a while, looked as though they might get it. One of the most impressive things about Rodgers' management is its confidence. He chose a 17-year-old, Raheem Sterling, on the left side and left three products of the Kenny Dalglish era — Stewart Downing, Andy Carroll and Jordan Henderson — on the bench.

In the centre of the field, meanwhile, young Joe Allen — bought by Rodgers from his old club Swansea — looked an assured and confident footballer. Allen looked comfortable in his surroundings, passed the ball rhythmically and, though his influence waned late on, was the most impressive player on the pitch.

With City so uncertain early on, there was opportunity for Liverpool to impose themselves. For a while they didn't really take it. Fabio Borini volleyed a chance wide from a Sterling cross, while at the other end Carlos Tevez ran on to a Samir Nasri pass to roll a shot against a post.

Midway through the half, however, Liverpool began to gather momentum. A Borini shot was charged down by Kolo Toure, while another from Suarez cannoned away off Vincent Kompany.

Then, 10 minutes before half-time, a goal. Steven Gerrard curled a corner in from the right and Martin Skrtel, leaving Aleksandar Kolarov in his wake, thundered in from the edge of the penalty area to send a punishing header high into the net.

It was a goal to bring a game to life and that is precisely what it did. The Kop were exultant at half-time and would have been even more excitable had Suarez found the corner of the goal as he moved on to an Allen lay-off 20 yards out.

As it was, Liverpool still had a precious lead and City had a game to chase.

Early in the second period the game followed a similar pattern. Liverpool looked confident, while City lacked fluency.

Had Borini provided a better pass for Suarez after intercepting a rank Yaya Toure pass in the 50th minute, then the home team might have sealed the game. As it was, Tevez skipped past Sterling to cross from the byline 15 minutes later and when Reina and Skrtel got in each other's way the ball bounced off Martin Kelly's knees to allow Yaya Toure to turn it in for the equaliser from six yards.

Back in the contest unexpectedly, City now had an opportunity to strangle the game. They did improve but Liverpool resisted and the excitement levels edged up a notch or two when they regained the lead.

Substitute Jack Rodwell was perhaps unfortunate to be penalised for handball when blocking a Gerrard shot. Replays showed the ball bounced up off his knee to strike his arm. Nevertheless, the subsequent positioning of the City defensive wall was lamentable and Suarez's expertly taken free-kick found its way round the side and into the bottom left corner of Joe Hart's net. This was turning into a dreadful afternoon for defenders. Each of the three goals could have been prevented.

Worse was to come, however, and this time the culprit was scorer Skrtel. Under pressure on the touchline, the Slovak committed the cardinal sin of passing back without looking. The lurking Tevez found himself presented with a gift and eased himself past Reina to roll his 100th goal in English football into an empty net. For Liverpool, it was like a balloon had burst. A win would have done much for them ahead of challenges to come. As for City, they are unbeaten after two. That is probably the most positive way to spin it.

MATCH FACTS

Liverpool: Reina; Kelly (Enrique 66), Coates, Skrtel, Johnson; Gerrard, Lucas

(Shelvey 5), Allen; Borini (Carroll 83), Suarez, Sterling.

Subs not used: Jones, Carragher, Henderson, Downing.

Goals: Skrtel 34, Suarez 66.

Booking: Suarez

Man City: Hart; Kolo Toure, Kompany, Zabaleta; Milner (Silva 76), De Jong, Yaya Toure, Kolarov; Nasri (Rodwell 59); Tevez, Balotelli (Dzeko 62).

Subs not used: Pantilimon, Savic, Lescott, Razak.

Goals: Yaya Toure 63, Tevez 80.

Referee: Andre Marriner. Attendance: 44,942.

The Daily Telegraph

For Liverpool, to lose the lead once could be considered a misfortune. To lose the lead twice seemed like carelessness yet their frustration at defensive lapses was assuaged by the gathering of undeniable plus points in terms of performance to go with the lone Premier League point. The Kop liked what it saw of Brendan Rodgers' vision on Sunday. The eyes of Liverpool fans did fill with disbelief and dismay at a couple of aberrations. Martin Kelly's leaden touch allowed Yaya Toure to level Martin Skrtel's thunderous header. After Luis Suárez restored Liverpool's advantage with a majestic free-kick, Skrtel's ill-judged pass gifted the excellent Carlos Tévez the chance to equalise with his 100th goal in English football.

It was Rodgers' insistence that his defenders did not launch the ball wildly forward when under pressure that eventually cost them, yet such was the price to pay for adhering religiously to a new doctrine, to the possession game, to rebuilding Liverpool. Row Z is for supporters, not clearances. Rodgers wants his players to be bold, to manoeuvre the ball out of tight corners, even with the obvious heightened risk. Nobody said it would be easy, learning a new way. Patience is required. Concentration too. Yet Rodgers' approach is to be lauded. The fans certainly applauded. As Rodgers began planting seeds of a more thoughtful, fruitful game in Anfield's lush terrain, it seemed strange to read the "we come not to play" motto of Liverpool's new kit sponsors splashed around the ground. The slogan, supposedly celebrating a focus solely on winning, was out of kilter with Rodgers' tenets. Liverpool do come to play.

Here were Liverpool passing and moving, the tone set by the composed Joe Allen. The fee of £15 million required to prise the midfielder from Swansea City raised many eyebrows but he answered many questions here.

He rarely wasted the ball, also demonstrating a hunger for closing opponents down, particularly when Lucas hobbled off, requiring Allen to anchor more in Rodgers' 4-2-1-3 system. Another plus was a lively display from Raheem Sterling, making his first Premier League start, signalling his promise with a series of runs at and beyond Kolo Touré, who resembled a statue at times.

Sterling was brought in from QPR's academy two years ago, and is already proving £500,000 well-spent. Investing in personnel was a theme on Roberto Mancini's mind. The Manchester City manager clearly feels the next five days will shape his season. They are hardly short of stars, and Scott Sinclair seems certain to arrive from Swansea on Tuesday, but there was a flatness about the champions on Sunday. Javi Martínez, seemingly in Bayern Munich's embrace, remains on City's radar, understandably so as the Athletic Bilbao player can operate as a ball-using centre-half in the 3-4-1-2 system Mancini occasionally favours, or dictate tempo in midfield. City also need a striker. Even taking into account the month-long loss of some of their cutting edge with Sergio Agüero's unfortunate incapacitation through injury, City should still have mustered a more menacing look in attack. Mario Balotelli rarely raised a canter, let alone a gallop. Samir Nasri disappeared down too many cul de sacs.

David Silva was kept in reserve too long. Edin Dzeko replaced Balotelli but failed to worry Liverpool. Only Tévez was a persistent threat. Only Tévez of Mancini's players really lived up to his vaunted reputation.

Mancini's tinkering with his tactics, here using a 3-4-1-2 system that accounted for Chelsea in the Community Shield, had been anticipated by Rodgers, who unleashed Sterling at the exposed Kolo Touré. The lyrics about a "teenage wasteland" from The Who's Baba O'Riley wafted around Anfield at the break, a slightly inappropriate song after the energetic exertions of the 17-year-old Sterling. It was an adventurous move by Rodgers, almost a statement of intent that he will give youth a chance. Given the value of Sterling, a penny for the thoughts of Stewart Downing and Jordan Henderson. Slim of frame but strong of will, Sterling acted like an adrenalin shot on Anfield.

The game took a while to come into vibrant life, eventually ignited by Sterling. Sebastian Coates suddenly drilled a long pass to the No 31, who tamed the ball effortlessly. Moments later, he was troubling Kolo Touré again, suddenly cutting back on to his right foot and lifting in a superb cross that Fabio Borini turned wide. City's usual thoroughbreds were off the pace. Only Tévez showed. The Argentine darted in from the right, shooting from a tight angle past Pepe Reina but hitting the post. Liverpool responded, Steven Gerrard whipping in a ball that Vincent Kompany almost diverted in past Joe Hart. The ball ended up in the Kop but was soon in City's net. When Gerrard drilled across the corner, Skrtel outmuscled and outjumped Aleksandar Kolarov and Pablo Zabaleta to power a header past Hart, almost ripping the net from the stanchions.

The new half failed to bring an immediate change in City's efforts.

Yaya Touré seemed penned too deep, a victim of Mancini's system that was supposed to liberate him. Mancini withdrew Nasri and sent on Jack Rodwell, the former Evertonian cruelly greeted with chants of "you should have stayed at a

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small club" by the Kop. Rodwell assumed the deep-lying duties, Yaya Touré pushed on and was soon rewarded. Tévez eluded Sterling on the right, brushing the youngster aside, and crossed into the box. Skrtel's slight touch took the ball away from Reina, sending it on to Kelly. Liverpool's full-back could have hooked it clear but chose to try and control it. His touch had to be adhesive. It was not and Yaya Touré pounced. Liverpool swiftly regained the lead via a 67th-minute free-kick, although Rodwell was unfortunate to have been deemed to have handled Gerrard's thunderous drive that engineered the set-piece. Hart ordered a wall, comprising Rodwell, Kolarov, Dzeko and James Milner. This human barricade appeared to be lined up properly, seeming to protect the space at the near post. Suárez, though, imparted enough bend to take the ball around Rodwell and draw it back in, bisecting the diving Hart and the post. Mancini finally switched to a back four. City, showing their character, pushed on in search of a point. It came gift-wrapped. Skrtel played the ball blind back to Reina, not noticing the lurking Tévez. Such a cool finisher as the Argentine was not going to waste such a present as this, rounding Reina and stroking the ball home.

THE INDEPENDENT

Liverpool show signs of promise but allow Tevez to rescue off-colour City

Brendan Rodgers will be only too aware that, two games into the season, his Liverpool team still lack the kind of result that announces to the world that the club are capable of making some impact this season. As for their performance yesterday, it was certainly the first tentative step along the road to putting in practice the deeply-held values Rodgers espoused when he first took over. The Liverpool manager met his players one-by-one as they came off the pitch, from 17-year-old Raheem Sterling wearing the Carlos Tevez shirt he had exchanged with the Argentine to Steven Gerrard who has witnessed more than one false dawn at Anfield. The mood projected by Rodgers was one of pride and contentment even if his team had twice thrown away a lead against the Premier League champions.

Liverpool should have won this game and there will surely be very few occasions when City are as unconvincing, especially in attack, as they were at Anfield. Fortunately for Roberto Mancini's team they were gifted two goals by dreadful defensive errors from first Martin Kelly and then by Martin Skrtel whose preposterous back-pass into the feet of Tevez for the second City equaliser was a dereliction of duty. Those two moments aside, however, this was a performance that gives some cause for optimism, although no-one at Liverpool is under any illusions about how long and hard the road will be. For the 14 minutes during which they led 2-1 after Luis Suarez's second-half goal this was shaping up to be a momentous result for the home team; as it was the final whistle was greeted with appreciation and a familiar sense of resignation.

In midfield, Joe Allen made sure the play ticked over nicely and Gerrard and Suarez demonstrated that once again they will be vital to Liverpool's season. Sterling, who won his place with that impressive performance against Heart of Midlothian last week in the Europa League qualifier, flitted in and out the game, as you would expect of one so young, but did more than enough to justify his inclusion. As for City, this was nothing like the formidable side that came from behind to beat Chelsea in the Community Shield and then Southampton on the previous weekend but nevertheless they still had enough about them to escape with a point. This is what, we are constantly told, champions are supposed to do; but champions are also obliged to play better than City did for much of the game. Mancini started with three in defence as he did against Chelsea two weeks earlier, and later was forced to switch back to an orthodox four. He changed in the second half to push Yaya Touré further forward and was immediately rewarded with a goal from the midfielder. He got a tirade of abuse back from James Milner, of all people, in one touchline exchange. All told, not City's best day.

Up in the directors' box was City's executive Brian Marwood, the man who, one gets the impression, the City manager would cheerfully throttle at the moment. The failure to land the big names available this summer, like Robin van Persie and Eden Hazard, might have stolen some of the momentum from City over the break but Mancini is hardly short of options.

He brought Kolo Touré into the side at the expense of Joleon Lescott who was also joined on the bench by, among others, Jack Rodwell, Edin Dzeko and David Silva, all three of whom came into the game later on. Having equalised through Tevez, who finished beautifully when gifted the ball by Skrtel, it was still City hanging on at the end and relying upon Vincent Kompany to head away Andy Carroll's goalbound attempt.

Without the suspended Daniel Agger, Rodgers opted for Sebastian Coates ahead of Jamie Carragher, a decision that will no doubt have deeply frustrated the latter. In midfield the Liverpool manager was forced to replace Lucas Leiva after five minutes when the player complained of a thigh problem. With Jonjo Shelvey on in his place, that immediately reduced Rodgers' capacity to make changes. His team responded well.

It is not hard to see why Carroll, who played only the last seven minutes yesterday, does not fit into the Rodgers master-plan. The forward three of Suarez, Sterling and Fabio Borini run hard to close down defenders and interchange quickly. In fact, Borini might have pinched a goal with a nicely-timed near-post run on 18 minutes to meet Sterling's cross from the left.

The best of City's forwards, Tevez, took the ball wide of Pepe Reina on 19 minutes

and shot from close to the goal-line outside the right post. It brushed the goalkeeper's glove which took it against the post but at fractionally the wrong angle to bounce in. Other than a shot from the ineffective Mario Balotelli, which landed in the second tier of the Anfield Road end, City looked laboured.

Liverpool, on the other hand, got their act together quickly. Kompany only just directed Gerrard's cross over from the bar on 33 minutes and from the resultant corner, Skrtel scattered Aleksandar Kolarov and Pablo Zabaleta on his way to heading the ball, hard, past Joe Hart. By the time the game reached the hour point, Liverpool were well in control. Samir Nasri, another below-par performer, was replaced with Rodwell and then just when they needed to stay tight, Liverpool conceded. Tevez got past Sterling on the right, Reina punched and then Kelly made a hash of controlling the ball, presenting it to Yaya Touré to score. Parity lasted just three minutes, until Rodwell conceded a dubious free-kick that struck his knee then his hand. Suarez curved the ball around the end of the wall on which the England man was standing and just inside Hart's left post before the goalkeeper could get down in time to save it.

From there the game should have been won but Skrtel's back-pass to Tevez needlessly put Liverpool under pressure and the striker did very well to sidestep Reina and score. It says something about Liverpool's performance that they could be disappointed only to take a point against such a good team but it is a point and something to be positive about and in these delicate early days, Rodgers will surely settle for that.

Match facts

Booked: Suarez Man of match: Allen Match rating: 7/10.

Possession: Liverpool 51%. Man City 49%

Attempts on target: Liverpool: 8 Manchester City: 5

Referee: A Marriner (W Midlands). Attendance: 44,942



Bobby Manc's out of shape at Anfield, but errors cost Reds

If Roberto Mancini picked this side to make a point, then it was the only decision that truly came off for him at Anfield yesterday.

There was a suspicion the Manchester City manager went with a back five to highlight his need for reinforcements in that area. How else to explain a bizarre tactical decision that should have cost the champions this game?

It certainly worked if that was the case, because Liverpool looked so superior for so much of the contest you almost expected one of those charity-style oversized cheques to be passed directly onto the pitch from the directors' box at the end. The Italian was outmaneuvered by his Liverpool counter-part Brendan Rodgers, and his side were completely overrun in midfield by opponents who were denied the most comfortable of victories only by two crass errors of their own.

Defending with so many men so deep against a side with one striker – and whose mission statement is to keep the ball in midfield – looked perverse.

Liverpool will still be wondering this morning how they didn't get their Anfield Premier League campaign under Rodgers off to the most spectacular of starts.

Where Mancini was cautious to the point of timidity, Rodgers was courageous – following his instinct to throw in 17-year-old Raheem Sterling for his full home debut instead of employing the safe option of Stewart Downing – and asking his side to have belief in their ability to out-pass the title-holders.

It worked for 70 minutes, with Joe Allen's virtuoso performance in the middle orchestrating a compelling Liverpool display that offered rich promise going forward. They created enough chances to have taken the game comfortably.

As it was though, the impressive Fabio Borini put one effort wide after a fine early move, and twice Luis Suarez failed to finish, before City skipper Vincent Kompany so nearly turned a Steven Gerrard cross into his own net.

It meant City – who created just one meaningful moment in the first half when Tevez hit the far post – remained in the game even when Liverpool finally found the net on 33 minutes. It was a fine goal as Martin Skrtel thundered onto a Gerrard corner to send the ball crashing into the roof of the net.

With Liverpool seemingly in total control, City were reduced to firing long hopeful balls to a talented attack made impotent by being completely cut off from their supply lines. In a rare moment of individual skill though, Tevez wriggled free on the left and Pepe Reina flapped woefully at the cross, sowing confusion which saw the ball bounce off defender Martin Kelly to sit up beautifully for Yaya Toure to tap in. Liverpool reasserted their dominance and promptly scored again, on 66 minutes, when Suarez unleashed a vicious swerving free-kick that exposed Joe Hart's errant wall positioning to nestle in the bottom corner.

Only then did Mancini recognise his tactics were wrong, and they reverted to a flat back four and pressed higher up the pitch, forcing Liverpool to pass under a pressure previously missing. With David Silva introduced – 25 minutes too late – finally City found the threat champions are supposed to pose.

Even so, it took another awful mistake to give them a passage back into the game. Skrtel passed blind back to the keeper, for Tevez to dart in, put Reina on his backside and roll the ball into the net.

City could have won it at the end when substitute Edin Dzeko twice came close, but that would have added to the injustice Liverpool felt, not least when they were denied a clear penalty when leading 2-1 after Kolarov caught Glen Johnson in the box.

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26 August 2012



The dawning of a new error

IT WAS so gloriously different yet ultimately so painfully familiar for Liverpool FC. 'We didn't get what we deserved' was a regular lament after games at Anfield last season and the first home instalment of the 2012/13 campaign evoked similar sentiments. But amidst the acute frustration of seeing Brendan Rodgers' side toss away two points against Manchester City, there was also a tangible sense of hope and excitement about what the future may hold.

This was a new Liverpool. A better and bolder Liverpool, who took the game to the champions and dominated an enthralling contest for long periods.

Twice they led courtesy of goals from Martin Skrtel and Luis Suarez but twice they shot themselves in the foot as defensive blunders allowed Yaya Toure and Carlos Tevez to steal City a point. On each occasion the Reds dusted themselves off and went again. Rather than sitting back and ever settling for what they had, they went for the jugular. This was the attacking brand of football Rodgers had promised when he arrived at Anfield and the supporters lapped it up.

Standards were set both on and off the pitch. The atmosphere was electric as those in red were inspired to greater heights by the wall of noise emanating from the stands. The constant tales of woe on home turf took their toll last season as often the ground was eerily quiet. Yesterday it was transformed.

"I want to use the incredible support to make coming to Anfield the longest 90 minutes of an opponent's life," said Rodgers at his unveiling. This was what he was talking about. If last weekend's nightmare opening day defeat at West Brom laid bare the size of the challenge facing the Northern Irishman, this performance suggested he's already getting to grips with it. Liverpool can't hope to compete with Manchester City over the course of this season. Roberto Mancini has a star-studded squad shaped with a bottomless pit of cash during the past four years under the ownership of Sheikh Mansour. In contrast Rodgers has had a mere eight weeks on the training ground and just a £20million transfer kitty to try to transform a group desperately lacking in depth. But by being tactically astute and establishing a system of play where everyone works tirelessly for the cause, the plan is that the whole will be greater than the sum of its parts.

For all City's riches, Liverpool had the game's outstanding performer in Joe Allen. Eyebrows were raised when Rodgers shelled out £15million to sign the young Welshmen from Swansea City this summer but he looks to be worth every penny. Allen pulled the strings in midfield as his vision and deadly accuracy picked holes in the City rearguard. His composure and reading of the game is remarkable. With the average age of the Liverpool team under 25, it was the youngest starting XI the club had fielded in the top flight since 2003.

Rodgers is happy to place his trust in youth and his decision to hand a full league debut to Raheem Sterling paid off handsomely.

Despite the 17-year-old winger's impact at Hearts three days earlier, starting him in such a high profile fixture was a gamble considering he had just 26 minutes of Premier League football under his belt.

The safe option would have been to stick with Stewart Downing on the left but the England international was relegated to bench duty and on this evidence he may have to get used to watching. Sterling showed maturity beyond his years.

There was no hint of nerves on the biggest day of his blossoming career as he using his breathtaking pace to good effect. There was a buzz of anticipation around the ground every time he got on the ball and he caused Kolo Toure a stack of problems. The other change to the side which was beaten at West Brom saw Sebastian Coates preferred to Jamie Carragher to replace Daniel Agger, who served a one-match ban. Coates started just four times in the league during his first year at Anfield and his distribution remains weak but defensively he was sound and grew in confidence as the afternoon wore on.

The absence of Charlie Adam and Jay Spearing from the matchday squad was telling with both expected to move on before the transfer window shuts on Friday night. With chairman Tom Werner and new loan signing Nuri Sahin watching on from the directors' box, Liverpool had to recover from the setback of seeing Lucas Leiva limp off inside four minutes with a thigh strain.

It was tough on the Brazilian who has worked so hard to recover from a cruciate injury and was making his first league appearance at Anfield since the corresponding fixture last November. But his replacement Jonjo Shelvey didn't let anyone down and as the first half wore on Liverpool strengthened their grip on the game. Fabio Borini should have broken the deadlock but stabbed his volley wide from Sterling's inviting cross. Tevez hit a post but City were on the back foot and the goal Liverpool deserved arrived 11 minutes before the break.

Skrtel timed his run to meet Steven Gerrard's corner to perfection as he unleashed an unstoppable bullet header past Joe Hart. In the second half Suarez went close to doubling the Reds' lead and they were cruising until they gifted City a 63rd minute equaliser. It was naïve to leave Sterling defending one on one against Tevez, who nipped past him and delivered into the box. A touch from Skrtel took it away from Pepe Reina and Martin Kelly inadvertently guided it into the path of Yaya Toure who gleefully converted.

The response was swift as within three minutes the lead was restored. Substitute Jack Rodwell handled Gerrard's piledriver and Suarez stepped up to curl a stunning 25-yard free-kick into the bottom corner. Anfield erupted but sadly there

was one more twist to come. After the ecstasy of his first goal since last season's Carling Cup final, there was agony for Skrtel as his shocking backpass allowed Tevez to restore parity. Rodgers went for broke as he introduced Andy Carroll and the reception the big frontman received made it clear that fans want him to stay at Anfield beyond this transfer window. The Reds threw everything at City in search of a winner late on but Shelvey's strike flew just over and Carroll saw his header cleared off the line. The champions escaped with a share of the spoils but if Liverpool can replicate this kind of intensity and cut out those self-inflicted wounds then other visitors won't be as fortunate.

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90:00+4:14 Full time The referee blows his whistle to end the game.
 90:00+3:47 Shot by Joe Allen from a long way out goes over the net.
 90:00+3:27 Booking Luis Suarez is booked.
 90:00+2:54 Carlos Tevez produces a right-footed shot from just outside the penalty box that misses to the left of the goal.
 90:00+2:23 Corner from the left by-line taken by David Silva, clearance by Sebastian Coates.
 90:00+1:25 Glen Johnson has a drilled shot. Save by Joe Hart.
 90:00+0:31 Pablo Zabaleta delivers the ball, clearance by Glen Johnson.
 88:45 The ball is sent over by Steven Gerrard, Joe Hart makes a save.
 87:29 Andy Carroll takes a shot. Vincent Kompany manages to make a clearance.
 87:14 Outswinging corner taken by Steven Gerrard, clearance by Pablo Zabaleta.
 87:00 Shot by Jonjo Shelvey. Kolo Toure makes a clearance.
 86:29 Corner taken right-footed by Steven Gerrard.
 86:21 A cross is delivered by Raheem Sterling, clearance by Pablo Zabaleta.
 86:07 Raheem Sterling sends in a cross, clearance by Kolo Toure.
 85:41 The ball is crossed by Aleksandar Kolarov, Effort on goal by Edin Dzeko from inside the penalty area goes harmlessly over the bar.
 84:27 Centre by Steven Gerrard.
 84:21 The ball is swung over by Glen Johnson, clearance made by Vincent Kompany.
 82:49 Substitution Liverpool makes a substitution, with Andy Carroll coming on for Fabio Borini.
 82:40 Edin Dzeko produces a left-footed shot from just outside the box that goes wide right of the goal.
 81:56 Shot by Jonjo Shelvey from just outside the area goes over the net.
 81:10 Foul by Vincent Kompany on Luis Suarez, free kick awarded. Direct free kick taken by Sebastian Coates.
 79:19 Goal scored Goal - Carlos Tevez - Liverpool 2 - 2 Man City Carlos Tevez finds the back of the net with a goal from the edge of the penalty area low into the middle of the goal. Liverpool 2-2 Man City.
 78:13 The ball is swung over by Yaya Toure, clearance made by Martin Skrtel.
 77:01 Effort on goal by Edin Dzeko from just inside the area clears the crossbar.
 76:25 Steven Gerrard produces a cross, Kolo Toure manages to make a clearance.
 75:19 Direct free kick taken by Sanchez Jose Enrique.
 75:19 Substitution Substitution David Silva joins the action as a substitute, replacing James Milner.
 75:19 Free kick awarded for a foul by James Milner on Sanchez Jose Enrique.
 69:13 Unfair challenge on Pablo Zabaleta by Luis Suarez results in a free kick. Indirect free kick taken by Pablo Zabaleta.
 68:53 The ball is swung over by Fabio Borini, clearance made by Jack Rodwell.
 65:54 The assist for the goal came from Steven Gerrard.
 65:54 Goal scored Goal - Luis Suarez - Liverpool 2 - 1 Man City Luis Suarez grabs a goal direct from the free kick from just outside the area to the bottom right corner of the goal. Liverpool 2-1 Man City.
 64:40 Substitution Substitution Sanchez Jose Enrique joins the action as a substitute, replacing Martin Kelly.
 64:40 Steven Gerrard takes a shot. Jack Rodwell handles the ball and concedes a free kick.
 62:54 Carlos Tevez provided the assist for the goal.
 62:54 Goal scored Goal - Yaya Toure - Liverpool 1 - 1 Man City Yaya Toure finds the back of the net with a goal from inside the penalty box to the bottom left corner of the goal. Liverpool 1-1 Man City.
 62:50 The ball is crossed by Carlos Tevez,
 61:18 Substitution Man City makes a substitution, with Edin Dzeko coming on for Mario Balotelli.
 60:59 The ball is sent over by Martin Kelly, clearance by Nigel De Jong.
 60:15 The referee blows for offside against James Milner. Jose Reina restarts play with the free kick.
 59:48 Centre by Carlos Tevez, clearance made by Martin Skrtel.
 58:59 Substitution Substitution Jack Rodwell replaces Samir Nasri.
 58:36 Raheem Sterling delivers the ball, clearance by Pablo Zabaleta.
 57:48 The ball is sent over by Luis Suarez, clearance by Kolo Toure.
 56:20 Fabio Borini delivers the ball, clearance by Pablo Zabaleta.
 54:44 Corner taken right-footed by Samir Nasri from the left by-line to the near post, Martin Skrtel makes a clearance.
 51:05 Foul by Vincent Kompany on Luis Suarez, free kick awarded. Free kick taken by Luis Suarez.
 50:10 Unfair challenge on Steven Gerrard by Mario Balotelli results in a free kick. Direct free kick taken by Steven Gerrard.
 49:14 Shot by Luis Suarez from deep inside the penalty area misses wide to the

left of the target.
 47:27 Free kick awarded for an unfair challenge on Kolo Toure by Raheem Sterling. Kolo Toure restarts play with the free kick.
 45:45 James Milner fouled by Raheem Sterling, the ref awards a free kick. Aleksandar Kolarov delivers the ball from the free kick left-footed from right wing.
 45:15 Martin Skrtel concedes a free kick for a foul on Mario Balotelli. Samir Nasri takes the direct free kick.
 45:01 The second half begins.
 45:00+2:11 Half time The referee calls an end to the first half.
 45:00+0:53 Unfair challenge on Mario Balotelli by Raheem Sterling results in a free kick. Shot on goal comes in from Aleksandar Kolarov from the free kick.
 45:00+0:20 The ball is delivered by Raheem Sterling, Kolo Toure manages to make a clearance.
 43:51 Corner taken left-footed by Aleksandar Kolarov, Fabio Borini makes a clearance.
 42:54 Inswinging corner taken left-footed by Aleksandar Kolarov from the right by-line to the near post, Martin Skrtel manages to make a clearance.
 41:34 Luis Suarez has a shot on goal from outside the area which misses right.
 40:58 Vincent Kompany concedes a free kick for a foul on Luis Suarez. Direct free kick taken by Steven Gerrard.
 33:37 The assist for the goal came from Steven Gerrard.
 33:37 Goal scored Goal - Martin Skrtel - Liverpool 1 - 0 Man City Martin Skrtel finds the net with a headed goal from close in. Liverpool 1-0 Man City.
 33:01 Corner taken right-footed by Steven Gerrard,
 32:52 The ball is crossed by Steven Gerrard, clearance by Vincent Kompany.
 32:38 The ball is sent over by Glen Johnson, Pablo Zabaleta manages to make a clearance.
 32:30 Luis Suarez produces a cross, clearance by Kolo Toure.
 30:59 Mario Balotelli produces a left-footed shot from inside the area that goes over the bar.
 29:51 Jonjo Shelvey concedes a free kick for a foul on Yaya Toure. Vincent Kompany takes the free kick.
 29:25 Shot by Luis Suarez from 25 yards. Vincent Kompany gets a block in.
 28:01 Corner taken by Steven Gerrard from the left by-line to the near post, James Milner manages to make a clearance.
 27:50 Fabio Borini takes a shot. Blocked by Kolo Toure.
 27:01 Free kick awarded for a foul by Glen Johnson on James Milner. Joe Hart restarts play with the free kick.
 24:44 Foul by Martin Kelly on Mario Balotelli, free kick awarded. Samir Nasri crosses the ball in from the free kick.
 22:41 The ball is sent over by Aleksandar Kolarov, blocked by Martin Kelly.
 20:40 Unfair challenge on Raheem Sterling by Kolo Toure results in a free kick. Free kick taken by Jonjo Shelvey.
 20:30 Kolo Toure takes the chance to get an effort at goal. Blocked by Martin Skrtel.
 18:37 Carlos Tevez takes a shot from close in that bounces off the post.
 17:09 Centre by Raheem Sterling, Fabio Borini has an effort at goal from close in which goes wide left of the goal.
 16:05 Carlos Tevez challenges Joe Allen unfairly and gives away a free kick. Free kick taken by Jose Reina.
 13:55 Carlos Tevez crosses the ball.
 12:01 James Milner crosses the ball, save by Jose Reina.
 10:07 Aleksandar Kolarov fouled by Fabio Borini, the ref awards a free kick. Free kick taken by Yaya Toure.
 9:03 The ball is swung over by Samir Nasri, Martin Skrtel manages to make a clearance.
 7:55 Free kick awarded for an unfair challenge on Mario Balotelli by Martin Skrtel. Strike comes in from Aleksandar Kolarov from the free kick, save made by Jose Reina.
 4:02 Substitution Substitution Jonjo Shelvey replaces Leiva Lucas.
 3:06 Steven Gerrard has an effort at goal from outside the area which misses left.
 1:20 Centre by James Milner, clearance by Sebastian Coates.
 0:29 Steven Gerrard produces a right-footed shot from just outside the penalty box that misses to the left of the goal.
 0:00 The game begins.

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Brendan Rodgers made one City fan cry last season. But it was the Liverpool manager who had his head in his hands after Martin Skrtel's horrific mistake gifted City a point at Anfield.

Defeat to Rodgers' Swansea was the low point in City's title bid last season. And City got a measure of revenge yesterday, Carlos Tevez denying the Northern Irishman his first league win after replacing Kenny Dalglish as Liverpool manager during the summer.

If things had worked out differently, Rodgers might have been on the visitors' bench yesterday.

After losing his job at Reading, he was approached to become Mancini's assistant.

"I went up at the end of the season, took a couple of days looking around the project and everything and I flew to Milan to meet Roberto out there," he revealed. "Then all of a sudden I got the opportunity to go to Swansea."

Ahead of the game Mancini insisted Liverpool under Rodgers are genuine title challengers.

"I think Liverpool will fight for the title this year," he said.

"They have bought good players, they have a good manager, they change their style of play and I'm sure they will fight for the title."

They're kind words. The type respectful managers trade in the build-up to big games. But whether he believed it not is another matter entirely. After all, Liverpool finished eighth in the Premier League last season, below neighbours Everton and 37 points behind City.

How far Liverpool have fallen since dominating English football in the 70s and 80s is best measured by Rodgers' own expectations.

In his programme notes he said his ambition was to return to the Champions League, although he conceded it would not be a 'quick fix'.

City have their sights set much higher. A long run in the Champions League is a priority but embarking on a Liverpool-style period of success is another.

When Liverpool won the league in 1964 it was their first for 17 years. They won 12 more titles in the next 26 years and lifted the European Cup four times. City have their eye on a similar haul.

Mancini trusted a much-changed side to carry on the defence of their Premier League trophy which started with a 3-2 win over Southampton on the opening weekend of the season. He ditched the back four he used against Southampton, opting for the back three he experimented with in pre-season and against Chelsea in the Community Shield.

Aleksander Kolarov, Kolo Toure, Nigel de Jong, James Milner and Mario Balotelli came in for Gael Clichy – missing to attend the birth of his child – Joleon Lescott, Jack Rodwell, David Silva and the injured Sergio Aguero.

Liverpool, already without the suspended Daniel Agger - a City target - were dealt an early blow when Lucas hobbled off after five minutes to be replaced by Jonjo Shelvey. Rodgers handed 17-year-old Raheem Sterling his first league start after an impressive full debut against Hearts in the Europa League in midweek.

And he created the first chance, fizzing in cross from the left which was stabbed wide by Fabio Borini under pressure from Kolarov.

Moments later, Kolarov was on the end of a verbal volley from Mancini. Tevez rounded Pepe Reina and saw his cross hit the post with Kolarov watching.

It wasn't hard to see that Mancini thought the Serbian should have been on the end of it. Kolarov pretended he didn't hear.

He did, even over the roar of the Kop. But there was no hiding from the tongue-lashing he walked into at half-time. Vincent Kompany did well to divert Steven Gerrard's dangerous cross over the bar. But from the corner, Skrtel blew past Kolarov to thump his header past Hart.

After half-time the City fans behind Joe Hart's goal urged their team forward but it was Liverpool again who had the first chance.

Borini intercepted De Jong's pass and it was only Yaya Toure who stopped Luis Suarez putting the hosts 2-0 up after chasing the Uruguayan striker 40 yards towards his own goal.

Mancini had seen enough. Off came Samir Narsi and Mario Balotelli and on went Jack Rodwell – to shouts of 'you should've stayed at a small club' from the Liverpool fans – and Edin Dzeko with Yaya given instructions to push further forward. It's Mancini's ace up his sleeve, a tactical tweak that he used to great effect at the end of last season. It took less than a minute to work this time.

Tevez brushed aside Sterling on the right, Martin Kelly got himself in a tangle and Yaya swept the loose ball into the net.

The Kop wasn't quiet for long. Suarez cites Tevez's success in England as one of the reasons he moved here from Ajax.

But Mancini will have wished he'd stayed away after watching Liverpool's No7 curl his 66th-minute free-kick around the wall and into the net.

But if games against QPR and Southampton have taught us anything, it's that City have developed a knack of not knowing when they're beaten.

They proved it again at Anfield, Tevez picking up Skrtel's back pass, rounding Pepe Reina and leaving Rodgers misty-eyed.

The only surprise was that City didn't go on to score a third and win 3-2 for a fourth time in a row.