

Date: 8 March 2015
Opposition: Blackburn Rovers
Competition: FA Cup

Times	Telegraph	Lancs Telegraph
Guardian	Mirror	Echo
Independent	Mail	BBC

8 March 2015

THE TIMES

Rodgers is blunted by Blackburn

Liverpool 0

Blackburn Rovers 0

Referee A Marriner Attendance 43,820

Like one of those television movies that you would sit through, only to be told it will continue after News at Ten, this FA Cup quarter-final has been put on hold just as it was threatening to get interesting. It will be another month before the teams meet again at Ewood Park, when Liverpool will need to raise their game if they are to break Blackburn Rovers' resistance.

No one can begrudge Blackburn a replay in the week commencing April 7, which represents more than just a second chance for a financially stricken Sky Bet Championship club still feeling the aftershocks of their relegation in 2012. Their supporters found themselves wondering whether their efforts might have merited even greater reward. "Nearly," Gary Bowyer, their manager, said when asked whether the afternoon had gone perfectly to plan. "In the plan, we were going to score a goal as well."

At Anfield, the sce of their nerve-racking Premier League title triumph two decades ago, Blackburn endured remarkably few scares and subjected a hitherto buoyant Liverpool team to a few worries of their own. The fluency that has returned to Liverpool's play of late was replaced by some disjointed performances yesterday, with Adam Lallana and Philippe Coutinho off-colour and Daniel Sturridge kept quiet by the excellence of Alex Baptiste and Matt Kilgallon at the heart of the visiting defence.

Blackburn dug deep for the final half-hour, in which they were forced to retreat, but they had been the more convincing team to that point. In Rudy Gestele, they had a centre forward who posed far more than nuisance value, particularly after his involvement in the incident that ended Martin Skrtel's afternoon prematurely. Brendan Rodgers, the Liverpool manager, volunteered how difficult his team had found life this season in three home matches against Sky Bet Championship opposition; they required a penalty shoot-out to defeat Middlesbrough in the Capital One Cup third round and a replay to overcome Bolton Wanderers.

That suggests something about the quality at the top end of the Championship, but it also reflects Liverpool's struggles at home to lesser opponents who are organised enough to stop them playing on their own terms. Aston Villa, Hull City, Sunderland and Leicester City have all taken points at Anfield this season and, while all of those games were before Liverpool hit form, the FA Cup ties against Bolton and Blackburn strengthen the feeling that Rodgers' team have yet to recapture the incisiveness that served them so well last season.

Rodgers wondered whether the injury to Skrtel had made it harder for his team to get going. Only two minutes had elapsed when the Slovakia defender was hurt in a challenge with Gestele -- caused not, it seemed, by the forward's flailing left arm, but by the impact when he fell. After an eightminute stoppage, Skrtel was taken away on a stretcher, replaced by Kolo Toure. The loss of Skrtel deprived Liverpool of their most aggressive defender against Gestele.

Midway through the first half Marshall dispossessed Raheem Sterling and produced a dangerous cross, from which Glen Johnson, under pressure from Gestele, chested the ball narrowly wide of his own goal. Then came a real chance after a move involving Marcus Olsson and Tom Cairney, whose pass was dummied by Gestele into the path of Craig Conway, who missed the target.

Aside from a Sturridge shot, which was well saved by Simon Eastwood, Liverpool barely threatened in the first half and almost went behind when Baptiste had a header blocked by Simon Mignolet soon after the interval.

Liverpool had a couple of penalty appeals, but it was not until the final minutes that Eastwood was tested again, this time by Jordan Henderson. At the end, the Blackburn supporters paid homage to the late Jack Walker, under whose chairmanship they won the Premier League title in 1995.

Those days are long gone, but, after a horrible few years, Blackburn believe that they have rediscovered themselves. The question is whether they can succeed where Bolton failed and make home advantage count in a replay against Liverpool.

the guardian

Liverpool face tricky replay after battling Blackburn hold firm

Long after the final whistle sounded and the majority of Anfield had emptied, 6,000 Blackburn Rovers fans chanted "One Jack Walker" in honour of the benefactor behind their Premier League title win at Liverpool 20 years ago. The celebration was shaped by the past but given fresh voice by the present as Gary Bowyer's Championship team nullified Liverpool to earn a shot at Wembley on their own terms at Ewood Park.

The Blackburn manager marked the goalless stalemate with a polite wave to the directors' box, where the travelling contingent were all air-punches and hugs in the front row after watching a resolute display frustrate the in-form team in the Premier League. Blackburn's post-match reactions were more captivating than the quarter-final that preceded them and, as Bolton Wanderers discovered in the fourth round, a draw at Anfield does not equate to mission accomplished against Brendan Rodgers' incisive team.

This was a moment to savour for a historic club that had been exposed to ridicule in the years before Bowyer restored stability and sanity to Ewood but one which remains under a transfer embargo.

Rudy Gestele led the Rovers line with towering intent, Lee Williamson and Corry Evans denied Philippe Coutinho, Adam Lallana et al any space to threaten while their backline was marshalled superbly by Matthew Kilgallon and Alex Baptiste. It often required 10 men behind the ball to keep Liverpool out of harm's way but it took a superb save from Simon Mignolet to prevent Baptiste scoring the all-important breakthrough. Rodgers bemoaned one or two close penalty calls but had no complaints over the merits of the replay. The first instalment of what the Liverpool manager hopes will be a trophy-winning dynasty continues to be a complication. Liverpool lacked their customary speed and sharpness with and without possession and could not build momentum even after the intensity of their performance increased in the second half.

Liverpool must have realised a long, awkward afternoon was in store the moment they lost Martin Skrtel to a worrying head injury after two minutes.

Gestele was a big, troublesome problem throughout and his first impression involved catching the Liverpool defender in the face with a flailing arm as they challenged for a high ball, although it was Skrtel's head-first landing that caused the damage. There were worrying scenes as he lay on the pitch for eight minutes, attended by 10 medical staff, before being carried off strapped to a spinal board. Thankfully Skrtel defiantly raised two tattooed arms as he was taken away and his withdrawal was confirmed as a precaution against possible concussion rather than serious injury.

In his absence, and with Emre Can starting in central midfield in place of the injured Joe Allen, the task of containing Rovers' towering centre-forward fell to Kolo Toure, Skrtel's replacement, Glen Johnson and Dejan Lovren.

Liverpool's makeshift back three were stretched frequently before half-time while their array of attacking talent had their own difficulties against Blackburn's supremely well-organised backline and midfield five. It was not until the second half that Rodgers' team were able to exert a measure of control on the tie.

Williamson typified the visitors' work rate and tenacity in central midfield, shutting down Can and Coutinho, and Kilgallon had to be on high alert to read Liverpool's attempted first-time passes into Daniel Sturridge or Raheem Sterling. The plan almost succeeded on several occasions but Rovers' goalkeeper, Simon Eastwood, read Liverpool's intentions well. When Eastwood was beaten by Toure in the 33rd minute, after Sturridge's header from a Coutinho free-kick fell to the Ivory Coast defender via a Blackburn player, a correct offside call curtailed Anfield's celebrations. Liverpool also had penalty appeals denied when Kilgallon made a vital interception to dispossess Lallana inside the area but pushed the midfielder in the process and, in the second half, when the Blackburn captain hauled back Sturridge off the ball.

Not that the quarter-final flowed one way. Rovers' formation prevented Liverpool finding their usual fluency until Rodgers' side upped their tempo and it also troubled the home defence when the visitors advanced in numbers. Gestele was central to their chances of an upset. The Benin forward outjumped Mignolet at a Tom Cairney free-kick only to head wide, pressured Johnson into diverting Craig Conway's cross just wide of his own goal and had a half-volley blocked inside the area by Liverpool's converted left wing-back Sterling.

Gestele's presence, and a decent first touch, gave Blackburn a potent outlet and they came close to opening the scoring following a flowing move from left to right on the half hour. A series of one-touch passes resulted in Ben Marshall squaring across Liverpool's penalty area, Gestele dummied and the in-rushing Conway had a glorious opening only to slice wide of Mignolet's goal. Baptiste went much closer shortly after the restart when he met Conway's corner with a powerful, free header. The defender's effort was destined for the roof of the net until the Liverpool goalkeeper showed superb reflexes to tip over from close range.

Thereafter, Liverpool were encamped in and around the Blackburn area. Sterling sent a diving header wide and the substitute Mario Balotelli shot over from distance but Eastwood's goal was relatively untroubled. Liverpool's path to Wembley has taken an unexpected detour.

Man of the match Alex Baptiste (Blackburn Rovers)

Times

Guardian

Independent

Telegraph

Mirror

Mail

Lancs Telegraph

Echo

BBC

8 March 2015

Date: 8 March 2015

Opposition: Blackburn Rovers

Competition: FA Cup

The

Date: 8 March 2015 Opposition: Blackburn Rovers Competition: FA Cup	Times	Telegraph	Lancs Telegraph	8 March 2015
	Guardian	Mirror	Echo	
	Independent	Mail	BBC	

was tackled by Kolo Toure. Conway, who never stopped running, then swept in a cross that Johnson almost chested into his own net.

Bowyer's defence was assured. Baptiste dispossessed Lallana. Kilgallon blocked a shot from Sturridge. Marcus Olsson intercepted a cross from Lallana. Eastwood saved routinely from Markovic and then athletically from Sturridge.

Liverpool needed to quicken their game, needed to pick out Sturridge more yet they almost conceded from a corner shortly after the re-start. Conway drilled the ball across in front of the Kop, Baptiste headed goalwards and only Simon Mignolet's reflexes rescued Liverpool. Rodgers' side slowly began to move up a gear. Sturridge got away from Kilgallon but was tugged back, an offence missed by Marriner. Liverpool kept attacking, kept run-ning into barricades constructed by Baptiste and Kilgallon. Rovers' firstteam coach, Craig Short, looked on, admiring the defensive master-class. Liverpool cranked up the pressure but their finishing was poor. Balotelli almost disturbed the top tier of the Anfield Road End with one shot. Sturridge fired wide under pressure from Kilgallon. Eastwood saved from Balotelli, then Henderson. Liverpool had almost 70 per cent possession but it was the Blackburn fans chanting "ole".

As Kilgallon and Baptiste held firm, as some of the Rovers officials in the directors' box beseeched the players to go down the corner flag and run down the clock, the away section chorused "Rovers 'til I die". Then came that final whistle and another roar from the away end. Walker would have approved.

THE

INDEPENDENT

Liverpool saved from ignominy by Mignolet's magic glove

The sign: "This Is Anfield" has seldom intimidated Blackburn Rovers. It was here, two decades ago, that they embraced the greatest moment in their history by winning the Premier League. The fact they were managed by Kenny Dalglish and had denied Manchester United the championship, meant their triumph was not exactly begrudged by Liverpool. Fifteen years ago, when the club had slid back into the second tier of English football, they came to Anfield managerless and knocked Liverpool out of the FA Cup. A goalless draw was not quite on the same level of achievement, although hearing the ovation that sounded on the final whistle you would not have known. Had Alex Baptiste's header not been superbly turned away by Simon Mignolet, it would have been louder still.

"It has been well documented what this club has been through," said the Blackburn manager, Gary Bowyer. "And the fans have suffered more than anyone. It was wonderful to see them celebrate like this. We have the same chance in the replay as we had in this match. I know Brendan [Rodgers] has been complaining about the state of the pitch at Anfield but, if he sees Ewood Park, he will think this is Wembley." The match could be summed up in one statistic. Liverpool had 21 shots at Simon Eastwood's goal but landed only four on target. Their domination had little cutting edge, although they will still be favourites to reach the semi-finals. In the fourth round, Bolton held them to a goalless draw at Anfield and were beaten in the rematch. "The replay will be in early April," said the Liverpool manager, Brendan Rodgers. "It certainly won't be on the Monday which it will be for Bradford and Reading and I feel for those clubs who have to play Saturday-Monday with everything that is at stake for them.

"We lacked sharpness. We tried to grind our way through the game and we could not get the result but you have to give Blackburn credit; they put their bodies on the line. "Our players have been through a lot. After the game at Besiktas and all the travelling that involved, I asked the players for four points from the next two games against Manchester City and Burnley. They gave me six and we are in the draw for the semi-final." It might have been considerably worse for Liverpool, especially when Martin Skrtel, going up for a challenge with Rudy Gestede, collapsed to the floor and lay motionless for seven minutes while he was treated on the pitch and then taken off on a stretcher. He watched the rest of the half before being taken to hospital as a precaution. Skrtel's departure gave Blackburn a chance they almost took. Rodgers has achieved great things with a back three but Glen Johnson, who chested a cross into his own side-netting, the out-of-form Dejan Lovren and Kolo Tour[c] sometimes appeared a flimsy screen for Mignolet. Tour[c], as he has whenever he has been called upon- most notably against Real Madrid in the Bernabeu - played very well. Gestede, who goes up for a challenge arms sprawled, was a handful in the first half but Tour[c] proved a nuisance in the Blackburn area, putting the ball in the net and heading against the outside of Eastwood's post. Both times, however, the defender was ruled offside.

Only when Rodgers reshaped his team just before the hour mark, bringing on Mario Balotelli and shifting Adam Lallana to the right flank to give Philippe Coutinho room to breathe did Liverpool's domination become complete and yet they never suggested they would ram their advantage home.

And yet the odds on Blackburn must have been immensely greater than they were when Nathan Blake scored the lone goal to knock Liverpool out in 2000. Blackburn are not credible candidates for the play-offs and were without their captain, Grant Hanley, and Josh King, whose hat-trick had destroyed Stoke in the fifth round. By the half-time whistle, which was delayed by eight minutes because of the injury to Skrtel, those odds would have reduced considerably. You could tell how Blackburn were doing just by looking at their manager. Bowyer displayed every kind of emotion with the expressions of an amateur actor on the church hall stage. He was watched from the stands by his father, Ian, who had won two European Cups with Nottingham Forest. There is a wonderful

photograph of Brian Clough and Peter Taylor sitting on the running track at Cologne during the 1979 semi-final on what appear to be fold-up chairs, legs crossed, utterly impassive. Gary is not that sort of manager.

Blackburn's best chance came from their centre-half, Baptiste. Last week, Bowyer had found himself so short of centre-halves that he had brought in Doneil Henry on loan from West Ham and, less than three hours after joining the team in Sheffield, the Canadian -who had never played a senior game in England - found himself kicking off at Hillsborough. Anfield in an FA Cup quarter-final was a different order of difficulty entirely and here Bowyer employed Baptiste, who showed tremendous calmness alongside Matt Kilgallon. A few moments into the second half, Baptiste was given a clear header to meet Ben Marshall's corner and Mignolet flung himself high to push it away. It kept Liverpool in the Cup.

Blackburn had a chance in each half. The first had seen Gestede dummy a low cross that set up Craig Conway perfectly. The shot was, however, not nearly as good as the approach work. Well as Kilgallon played, Blackburn's captain might have conceded two penalties. The first appeal was for a tackle on Lallana as he ran on to a superb ball from Lazar Markovic. Television replays were inconclusive, although Rodgers was convinced. He was less sure that Kilgallon's pull-back on Daniel Sturridge deserved a spot-kick. However, he did not dare argue that Liverpool deserved a win.

DAILY

Mirror

PAIN IN THE E GRASS; Rodgers so unhappy with Anfield surface after Rovers draw but Bowyer warns 'wait until you get to our place'

IF Steven Gerrard is to lead Liverpool out for a Wembley swansong then the Reds are certainly going to do it the long, drawn-out and agonising way.

A week after his side produced a performance of verve and guile to defeat the champions Manchester City here, Brendan Rodgers was left moaning about the state of the Anfield pitch after being held to a grim goalless draw by Championship club Blackburn. That complaint brought a stark warning from Rovers boss Gary Bowyer ahead of a replay at Ewood Park in four weeks' time.

"We were glad to see some grass on the pitch," said Bowyer. "When Brendan sees Ewood, he'll think this is Wembley." Blackburn have already battered Premier League Swansea and Stoke during a cup run which is restoring pride to a club that won the title here 20 years ago (below) but have since suffered misery under the ownership of the headless chicken farmers Venky's.

This was not a great weekend for the FA Cup. Two bore draws and a near-riot. It really comes to something when Aston Villa are the only team to score in the three ties. Skipper Gerrard is due back from a hamstring injury in time for next week's visit to Swansea. But in the competition which represents his only chance of a farewell medal before his Stateside semi-retirement, Liverpool have rarely shown their bravura league form of recent months. The Reds were fortunate to win at AFC Wimbledon and almost went out at Bolton before victory over Crystal Palace set up what had looked like a straightforward quarter-final tie.

But Bowyer's men were having none of it. Despite seven changes from their last league outing, Rovers defended stoutly and carved out two of the afternoon's three best scoring opportunities. t Yet this was a match which began with an eight-minute stoppage and barely got going after that.

Martin Skrtel injured his neck in an aerial challenge with Rudy Gestede and after a lengthy delay, the big centre-half was carried off on a stretcher, wearing a brace, and was replaced by Kolo Toure. During the interlude, Blackburn's supporters began to party like it was 1995, recalling their title triumph and singing for Alan Shearer. Gestede took his lead from this, putting himself about like the old Geordie warhorse in his pomp, clattering in to Simon Mignolet and then Raheem Sterling. Into the semi-Aston Villa Liverpool Bradford or Man Utd or At Wembley, April Draw after Man Ut ALIVERPOOL appealed loudly for a penalty when Matt Kilgallon appeared to push over Adam Lallana but replays suggested the Rovers defender got a touch and that ref Andre Marriner had called it correctly.

BLACKBURN's most glaring chance arrived on 31 minutes - a sweeping move from left to right, a dummy from Gestede but Craig Conway blazing high and wide. Liverpool had the ball in the net soon after - a Sterling free-kick headed goalwards by Daniel Sturridge and thumped home by Toure, who had been a yard offside. finals.. It was all failing to click for Rodgers' men. Coutinho has made a habit of scoring beauties of late and seemed to feel obliged to do the same each time he got the ball, peppering The Kop with wayward strikes. or Black'bn Reading Arsenal Sat 18 & Sun 19 to be made game tonight ttpw Slust before the break Sterling whizzed down the right and fed Sturridge, who was denied by keeper Simon Eastwood. The best save of the match, though, came from Mignolet soon after the interval, as the Belgian pushed over an Alex Baptiste header from Conway's corner. Liverpool had another penalty shout turned down when Kilgallon pulled back Sturridge, although the England forward fell with an Equity card tucked down his shorts. Blackburn were content to pack their defence and were troubled only occasionally. Toure headed against the outside of a post when he should have scored from a Coutinho free-kick.

Jordan Henderson had a shot blocked by Eastwood and when Glen Johnson fired a centre across the face of goal, neither Mario Balotelli, who replaced Lazar Markovic just before the hour, nor Sterling could apply the killer touch. It was a frustrating old day for Liverpool - and Ewood Park in early April does not promise to be too pretty either.

Times

Guardian

Independent

Telegraph

Mirror

Mail

Lancs Telegraph

Echo

BBC

8 March 2015

LIVERPOOL

ECHO

Like a boxing referee waving off a fight, Andre Marriner decided enough was enough. Just one added minute and not even that was completed as the West Midlands official took pity on the 43,820 hardy souls inside Anfield. There were no complaints. No Liverpool fan was asking for more.

A grim FA Cup quarter-final tie ended in stalemate as the Reds were frustrated by a jubilant Blackburn Rovers. If this season is going to reach a glorious finale under Wembley's iconic arch then Brendan Rodgers' side will have to do it the hard way. Liverpool spurned the opportunity to book their passage to the capital at the first time of asking as Gary Bowyer's Championship outfit deservedly got the replay they came for. The Reds will be in the hat for Monday night's semi-final draw but there is plenty of work to be done before Kopites start planning their latest pilgrimage to Anfield South. They face a trip to Ewood Park they could have done without with the replay set to be played on either April 7 or 8 in between crucial Premier League games against Arsenal and Newcastle.

Having ground out a trio of hard-fought 2-1 away wins at AFC Wimbledon, Bolton and Crystal Palace to reach the sixth round, now Liverpool will need to deliver once again on their travels. If the Reds do go on to lift the FA Cup for an eighth time on May 30 they won't have scored a single goal in the competition at Anfield this season let alone won a game. Liverpool had 70% possession and 21 attempts on goal against Blackburn but only four were on target.

This was an afternoon when standards slipped across the board. There was a lack of tempo and intensity to the hosts' play throughout.

Their passing was too slow, too predictable and too often they played in front of Blackburn rather than getting in behind them.

Rovers defended expertly with the midfield duo of Lee Williamson and Corry Evans shackling the creative talents of Philippe Coutinho and Adam Lallana. It had the look of a game too far for a group who had expended so much energy in the back to back league victories over Manchester City and Burnley.

This was Liverpool's fifth match in a space of a fortnight and fatigue undoubtedly played a part. There was no spark, few flashes of quality.

Their search for some fluency certainly wasn't helped by the state of the Anfield pitch which Rodgers has frequently bemoaned this term.

The Reds' passing game is all about playing at speed but such an awful surface slows everything down. It's a ridiculous situation for a club of Liverpool's stature to be hamstrung by their own facilities. And with cranes due to be stationed on the turf this summer as the redevelopment of the Main Stand continues, there's the alarming prospect of the Reds being unable to relay it until 2016.

With Indian chicken barons and Blackburn owners Venky's in town, Liverpool also had good reason to cry fowl about the big decisions that went against them.

Marriner turned a blind eye when Lallana was brought down by Matthew Kilgallon inside the box in the first half. After the break the Blackburn skipper also got away with pulling back Daniel Sturridge before substitute Mario Balotelli blatantly had his shirt pulled by Alex Baptiste. Somehow all three offences went unpunished. But a sense of injustice was tempered by the knowledge that over the 90 minutes Liverpool simply hadn't done enough to deserve to win.

The best news of the day arrived with confirmation that Martin Skrtel had only suffered concussion after a sickening fall inside the opening three minutes. The Slovakian defender hit the ground heavily after being knocked off balance in an aerial challenge with the combative Rudy Gestede.

There was an eight-minute delay while he received treatment before he was stretchered off wearing a neck brace with a conscious Skrtel giving concerned supporters the thumbs up. Rodgers, who had lost Joe Allen to injury 24 hours earlier, was forced into a reshuffle with Kolo Toure coming on.

After play resumed, Liverpool struggled to get out of first gear. Passes went astray and at the back they looked vulnerable up against Rovers' direct, physical approach. That unease was hardly surprising given that the Reds have looked at their best this term with the defensive trio of Skrtel, Emre Can and Mamadou Sakho. With Skrtel off, Can moved into midfield due to Allen's knock and Sakho only deemed fit enough for bench duty it was effectively a second-string backline.

When Toure misplaced a pass the Reds were left exposed but Craig Conway blazed wastefully wide. Toure did little else wrong and came within a whisker of bagging his long awaited first goal for the club.

His smile lit up Anfield when he hammered home after Sturridge had connected with Coutinho's free-kick but the Ivorian's celebrations were curtailed by the offside flag. Deep into first-half stoppage time Sturridge's strike was beaten away by Simon Eastwood but it was a rare sight of goal for the Reds striker who was often out-muscled and remained on the periphery. Sturridge wasn't the only one with Raheem Sterling wasted out on the left flank. The youngster needs to play through the middle to really influence games. On the right Lazar Markovic made little impact with the Serbian's form having taken a worrying dip. It was no surprise that he was taken off before the hour mark with Balotelli pushed up front with Lallana moved out wide. By then Liverpool had Simon Mignolet to thank for still being on level terms. Baptiste's header from Conway's corner was sailing above Lallana on the line but Mignolet did brilliantly to turn it over the bar.

The Reds did summon a late flurry. Balotelli and Jordan Henderson both forced saves from Eastwood before Coutinho fired into the side-netting and Sterling

noded wide from Johnson's cross. But a late winner would have flattered Rodgers' side. Twenty years after they won the Premier League title at Anfield, Rovers' 6,000-strong travelling army were celebrating once again. Liverpool will need to grab their second bite at the cherry at Ewood Park next month.

MATCH FACTS

Liverpool (3-4-2-1): Mignolet, Johnson, Skrtel (Toure 11), Lovren, Markovic (Balotelli 59), Henderson, Can, Sterling, Lallana, Coutinho, Sturridge.

Not used: Ward, Lambert, Moreno, Sakho, Williams.

Blackburn (4-5-1): Eastwood, Henley, Baptiste, Kilgallon, Olsson, Evans, Williamson, Conway, Marshall (Taylor 68), Cairney, Gestede.

Not used: Spurr, Brown, Rhodes, Henry, Lenihan, Steele.

Referee: Andre Marriner **Attendance:** 43,820 **Goals:** none **Bookings:** Can, Cairney.

Man of the match: Simon Mignolet. Came to the rescue with a fine save to deny Alex Baptiste early in the second half.

LANCASHIRE TELEGRAPH

MAGNIFICENT Rovers' dreams of Wembley remain very much alive after they held the Premier League's form team to a thoroughly deserved draw at Anfield yesterday.

Gary Bowyer's Championship side have done the club proud in their thrilling run to the FA Cup quarter-finals, sweeping aside Liverpool's top-flight rivals Swansea City and Stoke City to reach the last-eight stage.

But, even more so than the annihilation of Stoke, it is their outstanding performance here that will live longest in the memory of the inspirational 6,000 supporters who packed the Anfield Road end and the many more who watched from home and in the pubs of Blackburn.

And, on in this evidence, who is to say they cannot beat the Reds at the second time of asking in the money-spinning Ewood Park replay and secure a place in the semi-finals for the first time in eight years?

Liverpool came into the game as red-hot favourites after winning 13 and drawing five of their last 19 domestic matches.

But you could count on one hand the amount of saves Simon Eastwood had to make such was the unstinting and heroic efforts of the boys in blue and white in front of him.

From goalkeeper Eastwood to lone striker Rudy Gestede, they all did the club a great service.

And, 20 years on since Rovers lifted the Premiership trophy here, and 15 years on since they dumped the Reds out of the FA Cup fourth round here too, had it not been for Simon Mignolet's superb second-half stop from Alex Baptiste, we could even have been talking about one of the greatest shocks in the club's history.

On a glorious late winter's afternoon, inside one of the game's true cathedrals, the atmosphere that had been building before kick-off reached a crescendo when Andre Marriner sounded his whistle for the first time.

But once the action got under way the mood dampened after a sickening fall from Martin Skrtel. The Liverpool defender spent nearly 10 minutes on his back being treated by medics before he was stretchered off to be replaced by Kolo Toure. It was Rovers who reacted much the better to the long stoppage and, after Mignolet failed to deal with a Tom Cairney free kick, Gestede headed harmlessly wide. It was a sign of things to come for the hustled and harried Reds with the majestic frontman going on to dominate their three-man defence in the first half. But Gestede was not alone in impressing for a well-organised and ultra-disciplined Rovers side that was superbly set-up by their boss Bowyer.

They kept their shape and ensured that whenever they did not have possession, they worked tremendously hard to get it back or prevent their highly fancied opponents from doing anything with it.

Yes Liverpool had a penalty appeal turned down in the 20th minute – just when Rovers fans started their planned minute's applause for the late, great Jack Walker, whose vision, wealth, ambition and drive made the 1995 Premiership title triumph possible – when Matt Kilgallon beat Adam Lallana to the ball in the box. But it was not until the eight minutes of added time at the end of the half that Eastwood was called into action for the first time as he palmed away a stinging drive from Daniel Sturridge. By that stage Rovers could have should have been ahead. Firstly Glen Johnson chested a dangerous Craig Conway cross past his own post before Raheem Sterling, seemingly with his hand, blocked a Gestede volley. But their best opportunity came in the 32nd minute when Tom Cairney opened up the Reds backline with a pass to Conway who should have done better than slice wide from the corner of the area. It could have been a costly miss as moments later Toure had a goal ruled out for offside after Sturridge flicked on a Jordan Henderson free kick. The sighs from the Liverpool supporters that greeted the half-time whistle told you all you needed to know. Rovers had got under their skin. And their frustration so nearly turned to despair four minutes after the restart when Mignolet made a one-handed save to stop Baptiste's bullet header from a Conway corner finding the top corner.

Baptiste then made a timely block to prevent the lively Sturridge from worrying Eastwood yet it was not until the arrival of Mario Balotelli that his goal began to come under sustained pressure. But, with Lee Williamson and Corry Evans negating the threat of Lallana and Philippe Coutinho, even then the Reds had to work extremely hard for their openings. Their most promising one came in the 74th minute when Baptiste was unable to cut out a Balotelli ball over the top to Sturridge who, under pressure from Kilgallon, blazed wide.

Date: 8 March 2015 Opposition: Blackburn Rovers Competition: FA Cup	Times	Telegraph	Lancs Telegraph		8 March 2015
	Guardian	Mirror	Echo		
	Independent	Mail	BBC		

Balotelli then found space 25 yards from goal yett his attempt went straight down Eastwood’s throat.

Eastwood then had to stretch out a leg to deny Henderson after a Liverpool corner broke to their captain.

But, apart from when Sterling headed a Johnson cross wide at the back post, his goal was not troubled again as Rovers, fairly comfortable, kept the Reds at bay.

Roll on the replay.

BBC

Blackburn Rovers earned a deserved draw with Liverpool at Anfield as the Championship side forced an FA Cup quarter-final replay.

Craig Conway fired over early on for the visitors before Kolo Toure had an offside goal disallowed for the Reds.

Alex Baptiste then had a goal-bound header brilliantly saved as Blackburn continued to impress after the break.

Liverpool pressed late on with Jordan Henderson seeing a volley saved, but a replay at Ewood Park now awaits.

The match was halted for eight minutes early on as centre-back Martin Skrtel was taken off on a stretcher with a head injury after a heavy landing following a aerial challenge with Rudy Gestede.

Liverpool skipper Steven Gerrard was denied an Anfield FA Cup farewell, after being left out of the squad following six matches on the sidelines with a hamstring injury, but retains hope of a dream finale come 30 May.

The 34-year-old, who will leave Liverpool for LA Galaxy in the summer, has lifted the trophy twice for the Reds and this year's final - which would be his last game for the club - falls on his 35th birthday.

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard won't play in the FA Cup at Anfield again

The Reds will have to play better in the replay if they are to reach a Wembley semi-final, though, as Rovers soaked up early pressure to hit them on the break, with striker Gestede a real threat.

The visitors' confidence mirrored that shown in victories over Premier League Swansea and Stoke en route to reaching their second FA Cup quarter-final in three years.

And with Gestede dominating the hosts in the air early on, there were signs they could repeat their Anfield FA Cup heroics of 2000 when Nathan Blake scored to knock them out in the fourth round.

Rovers are 14 points off the play-off places in the Championship but Champions League-chasing Liverpool were struggling to cope as Conway and Gestede went close.

Liverpool, seeking their first FA Cup triumph since 2006, were thankful to goalkeeper Simon Mignolet's stunning save to keep out Baptiste's header after the break.

The inevitable home pressure finally came as the match clock ticked down, but Liverpool, who also drew 0-0 with Championship Bolton earlier in the competition, were unable to break their visitors down and must hope they can get the job done at the second time of asking.

Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers:

"Martin Skrtel is fine. He could have played on but you have to listen to the medical team and the experts and he is fine in the changing room. He fell heavily so there was a feeling he could have been knocked out or concussed but I'll leave that to the medical experts.

"Our objective this week was to get four points out of six in the league and get into the next round of the FA Cup. We got six points out of six and although we are not through to the next round, we are still in the draw."

Blackburn manager Gary Bowyer:

"In the first half especially we took the game to Liverpool in the areas we could exploit. Rudy Gestede was unplayable at times for us. We had to do a lot of defending but we had a game plan and we stuck to it.

"A lot of our team are young lads trying to make their way and to come here and have the experience is another massive boost in their development.

"We bring them back to Ewood Park and we hope we will have a full crowd. It's something our fans really deserve.

"The pitch at Ewood is nowhere near the standard here so it might be a bit of a leveller for us."

Date: 8 March 2015 Opposition: Blackburn Rovers Competition: FA Cup	Times	Telegraph	Lancs Telegraph		8 March 2015
	Guardian	Mirror	Echo		
	Independent	Mail	BBC		

BBC

90:00 +1:04 Full time Second Half ends, Liverpool 0, Blackburn Rovers 0.
87:53 Booking Tom Cairney (Blackburn Rovers is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
87:42 Mario Balotelli (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
87:42 Foul by Tom Cairney (Blackburn Rovers.
85:02 Attempt missed. Raheem Sterling (Liverpool header from the left side of the six yard box misses to the left. Assisted by Glen Johnson with a cross.
82:50 Attempt missed. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from a difficult angle on the left is close, but misses to the left. Assisted by Daniel Sturridge.
82:16 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Adam Henley.
82:13 Attempt saved. Jordan Henderson (Liverpool right footed shot from a difficult angle on the right is saved in the bottom left corner.
82:11 Attempt blocked. Dejan Lovren (Liverpool header from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by Adam Lallana with a cross.
81:46 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Chris Taylor.
81:05 Kolo Touré (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
81:05 Foul by Rudy Gestede (Blackburn Rovers.
80:45 Attempt saved. Mario Balotelli (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Jordan Henderson.
78:53 Mario Balotelli (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.
78:53 Foul by Craig Conway (Blackburn Rovers.
76:26 Foul by Jordan Henderson (Liverpool.
76:26 Corry Evans (Blackburn Rovers wins a free kick in the defensive half.
72:54 Attempt missed. Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool left footed shot from the centre of the box is high and wide to the left.
69:13 Attempt missed. Mario Balotelli (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is too high. Assisted by Raheem Sterling.
67:52 Substitution , Blackburn Rovers. Chris Taylor replaces Ben Marshall.
65:58 Attempt blocked. Emre Can (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked.
65:54 Attempt blocked. Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool left footed shot from outside the box is blocked.
65:01 Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool wins a free kick on the right wing.
65:01 Foul by Tom Cairney (Blackburn Rovers.
63:41 Foul by Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool.
63:41 Tom Cairney (Blackburn Rovers wins a free kick in the defensive half.
61:36 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Rudy Gestede.
61:15 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Adam Henley.
58:58 Kolo Touré (Liverpool hits the right post with a header from very close range. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho with a cross following a set piece situation.
58:35 Substitution , Liverpool. Mario Balotelli replaces Lazar Markovic.
58:08 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.
58:08 Foul by Craig Conway (Blackburn Rovers.
55:59 Attempt blocked. Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool left footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Lazar Markovic.
53:22 Emre Can (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
53:22 Foul by Adam Henley (Blackburn Rovers.
50:53 Attempt missed. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool left footed shot from the left side of the box misses to the left.
50:50 Attempt blocked. Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool right footed shot from the left side of the box is blocked. Assisted by Glen Johnson.
48:25 Corner, Blackburn Rovers. Conceded by Simon Mignolet.
48:19 Attempt saved. Alex Baptiste (Blackburn Rovers header from the centre of the box is saved in the top right corner. Assisted by Craig Conway with a cross.
47:52 Corner, Blackburn Rovers. Conceded by Emre Can.
46:50 Foul by Raheem Sterling (Liverpool.
46:50 Craig Conway (Blackburn Rovers wins a free kick in the defensive half.
45:00 Second Half begins Liverpool 0, Blackburn Rovers 0.
45:00 +8:05 Half time First Half ends, Liverpool 0, Blackburn Rovers 0.
45:00 +6:03 Attempt saved. Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool left footed shot from the left side of the box is saved in the top left corner. Assisted by Raheem Sterling.
45:00 +5:05 Attempt missed. Dejan Lovren (Liverpool header from the centre of the box misses to the right. Assisted by Jordan Henderson with a cross following a corner.
45:00 +4:35 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Markus Olsson.
45:00 +3:28 Foul by Dejan Lovren (Liverpool.
45:00 +3:28 Rudy Gestede (Blackburn Rovers wins a free kick in the attacking half.
45:00 +2:55 Attempt saved. Lazar Markovic (Liverpool right footed shot from the right side of the box is saved in the bottom right corner. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho.
45:00 +0:27 Booking Emre Can (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
45:00 +0:12 Foul by Emre Can (Liverpool.
45:00 +0:12 Tom Cairney (Blackburn Rovers wins a free kick in the attacking half.
41:50 Attempt blocked. Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool left footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Emre Can.
35:34 Attempt missed. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is too high. Assisted by Raheem Sterling.
34:14 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Adam Henley.
33:24 Offside, Blackburn Rovers. Simon Eastwood tries a through ball, but Rudy Gestede is caught offside.
33:01 Offside, Liverpool. Daniel Sturridge tries a through ball, but Kolo Touré is caught offside.
32:53 Attempt blocked. Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool header from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho with a cross.
32:24 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.
32:24 Foul by Craig Conway (Blackburn Rovers.
31:00 Attempt missed. Craig Conway (Blackburn Rovers right footed shot from the centre of the box is too high.

30:09 Attempt missed. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool left footed shot from outside the box is high and wide to the left. Assisted by Adam Lallana.
28:31 Dejan Lovren (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
28:31 Foul by Craig Conway (Blackburn Rovers.
27:40 Raheem Sterling (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
27:40 Foul by Rudy Gestede (Blackburn Rovers.
26:54 Attempt blocked. Markus Olsson (Blackburn Rovers left footed shot from outside the box is blocked.
25:03 Adam Lallana (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
25:03 Foul by Corry Evans (Blackburn Rovers.
22:51 Corner, Blackburn Rovers. Conceded by Glen Johnson.
19:54 Offside, Liverpool. Dejan Lovren tries a through ball, but Daniel Sturridge is caught offside.
19:53 Attempt missed. Dejan Lovren (Liverpool header from the centre of the box misses to the left. Assisted by Jordan Henderson with a cross following a corner.
19:15 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Matthew Kilgallon.
17:05 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Lee Williamson.
15:46 Dejan Lovren (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
15:46 Foul by Rudy Gestede (Blackburn Rovers.
12:19 Attempt missed. Rudy Gestede (Blackburn Rovers header from the centre of the box misses to the right. Assisted by Tom Cairney following a set piece situation.
11:46 Foul by Jordan Henderson (Liverpool.
11:46 Tom Cairney (Blackburn Rovers wins a free kick on the left wing.
10:24 Substitution , Liverpool. Kolo Touré replaces Martin Skrtel because of an injury.
10:15 Delay over. They are ready to continue.
2:22 Delay in match Martin Skrtel (Liverpool because of an injury.
2:12 Martin Skrtel (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
2:12 Foul by Rudy Gestede (Blackburn Rovers.
0:00 First Half begins.
0:00 Lineups are announced and players are warming up.