

Date: 15 December 2012

Opposition: Aston Villa

Competition: League

Post	Mail	Sunday Times	Sun Telegraph	Independent
BBC	Mirror	Observer	Times	Telegraph
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## THE TIMES

Villa's blossoming scholars deliver finishing lesson

Liverpool 1 Gerrard 87

Aston Villa 3 Benteke 29, 51, Weimann 48

Referee N Swarbrick Attendance 44,607

We may have seen the future at Anfield on Saturday. The problem for Liverpool was that it was the potential of Aston Villa being showcased so splendidly rather than that of a club still dreaming of past glories.

If Financial Fair Play does bring a more level playing field into English football, then any manager who can thrive having fielded six academy graduates, as well as three other players aged 23 or under, is going to be at a big advantage.

That is the situation that Paul Lambert has embraced after successfully integrating so many of Villa's home-grown starlets alongside a couple of astute signings.

Another awesome performance from Christian Benteke understandably earned him top billing, as the [pounds sterling]8 million acquisition from Genk scored two more goals and made another for Andreas Weimann, but Villa's young defence also performed impressively.

Only the relative experience of Brad Guzan and Brett Holman, each 28, kept Villa's average age as high as 23.45 on Saturday, the youngest starting XI the club have sent out in the Premier League era. It is three years since Chris Herd, Nathan Baker and Eric Lichaj cut their teeth together on loan at Lincoln City and now there is a cohesiveness about Villa's young team born of their growing up winning together.

There will be inconsistency with any young team, as the club's hierarchy acknowledged as they congratulated players emerging from the away dressing room at Anfield on Saturday, but after reaching the Capital One Cup semi-final in midweek, this felt like Villa's best week since Martin O'Neill was in charge.

"I think we have a great team spirit," Weimann, who also scored twice in the 4-1 win at Norwich City, said. "That is one of the things that stands out at the moment. The way everyone works so hard for each other is unbelievable. You saw against Liverpool, with the second goal in particular, that we also try to play football when we can as well. We've seen the progress under the manager.

"There is a good, tight bond in this team because we have lots of young players mixed in with the experienced players. We're all very comfortable with one another and many of us have come up through the academy together.

"So the way we want to do things as a club and the way the gaffer wants to build his team is very clear. It's exciting and we know we will get stronger and grow further as a team."

Villa are only three points above the relegation zone but, defeated only by the two Manchester clubs in the past 11 games, they are clearly moving in the right direction. They rode their luck in the early stages on Saturday when, as Brendan Rodgers said, it could have been a totally different game had Liverpool scored from a succession of chances as Villa defended deeply.

But Liverpool are another team in transition and, while they are intent on playing a creditably aesthetic game with an infusion of youth, there is a defensive naivety to be addressed. There was simply no pressing as Benteke let fly with his fine 25-yarder into the bottom corner. It was not just fear of the 6ft 4in Benteke that had Liverpool backing off. For Villa's quite brilliant second goal, Holman and Barry Bannan got away from Lucas Leiva and Steven Gerrard with implausible ease and when Weimann released Benteke down the inside-right channel, no-one went with the 21-year-old Austria forward as he sped away to receive his strike partner's pert backheeled return to finish with glee.

By the time Benteke barnstormed his way through a melting defence to clip in his eighth goal for Villa, Liverpool had accepted it was "one of those games" according to Glen Johnson. Gerrard diverted home the right back's left-footed shot with three minutes remaining but Johnson conceded afterwards that Liverpool had failed to muster sufficient momentum when Villa sat deep in the opening 20 minutes. "We were lacking a bit of tempo," he said. "Sometimes it's difficult to play too quickly when you are in so much room."

With Raheem Sterling, Jordan Henderson and Jonjo Shelvey, Liverpool also boast young talent of their own but if Martin Kelly, another of their England Under-21 players, is rejecting an offer of [pounds sterling]35,000 a week, it just goes to show the difficulty of buying in the best young players, as the local lads will want parity.

Lambert tried to share the praise with his back line but accepts that Benteke will be attracting new admirers. "He can be anything he wants," the Villa manager said of the Belgium striker. "You can never stop people looking but if you want to buy these players, you'll have to have a few quid. There is absolutely no chance we would be looking to sell."

### RATINGS

Liverpool (4-1-4-1): J M Reina 5 -- G Johnson 4, M Skrtel 5, D Agger 6, S Downing 6 -- Lucas Leiva 5 (sub: J Henderson, 60min 6) -- R Sterling 4, S Gerrard 6, J Allen 4, J Shelvey 4 (sub: J Cole, 46 4) -- L Suarez 6. Substitutes not used: B Jones, J Carragher, S Coates, Suso, A Wisdom. Booked: Suarez. Aston Villa (3-4-1-2): B Guzan 7 -- C Herd 7, C Clark 7, N Baker 7 -- M Lowton 6, A Westwood 7, B Bannan 8 (sub: K El Ahmadi, 86), E Lichaj 7 -- B Holman 8 (sub: F Delph, 70 7) -- A Weimann 8 (sub: C N'Zogbia, 90), C Benteke 9. Substitutes not used: S Given, M Albrighton, J Bowery, J Bennett. Booked: Benteke, Lowton.

## the guardian

Lambert lets his poker face slip after Anfield applauds Benteke

The temptation to gloat was surely immense but Paul Lambert, a man with a poker face set to permanent, would not bite - even following a Darren Bent-less, Christian Benteke-inspired defeat of Liverpool with the youngest Aston Villa team of the Premier League era. "I have my own thoughts," was all he said when invited to respond to those who questioned his faith in the young of Villa Park. Whatever they are, the dividends are starting to show.

With Brendan Rodgers lamenting a sobering afternoon for Liverpool - their recent improvement brought into perspective with an abrupt halt - and Lambert presenting a straight bat throughout the press conference, the significance of Villa's victory was not reflected in the reaction of the managers. But the signs were there. The average age of a Villa team that absorbed constant Liverpool pressure for the opening 25 minutes, struck superbly on the break and then defended stoically once more was 23 years and four months. Remove the goalkeeper Brad Guzan from the equation - Liverpool would still have struggled to hit the target - and the outfield average falls to 23.

There was clear unity between an impressive three-man defence of Chris Herd, Ciaran Clark and Nathan Baker, who came through the Villa academy together. Lambert's tactics, and admittedly Liverpool's final ball, stifled the home side's attacking threat while his signings Matt Lowton, Ashley Westwood and Benteke in particular showed his eye for rich yet modestly-priced potential. The Belgium international took his Villa tally to eight this season with two emphatic finishes while his part in Andreas Weimann's sublime team goal - one that drew applause from some Liverpool supporters - left his colleagues and the travelling fans in rapture.

Even Lambert was effusive on the subject of his pounds 7m signing from Genk. "He is brilliant. He can be anything he wants," the Villa manager said. "He might not hit his peak until he is about 28, you never know. But he has been incredible for us. Everyone loves playing alongside him, he is really popular in the dressing room and his two goals were outstanding. He is playing in an unbelievable Belgian side, which is bringing him along as well. He is still learning and he has got to keep learning.

"Before we signed him I spoke to a few people that he has played under and they gave a glowing report about him. Not just as footballer but as a guy, which is important."

Benteke's first came from outside the Liverpool area with a low shot that deceived Jose Reina and bounced in via the near post. Villa's second arrived after a move began with Barry Bannan and was finished by Weimann after Benteke's exquisite back-heel in the penalty area took out two Liverpool defenders. Their third typified Liverpool's failure to handle Benteke's physical menace all game as he muscled into the area, ignored Martin Skrtel and Joe Allen, and finished from close range. Luis Suarez and Joe Cole had lost possession prior to both Benteke goals, adding to Rodgers's frustration at the "self-inflicted" end to Liverpool's encouraging recent run.

The Liverpool manager said: "I find it hard to know where that performance came from to be honest. In some ways it was the most disappointing game we've had since I came here. We couldn't have arrived in the game on a better moment, but we must learn from this that no matter which team you play against, you have to be right on it. We must learn."

Steven Gerrard's late consolation denied Villa their biggest league win at Anfield since 1914, but nothing else. Appeals for a penalty when Clark man-handled Daniel Agger were refused by the referee Neil Swarbrick and Liverpool discovered the cost of Suarez having an off day and Lucas Leiva showing the effects of his recent absence through injury. "We are trying to build something here," said Lambert, who faces a similar task to Rodgers but with less expectation. "The signs are looking really, really good."

Man of the match Christian Benteke (Aston Villa)

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## The Mail

Reds rocked as brilliant Villa halt Rodgers revival

Liverpool's mini-revival was flattened by Belgian Christian Benteke, to leave some fans heading for the exit before full-time.

Three wins in a row had given the Kop hope that the Brendan Rodgers project was finally gaining momentum after a stop-start opening to his spell as Liverpool manager. But Paul Lambert's young Villa side quashed that particular wish, with 6ft3ins Benteke starring, scoring twice and producing a brilliant assist for Andreas Weimann. Steven Gerrard's late consolation prevented Liverpool from suffering their first three-goal defeat at Anfield since 2005 - but did little else to ease the gloom. It was an unexpected result for Villa who, before Saturday, had won only a single away game since January, and at last Paul Lambert can see breathing space between his team and the bottom three.

His inexperienced side rose to the Anfield challenge and Benteke in particular was brilliant, explaining why England forward Darren Bent - out injured - has hardly been given a kick by Lambert this season. The £7million summer signing from Genk was given some help by Liverpool's strangely lethargic defence, though.

His opening strike was made possible by Glen Johnson and Martin Skrtel backing away and allowing him to shoot.

His second, and Villa's third, was thanks to a sloppy moment by substitute Joe Cole. Benteke simply put his head down and charged into the Liverpool penalty area to score, with defenders falling off him.

Even Weimann's goal, created by a beautiful backheel by Benteke, will concern Rodgers.

Weimann broke into the box from deep while Agger, supposedly a top-class international defender, failed to track the run.

Lambert was understandably proud of his team. This time last year Ashley Westwood was playing at Crewe and Matt Lowton at Sheffield United but neither looked out of place at Anfield.

'If you don't give people the opportunity, how do you know if they can do it?' said Lambert.

'The performance was fabulous and I thought the goals were brilliant.

'Benteke has been unbelievable this season. Weimann is a natural finisher, he knows where the goal is. I am sure Liverpool will give anyone a game with the players they have, but we've got a fantastic spirit.'

Rodgers did not try to hide his disappointment following a result that will increase his desire to sign players in January, most notably Chelsea striker Daniel Sturridge and Blackpool's England Under-21 midfielder Tom Ince.

'I didn't see this result coming,' he said. 'Our confidence coming into the game was high but we didn't play with our usual intensity - I thought we were flat. We needed that first goal but we didn't make the final pass with any quality. And then we contrived to give away bad goals. It was sloppy.'

Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers defended his star striker, Luis Suarez, after the Uruguayan 'celebrated' his return from suspension by getting booked for dissent. Suarez missed last weekend's game at West Ham after collecting five yellow cards for an assortment of diving, dissent and gamesmanship.

But Rodgers said: 'I will never try to take the passion out of his game. Some of the bookings he has received have been needless from the referees' point of view.' A top-four finish looks fanciful, with Liverpool stuck in mid-table, but Rodgers said: 'For us it is going to be steady progress.

'There will be steps forward and today was a step backward.'

Not for the first time this season he thought Liverpool were denied a penalty when Ciaran Clark grabbed Agger's shirt.

By that stage, though, Villa were already 2-0 ahead.

Liverpool threatened through Stewart Downing and Jonjo Shelvey but the breakthrough came from Villa after 29 minutes and was simplicity itself.

A short pass from Brett Holman found Benteke on the edge of the area.

For some reason, nobody closed him down and the striker took aim and fired into the bottom corner. It was his 13th goal in 25 games for Genk, Belgium and Villa this season - and he was to later add No14.

Five minutes before the interval, Weimann played in Benteke, then ran on to the return without any challenge for a first-time finish past Reina.

Cole came on at the interval, but this is no longer the player who scored for Chelsea when they beat Liverpool 4-1 at Anfield in 2005.

He gave possession to Benteke, who shrugged off challenges to score.

Liverpool kept going until the final whistle. By then, however, the damage had been done.

**Liverpool:** Reina, Johnson, Agger, Skrtel, Gerrard, Downing, Lucas (Henderson 60), Allen, Sterling, Shelvey (Cole 46), Suarez,

**Subs not used:** Jones, Coates, Carragher, Wisdom, Suso

**Booked:** Suarez

**Goal:** Gerrard 87

**Aston Villa:** Guzan, Clark, Lichaj, Baker, Lowton, Westwood, Bannan (El Ahmadi 85), Herd, Holman (Delph 69), Benteke, Weimann (N'Zogbia 90)

Subs not used: Given, Bennett, Albrighton, Bowery

**Booked:** Lowton, Benteke

**Goals:** Benteke 29, 51, Weimann 40

**Referee:** Neil Swarbrick

**Attendance:** 44,607

## The Daily Telegraph

Rodgers must escape the trap of Anfield history

Liverpool 1

Gerrard 87

Aston Villa 3

Benteke 29, 51, Weimann 40 Att: 44,607

Brendan Rodgers may have learnt the most crucial lesson of his first season as Liverpool manager on Saturday. No matter how strong the temptation, never allow yourself to be infected by the chronic delusion that has plagued Anfield for too long. It is utterly debilitating.

Ahead of this sobering defeat - a comprehensive and deserved win for Paul Lambert's side - there was a hint Rodgers was falling into a familiar trap of presuming too much, too soon, hastily talking about this club in terms of the Premier League top two places.

Anfield's history seduces, hypnotises and imparts an unjustified sense of entitlement in those who should know better, even when contemporary reality has nothing in common with the past.

Rodgers sounds like a rational, shrewd, young coach when he embraces the truth of Liverpool's situation.

A brief diversion to talk about the aim of bridging an 11-point gap to Manchester City - now 14 again - when the gulf is nearer several million miles, and pounds, is counterproductive.

It was as if, after an encouraging few weeks on Merseyside, the footballing gods empowered Aston Villa to issue a sobering reminder of how far this club still have to go.

Villa exposed the deficiencies with expert counter-attacking. Christian Benteke bullied and bewildered the Liverpool defence, scoring twice and creating the second goal for the equally impressive Andreas Weimann. The discussion about the out-of-favour Darren Bent, absent here through injury, should be over.

Lambert described Benteke, 22, as "brilliant", adding: "He can be anything he wants. He might not hit his peak until he is about 28, you never know. But he has been incredible for us. Everyone loves playing alongside him. His goals were outstanding."

There is a broader problem for Rodgers, which none of his publicised January transfer targets will resolve - as well as a new striker, he needs another central midfielder.

Not for the first time, there was a lack of intensity, malevolence, and downright aggression in the way Liverpool played in the centre of the park. The midfield was timid, wilting whenever belligerent qualities were demanded.

Slow and uncombative, the weak-ness was demonstrated most clearly when Benteke waltzed unchallenged from the middle of the Liverpool half into the penalty area to score Villa's third after 50 minutes.

Lucas, only just back from injury, is a good player but he is absurdly overrated by some, as much as he was unfairly underrated by others a few years ago, while Joe Allen has endured a recent dip. Even at their best, the balance has not been right as Steven Gerrard tries to find his best role in a new system.

Talk of Anfield traditions too often neglects the legacy of Tommy Smith, Jimmy Case and Graeme Souness. They need a spiteful piece of work (on the pitch) who will earn his side the right to play and make sure the opponent cannot. Liverpool's cordial style sometimes gives the impression of docility. Great if you are far superior to the opponent, but not when they are capable of taking advantage of the time and space you offer them.

Villa could have scored more and most of Liverpool's most encouraging moments were squandered before Brad Guzan had to make a save.

In the final third, Liverpool's passing lacks the precision that wins admirers in less dangerous areas.

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### Rodgers given painful reality check by rampant Benteke

There is just one game to go before Anfield says goodbye to 2012, a year that in terms of defeats is now their worst since 1937. That year saw Liverpool escape relegation by three points, although Manchester United were not so fortunate. By the time 1937 came to an end with a 2-2 draw at Birmingham, Liverpool were 20th and had their manager, George Kay, remarked that they were only six points off fourth place he would have been met with incomprehension. They were only nine points off the leaders - Brentford.

Kay's latest successor, Brendan Rodgers, said he had no regrets about arguing before a crushing 3-1 defeat by Aston Villa that Liverpool should be aiming for second place come May. For a side that, however vast its fan base, has only once scraped into the Premier League's top 10 this season, that is some talk.

It is usually unwise to judge a manager by the comments left on internet forums but in the wake of the ninth defeat at Anfield, the Liverpool Echo's message board was awash with invective, mostly directed at what was seen as their manager's delusional over-confidence.

After the 3-1 loss, what he described as "the worst defeat of my time here", Rodgers remarked: "It is not an issue. It is a great privilege to deal with the history and tradition of this club. Huge standards have been set at this club over the years and that's why the players and myself came here. That is part of it. You have to embrace it."

"Expectation is something we all want to experience because we all want to be at the top end. You can't take a job at a place like Liverpool and complain about expectations."

Nevertheless, Rodgers will have to take some tough decisions next month and not just the embarrassment of trying to buy back Tom Ince for around [pounds sterling]6m, 17 months Kenny Dalglish allowed him to leave for Blackpool for a 10th of that fee. He will have to address whether the decline in the form of Steven Gerrard and Pepe Reina is a blip or something more terminal.

Before this game, Rodgers had claimed that the wins over Udinese and West Ham might be a "defining moment" in the season. The victories achieved by a young, highly effective Aston Villa side at Norwich that took them to a Capital One Cup semi-final and this one at Anfield look far more likely to fall into that category.

Their manager, Paul Lambert's, decision to dispense with Darren Bent has worked out better than Rodgers' gut feeling to let Andy Carroll go. His young defenders handled Luis Suarez as well as anyone and in Christian Benteke, Aston Villa have a centre-forward potentially as exciting as anyone in the division. They are now staring upwards. So, too, are Liverpool but they have to make base camp before they can talk about assaults on any summit.



### Second best: Villa expose Rodgers' claims Liverpool could finish as runners-up

Villa's revolution certainly rocked the Reds – and it didn't come from the left. The attack came right down the centre, with twin strike force Christian Benteke and Andreas Weimann plotting Liverpool's downfall.

Villa's up-and-coming hitmen, both in their early 20s, showed the 44,000 Anfield faithful the art of clinical finishing.

Both grabbed breakaway first-half chances to put Brendan Rodgers' pass-and-move artists on the back foot.

Then Belgium international Benteke used his powerful presence to carve out a third goal as he turned another half-chance to his advantage.

It looked like mission impossible as he received the ball from lively Brett Holman with two Liverpool defenders between him and the goal.

But Benteke hustled past Martin Skrtel with ease, then went through Daniel Agger before crashing the ball past exposed keeper Pepe Reina.

It left boss Paul Lambert drooling. He said: "The whole performance was fabulous. The goals were brilliant and Benteke's back-heel was a superb set-up."

"Benteke has been wonderful for us and with Weimann, what you see is what you get. He knows where the goal is and has a work rate and enthusiasm second to none."

Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers admitted Benteke was "outstanding."

But he said: "We weren't at it today but I didn't see that coming. We probably got punished for our decision-making in that first 20 minutes, we were a bit careless."

"We could easily have been 3-0 up and if we do that, we can control it much better. But we didn't have that final pass and bit of quality at the top end of the field."

"The momentum and confidence was there going into the game – perhaps the best we've seen all season."

"But we were flat. We had all those chances early on but we contrived to give away those goals. It was a self-inflicted defeat really."

Liverpool fans may claim the goals came against the run of play – but so what? They all count and Villa showed their midweek march into the Capital One Cup semi-finals is no flash in the pan.

Benteke, the 22-year-old spearhead of the Villa attack, was set up by Holman just before the half-hour for the opener.

The Kinshasa-born striker showed why Lambert shelled out more than £7million for the man who fired 19 goals for Belgian club Genk in just 37 appearances.

Benteke looked up and then drilled a low, 20-yard effort beyond the reach of Reina, who dived to his left but could only watch the ball zip in just inside the far post. Villa had to soak up a lot of pressure before and after Benteke's shock opener – but then they dished out the shell-shock treatment again.

Weimann, the 21-year-old Austrian international, started and finished the move. He passed the ball to Benteke, who cleverly back-heeled it back into the path of the one-time Rapid Vienna youngster.

Weimann was by then in front of goal and had the simple task of slotting past Reina, the Spanish keeper being badly let down by his defence.

Yet early on, Liverpool looked all set to add to their back-to-back league victories and their win over Udinese in Italy, which had put them through to the last 32 in the Europa League.

A Steve Gerrard bobbler was stopped by keeper Brad Guzan and the England man just failed to control a Luis Suarez set-up in front of goal.

Two Stewart Downing efforts added to the pressure, and Jonjo Shelvey was only denied a chance by a last-ditch block by Nathan Baker.

But it was perhaps an indication of Liverpool's bad luck when Suarez, back in the team after suspension, hit the side-netting with a drilled effort.

Then rising star Raheem Sterling spurned a chance as he rounded Villa's defence, only for his shot to be held by the alert Guzan.

Referee Neil Swarbrick was also busy as he turned down three penalty appeals, the first looking the most obvious as Ciaran Clark pulled Agger's shirt in a 47th minute tussle in front of goal.

Liverpool did manage to pull one back three minutes from time when Gerrard turned in a Glen Johnson blast.

But it was little consolation on what proved a thoroughly disappointing day for Rodgers and his men.

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Lethargic and aimless LFC suffer harshest of Christmas hangovers  
 FRIDAY was, apparently, the most popular night for office Christmas parties, as across the country millions removed their ties, slapped on their dancing shoes and threw themselves into the festive spirit. And the festive spirits.

For Brendan Rodgers and his players, of course, there were no such shenanigans. Friday was a day of rest, of focus, of preparation. Their Saturday, though, brought only the harshest of Christmas hangovers, with Aston Villa gleefully playing the role of party-poopers.

Rodgers admitted afterwards that he "hadn't seen this one coming". He was not alone. The Reds boss wore a red scarf for the occasion, but he would depart Anfield with nothing but the blues.

The Saturday morning papers had been flooded with Rodgers's assertion that Liverpool were aiming higher than fourth this season, but his side picked a bad time to deliver perhaps the worst performance of the Ulsterman's reign.

Having waited all season to lift his side into the Premier League's top half, this was a quite brutal reality check, administered by a team that had begun the day 17th in the table, with just one win in their last 16 Premier League away games.

"A mammoth performance," was how Villa boss Paul Lambert described his side's efforts. He was right, too. The visitors, though happy to ride their luck at times, were excellent.

For Liverpool, though, the adjectives were rather different, rather more cutting. Try disjointed, lethargic, careless, wasteful, nervous or aimless, for starters. Having shown their teeth at West Ham last week, and having welcomed Luis Suarez back into the fold following a one-match suspension, the chance was there for Liverpool to take a sizeable stride forward. Victory here would have taken them up to seventh in the table.

Instead, Rodgers faces another inquest.

Liverpool have now lost nine times at Anfield in all competitions in 2012. Only once previously have they managed that, and that was back in 1937.

Rodgers, of course, cannot take all of the blame for that particular statistical quirk. But he will have been alarmed by the manner of his defeat, perhaps more so than the defeat itself.

It has been a while since an average side has come to Anfield and scored three times in the league.

In fact, the last visiting team to do so were Villa themselves, in August 2009. But whilst that side contained the likes of Brad Friedel, Ashley Young and James Milner, the 2012 vintage is decidedly more modest.

Villa's side here contained six Academy graduates, two players plucked from League One clubs and a free transfer. Goalkeeper Brad Guzan made his Premier League debut here in a 5-0 defeat in 2009, but he was able to enjoy a virtually trouble-free afternoon this time around.

The same could not be said for Liverpool's defence, as they struggled to contain the inspired Christian Benteke. Strong and stealthy, powerful and polished, the Belgian striker was the game's outstanding performer, bullying Martin Skrtel in a way only Didier Drogba, in recent seasons, has managed.

His presence and his physicality unsettled Liverpool's defence all afternoon, though they did little to help their own cause.

Suarez's careless concession of possession, coupled with Skrtel and Glen Johnson's reluctance to close down Benteke, led to the first goal. For the second Andreas Weimann, also impressive, was allowed to follow his initial pass untracked to sweep Benteke's backheel past an exposed Pepe Reina.

The third was even worse, with Joe Cole, a half-time substitute, hassled out of possession by Brett Holman, and Benteke able to walk past Skrtel and brush aside Joe Allen to score.

It was, as Rodgers said, "not like Liverpool".

Their improvement has been clear in recent weeks, but this was some regression.

Their midfield play was stilted, sluggish, unimaginative – Allen, in particular, is struggling at the moment – whilst the front three simply failed to function after a bright opening 15 minutes. Villa's three-man central defence, led by their superb captain Ciaran Clark, suffocated Suarez better than any side has this season.

It is fair to say that days like this have been few and far between of late. This was just a second loss in a dozen league games.

But it is also fair to say that defeats like this are bound to happen with the squad Rodgers has at his disposal.

The likes of Allen and Raheem Sterling – who had a nightmare here – are being asked, in the absence of suitable alternatives, to play week in, week out. Sterling has played more games than any other Liverpool player this season. At 18.

It sounds like a broken record, but January really is a crucial month for the club.

Rodgers needs to end it with a squad that is better equipped, better stocked.

Maybe then, he will be able to look at second, third or fourth.

Because at the moment, Liverpool are living hand to mouth.

And they went home hungry this weekend.



LFC reach nadir of Brendan Rodgers' reign

MIDWAY through the second half at Anfield on Saturday, one angry Liverpool supporter had seen enough. Agitated by Aston Villa's timewasting and his own team's seeming disinterest, the fan hurled the wall in front of the Paddock enclosure and hurriedly retrieved a loose ball to great cheers from the home crowd. In one moment, he demonstrated greater speed of thought and urgency than most of Brendan Rodgers's players did throughout 90 tortuous minutes. By the time referee Neal Swarbrick blew to put Liverpool out of their misery, there were few of the Anfield faithful remaining to jeer an abject performance from the home side.

Of Rodgers' fledgling reign, this was the nadir. The opening-day defeat at West Bromwich Albion may have been heavier, but there were at least mitigating circumstances that afternoon. Not on Saturday.

Speaking before the game, Rodgers had been buoyed sufficiently by Liverpool's mini-revival to suggest a top-two finish was not beyond his improving squad. Certainly, they can forget any aspirations of being Premier League runners-up on this evidence. Instead, Saturday's dismal loss to Aston Villa underlined the areas in which they remain very much second best.

Armed with a gameplan, a growing resilience and the unstoppable Christian Benteke, Villa and their manager Paul Lambert brutally exposed the deficiencies that continue to hamper Liverpool. The touted January arrivals of Daniel Sturridge and Tom Ince may bolster the squad but, as Rodgers readily admits, it will be several transfer windows before the team are moulded into the image he wants. Liverpool supporters accept there will be days like Saturday. That, though, doesn't make them any easier to take. Only Steven Gerrard's late header spared Liverpool the ignominy of crashing to their heaviest home league defeat since being thumped 4-1 by Chelsea in Indeed, the last team to go 3-0 ahead at Anfield in a Premier League game was Manchester United back in 1994. Liverpool eventually fought back to earn a 3-3 draw.

At least Chelsea and United went on to win the championship in those respective seasons. Villa, by contrast, were in the relegation zone less than a month ago.

Like Rodgers, Villa manager Lambert is building a team within financial restraints that is reliant on youth; their average age of 23 years 309 days on Saturday made them the youngest Premier League side this season.

Of that fledgling crop, striker Benteke was the standout. Tall, powerful and direct, the Belgian international is the type of forward that doesn't fit into the Rodgers mould. Yet few could argue with his effectiveness, Benteke scoring two fine goals to sandwich a brilliant assist for Andreas Weimann to net Villa's second, albeit all indebted to slack home defending. By contrast, Liverpool's starlets suffered. Jonjo Shelvey never got to grips with his left midfield role while Raheem Sterling is beginning to feel the understandable effects of the whirlwind start to his senior career. No player has appeared more times for Liverpool this season and the 17-year-old, hounded out of the game by Villa's dogged rearguard action, would benefit from being withdrawn from the firing line for part of the imminent hectic festive schedule. He isn't the only one. Liverpool appeared gripped by a general fatigue on Saturday, both physically and mentally. But with such a small squad, Rodgers has few realistic options to change that.

To think matters may have been decidedly different had Luis Suarez not played the ball behind Gerrard rather than in front of him when the skipper was clean through on goal. That came in the sixth minute, the highlight of an opening quarter in which Liverpool's dominance suggested a home goal was a given. When Suarez did have a hand in the opener in the 29th minute, it was not how Rodgers would have intended. The striker's over-elaborate turn merely gifted possession to Villa on the halfway line, sparking a move that ended with Brett Holman rolling the ball into the path of the unpressured Benteke to strike home from 22 yards off the post.

It epitomised a frustrating afternoon for Suarez. But the Uruguayan wasn't alone, Joe Allen in particular giving cause for concern with another ineffective outing. If Villa's first goal was a body blow for Liverpool, then their second landed the knockout punch. It was a fine effort too, Weimann feeding Benteke down the inside right channel and then allowed to advance into the area unmarked to tuck away his team-mate's outrageous backheel pass.

Any hopes of a Liverpool comeback were dashed six minutes into the second half when Holman nipped in after Allen sold substitute Joe Cole short and again found Benteke, who simply strolled past Martin Skrtel, held off Allen and finished beyond Pepe Reina. Even before then, Liverpool appeared to have run out of ideas. Yes, there were strong penalty shouts when Daniel Agger was tugged inside the area by Ciaran Clark and a Glen Johnson header was handled by Nathan Baker – especially as Allen was penalised for a similar offence at West Ham United last week – but Liverpool deserved no more than the late consolation when Gerrard's head helped guide home a Johnson shot.

Back to the drawing board? There's been enough progress in the last few months to prevent such a kneejerk reaction.

But this was a reality check that it will be a long, long time before the bigger picture is completed for Rodgers.

MAN OF THE MATCH. Stewart Downing. Determined against his former club, he was by far the best of a disappointing bunch

Date: 15 December 2012

Opposition: Aston Villa

Competition: League

Post	Mail	Sunday Times	Sun Telegraph	Independent
BBC	Mirror	Observer	Times	Telegraph
	Echo	Sun Independent	Guardian	Birmingham Mail

15 December  
2012



### Villa shake Rodgers out of Euro dream

The table doesn't lie but it does seduce. Every football fan has gazed at it and wondered how it would look if they won their next three fixtures. As Sir Bobby Robson used to say: "If. Biggest word in football, son."

On Friday, Brendan Rodgers had gazed mistily at the table and noted Liverpool were a mere four points off a Champions' League place. If they really put their minds to it, they might finish runners-up.

It was good, positive talk but it assumed that all the teams around Liverpool would simply go into hibernation. This defeat - which until Steven Gerrard's late intervention threatened to be Liverpool's worst in the League at Anfield since the Chelsea of Jose Mourinho rolled over them in October 2005 - suggested nobody is going to stand aside.

Liverpool were not just beaten, they were taken apart by Christian Benteke and Andreas Weimann, the kind of young, relatively cheap talents that Liverpool's owners crave. Benteke, born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo but who learned his football in Belgium, was a dominant, sometimes irresistible figure until Aston Villa went three up and decided to ride out what proved a not especially fierce storm. When asked afterwards how he felt, Rodgers replied in a low, soft voice: "I didn't see it coming. Confidence was high, we were playing well. It wasn't us, not really. We were flat."

Benteke was, at [pounds sterling]7 million, the most expensive of the eight signings Paul Lambert brought to Villa Park in the summer amid criticism that only one, Joe Bennett, possessed any experience of the Premier League and that amounted to 45 minutes three years ago.

Lambert argued that it was this kind of hungry, lower-league footballer that had brought him such success at Norwich. "If you don't give someone the opportunity, how are you ever going to know?" said the Aston Villa manager after a week that had seen him reach a League Cup semi-final. He, like Rodgers, is rebuilding a great club but at the moment he is closer to a trophy.

Rodgers pointed out that Liverpool gave away the ball in their own half for the first and the third goals, courtesy of Luis Suarez and Joe Cole. "For the third, Benteke keeps running through us and doesn't finish it off until he is almost on the six-yard line," he said with a shrug.

The finishing, however, was superb. For the first goal, Brett Holman found Benteke, who was given far too much space and time, but he still shot perfectly into the bottom corner of Pepe Reina's net.

In a fluorescent yellow away strip and black shorts, Aston Villa looked like Lambert's former club, Borussia Dortmund, in the same way that Stoke's change kit is based on Barcelona's. But the difference was rather more difficult to detect. Villa not only looked like Dortmund, they played like them.

This was never better demonstrated than for the second goal, begun and finished by Weimann. In between, however, was a brilliant, muscular back-heel from Benteke that took out three Liverpool defenders. The home side came back, but while you might have backed Manchester United to overturn a three-goal deficit, this is not a team that deals in miracles. They ought to have had a penalty when Ciaran Clark took a fistful of Daniel Agger's shirt, but their only reward was Gerrard deflecting home Glen Johnson's shot. Liverpool are still only five points off a Champions' League place but the table does not seem quite so seductive now.

Liverpool: (4-3-2-1): Reina; Johnson, Agger, Skrtel, Downing; Leiva (Henderson, 60), Gerrard, Allen; Sterling, Shelvey (Cole, h-t); Suarez.

Aston Villa: (4-3-1-2) Guzman; Lowton, Baker, Clark, Licaj; Westwood, Bannan (El Ahmadi, 86), Herd; Holman (Delph, 70); Weimann, Bentecke.

Referee: Neil Swarbrick (Preston)

Man of the match: Benteke (Aston Villa)

Match rating: 8/10

## The Sunday Telegraph

Rodgers given a reality check by Villa

Liverpool 1

Gerrard 87

Aston Villa 3

Benteke 29 51, Weimann 40

Att: 44,607

Whatever they are putting in the Christmas punch at Anfield, it must be stronger than a gallon of unfiltered moonshine.

Prior to being dismantled by Aston Villa - or more specifically their imperious striker, Christian Benteke - Liverpool were targeting the top two. By the end of Brendan Rodgers's worst afternoon since assuming control, they were back to counting the hours until the opening of the transfer window.

Aspirational new year resolutions are admirable, but Paul Lambert's side provided a timely reminder to everyone at Anfield about the wisdom of keeping expectations sober.

Villa were like a dose of strong coffee, an antidote to premature giddiness on Merseyside after a few encouraging wins.

Belgian Benteke proved unplayable, scoring twice and creating another for Andreas Weimann as, in contrast to his opposite number, Lambert enjoyed his finest hour at his new club, underlining the recent improvements at Villa Park. After securing a League Cup semi-final place in midweek, this comprehensive victory must have felt even sweeter for a side flirting with the relegation places for much of the season.

"A mammoth performance," was how Lambert described it, and no one could accuse him overstatement as his team were magnificent.

Despite a late consolation from Steven Gerrard, Villa could have won by more. Liverpool began well enough, aside from their usual wastefulness in the final third, but deteriorated alarmingly after falling behind and they were simply picked off at will.

On this evidence, Villa's recent renaissance is built on firm foundations. They are loaded with precocious talent. After four goals at Norwich, they were set up to counter-attack expertly again, their tigerish midfielders showing a bravery and directness Liverpool could learn from.

There has been plenty said about the Villa striker who hasn't been playing much, Darren Bent, and this was the day to linger on the qualities of the one who has assumed his role, Benteke.1

The Belgian scored his first on 29 minutes, a snapshot from 20 yards beating Pepe Reina suspiciously easily at the near post. He then created the second for Weimann five minutes before half-time, when a clever back-heel put the Austrian midfielder clear in the box to finish emphatically.

When Benteke waltzed through the Liverpool defence on 50 minutes to strike his second, the combined efforts of Martin Skrtel, Daniel Agger and Joe Allen were no match for his power and skill.

"The whole performance was fabulous, but the goals were brilliant, especially the second," said Lambert. "Benteke has been brilliant and with Andreas Weimann, what you see is what you get. I get a lot of satisfaction at the way these young players are getting better and better. On song we have a very good side."

Few saw this coming after an Anfield upturn over the past month, particularly Rodgers, but it felt like a price paid for suggesting the club was ready to sprint towards the top before they've even limped away from mid-table.

Talk about anything higher than the top six too soon - even if the context appeared to be a discussion regarding long-term rather than immediate goals -- and you encourage the delusional army to latch onto loose talk and bury you if you get nowhere near it.

This wretched display underlined the fact if Liverpool qualify for the Champions League this season, it would be as improbable as winning the darn thing in 2005.

Rodgers returned to a more realistic assessment of Liverpool's standing after accepting it was 'a bad day at the office'.

"All the talk has been the possibility of the top four," he said. "For us, it's going to be steady progress and today was a step backwards. Now we will reflect on it and try to inject greater intensity and more quality at the top end.

"We are very disappointed. Our momentum and confidence coming into the game was high but we got punished. We weren't at it today. That wasn't us. Without taking anything away from Aston Villa, it was self-inflicted."

Luis Suarez, Gerrard and Allen all wasted chances at a time when it looked like a Liverpool breakthrough was inevitable thanks to their early pressure.

But Villa were making chances frequently as the Liverpool's defence looked exposed too often, the lack of midfield protection certainly a worry for Rodgers.

Lucas, who'd performed well on his comeback a fortnight ago, looked like someone who hadn't played for a year here, while Allen's form has also dipped. How rare it would be for Liverpool to buy a central midfielder who could score goals rather than simply shield the defence.

A shirt tug on Daniel Agger by Ciaran Clark, waved away by referee Neil Swarbrick, was as close Liverpool came to reigniting the contest shortly after half-time.

Liverpool will always aspire to look to the higher end of the table, but Villa showed them why, for the time being, they'd also be wise to keep one eye over their shoulder.

Date: 15 December 2012  
 Opposition: Aston Villa  
 Competition: League

Post	Mail	Sunday Times	Sun Telegraph	Independent
BBC	Mirror	Observer	Times	Telegraph
	Echo	Sun Independent	Guardian	Birmingham Mail

15 December  
2012



### Villa stun Liverpool

AT ANFIELD, great expectations are for life, not just for Christmas. And while even the most red-eyed Merseysider could not fail to see the shoots of recovery in Brendan Rodgers' nascent tenure and concomitant revolution in habits and approach, sometimes those expectations seem just too, well, great.

At the moment a corner seemed to have been turned with one defeat in 10 Premier League games, Liverpool ran straight into Aston Villa, a team manning the barricades of their own revolution.

"I certainly didn't see this coming," admitted Rodgers, whose pre-match talk of targeting the top four now seems careless indeed. "That wasn't us; we were flat, we lacked our usual intensity, we gave away sloppy goals and this was a self-inflicted defeat."

From their three unflappable centre-backs to their twinkletoe forward line, via a Stakhanovite midfield, Villa's team of boys played like men.

"We were fabulous," purred Paul Lambert, the Villa manager.

"To come to a place as steeped in history as this and to play like that is terrific. We've always had the self-belief that we can win games, and we're getting better and better."

Even so, for 20 minutes, Liverpool held the ascendancy, but, as Rodgers acknowledged, early missed chances proved crucial. A reinvigorated Stewart Downing overlapped and crossed low, for Eric Lichaj to almost slice past Brad Guzan; then Downing played a glorious crossfield ball that Jonjo Shelvey fed to Luis Suarez, who was foiled by Guzan.

Until yesterday, Villa were the Premier League's lowest scorers, but they sensed Liverpool might be there for the taking when Brett Holman unleashed Andreas Weimann, who was harried wide and then tackled expertly by Pepe Reina.

For all their attacking buoyancy, Liverpool suddenly looked sinkable and Villa had won it by half-time.

First, the Liverpool defence backed off Holman, who squared for Christian Benteke. The Belgium international had the time to pick his spot, albeit with a shot that bobbed over Reina's late dive.

Villa's second was a pearl but once again Liverpool's tracking of their men was less than Mountie-esque. Weimann's precise through ball was met by a superlative, first-time Benteke backheel, a moment of other-worldly but world-class magic that wrong-footed the Liverpool defence. The Viennese had run-on and, imperious as a Habsburg palace, smashed the ball gleefully past Reina.

Benteke is already looking splendid value for the [pounds sterling]7m it took to prise him from Genk.

Collectively, Martin Skrtel and Daniel Agger tried means fair and foul to stop him, but for 90 harrowing minutes they were outrun, outmuscled and outthought. And in Weimann, Benteke had a sidekick as eager and as willing.

To the Kop's increasing but hushed horror, it could have been three before half-time when Glen Johnson let in Weimann, who chipped on to the roof of the net. Rodgers dangled the carrot of redemption before Joe Cole and the midfielder found himself with 45 minutes in which to further revive his stuttering career. After six of them, it looked unlikely when he was pickpocketed by Holman. The Australian found Benteke, who charged towards goal, again untracked, and skipped past feeble Skrtel and Joe Allen challenges before slotting over Reina with the insouciance of a lambent player near the peak of his powers.

Liverpool sensed the game was up and they were soon resorting to hysterical, quixotic appeals for penalties and frustrated long-range efforts, which Villa swatted easily until the 86th minute when they fell asleep and Johnson's longranger was neatly diverted past Guzan by Steven Gerrard. Even then, home heads never dropped, but neither, again, would Villa's guard.

Liverpool: Reina 5, Johnson 5, Skrtel 5, Agger 6, Downing 6, Allen 5, Gerrard 6, Lucas 6 (Henderson, 60min, 6), Sterling 5, Suarez 5, Shelvey 6, (Cole, ht, 5) Aston Villa: Guzan 6, Lowton 6, Herd 7, Clark 7, Baker 7, Lichaj 6, Westwood 6, Holman 8 (Delph, 70min), Bannan 7 (El Ahmadi, 86min), Benteke 9, Weimann 8 (N'Zogbia, 90+1min) **KELLY TURNS DOWN [pounds sterling]35,000-A-WEEK OFFER ?** Martin Kelly, Liverpool's 22-year-old England defender, has rejected a [pounds sterling]35,000-a-week offer from the club. Kelly, part of Roy Hodgson's Euro 2012 squad, wants an improved offer, feeling that, having played for his country and proved able to operate at right-back or in central defence, he is worth more. ? Accepting the deal would also leave him far behind Liverpool's other young England players, such as Jordan Henderson. With 18 months left on his current contract, Kelly is waiting for Liverpool to restart talks.

? However, the club are close to tying down 18-year-old forward Raheem Sterling. After protracted negotiations his advisers seem ready to accept a radically improved contract for Sterling, currently on [pounds sterling]2,500 a week.



### Brilliant Benteke cuts down Liverpool's high hopes

LIVERPOOL 1

Gerrard 87

ASTON VILLA 3

Benteke 29 51 Weimann 40:

Whether innate optimism or the requirements of the job prompted Brendan Rodgers to assert that second place is not beyond Liverpool, his players picked the wrong day to expose the prediction to ridicule. They were not entirely responsible. Aston Villa, 17th at the start of play, mocked the pre-match form with a performance that stunned Anfield and possibly their own support. Led by the inspired Belgium forward Christian Benteke and the accomplished Barry Bannan in midfield, Villa capitalised on a careless Liverpool display to produce arguably the finest result of Paul Lambert's short reign as manager. Beyond dispute was the vindication for Lambert's steadfast faith in his young team as they offered the composure, penetration and defensive strength that Liverpool lacked to leave Merseyside with a merited victory. Rodgers admitted defeat was "self-inflicted" from an Anfield perspective. For Villa, victory represented a potential turning point.

"The goals we scored and the way we defended was excellent," said Lambert. "I'm pretty sure Liverpool will give any team a game here with the players they've got and this atmosphere behind them, so it is a question of holding your nerve and we did that. The back three were terrific for us in how they put their bodies on the line."

Liverpool were lulled into a false sense of security, for this was not the Villa of one win in their previous 16 away games. "I didn't see it coming," admitted Rodgers.

The visitors certainly lived dangerously early on, with their three-pronged central defence denying Liverpool with a final touch or a kind ricochet, but absorbing pressure and striking on the break, Villa delivered to perfection.

Benteke tested Jose Reina in the opening minute with a header from Bannan's free-kick, while the Liverpool goalkeeper made a fine sliding tackle to prevent

Andreas Weimann converting Brett Holman's through ball. Otherwise it was

all Liverpool pressure and no end product as Luis Suarez endured one of those

frustrating afternoons on the ball and received precious little

support. Liverpool's best player was the often maligned Stewart Downing,

operating out of position at left-back against his former club.

Brad Guzan was forced into an early save when Downing's cross struck Eric Lichaj

and deflected towards his own goal. But with Steven Gerrard stepping on the ball

when well placed, the ball striking Suarez's heel as he attempted to run clear and

Joe Allen miscontrolling when free inside the Villa area, Liverpool could not make

their possession tell.

They were punished in emphatic style. Suarez lost the ball inside

the Liverpool half and Villa built patiently down the left. Holman released Benteke

and, with no defender coming close, the Belgian found the bottom corner via the

inside of Reina's right-hand post.

Villa's second was even more impressive, with Benteke and the tireless Weimann

taking the plaudits for their four passes that pierced the Liverpool defence and

allowed the Austrian to sweep home Benteke's exquisite back-heel. The credit

runs much deeper, however, with Bannan, Ashley Westwood and others involved

in an 18-touch move before Weimann struck. As the goalscorer and creator

celebrated in one corner, Westwood turned the other way to applaud his team-

mates. It was the first time since 21 January that Villa had scored more than once

away from home in the Premier League.

Liverpool laid siege to Guzan's goal in the second half, and were denied a clear

penalty when Daniel Agger was hauled to the floor by Ciaran Clark at a corner, but

were further behind before they gathered momentum. Holman easily

dispossessed Joe Cole, a half-time replacement for Jonjo Shelvey, to release

Benteke against a defence that could not deal with his upper-body strength and

directness. He waltzed inside Martin Skrtel, Allen bounced off the striker, and

Benteke beat Reina convincingly for his eighth Villa goal of the season.

Gerrard grabbed a late consolation when he diverted Glen Johnson's drive into

the net and Benteke was fortunate not to be given a red card when he received

yellow for pushing the England right-back in the face. Nothing could remove the

gloss from Villa's day.

LIVERPOOL

Reina; Johnson, Skrtel, Agger, Downing;

Gerrard, Lucas (Henderson 61), Allen; Sterling, Shelvey (Cole 46); Suarez (Booked)

Subs not used Jones, Carragher, Coates, Suso, Wisdom

ASTON VILLA

Guzan; Herd, Clark, Baker; Bannan (El Ahmadi 86); Lowton, Westwood, Holman

(Delph 69), Lichaj; Benteke (Booked), Weimann (N'Zogbia 90)

Subs not used Given, Albrighton, Bowery, Bennett

Anfield 44,607

Game rating 8/10

Referee Neil Swarbrick

Date: 15 December 2012

Opposition: Aston Villa

Competition: League

Post	Mail	Sunday Times	Sun Telegraph	Independent
BBC	Mirror	Observer	Times	Telegraph
	Echo	Sun Independent	Guardian	Birmingham Mail

15 December  
2012

## Birmingham Mail

This was a pretty special performance. Aston Villa visited a Liverpool side which had won its last three games and lost only one of its last ten in the Premiership – and overcame them with a superb display. Paul Lambert has insisted all along that he has every faith in his Villa squad.

Well, football managers tend to do that don't they?

If a manager was to observe: "Blimey, me defenders are too slow, the strikers are a worry, the midfielders couldn't trap a bag of cement and him in goal? He couldn't keep pigeons," he would probably lose his players quite quickly.

Yes, managers can fly in the face of reason a bit on that one. But in the case of Lambert and the Villa squad of 2012-13, he might just have every right to have every faith in them. This was a pretty special performance. Aston Villa visited a Liverpool side which had won its last three games and lost only one of its last ten in the Premiership – and overcame them with a superb display.

Oceans of resolve, total commitment, a dash of pace and panache.

And two good goals and one magnificent one. Funny how it goes. Villa had been visiting Anfield for 107 years before they recorded a 3-1 victory there. Now they have done it three times in 11 years. But if the results in 2001 (Dion Dublin, Lee Hendrie and Darius Vassell scored the goals) and 2009 (an own goal, Curtis Davies and Ashley Young's penalty) were eye-catching, then this topped them.

Goalscorers Christian Benteke and Andi Weimann will hog most of the headlines after pulling, stretching and, in Benteke's case, bullying Liverpool's defence to ruin – and scoring three fine goals. But this win owed every bit as much to a backline which, after taking a few minutes to settle, snuffed out the home attack to lay the foundation for all that followed. Those goals would almost certainly not have come if Villa had not held firm early on.

If nothing injects belief and confidence more than a goal, then a resounding good old-fashioned tackle comes close. And as Liverpool pressed in the opening stages, Nathan Baker delivered a couple of classics of the genre – perfectly-timed clatters, strong but fair, which brooked no argument.

It's not surprising of course. A couple of years ago Baker, like team-mate Chris Herd, enjoyed the privilege of a loan spell at Lincoln City from where so many all-time greats hail. At Sincil Bank, your footballing education can only come on in leaps and bounds. Baker's and Herd's clearly did.

Ciaran Clark did not have the honour of a loan spell with the Imps (although there's still time?) but has still become a player of immense potential. At Anfield, with Luis Suarez dodging and darting and whining, you have to time your tackles carefully.

Clark found the perfect balance of taking care without holding back, though Villa did have one piece of luck when he tugged Daniel Agger's shirt deep in the box. It was a clear offence and Liverpool demanded a penalty but referee Neil Swarbrick waved play on.

Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers pondered, after the game, why his team never gets penalties. It might have a bit to do with Suarez. Go to ground too easily too often and suddenly spot-kicks become harder, rather than easier, to attain. Suarez cut a bedraggled, almost comical figure, by the end of the match. By contrast, Villa's front two were beaming and with every justification after delivering three terrific goals. The first, Benteke's 20-yard daisy-cutter, which went in off a post, changed the flow of the game. The second was a masterpiece. Barry Bannan broke into space in the centre circle and fed Weimann, who slid a pass for Benteke to chase. Cognisant of his strike partner's run, the Belgian sent a first-time back-heel perfectly into his path for Weimann to beat Pepe Reina. A move and a goal to treasure.

Attacking the Kop End in the second half, Liverpool could still have been dangerous but were soon killed off. With his backheel, Benteke showed the finesse of a silversmith. Five minutes after the break, it was the plain old strength of a drayman which saw him burst into the Reds' box, defenders literally bouncing off him, to stab the ball past an exposed Reina and make it 3-0 in front of Villa's elated supporters.

Liverpool had no way back from that. Villa stayed tight, drained the stadium (apart from their own jubilant corner, of course) of noise and closed out a victory which their supporters, without too much to shout about on their travels lately, deserved as much as the players.

Steven Gerrard's glancing header four minutes from time was the most irrelevant goal of his long career. The joy in the mutual applause between Villa's players and supporters after the final whistle was unconfined. After a performance of such strength and verve, it seemed strange to recall that, had results gone differently, Villa would have been in the relegation zone.

Lambert will be first to point out that this is only one match, one result, three points. One small step. Villa are still, first and foremost, in a relegation battle. Feet on the ground and all that.

But let's also be realistic the other way. After some pretty wretched fare in recent seasons, Villa fans are entitled to be wary but there is no question that this talented squad has a great deal to offer.

Could Anfield, December 15, 2012, come to be regarded as the day this young bunch started to fledge?

A long, hard season lies ahead and there's no doubt that a bit of experienced help in through the transfer window in January would be welcome – but Lambert's faith in his players could just prove to be fully vindicated.



Liverpool were left stunned after their hopes of challenging for a top-four spot were hit by a loss to Aston Villa.

The home side went behind against the run of play when Christian Benteke arrowed a shot in off the post.

Benteke's backheel set up Andreas Weimann for Villa's second, before the Reds were denied a penalty when Ciaran Clark pulled Daniel Agger's shirt.

Benteke made it three from close range for a resurgent Villa before Steven Gerrard netted a late consolation goal.

It was a second defeat in 12 games for Liverpool and will serve as a reality check to their growing levels of optimism and expectancy that they might be able to launch an assault on the Champions League places.

Reds boss Brendan Rodgers had even claimed he was looking higher than fourth place but those comments came back to haunt him after his side were beaten by an improving and youthful Villa, who extended their unbeaten league run to five games to move up to 14th place.

The Midlands side had reached the Capital One Cup semi-finals with a midweek win at Norwich and they translated that form to Anfield, with the finishing prowess of strike duo Benteke and Weimann showing Liverpool what they are missing.

Youthful Villa

Aston Villa's starting XI today was the youngest seen in the Premier League this season so far - they averaged 23 years, 309 days old.

The match had got under way following a minute's applause for former Liverpool captain and manager Phil Taylor, who passed away recently aged 95.

When the action did start, the home side were quickly given a wake-up call when Benteke headed a Barry Bannan free-kick straight at Reds keeper Pepe Reina. Liverpool took this as the cue to take a grip of the game as they passed and probed for openings, although their lack of a clinical edge in the final third let them down.

This was epitomised when Luis Suarez could have put Gerrard clean through on goal, only for the Uruguayan to put his pass behind his captain's surging run.

Even though the ball was quickly worked back to Gerrard, he sent his 12-yard shot straight at keeper Brad Guzan.

Liverpool again had the Villa goal in sight when Suarez robbed left-back Chris Herd of possession before laying the ball off to Jonjo Shelvey, who had the ball cleared off his toes by a last-ditch Nathan Baker tackle.

Having provided a warning to the Merseysiders when Weimann had earlier broken clear before being shepherded wide and then tackled by Reina, Villa shocked their hosts after 29 minutes.

Brett Holman laid the ball off to Benteke and, afforded time and space, the Belgian fired a low 22-yard shot in off the post.

Weimann put an effort onto the roof of the net as he almost capitalised on Liverpool right-back Glen Johnson's poor back-header, before the Villa striker did extend his side's lead.

Weimann and Benteke beautifully combined and the latter's backheel allowed the former to sweep a shot past Reina.

Rodgers brought on Joe Cole for Shelvey at half-time and, while Liverpool had a decent claim for a penalty turned down for Clark's shirt-pulling of Agger, the home side rarely threatened a comeback.

Instead, Cole gave the ball away and Benteke waltzed through the gaping defence of the Merseysiders before slotting home a close-range shot.

Gerrard did find a way past Villa keeper Guzan with a header from Johnson's shot but it was too little, too late.

Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers:

"We probably got punished for our decision-making in that first 20 minutes, we were a bit careless.

"We could easily have been 3-0 up in the game and if we do that we can control it much better but we didn't have that final pass and bit of quality at the top end of the field.

"Then we went on to concede some poor goals. We weren't quite at it today with our intensity and pressure in the game and they were a threat on the counter-attack and got the goals."

Aston Villa boss Paul Lambert:

"The whole performance was fabulous. The goals were excellent, as was the way we defended.

"I thought we were excellent. The goals were brilliant, the second goal, with the movement and the backheel, especially.

"Benteke has been unbelievable while Andi Weimann knows where the goal is. He's a natural finisher. His enthusiasm and work ethic are second to none."

Date: 15 December 2012

Opposition: Aston Villa

Competition: League

Post	Mail	Sunday Times	Sun Telegraph	Independent
BBC	Mirror	Observer	Times	Telegraph
	Echo	Sun Independent	Guardian	Birmingham Mail

15 December  
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90:00+3:31 Full time The match has reached full-time.  
90:00+1:22 Substitution Substitution Andreas Weimann leaves the field to be replaced by Charles N'Zogbia.  
90:00+1:18 Handball decision goes against Joe Cole. Bradley Guzan takes the indirect free kick.  
89:30 Booking for Luis Suarez for dissent.  
88:25 Joe Allen takes a shot. Ciaran Clark gets a block in.  
87:36 Glen Johnson takes the direct free kick.  
87:36 Booking Christian Benteke receives a caution.  
87:15 Free kick awarded for an unfair challenge on Glen Johnson by Christian Benteke.  
86:27 Assist on the goal came from Glen Johnson.  
86:27 Goal scored Goal - Steven Gerrard - Liverpool 1 - 3 A Villa Steven Gerrard finds the net with a headed goal from inside the penalty area. Liverpool 1-3 Aston Villa.  
86:26 Glen Johnson takes a shot.  
84:54 Substitution Substitution Karim El Ahmadi comes on in place of Barry Bannan.  
83:39 Inswinging corner taken left-footed by Luis Suarez played to the near post, Headed effort from deep inside the area by Joe Cole misses to the left of the goal.  
81:31 Effort from inside the area by Daniel Agger misses to the left of the target.  
80:18 Matthew Lowton is penalised for handball and concedes a free kick. Free kick crossed left-footed by Stewart Downing, Eric Lichaj makes a clearance.  
79:38 Headed effort from inside the area by Andreas Weimann misses to the left of the target.  
78:26 The ball is delivered by Joe Cole.  
76:24 Joe Allen gives away a free kick for an unfair challenge on Matthew Lowton. Barry Bannan takes the free kick.  
74:35 Foul by Fabian Delph on Raheem Sterling, free kick awarded. Direct strike on goal from the free kick comes in from Luis Suarez.  
74:24 Centre by Stewart Downing, Chris Herd makes a clearance.  
74:14 Jordan Henderson takes a shot. Blocked by Nathan Baker.  
73:55 Outswinging corner taken by Stewart Downing from the left by-line.  
71:40 Raheem Sterling takes a shot. Comfortable save by Bradley Guzan.  
70:09 Stewart Downing is flagged offside by the assistant referee. Indirect free kick taken by Bradley Guzan.  
68:48 Substitution Substitution Fabian Delph is brought on as a substitute for Brett Holman.  
68:38 Glen Johnson has a shot on goal from outside the box which misses right.  
66:48 Glen Johnson produces a left-footed shot from just outside the area that goes harmlessly over the bar.  
66:16 Unfair challenge on Joe Cole by Barry Bannan results in a free kick. Free kick taken by Glen Johnson.  
65:46 Daniel Agger takes a shot. Save made by Bradley Guzan.  
64:21 Luis Suarez shoots direct from the free kick, save by Bradley Guzan.  
64:04 Foul by Matthew Lowton on Raheem Sterling, free kick awarded.  
64:21 Luis Suarez has an effort direct from the free kick, blocked by Nathan Baker.  
64:21 Booking Matthew Lowton is shown a yellow card.  
64:04 Matthew Lowton gives away a free kick for an unfair challenge on Raheem Sterling.  
63:14 Outswinging corner taken by Steven Gerrard from the right by-line, Glen Johnson takes a shot. Blocked by Nathan Baker.  
61:06 Steven Gerrard takes the inswinging corner, Header from close in by Martin Skrtel misses to the right of the target.  
59:50 Substitution Substitution Jordan Henderson joins the action as a substitute, replacing Leiva Lucas.  
59:38 Joe Cole produces a right-footed shot from just outside the box that misses to the right of the net.  
59:08 Joe Cole delivers the ball, Chris Herd manages to make a clearance.  
59:00 Luis Suarez takes a shot. Blocked by Nathan Baker.  
58:16 Luis Suarez produces a cross, save made by Bradley Guzan.  
56:49 Glen Johnson crosses the ball, save by Bradley Guzan.  
55:45 Barry Bannan takes a shot. Save by Jose Reina.  
54:05 Andreas Weimann takes a shot. Save by Jose Reina.  
53:50 The ball is swung over by Joe Cole, clearance made by Eric Lichaj.  
52:24 Barry Bannan takes the inswinging corner, Martin Skrtel manages to make a clearance.  
51:39 Glen Johnson concedes a free kick for a foul on Eric Lichaj. Bradley Guzan restarts play with the free kick.  
50:20 Assist by Brett Holman.  
50:20 Goal scored Goal - Christian Benteke - Liverpool 0 - 3 A Villa Christian Benteke finds the back of the net with a goal from inside the area to the top right corner of the goal. Liverpool 0-3 Aston Villa.  
48:48 Martin Skrtel gives away a free kick for an unfair challenge on Christian Benteke. Barry Bannan delivers the ball from the free kick left-footed from left wing, clearance made by Martin Skrtel.  
48:33 Stewart Downing takes a shot. Save made by Bradley Guzan.  
47:53 Glen Johnson fouled by Christian Benteke, the ref awards a free kick. Leiva Lucas restarts play with the free kick.  
47:34 Luis Suarez takes a shot. Save by Bradley Guzan.  
46:42 Andreas Weimann challenges Daniel Agger unfairly and gives away a free kick. Jose Reina restarts play with the free kick.  
46:18 Corner taken right-footed by Steven Gerrard, save made by Bradley Guzan.  
41:45 Jonjo Shelvey takes a shot. Save by Bradley Guzan.  
45:01 The referee blows his whistle to start the second half.  
45:01 Substitution Substitution Joe Cole on for Jonjo Shelvey.  
45:00+1:06 Half time The players leave the pitch at half time.  
43:55 Raheem Sterling takes a shot. Save made by Bradley Guzan.

43:07 Free kick awarded for an unfair challenge on Raheem Sterling by Eric Lichaj. Jonjo Shelvey crosses the ball in from the free kick, Chris Herd manages to make a clearance.  
42:44 Jonjo Shelvey takes a shot. Save by Bradley Guzan.  
41:45 Jonjo Shelvey takes a shot. Bradley Guzan makes a comfortable save.  
41:16 Eric Lichaj concedes a free kick for a foul on Raheem Sterling. Steven Gerrard takes the free kick.  
40:38 Centre by Steven Gerrard.  
39:29 Assist on the goal came from Christian Benteke.  
39:29 Goal scored Goal - Andreas Weimann - Liverpool 0 - 2 A Villa Goal scored by Andreas Weimann from inside the box low into the middle of the goal. Liverpool 0-2 Aston Villa.  
37:28 Glen Johnson sends in a cross, Nathan Baker makes a clearance.  
35:09 Glen Johnson delivers the ball.  
34:07 The offside flag is raised against Jonjo Shelvey. Indirect free kick taken by Bradley Guzan.  
32:21 Effort on goal by Andreas Weimann from just inside the penalty box goes harmlessly over the target.  
31:46 Effort on goal by Luis Suarez from deep inside the penalty area misses to the right of the goal.  
30:10 Christian Benteke challenges Daniel Agger unfairly and gives away a free kick. Direct free kick taken by Stewart Downing.  
28:16 Assist by Brett Holman.  
28:16 Goal scored Goal - Christian Benteke - Liverpool 0 - 1 A Villa Goal scored by Christian Benteke from outside the penalty area to the bottom left corner of the goal. Liverpool 0-1 Aston Villa.  
27:15 Pass corner from left by-line crossed in by Steven Gerrard, clearance made by Ciaran Clark.  
26:34 The offside flag is raised against Jonjo Shelvey. Indirect free kick taken by Bradley Guzan.  
26:11 Luis Suarez takes a shot. Save by Bradley Guzan.  
22:44 Foul by Christian Benteke on Martin Skrtel, free kick awarded. Martin Skrtel takes the direct free kick.  
19:51 Raheem Sterling delivers the ball.  
18:17 Raheem Sterling sends in a cross, Bradley Guzan makes a save.  
16:08 Outswinging corner taken by Barry Bannan from the left by-line, Chris Herd produces a right-footed shot from inside the area that clears the crossbar.  
15:37 A cross is delivered by Raheem Sterling, Bradley Guzan makes a save.  
13:18 Glen Johnson sends in a cross, save made by Bradley Guzan.  
13:05 The ball is delivered by Raheem Sterling.  
10:38 Outswinging corner taken right-footed by Steven Gerrard.  
8:56 Joe Allen has an effort at goal from just outside the box which goes wide of the left-hand upright.  
8:05 Long range shot from Stewart Downing misses to the left of the target.  
5:03 Steven Gerrard takes a shot. Save by Bradley Guzan.  
4:22 The ball is swung over by Stewart Downing, save by Bradley Guzan.  
1:59 Free kick awarded for an unfair challenge on Jonjo Shelvey by Chris Herd. Free kick crossed right-footed by Steven Gerrard.  
0:33 Martin Skrtel challenges Andreas Weimann unfairly and gives away a free kick. Centre by Barry Bannan, Christian Benteke takes a shot. Jose Reina makes a save.  
0:00 The ref blows the whistle to start the match.