

Date: 26 December 2012

Opposition: Stoke City

Competition: League

BBC	Times	Telegraph	Echo
	Guardian	Mirror	Post
	Independent	Mail	Sentinel

26 December
2012

THE TIMES

Walters batters bemused Liverpool

Stoke City 3 Liverpool 1 Although Stoke City are not always given the credit for it, there is a lot to be said for doing the basics, for working harder than your opponents and taking advantage of their weaknesses. Last night the largely unheralded and often criticised approach of Tony Pulis's side brought them an impressive victory as Liverpool were brutally swept aside.

After going behind to a Steven Gerrard penalty in only the second minute, Stoke responded with the kind of character that would be expected of a team who went into the game on the back of an eight-game unbeaten run. Less predictable was that Liverpool, fresh from a 4-0 victory over Fulham, would capitulate so meekly in the face of their revival. When it came down to it, Liverpool did not find a cold, wet night in Stoke to their liking as they wilted against the kind of physicality that comes as standard at the Britannia Stadium. Stoke's goals - two from Jonathan Walters and one from Kenwyne Jones - came from a long ball, a corner and a long throw as Brendan Rodgers, the Liverpool manager, cut an increasingly bemused figure on the touchline.

To label this as simply a victory for long-ball merchants over a more sophisticated approach would be to do Stoke a disservice, however. At times, particularly after scoring their third goal, they outplayed Liverpool and had the stunning volley that Walters produced to apply the coup de grace come from a player of almost any other club, it would be held up as an example of technical excellence and rightly so.

The match was not even a minute old when Liverpool were awarded a penalty, their first in 31 games, as Luis Suarez was hauled down by Ryan Shawcross after latching on to Martin Skrtel's long ball. The Stoke fans were outraged and booed the Uruguay forward mercilessly thereafter, but the decision was a straightforward one and Howard Webb, the referee, had no option but to point to the spot.

After Gerrard sent Asmir Begovic the wrong way to give Liverpool the lead, a red flare was detonated in the away end in celebration, but given what followed it might as well have been a distress signal. Having become only the fourth away team to score at the Britannia Stadium this season, the expectation might have been that Liverpool would use the penalty as a platform to build on. Within ten minutes of going ahead, however, they found themselves in arrears, having conceded the kind of goals that Stoke specialise in and Liverpool find so difficult to combat. The equaliser came in the fifth minute and it was a goal that neither Daniel Agger nor Skrtel will look back on with any great fondness. Agger looked set to deal comfortably with Shawcross's punt forward but succeeded only in inadvertently heading the ball into the path of Walters. Even then the situation was retrievable from a defensive point of view, but Skrtel's slip gave Walters a clear run on goal that the forward took full advantage of, beating the exposed Pepe Reina with aplomb. From being in the ascendancy, Liverpool were suddenly being put to the test and they responded poorly initially, allowing themselves to be pushed back as Stoke pummelled them with a succession of long balls. Rodgers had said beforehand that he had no problems with the direct approach of Pulis's side, but his team were giving no impression of being able to cope with it, a feeling that intensified when Stoke went ahead after 12 minutes.

Again, Liverpool's defending left a lot to be desired but again, Stoke showed an aptitude to take advantage of their opponents' shortcomings, a quality for which they are not often enough given credit for.

Glenn Whelan's corner picked out the unmarked Jones at the near post and the Trinidad & Tobago forward scored with a powerful header despite Glen Johnson's fumbled attempts to clear the ball.

Had Reina not managed to tip over Matthew Etherington's powerful shot, Liverpool's plight could have worsened, but they maintained their competitiveness and could even gone in at half-time on level terms with better finishing. Gerrard was unfortunate to see a shot go narrowly wide with Begovic seemingly beaten, but Suarez's attempt to beat the Stoke goalkeeper from a tight angle resulted only in a comfortable save.

Since the formation of the Premier League, Liverpool have won only five away games when they have been behind at half-time and although Suarez hit the outside of a post early in the second half, their chances of doing so for a sixth time depreciated after 49 minutes when Walters scored his second.

Andy Wilkinson's long throw into the Liverpool box caused chaos as Skrtel was defeated in the air by Jones before Walters produced a wonderful piece of skill to control the dropping ball on his chest and beat Reina.

Liverpool had almost an entire half to find a reply but failed to produce one, the fight having been long since beaten out of them.

That, of course, is a Stoke speciality and they enjoyed a special evening at the Britannia.

Stoke City (4-4-1-1): A Begovic - G Cameron, R Shawcross, R Huth, A Wilkinson - M Kightly (sub: D Whitehead, 70min), G Whelan, S N'Zonzi, M Etherington (sub: R Shotton, 84) - J Walters - K Jones (sub: P Crouch, 78). Substitutes not used: T Sorensen, C Adam, M Upson, C Jerome. Booked: Shawcross, Cameron, Whelan. Liverpool (4-2-3-1): J M Reina - G Johnson, M Skrtel, D Agger, J Enrique - Lucas Leiva (sub: J Henderson, 59), S Gerrard - S Downing (sub: J Cole, 77), J Shelvey, Suso (sub: R Sterling, 46) - L Suarez. Substitutes not used: B Jones, S Coates, J Carragher, J Allen. Booked: Suarez. Referee: H Webb.

the guardian

Jon Walters' sucker punch for Stoke City floors disjointed Liverpool These feel like the best of times for Stoke City. With shrewd development and decision-making off the field, the club is growing as a Premier League force and results on the field have not been bad, either. This Jon Walters-inspired dismissal of a Liverpool side groping for consistency extended Stoke's club record unbeaten run in the league to nine matches.

Nobody gets an easy ride here and Stoke even shrugged off the disappointment of conceding an early penalty to Luis Suárez. Steven Gerrard's cool conversion of his club's first spot kick of the season was merely the prompt for Stoke to show their qualities.

Walters was the star turn, and his second goal was the game's outstanding moment, a chest-and-volley, one-two punch that floored Liverpool. Asked to chase the game, the visitors had no answers. Suárez was a thorn in Stoke's side, his quicksilver movement, vision and low-centre-of-gravity turns marking his threat but he sorely lacked for creative support. January needs to bring reinforcements.

At the other end, it was a horror show for Liverpool. Stoke's strengths are no secret and Brendan Rogers said his team had prepared to cope with the physicality and directness, particularly on set-pieces, but this only made the collective failure harder to swallow. Stoke's goals followed one long ball, a corner and a throw-in.

"That was the biggest frustration, the nature of the goals we conceded," Rodgers said. "They were quite straightforward to defend. The first one followed an unfortunate slip [by Martin Skrtel] but on the other two, we have to be better than that. They were all very, very soft."

Rodgers admitted that the same might have been true of his team's attitude. "It's not all about football," he said. "You have to earn the right to play. We are hoping to find this in the group, otherwise we are never going to progress. We have some big characters but tonight it was too easy."

Liverpool's dream start had followed a breathtaking surge from Suárez, which took him away from Ryan Shawcross and into the area. The Stoke captain grabbed a fistful of his shirt, he went down and it was a penalty, despite Stoke's protests. Suárez is a villain in these parts, after his alleged dive against Stoke at Anfield in October.

A red flare had banged to life inside the visiting enclosure upon the award but Stoke were level before the smoke had cleared. Daniel Agger leapt with Kenwyne Jones to contest Shawcross's high punt and when the ball broke, Skrtel slipped and Walters was in to finish. Stoke's second was a calamity from a Liverpool point of view. Agger failed to track Jones from Glenn Whelan's corner and Glen Johnson, having left his station on the post, could only divert Jones' header into the corner.

An entertaining first half featured chances at both ends. Jonjo Shelvey's heavy touch let him down when well-placed and Gerrard's first-time effort flashed narrowly wide. For Stoke, Matthew Etherington was twice denied by Pepe Reina. The game swung decisively, though, on Walters' second goal. Rodgers lamented the looseness that allowed Jones to flick on Andy Wilkinson's throw and Walters to collect. But there could only be admiration about the finish. Walters controlled on his chest with one touch and steered a glorious volley high into the corner with the second.

Suárez had gone close immediately after the restart following incisive work by substitute Raheem Sterling but the Uruguayan was booked when he stretched into a challenge on Asmir Begovic with his boot up. The Stoke goalkeeper was already airborne and he felt Suárez's studs on his knees. Rodgers complained that Suarez had eyes only for the ball and the striker came off worse, needing treatment and departing with ice to his ankle.

Walters' volley asked Liverpool to press yet they barely threatened to leave Stoke to luxuriate in their home fortress. Stoke last lost a league fixture here in February. "We're so proud to host a game against Liverpool," said Tony Pulis, the Stoke manager. "When you beat them, it gives you great delight. When I was growing up, they were an absolutely fabulous football club ... Liverpool, Anfield, it rings really loud in my ears."

For the modern side, the frustration is audible.

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The Mail

Wizard Walters casts his spell to rock Rodgers

DEFEAT in the Potteries is nothing new for Liverpool, but the manner of their latest reverse will give manager Brendan Rodgers plenty of cause for concern. If Saturday's 4-0 win over Fulham, the biggest of Rodgers's time in charge, lifted the mood around Anfield, here was a result to bring them back down to earth. It leaves Liverpool still waiting for their first Premier League win over Stoke. Their last two visits here had ended in defeat, but not since beating Blackburn 13 months ago had Tony Pulis's side scored three goals in a Premier League fixture. And it had all started so well, with Steven Gerrard converting a secondminute penalty. But two goals from boyhood Everton fan Jon Walters and one from a rejuvenated Kenwyne Jones saw Stoke leapfrog their opponents in the table. Stoke had been unbeaten at the Britannia Stadium for so long in the league that Rodgers was still in charge of Swansea when their 15-match run began with a win over the Welsh club back in February.

Almost every statistic pointed to a game of few goals, so it was surprising to see three inside the opening 12 minutes. The first came from a penalty awarded by Howard Webb after only 36 seconds. The fact that it was given for a foul on Luis Suarez will have pained Pulis. The Stoke boss called the Uruguay striker 'embarrassing' and demanded that he be banned for persistent diving when the two clubs drew at Anfield in October.

Pulis must surely have warned his players to be careful around Suarez but captain Ryan Shawcross got the wrong side of the Liverpool player from the first attack of the game and then clearly grabbed his shirt. Steven Gerrard sent Asmir Begovic the wrong way from the spot for only the fourth Premier League goal Stoke have conceded here this season.

But Stoke were level in the sixth minute thanks to a well-taken goal by Walters. Shawcross floated a long ball forward from the back and Jones got above Daniel Agger to flick on. There would have been little danger had Martin Skrtel not slipped at a vital moment, giving Walters a free run on goal. He took one touch before beating Pepe Reina with a clinical finish.

The Britannia was bouncing and Jones raised the noise level even higher when he headed Stoke in front six minutes later. Cameron sent over an inswinging corner from the left and Jones leapt to flick the ball just inside the near post, with Jose Enrique unable to keep it out on the line. Skrtel was by no means the only player who struggled to keep his feet in the first half. A stumbling Enrique deflected Steven Nzonzi's cross into the path of Matthew Etherington, whose first-time strike brought a wonderful reflex save out of Reina.

And then good work from Stewart Downing down the left ended with a pullback that wrongfooted Stoke's defenders, and Gerrard sent a bobbling effort just inches wide of Begovic's right-hand post.

Liverpool were on the ropes when Stoke extended their lead within three minutes of the restart. It was a typically direct goal. Andy Wilkinson took a throw from the left, Jones once again got the flickon and Walters controlled the ball on his chest and then hooked it right-footed beyond Reina and inside the post despite Agger's best efforts to make the block.

Suarez, who had been booed by the home fans even before he had won the early penalty, did little to endear himself to them on the hour when he chased a through-ball from Enrique and caught Begovic as the goalkeeper came out to claim the ball. Reina also needed attention following a clash with Dean Whitehead moments after the midfielder had replaced Michael Kightly in the 70th minute. Stoke looked the more likely to score, and Liverpool fans will have to take this one on the chin. Whether they will be quite as forgiving if Rodgers' side lose at QPR on Sunday is another matter.

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Why are you reading the wrong notes, Brendan?

Berbatov's name gives the game away -- the boss still had his Fulham crib sheet

STOKE 3

Walters 5, 49 Jones 12

(4-4-2)

TEAM AVERAGE 6.6

Begovic 6 Cameron 7 Shawcross 6 Huth 6 Wilkinson 6 Kightly 6 Whitehead, 70 6

Whelan 6 Nzonzi 7 Etherington 7 Shotton, 83 Walters 8 Jones 8 Crouch, 78

Subs not used Sorensen, Upson, Jerome, Adam Manager Tony Pulis 7

Booked Shawcross, Cameron, Whelan

Man of the match

Jon Walters

LIVERPOOL 1

Gerrard 2 (pen)

(4-2-3-1)

TEAM AVERAGE 5.5

Reina 5 Johnson 6 Agger 5 Skrtel 5 Enrique 5 Lucas 6 Henderson, 59 6 Gerrard 6

Downing 6 Cole, 77 Shelvey 5 Suso 4 Sterling, 46 6 Suarez 7

Subs not used Jones, Carragher, Coates, Allen Manager Brendan Rodgers 6

Booked Suarez

Referee

Howard Webb 7

Britannia Stadium Attendance: 27,490

The Daily Telegraph

Liverpool left reeling after Walters double

Stoke City 3

Walters 5, 49, Jones 12

Liverpool 1

Gerrard 2pen Att: 27,490

Trips to the Britannia Stadium remain as popular for Liverpool as cold-turkey sandwiches after Brendan Rodgers became the latest incumbent at Anfield to suffer a painful examination.

Tony Pulis is still yet to lose a Premier League game at home to Liverpool as Stoke produced yet another stirring performance in the Potteries, providing further proof of their emergence as a formidable force.

Stoke may remain the team the critics determined to make a name for themselves love to hate but they have not lost at home in the league since February and, at the very least, their first ever top-10 finish since the formation of the Premier League seems eminently achievable. There is surely not a better drilled, meticulously-organised team operating in this division on present form.

Rodgers was added to the list of Liverpool managers to depart this venue with his nose bloodied and he must be counting down the days until the transfer window opens. The signings of Daniel Sturridge and Thomas Ince alone will not be enough to help him transform the club in the direction he wants to take it.

The portents appeared promising early on - very early on - but by the end the visitors were well beaten, registering their fifth fruitless visit in succession since Stoke's elevation to the land of cash and controversy.

Luis Suarez, who so got up the nose of Pulis earlier this season, was heavily involved for the first goal but must feel sometimes he is staging a one-man crusade against opponents. He sorely needs support.

How ironic that Liverpool's first penalty of the season should come at the Britannia Stadium, and that Suarez should be the key protagonist.

After the 0-0 draw in October Pulis had been severely critical of the Uruguay international for alleged theatrics and the remit in the dressing room before the game must have revolved around defensive discipline in the penalty area when Suarez was in the vicinity.

But just 35 seconds into the game, Suarez was infuriating Stoke once again though Ryan Shawcross should never have got himself into a position where he was even attempting to manhandle the forward in the box. Contact appeared minimal but Howard Webb, the referee, was convinced enough contact had been made by Stoke's captain and Steven Gerrard rubbed salt into the wounds by confidently dispatching the penalty.

Liverpool's lead lasted barely four minutes. The Potteries has been an unforgiving venue in the Premier League for all of Rodgers's predecessors and Stoke were level through Jonathan Walters, the forward who bears the distinction of having many Everton season ticket holders in his family.

Daniel Agger failed to clear Shawcross's long diagonal pass under pressure from Kenwyne Jones and the ball squirted clear to Walters who took advantage of a Martin Skrtel slip to finish emphatically.

Stoke were ahead on 13 minutes through another typically clinical, well rehearsed set-piece, though it owed much to Liverpool's defensive hesitancy. Glenn Whelan's corner found Jones at the near post and he headed into the bottom corner with Pepe Reina rooted.

Reina was more impressive later on in the half, however, repelling two efforts from Matthew Etherington as Stoke once again proved how indomitable they can be on their own turf.

They have nearly gone a year without defeat at home, and Liverpool were broken a third time by Walters four minutes into the second period.

Chesting down a Jones flick-on, he turned to acrobatically volley the ball into the corner. The rugby songs were belted out with renewed gusto by the Boothen End. Suarez's popularity levels in Staffordshire rose even higher on the hour.

Attempting to challenge Asmir Begovic for a lofted pass from Jose Enrique, he caught the Stoke goalkeeper on his knee and was booked.

Rodgers, who received warm support in the bitter chill from the travelling fans, stood in his technical area imploring his players to keep attacking, but Stoke remained a danger on the counter-attack.

Peter Crouch, Stoke's record signing, was introduced with 12 minutes remaining and the game out of reach for one of his former clubs. They have not travelled back up the M6 with three points from Stoke in the league since 1984.

Rodgers has bigger challenges to face, however, than mere statistics.

WINDOW SHOPPING

STOKE CITY

Stoke are determined to land a couple of full-backs and perhaps a midfielder schemer. But surely a case of: "It's not broken, so why fix it?"

LIVERPOOL

Liverpool have already signed Sturridge and are battling to recruit Ince - but they need to start at the back and find a couple of commanding centre-halves.

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Another defeat puts Rodgers back in limbo

It's not the despair but the hope which makes supporting Liverpool such an agony in the Brendan Rodgers era.

Although defeat in the Potteries is pretty standard fare - the side have never won here in the Premier League era - the season is turning into a bumpy rollercoaster ride. A heavy defeat at home against Aston Villa, followed by the best yet for Rodgers at Fulham and now this: a pummelling at the hands of a Stoke side for whom Kenwyne Jones and Jonathan Walters led a vulnerable central defence a merry dance. For Stoke, who leapfrog Liverpool, there is a happy consistency of nine games unbeaten in the league, 16 at the Britannia, with their first three-goal haul in the league for 13 months, for good measure.

In the beginning, it seemed like Luis Suarez - whose contribution was outstanding again, despite the discomfort of a swollen ankle which he has been playing through for two weeks - would shape the night. It took him only 35 seconds to wriggle out of the grasp of Ryan Shawcross, who could get no closer than clutching at his shirt. The way Suarez then fell forward onto to the turf looked like simulation - he was being pulled by Shawcross, not pushed - but there really could be no complaints. Even Tony Pulis - who said he felt central defenders Shawcross and Robert Huth had been "off it" at Suarez's hands - could not criticise Suarez, as he did after his conduct at Anfield earlier this season. "Ryan was caught square and at fault but Suarez did brilliant," he said. Steven Gerrard despatched the penalty.

But Stoke never looked back from that point and some classic football of their type asked serious questions about the standard of Liverpool's basic preparations. It was not as if they did not know about the aerial challenge which undid them three times. "Everyone knows, every coach, every manager understands, the strengths of Stoke," Rodgers admitted. There was an element of misfortune about the first, as Martin Skrtel slipped to allow Walters to shape comfortably and score, but that did not forgive Daniel Agger - for whom this was a very poor night - dropping so deep that Shawcross' fifth-minute punt looping over him for Jones to head into Walters' path.

The second goal - Jones getting ahead of Agger to head Glenn Whelan's corner past Pepe Reina and beyond the despairing effort of Glen Johnson - was the poorest from a Liverpool perspective. Aside from Suarez, Gerrard and fleetingly Stewart Downing, Rodgers' players were simply bullied into defeat. Starting the game with Suso, who was withdrawn for Raheem Sterling at half time, looked as questionable a decision as resting Joe Allen, the kind of player this game needed.

"It's not all about football," said Rodgers, admitting his side lacked character.

"You've got to earn the right to play, especially coming here. We have big character and players but tonight it was not too easy."

Pulis did have a big character in Walters, whose second - Stoke's third - was of the highest technical order. Jones supplied again, flicking Andy Wilkinson's long throw into the path of Walters - an Everton fan - whose sublime chest and volley sealed the win. The Stoke manager's ambitions are crystal clear. "Forty points as quick as we can and then we will look at it," he declared. The Liverpool picture is less discernible. Sunday's visit to Queen's Park Rangers could prompt more top-four talk or leave their manager back on the outskirts of a crisis. Defeat at Loftus Road and Rodgers' record will be worse than Roy Hodgson's at the same distance into his Anfield career.



BRIT...3 BRITTLE ...1

AFTER feeling they had turned the corner against Fulham, Liverpool were driven round the bend by Stoke last night.

Their green shoots of recovery were trampled in typically robust fashion by a Stoke side who once again proved they are a Brit of all right at home.

The Reds' frailties were ruthlessly exposed by the Potters on a night striker and boyhood Evertonian Jonathan Walters will never forget.

Liverpool could not defend Stoke's trademark set-piece and route one plays as Tony Pulis' men swept them aside far too easily.

Not even taking the lead through a secondminute penalty made any difference to Liverpool and they have still to win in the league here in five attempts.

This defeat underlines to manager Brendan Rodgers (right) how much work he needs to do to transform Liverpool and he will need more than just sign Daniel Sturridge to improve his side on this showing.

Stoke leapfrog Liverpool in the table to eighth and the excellent Potters, who harried Liverpool all night, have stretched their unbeaten league run at the Britannia to 16 games.

They have the league's best defence, having conceded just 14 goals in 19 games, and must believe they can finish in the top 10, which has still eluded them since returning to the big time. After going nearly half a season without being awarded a penalty, Liverpool were given one by referee Howard Webb after just 34 seconds last night.

Ironically it was won by Luis Suarez, who was accused of diving by Pulis after the sides met for a goalless draw at Anfield earlier in the season.

Pulis would not have been happy with the Liverpool striker, but the Uruguayan was clearly tugged back by defender Ryan Shawcross before he went down.

Steven Gerrard duly converted the spot-kick on 90 seconds to become only the third opposition player to score a league goal at the Britannia this season - the others being Manchester City's Javi Garcia and Papis Cisse of Newcastle.

The away fans had just about settled into their seats when Stoke equalised in the fifth minute with a route one goal scored by Walters.

Kenwyne Jones flicked on a long ball from Shawcross and Martin Skrtel's slip led in the boyhood Evertonian to slot home, just as he did in this fixture last season.

After hitting Liverpool with one classic from their repertoire, Stoke rocked them seven minutes later with their speciality - a set-piece goal.

Glenn Whelan swung over a corner from the left and Daniel Agger lost Jones to allow the Potters targetman to get between the Dane and Gerrard to head home at the near post.

The Britannia was jumping and Stoke were only denied a third when Pepe Reina did well to touch Matthew Etherington's drive over.

Liverpool eventually gathered their senses after this Stoke one-two and began to play their way back into the game, exploiting the space just in front of the Potters' back four.

Gerrard hit a shot just wide, which he failed to hit cleanly, from Stewart Downing's left-wing cross before Asmir Begovic smothered a Suarez effort at his near post.

Rodgers brought off Suso at the interval and his replacement, Raheem Sterling, created an early chance for Suarez at the near post, which he knocked wide.

Stoke then hit Liverpool from another set-piece on 49 minutes to score three goals in a league game for the first time in 13 months.

Andy Wilkinson's throw-in on the left was flicked on by Jones and Walters controlled the ball beautifully on his chest before volleying it home right-footed.

Suarez became an even bigger hate figure for Stoke fans when he caught Begovic high with his boot as he challenged for the ball and got away with a booking.

But the Potters faithful could hardly accuse Webb of favouritism and the official erred on the side of leniency by not showing defender Geoff Cameron a second yellow card for his foul on Sterling.

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LFC bullied into submission on a wet Wednesday at the Britannia. THE true litmus test of a team is whether they can deliver on a cold, wet Wednesday night in Stoke then Liverpool FC failed it miserably. Once again a promising step forward was followed by one backwards as the joy of the Reds' ruthless 4-0 mauling of Fulham was swiftly erased.

Brendan Rodgers' side got exactly what they deserved on a bitterly disappointing evening at the Britannia Stadium. Skipper Steven Gerrard had urged his teammates to be brave and produce a show of character on Boxing Day but it didn't happen. The Reds were punished for some woeful defending as they wilted amidst the predictable aerial bombardment in a hostile atmosphere and meekly accepted their fate. Rodgers took the unusual step of giving his players Christmas Day off but they failed to reward him for that gesture.

In fact when the manager looks back at the DVD he will surely wish they had spent the previous afternoon working on defending set-pieces.

The lack of consistency shown by Liverpool is galling and an injection of quality into the squad can't come soon enough.

Since they started dishing out three points for a win in 1981, the Reds have never had fewer points than their current haul of 25 at the midway stage of the season. Suddenly, having slipped to 10th place, the prospect of that push for a Champions League spot seems a long way off. Even Stoke now look down on Liverpool.

It had all started so promisingly as Rodgers' side enjoyed a dream start. The Reds' failure to earn a penalty so far this season had been a source of bewilderment for the manager and fans alike. Not since Chelsea were beaten in the league at Anfield back in May had the Reds been awarded a spot-kick with a whole host of appeals waved away so far this term.

The chant 'When Suarez gets a pen, we're going to have a party' has become a regular chant from the travelling Kop. After just 34 seconds last night that moment finally arrived. Luis Suarez latched on to Martin Skrtel's long ball down the right and burst past Ryan Shawcross into the penalty box.

Having been left trailing, the centre-back cynically pulled the Uruguayan's shirt and Howard Webb rightly pointed to the spot.

Steven Gerrard stepped up to send Asmir Begovic the wrong way as a red flare was set-off in the away end. The celebrations didn't last for long.

Infuriatingly, rather than build on it, the Reds swiftly surrendered the initiative as they gifted the Potters an equaliser. Shawcross' long punt forward should have been dealt with but the ball squirmed off the head of Daniel Agger and a slip from Skrtel was pounced on by Jonathan Walters, who coolly slotted past Pepe Reina. It was a wretched goal to concede and suddenly Liverpool looked rattled. By the 12th minute Stoke were in front courtesy of more kamikaze defending.

Rodgers' team talk must have contained a warning about conceding unnecessary set-pieces but it went unheeded and they paid the price. Glenn Whelan swung an inviting corner into the near post and the unmarked Kenwyne Jones headed home. Liverpool regained their composure as the first half progressed. Reina was forced to tip over Matthew Etherington's strike but for the most part it was the Reds asking the questions.

Lucas Leiva picked out Jonjo Shelvey's run into the area but his touch let him down and the chance went begging. The decision to play Suso in such a physical game didn't pay off. He struggled to make an impression as he was muscled out of it and stuck firmly on the periphery. When the young Spaniard did thread through one inviting pass, Suarez failed to take it in his stride.

Just before the half hour mark Stewart Downing skipped past Michael Kightly and crossed for Gerrard, whose first-time strike bobbed agonisingly wide.

Suarez was a constant menace and after wriggling away from Geoff Cameron he was denied by Begovic from a tight angle.

There were plenty of uncomfortable moments at the other end as a result of the Potters pressing high up the pitch, coupled with Liverpool's insistence on trying to pass the ball out from the back.

At times it was crying out for someone to put their foot through it Stoke-style just to clear the danger. The problems the Reds encountered were largely self-inflicted. They were lucky not to fall further behind just before half-time as Reina raced off his line to block a shot from Etherington, who had been gifted half the penalty area to himself. It was no surprise that Suso didn't emerge for the second half as Rodgers replaced him with Raheem Sterling.

The teenage winger's impact was instant as he latched on to Gerrard's pass and raced away down the left. His cross picked out Suarez, whose scuffed shot struck the outside of the post. However, from a position of promise Liverpool shot themselves in the foot as in the 49th minute Stoke wrapped up the points. Once again a set-piece proved the visitors' undoing.

Andy Wilkinson hurled in a long throw, Jones flicked the ball on and Walters took it on his chest before firing a 15-yard volley goalwards. Reina got a hand to it but couldn't keep it out.

Stoke may be unbeaten at home in 10 months but they had only scored eight times in their previous eight home league games this season.

The manner in which they were able to significantly boost that haul last night will be a major concern to Rodgers. This was the first time in 44 league matches that Stoke had netted more than twice.

Glen Johnson could have halved the deficit but he fired over after Downing had directed Gerrard's deep corner back across goal.

Jordan Henderson came on for Lucas on the hour as Rodgers sought fresh legs to try to engineer a fightback.

It didn't happen as Stoke sat back and comfortably held on to their advantage.

Gerrard threatened late on but his 25-yarder was parried away by Begovic.

By then the game was up and the home chants of 'can we play you every week?' were deafening. At the final whistle, Suarez raced straight off down the tunnel in disgust.

Once again, Rodgers finds himself having to summon a response after a chastening defeat.

Stoke City (4-4-2): Begovic, Cameron, Shawcross, Huth, Wilkinson, Kightly (Whitehead 70), Whelan, Nzonzi, Etherington (Shotton 83), Walters, Jones (Crouch 78). Not used: Sorensen, Adam, Upson, Jerome.

Liverpool (4-2-3-1): Reina, Johnson, Agger, Skrtel, Enrique, Lucas (Henderson 59), Gerrard, Downing (Cole 77), Shelvey, Suso (Sterling 46), Suarez. Not used: Jones, Coates, Carragher, Allen.

Referee: Howard Webb

Attendance: 27,490

Goals: Gerrard pen 2, Walters 5, Jones 12, Walters 49.

Bookings: Shawcross, Cameron, Suarez, Whelan.



No Christmas cheer as LFC suffer another reality check

"WE'RE going to have a party when Suarez gets a pen" sang the jubilant travelling supporters as firecrackers exploded into the chilly Britannia air mere moments into Liverpool's visit last night. Come full time, however, the away end was almost empty with the smiles all on Stoke faces after the administering of another firm reality check for Brendan Rodgers' side. Just days after the high of the comprehensive dismantling of Fulham came the damaging low of this disappointing, disheartening defeat. So continues Liverpool's painful evolution under Rodgers. Stoke were never going to be as accommodating as Fulham were at the weekend. Liverpool and Rodgers knew what to expect.

And, as the manager later admitted, his players didn't earn the right to play their football. They didn't fight. They didn't compete. And they didn't deserve anything. But for all the debate over the physical approach of Tony Pulis's men, there was one chief reason why Liverpool lost this game.

They couldn't defend, Daniel Agger and Martin Skrtel suffering their worst collective performance in an age against the power and presence of goalscorers Jonathan Walters and Kenwyne Jones.

Not even a first penalty in 31 games, awarded for a foul on Luis Suarez after just 34 seconds and converted by Steven Gerrard, could provide a platform for victory. Instead, it merely irked Stoke into a response, Walters and Jones putting the hosts ahead within 11 minutes before the former netted again shortly after half-time.

Defeat – only Liverpool's third Boxing Day reverse in 25 years – will hurt. Not least because it allows Stoke to move three points clear of Rodgers' men, who now stand eight points off the Champions League places.

Certainly, the manager's talk of a possible second-placed finish appears as fanciful as most Liverpool supporters believed. The path back to the top will be a long one. This was always going to be a game in which Rodgers' unshakeable faith in his philosophy would be severely tested. Maybe the Northern Irishman needs to now compromise on those beliefs; after all, the right way is always the winning way. Too many players failed to perform last night; the defence creaking, Jonjo Shelvey anonymous, even Lucas Leiva struggling to match Stoke's high intensity. Liverpool's record of 25 points from 19 games equals their worst such return since three points for a win were introduced in 1981. That came three years ago, when Roy Hodgson was sacked after losing the next game.

Rodgers isn't in anything like the same predicament. But the manager must take his share of the blame last night, not least by naming an unchanged side that included the slight Suso in midfield – the failure of the Spaniard to reappear for the start of the second half was sadly inevitable.

Suarez, one of very few positives for Liverpool, had angered Tony Pulis with a poor dive during the dreadful goalless draw between the sides at Anfield in October.

Yet there could have been no complaints when, after just 34 seconds, referee Howard Webb, of all people, pointed to the spot after Suarez was clearly tugged back by Ryan Shawcross having chased down a searching Skrtel pass, Gerrard then sending Asmir Begovic the wrong way from the spot.

Rodgers, though, will have been furious that Stoke were gifted a way back into the game in just the fifth minute.

It was a soft goal to concede too, Agger misdirecting his attempted headed clearance from a Shawcross punt and Skrtel then slipping to give Walters enough time to clinically pick his spot.

And it got worse for Liverpool seven minutes later. Jones was allowed to meet Glenn Whelan's left-wing corner at the near post and his header beat the efforts of Glen Johnson to clear off the line. Stoke then set about business as usual, pressing Liverpool high up the pitch and thumping long balls down the channels for Walters and Matthew Etherington to chase.

The latter prompted Pepe Reina into two decent saves, tipping over a fierce shot

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Competition: League

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and later atoning for a poor clearance by smothering the unmarked winger's far-post effort. Liverpool were in danger of being bullied out of the match. But their response before the interval gave brief encouragement. Both Shelvey and Suarez were let down by poor control when found free inside the area by Lucas and Suso respectively, while Stewart Downing twice created chances down the left wing, first dancing past Michael Kightly and cutting back for Gerrard to hit inches wide and then finding Suarez with a similar move only for the striker to snatch at the opportunity and fire high and wide. The Uruguayan then came close either side of the break. A brilliant piece of skill saw Suarez lose Huth and smash a shot from the angle that was held by Begovic and then, two minutes after the restart, he struck the outside of the post after losing Shawcross to meet substitute Raheem Sterling's cross. But the game was over two minutes later. A long throw from Andy Wilkinson was flicked on by Jones and Walters was allowed time to chest the ball and volley brilliantly towards the top corner, Reina unable to keep the ball out. That was that. Liverpool kept going but there was no real belief they could fight their way back into the game, Stoke happy to plug away at what they do best. Not quite back to the drawing board for Liverpool. But it will feel like it this morning.

MAN OF THE MATCH. Luis Suarez. By far Liverpool's most dangerous attacking threat

The Sentinel

Jon Walters chief tormentor as Potters climb above Reds

JON Walters, that boyhood Evertonian, was Liverpool's chief tormentor as Stoke leapfrogged the Reds into eighth spot on the back of last night's excellent efforts. The Stoke faithful were catching their breath after seeing their goal-shy side hit two in the first dozen minutes in an aggressive response to Liverpool's early penalty. And Walters, having fired Stoke level during those dramatic early skirmishes, was the man who then popped up with a terrific volley to make it 3-1 just after the break. This was a Stoke side letting its hair down in attack – certainly compared to their more disciplined displays of late – after coming out fighting following the loss of that early goal in front of a stunned Boothend. Victory last night also made it nine unbeaten in the Premier League for Stoke – just two short of their all-time top-flight record – and on this form you wouldn't bet against them accomplishing 11 undefeated with games to come against Southampton at home and a faltering Manchester City away. Events last night kicked off with a bang – both on and off the field – as Stoke quickly made amends for a truly awful start. Ryan Shawcross was in dire straits the moment Luis Suarez took him on down Liverpool's right channel and started cutting in towards the Stoke area. Shawcross began tugging him outside the area and Suarez, never one to break his neck to stay on his feet, bided his time until he was in the box and then took a predictable tumble to win his penalty after just 33 seconds. Shawcross was booked and now misses Saturday's clash with Southampton after stacking up five yellows. A red smoke bomb then exploded deafeningly among the Liverpool fans before Steven Gerrard sent Asmir Begovic the wrong way from the penalty spot. The red smoke was still drifting across the ground – not to mention the red mist among the Stoke fans – by the time they saw their team level during a breathless beginning. It was Shawcross partially atoning for earlier events by lofting a long free-kick forward and seeing the ball bounce off an uncertain Daniel Agger to leave Jon Walters skating through and finishing with aplomb. Stoke, with Michael Kightly replacing Ryan Shotton their only change, were feeding off their joyous fans and the decibels soon went into orbit as Kenwyne Jones headed City into a stunning lead by only the 12th minute. A seemingly routine Glenn Whelan corner from the Stoke left was met by a firm Jones header and Glenn Johnson, the man on the Liverpool line, saw his view blocked by Shawcross as the ball sneaked inside the near post. Even Gerrard was being panicked into a shoddy pass as Stoke played on adrenalin during a frantic first quarter to the evening. And it might have been 3-1 by the 22nd minute after Steven Nzonzi pulled the ball back from the right for Matthew Etherington to let fly and Pepe Reina to tip over. Begovic saved at Suarez's feet, then Gerrard drove inches wide from Stewart Downing's low cross, as Liverpool livened themselves up amid a tasty old atmosphere approaching the half-hour mark. Suarez then wormed his way out of Geoff Cameron's grasp to fire hard and low from an angle, but Begovic kept his legs shut at the near post to preserve Stoke's one-goal advantage. Stoke continued to attack with gusto at the other end, meanwhile, as the likes of Walters put their head down and tried to poke holes in Liverpool's nervous rearguard every time they took possession. Raheem Steling entered the fray after the break and immediately cut the ball back for Suarez to scuff his shot wide at the near post. But after four minutes of the second period a throw from the left was flicked on by Jones for Walters, some 12 yards from goal, he chested down and hooked a superb right-footed volley past Reina's dive into the keeper's top right-hand corner for 3-1. You couldn't keep Suarez out of the action and there were a few question marks over his true intentions when his foot was raised to send Begovic spiralling

through the air as they converged on a high ball.

The subsequent yellow card for the controversial Uruguayan was greeted with predictable delight from Stoke's already giddy supporters. Cameron was heart-in-mouth when Sterling went over the already booked American, but referee Howard Webb sensibly waved the Stoke defender away and simply awarded a free-kick. Suarez did smash one into the Stoke net in the 65th minute, but the whistle had already gone a few seconds earlier when substitute Jordan Henderson slipped and handled inside the area. Shawcross was then in a sweat when stumbling right on the edge of the box and bringing down Stewart Downing, but again the referee looked generously upon the home side and confined himself to just the free-kick. The home side were content to sit deep on their lead and rely on the break, it seemed, as the likes of Gerrard and Suarez continued to prod and probe Stoke's stubborn defences. And a promising Stoke break might have yielded a fourth as Etherington centred from the left for sub Dean Whitehead to clatter innocently into Reina just seconds after stepping off the bench. Glenn Whelan then suffered a couple of dodgy moments in front of his own goal, but his team-mates combined typically to quell the danger before their increasingly-desperate visitors could pounce. And then Begovic made a late save from Gerrard to further frustrate Liverpool's timid efforts and their hopes of making inroads into Stoke's unassailable advantage.

BBC

Stoke City extended their unbeaten Premier League run to nine games with an impressive Boxing Day victory over Liverpool.

The Reds have never won in the league at the Britannia Stadium – and manager Brendan Rodgers fared no better than his predecessors despite seeing his side take an early lead.

Steven Gerrard put the visitors ahead with a penalty after Ryan Shawcross fouled Luis Suarez but Jon Walters and Kenwyne Jones led a stunning response with two quick goals to put Stoke in front.

Walters scored a spectacular third just after half-time as Stoke did not simply overpower Liverpool but also showed more quality in crucial areas. Stoke's victory moves them up to eighth place in the table and also means they have gone 16 games unbeaten at their hostile home fortress.

And it was easy to see why as they showed tremendous character and heart to sweep aside their early setback and run out thoroughly deserved winners.

Liverpool were just too lightweight and ineffective in too many areas, with the battling Suarez a glowing exception.

Rodgers will be desperate for reinforcements such as Daniel Sturridge and Thomas Ince to arrive in January to flesh out a squad that currently lacks the quality required.

Stoke's fans had already marked out Suarez as the villain of the piece even before he tumbled as Shawcross hauled him down from behind in the second minute.

Amid a tumultuous, angry response from the home support Gerrard remained calm to convert the penalty – Liverpool's first spot-kick in 31 games.

If Liverpool thought this early strike would dent Stoke's self-belief they were sadly mistaken and the hosts were level inside three minutes, Walters beating Pepe Reina with a powerful finish after Martin Skrtel slipped as he tried to deal with a long ball.

The game was turned on its head inside 12 minutes as Liverpool failed to deal with Stoke's trademark aerial power. Jones beat Daniel Agger to Glenn Whelan's corner at the near post to head in.

Stoke were pressurising Liverpool in all parts of the pitch and it took a magnificent Reina save to stop Matthew Etherington's rising drive, and at the other end Gerrard was narrowly off target after good work by Stewart Downing, with Suarez also testing Asmir Begovic.

Rodgers replaced Suso, who looked out of his depth, with Raheem Sterling at the start of the second half, only to see Stoke extend their lead within four minutes of the restart.

Suarez had just failed with an opportunist attempt when Walters showed great technique to master Jones's flick from Andy Wilkinson's long throw, control with his chest and volley high past Reina.

Liverpool's main threat throughout was Suarez, the Uruguayan tirelessly chasing every lost cause. He became even less popular with the Stoke fans after a high challenge on Begovic that brought a yellow card from referee Howard Webb. But for the remainder of the game Stoke contained what little Liverpool threat there was to emphasise their steady progress this season.

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90:00+4:03 Full time The referee blows his whistle to end the game.
90:00+1:10 Long distance effort from Luis Suarez misses to the left of the goal.
89:12 The referee blows for offside. Asmir Begovic takes the free kick.
88:57 Steven Gerrard takes a shot. Save by Asmir Begovic.
87:53 Foul by Dean Whitehead on Sanchez Jose Enrique, free kick awarded. Jonjo Shelvey takes the direct free kick.
85:41 Luis Suarez has a direct shot on goal from the free kick.
85:41 Booking Glenn Whelan goes into the referee's book for unsporting behaviour.
85:37 Glenn Whelan challenges Luis Suarez unfairly and gives away a free kick.
83:17 Foul by Sanchez Jose Enrique on Steven Nzonzi, free kick awarded. Glenn Whelan takes the free kick.
82:01 Asmir Begovic takes the indirect free kick.
82:01 Substitution Substitution Ryan Shotton joins the action as a substitute, replacing Matthew Etherington.
82:01 Jonjo Shelvey is flagged offside by the assistant referee.
81:44 Steven Gerrard takes a shot. Blocked by Robert Huth.
81:12 Corner taken by Luis Suarez from the right by-line, Geoff Cameron makes a clearance.
77:05 Substitution Stoke makes a substitution, with Peter Crouch coming on for Kenwyne Jones.
76:25 Substitution Substitution Joe Cole comes on in place of Stewart Downing.
76:07 Andy Wilkinson takes a shot. Blocked by Martin Skrtel.
75:11 Free kick awarded for a foul by Jonjo Shelvey on Steven Nzonzi. Free kick taken by Ryan Shawcross.
72:05 Glenn Whelan takes an inswinging corner from the left by-line played to the near post, Steven Gerrard makes a clearance.
70:29 Dean Whitehead concedes a free kick for a foul on Jose Reina. Direct free kick taken by Jose Reina.
68:47 Free kick taken by Asmir Begovic.
68:47 Substitution Substitution Dean Whitehead on for Michael Kightly.
68:47 The assistant referee signals for offside against Luis Suarez.
68:38 Luis Suarez takes a shot. Blocked by Ryan Shawcross.
66:43 Stewart Downing fouled by Ryan Shawcross, the ref awards a free kick. Stewart Downing crosses the ball from the free kick left-footed from right wing, Andy Wilkinson makes a clearance.
64:42 Jordan Henderson is penalised for a handball. Asmir Begovic takes the indirect free kick.
62:27 Geoff Cameron concedes a free kick for a foul on Raheem Sterling. Free kick crossed right-footed by Steven Gerrard, save made by Asmir Begovic.
60:04 Asmir Begovic takes the direct free kick.
60:04 Booking Luis Suarez receives a yellow card for unsporting behaviour.
59:13 Unfair challenge on Asmir Begovic by Luis Suarez results in a free kick.
58:08 Substitution Liverpool makes a substitution, with Jordan Henderson coming on for Leiva Lucas.
57:18 Kenwyne Jones challenges Daniel Agger unfairly and gives away a free kick. Martin Skrtel restarts play with the free kick.
56:30 The assistant referee flags for offside against Michael Kightly. Glen Johnson restarts play with the free kick.
56:07 Stewart Downing takes the inswinging corner, clearance by Robert Huth.
55:40 Stewart Downing takes an inswinging corner to the near post, Jonathan Walters makes a clearance.
52:02 Effort on goal by Kenwyne Jones from just inside the penalty box goes harmlessly over the target.
51:23 Foul by Michael Kightly on Sanchez Jose Enrique, free kick awarded. Jose Reina takes the direct free kick.
49:29 Inswinging corner taken by Steven Gerrard, Shot from deep inside the area by Glen Johnson clears the crossbar.
48:23 Kenwyne Jones provided the assist for the goal.
48:23 Goal scored Goal - Jonathan Walters - Stoke 3 - 1 Liverpool Jonathan Walters finds the back of the net with a goal from inside the area to the top left corner of the goal. Stoke 3-1 Liverpool.
46:48 Close range shot by Luis Suarez misses to the left of the goal.
46:08 Free kick awarded for an unfair challenge on Stewart Downing by Matthew Etherington. Glen Johnson restarts play with the free kick.
45:01 The referee blows his whistle to start the second half.
45:01 Substitution Substitution Raheem Sterling is brought on as a substitute for Jesus Fernandez Saez.
45:00+1:07 Half time It is the end of the first-half.
43:25 Matthew Etherington takes a shot. Jose Reina makes a save.
41:49 Jonjo Shelvey takes a shot. Save by Asmir Begovic.
40:43 Corner taken by Steven Gerrard played to the near post, clearance made by Glenn Whelan.
39:51 Shot from outside the box by Steven Gerrard goes wide right of the target.
38:31 Inswinging corner taken left-footed by Stewart Downing from the right by-line, save by Asmir Begovic.
37:11 Unfair challenge on Andy Wilkinson by Jesus Fernandez Saez results in a free kick. Free kick taken by Asmir Begovic.
35:47 Luis Suarez takes a shot. Save by Asmir Begovic.
34:23 Corner taken by Steven Gerrard, clearance by Matthew Etherington.
34:06 Luis Suarez takes a short corner.
31:47 Robert Huth fouled by Luis Suarez, the ref awards a free kick. Direct free kick taken by Robert Huth.
30:37 Corner taken by Glenn Whelan from the left by-line.
28:27 Luis Suarez produces a left-footed shot from deep inside the penalty area which goes wide of the left-hand post.

27:42 Shot from just outside the box by Steven Gerrard misses to the left of the goal.
21:51 Corner taken by Matthew Etherington from the right by-line, save by Jose Reina.
21:40 Matthew Etherington takes a shot. Save by Jose Reina.
15:09 Jonathan Walters gives away a free kick for an unfair challenge on Daniel Agger. Direct free kick taken by Jose Reina.
11:51 The assist for the goal came from Glenn Whelan.
11:51 Goal scored Goal - Kenwyne Jones - Stoke 2 - 1 Liverpool Kenwyne Jones grabs a headed goal from inside the six-yard box. Stoke 2-1 Liverpool.
11:25 Inswinging corner taken by Glenn Whelan from the left by-line played to the near post,
10:08 Corner taken left-footed by Matthew Etherington, save made by Jose Reina.
7:15 Glen Johnson is caught offside. Indirect free kick taken by Asmir Begovic.
5:34 Glenn Whelan takes an inswinging corner from the left by-line played to the near post, Jonjo Shelvey makes a clearance.
4:24 Assist on the goal came from Ryan Shawcross.
4:24 Goal scored Goal - Jonathan Walters - Stoke 1 - 1 Liverpool Jonathan Walters finds the net with a goal from inside the box to the top right corner of the goal. Stoke 1-1 Liverpool.
3:19 Daniel Agger takes the free kick.
3:19 Booking Geoff Cameron shown a yellow card.
3:13 Geoff Cameron challenges Leiva Lucas unfairly and gives away a free kick.
1:23 Luis Suarez provided the assist for the goal.
1:23 Goal scored Goal - Steven Gerrard - Stoke 0 - 1 Liverpool Steven Gerrard scores a placed penalty. Stoke 0-1 Liverpool.
0:39 Booking Ryan Shawcross is booked.
0:35 Penalty awarded for a foul by Ryan Shawcross on Luis Suarez.
0:00 The game begins.