

Date: 4 April 2015
Opposition: Arsenal
Competition: League

BBC	Sunday Times	Times	Telegraph	
	Echo	Sun Independent	Guardian	Mirror
	Sun Telegraph	Independent	Mail	

THETIMES

Wenger sniffs late run for title

Arsenal 4 Bellerin 37, Ozil 40, Sanchez 45, Giroud 90+1
Liverpool 1 Henderson 76 (pen) Referee A Taylor Attendance 60,081

After all the talk of Arsenal casting covetous glances at something Liverpool possess, it turned out to be Brendan Rodgers departing the Emirates on Saturday afternoon with envy in his eye as he gazed at all those things at Arsene Wenger's disposal. His team's season in tatters, he listed everything he had seen that Arsenal have and Liverpool do not. "The bench, the world-class players with the big talent" were all there; the place in the Champions League, too, something he fears now is beyond his side. "I'm a realist," he said. "I wouldn't expect them or Manchester United to slip up."

As he sought to explain what it was that had scored the groove between the two teams, though, his counterpart opted to take note of another sense: smell. There is a scent about Arsenal; not the perfume that has long been associated with the Barclays Premier League's great dandies, but something earthier, something sufficiently substantial to bring seven wins in a row and a place in a heavily handicapped title race, but a title race nonetheless.

"You can smell we can score goals," he said. "There is something happening," Wenger added, a little later, returning to his theme. "We have a good mentality and good cohesion. They are ready to fight for each other. You can see that. You can't cheat on it. People smell that." To get a sniff of it here, they would have had to get past the overriding aroma, which was that of Liverpool's top-four hopes going up in smoke. They were dismantled, utterly and irrevocably, in the space of eight first-half minutes: a curled finish from Hector Bellerin, after a passage of play that would make a pretty decent How Not To Defend DVD from Alberto Moreno, a brilliant free kick from Mesut Ozil, a firecracker of a shot from Alexis Sanchez. The second half almost brought a consolation, Raheem Sterling winning a penalty and Jordan Henderson more or less converting it, before Olivier Giroud twisted the knife in stoppage time. The most immediate comparison was with what Wenger's side suffered at Anfield last season, the suspicion was that this served as revenge. In truth, though, that is unsatisfactory. The scoreline might have been less emphatic but, if anything, the damage inflicted by Arsenal on Liverpool was more severe. They ruthlessly exposed all of Rodgers' team's limitations: Simon Mignolet's ability to make outstanding saves but not slightly more routine ones; the discrepancy between how they want to play and how they are able to play in defence; the lack of authority in midfield; the manager's occasionally baffling tactical selections, such as playing Henderson as a winger; the toothlessness that neither Sterling nor Daniel Sturridge has threatened to solve permanently at any point since the departure of Luis Suarez.

They made clear, too, quite how wide the gap between these two clubs has become, whatever recent form seemed to suggest.

What was striking, in those eight minutes when the game was won and lost, was just how smooth Arsenal looked and how ragged Liverpool were. Sanchez, Ozil, Aaron Ramsey and Santi Cazorla interchanged positions wordlessly, seamlessly. When they needed fresh legs, they could call on Danny Welbeck. After throwing on Sturridge, Rodgers looked at his bench -- Dejan Lovren, Glen Johnson, Javier Manquillo, Fabio Borini and Cameron Brannagan, a youth-team graduate -- and decided not to bother. More than all of that, though, what Arsenal managed was something that Liverpool did not quite do last season: they have, all but certainly, deprived them of a Champions League place for next season and in doing so they may have knocked their ambitions off course for rather longer.

As Rodgers admitted, missing out on Europe's elite competition risks kickstarting a vicious cycle, one that has no obvious route of escape. "It will be very, very difficult with seven games to go," he said. "We want to be in the Champions League but that is highly unlikely this year. "We always felt this year would be difficult, but it is frustrating that we got ourselves in a position over the last three months and have then come up short in our last two games [against Arsenal and Manchester United]. "That makes it difficult for us, there is no doubt about that. I think most players want to play in the Champions League. Liverpool is a phenomenal club that players want to play for, but, of course, players want to play at the top level and if you're not in the Champions League that makes it difficult for you [to attract them]."

That is not to suggest that the climax to Liverpool's campaign will be completely devoid of either purpose or intrigue. "Of course, winning the FA Cup would save our season," Philippe Coutinho said. "We want to be in the Champions League, that is our primary aim, but it is very important to have the cup as an objective, too." Even that, though, is by no means a given. They will face their quarter-final replay with Blackburn Rovers on Wednesday without Martin Skrtel, Steven Gerrard and now Emre Can, sent off late on for a second yellow card. Mario Balotelli might be back, though given that Rodgers confirmed the Italian had ruled himself out of this game because of an injury -- contrary to the advice of the club's medical staff -- you would not bet on it. If they get through that game, then, and past Aston Villa at Wembley -- two very big ifs -- they would most likely find their paths crossing with Arsenal in the final. After this harrowing experience, it is hard to believe that they would welcome the prospect, particularly with Wenger in such buoyant mood. "If you look at the number of goals we have scored [a rate of two a game in the league], it is quite good with seven games to go," Wenger said. "Giroud has surprised a lot of people. We missed him when he was out. Ozil the same. They were all out together. You can see that makes a difference."

Liverpool are a long way from Arsenal, that much is known, but even from that distance they can see it, and they can smell it, too.

RATINGS

Arsenal (4-1-4-1): D Ospina 6 -- H Bellerin 7, L Koscielny 7 (sub: G Paulista, 50min 6), P Mertesacker 7, I Monreal 6 -- F Coquelin 7 -- A Ramsey 8 (sub: M Flamini, 62 6), M Ozil 8 (sub: D Welbeck, 73), S Cazorla 7, A Sanchez 8 -- O Giroud 7.

Substitutes not used: M Macey, K Gibbs, T Rosicky, T Walcott. Booked: Bellerin.

Liverpool (3-4-2-1): S Mignolet 7 -- E Can 5, K Toure 5, M Sakho 6 -- J Henderson 6, L Leiva 7, J Allen 5, A Moreno 6 -- L Markovic 6 (sub: D Sturridge, 46 6), P Coutinho 7 -- R Sterling 6. Substitutes not used: B Jones, G Johnson, D Lovren, J Manquillo, F Borini, C Brannagan. Booked: Can. Sent off: Can.

theguardian

Stylish Arsenal leave Liverpool painfully aware of their limitations

Liverpool have been put in their place. Just two matches ago the team's resurgence after a botched start to the season led Brendan Rodgers to declare his side could still reach second spot in the Premier League; now he admits a top-four finish is almost certainly beyond them. This comprehensive defeat, on the back of the home loss to Manchester United, served as a reality check for the Liverpool manager, who says success in the FA Cup is now his priority as he seeks tangible proof of progress from a patchy campaign.

"It's frustrating that we got ourselves in a position over the last three months, very close, to then come up short in the past two games," Rodgers said. "But I look at Arsenal and their bench, the world class players on the field with big talent and it shows the continual work we have to do."

Like Chelsea, Manchester City and United, Arsène Wenger's side have strength in depth that Liverpool lack. That was brought into stark focus at the Emirates. With Martin Skrtel and Steven Gerrard suspended and Daniel Sturridge not fit to start, the visitors improvised but were pulverised by hosts who were sharper and slicker in all areas. Liverpool's defence lapsed frequently into chaos, their midfield – shorn of Jordan Henderson for the first half as he was assigned to Liverpool's problematic right wing-back position – did not have enough solidity or creativity, and they had neither a fulcrum nor a predator up front, where Raheem Sterling struggled to justify his valuation of himself.

Two fine saves from Simon Mignolet enabled Liverpool to survive Arsenal's early onslaught but the hosts were still out of sight by half-time after goals by Héctor Bellerín, Mesut Özil and Alexis Sánchez. Henderson converted a penalty in the second period after an impetuous foul on Sterling by the otherwise immaculate Bellerin, but Olivier Giroud curled in another lovely goal in stoppage time to give an emphatic stamp to Arsenal's victory.

Advertisement

Each home goal showcased Arsenal's qualities – speed, flair and a level of intensity that would likely have had them even higher in the table and still in the Champions League if they had shown it more regularly – and also exposed some of Liverpool's shortcomings, including rawness or inadequacy in key areas. The match looked like what it was: a clash between teams at different stages of development. Arsenal have not had to sell a top player since Robin van Persie defected to Old Trafford in 2012 and have instead splurged to blend proven talents such as Özil and Sánchez with the high-grade performers the club can now retain. "Something is happening here," said Wenger as he acknowledged that while Arsenal's seventh straight win in the league has probably come too late to truly threaten Chelsea at the top of the table, it fuels optimism for the future.

Liverpool might have scored first if Lazar Markovic had not spurned a clear shooting chance and instead mis-hit a pass to Sterling. A short time later Alberto Moreno erred as Bellerín put Arsenal in front with a wonderful strike. Moreno and Markovic have goofed several times this season but also displayed plenty of promise. That could be said of most of the recruits Liverpool made last summer, when they lost Luis Suárez and tried to cobble together nearly a whole team with the funds raised. But a couple of the signings look like flops. Mario Balotelli – who, according to Rodgers, ruled himself out of the Arsenal match after suffering a mysterious "knock" in training – has scored only one league goal this season.

Dejan Lovren has endured poor form and also an abdominal injury and was left on the bench behind Kolo Touré, who was perhaps Liverpool's most erratic performer on Saturday. A red card for Emre Can at the Emirates, coupled with Skrtel's suspension, means that, if fit, Lovren may play alongside Touré in Wednesday's FA Cup quarter-final replay against Blackburn Rovers. That is a prospect to be relished by Rudy Gesteau – should he be fit to play – who tormented a stronger Liverpool defence in the first match at Anfield. It will not inspire Rodgers with much confidence as he pursues the first trophy of a Liverpool reign that is nearing the end of its third season.

Winning the FA Cup would not, of course, give Liverpool a Champions League place and Rodgers admits that missing out complicates his efforts to close the gap on Arsenal. "Players want to play at the top level of the game and if you're not in the Champions League it makes it difficult for you," Rodgers said. "We showed in our season that we can still fight, be up there challenging ... it's going to be a little like this until we become more stable. We've got young players who are growing, getting more experience and then hopefully there will be a period where we qualify again."

Man of the match Héctor Bellerín (Arsenal)

Date: 4 April 2015

Opposition: Arsenal

Competition: League

BBC	Sunday Times	Times	Telegraph
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TheMail

KOP DONE FOUR

ARSENAL 4

LIVERPOOL 1

BRENDAN Rodgers conceded defeat in his quest for the top four and admitted this slide out of the elite will damage Liverpool in the transfer market.

Rodgers knows he must work harder to sell Anfield as a destination for ambitious players without the lure of a Champions League campaign -- and to keep those who might be hankering after a move, such as Raheem Sterling.

'It makes it difficult, there's no doubt about that,' said the Liverpool manager.

'Most players want to be in the Champions League. They want to play at the top level of the game and if you're not in the Champions League it makes it difficult for you. We know that.

'It's going to be a little like this until we become more stable. We've got young players who are growing, getting more experience and then hopefully there will be a period where we qualify again. We want to be in the Champions League.

That's important and it is key for us.

'It's highly unlikely this year. But Liverpool is a great club. I said that before I came into it. It's a phenomenal club that players want to play for.'

Rodgers starts the week seven points adrift of the Champions League places with fourth-placed Manchester City playing tonight at Crystal Palace. Successive defeats against direct rivals Manchester United and Arsenal have seen him write off his top-four hopes.

'I'm a realist,' said the Liverpool boss. 'We needed to take something from Arsenal. If we'd done that then our chances would have been greater. I wouldn't expect the others to slip up, particularly Arsenal or Manchester United. I don't expect them to do that.

Add to that, the sort of growing number we've got unavailable I think it will make it very, very difficult with only seven games to go.'

Rodgers will instead prioritise the FA Cup. It is nine years since Liverpool won the trophy but indiscipline is eating away at his options ahead of Wednesday's quarter-final replay against Blackburn.

Centre halves Emre Can and Martin Skrtel are suspended, which will not help solve the defensive shambles which unfolded at the Emirates Stadium. Steven Gerrard is also banned after being sent off against United.

Mario Balotelli ruled himself out of the 4-1 defeat at Arsenal, complaining of an unspecified knee injury after training on the eve of the game, while Daniel Sturridge played and did not look confident about his own fitness after pulling out of England duty with a hip injury.

After selling Luis Suarez last summer and starting the campaign poorly, Liverpool recovered, only to lose their impetus after beating Manchester City a month ago.

'We always felt this year was going to be difficult, that was the reality of it,' said Rodgers.

'Our run last year nearly brought us the title. We lost a world-class player and lots of other developments happened within the club. 'But it's frustrating that we got ourselves in a position over the last three months, very close, to then come up short in the past two games. I look at Arsenal and their bench, the players, the world-class players on the field with big talent and it shows the continual work we have to do. 'We don't give up. We will fight right to the end. Obviously the FA Cup is a priority for us. But there's been lots of positives from it, looking at players' development, seeing players grow, it's been good.

'And, as a manager not that long in the game, it's been great for me up to this point, learning about the dynamics of everything. We can still fight and we have an obligation to represent the supporters in the last seven games, and in the FA Cup, to finish as well as we can.'

Liverpool will meet Arsenal again at Wembley in the FA Cup final, if it all goes to form, and Arsene Wenger's team are finishing the season in irresistible form.

They have won 17 of 20 games in all competitions since Christmas, a sequence spoiled by the aberration in the first leg against Monaco in the Champions League. There are grounds for optimism at the Emirates but Wenger has good vibes about the future.

'We have a good mentality and good cohesion in the team,' said the Arsenal boss.

'There is something happening. That shows you that they are ready to fight for each other. You can see that. You can't cheat on that. People smell that.

That of course is a good basis, and defensively we are getting better. I think you also have to give credit to players who get less, such as Francis Coquelin.

'But I am old enough to know that things are never as comfortable as they look. Let's judge at the end of the season.

'We're on a good run and it will be down to how we can maintain that focus and urgency.'

ARSENAL (4-2-3-1): Ospina 6.5; Bellerin 6.5, Mertesacker 6.5, Koscielny 6 (Gabriel 49min, 6), Monreal 7; Coquelin 7, Cazorla 6.5; Ramsey 7 (Flamini 62. 5.5), Sanchez 7, Ozil 7.5 (Welbeck 73, 5.5); Giroud 7. Subs not used: Macey, Gibbs, Rosicky, Walcott.

Booked: Bellerin. Scorers: Bellerin 37, Ozil 40, Sanchez 45, Giroud 90.

LIVERPOOL (3-4-2-1): Mignolet 5.5; Can 5, Toure 4.5, Sakho 5; Henderson 6, Allen 6, Leiva 5.5, Moreno 5.5; Markovic 5 (Sturridge 46, 6), Coutinho 5; Sterling 6. Subs not used: Jones, Johnson, Lovren, Manquillo, Brannagan, Borini. Booked: Can.

Sent off: Can. Scorer: Henderson 76 pen. Match of the match: Mesut Ozil.

Referee: Anthony Taylor 6.5.

The Daily Telegraph

Rodgers fears Liverpool will miss top talent

Brendan Rodgers has admitted that he expects difficulty this summer in attracting elite talent to Liverpool after effectively conceding defeat in the race for the Champions League.

Saturday's 4-1 defeat against Arsenal has left Liverpool seven points off fourth-placed Manchester City with only seven matches left.

Asked if the top four was now out of reach, Rodgers said: "I think so. I'm a realist. I think we needed to take something from Arsenal. I would not expect the others to slip up, particularly Arsenal or Manchester United. Add to that, the sort of growing number we've got unavailable, I think it will make it very, very difficult with only seven games to go."

With Steven Gerrard compounding last summer's loss of Luis Suarez by announcing that he will leave at the end of this season, the importance of keeping Raheem Sterling and Jordan Henderson has been magnified. Rodgers has spoken personally to Sterling since the BBC interview last week that caused such a furore over his future and has blamed the 20-year-old's agent, Aidy Ward, for setting up the interview. Sterling was also told by Rodgers that he will not be going anywhere this summer.

The England winger has two years remaining on his contract but has so far refused the offer of a new deal worth around PS100,000. Sterling says that his football development and not money is the main motivation in his decision and Rodgers is not expecting it to be easy for Liverpool to make major signings this summer. The club's vast stature and history remain a selling point to some - Suarez and Philippe Coutinho were signed when the club were outside the Champions League - but Rodgers knows that the very best players want to measure themselves against Europe's elite.

Liverpool have finished in the top four just once since 2009-10. Asked if it would be hard to convince top players to join a club outside of the Champions League, Rodgers said: "I think most players want to be in the Champions League. I think it's also that Liverpool is a great club. It's a phenomenal club that players want to play for. But, of course, players want to play at the top level of the game and if you're not in the Champions League it makes it difficult for you. We know that.

"It's more frustrating when it comes to progressing as a team. But we just have to continue to fight in order to be a stable club."

In terms both of their revenues and wage structure, Liverpool are well behind Manchester United, Manchester City, Chelsea and Arsenal. That disadvantage is only likely to be exaggerated if those four clubs do qualify for the Champions League, but Rodgers is still sure that his vision can again allow the club to challenge the very best.

"It's going to be a little like this until we become more stable," said Rodgers.

"We've got young players who are growing, getting more experience and then hopefully there will be a period where we qualify again.

"For me, it's about restoring Liverpool to the challenge. We want to be in the Champions League. We always felt this year was going to be difficult. We lost a world-class player and lots of other developments happened." An added problem for Rodgers is again Mario Balotelli, who did not travel to Arsenal after complaining of a knee injury.

Liverpool now face a vital FA Cup replay on Wednesday night against Blackburn Rovers. They are already without Martin Skrtel, Steven Gerrard and Emre Can and Rodgers is unsure if Balotelli will be available.

He made it clear that Balotelli had not been ruled out of Saturday's game by Liverpool's medical staff.

"He trained with the team, had a slight knock Friday and felt he had to come out of the training," he said. "He felt it was too sore to travel. The medical team looked at it but it was the decision of Mario."

Coutinho believes that the FA Cup is now of huge importance. "Winning the cup would save our season," he said. "It would be a successful season to finish fifth and win the cup, but we want to be in the Champions League. That is our primary objective."

Goalkeeper Simon Mignolet is adamant that the players have not been affected by the uncertainty over Sterling's future.

"That had no impact at all - as a player you just focus on yourself and the job in hand," he said.

BBC

Sunday Times

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4 April 2015

THE

INDEPENDENT

With top-four hopes shot, future looks bleak for Liverpool

The slip, we know, will haunt Steven Gerrard for the rest of his life. But what of the stamp?

His Liverpool manager, Brendan Rodgers, admitted the chance of a top-four finish has gone after two crucial matches, against Arsenal on Saturday and previously Manchester United, in which the former talisman made his now infamous 38-second contribution which culminated in that stamp on Ander Herrera.

"I'm a realist," Rodgers said after the 4-1 defeat at the Emirates. "With the two games that we've had, I think we needed to take something from Arsenal, and if we'd done that then our chances would have been greater. I wouldn't expect the others to slip up, particularly Arsenal or Manchester United. I don't expect them to do that."

For the second season in a row, Liverpool will say goodbye to a world-class player - one whose slip near the end of last term was the death knell of their title hopes - and this one will not return [pounds sterling]75m to the transfer kitty, as was the case with Luis Suarez.

So what next? Kolo Tour[c], who admitted after the match he was "not happy with what I did today", insisted winning the FA Cup "would save our season", but the calibre of players Liverpool urgently need will not be lured by an FA Cup in the trophy room.

Tour[c] played dismally, yet his presence in the team consigned Dejan Lovren, the [pounds sterling]20m man and the most expensive defender in the club's history, to the substitutes' bench.

Mario Balotelli, all [pounds sterling]16m of him, had declared himself unfit to travel, a point Rodgers made several times. Not the medical staff, the player. His time at Anfield is surely almost up.

Lazar Markovic, another [pounds sterling]20m, was off by half-time, his most telling contribution a shockingly overhit pass that should have found Raheem Sterling with only an open goal in front him.

Emre Can - [pounds sterling]10m - the supposed midfield enforcer, was nowhere to be seen as Arsenal drove the match beyond doubt with three electrifying goals in eight first-half minutes, then, with the game lost, already carrying a yellow card, got sent off for an appalling tackle and is now suspended.

The players mentioned represent the money from Suarez's transfer. Almost all of it. The return on investment is nothing less than shocking.

And with Manchester United likely to spend heavily again in the summer, and Arsenal so obviously superior in almost every part of the pitch, is Liverpool's brief return to the very top table already over?

"I look at Arsenal and their bench, the players, the world-class players on the field with big talent, and it shows the continual work we have to do," Rodgers said.

"We always felt this year was going to be difficult. That was the reality of it.

"Our run last year nearly brought us the title. We lost a world-class player and lots of other developments that happened within the club. This year was always going to be difficult for us.

"But it's frustrating that we got ourselves in a strong position over the last three months, got very close, and then to come up short in the past two games."

His task now, he said, was "about restoring Liverpool to the challenge.

"We don't give up. We will fight right to the end. I think most players want to be in the Champions League. But I think also that Liverpool is a great club, a phenomenal club that players want to play for."

That is arguably so. But a glance down Saturday's team sheet certainly gives cause to wonder. Gerrard was the last link with Liverpool's phenomenal past. There is not much around that hints at the possibility of a phenomenal future.

Philippe Coutinho, though he was ineffective on Saturday, is one reason to be cheerful. In his view: "It would be a successful season to finish fifth and win the FA Cup."

Such an assessment would not have been true 12 months ago and, in the eyes of Liverpool's fans, is not true now.

Sterling, who was one of Liverpool's better players on Saturday, is wrong in what appears to be his view: that he is already too good for Liverpool, that he should be in a team that is regularly winning trophies. But that he should even be thinking it is telling indeed.

DAILY

Mirror

GUNS & NOSES;

ARSENAL 4 Bellerin 37, Ozil 40, Sanchez 45, Giroud 90 LIVERPOOL 1 Henderson 76 pen

ARSENE WENGER is enjoying the sweet smell of success.

Not since the Invincibles days of Thierry Henry and Robert Pires have Arsenal had such a reliable supply line of goals according to the manager.

Alexis Sanchez took his tally for the season to 20 and Olivier Giroud is now on 18 despite missing three months of the campaign.

Sanchez and Giroud scored goals of the highest quality but what was even more impressive was the Gunners' incredible eight-minute spell at the end of the first half.

Mesut Ozil masterminded the fantastic period of play as he set up Hector Bellerin's opener and scored a wonderful free-kick as Liverpool were overwhelmed.

Arsenal's movement, passing and goals were breathtaking and it left Wenger (above) remembering glories from the past with the heady days of Henry, Pires and Dennis Bergkamp.

But Wenger is also dreaming of what the future might bring and even what might have been in this season's title race but for injuries to key players. He said: "You smell that we can score goals. If you look at the number of goals we've scored now - 62 from 31 league games - that's quite good with seven matches to go.

"We last had two players scoring 25 a season with Pires and Henry, or maybe Bergkamp and Henry. That's a long time ago. But they're not bad names!

"Giroud has surprised a lot of people. It shows that we missed him when he was out for four months. Laurent Koscielny was out for four months too. Ozil the same. And basically they were all out together. You can see that that makes a difference.

"We have a good mentality and cohesion in the team. There is something happening. That shows you they are ready to fight for each other. You can see that. You can't cheat on that. People smell that."

Sanchez's goal - a 20-yard shot full of swerve and dip - was the pick of the bunch. Giroud's late strike was also magnificent.

Ozil looked a PS42million player and, in the past few weeks since his return from injury, he has been magnificent.

Arsenal also had some unsung heroes. Bellerin was picked for his pace to counteract the threat of Raheem Sterling and, but for one poor tackle which gifted Liverpool a penalty (converted by Jordan Henderson), the plan worked.

Francis Coquelin was also outstanding and proving that maybe they have found their solution to the defensive midfielder problem at last.

It was an impressive result which surely secures Arsenal's place in the top four.

With the FA Cup semi-final still to come, it could yet be a good season.

Liverpool were missing their best player this season, Martin Skrtel, and their defence without him was shocking.

Daniel Sturridge looked half-fit, Adam Lallana was missing, Emre Can was dismissed, and Mario Balotelli had clearly thrown his dummy out again as the decision not to play was laid clearly at his door by Brendan Rodgers post-match.

The Reds have made progress this season, their run since Christmas has been terrific and yet they still came up short against an Arsenal side who have roared back to form.

Top four looks in the bag for the north Londoners and they could yet finish second (do not be silly and talk about the title).

Yet Wenger is wise enough to know that it would be asking for trouble to describe finishing second as progress.

The Gunners boss added: "I'm a competitor and what that means is you have to go as high and as far as you can.

"If somebody was better than us, then well done, but we have to have given our best until the end and that's what I would like to do.

"I'm old enough to know that things are never as comfortable as they look. But what is true is that it's in our hands. How well we deal with the situation now will be important.

"Let's judge that at the end of the season. Let's give everything to do it and see what happens.

"It's too early with seven games to go but we're in a good position, with four games at home and only three away.

"We're on a good run so I'd say it will be down to how we can maintain that focus and level of urgency between now and the end."

Date: 4 April 2015 Opposition: Arsenal Competition: League	BBC	Sunday Times	Times	Telegraph	4 April 2015		
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LIVERPOOL

ECHO

Liverpool's Champions League hopes are in ruins after they crashed to a damaging 4-1 defeat to Arsenal at the Emirates.

Brendan Rodgers had warned his players they needed to take something from the trip to the capital in order to stay in contention for a top four finish. But they failed to deliver in the capital and were soundly beaten. Liverpool were blown away by the Gunners' three-goal burst in the space of seven minutes before the interval through Hector Bellerin, Mesut Ozil and Alexis Sanchez. Jordan Henderson reduced the deficit from the penalty spot as the visitors rallied in the second half but there was no way back.

The Reds' misery was compounded by the late dismissal of Emre Can for a second yellow card and Olivier Giroud added Arsenal's fourth in stoppage time. Liverpool now only have the FA Cup to save their season and they will go into Wednesday's quarter-final replay with Blackburn Rovers without the suspended trio of Steven Gerrard, Martin Skrtel and Can.

Rodgers had vowed his side would respond strongly to the defeat to Manchester United before the international break but they endured a torrid opening spell. Inside 30 seconds Sanchez fired wide after Joe Allen had lost the ball cheaply and then Santi Cazorla forced a save from Simon Mignolet.

In the fifth minute the Gunners should have gone in front. Kolo Toure had his pocket picked by Giroud and Aaron Ramsey burst through. His low drive was parried by Mignolet and Cazorla looked destined to tuck away the rebound but Toure got there first and forced it behind for a corner.

The Reds caused problems for themselves as they showed an alarming lack of composure and handed Arsenal the initiative.

But they weathered the storm and belatedly settled with the recalled Lucas Leivaproviding a semblance of control in midfield.

All eyes were on Raheem Sterling after his misguided midweek interview about his future and back in the central attacking role he relishes he started to cause Arsenal problems.

In the 19th minute Philippe Coutinho's pass released Lazar Markovic, who found himself one on one with David Ospina. But rather than shoot the Serbian inexplicably tried to pick out Sterling and his misplaced pass meant the chance went begging.

Coutinho then curled narrowly wide as the Reds continued to grow in confidence. Sterling should have done better when Markovic did finally find him with a pass but took the wrong option - hitting it early and dragging well wide.

Liverpool's resurgence was halted eight minutes before the break. Bellerin got the better of Alberto Moreno far too easily inside the box and curled beyond Mignolet into the far corner.

Three minutes later the Gunners doubled their tally. Sakho tripped Ozil and the German international dispatched a 25-yard free-kick past Mignolet.

On the stroke of half-time Liverpool's nightmare continued as Sanchez slammed a sweet strike into the roof of the net.

Rodgers responded by taking off Markovic and introducing Daniel Sturridge for the second half.

The England striker did improve the Reds but they never looked like launching a fightback.

Sterling worked way into space but lashed over high over the bar but it took a fine save from Mignolet to keep out Giroud's header as Liverpool almost fell further behind.

Emre Can went close before the Reds secured a lifeline with 15 minutes to go. Sterling was hacked down by Bellerin inside the box with the young full-back fortunate to somehow escape a second yellow card.

Captain Henderson took responsibility and tucked the penalty into the bottom corner.

But there was no late cavalry charge. Instead Can got a second yellow after a stupid challenge on substitute Danny Welbeck and Giroud's emphatic finish left Liverpool to lick their wounds.

London

Evening Standard

Alexis Sanchez, Mesut Ozil, Bellerin and Giroud destroy Brendan Rodgers' side at the Emirates

Arsenal kept up the pressure at the top of the Barclays Premier League as Liverpool were blown away 4-1 at the Emirates Stadium, where Reds contract rebel Raheem Sterling failed to make an impact.

All the pre-match headlines had been over Sterling's declaration he was "not a money-grabbing 20-year-old" despite rejecting Liverpool's offer of a new deal, said to be worth some £100,000-a-week.

However, the England forward blew his big chance to show why he is worth a pay rise, unable to convert a golden chance in the first half before Arsenal stuck three goals in the space of just eight minutes to settle matters.

Hector Bellerin rolled in a superb curling effort, with Mesut Ozil's free-kick and a blistering 20-yard strike from Alexis Sanchez effectively settling the contest before a fine late effort from Olivier Giroud sealed Arsenal's seventh straight league victory.

Liverpool netted a consolation penalty through captain Jordan Henderson - awarded for a foul on Sterling - but then saw Emre Can sent off for two yellow cards as a second successive defeat dealt a potentially fatal blow to their hopes of a top-four finish,

Arsenal had made a blistering start.

Liverpool goalkeeper Simon Mignolet saved from Santi Cazorla and then was alert to divert a low shot from Aaron Ramsey, with Mamadou Sakho stabbing clear as Cazorla looked set for a tap-in.

Protest groups from both sets of supporters had missed the opening 10 minutes, lobbying outside the ground at ticket prices in the wake of the new broadcast deal, while some of those inside also held banners against the rising cost of watching live Premier League football.

Liverpool, without suspended skipper Steven Gerrard and centre-half Martin Skrtel, had weathered the early storm and looked a threat on the counter.

Sterling should have opened the scoring in the 21st minute. Lazar Markovic was played into the right side of the Arsenal penalty area by Phillippe Coutinho, and he elected to square for Sterling. However, the England forward had not anticipated the pass and could not apply the finishing touch as the ball ran away from him.

Sterling was soon back on his feet, flashing a low, angled drive just wide from 20 yards.

However, Arsenal took the lead via the unlikely source of Bellerin, who curled home a superb effort on 37 minutes.

Ozil fed Ramsey on the right, and the Welshman in turn laid the ball off to the full-back. Spaniard Bellerin, 20, waltzed around Alberto Moreno before despatching a sublime low shot into the bottom left corner.

Before Liverpool could regroup, they were 2-0 down.

Ozil was tripped by Sakho just outside the penalty arc. The German playmaker - who came in for criticism following his trip to a Berlin nightclub after missing Arsenal's win at Newcastle before the international break through illness - took the free-kick himself, curling the dead ball around the wall and past Mignolet.

It got worse for the visitors just before the break when Sanchez rifled in a third. Ramsey played the ball up into the path of Sanchez. The Chile forward - a target for Liverpool before his £32million summer move to Arsenal - stepped inside Toure before blasting the ball up over Mignolet into the roof of the net.

Liverpool made a change for the second half, with Daniel Sturridge replacing Markovic, the forward having pulled out of England duty during the international break through injury.

Arsenal also soon were forced into a substitution as Laurent Koscielny hobbled off and Brazilian Gabriel Paulista came on.

In the 55th minutes, Giroud's bullet header was brilliantly tipped over by Mignolet, before Arsenal goalkeeper David Ospina had to be alert to deflect a snapshot from Can behind at the other end.

Ramsey appeared to have hurt his ankle, and was replaced by Mathieu Flamini on 62 minutes.

With the hard work done, Arsenal took their foot off the gas, which saw Liverpool's pressure result in a penalty when Bellerin tripped Sterling on 76 minutes.

Henderson squeezed the spot-kick past Ospina into the bottom left corner, but momentum was lost when Can picked up his second yellow card with five minutes remaining following a foul on substitute Danny Welbeck.

Cazorla's curling 18-yard effort shaved the outside of the post, before Giroud cut inside to blast home a left-foot shot into the top corner to continue his fine scoring form.

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Competition: League

BBC	Sunday Times	Times	Telegraph
Echo	Sun Independent	Guardian	Mirror
	Sun Telegraph	Independent	Mail



Ozil comes of age as Arsenal go second

There are days when Arsne Wenger is consumed by a martyr's anguish, taunted by the ignorance of the fickle and the faithless. This was his compensation, the crystallisation of his vision of football as a fusion of art and science, intelligence and application. Arsenal's seventh successive victory confirmed Liverpool's exile from the top four, and left Brendan Rodgers clinging to the lifeboat of the FA Cup. The most he can hope for is revenge at Wembley, assuming both sides justify the bookmakers' odds and reach the final on 30 May.

Three sumptuous goals in nine first-half minutes gave Arsenal the platform to move into second place. Their first title in 11 years remains an unsustainable flight of fancy, but they no longer exude the vulnerability of spring lambs.

Wenger spoke of "a great day", embroidered by a coruscating performance by Mesut -zil, but effectively conceded their ambition of becoming champions was unsustainable once they won only two of their opening eight games: "We missed important players at the start of the season, when we dropped too many points. We have the quality to find ourselves at the top, but that needs us to be perfect and for Chelsea not to be perfect." He studiously avoided the most obvious mantrap, of confirming his interest in Raheem Sterling, by artfully highlighting the attacking strength on his bench. Danny Welbeck made a vibrant cameo appearance. "We are not in a transfer period," he observed.

Sterling's most telling contribution was to win a penalty converted by Jordan Henderson. Rodgers did not shy away from exposing the curse of agent-driven intrigue. He favoured paternal understanding, praising Sterling's contribution and distancing him from the distasteful opportunism of modern transfer sagas. He defused emotion while reinforcing his authority, and hinted at Mario Balotelli's lack of commitment by revealing the Italian spared himself the chore of being a secondary substitute by ruling himself out with an indistinct knee injury.

For the neutral, the football was a blessed relief. The backcloth of synthetic emotions and sly protestations of loyalty was ripped asunder by a game of speed, intensity and technical skill applied at pace.

The moral question framed by a long red and white banner which read "[pounds sterling]5bn and what do we get? [pounds sterling]64 a ticket" will eventually require an answer, but this was undoubtedly Premier League gold.

Arsenal passed quickly, and Wenger praised their "killer instinct" but took care to highlight the quality of their combination play in the final third. They allowed Liverpool back into the game for a 15-minute spell in the first half, leaving large pockets of space which invited exploitation, but had few alarms.

This is a squad which is capable of much more; significantly they would have trailed but for Lazar Markovic's fearful, overhit squared pass, which Sterling missed with an empty goal gaping. Liverpool's only other genuine chance, squandered when Sterling dragged a shot wide, lent credence to suggestions he remains an incomplete player. The back stories of Arsenal's goalscorers hint at the breadth of Wenger's philosophy. Liverpool's defending was neurotic, but the manner in which they conceded was not entirely down to their fallibility.

Hector Bellerin, who opened the scoring after 37 minutes, has surprised Wenger with his progress, but is the perfect example of organic growth. Recruited from La Masia at 16, he has developed so impressively that he is even being spoken of as a realistic replacement for Dani Alves at Barcelona. The Spaniard was almost abashed by his impudence in sweeping past Alberto Moreno, who was too square on and obsessed with keeping his arms by his side to avoid the risk of handball.

He shifted the ball on to his left foot, and scored past Simon Mignolet's right hand -zil's left-footed free-kick three minutes later, set out wide before it arced into the side panel of the net, was so well struck he was running away in celebration while the ball was still in the air. The standing ovation he received when, physically spent, he was eventually substituted signalled overdue acceptance from a demanding crowd, which expects value from the [pounds sterling]42m invested on their behalf. He was outstanding, creative and diligent.

Wenger stressed: "He is always class. He is agile, flexible, and the intelligence and timing of his passes is exceptional. People love to play with him. " Alexis Sanchez remains the darling of the Emirates, however, a player of unrelmitting intensity, compelling physicality and endearing optimism. His 20th goal of the season, the perfect completion of a flowing move which started on halfway, was one for the ages. His first touch inside Kolo Tour[c] was sublime, and the ball stood up perfectly for him to strike it through the sweet spot. His rising drive was past Mignolet before the goalkeeper could even flinch. The game demanded and duly received a suitable exclamation point, when Olivier Giroud scored his 12th goal in 13 games with a majestic sweep of his left foot. By that time Liverpool's season was further complicated by Emre Can's second yellow card, a lamentable lunge at Welbeck. He misses Wednesday's Cup replay at Blackburn. Life for Rodgers gets no easier, but for Wenger it is almost redemptive.

Arsenal: (4-2-3-1) Ospina, Bellerin, Mertesacker, Koscielny (Gabriel, 48), Monreal; Coquelin, Ramsey (Flamini, 61); -zil (Welbeck, 73), Cazorla, Sanchez; Giroud

Liverpool: (3-4-3) Mignolet; Can, Toure, Sakho; Henderson, Allen, Lucas, Moreno; Markovic (Sturridge, 46), Sterling, Coutinho.

Referee: Anthony Taylor. Man of the match: -zil (Arsenal). Match rating: 8/10



Rampant Arsenal deal blow to Rodgers hopes

Arsenal 4 Bellerin 37, Ozil 40, Sanchez 45, Giroud 90

Liverpool 1 Henderson 76 pen Att: 60,081

Arsenal need perfection until the end of the season if they are to mount an unlikely Premier League title challenge, Arsene Wenger declared.

For 15 glorious minutes before half-time, they achieved just that against a Liverpool side who appeared burdened not only by injuries and suspensions but by the enveloping frustration of Raheem Sterling's increasingly messy contract dispute. There was a hand-dog mood from the visitors. Brendan Rodgers understandably dismissed Sterling's situation as a factor. Although the 20-year-old was indisputably Liverpool's best player, that did not take much to achieve with this dispiriting display. This was, annoyingly, a performance that will do little to convince the player that the club will be able to match his ambition.

At the end, Rodgers effectively threw in the towel and admitted that Liverpool had little chance of making the top four, of qualifying for the Champions League, and now had to concentrate on winning the FA Cup. It would be a welcome piece of silverware - even if Arsenal, the holders, may stand in their way for that also. Rodgers was far more bullish and impassioned - and rightly so - about why Sterling should stay at Anfield, but the result, after the last few days, was a perfect storm for Liverpool. They now go forward to an FA Cup quarter-final in midweek at Blackburn with Martin Skrtel - sorely missed here - and without Steven Gerrard and now also without Emre Can, red-carded late for a vicious scissor tackle of frustration on substitute Danny Welbeck, who now will also be suspended. That perfect storm might continue for Liverpool at Ewood Park unless they galvanise themselves quickly. For Arsenal, the season needs to run and run. They do not want it to end. Gears have now been clicked and they have an imperious sheen to them. Again they have confounded everyone with such a powerfully strong end to the campaign that it would not be unreasonable to suggest that were there a dozen or so more league games to play, rather than just seven for them, that they might just overhaul Chelsea at the top.

What a turnaround. And what a turnaround there was in this match with Arsenal a blur of initial attacking intent to such an extent that it was almost six minutes into the encounter before Liverpool managed to move the ball into their opponents' half. During the opening burst Arsenal could, should, have scored twice with Simon Mignolet saving superbly from Aaron Ramsey, with a onehanded blow low to his left, having already denied Santi Cazorla.

But then Arsenal could also have been two behind as Liverpool took over. It was as if a switch had been flicked. Lazar Markovic really should have scored when he collected Philippe Coutinho's clever pass and found himself free on goal. Instead he looked to pass to Sterling and over-hit the ball. The chance went. Soon after, Sterling jinked into space, shot early and dragged his effort wide.

Then the storm hit Liverpool. And what a storm it was. So much has been spoken about the value of players, about the PS42million Arsenal committed to Mesut Ozil, about whether the German has come remotely close to justifying his place in the team, never mind the fee, but here it was in a wonderful, destructive cameo after an initially sloppy first half-hour. "What he does is always classy," Wenger said and Ozil was just that. Class. As were all three - all four in fact - of Arsenal's goals. There were three inside just eight minutes before half-time. Each was an accomplished finish, although questions over Mignolet's suitability as the Liverpool goalkeeper also resurfaced. He was at his flaky worst. It began with Ramsey turning the ball back to Hector Bellerin who was allowed to run into the penalty area and then, foolishly, shown inside by Alberto Moreno and given the opportunity superbly to bend his left-foot shot around Mignolet and into the net. Within three minutes, Ozil had found the same spot, this time from a free-kick. It came after he was stupidly bundled over by Mamadou Sakho. Ozil stepped up and whipped the ball left-footed around the wall with Mignolet scrambling forlornly. As good a free-kick as it was it was also bad goalkeeping. Then Alexis Sanchez topped the lot as he nimbly collected Ramsey's pass, after Liverpool surrendered possession to Bellerin, thrillingly skirting past the hapless Kolo Toure - preferred to Dejan Lovren, a PS20million misfit on the bench, as Skrtel's replacement - and caught out Mignolet with a fierce right-footed drive from the edge of the area that dipped over the goalkeeper. Game over. "We had maybe a killer instinct and took advantage of that," Wenger said. "We had a crazy period just before half-time," Rodgers responded. "We defended very poorly in that period and before you know it we are 3-0 down. After that we were playing for pride." Wounded pride as well. The scoreline may have been harsh on Liverpool but that was no consolation as they sought consolation. Instead Mignolet, to cap the most uneven of displays, pulled off a wonderful save to push Olivier Giroud's close-range header over the bar before a tiring Ozil, who had delivered the ball for the striker, eventually departed to a standing ovation.

By then Rodgers had introduced Daniel Sturridge, who he desperately wanted to play from the start but who is still not feeling fully fit, and switched formation to a 4-3-3 with Sterling moving out wide. David Ospina saved well from Can, Coutinho bounced a shot wide and then there was a flicker of hope as Bellerin rashly chopped down Sterling who continued to take the fight.

The penalty was awarded and Jordan Henderson just managed to squeeze the ball low past Ospina even though the goalkeeper got a glove on it. Could there be an unlikely comeback? Liverpool's cause would have been helped had Bellerin, already cautioned, been red-carded as could so easily have happened.

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Instead, as Liverpool pressed on, it was Can who was dismissed as he betrayed his obvious frustration. It ended any faint hope they had while Arsenal scented more goals, with Cazorla unlucky when his clever curling shot clipped the outside of the post before Mignolet, in added time, was beaten again as Giroud ran onto Sanchez's pass, once more all too easily beating Toure, and arced his shot around the despairing goalkeeper.

Can Arsenal win the title playing like this, especially with Chelsea still to come to the Emirates? "That's not enough," Wenger said. "What we can master now mathematically is the top four. For the title, we need just to be perfect and for Chelsea not to be perfect. Let us focus on what we can master and that's our own performance - we move forward." It was perfect against a Liverpool who were hit by the perfect storm.



THE SUNDAY TIMES

Gunners hunt down rocky Reds

Arsenal and Liverpool often see themselves as mirror images: tradition, history, American owners, a certain idealism. They spend, yes, but not on the scale of Chelsea and the Manchester clubs. Their central strategy for competing at the top is development: of players, of a playing style and of the culture at their clubs. In pummelling their rivals on the pitch, with brutal combinations of brilliant football, Arsenal knocked something greater to the floor and not just Liverpool's already reeling campaign for a top-four place. It was the notion that these two are really comparable. Not at this moment in time they're not.

Liverpool -- wrong team, wrong tactics, wrong transfers, bad discipline, poor defending -- looked very much a creation Brendan Rodgers and Fenway Sports Group need to work on, reinvest in, revise.

In contrast, Arsenal seem closer to completion -- with genuine prospects of competing to win the Premier League -- than they have since challenging in 2007-8. They are unlikely to be champions this season for "we would need to be perfect and Chelsea not to be perfect," as Arsene Wenger said. But coming seasons? After multiple false dawns, they could be on the brink of something again.

This was devastating. And bore the hallmarks of Wenger's methodology. Exquisitely skilled stars, such as Mesut Ozil and the supreme Santi Cazorla, blended with hungry talents, such as Hector Bellerin, scorer of the all-important first of three goals in eight minutes at the end of the first half.

There is a bit of toughness too: the way Alexis Sanchez marries ability with aggression recalls some of Wenger's finest former players, such as Dennis Bergkamp and Patrick Vieira. You looked at Arsenal's bench and saw Wenger finally has a squad to rival any in the country. It could still be reinforced in defensive areas, but sign Raheem Sterling? Wenger suggested after the game he hardly needs another attacker.

Chelsea are still to come here, in Arsenal's next home game, but overhauling them is unlikely because of a disappointing start to the season Wenger is left regretting. With Rodgers conceding Champions League qualification won't happen, Liverpool's season hinges on Wednesday's FA Cup quarter-final replay at Blackburn. Get to the final and their likely opponents would be Arsenal: Rodgers' defenders, especially Alberto Moreno, might need persuading to face Cazorla and co again.

The match began with them blitzed. Cazorla shot close in the opening moments and soon he and Aaron Ramsey were descending on Kolo Toure to hustle him out of possession. Ramsey collected and almost beat Simon Mignolet. Toure recovered to pip Cazorla to the rebound but the vulnerability of Rodgers' back three, without Martin Skrtel, was exposed. With Toure gasping, sweating and diving in, seeing Dejan Lovren among the substitutes exposed the error of buying him for PS20m.

Wenger was bold, often pushing five attackers beyond Liverpool's midfield line. His surprise use of Ramsey as a right-sided attacker worked, further spooking Moreno, whereas Rodgers' wide deployment of Jordan Henderson backfired, depriving Liverpool of his legs and leadership in central midfield, where Cazorla and Ozil enjoyed periods of control.

An exception was the 20-minute spell leading up to Bellerin's goal. In a game of attack and counter-attack, when the initiative went to who could recover the ball quickest and move it best, Liverpool seized it for a time. Philippe Coutinho was important but Sterling was Rodgers' best player. Talk of contract controversy affecting him was quickly forgotten.

Lazar Markovic was substituted at half-time but could have been hooked for his 19thminute mishap alone. Coutinho played him through and Markovic faced David Ospina, with Sterling alongside him and free. Instead of finishing or squaring simply for Sterling, Markovic horribly overhit a pass and the chance was gone.

It was Arsenal, Wenger smiled, who had "killer instinct". Their flurry began when Cazorla found Ramsey who slipped in the overlapping Bellerin. Moreno stood, showing him inside. Bellerin accepted the invitation and curled past Mignolet for 1-0.

Mamadou Sakho fouled Ozil and the German bent a tremendous free kick, struck mid-height and with pace, inside the far post for 2-0: Mignolet, perhaps, had mispositioned his wall. Suddenly it was 3-0. Bellerin, intercepting, played a perceptive first-time pass to Ramsey, who turned beautifully to find Sanchez and the Chilean cut inside poor Toure before looping a shot -- almost like a volley,

because the ball bobbed up -- straight down the middle but in, because he smashed it too hard for Mignolet to save.

With Daniel Sturridge on for Markovic and Henderson finally playing more centrally, Liverpool improved in the second period, and Sterling, through his speed of footwork, enticed Bellerin to concede a penalty that Henderson just beat Ospina with.

But there'd be no comeback. Arsenal kept hitting Liverpool on the break and they cracked again after Emre Can was sent after a second yellow card, incurred for dumbly scything Danny Welbeck. In stoppage time, on a counter, Sanchez fed Olivier Giroud and the striker, who had enjoyed bullying Rodgers' back three all day, stepped past Toure and scored Arsenal's fourth, left-footed, beautifully, from 18 yards.

Arsenal: Ospina 6, Bellerin 7, Mertesacker 7, Koscielny 6 (Gabriel 49min, 7), Monreal 7, Coquelin 6, Ozil 7 (Welbeck 73min, 6), Cazorla 9, Ramsey 6 (Flamini 62min, 6), Giroud 7, Sanchez 8

Liverpool: Mignolet 5, Can 4, Toure 4, Sakho 5, Lucas 5, Moreno 4, Markovic 4 (Sturridge 45min, 5) Henderson 6, Sterling 7, Coutinho 6

TheObserver

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	Echo	Sun Independent	Guardian	Mirror		
		Sun Telegraph	Independent	Mail		

BBC

Arsenal tightened their grip on a place in the Premier League's top four while inflicting damage on Liverpool's Champions League aspirations with a convincing victory at Emirates.

The Gunners set the platform for a vital three points with a devastating burst of three goals in the last eight minutes of the first half from Hector Bellerin, Mesut Ozil and Alexis Sanchez.

Raheem Sterling - starting up front for Liverpool after the midweek interview with the BBC that cast further doubt on his long-term Anfield future - battled hard and won a late penalty from which Jordan Henderson pulled a goal back.

In reality, however, this was little other than an afternoon of unrelenting misery for an abject Liverpool, who had Emre Can sent off for two bookable offences before Olivier Giroud delivered the final blow with a spectacular fourth for Arsenal in the closing seconds.

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger will feel a place in next season's Champions League is now within his grasp but Liverpool's hopes are fading as they followed up the 2-1 home defeat by Manchester United by being convincingly outplayed.

The win puts Arsenal nine points ahead of Liverpool with seven games left, while manager Brendan Rodgers' side also trail Manchester United by five points before Saturday's meeting with Aston Villa at Old Trafford.

Sterling was a man in the spotlight after his outspoken explanation of his current contract impasse at Anfield - and while he fought as hard as any Liverpool player to fashion something in a losing cause, he was powerless to influence events.

Liverpool were without captain Steven Gerrard and Martin Skrtel, who were serving three-match suspensions for stamping in last month's match against Manchester United.

The decision to draft the veteran Kolo Toure into defence, while he was certainly not solely to blame, contributed to a calamitous first 45 minutes at the back for the visitors.

Toure was rescued by goalkeeper Simon Mignolet when he was caught in possession as Arsenal swarmed all over Liverpool in the early moments - but once they settled down it was suddenly the Gunners who looked under pressure.

Indeed, it was Liverpool who should have gone ahead after 18 minutes when Philippe Coutinho sent Lazar Markovic through on goal but he mysteriously passed on responsibility to Sterling, matters made worse by the failure to find his intended target.

There was little indication of the mayhem to come as the game moved towards the interval - but Arsenal delivered three heavy hits to Liverpool in the final eight minutes of the half.

Bellerin's finish for the first, cutting in from the the right before a precise left-foot finish into the bottom corner, was exemplary but the defending of Liverpool's Alberto Moreno was nothing short of shambolic as he virtually ushered his opponent into a dangerous position.

Arsenal's second came three minutes later as Ozil curled a delightful 25-yard free-kick beyond Mignolet and the third arrived on the stroke of half-time when Sanchez scored with a thunderous shot from the edge of the area - although it passed suspiciously close to Liverpool's keeper before going in.

Rodgers introduced Daniel Sturridge for Markovic at the start of the second half in the hope he would act as the catalyst for an unlikely comeback but it was Arsenal who came close to a fourth as it required a fine reflex save from Mignolet to divert Giroud's header over the top.

Liverpool were offered some hope with 14 minutes left when they were awarded a penalty for Bellerin's foul on Sterling. Henderson's penalty was not exactly convincing but it did the job as it sneaked past Arsenal goalkeeper David Ospina.

Any Liverpool hopes of a comeback were soon snuffed out when Can, who had picked up a foolish yellow card for dissent, made a wild challenge on Arsenal substitute Danny Welbeck and was sent off.

It was fully deserved but there was an element of justification to Liverpool's protests after Bellerin escaped a second yellow card after conceding a penalty.

Giroud's final goal was simply the gloss on a fine Arsenal display - and the final insult for Liverpool.

