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Opposition: Manchester United
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13 January 2013

THE TIMES

United almost pay price for dallying in comfort zone

Manchester United 2 Van Persie 19, Vidic 54

Liverpool 1 Sturridge 57

Referee H Webb Attendance 75,501

By the final minutes of this strange encounter, Manchester United's players were looking so nervous and Sir Alex Ferguson chewing so frenetically on the touchline that it was hard not to wonder how they had ended up making such heavy weather of a match in which they had seemed to be home and dry.

It is at moments like that, when they are sitting so awkwardly upon a lead, that United's advantage at the top of the Barclays Premier League -- stretched to ten points by the final whistle at Old Trafford, restored to seven by Manchester City's win at the Emirates Stadium later in the day -- must look just a little less daunting. But daunting it is because, no matter what weaknesses they have shown this season, many of them probed by Liverpool in the closing stages yesterday, they continue to thrive, thanks to the goalscoring prowess of Robin van Persie.

It remains to be seen whether City can claw back that deficit and Jose Mourinho, who watched from the directors' box yesterday, might acknowledge that his stuttering Real Madrid team must raise their game if they are to beat United to a place in the Champions League quarter-finals. United are far from infallible, but, with Van Persie in attack, they usually have what it takes to gloss over weaknesses. Ferguson suggested that United's first-half performance yesterday was "as well as we have played for a long time". And it was certainly good, with Rafael Da Silva, Michael Carrick, Tom Cleverley and Danny Welbeck helping to drive them forward, but it was not the type of electrifying performance we would once have associated with United at their best. It was controlled and efficient as they took a nineteenth-minute lead through Van Persie's 21st goal of the season, but Liverpool, whose first-half display was awful, were outplayed rather than overrun. When Nemanja Vidic got a decisive touch to Patrice Evra's header to make it 2-0 after 53 minutes, it looked like this could be the most chastening afternoon of Brendan Rodgers's tenure as Liverpool manager. Rodgers was putting it mildly when he used the word "tentative" to describe their efforts to that point, but they improved considerably thereafter, as Daniel Sturridge quickly reduced the deficit, and might have claimed a point. Ferguson said that United's defending in the closing stages was "a bit erratic and even desperate at times". Desperation, or at least unease, is understandable when an opponent as slippery as Luis Suarez is dribbling into a crowded penalty area, but Ferguson must have been concerned by his team's difficulty in stemming the sudden flow of passes to Liverpool's front players, hence his decision to send on Phil Jones to stiffen the midfield as well as introducing Chris Smalling in place of a tiring Vidic.

Earlier it had seemed unimaginable that Liverpool would force the issue. In the first half they played as poorly as they have done all season under Rodgers, lacking intensity, drive and resilience, but also conceding possession carelessly on occasions, Joe Allen being a particular culprit. For all the pre-match focus on Suarez, the Liverpool forward had to drop deep in search of possession and, on the odd occasion that he had the opportunity to run at the home defence, he found Rio Ferdinand and Vidic in determined mood. The opening goal came after a patient build-up that gathered pace when Shinji Kagawa, Welbeck and Cleverley, faced with congestion in front of them, combined to find Evra in space in an advanced position on the left-hand side. Evra's cross, drilled into the penalty area, was a good one, but Van Persie made it look even better, darting ahead of Daniel Agger to attack the ball before sweeping a low shot past Pepe Reina. The first half was summed up when United almost went 2-0 up just before the interval. With Raheem Sterling ball-watching, Rafael intercepted a Steven Gerrard pass and continued running forward, allowing Carrick to pick out his run with an incisive pass. Having got behind Glen Johnson, Rafael saw his cross flicked goalwards by Van Persie in elegant fashion, but the forward was denied by Martin Skrtel's goalline clearance. The introduction of Sturridge at half-time gave Liverpool more attacking threat, but within eight minutes they were farther behind. After a cynical foul by Skrtel on Welbeck, Van Persie swung over a free kick at which the visiting defence stood still as Evra rose to meet the ball with a header that deflected in off Vidic. Television replays showed that Vidic was in an offside position when Evra headed the ball, but the officials could be forgiven for not spotting that slight touch from the United captain. Rodgers, in any case, expressed himself more unhappy with his team's defending.

Four minutes later Liverpool reduced the deficit. An Evra pass was intercepted by Gerrard, who, after an exchange with Sterling, struck a low shot that David De Gea could not hold. The loose ball was converted by Sturridge, following up well to give Liverpool 33 minutes plus stoppage time to find an equaliser. When Rodgers and his staff study the match at the training ground today, they will wonder how their players failed to do so.

Sturridge, in particular, stretched the home defence, making some intelligent runs, but the forward missed his new team's clearest chance, sidefooting his shot over the crossbar after another of those twisting Suarez runs caused panic among United's players. Rodgers felt that his team might, by the end of what had at times been a traumatic afternoon, have deserved a point. On the balance of the final half-hour, possibly, but Liverpool, who have made progress of late but do not yet look good enough to trouble the Premier League's better teams, did not start playing until United had reached their comfort zone.

The lesson for United would be that, even with Van Persie in the team, taking

residence in the comfort zone is not advisable. Seven points clear they may be, but they cannot afford to slow down.

9 Appearances in past ten for United in which Van Persie has scored

17 Van Persie league goals this season (on course for 29 in total, one short of last season's tally at Arsenal)

11 League goals by United defenders this season: Evra 4, Evans 3, Da Silva 2, Buttner and Vidic

160 Home league games in a row in which United have scored



Relief for Ferguson after United survive Rodgers' belated change of tack

English football's most illustrious rivalry produced yet more regrets at Old Trafford but this time they originated from a wildly fluctuating contest only. It must be progress. Brendan Rodgers rued Liverpool's failure to turn up until the second half and Sir Alex Ferguson Manchester United's inability to score "three or four" when strolling in the ascendancy. Ferguson, at least, had the consolation of inching closer to title No20 at the expense of his fiercest foe.

Old Trafford was on edge with Ferguson frantically tapping his watch when Howard Webb called time on a spirited Liverpool recovery and a United victory that yet again demonstrated their in-built tendency to avoid the easy route. For almost an hour the league leaders, ahead through Robin van Persie's 21st goal of the season and an accidental first from Nemanja Vidic, gave credence to Ferguson's claim that he does not look at Liverpool's league position these days, such was their superiority over the men from Anfield.

The half-time introduction of Daniel Sturridge and an overdue tactical tweak from Rodgers altered everything, however, but the belated impetus and threat from Liverpool fell short of recording a significant comeback. Regret ultimately came second to relief for Ferguson. His Anfield counterpart has still to beat a team in the top half of the Premier League this season and only when Rodgers abandoned his favoured 4-3-3 to match United's 4-4-2 did Liverpool prosper.

Another tale of what might have been offers little consolation to the losers of this fixture. It was Ferguson's tactical and selection choices that worked from the start, with Ashley Young tireless on the right flank until suffering a knee injury that resulted in him leaving the stadium on crutches and Michael Carrick the decisive influence in midfield. All the focus on the duel between Van Persie and Luis Suarez was undermined by the lack of support Liverpool gave their outstanding forward. He must have looked on enviously as United offered the Dutchman and others opportunity to have sealed three points by half-time. Rodgers had promised bravery in possession and intent from Liverpool but there was a huge disparity between the manager's words and the actions of his players until the second half. The visitors were strangely passive in the face of United's superior passing and a shape that enabled Ferguson's team to dominate Liverpool's three-man midfield, penning the visitors deep inside their own half. With Rafael da Silva and Patrice Evra facing little resistance from Raheem Sterling and Stewart Downing, Carrick and Tom Cleverley threading passes almost at will through the centre, Liverpool were unable to muster one meaningful attack before the interval. The breakthrough typified United's superiority on the ball as they waited patiently for an opening then produced a devastating attack led by Carrick. Shinji Kagawa, Danny Welbeck and Cleverley all combined to release Evra down the left and when his cross arrived hard and low across the area Van Persie escaped Daniel Agger to convert beyond Jose Reina.

A slight bobble led to Van Persie shooting over when Young picked him out moments later, Agger blocked Welbeck's effort following a blind backpass from the poor Joe Allen and the United striker produced a wild finish having breezed beyond Martin Skrtel. Liverpool's response was non-existent in an attacking sense and Cleverley was inches away from doubling United's lead with a left-foot volley from Allen's weak defensive header.

The greater reprieve arrived on the stroke of half-time when Rafael was released in behind Glen Johnson by Carrick, stumbled, but squared for Van Persie who back-heeled past Reina. Skrtel blocked on the line and it required a brave stop from the Liverpool keeper to prevent Kagawa converting on the follow-up.

Rodgers had to act at the interval and introduced Sturridge alongside the isolated Suarez while matching United's formation. The effect on the Liverpool performance was immediate yet the size of their task increased when Vidic inadvertently headed United further ahead early in the second half. Van Persie produced an inviting free-kick, after Skrtel had been booked for pulling down Welbeck when clear, and Evra sent a free header past Reina at the far post.

Forensic replays, however, showed a final touch off Vidic's forehead had diverted the ball under the keeper's arm. Liverpool were offered a route back within three minutes when Steven Gerrard seized on a careless pass from Cleverley and forced David de Gea into his first genuine save of note. De Gea could only parry and Sturridge reacted quicker than Rafael to the loose ball to convert his second goal in two Liverpool appearances since a pounds 12m arrival from Chelsea. Finally the away section had reason to hope. Sturridge twice hit the side netting and the fit-again Fabio Borini volleyed just wide from 20 yards after coming off the bench. Sturridge then blazed over after Rafael had failed to clear under pressure from Suarez. "It was desperate at times," admitted Ferguson. United had their moments in a frenetic finale too, with Reina saving well from Kagawa and Van Persie. On a day members of the Hillsborough families were invited to watch the game by Sir Bobby Charlton, a game that has turned increasingly poisonous in

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recent years returned to the tense, fraught, absorbing spectacle it should be. But only United overcame their regrets.

Man of the match Michael Carrick (Manchester United)

The Mail

SIR ALEX CAN RELY ON ROBIN; Van Persie sinks bitter rivals with yet another great show ManUtd 2 Liverpool 1

IT would have been the most memorable backheel at Old Trafford since the days of Denis Law in a sky blue shirt. Antonio Valencia whipped the ball in low from the right and Robin van Persie clipped it in a manner traditionally classified as cheeky, only to meet his match in the athleticism of Liverpool goalkeeper Pepe Reina.

So it was a relatively unexceptional afternoon for van Persie.

Just the one goal, and the free-kick delivery for what proved to be the winner. All in a day's work for the man seemingly destined to deliver the title to Manchester United. Ho hum. It is a measure of van Persie's achievements this season that, having pretty much won the game for United, the man-of-the-match spoils, on television and in the mind of man-ager Sir Alex Ferguson, went to his partner, Danny Welbeck. They are so used to lauding van Persie around these parts that he needs to be almost superhuman to get the recognition these days: scoring one and making the other in a 2-1 win over bitter rivals? Close but no cigar.

Had that backheeled goal-of-theseason contender gone in, maybe the judges would have softened on the value of RVP's contribution.

Ferguson admitted that his team were happy to hear the final whistle at the end, which was markedly different to the state of play at halftime, when United led 1-0. So superior were the league leaders in the first half that the interval talk centred around regrets over how far ahead they should have been.

When that lead doubled in the 54th minute, there were fears Brendan Rodgers' Liverpool could be in for a sobering session. Instead, they were back in the game four minutes later through Daniel Sturridge. Liverpool then dominated the remaining half hour without doing enough to expose the inconsistent David de Gea. It is too late for Liverpool, who have now lost both league matches to United for the first time in six years, but there was a lesson here for the rest of the league. Attack and the champions elect look vulnerable. When Rodgers paired Sturridge with Luis Suarez after half-time, it was a different match. Alone, Suarez had struggled. His talent is still sublime, of course, but he could not make headway in isolation. Sturridge arrived like the cavalry and, suddenly, United were stretched. In the 85th minute, Liverpool's [pounds sterling]12million acquisition should have levelled the scores after Suarez fought and fought to find a way through the massed ranks of United's defence. Finally in the clear, he passed to Sturridge, who blasted his shot over the bar. The cool head he displayed in the 57th minute could have breathed some life into the title race. Instead, United remain comfortably in charge, heading for home at a canter. Liverpool are only historical rivals right now. Ferguson said he wasn't even aware of their league position before this game -- he knows how to wound, that guy -- and the gap presently stands at 24 points. There looked to be all of that between the teams for the first 45 minutes, less so by the end. Rodgers will surely get there with Liverpool, given time, but the gulf in quality remains daunting.

Steven Gerrard has struggled to dominate games this season and Joe Allen was removed after 77 minutes, eclipsed by Tom Cleverley and Michael Carrick in the heart of the action. Then there is van Persie. Liverpool may feel they have their equivalent in Suarez but he has spent much of the season lonely. United can call on Welbeck, Javier Hernandez and Wayne Rooney to complement their match winner. All of them would walk into Liverpool's team. Rodgers said last week that he wasn't certain Sturridge could yet last 90 minutes, and the moment of full fitness cannot come soon enough. Even now, Liverpool are undercooked as an attacking threat, while United's forward play is hiding a pretty substantial defensive frailty.

Welbeck was linked with a loan move to Reading this week: Ferguson's reaction was bemusement, followed by laughter. As if. Keeping track of Welbeck -- or Hernandez or Rooney -- is what affords van Persie the space he needs to win matches. For the first goal here, he got in front of Daniel Agger to meet a low cross from Patrice Evra and turn it smartly into the goal with a deft side-foot shot across his body. Blink and you would have missed it. Agger certainly did.

He gave van Persie a half-sight of the target, which is all he needs. He has now scored in nine of his last 10 appearances. It is Roberto Mancini's nightmare come true. United could have been further ahead when the hapless Allen presented the ball to Welbeck, only to be saved by a great block from Agger. In the last minute of the first half, Van Persie almost scored with another flamboyant backheel, which Martin Skrtel blocked on the line before Reina threw himself at Shinji Kagawa to smother the rebound. It was Welbeck who won the foul that gave United space to breathe, brought down by Skrtel nine minutes into the second half. Van Persie whipped in the free-kick, Evra met it at the far post and the ball glanced off the face of Nemanja Vidic on its way into the net. Repeated replays showed Vidic to be marginally offside when the ball was delivered, but his touch was so minute the linesman probably did not realise he had become active. Chalk another one up to the complexities of football's offside laws, which have afforded luckless officials an additional six pages of ways to be wrong.

And that would have been it were it not for another moment in which de Gea placed a question mark against his long-term future at Old Trafford. Gerrard shot, low and hard, and de Gea pushed it out in front of him rather than steering it away from goal, allowing Sturridge to react first and bury the loose ball. It is his second goal in two games for Liverpool. no mean start and probably the sort of

return his former club, Chelsea, would have been looking for from a goalscorer. Certainly one commanding, say, four times the fee Liverpool paid for Sturridge.

The Daily Telegraph

Van Persie the difference for resilient United
Manchester United 2 Van Persie 19, Vidic 54
Liverpool 1 Sturridge 57 Att: 75,501

Target man, talisman, Robin van Persie is looking every elegant inch the man for all reasons in the title race. He scored his 17th Premier League goal of the season, and created the second for Nemanja Vidic, filling with belief those Manchester United fans waving their 'Van The Man' scarves that the No20 will reflect their title total come May. The champions, Manchester City, prevailed 2-0 at Arsenal but will still feel that the seven-point gap would not exist if they had managed to land Van Persie in the summer. He remains the difference.

His work in the first 55 minutes here was crucially important as Liverpool then rallied thrillingly. Daniel Sturridge had arrived at the break, scoring and quickly forging a promising understanding with Luis Suarez. Sturridge gave Liverpool a forward focus, an able accomplice for Suarez. Liverpool ended the day vanquished but their supporters left a crowing Old Trafford with hope in their hearts, with further evidence that Brendan Rodgers is guiding them in the right direction.

They still need Joe Allen to be more assertive, for Steven Gerrard to be pushed on, liberating him from his deep-midfield patrolling duties. They still need the exciting Raheem Sterling to continue developing, improving his concentration levels. They still need strengthening. They are 24 points adrift of United and the gulf was particularly evident in a first half controlled by Michael Carrick and Tom Cleverley, Van Persie and Danny Welbeck. If victory over old foe felt particularly sweet, United will have enjoyed other elements. There was a resilience to the way they resisted Liverpool's energetic attempt to prise a point. There were further signs of the promise of Cleverley, who looks to be forming a well-balanced, legs-andbrains midfield axis with Carrick. There were substitute appearances by Phil Jones and Chris Smalling, reflecting United's depth of options. There was much for the watching England manager, Roy Hodgson, to savour with 10 Englishmen starting and four coming off the bench. Ferguson was effusive in his praise of Welbeck afterwards, understandably so. United's manager had surprisingly broken the Van Persie-Javier Hernandez axis, giving Welbeck a chance that the boyhood United fan took exuberantly. His pace and industry were a constant problem for Liverpool. The final touch needs enhancing but the raw materials are there in abundance. On a day heaving with positives, Ferguson was also treated to forceful displays by his full-backs, Patrice Evra and Rafael da Silva. With Jonny Evans ruled out with a hamstring problem, Vidic brought authority to a backline that has been too porous this season.

Initially one-sided, this contest between ancient adversaries eventually proved absorbing fare for the 75,501 audience, including some special guests in Jose Mourinho, scouting United before Real Madrid's Champions League encounter, and members of the Hillsborough families, who had been invited by Sir Bobby Charlton. The families had lunch with Sir Bobby and Lady Norma, a typically classy and compassionate gesture by the Charltons in seeking to strengthen relations between the clubs.

They did not look rivals on the pitch in the first half. United were in control, Carrick sweeping passes around, Shinji Kagawa darting here and there, Cleverley driving on and Welbeck and Van Persie taking up intelligent positions. By contrast, Liverpool were poor, lacking ambition. Gerrard was too deep, Allen too timid, Suarez too isolated.

United began building, Van Persie tweaking his sights, bringing Pepe Reina's goal into range. After 17 minutes, the Dutchman had a shot blocked by Martin Skrtel. There was an expectancy around Old Trafford that Van Persie would soon score. He looks an even more accomplished attacker now than when winning Footballer of the Year at Arsenal last season. He looks stronger physically, his body capable of withstanding the buffeting of defenders.

His anticipation was as sharp as ever after 20 minutes. The build-up itself was a joy to behold, showing United at their quick-moving, quickthinking best. The ball flowed from Kagawa and Welbeck to Cleverley and then to Evra down the left. The Frenchman's cross was low and hard but opportunity really knocked because of Van Persie's movement. He stepped back to deceive Daniel Agger, who should have been tighter, should have been more alert.

It was a masterclass in creating space. Van Persie then took a stride quickly towards the incoming ball, transferring it instantly left-footed from 10 yards past Reina. Van Persie stretched out his arms to envelop Evra and Cleverley in a celebratory embrace, the tangle of limbs reflecting the togetherness in the United ranks. United were rampant. Van Persie shot over. Welbeck eluded Skrtel but Agger intervened. Skrtel cleared Van Persie's back-heel off the line. Cleverley ley volleyed wide. Outclassed, Liverpool briefly became fractious. Allen went in late on Carrick. Lucas caught Ashley Young, who did not reappear for the second half and left the ground on crutches. Antonio Valencia replaced Young but it was a Liverpool change that really influenced matters.

Rodgers twisted at the break, send-on Sturridge for Lucas.

Sensing Liverpool's growing threat, United went through the gears after 53 minutes, Welbeck running through and being brought down by Skrtel outside the Liverpool box. Agger indicated he was covering and Howard Webb contented

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himself with a caution for Skrtel. United still made Liverpool pay. When Van Persie lifted the ball to the far post, Evra lost Sterling, stole in ahead of Glen Johnson and made contact with a header, the ball skimming in off Vidic.

Darren Cann, one of the best assistant referees in the world, failed to spot that Vidic was fractionally offside. Most people in the ground assumed that Evra had scored, particularly as he was leading the celebrations.

Liverpool looked aggrieved and pulled one back within four minutes. Carrick and Cleverley were hounded by Gerrard with Sterling seizing on the loose ball and ushering his captain forward. Two touches from Gerrard's right boot nudged the ball into a good shooting position and his third sent a low shot goalwards. David de Gea saved but he pushed the ball towards the onrushing Sturridge, rather than wide of goal. Sturridge calmly swept the ball past De Gea.

Liverpool were invigorated. Sturridge shot over. Fabio Borini fired wide. Yet Kagawa and Van Persie both tested Reina. At the final whistle, United celebrated the three points loudly but Liverpool certainly left with belief enhanced in the Rodgers era.

How strikers compared

Luis Suarez was a match for Robin van Persie in all areas apart from the most crucial -- goals and assists.



THE INDEPENDENT

New dawn fades for limp Liverpool before Sturridge rekindles some self-belief

This was the day when we were supposed to see the brave new face of Liverpool. Instead, we had the somewhat anxious one of Sir Alex Ferguson as he eyed his watch in the last minutes of his latest victory in a season which is beginning to reek of mediocrity. There were, it is true, some moments of redemption as his Manchester United side took another stride towards their 20th title.

Robin van Persie scored his 17th league goal after a rare bout of superior teamwork, a flash of conviction that seemed to have strayed into the wrong game, and when Brendan Rodgers remembered that he was in charge of a self-proclaimed football revolution, Liverpool began to look like a team of half-serious ambition. This development came when Daniel Sturridge was sent on at the start of the second half, by which time United really should have been in cruise control. With Sturridge at last assigned to what we had imagined was the entire purpose of his [pounds sterling]12m signing from Chelsea, which is to say giving some sustained support to Luis Suarez, United were suddenly obliged to do more than wait for the next clinical thrust of Van Persie. They were fortunate that along with the Dutchman's relentless striking, Michael Carrick continued to suggest his significant resurrection in midfield and Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic were able to pull off one of the more effective policing jobs on Suarez.

The Uruguayan conjured neither broiling controversy nor luminous skill in the first half, which inevitably left Liverpool looking well short of the momentum to prevent the current gap between the clubs stretching to 24 points.

That changed sharply when Sturridge swooped on the loose ball which followed David de Gea's half-save of a shot by Steven Gerrard. For Liverpool it was a way back from the crushing possibility that all the progress they had made since largely outplaying United at Anfield last September - despite a home defeat which left them in the bottom three - had been pretty much a rather large mirage. This was certainly the prospect after Patrice Evra, with his head, and Vidic, with his face, had conspired to turn a superbly flighted free-kick by Van Persie into the Liverpool net. Not only were Liverpool beaten, it seemed, but also caught out in a failure of will and self-belief that would surely have dismayed some of Rodgers's bolder predecessors, and most notably Bill Shankly.

Shankly had a notice placed on the entrance to the players' tunnel that declared, "This is Anfield". He deemed it the last word in intimidation. Yesterday Rodgers would have struggled for the same effect had he arranged for the identity of his team to be painted in the sky above Old Trafford.

This was a pity because so much of his work this season has kindled the view that he really is nursing back to life some of the old Liverpool values. They virtually eviscerated Queen's Park Rangers on their own ground, which may have just been the shock therapy that provoked Harry Redknapp's men into their astonishing resistance to Chelsea and Spurs, and the recent destruction of Sunderland reminded many of the old hauteur of a Liverpool team on rampage.

Yesterday there was little or no encouragement to believe in the new dawn before Sturridge appeared. Rodgers has said that his new player may be on his last chance with a major club and of course he arrived at Anfield on less than a wave of acclaim. Undoubtedly talented, his willingness to cover the hardest professional yards was not exactly shrined in the folklore of his previous clubs, Manchester City and Chelsea. At Old Trafford, though, there was an impressive statement of good intentions and more than a little evidence of superior ability. Certainly there was enough of it to persuade Ferguson that caution was his best policy when Liverpool found some of the best of themselves in the second half. He sent Phil Jones on for a misfiring Shinji Kagawa rather than seek the quick matador kill so often provided by Javier Hernandez.

At the finish Ferguson's relief was palpable. This was a game that threatened to run out of his control. It was also one that gave new reason to re-consider some of the Premier League's wilder claims about its supreme place in the pecking order of world club football. United might just find a vein of superior form. There may be a late flowering of the creativity of a Carrick, who seemed to be in danger

of slipping from sight.

Danny Welbeck, who was somewhat strangely voted man of the man of the match, could move onto a new level and, who knows, perhaps Wayne Rooney will re-emerge with some of his old furies?

None of this is impossible but at Old Trafford last night it was hard not to believe that Van Persie is shaping up as the man whose greatest achievement is to bring some flashes of light to a rather dark season.



DAILY Mirror

1 GIANT STEP FOR MAN U

ANOTHER goal for you know who. Another three points. Another huge step towards that 20th crown.

More importantly, perhaps, further proof that the divide between the two north west giants is now a gulping chasm, 24 points already and likely to extend further. For the Old Trafford fans who celebrated completing United's first home and away double over Liverpool for six seasons, that is all that mattered, all that will be remembered. When Nemanja Vidic inadvertently got the final touch to the Patrice Evra's header, to add to the latest manifestation of Robin van Persie's predatory instincts, it looked like carnage, not a contest.

Michael Carrick set the rhythm, Danny Welbeck was a constant foraging threat, and with Van Persie so lithe and alive, United appeared a class above a Liverpool side staring down the barrel of humiliation.

Instead, what followed was 30 minutes which gave the watching Jose Mourinho his first piece of good news all week, saw Fergie frowning at his watch and left Brendan Rodgers wishing Daniel Sturridge was even half as good as he thinks he is. In the end, Liverpool were left reflecting on a painful truth - if you don't start playing until you are two goals down, the odds are that any response will prove too late.

United held on for victory despite another example of David De Gea's tendency to palm long-range shots straight to an attacker.

And even though it became twitchy, nervy, anxious, at the end it is United who are aiming for the title, Liverpool facing more mid-table frustration.

A frustration stemming from the reality that, until far too late, Liverpool were horribly second best. They allowed Carrick to dictate the play, while Shinji Kagawa and Evra exploited Andre Wisdom's inexperience on the flank and Welbeck was proving dynamic up front.

Surprisingly it took 19 minutes for United to create a chance, but when they did, they took it.

Liverpool actually had seven black shirts inside their own box when Tom Cleverley fed Evra to cross low, but only one man wanted the ball, Van Persie beating Daniel Agger to turn home his 21st of the season.

Proof of his quality, now 65 in his last 77 Premier League starts for Arsenal and United. Titlewinning finishing, as Ferguson and Arsene Wenger both agree.

And given the platform, United took control, Liverpool's passing wayward, Suarez not in the game, the only discordant note coming from the stands as the chants Fergie condemned back in September were repeated.

Van Persie, found by Ashley Young, fired over, and only a terrific block by Agger denied Welbeck after Joe Allen had squandered possession.

Cleverley was a foot wide and, in stoppage time, Martin Skrtel kept out Van Persie's heel-flick, and Kagawa was wiped out by Reina in the frenzied aftermath. Liverpool had offered nothing.

Wisdom blazed their first effort wide at the start of the second half, but when United immediately hit their second it seemed a question of "how many?"

The goal came as the unmarked Evra nodded Van Persie's freekick against Vidic and past Reina. Cue the belated response.

Steven Gerrard caught Carrick in possession, before exchanging passes with Raheem Sterling.

He fired in a shot which De Gea parried and half-time substitute Sturridge tucked home, catching Rafael Da Silva on his heels.

Reina foiled Kagawa at full stretch, but then it was United who were straining to keep the visitors out. Sturridge gave Liverpool a directness they had lacked, Suarez showed his class.

The final 20 minutes were all about Liverpool calling the shots, "United pegged back.

Four times Sturridge found the ball at his feet, the goal in his line of vision, as Suarez created the space for him to prosper in. The best of them, five minutes from time, was a sitter, too.

Rafael failed to show decisive instincts under pressure from Suarez and the ball fell to the former Chelsea man eight yards out. True, it was on his right foot, not his best. But a top player, a player of the quality Sturridge ". has always claimed to be, had to core. He spooned the ball horribly over the bar.

On such moments are matches won and lost, the sort of chance Van Persie has taken all season. That sums up the difference, added to the joy for the majority, anguish for the rest.

Unconvincing, maybe. But United did not care. They had done what they set out to achieve. they remain the ones to beat.

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LIVERPOOL

ECHO

BRENDAN RODGERS had billed the clash with Manchester United as the chance to show just how far Liverpool FC had come. In truth it merely underlined the huge distance they still have to travel. A degree of pride may have been salvaged by the Reds’ gutsy late rally, but that was scant consolation as they suffered defeat at Old Trafford for the fifth successive occasion. This was a painfully avoidable setback where the wounds were self-inflicted. Courage and belief were Rodgers’ watchwords in the build up to the game, but those qualities were conspicuous by their absence during a dismal opening 45 minutes.

All Liverpool showed in a one-sided first half was an inferiority complex as they sat back and allowed United to dictate proceedings. The respect shown to Alex Ferguson’s side was baffling. United may be running away with the Premier League title, but time and time again this season their defensive frailties have been laid bare. However, rather than try to exploit the hosts’ weaknesses by playing on the front foot, Liverpool retreated.

The confidence generated by a prosperous festive period was nowhere to be seen and simply trying to contain United was never going to yield any reward. Where was the passion, the thunderous challenges, the intensity usually associated with fixtures between these fierce rivals? Liverpool were infuriatingly tentative. Only United’s wastefulness in the final third ensured that the damage at the interval wasn’t more severe than Robin van Persie’s clinical strike.

Of course the hosts enjoyed a degree of fortune early in the second half when Patrice Evra’s header was deflected in off Nemanja Vidic, who got away with the fact he had strayed into an offside position.

But this wasn’t a day for hard luck stories or scapegoats. No accusing fingers could be pointed in the direction of referee Howard Webb. This time the inquest was confined to the away dressing room. It was only after going 2-0 down that Liverpool sprung to life. The catalyst for the fightback was substitute Daniel Sturridge, who had replaced Lucas Leiva at half-time. The £12million striker followed up his debut strike against Mansfield by swiftly reducing the deficit and his classy cameo almost rescued a point. Prior to Sturridge’s arrival, Luis Suarez had been hopelessly isolated, but the Uruguayan was energised by finally having some company. Together they helped Liverpool dominate the final half hour but it was all in vain. The manner in which United were clinging on at the end only heightened that sense of ‘what if’.

What if Rodgers had been bold and started Sturridge alongside Suarez? What if the manager had kept faith with Jordan Henderson in midfield rather than Joe Allen? The only change to the side which had hammered Sunderland in their previous league outing was the return of Allen in place of Henderson. It didn’t pay off. Allen endured one of those days where he started badly and his desperation to make amends meant the errors just kept on coming. Passes went astray and needless free-kicks were given away in dangerous areas.

After such a bright start to his Anfield career, the Welshman’s form has dipped alarmingly. Just 22 and still learning his trade he deserves to be cut some slack. That £15million was an investment in the long-term but his struggles yesterday meant Liverpool were unable to get any semblance of control in midfield. The opening exchanges were surprisingly low key but the Reds’ repeated failure to retain possession on a poor playing surface enabled United to gain momentum. Martin Skrtel on his 200th appearance for the club had already made one block to deny van Persie before the prolific Dutchman struck in the 19th minute.

Where was the relentless pressing game Rodgers advocates? It was far too easy as under no pressure whatsoever United knocked the ball around 30 yards out. Stewart Downing got sucked inside, leaving Evra unmarked down the left and the defender crossed for van Persie to slam a first-time shot past Reina.

It could have got considerably worse as van Persie blazed over after being picked out by Ashley Young. Allen’s misplaced pass was then pounced on by Danny Welbeck but Daniel Agger got back to save his team-mate’s blushes.

Welbeck failed to hit the target from a tight angle before Tom Cleverley volleyed narrowly wide after latching on to Allen’s slack defensive header.

Liverpool’s attacking threat in the first half was non-existent. When they did break off the shackles and get out of their own half, passes went astray and Suarez was left to feed off scraps. The visitors were infinitely more impressive off the pitch with their fans refusing to respond to sick chants about Hillsborough and Heysel from the Stretford End. Just before the interval the Reds enjoyed a major let-off. Rafael got away from Glen Johnson in the box and crossed for van Persie, whose flick was cleared off the line by Skrtel. Shinji Kagawa appeared destined to put away the loose ball but succeeded only in clattering into Reina. Rodgers took decisive action at the break but Lucas Leiva could count himself unfortunate to be the man to make way as Sturridge’s arrival saw a switch to 4-4-2.

Nine minutes into the second half Liverpool shot themselves in the foot. Van Persie swung a free-kick to the far post where Johnson made a mess of tracking Evra whose header was inadvertently diverted home by Vidic.

The response was emphatic. Steven Gerrard dispossessed Michael Carrick and exchanged passes with Raheem Sterling before firing goalwards. His low right-footer was palmed away by David de Gea but Sturridge followed up to stick away the rebound. Suddenly, there was hope and the contest was transformed. Just past the hour mark Fabio Borini made his comeback after three months out with a

broken foot in place of Sterling.

Sturridge’s pace and power provided a new dimension going forward and Gerrard’s influence on proceedings increased. Johnson, Sturridge and Borini all fired wide as the home supporters grew increasingly anxious.

Sturridge could have restored parity late on after Suarez wreaked havoc but he blazed over from eight yards. Half an hour after the final whistle, Rodgers took a stroll through the rows of empty seats and approached the packed away end.

His applause for the 3,000-strong travelling Kop, who had been kept behind, was returned with interest as they chanted his name.

It was a show of unity at the end of a deeply frustrating afternoon when a strong finish couldn’t atone for such an insipid start.

DAILY POST

Deja vu for Brendan Rodgers' schizophrenic Reds

NO disputed red cards, no debatable penalty awards, no missed handballs. Instead, the only controversy raging among Liverpool FC supporters as they huddled inside Old Trafford long after the final whistle yesterday was why their team didn’t start the game the way they finished.

A throbbing sense of déjà vu pervaded the away end as Brendan Rodgers’ schizophrenic side saw their recent revival suffer a familiar setback in familiar circumstances.

That the cheers at the final whistle from the home fans were laced with relief was testament to how Liverpool had pressed hard for an unlikely comeback. But a dismal first half that left the Anfield outfit chasing the game underlined why they now stand a mammoth 24 points adrift of the Premier League leaders.

As at Tottenham Hotspur in November, Liverpool only started playing in the final hour having fallen two goals behind. And, as then, while they can take encouragement from their fight during the closing stages, the damage was done by a tentative opening approach. Liverpool lacked bite. They were far too respectful to their bitter North West rivals, far too compliant to threaten a United defence that has creaked significantly this season.

By the time self-belief, strangely lacking despite winning seven of their previous nine games, began to blossom, it was too little, too late.

Rodgers took the acclaim from the away fans still held inside the ground when en route to his post-match press conference, but he must take his share of the blame. Still searching for the right formula, the Northern Irishman erred yesterday. The experiment of playing Joe Allen, selected ahead of the in-form Jordan Henderson, in an advanced midfield role failed miserably, while the reliance on youngsters meant there was an inevitable sense of nervousness in Liverpool’s play. It was only when Daniel Sturridge, still not fit enough to last a full 90 minutes, emerged from the bench at the start of the second half – curiously, for Lucas Leiva – that Luis Suarez was given ample support and Liverpool began to make inroads. Sturridge gave the visitors hope by netting three minutes after Nemanja Vidic inadvertently doubled the United lead provided by Robin van Persie’s 19th-minute opener. Yet despite knocking loudly on the United door, Liverpool have now lost on 10 of their last 11 visits to Old Trafford, a record almost as revealing as their continued inability to defeat anybody in the top half of the Premier League table this campaign.

Yesterday, though, will rankle; not least the manner in which Rodgers’s men continually gifted United presents. Certainly, the leaders didn’t have to work hard to put themselves in a position to triumph.

With Suarez marginalised for far too much of the game, the expected shoot-out between the Uruguayan and van Persie failed to materialise.

And United, fielding Rio Ferdinand and Vidic at the heart of defence for the first time since September, were aided by a completely ineffective Liverpool attacking showing during a dismal opening 45 minutes from the visitors.

Allen, the only change from the team that thumped Sunderland 3-0 in Liverpool’s last Premier League outing, was particularly below par, his distribution poor with the Welshman completely lost amid the midfield scrap.

He wasn’t alone, however, as a seemingly intimidated Liverpool persistently stood off their opponents, reluctant to make even a token attempt at a challenge. That was never more apparent than when United forged ahead with their first real attack. Tom Cleverley and Shinji Kagawa were allowed to play around the Liverpool midfield before the ball was spread wide to Patrice Evra, whose low cross was turned in by van Persie ahead of Daniel Agger.

Allen was twice relieved to see United fail to capitalise on his sloppy play. On 33 minutes, the Welshman played a dreadful backpass intended for Pepe Reina but instead pounced upon by Danny Welbeck, whose shot was brilliantly blocked by Agger. And shortly afterwards, Allen directed a clearing backheader straight to Cleverley whose volley flashed narrowly wide.

Andre Wisdom was similarly wayward with one pass that sent Welbeck in only for Skrtel to save the situation with an excellent tackle, while on the stroke of half-time the Slovakian centre-back cleared van Persie’s flick off the line from Rafael’s low cross. The second goal, though, arrived on 54 minutes. Skrtel bundled over Welbeck, and a criminally unmarked Patrice Evra was allowed to meet van Persie’s free-kick at the far post for a header that diverted in off Vidic.

Those complaining Vidic may have been offside should be reminded Skrtel, as last man, could easily have been dismissed by referee Howard Webb.

However, the arrival of Sturridge and a switch to 4-4-2 had breathed new life into

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