

Date: 10 March 2013 Opposition: Tottenham Hotspur Competition: League	BBC	Times	Telegraph	Echo		10 March 2013
		Guardian	Mirror	Post		
		Independent	Mail	Standard		

THETIMES

Villas-Boas takes heart from defeat that ends fine run

Liverpool 3 Suarez 21, Downing 66 Gerrard 82 (pen)
Tottenham 2 Vertonghen 45, 53
Referee M Oliver Attendance 44,752

If Andre Villas-Boas is to find consolation in the circumstances in which Tottenham Hotspur conspired to lose against Liverpool, it will surely be that the fixture list features no more visits to Merseyside, the scene of two self-inflicted defeats that bookended their 12-game unbeaten run.

Almost three months to the day since Tottenham shipped two goals in the closing minutes to turn a seemingly certain win against Everton into a loss at Goodison Park, they allowed another lead to slip at Anfield and in doing so left their manager perplexed at how their superiority had again gone unrewarded.

The cause of their capitulation was as simple as it had been avoidable. With victory within their grasp after Jan Vertonghen had scored twice to overturn Luis Suarez's opener, a pair of shocking defensive lapses from Kyle Walker and Jermain Defoe handed Liverpool three points that will add to their growing belief that they could yet challenge Tottenham for a place in the top four.

While Tottenham will feel that this was an opportunity lost, Liverpool will believe that winning through sheer force of will on a day when Brendan Rodgers admitted they were short of their best is a sign of resilience returning to their ranks.

Only once previously this season, away to West Ham United, had Liverpool won a game in which they had conceded as the notion grew that they are the kind of flat-track bullies who need to be firing on all cylinders in order to succeed.

Yesterday they came up with a different kind of winning, a victory against the odds that afforded Rodgers the opportunity to hail their mental fortitude in a game in which they struggled to replicate the flowing football that characterised recent romps against Swansea City and Wigan Athletic.

"It's a very important win," the Liverpool manager said. "We're on a great run and we knew this would be a severe test of our qualities and our character. This was a real test and I think we had to show different characteristics to what we have in the last few weeks. We've been comfortable in a lot of games and been able to control them. But against a top side we were able to come through."

In the opening half-hour, with Gareth Bale seemingly under control and Suarez, his rival for the PFA player of the year award, driving Tottenham's defence to distraction, Liverpool looked ready to continue their promising recent form with another impressive display. Once again, Philippe Coutinho was the creative heart of their early endeavours. It was a back-heel from him that started the move from which Liverpool took the lead after 21 minutes, as the Brazilian then went on to combine with Jose Enrique, whose perfectly weighted through-ball allowed Suarez to beat Hugo Lloris at his near post with a typically impudent first-time finish. Liverpool had a penalty appeal turned down by Michael Oliver, the referee, soon after when Coutinho appeared to be hauled down by Walker at the back post. That, though, was the last seen of Rodgers's side as an attacking force for the rest of the half as Bale and Moussa Dembele took a stranglehold on midfield.

Bale had already wasted two shooting opportunities when Gylfi Sigurdsson narrowly missed the target with an effort from the edge of the box. With the pressure from Tottenham building, Liverpool set their sights on holding on to their advantage, but no sooner had stoppage time at the end of the first half been signalled than they conceded. Bale, predictably, was the creator, sending a delicious cross to the edge of the six-yard box, from where Vertonghen planted a powerful header past Brad Jones, Liverpool's back-up goalkeeper.

The momentum remained unchanged after the interval and Liverpool succumbed to another Bale delivery after 53 minutes. The home team claimed, with some justification, that the award of a free kick for a foul by Lucas on Bale was soft -- "If you give that as a foul you give about 200 per game," Rodgers complained -- but so, too, was their defending. Bale's set-piece was flighted into the danger area and, under pressure from Michael Dawson, Jamie Carragher's defensive header deflected off Daniel Agger and Vertonghen again demonstrated his finishing prowess with a well-taken left-foot volley. At that point, it seemed that there could be only one winner, but after Sigurdsson had a shot diverted on to a post via Johnson's back, the game was turned on its head.

Walker was the first to transgress as the full back attempted a ridiculous back-pass from the halfway line that brought Lloris scampering out of his box. When the goalkeeper sliced his clearance, Stewart Downing advanced on goal and sent a low shot through Vertonghen's legs and into the Kop goal.

As if that was not bad enough, Defoe, in an unfamiliar defensive position, then miscued and Suarez drew a rash challenge from Benoit Assou-Ekotto that sent the Uruguayan crashing to the turf. Oliver awarded a penalty and Steven Gerrard sent Lloris the wrong way. "A couple of mistakes cost us in the end but hopefully this is a reminder and we can go on another 12-game unbeaten run," Villas-Boas said.

Should Tottenham continue to perform with the same style and cut out the basic errors, there is no reason why they cannot, particularly as Merseyside has now disappeared into the rear-view mirror.

100 Percentage of Liverpool's league campaign played by Gerrard this season -- every minute. Only 35.4 per cent last term and 54.6 per cent the previous season

28 League games Gerrard and Suarez have started together this season. Only nine last season

5 Tackles won by Gerrard yesterday, the most by a Liverpool player

RATINGS

Liverpool (4-2-3-1): B Jones 6 -- G Johnson 5, J Carragher 6, D Agger 6, J Enrique 6 -
- Lucas 6, S Gerrard 8 -- S Downing 7, L Suarez 8, P Coutinho 6(sub: J Allen, 59min
6) -- D Sturridge 5 (sub: J Henderson, 88). Substitutes not used: P Gulacsi, M
Skrtel, J Shelvey, R Sterling, A Wisdom. Booked: Carragher.

Tottenham Hotspur (4-4-1-1): H Lloris 6 -- K Walker 5, M Dawson 7, J Vertonghen
8, B Assou-Ekotto 6 (sub: T Carroll, 90) -- M Dembele 8, J Livermore 6 (sub: L
Holtby, 84), S Parker 7, G Sigurdsson 6 -- G Bale 8 -- J Defoe 5. Substitutes not
used: B Friedel, T Huddlestone, W Gallas, K Naughton, S Caulker. Booked:
Vertonghen.

theguardian

Gerrard stays cool to give Rodgers a scalp to savour after Spurs self-destruct

Something in the Merseyside air prompts Tottenham Hotspur to self-destruct. Unbeaten in the Premier League since shipping two late goals at Everton in early December, Spurs again let three points slip carelessly from their grasp on their return. Liverpool are the wrong team to present with gifts at present.

An unfathomable back-pass from Kyle Walker and a weak touch from the goalkeeper, Hugo Lloris, presented Liverpool with an equaliser at a time when Tottenham had complete control at Anfield. But they were not finished with their generosity. Eight minutes from time Jermain Defoe sliced a dreadful touch into his own area and to Luis Suarez of all people. Suarez was bundled over by Benoit Assou-Ekotto, Steven Gerrard converted the resulting penalty, and Brendan Rodgers had the first significant scalp of his reign. Tottenham players railed at Suarez after the final whistle, with Scott Parker and Mousa Dembele also involved in an altercation with Brad Jones and Daniel Agger, but their frustrations were misplaced. The blame could be found in the mirror.

For Liverpool, the first hat-trick of league wins under Rodgers represented a triumph of character rather than the polished, attacking football that had brought nine goals and two clean sheets in previous league games against Wigan Athletic and Swansea City. The match had been billed as a play-off for Player of the Year between Suarez and Gareth Bale, and the Liverpool striker edged that contest, but more important for Rodgers was the momentum and the confidence that continue to develop at a timely stage in the campaign. Leap-frogging free-falling Everton into sixth was a bonus.

Jose Reina was unable to build on his impressive display at Wigan due to a calf injury but with Philippe Coutinho again a bundle of energy and invention and Suarez lethal, Liverpool played in the same impressive fashion that delivered the 4-0 win at the DW Stadium. They were often camped inside their own half, however, as Spurs' central midfield pinned Liverpool down for sustained spells and showed the composure of a team third in the table.

Spurs appeared to have weathered the early pressure when they were undone by a fine Liverpool attack with a Latin flair. Coutinho released Jose Enrique once with a impudent flick, then for a second time with a deft pass into the area. The Spanish left-back read Suarez's angled run across the penalty area superbly, threading the ball behind Michael Dawson for the Uruguayan to finish inside Lloris's near post with the outside of his right foot. It was the confident strike of a forward with 29 goals to his name this season.

Liverpool contained Bale for the opening 35 minutes but his influence increased as the interval approached and Gylfi Sigurdsson should have levelled when sent clear by the Welshman's flick but shot wide.

Bale really came to life after taking a blow to the back of the head from Gerrard, who won an aerial challenge but received a warning from referee Michael Oliver for leading with his arm. Seconds later, with the Kop jeering Bale for allegedly feigning injury, he silenced Anfield with an inviting cross from the right and Jan Vertonghen stole in ahead of Glen Johnson to steer a textbook header into the bottom corner.

Liverpool, denied a penalty when Walker grabbed Coutinho inside the area, were punished by another Bale-Vertonghen combination shortly after the restart. Spurs were awarded a dubious free-kick when Lucas Leiva touched the face of Bale, who whipped the set piece into the heart of the Liverpool area. Jamie Carragher, making his 500th Premier League appearance, won the initial header but a deflection off Agger and a slip by Johnson teed up Vertonghen for his second. The Belgian steadied himself well before sending a half-volley beyond Jones.

Spurs should have added a third in the dominant spell that followed. Johnson deflected a Sigurdsson shot on to a post after Bale had sprinted more than half the length of the pitch and floated a cross over to the unmarked midfielder.

Dembele also forced Jones into a desperate save. Then, with the visitors in the ascendancy, they shot themselves in the foot.

For reasons known only to himself Walker sent an aimless pass towards his own goal from the halfway line. Lloris was in trouble but failed to apply a convincing touch and allowed Stewart Downing to advance on goal and finish low between Vertonghen's legs. Then Lloris punched away a Gerrard free-kick only for it to return via a dreadful touch by Defoe. Oliver had no hesitation in pointing to the spot and Gerrard sent Lloris the wrong way before setting off on a victory lap.

Man of the match Jan Vertonghen
(Tottenham Hotspur)

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THE

INDEPENDENT

Suarez forces Spurs to pay penalty and leaves rival Bale in shade

One journalist was sent to Anfield with the task of writing about this game without mentioning Gareth Bale or Luis Suarez. It was like asking the Washington Post's theatre critic to review the opening night of "Our American Cousin" without referring to the fact that Abraham Lincoln had been shot while watching it. It was more than Suarez versus Bale. The immense roar that greeted the end of the game and the way the Tottenham Hotspur players reacted on the final whistle was proof of that. Some did turn on Suarez, although it is not quite clear why they were so angry with the Uruguayan. There was a blatant attempt to win a penalty with a dive but it was the Liverpool striker, Daniel Sturridge, rather than the usual suspect who hurled himself to earth with all the conviction of a baddie in a B-movie. When Suarez was questioned on the penalty he did win that allowed Steven Gerrard to settle this game, he seemed untypically unsure whether Beno[R]t Assou-Ekotto had actually fouled him. Tottenham's manager, Andre Villas-Boas, however, was more certain - it was a clear penalty.

For Brendan Rodgers, who once worked alongside Villas-Boas as part of Jose Mourinho's backroom staff at Chelsea, this was his first big win as Liverpool manager.

For Villas-Boas, it was further evidence of the single biggest barrier to Tottenham becoming a force that can win the Premier League title - their ability to self-destruct at critical moments. Earlier in the season, it was worked out that Spurs would have been top of the league, comfortably ahead of Manchester United, were games to last 80 minutes. Here, they would not have lost their first game since December - also on Merseyside, at Everton, and also in the wake of a European tie - without two back-passes that were respectively ludicrous and careless. Tottenham were 2-1 up and in reasonable control. Kyle Walker was on the touchline, not far from halfway, when for reasons best known to him, he tried to punt the ball back to his goalkeeper.

It was unnecessary and, worse, the pass was inaccurate. As Hugo Lloris dashed out of his area to meet it, the French international made a hash of trying to boot it clear. The ball was at Stewart Downing's feet, there was just Jan Vertonghen to beat and he drove his shot through the centre-half's legs.

Tottenham reacted by panicking some more. As the ball bobbed on the edge of his own area, Jermain Defoe attempted to toe-poke it back to his goalkeeper and succeeded only in looping it upwards for Suarez and Assou-Ekotto to challenge for it. The result was Michael Oliver pointing to the spot.

"It is difficult to us to take because we did ever so well to get back into the game," said Villas-Boas, who rejected suggestions that tiredness in the wake of their swaggering destruction of Inter Milan in the Europa League on Thursday had undermined them. "We lost control and it was down to our own mistakes when things were going our way."

He argued that had his Icelandic midfielder, Gylfi Sigurdsson, who would have been well acquainted with the bitter chill, not struck the post when he had an ocean of time to measure his response to Bale's cross, Tottenham might have cruised to three points. As it was, Spurs stumbled and then they fell.

It may not be his rivalry with Suarez for the title of Footballer of the Year that makes Anfield dislike Bale. It may be the way he poses before taking a free-kick like a Welsh Ronaldo or it may be Alan Shearer's theory that crowds instinctively jeer footballers they fear. When he sent a shot with the same trajectory as a Jonny Wilkinson drop-kick high into the Kop, there was laughter but it was laced with relief.

Bale did not score, as he had in Tottenham's five previous matches, but he contributed to both goals which were scored by the Belgian international, Vertonghen.

The free-kick that saw Spurs take the lead was questionable both because Bale flung his hands to his face, an area of his body Lucas Leiva had gone nowhere near to win it - and because it was soft. "On that reckoning, there would be 200 free-kicks a game," said Rodgers.

Liverpool did not deal with it well. Jamie Carragher headed it down, it struck Daniel Agger, Glen Johnson slipped and Vertonghen, switching feet with the kind of effortless technical ability that seems to come as standard for those who have played for Ajax, drove it home.

The first had been more of a centre-half's goal as Mousa Demb[c]I[c] held the ball up by the corner flag and found Bale, who characteristically produced a superlative cross.

Once more Vertonghen intervened, rising above Johnson to leave Brad Jones, deputising for the injured Pepe Reina, stranded.

Then it seemed Liverpool's opener would be a lost jewel that would vanish in defeat. It was fabulously executed, featuring some wonderful interplay between Philippe Coutinho and Jose Enrique, whose pass was brilliantly anticipated by Suarez to beat Lloris at his near post.

On reflection, it was debatable whether Liverpool deserved to win this pulsating encounter - they had probably played better when drawing with Manchester City and at Arsenal earlier in the season.

However, Suarez's latest goal, his 22nd of another remarkable scoring campaign, deserved to count for something.

DAILY

Mirror

SHOOT-OUT OF THIS WORLD; Both show firepower, but Suarez has edge on Bale

AS EVER, a much anticipated contest did not live up to the fevered pre-match billing . . but this time because it surpassed all the hype.

There was no overselling of what was a magnificent tussle between two well-matched sides, Luis Suarez and Gareth Bale more than justifying their depiction as dead-eyed hit men engaging in a lethal shoot-out.

Yet if it was Suarez who was left standing after inspiring Liverpool to a remarkable fightback, perhaps the sharpest shooting came from the visitors as they contrived to put a bullet directly into the heart of their ambitions of a second-place finish. In a game so blessed with skill and talent, it was ironic the outcome was decided by mistakes was ironic the was decided by mistakes from both defences, the home side seemingly throwing away their advantage before ruthlessly capitalising on two errors from Spurs to record their most important win so far under Brendan Rodgers.

If anything, Tottenham edged it, their muscular athleticism combining with a keen tactical sense and clever passing range to reflect their progress this season. They look a little further along in their development than a stillgrowing Liverpool, who nevertheless will feel this important victory leaves the door for fourth place slightly ajar.

Yet Spurs will reflect that for all Bale's at times jaw-dropping talent, they shot themselves in the foot.

Not content with gifting the Reds an equaliser with a shocking backpass from Kyle Walker, they repeated the trick to lose the game, and wreck their hopes of clinging onto Manchester City's coat-tails in second.

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That said, it is the quality of Suarez, the audacious composure of Jan Vertonghen, the pace and power of Bale, the match-turning energy of sub Joe Allen and the will of Steven Gerrard that will live long in the memory.

That sa Suarez, th of Jan Ve power of energy of of Steven in theme The o on o 21 a ga Engli this Ph pl pay - s an aa The opening goal for Liverpool on 21 minutes set the tone for a game as good as any as English football has served up this term.

Philippe Coutinho - another player brimming with skill - set up Jose Enrique with an outrageous back-heel and fine pass.

The defender's ball to Suarez was equally clever, but the finish surpassed them both, the Uruguayan taking his chance so early Hugo Lloris had no chance.

S bu b t them taking hi Lloris h But B oversha exploit conce entration ju j st before the conce But Bale is in no mood to be overshadowed for long, and he exploited a slip in Liverpool concentration just before the break, sending in an exquisite right wing cross. As Glen Johnson dithered, Vertonghen rose highest to head in.

Bale repeated the trick with an even better delivery after the break and Vertonghen again capitalised on the home side's inability to deal with set pieces, smashing a bouncing ball into the net.

It seemed Spurs' ability to step up a gear would pay dividends, and surely would have done but for Johnson somehow deflecting Gylfi Sigurdsson's shot onto a post soon after.

Again Bale had created the chance. But if Liverpool could not contain the Tottenham talisman, they could at least offer the desire and commitment of Suarez and Gerrard, and when Allen's energy and drive was added to the mixture, it tipped the balance Liverpool's way.

They simply harried and hounded the visitors to the point of distraction, first when Walker inexplicably sliced a backpass. Lloris still had chance to deal with it, racing out of the penalty area and getting to the ball first but hitting an attempted clearance against Stewart Downing.

The winger showed admirable calm to fire his shot through the legs of Vertonghen on the goalline to level.

That was calamity enough, but when Jermain Defoe produced an even worse backpass, Suarez was gifted a run on goal that was stopped by a bodycheck from Benoit Assou-Ekotto. Gerrard tucked in the penalty for the winner.

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LIVERPOOL

ECHO

Ruthless LFC make Spurs pay

FOR a club famous for its fightbacks the world over, this triumph barely registers on Liverpool FC's all-time list. Yet there was something highly significant about claiming the scalp of Tottenham after an absorbing contest at Anfield. Make no mistake, Brendan Rodgers' side have played better and lost this season. This wasn't a performance from the top drawer, not even close.

Liverpool failed to replicate the free-flowing, fluent passing game which had blown Swansea and Wigan away in recent weeks and they weren't defensively robust. But what the Reds did showcase was a bucket-load of character as they clung on at 2-1 down and then rallied to secure the most cherished victory of Rodgers' reign. The Reds' previous showdowns with teams in the Champions League places this term have been hard luck stories – tales of promise rather than points with performances wrecked by costly individual errors.

This time roles were reversed as Liverpool gleefully took advantage of Spurs shooting themselves in the foot.

The calamitous mistakes which led to Stewart Downing making it 2-2 and then skipper Steven Gerrard converting the match-winning penalty late on were gifts, but they were accepted with ruthless precision.

It's a sign of the progress the Reds have made in recent months that when they were under the cosh following Jan Vertonghen's double either side of half-time they refused to accept their fate. Good sides win games when they're not at their best. To do so against a Spurs team unbeaten in the Premier League for three months and fresh from dismantling Inter Milan, represents a sizeable step forward. Today Liverpool sit in the top six for the first time this season and finally look down on their neighbours from across Stanley Park. While others are feeling the strain, the Reds are getting stronger and momentum is growing in pursuit of a European place. There was only one winner in the shootout between Footballer of the Year candidates Luis Suarez and Gareth Bale.

Suarez was outstanding once again, plundering the 50th goal of his Liverpool career in his 91st appearance and drawing the reckless challenge from Benoit Assou-Ekotto which led to the winner.

The Uruguayan refused to give Spurs a moment's peace – the extent to which he got under their skin highlighted by Mousa Dembele's attempts to pick a fight with him after the final whistle. It was a cherished victory achieved without Pepe Reina, who failed a fitness test on a calf problem. Brad Jones was handed his first start since the FA Cup debacle at Oldham in January.

The other change from the 4-0 rout of Wigan saw Daniel Sturridge return from injury at the expense of Joe Allen, who dropped to the bench.

During the first half it was Philippe Coutinho who lit up the game, cutting inside off the left flank with menace. The Brazilian's quick feet and ability to spot a pass has made him a welcome addition to Liverpool's attacking armoury since his arrival from Inter Milan in January.

Coutinho expertly picked out Sturridge early on but the striker's heavy first touch forced him wide and the chance went begging. There was a scare at the other end when Jones unconvincingly swatted away Bale's dipping 25-yard free-kick. Liverpool were in the ascendancy and got their reward with a goal of true quality in the 21st minute. Glen Johnson intelligently switched play out to Coutinho on the left. The £8.5million signing back-heeled the ball into the path of Jose Enrique and then moved into space to receive it again.

Enrique darted forward and Coutinho didn't disappoint him, threading it through for the Spaniard to latch on to. The full-back then picked out Suarez, who flicked a breathtaking first-time finish inside Hugo Lloris' near post.

It was a wonderful strike from a player in the form of his life as the Uruguayan took his tally for the season to 29 goals. Enrique deservedly took the plaudits as well. Last season his form nose-dived badly but this term he has steadily improved and at times his understanding with Suarez borders on telepathic.

With his tricks and flicks, Coutinho's contribution was eye-catching but on the opposite flank Downing was equally as effective. Tracking back and making key interceptions, the tireless work rate of Downing was as heart-warming as the sense of purpose he displayed when he attacked. For so long that £20million price tag weighed heavily on Downing's shoulders but in recent months the shackles have come off. Rodgers' threat to sell him in January proved to be the wake-up call he needed. He was close to squandering the biggest move of his career but now the penny has dropped about the standards required.

The Kop provided another shot of confidence to Downing, politely informing Bale via song that he was only a pale imitation of Liverpool's own flying winger.

Coutinho had appeals for a penalty waved away after Kyle Walker appeared to haul him back but as the first half progressed the Reds got sloppy, giving the ball away cheaply and inviting pressure.

There was a let-off when Gylfi Sigurdsson fired narrowly wide and then Assou-Ekotto shot straight at Jones. Bale had been well shackled with Lucas Leiva shielding the back four and Jamie Carragher rock-solid on his 500th Premier League appearance. But on the stroke of half-time the Reds gave Bale too much time and space on the right and he made them pay, whipping in a cross which Vertonghen nodded into the far corner.

The delivery was enticing but Johnson didn't cover himself in glory, having

allowed the Belgian to get away from him far too easily.

It was a poor time to concede and the equaliser transformed the contest. In the second half Spurs turned the screw and Liverpool were a distant second best. Jones denied Jermain Defoe before the visitors grabbed the lead in the 53rd minute. The award of the free-kick – won and taken by Bale - was soft but that didn't excuse the failure to deal with it as Vertonghen converted again.

Tottenham could have wrapped up the points soon after. Bale burst clear down the right and found Sigurdsson at the back post. The Icelandic international, who spurned Liverpool's advances last summer, appeared destined to score but Johnson did just enough, diverting his shot on to the post. The Reds were being overrun in midfield and on the hour Rodgers took decisive action as Allen replaced Coutinho. The extra man in the middle paid dividends but it took a helping hand for the hosts to make it 2-2 in the 66th minute.

Walker's lofted backpass from halfway was wretched and Hugo Lloris raced out but couldn't deal with it. Downing pounced and then kept his composure, blasting it through Vertonghen's legs on the line. Suddenly, belief surged through the Reds' veins. Gerrard was crashing into tackles and rousing the troops. Downing followed the captain's lead, crossing for Sturridge, who nodded into the side-netting. With eight minutes to go Anfield erupted. In trying to clear Defoe's inexplicably played it straight into the path of Suarez, who was recklessly chopped down by Assou-Ekotto. Gerrard sent Lloris the wrong way to secure Liverpool's first win over Spurs in six attempts. The Reds' revival is gathering pace.

MATCH FACTS

Liverpool (4-2-3-1): Jones, Johnson, Carragher, Agger, Enrique, Lucas, Gerrard, Downing, Suarez, Coutinho (Allen 59), Sturridge (Henderson 88).

Not used: Gulacsi, Skrtel, Shelvey, Sterling, Wisdom.

Tottenham (4-3-3): Lloris, Walker, Vertonghen, Dawson, Assou-Ekotto (Carroll 90), Parker, Livermore (Holtby 84), Dembele, Bale, Sigurdsson, Defoe.

Not used: Friedel, Huddlestone, Gallas, Naughton, Caulker.

Referee: Michael Oliver (Northumberland)

Attendance: 44,752

Goals: Suarez 21, Vertonghen 45, Vertonghen 53, Downing 66, Gerrard 82.

Bookings: Vertonghen, Carragher,

Man of the match: Stewart Downing. Continued his resurgence as he caused Spurs problems down the right all afternoon and coolly netted the Reds' equaliser.

Next game: Southampton, away in the Premier League on Saturday (3pm).

LIVERPOOL

DAILY POST

Luis Suarez wins battle of stars for LFC

AS the two teams lined up for the start of the second half at Anfield yesterday, Luis Suarez and Gareth Bale shared a brief conversation on the halfway line. Whether it be on ballot papers or on the playing field, there has been little to separate the two main protagonists for the Player of the Year accolades this season. Forty-five minutes later, however, and it was Suarez who, not for the first time during his remarkable Anfield career, enjoyed the final word.

And with it came another compelling statement Liverpool are beginning to gain an appetite for success under Brendan Rodgers.

It was perhaps wholly apt that a foul on Suarez inside the box should pave the way for Rodgers' men to complete a stirring comeback yesterday, given the manager's displeasure at the unfair treatment suffered by the Uruguayan in comparison to misdemeanours from certain other players.

Steven Gerrard sent Hugo Lloris the wrong way from spot then raced down the touchline to give a high five to goalkeeping coach John Achterberg in the dugout for advice on where to despatch the penalty.

Such small details can make the difference. But there was a glaring aspect that had been used as a stick with which to bat down Rodgers' Anfield evolution; the failure to beat a top-six side. That sizeable shortcoming was thrillingly addressed yesterday, although it wasn't without the help of a Tottenham Hotspur side who, having fought back from Suarez's opener with two Jan Vertonghen strikes, then spectacularly shot themselves in the foot.

The Londoners, with Bale at the fulcrum, were underlining their top-three credentials with an increasingly dominant display until Kyle Walker's insane backpass was pounced upon by Stewart Downing to breathe new life into Liverpool's afternoon and, arguably, their season.

Champions League qualification will most likely remain out of reach – seven points with nine games remaining is surely too large a chasm to breach – but with fifth-placed Arsenal only two points ahead, that must be the target.

Having blown away Norwich City, Swansea City, Zenit St Petersburg and Wigan Athletic in recent weeks, yesterday demanded different qualities from Rodgers and his players, only the second Premier League game this season in which Liverpool have conceded and still won. In truth, Rodgers' men have played better against the leading clubs this season and failed to win. Liverpool at times struggled to cope with the pace and power of Tottenham, although Lucas Leiva and Downing led the fight to the visitors. Philippe Coutinho was another, the young Brazilian posting another encouraging display following his two assists at the DW Stadium last week. Coutinho was heavily involved in Liverpool's opener on 21 minutes, a clever backheel to Jose Enrique drawing puffs of approval from the Anfield crowd before a further combination ended with the Spaniard playing

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in Suarez, who clipped the ball home with the outside of his right foot inside the near post of Tottenham goalkeeper Lloris.

While small in stature, Coutinho has little fear as his running battle down the win with Kyle Walker and Mousa Dembele demonstrated. But like at Wigan, his obvious tiring in the second half suggests it will take time to acclimatise to the rigours of the English game. Coutinho had strong claims for a penalty on 27 minutes when he was tugged back by Walker as he raced to meet a low, driven Suarez cross that was parried out by Lloris.

Suarez's goal brought up the half-century for Liverpool and was reward for a decent opening from Rodgers' men, Tottenham restricted to a Bale free-kick unconvincingly shovelled away by Brad Jones, deputising for the injured Pepe Reina. Jamie Carragher, notching another landmark with his 500th league appearance for the club, kept Jermaine Defoe in check but soon visitors began to take a hold in midfield, cutting off the supply line to the increasingly isolated Sturridge and bringing Bale into the match. And the Welshman was inevitably involved as Tottenham transformed the game with two Vertonghen strikes inside seven minutes either side of the interval. Both were poor goals to concede. Bale, left unattended having returned to the field after treatment for a bang on the head from Gerrard, crossed from the right for the Belgian centre-back to rise above Glen Johnson and head in the equaliser on the stroke of half-time.

Then, on 53 minutes, a free-kick struck deep by Bale caused confusion in the area, the ball struck Daniel Agger and Vertonghen reacted quickest to lash the ball past Jones from 12 yards. Bale threatened to run riot, rampaging down the right beyond Gerrard and Carragher and crossing for Gylfi Sigurdsson, whose shot deflected off Johnson and looped off the post.

It was a turning point. Vertonghen was fortunate to escape only a booking when deliberately handling Suarez's intended throughball for Sturridge, but it was a gift when Liverpool drew level on 66 minutes. Walker's mindless crossfield backpass – echoing that of Everton's Phil Neville the previous day – put Lloris in all sorts of trouble, and Downing nipped in to take the ball and keep his cool to finish though the legs of Vertonghen on the line. Sturridge headed a Downing cross into the sidenetting before Tottenham imploded further on 82 minutes when another dire backwards pass, this time from Defoe, forced Benoit Assou-Ekotto into bundling over Suarez for a penalty converted by Gerrard.

Keep this up, and Liverpool won't want the season to end.

MAN OF THE MATCH. Stewart Downing. A forceful and productive performance from the winger

London Evening Standard

Liverpool 3-2 Tottenham

The recent performances of Gareth Bale have overshadowed the importance of some of his team-mates, yet Mousa Dembele is just as vital to this Tottenham side as the Welshman.

While Bale is peerless in the squad for the goals he scores and creates, Dembele is also unique at the club. No other midfielder is able to unite strength, technique and vision like the 25-year-old, which is why his fitness must be managed with the utmost care.

Since returning from a month-long absence with a hip injury to come on as a substitute against Lazio in Rome last November, Dembele has started 19 of the 23 matches Spurs have played. He was left out of two FA Cup games, one Europa League encounter and a single Premier League fixture.

All of those appearances have been in central midfield, until yesterday's defeat at Liverpool, when Dembele started on the right because Aaron Lennon was out through injury. Deploying Dembele in this role is not the best way to unleash his potential and yet, drifting inside, he was at the heart of Spurs' best attacking work.

At Anfield, Dembele showed again he can tackle as well as Scott Parker and also offered far more menace when possession was regained. Although Gylfi Sigurdsson is improving, he does not quite have Dembele's explosive ability to burst past opponents. Lewis Holtby has fine control and uses the ball wisely, yet lacks Dembele's strength when challenged.

It seemed strange that Holtby, who has started his Spurs career with promise, was left on the bench, while the limited Jake Livermore made his first start since last October. With Holtby on either the left or the right, Dembele could have started in his usual position alongside Parker.

To lose Dembele for any significant period could do serious damage to Spurs' hopes of finishing in the top four to secure Champions League football. It is why the Belgian should be left out of the starting XI when Spurs, protecting a 3-0 advantage from the first leg at White Hart Lane, try to reach the last eight of the Europa League at the expense of Inter Milan on Thursday.

By all means have him on the bench but this is surely a game where Dembele can be given a breather, perhaps allowing Holtby to play as one of the deep central midfielders in a 4-2-3-1 – a job the German has done for his former clubs, Schalke and Mainz.

Dembele's first season at Spurs has not always been rosy. He has scored only twice in 31 matches and his form dipped slightly in mid-season. His qualities suggest, though, that Tottenham would struggle without him. The club sold both

Luka Modric and Rafael van der Vaart last summer. Not only has Dembele taken over their playmaking role, he has done plenty of defensive work, too, especially since a knee injury ruled out Sandro for the rest of the season in January.

Apart from his failure to track the run of Jose Enrique which was partly to blame for Liverpool's first goal yesterday, Dembele's performance at Anfield was classy and assertive. His only other significant mistake came after the final whistle, when he clashed with Liverpool players and was grateful for referee Michael Oliver's lenience. Andre Villas-Boas is likely to be harsher with his players for the defensive mistakes that cost them the game. Spurs led 2-1 after Jan Vertonghen scored twice to cancel out Luis Suarez's opener but Kyle Walker and Hugo Lloris contrived to gift Stewart Downing the equaliser. Then, after Jermain Defoe's poor attempted clearance, Benoit Assou-Ekotto brought down Suarez for a penalty that Steven Gerrard converted.

"We lost control of the game when things looked to be going our way," said Villas-Boas. "It was more due to our mistakes than Liverpool's merit. Hopefully, it can serve as an example to move forward."

During the first seven months of the season, Tottenham have shown they have the skill and stamina to match their rivals. For the remaining two, they need to show the strength of mind required to get over the finishing line.

Villas-Boas's side have passed nearly all the tests handed to them in 2013, establishing a seven-point gap over fifth-placed Arsenal in the process. The first defeat after a long unbeaten run always presents a challenge and Villas-Boas's principal task is to ensure any self-doubt is quickly banished.

BBC

A late penalty winner kept Liverpool's faint hopes of gatecrashing the top four alive as they beat Tottenham. The Reds went ahead when Luis Suarez stabbed in after a slick move. Spurs hit back through a Jan Vertonghen header and the Belgian then fired the visitors in front with a 15-yard shot.

But a poor Kyle Walker backpass allowed Stewart Downing to drive in a Reds leveller before Steven Gerrard netted the winner with a spot-kick after Benoit Assou-Ekotto fouled Suarez. Spurs were authors of their own downfall as two late defensive mistakes contributed to their first defeat in 13 league games.

The White Hart Lane club stay third but this result will give the teams below them - including north London rivals Arsenal - hope that Andre Villas-Boas's side can be caught, especially given the way they faded towards the end of last season.

Spurs endured a spell of just six points from a possible 27 during last year's run-in, which ultimately cost them a Champions League place.

For Liverpool, this was a first victory of the season over a team currently in the top eight and lifts them to sixth, but they remain outsiders for a top-four spot. They are seven points behind fourth-placed Chelsea, who also have a game in hand on the Merseysiders. The Reds are the Premier League's leading scorers since the turn of the year with 25 goals and they quickly got into the attacking mode that has become a feature of their recent performances.

It was the home side who exerted the pressure in the opening stages, although a dipping 30-yard Gareth Bale free-kick was nervously swatted away by Reds keeper Brad Jones, playing in place of the injured Pepe Reina.

Liverpool's high work-rate and fluid movement stretched Spurs and the hosts duly took the lead with a well-worked goal.

Coutinho produced some lovely skill on the left wing before combining with marauding left-back Jose Enrique, who slipped a pass through for Suarez to stab neatly inside Lloris's near post with the outside of his boot.

Suarez threatened again when he latched on to a Steven Gerrard pass and when his shot from a tight angle was parried by Spurs' French keeper, the Reds felt they should have had a penalty after full-back Walker tugged Coutinho as he tried to get to the rebound. Bale had been contained by Liverpool and overshadowed by Suarez but, after shooting high following a surging run, the Welshman made his presence felt when he crossed for Vertonghen to beat right-back Glen Johnson to the ball and head home on the stroke of half-time.

The goal lifted the visitors and they added a second shortly after the break as Bale and Vertonghen combined again to undo Liverpool.

Bale delivered a free-kick that the Reds failed to clear, and centre-back Vertonghen showed a striker's prowess to drive home the loose ball.

Spurs were now overwhelming their hosts but failed to take a key chance to go two ahead. Gylfi Sigurdsson was found at the far post by Bale only to see his shot deflected off Jones against the outside of the upright.

The miss looked more costly when Walker's inadvertent backpass was missed by Lloris as he rushed out to meet it and Downing pounced to drive a low shot through the legs of Vertonghen.

Spurs striker Jermain Defoe then put his side in trouble again when he inexplicably played a ball into his own area for Suarez, who went down under Assou-Ekotto's shove.

Gerrard stepped up to send Lloris the wrong way from the spot and move Liverpool above Everton.

Tottenham manager Andre Villas-Boas: "It is difficult for us to take because we did ever so well to come back into the game in the first half and we started brightly in the second half.

"We lost control of the game when things looked to be going our way, which was more down to a couple of mistakes we did rather than to Liverpool's merit - although they worked very hard.

"Hopefully, this setback can serve as an example to move forward."

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