

Date: 29 November 2014

Opposition: Stoke City

Competition: League

Mail	Sunday Times	Sun Telegraph	Mirror
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TheMail

I'll go to a club that wants me, vows Johnson

LIVERPOOL 1

STOKE 0

GLEN JOHNSON looks destined to leave Anfield next summer after he revealed there is no prospect of his future being resolved.

Johnson, like Steven Gerrard, can start talking to foreign clubs in 31 days about joining them on a Bosman at the end of the season. But whereas Liverpool are in talks with their captain about a new deal, Johnson's situation is drifting.

The full back is clearly still committed to the cause -- ending up with stitches in his head after diving in to score the winning goal -- but has accepted that the end may be near.

Liverpool have not made any contact with him about extending his terms and Johnson, who has attracted interest from Roma, insists that he will not be pleading for a new deal.

'I want to play for a club that wants me,' said Johnson, who moved to Merseyside from Portsmouth for PS17.5million in 2009. 'I've seen some stuff that I have been offered half the money I am on. That's not true. I haven't been offered anything. 'Time goes very quick. I've enjoyed my time here, the majority of the six years.

There have been some good times, some bad times. But if I haven't got a contract, I can't stay. It does play on your mind but you have to be professional and do your best. I respect my teammates more than anyone.

'I'm not going to go crawling to anybody. They know where I am and they know the situation. There were minor talks at the end of last season but nothing that I could accept or reject.

'I don't worry about things that I can't control. All I can keep doing is my job. Whatever will unfold will unfold. It's not my business to talk to other clubs. I'm concentrating on winning for Liverpool. I want to respect my contract and that's what I will do.'

This has not been an easy season for Johnson. With Brendan Rodgers constantly chopping and changing his defence, his form has dipped and he has lost his place in the England squad.

That has led to him becoming a target for supporters' frustrations. There were a number of growls on Saturday when he made a mistake in the third minute. Aside from that Johnson did little wrong and followed up bravely after Rickie Lambert's effort struck the woodwork.

'It hurts a lot less when the ball hits the net,' said Johnson. 'When Rickie headed it, I thought it was going to hit the bar, so I just kept going. We fought hard and I would have been very upset if we'd only drawn. We deserved to win.'

Rodgers sprinted down the touchline and celebrated the goal with supporters. Behind him, his assistants and Liverpool's substitutes vaulted from their seats. Rodgers reflected: 'There was a feeling of elation, probably a mixture of relief. 'We've got to make slow steps.

The scrutiny was on us in a big game against a tough side but we came through it very well.' Stoke will consider themselves unlucky. On another day Bojan Krkic would have scored rather than hitting the post.

'There wasn't any real momentum behind Liverpool's play and we dealt with that quite easily,' said Stoke manager Mark Hughes. 'We let ourselves down. We had three or four defenders and [Johnson] reacted quicker than we did when it bounced off the bar.'

LIVERPOOL (4-2-3-1): Mignolet 7; Johnson 7, Skrtel 7.5, Toure 7, Enrique 7; Allen 7, Lucas 7 (Gerrard 75min, 6); Henderson 7.5, Coutinho 6 (Lovren 88), Sterling 8.5; Lambert 7. Subs not used: Jones, Moreno, Lallana, Can, Markovic.

Scorer: Johnson 85. STOKE CITY (4-2-3-1): Begovic 7; Cameron 6, Shawcross 7, Wilson 6, Pieters 6.5; Nzonzi 6.5, Sidwell 5 (Whelan 22, 5; Adam 46, 7); Arnautovic 5 (Crouch 88), Bojan 7, Walters 6.5; Diouf 6.5.

Subs not used: Butland, Muniesa, Shenton, Ireland.

Booked: Cameron, Shawcross, Wilson. Man of the match: Raheem Sterling.

Referee: Craig Pawson 7.

The Daily Telegraph

Gerrard: Talk of a rift is just nonsense

Liverpoll 1

Johnson 85

Stoke City 0

Att: 44,735

There were 15 minutes left at Anfield when Brendan Rodgers turned to his substitutes in an effort to find a winning goal against Stoke City.

Rodgers had PS87million of summer recruits from which to choose, Adam Lallana, Lazar Markovic and Emre Can contributing to the most expensive bench in Liverpool's history. Instead, Rodgers called upon his captain, Steven Gerrard, who had been left out of the starting line-up.

You could look at this as the latest damning verdict on the club's recent recruitment record or reaffirmation that for all the criticism directed Gerrard's way this season, he remains the man Liverpool managers expect to don the superman costume.

It has been this way for most of his 16 years at Anfield, Gerrard judged to higher standards because he is so good. On those occasions his form has dipped, the criticism has often carried bewildering ferocity.

Gerrard was not dropped on Saturday. He will be back in the side against Leicester City tomorrow. How peculiar it is that Frank Lampard or Yaya Toure can be rested and it is pragmatic management, yet when Gerrard's limbs are preserved it is presented as something more sinister.

The Liverpool captain used social media to dismiss any suggestion of a rift between himself and his manager after recent omissions, most notably in Madrid. "Just to set the record straight, talk of a fall-out between us two is nonsense," he said.

The context of his uncertain future undoubtedly makes fertile ground for such conspiracy theories, but the fact he is mulling over his options as his contract runs down is also hardly surprising given how long Liverpool waited to make him an offer. Gerrard has to weigh up if committing to another Anfield rebuilding process - one in which he will still be judged as if he is 24 rather than 34 - will be an enjoyable climax to his career. Gerrard was not directly involved in the winning goal for Glen Johnson, but his summoning from the bench was further proof Liverpool ought to be giving more serious consideration as to where they will turn when he is no longer around.

Johnson finds himself in a similar situation to Gerrard, free to sign a pre-contract agreement with another club next month, and although he too is much maligned - sometimes justly - it is evident Rodgers trusts him above his other full-backs.

First-choice players are in danger of not having deals renewed for financial rather than footballing reasons. If Johnson is not considered good enough for Liverpool that is fair enough, but recent selections suggest the manager thinks otherwise. Are players being judged on whether they can play football, or whether they stretch the budget? If it is the latter, Liverpool may soon be filled with a squad of moderately well-paid but average players, as opposed to richly rewarded internationals.

Johnson's commitment has been questioned but he put his body on the line to head Liverpool's winner five minutes from time. It had been coming during a second half which - after a grim opening 45 minutes - was Liverpool's most impressive at Anfield this season. Raheem Sterling, Joe Allen and Lucas Leiva, all outstanding, should have scored earlier, while Rickie Lambert's performance suggested there should be no easy way back for Mario Balotelli.

Stoke posed plenty of threat of their own, especially Bojan Krkic, who struck the post and helped Simon Mignolet restore his confidence with a wonderful late volley that was pushed over the bar.

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All I want is to play for a club that wants me; ..but I won't go crawling to anyone; BLOODIED AND UNBOWED.. JOHNSON SAVES THE DAY BUT WILL KOP SAVE HIM?
IN saving Liverpool and perhaps their season, Glen Johnson found himself prone on the turf, a beaten and bloody figure.
He will not be making a habit of it though, not when it comes to his contract negotiations.
"I'm not going to go crawling to anybody. They know where I am and they know the situation," he said afterwards, with the hint of a sour smile.
"First and foremost, I want to play for a club that wants me. It is as simple as that. I want to play my football - time goes very quick.
"I have enjoyed my time here, the majority of the six years. There have been some good times, some bad times. But if I haven't got a contract, I can't stay."
Over the last few months, and even in the closing stages of last season's glorious campaign, the commitment of a player in the final year of his contract has been almost consistently questioned.
Not even the harshest of his critics though, could find fault with his devotion to the Anfield cause against Stoke, after his courageous contribution in snatching a winner five minutes from time. It is hard to underestimate just how important that goal against a dogged Stoke side could be to the Reds' season.
Defeat here would have plunged them within three points of the relegation zone, and into a full blown crisis.
Instead, Johnson's goal - and bravery in taking a brutal kick square in the face from Erik Pieters as he followed up a crashing Rickie Lambert header on to the bar - allowed their supporters to some hope in their current position.
Yes, they are five points from the top four, but they are two rounds from Wembley in the Capital One Cup, and a win away from the knockout stages of the Champions League.
Achieve both and remain within touching distance of the top by Christmas, and things will not look anywhere near as grim as they did even a week ago.
Not that Liverpool looked anything like their old selves most g in a frankly horrible first half, when the home side concentrated almost solely on restricting Stoke's potential for carnage from set-pieces, by keeping them submerged in a midfield quagmire.
Yet they showed some character to grasp the game more urgently and express a keener attacking instinct after the break. Even if it did yield more possession and more chances for the visitors, it was certainly enough for the Reds to edge the balance of play. They had chances for the impressive Lucas and Joe Allen, along with Lambert, the quicksilver Raheem Sterling and Philippe Coutinho. And just when it seemed the goal they deserved would never come, Lambert highlighted his own improvement with his S Co formidable leap, and Johnson's anticipation did the rest.
For Stoke boss Mark Hughes (above) it was a case of what might have been again after impressive away performances at Manchester City and Tottenham.
Led by the lively Bojan, they had chances of their own, especially when the former Barca star hit the post with a clever shot, and even late on, when Jon Walters could have levelled from close range.
Hughes said: "They didn't cause us many problems.
"There wasn't any real momentum behind their play, it was a bit sporadic, and we dealt with that quite easily, but we let ourselves down in the end. It was an aimless ball into the box, Lambert has got on the end of it in an area where we had three or four defenders, which is disappointing.
"The Liverpool player reacted quicker than we did when it bounced off the bar. That has cost us the game."
47% Possession 53% 3 Shots on target 4 7 Shots off target 4 5 Corners 5 0 Offside 1 11 Fouls 9 Ref: Craig Pawson Att: 44,735 mirror.co.uk/sport/football
RATINGS..NOW HAVE YOUR SAY! OUR RATING Mignolet 7 Brave performance of real character after midweek mare Johnson 8 So brave for the goal, and deserves immense credit Skrtel 7 Part of an improved defensive performance Toure 7 Enthusiastic and willing to put self on line Enrique 6 Looked solid, worked hard and may earn regular start Henderson 6 Great energy down right if still missing a little sparkle Lucas 7 Fine game covering everything in front of defence Allen MOTM 8 Behind everything good about this display Coutinho 6 Some moments, but still needs to impose self more Sterling 7 Showed flashes of last season's form Lambert 6 Worked hard to provide focal point team has been lacking SUBS Gerrard (Lucas 75) 6 Lovren (Coutinho 88) 5 LIVERPOOL OUR RATING Begovic 6 Could do nothing with goal, and couple of big saves Cameron Booked 5 Given a bit of a chasing by Sterling in second half Shawcross Booked 7 As physical as ever, and lead by example Wilson Booked 6 Performed well up against Lambert challenge Pieters 6 Has the desire required, but not much going forward Walters 6 Worked hard enough with no real impression made Sidwell 5 Barely had time to touch ball before injury intervened N'Zonzi 6 Defensive duties performed well. The rest. Meh. Arnautovic 6 Has a hint of class, but hard for him to get in the game Bojan 7 The one attacking spark for side, unlucky not to score Diouf 6 Provides a real physical presence. Carried some threat SUBS Whelan (Sidwell 22) 5 Adam (Whelan 46) 5 Crouch (Arnautovic 88) 5 STOKE CITY



Sometimes inspiration can be found in the most unlikely of places.
For 85 minutes at Anfield on Saturday, frustration and anxiety ruled. Liverpool FC's search for a winner had become increasingly fraught as they struggled to find a way through. A stalemate would have done little to lift the gloom which has hung over the club this season. More pressure, more scrutiny was about to be heaped on the shoulders of players and manager alike.
But rather than meekly accept their fate, Brendan Rodgers's men dug deep to secure a morale-boosting triumph which unleashed a heady mix of elation and relief around Anfield. "I've got a different hand this year," the manager said in the build-up to Stoke's visit. "The cards are different. We have to work with what we've got." The identity of the two jokers who emerged from the pack to make the match-winning contributions was laced with irony.
Few have come in for more stick than Glen Johnson and Simon Mignolet during the Reds' troubles of recent months. Johnson has found himself ditched by England this term and many Kopites have been baffled by Rodgers's reluctance to follow suit. The 30-year-old full-back looks increasingly likely to leave as a free agent when his current deal expires next summer.
Liverpool won't offer him anything close to his current salary of £120,000 per week and Johnson isn't about to accept a hefty payout.
A parting of the ways appears inevitable but Rodgers insists he has no concerns about continuing to pick him. Johnson may be playing for a bumper contract elsewhere but if in doing so he helps Liverpool climb the Premier League table, then everyone wins. Certainly, Rodgers's continued faith in him was rewarded with a moment which answered questions about the defender's ongoing commitment to the cause. When Rickie Lambert's looping header crashed off the underside of the bar, Johnson bravely propelled himself towards the rebound.
He got a kick in the head from Erik Pieters for his troubles but still nodded past Asmir Begovic. It was Johnson's first goal for two years and he hadn't netted at Anfield since Roy Hodgson's shortlived reign.
When he finally got back to his feet after treatment, he was rewarded with a standing ovation from The Kop. Fact really is stranger than fiction.
What followed was painfully predictable as Stoke's late onslaught made for a nerve-shredding finale. But rather than wilt like they had done earlier in the week against both Crystal Palace and Ludogorets, the Reds stood firm.
This time the beleaguered Mignolet was a hero rather than a liability.
The fact that the Belgian kept his place on Saturday said more about the lack of competition for his jersey than any unswerving belief in his abilities.
Certainly, if Rodgers had been able to beat Spurs to the signing of Swansea's Michel Vorm last summer Mignolet would surely have been taken out of the firing line by now.
As it is the £9million man has got the opportunity to make amends for his recent blunders and a rare clean sheet represented a welcome step in the right direction.
Mignolet produced a stunning save to tip over Bojan Krkic's sweet volley deep into stoppage time. When he then clung on to Charlie Adam's corner, Anfield erupted. It was in this fixture last season that Mignolet enjoyed a dream debut with a penalty save late in the game from Jonathan Walters. The hope is that Saturday will provide a similar injection of confidence.
The manner of victory was a world away from the kind of ruthless thrashings dished out to the likes of Everton, Tottenham and Arsenal in L4 last term. But in its own way this scrappy, unconvincing win was as significant as any Rodgers has overseen during his Anfield tenure.
The Northern Irishman's job was under no immediate threat, but he knew that a miserable run of just one win in eight matches had cranked up the pressure.
The rot had to be stopped before the damage to this season became irreparable.
The Reds had to ensure that the tame surrender to Palace was the nadir.
In the team meeting in Sofia on Wednesday the manager had told his squad there was a clean slate. He was more interested in the future than dwelling on the past. It was a fresh start and he demanded greater character and resilience. The response has provided proof if any were needed that he retains the full backing of the dressing room. There will be no quick fix but Saturday showed there is the stomach to fight their way out of this slump.
Rodgers's calm and measured approach on the touchline went out the window when Johnson struck. His true emotions were laid bare by a delirious charge down the touchline. The outcome vindicated the big selection decisions he had made.
Rodgers had gambled by resting Steven Gerrard on the 16th anniversary of his debut. The captain, who provided a timely lift when he came on for the final 15 minutes, accepted that with the grace of someone who has always put the club first. Gerrard took to social media yesterday to rubbish reports of a rift between him and the manager. Retaining the services of Kolo Toure and Lucas Leiva after their efforts in midweek paid dividends for Rodgers. Lucas put in a tireless shift in the holding role and has grabbed the chance to re-ignite his Liverpool career.
The teamsheet was hardly a glowing endorsement of the club's transfer strategy. Out of the nine summer signings, only Lambert started with £85million worth of talent sat on the bench. But it was no coincidence that Martin Skrtel looked much more assured with Toure, who didn't cost a penny, rather than £20million Dejan Lovren for company.

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Johnson brings relief all round to Liverpool

The sight of Brendan Rodgers racing down the touchline after Glen Johnson's late winning goal summed up the sense of relief that gripped Anfield. A Liverpool side whose tentative efforts had earned howls of frustration during a woeful first half had stirred themselves and snatched their first League victory since 19 October. It was a match that could have gone either way - Stoke had more possession and more shots on target - but for Liverpool yesterday, winning was all that mattered. They had gone into the game on the back of three straight League defeats and until half-time the main talking point was Steven Gerrard's demotion to the bench on the 16th anniversary of his first-team debut.

Liverpool may be one of the most sentimental of football cities but there was no place for it in Rodgers' selection yesterday as the 34-year-old started a game on the bench for the first time since New Year's Day.

Rodgers said: "Steven is at the point of his career where he is not going to be playing in every game or every minute of every game, he has played against Crystal Palace and in Ludogorets where he was outstanding. We have other players here who can come in and do a job and Steven understands it. I wasn't aware it was the 16 years [anniversary] until I walked into to the changing room and saw the programme."

Gerrard was on the pitch by the time of the only goal, replacing Lucas after 75 minutes, but it came from a less likely source. Johnson had not scored since December 2012 but when Rickie Lambert's header bounced down off the crossbar with five minutes remaining, he flung himself at the loose ball and nodded into the net. In the process, he picked up a nasty head wound from the boot of Erik Pieters.

"He showed great courage and bravery," said Rodgers, who said the same of his entire team, who may be "low on confidence" but looked a side prepared to dig out a result for their manager.

Liverpool improved considerably in the second half. If Johnson was the improbable hero, there were also important contributions from the much-maligned goalkeeper Simon Mignolet and the pair of Kolo Tour[c] and Lucas, both making rare league starts.

Stoke shrugged off injuries to Steve Sidwell and his early replacement Glenn Whelan, who made way himself for Charlie Adam at half time, and were aggrieved to leave Anfield empty-handed. Mark Hughes, their manager, noted that the game became "more open because we were looking for a winner ourselves".

Although Jordan Henderson flashed a shot inches wide soon after the restart, Stoke could have made the breakthrough. Mame Biram Diouf was foiled by Mignolet after racing clear on to Bojan's clever through ball. Bojan then broke into the box and shot against the near post. Stoke have not scored a League goal at Anfield since March 1983 and their luck was out again - a point summed up when Mignolet tipped over a Bojan piledriver in stoppage time. "I thought the outstanding player on the day was Bojan," said Hughes.

Yet in Raheem Sterling, Liverpool had their own livewire. He sent Lucas through only for Begovic to make the save and then squared for Joe Allen to fire over when a goal seemed certain. Sterling even blocked a Diouf shot on the goal-line, before Liverpool finally broke through.

Liverpool (4-2-3-1): Mignolet; Johnson, Skrtel, Tour[c], Enrique; Lucas (Gerrard, 75), Allen; Henderson, Coutinho (Lovren, 88), Sterling; Lambert.

Stoke (4-2-3-1): Begovic ; Cameron, Shawcross, Wilson, Pieters; Sidwell (Whelan, 22; Adam, h-t), Nzonzi; Walters, Bojan, Arnautovic (Crouch, 88); Diouf.

Referee: Craig Pawson

Man of the match: Raheem Sterling (Liverpool)

Match rating: 7/10

The Sunday Telegraph

Johnson Liverpool's wise head

Liverpool 1
Johnson 85
Stoke City 0
Att: 44,735

Just as Brendan Rodgers was facing the prospect of far more awkward questions over the wisdom of dropping Steven Gerrard to the bench - on the 16th anniversary of his Liverpool debut no less, proving there is certainly no room for sentiment - the manager felt a sweet pang of vindication. And, with it, a sharp intake of relief.

Not just with the understandable but headlinegrabbing Gerrard decision - even if the captain did eventually come on to help tilt Liverpool towards victory - but in sticking with Glen Johnson and Simon Mignolet.

The contributions of the Liverpool right-back and the goalkeeper have been seriously questioned during this frustrating, disappointing campaign but both emerged to become key performers against Stoke, who counted themselves desperately unlucky to lose, not least because in Bojan Krkic they had the game's outstanding performer.

Johnson scored the late goal - bravely diving in to head home from close range after Rickie Lambert's own towering header had crashed off the bar - and Mignolet finally claimed a clean sheet, with fine blocks from Mame Biram Diouf and Bojan.

Liverpool will hope that this is a major turning point. Certainly there was bravery also in Rodgers' choice to omit Gerrard. He knew the cameras would pan to the 34-year-old the longer Liverpool struggled. And struggle they did for much of this match, particularly through a forgettable first half.

There was logic in Rodgers' decision also. Gerrard is an older player. Games are coming thick and hectically fast, with Leicester City away on Tuesday, and the midfielder played 90 minutes in midweek in the Champions League away to Bulgarians Ludogorets, having also faced Crystal Palace last Sunday.

Rodgers told Gerrard he would be leaving him out on Friday - even if he later admitted that he was not aware of the anniversary. It was only when Rodgers walked into the home dressing room and saw a match programme, adorned with tributes to Gerrard, that he knew. "I felt quite bad when I looked at it," Rodgers said while explaining the logic of resting the 34-year-old. "He's a wonderful man and he's very much about the team," Rodgers said. "Of course every player wants to play every minute of every game but the reality is that at this level and how competitive the squad is we can't rely on Steven for every game." Rodgers said there was no update on Gerrard's contract talks - his present deal expires next summer - but that should not cause alarm.

There may have been some mild alarm from the Anfield board that Rodgers also parked PS87million of summer signings on the bench. And neither are they all, as the manager later claimed, young players for the future.

Adam Lallana and Dejan Lovren do not fall into that category.

There was more insight from Rodgers when he explained this.

With Liverpool struggling it was, basically, time to get back to basics and eke out some results. Confidence would then return, his argument went, and so would the attractive football.

"We are in a moment now when we need to get results and we need to improve our style of football but we need to get the confidence back in the team," Rodgers admitted.

There was precious little confidence in the first half but, finally, the game fired into life with the trickery of Bojan and Raheem Sterling at the heart of it.

Bojan struck a post, after superbly deceiving Johnson and out-foxing Mignolet, and Sterling drifted a low shot narrowly wide before he also crossed low for Joe Allen to rush in and clip the top of the bar from close range with a sidefooted shot, as the game suddenly careered from end to end.

Stoke also needed a win and Mark Hughes urged his players to go for it. He also, later, urged his players to pass to the sublime Bojan a bit more often, while lamenting injuries to Steve Sidwell and Glenn Whelan. "Everyone has seen the quality that he has," Hughes said of the former Barcelona midfielder. "He is enjoying the Premier League and playing with us. The one thing that can be levelled against us is we need to give him the ball."

When Bojan had it, things happened. When Sterling had it, they also happened. It was a case of who could support them and Diouf was unfortunate after Bojan picked out his clever run - only for Mignolet to block one-on-one. Sterling then countered and released Lucas. Again through on goal, he shot too straight and Asmir Begovic parried.

Would it end in frustration? Rodgers summoned Gerrard, who had also come on as a substitute all those years ago for his debut, and the crowd stirred.

There were 15 minutes to go and Liverpool, clearly, upped it. Johnson instigated the move, finding Jordan Henderson whose cross was met with power by Lambert. It came back off the goal-frame and Johnson continued his run. He was caught on the head by Eric Pieters' boot but managed to connect with the ball.

Robin Thicke's 'Blurred lines' blasted out in Liverpool's dressing room afterwards, in recognition of Johnson's grogginess. But it was a result that brought much-needed clarity for the hosts and Rodgers.

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Johnson to Liverpool's rescue

ANFIELD'S EXPENSIVE BENCH

IF this is Liverpool's pragmatic new look, then the fans will take it every week. Though the home team took 85 minutes to break the deadlock, no one at Anfield cared when or how the points were secured. After a week of soul-searching and recrimination, any win was going to be good enough. Ironically, given that Brendan Rodgers had publicly promoted substance above style after three successive defeats in the Premier League, the goal, fashioned by Rickie Lambert and scored by Glen Johnson, had a distinctly oldfashioned feel to it. Think John Toshack and Kevin Keegan. A cross to the far post, a looping header against the bar and a scampering follow-up by the full-back, who unfortunately ended up prostrate in the back of the net with a nasty gash to his head. The win could not have come been more timely for Rodgers, who admitted in the week that he was favourite for the sack. Liverpool had not lost four successive League games for more than a decade and a precarious position in lower midtable, below Stoke at the start of the match, showed just how swiftly last season's hope had evaporated. The decline of Steven Gerrard has been a central topic of debate in the week and Rodgers tacitly acknowledged the passing of time by dropping - or resting, as the Liverpool manager preferred to call it - his captain for such a surprisingly key match. Lucas and Lambert kept their places and Kolo Toure took over the role of senior citizen in the Liverpool ranks. It was only when he looked at the programme that Rodgers realised it was the 16th anniversary of Gerrard's Liverpool debut against Blackburn Rovers. "I felt quite bad about that when I saw it," said Rodgers. "But it's the reality at this level. We can't just rely on Steve in every single game. But he's a wonderful man and he understood." For much of the match, Liverpool's woes continued, with or without Gerrard, and but for a couple of brilliant saves by Simon Mignolet, one of many Liverpool players under the spotlight after a howler in midweek, Stoke might well have come away with rather more than a bruising defeat. Bojan, the best player on the field, hit the post and forced the Liverpool goalkeeper into a fingertip save as Stoke pushed hard to save the game. Allowed to roam free for once, the Spain international prompted all of Stoke's best moments and with Raheem Sterling finally bursting into life in the second half, a dire first half was transformed into a real ding-dong, with Stoke giving as good as they got for long periods. "We needed to up the tempo of our game," said Rodgers, who should have torn into his players for such a lacklustre opening. "But the second half was excellent. I felt it [the goal] was coming. We showed great resilience. We're at a moment when we need to get results and get some confidence in our team." The first sighting of Gerrard was during a series of gentle ambles down the touchline straight towards the phalanx of Stoke fans, who duly enjoyed themselves at the Liverpool captain's expense. Gerrard took the stick in good nature and threw out his arms in a mock welcome to the visitors. On the field, his beleaguered side, with Lucas assuming the defensive midfield duties with Joe Allen, struggled to impose any sort of rhythm on Stoke, who have numbered Tottenham and Manchester City among their victims away from home this season. At times in the first half, Lambert must have developed some sympathy with the injured Mario Balotelli, so little relevant service did he get inside the penalty area. If Lambert went near post, the cross duly went to the far post and vice versa. Lambert looked a bit bemused, but at least he kept working at it and showed a deft touch on the ground as well as providing a physical presence in the air. When Sterling finally stirred himself, tormenting Cameron and Shawcross into conceding yellow cards, Liverpool looked a different team. Jordan Henderson and Sterling himself both dragged shots just wide before Asmir Begovic produced an outstanding pointblank save from Lucas. Stoke too had their twinkling star in Bojan, who burst through a hesitant Liverpool defence and drove a fierce shot against the post with Mignolet beaten. "Everybody saw the quality he has," said Mark Hughes, the City manager, of the man on loan from Barcelona. "We just need to give him the ball more." With quarter of an hour to go, Rodgers had seen enough. On came Gerrard for Lucas, but it was not Liverpool's talisman who saved the day. With the level of desperation rising by the second, Lambert initially came to the rescue before Johnson bravely stooped to score his first goal in 64 matches. "People say I'm only happy with 5-3 or 6-4, but I'm equally happy with 1-0," added Rodgers. Liverpool fans can forget about style for the moment. Liverpool: Mignolet 7, Johnson 7, Skrtel 6, K Toure 6, Enrique 6, Lucas 6 (Gerrard 75min), Allen 5, Henderson 5, Coutinho 6 (Lovren 88min) Sterling 6, Lambert 7 Stoke: Begovic 6, Cameron 6, Shawcross 6, Wilson 6, Pieters 5, N'Zonzi 6, Sidwell 6 (Whelan 22min 6, Adams h-t 7), Walters 5, Bojan 8, Arnautovic 6 (Crouch 88min) Diouf 7 ? Steven Gerrard, left, was dropped by Liverpool for yesterday's game against Stoke City 16 years to the day he made his debut for the club. The Liverpool captain had good company, though. Five of the club's PS110m worth of summer signings - Dejan Lovren (PS20m), Alberto Moreno (PS16m), Adam Lallana (PS25m), Emre Can (PS10m) and Lazar Markovic (PS20m) - joined him on the bench, indicating the troubled start they have had to life at Anfield.

The Observer

Johnson brings some relief for Rodgers

Liverpool still do not look convincing top-four candidates but at least the rot has been stopped. A late goal by Glen Johnson secured the first win of a fraught November and meant Stoke left empty-handed after a battling performance for the second season in succession. On the opening day last season Simon Mignolet saved a last-minute penalty to deny Stoke what would have been a well-deserved point. The home side lived dangerously in the last few minutes but were slightly better value for their victory here, and that might be the best news Brendan Rodgers has had in weeks. "We needed a result and we needed to show resilience and courage," Rodgers said. "We did all that: we kept going against a good team." It is exactly 16 years since Steven Gerrard made his Liverpool debut and the Anfield match programme went big on the anniversary, though the Liverpool captain had to be satisfied with a place on the bench. He is 34 after all, and Rodgers accepts he should not be asked to play three games in a week, though that hardly applies to the rest of the Liverpool substitutes. Five of Liverpool's summer signings found themselves keeping Gerrard company on the sidelines, with Rickie Lambert, in for the injured Mario Balotelli, the only capture with the Luis Suarez money asked to start the game. Liverpool spent almost pounds 120m in the summer, just pounds 4m of it invested in Lambert. Rodgers' transfer business has come under scrutiny during Liverpool's run of defeats. One highly critical supporter on the radio before kick-off said faults were glaringly obvious last season even though a second-place finish was achieved, and went so far as to describe Suarez as a fig leaf that covered the side's many embarrassing shortcomings. The Uruguay striker has been called many things in his time, but a fig leaf of respectability is probably a first. Suarez would certainly have enlivened proceedings here. It is no exaggeration to suggest the loudest cheer of a numbingly dull first half-hour was for the sight of Gerrard taking a jog along the touchline. Raheem Sterling put a low cross along the six-yard line early on with no team-mates sufficiently far up the pitch to take advantage, Johnson allowed himself to be dispossessed on the edge of his own area but got away with it because Bojan Krkic could not find anyone in support either, and, give or take a shot at each end from Martin Skrtel and Jon Walters, that was about it for first-half excitement. When Philippe Coutinho set off on a run on the stroke of half-time, making space for a shot but ultimately scuffing it, the Stoke fans in the Anfield Road end dryly began chanting: "Suarez would have scored that." Liverpool were presumably supposed to be advancing through Coutinho, Sterling or Jordan Henderson with the ball on the floor but ended up lumping hopeful long balls in the direction of Lambert. It produced a stalemate that suited the visitors but left the locals wondering what exactly Rodgers meant when he said his side could still manage a top-four finish. People are beginning to collect Brendanisms, and there was a marvellous one in the manager's programme notes. "Only our confidence has been knocked," he said. "Belief has not been affected." Mignolet's confidence must have been affected by all the criticism that has come his way of late, some of it justified, but the goalkeeper came to Liverpool's rescue when Stoke threatened a breakaway goal. Krkic measured a pass perfectly to play in the impressive Mame Biram Diouf behind Skrtel but Mignolet was out quickly to first make the angle difficult then smother the eventual shot. The game briefly came to life after that, with Krkic thumping a shot against an upright when he appeared to have done everything necessary to score, and Sterling going straight down the other end to miss the target by a matter of inches. Lucas really should have opened the scoring when a loose pass by Marko Arnautovic invited Liverpool to break in numbers, but when a clear shooting opportunity opened up with the whole of the goal to aim at from inside the area the midfielder could only manage to find Asmir Begovic standing tall. After Lambert forced another save from Begovic the best chance of the game was put over the bar by Joe Allen, whose close-range shot took a deflection off Charlie Adam. Unsurprisingly Rodgers turned to Gerrard before any of his other substitutes in an attempt to break the deadlock, sending his captain on for the last 15 minutes. An obvious, if cliched scenario now presented itself but it did not happen. Instead of Gerrard coming up with the winning goal in the closing minutes it was Johnson, bravely diving in for a header after Lambert had seen an attempt come back off the bar, picking up a cut on the head from contact with Erik Pieters' boot in the process but ultimately forcing the ball past Begovic in front of the Kop. All Liverpool had to worry about after that was Rodgers' decision to reinforce the defence with Dejan Lovren for the time that remained, including a whopping seven added minutes. "It was a bit harsh at the end, we deserved to leave with something," Mark Hughes said. "We put a huge effort in and I thought Bojan was the best player on the pitch. We are really encouraged by what he is producing, what we need to do is find a way of giving him the ball more often." LIVERPOOL Mignolet; Johnson, Skrtel, Toure, Jose Enrique; Lucas (Gerrard 75), Allen; Henderson, Coutinho (Lovren 88), Sterling; Lambert Subs not used Jones, Moreno, Lallana, Can, Markovic STOKES Begovic; Cameron■; Shawcross■; Wilson■; Pieters; N'Zonzi, Sidwell (Whelan 22; Adam ht), Walters, Krkic, Arnautovic (Crouch 88); Diouf Subs not used Butland, Muniesa, Ireland, Shenton Anfield 44,735 Game rating 6/10 Referee Craig Pawson

Date: 29 November 2014 Opposition: Stoke City Competition: League	Mail	Sunday Times	Sun Telegraph	Mirror		29 November 2014
	Echo	Observer	Times	Telegraph		
	BBC	Sun Independent	Guardian	Sentinel		

BBC

Glen Johnson's brave late header ended Liverpool's run of three successive Premier League defeats as captain Steven Gerrard was dropped to the bench on the 16th anniversary of his first-team debut.

Reds manager Brendan Rodgers insisted the 34-year-old was left out of his starting line-up with an eye on a busy forthcoming programme, but it was still a major call at a time of intensifying pressure.

Rodgers had £87m worth of his summer signings accompanying Gerrard as substitutes - but he also had the huge relief of ending the recent dismal run that has put Liverpool's Champions League ambitions under threat by securing a crucial win.

With Gerrard already introduced as a substitute and only five minutes left, defender Johnson reacted quickly after Rickie Lambert's header hit the bar to beat Stoke keeper Asmir Begovic and dive to head in.

Stoke provided plenty of anxious moments throughout, mainly through the gifted Bojan Krkic, who struck the post and forced a magnificent flying fingertip save from much-criticised Liverpool keeper Simon Mignolet during seven minutes of stoppage time.

The roar that swirled around Anfield at full-time was testimony to the fans' huge relief after such a poor sequence and the collapse of the optimism of last season, when Liverpool came so close to winning their first title for 25 years.

It was a victory forced out of determination rather than inspiration, but Rodgers will not worry about that ahead of Tuesday's visit to Leicester City. This was all about the victory.

Liverpool's disappointing return, at least so far, in the transfer market after the £75m sale of Luis Suarez to Barcelona could be seen in the presence of Dejan Lovren, Adam Lallana, Emre Can, Alberto Moreno and Lazar Markovic alongside Gerrard as substitutes.

Whether Gerrard now spends more time out of the starting line-up remains to be seen, but here Rodgers could at least point to the three points his side secured. Gerrard has been Liverpool's inspiration for much of the past 16 years, and it was a commodity completely absent in a desperately poor first 45 minutes, which saw Mignolet get the rough end of The Kop's tongue for the time he was taking over goal-kicks.

After the break, Liverpool finally attempted to press Stoke into making mistakes - although it was the visitors who created two glorious chances to take the lead. Bojan's perfect pass put Mame Biram Diouf clear but Mignolet, after initial hesitation, advanced off his line to make the block.

The Belgian keeper was powerless to prevent Bojan's shot crashing against the post, but Liverpool had opportunities of their own, Jordan Henderson volleying inches wide and Raheem Sterling also just off target.

With the game opening up, Liverpool broke five against three but when Lucas was played in on the angle in front of an expectant Kop, his shot was too close to Begovic.

Liverpool's best chance came after 68 minutes when Sterling drove into the box and set up Joe Allen, who scooped over the bar when he looked certain to score. Despite the increase in pressure, Liverpool were still searching for the breakthrough so it was inevitable Gerrard would eventually be introduced. The moment came in the 75th minute when he replaced Lucas.

For all Liverpool's improvement, Stoke were still a threat and when the hosts failed to clear a corner, Sterling was required to block Diouf's effort on the line. But Liverpool recovered from that scare - and Johnson's courage secured a crucial win.

Ex-Liverpool midfielder Danny Murphy on BBC Match of the Day:"Stoke played well, especially in the first half, they kept the ball well. They lost Steve Sidwell which didn't help, losing his bite.

"For Liverpool it was a strange game, they started quite lacklustre, there was a lack of energy and they were too deep. They did play in Europe midweek but they were slow. They didn't have Steven Gerrard dropping deep to get the ball. They were edgy which is understandable with recent results.

"In the second half the pressing was much better, the passing much crisper, they were getting at Stoke and the urgency was much better. They got their rewards through a brave goal, Glen Johnson has been criticised quite heavily and I'm pleased for him. Overall they deserved it."

Stoke manager Mark Hughes:

"We are disappointed to lose the game at the end like that. On balance of play I don't think anyone really deserved to win. We certainly didn't feel we deserved to lose. For long periods in the game we were in the ascendancy.

"We just got undone by a long ball into the box. Rickie Lambert has made it his own and a Liverpool player was the first to react.

"I was really pleased with Bojan Krkic, who was most the most accomplished player on pitch today. The disappointment from our point of view is we can't keep a clean sheet at the moment and that is holding us back. We had a performance that merited something today, probably not the three points.

"The game became more open in second half, maybe because we became encouraged that we could get something from the game."

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Full time Match ends, Liverpool 1, Stoke City 0.
90:00+7:07Full time Second Half ends, Liverpool 1, Stoke City 0.
90:00+4:45 Corner, Stoke City. Conceded by Kolo Touré.
90:00+2:54 Attempt missed. Jonathan Walters (Stoke City header from very close range is close, but misses to the left. Assisted by Charlie Adam with a cross following a corner.
90:00+2:35 Corner, Stoke City. Conceded by José Enrique.
90:00+1:22 Corner, Stoke City. Conceded by Simon Mignolet.
90:00+1:20 Attempt saved. Bojan (Stoke City right footed shot from outside the box is saved in the top right corner.
87:34Substitution SubstitutionSubstitution, Stoke City. Peter Crouch replaces Marko Arnautovic.
87:10Substitution SubstitutionSubstitution, Liverpool. Dejan Lovren replaces Philippe Coutinho.
86:57 Delay over. They are ready to continue.
85:44 Delay in match Glen Johnson (Liverpool because of an injury.
84:30Goal scored Goal!Goal! Liverpool 1, Stoke City 0. Glen Johnson (Liverpool header from very close range to the centre of the goal.
84:25 Rickie Lambert (Liverpool hits the bar with a right footed shot from the centre of the box. Assisted by Jordan Henderson with a cross.
83:53 Attempt blocked. Jordan Henderson (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked.
83:29 Attempt blocked. Martin Skrtel (Liverpool right footed shot from the left side of the box is blocked. Assisted by Steven Gerrard.
82:58 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Mame Biram Diouf.
82:57 Attempt blocked. José Enrique (Liverpool left footed shot from outside the box is blocked.
82:27 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Ryan Shawcross.
81:48 Attempt saved. Jonathan Walters (Stoke City right footed shot from outside the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Marko Arnautovic.
81:20 Attempt blocked. Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City right footed shot from the left side of the six yard box is blocked. Assisted by Ryan Shawcross with a headed pass.
80:58 Corner, Stoke City. Conceded by Glen Johnson.
80:11 Ryan Shawcross (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
80:11 Foul by Martin Skrtel (Liverpool.
79:44 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Marc Wilson.
79:43 Attempt blocked. Joe Allen (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked.
79:01 Attempt blocked. Charlie Adam (Stoke City right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Bojan.
74:44Substitution SubstitutionSubstitution, Liverpool. Steven Gerrard replaces Lucas Leiva.
68:52 Erik Pieters (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
68:52 Foul by Glen Johnson (Liverpool.
67:44 Attempt missed. Joe Allen (Liverpool left footed shot from the centre of the box is too high. Assisted by Raheem Sterling.
66:55 Attempt saved. Rickie Lambert (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Glen Johnson.
63:58 Attempt saved. Lucas Leiva (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Raheem Sterling.
61:26 Offside, Stoke City. Asmir Begovic tries a through ball, but Jonathan Walters is caught offside.
61:04 Ryan Shawcross (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
61:04 Foul by Rickie Lambert (Liverpool.
60:12 Attempt missed. Raheem Sterling (Liverpool left footed shot from the left side of the box is close, but misses to the right.
59:59 Foul by Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City.
59:59 José Enrique (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
59:14 Attempt missed. Bojan (Stoke City right footed shot from the centre of the box is too high.
59:12 Bojan (Stoke City hits the left post with a right footed shot from the left side of the box. Assisted by Erik Pieters.
57:58Booking Ryan Shawcross (Stoke City is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
57:46 Ryan Shawcross (Stoke City.
57:46 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
57:34 Attempt blocked. Steven N'Zonzi (Stoke City right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Charlie Adam.
56:15 Attempt blocked. Rickie Lambert (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Raheem Sterling.
54:57 Attempt blocked. Steven N'Zonzi (Stoke City right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Bojan.
54:23 Attempt saved. Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City left footed shot from a difficult angle on the left is saved in the bottom left corner. Assisted by Bojan with a through ball.
52:48Booking Geoff Cameron (Stoke City is shown the yellow card.
52:43 Foul by Geoff Cameron (Stoke City.
52:43 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.
51:01 Attempt missed. Jordan Henderson (Liverpool left footed shot from outside the box is close, but misses to the right.
46:51 Attempt blocked. Joe Allen (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Rickie Lambert.
45:34 Hand ball by Ryan Shawcross (Stoke City.
45:00 Second Half begins Liverpool 0, Stoke City 0.
45:00Substitution SubstitutionSubstitution, Stoke City. Charlie Adam replaces Glenn Whelan.
45:00+2:05Half time First Half ends, Liverpool 0, Stoke City 0.

45:00+1:32 Attempt blocked. Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Geoff Cameron.
44:42 Attempt missed. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box misses to the right. Assisted by Jordan Henderson.
43:29 Attempt missed. Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City header from the right side of the box is high and wide to the right. Assisted by Bojan with a cross following a corner.
42:59 Corner, Stoke City. Conceded by Kolo Touré.
41:52 Geoff Cameron (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
41:52 Foul by Raheem Sterling (Liverpool.
39:57 Hand ball by Glenn Whelan (Stoke City.
37:10Booking Marc Wilson (Stoke City is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
37:05 Foul by Marc Wilson (Stoke City.
37:05 Rickie Lambert (Liverpool wins a free kick on the right wing.
35:38 Geoff Cameron (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
35:38 Foul by Raheem Sterling (Liverpool.
34:53 Attempt missed. Martin Skrtel (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box is too high following a corner.
34:04 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Erik Pieters.
33:03 Foul by Bojan (Stoke City.
33:03 Joe Allen (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
31:17 Marko Arnautovic (Stoke City wins a free kick on the left wing.
31:17 Foul by Jordan Henderson (Liverpool.
31:03 Steven N'Zonzi (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
31:03 Foul by Rickie Lambert (Liverpool.
26:23 Attempt missed. Rickie Lambert (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is too high from a direct free kick.
25:27 Foul by Glenn Whelan (Stoke City.
25:27 Rickie Lambert (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
22:46 Bojan (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
22:46 Foul by José Enrique (Liverpool.
22:16 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Ryan Shawcross.
21:24 Delay over. They are ready to continue.
21:23Substitution SubstitutionSubstitution, Stoke City. Glenn Whelan replaces Steve Sidwell because of an injury.
19:29 Delay in match Steve Sidwell (Stoke City because of an injury.
17:40 Steve Sidwell (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
17:40 Foul by Rickie Lambert (Liverpool.
13:42 Foul by Lucas Leiva (Liverpool.
13:42 Bojan (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
11:30 Attempt blocked. Erik Pieters (Stoke City left footed shot from outside the box is blocked.
8:05 Foul by Raheem Sterling (Liverpool.
8:05 Jonathan Walters (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
2:04 Joe Allen (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
2:04 Foul by Steve Sidwell (Stoke City.
0:00 First Half begins.
0:00 Lineups are announced and players are warming up.