

Date: 31 March 2013
 Opposition: Aston Villa
 Competition: League

| | | |
|-------------|--------|-----------------|
| Guardian | Mirror | Post |
| Independent | Mail | BBC |
| Telegraph | Echo | Birmingham Mail |

31 March 2013

THE  **TIMES**

the guardian

Gerrard steps up as the executioner after Villa fall prey to another familiar collapse

This has been a season of setbacks for Aston Villa and in the context of their battle to remain in the Premier League, this result may prove the most severe. Dumped into the relegation zone following Wigan's win against Norwich on Saturday, Villa looked set to haul themselves back into the safety positions following Christian Benteke's first-half goal only to collapse after the interval with two goals conceded in what felt like a blink of the eye.

It has been an all too familiar turn of events for this Villa side and yet again they only had themselves to blame for a failure to keep what would have been a first clean sheet since 8 December. Youthful naivety remains at the heart of this team's problems, with the 21-year-old centre-back Nathan Baker the culprit on this occasion, making a reckless tackle on Luis Suarez just before the hour that gave the referee, Lee Mason, no option but to award Liverpool a penalty. Steven Gerrard duly converted to put the visitors ahead.

They had equalised less than two minutes into the second-half when, again, one of the youngsters was at fault. This time it was Ashley Westwood, with the 22-year-old midfielder allowing Jordan Henderson to run past him and place Philippe Coutinho's weighted pass over Brad Guzan.

Afterwards Paul Lambert, the Villa manager, refused to single out anyone for blame, insisting that in a "team sport you need everyone together", yet individual errors are threatening to plunge this club into the Championship. They sit in 18th, behind Wigan on goal difference, but having played a game more.

For Liverpool this was a welcome victory given that it moved them back within three points of Everton in sixth and went some way to making up for their 3-1 defeat to Southampton two weeks ago.

Brendan Rodgers made four changes to his starting line-up, with Pepe Reina and Jamie Carragher coming back in alongside Lucas Leiva and Henderson to give the Merseysiders a level of nous that was lacking on the south coast.

It was, however, a player who has not missed a minute of Premier League football this season who shone brightest. Steven Gerrard was at his influential and impressive best, dictating Liverpool's tempo from a deep-lying midfield role, and as well as playing a part in both of his side's goals - it was from the 32-year-old's cross-field ball that Coutinho set up Henderson for the equaliser - he also ensured Liverpool held on to their lead with a stunning goalline clearance on 65 minutes, after Benteke had been presented with a free header from Westwood's corner.

"He's a remarkable man and a real inspiration," said Rodgers of Gerrard having revealed that the club captain had undergone an injection in a heel in order to participate having picked up the injury while on international duty. "You see his ability and there were moments within the second half when he was showing the responsibility of being our on-field leader. I cannot speak highly enough of him."

Rodgers was also full of praise for Suarez, who was his typical industrious and ingenious self, displaying none of the tiredness that his manager saw in the 26-year-old upon his return from playing for Uruguay in their recent World Cup qualifiers. He was a constant menace to Villa's back four and, as Rodgers said, "frightened" Baker into giving away the penalty. The only negative aspect of Suarez's display was his finishing, with the Premier League's top scorer failing to beat Guzan with three inviting chances in the first half alone.

In fairness to Suarez he was left rather isolated early on, playing as Liverpool's sole attacker as his regular partner Daniel Sturridge looked on from the bench, and was forced to drop deep as Liverpool aimed to hurt on the counter attack. It was a dangerous ploy against a side buoyed by back-to-back victories and it did not come as a shock when Villa took the lead on 31 minutes. Gabriel Agbonlahor cushioned Westwood's long pass into the path of Benteke and the Belgian drove a low shot past Reina for his 18th goal of the season.

Villa were in control but everything changed within minutes of the restart.

Henderson scored and the balance tilted in Liverpool's favour, with the visitors now hogging possession and Villa looking increasingly edgy.

They had chances to grab an equaliser and even had the ball in the back of the net only for Benteke's late volley to be ruled offside. But there was to be no rescue and their afternoon got worse when the referee spotted Westwood's knee-high tackle on Henderson near the end and showed him a yellow card.

Man of the match Steven Gerrard (Liverpool)

Date: 31 March 2013
 Opposition: Aston Villa
 Competition: League

| | | |
|-------------|--------|-----------------|
| Guardian | Mirror | Post |
| Independent | Mail | BBC |
| Telegraph | Echo | Birmingham Mail |

31 March 2013

The Mail

VILLA CAN FIND LITTLE DEFENCE

WHEN pressed about Aston Villa's chances of avoiding relegation this season, manager Paul Lambert has repeated one phrase.

The words 'We'll be fine' have tumbled from the Scot's mouth as each bright new dawn has proved a false one. While Lambert has remained resolute in his belief, it appears as though the conclusion that almost every Villa fan dreads will become a reality in the next six weeks -- that this scrap to remain in the Barclays Premier League will go to the wire.

Wigan's victory over Norwich on Saturday ensured Villa dropped into the bottom three for the fifth time this season. On four occasions so far, they have managed to drag themselves clear.

Three wins in their previous five matches gave rise to a belief yesterday that a corner had been turned. The largest crowd seen at Villa Park this season hoped this momentum would continue.

Villa were, incredibly, within sight of three consecutive league wins for the first time in three seasons. But, as has happened too often during a campaign that has seen far more troughs than peaks, they were unable to complete the job.

Given the lead thanks to Christian Benteke's 18th goal of an impressive season, Lambert's side needed to show a streetwise streak. However, while youth and athleticism are high on the list of Lambert's requirements, it seems defensive solidity is not.

For the 20th successive match, Villa failed to keep a clean sheet. It is undermining the club's best efforts and left Liverpool with a route back into a match that could have slipped away from them.

In fairness, Lambert's side were unfortunate to run into Luis Suarez. Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers said he had observed the Uruguay striker in training on his return from South America for international duty and said he looked tired.

Whether it was the prospect of playing against a side with the second worst defensive record in the league was unclear, but he looked fresh and sharp from the off and that was to prove the difference.

The visitors protected their lead in the last 20 minutes but, until then, the two teams had been stretched in an open battle.

Gabriel Agbonlahor missed the first chance, sidefooting at Pepe Reina from six yards after a delicious Matt Lowton centre. Then, not for the first time this season, Villa keeper Brad Guzan stepped in, stopping a Suarez effort.

Back came the hosts and when Agbonlahor mis-controlled a Barry Bannan centre, Benteke thumped a right-foot shot home.

Villa had been worth their lead but it could have disappeared before the interval. Guzan stopped another Suarez effort and Steven Gerrard will have been disheartened that a rasping 30-yarder never found the net after another intervention from the American.

However, Guzan pulled the ball out of the net within two minutes of the restart. Gerrard fed a wonderful ball out to Philippe Coutinho as a Villa attack broke down.

That pass was bettered by the winger to find Jordan Henderson streaking through the middle.

'He didn't even break stride,' said Rodgers and the midfielder found a finish to match the approach.

This prompted Liverpool's best spell of the match. Suarez sent Coutinho clean through and the Brazilian missed by inches. Glen Johnson thumped a shot against an upright as the hosts' goal came under sustained threat.

Suarez then capped a superb individual display by chasing Gerrard's through-ball to the byline and duping Nathan Baker into making a challenge. It was a clear penalty and Gerrard capitalised confidently from the spot.

But an equally important contribution came from Liverpool's skipper after Andi Weimann had sidefooted a chance over from eight yards. Benteke rose to meet a corner and Gerrard somehow adjusted his body on the line to head clear.

Suarez ran to the last. Liverpool deserved their win, creating the better chances after weathering a storm.

Lambert said: 'We were excellent for 45 minutes. We competed, we were good going forward.

'We have enough to win games but I was disappointed with the goal two minutes after the restart. That was crucial.' Asked about a run of conceding at least a goal a game, which stretches back to December 8, Lambert said: 'I would rather give it a go than not. I don't want to be one of those sides who just sit in there and hang on to something for 90 minutes.' That may be so but, if it comes to a choice between survival and entertainment, the fans at Villa Park will take survival every time.

It must be assumed that goes for Villa owner Randy Lerner too.

The Daily Telegraph

Liverpool take advantage of Villa's schoolboy errors

Aston Villa 1
 Benteke 31
 Liverpool 2
 Henderson 47, Gerrard 60 pen Att: 42,037

Paul Lambert's brave new era remains in its infancy but he urgently requires his young players to grow up quickly as they prepare for seven crucial games that will determine their Premier League future.

This was another damaging selfinflicted defeat that leaves Villa feeling the bitter chill of the relegation trapdoor as all the recent optimism was blown away by another moment of naivety.

There was a depressing sense of deja vu as Nathan Baker crudely lunged in at Luis Suarez on the hour, with Steven Gerrard's penalty sucking the life out of Lambert's team and conspiring to keep them down among the dead men.

While Liverpool continue to display tangible signs of progress under Brendan Rodgers, with a European place looking distinctly possible, Lambert's revolution has a frustrating tendency to take one step forward before one of his players shoots himself in the foot.

Villa's visit to Stoke's Britannia Stadium next weekend now takes on mammoth proportions and all the talk about potential and building blocks for the future is irrelevant as the situation becomes increasingly critical.

All season Lambert has vigorously defended his decision to utilise young players but this is the time when experienced, calm heads are sorely needed, for Villa's propensity to make fatal mistakes continues to prove their downfall.

Lambert's determination not to panic is admirable, and his team lie only six points behind Fulham in 10th place and are below Wigan on goal difference alone, despite a 15th defeat of the season. The Scot's position is safe, even if he fails in his survival mission, and suffering a similar fate to his mentor, Martin O'Neill, is not a distraction he needs to worry about. But relegation would leave him open to the prospect of losing the likes of Christian Benteke and Andreas Weimann in the summer.

There has always been a nagging feeling that Villa's final game of the season, at Wigan, could prove pivotal and the scenario of Lambert requiring a result there is growing with each passing week.

"I don't think we can prioritise," Lambert said yesterday. "Every game is huge for us. We are playing well and we don't look like a side that's down there. Everyone is in it together and we move along to the next game. We are playing well enough to win games. Confidence is a big part of the game. We are not lacking in that. We are making errors because we're young but the confidence is there."

Liverpool certainly appear on course to end the season with a flourish and nobody epitomised their battling qualities more than Gerrard, who spectacularly cleared a Benteke header off the line five minutes after his decisive penalty.

Finishing the campaign strongly will also enhance Liverpool hopes of retaining Suarez and the forward was at his scavenging best here, pulling Villa's callow defenders all over the pitch. However, it could have been different for the home team. While they may have been stretched defensively in the first half they were effervescent going forward, with the pace and power of Benteke, Gabriel Agbonlahor and Weimann a constant nuisance.

Agbonlahor has recently displayed the qualities that led to an England call-up under Fabio Capello not so long back and should have eased the tension in the 16th minute but his close-range shot was superbly blocked by Pepe Reina. But Villa earned the goal their menacing approach work deserved through Benteke. The Belgium international is now easily in the [pounds sterling]20million bracket and while Suarez wasted chances, Benteke required only one opportunity, directing a fierce half-volley into the corner from Agbonlahor's knockdown. It was Benteke's 18th goal of an excellent breakthrough season.

Liverpool must have feared an excruciating afternoon as they struggled to find a way past Villa goalkeeper Brad Guzan. Saves from Suarez and Gerrard in particular, late in the half, were stunning and it seemed as if Rodgers was doomed to add another hard-luck story to his collection.

But the visitors were level three minutes into the second period. Philippe Coutinho's pass dissected the two Villa centre-halves to free Jordan Henderson, whose chipped finish over Guzan was clinical.

Villa heads dropped and on the hour Suarez's slaloming run was savagely brought to an abrupt end by Baker - no debate, no dive storm, no controversy. Gerrard's penalty transformed the game and Lambert's players never really recovered.

"It was a poor goal two minutes in, when we were attacking, but Liverpool can do that with the players that they've got," said Lambert. "From our point of view it's a poor goal."

Benteke thought he had equalised only for Gerrard to produce a sensational clearance and as time ebbed away Villa ran out of ideas.

Four times already this season Villa have scraped their way out of the bottom three but the hands of relegation remain clasped around their throats. Now is the time to stand up and be counted and prove that Lambert's bold vision is not short-sighted.

Date: 31 March 2013
 Opposition: Aston Villa
 Competition: League

| | | |
|-------------|--------|-----------------|
| Guardian | Mirror | Post |
| Independent | Mail | BBC |
| Telegraph | Echo | Birmingham Mail |

31 March 2013

THE INDEPENDENT

Gerrard industry emphasises lack of experience at Villa

Go back a few years and Aston Villa have a glorious history. The presence of their under-19s in today's NextGen Series final in Italy suggests they have a promising future. But the present? That is a worry.

With seven matches to go, the seven-times champions are in the bottom three with the prospect of being relegated for the first time since 1987 looming. And as Midlands rivals Nottingham Forest, Derby, Wolves, Leicester and Coventry know, an instant return is by no means guaranteed.

Though Christian Benteke gave them the lead at Villa Park yesterday, Villa failed for the 15th successive match to keep a clean sheet, conceding second-half goals to Jordan Henderson and, via the penalty spot, Steven Gerrard.

Gerrard, who played with a pain-killing injection in his heel, then cleared Benteke's header off the line to preserve a victory that enabled Liverpool to climb to within three points of neighbours Everton.

"He was in a bit of pain and struggling to get his boot on," said manager Brendan Rodgers. "Many other players would not play or even train, but he did what it takes to play. He's a wonderful professional."

Rodgers added: "I thought the players were brilliant today. In the second half the mentality and quality were outstanding. Once we got to 2-1 we controlled the game."

His counterpart, Paul Lambert, said: "I didn't think there was much in the game. We are playing well but it would be great for confidence to keep a clean sheet. Confidence is a big part of a game of football."

Confidence, and experience. Villa lack the latter and that became a problem when Liverpool levelled and confidence dipped. Initially Villa, bolstered by back-to-back wins, looked bright. Their youngsters wanted the ball and looked to play it around. Sometimes this led to being caught in possession and given their pace and strength in attack Villa should probably have played the ball forward earlier, but they still created a series of half-chances and should have led after 16 minutes when Matt Lowton's fine pass found Gabby Agbonlahor in the clear, but he put his shot too close to Pepe Reina. Fifteen minutes later Villa struck, Agbonlahor cushioning a long ball from Ashley Westwood for Benteke to thrash in his 18th Villa goal in all competitions of an excellent season.

At this stage, Benteke was monsterring Jamie Carragher whose final season is beginning to look as uncomfortable as Gary Neville's was, whereas Luis Suarez was being well-marshalled by Nathan Baker and Ron Vlaar. Suarez, who began wide but then swapped with Philippe Coutinho, was gifted his best chance by a wayward back-pass by Barry Bannan but wasted it.

At the break Rodgers told his team to raise the tempo and be more positive, but even he cannot have envisaged how swiftly Liverpool would equalise. A Gerrard clearance found Coutinho wide. The Villa defence were drawn towards him allowing Jordan Henderson to run off Westwood into space. Coutinho's pass was sublime and Henderson's finish immaculate.

Villa have let slip losing positions regularly this season and there was a sense of inevitability about the way the game now turned. Coutinho, fed by Suarez, rolled a great chance wide and Glen Johnson hit the post before the effervescent Suarez turned inside Baker and was needlessly felled for an undisputed penalty. Gerrard slid it past Brad Guzan for his 11th goal against Villa.

Villa sought an instant riposte but Andreas Weimann shot over from close-range when unmarked, then Gerrard cleared spectacularly from Benteke following a Westwood corner. Thereafter Liverpool were in command.

To flourish, Villa's narrow midfield requires Cafu and Roberto Carlos at full-back, not two lads out of the Football League, and as Matt Lowton and Joe Bennett tired, they increasingly thumped long balls which Carragher and Daniel Agger dealt with easily. This was when the lack of experience showed. Rodgers was talking about Gerrard, but might easily have been pin-pointing Villa's weakness when he said: "As a manager you want balance in the squad. You want players for tomorrow but it is vital you have players for today. Gerrard has huge experience and there were moments in the second half when he was organising the team, being vocal, being the leader. You need that."

Villa, however, have made a policy decision to go with youth this season in the hope that it will pay off in the long-term. "That's always been the remit," confirmed Lambert, "you have to be big enough and brave enough to keep going." Lambert is, but what about his owner? All the evidence suggests Randy Lerner will stick with his manager, and it would be unfair not to give his budget restraints, but no one thought Martin O'Neill at risk. Both managers professed themselves shocked at events at Sunderland with Lambert adding: "Nobody is safe."

DAILY MIRROR

SU GOOD TO BE TRUE

LUIS SUAREZ lag and exha produce a breath display, giving Astdefence sleepless adding to their rel worries.

LUIS SUAREZ beat jet lag and exhaustion to produce a breathtaking display, giving Aston Villa's defence sleepless nights and adding to their relegation worries.

Anfield boss Bren admitted Suarez lookethe build-up to the triyesterday.

Anfield boss Brendan Rodgers admitted Suarez looked exhausted in the build-up to the trip to Villa Park yesterday.

The Uruguay striker arrived back in the UK on Thursday night after playing in World Cup qualifiers against Paraguay and Chile.

Yet not only did he start, he gave the Villa backline the runaround operating on his own in attack.

The Uruguay strike in the UK on Thurs playing in World against Paraguay a Yet not only did h the Villa backline operating on his Suarez could stunning 29-term, but w which Ste converted to for Liverpool and tricks b home defe Vlaar and N knots. Suarez could not add to his stunning 29-goal haul this term, but won a penalty which Steven Gerrard converted to secure the win for Liverpool. Suarez's skill and tricks bamboozled the home defence, tying Ron Vlaar and Nathan Baker in knots. Exasperated Baker eventually scythed down Suarez in the box to concede the spot-kick.

Suarez's repertoire at Villa included an audacious chip from just inside the home half. Performances such as this illustrate why the South American is one of the most exciting and sought-after forwards in world football.

His temperament was yet again questioned last week after TV pictures showed him appearing to punch Chile defender Gonzalo Jara.

eventually Suarez in concede th Suarez's Villa includ chip from home half. such as this the South A of the mos sought-aft world footba His temper again questio after TV pictu appearing to defender Gonza And recent wanting Cham football had alert spenders. But R "We don't have the money or that. He's very want to keep s He's a wonderful pl "He's been away wit came back late Thurstraining Friday and I him and how shattereall the travel and all th"But you look at him And recent remarks about wanting Champions League football had alerted Europe's big spenders. But Rodgers insisted: "We don't have to sell him for the money or anything like that. He's very happy and we want to keep striving forward. He's a wonderful player.

"He's been away with Uruguay and came back late Thursday. He was in training Friday and I was looking at him and how shattered he was from all the travel and all the games.

"But you look at him today and his energy and willingness to work for the team. His sheer quality and his imagination in the game is incredible." He really frightens defenders, which led to the penalty."

LIVERPOOL'S first sight of goal was an ambitious ninth-minute curler by SUAREZ with the outside of his boot which flew over.

After Pepe Reina made a point-blanksave from Gabby Agbonlahor, Brad Guzan at the other end had to move smartly to deny Suarez.

The striker did superbly on at least two occasions to work an opening but then failed to capitalise.

And it was Villa who took the lead when Christian Benteke slammed in his 18th goal for the club. Ashley Westwood's ball to the top of the box was laid off by Agbonlahor to Benteke, who lashed in a right-foot shot.

A Barry Bannan error before the break let in Suarez but again he could not beat Guzan.

Villa's vibrant first half display made a mockery of their lowly league position. But Liverpool dominated virtually all of the second period to deservedly come from behind for the three points to keep in touch of sixth-placed Everton.

They levelled in the 47th minute when captain Gerrard found Philippe Coutinho on the left and his brilliant ball sent Jordan Henderson free to score his fourth of the campaign.

Liverpool then fashioned two great opportunities, the lively Coutinho put a one-on-one just wide and full-back Glen Johnson hit a post from outside the area with a curler.

But Rodgers' men were irresistible and when Suarez was fouled by Baker on the hour, Gerrard stuck the spotkick into the bottom corner for his 10th of the campaign.

Gerrard highlighted his importance to the Reds soon after when he denied Villa an equaliser.

Benteke's bullet header from Westwood's corner was heading in but Gerrard somehow managed to nod it off the line and over the bar.

It was to prove Villa's last clear sight of goal as Liverpool held out for the win.

Date: 31 March 2013
 Opposition: Aston Villa
 Competition: League

| | | |
|-------------|--------|-----------------|
| Guardian | Mirror | Post |
| Independent | Mail | BBC |
| Telegraph | Echo | Birmingham Mail |

31 March 2013



From winter of discontent, Reds spring back into action with Villa victory

NO other side has brought out the extremes in Liverpool FC quite like Aston Villa this season.

From the depths of December's humbling defeat at Anfield to the highs of their second half performance at Villa Park, the full range of the Reds' mood swings have been laid bare against Paul Lambert's men.

And if that shock loss before Christmas marked the turning point in their campaign then yesterday's revenge mission summed up the entire reign under manager Brendan Rodgers.

With their defensive susceptibilities exposed once more, the Reds rallied and produced passages of excellence and scored a picture book goal to help bring themselves level.

Liverpool showed the sides of their imperfect self in the Midlands.

But at least this time it ended positively and victory here keeps those hopes, however faint, of European qualification alive for another week.

Rodgers was bullish when he said the season would not be allowed to peter out and so the win not only put flesh on his words but also provided a much needed response to their woeful showing on the south coast two weeks earlier.

And the performance one of their constants in this rollercoaster season played a significant part in that – the brilliance of Luis Suarez.

He flew half way around the globe in the week to return from international duty and then turned in a performance which reaffirmed the belief he is worlds apart from most of the rest.

Suarez did not add to his goals tally for the season, though the chances were there, but won the penalty from which Steven Gerrard put Liverpool in front and frightened the living daylight out of Villa all afternoon.

He carried the fight almost single-handedly until the cavalry arrived in a rampaging second half display.

Gerrard, who now joins Robbie Fowler on a club record 12 goals against Villa, deserves credit not only for his goal and leadership but the athletic header that cleared Christian Benteke's goalbound effort off the line.

But the plaudits will, rightly, land in the lap of Suarez.

His manager insists top players will come to the club with or without the sweetener of European football and the hope must be the 26-year-old is willing to think on similar lines.

Simply, he was fabulous again yesterday. In an effort to drag Brendan Rodgers' men from their early slumber, he tried too hard at times but his invention and willing, lacking in most others, gave them hope at the turnaround.

It was a meek – almost disinterested – start to the game from Liverpool which was compounded when Benteke hammered home the opening goal; his third in two games against the Reds.

Scott Lowton launched a cross deep into Liverpool territory, Gabriel Agbonlahor found space in between Glen Johnson and Jamie Carragher before laying off the ball for Benteke to smash beyond Pepe Reina.

Liverpool conceded in similarly worrying fashion at St Mary's two weeks earlier and it reared its ugly head once again. Fortunately, there was a concerted response this time around and, belatedly, Rodgers saw his side stir into life.

Suarez should have scored when Barry Bannan's miscued pass put him through on goal but Villa goalkeeper Brad Guzan rushed from his goal and blocked the shot.

The American was then equal to Gerrard's goalbound piledriver as the break approached with Liverpool building momentum.

It was a spell which had the tempo the rest of the half was crying out for and those flickers of recovery turned into a fiery start to the second half.

Philippe Coutinho, who produced a confident display, threaded a delightful through ball to find Jordan Henderson's charge from midfield and the inch perfect pass was met with a deft finish.

The England under-21 captain was making his first start since in the league for nearly seven weeks as Rodgers made four changes from the side that suffered defeat to Southampton.

And fittingly, Liverpool were a transformed side from that day and were reinvigorated after the break here.

Suarez now had support flooding from midfield and the Reds counter attacked Villa with ever increasing menace.

They began to over-run their relegation-threatened hosts and Coutinho should have capped off his encouraging performance with a goal but when he raced clear from Suarez's pass, he fired wide.

It was not a miss Liverpool would rue as Steven Gerrard's penalty on the hour turned the game in Liverpool's favour after Nathan Baker hacked Suarez.

Although they required the skipper to produce a fine header to clear Benteke's effort from off the line and Reina to be alert when Lowton's miss-hit cross was looping in, Rodgers' men controlled the second period.

Though Villa began with energy there was always a nervous edge to their game and Liverpool preyed on that after the break.

Rodgers talked of Villa as the turning point but he must now hope they are on the straight and narrow to Europe.



Topsy-turvy win sums up LFC's season

IF defeat to Aston Villa back in December left Brendan Rodgers pulling out his hair, then victory yesterday would surely have left the Liverpool FC manager scratching his head. Such has been his team's schizophrenic season, a campaign of wildly contrasting fortunes neatly encapsulated during 90 entertaining minutes at Villa Park. What at half-time appeared to be heading towards a second successive demoralising away defeat was transformed into a morale-boosting and deserved triumph. With Rodgers convinced the 3-1 home loss to Villa before Christmas was the kickstart for Liverpool's Premier League campaign, then yesterday's win against the Midlanders at least ensures their season remains alive.

Certainly, there is no indication the Northern Irishman's side are willing to throw in the towel while there remains a glimmer of hope of claiming fifth place and the sole Europa League qualification berth.

How Liverpool needed a response having had a fortnight to brood over the disappointing reverse at Southampton, a result which exposed the shortcomings and maddening inconsistency that have undermined Rodgers' debut campaign. In the case of the latter, it could be argued nothing has changed.

The signs were ominous when Christian Benteke, who scored twice in Villa's Anfield win, thumped in a first-half opener. But, inspired by the remarkable Luis Suarez, Liverpool were transformed after the interval, Jordan Henderson equalising before Steven Gerrard coolly-converted from the spot.

Gerrard, who has now reached double figures for the eighth campaign, clearly loves playing Villa. This was his 12th career goal against the Midlanders; no Liverpool player has scored more in the fixture. But, once again, it was the irreplaceable Suarez who most captured the imagination.

Although failing to add to his 29-goal tally for the season, the Uruguayan was nevertheless the chief tormentor of a youthful Villa backline ultimately belied by their inexperience, most notably when teasing Nathan Baker into conceding the decisive penalty. Suarez, though, would frighten defenders of any vintage in this form. Rodgers spoke before the game of how Daniel Sturridge – rested to the bench yesterday – could learn from his strike partner's work ethic, and rarely can there have been a better example. There was encouragement elsewhere. Philippe Coutinho, busy, brave and creative, proves a more canny purchase with every outing, the Brazilian's perfectly-weighted pass compelling Henderson to bag the equaliser. It was a timely goal for both team and player. Henderson has been curiously overlooked in recent weeks – this was his first Premier League start in almost seven weeks – and with Joe Allen ruled out until the summer, the England under-21 man knows he must grasp the opportunity to prove he has a long-term future at the club. Having been dragged back into the drop zone the previous day, Villa's greater desire meant they began the brighter against a strangely listless Liverpool. Pepe Reina, returning to the starting line-up along with Jamie Carragher and Lucas Leiva, was in the right place on 16 minutes to prevent Rodgers' men falling behind, saving from point blank range after Gabriel Agbonlahor met Ashley Westwood's invitingly curled cross from the right.

But the Spaniard could do nothing when Villa's enterprise earned deserved reward on 31 minutes. For the umpteenth time, a long ball, this time by Matthew Lowton, caused consternation among the Liverpool defence. Agbonlahor found space between Jamie Carragher and Glen Johnson and his improvised lay-off was lashed in from 20 yards by Benteke. Suarez, inevitably, was Liverpool's most likely.

Fed by Johnson inside the area, the Uruguayan saw his shot turned over by Villa goalkeeper Brad Guzan, and was then distracted enough by Baker to hurriedly prod wide having been sent into space by Coutinho. Suarez later shot weakly at Guzan having twisted and turned his way clear of Baker and came closer four minutes before the interval when, capitalising on a wayward pass from Barry Bannan, he raced down the inside left channel but saw his eventual shot saved by the legs of Guzan. With the Villa goalkeeper then beating out a searching 25-yard effort from Gerrard, there were signs of Liverpool belatedly flickering into life.

And within two minutes of the restart, they were level. From a swift counter-attack, Gerrard picked out Coutinho down the left flank, the Brazilian advancing before delivering a delicious through ball for the unmarked Henderson to finish clinically beyond Guzan. Coutinho should then have found the target himself, pulling his shot inches wide of Guzan's far post from Suarez's incisive pass with the outside of his boot as the visitors continually poked holes in Villa's dangerously high defensive line. And moments after striking the inside of the post, Johnson played in Suarez who drew a rash foul on Baker. Referee Lee Mason had no option but to point to the spot; Gerrard did the rest. Villa, to their credit, responded. Andreas Weimann ballooned wastefully over from Yacouba Sylla's cross, Benteke's powerful header from an Ashley Westwood corner was nodded brilliantly off the line by Gerrard and Lowton's mishit cross prompted a backpedalling Reina to tip over the bar. The visitors, though, comfortably saw out the closing moments, with Suarez waiting too long to pull the trigger and register the goal his individual performance merited. With Rodgers' men having won four of their last five Premier League games, the reverse at Southampton could yet be regarded as a blip. Which Liverpool turn up against West Ham United on Sunday, however, not even the manager can be sure.

MAN OF THE MATCH. Luis Suarez. He may not have got a goal, but the Uruguayan was still in electrifying form

Date: 31 March 2013
 Opposition: Aston Villa
 Competition: League

| | | |
|-------------|--------|-----------------|
| Guardian | Mirror | Post |
| Independent | Mail | BBC |
| Telegraph | Echo | Birmingham Mail |

31 March 2013

Birmingham Mail

Aston Villa remain in the Barclays Premier League bottom three after Liverpool came from behind to claim the three points and keep alive their faint hopes of securing a Champions League spot.

Villa looked on course for a third successive win after leading at the interval through Christian Benteke's 18th goal of the campaign.

But the Reds equalised through Jordan Henderson early in the second period and then skipper Steven Gerrard's penalty sealed victory for the visitors.

The home side, who yesterday slipped into the relegation zone for the fifth time this season, are level on points with Wigan but have an inferior goal difference.

Villa posed plenty of threat to Liverpool in the first half with Benteke and Gabriel Agbonlahor linking well and Ashley Westwood pulling the strings in midfield.

But Liverpool upped their game a gear in the second period as they closed the gap on sixth-placed Everton to three points.

Luis Suarez was a handful throughout the 90 minutes, despite his World Cup qualifier exertions in Uruguay in midweek, and came close on several occasions to notching his 30th goal of the season.

Villa were the first to threaten and a probing pass from Westwood found overlapping left-back Joe Bennett in plenty of space.

He delivered a teasing cross to the near post which Benteke just failed to make contact with as it flew across the six yard box.

Andreas Weimann had a volley blocked but Agbonlahor should have put Villa ahead after 17 minutes.

Matt Lowton delivered a superb curling cross into the danger area which picked out the run of Agbonlahor.

But the England striker turned his shot straight at Jose Reina when it looked easier to score.

Brad Guzan was called into meaningful action for the first time when fingertipping a shot from Suarez over the bar after good play by Glen Johnson.

Then Nathan Baker had to be alert to nick the ball off the feet of Suarez inside the Villa area.

Benteke had scored twice in the 3-1 win at Anfield earlier in the season and after 31 minutes he put Villa ahead.

Westwood's cross was turned back by Agbonlahor to Benteke who drilled a fierce shot past Reina who got a hand on the ball but could not keep it out of the net.

It was the 18th goal of the season from the Belgian international.

Liverpool tried to retaliate and a misdirected pass from Barry Bannan allowed Suarez a free run at goal but Brad Guzan managed to keep out his low drive.

The Villa keeper then fingertipped aside a long-range drive from Liverpool skipper Gerrard.

Liverpool needed only three minutes of the second half to get back on level terms.

Philippe Coutinho's defence-splitting pass was seized on by Henderson who flicked the ball past Guzan into the corner of the net for his fourth goal of the season.

Gerrard became the first player to be booked for a foul on Agbonlahor.

Coutinho should have put Liverpool ahead in the 56th minute after beating the offside trap to run onto a pass from Suarez but he dinked his shot wide of the post.

But Liverpool were not to be denied and went ahead three minutes later.

Suarez was brought down in the box by Baker and the resulting spot-kick was converted by Gerrard.

Weimann could have made it 2-2 but scooped his shot over the bar from 10 yards. Then Gerrard headed Benteke's header off the line at full stretch from a Westwood corner.

But Liverpool had succeeded in taking much of the string out of Villa's attacking threat and quietening the Holte End.

Suarez had a shot on the turn saved by Guzan after some trickery inside the Villa box.

Benteke had the ball in the net in injury time but was clearly a yard offside.



Aston Villa missed the chance to pull out of the Premier League relegation zone as Liverpool came from behind to stay in the hunt for a European place.

Paul Lambert's side took the lead when Gabriel Agbonlahor's lay-off found Christian Benteke, who powered home.

Liverpool equalised shortly after the restart when Jordan Henderson dinked the ball past the reach of Brad Guzan.

And Steven Gerrard scored the winner from the spot after Nathan Baker brought down Luis Suarez in the area.

The second Liverpool goal came with 30 minutes left to play which gave the home side plenty of time to get something from the match.

However, after Austrian Andreas Weimann blasted his shot horribly high over the bar and Gerrard cleared Benteke's header off the line, it seemed the omens were not on Villa's side.

Boss Lambert now needs to reinvigorate his squad, who came into the match on the back of two successive league wins.

This defeat leaves them on 30 points, below 17th-placed Wigan on goal difference following the Latics' win against Norwich on Saturday.

Villa travel to Stoke next week before facing Manchester United and fellow strugglers Sunderland in what will be a crucial month in the future of the club.

It could have been a very different result for the Birmingham outfit had they not been so profligate in front of goal in the opening quarter of the match.

Almost straight from the kick-off Joe Bennett, in for the injured Ciaran Clark, delivered a sumptuous ball from the left that both Benteke and Agbonlahor failed to connect with from six yards out.

Moments later, Matthew Lowton swung in a cross from the other wing which this time found Agbonlahor, who wasted a golden chance by firing straight at Reina.

They eventually took the lead when Ashley Westwood played a quarter-back pass into the path of Agbonlahor, who used his thigh to lay the ball into the path of Benteke.

The Belgian, one of Villa's key performers this season, gave Pepe Reina no chance with his finish.

However, the half could have finished 3-3. Liverpool playmaker Suarez had two great chances - a shot that was tipped over by Brad Guzan and three that were easily saved when he was one-on-one with the Villa goalkeeper.

The United States international also came to the rescue when he punched a Gerrard drive clear that was destined for the top corner.

But he was helpless to stop the equaliser which came two minutes after the break. This time Gerrard found Philippe Coutinho with a long punt downfield.

The Brazilian midfielder threaded a precise ball through to Henderson, who lifted his shot past Guzan. It was an excellent move and finish.

Liverpool were in the ascendancy and Coutinho should have added another when he was put through by Suarez, while full-back Glen Johnson saw his strike come off a Villa player and rebound back off the far post.

The home side were holding on until the hour mark when Baker, who came through the Villa ranks, scythed down Suarez.

Referee Lee Mason pointed straight to the spot - there were few protestations. Gerrard stepped up and struck the ball low past Guzan.

More chances came Villa's way, but Weimann was wasteful when Yacouba Sylla found him with a ball from the right before Gerrard produced one of the best goalline clearances of the season when he nodded away Benteke's powerful header.

Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers: "We played reasonably well in the first half but we were punished for a mistake. We upped the tempo after the break and we were excellent. It is a terrific win for us. Both teams went right to the end.

"Our quality was there for all to see, and the rhythm and flow of our passing was improved.

"Villa went to a diamond and we exploited the space out wide. Coutinho's pass for the Henderson goal was superb, and Henderson's determination and desire to make the run was outstanding."

Date: 31 March 2013
 Opposition: Aston Villa
 Competition: League

| | | |
|-------------|--------|-----------------|
| Guardian | Mirror | Post |
| Independent | Mail | BBC |
| Telegraph | Echo | Birmingham Mail |

31 March 2013



90:00+3:05 Full time The referee ends the match.
 90:00+2:15 The offside flag is raised against Christian Benteke. Free kick taken by Jose Reina.
 90:00+2:01 The referee blows for offside against Stewart Downing. Bradley Guzan restarts play with the free kick.
 90:00+0:52 Sanchez Jose Enrique restarts play with the free kick.
 90:00+0:52 Booking Ashley Westwood goes into the book.
 90:00+0:44 Free kick awarded for an unfair challenge on Jordan Henderson by Ashley Westwood.
 90:00+0:16 Christian Benteke gives away a free kick for an unfair challenge on Steven Gerrard. Jose Reina restarts play with the free kick.
 89:00 Raheem Sterling fouled by Charles N'Zogbia, the ref awards a free kick. Direct free kick taken by Jose Reina.
 86:52 Fabian Delph challenges Luis Suarez unfairly and gives away a free kick. Leiva Lucas takes the free kick.
 85:43 Shot from 20 yards by Charles N'Zogbia. Jamie Carragher gets a block in.
 82:44 Shot by Luis Suarez. Bradley Guzan makes a save.
 79:58 Outswinging corner taken left-footed by Charles N'Zogbia.
 78:40 Fabian Delph gives away a free kick for an unfair challenge on Luis Suarez. Direct effort from the free kick comes in from Stewart Downing.
 77:59 Raheem Sterling takes a shot. Save by Bradley Guzan.
 75:48 Substitution Substitution Raheem Sterling comes on in place of Phillippe Coutinho.
 75:48 Substitution Substitution Karim El Ahmadi is brought on as a substitute for Yacouba Sylla.
 72:00 Steven Gerrard fouled by Charles N'Zogbia, the ref awards a free kick. Direct free kick taken by Leiva Lucas.
 71:30 The referee blows for offside against Luis Suarez. Bradley Guzan restarts play with the free kick.
 71:04 The offside flag is raised against Gabriel Agbonlahor. Jose Reina restarts play with the free kick.
 70:01 Phillippe Coutinho takes a shot. Blocked by Ron Vlaar.
 70:01 Phillippe Coutinho takes a shot. Jamie Carragher gets a block in.
 68:55 The ball is crossed by Matthew Lowton, save made by Jose Reina. Corner taken left-footed by Charles N'Zogbia from the left by-line, Steven Gerrard makes a clearance.
 63:41 Glen Johnson gives away a free kick for an unfair challenge on Christian Benteke. The ball is swung over by Charles N'Zogbia, Fabian Delph takes the chance to get an effort at goal. Blocked by Daniel Agger. Inswinging corner taken right-footed by Ashley Westwood, Christian Benteke takes a shot. Blocked by Steven Gerrard. Corner taken by Charles N'Zogbia from the left by-line, Daniel Agger makes a clearance.
 61:38 Substitution Substitution Charles N'Zogbia replaces Andreas Weimann.
 61:38 Substitution Substitution Fabian Delph replaces Barry Bannan.
 61:24 Shot from deep inside the area by Andreas Weimann goes over the bar.
 59:15 Assist by Luis Suarez.
 59:15 Goal scored Goal - Steven Gerrard - A Villa 1 - 2 Liverpool Placed penalty scored by Steven Gerrard. Aston Villa 1-2 Liverpool.
 58:23 Nathan Baker challenges Luis Suarez unfairly and gives away a Penalty.
 57:20 Glen Johnson has an effort at goal from just outside the area that bounces off the post.
 56:38 The ball is delivered by Andreas Weimann. Barry Bannan sends in a cross, Daniel Agger manages to make a clearance.
 55:26 Free kick awarded for a foul by Christian Benteke on Leiva Lucas. Free kick taken by Jamie Carragher.
 54:49 Phillippe Coutinho has an effort at goal from just inside the box that misses to the left of the target.
 54:18 The official flags Christian Benteke offside. Jamie Carragher takes the free kick.
 52:07 Luis Suarez is ruled offside. Bradley Guzan takes the free kick.
 51:57 Sanchez Jose Enrique crosses the ball, clearance by Matthew Lowton.
 50:41 Gabriel Agbonlahor produces a right-footed shot from just outside the box that goes wide right of the target.
 47:56 Barry Bannan takes the direct free kick.
 47:56 Booking Steven Gerrard is shown a yellow card.
 47:52 Steven Gerrard gives away a free kick for an unfair challenge on Gabriel Agbonlahor.
 46:42 Assist on the goal came from Phillippe Coutinho.
 46:42 Goal scored Goal - Jordan Henderson - A Villa 1 - 1 Liverpool Jordan Henderson scores a goal from just inside the area to the bottom left corner of the goal. Aston Villa 1-1 Liverpool.
 45:14 Leiva Lucas is penalised for handball and concedes a free kick. Ron Vlaar takes the free kick.
 45:01 The referee blows his whistle to start the second half.
 45:00+0:59 Half time The referee blows for half time.
 44:17 Foul by Glen Johnson on Christian Benteke, free kick awarded. Bradley Guzan takes the direct free kick.
 44:02 Corner taken short by Stewart Downing.
 42:19 Short corner worked by Stewart Downing. Steven Gerrard takes a shot. Save by Bradley Guzan.
 41:40 Free kick awarded for a foul by Christian Benteke on Glen Johnson. Free kick taken by Glen Johnson.
 41:27 The ball is sent over by Stewart Downing.
 40:23 Luis Suarez takes a shot. Bradley Guzan makes a save.
 40:03 Luis Suarez takes a shot. Nathan Baker gets a block in.
 39:34 Glen Johnson crosses the ball, Nathan Baker manages to make a clearance.
 38:07 Steven Gerrard takes an inswinging corner from the left by-line to the near post, Yacouba Sylla makes a clearance.
 36:59 Leiva Lucas challenges Ashley Westwood unfairly and gives away a free kick. The

ball is swung over by Barry Bannan, Christian Benteke takes a shot. Jose Reina makes a save.
 36:39 Luis Suarez delivers the ball, Joe Bennett takes a clearance.
 35:50 Luis Suarez has an effort at goal from long distance that goes wide left of the target.
 32:59 Inswinging corner taken right-footed by Steven Gerrard, save made by Bradley Guzan. Steven Gerrard takes an inswinging corner from the left by-line to the near post, clearance made by Ron Vlaar.
 30:38 Assist by Gabriel Agbonlahor.
 30:38 Assist on the goal came from Gabriel Agbonlahor.
 30:38 Goal scored Goal - Christian Benteke - A Villa 1 - 0 Liverpool Christian Benteke finds the back of the net with a goal from the edge of the area to the bottom left corner of the goal. Aston Villa 1-0 Liverpool.
 30:11 Luis Suarez takes a shot. Bradley Guzan makes a save.
 27:54 Foul by Jamie Carragher on Christian Benteke, free kick awarded. Barry Bannan crosses the ball in from the free kick, Glen Johnson manages to make a clearance. Corner taken by Barry Bannan.
 27:15 Long range shot by Gabriel Agbonlahor goes wide right of the target.
 26:53 Sanchez Jose Enrique produces a cross, clearance made by Ron Vlaar.
 25:10 The ball is sent over by Gabriel Agbonlahor.
 24:09 Joe Bennett delivers the ball, clearance made by Jamie Carragher.
 23:12 Joe Bennett sends in a cross, clearance made by Jamie Carragher.
 22:03 Andreas Weimann produces a cross.
 19:48 Leiva Lucas concedes a free kick for a foul on Gabriel Agbonlahor. Christian Benteke takes the free kick.
 19:05 Luis Suarez takes a shot. Save by Bradley Guzan. Inswinging corner taken right-footed by Steven Gerrard, save by Bradley Guzan.
 17:58 Stewart Downing delivers the ball.
 17:25 The ball is sent over by Barry Bannan.
 16:55 Yacouba Sylla fouled by Leiva Lucas, the ref awards a free kick. Barry Bannan crosses the ball from the free kick left-footed from left channel, clearance made by Jordan Henderson.
 16:12 Inswinging corner taken by Barry Bannan.
 15:46 Gabriel Agbonlahor takes a shot. Jose Reina makes a save.
 14:47 Christian Benteke fouled by Leiva Lucas, the ref awards a free kick. Barry Bannan delivers the ball, Andreas Weimann takes a shot. Leiva Lucas gets a block in.
 13:11 Andreas Weimann delivers the ball, Daniel Agger makes a clearance. Inswinging corner taken by Ashley Westwood.
 12:17 The ball is sent over by Steven Gerrard, Nathan Baker manages to make a clearance. Outswinging corner taken by Steven Gerrard from the right by-line, clearance by Ron Vlaar.
 9:47 Glen Johnson takes a shot. Bradley Guzan makes a comfortable save.
 8:02 Effort on goal by Luis Suarez from just inside the area clears the crossbar.
 7:20 Stewart Downing takes the outswinging corner, clearance by Ron Vlaar.
 3:51 Stewart Downing is caught offside. Free kick taken by Bradley Guzan.
 0:25 Luis Suarez is ruled offside. Bradley Guzan restarts play with the free kick.
 0:24 Stewart Downing takes a shot from 20 yards. Matthew Lowton gets a block in.
 0:00 The match begins.