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Opposition: Arsenal
Competition: League

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THE TIMES

Hard-man Skrtel rescues Liverpool with late show

Liverpool 2 Coutinho 45, Skrtel 90+7

Arsenal 2 Debuchy 45+1, Giroud 64

Referee MOLIVER Attendance 44,703

If the contrasting moods at the final whistle reflected the dramatic timing of Martin Skrtel's goal in the seventh minute of stoppage time, those feelings of relief and frustration were soon reversed. Liverpool's players wonder how they ended up so thankful for the small mercy of a draw, while Arsenal should be grateful for the point they gained, rather than lament the two they dropped. This was a game that Liverpool dominated for long periods, but they were staring at defeat, for the second successive Sunday, until they were spared by Skrtel's late equaliser. The fluency has been slowly returning to their game over the past few weeks, but there is still an alarming lack of killer instinct at one end of the pitch and resilience at the other. Just like at Old Trafford seven days earlier, Liverpool created most of the chances, but struggled to take them. By contrast, a porous defence continues to make it easy for opponents when they attack, which is how, having fallen behind to Philippe Coutinho's 45thminute strike, Arsenal were able to equalise through Mathieu Debuchy in first-half stoppage time and then take the lead through Olivier Giroud before leaving Skrtel free to head home Liverpool's equaliser from Steven Gerrard's corner in the seventh of nine minutes of stoppage time. There was a neat symmetry in that, since the added time came from a lengthy stoppage when Skrtel needed treatment for a gash to his head after an unfortunate tangle with Giroud. Given that Liverpool had seen Fabio Borini, their substitute, sent off moments earlier for two irresponsible bookable offences in quick succession, that said something for their spirit, although it was hardly a testament to Arsenal's durability that, 2-1 up against ten men, they failed to hold on. Brendan Rodgers suggested afterwards that his Liverpool team remain capable of a top-four finish and Champions League qualification even though they have now won just six times in 17 Barclays Premier League matches this season. Certain aspects of their performance yesterday would strengthen his belief that results will improve considerably in the second half of the season, but until they can find a way to start converting more chances - Daniel Sturridge's expected return from injury next month should help -- and to defend with even the slightest obduracy, it seems unlikely. Skrtel's goal kept Liverpool within five points of Arsenal, rather than falling eight points adrift, but the concern for Rodgers is not just about trying to catch Arsene Wenger's team. They are ten points behind an underwhelming Manchester United and nine points behind West Ham United. They have lost only one of their last eight games in all competitions, having stabilised considerably since starting November with a wretched run of four straight defeats, but winning games -- something that came so naturally when Luis Suarez and Sturridge were in tandem -- is proving difficult. It was hard to avoid the feeling that Arsenal had been there for the taking. Liverpool were playing with a renewed sense of energy, with and without the ball, but it was still a surprise to see an Arsenal team playing so sloppily in possession. Even if their defending was far more disciplined than in that calamitous 5-1 defeat at Anfield last February, when they trailed 4-0 after 20 minutes, this was a strangely disjointed performance from Wenger's team. Liverpool made an enterprise start, with Rodgers's 3-4-2-1 formation designed to try to get Lazar Markovic, Adam Lallana and Coutinho forward in support of Raheem Sterling -- a strikerless system that is far from ideal, but plays to the strengths of his squad in Sturridge's absence. Lallana, from Markovic's pass, struck a shot just over the crossbar. Markovic, enjoying his role as a left wing back, was denied by Wojciech Szczesny. The opening goal, significantly, came from Arsenal's carelessness in possession as Jordan Henderson seized on a loose pass from Giroud. Henderson moved infield and played the ball to Coutinho on the edge of the penalty area. So dexterous with the ball at his feet, Coutinho made space for himself, stepped away from Debuchy's challenge, and drilled a low rightfooted shot into the net via the inside of the post. Wenger's team had been sleepwalking through the first half, but that goal was as a wake-up call. Within 90 seconds they were level as Liverpool's set-piece vulnerability was exposed yet again from an Alexis Sanchez free kick. It was excusable to be beaten in the air by Per Mertesacker for the first header, but far less forgivable was how Liverpool defended the second and third balls. For the second, Mathieu Flamini beat Lucas Leiva to head the ball into the six-yard box. For the third, Skrtel failed to rise to the challenge and paid the price as he unwittingly deflected Debuchy's header beyond Brad Jones. Ah, poor Jones. He was not particularly culpable for either of Arsenal's goals, but he rarely looks like making a save. Promoted at the expense of Simon Mignolet, the Australian goalkeeper has now faced eight shots on target in two Premier League matches and conceded five goals. The blame for Arsenal's second goal can be apportioned elsewhere. Once again an opposition team passed their way through the Liverpool defence far too easily. When Santi Cazorla reached the byline unchallenged, none of Liverpool's central defenders was alert to the danger. Giroud, unmarked, swept his shot past Jones from close range. Liverpool pushed for an equaliser, but, as Lucas, Coutinho, Gerrard and Sterling were all frustrated, their hopes seemed to be slipping away. Borini's red card left them a man short, after he followed up a show of dissent by going studs-up on Cazorla, but, to Rodgers' satisfaction, they did not give up. Deep into stoppage time, Steven Gerrard swung over a corner from the right-hand side and Skrtel rose above Mertesacker and Calum Chambers to beat Szczesny. A point was the

very least Liverpool's efforts deserved, but, with such a porous defence, these hard-luck stories threaten to persist.

the guardian

Skrtel ensures that dominant Liverpool have the last word Liverpool left "a scar in the heart" of Arsene Wenger on his last visit to Anfield and fresh torment for Arsenal came courtesy of a scar on the head. Martin Skrtel, bandaged and bloodied from a nasty cut to the cranium, scored a towering header in time added-on for his earlier treatment to earn Brendan Rodgers' 10 men a merited reprieve. Some scars heal quicker than others. Arsenal played with the handbrake on, according to their manager, who also believed his team were burdened by the psychological baggage of February's 5-1 humiliation on this ground. Liverpool played with the intensity that had been the hallmark of Rodgers' teams until this season's rapid reverse, dominated possession and chances created, and refused to go quietly even after Fabio Borini's late dismissal for two bookable offences. But the points and poor defending at set-pieces were not all the teams shared. The pair continue to find momentum elusive or convince that they can be anything more than dots in the rear-view mirrors of Chelsea and Manchester City. Wenger's team were less than three minutes away from healing some of the wounds of 10 months ago and enabling their manager to walk through a train station without fear of confrontation with angry supporters. The result would have been more impressive than their performance, but even that proved beyond them when the conspicuous Skrtel was left unmarked in the area and headed home Adam Lallana's corner in the 97th minute. Goals from Mathieu Debuchy and Olivier Giroud, whose boot accidentally cut Skrtel's head - leading to nine minutes of injury time - were two of Arsenal's seven attempts on goal. Liverpool had 27, 10 on target. Rodgers' men also had 65% possession compared to Arsenal's 35%, their lowest percentage since the statistics began to be recorded in 2003. The Liverpool manager claimed this was a superior performance to the one that holed Arsenal's title credentials and affirmed their own in February. That was some exaggeration although, given the predicament Liverpool have found themselves in, any tentative step forward has to be embraced. A draw ultimately frustrated Arsenal but that they walked off level at the interval was a source of astonishment, even among their delighted travelling contingent. Liverpool dominated from the start, but for all of Raheem Sterling's tireless endeavour at the head of the attack there was a lack of penetration until Philippe Coutinho struck with half-time beckoning. At least Rodgers' team carried intent. An Arsenal side containing five forwards indicated similar adventure but the reality was imbalance and poor-quality supply to their isolated attack until improvement arrived in the second half. With Wenger's options limited by injury and that 5-1, the visitors sought to contain Liverpool in the first half even though only one of their central-midfield trio, Mathieu Flamini, was naturally suited to the task. Flamini received an early booking for a challenge from behind on the influential Coutinho and the benefit of the doubt from the referee Michael Oliver when he caught Lallana in the face with an elbow in the 43rd minute. Anfield bayed for a second yellow card that was not forthcoming but the controversy stirred a previously subdued contest to life. For all of their first-half control Liverpool's chances were restricted to a Lallana snap-shot that flew over, a Lazar Markovic effort that Wojciech Szczesny saved with his legs and a first-time curler from the Serb that sailed high over the Arsenal crossbar. Two minutes after Flamini's reprieve, however, the home side took a deserved lead. Jordan Henderson pounced on Giroud's poor touch and found Coutinho, who side-stepped Debuchy before beating Szczesny with a fine low finish off the inside of the far post. Liverpool should have seen the half out comfortably given their hold on the game and Arsenal's non-existent threat. Instead they handed momentum back to their opponents a minute later. From an Alexis Sanchez free-kick, conceded by Steven Gerrard with a foul on the Chile international, Per Mertesacker won the first header, Flamini the second and Debuchy the third to score beyond Brad Jones via a deflection off Skrtel's as-yet-undamaged head. Liverpool's persistent vulnerability at set pieces was graphically underlined. Level, despite contributing little in the final third, the visitors made the most of Liverpool's carelessness after the interval with a more incisive display. Shortly after injuring Skrtel, Giroud hurt Liverpool defenders again with the second goal. Kieran Gibbs intercepted a Gerrard pass and sprinted down the left before finding Giroud lurking outside the Liverpool area. The striker released Santi Cazorla to the byline, the Spaniard returned an inviting pass and Giroud converted through Jones' legs from close range. Lucas Leiva, Coutinho, Gerrard and Borini all went close to an equaliser for the home side and not even the dismissal of the Italian substitute, for a foul on Cazorla that warranted a second yellow card, disrupted Liverpool's flow. Skrtel soared through the air to level and spread the pain to Arsenal. Man of the match Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool)

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SKRTLE LEAPS TO RESCUE; Liverpool defender's 97th-minute header has Wenger reeling

LIVERPOOL Coutinho 45, Skrtel 90 ARSENAL 2 Debuchy 45, Giroud 64
JUST AS well they stopped the clock, really. Referee Michael Oliver added nine minutes, mostly for ahead injury to Martin Skrtel. In what must have seemed like an additional age from Arsenal's perspective, the bandaged one then scored. Maybe he got some extra rebound off the padding. It was certainly thick enough. Skrtel wore his giant black protection like a fallen halo, the result of Olivier Giroud accidentally stepping on his head. The wound appeared to be at the back, but he was still a brave man to go at Adam Lallana's corner with such abandon. His patchedup skull gave Liverpool the equaliser they deserved. Its timing, the 96th minute, made it a panacea for many of Anfield's current ills, and sent the locals home happy. Yet familiar problems remain. This should have been three points, not one, for Liverpool. They are desperately short of match-winners and the back line is vulnerable. Daniel Sturridge's return will not solve every problem. There is serious work to be done. The same could be said of Arsenal, fiercely proud of their stranglehold on Champions League qualification, but still four points off fourth place. An elite team should be able to hang on for a few minutes, even with Anfield at its noisiest and the home side piling on the set-piece pressure. Liverpool were down one goal and one man at the time they equalised, Fabio Borini having been sent off in added time for two bookable offences. The second yellow, a high kick on Santi Cazorla, could be blamed on over-enthusiasm. The first, throwing down the ball in a flagrant show of dissent over the award of a throw-in, was plain stupidity. Brendan Rodgers is short up front already, but the glance he shot Borini as he hared down the tunnel suggested he might be preparing to go even shorter. Still, in the circumstances, a saved point is considerably more to build on than defeat and the optimist in Rodgers will wish to accentuate the positive of a never-say-die attitude.

There were 96 minutes gone when Lallana raced over to take a corner in front of The Kop. They weren't finished, because they rarely are at Anfield, but after missing so many good chances at Old Trafford a week ago this looked like another one that was about to get away. Skrtel had other ideas. Lallana planted the ball directly on his heavily-cushioned cueball noggin and the ball flew past goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny in a way that reminded Liverpool precisely what they were missing. Presence. True presence, in the box. Manchester City won without strikers on Saturday, but they have massively imposing and experienced players like Yaya Toure, David Silva and, yes, Frank Lampard to pull them through. At Liverpool, the burden falls on the ageless Steven Gerrard or Raheem Sterling, who no longer has Luis Suarez or Sturridge to dominate the attention of defenders. It says something for Liverpool that their 27 shots were the most Arsenal have dealt with since 2003, when companies began recording such statistical minutiae. The problem is only two found their way past Szczesny, and one of those was a set-piece header from a centre-half. Giroud, lamented though he may be in some quarters, is precisely what Liverpool need. An old-fashioned, uncomplicated but technically proficient striker, who can finish. True, nobody regards him as the one that got away. He is not Alexis Sanchez, who chose Arsenal over Liverpool, or Cesc Fabregas, who elected to return to London with Chelsea. Giroud is not fashionable, but in the 64th minute as he stuck the ball smartly between the legs of Brad Jones, what would Liverpool have given for a goalscorer of his basic competence? High levels of possession and 27 shots only go so far without the cutting edge. Arsenal's front line lived off starvation rations, yet could easily have won. Liverpool's, by contrast, must have been sick of the ball by the end but could not put it into the net to collect the points they deserved. With match-winners variously sold, sick or suspended there is obvious mitigation for Rodgers, but it cannot continue like this. Liverpool are not strong enough at the back to keep a clean sheet, so have to score -- often more than once.

GIROUD showed them how to play percentages. He had one real chance, aside from a hopeful 63rd-minute shot, and took it. He is not the most cultured striker in the league, but he knows where the target is. And his goal was a thing of beauty. Sanchez burst down the left and fed the ball in; Giroud laid it off, intelligently, to Cazorla who took it to the by-line and cut it back, a perfect return pass. Giroud seized the moment and drove it, first time, through the legs of Jones. That is what is missing from Liverpool right now: confidence, swagger, the determination to define matches. Even when they triumph, there is no guarantee the back line can defend their position. Indeed, it almost sums up Liverpool's season that having fought so hard to make a breakthrough in the first-half, they should finally get their noses ahead only to keep their lead for little more than a minute. The opening goal, after 45 minutes of breathless hustle, was no more than the home team deserved. True, they had not created many clear-cut chances, far less forced Szczesny into action, but they had the lion's share of possession -- 79 per cent at the quarter-way stage -- and worked considerably harder at making the game than Arsenal. It is not often we see an Arsene Wenger team out-passed like this, and after Rodgers' stout defence of his players, credit Liverpool with backing their manager's words with action. The goal came from a scrappy build-up but was well taken. The ball bounced around in midfield until Jordan Henderson mopped up and darted towards the area with intent. He fed it to Philippe Coutinho, who switched on to his right foot and shot across his body, low, with Szczesny beaten. The ball struck the inside of a post and went the right way.

Coutinho's celebration displayed a giant release of tension. Liverpool had worked hard and now they were on their way -- for all of one minute and 53 seconds. Arsenal went up the Kop End with intent for probably the first time in the match and Sanchez won a freekick. Liverpool failed to clear it, Mathieu Flamini headed the ball back in and Mathieu Debuchy got above Skrtel to head in from six yards. On the bench, Rodgers looked devastated. This was the third goal scored from a free-kick against Liverpool this season -- the worst record in the Premier League, and one that any good side should be able to eradicate. So the dark days are far from over. After 16 games last season, Arsenal and Liverpool were first and second in the table. Going into this match with the same number of games played these teams were seventh and 11th. Both had risen a place by the end -- but despite a hard-earned away point and a feelgood finale, neither are truly near where they want to be.

The Daily Telegraph

Skrtel revives Liverpool as Arsenal buckle late
Liverpool 2 Coutinho 45, Skrtel 90 Arsenal 2 Debuchy 45, Giroud 65 Att: 44,703
Martin Skrtel left his blood on the Anfield turf, but inflicted a more serious wound on Arsenal's status as perennial Champions League quali-fiers to secure a point for Liverpool. It was in the seventh of nine injury time minutes - added due to the treatment the Liverpool defender received when his head inadvertently blocked the path of Olivier Giroud - when Skrtel rose to meet Adam Lallana's corner. He denied Arsene Wenger what would have been a fortunate win and enabled Brendan Rodgers to add credibility to his predicted restoration of last season's ideals. A year ago Liverpool earned a standing ovation from the Kop upon dismissing Arsenal with the most brutal attacking display Anfield had witnessed in 25 years. It is a sign of how rapidly circumstances have changed that the home fans were equally uproarious upon seeing their side draw 2-2, but in context the enthusiasm was justified. Liverpool have played much worse than this and won this season. In fact, they have not played this well at home since last May. Little wonder that Rodgers ended the afternoon promising that his side would still claim the final Champions League place. No side have finished above sixth with Liverpool's points tally (22) after 17 games, so it is quite a vow. Wenger, in contrast, cut a glum figure. On his previous visit to Anfield, he compared a heavy defeat to the "scene of an accident". Upon leaving Merseyside this time he bemoaned his side playing with the handbrake on. If his team have not yet gone into reverse gear, there are certainly plentiful signs they are stalling. For all the pre-match analysis of Liverpool being undermined by their lack of resilience in defence, a cutand-paste of similar articles could be applied to Arsenal. They led courtesy of wretched Liverpooldefending (is there any other kind?) and also had the benefit of an extra body as fulltime approached. The Liverpool substitute Fabio Borini was dismissed for two yellow cards, making the late rally even more improbable. For admirers of defensive fortitude, however, Anfield was a place to avoid. This was an occasion for champions of tippy-tappy midfield play, at times beautiful to watch, but in tandem demonstrating why both sides are so far off the title pace. At their best, Liverpool and Arsenal embroider the turf with the one-touch football of Philippe Coutinho, Santi Cazorla, Lallana and Alexis Sanchez. At their worst, they lack the grit and resolve necessary to withstand pressure. Arsenal fans will have seen the equaliser coming as their defence retreated and Skrtel rose unchallenged. It is a scene that has regularly played out in this stadium, but usually at the expense of the hosts. It should have ended in comfort for Wenger's men courtesy of goals from Mathieu Debuchy and Giroud, even thoughLiverpool did all the running - the trio of Coutinho, Lallana and the improving Lazar Markovic monopolising possession in a manner which Wenger must have admired, if not entirely appreciated. Arsenal shared only 36.5 per cent of the ball, a record low since Opta recorded their first stat. What Liverpool lacked was a cutting edge, although their Brazilian midfielder duly provided it on the stroke of half-time, easing past Debuchy on the right before finding the left-hand corner via the post. Rodgers's formation tweak in a bid to revive his side's possession game was enhancing the entertainment and belief, but the defensive flaws will take longer to eradicate. No sooner were Liverpool ahead, Steven Gerrard conceded a free-kick to Sanchez on the edge of his own box and the usual panic ensued. Skrtel was outmuscled by Debuchy and the goalkeeper Brad Jones offered further evidence that he considers diving and leaping an occupational hazard. Liverpool were left wondering how they had squandered their lead within 60 seconds. Arsenal needed just another shot on target to claim the lead on 65 minutes. Giroud and Cazorla combined, the Spaniard returning the pass for the French striker to slam in from close range. It was straight through Jones, whose inadequacies - and those of the defenders around him - were all too obvious again. Liverpool's vast improvement in their passing and movement deserved more, and in a season where every mild tonic has been consumed as an Anfield health restorer, Skrtel's equaliser felt more meaningful. He may never be short of words but it feels like Rodgers has rediscovered his true voice in recent days, as if he knew he was not being true to himself embracing the 'winning ugly' mantra. He still needs a competent keeper, reliable centre-half and fit striker, but the difference between thisLiverpool side and the one that made such a tame Champions League exit will reassure him. Wenger clearly has similar defensive issues to resolve.

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Ultimately, this was a game which lived up to its billing - great to watch because of the deficiencies as much as the strengths. Those flaws will cost at least one - possibly both - a Champions League place next season.



Liverpool regain fighting spirit to make a point for Rodgers

As centre-half heroics go it was a textbook afternoon for Martin Skrtel: blood wound to the head, lengthy treatment ensuing, major bandaging and then, more than six minutes into injury time, a thumping header to earn a point for his side when they needed it the most.

What it did for Brendan Rodgers' season will have been well worth the headache. Liverpool needed something to make them believe that not everything they touched was destined to collapse. This was not a calamitous performance, far from it, but as the game entered nine minutes of time added on, with the home side trailing 2-1, it was shaping up to be a calamitous result for Liverpool.

As for Arsenal, this was a post-Christmas party performance; the kind of club Christmas party Tony Adams used to organise before the days of Arsne Wenger. Befuddled and directionless in midfield, Arsenal sleepwalked through the first half and mysteriously found themselves level at the break with an equaliser from Mathieu Debuchy after Philippe Coutinho had scored Liverpool's first on 44 minutes. It had been Arsenal's only attempt on goal at that point. Their second, from Olivier Giroud on 64 minutes, gave them a 2-1 lead and when the game went into extensive injury time, necessitated by the lengthy treatment for Skrtel's second-half head gash, there was a chance that the away team might pinch all three points. As robberies go it would have been only slightly less heinous than taking the Christmas tree and all the presents. Rodgers' team, for all their defensive weaknesses, at least looked like a side trying to put together a performance. At times it was hard to know exactly what Arsenal were up to. They could barely pass the ball in the first half and overall mustered just three shots on goal and 35 per cent possession. This is not the Arsenal that Wenger has spent his life trying to build and his suggestion that "bad memories" of last season's 5-1 defeat in the same fixture had played their part was bizarre. In the end, Liverpool, who had the substitute Fabio Borini sent off for two yellow cards, got less than they deserved and Arsenal a great deal more. Yet it was Rodgers who looked the happier of the two managers. His description of his side as "brilliant" might have been pushing it somewhat but you could see what he was trying to do. He needs the confidence of this team, who are up to 10th place, to return if they are to have any chance of challenging for the top four again.

The game was controlled by Steven Gerrard in front of the back four, and in front of him the likes of Raheem Sterling, Coutinho and Lazar Markovic reprised the pressing game that is so crucial to Rodgers' philosophy. As for Wenger, he picked five attacking players and a defence protected by Mathieu Flamini, and they rarely looked coherent. Nevertheless, it was shaping up to be another afternoon of broken dreams for Liverpool when, on 90 minutes, Borini, the recipient of two bookings, ran down the tunnel having come on just 17 minutes earlier. His first booking was a needless throwing of the ball in anger. His second was for a raised boot on Santi Cazorla. More than anything, the Italian just looked embarrassed. In the first half in particular, Arsenal seemed outnumbered everywhere apart from in defence where, it should be said, Sterling was kept corralled. Danny Welbeck tried to lead the way by applying some sort of pressure, urging his team-mates to do the same, as he could not do it alone. But Rodgers' team passed their way through the away side's ragged midfield, in which Arsenal's low quality of passing had to be seen to be believed. A nadir came three minutes from half-time when Debuchy looked up and calmly passed the ball into touch. It said everything about the way Arsenal had played. They were a team that did not look like they had much of a plan. There were some moments of promise from Markovic, the slow-burn [pounds sterling]20m Serb, who Rodgers is clearly desperate will succeed as a signing. It was the Brazilian Coutinho who scored the opener, taking the ball from Jordan Henderson from the right and, with Debuchy standing off him, struck a right-foot shot across Wojciech Szczesny and in off the post. It was as much as Liverpool deserved at that point, but Rodgers has become accustomed to getting less than he has hoped for in recent months. So it was that referee Michael Oliver awarded a soft free-kick against Gerrard on the right side for a foul on Alexis Sanchez, whom the Liverpool manager would later accuse of diving to win the ball. From the free-kick, Arsenal equalised.

Liverpool missed their first opportunity to clear when Per Mertesacker got to the initial Sanchez free-kick. When the ball dropped to Flamini he headed it towards the back post and Debuchy, played by Wenger at centre-back, came in behind Skrtel to head the ball past Brad Jones. Liverpool had chances at the start of the second half, most notably a header from Gerrard that went over. Sterling had gone round Szczesny - another mad rush off his line - and cut it back to his captain. Lucas Leiva shot over from Markovic's pass. Then came the second Arsenal goal, well worked but hardly unstoppable. Kieran Gibbs broke forward and picked out Giroud, who snapped the ball back out to Cazorla on the left. Mamadou Sakho then lost the French striker, who struck first time through the legs of Jones. It became increasingly desperate for Rodgers, who tried to increase the pressure only to lose Borini to the red card. Yet Liverpool barely blinked when they went down to 10 men and Arsenal, who had shown little discipline, failed to make anything of the advantage.

In those last nine minutes Szczesny looked more assured stopping shots than the

Arsenal defence did with balls crossed into the area. Skrtel beat Calum Chambers for the equaliser, heading in from an Adam Lallana corner, and Rodgers had rescued a point, which was much better for him than the alternative he had been facing seconds earlier.



ANOTHER STRAIN JOURNEY FOR GUNNERS

YOU might have thought Arsene Wenger would have chosen a different route home.

But Wenger still went tumbling away from Liverpool as Arsenal's defensive frailties in an inconsistent campaign tripped them up - again.

Ten months ago, Wenger was left humiliated when his side were thrashed 5-1 and the Frenchman was pictured falling over as he went to board a train at Lime Street station.

Arsenal decided to let the train take the strain again last night and the journey back to Euston would have only been mildly less frustrating for their manager.

Wenger's men got a point from Anfield this time, but to concede an equaliser in the seventh minute of injury time made it feel like a defeat even if Liverpool, over the course of the 90 minutes, were the superior outfit.

Arsenal just do not seem to be able to generate any sort of momentum this season.

Now they are four points off the top four going into Christmas, facing yet another scrap for a Champions League place in the new year.

The Gunners were unconvincing yet again and are damned by statistics that tell their own sorry story.

Brendan Rodgers' men mustered 27 attempts on goal, Arsenal managed seven and Wenger's side enjoyed just 36.5 per cent possession - their lowest in a match since Opta stats began.

That surely shows that Liverpool dominated, Arsenal didn't play particularly well and yet, after getting themselves within touching distance of an away win, it was incredibly sloppy to throw it away.

Obviously the equaliser came from a setpiece. Arsenal's defending has been so poor from free-kicks and corners that they always look vulnerable.

In went Steven Gerrard's flag-kick, Calum Chambers lost his man and Martin Skrtel - bandaged head and all - powered an unstoppable header into the far corner of Wojciech Szczesny's net. It wasn't just Chambers either.

The London club look weak defensively and never fill you with a confidence that they can keep a clean sheet.

Fundamental errors spoil their every outing.

Back to square one for Arsenal then. All their earlier hard work undone but the frustrations of the entire season were right there in one moment as they let another chance slip away with more sloppy play.

Unless they find some sort of rhythm or a better balance in their team, the men from the Emirates Stadium will not be able to make up ground on West Ham and Southampton in the annual battle for fourth.

That is what it has come down to for Wenger. Chelsea, Manchester City and Manchester United are over the hill and far away into the distance. Now Arsenal are trying to make up ground on two clubs who are traditionally stuck in mid-table.

Maybe that's an indication of where their form and displays have been.

And in the first half, Arsenal were as bad as they have been, looking flat, unable to string two passes together and, of course, vulnerable in defence.

That possession stat is incredibly telling because Wenger's proud philosophy has always been about the passing game, yet every ball was bouncing back from their forwards.

The front three of Olivier Giroud, Alexis Sanchez and Danny Welbeck should be electric, full of pace, goals and dynamism. But they could not get into the game in the opening half and, rather typically, Welbeck and Giroud contrived to unwittingly play a part in Philippe Coutinho's opening goal just before the interval.

Welbeck's clumsy pass rebounded straight back off Giroud, Jordan Henderson pounced and fed Coutinho.

The Brazilian was given too much time and space by Mathieu Debuchy to work an opening and fire in off a post.

Arsenal at least showed character to fight back. Debuchy headed them level in first-half stoppage time.

Giroud's 64th-minute goal was more of a typical flowing move after good work by Kieran Gibbs and Santi Cazorla.

But for all their wonderful attacking players, Arsenal simply can't strike the happy balance between scoring goals and keeping clean sheets.

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Martin Skrtel netted a dramatic equaliser seven minutes into injury to earn Liverpool a deserved draw against Arsenal.

The Slovakian powered a header into the Kop goal to ensure Brendan Rodgers' side took at least a point from a game in which they dominated.

It had appeared the Gunners would escape with a trademark smash-and-grab raid despite being comprehensively outplayed for long periods of the match.

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Philippe Coutinho had shot Liverpool into the lead in the 45 minute, only for poor defending to allow Manuel Debuchy to draw the visitors level moments later.

Olivier Giroud then netted from Arsenal's only real moment of quality on 64 minutes. The Reds fought manfully but, after substitute Fabio Borini was dismissed for two bookings in stoppage time, it appeared they would slump to a second successive Premier League loss until Skrtel struck.

It was redemption for the defender, who had been at fault for Arsenal's equaliser. And the extended injury time period was because Skrtel had required lengthy treatment on a head injury after being stood on by Giroud.

Midweek victory at Bournemouth in their Capital One Cup quarter-final had at least provided a welcome fillip for Liverpool after the demoralising 3-0 reverse to Manchester United last weekend. Their only change saw Mamadou Sakho make his first start since the Merseyside derby in September in place of the injured Dejan Lovren. Arsenal were looking to atone last season's 5-1 drubbing at Anfield. But while Liverpool couldn't replicate their four-goal early salvo of that afternoon, this was more like the Reds of last season: pressing high and fast, hunting in packs, confident in possession and demonstrating good attacking movement.

Liverpool dominated first-half possession. But with no recognised striker, they were guilty at times of attempting to walk the ball into the net instead of trying their luck at goal. It was a bit like watching Arsenal play Arsenal.

The Reds, though, finally gained the reward their enterprise deserved in the 45 minute. After Giroud coughed up gave away cheap possession, Jordan Henderson fed Coutinho at the edge of the area who jinked away from Debuchy and shot low in off the inside of Wojciech Szczesny's right-hand post.

So it was infuriating when, within two minutes, Liverpool undid all their hard work by yet more poor defending at a set-piece.

After Alexis Sanchez was felled by Gerrard, the Chilean's free-kick delivery wasn't cleared properly and Manuel Flamini headed to the far post where Debuchy rose above Skrtel and headed in off the back of the Slovakian.

So poor were Arsenal, they would have been fortunate to go in only one behind, let alone level. The signs were there from the start. Per Mertesacker somehow escaped a booking in the third minute when fouling Coutinho on the edge of the area, Gerrard bending the free-kick narrowly over.

Lazar Markovic, enjoying another lively outing, then fed Adam Lallana who turned, run and fired an early shot that was always rising over Szczesny's crossbar. Markovic came close on 35 minutes, capitalising after Danny Welbeck failed to cut out Gerrard's lob forward but his shot from the angle was saved by Szczesny's legs. Then the Serbian shot excitedly over from the edge of the area following a trademark burst forward by Sterling.

The second half had a fractured start, Skrtel receiving treatment to a nasty head wound having been stood on by the lumbering Giroud.

When play resumed, Lucas Leiva shot wastefully over from the edge of the area before Sterling beat Szczesny to Lallana's punt forward, and crossed wide for the left for Gerrard to send a diving header off target.

Yet Arsenal were ahead on 64 minutes, Giroud sliding Cazorla in down the left and then when he crossed the Frenchman was unmarked amid four Red shirts to fire in the Spaniard's cutback through the legs of Brad Jones from a matter of yards. Liverpool kept at it. Coutinho mishit an effort, Gerrard kept the shot count ticking along and Lucas was only inches away after arriving on to Henderson's ball from the right.

With Borini and Rickie Lambert sent on in search of an equaliser, Sterling crossed for the former in the 87 minute only for Szczesny to brilliantly keep out the header.

The Arsenal keeper then saved from Sterling before Borini was dismissed for two yellow cards inside a matter of injury-time minutes, the first for dissent and the second for catching Cazorla with a high challenge.

But in the seventh minute of injury time, Skrtel was given the freedom to meet Lallana's corner from the right and bullet a header into the bottom corner.

There was still time for Jones to parry Cazorla's shot and Skrtel hack clear Nacho Monreal's rebound.

But there had been enough drama for one afternoon.



Stoppage time Martin Skrtel header denies Arsene Wenger's men victory

Martin Skrtel struck a 97th minute equaliser to deny Arsenal victory at ten-man Liverpool.

Although Skrtel's goal came late in proceedings, it was the least Liverpool deserved as they forced Arsenal into defending for long periods and kept up a head of steam despite Fabio Borini's stoppage-time red card for two bookable offences.

Arsenal were beaten 5-1 on this ground in February as Liverpool raced into a 4-0 lead after 20 minutes and the home side started brightly once more, with captain Steven Gerrard curling an early free-kick just wide.

But they had to wait until shortly before the interval to strike the first blow. Giroud gifted Liverpool possession and Jordan Henderson fed Coutinho on the edge of the box. The 22-year-old beat Debuchy on the edge of the box before firing a low 20-yards strike that found the net via Wojciech Szczesny's right-hand post. Arsenal's response was immediate. Alexis Sanchez swung over a free-kick in first-half stoppage time that Per Mertsacker and then Mathieu Flamini kept alive in the box, the latter finding Debuchy, whose header took a deflection off Skrtel to beat Liverpool goalkeeper Brad Jones. Early in the second half, Skrtel was pushed to the ground by Giroud as the pair chased Debuchy's aerial pass and then was caught, unintentionally, by the Frenchman's boot on the back of his head as the pair fell. The Liverpool centre-back received treatment for several minutes with blood clearly visible but returned to action with a bandage encased in a headband.

Giroud next involvement proved to be more damaging. A rare foray into the Liverpool half culminated with a one-two between Giroud and Cazorla and he fired the return pass through Jones' legs.

Liverpool rallied with Lucas, Borini and Gerrard all going close but Skrtel, benefiting from the time his injury largely created, scored in the seventh of nine added minutes to salvage a point for under-fire manager Brendan Rodgers.

Date: 21 December 2014 Opposition: Arsenal Competition: League	Times	Telegraph	Echo		21 December 2014
	Guardian	Mirror	Standard		
	Independent	Mail	BBC		

BBC

Martin Skrtel's equaliser seven minutes into stoppage time gave Liverpool a fully deserved point against Arsenal at Anfield.

Referee Michael Oliver had added nine minutes on after a lengthy second-half delay when Skrtel required treatment for a head wound sustained in an accidental clash with Olivier Giroud.

Giroud looked to have sent Arsenal on the way to avenging their 5-1 thrashing at Anfield last season when he put them ahead, Mathieu Debuchy having equalised seconds after Philippe Coutinho gave Liverpool the lead on the stroke of half-time.

But Skrtel, heavily bandaged and with Liverpool reduced to 10 men after substitute Fabio Borini was sent off late on, rose to meet Adam Lallana's corner in the 97th minute and power a header past Arsenal keeper Wojciech Szczesny in front of the Kop.

Arsenal were desolate but it would have been a real smash-and-grab had they hung on for three points after Liverpool showed most of the ambition and moments of quality in a game high on drama but short on class.

Liverpool supporters rose to acclaim their team's resilience at the final whistle, but they may actually feel disappointed not to claim all three points against an Arsenal side that were desperately poor for long periods.

Brendan Rodgers's team moved into the top 10 in the Premier League table, but they are nine points adrift of West Ham in fourth place, while Arsenal are sixth.

What was clear, however, was that these are two sides who will prove an irrelevance when it comes to the title race. Their main business will be contesting a top-four place and trying to ensure they are in next season's Champions League.

Liverpool kept Raheem Sterling in a central role, from where he scored two goals in the midweek Capital One Cup quarter-final win at Bournemouth, but it was the lively Lazar Markovic who had the best opportunities during a first half in which chances were in short supply.

Szczesny blocked with his legs when the £20m summer signing from Benfica was played in by Steven Gerrard and he should have hit the target from the edge of the area after being set up by Sterling.

Liverpool had been much improved without carving Arsenal open, but the breakthrough finally came on half-time when Coutinho made space in the area before drilling home a low right-foot shot off the post.

It would have given Liverpool a deserved lead at the break, but the defensive frailties that have haunted them this season meant they could not protect their advantage even for a few seconds until half-time.

Liverpool could not clear Alexis Sanchez's free-kick and, when Mathieu Flamini nodded on, Debuchy got the better of Skrtel to head past the flat-footed Brad Jones.

There was a delay after the break for Skrtel's head injury, before Lucas fired over the top and Gerrard headed off target from Sterling's cross, although replays confirmed he had handled the ball around the onrushing Szczesny.

Arsenal showed greater ruthlessness in front of goal to go ahead after 64 minutes, Giroud sweeping a finish past Jones at the near post from Santi Cazorla's cross.

Rodgers had introduced Rickie Lambert and Borini to give Liverpool the cutting edge they lacked, and it needed an athletic save from Szczesny to turn the Italian's header over the bar.

But Borini, out of favour with Rodgers, blotted his copybook further with two yellow cards, first for hurling the ball away then lunging at Cazorla.

Despite Arsenal's numerical advantage, Liverpool continued to press and Skrtel delivered a result that was the least they deserved.

Date: 21 December 2014

Opposition: Arsenal

Competition: League

B

B

C

90:00+9:42Full time Second Half ends, Liverpool 2, Arsenal 2.

90:00+9:09 Corner, Arsenal. Conceded by Martin Skrtel.

90:00+6:05Goal scored Goal!Goal! Liverpool 2, Arsenal 2. Martin Skrtel (Liverpool header from the centre of the box to the bottom right corner. Assisted by Adam Lallana with a cross following a corner.

90:00+5:43 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Per Mertesacker.

90:00+4:32 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Per Mertesacker.

90:00+4:26 Attempt saved. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is saved in the bottom right corner. Assisted by Lucas Leiva.

90:00+3:50Substitution SubstitutionSubstitution, Arsenal. Nacho Monreal replaces Alexis Sánchez.

90:00+2:56 Attempt missed. Raheem Sterling (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is high and wide to the right. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho.

90:00+2:45Booking Santiago Cazorla (Arsenal is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.

90:00+2:36 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

90:00+2:36 Foul by Santiago Cazorla (Arsenal.

90:00+1:45Dismissal DismissalSecond yellow card to Fabio Borini (Liverpool for a bad foul.

90:00+1:34 Foul by Fabio Borini (Liverpool.

90:00+1:34 Santiago Cazorla (Arsenal wins a free kick in the defensive half.

90:00+0:55 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Wojciech Szczesny.

90:00+0:53 Attempt saved. Raheem Sterling (Liverpool right footed shot from the left side of the box is saved in the bottom left corner. Assisted by Steven Gerrard.

89:45Substitution SubstitutionSubstitution, Arsenal. Joel Campbell replaces Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain.

89:16Booking Fabio Borini (Liverpool is shown the yellow card.

87:26 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Wojciech Szczesny.

87:24 Attempt saved. Fabio Borini (Liverpool right footed shot from a difficult angle on the right is saved in the bottom right corner. Assisted by Steven Gerrard.

86:32 Attempt missed. Martin Skrtel (Liverpool header from the centre of the box is high and wide to the right. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho with a cross following a corner.

86:20 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Santiago Cazorla.

86:08 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Wojciech Szczesny.

86:05 Attempt saved. Fabio Borini (Liverpool header from the centre of the box is saved in the top centre of the goal. Assisted by Raheem Sterling with a cross.

84:34 Foul by Lucas Leiva (Liverpool.

84:34 Francis Coquelin (Arsenal wins a free kick in the attacking half.

81:55Substitution SubstitutionSubstitution, Arsenal. Francis Coquelin replaces Olivier Giroud.

80:25Substitution SubstitutionSubstitution, Liverpool. Rickie Lambert replaces Kolo Touré.

79:52 Corner, Arsenal. Conceded by Kolo Touré.

79:26 Attempt blocked. Raheem Sterling (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Fabio Borini.

78:10 Bradley Jones (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

78:10 Foul by Danny Welbeck (Arsenal.

76:18 Corner, Arsenal. Conceded by Steven Gerrard.

75:27 Attempt missed. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box is close, but misses to the right. Assisted by Adam Lallana.

74:32 Attempt missed. Lucas Leiva (Liverpool left footed shot from outside the box is close, but misses to the left. Assisted by Jordan Henderson.

73:45 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

73:45 Foul by Danny Welbeck (Arsenal.

73:13Substitution SubstitutionSubstitution, Liverpool. Fabio Borini replaces Lazar Markovic.

71:35 Delay over. They are ready to continue.

70:55 Delay in match Danny Welbeck (Arsenal because of an injury.

69:33 Attempt saved. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is saved in the bottom right corner. Assisted by Lazar Markovic.

69:00 Attempt saved. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is saved in the bottom left corner. Assisted by Jordan Henderson.

67:01 Attempt missed. Raheem Sterling (Liverpool left footed shot from the left side of the box misses to the left. Assisted by Adam Lallana.

65:27 Attempt blocked. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by Adam Lallana.

64:00Goal scored Goal!Goal! Liverpool 1, Arsenal 2. Olivier Giroud (Arsenal left footed shot from the centre of the box to the bottom left corner. Assisted by Santiago Cazorla.

62:06 Attempt missed. Olivier Giroud (Arsenal left footed shot from outside the box is close, but misses to the left. Assisted by Alexis Sánchez.

61:14 Attempt missed. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool header from the centre of the box is just a bit too high. Assisted by Raheem Sterling.

60:40 Attempt missed. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box misses to the left. Assisted by Lazar Markovic.

60:19 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.

60:19 Foul by Calum Chambers (Arsenal.

59:28 Attempt missed. Lucas Leiva (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is too high.

58:52 Corner, Arsenal. Conceded by Lucas Leiva.

58:20 Foul by Martin Skrtel (Liverpool.

58:20 Olivier Giroud (Arsenal wins a free kick on the left wing.

57:20 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Calum Chambers.

56:56 Delay over. They are ready to continue.

51:07 Delay in match Martin Skrtel (Liverpool because of an injury.

50:53 Martin Skrtel (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

50:53 Foul by Olivier Giroud (Arsenal.

48:09 Attempt missed. Santiago Cazorla (Arsenal right footed shot from outside the box is high and wide to the right.

47:22 Attempt missed. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is high and wide to the right following a set piece situation.

46:40Booking Mathieu Debuchy (Arsenal is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.

46:36 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.

46:36 Foul by Mathieu Debuchy (Arsenal.

45:00 Second Half begins Liverpool 1, Arsenal 1.

45:00+1:58Half time First Half ends, Liverpool 1, Arsenal 1.

45:00+1:07Goal scored Goal!Goal! Liverpool 1, Arsenal 1. Mathieu Debuchy (Arsenal header from very close range to the top left corner. Assisted by Mathieu Flamini with a headed pass following a set piece situation.

45:00+0:32 Foul by Steven Gerrard (Liverpool.

45:00+0:32 Alexis Sánchez (Arsenal wins a free kick in the attacking half.

44:14Goal scored Goal!Goal! Liverpool 1, Arsenal 0. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box to the bottom left corner. Assisted by Jordan Henderson.

42:10 Adam Lallana (Liverpool wins a free kick on the right wing.

42:10 Foul by Mathieu Flamini (Arsenal.

40:24 Corner, Arsenal. Conceded by Kolo Touré.

38:06 Attempt missed. Lazar Markovic (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is too high. Assisted by Raheem Sterling.

37:00 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.

37:00 Foul by Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain (Arsenal.

34:15 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Wojciech Szczesny.

34:13 Attempt saved. Lazar Markovic (Liverpool right footed shot from the left side of the six yard box is saved in the bottom right corner.

33:20 Lucas Leiva (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.

33:20 Foul by Alexis Sánchez (Arsenal.

29:02 Attempt saved. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Adam Lallana.

26:17 Lazar Markovic (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.

26:17 Foul by Alexis Sánchez (Arsenal.

24:44 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.

24:44 Foul by Mathieu Debuchy (Arsenal.

22:25 Corner, Arsenal. Conceded by Mamadou Sakho.

21:40 Attempt missed. Olivier Giroud (Arsenal header from the centre of the box is close, but misses to the left. Assisted by Alexis Sánchez.

19:35 Foul by Kolo Touré (Liverpool.

19:35 Olivier Giroud (Arsenal wins a free kick on the left wing.

19:09 Attempt missed. Mamadou Sakho (Liverpool header from the centre of the box misses to the left. Assisted by Steven Gerrard with a cross following a corner.

18:40 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Santiago Cazorla.

18:38 Attempt blocked. Adam Lallana (Liverpool left footed shot from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by Lazar Markovic.

13:23 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Mathieu Debuchy.

13:22 Attempt blocked. Adam Lallana (Liverpool header from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by Steven Gerrard.

13:05Booking Mathieu Flamini (Arsenal is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.

12:52 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.

12:52 Foul by Mathieu Flamini (Arsenal.

11:34 Attempt missed. Adam Lallana (Liverpool left footed shot from the left side of the box is too high. Assisted by Lazar Markovic.

6:50 Foul by Lucas Leiva (Liverpool.

6:50 Kieran Gibbs (Arsenal wins a free kick on the left wing.

3:43 Offside, Arsenal. Kieran Gibbs tries a through ball, but Alexis Sánchez is caught offside.

2:45 Attempt missed. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is close, but misses to the left from a direct free kick.

1:40 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.

1:40 Foul by Per Mertesacker (Arsenal.

0:35 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.

0:35 Foul by Mathieu Debuchy (Arsenal.

0:00 First Half begins.

0:00 Lineups are announced and players are warming up.