

Date: 26 November 2014
Opposition: PFC Ludogorets Razgrad
Competition: Champions League

Times	Telegraph	Echo
Guardian	Mirror	BBC
Independent	Mail	

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THE TIMES

Liverpool's fate in their hands despite familiar failings

Ludogorets 2 Dani 3, Terziev 88

Liverpool 2 Lambert 8, Henderson 37

It was not only a Champions League campaign at stake for Liverpool in Sofia, but also their manager's reputation, their ability to stand up to pressure and show the character that their critics believe they lack. They came close to delivering on all fronts, coming from behind to take a lead that was only cancelled out by a Ludogorets equaliser two minutes from time, and in doing so kept alive their hopes of reaching the last 16 of the competition. The point they took in the Bulgarian capital means victory over Basle in two weeks time will allow Liverpool to reach that objective. It also meant they avoided the ignominy of losing a fifth successive match for the first time since 1953 on a night when Brendan Rodgers's request for silk to become secondary to steel were heeded in a much improved performance. It could have been even better for Liverpool as goals from Rickie Lambert and Jordan Henderson allowed them to overturn Dani Abalo's opener for Ludogorets but a familiar failing undermined them in the closing stages as they allowed the Bulgarian champions to equalise from a set piece. Regardless of that late disappointment, Rodgers will feel he now has something to build on, particularly as their chances of qualification remain in their own hands going into the final round of group games.

Rodgers's team selection reflected both the need for Liverpool to display character and the continuing struggle to integrate their eight summer signings. Lucas Leiva, Kolo Toure and Jordan Henderson were handed recalls in the hope of achieving the former, while Javier Manquillo and Lambert highlighted the latter by being the only new acquisitions to make the starting line-up.

Steven Gerrard, who scored on a visit to the Vasil Levski Stadium ten years ago, was deployed in an advanced position behind Lambert, with Lucas taking over the deep-lying midfield role in which the Liverpool captain has struggled of late. The theory behind the changes was that they would make Liverpool harder to beat after four successive defeats, but the idea was challenged within three minutes as Ludogorets took an early lead, and in doing so exposed many of the visiting team's weaknesses. Chief among them is Simon Mignolet, arguably Liverpool's worst first-choice goalkeeper of modern times, who spilt Marcelinho's tame shot to allow Abalo to sweep the loose ball into the net.

The hapless Mignolet was not the only weak link, though, just the final one in a chain that started with Raheem Sterling losing possession on the edge of the opposition penalty area, leading to Fabio Espinho racing forward almost unhindered before attempting a through-ball that Toure only halfcleared, inadvertently setting up Marcelinho's shot. Having wilted so easily, Liverpool's test of character became even greater and it was to their credit, albeit assisted by equally appalling defending, that they equalised soon after, with Lambert scoring his second goal for the club. Lucas's long ball forward should have been dealt with in routine fashion, only for Cosmin Moti to display the kind of indecision that has come to be expected of the Liverpool back four, and Lambert headed the loose ball over Vladislav Stoyanov, the goalkeeper. The Champions League had been treated to two goals of Sunday League standard and Toure almost added a third when his attempt to cut out Mihail Aleksandrov's low cross left the defender to prod the ball narrowly wide of a post with Mignolet wrong-footed. The Belgium goalkeeper's torrid night continued with a hopeless flap at Aleksandrov's floated free kick, only for Abalo to fail to make a clean contact with his attempted header at goal. Despite coming under concerted pressure, Liverpool were showing more resilience and a greater level of threat on the counterattack than they have of late, and both qualities were evident when they took the lead after 37 minutes.

After holding Ludogorets at bay, Liverpool countered in a style reminiscent of last season, with their assault culminating in Sterling picking out Henderson with a searching cross that the midfield player successfully converted at the far post. Henderson's furious goal celebration released at least some of the pent-up frustration that has been building in Liverpool's squad, but the job was still only half done and they now faced a new test -- of having to hold on to their slender advantage, something they had failed to do in a damaging 3-1 defeat by Crystal Palace three days earlier. Liverpool came close to extending their lead after the interval when Sterling dinked an inviting cross to the far post only for Lambert's header to be blocked by Moti in front of his own goal line. The loose ball dropped to Henderson, who fired over, his blushes spared by the award of a foul against him before making contact. Sterling was carrying Liverpool's attack and showing the kind of leadership that his manager had demanded from all of his players. He almost put the result beyond doubt after a wonderful give and go with Gerrard put him through but the winger's finish lacked power and accuracy. It was to be his final act as he hobbled off immediately after to be replaced by Alberto Moreno as Rodgers looked to shut up shop. That attempt failed when Ludogorets equalised with only two minutes of normal time remaining. Once again, Liverpool's chronic inability to deal with set pieces was their undoing as Georgi Terziev scored a far post header after Junior Caicara's header had been flicked on by Svetoslav Dyakov.

Ludogorets: (4-2-3-1): V Stoyanov J Caicara, C Moti, G Terziev, Y Minev F Espinho (sub: Y Hamza, 81min), S Dyakov V Misidjan, Marcelinho, M Alexandrov (sub: Wanderson, 72) D Abalo (sub: J Quixada, 69). Substitutes not used: M Borjan, A Barthe, A Abel, A Aleksandrov. Liverpool (4-2-3-1): S Mignolet J Manquillo, M Skrtel, K Toure, G Johnson Lucas, J Allen J Henderson, S Gerrard, R Sterling (sub: A

Moreno, 82) R Lambert. Substitutes not used: B Jones, D Lovren, P Coutinho, A Lallana, E Can, F Borini. Referee: A Lahoz (Spain).

the guardian

Late blow extends Rodgers' misery: Wait for a victory goes on and Liverpool must defeat Basel at Anfield to progress in Champions League
A Champions League campaign intended to showcase Liverpool's return among the European elite has delivered only torment for Brendan Rodgers. There was no escape here in Sofia. A precious first win in five matches beckoned for Liverpool only for Ludogorets to score an 88th-minute equaliser that transformed the mood but not the task confronting Rodgers' team against Basel in two weeks' time. Victory at Anfield will send Liverpool through as would have been the case with a win or a draw against the Bulgarian champions.

There were moments after the defender Georgi Terziev headed in a corner from Junior Caicara when Liverpool were fraying badly and another damaging defeat beckoned for Rodgers who spun on his heels and shouted in despair at Ludogorets' late leveller. Otherwise, this was a tentative step forward in comparison to the misery of recent weeks. Rodgers got the show of character he wanted if not the scrappy win he would have taken before kick-off and goals from Rickie Lambert and Jordan Henderson almost delivered.

So much for the rarified air of the Champions League. The opening exchanges of this contest would not have looked out of place in a Sunday League game as both sides traded gifts and showed why they are fighting for survival in Group B. First up with a calamity was Simon Mignolet, the butt of an ancient joke about Dracula and crosses from Bruce Grobbelaar before the game and subject to further ridicule after presenting a ludicrous goal to Ludogorets in only the third minute. The Belgium goalkeeper has endured a torrid campaign but here he betrayed Liverpool's lack of confidence with an awful attempt to deal with a long-range shot from Marcelinho.

The Ludogorets holding midfielder Fabio Espinho instigated their first foray forward with a surging run and crossfield pass that Kolo Toure, once again replacing pounds 20m Dejan Lovren for a Champions League tie, inadvertently turned into Marcelinho's path. The shot was straight at Mignolet even after taking a bobble but the keeper fumbled and Dani Abalo gratefully converted from close range.

To a man, Liverpool stared at Mignolet in disbelief. They had started brightly, with Raheem Sterling and Glen Johnson prominent down the left and here they were complicating life for themselves yet again. The visitors' saving grace was that their opponents self-imploded too. Only five minutes later Lucas Leiva launched a hopeful punt into the Ludogorets penalty area that no one took responsibility for. Lambert missed the first header but was given a second bite when Yordan Minev inexplicably stood back and allowed the ball to bounce up in his six-yard box. Lambert sent a slow, looping header in off the far post for his second goal in two games.

Liverpool then enjoyed comfortable periods of possession without troubling Vladislav Stoyanov in the Bulgarian goal. Ludogorets, by contrast, looked threatening whenever they ventured forward due to the alarming amount of space behind Liverpool's defensive midfield pair of Lucas and Joe Allen plus the full-backs, Johnson and Javier Manquillo, retained despite their respective trials at Crystal Palace on Sunday.

Rodgers had opted for his most experienced midfield to shield the team from a possible repeat. The Liverpool manager heeded calls for Steven Gerrard to be liberated from a play-making role and into a more advanced position but, even with a more defensively minded pairing in front of his defence, Rodgers watched an opponent cut through midfield far too easily.

Ludogorets' "home" game was 400 miles away from Razgrad due to their stadium failing to meet Uefa standards. Their domestic rivalry with CSKA, who top the table from the reigning champions, meant many of the locals in the stadium were supporting Liverpool. Toure almost sliced a low cross from Mihail Alexandrov into his own net but cut a relieved figure as the ball hit the side-netting with Mignolet stranded. The visiting goalkeeper then came and completely missed a free-kick from Alexandrov and was also reprieved as Abalo headed wide of an empty goal. Liverpool's defence was creaking badly with the exception of Martin Skrtel but a rare incisive counter-attack gave Rodgers' men the foothold they sought. Lambert released Sterling into a three-against-two break, the England winger delivered an inch-perfect cross to the far post and Henderson arrived with perfect timing to send a fine finish beyond Stoyanov.

Sterling has looked exhausted on occasion lately but was a constant outlet in the Bulgarian capital, stretching the Ludogorets' defence at will despite some rough treatment.

It was Sterling's left-wing run and cross that gave Lambert an opportunity to extend Liverpool's advantage but his diving header was blocked on the six-yard line and Henderson skied the loose ball over. His blushes were spared, however, by the referee's whistle for a push.

Terziev's header altered the complexion of the night but qualification remains in Liverpool's hands.

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26 November 2014

The



Mail

CARELESS REDS LET IT SLIP

LUDOGORETS 2 Abalo 3, Terziev 88 LIVERPOOL 2 Lambert 8 Henderson 37

IT'S STILL going to be tough. Basle are no mugs and they only need a draw at Anfield. Yet Liverpool are in there, fighting, still -- despite the disappointment felt here. They looked to have held on. Impressively, too. Ludogorets Razgrad is not one of the storied European names. They are not Real Madrid; or even Liverpool. But the elite have been travelling to tricky corners of Europe like this for decades and occasionally coming unstuck. The Soviet era national stadium. The iconic oblong floodlights. A classic easterly location. We used to watch grainy footage ofLiverpool in action on nights like this in the days when the competition was called the European Cup. They were not easy games. And neither was this. Liverpool had held their lead for close to an hour when Ludogorets' pressure told. It was a corner, one of a number late on. This one in the 88th minute found Georgi Terziev, who powered his header past Simon Mignolet. It does not change matters greatly. Liverpool always needed to beat Basle at Anfield next month -- but psychologically it was a blow. This might have been a corner-turning display, one that built confidence. Instead it is another indication of frailty. Make no mistake, a win would have been a good result here. The opposition were an unknown quantity, but technical and lively. The pitch was a bogey. It would have been very easy for Liverpool to have travelled here and lost -- certainly after going a goal down to a howler by Mignolet. But they didn't. They rallied and rode the odd storm and got a little lucky -- it may have been a penalty when Glen Johnson fouled Mihail Alexandrov in the second half, but referee Antonio Mateu Lahoz of Spain gave it outside the box. But it was not enough. At the end, for all their qualities, Liverpool caved -- and now they must step up again against Basle. Mark Lawrenson got sent off at the Vasil Levski Stadium, in what might be termed the good old days. Last night he watched from the press box, and what Liverpool would give for a defender of his composure on nights like this. For a goalkeeper like Ray Clemence or even Bruce Grobbelaar, too. From the third minute, when they fell behind, to the very end as Ludogorets continued to press, Liverpool were nervous. Mignolet -- whose penalty save against Stoke was a catalyst for the run that took them to within touching distance of the title -- is no longer part of the solution but a large slice of the problem. He was at fault for the first goal here, even if it was Kolo Toure's initial mistake that put Liverpool on the back foot. Toure cleared the ball straight to Marcelinho, one of five Brazilians in the Ludogorets squad, and he struck a low shot from just outside the area. It was powerful but straight and should have presented little problem for a topclass goalkeeper. Mignolet's attempt to gather it into his body, however, was pitiful. The ball rebounded off his chest and striker Dani Abalo, late of Celta Vigo in Spain, was first to react, prodding the ball into the net from close range.

It was not the only time Mignolet's handling caused concern. He reacted to every shot he faced as though it had exploded out of a jack-in-the-box directly in front of him. The pitch was partly to blame for that, calling into question Liverpool's decision to train at Melwood rather than on the Levski pitch. No goalkeeper will ever get used to an inconsistent bounce like that, but Mignolet might not have looked so startled every time it happened. THESE were not the only nasty instances. He completely missed a cross into his box -- and thankfully so did everybody else -- while Toure almost put a low ball from Mihail Alexandrov into his own net. In the 33rd minute, a shot from 30 yards by Fabio Espinho pitched in a rough patch and almost biffed Mignolet on the nose as he sought to collect it. By then, Liverpool's nerves were jangling. This being a charmed week for English clubs in Europe, however, eight minutes before half-time, Brendan Rodgers' team were ahead. Ludogorets had probably edged the first half, but like Manchester City against Bayern Munich, fortune had favoured the English side.

It wasn't just Liverpool who were weak in defence. Ludogorets let them back into the game with two errors: the second a lapse, but the first a real horror show. Jordan Henderson played a long, rather aimless, ball into the box, but it seemed to catch goalkeeper Vladislav Stoyanov and defender Cosmin Moti in two minds -- and neither of them was worthy of an application to MENSA. Moti dawdled, Stoyanov froze and Rickie Lambert popped in between the pair of them and sent a header into the far corner. It was the sort of goal that had the whole stadium looking to the linesman, expecting to see the flag. There was none. They created little after that, though, and a shot from Raheem Sterling that rose high over the bar seemed to sum up the difference in form from last season. There were 37 minutes gone, however, when Liverpool got the goal that changed the dynamic of this campaign. It came around the time that, over in Basle, Cristiano Ronaldo was giving Real Madrid the lead to greatly improve Liverpool's chances of progress. And while Henderson could not have known the news, he responded to Sterling's cross as if he did. Henderson showed Lampardesque energy as he arrived at the far post, timing his run perfectly and finishing from a tight angle to give Liverpool a gasp of breathing space. The marking could have been tighter but that is hardly Liverpool's concern. The celebrations mirrored those of Manchester City 24 hours earlier: two English clubs handed a reprieve in Europe. They have 90 more minutes to make it pay.

LUDOGORETS: Stoyanov, Junior Caicara, Moti, Terziev, Minev, Misidjan, Dyakov, Fabio Espinho, Mihail Aleksandrov, Marcelinho, Dani Abalo (Quixada 69).
Scorers: Dani Abalo 3, Terziev 88. LIVERPOOL: Mignolet, Johnson, Skrtel, Toure, Manquillo, Henderson, Gerrard, Lucas, Lambert, Allen, Sterling (Moreno 82).
Scorers: Lambert 8, Henderson 37. Referee: A Lahoz (Spain).

The



Daily Telegraph

liverpool stumble but still hunt for last 16

Ludogorets 2
Dani 3, Terziev 88
Liverpool 2
Lambert 8, Henderson 37 Att: 6,300

Brendan Rodgers's promise that Liverpool would "tough it out" to enhance their Champions League hopes was not fulfilled but they kept their European destiny in their own hands. Liverpool's inability to withstand pressure saw them concede an 88th-minute equaliser to Ludogorets, yet the draw last night still proved a useful result. A victory in their final group game to Basle will be enough to ensure Liverpool reach the knockout stages.

Rodgers's side made the test of their disputed character even sterner after falling behind to a third-minute goal, but strikes from Rickie Lambert and Jordan Henderson put them on course for victory before Georgi Terziev's late intervention. Until then there had been more of the resolve Rodgers was demanding after recent timid displays and the return to form of key personnel was also a source of relief given how con-fidence has sapped.

Raheem Sterling shone, his role in creating Henderson's goal typifying his evening, but this was still a game Liverpool should have won.

The performances as much as results are the subject of forensic examination for Liverpool. When drawn with Ludogorets, it seemed Uefa had offered the red carpet treatment to the five-time winners. Nothing is easy for this Liverpool side, as they discovered in the early moments at the Vasil Levski Stadium. Rodgers brought his squad to Bulgaria wondering where the next victory was coming from. Having arrived at Anfield vowing the restoration of attacking, pass and move football, his coaching education has led him to a module espousing the merits of pragmatism. Liverpool were never afraid to win ugly in Europe - club legends edit the after-dinner stories to omit the dour away draws when the club was accused of betraying football. The reason Bob Paisley so gloriously succeeded in the European Cup where Bill Shankly failed is because he understood the value of the occasional grinding win as much as battering everyone at Anfield.

In the pursuit of 'winning ugly' however, there is another pitfall. When you do not win, you just look ugly. There is nothing unattractive about winning.

Rodgers's hunt for solidity - some might say a belated quest - added Lucas Leiva and Kolo Toure to his starting line-up. Lucas has his limitations but his intelligence was a godsend at times here, bringing calm to midfield during frantic early exchanges, especially when Liverpool fell behind early. Steven Gerrard played in an advanced role and there was more attacking threat in the first half than most of the season.

Lambert continued up front but it was telling of the eight summer arrivals he was one of only two starting one of the most significant games of Rodgers' reign. No amount of philosophical or tactical changes can legislate for the kind of mistake Mignolet made in the third minute, however, fumbling Marcelinho's long-range shot into the path of Dani Abalo.

If the game plan was to slog out a victory, Rodgers was already having to rethink. Mignolet, without a trace of self-awareness, spent the rest of the evening encouraging those around him to calm down. Given he is as reassuring to the defenders as a tsunami warning, they could be forgiven for ignoring him.

His mistake was remedied by Lambert's header five minutes later, his pressurising of Cosmin Moti and Yordan Minev inducing an error. As they hesitated, Lambert pounced for his second goal in two games, heading past Vladislav Stoyanov.

Therein the game echoed many of Liverpool's of last season. That was both worrying and encouraging. They looked capable of conceding every time they were under pressure, but carried more threat on the break, especially with Sterling sharper. Toure almost sliced Mihail Alexandrov's cross into his own net on 20 minutes, but Sterling was terrorising the Bulgarian defenders, stopped in his tracks by over-officious refereeing until he broke clear on 37 minutes to enable Henderson to make it 2-1. The defensive flaws were still apparent, but the balance of the side was visibly improved even if certain personnel still looked flaky. Rodgers must have been encouraged his side was at least attacking in numbers again, Lambert's link-up play especially impressive.

With a lead to protect, the question remained how capable Liverpool's defence was at resisting. Ludogorets passed with pace and tempo, but their frustrations were growing in the early stages of the second half.

Sterling was one of Liverpool's most impressive performers, despite heavy treatment from the defenders and zero protection from the Spanish referee Antonio Lahoz, and there was a concern when he needed lengthy treatment for an ankle injury.

He was left hobbling after Moti's challenge early in the second half.

Sterling epitomised everything Rodgers was looking for - courage and skill - but he also missed the perfect chance to secure the victory on 80 minutes, striking straight at keeper Stoyanov when clean through.

He limped off a minute later, disappointed at the miss and with a stomach problem, but he had performed admirably but no sooner had he departed his side succumbed to an equaliser.

An 88th-minute corner fell to Terziev who headed in, but Basle's defeat against Real Madrid ensured that it was not as damaging as it might have been.

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THE

INDEPENDENT

Liverpool concede late and cling to final chance

Liverpool will have a European final of sorts. To qualify for the business stage of the Champions League they will have to beat Basel at Anfield. If they show the kind of resolve they displayed in a freezing night in Sofia, they should have every chance. If they continue to defend like they did against Ludogorets, they will have none at all. Here, the flares lit in the open stands at kick-off time had not even begun to fade when Liverpool's defence caved in yet again this season. Two minutes from what would have been a fine victory, they collapsed once more. Had Raheem Sterling kept his nerve when through on goal and not aimed his shot against Vladislav Stoyanov's legs, Ludogorets' late equaliser would not have mattered. However, the failings that have stalked Liverpool through the season returned. They have been so poor at defending set-pieces that at times conceding a corner has felt like conceding a penalty - which defender Glen Johnson was fortunate not to have done, just before Georgi Terziev headed home from a corner to seal the draw. It made little real difference to what Liverpool require in their final game, but it was another livid bruise to self-confidence that is as delicate and fragile as Dresden china laid out for a toddler's birthday party. It was not the worst result Liverpool have recorded in this stadium. In March 1982, they were knocked out of the quarter-finals of the European Cup by CSKA Sofia. Mark Lawrenson had been sent off in that game and, returning 32 years later, he remarked that the stadium had not changed. It was the same concrete bowl, the same vast floodlight pylons, the same shabby corridors. Liverpool have changed. They may have lost then, but they were European champions, a team where, in the words of Kenny Dalglish, "everybody knew their job". Glancing at the team that left the pitch last night you wonder how many know theirs. Under more pressure than at any time during his two years at Liverpool, manager Brendan Rodgers had pledged that here his side would show the resilience and character that some, including the club's former defender, Jamie Carragher, had thought was almost entirely lacking from their most recent performances. Mostly they showed it, although Rodgers could not have envisaged just how quickly Liverpool backs were to be pressed against the wall. As the season has soured, the Liverpool manager has talked of a basic lack of confidence in his squad, and nobody seems quite as drained of it as his goalkeeper. The match was three minutes old when Simon Mignolet's self-belief would have sunk another couple of notches. The much-maligned Liverpool goalkeeper was unable to deal with the bounce of a shot from Brazilian Marcelinho on a pitch his manager had chosen not to train on. The ball seemed to ricochet off his chest and Ludogorets' Spanish forward, Dani Abalo, drove in the rebound. Mignolet has a political science degree but this was fourth-form goalkeeping. Later in the first half, he was almost deceived again by the bounce of a free-kick delivered by Fabio Espinho. The home crowd, who had seen their side beat Basel and also push Real Madrid close in Group B, were at the same time delirious and disbelieving. Ludogorets were, of course, not at home. Their city lies a four-and-a-half hour drive from the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, and most of the population of 33,000 appeared to have found a way to the country's national stadium, willing their fairytale to continue. The fans' jubilation lasted five minutes, time for Rickie Lambert, the one positive to emerge from Sunday's debacle at Crystal Palace, to put the game level. On Tuesday evening, Lambert had delivered a stinging analysis of the way Liverpool had performed at Selhurst Park. Champions League press conferences, staged in front of a firing squad of television cameras and with your manager sitting beside you, seldom encourage observations from footballers other than: "We hope to do well." However, Lambert is 32. He grew up dreaming of competing for the European Cup with Liverpool and he knew that, unless there was a dramatic improvement, this would be his one and only opportunity. Now, with the ball bobbling in the Ludogorets area, he reacted quicker than anyone to head it home via the post. He may not be a natural centre-forward for the kind of teams Rodgers wishes to create, but he is a natural centre-forward. It provided only a respite in the flow of the game which was mostly towards Mignolet's goal. In order to shore up a vulnerable defence, Rodgers had recalled Lucas to shield the back four, pushed the Liverpool captain, Steven Gerrard, further up the pitch (although sometimes you would not have known it) and returned Kolo Tour[c] to the heart of the back four. Given his heroics in the 1-0 defeat by Real Madrid earlier in the month, it was no more than the Ivorian deserved, although he almost turned Mihail Alexandrov's low cross past his own goalkeeper. And then Liverpool broke away to take the lead. Sterling sprinted down the Liverpool left and delivered a low, fast ball with geometric precision that Jordan Henderson, sprinting in, clipped past Stoyanov. It was precisely the type of goal Liverpool had scored with such regularity last season, a campaign which has often seemed very long ago and very far away.

DAILY

Mirror

IT'S A KOP FINAL; Battling Reds do enough to set up a must-win Anfield finale against Basel

THE equation at least is simple, even if this contest on a frozen Sofia night was anything but. Liverpool must win their final game to make unlikely progress to the knock-out stages. That is a situation few would have expected minutes into this strange contest. To say the Reds made difficult work of erratic opponents is an understatement, given they gifted the Bulgarians a farcical opening goal, aided and abetted by a shocking pitch which gave keeper Simon Mignolet nightmares. Then a little of last season's Liverpool emerged to drag them back into the contest with goals from Rickie Lambert and Jordan Henderson, and with it, back into the competition. There is still some way to go though before anyone can start proclaiming the return of form and confidence. Something else from last season emerged - failings from set-pieces, which lead to a ridiculously nervy final few minutes. It meant when they conceded a sloppy goal from their weaknesses at a corner, with Georgi Terziev heading home from close range, the nerves appeared and they almost threw away a comfortable position. But survive somehow they did, and at least the gamble of pushing skipper Steven Gerrard further forward paid handsome dividends. With Gerrard's canny passing there, the Reds had an outlet they have been lacking for much of the season, and a leader to keep everyone playing. Raheem Sterling, in particular looked far more dangerous. This was far from a classic performance, but at least Brendan Rodgers' team provided what he promised before the game, which was grit and determination, even if they were on the back foot for long periods of the second half, and sat too deep. It is a result that means they face a decent Basel team on home turf with something tangible to play for. And that scenario is surely enough to lift even a side whose confidence is still visibly fragile. The fact they conceded at the end didn't actually matter, because win or draw here, they were always going to have to beat Basel to progress. If they are to do that they will still have to address continuing problems at the back. There is something a little Keystone Kops about Liverpool's defending. It was no surprise then, they committed not one, but two errors in the build-up to a goal gifted to the home side after just three minutes... which set the tone for much of what was to follow. All that was missing was a moustache and sepia-tinted chase. There was no danger as Kolo Toure dealt with an attempted through-ball outside his own box; until that is, the defender who was restored to the starting line-up to add solidity and experience, naively dived after the ball. It fell to Brazilian Marcelinho on the edge of the box, and his tame shot bounced off the poor surface, up into the chest of Mignolet, and fell to Dani Abalo, who gleefully accepted the gift. The Bulgarian defence seemed reluctant to put any part of their bodies in the way if they could help it....which balanced up the errors on eight minutes and allowed Liverpool to level. It came from a long ball from Lucas, but when Lambert challenged for the header, there was no one behind him. Moti let the ball bounce as his keeper daydreamed, allowing the Liverpool centre-forward to get on the end of his own flick on - again with comic effect. After intelligent and quick-silver interplay between Sterling and Lambert, and a fine cross from the youngster, Henderson ended a lung-busting run with a cool strike. Maybe the demands of a frozen night in Sofia are just what Liverpool needed to man up. Now they will have to do it again in a fortnight's time, but at least their destiny is in their own hands.

MIGNOLET 5 Bad bounce produced mistake for first goal and looks shot

MANQUILLO 6 Good energy and desire down right, joined in attacks well

SKRTEL 6 Toughed it out, even though real nervous air around him

TOURE 7 Mixture of desperation and desire, but a strong presence

JOHNSON 6 Still not the defender he was. Marooned for late equaliser

GERRARD 8 MOTM Provided presence going forward & lifted others

LUCAS 7 Important role in middle of the park, offered security

HENDERSON 7 Fine goal and incredible energy, coming back to form

ALLEN 7 Starting to look more important, gets around superbly

STERLING 7 Signs as game wore on he's getting more like his old self

LAMBERT 6 Important goal, and offers far more than Balotelli

SUBSTITUTES Moreno (Sterling 82) 6 Not used: Jones, Lovren, Coutinho, Lallana, Can, Borini

LUDOGORETS Stoyanov 6, Caicara 6, Moti 7, Terziev 6, Minev 6, Dyakov 7, Fabio Espinho 6 (Younes 81), Misidjan 6, Marcelinho 7, Alexandrov 6 (Wanderson 72), Dani Abalo 7 (Azevedo Junior 69).

Ref Antonio Mateu Lahoz Attendance 35,098

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LIVERPOOL

ECHO

The rot may have been stopped but Liverpool still couldn't escape that sinking feeling on a night of drama at Sofia's Vasil Levski Stadium. Georgi Terziev's 88th minute equaliser robbed Brendan Rodgers of the victory he craved to lift the gloom which has enveloped his Anfield reign. But, crucially, the Reds live to fight another day in the Champions League after Group B winners Real Madrid saw off Basel. Ultimately, Ludogorets' late strike counted for nothing in the grand scheme of things as the scenario remains the same. Liverpool must beat Basel at Anfield on December 9 to book their passage to the last 16. But to throw away maximum points in such a manner has to be another body blow to wafer-thin confidence levels. The frustration for Kopites is that the Reds were desperately close to securing the pick-me-up result this season of struggle so urgently needed. Rodgers got the show of character he had demanded in the Bulgarian capital as they dug themselves out of a hole after Dani Abalo's early opener. Goals from Rickie Lambert and Jordan Henderson appeared to have secured a morale-boosting triumph but their glaring defensive frailties were exposed again late on. Rodgers avoided an unwanted slice of history as no Liverpool boss had suffered five straight defeats since Don Welsh in 1953. But he will know a scrappy draw with a club from a town smaller than Skelmersdale is hardly much to crow about. The Northern Irishman had urged Liverpool to toughen up and his team selection reflected that search for greater fight. Dejan Lovren paid the price for the latest in a series of defensive horror shows as veteran Kolo Toure replaced the £20million centre-back. In midfield opted for physical presence over finesse as Henderson and Lucas Leivacame in for Philippe Coutinho and Adam Lallana. For both Toure and Lucas it was a first taste of action since they had risen to the challenge in the Bernabeu three weeks earlier. The inclusion of Lucas saw captain Steven Gerrard pushed further forward with the skipper operating behind lone frontman Lambert. If the message was to be solid and robust it clearly didn't get through as inside three minutes Liverpool shot themselves in the foot. Bruce Grobbelaar had become the latest to put the boot into Simon Mignolet when he labelled the Belgian keeper 'worse than Dracula' because of his problems with crosses. And Mignolet gave his army of critics yet more ammunition with another calamitous blunder. Toure did the Reds no favours as he gave the ball away sloppily but there still appeared to be little danger when Marcelinho fired goalwards. It was straight at Mignolet but he spilled it and Abalo followed up to tuck away the rebound. Liverpool were on the ropes but within five minutes they were back on level terms. Lucas' searching pass towards Lambert was cut out by Yordan Minev but bizarrely fellow defender Cosmin Moti allowed the ball to bounce six yards out. Lambert attacked it and gleefully accepted the gift as he nodded into the bottom corner. Having waited 13 games for a first Liverpool goal, the big frontman raced away to celebrate his second in four days. After such a chaotic start, it remained far too open with Ludogorets a constant threat with their pace on the counter-attack. It took some desperate defending to keep out the Eagles with Toure breathing a sigh of relief after prodding a cross just past the post. Mignolet did little to settle any of the nerves in front of him, flapping at a cross which saw Georgi Terziev flash a header narrowly wide. Liverpool didn't help themselves by conceding a succession of cheap free-kicks but somehow they rode the storm and finished the first half strongly. The lively Raheem Sterling got away from Marcelinho but failed to hit the target and then Javier Manquillo raced into the box only to fire tamely at Vladislav Stoyanov. Their threat was growing with Gerrard's influence increasing as he flourished behind Lambert. Eight minutes before the break Liverpool took the lead with the kind of devastating counter-attack which was their calling card last season. Lambert found Sterling wide on the left and the teenager burst down the flank before whipping an inviting cross towards the back post. The Reds vice-captain, back after missing the trip to Palace with a virus, had timed his run to perfection and coolly slotted home his second goal of the campaign. The 2,000-strong travelling Kop erupted. Ludogorets, who were only founded in 2001 and played outside of Bulgaria's top flight just three years ago, were expected to be the whipping boys of Group B. However, Georgi Dermendjiev's well drilled outfit have proved a tough nut to crack – beating Basel 1-0 at home and only losing 2-1 to Eurpoean champions Real Madrid. Any hopes that the minnows could meekly accept their fate in the second half were soon dashed as they set about retrieving the deficit. They were given a helping hand with Mignolet's error-strewn kicking and a general sense of panic spreading across the Reds' backline. Virgil Misidjan and Mihail Alexandrov went close before Fabio Espinho curled a free-kick just over. Sterling, who came in for some rough treatment, was the Reds' best attacking outlet. Just past the hour mark he twisted and turned before teeing up Lambert. His header was blocked and Henderson somehow skied the rebound, although his blushes were spared by the erratic Spanish referee spotting an infringement. After another lively break from Sterling, Henderson's strike was clawed away by the keeper. Sterling should have settled it nine minutes from time as Gerrard's pass released him but he was denied by Stoyanov. It proved to be a costly miss as

Liverpool dropped deeper and tried to cling on. Substitute Junior Quixada blazed just wide and then two minutes from time Junior Caicara's corner was flicked on and Terziev made no mistake. Liverpool's misery goes on.

Ludogorets (4-2-3-1): Stoyanov, Caicara, Moti, Terziev, Minev, Dyakov, Espinho (Hamza 80), Misidjan, Marcelinho, M Alexandrov (Wanderson 72), Abalo (Quixada 69). Not used: Borjan, Barthe, Abel, A Aleksandrov.

Liverpool (4-2-3-1): Mignolet, Manquillo, Skrtel, Toure, Johnson, Lucas, Allen, Henderson, Gerrard, Sterling (Moreno 82), Lambert. Not used: Jones, Lovren, Coutinho, Moreno, Lallana, Can, Borini.

Referee: Antonio Mateu Lahoz

Goals: Abalo 3, Lambert 8, Henderson 37, Terziev 88.

Man of the match: Raheem Sterling. There were signs of the teenager getting his mojo back as he caused the hosts plenty of problems.

Date: 26 November 2014 Opposition: PFC Ludogorets Razgrad Competition: Champions League	Times	Telegraph	Echo		26 November 2014
	Guardian	Mirror	BBC		
	Independent	Mail			

BBC

Liverpool conceded a late equaliser at Bulgarian champions Ludogorets - but are still just a win away from reaching the Champions League last 16. The hosts led when Dani Abalo pounced on Reds keeper Simon Mignolet's error, but Rickie Lambert headed in his first Champions League goal to equalise. Jordan Henderson steered Liverpool ahead at the far post, before Georgi Terziev headed in the equaliser.

Liverpool will still qualify if they beat Basel at Anfield next month. Despite an unconvincing performance in Bulgaria, Brendan Rodgers's side remain in control of their European destiny after Basel were beaten 1-0 at reigning champions Real Madrid.

Basel's defeat means the Reds are two points behind the Swiss side and will join the Spanish giants in the knockout stage with a win in their final group match. Liverpool had lost their previous four matches in all competitions and before kick-off Rodgers urged his players to kick-start their faltering season with a vital win. But their performance in near-freezing conditions in Sofia will have done little to encourage the Anfield side that an upturn in their fortunes is on the way. The visitors appeared to lack the confidence to cut through the ponderous Ludogorets backline and were once again uncertain in defence when the home side poured forward.

Goalkeeper Mignolet has faced mounting criticism during Liverpool's recent slump, with Reds legend Bruce Grobbelaar claiming his performances are one of the main reasons Rodgers's side are struggling.

And the Belgium international opened himself up to more of the same when he gifted a third-minute opener to the home side.

Home midfielder Marcelinho's low 20-yard shot should have been easily gathered, but the Reds keeper spilled it into the path of striker Dani who bundled in.

But Lambert, who netted his first Reds goal in Sunday's 3-1 defeat at Crystal Palace, levelled when he pounced on some flat-footed defending to steer into the bottom corner.

England forward Raheem Sterling had been lacking the sharpness of his early-season form in recent weeks, but looked back to his best as he orchestrated Liverpool's brightest attacking play and set up Henderson's goal with an incisive cross.

However, the youngster also missed a golden chance to put the game beyond the home side with 10 minutes left, steering straight at Ludogorets keeper Vladislav Stoyanov when clean through.

Liverpool's current lack of self-belief was clear to see in the closing stages, the visitors retreating nervously as the home side pressed.

But although Terziev's far-post header earned Ludogorets a deserved point, it does not alter Liverpool's task against Basel on 9 December.

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